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Italian Women Writers and the Fascist “Politica islamica” in Colonial Libya

Rebecca Hopkins

Introduction

The imaginary relationship between Italy and Islam in the southern Mediterranean basin, and especially in the Italian colony of Libya, has been the subject of recent scholarship in Italian studies. Beginning in the late 1920s, Italian discourses – including social policy, political propaganda, literature, urban planning, and architecture – imagined Muslim Libya in ways that complicated the earlier myths of cultural difference between Italy and Muslim Libya circulating in the early-mid 1920s.¹ No longer only a symbol of the colonial “other,” in the late 1920s and 1930s Muslim Libya was increasingly portrayed as an important source of Fascist values and even as a model for the Italian Fascist individual.² This article will examine in particular how Muslim Libya was imagined as an important source of the Fascist colonial ideal of the cult of devotion. This idea of the cult of devotion consisted of three principal Fascist “virtues”: 1) the sacrifice of the individual for the good of a higher ideal or what was imagined even as a form of “faith”; 2) fanaticism, or the excessive zeal characterizing individual devotion to the “faith”; and 3) “anticipatory consciousness,” a term used by Ernst Bloch in *Principle of Hope* (1954-1959) which is helpful in understanding the future-oriented psychology of these imaginary forms of devotion.

Examining the 1932 novel *Il rogo tra le palme*, which is set in colonial Libya and written by Italian author Augusta Perricone Violà, this article will attempt to understand to what extent women figured in this Fascist imaginary of Muslim Libya. In the novel, Islam – and particularly Muslim women – provides an important imaginary model for Italian women’s devotion to the Fascist regime and in particular the three virtues of devotion named above. Yet, Islam also provides a symbolic vocabulary with which Perricone Violà critiques and even contests the ideals of Fascist female devotion and, in this sense, acts more as a model of Italian women’s resistance than of consent. This reading complicates our current understanding of the imaginary relations between Muslim and Italian women in the colony as they figure in Italian women’s writing of the period. While the novel’s use of the Muslim allegory as a tool of Italian women’s self-representation and even self-fashioning would seem to convey Perricone Violà’s identification with, and respect for, the local culture of Libya – a stance that might seem surprising given Perricone Violà’s traditional label as “Fascist” and “colonial” writer, such a proposition ultimately proves highly dubious. Still, the novel is an important example of the complex ways that Muslim-Italian ties were imagined by Italian women writers in this period.

¹ See Tomasello’s chapter “Il romanzo dei protagonisti indigeni e i tentativi di una narrativa realista,” in *L’Africa tra mito e realtà*; von Henneberg, 155-56; Del Boca “Tra esotismo ed erotismo” in *Gli italiani in Libia: Dal Fascismo a Gheddafi*, 167-73; Wright, 121-30; Lombardi-Diop, 145-54; Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism*, 1-53.

² While the suggestion of Muslim Libya as *reflection* of Fascist values is symptomatic of the civilizing mission, the idea of Muslim Libya as *model* for Fascist values reverses the civilizing mission as it conceives of Muslim Libya as a *civilizing* force and not only that to be *civilized*.

Visions of Muslim-Italian sisterhood

The daughter of colonial official Carlo Violà, the wife of decorated cavalry colonel Roberto Perricone, and the mother of three sons, Augusta Perricone Violà lived in the first decades of the twentieth century in the Italian colonies of Somalia and Libya. Drawing on her own experiences in the colonies, she wrote the novel *Il rogo tra le palme* (1932), the memoir *Ricordi somali* (1935), the collection of short stories *Donne e non bambole* (1930), and various articles that appeared in important Italian colonial periodicals of the 1920s and 1930s.³ One of these articles, “Donne in colonia,” published in 1929 in the “Cultura ed arte” section of the colonial periodical *L’Oltremare*, establishes in a more literal fashion the imaginary relationship between Muslim and Italian women that will form the basis of my allegorical reading of the novel *Il rogo tra le palme*. A mix between fiction and journalism, the article envisions a form of cross-cultural respect and understanding that is symptomatic of more common notions of Muslim-Italian relations of the time, relations known more specifically in the 1930s by the term *politica islamica* [Islamic policies].⁴ Proudly differentiating itself from other European colonial regimes, the Italian Fascist colonial regime claimed to affirm the indigenous African religions as well as Islam--on which special emphasis was placed. This claim was especially evident in colonial Libya in the mid-to-late 1920s and 1930s, when the regime consistently depicted itself as a “supporting ally, and protector” of the Muslim world and “the common mother of all Mediterranean peoples.”⁵ Roberto Cantalupo, author of the popular *L’Italia musulmana* (1928), describes the *politica islamica* as a new social vision based on an “equilibrium” between Islam and Christianity in which each religion moves closer to the other. “Let’s limit ourselves,” he encourages his Italian readership, “to the question of how we will create an equilibrium between the Islamic civilization as it approaches ours and the Christian civilization as it approaches theirs” (263).⁶ Two years later, Giuseppe Bottai, then Italian minister of education, announces what he feels are the two most important questions of the colonial administration: the Mediterranean question and the Islamic question. Libya, he argues, is the key to the success of both of these. It is, in his opinion, a major factor in the Fascist pan-Islamic domination of the Mediterranean. For Bottai, Italy’s *politica islamica* is based on the concept of “full respect” for Islam.⁷ Finally, in 1937 Mussolini would make a much-celebrated visit to Libya (after his initial 1926 visit) in which he would be presented with the “Sword of Islam,” a symbolic gesture of the imaginary Italian-Muslim alliance. Waving the sword over his head in a typical Fascist spectacle, he would boast of Italy’s “sympathy toward Islam and towards Muslims the world over.”⁸

In this same period, the 1929 article “Donne in colonia” by Perricone Violà calls upon Italian women to become the new agents of this imaginary Muslim-Italian union: “our women

³ See Ghezzi, 126-38, for the most complete autobiographical information available on Perricone Violà.

⁴ For an overview of the Islamic policies see Marongiu Buonaiuti, 249-91. For information on “indigenous politics” see McLaren, 165-76 and Segrè, 74-78.

⁵ Marongiu Buonaiuti, 250; Wright, 122.

⁶ All translations of the Italian are mine unless otherwise noted. See also Insabato, “Maometto ed Islam di oggi,” and the following articles in *L’Italia d’oltremare*: “Il nuovo volto dell’Islam” 20 giugno 1937; “Mussolini e il mondo arabo-islamico” 29 luglio 1937; “Le affinità fra il vangelo e il corano” 20 luglio 1938; “La colonizzazione musulmana è la più viva espressione della politica dell’Italia verso le popolazioni libiche” 20 dicembre 1939.

⁷ Bottai is also quoted in Tomasello, 164; See Segrè, 74, for the idea of friendship as a form of weapon and pan-Islamic, pan-Mediterranean strategy.

