

The Impossibility of Motherhood in Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of motherhood in the novel *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*, written by the writer and journalist Oriana Fallaci in 1975, when feminist groups were addressing the issue of motherhood, and battles for the legalisation of abortion were taking place in Italy. In focusing on the question of maternity, the novel becomes part of the feminist critiques of the 1970s. At the same time, it reshapes and elaborates the painful experience of miscarriage which the writer went through some time before. Through a close reading of the text, this study seeks to interrogate the different discourses that, in their multiplicity, configure the concept of motherhood in this controversial and ambivalent narrative. The novel seeks to construct a new, non-patriarchal concept of motherhood. Nevertheless, the question of maternity remains intractable and unresolvable within the novel. The text, blurring fiction and autobiography, represents the impracticability of a different conception of motherhood within the social and cultural constraints of the time. The search for a non-patriarchal motherhood, centred on women's re-appropriation of their autonomy, creativity and sexuality, ends with the protagonist's miscarriage and her probable death.

KEY WORDS: Oriana Fallaci, women writers, motherhood, abortion, feminism

Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (1975) caused sensation and fuelled debate in Italian society during the 1970s, when feminist groups were addressing the issue of motherhood and battles for the legalisation of abortion were taking place. This novel is entirely dedicated to the question of motherhood, and is composed of a series of imagined letters which a nameless woman writes, upon learning that she is pregnant, to the child she is carrying. Through a close reading of the novel, this study will examine the different discourses that, in their multiplicity, configure the concept of motherhood and its relation to female subjectivity. The narrative will be considered in relation to its position within the conflicting and unstable historical period of the 1970s, focusing in particular on the feminist critique of motherhood. Labelled feminist, or anti-feminist, revolutionary or conservative, the novel radically challenges the themes of motherhood, abortion and female subjectivity as it seeks to reconstruct a new concept of maternity conceived as a choice and responsibility, rather than as the natural destiny of women. However, as will be analysed and discussed here, this attempt fails. The aspiration for a new experience of motherhood proves to be unrealisable, and literally “un-representable” by the text, which ends in fact with a miscarriage and the probable death of the woman (Benedetti 2007, 92-3).¹ In addressing the issues of motherhood and abortion, the novel re-elaborates and re-shapes the dramatic biographical experience of a miscarriage which Fallaci herself had gone through a few years earlier during a work trip (Aricò 1998, 160). From this perspective, the novel can be considered as a form of fictionalised autobiography, of *auto-fiction*, interweaving the self of the author with the fiction of the story. The text blurs genre boundaries, mixing a fictional narrative with autobiographical elements, and with the author/narrator's meditations on the meaning of motherhood for women. The tragic event of the miscarriage is represented, within the semi-autobiographical fiction of the narrative, as the painful outcome of the protagonist's attempt to experience a new and “regenerative” (Pickering-Iazzi 1989, 1) sense of motherhood, which therefore remains impossible within the text.

At the time, feminist movements were addressing the issue of motherhood, dissociating female identity from women's prescriptive maternal role and deconstructing the traditional, religious and political constructions of maternity. Motherhood was not rejected in itself, but in its connection to patriarchy. In 1970 Carla Lonzi, in “Sputiamo su Hegel,” defined maternity as a “resource” for female subjectivity:

La maternità, sia pure snaturata dal dissidio tra i sessi, dal mito impersonale della continuazione della specie e dalla dedizione coatta della vita della donna, è stata una nostra risorsa di pensieri e di sensazioni, la circostanza di una iniziazione particolare. Non siamo responsabili di aver generato l'umanità dalla nostra schiavitù: non è il figlio che ci ha fatto schiave ma il padre (40).

In the 1970s Italian feminists took varied and controversial positions on this matter. Motherhood constituted a dilemma, remaining an unresolved question for feminist critique. It could be conceived of as a risk and a regression in the process of reconfiguration of female subjectivity (Scattigno 1997, 285-8). Italian feminists, struggling between the rejection of motherhood and the choice of a “different” motherhood, responsible and autonomous, often had to affirm the limits of their own positions. The journalist and writer Rossana Rossanda, talking about her personal choice not to become a mother, defined it only as a “morale personale transitoria” (cited in Scattigno, 288). Conversely, some Italian feminists considered their rejection of motherhood as a political strategy. This refusal was intended as a radical form of denunciation and protest, a combative desire for “subtraction,” dis-identification in order to build a different society (287).

¹ The first edition ended with these words of the woman: “Tu sei morto. Forse muoio anch'io” (You are dead. *Maybe* I'm dying, too). In subsequent editions, the doubt about the death of the woman is removed: “Tu sei morto. Ora muoio anch'io” (You are dead. *Now* I'm dying, too). My emphasis.

