

# Maternal *Momoirs* in Contemporary Italy

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## **ABSTRACT**

In a social context such as Italy, dominated by hyper-sexualised images of women (Zanardo 2010; Marzano 2010; Lipperini 2007, 2013; Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012), maternal representations have undergone significant though ambiguous transmutations. In a socio-economic anti-maternal climate in which neoliberal practices contribute to falling birth rates (Valentini 2012), women are confronted with a paradoxical situation in which “la madre si è affermata come la figura per eccellenza della completezza e dell’autorealizzazione femminile, ricalcando paradossalmente alcuni degli stereotipi più antichi e persistenti attorno all’identità femminile” (Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012, 62). In response to this situation, a myriad of voices have turned to humour to articulate maternal ambivalence, creating a new genre akin to the British and North-American maternal memoir or *momoir*. Enmeshed in the contradictions of contemporary Italian society, these maternal narratives participate in the neoliberal market economy, which commodifies maternal expression for a reading audience. This essay explores the discursive forces that shape Italian maternal chronicles, as well as the conflict, ambivalence and guilt that these writings foreground. It considers how those texts approach the resignification and mythification of the maternal figure in Italian popular culture, which glorifies retreatism, domesticity and the Mulino Bianco family syndrome.

**KEY WORDS:** maternal memoirs, contemporary Italian society, work-life balance, post-feminism

In a social context such as Italy, dominated by hyper-sexualised images of women (Zanardo 2010; Marzano 2010; Lipperini 2007, 2013; Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012), maternal representations have undergone significant transmutations that reveal the ambivalence of the powerful cultural construction of motherhood. In the context of fluid modernity, characterised by increasing instability and more precarious working conditions, the discursive fashioning of contemporary motherhood, with all its conflicts and contradictions, takes up and repackages previous notions of proper maternal conduct, with a glamorous post-feminist twist. As a generation of highly educated though underemployed women face the dilemma of whether or not to have children, neoliberal labour market policies contribute to persistently low birth rates. An anti-maternal socio-economic climate characterised by severe gender discrimination in the workplace (Piazza 2009; Soffici 2010; Saraceno 2012; Valentini 2012; Ambrosi 2014) presents women with a paradoxical situation: “La maternità, idealizzata a parole, viene poi penalizzata nei fatti” (Vegetti Finzi 2008, 93). Put on a pedestal and supported by a plethora of naturalistic religious and lay discourses, this powerful cultural construction continues to dominate the Italian cultural landscape: “la madre si è affermata come la figura per eccellenza della completezza e dell'autorealizzazione femminile, ricalcando paradossalmente alcuni degli stereotipi più antichi e persistenti attorno all'identità femminile” (Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012, 62). While the choice to give life is complicated by adverse economic and structural forces and the increasing demands of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996, 8), a myriad of voices have turned to humour to articulate maternal ambivalence, creating a new genre akin to the British and North-American maternal memoir or *momoir*.

Like their English-language counterparts, these texts are characterised by first-person narration, humour and a real-life account of maternal upheavals. Since the publication of Claudia De Lillo's *Nonsolomamma. Diario di una mamma elastica con due bobbit, un marito part-time e un lavoro a tempo pieno* (2008), the publishing industry seems to have discovered the marketing potential of comical maternal narratives. Maternal memoirs like Paola Maraone's *Ero una brava mamma prima di avere figli* (2009), Camila Raznovich's *M'ammazza. Diario di una madre politicamente scorretta* (2011), Deborah Papisca's *Di materno avevo solo il latte* (2011), Chiara Santamaria's *Tutto quello che le madri non dicono* (2010) and Elisabetta Gualmini's *Le mamme ce la fanno* (2014), to mention just a few, express the challenges and conflicts that surround contemporary motherhood. This essay explores the discursive forces that shape Italian maternal memoirs, as well as the ambivalence and guilt that pervade these writings in response to the post-feminist resignification and mythification of the maternal figure in popular culture, a figure which glorifies retreatism, domesticity and the Mulino Bianco family syndrome (Chemotti 2009; Giorgio 2002; Carotenuto 2012; Benedetti 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Enmeshed in the contradictions of contemporary Italian society, these maternal memoirs are part of the neoliberal market economy, which commodifies maternal expression for a reading audience. It is significant in this sense that De Lillo's, Papisca's and Santamaria's books came into being at the request of their publishers, who saw the commercial potential of the authors' blogs. In these diaristic accounts of maternal experiences, the authors display “the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference” that has come to be associated with post-feminist aesthetic (Gill 2007, 255; Sarlo and Zajczyk 2012, 120; Soffici 2010, 18).<sup>2</sup> Written by educated middle-class professional women who

<sup>1</sup> The vast literary production centring on the mother-daughter bond has been the object of significant critical attention, but unlike literary accounts of maternal experiences, all too often felt to be a form of patriarchal imposition, the maternal memoirs that emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century have not yet received academic scrutiny.

