

Difference as Affirmation. The Restoring of Motherhood in Western Civilization

Laura Popa

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: Laura.Popa@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

The Symbolic Order of the Mother by the Italian philosopher and feminist Luisa Muraro is the first work translated into English (2018) from a brilliant and original body of works. Influenced by the politics of women of second-wave feminism in Italy, this book (1991) represents a continuation of the sexual difference thought elaborated during the 1970s and 1980s. The aim is to show how to correct the cancellation of the maternal order by the patriarchal disorder in Western civilization. Muraro's view of authoritative motherhood is both literal and symbolical. The maternal order represents the presence of our mother in reference to the body of women but is equally the gift of the mother tongue that introduce humanity to culture. Its denial is a form of nihilism that affects the political freedom of men and women. The maternal order needs to be brought back by a return to loving mothers as in the first years of life when they still had authority and our complete admiration.

How to cite:

Popa, Laura: "Difference as Affirmation. The Restoring of Motherhood in Western Civilization [Review on: Muraro, Luisa: *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018]". In: KULT_online 59 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.456>



Difference as Affirmation. The Restoring of Motherhood in Western Civilization

Laura Popa

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Muraro, Luisa: *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018; 162 pages. 80 USD. ISBN: 978-1-4384-6763-4.

Abstract:

The Symbolic Order of the Mother by the Italian philosopher and feminist Luisa Muraro is the first work translated into English (2018) from a brilliant and original body of works. Influenced by the politics of women of second-wave feminism in Italy, this book (1991) represents a continuation of the sexual difference thought elaborated during the 1970s and 1980s. The aim is to show how to correct the cancellation of the maternal order by the patriarchal disorder in Western civilization. Muraro's view of authoritative motherhood is both literal and symbolical. The maternal order represents the presence of our mother in reference to the body of women but is equally the gift of the mother tongue that introduce humanity to culture. Its denial is a form of nihilism that affects the political freedom of men and women. The maternal order needs to be brought back by a return to loving mothers as in the first years of life when they still had authority and our complete admiration.

How to articulate a philosophical discourse about womanhood and where to start? These questions suggest not only Luisa Muraro's difficulties in finding a starting point for her feminist theory in *The Symbolic Order of The Mother* published in 1991, as described in the first chapter, „The Difficulties of Beginning“;- they also reflect the challenge that Italian feminism experienced back in the 1970s and 1980s. Luisa Muraro shared alongside feminists Adriana Cavarero and Carla Lonzi an interest in articulating a woman's philosophical thought. One of the main research themes was to re(discover) symbolical feminine genealogies, and Luisa Muraro had drawn particular attention to theorizing the concept of the symbolical mother in *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (1991), a controversial work translated into German, Spanish and French. At the time of its publication, a significant part of the controversy came due to the essentialist depiction that seemed to equated womanhood with motherhood. Furthermore, contemporary feminist theory questions the relevance of the concept of

motherhood itself, seen as only related to debates of the sexual difference discourse already concluded. Likewise, according to the editors, the English translation comes in the context of a renewed interest in the United States for contemporary Italian philosophy.

Still, Muraro's feminist theory, elaborated in six chapters, doesn't aim to be just an essentialist elaboration of the maternal identity. It seems that it examines only „the capacity to freely give meaning to female grandeur, like that of my mother which I experienced and fully recognized in the first months and years of my life, and later on sadly lost and almost repudiated“ (p. 20) but what it intends is to make use of the already existing deconstructionist feminist critique and women's politics experience to construct or affirm motherhood as an element of power (pp. 20-21). Motherhood was already a topic of interest in Italian feminist critique and political practice in the 1970s and 1980s, so the text itself can be interpreted as an artefact of the history of Italian feminism. Reading the text as a historical product provides intriguing insights into the direct relationship between feminist agency „of those without established power“ (p. 90) and feminist theory in Italian second-wave feminism - in other words, how the political praxis met the philosophical discourse about womanhood.

