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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 1

Romeo and Juliet

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi and Emanuel Stelzer



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A Mediterranean, Women-Centred Rewriting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: Roberta Torre's *Sud Side Stori*

MARIA ELISA MONTIRONI

Abstract

Sud Side Stori – La storia vera di Romea e Giulietto (2000) is an unconventional cinematic version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by Italian director Roberta Torre. Blending neorealistic techniques with a non-realistic cinematic aesthetic and a Brechtian-inflected form, the film offers an oneiric and political rewriting of Shakespeare's tragedy set in mafia-ruled contemporary Palermo. In the city, locals are shocked by the massive and unprecedented spike in African immigrants, who are essentially women. The tragic and impossible love at the centre of the film is indeed between an untalented Sicilian singer, Toni Giulietto, and a Nigerian victim of the international sex trade, Romea Wacoubou. This hopeless romance is representative of the wider social tension in the background due to the conflict between the worshippers of Palermo's two main patron saints: the white Saint Rosalia and the black Saint Benedict the Moor. The article offers a feminist perspective attuned to both Torre's take and the female-centred filmic interest. The protagonist of *Sud Side Stori* is a black immigrant woman and a prostitute who exemplifies the intersectionality of different sources of oppression, which Torre explores and exposes.

KEYWORDS: *Romeo and Juliet*; *Sud Side Stori*; feminist criticism; adaptation; women; Mediterranean; immigration

1. Women, Immigration and the Sea in *Sud Side Stori*

Sud Side Stori – La storia vera di Romea e Giulietto (2000) is an eccentric cinematic version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*,

by the Italian director Roberta Torre, which premièred at the 57th Venice International Film Festival in a section called Dreams and Visions. Blending neorealistic techniques with a non-realistic cinematic aesthetic, and creating a postmodern pastiche of quotations, rhythms, forms of art, images and styles, the film offers an oneiric and political re-envisioning of Shakespeare's tragedy set in mafia-ruled, contemporary Palermo. In the city, locals are shocked and rocked by the massive and unprecedented spike in African immigrants, who are essentially all women. The tragedy's impossible romance is, in fact, between an untalented Sicilian singer, Toni Giulietto, and a Nigerian victim of the sex trade, Romea Wacoubo. The social conflict in the background is between the worshippers of the two main patron saints of the city of Palermo: the white Saint Rosalia and the black Saint Benedict the Moor.

The words "Mediterranean" and "immigration" together already evoked tragic situations of immense concern in the noughties, which is well expressed in the Human Rights Watch definition of the Mediterranean as "the world's deadliest migration route" (*HRW*). Yet, there is virtually no sea in Torre's Palermo. The breathtaking beaches and the turquoise water of the seaside resorts are almost totally absent from the film, and typical seafood is never cited. Although smuggling is mentioned, there are no images of overcrowded boatloads of immigrants in inhuman and degrading conditions, and most of the travelling experiences very briefly touched upon in the story revolve around passports and flights to Italy, while never referring to the perils of illegally crossing the sea, which instead dominate the public discourse on immigration. Furthermore, in the last part of the film Torre's fictional Sicily is apparently connected to Africa by a railway: after receiving the news of Toni's death, the banished Romea travels by train from her continent to Palermo (see Calbi 2013, 95). The deliberate absence of the sea in the film provides, on the one hand, an intriguing proposition open to interpretation, and, on the other, a different perspective on the question of the Mediterranean immigration crisis, defamiliarising it, shifting the attention from immigration per se to immigration as a trade – that is, human trafficking – in this case for the purpose of prostitution. Consequently, the focus is on the immigrants as victims and on different individual

responsibilities: of those who make money from it, of the uncaring men who indirectly support it in their everyday life, frequenting prostitutes and treating them as objects, but also of the people who are blind to this contemporary form of slavery, which affects women in particular.

The film serves this purpose through a Brechtian-inflected form: the suspension of disbelief is constantly broken, and the familiar is made strange by means of dislocation and comic juxtapositions.¹ Namely, verbatim and documentary techniques are used, “all the African actresses are prostitutes and many of the Palermitans are ordinary people playing themselves” (Masolini 2002-2003, 232), while the way they often speak directly to the camera “creates the theatrical illusion of an ongoing exchange between the audience and the characters” (229). Moreover, the unveiling of the camera’s presence maximises the expressiveness of the images, to the point that, as Pasolini argued in his essay “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’”, they almost reflect the archetypes of our dreams (see Pasolini 2005).

Despite the direct allusions to *West Side Story* (1961),² *Sud Side Stori* is not so much a musical as a film interspersed with thirteen songs, which reflect Brecht’s idea of music in epic theatre. Their functions go far beyond the spectacular ones of a sung-through work. Throughout the film, music intentionally breaks the illusion of reality, “communicates”, “takes up a position” and “gives the attitude” (Brecht 4[1927], 347). The songs are for the most part original and for the most part sung by actors (see De Crescenzo 2000). The only professional singers that feature in the film are Little Tony (1941-2013, in the role of the King of Rock 'n' roll),

1 Living in Palermo, but coming from Milan – where she graduated in philosophy and studied at the Milan Film School and at the Paolo Grassi Dramatic Arts Academy –, Torre’s view of Sicily is similarly estranged. In her own words, her gaze is “the gaze of the anthropologist, the observer” (quoted in Karagoz 2020, 213). As Bernadette Luciano writes: “Torre moved to Palermo in 1990 and finds Palermo and Sicily to be major sources of inspiration for her narratives” (2015).

2 The allusion works through the title, the characters’ names (Toni and Maria), the plot based on interracial love and, to a certain extent, the genre. Torre, in fact, “prefers not to call it a musical, but a film in which music plays a fundamental role” (Calbi 2013, 188).

and Mario Merola (1934-2006, in the role of Re Vulcano [King Volcano]). The former, an Italian version of Elvis Presley, crams his speeches with English words; the latter, a neomelodic singer, speaks Neapolitan. They are not there for particularly demanding singing performances, but rather to represent two cultural mindsets: the American-oriented and the local one, which in any case share a misogynistic outlook on women, as we shall see.

