# FOOD RITUALS AS SIGNS OF SUBMISSION AND SYMBOLS OF FEMININE MARGINALIZATION IN MARIA MESSINA'S WRITINGS

Daniela Bombara*

*Abstract*

Maria Messina (1887-1944) portrays women confined to subservience, unable to challenge male dominance and resigned to their fates, during a transitional period between enduring patriarchy and an unattainable modernity. Her works depict a world fixated on decorum and tradition, a stifling reality where attempts at change merely reaffirm the existing order. The assertion of male authority is deeply intertwined with rituals dictating domestic life, particularly those related to meals. In *La casa nel vicolo* (1921), the despotic Don Lucio enforces strict schedules and precise procedures for meal preparation, using them to test the loyalty and submission of the women under his control. These rigid customs suppress any aspiration for independence. On the other hand, Messina's women are often unaware of their subjugation. In *La porta chiusa* (*Le briciole del destino,* 1918), Ienna, confined to her room by illness, nostalgically recalls her kitchen 'domain', but this perceived authority is illusory, as her husband's affair with the maid elevates the latter to the true mistress of the household. Attempts to defy traditional roles end in failure: in *L'amore negato* (1928), Severa's rejection of her role as a house-wife leads to her downfall. Unlike later Sicilian literature, Messina refrains from lavish descriptions of meals. Her female characters eat hurriedly and in isolation, excluded from sensory enjoyment. Food, consumed without savor, becomes a potent metaphor for lives stifled by emotional and existential deprivation. These women, resigned to barren existences, are left only with 'the crumbs of life', as poignantly reflected in the title of Messina's 1918 collection.

*Keywords*: Maria Messina, patriarchy, food rituals, subjugation, Sicily

* University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

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> The official rhetoric of the Risorgimento and the ideology it upheld – which lived on well into the years of post-Unification – had assigned women an extremely important moral role in the ideal society of the new Italy. […] By selflessly assuring her husband the warmth and material comforts of a smoothly-run home, the Italian woman was silently helping him to perform his duties as a citizen; and by providing an example of domestic austerity, sacrifice and devotion, she was offering her sons a living example in the private sphere of what was expected of them in the public domain. This latter role was seen as particularly important in a country as desperately lacking in modern and efficient public educational structures as was post-Unification Italy.[1]

The ideals of the Italian *Risorgimento*, enhanced by the urgent needs of a newborn Nation, lead to a mythology of a domestic femininity. The Italian woman, 'angel of the hearth,' represents the moral center of a family steadily nurtured and nourished, as it constitutes the basic unit of the society and the core of the State as *mother*land.[2] The house/shelter of Romantic heroines, terrified by dangerous outdoors, becomes a 'realm' to be governed with wisdom and caution. Food is an integral part of this management: purchasing, preparation, provisioning, table setting, and organization of the convivial places. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is a remarkable proliferation of cookbooks and household manuals, addressed to an increasingly broad female audience;[3] the middle-class woman is thus trained to perform a well-defined, spatially localized role as wife and mother.[4]

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1 Lucienne Kroha, *The woman writer in late-nineteenth-century Italy: gender and the formation of literary identity* (Lewiston, N.Y.; Queenston, Ont.: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 11. See also Gabriella Romani, "Introduction. Scenes from Nineteenth-Century Italy: Delightful Stories on Those Long, Long Winter Evenings," in *Writing to Delight: Italian Short Stories by Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, eds. Antonia Arslan, Gabriella Romani (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 3-18. A special thanks to Jolie Cuminale for the translations of the Italian texts.

2 See Alberto Mario Banti, *Sublime madre nostra: La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 2014).

3 See Maria Paola Salvatori Moroni, "Ragguaglio bibliografico sui ricettari del primo Novecento," in *Storia d'Italia,* v. 13, *L'alimentazione,* eds. Alberto Capatti, Alberto De Bernardi, Angelo Varni (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 887-925; Elisabetta Maffia, "Donne e cibo tra letteratura e storia," *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, no. 2 (1998):155-174.

4 Fiorenza Tarozzi, "Padrona di casa, buona massaia, cuoca, casalinga, consumatrice. Donne e alimentazione tra pubblico e privato," *Storia d'Italia,* v. 13, *L'alimentazione,* 645-79; Stefania Aphel Barzini, *Fornelli d'Italia* (Milano: Mondadori, 2014).

Within this framework, the novels and short stories of Maria Messina[5] stand out for their uniqueness, as they aim to unveil the contradictions and fault lines in the ideological system of Post-Unification Italy, particularly its coercive and conservative dimensions. Parental feeding activities, which could allow women to express their creativity, become, in Messina's text, a heavy and exhausting burden—a sign of submissive obedience to the male authority. This occurs also because the area of nutrition is not exclusively a woman's domain: the master dictates the rules even in this traditionally feminine sphere, imposing mandatory, repetitive, and unvarying practices to suppress any rebellion.[6] Hence, the domestic female dominion is transformed into a stifling and secluded prison; any attempt to transcend the narrow confines of the household is perceived as a major transgression that could result in marginalization and dishonor.[7] The biological function of every woman—sustaining the existence of her progeny and favoring their evolution through nurture—, is turned against her, leading to depression, or even to a loss of dignity and identity.

Women's submission to male dominance is, therefore, enforced through obsessive *food rituals*: procedures, timetables, and eating habits are pre-

5 Maria Messina (1887-1944), a Sicilian novelist active in the first half of the twentieth century and rediscovered by Leonardo Sciascia in the 1980s, chooses to represent the difficult transition period between the patriarchal world—focused on decorum and preservation of tradition—and the increasing industrial society, from the point of view of the most disadvantaged groups in Italy at that time, namely women of the lower-middle class. Her correspondence with Giovanni Verga, who praised her first collection of short stories, *Pettini fini* (1909), helped her to publish other collections with well-known editors (*Le briciole del destino,* 1918, *Il guinzaglio,* 1921, for Treves; *Personcine,* 1921/24, for Vallardi; *Ragazze siciliane,* 1921, for Le Monnier), and novels: *Alla deriva (*1920), *La casa nel vicolo* (1921), *Un fiore che non fiorì* (1923), *Le pause della vita* (1926), for Treves*; Primavera senza sole* (1920) *for Giannini; L'amore negato* (1928) for Ceschina.

