

Motherland, Holy Mother, “Mother Courage”: the Representation of Motherhood in Contexts of Armed Violence

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to question the massive presence of the motherhood motif in fictional literary production concerning female armed combat, and especially the recurrence of an archetypal pattern that we will call the “Mother Courage” pattern. After introducing the history of this expression and its different meanings, from Brecht’s play to modern press, we will analyze the construction of the “Mother courage”, or the brave mother, in the literature about female participation in armed combat. So, using the examples of the protagonists of the novella *Umm Sa’d* (1969), by the Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani, and of *And Agnese Choose to Die* (1949), by the Italian writer Renata Viganò, we will discuss how this pattern intersects with other archetypal representations of motherhood, from the Holy Mother to the Motherland, and with modern representations inspired by the Feminist movement. We will not that, even if the motherhood of the two characters is constantly highlighted in these novels, nearly becoming holy, inspired by the Marian pattern, Agnese and Umm Sa’d follow different paths in regard to their engagement in armed combat. While the first one is a changing character who reaches, at least in part, a gender consciousness and whose role in the Italian resistance evolves throughout the story, the second one remains first and foremost a fighter’s mother who takes part in the armed movement through her son’s fight, and therefore through her motherhood. Through the examples of Umm Sa’d and Agnese, we will finally consider whether the representation of motherhood, which materializes through the Mother Courage motif, amongst others, paradoxically allows women to reappropriate armed violence, traditionally considered as masculine, or whether it affirms a normative literary construction of femininity, imprisoning women through their reproductive role as much as through their imposed non-violence.

Keywords: Normative Femininity, Female Combat, Motherhood

Despite the presence of a taboo around female violence (Cardi & Pruvost, 2012/2017) which leads to a phenomenon of invisibilization of female contribution to armed combat, literature has always been a space in which social taboos find their rightful place. In this way, we can note the presence of female fighter figures, especially in non-fiction produced following conflicts, but also in fiction. This paper aims to analyze the presence of a recurring archetypal motif that we will call the “Mother Courage” motif in fictional literary production.

The expression “Mother Courage” was coined by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, who wrote *Mutter Courage und Ihre Kinder* (1941/1963) in 1938-1939, during his escape from Nazi Germany to Sweden. This new expression was successful and we can point to the novel use of the term in European media to refer to a woman who resists in a context of generalized violence and protects her loved ones at all costs¹. But, Brecht’s “Mother Courage” is ambivalent and distinctly further from heroism. She represents those who attempt to benefit from wars; in this manner, she cannot be a good mother and protect her children who all die one by one. So, it is apparent that the meaning changed considerably from its first use by the German playwright.

Giuseppina Sapio (2017) links the representation of “Mother Courage” that we can identify in the media to a particular vision of maternity that is similar to Bernhard’s “Great Mediterranean Mother”. The Jungian psychologist creates this concept at the end of the nineteen-sixties, after having spent a long period of his life in Italy, working as a psychologist in Rome. Bernhard considers “The Great Mediterranean Mother” as a particular construction of maternity whose existence is supposedly present in the whole Mediterranean region, according to the psychologist. He discusses a system of incessant projections of the maternal instinct onto others which conse-

¹ The term *Madre coraggio* is often used in the Italian press. A recent example is the following article: Rossini, G. (2021). Madre coraggio con lo strofinaccio. *Il Sole 24 Ore* [online], <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/madre-coraggio-lo-strofinaccio-AEqC5yn>. This term is also used in other languages, such as French, *mère Courage*, and Spanish *madre coraje*. Even in non-European languages, we can find uses of this expression, for example in the Arabic press where this neologism, often translated from other languages, has begun to appear, for example: (2022). Bi-dāhiliha ṭiflāni... Fīdīwu li-umm šuġa’a tatašadā li-muḥāwalat sariqat sayyaratihā. *Sky News Arabia* [online]. <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/varieties/1538507>

quently builds constant filial relationships. So, motherhood is depicted as being entirely self-sacrificing, creating an interdependent relationship between mothers and their children. For that reason, Sapio highlights the existence of the “servant/queen” dual pattern: the mother gives herself entirely and sacrifices her individuality for her offspring, in order to be perceived as a servant of his family. But in the same way, her children must respect her role because, without her, they could not be her “kings”, therefore allowing her to retain a tyrannical power and to be perceived as a queen. This archetypal pattern was further influenced by Christian culture and most notably by Marian iconography which exalts Holy Mary’s self-sacrifice in giving up her only child for human salvation.

