

Exploring Identity Transformation Processes in Human Mobility Through Female Migrants' Literary Production

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Abstract This chapter explores the reconstruction process of migrant women's identities through self-reflexivity in the literary production of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Based on a wider project, its main aim is to bridge the gap between migrants' voices in the European literature landscape. The core question addressed is: what are the dominant discourses (systemic) and experiences (individual) about race, class, gender roles linked to relationships of power/oppression that shape migrant women identities and critical writing? The main findings show that rethinking identity construction is relevant for gender equality and social cohesion.

Keywords Female migrant writers. Autobiography. Migrations. Mobility. Identity.

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1 Introduction

Female migrant writers' voices are less known (Estrada 2014; Alicino 2015) in literary production globally, and, in particular, in literary production on human mobility and migration, also referred to as diasporic, postcolonial, intercultural, world literature or literature of migration. In this chapter, I will refer to this specific niche of literary production as transnational literature, which still suffers from

the role, or stigma, of a minor genre within literary production of the twentieth century. I will use the term transnational as it allows the boundaries of the nation-state and/or the frontiers of the national language to be transcended and shares human experiences related to the migration or resettlement of its characters or its authors. Moreover, it is linked with topics such as identity deconstruction and reconstruction processes, and self-perception of characters and authors.

This definition of transnational literature fits better with the aims of my broader study, focused on literary production from the margin of the intercultural literature market. In fact, many female migrant writers are producing work from the margins, remaining on the periphery of the market of the literary production, on the reconstruction processes of migrant women through self-reflexivity in literary production of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In addition, the definition emphasises that knowledge production from the margins is useful for reframing migrants' identities through an ad hoc methodology that, through writing and the use of self-reflexive strategies, stimulates psychosocial well-being. This methodology is a tool that may transform possible negative experiences in the context of migrants' displacement and resettlement in destination countries.

Indeed, one of the project's main aims is to bridge the gap between female and male migrants' voices in the European literature landscape, and to shed light on the links established between human mobility and social change, using transnational literature as a vector of social change, approached from critical discourse analysis and feminist literary criticism.

Today, women's literary production, as well as the lesser-explored field of transnational literary production by female authors, is still a 'theoretical challenge'. (223)

The study of the transnational literature, analysed from an interdisciplinary dimension and approached from a multidimensional perspective, allows us to delve deeper into psychosocial problematics, vulnerability and the structures of opportunities and constraints faced by migrants in the host country. Moreover, from a theoretical and methodological intersectional perspective, which takes into account the intersection of gender with other analytical categories, such as race/ethnicity, class, status (single, married, divorced), education, etc., we can shed light on minority and diasporic groups' creation of personal (micro-dimensional level) and collective (macro-dimensional) identities and the process of constructing belonging. Relational ties, environment and relationships are another issue (meso-dimensional) in the study of migration dynamics. In addition, it is also important to explore from an intersectional perspective the possible interconnection between the

micro-, macro- and meso-analytical dimensions of female migrants' expressive and creative writings, as well as diasporic writing.

In these writings, issues of belonging, identity, and creative expression emerge with renewed force, raising new questions about the location of production and consumption as well as the position from which interpretations and classifications arise (Ponzanesi 2004, 13).

Related to this, as Ponzanesi argues, it is relevant to establish some clarification about the relations of power and oppression in order to raise new questions about transnational literature, travel literature and resettlement.

Thus, I will analyse the dichotomy between identity and belonging and the conceptualization of 'home' in four migrant women's writings approached from the sociological 'migratory career's' lens. This allows analysis from an intersectional perspective at the macro-, meso- and micro-analytical level and the inter/intra-categorical crossing between race, ethnicity, class, education and gender. In this chapter, I also explore female migrant authors' self-reflexivity, analysing the management of the conceptualization of home and the sense of belonging and identity transformation, through the following selected novels:

1. Lea Ypi, *Free* (2021). British-Albanese writer, who lived in Italy during her university life. This is the autobiographical story of Lea Ypi's Albanian family. This novel recounts their life through Lea's eyes and her memories of before, during and after the communist regime.
2. Sabrina Efonayi, *Addio, a domani. La mia incredibile storia vera* (Goodbye, until Tomorrow. My Incredible True Story, 2022). Sabrina Efonayi is an Italo-Nigerian writer, born in Italy to a young a Nigerian mother who worked for a cruel woman, who exploited her in a house in Naples (Italy) and did not want her to have the baby. Thus, her mother gave her up for adoption to a Napolitan family, who were her neighbours, and she managed to regularly see her daughter after work.
3. Elif Shafak, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021). A British-Turkish writer living in London.
4. Margaryta Yakovenko, *Desencajada* (Disengaged, 2020). A Spanish-Ukrainian writer, living in Spain with her family since she was a child.

I have selected these novels based on their similarities and contrasts; they are emblematic examples of four different migration corridors and channels. The first novel corresponds to the Balkan area and the communist regime. The second, with a Nigerian origin, relates to the migration from African countries to Italy. The third novel identifies with the East European diaspora towards Spain, as the writer is from Ukraine. Finally, the fourth novel corresponds to the Turkish diaspora in the United Kingdom.

The selection has been made, on the one hand, due to the similarity of their plots and the narrative strategies that the authors have used, which correspond to a bio-fictional strategy. That is to say, they opted for a midway between the genres of autobiography, auto-bio-fictional and fiction. On the other hand, they were chosen for their differences being based on two different regimes of mobility (a macro-analysis of the structural axes that influence female migrants' lives).

