

## INFLUENCES OF THE EXOTIC IN MARIA MESSINA: *I RACCONTI DI CISMÈ AND ALLA DERIVA*

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### **Sommario**

I racconti di *Cismè* (1912) e il romanzo *Alla deriva* (1920) di Maria Messina contengono importanti riferimenti alla cultura giapponese che permettono di capire meglio il profilo dell'autrice. *Cismè* tratta le vicende esistenziali di un ragazzino giapponese approdando a un'evocazione autobiografica della scrittrice (l'unica volta che Messina ritrae se stessa esplicitamente in un'opera). Il legame fra il «giapponesino» e l'autrice ci rivela un nuovo aspetto della psicologia della Messina. *Alla deriva* allude alla pucciniana *Madama Butterfly*, a *Madame Chrysanthème* di Loti e a *Casa di bambola* di Ibsen; le suggestioni esotiche sono sintomo dei nuovi rapporti sociali tra uomo e donna, e contribuiscono a denunciare lo stato della condizione femminile all'interno della società patriarcale di primo Novecento.

Maria Messina's writing displays diverse influences, but her collection for children *I racconti di Cismè* (1912) and novel *Alla deriva* (1920) are conspicuous for the exotic motifs that distinguish them. Both works contain distinct references to Japanese culture, which permit deeper understanding of characterisation and plot, and also have autobiographical implications, an aspect which is important because very little autobiographical material of Messina's exists.

When considering material dealing with the Exotic, one should ask what purpose the Exotic serves. Perhaps the way the Exotic is portrayed signals its purpose. The Exotic – in terms of its opposition to a Western or Occidental discourse – has a long history of representation in European literature, art and music, and its representation has changed considerably over the centuries (if not

millennia)<sup>1</sup>. Lisa C. Arkin succinctly sums up Todorov's definition: "exoticism [is] understood as a form of relativism in which cultural knowledge is defined exclusively by the formulation of an imagined reality of the 'Other' by the European observer" (1994:304). The Exotic represents alterity, something different from our experience in Western culture. Todorov comments that "The best candidates for the role of exotic ideal are the peoples and cultures that are most remote from us and least known to us" (1993:265).

An aspect of Exoticism that has long been in the foreground, particularly in the post-colonial era when the Exotic began to be interrogated, is its implied inferiority to Western culture. Edward W. Said observes that

the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections. (2003:7-8)

A.L. MacFie points out an important function of the Exotic for those portraying it: as an escape from their own reality (65). This aspiration is well expressed by Harry Harootunian regarding the exoticism of Victor Segalen: "exoticism in his sense resembled Bovaryism<sup>2</sup> – the quest to escape the banality and boredom of everyday life where yesterday, today and tomorrow are indistinguishable" (2002:xiv). Escape is a recurring motif in literature, and often seems inseparable from the notion of the Exotic.

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<sup>1</sup> Tsvetan Todorov says that "the first famous 'exoticist' was none other than Homer" (1993:265).

<sup>2</sup> Todorov refers to "the law of bovaryism, so named after the book that Jules de Gaultier devoted to the topic (*Le Bovarysme*). Emma Bovary dreams of herself as romantic, different from what she is. In this she is not an exception but an illustration of a truth about all human beings: we are all possessed by unrealizable dreams" (332).

There has been intense debate over the evocation of the Exotic over the last century and it is a sensitive issue to explore. MacFie describes it as a problem, “the intractability of which is only equaled by its complexity” (14). The Exotic in Messina’s works is no less complex, particularly when considering the factors conditioning her writing: her position as a woman writer in an environment hostile to women’s writing (Futurism, the early days of Fascism), her position as a minor writer, excluded from the canon, who is finding her voice by testing it through the style of more prominent writers, such as Verga, Fogazzaro, D’Annunzio. She is writing during a period (1909–1928) which has seen a proliferation of works figuring the Exotic, in a time when this figuration has not yet begun to be questioned. Some of Messina’s major influences (e.g. D’Annunzio) depict the Exotic in ways that today we see as offensive. We need to explore how this affects Messina’s own depiction of the Exotic.

We begin the analysis with *I racconti di Cismè*, published in 1912 by Sandron and one of many collections Messina wrote for children. *Cismè* is unique, however, because of its setting. The Exotic governs the book almost entirely<sup>3</sup>. The cover of the collection is Japanese in style, depicting a small boy dressed in a kimono and holding a fan. The title and subheadings are in a font emulating Japanese characters.



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<sup>3</sup> A domestic source of inspiration for the story of *Cismè* is undoubtedly *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi (1883); however, here, the inverse occurs – *Pinocchio* is a wooden marionette who yearns to become a boy, while *Cismè* is a boy who wants to become a marionette.

The collection is fronted by a story entitled “La storia di Cismè”, which acts as the frame-story for the rest of the collection. It is in this frame-story that all the exoticism is gathered: the remaining stories are “Western” in atmosphere, and recall those of Hans Christian Andersen or the Brothers Grimm.

Cismè’s story follows a twisting and unpredictable path. I present a synopsis of the plot as follows, since the book is out of print and difficult to locate:

A young boy’s mother has died and his father is remarried, to a cruel woman. Beaten and unloved, Cismè passes his days outside, dreaming of art. He goes to the studio of a famous artist, Tora-san, who is patronised by the Emperor. Tora-san permits him to watch him paint. Cismè learns from him and paints better than Tora-san, which enrages the artist. Having painted a beautiful fan, he attempts to sell it, but no one will buy it. He gains access to the Princess Ozikai, but she becomes angry and chases him away. Desolate, he sits down next to a river. A puppet-maker comes along. Cismè tells him he would like to become a puppet with no emotions. A wizard transforms him into a wooden puppet that can see, hear and speak in a tiny voice. Cismè is happy, but then is forced to dance in public. This humiliates him and he begs to be dressed up as a doll and sold. Cismè is bought by a naval officer as a gift for his wife, and taken to Italy. The officer’s children begin to play with him, but then they start to abuse him. He is left in a corner of the sitting-room and sometimes is dusted by a maid. He is sad and lonely and regrets all his decisions. One day, he is sent to “Mariucca”, a young woman who spends all her days writing. She and Cismè immediately make friends, as she is the only person who has heard his tiny voice in all the time he has been a doll. As her young niece too wants to abuse Cismè, he begs Mariucca to keep him

safe, and in return he will tell her all the stories he knows. She agrees to do so.