6 The motif, recurrent in Messina's works, echoes a widespread belief of the period, which in turn derives from an ancient contempt for the female intelligence: "Alle mani delle donne si è sempre lasciata la risposta alle necessità quotidiane, tra cui quella dell'alimentazione, il di più, la raffinatezza dei cibi, lo studio di piatti originali viene dalle mani maschili. Il mestiere è donna, l'arte uomo" ["The responsibility for meeting daily needs, including food, has always been left in the hands of women. However, the extras, the refinement of dishes, and the creation of original recipes come from male hands"] (Fiorenza Tarozzi, "La società contemporanea," in *Donne e cibo: una relazione nella storia*, eds. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Fiorenza Tarozzi (Milano: Mondadori, 2003), 134).

7 Mariella Muscariello, "'Una straniera di passaggio'. Lettura della novella 'Casa paterna' di Maria Messina," in *L'occhio e la memoria. Miscellanea di studi in onore di Natale Tedesco* (Caltanissetta: Lussografica 2004), 463.

scribed by the householder and regarded as 'homages' and affirmations of his power. The focus on food discourse in the author's writings—an issue not yet deeply explored by scholars[8]—offers the opportunity, I argue, to recognize the modernity and innovative dimension of Messina's poetics. The Sicilian writer portrays, with disenchanted realism, the unsolvable negative status of women, who are forced to identify themselves solely through feeding practices manipulated by male figures to enslave them. The privileged position of the woman in Post-Unification Italian society as 'Queen of the house' reveals its *propagandistic nature*. In the author's works, this ideal is overturned, depicting women in passive role of unpaid and exploited laborers.[9] Leaving the confines of the stifling home is ultimately a false escape, as the outside world fails to provide stable working opportunities, once again confining women in their love-hate role as housewife.

Briefly, the public sphere mirrors the private one, reflecting the same male dominance that the female protagonists experienced within the walls of their homes. Women—and also young men, the weakest figures in a patriarchal context—bear a double imprisonment. In the domestic space, food and beverages, meticulously prepared and served, function both as symbols and as instruments of subjection.

### *Nurturing practices as obligation and slavery*

In Messina's second novel, *La casa nel vicolo* (1921), nurturing and nutritive activities already constitute a complex structure that reinforces—one

8 Some suggestions, not so much of the food motif, but about the negative condition of woman as housewife, in Clotilde Barbarulli and Luciana Brandi, *I colori del silenzio. Strategie narrative e linguistiche in Maria Messina* (Ferrara: Tufani, 1996), 12-13; Cristina Pausini, *Le briciole della letteratura: le novelle e i romanzi di Maria Messina* (Bologna: Clueb, 2001), 73.

9 "Through Messina, we are able to see the effects of a patriarchal system that forces women at all social levels to acquiesce to the men in their lives" (Fred Gardaphè, "Preface," in Maria Messina, *Behind Closed Doors: Her Father's House and Other Stories of Sicily* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2009), vi). Messina's geographical viewpoint is particularly significant, as "the sanctity of the family, primacy of motherhood, and cult of domesticity were deeply entrenched values in the conservative South, as was uncontested male authority" (Elise Magistro, "Introduction," in Maria Messina, *Behind Closed Doors,* 9). However, Messina's analysis of societal constraints on women and young men can apply to Italian society as a whole, during the period, which was smothered by the ideological closure of the Fascist dictatorship (Lara Gochin Raffaelli, "Shades of Ambiguity: Maria Messina's Writing during the Fascist Era," *Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, XV, no. 1 (2002), 59-69).

might say—the asymmetric relationship between man and woman.[10] The plot follows a linear trajectory: the docile Antonietta, upon marrying Don Lucio, invites her sister Nicolina to join her in her marital home. In the large but gloomy dwelling, the two sisters lose their freedom, subjected to the will of the paterfamilias, who moreover repeatedly abuses Nicolina, viewing her as his possession. In this "torture room," to paraphrase Giovanni Macchia speaking on Pirandello,[11] filled with hate and grievances "[e]ventually another, innocent family member [Antonietta's son, Alessio] comes to pay for the sinister web of relationships that evolve within the confines of this doomed domestic arrangement;"[12] after the tragedy, Antonietta goes mad, while Nicolina decides to remain in the house, serving everyone.

Throughout the novel, the despotic Don Lucio expects to passively receive drinks, lunch, and dinner at predetermined hours, sometimes monitoring the preparation process to measure the capability and fidelity of the woman responsible. Right in the first pages of the book, Nicolina is assigned a *heavy* responsibility:

> Doveva preparare il bicchiere d'acqua che il cognato sorseggiava lentamente, due ore dopo aver cenato. Strizzò poco meno di mezzo limone nell'acqua, badando che col succo non cadesse qualche seme; aggiunse tanto vino quanto bastava a tinger l'acqua; vi sciolse un cucchiaino scarso di zucchero; agitò, rimestò, lasciò riposare. Poi guardò il bicchiere contro il lume, per accertarsi che la bibita fosse perfettamente limpida, come sapeva prepararla Antonietta. E finalmente portò il bicchiere, su un piatto, cautamente.[13]

10 Feeding activities become in effect performative gender norms, as they force women to act under men's rules; see Judith Butler, "The Question of Social Transformation," in Ead., *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 212; by this way they are expression of a "'social power' imposed on women by the male tyranny" (Silvia Tiboni-Craft, "The Stole Identities in Maria Messina's Novel A House in the Shadows", in *Representations of Female Identity in Italy: From Neoclassism to the 21st Century,* eds. Silvia Giovanardi Byer, Fabiana Cecchini (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 126 n. 9). The gastronomic rites, once created to hold together the cohesive structure of rural ancient society, have now become tools of social constraint, as noticed in Cristina Benussi, "Cibo e storia nel romanzo italiano moderno," in *A tavola con le Muse. Immagini del cibo nella letteratura italiana della modernità*, eds. Ilaria Crotti and Beniamino Mirisola (Venezia: Ca' Foscari, 2017), 20.

