

## Migrant women. Voices and looks

### *Donne immigrate. Voci e sguardi*

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abstract

Based on 'conversational' interviews, this paper reflects on the experiences and hopes of migrant women: North African and Eastern European. The interviews describe their feelings of loneliness when they first arrive, their diffidence towards Italian women, the opportunities for contact offered by factory work, their nostalgia for their country of origin and, in the case of women from Eastern Europe, for the children they have left at home. The intention to remain in their new homeland differs the first group from the second who prefer the prospect of return.

**Keywords:** migrant women, migration, storytelling

*A seguito di interviste 'conversazionali' si propongono riflessioni sui vissuti e sulle speranze delle donne immigrate del Nord Africa e dell'Est Europeo. Da queste emergono il senso di solitudine, la diffidenza verso le donne italiane, l'occasione di contatti offerta dal lavoro in fabbrica, la nostalgia per il paese d'origine e da parte delle donne dell'Europa orientale, per i figli rimasti in patria. L'intento di rimanere nella nuova terra distingue il primo gruppo dal secondo che preferisce la prospettiva del ritorno.*

**Parole chiave:** *donne migranti, migrazione, narrazione*

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## 1. Women and traumatic journey

In approaching this subject that has already be tackled by others, though with different purposes and from different perspectives, I feel the need to point out some aspects that will be explored later in the course of this work (D'Iganzi, Persi, 2004; Persi, 2012, 2013, 2016). And my intention in doing so is to avoid leaving any areas of ambiguity, while instead clarifying some difficult concepts and problem areas, so as to avoid grey zones and exclude ambiguity. Moreover, the subject matter cannot leave either the author or the readers exempt from an emotional involvement, thus making room for interpretations that are not always objective and value judgments that are not always impartial.

Women are the subject matter of this paper, women with their knowledge, experiences and their gender. Women are now facing the tragedies of migration along danger-ridden tortuous routes, from which they emerge profoundly changed, women who are no longer who they used to be, because they find themselves in new environments having faced personal suffering and often been through painful trials (Cambi, Campani, Ulivieri, 2003; Ulivieri, Biemmi, 2011). But they are not defeated, not willing to abandon the dreams and hopes they had conceived and cherished at the beginning of their frequently traumatic journey. The experiences they have lived through may be grasped and measured through their words and looks, but we need to disengage and consider them from a little distance to avoid the risk of trivializing and/or losing their deeper meaning. Thus words and looks are the means by which we can draw closer to their experiences observing them, as if it were the first time, with all the curiosity and wonder of someone who has discovered a whole composite world steeped in affection but accompanied by repeated disappointments and changes of direction.

Words imply judgment and express the emotional state of the moment. And more, because they are often repeated, with some occurring more frequently than others, the interlocutor, after the initial interactions, may

experience a sort of “already heard this” feeling, *a déjà vu* which is always a *déjà vécu*. On the other hand, the limits of any narrative are associated with the difficulty of differentiating between perception and reality, dread and experience. And all this without considering the cases of indirect trauma, where identifying the magnitude of the problem and defining solutions and types of action can be particularly difficult. Looks are something very different and perhaps more difficult to decipher, though far less deceptive. It is difficult because it requires one to understand things that are left unsaid, to recognize hidden feelings and emotions, i.e. all that is less obvious and rational. It involves the use of instruments other than verbal communication, but looks are more immediate and often more truthful. Looks provide a communication that is often elusive, but has great participatory value and can create open bridges without words that at times can be deceitful. But looks have even more complex and wider meanings because they express the way new situations are faced. They express a view of the world as well as hopes and frustrations. They are our way of looking at life and human relations. Looks express the values enclosed in a person’s own culture and experience. Looks are not just for watching and interacting with an accidental interlocutor – a contact that should not be underestimated in terms of communication and dialogue – they are inner attitudes that result in possible and potential behaviour. From this perspective, migrant women are often revelations, which should be approached with great humility and professionalism and an equally great desire to understand and support. Words and looks are inseparable moments of knowledge, dialogue and contamination, they represent two progressive sequential stages. They enrich one another, with the former illustrating experiences and the latter the view of the world and long-cherished life projects now nearing fulfilment.