References that enable us (Westerners) to identify the Exotic abound in this story – from the setting – Japan – to the words and names used – kimono, tatamis (mat), the mention of chrysanthemums, of great symbolic meaning to the Japanese<sup>4</sup>, the Emperor. We need to understand the portrayal of this exoticism in Messina’s story. It is useful to apply a distinction, commonly employed by post-colonialists in their studies of Orientalism, designating positions of subject and object to various parties (the foreign and the familiar). Daisuke Nishihara quotes Noriko Imazawa, the translator into Japanese of Edward Said’s seminal book *Orientalism*, in her “Afterword”: “In the structure of Orientalism, the West, as the subject or the inspector, and the East, as the object or the inspected, stand in opposition” (2005:245). Imazawa is referring to the special situation of Japan, which as a colonial power in its own right, sought to imitate Western thought in its stance towards the Orient: “Japan even adopted the Western view of the Orient and became the subject or the inspecting side of Orientalism” (1993:393-94)<sup>5</sup>. As Western readers reading an Italian book set in Japan, we need to decide whether Japan is the subject or the object. Is it being viewed from an outsider, Occidental, orientalist viewpoint, or is it viewed internally, impartially, as insiders? The answer, in my opinion, is both. Our perception begins in one way, and ends in another. We perceive instantly from the picture on the cover and the Japanese-style name in the title that it is about Japan, and decide that Japan constitutes the Exotic, an object. Messina warns her readers at the outset, in her dedication to her nieces, that the subject matter of the book is Japanese:

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<sup>4</sup> “Chrysanthemum Throne is the common name given to the Imperial throne of Japan. The chrysanthemum (kiku in Japanese) is the coat of arms of the Japanese Emperor.” ([http://www.japan-101.com/government/chrysanthemum\\_throne.htm](http://www.japan-101.com/government/chrysanthemum_throne.htm))

<sup>5</sup> Imazawa is cited in Daisuke Nishihara (245); Nishihara’s translation.

A NORA E AD ANNIE

A VOI, PICCOLINE, CHE MI AVETE FATTO INTENDERE IL  
CIANGOTTÌO DE' BIMBI E DE' PASSERI, E MI AVETE  
INSEGNATO A CERCARE LE FATE TRA LE FARFALLE E I  
FIORI, A VOI QUESTI RACCONTI DEL GIAPPONESINO  
CISMÈ, IL PIÙ FEDELE AMICO DELLA ZIA LONTANA.

The last sentence catches our attention and diverts the notion of otherness: Messina claims that Cismè is her “più fedele amico”. Additionally, suspending disbelief as we begin to read, it is easy to consider that the story-book has been written by a Japanese author for Japanese children. For a while, the reader can imagine that he is entering a world that happens to be Oriental, and is participating at first hand in this context. Thus, although it is an Oriental world, we are not regarding it from an Orientalist, outsider perspective – we are following the story from an internal, indigenous position. This is made possible also by the author not labeling anything as “exotic”, or strange: everything is an objective description of this world. For instance, it is taken for granted that the reader will understand what a *tatamis* is. It is understood from its context but not explicitly explained, which would distance the reader. This immersion in the atmosphere of Japan facilitates the reader’s participation and insider perception. Todorov explains this mechanism by showing how the reverse occurs to indicate the exoticism of a place, pointing out that in Pierre Loti’s 1870s novels, *Madame Chrysanthème* and *Aziyadé*, Loti “resigns himself to labeling sensations rather than describing them: in an ‘exotic’ land characterized by an ‘exotic grace’ he leads an ‘exotic life’. Or, if he is in the Orient (that is, in Turkey), everything strikes him precisely as ... oriental. *Aziyadé* evokes ‘the perfumes of the East’, ‘Oriental languor’, ‘Oriental luxury’” (1993:311). These descriptions have the instant effect of identifying the objects as foreign. Messina does no such thing while Cismè is on Japanese soil. She mentions the word “Japan” twice only, once in her opening line “C’era una volta, in Giappone, un ricco mercante” and again when Cismè is dreaming of Tora-San’s paintings – “i vivi colori e i meravigliosi dipinti, ammirati da tutto il Giappone” (1912:11).

Absorbed into the story and immersed in its atmosphere, we follow Cismè's adventures without perceiving overtly that he is in a "foreign" or "exotic" country, or that he himself is foreign or "other". We, subjects, perceive him as subject. For at least the part of the story that takes place on Japanese soil, we may view Messina's tale as insiders.

How similar is Messina's tale to a Japanese tale? Can we construe it as a Japanese story, and hence view it as insiders? Research into the fairytales extant in Japanese tradition reveals an interesting phenomenon, showing that Messina's tale is not that different from a Japanese one. Chieko Irie Mulhern in her article "Analysis of Cinderella Motifs, Italian and Japanese" explains that there is a centuries-old influence of *Italian* fairytales on Japanese story-telling, due to the presence of Italian Jesuit missionaries in Japan in the sixteenth century:

The Western influence is traced to the Japanese-speaking Italian Jesuits stationed in Japan during the heyday of their missionary activity between 1570 and 1614; and actual authorship is attributable to Japanese Brothers who were active in the Jesuit publication of Japanese-language religious and secular texts. (1985:1)<sup>6</sup>

Messina's use of the common beginning element of the Cinderella story in *Cismè* (the wicked stepmother) connects her story both to the Japanese tradition (which as Mulhern demonstrates has several variants of the Cinderella story) and to older Oriental tales, as well as to the familiar European versions. This familiarity allows us, as Western readers, to maintain our position as "internal" readers, as the story is not foreign enough to distance us. The Cinderella story is present in different variations in *The Arabian Nights* (Marzolph & van Leeuwen, 2004:4 and 105) and has been traced to ninth-century China. There is hence an ancient common ancestry amongst the fairytales most familiar to us, with influence moving back and forth between Europe and the Orient. Other elements in common between

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<sup>6</sup> Also see Chieko Irie Mulhern, "Cinderella and the Jesuits. An Otogizoshi Cycle as Christian Literature" (1979:409-447).

*Cismè* and Japanese tales are alienation from family, and magical transformation. By contrast, a major difference between *Cismè* and Japanese tales – particularly of the Cinderella-cycle – is the resolution, in that, unlike in the Japanese tales, there is no reunion between child and father at the end. Messina’s tale does not resolve itself by completing a circle and ousting any villains – rather, it is completely linear and ends up far from its beginning. Significantly, it is this lack of reunion (which would entail *Cismè*’s return home and reconciliation with his father)<sup>7</sup> that causes the switch of the reader’s gaze to an outsider’s view, once *Cismè* reaches Italian soil, which enables us to analyse the significance of the Exotic. Were Messina’s tale to end in the same way as traditional Cinderella-cycle tales, namely within its Japanese context, we would constantly be on the inside as viewers – and the idea of the Exotic, paradoxically, would no longer apply. The removal of *Cismè* from his native soil, by a Western man, to a Western context, forces our re-evaluation of both the story and its protagonist, and causes us to see him as something Exotic: as soon as we see him transplanted to the West, we perceive him there as a foreign object, as Other. When he is unwrapped after his long journey to Italy, the naval officer shows him to the children and explains: “– È proprio giapponese. Un fantoccino giapponese” (30). He has finally been labelled. He becomes an exotic object for display, an ornament: “*Cismè* restò solo solo fra un gatto di lana e un servizio da caffè” (32).