<sup>2</sup> Although there is no univocal definition of post-feminism, I take it to signify “a backlash against feminist achievements or goals” (Gill 2007, 253) that in the Italian context coincides with the erosion of women's rights, an increasing objectification of women in the media and more and more discriminatory practices in the workplace. As a result we are witnessing the resurgence of anachronistic gender roles, such as the “moderna ragazza antica,” who is more devoted to homemaking than to a professional career.

struggle with newly minted myths of maternal perfection, these texts respond with a reassuring message regarding societal ambivalence towards motherhood. Acknowledging the difficulties of being a mother in twenty-first century Italy, these narratives often employ titles that underscore women's superhuman qualities. De Lillo's *Nonsolomamma. Diario di una mamma elastica con due hobbit, un marito part-time e un lavoro a tempo pieno* and Silvia Gianatti's *Guarda che è normale. Siamo tutte supermamme* evoke superheroes in an essentialistic rhetoric that opposes mothers to biologically different paternal figures, whose involvement in bringing up children remains marginal. Gualmini's *Le mamme ce la fanno. Storie di donne sempre in bilico tra famiglia, scuola e lavoro* and Elena Rosci's *Mamme acrobate* employ an acrobatic metaphor to denounce the difficulties of contemporary mothering, while at the same time creating a discourse that celebrates individual maternal achievements.

Nonetheless, as an analysis of these memoirs will reveal, the neoliberal marketing forces that allow for the articulation of maternal experiences are often the same as those that create profoundly anti-maternal conditions in the workplace. As Gribaldo and Zapperi point out, we witness the emergence of a paradoxical situation that sees "la maternità come chiave di strategie di autorappresentazione che si vorrebbero emancipatorie" (2012, 63). Such representation however, "deve necessariamente confrontarsi con la dimensione repressiva/produttiva degli immaginari materni attraversati da una malintesa interpretazione della procreazione come destino di libertà per le donne e allo stesso tempo come dimensione naturale non socialmente condivisa" (63). As a result, the apparent freedom to express one's own maternal subjectivity is a by-product of a neoliberal system in which confession becomes a means of self-construction, regulated by complex self-monitoring practices subordinated to economic forces.

Since traditionally "women are silenced most effectively by their association with maternity" (Boulous Walker 1998, 1), the emergence of maternal memoirs could be celebrated as a political act, ripe with meaning. Giving voice to silenced experiences might well symbolise a shift in the perception of motherhood and in the construction of maternal subjectivity, a way of counteracting the prevailing "silenzio che giornali, TV e politica riservano ai loro dubbi e concretissimi problemi" (Ambrosi 2014, 6). This new form of expression could be regarded as a dissident act that articulates the unknown inner discourse of a mother, a discourse that, as Julia Kristeva hopes, can have profound socio-political implications (1986, 297). It could offer an empowering experience, a way of reclaiming the lost female genealogy so long desired by feminists of difference. The maternal memoir could be perceived as a step towards a kind of feminist action, indeed the new maternal order or *ordine simbolico della madre* theorised by Luisa Muraro (2006), who, in dialogue with French feminists of difference, Luce Irigaray in particular, advocates a new mother-daughter relationship, one based on respect, love and mutual understanding, in order to overcome the antagonism postulated by the patriarchal order.

Reclaiming the relationship with the mother and giving voice to the maternal, as Cixous advocates (1976, 879), would acquire strong political connotations in providing an answer to Marianne Hirsch's emblematic question: "And where are the voices of mothers, where are their experiences with maternal pleasure and frustration, joy and anger?" (1989, 23). How better to unmask "the ubiquitous Western myth of placid, fulfilling maternity [...] that holds such sway over all the mothers" (Lazarre 1997, xxi)? As if to effect this reclaiming, maternal memoirs challenge the syrupy, idealised portrait of maternal contentment by selectively revealing certain facets of this parental role.

Born of maternal blogs, De Lillo's, Raznovich's, Papisca's and Santamaria's books demonstrate how the articulation of maternal experiences can acquire a market value without necessarily invalidating deep-seated notions of proper maternal conduct or advocating for societal changes (Lipperini 2013, 262; Thompson 2007). Although all these texts, each in its own way, attest to the difficulties of being a professional mother in a country with one of the lowest levels of female participation in the workplace, their ironic and often self-deprecating tone tends to drown out their criticism. What begins as a cathartic outlet, as a sort of "room of one's own"

– to echo Virginia Woolf’s famous phrase – becomes a public forum and eventually a textual artefact worthy of publication. In the “solitude of the global citizen” (Bauman 1999) characteristic of fluid societies, where social cohesion, solidarity and welfare are on the wane, maternal blogs provide a virtual space where likeminded mothers can share their feelings, their concerns and their distress protected by the anonymity of the medium.

Given the difficulties of mothering in an age of anxiety, an increasing number of women, often working in the communication field, find solace and even professional opportunities in the blogosphere (Ambrosi 2014, 5; Warner 2005). As women turn more and more to the Internet to alleviate their doubts, they increasingly avail themselves of the comfort, reassurance and empowerment offered by maternal blogs. Thanks to the comment function, these resources provide a sense of community, a support network, a space of apparent freedom that assuages the solitude that accompanies many new mothers, who, as Papisca and Santamaria point out, cannot count on a circle of peers with whom to share the *malaise* they experienced during the first months of their daughters’ existence.