⁸ Labanca, *Oltremare*, 163; Wright, 125; Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism*, 1-53; for Muslim-Italian “affinity,” see Burdett, “Transculturation and Representations of Libya in the late 1930s.”

are so many now in the colonies that they might now understand exactly what the Nation asks of them as destiny has placed them in contact with other, different women, to whom they might do good” (88). The article specifically defines this imaginary relationship as a form of Italian women’s “love” for the female Muslim inhabitants of its colony: “Let us penetrate the family temple [of the Muslim family], but penetrate with purely fraternal spirit, with a great love toward those beings who are weaker than us, who need us and maybe even unconsciously await so much good and so much light” (87). Perricone Violà’s curious choice of the verb “penetrate” constitutes an interesting prelude to Mussolini’s phallic sword display in Tripoli, noted above, as she envisions Italian women as colonial agents of conquest and colonial “love” in ways that revise what is, by 1929, a larger *topos* in Italian colonial literature: namely, the masculinist sexual “penetration” of the feminized mind and body of the African colony.⁹ Perricone Violà’s article “Donne in colonia,” as well as her other works, most notably *Donne e non bambole* and *Il rogo tra le palme*, rework these sexual colonial politics as they re-imagine a “sisterly” love between Italian women and Muslim women.¹⁰

This sisterly love is seen in the way that Perricone Violà imagines Italian and Muslim women as working together to form a more perfect Italian-Muslim union – a union that is ultimately imagined as essential to the Italian psychological conquest of Libya. All three works – “Donne in colonia,” *Donne e non bambole*, and *Il rogo tra le palme* – imagine Muslim-Italian female collaboration as they envision Italian women as models for Muslim women, but also as they imagine the reverse: Muslim women as models for Italian women. “Donne in colonia” and *Donne e non bambole*, for example, depict Italian women as stellar examples of dynamism, intelligence, and energy, while Muslim women are portrayed as examples of very different colonial Fascist virtues – but Fascist virtues nevertheless.¹¹ In the short story “Piccola Madonna blù dell’oasi” (1926) of *Donne e non bambole*, Perricone Violà’s narrator urges Italian women to learn from their “distant sisters” of Islam; the story lauds the Muslim women of the colony for having made their lives a symbol of “obedience” and “sacrifice” through their roles as ideal mothers. Muslim women’s so-called “innate” maternity, the story suggests, provides a radical counter-example to what is imagined as the “innate frivolity” of modern Italian women, who are too concerned with “cocktails,” “cigarettes,” and the “fox-trot” to give importance to their primary role as mother (137-38).¹² In a similar vein, “Donne in colonia” accuses Italian women

⁹ Both in symbolic and literal ways as seen in the myth of the local North African woman as the object of Italian officer’s amorous/sexual advances made popular by colonial novels on Libya by Mario Dei Gaslini, Guido Milanese and Gino Mitrano Sani. See Pickering-Iazzi “Labors of Love” for more on “love” in Italian women’s colonial novels.

¹⁰ See Tomasello, “Il ‘femminismo’ della donna islamica,” in *Africa tra mito* 164-68, for more on this topic of the importance of the Muslim women to the colonial mission.

¹¹ Perricone Violà, “Donne in colonia,” 88. See Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism*, 45, for a discussion of the imagined “cult of masculinity” in 1930s Fascism and as imagined in Muslim Libya. He analyzes Piccioli *La porta magica del Sahara*, which imagines a “new” Muslim-Italian society based on the Fascist regime’s imagined “revitalization” of North African Islam (i.e., the regime is depicted as bringing dynamism and fervor to a “dying religion” marked by “decay” and apathy) (40-41). Burdett also explains how in Italian discourses of the period Muslim Arabs were imagined as fulfilling stereotypes of Arab vice and fallibilities (such as “nervous apathy”) at the same time they were seen as important sources of Fascist virtues, including spiritual “austerity” and “solemnity” (39).

¹² See Lombardi-Diop, 148-50, for how Italian Fascist women writers looked to Muslim women as models of maternity and sacrifice in this story. She also notes the perceived lack of cultural difference in this period between Muslim women and Italian Fascist women as signaling the transition from exotic literature of an earlier period. In the Foreword to *Donne e non bambole*, De Bono, then minister of the colonies, describes Muslim Libyan women as

of being more interested in material and individual pleasures than in the more noble pleasure reaped from the sacrifice of the individual for collective ideals that is imagined as driving Muslim women. The collective ideal that the article imagines is, of course, not only the Italian family, but the Italian nation and regime. This connection between family and nation was commonly seen in the ways the regime in Italy and in Africa confounded public and private spheres as places of women's sacrifice and consequently agency during the *ventennio*.¹³

While examples of this self-sacrificing type of Italian women did exist in Africa and the metropole, the novel seems to offer an even more dramatic portrait of Italian female devotion. Examples of women of this sort who existed in the metropole are numerous. Victoria De Grazia, for example, describes Elisa Majer Rizzioli as the perfect embodiment of the "self-abnegating 'New Italian'" of the *ventennio* (39). Elisabetta Mondello also describes Majer Rizzioli's journal, *Rassegna femminile italiana*, as furthering "this new type of woman [the "nuova italiana"]": strong, determined, absorbed in her duty and her militancy, endowed with Fascist virtues, including faith, discipline, and a sense of sacrifice" (74). Echoing this model of self-sacrifice, in 1935 on the "altar" of Rome in Piazza Venezia, Queen Elena donated her wedding ring to the imperialist cause for the conquest of Ethiopia, encouraging thousands of Italian women to do the same. This gesture, argues De Grazia, suggests the way Italian women symbolically entered into "marriage" with the Fascist regime, its imperialist cause, and specifically with Mussolini himself. This gesture is also an important symbol of Italian women's sacrifice. The abandonment of earthly pleasures – not just the ring itself, but as De Grazia notes the symbolic sacrifice that the ring represents of one's actual flesh and blood husband, who competes with Mussolini for Italian women's devotion (77) – is a necessary prerequisite to Italian female devotion.¹⁴

The virtue of female sacrifice becomes even more important in women's actual move to Africa itself. In the austere living conditions of the African desert, the hot African sun, and the acclimation to a new culture, the Italian female disciple of the faith found her most supreme setting. In Africa, Italian women had to give up a good deal in the name of the nation, ranging from the old comforts of Italy to their families back home. A telling example of the immensity of the sacrifice required of Italian women in Africa is described in 1935 by a female journalist from Naples:

Today, we women of Italy, mothers, wives, fiancées, sisters, all fight under the African sun. . . . It is easy to say, but hard to do. To sacrifice all those rich colors, the purples, all the fine linens, the creams and perfumes, soft English wool, airy open shoes, lace, handkerchiefs . . . eye shadow, and cream for day and cream for night.¹⁵

perfect models for Fascist Italian women as "[w]omen of absolute devotion, women that feel the joy of the abandonment and sacrifice; exemplary mothers". In "Donne e culle," Pompei criticizes what he calls the Italian "donna moderna," who fails to fulfil her maternal duties; he complains that in Italy "the religious type of woman, truly and profoundly religious, has disappeared" (106-07). Pompei is discussed in Meldini, 6; 120.

¹³ Many have written on the connection between private and public spaces (home and nation) as overlapping spheres of women's influence in this period. See in particular De Grazia; Meldini; Pickering-Iazzi, *Mothers of Invention*.

¹⁴ The marriage idea is also complicated by nuances of the "love" affair between Selima and the saint. This "love" alluded to in their relationship acts as a compelling allegory for the "love" commonly expressed for Mussolini in the years between 1928 and 1932 that Passerini speaks of in *Mussolini immaginario*.

¹⁵ Cited in Cianci, 353.

This idea of sacrifice takes on a more spiritual connotation in Perricone Violà's *Ricordi somali*, which also shows the way that the imagery of female discipleship for the faith changed due to its migration to Africa, where the local landscape and culture became new sources of symbolism. In Africa the Fascist altar of the nation became projected onto the "golden dunes" rather than on the piazzas of Rome:

In the austere life of sacrifice of these voluntary hermits of faith and love there is continual heroism, calm and serene, that joins the woman with her companion in the civil religion that has for an altar – the golden dunes, for faith – the Nation and civilization, for its purpose – conquest and duty, for its ideal love – family and sacrifice and that even has its own apostles, heroes, and martyrs. (172)¹⁶

The secular spiritualism at the heart of Italian women's devotion in this period – and seen most notably in the passage above in the images of the "hermits" and "martyrs" of the "faith," and the nation as "civil religion" – is part of the larger discourse of secular spiritualism characterizing the way the Fascist regime imagined itself. The Italian Fascist woman was imagined, like her male counterpart, as a "martyr" for the Fascist faith. Emilio Gentile's classic study of Fascism, *Il culto del littorio*, argues that Fascism commonly depicted itself as a new political order complete with metaphors of saints, mass, martyrs, and communion. The goal of Fascism, says Gentile, was to "generate a 'new man' who was a believer in and disciple of the cult of fascism." This utopian notion of a new Italian society formed through faith is evident in a pamphlet of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*: "only faith can create new realities."¹⁷ Gentile's theories, which do not speak of the colonies in particular, are nevertheless applicable to the colonies. In fact, the author of *Mussolini da vicino* (1928), Paolo Orano, applies this very religious discourse to the colonies in Africa during the 1920s, where he describes Fascism as a form of "patriotism intensified to the point of mysticism, holiness, martyrdom, faith . . . [and] a force of social construction" (24).