It is noteworthy that when *Cismè* ceases to be new and interesting, he loses his appeal as an ornament and is discarded. The presence of the Exotic in the everyday gradually deprives it of its exoticism and mystique, and it becomes commonplace. “Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism”, explains Todorov (1993:265).

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<sup>7</sup> Terri Windling points out an interesting phenomenon in the “Cinderella-Cycle” stories, citing Angela Carter (1995:392): “the father is ‘the unmoved mover, the unseen organizing principle. Without the absent father there would have been no story because there would have been no conflict’. In every version of the story I have read, the father casts a remarkably blind eye over the circumstances of his household. He quickly disappears from the story both emotionally and literally. It is not to him that the Ash Girl turns — help must come from another source” (Terri Windling, “Cinderella: Ashes, Blood, and the Slipper of Glass” <http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/forashs.html>, accessed 15 July 2010). In *Cismè* too, the father is absent and offers no help to his suffering son.



From the position of subject, Cismè gradually becomes an object: he has effectively been colonised by the naval officer to brighten up his family's life. This appropriation of the Exotic for one's own purposes brings to mind a passage by D'Annunzio in *Il piacere*:

Il cavaliere giapponese s'inoltrava reiterando i sorrisi e gli inchini.

– Vedremo stasera la principessa Issé? – gli domandò Donna Francesca d'Ateleta, che piacevasi di raccogliere ne' suoi saloni i più bizzarri esemplari delle colonie esotiche in Roma per amor della varietà pittoresca.

L'Asiatico parlava una lingua barbarica, appena intelligibile, mista d'inglese, di francese e d'italiano.

(1951:101)

The derision directed at these exotic figures, clearly portrayed as inferior and grotesque, is evident. Messina's story bears some influence of this disparaging attitude. When our gaze as reader changes from internal to external, our perception of Cismè also changes from indigenous to foreign. His new position as "Other" is exemplified by the insult levelled by Mariucca's niece at Cismè: "Brutto giapponese pelato!" (39).

Cismè's foreignness is also emphasised when he sees Mariucca write unfamiliar Latin characters for the first time: "Si era seduta e scriveva con una piccola penna. Cismè, pieno di curiosità, seguiva i ghirigori bruni e frettolosi che si rincorrevano sulla carta uno dietro l'altro" (39).

How does this "Othering" of Cismè make us feel about him? We feel a stronger sense of alienation, on his behalf. We feel pity for him seeing that he is now alone, in a foreign country, far from his roots. But in truth, Cismè arouses our pity right from the start. Cismè is turned into the Other even in his own home, by his own people. He is always placed in an inferior, humiliated position. Let us examine the instances, step by step:

1. His new stepmother beats him: “una donna rissosa e cattiva che coglieva tutte le occasioni per litigare col marito e per picchiare il figliastro Cismè” (9).
2. He is neglected and distanced from his home: “Maltrattato dalla matrigna, non curato dal padre, egli passava il tempo a strimpellare una vecchia chitarra, accoccolato su un *tatamis*, fuori dell’uscio” (10).
3. Despite his artistic talent he is chased away by the artist Tora-San: “Egli non era mai riuscito a dare, a’ suoi fiori, tinte così fresche e così delicate. – Chi ti à insegnato, serpentello?! – gridò. E lacerata la tela la buttò via. Poi, rosso dalla rabbia, scacciò Cismè a pedate. E il piccolo Cismè, tutto piangente e mortificato, tornò sul suo *tatamis*, chiedendosi quale mancanza avesse mai commessa” (13).
4. He asks another painter in the city to share his paints and brushes, in return for a share of the profits he will make by selling his artwork: “– Oh oh! esclamò Tamitai. – Sei così mingherlino che la fortuna non ti scorgerà.” (14)
5. But when Tamitai agrees, and Cismè produces a beautiful fan, no one will buy it, since “Il pittore dell’Imperatore è il grande Tora-San” (16). He is then accused of fakery by the Princess Ozikai, who warns that she can have his head cut off by the Emperor for daring to pass his work off as that of Tora-San’s: “Non ti accuso all’imperatore solo perchè sei tanto piccino e mi fai pietà” (19).
6. Once his wish to become a puppet has been realised, he is forced to share lodgings with inanimate, real puppets: “Cismè chiese a un compagno se lì si recitasse. Ma il compagno, ch’era un burattino vero, non l’intese. E Cismè si rassegnò a stare fra vicini di stucco” (26).
7. His new life as a marionette is mortifying: “Sospeso col filo fu fatto ballare goffamente, fu mandato addosso a un compagno, fu lasciato picchiare da un altro, mentre il burattinaio strillava in falsetto delle orribili sguaiataggini. Cismè, sbalordito e vergognoso, supplicava timidamente di essere lasciato in pace; ma la sua vocina era coperta da’ berci del burattinaio e dalle risate della folla. Oh! quello era un lavoro troppo penoso!” (26-7).

8. In Italy, he enjoys being played with by the children until they begin to molest him: “Tutti seri gli strapparono il parrucchino. Stavano sdrucendo il kimono quando entrò la mamma” (32).
9. He attempts to talk to the maid who dusts him: “Una volta Cismè si provò ad attaccare discorso, ma quella non l’udì. Figuriamoci se una cameriera così imbronciata, dalle mani rosse e gonfie, poteva intendere la voce d’un fantoccino di stucco! Cismè era triste e non faceva che rammaricarsi” (33).
10. Soon, however, Cismè is no longer even *seen*: “Ogni tanto veniva una cameriera tutta imbronciata; spazzava, spolverava ogni gingillo e poi spolverava anche Cismè *senza neanche guardarlo*” (33). [italics mine]
11. No longer interesting, he is sent away: “Ma proprio quando Cismè non sperava più di cambiar vita, fu rimesso nella scatola che fu chiusa in fretta mentre qualcuno ordinava: – Va’, portalo a Mariucca [...]” (34).
12. Even when he is finally almost safe with Mariucca, he is mocked by her niece: “Cismè si spaventava. Ma Mariucca sorridendo, allontanava la bambina che, indispettita, faceva le boccacce al fantoccino” (39).