Though less successful, at least in the Italian context,³ than her previous musical film on the mafia, *Tano da morire* (1997), Torre's version of *Romeo and Juliet* has attracted the attention of Shakespeare and film studies scholars, most notably because it represents a local – Italian – appropriation of the global icon Shakespeare (Cavecchi 2008; Minutella 2012 and 2013) and because it thematises migration and hospitality (read through Derrida by Lehmann 2015 and, before that, Calbi 2013, who concentrates on the *spectral presence* of Shakespeare-in-translation).⁴ Despite the interesting research already devoted to the film, there is ground for further investigation from the viewpoint of feminist studies. The profitability stemming from the adoption of this critical angle of analysis is not only validated by the nature of Torre's work – which gained her the Woman in Set 2020 prize for “the importance the film director had throughout the 2000s in representing women in an industry, that of the cinema, which is still too masculine and sexist” (*sedicicorto*; my translation), but primarily by the characteristics of *Sud Side Stori* itself, which is clearly centred on women. Romea's lone presence in the centre of the film poster suggests she is the undisputed protagonist of the story and the main interpretative key of the reception process the film represents. Being black, immigrant, prostitute and woman, she exemplifies the intersectionality of different sources of oppression, which Roberta Torre explores and reveals.

This essay discusses Torre's peculiar rewriting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with an emphasis on the representation of female

3 “*Sud Side Stori* was one of the five films presented at the 2001 Wisconsin Film Festival in the section ‘Belonging and Marginality in the New Europe’, where it was internationally acclaimed” (Cavecchi 2008, 95).

4 See also O’Healy 2019 and Masolini 2002-2003.

characters and women's issues from a feminist, intersectional perspective. It also tries to account for the apparent impracticality of an analysis from a "thalassalogical" perspective (Gr. *thalassa*, the sea)" (Brayton 2012, 4), though the film is set in a Sicilian city by the Mediterranean Sea and is about immigration.

2. Roberta Torre and Women

Roberta Torre has always shown and asserted a keen interest in the depiction and narration of women's experiences, both out of a sense of gender belonging and of a fascination with inverting and reversing clichés of femininity. Her concern for the description of the female view, historically seen as 'the Other' vis-à-vis the dominant male one, is coherently paired with a thoughtful consideration of different marginalised categories, related to ethnicity, social class, religious creed and mental health. Through her multifaceted work, ranging from cinema to theatre, from fiction to the visual arts, she constantly questions common sense binary oppositions and invites her public to recognise themselves in, or commune with, 'the Other'. In dealing with women issues, her position may be well described as a combination of radical and materialist feminism.⁵ From the former she borrows the commitment to and artistic exploitation of women's consciousness-raising, the attention on "either male-gender oppression or female-gender strength" (Case 2014, 64) and the celebration of women's own spirituality, through a systematic appropriation of "the symbols, metaphors, rituals, organisations and experiences of the patriarchal religions that have historically dominated the spiritual realm, with their male priests and their male gods" (69). To such appropriating actions Roberta Torre adds the literary "realm", which she rewrites and provides with a female perspective. From materialist feminism she borrows the awareness of the "role of class and history in creating the oppression of women" (82), tackling the problems of marginalised women in different cultural contexts.

5 I am here referring to the different types of feminism categorised by Sue-Ellen Case for theatre in her milestone study *Feminism and Theatre*, recently adopted by Elaine Aston in her study of contemporary theatre (2020).

It is in the light of feminism that most of her works can be read. *Trash the Dress*, a study for a postmodern *Medea* (2013), takes the form of a female battlefield, a collective rite where women tied on a chair fight against their bridal wedding dress as the symbol of the social constraints of women and of their relegation into the domestic sphere. This work is, in its tone, reminiscent of Valerie Solanas's SCUM Manifesto (1967), since it blames male supremacy and urges female action. It is also in tune with "rituals such as bra-burnings" (Case 2014, 66), which characterised 1970s social movements and theatre productions. Sisterhood throughout the centuries is told in *Ipazia* (2016), a fascinating story that offers a sort of female alternative to Antoine-de-Saint Exupéry's *Little Prince* in presenting the surreal encounter between Camilla, a 20-year-old astronaut, and Ipazia (Hypatia), the Egyptian philosopher and astronomer killed by the "monks of the desert". The two women, despite belonging to different and distant cultural contexts, are spiritually connected through the code of music.

A reversal of women's representation is offered by Torre's photographic project *Ma-donne* (Palermo, 2009). Through a set of contemporary portraits of women in present-day situations evoking and reverting the well-known and omnipresent Marian iconography, Torre irreverently liberates women from the power of the "Catholic gaze", as it were. Many other of Torre's works, both in theatre and cinema, are devoted to women protagonists and gender issues.⁶ Since the beginning of her career, she has explored and rendered justice to the female world. A case in point is the 1991 documentary *Angelesse*, where the damages of patriarchy and cultural poverty are cleverly revealed through interviews with women from Palermo's suburbs, the eponymous female angels of the title, who spontaneously and naively talk about themselves and their lives, which are evidently inhibited by their socio-cultural milieu.

The decolonisation of literature from male supremacy and the centralisation of women's feelings and experiences are objectives pursued by Torre also in her cinematic reception of Shakespeare's

⁶ See Lamberti Zanardi 2011 and Karagoz 2020. Torre supports women also through her production company (see Luciano 2015).

plays. After *Romeo and Juliet*, she empowered with agency the female characters of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in a dark musical for the big screen, *Riccardo va all'inferno* (2017), which followed a theatre production of the same play, realised in cooperation with people living with a mental illness (*Insanamente Riccardo III*, Piccolo Teatro di Milano). In the film, as in Torre's entire cinematic oeuvre, contaminations from the world of theatre are evident and all the more so embodied through the presence of theatre actresses that have characterised the Italian contemporary stage with their distinctive traits.⁷ Torre's declared intention in adapting *Richard III* was that of updating gender roles (Turrini 2017), thus fixing the unequal gender politics that is handed down through canonical texts, such as Shakespeare's. In what follows, Torre's reclamation of women and world from patriarchal colonisation is revealed through the analysis of *Sud Side Stori*.