Italian women writers explored and grappled with gender issues faced by contemporary society. Female authors openly questioned motherhood in their novels, participating in a collective political practice of refusal of the patriarchal idea of maternity as it was imposed on women. Within this rigid image of maternity, controlled at a social level, “nature” and “culture” were difficult to distinguish (285). Writers such as Carla Cerati, Giuliana Ferri, Dacia Maraini, Oriana Fallaci and Lidia Ravera opposed, in various ways, the dominant symbolism of motherhood, with a radical aim of emancipation.² The critique of motherhood was linked to contempt towards the institution of the family. As Anna Nozzoli observes, women in feminist narratives were predominantly represented as wives and mothers, denouncing the cultural and social subordination of women from within the patriarchal institutions of family and motherhood (1978, 58). These feminist novels express ambivalent and conflicting issues in relation to motherhood, dramatising the parallel conflicts and contradictions experienced by feminism. Ravera in *Bambino mio* defined motherhood as “il pensiero proibito” (1979, 10), showing how motherhood remained a question which was impossible to “resolve” within feminist thought. *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* is part of this conflicting and unstable historical moment. The novel in fact expresses the need to affirm and represent a new, positive experience of maternity where women’s subjectivity, their creativity and desires are not repressed by their role as mother. At the same time, the text re-elaborates the traumatic autobiographical experience of miscarriage, which at the end of the novel seems to symbolise the impossibility of this renewed and liberated motherhood. Within the narrative, the experience of miscarriage is re-shaped to signify the impossibility of rewriting a new sense of motherhood, and the grim outcome of this attempt.

BECOMING A MOTHER: MOTHERHOOD AS A POSITIVE AND RESPONSIBLE CHOICE

Lettera a un bambino mai nato was published at a moment of radical transformations of Italian society. During the course of the 1970s, crucial laws regulating the institution of the family, motherhood, marriage and sexuality were enacted in Italy. In 1971 the ban on information on birth control was removed. 1974 saw the referendum on the confirmation of the law legalising divorce. In 1975 the new family code which assured greater equality for women in relation to marriage and children was approved. Abortion was legalised in 1978. *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* responds to the urgent political and social issues of the time. Fallaci was primarily a journalist, politically and socially engaged in crucial contemporary issues. As a female intellectual, she was called upon to take a stand on these issues. She never defined herself as a feminist and, throughout her life, whenever she embraced the cause of women’s emancipation, she always did so standing outside the practices of Italian feminist groups. In 1975 the director of the magazine *Europeo*, for which she wrote, asked her to write an investigative report on abortion. Fallaci, disobeying the orders received, did not come up with a journalistic article, but composed a narrative text, a fictional and very literary work, *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*. She decided to write this very intense and lyrical novel, instead of an “objective” journalistic report, for many different reasons which we cannot presume to explain completely. However, it is evident that her personal experience of miscarriage played a central role in her decision. In fact, even if the theme of abortion is present in the novel, the narrative elaboration of the trauma of miscarriage

² In 1975 Dacia Maraini, in *Donne in guerra*, writes about the rejection of motherhood, where abortion offered the female protagonist the possibility of an autonomous choice. Meanwhile Ravera, in *Bambino mio*, a text which presents several intertextual relations with Fallaci’s novel, describes the ambivalences and painful conflicts experienced by a woman whilst she is becoming a mother, deconstructing the traditional conceptions of maternity, but problematising feminism’s critique of motherhood. In *Un quarto di donna*, Giuliana Ferri imagined the transformation of a woman, unsatisfied and alienated in her marriage and maternal role (as suggested by the title), who feels the need to develop the entire potential of her individuality, beyond the routine of her daily life as a wife and a mother.

constitutes the essential focus of the narration.

The book begins by analysing the possibility of becoming a mother. Because of the uncertainty of the female protagonist, who does not know whether she really wants to be a mother, abortion – still illegal in Italy – is an option she initially seems to consider. However, almost immediately, she affirms she will never make this choice. The text in itself never seems to support abortion openly. At certain points, it almost gives the impression that it opposes it, implying an implicit “pro-life” position. The narrative is very ambiguous and vacillating on this matter, and in fact could be read as supporting both the “pro-choice” and “pro-life” sides of the abortion debate.³ The book has indeed been viewed as containing antithetical views on abortion and motherhood, consequently being embraced by opposing categories of readers (Aricò 1998, 163). Fallaci’s political abstention from openly supporting abortion attracted severe criticism, especially from the ranks of feminist thinkers who condemned this position as conservative. However, the novel was met with resounding success with the public, precisely on account of its ambivalence.