Il rogo tra le palme: *Italian and Muslim martyrs*

Perricone Violà's novel *Il rogo tra le palme* uses "Muslim" allegory to compare Italian women to disciples and "martyrs" of the "faith" as described in *Ricordi somali*. It, of course, projects these images onto the "golden dunes" of Italian Libya rather than Italian Somalia. The novel constructs an elaborate allegory by which Muslim female martyrs of Libya are imagined as important reflections of, and models for, Italian women's own martyrdom within the faith of the regime. The figure of the martyr is depicted in the heroine of the novel, Selima, a young native, Muslim woman of colonial Libya. The story tells how Selima lives with her father and his wives on the outskirts of an unnamed city in Italian colonial Libya. As a young girl, Selima draws the admiration of the wisest men of the Islamic faith, who along with others in the novel suspect quite early in the novel that the young Selima may well be a holy saint of Islam and even a *marabout*, a figure associated in the colonial imagination with the tradition of saints in North African Islam.¹⁸ But before Selima has a chance to fulfill her spiritual vocation, she is forced to

¹⁶ For one of the many other examples of this use of metaphor, see Randi, *Corso di preparazione della donna alla vita coloniale*.

¹⁷ Gentile, vii, 162, 129.

¹⁸ For this usage of "marabout" see Glassè, *New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 394-95.

marry, with the expectation that she will lead a life confined to the harem like the other Muslim women in the story. On her wedding night, however, Selima rebels against this fate and heeds the call of the faith. In this moment, she is transformed into what the novel tellingly calls “the new figure of woman” [la nuova figura di donna] (69, 88, 95). As “a new woman,” Selima flees her husband’s home and begins to roam the space of the oasis that borders the harem and the Italian colonial part of the city, which looms in the background of the novel. Exchanging her lavish wedding dress for the sober yellow tunic of the *marabout*, Selima vows to dedicate her life to a higher ideal: Islam and specifically the order of the saint Sidi Abdussalam, a figure based on the historical Libyan Islamic martyr of the same name. The novel describes how the saint calls Selima to the promise of a new world of possibility through her role as disciple to him. Female possibility in this case means the chance to be an acting subject (as opposed to the immobile passive creatures of the harem) and to experience new freedom as a result of this new mobility and dynamism. While Selima enjoys some initial agency (and freedom) as a disciple to the saint, she spends most of the novel desperately searching for any concrete sign of this destiny promised her by the faith. Not only does the saint never materialize in any human or even visible form, but the saint’s promise of freedom also never materializes in any sustainable way and remains only a dream in this story (both a literal dream and as dream implies the longing and hoping for a more ideal future). Eventually, the novel suggests that Selima’s dream of freedom and agency is actually more of a nightmare given her growing fear of and even repulsion toward the saint, as his increasingly unrealistic demands on Selima push her to a state of severe psychological distress. The novel concludes with Selima’s horrific death: she is eventually punished by fire at the end of the novel, due to the saint’s anger at her disobedience and ultimate failure to uphold the requirements of discipleship. It is this fire that both symbolizes her death as martyr who is sacrificed for the faith and suggests her rebellion towards the specific requirements of that martyrdom.

A more literal reading of the story – a reading I will complicate briefly – might interpret the novel as a critique of the fallibility of the Muslim characters and even Islam itself.¹⁹ The problematic myth of the Muslim woman’s psychological instability, and even fatalism, was typical in colonial novels of the period.²⁰ The novel would even seem to support such a reading, given the following passage that explains Selima’s “abnormal psyche” and in particular her “dark and distant gaze” and “tormented pallor”:

Only Africa with its sun that is too hot, with its unnerving solitude, with its exhausted races,²¹ tired and nervous . . . can produce these beings of a morbid sensitivity, of abnormal psyche, restless beings with a dark and distant gaze, with vibrating feverish limbs, with a tormented pallor; souls made over the stretch of centuries, traditions, legends, shaped across the passing of generations, each one donating a little of its own exhaustion and a little nirvana, little weak creatures, overtaken by imagination, tense bows eternally vibrating! (28)

¹⁹ See Ghezzi, 38, for a literal reading of this kind.

²⁰ Some examples are: Dei Gaslini, *Natisc. Fiore dell’oasi*; Milanese’s *Sperduta di Allah*; and Zuccoli’s *Kif Tebbi*. Milanese’s Muslim female protagonist is especially similar to Selima as she, too, wanders restlessly in search of a “strange” destiny. For this idea of Muslim decadence in the Italian imagination even outside of the novel see Del Boca *Gli italiani in Libia. Tripoli Bel suol d’amore 1860-1922* (456).

²¹ The term “race” is often confounded with religion in this novel as in many colonial texts.

Such portraits of Muslim women were so common that in 1929 in *L'Oltremare*, critic Osvaldo Guida bemoans the trite *topoi* of “Muslim resignation” and “fatalism” in Italian colonial novels and particularly those on Libya:

Enough, enough! After seventeen years of blood and suffering, of negation and exaltation, of ‘crucifixes,’ of ‘Hossanah,’ of ‘little huts of sand,’ of Eldorado; seventeen years of Mediterranean colonialism . . . enough with the desert and the oases, with the enflamed burnt sands, with the burning suns, the intrigue of Arabian nights, with over-the-top orientalism of Libya, with the complicated spirituality of the indigenous women! With Muslim resignation, with the eternal calamity, and even more eternal fatalism.

Enough! Now that we have become again a virile and healthy people, younger, more virile, healthier than ever, enough with the sins and tropes of colonial literature. (358-60)

Such a reading, therefore, might understand *Il rogo tra le palme* as heeding Guida’s call for new forms of colonial literature as the novel also portrays the Italian regime of the story as “youthful,” “new,” and “virile” and as assuming the moral responsibility of regenerating the “degenerate” Muslim African people.²² The following remark, spoken by the narrator of *Il rogo tra le palme*, and seemingly from the point of view of the Italian Caimacam of the regime, illustrates this relationship:

We [Italians] who precede them in the march have the job and the duty not to scold the latecomers for what they lack, but rather to guide them with justice, loving in them what is right, observing with clarity, chastising what is reproachful, understanding them, since in the end to dominate one must above all love and understand. (48)

The discourse of Italian “love” and “understanding” of its colonial subjects – situated, as in this passage, in the larger context of colonial “domination” and the goal of “revitalization” of Muslim fallibility – quite clearly reflects the complexities of the *politica islamica* noted earlier.

Yet, while this first reading of the story is valid, we might also read the story of Selima’s relationship with the Islamic saint as an allegory of the Italian woman and her relation to the Italian Fascist regime. The novel suggests this second reading as it employs a discourse that is uncannily similar to that of the Fascist cults of Italian female devotion circulating at this time. The novel’s allusion to specific elements of these cults of devotion – including elements of Italian women’s spiritual rebirth in the faith but also the virtues of sacrifice, fanaticism, and anticipatory consciousness – are most evident in the passages in which Selima undergoes a radical transformation into what the novel calls a “new figure of woman.” The narrator describes this moment when Selima leaves the home of her husband on her wedding night, and abandons her previous life for her new life as a disciple of the Islamic saint Sidi Abdussalam: “she put on

²² See other texts of this period in which similar metaphors of Italy and Islam exist. In *La nuova Italia d’oltremare* (1933), De Bono celebrates “the sacred, immaculate youth” of fascism (121). In *Italia musulmana*, Cantalupo argues that it is the moral duty of Italians and other Europeans to step in and assume responsibility for the “decadence” of Islam (170). Also see a 1930 article entitled “*Maometto ed Islam di oggi*” in which Insabato speaks of the regime’s relationship to Islam in the colonies as an “infusion of new blood to give new life” (12).

the yellow tunic of the *marabouts*, she unveiled her head leaving her curly black hair fall freely, forming a dark brown halo around her pale amber face . . . the new figure of woman appeared like a thing unreal” (88). This image of the transformation of Selima into a “new woman,” who is also a Muslim saint and martyr, acts, as we shall see, as an allegory for the *nuova italiana* of the 1920s and 1930s.

