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## Starvation, Binging and Disorderly Eating in Global Women's Writing

Inanición, atracones y trastornos de la conducta alimentaria en la escritura de mujeres contemporánea

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From the biblical scene of Eve and the apple to the hunger strikes of the British suffragettes in the late nineteenth century, up to contemporary food-related diseases, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, as well as disorderly eating<sup>1</sup>, feminine nutrition, starvation, and binging have been read often as metaphors of something else: love and affection, sex and promiscuity, hedonism and self-control, as well as social unease and self-empowerment. As Annie Fursland reminds us in her 1986 essay, "women's relationship with food is all too often ambivalent" (15)<sup>2</sup>, and often transcends solely nutritional concerns. Patricia McEachern (1998), author of one of the first analyses on the representation of anorexia in French literature, echoes Fursland's remarks, as do Anne Krugovoy Silver in *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002) and Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran in *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female*

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<sup>1</sup> With the expression "disorderly eating" in this article we refer to a spectrum between conventional eating habits and an eating disorder which may include symptoms and behaviours of anorexia, bulimia or binge eating, but at a lesser frequency or lower level of severity. Disorderly eating is not defined in the DSM-V (2013).

<sup>2</sup> The essay was written in the 1980s, yet Fursland's argument is still central to understand the complex dynamics behind the exponential rise of number of people, mainly women, affected by eating disorders.

*Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing* (2003). According to McEachern, this allegorical and complicated relationship between women and food in Western thought can be traced to *Genesis*: “Eve ate the apple and thereby original sin was committed. The first woman was the original and the quintessential disorderly eater” (1). By using the expression “disorderly eater,”<sup>3</sup> McEachern refers to eating disorders as the most explicit example of women’s multifaceted relationship with food. Thus, anorexia and bulimia, as well as other food-related psychopathologies, such as binge eating and several less well-known syndromes, are not only emblematic of contemporary times – they are, as Richard Gordon (1990) said in the early 1990s, a growing and enigmatic “epidemic” – but they also represent the most explicit outcome in the metaphorical relationship between women and food<sup>4</sup>; As Fursland notes: “I have been under the misapprehension all my life that Eve tempted Adam to eat the apple and God punished her for this. I now discover the serpent tempted Eve and all she did was share the fruit with her male companion” (15). In other words, women’s relationship with food has been (mis)interpreted since the very beginning of Western history, often erroneously equating eating with shame, sin, and transgression. Therefore, writing about women’s relationship with food and in particular on eating disorders and disorderly eating in fiction, autobiographies and accounts is not simply about describing the symptoms of these pathologies and the daily routine of the protagonists; it also means writing about complex issues of identity and on the self, the female body, social norms and behaviours and reflecting on women’s anxieties towards their gender roles. As captured by this special issue of *Quaderns de filologia*, the portrayal of eating disorders and disorderly eating in women’s writing from around the world engages with these complex issues, and the way women have discussed their anxieties towards identities and social roles through their relationship with body and food.

<sup>3</sup> For this expression to frame the fictional depiction of troubled relationship with body and food in women’s writing, see also Lilian Furst and Peter W. Graham, *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment* (1992).

<sup>4</sup> It all started with *Eve’s Sinful Bite*, as Claudia Bernardi, Francesca Calamita and Daniele DeFeo (2020) have also recently suggested in a co-edited volume on food and women in Italian literature, culture and society.

