

WOMEN AND RELIGION IN ITALIAN-CANADIAN NARRATIVES

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Socially inscribed and fossilized religious teachings have significantly shaped the lives of Italian-Canadian women who were expected to lead dutiful and chaste lives within the patriarchal family. Today feminist writers often engage in a parodic dialogue with these religious and cultural values that perpetrate ethnic stereotypes of Italian-Canadian women in order to posit new possibilities of emancipation from the stronghold of stifling religious traditions.

Donne e religione nelle narrative italo-canadesi

Insegnamenti religiosi socialmente iscritti e fossilizzati hanno significativamente plasmato la vita delle donne italo-canadesi che dovevano condurre un'esistenza rispettosa e casta all'interno della famiglia patriarcale. Oggi, autrici e autori femministi si impegnano sovente in un dialogo parodico con questi valori religiosi e culturali che perpetrano stereotipi etnici delle donne italo-canadesi. Ciò offre nuove possibilità di emancipazione dalla roccaforte delle soffocanti tradizioni religiose.

Introduction

That women and religion share a special relationship within the Italian-Canadian immigrant community, and that the identities of Italian-Canadian women are profoundly shaped by the stronghold of Catholic indoctrination, emerges most clearly in the works of authors of Italian origin. Here, no doubt, we repeatedly come across portraits of pious, dutiful, submissive and self-sacrificing women who, like Assunta Barone, the silent immigrant mother in Frank Paci's *Black Madonna*¹, comply with and transmit the strict moral dictates of the Catholic

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¹ As Joseph Pivato observes, Assunta is the embodiment of the archetypal immigrant mother and black clad mourning widow who appears in the works of numerous writers of Italian origin like Dino Minni, Alexandre Amprimoz, Caterina Edwards, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Filippo Salvatore, Saro D'Agostino and Antonino Mazza (*Echo*: 155).

religion, as well as the societal norms of patriarchal domesticity. At the other end of the spectrum there are women like Cristina Innocente, the transgressive adulteress in Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* who boldly violates Christian morality and the sanctity of marriage and is thus punished by the community, just like her namesake Saint Cristina. Both are archetypal female figures that fall within the saint/sinner or angel/devil paradigm of Judeo-Christian derivation and allegorically embody either the silent, de-sexed Virgin Mary or the lascivious, tempting Eve/Mary Magdalene. In other words, they represent what Elena Piezzo's anthropological study identifies as the «typical Italian-Canadian woman», a mythical creature that appears as «a stock character of sorts with exaggerated, traditional mannerisms and antiquated beliefs» (*The Crucible...*: 1), as well as her opposite, the non-conforming, rebellious and progressive woman who challenges traditional religious and family values by embracing the sexual freedom of ancient Mother Goddess figures. Claasen (1997) has, for instance, argued that both Assunta and Cristina are embodiments of the Black Madonna, an ancient Great Mother Goddess connected with pre-Christian earth-centered religions, and as such prefigure female empowerment.

The interplay between gender, ethnicity and religion is, thus, a significant tool of analysis when it comes to examining representations of Italian-Canadian women. Indeed, the relationship between Italian immigrant women and the community's religious life is a very close-knit and mutually interdependent one. On one hand, women are the preservers of the religious mores and rituals of their Catholic homeland, which continue to be the fulcrum of family and community life in the new world. Working within the tradition of female piety, they act as moral educators and spiritual brokers, and thereby safeguard the survival of religion by ensuring the observance of Christian morals within the household, and by mediating between the family and parish. On the other hand, religion affects women's lives socially as much as spiritually. While providing them with a communal sphere of social interaction outside domestic walls², it also exerts a profound influence in shaping the socio-cultural inscrip-

² Various studies on Italian-Canadian immigrants have emphasized how female participation within the church has allowed them to uphold the continuum between family and communal bonds. In her study of Mid-Victorian Italian immigrants to Brantford, Ontario, Marguerite Van Die ("Revisiting..."), for instance, emphasizes how church involvement allowed women to place their domestic life within a communal public framework. Similarly, in his investigation on the Italian community in Hamilton, Enrico Cumbo asserts that to a certain extent church associational life «opened up social opportunities unavailable to women» back home by «exposing them to new ways of thinking and new forms of worship and fellowship» and thus favoured their adaptation to the New World without, however, undermining their traditional religious beliefs» ("Salvation...": 215).

