

1-1-2016

## Motherhood and female identity in Oriana Fallaci and Valeria Parrella: A case of literary *matérnage*?

Aureliana Di Rollo  
*Edith Cowan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013>



Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

---

Di Rollo, A. (2016). Motherhood and female identity in Oriana Fallaci and Valeria Parrella: A case of literary *matérnage*? [Special issue]. *Intervalla: Platform for Intellectual Exchange*, 1, 35-46.

<https://www.fus.edu/intervalla/special-volume-1-to-be-or-not-to-be-a-mother-choice-refusal-reluctance-and-conflict/motherhood-and-female-identity-in-oriana-fallaci-and-valeria-parrella-a-case-of-literary-maternage>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/6752>

## Motherhood and Female Identity in Oriana Fallaci and Valeria Parrella: A Case of Literary *Matérnage*?

Aureliana Di Rollo  
Edith Cowan University, Australia

### ABSTRACT

Contemporary women writers have provided a wide range of interpretations of the relationship between motherhood and female identity, drawing into their stories a range of issues related to the various experiences of motherhood. Among this rich variety, I analyse here two contemporary Italian novels: *Lo spazio bianco* (2008) by Valeria Parrella, and *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (1975) by Oriana Fallaci. I argue that Parrella engages with the same question tackled by Fallaci thirty years earlier: can motherhood find its place in the life of an independent woman? Have thirty years opened up any possibility of negotiating a different balance?

The two novels share many similarities in structure, length and theme. Both texts centre on female protagonists who are alone in their experience of pregnancy. Neither novel depicts motherhood as an unavoidable destiny for women, but as a choice. However, the change in the social, political and economic context underlying the two texts leads to radically different outcomes. In spite of the obvious differences in style and generational background, the continuity between the two works provides the opportunity for a case study of the shifts (or the lack thereof) in the relationship between motherhood and female identity in contemporary Italian society. In addition, the affinity between the two novels allows a reflection on “the corrective and conflictual nature of inter-female intertextuality” (Giorgio 2002, 13), which I analyse using the tools provided by Italian Feminist Theorists.

**KEY WORDS:** motherhood, female identity, mother-daughter relationship, literary entrustment, Italian feminist thought

*As daughters, we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. [...] The quality of the mother's life is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.*  
(Rich 1977, 247)

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary women writers have provided a wide range of interpretations of the relationship between motherhood and female identity, drawing into their stories questions of childlessness, good/bad mothering, surrogacy, infertility and other issues related to the various experiences of motherhood (Comencini 2009; Mazzoni 2012; Murgia 2009; Sereni 2003). From this rich variety, we analyse here two contemporary Italian novels: *Lo spazio bianco* (2008) by Valeria Parrella and *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (1975) by Oriana Fallaci, which offer two snapshots of the same image, taken thirty years apart. The novels display many similarities in structure, length and theme, making it possible to draw parallels between the works and reflect on the social, political and economic changes that have occurred in relation to women in Italian society over the last three decades. In spite of the obvious differences in style, as well as in social and generational background, the continuity between the works provides the opportunity for a case study of the shifts (or the lack thereof) in the relationship between motherhood and female identity in contemporary Italian society.

Both texts are relatively short and based on a first-person account. In both cases the narrating voice belongs to a female protagonist who is about to become a mother, following an unplanned pregnancy. Both protagonists are strong, independent women, and both are alone in their experience of pregnancy. More importantly, neither novel depicts motherhood as an unavoidable destiny for women, but as a choice. However, the change in the socio-cultural context underlying the two texts leads to radically different outcomes. Fallaci's protagonist risks and loses everything, including her life. On the other hand, in Parrella's text, although the protagonist dreads losing her daughter and, as a consequence, her role and identity as a mother, her own life is not at risk.

Even if there is no open acknowledgement in *Lo spazio bianco* of Parrella's reference to Fallaci, there is a clear affinity between the two texts and following a pattern of relationship between women writers that Adalgisa Giorgio defines as "the corrective and conflictual nature of inter-female intertextuality" (2002, 13), I argue that Parrella engages with the same question tackled by Fallaci thirty years earlier: can motherhood find its place in the life of an independent woman? At what price and under what conditions? Are motherhood and self-fulfilment irreconcilable? Have thirty years opened up any possibility of negotiating a different balance?