The story narrated is very downbeat. The protagonist, like Fallaci, is a journalist, a single woman, committed to her job. She finds out she is pregnant but does not know at first whether she wants to continue the pregnancy. She begins to write fictional letters to the child she is carrying because she wants to question herself, also questioning the opportunity to give birth and the meaning of motherhood itself. Though the woman decides to continue the pregnancy, she experiences complications, ending up hospitalised. Against the doctor’s instructions she decides to take a work trip, during which she miscarries. In the last section of the novel, she is once again in hospital because of her miscarriage, in a critical condition and near death due to complications. She is in despair, feeling responsible and guilty. The novel ends with her last words, which anticipate her probable death. The transgressive aspect of Fallaci’s narrative is expressed through the construction of the text as a dilemma. Doubts and ambivalences characterise the protagonist’s experience of motherhood. The narrative deconstructs the normative concept of motherhood, and challenges the mythology of maternal self-sacrifice, the annihilation of a mother’s individuality for the sake of the child, presenting a mother-to-be who does not want to forgo her life, her work and her autonomy for the sake of the child. Yet the sombre story reveals the failure of this attempt, the impossibility of rejecting traditional and patriarchal notions of motherhood, and the impracticability of an alternative conception of motherhood.

Fallaci creates a very particular literary form – intense, lyrical and fragmented – as an autonomous space of reflection on the themes of motherhood, abortion and female identity. The structure of the novel, a meditation by the mother-to-be, is characterised by fragmentation. This fragmentation constitutes the narrative strategy which expresses female subjectivity in her questioning, deconstructing and doubting of motherhood. The ambivalence of motherhood can be elicited within this fragmentation. Nozzoli identifies fragmentation and discontinuity as typical features of the feminist literature of the 1970s, which needed “forme anomale, distruttive, eversive nei confronti della staticità della scrittura” (1978, 166). By writing her fictional letters, the protagonist enacts a difficult and fragmented process of *autocoscienza* and self-analysis, using the same kind of practice that women’s groups experimented with during that time in order to foster a process of reorganisation of female subjectivity within society. Through the practice of *autocoscienza* within Italian feminist groups, women were driven to question themselves, their role within society and family and their relationship to sexuality and work, as a means of identifying the forms of oppression they experienced, and to plan together personal or collective ways of

³ The author, though, did not want the book to be simply reduced to a pro- or anti-abortion text, affirming that its complexity went beyond this question. During an interview some years after the book was published, she angrily declared that the central point of the novel is not the thorny problem of abortion, but that of doubt, the Hamletic doubt about the meaning of existence (Aricò 1998, 167). Fallaci questions motherhood by opening a philosophical and metaphysical debate on the meaning of life, evil, freedom and responsibility.

resisting. On the first page of the book, Fallaci writes that “questo libro è dedicato/ da una donna/ a tutte le donne” (1975, 1). The protagonist, like all the characters, is anonymous, so she can be identified with Fallaci herself and, at the same time, can embody a story belonging to all women, with which women could identify, and through which they could change.

Motherhood is presented as a dilemma and a conflict from the very first lines of the book, where the protagonist announces her realisation that she is pregnant: “Stanotte ho saputo che c’eri: una goccia di vita scappata dal nulla [...] Non sono mai stata pronta ad accoglierti, anche se ti ho molto aspettato. Mi son sempre posta l’atroce domanda: e se nascere non ti piacesse?” (1). Fallaci opens the novel announcing the protagonist’s pregnancy as being neither planned nor wanted, but as an unexpected event. The ambivalences and contradictions characterising the experience of motherhood emerge from the first lines (“Non sono mai stata pronta ad accoglierti, anche se ti ho molto aspettato”). The structure of the novel consists of the dramatisation of the psyche of the narrator, who moves from one feeling to its opposite, from the wish to have a child to the questioning of the sense of motherhood, from an *a priori* refusal of abortion to a rebellion against her role of mother and a defence of her own subjectivity:

La nostra logica è piena di contraddizioni. Appena affermi qualcosa, ne vedi il contrario. E magari ti accorgi che il contrario è valido quanto ciò che affermavi. Il mio ragionamento di oggi potrebbe essere rovesciato così, con uno schiocco di dita. Infatti ecco: mi sento già confusa, disorientata (4).

The conflicted oscillation between opposite positions shows how impossible it is to approach maternity through ideological frameworks, since motherhood is irreducible and “intractable” through a fixed ideological structure. Maternal feelings are an intricate web of drives and desires. On the one hand, Fallaci represents woman’s biological and instinctive perception of motherhood, as shown by the first words of the novel, “Stanotte ho saputo che c’eri,” where the protagonist expresses her own intuitive awareness of being pregnant. On the other hand, the narrative demystifies the concept of “maternal instinct,” conceived as unitary, positive and non-conflicting. This, as the philosopher Elisabeth Badinter argues in *The Myth of Motherhood*, is an ideological and patriarchal construction, created by the discourses of science and religion. *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* reaches the core of the conflicts implied by maternity: “metterti al mondo, lo giuro, non mi diverte. Non mi vedo camminare per strada col ventre gonfio, non mi vedo allattarti e lavarti e insegnarti a parlare. Sono una donna che lavora ed ho tanti altri impegni, curiosità: [...] non ho bisogno di te” (3). The narrative seeks to reframe and reconstruct women’s experience of motherhood, representing “deviance,” “abnormality” and negative feelings such as fear, anxiety and rejection as an integral part of the maternal experience.

