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## Writing the voice of “the other”: migrant care workers narrated by European writers

The phenomenon of immigration has become a distinctive constituent of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. It features prominently in the public discourse, where it is mostly articulated as a cluster of problems – understood taxonomically by level of criticality –, which governments and ordinary citizens alike debate and attempt to resolve. Beyond the operational issues linked to the need to regulate flows, to identify and allocate resources, to enable the integration of entrants, some of the more loudly voiced concerns in Europe revolve around the transformational effects of immigration, particularly its impact on European culture(s) and collective identity. In countries that are, or consider themselves to be, “destinations of choice” for migrants, the very close connection between public discourse and political and institutional strategies has recently produced a flurry of sovereigntist policies.<sup>1</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, Brexit, the planning of border walls, and the closure of Mediterranean ports, all are political choices made in the name of protectionism and the preservation of national interests and identity.

As narrative fiction is an active participant in the processes of elaboration, articulation and dissemination of concepts of societal and cultural relevance, and has the potential to influence their mechanisms of production and reception, we intend to consider the type of discourse that emerges in some of its representations of migrants who settle in European societies. Our aim is to assess whether contemporary fiction, when drawing its inspiration from topical issues, can provide an alternative discourse to the defensive and isolationist positions

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<sup>1</sup> *Encoding e decoding* are the terms used by Stuart Hall to define the modalities of production and reproduction of messages in a complex system of communications which includes traditional and new media. See "Encoding/Decoding," *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks* 16676 (2001); *ibid.* The direct link between the mechanisms of encoding, decoding and circulating these messages, and dynamics of political power has been examined by Nicoletta Vallorani in *Introduzione Ai Cultural Studies. Uk, Us E Paesi Anglofoni* (Rome: Carocci, 2016), 36-37.

expressed elsewhere. We test our hypothesis through the analysis of two European novels from the early 21st century that feature migrant characters - a sample corpus that offers interesting insights in respect of the role that literary writing can play in addressing and subverting mainstream representations of migrant subjectivities.

Given the themes of the novels that we selected, in this essay we consider a specific subcategory of migrants: the economic migrants who contribute to the “care economy”. This is a large sector of the economy in European countries, which includes a range of health and community care services (e.g. care of the elderly, of children, of the sick), typically provided in public or private institutions or in private/domestic settings, and which is in constant expansion because of the socio-economic and demographic reality of Western societies. Our focus is on fictional representations of care in the domestic context, and on the figure of the migrant live-in care-giver as constructed in two European novels published in the early 2000s: *My Cleaner* (2005) by English author Maggie Gee, and *Orfani bianchi* (2016) by the Italian Antonio Manzini.<sup>2</sup> Both writers are very popular amongst readers, albeit for work in genres different from the two novels in question – Gee is a prolific author of science fiction, while Manzini’s fame comes from his police procedurals centred on the character of Deputy Police Chief Rocco Schiavone. Their standing and success as novelists gives their stories the potential to reach wide audiences- hence our interest lies in what their voices can contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of immigration, and what situations and dynamics they imagine when their lens zooms in to the domestic setting.

Despite having a profoundly different history as regards experiences of migration and relations with migrants, the British and Italian contexts have much in common when it comes

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<sup>2</sup> Maggie Gee, *My Cleaner*. Saqi, 2012. Antonio Manzini, *Orfani Bianchi*. Chiarelettere, 2016. References to both novels are taken from the Kindle editions.

to the current state of the care economy. In both countries, large numbers of immigrants find work in this florid and under-regulated market – as several studies by economists and sociologists demonstrate.<sup>3</sup> The number of foreign workers employed in the UK as carers has grown steadily in the last 10 years, with a rising proportion of them finding jobs in private homes.<sup>4</sup> Whilst traditionally workers in the sector tended to be nationals of the former colonies, such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria or India, their demographic profile has now changed, and they originate increasingly from countries within Europe.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that Brexit is causing concern amongst the operators in the care economy, who fear that the prospective, more restrictive policies on immigration, fuelled by and fuelling a widespread hostile stance towards migrants, will lead to a perilous staffing crisis across the sector.<sup>6</sup> The situation in Italy is similar in terms of volume of people involved, but slightly different in the geographical origin of the care workers, who have customarily been predominantly from Eastern Europe, with a conspicuous presence of Filipinos and South Americans.<sup>7</sup> Forecasts

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<sup>3</sup> Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, *Migration, Domestic Work and Affect: A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labor*. London, Routledge, 2010. Observing how domestic and care work in private households is now the largest employment sector for migrant women, this book sheds light on these households through its focus on the interpersonal relationships between Latin American “undocumented migrants”, domestic workers and employers in Austria, Germany, Spain and the UK. The personal experiences of these women form the basis for Gutiérrez-Rodríguez's decolonial analysis of the feminization of labour in private households and cultural analysis of domestic work as affective labour. See also G. Philip, C. Rogers, e S. Weller, *Understanding Care and Thinking with Care*, in *Critical Approaches to Care: Understanding Caring Relations, Identities and Cultures*, London, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Studies show an increase in the percentage of carers working in private homes from 1 in 8 (13%) in 2002, to 1 in 5 (21%) in 2008. See Vanna Aldin, Dan James, and Jonathan Wadsworth, *The Changing Shares of Migrant Labour in Different Sectors and Occupations in the UK Economy. An Overview*, in M. Ruhs and B. Anderson (eds), *Who Needs Migrant Workers? Labour Shortages, Immigration and Public Policy*, Oxford, OUP 2010, p. 65

<sup>5</sup> Data from 2017 show that, of all the foreigners employed in the care sector in the UK, 40% were Europeans. See *The Guardian*, < <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/2017/aug/15/clients-belittle-you-foreign-social-careworkers-on-life-in-the-uk> > last accessed 6th October 2018; and also [www.theguardian.com/society/2017/feb/25/brexit-fears-eu-nationals-working-social-care-theresa-may-sarahwollaston](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/feb/25/brexit-fears-eu-nationals-working-social-care-theresa-may-sarahwollaston), last accessed 6th October 2018