## AN INTER-GENERATIONAL "LEGAME DI PENSIERO" BETWEEN WOMEN WRITERS

Italian feminist thinkers and literary critics provide useful insights and theoretical tools for the comparative analysis of the two works. I am particularly indebted to the work of Stefania Lucamante (2007) and Ida Dominijanni (2002) for providing me with a theoretical framework for a comparative analysis of two female-authored texts. From Lucamante I draw the notion of literary entrustment, or affidamento, which "establishes a paradigm of women's relations connecting 'weaker' and 'stronger' women" (Parati 2002, 19) and extends to the field of textual analysis, a concept developed by the Women's Collective Bookstore (1987), the philosophical community Diotima (1987), Luisa Muraro (1991), Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (1991) and Adriana Cavarero (2002) as a political and relational practice between women. Even though in real life the practice of entrustment has revealed its limits (Cavarero 2002; Parati 2007;

Lucamante 2008, 34), in fiction it works well and is particularly appropriate to the field of literary criticism. According to Lucamante, “without entrustment there is no example to take [...] no model to follow” (34). Therefore, literary entrustment can be seen “to accommodate the problematic aspect of women writers facing the example and legacy of other women writers” (34).

Dominijanni hypothesises the existence of a different mode of relationship between women, which she defines as a “legame di pensiero” (2002, 191). This legacy of thought refers to the ability of women of a younger generation to question, reread and freely reinterpret the work of women belonging to previous generations, bestowing authority on them. In this way, they activate a process that Dominijanni defines as “la costruzione di un legame di pensiero con le donne che ci hanno preceduto” (191). Although reminiscent of entrustment for the asymmetrical bond between two women, the “legame di pensiero” is less problematic because it is always inter-generational and easily applies to women writers too. *Lo spazio bianco* appears as a contemporary exploration of the issues raised during the 1970s in *Lettera*. My aim here is to demonstrate that Parrella has built her own “legame di pensiero” with some chosen predecessors (such as Dacia Maraini), but with Fallaci in particular.

### MATERNITY AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN *LETTERA A UN BAMBINO MAI NATO*

A comparative study of the two novels unveils the extent to which the options available to Italian women have changed and how literature has interpreted and borne witness to that evolution. In *Lettera*, a nameless woman faces the dilemma of continuing her pregnancy at the cost of giving up her career and freedom. Her struggle against prejudices and patriarchal society is presented in the form of a conversation with her unborn child. In spite of the title, *Lettera* is not a letter, but rather a diary in which the mother, under the pretext of addressing her unborn baby, expresses her anxiety and the trouble she is experiencing in her attempt to combine motherhood (i.e. pregnancy) and freedom. The first-person account allows the protagonist to build an argument about the place of maternity in the life of a woman and to articulate her refusal to be defined in terms of her reproductive powers. She is an independent woman, ambitious and proud of her job, which provides the basis for her economic independence: “Io ho altri doveri verso la vita. Ho un lavoro che mi piace e intendo farlo. Ho un futuro che mi aspetta e non intendo abbandonarlo” (Fallaci 2009, 57). The protagonist does not need to be a mother in order to define her identity as a woman. She firmly rejects the idea of pregnancy as a woman’s primary identity: “Sono una donna che lavora: ho tanti altri impegni e curiosità. Te l’ho già detto che non ho bisogno di te” (8). When she decides to take on the responsibility of giving life, she is conscious of the risks she is taking and these risks quickly become evident. From the beginning, she meets with stubborn opposition from her partner, her boss, the doctors and, in general, the society in which she lives. Despite her courage and the support of a few figures, her struggle is doomed to fail and she dies as a consequence of her miscarriage. The baby’s death entails, or at least hypothesises, the mother’s death,<sup>1</sup> as a sort of divine punishment (Cevasco 1993).

*Lo spazio bianco* explores how a woman’s identity as both mother and daughter shapes and

---

<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity of Fallaci’s message is enhanced by an editorial detail regarding its ending. In the first 36 editions, the last sentences of the novel did not state clearly that the mother would die too as a consequence of the foetus’s death: “Tu sei morto. *Forse* adesso muoio anch’io. Ma non conta. Perché la vita non muore” (emphasis mine). In the revised edition, however, the author modifies the last sentence: “Tu sei morto. *Adesso* muoio anch’io. Ma non conta. Perché la vita non muore” (emphasis mine) and here it is clear that the woman dies. According to the author, the first version of the ending was influenced by her partner at the time. While Fallaci’s intention was to have the woman die, together with the foetus, her partner, who was also a poet, suggested a less dramatic ending for the story, and the revised and final version is thus the restoration of her original idea.

is shaped by the experience of motherhood. For the protagonist of *Lo spazio bianco*, becoming a mother entails interrogating her own identity as a daughter in search of the kind of mother she wants to be. Set in Naples, the narration gives voice to a first-time mother, Maria, whose daughter, Irene, is born premature. Following the birth, mother and daughter spend months in the hospital and while the child is hovering between life and death, Maria wonders what place her newly acquired identity as a mother will have in her life if the baby survives. As an independent woman, some years earlier Maria had made the choice to live her life independently of men and consequently, all her choices relating to the roles of reproduction, motherhood and parenting flow from that initial decision. The events narrated span less than a year and are related and examined in the protagonist's long-running interior dialogue.

