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Resisting the Mafia's Oppression Through Children's Literature

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Abstract

Attraverso l'analisi di quattro libri per l'infanzia ed adolescenza sulla mafia ed antimafia, questo articolo mette in risalto sia le funzioni narrative di tali racconti che quelle più propriamente sociali e culturali. Per l'analisi delle funzioni narrative, l'articolo si serve delle teorie strutturali di Vladimir Propp – soprattutto quelle relative alla persona drammatica dell'eroe e del "cattivo" – come delle teorie della narrazione del trauma. Queste ultime sono particolarmente favorevoli all'interpretazione degli orrori e tragedie causate dalla mafia nelle vite dei protagonisti. È proprio attraverso l'analisi delle funzioni narrative e letterarie che i racconti assumono il valore di testimonianze di una società che vuole cambiare sposando quei valori della legalità che possono creare una controcultura a quella mafiosa.

Introduction

In the 1980's, the mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, used the Sicilian two-wheel cart metaphor to describe the only possible way to fight *Cosa Nostra*, thus restoring Sicilian society: one wheel stood to represent the Italian state's institutions of law and order; the other the culture of lawfulness (Grant, 2021: 33). According to the

metaphor, only if the wheel of the culture of lawfulness works and pulls its weight can Sicily have a chance to resist the Mafia's power, which was on the rise at Orlando's time. After the Mafia murdered Sicily's governor Piersanti Mattarella (1/6/1980), the Region of Sicily passed Law N. 51, that called for "provvedimenti a favore delle scuole siciliane per contribuire allo sviluppo di una coscienza civile contro la criminalità mafiosa" (Santino, 2009: 384). The law was a first, necessary step toward the establishment and support of a culture of lawfulness. It required Sicilian schools to finance studies and research on the phenomenon of the Mafia in Sicily. The intent was that of educating students and citizens to better equip them not to cave into *Cosa Nostra's* power (Santino, 2009: 384). Following *Le stragi di Capaci e via d'Amelio*, the Minister of Public Education called for all Italian school districts to implement the culture of lawfulness in their curricula to establish "i valori irrinunciabili della libertà, dei principi insostituibili della legalità" (Santino, 2009: 384). As Nando Dalla Chiesa writes, "'l'educazione alla legalità' come filone distinto dalla tradizionale educazione civica (anche se con essa imparentato) nasce dunque fundamentalmente come educazione antimafiosa. La legalità è il diritto del più debole, l'argine alla prepotenza e alla violenza mafiosa" (2021: 82).

Although there is a whole field of studies dedicated to the culture of lawfulness and its application in Italian schools, my article focuses on another aspect of it, namely one articulated through children's literature. My selection's rationale lies in one scene in the film *Alla luce del sole* by Roberto Faenza (2005). Father Puglisi, a Catholic priest and Mafia martyr, begs a Cardinal to send an extra priest to his parish in Brancaccio, one of Palermo's most Mafia-stricken districts. To support his request, Father Puglisi presents his project: transforming his parish into a haven for all the district children, where children could learn about God and lawfulness. Father Puglisi's approach to fight the Mafia by educating the young to the concept of lawfulness was not different from that of Prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino (Ragone, 2016). However, how can a counterculture be articulated in a district like Brancaccio where, as Puglisi states, parents prefer their children work for *Cosa Nostra* than to go to school? How can such a paradigm shift take place in the hearts and minds of Brancaccio's inhabitants? Father Puglisi believed that children could work as catalysts for that change by challenging their parents' paradigms and reality tainted by the Mafia's power.

In the film, the character Rosario plays precisely that role. Although Rosario is a teenager already on the Mafia's payroll, he has a change of heart that will lead him to choose suicide over obedience to his father who is a *mafioso*. Somehow Puglisi's words empower Rosario. Then, he is able to step outside of the Mafia world he grew up in and embrace a different code of values antithetical to those of his father's, even at the cost of his own life. His dramatic decision begs the question: which rhetorical and emotional strategies empowered Rosario? Answering this question is the starting point of this article that looks at children's literature to foster a counterculture to that of the Mafia. How can a world of hurt be narrated to children, though? Even more important, is such an enterprise ethical? To what extent can children's literature work as counter-narrative to the Mafia's? How is the hero defined? Who is his/her nemesis? Do women authors tend to approach this kind of books differently from their male counterparts? These are some of the questions I address in this paper to analyze how children's books contribute to the creation of the culture of lawfulness.