<sup>6</sup> Jo Moriarty, "Competing with myths: migrant labour in social care." In Martin Ruhs, and Bridget Anderson, eds. *Who Needs Migrant Workers?: Labour Shortages, Immigration, and Public Policy*. Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 140

<sup>7</sup> The findings from a recent study conducted by the Moressa Foundation shows that in 2018 there are over 800 thousand people officially occupied in Italian households as carers, the majority of whom (92%) are females and from Eastern Europe (60%). See R. Cadeo. Badanti, una categoria in crescita costante, in “Il Sole 24Ore”, 9 January 2017, , last accessed 5th May 2018.

based on demographic trends suggest that their already significant presence will continue to increase for the foreseeable future, and, concomitantly, so will the practice of irregular – uncontracted – employment.<sup>8</sup>

The principal actors in the domestic care economy are women. On the one side, there are women from countries outside the privileged area of what we can call “the first Europe”, who arrive there and find work as domestic carers, taking care of children, of the elderly, or cleaning homes; on the other side, one finds the European women who are their principal referent in the work place. The cohabitation of the two groups produces transcultural territories, centred on experiences of the home: here customs, traditions, desires and needs meet, often generating conflicts and clear hierarchical demarcations, but also new forms of solidarity and networking. Whilst political rhetoric finds the focus on the conflictual aspects of the situation to be of greater value, and the presumed dangers to a nation’s cultural sovereignty to be more profitable in electoral terms, the micro-perspective of the human and emotional elements involved in these dynamics is ripe with suggestions, but generally neglected by the public discourse. Yet, the figure of the migrant live-in care-giver, and the effects that her presence in the household has on the relational dynamics within a family, are complex sociocultural phenomena, which attract the attention of both social scientists and authors of fiction.

Domestic care work, as sociologist Helma Lutz observes, has a unique logic that sets it apart from other employment areas: the work is performed in the intimate social sphere of the home, and the relationship between employer and employee is highly personalised, emotional, and based on mutual dependency.<sup>9</sup> The figurative crossing of the inviolable border

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<sup>8</sup> Enrico Di Pasquale, Andrea Stuppini e Chiara Tronchin, *Colf e badanti, l’immigrazione silenziosa*, Lavoce.info < <http://www.lavoce.info/archives/54522/colf-e-badanti-limmigrazione-silenziosa/>> last accessed 13 October 2018.

<sup>9</sup> H. Lutz (ed.), *Migration and Domestic Work. A European Perspective on a Global Theme*, London: Routledge, 2008.

of the family microcosm that the carer performs, and the space that she claims for herself inside it, provide a wealth of material for narrative fiction – in particular crime and noir. A narrative built around the story of a foreign body that penetrates the inner sanctum of the family can mobilise deepseated fears, all rooted in the value we assign to “home” and “personal relations” and the significance we place on their loss. If the foreign body is doubly foreign – extraneous to the family core, and to the wider ethnic community to which the family belongs – the fear intensifies, and the sense of violation affects not only the individual space, but more extensively the identity of the nation, and its integrity. The widespread national rhetoric on migration witnessed today in most parts of the so-called First World proves beyond reasonable doubt the intensity of this fear and its usefulness as an instrument of political propaganda.

A recent case that is representative of this dynamic of foreign transgression and invasion is Leïla Slimani’s *Chanson douce* (2016), a novel inspired by the real event of a live-in nanny in New York – a French national of Dominican origins – who in 2012 killed the two children in her charge.<sup>10</sup> Slimani’s novel is part of a buoyant subgenre of noir literary and filmic narratives that construct the governess as a predatory figure, who poses a concrete threat to the wellbeing of the family, typically by attempting to take over the life of her privileged counterpart – the mother.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is not just live-ins employed in the care of children that generate disquiet and thrilling fiction – “nannies still draw a keen audience,” observed journalist Felicia R. Lee in an eponymous 2010 article for the *New York Times*<sup>12</sup> – but also

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<sup>10</sup> Slimani’s novel was published in the UK as *Lullaby* (2016), in the US as *The Perfect Nanny* (2018), and in Italy as *Ninna nanna* (2016).

<sup>11</sup> The film *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (dir. Curtis Hanson, 1992) is possibly the best known example of these dynamics

<sup>12</sup> The article is available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/14/books/14nanny.html>, last accessed 25th January 2019.

those who take care of our elderly, a growing body of workers, as current statistics demonstrate.

In the two novels examined in this essay, the protagonist is paradigmatic of the situation outlined above: she is a foreign – immigrant – female live-in care-giver. Yet, in contrast with the instrumental way in which these figures are featured in public discourse, here she occasionally has the function of autodiegetic narrator, telling her own story. To assess the contribution these two texts can offer to a more comprehensive understanding of this particular aspect of immigration, we look at the symbolic transgressions their narratives establish and articulate, focusing on three recurring patterns. The first transgression can be observed at the level of the fabula, and is symbolized by the migrant female character's crossing of social and cultural borders, as well as geographical ones, to become a participant in spaces, roles and relationships to which neither *ius soli* or *ius sanguinis* entitle her, and where she holds neither authority nor authoritativeness. The second and third transgressions happen at the levels of discourse and text respectively, and are acted by the narrator and the author – both Western Europeans – who appropriate the voice of the migrant characters, assume their voice and presume to speak on their behalf. This operation of subject appropriation - which takes place when “an outsider [represents] members or aspects of another culture” and “[makes] the culture or lives of [that culture] the subject of a [...] story [...]”-<sup>13</sup> raises a number of questions: what right to speak, and what agency, should be accorded to the migrant as “subaltern”; whether the migrant should be the one voicing her own story; and whether speaking on her behalf disempowers her as an individual, as well as distorting her story.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This is what James O. Young states in relation to figurative arts. See J. O. Young, *Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation*, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, n. 63.2, Spring 2005, p. 136

<sup>14</sup> This is an issue presented and problematized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, see G. C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in C. Nelson, L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1988, pp. 271-3.

