

RETHINKING SEXUAL DIFFERENCE: THE SUPREMACY OF ALTERITY OVER IDENTITY IN DACIA MARAINI'S *VOCI*

Grazia Sumeli Weinberg

Sommario

*Il pensiero della differenza sessuale è un fatto sempre attuale nelle opere di Dacia Maraini anche se, ogni volta, si ripresenta nelle vesti più svariate e con toni più o meno accesi. Nelle opere più recenti che seguono il filone del lavoro di contestazione, l'autrice si addentra con somma destrezza nei temi scabrosi dell'incesto e della violenza sessuale non tanto per sfatare il culto della famiglia, ma per risalire al tempo primigenio del processo di socializzazione dell'individuo. L'argomento trattato nel romanzo, *Voci* (1994), un giallo in apparenza con risvolti mondani, vuole essere essenzialmente provocante, vuole mettere a disagio anche il lettore più accorto, il quale non può fare a meno di riconoscere, se solo precariamente, la natura profondamente ambigua che prevale sui rapporti tra uomo e donna. Di questi rapporti, che danno forma e concretezza alla realtà circostante dell'individuo, all'autrice interessa capirne la dinamica e, per estensione, il motivo dello stato di perenne conflittualità tra ricerca di identità e relazione con l'altro.*

The present article deals with the specificity of female sexuality and with the ethics of sexual difference as reflected in the works

of Dacia Maraini. Above all, it deals with the persistent influence of patriarchy in the lives of women today. Indeed, one of Maraini's latest novels, *Voci (Voices)*¹, is about love, but also about incest and violence and cannibalism, and central to the plot is the figure of the father. The story of *Voci*, heavily indebted to the thriller genre, relies on the disturbing discovery by a radio journalist, who is both narrator and main character, of the murder of a young neighbour of hers by the girl's stepfather. The enquiry leads the narrator face to face with a recurrent phenomenon in our society, and onto the slippery road of interpersonal relationships among members of a family when she attempts to unravel its secrets, its interdictions and its closely guarded rituals. The association of violence and the family in Maraini's novel should not surprise us. The high incidence of rape in South Africa has made us familiar with the notion that such violence upon women has its roots primarily within the inner circles of the family.

The subject matter treated in *Voci* is not unique. Throughout her career as a writer, Dacia Maraini's works have dwelled upon the figure of the father as a ubiquitous presence in the lives of her female characters. The father, for whom her various fictional subjects bear a boundless love, acts as a catalyst for Maraini's poetic discourse, primary signifier, and indispensable key to the subject's entry into the complex web of relationships with the world and her own body. The author's vision premised on paternal violence — a violence which she extends to all men who wield power and who use this power to the detriment of women — is biographical in its origins:

¹ *Voci*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1994.

Lacking ideological self-knowledge, [woman] is unaware of the pillage by male society at the expense of her imagination, of her artistic vitality. There is no doubt that the “fathers” have fed upon the imagination of the “daughters” by committing true acts of artistic cannibalism.²

A deep sense of parental betrayal characterizes the consciousness of Maraini's heroines whose malaise acts as a metaphor for the condition of women in our society. In response, the daughter's quest is to confront the nature of fatherly love. The underlying structure of each of the author's works, despite the many diverse modes of presentation, assumes the form of an investigation which, though still leaving many questions unanswered, leads to some startling discoveries, noted for the brutality of their content. Yet, as Maraini's subject struggles to come to terms with the father's devouring presence, a father much loved and much refused, she says, behind the façade of the normality of daily existence which her books admirably portray, lurks the homicidal tendencies of a daughter who “never quite managed to kill off the father inside her”³.

A devouring father and a patricidal daughter: at first glance, these are the extremes upon which Maraini pitches her discourse in the search for a female identity against a background where the existence of the father entails the annihilation of the daughter and vice versa. The duality, as in all polarisations, can be read as Maraini's attempt to establish the female “I” as an autonomous

² Dacia Maraini, “Nota critica”, in Biancamaria Frabotta, *Donne in poesia. Antologia della poesia femminile in Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi*, Roma, Savelli, 1976: 31 (my translation).