Therefore, the best way of starting a process of mutual understanding that also requires mutual trust and friendliness is to tell one’s own story. Narrative is a primary form of human communication, it can perform an essential function in our lives. We often think in narrative forms, we speak in narrative forms and try to give meaning to our lives through storytelling. Narrative, in its common everyday form, consists in telling – in a structured form events – experiences or some other facts in our lives (Atkinson, 2002, p. 3).

Narration makes it possible to assign meanings and connections to a series of events that would otherwise be disconnected and inconsistent. In fact, when we tell our life story, we are conveying “the meaning” that we attribute to it, a meaning that is reprocessed over time, on the basis of subsequent experiences. However, it is important to realize that when we try

to piece things together and narrate ourselves, we select and highlight the aspects that, in the context of our existence, we consider fundamental and important, so that the individual events become part of a single organic and significant plot.

And further, in autobiographical narrative and storytelling generally, the segmentation of time is not always chronological, but rather closely related to the unfolding of crucial events. It is a time that “is humanly relevant [...] the relevance of which is given by the meanings assigned by the protagonist of the story, by the narrator, or both” (Bruner, 1997, p. 149). On the other hand, through autobiographical narrative, events may be revised and processed, in particular the more dramatic and shocking ones.

Storytelling is present from early childhood and is the structure that organizes experiences and knowledge with reference to the sequence of events that are related in a cause/effect relationship and expresses a judgement of narrated events (Bruner, 1999).

Autobiographical narrative is clearly not to be understood as an objective transmission of events and contents, but rather as an interpretation of whatever the subject believes has taken place (Cambi, 2002; Pulvirenti, 2003). And this is especially true in cases of war, violence and genocides (Trevisani, 2004; Mukagasana, Kazinierakis, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to identify some common denominators, or at least some general guidelines to help migrant women tell their stories. When they talk about themselves they give visibility to their experiences, ranging from the most recent to the more distant, from the most pleasing to the most tragic, from everyday life memories, to projects, dreams and hopes.

Since it is impossible to explain the whole and the various nuances that distinguish every woman from all others – they come from different cultural contexts and very diverse geographical areas – an effort will be made here to give priority to the more frequent or significant elements which can provide an opportunity for reflection and discussion. Interviewed women live in the Pesaro-Urbino area.

## **2. Words and looks**

Most interviews start from their journey and the experiences that preceded them. Their journey, in particular, can be compared to a sort of a Way of the Cross, a struggle that is already implicit in the etymology of the word “travel” – “travail” and continues with all the difficulties of adjusting to new territorial, cultural and productive contexts (Ulivieri, Pace, 2012).

Fatima is a 35-year-old Moroccan woman, she recalls that she left her country about fifteen years ago and, describing her effort to find a job, she says: "It was not easy. After about a year I found a job in a factory that made pots and pans, and I'm still working there. At first I suffered because no one spoke to me, it seemed like I did not exist". This first statement clearly illustrates the first major difficulty often encountered by these women: the initial exclusion of migrant women struggling to overcome barriers in human relations. Fortunately gender solidarity prevails. "The only woman who spoke to me was Emma who worked next to me. Emma was my first Italian friend, now my best friend". So the person who was working side by side with her, and with whom she had to talk for work reasons, became a bridge into Italian society and a precious stepping stone allowing her to expand her relationships and soon find a boyfriend, who also worked in the factory. So she concludes by saying: "I quite like living in Italy, I would not go back to my country. Of course here I am not rich, but there is too much poverty in Morocco". And then she jokes about something that might sound banal but is not as trivial as it might at first seem. On the contrary, it reveals a refusal, an aversion to the burden of the tradition that she has now left behind "And there I would not be allowed to wear trousers" (Fatima, age 35, Morocco).

Nadia, a 42-year-old Tunisian woman who, in Italy, met a fellow countryman, married him and now has two daughters, tells a different story. She describes her longing for what she has left behind and is constantly asking her husband to take her home for the holidays: "It's already been nine years since I left. Sometimes it feels like a long time, sometimes just a few months. It depends on my mood. I was full of dreams when I left, I wanted to earn good money and help my family ... I am always so homesick, I would like go back and live in my country, but I do not think I'll manage to. Meanwhile my husband has promised me that next summer we are going to show our daughters our country: I can't wait". She feels a longing for her homeland and her life is marked by memories and nostalgia, and sometimes regrets, that hinder her efforts to undertake a process of integration and establish new relationships within the context she is living in. "I now have a beautiful and spacious home, I have several friends who come from Morocco and Tunisia, we can speak our language together, which gives me much pleasure. Unless necessary, I do not mix with Italians. I feel uncomfortable with them".

