

Migrant girls between reality and literature within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

Bambine migranti tra realtà e letteratura tra Otto e Novecento

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ABSTRACT

The numerical smallness of the female migratory flow compared to the male migratory flow has long been considered the reason for the scant coverage of this event, estimated to be about 20 per cent of the total departures between 1876 and 1914. However, this figure only considers the “official” expatriations of which one can easily get a record thanks to passport records. However, a large part of the migration remained hidden due to its clandestine nature, not to mention that, often, surveys tended to divide migrants between men, women and, in the best of cases, minors, children whose sex was often not even specified. The phenomenon of migration thus deserves a focus through a gendered lens that can bring to light those paths of girls that constitute a significant part of our country’s migration. To provide a rough idea of the elements that contributed to the formation in the collective imagination of the figure of the migrant girl child, we propose a parallelism between the image provided by the narrative for childhood and the portrait that emerges from the testimonies of lived life.

KEYWORDS

Female migration, girls, narrative, inquiries, nineteenth century.
Migrazione femminile, bambine, narrativa, inchieste, XIX secolo.

L’esiguità numerica del flusso migratorio femminile rispetto a quello maschile è stata a lungo considerata la ragione della scarsa copertura di questo evento, stimato in circa il 20% delle partenze totali tra il 1876 e il 1914. Tuttavia, questa cifra considera solo gli espatri “ufficiali” di cui si può facilmente avere traccia grazie ai registri dei passaporti. Una gran parte della migrazione, tuttavia, è rimasta nascosta a causa della sua clandestinità, senza contare che, spesso, le indagini tendevano a dividere i migranti tra uomini, donne e, nel migliore dei casi, minori, bambini il cui sesso spesso non era nemmeno specificato. Il fenomeno migratorio merita quindi un focus attraverso una lente di genere che possa portare alla luce quei percorsi di ragazze che costituiscono una parte significativa della migrazione del nostro Paese. Per dare un’idea degli elementi che hanno contribuito alla formazione nell’immaginario collettivo della figura della bambina migrante, proponiamo un parallelismo tra l’immagine fornita dalla narrativa per l’infanzia e il ritratto che emerge dalle testimonianze di vita vissuta.

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1. “*A quattro, cinque anni si cominciava a lavorare*”¹: from labour in the fields to domestic work

The strengthening and improvement of transport – combined with the changed social, economic and political conditions in the 19th century – led to an increase in the phenomenon of emigration not only of men and boys but also of women and girls who left their homes in search of better fortune (Bianchi, 2001, p. 260). These female travellers’ stories, diaries and epistolary accounts allow us to reconstruct their experiences and how the confrontation with other societies changed their social and individual identities. The girls who left their country, often as soon as they were teenagers, found themselves working in various jobs: from itinerant trades to herding livestock, to employment in the fields, in textile factories or in domestic service. Many of these girls were often driven by the desire to be able to earn some savings that they could accumulate and add to a possible dowry; fleeing to the city, moreover, represented an attraction and a sort of act of rebellion against the gruelling work the girls were often subjected to in the family, especially on farms and in agriculture. In this regard, Cristina Robaldo testifies how: “*A quattro, cinque anni si cominciava a lavorare. Se non ci mandavano al pascolo [...], ci mandavano a cogliere le pietre nei campi. [...] Quando eravamo un po’ più grandinot mio padre andava dal martinet (fabbro) e si faceva fare – vero dio eh – delle zappe che fossero state un po’ sottili, adatte a noi*” (Revelli, 2018, p. 351).

Domestic work, however, did not always correspond to the expectations of emancipation and independence to which young girls aspired but often proved to be a source of problems for those from rural areas. These were accustomed to hard work from an early age but avoided overworking rather than unhealthy jobs. Moreover, they were more used to defending themselves against direct sexual violence than to recognising seduction and interested promises.

Many times these girls found themselves bewildered by the anonymity that life in the city guaranteed and that deprived them of the security that the bonds of small rural centres where everyone knew each other could ensure (Notari, 1997, p. 108). For this reason, it was not uncommon for this kind of employment to lead girls towards rather complex and distressing vicissitudes such as illegitimate motherhood, running away from home, severed family ties and even, sometimes, prostitution and violence (Ulivieri, 2009; Ulivieri, Covato, 2001).