tions of female identity. Religious customs imported from the old world have, in fact, fueled the creation and persistence of ethno-cultural stereotypes, as well as biased preconceptions about gender roles within the family. In keeping with the strict moral teachings of Christianity, Italian-Canadian women are, for instance, expected to maintain their virginity until marriage and avoid lascivious sexual behavior. To a much greater extent than their male counterparts, they are expected to lead a pious and chaste life within the sacredness of matrimony and the patriarchal family. The men, instead, have to preserve and guard their women's honour, the loss of which is a source of great humiliation and disgrace for the family image. Not uncommonly, therefore, while Italian men are viewed as both overprotective and sexually macho, Italian women are typically seen by the larger and more secular Canadian society as old-fashioned, devotedly observant and almost sanctimonious creatures who are relegated to the home, lack professional ambitions and submit to traditional gender roles³.

How then do narratives counter the pervasiveness of such deep-rooted, socially-inscribed religious and moral dictates in order to overturn stereotypical representations of Italian-Canadian women? Many writers, who can variously be labelled as feminist, engage in a parodic dialogue with the religious culture of the old country so as to ironically subvert hagiographic representations of women as saints and Madonnas, which entrap them in conventional female roles: the immaculate virgin/chaste wife; the nurturing, selfless and hardworking mother; and the mourning and devout widow. The deconstruction of such conventional patriarchal inscriptions of womanhood upheld by Catholic beliefs is often achieved not through a dismissal *tout court* of Christian values and the religious heritage of the Italian-Canadian community, but rather through an ironic exposure of how certain tenets of the Catholic religion have been used to implement faulty social norms that uphold the patriarchal submission of women within established domestic roles. In particular, these writers address the problematic denial of women's sexual individualism, which is favoured by the contrasting images of the ideal woman as a de-sexed Virgin icon (like Dante's virtuous and heavenly Beatrice) and the anti-woman as a sinning Eve. As we will see in the comparative analysis that follows, strategies of cultural re-appropriation are, thus, employed to debase the saint/devil binary and blur the boundaries between these opposing stigmas of female identity, thereby creating an interstitial space in which a new, empowered image of the Italian-Canadian woman can emerge.

In order to fully grasp the delicate balance between traditionalism and progressivism which is at work in these texts, it is necessary to start our analysis

³ For a discussion of the typical stereotyped views of Italian-Canadian women see Piezzo's study.

with a brief overview of the peculiarities of religious practice in the Italian-Canadian community. Since religion has more to do with social dynamics than with individual spirituality, any attempt to distance oneself from Catholicism may well be perceived as a rejection of the ethnic community. In their narratives Italian-Canadian writers, thus, acknowledge the need to retain some of the traditional religious-cultural values that are part of their distinctive ethnic identity while criticizing others that impede acculturation into the new world society. Moreover, the role of Italian immigrant women as both perpetrators of ancient religious customs and precursors of more female-centered forms of religiousness is to be understood in the context of their allegiance to both Christian and pre-Christian religious beliefs.

Women, Religion and the Italian-Canadian Community

Religion has always played a central role in the lives of Italian-Canadians who, like other immigrants, brought their religious traditions, customs and rituals with them to Canada. Here the Roman Catholic religion⁴ acts both as an identifying marker of Italian-Canadian ethnicity and as a key factor of social interaction and cultural belonging. As a marker of identity it determines not only inclusion within or exclusion from the Italian-Canadian community, but also stigmatizes the community's collective identity vis-à-vis the larger Canadian society. Frances Giampara, for instance, points out that «being Italian-Canadian and Catholic is the norm, regardless of whether one is practicing Catholicism or not. This is a representation held not only within the Italian Canadian community, but also maintained by the Canadian world» (“Politics of Identity...”: 194). As a key social field of ethno-cultural interaction, religion provides persons of Italian descent with a communal gathering space and performs a fundamental cohesive function within the closer and more extended family circle. Today as in the past, the observance of festivities like Christmas, Easter or saints' days, and the celebration of sacraments like baptisms, communions, confirmations, weddings and funerals are important moments of family and social life for Italian-Canadians, who still turn to the Church for their rites of passage⁵. Indeed, as anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain

⁴ Roman Catholicism is the declared faith of 95 percent of the community members (Sturino).