Often conceived as an outlet for creative expression, mommy blogs offer relief from the stress caused by unachievable models of maternal perfection and by the increasing demands of a hectic lifestyle, lack of state support in childrearing, and unequal division of housework in the family. In doing so, they explore seemingly new ways of conceptualising maternal practices. In their acts of confession, these blogs and the books inspired by them reveal the conflicting nature of contemporary motherhood and the unsolved contradictions of “un paese in cui alle donne, anche se madri, si richiede di essere magre, sorridenti, piacenti e sexy” (Lipperini 2013, 212). What emerges in these publications are the idiosyncrasies of a country with deep anti-maternal structures in the workplace and the home, where seventy per cent of care work is still carried out by women (Sarlo and Zajczyk 2012, 112), and having children is often considered the kiss of death to a promising career. As Santamaria, whose temporary contract was not renewed during her pregnancy, found out when trying to resume her professional activity after giving birth: “Ambire allo stesso tipo di lavoro, quello che richiede assoluta dedizione in cambio di un ambiente stimolante e creativo era praticamente impossibile” (2010, 177).<sup>3</sup>

While Italy continues to experience one of the lowest fertility rates in the world and Italian women delay childbirth in part because of adverse socioeconomic conditions, maternal images abound in popular culture. There the myth of the radiant, fulfilled mother coexists with the newly-created portrait of the imperfect mother, a postmodern and post-feminist mother caught in an already difficult juggling act, made that much more challenging by an unprecedented imperative to display glamour, beauty and thinness.<sup>4</sup> As TV journalist Camilla Raznovich points out in her memoir *M’ammazza*, traditional notions of proper female conduct are now deployed in a more appealing format:

Perché anche dentro le nostre cucine Ikea nuove di zecca continuiamo ancora a pensare, in qualche stanzetta in fondo al nostro cervello, che il modello “angelo del focolare” sia in fondo il più fico. Ed è anche per questo che forse ci siamo incasinate la vita: ora non dobbiamo più solo essere professioniste affermate, ma vogliamo pure tornare a essere madri attente e premurose; il tutto, possibilmente, continuando a conservarci gnocche (2011, 15).

Following a global trend, the Italian media is spreading images of gorgeous and ecstatic new mothers, with a particular emphasis on celebrity pregnancy and celebrity mums, the so-

<sup>3</sup> Emblematic of Italy’s attitude towards working mothers is the story of Stefania Boleso, Red Bull marketing manager, who upon returning to work after her maternity leave, was mobbed into resigning.

<sup>4</sup> An example of this trend is the webseries *Una mamma imperfetta*, directed by Ivan Cotroneo, that employs a diaristic format in its depiction of the daily misadventures of a group of urban middle-class mothers struggling to live up to the demanding standards of contemporary motherhood.

called *mamme vip*. These serene, fulfilled, glamorous images are belied by an often ugly reality: actual mothers face increasing hardship, caused by the country's persistent economic woes and neoliberal government policies that translate into precarious limited-term work contracts, scarce benefits and often non-existent legal protection for pregnant women. Those women who are lucky enough to find jobs in a greatly debilitated economy still encounter profound gender inequality in the workplace, to say nothing of the notorious practice of “*dimissioni in bianco*” that forces women to sign a blank resignation letter that can be used by the employer at any time to force them to leave their job. This “*licenziamento incorporato nel posto*” (Valentini 2012, 59) is only the most visible example of a widespread Italian practice that allows employers to circumvent the existing norms protecting pregnant women and mothers from being fired.

Although in theory Italy offers a fair amount of legal protection for working women, in practice a longstanding anti-maternal climate – aggravated by the lack of state support for working mothers, the predominance of short-term contracts and a chronic paucity of nurseries – contributes to making women's participation in the workplace particularly difficult. This situation generates “*l'ostilità sociale e la mancanza di sostegno che accompagna l'esperienza materna nel nostro paese, al di là delle retoriche del discorso pubblico su famiglia e maternità*” (Sarlo and Zajczyk 2012, 113). Nor does the fight for validation end at the office door or factory gate. At home those same real-life mothers are obliged to overcome deeply entrenched attitudes towards parental roles. All these factors have chilled the once-stereotypical Italian ardour for big families and the current birth rate in the *Bel Paese* continues to be amongst the lowest in the world, at 1.39 (2013, 2014), while the average age of mothers at the time of birth has increased to 31.5 (ISTAT 2015).<sup>5</sup>

This phenomenon, which has attracted the attention of demographers, sociologists and psychologists, is part of the so-called “Italian paradox.” While the country is renowned for its celebration of maternal love, its legislation and corporate culture have fostered a deeply anti-maternal climate. Since the mid-nineties, Italy has registered record low fertility, with a rate of 1.2 children per woman. As Eleonora Cirant notes (2012), twenty per cent of Italian women voluntarily choose not to have children; one in five embraces a child-free lifestyle, though not all decisions are the fruit of a premeditated strategy to forego having children. Complex psychological, social, economic and professional reasons lead women to postpone reproductive decisions. While a certain social hedonism has been invoked to explain this phenomenon, along with the desire to pursue a fulfilling career, the “precarious-ization” of the job market (Molé 2012, 4) and the decline in job security following the Biagi reform in 2003 have played a significant role in dissuading women from having children (Santamaria 2010, 14).