3. Women in *Sud Side Stori*

In her version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Torre reverses early modern all-male theatrical practices. The main characters are female, the inhabitants of the neighborhood of Palermo where the film is set are almost exclusively women, and the black community invading it is made of women too. Cristina Cavecchi notices that, in *Sud Side Stori*, "the female body is the most prominent" (2008, 99), both visually and metaphorically, as well as in the choice of narrators, and she contends this can be traced back to the traditional feminine conception of Sicily and of its volcano, Etna.⁸ The prevalence of women over men is detected by Courtney Lehmann also in the naming of the characters. "Torre's treatment of the protagonists' names", she observes, "reinforces the matriarchal structure of her film: whereas 'Romea' is an explicit feminisation of Romeo, 'Giulietto' – Toni's last name – is conspicuously derived from Juliet,

7 Two examples are Silvia Calderoni of the Motus Theatre Company, through her bodily explorations of gender and androgyny, and Silvia Gallerano through her vocality (Capocasale 2017).

8 In a foreword titled "Sicily, Light Queen", Torre defines Sicily as "an impervious and sumptuous queen" (2020, 2).

completely denying the patrimony of ‘Montague’” (2015, 100).⁹ One may also add that the name Romea, which sounds odd in Italian, allows a Brechtian alienation effect that draws attention to gender issues, so central in the rewriting. Yet, although *Sud Side Stori* may pass the Bechdel test, the society it represents is not exactly as “matriarchal” as has been suggested. Women are commodified, sexualised, and not united in actions of mutual support. They are the victims of misogynistic mottos and beliefs, which Torre reveals as deeply rooted in Mediterranean culture, and they are simultaneously perpetrators of such ideas, as they seem to find the patriarchal ideology the only ‘natural’ one. The film highlights this attitude and compels the spectators to reflect upon it.

3.1. The Women Narrators

The narration is entrusted to two white, female voices: Saint Rosalia, patroness of the city, and Giuseppona, called “a sbirra (female police officer)”, but actually involved in mafia affairs. Telling the story through voiceovers and also appearing in the film, these two female characters are shown as in-power, but never using that power to support other women. They implicitly reveal the flawed features of the neoliberal idea of feminism that dominated the 1990s: individual empowerment, concentration on economic gains rather than cultural and political ones, and subordination of social demands to the laws of the market (see Aston 2020).

Saint Rosalia

Sud Side Stori opens with a framed prologue and with literal frames, subtly alluding to Luhrmann’s double prologue in *Romeo + Juliet* (see Calbi 2013, 83). The introductory narrating voice belongs to the picture of the snow-white Saint Rosalia. She speaks from one of the surrealist paintings with Baroque frames, gradually animating as video installations, crowding a bourgeois, papered, damask wall, which is red like the carpet on the floor. She tells the audience that the story is set in Palermo, where the mayor has sparked a civic quarrel by suggesting the city should celebrate, besides herself, a

⁹ See also Minutella 2012.

second patron saint: Benedict the Moor.¹⁰ The word “Two” that starts off the Shakespearean play, drawing attention not so much to the protagonists of the story but rather to the discord between families that informs the plot and provokes its tragic ending, has always been a major component in the reception history of *Romeo and Juliet*. As noted by Burnett, “across all world cinema adaptations of the play, it is the backdrop of conflict upon which the focus falls”, while “the ‘starcrossed lovers’ are often demoted, seen as less significant than the conditions that draw them apart” (2013, 198). *Sud Side Stori* is no exception. As already mentioned, the conflict situation is here provided by the rivalry between worshippers of two very different saints.

Besides broaching the issue of the cult image of Catholicism, a Shakespearean topic linked to Juliet, the “holy shrine” (1.5.94),¹¹ and highlighted in Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*, the argument over the proper holy protector locates the film’s conflict, first of all, at two different levels: ethnicity and gender. There is a fight between blacks and whites, as well as between the traditional Sicilian culture of Palermo and the Nigerian one of its immigrants, in the name of a religion that is shown throughout the film as hypocritical and feigned as the opening religious gallery. There is, moreover, an antagonism between an overtly feminine Saint Rosalia in the cave, with her recumbent posture, loose hair, and garland-crown of big, pink roses, as she is depicted in the most well-known twentieth-century *santino* (holy card)¹² and a male Saint, who is shown as a black man, wearing white, traditional African clothes. This detail leads to further levels of divergence hinted at in the film: colonial and class conflict.

Saint Rosalia introduces the story speaking from the privileged position of a bourgeois context, whose economic wealth and hedonism is signified by the material pomp of the room and by the

10 On the corresponding real-life event see Lo Piccolo 2000.

11 All the references to Shakespeare are from Shakespeare 2011.

12 The painting is an adaptation of the most popular twentieth-century *santino* devoted to the Saint (see *Cattedrale di Palermo* website). It has the same iconographic features as Gregorio Tedeschi’s seventeenth-century marble and golden statue in Santa Rosalia’s Cave Sanctuary, at Palermo’s Monte Pellegrino.

presence of a subordinate cleaner in service. This lady is portrayed as unrealistically smaller than the huge wall of paintings she is dusting, which blatantly dominates and overshadows her. The painting of the patroness also suggests the typical attitude of Orientalism in the Saidian sense of the word, because the saint, departing from the traditional iconography, reclines upon a crocodile,¹³ which cannot but remind one of the stuffed exotic animals displayed in European households since the early modern period, together with other luxurious and monstrous mirabilia from Africa, connecting “celebrated collectors of the Renaissance with the greed and violence of the transatlantic slave trade” (Greenfield 2017). A detail that is rife with meaning, when one considers that Saint Benedict is the son of African slaves kidnapped by European merchants and sold to Sicilian patrons in the sixteenth century. The slavery of the black saint's parents finds a contemporary correspondence in Romea's prostitution too, revealing postcolonial concerns as pivotal in Torre's work, as will be discussed later in this essay.

