

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

---

Italian Languages and Literature

Languages, Literatures and Culture Faculty  
Research and Publications

---

2021

## The Unmaking of a Nation: Maria Messina's "Casa paterna"

Giordana Poggiolo-Kaftan

Marquette University, [giordana.kaftan@marquette.edu](mailto:giordana.kaftan@marquette.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/italian\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/italian_fac)



Part of the [Italian Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Poggiolo-Kaftan, Giordana, "The Unmaking of a Nation: Maria Messina's "Casa paterna"" (2021). *Italian Languages and Literature*. 6.

[https://epublications.marquette.edu/italian\\_fac/6](https://epublications.marquette.edu/italian_fac/6)

## THE UNMAKING OF A NATION: MARIA MESSINA'S "CASA PATERNA"

GIORDANA POGGIOLI-KAFTAN  
(Marquette University of Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

### Sommario

*Questo articolo mette in risalto la presa di coscienza di Vanna, protagonista del racconto di Maria Messina, della sua subalternità, come donna, all'interno della nazione. Vanna, mancando di soggettività sociale e politica, è forzata a vivere in una condizione di dipendenza economica e, quindi, di dislocamento, non avendo neanche il diritto a possedere lo spazio domestico al quale è relegata. Non potendo più vivere all'interno di codici comportamentali e ideologici della borghesia liberale dell'Italia a cavallo tra i due secoli, Vanna vive in una condizione di oltrepassamento, e quindi di esilio, non dissimile da quella del soggetto coloniale. Per tanto, a Vanna viene a mancare un codice linguistico per articolare i suoi desideri di autonomia finanziaria e di accesso allo spazio pubblico, cioè culturale e politico. Il suo suicidio non è dunque fuga, ma bensì atto di resistenza contro un ritorno ad una vita che, nella sua condizione di oltrepassamento, non può più accettare. In questa analisi si evidenziano inoltre le strategie letterarie e narrative di cui fa uso Messina per poter navigare il mondo letterario e editoriale italiano dei primi del Novecento, ancora fortemente prevenuto contro le donne scrittrici.*

**Keywords:** New Woman, postcolonial, private space/ public space, knowledge, displacement

This article focuses on Maria Messina's "Casa paterna" in the collection, *Le briciole del destino*. Although this collection was published in 1918, the Great War and its destruction are absent in the story which is, instead, centered on Vanna, her Sicilian family, living in Palermo, and her husband, Guido, a lawyer from Rome. The story lacks much biographical data: The characters' family names, Vanna's parent's first names, and the professional activities of Vanna's father and brothers. Above all, Guido's motivation to marry Vanna is unclear:

she did not bring him any dowry, he is not interested in having children, and he visibly has only contempt for her and her family. The lack of relevant biographical and narrative material highlights the metonymical nature of the story's characters, whose value is representational. Thus, Vanna's drama transcends herself to signify that of liberal Italy's women, still living in oppressing subaltern positions within the family and the nation.

In the narrative, Vanna comes to the epiphanic realisation that she has no financial independence and, consequently, even no right to the domestic space to which she is relegated. Thus, the story highlights Vanna as a postcolonial and displaced subject who is denied access to both the nation's wealth and property as well as its public and cultural space. Moreover, I argue that Messina tactically uses different narrative strategies to better move within limits imposed by Italy's literary and publishing world, which was entirely controlled by men (Barbarulli & Brandi, 1996:9). Hence Messina makes use of different techniques: her readers' emotional response; "cultural re-appropriation" (Harris, 2003: 192); and Vanna's alternate and deliberate deliverance of silence, speech acts, and actions, as weapons available to the subaltern subject within the nation (Rajan, 1993:84).

To better understand Vanna's position as a subaltern and displaced subject, we need to look at women's status within modern civil society and state. According to G.W.F Hegel – one of the first modern philosophers to theorise on state, civil society, and nation to contrast individualism and absolute power – it is not possible to incorporate women into the state due to their inherent lack of those attributes and capacities deemed essential to constitute subjectivity. As a result, Hegel (1910:474) construed women as natural social and political exiles, as they "are the everlasting irony in the life of the community" that is, of the nation. Throughout modernity, women were constructed as socially and politically displaced within the nation-state since they could inhabit only the private space of their homes. Consequently, their position was highly ambiguous.

On the one hand, they were relegated to "the margins of the polity"; on the other hand, though, they were central to the idea of the nation, as their presence was reaffirmed "in nationalist rhetoric where the nation itself [was] represented as a woman to be protected" (Kandiyoti, 1994: 377). Within any nationalist rhetoric, women are expected to carry both

the weight of being “mothers of the nation” – a role that is ideologically defined to meet the state's priorities – and the “delivery” of the limits of the national group, by transmitting its culture (Kandiyoti, 1994:376-7). Although women are essential to the nation, they live at the margin of the national discourse, which men articulate.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy, women did not just live at the nation's margins; rather, they still lived in exile within the nation. As exiled and displaced beings, women acquired a postcolonial subjectivity. In this article, I use the term ‘post-coloniality’ to refer not to a simple periodisation, but rather to a kind of methodological revisionism that critiques Western structures of knowledge and power that, through exclusionary mechanisms, create subalternity (Mongia, 1996:2). Reading women as colonised subjects is not new, as Christiane Rochefort (1999:109) states, “I consider women's literature as a specific category not because of biology, but because it is, in a sense, a literature of the colonized. We as women [...] are obliged to use the language of the oppressor”. Rochefort's words point to women's lack of their own language, which thwarted the development of their own literary tradition. Similarly, Clotilde Barbarulli and Luciana Brandi (1996:29), writing about Messina's female character's silence, underline how language is ultimately a symbolic system created by and for men, leaving women without a linguistic code conducive to express their own feelings and desires. Thus, they choose silence.