Cismè is never included in society and his talents are never recognised, only envied, leading to his alienation. If attention is paid to him, it is only to deride or attempt to destroy him. Each new stage of Cismè’s misery is followed by his desire to change his circumstances, to become something different, to the point of leaving his human body behind, in order not to feel the pain of living any more – “non sentirsi più dentro un corpo” (26). However, even this does not placate his suffering, as his new circumstances also anguish him. Cismè is himself seeking out the exotic, as an escape from his own reality. But as his new reality always becomes a new source of suffering, he is constantly seeking another form of life to relieve it.

By point 9 above, it has become clear to Cismè that his eternal quest for the new has been a mistake, and that change has brought him only further sorrow: “Cismè era triste e non faceva che rammaricarsi. – Oh, mago Akil-mè, mago Akil-mè, sospirava – Mi ài fatto un bel regalo in verità! Ecco ch’io sono più infelice di quando strimpellavo

la chitarra, nel mio paese!” This constant quest for change, in order to find happiness, is a theme in itself, and serves as a moral message that may be traced all the way back to St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, Book Ten, Chapter XX: “How, then, do I seek a happy life, since happiness is not mine till I can rightly say: ‘It is enough. This is it.’” For St. Augustine, finding God is the answer to the quest for happiness: “For when I seek thee, my God, I seek a happy life”<sup>8</sup>. But for Cismè, the source of happiness seems to be peace, or at least freedom from suffering:

Fortuna che l’uscio dello studiolo non restava mai aperto! altrimenti il povero Cismè avrebbe fatto una brutta fine! Invece restò, sano e salvo, tanti e tanti anni, fra pagine bianche e fra pagine scritte, riparato da un mazzo di fiori, narrando delle storie e promettendone sempre delle altre, per paura di essere regalato ai bambini. (40)

This ending recalls the quintessential Oriental text: *The Arabian Nights*. This too is constructed as a frame-story followed by many other stories, and the frame-story – the recounting of stories, night after night, by Scheherazade in a bid to save her own life – may be seen as a possible inspiration for *Cismè*. So too must Cismè tell countless stories, to be assured freedom from harassment. This is an important, recurring theme in *The Arabian Nights*, as Irwin (1994) observes:

In the *Nights*, stories are the vehicle for saving lives – for example, the tales told by Sheherazade, or the tales told by the old men in order to save the life of the merchant who killed a jinn’s son with a carelessly discarded date stone. In the *Nights*, knowledge of a story and the ability to tell it may assure the survival of an individual.

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<sup>8</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book Ten, Chapter XX, <http://www.ourladywarriors.org/saints/augcon10.htm#chap20>, accessed 15 July 2010

Analogously it may be that in real life too knowledge of stories assists the survival of communities or of individuals within those communities. (236)

The “main virtue” of *The Arabian Nights*, according to Muhsin Mahdi, is the “communication of moral and political lessons through playful narrative appearing as though meant merely to be amusing and entertaining” (1995:21). What is Messina’s moral lesson in *Cismè*? Not to desire too much, in case we receive what we desire? It is hard to judge, because it is hard to judge Cismè for having made the decisions he made. His is a story of bad luck as much as it is of bad judgement. The motif of destiny comes to the fore, and inherent in this motif is the interplay of activity and passivity. It is clear that Cismè plays a role in his own destiny. Although maltreated by his stepmother and very alone, he does not sit passively by waiting for things to improve. He makes a proactive effort to improve his situation by learning to paint and attempting to sell his paintings. After failing at this, he makes two decisions, first to become a puppet, and then to become a doll – which, however, make him progressively more paralysed, a helpless wooden, though sentient, object at the mercy of strangers. From an active participant in his own life, he has moved to passive sufferer. But he is fortunate that Mariucca hears him and will protect him in exchange for his stories. Messina’s moral in *Cismè* is hence perhaps that you should keep your wits about you, if you want to retain your dignity. *Cismè* is not so much a story with a happy ending, as a story of the harshness of fate. This is a theme that is common to *Verismo*, the literary movement that inspired Messina’s earlier works.

We must address the figure of Mariucca. Is she Cismè’s Princess Charming or the Emperor to his Scheherazade? She is undoubtedly his rescuer, although there is a quid pro quo for her aid, namely the stories Cismè recounts her. Her role is thought-provoking, and as a character, she is unique amongst Messina’s works. There are several interesting points about Mariucca that we must contemplate: the way Mariucca is named; her occupation; the drawing of her in the text; the representation of her personality; and the fact of Cismè’s ending up with her, so far from his native context.

It does not seem unrealistic to conjecture that Mariucca is Maria Messina, self-inscribed into the book. There are several pointers to this: firstly, the name, which is a derivative of Maria. Secondly, the occupation she shares with Maria Messina, namely, writing. Thirdly, the fact that the dedication of the book states clearly that Cismè is “il più fedele amico della zia lontana”, which does two things: it brings Cismè out of the fictional realm and into reality, and creates a link between the author and Cismè. Syllogistically, if Cismè is the friend of the character, and Cismè is the friend of the author, one can infer that the character *is* the author. The fourth and most cogent clue is the drawing found on page 39, depicting Cismè sitting face to face with a woman, sub-titled “[...] chiacchierando colla sua buona amica, [...]”. Anyone familiar with extant photographs of Messina would recognise Messina’s likeness in the drawing of the woman, as the line drawing reproduces very faithfully and in detail a photograph of Messina from that era<sup>9</sup>: the style of the high-necked lace blouse, the hair style, the position of the head and shoulders, and even the rather doleful expression of the face are the same.



<sup>9</sup> The photograph is autographed “A Giovanni Verga, con viva devozione. Trani, luglio 1914. Maria Messina”, and is published in Giovanni Garra Agosta (1978:193-195). The drawing is to be found in *I racconti di Cismè*:39.

What is the significance of this graphic self-inscription? It is interesting that self-inscription is found commonly in writing by women who strive for a voice; in particular, by those who seek acceptance and recognition in a world that regards them as marginal, excluded from the mainstream literary (or artistic, or academic) current, or regarded as inferior in the patriarchal (or other oppressive) systems they inhabit. Mary E. Modupe Kolawole describes fiction as a “tool of self-consciousness” used by women writers in “recreating reality” and sees writing as not “a synonym for elusive fiction but a source of self-actualization”. By drawing attention to the process of fiction, Kolawole observes how writers “reveal the thin line between fiction and reality”. This process, she says, is therapeutic, as it allows “direct self-commentary by unveiling temporarily the veil of fiction” (1997:167).

