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## **An Unexpected Desire to Know the Past (F.G. Paci: *Black Madonna*)**

Family descent strongly determines a person's character not only genetically but diachronically as well. Human existence in its temporal and spacial dimensions is idiosyncratic in the immigrant experience. I would like to demonstrate how F.G. Paci sees the complex nature of living "elsewhere" in his novel *Black Madonna* (1982), and to show that this perspective can lead to an unexpected desire to get to know the past. Paci's trilogy *Black Madonna* was preceded by *Italians* (1978) and followed by *Father* (1984). They are closely related: the *family* is a spatial and temporal indicator in these novels. Spaciality and temporality are intricately woven together.

It is the *family* itself that is the main protagonist in *Black Madonna*. Each of the family members can only be understood in relation to another. Adamo, the father, went to Canada in search of a better life, and settled down in Sault St. Marie in the northern part of Ontario. Later he married Assunta, who was sent to him by proxy. The reason why Assunta came to the New World was to become a mother since she was past marriageable age back at home, and Adamo was looking for an Italian wife in Canada. Out of this marriage Joey and Marie were born, who represent a new generation in Canadian society. As it turns out later the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge causes serious problems.

The novel begins with the death of Adamo and ends with the death of Assunta, which provides the novel with a frame within which an intricate timescale is constructed. It is through flashbacks that the characters move between past, present, and even future in constant fluctuation, which allows them to move between spaces that include places. As Yi-Fu-Tuan notes, "In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place'. What begins as an undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan, 6). It is the *family house* that is given the most detailed description in the novel. According to Bachelard:

The house, quite obviously, is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of intimate values of inside space, provided, of course, that we take it in both its unity and complexity, and endeavour to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value (Bachelard, 3).

In this particular house in Northern Ontario, different values are confronted. It is the relationship between Assunta and Marie around which the other relations are brought together. Before the final resolution is achieved, the family exists in the midst of clashes; animosity is the prevailing emotion. Assunta, the mother, tries to live in the New World while preserving the traditions of the Old World. She is unable to adapt and has no desire to adapt either. The question of belonging to different national and geographical spaces arises. Paci explains:

It's simply *la via vecchia* (the old way) which can't understand *la via nuova* (the new way). Unskilled and uneducated parents who emigrate from as foreign a culture as the Italian (especially from the South) find it very difficult to understand or condone the behaviour of their children. It's not any more complex than that, when rendered abstractly. By the same token, the children don't understand the old ways. Let it be understood however, that I'm speaking about the characters in my work – not about Italians in general (Paci 1985, 9).

Assunta is forced to live in a partly self-imposed exile; her sense of self is disconnectedness. It certainly leads to alienating herself completely from her children, particularly from her daughter. Marie detests her mother for her poor, peasant Italian background and for being unable to cope in Canada. "Mother" seems a foreign word to her. She says:

We've never spoken the same language even. How can she be my mother? She's never had the least comprehension of what I was doing in school or what I wanted in life. All she did was cook and wash for me. And hit me a lot when I was a kid. There are no two people so different as we are. She's like a fossil. She's in the wrong time and the wrong country. So how can she be my mother? Tell me (Paci 1982, 17).

As Assunta rejects the Canadian reality surrounding her, the newfound presence, so does Marie reject her Italian heritage. This refusal involves both the wish and the ability to speak each other's language, which can be

interpreted symbolically, too. There is no shared linguistic, mental space between them. It often manifests in silence, too. Not being able to communicate in each other's language in this case refers to not being able to understand each other's way of thinking. Mary quarrels with her mother:

What's the difference if I speak English or Italian to you? You don't understand either way. I don't care anymore. If you want to know me learn my language. That's all there is to it. And I'm going as far from here as I can get. You can go back to where you came from, for all I care (Paci 1982, 72).

The novel abounds in metalinguistic comments on the linguistic disparity between the two generations. The lively dialogues in which English, Italian and broken versions of these languages keep changing vividly, in order to demonstrate the difficulties that the simultaneous use of different languages has created.

Marie's growth is determined by her strong will to break away from her Italian heritage. The transcultural (exchange) and intercultural (influence) challenges create problems for her. She feels "a foreigner in her own house" (Paci 1982, 66), and when she listens to her parents' friends talk she hears "sickening Italian voices" (66). She develops a revulsion towards Italian food, which her mother tries to force down her throat in ample amounts. Because she is forced to overeat she grows fat and develops a very low self-esteem as a teenager. Her adolescent years are full of pain and misery, which she fully attributes to her ethnic background. Joseph Pivato notes: "While Paci's Italian characters may struggle with questions of identity, they are also ashamed of being ethnic" (Pivato, 211). Therefore, she decides to leave her background behind and to go to Toronto and pursue her studies there, which is all to her mother's indignation. She cannot accept the long tradition of Italian daughters having to become only good Italian mothers, which is the only thing her mother is capable of teaching her: "Assunta had never shown the slightest bit of affection toward her. She had only known how to frustrate and bully her. Into becoming a perfect Italian wife and mother. Complete with the fat and martyred disposition" (Paci 1982, 116).