Explaining women's silence, Barbarulli and Brandi (1996:29) suggest

Quello che le donne avvertono come un limite interno, vissuto come mancanza ed incapacità, è, in realtà, lo scarto fra il linguaggio prodotto dalla soggettività maschile, sotto la forma delle oggettività, e le pulsioni, il senso corporeo della donna. Tradurre il desiderio, il dubbio, le lacerazioni in una lingua così codificata, determina una forma di scissione.

Therefore, Vanna's silence becomes a semantic code that needs to be interpreted to understand her desires, her doubts, and disappointments. Unlike Barbarulli and Brandi, though, I am also interested in analysing

Vanna's speech acts and actions as effective rhetorical tools accessible to the oppressed subjects within the nation (Rajan, 1993:84). Rajeswari Rajan underscores the interconnection between speech – as self-expression – and silence – as self-extinction – since they are closely tied into the project of subject-constitution. Moreover, since in democracy, speech is considered a right and silence – as its negation – is regarded as the denial of that right, it follows that access to speech defines social and political hegemony. Conversely, lack of speech marks social subalternity. Phrased differently: although silence does not always signify subalternity, the subaltern condition is invariably and successfully characterised by silence (84-85). Mostly, subaltern subjects' speech fails due to hegemonic subjects' implementation of two effective strategies: "One, by being pre-empted, i.e., invalidated in advance; and two, by being discredited, i.e., rebutted after the event" (88). Through these two mechanisms, the dominant group silences any form of dissent.

Furthermore, Rajan contrasts speech – viewed as expressiveness, liberation, truth, and power – to action, which dismisses speech as 'mere words' (85). As I will illustrate, Vanna makes ample use of all these strategies, as Messina tries to portray a woman who, just like her, had doubts and desires about her position within a patriarchal society. By the word patriarchy, I indicate a social, ideological, and political system where men subsume women – by direct pressure, or through culture, law, language, and the division of labour – and determine women's roles and the limits of their movements (Rich, 1976:57).

To better understand Messina *vis-à-vis* patriarchy, her work needs to be contextualised within the emancipatory New Woman movement that was taking shape in Europe, at the turn of the century. In Italy, in the 1880s, a publishing system came into existence, integrating the works of journalists and writers "per costruire generi per un pubblico (su base quasi nazionale) tendenzialmente omogeneo" that ultimately benefited women too. For instance, Emilio Treves published works by Matilde Serao, Mantea, Emma Perodi, and Sfinge, just to name a few. Female writers took advantage of the network of relations that female magazines created for them, hoping to embark on intellectual careers as "poetesse, novellatrici, bozzettiste, romanzieri" (De Giorgio, 1992: 379-80). However, as Michela De Giorgio reports, "Il sogno di una professione letteraria che conceda soddisfazioni economiche e

riconoscimento sociale è difficile da realizzare per le aspiranti italiane” (378). In 1910, a Department of Interior survey reported that out of 10,532 writers (for any publication), only 587 were women (395).

Messina's experience is not different from that of many other aspiring women-writers who often had to rely on male-writers' support to have access to publishers, as is evident from the exchange of letters that Messina had with Sicilian writer, Giovanni Verga. Verga acted as her mentor and, to a certain extent, her literary agent to help her navigate Italy's literary world, still very lukewarm to women. Relying on Verga's aid, Messina addresses him with utmost reverence in her letters, making ample use of the rhetoric of supplication, “Sono tanto lieta e commossa di potere, finalmente, far Le giungere Piccoli gorgi, l'umile omaggio di gratitudine che, piena di riverenza, mi permetto di offrire al più grande artista siciliano [...] Lo gradisca e, se esso è indegno dei Lei, mi compatisca” (quoted in Garra, 1979:11). In this letter, Messina's *captatio benevolentiae* is articulated through two rhetorical tactics: on the one hand, she strokes Verga's ego – defining him “il più grande artista siciliano” – and on the other, she debases herself, even asking for Verga's pity. Conceivably, her motive was in part due to her awareness that Verga's intervention was necessary for her to publish, as many of her letters demonstrate.

