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Abstract: Over the past twenty years Rossana Campo has established herself as one of the most interesting authors in contemporary Italian literature. Her writing is characterized by its heavy reliance on the spoken register and focus on the female voice and experience. *Never Felt So Good* (1995) unfolds during a dinner party among girlfriends. In the course of the evening each woman recounts her amorous adventures among laughter, tears, and a few big surprises. This excerpt is the tail-end of Lucia’s story, detailing her conversations with three female neighbors who are the catalysts for her rebirth and the release of the long suppressed memory of her earlier free and rebellious self. The introduction to the excerpt discusses Campo’s treatment of the classic theme of patriarchal domination as well as additional issues linked to this topic relevant to translated texts: the well-known hierarchical distinction between source text and translation; the tendency to borrow the language of gendered stereotypes in discussions about translation; the “feminization” of the translator as submissive and self-effacing; and, finally, the politics of publishing, text reception and censorship.

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Never Felt So Good by Rossana Campo

Translation of Excerpt, with Critical Introduction

ADRIA FRIZZI

Often referred to as one of the “bad girls” of contemporary Italian literature, Rossana Campo (Genova, 1963) enjoys unique popularity in Italy thanks to a very personal style that relies heavily on the colloquial, spoken register and her focus on the female voice and experience. Her production ranges from novels, short stories and journalism, to children's literature, theatre and painting. Her debut novel, *In principio erano le mutande*, published in 1992, later became a film by the same title directed by Anna Negri in 1999. Several novels followed, establishing Campo as one of the most interesting authors in contemporary Italian literature. Among them, *Il Pieno di super* (1993), *Mai sentita così bene* (1995), *L'attore americano* (1997), *Sono pazza di te* (2001), *L'uomo che non ho sposato* (2003), *Duro come l'amore* (2005), *Più forte di me* (2007), *Lezioni di arabo* (2010), *Felice per quello che sei - Confessioni di una buddista emotiva* (2012), *Il Posto delle donne* (2013), and *Fare l'amore* (2014).¹

The main focus of Campo's novels has been defined as “what women discuss when men are not around.”² Her humorous and ironic depictions of identity, sexual and emotional issues typical of the female experience, her quirky characters, and her uniquely vibrant, quotidian, and incisive language account for her success in the literary marketplace as well as the interest she has generated among scholars and critics.

Mai sentita così bene (*Never Felt So Good*) unfolds during a dinner party among girlfriends, all of whom are, like Campo herself, Italian expats living in Paris. They are celebrating the return of Lucia after she has ditched her respectable lover, prestigious career, and straight-laced life to run off with a German biker. During the course of the evening, all recount their amorous adventures and affairs among laughter, tears, and a few big surprises. The novel ironically inscribes itself in the fabulating tradition of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Chaucer, and Boccaccio by allowing each of the women to take center stage and spin her tale in an irrepressible and often raucous wordfest. Indeed, while the characters are captivating and their stories funny and enthralling, ultimately “the real actors are the words, and what dominates the stage is language.”³

The excerpt below is the tail-end of Lucia's story, detailing her conversations with Olga 1, Olga 2 and Milly, her Berlin neighbors and the ultimate catalysts for her rebirth. This in turn triggers the release of the long suppressed memory of her earlier free and rebellious self.

The classic theme of patriarchal domination in Campo, however, is not as black and white as in some profeminist works. Rather, it is portrayed in a more complex and open-ended way. The societal pressure to conform to a submissive female model is as strong as ever, but there are no male scapegoats in Lucia's story. Her adolescent metamorphosis from wild child into her feminine, compliant adult self predates the relationship with Jean-Claude, a sociologist fittingly interested in prison systems. And the Berlin epiphany is not a prelude to an idealized, down-pat “happy” ending, or even a clearly defined agenda, feminist or otherwise. There's no riding into the sunset for Lucia or her fellow travelers. It is not by accident that Campo closes the novel with a question, rather than a statement, in the voice of her reluctant standard-bearer: “Be', sono cambiata, no?”⁴

There are two more issues linked to the theme of domination that are worth raising in the context of any translated text as well as of this particular one. One is the well-known hierarchical

¹ The novels of Rossella Campo cited here are all published by Feltrinelli, Milan with the exception of *Felice per quello che sei - Confessioni di una buddista emotiva* (Perrone, Rome) and *Il posto delle donne* and *Fare l'amore* (Ponte alle Grazie, Milan).

