ITALIAN FEMINIST THOUGHT AT THE PERIPHERY OF THE EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

Italian feminist thought has not reached to-date a great popularity among a wide international audience nor has gained a recognized standing within the academic field of Women's Studies. Instead, Italian feminist theories seem to have kept a constant marginal role on the international literary and critical scene. This is certainly the result of a combination of factors related to the particular way in which Italian feminist thought has been produced and distributed at international level. However a further cause, intrinsic within the same nature of Italian feminism, cannot be underestimated. Following this direction, this article intends to present an overview of the nature of Italian feminist thought with special attention to the 'thought of sexual difference', highlighting the elements that have negatively influenced its international visibility.

ÖZET

İtalyan feminist düşüncesi halihazırda ne uluslararası seviyede, ne de Kadın Bilimleri Akademiyası nezdinde yüksek bir popülerlik kazanamamış olup, bunun yerine ancak, İtalyan Feminist Teorisi Uluslararası Edebiyat ve Eleştiri çevrelerinde kendine sabit bir yer edinmiştir. Bu pek tabii ki, İtalyan Feminist Düşüncesi'nin kendine özgü üretim ve yayım dağıtımından kaynaklanan bazı faktörlerle ilgilidir. Ancak, bir başka neden de aslında İtalyan Feminizminin kendi doğasında yer alan birtakım başka özellikler olduğu göz ardı edilmemelidir ki, işte bu nedenle bu çalışmanın amacı İtalyan feminist düşüncesine ve özellikle de 'cinsel fark kavramına' genel bir bakış açısı geliştirip, aynı zamanda uluslararası alandaki görünürlüğüne olumsuz etki eden öğelere dikkat çekmektir.

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The translation and publication in the United States in 1990 of the manifesto of Italian 'thought of sexual difference', *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nella vicenda di un gruppo di donne,* by Teresa de Lauretis[1], created, in the words of Susanna Scarparo, "the impression that a new and exciting brand of feminism was coming to the American academy and would perhaps act as the 'third way' between Anglo-American and French feminism".[2] In the same way, the first English language anthology of Italian feminist texts by Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, published in the following year[3], praised the change of climate and the entrance within the binary opposition of American and French feminisms of new feminist theories that might "help destabilize the old game of labeling feminist theory according to stereotyped dichotomies, and begin a more productive exchange".[4]

However, after seventeen years from these words, it could be argued that not much has changed in terms of Italian feminism's global visibility and popularity. Italian feminist thought, as a nationally distinguished, original body of thought, is still almost unknown on the international literary and critical scene and does not have a recognized standing within the, mainly Anglo-American dominated, field of Women's and Genre Studies.

This is certainly the result of a combination of factors, related to the particular way in which Italian feminist theories have been produced and distributed at international level and to the lack of translations in English of many of its core texts. Nonetheless, a further element, represented by the same nature of Italian feminism, cannot be underestimated.

Following this direction, this article aims to investigate the complex philosophical/political nature of Italian feminist thought, with special attention to the 'thought of sexual difference' and its core conceptual framework, trying

1 Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice,* Trans. Teresa de Lauretis and Patricia Cicogna (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

2 Susanna Scarparo, "Feminist Intellectuals as Public Figures in Contemporary Italy", in *Australian Feminist Studies* 19, no. 44 (July 2004), p.201.

3 Paola Bono & Sandra Kemp, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

4 Ibid., p.2.

to highlight the elements that have negatively influenced its international visibility and that have kept it at the "periphery of the Empire".[5]

Italian feminist thought is characterized by specific cultural and historical elements that have all contributed in providing its shape. Philosophy, psychoanalysis, semiotics, language studies, leftist politics have all had an influence and are clearly detectable as founding elements though at different stages of its development. In the 1970s Italy's feminism formed a highly politicized movement under the umbrella of the left and in particular of the Italian Communist Party, the largest in the Western world. This first wave of feminism was convinced that with its left-wing allies it could overthrow patriarchal institutions that included parliament as well as the family. By the end of the decade the left parties entered in a deep crisis, discredited by extreme left terrorism, and feminists dissociated themselves from their former allies, increasingly divorcing from party politics.

