

Reading *Little Women* after the Italian 1970s: The Influence of Postfeminism on Lidia Ravera's Reinterpretation of the Classic

Abstract

Published in two volumes between 1868 and 1869, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott follows the classic coming-of-age structure for female characters as developed in nineteenth-century literature. Although the story is first introduced as that of a family, it instead follows each protagonist on their individual journey towards social recognition, which, for the young March sisters, is gained with marriage. From this perspective, girlhood is a transient stage of life, routed towards the achievement of economic (and emotional) stability.

Since its first publication, Alcott's classic has been widely discussed and subjected to many reinterpretations in literary form, as well as in film and theatrical dramatisation. In this article I focus on the novel *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* (1986), a rewriting by the Italian author Lidia Ravera composed in the aftermath of the feminist struggles of the seventies. The novel, set in Italy during the eighties, offers the opportunity for the author to integrate the representation of girlhood with the language and images of mass culture. As Carol Lazzaro-Weiss points out in her study on the female *Bildungsroman* (1993), «women writers are creating new themes and plots and [...] they do so by recombining, challenging, and exploiting old structures to their purposes» (18). *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* offers a good example for studying such literary manipulation. This essay shows how Ravera's main character anticipates a new idea of femininity which – leaving behind political instances and reflections on gender essentialism – embraces a more individualistic and certainly more problematic approach to female agency influenced by postfeminist discourse (GREER 1999; HOOKS 2000; GAMBLE 2001).

Toward a Postfeminist Aesthetics

An internationally-known classic, *Little Women* (1868–69) by Louisa May Alcott is a female coming-of-age story whose success has been sustained to the present day by a series of reinterpretations in literature, theatre and film.¹ While for male writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Alcott's novel used to stand as a representation of female piety and sentimentality, for many female writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Gertrude Stein or Joyce Carol Oates, who read the story in the twentieth century, the book inspired ideas about the relationship between patriarchal culture and women's culture, as well as about female authority (SHOWALTER 1989, VII-VIII).

As Monique Wittig wrote, «any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions» (WITTIG 1992, 68-69). In this regard, Lidia Ravera's novel *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* (1986) is a good example of how rewriting a classic is not just a postmodern exercise, but can be used as a tool to register relevant cultural changes and political statements. Coming after the experiences of the Italian feminist movement, Ravera's rewriting re-elaborates some elements present in Alcott's novel (the matriarchal family, the four sisters, and Jo's character) and sets them in 1980s Italy. This decade represents a crucial moment of reflection for those feminist activists who experienced the struggles for abortion and divorce, and who, despite their political achievements, found themselves living in a society still very much subjected to a patriarchal system of values. In this article I will explore the influence of Ravera's own feminist experience on the rewriting of Alcott's classic, with special attention to some of the elements (references to mass culture, a new idea of female agency) that contribute to making *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* a novel in transition toward a new postfeminist aesthetics (GENZ and BRABON 2018; GAMBLE 2001). I will refer to postfeminism as an aesthetics more than a theory or a group of theories. I draw on Gamble's (GAMBLE 2001, 43-44) useful distinction between postfeminism and third wave feminism, the latter of which includes a consistent variety of thinkers - from bell hooks to Judith Butler, from Camille Paglia to Naomi Wolf - none of whom used the label 'postfeminist' to describe their work (although often it has been referred to by others as such). Postfeminist aesthetics have been widely promoted through mainstream media since the mid-eighties,

introducing a new, trendier image to represent empowered women in the popular culture: female personalities «dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitude» (36). Mainstream postfeminist discourse coheres around three main topics: the refusal of victimisation, focusing on the aspect of female responsibility and control; related to this, a general tolerance toward pornography in the name of self-determination and a woman's personal choice; and an individualistic attitude which leaves space for a very flexible ideology inspired by liberal humanism.

Rewriting a classic such *Little Women* from a feminist angle implies first of all a challenge to the structure of the coming-of-age genre with female protagonists. Despite the many differences among feminist critics, it is today widely agreed that the classic structure of the coming-of-age novel rests on a conservative and gendered representation of society. Strongly rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Bildungsroman* operates on a double standard for male and female characters, offering the image of a woman whose agency is possible mainly within home interiors and whose social affirmation occurs through the institution of marriage (LAZZARO-WEISS 1993, 95-117). According to this structure, there is little room left to female development besides the standard representation of a coming of age that is never fully autonomous from the modes of the romance.

