

# Women's Voices and Genealogies in Literary Studies in English



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Edited by

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and Gilberta Golinelli

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
The “Voice” of Women Writers in the Development of Literary Studies Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Gilberta Golinelli	

## **Part I: Theory, Methodology(ies) and New-Readings**

Chapter One.....	10
The Heritage of Women’s Genealogy: Sisterhood and Solidarity Vita Fortunati	

Chapter Two .....	26
Gender (still) Matters: A Genealogy of Feminist Subjectivities Raffaella Baccolini	

Chapter Three .....	41
“I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”: Genealogies, Re-Visions of the Body, and Feminist Figurations Rita Monticelli	

## **Part II: Experimenting with Gender and Genre: Subversive Forms of Women’s Resistance and Agency**

Chapter Four.....	58
Alternative Readings as Practice for Feminist Methodologies. A Case Study: Aphra Behn Gilberta Golinelli	

Chapter Five .....	70
“It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda”: Meta-Discourses and Female Genealogies in Late Eighteenth-Century English Novels Serena Baiesi	

Chapter Six .....	89
The History Play as Strategy of Resilience and Agency in Women’s Romantic Drama	
Lilla Maria Crisafulli	
Chapter Seven.....	108
“A woman of enlightened understanding”: Politics and Feminism in Mary Darby Robinson’s Literary Production	
Valentina Pramaggiore	
<b>Part III: Female Writing and Writing about the Female: Critical Debates and Recent Interpretations</b>	
Chapter Eight.....	124
“You must forget to be a woman”: Constructions of the Female Gender in Early Modern English Drama	
Josmary Santoro	
Chapter Nine.....	136
Feminist Genealogies and the <i>History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave</i>	
Valeria Morabito	
Chapter Ten .....	150
A Case Study of <i>The Emigrants</i> and <i>The Fugitive</i> : The Poetry of the Exiles in Charlotte Turner Smith’s and Mary Darby Robinson’s Literary Works	
Wilmarie Rosado Pérez	
Chapter Eleven .....	164
Impertinent Daughters in Imperial Genealogies: Doris Lessing’s Autobiographical Writings	
Cristina Gamberi	
Chapter Twelve .....	180
A Geocritical Exploration of “Racial” and Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Science Fiction	
Eleanor Drage	
Special Guest .....	193
The First Life of Mary Wollstonecraft: Godwin’s Perplexing Memoirs	
Janet Todd	

Contributors..... 204

Index of Names..... 209





## INTRODUCTION

# THE “VOICE” OF WOMEN WRITERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY STUDIES

LILLA MARIA CRISAFULLI  
AND GILBERTA GOLINELLI

How unpleasant it is to be locked out . . . and how it is worse to be locked in. (V. Woolf, *A Room of one's Own*, 1929)

It is difficult to deny that in *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf ironically asks her readers if for women writers it is worse to be locked out or to be locked in the literary tradition. In a *Room of One's Own*, and in her vast critical output, Virginia Woolf clearly highlights and anticipates the extent to which the relationship between women and literary tradition, writing and women's identity, has always been controversial, ambiguous and sometimes even hazardous.

The “voice” of women writers in the development of literary studies, or—as Tilly Olsen in one of the main manifestoes of second wave feminism emblematically referred to—women's *silences*<sup>1</sup>, are still crucial issues for women's and gender studies today. It is only in the last few decades, and mostly thanks to the lively dialogue between second and

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<sup>1</sup> *Silences* is the compelling title of Tillie Olsen's article, and later a book, which were respectively published in 1964 and 1978. In both publications she laments the absence of women writers and critics from the syllabus adopted at various levels of education, showing how “Literary history and the present are dark with silences: some the silences for years by our acknowledged great; some silences hidden; some the ceasing to publish after one work appears; some the never coming to book form at all” (Tillie Olsen 2003, 6). As she states, she intended to dedicate her survey to “our silenced people, century after century their beings consumed in the hard, everyday essential work of maintaining human life. Their art, which still they made—as their other contributions—anonymous; refused respect, recognition; lost.” (quoted in Panthea Reid 2009, 278).

third wave feminism(s), that women's and gender studies have been retracing and examining women's genealogies and contexts. They have been looking for a multifaceted women's tradition that is not only an "act of survival" but a radical revision of the (western) canon and its "holds over us" (Rich 1972, 18-19). Revision, the act of looking back "with fresh eyes", is crucial not only for finding a personal "voice" in the literary domain, but also for allowing women to become active agents in the cultural, social and political spheres at large. In so doing, women writers and critics have the chance to retrace a past that remains largely unwritten, exploring and unveiling those mechanisms and forces that have structured, and indeed still structure, mainstream history. This process of revision is necessary more than ever today. It helps to reveal how literary representations have persistently reproduced and sustained patriarchal assumptions that assigned women to a subordinate position in society. It also helps to explore how women have attempted, across time and space, to oppose the symbolic order, envisaging alternative figurations for new forms of (women's) identity and subjectivities. In other words, how women have been generating those processes of de-construction of the female subject(s) and self through the re-appropriation of language, the relationship between nature and nurture, the private and public domains, and revisions of the body, and the female body in particular.

