

MIGRANT WOMEN: CULTURAL OBSTACLES AND VIOLENCE, TACTICS OF RESILIENCE AND STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

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Abstract: *The article analyzes the relationship between female migration, inclusion, and integration from a cultural perspective. The perception of the sea as a cultural space rich in meaning, life, and exchange is the starting point for observing the integration process of women. The qualitative research focused on western Sicily, characterized by continuous and traditional immigration examples of successful integration. At the same time, the area has become a place for migration flows during emergencies. The findings show some forms of violence suffered by them and describe the actions taken to deal with them. The detected actions are distinguished into tactics of resilience or strategies of resistance.*

Key words: *Mediterranean Sea, violence, agency, resistance, resilience.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of the article is to analyze the obstacles and cultural violence encountered by migrant women. The Mediterranean context is the sociocultural framework, not only geographical (Matievich, 2018), in which the biographical paths that characterize their integration process are lived (Cesareo, Blangiardo, 2009).

The results presented in the article are part of a broader research on the effects of the migration process on the cultural identity of migrant women. The study was conducted in Sicily in the Mazzara del Vallo and Marsala area between 2016 and 2017 (Canta, 2017a, 2017b).

The qualitative survey used semi-structured biographical interviews (Bichi, 2000) with key informants to collect the results. Beginning with the sea-like comparison, the research aimed to foster women's narratives to bring out their social and cultural identities.

Indeed, individual behaviors that experience transition (generational, professional, and - even more so - migration) experience the coexistence of multiple references. The culture of origin interacts with the values and behavior patterns of the host society. It undergoes a process of readjustment and recoding of meanings, or there may be a closure in the original cultural world (Cesareo, 2002).

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The research showed that women pay attention in their narrative to the connection to the land: the land of origin and the land of arrival (Canta, 2017a). Within the pair was the biographical and identity construction of the interviewees (Malouff, 2005). In times of changes, all individual behaviors, and a fortiori those of migrants, manifest changes that are due both to the interaction between two different cultural references - the one of birth and the one of guest systems - and to changes in the choices that each person will have to make. The actions and strategies of social subjects arise within a dialectical relationship between the person's socio-cultural background and the system into which people are entering.

The analysis of the results presented in the article makes it possible to identify the obstacles and violence that women have encountered, and it allows us to outline the actions they have taken to overcome them in their integration process into the local community. The study identifies, on the one side, simple tactics of resilience (De Certeau, 2011), practiced as adaptive actions in reducing the distance or overcoming the trauma of violence, on the other side, more complex strategies (Crozier, Friedberg, 1994) of resistance built to interact with social reality and try to transform it.

2. Mediterranean background and forms of violence

In every period, on the various parts of the coast, we come across contradictions: on the one hand, clarity and form, geometry and logic, law and justice, science and poetics, and on the other, everything that opposes these particularities, the sacred books of peace and love and the wars of religion, crusades, and jihad. Generous ecumenism is next to a fierce ostracism. Universality and autarchy. The agora and the labyrinth. Dionysian joy and the boulder of Sisyphus. Athens and Sparta. Rome and the barbarians. The Eastern and Western empires. The northern and southern coasts. Europe and Africa (Matvejevic, 2018, p. 22). The Mediterranean is a social space with centrifugal and centripetal forces that have led and continue to lead to symbolic and real encounters and clashes between peoples and cultures. In its history, paths of wars and dialogues have arisen and continue to arise.

The Mediterranean is a space that challenges diversity to coexist, as Cassano (2003, p. 24) writes: *The Mediterranean has always been a frontier sea, overlooked by three continents and three religions... its knowledge is, by definition, a composite knowledge, a wisdom that hosts multiple pieces of knowledge, because it has accumulated and mixed them without forcing and without worrying about orthodoxy, respecting the multiplicity of tones and colors*. This sea becomes a myth – as highlighted by Panikkar (2006) – in its plurality of visions because it is a horizon of meaning that contains the hope of life and the suffering of death that cultivates the dream of peace and the nightmare of wars. In this non-neutral framework, the migratory movements pouring into the Mediterranean question the identity of the Mare nostrum, as they lead to the setting of new borders that divide instead of sharing forces to nurture bridge-building for a *Unitas Multiplex* (Morin, 2001).