In both novels, the woman's pregnancy is not uneventful, entailing an unexpected lack of control over her body and life. In the pursuit of her unconventional idea of motherhood, Fallaci's protagonist risks her identity, her independence, her job, finally her life and loses everything. In *Lo spazio bianco*, Irene's premature birth jeopardises Maria's emotions and self-perception, but does not threaten her life or freedom. Unlike the woman addressing her unborn child in Fallaci's *Lettera*, no one questions Maria's choices, and her reproductive function is no hindrance to her physical survival. Despite all the difficulties, Irene's unexpected arrival provides Maria with an extraordinary opportunity, that is, to become a mother and experience a new sense of self. Motherhood might be a risky, uncontrollable and overwhelming experience, as for Fallaci's protagonist, but it does not erase Maria's identity and desires as a woman. She feels entitled to have a sex life, a job, an existence of which her maternal role is only a part (although a very important one).

The ending of Fallaci's novel contradicts all the apparent claims for freedom and emancipation made by the protagonist, since it implies that, in spite of all her efforts, a woman's reproductive function prevails over her other roles and qualities. Therefore, the miscarriage (that is, the failure to become a biological mother) leads naturally to the end of the woman's life. As Benedetti argues in reference to this novel, "however resisted and rejected, motherhood had indeed become a life-defining experience for the protagonist, whose power to generate malignantly turns into the curse of self-annihilation" (2007, 93).

This ending is quite consistent with the system of values the protagonist (and the author, as I will show) unwittingly reveals. Through her words, a patriarchal vision of motherhood as a woman's self-sacrifice emerges: "Mi prendo la responsabilità della scelta. Me la prendo senza egoismo, bambino: metterti al mondo, giuro, non mi diverte" (Fallaci 2009, 7). Her discourse emphasises the idea of maternity as a painful duty and an agony (56), rather than a free and joyful choice inspired by love.

The protagonist of *Lettera* combats the idea that the female body has reproduction as its primary function, to which any other activity has to be subordinated. However, she ends up being deprived of her physical self. Because of the complications that arise during her pregnancy, she is forced to stay in bed and stop working, and gradually loses control over her body. The protagonist/narrator meditates on the terrible implications of her choice:

Perché dovrei sopportare una tale agonia? [...] in nome di che cosa? In nome della vita? E va bene, la vita. Ma cos'è questa vita per cui tu, che esisti non ancora fatto, conti più di me che esisto già fatta? Cos'è questo rispetto per te che toglie rispetto a me? Cos'è questo tuo diritto di esistere che non tiene conto del mio diritto ad esistere? (56)

Even though the discussion around abortion is not openly referred to, these last words echo the contemporary debate about abortion and women's freedom of choice. In an interview with Nazareno Fabretti, published as an appendix to *Lettera* in 2009, Fallaci reasserts this gloomy idea of motherhood, in which the priority is given to life, meaning the foetus's life, at the expense of a woman's desires and happiness: "L'importante è affermare la vita, senza pretendere,

come dicevo, la felicità” (112). This statement is consistent with the ending of the novel. In fact, one of the reasons for its controversial reception is that *Lettera* is open to different interpretations, including the idea of motherhood as an unavoidable destiny for women. If the death of the mother is consequential on the death of the foetus, a reader might draw the conclusion that a woman’s failure or refusal to become a mother makes her life not worth living. The author is aware of this risk, as she reveals during the same interview: “Mi sono resa subito conto [...] che era proprio per questo che correvo il rischio di vedere il mio libro strumentalizzato dai cattolici per un verso e dai non cattolici per un altro” (112).

In addition, the idea of motherhood as women’s biological destiny was quite widespread in Italy at the time of the book’s publication (Valentini 1997; Wood 1995)<sup>2</sup> and was strongly encoded in Catholic ideology (Accati 2006; Benedetti 2007; Lucamante 2008; Murgia 2011). Fallaci is not immune to its influence and admits that the idea of a mother dialoguing with her unborn child is modelled on the Catholic conception of life: “Sure, so as to use a foetus as an interlocutor, I’ve accepted, in a literary way, the Catholic’s basic concept of the human person” (quoted in Benedetti 2007, 90). Despite its heartfelt and detailed description of the complexity of a woman’s feelings towards motherhood, and although choice keeps returning as a core value, the book does not present a clear-cut position on the issue of women’s rights.