Women's and gender studies teach us that even when we deal with female genealogy and literature there may occur the risk of producing a totalizing narrative, favouring a process of "theorization", "abstraction" and "colonization"<sup>2</sup> which would silence the differences among women themselves, as well as their differences from us, from the present day. According to an intersectional methodology in which the use of gender interacts with other paradigms of interpretation such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, national origin and age, they have shown

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<sup>2</sup> These terms have an emblematic connotation since they were used to explain the danger of mainstream feminism itself. While for example Adrienne Rich recognized the risk of theory even when used by feminist scholars, since "Marginalized though we have been as women, as white and Western makers of theory, we also marginalize others because our lived experience is thoughtlessly white, because even our "women's cultures" are rooted in some Western tradition." (Rich 1984, 219), Chandra Talpade Mohanty used the term colonization to indicate the process of western mainstream feminism. According to her: "The definition of colonization I invoke is a predominantly discursive one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of 'scholarship' and 'knowledge' about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in writings on the subject which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and western Europe" (1988, 61).

how the subject and the self are dynamically construed through the intersection of different and sometimes opposed cultural formations (Susan Stanford Friedman 1996). Thus, when dealing with such complex issues as the interconnection of writing and identity, and when looking back for “our mother’s garden”, to paraphrase the title of Alice Walker’s ground-breaking essay<sup>3</sup>, we need to interrogate not only the social conditions in which women have acted, or have been acted, as subjects, but how, when and where this has happened. Being all “located” and “situated” in multiple ways, we should never forget the danger of generalization, of speaking for other women as if their positions are identical to one’s own. The practice of homogenizing the experiences of different groups of women leads to an erasure of their modes of experiences, of their differences.

In this respect the “voices” and “genealogies” that appear right from the title of our volume are meant to remind us the importance of the specificity of each story and experience, in various places and times; thus the plurality of—even conflicting—discourses that have characterized and still characterize women’s writing, literary criticism and feminism(s).

“It is not our differences which separate women, ... but our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation”. This is what Audre Lorde reminds us in a seminal speech delivered in 1980 as an answer to the emerging white mainstream feminism which, by focusing upon women’s oppression, tended to ignore the differences amongst women themselves (1984, 115).

Indeed, differences of little significance to most contemporary literary critics and feminists could have caused serious and contentious unease in the past, or in a specific geopolitical context of the same past but also of the present. As Anne Rosalind Jones argues, looking back at the process of consciousness-raising at the heart of both second wave feminism and the birth of feminist literary criticism, feminist critics did not consider how woman’s identity itself was a composite and dynamic category:

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<sup>3</sup> Moving from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and from the emblematic figure of Judith Shakespeare, Alice Walker claims the necessity to trace a black women’s tradition according to different parameters of interpretation which should first of all take into consideration: “What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.” ([1972] 1994, 402).

It's certain, ... that the phonocentric emphasis in American feminist criticism, the celebration of the 'real woman's voice,' came partly out of the consciousness-raising process: we wanted to speak, we constructed occasions to speak, we heard ourselves quavering out difficult sentences, we waited to hear a supportive response. ... None the less, ... there were crucial silences in that group. We were all white, all middle-class, and all (at least at the moment) heterosexual. (1992, 69)

Hence to read women's "voices" and "genealogies" is to disclose a series of debates, negotiations and even contradicting viewpoints, which still deserve to be explored, since literature, and we believe women's literature in particular, continues to be a fruitful means of education, knowledge, criticism, and public engagement.

Moving from this critical awareness, this volume intends to explore how women readers and, especially, women writers had to negotiate their admission to the public sphere of the print market and their place within the patriarchal literary domain. It intends to question how women—poets, novelists, dramatists, critics and even actresses—used writing as a fertile meta-discourse which allowed them to deal with issues of gender inequalities. The essays collected in the volume intend to investigate how, if and to what extent "women", across time and space, experimented with new literary genres or forms of expression in order to transform, question, resist or paradoxically consolidate gender discriminations and dominant ideologies. Patriarchy, colonialism, slavery and racism, imperialism, religion, (hetero)sexuality and male-centred "humanism" are all issues at the very core of the essays collected in this book. It does not, therefore, merely intend to enter the contemporary debates on these specific issues—proposing alternative and constructive reading of women's texts of the past and of the present—but also aims to analyse the state of the art of contemporary feminist and gender theories, and their possible applications or fruitful re-mediations.

This is one of the reasons why the volume is divided into three sections, the first of which is intended as a necessary theoretical and methodological reflection. *Theory, Methodology(ies) and New-Readings* opens our investigation with a series of essays that provide an overview of the development of feminist thought, while showing and examining its heterogeneity and inter-transdisciplinarity. The first three essays reconsider crucial categories of interpretation such as sisterhood and solidarity (Vita Fortunati)—resonant with second wave feminism—which however are still essential for the improvement and visibility of women's genealogies and their cultural heritage. While exploring new figurations for women's subjectivities (Rita Monticelli) and new manifestations of

feminism(s) for every new generation, this group of essays also examines the notion, and the efficacy, of gender as a method of analysis (Raffaella Baccolini) in an age, i.e. our own, in which gender does not seem to matter any longer. The essays in fact share the same aim, namely to question the effect of the theories, models and assumptions that have originated from various areas such as literature, cultural studies, literary criticism and philosophy, while proposing methodologies that highlight interchanges and interconnections between European and American feminism with feminism of non-Western contexts.

