

**Research project: Reading the women's history through the novel. The adolescence in the Italian female writers of the Twenty-first Century**

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**Introduction**

The project examines the representation of teenage girls in the Twenty-first Century's novel written by Italian female writers. The research's purpose is to investigate how the protagonists of the novels analysed "live the corps, the spaces, the writing"<sup>1</sup>, whether they have a fixed or evolving identity. It will also look at their family and education, as well as their connections with their parents and peers, and their emotional and sexual relationships.

Furthermore, the research aims to examine significant aspects of Italian history, culture and society at the turn of the two centuries by comparing the novels of the last twenty years to those published in the Twentieth Century. It will assess whether female contemporary authors propose new identification models, and if their way of writing reflects today's complexity and the fights for gender equality. Additionally, it will consider in how far their representation is related to the past and to the present.

Scholars believe that writing always expresses a specific point of view on reality, but that of women have not yet received an appropriate space. The study intends investigating the multifaceted views of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Century female writers on girlhood represented in their novels.

The project will therefore identify a text corpus of the Twenty-first Century, to be thematically analysed. Within this text corpus, the works of female writers born between the forties and the eighties of the Twentieth Century stand out, i.e. the novels of Ardone, Avallone, Caminito, Ciabatti, Di Pietrantonio, Ferrante, Mazzucco, Murgia, Pariani, Parrella, Postorino, Scego, Valerio. Additional authors will be identified following a selective census.

For the comparison with the Twentieth Century's novels, the research will focus on a more restricted text corpus on adolescence topics.

Finally, the project will extend its analysis to the comparison with French novels of the last two decades. The cross-study on these two realities aims to find out which female writers best reflect the "social imaginary and literary imaginary" (Turnaturi: 2003) and shed light on processes that go beyond the individual country.

**The state of the art**

The act of writing is always linked to attitudes, peculiar ways of relating imaginary and reality, representation methods and systems of meaning. However, female subjectivity has not yet fully entered "history and culture, modifying their own diversity of experience and their world's vision, as well as recovering from the violent century-long exclusion" (Sapegno: 2017, p. 18).

The analysis of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century's writers offers relevant insights on female characters, as proven by three essays which highlight the research topic from diverse and complementary perspectives (Nozzoli: 1978; Zancan: 1998; Palumbo: 2020). They all stress the strong relationship between literature and the patriarchal culture, and their influence on the literary canon. Forms of representation, themes, stylistic structures, discursive and expressive styles have all always been conditioned by the male thought, with

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<sup>1</sup> *Leggendaria*, n. 126, November 2017, <https://leggendaria.it/prodotto/leggendaria-126/>.

repercussions on female representation (Zancan: 1998).

Today, Italian female writers are the protagonists of innovations on a dual level, both of a form and content nature, and demonstrate new points of view, creating female characters no longer polarized between the angelic woman and the prostitute (Bazzoni: 2017, 4/4). Nonetheless, the minority role of the female production is confirmed by the programs for the Miur<sup>2</sup>'s competitions, still limited to the works of Deledda, Ginzburg and Morante. Similarly, high school literature textbooks still struggle to "balance" the occurrence of Italian female writers or relegate them to separate volumes, as a sort of "appendix" of the most famous male literature.

For this reason, Brogi expressively stigmatizes "the sexist misunderstanding of the separate fence" and condemns the addition of names, chapters, appendices, as well as female "labels" if they do not correspond to an actual revision of the past. Brogi believes that it is necessary to transform the "offscreen", namely what has not found historical representation, in "active offscreen", such as presence and awareness of what has been set aside (Brogi: 2022, pp. 22-23, 89, 34).

For the purpose of this research, it is hence not considered appropriate to "confine" the chosen novels to the reductive definition of «female writing» or «pink literature», which always relates to "intimate", private, sentimental matters, not reflecting the totality of interests and narrative possibilities (Bazzoni: 2017, 3/4).