For girls who left their family of origin to go and serve in other households, the departure almost always corresponded to a traumatic separation. That contributed to the fact that many girls, disorientated and crushed by loneliness, found themselves resorting to welfare organisations or turning to prostitution or emigration. Evidence of this fact can be found in the testimonies of many young girls who went abroad seeking work as waitresses in bistros, inns, or nannies and who left behind a painful experience as maids in their homeland. Service with families abroad was very uncommon, and girls preferred to work in hostels and inns that provided better pay and allowed the girls to fulfil their desire for independence and their sentimental and marital freedom to an even greater extent.

Lucia Abello, born in the province of Cuneo, recalls how her older sisters emigrated first at the age of 15 and then found work for the others as olive pickers, maids or cooks and how almost the entire family found themselves migrating to the extent that they felt entitled to say that their true homeland was France (Revelli, 2018, p. 205). Those who did not have the opportunity to exploit parental ties found themselves more exposed to pitfalls. Often these girls were offered the chance to work as maids or singers and models in various European cities, only to find themselves entangled in the web of prostitution once they arrived. By the 1880s, a kind of trafficking of southern boys and girls had already taken place. They travelled from Calabria and Sicily in the wake of musicians and jugglers who led them into prostitution in clubs in Crete and Malta that were located near the bases where military units were stationed (ACS, 1913-1915). Prostitution, however, was not only the prerogative of the southern regions: in the provinces of northern Italy, many young girls were hired through false employment agencies that were supposed to employ them as maids and instead led them into prostitution in France and Great Britain, but mainly in the United States, Argentina and Brazil (Paulucci di Calboli, 1902). As a result, many of the girls found themselves risking real sexual traps, and the only way they could defend themselves was to help each other. In this regard, Lucia Abello recalls: “*Certo che andavamo in mano a gente che poteva approfittarsi di noi bambine [...]. Una volta il padrone è riuscito ad afferrarmi. Mi sono aggrappata al tavolo e mi sono messa a piangere [...]. Ci siamo confidate tra noi amiche e stavamo all’erta*” (Revelli, 2018, pp. 208-209).

Although service jobs in families and hotels were generally the first choice for migrant girls, in the late 19th century, many girls left their rural communities of origin to join the ranks of workers in factories and manufacturing in Italy and the textile, food and tobacco industries abroad.

1 Due to the character and colour of the language, which is often dialectal, the quotations from the narratives and autobiographies have been kept in the original language: idioms and spelling mistakes have been transcribed as noted to preserve their characteristics of authenticity and directness as much as possible.

2. Italian women workers: from the spinning mills to the American canneries

Industrialists often had no qualms about making distinctions based on gender or age. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many young girls also found employment in the foundry furnaces in Bavaria and Austria (Cosattini, 1904, p. 97). A large proportion of female emigration followed their fathers, the brothers of their fiancés abroad, and Amy Bernardy notes how “when the influx of male labour begins, the doors of the factories, on Monday mornings, are besieged by the women who have followed the immigration of workers” (Bernardy, 1912, p. 58).

Among the girls who followed their families abroad were those who emigrated alone or in groups and constituted, in truth, the majority of young expatriates. Textile factories and spinning mills favoured particularly young workers aged 13 to 20. At the beginning of the 20th century, most of the female labour force in Marseille, Basle and Lyon was made up of Italian immigrants who, in the latter city, made up more than 60 per cent of the girls employed in the industry (Perrod, 1902).

The child labour market was particularly fruitful for textile industrialists who even found themselves recruiting minors through religious and trade organisations; it therefore often happened that several female workers from the same country and sometimes even from the same family worked in the same factory. Moreover, in order to encourage immigration, textile factories provided accommodation and boarding schools for those girls who emigrated alone and without any parental support. In this regard, Teresa Garro, who emigrated when she was only 12 years old, recalls that in a large spinning mill in Marseilles:

C'erano due dormitori molto grandi, ogni paese aveva il suo stanzone, qui le operaie di Peveragno, là quelle di Alba, di Priocca, di Asti... La maggior parte delle operaie era di piemontesi, ma erano numerose anche le calabresi e le spagnole, poche le napoletane. Le calabresi sono arrivate dopo il 1908. Anche in Calabria c'erano delle filande, allora queste donne avevano già il mestiere. Quasi tutte donne da sposare, dai quindici ai venticinque anni (Revelli, 2018, p. 8).

