

## Unspoken Feelings: Comparing the Feminism of Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna* and the Social Battle of the Present-day Anorexic

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The autobiographical novel *Una donna* (1906), which introduced Sibilla Aleramo (1876-1960) to the literary panorama of the early twentieth century, represents a watershed in Italian women's writing, in that it is the first to address a significant debate on the *questione femminile*.<sup>1</sup> Women's writing of the late nineteenth century had already discussed the social role of the middle-class wife and proposed a variety of models of femininity.<sup>2</sup> Aleramo, however, pushed the cultural boundaries of the period further by questioning, for the first time in Italian female narrative discourse, the relationship between women and motherhood and the cultural conventions of the time as regards a woman's obligation to marry and her behaviour during marriage. The novel, a first-person narrative, explicitly discusses the social role of bourgeois women of the time in its story of the unnamed young protagonist, who, in accordance with the social *mores* of the time, marries a man by whom she has been raped, a man who works for her father, a factory manager. To escape from the unhappiness of this unsuccessful marriage and the oppression she experiences at the hands of her husband, the Woman<sup>3</sup> flouts convention by leaving him and abandoning her young son, the Woman's only child, born after an earlier pregnancy that ends in a miscarriage.

As Marina Zancan points out, one of the characteristics of Aleramo's narrative works is her anxiety about communicating her feelings to others (1988: 13). Indeed, in *Una donna*, the writer employs two distinct levels of communication by which to express her thoughts through the protagonist's actions: not only does the Woman speak with the conventional language of the words but also with the metaphorical language of the body. Furthermore, as

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I will use the English translation of *Una donna* by Rosalind Delmar: see Bibliography. Antonia Arslan points out that the rule-breaking message of *Una donna* was already seen as a 'documento umano [*human document*]' and a 'bandiera di battaglia [*battle flag*]' by the audience of the early twentieth century (Arslan 1988: 164).

<sup>2</sup> I am referring in particular to three novels by Neera (1846-1918): *Teresa* (1886), *Lydia* (1887) and *L'indomani* (1889) where the author, through the stories of the three young protagonists, questions the female identity of the time and discusses the social meaning of the bourgeois marriage. For a view of the female social roles and their depiction in women's writings of the time see Arslan 1988. For an anthology of selected women's writings who question feminine identity in the nineteenth and early twenty century, see Morandini 1980.

<sup>3</sup> As none of the characters in the novel has a name, I shall refer to them as 'the Woman', 'the Mother' etc.

Saveria Chemotti demonstrates, in Aleramo's *Una donna* the body works as a 'supporto essenziale e primario [essential and primary support]' for the Woman's words and thoughts (2003: 49). In particular, as I argue in this article, the second means of communication replaces the first when the protagonist cannot express her intimate voice in words. In this way, the language of the body becomes a unique link between the Woman and the other characters and allows the young woman to communicate her repressed emotions. According to Dacia Maraini (1995: 15), the language of the body emerges sometimes as a 'protesta prelinguistica [prelinguistic protest]' in women's writings, when the first level of communication, the spoken word, is forbidden by the social conventions of the era; this is exactly what the socially trapped protagonist of *Una donna* experiences. In this paper, I shall analyse significant narrative images of the Woman's unspoken feelings, focussing in particular on her relationship with her mother and referring to the episode of the rape and her unsuccessful marriage. I shall suggest some similarities between Aleramo's protagonist and the present-day anorexic and compare the behaviour of the Woman to that of the 'disobedient eater'. As I will explain later, feminist and sociological researchers have been reading anorexia as an outcome of women's position in patriarchal culture and the anorexic as a 'protester' at her social status. I will suggest that, although they come from different historical periods, the young protagonist of the novel and the present-day anorexic fight the same social battle on the *questione femminile* and they attempt to protest against their repressive conditions through the language of the body, which articulates what words cannot describe openly.

From a feminist and sociological point of view, Susie Orbach points out that in the development of eating disorders, the language of the body acquires a metaphorical meaning for the anorexic: it communicates 'what she is unable to tell us with words' (1993: 83). Furthermore, she argues, women's bodies work as a 'vehicle for a whole range of expressions that have no other medium' (1993: 28). In this figurative connotation, the second source of communication used by the young protagonist of *Una donna* and the anorexic is employed similarly: they are both unidiomatic expressions of a protest.