At a time when neoliberal practices have profoundly transformed the Italian job market, resulting in a perverse “flexinsecurity,” women are confronting the re-emergence of a plethora of discourses that validate essentialist notions of biological gender differences that in turn support gendered differentiation of care. Positing an intrinsic divide between men and women absolves the former from the responsibility of achieving, or even attempting to achieve, a more equitable division of childrearing and domestic responsibilities, while placing the latter in the role of the “natural” caregiver. Such reified gender differentiation is becoming increasingly acceptable in Italian society, and although maternal memoirs depict it ironically, the irony they employ nevertheless fails to question it. By giving ample examples of male inability to handle maternal

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<sup>5</sup> Italy's Total Fertility Rates increased from the lowest (1.2), registered in the mid-nineties, to 1.46 in 2010 and then went down to 1.39 in 2013 and 2014, well below the European Union average of 1.58 for 2012 (ISTAT 2015). Within Italy there are differences in fertility rates that challenge the pervasive stereotype of the prolific South. Trentino leads the ranking with 1.65, while Sardinia, Basilicata and Molise hold the records of 1.13, 1.17 and 1.19 respectively. All Northern regions, with the exception of Liguria (1.31) display higher fertility rates than in the rest of the country, with an average of 1.46. The Centre has an average of 1.36, while in the South fertility decreases to an average of 1.32. These figures reflect the higher fertility rates of immigrant women, whose average is 1.97, versus 1.31 for Italian women.

duties, they naturalise it, concluding “[a] volte ricordarsi che sei donna e che un uomo, al posto tuo, non ce la farebbe mai, può essere d’aiuto” (De Lillo 2008, 28).

Moreover, highly demanding notions of parental responsibility gain new momentum when supported by the tenets of intensive mothering, a “naturalistic” parenting style, also known as “attachment parenting,” which prescribes an expensive and emotionally taxing return to nature, with prolonged breastfeeding, child-wearing, non-disposable nappies and co-sleeping. As French philosopher Elisabeth Badinter points out, this naturalistic approach to infant care is part of a global trend, “a revolution in our idea of motherhood,” that aims to “put motherhood squarely back at the heart of women’s lives” (2013, 1). Applied to a country like Italy, where women’s participation in the workplace and the availability of publicly-funded childcare remains far below the European objectives of the Treaty of Lisbon, the principles of naturalistic parenting essentialise childcare duties as a woman’s responsibility and thus complicate her already precarious work-life balance. They also generate a profound sense of guilt that supports entrenched notions of Catholic maternal duty and sacrifice. Those who resist the imperatives of this “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive” mothering philosophy run the risk of being considered “*madri snaturate*,” unnatural mothers, or of falling into the opposite category, that of the castrating, overprotective mother (Hays 1996, 8).

Psychoanalytic discourses intervene to further pathologise maternal conduct. As Massimo Recalcati has recently argued, these oscillate between two equally dangerous extremes: the suffocating, engulfing stereotype of the overprotective mother, and a new configuration of the narcissistic mother, who puts satisfaction of her own desires before her children’s well-being:

Il nostro tempo ci confronta con una radicale trasformazione di questa rappresentazione della madre: né bocca di cocodrillo, né ragnatela adesiva, né sacrificio masochistico, né elogio della mortificazione di sé. Alla madre della abnegazione si è sostituita una nuova figura della madre che potremmo definire “narcisistica.” Si tratta di una madre che non vive per i propri figli, ma che vuole rivendicare la propria assoluta libertà e autonomia dai propri figli (2015).

Resorting to the Lacanian notion of the “crocodile mother” who threatens to devour her children, the Italian psychoanalyst pathologises those women whose desire is directed away from their children, while at the same time pointing to the dangers of the previous model that required paternal intervention in order to counterbalance maternal omnipotence. While Italian mothers are often typecast as solely responsible for the widespread *mammismo*, Recalcati’s *La Repubblica* article stirred much controversy, as it foregrounds a kind of neotraditional view of maternal duties. As Chiara Saraceno points out in response to this alarming portrait of patriarchal and postmodern motherhood: “Non c’è scampo per le mamme” (Saraceno 2015). As a result, “la maternità è un campo di battaglia” (Valentini 2012, 181), and irony seems the best weapon to enable survival (Ambrosi 2014; Piazza 2009; Saraceno 2012; Soffici 2010; Valentini 2012; Proietti and Pompili 2011).

Written in a light-hearted tone for the general public, maternal memoirs shed light on the contradictions of contemporary mothering, which generate widespread feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and guilt. Issues of work-life balance, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, sleeping and childcare feature prominently in these texts. In a humorous tone, De Lillo, Raznovich, Papisca, Santamaria and Maraone, employing different styles and structures, recount their gestational and maternal experiences. They dwell on their personal transitions to the uncharted territory of postmodern motherhood and on the unexpected challenges of reconciling professional with personal life, overcoming social prejudices and finding a personal maternal style among the few that are acceptable.

