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The Conceptualisation of Gender in Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante.

Feminist Narratives and Anti-feminist Consciences – Martina Pala

Abstract: This work aims to investigate the relationship between some of the most popular and significant women writers in twentieth-century Italy – Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante – and feminism, focusing particularly on what can be perceived as a discrepancy between their narratives and their public and political stances. Indeed, I will argue that all authors are considerable feminists (or at least readable through a feminist lens) not despite their ‘anti-feminist’ statements but also in light of those. It will be doing so through a thematic analysis. This research will be structured into four macro-themes, shared by all the authors and aiming to shed light on the above-mentioned discrepancy – female subjectivity, motherhood, female friendship, and gender-based violence. These themes will demonstrate how and why these authors’ narratives are arguably feminist and will be juxtaposed to what I will define as ‘anti-feminism’. By doing so, this work will offer an investigation not only of these case studies but more generally of the conflictual relationships between women writers and feminism in twentieth-century Italy and how it evolved throughout the twenty-first century.



School of Modern Languages and Cultures

**The Conceptualisation of Gender in Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante.
Feminist Narratives and Anti-feminist Consciences**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisor: Dr Katrin Wehling-Giorgi

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Ustinov College

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List of abbreviations

<i>IdP</i>	<i>Itinerario di Paolina</i> (1937) - Anna Banti
<i>Voc</i>	<i>Vocazioni Indistinte</i> (1940) - Anna Banti
<i>Art</i>	<i>Artemisia</i> (1947) - Anna Banti
<i>Lav</i>	<i>Lavinia Fuggita</i> (1951) - Anna Banti
<i>Ldm</i>	<i>Le donne muoiono</i> (1951) - Anna Banti
<i>Ib</i>	<i>Il bastardo</i> (1953) - Anna Banti
<i>LlG</i>	<i>La libertà di Giacinta</i> (1963) - Anna Banti
<i>Lcb</i>	<i>La camicia bruciata</i> (1973) - Anna Banti
<i>Ulr</i>	<i>Un lungo rancore</i> (1973) - Anna Banti
<i>Lscvic</i>	<i>La strada che va in città</i> (1937) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Cam</i>	<i>Casa al mare</i> (1941) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Mm</i>	<i>Mio marito</i> (1942) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Esc</i>	<i>È stato così</i> (1947) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Lm</i>	<i>La madre</i> (1948) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Tini</i>	<i>Tutti i nostri ieri</i> (1952) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Lvds</i>	<i>Le voci della sera</i> (1961) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Lpv</i>	<i>Le piccole virtù</i> (1962) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Lf</i>	<i>Lessico familiare</i> (1963) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Mdd</i>	<i>Mai devi domandarmi</i> (1970) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Vi</i>	<i>Vita immaginaria</i> (1974) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Ss</i>	<i>Scritti Sparsi</i> (1995) - Natalia Ginzburg
<i>Qbap</i>	<i>Qualcuno bussa alla porta</i> (1936) - Elsa Morante
<i>Mes</i>	<i>Menzogna e sortilegio</i> (1948) - Elsa Morante

<i>IdA</i>	<i>L'isola di Arturo</i> (1957) - Elsa Morante
<i>Sa</i>	<i>Lo scialle Andaluso</i> (1963) - Elsa Morante
<i>Ls</i>	<i>La Storia</i> (1974) - Elsa Morante
<i>Ara</i>	<i>Aracoeli</i> (1982) - Elsa Morante
<i>Ara</i>	<i>Aracoeli</i> (1982) - Elsa Morante
<i>Poclba</i>	<i>Pro o contro la bomba atomica</i> (1987) - Elsa Morante
<i>Dia</i>	<i>Diario 1938</i> (1989) - Elsa Morante

All the quotes from the abovementioned works by Banti are from the collection *Romanzi e Racconti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2013); those by Ginzburg are from the collection *Opere* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995); those by Morante are from the collection *Opere* (Milan: Mondadori, 2012).

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To my mother

«I maschi, la cui assenza avrebbe definitivamente rovinato la vita di mia cugina, dovevano con la loro presenza salvare la mia. Non chiamai nessuno e ragionai tutta la sera su questo gesto mancato».
M.S.

È il mio film, la mia tragedia
Una sua foto mi coprirà
Chi volete mi legga altrimenti?
Ed egli diverrà il volto della mia storia.

Non ho sofferto una vita per illuminare lui
Non sarò una dedica a fine pagina
Non sarò un pretesto

E sia luce!
Solo per me mentre brucio, danzando, e porto con me tutte le muse, danzando, dietro la collina e
sotto il mare: noi, Ninfe, ce ne andiamo.

“The Nymphs are departed”, in *Insomniac* - Marina Colaiuda

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1. Introduction

This work aims to investigate the relationship of some of the most popular and significant women writers in twentieth-century Italy – Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante – with feminism, focusing particularly on the discrepancy between their narratives and their personal public statements. Indeed, I will argue that all authors represented feminist beliefs and behaviours in their writings – this in contrast with, but also by virtue of, their personal ‘anti-feminist’ statements in the public sphere. The analysis will focus exclusively on the author’s productions in fiction and as such, the *corpus* selected comprises novels and short stories. The analysis of these texts will be thematic – I will outline four macro-themes that are common to the three authors and that will help shed light on the above-mentioned discrepancy. These themes will demonstrate how and why these authors’ narratives are arguably feminist and will be juxtaposed to what I define here as their ‘anti-feminism’, which I will cover more extensively later on in this chapter. The underlying themes considered in this analysis are subjectivity, motherhood, friendship, and violence. In so doing, this work will offer a contribution not only about these authors, but also more generally about the conflictual relationships between women writers and feminism in twentieth-century Italy and how it evolved throughout the twenty-first century.

In this introduction, I will firstly provide a brief overview of Italian feminism, in order to highlight its peculiarities and to provide context to these authors’ approaches, as well as to the contestations and theories that followed. Secondly, I will define these authors’ ‘anti-feminist consciences’ and set the context for analysing the contrast with the authors’ literary works. I will then review the existing academic literature on the relationship between Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante and feminism, and the ways in which literary critics have explained the authors’ positions. In this context I will summarise the ways in which this research and its sections will serve to: provide the first comparative feminist reading of Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante analysed together; and address the lack of focus in academic literature on the juxtaposition between the representation of feminist values in their stories and the anti-feminism in their public stances.

1.1. Italian feminism – an overview

Italian feminism has been traditionally split into two parts – before and after Fascism (de Clementi, 2002: 69). Malagrecia (2006) offered a punctual summary of the main phases of Italian feminism, arguing that it would be difficult to include it in the categories that were drawn for other countries. Instead, Malagrecia prefers, for example, de Lauretis’ categorisation in *comunità* (communities) (1999), «in the sense that everything is intrinsically unstable and contextual, not based on the identity

of components or their natural bond, but a community that is the result of work, of struggle, of interpretation» (Malagrecà, 2006: 70).

It is commonly believed that Italy's tardiness in seeing the spread of feminist waves was due to the advent of Fascism and Mussolini's twenty-year regime. Yet, even before Fascism, Italian feminism emerged later than in other western countries in Europe – Malagrecà outlines Princess Cristina Trivulzio Barbiano di Belgioioso (1808-1871) as one of the first representatives of early Italian feminism, thus tracing it back to Risorgimento. The nineteenth century saw the introduction of the word 'feminism' in Italy (Danna, 2004) meaning to «signify an aspiration towards universalism, the improvement of women's education, and women's access to liberal professions» (Malagrecà, 2006: 71). In that same period, many women's magazines were founded such as *La Donna*, and intellectuals and writers like Matilde Serao, or later Sibilla Aleramo started writing and reflecting on women's condition. Furthermore, activists such as Anna Kuliscioff brought the issues of women workers to a public platform. This early phase of Italian feminism is defined as 'emancipationist' and it is characterised by a universalist approach to gender issues – «early feminism had to rely on a universal, usually asexual and generally a-historical conception of the human subject [...] rounded in a normative view of womanhood» (Malagrecà, 2006: 71-74). As mentioned above, the Fascist era – but also the Giolittian era, earlier – brought an abrupt interruption in the development and spreading of feminist movements. Nevertheless, women were an active part of the Resistance against the regime, and, before the second world war, some writers stood out in their representation of women's condition – Danna (2004) notes, for example, Grazia Deledda and Gianna Manzini, in addition to the literary works of the authors already discussed in this thesis (particularly the early short stories and novels by Natalia Ginzburg). After World War II women came out of their private spaces and started occupying and living in the public sphere (Saba, 1992) as the issue of women's rights resurfaced in political debates. Their first achievement was right to suffrage, which became law in 1945, yet women could only vote for the first time in the *referendum* choosing between Republic and Monarchy in 1946, and later in the national elections of 1948. Furthermore, in 1945 the founding of 'Unione Donne Italiane' marked a new era of Italian feminism, now more organised and with a more precise political agenda. The 1950s and 1960s saw the return of women to domesticity, causing a pause in their public activism – indeed, the Italian legislation in those year was influenced by the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, stating, for example, the indissolubility of marriage and the state control of prostitution (Malagrecà, 2006: 79). Female and feminist groups still existed during those years – they had fewer achievements and had to focus again on denouncing and escaping from a forced domesticity.

The 1968 revolts brought significant change in the assets of Italian feminism. Indeed, following the students' revolutionary movements, Italy finally saw the rise of second wave feminism, following the

first wave defined as emancipatory. Firstly, it is important to remember and recognise the impact that this neo-feminism had on Italian legislation – in 1970 divorce was introduced in the country; in 1975 the ‘Riforma del diritto della famiglia’ (ruling on the asset of the families) passed; in 1977 the law about ‘Parità di Trattamento tra uomini e donne in materia di lavoro’ (ruling on equity between women and men as for work) was approved. The new theoretical asset that neo-feminism built and spread is even more interesting for the purpose of this work and analysis of literary texts. The new groups, created after 1968, built their activism on a robust philosophical and psychoanalytical theory, more so than in the past but also more so than in other western countries. Some of the most influential women’s groups of those years were ‘DEMAU’ (Demistificazione Autoritarismo), ‘Anabasi’, ‘Rivolta Femminile’ (de Clementi, 2002), or ‘Diotima’. The most influential leader among these groups was Carla Lonzi, author of some of the milestones of feminist theories of those years – *Sputiamo su Hegel* (1970), *La donna vaginale e la donna clitoridea* (1971), and *Taci, anzi parla* (1978). Lonzi recognises that the models offered by philosophers and thinkers as universal exclude women, who are absent from history and marginalised. A condition also ignored by Marxism, according to Lonzi. Moreover, Lonzi also reflects on women’s sexuality, arguing that the concept of the orgasm is in itself a product of the patriarchy to subjugate women. Lonzi’s thought has been fundamental for the formation of the first feminist groups of the Italian second wave feminism.

Another trait distinguishing these neo-feminist groups is their new and declared separatism – Rivolta Femminile’s manifesto proclaimed that «women were not to be defined in relation to men» building their approach on «disparity or difference» rather than equality, at the base of the former emancipatory wave of feminism instead (Malagrecia, 2006: 82). They founded separatist journals and magazines such as *donnawomenfemmes* and *Memoria: Rivista di Storia delle Donne*. Furthermore, they were organised in *gruppi di autocoscienza*, where women gathered to reflect on issues regarding identity and representation. Indeed, the new focus within Italian feminism was on representation and identity, which were held to be fundamental tools to address political and social changes. Feminist thinkers started questioning the very definition of gender and womanhood, reflecting on their identity, and subjectivity, by subverting the codified ‘universal’ models that excluded them. From this approach, the concept of ‘sexual difference’ becomes fundamental as a political and theoretical tool to fight Patriarchy – the concepts of universalism and equality adopted by their feminist foremothers, according to the neo feminists, concealed and legitimised phallocentrism. In this way, women have been deprived of the faculty to shape their original subjectivity and have been silenced by being forced to adopt a language that does not belong to or represent them. Saba (1992) summarises as follows:

The renascent movements of the 1970s emerged in profoundly altered dress, the new feminists adding their voices to those demanding political and social rights. These rights had already been claimed by their mothers; the younger women reaffirmed freedom for the *persona-donna* (person-woman), defined as including self-determination in terms of sexuality, motherhood, and partnership. Separatism surfaced as women attempted to achieve autonomy and communal feminist consciousness; this strategy also followed the critique of their foremothers. (117)

In light of this overview of second wave feminism's theories and main concepts, it becomes evident how Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante can be seen as having rather 'anti-feminist consciences', as it will be further explained. Moreover, the conflict between foremothers and neo-feminists mentioned by Saba can help in justifying and contextualising the use of this definition for these authors.

1.2. 'Anti-feminist consciences'

Whilst Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante were never feminist activists, nor part of the emancipatory movements, there are traces of support for those fights and the principles behind those movements, as we will see in this analysis. Yet they never spoke in support of the later developments of Italian feminism – the neo-feminism founded by 'feminist daughters', the second generation of feminism. This separation between 'mothers' and 'daughters' will be very useful in the analysis of motherhood as a literary theme in these authors' novels and short stories, as well as in the conceptualisation of their characters and their subjectivities as women writers. Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante do not hesitate to support and represent emancipatory feminist values within their literature. However, as I will show, it can be argued that their narrative engages with the new concepts of second wave feminism despite their personal (outspoken) refusal. There is a double paradox in the intertwining of feminism and literature in these peculiar cases. While second wave feminism supports the practice of separatism and denounces a determinist conceptualisation of gender since «males and females appear to have been made into two virtually separate races, to some degree incapable of communication» (Saba, 1992: 119), these authors condemn and distance themselves from the separatist approach, whilst representing a dichotomic conceptualisation of gender as «separate races» (119) – Banti writes in *Un grido lacerante*, her last novel from 1981, that «Agnese presentì, come da bambina, di essere **estranea al mondo degli uomini**; senza rimedio»¹ (emphasis mine); Ginzburg

¹ «Agnese felt, just like when she was a child, that she was a stranger to the world of men, without remedy» (my translation).

theorises a metaphoric well (further explained in the next chapters) of melancholy in which only women fall («[...] la tendenza a cascare nel pozzo e trovarci una possibilità di sofferenza sconfinata che gli uomini non conoscono»², 1948: 107); in Morante women wish to be able to renounce their womanhood to be men («*Sarebbe bello per me, di non avere questo corpo! Di non essere una femmina! Ma di essere un ragazzo come te, e di correre per tutto il mondo, assieme a te!*»³, *IdA*, 1156). Moreover, whilst they do not endorse the practice of ‘entrustment’ (*affidamento*) for themselves – the practice of creating a female genealogy and relying on another woman who becomes a mentor and guide – they often narrativize it in their fictional works.

These are only a few of many contradictory elements that make the relationship between these authors (and their works) and feminism complex – a relationship that will be at the core of this analysis, having been ignored or underrated throughout the years.

Morante and Ginzburg’s works have been extensively analysed through a feminist lens (Giorgio 1993, 1994; Re, 1993; Finucci, 1988, Morelli in Lucamante, 2014, Nozzoli 1978, Ravanello 1980, Romanowska, 2013), while feminist criticism is less frequent for Banti (Fiorucci, 2010; Wood, 1995). However, these studies rarely take into consideration what I will call the authors’ anti-feminism. When these studies identify the authors’ reluctance toward feminism, they do not investigate the link between the authors’ (dis)engagement with the feminist label and their engagement in feminist values through women in their narratives. In addition, there are no comparative analyses of the three authors taken altogether, despite them being comparable on the grounds of historical period and genre. This research will aim to address these gaps.

When I refer to the anti-feminism of these authors, I am addressing the numerous occasions in which they distance themselves from the political movements which emerged in their years, in the defence of women’s rights. The authors explicitly claim their stance on anti-feminism in their articles and interviews. Anna Banti, when interviewed by Sandra Petrigiani (*Le signore della scrittura*, 1984 – a collection of interviews with different Italian women writers from the twentieth century) firstly explains how being a *scrittrice*, a woman writer, means being relegated and never being acknowledged in the whole and general context of literature⁴; later she claims to hate the label of

² «[...] the tendency to fall into the well and find in it a possibility of boundless suffering that men do not know» (my translation).

³ «It would be wonderful for me not to have this body! Not to be a woman but to be a boy like you and run all around the world with you» (Goldstein, 2018: 147).

⁴ Both Fiorucci (2010) and Lazzaro-Weiss (1999) reflect on Banti’s rejection of the label *scrittrice* dismissing it when they highlight that her heteronym Agnese Lanzi eventually accepts it for herself in *Un grido lacerante*.

feminist – «*Ma lei odia questa definizione... Sì, la odio*». (1984: 106) – stating that she is not on women's side all the time, given their natural tendency to be envious and mean:

Eppure lei ha sempre difeso la causa delle donne, nei libri come nella vita. Perché si urta tanto se le danno della femminista?

Perché il mio è più una forma di umanesimo che vero e proprio femminismo. Non sono sempre e comunque dalla parte delle donne. E le dirò questo: le donne sono cattive verso le altre donne. Sono invidiose. Non sopportano che un'altra si distingua in qualcosa. Le sembra femminismo questo?⁵ (1984: 106)

Banti, indeed, has been defined as «a feminist malgré soi» (Riccobono, 2013: 7) – even if taking a distance from feminism, Banti recognised her disadvantaged position of being a woman writer, and I will show how this awareness is even more evident in her narrative. Garavini (2013) diminishes Banti's anti-feminist statements enhancing the political value of her literary works and delimiting her aversion to second wave feminism:

Tutti sapevamo quanto Anna Banti fosse avversa al femminismo oltranzista esploso da noi circa un trentennio più tardi: ma si capisce che potessero soltanto irritarla le rivendicazioni ideologiche violente e verbose, come l'avrebbero sicuramente irritata, di Artemisia, il suo “beffeggiare la dappocchezza delle femmine di casa, la loro sciocca vanità” se “il diritto al lavoro congeniale e a una parità di spirito fra i due sessi” non fosse stato sostenuto dalla Gentileschi non solo con le parole, ma con le opere.⁶ (2013: XVIII)

Indeed, in the same interview with Sandra Petriggiani (1984), she clearly states not only her aversion to feminism, but Banti also explains her struggles of being a woman writer:

Sono citata nelle enciclopedie, sono presente nelle antologie. Ma una scrittrice, anche se di successo, è comunque emarginata. La diranno grande fra le altre scrittrici, ma non la equipareranno agli scrittori. È

⁵ «*Yet you have always defended the cause of women, in books as in life. Why do you get so upset when people call you a feminist? Because mine is more a form of humanism than true feminism. I am not always on the side of women. And I will tell you this: women are mean towards other women. They are envious. They cannot stand that another one stands out in something. Does that sound like feminism to you?*» (my translation).

⁶ «*We all knew how much Anna Banti was opposed to the extremist feminism that exploded in our country some thirty years later: but it is understandable that she was only irritated by the violent and verbose ideological claims, just as Artemisia's “mocking the pettiness of the females of the house, their foolish vanity” would certainly have irritated her if “the right to congenial work and an equal spirit between the two sexes” had not been supported by Gentileschi, not only in words, but also in deeds.*» (my translation).

un'usanza diffusa. [...] Un racconto che amo moltissimo è *Lavinia fuggita*, che apre *Il coraggio delle donne*: è un po' femminista anche.⁷ (1984: 106)

The feminist label attached to the novel *Lavinia fuggita* is also given to *Un grido lacerante* when talking about the reception of the work – two novels written respectively in 1951 and 1981, the former telling the story of a musician struggling with her womanhood and the latter about the life of Agnese Lanzi, heteronym of Banti herself. In the latter novels, she makes significant use of the verb 'accused' of feminism, as it will be explained further, highlighting the conflict between the desire not to be associated with official feminist movements and the awareness of wasting her talent of voicing others (other women) by taking a distance from a 'feminist' narrative:

Dunque avevano ragione quelli che l'avevano accusata di femminismo, la parola che lei detestava. e qui, immergendosi in una intensa riflessione, si scavava a fondo, volta a volta deplorando o giustificandosi. No, lei non aveva reclamato altro che la parità della mente e la libertà del lavoro, ciò che tuttora, da anziana contestatrice, la tormentava. Aveva amato pochi uomini, anzi un uomo solo, ma pochissime donne, e quelle poche, riunite in una favola, sempre la stessa: il mito dell'eccezione contro la norma del conformismo. [...] le vittime, fin dalle prime notti dei tempi non hanno mai ricusato il proprio destino, e lei, la cantafavole, ha ferito se stessa deprezzando ciò che aveva ricevuto nascendo, la facoltà di moltiplicarsi in tante creature.⁸ (2013: 1612)

Furthermore, in *Le signore della scrittura* (1984) Banti also offers a political reflection – in a way arguably naïve – about women's condition that without any doubt nourishes the debate around the author's inconsistent relationship with feminism:

Ma non le sembra che le donne abbiano, in una società fatta su misura dell'uomo, tanti problemi in più dei maschi?

⁷ «I am mentioned in encyclopaedias, and I am in anthologies. But a female writer, albeit successful, is still marginalised. They will call her great among other female writers, but they will never compare her to male writers. It is a widespread custom. [...] A story I very much love is "Lavinia fuggita", which opens *The Courage of Women*—it is a bit feminist too.» (my translation).

⁸ «So those who had accused her of feminism, the word she detested, were right. And here, immersing herself in intense reflection, she dug deep, either deploring or justifying herself. No, she had not demanded anything but equality of the mind and freedom of labour, which still, as an elderly protester, tormented her. She had loved few men—in fact only one man—but very few women, and those few were united in always the same fable: the myth of the exception against the norm of conformism. [...] The victims, from the earliest times, never recanted their fate, and she, the storyteller, wounded herself by depreciating what she had received at birth, the faculty to multiply herself into many creatures» (my translation).

Sì, questo lo credo. E penso anche che gli uomini ne fanno veramente di tutti i colori e che, politicamente, ci stanno portando alla rovina. Forse, se ci fossero le donne al potere, le cose andrebbero meglio.⁹ (1984: 107)

Not only does Banti here recognise the subjugated condition of women at the time, but she also aims for a redistribution of the political power between men and women, despite her previous aggressive rejection of the feminist cause.

Natalia Ginzburg is the author who offers most material to analyse, spreading traces of an anti-feminist attitude throughout her essayistic production. In the introduction to the volumes of her *opera omnia*, Cesare Garboli (1995) suggests that «manca alla Ginzburg il sale del femminismo, la competitività, l'invidia nei confronti degli strumenti intellettuali e culturali che sono il privilegio storico (il potere) del maschio»¹⁰ (XXVI). These are problematic and controversial stances, since being a feminist would involve, according to Garboli «competitività» and «invidia», however, it is also what Ginzburg will theorise and what will provide her main justification for her political distance from the movement. She wrote:

Il sentimento essenziale espresso dal femminismo è l'antagonismo fra donna e uomo. [...] femminismo nasce dunque da un complesso d'inferiorità antico di secoli.¹¹ (Vi, 648)

[...] ragioni d'orgoglio: nei movimenti femminili, ciò che mi sembra sommamente sbagliato è lo spirito di competizione con il sesso opposto [...] è sbagliato scoprire delle ragioni, o delle ragioni da avvilitamento, nella propria nascita o origine, o nella propria condizione umana.¹² (Ss, 1304)

Garboli continues:

Se l'oscurantismo della Ginzburg è un'espressione di femminismo eretico, l'uomo non è escluso per esigenze di lotta, ma per le ragioni opposte, per un impulso solidale che fa preferire la divisione dei ruoli, secondo una scelta affettiva protetta da un punto di vista fisiologicamente privilegiato, da un complesso di superiorità (la

⁹ «But does it not seem to you that women have, in a society made for men, so many more problems than men? Yes, I think so. And I also think that men are up to all sorts of things and that, politically, they are leading us to ruin. Maybe if there were women in power, things would be better» (my translation).

¹⁰ «Ginzburg lacks the salt of feminism, the competitiveness, the envy for intellectual and cultural tools that are the historical privilege (the power) of the male» (my translation).

¹¹ «The essential sentiment expressed by feminism is the antagonism between women and men. [...] feminism thus stems from a centuries-old inferiority complex» (my translation).

¹² «[...] reasons of pride: in women's movements, what seems to me to be supremely wrong is the spirit of competition with the opposite sex [...] it is wrong to discover reasons, or reasons for disillusionment, in one's birth or origin, or in one's human condition» (my translation).

madre e il figlio). Ebbene, il privilegio è pari alla sua “oscurità”, alla sua ambiguità: la divisione dei ruoli è infatti esagerata, dalla Ginzburg, volutamente esagerata, mentre questa divisione non può essere estesa all’intelligenza.¹³ (1995: XXVII)

Thus, in the attempt to explain Ginzburg’s absence of feminism in her literature and her persona, Garboli argues that her literary separatism derives from the narrative importance of the relationship between mother-son and the superiority that the mother covers in it. Ginzburg pursues a common tendency in Italian women (writers) of those times (and beyond) – that of refusing the ‘practice of difference’ in the language defining her, thus refusing, for example, to be called and considered a *scrittrice*. In *Le piccole virtù*, a collection of essays and articles published in 1962, she admits that:

L’ironia e la malvagità mi parevano armi molto importanti nelle mie mani; mi pareva che mi servissero a scrivere come un uomo, perché allora desideravo terribilmente di scrivere come un uomo, avevo orrore che si capisse che ero una donna dalle cose che scrivevo. Facevo quasi sempre personaggi uomini, perché fossero il più possibile lontani e distaccati da me.¹⁴ (PV, 847)

The possibility to be recognised as a woman writer frightens her. Her approach radically changes after her pregnancies:

Il personaggio principale era una donna, ma molto molto differente da me. Adesso non desideravo più tanto di scrivere come un uomo, perché avevo avuto i bambini, e mi pareva di sapere tante cose riguardo al sugo di pomodoro e anche se non le mettevo nel racconto oppure serviva al mio mestiere che io le sapessi: E in un modo misterioso e remoto anche questo serviva al mio mestiere. E mi pareva che le donne sapessero sui loro figli delle cose che un uomo non può mai sapere.¹⁵ (PV, 850)

Something similar, about the intention to write like a man or at least not be recognised as a woman writer, is stated also in *Nota* (a text following the novel *Lessico familiare*):

¹³ «While Ginzburg’s obscurantism is an expression of heretical feminism, men are not excluded for reasons of fight. It is rather for the opposite reasons—for a sympathetic impulse that makes the division of roles preferable according to an affective choice protected by a physiologically privileged point of view, by a superiority complex (the mother and the son). Well, the privilege is equal to its ‘obscurity’ and ambiguity: the division of roles is indeed deliberately exaggerated by Ginzburg, while this division cannot be extended to intelligence» (my translation).

¹⁴ «Irony and nastiness seemed to be very important weapons in my hands; I thought they would help me write like a man because at that time I wanted terribly to write like a man, and I had a horror of anyone realizing from what I wrote that I was a woman. I almost always invented male characters because they would be the furthest and most separate from myself» (Davis, 2016: 54-56).

¹⁵ «The main character was a woman, but very different from myself. Now I no longer wanted to write like a man, because I had had children and I thought I knew a great many things about tomato sauce and even if I didn’t put them into my story it helped my vocation that I knew them; in a strange, remote way these things also helped my vocation. It seemed to me that women knew things about their children that a man could never know» (Davis, 2016: 58).

Non sognavo che la freddezza e il distacco, e quel racconto mi sembrava ammirevole: eppure qualcosa in tutto quel distacco mi disgustò. Per sembrare un uomo, avevo addirittura finto, in quel racconto, d'essere un uomo.¹⁶ (Ls, 1123)

In *Due comunisti* (included in the collection of writings *Mai devi domandarmi* and written in 1970) she writes that she does not like to deal with and reflect on 'women's issues':

Nei giorni intorno allo scorso Natale mi telefonò a una persona. Mi disse che aveva da propormi un lavoro. Venne. Era uno che non avevo mai visto prima; lo trovai molto simpatico. Parlammo a lungo di varie cose. Di lui non so e non potrei dire nulla, se non che è molto simpatico e che lavora alla televisione. Mi chiese se volevo fare, per la televisione, un'inchiesta sulla donna in Italia. Risposi che non sapevo fare le inchieste e che non mi piaceva per niente pensare "alla donna", cioè pensare ai problemi delle donne isolati da quelli degli uomini.¹⁷ (Mdd, 1144)

Nevertheless, Ginzburg is also the author of an article significantly entitled *La condizione femminile* (1974), collected into *Vita immaginaria*. This is the most useful piece by Ginzburg in order to understand her positions toward feminism, which she dislikes, despite supporting some of its fights:

Qualche tempo fa ho risposto ad alcune domande sul femminismo. Non amo il femminismo. Condivido però tutto quello che chiedono i movimenti femminili. Condivido tutte o quasi tutte le loro richieste pratiche. Non amo il femminismo come atteggiamento dello spirito.¹⁸ (Vi, 647)

It is evident how Ginzburg tries to take a distance from the separatist approach that Italian second wave feminism, spreading in those same years, adopted. Instead, she argues for the need for men and women to fight together, and to return to an emancipatory approach, more similar to first wave feminism. Nevertheless, in this same article, Ginzburg defends also certain domesticity that even earlier feminism disliked:

¹⁶ «I dreamt of nothing but coldness and detachment, and that tale seemed admirable to me: yet something in all that detachment disgusted me. I had even pretended, in that tale, to be a man» (my translation).

¹⁷ «In the days around last Christmas, someone phoned me. He told me that they had a job to offer me. He came. He was someone I had never seen before. I found him very nice. We talked for a long time about various things. I do not know and could not say anything about him, except that he is very nice and that he works on television. He asked me if I wanted to do an investigation on women in Italy for the television. I replied that I did not know how to make enquiries and that I did not like thinking 'about women' at all, that is, thinking about women's problems in isolation from those of men» (my translation).

¹⁸ «Some time ago, I answered some questions about feminism. I do not like feminism. I do, however, share everything the women's movements demand. I share all or almost all their practical demands. I do not like feminism as an attitude of the spirit» (my translation).

Umiliante per il femminismo anche generare figli e allattarli, così come è umiliante accudire alle case, umiliante per le donne dedicarsi agli altri e non a se stesse [...] Poiché sono le donne a generare i figli, il peso di accudirli e crescerli tocca soprattutto alle donne. [...] Ella si sente tenuta ad accudire ai figli. Quando non lo fa, si sente in colpa, e quando lo fa, si sente ansiosa e irrequieta e traduce allora l'ansietà e l'irrequietudine in un senso di umiliazione e frustrazione. [...] Ma contro una simile sensazione, non esistono difese possibili, essendo una sensazione d'angoscia che non ha nulla da fare con le colpe della società. [...] Come la condizione femminile, così anche la maternità non è in sé stessa né una ragione di umiliazione, né una ragione d'orgoglio. Come la condizione femminile, non è nulla in se stessa.¹⁹ (Vi, 649-651)

Ginzburg recognises the frustration that even motherhood, as traditionally conceived, can provoke – and it will be fictionalised in her novels – but she refuses to admit the societal nature of this.

Similarly, in the article *Dell'aborto* (1975, now in *Scritti Sparsi*) Ginzburg proves again to support feminist demands, such as the right to abortion, but she is once again critical of feminism's approach to the matter:

Sono per la legalizzazione dell'aborto [...] nella campagna per l'aborto legale, trovo odiosa una diffusa attitudine di gagliarda spavalderia, trovo odioso che si parli dell'aborto come se fosse una libera e allegra festa [...] odiose le sfilate delle donne con le bamboline appese sulla pancia, odiose le parole “la pancia è mia e ne faccio quello che mi pare”: in verità anche la vita è nostra, e nessuno di noi riesce a farne quello che gli pare [...] l'orgoglio di sesso nei movimenti femminili è però assai simile all'orgoglio di patria, perché ne assume le fattezze, ne assume gli aspetti aggressivi e faziosi, la grottesca e irreale combattività [...] le separazioni che si delineano fra i gruppi umani, le alleanze fra donne, o fra omosessuali, o fra ebrei, non hanno nessun senso perché non ubbidiscono a una scelta politica, ma si basano su un lontano fatto d'origine, legato all'ora della nascita, o magari, come e forse nel caso degli omosessuali, legato a una lontana decisione infantile²⁰ (Ss, 1299-1308)

¹⁹ «It is also humiliating for feminism to give birth and breastfeed children, just as it is humiliating to look after the home, humiliating for women to devote themselves to others and not to themselves [...] Since it is women who give birth, the burden of looking after and bringing up their children falls mainly on women. [...] She feels obliged to take care of her children. When she does not, she feels guilty, and when she does, she feels anxious and restless and then translates the anxiety and restlessness into a sense of humiliation and frustration. [...] But against such a feeling, there is no possible defence, as it is a feeling of anguish that has nothing to do with society's faults. [...] Like the female condition, motherhood is in itself neither a reason for humiliation nor a reason for pride. Like the female condition, it is nothing in itself» (my translation).

²⁰ «I am in favour of the legalisation of abortion [...] in the campaign for legal abortion, I find a widespread attitude of gallant arrogance abhorrent. I hate the fact that abortion is spoken of as if it was a free and cheerful celebration [...], I hate the parades of women with little dolls hanging from their abdomen, as well as the words ‘it is my abdomen and I can do what I want with it’: the truth is that life is ours too, and none of us can do what we like with it [...] the pride of sex in women's movements is, however, very similar to the pride one feels towards their own country, because it takes on its

Nevertheless, even in her non-fictional writings, Ginzburg proves to engage with what she claimed to avoid, such as women's issues and their condition – «le donne pensano che per gli uomini è quasi la stessa cosa. Però non del tutto. Gli uomini, essendo considerati i padroni della terra troveranno forse fino all'ultimo un poco di spazio, ma alle vecchie donne sarà negato»²¹ (*Le donne*, in *Vi*, 600). The purpose of this work is to show how her narrative presents signs of alignment to the theories that rethought structuralism in a feminist direction, despite her outspoken aversion to it. This will be done by investigating her fictionalization outside of stereotypes of giving birth and motherhood, for example, described as 'disgusting' and hindering for women.

Morante's anti-feminism is more widely a rejection of ideologies and of lining up with a particular faction. Petrignani, in her fictional interview with Morante,²² makes her refuse left-wing ideologies (1984: 117). In this case, her anti-feminism lies in her distancing herself from expressing any political opinion, while reflecting, in an original way, on the feminine in her narrative. When facing the recurrent issue of the inclusive language, thus the possibility to be addressed and defined as «scrittrice» rather than «scrittore», Morante, similarly to Ginzburg, refuses this possibility:

Lukàcs l'ha definita "il più grande romanziere europeo dopo Thomas Mann" e lei ha sempre tenuto a conservare quella definizione al maschile. Lei è scrittore e non scrittrice, poeta e non poetessa, narratore e non narratrice. È capace di infuriarsi se qualcuno la definisce al femminile. Perché tanto disprezzo per il suo sesso?

Sarò stata sfortunata, ma non ho mai conosciuto una donna veramente intelligente. Le donne pensano solo a se stesse e alle loro faccende private, scimmiettano l'uomo, ed è un segno della loro stupidità voler essere come i maschi: spregiano le loro grandi qualità femminili diventando spregevoli.²³ (1984: 119)

features and aggressive, sectarian aspects, its grotesque and unreal pugnacity [...] the separations that emerge between human groups, the alliances among women, or homosexuals, or Jews, make no sense because they do not obey a political choice, but are based on a distant fact of origin, linked to the time of birth, or perhaps, as in the case of homosexuals, linked to a distant childhood decision» (my translation).

²¹ «Women think that it is almost the same for men. But not entirely. Men, being considered the owners of earth, will perhaps find a little space until the very last, but old women will be denied it» (my translation).

²² Petrignani does not interview Morante but rather builds her text from different sections of different interviews and statements.

²³ «Lukàcs has defined you as 'the greatest European novelist since Thomas Mann' and you have always kept that definition in the masculine. You are a male writer and not a female one, a poet and not a poetess, a male storyteller and not a female one. You would become infuriated if someone defined you using the feminine form. Why do you have so much contempt for your gender? I may have been unlucky, but I have never met a truly intelligent woman. Women only think of themselves and their private affairs, they impersonate men, and it is a sign of their stupidity to want to be like men: they despise their great feminine qualities and become despicable» (my translation).

Morante's answer is also very similar to Banti's claims of natural malice among women. Porciani (2019) recognises that even feminist scholars tended to ignore Morante's positions against feminism – «Si tratta, peraltro, di letture che spesso glissano sugli episodi sgradevoli che negli anni Settanta caratterizzarono il rapporto di Morante con i movimenti femminili»²⁴ (2019: 351). Among these «episodi sgradevoli», she remembers the author's refusal to be included in different women's anthologies:

Si pensi all'aspro rifiuto di far parte dell'antologia *Donne in poesia* curata da Biancamaria Frabotta e Dacia Maraini nel 1976, ma anche a un altro episodio, meno noto, verificatosi nel settembre 1974, di cui si conserva la documentazione presso l'Archivio Morante della Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma. Rigettando la proposta della direttrice di *Noi donne*, Giuliana Dal Pozzo, di partecipare a un'antologia «delle maggiori scrittrici italiane», da regalare alle ventottomila abbonate della rivista, scrive Morante in una lettera di cui ci è rimasta una copia dattiloscritta: «come già ebbi modo di spiegarle al telefono, io sono assolutamente contraria a simili apartheid sessuali, che secondo me non rappresentano altro che una forma di razzismo».²⁵ (2019: 351)

Like Ginzburg and Banti, Morante justifies her distance from second wave feminism by adhering to a form of 'universalism' that does not involve categories, thus refusing the practice of sexual difference theorised and adopted by Italian feminist groups in the 1970s. Porciani offers a significant document from 1960 reiterating this opinion:

È vero, effettivamente, che da bambina mi sarebbe piaciuto di essere un ragazzo, per la ragione che, fra i ragazzi, trovavo maggiore spirito di avventura, e quelle aspirazioni all'eroico, o, magari, all'impossibile, che raramente si incontrano fra le bambine, giacché il carattere femminile, in genere, è più pratico di quello degli uomini. Per questo stesso motivo, può accadermi, anche oggi, di preferire, in generale, la compagnia degli uomini a quella delle donne. Ma questo non significa affatto che io mi senta più solidale con gli uni che con le altre in generale. [...] Secondo me, in tutto il mondo, ancora oggi, esiste in realtà una specie di razzismo, evidente o larvato, nei riguardi delle donne: perfino nei paesi dove le donne sembrano dominatrici! [...] Basterebbe la distinzione – che ancora si usa fare dovunque – fra scrittori e scrittrici: come se le categorie culturali fossero determinate dalle categorie fisiologiche (sarebbe lo stesso che dividere gli autori, per esempio,

²⁴ «Moreover, these readings often gloss over the unpleasant episodes that characterised Morante's relationship with women's movements in the 1970s» (my translation).

²⁵ «It would be enough to think of the bitter refusal to be part of the anthology "Women in Poetry" edited by Biancamaria Frabotta and Dacia Maraini in 1976, but also of another, less well-known episode, which occurred in September 1974, documentation of which is preserved in the Morante Archive of the Central National Library in Rome. Rejecting the proposal of the director of "Noi Donne", Giuliana Dal Pozzo, to participate in an anthology "of the greatest Italian women writers", to be given as a gift to the magazine's twenty-eight thousand subscribers, Morante wrote in a letter of which a typewritten copy has survived: "as I had already had occasion to explain to her on the phone, I am absolutely opposed to similar sexual apartheid, which in my opinion represent nothing more than a form of racism"» (my translation).

in autori biondi e bruni, grassi e magri). In realtà, il concetto generico di scrittrici come di una categoria a parte risente ancora della società degli harem. Ed è ancora in uso, lo ripeto, non solo in Italia, ma in tutto il mondo.²⁶ (2019: 352)

Porciani, reflecting on Morante's statements, argues that Morante has generational incapability to recognise social stereotypes linked to women that she adopts as natural (similarly to Banti claiming women's malice) (2019: 353).

Nevertheless, as for Banti and Ginzburg, this does not prevent Morante from recognising and explaining the gender-based struggles that she and her colleagues have to face – «una donna, per affermarsi col proprio ingegno, deve superare difficoltà almeno dieci volte superiori a quelle che incontrerebbe un uomo»²⁷ (Porciani, 2019: 353). It can be argued – in order not to merely reaffirm these authors' anti-feminism without problematising it – that the refusal of second wave feminist approach to gender and representation, to *differenza sessuale* and *affidamento*, actually makes these authors precursors who invoke intersectionality – a notion that neither official feminism had theorised at the time (Porciani, 2019: 353). This is the reason why their anti-feminism is an aspect that should not be underrated in the analysis of their works. Indeed, it is important to understand the limits which divide the engagement with feminist theories and concept in their representation of women's condition and their open contrast of feminism as a political movement, because I argue that their anti-feminism itself underpins their feminist narratives.

1.3. Scholars reflecting on 'anti-feminism'

While critics have acknowledged the authors' lack of commitment to feminism, they tend to explain the latter by highlighting other factors. Fiorucci (2010) takes into consideration Banti's links with Italian feminism. However, she does not include other writers and thus does not investigate whether Banti's sentiment towards the feminist movement was shared by a whole generation of women

²⁶ «It is true, indeed, that as a child I would have liked to be a boy, because I found that boys had more the spirit for adventure and aspirations to the heroic, or, perhaps, to the impossible, that one rarely encounters in girls, since these are, in general, more practical than men. For this same reason, it may happen to me, even today, that I generally prefer the company of men to that of women. But this in no way means that I feel more sympathetic to the former than the latter in general. [...] In my opinion, all over the world, even today, there is in fact some kind of racism, whether overt or covert, towards women, even in countries where women seem to dominate. [...] It would be enough to make the distinction —still used everywhere—between male and female writers: as if cultural categories were determined by physiological categories (it would be the same as dividing authors, for example, into blond and brunette, or fat and thin). In fact, the generic concept of a female writer as a separate category still suffers from the harem society. And it is still in use, I repeat, not only in Italy, but all over the world» (my translation).

²⁷ «A woman, in order to assert herself with her wits, must overcome difficulties at least ten times greater than those a man would encounter» (my translation).

writers. Fiorucci draws a distinction between feminism of difference and feminism of equality. Banti's portrayal of female characters is, according to Fiorucci, a feminism of difference *ante litteram*, which contrasts with the feminism of equality that was spreading in Italy in those years. Fiorucci never identifies Banti's attitude or statements as anti-feminist, but rather she agrees with Banti's definition of 'humanism'. Similarly, Carù does not use the definition of anti-feminism, and whilst recognising Banti's rejection of feminism, in her view, it is due to the author's attempt to avoid being ghettoized (1997) that she takes distance from official affiliation with the movement. It is important to note that Banti never theorised different categories of feminism and she criticises the whole movement. Whilst echoing Fiorucci's argument of a feminism of difference and the use of the sexual difference in the construction of Banti's female subjectivities, I argue that it is fundamental to reflect on her political anti-feminism and to analyse this sentiment as a shared attitude within Italian society, and particularly among the category of women writers. My research aims to consider anti-feminism and compare Banti's works to those of other influential women writers of the same period. Indeed, even less attention has been given to other authors' conflictual relationship with feminism. As for Ginzburg, Anderlini-D'Onofrio (2000) mentions the author's attitude towards feminism as neutral but with respect, and she argues that by putting herself in such a position she «could support the two major claims that animated the movement – divorce and abortion – while reserving her right to critique feminism» (2000: 198). On Morante, Liimatta often refers to her as feminist conscious without mentioning Morante's tendency to avoid the topic of feminism or her tendency to actively distance herself from it (2000). Re (1993) mentions Morante's avoidance of the topic of feminism – she recalls the episode in which Morante refused to be anthologised within a collection of female poets and she refused to answer questions about new feminist movements when asked by Frabotta (1993: 361), as mentioned above. Building on Gargani's definition of *voce femminile* within literature and history (2012), Re claims that *La Storia* can be defined as a feminist novel. Nevertheless, she does not problematise Morante's anti-feminism, which, on the contrary, is recognised by Nozzoli (1978) who argues that her other novels are anti-feminist. Thus – unlike this research – she does not outline any discrepancy between Morante's public statements and her narrative. Similarly, Pickering-Iazzi does not recognise feminism in her analysis of *La Storia* (1989). Giorgio (1994) highlights how it is possible to build an analysis on feminist and gender theories by Kristeva, Cixous, or Irigaray as for *Aracoeli*, thus she recognises the presence of a discourse on women by Morante, which is «contradictory and ambiguous» because her works are not readable as emancipatory, but neither as «misogynist nor sexist» (116). Whilst the academic literature on Morante shows an awareness of a significant discrepancy, this remains unresolved.

This research aims to fill this gap by assessing the extent to which an analysis of the authors' texts and the records of the authors' own opinions about their work and feminism may provide an answer to explain such a discrepancy. Hence, this research is not trying to discredit the feminist values of some of these literary works – which, on the contrary, will be outlined through the analysis of selected themes. When analysing Morante's anti-feminism, Porciani (2019) argues that neither ignoring it or forcing her texts within anachronistic labels nor diminishing their literary or political value in light of this would be the right approach:

Ricordare questi episodi non implica avventurarsi in sentieri psicocritici alla ricerca delle più intime ragioni di un'avversione sin troppo plateale per non risultare sospetta; si tratta, piuttosto, di valutare documenti che rendono improbabile chiedere alla scrittura di Morante una progettualità di personaggi che offrano role models per una diversa narrazione (nazionale) del femminile. Ciò non significa che si debba alzare bandiera bianca e accontentarsi di una resa incondizionata di fronte al radicale – almeno a quest'altezza cronologica – antifemminismo dell'autrice; né, soprattutto, che si debba considerare una simile posizione un monolitico dato di fatto che rende vane un'indagine di genere e una problematizzazione delle ricadute (latamente) politiche del femminile morantiano. Anzi, accade proprio il contrario: quanto più si esclude con ogni evidenza un programmatico approccio femminista – o anche femminile – da parte della scrittrice, tanto più diventa importante indagare le questioni di genere in Morante, specie in rapporto alle loro diramazioni tematiche e alla caratterizzazione dei personaggi.²⁸ (352)

This focus indeed allows considering the many struggles faced by women (writers) when they find themselves reflecting on women's condition. They feel the need to denounce injustices but, at the same time, they also feel forced to keep themselves out of labels, categories, and stances, which would make it even more difficult to be accepted within a male-dominated environment. This is an important aspect to consider since this reluctance encouraged the tendency to silence women's condition and to diminish the impact of feminism in literature, even though these authors were being subjected to the same issues they wrote about. I argue that the feminism of literary works and the anti-feminism of their authors cannot be separated – they need to be analysed together to be able to

²⁸ «Recalling these episodes does not imply venturing down psycho-critical paths in search for the most intimate reasons for an aversion that is too blatant not to be suspicious; rather, it is a matter of evaluating documents that make it unlikely to ask Morante's writing to design characters that offer role models for a different (national) narrative of the feminine. This does not mean that we should raise the white flag and be content with an unconditional surrender in the face of the author's radical—at least at this chronological height—anti-feminism. Equally, it does not mean that we should consider such a position an inflexible factual datum that nullifies a whole gender investigation and a problematisation of the political repercussions of Morante's concept of feminine. On the contrary, quite the opposite is the case: the more one clearly excludes a programmatic feminist—or even feminine—approach, the more important it becomes to investigate gender issues in Morante, especially in relation to their thematic ramifications and the characterisation of the characters» (my translation).

understand the causes and the consequences of this discrepancy. Whilst the existing academic literature hints at this discrepancy, it does not problematise the writers' statements and does not consider it across different authors, as a collective attitude. For example, in order to shed light on works rarely studied, Fiorucci did not extend her analysis to more popular novels by Banti. Or in Morante, the debate has often focused only on *La Storia*. Thus, my research aims to problematise the anti-feminism in various authors and throughout different works, in order to reflect on its real-life implications for these authors, as a recurrent mechanism. I will pursue Fiorucci's suggestion of focusing on the sexual difference and her category of feminism of difference present in Banti, as well as in Ginzburg and Morante's novels and short stories. In addition, the thesis will be the first work to systematically probe the authors' anti-feminism. Furthermore, I will build on Giorgio's suggestion to build an analysis of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva's theories. Poststructuralist feminism (particularly theories from Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, which were also building the Italian second wave of feminism) will not be used to rebut the authors' anti-feminism, but rather to recognise it, contextualise it, and demonstrate how their works are still readable as feminist and anticipatory of the coincidence between «consciousness of identity and consciousness of oppression» (Andersen, 1978: 8) and of a form of gendered awareness that will spread, slowly, only later in Italy and in the Italian literary environment.

1.4. Structural overview

In order to investigate the discrepancy between the conflictual relationship that Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante had with feminism (only further complicated by their narrative openly engaging with feminist issues and anticipating or echoing theories from the second wave that they took a distance from) this work will reflect on recurrent themes that can shed light on these authors' conceptualisation of gender and gender issues.

The first chapter will focus on female subjectivity as a literary theme. Building my analysis on the authors' binary conceptualisation of gender, I will argue that the protagonists of the selected works struggle to accept the codified category of womanhood they are part of. Indeed, I will show how the awareness of being socially marginalised is narrativised by representing them as metaphorically or physically silenced. Then it will investigate the reasons why and the modalities through which these characters wish to adopt a masculine subjectivity. Hence, through the use of Poststructuralist feminist theories, the chapter will reflect on how what can be perceived as reinforcing a masculine and patriarchal discourse derives only from the authors' precocious awareness of the concepts of female

‘fragmented identity’ and of the lack of a universal language spoken by and representing also women. Later, I will adopt the concepts theorized by Gardener (1981) of ‘empathic identification’, ‘defensive narrative strategy’, and ‘representation of memory’ to reflect on the narrativisation in these novels and short stories of the act of writing. Explaining how authors and characters overlap within hybrid literary genres and the ways in which these protagonists recover their voices through writing (and more in general through art) would allow me to draw a parallel between authors and their characters, thus bridging their ‘anti-feminist consciences’ and their ‘feminist narratives’. Finally, I will show how not only by hybridising the genres of their works, but also by rewriting time and space in their stories, Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante deal with their fear of being perceived as women writers and make their protagonists escape from a system that keeps silencing them.

The second chapter will focus on the theme of motherhood. Firstly, it will highlight the macro-theme, shared by all the authors, of ‘rejected motherhood’ and it will analyse it in light of feminist theories on the maternal (e.g., Kristeva). Secondly, it will outline how these works focus on the maternal language – how it differs, what are its peculiarities, how or if it is transmitted, and its role within women’s identity. Then, it will argue that in most cases, motherhood is conceptualised as a disease and mothers as ‘monstrous’. Building on Creed’s concept of ‘monstrous feminine’ I will argue how this category can be applied *ante tempore* to Banti’s, Ginzburg’s, and Morante’s mothers. Finally, this chapter will investigate the theme of breastfeeding, how it is linked with ‘maternal language’, and how it shapes the relationship with the children. Through the analysis of these motives, this second chapter aims to provide a parallel reflection on the authors’ rejection of the maternal role in the attempt not to be included in any female genealogy: however, this does not diminish the engagement with feminist concepts in their representation of motherhood out of patriarchal and idealised stereotypes.

The third chapter will focus on female friendship. It will first reflect on the characters’ childhood and the way in which they perceive friendship as children, arguing that they already show an aversion to the possibility to get close to other girls. I will argue that if on the one hand, this mirrors their authors’ desire not to be part of a female genealogy, on the other it is due to the struggle they perceive against the patriarchal system that other girls seem to adhere to. In light of this, the concept of ‘chorus’ will be theorised, explaining how in these narratives women protagonists seem to be confined and marginalised also by other women. Finally, while investigating the nature of the (im)possibility for women to bond with each other, the characterisation of their husbands will be analysed and their impact on female bonds will be scrutinised.

The fourth and last chapter takes into consideration the theme of gender-based violence. Firstly, it will reflect on Ginzburg separately, since, unlike the previous themes, her works differ from the other authors' as for violence – I will argue that in Ginzburg's texts a more subtle and psychological gender-based violence is narrativised, often practised by fathers more than by husbands. Secondly, in order to smoothly transition from Ginzburg to Banti and Morante, I will reflect on the shared theme of disgust regarding heteronormative sex – I will argue that these characters' dislike of sex swings between the representation of a repressed sexuality and the refusal of sex as another patriarchal tool of oppression. Finally, attention will be drawn to the negotiation of gendered violence in Anna Banti and Elsa Morante's works. I will offer a close reading of rape scenes in the two authors focusing on the common motives of 'disgust' and 'silence', arguing that in opposite and specular ways, Banti and Morante reflect on the private and public aspects of gender-based violence.

The lack of a comparative reading of these three central figures in (female) Italian literature and the above-explained tendency to ignore or diminish the meaning and the impact of these writers' anti-feminism offer an original insight not only into the literary works here selected and analysed but also to the cultural system of twentieth-century Italy. Furthermore, it sheds light on current debates about the relationship between Italian writers and feminism – indeed, cases of contemporary authors and their relationship with feminism will be included at the end of the work, but contemporary references will be deployed also throughout the analysis of the main twentieth-century corpus selected (e.g. Ferrante's notion of genealogy will be useful to shed light on the refusal to be part of a 'female' network of intellectuals).

2. Female Subjectivity

The rise of Poststructuralist theories led to the questioning of more established scholarly trends in qualitative analysis and challenged the mainstream perspectives through which the world and reality were being analysed – from philosophy to history, including literature. It led to rethinking the lens of ‘objectiveness’ which shaped Western thought and Humanities by uncovering their bias more overtly than what had been traditionally perceived – the established norm equated to a male, white, heterosexual, and wealthy perspective, thus unable to offer universal tools of analysis because unable to adequately represent the varied world that it tries to understand (Willett, Anderson, and Meyers, 2020). Cavarero herself explained how the ‘I’ of discourse, according to western philosophy, is ‘male’ (1999). Hence, the need arose to develop new perspectives which could include the point of view of women, and unprivileged individuals, as well as being ethnically inclusive whilst intersecting each of these aspects. In literature, as in other disciplines, it became urgent, for both authors and critics, to understand what kind of subjectivity an author is able to create. Philosophers and scholars started to notice how there is no such thing as a neutral subject, and if it did exist it would mean that anyone not represented within this ‘neutrality’ is, syllogistically speaking, a non-subject – those whose identity differs from that represented as universal for race, gender, or other aspects of identity are non-subjects, as they are deprived of a model and thus unable to define themselves according to the official codification established as the norm. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, stated provocatively that «He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other» (2011: 26). Building on this concept, feminist studies focused on the motif of the self, in order to voice the subjectivity of women who had been traditionally silenced, trying to offer a definition which, for the first time, could include a sense of agency. Among Poststructuralist scholars, who supported thus wider and intersectional approach, there are Luce Irigaray (*Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1974; *This Sex which is not One*, 1985), Julia Kristeva (*Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 1980), and Helene Cixous (*The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1976), amongst others.

