

## Italian Women Writers and Pandemic: New Voices of Empowerment

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how Italian women writers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, when Italy, the first country in Europe, was hit by the coronavirus outbreak in the spring 2020. I take as a starting point the general context of a male-dominated Italian literary society in which women writers are often marginalized. The article focuses on successful social media communities for book presentations and discussions between writers and readers, such as *Scrittori a domicilio* [*Writers to your Door*] and *Decameron. Una storia ci salverà* [*The Decameron. A Story Will Save Us*], launched by the collectives of female authors and journalists when cultural life in the country was paralyzed in the lockdown. It also investigates a significant contribution of Italian women writers to the intellectual reflection on the pandemic impact. In particular, I analyze articles and interviews, published or released by acclaimed writers Francesca Melandri, Nadia Terranova, Melania Gaia Mazzucco, Rosella Postorino, and Maria Rosa Cutrufelli. I explore some key issues that they addressed, such as the relation between emotional life and the absence of physical contact during the lockdown, time perception shifted by the coronavirus emergency, and changes of approaches to writing. The essay aims to demonstrate that during the pandemic Italian women writers gained an unprecedented level of recognition and visibility and found new forms of empowerment.

Italy was the first country in Europe to be overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic last spring. The life of Italians has changed drastically in a few days when on 9 March 2020 Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced a nationwide quarantine. The country has been under the strict lockdown until 18 May 2020, while hashtags #iorestoacasa [#istayathome] and #andràtuttobene [#everythingwillbefine] were spreading on social networks. The entire world saw unknown Italy: empty cities, military trucks carrying out coffins from Bergamo, Pope Francis praying in a deserted St Peter's Square under the rain, Italians singing together from the balconies.

A year after, the memory of that tragic days is still vivid, although the apocalypse has turned into a routine life under the restrictions and a slow vaccination campaign in the country divided into red and orange zones.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, many Italian intellectuals tried to reflect on the meaning of the pandemic for society and on its possible consequences.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Umberto Galimberti, physicist Carlo Rovelli, writers Claudio Magris, Alessandro Baricco, Paolo Rumiz, and other prominent figures published their articles in newspapers, magazines, and blogs. The essay of the writer and physicist Paolo Giordano *Nel contagio* was immediately translated into more than thirty languages.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to explore the responses of Italian women writers to the pandemic emergency. In particular, I am going to answer the following questions. Which role did the female authors play in the Italian literary society during the lockdown? How did they contribute to intellectual reflections on the pandemic? What were the main issues addressed in their texts and interviews? For the purpose of my research, I will analyze three cultural initiatives organized by Italian women writers and journalists in 2020. With regard to articles and interviews, I will focus on contributions of some acclaimed Italian female authors, such as Francesca Melandri, Nadia Terranova, Melania Gaia Mazzucco, Rosella Postorino, and Maria Rosa Cutrufelli.

The Italian literary system is still dominated by male intellectuals, writers, and literary critics. In this hierarchical paradigm, Italian women writers are often marginalized on different levels, including high school and university academic programs and researches in the field of Italian studies.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, female authors are less likely to win the major literary award, the Strega Prize, and they occupy a secondary position in the contemporary Italian canon. For that reason, it seems important to focus on the female authors' contribution in the time of the pandemic.

During the lockdown, cultural life in Italy was completely paralyzed. Literary festivals and major events, such as Bologna Children's Book Fair and Turin International Book Fair, were postponed or canceled. Cultural operators had to find new virtual spaces on the Internet and took advantage of the digital technologies, and in this regard, female authors and journalists had a pioneering role. Before the nationwide quarantine was announced, symbolically on 8 March 2020,

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<sup>1</sup> I examined Italian intellectuals' writings on the pandemic in this article (in Russian): D. Kozhanova, 'Literatura i pandemia: Italia', *Prochlenie*, 22 April 2020, <https://prochlenie.org/geo/30178>, (accessed 30 March 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See English translation: P. Giordano, *How Contagion Works: Science, Awareness and Community in Times of Global Crises. The short essay that helped change the Covid-19 debate*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Bazzoni, 'Canone letterario e studi femministi. Dati e prospettive su didattica, manuali e critica letteraria per una trasformazione dell'italianistica', in G. Mazzoni, S. Micali et al. (eds.), *Le costanti e le varianti. Letteratura e lunga durata*, Florence, Del Vecchio, 2021, pp. 139-162.

