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Intercultural Marriage: Contemporary Expressions of Displacement/Emplacement in British Fiction[1]

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Abstract: Fascination with Italy has been going on for centuries and is still prevailing in the literary perspectives of the British writers. While the writing styles show symptoms of change in the course of the selected last half of the twentieth century, the writers also vary in their observations with overarching discourses shifting the vast network of signs. Thereby, apart from portraying the various beauties of the Italian sun, landscape, religion, politics, art and music during the twentieth century, British writers have also started to reflect on another aspect of their cultural contact with Italians, marriage which becomes more complicated in the relational network of intercultural marriages – a Briton marrying an Italian or vice versa. This article particularly focuses on intercultural marriages in Eric Linklater's *Private Angelo* (1946), Jonathan Keates' *The Strangers' Gallery* (1987) and Tim Parks' *Cara Massimina* (1995), *Europa* (1997) and *Destiny* (1999), with the aim of discussing the kind of confrontation marriage with an Italian creates from the British male writers' perspective.

Keywords: Intercultural Marriage, Italian Wife, Emplacement in Italy, Eric Linklater *Private Angelo*, Jonathan Keates *The Strangers' Gallery*, Tim Parks, *Cara Massimina*, *Europa*, *Destiny*

While the twenty-first century is typified by globalization, Italy, it seems, retains its centuries-old fascination for specific nationalities – especially the British. Apart from portraying the various beauties of the Italian sun, landscape, religion, politics, art and music during the twentieth century[2], British writers have also started to reflect on another aspect of their cultural contact with Italians – marriage; the adventure of crossing cultures. As Peter M. Blau asserts "[t]here is a strain towards imbalance as well as toward reciprocity in social associations … A person who is attracted to another will seek to prove himself attractive to the other" (26). The imbalance in the so-called social associations – ie, marriage – becomes more complicated in the relational network of intercultural marriages–in this particular case, a Briton marrying an Italian or vice versa.

For the purpose of this article, I am going to focus on intercultural marriages in Eric Linklater's *Private Angelo* (1946), Jonathan Keates' *The Strangers' Gallery* (1987) and Tim Parks' *Cara Massimina* (1995), *Europa* (1997) and *Destiny* (1999), with the aim of discussing the kind of confrontation marriage with an Italian creates from the British male writers' perspective. British women writers are not included in this argument since

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[2] See Toplu, Sebnem. *Diverse Aspects of Italy and Italians in Contemporary British Literature*. Modena: Il Fiorino, 2001.

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generally, in the second half of the twentieth century, their characters' falling in love with a member of the counter culture functions as an end of the narrative between the respective couples such as in Sarah Woodhouse's *Meeting Lily* (1994), Anita Brookner's *Family and Friends* (1995) and Iris Murdoch's *The Italian Girl* (1964). Furthermore, Muriel Spark's novels do not cover intercultural marriages either, except for the rich American Maggie's marriage to an Italian aristocrat in *The Takeover* (1976). Despite the fact that their marriage does not fit into this discussion as of taking place between and American and Italian, I should note that the only implication about Berto as an Italian husband is his jealousy.

Primarily, in Eric Linklater's *Private Angelo*, written in 1946, Countess Pontefiore is an English woman who is married to an Italian Count. As with most British characters in novels, such as E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), "a holiday-fortnight that should have been devoted to the art of Renaissance" ends in marrying an Italian (*Private Angelo* 21). While waiting for a train to Pisa in Florence, the English girl wins immediately "the [Italian] Count's [Piccologrando] most passionate interest, and though their early friendship had been troubled […] she now, after twenty years of marriage enjoyed profound respect and the assurance, generally from a distance, of his enduring affection" (21). The ironic "enduring affection […] from a distance" signifies that the Italian husband lives in Rome and has an Italian mistress, the Marchesa Dolce, instead of living in Pontefiore with his English wife the Countess of Pontefiore.

The contrast between the Italian and British women is highly explicit in *Private Angelo* and is revealed on two axes; one on physical and the other on psychological qualities. That is, the usually plump Italian women have beautiful black eyes and black hair, whereas the British Countess is described as partly beautiful:"[H]er hair was faded but her eyes were bright" (21). The Italian women are portrayed as very affectionate and passionate, but when Angelo asks the British major Telfer if English women are very passionate, Telfer poignantly replies, "between their tennis-playing in girlhood and their later addiction to the card-table, there is a season during which they are not indifferent to love" (56). Conversely, though British women are criticized for not being passionate, they are left with a positive quality – their admirable strength in controlling situations and not falling apart after a catastrophe, displaced or emplaced. When the British Countess Pontefiore believes that her Italian husband, Count Piccologrando is killed during the German withdrawal, she continues "to go about her business of looking after Pontefiore with an apparent composure and real strength of mind that the villagers and peasants thought most unnatural" (44).