³ Grazia Cherchi, [interview with Dacia Maraini], “Padre mio, amore mio”, in ‘Produzione cinematografica’, *Cinema, letteratura, arti visive*, Milano, Gulliver, 1979: 63 (my translation).

unity, free at last of paternal influence. It is an attempt which, because of its emphasis on female identification, can be charged as self-contradictory since unity, it is argued, is the prerogative of a masculinized self. Other famous exponents of sexual difference — think of Luce Irigaray, the Paduan group of Diotima, and even of Julia Kristeva — have been accused of biological reductionism by Anglo-American feminists, that is, of making the mistake to look for an essence of female nature or experience⁴. The “feminine”, according to these critics, cannot be represented: it should be placed outside the bounds of the knowable; it should be mobilized as a site of disruption of the symbolic. There is no denying the validity of this statement, but in taking up this position, argues Christine Battersby, no thought has been given to woman’s potential to transform the actual⁵.

I would like to discuss that, for a writer like Maraini, to rethink sexual difference means positing a subject that is neither completely free nor autonomous, a subject that is “marked — ‘scored’ — into specificity by its relationships with ‘otherness’ and yet is itself capable of agency and of resisting modes of domination”. “This self”, continues Battersby, “is not only shaped by ‘the other’, it is also self-shaping as potentiality is transformed into actuality via echo and the feedback loops of memory”⁶. Whether one likes it or not, the body and consciousness have

⁴ Two works come to mind which present a counter argument against this criticism: *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva’s Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver, New York, Routledge, 1993, and Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998. Particularly convincing in Oliver’s book are chapters by Ewa Ziarek, “Kristeva and Levinas: Mourning, Ethics, and the Feminine”; Alison Weir, “Identification with the Divided Mother: Kristeva’s Ambivalence”, and Tina Chanter, “Kristeva’s Politics of Change: Tracking Essentialism with the Help of a Sex/Gender Map”.

⁵ Christine Battersby, *op. cit.*: 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 12.

been historically and culturally shaped, and in her work Maraini develops a relational self using woman as a key. While it would be futile to speak of a female fixed essence, she insists that her duty as a writer is to represent woman as different.

“There can be no socio-political transformation”, says Julia Kristeva in an interview, “without a transformation of subjects: in other words, in our relationship to social constraints, to pleasure, and more deeply, to language”⁷. Kristeva, in her book *Strangers to Ourselves*⁸, calls for the need for a third phase of feminism. Whereas in the first, feminists focused on the sameness of the sexes, and during the second, on their differences, in the third phase, the focus is on the ethics of respect for what cannot be known, respect, as she puts it, for an irreconcilable difference⁹. By elaborating the idea of the foreigner as stranger to the stranger within each of us, Kristeva develops the concept of a split subject in the sphere of social interaction and politics. Only by accepting that we are incomplete, that a radical strangeness is built into our psyche by way of the unconscious, can the possible, the virtual be reasserted. Only when faced with the unknown and with anxiety over nothingness, can a person, caught up in the denial of difference, find an opening towards the new. Like Kristeva, Maraini sees woman in present society as the Other that disturbs identity, for woman,

⁷ “Woman Can Never Be Defined”, trans. Marilyn A. August, *New French Feminism: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, New York, Schocken, 1981: 141.

⁸ Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991.

⁹ See “Women’s Time”, trans. S. Hand in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, and in *Shifting Scenes: Interviews on Women, Writing, and Politics in Post-68 France*, trans. K.A. Jensen, ed. Alice A. Jardine and Anne M. Menke, New York, Columbia U.P., 1991.

she seems to suggest in her work, provides the opportunity to face the split that is in all of us.

An *excursus* into Maraini works will reveal her commitment more clearly since, ultimately, the issue at stake for her feminist vision of the world is the possibility of affirming difference while retaining subjectivity.

Dwelling on the violence to which women are subjected under the rule of the father, the author purposefully links this act of brutality to cannibalism — a theme, as we have seen, which is central to her novel *Voci* and to many other of her works. Let me remind my audience before I go on — for it may be convenient to relegate the practice of eating human flesh to primitive tribes in some remote islands in the Pacific — that, as recent anthropological surveys have revealed, our very own European ancestors were cannibals, preying on the “vulnerable among themselves”¹⁰. Is one also to forget the ritual of the sacrificial lamb for the Jews, or its symbolic replacement by the body of Christ with the sacrament of holy communion? Can it be far-fetched, then, to assume that a feminist like Maraini, whom I will liken to an intrepid archaeologist, could have unearthed, through the act of writing, the remains of this pattern of behaviour in the psyche of modern man?