That Saint Rosalia is speaking from (*"dall'alto"*) (“above”), and that she occupies an advantaged place in the hierarchy of the universe and of society, becomes explicit in her prologue's closing words, when she states: “ora lascio raccontare il resto a qualcuno di giù” (“now I'll let somebody down below tell the rest”). Burnett reads these words as an “abnegation of responsibility for the ‘story’” which “points to a reductive construction of a heavenly perspective, to a parodic undercurrent that the saint's childish treble, and the throbbing, neon-lit assembly of portraits within which she appears, only serve to accentuate” (2013, 208). Yet, besides the emptiness of “pop-Catholicism” (*ibid.*), the Saint's appearance and her shirking of responsibility clearly point also to the patronising outlook on life of higher social classes and of the bosses of organised crime that control (but ultimately don't care about) the life of the city and of its immigrants too. The film makes it clear that Palermitan organised

13 See Romeo's description of the apothecary's shop: “And in his needy shop a tortoise hung, / An alligator stuffed, and other skins / Of ill-shaped fishes” (5.1.42-4). As René Weis notes, this unique occurrence of the word alligator in Shakespeare's canon “originates in Nashe's *Have With You*: ‘. . . and after hanged her over his head in his study, instead of an apothecary's crocodile or dried alligator’ (Shakespeare 2012, 316).

crime is accountable for the illegitimate management of the city's economy, for violent murders and also for human trafficking.

The patron saint's aristocratic nature is rooted in her hagiography. According to the latest tradition about the saint, which became popular from the late sixteenth century, Rosalia was a twelfth-century Norman princess, rebelling against family duties that would have had her married off for political reasons, therefore sharing Shakespeare's Juliet's will for self-determination as well as that of Toni and Romea. But Torre's patroness shows an indifferent attitude that contradicts the original disruptive power of the *exemplum* of her life. It is as if the original potency of her dissent were no longer part of her canonised identity since corrupted.

Giuseppona

The "down below" narrator is Giuseppona, a mafia dealer who manages the illegal business of the patroness festival and, declaring that "tutto si può fare, è una questione di soldi" ("everything can be done, it's a question of money"), even takes advantage of Toni's aunts, promising them they can get rid of Romea through black magic. Although she may at first seem an independent, self-ruling woman, as she lives alone and administrates money, the film discloses that she is entrapped by men's greed for sex and wealth. The camera zooms in on her generous neckline while she stuffs banknotes inside her bra, and on erotic parts of her body as she is continuously pestered by two grotesque, little old men who frolick around her like two homunculi, looking at her and touching her breasts and bottom with lust. They are always silent but act with outrageous gestures, as in a pantomime representing sexual harassment.

Her way of speaking about women mirrors this "testosteronic" outlook on life. She asserts that women need "forme" ("curves") and "furbizia" ("cunning") to drive men crazy and does so after singing a few lines of the famous Neapolitan song *Malafemmena* (bad woman), written by the celebrated Neapolitan comic actor Totò. The very beginning of the song, which is not sung by Giuseppona but well-known in Italy, mentions and tacitly supports the idea that a betrayed lover can kill his beloved out of anger for an offense. Following such logic, she ends up being killed by mafia criminals,

who are men, because they think she is responsible for Toni's death. In other words, she was murdered to save the honour of the Giuliettos and those who protected them.

3.2. Palermitan Women in a Male World

The topic of honour killing is openly brought at stake by Mario Merola in the following scene devoted to Toni's jealousy and cuckoldry. It is set in the tavern of Torre's fictional Palermo, *Da Zu Pippo* (Uncle Pippo's), which is a sort of hideout for men. As Maurizio Calbi points out: "according to the homosocial logic of the place, being with a woman – and a foreign black woman at that – is tantamount to being a cuckold, which is signified by the fact that he suddenly finds himself with horns protruding from his head" (2013, 89). Investigating the Mediterranean code of honour, Blok explains that the symbolic horns of the man with an unfaithful woman are, in that cultural context, specifically the horns of the billy-goat. Anthropology located the origins of this association in the ancient, Mediterranean pastoral code of honour, where the animal's behaviour was considered lascivious and weak, displaying immoral features in contrast to the moral ones of the ram which, as Blok illustrated, "in Mediterranean thought . . . has been since Homer's time the symbol of strength, honour, manliness and power, forming a complementary opposition with the billy-goat" (Blok 1981, 429). Interestingly enough, pastoral imagery is part of Torre's film, which more generally replicates the complementary oppositions, supported by ethnographic evidence, that Blok considers as "specific to a Mediterranean code of honour: rams – billy-goats; sheep – goats; honour – shame; men – women; virile man – cornute . . .; virility – femininity; strong – weak; good – evil; silence – noise; pure – unclean" and also "right hand and . . . left hand . . ., pastures and home, outside and inside, public and private sphere . . ., cheese and milk" (430-1).