However, to describe what a culture of lawfulness means, it is necessary to understand the Mafia's *Weltanschauung*, as Augusto Cavadi defines it (2006: 127). In other words, it is essential to underline those cultural elements that have been present in Sicilian culture – and to a certain point in Italy's culture as well – that have empowered the Mafia. Cavadi makes a list of these cultural and behavioral attitudes: Il fondamento "carismatico-tradizionale" della struttura gerarchica, il "familismo amorale," il maschilismo paternalistico, il rispetto dell'omertà, l'enfaticizzazione dell'onore, la svalutazione del lavoro, la mentalità dogmatica, la legittimazione della violenza come linguaggio privilegiato" (Cavadi, 2006: 127).

The Mafia's culture of unlawfulness is deeply rooted in Sicily's history, culture, and psyche. As Giuseppe Carlo Marino reports,

la mafia non è venuta dal popolo siciliano ma dai suoi indigeni oppressori. Non consiste in un mero fenomeno di criminalità più o meno organizzata, ma in un'originale prassi del potere (ben visibile ed analizzabile nelle sue forme e nelle sue dinamiche) con la quale i ceti dominanti hanno fomentato e alimentato, nel popolo, la moltiplicazione di un illegalismo diffuso, funzionale alla salvaguardia dei loro privati interessi e privilegi. (2011: 21)

Although the Mafia does not come from Sicilian commoners, they have learned how to adjust and live with it and, sometimes and for some people, profit from it. As Marino argues, *Cosa Nostra* cannot be explained only through the equation: Mafia = organized crime + political power. *Cosa Nostra* has its own culture (Marino, 2011: 41). Moreover, the Mafia generates a society that becomes the perfect soil for the Mafia to grow (Santino, 2015: 34–35). Santino describes seven features of a Mafia-generating society that go from the local population's moral acceptance of illegality, to their acceptance of various forms of aggression, all of which often go unpunished. Furthermore, Sicily's legal economy, its state institutions, and its civic society are too fragile to curb *Cosa Nostra's* power, fueling a sense of fatalism among its people (Santino, 2015: 35).

Writing about Mafia culture and the necessity to resist it, Cavadi suggests that “in base a questi elementi, occorre costruire un progetto culturale ed educativo che – punto per punto – si configuri come alternativo e contraddittorio rispetto a quello mafioso” (Cavadi, 2006: 127). Cavadi's conceptualization of “un progetto culturale ed educativo” would entail, “la democrazia, la corresponsabilità nelle relazioni intrafamiliari, la salvaguardia autentica della femminilità, la legalità, l'etica del lavoro, il senso critico, il pacifismo e la solidarietà internazionale” (2006: 127).

Before looking at antimafia children's literature we need to establish the pedagogical value of children's books, though, especially for children growing up in Mafia-ridden districts. Children's literature is a very particular genre as it is written by adults with a clear pedagogical intent that often makes entertainment secondary. According to Pulimeno, Piscitelli, and Colazzo, children's literature offers its readers three possibilities: an educational role, a didactic role, and a psychological value. The educational role helps children create a value system, presenting moral principles and teaching in an entertaining and engaging way – in line with the new concept of “edutainment”. The didactic role motivates them to participate in educational activities by supporting their language and cognitive development. Lastly, the psychological value helps children resolve inner conflicts and everyday life problems encouraging them to overcome fears and promoting changes in their behavior and that of the community (Pulimeno, Piscitelli and Colazzo, 2020). I would argue that antimafia children's literature sets itself up to address all three possibilities, having the educational and the psychological roles as the major focus. Its intent is that of fostering the culture of lawfulness among the youth, especially those living within communities and families where the Mafia's presence is very prevalent.

Lorenzo Cantatore argues for the potential testimonial power of antimafia children's books, since they “insistono sul rapporto del soggetto con la paura della violenza mafiosa, nel passaggio ineludibile dall'esserne vittima all'attraversamento degli stadi di consapevolezza che portano al riscatto attraverso la forza della testimonianza” (2016: 119). Fear is therapeutic for young readers who, through transference, can become the paladins of justice fighting the “monster” that is the Mafia and the “grown-up” world the Mafia is part of (Cantatore, 2016: 121). As Aristotle reminds us, we feel fear only if we believe that we still have a chance to escape our doom (Cantatore, 2016: 118). That is why fear is a compelling and ethical pedagogical tool in antimafia children's books.