### PARRELLA’S RE-READING OF *LETTERA*

Parrella sets her investigation into motherhood, female identity and women’s freedom beyond Fallaci’s battlefield. While in *Lettera* the life of the protagonist becomes subordinate to the life of the baby, in *Lo spazio bianco* only the maternal role of the protagonist depends on the survival of the daughter, and no one is questioning the mother’s right to choose between giving life or giving it up. Despite the complications during her pregnancy and her premature delivery, Maria’s battle is over the tiny body of her daughter, while her own body is not at stake. Translated into metaphorical terms, Maria is struggling to keep her newly acquired identity as a mother along with the other layers of her identity, without one role engulfing the others.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that contemporary women writers perceive motherhood as less problematic. During the 1970s, narratives on motherhood took for granted a woman’s ability to have a child. From the 1990s onwards, women writers started dealing with other difficulties related to the experience of maternity, such as infertility or the birth of a child with health problems, or with other complications related to reproduction (Mazzoni 2012; Sereni 1993, 2003). Under the influence of debates occurring in contemporary Italian society, other issues related to maternity and women’s bodies such as surrogacy, non-biological motherhood, fertility and fecundation, have also come under investigation in theoretical studies (Diotima 2007). This shift is reflected in the two texts studied here. While Fallaci represents a woman’s struggle to have a life and an identity outside and beyond the maternal role, which is considered a prison, Parrella explores other complications arising from the experience of motherhood.

The parallels between the protagonists can be extended to other characters in the two novels. For instance, just as the mothers have several features in common, so do the two biological fathers, who have no interest in parenthood and consider the unplanned pregnancy an embarrassing or irrelevant accident. However, after his initial attempts to convince his partner to opt for an abortion, the man in *Lettera* adheres to a traditional role and displays behaviour permeated by a patriarchal system of values. He claims his rights over the unborn baby, advocating the primacy of the foetus over the woman’s life. For this reason, he feels entitled to spend a night with her (Fallaci 2009, 51), regardless of her feelings. Furthermore, he starts

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1975 abortion was still illegal in Italy, although public debate over the right to abortion was increasing. A significant part of public opinion at that time supported the idea that the foetus’s life held absolute priority over the mother’s right to choose, but the pro-choice campaigners eventually won the referendum and soon afterwards abortion was legalised.

fantasising about having a male child, which he considers a sign of superiority compared to having a daughter (48-9). When complications occur during the pregnancy, the doctors suggest that the woman should give up her job and stay in bed. Upon her refusal, the man blames the woman for being selfish, revealing that he considers the female body merely a container for his child. In *Lo spazio bianco*, the biological father is an absent and irrelevant figure. He is represented as an attractive but unreliable man: “Era un uomo elegante che mi era passato nella vita recitando frasi molto belle. E la bellezza si era poi rivelata essere l’unico valore che avevano” (Parrella 2008, 16). His occasional presence has no influence on Maria’s and Irene’s life, nor is he worthy of being involved. As Maria admits to herself without regret: “Non era stato un grande amore, era solo stato distratto” (16). On the one hand, these words emphasise the superficiality of Maria’s attachment to Irene’s biological father, on the other they explain his role in the unplanned conception, which is due to a lack of attention (“era solo stato distratto”). All she recalls from their relationship is a shared sense of loneliness: “Tutto quello che avevamo costruito insieme, era stato uno specchio che rifletteva le nostre solitudini” (16). He has no name, he is not even a presence in the novel, a circumstance which enhances Maria’s independence as well as her solitude.

Like the fathers, other secondary characters, have similar functions in the two novels. Their marginal presence indirectly underlines the two protagonists’ autonomy and solitude. However, there is a significant difference. The beginning of motherhood in *Lettera* coincides with the end of the protagonist’s previous life as an independent woman. Those who show solidarity with her, such as the female doctor, her best friend and her parents, make her feel less isolated, but also highlight her growing weakness and powerlessness. The more company she has and her solitude lessens, the more dependent she becomes. Maria is as strong, independent and self-aware as the nameless protagonist of Fallaci’s text was at the beginning of her experience. However, Maria’s experience has a different outcome in terms of independence and isolation. Her occasional partner does not try to objectify her body, her pregnancy does not jeopardise her life, even though it turns it upside-down. Furthermore, she has the unfailing support of a few female and male acquaintances, the doctors in the hospital and the institutions. Above all, she is not forced to choose between herself and her baby. She can keep her job and look after Irene at the same time. Despite her limited but important network of relationships, Maria still appears much more isolated than the protagonist of *Lettera*. However, she is also much more independent than Fallaci’s heroine, precisely by virtue of her relative solitude, as we see on several occasions: at work, in the hospital, with her friends, in her sexual behaviour, in her interaction with any kind of hierarchy.

## THE ROLE OF UNBORN/HALF-BORN CHILD

The most interesting element of the plot in both novels is the baby: an unborn baby in the case of Fallaci, a half-born baby in Parrella’s novel. Neither can speak or interact with their mothers. However, in the last part of Fallaci’s novel, the foetus is given voice. His mother dreams of him as an adult, acting as a member of the jury during a trial against her. Regardless of the fact that he is already dead, the unborn child becomes an interlocutor and speaks to his mother. Conversely, all we perceive of Irene, Maria’s premature daughter, is her silent presence through her mother’s account, which highlights the fragility of her tiny body: “così minuscola che nell’incubatrice avevano dovuto avvolgerla tra i cuscini” (16).