As I have already observed, despite their different cultural and historical contexts, the protagonist of *Una donna* and the present-day anorexic share a common battleground: the oppressive social role of being a woman. While the nineteenth-century woman was fighting against the cultural conventions of her time to achieve new political and social rights, such as working outside the household and gaining a higher education, the anorexic '[l]ike the hunger

striker, is in protest at her conditions' (Orbach 1993: 82-83). In the following passage, feminist sociologist Morag MacSween (1993:1) explains the relationship between womanhood, cultural milieu and eating disorders in the twentieth and twenty first centuries:

The anorexic 'boom' at precisely the time when feminism is again challenging the oppression of women, coupled with evidence that almost all anorexics are women, that anorexia has a strong middle-class bias and it is virtually unknown outside the developed West, suggest that the illness has some relationship to the social situation of middle-class women in modern Western culture.

Eating disorders are a complex answer to social pressures and the construction of female identity, whereby slimness and 'bird-like-eating' evoke the ideal characteristics of the contemporary girl (Orbach 1978: 163). Although slenderness was already regarded as an ideal of beauty among middle class women at the turn of the twentieth century, the ideal level of thinness is not comparable to current unachievable models. It is worth noting that at the end of the nineteenth century, Giuseppe Seppilli had already included in the development of eating disorders the pursuit of slimness, referring to it as a sign of 'civetteria [*coquetry*]' (Colella 2003: 255). Anorexia was officially identified as such in the second half of the nineteenth century, but many researchers link it to even more ancient times, going back to the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

As I have already observed, eating disorders are commonly perceived as the quintessential outcome of our current era, especially because of their relation to thinness. However they also involve significant social factors, such as the role of middle class women, as the quotation by MacSween above exemplifies. In fact, the medieval fasting which was practiced by the so called 'anorexic saints', can, according to Rudolph Bell, be read as a complex response to the social and religious framework of the time: 'whether anorexia is holy or nervous depends on the culture in which a young woman strives to gain control of her life' (Bell 1985: 20). While it is commonly accepted that Charles Lasègue in 1873 and William Gull in 1874 identified anorexia (Gull and Lasègue 1998), it should be pointed out that an Italian physician, Giovanni Brugnoli, was also investigating the illness at the same time (Brugnoli 1875). While the emphasis on thinness plays a central role in the development of present-day anorexia, my analysis is not interested in comparing the levels of ideal slimness of the early twentieth century to the ones of the postmodern era but in the complex understanding of eating disorders as 'one of a range of 'solutions' to the irreconcilability of individuality and femininity' (MacSween 1993: 255).

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<sup>4</sup> See Bell 1985.

As Fabio Girelli Carasi suggests, hysteria, which was regarded as the emblematic disease of the nineteenth-century middle class woman, could be compared to the symptoms of Aleramo's autobiographical character. However, while hysteria shares with anorexia the communication of the deepest emotions through the body, the anorexic pushes herself further by 'defemini[sing]' the body (Orbach 1993: 7). As MacSween suggests, 'in the anorexic symptoms women try to synthesize contradictory elements in their social position through the creation of an "anorexic body"' (1993: 2). The nonconformity of Aleramo's Woman from her childhood on, her work at her father's business, as well as some physical details, such as her short hair, do not suggest what Orbach calls the 'feminine frailty' of the late nineteenth-century lady but, rather, recall the obstinate behaviour of the anorexic in pursuing her battle (1986: 7). As I will discuss later, some characteristics of the protagonist's behaviour are opposed to those of her mother, who better embodies the 'weakness' of the hysteric. Both women suffer from their submissive social conditions but while the protagonist of *Una donna* escapes from her marital subordination, her mother cannot. I am not suggesting that Aleramo's autobiographical character has an explicitly troubled relationship with food but that, in her novel, we can identify what I will refer to as an 'anorexic attitude' which resembles the social protest of the 'rebellious eater' in today's feminist understanding of anorexia.<sup>5</sup>

The emergence of the protagonist's masculine behaviour is highlighted right from the beginning of the novel. Her childhood is deeply influenced by her father, who allows her to grow up with more social freedom in comparison with other middle-class girls of the time, for instance by employing her in his factory:

I remember a photograph of myself taken a year later, when I started to work regularly in the factory office. I was wearing an odd assortment of clothes – a straight-cut jacket with lots of small pockets for my watch, pencil, and notebook, over a short skirt. My hair fell in curls over my forehead but had been cut short at the back, making me look like a young boy — at my father's suggestion I had sacrificed my glossy pigtailed with their golden gleams. (1980: 15)

Having grown up with the liberal ideas of her father, not only is the Woman allowed to visit the factory but also to work among lower class employees, and this in a historical period when a wealthy Italian woman's working outside the home was still seen as a cultural taboo.