What if besides the “fear of the Mafia's violence,” to use Cantatore's words, antimafia books illustrated also the trauma that the Mafia's violence has been causing on its victims? What if through antimafia children's books the unspeakable could be articulated? As Kenneth Kidd states, “we no longer have the luxury of denying the existence of or postponing the child's confrontation with evil” (2005: 121). The “evil” Kidd refers to is the

Holocaust. In his article, he argues for the pertinence of what has been defined as the “Children's Literature of Atrocity” as he contends “children's literature is the most rather than the least appropriate forum for trauma work” (2005: 120). Since the 1990s, children's books on trauma, from the Holocaust to 11/9, have proliferated, creating this new *genre* of children's literature. It is precisely within the frame of “Children's Literature of Atrocities” that antimafia children books need to be read. Because of their symbolic and imaginative power, children's books dealing with trauma invite their readers to participate in terrifying and alienating experiences (Doane, 2004: 523). This narrative moves and informs the reader helping him/her understand the forces that induce and foster trauma to, then, perform a sociocultural critical analysis of it. Consequently, these trauma narratives are ethical since they use literary techniques to engage the reader's empathic, ethical, and critical thinking (Doane, 2004: 524).

Due to the article's page limit, my research focuses only on four books. I chose two books written by men and two by women to better analyze narrative differences due to gender. Moreover, the books I chose belong to four distinct children's book genres: folktale: *La mafia spiegata ai bambini: l'invasione degli scarafaggi* (Rizzo and Bonaccorso, 2014); contemporary fiction: *Mio padre è un uomo d'onore* (Zaninelli, 2006); biography: *Chiamami solo Danilo: racconto per bambini e per chi non ha mai smesso di sognare* (Morgante, 2017); and historical fiction: *Salvo e le mafie* (Guido, 2017) (Harper Collins Publishers). Finally, the four books have also different intended audiences. *La mafia spiegata ai bambini: l'invasione degli scarafaggi* by Marco Rizzo and Lelio Bonaccorso (2014) is an illustrated book for pre-school children. The story takes place in a fantasy world where the characters are andromorphic animals like in many traditional folktales. *Mio padre è un uomo d'onore* by Martina Zaninelli (2006) is an illustrated book. Telling the story of a young boy who is adopted by *lo zio Totò*, the Mafia boss who killed his parents, it is the most traumatic of the four books, although it is deemed appropriate for six-year-old readers. *Chiamami solo Danilo: racconto per bambini e per chi non ha mai smesso di sognare* by Tiziana Rita Morgante (2017) is the biographic tale of antimafia leader Danilo Dolci, written for late-elementary schoolers. The graphic novel *Salvo e le mafie* by Riccardo Guido (2017) traces the history of the Mafia through the life of the protagonist, Salvo. Salvo is a pre-teenager whose grandpa was a Mafia boss, but whose father has a change of heart as he witnesses “i crimini commessi dai mafiosi” and “gli amici di scuola che diventavano schiavi della droga” (Guido, 2017: 31), and decides to leave Sicily to allow his son to be “salvo” from the Mafia. Because of its numerous historical references, this book would be best suited for middle/high schoolers.

All children's books inherit the folktale's rigid narrative structure and rules that combine narrative elements into a meaningful whole (Nikolajeva, 2003: 6). As Vladimir Propp underlined, folktales have three elements: the setting of the action, the characters, and a problem that the protagonists encounter. In folktales, the narration moves through thirty-one different functions that can be summarized into four: context, explaining the setting of the story; turning point, introducing a problem; action, when the characters understand the problem and set up to solve it; reversal, when some form of the previous harmony and balance are regained (Propp, 1971: xii). Among the functions of the *Dramatis Personae* are those of the villains and heroes (Propp, 1971: 27, 50). All the books I study present rigid narrative structures: they all showcase the disruption of what the reader easily understands used to be a harmonious life. The disruption caused by the Mafia is met by the protagonist's actions; these actions reverse the disruption, setting up a new order. All four books have clear villains and heroes; both types of characters play a particularly important role in the psychological development of children. These characters help define children's identity as they try to emulate the behavior of heroes, and avoid villains (Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002: 161). Thus, antimafia children's literature plays an instrumental role in helping children identify with lawful behavior through the *exempla* of the characters in the books.

