

The *Ferrante* phenomenon in Albania

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the Albanian reader has welcomed the work of the Italian writer Elena Ferrante. The work that caused a stir and made her famous in Albania were the four volumes "The genius friend", which were successively published. What mostly attracts the Albanian reader is the reality the characters live in and the city of Naples where the events take place. Thanks to the way and style of writing, the Albanian reader experiences this reality because there he/she finds many things in common, almost the same mentality, not only the same lifestyle and habits, but also problems similar to those of southern Italy and especially Naples. The atavistic asphyxiation of the Neapolitan social classes only evokes ignorance and violence in daily life, and painlessly suppresses human intelligence. Elena, the main character of the work, embodies the characteristics of the city from which she wants to leave at all costs and where again the blood bond calls her and does not leave her free. Elena Ferrante portrays with a lot of elegance this reality which the Albanian reader can undoubtedly encounter in his/her daily life. Another motive that attracts the reader's attention is the close relationship of two friends, Lenu and Lila, a close friendship between girls, where love and envy, cooperation and rivalry, acceptance and rejection are the necessary directions of a society which would not exist, if it were in another, different form. For this and many other reasons the Neapolitan saga has been translated into 40 languages of the world and still continues to fascinate readers and publishers.

Key words: narrative, reader, friendship, mentality, culture.

Introduction

Since 2011, the Neapolitan saga of "The genius friend" has attracted over millions of readers around the world considering their writer Elena Ferrante as the most admired author of recent years. In the United States, a documentary entitled "Ferrante Fever" was made and the phenomenon *Ferrante* was discussed at the academic level and became the focus of researchers' articles and papers in seminars, conferences and serious publications. In Albania, Elena Ferrante comes with four volumes translated into Albanian. The first one entitled "The Genius Friend" appeared in 2016, then followed the "New Surname" in 2017, "The History of Escape and Resistance" in 2017 and "History of the Lost Girl" in 2018, all published by "Pegi" publishing house. The Albanian reader immediately welcomed Ferrante's work turning it into a bestseller and Ferrante herself into a literary phenomenon similar to many other parts of the world. This novel is mainly part of what is called the *novel of formation* (buildingroman) focusing on the story of the journey of two female characters, their formation throughout life until the disappearance of one of them, a moment when the other friend undertakes to tell the story of their life by perpetuating it.

Close friendship, as a complementary form of a relationship

The so-called "Genius Saga" introduces us to two characters and two different worlds that each of them represents; Elena Greco (Lenù) and Rafaella Cerullo (Lila), close friends since childhood, with an intense and very strong bond which will last until adulthood and will include sixty years of history, from the years of Post-World War II until the end of the century. Elena Greco (Lenù) is considered as the embodiment of the writer herself: a wise and intelligent woman growing and moving forward only thanks to her hard work and efforts. Her friend is Lila, the opposite part of her personality and the complementary part, as well, where one is the genius friend of the other. Strong friendship between two friends, love and envy, cooperation and rivalry, acceptance and rejection are necessary directions of a society that would not exist if it were in another different form. The relationship between them is often complicated, unhealthy and inevitable, it is prey to almost unresolved contradictions with which they have to coexist because that is exactly their origin. Lila turns into Lenù's alter ego, disorienting her every day, putting her into trouble, shocking her until the end of the story when Lila disappears, and what remains from her is only her childhood with the lost dolls that will be finally refound. And there could be no other choice if Lenù had to live.

Among the articles in the Albanian press, it will be reflected almost in the same way because "... it is extremely touching to find a little of yourself within these pages and there is so much to learn from the scenes that Ferrante "paints" with her skillful hand. Partly narration and partly inspiration, Neapolitan novels offer the reasoning of women of all ages about what early feminist writers have called "Female Mysticism," in particular anger, grief, and frustration over the role of women as *The Second Sex*."¹.

City and mentality at the junctions with the Albanian reality.

The events take place in post-war Naples, in a poor neighborhood where behavior, attitudes and language are inherited unchanged for centuries. The atavistic asphyxiation of the Neapolitan social classes only evokes ignorance and violence in daily life, and painlessly suppresses human intelligence. Elena will embody the characteristics of the city she wants to leave at all costs and where again the blood bond calls her and does not let her free. It's not just the second volume she would write in detail about that stifling and almost unbearable reality:

"Every time I came back, I found more and more a jelly town, which could not withstand the change of season, heat, cold, especially storms. This is where the station was flooded, this is where the gallery opposite the museum collapsed, this is where a landslide

¹<http://bitchmagazine.al/kulture/7-leksione-per-te-mos-harruar-nga-novelat-napoletane-te-elena-ferrantes/>

occurred, electricity was no longer available. Dark roads full of dangers, ever-confusing traffic, torn cobblestones, large puddles had taken refuge in memory. Sewage overflowed canals would burst and spill all over. Lava of water, sludge, litter, germs poured into the sea from the hills where brand new and fragile constructions swarmed or eroded the world beneath it. People were dying of carelessness, perversion, misery and bullying, and yet, whenever elections were held, they enthusiastically gave their consent to politicians who made their lives unbearable.” (Ferrante,2017).