While self-inscription has been seen to be common to writers seeking a voice, it is not, however, a common feature of Messina’s collected work; it is confined to *Cismè*, and we should explore it. It is difficult to conclude whether any of Messina’s literary production is autobiographical (although this uncertainty is contradicted by Donna C. Stanton’s observation of “the age-old, pervasive decoding of all female writing as autobiographical” (1984:4). One could study the female (and even male characters) that she depicts, to try to derive a sense of the author behind the character – but the conclusions one draws are speculative. Messina’s personality and mindset are difficult to gauge through her characters, as her novels were all written during the time of Fascism, and she was forced to cloak her intent in ambiguity in order to be published<sup>10</sup>. One can derive an idea of her self-image from her letters to Verga, Alessio di Giovanni and Enrico Bemporad<sup>11</sup>, however, she tends to manipulate the presentation of herself to these men, not providing us with an entirely true or honest

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<sup>10</sup> For the ambiguity of her plots and characters, see my article, L. Gochin, “Shades of Ambiguity: Maria Messina’s Writing during the Fascist Era” (2002).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Messina’s manipulative strategies in writing to literary men, see my article, L. Gochin, “Una storia approfondita: Le lettere di Maria Messina ad Alessio Di Giovanni ed Enrico Bemporad 1910-1940” (2009).

portrait of her. The self-inscription she provides in *Cismè* is hence all the more interesting.

Boxwell describes the “author-image” as discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin: “This is what allows the viewer or reader to feel the presence of the artist even though the author is not a depicted, or visual image, as she would be, say, in a photograph. The ‘author image’ is produced by the writer in some sense entering the text ‘as part of the work’ (109)” (1992:605)<sup>12</sup>. Bakhtin writes that “We find the author (perceive, understand, sense, and feel him) in any work of art” (1986:109) but adds that “The so-called author’s image is, to be sure, a special type of image, distinct from other images in the work, but it is an *image* and has its own author who created it” (109). Bakhtin thus distinguishes between the author-image created by the author, and the “pure author” him/herself. He discusses the concept of “objectification”: “To express oneself means to make oneself an object for another and for oneself (‘the actualizing of consciousness’)” (110). For a woman writer, this actualising of consciousness has significance, given the marginalisation of women and their writing. Domna C. Stanton writes:

autogynography, I thought, had a global and essential therapeutic purpose: to constitute the female subject. In a phallogocentric system, which defines her as the object, the inessential other to the same male subject – that *The Second Sex* had proved beyond a doubt – the *graphing* of the *auto* was an act of self-assertion that denied and reversed woman’s status. It represented, as Didier had said of Sand’s *My Life*, the conquest of identity through writing. Creating the subject, an autograph gave the female “I” substance” (1984:14).

In *Cismè*, Messina has inscribed or “graphed” herself into the work by means of various metafictional methods. She has made herself into an “object for another” to scrutinise. She has allowed “the viewer or reader to feel the presence of the artist”, as Boxwell puts it, by

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<sup>12</sup> Boxwell is citing Mikhail Bakhtin (1986:103-131).



providing an identifiable image of herself, inserted solidly into the fictional realm, while maintaining autographically, as well as autobiographically, a consistent identity of herself as a writer. Using the self-conscious technique of metafiction, Messina has brought herself to the reader's consciousness – no longer the potentially invisible author of *Cismè* but as an object of attention – a fictionalised character who is entirely, graphically, visible. This self-fictionalisation has the interesting opposite effect of animating herself: she is no longer the unseen or ignored figure behind the words, but one brought to life, to the reader's attention, *through* the words. We must recall the dedication to *Cismè* here: she transfers the character into real life by calling him her “più fedele amico”. She operates a reverse procedure with herself and her character: she fictionalises herself, and brings her fictional character to life, mingling the boundaries of real life and fiction. This helps to consolidate the connection between Mariucca and Cismè.

Bakhtin makes a further observation regarding the author's actions during the process of writing. The author is writing words in order to be heard: “Being heard as such is already a dialogic relation. The word wants to be heard, understood, responded to, and again to respond to the response, and so forth *ad infinitum*. It enters into a dialogue that does not have a semantic end” (1986:127).

What can we read into Messina's self-inscription, aside from the assumption that she needs to be heard and seen? How does she portray Mariucca/Maria in the story? And what connection does this have to the Exoticism that is intrinsic to this story? Kolawole writes that Metafiction “enhances self-awareness and self-healing” (1997:168). We have seen twice, above, the use of the word “therapeutic” in conjunction with autography or self-inscription. We can infer that Messina is self-inscribing in order to counteract some lack, some hurt. Can we derive a sense of this from the story? Let us posit that Mariucca and Cismè are mirror characters. They are equal but opposite. We can tell that they are opposite from the fictionalising/bringing to life procedure. They are equal because they are brought together at the end of the story into a symbiotic relationship: Mariucca receives what she needs – inspiration for her stories – while Cismè receives protection. They are equal in other

ways too. Cismè finds himself constantly trapped in hurtful situations. Mariucca is also depicted as trapped. She is closed in a room all day, writing. Her appearance attests to this: she is described as having a “viso pallido” (35), which implies never going outdoors. While Cismè strives to escape to different situations, Mariucca strives to escape through her imagination, by bringing fictional worlds to life. Cismè is described at the beginning of the story as appearing eternally younger than he is – due to sickness: “era già grandicello, ma pareva un bambino; un po’ perchè era malaticcio”. He is then converted into a puppet which will remain small (and defenceless) forever. It is implied that Mariucca behaves immaturity for her age: the niece berates her for playing with Cismè, the doll: “E tu – diceva a Mariucca – non ti vergogni di giocare con le bambole, all’età tua?!” (39). The impertinence of the child shows that she feels entitled to address Mariucca in this way, suggesting that Mariucca has no authority, even over children, and has a subordinate position in the household. The fact that once the naval officer’s children are tired of Cismè they decide to send him to Mariucca implies that she is regarded as someone who receives cast-offs. Mariucca remains in her room for years and years – “tanti e tanti anni”, with the door closed – “l’uscio dello studiolo non restava mai aperto” – and significantly, together with Cismè, enclosed “fra pagine bianche e fra pagine scritte”.

It is tempting to seek a correlation between Cismè and his entrapment in a wooden body, and Messina’s multiple sclerosis. This would be easier to prove if we had more concrete evidence of when the disease presented itself. *Cismè* was written in 1912 when Messina was 25; some sources state that the disease began in her twenties, while others say it was in her thirties. In her letters, the first mention I can find of her disease is in December 1925 in a letter to Bemporad. However, her novel *Un fiore che non fiorì*, published in 1923 and probably written in 1920<sup>13</sup>, portrays a young woman who dies of a wasting disease, which begins with her legs losing their strength. We can only speculate that Messina already suffered from this disease and was externalising it through one of her characters. If it is not the case

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<sup>13</sup> See Messina’s letter to Alessio di Giovanni, no. 19, dated 3 June 1922.

that she already suffered from the disease in 1912, then it is eerily prophetic that she should write of a character trapped within his own body, over which he has no control – the same way she was tragically destined to end up herself.