Papisca, Raznovich, Maraone and Santamaria, all professional women working in the

field of communication and media, structure their narratives around a chronological sequence that stretches from their pre-pregnancy status as independent and confident young women, to the ups and downs of their pregnancy, childbirth and the emotional tsunami that swept away their formal selves once they returned home with their newborns. Whether the pregnancy was the result of a decision, as in Raznovich's and Maraone's cases, or a chance event, like that of Papisca and Santamaria (Papisca having earlier been told she could never have children), all of them interrogate the profound discrepancies between the omnipresent idealised representations of maternal bliss and their own personal experiences, and thus reveal the extent to which "social myths permeate and complicate the experience of mothering" (Bassin 1996, 3). In their humorous reflections, they expose the artificiality of the representations of motherhood. "Quello che si dice sulla maternità è una bugia, un inganno collettivo che si consuma con la complicità di quelle mamme che già lo sono, tutte zucchero e sorrisetti estatici, colori pastello e felicità sbandierata ai quattro venti," warns Raznovich, who admits that once you discover what motherhood is really like, it's too late (2011, 8).

With an upbeat, positive tone, these authors explore taboo subjects, such as post-partum depression; the disconnect between the idealised portrait of maternal bliss and the reality of excruciatingly painful breastfeeding sessions; endless sleepless nights; anti-maternal labour market policies, and relentless maternal competitiveness. Most of the concerns that find expression in these books reflect a widespread phenomenon that greets new parents: the notion of parental perfection. As Loredana Lipperini points out, nowadays "[i] genitori vogliono sentirsi perfetti perché temono che qualcuno li giudichi inadeguati. Perché questa è l'epoca in cui la maternità e la paternità sono una performance sociale e anche mediatica, e non solo l'esperienza di educare al mondo un altro essere" (2013, 97-8). Maternity has gained unprecedented visibility in the field of popular culture, with celebrity pregnancies featured not only in gossip magazines such as *Novella 2000* or *Chi* but even in the most prestigious daily newspapers, such as *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*. Consequently, parenting practices in general and maternal practices in particular have become objects of intense scrutiny. A sense of inadequacy engulfs women, since "[t]oday's ideal is supremely demanding, even more than twenty years ago, when people had already registered the expanding demands made of mothers" (Badinter 2013, 115). As the ideals of motherhood undergo a process of resignification, greater emphasis is placed on maternal responsibility for the child's emotional and physical development. In response these authors offer counter-narratives that employ irony and mild self-deprecation.

While motherhood proves to be increasingly unsettling, Italian mothers, like their North-American counterparts, feel unprepared to face the challenges of their newly acquired role. As a result they turn to a kind of maternal writing, on- and off-line, that can provide much-needed support and comic relief. As family structures change and procreation ceases to be women's destiny, the decision to have a child brings about greater psychological and affective responsibilities (D'Amelia 2005; Saraceno 2012; Zanatta 2011). Coupled with the fact that, according to Maraone, at least thirty per cent of new parents have never held a child before their own (2009, 182), it is understandable that many new mothers feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for a newborn. The lack of familiarity with childrearing increases their insecurity and feeds their fear of making irreversible mistakes. As paediatrician Silvia di Chio observes: "Oggi abbiamo paura dei bambini. Abbiamo paura di nutrirli poco, di sgridarli troppo, di fare errori" (2009, 9). New mothers are besieged by doubts as they try to measure up to imaginary models of maternal competence and perfection. For this reason, Maraone subtitles her book *Guida pratica per sopravvivere al primo anno di vita del bambino*. With an ironic inversion, the focus is shifted from the child to the mother, who is now the one in need of reassurance and emotional support, since the normative notion of the happy, fulfilled mother makes a taboo of any expression of dissidence.

Focusing on her own experience, Maraone, a journalist at the popular Italian magazine *Oggi*, enriches each chapter with a section significantly entitled "Quel che pensavo prima [...] e

quel che è successo dopo.” Her aim is to expose the chasm that opened up between the expectations she harboured before giving birth and the cruel reality of what actually happened. Like most educated women, she admits to having prepared for her maternal role by reading a variety of books on the subject. None, however, had truly prepared her for what was to come, especially because “L’iconografia classica, i film di Hollywood, i romanzi di successo, fanno sentire la neomamma inadeguata” (2009, 40).

To dispel the aura of sanctity around motherhood and provide uncensored information about this declining institution, another blogger, Santamaria, has authored her own peculiar guidebook to pregnancy and infant care entitled *Quello che le madri non dicono*. In it Santamaria recounts her personal experience as a glamorous party girl faced with an unplanned pregnancy, and reveals her prejudices towards what she perceived to be “uno stereotipo scialbo e melassato di mamma” (2010, 22), that of a person who loses her identity to succumb to the tedious dullness of a frumpy lifestyle. Against that terrifying stereotype Santamaria wages war, swearing to remain “una madre figa” (13), able to “far convivere pacificamente perizomi e pannolini. Mojito e Mellin. Pampero e Pampers. Ma soprattutto me e il pupo” (23). In recounting her doubts and fears at the age of twenty-seven, when she was living a dream life of travel, parties and glamour, with the prospect of an exciting though precarious career, she admits that before choosing to give birth, she had a negative view of mothers, since “[p]rima di diventarlo le compatisci anche un po’, le mamme” (258). With humour and boldness she recounts that she managed to overcome her deepest fears and opted to go through with an unwanted pregnancy for which she did not feel psychologically and financially ready. While creating an aura of hip mummy for herself, Santamaria reveals the many contradictions in Italy’s hedonistic and consumerist society with regard to reproduction, parenting, employment and work-life balance.