⁵ In *Leaving Christianity* (2017), Clarke and MacDonald note that for many second-generation Italian-Canadian men (generally less churchgoers than the women) the Church represents a gathering space which has more to do with family than with their

writes, these rituals provide «the ceremonial core of the community», which «is not only a network of kinsmen, friends, neighbours and workmates: it is to a very large extent also a religious congregation» (“The Italians...”: 98). In spite of a general North American trend towards a secular and irreligious culture⁶, Italian-Canadians are generally more inclined to be observant of traditional forms of worship, to attend Catholic schools and parish-based recreational and educational activities (like Italian language and heritage classes), and to be influenced by Catholic values in their daily lives. Compared to the overall Canadian average, they, for instance, often provide care to elderly parents within the home and have higher marriage and fertility rates since many are opposed to divorce and abortion.

Alongside conventional Roman Catholic mores, however, the religious creed of many Italian-Canadian immigrants also comprises more unconventional, superstitious beliefs which have survived in the peasant folk cultures of Italy from pre-Christian paganism. Examples of such vernacular forms of cult include the belief in the evil eye, widespread above all in the *mezzogiorno* area of Italy, and the veneration of the Black Madonna. Associated with these beliefs are folk-cultural practices such as keeping protective religious statues, effigies, amulets and medallions against sickness, curses and misfortune; performing quasi-magical rituals to fight off evil and heal from sin; or observing traditional mourning rituals such as wearing black garments for extended periods of time⁷. Overseas these and other rural forms of worship have often clashed with the urban, institutionalized dogmas of the Christian Church, but have, nonetheless, survived (in many cases with greater tenacity than in the homeland) as a complementary and interdependent part of the community’s devotional life. Women, in particular, have bridged the conventional and clerically orthodox practices of the Church with these older popular patterns of spiritual belief. Enrico Cumbo argues, for instance, that in keeping with the Catholic tradition of *pietas*, Italian immigrant women have acted as the familial spiritual proxies by both «attending church services, novenas, rosary recita-

relationship to God and religiousness. It is the place they return to on special occasions to mark family events and to come together as family. The predominantly social dimension of religion can also be seen in the grandeur of Italian-Canadian wedding celebrations which, unlike the more subdued ceremonies of the homeland, gather hundreds of relatives and *paesans*, but also function as an index of the socioeconomic success obtained by the immigrant family.

⁶ On the topic of Canada’s growing secularism see, for instance, Block; and Clarke and MacDonald.

⁷ Claasen links this custom to the Black Madonna and the blackness of the earth (“The Black Madonna...”: 1-4).

tions, and other church-based devotions» and by incorporating «extra-canonical and magical religious practices... for the protection and betterment of their homes and families» (“Salvation...”: 215).

Although often considered «theologically ignorant and superstitious» (205) by the North American Catholic clergy and, more generally, by Canadian society, Italian women have, thus, had a central role in ensuring the community’s religious survival. Through their involvement in parish functions and church associational life (i.e., bazaars, picnics, choirs, immigrant aid sodalities, etc.), they have contributed to establish the Italian ethnic church, which provides «the territorial framework of the Italian community» (Boissevain. “The Italians...”: 98) and favours that extended religious and socio-cultural networking that has enabled the Italian-Canadian community to maintain its distinctive identity. More importantly, they have preserved and administered the traditional home-based spirituality, which is central to Italian peasant-based religiousness. By complying with their old world gender-specific roles as «spiritual labourers» and «burden-bearers» (Cumbo. “Salvation...”: 216)⁸, Italian immigrant women have upheld the largely familial and communal world of Italian popular Catholicism and maintained the centrality of the family as the privileged source of moral authority and spiritual values. Within the private sphere of the home they, in fact, provide religious nurturing and moral surveillance to the other family members, including Italian-Canadian men, who are more disengaged from organized religion and considered «anti-clerical, indifferent, if not entirely irreligious» (Cumbo. “Salvation...”: 205).

As guardians of the family’s morality first-generation immigrant women have also complied with and upheld a legacy of culturally inherited social roles and gendered expectations. Often, therefore, the strict moral codes and antiquated religious practices maintained in the early Italian-Canadian immigrant home were at the basis of the generational clash between parents and children. Daughters, in particular, rebelled against the religious mores that impeded their acculturation into Canadian urban society and contributed to the creation of widespread stereotypes about Italian women as the ‘homey-churchy’ type: a submissive, chaste, plump creature closely guarded by protective fathers, husbands and brothers who was not allowed to socialize outside the family circle and the parish neighbourhood.