As explained above, the book however also aims to offer alternative readings of women’s writings of the past, and see how these texts can help to understand our present and thereby, in Catherine Belsey’s words, challenge “the system of differences which legitimates the perpetuation of things as they are” (Catherine Belsey [1985] 2002, 171). The second section, *Experimenting with Gender and Genre: Subversive Forms of Women’s Resistance and Agency*, consists of essays that propose resisting and constructive readings of some emblematic women authors of the past. As women’s and gender studies remind us, the act of reading always entails a complex interaction between the gender of the writer, the text and the reader, in which the gender of the latter is not irrelevant either. Alongside the necessity to reconsider some neglected women writers, or to re-read them in a new light, this section aims to show how, as authors and subjects, women’s empowerment and agency were attained thanks to a continuous negotiation with, and intersection of, various ideologies (Gilberta Golinelli), including issues of class, race, gender and nationality. This section also intends to highlight how women became aware of the importance of the act of reading as a potential means to circulate, share and develop needs, ideas and ideals. It was through the reading and circulation of their texts that women could, albeit transversally, enter that public domain from which they had been excluded, and claim reforms and change.

These essays tell us how women’s emancipation and self-determination were achieved through a dynamic and prolific experimentation with literary genres. Among these genres, the novel, historical drama and poetry (Valentina Pramaggiore) certainly played a pivotal role. While an inquiry into the various forms of novels confirmed women’s importance in the innovation of Romantic fiction (Serena Baiesi), a gender interpretation of women’s historical drama (Lilla Maria Crisafulli) shows how women forged an important role within male-engendered historiography. Reconsidering British Romantic women’s drama reveals how women experimented with

historical writing, in order to propose an alternative to male-oriented history, and to plead for a full citizenship that was still denied them.

The time span outlined in this section is chronological, yet we do not intend to establish a precise moment or a specific date in which women began to claim greater rights and freedoms, or when they presumably reached that equality that they sought in their literary experimentations. The essays rather confirm that women's approach to change has often been multifaceted and non-linear, characterised by negotiations and even strong ambiguities. A woman writer cannot be considered as representative of a homogenous group of women, but rather a representative of those women who share her same access to knowledge and privileges, or the obstacles related to her class, her ethnicity, or to the community or nation to which she belongs. Moving from this theoretical assumption, the third section of the volume, *Female Writing and Writing About the Female: Critical Debates and Recent Interpretations*, likewise exposes the need to approach women's progress towards self-determination and emancipation through multi-layered discourses and multiple practices. These discourses and practices are further disclosed by the performative nature of gender as staged in the drama and theatre of the early modern age (Josmary Santoro), or by female slave narratives from nineteenth century British literature (Valeria Morabito), within a dominant colonial ideology and its cultural representations.

The controversial relationship between the centre and the margin, the individual and the community becomes crucial in women's poetry of exile, in which tropes of displacement and isolation are functional to entering the public debate on political matters, gender issues and relations of power (Wilmarie Rosado Perèz). Tracing women's voices and genealogies also means disclosing the relationship between different generations, often narrated in terms of mother and daughter relationships. Women do not only "need to think back through *our* mothers", to paraphrase Virginia Woolf's famous statement ([1929] 2015, 56), they also need to reconsider "their" mothers critically, in order to emerge as independent subjects (Cristina Gamberi).

The existence of women's genealogy has for a long time been a sort of utopian *quest* that has generated visions of alternative worlds and communities. Not by chance, the genre of science fiction has often dealt with such metadiscourse, in which spatial construction and policing of gender and "racial" identities have been experimented and debated (Eleanor Drage).

*Women's Voices and Genealogies in Literary Studies in English* closes with an appendix that is not only a homage to the "mother" of all

researchers in women’s studies, Mary Wollstonecraft, but also a valuable contribution on her life and work by one of the most outstanding representatives of this field, and pioneer of women’s critical genealogies, Janet Todd.

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**PART I:**  
**THEORY, METHODOLOGY(IES)**  
**AND NEW-READINGS**

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE HERITAGE OF WOMEN'S GENEALOGY: SISTERHOOD AND SOLIDARITY

### VITA FORTUNATI

*Abstract:* The working hypothesis of my paper is that the two concepts of *sisterhood* and *solidarity* are essential in women's genealogy and in their cultural heritage. In the first part I outline how, in contemporary critical feminist theory, women discuss the centrality of ethics and enter into a discussion with Levinas, the philosopher who stressed the supremacy of ethics over philosophy. The concepts of responsibility, justice and proximity to the other are taken up by women critics who have underlined how, in dialoguing with women who belong to different political, geographical and historical contexts, the attention to the other is central, implying as it does a different way of being. In theorizing transnational literatures women stress the importance and the dignity of emotions (Nussbaum 2002), especially the feeling of "affect" in the relationship with the other. In the second part of the paper, I present two case-studies, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1925) and Elizabeth Strout's *Amy & Isabelle* (1998), where the values embedded in *sisterhood* and *solidarity* are represented: the women's capability of connecting bridges, empathy, love and conviviality in approaching the other.

