

A Mediterranean Participation in the Work of Pietro Bartolo and Lidia Tilotta

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Starting from a model introduced by Aristotle and successively elaborated by contemporary scholars, compassion is considered as the involvement in another individual's occurrence and is shown through a change in awareness or understanding, or an act to enhance the condition of another. Such compassion might be displayed as a positive word, a thoughtful conduct, or a helpful effort communicating that another individual is confronting an obstacle. The present study examines different representations of suffering and their related compassionate outcomes. The aim is to demonstrate the significance of offering caring attention to a mass of people perceived as unique individuals with an exclusive history, emotional experience, and self-awareness, rather than as undetectable individuals defined as a wave of refugees. This explanation is significant since the popular approach of the media tends to dehumanize the migrants, portray them as a group of individuals without specific needs, goals, rights, or responsibilities, and therefore associate them to a situation that is dangerously out of control. This study underlines the way in which the authors of the book utilize representations of suffering and compassion to recreate the migrants' identity and suggest a refreshed way of comprehending the flood of people landing in Lampedusa every day.

Keywords: *theories of emotions, compassion, emotional proficiency, cultural competency, global communities, migration, autobiography*

Introduction

Tears of Salt (2013) is a significant and compelling memoir by medical doctor, Pietro Bartolo, and journalist, Lidia Tilotta, that highlights a current world crisis taking place in Italy's southernmost island of Lampedusa. Located more than one hundred miles off Italy's southern coast, this island has become well known in recent years as the first port of call for the flow of hundreds of thousands of African and Middle Eastern refugees escaping civil war and terrorism and hoping to create a different life for themselves in Europe.

All through history and all around the world, individuals have always been relocating. They have been migrating from different countries and continents seeking better opportunities of life, and running away from natural disaster, political conflict, violence, oppression, wars, and poverty. As such, migration is a significant element expressing people's adjustment to environmental stress, social turmoil, and additional threats. But although migration is a global phenomenon, there is still no global understanding of how to manage it.

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Studies demonstrate that our ancestors migrated from Africa and were moving around Eurasian grasslands and tundra migrating also herds of animals as mastodons. This process of spreading from Africa to Asia and then all over the world including the southernmost point of South America, took centuries (Bae et al. 2017).

During the Age of Exploration, from the 15th century to the 17th century, and European Colonialism, individuals started to migrate at a much quicker speed. According to the study by Eltis (1987) around 240,000 Europeans arrived in America ports and in the 19th century, over fifty million individuals left Europe to resettle in America. The local populations, such as the Indigenous people in Canada, United States, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia were numerically overwhelmed by incoming colonizers and by those explorers' indentured laborers and slaves.

In recent years, migration practices became global progressions, thanks to technologies, developments in transportations and, for certain individuals, increased funds to migrate due to scarcity decrease. Global relocation has risen greatly generating complex conditions that impose a reexamination of our view of the world and resettlement (Ruist 2021). Nations today experience migration as country of origin, transit, and destination, and need to face changing demographics, evolving needs of labour markets and continued challenges posed by wars, shortages, human rights violations, and climate change.

This research aims to consider the representation of the mass migration arriving in Lampedusa proposed in *Tears of Salt* in order to grasp a different dimension of the migration phenomenon, give refugees a more authentic representation, and offer important skills for a global coexistence.

Literature Review

Tears of Salt taps into the emerging trend of reconsidering migration as a form of people movement over long distances from one country to another, as well as internally, which has become the dominant form globally. The renewed interest in long distance migration has been demonstrated by the release of several significant movies and written works that depict a variety of immigrant experiences. Significant Italian films that have attracted the interest of the public for their authentic representation of the migrants include, among others, *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti/Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (2005) by Marco Tullio Giordana, which is inspired by the 2003 novel with the same title by Maria Pace Ottieri and focuses on undocumented migration to Italy via Mediterranean sea; *Terraferma* (2011) by Emanuele Crialese, depicts displaced individuals arriving in the Mediterranean island of Lino and facing the harsh reality that Italians are punished when attempting to save the refugees; *Ius Soli: The Right to Be Italian* (2011) by Fred Kuwornu centers on the experiences of men and women born in Italy who are denied the right to acquire the Italian citizenship by the *Ius Soli* law; Oscar nominated *Fuocoammare/Fire at Sea* (2016) inspired by *Tears of Salt* by Gianfranco Rosi, which documents the

lives of hundreds of thousands migrants arriving to Lampedusa from Africa and Middle Eastern countries; *La vita davanti a sé/ The Life Ahead* (2020) by Edoardo Gale, screen adaptation of 1975 novel, *The Life before Us* by Romain Gary, which tells the story of a Jewish Holocaust woman survivor and former prostitute who offers a home to children of other women who work in the port of Bari and highlights the friendship between her and a Senegalese boy.

