

BOOK REVIEW

Representations of Lethal Gender-Based Violence in Italy between Journalism and Literature: Femminicidio Narratives

**by Nicoletta Mandolini, London, Routledge, 2021, 123 pp., £49.99
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In recent years, public and scholarly attention have turned decisively toward the gender-based violence ‘emergency’ and to its most extreme form, femicide. *The Routledge International Handbook on Femicide and Feminicide* (edited by Myrna Dawson and Saide Mobayed Vega), published in 2023, was the first transnational, multidisciplinary volume to draw together varied and in-depth work by internationally recognised feminist and grassroots activists, researchers, and academics who explore the phenomenon from a range of perspectives as they advocate for its prevention and eradication on a global scale. In the Italian context we find a similar turn to didactic activism: in 2023, two feature-length documentaries – *Un altro domani* (Silvio Soldini) and *Nel cerchio degli uomini* (Paola Sangiovanni) – interrogated gender-based violence and its deep cultural embeddedness in Italy in a multi-faceted and nuanced way. Public sensibility to femicide seemed to reach a climax with the Giulia Cecchettin case, which has been attributed, in some circles, to the unexpected enormous success of Paola Cortellesi’s feature film *C’è ancora domani*.

Hence, *Representations of Lethal Gender-Based Violence in Italy between Journalism and Literature: Femminicidio Narratives* (2021) is certainly a timely and relevant publication. Nicoletta Mandolini contributes to the current dialogue on femicide as she investigates the impact of the emergence of a feminist metadiscourse on written narratives of femicide produced in Italy since 2012, the year that saw femicide debates move from niche feminist circles into mainstream spaces. Through her focus on discourse and narrative, Mandolini affirms the persistence of certain narratives and tropes in the media that remain obstacles to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon she labels more inclusively as ‘lethal gender violence’. In her examination of the texts that provide case-study evidence for her claims, Mandolini displays her familiarity with a range of critical theoretical approaches and deploys them to analyse the narrative techniques and modes of discourse, lauding the texts’ alignment with feminist discourses while identifying their failure to display broader and multiple perspectives.

Departing from the premise that the narration of femicide is a necessary act and a risky practice that gives voice to but potentially revictimises the victim, Mandolini explores both journalistic and literary accounts that have contributed to growing public awareness

of the phenomenon. The first part of the book focuses on journalistic book accounts and the second part on literary texts. Both parts include chapters dedicated to individual case studies selected on the criteria that they display 'clear authorial positioning, the capacity of the text to describe and at the same time overcome gender hierarchies and an effort to avoid spectacularization and promote identification' (p. 12 hardback edition).

In Part 1 of the book, Mandolini acknowledges the proliferation of both television and print journalistic investigations. She explains her choice to focus on book-length works because they are less 'simplistic' and acknowledge the author's perspective rather than resorting to an 'objective' narration. Mandolini selects case-study texts that can draw attention to the pitfalls of stereotypical narrations and discourses and offer more nuanced forms of recounting events or representing the players. The three case studies in Part 1 are *Il sangue delle donne* (2014) by Alvaro Fiorucci, *Se questi sono gli uomini* (2012) by Riccardo Iacona, and *Quello che resta* (2013) by Serena Maiorana. The ordering of the chapters is not chronological but rather moves from weaker to stronger texts along the lines of feminist discourse criteria. *Il sangue delle donne. Cronache di femminicidi in Umbria* is a collection of 64 accounts of murder cases. Mandolini's main objection to this book is that it relies on a supposedly objective and highly stereotypical narrative style that often revictimises the women, oversimplifies the perpetrators and repropose the very stereotypical representation of the lethal gender-based crimes that it aims to debunk. *Se questi sono gli uomini*, whose title clearly references Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, is a reportage written by television journalists that assumes a subjective male narratological position in an attempt to rewrite the stereotypical inaccessible male perpetrator and present the complexity of the victim. *Quello che resta* investigates the femicide case involving Stefania Noce and provides a victim-centred perspective that avoids stereotyping and reassigns dignity and agency to the victim. According to Mandolini, what remains problematic in this work is the unidimensional representation of the perpetrator.

The second part of the book draws on the concept of feminist rewriting embraced by feminist historical and life-writing scholars. The focus is on literary texts that re-narrativise some well-known femicide cases previously recounted in journalistic narratives with the aim of highlighting the gaps between journalistic and creative narratives. The texts selected for analysis include two short story collections based on journalistic accounts of femicide: *Fiore come me* (2013) by Giuliana Covella and *Nessuna più* (2013) by Marilù Olivia. *La scuola Cattolica* by Edoardo Albinati is a retelling of the Circeo massacre, a perpetrator-centred text that prevents the emergence of the victims' voices and limits the readers' engagement with them. The author reserves her greatest praise for *Padreterno* (2015) by Caterina Serra, which uses the classical myth of Aristaeus as an intertext for a fictional narrative of gender-lethal violence and redemption. Mandolini identifies in the 'utopic' realm of literature a possible space for overcoming gender polarisations. Certainly, in her critiques, Mandolini does not waver from a rigorous insistence on multifaceted and nuanced texts that showcase the complexity of lethal gender-based violence.

Mandolini's book, which builds on her previous scholarship, is a well contextualised and researched analytical study grounded in the fundamental notion that understanding how gender violence is represented and perceived in Italy is a necessary step toward cultural change and its eventual eradication. While Mandolini's work is founded on scholarly theoretical considerations, her aim is ultimately activist and her analytical process accessible and convincing. Her balanced critique of the texts and her acute awareness of language and narrative make us critical receivers of nuanced analyses that awaken us to the fact that, in our discursive focused world, understanding and ultimately questioning how texts condition our responses to gender-based violence is fundamental to our productive engagement with these issues and our capacity to participate in and advocate for change.