As noted by Rita Felski in her study on feminist aesthetics, in contemporary literature the *Bildungsroman* «has acquired a new function in charting the changing self-consciousness of women accompanying their gradual entry in the public domain» (FELSKI 1989, 133). In what Felski describes as 'novel of self-discovery', the journey of the woman from the world within to the world outside is often mediated by the female community, considering the dominant role of gender in the definition of identity. Although inner growth is a relevant aspect of feminist coming-of-age stories, interaction with a social environment is the most significant detail that distinguishes the feminist *Bildungsroman* from the classic model of the genre. By drawing a comparison between *Little Women* and Ravera's rewriting, I will consider girlhood from a structural angle, as a transient status that leads toward womanhood. How this passage occurs in both novels is a key aspect worthy of examination, in order to understand to what

extent the social changes which occurred in twentieth-century women's history had the power to affect their literary representation.

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott – published in two parts between 1868 and 1869 – is a novel whose structure perfectly represents that of the classic female *Bildungsroman*. Set in the years of the American Civil War, the novel focuses on the story of the March family, specifically the four sisters and their mother, the father being involved directly in the war. The young protagonists – Jo, Beth, Amy and Meg – are described in the privacy of their domestic games and their social experiences outside of the home, in particular with the rich neighbour Laurie. From being just 'little women', the reader will follow the March Sisters until their transformation into 'good wives', with marriage represented as a stage that will allow them to reach a respectable social position and economic stability.

Far from being a story set within the home interior, Ravera's *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* follows the rhythm and themes of a Hollywood action movie. Almost twenty years after he left the family, Giò's father sends a letter to her mother inviting her to meet him for the last time in Barcelona, since he has only a short time left to live. The mother ignores the letter, but Giò secretly steals it and leaves with the desire of finally getting to know her own father. While waiting for her parent in Barcelona in front of the Sagrada Família, the girl meets Mike, who, she will later find out, is her father's partner in crime. The two men are in fact criminals who pretend to be artists involved in the selling of traditional African statues, although in reality, they use the statues to hide diamonds that they illegally trade. When Giò and Mike are kidnapped by a group of rival gangsters interested in taking possession of the diamonds, the story moves across three continents, Europe, America, and finally Africa. The novel culminates with a spectacular happy ending in which Giò reunites with her father and defeats the gangsters.

The plots of the two novels are clearly very different, although their points of connection are quite significant. In order to explore these it is first of all useful to consider why, among all the classics, Ravera specifically selected Alcott's work. Introducing the new edition of *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* in 2012, Lidia Ravera explained why *Little Women* was still relevant in 1986, when she decided to bring it again to the attention of readers:

La Alcott ha dato una spallata all'indistinto del femminile, ha fatto vedere quattro caratteri e noi tutte bambine ci siamo appassionate alla possibilità di scegliere perché una poteva essere saggia, poteva essere maschile e intellettuale, poteva essere buona (e infatti morire giovane), e poteva essere civetta e seduttiva e infatti sposare il vicino di casa, quello lì ricco (LIDIA RAVERA – BAGNA I FIORI E ASPETTAMI).²

The writer recognised in the classic novel the merit of providing diverse female models for girls to identify with. The first interesting aspect of Ravera's statement concerns the «possibilità di scegliere», the chance for each girls to choose her personal role model based on their preferred attitude and style; beneath this apparently simple choice we can read an elementary form of agency, which is an act of self-definition following the process of identification. The second crucial aspect in Ravera's comment is directly connected to the act of choosing and regards the diversity of the proposed role models. In a book like *Little Women*, female characters are not just introduced in opposition to the male protagonists (in the form of «indistinto femminile»); on the contrary, they stand out as complex individuals. In this sense, Alcott's book anticipates an attention to diversity that will constitute a central point in postfeminist aesthetics (GAMBLE 2001, 41). When it comes to postfeminism, the term 'diversity' is quite problematic and has been often criticised by feminist scholars. For those who have pointed out how postfeminism is nothing more than a privilege for western women (GREER 1999; HOOKS 2000) the word is not synonymous with 'inclusivity', but addresses instead a commercial diversification of targets and consumers. While discussing the decision to re-write *Little Women*, Lidia Ravera does not take into consideration the problematic aspects of postfeminism, preferring to focus on the act of self-determination and self-identification implied in Alcott's novel; as little girls, young readers become passionate («ci siamo appassionate») about the possibility of choosing their own character (and thereby their own future), which, as already mentioned, stands as a basic introduction to the concepts of agency and responsibility (MANN 1994).