Villains

As it is easily understandable, the Mafia is the main villain. Yet, unlike in many children's books and superheroes comics, in the antimafia children's books state institutions' representatives – like the police or *carabinieri* – are often villains too and cannot be trusted. We can see this lack of trust in *Chiamami solo Danilo*. The book describes how the Mafia came to rule over Trappeto, a little village of poor fishermen, due to its systematic poverty. As the Mafia's oppression became unbearable, the fishermen took to the streets to protest: “Qualcuno era troppo arrabbiato e per protestare contro lo stato avrebbe voluto lanciare sassi sui Carabinieri o la Polizia, altri pensavano si dovessero incendiare gli uffici del Comune, sempre sordo alle loro esigenze” (Morgante, 2017: 38). The fishermen's sentiments denounce the Italian state's cold, distant, and corrupt institutions that fail to understand their plight and to protect them.

One of the oppressions Danilo fights is the lack of water to irrigate the land. Thanks to the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno*'s funds, Danilo and the Trappeto's people build a dam that brings much needed public water to the almost-barren fields. As the story goes, “con la diga una nuova primavera si diffuse nella zona. La terra, irrigata adeguatamente, si rinverdì e si rivelò ricca e florida, capace di dare generosamente lavoro a tutta la popolazione” (Morgante, 2017: 47). However, for centuries barons and Mafia bosses exercised total control over public water and Danilo's dam project went against their interest. Hence, the Mafia's intervention in the matter, “una delle prime azioni degli uomini della mafia fu ostacolare la costruzione della diga, anche con la complicità di uomini politici e dell'amministrazione pubblica” (Morgante, 2017: 49). Danilo and his people confronted the Mafia's arrogance with “accuse contro i mafiosi e politici che operavano in Sicilia e in Italia... erano accuse vere, precise puntuali e debitamente firmate da molti testimoni” (Morgante, 2017: 49). Yet, once again, state representatives are the villains, “Danilo e il suo amico Franco furono zittiti con ogni mezzo dalla polizia, dalla chiesa, per poi essere arrestati e condannati per “calunnia e diffamazione”” (Morgante, 2017: 49). Here, again, Morgante's accusation of the *polizia* and the jurisdictional system is unequivocal.

We see the same accusation and denunciation in *Salvo e le mafie*. As I wrote above, this graphic novel traces the parallel history of Salvo's *mafioso* family and that of the Mafia. When the book reports about Giuseppe Impastato's killing by the hands of the Mafia, we read that the murder happened “grazie anche ad alcuni carabinieri infedeli che deviano le indagini” (Guido, 2017: 26). Just like Dolci, Impastato was an antimafia organizer who denounced Mafia boss Gaetano Badalamenti's grip on Cinisi through Radio Aut, his radio station. In 1978, Badalamenti had him killed and had the *carabinieri* brand him as “a terrorist who had committed suicide” (Santino, 2015: 91).

In *La mafia spiegata ai bambini: l'invasione degli scarafaggi*, the Mafia is described as a disease that is spreading all over the city of *Castelgallo* morphing its people into beetles. Doctor Tortugo has no doubt as he announces “ci troviamo di fronte a una chiara epidemia di... “mafia”” (Rizzo and Bonaccorso, 2014: 5). Nevertheless, the following day, two gigantic men threaten the doctor and Tortugo cowardly gives in, denying the existence of the Mafia: “trattasi a ben vedere, di una normalissima influenza stagionale... passerà” (Rizzo and Bonaccorso, 2014: 6). If the criminal phenomenon of the Mafia is translated into a biological/pathological metaphor, then the doctor would be the highest authority in the justice system. Consequently, also in this book, the authority is deficient and negligent in protecting the people by denouncing the Mafia. The illness as a metaphor to describe a social plague has often been used in literature to avoid naming the people responsible for it. However, in a book for very young readers such a narrative strategy works well.

Mio padre è un uomo d'onore denounces the *carabinieri*'s collusion with the Mafia too. The protagonist of the story, a young boy by the name of Sergio, tells the reader how the Mafia threatened his father for not paying the *pizzo* on his vineyard. Then, his father “ha chiamato i carabinieri e ha parlato a lungo con loro” (Zaninelli,

2006: 15). His mother, though, “non voleva e piangeva” (Zaninelli, 2006: 15). Sergio's mother knew that speaking with the *carabinieri* might have the opposite effect, as it did:

Poi sono venuti alcuni amici dello zio [a Mafia boss] hanno portato mamma e papà a fare una gita al mare. La mamma piangeva. Papà mi guardava. I suoi occhi erano scuri come il cielo prima dei temporali. Io sono andato a scuola e quando sono ritornato la casa era tutta bruciata, non c'era più niente, nemmeno mamma e papà. (Zaninelli, 2006: 15)

Here too, we see how the *carabinieri's* inaction leads to Sergio's parents' death by the hands of the Mafia.