Therefore, I have decided to analyse the different origins of the female migrant authors, who are embedded in contrasting regimes of mobility in the triangulation of different contexts: Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom, within a European country framework. The understanding of the regimes of mobility and the influence that they exert on migrant people's lives, especially female migrants, is very important for the study of migration, resettlement and the social impact of human mobility on migrants' lives.

Related to the discourse on regimes of mobility, at an international level scholars (Riaño, Baghdadi 2007; Raghuram 2009; Kofman 2012; Sandoz 2018) have shown the effects of macro-sociological factors on the micro-sociological dimension of migrant people's lives. Other scholars (Di Martino, Maiztegui, Aristegui 2020; Martiniello, Rea 2014) have shed light on the importance of the existence of the articulation between the macro-, meso- and micro-analytical dimension, influencing migrants' emigration and immigration paths, the whole decision-making process and the various adaptation and integration dynamics in the destination country. In this sense, it is important to stress that the structures of opportunities and constraints, which act on migrant women in different way at the local level in the country contexts, are linked to the structures of power and oppression, which have an influence on the way of approaching the socio-cultural system of the country of destination and resettlement. At the same time, such structures influence the coping strategies that the migrants adopt to face the different barriers they encounter on their way to develop their personal and professional career paths, their self-definition and empowerment as well as the integration and adaptation processes of the new environment and socio-cultural country context.

2 Conceptual Framework

There are writers who write for fame. And there are writers who write because we need to make sense of the world we live in; writing is a way to clarify, to interpret, to reinvent. We may want our work to be recognized, but that is not the reason we write. We do not write because we must; we always have a choice. We write because language is the way we keep a hold on life. With words we experience our deepest understandings of what it means to be intimate. We communicate to connect, to know the community. (bell hooks 1989)

This fragment from bell hooks is enlightening when we engage with the writing and the world of literary production.

Indeed, bell hooks' words are aligned with this chapter's exploration of the work of female migrant writers and the question of self-reflexivity.

Self-reflexivity can be a tool or a strategy for speaking out and speaking about personal experiences and a collective universe.

In this chapter, viewing self-reflexivity as an act of reflection of inner images, perceptions, memories and feelings in migratory trajectories is important in order to understand agency and its meaning and the process identity deconstruction and reconstruction of the migrant's insider/outsider perspective.

Self-reflexivity has many nuances in literary studies. Thus, the concept of self-reflexivity into female migrant writers' work is focused on the act of reflection of writers' subjectivities and their own experience of migration into literary works, as well as on the act of navigating through different personal and collective deconstruction and reconstruction processes of meaning. In fact, self-reflexivity, in its link with migration studies, can be an ethical tool to "give full play to our explicit and implicit subjectivity" (Cruz 2015, 1723). Nicklas Luhmann argues that,

'reflexivity' means that law, as an autonomous sub-system of society, is obliged to respect the autonomy of other sub-systems of society, including organisations and interactions. (2018, 389)

According to Luhmann (1982), subjects reflect and this assumption is based on agency as a force through which individuals reflect and make social interactions. Thus, in this work, self-reflexivity is approached according to Luhmann (1980, 9), as the

ability of individuals of a social system to reflect on and evaluate both their conception of the system and their role in it and to choose activities from among the available option according to their own personal evaluation.

This chapter also draws on Goldmann's (1967) theory of genetic structuralism, which claims that each subjectivity belongs to a social movement.

It has to be stressed that genetic structuralism is linked to the concepts of self-reflexivity and agency. Agency is a key element for migrant people to navigate the social contexts of home and host countries, the process of identity deconstruction and reconstruction, the reformulation of meanings and knowledge about the environment and themselves (Di Martino, Maiztegui, Aristegui 2020). Thus, agency is a principal component in migrant women's socio-political participation in society. In line with this discourse, Luhmann (1980) highlights the range of interconnected systems, which act in such processes linked to migration and migrant people. However, it should be stressed that these systems often reproduce vulnerability (Tagliacozzo, Pisacane, Kilkey 2021). According to Goldmann (1996), another expression of the inner self and experiences of human beings is the cultural. This is another way to channel and catalyse individual and collective expression, feelings, imaginaries and symbolic happenings and experiences of daily life

If these processes and meaning constructions are individual, they take also into account the structures of opportunities and constraints and the structures of power and oppression, which form reality and genetic constructionism, as well as taking an intersectional approach in an attempt to problematise them. In fact, in Goldmann's 1996 theorization, it is important to contextualise both historically and sociologically the creation of art. In migratory studies, and specifically in female migrant writers' work, the art creation can be transferred to the idea of the positioning of the migrant women and writer in the context of her own origin and in the context of resettlement, without forgetting the space in-between. Moreover, from the intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1994; Yuval-Davis 2015), the positioning of both literary work and the writers' positionality is linked with the specificity of their gender, race/ethnicity, class, etc., to be revisited through spatial (geographical) and historical time.