## 1. Feminism and eating disorders

Feminist scholars of the 1980s-90s, such as Susie Orbach (1978; 1983), Marilyn Lawrence (1984), Kim Chernin (1986), and Morag McSween (1993), suggest that eating disorders and troubled relationships with food are strategies adopted by women as a form of self-expression; therefore anorexia, bulimia, and other complex pathologies related to body and food become an alternative and self-destructive means of communication that nevertheless gives them the opportunity to replace the conventional verbal language they are unable to use to frame issues of identity and the self. In this light, eating disorders may also (controversially) be self-empowering: while they are self-destructive, they offer an “opportunity” to say what cannot be expressed in words. This is the framework which Sofia Medina applies to her analysis of the autobiographical work *Hunger: A Memoir of My Body* by Roxane Gay; in her article she analyses how food and eating disorders symbolise survival tools as they, not only enable the creation of an own language through which women can express their opposition to an oppressive system, but also, represent a way of externalizing the experience of traumatic situations. Medina’s interpretations echo the understanding of eating disorders also by renowned psychiatrist Mara Selvini Palazzoli in *L'anoressia mentale* [Mental Anorexia] (1963)<sup>5</sup>. Palazzoli sees the origin of these pathologies in societal expectations and cultural norms placed on women by patriarchal authority of post-war times. In other words, according to Palazzoli, Orbach, Lawrence, Chernin, and McSween, eating disorders function as a controversial way to put identities into discussion as well as women’s traditional social roles as assigned by the patriarchal order. According to Lawrence, “anorexia is a problem crucially related to women’s psychology, which is related in turn to women’s way of being in the world” (13). From different disciplinary perspectives and with different approaches, all these scholars suggest that women’s troubled relationship with food and

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<sup>5</sup> One chapter of *L'anoressia mentale* considered the rapid increase of anorexia among young women in the 1950s and early 1960s. The 1970s–80s feminist perspectives on eating disorders were anticipated by Palazzoli’s pioneering study: “Today, in fact, women are expected to be beautiful, smart and well-groomed and to devote a great deal of time to their personal appearance even while in business or the professions. They must have a career and yet be romantic, tender and sweet, and in the marriage play the part of the ideal wife cum mistress and cum mother who puts away her hard-earned diploma to wash nappies and perform other menial chores”. For the original Italian text see Mara Selvini Palazzoli, *L'anoressia mentale*, 75-79; for its translation in to English see Mara Selvini Palazzoli, *Self-starvation: from Individual to Family Therapy in the Treatment of Anorexia Nervosa* (trans by Arnold Pomerans), 35.

the body do not fall into the category of the “traditional” illnesses but rather should be considered as complex pathologies where sickness, cultural context and women’s psychology come together. In her autobiographical novel, *Volevo essere una farfalla* [I Wanted to Be a Butterfly] (2011), Michela Marzano, an Italian academic, philosopher and essayist, briefly touches on this point by referring to her father, who did not understand the complex socio-cultural mechanism which shapes the development of her daughter’s pathology: “[He] believes that anorexia is like a cold that you catch outside if you are not covered up enough. [...] But when will this battle end?”<sup>6</sup>. Just as in many feminist scholars’ readings of eating disorders, Marzano’s anorexia is not a “traditional” disease, as her father believes, but a long and complex “battle” against herself, her family environment, those who do not feed her constant hunger for affection, her demanding academic career, and the expectations placed on women by contemporary society. In Orbach’s words, “the anorexic is in protest at her conditions” (1983: 82-83), and Marzano in *Volevo essere una farfalla*, like many other protagonists of global women’s writing, is in protest at her socio-cultural role. Other psychological approaches to the representations of eating disorders have also been used, this is the case of the article by Manuel Asensi Perez and Carla Asensi Richart. In this text the authors deal with feeding problems in the light of what is known in Lacanian terms as the “graph of desire”. This dates from the years 1958-59 when Jacques Lacan gave his seminar on *Desire and its Interpretation*, currently published as number 6 of the Seminar in the official edition of Jacques-Alain Miller in 2013. It appears again in the essay “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l’inconscient freudien”, published in 1966 in his book *Écrits*. Lacan’s topologies have the virtue of clarifying pathological phenomena and shedding light on them, as well as the structure of the personality. An unavoidable place of passage is the Freudian theory of the oral drive, which constitutes the discovery of the central problem of this pathological phenomenon, and the basis on which all subsequent psychoanalytic developments are based.

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<sup>6</sup> Our own translation. For the original extract see: “[Mio padre] immagina che l’anoressia sia come un raffreddore che si prende per strada se non ci si copre bene. Ma quando finirà questa [...] battaglia?”. Marzano, *Volevo essere una farfalla. Come l’anoressia mi ha insegnato a vivere* 21 and 29.