Yet at the end, the story seems to allow for the *carabinieri's* redemption, as they arrest *lo zio Totò*, the Mafia boss responsible for murdering Sergio's parents, “adesso sono nella caserma dei carabinieri. Seduto. Questa mattina sono venuti a prendere lo zio” (Zaninelli, 2006: 35). At the end of the story, a *carabiniere* helps Sergio reverse his life back to what it used to be: “ci sono anche i quattro che hanno preso lo zio... uno di loro è uscito ed è rientrato con un panino... È rimasto un bel po' senza parlare, poi mi ha chiesto: “Come ti chiami?” (Zaninelli, 2006: 35). However, in the illustration, the policeman who approaches Sergio does not wear a uniform, thus, he is not graphically recognizable as such. Rather, in the illustration the policeman looks like a stereotypical Native American with a feather on his head and a bow on his right side. The ghostly-white color of both feather and bow marks them as figments of Sergio's imagination. In previous pages, Sergio's admiration for “gli indiani” puts into context the policeman's transposition into a Native American warrior.

Heroes and Culture of Lawfulness

If there are no superheroes and not all state representatives can be trusted, who are the heroes? As Salvo in *Salvo e le mafie* suggests, the real heroes are “la gente comune,” common people. As Salvo reports, “la gente comune, da parte sua, lentamente capisce che per non subire bisogna essere attivi contro le mafie. Si tengono le prime manifestazioni per ricordare le vittime, i giornalisti, i magistrati, i commercianti onesti. Si prova a dimostrare alle mafie che non possono controllare tutto” (Guido, 2017: 32). Common people get organized to better withstand the Mafia's power by choosing to adhere to the code of lawfulness, unlike the organization of *Cosa Nostra*. In *Salvo e le mafie*, Sicilian civic society takes to the streets after the killings of the prosecutors Falcone and Borsellino. As Salvo reports,

la partecipazione ai funerali dei due giudici e delle altre vittime, uccisi a soli due mesi di distanza è enorme. Tutti i cittadini *onesti*, soprattutto in Sicilia, vogliono dimostrare la loro lontananza da un'organizzazione così brutale. Nascono manifestazioni spontanee, qualcuno decide di esporre alle proprie finestre dei lenzuoli bianchi, a simboleggiare la propria voglia di una terra *pulita e libera dalla violenza mafiosa*. (Guido, 2017: 36; italics mine)

In the story, though, Salvo's father plays a transformative role too, since he realizes that he does not want to partake into his father's illegal business: “io ho sempre ricevuto e dato ordini. E così hanno fatto mio padre e mio nonno prima di me. E tutto per difendere gli interessi dei potenti e raccogliere ricchezze strappate a chi lavora onestamente”. Then comes the realization that he communicates to his wife: “dobbiamo cambiare tutto” (Guido, 2017: 42).

Salvo, the youngest representative of a Mafia family, becomes the depository of the atrocious and traumatic truth surrounding him and his parents. “Mio padre mi ha raccontato tutto della storia della mia famiglia. Quando lo ha fatto, mi ha detto: “Tu devi capire, Salvo, e devi sapere che io ho scelto di cambiare vita grazie a te, quando ho saputo che saresti nato”. Io ho pensato che tutti dovrebbero conoscere la nostra storia” (Guido, 2017: 8). Hence Salvo becomes the testimony of his Mafia-family's horrendous actions. By narrating his traumatic family story – made of homicides, heinous crimes, violence and oppression – to his readers, Salvo, “si fa carico di

testimoniare [il trauma] e che poi la comunità assume come tale. Ed è solo attraverso la rappresentazione che un trauma può essere riconosciuto e divenire un pezzo della coscienza collettiva” (Affuso, 2014: 283). Affuso argues that the graphic novel is a perfect medium to transmit any collective trauma like Mafia, as they are an autonomous system of images and texts, creating a collective memory (2014: 275). As she writes:

Il fumetto contribuisce quindi alla cultura del ricordo. E lo fa in quanto linguaggio multimediale e intertestuale, atto a compiere un’opera di narrazione e di figurazione che non consiste solo nel fornire informazioni visibili, bensì nel consegnare una testimonianza. Tale testimonianza è quella di una storia, di una società e dei modi intersoggettivi di elaborarla e immaginarla. (2014: 276)

The graphic novel's particular language makes it conducive to narrate trauma, which in Salvo's case is both personal and universal.