With the end of the Great War, women writers, including Messina, starting portraying women who, like themselves, aspired to professional lives (Kroha & Haedrich, 2017:64), even if their civil and political status had not yet changed. Although Lucienne Kroha and Alexandra Haedrich rightly argue that Messina's female characters' lives are less restricted by external forces such as arranged marriage or a lack of dowry (64), Vanna is not one of those characters. Vanna, living in one of Messina's first stories, cannot yet enjoy “a world in which the obstacles to self-realization are far less clearly demarcated, in which women appear to enjoy greater freedom of choice at every level – economic, social, sexual” (64).

Vanna desperately desires and tries to enjoy a greater freedom of choice, only to find out that the rest of her family – who still live according to the paradigms of liberal Italy's patriarchal society and ideology – is not ready for that. However, Vanna demonstrates the strength to take a transgressive action and leaves her husband's house in Rome to return to her father's house in Palermo. Her intent is to

denounce an unlivable marriage with Guido, who neither loves nor respects her. As Vanna arrives at Palermo alone, though, her older brother Antonio scolds her, “Che idea venir sola!” (Messina, 1990:9). Antonio’s reproach is soon echoed by every family member, “sbalorditi, costernati, parlavano di Vanna discutendo sul da farsi. Chi si pigliava la responsabilità di ricettare una donna così giovane, fuggita dalla casa del marito?” (14). Her mother is visibly the most concerned:

La madre si sentiva la più colpevole. Lei non aveva saputo inculcare alla sua Vanna quei sentimenti di sottomissione e di sacrificio, che sono le virtù principali di una donna. La vecchia signora aveva dei doveri anche verso la figlia minore, verso Ninetta, che poteva buscarsi una brutta fama per via della sorella mal maritata. (Messina, 1990:22)

Vanna’s family can neither accept nor understand her unwillingness to live in her husband’s repressive house and her consequent decision to leave it, since the main goal in educating women was the acquisition of “quei sentimenti di sottomissione e di sacrificio che sono le virtù principali di una donna” (22).

Breaking away from societal constrictions and prejudices, Vanna was aware of the scandal that her action would cause and the consequent uneasiness of her family *vis-à-vis* her decision. Writing about women’s marital conditions in Italy at the turn of the century, De Giorgio (1992:344) reports

Il rispetto sociale consacrato al matrimonio, la deferenza nei confronti delle maritate, e all’opposto l’esecrazione che colpisce le donne separate, coincidono con i sentimenti individuali della grandissima maggioranza delle donne che pur nell’infelicità coniugale e nell’insoddisfazione sessuale, non pensano di poter rompere il matrimonio.

Consequently, women’s family members tended to share the same “sentimenti” that condemned even the idea of “rompere il matrimonio”.

As Vanna is greeted with reproaches by her family, she is unable to defend herself by articulating the reasons for her decision. She provides them only with a simple, “Non ne potevo più” (Messina, 1990:12).

Barbarulli and Brandi (1996:44) define Vanna's inability to speak as social aphasia, "l'impossibilità a dare libera espressione ai propri pensieri e desideri [che] è un tratto che restringe le possibilità di relazione interpersonale, ma soprattutto di realizzazione del proprio io". Vanna explains her difficulty in freely expressing her thoughts and desires about her marriage to Maria, "Non ho trovato le parole per farmi capire" (Messina, 1990:16). Later, at the end of the story, she again displays the same difficulty with her husband when Guido comes to Palermo intent on taking her back to Rome, "Tacevano. Non avevano niente da dirsi" (29).

Vanna's inability to articulate her desires and defense underlines Vanna's condition of *oltrepassamento*, as she goes beyond the traditions and behavioural codes of her family; thus, her silence (Barbarulli & Brandi, 1996:31). The male-codified language fails her as it cannot describe her new reality.

In line with Rajan's aforementioned theory of the implementation of the two strategies to silence the subaltern subject, I argue that Vanna also chooses silence because her brother, Antonio, discredits her thinking and rational capacities. When Vanna asks him not to write to her husband, he paternalistically rebukes her, "Cervellino! [...] Sei sempre la Vanna dei soliloqui!" (Messina, 1990:13). Antonio's invalidation strategy is twofold. On the one hand, he defines his sister as having a limited intellectual capacity, due to her supposed little brain, and, thus, not being able to think by herself. On the other hand, he constructs her as someone whose speech is so irrelevant and irrational, that it cannot find an audience. She can talk only to herself. Here it is essential to underscore that, in the western philosophical tradition, thinking abilities are required not only to establish a person's subjectivity but also his/her essence, as Renè Descartes's axiom "cogito ergo sum" reminds us.

Vanna's position of *oltrepassamento* is also challenged by the presence of Viola, one of her two newly acquired sisters-in-law and a member of "le due facce nuove" (11).

Viola is Vanna's *alter ego*, as she embodies what Vanna is not. Viola and Remigia (the other new sister-in-law) are described as "Viola biondissima e Remigia castana; donne belle e fiorenti, dal seno colmo [...] ispirarono [a Vanna] subito soggezione perché lei era bruna e gracile" (11).