The working hypothesis I aim to demonstrate in this essay is that women's genealogy is founded on the two concepts of *sisterhood* and *solidarity*. Starting from the etymology of the two words may help to understand the characteristics and differences between the two terms. Sisterhood derives from sister and the suffix hood, abstracting the particular essence of a thing. It is an ancient word, dating back to the sixteenth century, designating a community of religious women united in the same faith. The term was later adopted by Virginia Woolf, who, in her enlightening essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) implicitly juxtaposed it to brotherhood, because it is in this essay that Woolf laid the groundwork for the values of female culture, in sharp contrast to the patriarchal society of her time. From the nineteen-sixties onwards, this term would become a pivotal reference point for feminist theory and practice.

The term solidarity has a much more modern origin, deriving from the Latin adjective *solidus* via the French *solidarité*, a term coined by the *Encyclopédie* (1765), and then spread in relation to the French Revolution to define a communion of interests and mutual accountability amongst the members of civil society. The term solidarity is broader, not exclusively centred on the female gender, but rather addressing all the members of a given community: the duties of solidarity expressed by various constitutions, and, in languages that have absorbed the original Latin adjective *solidus*, such as Italian, imply the quality of being *solidale* i.e. supportive, when empathising with a victim of injustice. *Solidus*, 'solid', is a quality of materials whose components are all united, cohesive, compact. Likewise, a social body is solid if its members help and assist each other. The two concepts—sisterhood and solidarity—have become central to our contemporary world, characterised by a worrying crisis of democracies, which have crumbled, and by the huge problems connected to migratory flows and the waves of xenophobic hate and violence in metropolitan areas. The need for an ethics of civil life has been affirmed on many sides, and in particular by women; an ethics where values such as solidarity, welcoming others, peace, knowing how to talk to each other and the acceptance of diversity. In the tradition of female culture this has been, and is, a heritage women have cultivated and tried to transmit. While the term solidarity is linked, as we have said, to the public sphere, that of sisterhood also aims to include the private sphere, and find a link between the public and private worlds. There is, on the part of women, an attempt to find a mediation between their memory, and collective memory, because sometimes these two are in conflict. In this sense, memory plays an important role in the formation of women's identity, which is also formed in interpersonal relationships. Feminist critics highlight how important intersubjectivity is, meaning the way in which the "I" is structured by the interaction with others, and, more generally, the way in which it is moulded and forged by society (Fortunati 2013). As I have already highlighted in other essays, for the last twenty years women have stressed the importance of emotions. In her books, USA philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2001) has made an effort to understand how mature deliberation and education of intersubjective feelings may contribute to the development of a democratic society. The reciprocity of love means respect for the personality of others: indeed, love helps us to perceive the qualitative oneness of other people, thus fostering understanding of those who are different from us, and allows us to understand what we are capable of. Emotions such as love or compassion offer not only greater mutual comprehension, but also the understanding of

the self, one's own capabilities, and consequently, in the case of women, the awareness of their own capabilities. Women underline the importance of reinforcing their own identities, of acquiring empowerment and agency, the capacity of knowing how to act in complex and difficult situations.

## 1

Recent women's criticism interested in transnational literatures has highlighted the importance of ethics in their critical methodology. In discussing the centrality of ethics, they refer to certain ideas and enter into a discussion with Levinas, the philosopher who stressed the supremacy of ethics over philosophy. The concepts of responsibility, justice and proximity to the other are taken up by women critics who have underlined how, in dialoguing with women who belong to different political and historical contexts, the attention to the other is central, implying as it does a different way of being.

Being responsible means not only being willing to answer the other, but also answering for the other in a disinterested inter-relationship. Then talking to the other immediately becomes something more than simply talking, speaking to the other, it becomes seeing otherwise. As Levinas states in his illuminating pages on the iconicity of the face, the word and being aware of the other, speaking and the face are anchored to each other. Answering is becoming responsible, and becoming responsible is responding. In this sense, and only in this sense, speaking becomes dialogue (Levinas [1961] 1969).

Women not only highlight the importance of being humble when approaching the other, but also the willingness they need to have in order to understand the other. Women, that is, underline how fundamental the new way of relating to the other is, where feelings and the sphere of affection acquire great value. The thought of "how" compels one's gaze to widen, forces constant and thorough reassessments. The thought of "how" obliges forgotten thoughts to be remembered, and encourages the emergence of both implications and misunderstandings embedded in daily thoughts and actions. In this perspective, the thought of "how" does not only mean to know things but also to perceive and feel them, to practice them with affection.

