The definition of motherhood is the subject of ongoing debate. Not only is there a contentious distinction between becoming a mother by virtue of biological processes and fulfilling that desire by means of adoption and/or reproductive technologies, but defining motherhood itself challenges the delicate architecture of Italian national identity. Although the literature of Italian women in the twentieth-century is rich with images of “devoured mothers,” as Annie Vivanti’s protagonist in I divoratori (1901) ecstatically states, “I am one of the devoured. My little Anne-Marie devoured me,” the twenty-first century presents a more diverse notion of motherhood and devotion. The ever increasing presence of immigrant women writers in Italy brings to light a connection, yet unexplored, between motherhood and Italian national identity. If during the twentieth-century the emphasis placed on motherhood was almost invariable, and the images of mothers in literature and society were reduced to “unconditional devotion to their offspring” (Laura Benedetti, 5), the twenty-first century literature of non-Italian women writers reveals how self-recognition generates devotion, and how motherhood is no longer perceived as self-sacrifice but as the extension of women’s own identity. By focusing on Gabriella Kuruvilla’s short story “Ruben”,

Politics of Recognition and Devotion: Motherhood at Stake between Identity and Race in Gabriella Kuruvilla’s short story, “Ruben”

Luisanna Sardu
CUNY Graduate Center, New York
this paper intends to explain how devotion, originated in the relationship between
the Indian-Italian author and her un-born child, is significantly interweaved with
her acceptance of motherhood and her desire to be recognized as Italian.

Immigrant women writers in Italy explain the Italian community’s reaction to the
growing presence of first-and second- generation immigrants and the changes brought
inside Italian society and families. According to Muller, Kingsley, and ultimately
Finnegan, the ever growing interest in the mutable aspects of social life has unavoidably
incorporated literature and its fundamental role as a “reflection” of society. This is to say
that literature reveals and emphasizes social and cultural characteristics rather than only
expressing the author’s inspiration. In the case of Italian society, a “reflection” on
identity and race must be reconsidered with reference to those traditional and cultural
spaces representing women, such as body and motherhood. Gabriella Kuruvilla, an
Indian-Italian author, holds a place of honor in this debate that sees the experience of
motherhood in tension between what entitles a person to be Italian and what determines a
“good” mother. Born in Milan in 1969 to an Indian father and an Italian mother,
Kuruvilla was raised in an artistic and intellectually stimulating environment. Surrounded
by books and walls that she used as blank white pages to freely convey her thoughts,
Kuruvilla found in the act of writing the ideal tool to dissect and understand her double
national identity, and later her experience as a mother to her son.

The intersection of Italianess and Otherness, as well as Kurivilla’s exertion in
framing her own national identity, is addressed in her short-stories “Colf” and “India.”
In “Colf,” the author focuses more on issues of class and the dissimilarity in color among
nonwhite women; in the biographical short story “India,” Kuruvilla reveals her inability
to communicate with her own body, “composto da due metà divise, da sempre” (69)

[composed of two halves, divided as it has always been]. This condition of
impermanence results in a double displacement for her, as the author defines herself:

…una creatura che originava stupore e imbarazzo,
un’enigmatica confusione tra Oriente e Occidente.
Possedevo alcuni tratti indiani ma il mio comportamento
era tipicamente straniero; ero Indiana, ma al tempo stesso
non lo ero, ero straniera ma non completamente tale.

(Kuruvilla, 75)

[…]a creature that caused consternation and
embarrassment, an enigmatic confusion between Orient and
Occident. I have some Indian features, but my ways are
typically foreign; I am an Indian and non-Indian altogether,
yet not completely a foreigner].

In the passage above, Kuruvilla expounds the sense of loss and isolation experienced by
all immigrants in Italy. The phenomenon of immigration in Italy has led to a growing
interest in the roles of race, ethnicity, class, and gender within a society caught in the
process of globalization. Immigration is challenging not only to the Italian perception of
its national borders, but it is also reshaping Italian society’s architecture and its
foundations, namely motherhood, family, work, and religion. As colfs (donna delle
pulizia), babysitters, and domestic employees in the household, immigrant women
entered the social fabric of Italy by joining one of the strongest socio-political
foundations of their new country: family. Despite becoming “members” of Italian family
life, the persistent financial instability, and the personal and cultural fractures in most
immigrant’s families continue to feed the stereotype that they are “unfit mothers”.
Nevertheless, Western Feminism prefers to perceive immigrant women as custodians of
family values interweaved with their home and culture. Interestingly, while the Italian
government did not take into consideration the permanence of immigrants, nor the probability of reuniting their families in Italy, women immigrants communicated, in their literary works, that possibility by merging their past with the future, giving their national identity a new subjectivity. As Braidotti observes, “immigrant women in Italy have adopted something like a nomadic or post-structuralist perspective; through artistic expression in plays and poetry, they demonstrate use of nomadic subjectivity” (97).