11 Giovanni Macchia, *Pirandello o la stanza della tortura* (Milano: Mondadori, 1981).

12 Lynne Lawner, "Enslavement in Sicily". *The New York Times* (22 April 1990), 31. Don Lucio, upon learning that Alessio has to pay a debt, not only refuses to help him but also sharply criticizes the boy, who commits suicide.

13 Maria Messina, *La casa nel vicolo* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2009), 14-15.

> [She had to prepare the glass of water that her brother-in-law was wont to sip slowly, two hours after his supper. She squeezed slightly less than half a lemon into the water, taking care that no seeds fell with the juice; she added just enough wine to tinge water; dissolved in it a level teaspoonful of sugar, shook it, stirred it, and let it settle. Then she held the glass up to the light to make sure the drink was perfectly limpid, the way Antonietta prepared it. And finally, cautiously, she brought the glass on a saucer].[14]

The *limonea*/lemonade possesses the elusive nature of an alchemical process: the approximate quantities of its three simple ingredients, determined by subjective evaluation, challenge the male claim of a perfect 'solution'. This ideal is even harder to achieve because it depends entirely on the trial and judgment of the master. This *very simple* recipe does not require specific skills but only the ability to adapt to Don Lucio's tastes and desires. The *limonea* becomes an emblem of the suffocating family life—a ritualistic performance[15] so significant and essential to the householder that, in its name, even a small pleasure such as an afternoon walk can be denied to the women: "E inoltre avrebbe dovuto alterare le comode abitudini. Addio fumata del dopopranzo, addio limonea da sorseggiare senza fretta…"[16] ["And besides, he'd have to alter his comfortable habits. No more after-dinner smoke, no more lemonade to be sipped unhurriedly"].[17]

The function of repeated actions and routines is to nip in the bud any hope of changing, any opportunity of escaping. "Sì! La felicità si trova nell'abitudine!"[18] ["Yes! Happiness consists of habits"][19] exclaims Don Lucio, superimposing his will and vision of life on others.

Another *female* ritual is the coffee preparation, described step by step.

> Nicolina portò sulla tavola la macchinetta e tutto l'occorrente, ché Don Lucio voleva vederlo preparare, il caffè, e sentirne tutto l'aroma. Nicolina si mostrava tranquilla nel compiere il suo dovere con la consueta precisione. Ecco che macinava, buttava un cucchiaio di caffè nel bricco fumante, copriva, rimestava appena si levava il bollore, tornava a coprire e finalmen-

14 Maria Messina, *A house in the shadows,* trans. by John Shepley (Marlboro, Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1989), 2.

15 Also relevant is the fact that the entire ritual takes place in silence, a lack of sounds that emphasizes the dialectic tyranny/submission, with the former seeking to tame the woman's will while also suppressing her voice. For a discussion on the role of silence in Messina's works, see Barbarulli and Brandi, *I colori del silenzio.*

16 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,*53.

17 Messina, *A house,* 29.

18 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 54.

19 Messina, *A house,* 29.

> te spegneva la fiamma senza che una goccia d'acqua si fosse versata o un po' della nera schiuma del caffè avesse imbrattato il bricco pulito, lucente, che pareva d'argento.[20]
>
> [Nicolina brought the coffee pot to the table, along with everything else that was needed, since Don Lucio liked to watch her prepare the coffee and to smell its aroma. Nicolina looked calm as she carried out her task with her usual precision. She ground the coffee, put a spoonful in the steaming jug, covered it, stirred it as soon as it came to a boil, covered it again, and finally extinguished the flame without a drop of water being spilled or a spot of black foam staining the clean shining jug, which looked like silver].[21]

In this passage, the food-drink *ceremony* reveals its theatrical nature: the result—*the coffee*—is not important, but rather the performance, which stages the absolute submission of Nicolina. Her body, exposed during the preparation, is left unprotected before the rapacious desire of her owner.[22]

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20 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 159.

21 Messina, *A house,* 102-103.

22 Nicolina's body, *reduced* to mere pleasure, is also mechanized, transformed in an extension of the coffee machine, operating accurately without thoughts. The enslaving task of supplying food is therefore carried out by Nicolina, who nullifies herself in the process. At the beginning of the story, the girl is described while preparing Lucio's breakfast: "Stese la tovaglia, imburrò il pane bianco (si faceva a parte col fiore di Maiorca per lui solo) e versò il latte, non troppo caldo e non troppo freddo. Mentre egli mangiava – un dottore gli aveva consigliato di masticare il boccone trenta volte lentamente, – Nicolina non tralasciava di servirlo. Andava e tornava dalla cucina (sul fuoco c'erano altre fette di pane in caldo), si trovava pronta a imburrare, ad aggiungere latte o zucchero, senza vincere la pungente paura di non accontentare il cognato. Intenta a servirlo, non si curava di sbrigare le molte faccende che l'aspettavano, o a preparare la colazione per sé e per Antonietta" (Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 25) ["She spread the tablecloth, buttered the white bread (it was made separately, for him alone, with the most expensive flour), and poured the milk, not too hot and not too cold. While he ate—a doctor had advised him to chew each mouthful slowly thirty times—Nicolina did not neglect him for a minute. She went back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen, where other slices of bread were toasting on the fire, she stood ready to butter them, to offer more milk or sugar, and still without overcoming her nagging fear of not satisfying her brother-in-law. Intent on these duties, she refrained from tackling the many other chores that awaited her, or preparing breakfast for herself and Antonietta"](Messina, *A house,* 10). The English translation overlooks the obsessive repetition of words associated with servitude (*servitù*), though it retains the use of the third-person masculine pronoun (he, him) throughout the text, emphasizing a unilateral focus on the master. For him, special and valuable foods are reserved—such as bread made from Maiorca flour, exceptionally white and highly nourishing.