Women critics underline that in the dialogue with women belonging to other cultures it is not sufficient to know them, but they emphasise the importance of *a new ethics*. This is indeed an innovative aspect, since by a new ethics they mean not being focused on our self, but a willingness to listen to the other, not to impose our own thought, but to understand it. In

fact the concept of proximity relies on feelings which are the fundamental ingredients for building this new dialogue among different feminisms. In her introduction to *Women and Human Development, The Capabilities Approach*, on international feminism, Martha Nussbaum states the importance of finding a 'common ground' of values amongst women belonging to different geographic and cultural contexts (Nussbaum 2000). The base of this international feminism is not a relativistic, but a pluralistic vision. She claims that it is possible to describe a feminist praxis of philosophy, following a strongly universalistic set up, committed to respecting intercultural norms of justice, rule of law, equality, at the same time sensitive to local specificities, and to the many models in which circumstances not only shape the possibilities of choosing, but also convictions and preferences. A basic concept in Nussbaum's thought is that of "human capabilities", that is what people are actually capable of doing and being, having as their model the idea of a life worthy of the dignity of a human being. The concept of 'individual capability' is based on the principle of the individual as an end, because in the past history and even today in many countries women are not treated as "ends"<sup>1</sup>, as people possessing intrinsic dignity, worthy of being respected by laws and institutions, they are seen and treated merely as means for others' ends, be it as reproducers, caretakers, sexual objects, agents of the overall prosperity of the family. In many of Nussbaum's pages there is an echo of Virginia Woolf's words, when in *A Room of One's Own* she actually highlights how, over the centuries women had no chance of expressing their creativity, both for financial reasons and the bias patriarchal society had against them. Thus the room, the place where a writer can isolate herself to enter a creative dimension becomes the symbol and metaphor of women's condition over the centuries: the room of one's own symbolises both the womb where works of art are conceived, and the emancipation of women in economic terms.

If in the past women critics in the dialogue with other feminisms used to stress the concept of "situated knowledge", nowadays there is an increased attention to ethics and to the sphere of affection. In this sense, the features of the production of feminist thought and its scholarship are re-visited, or better, are re-visioned: it is not enough to know or just to read. But as Levinas underlines, the true reading should always presuppose

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum worked with Armatyan Sen and was a research consultant for the World Institute for Development Economic Research in Helsinki. She travelled more than once to India to observe the development projects on female conditions, because she was well aware of not knowing the problems of poor working class, women in depth.

a new mode of being, no longer focussed on itself, but ready to open to the other, to the emergence of other thoughts, other voices, different from its own. Reading must in fact usher the world of others into my own. Only thus can reading subvert from its very foundations the assumption that the world is one and only thus reading will not limit itself to an exterior and functional relationship.

In their book on minor transnationalism, Françoise Lionnet and Shumei Shih point out these concepts we tried to foreground. In their introduction they underline that in order to study what has been defined as “minor transnationalism”, it is necessary to abandon a vertical perspective where a group was hierarchically put in a higher position and find a transversal one. We should not think about binary oppositions centre versus periphery, but rather need to underline the relationships among minor transnationalisms (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 8).

For this reason, the rhizome model is useful for understanding the new geography that Azade Seyhan defines as “The Third Space” (Azade 2000, 3). It was born by migratory flows and diasporas in different communities. The rhizome encourages the building of lateral “networks” among minority groups. The new planetary geography is not founded on hierarchy, on a vertical structure that implies the incorporation of a minor community into a major one in order to get citizenship or recognition. For historical reasons the politics of resistance prevailed over solidarity among ethnic communities, and has prevented politics of “international minority alliances”. Women critics preparing to operate in this field of research must constantly challenge the founding paradigms of Western culture, and humbly learn to be taught by women who have had different life-stories and different experiences. On this matter, once again, what Nussbaum says is important (Nussbaum 2000), when describing the life routes of Jayamma and Vasanti, two Indian women, who, despite living in different geographical contexts, being of different religion and social status, both show the same tenacious desire to develop some of their capacities. They wish to be independent, economically self-sufficient, in particular in their quest for competence, mastery and control of their life. Two women who have tried to understand and develop their inner capacities, and, however, develop them in relation to their social context, interacting with the latter. The American philosopher states that too often Western feminist theorists do not take into consideration specific details of day-to-day life and the dynamics of the poverty that are instead essential for understanding the quality of life of women working in poor countries (Franceschi 2018).

The same desire to experience different types of lives can be found in feminist critic Stanford Friedman’s essay, where the author hopes that

women will find not only new transnational theories and methodologies but also to open up their archives: "I ask that we widen the archive out of which we theorize about narrative, that is, move outside our comfort zones, engage with narratives and narrative theories from around the world" (Friedman 2011, 24).