Her book – based on her successful blog “Ma che, davvero?” – shares some features with the fictional mummy books “that deal with pregnancy” and that “usually begin with a woman reluctant to have a baby because she fears losing control of her personal and professional life. Slowly over the course of the book, the woman comes to accept the impending pregnancy” (Arosteguy 2010, 411). Like the fictional characters of North-American novels, Santamaria weaves a humorous story with more profound considerations on the “tsunami esistenziale” (2010, 176) that accompanied her journey to motherhood and her bumpy ride through her daughter’s first year of life. In the guise of an eternal Peter Pan, she exposes the perverse nature of the Italian job market, which is particularly hostile to pregnant women and young mothers, as she herself discovered first-hand when the last of her many short-term contracts was not renewed when she was four months pregnant. Facing unemployment, she started a blog; this enabled her to create a personal branding that has catapulted her to fame. The successful textual mask of her autobiographical narrative shows the paradoxical effects of neoliberal forces on young professional women. Although they are expelled from the world of full-time employment, these mumpreneurs cash in on the commercial value of their maternal narrations and can bank on the appeal of their maternal identity.

Another example of this trend is found in De Lillo’s blog “Nonsolomamma.” In it the former Reuters financial journalist dons an alter ego, Elastigirl, modelled after the character from the 2004 Disney movie *The Incredibles*. The fictionalised version of her unusual family structure finds fuller expression in her two books *Nonsolomamma*, subtitled *Diario di una mamma elastica con due hobbit, un marito part-time e un lavoro a tempo pieno*; and its sequel *Nonsolodue. Viaggi, avventure, stress quotidiano della mamma elastica più famosa d’Italia con due hobbit (+ 1) e un marito sempre più part-time*. Following a diaristic structure, these highly successful books recycle elements from three different realms: animated films, fantasy books and post-feminist TV series. As a financial journalist who juggles a demanding full-time job with raising two children, she crafts her own persona after that of the stay-at-home female superhero who has relinquished her crime-fighting career for suburban maternity. Her two endearing children are cast as the hobbits of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, so loved by her husband, Mr. Wonder, a Marxist economist who spends

most of his time in London, where he works at a prestigious university. Her family's fictional dwelling, Wisteria Lane, alludes to the setting of the post-feminist mystery-romance-comedy *Desperate Housewives*, which chronicles the dark side of contemporary suburbia. While her husband commutes between the City and Milan, she unleashes her superpowers to handle a professional career and a demanding family with the help of a providential babysitter, "Valentina Diolabenedica," while trying to assuage her constant sense of guilt.

With mild self-deprecation and unrelenting optimism, De Lillo recounts the tragicomic adventures of an "elastimamma, senza trucco, senza crema idratante e con i capelli a carciofo, che si barcamena, tra i bambini, il marito part-time, il lavoro a tempo pieno e il senso di colpa" (De Lillo 2010, 8), proud of her ability to juggle full-time employment with minimal support from a part-time husband, whose disengagement from domestic life and childrearing is justified by his professional career. Her daily entries, based on her highly successful blog, create anecdotal vignettes of her turbulent though endearing affluent family life. Disguised as the Disney heroine, she unmask the difficulties of contemporary mothering while rejoicing in her ability to face every unexpected situation and survive even the most adverse circumstances. Pleased with her children and academic husband, she never challenges the gender inequality of her family structure. Despite having been raised in the seventies by a feminist single mother, she displays a certain penchant for domesticity.

The comical recounting of balancing acts can have pernicious side effects, as it can implicitly validate the same anti-maternal conditions that it supposedly exposes. As Andrea O'Reilly observes of English-language maternal memoirs, those texts often support an ambiguous "discourse [*that*] ultimately reinscribes, or more accurately naturalizes and normalizes, the very patriarchal conditions of motherhood that feminists, including the motherhood memoir writers themselves, seek to dismantle" (O'Reilly 2010, 205). A case in point is Elisabetta Gualmini's book *Le mamme ce la fanno. Storie di donne sempre in bilico tra famiglia, scuola e lavoro*, which reveals the private life of a successful left-leaning intellectual, a professor of political science at the University of Bologna who is also director of a prestigious international research centre, and an active participant in the political arena, with opinion editorials in *La Stampa* and frequent TV appearances.