Unlike Maria’s description of Irene, the representation of the unborn child in Fallaci’s novel underlines his strength and his dominating presence, so that his mother perceives him as a threat and, at one point, speaks to him with no hint of tenderness:

L’unica cosa che ci unisce, mio caro, è un cordone ombelicale. E non siamo una coppia. Siamo un persecutore e un perseguitato. Tu al posto del persecutore, io al posto del

perseguitato [...] Ti insinuasti dentro di me come un ladro, e mi rapinasti il ventre, il sangue, il respiro. Ora vorresti rapinarmi l'esistenza intera. Non te lo permetterò (Fallaci 2009, 57).

In *Lettera* the mother sometimes considers the child a persecutor, devouring her from inside and feels the need to protect herself. Despite its relative size and its presumed dependence on the mother's body, the foetus is seen as an arrogant entity threatening to steal the mother's entire existence. In the following exasperated words, the narrator portrays him almost as a tyrant: "Se riuscirai a nascere nascerai. Se non ci riuscirai morirai. Io non ti ammazzo, sia chiaro: semplicemente, mi rifiuto di aiutarti ad esercitare fino in fondo la tua tirannia" (58). Nothing could be more distant from Maria's protective attitude towards the harmless and fragile Irene, who is a real presence in her mother's daily life, not just a dream, and whose frailty and weakness only elicit tenderness: "La sua mano, tutta, non arrivava a coprire la più piccola delle mie falangi" (Parrella 2008, 25). The idea of motherhood as a sacrifice or a painful duty, which permeates the whole of Fallaci's novel, is replaced by a more positive, although by no means simplistic idea of motherhood in Parrella's text. In spite of all the difficulties she has been through, Maria experiences motherhood as a potential source of joy and happiness. This is something Maria realises gradually, as her bond with Irene becomes stronger:

Un pomeriggio, in cui la poppata stava andando piuttosto liscia, persi di vista i monitor [...] e guardai Irene. Aveva gli occhi aperti [...] e guardava me. Forse sentiva solo il mio battito, acceleratissimo, che rincorreva il suo [...] Ma mi sentiva. Stava nel mio braccio, la tenevo, mi sentiva e io le sorrisi [...] Proprio un sorriso, di quando, in un momento, nella vita, sbuca una cosa inaspettata e piena e tua (95).

Here mother and daughter are communicating for the first time and the narrating voice highlights the totally unexpected pleasure and happiness generated by this discovery. *Lettera* reflects the cumbersome idea of motherhood as a woman's self-annihilation, which is a patriarchal notion. Parrella, instead, engages with a positive depiction of maternity. Challenging the traditional representation of motherhood, Parrella seems to suggest that Maria is a good mother precisely because she refuses to accept that logic.

While so far I have compared the two novels in order to determine their similarities, I will now focus on the differences between them. In *Lettera*, the child is an interlocutor from the beginning. Gradually he takes on a greater role, eventually developing into a character, speaking with his own voice in the imaginary trial against his mother. The unborn baby is mentioned even in the title, while the mother is not. Significantly, his death causes his mother's death. In this narration, the child assumes an overpowering centrality at the expense of his mother. This is mirrored at the level of the narrative structure, where the mother has to give up part of her subjectivity in order to allow the child to speak. In *Lo spazio bianco* on the other hand, the woman, who is talking about her baby, rather than to her, occupies the only speaking position. In the mother-child relationship formed by Maria and Irene, the different balance depends directly on the recognition of the mother's rights as an individual.

The threatening presence of the foetus in *Lettera*, compared with the silent figure of Irene in *Lo spazio bianco*, sheds light on a significant social evolution that occurred between the two texts. While both authors give subjectivity to the mother, Fallaci cannot help including the foetus's point of view as an implicit admission of the limits imposed by society and culture on women's lives once their reproductive function is triggered. In *Lo spazio bianco*, the perspective adopted is exclusively that of the mother and maternal subjectivity is uncontested. No space is allowed for the child's point of view. The dialectical exchange between the woman and the unborn child characterising the earlier text is here replaced by an interior dialogue between a mother and an adult daughter who are the same person. Instead of focusing on the conflict

between freedom of choice and motherhood, Parrella concentrates on the possibility of combining the maternal and the filial points of view, without having the maternal role absorb all other facets of her identity as a woman.