## 2. Anorexia and bulimia in late nineteenth-century

Historians and scholars of cultural and gender studies, such as Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli and Fiorenza Tarozzi (2003)<sup>7</sup>, Lucia Re (2005)<sup>8</sup> and Anna Colella (2003) have investigated the fascinating relationship between woman and food in several historical periods and how literature and arts portray this complex link. In line with feminist scholars of the 1980s and 1990s, their analyses suggest that preparing, eating, or refusing food offer a means to express intimate feelings through non-verbal communication. In her monograph, Colella (2003) focuses on middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century and how the socio-cultural expectations placed on them contributed to the development of pathological relationship with food, starvation, and binging. Similar to Joan Jacob Brumberg's investigation (1998) on eating disorders in the bourgeois Victorian context, Colella points out that Italian middle-class women were asked to restrict their diets in order to conform to the ideal femininity of the time and to differentiate themselves from the lower classes. They were required to suppress their appetite and to nourish themselves with only light food, such as milk, vegetables, and soup rather than meat (which was considered a masculine food in the collective imaginary of the era). However, at the same time, women were expected to perform their traditional duties as "feeders of the family," to cook sophisticated meals or manage the servants in preparing a delicious menu for their husband, children, and guests.

This focus on women's roles in food preparation animates *La virtù di Checchina* [Checchina's Virtue] (1884) by Neapolitan writer Matilde Serao, in which the protagonist is in charge of preparing a delicious meal with her servant Susanna to please her husband and the marquis invited as a guest to their house. In this short story, Checchina expresses her anxieties as a bourgeois woman of the time and as an unhappy wife destined to serve her husband and his wishes through her uneasy relationship with food preparation. The reader does not know how much Checchina eats during the sumptuous meal prepared for the marquis, but does know the time and effort she puts in pre-

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli and Fiorenza Tarozzi's *Donne e cibo* [Women and Food] deals with the history of food from a gendered perspective. Their analysis starts with Eve's scene and finishes in the nineteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> Muzzarelli and Re edited a book on women and food in arts and literature. In particular, Re's chapter analyses the "anorexic" behavior of the unnamed protagonist of Paola Masino's *Nascita e Morte della Massaia* [Birth and Death of the Housewife] (1945).

paring the perfect dishes to display her “virtuosity” as perfect middle-class woman. Furthermore, while the reader does not witness Checchina’s consumption at the table, they are aware that after the meal she releases her frustration by playing with the chestnuts’ skins, which were left on the dinner table after the meal. As Brumberg suggests, bourgeois society generated a variety of anxieties about food and eating, especially among women and girls. Where food was plentiful and domesticity venerated, eating became a social undertaking with plenty of related behavioural expectations. Displays of appetite were particularly challenging for young women, who understood the act of eating in public to be both a sign of greedy sexuality and an indication of lack of self-restraint. Eating was important because food was an analogue of the self, and it required women to display their virtues (178). Therefore, middle-class women were used to preparing food without eating some categories of dishes, constantly restraining themselves to show their self-control. Eating recalled sexual appetites, and as a consequence, employing bird-like eating attitudes in public was considered a remarkable sign of dignity, pureness, and control. Furthermore, a light diet was seen as a “remedy” to women’s naturally voracious behaviour and their “unsteady nature”. In late-nineteenth-century Italy, Spain and France patriarchal society, Catholic ideology and medical science agreed that “constraining” was the key to control women, and associated it to a specific social class: the bourgeoisie. Limited by their social position, “deprived” by food, and controlled for their “natural” nervous behavior, middle-class women were trapped by the cultural notions about womanhood and, in particular, motherhood. Spinsters and mistresses as well as highly-educated women fell in the category of the unconventional femininity. The so-called ethereal “angel of the house” was the suggested model for wives to emulate. And with it also comes the glamourization of non-eating, starvation, purging, and self-restraint. In this light, Checchina’s anxiety with the dinner for the marquis, which is in turn related to her performance as a perfect middle-class host, is symptomatic of the social expectations placed on her by the society of the time. Similarly The popular late-nineteenth-century writer Marchesa Colombi (pseudonym of Maria Antonietta Torriani), in her 1885 novel *Un matrimonio in provincia* [A Small-Town Marriage], reveals that women’s complex relationship with body and food where already one of the main concerns of women’s writing of the time and served as a means to negotiate their identities and personal or political anxieties (Bernardi et al, 2). *A Small-Town Marriage* (1885) ends with a remarkable comment by Denza, the protagonist: “The thing is, I am gaining weight” (195), thus revealing