Among the numerous literary works focusing on the topic of migration, it is worth noticing, *Imbarazzismi* (2002) by the Italian-Togolese writer Komala-Ebri and translated into English by Marie Orton, *Embar-race-ments: Daily Embarrassments in Black and White...and Color* (2019), which demonstrates that although individuals start to change perspectives on citizenry, they still need to grow to create a society comprehensive of subgroups and people coming from different countries. Similarly, the plight of individuals longing to be socially recognized is the central theme of *Madre piccola* (2007) by Somali Italian poet, Christina Ali Farah and translated into English by Giovanna Bellisia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto, *Little Mother* (2011), which highlights the strength of women, family, and community and generates a strong desire for a native country that has been denied. Another work analyzing the effects of imperialism is *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) by Italo-Ethiopian writer and performer, Gabriella Ghermandi and translated into English by Giovanna Bellisia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* (2015). The novel focuses on the Italian occupation of Ethiopia and other individuals' stories who have experienced colonialism or have been expelled by force from their birthplaces.

It is significant to mention here the anthology, *Future: Il Domani Narrato dalle Voci di Oggi* (2019) by the African-Italian writer Igiaba Scego which comprises the works of eleven Afro-Italian authors who investigate the possibilities of fashioning a new sensibility, an innovative perspective, and an original language to create more cohesive global communities. Finally, another text focusing on characters who navigate between the cultural beliefs of their native country and their adopted home is *Dove mi trovo* (2018) by Jhumpa Lahiri and translated into English by the same author, *Whereabouts* (2021), which centers on the reflections of a woman examining her situation and vacillating between the necessity to fit and the rejection to develop permanent connections.

In the last ten years, scholars also offered significant critical investigations on the topic of individuals' relocations allowing a deeper understanding of this complex process. This body of works consists of *I migranti nel cinema italiano* (2009) and *Senza frontiere. L'immigrazione nel cinema italiano* (2012), by Sonia Cincinelli; *Media e immigrazione tra stereotipi e pregiudizi. La rappresentazione dello straniero nel racconto giornalistico* (2011) by Ernesto Calvanese; *Cinquanta sfumature di mare (per gli immigrati al largo del cinema italiano)* (2012), by Claudia Svampa; and *Racconti d'immigrazione nel cinema del reale* (2014) by Vincenzo Valentino.

Methodology

Tears of Salt opens its narrative with the description of an autobiographical incident that happened to Pietro Bartolo as the doctor who runs the only medical clinic in his native island of Lampedusa and whose experience is being reported. At the age of sixteen, Pietro almost drowned in the Mediterranean after falling from his father's fishing boat unseen. In the opinion of some critics, this event was crucial to triggering Bartolo's empathy toward others in this respect: "The sensation of going under, gasping for breath and feeling left behind, provided him with a template for understanding the terror of countless others who have suffered the same fate – but without the happy ending of survival" (Morris 2020). In contrast, as clearly stated by Marjorie Kehe, what moved Bartolo was an emotion of anger toward the circumstances: "Bartolo is rightly angry about the conditions that created the suffering he encounters, but he is also deeply impressed by the courage and determination of many of the migrants" (Kehe 2018). In a similar way, the critic Adele Annesi underlined the emotional component of hope in Bartolo's writing and actions: "Throughout, Bartolo intersperses the miseries of human trafficking – rape, torture, disease, separation – and touches on attendant horrors, such as organ trafficking. Because he seeks to heal the body and inspire hope, he is a continual advocate for the refugees' plight beyond Lampedusa clinic."

The present study examines three increasingly intensified representations of suffering and their related compassionate reactions. The aim is to demonstrate the significance of offering caring attention to a mass of people perceived as unique individuals with an exclusive history, emotional experience, and self-awareness, rather than as imperceptible members of a flood of migrants. This clarification is important because, as will be specified later, the popular approach of the media is to depict migrants as a group of individuals without individual needs, goals, rights, or responsibilities.

Specifically, this analysis underlines the way in which the authors of *Tears of salt* utilize representations of suffering and compassion to reconstruct the migrants' identity and propose a renewed way of perceiving the flood of people arriving in Lampedusa every day. By doing so, the authors challenge the view that sees refugees as dangerous and threatening intruders. In order to investigate this emotional participation, I will utilize the work of several scholars that investigate the features and effects of emotions and in particular compassion such as, for instance, Martha Nussbaum, Maureen Whitebrook, and Miguel Noguero.