The text focuses on the doubts and terror of the mother-to-be, expressing the protagonist’s fear upon discovering her pregnancy:

Mi si è fermato il cuore. E quando ha ripreso a battere con tonfi sordi, cannonate di sbalordimento, mi sono accorta di precipitare in un pozzo dove tutto era incerto e terrorizzante. Ora eccomi qui, chiusa a chiave dentro una paura che mi bagna il volto, i capelli, i pensieri. E in essa mi perdo. Cerca di capire: non è paura degli altri. Io non mi curo degli altri. Non è paura di Dio. Io non credo in Dio. Non è paura del dolore. Io non temo il dolore. È paura di te, del caso che ti ha strappato al nulla, per agganciarti al mio ventre (1).

Pregnancy is an ambivalent and uncanny event as it can evoke the maximum antagonism of unconscious feelings, between the desire for maternity and its rejection. Julia Kristeva (1980, 1987) states that with its violent emotions of love and hate, unity and division of the self, motherhood resembles states of madness and psychosis. Fallaci expresses this uncanniness with

a series of metaphorical expressions, depicting pregnancy as the invasion of a woman's body by the foetus: "Mi rubi a me stessa, mi succhi il sangue, mi respiri il respiro" (Fallaci 1975, 9), "ti avventi come un vampiro contro il mio corpo" (17), "Prima pretendi di controllare il mio corpo [...] Dopo pretendi di controllare addirittura la mia mente" (38), "E non siamo una coppia. Siamo un persecutore e un perseguitato. Tu al posto del persecutore e io al posto del perseguitato. Ti insinuasti in me come un ladro, e mi rapinasti il ventre, il sangue, il respiro. Ora vorresti rapinarmi l'esistenza intera. Non te lo permetterò" (40). Kristeva describes pregnancy as "the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject," and "a fundamental challenge to identity" (1986, 206). In *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* pregnancy is represented through the fantasy of invasion, and the foetus is perceived as an extraneous entity growing inside the woman, taking possession of her. Within this fantasy, the female body is threatened. Maraini uses the same metaphor of the invasion of the female body in *Un clandestino a bordo* (1996), adopting the image of the vessel/boat for the pregnant female body and of the clandestine for the child.

In many respects, Fallaci's novel is part of the protest of the 1970s. It highlights the contrast between the two meanings of motherhood defined by Adrienne Rich as "experience" and "institution." These two meanings, Rich explains, are "one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that the potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (1976, 2). In the novel, the *experience* of motherhood consists of the search for a responsible and conscious motherhood and the expression of the ambivalence and uncanniness connected to maternity. Throughout the novel, the protagonist confronts a culture and society that are intrinsically patriarchal, thus clashing with the *institution* of motherhood as framed by the Church, the State, the law, the family and scientific institutions. At the narrative level, these institutions are embodied and signified by male characters, reduced to their oppressive social function: the doctor represents medicine, the woman's boss the world of work, the lawyer the law. The creation of new female subjectivities and of a new representation of maternity is imagined and addressed in the narrative through the protagonist's clash with Italian society, depicted in its patriarchal and phallogocentric structures of power. The protagonist – a single woman, independent, working, non-religious – radically questions the meaning of motherhood and clashes with an androcentric society where the traditional notions of motherhood and the role of the mother are still very powerful. Her boss, like her male gynaecologist, and the male tailor she meets, show their disapproval in relation to her transgressive behaviour as a mother-to-be, as she looks for an alternative and autonomous experience of motherhood, and refuses to embody the patriarchal myths of motherhood as self-sacrifice and renunciation.

Fallaci represents medicine and science as part of the patriarchal macro-institution of power. Nearly contemporaneously, Kristeva (1980) accuses medicine of objectifying maternal subjectivity and of restricting it to nature and its biological function. According to Kristeva, the subjectivity of the mother had been removed from scientific discourse, which had isolated the child as the absolute and primary addressee. Fallaci stresses the opposition between the mother-to-be and the medical institution embodied by the male doctor, evinced in this description of a medical examination:

Così, in una stanza gelidamente bianca, attraverso la voce di un uomo gelidamente vestito di bianco, la Scienza mi ha dato l'annuncio ufficiale che c'eri [...] il medico ha infilato un guanto di gomma e mi ha ficcato un dito dentro, con rabbia. Col dito dentro ha pigiato, ha frugato, ha pigiato di nuovo, facendomi male, ed io ho avuto paura che ti volesse schiacciare perché non ero sposata (Fallaci 1975, 10).