Viola's healthy body and full bosom are typical characteristics of *la donna-fattrice*, which is an important aspect of archetypical representation of the woman as *l'angelo del focolare* in liberal Italy and later, under Fascism (Barbarulli & Brandi, 1996:10). However, in contrast, Vanna's body is sickly thin and, therefore, not conducive to bearing children. Talking with Maria about her pregnancy, Vanna muses, "Anch'io l'aspettavo. Ti ricordi? [...] Gli avrei voluto molto bene [...] Mi è svanito anche lui, prima d'avere un volto, un'espressione ch'io avessi almeno potuto ricordare" (Messina, 1990:19). Even in her physicality, Vanna lives in a condition of *oltrepassamento*, as she cannot perform her primary duty of bearing children for the nation.

Moreover, Viola, as was customary in Italy, brought a conspicuous dowry to her husband, which empowers her to criticise Vanna's behaviour, "Quando non si porta un soldo di dote non si possono avere tante fisime! Viola era fiera di possedere trentamila lire in contanti che avevano permesso a Luigi di prendere un appalto in società con Nenè" (24). Viola incorporates post-unification Italy's ideology about women's role within the family and nation and, from her privileged position, she *viola* – that is, she violates – Vanna's desires "a dare libera espressione ai suoi pensieri" – to use Barbarulli's and Brandi's (1996:44) words.

However, Vanna is able to communicate her desires to her sister-in-law, Maria. Unlike Viola, Maria "era piccola come lei, bruna come lei" (Messina, 1990:17) and Vanna feels close to her "come un'altra sorella" (17). Maria becomes the depositary of Vanna's epiphanic desire to leave her husband, "Tu non hai un'idea di Roma. Esser sola, non conoscere anima viva; passare la giornata aspettando l'unica persona che dovrebbe volerti bene [...] Sta quasi tutto il giorno fuori" (14). From this vivid depiction of her loneliness in a foreign city and her husband's inattentiveness, Vanna goes on to describe her dehumanised state of being within the walls of her husband's house,

Certe sere rientra con due o tre amici. Avvocati come lui.  
Gente che scrive sui giornali. Parlano per ore ed ore di cose  
che non capisco; di politica, di teatri, di filosofia. Allora,  
nella stanza attigua, mi par d'essere una povera cosa  
buttata in un canto. Una di quelle pupattole di cencio che  
facevo da piccola. (Messina, 1990:14)

Then, comes her sad realisation, “Io non faccio parte della vita ch’egli vive” (14). By stating that she is feeling like a *pupattola*, a doll, she is denouncing her objectification and the distress that comes with that realisation. Above all though, she denounces her husband’s role in it: He has no interest in making her part of his life.

Her status within her husband’s house is that of a *pupattola*. What propels her into this Ibsen-like doll-state is her impossibility to share the same space with her husband and friends, as she sits “nella stanza attigua”. In this “stanza attigua”, she is not just physically removed from the discussions, her removal is also intellectual, as she admits to not understanding the men’s conversational topics: politics, philosophy, and theatre.

Her ignorance about those subjects is a reflection of women’s limited access to education, especially in comparison to that of men. At the turn of the century, most Italian middle-class girls would only attend school until the age of ten or eleven. A small number of girls would continue their studies until the age of 15 or 16, and fewer still to the age of 18 (De Giorgio, 1992:418). The state of women’s poor education was justified by the notion of women’s supposed inferior intellectual abilities (Barbarulli & Brandi, 2017:92-93). In fact, Messina herself did not even attend school, as her mother educated her at home, while her brother graduated in law (Messina, 1988:11-12).

As women were not allowed to study, Vanna’s contact with the world around her does not come to fruition through her mind and intellect. Indeed, Guido’s intellectual knowledge and interests are contrasted with Vanna’s sensual connection and understanding of nature with which she seems to communicate and live in a state of almost animistic symbiosis. The story gives many examples of this: when she arrives at Palermo, for instance, she looks at the sea, “Vedevo il mare... che la salutava da lontano” (Messina, 1990:15); when she confides her sorrows to Maria, “Sentivo l’odore delle alghe nelle vostre lettere” and describes her trepidation waiting for Guido’s letters, “I rumori che venivano dal cielo dal mare [...] erano profondi e tumultuosi come i battiti del suo cuore” (17-18); and when she feels utterly rejected by her family, she again turns to nature, “Vanna sentiva le gravi parole della notte cupa. – O mare della mia fanciullezza! [...] Io t’ho passato due volte con il cuore gonfio di speranza [...] O mare! Tu solo m’hai

fatto festa la notte del mio ritorno” (25). She cannot observe the laws of nature since she has no knowledge of their existence. Therefore, she relies on the senses, on her body: Her sight (*vedeva*); her smell (*l'odore delle alghe*); her hearing (*sentiva le gravi parole*). It is also important to remember that in colonial discourse, western scientific knowledge, based on concepts, has always been contrasted to the native's awareness based on perception and imagination (Radhika, 1999:8).

The importance of nature in Messina's work has already been highlighted. For instance, writing about the difficulty that Messina's characters encounter with words, Barbarulli and Brandi (1996:46) acutely observe, “*È la natura, talvolta, ad esprimere – semmai – ciò che è difficile da dirsi*”. While Mariella Muscariello (2017:465) underscores how nature helps Vanna live “*nell'estrema profondità della reverie*” of the father's house, where she used to feel protected.