Discussion

The patterns of compassion considered here draw, among others, on the work of Martha Nussbaum who, as inspired by Aristotle in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, claims that compassion is triggered by precise requisites: "the judgment of size (a serious bad event has befallen someone); the judgment of non-desert (this person did not bring the suffering on himself or herself); and the

eudemonistic judgment (this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted)” (321). Starting from this paradigm and expanding upon it, compassion is considered as the partaking in another individual’s experience and is revealed through a shift in awareness or insight, or a gesture to improve the state of another. Such compassion might be exhibited as a positive word, a caring behavior, or a thoughtful deed expressing that another human being is facing an impediment. However, two key questions to be asked are: How does the authors use representations of suffering to instigate compassion? Who are the subjects or conditions activating compassion?

Compassionate Occurrences

Bartolo’s and Tilotta’s representation of suffering and compassion allows them to recount private and public stories and, at the same time, explore Dr. Bartolo’s emotional involvement. Reproducing a similar model already introduced in Italian literature through, for instance, Primo Levi, Pellegrino Artusi, or Clara Sereni, the authors insert another type of discourse within the immigrants’ experiences. First, they inform readers by means of an autobiographical narrative, including specific events and the emotional involvement associated with Bartolo’s life. Then, they complete their explanation with the narration of Bartolo’s encounter with the refugees, which becomes an integral part of the story and with which they explore and illustrate the emotion of compassion.

After carefully illustrating Bartolo’s memories regarding his precious attachment to a pet piglet when he was a child, the authors introduce an encounter with a very young Sudanese girl carrying her black cat in a carrier when arriving in Lampedusa with a British navy ship along with another two hundred migrants. As normally occurs in these circumstances, Bartolo was asked to examine the migrants’ physical conditions. For practical reasons, the girl was asked to leave the cat or to provide proof of its vaccinations. Unable to satisfy this request, she started to cry so hard that she began convulsing. At this point, the authors describe Bartolo’s compassion toward the girl: “I managed to placate her by promising that we would treat her pet well and give it back to her as soon as possible. We then helped to gather her family and put them all onto a bus bound for the reception center” (77). Following the example illustrated by Nussbaum, Bartolo’s compassion is triggered by his awareness of a difficult situation that might also happen to him and that the girl is a significant individual in his scheme of values. The authors propose this model of compassionate involvement to demonstrate that, although the immigrants might have left very difficult circumstances at home and experienced tremendous adventures before reaching Lampedusa, they also witnessed open-mindedness that facilitates the association and understanding of the plight of others. By linking Bartolo’s autobiographical experience to that of the girl, the authors suggest a connection between the two individuals. In this way, they highlight the notion that, even if knowledge of cultural differences might help to correctly interpret and understand the behavior of others, the significance of discovering similarities might be a more productive way to proceed.

Bartolo's experience also includes extremely dramatic encounters that activate compassion and a desire to better the condition of others. The authors propose the story of Faduma, a thirty-seven-year-old Somali, who was brought to Lampedusa by helicopter in the spring of 2016. During a rescue operation, she was picked up among many other shipwreck victims: "She was in a serious condition. She appeared to be partially paralyzed, and they thought she might have suffered a stroke" (95). Bartolo realized the seriousness of the situation and acted immediately to save her life. He later learned Faduma's age and that she had had seven children and was travelling alone. During the birth of her third child, she had suffered an apoplexy and a consequent paresis. The woman spoke dispassionately since she needed help: "Six months ago, the militia came to the house in Mogadishu where I lived with my husband, my children, and my mother . . . the children were terrified – we all were . . . They shouted at us, insulted us, threatened us" (96). Then the woman confessed that they were all crouching on the floor to not provoke their fury, while her husband attempted to convince them to take him and let everyone else go. Unfortunately, as the authors recount, "They grabbed hold of him and forced him to kneel in the middle of the room. They decapitated him. They cut off his head in front of our children. They are animals, ferocious, bloodthirsty monsters" (96). Faduma's only chance to survive and help her family was to trust her children with her mother and leave to find a job. Moved by Faduma's dramatic existence, Bartolo realized that she would not be able to find any work because of her condition. He believed that the only solution would be for her to return to Somalia and allow her children to be adopted by donors abroad through a nonprofit organization. Bartolo promised Faduma that he would help her to find that kind of solution.