The sea becomes a barrier erected by political and economic interests. It becomes a sea that repels and submerges. *The Mediterranean has often been described as a blood-red sea because of the wars that have been fought there throughout history, and because of the deaths whose memory still seems to move us. Instead, one wants to ignore that the*

Mediterranean is a sea of blood, which still feeds on the lifeless bodies of the women and men of our time (Canta, 2019, p. 15). The management of migration flows also becomes a battleground for governments and different levels of government that often deal with the phenomenon uncertainly (Ambrosini, 2021; Dimitriadis, Hajer, Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2021). Unfortunately, migration flows foster the construction of the Mediterranean social and cultural space in which behavioral patterns develop that fuel the intertwining of violent conduct legitimized by sexist logic and patriarchal cultures (Bartholini & Pascoal, 2018). The faces of violence are diverse. New and ancient forces emerge that justify actions of control over women within gender relations (Bimbi, 2015).

Women suffer double discrimination due to gender differences and migrant status (Perra and Pilati 2008). Their drama requires directing a careful and supportive gaze to the many women who seek them elsewhere in countries across the sea (Pinto Minerva, 2017). Cultural representations of subordination, contained in the socialization process women experience in countries of origin, overlap with those the women encounter in countries of transit or arrival: the language and the cultural barriers can create the danger of racialization of migrants in pathways of reception and integration (Crenshaw, 1991), the organizational methods and the administrative practices of the receiving society can also become structural violence that produces marginalization and isolation (Farmer 2006). Examples are varied: from non-recognition of qualifications and training courses to non-recognition of work experience, from loss of social capital to perceived greater economic vulnerability (Pepe, 2009).

Within migration pathways, it is, therefore, necessary to intercept and counter forms of symbolic violence that permeate a social structure constructed by “male dominance” that naturalizes gender inequalities (Bourdieu, 2014) often found in everyday life. At other times they are reconstructed in exceptional events as happened, for example, during the Arab Spring season when *the male narrative... renders the female component marginal both before and during the revolution, leading women's experience back to men's once and proposing a binary reconstruction that prevents the female narrative from manifesting itself* (Guardi, 2017, p. 96). At the same time, it seems necessary to avoid the homogenization of “migrant woman” figures in order to adopt an approach that directs and calibrates research toward understanding conditions and knowledge of women (Haraway, 1988; Carbone, 2019). The study that involves women in the Mediterranean context aims to focus on their ability to weave networks of formal and informal relationships and solidarity (Pulcini, 2003).

3. The journey toward integration

The trajectories of integration in a new society are certainly subjective experiences, whereas they take on the aspects of concrete paths that touch similar stages. The sequence of episodes can be different: it is related to the starting point, opportunities, and relational networks (Casavecchia, 2018).

Upon arrival, each migrant begins to draw a path that identifies his own biographical trajectory in the society in which he fits in, or tries to fit in. Each path is marked by choices, second thoughts, expectations and obstacles that condition the daily life

practices of individual subjects and become generalizable phenomena. Therefore, the levels of socio-cultural integration of migrants will also be different. These people find themselves redefining their identities and cultural references: *The behaviors of individuals, who find themselves experiencing any type of transition... and even more so the behaviors of migrants, show the bilateral or multilateral nature of references, and also the reversibility of the choices a person is capable of* (Cesareo, 2002).

Legislative and administrative acts influence the development of itineraries and often lead immigrants into a kind of limbo for an extremely long period. The trajectories of their paths are influenced, for example, by the different types of residence permits held by migrants. This process determines different phases of integration, which hide the precarious nature of a settlement linked to administrative and legislative decisions in the case of temporary residence permits. Permanent residence permits make the migrant more stabilized than before, but still in a kind of limbo for an extremely long time: they place themselves: *in an intermediate condition between that of a citizen and that of a foreigner. It is similar to institutions in other countries that define a state of denizenship, a sort of partial naturalization, based on granting full civil rights even to those who have not acquired a new nationality* (Zanfrini, 2004, p. 30). However, they are not granted political rights, so they remain in a state of partial citizenship, as they are hindered in participating in political life and in the decisions related to it in the country where they actually live.