It is exactly this reality which reveals elements that resemble the Albanian reality, - said during an interview, the translator of the three volumes of tetralogy, Agim Doksani. The Albanian reader will seem to be in this reality where he/she finds many things in common, not only in regards with mentality, lifestyle and customs, but also in problems similar to those of southern Italy and especially Naples. Elena Ferrante portrays with a lot of elegance this reality which the Albanian reader can undoubtedly encounter in his/her daily life. This is similar to what Roberto Saviano writes about Naples. Three of his works have been translated by the translator Agim Doksani.

Appeal to the mysterious identity

But who is Elena Ferrante? It has been known for years that the novels written by her are signed by a nickname. It has been searched for a long time about her mysterious identity. The character of Elena (Lenù), the protagonist of the Neapolitan saga, has been studied in detail to find biographical elements that lead to the true physiognomy of the Italian writer. In particular, since Roberto Saviano, the well-known author of Gomorrah, nominated the writer for the Strega Award, curiosity about this novelist has exponentially grown. However, the Italian media, after extensive research, suggest an alternative which is later followed by others making it even more difficult to discover Elena Ferrante’s identity. However, it is said that it is about the 63-year-old translator, Anita Raja, who was born and raised in Naples. She was the daughter of a Polish Jew who fled the Holocaust and settled in Naples, and also the wife of the writer Domenico Starnone. She has never preferred any her photos or the confession of her identity because the work does not need to speak through the name. Keeping distance from the work, the author lets her communicate directly with the reader as the books have already been written and they no longer need the author.

The extraordinary success of this sage, according to the Italian reseracher Tiziana De Rogatis, is closely related to four elements, seemingly heterogeneous, but which have mutual relations and are decisive in the book reception. “The essential components that position the novel in the international arena are: 1. The setting of events in Naples, the emblem of Italian

diversity and oscillations between opposite worlds and periods. 2. A new model of female identity where archaic and contemporary elements are combined. 3. The narrative period extended through a long time span 4. Autobiographical literary genre, memoir. (elements which will be further deepened in De Rogatis, 2015, pp. 288-289)" (Siciliano, 2020: 11).

A strong message conveyed by the author draws the attention to the attentive reader about today's youth and the importance of their education. Studying and reading will help generations understand what their future should be like as well as what should be the safest way to leave behind a compelling and almost inevitable past. What united the two friends, Lila and Lenù, was the school and the books. They were forced to confront and struggle with the patriarchal mentality of the society and parents who conceived the girl only as a woman and then as a mother. But they will be rewarded only through studying and reading; Elena will escape by leaving for further studies in Pisa, while Lila will never lose the desire to learn, which will also turn out to be her good luck. What united them throughout their lives and what constitutes the force of tetralogy is the genius friendship between the two girls because despite jealousies, envy, lies, Elena and Lila will never cease to be close friends, collaborators and allies. They will always be united in a not only turbulent and stormy relationship but also strong and solid that no one can break.

Exactly, the strong point of these volumes is the interweaving of the sociological and psychological plan. Narrating female emancipation, narrating the Italian society of the time and its history, as well as narrating the doubled emotions and torn hearts by human contradictions and fragility is an extraordinary mastery and ability of the Ferrante phenomenon. For this and many other reasons the Neapolitan saga has been translated into 40 languages of the world and still continues to fascinate readers and publishers. The *Guardian* writes about the second volume: "Much more vivid and shocking than the first book... The only book that made me scream for something I read in its story." Or New Republic comments on the entirety of the volumes that make up the tetralogy:

"The Neapolitan saga is not one of Ferrante's first works. [...] But it is really different, it belongs to a completely different artistic order. Sometimes it happens: a writer works diligently and steadily for a while and then, there is a leap towards the extraordinary. [...] We should be grateful. "When this populated epic is closed, as readers we will be left with the taste we most eagerly await from literary prose: a world full of life" (Ferrante, 2017).

Conclusions

It must be said that the world of the novel needed such a special "friendship", such a genius friend who would stay for long in our literary taste. The reader will feel the emptiness of such a friend ending with the fourth volume of the saga and will also miss the unrepeatable emotion caused by this unique relationship and this "nameless" writer who turned into a literary phenomenon leaving her art of writing to communicate only through its magic. The Albanian language welcomed Ferrante's narrative in the best version through a very careful translation making our reader feel the force of a reality that weighs and oppresses, and at the same time of a genius female relationship that inspires and fills with passion and love.

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