Organised around anecdotal entries about her children's scholastic and extra-curricular activities, *Le madri ce la fanno* chronicles the juggling of ever more maternal accomplishments in the Darwinian circus that is contemporary motherhood. The author's tone is self-celebratory throughout. An expert in labour policies, Gualmini is the author of several academic books, including *Rescued by Europe? Social and Labour Market Reforms in Italy from the First Republic to Berlusconi*. Yet despite her expertise in this area, her maternal narration makes no reference to the structural forces that have led to unequal working conditions for men and women. Nor does it analyse the effects of labour reforms on working mothers. The Italian school system is still designed according to out-dated family structures, and only the more affluent families can afford hired help; nevertheless, this intellectual mother, who thanks D'Alema for his encouragement when writing this book, seems unaware of the real challenges that many less fortunate and less economically stable mothers face. Basing her observations on a limited number of equally privileged upper middle-class liberal mothers, Gualmini offers a very partial view of contemporary motherhood. Her assertion that, in spite of challenges, women can make it, overlooks the painful reality of a generation of workers in precarious situations, whose short-term contracts preclude the possibility of maternal leave and further employment. While most mothers are besieged with doubts and often wonder "ce la farò?" or "posso farcela?" Gualmini's *Le mamme ce la fanno* seems to have no doubts.

On the surface, maternal memoirs seem to pave the way for a less idealised, less sugarcoated representation of maternity, thus offering a more forgiving mirror in which women can see themselves. Their titles, *Nonsolomamma*, *M'ammazza*, *Ero una brava mamma prima di avere figli*, *Di materno avevo solo il latte*, *Quello che le mamme non dicono*, just to quote some of the most

famous ones, point to “the mismatch between expectation and experience, between what we ought to be feeling and how we do feel, between how we ought to be managing and how we do manage” (Maushart 1999, xi). As pointed out by Deborah Papisca, who chronicles a painful struggle to overcome post-partum depression, those who do not feel overjoyed by the presence of their newborn bear an unmentionable stigma: “[q]l mondo vedeva la maternità come un’esperienza unica, meravigliosa, globalmente inattaccabile. E io mi sentivo una misera profana” (2011, 95). Her inability to connect with her child, to rejoice in her presence and establish an emotional bond with her, is compounded by a sense of failure and inadequacy instilled by a culture that continues to idealise motherhood as the source of infinite pleasure. Admitting to an inability to experience the tender feelings of a “normal” mother brings about a profound sense of guilt, something akin to the social stigma once reserved for adulterous women:

Mi sentivo come la protagonista della *Lettera scarlatta*: a lei era stata ricamata sul petto la lettera A per l’adulterio commesso, a me spettavano, tatuate in fronte, le lettere MI in formato gigante che stavano per Madre Incapace. Sapevo di non avere altra scelta ed ero disposta ad espiare tutti i miei peccati pubblicamente, pur di evitare che anche una microscopica parte della mia macrosofferenza si ritorcesse su quell’anima candida di mia figlia (108).

Recognising the symptoms of post-partum depression, Papisca turns to her family for help, in particular her mother and her mother-in-law, and to the expertise of Google for authoritative advice. Thanks to the unconditional support of her family members, the suggestions found online, the gentle guidance of a yoga teacher, and a virtual Internet community, she eventually manages to overcome the negative feelings that besiege her after giving birth and to re-emerge from the abyss of depression to offer her story to other women who might be able to benefit from her example.

Although the authors of maternal memoirs examined here are all university-educated working mothers, their narratives tend to validate gender inequality, as the mothers appear to be the main caregivers. The gendered division of caregiving labour goes mostly unquestioned. Santamaria points out the double standard, which is accepted as the norm even by the seemingly most progressive of these writers, such as De Lillo and Gualmini. For them, as for Papisca, gendered divisions of domestic duties are simply taken for granted. Each in her own way, these authors support the notion that when women are employed in extra-domestic activities, they are the ones responsible for finding a substitute for maternal care. In De Lillo and Gualmini’s books, it appears clear that childcare is solely the woman’s responsibility. Women are the ones who get children ready for school in the morning, get them dressed, take them to pre-school or school, and take charge of managing babysitters and domestic help.

Given the complexities and implications of articulating a maternal subject position, these maternal memoirs walk a fine line between unmasking motherhood and proposing an insidious re-masking (to borrow Susan Maushart’s famous definition), one that threatens to undo the advances in gender equality achieved over decades of feminist struggle. In their writings these mothers display some elements described by Gilles Lipovetsky (1997). As educated working women who are free to take control of their sexuality and make informed reproductive choices, they have acquired a degree of emancipation; nonetheless, their existence reveals a puzzling relationship with “l’ordre domestique, sentimental ou esthétique” (Lipovetsky 1997, 13). According to the French theorist, this is a feature of the postmodern condition, one characterised by the persistence “du rôle prioritaire de la femme dans la sphère domestique combinée avec les nouvelles exigences d’autonomie individuelle” (357). Aesthetic concerns are present, especially in Santamaria’s and Raznovich’s books, which express greater anxiety about their authors’ ability to reorder their post-partum bodies and regain their pre-pregnancy appearance.