These oppositions are manifest in many details of the film. Men are mostly quiet, while women are noisy: "in a long sequence", as Cavecchi observes, Torre's camera shows "the aggressive rock'n'roll of Palermitan women, dancing clumsily in the street

with their brooms and buckets” and “the drum beat and exotic dance” of the Nigerian women (2008, 93). While “uomo bianco puzza di formaggio” (“white man smells like cheese”) according to Romea’s friend, milk is linked to women. Upon the arrival of the Nigerian women, the camera first zooms in on an iconic image of a Nigerian girl, wearing a surreal, wide, golden collar, holding an old suitcase and keeping a goat on a cord leash. Palermitan women are shown as victims of an inherently misogynistic society, pervaded by that “‘domestication’ of women, which has often been regarded as one of the most striking features of all Mediterranean regions” (Blok 1981, 431). Toni’s mother is described as a prostitute for her promiscuity. It is thanks to her love-affair with a mafia boss that her untalented son is hired to work as singer. She has left Toni to his three aunts, who are depicted in a claustrophobic domesticity where their main objective is cooking. Resorting to Janet Adelman’s well-known definitions, Masolini considers them as both “nurturing and suffocating mothers” (2002-2003, 234). They are often in the company of Maria, Toni’s betrothed. He dislikes her and calls her “la balena” (“the whale”), because she is overweight and obsessed with food.

From a feminist perspective, Maria’s fatness is meaningful and polysemous. Considering the reaction it provokes in Toni, it reveals the important issue of the gendered “problem of the fat body” (Farrell 2021, 47), denigrated and refused. And yet, taking into account the past perception of fatness as “a sign of good health, access to food/wealth, and strong reproductive capacities” (Choudhury 2021, 242), Maria may also embody the image of the chosen wife, a concept pertaining to a likewise old-fashioned outlook on life. Looking at her compulsive way of eating, moreover, Maria’s shape may well be read as a manifestation of a dysfunctional society, fixated with consuming and denying women agency outside the domestic sphere.

Tellingly, male chauvinist attitudes are particularly revealed in the scenes set at the tavern, which is “male-dominated” and described by Giuseppona as a place of “orge, perdizione e lussurie” (“orgies, perdition and lust”) (Calbi 2013, 88). While in the middle ages alehouses were often defined as “the Devil’s alternative to the Church” (Earnshaw 2000, 18), in this place there is a dissonant

juxtaposition of Catholic elements, sinful desires and mafia rituals. The church-like tokens include a portrait of Saint Joseph and the Child, a pew, a bookrest and a huge, white mobile-confessional, which reminds one of the Pope-mobile, mainly because inside is seated the venerated host, wearing a white cassock (with a white apron over it) and a showy pectoral cross. Lost among aphrodisiac garlic and dried red peppers hanging from the ceiling, and self-indulgent men who dance as odalisques or pop up bare-chested from little volcanos as in a Dantean *bolgia*, or else emerge from wine casks dressed à la Elvis Presley, Toni is advised on his love affair. It is in this context that Mario Merola as King Volcano bluntly states that “la femmina che ti tradisce non si perdona, si uccide” (“the woman who betrays you cannot be forgiven, she must be killed”).

Merola ultimately advocates the justice of the crime of honour, which Ernesto de Cristofaro describes as marked by an “emphasis on private sphere, on family ties and on feelings, which is typical of Mediterranean cultures” and as a motif that has “acquired in Italian history a level of importance which is witnessed by masterpieces of art” (2018, 1). It was considered legal on the Italian peninsula from the Roman law up to the Zanardelli code (1889-1930) and by the following Fascist norm, which even determined that “the discovery of the victims in blazing offence (or *in flagrante delicto* or *in ipsis rebus venereis*) is not required” (3). This is justified by the Minister Alfredo Rocco as follows:

The cynical and brutal confession of the illegitimate relationship or the discovery of it through love correspondences, where the embraces are often recalled, can determine in the spouse, outraged in his dignity, or in the father or brother, offended in their most vivid feelings of familiar honour, an intense emotion, a state of anguish and pain, an impetus of anger that, if it leads to the consummation of violent acts, cannot but attenuate the seriousness of the fact and reveal in the guilty an unfortunate rather than a dangerous man. (Rocco in De Cristofaro 2018, 4)

The existence of a double-standard is more than clear. Suffice it to mention the words of the lawyer Luigi Filippo Paletti, who asserted, in a harangue of the period, that “the guilt of a man may be the disturbing of peace and the order of the family; and sooner or later

the ashes of oblivion come to bury even their memory. But the wife's adultery opens the gates of hell and makes the pain desperate and opens the abyss of all damnation" (in De Cristofaro 2018, 5). It was only with the enfranchisement and emancipation of women led by the newly formed Italian democratic Republic, after World War II, that the law was debated and finally abolished in 1981. Even so, as Torre highlights and anthropological and cultural studies confirm, men's reputation based on honour and the use of murder to protect it are among the elements of an archaic and patriarchal system, still considered valid by mafia culture.

At Zu Pippo's, Toni listens to other two men who, despite their very different standpoints share a certain patriarchal line of thought. Little Tony understands Toni's fascination for Romea and sings of his Elvis cut that attracts "le negrette" ("N-word girls") who dance along. Later on, in the scene where he helps Toni meet Romea, whom he calls "la tua pupa nera" ("your black doll"), he instructs him claiming that "una donna non sa mai quello che vuole fino a che un uomo non glielo dice" ("a woman never knows what she wants, until a man tells her"). These are words that echo Capulet's "Mistress minion" (3.5.151) and his misogynistic attitude towards Juliet in 3.5.

Most significantly, the tavern's host "warns [Toni] against inappropriate liaisons" (Calbi 2013, 88), reminding him, with hammering insistence, that he is not black and that Romea "will be his downfall" (Lehmann 2015, 102). His words are imbued by the same discourse that informs the lawyer's words on men's dishonour and the subsequent "hell" and "abyss of all damnation" (Paletti in De Cristofaro 2018, 5) quoted above. The implied critique towards the hypocrisy of the male-dominated Catholic world, including their consideration of women and immigrants, can hardly be overestimated. Notably, Toni's odd confession with the host is followed by his protest song titled "E se fossi nero anche io" ("And what if I were black too").¹⁴ The lyrics, which describe the past of black people enslaved on cotton plantations, "nati per soffrire"

¹⁴ Consider also Giuseppona's disillusioned exclamation at the beginning of the film: "se c'è veramente un Dio, beh... lasciamo stare" ("if there really is a God, well... forget it!").