the strong link between eating and emotions as well as their effects on the body (Calamita, 2015). Denza, a young and intelligent girl, had been forced to marry a forty-year-old notary, whom she is neither in love with nor attracted to; however, she accepts his proposal in order to honour her family's wishes to see her married. Thanks to her final remark, readers understand not only her legitimate frustration with her unhappy marriage, but also how her disappointment towards her life shapes her relationship with food. Her body, which has changed since her wedding day, becomes the tangible proof of her frustration. By gaining weight, Denza's body communicates a non-verbal message about her silent battle against a social role that has trapped her into an undesired marriage and life (Bernardi et al., 3). As Susie Orbach wrote of women affected by bulimia and binge eating disorders, "[t]he resulting fat has the function of making the space for which women crave" (1978: 25), and with her more rounded body Denza looks for some freedom and empowerment in a self-harming way, as many other protagonists of western literature of *fin de siècle*. Even if written one century later in the 1980s, *Óxido de Carmen* and *Lumpérica* show patriarchal violence that mutilate body and psychological balance of women through eating behaviour control and desire-inhibiting restrictions, similarly to those described in Serao and Colombi's works. From the novel by Ana María del Río, Marina Gay Illa delves into community identity ties established around the act of feeding and the processes of identity destruction that the author recounts to the extreme, through the anorexia that Carmen suffers, who finally finds herself in a purgatory pit, from which she only manages to get out by disappearing. From the work of Diamela Eltit, *Lumpérica*, Gay Illa analyses the way of create identity that the author offers which doesn't involve an inescapable destiny of a blurred silhouette until its extinction, but a deformed figure, an elected mutation and animalization of female identity. In *Lumpérica* we can see the image of existence on the margin and its struggle to take space, the revelation of recognizing themselves on their own terms.

### 3. Narratives of eating disorders and disorderly eating in literary context

The Canadian author Margaret Atwood has often employed her female characters and their relationship with food as a means through which condemn what women suffer. Nonetheless, it was in her first novel *The Edible Woman*

(1969) in which she took this idea to the extreme and used the eating disorder that the protagonist suffers, beginning with anorexia and ending with a type of cannibalism as she is incapable of consuming food, to denounce the social pressure and loss of identity that women endure. In her article Sofia Duarte argues that the rejection the protagonist feels towards food, specially the one that has food origin, can be studied from the perspective of animal studies and Carol J. Adams concept of the *absent referent* (1990). As Petra Bagley, Francesca Calamita and Kathryn Robson note in the introduction to *Starvation, Food Obsession and Identity: Eating Disorders in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2017), one of the main aims of the intense scholarly research on eating disorders in women's writing over the last few decades has been to explore how narratives of anorexia, bulimia, and other pathological relationships with body and food located in different cultural, linguistic and political contexts may relate to (and differ from) each other (1-17).<sup>9</sup> Eating disorders, including their latest example, orthorexia, unsurprisingly constitute a strong thematic trend in recent women's writing, across a range of genres and languages. As a consequence, the representation of eating disorders and disorderly eating is not limited to one interpretation but should be analysed across sexes, classes, generations, and ethnicities, as it is argued in the recent special issue of the *Journal of Romance Studies* edited by Shirley Jordan and Judith Still (2020)<sup>10</sup>. Analysing the representation of these pathologies requires cross-disciplinary approaches – such as psychology, anthropology, gender studies – and comparative literature methodology. As we have suggested with the examples of Marchesa Colombi's *Denza* and Matilde Serao's *Checchina*, women writers have depicted a series of anorexic and bulimic protagonists in their autobiographies and novels since the late nineteenth century; in these works, emotions, complex family backgrounds and interpersonal relationships, as well as socio-cultural factors, take centre stage. It is only since the 1980s that eating disorders were referred to with the appropriate terminology in autobiographies and fiction. For example, when Clara Sereni wrote her autobiographical work *Casalinghitudine* [Keeping House: A Novel in Recipes] in 1987, she described eating disorders and her complicated relationship with food, when she was an adolescent girl, in these terms:

<sup>9</sup> Their volume answers to these questions in European women's writing and find differences and similarities with particular attention to the Italian, French and German contexts.