By contrast, according to Kennet Gergen 2002, the origin of social reality consists in historically situated social relations and is symbolically mediated. The question of memory is a key issue in the migrants' narratives. In fact, according to Halbwachs (1992), it should be stressed that collective memory is produced by places and that individuals and their identity are situated and linked to real places, what implies that the narrative changes if the places change. This assumption recalls Ricoeur 2000, who claims that geographical spaces are not stable, as they are constructed on the relationships with others, with society; in short, places are constructed based on social interactions. Therefore, it can be argued that the act of writing is a mediation between the writer and the reader, the writer and her

experience of migration, the writer and the networks, places and social interactions reflected in the migratory experience, that explain that each migratory experience is different for every migrant. The role of memory in transnational literature is to maintain the new identity well anchored to the security of the country of origin. Therefore, in literary works there is a continuous shift between real places situated in the memory and imaginary places. This shift can have another function: the creation of a collective symbolic space, which would represent the historical capital of a population (Nora 1989). In that sense, thus, memory becomes a communicative process which constructs reality, self-reflexive images and collective identity (Kitzmann, Creet 2014). It reflects the need to find a way in which intercultural dialogue would be possible without manipulation (Callegari 2008). Furthermore, the complexification of reality, as well as its complexity, are notions at the core of genetic structuralism (Goldmann 1996). Transnational literature, in that sense, can help to explore migration and human mobility processes from a systemic overview (Fanon 1952). At the same time, it can help to delve deeper into the universe of travel literature and self-reflexive behaviours of languages, authors, readers and editorial markets. Reality is conceived as a place and space for exchange, contact or conflicts, between different ways of life, states of mind and cultural and cross-cultural practices. In that sense, female diasporic writings (and the questions raised)

reveal the changed relation between cultural, historical, and political events and their representations, between the residual ideologies of colonialism and their impact on present society, and between the text and its context. (Ponzanesi 2004, 13)

In this regard, literary work's objects of study link memory and migration focused on two elements: 1) on collective identities' de/reconstruction processes, and 2) on the sense of belonging to the 'lost' nation and the host nation. Moreover, the transit of migration into memory is multidimensional: a) geographical-spatial (physical): the country of origin and the destination country; b) imaginary (mental): representation of the past; c) temporal: in time, negotiating between the past and the present; d) psychological: on two levels, consciousness and unconsciousness.

3 Methodology

In this chapter, I will analyse the dichotomy between identity and belonging and the conceptualization of 'home' in four migrant women's writings through two methods: critical discourse analysis and the 'migratory career' lens (Martiniello, Rea 2014). Discourse is commonly used in various senses including: (a) meaning-making as an element of social process, (b) the language associated with a particular social field or practice (e.g. political discourse), and (c) a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective.

The sociological 'migratory career' lens (Martiniello, Rea 2014; Di Martino, Maiztegui, Aristegui 2020) allows a multidimensional approach to analysis at the macro-, meso- and micro-analytical level, inter-categorical dimensions (between different groups), and intra-categorical dimensions (within the same group), by intersecting between race, ethnicity, class, education and gender, added to the analysis of migrants' migratory trajectories in space and time. In the analysis of the selected works, I have linked the migratory career lens with a discourse-analytical approach through an innovative methodological strategy on two levels: the told and untold narrations. Moreover, due to their symmetry and correspondence, I focus, on the one hand, on the assessment of the structures and relations of power and oppression within literary production and, on the other hand, on the agency and coping strategies used by the female migrant authors in their writings and in their life, through the central analytical concept of self-reflexivity. The analytical nature is mainly interdisciplinary, therefore, it is appropriate to explore the selected cases, related to the intercultural or transnational literary production of female migrant writers. Finally, I have carried out interviews with the authors, in order to compare their work and their own experience of writing about migration.

4 Analysis and Discussion

To answer the main questions of inquiry, I have used the discourse analysis for the texts and the 'migratory careers' lens applied to the authors' narrative. Thus, I have applied such methods to the multidimensional level to explore the interconnection between macro-, meso- and micro-level of analysis. I have found that the systemic level constructed on the structures of opportunity and constraints, as well as the structures of power and oppression, are linked with the micro-analytical sphere, that is to say, macro and micro dimensions of female migrant authors are linked and they influence each other in a perpetual dance. This multidimensional analysis shows that the

socio-political participation of migrant women through writing is real. In fact, the women conceive writing as acts of revelation and revelation for the inner self, collective experience and collective ethnic belonging.

In that sense, writing becomes a tool that provides the catharsis for female migrant authors of their own experiences. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that, in this process, memory is another principal element, important in the de/reconstruction process of the female migrant writers' identity in a space in-between two socio-cultural systems (origin and host country), and the level of difficulty is based on the intersectional level.

In this section, thus, I aim to respond to the main questions of inquiry, which are linked to a multidimensional perspective and approached from an interdisciplinary method. I have mixed different methods, taken from different disciplines, in order to have a broader view of the interconnection between the diverse factors and elements that influence the deconstruction and reconstruction processes of female migrants' identity and belonging.

The first question I answer is the following: what are the dominant discourses (systemic) and experiences (individual) about race, class, gender roles linked to relationships of power/oppression that shape migrant women identities and critical writings?

The second question I address is about the migrant women's positioning and representations in-between spaces.

The third and final question of inquiry, which will follow the analysis of the novels, is if the literature might be an expression of identity reconstruction processes able to challenge the dominant writing and opinions.

4.1 Lea Ypi, *Free* (2021)

Free belongs to the autobiographical genre. Written in the first person, and drawing on the historical memory's reconstruction strategy, Ypi recounts her family's story.

The discourse on the systemic dimension of emigration is emblematic, as it is also linked to the political axes on which the novel is constructed. Indeed, Ypi's mother left Albania with her brother, because she could no longer tolerate the socio-political situation of the country.