The relationship with the other returns in even more complex terms, because migratory flows have stratified and complicated the concepts of ethnicity, race and citizenship: "...the fluidity and complexity of our transnational moment, where migration, travel, and diaspora can no longer be clearly distinguished by intention and duration, nor by national citizenship and belongings" (Shih 2005, 74) From a methodological point of view what Shu-mei Shih tells about "the affect" resulting from the meeting with the other, is very important:

... the prominence of affect as a subjective expression of desire, feeling, and emotions in discursive and political encoding of difference" since it has a direct effect on the relationship with the other: the key to transnational communication is the ability and willingness to situate oneself in both ones' position and the other's position, whether on the plane of gender, historical context, or discursive paradigms. ... the challenge before us is how to imagine and construct a mode of transnational encounter that can be "ethical" in the Levinasian sense of non-reductive consideration of the other, for which the responsibility of the self towards the other determines the ethicality of the relationship. (Shih 2005, 100)

Women scholars refer to Levinas's thought because the other is never reduced to a mere object of knowledge and subjectivity is defined in terms of the heteronomy present in the other. They underline the importance of a dialogue that takes into consideration the history of colonization and imperialism and the political-social spaces where it takes place. Only in this way we can think about a transnational politics based on interaction, communication and representation.

The term representation is used to underline how essential literature and imagination are for learning and evaluating this new mental attitude. A concept Nussbaum also underlines, giving precedence in her books, despite being a philosopher, to transdisciplinary research, and spotlighting the heuristic value of literature, especially that of the great Greek tragedians, to understand the dynamics of emotions and their dignity. (Nussbaum 2000; Bauman and Mazzeo 2017).

The importance of ethics on the behaviour we should assume towards the other can make women aware that one of the limits in this dialogue and exchange is to adopt "a monistic perspectival narrowness in scholarship".

Women propose a transversal and trans-positional politics, where being ethical is able to shift position to those of the other and many others beyond the binary logic of First World hegemony and Third World nationalism. This politics is sustained by the idea that the Third World should have a predominant role in the political, social and cultural transformation of the world.

## 2

In this second part I have taken two examples from two female authors, Virginia Woolf and Elisabeth Strout, who, in their novels *To the Lighthouse* (1925) and *Amy and Isabelle* (1998), respectively, have represented sisterhood and solidarity between women and have shown how women in particular are capable of bestowing care, love and understanding the other (men/women). Two writers who are aware of living in a violent, aggressive, hierarchical and competitive society and for this reason propose a community characterised by values such as empathy, solidarity and conviviality.

In *To the Lighthouse* the theme of welcoming is expertly developed in chapter 17 of the first part, which describes the dinner party Mrs Ramsay organises for her guests in the family's summer house on the isle of Skye, in the Hebrides. *To the Lighthouse* was written in 1925, during the writer's artistic maturity, when she had honed and developed the narrative techniques of the new novel, which aimed to be in opposition to the realist novel, by its subtle psychological introspection of its characters through the stream of consciousness, by its new psychological conception of time and the multiple points of view. *To the Lighthouse* is a modernist novel, characterised by experimental writing: Woolf pursues her research, which deconstructs realist novels and places her together with the greatest twentieth century writers, from Proust to Joyce. Thus, in *To the Lighthouse* the various points of view of the characters intertwine, plot is no longer essential, but rather the perceptions, impressions and sensations that overlap in the minds of the various characters. The novel is divided in three parts; in the first part, *The Window*, the action is concentrated in one day and is dominated by the mother, and her son, James; the second part, *Time passes*, tells what happens to the family over the space of ten years, the war, Mrs Ramsay's death, the death of one of the sons in the war; and finally, the last part, *The Lighthouse*, where the two actions interrupted in the first part, namely, Lily's picture and the landing to the lighthouse, are completed. The novel, as the writer herself stated, has deep



autobiographical roots<sup>2</sup>: Virginia was over forty and worked, with deep-felt nostalgia, on her childhood and teen age memories: Mrs Ramsay was a form of idealisation of her mother, who for both sisters, Vanessa and Virginia, represented a more open conception of life compared to that of Leslie Stephen, a man of letters, a biographer, the typical product of Cambridge University, firmly believing in man's supremacy. A widower of his second wife in 1895, he had taken upon himself to educate his children: Virginia and Vanessa had to bear the weight of his authoritarian personality. The two sisters' feminist outlook grew to fruition during their childhood and adolescence, dominated by a possessive, authoritarian father. Despite the differences in personality and having operated in two diverse artistic fields, for all their lives, both of them joined forces to oppose and subvert the rules and order of a patriarchal society which had always excluded women from universities and sanctioned the incompatibility between having intellectual talent and being female.

Chapter 17 exemplifies the conception of the dining table as skilful welcome, and the character of Mrs Ramsay becomes the central element for this to be accomplished. She not only symbolises the maternal feminine, but she is also Dike, the goddess of justice that gathers and connects the various, dispersed dinner guests round the table.

The dinner has its prelude in Mrs Ramsay's donning her "vestments" and in her choice of jewels to wear, helped by her children, Rose and Jaspers: everything must be perfect, also from an aesthetic point of view, not only must the table be decorated with plates of fruit and candelabras, but also by the elegance of the beautiful and charming hostess who, as the authoress informs us, has a regal aspect. The capacity of savouring the food is linked to the fact of the table possessing a quality of refinement. It is a dinner for fifteen guests, announced by the loud clanging of the gong.