⁸ As Cumbo explains, the idea of women as burden-bearers for the faithful is connected to old world female-centric notions of suffering which are in keeping with Catholic orthodox traditions in the mythic prototypes of Eve and Mary (216).

Debasing Religion-based Stereotypes about Women

It comes as no surprise, then, that one of the first stereotypes that writers set out to come to terms with and debunk in their narratives is that of the Italian immigrant mother, an archetypal Madonna-like figure who identifies completely with her traditional nurturing role and thus selflessly provides material and spiritual nourishment to her family. Like the emblematic Assunta Barone, she remains «alienated from North American society» and divides her life between the home, the church and sometimes a working-class job (Pivato. *Echo*: 156). Stubbornly, she preserves old world customs and traditions, which she imposes onto her children as well. Despite her complete self-abnegation when it comes to expressing her own individual identity, within the household she is, thus, often considered a tyrannizing matriarch, who enforces ethnic identity and gender roles. Assunta's daughter Marie, for instance, rejects her mother and the Italianness which she embodies because she feels the weight of her mother's ethno-cultural practices as a burden that suffocates her emancipation. In particular, Marie, like other Italian-Canadian daughters, rejects the Christian ideal of motherhood that Assunta represents and the self-denial it entails. As Gianna Patriarca writes in her poem "Italian Women", like the immaculate and sorrowful Virgin Mary who bears the burden of collective suffering,

these are women
 who were born to give birth
 they breathe only
 leftover air
 and speak only
 when deeper voices
 have fallen asleep [...]

i have seen them wrap their souls
 around their children
 and serve their own hearts
 in a meal they never
 share (9).

The poet's description of these desire-less women who passively submit to the roles of procreators and caring mothers is, no doubt, a compassionate one, yet one which resists victim/victimizer dichotomies as much as Paci's ambivalent portrayal of Assunta does. Various scholars have, indeed, suggested that Paci's heroine embodies both the Catholic Madonna and the pre-Christian Great Mother Goddess. In her analysis of the novel, Schiff-Zamaro, for in-

stance, links Assunta with «the primordial feminine principle» of the Great Goddess myth which is «almost completely effaced» (“Black Madonna...”: 87, 90) in Christian mythology. Tuzi similarly argues that Assunta, as the Black Madonna, is associable with the Virgin Mary who «symbolizes purity, vitality, and motherhood, as well as suffering and mortality»; with «la Madonna» of Italian peasant culture who «speaks of fatalism, spiritual redemption, economic enslavement and moral perseverance»; and with the Great Goddess of ancient pagan beliefs who is connected with the land and has «powers of life and death» (“Provisionality...”: 87). What these and other studies suggest is that such a subversively ambivalent representation revises the mythical weight of virginal Christian motherhood in that the connection with a pre-Christian female deity foregrounds the possibility of a different maternal-feminine prototype—one in which women’s procreative role neither enforces the relinquishing of female sexuality, identity and power, nor forces women into the oxymoronic position of creator/nurturer and destroyer/tyrant.

Mary Di Michele employs a different subversive strategy in her poems “Ave” and “Pietà ’78” from the collection *Bread and Chocolate*. Here too, as the titles suggest, the poet relies on religious imagery to inscribe the mother figure as a Madonna. But, instead of merely connecting her to the Virgin’s «sacrifice and martyrdom», the Madonna imagery is also used, as Lisa Bonato has argued, to foreground female «power and fortitude» (“Voce...”, 23). Rather than resorting to the Great Goddess myth of pagan worship, Di Michele re-appropriates the religious symbolism of the Marian Catholic tradition⁹ in a double intent to oppose traditional stereotypes about the Italian mother and re-inscribe an image of the maternal which exalts female creativity *tout court*. If, on one hand, the mother is portrayed as a woman suffering from the many hardships of life, on the other, she is also a revered feminine model of inspiration for her daughter, who recognizes that her mother’s house

[...] is the only church I frequent,
 the choir of household noises in attendance, the sermons
 on money and weather. It is the only temple I honour
 because there are still some things I hold sacred:
 the warmth of baking, its glow imminent in my mother’s
 brow as the light fans her hot face by the window (*Bread...: 43*).