After a while, Don Lucio, "centellinava il suo caffè voluttuosamente"[23] ["sipped his coffee voluptuously"],[24] a clear metaphor for the sexual abuse he has been inflicting on the girl. The scene occurs at a crucial moment in the story: Alessio, cruelly reproached by his father, is not coming; the two sisters are deeply distressed and beneath their quiet obedience lies an impatience that Don Lucio cannot perceive, secluded in his *bestial* delight. Indifferent to his son's fate, "gli occhi socchiusi masticava adagio adagio, assaporando il cibo"[25] ["his eyes half closed, he chewed slowly, savoring his food"].[26] A large quantity of food is consumed by Don Lucio's wiry body; his thinness underscores the true significance of the food—not as nourishment, but as an offering to a deity who guarantees the household's economic stability. Unlike Don Lucio, the sisters dare not eat; "Del resto, loro donne si adattavano facilmente con un pò di pane e un pezzo di ricotta mangiato in piedi"[27] ["Anyway they, being women, were used to getting along with a piece of bread and a little ricotta cheese eaten on the run"].[28] The denied female conviviality is a *leitmotif* in the novel: for Antonietta, her daughters, and Nicolina, food is a simple means of survival, necessary to maintain an efficient workforce. It is, however, a male pleasure—not in and of itself, but as a tool for monitoring the women's 'proper sphere', contaminating it with a gender-oriented will of dominate. Messina never describes the adult women sitting at meal; even the little girls are neglected and forced to eat the remains in a space normally reserved for the servants:

23 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 159.
24 Messina, *A house,* 103.
25 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 158.
26 Messina, *A house,* 103. The bestiality and brutality of Don Lucio are highlighted by the exaggerated depiction of his mouth, always in motion—chewing, savoring, swallowing—offering a clue to an exclusive and egocentric self-absorption. When Alessio arrives home for lunch, visibly upset after hearing a quarrel between the sisters, Don Lucio, absorbed in chewing slowly for good digestion, fails to notice his son. The disgusting slowness of his chewing and "il sordo 'mpe mpe delle labbra di Don Lucio che succhiava placidamente la pipa" (Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 57) ["the muted smacking of Don Lucio's lips as he sucked placidly on his pipe"](Messina, *A house,* 31), grotesquely reduces the character to an ever-open orifice, ready to receive the tribute of his slaves. Lucio's mouth continuously works—absorbing food, smoke, spitting out words of reproach and condemnation to quash any rebellion—ultimately devouring the identities of the two sisters, like a parasite that destroys the hosts it feeds on. The sound of the pipe been sucked is also central in the scene of Nicolina's rape.
27 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 26.
28 Messina*, A house,* 10.

> Perciò [Nicolina] ingollava dopo un boccone, assieme a Carmelina che aspettava in cucina, come un gattino, sperando che la zia riportasse indietro qualche rimasuglio dei delicati manicaretti preparati a parte per il capo di casa.[29]
>
> [Thus [Nicolina] would have a bite to eat in the kitchen, along with Carmelina who waited like a kitten, hoping her aunt would bring back a few scraps of the choice dishes specially prepared for the master of the house].[30]

Indeed, when Don Lucio goes outside, cooking is regarded as superfluous; nourishment activities, detached from their ritual context, become simple and essential, with standing up to eat becoming a daily behavior.[31] The female and male worlds are presented to the reader as opposites and disconnected: quickness versus slowness, nibbling versus savoring, marginality versus centrality. However, the latter is no more enviable than the former, given a state of discomfort (headaches, indigestion) that Don Lucio frequently complains about. The predatory attitude of the man is subject to a sort of counter step, symbolized by his continuous indigestion. No quantity of Tot,[32] a brand of digestive aid widespread at the time, always on the table when Lucio eats, can dispel the hodge-podge of the frustrations and the grudges by which he is nourished, dominating from a banquet table reversed into a torturous place. No one can end the meal without the man's permission, nor speak or move; the waitstaff's service must be quick and precise, the temperature of food must be tested, and no delays are allowed in serving or in arriving at the predetermined time for eating.[33] Those who

29 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 57.

30 Messina, *A house,* 31. Scholars have noticed that Nicolina's humiliation is pervasive in her role of servant-nurturer. The key lies in her spinsterhood: the girl can be only a substitute for wife and mother. This 'in between' condition, suspended in the midst of old and new, is potentially subversive and must be strictly controlled. Nicolina is able to express her own identity only in a liminal space, such as the balcony, where she is not forced into an everlasting state of giving without receiving—this being the essence of her existence. (See Tiboni-Craft, "The Stole Identities").

31 Both Antonietta and Nicolina experience their relationship with food without genuine interest or pleasure; it is merely a barren and stressful duty. The book makes no mention of any recipe—aside from the symbolic *limonea*—nor does it highlight any notable skill the sisters demonstrate in cooking, nor is there any appreciation from the master.