The collective elaboration of trauma takes place in different fields – from the jurisdictional to the philosophical and aesthetic ones – that transform one individual's traumatic event into a collective one giving a collective identity to the whole group. In Salvo's case the group is made up of his own readers. Above all, as Affuso writes, “Attraverso la rappresentazione del trauma viene sfidata e sovvertita l’idea che un evento sia indicibile ed inaudibile” (2014: 284). Salvo's testimony becomes the event that makes the Mafia's traumatic history intelligible, utterable, and thus transmittable. Hence Salvo and his father become *exempla* for the readers, and Salvo must face the Mafia's traumatic history and essence just as his father did, as readers tend to identify with the character of the books they read (Lucas and Soares, 2013: 139). The story of Salvo's father becomes emblematic of all those individuals who decide they must change their lives, their identities, and their alliances, even if they were born into Mafia families. As Salvo explains, “se le mafie sono un po’ meno forti di ieri è perchè il mio papà si è ribellato alle loro regole” (Guido, 2013: 8).

Notoriously, Peppino Impastato was one of those people born into the Mafia who had the courage to change his identity, life, and alliances. So was Maria Saladino who devoted her life to saving poor children by giving them shelter, an education, and legal employment. In her testimony, Saladino writes, “when I was twenty-five, I found out I was the daughter of a mafioso. And my world caved in on me. Me with my Christian principles, me with my ambitious project to eradicate violence and evil from my land, me with my dreams of defeating the Mafia, starting with children, me of all people, I was a mafioso's daughter” (Pickering-lazzi, 2007: 138). Rita Atria's testimony echoes Saladino's words of astonishment:

To wait for whom? Or what?
Perhaps a hope
The illusion of changing what surrounds you
So complicated because you know
What was stolen from you can never be returned
You can scream, cry, suffer,
But no one will listen, no one will understand you
Instead, they will judge you. (Pickering-lazzi, 2007: 160)

After a Mafia war claimed her father's and brother's lives, Atria collaborated with Prosecutor Borsellino who transferred her to a witness protection program in Rome. In the wake of the Mafia attacks that killed Prosecutors Giovanni Falcone (23 May 1992) and Borsellino (19 July 1992), Atria jumped out of her safe apartment's balcony on the sixth floor to her own death. A deep feeling of isolation is palpable in Atria's testimony: “no one will listen, no one will understand you” (Pickering-lazzi, 2007: 160). Through Atria's and Saladino's testimony their trauma becomes a collective experience, as we, the readers, must confront it.

Trauma and its effects on a young boy, Sergio, are also at the center of *Mio padre è un uomo d'onore*. The story develops along two tracks: one deals with Sergio's present life with his adoptive father *lo zio Totò*; the other deals with his previous life with his biological father. The book title, *Mio padre è un uomo d'onore*, plays precisely on Sergio's double lives. For his courageous stand against the Mafia, Sergio's biological father is truly a man of honor. However, *lo zio Totò*, as Sergio's surrogate father, is also a "man of honor," in this case meaning a *mafioso*. Sergio is the narrator of his life story. With candid and naïve tones, Sergio tells the horrific details of his life with *lo zio Totò*: "lui [lo zio Totò] mi vuole sempre con sé, mi ha perfino insegnato a leggere e scrivere. Dice che sono il suo orecchio e il suo occhio... ha un sacco di amici in città, tutti lo rispettano, ma preferisce mandare me" (Zaninelli, 2006: 2). *Lo zio Totò* has taught Sergio to spy on the district people and write a report on all their activities,

Allora io vado, porto i suoi messaggi, guardo come vanno le cose al mercato, ma anche in piazza. [...] Poi corro subito dallo zio e scrivo tutto quello che ho visto. Lui legge soddisfatto, dice che sono bravo mentre brucia il foglio mi ordina di non parlare con nessuno. Io non parlo. Parlare non conviene, dice lo zio. (Zaninelli, 2006: 9, 10)

The text's words are framed by images of houses and boats burning and people crying, all caused by Sergio's dutiful reporting.