Through this political story of Albania, the author describes her family's universe, way of thinking, political background and her mother's militancy in the feminist movement, as well as the way in which they manage the transition from a communist regime to a democracy. She speaks about her feelings for the 'cultural revolution', a dimension in which her mother does not depend on the State (Ypi

2021, 206). Lea Ypi also speaks about the power/oppression under which women lived during the regime. At the same time, she plays with the idea of freedom and through the text she shifts between the illusion of being free and actually being free.

It is explicit and is connected with the historical era of the communist regime, the repressing socio-political situation and the abuse of authoritative structures where the dominant thinking was an abuse of power. The (individual) experiences about race, class, gender roles that shape migrant women's identities are linked to relationships of power/oppression.

In the last part of the novel, Ypi shows her inner feelings about the civil war through her diary, "How a civil war is told" (265). Moreover, she talks about the feelings related to the departure of her mother and brother, the concerns about their flight to Italy.

The positioning in *Free* is clear: the writer is a child, a young girl and an adult, who, whilst growing up, lives through a transition period and witnesses the crumbling of her world. She has to go out of her comfort zone and wonders if she has been living a lie until the fall of the communist regime. She uses a complex and bright strategy to compare different, and often opposite, ideological and political positioning. She describes her parents' ideological thinking which she actually calls "contradictory". Thanks to the strategy of the autobiographical novel, Lea Ypi narrates, through her characters, the complexity of that world. She narrates the difficult world before, during and after the communist regime and her mother's emigration with her little brother to Italy.

Lea Ypi narrates a historical era, its advantages and drawbacks. In her novel, she tries to balance all the events that revolve around the regime and around politics and political philosophy. I argue that the positioning is painted through the memory of the child and teenage Lea. Thus, memory is a fundamental element in her de/reconstruction of events, on both the personal level and in historical-spatial time.

4.2 Sabrina Efionayi (2022), *Addio, a domani. La mia incredibile storia vera*

Sabrina Efionayi's autobiographical novel, written in the third person, is about her story as a migrant's descendent and her mother's story, who arrived in Naples by the worst route from Nigeria. Her mother worked for a very cruel woman, who did not allow the women to have a baby with her. In order to protect her baby girl, she decided to give her up for adoption to an Italian family who were her neighbours. In this way, Sabrina's mother was able to visit her daughter whenever she wanted. It is the story of a second-generation migrant trying to adapt and integrate herself into Italian society. Nevertheless, this is

not only the story of a migrant girl and her daughter, but also a story about the deconstruction and reconstruction of Sabrina's identity due to an intersectional self-reflexivity, based on the categorical crossing of gender, race/ethnicity, class and status. In the reconstruction of this identity, Sabrina talks about two mothers: her Italian mother and her Nigerian mother. She talks about the process of identification, which is a difficult struggle, due to her skin colour in a white Italian family.

Sabrina's writing is also political. Due to her activism, in practice it becomes a novel about her migratory and racial experience on an existentialist and ontological level. It is about the self-empowerment of young, second-generation migrant and writer and the self-reflexivity in her writing can help other migrants and other migration experiences. Intersectionality is also explicit in her work and speaks about the debate on the migration journey and on the Italian journey.

The positioning in *Addio, a domani*, in contrast to Lea Ypi's *Free*, is constructed on the basis of gender and race/ethnicity. From the analysis of the text, it emerges that the positionality of the author is based on a duality: the hybridity in the de/reconstruction process of her identity, and the will to go beyond such hybridism. Thus, through her activism, she gives a personal restructures her identity.

The intersectional approach (Yuval-Davis 2015) helps to understand how the author's strategy functions. Her skin colour is an important element in the writing and the socio-cultural and ethnic approach to her dual and divided complex reality is clear in the description of her two families: on the one hand, her mother from Nigeria and with strong Nigerian roots and on the other hand, her Italian family, her Italian mother, who raised her and educated her with Italian socio-cultural principles. The dual narrative and its dilemma is well addressed in the novel by Sabrina Efonayi.

There is her mother's story. Her precarious situation drove her to travel to Italy, where she found a miserable job and where she fell in love with Sabrina's father, who is also Nigerian. When she became pregnant, the man abandoned her and the woman she worked for did not want a baby in her home. Thus, Sabrina's mother had a very intense migration history and this novel is about a migration that is a temporal continuum in the story of Sabrina's rootedness in an Italian family.

I argue that there is a clear dual positioning in this novel. The Nigerian Sabrina and the Italian Sabrina are two inseparable identities fighting for survival, until Sabrina gets to the point when she understands that they can live together. There are clear contradictions and duality within the author, which she tries to resolve throughout her brief life through her writing. Once again, memory, her mother's and her own, are key elements in the de/reconstruction process during the migratory trajectory and resettlement in space and time.

4.3 Elif Shafak (2021), *The Island of Missing Trees*

In this book, the author tells the story of the traumatic conflict between Cyprus and Turkey as well as its socio-political and psychological costs. The novel is framed by Ada's attempts to discover the truth about her parents' past in Cyprus and the reasons they decided to migrate. A fig tree is the narrator of the novel and this loquacious, well-travelled tree fills in parts of the plot unknown to the human protagonists and offers rambling commentary on Cyprian history, plants and animals. Trees seem to have more wisdom than human beings, especially the fig tree.

A happy ending to this love story that is full of secrets and full of silence, is of a teenage couple, Kostas, who is Greek, and Dafne, who is Turkish. It is 1974, and they belong on opposite sides of a divided Cyprus. This is the love story of this couple with the fig tree as witness to their secret love. Decades later in the UK, their daughter, Ada, tries to untangle her parents' silence about the island, the facts, the conflict, but the only memory that she has is told from her aunt.