Jo March and Giò Lazzarini: from the story of a family to the story of the individual

In *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* Giò works as an operator answering phonecalls for the commercial television station *Canale 5*; she introduces herself as «postmoderna»³ (RAVERA 1986, 7) and a person difficult to label. The reference to postmodernism made in relation to the protagonist in the very opening of the novel confirms the interpretation of this re-writing as a postfeminist version of the classic. The notions of 'postmodernism' and 'postfeminism' have been often discussed together by feminist critics (GAMBLE 2001, 48; BROOKS 1997, 36), and not only because of their similar etymologies (the idea of coming *post*, after other systems of thought). According to Gamble, the difficulties concerning their definition come with the shared aim of disrupting universalising patterns of thought and consequently generating a pluralistic epistemology (53). In this regard, the idea of gender as a performance, rather than a biological feature, can be addressed in the postfeminist deconstructive approach (GAMBLE 2001, 42). Gender and certain gender-related stereotypes are elements that both Alcott and Ravera play with in their description of Jo (Giò in the Italian version), although they never question the protagonists' heterosexuality. In *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* her physical posture as well as her attitude cannot be described as stereotypically feminine:

Muovo troppo le braccia e non ho simpatia per le borsette. Esigo scarpe che non si alzino a terra più di due centimetri e, siccome sono alta, tendo a incurvare leggermente le spalle [...].

Non ho simpatia per i profumi che vadano al di là della cara vecchia saponetta inglese e considero la depilazione mediante ceretta calda una pratica nettamente precivile (13).⁴

In the original novel by Alcott, we find a similar paragraph where Jo March also describes herself in the first person:

I hate to think I have got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns [...]. It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boys' games, and work,

and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy [...]
(ALCOTT 1989, 3).

When introducing the readers to her job, the Italian Giò makes another significant statement about herself as a woman:

Il fatto che io sia bella, per esempio, le attrae e le urta [le colleghe], ma soprattutto le sconcerta: le belle, qui, in genere, sono addette a compiti più prestigiosi.

[...] Nessuna bella ragazza risponde al telefono. [...] Non voglio essere promossa da soldato semplice a pupa del sergente. Aspiro direttamente a un posto da generale. E in attesa della nomina preferisco fare la guardia a un telefono, piuttosto che ricorrere ai miei attributi femminili (RAVERA 1986, 92-93).⁵

Giò assumes a critical position toward the new feminine ideal promoted by Italian television, more specifically by *Canale 5*, a broadcasting channel owned by Silvio Berlusconi and populated by hypersexualised adolescent girls (HIPKINS 2015; CUTER 2017; MARINI-MAIO 2017); by criticising women who adhered to the model proposed by the Italian capitalistic culture, Giò is caught into a mechanism that has been defined by Angela McRobbie as «double entanglement», because she feels empowered by taking a distance from those girls that she intellectually and politically dislikes (McROBBIE 2009, 12). This attitude will also distinguish the comedians hosting the television show *La tv delle ragazze*, broadcasted on Rai Tre between 1988 and 1989; Serena Dandini and her co-hosts will openly criticise «the commodified girls of the society of the spectacle», an approach that can be regarded as postfeminist, as much as the one shown by Giò in Ravera's novel (MARINI-MAIO 2017). Furthermore – for the personal development of the main character – it is relevant to consider how, at the beginning of the story, Ravera's protagonist explicitly refuses to adhere to that mainstream feminine model by using her attractive body to her own advantage («i miei attributi femminili»), a position that she will reconsider later in the novel.

In *Bagna i fiori e aspettami*, the other Lazzarini sisters are also briefly introduced in the first pages by adapting the original idiosyncrasies of the

classic characters into a modern version transposed into the Italian eighties. Margherita is a secretary in a school with quite modest dreams of love; Amelia, the youngest, is ambitious, and dreams of a husband with «una casa in Sardegna e una barca per arrivarci» (RAVERA 1986, 3).⁶ Finally, Elisabetta is «una tosse continua» (ibid. 3),⁷ superficially connecting this character to the weak Beth, destined to die in the original novel. Further on in the book, another description of the sisters portrays them as consumers, their differences and individualities represented through the objects bought by their mother for each daughter: «golfini di alpaca, scarpe inglesi, mutandine di pizzo e romanzi di Adelphi» (ibid. 10).⁸