## Objectives

The overall objective of the project is to analyse how female adolescence is represented in the novels of Italian female writers of the last two decades, in relation to the most significant aspects of Italian history and society. More specific research questions are:

- the identification of models and typical adolescence representations in the contemporary Italian novel, by authors born in the '40s-'80s of the Twentieth Century;
- the comparison between these representations of female adolescence and those proposed by the "pioneers" born in the late Nineteenth Century (i.e. Deledda, Aleramo, Banti) and the following years, the '10s and '30s, (i.e. De Cespedes, Ortese, Ginzburg, Morante, Sapienza, Gianini Belotti, Maraini);
- the verification of reality and verisimilitude's extent in the representation models proposed by the novels, by comparing these with the materials of the National Diary Archive, in Pieve Santo Stefano<sup>3</sup>;
- the identification of difference between the depiction of Italian and French girlhood in contemporary female authors. Italian and French cultural contexts, which are close to each other in many respects, can broaden the perspective on the role of women in the yesterday's society and today's society, thanks to literature's ability to portray the existing by bringing out the deepest social dynamics;
- the dialogue between the adolescent representations of the novels examined, as well as the perception and the reception of these models by today's girls.

## Methodology

The research is based on different methodological approaches, alternating thematic analysis, archival research and sociological investigation in the field.

Textual and extra-textual elements will be connected through the thematic analysis, allowing for the contribution of other disciplines, such as "the linguistics, the semiotics, the sociology of literature, which have built, together with the theme, the most complete and complex hermeneutic network imaginable" (Puglisi: 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> Education, University and Research Ministry.

<sup>3</sup> <http://archiviodiari.org/index.php/consultare-larchivio.html>

First of all, the text corpus will be subject to a qualitative and quantitative thematic analysis aimed at identifying recurring threads and innovations in the representation of female adolescence. The main theme will be broken down into sub-themes or motives to grasp the similarities with the previous literature and the peculiarities of the third millennium. More specifically, the research will be divided as follows:

- First year: extensive reading of novels (Italian female writers, Twenty-first Century), definition of the text corpus. Portrait of the protagonists, based on age, family, social context, spatial and temporal links. Census of "basic semantic units". Identification of a reduced corpus of contemporary French novels starring teenage girls. Drafting of analytical tables.
- Second year: the representation of female adolescence in the great Italian writers of the Twentieth century (born from the late Ninetieth century till the '30s of the Twentieth Century). Survey on the life of Italian teenagers in the Twentieth century from archival research.
- Third year: comparison between the novels of the Twenty-first Century (authors born between the 40s and the 80s of the Twenty Century) and those of previous periods. Mechanisms of "revival or variation" (Bertoni: 2018). Identification of constants, differences, original aspects regarding some sub-themes or motives, such as the relationship of the protagonists with the origins, the family, the place of birth. Overall interpretation of the novels, considered also in their formal, stylistic and expressive aspects.

Comparison between Italian and French novels. Writing critical synthesis on the subject under study.

Sociological survey on contemporary adolescents and the Italian novel: the aim of this phase is to work, in collaboration with various high schools and within third mission projects, on the identification processes, appropriation or negotiation of the representations proposed by the books. The final result of the research will allow to establish reading tracks for schools and the creation of a textbook including both the contribution of male and female students (through feedback on novels read and personal reading orientations).

### **Relevance of the project with the educational objectives of the doctorate**

"The stories narrated in the literature make visible what was not visible before, they change the gaze of the reader and the researcher, and turn the spotlight on the world [...]; since it plays this role of illumination, of magnifying glass, literature make us not only able to see what we have not seen, but also to look, from that moment on, through what has been highlighted and pointed out" (Turnaturi: 2003, p. 39).

With these words Turnaturi clarifies the importance of considering the novel from a sociological and culturological perspective, integrating analysis and literary criticism. The objective of the project is to interpret the representation of female adolescence in the novel as vivid documentation of the continuous cultural negotiation that Italian society operates and has operated over a century with regard to gender issues.

From this point of view, the political and cultural value of novels is clear, as well as the placement of this study within a PhD that deals with the analysis of European history and culture, of which Italian literature is an integral and significant part.

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