It is our contention in this essay that the framework of transgressions that constitutes the architecture of the novels enables a discourse on the “foreign body” that is oppositional to the ones disseminated through political rhetoric and propaganda. In being more personal, subjective, free from the strictures, limitations, and requirements for simplification of prevailing stereotypes, the novels introduce the possibility an alternative point of view to the pervasive narratives of emergency and social panic. We further contend that the choice of strategies used in the texts to voice the experience of the immigrant empowers, rather than limit, her: we demonstrate that what could appear as an operation of voice appropriation does not drown the identity of the migrant, but conversely lets “the subaltern speak”; and we argue that, notwithstanding the fact that Gee and Manzini speak for the migrant, the use they make of other narrating voices effectively strengthens the migrant’s one, as well as gives her a face and a story.

### **The care-giver as a literary topos**

The character of the governess, an employee who resides in a private home and takes care of the house and its inhabitants (especially of children), is a classic of literature in English. It emerges during the Victorian age, and marks a significant moment for the representation of women in contexts of paid employment; in particular, it focuses on young women from the middle class who, in the absence of a dowry that would secure a profitable marriage, manage to provide for themselves and not burden their family of origin to support them. Her presence, however, also codifies the boundary of the family, which the governess at the same time defines and transgresses: as Bonnie G. Smith writes, the governess “was neither a



servant nor a member of the family. She was from the social level of the family, but the fact that she was paid a salary put her at the economic level of the servants”.<sup>15</sup>

In Victorian narratives the fracture between these two subject positionings is often resolved by marriage, as happens to Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and to perhaps one of the most famous governesses of English literature, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Another possible solution to this aporia is the complete desexualisation and dehumanisation of the governess or, to use the term we have chosen for this essay, the care-giver. Mary Poppins, the protagonist of the cycle of children’s books by P.L. Travers<sup>16</sup> and turned into a global icon by the 1964 Disney film starring Julie Andrews, crystallized the nanny as a saving figure, whose arrival in a dysfunctional family marks the beginning of a sentimental education not only for the recipients of her work – children or the elderly – but especially for the adults. The housekeeper in this scenario works as means for other characters to change and develop their relationship with each other, and represents the utopian aspect of a long-standing imaginary that, as will emerge later on, is not always equally comforting.

The care-giver emerges as a recurring character also in postcolonial literature in English, where often the sacrificial function of the woman invested with the care of others becomes a metaphor for the complex relationship between motherland and (former) colony. This is the case, for example, in Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Stanasyini” (breast-giver), where the protagonist Jashoda, a nursemaid by profession, after having nursed the many children born in the family where she works (even at the cost of neglecting her own children) develops breast cancer.<sup>17</sup> Lidia Curti argues that this tale works as “a sort of parable of India in the

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<sup>15</sup> B. G. Smith, *Changing Lives. Women in European History since 1700*, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington 1989

<sup>16</sup> P. L. Travers wrote eight novels on Mary Poppins, published from 1934 to 1988 (*Mary Poppins*, Peter Davies, London [1934] 1940; *Mary Poppins comes back*, Collins, London 1973; and *Mary Poppins and the house next door*, Collins, London 1988).

<sup>17</sup> The story is contained in M. Devi, *Breast Stories*, trans. and intro G. C. Spivak, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997.

transition from colonization to the nation”,<sup>18</sup> but also as a tribute to the ayahs, the Indian governesses so present in English literature that the word itself has become part of the current language.<sup>19</sup> Even the most recent nanny novels find their antecedent in a diasporic novel, *Lucy* (1990) by Jamaica Kincaid, which tells the story of an au pair working for a wealthy family in New York.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the aforementioned strand of the nanny novel that fits into the crime or *noir* genre, capitalizing on the most disturbing aspects of the care-giver as transgressor of boundaries, there is a version of the care-giver located at the opposite side of the crime fiction coordinates: as Bruce Robbins notes in the classic *The Servant's Hand*, one of the functions of the care-giver in English novels is that of narrator, entrusted with keeping and transmitting the history of the house where she works: this happens to Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* as well as the governess from Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, but also, in some ways, to Jane Eyre herself.<sup>21</sup> In these cases, the care-giver functions as a detective, rather than a criminal: her aim is to uncover the causes of the discomfort that affects the home to dissipate it (as does Mary Poppins) or at least to transform what causes it into a cautionary tale for future generations. However, if through her criminal transgression the care-giver is entitled to her own story, as a detective she resumes the essentially functional role of healing the lives of others.

### ***The storyteller as detective: My Cleaner (2005)***

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<sup>18</sup> L. Curti, *La voce dell'altra: scritture ibride tra femminismo e postcoloniale*, Meltemi Editore, 2006. P 111. Our translation.

<sup>19</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the ayah as “a nursemaid or nanny employed by Europeans in India or another former British territory”; the word can be found in classics of children's literature such as *Peter Pan* and in *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett.

<sup>20</sup> London: Jonathan Cape, 1991

<sup>21</sup> See Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand*. English Fiction from below, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1986, pp 91-93.

Gee's novel *My Cleaner* (2005) deals with the many facets of the character of the care worker in English writing, choosing a diversified approach which borrows elements from the tradition of crime but replaces the raw naturalism of genre fiction with an ironic register. Gee is best known as a science fiction author for the dystopian trilogy *Where Are the Snows* (1991), *The Ice People* (1998) and *The Flood* (2004), as well as for *The White Family* (2002), nominated for the Orange Prize in 2003. Both *The White Family* and *My cleaner* focus on racism in contemporary London, but while the former unravels the theme by investigating British white identity mainly through male characters, the latter is repositioned on the lines of irony and the world as seen by female characters.