It is important to underline that though generally linked to left wing ideologies the feminist movement has been characterized since its origins by two distinct souls: a 'separatist' and an 'activist' or 'political' one. The first denominated 'neo-feminism' and formed by independent and extra-parliamentary women and the latter more strictly related to the UDI (*Unione Donne Italiane*), the feminist group born from the Communist party in 1944 and become independent in 1982. Despite tensions within feminist ranks, all the groups have collaborated throughout the seventies in lobbying the government towards the adoption of progressive legislation for women as the protection of working women (1972), equal rights in the family (1975), equal wages with men (1977), and the rights of divorce (1970) and abortion (1978). The campaign to reform the old law on rape has witnessed, since the 1980s, an even stronger collaboration between political feminists and neo-feminists that only in 1996, after more than fifteen years of lobbying, bore its fruits[6].

Starting from the 1980s, in coincidence with a more stable domestic political background in the Italian society, the feminist movements, no longer united by clearly defined political objectives, have undergone a substantial

5 Umberto Eco used this metaphor in his book *Dalla periferia dell'Impero*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1976), to indicate the marginal cultural, economic, social situation of Italy in respect to United States.

6 The old law declared rape a crime 'against public morality' while the new law, approved by Italian Parliament in February 1996, reclassified rape as a crime 'against the person'.

process of revision and reevaluation. Feminism, in general, has shifted from its position of marginal and subversive ideology towards more theoretical contexts related to the development of women as individuals mainly through philosophy and psychoanalysis. From this process two main schools of thought have emerged: one derived by 'separatism', committed to sexual difference and motivated by the desire to inject all facets of life with a separatist, feminist perspective and a second, closer to leftist political parties, that seeks a mediation with the mainstream.

The first group is mainly represented by the *Libreria delle donne* and *Diotima* groups and leading feminist figures as the philosophers and scholars Luisa Muraro, Adriana Cavarero and the journalist Ida Dominijanni interested exclusively in the theory and practice of sexual difference; the second group headed by the feminist magazine *Noidonne* and its literary supplement *Leggendaria* and by famous feminist journalists as Miriam Mafai, Anna Maria Crispino, Monica Lanfranco, Tiziana Bartolini is committed instead to research all subjects related to women.

Polemics over separatism have characterized the dialogue between the two factions and Miriam Mafai, former editor of *Noidonne,* has accused separatist feminists of being less open-minded than men[7]. The feminist theory, elaborated by the *Diotima* group mainly within a philosophical and psychoanalytical framework, has also been criticized by non-academic feminists for its obscurity and elitism of language that has alienated many readers. Despite these critics, the 'separatist' feminists have reached in the last twenty years a recognized, prominent position in the cultural landscape of Italian feminism by developing a fully original and unitary construction to which the majority of Italian feminists now tend to refer and that is known as *pensiero della differenza sessuale (*thought of sexual difference).

To understand the thought of sexual difference we need to start from its basic concept: 'difference'. Whilst Anglo-American feminisms and Italian feminist activists have focused mainly on 'equality', intended in a libertarian and equalitarian approach, the feminists of *Diotima* and of the *Libreria delle donne* have, since the 1980s, stressed their emphasis on 'differences', the notion

7 See Isabella Bertoletti, "Feminist Theory: Italy", in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian literature*, ed. Rinaldina Russell (Westport - Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 115.

that equality between men and women, or among women, must not erase individuality or multiplicity of perspectives.

Adriana Cavarero, one of the founding members of *Diotima* along with Luisa Muraro, affirms that Western philosophical thought is not neutral and universal but rather the thought of the male subject. She stresses the rethinking of sexual difference within a dual conceptualization of being in a 'female' and in a 'male' subject in opposition to the universal 'One' that has characterized Western thought. In the words of Luisa Muraro such difference "is not one culturally constructed from biology and imposed as gender but rather a difference in symbolization, a different production of reference and meaning out of a particular embodied knowledge."[8]

Hence, Muraro's elaboration of thought takes as its project the establishment of a new feminine genealogy or *collocazione simbolica* (symbolic placement), the research of a new reference and tradition within which to situate woman. She re-elaborates the psychoanalytic thesis of Jacques Lacan that had underlined the implication on the human subject being born into a symbolic order, which pre-exists the subject and gives him its identity. To this "symbolic order of the father" Muraro substitutes the "symbolic order of the mother" (*L'ordine simbolico della madre*[9]) that is the capability to keep together body and words, experience and language that women learn in their primary relation with the mother.