The Mother Courage pattern exists not only in the media but also in literature and has become a literary motif of female participation in armed combat, seen in fiction and non-fiction alike. Although female fighters are frequently reduced to this archetypal pattern, in Sapio’s opinion the Mother Courage motif is ambivalent by its very nature because it represents an attempt to change the power dynamics between genders in the family sphere and in society. Taking the example of the Italian novel *L’Agnese va a morire* (or *And Agnes Choose to Die*) by Renata Viganò (1949/2014) and the Palestinian novella *Umm Sa’d* by Ghassan Kanafani (1969/2011), the question that I would like to pose is whether the representation of maternity in female combat literature reinforces an archetypal image of femininity or whether this representation could actually be a strategy to challenge it. Therefore, motherhood could become a strategy for female empowerment in the context of armed violence.

Umm Sa’d is a short novel written by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani in 1969, a few years before his car-bomb murder in Beirut. It deals with the story of the character *Umm Sa’d*, a middle-aged Palestinian woman living with her family in the Bourj al-Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut. As we can see in the novel, the protagonist is introduced using the Arabic *kunia*. The use of the *kunia* is the linguistic custom in Arabic-speaking countries to call someone by his or her eldest son’s name, Umm Sa’d, therefore, literally means “Sa’d’s mother” in Arabic. Although the use of the *kunia* is quite common, linguistically speaking, most notable in the novella is its exclusive use, to the point that the reader never learns the protagonist’s real name. It is evident that, from the opening lines, the text emphasizes and pushes the character’s maternity to the extreme. She is first and foremost Sa’d’s mother,

a fighter's mother. In this way, her battle and struggles pass through her son's fight, and therefore through her maternity.

Renata Viganò's character, Agnese, on the other hand, is not a biological mother. The protagonist of *L'Agnese va a morire*, a novel written after the end of the Second World War¹, in 1949, is an aged washerwoman who, after the deportation of her husband due to his political ideas, decides to rejoin the resistance movement. While she has no children of her own, she establishes maternal-filial relationships with all the other characters. At the beginning of the novel, she lives with her husband, Palita, to whom she is not only a wife but also a kind of mother and the feelings between the two of them are described as "Un bene anche da madre"² (p.43), "a love also like that of a mother". Palita is a brilliant man who unfortunately is unable to work due to a severe illness. As a result, Agnese must work for both of them and constantly take care of her husband, contributing to a reversal of gender roles.

As they have no children, we can suppose the possible infertility of Palita, which would confirm his feminization. We do not have any information about their sexual lives, and Agnese is never described as a woman who can feel romantic or sensual emotions. Her desire is wholly absent from the novel, and her body is also desexualized. She is often described, including through the eyes of her husband, as an ugly old woman who has lost her beauty: "Lei era bella, alta, non grossa come adesso" (p.13), "she was beautiful and tall, not fat, as she was now". Her female nature is denied, and her Femininity is reduced to her maternity. Therefore, as Umm Sa'd, she is first and foremost a mother.

But Palita is not the only one with whom Agnese has a maternal relationship. After she joins the partisan brigade, she progressively becomes the "mother" of the entire group, and the partisans, especially the youngest ones, start calling her "Mamma Agnese" (p. 57), literally "Mommy Agnese". It is the same for Umm Sa'd who has filial relationships with the entirety of the novel's other characters and, in particular, with the narrator, whose description is very close to that of the author. As this relationship becomes closer and closer, he finally calls her "Ya yumma"³ (p. 42), which means "Mommy" in Palestinian Arabic, without even realizing it.

¹ During which Viganò participated in the Italian resistance movement. So, she was also a woman partisan.

² The following comments rely on my own personal translation from the Italian edition.

³ The following comments rely on my own personal translation from the Arabic edition.

This motherhood that becomes a real leitmotiv in these novels is also a very particular kind of motherhood because is described as holy. Agnese becomes a “Madre benedetta”, “blessed Mother” (p. 224) among the partisans, a Marian representation laden with salvation that can protect her “sons” in many ways. The sacralization of Umm Sa’d’s maternal body is even more complicated because she is not directly linked with the Holy Mary, but rather with Jesus Christ on the cross. Indeed, the mud encrusted on her robe is compared to the crown of thorns, the symbol of the Crucifixion (p.33). In this way, the novel establishes an essential link between the son's sacrifice and the mother's sacrifice. Christ’s sacrifice for humankind is actually a mother’s sacrifice to give birth and lose her child as well. The link between these two struggles becomes crucial to understanding Umm Sa’d’s concept of resistance. During the entire novella, the female protagonist and her son seem to be linked in a very deep and special way. When he decides to leave the refugee camp to go fight at the border with Israel, she starts to feel him inside her like she is still pregnant, “Aḥassathu fī ḡasadiha kamā kāna yawm ānna wulida”, “She felt him in her body like the day of his birth” (p.46). Through pregnancy and motherhood, Umm Sa’d is able to fight despite the taboo of female violence. It is as though the female protagonist were fighting with or in Sa’d’s place because she even shares her son’s injuries and his scars. When she shows the narrator the trajectory of the bullet that has wounded her son, he notices a scar in the same place which is described as “multaḥam” but “kāmin” (p.38), lightly erased but still present. So, we can say that the mother and the son are conceived as one in this novella.