The virtue of sacrifice that Perricone Violà’s other works depict is an important feature of Selima’s transformation into this “new woman.” This sacrifice is seen most clearly in the novel when Selima, wishing to follow the saint, must abandon her former life in every sense, including her family, her home, and even the very clothes upon her body. The saint first appears to Selima in her dreams and he says to her: “Remember, Selima, you are mine, you are devoted to me. You must abandon all earthly love and pay homage to my tomb and live by my faith” (42). The novel describes the self-abnegation that is then required of Selima as disciple of the faith: “The sensual pleasure of her poverty, of her sacrifice, of the refusal of all pleasures, riches, of every satisfaction, to give herself entirely to an ideal, made her delirium something at once unconsciously great and sublime” (100). Selima’s devotion to the saint will eventually even take the form of martyrdom: self-sacrifice in the most dramatic of terms as seen in the scene at the end of her death. As a condition of devotion, Selima must renounce her body in more ways than one. She must burn her body in the fire of martyrdom as a symbol, it seems, of the sacrifice of her sexuality (seen also in the saint’s growing demands of her chastity) and the sacrifice of smaller “pleasures” like clothing, make-up, and jewelry.

As a disciple and “new woman,” however, Selima’s sacrifice for the faith rejects another type of “sacrifice”: the sacrifice other women in this novel must make in order to become mothers. Of course, it will not be long before the novel shows the way her role as disciple problematically resorts back to conjugal roles and hence the “exemplary wife” (as the saint calls her his “bride” throughout the story). Still, even then, Selima’s successful evasion of the reproductive responsibilities that her fellow Muslim women must bear is a consistent part of her role as disciple. In fact, it is no coincidence that she flees the bridal chamber at the very moment that the marriage would be consummated. The figure of Selima’s own mother forms an important reminder of Selima’s original destiny as a mother doomed to languish in the harem. Therefore, the novel presents two very different images of Muslim women: the *sposa e madre esemplare* (seen in the mothers of the harem) and a female disciple who is “wife” but not “mother” (seen in Selima).²³ This new figure of the Muslim woman in Selima is important as it contrasts with the image of Muslim women in “Piccola Madonna blù dell’oasi” in which the idea of Muslim (and Italian) female devotion hinges upon a woman’s role as mother.²⁴

While the Italian equivalent of the female disciple of the regime who rejects outright the role of the Fascist icon of the *madre esemplare* [exemplary mother] existed in both the colony and the metropole, it seems that the imaginary space of the colony offered more surprising and hence dramatic figures of female resistance – a point I will show briefly. That is, the *nuova italiana* in the 1920s and 30s included not only the *donna-crisi* (crisis woman: the women of the dance halls and cocktails mentioned earlier) and the *sposa e madre esemplare* [exemplary wife and mother], but also the *cittadina* (citizen woman). While scholarship has shown the way mothers and wives were *also* considered citizens by Mussolini – a combined role that in the colonies was especially important as women became the biological defenders of the Italian race – Italian women also

²³ This term, now used commonly, is most often associated with Meldini’s book of the same title.

²⁴ This reading of the novel shows a different Italian imaginary of Muslim women than as noted by Lombardi-Diop in *Donne e non bambole* (see pp.145-54 in Lombardi-Diop).

became acting subjects whose range of activity and influence (at least symbolically) moved beyond confining maternal roles. Women became members and organizers of national women's organizations such as the *Fasci femminili* [Female Fascists]. They attended rallies for the empire in the piazza. They founded journals, and they wrote articles for important Fascist colonial periodicals like *L'Oltremare*. In *How Fascism Ruled Women*, De Grazia claims that Majer Rizzioli incarnated the figure of the *nuova italiana* as a more empowered figure of women. The founder of the women's *Fasci* and later in 1925 of the important women's periodical *Rassegna femminile italiana*, Majer Rizzioli was one of many women during the Libyan war to be swept up by the fervor of female patriotism regarding North Africa.²⁵

While the *nuova italiana* has been examined within the space of the Italian metropole, scholars suggest some ways in which we might better understand how this Italian female figure assumed new significance in the colonial context. In most cases, the idea of the colonies as a place of empowerment of the Italian subject was intended mainly for the realization of the male citizen;²⁶ however, women partook in this vision of self-realization as well. In fact, many understand the *nuova italiana* as the female counterpart to the Italian *uomo nuovo*, the Italian male hero of Italian colonial literature.²⁷ Through colonial adventures and narratives about those adventures, women, too, gained access to new social orders in which they became subjects, actors, and heroines, often for the first time. Robin Pickering-Iazzi claims that Africa in the 1930s was more than ever a "frontier" of new possibility for women, a "dreamscape of feminine mobility, where professional and entrepreneurial opportunities for women abound[ed]."²⁸ The 1937 article "*La donna fascista e l'impero*" by Nino Dolfin, published in the important colonial periodical *L'Italia d'oltremare*, asserts: "In no other environment as in the colonial one is the woman given the sublime gift of reaching her highest form, her most exquisite and eternal usefulness."

The Libyan oasis as colonial hall of mirrors

The cross-cultural aspect of the novel's allegory is further suggested by the connection it draws between the Italian colonial regime of the story and the Muslim saint. This connection is established through the allegorical landscape of the Libyan oasis, which by 1932 was a favorite image in Italian colonial literature about Libya. In one scene in particular, the fountains of the oasis (or what are called the *gebie*) act as a symbolic mirror that brings together the saint and regime in one common space of signification:

Without sadness and regret, she [Selima] ran through the oasis hiding from passers-by, singing in the solitude, eating dates, and drinking water of the *gebie*

²⁵ Cofounder of the ultra conservative Fascist magazine *Gerarchia* with Mussolini in 1922 and author of Mussolini's biography, *Dux*, Margherita Sarfatti is another example. Sarfatti writes about colonial Egypt (albeit not technically an Italian colony).

²⁶ Pickering-Iazzi, "Labors of Love," 72-74; Lombardi-Diop, 145-54; Pagliara, 20-21. In D'Annunzio's *Le canzoni della gesta d'oltremare* (1912), a collection of poems published in the wake of the Italian victory in Libya, and the play *Più che l'amore* (1914), as in Marinetti's *Marfarka il futurista* (1910), Africa is portrayed as a new world where the moral, spiritual, and creative regeneration of the Italian male subject becomes possible. In the Fascist period, examples include Zuccoli's *Kif Tebbi* (1923) and Dei Gaslini's *Piccolo amore beduino* (1926).

²⁷ Pickering-Iazzi, "Labors of Love," 72-75; "Mass-Mediated Fantasies"; Mondello, 17, 53.

²⁸ Pickering-Iazzi, "Mass Mediated Fantasies," 201-03. See also Ghezzi, 109-29, for various women in the colonies (including Libya) who were acting subjects and not necessarily *madri esemplari*.