A revolutionary order as the mother-daughter relation has been cancelled in the patriarchal order. Learning to practice this order in the adult life, substituting the opposition towards the mother with the gratitude to her and to the other women that continue her work, open the space for the possibility to express the female experience otherwise negated by the conformation to the male norms and power. Muraro, with her work, intends to put at the center of her thesis not the maternal as ethical or psychological capacity but the relation with the mother as a symbolic form, able to generate social forms leading to a linguistic mediation more than to law. For her, women have lost their originality as a consequence of the relation with men. They have internalized men's needs and lost their female origin. The new order can allow a rediscovery of the

8 The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice,* p.27.

9 Luisa Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1991).

deeper maternal/feminine unconscious layer that can be joined with the more superficial and rational conscious.

This position can sound essentialist to the Anglo-American feminists but it is not perceived in the same way within the Italian context. Cavarero and Muraro as professional philosophers draw their discourses from philosophy and psychoanalysis. As academics belonging to Italian humanistic tradition their reference is Greek and Latin mythology and German and French philosophy. They are not concerned with the issues related to the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' that has strongly characterized the Anglo-American feminist discourse as Italian language has no distinction between the two words and the term *sesso* (sex) is used to mean both.

They follow neither the pragmatic route of gender identity nor that of social changes but seek a deeper, structural analysis of the psychoanalytical and philosophical rooting of women's difference. For the Italian theorists of sexual difference, in fact, to be woman is not simply a biological factor, as affirmed by essentialism, but it is also an experience of estrangement and separateness and it is strongly rooted in history. This is, moreover, not only limited to the personal sphere of women but it is also a highly political issue. To affirm a difference rooted in the symbolic order means affirming something more than equality to the male subject as the two subjects, different from each other, have to be accepted both as partial and as founding of the new order. Difference means within this theory 'duality' and it is on this duality that the universe needs to be reshaped by a deep modification of all structures at all levels – symbolic, institutional and economic.

However, difference does not characterize only the man/woman relation but also the relation among and between women. In this context Muraro argues for the theorization and practice of 'entrustment' and 'disparity' that both derive from a new understanding of 'authority', distinguished from male authoritarianism and hierarchy but read in the frame of the mother/daughter relationship. It is, in fact, through the recognition that all women are not equal that one woman may entrust herself to another, taking that other, authoritative woman as her frame of reference and symbolic mediation with the world.

For Chiara Zamboni, an other philosopher of *Diotima*, authority becomes "a bridge, a mediation, between two women"[10] and it is clearly distinct from 'power' as intended within the framework of paternal authority. In the words of Susanna Scarparo: "The feminist intellectual is granted such authority by the person with whom she forms a relationship, but she does not assume that authority a priori. This understanding of authority is markedly distinct from power, particularly institutional power".[11]

As we have seen the reconstructed relation with the mother, intended in a metaphorical and philosophical approach, becomes the basis of a new symbolic order where the woman does not have to sacrifice her symbolic origins to accede to language and to the paternal law. The research for a female subjectivity or *pensiero sessuato* (sexed thought) in the words of Cavarero is also stated by the post-modernist feminist critic Rosi Braidotti that considers the philosophy of sexual difference:

> (…) a necessary political gesture. As a collective political, social, theoretical, movement we must found a female cogito. We authorize for ourselves the statement: ' I/woman/ think/as/woman and therefore I am'. *What* I am, as a woman, is another matter, located at a more individual level. Let us not confuse the individual with the subject. We can all agree on the affirmation of a female subjectivity. 'We', movement of liberation of each woman's 'I', of all those women who recognize themselves in the statement 'I/woman am'.[12]

The theory of sexual difference has had strong repercussions on the issue of language and on the way in which the female sexed thought could express herself by the medium of the existing language created by men within a patriarchal system. Feminist studies within the field of linguistics, semiotics and literature have dealt with this issue not by trying to create a new female language, as in the French feminism, but by a re-reading of literary, philosophical, mythological, psychoanalytic discourses that rejects a male,

10 Chiara Zamboni, "Ordine simbolico e ordine sociale", Diotima, *Oltre l'uguaglianza: le radici femminili dell'autorità* (Napoli: Liguori, 1995), p.40.