This sacralization of the female protagonists through their motherhood contributes to their heroization. Agnese and Umm Sa’d are strongly positive characters, contrasting with Brecht’s *Mother Courage*. Part of this positivity can be attributed to the fact that they are women of the people. Indeed, Raḍwā ‘Āšūr (1977) points out the constant presence of the social novel’s main features, belonging to Ghassan Kanafani’s literary production, such as the existence of subaltern characters with notable class consciousness. Umm Sa’d is a prime example of this pattern because she is a subaltern woman at several levels, as she is dominated due to her sexual identity, her ethnicity, and her social class. But, despite her illiteracy, she shows a deep understanding of the dynamics of domination, and in the preface of the novel, the author himself calls her a “madrassa yawmīa”, a school of daily life. In this preface, the author tries to convince the reader of the referentiality of Umm

Sa'd's existence: "Umm Sa'd īmr'a ḥaqīqiyya" (p.13), "Umm Sa'd is a real woman". This choice could be a strategy to generate a phenomenon of *captatio benevolentiae* during the reading and is shared by Renata Viganò who makes the same choice and brings out the real existence of her character in the afterword of the novel. This strategy may be linked to the engaged practice of literature that identifies the two authors.

So, we can say that also the protagonist of *L'Agnese va a morire* is a socialist heroine who progressively gains class consciousness. But the main difference between the two protagonists is the accumulation of "gender consciousness" in addition to that of class. While Agnese is partially aware of her social conditions as a woman at the end of the novel, Umm Sa'd is not. It is for this reason that we can point out that the difference also depends on the literary construction of the characters. Agnese evolves considerably during the story and she is not the same at the beginning and the end of the novel. After a period spent with the partisan group, the old washerwoman notices that she is a different person. "Ed era già passato quasi un anno. Lavoro, paura, e morti. Allora lei era più forte nel corpo e più tarda a capire: adesso il cervello le si era fatto pronto, ma il corpo s'indeboliva" (p.123), "And it had been almost a year. Work, fear and deaths. Then, she was stronger in the body and slower in mind: now, her brain had become smarter, but her body was weakening". As time passes, the protagonist progressively realizes that she can understand the "cose da uomini" (p.166), literally "men's business", which she did not feel able to discuss with her husband before his departure. In this way, Agnese internalizes gender consciousness relating to the construction of gender roles. And for that reason, her activity in the partisan group also changes gradually. When she enters the group, her role fits in with the representation of normative femininity (cooking, washing, cleaning). However, she progressively gains more power in political decisions to the point that she first becomes a *staffetta*, an Italian term used to identify the group of people, especially women, whose role during the Resistance was to carry the letters, messages, and weapons from one group to another, and then the chief of the *staffette* who takes political decisions.

Umm Sa'd, on the other hand, is a static character that does not evolve through the story. From the very beginning, she has a deep class consciousness, so she is depicted in different situations fighting against class injustice. However, she is not conscious of her situation as a woman, and she does not develop a sense of "gender consciousness". In the same way, her role in the

Palestinian fight never evolves and she does not enter the *fedayeen* like her son. We must also note the difference between her and Agnese, who truly uses violence¹ when she kills a German soldier after the murder of her cat, her only friend after the forced departure of Palita.

But Umm Sa'd seems to have the desire to participate in the armed combat against Israel. This wish is particularly evident in the preface, where we can see a portrait of the female character in which metonymy plays a central role. Among the different body parts presented in the narration, we find the protagonist's hands, which are described as "tantaziru al-silāh 'ašrīna sanatan" (p.13), "waiting for weapons for twenty years". So, it is normal to ask why she did not succeed in her desire to rejoin the armed fight, and the answer is likely found in the vision of Motherhood introduced by the novella. In fact, Umm Sa'd often describes her role as a mother as an obstacle to her entry into the *fedayeen*: "al-atfāl ḡull" (p.28), "Children are a humiliation". Paradoxically, her Motherhood is at the same time an obstacle and a strategy to participate in the "resistance movement". Stéphanie Latte Abdallah (2006) points out the emergence of a demographic war in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the 80s, in such wise that the image of the resistant's mother seems to become more and more important to the point where Latte Abdallah reminds us through the use of the term "Umm Ġihād", literally meaning "Mother of the fight". Indeed, in a situation where the most significant challenge is the relation to a specific land, changing the demographics of a people through population growth means being more present and represented in the territory that we claim.