Gabriella Kuruvilla’s nomadic subjectivity seems to oscillate between her fear of transferring her knowledge about alienation to her baby, and her doubts about becoming a mother. As she narrates,

Io che non pensavo di avere un figlio. Nel terrore di essere una madre bambina troppo presa da se stessa per potersi dedicare a qualcun altro. Nel terrore di avere un figlio che potesse sentirsi, come me, esiliato in ogni terra.

(Kuruvilla, 86)

[I always thought I couldn’t have a child because I lived in the terror of being a child-mother, too self-centered for taking care of others. The terror of having a son who might feel exiled from every land as I did]

In the passage above, the author’s self-monitoring emphasizes the inseparability between motherhood and society, between body and politics. As Cristina Mazzoni explains, the self-monitoring of the pregnant woman is an instance of the overlapping between the subject and what she represents in society, between her as a woman and the image of mother. When does the self-monitoring start? At the very first moment a woman realizes or suspects she is pregnant. The thought of another life growing inside “incises” a woman’s body and mind even before the first “quickening,” or “fetal movement.”
Gabriella Kuruvilla associates the image of a pink dot with a new physical presence, stating, “Al rosa di quel pallino in più che si è impresso sul test di gravidanza. Sono in cinta. Non lo volevo. Adesso non so se lo voglio.” [That extra pink dot stamped in my pregnancy test. I am pregnant. I didn’t want it. Now, I don’t know if I want it.] (83). The recognition of a new condition and knowledge forced Kuruvilla to open a new debate about her ethnicity and what entitles her to be Italian. She is stripped of her desire to belong to one nationality; furthermore, her future baby becomes an extension of a self that the author wants to forget, to abort, as Kuruvilla claims,

[... ] appartenevo a una sola nazione, quella Italiana, perchè l’altra ormai era stata abbandonata. [... ] Non è vero che non ti imagino. Faccio finta di niente ma sotto sotto penso che tu sia nero: di pelle, di capelli e di occhi. Assolutamente nero. Come tuo nonno. [...] e penso che tu possa avere i dread.

[ I belonged to only one nation, the Italian one, because the other was long abandoned [...] I do imagine how you will be. I pretend not to, although I think that you will be black: skin, hair, and eyes. Absolutely black. Like your grandfather. I think you might have dreadlock.

(Kuruvilla, 84-89)

If we are to define devotion as unconditional dedication to another human being or principle, or expression of an enthusiastic attachment to an entity, certainly such a definition does not seem to apply to Kuruvilla’s experience of motherly devotion. If and how a mother’s emotions (fear of her child’s skin color, happiness in a new life, sadness caused by being discriminated against, etc.) can affect a fetus is still an open debate. As Mazzoni observes, George Feldman’s *The Complete Handbook of Pregnancy* (1984) does not take a clear position on this issue. Initially, Feldman claims that accurate evidence on how a mother’s emotions can affect her baby does not exist. Later, he states
that unhappy and apprehensive mothers can give birth to “unhappy and anxious” children. By the same logic, joyful mothers will give birth to happy infants. Similarly, Barbara Katz-Rothman argues, “mothers and fetuses are not just connected chemically” (97). Rothman continues by explaining that the relationship between a mother and her fetus goes beyond the physical bond because the mother is reacting socially to the experience of carrying a new life. In fact,

[…], any mother is engaged in a social interaction with her fetus as the pregnancy progresses. Women are […] social beings, giving social meaning to their experience. When a baby uses her bladder as a trampoline, the woman responds. She responds socially with annoyance, amusement, irritation, anger, sometimes even with pleasure at the apparent livens of the baby […]. But respond she does, not only to the physical experience, but to the social and emotional overlays of meaning given to that experience. (Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood*, 97-98)

That is to say, while a mother is a social being, fully capable of interacting with the “outside world,” her fetus has not yet reached that dimension. Still, as Rothman argues, a fetus’s mother represents its first social experience. Undeniably, the external surroundings, and therefore the cultural environment, both affect a mother’s physical and emotional sphere. I am not suggesting that a cultural frame can directly influence a fetus by the means of her mother’s body. However, it is clear that Kuruvilla projects her fear of intolerance and discrimination toward immigrants in Italian culture to her fetus. There are no traces of devotion toward her un-born child yet. Kuruvilla responds socially by influencing her psychological, physical, and emotional balance as she clearly conveys in her narrations. Is she affecting her child? Once born, could her baby share the same
negative feelings toward ethnicity and diversity? It is the arrival of her child, Ruben that
finally draws a new line between diversity and sameness, identity and misidentification.

Navigating between sarcastic undertones and hilarious comments, Kuruvilla describes her experience of labor as being a painful stomachache,


[It’s 4 AM, I am crawling on the floor, clinging to the furniture. I’ve never had such an agonizing stomachache. I went to the hospital […] I thought I would be dismissed with a painkiller […] They took me to the delivery room. You are about to be born. T-shirt, yoga pants, red heavy-duty boots. Anyone! Get me an embroidered night-gown and pink slippers! This is not a rave! Push, push, push, this is unbearable. You don’t want to get out. Give me an epidural. Give me a cigarette. I’ll be back tomorrow. Nothing. No anesthesia, no smoke, no home. I stay here. First I sat in a bathtub, then I crouched on the floor, finally I lay on the floor.]