Maraini’s style of feminism is ideologically radical in nature since she is unwilling to rest its case with the attainment of equality and the entrenchment of civil rights across the gender lines. Conscious of the historical position occupied by women and of their exclusion from the seat of power, she has exploited, and still exploits in her works, the negative role which women

¹⁰ *The Star*, Friday, June 6 1997, has published a report from SAPA-DPA released from Madrid on Ancestor Man, describing him as the missing link between Homo Sapiens and earlier human species.

have been forced to play over the centuries by turning it to their advantage. She argues most strongly that, because of their position, women have a special access to outsideness or foreignness. Like Kristeva, who extends this position of privilege to many artists and creative thinkers, Maraini sees women's marginalization as essential for the accomplishment of a true revolution in our present symbolic order¹¹. And a true revolution, for both men and women, has yet to begin, she seems to imply, as long as women remain entrapped within a reality which is laid down for them in masculine terms.

Armed with the conviction that true power is in the appropriation of words, long denied to women, she inscribes on the blank page those fragments of female identity resulting from the specular distortions of a male-centred vision of society. The text, then, becomes the body of woman, a mutilated body at that, while the act of writing functions as the locus in which the speaking subject gives substance to an absence. It is her belief, which she shares with other female authors, that in this manner, woman will rediscover and recreate a consciousness that is uniquely her own. Turning the tables on the father, Maraini's discourse, by now a distinct daughter's voice, is based on an act of theft, as Adriana Cavarero puts it¹². By stealing back those alienated figures of women, her female subjects are able to come face to face, through the cracks on the surface of the father's representation of them, with the horror of their non-identity¹³.

¹¹ "Women's Time", *op. cit.*

¹² Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. Trans. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995.

¹³ Biancamaria Frabotta, *Donne in poesia*, *op. cit.*: 13.

Maraini's redeployment of female figures draws mainly from everyday life. Foremost in her mind, and a driving force in all her writings, is the cruelty of the mutilation inflicted on the daughter's body by the father. One of the most recent and convincing example published in 1991 is to be found in her novel *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria (The Silent Duchess)*. Marianna's disability — she is speechless — is the shock result of a traumatic experience buried deep in her childhood. Many of Maraini's female characters, loath to recognize their beloved father's complicity in this act of violence towards them, are bereft not only of speech but also of memory which deprives them altogether of a sense of awareness of time and of history as the necessary tools for the recovery of a social consciousness. Destined by a cruel fate to embody the role of victims, these women will unwittingly take for normal their maimed and disfigured lives, at times fiercely defending the *status quo* to the death. Their mutilation, far from being a metaphorical device to illustrate the condition of women, is transformed in these instances on the written page into the concrete evidence of the psychosomatic symptoms which plague their existence.

How, the author asks, can a father, who is so loving and tender, do this to his own daughter? What then is the nature of this love which is the cause of so much violence? By probing these questions in her works, Maraini finds other, more gruesome manifestations of the daughter's mutilation, culminating in what she calls "cannibalismo amoroso" (loving cannibalism) in her novel *Voci*. Yet, as I have intimated, the presence of paternal cannibalism is not new, nor is it a recent development in the author's imagery. It gives unity and structure to the dialogue with the father which Maraini began in her first collection of poems published in 1966 and with the telling title of

Crudeltà all'aria aperta (*Cruelty in the open air*). The father-daughter relationship finds its most baffling expression in a singular poem called “Filastrocca”, a nursery rhyme that will also reappear in the later novel, *Voci*. It is a chilling tale of a king who, for pure enjoyment, tortures and kills his three daughters after having committed incest with them. His anguish, at the end, for the loss, hinges upon the awareness that, with his daughters' death, gone are also his playthings and the source of his pleasure. An apt allusion, I think, to the closure effected by a totalizing male subject.

The most remarkable feature in these poems, apart from the realization of paternal tyranny and betrayal, is the open display of a morbid attachment to the father, of the subject's willing surrender to his seductive charm, and of the ultimate sense of loss and death that she experiences when she tries to cut herself off from his love. Fatherly love, therefore, has the power to give or to take away, leaving the daughter in both instances in an unenviable position since her choice, if she wishes to express her love in the world of the father, falls between inauthenticity and non-being.

