

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

Francesca Calamita

*Victoria University of Wellington*

### Abstract

One of the ways Sibilla Aleramo (1879-1960) depicts the deepest feelings of her autobiographical character in *Una donna* (1906) is through the language of the body, which provides an alternative unidiomatic source of communication by expressing what the words of the main character cannot illustrate openly. As Susie Orbach points out, in the development of eating disorders the body acquires a metaphorical role for the contemporary anorexic: it communicates 'what she is unable to tell us with words' (1993: 83). In this meaning, the language of the body is used by women writers to express a 'protesta prelinguistica [*prelinguistic protest*]' in historical periods where women lack the power of words (Maraini 1995: 15), which is exactly what the protagonist of *Una donna* faces in the social and cultural framework of the turn of the twentieth century. The language used by the contemporary anorexic and that employed by Aleramo's autobiographical character are both non-verbal expressions of a protest. Furthermore, they question feminine social roles in different times. In this chapter, I relate images of the 'disobedient behaviour' of the protagonist of *Una donna* to feminist understandings of contemporary anorexia, with an emphasis on the relationship between the main character and her mother, the episode of the rape and her unsuccessful marriage. Through the construction of an 'anorexic attitude' and the shaping of an 'anorexic body', the young woman articulates her voice and expresses her disagreement with the societally sanctioned female role of the era, drawing a significant link between the first wave of feminism and the contemporary debate on the *questione femminile*.

**Keywords:** body, feelings, feminism, *Una donna*, Aleramo, anorexia, *questione femminile*.