The protagonists and narrators of *My Cleaner* are Vanessa Henman, a proudly middle-class novelist with a 20-year-old son in the throes of a mysterious depression, and Mary Tendo, her former Ugandan governess. Persuaded by an attractive salary offer, Mary returns to London and to the Henmans after many years, despite the fact that the child she used to look after is now a young adult, and Vanessa is no longer a young professional mother needing childcare while launching her career. The novel alternates between free indirect speech and first person narrations by the two female characters, who claim their own narrative by inserting themselves into the story. This alternation between the two narrators creates a polymorphic structure, which intersects the typical methods of the crime novel with a wider concern for the politics of race, migration, and care work.

Gee's personal experience of Uganda, dating back to 2003 and to a literature exchange programme, is what inspired the novel and the author's interest in writing "a two-hander with two people looking at each other who really didn't get each other".<sup>22</sup> In pursuing this narrative project, Gee transgresses one of the unwritten rules of contemporary fiction by using, as an Anglo-English author, a first-person narrative for a character of African descent: a decidedly risky choice in what Susie Thomas

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<sup>22</sup> J. Palmer, Maggie Gee: How Clean Is your World? In *The Independent*, 18th August 2005, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/maggie-gee-how-clean-is-your-world-306755.html>, last accessed 9 May 2019.

has polemically defined as the contemporary “literary apartheid” in place in English literature.<sup>23</sup>

Gee’s choice to give voice in the same novel to a Ugandan character and an English one marks narration as a locus of conflicting authorship, a theme that unfolds throughout the novel, and that is reflected in the conflict of authority that often characterizes the relationship between the employer and the care-giver within the home.

Despite Gee also mentioning having worked as a maid when she was a student, hence further aligning her personal experiences with those of the character Mary Tendo, it is difficult to disentangle the writer’s persona from Vanessa, who clearly poses as a weakened version of the author’s voice. From its incipit, the novel offers an explicit reversal of expected social hierarchies, which threatens to influence narrative authority as well: while Mary, back in Uganda after her long spell in the UK, occupies a position of responsibility in a large hotel in Kampala, Vanessa earns a living as a teacher of creative writing, struggling to overcome the writer’s block that hit her after the publication of her first, successful novel. Vanessa is committed to an ideal path of *bildung* whose failures – the lack of a literary career, but also her divorce and her son’s depression – reveal her actual fragility: as Emily Johansen points out, she is “posed as a stand-in for a certain category of neoliberal subjects who imagine themselves very progressive – particularly on the topic of racial and cultural sensitivity – and whose progressiveness indicates their social maturity and achievement of an evolutionary *telos*”.<sup>24</sup>

The character’s obsession with her own journey to Kampala represents the most clear echo between Vanessa and Gee herself; yet it also embodies the self-mocking nature of this echo, especially in the way Vanessa now believes she is educated in the “African ways” (Gee 2012,

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<sup>23</sup> *Literary Apartheid in the Post-War London Novel: Finding the Middle Ground*, in *Changing English*, n. 12, 2005, pp. 309–325.

<sup>24</sup> *The Banal Conviviality of Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism*, in *Textual Practice*, n 29.2, 2015, p. 303.

Kindle Locations 252-256).<sup>25</sup> Vanessa relies on the two weeks she spent in Africa for the authority of her own speech, but this authority is insistently deconstructed by Mary. Her counterpoint systematically reveals the inaccuracy and prejudice in Vanessa's approach to cultural and ethnic difference: "[Vanessa] thinks she will show me she loves my country; she believes she will please me with all this 'knowledge'. After a bit, Miss Vanessa gives up. It is not her fault. She is ignorant" (Kindle Location 1262). It is on the basis of this prejudice that Vanessa initially projects onto Mary the salvific function of her literary namesake: the Ugandan maid should, like Mary Poppins, descend from the sunny skies of Africa to melt away the incomprehensible lump of suffering that seems to have transformed her son Justin. In Vanessa's vision, Mary is just a metonymy of that Africa of which she herself feels a part, a separate and orphaned part: "She [Vanessa] thinks, I need light. I am a creature of light. The sun must be shining on Africa" (Kindle Locations 62-63).

Vanessa's romantic vision of the migrant's condition contrasts with the novel's harsh portrayal of those people who in European news are often described with condescension as "economic migrants" – not refugees or asylum seekers but people who move, often temporarily, to the "first world" to seek a better status for themselves and their families. This narrative is mostly entrusted to Mary's first person (who will later prove to be metanarrative), where her life in London during her youth is told, a life invisible to the eyes of the wealthy English:

The sun rose over the bridges of London as my bus ran along the burning Thames. Going home from my work as the sun came up and office workers were beginning that day. [...] I did my work like the other foreigners, cleaning the offices of the sleeping English. [...] Later in the day I went to their houses and did the same job for less money. It was the only way to

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<sup>25</sup> For example, upon Mary's arrival, Vanessa associates the need to agree on a fee for the position she is offering Mary with "typically African" bargaining, as if negotiating the price of a service were not part of any professional agreement: "Naturally there would be deals to be done. In any case, this was the African way. I understood things better now I'd been to Africa" (Kindle Locations 252-256).

enter their houses, to feel what English lives were like. (Kindle Locations 133-134)

As a domestic worker, Mary crosses the border that separates the English household from the public space and reveals its limits and imperfections: many of Mary's reminiscences focus on filth as a main component of her working environments, reversing the racist stereotype according to which it is the hygienic habits of the colonized who are insufficient. It is no coincidence that "my cleaner", the title of the novel, is also the way in which Vanessa introduces Mary to her friend Fifi (and to readers) in the very first pages of the novel: "Last week I sent a letter to my cleaner" (Kindle Location 27). So, despite having invited her to London to investigate her son's illness, Vanessa expects Mary to naturally resume her role, that of the one who cleans, who makes the dirt – material and immaterial – of bourgeois lives disappear as if by magic, without leaving a single trace. And so, when the conflict between the two women explodes, it is this formula that Vanessa uses to try to nail Mary to her supposed role: "You are my cleaner! You are just my cleaner!" (Kindle Location 1328). The definition clearly embodies not only an occupation, but an existential condition of inferiority that the European subject has the authority to attribute to the non-European.<sup>26</sup> But at this point in the narrative it is evident that Mary is not (or at least no longer) Vanessa's cleaner or governess, just as the migrants from different generations who live in London are no longer just maids and servants of Anglo-English residents. "London is full of African things; London is full of Africans" (Kindle Location 1152), replies Mary to a Vanessa annoyed by the invasion of her kitchen by foreign foods, noises, tastes and smells.

