JAST, **2023; 60: 61-72**
Submitted: 23.04.2023
Accepted: 31.05.2023
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Food and Women in an Italian-Canadian Novel: *Tenor of Love* by Mary Di Michele

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Abstract

Food is an important "identity marker" and plays a key role in the migration process: by consuming the food and maintaining the culinary habits of their country, migrants affirm their identity and culture. Moreover, food is often associated with memory and nostalgia for the country of origin: indeed, it is evident that the presence of food and its preparation in literature becomes a kind of mirror for society. In the case of Canada, this analytical perspective appears particularly interesting, because its cultural context is hybrid: half American, half European, and with a considerable number of immigrants from all over the world.

In this "gastro-literary" journey I propose to take, I will try to show that nourishment is a solid and real principle in the construction of identity in Canada, through the works of Italian *migrant* writers. In this contribution, I will analyze the theme of food connected to pleasure in a novel by an Italian-Canadian writer, Mary Di Michele, entitled *Tenor of Love*. I will mainly consider the passages in this novel in which culinary practices are used as metaphors for situations typical of Italian migrants to Canada. Thereafter, I will examine the close link between the search for identity and female authenticity present in the novel, and how Di Michele manages to deconstruct the *clichés*

associated with Italian culture and tradition through the figurative value of nourishment, managing to restore, through writing, legitimacy to women.

Keyword: Food, identity, Italian-Canadian writer, Mary Di Michele, women

İtalyan-Kanadalı Bir Romanda Yemek ve Kadın:

Mary Di Michele'in *Tenor of Love* Adlı Romanı

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Öz

Yemek önemli bir "kimlik göstergesi"dir ve göç sürecinde temel rol oynamaktadır. Göçmenler ülkelerinin yemeğini tüketerek ve yemek pişirme alışkanlıklarını koruyarak kimliklerini ve kültürlerini olumlarlar. Ayrıca yemek, sıklıkla kendi ülkelerine duyulan nostalji ve bellek ile ilişkilendirilir. Aslında edebiyatta yemeğin varlığının ve hazırlanışının toplumun bir çeşit aynasını oluşturduğu açıktır. Bu analitik bakış açısı Kanada bağlamında özellikle ilginç görünmektedir. Çünkü Kanada'nın kültürel dokusu, yarı Amerikalı yarı Avrupalı ve dünyanın her yerinden gelen önemli sayıda göçmenlerle hibrittir.

Bu "gastro-edebi" yolculukta, İtalyan göçmeni yazarların eserlerinde, Kanada'da göçmen kimliğinin oluşumunda beslenmenin temel ilke olduğunu göstermeye çalışacağım. Yemeğin keyif almakla olan bağını İtalyan-Kanadalı yazar Mary Di Michele'in *Tenor of Love* başlıklı romanında inceleyeceğim. Özellikle yemek pişirme pratiklerinin Kanada'ya göçen İtalyanların durumlarını anlatmak için metafor olarak kullanıldığı kısımlar üzerinde duracağım. Sonrasında, romandaki kimlik arayışı ve kadının özgünlüğü arasındaki yakın bağı ve Di Michele'in beslenmenin sembolik anlamlarını kullanarak İtalyan kültürü ve geleneğiyle özdeşleştirilen klişelerin yapısökümünü nasıl yaptığını ve yazarak kadınlara meşruluklarını iade ettiğini tartışacağım.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yemek, kimlik, İtalyan-Kanadalı yazar, Mary Di Michele, kadın

As a well-known Latin saying goes: *Venerem sine Libero et Cerere frigere,* there is an intimate connection between food, wine and love, a triad that, since antiquity[1] to the present day, has represented the essential intersection of the joys granted to human beings and comestible commodities, such as prepared foods, are the foundations of social transactions. From the biblical myth of an Edenic paradise and original sin to today's advertisements that show sensual baths in milk or chocolate, the combination of food and pleasure, sex and creativity, is one of the major literary and cultural tropes of the Western world (Kiell). Simmel suggests that objects are not difficult to acquire because they are valuable, "but we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them" (Simmel 67).

And what constitutes the consumption of food at a feast is the transformation it effects – which may be minuscule or intensely significant, depending on the nature of the occasion – in the relative social identities of the parties to the host/guest, feeder/fed, transaction involved. This is analytically quite distinct from any contingent metabolic processes the food may undergo at the same time. In many Italian-Canadian feasts the food is not actually eaten by the participants, but the feasts remain consumption rituals in Douglas and Isherwood's sense (Douglas and Isherwood). What distinguishes consumption from exchange is not that consumption has a physiological dimension that exchange lacks, but that consumption involves the incorporation of the consumed item into the personal and social identity of the consumer.