What is the significance of Cismè ending up in Mariucca's study, and what is the role of the Exotic in this? We have two protagonists: Cismè, who does all the wandering in his own personal Odyssey; and Mariucca, who sits enclosed in her room, and who only comes to our attention – and into being – when Cismè reaches her. If Mariucca can be considered as Cismè's coming home, Cismè and his stories must be regarded as Mariucca's portal to the outside world, to life. Irwin's comment that "knowledge of stories assists the survival of communities or of individuals within those communities" can be understood in relation to Mariucca and Cismè and their survival.

Entrapment and escape are recurrent, persistent themes in this story. Cismè has sought change as an escape from the alienation of his reality, and finds comfort in the known and the familiar with Mariucca. Conversely, Mariucca, caught in the known and the familiar, is given access to the Exotic, to the unfamiliar and the unknown, through Cismè's arrival and his stories. One character carries out a long journey from the Exotic; when it ends, the other character's journey begins, towards the Exotic. Escape is made possible only through fiction, through story-telling, for Mariucca. Cismè *is* the Exotic and *is* fiction; both transport Mariucca, or Messina, beyond the confining boundaries of her life. If she cannot leave her room and explore distant lands, she will bring the Exotic to her room.

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Eight years separate the publication of *Cismè* and *Alla deriva*, and the evocation of the Exotic has evolved from a theme that expresses the frustration of an individual within society, to one that encompasses the existential concerns of men and women within a changing society. In *Alla deriva*, where Exotic concepts are employed, the sphere of reference is again Japanese. This shows the influence of

“giapponismo” or “japanisme”<sup>14</sup> that had become popular in Europe in the preceding decades, and especially, Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly*<sup>15</sup>. Also extremely influential in Europe was Pierre Loti’s<sup>16</sup> *Madame Chrysanthème*, one of the sources for *Madame Butterfly*. Translated into Italian and published in 1908 as *La signora dei crisantemi*<sup>17</sup>, the novel could easily have been accessible to Messina, and influences in *Alla deriva* appear to derive as much from *Madame Chrysanthème* as from *Madame Butterfly*.

*Alla deriva* was Messina’s second novel, published by Treves, Milan, in 1920<sup>18</sup>. The plot is simple: a man and a woman meet and marry. Their relationship deteriorates; she leaves him, though pregnant. She returns to have her baby but soon dies. He goes off to war.

There is much tension in *Alla deriva* between the foreign and the familiar. Sometimes, the foreign is aligned with alienation and discontent, associated with the war about to be waged beyond Italy’s borders. The foreign hence has an association with destruction and death. At other times, reference to the exotic shows a yearning for the new. The Exotic is here too frequently associated with the desire to escape from reality.

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<sup>14</sup> Defined by Arthur Groos as “the appropriation and incorporation of Japanese subject matter in European art-forms at the end of the nineteenth century, a process that in verbal genres often encodes the exotic material with a variety of sub-texts” (1989:168).

<sup>15</sup> *Madame Butterfly*, the opera first presented by Puccini in 1904, was based on several sources: Pierre Loti’s novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), a short story by John Luther Long, “Madame Butterfly” (1898), based on a real-life event in Japan, and a play by the same title, by David Belasco (1900). (See Helen M. Greenwald, 2000:239). Arthur Groos also points out that “*Madama Butterfly* was preceded by a rather motley series of operas with Japanese subject-matter: Saint-Saens’ *La Princesse jaune* (1872), Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado* (1885), Messager’s *Madame Chrysanthème* (1893) and Mascagni’s *Iris* (1898)” (1989:168).

<sup>16</sup> Pseudonym of Julien Viaud (Todorov, 1993:308). Arthur Groos observes that in 1906, “*Madame Chrysanthème* [was] still a best-selling novel and nearing its seventieth printing” (1987:671).

<sup>17</sup> Milano: Società Ed. Milanese, 1908 (Galimberti, Politti e C.).

<sup>18</sup> Sellerio, Palermo, has republished some of Messina’s novels and many of her short stories in collections.

The male protagonist Marcello embodies a refusal of the Exotic. He expresses resistance to foreign influence. He thinks scornfully of his professor's lecture: "Esaltare la poesia nazionale tedesca e rinvilire così tutta la poesia del nostro Risorgimento! È eccessivo! pensò" (1920:13). His associate, Angelo Fiore, says to him incredulously, "Vorresti che si facesse un falò delle edizioni straniere?" and Marcello answers: "Ammiro i tuoi amici stranieri e le loro virtù, ma io non potrei amarli. C'è qualcosa che si ribella, nel mio spirito, oggi più che mai, oggi che c'è la guerra" (110). Todorov observes that the inversion of exoticism is nationalism, where "xenophilia becomes xenophobia" (1993:318), and this is indeed borne out in Marcello's attitude. At one stage, Marcello hears Simonetta singing, and the narrator comments: "Non comprese le parole. Parve accorgersi per la prima volta che non sapeva l'inglese" (1920:114). This inability of Marcello's to understand the language his wife learned from her English mother underscores his own alienation from her, and her Othering. In her difference, she represents the Exotic, and it gradually becomes a barrier between them. By contrast, Marcello's brother, Andrea, an aspiring artist, finds Simonetta's exoticism alluring and sophisticated: "La cognata gli parve di nuovo una creatura venuta da paesi lontani e ignorati [...]" (121-2).

A prominent theme is that of class and cultural differences. This is seen in the relationship between Marcello (from the South, poor) and Simonetta (from the North, more well-off), and in the contrast between Marcello and his university rival, Angelo Fiore, from a cultured wealthy Northern family. The protagonists' two cultures are compared and contrasted through constant movement between Northern and Southern Italy. Set between 1912 and 1915, the scenes of the novel shift between Florence, Sicily and Ascoli Piceno, showing the different lifestyles and attitudes of the inhabitants of these areas. Simonetta has always led an active intellectual city life, immersed in art, music and literature, accustomed to the salon society of her city, Florence, and its emphasis on English and French culture, its decadence and love of luxury and the exotic. Marcello's family, which is poor and values practical things above books, lives in a small

Sicilian town<sup>19</sup>. After their marriage, Simonetta yearns for some challenging, useful pursuit, such as assisting her husband with research, but he prefers to see her in the traditional role of wife. Despite being aware of her intellectual interests, he treats her, after their marriage, like a doll, and grows increasingly distant as he struggles to make a living and assert himself as an intellectual. The contrasts show how regional differences signify alterity. At times, this alterity is a source of fascination and interest. But it also can lead to conflict.