The woman is humiliated because of the transgression and eccentricity she carries within as a single mother who intends not to conceive of motherhood as self-immolation and passivity. The discourses of science strengthen those of patriarchal morality. The doctor negates the

woman's subjectivity, reducing her to pure biological elements and processes. He conveys the aggression of a science whose phallogocentric structure was denounced by feminism at the time (Braidotti 1996, 36-40; Harding 1991; Irigaray 1985, 1993). During the 1970s, Italian feminist groups created a complex web of autonomous medical spaces and practices in order to address women's specific needs and issues, neglected or negated by institutional male-centred medicine. A diversified system of self-managed *consultori* for women (clinics, counselling and self-help centres) was organised by feminist groups in Italy. These structures dealt with the difficult question of abortion and with a broad range of issues related to maternity, sexuality and the female body, which were seen by feminism as the central focus for women's liberation. Fallaci's description of the protagonist's pregnancy fits into this particular moment of critique of the patriarchal institution of medicine raised by feminist groups in the 1970s.

In the novel, during the medical examination, the doctor discovers complications with the pregnancy and links these problems to the protagonist's emotional stress and anxiety. He tells her to be calm and not "think" too much, as this can be harmful to the foetus. The woman begins to be identified with the archetype of the cruel mother, the destructive mother, *la madre snaturata* (the "denaturalised" mother). The doctor's words arouse in her a sense of rebellion as she addresses the foetus:

Sono impaurita. Ed anche adirata con te. Cosa credi che sia: un contenitore, un barattolo dove si mette un oggetto da custodire? Sono una donna, perdio, sono una persona. Non posso svitarmi il cervello e proibirgli di pensare. Non posso annullare i miei sentimenti o proibirgli di manifestarsi [...] Anche se potessi, non vorrei disfarmene per ridurmi allo stato di un vegetale o di una macchina fisiologica che serve a procreare e basta! [...] Se vogliamo restare insieme, bambino, dobbiamo scendere a patti. Eccoli. Ti faccio una concessione: ingrasso, ti regalo il mio corpo. Ma la mia mente no. Le mie reazioni no. Me le tengo (Fallaci 1975, 38).

The mother-to-be defends her autonomy. She contests the myth of the maternal ideal of self-sacrifice, solidified in the intersections of science and religion, along with the cultural and political practices of Italian society. She transgresses the vision of motherhood as an *aut aut*, a choice between the identity of woman or of mother. Two decades later, in 1996, Maraini in *Un clandestino a bordo*, was to deal with the same issues, demonstrating that women are still faced with the institutionalised concepts of motherhood, by which their activity and autonomy are negated culturally, socially and politically: "La maternità, nella cultura dei padri, è stata trasformata in un evento di estrema passività per le donne [...] in quasi tutte le maternità che conosciamo, vengono decantati il silenzio, l'accettazione, la ricettività, l'obbedienza, la rassegnazione materna" (19).

The novel attempts to conceptualise a maternal figure uncharacterised by passivity and self-denial, putting forward a positive affirmation of motherhood. When the protagonist is forced to lie immobile in hospital as a consequence of the complications of her pregnancy, she chooses to leave the hospital against the doctors' advice because she does not want to cancel an important work trip, as a result of which she will miscarry:

Perché dovrei sopportare una tale agonia? In nome di cosa? Di un reato commesso abbracciando un uomo? [...] Cos'è questo rispetto per te che toglie rispetto a me? Cos'è questo tuo diritto ad esistere che non tiene conto del mio diritto ad esistere? [...] Non vedo perché dovrei avere un bambino. Non mi sono mai trovata a mio agio, io, coi bambini. Non sono mai riuscita a trattare con loro. Quando mi avvicino con un sorriso, strillano come se li picchiassi. Il mestiere di mamma non mi si addice. Io ho altri doveri verso la vita. Ho un lavoro che mi piace e intendo farlo. Ho un futuro che mi aspetta e non intendo abbandonarlo (Fallaci 1975, 40-1).

The text rejects the ideal of maternal self-sacrifice, a powerful one within the Italian construction of the mythology of motherhood due to its relationship with the icon of the Virgin. The symbol of the Madonna was central to the construction of the Italian mythology of motherhood during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bravo 1997; Buttafuoco 1994, 179). The image of the Counter-Reformation Madonna sacralises the ideal of maternal self-sacrifice:

È la Madonna della Controriforma, potente e redentrica, che riversa un'aura sacra su tutte le madri e nello stesso tempo ne fa figure asessuate, oracolari, inibite a provare rancore, pronte a soffrire illimitatamente per e a causa della propria creatura. Un modello che mette il rapporto con il figlio sopra ogni altro e lo trasforma da legame fisico tra madre e bambino in dipendenza morale al di sopra della legge e della socializzazione. Qualcosa della Grande Madre è trasmigrato nella Madonna (Bravo 1997, 151).