Within this purely patriarchal tradition, woman is often excluded from the enjoyment of these pleasures, even though she is the one who grants them, through her body and her role as mother, wife, lover and cook who lovingly prepares and offers food to others. In the collective imagination, a series of stereotypical associations have developed between women and food, between the female body and nourishment, between food and eros, which have contributed to a decreeing of female passivity in the dichotomous construction of pleasure in terms of binary oppositions between eating/being eaten, desiring/being desired, creating/being created, nourishing/being nourished (Sceats).

The search for female identity and authenticity, present in a myriad of contemporary texts written by women, thus aims to re-appropriate the figurative value of nourishment in order to subvert the

conventional links between food, sexuality and artistic creation. The result is to reassign legitimacy to women, both as desiring beings and as creators.

In the novel *Tenor of Love*, Italian-Canadian writer Mary Di Michele recreates the life of the famous tenor Enrico Caruso through his love affairs with different women, with the Giacchetti sisters in Italy, at the dawn of his career, and with his young American wife, when he is at the height of his success. In all three cases, extensive use is made of the metonymic value of food to depict sexual desire, both as a key stage in female emancipation and as a tool of domination by men. For example, in the novel's *incipit*, the description of the first meeting, in July 1897, between the almost 17-year-old Rina Giacchetti and the young and penniless Rico, is dominated by olfactory, gustatory, visual and tactile sensations related to food. Rina perceives Rico's smell as that of cooking oil and Sicilian olives spiced with garlic and chili peppers mixed with a "murky music composed of musk and wood" (Di Michele 10); his full-bodied voice reminds her of the flavor and sweet voluminousness of whipped cream, so much so that she perceives "a fluttering in my knickers as if a moth, asleep for sixteen years, had suddenly burst through its cocoon and was beating its wings against my bottom" (Di Michele 11). According to Dante, this is the beginning of Rina's *vita nova* as a desiring woman, which is then metaphorically made explicit through the image of artichokes. Those "thorny green roses" (Di Michele 10) that Rina buys at the market for her mother, fall from her hands at the sight of the young Caruso, rolling like heads, free, bloodless, "as if from the clean execution of the guillotine" (Di Michele 10). Despite her attempts to pick them up and carry them in her skirt, the forbidden flowers fall again, forcing her to expose herself to Rico who, perceiving the artichokes as "golden apples" (Di Michele 59), enjoys staring "at the lace of her skirt" (Di Michele 11). On a symbolic level, the artichoke's dual association with the apple and with a thorny-crowned rose, concealing its heart in its center instead of flaunting its beauty, evokes the antithetical feminine ideals of the sinner and the saint. These same ideals are deconstructed by Di Michele throughout the novel, as elsewhere in her poetic production.

While eager to share her mother's "cravings" for artichoke, which, in Rina's words, "is not a mistress, but a wife swathed in a chastity belt" (Di Michele 10), with the unexpected arrival of the tenor, the young woman sniffs for the first time "the smell of eating in bed,

not the invalid's, but the lover's" (Di Michele 10). She immediately surrenders to carnal fantasies about "the Neapolitan" (Di Michele 10) with an angel's voice, who she identifies as her long-awaited future husband. When she walks on the Ligurian beach, and the frothy waves "lick my feet, and then suck at my toes" (Di Michele 22), she tries to imagine the taste of "a man's mouth, a man's tongue" (Di Michele 22), while, at night, dreaming of her beloved, she accidentally touches herself, deluding herself that his skin is an extension of her own and, caressing her round, smooth belly, enters "a territory both familiar and strange" (Di Michele 26), into that uncharted territory of one's own body and erotic desire.

Therefore, Rina's search for identity and pleasure clashes with the dominant feminine ideals of the late 19th century which, in part, survive to this day. On the one hand, there is an almost sacred model offered by the figure of the mother, a perfect nurturer capable of curbing her own sexual instincts through ascetic Christian fasting; every morning, for example, she allows herself breakfast only after going to mass, praying and taking communion. On the other hand, there is the figure of her sister Ada, a beautiful *femme fatale* who delights in devouring the men who worship her, such as the naive Enrico, whose appetite is, according to Rina, far greater than that of all other diners.

Despite being married and having a child, Ada categorically rejects these conventional roles and behaves like a successful diva whose desire for fame and independence is commensurate with her sexual appetites. Sporting a haughty and contemptuous attitude toward the infatuated "*little tenor*" (Di Michele 35), at the restaurant, for example, Ada carefully studies the menu, ordering the most expensive dish, namely veal marsala, followed by dessert. Her carnal desire, symbolized by her choice of the meat dish, contrasts with the simple choice of Rina who, like her mother, orders spaghetti *alla marinara*.