Read as a reflection of the conditions in which women experience mothering in contemporary Italy, these narratives reveal the high levels of stress, anxiety and apprehension that accompany women with children. Mothers are left with the task of running daily marathons to fulfil all their duties and be successful on all fronts, burdens made especially heavy by the pervasive and enduring discrepancy between gender roles. Foregrounding the difficulties of meeting such demands, these texts offer upbeat, optimistic narratives that celebrate and ultimately validate women's achievements in the maternal sphere. Often resorting to the well-known metaphor of the "equilibrant," they walk a fine line between unmasking and remasking maternal practices. As Lipperini points out with regard to writing mothers, "[a] volte si smitizzano, creando però nuovi miti" (2013, 252). Resorting to an ambiguous self-celebratory tone, these maternal memoirs often support the same anti-maternal structures whose effects they ironically describe, especially with regard to the gendered division of labour.

Given that motherhood as a patriarchal institution is a powerful cultural construction, this essay has explored the ways in which recently published maternal memoirs engage with current notions of proper maternal behaviour. It describes a process of resignification in which the traditional figure of the self-abnegating, caring, omnipresent Italian mother, a figure that reverberates with the Christian virtues of devotion and sacrifice, acquires a more glamorous facelift. As a discursive construction, motherhood is a pliable, though deeply influential concept that can be deployed to further multiple interests. As Marina D'Amelia (2005) points out in her historic exploration of the construction of the myth of the Italian mother, the often-invoked notion of *mammismo* served as a unifying myth in post-war Italy. And in Italian literature, notes Laura Benedetti: "the institution of motherhood has been the site of constant negotiation" (2007, 3). Indeed, journalists such as Oriana Fallaci and Lidia Ravera, in *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* and *Bambino mio* respectively, reflected deeply on the incompatibility of motherhood and journalism at a time when Italy was still debating the abortion issue, creating protagonists who struggle with the question of giving birth or not as they try to pursue a characteristically male profession.

Over thirty years later, the generation of women born during and after that period of intense feminist activism have come into adulthood in a country that in theory offers greater freedom for women. As Italy grows older and the chauvinism of Italian society acquires greater intensity, however, the figure of the mother is undergoing a series of discursive permutations. The figure of the mother, pitted against that of the *veline* who dominate the mediascape, is appropriated by numerous lay and religious discourses and reimagined as a stronghold against the commodification of the female body:

Il corpo materno è infatti onnipresente nelle rappresentazioni, costantemente immaginato e visualizzato nella sua dimensione normativa come soluzione, realizzazione e completamento di sé, via d'accesso a quella "dignità" femminile che viene opposta con forza al degrado rappresentato dalla velina, che si offre spontaneamente all'interno del mercato dei corpi femminili (Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012, 64).

The memoirs analysed here celebrate motherhood as a means to self-fulfilment within a widespread discourse of maternal multi-tasking, which is often shown on their book covers. Both *Nonsolomamma* and *Le mamme ce la fanno* were inspired by the famous February 2005 *Newsweek* cover entitled "The Myth of the Perfect Mother," which features a cross-legged mother holding her newborn with two arms, while the other six arms and hands hold symbols of her multiple roles: a football, alluding to the well-known type of the suburban "soccer mom"; weights, which symbolise the imperative for fitness which accompanies millennium mothers; a stiletto shoe, symbol of fashion, glamour and consumerism; a phone, connecting the stay-at-home mum with the outside world; a frying-pan containing bacon, connoting both financial subsistence and home cooking; and a raggedy Andy All-American doll, which evokes traditional

notions of childhood. A modern rendition of the goddess Kali, this image has become a familiar icon of contemporary motherhood.

While the American magazine cover portrays a photo-shopped image of a real person, De Lillo's book cover shows a comic caricature of a frantic mother. She is pulling her hair out with a set of hands while holding two uncooperative children (one screaming, the other bent on mischief), along with a mobile phone, a briefcase, a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, an aeroplane and the title of the book itself to symbolise the complex juggling act she performs on a daily basis. Gualmini's cover, still reminiscent of the multi-armed Indian goddess, presents a stylised, serene and effortless young mother whose arms and legs hint at her multiplicity of roles: cooking while holding a bag of groceries, a stylish purse, a tablet phone, a crying infant, a laptop and a broom. She is certainly a working mother, yet also one who is in charge of all domestic tasks. Appropriately, her lower part features four legs and feet in an array of attires: formal trousers and stiletto shoe, pyjamas and bunny slipper, bare leg and sandal, jeans and red Converse. Even the more self-consciously fashionable *Quello che le mamme non dicono* avoids glamorous images. The famous TV presenter Raznovich is herself featured on her book cover to cash in on her visibility, while Papisca's cover presents a milk-stained organiser, revealing the impact of motherhood on her professional self. Maraone's instead opts for a vintage fifties look and depicts a desperate mother trying to get her child to eat.

In their visual appearance and substance, each of these maternal memoirs purports to demystify idealised representations of motherhood by articulating individual mothering practices. Giving voice to maternal frustration and chronicling the misadventures of less virtuous mothers, these texts could be hailed as a challenge to normative notions of proper maternal conduct. Nonetheless, thanks to their pre-emptive irony, these narratives often walk a fine line between the unmasking and the subtle self-celebratory remasking of oppressive stereotypes.

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