The protagonist chooses to be a mother without relinquishing her professional and intellectual ambitions. She seeks a positive conception of motherhood as a responsible choice: “Mi prendo la responsabilità della scelta” (Fallaci 1975, 12). She takes responsibility for herself both as a mother and as a woman, without suppressing either of these dimensions. The text reframes the conflicts between womanhood and motherhood which Sibilla Aleramo in her famous novel *Una donna* – often considered one of the first Italian feminist texts – had already represented in 1906. Like Aleramo, Fallaci opposes the patriarchal construction of motherhood, which, through new configurations, still deprives mothers of their subjectivity and autonomy as individuals. Unlike Aleramo’s protagonist, the woman of Fallaci’s novel is not forced to choose between her autonomy as a woman and her role as a mother, and she affirms both these dimensions. Nevertheless, the text ends by excluding the possibility of this reconfiguration, by negating the same subjectivity of the mother/woman. Being a woman *and* a mother is still represented by the text as an “impossible desire” (Scattigno 1997, 290).

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MOTHERHOOD

This section will examine the conflicting narratives within the text which render the question of motherhood intractable and unresolvable. The end of the novel writes this impossibility through the death of the foetus and the probable death of the woman, in which the rhetorical possibility of the same narration is annihilated. A “regenerative notion of maternity” (Pickering-Iazzi 1989, 325) is indeed contained in the text and should have the power to change society and culture, yet proves to be impossible and un-representable. The end of the text represents, in its stead, the deletion of female subjectivity. The text, therefore, literalises the “miscarriage” of this reconfiguration of motherhood.

The narrative is full of ambiguous discourses on motherhood and these ambiguities distance the text from other feminist novels of the time. Novels such as Maraini’s *Donna in guerra*, Magrini’s *Una lunga giovinezza* or Bonanni’s *Il bambino di pietra* presented female protagonists rejecting motherhood, deciding not to become mothers. Other feminist novels of the same period, such as Ferri’s *Un quarto di donna*, Fiumi’s *Come donna zero*, or Ravera’s *Bambino mio* focused on representing the difficulties and the fatigue involved in maternity. Even if *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* tries to deconstruct and reconfigure the concept of motherhood, the narrative implies and sustains a sort of “mystique of motherhood,” which is never openly discussed, yet constitutes a very strong principle in the narration. Fallaci indirectly suggests the idea of a secular sacredness of motherhood, which she related to the principles of Life and Existence (“anche quando sono infelice, penso che mi dispiacerebbe non essere nata perché *nulla è peggiore del nulla*,” 1975, 2, my emphasis). Women, as potential mothers, are vehicles of this sacredness, and responsible for it. This position in relation to motherhood conflicts with the critical and

deconstructive tension of the text. This contradiction emerges in relation to the question of abortion, which seems to be rejected *per se*. As noted by critics, the epistolary structure of the text denotes the child/foetus as the recipient of the letters, suggesting s/he is considered as a fully developed person. Hence, by considering *a priori* a foetus as a human being, the text seems to negate the very possibility of abortion (Fabbretti, cited in Gatt-Rutter 1996, 66). In several parts of the novel, the protagonist sustains a sort of radical “pro-life” position. This is expressed, however, from within a decisively secular perspective. This position seems to suggest that, from a bioethical perspective, any kind of abortion must be condemned in the name of Life:

Se un giorno griderai: “Perché mi hai messo al mondo, perché?,” io ti risponderò: “Ho fatto ciò che fanno e hanno fatto gli alberi, per milioni e milioni di anni prima di me.” [...] Mi sembra irreali. Eppure l’inizio del mondo, quando si formò quella cellula e tutto ciò che nasce e respira e muore per rinascere ancora, dev’essere avvenuto come avviene in te: in un brulicare, un gonfiarsi, un moltiplicarsi di vita sempre più difficile, sempre più veloce e ordinata e perfetta [...] Se voglio liberarmi di te, sostengono, questo è il momento. Prima eri troppo piccolo per essere individuato e strappato. Sono pazzi (Fallaci 1975, 4, 13).