² Cited from memory.

³ Angelo Guglielmi, back cover blurb, *Mai sentita così bene*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995.

⁴ Rossana Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995. P. 162.

distinction between source text and translation, in which the “original” or “primary” text is viewed as superior and the translation as subordinate and derivative. An offshoot of this narrative is the tendency to borrow the language of gendered stereotypes, and more specifically of marriage and relationships, frequently surfacing in discussions about translation. One of the most notorious commonplaces is the comparison of translation with a woman, who is either faithful or beautiful according to some, or only beautiful when she is faithful according to others. Yet another is the “feminization” of the translator as submissive, self-sacrificing, and invisible as the stereotypical wife. The enduring presence of this bias in discussions and perceptions of translation is proof that these views remain as entrenched as patriarchal thought itself.

One more manifestation of domination with regard to this particular text is linked to the politics of publishing, text reception, and censorship. In spite of the popularity Campo enjoys in Italy and elsewhere in Europe (with impressive print runs and translations into several languages, including French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Portuguese, Greek, and Romanian), her work remains largely unpublished in the U.S. My own experience confirms the apparent disconnect between Europe and the U.S., and seemingly between readers and publishers within this country, at least on the empirical level. While *Never Felt So Good* has consistently captivated scholars as well as students, colleagues, and other readers, my attempts to find a publisher for the translation manuscript have been rebuffed by publishers and agents alike. Perceptions of this text seem to be largely based on the fact that it doesn’t fit familiar but rigid and often obsolete categories and expectations (literary vs. commercial; canonical vs. experimental) or even established genres and subgenres (fiction vs. theatre or film script; romance, confessional, chick lit, etc.). While the silencing of female voices may no longer be as intractable a problem as it was in the not so distant past, issues of dominance and power in the shaping of a literary canon remain critical to any discussion of the diffusion of individual authors and literatures.

*An Excerpt from Rossana Campo’s Never Felt So Good*⁵

22.

The afternoon we arrived in Berlin was so beautiful, Lucia says. There was sunshine, fresh air, a turquoise sky. We stopped to have a snack in a big pastry shop, in the city center, on the Kudamm. There was a bunch of old ladies stuffing themselves with pastries and cakes. We’re scarfing down cream puffs and liters of weak coffee ourselves. We keep kissing, and he asks me: are you doing okay? Me: I’m doing great. He goes: are you happy I brought you to Berlin? Me: really happy. Him: do you want to go back to the professor? Me: no. So we go over to his friends’ who live in a squatter neighborhood, in the East, Prenzlauerberg.

What? Nadia asks.

A neighborhood of buildings occupied by squatters. Ralph’s friends are all real nice, there’s a girl who’s a gas-station attendant, Heidi, with shoulders this big, she was with this Chilean guy, and then there was a Kurdish guy who lived with them, Abidin, the leader of the Kurdish Maoists. There were all kinds of people going in and out of the building, Kurds, Turks, South Americans, maoist-leninists...

Maoist-leninists, Betty repeats slowly, as if she’s supposed to memorize it.

What the fuck were you doing with those people?

I can’t picture you with gas-station attendants and Turkish maoists...

⁵ I would like to thank Traci Andrighetti for bringing this novel to my attention and for her collaboration in the early stages of the translation. The translation ms. of *Never Felt So Good* is completed and in search of a publisher.