What is most disturbing about Sergio's new life is his physical and psychological submission to *lo zio Totò*. Writing about trauma related to submission, Girolamo Lo Verso states, "la mafia produce uno schianto psichico enorme, confusione, calo di autostima, cambiamento dell'identità, rotture e frammentazioni nelle reti sociali. Intimidisce fino al punto di determinare un isolamento della persona... La solitudine e la paranoia attraversano queste esistenze..." (2021: 102). Sergio displays most of these symptoms from lack of self-esteem to confusion to change of personality and total isolation.

Above all, Sergio displays a total adherence to the *omertà*, as *lo zio Totò* requires of him. Sergio's silence is absolute to the point that, when reading his story, one has the feeling that Sergio is self-talking to cope with the absurdity of his new reality. Self-talk is defined as "dialogue through which the individual interprets feelings and perceptions, regulates and changes evaluations and convictions, and give him/herself instructions and reinforcements" (Hackfort and Schwenkmezger, 1993: 355). It is precisely thanks to his self-talk that he can find the strength to resist *lo zio Totò's* imposition of total alienation, "tutti mi chiamano Mutomonnezza, ma il mio vero nome è Sergio. Muto va bene, ma monnezza no" (Zaninelli, 2006: 5). Within his inner self, Sergio refuses to be called "rubbish" while accepting to be mute as survival strategy.

By stating his name, he demonstrates that his identity is not completely erased. The memories of his previous life with his real father are keeping him anchored in a different wholesome reality, "lo zio mi permette di andare tutte le volte che voglio alla discarica... Un tempo ci andavo con il mio papà, non c'era la discarica. C'era la campagna fino al mare e il mio papà ci coltivava l'uva per il vino" (Zaninelli, 2006: 12, 15). Sergio's sense of attachment to his father is strong and healthy. Within a child's psychological development, the father's function is thought to be that of opening the child to the outside world (Paquette, 2004: 198). Danielle Paquette defines as "activation relationship" a healthy and strong bond between fathers and their children and writes, "the father-child activation relationship would seem to help children to be braver when they encounter new experiences, which may later enable them to overcome obstacle to their later success [...]" (Paquette, 2004: 212).

Thanks to Sergio and his father's activation relationship, Sergio does not succumb completely to *lo zio Totò's* unlawfulness as he is able to recall memories of his previous life "il mio papà lavorava la terra con le sue mani, ed era felice. "Sono un uomo libero" diceva. "Non devo niente a nessuno, né soldi né onore"" (Zaninelli, 2006:

32). At the landfill, Sergio can connect with his father and his ethical ways of living and find peace. Similarly, young readers can connect with Sergio and his struggles between the two tracks of living: a lawful one and an unlawful one.

Moreover, even in this story, “common people,” ethically organized in an equal and horizontal society, are ultimately the heroes who save Sergio:

Oltre al capanno, lì alla discarica, c'è un grande albero, io mi ci arrampico e rimango ore e ore a guardare le nuvole sul mare. Immagino che siano i grandi capi indiani... Mi piacciono gli indiani perché guardano negli occhi, usano le frecce che non fanno rumore, e non hanno paura... Penso che loro sì sono forti e coraggiosi. Ogni uomo si costruisce la casa con le proprie mani, non la porta via agli altri, va a caccia per sé e per la sua famiglia, quando uccidono i bisonti è per mangiare e nulla più. (Zaninelli, 2006: 21, 29)

Even if the “Indians”¹ are for Sergio only an imaginary group of people, they still function as “the common people” who refuse to be oppressed and to follow a predatory logic and way of living.

In *Chiamami solo Danilo*, Trappeto's oppressed people who, as I wrote above, wanted to throw stones at the *Carabinieri* or *Polizia*, understood, “che, nonostante fossero tanto arrabbiati, la strada giusta non era la violenza, bisognava agire dopo aver riflettuto... Piano piano la gente di Trappeto e Partinico, che subiva giornalmente prepotenze, aveva iniziato a comprendere che la forza non era la risposta nella violenza, ma nel gruppo che insieme agisce e si difende, usando la forza delle parole e di azioni ben progettate” (Morgante, 2017: 38). Similarly, writing about Danilo's dream of building the dam and the Mafia's attempt to thwart his plan, Morgante writes, “Danilo non era solo, il gruppo era la sua forza: una forza che non *aveva bisogno della violenza*” (Morgante, 2017: 51; italics mine).