[fountains] that like big mirrors reflected the images upside down, diminishing the sun in tiny golden balls and giving a greenish reflection to the azure sky almost like turquoise . . . Everything for her was a gift of the saint! The sparkles, like gems; the colors, precious silks; the singing of the birds, like a divine orchestra of paradisiacal instruments. (155-56)

The reference to the water as “big mirrors” acts according to a poststructuralist understanding of signs as endlessly gesturing and endlessly undoing the more apparent narrative of the text. In this space, signs recombine with other signs forming new narratives. The fountains create the effect of a hall of mirrors where endless reflections – and endless stories – are projected. The water reflects the modern electric lights of the Italian regime located just at the edge of the oasis in the figure of the colonial administrative buildings. These lights infiltrate and illuminate the oasis in ways that point back to the civilizing mission’s discourse of penetration and illumination. Yet, the light of the Italian lamps recombine in the space of oasis with the light that is also generated in this very same space by the saint. That is, the saint’s presence in the novel is consistently represented by the “blinding” light of the reflections of his sword and the silver of his 500-men calvary. He is also alluded to by his “fiery eyes” that in turn ignite “a fire” of desire and hope in Selima. And finally, he appears via the blazing fire at the end with which he literally immolates Selima in her death scene (25-27, 41). These reflections of metal, fire, and electric lamps produce an almost dizzying semiotic spectacle to the point that it becomes difficult for Selima to distinguish the light of the Italian lamps from the light associated with the saint (i.e., the metal and fire). The shifting and unstable nature of the signs is described as occurring “in [Selima’s] hazy and delirious mind, where images appeared in knots, in overlapping forms, now joining, then separating, once again joining until they are no longer distinguishable”(226). In this play of light, signifiers become detached from signified. As a result, the novel suggests that the figure of saint is to be read as a “reflection” of the actual figure of the Italian colonial regime in this story. In *Ricordi somali*, in fact, the same images – fire and the electric lamps – are used interchangeably as symbols for the Italian regime and especially its civilizing mission. As a result, the question of who (the Muslim saint or Italian colonial regime) is civilizing whom becomes difficult to discern in this scene of the *gebie*.

Why Islam?

The North African oasis that figures in the scene of *gebie* is a typical metaphor used to describe Italian notions of paradise in novels of this period. As Charles Burdett notes in *Journeys through Fascism* regarding Angelo Piccioli’s *La porta magica del Sahara* (1934), the Italian imaginary of the Libyan paradise that was common in the liberal period becomes transformed in the 1930s according to the changing values of the *politica islamica*. Rather than the Judeo-Christian space of Italian paradise (i.e. the *terra promessa*), the novels of the 1930s imagined the paradisiacal oasis as an Italian “Eden of Allah” (40-41).²⁹ While Burdett examines the way Italian male writers wrote of this “Eden of Allah,” we see that Italian women were also imagining “Eden[s] of Allah” of their own creation. In *Il rogo tra le palme* these women’s “Muslim” Edens reflect

²⁹ See Tomasello also for how the 1920s and 1930s saw a new use of indigenous characters (and Muslim especially) in Italian colonial fiction. She notes the new attempt to narrate colonial Africa from the point of view of the indigenous character and not from that of the Italian colonial officer as in the liberal period (121-22). See her chapter on “Gino Mitrano Sani ed il fascino delle terre dell’Islam.”

Italian women's particular definitions of what constitutes ideal worlds. The question of why Perricone Violà chooses Islam and not Catholicism for her depiction of female ideal worlds – as Catholicism would seem a more natural choice given the more common Fascist appropriation of Roman Catholicism – is best answered by considering the way Muslim women were imagined in Italian works of this period as possessing heightened virtues of sacrifice, fanaticism, and “anticipatory consciousness”.³⁰

In “La nuova donna italiana,” a 1929 article in *Rassegna femminile italiana*, Majer Rizzioli addresses what she perceives as a contemporary dilemma: how to “renew the [Italian] woman.” She, like many others of the time, laments the modern Italian woman's loss of moral values, religion, and of a sense of family, home, and the “sacrosanct duty” of maternity. While Perricone Violà's novel rejects these more traditional understandings of the Muslim woman as mother and, instead, imagines her as an important role model of a self-sacrificing and yet *non*-mother figure, it continues to think about other implications of this challenge of female discipleship.³¹

Like self-sacrifice, the stereotype of North African Muslim fanaticism acts as an important model, it seems, of how to “revitalize” the Italian woman's devotion to the faith of the nation. As we saw in “Donne in colonia,” Muslim women are imagined by Perricone Violà as innately more zealous in their devotion to ideals beyond themselves, compared to what is imagined as the more apathetic and selfish “nature” of Italian women.³² This fanaticism is seen in Selima's increasing “delirium” as she roams the oasis attempting to fulfill her pledge of devotion to the saint. The excessive and even irrational devotion that fanaticism denotes is apparent in the idea of Selima “giv[ing] herself entirely to an ideal” in a way that is described as “obsessive” (24). In one particularly dramatic episode in the novel, Selima attends a gathering of other Muslim mystics in the piazza before the mosque. As the crowd begins its frenetic dance to the beat of the maddening drums, Selima finds herself slowly hypnotized and partaking in the spellbinding spectacle: “She was drawn in by a supernatural force that made her oscillate and then she couldn't resist; she obeyed a powerful and invisible hand that repelled and attracted her at once, and breathless and suffering, she danced and danced . . . the terrible dance, to the obsessive and gloomy rhythm of the tamburines” (148). Her “terrible” and wonderful dance here mimics the frenzy of her almost maddening roaming of the oasis that occupies most of the novel.

The “crazy gaze” of the faithful in this scene is also reflected in Selima's own “gaze,” whose fanaticism ranges in the novel between the “empty” trance-like stare and a gaze imbued with animated and rich visions of future worlds. This latter gaze is evident when Selima's husband

³⁰ Of course, the problematic roles that Catholicism prescribed for Italian women in the 1930s would in some cases contradict the very goals of female agency imagined. This is not to say that Islam offered women in this period less restricting roles. Nevertheless, Perricone Violà imagines a more sympathetic position of Islam toward women.

³¹ See Burdett, *Journeys*, 25-34 in which he discusses Sarfatti's “Una regina di tremila anni fa” as an example of how Italian women turned to colonial Africa and namely Queen Hatshepsut to imagine new models of Italian Fascist female power. Sarfatti also draws an analogy between the Forum Mussolini and Tell el Amarna, imagining a striking “likeness between the Egyptian ruler and the Italian dictator.” While Egypt was not an Italian colony per se and Sarfatti's analogy is to an ancient pre-Islamic culture, it still shows the way Italian women writers who were supportive of the regime, like Sarfatti, were searching for better models of female empowerment in the local culture of European colonies on the southern Mediterranean shores as opposed to in the metropole.

³² Some examples include Zuccoli's novel *Kif Tebbi* and Dei Gaslini's *Natisc, fiore dell'oasi*. Zuccoli's fanatic character, Ajàd, is admired by the Italian colonial regime for the outward form only of devotion of his fanatic determination to “fight for Allah.” Tomasello, however, reads Mitrano Sani as envisioning the Italian attempt to “combat” Muslim fanaticism in Libya through the civilizing mission, rather than imitate it (166). Ghezzi describes Italian women's writing of Muslim Libya from the liberal period, which focuses on women of the harem as figures of “pleasure” and apathy (rather than the sacrifice and fervor seen in *Il rogo tra le palme*) (119-20).

first beholds her on the night of her transformation into a “new figure of woman”: “[he] found himself before a tiny figure, straight as a rod in the long tight yellow tunic, with her hair boldly unveiled; she was alert in a stance of defiance, with her gaze fixed in an ardent and powerful stare; she was a strange and unexpected vision, whose beauty was unreal” (88).³³ This passage describing her “ardent and powerful stare” offers a more compelling way to understand her “dark and distant gaze” cited earlier: that “dark and distant” gaze is not so much a metaphor of the Italian colonial imaginary of Muslim African psychological degeneration and, specifically, fatalism (that was common in literature of this time) but rather of “Muslim” psychological dynamism and even visionarism. The adjective “distant” does not refer to the dark space of the *past*, but of that of the future: an unknown space that is still to be explored.³⁴ This future-oriented gaze of the “new woman” resembles what Ernest Bloch calls “anticipatory consciousness,” a dynamic, future-oriented gaze that constitutes a form of utopian “desire” as it “longs” and “hopes” for a better world. It is a gaze that differs greatly from Freud’s past-oriented and even immobilizing gaze of the unconscious, which also conveys the sense of desire, but desire for an object one has lost and then seeks to recuperate. Rather, Bloch’s gaze expresses the desire for a “good world” that one has *yet* to obtain.³⁵