32 The reference to the well-known brand of digestive has been neglected in the English translation.

33 As Massimo Montanari notices: "Sempre, la tavola rimane il luogo per eccellenza attorno a cui si concentrano valori e ideologie, si scambiano segni e messaggi, si esprimono sentimenti e passioni. Sempre, la tavola rimane—per lo storico—un

break the rules are immediately punished, and the tool—a riding crop—is inserted into the back of the chair, thus becoming part of the table's furnishing, as a significant site of parent-teenager, male-female tensions.[34]

But the despotic power of the *paterfamilias* is frail, inwardly corroded—a sign of the advancement of the industrial age, which is symbolically alluded to in the text by his sickness. At the end of the story, when the family is disjointed, Don Lucio, sadly, will be cooking his own simple dinner, a blatant symbol of the passing of his dominance. Now, for him as well, feeding is no longer a pleasure but a need; his condition is therefore akin to women's. But Nicolina's destiny has an even more tragic essence: 'devoured' by a patriarchal system that has had its day and can survive only by eliminating those who cannot defend themselves, she experiences a situation of emptiness, highlighted in the text by a disheartening gastronomic metaphor: she feels "come un limone spremuto che si butta in mezzo alla strada"[35] ["as a squeezed lemon thrown in the middle of the street"].[36]

### *Questioning the identity-form role of women's nurturing*

In subsequent works by Messina, food and nurturing, as relevant components of the female personality and identity, are often portrayed in a sur-

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luogo particolarmente idoneo all'osservazione dei rapporti fra gli uomini e dei modi in cui quei rapporti vengono rappresentati" ["The table has always been the quintessential place where values and ideologies converge, where signs and messages are exchanged, and where feelings and passions are expressed. For the historian, the table has always remained a particularly suitable place for observing relationships between people and the ways in which those relationships are represented"]. (Massimo Montanari, *Nuovo convivio: storia e cultura dei piaceri della tavola nell'età moderna.* (Bari: Laterza, 1991), 2.

34 "La finisci? Non imparerai mai a stare composta? – ammonì Don Lucio toccando il frustino che teneva infilato nella spalliera. Carmelina si rannicchiò tutta, come se fosse stata già battuta" (Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 105) ["Can't you learn to sit still?" Don Lucio admonished, touching the riding crop that he kept hanging on the back of the chair. Carmelina cringed, as though she had been struck"] (Messina, *A house,* 65).

35 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 112.

36 Messina, *A house,* 70. In this novel, as in other works by Messina analyzed in this essay, food has a clear connotative and structural function, as it reflects the characters' personalities and influences the development of the story. See Silvana Ghiazza, *Le funzioni del cibo nel testo letterario (*Bari: WIP, 2015), 39-76; 105-136.

real or fairy-tale context, which actually disavows their positive function. Alternatively, the feeding activities are depicted as a 'privilege' whose loss indicates the marginality of the subject; lastly, they are portrayed as a tool of deception. Rarely do Messina's characters firmly refuse the burden of nurse that the patriarchal society assigns to them, but this extreme position is doomed to failure.

An example of the first narrative pattern can be found in the short story *Villeggianti*: a married woman, Leda, feeling inadequate as a mother, entrusts her child, Chicchi, to a baby-sitter, Annetta, a very young and unreliable girl, always made up with red lips and bleach-blond hair, dangerously far from the traditional model of 'broodmare'. The girl's expressionistic description, "una bella ragazza con due ciuffi troppo biondi sulle orecchie, grandi denti, grandi occhi viola, labbra sottili e ridenti troppo rosse"[37] [a beautiful girl with two very blonde ponytails hanging over her ears, big teeth, large violet eyes, and thin, smiling, too-red lips], positions her as an inverted double of the mother, whose inexperience – the weaning takes place too soon – kills the baby; the lack of milk, a basic and vital food, makes the infant sick and weakens him with surprisingly quickness.[38] The vampire image of the nurse, who seems to absorb the child's life, and the final scene, when the narrator comments, seeing the child lying on his deathbed, "Oh! Era diventato più lungo il piccolo Chicchi!"[39] [Oh! Little Chicchi had become too long!], classify the story as non-realistic, instead of a parable of diverted and consequently punished motherhood. The mother, named Leda, like the mythical betrayer, also 'betrays' her familiar duties and is sanctioned with an abnormal '*growth by death'* of her son.

The second aforementioned theme, which is realistic, is related to food deprivation—in both the giving and receiving it—as a sign of social marginalization. This is the painful experience of Vanna in *"Casa paterna"* (from the collection *Le briciole del destino*, 1918), who is married to a career man. He always eats outside, avoiding the meal as a time for sharing, even when he comes back home with his friends. The girl, prevented from even providing food, realizes her nullification. Vanna then seeks shelter

37 Maria Messina, "Villeggianti. Novella", *Nuova antologia di lettere, scienze ed arti,* Serie 6, v. 232 (1923), 329.

38 Tarozzi ("La società contemporanea", 127) quotes the traditional belief about nannies, whose appearance had to be wholesome, both physically and morally; Anna Colella, in *Figura di vespa e leggerezza di farfalla: le donne e il cibo nell'Italia borghese di fine Ottocento* (Firenze: Giunti, 2003), 63, recalls the medical prohibition on the earlier weaning.

39 Maria Messina, "Villeggianti", 333.

in her father's house but is barely tolerated by her sisters-in-law and is rarely invited to join the family's food rituals.[40] Her exclusion from her native community is highlighted by the breaking of the nutritive stream. An '*in-between'* character who illustrates the discrepancies in both rural and urban-modern societies, Vanna cannot nourish herself, nor feed others, in either of these environments. The focus on nurturing activities clearly shows the tragic condition of sentimental dryness and incommunicability to which the protagonist is condemned. The only resolution, however negative, is to be swallowed by the sea, in whose waters Vanna immerses herself in an attempt at suicide. This extreme action must also be seen as a way to rejoin the 'other,' satisfying a desire for harmony with the whole that the interrupted flow of nourishment and care had questioned.