The ways in which the objects are described in the novel is often in relation to women's identities, another aspect that reveals Ravera's postfeminist approach in the rewriting of Alcott's classic. Within postfeminist theory, objects – and consumption in general – represent a source of power and choice (GENZ and BRABON 2018), although this very entanglement with mass culture and consumerism has been the most criticised aspect of the theory. Germaine Greer aptly summarises the criticism levelled against postfeminism by other feminist scholars when she defines it as «nothing more than a market-led phenomenon» (in GAMBLE 2001, 42). Greer explained how postfeminist's «assurance to women that they can 'have it all' – a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life – actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion and convenience food» (42). In 1986, when Ravera attended to her rewriting of *Little Women*, the influence of brands and advertising was slowly entering literary territory. This phenomenon would increase towards the end of the decade and reach its highest point in the nineties, with the anthology of short stories *Gioventù cannibale*, published by Einaudi in 1996 (MONDELLO 2017).

Besides a few shared aspects, Jo and her Italian literary twin also present several differences that are worth mentioning. Firstly, Giò Lazzarini is not part of a choral system like the March sisters could be; she is mainly on the run on her own, although her thoughts sometimes return home to her mother and the other girls, waiting in Rome. It is significant to consider how in Ferrante's novel *L'amica geniale* (2011), the reference to *Little Women* is introduced to symbolically reflect the story of Lila and Elena and their mutual support, a

representation of solidarity among women which also recalls the practice of *entrustment* theorised in the seventies (COLLINA 2018).

In Ravera's rewriting, the description of the Lazzarini family, with its matriarchal dynamics, is introduced by the writer just like a detail taken from the classic, a more-than-symbolic element with the potential of a statement. The individualism of Ravera's Giò compared to Alcott's original is evident also from a quick comparison between the paratextual elements of the classic and its rewriting. In almost every edition ever published of Alcott's *Little Women*, the family is represented as a unity and the four sisters are always presented together on the book cover. In Ravera's *Bagna i Fiori e Aspettami*, Giò stands alone (see Image 1); she is represented with a short haircut, as a reference to the classic version of the novel, and a fashionable masculine outfit that recalls certain women's magazines of the eighties or the girls' board game *Gira la Moda* (*Fashion wheel*), produced by MB and distributed in Italy since 1984. The protagonist's silhouette stands as an icon for neofeminist statements of 'empowerment' and 'self-fulfillment', consistent with the rhetoric of neo-liberalism that unites consumerist culture and individualist values (GENZ and BRABON 2018, 105-118; CUTER 2017).



Image 1

Another substantial difference between the original Jo and her Italian version is in the element of writing. While occupying a key role in Jo March's life, in Ravera's version it disappears almost completely. Giò Lazzarini is less complex than the original character created by Alcott. Her agency is all turned toward the outside world, while Jo March uses writing as a tool for self-reflection and interior growth. Writing is an activity that often recurs in female coming-of-age stories, in particular in what Fortini and Bono described as *the novel of becoming*⁹ (FORTINI AND BONO 2007). In these kinds of stories, writing is used by the female protagonist as a tool for self-reflection and self-discovery, compared to the male coming-of-age novel which «typically substitutes inner concentration and withdrawal for active accommodation and rebellion»

(LAZZARO-WEISS 1993, 97). Furthermore, for the original Jo March the act of writing is an emancipation tool through which she aims to gain the status of a genius, an attribute mainly reserved for men during the Romantic era.

Rewriting, reconsidering: making feminist fiction in the backlash of the seventies

Bagna i fiori e aspettami follows ten years after Ravera's debut novel. *Porci con le ali* – subtitled «diario sesso-politico di due adolescenti»¹⁰ (RAVERA 1976) – came out at a core moment for feminist activism in Italy and the success of the book allowed the writer to take part in the social and political discourse of the time. Following to the letter the feminist slogan 'the personal is political', the book aimed to challenge all the taboos around the subject of sex, sexual practice, sex education and sexual orientation within Italian society. The female protagonist of this novel, Antonia, is described in her sexual and political coming of age, culminating in the final recognition of the priority of the struggle against patriarchy over any other form of engagement (cfr. RAMPONI 1973). During the rewriting of *Little Women* in 1986, Ravera had the opportunity to reflect upon her political experience; in particular, the family element, which occupies a central position in the original novel, allows the Italian writer to establish a fictional dialogue between two generations of women through the characters of Giò (who is nineteen when the story takes place) and her mother (who is in her forties).