Oh, I made friends with the three girls who lived across from us, two Basques and an Italian. The Basques were nurses, the Italian did tattoos. One afternoon they invited me over and we became friends. Their place was a complete mess, a big table in the middle of the room was covered with leftover pizza, cartons, empty beer cans, on the wall some bullfighting posters, Marilyn, Greta Garbo, stuff like that.

It would have been better if you'd stayed home, comments Betty the conservative.

Their names were Olga 1, Olga 2, and Milly. Milly, the one who did tattoos, was covered with them. She did one on me too,

Where? Nadia asks alarmed.

Here, she goes, turning her back and showing us a small scorpion perched on her left shoulder blade. Then she continues: The afternoon they invited me over, we sat on this pretty filthy carpet, they made green tea, and Milly pulled out some kind of pipe. She goes: do you smoke? Me: oh no. Her: too bad. Me: in any case, I certainly wouldn't smoke a pipe. This isn't a pipe, it's called a chillum and you smoke drugs in it, she goes. What drugs?! I go. It's nothing, goes Olga 2, don't scare her, it's light stuff. And they start puffing away on the pipe. Olga 2 goes: are you Ralph's girlfriend? I nod. Have you guys known each other long? Milly asks, tossing her hair back before taking another hit on this big pipe. She had hair down to her ass, bright red from henna, but beautiful. I say, we've been together for almost a week. Oh, Olga 1 goes, anyway you guys make a handsome couple. So then I add, to tell you the truth I sort of had a husband, but I've just run away from home, with Ralph. You ran away from home? Olga 2 asks. Exactly, I go. GUAPA! Olga 1 shouts. GUAPISSIMA! Olga 2 concurs. That increased my stock two thousand points in their eyes. Is your husband boring? Milly asks. Oh no, he's very intelligent, he's a sociologist, he's written some books on penal systems, for example... Whatever, Milly goes and hands me the chillum.

Nooooo!!! Don't tell me you smoked! Ale goes.

What a crowd, huh, Monica says.

I swear, after two hits I'm starting to feel pretty out of it, my head's spinning, I ask: don't you guys have boyfriends? The three exchange a look and Milly goes: we know how to enjoy ourselves without men, and she winks at me. Sometimes with men, too, Olga 1 adds, but it's not the norm. I try to make an expression like I know what's going on, and we continue to smoke in silence. Milly goes: being a wife means denying yourself to satisfy other people's needs. Olga 1 adds: my mother always told me, Olga, remember that in marriage women have a lot to lose, as usual.

Lucia pours herself a drink, lights a cigarette and continues: Man, those girls told me all kinds of stuff. By the way, they're the ones who cut my hair, Milly did.

That criminal! Betty goes,

The two Olgas would go to the hospital, and I'd go to Milly's. I started asking her questions about Ralph, I wanted to know what he did for money. She got irritated, one day she goes: leave Ralph alone. He's a good guy, let him do whatever he wants, think about yourself a little. I go, oh, I stopped thinking about that a lifetime ago, about myself, I mean. And Milly, you've gotten yourself into a pretty bad place, huh. Then she looks me over and says: let's see if we can't do something about that. First of all, I think you should spiff up a little. She gives me a pair of her jeans, old, all worn and ripped, which I wouldn't have even worn to clean the apartment in Paris, then she goes: go on, take off that miss-goody-two-shoes blouse. Before taking it off I go, could you turn around? She gets ticked off again and goes, Jesus, you think I've never seen a pair of tits before? Then she says, take off your bra for a second, let me see, hmmm, not bad, they're bigger than they look... then she comes closer and touches my hair as if she were touching something useless and repulsive and goes: I'd change it, you have a thin face, you'd look good with short hair, what do you say?

And you? Did you let her?

Me? Yeah, I've always let other people do whatever they want to me. No, really, something

happened... I let her cut my hair really short, I slipped on those trashed jeans, a T-shirt she gave me and then I look at myself in the mirror and feel like crying.