Employment in the textile industry had negative implications; a large number of spindles and reels checking, the piecework pay, and the hot and humid climate in which the girls worked made the work tiring and nerve-racking. Even in the factories that carried out the sorting of rags, the working conditions were downright miserable; the environment was often dirty, full of bad smells and highly harmful due to the dust. In the spinning mills, on the other hand, even though the work was not particularly complex or arduous in itself, the girls nevertheless had to deal with dermatological severe problems due to the washing in the basins, which, being done by hand and without any kind of protection, tended to macerate and excoriate the skin. For this reason, it was difficult to find local workers and the factory managers willingly resorted to using immigrant labour: “Le francesi? Oh, le francesi erano poche perché trovavano che il lavoro della filanda era troppo faticoso, troppo sporco [...] non erano mica *travaiose* come le italiane” (Ivi, pp. 10-11).

The industriousness and willingness to undergo greater workloads and difficult employment conditions meant that even in Switzerland, Italian labour supplanted the indigenous one within a few years; in silk weaving factories, textile factories, lace and ribbon factories, but also in tobacco and chocolate factories, almost all the employees were young Italian immigrants.

Le operaie italiane sono, in generale, giovinette dai 14 ai 20 anni, senza famiglia, provenienti per lo più dalle provincie venete, emiliane, bergamasche, bresciane. Il loro lavoro è alquanto penoso, non per la fatica materiale, ma per l'attenzione continua che richiede. La paga è molto scarsa: oscilla fra 1,5 e 2 franchi, per 10 ore di lavoro (De Michelis, 1903, p. 73).

The female workers were often hired as apprentices at minimum wage and - paid piecework - were immediately forced into work disproportionate to their age and strength. After about a couple of years, when they could make claims and demand more rights, most were dismissed and replaced by younger girls. Women workers of Italian descent were content with much lower wages than women of other nationalities. That contributed to the fact that most women employed in men's dressmaking in five major US cities were Italian. A survey carried out in 1908 on the conduct of this type of work in the cities of Chicago, New York, Rochester, Philadelphia and Baltimore based much of its findings on Italian women, who constituted as many as 84.3% of the total (U.S Department of Labor, 1918). These could count on children's help; in New York in 1908, a survey carried out in various districts of the metropolis revealed that out of 100 Italian families visited, as many as 195 children were found at work.

I ragazzi vengono adoperati come assistenti, infilano aghi, attaccano foglie a fiori, legano mazzetti, sfilano le imbastiture [...]. I piccolissimi sono messi a infilare nastri colorati ai capi di biancheria [...] e ad infilare i cordoncini alle matite per i *camets* da *cotillons*. I grandicelli si impiegano poi anche, anzi soprattutto, ai trasporti fra casa e fabbrica (Bernardy, 1909, p. 37).

The girls employed in factory work, whether in textile, garment, food or tobacco factories, ranged in age from twelve to twenty. A survey by the Bureau of labour in 1918 found that Italian factory workers were the youngest ever. Approximately 30% of the female workers employed in these industries were under 18 years of age; however, the figure rises to over 40% if the Italians are considered. Data confirms that in the cotton industry too, where a relatively high percentage of Italian girls were employed, even those under sixteen. According to a survey also conducted by the Bureau of labour, in 1913, around 34% of the female workforce employed in the garment industry in New York was made up of young Italian girls who were entrusted with finishing and machine sewing tasks (U.S. Department of Labor, 1916).

3. The figure of the migrant girl in children's literature

In contrast, youth literature devoted to the subject – also by the cliché of the little musician emigrant – seemed to propose the stereotype of the wandering maiden as the most widespread form of employment. We find little Lena's character in the novella *La piccola emigrante* by Annina Biagiotti (1896). Although this production is also characterised by certain stereotypes – such as the southern origin of the family – the story of this little girl's journey breaks away from the classic vision of the 'hoarder' and is not characterised by masterly practices. Lena, when she was only seven years old, left with her parents and two little sisters for England because of the agricultural and economic crisis that pushed many inhabitants of the South to seek better fortune elsewhere. When they arrived in Birmingham, the family joined their uncle Tonio, who had emigrated earlier, and discovered that, having found no steady employment, he supported himself by playing the accordion in the city streets. The family's expectations are disappointed once they learn of their uncle's situation, as they had hoped he had made a better fortune; however, he reassures them by stating that street organ playing is a reasonably stable profession, so much so that he declares to his brother: "non morirai di fame: son buoni qui con noi italiani: nessuno ci rifiuta un soldo, dopo che li abbiamo tormentati colla musica dei nostri organi" (Ivi, p. 12).