Elif Shafak is a Turkish writer living in London. Throughout the book of *The Island of Missing Trees*, she talks about the principal characters' experience of migration and exile as well as the story of symbolic borderlines embodied in their characters based on their religious differences: Kostas, the Greek Christian boy, and Dafne, the Turkish Muslim girl. The author argues that "the migrants' inherited suffering". Constructed in this phrase is the intergenerational silence on the conflict, the oppression, the love, the truth present in the plot, which Ada, their sixteen-year-old daughter, discovers through her aunt who gives her all the answers about a lost and phantom heritage.

In her mother's language, her name means 'island'. When she was younger, she had assumed it referred to Great Britain, the only island she had ever known, only later coming to the realization that it was, in fact, another isle, far away, and the reason was that she was conceived over there [...]. Growing up, each time she had enquired about why they had not yet been to Cyprus to meet their relatives [...] both her father and mother had given her a whole host of excuses. (Shafak 2021, 13)

The trees are a metaphor for describing human feelings. The principal tree is the fig. It was the tree of Paradise, the tree of Adam and Eve, and a witness of the coexistence of Cyprians and Turks. In this novel, the socio-political situation is explicit; the description of the Cypriot-Turkish conflict and its waves of violence, a systemic concern which obliges the lovers to emigrate, exiled from their origin. The role of love in the book is also strategic. In fact, Kostas and Dafne represent the archetype of Adam and Eve. The tavern where they use

to meet in secret and the island area metaphors of a paradise lost, evoking John Milton's work, shared as a universal literature, where the author reflects states of mind, and reflects about good and suffering. Elif Shafak joins at the macro-analytical level of the novel, where structures of opportunities and constraints are found, as well as the structure of power and oppression embodied in the love between a couple from different origins, with the micro-analytical dimension of their own love. Their feelings, the psychological dimension of love and personal empowerment, navigate through a universe of contraries and opposite politic backgrounds, of which the fig tree is the only witness and the transmitter of a forgotten memory and heritage.

In this novel, Elif Shafak sublimates the Turkish-Cypriot conflict in a postcolonial Cyprus, where she explores the costs of the conflict and the intergenerational trauma transmitted through memory. When the war breaks out and the capital is destroyed, the teenagers vanish and separate. Elif Shafak uses the trees as metaphors for human feeling, thus, she is able to construct a universality as these images can be applied to other socio-cultural backgrounds; she creates common values through the trees. The socio-political situation, and its condemnation, is described through an emblematic love story with a fig tree acting as the superior witness of an archetypical story. The systemic concerns are hindering factors in the love story of a couple with clear opposite positioning. Emigration, thus, is the most logical solution or strategy to a happy ending. She uses emigration to mix micro-realities and macro-concerns. As in Sabrina Efinayi's novel, there is an intergenerational circular ending, and the role of memory is relevant in order to bridge the gap between the past and the present.

In that sense, we find their sixteen-year-old daughter, Ada Kazantzakis, who has never visited Cyprus, years later in London, searching for her roots that are hidden by a secret mystery.

She starts seeking within the silence, the secrets and the strong separation from the island. The only connection she has to her parents' island is the *Ficus Carica* growing in the back garden of their home. Memory again plays an important role in the construction of collective identity and continuity of ethnic belonging, as well as the intergenerational understanding of that belonging. Ada does not know anything about her parents' culture, their sense of home is tangled up in 'the happy fig tree', which is not only a symbol of their parents' love, but also a symbol of the whole family's Cypriot roots.

4.4 Margaryta Yakovenko (2020), *Desencajada*

Margaryta Yakovenko is a Ukrainian writer living in Spain with her mother since she was a child. This novel, written in first person, is a fictional novel based on real events in Margaryta's family, which reflects the story of immigrants in Spain. Its plot is common among other female migrant writers who choose the same genre. The novel has two levels of analysis: the societal challenge and the author's personal lived experience of migration. Thus, a common thread that can be observed is the xenophobia in Spanish society, and the author's suffering for being excluded, the feelings of inferiority and being treated like a second-class citizen. We can read how the gaze of the Other afflicts the protagonist to the point of provoking a rupture in her self-concept and self-esteem. The following fragment exemplifies this: "I've been living twenty years in Spain and a civil servant with filthy fingernails does not consider that I deserve my status" (Yakovenko 2022, 2).

For the reader, the contempt is directed at the appearance of the other (with more value placed on being a national than on being a foreigner), which, in the process of identity transformation experienced by the young protagonist, has clear racist connotations that make the young woman feel like a second-class citizen. This feeling is shared by the other female migrant authors in their work, and is linked with the dichotomy of migration/belonging, a fact that limits her self-image and self-esteem. The approach to emigration is described in the authors' words:

My father calling my mother one spring day and breaking that promise 2,000 miles away. My mother being angry for days. My mother's family telling her that she should abide by what her husband said. My father's family yelling at him in the kitchen that he had no right to leave his fatherless daughter on a whim. As if staying in your home was the crazy occurrence of a selfish hysteric. As if she had forced him to leave. And suddenly, my mother going to Kiev to arrange a visa for us. My mother said goodbye to her colleagues at the hospital where she had worked since I was born. My mother packing our things in a wheeled suitcase and going to the train station to start a journey that for me was adventure and for her exile [...]. That's the beginning. Neither of us chose it. The signification of the word *liubov* is love. (4)

Margaryta Yakovenko's positionality in her work is clear. Daria, the principal character, is her alter ego, a young immigrant girl who is trying to integrate in Spanish society, but at the same time is trapped in the memory of the past. She is trapped in her Ukrainian identity that prevents her from reconsidering any transformation. A main

theme in her work is memory and the narrative is based on the shift between past and present. In the past, Daria is represented as a child and in the present the principal character is represented as a Spanish-Ukrainian young girl who is in a constant personal conflict between the past and the present: the child and the adult, her Ukrainian origin and her new Spanish nationality, which, as she explains at the beginning of the book, she has just obtained. The before and after the migration are explicit in her narrative, the two periods are clearly separated from the beginning of the novel.

