



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: Film Review: *Una femmina / Una femmina - The Code of Silence* by Francesco Costabile

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 9 (2022)

Author: Veronica Vegna

Publication date: 12/31/2022

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/17-una-femmina>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15781/nk7g-qy26>

Keywords: Film Review

Copyright information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Una femmina / Una femmina - The Code of Silence. Directed by Francesco Costabile. Tramp Film, O'Groove, 2022. 120 minutes.

Francesco Costabile's feature film debut revolves around the predicament of Rosa (Lina Siciliano), a young woman from Calabria, whose family belongs to the *'ndrangheta*. With family as its central theme, this drama focuses first on Rosa's quest for the truth about her mother's death when she was a child, and then on her revenge, once she realizes her mother died at the hands of her own relatives. This film is inspired by journalist Lirio Abbate's book *Fimmine ribelli* (Rebel Women, 2013). Abbate co-wrote the film's storyline with Edoardo De Angelis, and the screenplay with Costabile, Serena Brugnolo, and Adriano Chiarelli. *Una femmina* evokes those "women of *'ndrangheta*" who took on the mafia and, in some cases, were murdered for their actions. Several real-life stories come to mind when watching *Una femmina*—from Giuseppina Pesce's to Lea Garofalo's and Maria Concetta Cacciola's, to name a few. These brave women, oftentimes mothers, rebelled against the tyrannical, misogynist, and patriarchal system of the *'ndrangheta*. These are stories of domestic violence, vengeance, and femicides carried out to "protect the family honor." They describe forced arranged marriages wherein women are bargaining chips to create alliances and consolidate power.

Right from its beginning, *Una femmina* makes a clear reference to reality with an inscription—"Questo film è ispirato a storie e fatti realmente accaduti" (This film is inspired by facts and stories that have actually taken place). What follows is a dedication to all the women who are victims of the *'ndrangheta* and to all "femmine ribelli" (rebellious females). In a way similar to the title of Abbate's book, the term "femmine" is here used as a synonym of "donne" (women) by drawing on the Calabrese dialect spoken in the film together with standard Italian. "Femmine"—coupled with "ribelli" as in Abbate's book—hints at the film's main plot. This word choice is significant as it conveys a gender struggle, but also the role of procreation characterizing women. When used as a noun in lieu of the term "donna" (woman) in Italian, "femmina" often carries a derogatory and male-chauvinist meaning. It suggests a parallel with female animals, underscoring the reproductive function over women's many other roles and abilities. Costabile makes frequent references to animals in this film—visually and through the dialogues—while foregrounding the rural context of the story with its Calabrian mountainous landscape. This combination further conjures a fitting analogy between animals and women. Both are property of the *'ndrangheta* family, and, therefore, both can be acquired, given, consumed, and disposed of.

Starting from its opening scene—a flashback partially revealing the circumstances leading to the death of Rosa's mother, Cetta—*Una femmina* successfully highlights the devastating effects of the mafia's repressive patriarchy on women. Frequent shots of Rosa's family house on the mountains, the camera's insistence on food preparation and consumption, and indoor mealtime scenes convey the centrality of the domestic environment in the oppression of the female characters. This is particularly meaningful given the context of the *'ndrangheta*, a type of mafia whose structure is based on blood ties, with families coinciding with clans. While featuring the rural face of the *'ndrangheta*, the film also hints at its extremely profitable drug trafficking, which has made this mafia organization extremely powerful on the global stage.

The centrality given to women in *Una femmina* is not limited to Rosa's resistance and rebellion. Through her grandmother (Anna Maria De Luca), who at some point claims authority in the *'ndrina*, or family/clan, this film points to the complicity and also the active role of women within the *'ndrangheta*. In addition to educating their offspring to the organization's code of conduct, including *omertà* (the code of silence, referenced in the English title), some women play a significant role in the

organization's activities and, when distinguishing themselves, might earn the name "sorelle d'omertà" (sisters of omertà) as a form of recognition.

As in other films focusing on women and the mafias, motherhood is a leitmotif that circularly connects the opening and ending of *Una femmina*. This theme underscores how, while primarily functional to the organization, mothers can threaten its existence by becoming State witnesses, as Rosa and her mother do. Costabile's movie centers around a daughter's revenge. Renate Siebert's notion of "pedagogy of the vendetta," where women incite revenge to be carried out by their mafiosi relatives, is here replaced by Rosa taking the law in her own hands, a role more commonly assigned to men in mafia movies.¹ Through the dichotomy between Rosa and her grandmother, the film points to a generational change, as Rosa fights back against her family's oppressive tactics. However, while emphasizing Rosa's strength and resilience through this coming-of-age story, the prominence of her revengeful actions contrasts sharply with the final decision to seek witness protection at the abrupt ending of the film. By only hinting at Rosa's collaboration with the authorities in the final scene, *Una femmina* does not foreground her brave decision to embrace legality, and thus distinguishes itself from several of the stories in Abbate's *Fimmine ribelli*.

Aesthetically, the recurrent and prolonged close-ups and extreme close-up shots are coupled with dramatic nondiegetic music, and, at times, theatrical mise-en-scène. Together with Rosa's intense gaze, these artistic elements contribute to the highly emotional and solemn tone of this Greek-like tragedy, evoking Calabria's rich history. In some instances, Costabile demands the viewer's active participation to explore and interpret his shots without fully revealing the facts, thus adding to the already engaging plot and convincing acting (playing the role of Rosa's uncle is Fabrizio Ferracane, one of the leading actors of Francesco Munzi's *Anime nere / Black Souls* (2014), a renowned feature film about the 'ndrangheta).

Una femmina brings to the fore women who take a stand against the mafia, moving away from more traditional ancillary functions of female characters in cinematic portrayals of Italian organized crime. In line with the attention given to women in mafia studies since the 1990s, it joins other films featuring female protagonists in the context of the mafias—among them, *Angela* (2002) by Roberta Torre, *La siciliana ribelle / The Sicilian Girl* (2008) by Marco Amenta, and *Galantuomini / Brave Men* (2008) by Edoardo Winspeare—and recent films on women and 'ndrangheta, such as *La terra dei santi / Land of Saints* (2015) by Fernando Muraca, *Lea* (2015) by Marco Tullio Giordana, and *A Chiara* (2021) by Jonas Carpignano. Contrary to her grandmother's gloomy view that "senza omini come a chisti, noi non siamo nenti" (without men like these, we are nothing), a pregnant Rosa embracing legality for her future daughter's wellbeing is *Una femmina*'s emancipatory ending and a homage to all those women who made a similar choice, despite male domination and coercive, life-threatening circumstances.

VERONICA VEGNA
The University of Chicago

¹ Renate Siebert, *Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia* (London and New York: Verso Book, 1996).