11 Susanna Scarparo, "Feminist Intellectuals as Public Figures in Contemporary Italy", p 208.

12 Braidotti Rosi, "Commento alla relazione di Adriana Cavarero", in *La ricerca delle donne. Studi femministi in Italia*, eds. Cristina Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi Doria (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), pp. 190-191.

neuter perspective but uses the female subjectivity as the new measure of research.[13]

This allows a new freedom within the field of research without subordination or identification with the codified knowledge but with the intellectual attitude of an itinerary subjectivity in transition between places, experiences, roles and languages and that Rosi Braidotti has assimilated to the image of the "nomad".[14] She identifies, in fact, an interrelationship between female identity, feminist subjectivity, and "the radical epistemology of nomadic transitions from a perspective of positive sexual difference".[15] The new female subjectivity as a nomadic concept does not observe disciplinary boundaries and "has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity"[16] as the nomad is a "form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity".[17]

Braidotti's theory of sexual difference represents a further development from *Diotima*'s thought at the intersection between feminism and postmodernism/post-structuralism. Following the path of *Diotima*'s theorists, Braidotti also intends to work with the body as "a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological".[18] For her, locating subjectivity in the body is not an essentialist position but, on the contrary, it is radically anti-essentialist, because it forces subjective specificity, multiplicity and complexity within multiple discourses and physical positions. However, she is mindful of the question of how deeply subjectivity can be rooted in embodiment and sexual difference before it slips into nostalgia or moralism.

Returning to the issue of international visibility, even on the basis of this brief, general outlook, the notion of sexual difference, which predominates in Italian feminist thought, results clearly a low accessible theory for international

13 Among the most important studies in this field see: Elisabetta Rasy, *La lingua della nutrice. Percorsi e tracce dell'espressione femminile* (Roma: Edizioni delle donne, 1978); Patrizia Magli, ed., *Le donne e i segni: scrittura, linguaggio, identità nel segno della differenza femminile* (Ancora: Il lavoro editoriale,1988); Patrizia Violi, *L'infinito singolare. Considerazioni sulla differenza sessuale del linguaggio* (Verona: Essedue edizioni, 1986).

14 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory(*New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

15 Ibid., p.149.

16 Ibid., p.22.

17 Ibid., p.23.

18 Ibid., p.4.

grass-roots feminists and for a wider, popular audience. Its natural rooting in Western philosophy and psychoanalysis creates, in fact, both linguistic and content barriers for non-academic feminists. This difficulty is even more accentuated in regard to the Anglo-American audience with a more pragmatic and less philosophical approach to feminism than countries like Germany, France and Italy.

Moreover it is important to underline that the thought of sexual difference, in the words of Cavarero, is born as the "*philosophical* systematization of the concepts and categories of the feminist theoretical speculations carried on by the feminist movement in Italy"[19] (my emphasis). Therefore the theory of sexual difference, is basically a 'philosophical' theory laid down by professional women philosophers working within the academia in a period of no institutionalization of feminism in Italy and does not represent Italian feminism as a whole but it is its more philosophical, elitist, separatist branch. It has been exported abroad in the 1990s by two academics, Teresa de Lauretis and Rosi Braidotti, and because of its specialist nature it has kept a marginal role in respect to the larger culture and society while finding resonance only among feminist academia and intellectuals.

However, even within the professional elite of femocrats[20], Italian feminist thought has not reached to-date a great popularity within the field of Anglo-American Women's Studies but has kept a constant marginal role. This can be ascribed to three main causes: the uncontested close link between the theory of sexual difference and the French feminist theory; Italian feminism's neglect of postmodernism and post-structuralism; the low degree of institutionalization of feminist theory within Italian universities.