Before the emigration, I went to the School no. 5 in Mariupol, a grey concrete building with cracks like seams through which the cold seeped in during the winter. *After emigration*, I went to a two-story school with a peach-coloured facade and red tracks in the courtyard where in spring we would find dead chicks that had fallen out of their nests. (Yakovenko 2020, 8)¹

5 The Role of ‘Communicative Memory’

To respond the third question, I claim the role of ‘communicative memory’ in the auto-biographical and auto-fictional works analysed. Memory plays a key role in the construction of literary production in transnational literature and the consequent transformative process of personal feelings and different kinds of trauma experienced during the migration process. There is no doubt about the reality of this kind of literary production by female migrant women, which should be understood as a new expression of self-reflection and a new response to the challenges of the era of a globalised world.

This is framed through the spontaneous movement of women and girls towards self-determination as a hybrid, mixed-cultural, bi-cultural or trans-cultural product of the contemporary globalised world.

In the four novels analysed, the importance of systemic structure and the structures of power and oppression have to be taken into account, in order to understand the impact on the female migrant writers’ lives and the influence on their migratory trajectories, confirming Luhmann (1977) and Goldmann’s (1967) theories of social systems. In fact, if we compare the authors’ autobiographical works and the socio-political context in which they are embedded, it is clear that the regimes of mobility, the non-gender sensitive politics, the different levels of racism and different levels of rootedness and displacement, are all elements influencing their personal, professional and family paths.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translation are by the Author.

It can be argued that in the writers' construction of reality and their self-reflexive characters, the macro-, meso- and micro-socio-political dimensions are linked. From the discourse analysis of the texts, the role of national policies emerges as a pillar of the migratory experience. In fact, the regimes of mobility are the most important structure in the immigration scheme and resettlement patterns for migrants, displacement and exile.

In all the novels analysed the political action is another key element. In my interviews to some writers, during a wider project, the writers interviewed claim that their writing has a vocational approach, suitable for enlightening the paths of other migrants. Thus, writing itself has a dual function: 1) re-writing the personal experience of migration, where the writing has a method of reflexivity and self-reflexivity, and 2) re-writing as a way of reframing the personal experience. I will respond to the three main questions in the following reflections.

By contrast, memory also plays a key role in the real (autobiographical) and/or imaginary (auto-fictional or fictional) and self-reflexive literary production. Moreover, in the cases analysed, the memories of migrations are constructed on the base of a unity and a common past transmitted by written stories. Therefore, the identity reconstruction process is based on a previous phase of deconstruction and decolonisation of the mental attachment to the country of origin and/or the country of destination (Fanon 1952). In that sense, systems (Tagliacozzo et al. 2021) are very important in migrant people's adaptation processes. In this chapter, it is evident that the difference of country of origin is a key element for the migrant women, related both to the migratory trajectories and the integration process, and to the identity transformation processes. They are based on different kinds of approaches and strategies used for overcoming: a) the structures of power and oppression, and b) the structure of opportunities and constraints in the destination country, as I have previously argued (Di Martino, Maiztegui, Aristegui 2020).

6 Identity and Belonging: The Sense of Home

The main findings show that rethinking identities is relevant for gender equality and social cohesion in contexts of human mobility and migration. Reframing one's own migratory experience and migratory identity plays a key role at the systemic level (identified with the structures of opportunities and constraints) seen through macro-analytical lens, helping to shape better gender-sensitive policies and improved integration processes in the host countries. Moreover, the role of writing and re-writing actions is key in the process of the reconstruction of mental health among migrants (at a micro-analytical

level). Emigration in the sense of reconstruction of home ad hoc for each migrant is an opportunity to do things better, to be a better person. For the writer, the act of writing in another language is both an effort and a challenge. Both in the home country and in the host country, which are embodied in language as part of their personal identity, the women had two or three languages that needed to be reformed..

Thus, it can be argued that there are two steps in transnational literary production, which I have identified as re-writing and reframing migrants' self-reflexive stories of migration, displacement and resettlement, which can help to better understand the subjective migratory processes. In fact, in the act of re-writing, both through the autobiographical, auto-bio-fictional or fictional genres, female migrant writers take the opportunity to look at their migratory experience and to initiate a process of awareness that will lead each writer to a different conclusion about herself and her own migration story.

The idea of re-writing, as in the project *Rewrite*,² is linked to the complexity of reshaping and reframing female migrant writers' personal stories of migration, displacement and mobility, through the articulation of elements and factors at meso- and macro-sociological dimension. This act is based on the 'pact of honesty' where the writers have to negotiate to what extent they want to recount their migration and personal experiences and what strategies to use to tell them among auto-biography, fiction and auto-fiction. It is the act of thinking about the migratory experience, the transit between two or several countries and the temporal or permanent settlement in the destination country.