(Kuruvilla, 89-90)

Completely unaware of her approaching childbirth, Kuruvilla reveals to her readers that she is completely unprepared for Ruben at all. Throughout her biographical narration of the events, the author not only reports her fears and doubts about national identity and race, but she also discloses a lack of general knowledge and common sense about pregnant bodies. Certainly childbirth is a natural process, and women had been giving
birth centuries before any miraculous medical advancement was made. It seems as though the universal intention, for the expectant mother, is to stay healthy and give birth to a healthy new life. Kuruvilla only stumbles upon this common goal, as her main concern seems to be the loss of her space, her routine, and her dynamic lifestyle. Feeling trapped in a limbo of rejection and acceptance, the author continues smoking, drinking, painting until 3 AM, and riding her bike one month before Ruben’s birth:

Continuo a dipingere, […] intanto ho finito tre Moretti grandi e un pacchetto di Fortune rosse […] Non so se riuscirò ad amarti. Non voglio farti del male. Mi accendo l’ennesima sigaretta. Non c’è niente in casa per te […] neppure la culla.

[I continue painting, […] meanwhile I have already finished three Moretti beers and smoked an entire pack of Fortuna cigarette. […] I don’t know if I’ll be able to love you. I don’t want to hurt you. I light another cigarette. There is nothing at home for you […] not even a crib.]

(Kuruvilla, 85-87)

Childbirth in Kuruvilla’s text seems to reiterate the feminist idea against maternity, proclaimed between the end of the eighteenth-century and the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy, and which saw as its major proponents the writers Sibilla Aleramo and Matilde Serao. The revolt against maternity focused on reclaiming a woman’s body and space by separating herself from her role as mother. In this respect, Kuruvilla perceives motherhood as a condition of disability, an obstacle that would prevent her from continuing her “normal” existence; she sees the death of her freedom as linked to the arrival of a new life, and with it the termination of any possible germs of devotion. For this reason, the author’s unhealthy habits can be interpreted as attempts to avoid the splitting of her identity as a not-pregnant woman. Woman and mother are at a cross-roads.
Kuruvilla’s case becomes even more complex as the conventional role of mother as keeper of culture and tradition is jeopardized by the author’s rejection of her Indian background and her vain efforts to be recognized as Italian. Therefore her pregnant body represents the fold between woman and mother, Indian and Italian culture, one individual and its Other. Only Ruben’s genetic characteristics will fill the gap between these multiple binaries and bring peace to Kuruvilla’s fears and anxiety.

Having fallen into the turmoil of such mixed feelings, Gabriella Kuruvilla is confused and embarrassed to realize that Ruben is born white, blonde, and with blue eyes. In disbelief, the author laments, “sei bello. Bellissimo. […] Hai fatto un miscuglio tutto tuo scegliendo bene tra i caratteri chiari. Fetente.” [Handsome. The most handsome. […] you made a medley of DNA by picking well among the fair color features. Traitor.] (91). In spite of her initial bedazzled disappointment, the author finally comes to comprehend the meaning of motherhood, as she states, “la mia vita, adesso, ha il tuo significato” [my life, now, has your meaning] (90). In this precise moment lies “the birth” of devotion and sudden recognition. Kuruvillla is now able to embrace the new significance of motherhood as dedication to her new born life, and also to accept the extension of her identity. Kuruvilla’s journey to devotion started, therefore, with what Sara Ruddick defined as “maternal thinking,” a project of self-understanding, and ended, to put it in words, with the knowledge that, “the love of children at any rate, is not only the most intense of attachment; it is also a detachment, a giving up […] to see the child’s reality with the patient, loving eyes of attention”. And, I would like to add with the “eyes of devotion.”
As Huff explains, “women’s biographies of birth give us accounts which highlight the intricate relationship between the physical, cultural, and textual construction of delivery” (119); Kuruvilla’s biographical narration is certainly multilayered and reveals a complex cultural architecture embedded in Italian society. Although Kuruvilla recognizes herself as mother now, the “whiteness” of her baby does not allow her to be identified as Ruben’s maker in the eyes of society. The author bitterly jokes about being pointed out as the babysitter when waiting for Ruben outside of his school. Ironically, when Kuruvilla finally experiences continuity and a sense of belonging by the means of childbirth, Italian society de-mothers her. Still, she finds relief in watching Ruben holding his grandfather’s hand, the former completely rooted to Italy, the latter eradicated from his country of origin, both diverse and altogether the sameness.

NOTE

5 All the translations from Italian to English are mine unless otherwise indicated.
7 See Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway. What to Expect. When You are Expecting: “the only goal – which all parents share-is a healthy mother and a healthy baby” (208).
8 See Alba Amoia. No Mothers We!: Italian Women Writers and their Revolt Against Maternity.13-29