Moreover, in *Lettera* the child is referred to as male, while in *Lo spazio bianco* the protagonist gives birth to a daughter. Even though the speaking voice of *Lettera* does not know the baby's sex, all the pronouns, nouns, adjectives and other grammatical terms referring to the unborn child are nevertheless in the masculine form: *bambino*, *nato*, *figlio*, *lui*, and so on. It is true that in Italian the masculine is the all-inclusive grammatical gender (Lepschy 1989; Marcato 1995; Robustelli 2000; Sabatini 1987), having replaced the functions of the neuter in Latin, but it is noticeable that the woman shows no hesitation in her use of the masculine. Even though she considers the possibility that the foetus might be a female (Fallaci 2009, 10), and despite the fact that the author seems fully conscious of the asymmetric use of gender in the Italian language (10), her insistence on referring to the foetus as a *bambino* reinforces the idea that the use of the masculine is not neutral. The dream of the trial (83) clarifies once and for all that in *Lettera* the unborn child is definitely a boy. In fact, in this passage the child is imagined as an adult: he is a man, and the terms referring to him are always masculine. The privileged position of the mother-son dyad that characterises Western culture, and even more Italian culture, emerges uncontested in *Lettera* (Accati 2006; D'Amelia 2005; Diotima 2002, 2007; Giorgio 2002, 2007). The preference for the son implies a widespread, deep-rooted devaluation of women in a society that relegates women, and especially mothers, to the condition of passive objects. Fallaci perceives and reflects this devaluation, but does not attempt to overturn it.

The author herself implicitly confirms this interpretation when she states that being a woman implies unavoidable suffering: "La condizione femminile è sofferenza senza scampo [...] Lo è dai tempi remoti in cui si formò questa società dove quasi ogni diritto spetta agli uomini e quasi ogni dovere alle donne" (Fallaci 2009, 102). Fallaci is acutely aware of the imbalance between the sexes, yet she is unable to redress this unfair situation through the voice of her protagonist. In fact, if on the one hand the protagonist of *Lettera* finds her partner's preference for a son deplorable (54), on the other, by dreaming of the unborn child as a male adult, she proves herself unable to display a different attitude.

The different sex of the child is an important part of the inter-textual corrective relationship between these two women writers. The reason for this difference might be that, since the unborn child in *Lettera* is a threatening presence and represents almost an enemy in his mother's life, it is naturally perceived to be male. This is consistent with the fact that all men in the novel obdurately oppose the woman's choice, so that the novel betrays its grounding in a male-dominated society hostile to women. On the contrary, *Lo spazio bianco* depicts a mother who locates herself in a space that is not male-centred, and in which being a woman is not necessarily a disadvantage. Therefore, it is no surprise that Maria has a daughter. However, my suggestion is that there is a more complex explanation than this. By turning the gender-undetermined or male child into a daughter, Parrella accomplishes a metamorphosis that has an extreme relevance to Italian literature. The detail concerning the sex of the foetus is not secondary in a literary tradition that offers many examples of the relationship between mother and son, but allows little or no space for the mother-daughter dyad (although exceptions include Bruck 1988; Cerati 1990; Di Lascia 1995; Di Pietrantonio 2011; Duranti 1976; Ferrante 1992; Ramondino 1981; Sanvitale 1980; Sereni 1993; Stancanelli 1998; Trombetta 2001).

Muraro blames Western culture for the preference given to the love between mother and son: "[Nella] nostra civiltà [...] la preferenza materna per il figlio maschio [...] non è un'ingiustizia materna, ma una caratteristica della nostra cultura" (1992, 12). Muraro is not referring exclusively to Italian culture. In the history of Western culture the mother-daughter relationship, which appeared early in pre-patriarchal societies and in the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, was soon replaced by a multitude of mother-son dyads, the most powerful of which is, in symbolic terms, the relationship between Mary and Jesus as iconised by the Catholic

tradition (Accati 2006; Cavarero 2007; Giorgio 2002; Murgia 2011; Sambuco 2012). As Cavarero argues:

La relazione madre-figlia che si ritrova nel mito, è rarissima nella storia della cultura. Nella storia della cultura d'occidente, poi, come sapete bene, viene sostituita da una relazione celeberrima e con una potenza simbolica immane, che è la relazione madre-figlio nella figura di Maria e Gesù (2007, 47).

Fallaci does not escape this cultural pressure. By replacing the unborn male child with a daughter, therefore, Parrella has accomplished a complex cultural and literary operation. On the one hand, she has aligned herself with the most recent tradition of women writers who give prominence to the mother-daughter relationship, and on the other she develops a legacy of thought (“legame di pensiero”) with another woman writer, Fallaci, whose canonical text she reinterprets. By choosing to rewrite a female-authored text, Parrella locates herself in a relationship of literary “entrustment,” insofar as literary entrustment “helps to construct the relationship between the novels of women writers and the texts they have inherited” (Lucamante 2008, 241). Furthermore, by virtue of this unspoken (and unacknowledged) dialogue with a literary mother, Parrella becomes part of what Ida Dominijanni (2002) calls a female genealogy.