The role of writing and re-writing actions is key in the process of the reconstruction of mental health among migrants. Actually, this exercise has two main aims: a) try to order our own reality and find reasons and logic in events, acts, occurrences, and b) try to order the feelings and thoughts about the migratory experience and ourselves. In fact, the writing helps the writers, positioned as migrant women (adding concerns about the expression of feelings generated by the processes of identity transformation resulting from migration, displacement and mobility). It is also useful to reformulate the place migrants want to occupy in the country of destination. In fact, in the country of destination, they create a new home and the idea of home.

The reformulation of the idea of the new home in a country that is not the country of origin is raised; the notion that a migrant has to start her new life from scratch, through the combination of new

² Project financed by the Marie Curie Actions of the programme H2020 of the European Commission (2021-23), which investigated the self-reflexivity in the female migrants' literary works. For more information see: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101027193/es>.

structures of power and oppression, different from those of the country of origin, but which are still valid from an intersectional perspective, where gender intersects with other categories that create vulnerability, such as race/ethnicity, class, status, etc.

Identity is broken down, to be put together again, after having found its meaning in the family, professional and personal migratory experience and history, and it does so through writing. Thus, it can be affirmed that writing is the medium par excellence through which migrant women have managed to restructure their world and their often harsh, and to varying degrees traumatic, reality. Writing, then, is the instrument they use to give voice to their characters, their aliases or themselves. Through writing, positioned and situated in a specific context, or in a universal symbolic world, migrant women writers manage to deal with the structures of power and oppression.

Loneliness is one of the stronger feelings in the novels. The subjects in writing and rewriting action are agencies in loneliness.

All that loneliness was not unlike the loneliness I feel now, sitting on the sofa in Celia's apartment, very still, hands on my knees and back straight, the balcony door open and the street noises reverberating against the walls. Street noises that seem to be taking place inside the house. And I am in the middle of it. In the middle of this house. In the middle of the street. In the middle of the loneliness. After migration. *After integration*. After having shed my skin and abandoned my dry and empty exoskeleton, dry and brown, brown and transparent. The days when I was a foreigner and alone. The days when I started to be Spanish and I was alone. The days when I never stopped being alone. (Yakovenko 2020, 7)

There is a negotiation with the host culture, with another language, another worldview, through the combination of the elements that are closest to each other. It can be concluded that, although the processes of the writers are similar, because they share the fact of being women with a migratory experience, with the journey, the displacement and the reformulation of their own identity as a common element, it should be noted that each woman writer activates a different process of synthesis and negotiation; there is no homogeneity in the emotional management and processes. However, it can also be affirmed that they all have in common the fact that writing is their way of being in the world, their way of facing the problems of human mobility. For them, writing is also a way of denouncing a personal, but at the same time collective, identity situation of migrants. It is a way of healing or transforming conflicting feelings and, in this sense, writing, and essentially the act of rewriting their lives, is an act of resilience, a healing, revealing and transforming act in itself. It also has connotations of homeland; it has to do with feelings

of abandonment, guilt and relief. The migratory story brings a new way to look at social participation and integration for migrant women, as well as the act of writing understood as a new tool to participate, both supporting the migrant women's voices and experience and to take an active role in socio-political participation being an example of women's activism.

7 Memory and Migration

The memory and the act of remembrance emerge from the analysis as one of the most important elements in the writings. Memory helps female migrant writers to bridge the gap between past and present, home country and resettlement country experiences of migration in the authors' works. Memory is the key element in the migration trajectory that acts as the vector of the deconstruction and reconstruction process. Such a process directed by memory is both spontaneous and artificial, confirming theories on memory (Yates 1974; Halbwachs 1992; Ricoeur 2000).

Individual memory of the female migrant writers analysed in this chapter can turn the experiences of migration into an experience of collective ethnicity. Collective and individual experiences and memory are linked. In fact, it can be argued that in the transnational literary works analysed in this chapter, memory plays an important role in shaping imaginaries and real images, and in the construction of identity within the framework of the migratory experiences lived by the authors (in the self-reflexive strategy) and by the characters (in the fictional strategy adopted). In the literary production, in fact, there is a dual sense related to the construction of meaning. On the one hand, the effects of immigration on individual and collective memory can be seen. On the other hand, the effects of the construction of a collective and symbolic identity through the communicative process of the individual identity are also evident. Thus, the findings show the ways in which memory influences the migratory experience and meaning de/reconstruction process of identity and the bicultural representations across generations, reflecting the studies on memory and migration (Kitzmann, Creet 2014).

In addition, in the literary work analysed, memory plays a triple role: 1) it helps the formation of the subject's identity, maintaining the identification with the original group, 2) it is therapeutical because it helps the subjects to face the difficulties related to adapting to the new socio-cultural context of the destination country, and 3) it helps in the formation of a community, creating links among migrants who share specific experiences and supports the fight against local discrimination (Kitzmann, Creet 2014). Aligned with this, it can be argued that female migrant writers create a collective identity, which corresponds

to a symbolic memory, through the construction of a collective memory in their literary works. Thus, the old identity corresponds to the home country as a place in the memory. The new identity, or the identity in transition, corresponds to the host country as a place in the memory. The intersection between memory and migration, considered a social construction (Gergen 2002), is based on the nostalgic attachment and melancholia, historical research and knowledge and a symbolic ethnicity and identity of an ethnic group linked to place. Finally, in transnational literary production the three levels of memory can be aligned with this: spontaneous memory, with artificial and symbolic.