<sup>10</sup> The special issue on eating disorder and disorderly eating offers a variety of articles on anorexia, bulimia and binge eating in contemporary women's writing by Heike Bartel, Francesca Calamita, Ruth Cruickshank, Abigail Lee Six, Shirley Jordan and Judith Still.



Al tempo della mia adolescenza il termine “anoressia” non era ancora di moda, forse per questo quel periodo di digiuni non ha avuto conseguenze gravi. Ma ero comunque sempre magrissima [...] e l'ultimo periodo di convivenza con i miei fu contrassegnato da un rifiuto del cibo radicale: vomitavo quasi tutto quello che mangiavo (70).

[When I was an adolescent the term “anorexia” was not yet fashionable; that must have been the reason why my fasting did not carry serious consequences. I was, however, always very thin and my last period of my life at home with my parents was marked by a radical refusal of food; I was throwing up almost everything I ate (71)].

Sereni is one of the first Italian women writers to use the word “anoressia [anorexia]” in her book, and since then the number of novels and autobiographies that present anorexic and bulimic characters have increased exponentially, as in other Western literary contexts, such as in French and German women's writing. As Calamita suggests in her 2015 monograph, Italian women's novels have described anorexic and bulimic protagonists since the late nineteenth century, but they did not label them as such until the late 1960s. As Nathalie Morello points out in “Anorexia, Hunger and Agency” (2017: 121-141), in French Studies, this new literary genre has been renamed “écriture féminine” (Meuret, 2006), playing with the word “feminine” and “faminine” and “écriture taille zero” (Meuret, 2007). Despite the growing numbers of autobiographies on this subject in Italian literature, however, fewer analyses had been carried out on the topic, hence the lack of a specific genre category for this type of narratives<sup>11</sup>. Following in the footsteps of French Studies, in 2017 Calamita proposed to use the expression *bulimanografie* [bulimanographies] as an umbrella term to define this new literary genre where bulimic and anorexic experiences, including disorderly eating, take centre stage in the Italian literary context. Similarly, as Leopoldo Domínguez Macías and Juan Manuel Martín point out in the article, a constant in Olga Grjasnowa's work is the representation of female figures who struggle between the vital need for points of reference and the desire to transcend limits, whether geographical, cultural or sexual. In her novel *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe* (2014), Grjasnowa presents a protagonist with principles and habits related to her body. These are the imprint of an insurmountable cultural memory, despite the displacement to a new spatial and cultural framework. Likewise, Grjasnowa shows how there are categories in the places of departure, but also in those of arrival,

<sup>11</sup> Among these exceptions are Grazia Menechella (2001) and Stefania Lucamante (2008).

which limit the capacity of the subjects to create new spaces for hybridization and definition of their identity.

#### 4. Women's writing on the other side of the Atlantic and eating disorders

As Laura P. Alonso Gallo reminds us, the main characters in some of the short stories *Historias del Silicon Valley* by H. Gil Guerrero (2019) are contemporary archetypes of the so-called useful and docile individual who appear to be asexual and beyond gender differences. While working for prestigious digital technology companies, these characters pursue optimal efficiency at the cost of personal time and healthy lifestyles. Gil Guerrero portrays a generation of young people whose system of communication in social relations fails as it is based on images (social media) and quick exchange of short messages (chats). Isolation leads these young to alienation. Her article analyses the circumstances emerging from the digital era that trigger depression, burnout, and alienation among young women, and how their relationship with food becomes abnormal and instable, resulting in their bodies being neglected through medication and compulsive eating.