The duality that besieges women within the present social order is further explored, with a view to finding a way out of their predicament, in the third collection of poems, *Mangiarmi pure* (*Devour me too*), published in 1978. Turning to a hypothetical lover, a substitute father figure in the lives of women — and indeed Maraini in *Bagheria* refers to her long-standing partner, Alberto Moravia, as “l'altro padre-figlio” (her other father-son)¹⁴

¹⁴ In the poem “Se essere uomo”, the subject speaks of a dream in which she turns the man “t'ho/fatto padre e figlio e amante” (53). Think also of the leitmotif of Don Juan and the definition of the figlio amante. In *Bagheria* (Milano, Rizzoli, 1993: 63) she speaks of Alberto Moravia as “l'altro padre-figlio, compagno di viaggi che ho amato nella mai vita”.

— the poetic “I” examines the nature of their love. When the relationship is found wanting of mutual respect and acceptance of the diversity of the other, the subject, unwilling to shatter the lover's illusion, offers herself up as a “cruda vivanda” (crude food) to appease his hunger and greed for divine self-containment.

Recognizing the inability of the male to take full cognizance of the presence of otherness as embodied by woman in a love relationship leads the author to a shift of focus from the realm of the father to that of the mother in the novel *Lettere a Marina* (*Letters to Marina*) published in 1981. Maraini's need is unmistakable: lacking the space to represent herself in the phallogocentric world, woman must henceforth look upon her sisters and set out with them on the path that will lead them back to Demeter, the earth goddess. But even in the world of the maternal, joyous as the reunion may be in releasing the forces of the repressed, the subject must face the problem of sameness. Moreover, by condemning the father of breaking up the original unity with the mother, women fail to acknowledge that “the phantasy of complete gratification in the phallic mother” — a mother that is born from the need to repudiate and refuse to identify with the given symbolic order — “is itself a product of the patriarchal order and is essential to the preservation of that order”¹⁵.

A woman's world turned solely upon itself is none other than a reactionary force, the opposite side of the same coin present in patriarchy. Once more, women are not other, but a specular

¹⁵ Allison Weir, “Identification with the Divided Mother: Kristeva's Ambivalence”, in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, op. cit.: 80.

phenomenon of the paternal. The true road towards the mother, Maraini points out, lies elsewhere:

The old institutionalized maternal love based on fear and sacrifice is not enough. There is need for a love that is courageous, a refusal to be victims [...] [U]ntil a strong line of love, of approval and of example, exists from mother to daughter, from woman to woman, from one generation to the next, women will continue to wander alone in the wilderness.¹⁶

Though the return to the maternal may be a starting point for the recovery of the suppressed and of preverbal innocence — the *chora*, as Kristeva defines it¹⁷ — woman's closure away from man is equally devastating for the individual as it blocks the entrance into the symbolic order. The myth of Demeter speaks unambiguously: the daughter Persephone must live for six months with her infernal lover and six with her mother. The balance is even, and the dwelling in the maternal will bring ultimately its own evils, for the same fury of self-containment sets sister upon sister, in a cannibalistic feast of narcissistic proportions.

The return to the father's world in the author's recent novel, *Voci*, takes the exclusion of women as a given and refocuses attention on the ongoing violence between father and daughter by unhinging the mechanism of cannibalism, a “loving cannibalism” [cannibalismo amoroso] as Maraini describes it.

¹⁶ *La bionda, la bruna e l'asino* (Milano, Rizzoli, 1987: 87), “Il vecchio amore materno istituzionalizzato fatto di paure e di sacrifici non basta. Occorre un amore coraggioso, rifiutarsi di essere vittime [...] fine a che non esisterà un forte filo ininterrotto di amore, approvazione ed asempio, da madre a figlia, da donna a donna, di generazione in generazione, le donne continueranno a vagare solitarie in territorio ostile”.

¹⁷ *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. M. Waller, New York, Columbia U.P., 1984.