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<sup>5</sup> In her discussion of Paola Masino's *Nascita e morte della massaia* (1945), Lucia Re analyses the relationship between the protagonist, her body and food. While the historical context differs from that of my research, Re suggests that Masino questions the feminine identity of the Fascist era through the action of the protagonist who refuses to accept her submissive social role and employs food and the body to protest (Re: 2005). The relationship with food and the body in *Nascita e morte della massaia* is also central to Enrico Cesaretti's analysis which focuses on the 'aesthetic/hermeneutical aspect' of the 'anorexic attitude' of the protagonist (Cesaretti 2007).

The ‘social concessions’ allowed by her father could have influenced her by establishing both her nonconforming behaviour and what she anticipated her future choices as regards family and motherhood would be. This is made clear, for example, when she compares her ambitions with those of a woman who comes to their house to help her mother with domestic tasks: ‘I assured her that *I would never marry*, that I would never be happy unless I could go on working, and that furthermore all girls should do the same as me, for marriage was a mistake — Father said so’ (1980: 29: original emphasis). The contemporary anorexic grows up in a society in which she may choose to pursue greater education and professional development opportunities but she is still expected to be a wife and mother, because she has been educated from her childhood on to believe that she still needs to take care of the family in fulfilment of her natural duty (Lawrence 1984: 51-55).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the young protagonist of *Una donna* grows up with her father’s liberal ideas but, as soon as she becomes a teenager, her personal experiences, such as her rape and her father’s infidelity, force her to realise the influence of patriarchal society in women’s lives. Both the present-day anorexic and the novel’s protagonist discover patriarchal societal expectations after having attempted to ‘access’ the male world, and feel trapped in their contradictory social conditions.<sup>7</sup>

The Woman’s parents are two contrasting characters, her father strong and powerful, her mother emotionally dependant on her husband. The Mother is strongly influenced by the social *mores* of the times while the Woman as a child, as we have seen, grows up with the masculine ideas of her father and does not want to pursue her female destiny. By comparing the two feminine figures, Aleramo explains the social evolution of Italian middle class women at the turn of the twentieth century and describes both the concrete possibility for women to change their social destiny and the difference between two generations. This point recalls a major theory on eating disorders by Kim Chernin (1986: 42), who suggests that the mother-daughter relationship is implicated in the development of anorexia:

It is worth considering the fact that for most women the new image of female development is not handed down by a mother. It is worth considering what it means to a woman putting food into her mouth that she must immediately fear this food will turn her into a woman whose life is without ambition, who married and had babies and feels so ashamed that she does not dare to

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<sup>6</sup> The development of anorexia is not limited to young women’s position in patriarchal society; other factors such as age, gender and sexuality are involved. For instance, in her latest study on the relationship between body and social context, Orbach makes numerous references to men’s social position in the postmodern era; furthermore, she makes reference to the increasing number of women suffering from eating disorders in non-western countries (Orbach 2009). In this article I have chosen to engage with feminist debate on anorexia, however other theories could have been considered, such as psychological and psychiatric explanations; my analysis is not interested in ‘psychoanalysing’ the young protagonist of *Una donna* but in the social relationship between the feminist understanding of eating disorders and the present-day *questione femminile*.

<sup>7</sup> Orbach argues that ‘anorexia illuminates the difficulties of entry into a masculinist world’ (Orbach 1993:7).

leave her house. For a daughter whose mother's life has made this impression on her, the act of eating will be fraught with peril. With every bite she has to fear that she may become what her mother has been.

By not eating any food, a daughter tries to differentiate herself socially and physically from her mother and attempts to acquire a slim body as synonymous of freedom from patriarchal society. We should consider that despite being addressed to contemporary generations, Chernin's theory could also be applied to the social situation at turn of the twentieth-century; indeed, from the unification of Italy to the postmodern era, generations of middle-class women have progressively overtaken their mothers by accessing greater education and working outside the household. The young protagonist does not respect her mother's submissive behaviour and refers to her, with adjectives that recall her social position with compassion, as 'the unhappy [...]' and 'the unfortunate woman' (1980: 53-55). In fact, Chernin reveals that her patients often discuss their mothers with terminology that recalls that used by the protagonist of *Una donna*: '*shrunken, impoverished, exhausted, drained, depleted [...]*' (1993: 62: original emphasis).