The influence of these theorists gave rise to the development of Gender Studies, aiming to address precisely issues of representation throughout different disciplines. Poststructuralist feminists and gender theorists offered different definitions of ‘female subjectivity’ throughout the years – theories deeply and metaphorically linked with the female body were initially dominant, until scholars tried to take a distance from this approach. To mention a few names among the many thinkers who focused on these topics, Irigaray re-reads traditional scholars such as Freud, but also later Lacan or Derrida, in order to denounce the bias of masculinity in the conceptualisation of what the ‘I’/self is and hopes for the codification of a new language which can include the female body and represent it outside of

the stereotypical male gaze (1974). Similarly, Cixous recovers the importance of the body in the process of writing of women for women (1976), escaping from a biased masculine representation. Kristeva stated that the self is a 'subject of enunciation', a speaker who can use the pronoun 'I' (1980). She argues that language is twofold – it involves a symbolic aspect and a semiotic one, recognising the former as masculine and rational and the latter as feminine and linked to rhythms, tone, and irrationality:

[The semiotic] refers to the actual organization, or disposition, within the body, of instinctual drives (...) as they affect language and its practice, in dialectical conflict with [the symbolic] [...]

[The symbolic] is a domain of position and judgment. Genetically speaking, it comes into being later than the semiotic, at the time of the mirror stage; it involves the thetic phase, the identification of subject and its distinction from objects, and the establishment of a sign system. Synchronically speaking, it is always present, even in the semiotic disposition, which cannot exist without constantly challenging the symbolic one. (1969: 18-19)

The symbolic, in a patriarchal society, represses the semiotic. However, they are both parts of the same language, which cannot overlook the feminine. By taking into consideration the feminine aspect of language, Kristeva does not accept the symmetrical and homogeneous 'I' attributed, traditionally by men to men, but she recognises in women a 'subject in process' (Kristeva, 1980) – not static, that has to be recovered and represented also and mostly by women – «[...] unitary subject discovered by psychoanalysis is only one moment, a time of arrest, a stasis, exceeded and threatened by this movement. [...] The process dissolves the linguistic sign and its system (word, syntax), dissolves, that is, even the earliest and most solid guarantee of the unitary subject [...]» (1998: 134).

These kinds of theories were later reviewed in light of the attempt to break the gender dichotomy on which they were built, and in order to eschew any form of essentialism – which incurs the risk of not being inclusive. Theorists like Judith Butler introduced the conceptualization of gender as 'performative' (1988), trying to avoid 'biologism' which Butler saw as a form of discrimination. Building on the studies of the above-mentioned feminist thinkers who came before her, Butler managed to bring a more inclusive perspective to their discourses thus actually enhancing their views. However, as I will explain later and as previously mentioned, my work will not specifically refer to Butler's theories as the theoretical framework of reference for this analysis because they are conceptually far from the cultural context in which the authors I investigate operate. The latter, in fact, still relied on a dichotomic conceptualisation of gender underpinning the reality of their narratives. Referring to a theoretical framework that is more contemporary to these authors is key to

analysing the rationale underpinning their writing, which is one of the main objectives of this research.

This chapter aims to investigate the ways in which Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante deal with the creation of women's subjectivities. It will be divided into three parts – the first part will discuss the ways their characters are eager for a masculine subjectivity. Nonetheless, it will also argue that in representing these struggling characters they offer original examples of female subjectivities. Secondly, it will show how they manage to create what Gardiner (1981) defined as 'empathic identification', thus also creating a subjectivity as women writers, through characters involved in the act of writing or of creating art. Finally, building on poststructuralist and feminist studies, I will argue that these authors create a new language which, through rethinking traditional concepts (e.g., time and space), voices the point of view of women. This analysis shall serve to show how, albeit largely unfamiliar with Gender Studies and theories,²⁹ these authors sometimes anticipated or reflected on some of the principal tenets of later feminist thought through their narratives. In doing so this analysis acknowledges that they are still anchored to a dichotomic conceptualisation of gender and still dealing with questions such as 'who am I?' – issues that later feminist theories abandoned, changing the focus of their reflections on gender as a cultural construct (Butler, 1990). Hence, Poststructuralist theories are the most effective lens to analyse the creation of female subjectivity in Banti's, Ginzburg's, and Morante's narratives. Indeed, whereas they publicly show to have links to a system that tries to impose a homogenous and symmetric masculine self at a universal level, poststructuralist feminism will help to demonstrate how their narratives are anticipating theories and systems addressing the issue of the representation of the feminine.

2.1. Between feminine and masculine subjectivity

As briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph of this chapter, the definition of self was traditionally built on theories and models which were sponsored as universal, and addressed to every human being, but which were later dismissed as biased and excluding, for example, women. In structuralist systems, but even in later systems, the feminine is argued to be «repressed, excluded, unrepresentable» (McDermott, 1987: 54). Women were traditionally conceptualized as only responsible of the horror of castration, and their sexual difference couldn't be represented within the language, without destroying the symmetry attributed to the self (McDermott, 1987: 52). Poststructuralist feminists

²⁹ From some of their non-fictional writings or interviews, these authors show to have read only some of Virginia Woolf, or Simone De Beauvoir's theories.

defined this trait of this system as 'sexual indifference' (Irigaray, 1974: 28; Gallop, 1982: 58). They argued that women tended to be described as a deficiency, fighting against each other in order to obtain male organs (if heterosexual), or in order to identify with men (if lesbians) (Irigaray, 1974: 77). The concept of a unitary self was dismissed also by Lacan, for example, who, in rereading Freud, argues that the identity of an individual cannot be unitary because is the result of how others perceive a 'self' (Mitchell, 1982: 5). He also argues the existence of the Other when the 'self' misrecognises themselves in the so called 'Mirror stage'. However, even if the unitary self was questioned, poststructuralist feminist studies later argued that in this system the woman is not yet an actual self, but just a category within the language, thus object, rather than subject, of men's fantasies – the female is Other par excellence. Irigaray argues that in the Mirror stage the mirror is created by men and can reflect only men. Thus, the woman is defined only by subtraction («men minus...») (1974: 27). She is an object of men's fantasies from childhood, being the mother object of desire; when the woman watches into the Lacanian mirror which can reflect only men, thus, she desires male sexual organs. In every case, women are objects out of any discourse, which is always masculine and phallic, never feminine. This has a lack of representation for women as a consequence. According to Gallop

a woman enters into these exchanges only as the object of a transaction, unless she agrees to renounce the specificity of her sex, whose identity is imposed on her according to models that remain foreign to her [...] woman's social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to 'masculine' systems of representation which misappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other women. (1982: 85)

My analysis of the conceptualisation of subjectivity in Banti's, Ginzburg's, and Morante's works builds on this statement. I argue that, in their novels and short stories, characters are aware of their condition of «no access to language» and of the lack of representation. They can feel like to be just objects without any chance or right to express themselves. And, precisely, they seem to find the solution postulated by Gallop (1982) – that of renouncing the specificity of their sex. Indeed, the discrepancy between these authors' engagement with feminist ideas within their narratives and their declared anti-feminism particularly emerges when they reflect on their being women (writers) through the construction of their characters' subjectivities. I argue that both the authors' and the characters' subjectivities build on the assumption that adhering to a masculine model of subjectivity is necessary in order to find room for themselves in the system in which they live. A parallel can be traced between what their characters do when they try to transform and adapt their subjectivities – in order to recognise themselves in a pre-existent model and to see themselves socially acknowledged – and what the authors do. This does not mean that there is an equivalence between author and

character (yet), but that both are women from the twentieth century (or before) struggling in a system that recognises as universal a model made up by men for men. Thus, the effects on their subjectivities are arguably similar and worthy of analysis in light of gender and psychoanalytical theories. This not only offers new insight into their works, but it would also allow us to explain some seemingly paradoxical, yet recurring, behaviours.

However, I argue, this does not diminish the originality of their writings as for their conceptualisation of female subjectivities, which still manages to escape from the unitarian system in which they try to fit. Indeed, these authors even anticipate some theories and intuitions about gender not yet theorised or not yet largely known in Italy. This analysis aims to recognise for these authors the possibility to still be models of *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976) for contemporary women writers, despite their declared rejection of such a duty.

2.1.1. Silenced voices

The absence of women from language, as argued by feminists rereading Freud's or Lacan's theories, is something also our authors are aware of. Indeed, I argue that Banti's, Ginzburg's, and Morante's awareness of this absence is mirrored by their characters, who are presented as excluded by this system. Furthermore, I argue that these authors convey this absence through three different ways of being silent – Banti's female characters are artists whose works of art or musical compositions, for example, are largely ignored; Ginzburg's characters are physically silenced in different ways; Morante's characters seem to be able to express themselves mainly through singing when deprived of the possibility to 'speak out loud'. They are all metaphorically 'castrated' of their voices.

In *Lavinia fuggita* by Banti, the only way in which the protagonist can express her own identity is by writing music, which provides a way of expressing her subjectivity. However, Lavinia shows awareness that her music is unheard, in a society in which this kind of self-expression is reserved only for men:

Capisci, non avevo altro mezzo, mai mi prenderebbero sul serio, mai mi permetteranno di comporre. La musica degli altri è come un discorso rivolto a me, io devo rispondere e sentire il suono della mia voce: più ne ascolto e più so che il mio canto e il mio suono sono diversi: non è uno scherzo: potresti star zitta quando ti senti chiamata da chi ti vuol bene? Pensa dunque, qui dentro c'è tutto il mio bisogno, strumenti, voci, chi ascolta:

ma senza inganni, per me, è come un tesoro sepolto, nessuno suonerebbe una nota sola di quel che invento.³⁰
(*Lav*, 487)

Lavinia is aware that her creativity, her talent, and her music, thus her interiority, are not taken into consideration by the main public and by other male musicians. Nevertheless, her need to write music persists, because without it she feels as though she does not even exist, since she sees her identity as lying in the act of creating art. If her music is not listened to, her subjectivity will never be externalised and understood.

Banti's Artemisia lives the same struggle. Her identity, again, lies in her art, which becomes the only way to express her subjectivity. But, like Lavinia, not only is Artemisia socially voiceless, and must renounce the possibility to voice her subjectivity with the system of the language, but her alternative way of expressing and being part of an unconventional language is also shaped by men and she ends up being excluded from that as well.

Often, the exclusion from language is represented by the physical impossibility to speak properly. In Banti, again, Paolina lives this effort when trying to tell a story to some children: «Gran disgrazia veder le cose tanto piatte. E poi chi ce la fa a ritmare la voce, a cullare le frasi, con questa fretta in gola che succhia i periodi migliori, asciuga la morbidezza dei passaggi, ingorga il respiro e la saliva?»³¹ (*IdP*, 107). It seems that Paolina owns the potential of the language within herself – the perfect sentences, the softness of the passages, and her voice are all present. Nevertheless, external factors make her mute. A certain «fretta» (rush) prevents her from being a good narrator, from using properly her voice and her breath, so much that she could not be able to tell a story, thus, to express herself.

This type of 'voiceless' character is even more present in Ginzburg's works. In *La strada che va in città* and in *Le voci della sera*, for example, the protagonists themselves, whose points of view are adopted, do not use direct speech. They are left voiceless. In *È stato così*, the protagonist does not speak much, and when she does, she is unable to speak for herself, to pronounce her thoughts, and

³⁰ «You know, I had no other way. They never would have taken me seriously; they never would have allowed me to compose. The music of others is like being talked to in person. I have to respond and hear the sound of my own voice. The more I hear it the more I know my song and my music are different. It's not a joke. Could you keep quiet if called by someone who loves you? Just think, everything I need is here inside instruments, voices, a listener. But for me, without some sort of use, it's like a buried treasure. No one would play a single note of my composition» (King, 2005: 212).

³¹ «A great misfortune to see things so flat. And then who can manage to give rhythm to the voice and cradle the sentences, with this haste in the throat that sucks out the best periods, dries out the softness of the passages, and engorges breath and saliva?» (my translation).

thus to express her true identity; rather, she keeps unnoticedly repeating what her husband usually says:

Gli ho chiesto come lui aveva passato l'estate. Subito ha preso una aria come stanca e lontana e m'ha detto che soltanto aveva guardato il lago e che gli piacevano molto i laghi perché non c'è nessuna violenza nella luce e nel colore di un lago e invece il mare e qualcosa di troppo grande e crudele con le sue luci e i suoi colori violenti. (*Esc*, 89)

[...] e le ho detto che il mare mi faceva orrore con le sue luci e i suoi colori violenti.³² (*Esc*, 98)

Being excluded from the linguistic system, she adopts her husband's. The protagonist of *La madre* is another character unable to speak properly. She is described as 'afasica', 'balbettante'. Her exclusion from the linguistic sphere is conveyed through a physical and pathological condition. Even in *Lessico familiare*, it seems difficult to hear Natalia Ginzburg's internal voice whose only role is that of narrating those surrounding her. Ginzburg, indeed, seems to disappear from her narration even when she is telling episodes lived as a protagonist. When talking about her own experience not only is she extremely synthetic – as for instance concerning the arrest of Leone Ginzburg («Leone dirigeva un giornale clandestino ed era sempre fuori di casa. Lo arrestarono, venti giorni dopo il nostro arrivo; e non lo rividi mai più»³³ (*Lf*, 1061); «Leone era morto in carcere, nel braccio tedesco delle carceri di Regina Coeli, a Roma durante l'occupazione tedesca, un gelido febbraio»³⁴ (*Lf*, 1054) - but she immediately shifts the focus on the feelings and thoughts of another character on that same episode. This happens when she writes about her own wedding, that soon becomes an excuse to provide a portrait of her father – «Mi sposai; e immediatamente dopo che mi ero sposata, mio padre diceva, parlando di me con estranei: "mia figlia Ginzburg". Perché lui era sempre prontissimo a definire i cambiamenti di situazione [...]»³⁵ (*Lf*, 1027).

Finally, Morante's characters seem outside of the 'universal' and traditional system of language, and their way of expression recall ancient and archaic times and systems, in which rituals and magic seem to dominate. They often sing rather than speak. Ida, Aracoeli, and Nunzia communicate with their

³² «Then I asked him about his holiday. He immediately put on a weary and faraway expression and said that he had nothing but to look at the lake. He liked lakes, he said, because their water does not have the same violent colours and glaring light as that of the sea. [...] I told Francesca that I hated the violent colours and glaring light of the sea» (Frenaye, 2021: 13).

³³ «Leone was the editor of a clandestine newspaper and was never home. They arrested him twenty days after our arrival and I never saw him again» (McPhee, 2017: 121).

³⁴ «Leone had died in prison, in the German section of the Regina Coeli prison one icy February in Rome during the German occupation» (McPhee, 2017: 116).

³⁵ «I got married. And right after I got married my father would say about me when talking to strangers, "My daughter Ginzburg." My father was always ready to point out changes in any situation» (McPhee, 2017: 96).

sons mainly through singing. Moreover, Fanning outlined how in *Diario 1938* Morante uses the verb writing for herself only when she refers to the compositions of some songs (2017: 155).

Ida sings for her children, exactly like her father used to sing for her: «Allora Ida, levandosi a mezzo dai lenzuoli, per invogliarlo al sonno gli ricantava la famosa ninna-nanna già cantata da suo padre, e lei stessa poi a Ninnarieddu: con la variante finale [...]»³⁶ (*Ls*, 405-6). Nevertheless, in addition to her being particularly quiet, she is also not good at singing. Her self-expression does not find wholeness in songs: «Essa era, per sua natura, così, stonata, da non fare nessuna differenza di note, fra l'una e l'altra melodia. Tutte quante, le musicava allo stesso modo, in una sorta di cantilena agra e bambinesca, dalle cadenze stridenti»³⁷ (*Ls*, 406). Even though it is in her voice that her true feelings and her true self are located, when it comes to expressing them, she loses her ability to speak out loud or to scream. This is the reason why she loses her voice in the most dramatic moments of her life, when her sons die, for example. And even if she feels that screaming would be the only way to express her sorrow, she is unable to do it.

In *Aracoeli*, Manuele's first memories of his mother are her songs: «Questa e altre simili canzoncine del medesimo repertorio, compagne della mia piccola età felice, sono tra le poche testimonianze a me rimaste della sua cultura originaria»³⁸ (*Ara*, 1039). Aracoeli is able to express her own identity through songs in her mother tongue, and only by breastfeeding or speaking in Spanish to Manuel she is able to transmit part of her 'self' (Fortuna and Gragnolati, 2009: 11; Wehling-Giorgi, 2014: 204).³⁹ Nunzia not only sings lullabies, but she also sounds as if she is singing when she speaks to herself (*IdA*, 1136: «La udivo anche, in taluni momenti, esprimere fra sé qualche suo pensiero, con [...] una voce dolce di cantilena»⁴⁰).

On the one hand, there is the 'feminist' awareness of women's condition, within a system that 'mirrors' and represents only men, and the attempt by these authors to denounce women's exclusion through the abovementioned leitmotifs. This is obtained through the highlighting of what Kristeva defined as the semiotic aspect of the language, the only one in which women can be contemplated (it is particularly evident in Morante, as already shown by Fortuna and Gragnolati (2009: 14) and by

³⁶ «Then Ida, half rising from the sheets, to lure him back to sleep would sing the famous lullaby sung to her in the past by her father and then to Ninnarieddu, with the variation adopted for the occasion» (Weaver, 2000: 129).

³⁷ «She was, by nature, so completely tone-deaf that she could make no difference in notes, between one tune and the other. She set them all to the same music, a kind of shrill and childish chant, with strident cadences» (Weaver, 2000: 130).

³⁸ «This song, and similar ones from the same repertory, were the companions of my little, happy life and are among the scant evidence that had remained to me of her cultural origins» (Weaver, 1984: 3).

³⁹ This specific aspect will be further analysed in the second chapter.

⁴⁰ «I also heard her, occasionally, express to herself, in joyful or rapt phrases, her voice sweet with humming, some thought that was addressed to no one» (Goldstein, 2018: 134).

Wehling-Giorgi (2014: 204)), and by outlining how female characters are kept away from the symbolic when unheard or unable to speak rationally (in Ginzburg and Banti, mainly).

On the other hand, the authors seem to create subjectivities who tend to wish to adhere to a traditional (male) model in order not to be ‘othered’, and they can be argued to dismiss their character’s desire to revolt, by making them crave to be men, as the only solution for this status of things, as it will be shown below.

2.1.2. Towards a masculine subjectivity

Despite the successful attempts at challenging and overcoming patriarchal power systems (above mentioned and further analysed later in this chapter), in light of their frequent anti-feminist statements, it is important also to recognise that several protagonists across the three authors’ works express the desire to be men or to become men. In their view, it is only by doing this that they would manage not to be voiceless anymore, to be listened to, and to experience the freedom they have always desired but never had because of their gender.

Banti’s Artemisia often states that she would like to be a free artist, and this would be possible only by being a male artist⁴¹ – «L’ho indotta a sottoscrivere i gesti di una madre sola e imperfetta, di una pittrice dal valore dubitoso, di una donna altera ma debole, una donna che vorrebbe esser uomo per sfuggire se stessa. E da donna a donna l’ho trattata, senza discrezione, senza **virile** rispetto»⁴² (*Art*, 345, emphasis mine). In *Il bastardo*, Banti explicitly claims that there is a marked difference between the male and the female subject. Given this difference, the protagonist does not want to embody what a female subject is expected to be (almost an object, more than a subject), thus her attempt not to seem like a woman:

“Stia sicuro, babbo, non guarderò nessuno, nessuno si accorgerà di me, sarà come non fossi una donna.” La voce della ragazza fu, alle ultime parole, quasi un soffio: del suo stato di donna, per la prima volta ammesso e confessato, la poverina si vergognava come d’un fallo. E un fallo era, chi volesse esser preciso, agli occhi del barone, la condizione femminile. [...] Questa, che vuol trascendere il suo stato di soggetto e pretende di farsi

⁴¹ As for Artemisia’s wish to be a man it is interesting the comparison that Fiorucci (2010: 10) made between Banti’s protagonist and Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, given also the explicit feminism of Woolf, whose works Anna Banti translated.

⁴² «I have forced her to subscribe to the role of an imperfect, unmarried mother, of an artist of dubious quality, of a proud but weak woman, a woman who would like to be a man in order to escape from herself» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 146).

ascoltare da eguale, ha pur detto la parola giusta, la parola che gli dà ragione: “come non fossi una donna”. [...] s’umiliava di non esser donna per non sembrarlo.⁴³ (*Ib*, 597)

The choice of not being a woman anymore, in order to pursue her ambitions, since ambitions are for men only, is deliberate and it is interesting how Banti uses a metaphorical and anatomical language when she tries to explain this kind of struggle. ‘Womanhood’ is a «fallo», guilt – she recalls male anatomy to describe the condition of being a woman as an obstacle. She recognises the ‘humiliation’ of being forced to «non sembrare donna». Moreover, Banti herself uses a masculine similitude in order to describe her female characters when they distinguish themselves in activities that are not suitable for women: «Suona, canta, legge, è femmina un poco troppo istruita, l’estate ai bagni di Posillipo esce fuori dal recinto e nuota come un uomo»⁴⁴ (*Ib*, 518). In *Itinerario di Paolina*, the protagonist observes women and cannot recognise herself in their category; but when she looks at men, she thinks she found her place to be:

Da principio la novità dei modi, nei ragazzi, la convince, la entusiasma e le fa credere di aver trovato finalmente a chi parlare: ma è una impressione che dura poco. Se con le sue pari le riesce così duro comunicare, livellarsi, coi ragazzi non c’è neppure da pensarci. Quando meno te lo aspetti ecco che saltan fuori a rinfacciarti che tu sei una bambina; una bambina e nient’altro; mentre ancora tu non ti sei figurata che cosa una bambina precisamente sia. [...] comincia a sentire una gran voglia di menar le mani e prendersela proprio con quel capo che nessuno ha eletto. Qualche volta ci prova, il cavaliere picchia sodo, l’amazzone mena pugni a occhi chiusi, le femminelle stanno a guardare scandalizzate; e la fine è sempre quella di dover tornare a casa sola, col grembiolino strappato e i lividi allarmanti.⁴⁵ (*IdP*, 29-30)

⁴³ «“Rest assured, father, I will look at no one, no one will notice me, it will be as if I were not a woman.” The girl’s voice was, during the last words, almost a breath: the poor girl was ashamed of her status as a woman, for the first time admitted and confessed, as if it had been a mistake. To be precise, the female condition was indeed a mistake in the eyes of the baron. [...] This one, who wants to transcend her status and expects to be heard as an equal, has yet said the right word, the word that makes him right: ‘as if I were not a woman’. [...] She humbled herself for not being a woman so as not to appear to be one» (my translation).

⁴⁴ «She plays, sings, and reads. She is an overeducated female. During the summer, in Posillipo, she comes out of the enclosure and swims like a man» (my translation).

⁴⁵ «At first the novelty of the boys’ manners convinces her, excites her, and makes her believe that she has finally found someone to talk to—but it is a short-lived impression. If she has such a hard time communicating with her peers, with boys it is a no-brainer. When you least expect it, they come up and tell you that you are a child, a child and nothing else, while you still have not worked out exactly what a child is. [...] She begins to feel a great urge to lash out and take it out on that very leader whom nobody elected. Sometimes she tries: the knight hits hard, and the amazon bangs her fists with her eyes closed, while the sissies look on in scandal. In the end, she is always the one having to go home alone, in her torn gown and alarming bruises» (my translation).

Nevertheless, the attempt of being part of a group of men is unsuccessful – Paolina does not want to be part of the group of girls («femminelle scandalizzate»), but she is rejected also by boys, who struggle to overlook her womanhood when judging her.

In Morante's novels and short stories, the desire and the attempt to become a man happen also through the body, which must either appeal to men or must not resemble that of a woman. Some of them try to hide their hips (or their bodies in general),⁴⁶ for example:

Essa non aveva mai avuto confidenza col proprio corpo, al punto che non lo guardava nemmeno quando si lavava. Il suo corpo era cresciuto con lei come un estraneo [...] Con quella sua eccessiva gravezza dei fianchi, e patito nel resto delle membra, esso era diventato, oramai, solo un peso di fatica.⁴⁷ (*Ls*, 351)

La sua [Cesira] malevolenza scopriva imperfezioni e difetti in Anna: – Sei troppo magra. – diceva ella a sua figlia, – sei troppo pallida, – oppure: – sei bella, ma non hai quello che piace agli uomini...⁴⁸ (*Mes*, 151)

In the short story *La nonna* (in *Lo scialle andaluso*), the grandmother protagonist «si fasciava il petto e i fianchi» (wrapped her breasts and hips) (*Sa*, 1410), parts that distinguish a woman from a man, traditionally. It is impossible not to think that this is another attempt to mimic men because this is the only way to conquer the freedom necessary to express the 'self'.

In *L'isola di Arturo*, Morante at first describes through Arturo's words the role that women cover within the society, that of an object more than a subject:

⁴⁶ Liimatta argues that Ida hides her body because it is expression of a sexuality that she herself does not know and that must be kept secret. Furthermore, she links this hiding of the body-sexuality with the attempt to hide her surname which would disclose her Jewish origins (2000). In *La Frantumaglia* (2016), Elena Ferrante observes that: «Voi certamente le conoscete meglio di me ed è inutile che ve le trascriva. Dicono di come i figli si immaginano le madri: in stato di perenne vecchiezza, con occhi santi, con labbra sante, in abiti neri o grigi o al massimo marrone. All'inizio l'autrice parla di figli determinati: "quei siciliani severi, d'onore, sempre attenti alle loro sorelle". Ma, nel giro di poche frasi, mette da parte la Sicilia e passa invece – mi pare – a un'immagine materna meno locale. Questo accade con la comparsa dell'aggettivo informe. Gli abiti delle madri sono informi e la loro unica età, la vecchiezza, è anch'essa informe, "giacché" scrive Elsa Morante, "nessuno, a cominciare dalle sarte delle madri, va a pensare che una madre abbia un corpo di donna» («You certainly know them better than I do and it's pointless for me to repeat them here. They describe the way sons imagine their mothers: in a state of perennial old age, with holy eyes, with holy lips, dressed in black or grey or at most brown. At first the author speaks of particular sons: "those severe Sicilians, honourable, always watchful of their sisters." But, within a few sentences, she has set aside Sicily and moves instead—it seems to me—to a less local maternal image. This happens with the appearance of the adjective "shapeless." The mother's clothes are shapeless and her only age, old age, is also "shapeless," "since," Elsa Morante writes, "no one, starting with the mother's dressmaker, must think that a mother has a woman's body» Goldstein, 2016: 53).

⁴⁷ «She had never felt at ease in her own body, to such a degree that she didn't look at it even when she bathed. Her body had grown up with her like an outsider [...] With this excessive weight on its hips, and the wasting of its limbs, it had become for her only a toilsome burden» (Weaver, 2000: 87).

⁴⁸ «Her malevolence unveiled imperfections and flaws in Anna: "you are too skinny", she would say to her daughter, "you are too pale", or: "you are beautiful, but you do not have what men like..."» (my translation).

L'avventura, la Guerra e la gloria erano privilegi virili. Le donne, invece, erano l'amore; e nei libri si raccontava di persone femminili regali e stupende. [...] Secondo il mio giudizio, le donne reali non possedevano nessuno splendore e nessuna magnificenza. Erano degli esseri piccoli, non potevano mai crescere quanto un uomo, e passavano la vita rinchiusi dentro camere e stanzette: per questo erano così pallide. Tutte infagottate nei loro grembiuli, gonne e sottane, in cui dovevano sempre tenere nascosto, per legge, il corpo misterioso, esse mi parevano figure goffe, quasi informi. [...] Da bambine, esse ancora non apparivano più brutte dei maschi, né molto diverse; ma per loro non c'era la speranza di poter diventare, crescendo, un bello e grande eroe. La loro sola speranza, era di diventare le spose d'un eroe: di servirlo, di stemmarsi del suo nome, di essere la sua proprietà indivisa, che tutti rispettano; e di avere un bel figlio da lui, somigliante al padre.⁴⁹ (*IdA*, 997-998)

Arturo's belief that women's 'condition' is natural rather than socially constructed is shared also by Nunzia. In a discourse in first person by Nunzia, written in italics but not reported as a traditional direct speech, Nunzia is temporarily and finally narrator of her desires. On this occasion she recognises what Arturo has already said – her own body is the main obstacle in the definition of her own identity as free, and independent. Her wish would be that of escaping and this possibility is recognised only in the process of 'masculinisation' of her own body and subjectivity: «*Sarebbe bello per me, di non avere questo corpo! Di non essere una femmina! Ma di essere un ragazzo come te, e di correre per tutto il mondo, assieme a te!*»⁵⁰ (*IdA*, 1156).

Irigaray argued that a way to subvert the system which systematically excludes women is to abandon the unity and the symmetry searched by masculine discourse, thus women should not try to enter as new subjects, even less as objects, within the male-dominated discourse. They should highlight and practice the sexual difference intrinsic in womanhood which they have been traditionally denied (1985: 28). Although Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante are still tied to the male discourse, as witnessed by the tendency to make their characters desire to be men, I argue that they inadvertently start to put into practice what French feminism sponsored, through certain narrative themes.

⁴⁹ «Adventure, war, and glory were men's privileges. Women, instead, were love; and books told stories of royal, splendid females. [...] According to my judgment, real women possessed no splendor and no magnificence. They were small beings, who could never grow as tall as a man, and they spent their lives shut up in kitchens and other rooms: that explained their pallor. Bundled into aprons, skirts, and petticoats, in which they must always keep hidden, by law, their mysterious body, they appeared to me clumsy, almost shapeless figures. [...] As children, they seemed no uglier than boys, nor very different; but they had no hope of growing up to become a handsome, great heroes. Their only hope was to become the wife of a hero: to serve him, to wear his name like a coat of arms, to be his undivided property, respected by all; and to bear a handsome son, resembling his father» (Weaver, 2000: 40).

⁵⁰ «It would be wonderful for me not to have this body! Not to be a woman but to be a boy like you and run all around the world with you» (Goldstein, 2018: 147).

2.1.3. Unwilling feminist narratives

Irigaray argues that a return to the grammar of the language and of discourse is necessary, but this implies focusing on silences, rather than ‘voices’ (1985: 75). This is exactly what these authors do, as demonstrated above. On the one hand, they are endorsing male discourse when they try to become part of it by renouncing sexual difference; on the other hand, and simultaneously, they voice women’s silences – the inability to speak, the unheard forms of art, the power of ‘vocality’ when the words are not pronounced or not listened to. Only by focusing on the ‘silences’ by drawing attention to the vocal sphere, which originated from the repression of the unitarian discourse theorised by Freud and Lacan, can women emancipate from the status of Other. Not only do these authors’ works foreshadow what the poststructuralist feminists proposed, but also later theories. In this context, it is particularly useful to remember what Cavarero wrote about voices in 2003. Indeed, Cavarero, building her analysis on Calvino’s short story *Un re in ascolto* (1984), reflects on how the voice – rather than the meaning, the semantic – keeps the identity of an individual (2003: 9). Calvino’s character loses his voice, as a metaphor for his loss of power. Similarly, Banti’s protagonists, forced to listen to other ‘voices’ but never heard, or Ginzburg’s women literally muted, are all symbols of women’s impossibility to have a codified identity, thus, to have some form of power. Cavarero investigates the ancient origins of the process of the cancellation of sexual difference (2003: 14) arguing that female being is an object of the masculine subject because silenced in their voices. Morante, finally, perceives how important the return to the voice is, as the *locus* of a unique subjectivity, and it is evident every time she characterises her women through their voice, their songs, hence the semiotic aspect of their language, rather than the symbolic (Kristeva, 1969).

Irigaray also speaks about a fragmented female identity, following the structure given by Lacan and Freud who focused on sexual organs, she explains that female sexual pleasure is fragmented, multiple, and diversified (1974: 29). This is also what happens for female characters in the works analysed. Despite their knowledge of traditional psychoanalysis⁵¹ which tend to flatten the concept of sexual pleasure (Irigaray, 1974: 29), I argue, Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante recognise the fragmentation of female identities in their narratives in disagreement with the symmetry traditionally argued. This is particularly overt in Banti because this fragmentation is evident on different levels. I shall argue there is a first level of fragmentation of the author’s subjectivity in her relationship with her female characters, and a second level of fragmentation within her characters’ subjectivities – both these dimensions speak to the fragmentation of women writers in a patriarchal industry and wider society.

⁵¹ We know, for example, that Morante read and accepted Freud’s theories, as she admits in her interview by Michel David, «Interview d’Elsa Morante», *Le Monde*, 13 Aprile 1968.

They are a byproduct as well as an act of resistance to the dominance of male subjectivity. They contribute to a complex dynamic between these authors and feminist ideals, which seem to animate their works and yet they reject. As for the first level of fragmentation, I argue that it is possible to state that there is a correspondence between the author and some of their characters. Even if they have different names, Banti's characters show to suffer the same struggles and to share the same and only (fragmented) subjectivity,⁵² shared also by the author, Banti becomes a character herself in *Artemisia* and her persona also seems to coincide with her last character, Agnese, in *Un grido lacerante*, a *summa* of every other Banti's character. Agnese is Banti's most (and openly) autobiographical character.⁵³ She lives experiences and events that coincide perfectly also with those lived by Paolina from *Itinerario di Paolina* and *Artemisia*, whose voice overlaps with that of Banti herself as character-narrator, making the two subjectivities intertwine. With Agnese autobiographically inspired, Banti's subjectivity is arguably also present in these two characters – given the episodes of life shared by Agnese and Paolina, or the fact that both Agnese and Banti write and mirror themselves in *Artemisia*, in a syllogistically way, they are all linked and overlapping.⁵⁴ Secondly, I argue there is a level of fragmentation in the characters' subjectivities too. Agnese defines herself as fragmented (*UGL*, 1585: «Pensava a frammenti, era sicura di non essere mai nata»)⁵⁵ Moreover, later she starts to 'fragment' deliberately herself and to scatter parts of her 'self' within the women she writes about and with whom she dialogues – as arguably, thus, Banti does while writing, as previously stated – (*UGL*, 1613: «e lei, la cantafavole,⁵⁶ ha ferito se stessa deprezzando ciò che aveva ricevuto nascendo, la facoltà di moltiplicarsi in tante creature»;⁵⁷ *UGL*, 1657: «[...] il dialogo poteva continuare»)⁵⁸ This has consequences also in the process of the writing of an (auto)biography – if traditionally the

⁵² Marrero argued that the characters of *Allarme sul lago* (1954), Eugenia, Adele, Ottorina, and Katrina «are used as a collective character» (2004: 2)

⁵³ Fiorucci (2010: 9) states that an autobiographical reading of *Un grido lacerante* is possible.

⁵⁴ Fanning adds that «all of them are, to greater or lesser degrees, versions of herself [Banti]» (2017: 192); Valentini mentions «a pattern of self-recognition» (1996a: 60); Lazzaro-Weiss (1999: 42) defines this process as «re-narrativizing her previous works»; Benedetti (1999: 52) that Banti «transformed the search for Artemisia's voice into a search for her own self [...]»; Scarparo argues the identification between narrator and character, rather than between the author and the character, but through the identification between Artemisia and the protagonist of one of her paintings she traces a parallel between different kind of narrators and authors with their characters, thus also between Banti and the narrator of Artemisia's fictional biography (2002a: 369); Torriglia (1993) defines the relationship between Banti and Artemisia as one of identification.

⁵⁵ «She thought in fragments, she was sure she was never born» (my translation).

⁵⁶ The use of the word «cantafavole» recalls, again, the theme of 'vocality' theorised by Cavarero (2003). Cavarero argues that it is necessary to juxtapose to the study of orality, also that of vocality, since in this lies the uniqueness of a 'narrator' and because it overlooks the language as symbolic, rather it involves every other aspect that Kristeva defined as semiotic. Thus, Banti here, in addition to highlighting the silences, as Irigaray postulated, of characters unheard as Artemisia, wants to outline the importance of the vocality and of the semiotic in the way in which her heteronym approaches the act of writing.

⁵⁷ «And she, the storyteller, wounded herself by depreciating what she had received at birth, the faculty of multiplying herself into many creatures» (my translation).

⁵⁸ «The dialogue could continue» (my translation).

self is here homogenous, it remains fragmented in women's (auto)biographies (Gardiner, 1981: 355; Fanning, 2017: XII). Indeed, Fanning wrote about it:

The male writer is often expected to present his reader with a unified, coherent self (in both unrealistic and anachronistic fashion), while the female writer's self-presentation is equally often expected to be somehow more fragmented and less ordered. [...] For the male writer, the problem arises in envisioning himself as an object of his gaze; for the female writer, having located herself as an object, how does she then present herself as subject, and literally as speaking subject in the case of first-person autobiographical narrative? For both, the split between object and subject that lies at the heart of autobiographical writing is problematic. (2017: XII-XII)

Fortini, as well, outlines how women's writings differ from male writers in this aspect. Quoting Farnetti,⁵⁹ Laura Fortini argues that by writing about the lives of other women, and particularly, by writing about children's experiences, women writers «come to life themselves» or they «reborn», and she highlights how this reading is not possible, or rather is less frequent in authors such as Proust (2016: 135-136). This is also what Bono and Fortini (2007) theorise as for women's *bildungsroman*, which, unlike for men authors, involves a «processo di formazione e di autoformazione che contribuisca a mettere al mondo le donne, oltre che il mondo stesso»⁶⁰ (6).

Artemisia, as well, is a character in continuous evolution. Every time she makes an important decision in order to change her destiny and to control it rather than to tolerate it, she becomes a 'new woman' (*Art*, 295: «Così scese una mattina a Piazza del Popolo: un'altra donna da quella che ne era partita»⁶¹). Pierini (2013) writes, as well, about 'fragmentation' when analysing how Banti deals with subjectivities in her narrative. She writes: «Nella Banti non si assiste a quella che fu definita da Cecchi "pulverizzazione dell'io" tipica dei fautori del "nuovo romanzo" quali Marcel Proust o James Joyce, ma ad una sua moltiplicazione che trova nell'*Artemisia* un mirabile esempio»⁶² (90).

⁵⁹ «The debate is therefore no longer based on the juxtaposition between life and writing, but it focuses on the transposition from life to invention instead, with the margin of the invention that any writing produces taken into consideration; it is on that margin that one works» (2002: 9).

⁶⁰ «Process of development and self-development to help bring women into the world, besides the world itself» (my translation).

⁶¹ «And so one morning she disembarked from in Piazza del Popolo, a different woman from the one who had set out from there» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 84).

⁶² «In Banti, we do not witness what Cecchi called the 'pulverisation of the self' typical of the proponents of the 'new novel', such as Marcel Proust or James Joyce, but rather a multiplication of the self that finds an admirable example in *Artemisia*» (my translation).

The fragmentation of the author's self into her characters happens also in Ginzburg, who admits: «E da allora sempre, quando usa la prima persona, m'accorsi che io stessa, non chiamata, non richiesta, m'infilavo nel mio scrivere»⁶³ (*Nota*, in *Ls*, 1127).

To conclude, these female authors become deliberately part of the male discourse also at a personal level – they refuse not only the feminist label and not as much the label of *scrittrici* (women writers), thus inserting themselves within a language that codifies only men, and which can represent only men. In order not to feel excluded, or segregated, they promote masculine discourse when it comes to reflecting on their activity of women writers. Despite these limits, and in continuity with the discrepancy between personal statements and narrative, I argued that they convey male discourse also into their narrative when their characters become part of it; however, I also demonstrated that there are clear traces of space given to women for their self-expression and for the affirmation of their identities as subjects, rather than objects of the narration. Offering fragmented selves, indeed, can be read, as already argued by Fanning, as a form of resistance against the tradition that wanted women just as objects, rather than subjects:

[...] a fleeting hold of a double/ multiple/ unstable subjectivity is a positive liberation for the woman writer from the relentlessly monotonous, negative, and fixed position of object of discourse and narrative. [...] to write as a woman, in this context, autobiographically and, worse, to openly represent the self in the act of writing involves taking on an uncomfortable number of taboos and breaking them. (2017: XIII, 156)

2.2. 'Empathic identification'

In 1981 Judith Kegan Gardiner, reflecting on the possible relationship that a female author can create with her female characters, argued that «the hero is her author's daughter» (1981: 349). She explains:

[...] the woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character. Thus the text and its female hero begin as narcissistic extensions of the author. The author exercises magical control over her character, creating her from representations of herself and her ideals. [...] Thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero. (1981: 357)

⁶³ «And ever since then, when using the first person, I have realised that I myself, unasked, unsolicited, slip into my writing» (my translation).

In this section, I am not arguing that these authors' characters are all autobiographical. I will argue, rather, that through the writing of (female) characters and through the creation of their subjectivities, their authors become to an extent more aware of their subjectivities as writers.

In Banti this process is more evident than in the other fellow writers, both because she shows in her novels the 'magical control' that Gardiner theorised and because of a circular structure that some of her novels shape openly around the author herself, as partially shown above. In Ginzburg, this kind of identification is more difficult to outline if one excludes the autobiographical novel *Lessico familiare*. However, some of her interviews and statements can help to throw further light on this argument. Morante's characters, as well as some of Banti's and Ginzburg's, often show a wish and a need to write, which further link them to their authors. Furthermore, in *Pro o contro la bomba atomica* she writes that the author is an «io recitante» (an acting 'I') – «[...] s' 'intende che quella da me rappresentata non è la realtà; ma una realtà relativa all'io di me stesso, o ad un altro io, diverso in apparenza, da me stesso, che in sostanza, però, m'appartiene, e nel quale io, adesso, m'impersono per intero»⁶⁴ (1505) – and scholars have often reflected on how Elisa from *Menzogna e sortilegio* can be an alterego of the author herself, whose name is so similar (Garboli, 1995).

Banti's authorial control of characters (Gardiner, 1981) during the process of self-identification is evident every time she, as a narrator, describes them, in metaliterary passages, as «personaggi» (characters). She does it with Paolina in *Itinerario di Paolina* (9: «[...] state pur sicuri che Paola non si riferisce all'immagine del ritratto, ma al seme di un impreciso personaggio che ha in animo più di diventare che d'essere stata»),⁶⁵ but also with Artemisia (*Art*, 331: «così si abbandona un personaggio primario?»).⁶⁶ Hence, Banti herself covers an important active role within these novels, in which her intrusive presence as an extradiegetic narrator makes the third person coincide with the protagonist's first person. In the case of *Artemisia*, Banti becomes a real character in the novel, dialoguing with Artemisia, the protagonist. Here, this process of explicit authorial control is even more significant since it reflects on the process of rewriting a phallogentric History and a woman's life which used to be traditionally misinterpreted, according to what the definition of *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976) involves. The process of empathic identification in Banti is made explicit in at least three novels – *Itinerario di Paolina*, *Artemisia*, *Un grido lacerante* – which, I argue, are readable as forming a

⁶⁴ «[...] it is understood that what I represent is not reality, but a reality relative to the self of myself, or to another self, different in appearance from myself, which in substance, however, belongs to me, and in which I now impersonate myself in full» (my translation).

⁶⁵ «[...] rest assured that Paola does not refer to the image of the portrait, but to the seed of an imprecise character who has more in mind to become than to have been» (my translation).

⁶⁶ «Is this how you abandon one of your main characters?» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 129).

circular structure created by the author revolving around herself. In her last novel *Un grido lacerante*, Banti uses a heteronym, Agnese, to tell her own story. It is not conceived as a traditional autobiography – rather, as an autofiction – however, despite the fictionalisation of the events and of the characters, the parallelism between Agnese’s and Banti’s life is evident. The question ‘Chi sono io?’, and ‘Who am I?’, pursues these characters.⁶⁷ In 1990 Judith Butler theorised how believing in the possibility to find an answer to these questions is an illusion – trying to impose the individual self in these terms would mean not recognising the performative nature of the self and that of the categories in which it is immersed. Banti, in a certain way, shows to perceive a truth like what Butler will theorise later. This question arises in her characters every time they feel inadequate and when they try to collocate themselves in a recognised category. The question itself is the fruit of social expectations, the same that dictate the ‘nature’ of the individual without contemplating their performativity. The recurrence of the question makes Banti’s *opera omnia* continuous in its structure, as if all the novels form the lifetime, the becoming, of the same subjectivity, under different names. In *Un grido lacerante*, Agnese tells the process which took her to rewrite the story of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, thus rendering inextricable the link and the coincidence between Agnese Lanzi and Anna Banti. In *Artemisia*, even if the third person for the protagonist is dominant, the narrator and the character will overlap repeatedly (256, «Ecco che Artemisia – e non solo Artemisia – soccombe al ricordo»,⁶⁸ 342, «Questo risveglio di Artemisia è anche il mio risveglio»)⁶⁹ (Pierini, 2013: 79). *Artemisia* is the most complicated novel as far as narratological tools and points of view are concerned. The novel opens with the narrator-author using the first person to explain how she lost her writings about Artemisia Gentileschi, and her despair because of it. Soon, and suddenly, the author is not alone anymore, and a voice starts dialoguing with her – it is Artemisia herself talking to her author. The dialogue between narrator and character just alluded to in *Itinerario di Paolina*, is now deliberate and textualized through direct speech between the two women (Pierini, 2013: 79). The dialogue is dense and difficult, and Banti often fights with Artemisia’s voice, which puts her in front of a mirror thus acknowledging her struggles (*Art*, 263: «Decido che non lascerò più parlare Artemisia, non parlerò più per lei, nel mio presente non c’è più posto per il passato né per il futuro»⁷⁰). But silencing Artemisia would mean silencing herself, so much are their subjectivities intertwined. When Banti starts telling Artemisia’s life in order to collect her memories about her lost writings, she

⁶⁷ Also Elisa in *Menzogna e sortilegio* asks herself «Chi è questa donna? Chi è questa Elisa?» («Who is this woman? Who is this Elisa?», my translation) (10).

⁶⁸ «So now Artemisia – and not only Artemisia – is succumbing to the force of memory» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 34).

⁶⁹ «This awakening of Artemisia is my own awakening» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 14).

⁷⁰ «I decide that I will not let Artemisia speak again, nor will I speak for her again; in my present there is no longer any place for the past, or the future» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 44).

switches, of course, to the third person and Artemisia becomes the protagonist of the story. The use of the third person is commented by Banti in metaliterary asides in which she explains how ephemeral this third person is since it often involves herself as deeply linked to Artemisia's feelings and experiences (*Art*, 278: «Ero sola (questa commemorazione scavalca spesso la terza persona)»).⁷¹ She defines herself as «compagna di Artemisia» (Artemisia's companion) (*Art*, 280). Scarparo argues that the narrator and the character «share the memories of Artemisia's life» (2002a: 364). This kind of dialoguing relationship legitimates both the activity of the painter for Artemisia and that of the writer for Banti, both trying to create their subjectivities through different forms of art. Banti for the first time admits identifying with a certain 'womanhood' while writing, essential in this phase of rewriting a woman's life (*Art*, 345 emphasis mine: «E da donna a donna l'ho trattata, senza discrezione, senza **virile** rispetto»,⁷² emphasis mine). Fiorucci recognises «that she eventually understands that woman needs a category of representation separate and different [...]», addressing the presence of the element of sexual difference in the definition of 'what' a woman is, in order not to be othered (2010: 29). However, this relationship of validation is not univocal – if Banti rewrites her story, Artemisia validates Banti as a woman writer:⁷³ «Ritratto o no, una donna che dipinge nel Milleseicentoquaranta è un atto di coraggio, vale per Annella e per altre cento almeno, fino ad oggi. “Vale anche per te” conclude, al lume di candela, nella stanza che la guerra ha reso fosca, un suono brusco e secco»⁷⁴ (*Art*, 425). Furthermore, Pierini (2013) outlined how the figures of Artemisia and her author are often superimposable, defining Banti as a character herself within this novel:

Artemisia ed Anna Banti hanno in comune l'amore per la pittura, la consapevolezza di possedere talento e la spinta all'affermazione professionale osteggiata dalla società. Artemisia deve farsi spazio in un mondo che l'ha ferita e poi rapportarsi alla figura imponente del padre Orazio; Banti, invece, ha un riconoscimento ancora marginale nel mondo letterario a lei contemporaneo e vuole riuscire a svincolarsi dal paragone con il marito Roberto Longhi, figura dalla personalità culturalmente centrale.⁷⁵ (2013: 79)

⁷¹ «I was alone (this commemoration often slips from the third person)» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 62).

⁷² «And I have dealt with her as one woman to another, lacking manly respect» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 146).

⁷³ As recognised by Fanning (2017: 162).

⁷⁴ «Whether it is a self-portrait or not, a woman who paints in 1640 is very courageous, and this counts for Annella and for at least a hundred others, right up to the present. “It counts for you, too”, she concludes, by the light of a candle, in this room rendered gloomy by war, a short, sharp sound» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 246).

⁷⁵ «Artemisia and Anna Banti share a love for painting, an awareness of their talent and a drive for professional affirmation opposed by society. Artemisia has to make room for herself in a world that has wounded her and then relate to the imposing figure of her father, Orazio. Banti, on the other hand, has a still marginal recognition in the literary world contemporary to her and wants to succeed in freeing herself from the comparison with her husband Roberto Longhi, a figure with a culturally central personality» (my translation).

It is Artemisia's voice dialoguing with Banti to say to her author how courageous she is while writing. Not only Banti's writings influence and free Artemisia and women readers and writers, but also Artemisia's art and her life become an example for Banti, and other women. Banti creates female identities in order to give voice also to her subjectivity.

As anticipated, it is more difficult to trace Ginzburg's empathic identification or her authorial control. Both when she uses the first or third person, the narrator is never intrusive, and episodes of her life are never used in her works as openly as in Banti. The only episode in which one can argue to outline something shared by fiction and reality is the passages from *La madre* (fiction) and *Lessico familiare* ('autobiography') in which fictional and real mothers are described similarly:

- La nostra mamma è troppo giovane! [...] Io invece avrei voglia di una mamma vecchia, grassa, con tutti i capelli bianchi! Una che stesse sempre a casa, che ricamasse delle tovaglie. Come è la mamma di Adriano. Mi darebbe un tale senso di sicurezza avere una mamma molto vecchia, tranquilla.⁷⁶ (*Lf*, 1018)

[...] I ragazzi si stupivano sempre a vedere le madri dei loro compagni, com'erano grasse e vecchie.⁷⁷ (*Lm*, 203)

However, it would not be possible to use this passage in order to argue that there is identification – also because the characters involved are Ginzburg's sister and the female protagonists' children, rather than Ginzburg herself and the protagonist. However, Fanning recognises Elisa from *Le voci della sera* as an alter-ego of the author (2017: 48). Moreover, it has been highlighted how Ginzburg's «awareness of family links acts both as creative stimulus and a recurrent motif within her work» (Nocentini, 2013: 155). Even when Ginzburg approaches the genre of autobiography in *Lessico familiare*, she does specify that her work must be read as a novel, admitting that memories are fallacious in the *Avvertenza* opening of the novel (*Lf*, 899). Moreover, her character is hidden in order to voice those surrounding her, who shape her identity. The first person is used, as one would expect from an autobiography. However, the fact that the first time she uses it is not at the very beginning, but rather, after seven paragraphs, is a symptom of how this first person is hybrid and misleading.⁷⁸ Before this specific point, she speaks in the third person of some members of her family, or the first-

⁷⁶ «Our mother is too young! [...] I would like an old, fat mother with white hair. One who's always at home embroidering tablecloths, like Adriano's mother. It would make me feel so secure to have a mother who was very old and calm» (McPhee, 2017: 91).

⁷⁷ «The children were always amazed to see the mothers of their school mates, how fat and old they were» (my translation).

⁷⁸ «In *Lessico familiare*, [...] there are only twenty-five uses of the emphatic "io" in some two hundred pages of avowedly autobiographical text» (Fanning, 2017: 163)

person plural when she speaks of her whole family or of her group of brothers and sisters. She is part and parcel of a group, but she does not stand out, and she seems almost reluctant to write about herself, her identity, and her persona outside of the shadows of other ‘characters’. Indeed, even when she starts writing about herself only, immediately she is absorbed by the presence of other people around her, which she mirrors, or behind whom she hides her peculiarities as shared by others, and the first-person singular disappears among many other voices:

Io ero, a quel tempo, una bambina piccola; e non avevo che un vago ricordo di Palermo, mia città natale, dalla quale ero partita a tre anni. M’immaginavo però di soffrire anch’io della nostalgia di Palermo, come mia sorella, e mia madre; e della spiaggia di Mondello, dove andavamo a fare i bagni, e di una certa signora Messina, amica di mia madre, e di una ragazzina chiamata Olga, amica di mia sorella, che io chiamavo “Olga viva” per distinguerla dalla mia bambola Olga; [...].⁷⁹ (*Lf*, 923)

Even when she inevitably becomes the protagonist of some events, for example when she gets married, Ginzburg-narrator manages to move the attention to some others’ point of view, thus she tells that same event as if she is not looking at herself and writing about herself, but as if someone else is the narrator of her life – «Mi sposai; e immediatamente dopo che mi ero sposata, mio padre diceva, parlando di me con estranei: “mia figlia Ginzburg”. Perché lui era sempre prontissimo a definire i cambiamenti di situazione [...]»⁸⁰ (*Lf*, 1027). In this passage, for instance, she uses her wedding to speak about her father and his personality, rather than writing about her feelings. When it comes to writing about herself, her first-person swings more easily into plurality and third person, as to avoid exposing herself or in order to be defined by those surrounding her. I argue that a gender-aware lens should be used in order to offer a new interpretation of this fragmentation of the identity and of Ginzburg’s silences. Indeed, these devices are what Maria Crispino noticed as recurrent in many women’s writings which are «dismantled», and in which they place themselves «voluntarily at the edges, looking for a writing that is relevant for the individual experience and the search for an identity and meaning» (Fortini, 2016: 133). Ginzburg does it, extraordinarily, not only in fiction but also in her autobiography, hiding her ‘self’ in order to paradoxically find it within the multiplicity of subjectivities she describes when there is the impossibility to recreate a unitary self.

⁷⁹ «I was a small girl then and I had only the vaguest memory of Palermo, the city where I was born and then left when I was three years old. I believed, however, that just like my mother and sister, I too missed Palermo terribly. I missed the beach at Mondello where we would go swimming, and I missed Signora Messina, a friend of my mother’s, and a little girl called Olga, a friend of my sister’s, whom I called “Live Olga” in order to distinguish her from my doll called Olga» (McPhee, 2017: 26).

⁸⁰ «I got married. And right after I got married my father would say about me when talking to strangers, “My daughter Ginzburg.” My father was always ready to point out changes in any situation» (McPhee, 2017: 96).