the International Women's Day, journalists Serena Uccello, Chiara Palumbo, Michela Fregona, Benedetta Pallavidino, and the book blogger Valentina Berengo launched an online literary project on Facebook group *Scrittori a domicilio* [*Writers to your Door*].<sup>4</sup> Their aim was to organize virtual book presentations, which before the pandemic usually took place in the bookshops, and support the publishing industry impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. The activities did not stop after the quarantine, and *Scrittori a domicilio* holds book presentations every day. To engage readers more actively, they extended social media presence: in addition to the Facebook group, which has almost 15,000 members, Facebook page, Instagram account, and YouTube channel were created.

On 11 March 2020, nine prominent Italian female authors (Michela Murgia, Chiara Valerio, Teresa Ciabatti, Helena Janeczek, Evelina Santangelo, Caterina Bonvicini, Valeria Parrella, Rossella Milone, and Alessandra Sarchi) launched Facebook page *Decameron. Una storia ci salverà* [*The Decameron. A Story Will Save Us*].<sup>5</sup> The title was inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's masterpiece in which a group of young men and women escapes the Black Death and shelters in the villa near Florence, telling stories. Actualizing the past, contemporary Italian women writers sought to create a virtual space where authors and readers could meet and talk about books, in spite of the pandemic. The page hosted numerous book presentations and turned into the center of cultural life, with more than 11,000 followers. *Decameron* became a platform for the first virtual festival of contemporary writing and publishing supported by leading Italian publishers, including Mondadori, Rizzoli, and Longanesi. Like *Scrittori a domicilio*, the project continued its activity after the lockdown, and now it organizes online presentations and discussions in collaboration with bookshops.

Italian women writers played an important part in intellectual reflections on the pandemic experience. Some of their contributions received huge acclaim not only in Italy, but also abroad, like *Lettera dal futuro* [*Letter from the Future*] of screenwriter, novelist and filmmaker Francesca Melandri. In March, French newspaper *Liberation* asked her to write a text about the lockdown in Italy, which was about to happen in France. When Melandri's article *Lettre aux Français depuis leur future* [*Letter to the French from their Future*] was published on 18 March 2020, people from different countries started translating it. On 27 March 2020, *Guardian* published a version for English-speaking audience, and after that, Melandri's essay became striking evidence of the occurring pandemic for readers across the world.

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<sup>4</sup> *Scrittori a domicilio* [Facebook group], <https://www.facebook.com/groups/667604810719292>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

<sup>5</sup> *Decameron. Una storia ci salverà* [Facebook page], <https://www.facebook.com/videodecameron>, (accessed 30 March 2021).

The writer observes that the COVID-19 works as a time machine, because the present of the countries already hit by the pandemic, such as China and Italy, becomes the future of other nations. Melandri, like a seer, describes the future (the recurring phrase in the text is ‘you will’): ‘I am writing to you from Italy, which means I am writing from your future. We are now where you will be in a few days. The epidemic’s charts show us all entwined in a parallel dance’.<sup>6</sup> Melandri provides a detailed account of the pandemic reality and reveals the harsh truth about the coronavirus, which is not ‘only the flu’, as many people continue to think. She demonstrates how our everyday routine and personal relations will be completely changed in the lockdown: we will read dystopian literature, spend all the time on social media, make appointments with friends in the supermarket queues, play music from balconies. Moreover, the global emergency will provoke psychological changes and make us see profound contradictions that we usually overlook in normal life.

In addition, Melandri foresees how the pandemic will affect the most vulnerable members of society, such as homeless people. As she points out, although the nation is united in the communal effort, the COVID-19 also exposes social inequality, since spending quarantine in a private house is not the same as living under the lockdown in an overcrowded apartment. The writer does not forget the female condition and prophetically argues that many women will be beaten during the lockdown.<sup>7</sup>

In her profound essay, a message of solidarity to the world, Melandri swings between the private and the public life, between big ideas and small things, and depicts an overview of how nations and single individuals deal with the pandemic crisis. The text is mostly based on the shared experience, but in the end, the writer invites readers to look beyond the near future, which she has described. ‘If we turn our gaze to the more distant future, the future which is unknown both to you and to us too, we can only tell you this: when all of this is over, the world won’t be the same’.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most acclaimed Italian female authors, Nadia Terranova, released interviews and wrote texts about the lockdown, using different genres, such as personal essay, short story, and reportage, often mixed with each other. Born in Sicily, she lives in Rome, in the neighborhood Pineto, a residential area not so far from the city center. She compares Pineto to the island and in