I believe it, Ale goes.

You guys don't get it, it wasn't despair, I was moved.

Moved? Betty repeats.

I saw something incredible in that mirror, sure, I felt ridiculous, I looked disheveled, scruffy, messed up,

Need any other synonyms?

So, I felt like crying,

You were that horrendous?

You don't get it, Lucia goes, I know it's not easy... okay: that was the first time I wasn't made up like a good little girl, like a miss goody-two-shoes, as Milly said. She really hit it on the head. I was confused, messed up, inside and out, and it was the first time my outside appearance corresponded to what I felt on the inside. I kept looking at myself in the mirror and it was like I'd already seen myself that way before,

You've lost me, Monica goes,

Lucia explains again: I was like that before, when I was a kid, when I was thirteen, fourteen years old, I was like that, kind of dirty and scruffy.

23.

Dirty? Betty asks.

But I talked a lot, you know, I didn't always keep my mouth shut like now, I mean, like before I ran away, all meek and mild, damn it. I had short hair, as a kid, guess who my idol was?

Let's hear this too,

Suzy Quatro, you guys remember her?

Oh lord, I had actually repressed all memories of her, Monica goes.

Oh yeah, yeah, Suzy was great, I go, fuck yeah I remember her, I had one of her records, what the hell was it called, I practically listened to it day and night.

Well, you know, that's what I was like, I didn't study, I got lots of F's, I wore Indian silk shirts, rings necklaces and bracelets, I wore patchouli,

That stuff was really gross,

You were right to lose that,

And I didn't have glasses, I didn't have gastritis, I ate junk, potato chips and ice cream, anything but organic food. I ate junk and I felt great, no gastritis whatsoever, man.

And then?

I flipped out, I started thinking about my entire life, from when I was a kid, when I'd cut classes to hang out with my friend, my best friend, her name was Annamaria, she was fat as a cow, I was really skinny,

That's classic, Nadia goes.

Man, we were so wild, continues Lucia, now unstoppable in her exterior monologue. She says: We'd spend the whole day gawking at boys, we'd go walking along the main drag and do nothing but devour boys with our eyes. Then we'd smoke in secret, we put on tons of make-up, I had some platform shoes that were six inches high, man, I still remember them, they were terrible, the top part was made of denim, the wedge of wood, and in the wedge I had carved, I Love You, stuff like that,

I did those things too, man, unbelievably tacky stuff, Monica goes,

Well, this may seem strange to you guys, but in our own small way, in our own provincial, tacky, small way we were real rebels. We didn't take any shit from anyone, we knew what we wanted,

what we were going to do when we grew up. Annamaria wanted to be an attorney and defend the poor, abused women, the handicapped. I didn't ever want to get married, or have kids. I wanted to be in a rock band, like Suzy Quatro, with three or four guys playing with me, but I was the star. I was gonna tour the world with my band.

And then?

By the way, whatever happened to Suzy Quatro?

I'm not exactly sure what happened next, I can't tell you the exact moment I changed, when they beat me down. I started to study, I stopped yelling, fighting with my parents, with my teachers, I stopped staring at boys like a maniac, it must have been... I don't know... it was as if I felt I had to hide those things, I had to change them, it was inappropriate. All my feelings, my crazy ideas, my dreams, there was no one to tell me, okay, it's a bunch of crap but you have the right to think them, you have the right to want this... It's hard to say when it started, all I can tell you is that two years later I found myself sitting in the front row, with glasses, a little blue skirt, a pony tail, and lots of good grades on my report card. I stopped getting my period, I didn't have it again for three years, to think that I'd been the first one in my class to get it, at eleven-and-a-half, even my boobs had started to grow... then it all disappeared, as if something had sucked everything back inside,

Hey, this is heavy stuff, Luci, Monica goes.