Nevertheless, some of her interviews and essays help us in stating that, even if almost imperceptible, there is arguably a form of empathic identification in her novels and short stories. Indeed she states, as mentioned above, that «[...] sempre, quando usa la prima persona, m'accorsi che io stessa, non chiamata, non richiesta, m'infilavo nel mio scrivere»⁸¹ (*Nota*, in *Lf*, 1127). Furthermore, Ginzburg admits that her motherhood allowed her to create a new kind of relationship with her characters (*Lpv*, 852). This makes the definition of characters as «author's daughter» (Gardiner, 1981) precise, even if Ginzburg avoids the gender discourse when admitting it.

2.2.1. 'Defensive narrative strategy' and 'representation of memory'

The division that Gardiner theorises for empathic identification in women's writing is useful to include Ginzburg in this kind of discourse. Indeed, Gardiner argues that there are two types of narrative identification – by a «defensive narrative strategy» and by the «representation of memory» (1981: 358). As for the former we can read in Gardener's article:

These characters seem to reflect an oppressed, early stage of female self-awareness. They are poor, improvident, economically dependent, and sexually humiliated. [...] Yet these sad women are not "failures of imagination"; they are complex triumphs in the management of readers' feelings. Although we readers do not want to be like these women, we are forced to recognize that we are or could be like them in similar circumstances. We become angry, then, both at the women and at their oppression. [...] The author who creates these characters never voices her own anger, yet we become enraged at the patriarchy and sympathetic to its victims of both sexes, reassured because we know that the author is herself a survivor, in control of her prose and of her heroes' destinies as none of them are. (1981: 358)

Even if Ginzburg does not show to identify herself with her characters, through the creation of subjectivities similar to those described by Gardiner, she manages to make readers identify with these oppressed women even when they are silenced, rather than with their voiced oppressors. And this is evident for all the female protagonists of short novels such as *La madre*, in which the point of view adopted is never that of the protagonist, who is perceived anyway as the victim of the patriarchal system represented by the characters voiced in the short novel.

As for the second model of identification employed by women in their writings, Gardiner states that:

⁸¹ «[...] always, when using the first person, I realised that I myself, unasked, unsolicited, slipped into my writing» (my translation).

Many women writers feel that women remember what men choose to forget. If memory operates in the service of identity maintenance differently in the two sexes, it will appear differently in literature by women – both in the representation of characters’ mental processes and in the representation of the narrative process itself. She controls her dreams so that instead of “making up stories about life” she goes “back and look[s] at scenes from my life” (1981: 359)

This is traceable mostly in Banti and Morante. They create a system of telling in which the story proceeds through memories and dreams, in addition to a structure of different levels of narration, made of a female genealogy usually, which permits the transmission of the stories among different women before making them available to readers.

In Banti’s *Itinerario di Paolina*, memory is the main device through which tell a story is made possible. But also in *Artemisia*, the passage in which Banti is presented both as a character and as the narrator of Artemisia’s story is introduced by the verbs «mi rammento, mi rammento benissimo come andarono le cose»⁸² (*Art*, 249). It is significant that Banti and Artemisia overlap – as previously explained – precisely in the act of remembering. Banti is telling Artemisia’s story, who, by remembering, is essential to Banti’s act of writing, in turn. Artemisia shows as much agency as Banti in helping to produce her own story through memories. As a memory, dreams are fundamental for the protagonist in the attempt to express herself in *Un grido lacerante*. Through streams of consciousness, Agnese often tells her dreams, misleading the reader into believing that what they are reading are real events. Thus, dreaming has the same role as memory – that of telling a plausible story and the real feelings it involves.

Memory is a cornerstone also within the system of different levels of narration in Morante’s novels. In *La Storia*, in addition to the author who does not show herself, the narrator seems extradiegetic and omniscient, and it is revealed only at the end of the novel. During the novel, it is possible to assume that the narrator is a woman (*Ls*, 379: «io stessa»),⁸³ and at the very end, it is made explicit that she decided to tell the story of Ida, whom herself told her memories to the narrator. Hence there are three women writing and telling one story. It is meaningful that Ida is not writing her own story – she decided to use orality, to tell it directly to a woman who will write it up, because her own story, as her own identity, is in her voice. *Menzogna e sortilegio* is a complex novel, in which different levels of authorship are traceable. The novel is a first-person narrative, and the protagonist is Elisa

⁸² «I recall, I recall very clearly just what happened» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 27).

⁸³ The English translation does not allow the same reflection, due to the absence of gender in its grammar.

who decides to tell her own story. In order to do it, she starts telling the stories of her parents and grandparents through a journey into memories. Finucci highlights how in this novel «memories are important [...] not in themselves but because they are verbalized» (1988: 310). Indeed, one cannot ignore the fact that the act of writing recurs in these novels.

2.2.2. The act of writing

I argue that the act of writing is another element, not considered by Gardiner, towards which attention should be drawn as for empathic identification. As already seen, Elisa is the fictional author and the narrator in *Menzogna e sortilegio*. However, part of the narration is also constituted by Anna's – Elisa's mother – auto-narration through the letters she wrote to herself, pretending they are from her beloved Edoardo. Anna, as well, tries to create her version of reality, thus her own identity, even if through a lying form of writing. The ways in which the female protagonists reshape their destiny or their past in order to define their subjectivities are both ascribable to a sort of exercise of 'autofiction'. Finucci explains that «all the characters in *Menzogna e sortilegio* are engaged in one way or another in reading personal events novelistically or in understanding fiction referentially» (1988: 308). The issue of gender becomes central in the act of writing in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, indeed Anna is able to imitate Edoardo's style making in the process what has been defined as 'phallic identification' – Anna has no problem in writing in the masculine (Finucci, 1988: 321). Similarly, Concetta tries to define herself through her son Edoardo. Elisa is the only one not using the narrative lens of Edoardo. She, rather, searches for her identity within a female genealogy. Thus, all women are linked by a *fil rouge* defined by de Rogatis as «gemellarità reciproca» (2019a) which they more (Elisa) or less (Anna and Concetta) consciously create. The need to create a subjectivity is shared by all of them. The ones created by the older women are still permeated by men (by the man, Edoardo), while Elisa's notion of selfhood builds on the rewriting of female figures. Even when she tries to create her version of the character Edoardo, she does it by transfiguring him into a female semblance (*Mes*, 752: «vesti femminee», «volto di bambina»)⁸⁴ (de Rogatis, 2019a: 18). However, it is in *Diario 1938* that the act of writing becomes the process par excellence through which one can express the self. As for this work, Ursula Fanning has highlighted how, despite Morante herself being a «subject of writing», «she rarely conjures herself up in the act of writing» (2017: 155). This is one of the few cases in which scholarship links a narrative aspect of one of these authors with the phenomenon that I describe here as anti-feminism. Indeed, Fanning claims that:

⁸⁴ «Women's clothes, girl's face» (my translation).

Morante's reluctance to directly represent the self as a writer may be attributed to a number of factors. It seems reasonable to posit that its roots lay in the relationship of Italian women writers to the canon. JoAnn Cannon discusses precisely this issue and Morante's response to it; Morante is, she notes, "most vitriolic" at the thought of being labelled a "scrittrice." She prefers, understandably, to be thought of as a writer, rather than as a woman writer, given the marginalization of women's writing within the Italian canon. (2017: 156)

The need to write her own story is present also in one of the short novels by Ginzburg. In *È stato così* the protagonist's independence, after her husband's murder, starts also from the possibility for her to express herself through writing. It is significant that she asks herself whom is she writing for, for other women or for herself: «[...] e mi son messa scrivere sul libretto della spesa. Tutt'a un tratto mi sono chiesta per chi scrivevo. Non per Giovanna e non per Francesca e neppure per mia madre. Per chi? Ma era troppo difficile deciderlo e sentivo che il tempo delle risposte limpide e consuete s'era fermato per sempre dentro di me»⁸⁵ (167).

Similarly, Banti's Agnese in *Un grido lacerante* recognises herself as a writer after wondering whom she is writing for (Fanning, 2017: 162). These passages are another example of empathic identification. The authors themselves are asked for whom they are writing, and whether they do so also in order to inspire other women. In *Il mio mestiere*, Ginzburg perfectly explains how writing represents a way of expressing herself as an individual and her subjectivity. She says that when she writes articles or essays, she must search outside of herself; rather, when she writes stories, on the other hand, she must search for them inside of herself (*Lpv*, 839-840). And this is also what this character does, and the only way to make this activity fruitful and not useless is to write about it, and not keep it private. Not writing would mean being in exile. Only writing and, thus, expressing her own identity would provide freedom. Moreover, Ginzburg explains that, after attempts to write for men about men, she realised that she must write about things she can find inside herself, in her experience (*Lpv*, 848). This makes it even more important to search for authorial subjectivity in her novels, in addition to her characters.

In Banti's *Itinerario di Paolina*, the protagonist is often called «narratrice» (narrator). She starts to make up stories and to tell them, at first, to children. Paolina, through an indirect free discourse, thinks about how she could not be a mother, by listing a series of actions which could be referred also to as the act of telling a story – «Gran disgrazia veder le cose tanto piatte. E poi chi ce la fa a ritmare la

⁸⁵ «I took pen and ink and began to write in the notebook where I kept an account of household expenses. All of a sudden, I asked myself for whose benefit I was writing. Not for Giovanna or Francesca, not even for my mother. For whom, then? It was too difficult to decide, and I felt that the time of conventional and clear-cut answers had come for ever to a stop within me» (Frenaye, 2021: 88).

voce, a cullare le frasi, con questa fretta in gola che succhia i periodi migliori, asciuga la morbidezza dei passaggi, ingorga il respiro e la saliva?»⁸⁶ (*IdP*, 107). Paolina, metaphorically, thinks that the way of telling stories expected from a mother is not the way in which she wants to narrate. Her anxiety about creating and telling stories, her craving, and her urge, are not maternal. She is an unmaternal *narratrice*, creating and telling stories for an individual quest for identity, rather than for others. Paolina, however, is not the only *narratrice*. Banti's characters all cover the role of *narratrici* in their stories, even if in different ways. Firstly, they are often artists and writers (Artemisia, Lavinia, Agnese), thus producing works that can define and describe their subjectivities. Particularly, Agnese is a writer (Banti's heteronym, precisely). Agnese argues that the real life is not her life as author, but rather the work of art itself (*UGL*, 1662: «[...] poi aveva capito che la vera vita era quella dell'opera d'arte»)⁸⁷ Banti conceptualises agency in the act of writing and explains why it is possible to see her mirrored in her characters. From the very beginning of the novel, the concept of «respiro» (breath) is presented to the reader. Agnese defines *respiro* as both the act of giving life and being born and the act of dying. The two events are only apparently opposite – being born means coming out from a body but dying is nothing more than coming out from their bodies. The *respiro* is present throughout the novel, and at a certain point 'breathing' becomes not only living (and dying) but also writing (*UGL*, 1641: «D'un colpo si accorse che la sua fame di attività laboriosa stava per abbandonarla; e ne ebbe paura, era come perdere la facoltà di respirare»)⁸⁸ Agnese becomes aware that being alive and self-determined, «respirare», implies the act of writing. Furthermore, *respirare* also involves the act of speaking – you cannot speak without breathing. And for Agnese, breathing, thus writing, is the only way she has to be voiced, to speak, and to express herself. Her first estrangement from this kind of agency is taking a distance from art and her activity as an art historian. This is compared to death: «Il difficile era appena incominciato: il Louvre, l'Orangerie, le tante gallerie. Li visitava sola, quasi di nascosto, essi non dovevano esistere per lei, dato che Agnese Lanzi era morta senza vederli»⁸⁹ (*UGL*, 1553). Her return to life will be marked only by starting to write. This awareness brings to her mind the name of Artemisia – she shares with her the same need to work, and the same womanhood lived as an obstacle to her ambitions (*UGL*, 1554). Agnese manages to legitimate her need to write

⁸⁶ «A great misfortune to see things so flat. And then who can manage to give rhythm to the voice and cradle the sentences, with this haste in the throat that sucks out the best periods, dries out the softness of the passages, and engorges breath and saliva?» (my translation).

⁸⁷ «[...] then he understood that the real life was that of the work of art» (my translation).

⁸⁸ « 1. Suddenly she realised that her hunger for laborious activity was about to leave her. 42. She was afraid of it. It was like losing the ability to breathe» (my translation).

⁸⁹ «The difficult part had just begun—the Louvre, the Orangerie, the many galleries. She visited them alone, almost secretly. They could not exist for her, as Agnese Lanzi had died without seeing them» (my translation).

«storie di donne indignate e superbe»⁹⁰ (*UGL*, 1555), women like her. Her attempts to be part of the «mondo degli uomini» (men's world) have failed officially, and Agnese accepts it only when she discovers why and how she should stay in her world made of rebel women fighting like her to express themselves out of stereotypes (*UGL*, 1554 «Agnese presentì, come da bambina, di essere estranea al mondo degli uomini; senza rimedio»),⁹¹ as in *Itinerario di Paolina*. Finally, the protagonist of *La signorina* (which I consider a draft of *Un grido lacerante*, and whose protagonist is a 'potential' Agnese) finds relief from her struggling in search for an identity in the act of writing – «[...] tracciare parole non chiamate, non necessarie ma urgenti e quasi supplici, voci remote di immagini sul punto di dissolversi. [...] il pericoloso colloquio tra la carta e la penna che prometteva una seconda vita e per gli anni tardi – se pure verrebbero – l'unica vera pace»⁹² (*UGL*, 1522).

Ursula Fanning offers an important analysis of how in some women writers from twentieth-century Italy the act of writing is presented as a woman. Particularly she identifies different recurrent definitions of writing in these terms: writing as a salvificatory (Sibilla Aleramo and Grazia Deledda), writing as a problematic enterprise (Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, Francesca Sanvitale, and Rosetta Loy), writing as a given (Fausta Cialente and Clara Sereni), the seriousness of writing (Gianna Manzini, Lalla Romano, Edith Bruck, Francesca Durante and Fabrizia Ramondino), writing as maternal (Aleramo, Ginzburg, Ravera, and Maraini) (2017). While she does not analyse Morante – stating only how difficult is for this author to express herself as a writer in *Diario 1938* – she takes into consideration Anna Banti and Natalia Ginzburg. The categories in which Fanning recognises Banti's and Ginzburg's conceptualisation of the act of writing are significant also for my argument – indeed, a link is traceable between the difficulty of the authors in considering themselves writers and the twisted and problematic ways in which the act of writing is faced by their characters. However, the maternal sphere identified by Fanning does confirm their contribution to the feminist cause when it aims to represent women and not let them be underrepresented or stereotypically represented by men. Indeed, Fanning concludes that all these authors register the centrality of writing in the definition of their selves, and their meta-writing is an act of resistance.

The identification traceable in the use of certain techniques studied by feminist scholars conflicts with the intentions of not being authors of *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976). It is important again to

⁹⁰ «Stories of outraged, proud women» (my translation).

⁹¹ «Agnese felt, just like when she was a child, that she was a stranger to the world of men, without remedy» (my translation).

⁹² «[...] tracing words not called, not necessary but urgent and almost pleading, remote voices of images on the verge of dissolving. [...] The dangerous conversation between pen and paper that promised a second life and for the later years—if they would come at all—the only true peace» (my translation).

highlight how they anticipated some of these literary devices, only later theorised. They manage to offer not only non-stereotypical portraits of women but also to reflect on struggles that the authors themselves probably shared. Thus, the attempts to hide their subjectivities under the process of characterisation of their protagonist may respond, I argue, to the need not to adopt genres that were traditionally and pejoratively attributed to women writers, such as memoir or autobiography – for example, Anna Banti shows to have introjected this belief by writing in *Vocazioni indistinte* – «Si sa come la gente abbia a noia un tal costume, che [...] trova spesso uno sfogo in certi libretti di larvata autobiografia [...]. Le donne, mature ed oziose, eccellono nel prepararli»⁹³ (236). The same fear is highlighted by Fanning in Ginzburg (2017: 160). After all, scholars and critics contributed to the spreading of this prejudice. Linda Anderson outlined how «male critics had too easily conflated the description of a genre with a narrative of the masculine subject», but they traditionally dismissed the same genre if the subject was feminine. Thus, the feminist ‘need’ to seek «validation for women’s experience in a not dissimilar way, by using autobiographical texts as reference for life» (2001: 86). As always, the desire to camouflage themselves in a system that discriminates against them actually ends up offering literary works that have their artistic value but beyond that also political and social intent. This is made possible through an empathic identification in the creation of subjectivities, allowing these authors to accept their womanhood as writers, the same they claim to deny.

2.3. Redefining time and space

Despite the need and the desire to adhere to a masculine subjectivity, Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante testify more or less conscious attempts to find a new language that gives space to a feminine subjectivity to express. I argue that through the hybridisation of genres, the use of the feminine body as a leitmotiv, and the attempt to escape from the traditional conceptualisation of time and space, the three authors struggle with their fear to express female subjectivity.

As already seen, Irigaray suggested that women should build their language, no longer merely masculine, on sexual difference. By doing so, the form of this new language would be hybrid, altered, and not homogenous or coherent. Due to their social and historical subjugation and silence, the self in women’s writing has been defined as «in crisis», «fragmented» (Loftus, 1996: 156), «fluid», and «flexible» (Gardiner, 1981: 355), due to «disparity [...] determined by historical discontinuity» (Schwartz, 2007: 1) – «Their gradual fragmentation is a result of patriarchal constrictions imposed on female creativity, sexuality, and desire, and/or of male sexual violence. In these texts the crisis of

⁹³ «It is known how people are bored with such a custom, which [...] often finds vent in certain little books of vague autobiography [...]. Mature and idle women excel in preparing them» (my translation).

the female self is thus defined in more specific, gendered terms than the crisis of the male self in the canonical texts» (Schwartz, 2007: 2). But, also, as a response to the rational and linear self traditionally conveyed as universal by theories such as Kantian ethical subject and *homo economicus* (Willett, Anderson, and Meyers, 2020). This becomes evident when women attempt to textualise the self – women create «non-linear autobiographies, autobiographical novels or “novelistic-like” autobiographies» (Gardiner, 1981: 355) and a sense of ‘doubleness’, not conforming to «the generic prescriptions of the male canon» (Loftus, 1996: 155). Similarly, Linda Anderson states that «women’s difference is produced in terms of an absence or gap within language, which can also be used as a subversive space», since the dominant phallogentric language subsumes the feminine into a masculine «universal» (2001: 87). Anderson also encourages women not to adhere to a homogeneous (and masculine) self when textualising the self, rather she suggests embracing the plurality of it: «This need not mean returning to the same (masculine) subjectivity which saw itself as unitary and complete, simply expanding it to include women within its definition, but rather imagining multiple subjectivities, which are without foundation but located, instead, in particular times and places» (Anderson, 2001: 90). Fortini (Bono and Fortini: 2007), aiming to analyse the genre of the bildungsroman as for women, explains that it is part of the «costruzione del sé» (construction of the self) which in women writers shapes differently accordingly to the genres – «autobiography, historical novel, sci-fi, generational novel» (2007: 9). Finally, Farnetti recognises that the bildungsroman in women is at the same time «romanzo di deformazione, conformazione, trasformazione e performance»,⁹⁴ involving elements of hybridity and changeability in the form (2002: 82). These statements are quite useful as for Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante, since their transgression of language is not traceable in the syntax or in the lexicon; rather it predominantly appears in the choice of the genre they choose to write.

2.3.1. Gendered Genres

It is often difficult to identify the genre in which these authors’ novels can fit – one can usually argue the coexistence of different forms and genres within them. Morante, for example, often inserts poems within her novels (such as in *Menzogna e sortilegio*), or essayistic passages (such as in *La Storia* in order to contrast hegemonic History with the private stories of her characters). Ginzburg writes an autobiography advising the reader to approach her work as a fictional novel – indeed, Nocentini states that «it is also limiting [to place] Ginzburg’s contribution well within the boundaries of an autobiographical, self-reflective, introspective genre [...]» (2013: 155). Banti chooses autofiction

⁹⁴ «Novel of deformation, conformation, transformation and “performance”» (my translation).

rather than autobiography – Pierini (2013: 78) and Scarparo (2002a: 365) highlighted how *Artemisia* is the perfect example of the way in which she goes beyond the ‘borders’ of the narrative, the autobiography, the biography, and the historical novel; Benedetti observes how in *Artemisia* «autobiography and biography, historical research and personal quest merge in the narration» (1999: 52).

The transgression built on gender difference is stronger in Banti’s historical novels (*Artemisia*, *La camicia bruciata*). Indeed, Banti hybridises this genre by making her historical protagonist dialogue with the author in present times (*Artemisia*) and she explicitly adopts the historical novel to rewrite female subjectivities traditionally underestimated or ignored. Only by doing this, she gives sense also to her activity of writing. I argue that by rewriting women from the past Banti uses what Irigaray defined as *parler femme* (1974), here represented by the hybridisation of genres, to construct women’s subjectivities not ignoring the gender difference. This non-traditional form, this transgression seems the only solution to the process of ‘writing out’ women of history, but it also mirrors what has been defined as a «schizoid position of being simultaneously in history and not in history» (Pinggong, 2018: 250), which is ascribable also to Morante’s *La Storia*, as seen above.

2.3.2. Female bodies

Another way to build a new literary ‘language’ on gender difference is to ‘rewrite’ female bodies. As already seen, the female body is often conceptualised as an obstacle, rather than something building a strong and new female subjectivity.

Ida, like all the other Morante’s characters, perceives her female body as the place which seals her disadvantage. Throughout the years it becomes more and more decadent, and it represents a weight for her to carry (*Ls*, 351). While society defines herself because of her body, and her identity through her body, she does not manage to locate her ‘self’ within it. Nunzia, in Morante’s *L’isola di Arturo*, recognises that her own body is the main obstacle in the definition of her own identity as free and independent. Her wish would be that of evading and this possibility is seen only in the process of ‘masculinisation’ of their bodies and subjectivities (*IdA* 1156). This masculinisation is attempted also by other Morantian characters. They try to transform their bodies symbolically and deeply, thus, transmuting the main obstacle – in *La nonna*, the protagonist «si fasciava il petto e i fianchi»,⁹⁵ for example (*Sa*, 1410). Morelli interestingly examined how this fluidity of gender, which comes through bodies in Morante’s narrative, is traceable also in male characters such as Manuel in *Aracoeli*. Morelli (2014) reads the episodes in which Manuel does not recognise the body he sees reflected as his own,

⁹⁵ «She wrapped her chest and hips» (my translation).

or in which he expressed his childish desire to be the ‘munecca’ that Aracoeli wanted as a daughter, in parallel with the episodes in which Elisa, in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, eagers to be her mother’s son (223). Morelli applies Butler’s theories about gender in order to argue that Morante is challenging patriarchal prescriptions about it and denouncing the violence of a masculine system that victimises Manuel, or women in general (2014: 224).

Banti’s Artemisia feels that her own body represents the main obstacle for her identity to be affirmed and for her to be free: «Non ha casa il suo corpo giovane e perseguitato, non ha casa il suo spirito che troppe volte non trova né condizione né tempo che lo esprima, e non può accettarsi né farsi accettare senza violenza e un infelice turgore per cui non era nato»⁹⁶ (*Art*, 320).

In Ginzburg’s *È stato così*, the protagonist starts to feel imprisoned in a forced identity that she did not choose. Her first way to create her subjectivity is that of becoming a new woman, abandoning what she was before. This process comes metaphorically through her own body – she needs to take everything she used to wear off and start all over again: «Mi sono spogliata e ho guardato allo specchio il mio corpo nudo che adesso non apparteneva più a nessun uomo. Potevo fare quello che volevo di me. [...] Potevo diventare un’altra donna se facevo uno sforzo»⁹⁷ (*Esc*, 133). From her body, she starts also to interrogate her identity. The expression ‘guardarsi dentro’ becomes a *leitmotiv*:

Ma sono stufa di pensare sempre a quello che a lui gli fa male. Sono stufa di non fargli del male. Sono stufa di stare sempre al buio da sola e guardare sempre dentro di me.⁹⁸ (*Esc*, 135)

Ma a me pareva adesso di vedere che io non ero mai stata capace di vivere e adesso certo era troppo tardi per imparare, pensavo che nella mia vita non avevo mai fatto altro che guardare fisso nel pozzo buio che avevo dentro di me.⁹⁹ (*Esc*, 157)

It is important to contextualise this quote in light of an article that Ginzburg wrote in 1948 for the magazine *Mercurio*. Here Ginzburg used the same metaphor of a «pozzo» (a well), in which all women – young and old, poor and rich – regularly fall, facing a phase of melancholy and distrust in

⁹⁶ «Her young, persecuted body has no home of its own, no home for her spirit, which all too often cannot find a temporal or physical setting in which to express itself, in which cannot accept itself nor be accepted unless with violence and an unhappy pomposity for which it was not made» D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 114).

⁹⁷ «I got undressed and looked in the mirror at my naked body, which now belonged to no man. I was free to do what I wanted [...] If I made enough of an effort, I could turn into quite a different woman» (Frenaye, 2021: 55-56).

⁹⁸ «But I’m sick of thinking of things that it hurts him to have me think about. And I’m sick of not hurting him, too. I’m sick of being alone and in the dark, analysing my own thoughts» (Frenaye, 2021: 58).

⁹⁹ «But it seemed to me that I had never been able to live and now it was certainly too late to learn. I thought that in my life I had never done anything but stare into the dark well within me» (my translation).

their abilities and talent. Men are excluded from this well firstly because they are able to identify themselves with their job – while women cannot, also due to maternity which prevents them from keeping doing it – and secondly, but most importantly, because men are not able to look inside themselves, because they do not need to do it, given the fact that their subjectivity is never questioned or denied. Alba de Céspedes understood the (‘feminist’) potential of Ginzburg’s reflections by answering with another article (1948), in the same volume of the magazine, in which she confirms and appreciates her colleague’s intuition, and she adds that the ‘well’ itself must be used by women as the basis on which building their fight to emancipate themselves. Finally, she states that, since all women know and fall within the well, they must gather in this fight, which is only apparently personal. Ginzburg’s characters, by keeping looking at their inside, recognise the existence of this well, but, as their author and unlike de Céspedes, they do not conclude that this is the metaphor of the sexual difference that they should exploit in their search for an identity, neither they conceptualise the idea of gathering with other women in doing it. However, they perceive that this activity of *guardarsi dentro* is not enough anymore. The protagonist from the previous passage must bring this private search from the inside to the outside. Looking inside herself must extend to looking at herself also from the outside, thus also to her body, which had been the property of someone else before her epiphany.

2.3.3. Space and time

The reasons behind the skepticism against their bodies are also due to the traditional dichotomy according to which the concepts of space and time are attributed to women and men respectively. Women are space, but an empty space, a void which can be filled by men or by pregnancy. Feminist thinkers started to claim that women are fluid, whilst men try to contain them within a closed space (e.g., domestic environment): «[...] their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties are our exile. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gag upon our lips» (Irigaray, 1985: 212). I argue that the authors manage to reflect on the concepts of space and time in a non-stereotypical way, making the female protagonists reflect on the concept of time and try to escape from the space in which they are trapped, in order to find new places for them to be free individuals. This recalls Caverero’s notion of woman as ‘atopia’ (1996) – because «she belongs to no place» (Torrighia, 1996: 370). Narratively, Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante, rethink time and space to define female subjectivities. Their characters show to be fluid in their escapes through time and space. The result of this process of searching for their own identities coincides always with the achievement of freedom. The escape can be metaphorical or physical.

As for the former, the passage from Banti's *Itinerario di Paolina*, examined in the previous paragraph, is useful also in this context – «[...] state pur sicuri che Paola non si riferisce all'immagine del ritratto, ma al seme di un impreciso personaggio che ha in animo più di diventare che d'esser stata» (*IdP*, 9). The stress put on the expression «più di diventare che d'esser stata»¹⁰⁰ is interesting if one thinks of theories about 'female bildungsroman', which could be adopted for this novel and for the whole structure of Banti's *opera omnia*. Laura Fortini (2016), analysing Goliarda Sapienza's works, talks about the «novel of emergence», or «novel of becoming», rather than the traditional genre called Bildungsroman (137). She argues that when women write about themselves or about a character from their childhood onward, they do it «in enclosed spaces» 'in an *intus* «which makes their struggle «amongst the normal and the rebellion» an inner journey, rather than just a journey» (2016: 137). She adds that this kind of writing and this kind of journey always involve processes of self-reflection (2016: 138). I argue that this new categorisation of female biographical writings can be extended also to Anna Banti, and to *Itinerario di Paolina*, in particular. The form of escape that Paolina, and other Bantian characters, choose is similar to the inner journey that Fortini highlights in Goliarda Sapienza. Paolina's inner journey, as that of every other Bantian character, oscillates between what they should be and accomplish, and what they want to be and conquer, from the woman they are socially expected to become to the free human being they are eager to become. The whole process of growth of Paolina is characterised by the repetitive question «e io, chi sono?» (who am I?). In order to answer this question, the journey which overlooks categories of time and space starts for Paolina and other characters. This dynamicity of female subjectivity reminds also what Kristeva theorised about a self in the process, which is not static and already structured but moving forward in the search for themselves. So much that it is often recalled the idea that the subject is born and dies repeatedly, not only in Banti, as it will be seen more in detail in the next chapter about motherhood, but also in Morante: «[...] e quella ragazzina fui io, o forse mia madre, o forse la madre di mia madre; io sono morta e rinata, e ad ogni nascita si inizia un nuovo processo incerto»¹⁰¹ (*Il ladro dei lumi*, in *Sa*, 1414).

2.3.4. The Space of Writing

Another form of metaphorical escape, through which the protagonists rethink the categories of space and time, is the act of writing, already analysed above. The protagonist of *La signorina* by Banti,

¹⁰⁰ «[...] rest assured that Paola does not refer to the image of the portrait, but to the seed of an imprecise character who has more in mind to become than to have been» (my translation).

¹⁰¹ «[...] and that little girl was me, or perhaps my mother, or perhaps my mother's mother. I died and was reborn, and with every birth a new, uncertain process begins» (my translation).

similarly to the other characters, understands that only by escaping from the space and time of her reality towards the non-space of writing she can also find herself: «[...] tracciare parole non chiamate, non necessarie ma urgenti e quasi supplici, voci remote di immagini sul punto di dissolversi. [...] il pericoloso colloquio tra la carta e la penna che prometteva una seconda vita e per gli anni tardi – se pure verrebbero – l'unica vera pace»¹⁰² (*Ls*, 1522).

The use of a language that semantically recalls indefiniteness and dissolution («remote immagini sul punto di dissolversi») confers the status of non-place, non-space, to the act of writing.

As for Ginzburg, the only female character who tries an escape from her condition of voicelessness is the protagonist of *È stato così*. However, her escape is radical, demonstrating the impossibility for these women to find a way of emancipation. Indeed, she ends up finding her freedom only by killing her husband. The killing coincides also with her starting to write her own story and thoughts.

In *Menzogna and sortilegio*, writing ensures women the possibility to escape the reality in which they are defined by others, and mostly by their mothers. Elisa hopes to find «una tutt'altra me Stessa» (another myself), showing a desire not only to find herself but a new version of herself. Thus, believing in the possibility for the identity to be 'in process'.

These forms of evading are 'spaceless', given the fact that they let women escape from the domesticity in which they are or are destined to live in. In Banti's *La libertà di Giacinta*, for example, women manage to taste some freedom only by emancipating themselves from the domestic environment: «Intente e quiete le damigelle imparavano finalmente il senso del loro mondo e il mezzo di non vergognarsene, liberandosi dal vizio di chiudersi fra quattro mura, in cui nessuno potesse inquisire»¹⁰³ (*LIG*, 506). Moreover, they are timeless, not only in Banti's case in which historical figures travel through time to inspire and to dialogue with their author and through her with every other woman from the twentieth century but also because many of them, while reflecting on themselves, do not consider themselves as part of a traditional conceptualisation of time. For example, Concetta, in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, states that she feels as though «[si aggirasse] disorientata nelle dimensioni del tempo, sì che presente, passato e futuro era tutt'una cosa per lei»¹⁰⁴ (*Mes*, 754). But also in *Un grido lacerante*, similar reflections are traceable – through Agnese's voice, Banti reflects on the fact that the subject is in process, that her individuality flows through time:

¹⁰² «[...] tracing words not called, not necessary but urgent and almost pleading, remote voices of images on the verge of dissolving. [...] The dangerous conversation between pen and paper that promised a second life and for the later years—if they would come at all—the only true peace» (my translation).

¹⁰³ «Intent and quiet the damsels finally learnt the meaning of their world and the means of not being ashamed of it, freeing themselves from the vice of enclosing themselves within four walls, where no one could intrude» (my translation).

¹⁰⁴ «[she wandered] disoriented in the dimensions of time, so that present, past and future were all one for her» (my translation).

Per lei il presente era scontatissimo, un presente previsto, una specie di futuro indovinato, digerito, senza sorprese; mentre il vero passato rimaneva inerte, nella sua cassaforte, da cui poteva toglierlo a volontà, pezzo per pezzo, a capriccio, e senza soverchie compiacenze. In altre parole, lei non credeva nel tempo, elemento disturbante, nocivo all'essenza della vita umana, la quale era tutto un **divenire**¹⁰⁵. (*UGL*, 1651, emphasis mine)

Nevertheless, there are often 'physical' forms of escaping that the protagonists choose when their environment is perceived as preventing them from being free to express themselves.

In Ginzburg, the spaces are more evidently gendered – the author connotes domestic spaces as feminine and open spaces as masculine, with polemic intentions. In *La strada che va in città*, in addition to this division, there is the juxtaposition of the countryside as female spaces, and cities as spaces of opportunities, thus masculine. Nocentini (2013) analyses how the protagonist of this short novel dreams of going back to the city, after being isolated in the countryside because of her unwanted pregnancy. Nevertheless, she is prevented from doing it. Furthermore, reflecting on the protagonist of *È stato così*, she adds – «Solitary walks are a rare occurrence in the novel because Anna is characterized as both gregarious and lazy, but they are always a source of self-reflection, as if her thoughts are set in motion by the very act of walking on her own [...] » (2013: 159). The static position of the woman within social space can be subverted by a more dynamic approach towards it. Here, investigating identity is made possible by investigating the space and not undergoing passively the surrounding space. Ginzburg is not the only one theorising a form of escaping from restrictive spaces for her female characters.

In Banti, Marguerite from *La camicia bruciata* disappears, also leaving her children, towards somewhere not specified, in a non-place. Time and space are too strict for a woman searching for her 'self' and following her ambitions rather than passively accepting what family and society want from her. Artemisia wanders in different cities and countries to find a place in which she could express her art, thus her 'self'. However, she never manages to find the place and time which she could fit into, also because it is in her own body that the main obstacle for her identity to be affirmed and for her to be free lays – «Non ha casa il suo corpo giovane e perseguitato, non ha casa il suo spirito che troppe

¹⁰⁵ «To her, the present was a foregone conclusion, a foreseen present, a kind of predicted future, digested, without surprises. On the contrary, the real past remained inert, in her safe, from which she could remove it if she so wished, piece by piece, on a whim, and without excessive complacency. In other words, she did not believe in time, a disturbing element, harmful to the essence of human life, which was all about becoming» (my translation).

volte non trova né condizione né tempo che lo esprima, e non può accettarsi né farsi accettare senza violenza e un infelice turgore per cui non era nato»¹⁰⁶ (*Art*, 320).

She moves and searches for a place that could host her, but both the domestic environment and big cities are hostile towards an ambitious woman artist. In *Lavinia fuggita*, the protagonist pursues her own identity by disappearing and escaping in «una pianura senza limiti, dove [...] non è più che una voce sotto il cielo, e nessuno può dirle: no»¹⁰⁷ (*Lav*, 496).

In Morante Aracoeli, similarly to Banti's protagonists, escapes leaving Manuel and her family in order to handle her grief, her sense of imprisonment or even her madness. In *L'isola di Arturo*, Nunzia dreams about leaving, admitting the impossibility of it because she is a woman. In Morante, it is interesting to link this theme of escaping with that, more developed and evident, of illness. Ida, in *La Storia*, has a physical illness, a kind of epilepsy, which she transmits to Useppe, and she thinks and speaks about her Jewishness as an illness, similarly and dangerously transmitted to her sons. Thus the illness is intrinsic to her own identity. Ferreri (1976) argues that both in Useppe and Ida the physical illness mirrors a spiritual illness (85). Moreover, Ida develops a proper mental disease when, after Nino's death, also her second son dies as if the illness itself is the only therapy to her sorrow – which is personal but also 'historical'¹⁰⁸ – and it is narratively elaborated as an escape from her condition. Similarly to Ida, Aracoeli finds an escape in what is identified by her narrator-son as an illness. Giorgio highlights that Manuel himself has to escape his reality through visions, imagination, and the use of drugs (1994: 98) and outlines a Freudian desire to escape the family in *Aracoeli* (113-114), as if she transmits, again, an uncommon disease to her son culminating in 'sexual depravation'. However, her escape ends up in another arguably masculine and patriarchal environment, that of a brothel, and her illness becomes the manifestation of a lack of culture and of political castration (1994: 115-116), recognising in Morante the attempt to resist to patriarchy through psychosomatic diseases as forms of escape from the reality they are rejecting.

The authors make their protagonist move through space and time in search of their own identities. They keep believing that what they are looking for is a masculine identity, as above mentioned. In absence of a structured female subjectivity, they escape pursuing a masculine and symmetric one, considered the only one which would allow them to find who they are, to express their art and their

¹⁰⁶ «Her young, persecuted body has no home of its own, no home for her spirit, which all too often cannot find a temporal or physical setting in which to express itself, in which cannot accept itself nor be accepted unless with violence and an unhappy pomposity for which it was not made» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 114).

¹⁰⁷ «A plain without limits, where [...] she is no more than a voice under the sky, and no one can say "no"» (my translation).

¹⁰⁸ Christian Gabriele Moretti gives a symbolical interpretation of the illness «as standing for history as a negative force that hammers away at the innocent and weak» (2013: 430).

own identity. Similarly, this is what their authors try to do when stating to be *scrittori* – in absence of acknowledgement of the possibility to be women writers, or even risking being ghettoized because of this, they try to shape their subjectivities of writers according to a masculine model. In this sense – but keeping in mind the reasons behind these stances and the historical context – we can talk about anti-feminist consciences. Nevertheless, I argued that this did not prevent these authors from being responsible also for the creation of a fragmented or fluid female subjectivities which provides an early example of the foundation of a new language that can embrace the feminine, too. Although their struggle in wanting to be considered male authors, *scrittori*, their narrative presents a new and fluid interpretation of the categories of time and space.

Despite (or even due to) their representation of these characters' longing for a masculine identity, by making their silence loud and focusing on alternatives way of communicating and expressing their repressed thoughts (singing, writing, painting, reading...), by creating different levels of narration, building a genealogy of feminine 'authorial voices' dialoguing throughout time and space – rewritten in a more fluid way – Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante manage to challenge patriarchal power structures, whilst opposing the direct alignment with the feminist movement. Whilst of course not amounting to a feminist statement as such, the elements with which they undermine patriarchal discourse and spaces by often creating an alternative semiotic code provide a subtle but decisive critique of the rigid structure identified with the patriarchal society.

3. Motherhood

Motherhood is a *leitmotiv* in the narratives of Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante. These three authors reflect on motherhood through their characters even when it is not a key topic for the plot, or even when the protagonists are not mothers themselves.

Many scholars have focused on motherhood in Italian literature (Giorgio, 2002; Lucamante, 2006; Pickering-Iazzi, 1989; Torriglia, 1996), and deeper consideration has been given to authors such as Elsa Morante (Becchi Patrucco, 1993; Lazzari, 2006; Lucamante, 2014; Morelli, 2014; Wehling-Giorgi, 2014). Yet, less attention has been dedicated to this theme in Banti or Ginzburg's narratives – with important exceptions such as Giorgio's essay (1993) on *La madre* by Ginzburg or Torriglia's study of female genealogy in Banti's novels (1996). This chapter aims to address this gap by analysing the conceptualisation of motherhood in Banti's and Ginzburg's narratives, as well as Morante's, through the lens of gender and feminist theories. Firstly, it will retrace their (more or less unintentional) use of codified feminist theories across the theme of motherhood. In addition, by taking into consideration non-narrative materials by the three authors – e.g., interviews and essays – this chapter will consider the notion of motherhood in light of Banti's, Ginzburg's, and Morante's 'unorthodox feminism', or rather their anti-feminist attitude, and will reflect on the reasons behind these stances. In so doing, it will consider the juxtaposition of the feminist motives and theories traceable in these authors' narratives and their anti-feminist public positions, arguing that these three authors wrote works that are often in line with feminist ideals.

Throughout the years, feminist scholars and philosophers have taken distinct approaches to the theme of motherhood, often adopting opposing ones. On the one hand, motherhood has been seen as one of the most ancient tools of oppression constructed by the patriarchy, which generates the need to reject it (De Beauvoir, 2011); on the other hand, motherhood has been considered a potential *locus* of resistance against patriarchy itself and phallogentrism, as it is the highest emblem of femininity (Irigaray, 1985; Cixous, 1976; Kristeva, 1989)¹⁰⁹. However, both positions, including the latter, share the need to symbolically 'kill' the mother. This concept serves to build a new and free identity thus destroying the patriarchal system in which the mother had been trapped (Kristeva, 1989). According to Kristeva herself – who proposes a re-evaluation of motherhood within feminist studies – the act of killing the mother is necessary in order to conquer individuality and freedom – «matricide is our vital

¹⁰⁹ Gill Rye et al. (2018) argued that the history of motherhood studies is threefold, a «drama in three acts» (3) – «the first involves a repudiation of mothering (Beauvoir, Friedan, Firestone); the second, a more recuperative view (Dinnerstein, Rich, Chodorow. Kristeva, Ruddick, Irigaray, Cixous), and the third, a kind of impasse, characterised by uncertainty as to future solutions and directions (Hansen)».

necessity, the *sine qua non* of our individuation» (1989: 38). Both positions are present in Italian feminist movements, which underwent a gradual transition from a radical rejection of motherhood to its acceptance as a ground for resistance (Giorgio, 1993: 865). Only when 1970s feminist movements arose, «daughters discovered the importance of the mother in their lives but found no positive elements of identification in her» (Giorgio, 2002: 120), and only in the 1980s did «new feminist practices and theories [...] have attempted to turn the negative value traditionally granted mothers into positive difference» (Giorgio, 2002: 120). As Adalgisa Giorgio clearly stated in *Writing Mothers and Daughters* (2002), the point of view adopted, and, consequently, dominant also in literature – and in literary analysis – is that of daughters. Hirsch advocated for a new centrality of the voice of maternity within psychoanalysis, history, and social studies (1989). During the act of writing, women always look back to their mothers to establish whether it is more useful to ‘kill’ them and what they represent – «powerless individuals enmeshed in patriarchy» (Giorgio, 2002: 12) –, or to reconcile with them (Giorgio, 2002: 15). Contemporary thinkers tend to replace the traditional passive image of mothers with a more agent and ‘doing’ one (Rye, 2020: 4) – e.g., Lisa Baraitser (2009), Alison Stone (2011), Podnieks and O’Reilly (2010) – building on Butler’s concept of performativity.

This chapter will offer a close reading of Banti’s, Ginzburg’s, and Morante’s novels and short stories, in order to identify the presence of feminist theories within the use of certain narratological tools, themes, and motifs represented by the authors. The analysis will mainly build on less recent motherhood studies – nevertheless, always taking into consideration contemporary developments – because I argue that through the narrativisation of the passivity denounced by the initial phase of motherhood studies, these authors tend to a new form of agency, later theorised in what Rye defined as the second act of these theories. These authors hence anticipate a debate that more recently has been further developed in a more intersectional, transnational, and fluid direction. Moreover, the deployment of these particular theories is due to the fact that these authors look at gender still as binary rather than as a spectrum or as performed (Butler 1988: 527). The feminist underpinnings of these narratives about motherhood will be traced within four sub-themes: rejected motherhood, maternal language, the monstrous-feminine, and breastfeeding. It will be shown how these themes are employed by the authors in order to depict women outside of patriarchal stereotypes, and in order to fight or denounce their condition. In light of these findings, it will consider also the authors’ stances on feminism, highlighting the evident contradiction between narratives and public persona. Thus, it will reflect on the nature of this discrepancy. The juxtaposition of these authors building on shared themes is new, since there are not many comparisons among these authors specifically. Through the comparative element of my approach, I hope to gain new insights into a more general attitude of

Italian women writers from the twentieth century towards feminism, not forgetting that did exist also a more conscient and political wave of authors (e.g., Aleramo, de Céspedes). These texts present several attempts to break the patriarchal system through the use of concepts like matricide, the monstrous feminine associated with motherhood, theories on maternal language, and breastfeeding. A contemporary reading of these themes would identify them as feminist and would outline a 'proto'-use of feminist theories. Nevertheless, their consciences, intended as their public stances and their positions towards feminism, are still openly 'non-feminist'. As already explained, while previous scholars ignored this discrepancy or claimed that their antifeminist attitude would not affect their effort of denouncing women's condition, I argue that their interest in women's condition and their use of feminist motives in their narratives should not prevent us from reflecting on their lack of commitment with political and cultural feminist movements. Indeed, within the theme of motherhood, one could argue the authors' 'feminist' narratives are in themselves expressions of their anti-feminism. Banti and Ginzburg's fictional mothers are able to create a maternal 'subjectivity' (Lacan, 1977) only by refusing motherhood, ascribing themselves to the feminist belief according to which motherhood is the main tool used by patriarchy to control women. Similarly, Morante's children are able to create a notion of selfhood, an identity, «when the union with the mother is ruptured and the children perceive themselves as other» (Lacan, 1977). The characters manage to revolt against social constrictions. However, their rejection of motherhood (both in mothers and children) often occurs by switching from a patriarchal stereotype of women to the other (from chaste to femme fatale), or by longing for a masculine condition. Similarly, their authors renounce their identity as female writers and, metaphorically, they reject 'motherhood' by refusing the role of mentors (mothers) in order to avoid being «recognised as canonical» (Lucamante, 2006: 32) by a generation of writers-daughters. The parallelism is even stronger if one considers scenes of breastfeeding in the novels and Cixous' theory of 'white ink' (1976: 881), according to which women's writing nourishes other women writers, as well as breastmilk feeds infants. On the one hand, characters never breastfeed their children, on the other hand, authors refuse to create the 'white ink' (Cixous, 1976: 881) that feeds other generations of women writers.

3.1. Rejected Motherhood

Episodes ascribable within theories of 'matricide' are present in all three of our authors. Nevertheless, while in Banti and Ginzburg the protagonists are women trying to evade their own 'condition' as mothers – they try to do it in different ways which will be explained below – in Morante there are sons trying to kill their mothers, struggling between rejection and desire for them, thus being even closer to what feminists will theorise later, and developing further Banti's and Ginzburg's 'drafts' of

matricide.

It is evident from their texts that Banti and Ginzburg, writing mostly before the spread of feminist movements in Italy, – more or less consciously – endorse the attitude to destroy the mother and what she socially represents. The main difference is that, with their characters being prevalently mothers and not daughters, the mother who has to be ‘killed’ is not their biological mothers, but indeed their motherhood. Focusing on these authors’ narratives and on their characters as mothers rather than daughters (Giorgio, 2002: 30) is the key in order to investigating motherhood in Banti and Ginzburg. As this chapter juxtaposes these authors’ texts to their public positions on feminism, it is useful to look at the characters as mothers rather than daughters. Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante represent a generation of mothers, who paved the way for other women writers throughout the twentieth century and twenty-first century in Italy. On the other hand, their main models were almost exclusively male writers. However, this research aims to investigate their role of women writers confronting themselves with feminism and other women. As for Morante, the narrative in her texts is particularly heterogeneous – looking at her works taken altogether, it is difficult to say whether they are ‘mother-texts’ or ‘daughter-texts’ (Juhasz, 2003: 398). The first thing to note in Morante is that her main characters are not only mothers – indeed, her novels give voice to sons (only in *Menzogna e sortilegio* to a daughter) looking for a maternal figure and retracing their ambiguous desires to their mothers. Mothers are seldomly given a voice. In her narrative, matricide is not immediately perceived as necessary, as in Banti and Ginzburg (with the exception of Anna in *Menzogna e sortilegio*), but rather, it is achieved gradually throughout her works – only with her last protagonist, Manuel in *Aracoeli*, the author fully conveys the awareness that the separation from the mother is necessary in order to become an individual. Some critics used the expression «anxiety of maternity» (Lucamante, 2006: 38) to describe motherhood in Morante. Her writings oscillate between proposing an ideal type of mother and a subversive one (Wehling-Giorgi, 2014: 194), and sons and daughters struggle between desire and rejection of their mothers. Even if less openly than in Banti’s and Ginzburg’s, ‘matricide’ is still present in Morante – on the one hand, sons manage to understand that the separation from the mother is the only way to grow into individuals; on the other hand, Anna in *Menzogna e sortilegio* – who is more focused on her love for Edoardo rather than on her daughter’s wellbeing – proves to be as negligent and distant as Banti and Ginzburg’s mothers.

3.1.1. Anna Banti

Most of the novels by Anna Banti depict the biographical trajectory of female characters, or just a particular stage of their life. Even when they are at a young age, thus when they would be expected

to cover just the role of daughters, they are not exempt from the condition of their potential motherhood. In *Itinerario di Paolina*, for example, the main protagonist starts questioning her future role as a mother when she is just a child (*IdP*, 16). Paolina becomes a mirror of the author herself and anticipates Banti's most autobiographical character – Agnese, in *Un grido lacerante* – and her open rejection of motherhood. In her games with other young girls, Paolina is the only one feeling uncomfortable with the yearned for the role of mother – she is annoyed («infastidita», 13) and discontent («scontenta», 28) when she is told to pretend to be a mother, as all the other girls do spontaneously during their games. This attitude towards her potential role as a mother is reflected in a symbolic and meaningful scene in which Paolina climbs on her toys to reach one of them:

Per rinnovare la carica dell'elefante di latta mette i piedi sulla bilancina, pesta i tegamini, dà un calcio alla cucinetta; poi sotto le sue dita brusche la chiave spinta troppo forte finisce per incontrare un ronzio chioccio, e gira a vuoto. L'elefante è fermo, e nel silenzio della stanza Paola riode il suono roco, di malaugurio che la cattiva febbre di pocanzi non le ha fatto registrare. Qualcosa è caduto, qualcosa si è rotto: e la bambina è sicura che la bambola giace, faccia a terra, con la fronte spaccata. [...] Non si rammarica, non si intenerisce [...].¹¹⁰ (*IdP*, 16)

Paolina consciously decides to sacrifice 'girl toys', in order to gain a less gendered toy. When her doll breaks because of her weight, Paolina looks at it unperturbed. Focusing on Paolina's toys and in light of her rejection of motherhood in her games, Anna Banti shows to be well aware of how toys can mirror domesticity in which Paolina, and every other girl, are expected to live in their society. Theories according to which «females are quite simply conditioned into “acting” as women» (Craig, 1979: 151) had been put forward by Simone De Beauvoir, who mentions a destiny imposed upon women by society» in *The Second Sex* (2011). Anna Banti knew and read De Beauvoir, and, commenting on her works, she claimed to have anticipated some of these theories in her novels. It is important to highlight the link with De Beauvoir, since it shows Banti consciously included feminist theories into her narratives, or at least she later recognised them as feminist, despite having herself taken a distance from feminist movements. This motif is recurrent in Banti – similarly to Paolina, Agnese in *Un grido lacerante* and *La Signorina*'s protagonists remember their childhood and their rejection of dolls and other girl toys. These episodes, as the others following in this paragraph, show

¹¹⁰ «To renew the charge of the tin elephant, he puts his feet on the sling-bar, stamps the pans, kicks the kitchenette. Then, under his brusque fingers, the key, pushed too hard, ends up meeting a clacking buzz, and turns round and round. The elephant is standing still, and in the silence of the room, Paola hears again the hoarse, ominous sound that earlier she could not completely appreciate due to her bad fever. Something has fallen, something has broken, and the child is sure that the doll lies, face down on the floor, her forehead cracked. [...] She does not regret, she is not moved [...]» (my translation).

Banti's awareness of women's condition within family and society – through her narratives she manages to convey her conceptualisation of motherhood as a form of oppression against her female characters and against every woman. Nevertheless, she denies being influenced by feminism. She seems more eager to prove freedom of thought rather than label her narrative as feminist. This behaviour of the author is traceable also in the characterisation of adult protagonists of her novels. In their adulthood, motherhood is rejected in two different ways – by abandoning their children or by not giving birth. Artemisia gives birth to Porziella. From the moment Porziella is born, she implements a sort of 'alienation' towards her, as Benedetti noted (Benedetti, 1999: 57). Benedetti claims that Anna Banti «deliberately overlooks» (1999: 56) Artemisia and her daughter's relationship in order to highlight the protagonist's loneliness. Indeed, historically, Artemisia and her daughter were quite close and had a good relationship and Anna Banti herself is aware of their link as she shows in *Un grido lacerante* (Benedetti, 1999: 57). Nevertheless, Anna Banti decided that 'her' Artemisia had to take a distance from her daughter and her domestic life. In addition to Benedetti's interpretation of Artemisia's loneliness, I argue that Artemisia's 'alienation' could also be read in light of the *leitmotiv* of the rejection of motherhood. Anna Banti 'rewrites' a historical character – she deliberately changes historical truth, by fictionalising the mother-daughter relationship for example – and mirrors herself and her other female characters who refuse motherhood. The physical and mental distance between mother and daughter, perceived throughout the novel, is just another way for a woman in search of her own identity to reject motherhood. Artemisia deliberately chose to pursue her career as a painter, and, in order to do it, she strongly believes that a woman must renounce motherhood, as well as her husband. Furthermore, in *Artemisia*, Anna Banti consciously ignored the fact that Porziella was a painter too, whilst it is very likely that she knew (Benedetti, 1999: 56). It is a meaningful element of the construction of the plot since it anticipates another theme recurring in her future narratives, made particularly explicit in *Un grido lacerante* – the rejection of motherhood is strictly correlated to the fear of giving birth to another version of herself. While Agnese, in *Un grido lacerante*, openly admits she does not want to give birth to another version of herself, Anna Banti appears to be in an initial, less explicit, phase of this theme in *Artemisia* by just omitting that Porziella too was a painter – indeed, this is hidden to the reader, but it is internalised by the author herself. Banti describes the affection that Artemisia feels for Porziella, who is able to «[farle] battere il cuore e precipitare il sangue»,¹¹¹ but she also let it transpire how this affection jeopardises Artemisia's freedom (*Art*, 330: «[...] un amante, un padre, dei fratelli, il marito: di nessuno,

¹¹¹ «[...] is enough to make her heartbeat faster and the blood rush in her veins» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 127).

finalmente, una donna ha bisogno. E ora questa figlia...»¹¹² Artemisia fights for her right to paint, but at the same time knows the disadvantages of being a woman – during the novel she keeps repeating that being a woman is such a damnation. By omitting Porziella's choice to pursue her mother's career, Anna Banti is omitting what will be more explicit in her later works – the fear to transmit to a daughter her fate, as a disease:

Forse Porziella che è rientrata in convento, dopo una vacanza infastidita dalla madre e dalla pittura [...] a cinque anni, già si trovava bene con le monache, e si tingeva d'un rossor cupo quando le dicevano: "Sei la figlia della virtuosa". Non volle imparare disegno [...] Detestava i pittori, i colori, le tele: quando era in casa nascondeva i panni ai modelli e faceva loro mille dispetti, vantandosene poi in convento, come di opere meritorie.¹¹³ (*Art*, 344)

The author and the protagonists of later works are well aware it would be shameful to condemn another human life to the same inevitable and miserable condition.