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<sup>6</sup> F. Melandri, ‘A letter to the UK from Italy: this is what we know about your future’, *Guardian*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/27/a-letter-to-the-uk-from-italy-this-is-what-we-know-about-your-future>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

<sup>7</sup> According to Istat, in the period from 1 March to 16 April 2020, there have been 5031 calls (+73%) to the emergency number 1522 of the Department for Equal Opportunities, which aims to support victims of gender-based violence. See Istat, *Violenza di genere al tempo del COVID-19: le chiamate al numero di pubblica utilità 1522* [website], <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/242841>, (accessed 2 April 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Melandri, *Guardian*.

that way connects her current home with the native land. There is also a connection on a linguistic level because the words ‘isola’ [‘island’] and ‘isolamento’ [‘isolation’] have the same root. This perspective helps Terranova to deal with tough circumstances of the quarantine: ‘E io, che sono isolana, chiusa dentro un’isola so di poter sopravvivere’ [‘An islander closed on the island, I know that I can survive’].<sup>9</sup>

The metaphor of the island is her key to describe the life of the area under the restrictions when the heart of Pineto’s ‘island’ is at everybody’s home. ‘L’isola di ciascuno si è rimpicciolita come non pensavamo possibile, ma il sentimento del quartiere è lo stesso’ [‘Everybody’s island became smaller in a way we did not think would be possible, but the sense of the neighborhood is the same’].<sup>10</sup> The writer depicts how the resilient, united, ‘invisible’ community is going through the quarantine. People play bingo from different buildings, sing from the balconies in the evening, and the daily routine of residents in the apartment building is interconnected. Terranova points out that in quarantine we live simultaneously in different temporalities, in the present that embraces the past and the future since we constantly check social media but also use ‘old’ devices, such as landline and radio.

The same attention to the details of everyday life inspires another Terranova’s text. The writer narrates different family stories and, looking at the tragic circumstances with a hint of humor, demonstrates how our relationships with dear ones are changing in the quarantine. A Terranova’s cousin continues to work as a delivery rider during the lockdown to pay university tuition fees, and every week her mother orders a pizza to say hello to the daughter. Social life acquires a new hidden dimension online, when relatives and friends exchange practical tips on how to cope with the everyday routine in the lockdown. ‘Quando tutto sarà finito, faremo finta di niente con eleganza, come gentiluomini, e la prima cosa che si diranno i nostri sguardi, incontrandosi di nuovo, sarà che certe sconvenienti chat non sono mai esistite’ [‘When everything is finished, we will turn a blind eye with elegance, like gentlemen, and the first thing our meeting eyes will say to each other is that some improper chats have never existed’].<sup>11</sup>

In Italian female authors’ writings about the pandemic, there are some key issues. The one is the relation between emotional life and the absence of physical contact during the lockdown, in other words, the connection between ‘spiritual’ and bodily dimensions, both fundamental for

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<sup>9</sup> N. Terranova, ‘Un’isola (felice) nella solitudine’, *Ponzaracconta* [web blog] (republished from *La Repubblica*), 26 March 2020, <https://www.ponzaracconta.it/2020/03/26/cronache-al-tempo-del-covid-19-14-qui-roma/>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Terranova, *Ponzaracconta / La Repubblica*.

<sup>11</sup> N. Terranova, ‘Virus e tulipani. Quando tutto sarà finito, faremo finta di niente con eleganza’, *Linkiesta*, 4 April 2020, <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/04/quarantena-coronavirus-nadia-terranova/>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

women's identity. The winner of the Strega Prize 2003 and the current president of its Directive Committee, Melania Gaia Mazzucco explored these topics in her text for *La Repubblica*. The writer confesses that during the lockdown she has to deal with the tyranny of the body, which is described as an immobile, almost inhuman object. Her body is thirsting for physical contact with any human being, although before it seemed so normal to kiss and hug somebody every day. For Mazzucco, this deprivation of touches causes 'mental deprivation', the incapacity to have feelings and emotions: 'Senza con-tatto<sup>12</sup>, sono disorientata, spersa: mi sento disamata e incapace di manifestare l'amore. Scopro, sbalordita, che la parola può tacere, il corpo no' ['Without a contact, I am confused and lost: I feel unloved and unable to manifest love. Stunned, I discover that the word can be silent, but not the body'].<sup>13</sup>