References to the Exotic in this novel are simple yet evocative. The first is the recurrent use of the Japanese word “musmè”. This recurs frequently throughout the novel, always used by Marcello in addressing Simonetta. It is found on pages 54, 71, 75, 79 and 129. Meanings for this word are given as “ragazza di piacere, ospite di una casa da té giapponese” and also “Dal fr. *mousmée*, adattamento, nel senso peggiore, del giapp. *musumé*, "fanciulla” (Battaglia, 1981:127). In *Alla deriva*, the term also has a derogatory association. This repetition of the word “musmè” ties the novel strongly to Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*, in which “mousmé” recurs very frequently. Indeed, his character narrates:

The word ‘mousmé’ means a young girl, or very young woman. It is one of the prettiest words in the Nipponese language; it seems almost as if there were a little pout in the very sound – a pretty, taking little pout, such as they put on, and also as a little pert physiognomy were described by it. I shall often make use of it, knowing none other in our own language that conveys the same meaning. (1897:88)

Loti uses the term mostly in a patronising way. Coupled with the word is the notion of “doll” whenever Loti refers to young women: Todorov says that “With *Chrysanthème*, things are even clearer: she is explicitly designated as an object-woman, a doll, a toy” (1993:316).

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<sup>19</sup> “È così quando si leggono troppi libri. Non si guarda la terra dove si mettono i piedi”, says Zio Cosimo (Messina, 1920:56).

Messina has given her use of the word “musmè” the same significance. What connection does this have to the Exotic, and what does this connote for Messina’s novel? We need to relate the figure of Simonetta to Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*, which perceives the Exotic from a decidedly Outsider perspective. Loti seeks out the Exotic, but regards it from a superior vantage point (the Japanese are always diminutive; he constantly compares them to monkeys and describes them as grotesque). The temporary wife, Chrysanthème, whom Loti takes in the novel, is regarded as a less-than-intelligent being – he wonders if she has any thoughts at all. By applying the word “musmè” to Simonetta, Marcello is also labelling her as a doll, an inanimate being. Casting her in the role of decorative, useless wife, he is also negating her intellect. Simonetta is associated with the concept of “doll” in other ways: her aunt Laura comments: “Se ti vedesse la tua povera mamma! Come l’amava la sua ‘little doll!’” (1920:24).

In *Madame Butterfly* the idea of the woman-plaything, subject to men’s desire, is pre-eminent:

PINKERTON

*guardando amorosamente Butterfly*

Con moti di scoiattolo i nodi allenta e scioglie! [...]

Pensar che quel giocattolo è mia moglie! mia moglie!

(sorridente)

Ma tal grazia dispiega,

ch’io mi struggo per la febbre d’un subito desio.

(Puccini, 1904:Act 1)

The notion of woman as sexual object, to be taken up and discarded at will, is also found in *Alla deriva*, where the wording recalls Pinkerton’s:

Era una “musmè”, una pupattola, che lui prendeva fra le braccia nei momenti buoni [...] Ecco tutto [...] E talvolta lo sfuggiva, offesa, umiliata, quando egli l’abbracciava guardandola con improvviso desiderio, dopo settimane e

settimane in cui pareva averla dimenticata. (Messina, 1920:90-91)

The Exotic is also found in the description that Simonetta gives to her ideal home, when Marcello claims that they are too poor for the type of house she is imagining:

– Taci – replicava Simonetta chiudendogli la bocca con le due mani – . Sai come la sognavo io? Piccola. Piccola come una casa giapponese. Con pochi o punti mobili e molti fiori. Non sarà così la nostra casetta?  
– La tua casetta di sposa sarà proprio così, mia piccola musmè! esclamava Marcello. (54)

This description of a Japanese house may be found both in the *bozzetti* to *Madame Butterfly*, depicting a bare spacious room with many flowers<sup>20</sup> and in *Madame Chrysanthème*. Loti narrates: “To any one familiar with Japanese life, my mother-in-law’s house in itself reveals a refined nature – complete bareness, two or three screens placed here and there, a teapot, a vase full of lotus-flowers, and nothing more” (1897:2010).

One other Japanese motif is that of chrysanthemums: Simonetta is described as entering her house “con un gran mazzo di crisantemi rossi fra le mani”, which she then arranges “nei molti vasetti

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<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.puccini.it/imgs/SceneMilano1904.pdf> (accessed 23 July 2010) for the *bozzetti* produced by Carlo Songa for the 1904 production of *Madama Butterfly* and <http://www.comitatopuccini.it/page.php?page=67&langId=1&zoomImg=19> for the *bozzetti* produced by Michel Jambon and Alexandre Bailly for the 1906 performance.

See <http://www.univirtual.it/corsi%20V%20ciclo/II%20sem%20IND/biggi/download/mod04OL.pdf> for a discussion of the stage setting of the first performances. Helen M. Greenwald comments: “Carlo Songa’s sketch for the second act set of the 1904 premiere of *Madama Butterfly* reveals the interior of Cio-Cio-San’s house to be a curious mix of turn-of-century opulence and authentically spare Japanese design, not quite a true Japanese ambience, but one filtered through the Italian eye, adapted and reshaped (Fig. 1). It would not be long, however, before Albert Carré, in his production, premiered 28 December 1906 at the Opera-Comique in Paris, purged the Italianate excesses from the staging” (2000:243.) Interestingly, the Japanese atmosphere of the 1906 production ensured that “Thus the set ultimately presented an environment quite different from any in which the audience might have lived. In true ‘Orientalist’ fashion, they remained outsiders to the opera’s milieu at the same time that the opera itself attempted to convey more truthfully the feel of Japanese life” (243).



disseminati qua e là” (Messina, 1920:66). After she leaves Marcello, he wanders around the house and sees that “Nei vasi restava qualche crisantemo appassito” (139), as if this were the symbol of their failed relationship, of the Exotic that has disappeared. The familiarity of married life signals the end of the Exotic and brings about intolerance:

Marcello cominciò a sentirsi offeso dall’atteggiamento ora rassegnato ora malinconico di sua moglie. Ella si richiudeva in sé, come una vittima [...]. O più tosto [...] sì, sì, era imbruttita dallo stato fisico in cui si trovava per la prima volta [she is pregnant]. Ecco le inevitabili conseguenze del matrimonio. Col tempo avrebbe somigliato a tutte le mogli del mondo. Sfuggì la presenza di lei, il più che gli fosse possibile. (133)

Marcello is a character in whom tension exists between the mystique exerted by the Exotic, the refusal of it, and the contempt brought about by familiarity, at the same time.

