Dacia Maraini

Woman at War

Donna in guerra

Presented by: Matteo Heilbrun

In Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra*, the war does not begin for Vannina, the epistolary novel's narrator and protagonist, when she abandons her husband and joins a group of young people engaged in a revolutionary struggle against the Italian state and global capitalism; the war begins in the home. The novel provides a stark assessment of a country rotten from the roots upward, in which boys are taught from a young age to hurt women and girls are taught to accept male violence as natural. The family, the school, work, and married life all reproduce this dynamic of brutality. We might expect this novel, published in 1975 in the middle of the Years of Lead in Italy and set in 1970 in the aftermath of May '68, to find hope in the various expressions of collective activism that at the time were immensely popular: the students' movement, labor activism in the wake of the Hot Autumn of 1969-70, and the Italian Communist Party at the peak of its popularity (the second-wave of feminism did not gain popularity in Italy until the early 70s, unfortunately for our protagonist). Instead, Maraini takes a critical stance against these movements, suggesting that they perpetuate the culture of violence against women learned in the institutions they aim to overthrow. The only hope in this novel comes to Vannina as a desperate and hard-earned freedom, attained after destroying her life and finding herself utterly alone.

The novel begins with Vannina and Giacinto, a childless married couple, on vacation on the island of Addis, a fictionalized Ischia, in August 1970. The couple simulate an almost prehistoric familial division of labor, as Giacinto spends every morning fishing in the Bay of Naples while Vannina tidies the house, buys and prepares food, does the laundry, tends to the garden, and generally completes a nearly infinite list of chores that she dutifully notes in her diary, which, along with a few letters, composes the entirety of the novel. Vannina even cooks the bounty that Giacinto brings home from his fishing outings. The problem with this hunter-gatherer division of labor is that Giacinto's work is in fact leisure, while Vannina's labor is just that.

Over the course of their weeks on the island, Vannina and Giacinto befriend a group of young people who they eventually learn are left-wing activists. Among these activists is Suna, the daughter of a Turkish arms dealer who has limited use of her legs and uses crutches because of a childhood sickness, and, unlike the modest Vannina, lives her sexuality loudly and publicly. She informs Vannina early in their friendship that she is bisexual, and asks Vannina if she ever has or ever would sleep with a woman. She guesses correctly that Vannina and Giacinto have an unfulfilled sex life, and urges Vannina to leave him.

Suna eventually persuades Vannina to come spend time with her and her activist group in Naples before Vannina has to return home later in September to resume her job as a schoolteacher. In Naples, Vannina becomes more involved in the revolutionary group's activities, and finds herself in risky situations of increasing illegality. Vannina and Suna also find themselves engaged in the free-

love ethos of the movement, as they become embroiled in complicated relationships with men and with each other. They endure together the sexist, homophobic, and chauvinistic behavior of the male leaders of the movement, who, despite their left-wing politics, are only slightly more enlightened than the men who terrorize Vannina and Suna in the streets, on the bus, and at work.

Vannina returns home and finds her old life untenable. She resents Giacinto's childish inability to contribute to domestic work, his selfish lovemaking, and his possessive attitude. She wakes one night to find Giacinto attempting to forcibly impregnate her in her sleep. At school, she witnesses in horror a group of boys and girls simulating a gang rape while the rest of the class cheers. Vannina learns that she is pregnant, and decides to get an abortion and leave Giacinto.

Maraini's novel sketches a process of coming to consciousness that Luisa Passerini's scholarship would later reveal to have been common among women at the time: that the students' movement frequently functioned as a conflictual step toward the acquisition of the feminist consciousness which would find form in the radical feminism of the mid-70s in Italy. Passerini characterizes the *doppio impegno*, or "double consciousness" between Marxist and feminist activism, as consisting of not parallel but clashing political projects, if not in theory then in practice. Passerini concludes that the former often impeded the latter, and that many feminists could only undertake the feminist struggle after leaving the male dominated students' movement.

Vannina's experience in the students' movement indeed suggests that its vision of revolution would only perpetuate the mentalities of the oppressor unless it were to entail a cultural revolution as well, one that started with the family and continued in school and in the workplace. The degree to which Vannina and Suna are mistreated within a movement run by deeply sexist, homophobic, and chauvinistic men suggests that if this movement were to succeed in its revolutionary aims, then women like Vannina and Suna would only be marginally better off under this new dictatorship of the proletariat. Equality for women and sexual minorities could only emerge from a movement aimed to rethink the family and reimagine childhood education radically enough to catalyze broad cultural change. *Donna in guerra* allows us to excavate an expansive vision of such a political movement, one in which the struggle in the workplace, the home, and the school must necessarily work together toward the ideal of a better world.

References

Passerini, Luisa. Storie di donne e femministe. Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991.

LANGUAGE: Italian/Italiano

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