As Maria Morelli points out, partly an erratic autobiography and partly a biographical mixture of anecdotes concerning the Suleri family, *Meatless Days* (1989) stands as a feminist account of Pakistan written with the aim of bringing the peripheral presence of its invisible women back to the centre. Divided into nine stand-alone chapters, the memoir interweaves feminist reflections with humorous and affectionate sketches of the author's family members and closest friends, whose private stories function as an interface with the official history of the nation. It is through the tension that arises from this constant negotiation between the personal and the political that Pakistani American literary critic and author Sara Suleri tries to forge her sense of individual identity. She does this through a decentered and ahistorical position as a Third World woman transplanted to the United States from where she can deconstruct the grand narrative of Pakistan by superimposing her matrilineal genealogy onto it. In her memoir Suleri sets herself the task of rewriting the stories of her (mostly female) family members against the genesis of the nation, in a move that makes private histories public, and public events a mere background to the narration.

According to Orbach, eating disorders of today are similar to “hysteria” in the nineteenth century: a “response to emotional distress” (1983: 4) and “a dramatic expression of the internal compromise wrought by western women” (1983: 4). If hysteria did not involve women’s obsession to transform their bodies in the way that anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating so frequently do, the pathologies nonetheless share deeply-rooted socio-cultural causes. Similarly, in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Susan Bordo quotes Orbach’s analysis frequently and examines eating disorders as a form of control in response to women’s complex social roles. Orbach’s *Hunger Strikes*, Bordo’s *Unbearable Weights*, and Chernin’s *The Hungry Self* extensively discuss facts and details of the kind portrayed in *Meatless Day* and *Historias del Silicon Valley*; disorderly eating in these accounts constitutes a desperate attempt to express through the protagonists’ body her unspoken feelings and to fill the emotional void created by their relationships, very much as a diagnosed present-day anorexic or bulimic might do.

## 5. Migrant women’s writing and eating disorders

As past and recent migration dynamics have helped to shape alternative identities, a new literary genre has also emerged: migrant women’s writing. This new literary wave has produced an extensive and diverse body of work which Lidia Curti labels as “diasporic literature,” thus referring to writings linked to the ex-colonies and those from other parts of the globe, including writings by children of migrants. Their marginal position, because of their countries of origin, race, and gender, is discussed in these autobiographical and fictional writings, which also address contemporary debates on immigration.

Kathryn Robson’s article explores obsessive appetites in Leïla Slimani’s *Chanson Douce* [Sweet Song], translated into English in the UK with the title *Lullaby* and in the US as *The Perfect Nanny*, and *Dans le jardin de l’ogre* [In the Ogre’s Garden], translated as *Adèle*. She draws on Lauren Berlant’s ideas on the connections between obsessive eating and obsessive sexuality in *Cruel Optimism*, highlighting how in Slimani’s work, eating disorders and sexual compulsions constitute repeated enactments of failed attachments and are triggered by a form of systemic trauma (which Berlant calls ‘crisis ordinariness’) rooted in socio-cultural alienation. The desperate quest for intimacy, in *Chanson douce*, and for anti-intimacy, in *Dans le jardin de l’ogre*, leads to self-destruction, figured in self-starvation, in damaging sexual relations, and

ultimately in murder. The reader, I argue, gets caught up in the destructive repetitions and in the desire to move beyond them to some sort of satisfying ending, which in these texts entails the brutal silencing of female desires and agency (written into the narratives from the very beginning). Thus reading here is shown to be bound up in the violence of cruel optimism and its obsessive appetites.