In the text *L'amore senza abbracci* [*Love without Hugs*], Nadia Terranova reflects on how our sentimental and sexual life is changing in the time when every contact with another person is potentially dangerous and even lethal.<sup>14</sup> Rosella Postorino, the winner of the Campiello Prize 2018, talks about the importance of a hug, a normal gesture of care and affection undermined by the pandemic. 'È come se il virus avesse ridefinito da capo le nostre relazioni, anche con le persone che conosciamo molto intimamente. Non sappiamo più fino a che punto possiamo spingerci. Il contatto umano è, molto più di prima, un rischio' ['As if the virus has completely redefined our relationships even with persons we know very intimately. We do not know anymore to what extent we can move. The human contact is a risk, much more than before'].<sup>15</sup> The writer admits that she is afraid not only of the virus but also of this 'mutilated' life deprived of affection. Like Mazzucco, Postorino uses an inhuman metaphor and compares this life to a pure biological existence, when one just has to survive.

Between the first and the second COVID-19 waves in Italy, inQuiete Festival of women writers took place in Rome from 24 to 25 October 2020. A collective of women who work in cultural sphere and publishing (Barbara Leda Kenny, Viola Lo Moro, Francesca Mancini, Barbara Piccolo, and Maddalena Vianello) founded the festival in 2017. The 2020 edition united women writers, journalists, philosophers, artists, and scholars and provided both virtual and physical space in which to reflect on the pandemic experience from a female perspective. There have been some

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<sup>12</sup> In this case, Mazzucco plays with the structure of the word 'contatto' ['contact', 'touch'], which she divides into two words: 'con' ['with'] and 'tatto' ['touch'].

<sup>13</sup> M. Mazzucco, 'Melania Mazzucco: "Baci e abbracci, il senso perduto del contatto"', *La Repubblica*, 19 March 2020, [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/19/news/melania\\_mazzucco-251728914/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/19/news/melania_mazzucco-251728914/), (accessed 31 March 2021).

<sup>14</sup> N. Terranova, 'L'amore senza abbracci', *La Repubblica*, 26 March 2020, [https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/locali/2020/03/26/news/l\\_amore\\_senza\\_abbracci-252291242/](https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/locali/2020/03/26/news/l_amore_senza_abbracci-252291242/), (accessed 1 April 2021).

<sup>15</sup> P. Bottero, 'Rosella Postorino: "Ho più paura di vivere così"', *Sud e Futuri Mg*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.sudfuturi-magazine.it/2020/05/07/postorino-paura-virus/>, (accessed 1 April 2021).

discussions about the quarantine impact on female bodies. As the organizers argued, during the lockdown women had to deal with an increased amount of care work, so the need to find new creative strategies for the resistance emerged. Writer Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, philosopher Caterina Botti, psychoanalytic Manuela Fraire, and author and translator Flavia Gasperetti took part in the discussion *Dai corpi delle donne* [*From the Women's Bodies*].

Just before the spring lockdown started, Cutrufelli, one of the key figures in Italian women's writing and an active participant in the feminist movement, published a dystopian novel *L'isola delle madri* [*The Island of Mothers*]. In this book set in the near future, because of environmental crisis and climate change, the world is affected by a pandemic, 'disease of emptiness' (sterility), so people have to use biotechnologies to procreate. Cutrufelli portrays a female community of mothers, and for them the relationships become a form of resistance to biopolitical control. The writer urges to analyze the pandemic and quarantine experience from a feminist perspective and expresses concerns that in the lockdown, everything becomes virtual and intangible, even the female body.<sup>16</sup>

During the lockdown, many writers (not only in Italy) thought about how the coronavirus outbreak would change our approaches to writing and how the literature would reflect the pandemic. Very frequently, Italian authors talked about the impossibility of writing during the coronavirus emergency. What seemed to be a perfect condition for writers, turned out to be an obstacle for literary creativity. When the country was suspended between life and death, it appeared impossible not only to write but also to read fiction to escape reality, since everybody was immersed in coronavirus news on TV, radio, computers, and cell phones.