Selima’s gaze of future possibility is in some ways a *model* for Italian women in the regime as they look forward and imagine their own worlds of possibility; however, it is also *reflective* of the future-oriented gaze that *already* characterizes Italian women’s psychological position within the regime at this time. While Italian women did find a good deal of immediate empowerment in the roles that the regime accorded them both at home and in the colonies, this novel and others of the time suggest that women’s hope for more total and sustainable agency was often relegated to a future space. In the metropole, this is evident in the discrepancy that existed between the promise of female emancipation at this time and the legal reality of Italian women’s situation. Women might have found new responsibility in the regime, but Italian law still told a very different story; women could join organizations, participate in the war cause and imperial campaigns, raise the future generations of new soldiers, accompany their husbands to the colonies, and endure difficult conditions in the name of the nation; however, they still could not vote. The vote was in many ways dangled in front of Italian women by the regime as a way to secure their support. While that dream would not materialize until 1946 after the fall of the regime, in the 1920s to the early 1940s that promise of female agency and equality was nevertheless still looming on the horizon, which in part may explain women’s curious “adhesion” to the regime even after 1926.³⁶ In fact, as we shall see, the female psychology of

³³ As to the references to her “strangeness,” the allegory seems to suggest that the rejection of maternity was still somewhat suspect within the regime, given Mussolini’s ultimate plan to return women to home and hearth and reproductive roles. See De Grazia, 1, on this latter idea. The allegory might even suggest Selima’s own horrifying figure as a form of female mostrosity. See the idea of the “monstrum” in Re, “Passion and Sexual Difference,” 180. Selma is, however, horrifying at the same time she is “beautiful”: a sign that the novel celebrates her transformation as a positive act of female possibility.

³⁴ Her gaze contrasts notably with the idea of Muslim women in “Donne in colonia,” in which the Italian woman is an energetic and active force compared to the tired and even deathly passive Muslim woman, closed in her dark, mud hut like a “tomb that conceals a sleepy secret of sleepy lives” (87).

³⁵ This idea is expressed in Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*, written in the late 1930s and 1940s. Bloch’s ideas were, however, already partly formed by the 1920s in his work *The Spirit of Utopia*. My reading of Bloch is indebted to Levitas who emphasizes the way Bloch himself distinguishes between “anticipatory consciousness” which operates on a preconscious level and Freud’s “rubbish bin” of the past: the unconscious (Levitas 86-87).

³⁶ See De Grazia, 35-36, for more on the vote, which was less officially dropped as a platform by the regime in 1922 (and more officially in 1926). She notes one woman in particular, pro-suffragist leader Paola Benedettini Alferazzi

waiting for future promise to materialize is a major problem in this novel. Majer Rizzioli embodies this duality inherent in Italian women's anticipatory consciousness of the time. Even to her last days when Majer Rizzioli lay dying at home, her thoughts were focused on the fact that she was "still hoping to get a 'word of encouragement' from the Duce."³⁷ Majer Rizzioli is a symbol of the many women in the regime who were left disappointed by the reality of the regime's fantastic promises of an ideal future.

Perricone Violà's "Donne in colonia" depicts the Italian women in colonial Libya as particularly symbolic of this form of anticipatory consciousness. They are women who are "pushed forward by the bright and strong love of Nation, who wants, who waits, who asks, who hopes, and to whom one must give, give, and still give" (88). This image of women driven eternally "forward" toward the "bright" destiny that awaits them is one that is essentially focused on the future as the space of the nation's realization and of Italian women's realization, as well. Perricone Violà's other works, including *Ricordi somali*, imagine the Italian woman as a kind of "modern vestal virgin" who both ignites and guards that light of "marvelous future" of the nation (15, 47), which acts in turn as a metaphorical beacon of hope for the "bright" new destiny of the "new Italy" in Africa (15).³⁸

This future world of possibility and agency for Italian women would demand, of course, a very particular form of allegory in colonial fiction. The allegory must express the formlessness of women's future in the regime and, therefore, what is the almost supernatural ability of women to imagine that formless future. The novel imagines Islam as offering a dramatic metaphor of this formlessness while at the same time it finds an important metaphor and even *model* for Italian women's own "visionary" faculties. As a prophetess of sorts, Selima possesses what are indeed supernatural and even magical powers as she is able to envision future, "unknown," invisible, and "new worlds" of possibility (28). The phantom figure of the saint is a perfect metaphor of this hazy vision of future possibility for women. He appears only in supernatural erratic flashes of light that "haunt" Selima in the entire novel and never takes any material or other concrete form (41). Selima, however, possesses the unique ability to see the saint and his promises of a bright future when others cannot see either. At one point, it is even said that Selima is able to imaginatively transform the intangible signs around her in the oasis (i.e., the wind, the perfumes of the oasis) into concrete signs of her new "freedom": "How sweet was the soft caress that slowly was felt in her hair! They must have been the fingers of the saint that knew how to caress her so agilely! Taken by the pleasure of her solitude and her dream, drunk on liberty, on the aromatic wind of the oasis" (102).

and key member of Fascist women's organization in the 1930s, who remained disappointed after Mussolini failed to come through with his promise of the vote. She quotes her as saying she was "still awaiting his final word," although she would eventually warn Italian women to think in more realistic terms as she feared issue might drag on interminably.

³⁷ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 39.

³⁸ Piccioli, De Bono, *La nuova Italia d'Oltremare*. The "new Italy," or "nuova Italia," and in particular the "destiny" of a future Italy is a term used often in works of this period. Many works on colonial Libya employ similar metaphors of the "bright" future of Italy in Africa. This discourse originates in the liberal period, as seen in Corradini's famous *L'ora di Tripoli* which establishes the idea of Italian "prophecy" that informs the Fascist *ventennio's* own understanding of its particular destiny in Libya, including that in Piccioli and De Bono. For these ideas in colonial novels, see Comerio's *Sulle vie del sole*, which contains similar imagery of light (in particular the "blazing sun" or "path of light") to depict the future of Italy in colonial Libya. Comerio's novel also uses a Muslim hero, a man named Sen.

The Italian colonial idea of Muslim subjects as innately poetic and imaginative, which this scene seems to suggest is as a key component of anticipatory consciousness, is common in this novel and other novels of the period.³⁹ Yet, it is not that Perricone Violà sees Italian women as unimaginative, but rather she views them as possessing a different imaginative faculty than that of Muslim women. In “Donne in colonia,” for example, the idea of the “seriousness” of Muslim women’s visionary nature is contrasted to the “frivolty” of the Italian women, whom the narrator sees as foolishly caught up in the superficial fantasy of the dance hall and other forms of modern leisure. Instead, as the article will show, the “dark” dreams and even “horrific” supernatural visions of the Muslim women are not just accessing ideas of Muslim psychological instability, but rather they indicate a notion of the “sublime” nature of these women’s thoughts compared to those of Italian women. This term ‘sublime,’ which appears in a passage below, conveys the sense of a distant, irrational, and ultimately more profound realm of possibility. In “Donne in colonia” the narrator makes this distinction: “The [Italian] woman in the colonies can be a great instrument of conquest and penetration, but first we must instill in her a profound national consciousness and a *seriousness* of thought” (88).⁴⁰

Tumultuous relations: Italian women and the “faith” of the regime

The allegorical reading of the passage above portrays Italian women in this period not only as possessing special visionary ability to see a distant future of new possibility for women, but also as more susceptible to the quasi-magical “spell” cast upon them by the regime. The spell in this case signifies the enchanting promise of Italian women’s future freedom in the regime, both at home in the metropole and in colonial Africa. It conveys this idea as it problematically underscores the colonial imaginary of North African Islam as a faith grounded in magic and supernatural forms.⁴¹ This idea of “enchantment” and its associations of “seduction” (seen, for example, in the wind that becomes like the fingers of the saint sensually caressing Selima’s hair) recalls Maria Antonietta Macciocchi’s classic work on Italian women’s position in the regime: *La donna ‘nera’* (1976). Yet, the novel certainly does not settle on Macciocchi’s theory of mystification. In fact, it immediately deconstructs the very suggestions of devotion in its earliest scenes. When Selima first dreams of the saint, she immediately experiences a terrifying “premonition” of her martyrdom, in which her “destiny seemed horrible and frightening, too much to bear, too bright to realize” (43).