... when the great clangour of the gong announced solemnly, authoritatively, that all scattered about, in attics, in bedroom, on little perches of their own, reading, writing, putting the last smooth of their hair, or fastening dresses, must leave all that, and the little odds and ends on their washing table and dressing tables, and the novels on the bed-tables, and the diaries which were so private, and assemble in the dining room for dinner. (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 112)

Dinner starts and it is charged with deep symbolic values, because during the meal, in the consciousness of the various characters, thought about their existence and their feelings all overlap: a dinner opening with a mood

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<sup>2</sup> See the Diaries of Virginia and Vanessa, and the letters they exchanged.

of great tension, but which, at the end, due to the hostess's great skill in building bridges and uniting people, will dissipate.

Guests enter the dining room one after the other and it is the hostess—of course—who assigns them to their places. As she pours the soup in the bowls, she is immediately aware that her various guests lead very different lives, characters marked by differences in personality, class, age; it will be her arduous task to create harmony and unity against the chaos and disorder reigning at the beginning of the meal. A difficult task that Woolf compares to that of a sailor:

... as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea. (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 114)

Although aware of the difficulty, Mrs Ramsay embarks on this perilous journey: she is sitting at the head of the table and, through the stream of consciousness technique, Woolf highlights the discrepancy between what the hostess is thinking and what she is doing (serving her guests their soup). The guests, ranging from Charley Tansley, a young philosopher and disciple of Mr Ramsay, to William Bankes, a botanist and an old family friend, from Augustus Carmichael, a poet, to the engaged couple, Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley, and from Lily Briscoe, a painter to the Ramsay children, despite being wildly different, will manage to communicate and create a community thanks to the hostess's adroitness in mediating between and connecting people. At the beginning of dinner each guest is like a monad, separated from the rest and immersed in their own thoughts, incapable of communicating with others. Mrs Ramsay, together with her friend Lily Briscoe, is immediately aware of this, and they will both make an effort to unite and connect the various dinner guests.

The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere ... Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separately. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three, one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper. (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 113)

In the expression “the sterility of men” the important element of the difference between the two main characters, Mr and Mrs Ramsay, starts to emerge; Mrs Ramsay's personality and character are very different from those of her husband. Mr Ramsay is all rationality, he is rigid, unyielding, and selfish; his knowledge is detached, objective, he does not possess the characteristics of true knowledge, which is what makes us move and startle. He is the emblem of the frustrated intellectual, endlessly requiring continuous validation; a man who is always needing public recognition and the admiration of others. Mrs Ramsay, on the other hand, represents, together with Lily Briscoe, an inquiring, lively and intuitive personality, always in search of knowledge. Those are the qualities that make her capable of keeping very different personalities united and dissipating tensions and oppositions. Mrs Ramsay's knowledge is emotional, it induces “moments of being”, it tears the veil that hides, covers the essence of things, to discover their true light; it is knowledge that begs to be shared. It is no coincidence then, to remember that for Woolf the true artist is androgynous, can unite sensitivity and intellect, the two Jungian categories of *animus* and *anima*, the two ‘female’ and ‘male’ principles.

Mrs Ramsay knows how to welcome, understand and comprehend, and this is the difference between man and women. A difference that transpires from the very first lines of the novel, when, answering her son James on whether the trip to the lighthouse will happen, she says “Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow” (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 7). Her motherly ‘yes’ is the word that holds the gift and the promise of what is possible, it is a word of love, understood as charity and mercy; the opposite of the father, who says no. Going to the lighthouse will not be possible, the wind is against it, the landing impossible, the father adheres to the conditions of time and place. The words of the father break the illusion, he holds the power of denial, of negation.

During dinner the motif of men's prejudice against women returns, in the character of Charles Tansley, the young philosopher who is Mr Ramsay's pupil and protégé, who harbours no respect for women, does not believe in their intellectual possibilities and reveals misogynistic attitudes towards young Lily's talent as a painter. According to him, women cannot write, they cannot paint: “Women made civilization impossible with all their ‘charm’, all their silliness.” (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 116).

It will indeed be Mrs Ramsay who breaks the silence prompting William Bankes to speak; masterfully, Woolf describes the scene, dwelling on the thoughts occupying the minds of all fellow guests. The dinner is only apparently a social duty, because the characters, in the streaming of their thoughts, express their worries, their anxieties, and their

problems. Thus Charles Tansley suffers from a strong inferiority complex due to his being from a lower class compared to the Ramsays, and of being poorer, too. "He had come down in his ordinary clothes. He had not got any dress clothes" (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 116). An inferiority expressed by wanting to be at the centre of attention, in his addressing Lily Briscoe aggressively and snappishly; he wants to talk and, for this very reason, Lily gives him the opportunity to speak. The conversation deals with futile subjects, but because Woolf allows us to penetrate, via her stream of consciousness, into the characters' thoughts, their inner psychology, such subjects acquire importance. The scene is described following the points of view of the various guests, sitting round the long table. Woolf's talent is that of bearing in mind the various points of view: Mrs Ramsay thinks of the wasted opportunities in her life, of how much she loved her children and how much she would have wanted to keep them close always; Lily, with a mix of revulsion and attraction, of Charles Tansley; in the meanwhile, Charles thinks of his studies and his appearance, his shabby clothes; and Paul of his newly declared love for Minta, while Mr Bankes discusses politics with the host. The two female characters' willingness to talk to all the guests and give them the chance to discuss various topics, from politics to the daily lives of fishermen, makes them all release their tension and soothe their anxieties.