These issues were raised by leading Italian authors during the online edition of the Festival *Incroci di civiltà* (3-4 April 2020) annually organized by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Melania Mazzucco, one of the speakers of the Festival, acknowledged that the quarantine was not a fruitful experience, because writers' isolation had always been voluntary: 'La vita materiale, la vita nuda viene fuori con una prepotenza straordinaria, e in questo momento non potrei scrivere assolutamente nulla' ['The material life, the naked life emerges with an extraordinary high-handedness, and now I could write absolutely nothing'].<sup>17</sup>

At the beginning of the lockdown, Nadia Terranova could not read anything, except news, and stopped working on her novel; she wrote only essays on the pandemic for newspapers and

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<sup>16</sup> InQuiete festival, *Dai corpi delle donne* [online video], 28 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-iKFwI4hWc>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

<sup>17</sup> *Melania Mazzucco - Incroci di civiltà* [online video], 3 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuYZfqKiVR0>, (accessed 2 April 2021).

magazines, but gradually returned to her book as well. Among others, she wrote some texts on how the coronavirus would be reflected by the literature. For Terranova, time has a crucial role in the interconnection between writing and the pandemic. In the previously mentioned article for *La Repubblica*, Mazzucco states that during the lockdown time for her became endless ('il mio tempo ha perso il metronomo e la misura' ['my time lost a metronome and a measure']<sup>18</sup>). Terranova reflects on our time perception shifted by the pandemic in the text *Tempo di mezzo* [*The Time in Between*].<sup>19</sup> She argues that probably we should not consider the pandemic time as 'the time in between' because, adopting this point of view, we risk understanding nothing about the present and the future. It would be better, instead, to invent our own unity of time's measure and use this 'slabbrato presente' ['tore present'] to embrace our future and past turmoil.

The subtitle of the article *Come uscire dall'eterno presente che ci ha imposto il coronavirus* [*How to Get Out from the Eternal Present that the Coronavirus Dictated*] is also very important since Terranova connects the concept of 'eternal present' to the writing on the pandemic in the text *Cosa ne scriveremo* [*What We Will Write about It*]. She claims that coronavirus has already ended up in the literary works, even when it did not exist: there is a rich tradition of writings on contagion and imaginary dystopian societies. Terranova is sure that there will be a polyphony of direct and indirect COVID-19 narratives. However, the writer affirms that we will need time to reflect on these events, while in the pandemic we all live in the 'eternal present', which is a perfect time for news, but not for novels. The coronavirus, as 'vibrant matter'<sup>20</sup> (to cite Jane Bennett's concept), is already making its own narrative and, therefore, does not need authors' mediation.

For that reason, Terranova argues that especially novels, which do not describe the coronavirus emergency, will convey a profound sense of this pandemic, 'conterranno indizi su ciò che stiamo vivendo in un modo misterioso anche a chi li sta scrivendo o concependo' ['they will narrate hints about what we are living in a mysterious way even for those who are writing or imagining them'].<sup>21</sup> In other words, authors will write about the COVID-19 without even noticing it, as we already do, reading familiar literary works from a different perspective. Now we find traces of the pandemic even in Gianni Rodari's masterpiece *Favole al telefono*, because telling stories to children remotely is one of the details of the coronavirus era.

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<sup>18</sup> Mazzucco, *La Repubblica*.

<sup>19</sup> N. Terranova, 'Tempo di mezzo. Come uscire dall'eterno presente che ci ha imposto il coronavirus', *Linkiesta*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/03/coronavirus-italia-stare-a-casa-imposizioni/>, (accessed 2 April 2021).

<sup>20</sup> J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> N. Terranova, 'Come ne scriveremo', *Il Foglio*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/cultura/2020/04/20/news/come-ne-scriveremo-313902/>, (accessed 2 April 2021).



In conclusion, I argue that during the coronavirus outbreak Italian women writers, often silenced and marginalized in the contemporary canon, gained an unprecedented level of recognition and visibility. They launched successful cultural events and projects in the digital environment and made a significant contribution to the intellectual reflection on the pandemic experience. Therefore, Italian female authors in the COVID-19 emergency managed to create new virtual communities and find new forms of empowerment.

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