(“born to suffer”), beaten on the back by their “padroni” (“masters”), lead spectators to draw a parallel with the modern form of slavery shown in the film. Even more provocatively, the song wonders: “e se fosse nero anche Dio” (“and what if God were black too”).

3.3. Romea and the Nigerian Women

The fact that the main protagonist of the story is the immigrant Romea is in line with Torre’s intention to “make a film on immigration and on the problems it inevitably brings” (quoted in Cavecchi 2008, 92).¹⁵ When the film maker shot *Sud Side Stori*, Italian society was coping with the tensions resulting from nearly a decade of growing immigration rates from Africa, although the number of black Africans residing in the Peninsula was still relatively small (O’Healy 2019, 78) and the peak of the refugee crisis (2015-2016, see Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018) had yet to come. In his 1995 study on immigration politics in liberal democratic states, Gary P. Freeman defined Italy as one of the “new countries of immigration” (1995, 893) together with Portugal, Spain, and Greece. Freeman pointed out that these states had “only recently gone from being countries of emigration to experiencing pressures from migrants, legal and illegal, and asylum seekers” (882), and specified that “return migration first exceeded emigration in Italy in 1972” (893). With its rather short immigration history, Italy was unprepared for the social, political and ethical issues posed by the maritime migration across the Strait of Sicily, which was and still is the main gateway to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, thus a place

¹⁵ Well before other films, *Sud Side Stori* fully captures the interracial frictions, the intercultural shock and the contradictions of this historic juncture. Credited to be “the first comedy about immigration to Italy to tackle . . . taboo subjects such as racism and miscegenation” (Luciano and Scarparo 2013, 137), anticipating Laura Muscardin’s *Billo – Il grand Dakhaar* (2007) and Cristina Comencini’s *Bianco e nero* (2008), *Sud Side Stori* is aesthetically very different from these new millennium Italian comedies and, despite its “carnivalesque” (ibid.) and parodical traits, the ending is not happy or bitter-sweet but rather tragic.

of dramatic importance for the whole continent. Anti-immigration and xenophobic discourses were gaining ground all over Europe. In Italy, Northern League leader Umberto Bossi championed a referendum to abrogate the Turco-Napolitano immigration Act (1998) and promoted a populist campaign to establish tougher measures, which were eventually passed under Berlusconi, in 2002, through the widely criticised Bossi-Fini Law, reported as “unjust, disgusting, cruel, enslaving, racist, fascist” (my translation)¹⁶ by its most vehement opponents. More precisely, though, Romea is a victim of trafficking. This is a mostly gendered experience of immigration, involving abuse, exploitation and postcolonial issues.

In his 1999 book *Schiavi (Slaves)*, Pino Arlacchi, executive director of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, discusses the existence of contemporary slavery. Its victims, he argues, must endure terrible situations and are as if bound with invisible chains. Indeed, at the beginning of the new millennium, the annual profits of people traffickers amounted to “some \$7 billion in prostitution alone”.¹⁷ *Sud Side Stori* reports short interviews with Nigerian women explaining how they arrived in Italy paying large amounts of money to have a better future and were then tricked into prostitution. It also offers glimpses into their working routines with unscrupulous, criminal, male *domini* (who nevertheless have female collaborators) and unscrupulous, ordinary, male clients, using aggressive eroticised language. As they speak to the camera, portraits of Saints can be seen in the background achieving an alienating effect. Moreover, Áine O’Healy observes that the crude chronicle of these “conditions, described by various commentators as tantamount to slavery”, creates “a sense of a chilling dissonance” (2012, 209), because it interrupts the otherwise ironic tone of the film. Particularly alienating are the very brief conversations in English, while the rest is in Italian, with either Sicilian or Nigerian inflections. The English exchanges

16 Graziella Mascia, a member of the Italian Refounded Communist Party. Resoconto Stenografico Seduta n. 153 del 4/6/2002 http://documenti.camera.it/_dati/leg14/lavori/stenografici/sed153/s150r.htm (Accessed 20 May 2022).

17 <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/fyi/news/04/05/human.trade/index.html> (Accessed 20 May 2022).

reinforce the criticism of human trafficking as postcolonial slavery because of their topics and the non-standard, postcolonial variety used. The Nigerian girls are shown handing down their nightly profits to their madam. She dutifully asks in English “How much is it?”, eagerly counts banknotes barking “Go away! Go away!” to the tailing camera¹⁸ and rebukes a girl for having earned too little, saying: “This money is too small”. The pimp instead shouts to the camera “first you pay and then you play”, as if spectators were punters, and routinely writes the figure of the earnings under the picture of each girl in a big poster where they appear as products for sale. The fact that in a film adaptation of a Shakespearean play, English is never employed to quote its beautiful and musical lines, but exclusively to speak about money and prostitution cannot but recall Caliban’s desperate answer against Prospero, which could be misquoted as follows: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to . . .” (1.2.364-5) enslave people.¹⁹

Just like the Palermitan population with their money trafficking for the festival of Saint Rosalia, profit is a pervading preoccupation in the Nigerian community. Romea’s friend suggests she should not fall in love with Toni because she is there to work, “fare tanti soldi” (“to make lots of money”). In her mind, the only acceptable condition would be finding a rich white man with a beautiful car. The procurer aggressively reminds Romea she is there to make money and that time is money. The film also reports the comments of two Italian men on the prostitutes’ conditions, and they all revolve around money. Both speak directly to the camera so that the spectators become complicit in what is said. One of them reveals he is involved in human trafficking and expresses his worries because whereas Nigerian prostitutes “si arricchiscono” (“get rich”), the men of Palermo “si impoveriscono” (“become poor”). Another invites an ideal interlocutor to do the maths and calculate how much money “20 ragazze a 100.000 lire” (“twenty girls at 100,000 lire each”) can

18 Zavattini’s theory of *pedinamento* (tailing) to investigate reality is one of Torre’s main influences. See https://www.adolgisio.it/enterprise/roberta_torre.asp (Accessed 20 May 2022).