Regarding the first cause, it is important to remember that French feminist theory, as the Italian one, is not a homogeneous corpus of thoughts but is characterized by many, fragmented trends. However what has been called 'French feminism' in the English-speaking world is its more philosophical branch represented by academics as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia

19 Adriana Cavarero, "The Need for a Sexed Thought", in P. Bono & S. Kemp, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought. A reader*, p.181.

20 'Femocracy' is intended as the professional domain of feminism. The term has been coined by Ann Yeatman in her *Bureaucrats, Technocrats, Femocrats: Essays on the Contemporary Australian State* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990) and by Marian Sawer in *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

Kristeva. In early 1980s the works of these scholars became available to American readers through translations and entered the field of Women's Studies primarily through departments of French and Comparative Literature. As affirmed by the American feminist critic Elaine Showalter:

> They [French feminists] saw post-Saussurean linguistics, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and deconstruction as the most powerful means of understanding the production of sexual difference in language, reading, and writing (…) and following the work by Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Franco-American feminist critics focused on what Alice Jardine calls 'gynesis': the exploration of the textual consequences and representations of 'the feminine' in Western thought.[21]

French feminism has from then become the dual pole of Anglo-American feminism and already in 1988 the critic Nancy Miller refers to the relation between the two movements as "the old Franco-American game of binary oppositions (theory and empiricism, indifference and identity)".[22]

The relevance of this special Franco-American relation to Italian feminism needs to be investigated in terms of the close relation bonding French and Italian feminist thoughts and in particular in relation to the debt that the Italian theory of sexual difference has in respect mainly to the Belgian-French philosopher, linguist and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray. She has been in fact one of the main points of reference for Italian feminist thought and all her works have been translated in Italian by *Libreria delle donne* of Milan within one year of their original publications. Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero, as well as other major Italian theorists of difference, have been deeply influenced by these works and by the ideas of Irigaray that has also been actively engaged in the feminist movement in Italy and has participated in several initiatives to implement a respect for sexual difference on a cultural and, in her most recent works, governmental level.

Although Italian feminist thought bears specific characteristics that differentiate it from its French equivalent, in the English speaking world it seems to have been considered as an extension of French feminist theory with

21 Elaine Showalter, "A Criticism of Our Own: Autonomy and Assimilation in Afro-American and Feminist Literary Theory", in *Feminisms*, eds. Sandra Kemp & Judith Squires, (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.65-66.

22 Nancy Miller, *Subject to Change* (New York: Columbia University, 1988), p.17.

all its limitations but without the same strengths derived by the wide networks of translations and by French feminism position of stronghold of 'European', opposed to 'Anglo-American', feminist thought. Following this approach, Italian feminist theory has been seen as a kind of derivate of French theory but without the same international stand and the same claim for originality.

Moreover, because of the similar nature of the two movements, it has suffered the effects of the same kind of criticism made to French feminist theory. The main criticisms are certainly linked to the issue of essentialism as Italian feminist thought is generally accused of accepting the thesis of a fundamental difference between men and women rooted in biology.

However, as the British feminist researcher Helen Haste has pointed out, the major problem is not its claim of biological determinism but rather its maintaining that there can be a "universal female experience" and that under this invoked universalism it is ignored "the diversity and plurality of female experiences and perspectives".[23] In fact Anglo-American feminist theoretical production has engaged, since the 1990s, with issues of class, race, culture and sexuality leading to an eclipse of the importance of sexual difference and the emergence of a plurality of identities thus diluting the centrality of male/female divide. Black, lesbian and migrant feminisms are nowadays important realities and major theoretical and political issues within the Anglo-American feminism but their specific problems are not dealt by Italian thought of sexual difference and this is certainly a strong limit to its 'exportability'.

Furthermore, as highlighted by the critic Carol Lazzaro-Weis[24], this limitation is exacerbated, in the eyes of American feminists, by the strong tie that Italian theorists of difference appears to have with the more radical separatist and essentialist factions of early American feminism, writers such as Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich and Shulamith Firestone who have been superseded by other stages of American feminist criticism. Their definition of sexual difference – the different nature of women's experience, history, tradition and culture from that of men – had been, in fact, swept away by internal criticism

[23] Helen Haste, "Sexual Metaphors and Current Feminisms", in *Feminisms and Women's Movements in Contemporary Europe,* eds. Anna Bull, Hanna Diamond, and Rosalind Marsh (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp.21-34.