La camicia bruciata presents another example of a woman refusing motherhood by abandoning her children as the protagonist escapes from an unhappy marriage. She feels imprisoned by both her marriage and by her role as a mother. Thus, she decides to escape even if this means being condemned both by society and by her family as a sinful woman who is not able to fulfil her 'womanly' obligations.

On the other hand, Banti's autobiographical characters, such as Agnese or the protagonist of *La signorina*, represent examples of rejected motherhood by not giving birth. The main character of *La Signorina* seems a first draft of the character of Agnese – she decides not to have children and she feels an instinctive 'dispetto' when she is falsely suspected to be pregnant. *Un grido lacerante*'s protagonist, Agnese, a married woman, decides deliberately not to have children. Nevertheless, the novel opens with an emblematic scene of a birth. The passage is deliberately ambiguous, since it is not clear whether the narrative 'I' is giving birth or is being born. In the English translation of the novel, the ambiguousness is not as evident as in the Italian and original version – the fact that, in English grammar, the pronoun subject must always be explicit forced the translator to choose a univocal reading of the passage in which it is clear who is who and who is doing what. The absence

¹¹² «[...] a lover, a father, brothers, a husband: of none of these, in the end, does a woman have need. And now this daughter of hers» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 127).

¹¹³ «Maybe Porziella, who has returned to the convent after spending her holidays at home, bored with her mother and her painting. [...] at the age of five Porziella was already totally at home with the nuns and her face would turn deep red when they said to her, "You are the daughter of the famous, lady artist". She refused to learn to draw [...] She hated artists, paints, canvas: when she was at home, she would hide the models' clothes and play all sorts of spiteful tricks on them, which she would then boast about in the convent as if she had done something to be proud of» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020; 144-146).

of pronouns in the original passage makes everything less clear and deliberately, I argue, ambiguous. This kind of translation of Anna Banti highlights the tendency of previous scholarship to ignore the discrepancy between feminist motives and anti-feminist public statements. Indeed, reading this passage as deliberately ambiguous – as I will do in the following textual analysis – is a confirmation of what has been shown so far – Banti's negative and meticulous conceptualisation of motherhood in order to denounce women's condition. Here follows a comparative reading of the complete passages in Italian and in its English translation:

A faint, imperceptible **breathing** reaches the brain just before expires; and **this is death**, there is no way back. There is a seething of **blackness**, some **lightening flickers** and die in the dust of a distant glow. **She** can see, but she does not know what. **It** has neither shape, nor substance, nor thickness. The darkness condenses, suffocating it, crushing it with the force of immobility. Without tears, **she** cries.

A **piercing cry** lacerates time **reborn**: the lowest of beings, writhing any way it can, a deaf and dumb mass. The cry echoes it in an instant. Below, on the bed, her rigid body fades, and next to her someone keeps screaming while an immense bulk tosses and grasps for air. A strong, clear voice explains:

It's a beautiful baby girl.

Suddenly **she** understands. Not in fact a **return** to dear life, to the dear, grief-stricken faces. **A mistake**. Hurling down into a **nightmare**. Out of a small, wide opening comes a muffled sound: the new voice, while gigantic hands are hitting the lump of flesh that has begun to breathe. Thus a new-born has slipped down among unknown persons. Fortunately, **death** returns. Yet, it is not **death**, it is sleep.

Since childhood, this had been a recurrent dream of Agnese Lanzi [...].¹¹⁴ (emphases mine)

Un filo d'impercettibile **respiro** sale al cervello vacillante che sta per spegnersi; e **questa è la morte**, non si torna indietro. C'è **nero** brulichio, qualche **lambo** guizza e si disfa nella polvere di un chiarore lontano. () Vede, ma cosa non sa. () Non ha corpo, non sostanza, non spessore. Il buio si condensa, lo soffoca, lo schiaccia con la prepotenza dell'immobilità. Senza lacrime, () piange.

Un **grido lacerante** squarcia il tempo **rinato**, un budello infimo che sussulta come può, senza gola né orecchie. E il grido dopo un attimo riecheggia. Laggiù nel suo letto, svanisce il suo corpo rigido, accanto qualcuno seguita a urlare, mentre si agita e ansia una massa enorme. Una voce chiara e forte proclama. Una voce chiara e forte proclama:

È una bellissima bambina.

D'un tratto () capisce. Non dunque il **ritorno** alla cara vita, ai cari volti desolati. **Uno sbaglio**. Una caduta fra i **mostri**. Da una piccola rossa fessura spalancata esce un suono strozzato: la sua voce, mentre mani gigantesche

¹¹⁴ Translation by Daria Valentini and Samuel Mark Lewis (1996).

battono il grumolo di carne che ha cominciato a respirare. Dunque un neonato, scivolato giù fra ignote presenze. Per fortuna la morte ritorna. Ma non è **morte**, è sonno.

Tale il sogno ricorrente, fin dalla prima infanzia, di Agnese Lanzi [...].

She can see, but **she** does not know what. **It** has neither shape, nor substance, nor thickness.¹¹⁵

() Vede, ma cosa non sa. () Non ha corpo, non sostanza, non spessore. (*UGL*, 1527, emphasis mine)

The event is strongly linked with the experience of dying (1527, «e questa è la morte, non si torna indietro»)¹¹⁶ The coexistence of life and death is made immediately clear by the author, even before letting the reader understand that the scene described is that of labour. A *leitmotiv* of the whole novel appears in the first lines – the ‘breath’, symbolising life. However, the breath itself, which nourishes the whole novel and the plot, is, actually, described as the last one, bringing death rather than life: «Un filo d’impercettibile respiro sale al cervello vacillando che sta per spegnersi; e questa è la morte [...]»¹¹⁷ (1527). Banti continues to create figures of meaningful oxymorons – breath and death are substituted by the traditional opposition between light and dark. The space in which the unclear scene is taking place is dark, but a sudden and mysterious glance of light stabs the symbolical night: «C’è nero brulichio, qualche lampo guizza [...]»¹¹⁸ (1527). These new oxymorons keep outlining the association between life and death and particularly between giving birth and death in addition to life, thus enhancing again motherhood as metaphorically deadly for a woman. The scene is made even less intelligible by the absence of a well determined and described subject – reading the passage it is not immediately clear who is acting and living or dying: «Non ha corpo, non ha sostanza, non spessore»¹¹⁹ (1527). This first page of the novel is ambiguous also from a formal point of view – indeed, the passage is divided into some kind of paragraphs, like stanzas, as in a poem.

Of the material analysed so far, what emerges as most confusing and indefinite is part of the first ‘stanza’. The breath opening this first stanza becomes a scream in the second. From this scream, it becomes clear, finally, that the author is describing a birth. It is no longer a matter of (dark) space, now, rather it is a matter of time. While the dying breath stabbed the darkness, the scream rips the time, defined as ‘reborn’ («rinato»): «Un grido lacerante squarcia il tempo rinato»¹²⁰ (1527). The latter word anticipates a complex theme of the novel, explained only in the last pages and anticipated, as it

¹¹⁵ Translation by Daria Valentini and Samuel Mark Lewis (1996).

¹¹⁶ «[...] and this is death, there is now way back» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

¹¹⁷ «A faint, imperceptible breathing reaches the brain just before expires; and this is death [...]» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

¹¹⁸ «There is seething of blackness, some lightening flickers [...]» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

¹¹⁹ «It has neither shape, nor substance, nor thickness» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

¹²⁰ «A piercing cry lacerates time reborn» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

has been seen, in Artemisia – the possibility to give birth to herself. The subject is more definite now – it has a body, even if it is just a «budello infimo»¹²¹ with no throat and no ears (1527). Suddenly, the subject is no longer one – the body unfolds. There are two bodies acting on the page. The new body is that of the mother. Her body is rigid, and it disappears in the bed when the new body is put by her side. Again, a living body next to a dying body. This new passage can shed light on the previous one – the dying breath belongs to the dying body of the mother; whose death seems already and deeply linked with the life of the screaming new body. However, the absence of pronouns indicating the subjects offers a double reading of the same passage. It can also be read as if the infant's body was the rigid one, while the mother screams and protests: «Laggiù, nel suo letto, svanisce il suo corpo rigido, accanto qualcuno seguita a urlare, mentre si agita e ansima una massa enorme»¹²² (1527). The two bodies are two separate entities, but paradoxically undistinguishable and influencing each other. They intertwine as life and death do. A direct speech stops the ambiguous narration and marks half of the page and of the paragraphs. A third character, presumably a nurse, a doctor, or a midwife, announces that the new-born is a baby girl (1527).

The third paragraph tries to shed light on the plot of the scene – indeed, the first sentence is «D'un tratto capisce»¹²³. Nevertheless, the ambiguity is still strong since a double reading is possible, again. On the one hand, the mother could have realised that her baby's birth is not a «return to the dear life», but rather 'a mistake', a «caduta tra i mostri» – by placing this epiphany right next to the announcement of the gender of the baby born, the author seems to suggest that being female is equivalent to die; on the other hand it could be the mother herself realising that giving birth is not a way to create life and thus come back to life again, but it is, as mentioned above, a mistake, a damnation for herself. (Giving) birth coexists with (and involves) a symbolical death of the mother, whose motherhood, hence, kills her; but, at the same time, it involves also the metaphorical death of the baby girl. Not only do these 'deaths' recall the Kristevan matricide, but also the violence of the labour is a vivid example of that kind of 'deep physical violence' described by Kristeva in the process of the separation from the maternal body. Here, the bodies are at first symbolically linked; then they get separated abruptly and violently, in a dark space and among screams and dying breaths. The experience of giving birth and that of being born overlap and become indistinguishable. Being the beginning of an (auto)biography, at first the scene is perceived as the birth of the protagonist, Agnese; but later it is clear that it is just a dream of the adult Agnese about her giving birth. But since giving

¹²¹ «The lowest of beings, writhing any way it can, a deaf and dumb mass» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

¹²² «Below, on the bed, her rigid body fades, and next to her someone keeps screaming while an immense bulk tosses and grasps for air» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

¹²³ «Suddenly she understands» (Valentini and Lewis, 1996).

birth involves ‘rebirth’ and ‘death’, it is Agnese herself who is reborn and who is dying because she is a mother and because she is reborn as a female. Indeed, at the very end of the novel she remembers her birth alluding to a scene very similar to her initial dream: «Come nella prima ora del distacco desiderò la morte irrefutabile, l’immobilità irreversibile, il nascondiglio della tomba»¹²⁴ (*UGL*, 1661). Again, life and death are linked. Moreover, the use of the word «distacco» recalls Kristeva’s theory of matricide, which coincides with the separation from the maternal body itself. Anna Banti conceptualises the existence of a woman as constituted by being born female, by ‘dying’ due to her gender in a patriarchal society, and by the illusion to come back to life by giving birth, which is no other than dying again. The act of delivery, motherhood, but also being a daughter, inexorably involves death.

Later in the novel, Agnese recognises motherhood as a «natural and female compulsion», but she claims that it was also very far from her nature and desires. While ageing her biggest concern is to be perceived as a maternal figure. The end gives a circular structure to the novel in its profound link with the first oneiric scene of a birth. After the death of her husband, Agnese explains how she is intimidated by a group of children whose school is near her house: «S’era da poco aperta una scuola in vicinanza della sua casa e quando incontrava un gruppo di ragazzetti sciamanti, ne distoglieva, quasi paurosa, lo sguardo»¹²⁵ (1661). She believes to be able to recognise her husband’s soul in one of the children. Moreover, she talks about «rinascita» and the possibility to come to life again into a new body – «[...] chi crede nella rinascita, sa quanto sia incerta, essa avviene fuori del tempo e dello spazio, senza regole, scavalcando millenni»¹²⁶ (1661). This theory sheds light on the initial dream recalled also by the concepts of space and time and it gives credit to the argument according to which motherhood scares her for the possibility of being born again and thus dying, and simultaneously and inextricably of giving birth to another doomed life like hers, destined to ‘die’.

3.1.2. Natalia Ginzburg

In light of Banti’s approach to these themes and her personal views on feminism, it becomes very interesting to consider Ginzburg’s notion of motherhood. In Ginzburg’s first novels, there are striking similarities with Banti’s conceptualisation of motherhood. However, the motif is less explicit and less central in the construction of her characters, which is the reason why few studies focused on this

¹²⁴ «As in the first hour of separation, she longed for irrefutable death, irreversible immobility, the hiding place of the grave» (my translation).

¹²⁵ «A school had recently opened near her home and when she encountered a group of swarming boys, she turned her gaze away, almost fearful» (my translation).

¹²⁶ «[...] those who believe in rebirth know how uncertain it is, it happens outside time and space, without rules, bypassing millennia» (my translation).

aspect of her writings – the first scholar to note the lack of academic interest in Ginzburg's theme of motherhood has been Adalgisa Giorgio (1993), who, however, focused mainly on Ginzburg's *La madre*. Nevertheless, as motherhood is always and significantly present in Ginzburg's stories, in one form or another, I will try to broaden the focus on other works by Ginzburg. Although Natalia Ginzburg claims she no longer tried to write like a man since she became a mother and she started to have a maternal relationship (*Lpv*, 852) with her fictional characters, one can argue that motherhood in her novels and short stories is still depicted as a form of oppression against which her female characters try to fight in vain. In light of Natalia Ginzburg's interest in Annie Vivanti's works (*Mdd*, 84) – one of the few female inspirational figures for Ginzburg – it is interesting to trace some similarities in these authors as for this theme. The most famous work by Vivanti is *I divoratori* (1910), traditionally read as a novel about prodigies, art, and how genius can consume the lives of those surrounding it and trying to nourish it. However, giving more attention to the theme of motherhood in Vivanti's work becomes even more necessary in light of the way this theme is positioned in Ginzburg's narrative. *I divoratori* is the story of different generations of women – mothers dealing with their prodigious daughters. Being prodigies themselves, they must renounce to their own desires and talents in order to make their daughter follow theirs – a vicious cycle in which talented women face the choice between their own career and art, and their motherhood. Motherhood means to sacrifice themselves, a sacrifice that is not requested to their husbands. Thus, we should not only focus on the problematic genius, but also on women's condition and what motherhood means for their personal fulfilment. In Vivanti motherhood is not rejected or despised, it is, on the contrary, desired and welcomed. However, women are aware of the sacrifices they are forced to make in order to be good mothers. Even when they try to reconcile motherhood and their careers, they manage to accomplish this. Arguing that Ginzburg reached her personal conceptualisation of motherhood in her novels through a close reading of Vivanti would be hazardous, but we cannot neither exclude this possibility.

One of Ginzburg's first literary works, *La strada che va in città*, is about the unexpected and blameful pregnancy of the protagonist Delia, who is unmarried. The disadvantages of giving birth for a woman are anticipated by Delia's mother, a distant and cold woman with her own children, who defines them like poison: «I figli sono come veleno e mai dovrebbero essere messi al mondo»¹²⁷ (*Lscvic*, 7). Delia blames her grandmother because she gave birth to her mother – «Maledetta la madre che t'ha fatto»¹²⁸ (*Lscvic*, 10). When Delia got pregnant, in addition to the shaming she suffered within her family and

¹²⁷ «[...] children were serpents' teeth and that no one had any business bringing them into the world» (Frenaye, 2021b: 8).

¹²⁸ «I threw in a curse at the mother that had borne her» (Frenaye, 2021b: 10).

society – since she is not married – she lives a personal struggle. The characteristics of this struggle recall some *leitmotifs* already traced in Banti's narratives. Firstly, there is a dark connection between giving birth and death – Delia's delivery is described as a disease: «Ma io ero tutta stravolta dalla paura e dal male, avevo avuto già due svenimenti e la levatrice disse che bisognava portarmi d'urgenza all'ospedale in città» (*Lscvic*, 64). Moreover, Delia herself thinks she could die: «[...] e pensavo che presto sarei morta»¹²⁹ (*Lscvic*, 64). Secondly, Delia expresses her fear to transmit old features to the new life – yet, this time she is not afraid that her kid looks like her but rather that that the child looks like Giulio, the father, and her mother-in-law, not resembling herself at all: «Mi faceva tristezza d'aver messo al mondo quel bambino, che aveva il mento lungo di mia suocera, che somigliava anche a Giulio ma non aveva niente di me»¹³⁰ (*Lscvic*, 65). Delia's rejection of her motherhood starts from her rejection of gestation, lived as a disease. Yet, she could not do anything but accept her fate of becoming a mother – deprived of the freedom which is not taken away from the father of her baby. Even when the mother-daughter relationship is not openly challenged, like in *È stato così*, one can still feel the presence of a sense of rejection towards motherhood. Francesca, the protagonist's best friend, claims to have the desire not to have children at all, because it would mean losing her own freedom: «Non potrei sopportare un bambino [...] Il giorno che avessi un bambino mi ammazzerei subito»¹³¹ (*Esc*, 121). The protagonist herself, who apparently does not completely reject her *status* as a mother, still finds herself thinking she does not want to see her daughter and that she is annoyed by everything related to her – her toys, her food etc. She feels like she has irremediably lost her freedom to go wherever she wants and to act however she likes. Furthermore, when her husband says giving birth is the most important thing in the lives of both women and men, she is actually aware that only women's lives change because of a newborn. Like Delia, she perceives motherhood as a 'trap' exclusively for women – a tool of oppression for their freedom and ambitions. In Ginzburg's texts, unlike Banti's, the protagonists do feel motherhood as oppressive, but they do not actively rebel against it, like Artemisia or Agnese Lanzi do. Indeed, in *È stato così* the daughter of the protagonist dies prematurely, but this brings sorrow rather than freedom to the protagonist, who is still trapped in her marriage. The same elements are traceable also in the short stories by Ginzburg. Three of them are particularly useful in this context – *Casa al mare*, *Mio marito*, and *La madre*. In *Casa al mare*, the point of view adopted by the narrator is that of the husband, rather than that of the wife. The most interesting element is that the male judgment on women as mothers does

¹²⁹ «I was sure I was going to die» (Frenaye, 2021b: 56).

¹³⁰ «I was sorry to have a baby with my mother-in-law's long chin and something of Giulio about him but not a trace of myself» (Frenaye, 2021b: 57).

¹³¹ «I couldn't stand a baby [...] If ever I had a baby I'd kill myself, for sure» (Frenaye, 2021: 44)

not differ consistently from that expressed in narratives in which the point of view is feminine. In this text, Vilma is seen as a distant mother, annoyed by her children and thus always asking for the assistance of a nanny. Vilma feels and is told by her own relatives not to be made for being a mother. This kind of judgment is imbued with patriarchy, since it considers Vilma an exception in feminine behavior, which would be naturally inclined to motherhood: «Diceva che Vilma non era fatta per tirar su un bambino. Ella lo alzava tardi, non gli permetteva di stare troppo a lungo nell'acqua né di giocare al sole con la testa scoperta. – E poi, come lo veste e come gli fa crescere i riccioli. Sembra il figlio di un'attrice»¹³² (*Cam*, 184). The image of an actress, a role for which women had been traditionally blamed, is here opposed to that of the 'good mother' which Vilma is not able to meet. By not giving a voice to Vilma, the reasons behind her feelings which drove her to this kind of rejection remain unexplained like in the previous examples. However, the portrayal of the mother is still one where the woman rejects this role – in this case, the protagonist is more similar to Banti's characters – rebelling actively by acting against patriarchal restrictions. In *Mio marito*, two women are dealing with motherhood and giving birth. The protagonist – whose point of view is adopted throughout the account – is similar to the mother protagonist of *Casa al mare*. She loves her children, but her love is different from what she was told a woman should feel – she is annoyed («infastidita») by her role of mother. Her personal explanation is that the dissatisfaction and the lack of engagement with her children lie in her own unhappiness – «[...] forse ero troppo triste per stare coi bambini»¹³³ (*MM*, 196). Her rejection of motherhood is so uncommon and inexplicable, for the protagonist herself, that she believes that a pre-existent depression makes her a bad mother. She cannot entertain the possibility that motherhood itself causes her depression, depriving her of her freedom and ambitions (*Mm*, 199: «non desideravo più di esser bella, non desideravo più niente»).¹³⁴ The other character giving birth is the young lover of the protagonist's husband. She got pregnant, and not only her delivery is again depicted with terms and tones alluding to the semantic field of disease, but she also ends up dying during the labour along with her child: «Poi Mariuccia cadde svenuta e la portammo sul letto. [...] si dibatteva sul letto con i capelli in disordine. [...] Le lenzuola erano macchiate di sangue, c'era del sangue perfino per terra. [...] Ora Mariuccia non gridava più, giaceva pallida, e il sangue non cessava di scorrere dal suo corpo. [...] era morta»¹³⁵ (*Mm*, 200-201). On the one hand,

¹³² « He said that Vilma was not made to bring up a child. She would get them up late, not allow them to stay too long in the water or play in the sun with their head uncovered. He said that she would not know how to dress them or make their curls grow. He looks like the son of an actress» (my translation).

¹³³ «I was too sad to have the children» (Lewis, 2019: 252).

¹³⁴ «But I didn't care to look pretty anymore. I didn't care about anything» (Lewis, 2019: 255).

¹³⁵ «Mariuccia was writhing on the bed and her hair was all dishevelled [...] The sheets were stained with blood; there was even blood on the ground. Now Mariuccia had stopped screaming; she lay there extremely pale, and the blood continued to flow from her body [...] was dead» (Lewis, 2019: 256).

the narrative portrays a woman who gave birth, but again is not able to be the mother that society and her own family expect her to be. On the other hand, it shows how a woman killed by her own gestation – giving birth and death are, again, significantly, and inextricably linked. *La madre* is the text in which women's alienation within the family and society is most evident. The point of view adopted is that of the children of the mother who gives the title to the work, rather than that of the mother herself. The mother's *status* of a voiceless character is not only metaphorical but also physical; not only is her point of view not adopted, but she is described almost as 'aphasic' – «Non parlava quasi mai e quando parlava pareva che facesse fatica, la sua voce veniva su debole»¹³⁶ (*Lm*, 212). In *La madre*, Natalia Ginzburg manages to denounce «patriarchy's whole discourse on motherhood» (Giorgio, 1993: 866). Indeed, according to Giorgio, this narratological choice is already a tool to denounce how motherhood is conceptualised as the act of sacrificing the self and one's voice for the children (Giorgio, 1993: 871). A new element appears here, which is almost unprecedented in Ginzburg's previous works – a focus on the body. The story begins with a physical description of the mother, whose body is different from the one a good mother is supposed to have – the protagonist is thin, young-looking. Giorgio reflects on how this conceptualisation of the maternal body is a product of Fascist ideologies on motherhood (1993: 870), ideals to which the children of the story seem to unconsciously adhere, thus their discomfort with their mother's body. Right after, a kind of abandonment, or at least a form of detachment, of the children by the mother is made explicit (*Lm*, 204: «La madre non era importante»)¹³⁷ because even if she is with her children, she does not cover her expected role. She does not take care of her children, she does not impose rules, and her role is replaced by the grandmother, or even by the maid, whose bodies are fat, warm, aged, thus conform to the children's concept of maternal body. The body is, interestingly, identified as the cause of the inability to escape (from the children) – «[...] la nonna non poteva scappar via, era troppo vecchia e troppo grassa, era bello avere qualcuno che stava in casa e non poteva mai scappar via»¹³⁸ (*Lm*, 212). Not only the mother breaks the patriarchal rules of how to be a good mother by not taking proper care of her children, but also by acting as the stereotype of a *femme fatale* – going out at night and hanging out with men. The mother is so atypical and distant from her children, that her death is a relief for her family. The protagonist perceives throughout the novel her inadequacy, the lack in her of the natural 'maternal instinct' that her family and society expect from her. To keep living according to her own rules and desires is painful and blamed by the dominant voices of the children but is also a tool or

¹³⁶ «She hardly ever spoke and when she/he did speak, she/he seemed to struggle, her/his voice came out weak» (my translation).

¹³⁷ «The mother was not important» (my translation).

¹³⁸ «[...] his grandmother could not run away. She was too old and too fat. It was nice to have someone who stayed at home and could never run away» (my translation).

resistance against her forced motherhood.

A final example of mother figures who refuse their status by being distant and not following stereotypes of 'good mothers' is Maddalena, in *Valentino*. She displays the characteristics of the absent mother, whose children are entrusted to a nanny, and whose behaviour causes concern because she keeps working after having given birth. Maddalena brings back also the fear to give birth to a copy of herself, as Banti's characters, thus her desire to have just sons rather than daughters.

The kind of rebellion of Ginzburg's mothers is different from that of Banti's – they are mere victims of their own status, aware and thus suffering, or rather they do not take care of their children in the way they are told to. In both cases they are more victims than rebels (e.g. Delia and *Mio marito*'s protagonist as for the former, Vilma, Maddalena or *La madre*'s protagonist as for the latter). Nevertheless, Ginzburg manages to denounce women's condition within the social construct of motherhood by giving a voice to mothers who fail to conform to society's expectations and suffer the consequences.

3.1.3. Elsa Morante

Having analysed the ways in which Banti and Ginzburg (de)construct the ideals of motherhood in the context of their own (anti)feminist beliefs, I shall now move on to see how this theme is problematised in the work of Elsa Morante, who is possibly the most prominent among this group of female authors in terms of literary popularity and success.

There are few cases in Morante of mothers refusing their own motherhood, according to the terms traced in Banti and Ginzburg's narratives – Mirtilla in *Qualcuno bussa alla porta* and Anna in *Menzogna e sortilegio*. Mirtilla, anticipating the whole series of forthcoming Morante's female protagonists (Nelsen, 1994: 272), escapes with a mysterious man who later abandons her with her pregnancy. She gives birth to a girl but leaves her in a basket outside of a house, disappearing until the very end of this short story, where she reunites with her daughter Lucia. In this occasion, the reader apprehends that Mirtilla has become a 'witch', embodying what she was only potentially at the beginning of the story – «strana e selvaggia» (weird and wild). Her living at the edge of society, immersed in the nature of the island she moved to, dedicated to a sort of 'witchcraft', not only make her 'other', but represents the fulfilment of the creation of an independent subjectivity; and she manages to do so only by refusing her own motherhood. In *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Elisa, one of the main protagonists and narrator of the novel, tries to create a «space of intersubjective communication with her mother» (Giorgio, 2002: 123), Anna, but her attempts are vain. Anna seems interested only in the man she had always loved, her cousin Edoardo, neglecting her whole family, and particularly her daughter Elisa. According to Finucci (1988) «Elisa paradoxically loses her; to resurrect her [...]»

(312). As Banti and Ginzburg's mothers who are able to create a notion of selfhood subject only by refusing their own motherhood, Anna manages to do it only when she writes to herself the fake letters from Edoardo (Giorgio, 2002: 125). Analysing this novel, Giorgio wrote about mothers «aloof from, and indifferent to, their daughters» (2002: 148). This category, as it has already been shown, is valid also for Banti's and Ginzburg's mothers. These characters attempt to pursue their own identities as women, regardless of their motherhood. Nevertheless, Morante offers other typologies of motherhood in her works. In her narratives, motherhood can also be strongly desired – it is the case of both short stories such as *La nonna* and novels such as *L'isola di Arturo*. In the former example, the protagonist's desire can be read as fed by social pressure:

Nel matrimonio era stata sterile, ma il desiderio dei figli bruciava in lei durante la verginità e la maturità; e nell'attesa inutile, sentendo le sue viscere disseccarsi in quella disperata brama, ella aveva cucito un sontuoso corredo, e ricamato i bavagli e i corpetti provando la stessa gioia puerile e mistica delle suore quando nei conventi cuciono le pianete.¹³⁹ (1426)

Similarly, in *L'Isola di Arturo*, Nunziata shows the authentic desire to be mother, firstly of Arturo, who is not her biological son and who is almost her age – but she is eager to represent a maternal figure for him – and then for her biological son, Carmine. Nunziata is a present, caring, and loving mother. She is not negligent; she does not feel the need to abandon her children – her own identity lies in her motherhood. On the contrary, Arturo does try to take a distance from her. He had always missed a maternal figure; thus, he ended up idealising the imago of his dead mother. At the same time, he does not accept this new mother in his life – he struggles between the desire to be loved maternally, and the hatred he feels towards Nunziata. When their relationship seems to improve, he realises that what he feels for Nunziata is not maternal love, but rather passion and sexual desire. Nunziata eventually rejects him and Arturo escapes from her. This kind of struggle between desire, search for a mother, and the need to reject her, to separate from her in order to become an individual, is replicated by Morante in *Aracoeli* – even though the exploration of maternity in *Aracoeli* is different and far more complex – in which the quest and the struggle finally come to an end. The novel focuses on Manuel's journey to rediscover his mother's origins and *Aracoeli* herself, but he slowly realises how his own mother represents the obstacle for him to go on with his life, thus the journey becomes the tool to actually separate from his mother towards which he has conflicting and

¹³⁹ «In marriage, she had been barren, but the desire for children burned within her during her virginity and maturity; and in the futile wait, feeling her insides drying up in that desperate longing, she had sewn a sumptuous trousseau, and embroidered the bibs and camisoles, feeling the same puerile and mystical joy as the nuns do when they sew the chasubles in convents» (my translation).

ambiguous feelings and to distance himself from the symbiotic relationship they initially have in Totetaco.

Nevertheless, in *L'isola di Arturo*, there are still elements which mark motherhood as 'deadly', as in Banti and Ginzburg. Firstly, the protagonist, remembering his mother, talks about 'maternal illusions'. She had illusion of a happy motherhood, while she ended up dying while giving birth – «[...] fra le sue comuni illusioni della maternità. Essa già sospettasse il suo destino di morte, e d'ignoranza eterna»¹⁴⁰ (*IdA*, 954). In a chapter entitled "Contro le madri (e le femmine in genere)" (Against mothers, and women in general), there is a long monologue by Wilhelm, who explains how mothers tend to 'kill' sons with their love, because in a woman's life a child is a guilt («colpa») she tries to atone from, and the only 'expression of her destiny' – this *leitmotiv* of guilt recurs also in *La Storia*, in which Nino's death is caused only by Ida's «colpa» (fault) to have given birth to him (*La S*, 810: «La colpa è tua, Mamma. La colpa è tua. La colpa è tua»)¹⁴¹. Wilhelm's theory is reversed by Arturo, who, instead, sees mothers as killed by their children. Indeed, in this novel, the gestation and then the act of giving birth are again described as a fatal disease – the distance between giving birth and dying is almost void. Nunziata is made 'ugly' by her gestation – she looks tired, pale, colourless. Arturo identifies the culprit in the baby she is expecting. He is compared to a 'monster', a 'disease', which Nunziata can only passively undergo. In line with this description, the paragraph of the birth is significantly titled 'Assassinata?'. Arturo witnesses the experience, and he perceives it as a death scene:

[...] mi pareva di ravvisare, nella matrigna, molti segni di quella medesima angoscia estrema che aveva condotto Immacolatella a finire sotto terra, presso il carrubo; e credetti di intendere che lo stesso male, di cui erano morte mia madre, e Immacolatella, stava per uccidere, stanotte, anche quest'altra femmina!¹⁴² (*IdA*, 1161)

The women of his life seem to be destined to die while giving birth. Arturo uses words as «assassino» (murderer) and he keeps repeating the word «morte!» (death). Arturo perceives himself as an «assassin» as well, when he thinks of the death of her mother (*IdA*, 999: «Essa era morta per causa mia: come se io l'avessi uccisa»)¹⁴³ – thus, giving birth is univocally linked with dying. The word

¹⁴⁰ «As if, among the common illusions of maternity, she already suspected that her destiny would be death and eternal ignorance» (Goldstein, 2018: 9).

¹⁴¹ «It's your fault, Mamma. It's your fault. It's your fault» (Weaver, 2000: 475).

¹⁴² «It seemed to me that I saw, in my stepmother, many signs of that same extreme anguish that had led Immacolatella to end up underground, near the carob tree; and I believed I understood that the same illness my mother had died of, and Immacolatella, would tonight kill this other woman, too» (Weaver, 2000: 151).

¹⁴³ «She had died because of me: as if I had killed her» (Weaver, 2000: 41).

«assassina» recurs also when Ida, in *La Storia*, finds out about her son's death, whom she herself feels to have killed by giving birth to him, paradoxically (*Ls*, 809: «“Vattene via da me. La colpa è tua. Perché m’hai fatto nascere?!; [...] Perché m’hai partorito? La colpevole, sei tu”. Allora, essa si metteva spavento, come un’assassina, di attraversare il corridoio scuro [...] Era lei, che aveva ucciso Ninuzzu [...]»¹⁴⁴ There are two more similarities with the recurrent dream of Agnese Lanzi in Banti's *Un grido lacerante*. Firstly, the violent and dramatic scene is compared to a «tragedia misteriosa» (mysterious tragedy) in which Arturo is part of the audience. As in *Un grido lacerante*, a meta-narrative filter is put between the birth scene and the spectator – a dream in Banti's case, and a tragedy in Morante's.¹⁴⁵ As if fictionalising it would make the crudeness and the violence of the scene more bearable. Secondly, giving birth, but also being born, becomes equivalent to dying. Arturo meets the midwife who helped her mother to deliver him. But he is not able to be grateful to her, who is, indeed, described as a murderer (*IdA*, 1162: «Le sue mani, enormi e scure, mi parevano le mani di una omicida»¹⁴⁶ The reader is uncertain whether Nunziata is dead or not by giving birth until she speaks to Arturo. Before those words, her body is described as a voiceless corpse: «[...] il gridare di una creatura appena nata. La voce di lei non si udiva più. [...] lei, di spalle, stesa immobile sotto le coperte, e il letto macchiato di sangue, Pensai: “è finita!”»¹⁴⁷ (*IdA*, 1167). In *La Storia*, Ida, unlike Banti and Ginzburg's protagonists, eagers to be a mother, and she is ready to 'bear' sexual intercourse with her older husband, her sexuality is non-existent if not in order to give birth – «Nora l’aveva avvertita soltanto che per generare bambini l’uomo deve entrare col suo corpo nel corpo della donna. È un’operazione necessaria, a cui bisogna sottomettersi docilmente, e che non fa troppo male. E Ida desiderava ardentemente d’avere un bambino»¹⁴⁸ (*Ls*, 296). Even when she is raped by a German soldier, the violence is described through a lexicon recalling the semantic field of motherhood: «Quell’altro corpo ingordo, aspro e caldo, che la esplorava al centro della propria dolcezza materna era, in uno, tutte le centomila febbri e freschezze e fami adolescenti [...]»¹⁴⁹ (*Ls*, 337). Nevertheless, scenes of giving birth and motherhood itself are constantly associated with the idea of death

¹⁴⁴ «“Go away from me. It's your fault. Why did you make me be born?! [...] Why did you give birth to me? You're the guilty one.” Then, she took fright like a murderess at crossing the dark corridor [...] It was she who had killed Ninnuzzu» (Weaver, 2000: 473-474).

¹⁴⁵ In Morante, dreams can be argued to have the same function. Indeed, Freud himself «emphasized that the function of placing a piece of reality in a dream within a dream is an attempt to rob it of its significance and obliterate it» (Mahon, 2002: 118).

¹⁴⁶ «Her enormous, dark hands seemed to me the hands of a murderer» (Goldstein, 2018: 153).

¹⁴⁷ «[...] the wail of a newborn. Her voice couldn't be heard. [...] her, from behind, lying motionless under the covers, and the bed stained with blood. I thought: “It's over!”» (Goldstein, 2018: 154).

¹⁴⁸ «Nora had informed her only that to procreate babies the man's body had to enter the woman's. It's a necessary operation, to which you have to submit dutifully, and it doesn't hurt too much. And Ida desired ardently to have a baby» (Weaver, 2000: 43).

¹⁴⁹ «That other body, greedy, harsh, and warm, which explored her in the centre of her maternal sweetness was, at once, all the hundred thousand fevers and coolnesses and adolescent hungers» (Weaver, 2000: 77.).

throughout the novel. Firstly, in her recurrent dreams about motherhood (represented by the presence of a doll, for example), Morante gives the idea of death through the use of colours – Ida is surrounded by a dark, black or grey space; the only vivid colour is the red of the doll she mysteriously holds, which, nevertheless, recalls blood to the mind of the reader (recalling, moreover, Agnese's dream in *Un grido lacerante*, but also toys' role in *Itinerario di Paolina* by Banti): «In uno [sogno], che con diverse variazioni le tornava a intervalli, essa si vedeva correre in un luogo fosco di caligine e di fumo (fabbrica, o città, o periferia) stringendosi al petto una bambolina nuda, e tutta di un colore vermiglio, come fosse stata intinta in una vernice rossa»¹⁵⁰ (*Ls*, 291). It is interesting that the doll is female, while her children are both male, as in *Aracoeli*, where Manuel's mother wishes for a daughter that she calls «muneca», a doll, precisely. When motherhood is imagined, dreamed and conceptualised at a metaphysical level it is always linked to a daughter-mother relationship, rather than son-mother. Images of blood return when Ida's first labour is described (*Ls*, 299: «Il parto, faticoso e rischioso, la torturò ferocemente per tutto un giorno e una notte, lasciandola quasi dissanguata»)¹⁵¹. This delivery is defined as 'risky', 'tiring', a 'torture' (*Ls*, 299), but also «come una malattia» (as a disease) (*Ls*, 351), capable of deforming permanently Ida's body (*Ls*, 351). Even if her second labour is not as long and hard as the first one (*Ls*, 365), her screams are still agonising (*Ls*, 365). Moreover, Ida feels constantly guilty of transmitting 'diseases' to her children, both literally and metaphorically. Indeed, not only Useppe has the same neurological disease that his mother has always had, but Ida herself is obsessed by the possibility to have transmitted to Nino and Useppe her Jewish origins, thus causing them to live in danger of the Fascist laws regulating race in 1938. She scribbles family trees in order to check how much they have inherited from her. Hence, motherhood is again *locus* of disease. This idea of motherhood as scary is enhanced also by the figure of the midwife who helps Ida to give birth. Her aspect is described as not reassuring, as masculine, she is called also with a male name, Ezechiele:

Ancora, per il magazzino, si aggirava la levatrice, una ebrea napoletana. La quale – nei sopraccigli folti, nel naso robusto e arcuato, nei grossi piedi e nella larghezza del passo; e persino nel modo di portare il suo berrettuccio bianco di cotone sui capelli grigi e riccioluti – ricordava una stampa del profeta Ezechiele'. [...] meno che mai si capiva se fosse una donna, o un vecchione. Anche la voce non era di donna, ma di vecchio.¹⁵² (*Ls*, 363-367)

¹⁵⁰ «In one, which returned at intervals with several variations, she saw herself running in a place gloomy with soot or with smoke (factory, or city, or slum), clutching to her bosom a little doll, naked and all a vermilion color, as if it had been dipped in red paint» (Weaver, 2000: 38-39).

¹⁵¹ «The birth, dangerous and difficult, tortured her fiercely for a whole day and a night, leaving her almost drained of blood» (Weaver, 2000: 35).

¹⁵² «In the shop, the midwife, a Neapolitan Jewess, was still bustling around. Her thick eyebrows, her sturdy, arched nose, her heavy feet and her stride, and even the way she wore her white cotton cap over her curly gray hair, made her resemble an engraving of the prophet Ezekiel. [...] Her voice wasn't a woman's either, but an old man's» (Weaver, 2000: 97-100).

Death recurs also after having given birth – the morbid kind of relationship between mother and son, traditional in Morante’s narrative, has been established. However, Ida feels that death itself unites them, and finds herself hoping to die with her baby: «E le sarebbe piaciuto di morire in quel letto insieme con la creatura, andandosene tutti e due via dalla terra, come in una barca»¹⁵³ (*Ls*, 368). The fact itself to be pregnant is defined as a ‘risk’, a ‘fear’ by Ida (*Ls*, 353). Finally, the inextricable link between giving birth and death is made explicit when Nino dies. Ida is in front of her dead son when she feels the same pain of her delivery, the same kind of suffering:

All’atto di riconoscerlo, la sensazione immediata di Ida fu una feroce lacerazione della vagina, come se di nuovo glielo strappassero di là. Diversamente da quello di Usepe, il parto di Nino era stato terribile per lei, seguito a un travaglio lungo e difficile, e quali l’aveva dissanguata. Il pupo alla nascita pesava circa quattro chili, era troppo grosso per una madre piccoletta e primipara e avevano dovuto strapparglielo a forza dal corpo. Però allora la partoriente aveva emesso urla così selvagge da sembrare una belva grande e poderosa, a quanto le diceva in seguito, canzonandola suo marito Alfio; mentre che oggi, invece, alla gola di Ida non poté uscire nessun suono, come se le ci avessero colato del cemento.¹⁵⁴ (*Ls*, 802)

The experience of dying and that of giving birth are intertwined, as noted in Ginzburg but even more in Banti. Ida feels to be guilty of the death of Nino, because his suffering and his death itself are caused by the fact that she gave birth to them. The act of giving birth coincides with dying and killing. This passage invites associations with the «third major characteristic of the Kristevan model of the Chora, (...) – Thanatos, or the death instinct» (Bond, 2012: 24) which links «the female with the impulses of the body», using Bond’s words. Another literary transposition of Kristeva’s concept of matricide happens in *Aracoeli*. Here, Manuel, the protagonist remembers – paradoxically – the time he was given birth and he describes the event as traumatic, as a separation from his mother which he had always tried to cancel by uniting again with her:

È il giorno e l’ora della mia nascita, la mia prima separazione da lei, quando mani estranee mi strapparono dalla sua vagina per espormi alla loro offesa. E s’è udito, allora, il mio primo pianto [...] Io so difatti, che il

¹⁵³ «And she would have liked to die in that bed along with her child, both leaving the earth, as if in a boat» (Weaver, 2000: 100).

¹⁵⁴ «On recognizing him, Ida immediately had a fierce lacerating sensation in the vagina, as if they were tearing him again from there. Unlike Usepe’s, Nino’s birth had been terrible for her, after a long and difficult labor, which had almost drained her of blood. At birth, the baby weighed almost seven pounds, too big for a tiny little mother bearing her first child, and they had had to rip him by force from her body. But then the little mother had let out such savage cries that she seemed a great, massive beast, according to what her husband Alfio told her afterward, teasing her; whereas today, on the contrary, no sound could emerge from Ida’s throat, as if they had poured concrete over her» (Weaver, 2000: 468).

mio è stato un vero pianto, di lutto disperato: io non volevo separarmi da lei. Devo averlo già saputo che da quella nostra prima separazione sanguinosa ne seguirebbe un'altra, e un'altra fino all'ultima, la più sanguinosa.¹⁵⁵ (*Ara*, 1057-1058)

The same accusations are made by Manuel against his mother, who is guilty to have given birth to him (*Ara*, 1165: «Ma il tuo misfatto fu di generarmi»).¹⁵⁶ Aracoeli's love and care are compared to a planned murder: «Era meglio se tu mi abortivi, o mi soffocavi con le tue mani alla nascita, piuttosto che nutrirmi e crescermi col tuo amore infido, come una bestiola allevata per il macello. In realtà, mentre mi sorridevi coi tuoi occhi innamorati, tu ammiccavi ai tuoi mandanti»¹⁵⁷ (*Ara*, 1163). Manuel explains that his mother's desire of maternity was selfish and childish – she only wanted a «muneca», rather than a son (*Ara*, 1165, 1166, 1667), recalling again the symbolical image of the doll which embodied, here and in Banti, motherhood and domesticity. Nevertheless, in opposition to Agnese's dream in which the announcement of a girl creates disappointment, here Aracoeli had always dreamed of being mother to a baby girl, embodied, again, symbolically by the «muneca»: «La vera muneca è femmina. TU avresti voluto essere incinta di una nina. E certo provasti una punta di delusione quando, circa un anno dopo, la levatrice disse: “è nato un maschio!”»¹⁵⁸ (*Ara*, 1169). Some similarities can be outlined between Aracoeli's gestation and that of Ida or Ginzburg's characters. Firstly, as for Ida, at the beginning of the novel, Aracoeli's sexuality has the only purpose of reproduction – she is not attracted by sexual pleasure, sex is rather something she has to undergo in order to become mother (until her eventual nymphomania after her daughter's death), since she cannot become mother as she used to dream, 'without sin' as the Virgin (*Ara*, 1167-1168).

Despite this great desire of maternity, Aracoeli's experience is not different from the traumatic gestations experienced by Ginzburg's fictional mothers. Her body suffers a process of «abbruttimento» (1274) when pregnant. Furthermore, it is described as a disease, which weakens her day by day:

Mia madre più sfiancata e torbida.¹⁵⁹ (*Ara*, 1284)

¹⁵⁵ «The day and the time of my birth, my first separation from her, when alien hands tear me from her vagina to expose me to their insult. And there, then, my first weeping was heard [...] I know, in fact, that mine was a real weeping, desperate mourning: I didn't want to be separated from her. I must already have known that this first, blood-stained separation of ours would be followed by another, and another until the last, the most bloody of all» (Weaver, 1984: 17).

¹⁵⁶ «But your unpardonable misdeed was to generate me» (Weaver, 1984: 95).

¹⁵⁷ «It would have been better if you had aborted me, or strangled me at birth with your hands, instead of nourishing and raising me with your treacherous love, like a little animal being raised for the slaughterhouse. In reality, as you smiled at me with your enamored eyes, you were winking at your instigators» (Weaver, 1984: 94).

¹⁵⁸ «The real muneca is female. You would have liked to be pregnant with a nina. And certainly you felt a pang of disappointment when, about a year later, the midwife said “It's a boy!”» (Weaver, 1984: 98).

¹⁵⁹ «My mother ... even more worn-out and sluggish» (Weaver, 1984: 185).

Il peso del suo ventre non appariva eccessivo; ma pure sembrava fiaccarle ogni muscolo e rallentarle il flusso vitale, rendendole il sangue più denso e vischioso.¹⁶⁰ (Ara, 1285)

Giorno e notte, Aracoeli era tutta in sudore. Il sudore le gocciava dai cigli e le rigava il volto, non era più il suo volto di prima. Guastato dal pallore, maculato alle gote, e quasi tumefatto, spesso prendeva un'espressione stupida e senz'anima. Gli occhi, prima limpidi e un poco sporgenti quali grosse gemme incastonate, adesso le rientravano nelle orbite gonfie, sempre appannati da una nebbia sporca. Nella sua passività assente, immune dalla noia e dal corso del tempo, essa imitava una bestia caduta in letargo nell'attesa del risveglio equinoziale.¹⁶¹ (Ara, 1285)

La terribile fatica della gravidanza le lasciava così poco fiato, che costantemente essa si teneva silenziosa.¹⁶² (Ara, 1286)

Not only does her son perceive her body as ugly and weakened by her pregnancy, but her delivery itself is painful and risky (1291). In Morante a deeper desire of maternity is traceable in the characters, nevertheless they end up having pregnancies similar to those described in Banti and Ginzburg, and a comparable feeling of death and catastrophe is perceived by sons and consequently by mothers themselves.

3.2. Maternal language

Even when the mothers are the protagonists of these novels and short stories, they do not always have a voice. Voicelessness in these authors' narratives has been further investigated in the chapter focusing on 'women's subjectivity'. This section will focus mainly on the role of mothers.

Banti's, Ginzburg's, and Morante's narratives with regards to this aspect are heterogeneous. They adopt different narratological tools and they also differ within their individual streams of work. While Anna Banti usually gives voice to the mothers or potential mothers in her stories, with the only (and partial) exception of *La camicia bruciata*, Natalia Ginzburg and Elsa Morante alternate mothers who are given a voice with silent ones.

¹⁶⁰ «The weight of her abdomen didn't seem excessive, but still it apparently weakened her every muscle and slowed her vital flux, making her blood thicker and more viscous» (Weaver, 1984: 185).

¹⁶¹ «Day and night, Aracoeli was covered with sweat. Sweat dripped from her lashes and streaked her face, which was no longer her face of the old days. Wasted by pallor, the cheeks splotchy, and somehow swollen, it often took on a stupid, soulless expression. The eyes, formerly clear and a bit protruding, like big gems in their setting, were now sunk in the swollen sockets and always clouded by a dirty vapour. In her absent passivity, immune to boredom and the course of time, she imitated an animal that has gone into estivation until the equinoctial awakening» (Weaver, 1984: 186).

¹⁶² «The terrible strain of her pregnancy left her so short of breath that she remained constantly silent» (Weaver, 1984: 186).

Anna Banti usually chooses the third person in her narrative, with the exception of *Artemisia* in which the first person of the author herself and of the character alternate in a complex structure. Despite the constant presence of the narrator, the point of view adopted is that of the woman protagonist. Thus, it is easier to investigate the protagonists' (mothers and non-mothers) feelings and thoughts. Through their own words, Banti's conceptualisation of motherhood emerges as shown in the previous paragraphs. In *La camicia bruciata* things get more complicated. Anna Banti, in this novel, decides to create a more polyphonic novel through the adoption of different points of view. By doing so, the mother protagonist is silent in certain paragraphs. In these passages, Banti lets the reader know what her family and society think about her. In the third chapter of the novel the focalisation changes – the narration adopts the point of view of the protagonist's sons and daughters. Their attitude towards their mother is ambivalent – they struggle between the rejection of her figure and her role, and the desire to stand by her side. On the one hand they claim not to miss her – and they do it by reproducing the patriarchal discourse as it is evident in the passages below – because she has always been a distant mother (*Lcb*, 1389: «finora maman era un'ombra tiepida»)¹⁶³ and because she is depicted, and thus blamed, as sinful and shameful for having abandoned her children refusing her role of wife and mother:

[...] recitando [...] le preghiere serali. Così esse valessero a disarmare la collera divina per le colpe che sua madre ha commesso, e, come dicono, ancora commette.¹⁶⁴ (*Lcb*, 1391)

Quanto le rimane di maman, una donna ribelle ai suoi doveri, oggetto di vergogna e di scandali.¹⁶⁵ (*LCB*, 1392)

Non le dispiace che la madre sia lontana: sta in convento, è vecchia, e se non può giovarle, ormai non le può nuocere [...].¹⁶⁶ (*Lcb*, 1396)

On the other hand, they often replicate their mother's voice from the previous chapters – they try to understand her reasons and they cannot help but loving her, despite her untraditional maternal role:

Per tutta l'adolescenza, raramente Ferdinando ha ricordato la madre in esilio, quando gli succedeva, se ne

¹⁶³ «So far, *maman* was a lukewarm shadow» (my translation).

¹⁶⁴ «[...] reciting [...] the evening prayers. Thus, these would disarm the divine wrath for the faults that maman had committed, and, as they say, still commits» (my translation).

¹⁶⁵ «What remains of *maman*, a woman rebellious to her duties, an object of shame and scandal» (my translation).

¹⁶⁶ «She does not mind that her mother is far away: she is in the convent, she is old, and if she cannot help her, she cannot harm her now [...]» (my translation).

distoglieva di proposito, aveva capito da un pezzo che sul dissenso fra i genitori era meglio non indagare. Tuttavia, nel fondo dell'animo aveva sempre parteggiato per *maman*, così bella e così diversa dalle insipide dame del Pitti. In cuor suo, la difendeva: se se n'era andata, se aveva abbandonati i figlioli doveva esserci stata costretta dalla meschinità del marito. [...] Delle chiacchiere che correivano su di lei gl'importava meno che niente [...].¹⁶⁷ (*Lcb*, 1403)

The former behaviour is more similar to Ginzburg's narrative, while the latter can be compared to Morante's.

Ginzburg uses both the first and the third person in her short stories. In *La strada che va in città*, in *È stato così*, in *Casa al mare*, and in *Mio marito*, the maternal protagonists of the plots speak in the first person. As for most of Banti's production, the adoption of their point of view gives the opportunity to read more easily the conceptualisation of motherhood and of rejected motherhood by Ginzburg. Nevertheless, in *La madre* the protagonist is silent on different levels. Firstly, Ginzburg uses the third person in this short story. The lifetime of the main character is told by an extradiegetic narrator who adopts the point of view of the people surrounding her, rather than her own point of view. This is the first way in which the mother protagonist is silenced. It has already been explained how, by giving voice, for examples, to her children, Ginzburg manages to convey the 'voice' of the patriarchal society in which women are forced to live, always judged according to strict social constructs (Giorgio, 1993) even if, sometimes, her children themselves seem to dissent with some of those voices. The second way in which the mother is silenced is by not giving her a name throughout the story. It is actually a common choice in Ginzburg's writing – at least in her first works. For instance, in *La strada che va in città* the name of Delia is made explicit in a direct speech only at the end of the novel. In this case the protagonist is always called «la madre», the mother. As if all her life should consist only in her maternal role. Finally, not only her point of view is not adopted, but in the rare occasions in which she tries to speak she is physically unable to do it. She is described as almost 'aphasic', with her low voice and her inability to articulate complete sentences in front of her family – «Non parlava quasi mai e quando parlava pareva che facesse fatica, la sua voce veniva su debole»¹⁶⁸ (*Lm*, 212). Family's (and social) opinion about her inability to cover her role properly, for the reasons highlighted in the previous paragraph, makes her also unable to communicate and express her own

¹⁶⁷ «Throughout his adolescence, Ferdinando rarely remembered his mother in exile, when it happened to him, he would turn away from her on purpose, he had understood long before that it was better not to investigate disagreement between parents [...] 72. Nevertheless, deep down, he had always sided with *maman*, so beautiful and so different from Pitti's insipid ladies. In his heart, he defended her: if she had left, if she had abandoned her children, she must have been forced into it by her husband's meanness. [...] He cared less than nothing about all the rumours about her [...]» (my translation).