8 Conclusions

The four novels analysed in the present chapter, as many others which I have analysed in the framework of the project *Rewrite*, show that the key elements of the present day's debates on transnational literature are focused on: a) the sense of home and sense of belonging, b) the structures of opportunities and constraints are important and influence the way of thinking and the experience of migration, c) the shifting between two different identities (of origin and the identity created in the new context), and d) the mental health of migrants, and the migrants' children, the second-generation migrants, who from a very early age have to face situations of discrimination and exclusion, and this can later result in mental health problems.

Both protagonists, Daria in *Desencajada* and Sabrina in *Addio, a domani*, show such an uncomfortable belonging, a half-belonging. For Daria, it is based on the prejudice of the host society towards the Eastern European origins of the protagonists. In contrast, for Sabrina, it is also based on her skin colour, which is impossible to hide. It is clear that there is an intersectional reality of discrimination in the host countries, based on the intersectionality of categories such as gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, class. They are interrelated and interconnected with socio-cultural prejudices.

Nevertheless, in the four novels that I have analysed, the authors' positionality can be found within the context of the international debate of a more intense need for expression and speaking out by female migrant writers. It can be found in the formation of such transnational literature created by female migrants, which is not yet defined as a genre equally important as other narrative proposals in the literary production of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This work is created from the margins of literary works and this is another challenge for the knowledge production for society with a nuance of that agency, which pushes female migrant writers to forge ahead with the visibility of a little known universe: the universe of human mobility, migration, displacement and exile.

Therefore, it is appropriate to stress that this chapter sheds light on the link between human mobility and social change through the analysis of literary works written by female migrant authors, focusing on novels written in the twenty-first century. The approach used is a critical discourse analysis and feminist literary criticism, through which it has been shown that the individual is the result of “an infinite rhizome of discursive formations and representations” (De Toro 2022, 9).

In this sense, for female migrant women, writing is not only a discursive act with them from a self-reflexive perspective; it is also a dialogue with their readers. Consequently, it is a discursive act with the society receiving the texts, the meanings and the points of view.

The main findings have shown that rethinking identities is relevant for gender equality and social cohesion and plays a key role in shaping improved non-gender-sensitive policies and better integration processes in the host countries. Moreover, the role of writing and re-writing actions are key in the process of the reconstruction of mental health among migrants. Finally, the interdisciplinary approach to literary studies and integration politics has allowed an exploration of female human mobility, starting from the interconnection of different dimensions: the meso (relations and system approach) and the micro (subjective dimension), related to the environment and situated socio-political contexts, and the macro (structures of opportunities and constraints and structures of power and oppression). The texts analysed, implicitly or explicitly, share the female and anti-racial discrimination struggle. At the same time, the literary works selected are embedded in a socio-political context in which migrant women are classified as unequal citizens in the context of the destination countries.

On the one side, both the novels and their authors are conducting a struggle for gender-sensitive and non-discrimination policies through their characters’ voices. Therefore, it can be concluded that they are socio-political activists, even if they are not part of a feminist, transnational or local social movement. It is inevitable to say that the works and the writers are framed in the global and local politics for the promotion of gender equality and more equal migration policies. Indeed, in the confluence of literary production, social migrant subjectivities on the move are exposed to the judgement and solidarity of their readers. Indeed, their work may help in the processes of meaning de/reconstruction for migrants’ mental health. In that sense, the approach from an interdisciplinary perspective can help to shed light on the subjective conceptualisation of home, migration, displacement, places of resettlement and the act of crossing borders. These concerns are important to understand the hidden vectors of change in our societies, linked with the human mobility process. Through literary production and the self-reflexivity of migrants,

and, in particular, of female migrant writers, in their work we can delve deeper into the psycho-sociological dynamics at the structural and systemic level.

By contrast, is worth stressing that there is no hybridity in their discourse, such as Bhabha's theory of the third space (1989). In fact, in the literary works analysed and through the analysis of the interviews with the female migrant writers, the results aim to reconstruct a collective identity, a plural identity on the move, which is valid both at local, transnational and global levels. On the basis of Mateo's (1995, 42) reflection on the positionality of the subjects, it can be argued that 'decentering' is a postcolonial strategy that goes beyond the analytical discourse method, because their identities are inserted into a wider space of 'peripheral fields' that need a readjustment. In this way, the acts of re-writing and re-framing are aligned. Thus, following Mateo's claims, the findings show that there is a deconstruction of power in the texts of the female migrant writers.

On the one hand, the narrative empowers them, but, on the other, the discourses that they use describe their migratory experience as a militant act, so the agency is, at the same time, a factor that propels them, a product and a catalyst in their writing. Indeed, female migrant writers apply a method of de-hierarchisation and in contemporary transnational literature we can see "the recovery of marginalized voices" (De Toro 2022, 11), trying to overcome the labels used in the literary market. The role of memory in transnational literary production plays an important role. It represents a continuity in the dissociation of subjective/collective identity and is fragmented in the transitory memory. At the same time, it is the *file rouge* linking the home country/identity of origin and the new space and time (host country and new identity). It also creates unity within the infrastructure of identity, in the socio-cultural context of the destination country, on the basis of common elements. It creates a stability for the subject and the community in the new context, which allows the subject to fight against discrimination. In this kind of transnational literature, we can imagine the co-creation of a new type identity on the move, in which gender and political dimensions are the result of a mix of cultures and socio-political localities. Therefore, the messaging is both social and political and female migrant writers are voices with agency, with the potential to transform societies and promote social change.

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