[24] Carol Lazzaro-Weis, " The Concept of Difference in Italian Feminist Thought: Mothers, Daughters, Heretics", in *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference*, eds. Graziella Parati & Rebecca J. West (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), pp.31-49.

from women of color, lesbians and Jewish women who felt marginalized by this emphasis.

The universalism invoked by Italian feminism can be explained only by acknowledging that the study of gender relations cannot avoid reflecting the social practices it attempts to understand. Any regional feminism works from a specific location that possesses its own identity given by a specific historical, cultural, social background. Italy, differently from the United States or the United Kingdom, has presented until recently a quite homogeneous racial and social structure, where the identification by feminist theorists of 'Woman' with a Western, white, middle-class model has been a natural process, situated within an historical framework.

In this context separatism and essential female difference have to be considered primarily strategic responses to the specific situations that Italian feminism has had to contend with as it developed within its own tradition. Moreover, Italian feminist thought by proposing a dialogue with traditional, continental philosophy has been less affected by post-structuralist and post-modern theories and by authors as Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, very popular among Anglo-American feminists of the 1980s and 1990s. This influence has lead the Anglo-American feminist theorist to abandon the idea of constructing a universalistic social theory as this would risk "projecting the socially dominant conjunctions and dispersions of her own society onto others, thereby distorting important features of both"[25]. As a consequence, the account of female subjectivity under a homogeneous identity has been rejected as considered too reductive. In the words of Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson:

> Postmodern-feminism theory would dispense with the idea of a subject of history. It would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation.(…) This, then, is a practice make up of a patchwork of overlapping alliances, not one circumscribable by an essential definition.[26]

[25] Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge,1990), p.31.

[26] Ibid., pp.34-35

The fragmentation and multiplicity of feminine subjectivity has become nowadays one of the main issues within the modern Anglo-American feminist thought that speaks the language of deconstruction, post-structuralism and postmodernism. The same cannot be said for the Italian feminist theory that, mostly focused on psychoanalysis, on the *pratica delle relazioni* (practice of relations) and on the research of a symbolic placement of women, does not seem to share the same theoretical basis. As highlighted by Adriana Cavarero:

> The (Italian feminist) theory does not assume the objective and distant perspective typical of traditional philosophy and of postmodern deconstruction. It is, instead, a theory whose language belongs to the speaker. This language is contextual and relational: it answers the sense that is materialized within the context and the relation.[27]

The individuality and singularity of each woman within Italian feminist theory is not searched, as in the Anglo-American one, by analyzing the categories that unites or divide women – sexuality, class, ethnicity, etc. – but, instead, is found in the 'practice of relations' among women. This practice of relations is divided in a first phase, where the similarities among women have been confused with equality and have been embodied in the significant 'Woman', and a second, more mature phase where the creation of a female symbolic order will connect the *self* of each woman to the *self* of the others according to dynamics of *affidamento* (entrustment) and *disparità* (disparity). The aim of Italian feminist thought is to found a 'politics of symbolic placement' and is consequently strongly rooted in psychoanalysis, political practices and women experiences, so referring mostly, but not exclusively, to Italian women and society.

The lack of broader horizons of analysis in respect to Anglo-American researches is however also the consequence of an almost non-existent legitimacy of feminist scholarship in Italy. While the early institutionalization of Women's Studies in the United States and Great Britain has meant a dramatic increase in the size of the community of feminist theorists, feminist scholarship

[27] "La teoria medesima non assume quindi il punto di vista distaccato e oggettivo, tipico tanto della filosofia tradizionale quanto della decostruzione postmoderna. È piuttosto una teoria nel cui linguaggio *ne va* del sé di chi parla. Tale linguaggio è appunto contestuale e relazionale: risponde al senso che si materializza nel contesto e nella relazione". (My translation). Adriana Cavarero, Franco Restaino, *Le filosofie femministe. Due secoli di battaglie teoriche e pratiche* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2002), p.97-98.