The first and the second themes are blended in the short story "*La porta chiusa"* (from the collection *Le briciole del destino*), in which the referential data are organized within an oneiric atmosphere. Ienna suffers from heart troubles and cannot access the upper floor in her house, where the kitchen is located. Dethroned, the woman is separated from her 'realm' by a locked door. This leads to a sense of dispossession and loss of identity, particularly since the protagonist now depends on a hideous old maidservant, Savatura, who neglects her mistress by giving her insipid and cold soups, and replaces Ienna in all respects, maliciously pointing this out. At the beginning of the story, Savatura is in Ienna's room, leaving some freshly baked bread, the fragrance of which should remind Ienna of her inanity. The smell is a strong olfactory signal—no matter how subliminal—of the

40 "A l'ora del caffè e latte, Viola preparava per tutti e poi diceva: – Mi scordavo di Vanna… – e riempiva un'altra tazza" Maria Messina, "Casa paterna," in Ead, *Piccoli gorghi* (Palermo, Sellerio, 1988), 167. "When it was time for morning coffee, Viola prepared it for everyone and would then say: "Oh, I've forgotten about Vanna…" and she would fill another cup" (Maria Messina, "Her Father's House", in Ead, *Behind Closed Doors*, 96). The exclusion of the guilt through a nutrition symbology had been previously in Verga's *Malavoglia,* when the young 'Ntoni comes back home: "Venni per vedervi. Ma dacché son qui la minestra mi è andata tutta in veleno" Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia,* ed. Giulia Carnazzi (Milano: Rizzoli, 2015), 305. "I came to see you all. But since I have been here the food seems to poison me" Giovanni Verga, *The House by the Medlar-tree,* trans. Mary A. Craig (New York and London: Harper &Brothers, 1890), 296. Vanna is excluded also because, having left her husband, she has no means of support. Food as a social gradient, as in Verga (Dora Marchese, *Il gusto della letteratura. La dimensione gastronomico-alimentare negli scrittori italiani moderni e contemporanei,* Roma: Carocci, 2016, 69), is a central theme in Messina's *Primavera senza sole* (1920), where the dialectics of both the lack and abundance of food reflect the financial position of the characters.

current role reversal: the servant is the authentic hostess in the house, as she fills every space and interstice with a sensory trace of her feeding activity, namely of her core function in the domestic space. The dominion is not limited to the culinary field: the maidservant satisfies Ienna's husband both gastronomically and sexually, as the protagonist will soon discover. When Ienna is able to reach the upper level of the house, she finds a dirty kitchen, an open cupboard, and a dining room left in squalor; a reversed world that mirrors the upheaval of the slave-master relationship, where negligence and waste replace control and conservation. Though everything in the servant's room is clean, a table is set for two in the middle, and

> sulla tavola c'erano anche due graziose coselline di pasta, come le manipolava lei prima, ogni volta che si faceva il pane. Figuravano due lettere; e una, attorcigliata a serpentello, pareva una esse.[41]
>
> [on the table, there were also two beautiful pieces of dough, as she, too had kneaded before, each time she made bread. They looked like two letters; and one, twisted as a snake, looked like an 's']

The adjacency between the laid table and the bed—the meal is eaten in the servant's bedroom—illustrates in the story the identification of food with sex, a motif already mentioned but not particularly developed in *La casa nel vicolo*. If Ienna can no longer be a cook, she also looses all her attractive traits in the eyes of her husband, who is involved in a sexual relationship with Savatura. It is also meaningful that the female protagonist has no children, another deficiency that underlines the inability to nurture, thus creating a reversed image of the typical traditional woman. Food, and the social clichés associated with it, become a tool of deception in the text; Savatura seduces Ienna's husband merely by feeding him. This interpretation, however, leaves some meanings obscure. Ienna is a young woman, while Savatura is old, ugly, and somehow terrifying, as the storyteller notes, expressing Ienna's thoughts: "Sì, era una strega, Savatura, con gli occhi freddi e chiari che parevan di vetro, le labbra più sottili di un fil di spago, sigillate."[43] [Yes, she was a witch, Savatura, with clear, cold eyes that seemed made of glass, her pursed lips thinner than a string of twine]. The man's choice would be inexplicable, so it seems to stem from a kind of spell, and

41 Maria Messina, "La porta chiusa", in Ead, *Piccoli gorghi,* 179.
42 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
43 *Ibidem*.

the small shapes of bread highlight both the 'possession through food' and the submission of the male: his first initial is interwoven with an S, which stands for Savatura but also snake, both a symbol of Satan and of Eve's sin.[44] The servant, with her witch's face, taking hold of the nutrition ritual, exerts a devilish power over the house, stimulating a morbid desire in the man, and perhaps exacerbating the illness—partly psychosomatic—in the woman.[45] The story is suspended between reality and a fantastic atmosphere, which highlights how the centrality of food practices in a conservative context can become obsessive, leading people to live in disturbing domestic spaces, marked by atrocities such as an unreasoned imprisonment or disgusting adultery.

As a tool and emblem of the woman's unjust subjugation to the father, the discourse on food is always marked by deep tensions and intense sorrow. Within this framework, the short story "Demetrio Carmine" (from the collection *Le briciole del destino*) stands out in bold contrast, as it depicts a harmonious world where man and woman collaborate in preparing meals and tasting food without overpowering one another. Demetrio, a dentist, and his sister Caterina, a homemaker, share every task in the nutritional sphere. They constitute a small, atypical family, based on two-way, symmetrical relationships: Demetrio provides the raw materials and sets the table, Caterina cooks with passion. The perfect microcosm is dismantled by a stranger, Claretta, a typical seductress: despite being a working and emancipated woman (she is a teacher, a 'professora'), Claretta wishes to settle down, attracted to Demetrio by his wealth. She therefore pretends to perform traditional behaviors, exhibiting a deep interest in cooking.

