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Gabriele, Tommasina. *Dacia Maraini's Narratives of Survival: (Re)Constructed*. Madison-Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016. Pp. 153. ISBN 9781611478815. \$33.89

Tommasina Gabriele's *Dacia Maraini's Narratives of Survival: (Re)Constructed* is a valuable contribution expanding the scholarship on the works of one of the most engaging and prolific contemporary Italian female authors. Although Maraini made a name for herself as a powerful fiction author as early as 1962 with her acclaimed novel *La vacanza* and has received numerous prestigious awards, critical attention to her works has grown slowly. And while numerous interviews and articles dealing with her work were published in Italian and international literary journals, the first comprehensive study of her writing only appeared in 2000 (*The Pleasure of Writing: Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini*, edited by Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Testaferri, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue, 2000). This text sparked interest in Maraini's fictional, political, and cultural writing, and it paved the way for studies like Gabriele's.

Tommasina Gabriele's book contributes to the critical investigation of Maraini's narrative by re-reading it through the dynamics of memory and past experience and their intersection with fiction. *Dacia Maraini's Narratives of Survival: (Re)Constructed* takes into account some of the novels and short stories written between the 1980s and the 2000s (*Il treno per Helsinki*, *Bagheria*, *Buio*, to name a few) and reinterprets them by taking them beyond the limits of gender. "We as reviewers, readers and scholars have often enclosed her [Maraini's] work in a feminist framework," Gabriele writes in the introduction to her book, facing head-on Maraini's well-known aversion to labels (xvi). Certainly, Maraini's deliberate choice, as early as the 1970s, to give voice to gendered disparities and abuses – a reaction to the political and cultural hardships coeval to her writing – marks her as a 'feminist' writer today. Yet, even in the midst of her heartfelt critique of Italy's "profoundly" misogynist literary marketplace, she goes beyond the confines of a mere feminist framework.

To avoid the clutches of classification, Gabriele's book takes an alternative route to reading Maraini by stretching the boundaries of what a gendered framework is, so as to give more prominence to the "ethical" issues Maraini's works so powerfully tackle. "Feminism," "gender," and "genre" are all terms that Gabriele's theoretical scaffold addresses (Kristeva, De Lauretis, Irigaray), relating them through a critical discourse the author calls "flexible." What Gabriele means by flexibility is a paradigm of narrative "re-construction," which is already sketched in the title as a hyphenated noun to detach it from other misleading historical references. The 'construction' process Gabriele points to won't "merely offer a summary," as the author herself claims (ixi). Rather, it follows the path of memory and strategies of survival, highlighting the role that personal experience played for the author in building the characters. Many of Maraini's novels are indeed informed by her own life, but Gabriele interestingly speaks of memoir as a dynamic genre propelling the fusion of past and present within fiction, while pointing to this amalgamation as a recurrent thread in Maraini's storytelling.

In Chapter One, Gabriele explores the narrative dynamics in *Il treno per Helsinki* by letting the reconstruction of the female protagonist's past intertwine with questions of childhood, love, and politics. Food, in particular, is originally turned into a metaphor for the hardships of life that, like nourishment, need to be 'ingested' and 'digested' by the character as inevitable steps towards her emotional and physical rebirth. Here, autobiography is interestingly treated as background, an element that isn't easy to separate from fiction in comparison to the real-life allure defining other works such as *Bagheria*.

The past is also central in Gabriele's argument. In Chapter Two, which deals with the story of *Isolina, la donna tagliata a pezzi*, the passing of time is re-constructed to regain the dignity of the female body. Indeed, Isolina is released from obscurity through the re-telling of her story, proving the healing power of words and their capability to make up for what history and criminal news have failed to acknowledge. By focusing on other works by Maraini such as *Buio*, as she does in Chapter Five, Gabriele broadens this analysis of gendered violence and calls the reader's

attention to the forms of discrimination that Maraini aims to take beyond a limiting female boundary. This critical discourse touches on male protagonists, homosexuality, childhood, and motherhood, without bypassing social forms of victimization, such as prostitution and racism, which the short stories in *Buio* widely address. The results once again show Maraini's predilection for genre switching and her ability to let news naturally flow into fictionalized narrative, as well as Gabriele's keen use of such insights to make her point.

Interestingly, Gabriele tends to focus on characters who are, in many ways, universal representatives of womanhood. Isolina, Armida, and Colomba all embody the ethical tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas that political, religious, and socio-cultural interdictions have ascribed to the female body. Gabriele uses these female characters and their plights of rape, murder, and social misjudgment to highlight and explore the motif of survival that runs through Maraini's works. Inevitably, Gabriele's critical discourse has to tackle painful, female-related emotional issues, such as abortion, the politicization of pregnancy, and the delicate dyad of biological and adoptive mothering. Chapters Three, Four, and Six convincingly rework these questions, bringing childhood and the relationship between child and mother into her discourse, thus defying the misconception that Maraini's narrative does not focus on infancy (p. 58).

Gabriele's clear and straightforward prose aptly interprets Maraini's inclination to put the literary text at the service of critical social issues. *Vita, Voci, Bagheria*, and many of the short stories commented in the book are representative of a dark narrative which is inevitably tinged with sadness and crime, but so is life. By problematizing Maraini's empathy for and dismay at avoidable tragedies, this book seconds her willingness to promote responsiveness through a kind of writing that prevents the reader from being anaesthetized to social injustice by systematic exposure to gendered crime. The "re-construction" that Gabriele looks at in her book indeed leads towards Maraini's much coveted awareness by turning the past into a memorial process that fosters acknowledgment of meaning and truth. And this is perhaps the most novel aspect of this book, making it a challenging and timely contribution to the current debate about Maraini's work among researchers and scholars. But it also makes it an appealing read for teachers and the general public interested in exploring the social, cultural, and political activism underscoring Maraini's writing.

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