The birth of the two babies within a few years has led her to retreat into the family and not look for a job, which would inevitably have forced her to interact with the outside world. Her family's comfortable financial condition somehow encourages this seclusion: "My husband is a factory

worker, but he earns good money, we manage on only one salary” (Nadia, age 42, Tunisia).

We find the same state of mind and loneliness in another Tunisian woman, the same age as the previous one, who arrived in Italy eight years ago. She left Tunisia with her husband and says she “never managed to find a decent job which is why she moved to a different town three times, choosing gradually smaller towns. Especially in larger cities “neighbours never spoke to me and I felt very lonely”. But even in small towns, things are no different: “I really miss my friends. I feel lonely here because my husband is out all day and I have no children. I feel like people stare at me... my husband tells me I shouldn’t talk to you Italians, but I’m happy to tell my story, and anyway you’re a woman and I don’t feel embarrassed with you” (Habiba, age 42, Tunisia).

Habiba’s words are echoed by Sarah, a 32-year-old Moroccan woman, She arrived in Italy ten years ago and speaking of herself and her husband she says: “We are quite happy, but I do miss my country and I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to go back there. Maybe we have to wait and save a bit more money... My husband and I left with so many dreams and wanted to find good jobs and have a nice house and even send some money to our family ... We have some Moroccan friends here, but we do not have much contact with the locals. I wear the veil and see that sometimes people frown at me. I’m a Muslim and wearing the veil seems right to me. So I’ve decided not to mix with the Italians unless I have to” (Sara, age 32, Morocco).

Although each experience is different, these four interviews suggest an initial reflection on the valuable role a job can play as an opportunity to meet people and socialize and also as a first chance to share values; while lack of a job, added on to strong traditions, lead to isolation for migrant women who retreat into their own identity, avoid questioning it and comparing it with other values that are not necessarily worse.

If the focus shifts to women from other cultural spheres, we encounter different types of behaviour and, possibly, a better integration in the new context of migration. Elona, a 34- year-old unmarried Albanian, seems to be well integrated, to the point that she might be willing to abandon her roots and embrace Italian customs and traditions. “I have succeeded in obtaining a residence permit and am very happy, before I used to be afraid anytime I met a policeman. There are other Albanian workers at the factory and we have become friends. I also have some Italian friends”. Unhappiness and non-integration are not caused only by the difficulties encountered in mutual understanding, but are often fuelled by fear of being at fault because one’s does not have the required documents. On the other

hand, for anyone who embarks on this journey out of choice, there is no other option than to enter the country as a illegal migrant and remain here without a permit, living day after day as an illegal migrant, coping with fear with determination.

This is a word that is often used in the interviews. Fear. At times it is openly stated, at others it can be inferred from the women's words, implicitly linked to their concern that they will not be accepted, to their interpretation of the looks they receive from other people that, according to the interviewees, most of the time express a negative opinion of them. This fear emerges when they speak of their migratory journey, even if it had been wanted, faced with enthusiasm and dreams of a new and, possibly, a better life. Fear of the unknown, of all that is unfamiliar and often translates into loneliness or isolation. A side effect that can affect people in different ways: in the first case, we call it loneliness because these women are and feel lonely and suffer because of this. In the second case, it is a choice forced upon them because they do not have people around or do not mix with them and thus they isolate themselves.

Their memories of their country of origin, always nostalgic, are often associated with the suffering and hardships they experienced there: "I left my country because we were really poor. Now, at last, I can buy the clothes I like and even eat pizza, which I like a lot", and she is not afraid to confess: "I even feel a bit Italian now, though I don't mix with locals very much. I have a dream: I want to buy myself a house. I don't want to go back to my country. I live here now. I love watching television and I'm always trying to learn some new sentence so that I won't feel ashamed when I speak to Italians" (Elona, age 35, Albania). So there is a desire not to go back home, to establish relationships with Italians, a leap forward in terms of perspectives and also a lesser degree of suspicion. These are very important aspects to build relationships on and start a process of integration that does not come from the outside, but is born of personal reasons. Not all Albanians, however, have this propensity and open mind, and not always working in a factory with other people results in closer relations. In fact, "I came to Italy six years ago, I'm doing ok, my husband has lived here longer than me. When I arrived, he had a lot of friends, Albanians and Italians ... I work in a factory ... my job isn't very good, I rarely speak to fellow workers, sometimes they mistreat me, are rude to and they make comments in dialect so that I cannot understand". This makes her conclude "Sometimes I think I should go back to Albania, but then I think there it would be even worse because there is so much poverty there. So I take courage and grit my teeth" (Lirje, age 37, Albania).