As in the case of Slimani, diasporic writers use often food scenes – preparation, consumption and/or rituals – to discuss their heritage and identity. This is not unique to “diasporic literature,” but, as a way to connect to a native country, it plays a central role in it. For example, Italian writer of Somali origins Igiaba Scego often recalls recipes from the African country in the short story “Dismatria” [Exmatriates] (2005) and in the novels *Rhoda* (2004) and *La mia casa è dove sono*. Furthermore, in the appendix of *Rhoda* as well as *La Nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* [The Nomad Who Loved Alfred Hitchcock] (2003), not only does Scego present some Somali recipes, but she also invites the Italian readers to establish physical contact with the “others,” by eating their food. In doing so, Scego attempts to make her Somali origins more visible through food habits and to share her heritage with Italian audience, thus attempting to reinforce connections among cultures. As Sandra Federici (2014) suggests about diasporic writing: “claims related to food [...] are a full-fledged request to be recognised, which could be defined as complete, and made up not only of physical, but also cultural and psychic elements, including undeclared or badly declared or unconscious demands related to affection”<sup>12</sup>. This interpretation also applies to Scego’s works. If food can be read as an instrument to build community and relations, to demonstrate love and affection among friends and family members, and to create new links between people, it can also be seen as demarcating differences among populations and reinforcing cultural stereotypes. In other words, food can be read as a powerful social “glue” in many contexts, but also as a strong marker of identity, a way to delineate boundaries rather than building cultural bridges. On this point, Peter Scholliers (2001) adds: “Because people absorb food, they seize the opportunity to demarcate their own and the other group. People

<sup>12</sup> “le rivendicazioni legate al cibo [...] costituiscono a tutti gli effetti una richiesta di riconoscimento che si potrebbe definire completo, composto di elementi non solo fisici, ma anche culturali e psichici, incluse indichiarate o mal dichiarate o inconscie istanze affettive (2).” My translation in the main body of the essay.

eating similar food are trustworthy, good, familiar, and safe; but people eating unusual food give rise to feelings of distrust, suspicion, and even disgust" (8)

## 6. Conclusion

In women's writing from around the world, anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and other atypical relationships with food that fall in the category of disorderly eating are problematic, paradoxical, harmful instruments of self-empowerment. On the one hand, they are depicted as complex diseases where several factors contribute to their development, including those influenced by society and family; on the other hand, they contribute to a process of self-discovery and transformation, thus fitting in the categories of the paradoxical diseases which are at the same time harmful and empowering, as feminist scholars of the 1980s-1990s frame them. Self-injuring through food becomes a metaphorical language which helps the main characters of the novels, autobiographies, and short stories to find a way to question the social constrictions and cultural contradictions inherent in women's position in contemporary culture.

The question of how to read and respond to narratives of eating disorders remains urgent in women's writing, including in migrant literature and "diasporic literature," as Curti labels it; in many narratives the anorexic, bulimic and disordered eating protagonists display their uneasiness with socio-cultural conventions and their bodies "become the vehicle for a whole range of expressions" (Orbach, 1983: 128). By controlling food intake through abnormal alimentary behaviour the characters gain some control over their lives; however, their utopian standards, including their weight goals, as in the case of anorexia, are often unachievable and lead to self-harm. Anorexia, bulimia, binge eating and other atypical relationships with food and the body have attracted interest not only for the threat they pose to women's and, more recently, men's health (Orbach, 2009), but also for the substantial corpus of creative works they have generated globally. Since the 1990s, in Western countries, medical doctors, psychologists, and academics have become more familiar with disordered eating habits, and forms of compulsive eating that manifest a new form of eating disorders, such as orthorexia, the obsession with confining one's diet to healthy foods, "clean eating" and "superfoods" (Donini, Marsili, Graziani, Imbriale, Cannella, 2004). Common people also discuss such topics regularly in non-conventional contexts, such as popular culture

and media. The adjectives “anorexic” and “bulimic” are often used inappropriately in TV shows and other pop-culture contexts, yet there is also much more awareness of them, which help to dismantle the glamourisation of these illnesses. These new changes have yet to be widely portrayed in *bulimanografie*, particularly men’s relationship with eating disorders and disorderly eating as well as the relationship between “new” food philosophies, such as veganism and vegetarianism, and their possible connection with anorexic and bulimic attitudes.<sup>13</sup> The research to be done in exploring the literary representations of eating disorders is far from being completed, and as guest editors, we hope this special issue of *Quaderns de Filologia* will be a good starting point for scholars interested in contributing to it.

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<sup>13</sup> Outside the context of Italian literature, see for example Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2007).

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