In the novel, there are no images of nutrition with which to compare the eating habits of the young protagonist of *Una donna* to those of the present-day 'disobedient eater' as regards the mother-daughter relationship, however Chernin's explanation recalls the social gap between the protagonist and her mother. Indeed, the Woman, fascinated by a book about women's movement in England and Scandinavia, thinks about the word 'emancipation' and relates it to the maternal role: 'But a good mother must not be simply a victim of self-sacrifice, as mine had been: she must be *a woman*, a human individual' (1980: 113-14; original emphasis). In this passage, she freely admits to having overtaken her mother's social status, through her nonconforming choices; by interpreting her mother as 'a victim of self-sacrifice' she recalls the attitude of the contemporary 'rebellious eater' who tries to avoid conforming to her mother's social role through the metaphorical refusal of food. Both the protagonist of *Una donna* and the anorexic refuse to conform to their mothers' social status and attempt to overtake them through the construction of a disobedient 'anorexic attitude', as I have described it. It is pertinent to recall here the episode of the protagonist's miscarriage, which occurs as the Mother's condition deteriorates (suffering from depression, she is finally committed to a psychiatric clinic): the interruption of the pregnancy could be seen as a further attempt by the Woman to communicate her inner voice through her body. Ceasing to menstruate is one of the characteristics of the anorexic, and it is what Orbach (1993: 7) calls 'the explicit marker of her reproductive capacities'. Through the construction of a 'gender-

neutral body' the present-day anorexic discusses her canonical social duties (MacSween 1993: 2-4), which also includes motherhood; similarly, Aleramo's young protagonist experiences an analogous metaphorical situation through the miscarriage.<sup>8</sup> In this interpretation, the Woman's body symbolically refuses to live in complete marital submission as her mother did; the detail of the miscarriage and the passage quoted above suggest that the young protagonist is not ready for maternal sacrifice.

The Mother's mental condition could be interpreted as that woman's attempt to rebel against her repressive social role and to express herself through her body her inner voice, just as her daughter does. There is a physically significant element about the Mother which exemplifies this suggestion: during her daughter's childhood, the Mother is an elegant and well-dressed woman, but in later life when confined in the clinic she becomes fat: 'She had put on even more weight since our last visit, and her tiny, delicate features, were by now almost submerged in her fleshy cheeks and chin' (1980: 85). On the one hand, this dichotomy in her physical appearance could be seen as the social fracture between the mother and the protagonist, the former's social failure and the latter's ability to advance, but, on the other hand, it could be read as a sign of the Mother's liberation: removed from the tyranny of her husband, she abandons the social conventions of the time, which also include the relationship with food and body. In this way, her corpulence could represent a symbol of her transgressing the strict rules of the household which had imposed on her the role of submissive wife and mother, ready to sacrifice herself for the family. According to the author of the well known best seller *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, a more rounded body allows women to mask their sexuality: 'Fatness took them out of the category of women and put them in the androgynous state of 'big girl'' (1978: 43). Orbach suggests that the compulsive eater unconsciously seeks 'to hide' herself through the creation of a fat body (1978: 42). Fatness desexualises her, just as thinness does in the construction of the anorexic body (1978: 169). As she points out, anorexia '*is the other side of the coin of compulsive eating*' and both choices express a complex response to the same social oppression (1978: 162; original emphases). In this sense, the Mother's overweight body legitimises her refusal of her social status and frees her from the cultural expectations of the time, especially from the 'natural' duty of wife and mother. The Woman's emotional crisis and the Mother's depression can therefore be read as two different resolutions to the same social battle for the construction of their feminine identities.

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<sup>8</sup> Chemotti (2003:52) draws attention to the important passage in which the Woman, having realized her Mother's condition, describes her own emotional and physical status as a 'savage rebellion' prior to experiencing a miscarriage (Aleramo 1980: 53).

Zancan, who has studied ‘la genesi e la storia [*the genesis and the story*]’ of the novel, has made an analysis the first drafts of *Una donna* (1998: 181-97); one passage in particular, which does not appear in the final version, links the physical appearance of the Woman as a young girl with the contemporary social role of women:

Il meccanismo del mio cervello si era quasi arrestato, benché non m’accorgessi che d’un po’ di torpore, e continuassi a leggere qualcosa. Il mio fidanzato lodava i miei gusti letterari, incoraggiandomi però di preferenza a impraticarmi nelle faccende domestiche, il che facevo per convinzione di dovere ma naturalmente senza entusiasmo. Durante l’estate crebbi di statura e diventai molto snella. (194)

*[The mechanism of my brain would almost stop, although I would feel nothing more than a slight lethargy, and I would carry on reading something. Although my fiancé praised my literary tastes, he encouraged me improve myself preferably in the domestic arts, which I did out of a sense of duty but naturally without any enthusiasm. Over the summer I became taller and very thin. (My translation)]*