Irina, 35 years old, Ukrainian. She arrived in Italy on a tourist visa re-

lying on the help of fellow countrywomen who had secured her a job as a caregiver, but she soon discovered that the promised solidarity could not be taken for granted. “When I arrived I was very scared. Those women had promised me help but in fact they wanted money from me so I had to pay to get a job”. Language was also a problem, she taught herself, but it did not help her integrate quickly, nor did her job. “I taught myself Italian, I bought a small dictionary and every evening I learned a few words by heart. The life of the caregiver is not easy because often the person you are looking after is in very poor shape and family members – especially the men – try to take advantage of you. Once, the son tried to cheat and not pay me and another time he even tried to molest me”. She knows she cannot aspire to a different job although she would love “to go to the movies, maybe see films shot in my own country, but how can I? Because of my job I can’t go out in the evening ... and anyway this is basically the only kind of work I can do” (Irina, age 35, Ukraine).

For Eastern European women, memories of the family they have left behind and nostalgia for their own country are alleviated by religious practice: “Every evening I used to go to church to pray. I prayed for myself and for my two children left in my parents’ care. I call them every day, sometimes they send me pictures and I always get emotional when I see how fast they are growing”. These words clearly show that for foreign women, who have come to Italy without their family, time always drags by and this is why they are surprised to see how their children are growing up. This point leads to considerations on migratory patterns that are different from those of women who come to Italy from Northern African countries, usually with their children long after their husband. Women from Eastern Europe, instead, as we can infer from many interviews, move here in order to provide an income for their families, but they arrive on their own, leaving their husbands and children at home or, in the case of widowed or separated women, leaving their children with their parents. In the country they now live in and work, one might expect solidarity amongst migrant women, in particular those of the same nationality, but this is not always the case. And she says “I don’t go out very much and prefer not mix with people from my country. I only have a couple of trusted friends, the others I just greet when I meet them by chance.” Her main concern is to send money home and she hopes that, as soon as the economic problems at home have been solved, she’ll be able to go back. “Every month I send a lot of money to my parents and I hope to go back to my country soon ... I don’t have a residence permit and I’m waiting for new law that will allow me to become a legal migrant”. “In the meantime – she adds – I’m still an illegal migrant and it frightens me”.



Luba, Ukrainian, 37 years old. She works in a factory and feels a deep nostalgia for her country, accentuated by a kind of isolation from fellow Ukrainian migrant women. She came to Italy six years ago, leaving her husband and children at home. During her stay in Italy she has learned the language very well so that she would be able to easily meet and mix with Italians, but she does not even try, limiting her contacts with local people to work related interactions.

Although most of the women from Eastern Europe move to Italy on their own, there are, less frequently, cases of women who have joined their husbands with their children. This happens mostly with younger women who, although they feel far from their country and are homesick, integrate more easily and think they will live in Italy until they grow old: “I don’t think we will return to Ukraine. My son was born here and I would not want him to move away. Perhaps my husband and I will go back home when we are old” (Linda, aged 28, Ukraine). These words suggest that Linda thinks, or perhaps hopes, that her son can establish himself in Italy without losing his identity and cultural heritage and gives a chance to the possibility of bringing together the two diversities. “I want my son not to forget his origins and so I speak to him in Russian. Once he is an adult, I want him to be proud of himself and his origins”.

## Conclusions

At a theoretical level, voices and looks may appear as separate, but they are in fact inseparable elements that interpenetrate and enrich each other. The theme that emerges from the interviews sheds a light on the narrated past and on a future made of aspirations and hopes. Looks add to the words. If we really want to make a distinction, we can say that looks physically reveal feelings and unspoken thoughts, and one can read in them the projections and illusions underlying the difficult choice that migrants make and pursue, at times at the cost of unspeakable personal sacrifices. This certainly applies to the geographically and culturally more distant populations; they have crossed deserts and seas in order to reach the “promised land”, where they alternatively encounter hospitality and rejection.