¹⁶⁸ «She hardly ever spoke and when she did speak, she seemed to struggle, her voice came out weak» (my translation).

feelings or thoughts. Her narratological silence and her ‘social’ silence are ‘echoed’ also on a physical and biological level. She is unheard also because she is prevented from and unable to speak out loud. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that her silence is significantly opposed to the grandmother’s own language. She speaks dialect with the children, who perceive it as maternal, protective, and warm as her own body, and unlike their mother’s body: «[La nonna] li prendeva sulle ginocchia e diceva nel suo dialetto delle parole tenere e come un poco pietose»¹⁶⁹ (*Lm*, 206). «Poetic omissions», in the words of Emma Bond (2012), «brings into question relevant issues of truth and memory, discourse and meaning» (2012: 13). Moreover, Emma Bond explains how the voice – against silence – is considered by Hebrew tradition (and Natalia Ginzburg has Jewish origins) as a «signal of individuality and bodily existence». Thus, by not giving voice to her protagonist, the author can be argued to denounce the lack of individuality socially recognised to a woman outside of motherhood. Indeed, the absence of other tools the writer might have adopted silences to express dissent. Paradoxically, muting her character also from a narrative point of view makes Ginzburg able to convey and denounce her social silence. Furthermore, these silences become even more interesting in light of the same techniques adopted also for herself as a character elsewhere – as it is shown in the Chapter “Female Subjectivity” of this work.

Morante gives a voice to mothers only in her short stories and in *La Storia*. In all her other novels, daughters and sons are in the spotlight, rather than mothers. Their own perception of their status of mothers appears only through their children’s thoughts and feelings. Morante is the only one in this group of authors who is, apparently, more concerned with sons and daughters’ relationship with their mothers rather than with the mothers’ experience. In *Menzogna e sortilegio*, the voice writing the stories of different generations of mothers is Elisa, the only character who is only a daughter and not a mother. Anna’s rejection of motherhood is told through the point of view of the abandoned daughter. It is a narratological point of view adopted also by Ginzburg and Banti. However, in Banti it was always juxtaposed to the mother’s point of view, and in Ginzburg it had the explicit purpose to denounce the silence in which mothers are forced to. I would argue that they all stand in between the two faces highlighted by Hirsch (1989) of mothers silenced by their own daughters in search for emancipation by linking themselves to the paternal, and daughters revaluating also the maternal in order to impose their own creative subjectivity.

Also in her later novel *Aracoeli*, the first person, and thus the point of view of the son protagonist, Manuel, is adopted. It is him remembering his mother and what he has been told about her before his

¹⁶⁹ «[Their grandmother] would take them on her lap and say tender words in her dialect, even a little merciful» (my translation).

birth. He explains that he knows perfectly her story as if it has been transmitted to him genetically, while she was pregnant – «La sua storia mi era stata trasmessa, fino da quando io le crescevo nell’utero, attraverso lo stesso messaggio cifrato, che aveva trasmesso dalla sua pelle alla mia il colore moreno»¹⁷⁰ (*Ara*, 1041). Her pregnancy and her experience of motherhood is told by him according to his perception of his own mother, loved effortlessly, desired, but also rejected because she had not been able to keep alive that pre-Oedipal relationship which linked them, thus causing their catastrophic but inevitable separation. In addition to focalisation and point of view, it is noteworthy also what Morante writes about their own actual voices. On the one hand, similarly to Ginzburg, there is an ‘aphasic silence’ which characterises mothers; on the other hand, maternal singing has an important role in *Aracoeli* – indeed, Manuel often remembers his mother’s Spanish songs, even when breastfeeding him, thus impressing on his memory episodes otherwise neglected. Giorgio (1994) noticed how images, physical sensations, words and songs belonging to the «tempi della nostra intimità esclusiva» (times of their exclusive intimacy) continually break through Manuele’s account of his journey to Spain (107). As for the former, in opposition to the screams during deliveries, there is silence when a son dies. Despite this discrepancy of sounds, the two events are very close and similar. When Ida sees the dead body of Nino, she lives again the pain suffered while she was giving birth to him. Nevertheless, this time she is unable to scream or to say something:

All’atto di riconoscerlo, la sensazione immediata di Ida fu una feroce lacerazione della vagina, come se di nuovo glielo strappassero di là. [...] Però allora la partoriente aveva emesso urla così selvagge da sembrare una belva grande e poderosa, a quanto le diceva in seguito, canzonandola suo marito Alfio; mentre che oggi, invece, alla gola di Ida non poté uscire nessun suono, come se le ci avessero colato del cemento. Ecco, dopo la scena dell’obitorio, la seconda sensazione semiosciente che le resterà di quella mattina: lei non poteva urlare, era diventata muta [...].¹⁷¹ (*Ls*, 802)

In Ginzburg the silence becomes a narratological tool in order to denounce her voiceless condition within a patriarchal society. In Morante, it marks the process of separation between mother and son, it highlights the awareness of being guilty to have given birth to a damned soul.

As for the ‘maternal songs’, Manuel explains how he learnt his mother’s language through the songs

¹⁷⁰ «Her history had been passed on to me, even as I was growing in her uterus, through the same coded message that had transmitted the dusky hue of her skin» (Weaver, 1984: 4).

¹⁷¹ «On recognizing him, Ida immediately had a fierce lacerating sensation in the vagina, as if they were tearing him again from there. Unlike Useppa’s, Nino’s birth had been terrible for her, after a long and difficult labour, which had almost drained her of blood. At birth, the baby weighed almost seven pounds, too big for a tiny little mother bearing her first child, and they had had to rip him by force from her body. But then the little mother had let out such savage cries that she seemed a great, massive beast, according to what her husband Alfio told her afterward, teasing her; whereas today, on the contrary, no sound could emerge from Ida’s throat, as if they had poured concrete over her» (Weaver, 2000: 468).

she used to sing while she was breastfeeding him. Actually, Morante's fictional mothers sing to her children – from Nunziatella to Ida, and they always sing in their 'ancestral' language, being it Spanish as for *Aracoeli* or some Italian dialect. One of the metaphors Cixous uses to describe women's expression, in addition to the comparison with breastmilk, involves songs themselves. She writes that «in women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating [...] is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman» (1976: 881). But also Cavarero, studying the concept of 'voice' (2005), states that traditionally philosophy ignored 'voice' as element of individuality and being, thus relegating women as a subcategory of the male (Freccero, 2006). Since women are excluded from the categories of philosophy and rationality, they are left with only their voices, their singing, ignored by men (Cavarero, 2005: 11). In *Aracoeli* the phenomenon is more evident and interesting since Manuel specifies that he has now forgotten his mother's language and he barely remembers those songs of his childhood. This event will be more deeply analysed in the paragraph about breastfeeding, built on Gragnolati and Fortuna's intuition about the Kristevan construction of language (2009) in Morante's last novel. However, it is already evident how language is another factor which contributes to create the deep bond between mother and son, which fades when the separation is enacted.

3.3. The 'Monstrous-feminine'

In light of what this chapter outlined with regards to themes like the rejection of motherhood and the ways in which motherhood is conceptualised through language in the narratives of Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante, this analysis will now consider the works of these three authors through the lens of another theme – that of the 'monstrous-feminine', as theorised by Barbara Creed (1986). Whilst, like for other feminist theories which this chapter touched upon, these authors' work are actually antecedent to these theories, there is value in conducting a retrospective analysis in light of these feminist studies as they are particularly useful to pinpoint the feminist undertone of the stories by Banti, Ginzburg and Morante, and its implications on their '(anti)feminist consciences'. Barbara Creed uses the category of the monstrous-feminine in the analysis of horror films in order to question Freudian theories of sexual difference and in order to link this category to the reproductive body. Building on a patriarchal stereotype which traditionally associated women's body with the monstrous, Creed challenges common views of the 'monstrous-feminine' thus turning it into a tool of resistance against patriarchy itself. In her film analysis, she does not read horror female characters as victims but as actors, feared by men as castrators. She critically builds on Freudian theories according to which women's sexuality is considered to be castrated compared to the male sex, as it is characterised by an inevitable penis envy, and she recognises the same fear in monstrous representation of women

and their sexuality in horror films (1986). Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine is very helpful to carry out a feminist reading of Ginzburg's, Banti's, and Morante's texts and their conceptualisation of motherhood.

In Ginzburg, the element of monstrous-feminine is not recurrent. However, it is associated with maternity and maternal body, like in Creed's theory. In *La strada che va in città*, for example, the mother of the protagonist is compared to a witch in her appearance – «Aveva i capelli grigi e spettinati e le mancavano dei denti davanti. “Sembri una strega mamma” le diceva Azalea quando veniva a casa»¹⁷² (*Lscvic*, 7). In her case, her own motherhood and her own life of married woman devoted to domestic life and domesticity turn her into a 'witch'. The same monstrous attributes are not reserved for *La Madre*'s protagonist, whose body, as above-mentioned, is not what her children perceive as canonically maternal. Nevertheless, her young body is blamed because far from a maternal one. She is still 'othered' by society because she does not correspond to societal expectations. In Ginzburg both 'good' (e.g., *La strada che va in città*) and 'bad' mothers (e.g., *La madre*) are 'othered' by society and by their families, through different conditions of 'monstrousness', that can be physical or behavioural. In both cases it seems impossible to escape from the latter.

It is interesting to note how in Anna Banti, the use of monstrousness in association with women does not apply to mothers. Yet the monstrous-feminine is associated to these women precisely by virtue of being non-mothers. Banti is constantly anxious to show how women are forced to be mothers by the society in which they live and by their families' expectations. Thus, her purpose is to show how non-mothers are blamed, rather than bad mothers as in Ginzburg's novels. Banti's mothers are blamed because they escape from their motherhood, hence because they are not mothers anymore, unlike Ginzburg's mothers are blamed because they do not cover their role according to what patriarchy expects from them. Therefore, in Banti's narratives, the monstrous-feminine belongs to non-mothers, rather than to maternal bodies, as theorised by Creed and as highlighted in Ginzburg. Anna Banti recognises in her texts that women are patriarchally conceived as mothers, as «macchine da figli» (machines for children). This is the reason why some characters still feel the social pressure to give birth and be mothers. Violante in *La camicia bruciata* is the greatest example of this attitude. But even Artemisia wishes to be a normal mother and wife and sometimes regrets her choice to pursue her career. Both these groups of women – those who reject it and those who eagerly pursue it – use repeatedly the image of a 'witch' to describe how non-mothers are generally perceived – «Di notte, sogna di essere una strega, le streghe non partoriscono. Che io abbia un figlio, prega, a prezzo della

¹⁷² «[...] with her unkempt grey hair and missing front teeth, she seemed for all the world a peasant. “You look like a witch, mother”, Azalea would say when she came to the house» (Frenaye, 2021b: 7).

vita»¹⁷³ (*Lcb*, 1429); «La donna vecchia, invece, se non è madre, diventa una esecrabile strega»¹⁷⁴. (*UGL*, 1647). In *La camicia bruciata*, Marguerite Louise, the noble woman who abandons her family, is also depicted as a «zanzara», a mosquito. It is not always clear if the author is just using a similitude to describe her personality as perceived by others or if it is a metaphor and Banti is alluding to the fact that she is ‘reborn’ as a «zanzara». In both cases, Marguerite «non parla, ronza, sibila, punge. Non vede la finestra aperta, sbatte sui vetri. Qui c’è sangue da succhiare, fuori la luce dove tutto dilegua le è nemica. Aspetta il buio per abbassarsi a volo radente, minimo vampiro protetto da un nome [...]»¹⁷⁵ (*Lcb*, 1287). She is associated with not only the animal world, as it happens in Morante, but also with a vampire. Again, a woman who is turned into an example of monstrous-feminine (the type of the vampire is analysed by Creed herself) by the society’s perspective blaming her as ‘unmaternal’. In *Un grido lacerante*, the baby born of the dream-scene is told to have fallen among monsters, even if this element is lost in the translation – «una caduta tra i mostri» is translated as ‘hurling down into a nightmare’, thus the association with the monstrous-feminine is made possible only for the Italian version of the novel. Building on the original version, Banti seems to suggest that being born female would mean live among the monsters of patriarchy, or perhaps among other women considered traditionally as monsters. Given the deliberate ambiguousness of the passage – as shown in the previous paragraph – this ambivalence in Banti’s conceptualisation of womanhood is emblematic of the inherent tension within women’s condition in a patriarchal society which they are a by-product of, whilst simultaneously being considered as monsters. The monstrous-feminine is more constant in Banti, but it is associated with women refusing motherhood, in one way or another, rather than to mothers themselves. They are castrated, but of their own faculty of giving birth, rather than of male genitalia as for Freud. And being deliberately castrated is the only way for them to be castrator against patriarchy. While in Creed the maternal body is castrator, in Banti I argue that women castrated of their motherhood are castrators.

Mirtilla, one of the protagonists of *Qualcuno bussa alla porta*, is one of the first Morantian character depicted as a ‘witch’, as a «stray gipsy who has succumbed to madness» (Wehling-Giorgi, 2015: 201). This ‘metamorphosis’, as anticipated in a previous paragraph, has been caused by Mirtilla’s deliberate rejection of motherhood. Here, then, it can be argued that similarly to Banti’s narrative, the absence of motherhood is associated with ‘monstrousness’. The protagonist of the short story *La*

¹⁷³ «At night, she dreams that she is a witch. Witches do not give birth. May I have a son, she prays, at the price of her own life» (my translation).

¹⁷⁴ «The old woman, on the other hand, if she is not a mother, becomes an execrable witch» (my translation).

¹⁷⁵ «She does not speak, she buzzes, hisses, and stings. She does not see the open window; she bangs on the glass. Here there is blood to suck, outside the light, where everything fades, is her enemy. It waits for the dark to swoop down, minimal vampire protected by a name» (my translation).

nonna is also accused of witchcraft. Here, a woman claims that the protagonist is a witch able to make her son fall in love with her (*Sa*, 1432: «Me l’hai stregato [...]»¹⁷⁶). This protagonist is a sterile widow, who did not have children in her previous marriage. As in *Banti*, again, the monstrous characteristics are here associated with a non-mother. Even if motherhood is not deliberately rejected, the physical inability to procreate is socially perceived as monstrous. However, a certain kind of ‘monstrousness’ is associated also with mothers. In Morante’s novels, the role that monstrousness has in *Banti* or *Ginzburg* is substituted by comparisons between mothers and animals. Firstly, Morante writes also about real animals, and they are often mothers: «Ma come non s’accorge che la capretta urla, ha le doglie, sta per partorire!»¹⁷⁷ (*Ls*, 355); «È tempo di notare, a questo punto, che gli animali resi sterili, a quanto si dice, perdono in genere la loro aggressività; però Bella evidentemente, almeno per ora, contraddiceva a questa legge fisiologica»¹⁷⁸ (*Ls*, 1019). In *Menzogna e sortilegio* cats seem to even fill the lack of affection that Elisa receives from her mother. Furthermore, as it will be explained more deeply in the section «Breastfeeding», Nunziata is often compared to a goat. In *La Storia* Ueseppe perceives his dog as a second mother (*Ls*, 1021, «[...] al pari dell’altra madre di costui, la pastorella maremmana»¹⁷⁹). Comparisons with animals are even more common when Morante describes pregnant characters. The ‘decay’ of pregnant bodies makes these women look like ‘beasts’ – «Quanto a lei medesima, rimase, dal parto, così smunta, da sembrare una cagna randagia che s’è sgravata in un angolo in strada»¹⁸⁰ (*Ls*, 366). They are like animals also when they give birth or when, witness of their children’s death, they experience again their delivery, as it has already been explained – birth and death coincide in all the three authors, even if differently; in Morante this is proved also by the use of the same animalistic similitude. Aracoeli, for example, screams like a ‘rabid dog’, a ‘beast’ after her daughter’s death:

[...] tali erano state le sue urla, da fare accorrere non solo i vicini del palazzo, ma perfino alcuni passanti dalla strada. Pareva, all’udirli da fuori, un’invasione di cani rabbiosi o di belve, e lo spettacolo che se ne aveva era terribile. Essa cadeva e si rialzava e ricadeva, trascinandosi sulle mani e sui piedi come una bestia; e si aggrappava ai presenti, respingendoli poi subito con orrore; e andava sbattendosi alla cieca fra i mobili e i muri, tanto che nell’urto di uno spigolo s’era ferita in fronte. E non emetteva parole umane, ma solo voci brutali

¹⁷⁶ «You bewitched him for me [...]» (my translation).

¹⁷⁷ «How could she have failed to see the goat is howling, in labor, about to give birth!» (Weaver, 2000: 90).

¹⁷⁸ «We may note at this point that sterilized animals, according to what people say, usually lose their aggressiveness; but Bella, obviously, at least for the moment, contradicted this physiological law» (Weaver, 2000: 647).

¹⁷⁹ «Like his other mother, the Maremma shepherdess» (Weaver, 2000: 648).

¹⁸⁰ «As for herself, the delivery left her so scrawny she looked like a stray bitch who had whelped at a street corner» (Weaver, 2000: 99).

irriconscibili: finché un dottore, aiutato da un'infermiera, con una puntura le aveva interrotto la coscienza.¹⁸¹
(Ara, 1294-95)

On the opposite, yet still preserving some similarities, Ida is unable to scream when she recognises her son's corpse, however she remembers the bestial screams she made while giving birth to Nino – «Però allora la partoriente aveva emesso urla così selvagge da sembrare una belva grande e poderosa, a quanto le diceva in seguito, canzonandola suo marito Alfio; mentre che oggi, invece, alla gola di Ida non poté uscire nessun suono, come se le ci avessero colato del cemento»¹⁸² (Ls, 802).¹⁸³

Building on theories that aim to include animals within the study of history, for example (Simons, 2002), scholars have more or less recently offered new posthuman reading of the presence of animals mainly in *La Storia* by Morante, trying to disrupt the negative connotations of the recurrent parallelism between animals and characters. D'Angeli (1987), for example, has observed how animals are often protagonists of Morante's narrative – «se un personaggio come Usepe fa il suo ingresso da protagonista in un romanzo, allora l'universo narrativo può essere aperto anche agli animali, assunti con dignità di personaggi»¹⁸⁴ (66-67). Similarly, Ziolkowski focused on the association of humans and animals as illiterate (Usepe and Bella, in particular) within *La Storia*, on how animals are proper characters of the novel (2015: 60), and on the mechanisms that make humans and animals understand each other despite their different species (2015: 61). Mecchia and Giménez Cavallo (2016) outline Morante's valorization of animals as sentient beings also in her non-fictional writings – «E chi negò che i nostri compagni animali possiedano un'anima?»¹⁸⁵ (Pociba, 20). Not only Giménez Cavallo's study focused on the relationship between Usepe and animals, arguing that this «not belittle him, as if he were a non-human, but rather elevates him for his capacity to transcend biological categories and almost become unified wit» (2016: 438), but it also focused on Bella and her motherhood. Bella's maternal role – in light of the before-mentioned posthuman studies – proves

¹⁸¹ «[...] her screams had been such that not only our neighbours in the building came running but even some passersby from the street. From the outside, it sounded like an invasion of rabid dogs or wild beasts. She would fall, stand up, and fall again, dragging herself by her hands and feet like an animal; she would cling to the witnesses then suddenly repel them with horror; and she blindly slammed into furniture and walls hit walls, and even truck a corner, wounding herself on the forehead. And she didn't utter human sounds, but only brutal, unrecognisable noises [...]» (Weaver, 1984: 193).

¹⁸² «But then the little mother had let out such savage cries that she seemed a great, massive beast, according to what her husband Alfio told her afterward, teasing her; whereas today, on the contrary, no sound could emerge from Ida's throat, as if they had poured concrete over her» (Weaver, 2000: 648).

¹⁸³ On the other hand, according to Giovanna Rosa, the image of «cemento»/ «polvere» / «calce» (cement/dust/lime) recurrent in Nino's death scene symbolises rather a process of «snaturamento», following the unnatural death of a son (1995: 269-270).

¹⁸⁴ «If a character like Usepe makes his entrance as a protagonist into a novel, then the fictional universe can also be opened up to animals, taken on with the same dignity as characters» (my translation).

¹⁸⁵ «And who denies that our animal companions possess a soul?» (my translation).

that also mothers-animals similitudes and metaphors aim to nourish the recurrent «supernatural force of maternal love» (2016: 433) in opposition to male violence.

3.4. Breastfeeding

The motif of breastfeeding sheds further light on Banti's, Ginzburg's, and Morante's conceptualisation of motherhood. Breastfeeding is a relevant element also in feminist theories – in those revaluating motherhood, breastfeeding is empowering for a woman, who is able to symbolically transmit values through her milk. Moreover, it is deeply linked with the faculty of language, not only in feminist theories but also in a more ancient literary tradition, particularly in Italy. Dante, for example, in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, is one of the first establishing a link between language and breastmilk – he argues that the first language learnt is «volgare», vernacular, absorbed by the infants from «nutricem», whose role is that of breastfeeding them. This is an uncoded language, learnt only by coming into contact with her. If the link breastmilk-language is here implicit, it becomes more explicit in other works (Bordin, 2014: 299) – «Omai sarà più corta mia favella, | pur a quel ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante | che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella» (Paradiso, xxxiii, 106-108). This association is strong also in feminist theories. Kristeva,¹⁸⁶ for example, writes that breastmilk is a metaphor «of non-language, of a “semiotic” that does not coincide with linguistic communication» (1989:143). Maternal metaphors like these are numerous also in Cixous's theories (Giorgio, 2002: 16). In her attempt to encourage women to reappropriate their bodies through writing, Cixous compares women's writing – and its ink, through a synaesthesia – to breastmilk, recalling the concept of *languelait*. Again, the faculty to communicate, to express themselves through a language no more imbued with patriarchy, because no more in control of men exclusively, is metaphorically linked with the act of breastfeeding – Wehling-Giorgi outlined the same phenomenon in Sapienza (2016), stating that here as well the baby's alienation from the mother due to the absence of breastfeeding underlies the author distance from the traditional conceptualization of language as maternal.

The three authors confront the motif of breastfeeding differently – in Ginzburg and in Morante, it is much more present than in Banti. However, breastfeeding is perceived as fundamental within mother-child relationship by all three authors, as transmitting maternal values, and, in their narratives, it is often refused by mothers in order to escape from the maternal role itself or by sons who gain individuality when they stop to be breastfed. Building on Cixous' theory of 'white ink', this analysis draws a parallelism between the characters' rejection of breastfeeding, and the authors' rejection of

¹⁸⁶ Fortuna and Gragnolati (2009) juxtaposed Dante and Kristeva themselves and their discourses around language, corporeality and breastfeeding as the theoretical framework of their analysis of Elsa Morante's *Aracoeli*.

feminist labels. Helene Cixous, reflecting on *écriture féminine*, offered an interesting parallelism between the act of writing and the act of breastfeeding. Cixous states that «there is always within [a woman] a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink» (1976: 881). The role of the woman writer is compared to that of a mother – the relationship of a daughter with her mother, and thus with her writings, is the only tool she has in order to become able to love and deeply know herself and her body. Cixous strongly believes in the importance of pursuing the prerogatives of female writing, as a means of resistance which needs to be appropriated by women themselves in order not to be misrepresented by the traditional and patriarchal view and writings. Cixous claims the need for women to write in their own names rather than keep reading about themselves, to be written only by men according to old stereotypes. She underlines the necessity of the female body in the process of writing about women – women must write through and from their own bodies. By writing about themselves, women can inspire other young women writers to do the same. Therefore, she states that female writing has the same function of breast milk, thus the name white ink (1976: 881). Reading Banti's, Ginzburg's and Morante's works through the lens of this theory is useful to explore the link between the authors' conceptualisation of breastfeeding and their anti-feminist attitude – alluding through the breastfeeding metaphor to women's writing, it allows us to juxtapose the analysis of breastfeeding in their narratives and their 'anti-feminist' relationship with 'female writing'.

Anna Banti wrote about breastfeeding just once, in *La camicia bruciata*. Her characters are mostly non-mothers; thus, they do not breastfeed. Even when they are concerned about the imposition of motherhood or to be perceived as maternal figure, they do not reflect on breastfeeding. *La camicia bruciata* is the only novel in which the author alludes briefly to this motif. She writes that the protagonist's children, before being abandoned by their mother, are breastfed by a Tuscan wetnurse. The family at the centre of the novel is aristocrat and from XVIII century, thus, this was common practice at that time and in that social class. However, by specifying the nationality of the wetnurse, the author highlights the fact that these children, who live in Tuscany, do not inherit anything from their French mother – neither affection, nor culture, nor language. Because of her abandonment, but also because of the lack of breastfeeding, their mother is a stranger unable and unwilling to transmit nothing to them. This is in line, for example, with the fear of Agnese Lanzi – protagonist of *Un grido lacerante* – but also other Banti's characters, to be 'reborn' in someone else – as if the attempt not to transmit anything of themselves was deliberate.

In Ginzburg the theme of breastfeeding is more present and meaningful. In her stories breastfeeding is deeply linked to death. In *La strada che va in città*, after a gestation and a labour described as a disease, the protagonist cannot breastfeed because of her physical weakness:

Mi nacque un maschio e lo battezzarono subito, perché sembrava che dovesse morire. Ma la mattina dopo stava bene. Io ero debole e avevo la febbre, e m’avevano detto di non allattare. Rimasi all’ospedale un mese dopo nato il bambino. Mio figlio lo tenevano le monache, e gli davano il latte con il poppatoio. Me lo portavano di quando in quando, brutto come la fame [...].¹⁸⁷ (*Lscvic*, 64)

Ginzburg’s fictional mothers are distant because of their refusal to breastfeed. Delia is a perfect example of this. In a later passage she is blamed by her mother-in-law because she does not breastfeed. A comparison between Delia as a bad mother and her mother-in-law as a good mother is created with reference to breastfeeding – the protagonist appears physically unsuitable for breastfeeding (she says: «Ma aggiunse che del resto io non avevo un bel petto. Venne a guardarmi sotto la camicia. Con un petto così non potevo allattare»¹⁸⁸ (*Lscvic*, 65)). Her inadequacy for motherhood is inherent in her own persona and mirrored in the physical attributes of her body. Similarly, in *Mio marito*, the protagonist cannot breastfeed because her body does not produce milk (*Mm*, 194: «Poiché io non avevo latte, venne fatta arrivare una balia da un paese vicino»¹⁸⁹). The same physical inadequacy to breastfeed is traceable also in *La madre*. It has already made clear how the maternal body is conceptualised in this short story, and how the protagonist does not respect the terms needed to be a good mother. Her physical inadequacy involves breastfeeding, as well: «Da quando avevano saputo che i bambini stanno nella pancia della madre prima di nascere, si erano sentiti molto stupiti e anche un po’ vergognosi che quel ventre li avesse contenuti nel tempo. E anche gli aveva dato il latte con le sue mammelle: e questo era ancora più inverosimile»¹⁹⁰ (*Lm*; 208-209). This time the mother did breastfeed.

Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that a negligent mother like her, with her ‘unmaternal’ body is able to nurse. Hence, the inadequacy of her body is highlighted by the astonishment caused by the possibility of that woman to breastfeed – as if a body like hers, shameful and sinful, would be unable to transmit, through milk, any maternal value. Indeed, she is not able to transmit the faculty of language to her children. She is described as ‘aphasic’, unable to speak properly – particularly, the maternal dialect, as on the other hand spoken by the grandmother or as Dante’s *nutricem*. The

¹⁸⁷ «The baby was a boy and they baptised him immediately for fear he wouldn’t live. The next morning he was flourishing, while I felt very weak and had a fever and they told me I couldn’t nurse him. I stayed at the hospital for a whole month, and the Sisters fed the baby with a bottle. Every now and then they brought him in for me to see, wearing Santa’s cap on his head. He was ugly as sin [...]» (Frenaye, 2021b: 56).

¹⁸⁸ «I wasn’t well enough developed to have milk, anyhow» (Frenaye, 2021b: 56).

¹⁸⁹ «Since I did not have any milk, a wet nurse was summoned from a nearby village» (Lewis, 2019: 251).

¹⁹⁰ «Ever since they had learnt that babies lie in their mother’s womb before they are born, they had felt very astonished and even a little ashamed that that womb had contained them. And she had also given them milk with her breasts: and this was even more improbable» (my translation).

abovementioned theories about breastfeeding and language (Klein, 1946; Kristeva, 1989) invite associations between the protagonist's inability to breastfeed and her inability with respect to the language and to transmit it. The last example of breastfeeding in Ginzburg is from *È stato così*. Here, the protagonist contemplates the idea to kill her husband, and she associates this kind of thought with the idea of giving birth to another child and breastfeeding them: «Allora ho cominciato a pensare a quella rivoltella. Ci pensavo come prima certe volte pensavo di allattare un nuovo bambino»¹⁹¹ (*Esc*, 159). The parallelism between the two actions is explicit. The protagonist has already lost a child. She is disillusioned, and, despite her husband's desire to have another baby, they did not manage to have it and she did not want it. Before these events, she believed that motherhood could free her from her unhappy and oppressive marriage. After her mourning, she seems to realise that being a mother cannot free her. Her domesticity had increased as a mother, and killing her husband now seems her only way to escape. This image of breastfeeding marks the end of the illusion according to which motherhood could empower the protagonist. At the same time, it links, in an unsettling way, breastfeeding and breastmilk with death and blood and a sense of agency emerges. The protagonist feels the opportunity to switch from a passive role to a new sense of agency – by 'actively' killing her husband, she would be able to gain freedom. Ginzburg manages to convey the change of pattern of the protagonist, the passage from a hopeful motherhood to a disillusioned one. She manages also to convey the usual dark and dreadful atmosphere which surrounds motherhood in her first works.

In Morante's *L'isola di Arturo* there is a dialogue between Arturo and Nunziata which explains how breastmilk is conceptualised as embodying maternal values. Nunziata is shocked when she apprehends that Arturo has not been breastfed, because of the death of his mother:

“Silvestro chi era?” – ella s'informò.

“Era uno di Napoli, che rimase qui finché non lo chiamarono per fare il soldato. Un amico mio! È lui, che m'ha dato il latte!”

“Come! T'ha dato il latte!”

“M'ha allevato col latte di capra!”

“Uh!” essa notò con profonda indignazione, “il latte di capra! Che non ha nemmeno un sapore cristiano. E tu come hai fatto, a crescerci così bello! [...] Eh a casa nostra sì che t'avremmo tenuto bene! Là siamo in tante

¹⁹¹ «It was then that I remembered the revolver. I began to think about it in somewhat the same way as I had thought of nursing another baby» (Frenaye, 2021: 79)

femmine! Ci vogliono le femmine, per custodire una creatura! [...]”¹⁹² (*IdA*, 1062)

Breastmilk is necessary for the growth of a child, according to Nunziata, who cannot believe that Arturo is now a healthy and beautiful boy, although he had not been breastfed. Later in the novel, explaining his difficulty in saying or writing the name of Nunziata, Arturo suggests calling her Nunz, and adds that that name recalls an animal, a cat or a goat (*IdA*, 1090). Even if the link is not explicit, one might argue that it is not fortuitous – although she was not his mother, she is associated with the animal whose milk has fed him when he was a baby. He is subtly recognising her maternal role. The comparison emerges more explicitly in the description of her breast towards the end of the novel. Nunziata is described as: «Così piccolina e nuda sul materasso di granturco, con le sue mammelline olivastre con le punte color geranio, e un po’ rilasciate e oblunghe, da far pensare alle capre»¹⁹³ (*IdA*, 1276). Her maternal role starts to be accepted by Arturo by indirectly tracing her back to breastfeeding – even if the sexualisation of her portrait still marks the ambiguity of their relationship. The latter sexualisation is reiterated also in *Aracoeli*, when the protagonist remembers, as well, his mother’s breast (*Ara*, 1187, «[le mammelle] il più caro oggetto della nostra intimità, che spesso, anche svezzato, io ricercavo ansiosamente, annaspando, attraverso la tela delle sue lunghissime camicie da notte»¹⁹⁴).

In *La Storia*, Ida breastfeeds Nino, but she cannot breastfeed Ueseppe, due to her full-time job (2012: 382). Another example of a mother who does not breastfeed is embodied by Carulina, in the same novel, who does not produce enough milk for her twins. Thus, she asks her sister-in-law for help:

[...] la soccorse una delle sue cognate romane, la quale si trovava addirittura oppressa dal troppo latte che teneva, avendo appena svezzato di prepotenza l’ultimo figlio (Attilio) il quale, se no, troppo fanatico della sisa, a cui voleva stare sempre attaccato, minacciava di crescere mammane. [...] E in questa operazione dell’allattamento si dava un’aria di grande importanza.¹⁹⁵ (*IdA*, 469)

¹⁹² «“Who was Silvestro?” she asked. “He was someone from Naples, who stayed here until he was called for military service. A friend of mine! He’s the one who gave me milk.” “What! He gave you milk!” “He raised me on goat’s milk.” “Ugh!” she noted with deep indignation. “Goat’s milk! it doesn’t even have a human taste. And how did you manage to grow up so handsome! [...] Oh, at our house we would have taken good care of you! We’re so many women there! It takes women to care for a child! [...]» (Goldstein, 2018: 83).

¹⁹³ «So small and naked on the corn mattress, with her olive-colored breasts and their geranium-colored nipples, slightly slack and elongated, to make one think of a goat» (Goldstein, 2018: 232).

¹⁹⁴ «[...] her breasts (the dearest object of our intimacy, which often, even after weaning, I sought eagerly [...])» (Weaver, 1884: 112)

¹⁹⁵ «Naturally, her scant milk wasn’t enough for the two babies; but one of her Roman sisters-in-law helped her out. She was actually suffering from an excess of milk, having barely and forcibly weaned her last son (Attilio). Otherwise, he would have been too addicted to tittie, where he wanted to stay attached always; he might grow up to be a mamma’s boy [...] And during this nursing operation she assumed an air of great importance» (Weaver, 2000: 180).

In this passage it starts to be evident how breastfeeding is not conceptualised just as a physiological aspect of motherhood. Morante, through her characters, explains how this practice is fundamental for the growth of the child also from a psychological point of view. Attilio is told to become a «mammone» if he does not stop to be breastfed. Breastfeeding represents a unique link between mother and children, which prevents them from being separated individuals if the practice is extended. Later in the novel, after the death of her older son Nino, it is clear how Ida as someone who has given life and nurtured her son, feels responsible for his death: «Era lei, che aveva ucciso Ninuzzu; e adesso, riesumava una per una le prove innumerevoli del proprio delitto: dei primi respiri al latte che gli aveva dato, fino all'ultima infamia: non avergli impedito, con qualsiasi mezzo (magari con l'intervento della forza pubblica), di andare a morire...»¹⁹⁶ (*Ls*, 809).

In *Aracoeli*, the relationship created by the act of breastfeeding is even deeper. Manuel, the protagonist, paradoxically remembers the moments during which he was breastfed, and he is able to live them vividly every time he recalls them to his mind (*Ara*, 1049): «E tale è questo. Di fra le palpebre socchiuse del me stesso di allora io rivedo la mammella di lei, snudata e bianca, con le sue venine azzurre e intorno al capezzolo un piccolo alone di colore arancio-rosa. [...] Il suo latte ha un sapore dolcigno, tiepido, come quello del cocco tropicale appena staccato dalla palma»¹⁹⁷ (*Ara*, 1050). In her last novel, Morante makes the link between breastfeeding and the faculty of language explicit. Gragnolati and Fortuna brilliantly offered a philosophical and linguistic ‘meditation’ of this novel built both on Dante’s and Kristeva’s discourses of language, in order to explain the deep link between the faculty of language and the creation of a subjectivity (Gragnolati and Fortuna, 2009). Indeed, Manuel remembers that his ‘first human language’ was constituted of the Spanish songs *Aracoeli* used to sing to him. The fact that the memories of these songs coincide with the moments during which he was breastfed cannot be a coincidence: «Con le sue prime nenie di culla (che furono, in realtà, il primo linguaggio umano, da me udito) essa accompagna invariabilmente, in queste mie “rimembranze apocrife” l’atto di porgermi il petto e di dondolarmi»¹⁹⁸ (*Ara*, 1051-1052). The faculty of language is assimilated by Manuel through breastfeeding itself, during which he listens to the voice of his mother singing in Spanish. However, while growing up, he admits having gradually forgotten his mother’s language:

¹⁹⁶ «It was she who had killed Ninnuzzu; and now, one by one, she dug up the countless proofs of her own crime: from his first breath and the milk she had given him to the final wickedness: not having prevented him, with whatever means (perhaps with the intervention of the law) from going off to die...» (Weaver, 2000: 474).

¹⁹⁷ «From the half-closed eyelids of the me of that time I see again her breast, bared and white, with its little blue veins and, around the nipple, a little halo of orange-pink color. [...] Her milk has a sweetish taste, tepid [...]» (Weaver, 1884: 11).

¹⁹⁸ «Her first cradle chants (which in reality were the first human language heard by me) are invariably accompanied, in these “apocryphal memories” of mine, by her act of giving me her bosom or rocking me» (Weaver, 1884: 12).

È un fenomeno antico. Io difatti (mentre so usare, fino dalla fanciullezza, le lingue estere principali) sono fatto incapace, non so più da quando, d'intendere e praticare con successo la lingua spagnola. Questa parlata doveva pure suonarmi chiara nei giorni che, analfabeta, imparavo le prime canzoncine di Aracoeli; ma in seguito – essa è piombata in qualche impervio, oscuro dirupo della mia conoscenza. E adesso il suo rumore quasi estraneo, intorno al mio scalino solitario, mi si rivolta in una nostalgia negativa, di rigetto, come lo stormire di un albero abbattuto e un passero che, prima, ci teneva il nido.¹⁹⁹ (*Ara*, 1065)

As not being fed by her breast anymore implies their physical separation, this link is severed also on a non-physical level as he notes he lost what she had implicitly taught him so far. Indeed, Gragnolati and Fortuna read Manuele's retrieval of Spanish as a «progression of a specifically linguistic nature, which overcomes the stage of a language blocked at the condition of a *languelait* and moves towards a fully grown-up language (which also preserves the bodily aspect of the semiotic)» (2009: 15).

3.5. Reconciling feminist texts and anti-feminist consciences

This analysis has shown how these authors' narratives offered an alternative and non-stereotypical representation of motherhood. Such conceptualisation seems contradictory when considering the authors' own views on feminism and feminist literature. Anna Banti had openly criticised feminism in both interviews and novels. Being a successful woman writer, she had often been asked what her position towards new feminist movements was. In an interview with Sandra Petrigiani (1984), as mentioned also in the "Introduction" Anna Banti claims not to appreciate to be considered a great «scrittrice», because a *scrittrice*, a woman writer, is destined to be marginalised in anthologies and collections of only female writers (1984: 106). In her view, a woman writer will never be compared to a man writer. She admits that some of her works – *Lavinia fuggita*, for example, can be considered feminist, 'unfortunately', she adds (1984: 196). 'Unfortunately' because she hates the feminist label. Anna Banti claims that her engagement with women in her narratives is due to her 'humanism' rather than to feminism. Indeed, in her most autobiographical novel, *Un grido lacerante*, she uses the verb to be 'geaccused' of feminism (*UGL*, 1612), highlighting the negative connotations associated to this label and she remarks the distance between her autobiographical character from feminism and its theories.

¹⁹⁹ «It is an old phenomenon. In fact (though I have been able to speak the chief foreign languages), I am incapable – I no longer know since when – of understanding or successfully employing the Spanish tongue. This language must have been clear to me in the days when, illiterate, I learned my first little songs from Aracoeli, but afterwards – apart from the obsessive return of those cradle songs – it plunged into some inaccessible dark chasm of my consciousness. And now its almost alien noise, around my solitary stairway, becomes in me a negative nostalgia [...]» (Weaver, 1884: 22).

Ginzburg give similar answers to interviewers when openly asked about feminism, and she is also wrote essays and journal articles about feminism. Even if she recognises the subordinate position that women have in society, and even if she claims to share and to support what feminist movements ask and fight for (e.g., abortion), Natalia Ginzburg states, in *La condizione femminile*, that she does not appreciate feminism as «atteggiamento dello spirito» (as an attitude of the spiriti) (Vi, 647). Ginzburg blames feminism for enhancing the conflict between men and women, because of an ancient and historical inferiority complex that feminists still have. Furthermore, and most importantly, Ginzburg believes in the existence of two distinct way to make literature – a masculine one and a feminine one. She asks to be called *scrittore* (a man writer) rather than *scrittrice* (woman writer), and she admits that in the first part of her career, she tried to write like a man, not to let perceive from her style that she was a woman writing (*Lpv*, 847). She gave up these efforts later, stating that writers must write about what they know, thus accepting to write about female protagonists and female condition (this is evident in her short stories such as *La strada che va in città* or *La madre*).

Elsa Morante stated similar positions. Sandra Petrigani (1984) remembers how Morante has always availed herself of male nouns, such as «scrittore», «narratore», «poeta», rather than «scrittrice», «narratrice», «poetessa» (1984: 119). In the same text, Petrigani recalls as Morante's models almost exclusively male authors (1984: 118).

Hence, the three authors seem to share the same «pregiudizio della “femminilità”» (prejudice against womanhood) – by refusing the feminist attempt to create a female canon, they show the fear to be ‘marginalised’ in a restricted space in which they could never have the possibility to be accredited amongst the most praised male writers, their own role models (Romanowska, 2013).

They can be considered – and have been considered – mother-writers of younger and later generations of women writers. Nevertheless, they refused to be «recognised as canonical» (Lucamante, 2006: 32) by a generation of writer-daughters. Thus, one could argue that there is a parallel between them and their own mothers-characters. This is a key to reading the above-mentioned discrepancy. Similarly to their characters refusing motherhood and breastfeeding – becoming monstrous-feminine or becoming unable to communicate – these writers refuse to be ‘white ink’ and the label of ‘feminist literature’. While their characters renounce or try to renounce to be mothers and to breastfeed or who recognise the need to stop breastfeeding, for example, in order to ‘enact’ the process of separation from the mother, these authors refuse to be the ‘white ink’ (Cixous, 1976: 881) that feeds other generations of women writers. By making their characters refuse motherhood and breastfeeding, and thus refusing to be marginalised in the role of a mother, Banti and Ginzburg seem to express the rejection of their role of mother-writers – they want not be part of a separate female canon. The same aspect of her anti-feminism is conveyed by Morante's conceptualisation of motherhood and breastfeeding. Her

characters do not always refuse them. Nevertheless, the author recognises the importance to be mothers and to breastfeed as a practice transmitting maternal values and she recognises the need to separate from the mother, to almost kill her, in order to gain an individual notion of selfhood. And this separation comes through the separation from the mother's breast, as in *Aracoeli*. Breastfeeding, as well as the faculty of language transmitted by his mother's songs, represents the kristevan chora – the first stage of psychosexual development for an individual, the pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and son (Fortuna and Gragnolati, 2009: 11). As her fellow writers, likewise her characters recognise the need to stop breastfeeding, Morante takes a distance from the concept of 'white ink' for her own narrative.

Through the inexplicit use of feminist theories in order to consciously denounce women's condition, through the representation of women and their motherhood outside of patriarchal stereotypes, Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante manage to affirm their anti-feminist consciences of writers who want to stay out of the feminist canon. Whereas they manage to denounce their condition through the use of feminist narratives *ante litteram*, I argue that they also replicate their rejection of being mothers within a female canon.

This analysis has shown how Banti's, Ginzburg's and Morante's texts offer the ground for a feminist analysis of their conceptualisation of motherhood. This feminist reading has proven to be particularly meaningful in the context of these author's own conscious and subconscious views on feminism. This analysis showed how Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante conveyed a conceptualisation of motherhood – and of gender – which reflects different positions within feminist movements in Italy at the time. On the one hand, Ginzburg and Banti's characters refuse motherhood and breastfeeding in order to gain their own freedom; on the other hand, Morante conceptualises breastfeeding as locus of maternal values and as the origin of relationships which stunt the growth of the individual, thus the need for the sons to reject it and to separate from their mothers. In different ways and through different narratives, this analysis showed how they anticipate some feminist theories – such as Kristeva's matricide and abjected mothers; but also, theories about language and the monstrous-feminine. By silencing their characters, or by letting them speak out loud, Banti and Ginzburg endorsed their narratives of rejected motherhood, while Morante enhanced the link between mother and son also through language, anticipating, again, important feminist, psychoanalytic, and posthuman theories. Finally, by associating their fictional mothers to monstrous images or animals (and by offering also a posthuman reading of these) they managed to challenge certain patriarchal stereotypes and to represent women trying to evade patriarchal narrative schemes.

Through a feminist reading of the conceptualisation of motherhood in their texts, this chapter

highlighted the ways in which such feminist potential seems to be contradicting the authors' own views on feminism and feminist authorship. By exploring this dichotomy, my analysis has shown how this tension is an expression of these authors' dissent towards the conceptualisation of female writing in twentieth century Italy and their willingness to not ascribe to a canon which is not exempt from patriarchal hegemony. What may appear as a rejection of female-writing is actually a rejection of the patriarchal structures which led to its existence as demonstrated by the richness of feminist content in the authors' work. Though not seeing themselves as feminist in the context of Italian feminist movements and the development of the literary industry, these authors put forward unprecedented representations of motherhood and its implication on the conceptualisation of women which are radical for their times and contribute to foster the development of feminist consciences in twentieth and twenty first century Italian literature.

4. Friendship

In this chapter I aim to analyse the presence or the absence of bonds of friendship between women in Banti's, Ginzburg's, and Morante's novels. I argue that it is difficult to trace bonds of friendship in their plots and that if on the one hand the protagonists' loneliness can be read as an isolation caused by patriarchal impositions, on the other hand I argue that this is also product of the pessimism of these authors around the possibility for women to gather in «comunità sororali» or political movements, and that, thus, these two aspects are interlinked.

Similarly, Donovan writes about Irigaray:

Irigaray's view of ethics is criticized because she describes the quintessential ethical relationship using a man and a woman. The question arises of whether or not Irigaray is suggesting that the heterosexual couple is the model for ethical relationships. Since it is unclear whether or not Irigaray's view can be applied to other types of relationships (e.g. same sex friendships or same sex love relationships), this point of criticism remains unresolved.²⁰⁰

I am not trying to state whether or not these critics against Irigaray are valid, rather I am trying to prove that if such critics are moved against a feminist theorist. Moreover, I believe that the same reasons (analysed in the previous chapters) behind the difficulty to write in the first person cause also the impossibility to be supportive among women – the risk is to be catalogued in a paraliterary genre in which women's literature is traditionally and stereotypically inserted and discredited:

Women are often viciously insulted and shamed for writing about their personal lives, much more than their male counterparts; it's part of the sexism that lingers in the literary world as it does in the world at large. [...] So why is first-person writing deemed as feminine, and therefore quaint and trifling, as knitting and embroidery? (Lyons, 2016)

I will argue that in Ginzburg friendships are characterised by envies or contrasts and destined to end; in Morante women are always alone or surrounded and defined by men (with the exception of the attempts of Elisa from *Menzogna e sortilegio*, who, however, seeks for a maternal figure rather than a friend); in Banti women appears as inevitably enemies. Nevertheless, by using de Rogatis' concept of polyphony (2016), I will also argue that attempts to create 'feminine' bonds of solidarity are present between authors/narrators and protagonists. I will argue that while a form of polyphony created by different female subjectivities as characters do not imply the opportunity to create and express

²⁰⁰ Donovan, Sarah K., "Irigaray, Luce | Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy", Iep.Utm.Edu <https://iep.utm.edu/irigaray/>.

identity, the polyphony created by different levels of narrators/author who mirror in each other and tell each other's stories involves the succeeding in adopting female points of view and in giving women a voice.

Before delving into this analysis, it is important to look at the academic literature on these topics. If friendship, in its broadest meaning, has always been little studied, female friendship not only has had little attention, but it has been traditionally trivialised. Many scholars have reported this form of negligence. O'Connor (1992) argued that the topic was academically underrated since it was inserted within the category of the 'private', rather than the 'public' (1), and that women's friendship was «systematically ignored» and also «derogated and trivialized within a very wide variety of traditions (including history, anthropology, sociology and psychology)» (9) or seen as «suspect (i.e. as lesbian relationships)» (26). As for literature, the same conclusions have been drawn – the subject has been «under portrayed» or portrayed as «two-faced, gossipy or as a juvenile phase in the progression towards normal psychosexual development» (i.e. heterosexual relationships) (O'Connor, 1992: 10). O'Connor observes that this phenomenon has developed further in the twentieth century (1992: 96): «The purpose it serves for the patriarchal society in which we live is to reinforce women's dependence on men. For if women cannot trust or work for or be friends with women, then they must of course turn to men» (Seiden and Bart, 1975: 194). Frith (1988) argues that women are always portrayed as mothers and daughters and in relation to men, but never as friends and in connection to other women (1). Anderson (2010), through an *excursus* from Montaigne to Derrida, explains how women's friendship has been underrated because traditionally and biologically considered impossible to develop in the same terms as for men, thus it cannot have ethical and political connotations or consequences – Anderson refers to the latter in terms of a «double exclusion» (2010: 247). As for the arts, an interesting study by Hollinger (1998) defines the category of 'anti-female friendship films', which portray friendship as follows:

they rely on conflicts between women [...] obscure other issues related to women's position in society, relieve men of any responsibility for women's problems, and suggest, instead, that women should grant men primary importance in their lives because they are the only ones upon whom women can rely. (1998: 207)

Today the motif has been at the centre of some new novels by women writers – Eschner (2018) cites Elena Ferrante as one of the first to have recovered this issue in her narrative, stating that «the characterization of female friendship in Ferrante's books highlights the "silence" of female friendship in fiction elsewhere, from both the past and the present»; and Clark (2016) witnesses that

recently, there has been a growth in the literary depiction of a particular type of friendship, one that has in the past found itself vulnerable to dilution and deflection by the ostensibly more powerful imperatives of heterosexuality and motherhood. Fictional female friends are suddenly all around us. (2016: 1)

However, friendship has also been recognised as building identities, and, particularly, women's identities. Minnich (1985) argues that by telling women's stories – not only our own stories – a feeling of friendship develops which helps in discovering our own subjectivities. Her argument will be very useful to analyse the narrative works by Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante. Moreover, from the rise of second wave feminist movement onwards, «the bonds between women were openly acknowledged as an organizing force for political change» (Friedman, 2015).

As for the Italian context, the group Diotima strongly believed in the political value of bonds between women. Luisa Muraro (1990) writes about «omosessualità femminile non solo di coppia ma anche e soprattutto di comunità» (a community female homosexuality) when denouncing the need for women to gather and create emotional links between each other (192):

Sono necessari, se una donna è credente, per giungere liberamente fino al vero dio e per non finire ad adorare il dio uomo o il dio dell'uomo. [...] sono necessari in generale, affinché vi sia riconoscimento sociale e valorizzazione delle genealogie femminili.²⁰¹ (1990: 192)

Moreover, the group Numero 4 introduced the concept of 'affidamento' ('entrustment') in the essay *Più donne che uomini* (1983). An excellent summary of the definition of this concept has been given by Scarparo (2005), who writes:

In simple terms, a woman recognises that another woman has something more, un di più (as it is generally called), which, she believes, will also help her realise her full potential and mediate her access to the social world. This recognition fuels her desire to enter into a relationship of "entrustment" with the other woman. It is important to make two clarifications: first, that entrustment is not an equal relationship between the two women, and second, that the competence of the woman to whom one entrusts oneself does not relate to institutional power. (42)

²⁰¹ «They are necessary, if a woman is a believer, to come freely to the true god and not to end up worshipping the god-man or the god of man. [...] They are necessary in general, so that there is social recognition and appreciation of women's genealogies» (my translation).

Scarparo adds that the term and the concept itself have been criticised by later feminists themselves, because of its ‘elitism’ and its ‘hierarchical dynamic’ (2005: 43). However, I agree with Scarparo when she states that «the practice is still fundamental to the theoretical reflection of all women and men involved in the sexual difference networks, groups, communities and associations». (2005: 42) Finally, from a psychoanalytical point of view, Abel (1981) and Gardiner (1981) – both building their arguments on Chodorow’s²⁰² theories – argue that the self-identification and the process of creating or discovering their own subjectivities comes through friendships and ‘female’ bonds:

Through the intimacy, which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to another who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self. (Abel, 1981: 416).

4.1. Friends and enemies in Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante

Friendship in Ginzburg’s works has garnered very little critical attention. Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2000) reflects on it in her analysis of two plays by the author – *Ti ho sposato per allegria* (1965) and *Fragola e panna* (1966). In her article, Anderlini-D’Onofrio recognises the portrayal of ‘homosocial friendship’. Nevertheless, she argues that this representation hides the possibility of a homoerotic secret:

But the social order constructs women as good talkers and bad doers precisely because they are seen as human beings devoid of autonomous eros. The ‘queer’ code presupposes that they might have a Sapphic or homoerotic secret. If their transgressive closeness is an indication that there is such a secret, the dysfunctional families that host the duos might be the safest closets in which to hide it. The sum of the two codes produces the meaning that the strength of the women’s movement is connected in some uncanny way to the possibility of this secret. (2000: 206)

Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2000) offers also a reflection about how this relationship makes these works ‘feminist’ in their value (215: «the possibility of their friendships makes feminism present in the spaces they inhabit»). I agree with Anderlini-D’Onofrio’s conclusion about feminism; nevertheless, I will focus on relationships of friendship, rather than romantic relationships, and on the possibility to create female ‘genealogies’ in which solidarity is made possible among women. I will argue that

²⁰² In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Chodorow argues that the relationship mother-daughter is stronger or at least more long lasting than the mother-son one. Due to this bond, which is difficult to emancipate from, women will find their way of identification in other women before than in men.

this specific element is almost absent in Ginzburg, who enhances, rather, the loneliness of her characters.