On the one hand, the extract could be seen as a normal description of the passage from childhood to adolescence — becoming taller is part of this process — but, on the other hand, if we consider her nonconforming behaviour and the ‘anorexic attitudes’ we have discussed so far, the detail of her weight loss could be read as her reaction to her fiancé’s encouragement to put aside her reading and be more involved in domestic work. In this, the body becomes emblematic of the rebellious personality of the Woman, who does not want to become an ‘angel of the house’ and would like to reach a level of economic and social independence through the work of journalist and writer. The depiction of a plumper body, typical of a maternal figure, would have been a sign of her having accepted her fiancé’s suggestion to spend time on domestic tasks; a slim body, on the other hand, symbolises her independence and her future social rebellion. As we have seen, the Woman and the Mother each acquire two opposite body shapes, both of which metaphorically suggest a complex resolution to the same oppressive social conditions. Although the passage quoted above was not included in the final version of the novel, they represent a significant detail for my analysis, in that they suggest an awareness of the symbolic value of body size on the part of Aleramo.

The Woman experiences numerous periods of sickness which resemble the symptoms of an emotional crisis. As Girelli Carasi points out, her ill-health is not only a result of her daily routine as wife and mother but something that recalls past events: ‘[a] reactivation of an earlier experience’, like the rape that took place in her father’s factory when she was a teenager. After having attempted suicide, the Woman identifies the episode of the rape as the origin of her ill-health:

How long had this crisis been building up inside me? Surely since the day the turbulent man I later married disrupted my life so brutally, leaving me vulnerable to corrosive influences which gradually wore me down, physically and mentally. But I had not been aware of the psychological crisis he had initiated until the last moment. (1980: 91)

Analysing feminist research on sexual violence, MacSween suggests that rape is ‘one expression of a sexual politics in which patriarchal power is played out’ (1993: 167). This social situation is precisely what the Woman as a teenager faces at the turn of the twentieth century through the violence against her; the ‘social meaning’ of the episode is experienced later by her as a young woman and influences her emotional life after her marriage. Indeed, it is while she is living with her husband that she experiences her emotional crisis:

As time went on I was taken over by a sort of lethargy. I seemed to need to do nothing except abandon myself completely to my surroundings. As a result my body submitted to my husband’s wishes although I found him physically more and more repugnant. I put this down to my exhaustion, my tiredness. [...] I prepared lunch and dinner myself, willing to do it though it gave me no pleasure. (1980:48)

It is notable that the Woman links her emotional conditions to sexuality and domestic chores. As an early twentieth century bride, she cannot refuse her conventional female responsibilities; however she takes no pleasure from food or sexuality. I suggest that in this figurative connotation, the passive attitude of the young protagonist symbolises a visible manifestation of her inner reaction to her oppressive conditions through her unreceptive behaviour as regards food and domestic chores.

‘Love, sacrifice yourself, and submit! [...] Was that every woman’s destiny?’ (1980: 55) the young protagonist asks herself, trying to articulate a solution. Anorexia as a complex answer to women’s social role addresses a similar question on womanhood. Indeed, Aleramo’s feminism and the social battle of the anorexic draw a significant link between the first wave of feminism and the present-day *questione femminile*. As we have seen, despite their different social contexts, they share a similar desire: to dispute the received female identity of the time. The body and food metaphorically represent the woman as a mother and caregiver for the family and they are synonymous of her natural disposition to take care of others’ needs. But significantly the body and food are also the same instruments employed by the contemporary anorexic to protest. Questioning her social role, Aleramo’s Woman uses her body with a similar ‘disobedient attitude’. In her childhood, she was introduced to the ‘male world’ by her father; after his adultery and the episode of the rape, however she begins to realise the patriarchal influence on the female social role of the time. As we have seen, the anorexic grows up in a society where various choices in the construction of female identity are offered to women; however, western cultures are still ambivalent about these roles. Using

a second, corporeal means of communication, allow both Aleramo's protagonist and the present-day anorexic to speak about their deepest feelings. MacSween points out that her sociological research on eating disorders does not seek to establish why one woman becomes a feminist and another anorexic but rather discusses 'the political meaning of anorexia as one engagement with the dilemmas of patriarchy' (1993: 255). This is precisely the link between Aleramo's feminism and the social battle of the present-day anorexic. The young protagonist of *Una donna* in the late nineteenth-century context experiences the same sense of uncertainty and attempts a second source of communication through her body to articulate what she was still forbidden to express; employing an 'anorexic attitude', the protagonist speaks with her body and protests like a present-day 'disobedient eater'.

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