I want to expand on these interpretations of Vanna's robust and compassionate connection with nature, through Elisabetta Donini's notion of “*natura come storia*” (1999:64). Donini's starting point is the polarisation of society where women equal nature and men equal culture. Women are equal to nature because nature has been constructed as both that which gives life, and is constantly changing and nurturing (*natura naturans*) and that which can be perceived and enjoyed freely without intellectual and learned mediation (67). In opposition, culture – including science as the empirical observation, recording, and understanding of natural phenomena – has been constructed as that which is attained through rigorous studies, from which women have been traditionally barred (67). Following Thomas Kuhn's lead, Donini states that science's paradigms are culturally determined (64-64). Although there is one nature, there are many ways to represent it. Consequently, Vanna's through-her-body perception of nature as *natura naturans*, which nurtures humanity, is different from the academic and scientific representation of it as *natura naturata* – as object of studying and exploitation to the advantage of humanity.

Through Vanna's reflections, Messina seems to indicate the possibility of setting up a female epistemology of nature. This project is not very different from the project that ecofeminists, all over the world, have been embracing in the last thirty years (68). The story seems to validate Vanna's epistemology as her only means to resist the intellectual confinement imposed on her by patriarchy. Ultimately,

Vanna's interpretation of *natura naturans* becomes a point of resistance as a form of "cultural re-appropriation," as exposed by Michael Harris. Harris (2003:192) explains re-appropriation as a valid form of intellectual resistance which entails "taking a weapon used against you, making it your own, and thereby controlling it and preventing it from doing further harm". By setting up a female epistemology of nature, Messina uses a technique, similar to the one Harris proposes, to control and defuse male rhetoric that both constructed women as incapable of devoting themselves to rigorous scientific studies and relegated them to the powerless "stanza attigua".

Vanna's rejection of her life in her husband's "stanza attigua" is the reason for her return to her *casa paterna* since her lack of wealth excludes her from living independently. As mentioned earlier, her family does not welcome her resolution and treats her with affection but also with visible apprehension, "La mamma e Maria soffocarono Vanna di baci. La guardavano e le parlavano con visibile ansietà" (Messina, 1990:11). She understands their uneasiness, but hesitates to explain the reason for her unexpected visit, "Era confusa perché voleva dire *questa volta* voleva restare per sempre e sentiva che nessuno si aspettava con piacere una simile proposta" (12).

In her father's house, though, Vanna soon finds out that there is no longer a room for her,

Ti abbiamo preparata questa [stanza], perché ieri, lì per lì,  
non s'è trovato di meglio – spiegò la madre [...]  
- E la mia? – esclamò posando il velo sul letto.  
- Quale?  
- Quella rosa. Vi stavo prima.  
- Ah, lì dorme Ninetta adesso. (11-12)

Di Giovanna (1989:37) underlines how

la fuga di Vanna dall'opprimente casa del marito si  
indirizza verso un'altra casa, quella del padre, sentita come  
un Eden salvifico e centro di tutti i legami affettivi e di  
tutte le care memorie (anche se poi la casa paterna si  
rivelerà [...] luogo falso e ostile).

In her *casa paterna*, Vanna is confronted with both the harsh reality that there is no room for her and her family's hostile unwillingness to create one for her.

There is no physical space for her in Palermo just as there was none in Rome. Ironically, Vanna lost her place in her father's house because her brothers brought their wives to live there. On the way to their father's house, Vanna's brother, Nenè, describes the house's improvements to accommodate the new families with the advantage "che si resta in famiglia" (Messina, 1990:10). Nevertheless, the family denies Vanna that advantage because, as a woman, she needs to be displaced to a different house: her husband's. It is just a matter of economics, which keeps alive what Maria Serena Sapegno (2012:15) defines as "il mercato matrimoniale delle figlie", since marriage, for too many women, was still the only means of survival. Vanna becomes perfectly aware of being an exile in her father's house, as she states

Non si torna indietro. Tutto cambia. I fratelli hannno un altro viso. La madre ha un'altra voce. Altre donne hanno occupato il tuo posto mentre eri lontana. E ciascuno ti accoglie, come s'accoglie una straniera di passaggio. (Messina, 1990:25)

Thus, Vanna is forced to live as a social exile from her family, her husband and their houses. At the same time, Vanna — as a woman — is a social exile within her own country and has to come to terms with the *unheimlich* feeling of estrangement to which she succumbs, "Vanna si mise a correre verso la costa. Andò davanti al mare. Il vento le passava sui capelli. Un fiotto s'avanzò fino ai suoi piedi" (30).

Vanna's suicide needs to be read as her decision to take an action which goes against all social conventions and, above all, Catholic ethics. Vanna's suicide, thus, should not be read like "una fuga impossibile" (Di Giovanna, 1989:24) instead, it is a rebellious action not dissimilar from that of leaving her husband. Hence, the story begins and ends with Vanna's violent actions that violate the status quo.