The novel often portrays a sense of longing to return to one’s childhood home. The idea is expressed that family or home roots should be respected: “– Si vede – esclamò il proprietario della Ganzini – . Si vede che ognuno deve restare dove è nato” (96). This is consonant with the idea of nationalism that is earlier expressed by Marcello. It is the alienation brought about by removal from one’s native place that brings about discontent and friction. The longing to return to the place of one’s childhood is found in quite a few examples in the novel. Todorov investigates the notion of childhood memories and their connection to the idea of the Exotic, with reference to Pierre Loti’s work. It is the idea of the Exotic that gives us back our sense of mystery which is so prevalent in childhood:

Loti is explicit about this, particularly in *Madame Chrysanthème*. He recalls childhood as a paradisiacal period, for in that phase every thing benefits from its freshness and the component of mystery it conceals. “It seems to me that then only did I truly experience

sensations or impressions” (171). But childhood cannot last forever and as one matures the charm is lost. “Well, I have grown up, and have found nothing that answered to my indefinable expectations” (172). Sensations are dulled, impressions no longer leave their mark: in order to revive them, one sets out on a journey, even though what one finds is often only a pale copy of one’s dreams. (1993:310)

Simonetta has a strong desire to return to the place of her childhood: “Ora Simonetta pensava intensamente a Villa Molly. Tornarvi per rivivere, almeno nei ricordi, il tempo della serena fanciullezza; tornarvi per illudersi di ritrovare sé stessa” (Messina, 1920:129). Marcello has the same longing:

Oh, poter tornare così, una sera, spingere l’uscio intarmato che cìgola sempre un poco, ripresentarsi alla madre che prega, che forse prega per lui che è lontano. E sedere lì, nella tiepida cucina, come allora, come se il tempo che passa fosse un buono fedele compagno che non fa male. (143)

The dog, Big, suffers from the same affliction:

Cerca il mare. Non era mio, questo cane. Mi fu regalato da un amico di Porto d’Ascoli che l’ha allevato. Cerca il mare per orientarsi. Una volta fuggì. Si smarrì. Non era possibile che potesse ritrovare il padrone! Avessero veduto come tornò mortificato, povero animale. Da quella volta non ha tentato più di scappare. Ma se vede il mare, anche in lontananza, come oggi, è una passione. (96)

While childhood and the Exotic are connected through the sense of mystery that both embrace, childhood in Messina is depicted more strongly as a time before the responsibility, the reality and the disappointment of adulthood set in. Much emphasis is placed on the

disappointment inherent in reaching adulthood – one’s dreams very rarely come to fruition, or if they do, it is only a short time before the newness becomes quotidian. The evocation of the exotic is an attempt to overcome daily normality, but it is eroded by exposure to it. What Arthur Groos says about *Madame Butterfly* can be applied equally well to *Alla deriva*: “the tragedy lies not so much in a clash of cultures as in a contradiction between the principals’ fantasies about each other and reality” (1987:666).

While Loti in *Madame Chrysanthème* and Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly* both abandon their “temporary wives”, Marcello is abandoned by Simonetta. The recurrence of the doll-motif suggests a link to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879). In the allusion to the woman as a decorative, dependent ‘doll’, in her objection to being treated in this manner by her husband and in her decisive move to leave his authority, *Alla deriva* recalls the story of Nora. We could, stretching the Orientalist/Exoticist theme, suggest that Nora and Simonetta are declaring independence and throwing off the yoke of male imperialism. Todorov says of the equation women/Exotic: “The man, for his part, enjoys the same superiority with respect to women that the European enjoys with respect to other people” (1993:315). But times are changing, and despite Simonetta’s submissive, self-abasing comments at the beginning of the novel (“A me piace una cosa solo perchè piace a te”) (Messina, 1920:63), the underlying and evolving desire for women’s autonomy is perceived. Why, then, would Simonetta claim to desire a small, bare house just like a Japanese house, like those found in *Madame Butterfly* and *Madame Chrysanthème*, if this opera and this novel represent the subjugation and exploitation of women? Coming from a privileged household into a marriage characterised by poverty, perhaps Simonetta is attempting to Exoticise her reality, to find creativity and stimulation in a realm where it has been denied to her by virtue of her gender and pre-ordained role within marriage, and by extension, in society. By aligning sparseness and bareness with a fashionable, alluring Oriental idea, Simonetta is creating an illusion for herself, masking the poverty and her dissatisfaction in an exotic ideal. But it becomes clear that Simonetta’s illusion cannot last; just as Marcello finds, when the exotic wears off, reality is hard to bear.

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Messina's two texts embrace the notion of the Exotic and put it to use in articulating the frustrations of the individual within their societal confines, at different levels. *Cismè* uses a mirroring device to depict the frustration of one woman, trapped by circumstance, or even by her own family, confined to one small room and to her own body. Here, the entrapment of the body could represent Messina's encroaching immobilising sickness, or further, female gender serving as entrapment and confinement within patriarchal society. The notion of the Exotic hence functions as a symbol of longed-for freedom; to be taken out of the body, out of the confines of the room, and beyond stifling reality.

In *Alla deriva*, the portrayal of the Exotic indicates a more extensive sense of frustration, moving from the individual level to a wider societal level. While in *Cismè* both the male and the female gender are represented as major characters, Cismè, who is a boy, and then a puppet, is stripped entirely of male power and autonomy, and placed in a subordinate position, a state equivalent to the powerlessness of the female. In *Alla deriva*, the predicament of both men and women within society is shown in different ways, and the Exotic is the lens through which these separate predicaments may be viewed. The motif of "musmé" or doll that recalls *Madame Butterfly*, *Madame Chrysanthème* and *A Doll's House*, is used to cast into relief the subordinated position of women vis-à-vis men and to denounce it. Marcello, a male vested with power and autonomy, is depicted as resenting the Exotic, which is Other, foreign, and threatening. His is a chauvinism (both in terms of women and in terms of nationhood) which is being challenged by the changing times and changing roles of women. This is why Marcello's power and autonomy may be seen to be limited and thwarted. Although Marcello attempts to "colonise" and subjugate Simonetta, he is never fully successful, as she resents this imposition of authority, and continues to invoke the Exotic in an effort to break free of the known reality, to find autonomy and recognition as a human being in her own right. Messina's portrayal of the Exotic may hence be seen to reflect Edward W. Said's "battery of

desires, repressions, investments and projections”, and serves to represent and underscore her characters’ struggle to satisfy their needs and strive towards self-actualisation within the constraints of their existence.

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