Even in the very first days of her spiritual vocation in the oasis, Selima already seems to be reconsidering her initial pledge of sacrifice, which was made in the excitement of the moment and without a serious understanding of what that pledge might entail in the long run. While

³⁹ This correlation is also seen in the passage cited earlier in *Il rogo* that describes the local women as “small weak little things, wrapped up in imagination” (46). Selima is said to adore stories of the supernatural and other fantastic legends (10-11). In the novel *Sulle vie del sole* (1934), set in colonial Libya, Comerio’s Sen is likewise held up as a hero on par with other Italian colonial heroes of Italian utopian literature in Libya mainly due to his highly poetic imagination. Milanese’s Muslim Libyan heroine in *La sperduta di Allah* is also described as naturally given to “dreaming” (81).

⁴⁰ Italics are mine. In the novel as well Selima’s gaze is described as “pensive” and “deep” in its “dreamy” and “imaginative” nature (92, 10-11)

⁴¹ The novel describes the so-called Muslim penchant for tales of the supernatural including the “superstitious” belief of the stories of *ginni* (136). This idea draws, it seems, on larger European ideas of North African Arab culture as given to the magic and supernatural, ideas seen in the European fascination with the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights* (noted in Guida’s critique).

Selima's devotion requires the sacrifice of individual and material pleasure, the passage regarding the *gebie* (fountains) cited earlier shows the way Selima still desires such pleasures. These pleasures are seen in the "sparkle of lights like gems," "the colors, [like] precious silks," and her indulgence in sumptuous food delicacies (seen in the dates she happily nibbles as she leisurely sings). These moments of individual and material pleasure question the harsh, and even unreasonable, conditions required of Italian women for the nation. In particular, the scene casts light on the sustainability of Italian women's self-sacrifice over time. The novel suggests that these little material and individual pleasures are essential to Selima's sense of self; in fact, without them her sense of identity becomes gradually dissociative, culminating in her nervous breakdown and symbolic death in the fire. The devotion required of Italian women in this period – and especially in the colonies – is, as the journalist Bordia simply but tellingly expressed earlier, "so easy to say, but hard to do."

The happiness that is present in the early passages regarding Selima's devotion presents a striking contrast to the anxiety that sustained sacrifice, fanaticism, and anticipatory consciousness ultimately provoke in her. One passage that is particularly representative of her mounting anxiety is the scene in the novel when Selima asks another character, Mogora, if she is happy "running always after the poisoned but sweet Fountain and drinking the water running from it with big gulps." Mogora replies, "No, I am not happy The water doesn't quench my thirst. The more I drink, the more I am thirsty" (197). This harrowing image of female desire plays with the idea of the classic desert mirage and the dream of the impossible and illusory. In one passage, the saint calls to Selima, "My beloved, my beloved, why have you fled?" Selima "looks for him, she thinks even to call out to him, but she can only see a smoky haze she becomes desperate, cries out, runs, but the haze all becomes more dense, gathering around her, suffocating her, until she falls" (178). While Selima in the early scene of the *gebie* drinks to her heart's desire, increasingly she, too, becomes a figure, like Mogora, chasing an impossible dream. Most of the second half of the novel depicts Selima desperately racing through the oasis in search of her "destiny" and also her happiness.⁴² While the initial dream of future of possibility offers excitement and even a kind of crazed euphoria, the question of any sustainable happiness over time – given the impossible demands that female devotion requires – becomes a major source of doubt in this novel.⁴³ The forward "triumphant march toward progress [and] liberty" of the nation's and Italian women's destiny of *Ricordi somali* (7) is imagined instead in this novel in a more problematic form as it is a *maddening* march toward a ghost-like and even horrific future.

The novel shows how the prolonged state of waiting for the dream to materialize incites only more desire, in turn causing anxiety and, finally, the dissolution of the self when that desire is not satisfied completely, or at least not in a way that matches the hype of the original promise of the object desired. The following passage draws a clear corollary between desire and anxiety: "[Selima] waited with the morbid anxiety of sick desire for the shadow to reappear, for the hazy indefinite something it promised" (200). Selima, the novel demonstrates, chases the "chimera" of

⁴² This image recalls Margerita Sarfatti's consideration of the topic of the Italian woman's "pursuit of happiness," the title of a collection of essays she eventually published in 1937. Like Majer Rizzioli, after an initial period of newly found liberty and responsibility in the regime, Sarfatti, too, found herself bitterly deluded by that dream.

⁴³ The same might be said of the new Italian women in this period such as Majer Rizzioli, Sarfatti and Perricone Viola, all of whom reaped immediate pleasure and a sense of agency in their roles in the regime and yet the agency was, it seems, also and perhaps even more so built upon the promise or "dream" of what was still to come in the future.

a hazy future of possibility within the faith as she struggles to distinguish what is “dream” from what is “real” (210; 222). One of the more well-known experts on desire, Sigmund Freud, defines anxiety as resulting not only from the fixation on the *past*, but also from the anticipation of the *future*.⁴⁴ This kind of “anticipatory” anxiety is certainly the case for Selima. The fire of martyrdom at the end of the novel might even be read as a symbol of a self-consuming trajectory of desire.

Selima’s tragic end, therefore, is caused mainly by the prolonged state of excessive desire: both due to the overly zealous form of that desire but also of the excessive anticipation that characterizes it. The initial dynamism of anticipatory consciousness and even fanaticism ultimately reduce Selima to “a living larva, lacerated, pale, dishevelled, burnt by the morose flame of madness, wandering like a rabid dog, exhausted, suffering, infinitely tired” (210). At one point, Selima is called “crazy, crazy from too much dreaming” (191), and in another, her crisis becomes attributed to “too much future” (201). The earlier scene at the *gebie* espouses, in fact, a portrait of a better world of agency for women that is more grounded in the present; the otium of this same scene (mainly conveyed in Selima’s lesiurely dillydallying) offers a welcome alternative and even critique of the “furious gallop towards a future destiny” that characterizes the rest of the novel.”⁴⁵

Scholars describe the way Italian women’s initial euphoria in the 1930s quickly shifted to disenchantment as the initial dream of freedom revealed almost overnight what was only a new form of bondage.⁴⁶ Likewise, the image of Selima as “drunk on liberty” in a scene noted earlier in the novel creates a startling contrast to the later images of the “walking larva” and “rabid dog” that convey not only a state of “disenchantment” but “horror” (102). The novel conveys Selima’s growing sense of repulsion toward the saint as his demands on Selima become increasingly more unrealistic and he himself becomes “unappeasable.” Once a beacon of light in the shadowy oasis, the saint becomes a dark and ghoulish presence to Selima. Once calling her to dreams of new possibility, his voice now incites mainly “spasms of terror” and nightmares of “subjugation” (116, 227). Originally a site of female paradise, by the end of the novel, the oasis and its promises for female agency have become a veritable hell, on par with that depicted in the tradition of colonial “horror” stories, such as Ennio Flaiano’s *Tempo di uccidere* (1947) and Pina Ballario’s *La sposa bianca* (1934).

The complicated relation between Italian women and the colonial Fascist regime, which is suggested in these alternating moments of repulsion and fanatical attraction, makes sense when considered in light of theories of resistance, including Antonio Gramsci’s idea of “contradictory consciousness.” Gramsci argues that a subject in society who is interpellated by the dominant ideology still maintains a voice of dissent to that ideology. This idea is seen in the novel in the metaphor of the saint calling Selima in the oasis (i.e., “interpellating” her in a strikingly Althusserian manner). While she follows his call, she simultaneously fears it and even imagines alternatives to it; these alternatives appear as fantasies, daydreams, nocturnal dreams, and

⁴⁴ See for example Shepherdson, Introduction to *Lacan’s Seminar on Anxiety*, by Harari.