By the end of the Second World War, the Count goes back to Pontefiore to rejoin his English wife after more than twenty years. By this time, as a result of all the hardship Countess Pontefiore goes through on her own during the war, including the occupation of her house by German soldiers and the destruction of all her valuables, she starts drinking and becomes a more relaxed person. It is this particular personality that finally gains Count Piccologrando's admiration. Hence, the portrayal of the earliest marriage in this sequence is of an Italian man and an English woman who meet on vacation and marry to live apart for twenty years, only to rejoin to enjoy a relaxed quiet life when they are older and when the lady becomes almost an alcoholic. Thereby, it is possible to conclude that, ironically, the intercultural marriage continues on better terms when one of the parties involved, in this case the Countess, loses her characteristic of strong willpower and adapts to Italian mannerisms.

In contrast to Linklater's humorous way of handling the issue, Jonathan Keates' historical novel *The Strangers' Gallery* (1987) is a love story between an Englishman, Edward, and an Italian girl, Cristina Bentivoglio, within a nineteenth-century context. Yet, it is an impossible love since Cristina is destined for an arranged marriage with a rich Italian man. However, the intercultural marriage is a sub-plot since it is underpinned in Edward's English aunt Augusta's marriage to an Italian aristocrat, Count Castelvetro. Though we do not have clear textual evidence of his deceiving her, the Count stays away from his wife most of the time. Although not exactly similar to Count Pontefiore's twenty years' absence in *Private Angelo*, the coldness between the Count and Countess Castelvetro is implied by their physical and emotional distance. Count Castelvetro is a formidable man with whom even Augusta's nephew Edward feels uncomfortable.

On the other hand, Keates' comparison between the Italian and British women on two levels is parallel to Linklater's. Cristina's beauty is typified by dark bright eyes and she is metaphorically sculptural: "There was a brightness in her [Cristina's] glance and in the falls of her hair [...]. Thus tranquil and motionless, in her plain walking dress, she seemed fixed here in the church like an effigy" (*The Strangers' Gallery* 104). Likewise, Cristina's cousin Mariclò also has the typical "thick black hair" (104). Edward's aunt, Countess Augusta, contrary to expectations is described by her Italian steward Basevi as follows: "We'd heard of Englishwomen before, even if none of us had met any; they aren't much known to this region. Therefore, I'd expected someone marble and aloof, an effigy of pride and self-possession anything rather than your aunt. I looked at her, a thin, anemic, girlish creature with weak eyes and big hands, the Countess Castelvetro, my new master's wife, and I felt pity for her at once" (94). In the end, during an attempted assassination plotted against the Duke of Modena by Count Castelvetro himself, his English wife is tragically killed while trying to stop the incident. Thus, contrary to Italian prejudices, she acts courageously, justifying the stereotyped Englishwoman displaced in Italy, likewise formerly portrayed by Linklater.

Tim Parks' novels, on the other hand, handle the issue of intercultural marriages in detail and from a more complex stance. Parks reverses the situation exposed by Linklater and Keates, that is of beautiful Italian girls and supposedly stereotyped English women who prove to be courageous, instead Parks projects Englishmen who marry Italian girls. There are two particular points to make here: The first one is that, interestingly enough, Parks is also the only writer who is married to an Italian woman in his personal life. Secondly, his fiction covers a more recent period, the end of the twentieth century: *Cara Massimina* written in 1990, *Europa* in 1997 and *Destiny* in 1999.

In *Cara Massimina*, the English tutor Morris Duckworth partly intends to marry his student Massimina, kidnaps her for a handsome ransom of eight hundred million lire from her rich mother Signora Trevisan, while Massimina thinks they are eloping. Finally, when Massimina sees herself on the TV screen in Sardinia, Morris pretends that he did not know the police and her family would think she was kidnapped instead they would assume she had eloped. Therefore, Massimina tries to call her parents to explain and is killed by Morris in an unplanned act. Since Morris is so trusted by the police and Massimina's family his crime is not discovered in that he ironically ends up marrying Massimina's sister Paola. Thereby, rather than the usual comparisons between the characteristics of Italian and British women, Parks goes one step further than his fellow writers and makes his displaced Englishman a murderer[3] of an Italian girl before he actually marries one!