The sexually mature and willing woman who does not deny her body is contrasted with the young virgin who is, yes, curious to discover her sexuality, but only within the social conventions of marriage. Rina does not deny that she wants to be similar to her mother, as evidenced, moreover, by her dedication to learning the art of *making tortellini*, curiously, they look to her like the buttocks of newborn babies rather than the navel of Venus. This confirms the privilege she accords to the procreative role both on the level of pure sexual enjoyment and on the

artistic and creative level. Unlike her rival, Ada, who lives for art, Rina, in fact, does not desire a musical career, but considers music simply as "the *zabaione*, the sweet and frothy dessert in life's feast," where "the first and primary course was always the family; a husband and children was what I planned for" (Di Michele 20).

Yet, Rina's youthful, Platonic infatuation with Rico marks not only the blossoming of her sexual desire, but also her artistic initiation. Complaining that she does not know the language of love, except through the verses composed by men to describe women, Rina attempts to create a new one, pleased that she has managed to imitate Dante in weaving metaphors: "The rose may be Dante's, but the fern, the fern is mine" (26).

Similarly, Rina's romantic disappointment, ironically she lost Rico to preserve her virginity until marriage, brings her closer to music, that "cheap form of catharsis" (Di Michele 60). In fact, music becomes her life, turning her into a fairly successful opera singer and enabling her to earn her own economic independence. The latter condition is denied to her adulterous sister who, according to the laws of the time, cannot even obtain a divorce from her husband in order to marry Enrico, her new partner, upon the birth of their firstborn son.

Through the dichotomous opposition between the two sisters and their relationships with Caruso, Di Michele executes a parodic deconstruction of female stereotypes that imprison female pleasure in the roles of chaste nurturer on the one hand, and erotic nurturer on the other. In this deconstructive framework, recurrent references to the Catholic religion, exemplarily impersonated by the mother, help subvert the biblical myth of creation and original sin. Eve's condemnation for having brought the apple to Adam fueled the ideal of woman as mere corporeality, causing her to feel ashamed of her own body. Rina's gradual rediscovery of her own sexuality, which represents a milestone in the process of female emancipation, finds its climax in the almost archetypal moment of mock communion that Rina and Rico share during their first picnic. Here bread and wine, the sacred symbols of religious ritual, are ironically consumed as a prelude to mating. In fact, mating does not take place on this occasion because Rina, feeling ashamed of her own menstrual blood, reins in her passion. Significantly, the dual perception of sex, sacred act and sin, is co-present. For Rina, in fact, the first kisses they exchange have the mystical and ecstatic flavor of the sacred host, but also the impetuosity

of a large snake, "as if to kiss meant to eat – or to be eaten" (Di Michele 20)[2].

The author's parodic intent is clearly to subvert both of these distorted visions of love: the romantic love embodied by Dante's heavenly Platonic feeling for Beatrice, idealized even more by Rina, and the instinctual, carnal, devouring love that is proper to both young Enrico and Ada. The latter has devastating emotional consequences for both, as it openly puts them in conflict with social conventions, making them dangerously transgressive. In recounting the love triangle between Rina, Rico and Ada, Di Michele denounces the weight of sociocultural conventions, and specifically those in Italy, from Stilnovism to the early 20th century, that stifle female eros and hinder authentic relationships devoid of idealizations between the sexes.

Dante's ideal of love as a kind of nourishment of the soul, capable of orienting to bliss and eternal salvation, proves particularly harmful, as it perpetuates the split between body and soul and, therefore, between "lust" and "pure love" (Di Michele 73): the separation of the passionate desire for pure love imprisons the woman in the role of angelic nurturer. Initially, Rina accepts that role, deluding herself that she can win Rico back and take their relationship to a higher plane, where the temptations of the flesh can be repressed, and one feeds only "on crumbs" (Di Michele 73). Her desire for food/sex fades so much that "the food, all the pasta and roasted meat, had made me drowsy" (Di Michele 83). Regressing almost to the stage of "child" (Di Michele 82), she accepts that she is only "an angel" for Rico, with the resigned knowledge that Ada is his "goddess" (Di Michele 84), the goddess without whom he cannot live.

The chaste nurse attempts, forcefully, to suppress her own passionate instincts, not only by offering her breasts to Rico and Ada's baby Fofò, substituting herself for her sister as surrogate mother, but also by projecting her desire to make love to Rico on the stage, imagining fictitious intercourse while acting in *Carmen*. Paradoxically, however, her choice to pursue a career as an opera singer in order to get closer to Rico and share, like asexual angels in the firmament, the music of the heavenly spheres, takes her in the opposite direction.