⁹ See Johnson for a discussion of the Marian tradition as a fruitful source of female imagery of God. Of interest are also feminist works that put forward a rethinking of the centrality of the male God in canonical religious interpretations of the scriptures by re-evaluating God’s feminine qualities (cf. Frances; Daly; Ruether).

The sacredness of simple female gestures like Christmas baking carried out in the warmth of the kitchen provides the daughter with a new female-centric religiousness which eventually allows for independence and intellectual empowerment, as her reading of Simone De Beauvoir's feminist text signals. Counter to the image of the suffering *pietà*, it can thus be argued that Di Michele's inscription of the mother as a Madonna also resurrects an envisioning of the Holy Mary as the New Eve¹⁰, the mother of a new creation, which, in this case, is her intellectual daughter. By virtue of her holiness, she represents the feminine side of God and stands for a symbol of fertility, wisdom, energy and grace. These qualities, which became subordinated to her holy motherhood role in Catholic dogma, can, nonetheless, be retrieved to re-envision the maternal beyond patriarchal expectations of female submissiveness and self-abnegation. Indeed, the daughter's recognition of the divine in her mother releases both women from powerlessness.

Acknowledging the Madonna/Great Goddess connection and Mary as a fertility symbol¹¹ (both emblems that foreground a woman whose life-giving power is not divorced from her sexual agency) provides women with a means of revising hideous constructions about female sexuality as sinful and the concomitant stereotype of the seductive temptress. Opposed to the ideal of the immaculate virgin/virtuous wife/devout widow continuum which is implicit in the woman=Madonna equation, there is, in fact, the despised image of Eve, the original sinner who is seduced by the devil into giving free leash to her desire. As symbols of the emancipated female who defies order and authority, sexually active women like Ricci's Cristina Innocente represent a threat for patriarchal society. They are, thus, scornfully emarginated and stigmatized as licentious whores, transgressive femme fatales, or even evil witches associated with the occult powers of the devil. Yet, as Ricci's narrative suggests through its witty juxtaposition of Christian and pre-Christian symbolism, these women simply prefigure a return to the sexual freedom and individualism enjoyed by the ancient Mother Goddess and women in pre-androgenic societies. As Claasen points out, «the patterns of the good/bad female» are exploded through Cristina's simultaneous association to «the images of the pre-Christian

¹⁰ Although it finds some controversy among theologians, the idea of Mary as a New Eve runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

¹¹ Johnson, for instance, points out that «Marian symbols of earth and water, vines, flowers, eggs, birds and young animals evoke her connection with fertility and the motherhood of the earth. The theme of overturning the ancient sin and beginning again, so connected with her historic pregnancy, finds its parallel in the springtime renewal of the earth... She initiates novelty, instigates change, transforms what is dead into new stretches of life. Fertility is intimately related to Her creative divine power» («Mary...»: 524).

Madonna and the Christian celestial female», which make her an embodiment of both «female sexual freedom and voluntary procreation» and «the other features of female submission and compulsive reproduction imposed by men» (*Black...*: 50-51). The image of Cristina as the evil seductress bearing «some devil» (*Lives...*: 108) inside her is, indeed, shattered by her son's envisioning of her as his black Madonna earth mother and as the Christian martyr, Saint Cristina, both symbols of progressive women who enjoy female autonomy.

The dichotomous representation of women as either saints or devils is also parodically addressed to emphasize the harrowing effects that such inscriptions of identity have on Italian-Canadian women's lives and their relationship with their bodies. To begin with, the inscription of ideal womanhood as immaculately pure and de-sexed occasions a repulsive disconnection with the female body which induces women to feel a sense of apologetic shame toward their menstrual bleeding and birthing waters. In "Italian Women" Patriarca, for instance, ironically comments that women «bleed/in the dark/hiding the stains inside them/like sins/apologizing» (*Italian...*: 9). Equally apologetic is their attitude toward their gender, since being born female is a sin to be forgiven for, a mistake to be blamed for, and a disappointment for the father who, as we read in the poem "My Birth", loses his immortality when his first child is not male. Thus he paradoxically becomes «a great martyr» who «has forgiven me everything/even my female birth» (*Italian Women*: 10). The parodic re-appropriation of religious symbols (the red wine he gets drunk on, the prize in the Easter egg), however, dissipates notions of martyrdom and thereby reverses the image of the female as a bitch implicit in the verses: «January was a bitch of a month/when I raised my head for the/first time/from my mother's stained and/aching womb» (10).