> Una domenica si chiusero in cucina per fare un certo budino toscano. Claretta dosò, pestò, finse d'aiutar Caterina che s'affannava a manipolare una pasta dura come un ciottolo, mentre Demetrio la serviva e rideva come un ragazzo girandole attorno. Sprecarono un sacchetto di Maiorca, dieci uova, un barattolo di zucchero, la cucina fu messa a soqquadro; e finalmente Caterina levò di forno un empiastro bruciato duro che sapeva d'amaro. Pure fratello e sorella si profusero di elogi. Ciò che faceva Claretta era sempre ben fatto.[46]

44 The servant's name is certainly a speaking name, used in an antiphrastic sense, as the female Savior is, in fact, a destroyer.

45 Culinary art is considered a form of magic in ancient cultures, as evidenced by the Greek word *magheiros*, meaning cook, See Gilberto Pierazzuoli, *Mangiare donna. Il cibo e la subordinazione femminile nella storia* (Milano: Jouvence, 2016), 137-139.

46 Maria Messina, "Demetrio Carmine," in Ead, *Piccoli gorghi,* 250.

> [One Sunday, they shut themselves up in the kitchen to make a particular Tuscan pudding. Claretta measured, mixed, and pretended to help Caterina, who became breathless trying to knead a particularly tough dough that was hard like a pebble, while Demetrio served her and laughed like a boy, circling around her. They wasted a sack of Majorca flour, ten eggs, and a jar of sugar, and reduced the kitchen to shambles; finally, when Caterina pulled a burnt mess from the oven, which was hard and smelled bitter, both brother and sister praised profusely. Everything Claretta did was, after all, well done]

The joyful execution of the recipe hides, beneath a superficial gaiety, worrying signs: Claretta is unable to cook and, as Caterina is going to notice while looking at her manicured hands, she is not used to doing any housework. The girl is lying; moreover, she introduces a sense of useless waste into the well-balanced life of the brother and sister: the dispersion of precious ingredients—once again, the refined Maiorca flour is mentioned—foreshadows the severe loss that Caterina will suffer when Claretta persuades Demetrio to relocate his dental practice to the North of Italy. As Savatura, though in a different way, the 'professora' uses food as a weapon of deception. If feeding is a substitute for sex in the world created by the old, uncanny servant in a conservative environment, Claretta adapts her behavior to a more democratic context, highlighting the game-like nature of nurturing, which had previously been a means of sharing experience and feelings joyfully for Demetrio and Caterina. When Claretta becomes engaged to the man, she refuses to cook the traditional dishes that Caterina prepared for Demetrio, such as the *frittedda,* a Sicilian recipe made of fava beans, peas, and artichokes, thus severing her fiancé from his native country. Claretta therefore uses the widespread image of woman as 'queen of the house' as a mask, concealing her double nature, which is surprisingly similar to that of the Tuscan pudding she tries to prepare: seemingly sweet yet actually hard and bitter. Like Ienna, Caterina is unable to react to the devastation of her family and of her conservative world; the two women do not realize that the patriarchal value system is outdated. They remain, as Sapegno notices for the majority of Messina's characters—and the same could be said for Antonietta and Nicolina—on the threshold of consciousness.[47]

The last novel of Messina, *L'amore negato* (1928), seems to go a step further: Severa, the protagonist, outrageously refuses the woman's role as the dispenser of food. Instead, she intends to make a career as a milliner.

47 Maria Serena Sapegno, "Sulla soglia. La narrativa di Maria Messina," *altrelettere,* 2012 www.altrelettere.uzh.ch/article/view/al_uzh-3/304 (last consulted: 11 december 2024).

To achieve her goal, she doesn't hesitate to deceive, even depriving herself of family affection and all kinds of emotion. Her repressed passions return – in a Freudian sense – when Severa, now a mature woman, falls in love with a young man, Marco, whom she hired as an accountant. The character then neglects her atelier, which goes bankrupt. Finally, Severa, left in the lurch, goes mad.

The novel opens by describing Severa's family at lunch, a crucial moment that focuses on the characters' vision of life. The mother, Emilia, is a typical housekeeper, and her personality is expressed through cooking, an agreeable labor. She had "il viso rosso e lustro perché s'era staccata allora allora dai fornelli, ed era tutta affannata."[48] [a shiny red face, having just pulled herself away from the stove, and was completely out of breath]. Similar to the mother, the younger sister Miriam sets the table accurately and reproaches Severa, who is nibbling on the bread. Severa, in turn, accuses Miriam:

> Che piccola anima di serva tu hai! […] Tu somigli a nostra madre che non sa vivere senza cucinare e sfrigolare per portare a tavola manicaretti e budini![49]
> [What a small, servile soul you have! You are just like our mother, who has no idea how to live without cooking and sizzling, in order to bring delicacies and puddings to the table!]

The protagonist criticizes not only the subjugation that preparing food involves but also the hedonistic component of nourishment—a pleasure she cannot afford. Another diner is the teacher Corinna, a tenant in the house, who lives between tradition and innovation, taking the best from both. She is an efficient worker but is also capable of appreciating Emilia's recipes, cheering at a dish of "bruciate," hot chestnuts. This simple food is mentioned later, along with wine, when the storyteller reminds the reader of the love story between Severa's parents.[50] The combination of wine and hot chestnuts is central in the opening depiction of the meal, when the drink is glorified in a quote from gastronomic literature: Severa prevents her father from drinking wine, so Corinna recites some verses from *Bacco in Toscana* by Francesco Redi, which enhances the power of wine as an an-

48 Maria Messina, *L'amore negato* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1993), 17.

49 Ivi, 21.

50 On the literary motif of chestnut as natural and humble food, see Elisa Curti, "Castagne," in *Banchetti letterari. Cibi, pietanze e ricette nella letteratura italiana da Dante a Camilleri*, eds Gian Mario Anselmi and Gino Ruozzi (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 85-91.