The migrant subject needs to reformulate his or her action strategies within a social system, a value scenario and behavioral models that differ from those he is familiar with.

The challenges are various. From the social system side, as has been observed: *The emigrant transformed into an immigrant is subjected to a process of disabling in the countries of arrival. The lack of recognition of qualifications (school capital), the deprivation of support deriving from one's family group and one's community (social capital), economic hardship (economic capital)* (Pepe, 2009, p. 138).

On the individual side, people have to re-discuss their expectations within a new social system, which often does not respond to migrants' aspirations to improve their starting conditions. We witness the process of brain waste in the country of arrival, which leads to the continuous combination of medium-high levels of education of migrants and low-skilled job offers in industry and services (Reyneri, 2007), the strong presence of migrants in the care services sector is an example (Maioni, Zucca, 2016).

Within this process of redefining identity, gender specificity also has to be considered. In fact, on the one hand, migrants contribute to the process of the entry of the feminine into the public space, which implies the search for a proper subjectivity, on the other, they introduce a fracture in the feminine universe itself (Zanfrini, 2004). Once they arrive, migrants also find themselves going through an integration process in which three phases of agency can be identified: in the first, people build their strategies as an agent, who searches for attitudes and behaviors appropriate to the social context in which they find themselves; then there is the figure of the actor, who moves towards an objective and is aware of the existing social rules; finally there is the figure of the subject, who searches for and generates complex actions that are potentially innovative and capable of introducing changes in the social system (Blangiardo, Cesareo, 2009). Within the three steps, we can also place the symbolic and structural violence that migrant women

experience and face during their integration process. Their level of awareness and their ability to react can be detected.

4. The research in Sicily

The analysis considers the results obtained from research conducted in Sicily (Canta 2017a, Canta 2017b) to observe and analyze the biographies of migrant women. The study, carried out by the Laboratory on Cultural Pluralism² of the University of Roma Tre, aims to verify the women's agency in the context of their integration process in the host community, making them confront a cultural object: the sea. An object becomes cultural when it acquires a specific and shared meaning (Griswold, 2002). In this case, the sea is not just an ecosystem or geographical space. It takes on an additional meaning for the migrants who cross it. For migrants in Sicily, the sea can take on multiple meanings: the memory of the journey, the distance from the native land, the trace of a border, or the prospect of hope (Casavecchia, 2017). The starting point that united the stories of the women interviewed was the sea and the meaning they attribute to it.

The chosen survey area includes the municipalities of Mazara del Vallo, Marsala, Petrosino, Paceco, Trapani, and Custonaci - an area in the North-Western Sicily - is currently the scene of a continuous passage of migratory flows and is also a place of ancient migration, where communities from other countries (for example Tunisians) have historical roots. Therefore, it is possible to find more easily women at the beginning of their migratory project and women who have been living in Italy for many years (some interviewees have been in Sicily for over 20 years).

Video interviews were conducted on the biography of ten women to collect information (Bichi, 2000; Silverman, 2021; Delli Zotti, 2021). Contact with the subjects was possible with the support and guarantee of some NGOs that work in the territory in collaboration with the municipalities.

The documentation of the images allowed us to analyze both verbal and non-verbal languages and improve the description of the environments proposed by the interviewees, their expressions during the dialogues, their attitudes during the silences, and, in some cases, deep silences. The images supported the interpretation of the interviewees' words (Loperfido, 2021).

The interview program was not completely open: some questions were suggested to help the women talk about their migratory path and their integration path in the community, in which they have settled or are settling, about the obstacles and difficulties they have experienced and are still experiencing.