And then there's another thing, I figured it out talking to Milly, because as soon as she cut my hair, the first thing I said was, oh god, will Ralph still like me? What if he doesn't like me anymore? And then she really lay into it, she goes: Listen, you sound like the type who's always asking herself if other people like her.

Damn, she pegged you, this Milly pegged you dead on, I go.

She said to me: try turning it around, try to think about whether you like yourself like you are, like you feel. Try asking yourself if you like him, you know? Not just if he likes you.

Man, this Milly is really cool!

Was she pretty?

Who, Milly? Not in the conventional sense. Skinny as a rail, big mouth, big teeth, huge eyes, a sort of square face, but she's one of those women who look really beautiful even if they aren't,

Did she really say that to you?

Lucia continues and not even baby Jesus could stop her: You know what I thought? I thought that at some point in my life whatever I was wasn't working, no one liked me, so my real personality must have gone into hiding, and something that had nothing to do with me took my place. This something, this sort of voice, was constantly saying: okay, Lucia, this is a good job, working with books, it's the right thing to do, and here is a cultured intelligent and elegant man, you'd do well behaving in a way that makes him appreciate you and want to keep you. Be careful not to bother him too much and don't bore him with strange requests, don't talk too much about yourself, you're not that interesting. And so on. Even that pig Philippe, here's a writer, you love books, it's so nice that someone who writes books invites you out to dinner, make sure you behave and don't make a nuisance of yourself.

Shit, you figured all this out just by going to Berlin? Monica asks.

I've half a mind to hop on over there myself, Nadia goes.

Did you know that Nadia also had an affair she kept from us? I say.

I want to hear all about it later, Lucia goes perfunctorily, and then continues, Look, I was there in Berlin with people that Jean-Claude wouldn't have liked at all, that a lot of people wouldn't have liked, and I'd done one of the worst things a woman can do, run off with her lover, I dumped my almost husband without saying anything to him, and you know what I thought? That it was the best thing I'd ever done in my life, since I was fourteen.

What do you mean, a good man like that...

And your job? Series editor at Arrêt, that's no small feat...

Fuck that shit, I don't want to see those people again, not even in a photograph, you know...

Hey, how much can getting laid...

No, listen, you guys still don't get it. Ralph was a wonderful thing, maybe the best thing that's ever happened to me in my whole life, but I don't know if I'll stay with him, I... I... I think I need to be by myself for a while...

Are you sure you did the right thing breaking it off with Jean-Claude?

That's right, Monica's philosophy is never say anything,

Deny everything, even the evidence.

You guys can think what you want, but right now I feel like I've found myself, I'm full of energy, I feel like taking on the world, and I'm not going back, not for anything. That's what I was like when I was a kid, I hated doing things half-assed, maybe you're doing the right thing holding on to Paul and running around having affairs, I'm not telling you otherwise, I don't want to impose my point of view on anyone,

Careful, you're starting to talk like the pre-flight Lucia again, Ale goes,

No, seriously, everyone needs to do what they feel is best for them. I don't want to lie, I don't want to wear a mask anymore, not even if Jesus Christ asked me to do it.

Well don't tell me it's all the poor sociologist's fault,

No, I don't mean it's Jean-Claude's fault, when I met him I was already like that, I was already the fake Lucia. And he liked me precisely because I was the fake Lucia. He spends his time studying prison inmates,

Of course, they remind him of himself... I go, trashing poor J.-C.

Maybe he was a rebel as a kid too, what do I know, to be honest, I feel a little sorry for him, Nadia says.

No, look, if you ask me, Jean-Claude was born that way, with short hair, tortoise-shell glasses and a Foucault book under his arm, Monica trashes further.

Come on, you really want to quit your job?

Girls, I've discovered that everything I thought was true and right up until today IS NOT! And there's no going back, you know!

Hey, how about some ice cream? You still like ice cream or are you against that too?

As long as it's not organic, says our newly recovered friend Lucia.