Secondly, inscribing female identity within the saint/devil, virgin/whore binary easily turns women into victims of male violence, a measure which finds some sort of socio-cultural/religious justification in the intent to fight off evil, almost as if it were a way to exorcise the devil. In "Daughters" Patriarca reports how when simply suspected of having transgressed the family's honour, «my father called me whore/[...] his eyes were coral/ as he rammed his fist/ into my mouth» and wondered «how did the Devil/come to live inside our house?» (11). Her mother, instead, helplessly cries, screams, and ultimately prays that she would be more like her «married sister/or the virgin daughters/of the virgin neighbours» (11). As suggested in the poem "Nina, la matta", however, religious practices of a more superstitious kind are also employed by women as measures against male violence, even if such non-conforming socio-religious behaviours favour their prejudicial envisioning as crazy:

they think her screams
are of a woman gone mad
with superstition

she pours bags of salt
on the green grass around her house
to keep away the evil eye
there are crosses and beads
everywhere
knives in plastic bags
buried beneath the veranda (63).

In an ironic reversal of the woman-devil association, the poet thus links the evil eye with violent men who, far from being exorcists against evil, are themselves satanic creatures who inflict pain on women and pass down a spiral of violence and disrespect for the feminine to the following generations:

the neighbours know nothing
of the jagged glass
he tried to shove into her vagina
as their six-year-old son watched
they know nothing of her beaten body
hurled down cellar stairs
like discarded work shoes (63).

Thirdly, the disassociation between women's sexuality and their procreative/nurturing role also requires a self-sacrificial repression of sexual desire, which impedes a full acceptance, understanding and appreciation of the female body. In the poem "Mary", Patriarca tells us how young Italian girls and women are taught to view their bodies as

foreign countries
never to be looked at
never to be touched
never to be understood
preserved in plastic
like Teresa's couch and chair
like her giardiniera
petrified in vinegar
to last forever
for some great, sacred
feast (68).

Interestingly, here, as elsewhere in Italian-Canadian writing, the poet relies on the metaphoric value of food-related imagery to debase women's entrapment in the stifling social and sexual roles imposed by the Virgin Mother Mary archetype and to foreground female emancipation. Indeed, the image of Teresa's petrified *giardiniera* timelessly preserved in vinegar for the sacred feast of matrimony and motherhood is undermined by the image of fruitless breasts: «Mary's breasts drip with/acid milk/she cannot feed her child/it will not nourish/it will not fill» (68). What is suggested is that bottling up female sexuality as if preserved food does not necessarily ensure procreative fruitfulness and nourishment. What it does, instead, is crush women's lives, like the olives that Aunt Flo prepares in Darlene Madott's short story "Making Olives", by swallowing them up into the unconditional obligation to family and devoted wifehood. Conversely, female bonding offers women a new religiousness, which can provide spiritual healing from the effects of patriarchal oppression:

my arms around her like a prayer
 to flush out this devil
 we do not understand
 our hands bonded, like children
 I am here, please heal (*Italian Women*: 69).

In her novel *Tenor of Love*, Di Michele similarly makes extensive use of the metonymic value of food to express sexual desire as a means of female emancipation and to debunk the dichotomous separation between the two opposite ideals of women either as devoted nurturers who suppress their libido or as erotic nourishment for men's carnal appetites¹². The twofold religious symbolism associated with the artichokes that Rina drops when she first meets the young Rico Caruso is, for instance, emblematic of Di Michele's subversive deconstruction of antithetical approaches to sexuality implicit in the saint/sinner, nurturer/nourishment binary, namely «pure love» vs. «lust» (73). On one hand, these «thorny green roses», whose «prickles are on the head, surrounding the heart, and the choke is at the centre» (10) remind the pious Rina of the image of Christ's sacred heart encircled by a thorny crown. They thus metaphorically signal her chaste, ascetic approach to sex. Like Dorothy, Caruso's young American wife in the second part of the novel, Rina embodies, in fact, the nurturing virgin who sacrifices her carnal desires in exchange for the ecstatic rewards offered by the spiritual bond of pure love within marriage. On