⁴⁵ The valorization of the world of the present is a happy alternative to the narrative of progress apparent in the utopian vision of the regime in this story, seen in the modern technology of the lamps, the modern palazzi, and the airplanes whizzing overhead.

⁴⁶ See for example De Grazia: “The generation of Italian women that came of age in the 1930s, as Irene Brin saw it, was “noisy, ingenuous, and sad.” Although “frightfully self-conscious about itself,” it was a generation “ignorant of being subject to constraints unprecedented in their absoluteness.” So exalted was it by a “sense of freedom from all moral, sentimental, and physical bonds that I didn’t realize until too late that it had lost its liberty” (1).

impulses that for scholars like Bloch constitute the very core of anticipatory consciousness. For Bloch, in fact, anticipatory consciousness is a “dream” of the “not-yet-become” (which acts on the conscious level) and the “not-yet-conscious,” which acts on the preconscious level. Despite the fact that both are not completely formed visions of the future – and one not even conscious – they are nevertheless very real and even forceful forms of social reconstruction.⁴⁷ The novel seems to be working at both of these levels. While it is a work of fiction (as opposed to more literal forms used in “Donne in colonia”), the novel’s critique of women’s problematic roles in the regime still presents very real concerns.

Moreover, as a way of understanding the somewhat inconsistent aspects of the novel’s critique, we might consider Pickering-Iazzi’s theory of female resistance in this time period. She maintains that Italian women’s opposition during Fascism occurred in the form of “shifting positionalities,” or “multiple, micropolitical sites where authority bears upon social subjects,” and not “a unified, linear movement.”⁴⁸ The “shifting positionalities” and contradictory consciousness that inform this novel are actually at work on several levels: on the level of the story and also on the level of its authorship. As seen in “Donne in colonia” (as well as her other works), Perricone Violà is a best known even today for her ardent support of the regime – a support seen quite clearly in her other works. This novel, however, offers a new way to interpret the complexities of that “support,” which turns out to be tinged with traces of resistance. The novel’s image of the “mysterious hieroglyphics” forming Selima’s indecipherable “Muslim” and “Libyan” psychology in an early scene of the novel offers, in fact, a suggestive metaphor for the complex psychology of Italian women in the regime in this period (34).

Conclusion: Exceptional forms of love

This same problematic image of the “mysterious hieroglyphics” of the Muslim female mind is also indicative of the “special” place that Muslim Libya occupies for Augusta Perricone Violà. This special place accorded Libyan subjects is seen in other colonial novels of the period as well, including most notably those of Pina Ballario and Carlo Comerio. Like these other novels, *Il rogo tra le palme* distinguishes between the “simple and primitive” mind of its Sub-Saharan characters (namely Selima’s servant, Mahazuma, who is most likely Eritrean or Somali) and the complex mind of the Muslim North African characters (34-35).⁴⁹ While this form of exceptionalism of the Muslim Libyan figure would seem an act of admiration of the local culture of the colony, we see that there are serious contradictions that run counter to that idea. The problems stem from the two-fold nature of the exceptionalism of the Italian women’s love for her Muslim Libyan “sisters,” that is, there is the exceptionalism of the kind mentioned above and a second form: while the novel chooses a Muslim woman as a “mirror” and model of Italian Fascist virtue – and specifically that of the new Italian woman – there remains the underlying suggestion that this Muslim heroine is an exception to the imagined general “rule” of Muslim women in the colony. Therefore, the novel celebrates and in many ways looks up to this Muslim heroine as an ideal female figure of consent and dissent, but only as it reminds us – quite disturbingly – that such women are rather “the few sublime women that Muslim culture has

⁴⁷ See Levitas for Bloch’s “anticipatory consciousness” as offering “will-ful” versus “wish-ful” notions of future possibility and social change (88).

⁴⁸ Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible*, 6; Pickering-Iazzi, *Mothers of Invention*, xiii.

⁴⁹ For this distinction in other discourses of the regime see Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia. Dal Fascismo a Gheddafi*, 121.

created . . . rare beacons of light against a dark sea” (13).⁵⁰ This exceptionalism is explained in “Donne in colonia,” in the vivid image of Muslim women as “marvelous at the source” (87). This metaphor, which plays with the idea of the desert water source that is buried deep beneath the desert sands, insinuates that while the “core” of the Muslim female person is “virtuous” (in Fascist terms) that core becomes ultimately “deteriorated” due to multiple external factors, including the burden of time in what is perceived as a culture and land that are “too” old and a climate that is too extreme (as noted in the passage from the novel cited earlier) (87). It is here that Perricone Violà sees the Italian woman as forming a special alliance with her Muslim “sister”; while the Muslim woman is imagined as containing certain “innate” qualities such as the instinct of extreme forms of self-sacrifice, of profound and even sublime visionarism, and of fanaticism, Perricone Violà imagines Italian women as then assuming the task of revitalizing and renewing these qualities through what is perceived as their comparative Italian modernity and youth.

This imaginary of Muslim-Italian female relations in the colony underscores the problematic nature of the *politica islamica* of the period. As noted earlier, the *politica islamica* consists of an outward position of Italian “love” and “understanding” of its Muslim Libyan subjects and, yet, one that is ultimately shadowed by competing suggestions of denigration and grave misunderstanding.⁵¹ As a result, we see that while the novel imagines a Muslim Libya that is akin to Fascist Italy in terms of shared moral, social, and psychological values, the *imaginative* nature of that so-called kinship remains its most prominent quality. Just as the regime’s own “respect” and “sympathy” for Islam were riddled by most disturbing contradictions of violence and subjugation in the colonial occupation of Libya, so was the Italian woman’s mission of “love” and “understanding” in colonial Africa as it is depicted by Perricone Violà.⁵²

⁵⁰Also in “Donne in colonia”: “Is it possible that from these mute and invisible ranks of pale women that no soul has seen and who have seen nothing, that the great figures of saints and warriors have emerged? Is it possible that from those big mud huts the beautiful aescetic souls of charity, sacrifice and prayer of . . . the African Joan of Arc, Dahmia, also known as la Cahena, the priestess, . . . emerged? . . . And in fact these great figures of legends are lights in the shadow, stars in the dark night, rare beacons of light in the span of centuries” (87).

⁵¹See Tomasello’s section “Il ‘femminismo’ della donna islamica,” in *Africa tra mito*, 164-67. Tomasello concludes that Italian women’s interest in North African Islam was only motivated by the attempt to use western feminism as a weapon in the civilizing process. She discusses the 1932 article “Femminismo e Islam” by Vaglieri.

⁵²The *politica islamica* is now seen by historians as merely a political façade, a strategy in a larger plan of pan-Islamic domination. The discourse of “love,” “compassion,” and cultural “equilibrium,” scholars argue, only masked what were in reality egregiously racist colonial practices and laws, along with atrocities toward the native population (See: Segrè, 74-78; Marongiu Buonaiuti, 250-91; von Henneberg, 155-66; and Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism*, 47). Between 1930 and 1933, the same period in which Perricone Violà published her novel, the Fascist regime established between thirteen and sixteen Italian concentration camps in the Cyrenaica region of Libya. Four-fifths of the nomadic and semi-nomadic population of this area – approximately half the population of eastern Libya – were deported to these camps. Their property was seized by the regime, and many did not make it out alive; it is estimated that of the 100,000 people who were held in these camps, half (or near that) perished due to executions, starvation, disease, the duress of forced labor, and harsh punishment in colonial hands. For the history of occupation (and data above) see Labanca, “Italian Colonial Internment” 27-32 and *Oltremare: la storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana*, 137-41, 144-49; and Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia*, “The Myths, Suppressions, Denials, and Defaults of Italian Colonialism,” 25-27, and *Italiani, brava gente?* 105-23.

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