The two women seem to agree on the idea that beauty for women constitutes a burden rather than a privilege, although they react differently to it in the way they decide to hide it or use it to their own advantage. Talking about her childhood, Giò says:

Avevo cinque anni quando si parlava di liberazione dall'obbligo di essere graziose. Mia mamma regalava a tutte noi trenini e mitra spaziali. [...]. Portavamo capelli lunghi, sciolti sulle spalle, ma nessuno ce li spazzolava. Erano tempi diversi» (RAVERA 1986, 93).¹¹

The statement «erano tempi diversi» is introduced by the narrator as a way to distance herself from her mother's attitude toward beauty and femininity. In this regard, if on the one hand Giò introduced herself as not stereotypically feminine at the very beginning of the novel, on the other she will learn by the end of the story how femininity can be a source of empowerment. Contrary to those interpretations of the classic which underlined the queer aspects of Jo as a character (DOYLE 2005; PATRAKA 1993), Ravera saw in Alcott's protagonist a peculiar kind of femininity based on a strong and determined attitude, a model that matched the new idea of empowered woman promoted within the postfeminist aesthetics (MARASCO 2016, 117-118).

Giò steps into womanhood by learning the threat represented by the opposite sex. A woman's body can neither escape the male gaze nor men's unwanted physical approaches, like that of the stranger sitting beside her on the plane to Barcelona: «Mi tocca il gomito e mi annuncia che ho bisogno di mangiare» (ibid. 29);¹² or the man she meets on the bus while travelling to see her father: «mi tocca il vestito [...]. No, non voglio un passaggio né un caffè, né una guida per i caffè della Rambla. Voglio essere lasciata alle mie elucubrazioni» (ibid. 32).¹³ When she meets Mike, he is «il terzo uomo che si occupa di me oggi» (ibid. 35) and «odiosamente protettivo» (ibid. 38).¹⁴ Walking in the evening down the Spanish *Avenida*, Giò lets the reader know the discomfort caused by her own body: «cammino rigida, muovendo solo le pupille, la testa incassata in posizione di difesa dall'imprevisto maschio, nella lumachina portatile del colletto rialzato a nascondere bocca e curve» (ibid. 61).¹⁵ The novel is full of moments similar to these; in this story the protagonist is always introduced on the scene as a female body before being perceived as a person by the other characters. In one of the central scenes of the novel, Giò and Mike have been kidnapped by a rival group of gangsters and during the night one of them rapes Giò. This tragic episode is followed by a scene on the plane in which the use of irony, typical of the narrator, seems no less sharp: «Gegè [lo stupratore] riesce a palparmi un gomito strisciando rasente al finestrino. Ha un tocco inconfondibile: come se cercasse la clitoride nella piegatura del braccio» (ibid. 139).¹⁶ Commenting on this part of the novel years later for the launch of the second edition, Ravera herself admitted how in this book there is a desperate

attempt to laugh while recognising the horror (LIDIA RAVERA – BAGNA I FIORI E ASPETTAMI).

Through the dangers and the obstacles that Giò has to face in *Bagna i fiori e aspettami*, Ravera highlights the persistence of gender-based violence and abuse in a society that continues to objectify women's bodies despite all their political achievements. Ravera's reconsideration of past political experiences has already been observed by Hanna Serkowska; analysing the short story *Per funghi*, published in the same year as *Bagna i fiori e aspettami*, she observed how «nell'ottica della Ravera il femminismo politicizzato non sia valso a nulla, scontratosi con le vecchie, solide e evidentemente insuperabili barriere biologiche» (SERKOWSKA 2008, 149-158).¹⁷ In this regard, Susan Faludi's observation that postfeminism constitutes the backlash itself seems quite appropriate, especially considering that its main characteristic lies in the ability to define itself as an ironic critique of the feminist movement rather than a hostile response to it (in GAMBLE 2001, 38).