Morris' relationship with Massimina, despite the fact that it is not bound by marriage, is depicted in detail. The issue of displacement, taken from a different angle compared to the previous novels, is distinctive. At seventeen and a half, Massimina is not a striking girl but shares with the other Italian girls the characteristic feature of a "generous" (*CM* 8) figure, "full dark eyes" (20) and a "curious mixture of long black hair, light freckles on a camilla textured skin and clear big generous dark brown eyes. Her nose and facial structure had a fine sharpness about them" (21). Correspondingly, "[o]nce you got to know it, her face certainly had its character; oval and freckled with wide, liquid deep brown eyes and an expression that generally settled into a little practical frown [...] and when she smiled she was definitely attractive, though in a kindly rather than sexy way" (21). Massimina gradually gets more beautiful during the course of narration. Morris advises her to buy brilliant colours for make-up with the intention of making her look common and different for the sake of her disguise for their elopement/kidnapping. Instead, she applies them so carefully and well that she highlights her prettiness and ends up looking like "an angel with those neon reds and blues attracting all the wrong kind of affection" (110). Thus, Massimina's portrayal reveals a beautiful Italian girl, attractive and intelligent, carrying all the stereotypical Italian woman's characteristics. Furthermore, Morris also emphasizes his admiration for the femininity of the Italian girls expressed in their adoration of babies and children, and by their walking arm in arm – "not afraid of expressing an innocent affection for each other" (114). However, whether the British women

[3] Discussing Morris' motive for kidnapping is out of the focus of this article and thereby not included.

are displaced or not, they are still critically compared to the Italian women since the displaced Englishman Morris still seems to carry negative feelings: "Morris was really beginning to like the girl [Massimina]. She wasn't at all like those tweed-skirted, toffee nosed types one had felt obliged to court in one's student days, always ready to air some opinionated opinion on any and every subject, the spirit of contradiction prompts and bristling under their powdered Oxbridge skins should you try to do the same" (9).

In this intercultural relationship, which seems very close to actual marriage, the only comment on the Englishmen by Massimina is made on the beach: "They are stretched out on the beach at Rimini. Morris under a sunshade, Massimina a foot or two away in the full sun. Morris felt rather embarrassed by his dead white English skin" (97) and Massimina remarks to her friend Sandra how English he was "staying hidden and white under the sunshade like a mole, while everybody else basked" (110)[4].

In *Europa* (1997), Parks similarly handles the issue of intercultural marriage between an Englishman and an Italian woman, yet this time concerning a couple divorced after nineteen years of married life. Since it is a first person narrator, the English professor Jerry Marlow asserts that the reason they divorced was because the relationship had become unbearable. Although Parks still depicts the Italian girls as beautiful with "long attractive legs" (*Europa* 13) and "the blackest, raven, almost blue hair" (169), his wife's beauty is never described and ironically her name is never mentioned. According to the text, she was as beautiful as Jerry's students when young, but the reason why Jerry finds a French mistress and divorces his wife is because of the defect Jerry hates in his Italian wife's character. In fact, it is her very feminine act of cleanliness in pursuit of an impeccable home that becomes a metaphor by Jerry's obsessive hatred:

> I often feel that one of the reasons our marriage reached the sorry state it did was my wife's obsessive use of the vacuum-cleaner, and not only of the vacuum-cleaner but of every cleaning implement, product and aid available to modern man, or rather invented by modern man for modern woman. Simply, the vacuum-cleaner was always on, nudging around my feet when I was trying to read on the sofa or to play draughts with Suzanne, clattering against the bedroom door when perhaps I was trying to sleep late on a Saturday. And this was nothing other, I believe, than one of my wife's many ways of expressing her suffocating desire to ripristinare, as the Italians say, to be constantly returning thing to their pristine state, or more particularly in my wife's case, her desire to have everything remain exactly as it was the day we were married and moved into the new flat which I had made the terrible mistake (in this case absolutely formative, one of the grand structural mistakes of my life), the terrible mistake of letting her parents buy for us and of living in ever since, or at least until about eighteen months ago, which means it was nineteen years, nineteen years, and every year the shutters had to be re-varnished and the walls re-whitewashed and the window-frames re-sealed, and in our relationship, too it was likewise understood that everything had to be kept in a perfectly mint emotional state. (*Europa* 58)