19 There are only a few quotations from *Romeo and Juliet*, and they are in Italian translation. On Shakespeare’s text in the film see Calbi 2013.

make, mentioning only in passing that these women are abused and “da macello” (“meat fodder”). These apparently realistic comments and the interviews with the Nigerian immigrants are given alternately while the women tricked into prostitution dance and sing together the lyrics of the film soundtrack, titled *Sud Side Stori*, which again involves the spectators since it is addressed to a general, plural “you”. As in the best of Brecht’s songs, the catchy and lively melody accompanies a biting criticism of society and unveils hypocrisies and responsibilities. They sing that “dalle sei di sera vieni qua e ti scegli la tua nera” (“from six o’clock at night you come here and choose your black woman”) in a “vetrina” (“shop window”) for “30,000 lire”. They also specify that at night “a voi piace l’Africa più nera” (“you like the darkest Africa”) in Palermo.

4. Immigration, Saint Rosalia and the Sea

“With unabashed irreverence”, Lehmann writes, “[Torre] align[s] the spiritual trafficking in souls to the sexual trafficking in bodies, tying the local politics of hagiography to the global flesh trade” (2015, 99). Besides being involved in a trade, though, Romea and the Saint share a further common experience. According to an established legend, Rosalia was a “first-century beneficent Middle Eastern hostess, alongside the apostles of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem” (ibid.). A key element in Saint Rosalia’s unstable hagiography is the dangerous journey through the Mediterranean, “a structural hagiographical connection” (Waldeier Bizzarro 2020) among different lives of saints, which functions as a guarantee of their sanctity. A nineteenth-century traveller to Sicily, George Glied was told by a local priest that she was “a lady of rank and fortune” from the Middle East, who “lived in great splendor, and exercised much hospitality towards the believers, till the persecution consequent on the martyrdom of Stephen arose” (Glied in ibid.). She was one of the early Christian refugees, thus an immigrant ante-litteram, whose oldest extant representation is a thirteenth-century black icon. Rosalia “was a young, noble, and virginal woman, escaping the demands of society [... thus] a transgressive force . . .” (ibid.). These features resonate in today’s cult of the saint. Indeed, a strip

of sea is depicted in the background of the film's painting of Saint Rosalia, as is often the case in her iconography.

Translocation through the sea is represented in Palermo's patroness feast, whose preparation provides the backdrop for Torre's story. On the cry of

'Viva [All hail] Santa Rusalia!' . . . , an enormous boat-shaped float, bedecked with effigies of angels floating amidst clouds of fabric, garlands of roses, serenading musicians, and the cult statue of Santa Rosalia . . . , is drawn through the streets by local teams of oxen . . . , from the city-center to the marina by the sea, from whence Rosalia first reached the island of Sicily. (Ibid.)

This procession and the people's cry to hail the Saint commemorate and advocate the spirit of possibilities and the renewing energy implicit in the saint's life. As Tina Waldeier Bizzarro observes, these ceremonies

create transformative countersites or heterotopias, in the language of Michel Foucault, which turn our realities upside down. The sites that are created in these ritual dramas are privileged, forbidden, and perfect – all at the same time . . . They mark liminal places where heaven and earth meet, where time collapses, where thresholds tempt us to taste the eternal. We break with traditional time and enter the locus of epiphany and transformation . . . (ibid.).

It is in this carnivalesque setting that Romea and Toni fall in love and their union proves as disruptive and transformative as Saint Rosalia's original holiness, now corrupted by economic interests.

Romea and Toni belong to two separate dimensions, but when they meet up time collapses, they experience epiphany and transformation, and create countersites. The balcony scene, which actually includes also scene 1.5, is emblematic in that it provides a counterdiscourse to both life in Palermo and Shakespeare's play. The noisy and chaotic soundscape of the street is abruptly suspended and gives way to an imaginary silent auditory dimension inhabited by the two lovers only. With Toni on the balcony and Romea underneath, in an interesting reversal of roles, the iconic encounter is rendered as a slow-motion scene in a silent movie, where the characters do not speak but eloquently gesticulate against the tune

of a sentimental, violin melody – Antonín Dvořák's *Slovanské tance* (Slavonic Dances) Op. 72 N.2 –, which is interrupted only by a tinkling sound effect associated with an earring worn by Romea. Whereas in Shakespeare the beautiful Juliet is described as bright as a “rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear” (1.5.46) – and as a “snowy dove trooping with crows” (1.5.48) –, Torre borrows the simile but uses the sparkling earring to highlight the black woman's beauty, revealing the ethnocentrism of Shakespeare's words, echoed in Romeo's remark that “These happy masks that kiss fair ladies' brows, / Being black, puts us in mind they hide the fair” (1.1.230-1). The western-centric beauty standards and their influence even on black women are thematised in the film by the presence, in Toni's bedroom, of a life-size cut-out of Marilyn Monroe, “embodying an impossible whiteness” (Lehmann 2015, 102) and by the fact that Romea's friends “demonstrate their admiration for distinctly Berlusconi models of the (white) ‘body beautiful,’ eagerly purchasing blonde wigs and hair-straightening cream with the exclamation ‘Bellissima!’” (104).

A similar locus of transformation is created by the two lovers inside the Tunnel of Love where they meet and kiss, before Romea is obliged to flee back to Africa. Again, silence and the same sentimental violin melody mentioned before indicate the difference of the lover's dimension, which is a countersite to society. It is worth noting that the same tune interrupts, out of the blue, the song *Sud Side Stori* (on the Nigerian prostitutes in Palermo), when Romea refuses Toni's uncle as a client. This act is in fact a *Gestus*: it indicates a breach with the common outlook on life through the triumph of love over money.