The questioning of Vanessa's authority corresponds to the growing reliability of Mary's, whose role is increasingly configured as that of the detective. Her aim is to discover

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<sup>26</sup> See Elif Öztürk-Avcı "Cleaning up the "dirt": a study of Maggie Gee's *My Cleaner*", in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, no. 50.4, 2014: 478-491. The study offers a very interesting reading of the novel on the themes of cleanliness and dirt in imperial and post-imperial rhetoric.

the cause of Justin's depression: "The truth is, I am here as a detective. I thought they wanted me as a nurse, but I cannot nurse an unknown illness. Once I understand, I know I can help him" (Kindle Location 898). The mystery, the unspoken that must be revealed to allow recovery for the young man as well as for the family as a whole, intersects the paradigm of the crime novel with that of psychoanalytic therapy; it also touches another sensitive point of the British colonial imaginary, that of miscegenation.<sup>27</sup> Justin is, in fact, in love with Zakira, a woman of Moroccan origin who is expecting his baby but whom he has left to lock himself up in a pathological childhood. Mary manages to make the two reconcile, fulfilling her double role of detective and care-giver.

The comforting closure dictated by genre conventions are therefore fully respected; even for Mary the conclusion of the novel looks to new beginnings, including both a pregnancy and the writing of the autobiographical novel *The Life of Mary Tendo*, which will be published by Vanessa's publisher. The appropriation of writing is perhaps the most explicit among Mary's transgressions in the novel, as it directly confronts the question of cultural appropriation. Mary's narrative voice may be read as a classic example of subject appropriation, defined by James Young as the phenomenon that occurs "when an outsider represents members or aspects of another culture [and] makes the culture or lives of insiders the subject of a painting, story, film, or other work of art".<sup>28</sup> However, the novel rejects the mimicry of the "other" voice in the first-person narrator, avoiding for example the use of the Ugandan variety of English for Mary's written and spoken voice: and if on the one hand this could be taken to indicate a lack of critical attention to the gap between standard English and

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<sup>27</sup> For the centrality of miscegenation in the British imperial imagination, including its dynamics of attraction and repulsion, see Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London and New York 2005, especially pp.165-66.

<sup>28</sup> J. O. Young, *Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation*, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, n. 63.2, Spring 2005b, p. 136

its globally widespread varieties,<sup>29</sup> on the other hand this choice avoids any comic or parodic effect in Mary's narrative, giving the same authority to her narration as to Vanessa's. In the final metanarrative twist, therefore, the author's overlap with Vanessa is both unravelled and consolidated in the shift of authorship from Vanessa to Mary.

However, there is one aspect in which Mary's narrative line is less consolatory: her grief for the loss of her own son to the jihad is only heightened by her emotional investment in the wellbeing of Vanessa's, who was "[e]asier to love, because not mine" (Kindle Location 345). Maternity and narration are therefore Mary's two forms of primary subjectivation (as, in other ways, Vanessa's), which intertwine in a relationship that is neither complementary nor conflictual, but a complex negotiation of affections. Significantly, this pattern is also found in Manzini's novel, where motherhood remains an incurable vulnus at the heart of the protagonist and her relationship with both the motherland and the land of arrival.

### **The storyteller as witness: *Orfani bianchi* (2016)**

In a situation that mirrors that of Gee with *My Cleaner*, with *Orfani bianchi* Manzini takes temporary leave from his typical writing, and from his best-selling character - Deputy Police Chief Rocco Schiavone, the rebellious policeman and contentious figure made popular through a series of short stories and novels and their successful adaptations, which aired in prime time slots on Italian national television. Notwithstanding this departure from character and genre, Manzini maintains his gaze firmly anchored to themes of large resonance in Italian society. If in the Schiavone cycle the attention is on the pervasive presence of micro- and macrocriminality in private and public political and business activities in Italy, on the complex relationship that individuals and institutions alike have with Justice, and on intensely

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<sup>29</sup> This is, for example, Öztabak-Avcı's conclusion (see 2014, 487).



personal tragedies, including bereavement and the management of grief, in *Orfani bianchi* the spotlight is on female immigration to Italy, its human cost, and what it reveals about human nature and its capacity for compassion. The relatively newly constituted microcosm that revolves around the domestic care system in Italy has been the subject of a few works of fiction in the last few years, reflecting a social reality that is becoming firmly established. The plots are constructed on the interaction between carers— or *badanti* as they are known in Italian, generally women and foreigners –, and their “charges” – generally elderly and middle-class –, two groups demographically at the antipodes who however share the same awareness of their condition of vulnerability and frustration about loss of agency. Additional layers of complication are introduced in the stories when the extended family of the “charge” become involved in the plots, typically bringing in emotions such as suspicion and jealousy. Many of the novels are inspired by a desire to understand a phenomenon that affects the lives of many Italian families, and the new dynamics that operate in a domestic context once a *badante* becomes part of the family nucleus. In *Badante Sissignora* (Carer, Yes Ma’am)<sup>30</sup>, the narrator, a young Italian woman who observes the succession of *badanti* hired to look after her elderly grandmother, tries to figure out what these apparently very different individuals have in common. Her attempt to find a comprehensive definition for the category, to identify its distinctive traits, aims to make it easier for the European family to understand these figures who are as indispensable as they are disturbing in that they are incomprehensible foreign objects. With a title that explicitly renders the power dynamics between care-giver and employer, the substantial conclusion that the narrator reaches is that the common denominator that links the *badanti* is their determination to “survive” - the isolation and loneliness that come with the role and that are the premise for a new and better life, and the anguish for all they have left behind. Similarly to *Badante sissignora*, Matteo Collura’s *La badante* poses the

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Rainieri, *Badante Sissignora*, Nitrolibri, Milan: ExCogita, 2010.

care-giver as the object, rather than the subject of the narrative,<sup>31</sup> and builds a story around the most perturbing of myths that surround the carer-charge relationship: the power of seduction that a younger, foreign woman can exercise on a man weakened by illness and age, and the chaos and fractures that this power creates inside a family. The increased presence of Italian nationals among the domestic carers workforce is reflected in Gianni Caria's novel *La badante di Bucarest* (The Bucarest care-giver)<sup>32</sup>. In contrast to what the title seems to suggest, the protagonist is not from but in Bucharest: she is an Italian working as a carer in the home of an elderly Romanian gentleman. The inverted perspective, the surprising role reversal where the position usually occupied by foreign women is played by someone from "the first Europe" who has herself become a "foreigner" throws into sharp relief the loneliness, the sense of isolation and the longing for home that go with this job.