To better understand the subversive nature of Vanna's actions vs. her speech acts, I turn to Hannah Arendt, who states that speech, as an act of persuasion through words, is political and that freedom resides in the political realm (online:26). Antithetically, action is "primarily a pre-

political phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organization, and [...] force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity [...] and to become free" (online:31). As a woman, Vanna is denied political subjectivity; consequently, she cannot articulate her desires to become free through speech acts neither within her family nor the nation. She is left only with the decision to take desperate action: leaving her husband's "*stanza attigua*" and committing suicide to break away from both.

Vanna's need to possess her physical and cultural space is linked to her need to acquire financial independence. While describing her sorrowful life in Rome with Guido, who does not even allow her to buy new clothes, she states, "Magari avessi del *mio*" (Messina, 1990:15). The typographic italics for the possessive pronoun "*mio*" stresses both Vanna's lack of possession and her desire to own her own wealth. Vanna's aspirations to have her own property underscores her ambition to work to acquire economic power.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, only a limited number of Italian women could find employment, and those who were employed received salaries too low to enable them to live independently. Because women had to meet, first and foremost, their maternal duties, they often were only able to work during limited phases of their biological lives — when young and/or unmarried — or because of a desperate situation, such as widowhood. Above all, their professional choices were minimal. This situation was especially problematic for middle-class women, on whom motherhood societal expectations were higher (Biadene, 1979:167-8-9).

Moreover, women's right to own property was not very well established in Italy. The Pisanelli Code (1865), regulating Family Law, provided that the husband had "il compito di deliberare sulle spese, di procurare i mezzi per soddisfare i bisogni della famiglia e sostenere i pesi del matrimonio." Women had only "un dovere sussidiario di concorrere con le [loro] sostanze alle spese familiari, in una certa misura (art. 132)" (Bellomo, 1970:110). Thus, the importance of the dowry as

il migliore regime patrimoniale dei rapporti tra i coniugi.  
La dote passava al marito ma era inalienabile [...] a  
garanzia della moglie, della sua famiglia d'origine e del

sostentamento della nuova famiglia (artt. 1399-1404-5).  
(Bellomo, 1970:110)

Although the Pisanelli Code abolished the obligation of providing women with a dowry, the practice remained almost unaltered until 1919 (Ungari, 2002:161-2). The dowry was calculated according to the family's wealth. However, most of the time, women got only a disproportionately small part of the patrimony when compared to the male members of the family (Bellomo, 1970:41).

During her trip from the port to her family house, Vanna finds out from her brother, Antonio, that the family has acquired a new property. "Si è comprato il quartierino attaccato alla nostra casa. Te l'abbiamo scritto, mi pare." Vanna denies that, "No. Io non so nulla." Antonio insists, "No?! Mi pareva. L'abbiamo proprio comprato. Ha undici stanze: cinque Luigi, sei Nenè [...] i capitalisti della casa. Io sto con papà. Si vive, ogni famigliola per conto suo, con la massima libertà" (Messina, 1990:10).

Antonio's choice of words, "si è comprato" and "l'abbiamo proprio comprato", indicates plural subjects and underlines their parents' complicity in the acquisition of the new property. However, Vanna did not receive a dowry, which she perceives as the main reason for her husband's lack of affection for her,

S'è ingannato. Ci voleva un'altra moglie. Ricca [...] Vedi io non gli ho portato neanche una piccola dote. Pure con un capitale tra le mani, avrebbe potuto fondare il giornale. È la verità. (16)

Furthermore, Vanna was not informed of the family's financial adventure, as she insists, "Io non ne so nulla". It is almost impossible to believe that communicating with Vanna regarding such a conspicuous investment might have slipped her family members' minds. Hence, one may suspect that the reason for Vanna's ignorance lies in her family's desire to keep it a secret. Since the Pisanelli Code provided the right for women to their parents' patrimony (Bellomo, 1970:108-9), it would have been hard to justify such a vast disbursement to Vanna, who was married off without a dowry.

Moreover, the Pisanelli Code also defined the legal status of a married woman as “costretta a seguire il marito ovunque questi riteneva opportuno fissare la sua residenza (art. 131), a seguirne la condizione civile [...] sottomessa al marito che doveva tenerla presso di sé, proteggerla e somministrarle tutto ciò che è necessario ai bisogni della vita (art. 132)” (Bellomo, 1970:109).

By marrying a man from Rome, Vanna had been forced to leave Palermo, her family, and her familiar customs to follow him. Living in Rome does not suit Vanna well, “Io non conosco nessuno. Per le vie di Roma mi pare di essere una formica” (Messina, 1990:15). If her husband's house makes her feel like a doll, Rome's public space transforms her into an ant, as she is totally unprepared to navigate its crowded streets. Her ant-like condition further underscores her alienation, displacement, and postcolonial existence in Italy's capital.