For the same reason, in Palestinian cultural production, from literature to art, the relationship between the land, or Palestine, and the female figure becomes deeper and deeper to the point that the female protagonist is typically a representation of the lost land itself². This is not a Palestinian specificity; in other contexts of a struggle for the possession of lands, we can find the same motif. It is the case, for example, in Algerian literary production, in which the female figure is often a representation of colonial Algeria. Nedjma, the protagonist of the novel of the same name, written by Kateb Yacine (1956), is a famous example: the illegitimate daughter of a French woman and an Algerian man, she is more of an icon, an idealized personification of a

¹ Although the violence of this murder is not emphasized in the narration, it is compared to the action of beating rugs which Agnese was accustomed to doing in the context of her job, therefore placing her in a normative female role.

² For example, in the poem *Hamza* by the major Palestinian poet Fadwā Tūqān (1969), she writes "This earth is a woman".

bastard Homeland during colonization, then a real woman. Loved by all the men around her, French and Algerian, colonizers and colonized, she exists through their love for her, and her life remains a mystery for the reader. In this way, the land becomes a woman, alternately a mother or a lover, cruel or tender, but nonetheless essential to self-construction.

The representation of the land as a mother to protect finds its most important example in the concept of Motherland himself. This term is present in a multiplicity of languages (in Italian, *madre patria*, and in Arabic *umma*, a word that comes from the same triconsonantal root as *umm*, mother) and materializes in artistic productions, in which the Motherland is often represented as a woman¹. But this representation is not a simple linguistic or artistic fact. On the contrary, it reflects a specific vision not only of the land and our relationship with it but also of normative femininity and its expression. The Earth and Woman² are put on the same level in their common fertility, as symbols of the creation of life. Thus, we can note that femininity is essentially reduced to the capacity of reproduction.

In the case of Umm Sa'd, the concept of the Motherland is pushed to the extreme because the female character is described as a concrete part of this land. Indeed, her body is constantly compared to the earth, so she becomes alternately in the narration a "turāb masqī" (p.31), watered ground, or a "arḍ yu'addibuha al-'aṣ" (p.43), thirsty land, so all the different shades of the earth correspond to its level of fertility. Agnese, however, is more of a "feminist protagonist" than a Motherland, because firstly, she is not a biological mother, nor a perfect normative mother and woman, and secondly, she is not systematically compared to the earth, as Umm Sa'd.

Perhaps for that reason, the ends of the two novels are diametrically opposed. Her motherhood gives Umm Sa'd a new destiny. After her son's departure, her husband progressively regains the joy of living, his honor in society, and his place in the family, and starts respecting her again because she is seen as the one who gave life to the resistance. Her deep relationship with the earth also becomes a symbol of hope for the future and the spread of this military resistance, born from the effort of Palestinian "mothers". This can be seen through the vine that the protagonist plants, which starts to grow at the end of the story. The destiny of Agnese is not as happy as that of

¹ Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) is a well-known example.

² Capital letters are used here to refer to overarching concepts.

Umm Sa'd because she meets her death in the novel's last scene, at the hands of a German soldier who recognizes her. The female protagonist, who becomes ever bigger and occupies more and more literary space over the course of the novel, is reduced to "un mucchio di stracci neri sulla neve" (p. 239), "a pile of black rags on the snow", following her murder.

In conclusion, we can say that motherhood is essential in the two novels but also that it manifests itself in many ways. In moments of extreme violence in which society's points of reference are completely erased, such as in times of war or revolutions, or in the context of guerrillas, motherhood may be one of the archetypes put forward in an attempt to safeguard these same points of reference (among them, the gender distinction). But through the examples of Umm Sa'd and Agnese, we have noted that the leitmotiv of motherhood in literary production concerning female participation in armed violence, which is further concretized in the Mother Courage motif, is not simply an archetype but a complex reflection on possible ways of transgression within imposed female non-violence. Paradoxically, while motherhood seems to give female characters the possibility to legitimate their fight, the central and more complicated challenge becomes, in that case, analyzing whether this possibility leads to true empowerment.

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