The story that unfolds in *Orfani bianchi* revolves around Mirta Mitea, a 36-year-old Moldovan who works as a *badante* in Rome. Like all *badanti*, Mirta is an economic migrant, who has left her family behind in order to secure a way out of extreme poverty for them, particularly for her 10-year-old son Ilie. She puts up with prejudices, difficulties and exploitation in the name of a brighter future, where her son will be able to have an education and a comfortable life – a future she constantly fantasizes about in her conversations with fellow nationals and in the one-sided email exchanges with her son. A major turn in Mirta's life and in the novel occurs when her mother dies and she finds no alternative care provision for Ilie to an orphanage – the infamous internat of Soviet memory – where the eponymous "white orphans", the children of mothers who have migrated to the West, are taken care of in the absence of relatives who can look after them. The description of the internat – freezing cold, soulless, and impregnated with the smell of ammonia mixed with boiled cabbage –

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<sup>31</sup> Matteo Collura, *La badante*, La Gaja Scienza Volume 1177, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Gianni Caria, *La Badante di Bucarest*, Rome: Robin, 2012.

offers readers a stark picture of what lies in the background, and is forever present in the mind, of many of the women who look after their elders. As it is the case for Gee, in fact, and for the authors of the *badanti* novels cited above, Manzini was inspired to write *Orfani bianchi* by personal events – the observation of the *badante* who looked after his grandmother – and wanted to voice “the drama that we cannot even begin to imagine” of women who care for others far away from the people they really care for.<sup>33</sup> Manzini imagines the drama: he gives words and a structure to Mirta’s hidden suffering, making her the epitome of the foreign woman in a large Italian city, and at the same time he sketches a detailed and realistic portrait of Italian society today.

The novel is in two parts, followed by a short epilogue. The first part covers a period of a few weeks, and provides an outline of the protagonist’s life – so typical of, and similar to, the lives of many of her peers – in Rome: a job that finishes abruptly because her charge is transferred to a nursing home, making her unemployed and homeless; a new job as a cleaner in a block of flats; new lodgings in a shared house with other immigrant women, where the biggest luxury is having a roommate with opposite shifts to hers, so that she can have the bed to herself. Running parallel to her vicissitudes at work, this section provides a description of Mirta’s private life in short glimpses, through translations/transcripts of telephone calls and emails with her best friend in Milan, with the priest back home, and with her son. The second part of the novel covers a much shorter period, after Mirta has found a new job as a *badante* through deception: it is much slower in rhythm, contains long descriptive pauses alternating with mimetic scenes, which reveal the ruthlessness and lack of compassion of the Europeans (her employers and their circle of friends) in contrast with the humanity of the other “foreign bodies”, each with their personal history of suffering which makes them empathetic to each

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<sup>33</sup> See *L’azzardo di Manzini: congelare Schiavone*, interview with Massimo Lugli, in “La Repubblica”

other's predicaments. The novel is concluded by a short police report documenting the recovery of the body of a woman drowned in the river Tiber.

The story is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator – whom the reader is led to identify with the author – who assumes the voice and point of view of the protagonist, and gives visibility and resonance to her experiences and feelings through fixed focalization.<sup>34</sup> *Orfani bianchi* is explicitly written with the intention to give literary form to human experiences and situations that are real and extremely common, and it ensures that the reader remains aware of the reality that inspires the fiction: the transcriptions (supposedly translated into Italian) of email exchanges between the protagonist Mirta and her Moldovan relatives or friends, inserted at various points in the text, confer authenticity and a documentary value to the narrative. Similarly, the police report with which the story ends aligns the novel's conclusion with the dramatic reality of metropolitan crime news.

Manzini refrains from exoticising Mirta to attract the attention of the reader to her being foreign, which is presented as a mere question of passport and not of character features. Her expressive neutrality suggests two complementary considerations: one is that the story wants to emphasise the level of integration to which Mirta aspires, and which she has partly reached: she dreams of bringing her son over to Italy, she encourages him to study Italian, and sees in marriage with a fellow Moldovan a step towards an ordinary, "Italianised" existence. The other is that the author wants to underline the empathy felt for the existential condition of the protagonist, avoiding the risk that an "accented" language diminished the authoritativeness and the gravitas of her words.

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<sup>34</sup> The terminology used to define the type and level of narrator, and the representation of point of view comes from Gérard Genette and Jane E. Lewin, *Narrative Discourse : An Essay in Method*, Cornell Paperbacks, 1980

Mirta's perceived integration in the Italian context is effectively conveyed by the narrator when he relates her observation of the people she sees as she moves in the city. This is what she observes whilst travelling on the number 24 bus:

A man, from *Maghreb*, lifted an arm to steady himself, and a whiff of a sweaty armpit oozed out of his jacket and hit her like a deadly punch. She reached into her handbag and took out the *Chanel* perfume tester she had found in the magazine *Donna Moderna*: a couple of drops under her nose and she would have made it until the end of the journey. [...] Now the *North African's* sweaty armpit became mixed with the smell of garlic from a *Chinese* behind her, and with the alcoholic breath of a couple of her fellow nationals. She could see them, half way down the bus, their faces red and the eyes swollen and dull. *They did not have 16 teeth between them [...]* A fat Chinese man, the main suspect for the stench of fried garlic that exuded from his pores seemed to be enjoying the bus's stops and jolts. He looked at her and smiled, showing two silver front teeth and a range of yellow teeth placed in his mouth at random. Mirta kept looking down. Better to suffer and wait. Wait and suffer.<sup>35</sup> (Emphasis added.)