An ethnomethodological approach was chosen to reduce the distances between the subjects of the research (scholars and interviewees), to facilitate the interpretations of the conversations, and to favor the emergence of the dynamics with which the subjects organize their routines (Garfinkel, 2002). The interpretation with which the information

² Data collected were used solely for research purposes by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR-2016/679) adopted by the European Union, and in compliance with Italian legislation governing the processing of personal data in these areas. Data were collected and stored by the Laboratory, voluntary participation in the survey was ensured, and all data were protected.

for this article was collected and reworked aims to understand, firstly, the obstacles and symbolic and structural violence that women have suffered and, secondly, the ability of women to react to the violence suffered.

5. Women's stories: structural and cultural barriers

From the interviews, we can recover the stories of the women living in Sicily and distinguish the obstacles they encountered and some actions they implemented.

The story of Halima (a 30-year-old Eritrean) shows us the structural and cultural barriers encountered upon arrival in Italy. Her journey is like that of many others. She left Eritrea, crossed the desert, and lived in Libya, where she got married, and there she remained until she and her husband could pay for a place on a boat to reach Italy. Once she arrived in Sicily, she applied to receive the acknowledgment of a political refugee. After a few years spent, first in Marsala and then in Rome, Halima left Italy to live in Norway with her family. However, Norwegian authorities implemented the Dublin Treaty and sent her and her family back to Italy according to the Dublin Treaty. She tells us about the welcome she received at Fiumicino airport: *They delivered us to the Italian police. I gave the document [...]. They delivered us like a package [...] I heard them talking and saying: the others don't want them, and we collect them like garbage [...]. I was angry because I spoke Italian, and I understood what they were saying [...]. It was March 2009, and I was pregnant with my second baby.* Halima from Fiumicino airport is transferred to Marsala after staying in Rome for a short time. In her story, she adds: *I had a good time here. I liked Rome. I learned the language. I was welcomed by the nuns, but I was forced and so not free.* Cultural barriers are added to the structural violence that comes from the bureaucracy that prevents “freedom”. When Halima describes how she feels in Italy and compares the difference with Norway, she highlights racist attitudes: *For example, while I walk, someone tells me to go to your country, go away, something negative always happens to me even here in Marsala. I don't answer I'm not interested; everyone has their own story. Someone can't choose the country they want to live in.*

An invisible, subtle violence that is rooted in the control of the patriarchal model also emerges from the stories of the women interviewed. We encounter an example in the experience of Salwa, a Tunisian woman who has lived in Italy for over 20 years. She has arrived to follow her husband, who is a fisherman. Salwa's interview takes place in a tidy, clean house full of comforts, but she has not elaborated on her journey and remains anchored to her native country. Her life unfolds inside the house, and she highlights the traits of a past depression in the interview: *I was sick, I never wanted to go out, the neighbors came to visit me... I recovered when my children were born.* Her house, which she enriches with her care, is a golden prison. Nostalgia is the feeling that shines through strongly in her words.: *This is my house, but all things, I feel like a guest. I am always a guest because this is not my country [...] My country and home are Tunisia [...] When I go to Tunisia and open the door in the morning, my heart is like reborn [...] There I feel God, that is the house of God, the land.* She aspires to live in her country but gives up because she unconsciously obeys a patriarchal model that sees her as a housewife and mother, faithful to her husband.

Another form of violence that emerges from the stories is symbolic violence. We find an indication in the words of Malika, a young Moroccan Muslim. She is married and has children. She has joined her husband, who works in Italy. She clashes with the cultural barriers that she encounters in the country where she lives. She tells of a significant experience when she describes how she behaves on the beach: *When I take the children to the seaside, they play, but I don't go into the water because I'm ashamed of going into the sea dressed... In Morocco, in my homeland, I could swim like that too. Nobody would tell me anything.* The fear of receiving negative judgments and being stigmatized conditions her and she ends up censoring her behavior. Respect for the religious norm that prohibits exposing her own body becomes an obstacle that prevents her from feeling integrated; on the other hand, her religion is a trait that distinguishes and identifies her. However, Malika has started her integration process. She does not speak Italian fluently but is taking a course to learn it. She lives her motherhood by accompanying her children to school and lives her moments of socialization even if she retains her diversity.