More studies about friendship have been pursued in Banti. Most of them analyse *Artemisia*, arguing that the kind of friendship portrayed is dominated by rivalry and jealousy. For example, Streifer (2017), analysing a specific passage of the novel, writes:

Their friendship is quickly contrasted with the competition and rivalry of the four Florentine noblewomen to whom Artemisia is beholden and who visit her studio to watch her paint. [...] idle women of the upper class who seem to Artemisia envious, resentful, and litigious gossips, but with a degree of evil that renders them almost like witches or furies. (2017: 12)

Biagini (Lazzaro-Weiss, 2000) recognises a form of feminism in Banti's works, nevertheless she argues that her feminism excludes solidarity or friendship among women (432). Similarly, Torriglia (1996) states that women characters in Banti are «primarily each other's enemies»:

Within the patriarchal order, they fight each other like beasts in a circus in order to win male attention: fiercely evaluate each other according to the aesthetic canons the gaze has set up for them. Women deny each other the support which they could try to oppose their enlistment – and therefore denial of subjectivity – within the “neutro universal”. (1996: 374)

Unlike Torriglia, de Rogatis sees a bond between Banti's characters, built on art (2018). Indeed, different artists live in Banti's pages, sharing the same struggles of establish their arts and their works. There are some scholars who enhance the presence of strong bonds among women in Banti. Valentini (1996b) focuses on the creation of female communities in some of her fewer known novels or short stories:

A trait shared by many women in Banti's production is the attempt to flee from reality either by retreating into a utopian all-female environment or by pretending to be fictional heroines. This fictionalization appears in two forms: the idyll and the fairy tale. The convent is a comforting environment because it allows an all-female community to exist, providing sisterhood and solidarity. [...] (333) The result for both is a unique and painful estrangement from history. All female communities are a recurrent setting in Banti's oeuvre [...] Women gather to find support among their peers and boldly initiate an alternative society founded on the ideal of sisterhood. No such image of womanhood has been institutionalized through mythology. Thus the utopian element inherent in women's communities replaces traditional society [...]. (343)

Nonetheless, I would argue that the utopian element highlighted by Valentini in these cases makes these examples peculiar – Banti hopes in such a perspective, however she can imagine the creation of similar bonds only in a space and a time outside of the reality, while in her ‘realistic’ stories it becomes impossible for women to form links. Scarparo (2002a) analyses the relationship between Artemisia and Annella as one between mother and daughter, in which Artemisia has the role of the mentor. Similarly, Benedetti highlights how the only bonds possible for Artemisia are with women whom she can maternally take care of:

By the same token, her search for female friendship only results in her leading a “bestiale connivenza di femmine” (bestial connivance of females). The only women to whom Artemisia can relate are fragile, threatened by precarious health (Cecilia and Arcangela) or by male violence (Annella De Rosa). Furthermore, the art of painting, Artemisia’s only escape, also increases her alienation from other women. (1999: 55)

Besides this relationship which replicates a mother-daughter link rather than a friendship, also Benedetti argues the impossibility to have solidarity among women in Banti. Finally, Fanning (2017), in her study of Banti’s characters enhances their loneliness as a defining and shared trait.

I agree that in Banti’s works it is difficult to trace elements of friendships, that stereotypes of cruelty and rivalry are present. Nevertheless, I will also argue that attempts to create bonds are traceable between the author and her own characters, creating an effect of polyphony which can be associated with the political and social value that second wave feminism had attributed to female friendship; a kind of all-female polyphony which can be found also in Morante’s works. As for this last author, similarly to Banti’s narrative, I will argue that despite being rich of female characters, her protagonists remain in a condition of loneliness. There is often the depiction of a woman protagonist surrounded by minor female characters who constitute a sort of theatrical chorus in which the main character feels not to be able to be part of. Differently, in Ginzburg women are so lonely that they are unable even to face a chorus of enemies. If on the one hand their protagonists’ struggles mirror women’s struggles within a patriarchal system, on the other hand the authors seem to deny it by isolating their struggling characters against other women who apparently are not suffering from the same pressures. Depicting conflicted relationships between women is dangerous when it risks reinforcing the stereotype according to which women cannot have healthy bonds with other women. However, it can also depict an existent condition – which nourishes the stereotype – created by patriarchal systems in order not to let women collaborate and gather.

4.2. Friendship and childhood

In this section I will analyse how these authors represent friendships among children and girls in their narrative. Three different ways will be outlined. Firstly, Banti, who explores the theme the most, does depict protagonists in their childhood and their attitude towards the possibility to bond with other girls. Banti's protagonists, I argue, reject female bonds and friendship from a very tender age. However, I will also argue that this absence can be a form of seeking freedom from patriarchal mechanism, paradoxically. Secondly, Ginzburg is more focused on adult protagonists. Nevertheless, from some passages it is arguable that friendship is contemplated only at a young age for women, while they must remain within the familiar and marital environment when they become adults. This *status* on the one hand is chosen by the protagonist, on the other hand I will highlight how this is something that they accept because imposed 'from above', from a system which does not contemplate any other possibility for them. I will argue that this both represents a veiled critic to patriarchy and an attempt by Ginzburg to avoid the label of 'female writings' or of 'feminist writer'. Finally, I will analyse the absence of this kind of bonds in Morante's linking it to her positions against the possibility for women to gather artistically and personally in order to express their voices.

Anna Banti is the author – among those selected – who mostly alludes to (im)possible friendships between women characters. Fausta Garavini highlighted how her *opera omnia* is full of female characters «opposti e speculari» (opposite and symmetrical) (e.g. Ofelia and Giulia, Arabella and Claudia, Marguerite Louise and Violante) (2013: XVI). Rarely they present similar traits on which they would build a bond of solidarity or empathy. Indeed, Banti's characters seem to refuse friend(ship)s from a very tender age. For instance, Paolina from *Itinerario di Paolina* lives the moments of plays and games with her friends with pain and intolerance. What Paolina rejects, as already explained in the previous chapter, is the patriarchal component of these games (*IdP*, 24, 27). Paolina despises other girls and their games because they are too similar to their mothers and the role they cover within families (28). Thus, there is already the presence of a chorus of children – as it will later be analysed – accustomed to the patriarchal structure of the family, and a protagonist struggling between the pressure to accept it and the natural tendency to rebel against it and, thus, against those accepting it. Paolina is interested in observing and studying the universe of women, trying to understand whether she is part of it:

Sono gli adulti, naturalmente, che le interessano; e, in modo speciale, le donne. Poco importa quel che dicono e come son vestite: contano le inflessioni delle voci, tagliate sullo stesso modello di contegno, contano i gesti comuni a tutte: aprir la borsetta, accomodarsi i capelli sulle orecchie, infilare il guanto lasciando il pollice per ultimo, far scattare la cerniera del portamonete. Queste e simili prerogative hanno, agli occhi di Paola,

l'importanza di un suggello, di un salvacondotto, non tanto per l'individuo quanto per la parola che lo classifica genericamente: "una donna, una ragazza"; alla quale poi l'individuo può ancorarsi con sicurezza, come a un palo di sostegno.²⁰³ (*IdP*, 10)

There is also the seed of a polemic against the strict rules that a woman must respect in order to be part of a category that seems to be socially constructed, rather than naturally perceived. Thus, in Paolina the absence of female friendship is used as a tool to denounce an unfair system in which other women and girls are oblivious victims. However, this does not cause empathy or pity in Paolina. Hate and resentment is what she uses to take a distance from them and to stay in her own loneliness:

quel che succede domani è, invece, la malaugurata salita su un altro gradino di quella scala di isolamento in cui la bambina si rifugia per vendetta.²⁰⁴ (*IdP*, 26)

The loneliness is also the result of the rejection from the category of men, in which she tries to enter – as already explained:

Da principio la novità dei modi, nei ragazzi, la convince, la entusiasma e le fa credere di aver trovato finalmente a chi parlare: ma è una impressione che dura poco. Se con le sue pari le riesce così duro comunicare, livellarsi, coi ragazzi non c'è neppure da pensarci. Quando meno te l'aspetti ecco che saltan fuori a rinfacciarti che tu sei una bambina; una bambina e nient'altro; mentre ancora tu non ti sei figurata che cosa una bambina, precisamente sia.²⁰⁵ (*IdP*, 29)

Not only female friendships are denied for Paolina, but also male friendships. This will return also for other characters, who will try to win their loneliness sacrificing their own identities in the name of a romantic relationship with a man. When Paolina becomes a teenager, rebellious nature and her aim to avoid friendships and female solidarity become weaker and her rejection of them become more and more the result of a patriarchal code that pushes women to distrust other women through jealousy:

²⁰³ «It is adults, of course, who are of interest to them, and, in a special way, women. It matters little what they say or how they are dressed: it is the inflections of their voices, cut in the same pattern of demeanour. It is the gestures common to all of them that count: opening the handbag, placing the hair over the ears, putting on the glove leaving the thumb for last, and unzipping the coin purse. These and similar prerogatives have, in Paola's eyes, the importance of a seal, of a safe-conduct, not so much for the individual, but rather for the word that generically classifies him or her: 'a woman, a girl', to whom the individual can then anchor themselves securely, as to a supporting stick» (my translation).

²⁰⁴ «What happens tomorrow is, instead, the unfortunate ascent onto another rung of that ladder of isolation into which the girl takes refuge out of revenge» (my translation).

²⁰⁵ «At first the novelty of the boys' manners convinces her, excites her, and makes her believe that she has finally found someone to talk to—but it is a short-lived impression. If she has such a hard time communicating with her peers, with boys it is a no-brainer. When you least expect it, they come up and tell you that you are a child, a child and nothing else, while you still have not worked out exactly what a child is» (my translation).

Giocano a esser gelose. Diciamo: Giovanna gioca. Quanto a Paola essa soffre a ondate altissime una gelosia verde e folgorante come un ramarro, che la lascia poi indolorita, ma tranquillissima e come immunizzata da un tempo così lungo.²⁰⁶ (*IdP*, 109)

The presence of a chapter within *Itinerario di Paolina* entitled “Amicizia” is significant. Here, if firstly Paolina seems the most involved one in the feeling of affection that links her with Giovanna, soon seems unable to keep such a feeling – envy and jealousy appear as if inevitable between two women:

Non ci vuol altro che svegliare nel cuore di Paola un pessimo diavolello che s’irrita, respinge e quasi odia per un momento quella voce sempre così cara.²⁰⁷ (*IdP*, 107)

In *Lessico familiare*, friendship is something that happens mostly to men, or to Ginzburg’s mother and sister. It must be remembered that Ginzburg’s self stays at the edge of the narration, thus friendship might be another thing which happens to others rather than to herself. Her mother’s and sister’s friends are belittled by the patriarch of the family, but always benignly. As for her own friendships, Ginzburg enact in her pages two main stereotypes of female bonds. Firstly, the natural and inevitable rivalries between women, that will be analysed in later paragraph; secondly, the belief according to which friendship is a feeling that a woman can and must live during her childhood or teenage years, but not during adulthood, in which marriage and maternity are the only possible experiences, as for human feelings. Indeed, the only scene in which Ginzburg describes some friends is when she writes about her teenage friends, highlighting how they were kindly belittled as «squinzie». Moreover, she enhances the fact that the bonds between them have naturally decreased when they got married:

Avevo avuto, nella mia adolescenza, tre amiche. Le mie amiche erano chiamate, in famiglia, “le squinzie”. “Squinzie” significava, nel linguaggio di mia madre, ragazzine smorfiose e vestite di fronzoli. Quelle mie amiche non erano, a me sembrava, né tanto smorfiose, né tanto vestite di fronzoli: ma mia madre le chiamava così riferendosi al tempo della mia infanzia, e a certe bambine smorfiose in fronzoli che forse allora usavano giocare con me. – Dov’è la Natalia? – È dalle sue squinzie! – si diceva sempre in famiglia. Quelle mie amiche,

²⁰⁶ «They play at being jealous. We say: Giovanna plays. As for Paola, she suffers high waves of green and flashing jealousy like a green lizard, which then leaves her pained, but very quiet and as if immunised by such a long time» (my translation).

²⁰⁷ «It takes nothing more than to awaken a bad little devil in Paola’s heart, who becomes irritated, rejects and almost hates for a moment that voice always so dear» (my translation).

le avevo dagli anni del liceo; e **passavo, prima di sposarmi, le giornate con loro. [...] dopo sposata, continuai a frequentare quelle tre ragazze, ma un po' meno, e lasciando passare giorni e giorni senza cercarle, cosa che loro usavano rimproverarmi, pur comprendendo che era inevitabile che fosse così.** Tuttavia vederle ogni tanto mi rallegrava, e mi restituiva per un attimo la mia adolescenza, che sentivo fuggire alle mie spalle.²⁰⁸ (*Lf*, 1031, emphasis mine)

Similarly, in *Sagittario*, it can be read:

Ma sarebbe stata contenta di sapere che avevo anche un gruppo di amici, gente allegra con cui passare il tempo. Per esempio non le risultava che andassi a ballare, né che facessi alcun tipo di sport. Così era un po' difficile che io mi sposassi.²⁰⁹ (*Sag*, 581)

On the one hand, this end of friendships coinciding with the beginning of a marriage may make think to a sense of resignation in Ginzburg towards a system that makes female bonds impossible, but not distrust to in friendship itself. However, it is important to read, as usual, this narrative choice also in light of some stances by Ginzburg herself, outside of narrative. It is useful, then, a comparison with Alba de Céspedes, with whom Ginzburg dialogues about women's condition on *Mercurio* in 1948, and whose narrative differs deeply from Ginzburg's as for this theme. Ginzburg writes for the magazine the article *Discorso sulla donna*, and de Céspedes replies with *Lettera a Natalia Ginzburg*. Ginzburg uses the metaphor of a well to describe a condition of melancholia and numbness that women cyclically face: «[...] le donne hanno la cattiva abitudine di cascare ogni tanto in un pozzo, di lasciarsi prendere da una tremenda malinconia e affogarci dentro, e annaspere per tornare a galla: questo è il vero guaio delle donne»²¹⁰ (Ginzburg, 1948: 105). She adds that this 'fall in the well' happens regardless of age, class, or education., but that it does not happen to men:

²⁰⁸ «During my adolescence, I had three friends. In my family my friends were called “the tootsies.” “Tootsies” meant, in my mother's language, coquettes who dressed in frippery. Those friends of mine didn't seem to me to be very coquettish, nor did they dress in frippery, but my mother called them this because she was thinking back to my childhood, and to some coquettish little girls dressed in frippery with whom I might once have played. “Where is Natalia?” “She's with the tootsies!” This was often said in my family. During high school, those girls were my friends and before I got married I used to spend my days with them. [...] After I got married, I continued to see those three young women but a little less often, and then days and days would go by without my getting in touch with them, something they would scold me for while also understanding that it was inevitable. Seeing them every once in a while, however, lifted my spirits and momentarily restored to me my adolescence, which I felt was fast slipping away» (McPhee, 2017: 99-100).

²⁰⁹ «But she would have been happy to know that I also had a group of friends, cheerful people to spend time with. For example, she did not know that I went dancing or played any kind of sport. In this way, it was a bit difficult for me to get married» (my translation).

²¹⁰ «[...] women have a bad habit of falling into a well every now and then, of getting caught up in a terrible melancholy and drowning in it and struggling to get back to the surface: this is the real trouble with women» (my translation).

[...] la tendenza a cascare nel pozzo e trovarci una possibilità di sofferenza sconfinata che gli uomini non conoscono forse perché sono più forti di salute o più in gamba a dimenticare se stessi e a identificarsi col lavoro che fanno, più sicuri di sé e più padroni del proprio corpo e della propria vita e più liberi.²¹¹ (Ginzburg, 1948: 107-108)

thus, recognising a social nature of the phenomenon. The article is closed by the encouragement for women not to fall into the well, where they would be alone and unable to gain freedom again: «[...] un essere libero non casca quasi mai nel pozzo e non pensa così sempre a se stesso ma si occupa di tutte le cose importanti e serie che ci sono al mondo e si occupa di se stesso soltanto per sforzarsi di essere ogni giorno più libero»²¹² (Ginzburg, 1948: 110). This conclusion, I argue, mirrors Ginzburg's attempts to take a distance from what she perceives as accusations of writing for women about women. Indeed, if in this article she claims that reflecting on their condition as women from within a well in which only women fall does not help them in finding emancipation. Rather, they should reflect on their condition as human beings. Similarly, Ginzburg claims that she writes about humanity, not about women's problems. Even when defending Carlo Cassola from harsh critics, she states that the value of his novels is in the fact that he explores human sorrow, rather than being too sentimental writing only about women²¹³ (1971). Focusing on sexual difference is not something that Ginzburg wants to do or aims to do. This is important also when analysing friendship in her narrative, because I argue that the omission of these bonds answer to her need to distance herself from a closed category of women. The difference with de Céspedes in her reply and in her novel helps me in arguing this. De Céspedes is enthusiast of Ginzburg's findings and metaphor, however she is not as pessimistic as her colleague about the well:

Ma – al contrario di te – io credo che questi pozzi siano la nostra forza. Perché ogni volta che andiamo nel pozzo noi scendiamo alle più profonde radici del nostro essere umano, e nel riaffiorare portiamo in noi esperienze tali che ci permettono di comprendere tutto quello che gli uomini – e quali non cadono mai nel pozzo – non comprenderanno mai.²¹⁴ (1948: 111)

²¹¹ «[...] the tendency to fall into the well and find in it a possibility of boundless suffering that men do not know perhaps because they are stronger in health or more capable of forgetting themselves and identifying with their job, or more self-confident and more in control of their bodies and lives, and freer» (my translation).

²¹² «[...] a free being hardly ever falls into the well and does not think of themselves in this way all the time. They are occupied with all the important and serious things that there are in the world and take care of themselves only to strive to be freer every day» (my translation).

²¹³ Ginzburg writes it in the introduction of the reprint by BUR of *Paura e tristezza* by Carlo Cassola (1971).

²¹⁴ «But, unlike you, I believe that these wells are our strength. For every time we go down into the well, we go down into the deepest roots of our human being, and when returning to the surface, we bring within us experiences that enable us to understand all the things that men—who never fall into the well—will never understand» (my translation).

Firstly, she argues that in the well women are not alone, rather they can gather, being all in the same situation. Secondly, she recognises in the 'fall' the sexual difference fundamental for women as a tool to fight for the expression of their own voices and identities. Finally, she argues that this phenomenon is men's responsibility:

Le donne possono farci cadere nell'ira, nella cattiveria, nell'invidia, ma non potranno mai farci cadere nel pozzo. Anzi, poiché quando siamo nel pozzo noi accogliamo tutta la sofferenza umana, che è fatta, prevalentemente, dalla sofferenza delle donne, siamo benevole con loro, comprensive, affettuose. Ogni donna è pronta ad accogliere e consolare un'altra donna che è caduta nel pozzo: anche se è una nemica. Poiché è appunto a prezzo di questa pietosa comprensione del dolore umano che noi a poco a poco ci risolviamo e riusciamo a venir fuori dal pozzo.²¹⁵ (1948: 111)

This difference in the interpretation of the well is traceable also in their narratives. Differently to Ginzburg, in de Céspedes friendship is present in the plots and important in the process of characterisation. In her novel, female protagonists gather around the shared sorrow that comes from being women in a patriarchal society. As she puts it in *Dalla parte di lei*:

Nel cortile le donne vivevano a loro agio, con la dimestichezza che lega coloro che abitano in collegio un reclusorio. Ma tale confidenza, piuttosto che dal tetto comune, nasceva dal fatto di conoscere reciprocamente la faticosa vita che conducevano: attraverso le difficoltà, le rinunce, le abitudini, un'affettuosa indulgenza le legava, a loro stessa insaputa. Lontano dagli sguardi maschili, si mostravano veramente quali erano, senza la necessità di portare avanti una gravosa commedia. [...] tutte, rassegnate, accettavano, col nascere un nuovo giorno, il peso di nuove fatiche [...].²¹⁶ (de Céspedes, 1949: 21)

Or, in *Nessuno torna indietro* the plot builds on the bonds between eight women sharing the desire to escape from the rigidity of a role they are called to cover in their society.

Hence, I argue that in these two cases, the way in which the authors represent friendships echoes what they think of the feminist purpose to gather in sororities to keep fighting for their rights.

²¹⁵ «Women can make us fall into anger, wickedness, envy, but they can never make us fall into the well. On the contrary, since when we are in the well, we welcome all human suffering, which is predominantly made up of the suffering of women, we are benevolent with them, understanding, and affectionate. Every woman is ready to welcome and console another woman who has fallen into the well, even when she is an enemy. For it is precisely at the price of this compassionate understanding of human pain that we little by little rise and manage to come out of the well» (my translation).

²¹⁶ «In the courtyard, the women lived at ease, with the familiarity that binds those who live in a cloistered convent. But this familiarity, rather than from the common abode, arose from the fact that they knew each other's laborious lives: through difficulties, sacrifices, and habits, an affectionate indulgence bound them together, unbeknownst to them. Far from the male gaze, they showed themselves truly as they were, without the need to carry on a burdensome comedy. [...] Resigned, they all accepted, as a new day dawned, the burden of new labours [...].» (my translation).

In Morante childhood is protagonist, however rarely the women protagonists or co-protagonists live that phase of their lives in the pages of their respective novels. Actually, also the boys protagonists of her works do not experience the bond of friendship – Nino, in *La Storia*, is the only one surrounded by a group of friends, but Nino is not the main representative of childhood in the novel, where Usepe rather incarnates this stage of the life, and who has bonds with adults but not with other children. As for Morante's female protagonists, Ida remembers her childhood, Nunzia and Aracoeli are forced to become adult soon, ending up being trapped in childish desires. However, friendship is never mentioned for them, neither at this age. Elisa, in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, the only one living teenage years in the pages of her memoir, never searches for a friend, rather she needs a maternal figure. This quest is helpless since the women surrounding her do not seem to be eager to lead her or to take care of her – their worlds spin around the figure of Edoardo, and their relationships are subjugated to rivalries and jealousy in the name of a man. Something that Elisa does not comprehend completely – she manages to find the role of a loving mother in Rosaria. While in Ginzburg this absence is more perceivable in the plots, I argue that in Morante it is less tangible, even if stronger. Loneliness seems natural for these protagonists, who try to impose their subjectivities and to find their identities even when they are impeded by women themselves. There is the perception that Morante has introjected more the lack of need to gather for women. This is, at least, what she also thinks of herself when she faces the possibility to be part of an alternative and female canon of writers, who feel the need to gather and to state their belonging to a separate category of literature only with the propaedeutic intent to be finally voiced. I think that behind the more or less aware choice not to surround her protagonists with other women helpful in their journeys is comparable to her choice not to be part of an anthology of female poets:

Secondo me, in tutto il mondo, ancora oggi, esiste in realtà una specie di razzismo, evidente o larvato, nei riguardi delle donne: perfino nei paesi dove le donne sembrano dominatrici! [...] Basterebbe la distinzione – che ancora si usa fare dovunque, – fra scrittori e scrittrici: come se le categorie culturali fossero determinate dalle categorie fisiologiche (sarebbe lo stesso che dividere gli autori, per esempio, in autori biondi e bruni, grassi e magri). In realtà, il concetto generico di scrittrici come di una categoria a parte, risente ancora della società degli harem.²¹⁷ (Morante, qtd. in Porciani, 2019: 352)

²¹⁷ «In my opinion, all over the world, even today, there is in fact some kind of racism, whether overt or covert, towards women, even in countries where women seem to dominate. [...] It would be enough to make the distinction —still used everywhere—between male and female writers: as if cultural categories were determined by physiological categories (it would be the same as dividing authors, for example, into blond and brunette, or fat and thin). In fact, the generic concept of female writers as a separate category still suffers from the harem society» (my translation).

In conclusion, the loneliness of female protagonists begins in a tender age with some differences. This absence is total in Morante, partial in Ginzburg – but destined to be temporary when present – and Banti. I argued that in Morante the complete removal of friendships from the life of these women is due to the greater awareness of Morante in her belief of not needing forms of aggregation or separate categories for women to express themselves. Ginzburg is still struggling with this awareness. Rather, if on the one side she seems refusing it, on the other side she is accepting it as another result of patriarchal dynamics. Similarly, Banti does not seem to believe completely in the natural need to avoid women gatherings. Indeed, as for childhood she shows to be able to use the absence of bonds in a feminist key, given the fact that refusing it means refusing the patriarchal structure of the family.

4.3. Outside of the chorus

In this section I will outline how the impossibility of creating female bonds is witnessed also by a phenomenon traceable both in Banti and Morante – in their works, I will argue, when the protagonists become adults, the constant in their life is not only loneliness, but also the feeling of being excluded from a group of people (women) to which they are not able to belong. The protagonists are alone attempting to be accepted in a ‘chorus’ of women hostile to them. What links these groups of women is not friendships, again, rather the acceptance of rules and expectations on women’s roles, and the disrespect for women who do not do the same. In Ginzburg, I will, argue, this ‘chorus’ is not present because loneliness for her women reaches the level that neither those accepting patriarchy are able to gather.

The feeling that Banti’s minor characters are a chorus subsisting of only women in which protagonists cannot mirror themselves is traceable in different novels or short stories. In *Lavinia fuggita* the narrator describes her as outside of a chorus of malicious and deceptive women (*Lav*, 485: «Lavinia non aveva malizie e intrighi come quest’altre del **coro**» emphasis mine).²¹⁸ In *La signorina* the protagonist tries to be part of this chorus, in the attempt to live according to what society expects from her role as a wife:

Le mogli che incontrava erano ragazze vivaci, con qualche cognizione di letture, di pitture, soprattutto di musica: nessuna aveva lavorato, ma conoscevano un sacco di gente e avevano la conversazione facile. Non

²¹⁸ «Lavinia had no malice and intrigue like these others in the choir» (my translation).

l'avevano in simpatia, quelle donne, ma le apparivano così seducenti e ardite che, quasi a difesa, si applicò a migliorare il proprio aspetto con un lieve trucco, tanto da non scomparire fra quelle bellezze.²¹⁹ (*Ls*, 1519)

A different kind of chorus is described in *La camicia bruciata* in which the protagonist, escaped from her house and family and finding shelter in a monastery, finds female solidarity in a group of nuns, whom she compares to her family unable to love her:

Sono così mansuete, le poverine, così pazienti, che lei comincia a sperare di amarle come sorelle. Madre, marito, figli non l'hanno forse abbandonata? Ha dunque il diritto di trasferire su quelle tapine i suoi affetti e di esserne ricambiata.²²⁰ (*Lcb*, 1377)

In this case, empathy rather than hostility is found in this 'chorus'. However, this empathy fits in the kind of female bonds that Valentini (1996b) highlights in *Banti*, but that are only possible in 'a utopian all-female environment' or in peculiar communities such as the religious community encountered by Marguerite Louise, but that is impossible to find in circumstances not circumscribed in this utopian essence.

Artemisia is another example in which the protagonist tries, in vain, to be part of the chorus. There are different passages in the novel in which Artemisia's hope to create female bonds is made explicit. Not only would it be beneficial for her, disappointed from a world of men that betrayed her in different ways, but she herself eagers to cover a salvific role for the women she meets:

[...] la bella figliola, così valente, una perla, ha un marito bestiale che la batte per gelosia. "Salvarla bisogna" fiammeggia Artemisia che nulla farebbe indietreggiare quando s'immagina che il teatro delle azioni si metta in movimento.²²¹ (*Art*, 339)

Artemisia knows, however, that women are skeptical on this possibility, and they approach her with suspicion:

²¹⁹ «The wives she met were lively girls, with some knowledge of reading, painting, especially music: none had worked, but they knew a lot of people and had easy conversation. They did not like her, those women, but they seemed so seductive and daring that, almost in defence, she committed to improving her appearance with some light make-up, so as not to disappear in all that beauty» (my translation).

²²⁰ «They are so meek, the poor things, so patient, that she begins to hope to love them as sisters. Have not her mother, husband, and children abandoned her perhaps? She has the right, therefore, to transfer her affections to them, and to be reciprocated» (my translation).

²²¹ «This lovely girl, so talented, a pearl among women, has a brutal husband who beats her out of jealousy. "Someone must save her", says Artemisia passionately, for nothing can make her draw back once she imagines that a course of action has been set in motion» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 138).

Le donne non sono amiche che a paio, sapevo bene che insieme parlavano di me in punta di labbra, pure stillavano di gran sotterfugi per trovarmi sola e aprirsi meco nei più strani discorsi.²²² (*Art*, 281)

The leitmotiv of the inaccessible chorus of women returns when Agnese becomes an adult and gets married (*UGL*, 1607: «[...] il timore di non essere gradita e troppo diversa dalle donne del suo ambiente, buone borghesi e buone madri o nonne, compiaciute dei loro salotti, delle loro amicizie e persuase del proprio patrimonio culturale»).223

Nevertheless, it is important to quote a passage from *Artemisia*, in which the protagonist, after becoming aware of the impossibility to see her need of female bonds satisfied, reflects on the political implication of this ‘feminine’ tendency and on the nature of the rivalries that divide women:

Nessuno le può far male quanto una donna [...] “Vedete queste femmine” avrebbe dovuto dire, “Le migliori, le più forti, quelle che più somigliano ai valentuomini: come son ridotte finte e sleali tra loro, nel mondo che voi avete creato, per vostro uso e comodità. Siamo così poche e insidiate che non sappiamo più riconoscerci e intenderci o almeno rispettarci come voi vi rispettate. Per gioco ci lasciate libere, in un arsenale di armi velenose. Così noi soffriamo...”²²⁴ (*Art*, 341-342)

Here Banti shows not to be only a victim of what has been theorised as a trivialisation of female bonds, rather she is aware and convinced that there is nothing natural in this impossibility. The incapacity of women to recognise themselves, understand and respect each other is another phenomenon socially and culturally constructed, aimed by men to separate them and make them weaker. In this sense, Banti is closer to de Céspedes’ conceptualisation of the ‘fall in the well’ (1948) than to Ginzburg’s, being the masculine responsibility central in both the authors. Thus, also the chorus of women against her protagonists is a tool of patriarchy against women that feel the need not to adequate to its prescriptions, rather than a natural tendency of female behaviour.

²²² «Women can only be friends in twos. I was well aware that they whispered about me when they were together, and yet they were constantly resorting to all sorts of subterfuge to be alone with me and open up their hearts to me in the strangest conversations» (D’ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 66).

²²³ «[...] the fear of being unwelcome and too different from the women of her milieu. They were good bourgeois women and good mothers or grandmothers, pleased with their drawing rooms, their friendships and convinced of their own cultural heritage» (my translation).

²²⁴ «No one can hurt her as much as another woman [...] “Look at these two women” she should have said “two of the best, the strongest, two who most resemble exemplary men. See how they have been driven to being false and disloyal to one another in the world that you have created for your own use and pleasure. We are so few and so besieged that we can no longer recognize or understand or even respect each other as you men do. You set us loose, for fun, in an arsenal of poisonous weapons. And so we suffer...”» (D’ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 144-142).

In Ginzburg, it is rarer to find a chorus of women against the protagonist. It is more common that a series of lonely women wanders in the plots of the novel, encountering each other, unable to mirror one another thus to find support. Moreover, the women put in front of each other are often opposites. The protagonist of *È stato così*, for example, struggling in her role of wife and mother, lonely and depressed, can see in her friend Francesca another type of woman, not married, apparently freer. However, also Francesca is not able to find happiness in her condition. This is a scheme which often returns in Ginzburg's novels. Women are not gathered in choruses because loneliness for them is all-embracing. This is what is also theorised in *Discorso sulle donne* (1948). Ginzburg, unlike de Céspedes, believes that the well is only an obstacle because they keep being alone in it. In what de Céspedes identifies as the base of women's fights because the common ground of a sorrow shared by a whole category, Ginzburg sees a tool of further isolation. Neither women less aware of their condition manage to gather in a chorus subjected to patriarchy. The refusal of a category of women is traceable also here – women are victims, but every victim suffers from a different kind of sorrow. This is the reason why, I argue, Ginzburg's protagonists are alone. While in Banti awareness of their condition makes few women exceptions wandering in search for an identity and meeting choruses of enemies not aware of what they are undergoing, in Ginzburg also less aware women are alone in their subjugation. On the one side, class, race or education do not impact their 'fall in the well' – we are far from the theorisation of intersectionality –, on the other hand every 'fall' is different. Women cannot understand each other; thus, they are unable to support each other.

As for Morante, some traits highlighted also in Ginzburg and Banti are traceable. Firstly, the loneliness of women protagonists. Morante's main characters are alone, with their children, but often without husbands (for different reasons: they can be dead as in *La Storia*, or geographically or emotionally distant as for *Menzogna e sortilegio*, *Aracoeli*, *L'isola di Arturo*).

Secondly, as in Banti, also in Morante there are situations in which the protagonists are surrounded by other women but outside of the chorus they form. In *La Storia* this is evident when Ida finds shelter with other people displaced by the war. In that occasion she finds herself among other mothers, but she remains in silence, on the edge, and she is never part of a group of women sharing experiences and difficulties. *Aracoeli* is immersed in a new environment in which she does not manage to free herself from the label of stranger – the women part of the family of her husband surround her but do not include her in a bond of solidarity or support. This and other traumas will push her to escape towards a life that this chorus of women can only despise. The only women able to offer support to some of these protagonists are the *mammane* who help Ida and Nunzia, for example, to give birth to their children. However, as analysed in the previous chapters, they acquire the semblance of men, or

at least of genderless figure, almost ‘mythical’, who appear and disappear in few pages. In *La Storia* the midwife is called ‘Ezechiele’, a masculine name, because her appearance resembles that of a portrait of the homonym prophet:

[...] nei sopraccigli folti, nel naso robusto e arcuato, nei grossi piedi e nella grandezza del passo; e perfino nel modo di portare il suo berrettuccio bianco di cotone sui capelli grigi e riccioluti – ricordava una stampa del profeta Ezechiele.²²⁵ (*Ls*, 365)

E a vederla qui in casa sua – con una vestaglia di cotone lunga che pareva una tunica – meno che mai si capiva se fosse una donna, o un vecchione. Anche la voce non era di donna, ma di vecchio.²²⁶ (*Ls*, 367)

Similarly, in *L’isola di Arturo*, there is a paragraph entitled “Mammàna” in which the labor of Nunzia is described. The portrait of the ‘mammana’ (a midwife) is very similar to that previously read in *La storia*:

[...] sebbene portasse le vesti, lei non si poteva annoverare propriamente fra le femmine [...] la si sarebbe detta un qualche soldatuccio della flotta turca, reincarnatosi nel ruolo di mammàna [...] e vicino alle altre donne pareva una **gigantessa** [...] sul labbro le cresceva un poco di baffi, e perfino dei peli di barba sul mento, Aveva piedi e mani enormi, denti lunghi e irregolare e una voca sgraziata, cupa, piuttosto rauca.²²⁷ (*IdA*, 1163, emphasis mine)

Morante highlights through her characters’ point of view the ‘ambiguity’ of these women, the only ones from whom the protagonists must accept help and support. It is, thus, interesting that neither in this case they have the feeling to have a bond with a woman. They are, rather, genderless human being, who convey also something magical (Morante uses the word «gigantessa»)²²⁸.

²²⁵ «In the shop, the midwife, a Neapolitan Jewess, was still bustling around. Her thick eyebrows, her sturdy, arched nose, her heavy feet and her stride, and even the way she wore her white cotton cap over her curly gray hair, made her resemble an engraving of the prophet Ezekiel» (Weaver, 2000: 97).

²²⁶ «And seeing her here at home — with a long cotton robe that looked like a tunic — it was harder than ever to tell whether she was a woman or an old man. Her voice wasn’t a woman’s either, but an old man’s» (Weaver, 2000: 100).

²²⁷ «[...] although she wore women’s clothes, she couldn’t be properly numbered among women. [...] you would have said she was some petty soldier of the Turkish fleet, reincarnated as a midwife. [...] near other women, she seemed a giantess. [...] over her lip grew a small mustache, and on her chin some beard hairs. She had enormous feet and hands, long, irregular teeth, and an unpleasant voice, dark and rather hoarse» (Goldstein, 2018: 153).

²²⁸ Many years later, Antonella Ossorio will break the gender stereotypes in her historical novel *La mammàna* (2014) by giving voice to a transgender woman who decides to dedicate her life to midwifery, in order to experience somehow the act of giving birth.

Loneliness is peculiar of the characters of all three the authors taken into consideration. While in Banti and Morante they are exceptions against groups of women subjugated to patriarchal prescriptions, in Ginzburg all women are alone, but every loneliness is different, thus the impossibility to bond, building a relationship on a shared struggle. In all the three cases, I argue that what de Rogatis in Ferrante defined polyphony can be traced. De Rogatis (2016) defines polyphony the intertwining of two different voices (Elena's and Lila's, in Ferrante's case) in the narration of the same story, with the result that one finds validation in the other. There is polyphony in Banti and Morante every time that a protagonist clashes against a 'chorus' of women; there is polyphony in Ginzburg summing the loneliness of every woman. What is different compared with de Rogatis' concept of polyphony (2016) is that in these authors polyphony prevents female friendship. Similarly to Elena and Lila in Ferrante as read by de Rogatis, the differences and the different sorrows of Alessandra and Fulvia in *Dalla parte di lei*, for example, was the glue of their relationship (de Rogatis, 2016: 128-9: «La spirale di perdita e accrescimento dell'amicizia femminile si traduce poi in un'altra strategia formale particolarmente riuscita: una narrazione polifonica, duale, grazie alla quale la voce narrante di Elena si sdoppia in quella dell'amica»²²⁹ If in Ferrante, according to de Rogatis, «la polifonia femminile è anche una risposta sedimentata nella forma a[l] monologismo maschile»²³⁰ (2016: 130), in Banti, Morante, and Ginzburg female polyphony is the result of «monologismo maschile» but not its solution, at least as for relations among characters. Relations between narrators/authors and characters represent a different case, as it will be analysed later.

4.4. (Im)possible bonds between women

Here I will reflect on the nature of the impossibility for women to bond, which seems social constructed in Banti, and more inevitable in Ginzburg and Morante. Furthermore, I will explain, as earlier anticipated, how the choice of different levels of narration and narrators contrasts with their statements about the impossibility for women to bond, and how it makes these narrative close to de Rogatis' concept of polyphony (2016).

It is evident throughout her novels – and as it has been above argued and explained – that Banti herself is skeptical towards female solidarity and the possibility to create strong friendships able to free

²²⁹ «The spiral of loss and growth in female friendship eventually results in another formal strategy which is particularly successful: the use of polyphonic narrative, whereby Elena's voice doubles up with that of her friend's» (de Rogatis, 2019b).

²³⁰ «The female polyphony is also an answer to the violence of men and their intellectual autism/inability» (de Rogatis, 2019b).

women in other fields of their lives. In *Vocazioni indistinte*, for example, the protagonist Ofelia takes distance from her cousin not in name of a rebellion against social impositions, but, at the contrary, because her cousin, by deciding to study and work instead of getting married, is despised by Ofelia. When, later in the plot, Ofelia is forced to find a job and to live a life like her cousin's, she starts empathising with her and the two are now linked by a bond of solidarity. However, the impossibility for them to stay united and share their struggles emerges as impossible in the last scene of the short story (*Voc*, 242). Indeed, the two women are reflecting on their destinies and their existence, and while intimacy and empathy are being reached, her cousin must leave because of her job. The two women return to their inevitable loneliness. If at the beginning of the story the two of them seemed to be divided by personal and natural hostilities, at the end they are divided by social impediments. Furthermore, in her interview for Sandra Petrignani (1984: 106), as previously mentioned, Banti explains why she does not consider herself a feminist also by denouncing the malicious nature of women, who are not able to link to each other without jealousy and intrigue (106, «le donne sono cattive verso le altre donne. Sono invidiose. Non sopportano che un'altra si distingua in qualcosa»²³¹). However, how it has been highlighted in some passages from *Artemisia* for example, it is also clear that she does not believe completely in the stereotype according to which the impossibility for women to bond with each other is 'natural'. Rather, she seems to blame a system made up by men in order to divide women to keep them subjugated. Indeed, some characters, such as Agnese Lanzi in *Un grido lacerante*, openly admit wishing for and being able to create friendships, nevertheless they never succeed in it (*UGL*, 1640: «all'amicizia, invece, era stata sempre sansibilissima e anche dolorosamente»²³²). This awareness undergirds Anna Banti's depiction of lonely women. However, Artemisia's desire to create female bonds is arguably also Banti's (as a narrator) desire. It is evident in the way in which she links her own persona to Artemisia's character in the novel, through a levelled structure in which narrator and characters become «compagne» (companions), as seen in the previous chapters:

mi porto dietro Artemisia, poco conta dove mi trovo, oggi le sono compagna sui monti di macerie che basta aver visto una volta.²³³ (*Art*, 280)

²³¹ «Women are mean towards other women. They are envious. They cannot stand that another one stands out in something» (my translation).

²³² «Friendship, on the other hand, had always been very unfriendly and also painfully so» (my translation).

²³³ «I carry Artemisia round with me in fragments. It matters little where I happen to be: today I am keeping her company on the heaps of rubble which it is enough to have seen just once» (D'ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 66).

Banti believes and depicts the impossibility for women to be friends, nevertheless she recognises the potential in such a relationship, by reserving for herself an empowering bond with her character. This hope is narrativized in the short story *Il bastardo*, a *unicum* as for female friendship in Banti's oeuvre. Here Cecilia and Francesca find support and shelter from a society which prevents them from expressing freely their subjectivity:

E poi si allacciano alla vita, le due amiche, e si sporgono alla finestra con lo slancio di due rondini che si tuffino insieme nel volo. Il candido fervore di Cecilia scioglie a poco a poco la ritrosia di Francesca, e trasforma la leggenda banale di due giovani bellezze in una coscienza di forza e di potenza. Gli apprezzamenti degli invitati non turbano il riflesso che l'una coglie dell'altra, a incremento di sé. Tante grazie e così intatte, riscattano, in due esemplari, una specie che non è nata per caso, né invano. Ecco un momento in cui non è difficile né ingrato trovarsi donna, ma sembra anzi che soltanto una donna possa pensare, agire, convincere, e mutare in bene ogni male. [...] gli occhi di Cecilia versano in quelli di Francesca una fede ristoratrice.²³⁴ (*Bb*, 568-569)

Non c'è dubbio, Cecilia è smarrita e ha scelto di rifugiarsi da lei. L'impresa della pioniera, della donna forte, cede a questa immagine. Due amiche furono e son rimaste. Si sarebbero intese fino alla vecchiaia, non si sarebbero più perdute.²³⁵ (*Ib*, 653)

This doubleness – pessimism towards the practical possibility to be friends among women and awareness of the personal and social potential of such a bond – is witnessed also for the portrayal of Agnese Lanzi, Banti's heteronym, in *Un grido lacerante*. When Agnese is just a child, unlike Paolina, she dreams of having a friend (*UGL*, 1535: «Nella scuola nuova la aspettava una sorpresa, il compimento di un suo desiderio: un'amica»).236 Later in the novel, she admits the utopian aspect of desiring a female friendship, but she also states how fundamental it is to believe in it:

²³⁴ «And then the two friends latch on to life and lean out of the window with the impetus of two swallows diving into flight together. Cecilia's candid fervour gradually dissolves Francesca's reluctance and transforms the banal legend of two young beauties into a consciousness of strength and power. The appreciation of the guests does not disturb the reflections that one catches of the other, and that makes them bigger and more complete. So many graces and so intact redeem, in two specimens, a species that was not born by chance, nor in vain. Here is a time when it is neither difficult nor ungrateful to find oneself a woman, but rather it seems that only a woman can think, act, convince, and change every evil into good. [...] Cecilia's eyes pour restorative faith into Francesca's» (my translation).

²³⁵ «There is no doubt, Cecilia is lost and has chosen to take refuge in her. The undertaking of the pioneer, the strong woman, yields to this image. They were and remained two friends. They would understand each other until old age, they would never lose each other again» (my translation).

²³⁶ «In the new school a surprise awaited her, the fulfilment of her wish: a friend» (my translation).

Era amicizia? Adesso davanti ai suoi cataloghi e alle sue cifre, ripensando a come essa era nata e a poco a poco illanguidita, si chiedeva se altrove nel misterioso Universo in cui credeva l'amicizia non fosse, come il respiro, condizione di vita. Questa utopia della cui irrealtà si doleva, le era necessaria, non sopportava che fosse un concetto astratto.²³⁷ (*UGL*, 1536)

In Ginzburg there are even fewer examples in which the protagonists, subjugated by the domestic life and their families, find relief in a friend. It is what happens to the main character of *È stato così*:

Francesca è rimasta da noi venti giorni. Ero molto contenta e mi faceva bene parlare con lei. Non mi spaventavo tanto quando la bambina aveva la diarrea e lei mi maltrattava un po' quando mi spaventavo ma in un modo che mi faceva bene. E qualche volta mi persuadeva a lasciare la bambina con Gemma e andavamo al cinema lei e io. Era una cosa piacevole alzarsi al mattino e trovare Francesca per la casa con una gran vestaglia di raso bianco e la faccia impiastricciata di crema e chiacchierare fino all'ora del pranzo. Era un gran sollievo avere lei per parlare.²³⁸ (*Esc*, 124)

Here Francesca becomes the only interlocutor for the protagonist, who, otherwise, is deprived of her own voice when in presence of her husband, as seen previously.

Moreover, as early anticipated, bonds between women in Ginzburg are made impossible also because of the 'natural' rivalries and jealousy that seem to be inevitable for them. When she describes the first encounters with one of her dearest friends in *Lessico Familiare*, Ginzburg admits that she felt initial aversion:

Vedevo a volte passare, sul corso Re Umberto, una ragazza che mi sembrava odiosa e bellissima [...]. Chiesi a Lisetta se sapeva chi era. – Quella, – mi disse di Lisetta, – è una del D'Azeglio, che va bene in montagna e che si dà molta importanza. – Odiosa, – dissi, – odiosa, e molto bella –. La ragazza odiosa abitava in una traversa del corso, al pianterreno; e io la vedevo, a volte, d'estate, affacciata alla finestra, che mi guardava con

²³⁷ «Was it friendship? Now in front of her catalogues and figures, thinking back on how she had been born and little by little weakened, she wondered if elsewhere in the mysterious Universe, in which she believed, friendship was not, like breathing, a condition of life. This utopia, the unreality of whose unreality she grieved, was necessary to her; she could not bear this being an abstract concept» (my translation).

²³⁸ «Francesca stayed with us for three weeks. I was very happy all this time, and it did me good to talk to her. I was no longer so nervous over the baby's diarrhoea, and when I did show some nervousness, she teased me out of it. Sometimes she persuaded me to leave the baby with Gemma while we went to a moving picture together. It was fun to get up in the morning, find Francesca wandering about the house in a long white satin wrapper and cold cream on her face and pass the time of day with her until it was time for lunch. It was, in fact, a relief to have her to talk to» (Frenaye, 2021: 46-47).

gli occhi socchiusi, le labbra sprezzanti disgustate, i bruni capelli tagliati alla paggio intorno le bronzee gote, l'espressione annoiata e misteriosa. Dissi a Lisetta: - è proprio una faccia da schiaffi! ²³⁹ (*Lf*, 1028)

It is the same aversion that Banti claimed for herself, as witnessed in the above quoted interview, and that her protagonists live, as explained (see Artemisia and her attempts to be mentor of fragile women). And it is readable considering the definition of chorus of the previous paragraph. This natural aversion among women prevents them from creating a chorus in Ginzburg and make the protagonists in Banti and Morante outsiders of the chorus of women.

Nevertheless, even if the protagonists are alone, or outside of a what I defined as a chorus of women, they are often entangled in a genealogy of *narratrici* (narrators) and female authorship. As explained in the first chapter, Ida tells her story to a woman who decides to write it up. This bond is not a typical friendship, however, links them deeply and legitimate the story of the former and the voice of the latter. Similarly, Elisa tells other women's story in order to tell hers, and through their voices and their writings she builds her subjectivity. And it has already been explained how Banti reflects herself in Artemisia, or how Agnese Lanzi is a heteronym. While, if one takes into consideration characters, de Rogatis' polyphony was sterile as for women's bonds in these works, as for narrators it becomes prolific. de Rogatis writes about Ferrante:

La polifonia di Elena e Lila è una forma parlante e ambivalente: la sola che può dare vita ad un punto di vista femminile in grado di nominare la ferocia cui le donne sono sottoposte senza ridurle al ruolo stereotipato delle vittime, senza fare della narrazione che le racconta una vicenda patetica e lacrimevole. Storicamente rappresentato e percepito dalle stesse donne come silenzioso e invisibile, oppure al massimo come gregario e subordinato, il punto di vista femminile non può mettersi al centro di questa narrazione in modo immediato e irriflesso. Arriva a questa centralità attraverso una complessa costruzione, una premessa e una cornice che rafforzano attraverso lo sdoppiamento la loro ragione d'essere.²⁴⁰ (2016: 130)

²³⁹ O«n the Corso Re Umberto, I sometimes saw a young woman pass by whom I deemed both detestable and beautiful (...). I asked Lisetta if she knew her. "That," Lisetta said to me, "is a D'Azeglio girl. She's a good mountaineer and has a high opinion of herself. She's detestable." I said, "She's detestable and very beautiful. The detestable girl lived on the ground floor of a building on one of the streets off the Corso. I sometimes saw her in the summer at her window, her brown hair in a pageboy cut framing her bronzed cheeks. She watched me with her half-closed eyes, her mouth disdainful and disgusted, her expression bored and mysterious. I said to Lisetta, "She's got a face asking to be slapped!"» (McPhee, 2017: 97).

²⁴⁰ «The polyphony of Elena and Lila is ambivalent: the only narrative form that can give voice to a female point of view that expresses the ferocity which women are subjected without reducing them to the stereotypical role of victims, without making the narrative pathetic and melodramatic. Historically represented and perceived by the two women themselves as silent and invisible, the female point of view cannot be at the center of this narrative in an immediate and unreflective way. It gets to this centrality through a complex building, a premise and a frame that get stronger through the splitting/doubling their reason for being. Only an exceptional circumstance justifies this centrality: a death, or a disappearance, an absence» (de Rogatis, 2019b).

Similarly, the multiplicity of the voices narrating women's stories in these novels manage to adopt the female point of view, traditionally silenced. Struggling between the need not to be ghettoised in stereotypical categories and the need to denounce what women undergo, these authors renounce to the possibility to create a female genealogy for themselves but manage to create it among themselves and their characters. The concept of a female genealogy between women in literature, in this specific case, is again traceable and theorised by Ferrante herself in *La frantumaglia* (2016):

Abbiamo bisogno, tutte, di costruirci una nostra – diciamo – genealogia che ci inorgoglisca, ci definisca, ci permetta di vederci fuori dalla tradizione in base a cui gli uomini da millenni ci guardano, ci rappresentano, ci valutano, ci catalogano.²⁴¹ (347)

But even before Ferrante, and contemporarily to Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante, Laudomia Bonanni used to talk about «gineceo letterario» when referring to her epistolary relationship with other writers and when highlighting the importance to gather to win the opposition of all-male literary criticism. The difference with these authors lays in the fact the Bonanni was never hesitant to express her womanhood in her literature. I argue that this attitude caused her exclusion from the literary canon of that period. It is significant that amongst the names of the female genealogy she created, few are still popular, studied or read – all victims of what can be defined as a common and shared destiny of Italian women writers. Moreover, her attitude so open towards women writers and colleagues, and less benevolent towards male writers and critics did not help her. She wrote to some of them to complain about their lack of attention to her works (Arnaldo Bocelli, Alessandro Bonsanti, Giuseppe De Robertis). Someone used the term 'protofeminism' for her (Samaritani, 2006), even if her feminism is considerable 'proto' only in Italy, since in the rest of western countries feminist movements had already spread. Authors such as Natalia Ginzburg or Elsa Morante managed to keep their success – but still less than any other men – also because, I argue, they (un)consciously accepted to compromise with their 'womanhood' as writers, by taking a distance from politicised labels such as that of feminist or, simply, *scrittrici*. Despite the more or less deliberate removal of female bonds in their novels – I argue also because of their need not to be catalogued as 'feminine' or 'feminist' – the engagement with feminist concepts in their works is undeniable thanks to what Ginzburg, Morante, and Banti managed to do with their role of authors and/or narrators and their characters. The presence of solidarity between the different levels of female narrator, through the telling of

²⁴¹ «We, all of us women, need to build a genealogy of our own, one that will embolden us, define us, and allow us to see ourselves outside the tradition through which men have viewed, represented, evaluated and catalogued us—for millennia» (Goldstein, 2016: 303).

women's stories by other women, create the female friendship – according to what Minnich argued (1985) about creating bonds and identities by telling other women's stories – otherwise absent in these works.

4.5. Husbands

In this last paragraph I aim to show how loneliness is the cause and the result of the absence of friendship in female characters' life. Mostly, I will argue that the need to fill the sense of emptiness appears to have a solution only in marriage, for these women, but men, and a relationship with men, will always end up leaving the protagonists unsatisfied.

Women in these authors' novels know that their destiny and their main duty is that of getting married. This awareness is absorbed by our novels' protagonist very early. It has already been explained how Banti's characters refuse certain children games because they already mirror their future of subjugation (*IdP*. 12-13: «“Quando sarai grande ti sposerai, avrai dei bambini, una casa...!, questa eventualità pure chiamata spesso nelle finzioni dei giochi fra ragazzette, la infastidisce tanto da farle imbastire un broncio di mezza giornata»²⁴² Paolina herself, the youngest but also the most rebel among Banti's characters, has to give up and to adopt «acquiescenza» hoping that things will change for her:

“Noi siamo due sposine, ci incontriamo alla passeggiata e parliamo dei nostri mariti.” Non convinta, ma soggiogata da un fastidioso interesse Paola la imita, non però al punto di dondolarsi come lei per simulare il movimento di una vettura. E aspetta: sente che qualche cosa deve venir che merita la spesa dell’“acquiescenza”.²⁴³ (*IdP*, 24)

Men become soon not only the main desire of these women, but the main reason of rivalries among them. Paolina feels that the friendship with Giovanna is undermined not only by the usual jealousies, but mostly by the appearance in their lives of male attention. Indeed, a sense of apocalypse on their relationship seems to impend when Giovanna explains that the book she is reading has been lent by Giulio Valli, a boy:

²⁴² «When you grow up, you will get married, have children, a house..., this eventuality, also often referred to in the fictions of young girls' games, annoyed her so much that she sulked for half a day» (my translation).

²⁴³ «“We are two young brides; we meet at the promenade and talk about our husbands.” Unconvinced, but subjugated by an annoying interest, Paola imitates her, but not to the point of rocking like her to simulate the movement of a vehicle. And she waits—she feels that something must come that deserves the expense of “acquiescence”» (my translation).

Prestato da Gino Valli. E che c'è di male? Uno sguardo alla cassetta della posta dove per Paola non arriva mai nulla. Il primo scalino. “Me l’ha prestato Gino Valli.” Quando poi? Io non ho visto. [...] Ora Paolina si mette a correre e fa gli scalini due a due piegata esageratamente in avanti sulla vita. A guizzi, a lampi, la perseguitano visioni sconcertanti, inevitabili. Conoscere la vera Giovanna: avere il coraggio di allontanarla, di guardarla cogli occhi di tutti, di toglierla al dolce teatrino della sua vita. Un mondo nuovo da avvicinare presto, da accettare e giustificare. Su tutto una densa disagiata vergogna come davanti alla grata del confessionale. (*IdP*, 114-115)

In *Un lungo rancore* this is confirmed when Banti writes «Trepidare per i loro uomini, proteggerli dai maneggi interessati delle fanciulle da marito, faceva parte dei loro sacri doveri»²⁴⁴ (*Ulr*, 715). In the expression of «sacri doveri» irony can be traced; however, these protagonists struggle between the need to be free human beings, chasing for their ambitions, and the need to heal their loneliness. Friends are not taken into consideration when reflecting on their loneliness. On the contrary, friendship can be only a juvenile phase of life, a tool to reach a good marriage, as in *Sagittario*: «Ma sarebbe stata contenta di sapere che avevo anche un gruppo di amici, gente allegra con cui passare il tempo. Per esempio non le risultava che andassi a ballare, né che facessi alcun tipo di sport. Così era un po’ difficile che io mi sposassi»²⁴⁵ (*Sag*, 581). Men, who are often perceived as their oppressors, are also the only ones able apparently to fill their emptiness: «perché la vita è troppo malinconica per una donna, se ci si trova sole»²⁴⁶ (*Lscvic*, 71).