The voices and looks of women from very different worlds and situations. Women are always protagonists, even when they are seemingly defeated and have experienced and suffered along the many pathways they have trodden. All these migrant women share the need for economic redemption, the will to be free from personal and family needs, the determination and fortitude and, sometimes, an implicit denunciation of inequal-

ities and social injustice. This is what we can see in their eyes during the interviews, beyond the many words that are spoken. Their enthusiasm and their hopes for the future are true bridges between their homeland and the land where they now live. It would be simplistic to think that all this only refers to transferring their earnings from rich countries, with a poor welfare system, to underdeveloped countries with poor geo-political conditions, even though financial considerations are undoubtedly one of the main reasons for migrating. There are, however, women who decide to uproot their lives in order to realize their dreams of becoming emancipated, self-fulfilled and developing their own personal resources: "First I want to have my own life. I want to live alone, without my parents having to work for me. I'm smart. I do not want to be a burden; I will do whatever I have to on my own" (Fatima, age 27, Morocco).

Whatever the reason why people migrate, once they reach their destination they must face a new reality, and irrespective of their individual will, each and everyone of them is – positively or negatively – influenced, contaminated. Every experience leaves its mark. New knowledge leads to change. Every meeting has an emotional impact that marks a person's future path. In time this produces changes. Sometimes nostalgia and a desire to return home prevail, in other case people think fondly of the home they have left behind, but feel no regrets. In fact, women who migrate find themselves experiencing the ambiguity of a dual and often conflicting feeling of belonging. Some are aware of this, others are not and when they go back home for short stays they are surprised that they are no longer considered to be locals.

Many women feel they are foreigners in Italy, even if they have been living in the country for many years and, at the same time, they no longer feel they belong in their country of origin, which seems backward compared to Italy and, in any case, will inevitably have changed from the country they had left, a country that is no longer familiar. In fact, often, we hold fast to the memory of what we left behind, but the time of memory is not the same as that of a changing society and so, when one goes back, one does no longer recognise the places that for years have been kept in mind as static and identical images seen at the time of departure. Often these women feel lost, hence a new sense of alienation and disorientation. They feel foreign at home. This applies more to those who have spent many years in Italy and are surprised to read in the eyes of their countrymen that they are no longer considered locals. It is very clear that contamination makes them foreign everywhere.

A further thought, that is nothing new, is that integration is a slow process, takes a long time. But, unlike what happened in the past, there is

now a general understanding that being able to see diversity does not entail adopting it: to see, to know, to experience and process are the steps that are needed in order to become an agent of change and, consequently, a protagonist in the process of integration.

Many Muslim women who wear the veil know that this is an element of discrimination, but their tradition is strong and their desire to feel that they belong leads them to wear it, even when they did not in their previous life in Morocco. On the other hand, as many migrant women have said, at home they did not need to show to which group they belonged, while in Italy sometimes “we are excluded by Italian women as well as men, and so you might as well wear it, at least we are united among ourselves. Even though I have been living in Italy for many years now, I could never find a job, not even in the kitchen as a dish-washer. Nobody would hire me. And all because of this” (she says pointing to her veil). And consider that in all your hotels, for example, everyone has to wear a cap to keep their hair from showing (falling) in the kitchen or on the dishes” (Rashida, age 32, Morocco).

For the women I have interviewed, lack of recognition from their own gender group is what hurts the most. Prejudice and stereotypes linger in the conversations that took place during these “conversational” interviews. Many, in fact almost all of the women who were interviewed, regardless of their ethnicity, said that they perceive a lack of acceptance on the part of Italian women. “They become your friends if you do everything they want. Initially they do not trust you. They keep an eye on you and only after a long time, after testing you – by leaving 1 Euro under the bed for example – will they trust you. But you never know if you can trust them. Italian women no longer want to cook, wash and iron, they don’t even look after the elderly. There are good ones, but they are very few” (Dana, age 64, Moldova).

This lack of mutual trust is almost funny and suggests that we are more alike than different. It almost sounds ‘strange’, based on a false common sense that tells us to be especially nice to people who come from other countries, to find out that it is precisely foreign women who are in Italy to look for a job who are suspicious of Italian women.

Of course there are also other experiences that highlight the positive aspects of aggregation, where Italian and foreign women, in different areas and through different activities, promote of gender solidarity and try to make the integration process easier and more natural. These are the women who invest in networks of relationships so as to break down the barriers that slow down relational and educational processes, for the purpose of building a more participatory society.

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