In *La mafia spiegata ai bambini: l'invasione degli scarafaggi*, the “Mafia disease” is finally stopped by a group of children who decide to be nice and inclusive also to the Mafia boss's son Totillo. Imitating his father's racketing activities, Totillo bullies his classmates at school, stealing snacks. Tired of Totillo's vexations, Alberto decides to change him by giving him a diary as a present. “Ho visto per terra il tuo diario, e ho notato che è un po' malmesso. Visto che dovevo comprarne uno nuovo per me, ho pensato di farti un regalo. Totillo si commosse. Nessun compagno, fino a quel momento, gli aveva mai regalato qualcosa. E lui non aveva mai avuto un diario tutto e davvero suo” (Rizzo and Bonaccorso, 2014: 26).

Alberto's classmates follow his example, “ispirati dai comportamenti di Alberto, che continuava a cercare di far guarire Totillo con altri gesti gentili, gli altri compagni cominciarono a non mostrarsi più spaventati, e a rifiutare ogni minaccia. Prima iniziarono a coinvolgerlo nei loro giochi” (Rizzo and Bonaccorso, 2014: 38). First, comes the acceptance of Totillo. Then comes the understanding of a different reality, “e capirono che Totillo era solo più sfortunato degli altri perché aveva un padre cattivo” (Rizzo and Bonaccorso, 2014: 38). Their newly-acquired sensitivities toward Totillo ultimately change him, “Totillo allora cominciò a capire che era più bello ricevere pacchetti infiocchettati donati con il cuore che merendine ottenute con la paura” (Rizzo and Bonaccorso, 2014: 30, 31). The coordinated effort of a group of children, who refuse to accept abuse, finds a solution to the city's problem. The solution is found within the Mafia-affected organized civic society that always chooses “legalità” and “pacifismo” while rejecting “la legittimazione della violenza come linguaggio privilegiato,” to use Cavadi's words.

Lack of Female Heroes

Cavadi insists also on the necessity to enforce, “la salvaguardia autentica della femminilità” necessary to fight against “il maschilismo paternalistico” (2006: 127). Yet in the four books I studied, female characters are neither

the heroes nor have a strong supportive role. This void seems to go against one crucial point of children's literature's intent: that of educating. This apparent blind spot is disappointing for three reasons. First, historically women were the first to organize against the Mafia's presence in the island. In 1980, the "Association of Sicilian Women against the Mafia" – a group of wives and mothers who lost their beloved ones to the Mafia's violence – came into existence, thanks to the work of Anna Puglisi, sister of Father Puglisi. The work of these women was instrumental in creating laws that would require enhanced penalties for crimes committed by the Mafia. Second, the vast amount of research on literacy practices and gendered readers underlines that the social discourses on gender, which normalize certain characteristics as masculine or feminine, have a great influence on how we see ourselves in relation to many activities including literary and cultural practices (Brendler, 2015: 223). Thus, we need to assume that girls who read books lacking female heroes fighting the Mafia might not get engaged with the value of acquiring a culture of lawfulness. Girls may not live through the fear and trauma that these books evoke, thus not activating the same empathic, ethical, and critical thinking as their male counterparts. Third, women writers are as remiss as male writers about not choosing female characters for their stories, ultimately indicating their subscription to "il maschilismo paternalistico" as their intended readers must be male and living in a male world.

Conclusion

With this article I wanted to demonstrate the validity and necessity of antimafia children's literature. By representing the common people's courage in organizing to fight the Mafia's oppression and violence, these books carry out a crucially ethical and educational function. The characters' traumatic experience work as a catharsis for young readers, helping them confront such an evil. Through the *exempla* of the characters, young readers can identify with the struggles the protagonists engage with to set up a culture of lawfulness. Unlike the hierarchical, violent, and repressive structure of the Mafia, civic society's organizations are described as operating according to a horizontal and, thus, democratic axis, within the limits of legality and with peaceful means. The only disappointing note is the lack of female characters to establish "la salvaguardia della femminilità" and thus fight "il maschilismo paternalista" (Cavadi, 2006: 127).

Footnote

1. In Italy the word "Indian" was not considered politically incorrect in 2006, when the book was published.

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