As Dominijanni explains, tradition and genealogy are somehow opposites. In the mechanism of tradition the younger generation is expected to have a receptive, passive attitude (2002, 191). Dominijanni uses the term “genealogia” to place emphasis on the freedom of the younger generation to interrogate and re-interpret what they have received, allowing them to play an active role in the process of transmission:

La genealogia [...] comporta un movimento ascendente, in cui chi viene dopo interroga chi è venuto prima a partire da sé, lo/la reinterpreta sulla base delle proprie domande, gli/le fornisce autorità in un rapporto di libertà; e in questo caso è il presente che riscrive il passato (191).

The concept of genealogy has a liberating effect on younger authors who embrace it; unlike tradition, which gives prominence to predecessors and their authority through a chain of transmission that moves downwards, genealogy can create an upward movement. In this case transmission privileges the perspective of the new generation, who are free to interpret and rewrite the past in a way that respects both the authority of earlier authors and the right of the younger writers to move beyond it.

In her re-reading of Fallaci's text, Parrella clearly follows the pattern of genealogy. The younger author takes on the challenge undertaken by the elder author and produces a text based on the same elements of the plot as those of her predecessor, modifying what is necessary in order to suit a new social context. The corrective aspect of this rewriting is not intended to be a competition between the two writers, but rather an up-to-date portrayal of women's situation within contemporary Italian society. The re-reading of the earlier text, accompanied by a respectful attitude toward the literary mother, provides the younger author with “a new epistemological system in which [*her*] work can be inserted” (Lucamante 2008, 106).

The reconceptualisation of Fallaci's novel provided by *Lo spazio bianco* is a significant example of how female inter-textuality follows a pattern of literary *matérnage*. To a lesser degree, in much of Parrella's literary production it is possible to retrace that “legame di pensiero” that connects her to a genealogy of Italian women writers by virtue of her thematic choices and the clearly gendered perspective she adopts. For instance, in “L'amico immaginario,” one of the short stories included in *Per grazia ricevuta* (2005), the female protagonist, Marina, an emancipated young woman, proves herself fully aware of the potential of motherhood and her freedom of

choice. She conceives a child with her husband but, since she is in love with another man, she opts for an abortion, refusing to carry the unwanted child of a man she no longer loves. The perspective adopted in this short story links Parrella to another important woman writer, in that “L’amico immaginario” reflects Dacia Maraini’s definition of abortion as a woman’s decision to give or give up a life over which she has absolute power. Maraini’s relentless attention to themes such as female sexuality and women’s oppression in a male-defined system makes her an important point of reference, that is, a literary mother, for many younger writers, including Parrella.<sup>3</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Judging by her early career, Parrella seems to belong to a genealogy of female authors who give prominence to the depiction of women’s struggle for freedom, fulfilment and happiness in the context of Italian society, which is particularly conservative with regards to reproduction, female sexuality and family. From within this genealogy Parrella criticises and then reconstructs Fallaci’s work. Conversing with a text that has much in common with her own, Parrella incorporates into her predecessor’s world new elements arising from the social and cultural context to which she belongs. Fallaci’s nameless protagonist desperately tries to adjust maternity to her life and is defeated. She wants motherhood redesigned in different terms and her suggested death is – possibly – a symbolic sign of her failure. Similarly, Maraini depicts women who fail to adjust motherhood to their own life. Three decades later, Parrella’s *Lo spazio bianco* continues to explore how motherhood can find its place in an independent woman’s life and offers new and more constructive outcomes in the relationship between motherhood and female identity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Accati, Luisa, *Beauty and the Monster. Discursive and Figurative Representations of the Parental Couple from Giotto to Tiepolo* (Florence: European Press Academic Publishing, 2006)
- Benedetti, Laura, *The Tigress in the Snow. Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2007)
- Bono, Paola, and Sandra Kemp, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought. A Reader* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991)
- Bruck, Edith, *Lettera alla madre* (Milan: Garzanti, 1988)
- Cavarero, Adriana, *Il femminile negato* (Rimini: Pazzini, 2007)
- Cavarero, Adriana, and Franco Restaino, *Le filosofie femministe. Due secoli di battaglie teoriche e pratiche* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002)
- Cerati, Carla, *La cattiva figlia* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 1996)
- Cevasco, Francesco, “Francesco Cevasco intervista Oriana Fallaci,” *Corriere della Sera*, 21 settembre 1993. Published as an Appendix to Oriana Fallaci, *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009), pp. 119-31
- D’Amelia, Marina, *La mamma* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005)
- Di Lascia, Mariateresa, *Passaggio in ombra* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995)
- Diotima, *Approfittare dell’assenza. Punti di avvistamento sulla tradizione* (Naples: Liguori, 2002)

---

<sup>3</sup> In one of her early works, *Donna in guerra* (1975), Maraini portrays a woman who decides to have an abortion after falling pregnant to her husband, both because she no longer loves him, and because he made her pregnant against her will. Several other works authored by Maraini, such as the novel *Il treno per Helsinki* (1984) and the essay *Un clandestino a bordo* (1996), tackle the theme of a woman’s right to freedom of reproductive choice.