Artemisia becomes aware, for example, that her most precious belonging is her own husband (*Art*, 296):

Riscuoteva antichi crediti di benevolenza familiare, di familiare rispetto. Aveva – e la parola continuava a esaudire il suo pensiero. Aveva un marito.²⁴⁷ (*Art*, 302)

“O Antonio” provò a dire, dopo tanti giorni che non le avveniva, ma senza intenzione precisa, per saggiare se stessa, la sua solitudine e quella pena logorata e smorta che pareva tristemente smarrita. La sua invocazione rimase povera, inutile, come una scommessa perduta in partenza.²⁴⁸ (*Art*, 388)

²⁴⁴ «Being anxious about their men, protecting them from the self-interested handlings of marriageable maidens, was part of their sacred duties» (my translation).

²⁴⁵ «But she would have been happy to know that I also had a group of friends, cheerful people to spend time with. For example, she did not know that I went dancing or played any kind of sport. In this way, it was a bit difficult for me to get married» (my translation).

²⁴⁶ «It’s too bad to be a woman alone» (Frenaye, 2021b: 62).

²⁴⁷ «She was redeeming old debts that were owed to her, debts of family love, of family respect. She had – and the word continued to fulfil her thoughts – she had a husband» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 92),

²⁴⁸ «“Oh Antonio” she tried saying, after all this time that she had not invoked his name, but she did not really know why, perhaps just to test herself, her loneliness and that dull, worn-out pain that seemed sadly to have disappeared. Her invocation remained pathetic, futile, like a bet that is lost at the outset» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 199).

Artemisia whispers her husband's name when the loneliness is too strong, but her attempt is «povero, inutile, senza intenzione precisa» (pathetic, futile): she is trying to convince herself that the solution lays in the role that Antonio covers in her life. But she keeps being skeptical about it. Artemisia, as other fellow characters, attempt to find their own subjectivity through male figures:

Di nuovo era moglie [...]. Cheta e immobile, contemplava quel dono, quella sorpresa, la creatura che dormiva al fianco, abbandonata. [...] Antonio dormiva da innocente e un uomo innocente è una gran cosa. [...] “Che bella cosa [...] che bella cosa appartenere a qualcuno, spogliarsi di sé, essere diversa, irriconoscibile. Che bella cosa?” l'esclamazione diventava interrogativa ed era come l'ombra di un sogno che cominciasse, d'una melanconia incantata che alla giovane faceva inarcare la fronte nello sforzo di penetrarla, afferrarla intera. al risveglio, neppure con un sogno la rammentava.²⁴⁹ (310-311)

Unsure about who she is, she here tries to «essere diversa, irriconoscibile» (different, unrecognisable) and aims to do it through her marriage and by being a wife. Nevertheless, «l'esclamazione diventa interrogativa» (the exclamation turn into a question): she is not able to find an answer to her questions. She perceives that this attempt is destined to fail. Failing are also the similar attempts of other characters: Marguerite in *La camicia bruciata* admits that she has tried to look at herself through male eyes (as previously outlined, it is important to remember how these authors are able to narrativise the concept of 'male gaze' when this had not been theorised yet): «In Carlo io ho amato la bella quindicenne che ero, mentre in Cosimo non riuscivo ad amarmi, così sono arrivata a odiarlo perché in lui mi odiavo»²⁵⁰ (*Lcb*, 1422). Similarly, Fausta Gavarini writes that «Agnese Lanzi è una donna insicura, incerta ovviamente sulla propria identità [...] ma soprattutto eternamente inadeguata che affida la propria autostima all'avarico assenso di un uomo?»²⁵¹ (2013: LII). But also in Ginzburg women unconsciously seek for male approval, and judge themselves through male gaze: «A una ragazza le fa tanto piacere pensare che forse un uomo è innamorato di lei, e allora anche se non è innamorata e un po' come se lo fosse. Diventa molto più carina con gli occhi che splendono e il passo

²⁴⁹ «She was a wife once again [...] In silence, and without moving, she contemplated this gift, this surprise, this creature who slept at her side, totally relaxed [...] Antonio enjoyed the sleep of the innocent, and an innocent man is a wonderful thing [...] “How lovely it is [...] how lovely it is to belong to someone, to lose one's identity, to become different, unrecognizable. How lovely is it?” The exclamation turned into a question, and it was like the shadow of a dream that was just beginning, of an enchanting sadness that made the young woman knit her brow in an effort to penetrate it, to seize it whole. In the morning, she had no recollection of it, not even as a dream» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 101-102).

²⁵⁰ «In Carlo, I loved the beautiful fifteen-year-old girl I was, while in Cosimo, I could not love myself, so I came to hate him because in him I hated myself» (my translation).

²⁵¹ «Agnese Lanzi is an insecure woman, obviously uncertain of her own identity [...] but above all eternally inadequate, who entrusts her self-esteem to the miserly assent of a man» (my translation).

leggero e la voce più leggera e più dolce»²⁵² (*Esc*, 83). Nunzia in Morante's *La Storia* is happy to be married even if her husband is distant and emotionally unreachable.

Nevertheless, their disappointed expectations not only do not fill their emptiness or their loneliness, but they also make their need to escape and to be free even stronger. Banti, through Artemisia, reflects on how married women «stringono fra le ciglie seriche al sommo della guancia vellutata, recriminazioni, voglie nascoste, segreti progetti»²⁵³ (*Art*, 289) and through the protagonist of *La signorina* that «Se l'amore le è ormai indispensabile, esso non le è sufficiente e, insomma non la giustifica»²⁵⁴ (*Ls*, 1516). On the one hand, love is still felt as necessary for them to ease their sorrow and their loneliness but is not sufficient anymore – something is still missing, however these authors, and their characters, never conceptualise the idea that female bonds can be a healing for this pain.

Morante's characters realise the perishing of their dreams and of their ambitions, and the waste of their lives because of the role of wives they accepted to cover to satisfy society expectations but also to feel validated by men. In *La nonna*, by Morante, for example, the widow protagonist starts to feel a new sense of emptiness after her husband's death, but only because she finally realises how she wasted her life:

Rimasta vedova a quarant'anni, Elena si accorse di essere viva soltanto a mezzo e di trovarsi in un vuoto spietato e senza rimedio. Suo marito non era mai stato un compagno per lei; ella aveva vissuto o meglio vegetato accanto a questo mercante avaro come una pianta parassita a cui un minimo di terra e di linfa è sufficiente per non morire. Ma dopo scomparso l'uomo si sentì come chi sia giaciuto in letargo e, destato da una violenta scossa, si accorga dell'inverno che ha circondato il suo sonno che ora non potrà dar cibo alla sua veglia.²⁵⁵ (*Sa*, 1426)

An interesting element traceable in all the three authors' works, as an effect of the social pressure to get married and be validated by a man and the consequent disappointment, is the lack of erotic interest for men. This theme will be further and better analysed in the next chapter, however it is important to highlight it also here, given that, I argue, it is another symptom of the fact that heterosexual

²⁵² «A girl is so pleased to think that perhaps a man is in love with her, and so even if she is not in love, it is a bit like she is. She becomes much prettier with her eyes shining and her voice becoming lighter and sweeter» (my translation)

²⁵³ «Between their silky lashes at the top of their velvety cheeks, they clasp their recriminations, hidden desires, and secret projects» (my translation).

²⁵⁴ «Love is now necessary to her, but not sufficient, and it does not justify her» (my translation).

²⁵⁵ «After she became a widow at the age of forty, Elena realised that she was only half alive and that she was in a pitiless void without remedy. Her husband had never been a companion for her; she had lived or rather vegetated beside this miserly merchant like a parasitic plant to which the bare minimum of soil and some sap are enough to survive. But after he had disappeared, she felt as if she had lain in hibernation and, awakened by a violent shock, is now aware of the winter that has surrounded her sleep, which will now be unable to feed her wakefulness» (my translation).

relationships as unsuccessful remedy for the ‘fall in the well’ that these protagonists experience but that they do not try to fix through female bonds. In Morante, particularly, sex is experienced as a duty, both as wives and as potential mothers. Ida in *La Storia* is a great example as for this phenomenon. In Ginzburg, the protagonist of *È stato così* often reflects on her sexuality, claiming feelings of fear and repugnance towards it:

Ma quando pensavo che anche avremmo fatto all’amore sentivo **ribrezzo**, e allora mi dicevo che forse non ero innamorata e non capivo più niente.²⁵⁶ (*Esc*, 91, emphasis mine)

M’è venuto come uno spavento e un ribrezzo [...] pensare che presto ci saremmo sposati avremmo fatto l’amore (...) quando mi baciava sentivo un po’ di ribrezzo.²⁵⁷ (*Esc*, 100)

Avevo ribrezzo e vergogna quando faceva l’amore con me, ma pensavo che forse così succede a tutte le donne nei primi tempi. Mi piaceva sentirlo addormentato vicino a me. Ero calma. Gli ho detto mi come sentivo nel fare all’amore, gli ho chiesto se a tutte le donne succede così, Mi ha detto che lui non sapeva cosa diavolo succede alle donne, e che io avevo bisogno di avere un bambino perché questa è la cosa più importante per una donna e anche per un uomo. E mi ha detto che dovevo guarire da quel vizio che avevo di guardare sempre fisso dentro di me.²⁵⁸ (*Esc*, 104)

But also in Banti, Artemisia claims the desire of «impazzire di castità»²⁵⁹ (*Art*, 279) rather than thinking of the possibility to have sexual relationships with men. However, in this specific case, also trauma as a consequence of the sexual violence suffered is behind this kind of rejection (as it will later explained).

On the one hand, Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante more or less recognise as socially induced the loneliness of their characters, on the other hand they do not believe that female bonds can be a solution. Or perhaps, they keep representing the tendency of women who look at themselves through male gaze to search for a solution in men and heterosexual relationship, unlike second wave feminism was starting to prescribe.

²⁵⁶ «But when I imagined our making love together, I felt something like disgust and said to myself that I couldn’t be in love with him after all. It was all very confusing» (Frenaye, 2021b: 15).

²⁵⁷ «[...] a wave of terror and disgust came over me at the thought that soon Alberto and I would be married and make love together [...] but I remembered the slight disgust I felt every time he kissed me» (Frenaye, 2021b: 24).

²⁵⁸ «I was disgusted, and ashamed every time Alberto made love to me, but I imagined that all women must feel the same way at the start. I liked best to lie quietly and feel him sleeping beside me. I told him the way I felt about making love and asked him if other women felt the same way. He answered that he didn’t know how the devil it was with women. The main thing for a woman was to have a baby, and for a man too. And I ought to cure myself of the habit of thinking about things so hard» (Frenaye, 2021b: 27-28).

²⁵⁹ «I would go out of my mind in my obsession with being chaste» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 63).

5. Violence

In the previous chapters, I reflected on the feminist narratives of Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante by analysing their characters through thematic lenses, thus by enhancing the authors' conceptualisation of those themes – female subjectivity, motherhood, and female friendship. Given the nature of the selected themes and their focus on 'womanhood', male presence has been latent. While shedding light on how female characters search for a way to discover and explore their subjectivity, male control has emerged as obstructing this process. Motherhood has been explained also – but not only – as a patriarchal product, imposed by men, or conceptualised by women themselves through the male gaze – thus, even in this respect, male presence has been subtle. Finally, it has been argued that female friendship may be absent also because obstructed by men, conscious of the revolutionary potential it can represent in women's lives. Despite present, the 'masculine' has been deliberately overlooked, both in the narratives and in their analysis. Garboli (1995), for example, defines the 'male' in Ginzburg as 'other' (XX) arguing that men are excluded both from fictional and non-fictional production by Ginzburg (XXIV).

Nevertheless, it is important also to reflect on how and what kind of relationships between women and men these authors represent in their narrative. As for the usual feminist reading of their prose against their authors' 'antifeminist' statements, reflecting on what is arguably the most patriarchal aspect of these relationships – violence – becomes particularly interesting. Through this peculiar aspect it will also be possible to deepen what might at first appear as less violent dynamics, which, however, underlie the prevailing heteronormative relationships narrated. I will linger particularly on the nature of the violence suffered by women, on the literary representation of it, and on the consequences developed within the protagonist victims. These issues have been deeply scrutinized within the literary context and beyond. Recently, Porcelli (2020) has analysed the nature of male violence within *La Storia* by Morante, and her study will be very useful also for my analysis later. In less recent times, Re (1993) reflected on the violence of History in Morante – expressed through «sexual violence», «violence done to children» (362), and racism (368). Fiorucci (2010) described the relationships between men and women in Banti as «unbalanced» (33), as a consequence and result, at the same time, of the violent nature it presents. Similarly, Benedetti (1999) argues that in Banti relationships with the opposite sex are marked by violence and antagonism (58) and that this is the only possible ground building solidarity among women – Artemisia manages to bond only with women who are «fragile, threatened by precarious health [...] or by male violence» (55).

As for this aspect, Mandolini (2017) draws an interesting parallel between Artemisia and Annella (another painter), positing Annella as an *alter ego* of Artemisia, and the two bond because of the male

violence they suffer (rape for Artemisia, killing for Annella) and that conditions their agency (4-6). Daly (1998), as well, reflects on how Banti deals with male violence in her most famous novel, focusing on (and arguing that) «the violence and the humiliation which Artemisia has suffered are forgiven and the artist rejects violence as a viable response, embracing instead her own creative powers to overcome the past by re-staging it» (178) – as I will further discuss below. Liimatta (2000) explained how women's bodies and minds become subject to violence, or in the worst case, to mutilation, due to the prevailing patriarchal order of society that reigns in the world (29) and describes women as victims of male violence as passive and silent (38). A controversial reading of Ida's rape in *La Storia* by Morante has been given by Oram (2003) who suggested both to read it positively – by inverting the power dynamics of rape and History – and negatively. Thus, violence is a well investigated theme in these authors, in Morante and Banti, particularly. Nevertheless, further analysis is necessary. In particular concerning Ginzburg, there is a gap in literature dealing the theme of gender-based violence. Certainly, in Ginzburg the theme is not as dominant as in Banti and Morante, however I will argue that there are episodes whose analysis is worthy – particularly, paternal violence. Moreover, there are as yet no comparative scholarly readings of similar events included in the novels by Morante and Banti. Mandolini (2017) chose to compare Banti and Morante concerning the theme of *femminicidio* (gender-based murder of women) – indeed, she juxtaposes the killing of Santina in *La Storia* and the killing of Annarella De Rosa in *Artemisia*. Thus, a specular comparison of the rape scenes, for example, narrated by Morante and Banti provides an innovative lens through which to reflect on the nature of certain differences or similarities behind a peculiar way of representing them. In Morante's and Banti's writings, violence is a more dominant theme than in Ginzburg, as mentioned above. Thus, I will start by assessing the extent to which the theme is traceable also in Ginzburg's narrative. Then, this chapter will first assess the role of disgust as a literary theme. Disgust will be investigated in order to expand the concept of gender-based violence and to argue that in Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante also consensual sex can be perceived as a form of violence, and disgust can be both a symptom of sexual repression and a tool to rebel against a system imposing heteronormative sex on women. Then, focusing mainly on the rapes in *La Storia* by Morante and *Artemisia* by Banti, this chapter will read rape episodes in these novels through two conceptual dichotomies – firstly focused on silence vs voice, and finally focused on private vs public. This chapter, then, will demonstrate how through different narrative tools, these authors manage to report a phenomenon that, despite their usual 'anti-feminist' statements, they read as subjected to gender-based power structures. Even when their narration may sound ambiguous, as it will be analysed, they reflect lucidly on the causes and the effects of male violence against women.

But firstly, it will be necessary to open the investigation with a separate section focusing on violence in Ginzburg. Indeed, I will shed light on the overall absence of physical violence in this author but nonetheless I will underline the relevance of paternal and psychological violence in her narrative. This is the reason why we need to investigate it separately rather than include it within the comparison between Morante and Banti, that will be offered later.

5.1. Natalia Ginzburg

Violence emerges overwhelmingly in the lives of most female characters narrated by Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante. They depict different kinds of violence, representing a context which torments women from different directions and in different ways. The violence exerted is clearly a gender-based violence, firstly because it is inflicted only on women and mostly by men. There are both representations of psychological and physical violence in these works. As for the former the examples are numerous in all the three authors. As previously highlighted, women are metaphorically and physically silenced by societies and families. In Ginzburg's works, violence is mainly perpetrated within marriage. Women dream to gain freedom from this institution, but they end up being entrapped in a series of social formalities in which they can only be subjugated to their husbands:

Pensavo che dopo sposata volevo essere libera e godermela un mondo, e invece forse con Giulio non sarei stata libera per niente. Forse avrebbe fatto come il padre, che sua moglie l'aveva chiusa in casa perché diceva che il posto di una donna è fra le mura domestiche, e lei era diventato una vecchia tignosa che stava tutto il giorno alla finestra a vedere passare la gente²⁶⁰ (*Lscvic*, 15)

In *È stato così*, as already shown, when the protagonist (rarely) speaks she merely repeats things her husband has already told. Even in her autobiographically inspired essays, Ginzburg, in *Lui e Io* in *Le piccolo virtù*, portrays her husband's diminishing behaviour towards her:

Suole dirmi che non capisco niente, nelle cose da mangiare.²⁶¹ (*Lpv*, 822)

Mi dice che manco di curiosità.²⁶² (*Lpv*, 824)

²⁶⁰ «I was in a hurry to get married, but I wanted to enjoy myself afterward too. And perhaps with Giulio I shouldn't be so free. He might treat me the way his father treated his mother, shutting her up on the pretext that a woman's place was in the home until she had turned into an old hag who sat all day long by the window, waiting for someone to go by» (Frenaye, 2021b: 14).

²⁶¹ «He used to tell me that I did not understand anything when it came to food» (my translation).

²⁶² «He tells me that I lack curiosity» (my translation).

Se gli racconto come si è svolto un mio pomeriggio, lo trova un pomeriggio tutto sbagliato.²⁶³ (*Lpv*, 825)

Se gli propongo di prendere anch'io la patente, non vuole. Dice che tanto non ci riuscirei mai.²⁶⁴ (*Lpv*, 826)

Mi canzona poi per il modo come ho fatto la spesa, per il modo come ho soppesato gli aranci nella mano, scegliendo accuratamente, lui dice, i peggiori di tutto il mercato, mi schernisce perché ho impiegato un'ora a fare la spesa, ho comprato a un banco le cipolle, a un banco i sedani, a un altro la frutta. A volte fa lui la spesa per dimostrarmi come si può fare velocemente [...].²⁶⁵ (*Lpv*, 829)

Dice che il mio pianto è tutto una commedia.²⁶⁶ (*Lpv*, 830)

The author's tone here is benevolent, rather than indignant. Nevertheless, highlighting this nuance is interesting in light of the description of fictional husbands, who are characterised similarly and often diminishing their protagonist wives.

In Banti's works, marriage has the same exhausting effect on women («Da dieci anni sospira Donna Elisa, che da undici è maritata»;²⁶⁷ *Ib*, 517). However, psychological violence lays also in the fact that protagonists are forced to abandon their ambitions in the name of the role of wives they must cover. Banti's protagonists are all promising women, who feel they stop being intelligent every time they surrender to marriage – they not only stop employing their intelligence, but they feel like they actually lose it. In *Un grido lacerante*, Agnese renounces her career in order to follow her husband and to be a proper and good wife. This also happens to Francesca in *Il bastardo*, and this is what *La signorina*'s protagonist admits openly:

Inutile illudersi, la felicità ha spento la sua intelligenza, l'ha confinata al ruolo di una furba accaparratrice. La "signorina" tradita si vendica: impossibile ritrovare l'antica solitudine, l'iniziativa personale, il gusto delle difficoltà e un'ambizione tutta volta a dimostrare un valore misconosciuto. Chi sono, ormai? Una moglie che non discute, attenta al lampo di uno sguardo aquilino, agli umori di una suscettibile generosità. Non sa più dire: "mi piace", "non mi piace", si crogiola nella rinunzia a decidere: ha persino disimparato a scegliere, i

²⁶³ «If I tell him how an afternoon of mine unfolded, he will find it all wrong» (my translation).

²⁶⁴ «If I propose to him that I should get a driving licence too, he does not want to. He says I would never get it anyway» (my translation).

²⁶⁵ «He then scoffs at me for the way I did my shopping, for the way I weighed the oranges in my hand, carefully choosing, he says, the worst ones in the whole market, he scoffs at me because it took me an hour to do the shopping, I bought onions at one stall, celery at another, fruit at another. Sometimes he does the shopping to show me how it can be done quickly [...]» (my translation).

²⁶⁶ «He says my crying is all a comedy» (my translation).

²⁶⁷ «For ten years, Donna Elisa, who has been married for eleven, has sighed» (my translation).

vestiti le cadono addosso come per magia, gli improvvisi viaggi la trasformano in una piccola valigia inutile al viaggiatore.²⁶⁸ (*Ls*, 1515)

This chapter aims to reflect on the physical violence women suffer in these narratives. Morante and Banti will be the main object of analysis. However, it is also important to include Ginzburg reflecting on the overall absence of physical violence in her works, but also highlighting the relevance of paternal and psychological violence faced by her protagonists.

In *È stato così*, when the protagonist tells Alberto about her youth and her family, she remembers «[...] quando mio padre mi picchiava sulle mani»²⁶⁹ (*Esc*, 84) and the consequent desire to escape (84, «una tremenda voglia di scappare lontano che mi prendeva a guardare quei campi e la collina deserta»)²⁷⁰ felt since she was just a child. But even more interesting is the paternal violence in *La strada che va in città*. Here, the protagonist, Delia, has a secret relationship with Giulio. When her father finds out about the affair, his reaction is violent. He brutally attacks his daughter:

[...] mi prese i capelli e si mise a coprimi di schiaffi, mentre io gridavo: - aiuto, aiuto! [...] Io avevo un labbro che sanguinava e dei segni rossi sul collo, avevo le vertigini e quasi non mi reggevo, e mia madre voleva aiutarmi ad asciugare il sangue, ma mio padre la prese per un braccio e la spinse fuori.²⁷¹ (*Lscvic*, 20-21).

Even more than husbands, fathers – whose presence in these novels and short stories is marginal (particularly in comparison with the roles of mothers) – are the ones enforcing the rules of patriarchy through violence. They are defending a system in which their daughters have a fixed role, that of being virtuous waiting for a husband and for becoming mothers. Mothers, as well, have the same intent, but the violence they apply is psychological, more like the one applied by husbands, as well. Indeed, even if they are not physically violent against their wives, it has already been explained how they exercise their power (patriarchal power) subtly and psychologically. As theorised in the previous chapters, marriage silences these women. However, in Ginzburg violence can belong also to women. Indeed, for example, physical violence becomes, in *È stato così*, the only escape for the protagonist

²⁶⁸ «It is useless to be delusional; happiness has extinguished her intelligence and confined her to the role of a cunning hoarder. The betrayed 'young lady' takes revenge: it is impossible to regain the old loneliness, personal initiative, a taste for difficulties and an ambition all aimed to prove a misunderstood value. Who am I now? A wife who does not argue, attentive to the flash of an aquiline glance, to the moods of a susceptible generosity. She no longer knows how to say 'I like it' or 'I do not like it'. She basks in the renunciation of deciding: she has even unlearned how to choose, clothes fall on her as if by magic, sudden journeys turn her into a small suitcase useless to the traveller» (my translation).

²⁶⁹ «[...] how my father used to rap me over the fingers with his cane» (Frenaye, 2021b: 8).

²⁷⁰ «[...] and I used to walk down the road between the fields and vineyards to the cemetery, I had a violent longing to run away» (Frenaye, 2021b: 8).

²⁷¹ «He took me by the hair and began to hit me, while I cried: "Help! Help!" [...] I had a bleeding lip and red marks on my neck and I was so dizzy that I can hardly stand up. My mother wanted to help me wipe away the blood, but my father took her by one arm and pushed her out of the room» (Frenaye, 2021b: 18).

from the domestic marginalisation and from the repression of her subjectivity. At the end of the novel Delia kills her husband. In a system dominated by different forms of violence, the victims themselves have to fight back with violence. Nevertheless, it is not sure that this will bring an actual liberation for them.

Thus, even if gendered violence is not a central leitmotif in Ginzburg, as on the other hand it is in Morante and Banti's works, nevertheless it helps shaping not only the characterisation of the protagonists as victims of the system and of the society which they are indeed trapped in, but it also contributes to Ginzburg's overall denunciation of that same system. The absence of men, their more or less subtle violence when they are active characters, or even the patriarchal violence that mothers themselves put in act are all traces of a certain awareness of gender issues, despite Ginzburg claiming to aim to represent universal human, rather than specifically women's, sorrow. Even if the narrativization of the theme is different with respect to Banti and Morante, I argue that violence is still silencing Ginzburg's women (as in Morante) or it leads them to rebel (as in Banti), even if Delia's rebellion is destined to fail unlike Artemisia's, as will be shown later.

5.2. Disgust

Before analysing the representation of sexual gender-based violence in Banti and Morante, it is important to reflect on a peculiar element that I interpret as a response to the violence suffered by these women – 'disgust'. Porcelli, for example, claims that disgust is the main feeling dominating Ida's rape scene in *La Storia* and the engine of the rape itself (2020: 55):

Il soldato risentì come un'ingiustizia quel **ribrezzo** evidente e straordinario della sconosciuta signora. Non era abituato a suscitare ribrezzo nelle donne, e d'altra parte sapeva (a dispetto delle sue piccole delusioni precedenti) di trovarsi in un paese alleato, non nemico.²⁷² (LS; 329; emphasis mine)

Indeed, in some passages it seems that Gunther's violence if not caused, at least it is fuelled by the perception of his victim's repulsion against him, even if it is, actually, partly related to a misunderstanding caused by Ida's epilepsy – he thinks she is pushing him away, while she is having a seizure. However, disgust is traceable not only in violent contexts. Ida feels disgust towards her own body, her mother's name, her Jewishness (Porcelli, 2020: 53). In these novels and short stories disgust towards female bodies – described as in decline, and as something that must be hidden – is

²⁷² «The soldier was offended, feeling the unknown lady's evident and extraordinary disgust was an injustice. He wasn't accustomed to inspiring disgust in women, and furthermore he knew (despite his earlier little disappointments) he was in an allied, not an enemy country» (Weaver, 2000: 70).

recurrent and linked to ageing or even to the postpartum. As already explained, women in Morante are ashamed of their bodies and try to camouflage it, both when they are young (as in this example from *La Storia*) or because they are ageing (as in *La nonna*):

Essa non aveva mai avuto confidenza col proprio corpo, al punto che non lo guardava nemmeno quando si lavava. Il suo corpo era cresciuto con lei come un estraneo [...] Con quella sua eccessiva gravezza dei fianchi, e patito nel resto delle membra, esso era diventato, oramai, solo un peso di fatica.²⁷³ (*Ls*, 351)

si fasciava il petto e i fianchi.²⁷⁴ (*Sa*, 1410)

Women's bodies are never good enough:

La sua [Cesira] malevolenza scopriva imperfezioni e difetti in Anna: – Sei troppo magra. – diceva ella a sua figlia, – sei troppo pallida, – oppure: – sei bella, ma non hai quello che piace agli uomini...²⁷⁵ (*Mes*, 151)

Morante's protagonists do not want to have a 'womanly' body – «*Sarebbe bello per me, di non avere questo corpo! Di non essere una femmina! Ma di essere un ragazzo come te, e di correre per tutto il mondo, assieme a te!*»²⁷⁶ (*IdA*, 1156). Furthermore, giving birth deforms their bodies – Aracoeli's body is told to go under a process of «abbruttimento» (*Ara*, 1274) when pregnant:

Giorno e notte, Aracoeli era tutta in sudore. Il sudore le gocciava dai cigli e le rigava il volto, non era più il suo volto di prima. Guastato dal pallore, maculato alle gote, e quasi tumefatto, spesso prendeva un'espressione stupida e senz'anima. Gli occhi, prima limpidi e un poco sporgenti quali grosse gemme incastonate, adesso le rientravano nelle orbite gonfie, sempre appannati da una nebbia sporca. Nella sua passività assente, immune dalla noia e dal corso del tempo, essa imitava una bestia caduta in letargo nell'attesa del risveglio equinoziale.²⁷⁷ (*Ara*, 1285)

²⁷³ «She had never felt at ease in her own body, to such a degree that she didn't look at it even when she bathed. Her body had grown up with her like an outsider [...] With this excessive weight on its hips, and the wasting of its limbs, it had become for her only a toilsome burden» (Weaver, 2000: 87).

²⁷⁴ «She wrapped her breasts and hips» (my translation).

²⁷⁵ «His malevolence unveiled imperfections and flaws in Anna: "you are too skinny", she would say to her daughter, "you are too pale", or: "you are beautiful, but you do not have what men like..." » (my translation).

²⁷⁶ «It would be wonderful for me not to have this body! Not to be a woman but to be a boy like you and run all around the world with you» (Goldstein, 2018: 147).

²⁷⁷ « Day and night, Aracoeli was covered with sweat. Sweat dripped from her lashes and streaked her face, which was no longer her face of the old days. Wasted by pallor, the cheeks splotchy, and somehow swollen, it often took on a stupid, soulless expression. The eyes, formerly clear and a bit protruding, like big gems in their setting, were now sunk in the swollen sockets and always clouded by a dirty vapour. In her absent passivity, immune to boredom and the course of time, she imitated an animal that has gone into estivation until the equinoctial awakening» (Weaver, 1984: 186).

What also recurs in all our authors – making the *topos* particularly interesting – is a certain disgust towards sexuality. Of course, Catholicism and the virtue of chastity are easily some of the sources of the feeling of disgust in relation to sexuality, given the period in which these authors write and in which these stories are set. However, I argue that disgust can be read not only as a consequence of a form of (religious) repression that women suffer. Indeed, it can also become a tool of resistance against a system in which heteronormative sex is a mandatory phase only possible within the institution of the marriage. If on the one side, their disgust prevents them from living their sexuality fully – because Catholicism and patriarchy do not expect this for women, on the contrary they promote the virtue of chastity through the symbolism of the virgin Mary –, on the other hand it is another sign of their not fitting within the patriarchal and heteronormative institution of marriage and, more in general, romantic relationships with men. In Morante, Ginzburg, and Banti female protagonists live the idea of having sexual intercourses with men with disgust and resignation.²⁷⁸ The commonality of this feeling both in violent scenes and in the narration of consensual sexual encounters makes these experiences closer than usual – as if heterosexual sex is, at a different degree, a form of violence itself, suffered by women characters. This is also argued by Liimatta (2000) with regards to Morante – indeed, she writes that «sexual encounter between a wife and a husband resembles a rape because of the sexual violence imposed on a submissive, passive, and helpless woman who cannot or will not fight back» (37). Milkova (2013) studied the concept of ‘disgust’ as a tool for feminine introspection in Ferrante, and she claims that recently there has been an increment in the use of this narrative device both in the arts and in literary criticism (92). Since it is an important element also in the authors presently examined, I will highlight how they reflected on disgust before the new preponderance of it. Moreover, by dwelling on the theories by Freud, Wilson, and also Kristeva in her reading of Ferrante Milkova argues that «disgust arises when boundaries are transgressed and the prohibited is enacted. It thus signals the slippage of categories, the breakdown of barriers, the collapse of the threshold» (96).

Much of this statement can be applied to the motif of disgust in Banti and Morante’s novels, too. On the one hand, in light of these theories, it can be argued that disgust is the tool through which protagonists respect «taboos, limits», the «civilizing barriers of disgust», and the «prescriptive voice of society», forcing them to stay in the realm of ‘good women’ (a realm from which they are excluded

²⁷⁸ These are not isolated cases, since also in Carlo Cassola’s narrative, for example, female characters live the same repulsion for men and sex, so much that Fortini talked about «repulsione del fallo», a repulsion of phallus (1961) as for his protagonists. The same motif can be traced also to other women writers from the twentieth century such as Laudomia Bonanni or Alba de Céspedes.

when they cross these barriers, as Aracoeli by Morante or the protagonist of *La madre* by Ginzburg do); on the other hand I argue that this is also their response to the violent way in which sexuality is imposed to them, as a duty that does not involve or take into consideration the possibility of pleasure for them. If read as the cause of their traumatic sexual experience, as a society's tool to make them stand behind the border of the licit, disgust is the proof of their *status* of passive victims also in apparently non-violent contexts. However, I argue that disgust in these women can also be read as an active response of women themselves against a system which imposes them how to live their sexuality. Feeling disgust in such a 'normal' and expected aspect of life expands the definition of violence, within which these characters are not only, or always, passive, but against which they fight back through disgust. This is also confirmed, I argue, by the fact that their disgust is never addressed to and absorbed by the reader through 'disgusting' descriptions. Milkova notes that

The reader's or viewer's disgust functions as the primary aspect of definitions of obscene materials under current obscenity laws (Nussbaum, 2004: 2–3). In aesthetic terms, Menninghaus writes of how "disgusting zones" and "disgusting moments" regulate the construction of the beautiful female body so that any flaws in it, such as visible bodily openings, discharge of bodily fluids, defects of skin and form, are registered as disgusting. (2003: 7) (96)

In Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante elements of explicit disgust are more evident in relation to giving birth and motherhood (as already explained and examined in the previous chapters of this work). As for sexuality, this is less explicit, or at least described less in details, but still tangible. Disgust remains within the protagonists, risking being inexplicable for the reader. Its nature is social and cultural, I argue. It is the most direct consequence of the unhappy experience of marriage and sexuality, which is forced for them, as if it was a violence, as demonstrated by the following passages from *Il Bastardo* by Banti and *È stato così* by Ginzburg:

La verità era forse che per Elisa, immutabile zitella solitaria, il matrimonio non aveva finito di essere un'avventura fisicamente felice.²⁷⁹ (*Ib*, 535).

Ma quando pensavo che avremmo fatto all'amore sentivo ribrezzo, e allora mi dicevo che forse non ero innamorata e non capivo più niente.²⁸⁰ (*Esc*, 91)

²⁷⁹ «The truth was perhaps that to Elisa, the never-changing lonely spinster, marriage had not stopped being a physically happy adventure, the objective reason that was good enough to justify an existential wound that came from much further away» (my translation).

²⁸⁰ «But when I imagined our making love together, I felt something like disgust and said to myself that I couldn't be in love with him after all. It was all very confusing» (Frenaye, 2021b: 15).

mi è venuto come uno spavento e un ribrezzo a pensare che presto ci saremmo sposati avremmo fatto all'amore. [...] Quando mi baciava sentivo un po' di ribrezzo.²⁸¹ (*Esc*, 100)

avevo ribrezzo e vergogna quando faceva all'amore con me, ma pensavo che forse così succede a tutte le donne nei primi tempi. (...) Gli ho detto come sentivo nel fare all'amore gli ho chiesto se a tutte le donne succede così punto mi ha detto che lui non sapeva cosa diavolo succede alle donne virgola e che io avevo bisogno di avere un bambino perché questa è la cosa più importante per una donna e anche per un uomo.²⁸² (*Esc*, 104)

non mi piaceva molto fare all'amore ma mi piaceva stare sveglia nel buio e ridirmi quelle sue parole²⁸³ (*Esc*, 105)

In Banti, traumatised Artemisia's disgust towards sexuality and men is expressed when she fiercely claims the aim of «impazzire di castità» ([going] out of [her] mind in [her] obsession with being chaste):

con un certo gusto mi comportavo come una vedova, vestivo di nero, sentivo messa tutti i giorni: solo che le vedove amano gli uomini e io li odiavo. Al Mercato, in via Larga, incontravo quegli amici di mio padre che avevo intraveduti. Capivo che parlavano di me, mi guardavano molto, mi salutavano appena. E io non salutavo nessuno: pensavo ai loro sporchi discorsi **e impazzivo di castità**, al mio paragone una monaca era una baldracca.²⁸⁴ (*Art*, 279, emphasis mine)

It is interesting to note that the only passage alluding to sexual pleasure in Morante is traceable in Ida's rape scene:

[...] Non fu, per lei, neanche stavolta, un vero piacere erotico. Fu una straordinaria felicità senza orgasmo, come talora capita in sogno, prima della pubertà.²⁸⁵ (*Ls*, 336-337)

²⁸¹ «[...] a wave of terror and disgust came over me at the thought that soon Alberto and I would be married and make love together [...] but I remembered the slight disgust I felt every time he kissed me» (Frenaye, 2021b: 24).

²⁸² «I was disgusted and ashamed every time Alberto made love to me, but I imagined that all women must feel the same way at the start. I liked best to lie quietly and feel him sleeping beside me. I told him the way I felt about making love and asked him if other women felt the same way. He answered that he didn't know how the devil it was with women. The main thing for a woman was to have a baby, and for a man too. And I ought to cure myself of the habit of thinking about things so hard» (Frenaye, 2021b: 27-28).

²⁸³ «I didn't care much for the love making, but I enjoyed lying awake in the darkness and saying his words over and over to myself» (Frenaye, 2021b: 28).

²⁸⁴ «I took a certain pleasure in behaving like a widow – I dressed in black, I went to Mass everyday – except that widows like men and I hated them. At the market in Via Larga I would come across those friends of my father's whom I had glimpsed. I knew that they were talking about me. And I greeted no one. When I thought about their filthy talk, I would go out of my mind in my obsession with being chaste: compared to me a nun was a harlot» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 63).

²⁸⁵ «It was an extraordinary happiness without orgasm, as sometimes happens in dreams, before puberty» (Weaver, 2000: 77).

However, the pleasure described here can be associated more productively with the pleasure of regression, during the epileptic fit, to an undifferentiated state of being. Indeed, Ida experiences an epileptic crisis also during the rape, thus hers is not a normative psycho-physical status. The author describes Ida's experience as «una straordinaria felicità **senza orgasmo**» (an extraordinary happiness without orgasm, emphasis mine). Thus, by specifying «senza orgasmo» (without orgasm), Morante excludes also this passage from the possibility to be read as the protagonist experiencing sexual pleasure. Ida spent her whole life aware that sexuality is admissible only in order to get pregnant and that it must be lived by being meekly subjugated:

Iduzza era vergine non soltanto nel corpo ma anche nei pensieri, [...] Nora l'aveva avvertita soltanto che per generare bambini l'uomo deve entrare col suo corpo nel corpo della donna. È un'operazione necessaria, a cui bisogna sottomettersi docilmente, e che non fa troppo male.²⁸⁶ (*LS*, 296)

Ida can experience pleasure, or rather and arguably an absence of pain, only by entering a different psychophysical dimension. Also with her husband, sex is described as a «strazio così atroce», so much that «Ida non comprendeva il godimento sessuale, che le rimase per sempre un mistero»²⁸⁷ (*LS*, 297).

5.3. Silence

A parallel can be drawn between Morante and Banti when facing and writing about rape in their novels. I will argue that on the one hand rape has the power to silence Morante's protagonists, who are victims of sexual abuses.²⁸⁸ On the other hand, this kind of trauma seems to bring a greater awareness in Banti's Artemisia, who manages, in a painful way, to reappropriate her voice, muted as well by years of male violence. Silence, or the breaking of it, is strictly linked to another motif present in both the authors, but, again opposite in their deployment within their narratives – the motif of anger, largely absent in Morante's characters, whilst shaping the destiny and the identity of Artemisia and her fellow protagonists. Even if so distant, these narrativizations of rape manage to reinstate perfectly the trauma that all these female protagonists live.

Wehling-Giorgi, writing about trauma and violence against women in Morante's narrative (2021), explains that «[...] rape systematically dismantles the victim's belief system whilst aiming to erase

²⁸⁶ «Iduzza was a virgin not only in her body, but also in her thoughts. She had never seen an adult naked, because her parents never undressed in her presence; and she was extremely modest also about her own body, even when she was alone. Nora had informed her only that to procreate babies the man's body had to enter the woman's. It's a necessary operation, to which you have to submit dutifully, and it doesn't hurt too much» (Weaver, 2000: 43).

²⁸⁷ «Iduzza didn't understand sexual pleasure, which remained a mystery to her always» (Weaver, 2000: 44).

²⁸⁸ It must be specified that this process of silencing is strongly linked also to the atrocities of history and the marginalisation of certain categories of people in the dominant power structures of history.

a woman's voice and agency (121). In Morante, indeed, women who are raped are consequently silenced, muted. Not only are rape scenes characterised by women's passivity, inertia, or silence, but silence is perpetrated also after the violence – for example, by Ida who does not denounce, nor she tells anything to anyone, as if ashamed and traumatised by the event. Judith Herman recognised this form of silence, usually caused by fear and shame (1992: 28), as one of the most common consequences of a sexual abuse – «The perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting [...] Without a supportive social environment the bystander usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way» (1992: 8). Morante represents different declinations of silence – indeed, the topic is treated differently within the three rape scenes narrated in the novel *La Storia*. The first rape we encounter opens the novel itself. It is the one suffered by Ida and committed by the German soldier she randomly meets in the streets while returning home. Silence here is also forced by the situation of incommunicability between the two protagonists. Gunther does not speak Italian; he knows few words learnt in order to 'pursue' women. Ida does not say much, neither would it be useful given her foreign interlocutor, in what Morante defines «una babele Terrestre» (a terrestrial Babel):

E in una preghiera ilare benché proterva, nella sua voce di basso già timbrata ma fresca e nuova, con dentro ancora qualche acidezza della crescita, ripeté due volte: «...schlafen... schlafen...». A lei, che ignorava del tutto la lingua germanica, l'incomprensibile parola, con la sua mimica misteriosa, suonò per una qualche formula gergale d'inchiesta o d'imputazione. E tentò in italiano una risposta indistinta, che si ridusse a una smorfia quasi di lagrime. Ma per il soldato, grazie al vino, la babele terrestre s'era trasformata tutta in un circo.²⁸⁹ (*Ls*, 329-330)

Her silence continues also during the attack – Ida does not fight back, also because frozen in terror. She seems to surrender immediately to Gunther (*Ls*, 335: «il corpo di Ida era rimasto inerte, come la sua coscienza: senz'altro movimento che un piccolo tremore dei muscoli e uno sguardo inerme di ripulsa estrema, come davanti a un mostro»)²⁹⁰ and well aware of their roles – she is the victim, and Gunther is a «mostro», a monster, at least at the beginning of the tale – however, these roles are also deliberately left ambiguous, as Gunther also appears as a victim, as it will be seen later. Ida's silence is not only vocal now, but corporeal. Her body is silent. Indeed, Ida, who suffers from epilepsy, has

²⁸⁹ «And his bass voice, already mature, but fresh and new, with a certain greenness of growth in it, repeated twice the cheerful but stubborn plea: "Schlafen... Schlafen..." To her, totally ignorant of the German language, the incomprehensible word, with its mysterious pantomime, sounded like some formula of investigation or accusation. And in Italian she attempted a vague answer, which was reduced to an almost tearful grimace. But for the soldier, the wine had transformed all the terrestrial Babel into a circus» (Weaver, 2000: 70).

²⁹⁰ «Ida's body had remained inert, like her consciousness, with no movement but a throb of the muscles and a defenseless gaze of extreme repulsion, as if she were facing a monster» (Weaver, 2000: 75).

a crisis during her rape and becomes completely absent. She is described as ‘out of conscience’ (*Ls*, 336: «Essa in realtà era uscita di coscienza, in una assenza temporanea da lui stesso e dalle circostanze, ma lui non se ne avvide»²⁹¹). This extracorporeal condition makes Ida inert and passive, silent and quiet. What Ida experiences is what Herman (1992) defines as «the third cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder» – «alteration of consciousness [...] a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage and pain dissolve» (42). This is also referred to as ‘dissociation’. Even when she wakes from her crisis, she is almost relaxed, quiet, in a sensation described as «beata», blessed:

E tanto era carico di tensioni severe e represses che, nel momento dell’orgasmo, gettò un grande urlo sopra di lei. Poi, nel momento successivo, la sogguardò, in tempo per vedere la sua faccia piena di stupore che si distendeva in un sorriso di indicibile umiltà e dolcezza. “Carina carina”, prese a dirle (era la quarta e ultima parola italiana che aveva imparato). E insieme cominciò a baciarla, con piccoli baci pieni di dolcezza, sulla faccia trasognata che pareva guardarlo e seguitava a sorridergli con una specie di gratitudine. Essa intanto rinveniva piano piano, abbandonata sotto di lui. E nello stato di rilassamento e di quiete che sempre le interveniva tra l’attacco e la coscienza, lo sentì che di nuovo penetrava dentro di lei, però stavolta lentamente, con un moto struggente e possessivo, come se fossero già parenti e avvezzi l’uno all’altra. E si ritrovava quel senso di compimento di riposo che aveva già sperimentato da bambina, alla fine di un attacco, quando la riaccoglieva la stanza affettuosa di suo padre di sua madre; ma quella sua esperienza infantile oggi le si ingrandì, attraverso il dormiveglia, nella sensazione beata di tornare al proprio corpo totale.²⁹² (*Ls*, 336).

This quietness – that is clearly linked to the epileptic attack and that might also be described as an act of dissociation for Ida – is prolonged, as a result of her trauma, when Ida decides not to talk about the event with anybody, not to denounce it, neither to confess it to her son Nino nor to the midwife who will help her in giving birth to Usepe, the child of this rape:

²⁹¹ «In reality, she had lost consciousness, in a temporary absence from him and from the situation, but he didn’t realize this» (Weaver, 2000: 76).

²⁹² «And he was so charged with stern, repressed tensions that, at the moment of orgasm, he emitted a great scream above her. Then, in the following moment, he peeped at her in time to see her face, filled with amazement, relax in a smile of ineffable humility and sweetness. Carina carina,” he started saying to her (this was the fourth and last Italian word he had learned). And at the same time, he began kissing her, with little kisses full of sweetness, on the dazed face that seemed to look at him and continued smiling at him with a kind of gratitude. Meanwhile, she was gradually coming to, abandoned beneath him. And in the state of relaxation and calm that always passed between the spell and consciousness, she felt him again penetrating her, but slowly this time, with a heartrending and possessive movement, as if they were already kin and accustomed to each other. She found again that sense of fulfilment and repose she had known as a girl, at the end of an attack, when she was received once more by the affectionate room of her father and her mother; but that childish experience of hers was extended today, through her half-waking state, into the blissful sensation of returning to her own complete body» (Weaver, 2000: 76-77).

Di quel loro rapporto fugace, nessuno ne aveva notizie fuori di lei stessa; e neanche Nino ne aveva sospettato niente. Per cui ora non le restava che rimuoverlo anche dalla propria memoria, seguitando la sua vita solita.²⁹³ (*Ls*, 352)

She will never explain it, so much that even her son Nino must accept the mystery around Useppe's fatherhood.

In the case of Mariulina's rape, the victim is silenced in a completely different way. Mariulina is a partisan and Nino's girlfriend. Her rape, this time, is described less 'ambiguously' than Ida's. It is perceived as a proper violence, in its brutality, and the victims try to react, as much as possible. Mariulina is interrogated by a group of German soldiers who suspect that she hides and helps some partisans. Mariulina manages to stay loyal to the Resistance by not saying anything until she gets humiliated. She suddenly has her period while interrogated in front of the troupe. The stain of menstrual blood humiliates her so much that her efforts to cover Nino and the other partisans vanish, and thus she speaks:

In quel punto, avvertì alle reni un piccolo spasmo caldo, che pareva scioglierle con dolcezza le giunture, rilasciandole giù in basso il peso del corpo. E repentinamente arrossì, serrando strette le gambe e sogguardandosi i piedi, che al flusso improvviso e violento già le si imbrattavano di sangue mestruale. All'incidente che la sorprendevasi impreveduto in presenza di tutti quei giovanotti, la vergogna si mescolò con la paura. E sbattuta fra la vergogna e la paura, tentando di nascondere i piedi e insieme di pulire il pavimento bagnato con le suole delle sue scarpacce, tremando tutta come una canna disse tutto quello che sapeva.²⁹⁴ (*Ls*, 611)

She is 'silenced' in her 'activism', in her help to the Resistance, by making her betray her ideals and fight. Moreover, this is one of the few passages in which 'disgust' as a narrative motif is very similar to the definition postulated by Milkova for Ferrante. This time it is linked directly with womanhood, her bodily fluids, and her biology. The disgust provokes shame in Mariulina herself. The shame is that of not being able to hide her womanhood in front of a group of men ready to violate that same womanhood. The shame related to female body here seems to further propel Mariulina into a situation

²⁹³ «Except for herself, no one knew anything of their fleeting relationship; and not even Nino had any suspicions. So now she had only to expel it from her memory, continuing her usual life» (Weaver, 2000: 87).

²⁹⁴ «At that point, she felt a little warm spasm in her kidneys, which seemed gently to dissolve her joints, relaxing the weight of her lower body. And she immediately blushed, clenching her legs tight and glancing at her feet, which in the sudden and violent flow were already being stained with menstrual blood. At this unforeseen incident, which took her by surprise, in the presence of those young men, shame mingled with her fear. And hurled between shame and fear, trying to hide her feet and at the same time to wipe the wet floor with the soles of her heavy shoes, all trembling like a reed, she told everything she knew» (Weaver, 2000: 301-302).

of the most brutal patriarchal violence. It is the same shame towards the female body – and disgust – felt also in non-violent contexts by most of Morante's characters. It is the same shame that pushes Ida to «infagottarsi» (hiding the forms of the female body, as explained in a previous chapter):²⁹⁵

Essa non aveva mai avuto confidenza col proprio corpo, al punto che non lo guardava nemmeno quando si lavava. Il suo corpo era cresciuto con lei come un estraneo (...) Con quella sua eccessiva gravezza dei fianchi, e patito nel resto delle membra, esso era diventato, oramai, solo un peso di fatica.²⁹⁶ (*Ls*, 351)

It is also the same shame that makes Nunziatella prefer being a man (*IdA*, 1156: «Sarebbe bello per me, di non avere questo corpo! Di non essere una femmina! Ma di essere un ragazzo come te, e di correre per tutto il mondo, assieme a te!»).²⁹⁷

Finally, the third act of sexual violence narrated in *La Storia* is the murder of Santina, a prostitute killed by her procurer. In this case, Santina is no longer the protagonist of the event. The episode is narrated after it has already occurred. Moreover, the style is journalistic, the point of view becomes suddenly detached and distant. The narration is all focused on the killer, rather than on the victim,²⁹⁸ whose description is meagre and indicating an incontrovertible destiny of death. Santina is mentioned only when her photograph is described (in which, however, she is dehumanized and compared to an animal, destined to be killed) and at the end of the report:

Santina, l'anziana passeggiatrice, fu assassinata dal suo magnaccia. Lui stesso, poche ore dopo, si costituì alla polizia. [...] Questa apparve sui giornali di Roma, e c'era pure la foto di lei e quella dell'assassino. La foto di Santina era di data non recente; ma, anche se più fresca e piena, e meno brutta di adesso, già la sua faccia vi

²⁹⁵ In *La Frantumaglia*, Elena Ferrante observes about this literary motif: «Voi certamente le conoscete meglio di me ed è inutile che ve le trascriva. Dicono di come i figli si immaginano le madri: in stato di perenne vecchiezza, con occhi santi, con labbra sante, in abiti neri o grigi o al massimo marrone. All'inizio l'autrice parla di figli determinati: "quei siciliani severi, d'onore, sempre attenti alle loro sorelle". Ma, nel giro di poche frasi, mette da parte la Sicilia e passa invece – mi pare – a un'immagine materna meno locale. Questo accade con la comparsa dell'aggettivo informe. Gli abiti delle madri sono informi e la loro unica età, la vecchiezza, è anch'essa informe, "giacché" scrive Elsa Morante, "nessuno, a cominciare dalle sarte delle madri, va a pensare che una madre abbia un corpo di donna» («You certainly know them better than I do and it's pointless for me to repeat them here. They describe the way sons imagine their mothers: in a state of perennial old age, with holy eyes, with holy lips, dressed in black or gray or at most brown. At first the author speaks of particular sons: "those severe Sicilians, honorable, always watchful of their sisters." But, within a few sentences, she has set aside Sicily and moves instead—it seems to me—to a less local maternal image. This happens with the appearance of the adjective "shapeless." The mother's clothes are shapeless and her only age, old age, is also "shapeless," "since," Elsa Morante writes, "no one, starting with the mother's dressmaker, must think that a mother has a woman's body"» Goldstein, 2016: 53).

²⁹⁶ «She had never felt at ease in her own body, to such a degree that she didn't look at it even when she bathed. Her body had grown up with her like an outsider [...] With this excessive weight on its hips, and the wasting of its limbs, it had become for her only a toilsome burden» (Weaver, 2000: 87).

²⁹⁷ «It would be wonderful for me not to have this body! Not to be a woman but to be a boy like you and run all around the world with you» (Goldstein, 2018: 147).

²⁹⁸ Here it is, once again, important to describe the alignment of male power with the atrocities of history – Nello's signature is compared to that of Hitler, for instance, and the violent act is dismissed as a typical script of patriarchal violence.

mostrava quella rassegnazione opaca, di animale da macello, che oggi, a riguardarla, pareva il segno di una predestinazione.²⁹⁹ (*Ls*, 751)

Here she appears already as a dead and inert body. Her sorrow is not described. The reader does not know anything about her reaction, whether she fought back or not. The victim is arguably silenced by the narration itself. Only the last sentence alludes to the possibility of feeling compassion for a woman who was likely to trust her killer, since she used to accept to take her clothes off only with him, who, thus, is not part of the ‘crowd’ of her lovers/clients (*Ls*, 752, «il corpo di Santina era sul letto, nudo (forse, col suo unico ragazzo, a differenza che con gli amanti di passaggio, essa acconsentiva a spogliarsi»)).³⁰⁰ It must also be acknowledged that Santina seems also to cover a maternal role in the life of her pimp (*Ls*, 757, «E gli lavava e stirava la biancheria, i pantaloni, gli cucinava la pasta e la carne su suo fornello, gli faceva trovare per sorpresa le sigarette americane»)).³⁰¹ This is significant in light of the past of Nello, raised in an orphanage because her mother was, as well, a prostitute – as in Gunther, the narration leaves space to brief passages of humanisation of the rapists/killers. These elements are the only moments of ‘sweetness’³⁰² in a passage that contains, again, the definition of disgust analysed by Milkova (2013), that does not leave space to ambiguity while reading what is undoubtedly a violence:

Il delitto, non premeditato a quanto pareva, si era compiuto nel terraneo della donna. E le armi erano state più d’una, quelle che si potevano trovare là in casa: un paio di grosse forbici, il ferro da stiro e perfino il secchio dell’acqua sporca. La morte, tuttavia, risultò dovuta a un colpo di forbici iniziale, che aveva reciso alla donna la carotide; però l’assassino si era ostinato ancora contro quel corpo insensibile, contro ogni oggetto che gli capitava fra le mani. In proposito i giornali parlavano di un “raptus omicida”. [...] Il colpevole non s’era dato nessuna cura di cancellarne le tracce. Aveva lasciato perfino la porta accostata, così che una striscia di sangue ne colava dall’interno, irridendo il terriccio polveroso di fuori. Dentro il locale, il sangue formava una grande

²⁹⁹ «Santina, the elderly streetwalker, was murdered by her pimp. A few hours later, he turned himself in to the police. [...] It appeared in the Rome papers, and there were also photographs of Santina and of the murderer. Her picture was not recent; but, though more fresh and full, and less ugly, her face already showed that opaque resignation of an animal marked for slaughter, which today, when you looked at it, seemed the sign of a predestination» (Weaver, 2000: 423).