The Tunnel of Love, a romantic trope Torre borrows from Hollywood-inspired animations and films, is permeated with racist, postcolonialist and also sexist elements which are part of mass-culture. Above the entrance, there is the huge image of a gorilla, like King Kong, the black monster of the eponymous movie (1933). The ride, moreover, is advertised by an off-screen voice as the “magical world of Tarzan and Jane”, referring to Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912), whose film version directed by Scott Sidney in 1918 was most influential. As John Stephens points out, in the novel “Burroughs' depiction of the gorillas (and the indigenous Africans) as lesser species” reveal “imperialist and anthropocentric

ideologies” (Stephens 2002, 129). The same political agenda is implicit in *King Kong*, which mirrored the fears and anxieties of an American society “immersed in racial segregation” and facing the outcomes of the economic crisis of ’29 (Roche Cárcel 2021, 5).

These popular icons are used by Torre to have the audience reflect upon the Orientalism and the racism pervading Western culture, which Toni and Romea challenge, but which they cannot easily escape. Toni himself, with his Elvis Presley style, shows the introjection of certain Western canons. Haeussler describes Elvis as a cultural artifact, “an American icon in a cold war world” (2020), whose public image was politicised and implied in tackling controversial issues regarding sex, race and class, often with highly controversial results. In Europe, he was inextricably linked with the Janus-faced image of America: on the one side the dream of freedom and revolution, on the other the nightmare of an individualistic and consumeristic society. “In West Germany, for example, the singer’s opponents depicted him as a prime example of the US’ alleged cultural imperialism and primitivism of its mass culture, whereas his supporters embraced him as the prime symbol of American-style modernity and coolness” (Haeussler 2020).

On the entrance of the funhouse walls there are murals depicting Toni and Romea through a Western-centred iconography. One shows them kissing each other, while being attacked both from the left and from the right, by his white aunts and her black friends respectively. Interestingly, in this drawing Romea is in profile and wears a red veil and a golden hoop earring. This makes her face very similar to the so-called *caput Ethiopicum*, frequent in European heraldry to symbolise Christian and imperial expansion. The second mural portrays Romea dressed as an odalisque and Toni as Disney’s Aladdin riding on a camel under the moonlight in the desert, while a monkey hops around him. This discloses the threat posed by the seductive black woman in the white collective unconscious: she can swallow the man in her primitive, animalesque world. Yet, in popular culture “the bestialized Other” (Roche Cárcel 2021, 9), often associated with an uncontrolled eroticism, is commonly a black man who is blamed for falling in love with a white woman, in line with a “Eurocentric system of esthetic valuation that specifically denigrates women of color” (2). In Torre’s film, instead, “the bestialized Other”

is a woman, metaphorically described as a wild animal throughout the film (“a gazelle, a black panther”), whose libido is manufactured, forced, marketed and exploited, unless stirred by romantic love.

4.1. Looking for the Sea in Torre's Palermo

That interracial romantic love is a patriotic act and a social challenge at the same time is well conveyed by Torre in the meeting scene. As Lehmann points out:

While Toni and Romea kiss in the funhouse, Torre uses a green filter that highlights the contrast of Romea's red feather collar against Toni's white shirt and skin, creating a fleeting tableau of Italy as a place where responsibility for the other is still possible – where the demarcations of the *tricolore* remain powerfully intact but unopposed, existing peacefully in extreme proximity to each other. (2015, 106)

Yet, the Tunnel of Love turns out to be also a Horror Tunnel. In it, Romea passionately kisses her Toni, but is also constantly reminded she needs money to have her passport back by disturbing visions of a black woman threatening her. It is implicit that the only thing she can do is accept imposed prostitution. It has been suggested that “it is in the times of traumatic situations, generalized crises, and especially economic ones when horror films . . . flourish, which spontaneously reflect symptomatic attitudes of collective unease” (Roche Cárcel 2021, 5). Torre, instead, seems to use the alienating effect arising from the juxtaposition of love with horror to create collective unease and rouse people's consciousness on the conditions of women who are victims of trafficking.

Lehmann's discussion of the film conclusion is acutely insightful:

Driving the dagger through her abdomen, Romea breathes her last as Toni revives only to be killed by the Mafia moments later. ‘Forgetting any other home but this’ (2.1.220), Toni and Romea are hereby repatriated in death, their collapsed bodies basking in the obscene glow of *tricolore* lights – this time in a tableau of national implosion. Red, white, and green all over, they embody

the immigration ‘reform’ that is written in the blood of insuperable economic interests. (2015, 107)

The glow of lights invades the room and wraps the two corpses like sea water.

By imposing a Mediterranean *genius loci* on the play and re-signifying its characters, *Sud Side Stori* provocatively resonates with the Italian present while exposing motifs of ethnocentrism, greed and misogyny embedded in Shakespeare’s play. Questioning Shakespeare, Torre highlights elements of misogyny and ethnocentrism both in the sixteenth century play and in some aspects of contemporary Italian culture. Following Shakespeare, Torre shows that “gold” is a “worse poison to men’s souls, / Doing more murder in this loathsome world” (5.1.80-1) than poisonous compounds. She also de-mythologises saints and secularises bliss. The countersites created by the encounters of Romea and Toni demonstrate that it is only in sincere love that the disruptive force of holiness resides. The Mediterranean Sea, as the road of pioneering saints, as “a space of cultural hybridity, liminality, and transformation” (Schülting 2019, 2), is like a u-topia in Torre’s film, which finds no place but in the suspended, rebellious and, to some extent, blessed (although tragic) dimension of the two lovers. It is a “boundless” and “infinite” sea (2.2.133, 135); “a sea nourish’d with lovers’ tears” (1.1.192).

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