- *Il cielo stellato dentro di noi. L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1992)
- *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987)
- *La magica forza del negativo* (Naples: Liguori, 2005)
- *L'ombra della madre* (Naples: Liguori, 2007)
- *Oltre l'uguaglianza. Le radici femminili dell'autorità* (Naples: Liguori, 1995)
- Di Pietrantonio, Donatella, *Mia madre è un fiume* (Rome: Elliot, 2010)
- Dominijanni, Ida, "Nella piega del presente," in *Approfittare dell'assenza. Punti di avvistamento sulla tradizione*, ed. by Diotima (Naples: Liguori, 2002), pp. 187-212
- Duranti, Francesca, *La bambina* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1976)
- Fallaci, Oriana, *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009 [1975])
- Ferrante, Elena, *L'amore molesto* (Rome: e/o, 1999)
- Giorgio, Adalgisa, ed., *Writing Mothers and Daughters. Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002)
- Giorgio, Adalgisa, and Julia Waters, eds., *Women's Writing in Western Europe. Gender, Generation and Legacy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007)
- Lepschy, Giulio, "Lingua e sessismo," in *Nuovi saggi di linguistica italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989), pp. 61-84
- Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (Milan: Rosenberg & Seller, 1987)
- Lucamante, Stefania, *A Multitude of Women. The Challenge of the Italian Contemporary Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008)
- Maraini, Dacia, *Donna in guerra* (Milan: BUR Rizzoli, 1998)
- *Il treno per Helsinki* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985)
- *Romanzi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000)
- *Un clandestino a bordo. Le donne: la maternità negata, il corpo sognato* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1996)
- Marcato, Gianna, ed., *Donna e linguaggio* (Padua: Cleup, 1995)
- Mazzoni, Eleonora, *Le difettose* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012)
- Muraro, Luisa, "Bonding and Freedom," in *Italian Feminist Thought. A Reader*, ed. by Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 123-6
- *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991)
- "L'orientamento della riconoscenza," in *Il cielo stellato dentro di noi. L'ordine simbolico della madre*, ed. by Diotima (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1992), pp. 9-19
- Murgia, Michela, *Accabadora* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009)
- *Ave Mary* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011)
- Parati, Graziella, and Rebecca West, eds., *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice. Equality and Sexual Difference* (Plainsboro, NJ: Associated University Press, 2002)
- Parrella, Valeria, *Lo spazio bianco* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008)
- *Per grazia ricevuta* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 2005)
- Ramondino, Fabrizia, *Althénopis* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981)
- Rich, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Press, 1977)
- Robustelli, Cecilia, "Lingua e identità di genere," *Studi italiani di linguistica teorica e applicata*, XXIX (2000), 507-27

- Sabatini, Alma, *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1987)
- Sambuco, Patrizia, *Corporeal Bonds. The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth-Century Italian Women's Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012)
- Sanvitale, Francesca, *Madre e figlia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980)
- Sereni, Clara, *Il gioco dei regni* (Florence: Giunti, 1993)
- . *Passami il sale* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003)
- Stancanelli, Elena, *Benzina* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996)
- Trombetta, Marlisa, *La mamma cattiva* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001)
- Valentini, Chiara, *Le donne fanno paura* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1997)
- Wood, Sharon, *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994* (London: The Athlone Press, 1995)
- Zamboni, Chiara, "Ordine simbolico e ordine sociale," in *Oltre l'uguaglianza. Le radici femminili dell'autorità*, ed. by Diotima (Naples: Liguori, 1995), pp. 31-48

## BIOGRAPHY

**Aureliana Di Rollo** completed her PhD at Monash University (Melbourne) on the representation of mother-daughter relationships in contemporary Italian Women Writers. Her background is in Classical Studies, Gender and Feminist Studies, Linguistics and Italian Literature. Her main fields of interest are Representations of Motherhood and Mother-Daughter Relationships, the Gendered Use of Language and representations of gender in Italian Opera Librettos.

Before moving to Australia in 2009, Aureliana taught Italian, Latin and Ancient Greek for ten years in an Italian Liceo Classico. She also taught at the Lycée International Saint-Germain-en-Laye. She has co-authored a book on Western Australian history and is author of several book chapters, journal articles and magazine articles on her areas of expertise. Since 2010 she has been teaching Italian at the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts (Edith Cowan University, Perth).