³⁰⁰ «Santina’s body was on the bed, naked (perhaps, with her one boyfriend, she agreed to undress, as she didn’t with her transient lovers)» (Weaver, 2000: 424).

³⁰¹ «And she washed and ironed his clothes, his pants, she cooked his pasta and meat on her little stove, she bought American cigarettes as a surprise for him» (Weaver, 2000: 429).

³⁰² This aspect also recalls what has been investigated in the chapter of Motherhood as the realm of the preconceptual, preverbal, that, again, hence make the maternal in Morante’s writings provide protection from the atrocities of history.

pozzanghera presso il letto, il tappetino e il materasso ne erano impregnati, ne era schizzato perfino sui muri, e inoltre l'assassino aveva lasciato dovunque le proprie pedate e ditate sanguinose.³⁰³ (*Ls*, 751-752)

In Banti's *Artemisia*, violence is represented in a very different way. A parallelism can be traced between the scenes of the rapes against Ida and Artemisia. If on the one hand, Ida does not seem completely aware of the fact that what she suffered is a form of violence, on the other hand Artemisia is well aware of what she underwent. Not only, but her rape even brings to her a greater awareness of the subjugated role she covers within her family and within current her society. Her trauma pushes her to search for a way to express her voice, already muted, and that would be even more silenced by the violence, if she did not react. If Morante enhances the power of Ida's, and other characters', trauma, Banti focuses on the revenge that such an episode can propel within the victim. The lack of silence, which on the contrary is dominant in Morante, is evident also in the rape scene itself. The scenes of violence are loud, ferocious – there is no ambiguity on the nature of what is being described. Artemisia is not a passive victim. She tries to fight, during and after the violence (*Art*, 260: «Mi tenne a forza sul letto con le pugna e coi denti, ma io avevo visto sulla cassa il coltellino di Francesco, mi allungai, lo agguantai, e menavo di sotto in su, tagliandomi la palma»)³⁰⁴ Indeed, she publicly denounces the rape, she refuses to marry her rapist, Agostino Tassi, jeopardising her reputation. Consequently, the trial supposedly against Tassi soon becomes a trial against her persona. Neither on that occasion Artemisia stays silent. Both Benedetti (1999) and Carù (1997) highlighted the fact that Artemisia is loud, never silent, and returns to the narration of her rape multiple times, unlike Ida, who never mentions the rape with anyone, neither within herself, thus it can be argued that, apparently, agency is developed for the characterisation of Artemisia but less for Ida:

Artemisia resists that intrusion, takes control of the page, speaks in the first person, and obsessively repeats the events that led to the rape, with the petulance of a Pirandello character who has no history but that of its own trauma (Benedetti, 1999: 53).

³⁰³ «The crime, apparently unpremeditated, had taken place in the woman's ground-floor room. And the weapons had been more than one, things to be found there in the house: a big pair of scissors, the iron, and even the bucket of dirty water. Death, however, proved to have been caused by an initial stab with the scissors, which had cut the woman's carotid artery; but the murderer had continued striking the unconscious body with every object he could get his hands on. The newspapers, referring to the crime, spoke of "temporary insanity. [...] It hadn't taken long, in any case, to discover the crime, since the murderer hadn't gone to any pains to wipe out the traces. He even left the door ajar, so that a stripe of blood trickled through it from inside, soaking into the dusty ground. In the room, the blood formed a big puddle by the bed, the rug and the mattress were steeped in it, and it had also splattered on the walls; moreover, the criminal left his own bloody footprints and fingerprints everywhere» (Weaver, 2000: 424).

³⁰⁴ «He held me down on the bed by force, fighting tooth and nail, but I had spotted Francesco's knife on the coffer. I reached out and grabbed it, and used it with an upward motion, cutting the palm of my hand» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 39).

The act of screaming is something recurrent in Banti's oeuvres, and it is always a woman screaming. It is not a coincidence that her last autofiction is titled *Un grido lacerante* (a piercing cry). It seems the only, or the main, tool in a woman's hands (unlike Morante's Ida who is unable to scream even in front of the dead body of her son Nino), but also the natural reaction (and response) against what they face. Artemisia screams during the trial against Agostino Tassi. She screams when she refuses her rapist's proposal to marry him (*Art*, 258, «Prorompe il grido spropositato e drammatico in bocca a tanto tenerella: “Questo è l’anello che tu mi dai, queste sono le promesse!”),³⁰⁵ and her scream is «spropositato» (exaggerated) in comparison to her young age and her fragile body, that can barely support it. When she is tired even of screaming, her cry is still ‘piercing’ in her mind and in her heart (*Art*, 263: «eppure in fondo al cuore seguitavo a disperarmi fino all’ultimo»³⁰⁶). And when she is tired and her voice is low, thus she is not able to tell the narrator her story anymore – Anna Banti, in a process of reading each other's mind, speaks for her (*Art*, 259-260: «“Debbo aiutarla, stanca più di lei. [...]” Poggia il capo sulla mia spalla, un peso di passerotto, e con voce convalescente: “Dopo, tutte le volte facevo sangue e Agostino diceva che ero di povera complessione”»³⁰⁷).

The presence or lack of silence in Morante and Banti is echoed and mirrored also by another fundamental element representing rapes – the opposite deployment of the motif/feeling of ‘rage’. In Morante ‘rage’ belongs largely to men (Gunther, for example):

Lo sguardo di lei parve, a questi occhi, un insulto definitivo. E istantaneamente una bufera di **rabbia** li oscurò.³⁰⁸ (*Ls*, 335, emphasis mine)

E senza neanche togliersi la cintura della divisa, incurante che costei fosse una vecchiaia, si buttò sopra di lei, rovesciandola su quel divanetto arruffato, e la violentò o con tanta **rabbia**, come se volesse assassinarla.³⁰⁹ (*Ls*, 336, emphasis mine)

Porcelli (2020) reflects on the fact that:

³⁰⁵ «She burst out with her exaggerated cry, so dramatic in such a young mouth. “So this is the ring you gave me, these the promises you made» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 37).

³⁰⁶ «And yet in the depths of my heart I never stopped struggling to the very end» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 37).

³⁰⁷ «“I must help her, though my fatigue is greater than hers [...] She rests her head on my shoulder, it weighs no more than a sparrow, and says in the voice of a convalescence: “Every time after that I used to bleed and Agostino would say that I had a weak constitution”» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 39).

³⁰⁸ «To those eyes her gaze seemed the definitive insult. And instantaneously a tempest of anger clouded them» (Weaver, 2000: 75).

³⁰⁹ «And without even taking off his uniform, caring nothing that she was old, he hurled himself on top of her, throwing her on that dishevelled daybed, and raping her with rage as if he wanted to murder her» (Weaver, 2000: 76).

[...] the emotion of anger is an issue of both status and gender. Although we don't think of anger today in terms of class and women are (re)claiming the right to be angry, for a long-time anger did not belong to them or to those who were either deemed inferior by others or considered themselves to be inferior in the social ladder. (57-58)

Morante's women rarely feel rage, neither when they suffer injustices, nor when they are raped. Resignation is the dominant feeling – Ida is never angry at her rapist, on the contrary, as it will be seen, she feels compassion for him. Women in Morante fit in the category of inferiors that Porcelli argues are unable to feel rage. Again, Porcelli argues that «Ida never feels anger: it would probably constitute an act of rebellion against authority which she would find impossible to envision» (2020: 60). Quite the opposite happens in Banti, whose narrative is full of enraged 'inferiors'. In Banti, Artemisia is able to feel a form of rage that Ida is unable to experience. Artemisia's anger is, indeed, the «act of rebellion against authority» which Morante decides not to include in her narrative, focusing on the effects that men's violence has on women, and that History's has on human beings – Mandolini (2017) shows how gender-based violence in Morante, rather than waking female subjectivity (as in Banti, I argue) is a tool to portray different kind of power dynamics (8). Artemisia's rage fuels a strong desire for revenge that will explode only within her art, giving back through her painting the same amount of violence she received – Banti's ekphrastic discussion of the painting *Judith and Holophernes* (analysed later in the chapter) is the main example of the rage Artemisia is able to nourish, but also of her revenge against Agostino Tassi. The opposite reactions to rape in Morante and Banti do not involve that one of the two is more effective than the other in denouncing women's condition or in representing them out of stereotypes. Indeed, the two attitudes described and above analysed are both defined by Herman (1992) as constitutive, at the same time, of the trauma of a person who is the victim of sexual abuse:

[...] the alternation between these two extreme states might be understood as an attempt to find a satisfactory balance between the two. But balance is precisely what the traumatised person lacks. She finds herself caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma, between floods of intense, overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all, between irritable, impulsive action and complete inhibition of action. (47)

The portraits offered by Morante and Banti are actually two sides of the same coin. Thus, as for the themed previously analysed, also rape is another element that I argue allow a feminist reading of these novels, despite the proverbial 'anti-feminism' of the authors – even if differently, Morante and even more Banti (since in her case not only agency becomes dominant but there is no wider

connection with History's atrocities, hence violence is purely gendered) shows awareness of women's subjugation and of how men deploy violence to keep this state of things.

5.4. Private vs Public

There is another significant difference between Morante and Banti in the representation of rape, which offers new ideas for reflection. This difference lays in the 'dimension' of the rapes represented – more 'private' in Morante, and 'public' in Banti. With 'private' and 'public' I address the implications violence brings – more personal and intimate, apparently, in Morante, and social in Banti – and the way in which it is lived, perceived, and processed by the victims. Of course, this does not deprive Morante's works of the political implication that a novel such as *La Storia* offers – the structure itself, with its historical sections, characters such as Davide or Nino, and the representation not only of gender-based violence but also of war-time sexual abuses ensure that this novel is not wholly relegated to the sphere of the 'private'. In fact, in Morante, scenes of violence are potentially 'collective' – rapes are wartime sexual violence both for Ida and Mariulina, whose rapists are Nazi soldiers.

Nevertheless, I argue that they are represented mostly at a private level, and that elements which usually characterise wartime sexual violence are not dominant in her description and narrativization of the phenomenon, despite Gunther being a member of the Nazis and him being the perpetrator of sexual violence, for example. This would involve, apparently, emptying the episode of the awareness that (wartime) sexual violence aims to keep unaltered the male dominance over women as a political tool. Actually, I aim to offer two keys of reading this 'absence' of political denunciation, in order not to deprive Morante's narrative of the political (and feminist, I argue) implications it conveys. Firstly, I argue that by representing these forms of sexual violence as private – since there is not a public report of the happening as in *Artemisia*, for example (Ida manages to keep the secret and deal with it privately), Morante makes Ida, and women in general, central in this issue, thus sexual violence is not employed anymore as a political form of propaganda used by men against each other (e.g., Italy vs Germany). Brownmiller (1975) highlights moments of 'breaks' (*cesure*) in rape history – e.g., during WWI it was drawn more attention to sexual violence (Feci and Schettini, 2017: 13). However, Brownmiller argues, this is not given by a new and greater interest in women's rights, but only in order to exploit it for propaganda reasons. In those years, and later also during WWII, rape was presented as a German crime. From 1937 (Tokyo) to 1946 (Nuremberg) also trials gave this partial and biased interpretation of wartime sexual violence (Mantioni, 2017: 141). Brownmiller remembers that, of course, rapes were not committed only by German soldiers, even if it is true that Axis troupes did exacerbate the concept of male superiority which develops also in sexual violence (Mantioni,

2017: 141). However, this does not exclude Allies from the same forms of annihilation. Morante deletes this component from her representation of violence, thus a political manipulation of the phenomenon is not made possible. Rapists, despite (or because) humanised (as it will soon be analysed), are not at the centre of violence anymore as representing their nationalities – women are protagonists of male (the only common denominator) violence. The humanised portraits of these men, paradoxically, make all men potential criminals, avoiding limiting the danger to a specific and monstrous category. The interpretation of these passages by Porcelli is slightly different. Porcelli (2020) actually writes about an ‘institutionalised rape’ (37) as for *La Storia*:

Throughout the scene, she only sees the soldier, metonymically represented by his uniform [...] Even the body of the young man seems to disappear from her sight, obscured by the uniform [...] Ida never really sees a person in Gunther, but only (...) a symbol, in other words, of Germany, Nazism and the racial laws. [...] I argue that gender and history play a significant role in what appears to be an asymmetrical encounter. (45-49)

Despite the metonymic significance for his uniform, also Porcelli, quoting Oram (2003) agrees with the fact that it is not merely History or politics to use violence against female bodies:

We could compare it with the rape of the partisan Mariulina and her mother, perpetrated by German soldiers later in the novel as an act of retaliation against members of the resistance, and the rape of Rosetta in Alberto Moravia’s *La ciociara* [...], committed by a gang of Moroccan soldiers depicted as brutal mass rapists. The horrors of history and the cruelty of establishment may be the remote cause for the characters’ suffering, but the root of evil is not “external,” it is not in the fat cigar smoking capitalists and their fascist warmongering lackeys. A deep, ahistorical level of evil is revealed in the scene of the rape. It is a scene with only two characters in the room, a man and a woman, both of them good and simple souls. But one good soul suddenly inflicts pain and humiliation on the other good soul. I suggest that the complexity of this scene is the result of a combination of conflicts that are embedded in the emotional history of the two characters, especially Ida’s (2020: 64).

The absence of a political and collective dimension of the violence (apparently) and particularly the lack of patriotic deployment of gender-based violence as a war tool are made possible by the process of ‘humanising’ the rapist carried out by the author through the points of view of the victims. Porcelli (2020) remembers that «Critics have grappled with the interpretation of *La Storia*’s rape scene because the narrator seems at times to sympathize with Gunther – defined as a nostalgic humble soldier («soldatuccio»), a beggar («mendicante») and innocent («innocenza quasi terribile»)» (*Ls*, 62) and that Ida’s physical response itself through an epileptic crisis (as previously analysed) adds

ambiguity to the scene (*Ls*, 63). Moreover, Oram (2003) wrote about the «redemptive reading» of the rape (412). I would not define redemptive the humanisation of Gunther or of Santina's killer. Rather, I argue that such a literary device put back at the centre of the narration the women as victims, and that by avoiding a political instrumentalisation of the events let her represent a more general and hierarchical power dynamic, in which women, as well as other minorities, end up being victims. Actually, through the humanisation of Gunther, Morante seems to also depict Ida's sense of guilt, who sometimes does not seem to consider what happened to her as a violence. This sense of guilt has been object of interesting studies. Sutherland (1970), for example, analysed a specific sense of guilt developed in white women victims of rapes perpetrated by black men. In her study³¹⁰ white female activists who were victims of rape committed by black men showed reluctance in accusing their rapists, due to the political belief that they were themselves victims of racial oppression. Also Brownmiller (1975) highlights the frequent ideological interpretations of sexual violence, often given by the victims themselves (Mantoni, 2017: 142). I am not trying to argue that Morante was deliberately conveying such a theory, however I argue that it is important to reflect on the unconventional way to represent a rape, through the humanisation of the rapist, and to recognise that through this technique itself,³¹¹ Ida's sense of guilt is made even more tangible and interesting, also because it is a more universal kind of power dynamic emerging that transcends political or national affiliations, as above argued. Similarly, in the case of Santina, her killer is object of another process of humanising him, arguably. Although he is described as a 'monster', Nello's background as an orphan looking for a maternal figure also plays an important role here.³¹²

La foto dell'assassino, invece, era stata presa in questura all'atto stesso dell'arresto; però anche lui appariva più giovane della sua età. Aveva, difatti, trentadue anni, ma dalla foto dimostrava dieci di meno. Scuro, sporco di barba nonostante la data festiva, con la fronte bassa e gli occhi da cane rabbioso, era proprio quello che si dice "una faccia da galera". Non dava a vedere nessuna emozione particolare, se non che, forse, in un suo linguaggio inespresso e torpido, sembrava dichiarasse: "Eccomi qua. Ci sono venuto da me. Non siete voi che mi avete preso. Guardatemi. Guardatemi pure. Tanto, io non vi vedo" [...] In tutta la sua precedente vita, lui non aveva mai posseduto nulla di suo. Era cresciuto negli istituti pubblici per gli infanti abbandonati e i minori. Nella sua infanzia, le suore dell'istituto, una volta all'anno, e cioè per Natale gli veniva ritolto e conservato in certi armadi fino all'anno seguente [...] Rilasciato dagli istituti verso i vent'anni. Era andato di sua propria

³¹⁰ Summarised brilliantly in Feci, Simona and Schettini, Laura. *La violenza contro le donne nella storia: Contesti, linguaggi, politiche del diritto (secoli XV-XXI)* (2017).

³¹¹ Among many other elements and different kind of traumas, indeed it is also worth remembering that Ida's transgenerational 'shame' linked to her Judaism is triggered by Gunther's appearance - she initially takes him to be a German soldier who has uncovered her Jewish origins.

³¹² The killer is, however, in his signature, also compared to Mussolini and D'Annunzio, thereby aligning him with a political dimension of power.

iniziativa a trovare sua madre, costei [...] s'era data da giovane allo stesso mestiere di Santina [...].³¹³ (*Ls*, 751-754)

His 'humanisation' can be traced also when the author alludes to the love he feels towards Santina despite her murder:

[...] se voleva, poteva trovare qualcuna più adatta alla sua età, e meno brutta di Santina; ma lui stesso, d'istinto, si scansava dalla gioventù e dalla bellezza, come un idrofobo che teme di mordere. La sola donna sua, era Santina. Il loro legame stava nei soldi. Ma siccome, in realtà, lui l'amava, l'interesse dei soldi, a sua propria insaputa, gli serviva piuttosto di pretesto per trovarsi vicino a lei.³¹⁴ (*Ls*, 756)

In Banti, as mentioned above, rage seems to be the dominant feeling in Artemisia's experience of violence. However, there is an earlier phase, preceding rage, similar to the sense of guilt described in Morante. In *Artemisia*, women are victims of different kinds of male violence. Banti manages to represent all the sorrow and the whole trauma that Artemisia lives every time she is at the mercy of male gaze or victim of street harassment. The male gaze is always on her body, causing shame in the protagonist:

E colse, più d'una volta, uno **sguardo** pigro, fermo come una mosca sulle rotondità del suo corpo trinato: no, non poteva soffrire maggior vergogna!³¹⁵ (*Art*, 336, emphasis mine)

[...] Artemisia non pensò a scrivere quanto avesse avuto paura, in quella osteria, che era la sola donna che ci fosse, e gli uomini di sotto **l'avevano guardata** a lungo, lei e le sue valigie.³¹⁶ (*Art*, 338, emphasis mine)

³¹³ «The murderer's photograph, on the other hand, had been taken at the police station at the moment of his arrest; however, he also seemed younger than his age. He was, in fact, thirty-two, but he looked ten years less in the picture. Dark, a smudge of beard despite the holiday, with a low forehead and the eyes of a mad dog, his was exactly what they call a "jailbird's face." He betrayed no special emotion; he merely seemed to declare perhaps, in an inexpressive and sluggish language of his own: "Here I am. I came on my own. You didn't catch me. Look at me. Go ahead and look. I don't even see you, anyway [...]" In all his previous life, he had never possessed anything of his own. He had grown up in public institutions for abandoned children and minors. In his infancy, the nuns of the institution, once a year, at Christmas, gave him a teddy bear, which was taken from him after Christmas and kept in a closet until the following year [...] Released from the institution at about twenty, he had gone, on his own initiative, to seek out his mother. [...] she had turned, as a girl, to the same trade as Santina» (Weaver, 2000: 423-426).

³¹⁴ «Still, if he had wanted, he could have found one more suited to his age, and less ugly than Santina; but he himself, instinctively, avoided youth and beauty, like a hydrophobe afraid of being bitten. His only woman was Santina. Their bond was money. But since, in reality, he loved her, the financial interest, unbeknownst to him, served him rather as an excuse to be with her» (Weaver, 2000: 423).

³¹⁵ «And more than once she intercepts a lazy glance that lingers like a fly on the swellings of her lace-trimmed bodice: ah no, what greater shame could she endure?» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 76).

³¹⁶ «Artemisia did not feel like writing about how afraid she had been in that inn, the only woman in the whole place, and how the men downstairs had stared at her for ages, her and her luggage» (D'Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 198).

The gaze is the first tool through which violence is committed against female bodies, anticipating more severe forms of violence, such as the rape experienced by Artemisia. Indeed, a ‘continuum theory’ has been theorised (Marcus, 2002) to link verbal and properly sexual abuses. So that «such verbal acts should be countered and censured for what they are – initiatives to set up a rape situation» (Marcus, 2002: 389).

In this novel, violence is at first a private event, rather than a collective or political phenomenon. Garavini (2013) outlines how rape – but also every other form of gender-based violence suffered by Artemisia – seems at first the consequence or the result of a personal guilt (XXI, «la ragione oggettiva buona a giustificare una ferita esistenziale che viene da molto più lontano»³¹⁷). At the beginning of the novel there are numerous passages describing the mixed feelings that Artemisia experiences when she falls victim even ‘just’ of men’s gaze. In these passages, the lexicon focuses on the semantic area of shame and guilt, emotions socially conditioned. Artemisia feels the shame of being stared at by men who comment on her body ignoring or actually reinforced by her embarrassed silence. Artemisia herself seems to know how illogical such a feeling is; indeed, it is described as «strano», weird, however she cannot help but experiencing it (*Art*, 261, emphasis mine: «Non rispondevi, andavi innanzi in furia, avevi voglia di piangere e uno strano orgoglio **vergognoso**»³¹⁸). Also, when remembering the rape inflicted by Agostino, in a primordial phase of her grieving, she is unable to feel rage or resentment, on the contrary she judges herself as «colpevole», guilty. She must be guilty if those surrounding her state it firmly, defending Agostino (*Art*, 266, emphasis mine: «Oggi si sente **colpevole**, colpevole come ciascuno vorrà, [...] Se la trattano così, devono aver ragione una macchia l’ha sempre designata agli occhi di tutti»³¹⁹). In this phase also her body is depicted as inert, still, not able to fight back – she tries but soon her «malanimo» converts into «consenso»:

il vento era cessato, volevo immaginarmi d’esser sola e sperduta, chiudevo gli orecchi alla voce e alla pedata di Agostino, ma le nostre ombre erano già unite. Così feci anche questa volta quello che voleva. Mi stancava la rapidità con cui passavo, a quel tempo, dal malanimo al consenso: eppure in fondo al cuore seguivava a disperarmi fino all’ultimo.³²⁰ (*Art*, 263)

³¹⁷ «The reason justifying the ancient existential wound» (my translation).

³¹⁸ «You did not reply, you walked on ahead, hurrying, you felt like crying, but you also felt a strange, shameful pride» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 41).

³¹⁹ «Today she feels guilty, guilty as everyone wishes her to be [...] If they are treating her like this, they must be right: a stain has always marked her out of the eyes of others» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 47).

³²⁰ «The wind had dropped. I tried to imagine that I was wandering alone, lost; I closed my ears to the sound of Agostino’s voice and footsteps, but our shadows had already joined together. And so once again he did what he wanted. I was exhausted by the speed with which, at that time, I would change from being unwilling to giving in; and yet in the depths of my heart I never stopped struggling to the very end» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 43).

Later in the narration of Artemisia's life, her personal guilt changes. Artemisia becomes aware that the violence she has experienced is shared by many other women, victims as well. Her trauma becomes the symbol of male violence against women, thus shifting from a personal level to a more political or public one. It is this passage that brings also the end of her feelings of guilt and introduce a new phase of revenge. Artemisia realises that her real guilt is that of being a woman. An important episode that marks this passage towards awareness and towards different feelings is that of the making of the painting *Judith and Holofernes*. The women of the court surrounding her while working (all victims of different forms of male violence) feel represented by Judith, who incarnates the desire of female redemption. Judith for Artemisia – but also, in parallel, Artemisia herself for Banti – is the tool for a new representation of (a violated) female body, which mirrors that wished by Sharon Marcus (2002) – a body which is not defined as 'raped' or 'to be raped', not trembling or still (as in Morante's Ida or as Artemisia at the beginning of the novel), but fierce, strong, able to take its revenge:

Rape exists because our experience and deployment of our bodies is the effect of interpretations, representations, and fantasies which often position us in ways amenable to the realization of the rape script: as paralyzed, as incapable of physical violence, as fearful. New cultural productions and reinscriptions of our bodies and our geographies can help us begin to revise the grammar of violence and to represent ourselves in militant new ways. In the place of a tremulous female body or the female self as an immobilized cavity, we can begin to imagine the female body as subject to change, as a potential object of fear and agent of violence (Marcus, 2002: 400)

This important change both in the representation of Artemisia's body – and the body of all women victims of male violence – and in the feelings of Artemisia herself lays in the ekphrasis offered by Banti when describing the painting *Judith and Holophernes*. Indeed, also Herman theorised how «traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather they are seconded in the form of vivid sensation and images» (1992: 38). In his analysis of this work, Roberto Longhi himself – Banti's husband and former teacher – offered a psychoanalytical key of reading, highlighting the female desire of redemption and liberation against male and sexual violence suffered by Gentileschi. This key is further developed and narrativized by Banti. The parallelism between Judith and Artemisia is explicit – Banti writes: «Non aveva impugnato il coltello contro Agostino? Non aveva dipinto il grosso sangue di Oloferne? Così di nuovo si vendicava di esser donna: perché di esser donna di nuovo

era stanca»³²¹ (*Art*, 392). Artemisia has to admit to herself that what she is painting is her own revenge, no more peaceful. The sense of guilt for this desire of violence is still present, thus painting – through which she shapes and express her identity, like Lavinia from *Lavinia fuggita* or Agnese from *Un grido lacerante* do respectively through music and writing – is the only way in which such a bloody revenge can be staged:

Agostino, il pugnale, la miseranda scena del letto a colonne avevan trovato la via di esprimersi non a parole o con interiore compianto, ma con mezzi che la mente avrebbe dovuto difendere e mantenere inviolati. Ecco perché Artemisia si sente colpevole più delle Torrigiani e di Violante: il suo gesto, nel congedare Anastasio, è brusco, evasivo. Intanto un’immensa fierezza le gonfia il petto, un’orribile fierezza di donna vendicata in cui trova luogo, malgrado la vergogna, la soddisfazione dell’artista che ha superato tutti i problemi dell’arte e parla il linguaggio di suo padre, dei puri, degli eletti.³²² (*Art*, 285)

The shame is substituted by «fierezza» (pride). The parallelism, is explicit when Artemisia looks at the mirror in order to search for her heroin’s traits to portray:

Le sciocche dame non si accorgevano di chi fosse la truculenza che, sulla tela, Giuditta aveva principiato a scoprire: di buon’ora e solo Artemisia aveva cercato nello specchio i tratti dell’eroina e le aveva riposto un ghigno che ormai antichi motivi ispiravano. Non più nobili, non più puri di quelli che la vedova Violante coltivava e nutriva intorno a sé, e la ragione la sapeva lei sola.³²³ (*Art*, 285)

Artemisia’s revenge becomes the revenge against her womanhood, that make her a victim:

³²¹ «Had she not used the knife against Agostino? Had she not painted Holpherne’s thick blood? And so once again she took her revenge for being a woman, because once again she was tired of being one» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 203-204).

³²² «Agostino, the dagger, the pitiful scene in the four-poster bed had all found a means of expression, not with words or silent self-pity, but by a route that the mind ought to have defended and maintained inviolate. This is why Artemisia feels she is guiltier than Torrigianis or Violante: the gesture with which she dismisses Anastasio is brusque, evasive. Meanwhile, an immense feeling of pride swells her breast, the awful pride of a woman who has been avenged, in whom despite her shame, there is also room for the satisfaction of the artist who has overcome all the problems of her art and speaks the language of her father, of the pure, of the chosen» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 71).

³²³ «The foolish women did not realize whose was the truculent expression that Judith, on the canvas had begun to reveal: earlier, while she was alone, Artemisia had looked in the mirror for the features of her heroine and she had been rewarded by a sneer, the motives for which now belonged to the remote past. Motives that were no more noble, no more pure, than those that Violante the widow cultivated and fostered around herself, the reasons for which she alone knew» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 71).

Si ritrovò crudele, quasi sanguinaria. Non aveva impugnato il coltello contro Agostino? Non aveva dipinto il grosso sangue di Oloferne? Così di nuovo si vendicava di esser donna: perché di esser donna di nuovo era stanca.³²⁴ (*Art*, 392)

But it is also the revenge of every woman victim of some kind of gendered violence: from rape (as in the case of Artemisia) to the obstacles encountered by Banti in her career, to the physical or psychological violence suffered by the women of the court around Artemisia (*Art*, 339: «[...] ha un marito bestiale che la batte per gelosia. “Salvarla bisogna” fiammeggia Artemisia che nulla farebbe indietreggiare quando s’immagina che il teatro delle azioni si metta in movimento»³²⁵). Each of these women eagers to be the model for Artemisia’s Judith: «Orribilmente fascinate, Artemisia vide, dal fondo della stanza, lampeggiare sulla schiera di femmine una lama sottile, e la teneva Caterina, stretto il pugno di morta, dormente il molle viso, e sulla fronte bassa una tensione senza rughe»³²⁶ (*Art*, 287). These women are eager to see themselves as Judith. Banti explicitly writes that they keep observing Artemisia’s work because through the painter they see their own sorrows represented:

le dame confidano le violenze domestiche e trovano vendetta tramite Giuditta: allo scherno succedevano racconti di sevizie segrete e leggendarie con fantasmi di mogli claustrate, avvelenate, fatte sparire senza lasciar traccia, fantasmi che parevano mescolarsi al gruppo delle viventi e insinuarvi uno stimolo di vendetta che eccitava le narici insieme all’odor della trementina. Di tratto in tratto, occhiate rapidissime e taglienti sfioravano il modello e lo oltrepassavano luccicando.³²⁷ (*Art*, 284)

Banti returns on the contrast between opposite colours – on the red corrupting the white. If at beginning of the novel the red would have meant the rape corrupting Artemisia’s whiteness, at this phase of the story the red is the blood of Holophernes, thus the wish for revenge ‘corrupting’ the spirit of Artemisia who is not passive anymore in her quiet sorrow:

³²⁴ «She felt cruel, almost bloodthirsty, once more. Had she not used the knife against Agostino? Had she not painted Holpherne’s thick blood? And so once again she took her revenge for being a woman, because once again she was tired of being one» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 203-204).

³²⁵ «She has a brutal husband who beats her out of jealousy. “Someone must save her”, says Artemisia passionately, for nothing can make her draw back once she imagines that a course of action has been set in motion» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 138).

³²⁶ «Horribly fascinated, Artemisia, from the other end of the room, saw the flash of a thin blade in the midst of the group of women: Caterina was holding it, her fists clenched tightly as though in death, her flabby face devoid of expression and on her own forehead and unwrinkled tension» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 73).

³²⁷ «Following on this mockery came tales of secret, legendary tortures evoking the ghosts of wives who had been cloistered or poisoned, who had disappeared without trace, ghosts who seemed to mingle with this group of living women, sadly goading them into ideas of revenge which, with the smell of the turpentine, made their nostrils flare. from time to time, very rapid, harsh glances were darted towards the model and passed beyond him, glittering» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 71).

[...] così si tiene il pugnale?” “Io non saprei colpire.” “Io, sì.” “io, vorrei provarmici.” “Tutto quel sangue...” ritornavano sempre al sangue che Artemisia dipingeva, una carneficina tessuta, rivo per rigo, come un ricamo,³²⁸ sul bianco lino.³²⁹ (*Art*, 285)

Banti herself intervenes in her text to offer support to Artemisia’s revenge, as if it can become her revenge as well:

[...] dietro Giuditta e Oloferne, prende corpo la figura di una donna eccezionale, né sposa né fanciulla, senza paura; in cui le piace riconoscersi, accarezzarsi, spronarsi. Da troppo tempo le mancava questo essenziale motivo del vivere, questa compiacenza di sé: forse dai giorni che Cecilia Nari la vedeva balzare, dalle fratte del Pincio, verso la sua finestra.³³⁰ (*Art*, 286)

This ekphrasis is revolutionary also because it subverts the traditional structure of the narrative device. Mitchell (1995) theorises that ekphrasis involves a triangle (poet – image – reader) which is traditionally masculine – feminine – masculine. This happens because the image is female since silent and ‘watchable’ and, viceversa, women are image because muted and subjected to the gaze. Image and women are “other”. Mitchell offers the same example but from a racial point of view: whiteness is invisible, blackness is characterised by physical features. In Banti firstly the triangle gets more complex – the base triangle is Artemisia-Judith-women of the court, but Banti adds herself and the readers, making the geometrical figure more complex. The image is again female, but it is not silent or motionless, it is strong, fierce and it validates and redeems the (women) readers, the women of the court, in addition to the “women poets” Artemisia and Banti. Thus, it is sent and received by female gazes, affirming the sense of agency previously argued in Banti’s conceptualisation of gender-based violence.

Exploring the theme of gender-based violence in the three authors has been particularly productive. Despite Ginzburg’s intention to depict human condition rather than women’s, despite Banti’s aim not to deal with feminist topics and issues, and despite Morante’s desire not to be politically labelled, they all offer a powerful representation of women’s subjectivity when traumatised by male violence.

³²⁸ Here it is interesting also that the reference to weaving, which is often compared to female storytelling, confirms what has been argued in the chapter “Female subjectivity” about the art form of expressions deployed by Banti’s protagonist to build their own subjectivity (painting, music, writing...).

³²⁹ «“Is that how you hold a dagger?” “I wouldn’t be able to stick it in” “I would” “I’d love to try” “All that blood...” they always came back to the blood that Artemisia was painting, a carnage woven, drop by drop, like embroidery on the white linen» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 71).

³³⁰ «[...] behind Judith and Holofernes, their takes shape the figure of an exceptional woman, neither wife nor girl, fearless, in whom she loves to recognise herself, flatter herself, spur herself on. For too long these essential components of living had been missing, this self-esteem: perhaps ever since the days when Cecilia Nari used to watch her as she leapt down from the bushes on the Pincio hillside towards her own window» (D’Ardia Caracciolo, 2020: 138).

Even if it has been prefaced that in Ginzburg violence is not as fully developed as in Banti and Morante, the analysis of the psychological violence that her characters (as well as Banti and Morante's) suffer helps us in understanding how Ginzburg is well aware of how women are always and in different ways victims of male power, employed to submit them. And, at the same time, in some ways, her desire not to be dismissed as a female, sentimental writer also implies a certain violence to fit into a specific narrative form – witnessing the complex relationship between feminist narratives and what I have been defining 'antifeminist conscience'. Not only, but some peculiar passages testify how fathers' violence is a motif in Ginzburg – absent in the other two authors. Ginzburg's fathers, despite mostly silent or absent, when on the scene are physically abusive with their daughters, in the attempt to make them respect social expectations. Mothers do the same but in a predominantly psychological way, rather than physical. Finally, a motif shared by all the three authors is the disgust felt towards sexuality, in general. I argued that this motif permits a reading of heteronormative sexuality as a violence itself, making these authors particularly and subtly aware of the complexity of male violence, that can hide in unexpected contexts. The theme of disgust linked to sexuality broadens the very notion of violence, making also Ginzburg's analysis pertinent and offering an original approach to the feminist reading of these works.

However, Banti and Morante's writings offer specific causes for reflection. The analysis of the rapes represented in their novels have been read through two significant oppositions – silence and voice, private and public. Silence is peculiar of Morante's representation of violence. As a brilliant portrayal of trauma in women's hurt consciences, silence is the main expression of this trauma – Ida, Santina, and Mariulina are differently but unequivocally silenced by the violence suffered. Ida does not tell anybody of her trauma; Santina is killed and only her murderer has the narrative possibility to explain her point of view of the event (although, we cannot overlook to the voice of the *narratrice*, through whom the voice of the murderer is filtered and indeed compared to other perpetrators of history); shame makes Mariulina 'betray' the partisans she was protecting (in this case on the one hand violence actually interrupts Mariulina's silence, on the other hand, arguably, her activity within Resistance is metaphorically 'silenced' by Nazi-fascist violence). The focus on the interiority of these traumatised women does not diminish the value of such a representation – indeed, «the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected... the tyrannies and servilities of one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other», wrote Virginia Woolf (1938: 47). Less ambiguous, and perhaps more canonical, within a feminist reading, representation of the rape is traceable in Banti. Indeed, the victim in Banti is vocal, angry, polemical, aware of what she has been victim. This brings a greater awareness of the need to express her subjectivity and to revolt. Thus, the sphere in which violence is represented is more public here, focused more on the revenge that women can and should plan, in order to gain

emancipation from these dynamics, rather than on the wound that trauma leaves on these rebellious consciences. The key notion of agency has been fundamental for this comparison, arguing that Banti is more worried to characterise Artemisia's agency against the lack of it in the traumatised protagonists of Morante.

Ginzburg's narrativisation of psychological and paternal violence, the opposite representation of rape in Banti and Morante, the conceptualisation of heteronormative sex as disgusting because in a way violent as well are all elements that seem to contrast with what has been defined potentially as antifeminism. These authors, as showed previously, remarked the aim not to talk only about women, nor to represent their struggles within society. And if with Morante it is arguably a broader discourse involving more categories and the atrocities of History (in *La Storia*, at least), it is more difficult not to read a literary representation of women's struggles with male power and violence in Banti and Ginzburg. After all, in the interviews and articles already cited, these authors show a political awareness that goes beyond their narratives but that is closer to their literary characterisations rather than to the claimed distance from feminism. Thus, this further discrepancy witnesses the intentions not to be associated with 'female literary stereotypes' or with radical groups, not to be labelled or categorised, rather than not engaging with women's issues and representation:

Sì, questo lo credo. E penso anche che gli uomini ne fanno veramente di tutti i colori e che, politicamente, ci stanno portando alla rovina. Forse, se ci fossero le donne al potere, le cose andrebbero meglio.³³¹ (Anna Banti in Sandra Petrignani, 1984: 107)

[...] la tendenza a cascare nel pozzo e trovarci una possibilità di sofferenza sconfinata che gli uomini non conoscono forse perché sono più forti di salute o più in gamba a dimenticare se stessi e a identificarsi col lavoro che fanno, più sicuri di sé e più padroni del proprio corpo e della propria vita e più liberi.³³² (Ginzburg, 1948: 107-108)

Secondo me, in tutto il mondo, ancora oggi, esiste in realtà una specie di razzismo, evidente o larvato, nei riguardi delle donne: perfino nei paesi dove le donne sembrano dominatrici!³³³ (Morante in Porciani, 2019: 352)

³³¹ «Yes, I think so. And I also think that men are up to all sorts of things and that, politically, they are leading us to ruin. Maybe if there were women in power, things would be better» (my translation).

³³² «[...] the tendency to fall into the well and find in it a possibility of boundless suffering that men do not know perhaps because they are stronger in health or more capable of forgetting themselves and identifying with their job, or more self-confident and more in control of their bodies and lives, and freer» (my translation).

³³³ «In my opinion, all over the world, even today, there is in fact some kind of racism, whether overt or covert, towards women, even in countries where women seem to dominate» (my translation).

6. Conclusion

This work has investigated the discrepancy between what I have referred to as anti-feminist consciences and feminist narratives in Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante's works. Indeed, I argued how these two spheres often seem to conflict. I demonstrated the meaning of the expression anti-feminism showing how the selected authors distanced themselves from feminism throughout the years – interviews, essays, and articles by Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante prove the willingness not to be defined as feminist or to be associated with the movement. Even when they declare to support some of the feminist causes, they tend to affirm their need not to be catalogued as such, for example, and mainly, through the refusal of a language that marks their gender (e.g., *scrittrice* vs *scrittore*). Simultaneously, I argued that their narratives are nonetheless readable through a feminist lens since their novels and short stories kept representing women and their condition through time out of stereotypes. Clearly, they engage with women's representation and with gender-based issues, thus the need to investigate the nature of their manifest anti-feminism. To do so, the analysis of the selected *corpus* was structured into four main themes, to prove how not only their public statements do not prevent these narratives from being potentially read as feminist, but also how these authors (more or less deliberately) adopted and anticipated some theories of second wave feminism and poststructuralist feminism, and how their anti-feminism is mirrored in their narratives with the aim not to be ghettoised as women in a marginalised literary category.

After an overview of Italian feminism during the twentieth century and an investigation into these authors' anti-feminism, the second chapter aimed to analyse the representation of female subjectivities in their narratives. Through the analysis of this theme, I drew a parallelism between the characters' renouncing the specificity of their sex and that of their authors – I argued that both the authors' and the characters' subjectivities build on the assumption that adhering to a masculine model of subjectivity is necessary to find room for themselves in the system in which they live.

The third chapter of this work investigated the conceptualisation of motherhood by Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante. The feminist underpinnings of these narratives about motherhood have been traced within four sub-themes: rejected motherhood, maternal language, 'the monstrous feminine', and breastfeeding. This chapter has shown how these authors offered an alternative and non-stereotypical representation of motherhood while refusing to be «recognised as canonical» (Lucamante, 2006: 32) by a generation of writer-daughters.

The fourth chapter dealt with the representation of female friendship, a less common literary theme. I argued that the difficulty itself to trace bonds of friendship in these narratives can be read as a form of isolation caused by patriarchal impositions, in addition to being the product of the pessimism of

these authors around the possibility for women to gather in «comunità sororali» or political movements, and that, thus, these two aspects are interlinked. I reflected on how the representation of female bonds in these narratives echoes the need not to be catalogued as ‘feminine’ or ‘feminist’, struggling between the need to voice women and that of not being inserted within a genealogy of only women that would make these authors feel in a trap. The last chapter of this work focused on the violent relationship that men seem to build with women as a form of power. This chapter lingered on the nature of the violence suffered by women, the literary representation of it, and the consequences developed within the protagonist victims.

This work contributed to shedding light on an aspect that is often underrated, but fundamental not only from a literary point of view but also from a historical and political perspective. Indeed, focusing on the ‘anti-feminist’ stances by Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante did not prevent this thesis from recognising the anticipatory use of certain feminist theories, and their engagement with women’s representation, arguing that what is today often perceived as ‘antifeminism’ actually shaped their narratives in a feminist way. The issue around inclusive language – the refusal to be called *scrittrici* thus denying the sexual difference theorised as a tool of resistance against the patriarchy – is the most emblematic element of contradictory and controversial positions, that, however, help to shed light also on the current situation of Italian women’s literature. Indeed, despite the attempt not to be considered ‘mothers’ of other women writers, the distance from the concept of ‘white ink’ theorised by Cixous (1976) (thus the possibility to write about women to inspire other women to express their subjectivities), writers such as Elena Ferrante or Giulia Caminito in today’s Italy openly declare their inspiration from authors like Morante or Ginzburg even when claiming sexual difference as their main tool of resistance against a male-dominated environment. If during the spread of second wave feminism the authors selected for this work tended to refuse what this movement proposed and theorised, the fact that their theories and concepts still build feminist consciences in Italy today does not surprise, given the traditionally slow pace of feminism in Italy.

6.1. Italian women writers today

Elena Ferrante is first worthy of mention since it is believed that she is the reason why so many Italian women writers have been recently awarded and translated worldwide. Ferrante allows us to start a dialogue also beyond Italian literature. Indeed, she is often said to have fuelled interest in other Italian women writers (Momigliano, 2019) and in female-authored Italian literature in translation (Granacki, 2019) so much that the expression «Ferrante effect» had been used for this phenomenon.

Ferrante's explicit and declared feminism is inspired by the values and the thought of western second wave feminism. Sotgiu (2017: 61), for example, recognises that the bond of 'sisterhood' between Lenù and Lila – the protagonists of the *Neapolitan novels* – is similar to the bond theorised by the feminism 'of difference' from the 70s. Sotgiu adds (2017: 68) that the capacity in Ferrante's novels to create a symbolic feminine order, regardless of the patriarchal one, builds on the concept of entrustment as was theorised by the group Diotima in the 80s (and analysed in the previous chapters). Finally, Sotgiu also recognises the influence of Luisa Muraro in the conceptualisation of the relationship between mother-daughter (2017: 70). The influence of feminism of difference is both recognised by scholars (e.g., Sotgiu, 2017; Guarracino, 2016) and admitted by Ferrante herself in her non-novelistic production – in *La Frantumaglia*, for example, she cites Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous as some of the female thinkers who have influenced her work.

The fact that twenty first century Italian women writers are more willing to be identified as feminists is proven also by their presence in literary festivals admittedly feminist such as “Fiera editoriale delle donne”, including guests such as Michela Murgia (activist and author of feminist essays and podcasts), Giulia Caminito (author of articles and editor of volumes aiming to recover forgotten women writers), Sandra Petrigiani (already mentioned in this work and active in the revaluation of twentieth-century female-authored writings). Donatella Di Pietrantonio, whose novels find explicit inspiration in Ferrante's narrative (who in turn was inspired by Morante) in an interview in 2018 claimed that feminism influenced her life and her writings. A work by Bazzoni (2021) collecting interviews with five important contemporary Italian women writers – Antonella Cilento, Helena Janeczek, Laura Pugno, Caterina Serra, and Nadia Terranova – investigates the Italian literary system from a gender perspective. It is particularly helpful in order to reflect on the relationship between female writing and feminism today, as Bazzoni explains that all the writers define themselves as *scrittrici*, unlike Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante. Pugno, for example, chooses to be called a *scrittrice* as a political statement:

Noi siamo abituati al suono e all'uso di determinati termini, pensiamo a studentessa o professoressa che oggi ci sembrano assolutamente normali ma ai primi del Novecento sembravano degli abomini linguistici perché era nuovo il fatto che le donne accedessero a determinati ruoli. Così come si è dibattuto su infermiera sì, ingegnera no. Queste parole suonano stonate perché il nostro orecchio si è formato in un determinato modo. Detto questo, io ho fatto una consapevole scelta di usarle, anche quando magari il loro suono mi sembri

stridente, semplicemente perché lì ove è esistita una funzione di potere nella storia è sempre esistita anche la parola: diciamo regina, principessa e sacerdotessa.³³⁴ (2021: 6-7)

However, Bazzoni also highlights how these writers do recognise the tensions around this issue. Janeczek claims:

Sì, io mi definisco scrittrice, io come altre cominciamo a rivendicare il fatto che possiamo essere insieme donne e produttrici di qualcosa che sia letterariamente altrettanto strutturato dell'opera di un collega. Io credo che da parte delle scrittrici, anche da parte di generazioni diverse, negli ultimi tempi ci sia stato un rendersi conto che le condizioni di ascolto e di riconoscimento non fossero pari a quelle dei colleghi e quindi c'è stato almeno un tentativo di mutuo riconoscimento.³³⁵ (2021: 6)

Cilento openly quotes writers from the twentieth century such as Morante and Banti and their choice to use the masculine, recognising how it is implicitly prestigious in its use:

Sicuramente è più facile oggi definirsi scrittrice rispetto ai tempi di Elsa Morante, dove la maggior parte delle scrittrici italiane dovevano avere qualcuno accanto. Per paradosso Morante è in assoluto la più grande anche per aver avuto accanto per tanti anni Alberto Moravia, che rendeva la cosa in qualche modo socialmente più accettabile. E lo stesso è valso per Anna Banti, che è un'altra grandissima, però che era riuscita ad essere rilevante anche perché moglie di Roberto Longhi. Ed è vero anche che per esempio per Anna Maria Ortese il fatto che non ci fosse un uomo accanto per lei ha pesato moltissimo, per la sua storia editoriale e per le sue vicende. Certamente non siamo più negli anni Cinquanta o Sessanta, e dirsi scrittrici oggi dovrebbe non essere un problema. Tuttavia, ci sono anche tante scrittrici o poetesse viventi che insistono per farsi chiamare ancora poeta o scrittore, perché in qualche modo dobbiamo ancora conquistarci un completo rispetto, un totale riconoscimento.³³⁶ (2021: 7)

³³⁴ «We are used to the sound and use of certain terms. Think of “studentessa” (female student) or “professoressa” (female professor), which today seem absolutely normal to us but in the early twentieth century seemed linguistic abominations because it was new for women to take on certain roles. Just as there have been debates about whether “infermiera” (female nurse) is acceptable or “ingegnera” (female engineer) is not. These words sound out of tune because our ear was trained in a certain way. 128. Having said that, I have made a conscious choice to use them, even when their sound may seem strident to me, simply because where there has been a function of power in history there has always also been the word: we say, for example, queen, princess and priestess» (my translation).

³³⁵ «Yes, I call myself a “scrittrice” (female writer; hereinafter “scrittrice”). I, just like many others, are beginning to claim that we can be both women and producers of something that is as literarily structured as the work of a male colleague. I believe that on the part of women writers, even from different generations, in recent times there has been a realisation that the conditions of recognition were not equal to those of male colleagues and therefore there has been at least an attempt of mutual recognition» (my translation).

³³⁶ «It is certainly easier today to call oneself a “scrittrice” than in the days of Elsa Morante, where most Italian women writers needed to have someone beside them. Paradoxically, Morante is also the greatest because she had Alberto Moravia beside her for so many years, which made it somewhat more socially acceptable. And the same applied to Anna Banti,

Serra, while claiming to be a *scrittrice*, hopes to be able to go beyond gendered categories, something that I argued also for Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante – their refusal to be *scrittrici* is of course linked to their distance to feminism but with the aim not to be included in any category:

Non mi definisco scrittore, però capisco perché ci sia tutt'oggi qualcuna che decide di dire “sono scrittore”: dà conto di una storia e di una cultura che riconosce nel maschile il saper fare, il saper essere, [...] Oggi, preferirei parlare di no gender, di nessuna distinzione di genere, dove il genere è stato ed è funzionale al sistema patriarcale ancora dominante.³³⁷ (2021: 6)

Thus, as previously argued, reflecting on Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante's antifeminism helped in arguing that their stances are anticipating a later wave of feminism. Their refusal of feminism comes from the feminist awareness of their condition of women writers. This is also what Terranova argues in her interview with Bazzoni, quoting Morante herself (2021: 6):

Io credo che oggi si dica scrittrice e io preferisco dire scrittrice, perché credo che forse l'affermazione della parola al femminile possa pian piano mettersi sullo stesso piano di quella maschile e cercare di recuperare il terreno perduto. Penso che il passo indietro che faceva Elsa Morante andasse comunque nella stessa direzione in cui oggi si va cercando di affermare la parola scrittrice al femminile, nel senso che l'obiettivo è comune, le strade per raggiungerlo sono diverse. L'obiettivo comune è quello di considerare scrittrici e scrittori su unico piano. È una lotta difficilissima.³³⁸

Bazzoni outlines how the new writers are more aware of the political importance of the language and how they have more space and possibilities to make political statements. However, she also points out that their (public) acknowledgment has not (significantly) increased (2021: 7). I have argued that authors such as Banti, Ginzburg, and Morante, aware of this lack of acknowledgment, deliberately

who is another great one, but who also managed to be relevant because she was Roberto Longhi's wife. And it is also true that for Anna Maria Ortese, for example, the fact that there was no man next to her had considerable repercussions on her editorial history and for her vicissitudes. We are certainly no longer in the 1950s or 1960s and calling oneself a “scrittrice” today should not be a problem. However, there are also many living women writers who insist on still calling themselves a poet or writer, because, somehow, we are still to win complete respect and recognition» (my translation).

³³⁷ «I do not call myself a “scrittore” (male writer; hereinafter “scrittore”), but I do understand why there are still some who decide to say “I am a ‘scrittore’”: it gives an account of a history and culture that recognise in the male the ability to do, the ability to be. [...] Today, I would prefer to speak of no gender, of no gender distinction, where gender has been and is functional to the patriarchal system that is still dominant» (my translation).

³³⁸ «I believe that today we say “scrittrice” and I prefer to say “scrittrice”, because I believe that perhaps the affirmation of the Italian feminine word can slowly put itself on the same level as the masculine word and try to recover lost ground. I believe that the step backwards that Elsa Morante took was going in the same direction in which we are going today trying to reinforce the word “scrittrice”. The objective is common, but the ways to reach it are different. The common goal is to consider female writers and male writers on the same level. It is a very difficult struggle» (my translation).

chose not to embrace the feminism of difference oscillating between nourishing the male prestige and the avant-gardist aim to impose a system beyond categories. Moreover, I strongly believe (as I hope to have shown in the present thesis) that despite the latter position, their narratives are still readable as feminists, or at least their representation of women in their works successfully defy stereotypes and had the political power to influence contemporary (feminist) writers because of their need not be catalogued according to their gender. Further proof of this specific influence is also how these authors, despite being Italian and from the previous century, not only have an impact on contemporary Italian women writers as explained above, but they have been recovered also by contemporary anglophone writers, for example, ‘daughters’ of a more mature feminism who, nevertheless, are not deterred from taking inspiration from apparently ‘anti-feminist’ authors. Indeed, quoting Lara Feigel’s (2019) reflections on renewed global interest in Ginzburg: «If Ferrante is a friend, Ginzburg is a mentor». To mention just a couple of successful contemporary authors endorsing Ginzburg, the Irish bestselling author Sally Rooney has recently written the preface to the translation of *Tutti i nostri ieri* by Ginzburg (*All of Our Yesterdays*; Daunt Books, 2022), defining it as a «perfect novel» (Rooney, 2022), and Rachel Cusk has authored the introduction of the latest translation of *Little Virtues* by Ginzburg.

Hence, this study makes an important contribution to scholarship in a climate in which contemporary women writers are more validated and confident in their feminist views yet continue to acknowledge a debt to the previous generation of writers and the difficult choices they faced. At the same time, this research can dialogue with more recent voices and contribute to changing a narrative about the previous generation of women writers, and it does so in an historical moment in which not only the specificity of the Italian context gains attention, but Italian authors of Banti’s, Ginzburg’s, and Morante’s generation seem to finally start receiving the recognition they deserve.³³⁹

³³⁹ In addition to the cases above mentioned, we can mention as examples the new translation of *Menzogna and sortilegio* (forthcoming in 2023) by Jenny McPhee and her recent new translation of *Lessico Familiare*.

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