Women's alienation from the economically powerful public space was further established since only men had “il compito di procurare i mezzi per soddisfare i bisogni della famiglia e sostenere i pesi del matrimonio” (Bellomo, 1970:110). Women's personal expenditures were regulated by “il patto di trattamento,” which was a contract between the two families – signed on the day of the wedding – providing women access to some family wealth. The contract provided for “[un elenco] di comodità di cui la donna aveva diritto durante il matrimonio” or “il diritto [per la donna] di riservare alle sue minute spese, a suo capriccio, una parte dei frutti dotali (patto di spillatico proprio)” or “l'obbligo [per il marito] di corrispondere alla moglie un assegno mensile, da destinare allo stesso scopo (patto di spillatico improprio)” (111).

Thus, as Vanna did not contribute to her husband's wealth with any dowry, “il patto spillatico proprio” or “l'improprio” did not apply to her. Hence, her dire financial situation that does not allow her to spend money on herself, and the probable reason for her husband's stinginess and negligence toward her material needs.

Vanna is keenly aware of her debased position within her marriage due to her lack of money and she tries to fix it in the only way she knows,

Un giorno ho venduto l'orologino d'oro, una cosa inutile  
per me, e mi sono comprata un vestito azzurro bell'e fatto.



Gli è piaciuto e mi ha condotto a teatro, una volta (lui ha la poltrona gratis). Allora ho provato una gran pena, perché ho capito che lui sarebbe quasi affettuoso se io non fossi così povera. (Messina, 1990:15)

Vanna feels self-pity because she understands the unfairness of her situation: her brothers have appropriated her share of the family's wealth and her husband's consequent lack of affection and respect for her. Vanna's emotions force the reader to confront Vanna's reality. As Robert Solomon (1980:263) argues, "emotions are purposive, serve the ends of the subject". Vanna's self-pity serves to express what she is not able to articulate. Messina wishes to elicit an emotional response from her readers, so as to make them reflect on patriarchy's ills and, thus, the need to alter women's conditions.

The use of this tactic in the narrative allows Messina to adhere to a discourse of feminine moderation and enables her to better manoeuvre within Italy's strict and stiff cultural and literary rules and regulations, thus making her text publishable. As Di Giovanna (1989:30) underlines:

la voce narrante sembra astenersi da giudizi, in realtà nel corso della narrazione attraverso interventi più o meno mimetizzati, e anche attraverso il montaggio dei fatti, si è creata una luce [...] che illumina diversamente le varie figure [...] in modo da influenzare l'ipotetico lettore.

In order to "influenzare l'ipotetico lettore," Messina relies on the readers' emotional responses. We see this tactic at work again, when Messina describes Guido's shameful gaze on Vanna, "Se usciamo quasi si vergogna, perché io debbo essere ben goffa nei miei vestiti di quand'ero ragazza" (Messina, 1990:15). Guido's supposed *vergogna* involves the reader emotionally, as s/he is asked to reflect on Vanna's sense of shame rooted in her lack of financial independence – that did not allow her to buy new clothes – and makes her state "Magari avessi del mio" (15). Nevertheless, Vanna does not own any wealth. The sale of the gold watch foregrounds both Guido's miserliness towards his wife's needs – miserliness that was legally protected – and Vanna's

desperate attempt to catch her husband's attention and, hopefully, affection.

Vanna's move ultimately demonstrates that she had internalised the surveyor/surveyed dichotomy as outlined by John Berger (1972:46), who writes:

To be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space.

According to Berger (46-47), men's tutelage meant that women were always under men's gaze and learned to behave accordingly:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself [...] Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.

Vanna knew that to get Guido's attention, she needed Guido's gaze on her and, to that end, she buys a new dress. Guido surveys his wife and, being pleased, decides to take her to the theatre for the very first time.

Although we, as readers, cannot ascertain Guido's intention with certainty, we can suspect that he may have desired to show her off, since a theatre is a public space where people observe and are objects of observation. In the theatre's public space, the surveying grows exponentially, as more men are in the position to look at her, maybe even to her husband's delight. Men surveying Vanna accomplishes two goals: It objectifies Vanna and empowers the onlookers, as they are aware that their surveying is the tape through which women measure themselves. Men surveying women has had a precise historical and social function, as Virginia Woolf (2000:37) argues,

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size [...] That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon

the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge.

In other words, men surveying women is also the tape through which men measure themselves to ground their superiority over the other sex.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois (1994:2) defined as double-consciousness that psychological phenomenon by which his own people look at themselves “through the eyes of others,” measuring themselves “by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”. Du Bois’s description of black people’s double-consciousness is not different from Messina’s depiction of women and their surveyed/ surveyor experience within society and the nation, underscoring that subaltern’s essential features cut across gender and race.

### **Conclusion**

By analysing Messina’s “Casa paterna”, I brought to the fore her narrative and literary choices that aim at hiding her deconstruction of patriarchal structures such as marriage, domesticity, and male-centered education, which constricted women both financially and spatially.

As a woman, Messina had no easy access to the publishing industry, which men controlled, and she had to temper the radicality of her beliefs with the rhetoric of femininity, not to sound too subversive to her publishers.