Muraro herself confesses that from the active politics of women she has learned that „a woman needs the symbolic power of the mother“ (p. 6). She further argues that a great part of this symbolic power is given by the mother tongue because it allows children to achieve the faculty to speak (p. 46). Not only that though, as she continues emphasizing how the mother tongue introduces humanity to philosophy by having the symbolic authority „to say what it is“ (p. 32) and defines „who the mother is and what language is“ (p. 43): „matrix of life“ and „mediator of female grandeur“ (p. 64). In using language as an empowerment tool, one can easily see the influence of the political feminist practice of consciousness-raising. In the feminist groups, women gathered in exclusively women's private spaces were using the mother tongue „to say one's own experience“ (p. 30). This innovative idea of women achieving their own female thinking and subjectivity by using the mother tongue is a strong strand of argumentation in the third chapter, „The Word, a Gift from the Mother“. Again, in the last two chapters „The Circle of Flesh“ and „The Abyssal Distance“ focused expressly on politics, she stresses how revolutionary the key discovery of language as a liberation tool for women in the political practice of consciousness-raising has been for her: „this discovery is equivalent to finding the viewpoint of origins“ (p.75).

Aside from language, Muraro's solution for women's liberation from the male-dominated system is to reactivate the unconditional love for the mothers from childhood, as emphasized in the second chapter, „Knowing How to Love the Mother as a Sense of Being“. To do so, women must consider the female parent as the true figure of origins. The fourth chapter, „Or the One in Her Place“, shows that

feminine genealogy begins symbolically for every woman with the mother itself, where the woman's truth can be found symbolically. This is „the maternal continuum“ (p. 52): only women can substitute other females. The exclusivist mother-daughter continuum concept recalls the feminist practice of the absolute political separation from men (*separatismo*). Here the fundamental idea that the symbolic power „is contained in the female relationship with the mother“ (p. 20) returns, connected to the feminist practice of the female mentor-disciple relationship (*affidamento*) with the ultimate goal of rediscovering women's thinking.

The philosophical reflection on womanhood from women's critical perspective was a particular goal of Italian feminism that Luisa Muraro's work has accomplished. Considering the text's publication almost thirty years ago, the book's value might be given precisely by its historicity, which can reveal the tight relation between the women's liberationist practice from the years of political activism (the 1970s, 1980s) and feminist theory elaborated afterwards (1991). One can also see how motherhood, a vividly discussed topic by Italian feminists, is perceived not as a limitation of the feminine in culture and politics but is reconsidered as the most powerful element usurped and instrumentalized by the patriarchal system. *The Symbolic Order of The Mother*, if read as what it is, namely:- a text written after the author's experience in second-wave feminism in Italy, can still illustrate how Luisa Muraro deconstructed the patriarchal system in order to construct a political logic of female affirmation.

German Abstract:

Unterschied als Bestätigung. Die Wiederherstellung der Mutterschaft in der westlichen Zivilisation

The Symbolic Order of the Mother der italienischen Philosophin und Feministin Luisa Muraro ist das erste auf Englisch übersetzte Buch (2018) eines reichen und originellen Werks. Beeinflusst von der Frauenpolitik der zweiten Welle des Feminismus in Italien, stellt dieses Buch (1991) die Fortsetzung der Diskurse über sexuellen Unterschied dar, die in den 1970er und 80er Jahren angestoßen wurden. Ziel ist es zu zeigen, wie die Aufhebung der „mütterlichen Ordnung“ durch „die patriarchale Störung“ in der westlichen Zivilisation behoben werden kann. Muraros Auffassung von autoritärer Mutterschaft ist sowohl wörtlich als auch symbolisch. Die mütterliche Ordnung ist die reale Präsenz unserer Mütter in Bezug auf den Körper der Frau, aber auch das Geschenk der Muttersprache, die uns in die Kultur einführt. Ihre Leugnung ist eine Form des Nihilismus, die die politische und kulturelle Freiheit von Männern und Frauen beeinflusst. Die mütterliche Ordnung muss wieder hervorgebracht werden durch die Rückkehr zur Liebe zur Mutter, wie wir sie in den ersten Lebensjahren haben, als die Mutter noch Autorität und unsere volle Bewunderung hatte.

Laura Popa

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: Laura.Popa@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

How to cite:

Popa, Laura: "Difference as Affirmation. The Restoring of Motherhood in Western Civilization [Review on: Muraro, Luisa: *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018]". In: KULT_online 59 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.456>