¹² For a full discussion of the connection between food-related imagery and sex in the novel see Saidero.

the other hand, for the young would-be tenor Rico, the artichokes are «golden apples» (59)¹³ which allow him to furtively catch a glimpse of Rina's bloomers. As emblems of lust, they stand for his carnal desire, which is shared by the other couplet of female characters – the sexually mature and adulterous opera diva Ada and the Neapolitan cook Bibi – whose sexual appetites make them voluptuous and devouring femme fatales. Because they are desirous to express their eroticism and artistic aspirations in spite of the devastating social and emotional consequences that this can have, they are transgressing Eves who, like Cristina Innocente, however prefigure an emancipated woman who defies patriarchy to assert her right to both sexual pleasure and artistic creativity.

In Di Michele's narrative, however, the antithetical polarization between the angelic nurturer and the desiring temptress is never clear-cut, but always skilfully blurred to re-instate the legitimacy of multiple identities within the binary. Rina, in particular, is ambivalently portrayed as a self-sacrificing Christ-like martyr and a fallen angel. She is, indeed, a desiring young woman, eager to explore sex with Rico, an aspiring artist, and «a Carmen, a gypsy harlot» (132) repudiated by her family and Caruso for having lost her virginity. But she is also the virginal surrogate mother who nurtures Ada's child, the immaculate unmarried spinster, and the spiritual guide who, like Dante's Beatrice, aspires to elevate Caruso to eternal bliss and salvation. The religious symbolism that connects her to Christ both prefigures her resurrection as a new woman and poses her as a new female deity. Her re-appropriation of female sexual desire, symbolically foregrounded in the mock communion she shares with Rico when they first kiss, is, thus, presented as a quasi-mystical journey which, in a parodic reversal of Dante's sublime quest for spiritual salvation, marks the beginning of her *vita nova*¹⁴. Indeed, her symbolic death as the angelic nurturer allows her to embrace a new kind of spirituality, which does not hinge on the division between body and soul, and thereby frees her from the angel/demon paradigm. As she admits, although «I was a fallen woman, at least that made me a free one» (132).

¹³ The apple imagery is reminiscent of the forbidden biblical apple and establishes a connection with the original sin.

¹⁴ In the novel Di Michele engages in an extensive parodic intertextual play with Dante's *Vita Nuova*, the work in which the Italian bard celebrates his love for Beatrice in the idealized tradition of the *dolce stilnovo*. Di Michele parodies in particular the platonic vision of love which perpetuates the division between body and soul, between libido and spirituality, since by considering the loved one a sort of nourishment for the soul, it allows the lover to be elevated to eternal bliss and salvation.

Conclusion

In the poem “The Other Woman”, Patriarca writes:

when the Virgin Mary
is the other woman [...]

you are no competition

you are just a woman
with a mountain of faults (*Ciao Baby*: 54).

Competing with the holiest of Catholic female symbols is certainly a challenging task for Italian-Canadian women, whether they comply with or defy the ideals of womanhood she embodies. However, as our analysis has shown, the subversive cultural re-appropriation of religious archetypes of femininity which have shaped women’s lives within patriarchy posits the emergence of a new female archetype: that of an empowered New Woman who is released from the faulty constraints of binary identities that repress individuality, sexual freedom and creativity and who can thus appreciate and love the Goddess within herself. The women we encounter in many narratives are indeed New Marys or New Eves: women who reclaim the feminine dimension of the divine and joyfully accept their nurturing, procreating and care-giving qualities in symbiosis with – and not disassociated from – their libido, freedom and creative mastery. These are women who take pride in both their intellectual and maternal achievements, who cherish a connection with the Mother Earth, and who are not afraid, nor ashamed to express their desire and enjoy bodily pleasure, because, as we read in “Loreta, la calda”, it makes them «so beautiful» (*Daughters...:74*). As a composite figure who encompasses the Virgin Mother, the Biblical Eve, and the Great Mother Goddess of pagan tradition, this New Mary ultimately emerges as a powerful symbol for a new female-centric religiousness which releases Italian-Canadian women from a legacy of engendered roles, social expectations and stereotyped ethnic identities.

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