My analysis resulted in contextualising Messina’s work within the New Woman movement in Europe; although, Italian women’s emancipation was particularly slow and arduous.

Through Vanna’s story, Messina is metonymically representing women’s displaced living conditions in liberal Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. As a social and political exile, Vanna cannot articulate her desires to own wealth, which would give her access to public space, where power resides. Only with powerless Maria, Vanna can confess her awareness of her subaltern condition within her family and nation, and only through her suicide can profess her rejection of and resistance to it.

## Bibliography

- |                             |      |  |
|-----------------------------|------|--|
| Arendt, H.                  | 1958 | <i>The Human Condition</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press.   |
| Barbarulli, C. & Brandi, L. | 1996 | <i>I colori de silenzio: strategie narrative e linguistiche in Maria Messina</i> . Ferrara: Luciana Tufani Editrice.   |
| ——.                         | 2017 | “Le voci del corpo e il gioco della similitudine nelle novelle di Maria Messina”. In: Giovanardi Byer, S. & Cecchini, F. (eds). <i>Representations of Female Identity in Italy: From Neoclassicism to the 21st century</i> . New Castle (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 91-106. |
| Bellomo, M.                 | 1970 | <i>La condizione giuridica della donna in Italia</i> . Torino: Eri.  |
| Berger, J.                  | 1972 | <i>Ways of Seeing</i> . London: Penguin Books.   |
| Biadene, G.                 | 1979 | “Lavoro”. In: d’Amato, M.; Ergas, Y.; Piccone Stella, S. et al (eds). <i>Sociologia della famiglia. Sull’emancipazione femminile</i> . Milano: Gulliver: 166-192.  |
| De Giorgio, M.              | 1992 | Le italiane dall’unità ad oggi. Roma: Laterza.   |
| Di Giovanna, M.             | 1989 | La fuga impossibile sulla narrativa di Maria Messina. Napoli: Federico & Ardia.  |
| Donini, E.                  | 1999 | “La natura come storia. Una prospettiva femminista su scienza, sviluppo, tecnologia”. In: Car, P.; Covi, G.; Giammoni, P. & Neiger, A. (eds). <i>Reinventare la natura. Ripensare al</i>   |

- femminile*. Trento: Università degli studi di Trento: 91-106.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1994 [1903] *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Garra, A.G. 1979 *Un idillio letterario inedito verghiano: lettere inedite di Maria Messina a Giovanni Verga*. Catania: Greco.
- Kandiyoti, D. 1994 "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation". In: Patrick, W. & Chrisman, L. (eds). *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press: 376-91.
- Kroha, L. & Haedrich, A. 2017 "Modernity and Gender-role Conflict in Maria Messina". In: Giovanardi Byer, S. & Cecchini, F. (eds). *Representations of Female Identity in Italy: From Neoclassicism to the 21st century*. New Castle (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 63-75.
- Harris, M. 2003 *Colored Pictures*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1910 [1807] *The Phenomenology of the Mind*. Baillie, J.B. (trans.). London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Limited.
- Messina, A. 1988 Introduction. In: Messina, M. *Piccoli gorghi*: i-x. Palermo: Sellerio.
- Messina, M. 1990 [1918] "Casa paterna". In: *Le briciole del destino*. 3rd edition: 9-30. Palermo: Sellerio
- Mongia, P. 1996 "Introduzione". In: Mongia, P. *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. London-New York: Arnold:1-19.

- |                 |                |   |
|-----------------|----------------|---|
| Muscariello, M. | 2017           | “Una straniera di passaggio. Lettura della novella ‘Casa paterna’ di Maria Messina”. In: Giovanardi Byer, S. & Cecchini, F. (eds). <i>Representations of Female Identity in Italy: From Neoclassicism to the 21st Century</i> . New Castle (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 463-71. |
| Radhika, M.     | 1999           | <i>Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space</i> . Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota Press.   |
| Rajan, R.S.     | 1993           | <i>Real and Imagined Women</i> . London-New York: Routledge.  |
| Rich, A.        | 1976           | <i>Of Woman Born</i> . New York: Norton.  |
| Rocheft, C.     | 1999           | “The Privilege of Consciousness”. In: Stambolian, G.; Marks, E. & Howard, R. (eds). <i>Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts</i> . Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press: 101-13.  |
| Sapegno, M.S.   | 2012           | ‘Sulla soglia: la narrativa di Maria Messina’. In: <i>Altrelettere</i> . DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.5903/al_uzh-3">https://doi.org/10.5903/al_uzh-3</a> . Zurich: University of Zurich Press.   |
| Solomon, R.     | 1980           | “Emotions and Choice”. In: Oksenberg Rorty, A. (ed.). <i>Explaining Emotions</i> . Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press.  |
| Ungari, P.      | 2002           | <i>Storia del diritto di famiglia in Italia 1796-1975</i> . Bologna: Il Mulino.   |
| Woolf, V.       | 2000<br>[1929] | <i>A Room of One's Own</i> . London: Penguin.   |

Copyright of Italian Studies in Southern Africa is the property of Association of Professional Italianists / Associazione Professori d'Italiano and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.