The foreigners – the Chinese, the North African, the East Europeans, whom she calls “fellow nationals” more to remark the distance between herself and them – are identified by olfactory (sweat, alcohol, garlic) and aesthetic (bad teeth, swollen eyes) markers, whether endogenous or caused by external factors, which on a granular level are signifiers of national stereotypes, and on a more general level are indicators of alterity, of deviation from a presumed “norm”. Conversely, Mirta is connoted by elements that underscore her contiguity with the cultural features of the West, such as her reading of a famous woman's magazine, and her appreciation of French perfumes. In the same way as she observes the prominent presence of

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<sup>35</sup> Un uomo, un magrebino, alzò il braccio per afferrare anche lui il corrimano e una zaffata di ascella sudata strisciò fuori dal giubbotto e la colpì micidiale come un pugno. Infilò le mani nella borsetta. Prese il campioncino di Chanel che aveva trovato su “Donna Moderna”. L'idea era di mettersi due punti di profumo sotto le narici e tirare avanti fino alla fine della corsa. Ma era evaporato. Le toccava sottostare alle esalazioni dei suoi compagni di viaggio. Ora l'ascella del magrebino si era mischiata all'aglio di un orientale alle sue spalle e all'alito etilico di un paio di suoi connazionali. Li intravedeva a metà autobus, rossi in viso e con gli occhi tumidi e spenti. In due non arrivavano a sedici denti. [...] Un ciccione cinese, il sospettato numero uno per l'olezzo di aglio fritto che gli trasudava dai pori della pelle, sembrava provarci gusto a quegli sbatti e struscia improvvisi. La guardava e le sorrideva con due incisivi d'argento e una chiostra di denti giallo paglia infilati casualmente in bocca. Mirta teneva lo sguardo basso. Meglio soffrire e aspettare. Aspettare e soffrire. (Kindle Locations 290-298, emphasis added. Our translation).

foreigners, Mirta remarks on the lack of Italian nationals in public spaces, such as the bus number 64:

Mirta could hear at least 10 different languages, from Spanish to Russian, to Cantonese dialects, Polish and African stuff. Not a single Italian. [...] [M]en and women became one solid mass, multiracial and multiform. [...] Mirta had a black hand covered in rings in front of her nose, the face of a Peruvian child stuck to her pubic area, a Russian leg between hers and afro plaits on her neck. [An] elderly woman pushed past and glared at her: “Foreigners... before you arrived buses were always on time [...] Move, let me through!”<sup>36</sup>

Mirta’s own positioning inside this system is presented as ambivalent: whilst she sees herself as part of the Italian sociocultural context – this is what her own considerations suggest, and it is from this point of view that she observes the foreigners around her – the way the few Italians present react to her presence reveal her status of a barely tolerated foreign body. Like all the others, she remains an undesired presence and guilty by virtue of being a foreigner. “How much longer did she have to suffer being trod on, without being able to react? As if she did not have any pride. Hunger takes your pride away, and your self-respect, and your dignity. [...] *Would she ever see the day when people would judge her only for what she was and for what she did?* [...] With a shrug of her shoulders she swept these thoughts away, and got up from the table. Keep your head down and keep going”.<sup>37</sup> (Emphasis added.)

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<sup>36</sup> Mirta sentiva parlare una decina di lingue diverse, dallo spagnolo al russo, dialetti cantonesi, polacco e roba africana. Neanche un italiano. [T]utto si mischiò e uomini e donne divennero una massa compatta, multirazziale e multiforme. [...] Mirta aveva una mano nera e inanellata davanti al naso, il viso di un bambino peruviano attaccato al pube, una gamba russa in mezzo alle sue e delle treccine afro sul collo. [...] ‘Mi fate passare che devo scendere?’ berciò una donna sui settant’anni alzandosi dal sedile. [...] La donna anziana le passò accanto guardandola con gli occhi carichi di odio. ‘Stranieri... quando non c’eravate gli autobus erano sempre in orario [...]’ disse fra i denti. ‘Permesso!’ urlò. ‘Levateve, fateme passa!’ (Kindle location 311-326)

<sup>37</sup> Fino a quando sarebbe stata colpevole per nascita? Fino a quando avrebbe dovuto sentire i piedi della gente sulla faccia senza poterseli togliere di dosso? Come se non avesse un orgoglio. La fame te lo toglie, l’orgoglio. E ti toglie l’amor proprio, e la dignità. [...] Sarebbe mai arrivato il giorno in cui sarebbe stata considerata né più né meno che una donna e giudicata per le sue azioni? [...] Ogni volta l’orizzonte si rinnovava, sempre più distante, inavvicinabile. Costava fatica raggiungerlo, perché appena le sembrava di averlo a portata di mano quello rapido e irriverente si allontanava di nuovo. Dopo tutti i rospi salamandre e lombrichi mandati giù a cena pranzo e colazione, quanta merda l’aspettava ancora? [...] Ma non perché la trattavano così, loro erano i vincitori e si sa che i vincitori non provano pietà per i vinti, ma perché con gli sguardi e le parole le riportavano alla mente sempre

This ambiguous perspective points to some incontrovertible facts: the protagonist's desire for integration, unrealised and possibly unrealisable; the certainty that the distance between "us" and "them" cannot be bridged; and the sense of guilt that is inherent to the status of "other". Orfani bianchi foregrounds the systematic abuses that the dominant "us" inflicts on the subaltern "them", and exposes the intolerance that often colours relations within domestic care contexts. The perspective offered by Mirta, the foreign body, voiced by the Italian narrator, forces the Italian reader to focus on the signified and not on the signifier, and subsequently produces an estrangement effect that causes readers to see themselves through the eyes of the "other", but to hear themselves being described by a voice that they recognise as akin to theirs.