Thereby, the basic conventions of Italian life: the parents' buying a house for their child, maintaining close family ties and endeavouring to keep things new, form a metaphor in Jerry's relation with his Italian wife; to keep things in a pristine state becomes the constant mocking of renewing a relationship that is dead. Yet, the ironical situation is that failing in this intercultural marriage, Jerry finds a French mistress and when the mistress betrays him he decides to leave Italy, the country which finally delineates itself metaphorically as a trap. To justify deserting his Italian wife, on the bus trip to Strasbourg, Jerry relates the issue to his expatriate colleagues: "I asked jokingly, if others present are aware what the divorce rate is in marriages between people from different

[4] The discrepancy is revealed in Parks' *An Italian Education* (1996) a non-fiction where he honestly talks about every aspect of his experience in Italy with his Italian wife Rita and their three children. When they are on the beach at Pescara, Parks remarks that "where I was brought up, if you got down to the sea at 8.30 in the morning, you would freeze to death" (3) and "if you set up a sunshade on the beach at Blackpool, where I lived as a child, the chances are it would be blown away. Even with a huge cement base" (3-4).

European countries, and when of course they don't know, as why on earth should they, of what use are statistics to any of us? I tell them fifty per cent higher than an average of the average in each of the countries concerned. Fifty per cent" (*Europa* 49).

By the end of the novel, Jerry decides against going back to Italy at all. Yet, ironically, he insists on being displaced, as he decides to stay in Strasbourg and work at the European Parliament with the implication of starting a new relationship. Consequently, he completes the loop with a girl from Yorkshire, but Parks does not depict the English girl at all, thus he terminates the contrast between the Italian and British women.

Tim Parks' *Destiny* (1999) similarly reflects the cultural incompatibility in intercultural marriages between the British and the Italians. Three months after returning to England writer Christopher Burton receives a phone call at the reception desk of a hotel in Knightsbridge informing him of his son Marco's suicide. On receiving this devastating news, Burton immediately decides he must leave his Italian wife, Mara, of thirty years' standing, while he finds it so difficult to focus on his for his son: "[T]here is no reason, I told myself…no reason at all for you and your wife to go on living together now that your son is dead" (*Destiny* 1). Within the course of a couple of days during which they fly from London to Rome for their son's funeral, Chris keeps re-evaluating his marital relationship: "But other things are equally bad for your health – as for example the uncertainty generated by your wife's constant changes of mind, her inexplicable rancor, her obsessive attachment to your unhappy son Marco, things that undeniably lie at the root of your various disorders – do not concern her in the least" (3).

Burton's cultural identity comes to the fore in trying to justify his feelings against his wife and in his "hysteria"[5] (Modleski 137-40). Italy recurs as a metaphor of a marital trap just as in Parks' previous fiction *Europa*: "I did the right thing, I suddenly thought, returning to England. After all, I am English myself. Even after all these years away, the decades, I am still English. If you had remained in England you would surely have divorced your wife ages ago, I told myself complacently in the Hotel Rembrant breakfast room" (*Destiny* 6).

Planning to write a book on national character (which is the Italian character in this case), the samples Chris chooses are ironic because he keeps comparing his wife's and former Italian politician Andreotti's[6] characteristics – in an attempt to construct an Italian national character. However, what he achieves is to strengthen his argument by stereotyping his wife:

> the predictability, given a proper understanding of race, character, sex and circumstances, of all human behavior [...] national destiny [...]. Andreotti would say exactly what was expected of him. Exactly what I had said he would say [...] Or indeed my wife – most of all my wife – if only one could put one's wife in a monumental book. People are who they are, I thought. I have always thought. Most particularly your wife. So every study in prediction, in political calculation, and all failure to predict is a failure to understand character [...]. Who is at once more himself and more exquisitely, as the Italians put it, Italian, than Andreotti? (*Destiny* 10-11).

In his evaluation, Chris Burton goes through all aspects of the Italian characteristics. He falls in love with his wife "for her vivacity, her vehemence [...] her energy" (*Destiny* 27). He remarks, "[i]t is rare for my wife not to attend to her make-up. Like many Italians, she is a person intensely aware of her physical appearance, her physical attractions. I love her for that" (74). Yet, he adds, "look what happened to my adventurous marriage [...] that sudden meeting of two nations. Two cultures. Hounslow lower-middle and Roman aristocracy (so-called). Oh, if you knew, I laughed! From an Acton terrace to the house of ghosts! So– called" (55). Chris' mention of

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[5] Male hysteria linked to traumatic shock.