The idea of Nature is recalled in order to establish the sanctity of life as an indisputable postulate. The text evokes the “mito impersonale della continuazione della specie” which the feminist Carla Lonzi condemned as part of the patriarchal distortion of motherhood (2010, 40). In the novel, the woman describes her decision to continue the pregnancy in the following way: “Tenendoti, non faccio che piegarvi al comando che mi impartisti quando s’accese la tua goccia di vita. Non ho scelto nulla, ho obbedito” (Fallaci 1975, 17). Motherhood is again seen as an instinct and an obligation, and appears to be unquestionable for women, guardians of an intrinsically sacred principle of Life. Within this perspective, woman yet again becomes the exemplary figure carrying the biological obligation to embody and perpetuate the process of life and procreation: woman *is* Nature. The intention of conceiving motherhood as a responsible choice is not compatible with this concept of motherhood seen as an impersonal biological process. The text falls back on the idea of the female subject as an instrument of reproduction, as the executor of the process of continuation of life. This cultural construction has long been hegemonic within Western thought on motherhood, as Caterina Botti affirms in her study on pregnancy and motherhood:

Si è infatti ormai mostrato come il pensiero occidentale fin dalle sue origini (l’antica Grecia) abbia consegnato o relegato le donne, proprio in quanto madri, alla natura, alla casa, alla riproduzione, in una parola alla passività, all’accoglimento e alla reiterazione di gesti non scelti ma dettati dall’istinto [...] Si è cioè negato alle donne l’accesso a ogni forma di realizzazione di sé, se non quella di fare figli, e al contempo si è connotata la maternità *non come campo di azione o di scelte ma come un processo biologico, naturale*, di cui le donne sono tramite e non motore, quindi qualcosa di molto diverso da altre forme di realizzazione di sé (2007, 28, my emphasis).

Although the text transgresses this notion, the narrative expresses the power this patriarchal construction of motherhood still exerts on women. The protagonist attempts to experience motherhood autonomously and critically, yet the novel casts light on the ambiguities and contradictions of this experience. The narrative performs the ambivalent and conflicting drives and sentiments provoked by maternity.

Paradoxically, at a narrative level, a new reconfiguration of motherhood is precluded by the same figure of the unborn child and by the notion of the “strong” subject s/he conveys. Towards the end of the narrative, the woman imagines she sees the child. In this dreamlike state,

the child is imagined as an *adult man*, exacerbating the fantasy of the foetus's personhood. In this context, another "counter-narrative" appears to emerge. At the book's inception, interestingly, the protagonist states that she would love to have a baby girl:

Sarai un uomo o una donna? Vorrei che tu fossi una donna. Lo so: il nostro è un mondo fabbricato dagli uomini per gli uomini, la loro dittatura è così antica che si estende perfino al linguaggio. Si dice uomo per dire uomo e donna, si dice bambino per dire bambino e bambina, si dice figlio per dire figlio e figlia [...] E tutti i loro eroi sono maschi: da quel Prometeo che scoprì il fuoco, a quell'Icaro che tentò di volare, su fino a quel Gesù che dichiararono figlio del Padre e dello Spirito Santo (Fallaci 1975, 5).

The child, instead, is a boy. We could say that the subconscious of the text is compelled to use a male hero, even if the text itself apparently protests against male dominance in our language and narratives. The narrative unconscious of the text is unable to deviate from the consolidated models of the mother-son relationship, crystallised in the couple formed by the Virgin and the Son, institutionalised by the Oedipal narratives of psychoanalysis and dominant in patriarchal discourses. The image of the child as a man could well be the physical metaphorisation of the patriarchal institution of motherhood that the narrative is unable to dismiss. The Oedipal myth survives in the text in the erotic and absolute relationship between mother and son. In another letter, the protagonist speaks to the son: "Allora vieni qui, accanto a me [...] Dormiamo insieme, abbracciati. Io e te, io e te [...] Nel nostro letto non entrerà mai nessun altro" (36). The son is the textual principle of the phallogocentrism which controls both the narration and the figure of the mother. The son is the metonymy of the father.

In the final part of the book, the protagonist has a miscarriage and is again hospitalised in a critical condition due to complications. Assailed by pain and guilt, she does not want to release from her body the dead child she is still carrying: "Sono giorni che te ne stai chiuso lì dentro, senza vivere e senza andar via. La dottoressa ne è stupita e impaurita. Posso morire, dice, se non ti tolgo" (62). In the book's final pages, the narrative reaches a dramatic climax as the woman continues until her death her imagined dialogue with the unborn child, at which point the novel ends. The end of the text revisits the tradition of the *mater dolorosa* crying for the Passion of the son. In parallel, the woman's negative pregnancy is also the Passion of the mother who, as a Christological figure, endures a "calvario" (67), as she defines her maternal experience, ending in her death. Through her death, she atones for the guilt of not having been a "good mother" and sacrifices herself, having previously refused to fulfil her motherly duties. Although Fallaci depicts a "transgressive" mother, she cannot avoid assimilating the Marian tradition of motherhood as the absolute sacrifice of the mother for the son. The protagonist will probably die because she does not want to abandon the dead child she is keeping inside her womb as if in a grave, her womb becoming a tomb while her death is her extreme self-sacrifice for the child.