### **Writing a voice for the "other": the cleaner and the orphans**

The titles of the two novels are significant. The one chosen by Gee indicates from the start what are the deictic centre and the presumed position of utterance of the narrative: the possessive adjective that accompanies the noun (one that defines Mary Tendo through her profession) appears to declare from the outset the point of view of the narrative and its power dynamics, creating an expectation in the reader (particularly regarding any potential for agency for Mary). The unfolding of the story will overturn this expectation. The title of Manzini's novel, conversely, goes beyond the specificity of the personal vicissitudes of the characters, and makes a collective reference to one of the most tragic epiphenomena of 21st century female migration: that of young children in poor countries, abandoned by mothers who migrate to the "first World" to look after the young children, the elderly parents, the

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quella domanda: fino a quando? Con una scrollata di spalle cancellò l'eco dei suoi pensieri e si alzò dal tavolo. C'era da pedalare. Pedalare e basta. (Kindle Locations 1604-1614, emphasis added, our translation.)

homes of others who have no time, or opportunity, or inclination to provide this care themselves.

Gee's novel features two voices: part of the story is narrated by Vanessa Henman (whom, as mentioned before, one could reasonably assume to be the alter ego of the author), part by "her" eponymous cleaner Mary. In Manzini's novel, the narrative is mostly heterodiegetic (and the reader justifiably attributes the voice of the external narrator to that of the implied and of the real author himself, especially because of what Manzini himself declared about the genesis of the novel); yet the heterodiegetic voice is in places replaced by Mirta's own. In both cases, it is significant to note that the representation of the voice of the migrant avoids linguistic mimicry – both migrant characters speak and write in correct English and Italian, devoid of foreign nuances. This decision does not belie a lack of consideration for the differences in the use of language, to the richness and significance of culturally connoted varieties, but conversely prevents the attention of the reader from being attracted to those aspects that emphasise their "otherness", remaining instead focussed on their experiences of "being othered". Both authors give ample evidence of their awareness of linguistic diversity and of the rhetorical effects of a language which is reported mimetically. Gee is finely tuned in to the variations of English spoken by the multi-ethnic communities in London, and Manzini is equally sensitive to the continuum of Italian spoken in the streets of Rome: his minor characters – less "significant" in terms of advancing the propositional content of the narrative, and functioning exclusively to emphasise Mirta's experience – are strongly connoted from the linguistic point of view. The groups of Filipinos, Latin Americans, Eastern Europeans, and local Romans who crowd the scenes where Mirta moves speak a strongly accented language, imitating the narrative pseudoreality with a deliberately parodic effect. Mirta and Mary, conversely, are not cast into the role of the "exotic". Their being foreign is a



*datum*, a question of passport, of place of birth, although a major factor in shaping the way they are perceived by the “locals”.

Both novels avoid a characterisation of the migrant protagonist that is essentialist, steering clear from stereotypes, including and beyond those linked to linguistic registers. At the same time, they avoid the typical pitfalls of any operation of appropriation of the voice of “the other”: they do not silence the voice of the migrant by superimposing their own on it. The voices of the protagonists, and their personal predicaments in the country they have migrated to, emerge loud and clear, although this is achieved through different emplotment strategies.

In *My Cleaner*, Gee stages the interlocution between “inside” and “outside”, Vanessa and Mary, through a narrative of two voices where (ostensibly) both have the chance to express themselves, and where the differences between them are progressively effaced to the point where role reversal becomes apparent. Mary Tendo refuses to be subsumed by the rhetoric of subordination where Vanessa wants to confine and keep her, and achieves personal and professional success in a direction which mirrors what Vanessa desired (Mary becomes a published writer, falls in love, and gets pregnant).

In *Orfani bianchi*, instead, the use of an extradiegetic narrator means that control of the narrative remains firmly in external hands. Even the portions of the text which are wholly mimetic, such as the aforementioned notes by Mirta to her teenage son in Moldova, or her emails to her best friend who lives in Milan, appear as momentary concessions to an alternative voice made for documentary purposes only, in the interest of realism. However, the intensity of Mirta’s life story is rendered powerfully: by opting for fixed focalization – with Mirta as the sole focalizer – the narrator offers himself as a facilitator, as the voice that conveys an experience, and uses his perceived authority to gain an audience for it.

The two novels differ also in the choice of epilogue. In *My Cleaner* the ending is reassuringly positive: not only does Mary Tendo complete the task for which Vanessa had called her back to the UK, but she is no longer a cleaner, finds love and literary success – an example of personal upward trajectory that does not clash with the expectations of an audience familiar with the opportunities for social mobility and transcultural integration available in the UK (and in London particularly). In *Orfani bianchi*, on the other hand, the ending is tragic, and tragically common: the percentage of live-in carers who commit suicide is on the increase, to the point that the phenomenon is part of a condition that has been given the name of “syndrome Italia”; and equally on the increase is the percentage of their children who kill themselves back home. Manzini’s epilogue marks the end of the protagonist’s dreams of integration and of happiness, appealing instead – one can argue – to the empathy of readers, inviting them to connect with the human tragedy of a character whose misfortunes could befall all of us. This sense of human solidarity is something that a large part of Italian society is trying to disseminate, in order to counter an increasingly aggressive political stance, which is manifestly hostile towards immigrants.

Despite the many differences, the two narratives subvert or undermine the stereotypes against migrants, typically and conveniently seen as a monolithic block, collectively usurping our positions, our rights and privileges. In particular, by narrating the stories of two very ordinary migrant women, they expose the prejudices that colour the attitude of the citizens from the “first world” towards foreign domestic carers – indispensable to the running of families, but simultaneously feared for what they come to represent in our lives.

Ultimately, these novels present a view of the world that is dissonant with the dominant narrative that is spread through political rhetoric, and invite the reader to accept, and reflect upon, the continuum of human experience, instead of settling for simple, static and oppositional categorizations.