All these stories show the actions of migrant women in reaction to the barriers they encounter.

From Malika and Salwa's interviews, we recognize some tactics elaborated by women to adapt to life in Italy. The first one gives up swimming in the sea to avoid being stigmatized, and the second builds a perfect house to stifle nostalgia.

From the other interviews, we can obtain traces of strategies that women implement to mark a change in society. Halima, who is a victim of racist episodes and forced to return to live in Marsala, carries out volunteer work at a Maharaba association founded by a friend of hers: «I stayed because then she opened this association, and I told her that I wanted to work too. In this association, we help needy immigrants but also Italians. The name of the association is foreign, but we help everyone». Her words highlight the desire to build bonds regardless of skin color.

Another indication comes from the story of Semia. She was a Tunisian nurse. Her family refuses to welcome her into their home after her divorce from her husband. Semia receives the proposal to come to Italy to become a cultural mediator in Mazzara del Vallo: *The nuns wanted me to come here to work with Tunisian women, to assist Tunisian women who live in Mazara del Vallo. And I came. Then I discovered the reality of this community concentrated in Mazara. Then I said to myself, why not? Have I started this experience? I thought I would stay for a year or two, then the years passed, and I'm still here.* In her journey of empowerment, Semia is committed to the empowerment of other women who face structural and linguistic barriers: *Tunisian women don't know what a patronage is, they don't know how to fill out a form when their husband who is a fisherman dies.*

6. Discussion: the action between tactics of resilience and strategies of resistance

The accounts of the experiences of the women who met during the research reveal the cultural (Crenshaw, 1991) or structural (Farmer, 2006) violence that they had to endure. The analysis highlighted two types of actions. The comparison between the paths of

Semia and Salwa can exemplify the different reactions. Both arrive in Italy conditioned by a patriarchal culture: the first escapes because her condition as a divorced woman is rejected by her family, which does not welcome her back into town; the second since arrives in Italy she suffers the choices of her husband, in a cultural model that places the woman in the domestic sphere.

Salwa activates survival tactics (De Certeau, 2011) that do not aim to change the social system that surrounds her. Therefore, they are not transformative actions. Salwa practices acts of resilience, intending to make her existence more bearable. She drives, manages the house, and cares for the children, but she is dissatisfied and dreams of returning to Tunisia. She lives immersed in her nostalgia.

Instead, Salima activates strategies of change. She adopts strategies that show awareness of what is happening around her. She does not simply act to adapt but promotes practices to transform society and its culture: she chooses to be a cultural mediator, and she becomes a protagonist committed to building her own identity and promoting the lives of others with attention to building a better society.

Her actions build strategies that demonstrate, on the one hand, knowledge of the rules of the game of the social structures in which one lives and, on the other hand, the hope of activating processes of change.

Finally, in the integration process, our interviewees place themselves in the phases of social actors or social subjects (Blangiardo, Cesareo, 2009): the first ones (i. e. Salwa) implement resilience actions to adapt in the best possible way to what happens to them during their life routine. The others (i.e. Semia) implement actions of resistance that introduce spaces for change for themselves and others.

Malika's story shows another outcome. On the one hand, she gives up so as not to be a victim of stereotypes and adopts resilience tactics. On the other hand, she activates practices to integrate into the community. Malika lives in the social actor phase. This phase can temporarily be a solution, but it does not complete her attempt to be welcomed.

Resilience is understood as dependent not only on the subjective characteristics of each individual and on the weight that certain adverse events have on their balance but also on the social and relational resources that they can draw on, which influence the ability to activate resilient behaviors (Anaut 2003). The tactics developed by the interviewees show the implementation of resources aimed at adapting in the face of adverse situations. Instead, women who develop resistance strategies trigger, in addition to the adaptive resilience process, a process of change that makes them protagonists in their context. Their action exceeds individual boundaries and establish connections (Canta, 2018) between the host community and other women who have suffered or are still experiencing abuse.

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