Aware of the dangers as well as the effects of her beauty on men, by the end of the novel Giò learns how to use her attractiveness to help herself out of difficult situations, as in the episode with the taxi driver in Barcelona («Ho cercato di convincere quello che mi ha poi accompagnata all'albergo che 50 dollari interi erano troppi per lui [...]. Mi sono lasciata palpare il seno»¹⁸) (RAVERA 1986, 69). Transitioning toward a postfeminist aesthetic, Ravera plays with the structure of the coming-of-age novel and bends it into a new shape which does not involve a change in social status for the main character, nor her recognition as part of a wider community of women. The individualistic attitude accompanies Giò from the opening until the end of the novel; what really changes in her is the understanding of her personal agency as a woman. At this point it is relevant to observe how the development of Ravera's protagonist appears as problematic as postfeminism itself. In her study of female agency, Patricia Mann argued that «women had long been aware of a male "sexual gaze" always ready to eroticize their presence» (MANN 1994, 9); the patriarchal system of values helped to develop gendered forms of social and sexual agency, and while male sexual agency has always been identified with desire, within this system of values women were given responsibility for recognizing this desire and consequently encouraging or avoiding it. Although the knowing use of this

‘power’ might help the individual in overcoming specific situations (such as that with the taxi driver for Giò), it still remains within the patriarchal hierarchies and structures without moving toward any form of liberation for women as an oppressed group.

In nineteenth-century fiction the options for female characters were only negative ones; either having to inhabit a repressive marriage or closing themselves into inwardness, a decision that often coincided with self-destruction, as for Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina (FELSKI 1989, 128-129). Itself a nineteenth-century story, *Little Women* ends with a series of marriages, even for the reluctant Jo. Feminist readers agree in their consideration of Jo’s marriage as a form of censorship for a character whose identity appears to be queer from the very beginning. While approaching Alcott’s classic, is relevant to keep in mind «how what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in a culture is constructed in terms of hegemony, of a cultural consensus about dominant values which produces overt restrictions» (PATRAKA 1993, 7). The disappointing ending of Alcott’s novel becomes, at this point, the only possible ending, probably the most convenient compromise for young women living at that specific time. This interpretation is supported by Alcott’s own revelation of her plan to portray Jo at the end of the novel as a «literary spinster» (SHOWALTER 1989, XIX), a destiny that she had to change for a more traditional marital ending owing to reader pressure on the publisher. Jo, nonetheless, does not marry for love: she marries out of intellectual affinity and for economic interest, which constitutes a «realistic feminist framework» for Alcott’s time (ibid. XXIII).

As already mentioned, Ravera’s *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* does not end with a marriage nor with a suicide: the spectacular closing of the book, with the sudden appearance of Giò’s mother and sisters armed with guns and ready to defeat the gangsters in order to reunite the family, overthrows the classical epilogue in which the female characters are mainly waiting for events to happen to them. The very same figure of the absent father in Alcott’s novel is in Ravera’s version someone to go to, rather than someone to be waiting for. The structure of the female coming-of-age story is replaced in this rewriting with a postfeminist version, projecting women’s agency toward the outside world and enriching the narrator’s voice with mass-cultural references. In this, as stated

by Felski, literature is used as an instrument of criticism and opposition against patriarchal representation of gender and social roles (FELSKI 1989, 128-129).

Bagna i fiori e aspettami occupies a transitional position in the evolution of feminist fiction in Italy. While on the one hand it represents the prevailing mood of disillusionment and backlash following the experiences of the seventies, it also stands as a link to the new feminist approaches of the nineties which only a few years later would blend mainstream and individualised forms of feminism into a «power feminism» (or Girl Power) that is «unapologetically sexual», «free-thinking», «pleasure-loving» and «self-assertive» (WOLF 1994, 149 -180; see also CUTER 2017). Ravera's protagonist, coherently with the whole novel, is halfway between openly engaged feminism (which refuses stereotyped femininity) and an individualistic, assertive attitude typical of the new economic environment (RICCI 2021, 76). In this, in *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* Giò appears to be moving toward a new model of femininity, that which will be advertised in girls' magazines after the seventies (MCROBBIE 1991, 55).

Conclusions

Ravera's reinterpretation of *Little Women* reflects upon the experiences of Italian feminist groups, recognising their importance and, at the same time, considering their limits. Giò Lazzarini, the Italian version of the classic's Jo March, is only nineteen years old at the beginning of the story. Until events related to the search for her own father involve her in a series of adventures across three continents, she has led a quiet life with her mother and her sisters in Rome and working as a secretary for a television station. The coming-of-age process accelerates as soon as the protagonist leaves home and faces the dangers and challenges awaiting her in the outside world as a woman. What can certainly be read as a novel of self-discovery (FELSKI 1989, 128-133) turns into something more complex when Giò understands herself not only as an individual but as a woman with specific agency. The succession of events will expose the protagonist to different forms of violence and sexual abuse at the hands of men, culminating in the rape scene that will take her virginity. Giò's reaction at this point is very significant: conscious of her attractiveness, she

starts using it to her own advantage by strategically turning the male gaze against the men who lay obstacles in her path.