The woman's death corresponds to the literalisation of symbolic matricide, the cultural suppression of maternal subjectivity, which was denounced at the time by feminist theorists as diverse as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Adrienne Rich. Towards the end of the novel, the imagined child affirms that he has not been killed by the mother because of the miscarriage. *He* did not want to be born, and so he killed himself. Through this "choice," he refused both the possibility of life and the figure of the mother. He rejected the mother because of her doubts, fears and hatred – the ambivalent feelings and drives explored by the narrative. The child addresses the mother – "Ma poi crebbero le tue incertezze, i tuoi dubbi, e prendesti ad alternare lusinghe e minacce, tenerezza e rancore, coraggio e paura" (76) – and therefore, he says, he decided to kill himself. Rejecting the mother, the child causes her death. The miscarriage becomes matricide.

The bleak presence of death, both within the text and the woman's womb, can be read through the concept of the abject theorised by Kristeva (1982). Kristeva relates the abject to the

collapse of identity and of signification which accompanies the loss of borders, limits and the distinction between the self and the other, between life and death. An open wound or menstruation or a dead body are figures of the abject, which is connected to bodily fluids and viscera (2). Kristeva states that the abject, banished by our culture as a taboo, finds expression in literature (207-10). Literature can be an exploration of the abject, of the limits of language, till it collapse into violence and obscenity, as occurs at the end of Fallaci's novel. Here, the mother – *locus* of birth – becomes a space of death, the womb is a tomb, the foetus a cadavre. In the last pages, the narrative incorporates the idea of the abject in the grotesque image of the child/foetus who becomes visible inside a jar. The foetus, removed from the woman's womb, is put in a glass. The protagonist, from her hospital bed, looks at him: "dentro un bicchiere ci sei tu [...] Non sei un bambino: sei un uovo. Un uovo grigio che galleggia in un alcool rosa" (Fallaci 1975, 67). The image of the grey egg in a pink liquid evokes a sense of disgust as it exposes what is supposed to stay inside, to be held and hidden by the maternal body. This repugnant image suggests a moment of breakdown of established boundaries (self and other, inside and outside, life and death, past and present). This image coincides with the collapse of the narration, caused by the impossibility of writing a new discourse of motherhood.

The novel dramatises the conflict between womanhood and motherhood. It does not end however, with the rejection of one of these two dimensions by the protagonist choosing to be a "woman" or a "mother." Nor does it end with the imaging of an alternative experience of motherhood in which the woman's subjectivity is not suppressed. Instead, the novel constitutes exactly the *mise en abîme* of the "impossibility" of motherhood, its intractability, which feminist movements at the time were also facing. The narrative, in contrast to how it might seem, literalises the symbolic "matricide" which Luce Irigaray, in opposition to the Freudian parricide of *Totem and Tabù*, identified as the foundation of Western tradition, in the original suppression of the mother, of her subjectivity and desires:

We need to be careful in one respect: not again to kill the mother who was immolated at the birth of our culture. Our task is to give back to that mother, to the mother who lies within us and among us. We must refuse to allow her desire to be swallowed up in the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to sexual experience, to passion, give her back the right to speak, or even to shriek and rage aloud (Irigaray 1993, 19).

On account of this matricide, Irigaray states the need to give symbolic representation and language both to maternal subjectivity and to the mother-daughter bond, nullified by phallogocentric narratives. *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* represents the suppression of the "eccentric subject" of the mother, rejected by the child since hers is a thinking, doubting and desiring subjectivity, and since she affirms a maternal "experience" which is incompatible with its patriarchal "institution."

The novel approaches the issue of motherhood through a *via negativa*. It interweaves the need to represent a new experience of motherhood – a non-patriarchal motherhood, centred on women's re-appropriation of their autonomy and creativity – and the autobiographical experience of loss and mourning experienced by the author herself through her miscarriage. By the end of the narrative, the miscarriage comes to represent the consequence of woman's attempt to redefine a new sense of motherhood, beyond the constrictions of centuries of patriarchal culture. Fallaci's experience of miscarriage is elaborated in the auto-fiction of the text as the impossibility of a positive reconfiguration of the maternal within the social and cultural constraints of the time. All the conflicting narratives examined collide and preclude the rewriting of motherhood. At the end, the text collapses as meaning collapses with the death of the protagonist. The grim ending expresses this crisis of signification. John Gatt-Rutter in his fascinating analysis defines the novel as "a complex of self-deleting textuality, whose very source, the narrating mother, is herself deleted in death. The text survives, therefore, only as a series of

deletions, as a toxin, the perfect semiosis of a miscarriage followed by the death of the gestatrix” (1996, 63). The end of the novel expresses the failure of the discourses present in the text. The literary act of questioning motherhood collapses into the abject. The project of rewriting motherhood becomes an abortive attempt, a textual miscarriage. Nevertheless, through its negativity and ambivalence, the novel remains an interlocutor for its readers, seeking to renegotiate the mother’s subjectivity whilst searching for new representative forms of counter-hegemonic meanings of motherhood.

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BIOGRAPHY

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