What indeed lies behind this act of devouring one's own closest of kin? And how is one to explain the daughter's acquiescence to be thus immolated? *Voci* is a story of seduction and incest and of hidden desires and fears. It is a story, too, of the origins of the Oedipal complex and of Freud's primal horde of *Totem and Taboo*. Ultimately, it is the story of the way in which our civilization has shaped its own laws of reality, for the cannibalism practised within the innermost recesses of family living is, in a final analysis, not based on brutish but rather on divine hunger. Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday elaborates further:

[...] the events associated with cannibalism refer not to hunger but to the physical control of chaos. For example, the victim is cast as the living metaphor for animality, chaos, and the powers of darkness — all those things people feel must be tamed, destroyed, or assimilated in the interest of an orderly social life. Cannibalism is then associated with a destructive power that must be propitiated or destroyed, and the act of propitiation or destruction is directly tied to social survival.¹⁸

Cannibalism, she continues, is directly related to the “structures that predicate being” and with the symbolic vehicles that are bound up with the opposition between the internal self and the external other¹⁹. In other words, it deals with relationships and with the cultural construction of the subject and of consciousness.

The phrase “cannibalismo amoroso” encapsulates the contradictions inherent in Western patriarchal society based on the view of woman as object. If, according to Claude

¹⁸ *Divine Hunger Cannibalism as a Cultural System*, Cambridge, CUP, 1986: 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 33.

Levi-Strauss, the taboos around incest have evolved to facilitate the broader social exchange —

the prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others — ²⁰

then the father must henceforth let go of his daughter. On the other hand, the father's own existence as a father, his identity as the dominant member of the family clan relies on his possessive hold of the daughter in obedience to an ancient telluric force: is she not “flesh of his flesh, and blood of his blood?”²¹. Within the paradigm of the paternal hierarchical system in which the mother is the property of the father, it is not the son, who as his heir is the potential rival of the father and hence will one day lay claims on her, but rather the daughter who must be subjugated and taken away from the mother, for it is the link between mother and daughter that has to be controlled to guard off the eruption of the forces of nature and the disintegration of a male-centred universe.

Seen in this context, the scope of fatherly love is based on seduction. And here I share Braudillard's definition of seduction when he says:

*[...] seduction represents mastery over the symbolic, while power represents only mastery of the real universe. The sovereignty of seduction is incommensurable with the possession of political or sexual power.*²²

²⁰ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kingship*, quoted in Judith Lewis Herman, *Father Daughter Incest*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981: 50.

²¹ *Bagheria*, op. cit.: 145.

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer, London, Macmillan, 1990: 7 (italics originally in text).

By seducing his daughter, the father's desire is to banish all memory of her ancient attachment to the mother. Incest is the father's way of containing and assimilating the maternal. And incest is linked to cannibalism, according to Peggy Reeves Sanday, which

is part of the drama of becoming a self and like the dramas uncovered by psychoanalysis, the drama of cannibalism begins with the mother, or some other entity symbolizing the whole, and follows a path that leads from the satisfaction of desire to the recognition of another consciousness through which the self comes to know the self.²³

In her novel, Maraini takes the outcome of this love relationship between father and daughter to its logical conclusion by uncovering what lies behind the social taboos which regulate it. The acts of incest and murder and cannibalism are simultaneously expressions of a loving father and symbols of a ritual in which the daughter is sacrificed on the altar of the patriarchal gods, those gods who decree that she has no identity other than that subsumed in the father. (The fate of Iphigenia comes to mind.) Guided by the father's loving hand, the victim, as I've mentioned earlier, rather than face the horror of nothingness, will willingly surrender her life to appease the hunger of the divinities. And like the newly sacrificed victims of the Aztec religious cult who during the ritual are themselves elevated to the status of gods, it is the daughter in Maraini's novel who, given no space of her own, no other outlet for her love, will paradoxically turn the logic around. It is she who, from being seduced,

²³ *Op. cit.*: 45.

becomes the seducer, enticing the father to possess her, to devour her:

[...] her body was there ready to flatter and to cajole, it was difficult to resist her, and in fact no-one could... the body of a child hungry for love, a body so yielding and so soft that it invited one to a sort of loving cannibalism [...]²⁴

In Maraini's vision of modern society the destinies of father and daughter, in the absence of the mother, are locked inexorably together in an act of mutual annihilation where the oppressor and the oppressed perversely join hands in a macabre dance of death.

(University of South Africa)

²⁴ *Voci*, 288: “[...] il suo corpo era lì a lusingarti, blandirti, era difficile resistere, nessuno resisteva in effetti ... un corpo di bambina affamata d'amore, un corpo talmente arreso e morbido che invitava ad una sorta di cannibalismo amoroso [...]”.