[6] **Giulio Andreotti,** (January 14, 1919, Rome,— May 6, 2013, Rome), Italian politician who was one of the country's most skillful and powerful politicians in the era after World War II. Over a 20-year period, he was a leading figure in the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and served as prime minister of Italy several times (1972–73, 1976–79, and 1989–92) (*Britannica online*).

the Roman aristocracy is a criticism of the abundance of titles in Italy (Keates 1991, 48). On the other hand, his wife's aristocratic background and close family ties lead him to refer to his house as "the houses of ghosts". Furthermore, his abhorrence of "the house of ghosts" also parallels the metaphor of Italy or Italian homes as a trap, as in Parks' previous fiction *Europa*.

The complex working of Burton's mind even refers to tax evasion as a cultural influence of his wife:

> To the extent, I reflect, that after all those years castigating corruption, I had myself started evading tax. In Rome as the Romans [...] You know your wife, I thought [...] so ultimately you become like her. You eat into the apple, only to find it has eaten you. You're not so English as you imagine, I thought. You have become Italian. You have become like your wife [...] so that if Italy, like your wife, remains obscure to you, that can only be because you yourself are obscure. (*Destiny* 123-4)

Always accusing Italy, he concludes, "I myself would have behaved entirely differently, I felt – no, I was sure – in London or Los Angeles, or with an English wife in Rome" (*Destiny* 129). Moreover, "[i]t was your wife who gave you your monuments" (193). As the narrative is the first person, we learn about Chris' wife Mara through him and her assumed point of view is mediated in this way. Nonetheless, what we gather is that, compared to Chris, Mara behaves in a controlled and natural fashion in the expression of her grief for the death of their son. Although Chris insults her over their son' grave, when Chris goes back to "the house of ghosts" Mara accepts him: "Tomorrow it seems we will move out of the house of ghosts. Tomorrow we can begin to mourn our son" (249). Finally Chris indicates a metaphorical shift from Italy as a "trap" to solely "the house of ghosts" as the final trap, and in the end, he is resolute that moving out of the house itself will constitute a change. Instead of reacting naturally to his son's suicide, Christopher Burton's initial fear of going from England back to Italy, his almost paranoiac discussion of his difference from his Italian wife throughout the novel, can be explained by Bauman who argues that fear of deviation is a closely condensed kind of anxiety, "[i]t is relatively easy to discern a common content behind the variety of forms; Horkheimer and Adorno could unerringly pinpoint the 'fear of void', experienced as the fear of being different and thus lonely, as the hard core of modern anxieties" (115). Thereby for Bauman, instead of "chasing a postmodern 'mother of all fears', it is prudent to settle for an inventory of postmodern anxieties" (115).

Analyzed as a whole, this portrayal of an intercultural marriage by an Englishman in Tim Parks' *Destiny* disregards any of the positive aspects of Italian womanhood or Italy itself. At the instigation of the void caused by his son's death, Chris Burton immediately starts to question his wife's typical Italian qualities, including her close family ties, predictability, and her obsession with appearance – *La Bella Figura*[7] (Richards 19) (emphasis original). Displaced and anxious Chris argues about his wife's role throughout the novel only to end up by her side in the end, emplaced in Italy.

In the absence of women writers to tackle these issues, it is Linklater, Keates and Parks who address the question of intercultural marriages, displaced in Italy themselves as writers. However, these male writers' handling of the dispute of intercultural marriage is usually insufficient in the complexity of its argument (with the exception, perhaps, of Tim Parks' *Destiny*). While Linklater and Keates focus on infidelity and/or distant manners of Italian husbands married to displaced British women, Parks develops the relationship the other way around, focusing on what an Englishman goes through as the husband of an Italian woman, displaced and emplaced in Italy. Moreover, in general what these male writers present is a pointedly negative portrayal of intercultural marriages, despite the beauty of Italian women. Regarding Elaine Showalter's analysis metaphorically, it is possible to conclude that "the woman becomes the case study as well as the case, an object to be incisively opened, analysed, and reassembled by the male writer" (128).

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[7] Richards maintains that Italians are the "world's best-dressed people" (xv) in that *La bella figura* means always looking one's best even in order to "conceal indigence, or unhappiness" (19) (emphasis original).

Consequently, it is possible to argue that these male writers constantly employ prejudiced and distorted female images to overcome their sense of alienation caused by dislocation. Furthermore, the writers gradually become emplaced in Italy, since they are transformed in their writing process. As Foucault asserts, "[f]or me intellectual work is related to what you would call aestheticism, meaning transforming yourself [...]. This transformation of oneself by one's own knowledge is, I think rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?" (14). Covering the period between 1946-1999 then, I suggest for Linklater, Keates and Parks the adventure of crossing cultures provides the opportunity for personal growth; transforming alienation into a sense of belonging.

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