in Italy is only a recent phenomenon. Until the late 1990s feminist research within universities was limited to the will and commitment of feminist scholars that taught Women's Studies within their own traditional courses and/or organized seminars and extra-curricular activities. Since August 2000, with the reform of Italian Higher Education System, and within a context of equal opportunities policies fostered by the European Union, degrees and qualifications in Women's Studies have been introduced. However this process is still at an experimental stage. There is in fact only one professorship (Women's History at the University of Bologna), few centers devoted to Women's Studies (Universities of Calabria, Bologna, Torino and Verona) and some PhD and MA courses in Women's History, Women's Literature, Gender and Family at the universities of Naples and Rome.

The maturity attained by feminist scholarship in the English speaking world has attracted contributions not only from different layers of American and British societies but also from researchers from around the world that, through the medium of the English language, have been able to express their personal, localized feminist perspectives. This has shaped the so called Anglo-American feminist thought "more like a collective puzzle whose various pieces are being filled in by many different people than like a construction to be completed by a single grand theoretical stroke"[28].

On the contrary, Italian feminist thought is still represented internationally only by few, well-known feminist theorists whose works have been translated in English. Despite the presence, also in Italy, of a motivated and heterogeneous group of feminist theorists, Italian feminist texts do not envisage a foreign publication. They are in fact intended to circulate within the well-developed and sophisticated net of collectives and women cultural centers spread on the national territory that have, since the 1970s, ensured the preservation of the Italian feminist tradition. The great fragmentation of this system, however, originally intended to maintain a strong link with the territory, has worked to the detriment of national and international visibility and has not enabled the creation of centralized bodies. Only in the last ten years, with the beginning of the process of institutionalization of Women's Studies, new projects have been set out in this direction. One of this has been the creation of collective databases (OPAC) allowing the research and localization of books, articles and documents spread over the various feminist centers. Successful

[28] Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, p.32.

examples are *Lilith*, that comprises about 36,5000 records available through Internet and *Lilarca*, a collective database dedicated exclusively to feminism in the 1970s.

As shown in this article many elements have concurred in keeping Italian feminist thought and its predominant notion of sexual difference at the periphery of international feminism and Women's Studies universes. Most of these reasons, however, can be ascribed to the particular nature of Italian feminist thought and to the original and, to some extent, anomalous way in which the thought of sexual difference has developed.[29] The Italian philosophers of difference, in fact, though strongly rooting their theories within the canonical texts of philosophy, move along the political practices and speculate on them rather then on the texts. As affirmed by Cavarero:

> The work on the texts is part of their work but the approach to them is oriented by the problems that come from real contexts in which intercrosses the various practices: the practice of the unconscious, of symbolic, of disparity, of entrustment, of relation and of self awareness, to name a few.[30]

On the theoretical level, this has kept Italian feminist theorists away from the objective and detached perspective of feminist academics while on the political level their complex entangle of philosophy and psychoanalysis has turned away the grass roots feminists.

However, the nature of Italian feminism is not static and immutable but a direct response to external stimuli that a fast-changing reality strongly influences and directs. In the last ten years new elements have concurred in modifying Italian feminism's social basis.

The great number of immigrant women arrived in Italy have started to break the traditional race, language, religion homogeneity that had characterized the Italian feminism of the 1970s and 1980s and have posed new issues within the framework of feminist thought. Something unprecedented is changing the

29 Adriana Cavarero, Franco Restaino, *Le filosofie femministe. Due secoli di battaglie teoriche e pratiche,* p.97.

30 "Il lavoro sui testi fa ovviamente parte del mestiere, ma l'approccio ai medesimi è orientate dai problemi che provengono dai contesti reali in cui si incrociano le varie pratiche: quella dell'autocoscienza, del simbolico, della disparità, dell'affidamento, della relazione e del partire da sé, tanto per nominarne alcune". (My translation). Ibid.