Hence, her erotic transgression with another man, one of the many petty suitors who, while on tour in Chile, forcefully slips into her

dressing room, attempting to seduce the "weak" and "hungry" nurturer-virgin with flowers, chocolates and champagne. Rina's transgression, though a single, brief moment of weakness of the flesh, is punished almost biblically and with greater severity than the many transgressions of the adulteress Ada. Rico treats her with cold detachment, while her family now judges her "as a Carmen, a gypsy harlot" (Di Michele 132). Such loss of innocence, such a sinful fall reminiscent of Eve's, will enable her to overcome the nurturer/nutrition dichotomy and enjoy a new freedom. The following words are significant, "If I was a fallen woman, at least that made me a free one. It made it easier to make decisions…I was now a woman in every way. I was no longer afraid to leave home" (Di Michele 132-3).

In the second part of the novel, which chronicles Caruso's New York affairs, Di Michele again exploits the symbolic value of food, not only to legitimize the female libido, but also to articulate the ethnic woman's desire to conquer her own cultural identity.

In fact, the spatial dislocation from Italy to the new continent allows the author to introduce the perspective of Bibi, the aspiring Italian-American singer who works as a companion in the home of the American lawyer, Park Benjamin: she resorts to her passion for food as a strategy of resistance against patriarchal indoctrination and to re-appropriate her Italian heritage.

Since the presence of her compatriot Caruso allows her to rediscover the pleasure of speaking Italian and singing opera, Bibi tries unsuccessfully to charm the famous tenor by cooking him traditional Mediterranean, and particularly Neapolitan, dishes. She explains that: "Italian folk wisdom says that if you cook like a man's mother, he begins to see you as a wife" (Di Michele 234). On the occasion of Enrico's first visit, Bibi prepared a sumptuous lunch with the singer's favorite dishes: "a prosciutto and melon appetizer, spaghetti with tomato sauce, veal stew with lentils and peas, fried eggplant flavored with garlic, peasant bread with spiced olives, and Neapolitan pastries stuffed with ricotta and raisins" (Di Michele 215).

The abundance of food is as closely related to the woman's physical appearance, described as "a petite woman in her thirties, buxom and bubbly" (Di Michele 198), as to her sexual desires. The male diners consider these "appetites" to be somewhat exaggerated

and inappropriate, as reflected in Park's lapidary response to the sight of dessert: "Don't you think we've eaten enough?" (Di Michele 217). Caruso himself does not give in to the effervescent Bibi's attempts to seduce him, as he considers the exuberant Bibi's pleasure in food, sex and *bel canto* as a dangerous transgression of the feminine ideal he has in mind. After the disappointment of his relationship with Ada, Enrico, now a mature and successful man, is well aware of the danger of the devouring woman, who nurtures eros, but is incapable of offering the nurturer's protection and affective tenderness. He is, therefore, careful not to be devoured by female voluptuousness falling back instead on the tranquility and security offered by the nurturing woman. He continues to attend convivial dinners, organized by Bibi, but only to win over Dorothy, Park's young daughter. The thin, well-mannered young woman, who is anything but sophisticated and lascivious, has dormant appetites, for as she herself states: "I was a comatose patient, not a princess, asleep in my father's house. Or worse, trapped in the cloistered space of the kitchen where it was perpetually morning and my father would be demanding perfectly cooked eggs" (Di Michele 191).

Although she plays the role of nurturer in her father's cloister, Dorothy, like the nuns at the Sacred Heart Convent where she studied, is denied the enjoyment of food. Only the father-master, described by his daughter as a tyrannical Egyptian Pharaoh and Dickensian *Master*, is allowed to find pleasure in food, enjoy drinking a good cognac after dinner and impose his own tastes on his daughter. When he then repeatedly insists on steak, disdaining the dishes of lamb in mint sauce, rice and green beans that his daughter prepares for him, he also usurps her role as nurturer.

As in the Rossinian aria placed in the epigraph, Dorothy, a modern Cinderella who dreams of meeting her prince, naively accepts the attentions of the king-tenor in order to free herself from oppressive patriarchal power; but her American fairy tale does not have a happy ending. Her quest for independence and authenticity is not, in fact, satisfied by marriage to Caruso: the union turns out to be, in some ways, as oppressive and alienating as life with her father.