The central moment of the dinner is when Mrs Ramsay gives instruction to light the candles and the room lights up.

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round the table, for the night was now shut off by the panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 131-132)

The candles highlight the mood of order and peace filling the room, created thanks to Mrs Ramsay: a room that now gives off a sense of security, in opposition to the fluctuating, chaotic, misshaped world outside. The climax of the scene is marked by the entry of the main course, the *Boeuf en Daube*, a French recipe of Mrs Ramsay's mother, and there spreads, in the room "... an exquisite scent of olives and oil and juice rose from the great brown dish as Marthe, with a little flourish, took the cover off" (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 135).

The guests now feel they are an integral part of a community and can savour this delicious dish thanks to the miracle wrought by Mrs Ramsay. Even stiff Mr Ramsay, who had darkened because his friend Augustus had had two bowls of soup, an inadmissible sign of greediness in his eyes, is now placated. And while Mrs Ramsay chooses, with the utmost care, a piece of meat for their friend Bankes, she is thinking of the love of the two fiancés, Minta and Paul, who arrived, alas, late for dinner, but who are now there, their love irradiating the others at the table.

This will celebrate the occasion—a curious sense rising in her, at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two emotions were called up in her, one profound—for what could be more serious than the love of man for woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death; at the same time these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering eyed, must be danced round with mockery, decorated with garland. (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 135-136)

Mrs Ramsay is by now convinced that a connection has been established amongst the diners, because they all chat and eat convivially: her soul is placated and a sense of peace and restfulness envelops her.

Everything seemed right. Just now she has reached security, she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends ... there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change and shines out. ... in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had once today already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain ... Here she felt, putting the spoon down, was the still space that lies about the heart of things, where one could move or rest ... (Virginia Woolf [1925] 1992, 141-142)

With Emily Strout's novel *Amy and Isabelle*, we are transported to 1960s America, to a small provincial town like so many others, Shirley Falls, having a river, a big factory, and the residential area, separated from the former by the river itself. Emily Strout, one of the most promising writers in the contemporary American landscape, won the Pulitzer prize in 2009 for her novel, *Olive Ketteridge*. Despite being her first novel, *Amy and Isabelle*, published in 1998, presents a well-constructed plot (one travels from the sweltering summer to then go back in time to winter and then return, at the close of the book, to autumn) and the characters are

finely described from a psychological point of view. The novel centres on the difficult relationship between Isabelle, the mother, and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Amy, and their difficulties in communicating and expressing their feelings and affection. The mother is not ready to manage the great love and tenderness she feels for her daughter, which she is not able to reveal. It has been said that Strout is a writer capable of deep psychological insight, as well as of intense realism; it is her realistic technique that enables her to describe the dark, violent side of America, and in particular to lay bare the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of its middle class, in a steeply provincial town, engaged in preserving decorum and facades, but incapable of showing solidarity and empathy towards people in difficulty and needing help. In the opening pages of the novel Strout recounts the disappearance and kidnapping of twelve-year-old Debbie Key Donne, events the two women follow every evening on the local television news. A realistic technique that Strout also uses to describe the details of objects, the physical features of characters, the landscape, and, above all, flowers. Details described with painstaking precision, which are charged with deep symbolic meaning.

Like in the great European realist novels of the nineteenth century, Strout establishes a close link between the two main characters' physical appearance and their moods and their psychology. Their outer appearance mirrors their inner life. The mother is always impeccably turned out, wearing tights even in the sweltering heat of the summer when the narrated events take place, her plain coloured hair always tied in an orderly bun. Her posture is rigid, restrained, as if she wanted to keep a secret she does not want or dare to share with anyone else. Within the factory's microcosm, she has an attitude of superiority towards the other women, since she feels invested with her role as personal assistant to the factory's head, Avery Clark, with whom she is secretly in love. Her daughter Amy is an introverted adolescent, going through that trying age characterised by a strong, intense need for love; unlike her mother, she wears her beautiful wavy, golden blond hair in a mane. From the very first pages of the book Strout describes the difficult relationship between the two women by means of metaphor. Amy and Isabelle work in the same factory, their desks are distant, but it is as if a black line kept them united, no thicker than a pencil mark, a black thread Amy perceives as suffocating because Isabelle will not slacken it. Two women who are incapable of communicating, living in a house isolated from the rest of the town, a mother and a daughter living for each other: this represents the only emotional landscape they know and it is for this very reason that they suffer a deep-seated and harrowing loneliness. In the months preceding