basis of Italian society and the old sense of 'uniqueness' of female experience, though assumed to be felt in different ways by different individuals, is giving the way to a new sense of 'multiplicity' and 'plurality' of experiences coming from women that belong to different races, cultures, religions and so offer a completely new perspective to traditional feminists. This is even more accentuated by the fact that Italy is witnessing the arrival of a more diverse immigrant population than other European nations because it does not have a strong colonial history or ties to a particular country[31]. As affirmed by Judith Adler Hellman, as a result of this, "overall, the recent Italian experience of immigration has been one of receiving people who are culturally distinct from the dominant society in almost every aspect".[32]

While this is having both positive and negative repercussions on society at large, from the perspective of the feminist movement, Italian feminist theory is been forced to become more and more an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural project where the analysis of what women share and what divides them is not derived exclusively from an Italian or Western European context but is the result of a complex, cross-cultural pattern of thoughts and ideologies.

However, this is not a simple path. As we have seen, Italian feminism is torn between a feminism of socialist and communist tradition, relying on the emancipation through the work and the equal opportunities, and a feminism of difference, with philosophic and psychoanalytic inspiration. To this division can be ascribed the difficulty that Italian feminists have in recognizing the importance of the immigrant women in Italy, with regard to the gender relations in the Italian society. Split among them, in fact, Italian feminists seem to have difficulties in finding common positions in the face of the new topics that female immigration is carrying to Italy: Islam, the veil, the prostitution, the traffic, the strategies about female genital mutilations, etc.

However, as the recent analysis by Wendy Pojmann[33] has witnessed, there is in the last few years an increasing formation and growth of autonomous immigrant women associations as well as the birth of multicultural associations,

31 See Wendy Pojmann, *Immigrant women and feminism in Italy* (Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate, 2006) p.19.

32 Judith Adler Hellman, "Immigrant 'Space' in Italy: When an Emigrant Sending becomes an Immigrant Society", in *Modern Italy,* no.3, 1997, p.36.

33 Wendy Pojmann, *Immigrant women and feminism in Italy.* This study based on an important work on field, is one of the most comprehensive research between Italian feminism and the migration, the Italian feminists and the immigrant women.

with Italian and immigrant women, such as *Alma Mater*, *NoDi, Trame di terra, Nosotras.* As suggested by the scholar, the development of a multicultural feminism is only possible through the interaction of the Italian women associations and the immigrant women ones. In her words: "For multicultural feminism to succeed, native feminists will have to turn to migrant women. They will have to confront the meanings and implications of women on the move to the merging of first and third world feminism".[34] In a global perspective, the construction of theories and practices for a multicultural feminism cannot avoid dealing with the issue of migration and this is a new reality that Italian feminism is just starting to face.

Moreover, next to the issue of migration and multiculturalism, the new developments in the fields of science, technology, medicine, genetics are creating new ontological issues concerning the essence and origins of the human being while its same biological/natural dependence from the body of the woman has become a political more than a moral issue. These and many more new questions have started to be discussed in the last ten years by Italian feminists and this constant work-in-progress is deeply affecting and influencing the same nature of Italian feminism that, as affirmed by Parati and West "as itself a site of dialogue and difference, if not conflict, is anything but monolithic ".[35]

Although these changes have not find yet a correspondent visibility and attention in the international and Anglo-American contexts, the great domestic ferment of researches concerning women and the fast growing field of Women's Studies within Italy in the last years are symptomatic of a new promising direction taken by Italian feminism, in line with a more open, international perspective.

As this article has tried to highlight, the marginality of Italian feminist thought is not the consequence of the lack of indigenous feminist movements or of a body of original feminist theories that are, instead, represented by a strongly articulated, even if often conflicting, body of thoughts deeply rooted within Italian culture and society. It is just this strong tie of Italian feminism to its territory and the lack of a recognized institutionalisation and professionalism by Italian feminist theorists that have kept Italian feminist thought away from the international stage.

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34 Ibid., p.162.

35 Graziella Parati & Rebecca J. West, *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference,* p.16.

However, the new directions taken towards a more multicultural feminism and the broader institutionalization of Women's Studies represent great potentials for Italian feminist thought that only through the acquisition of the pressing requirements of new trans-cultural and language skills and the legitimacy of feminist scholarship can overcome its national limitations and remove the severe label of provincialism in which it seems to have been trapped for so many years.

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