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Patriarchal Resistance and Critique in Sibilla Aleramo's *Una Donna* (1906) and Ada Gobetti's *Diario Partigiano* (1956)

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*'travels back and forth with dangerous responsibilities, makes contacts, and spreads
propaganda intelligently,' (Gobetti 311)*

Both Sibilla Aleramo's *Una Donna* and Ada Gobetti's *Diario Partigiano* are revolutionary in their use of autobiography as a weapon against dominant narratives of patriarchy, and illuminate women's experience of both marginalisation and agency. In *Una Donna*, published in 1906, Aleramo communicates personal experiences and universalises them as a typical product of the patriarchal structures she challenges. In doing so, she breaks the silence surrounding women's oppression and the societal acceptance thereof. Gobetti's 1956 *Diario Partigiano* also offers a broad portrayal of womanhood, but it places particular emphasis on the ways women exercise agency to drive change. Throughout her autobiography, which also serves as a primary source in the historical archive, she illuminates the critical yet historiographically forgotten role of women in the Italian *Resistenza* of the mid-1940s. In the *Resistenza*'s fight against fascism and the German occupation of Italy, she presents the function of women as essential and intrinsically feminine. Aleramo similarly validates femininity as valuable in its own right through her innovative, feminine writing, offering an alternative to the stylistic norms exhibited by the male-dominated literary canon. Hence, both authors contradict patriarchy by highlighting its shortcomings, and, by evidencing the potency of femininity, they reframe autobiography as a political tool.

Through their autobiographies, Aleramo and Gobetti both resist patriarchal hegemony and reject its narratives. In *Una Donna*, Aleramo invites her readers to question socially accepted injustices against women in an approach that is characterised by her challenging the canonical silencing of female experiences to highlight an untold story of marginalisation. She suggests that the dissemination of women's experience is necessary to aid social improvement, expressing the 'need' for a book to be written that 'would show for the first time what it was really like to be a woman now, and that for the first time would inspire in ... men, both remorse for the past and desire for a better future' (Aleramo 134). Hence, she presents in her text the trauma of womanhood, notably her own and that of her mother. She

sharply juxtaposes her ‘carefree and lively’ childhood, with its promise for a future ‘full of ... adventures,’ with an oppressive adulthood that begins prematurely when she is violated as an adolescent by a colleague, with whom she is compelled into a conventional *matrimonio riparatore*, which exonerates him from the crime (Aleramo 3-5; Aiello 402). Highlighting the cruelty of this societal norm propels the reader to question both tradition and the patriarchal structures that continue to support it. The injustice of the condemnation of the sixteen-year-old Aleramo to a life of ‘subject[ion] to the will of [her] husband’ as punishment for an act of violence committed against her is intensified by responses to the extramarital relations pursued by her father (Aleramo 53-56). Despite being conspicuous to the degree that his employee informs Aleramo of her father’s betrayal, he faces neither social nor legal consequence (Aleramo 31-34). Furthermore, following his wife’s attempted suicide, he questions what brought the act on with ‘unmistakeable, passionate sincerity,’ despite the implication that his affair, at least, played a role (Aleramo 27-30). This reaction appears to originate from the societal normalisation of this behaviour, inviting readers to question the ubiquitous acceptance, and perhaps even expectation, of male infidelity, and the punishment of women for traumatic and entirely involuntary experiences. Aleramo therefore reveals the hypocrisy of patriarchal norms, emphasising also the damaging effect of these on individual women.

Aleramo’s connection of personal experience to broader societal conditions exemplifies Ann Caesar’s argument that Aleramo contributes to Italian feminism through ‘articulating her own pain and relating its origins to women’s social position’ (Caesar 79). In the indefinite article of the book’s title—*Una Donna* (A Woman)—and in its nameless characters, Aleramo magnifies a personal story and universalises it as inherent to womanhood within its social context. Thereby, Aleramo problematises the normalisation of abuse of women and the hypocriticism of patriarchy, positioning her experience as a typical product of

contemporary Italian society. The injustice of this is accordingly made evident to a reader, as Aleramo challenges patriarchal structures by inducing her reader to question the societal acceptance that allows for their existence and perpetuation.