Unlike the descriptions of Rina's amorous encounters, which are characterized by abundant culinary metaphors, an absence of references to food emerges in the relationship between Dorothy and

Caruso: this makes explicit the failure of Dorothy's search for an authentic and satisfying sexual identity. Food and pleasure are, instead, presented as the prerogatives of the male world: it is Caruso who smells of licorice, who identifies watermelon as the best fruit, who recalls the practice of hunting, since in Italy "it takes a lot of birds to season spaghetti sauce" (Di Michele 245), playing with double entendres. One example is offered by the following observation: in his dialect *ice-cream* is read "i ce creame", that is "here we create ourselves" (Di Michele 223), thus reaffirming his role as creator/artist. In his hands Cinderella Dorothy becomes Doro, a little princess with golden hair, an obedient, passive and humble wife who shines in reflected light, a tender mother and a helpful nurturer, but never a prima donna like Ada. Although she satisfies her husband's palate by learning to make a real Neapolitan espresso, her libido is suppressed and her desire for bread is again reduced to the communion wafer, preparing to be "good like the Madonna herself" (Di Michele 273).

In the same way as Rina, Dorothy seems to resign herself, then, to the passive role of nurturer, condemned to give up her own pleasure in order to be appreciated by Caruso. Their resigned surrender is, however, only an apparent failure of the identity *quest*. Indeed, while dedicating the novel to the legendary Tenor of Love, Di Michele does not make Caruso the absolute hero. Instead, it is precisely Rina and Dorothy who are the real protagonists of the story: being placed as the narrating voices of the novel, it is they who tell, in the first person, their own stories and that of the great tenor, who retrace their desire for sexual emancipation, taking pleasure in the creation of culinary metaphors, and who enjoy the act of textual creation that is also a re-creation of themselves.

Unlike Ada and Bibi, the *creative* transgression that Di Michele grants to Rina and Dorothy allows the latter to redeem themselves and overcome the split between being a nurturer or being nourished, accepting both roles as complementary aspects of female identity. Doro, like Rina, nurtures, but is, at the same time, nurtured by Caruso, not so much sexually as intellectually. It is through him that she approaches the world of opera by discovering alternative female roles; that she learns to overcome the impenetrable mystery of her own face and to recognize in the mirror the body of a woman "capable of seeing well" and "worth being seen" (Di Michele 194). Having abandoned her youthful shyness, Doro learns, moreover, to have self-confidence,

both as a woman and as an aspiring writer: hence the awareness that her destiny will be to become the biographer of the great master, the one who can "record the small details, the intimate gestures of his last moments" (Di Michele 299).

In adopting the female perspective to reconstruct Caruso's life, Di Michele restores to his women the dignity as prima donnas precluded to them in the era in which they lived and reevaluates the significant role they both played for Enrico, not only as chaste nurturers/loving mothers/tender lovers, but also as artistic and spiritual nourishment, and as musical inspiration and accompaniment. Like Ada who serves as singing teacher to the young tenor, Rina and Doro also help the great Caruso perfect his singing and strengthen his voice at important moments in his career. The female narrative also reshapes the myth of Caruso, revealing the man, with his weaknesses and false illusions about women and love, with appetites and disappointments, with the pleasure of *devouring* women and with the horror of being devoured like a dessert, with the desire to seduce by playing the clown and with the pain of suddenly discovering that he has been betrayed and transformed into the *clown* Cain, not only on stage.

Di Michele, as is also evident from the numerous musical, literary and ekphrastic references, conceives of the text as a kind of banquet, a modern symposium where female voices participate in an alchemical fusion of pleasures, where the metaphorical associations between food, eros and creativity are revisited and re-appropriated. In this way, the cannibalistic and subversively erotic act of writing becomes a feminine instrument of liberation, a new recipe book of rebellion, capable of enrapture and excitement, pleasure and fulfillment, nourishment and devouring. In the text's carnivalesque banquet, the Italian woman-writer creates a new expression of desire, a language that, in freeing her voice, provides her with a sublime pleasure that is both erotic and spiritual by satisfying every appetite. In uniting the complementary processes of cooking/writing and eating/reading, Di Michele invites us to share, savor and enjoy the pleasures offered by her orgiastic banquet.

Notes

[1] In Greek symposia, the consumption of food and wine combined with the playful enjoyment of singing, music, and conversation is an inevitable prelude to libido.

[2] The opposition between sacredness and sin, which recalls the dualism between physical love and spiritual love, between pleasure of the body and pleasure of the soul, is skillfully and ironically deconstructed through contrasting biblical references. The symbolism of the serpent, along with the observation that "We might have been Eve and Adam" (28) in the Garden of Eden, is, for example, counterbalanced by the symbolism of wine and menstrual blood that refer to Christ's sacrifice.

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