Having left behind the political struggles of the seventies and the theoretical experiences of the early eighties, Ravera moves towards a postfeminist approach, which implies women's control of that very objectification criticised by the Italian writer, with the showbiz and porn industries becoming the main context of this new form of agency. Finally, Ravera's novel is also a recognition of the power of popular culture, where the reappropriation of female space starts with the language of the new media, with the aim of reaching a wider audience through the instruments of entertainment. Ten years later this attitude would be the core of third-wave feminism, internationally spreading the statements of 'Girl Power' (RICCI 2021, 76) through mainstream music, cinema and fashion.

Notes

¹ Among the many, see the theatre play *Little Women – the Tragedy* (1983) by the Lesbian Britches; the novel “Volevamo essere Jo” by Emilia Marasco (2016); and the Oscar-nominated film *Little Women* (2020) written and directed by Greta Gerwig.

² Translation into English: “Alcott criticised that feminine indistinctness, she showed four characters and we, as little girls, loved the idea of picking one of them, since one could be wise, one could be masculine and intellectual, one could be good (and therefore die young), and one could be flirtatious and seductive, and end up marrying the rich neighbour” (LIDIA RAVERA – BAGNA I FIORI E ASPETTAMI).

³ Translation into English: “postmodern” (RAVERA 1986, 7).

⁴ Translation into English: “I move my arms too much and I don’t like bags. I demand shoes that are no higher than two centimetres from the ground and, since I am tall, I tend to slightly curve my shoulders [...]. I don’t like perfumes apart from the good old English soap and I regard waxing epilation as a pre-civil practice” (RAVERA 1986, 13).

⁵ Translation into English: “The fact that I am good-looking, for instance, attracts and annoys them [the colleagues], but mainly it confuses them: good-looking girls, here, generally, are given more prestigious roles.[...] Good-looking girls don’t answer the phone. [...] I don’t want to be upgraded from being a simple soldier to being the sergeant’s babe. I aim to be a general. And while I wait for this role to be offered to me, I prefer to guard the phone, rather than using my feminine attributes.” (RAVERA 1986, 92-93).

⁶ Translation into English: “A house in Sardinia and a boat to get there” (RAVERA 1986, 3).

⁷ Translation into English: “A continuous coughing” (Ivi).

⁸ Translation into English: “alpaca pullover, English shoes, lace lingerie, novels published by Adelphi” (ibid., 10).

⁹ Translation into English: “Novel of becoming” (FORTINI AND BONO 2007).

¹⁰ Translation into English: “The sexual-political diary of two adolescents” (RAVERA 1976).

¹¹ Translation into English: “I was five years old when they used to talk about liberation from the obligation of being cute. My mother used to give us little trains and space-guns as presents. They were different times” (ibid., 93).

¹² Translation into English: “He touches my elbow and he lets me know I need to eat” (ibid., 29).

¹³ Translation into English: “He touches my dress [...]. No, I don’t want a ride nor a coffee, nor a guide through the Ramblas cafes. I want to be left alone to my thoughts” (ibid., 32).

¹⁴ Translation into English: “the third man who looks after me today” (ibid., 35); “annoyingly protective” (ibid., 38).

¹⁵ Translation into English: “I walk stiff, moving only the eyes’ pupils, my head retired in a defensive position from the unpredictable male, the snail-like collar lifted up to hide lips and curves” (ibid., 61).

¹⁶ Translation into English: “Gegè [the rapist] manages to touch my elbow by moving his hand along the window. He has an unmistakable touch: as if he was looking for the clitoris in the arm’s bend” (ibid., 139).

¹⁷ Translation into English: “while for Irigaray and Diotima thinkers the female body was the source of writing, for Ravera body and physiology are a source of torment” (SERKOWSKA 2008, 149-158).

¹⁸ Translation into English: “I have been trying to persuade the man who drove me back to the hotel that 50 dollars was too much for him [...]. I let him touch my breast” (RAVERA 1986, 69).

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