Gobetti similarly rejects patriarchal hegemony and its narratives in *Diario Partigiano* by elucidating female experience. For Gobetti, however, there is a greater focus on female strength and agency and the rejection of broader narratives; namely, the postwar heroic myth and the masculine framing of political change. This text, published roughly a decade after the *Resistenza*, is an important challenge to the historical narrative that had already begun to form, which took a heroic tone and significantly diminished the role of women. Gobetti's personal testimony of her experience of the *Resistenza* illuminates the indispensable role played by women, as well as the parallel feminist struggle she waged simultaneously. Chiara Bonfiglioli characterises this as a recitation, which tells a familiar story from a new perspective and operates 'as a breaking open of the presumed relation between the past and present' (Bonfiglioli 81). Within the *Resistenza*, women primarily played the extremely dangerous role of unarmed *staffette*—couriers who occasionally assisted with nursing and spying (D'Amelio 131). Throughout the text, Gobetti emphasises the importance of this difficult work, reflecting that a young woman known to her 'travels back and forth with dangerous responsibilities, makes contacts, and spreads propaganda intelligently,' despite having been 'a child without many ideas... one year ago' (Gobetti 311). Thus, Gobetti illuminates the significance of women's political role, contradicting the prevalent masculine framing of the antifascist movement.

Additionally, Gobetti rejects the mythologisation of the *Resistenza*. She often refers to the male soldiers as 'boys' and highlights their bewilderment; she also humanises the enemy in a similar way, noting that a German soldier she had encountered by night had likely been more afraid of her than she of him (Gobetti 22, 149, 193, 220). She therefore disputes the

conventional, heroic narrative of the *Resistenza*, emphasising instead the war's toll on ordinary people. Gobetti additionally draws attention to feminist meetings and circulation of propaganda, despite the danger of being discovered under fascist occupation (Gobetti 310). In doing so, she challenges the common construction of the waves of feminism by illuminating the role of women between the periods of first- and second-wave feminism. Gobetti's text therefore also calls into question the broader convention of periodisation, which is interpreted by historiographer Jean Bernhardt as a simplification of the continuous flow of history (Bernhardt 438). Hence, Gobetti highlights the often overlooked female strength and agency in resisting fascism in 1940s Italy, whilst also challenging historiographical norms surrounding both the *Resistenza* and feminist movements.

Finally, both Aleramo and Gobetti challenge patriarchy by using literary innovation and historical recitation, respectively, to depict womanhood as inherently powerful. Aleramo writes in her book *Andando e stando* that women's writing does not have to follow the style of the male-dominated canon, and should rather carry the mark of women (Aleramo 214-217). In *Una Donna*, she acknowledges female sexuality—'I fantasized, first about one boy ... then about another'—and shows a connection to her body through the depiction of her son's birth, while also embracing distinctively feminine emotional expression (Aleramo 34, 71-72). Aleramo thereby embodies *écriture féminine* (Cixous 885). Meanwhile, Gobetti displays the weaponisation of traditional femininity against Nazi soldiers in *Diario Partigiano*, both through the high-risk tasks undertaken by women due to their underestimation by enemy troops. Gobetti's implication that the domestic role of women is essential to the *Resistenza* can be viewed as a precursor to the 1970s Italian feminist appreciation for women's reproductive labour, and the argument that capitalism could not function without it (Gabrielli 79-81). Hence, Aleramo and Gobetti both challenge patriarchy by spotlighting femininity as intrinsically valuable: through a writing style which is

innovative and influential in its embrace of femininity, for Aleramo; and through an emphasis on women's unique and indispensable roles in the *Resistenza*, for Gobetti.

In conclusion, both Aleramo and Gobetti use writing as a space of opposition and resistance to patriarchy by illuminating its direct impact on women and challenging the narratives it perpetuates. For Aleramo, the depiction of women's suffering as a result of patriarchal norms highlights injustices that are socially accepted and calls for their interrogation. For Gobetti, emphasis on historical female agency indicates that the male dominance that permits patriarchal prevalence is unsubstantiated, and exposes the limitations of the historical narratives generated by patriarchy. Overall, both writers reclaim femininity as a site of power within literature and in politics, challenging male hegemony and supporting women as indispensable agents in political change.

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