She has, however, a rational mind, which she intends to develop by studying mathematics at university. Cold logic determines her existence in every area of life: "[she] had used mathematics as a way of breaking away from her parental connection. To think mathematically, to think logically, was the

only way to think independently and thus develop a mind of one's own" (Paci 1982, 139). She admires her lover, later husband, a Protestant English man, for his theoretical mind, but cannot connect with him in love-making: "She realized it would take a total surrender, which she had never done and was perhaps unable of doing" (Paci 1982, 114). Being unable to yield she remains in the territory of her mind and cannot break out from there. Her rationality, however, is combined with some irrational deeds revealing the instability of her very self. She eats only a minimal amount because eating is related to her torturous childhood experiences, and thus she develops anorexia nervosa. This could only lead to self-destruction. Ironically enough, she turns out to be very similar to her own mother in her paternal conduct; the rapport between Marie and Michael, her son, is not harmonious: "Looking into his eyes she saw he was a different human being from her – and capable of spurning her. He had come of her flesh and yet had the capacity to think and feel in a way entirely different from her" (Paci 1982, 142). Her moody son tends to eat little, triggering the same emotions in her as she used to in her own mother; the circle is not closed. "He had become a separate person, capable of emotions and a life totally different from hers. Somehow that inescapable fact produced such an outpouring of hate toward him that some deep-seated fear had been uprooted" (Paci 1982, 145).

Marie is just as controlling as her mother is: "He [Michael] has will of his own. I love him too much to let him have a will of his own. That sounds stupid, but it's true. How can I explain it. It's how I feel. It's too complex" (Paci 1982, 146). Her marriage deteriorates, which recalls the hard relationship maintained between her own parents. However, Assunta could not bear the loss of Adamo; in a similar fashion Marie and Richard ponder upon a new start, too.

After losing her husband, Assunta buries herself in the customs of mourning practiced in Italy and thus becomes a Black Madonna. Clad in complete black, shearing her hair by her own hands, she gradually isolates herself from everybody. Her new and bizarre patterns of behavior end when finally she is run over by a train on one of her strange walks along the railway tracks. Marriages in the old world were of a different nature according to Father Sarlo:

In the old country I used to see marriages where the wife and husband hardly talked to each other – but if you took away the husband or took away the wife, the other became nothing. In small villages and farms where they worked all day, love meant living with a person for many

years. Love came from a need. [...] It's like bread. You need bread to live (Paci 1982, 157).

And “when the husband died the wife got the worst of it” (Paci 1982, 157). During the last months in her life, Assunta suffered from the overwhelming sense of failing her children. The sacrifice first generation Italians had to make for their children is a recurring theme in Italian-Canadian writing. As Father Sarlo sums it up:

You should be ashamed of yourselves. You grow up in this community, in an Italian home with good parents who work to the bone for you, and what do you do? You grow away from your mother tongue. You lose your culture and your heritage. And then you become strangers with your parents. They come to this country mainly because for you, so that you can have the advantages denied to them – and what do you do? The first moment you get the opportunity you turn your back to them (Paci 1982, 158).

Paci calls our attention to the delicate nature of the parent children relationship represented in his novels: “There is a dark streak of doom in these works. At the same time, there is a note that the sacrifices of the parents have not been in vain, although these sacrifices may have been disproportionate to what has been gained” (Paci 1990, 232). A possible means of escape from the tribulations one has to face in Canada has always been a return journey to Italy. Could it be called a “neo-reaculturation”? Assunta often voiced this dream of hers and becomes preoccupied with it towards the end of her life: “You send me back to Italia. I want to die in Italia” (Pivato, 95). The motive of the return journey can be found in a large number of works written by Italian-Canadians. “The return trip pattern is more than a recurring theme, it is an obsession. Unlike the political or religious refugees and exiles found among the writing of other ethnic minority groups, Italians have always been able to go back, if only for a short visit” (Pivato, 214). It is Joey who takes care of his mother in the final and fast decaying period of her torn life. This very demanding duty exhausts him, and at one point he hits his mother. His suppressed frustration bursts out in an extreme way, similar to when Marie throws up the undigested food in front of her mother.