tidote to the pain of man's existence. Hot chestnuts and wine testify to the naturalness of food, which Severa sees only in a gender-oriented perspective, instead of as a means to foster affectionate bonds. Denying herself the pleasure of food, Severa removes herself from conviviality, friendship, and the needs of her body. She displaces onto her family the responsibility of a 'lack' she feels, interpreting it as a deficiency of opportunities—her parents did not have enough money to pay for their daughter's education. The protagonist, instead, has a neglectful personality. It is noticeable that the Freudian displacement is depicted using a gastronomic metaphor: "Era destino che la famiglia dovesse prepararle un boccone amaro ogni volta che le pareva venuto il momento di poter godere![51] [It seemed destined that her family prepared a bitter bite for her every time it seemed to her that a moment of enjoyment had finally arrived!] Severa feels she is not well-fed enough—and the prohibition to eat the bread has, for her, this proper meaning—while it's her responsibility not to accept everything (food, help, interest) that could come from her relatives. When she meets Marco, she subconsciously attempts to seduce him, and it is no coincidence that it happens while she offers him the daily dinner in a sumptuous setting, which reveals the woman's sexual availability within a master/ employee dynamic.

> Lui non avrebbe voluto accettare sera per sera. Gli pareva di lasciarsi fare l'elemosina! […] Ma l'offerta era così amichevole! [ ] Anche la piccola tavola bene apparecchiata, con le stoviglie che luccicavano nello splendore di due grandi lampade velate di seta gialla, lo invitava a restare senza tanti complimenti.[52]
>
> [He wouldn't have wanted to accept every evening. It seemed as though he would be taking handouts! […] But it was such a friendly offer! […] Even the small table beautifully laid, with the place settings that gleamed in the radiance emanating from the two large lamps shaded with yellow silk, invited him to stay without many compliments]

Marco eats voraciously, disregarding all etiquette; Severa looks at him eagerly, confronted with an example of mere instinct and pleasure, which she has removed from her own experience. The woman is dazed and overwhelmed, thorough food, by her body's demands and by an irrepressible awakening of senses:

> A Severa piaceva vederlo mangiare. Aveva denti grandi, sani, labbra un po' grosse che dopo cena gli diventavano più rosse e più tumide. Certi momenti,

51 Messina, *L'amore negato*, 72.
52 Ivi, 87.

> nel guardarlo mentre addentava a quel modo, socchiudeva gli occhi assalita da uno struggimento penoso e piacevole nello stesso tempo, aspettandosi di sentirsi baciare, tutt'a un tratto.[53]
>
> [Severa enjoyed watching him eat. He had large, healthy teeth, and full lips, which after dinner, became redder and tumider. In certain moments, while watching him biting in that way, she would close her eyes assailed by a grief, which was both punishing and pleasing at the same time, waiting to be kissed all at once].

Once again, the food/sex equivalence takes on a crucial hermeneutic role, revealing to Severa that her strategic design to conquer independence as a woman is unachievable, as it creates in her a 'vacuum' that blocks her capacity for action. To offset the emptiness in her personal life, the woman fills Marco with food. In this sentence and in her actions, nourishment becomes a glaring substitute for the sexual act. From this point on, the depiction of Severa's body as shriveled and deprived of nourishment intensifies in the novel.

In my opinion, the key to reading *L'amore negato* through food representations better illustrates the author's intention than other interpretations. Severa's behavior is penalized in the text not because, as Verga might have portrayed, the woman tries to exceed the limits of her role and social class, but because she denies her own physicality and her need to nurture. The protagonist's solution is flawed, as it nullifies its own goal upon reaching it: the correct path to achieving female independence does not involve rejecting one's femininity.

## *Conclusions*

Messina's works, therefore, offer an in-depth reflection on food as an expression of gender relations, women's marginalization, and the awareness of the female body. One should now wonder what exactly the author's point of view is on the world described. It has been noted, in fact, that Messina holds a conservative ideology, as she does not propose improvement strategies regarding women's condition.[54] Evolution is not envisioned

53 *Ibidem*.

54 See Maria Di Giovanna, *La fuga impossibile. Sulla narrativa di Maria Messina* (Napoli: Federico & Ardia, 1989); "La testimone indignata e le trappole del sistema. Il percorso narrativo di Maria Messina," in *Donne e scrittura,* ed. Daniela Corona (Palermo: La Luna, 1990), 337-345.

in a narrative that finds its basic element in the 'eddy'—the static nature of oppressive situations, its basic element.[55] Even when viewed from the perspective of food-centered activities, Messina's characters generally do not rebel against their enslavement, of which they are only vaguely aware. However, the representation of the motif—through the slow, exhausting rituals of food preparation and serving, the despotism shown by the master and father, who is 'nurtured' like a god, and the excruciating nature of the dining spaces—clearly reveals the author's strong vein of criticism. This, in turn, stimulates in the reader a distancing from the idealized image of the woman as 'Queen of the house.' Messina's works dismantle many clichés surrounding the role of women in society and also warn against easy solutions, such as Severa's, who tries to assert herself in a male-dominated world by eliminating her corporeality.

Actually, women's social action spaces are minimal, mainly due to the ideological regression of the fascist era. Female marginalization is an undeniable fact, and the only possible action is to become aware of it.[56] Forced to care for others and confined to liminal spaces in the home, the Messinian woman is sentenced to a malnourished and barren existence. She is destined to receive only, paraphrasing the title of Messina's collection published in 1918, often quoted in this article, 'the crumbs of life'. The innovation and modernity of Messina's discourse lie in its ability to reveal the squalor and the latent injustice of these 'crumbs' in contrast to the insatiable voracity of men.

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55 Mariella Muscariello, "Vicoli, gorghi e case: reclusione e/o identità nella narrativa di Maria Messina," in *Les femmes écrivains en Italie (1870-1920): ordres et libertés,* ed. Emmanuelle Genevois, *Croniques Italiennes*, n. 39/40 (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1994) 329-46.

56 See Barbarulli and Brandi, *I colori del silenzio,* 61.

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