Biagiotti's closing seems to propose – perhaps for the first time set out in such a clear and direct manner – a blatant invitation to accept one's social and economic condition, which betrays an intention to discourage the practice of emigration. If there were any doubts about the author's position, these are made even more evident in the sad and tragic ending in which the girl dies of cold and starvation in the same way as *The Little Match Girl*, without the reader being provided with any form of consolation, not even religious relief, as in Andersen's fairy tale.

Another literary work in which we can find the figure of the young wanderer is Chelazzi's novel *Due ragazzi e una scimmia* (1934), which narrates the adventure of two children: Carletto and Giorgina. In this case, the narrative alternates realistic elements with fictitious ones. Nevertheless, despite containing a certain number of stereotypes, the historical reconstruction seems at least plausible and is not too far removed from the reality analysed by Bernardy. The children's family emigrated to the United States, and the two children became victims of the strict emigration laws. Motherless children, the two children – who were already destitute – are expelled from the United States after the death of their father (a figurine maker from Lucca, also one of the various stereotypes in the book). The journey for repatriation becomes a veritable odyssey: after falling into the clutches of a shady circus entrepreneur, Carletto escapes accompanied by the monkey Puff and ends up clandestinely on a steamship bound for Marseilles, while the circus owner sells Giorgina to a woman who takes her to Paris, forcing her to dance in the streets to earn some money.

Emma, published in 1895 by the writer and journalist Guido Fabiani, tells instead of an 'alternative' emigration; in this case, the protagonist is taken to Brazil by her uncle, who has already made his fortune abroad thanks to his hard work and the 'salvific' intervention of the philanthropist on duty. Gerolamo Berretta, the prototype of the 'uncle from America', returns to Italy some forty years after his departure, a period in which he has accumulated a considerable fortune. The reason for his return is the classic leitmotif of so much literature of this type: nostalgia for his native places, his relatives and his 'dear homeland'. On arrival in Italy, he discovers that the only family related to him, consisting of his niece Maddalena, her husband Giuseppe and their two daughters Ghita and Emma, is in extreme poverty.

The novel continues with a succession of sad and painful events that allow the author to make his point of view on emigration clear: the voyage of the bastion 'Regina d'Italia' is the backdrop to life on board, the maiden's encounters with the poor third-class passengers, and already includes many difficulties such as overcoming a storm that will instead cause the shipwreck of a ship of Swedish emigrants returning home (Luatti, 2020). The events include the death of one of the passengers, which constitutes an established τόπος in emigration literature. The character's departure allows the author to reiterate how the migrant journey is, in his eyes, a veritable odyssey that only a few manage to complete and allows him to warn the reader to avoid following the promises of the so-called 'uncle from America'. Fabiani makes his point very clear: emigration is an illusory dream studded with sad and bitter events that are best avoided; a miserable but dignified life at home is preferable to venturing abroad amid hardship and regret.

4. Conclusions

Analysing children's literature, it is evident how the figure of the emigrant child is almost completely absent from the production of the period from the mid-19th to the early 20th century, which instead represents, for our country, the peak of migratory activity. Of all that fiction that proposed images of the 'little exploited' to children, be they 'little glassworkers', 'little miners', 'little slaves' and so on, the publications that feature 'little girls' as protagonists are rare, if not unique. The image of women and minor girls, in particular, seems almost hidden within the pages of this tearful production. This is probably due not only to the numerical majority of male expatriates but also to the influence that a patriarchal and macho society – such as that of Italy in the period under analysis – had on the authors. Moreover, the testimonies collected by Bernardy add to the statistical data by proposing a decidedly high female migratory total, including minor children, to which we must not forget to add all that submerged migration consisting of illegal immigrants. It is, therefore, impossible not to observe a decidedly significant discrepancy between what the image intended to be offered in the 'realistic' production of the period analysed and the actual reality of the Italian migration phenomenon. In short, it seems that literature could not represent reality in its entirety and contributed, instead, to providing an image that was at times sweetened and exaggerated, depending on the authors' intentions and the didactic or propagandistic use they intended to make of it.

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