However, Joey's character differs from that of Marie's to a large extent. His obsession is playing hockey, which he has to renounce at his father's request. He follows in his footsteps and works in a steel plant and later shows

interest in bricklaying of which his father was a real master. In contrast to Marie, Joey stays at home, and it takes a longer time for him to grow up. He is more emotional, and at times even sentimental; he lives in his memories and dreams. His recurring dream is skating on the infinite surface of a lake. His father's death shocks him and pushes him forward to more dynamic actions:

His memories. The fields where he roamed as a kid. The vast area on the shores of Superior and St. Mary's river. The sure solid ground of his home. He seemed to be regarding it all in a different light now, as if he were seeing something that had escaped him all the time he had been living there. As if, as Annalise said, he was awakening from a sleep (Paci 1982, 135).

Paci went through a similar experience when he first visited Italy:

For twenty years I had been nurtured away from Italy in a house that I took to be representative of Italy. It was as if I had been asleep for twenty years. I woke up. I saw that Italy was in my blood; I came to see my parents more clearly and to appreciate them for the first time (Paci 1990, 232).

He retains good relations with his father after his death:

Because I can feel my father inside me somehow. I find myself sometimes doing what he'd do. Or I stop in the middle of an expression and it's his expression, you know. It's hard to explain. I feel free of something and yet my father seems to live more inside me than ever before (Paci 1982, 167).

By the end of the novel he develops a moving love relationship with the artist Annalise, the one and only woman in his life, who captures the essence of his being in one of her paintings recalling Joey's dream of skating on the dazzling surface of a huge lake.

Marie's fate reaches a kind of resolution, too. Her mother has always haunted her in a less and less menacing way. On one such haunting occasion she actually desires an Italian Christmas dinner, on another she hears herself saying: "Mamma, I don't even know you" (Paci 1982, 116). Her identity is in the process of changing, and this metamorphosis forms a new kind of

personality. Her ties to her family and to her Italian background remain hesitant. Her mother's death means a real revelation for her. She has always wanted to find the key to Assunta's Hope Chest, a trunk brought over from Italy in which there were the gifts to be given to a daughter about to be married, which were handed down from one generation to another. It symbolizes the Italian heritage in which Marie has slowly become interested. She goes systematically through the different layers of goods stored in the Hope Chest, which actually happens to be open, and thus immerses herself in different layers of the past the different objects represent. They raise deep emotions in her, and make her want to find out more about her roots. The Hope Chest had been open; her mother did not want to hide her Italian background at all. The world of her family history opens up in front of her eyes. Relatives belonging to different generations appear in the photographs. After going through the contents of the trunk, she lights candles and goes through an almost purifying ritual before she says out loud: "Mamma, I'm sorry" (Paci 1982, 192). Paci notes, "We can't really be ourselves unless we leave our parents, and yet, we can't really be anything else unless we return to them" (Paci 1985, 10). The physical resemblance between Marie and Assunta is no longer surprising. She finds a mourning dress and when she puts it on, it fits "like a glove" (Paci 1982, 191). She becomes a Black Madonna herself.

Roberta Sciff-Zamaro analyzes the mythological dimensions of the figure of the Great Mother, or Great Goddess. She notes:

[...] the figure of the Great Mother has a three-fold nature; in her first manifestation she presents herself as the white goddess of birth and growth; in her second one, as the red goddess of battle and love; in her third one, as the black goddess of death and divination (Sciff-Zamaro, 89).

At the end of the novel, we find Marie in this last stage, "the black goddess of death and divination". She is mourning, and at the same time she has gained new knowledge about the world and about herself. She comes to terms with her Italian background, accepts the fact that it is part of her identity. This gives her peace and makes her whole. Marie's transformation makes full circle; she decides to make the trip back to Italy that her mother had always wanted to make. Pivato's comment holds true for Marie, too: "In Italian-Canadian novels and stories the return journey by immigrants and the children of immigrants can be a search for a lost heritage, or

a re-establishing of family ties with Italy” (Pivato, 213). Marie actually goes back to Italy for both reasons. When she boards the plane Joey notices: “The people going through the gate looked very Italian and his sister didn’t look out of place” (Paci 1982, 198).

Spatial constraints cease to exist for her and the intersection between time and space will provide her with a heightened awareness of her roots. Maurice Halbwach points out: “Time is real insofar as it has content – that is, insofar as it offers events as material for thought” (Halbwach, 127). Marie will have “food for thought” which will certainly change her future because her unexpected desire to know her past will be fulfilled.

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