The representation of this model of compassion focusing on the condition of vulnerability experienced by Faduma sheds light on a different model of compassion. Differently from Nussbaum, Whitebrook (2002) emphasizes the importance of vulnerability as the primary reason underlying emotional participation. In her opinion, neither the suffering nor the judgment of its cause produces compassion; rather, it is the person that is the proper object of compassion: "The vulnerable are those who can be taken advantage of, against whom power is exercised to their disadvantage" (537). Accordingly, vulnerability is a condition that exposes individuals to emotional trauma or to situations in which their feelings or rights are ignored, thereby allowing other individuals or institutions to take advantage of them. In our example, Faduma's position of liability due to her weak physical and psychological conditions enables the activation of compassion and underscores the significance of knowing another individual's experience. With this example, the authors call attention to a less typical kind of migrant that highlights the strength, courage, and independence of women, while offering an expanded view of attitudes of women coming from third world countries.

Compassion is also activated to accentuate the uniqueness of each individual arriving on the island. It is important here to understand how this process contrasts the representations of migrants offered by the media. It is commonly accepted, that the means of communications are powerful instruments to shape an understanding

of the world that people subsequently develop. Several studies demonstrate that this depiction contributes to generate a climate of fear associated to the arrival of a considerable number of migrants. For instance, the investigation by Arcuri (2015) clarifies that the media provides a perception of living in a society where there is a prevalence of undocumented immigrants much superior that its real number and that they cause the greater part of crimes. This impression of overestimation is caused by what Esgate and Groome (2005) define availability heuristic, a mental shortcut that depends on standards that come to individuals' mind when assessing a particular subject, person, or situation. This process operates on the premise that if an individual remembers something, for instance a notion of danger, it means it is significant. According to Cavazza (1997), individuals calculate the number of migrants in the base of their capability of remembering the news associated to them. In his opinion, the reasoning connected to this process is simple, "se mi ricordo tante notizie su questo argomento allora vuol dire che ce ne sono tanti" (93) ["If I remember a lot of news on this topic then it means that there are many"].

Although the media often refer to expatriates as a "flood of refugees" or a "boatload of migrants" (Hansen and Poggioli 2011) and emphasize the danger they may represent for the host country, the authors of the book stress the importance of individual attention. This model of compassion is introduced with the tragic event of October 3, 2013, when Bartolo was called to help in the aftermath of a shipwreck. The authors illustrate this tragedy with a description of a typical night for a fisherman in Lampedusa. They explain that one night a fisherman took some visitors out to a pristine natural cove called Tabaccara. Tourists often spend the night there, sleeping on the boat and then coming back to harbor for breakfast. That night they heard a noise similar to seagulls but when they approached the area, a horrifying scene appeared: "The sea was full of people shouting for help. And lifeless bodies. There was no sign whatsoever of a boat. The migrants' barge had gone down right by the entrance to the harbor. More than five hundred people were panicking just yards from the shore" (188). The fisherman, who was an expert sailor and had faced death many times, declared that nothing like that had ever happened to him. He saved twenty people who, although extremely unwell, were able to climb in the boat: "His boat did not have a ladder to make it easier for survivors to climb aboard. To get the survivors onto the boat, he'd had the crew grip his legs while he leaned out to heave them by the arms" (189). The difficulty was compounded since their bodies were covered by diesel oil. The fisherman said: "Many of them slipped through my fingers because of all the diesel – they might as well have been covered in grease . . . They went underwater, and they never came back up . . . I tried to save them, but I couldn't. It was dreadful . . . The sea was full of bodies. . . Dead bodies floating everywhere" (189). Because of the magnitude of such a disaster and because he was used to observing the Law of the Sea in which it is unthinkable to leave a dying person in water, the fisherman is represented as vigorously and generously working to save as many individuals as possible. He is depicted as activating the most accepted meaning of compassion, namely, simply feeling for another or attempting to alleviate another's suffering (Lopez et al. 2019).

Although it is often stated that disasters may provoke chaotic self-interest and brutal survival competition, through the fisherman's compassionate action, the authors of the book choose to represent an altruistic quality that exalts the generous spirit of Lampedusa but also the uniqueness of all three hundred and sixty-eight victims of this tragedy. After several days of careful identification of the body and bone fragments of the victims, it was decided to honor them by holding a regular funeral with coffins and the presence of relatives coming from all over Europe for almost every victim. The authors use compassion to emphasize the importance of resisting the view that considers refugees as exploiters, perpetrators of crimes, and those who are responsible for increasing economic inequality in their host countries. They propose, instead, the need to understand the migrants' circumstances and to assume the responsibility for improving their conditions: "We want people to be moved by the migrants' plight, to understand that they are good people who are grateful for our help" (183).

Conclusions

Tears of Salt is the autobiographical work depicting Dr. Bartolo's personal experience in trying to save the greatest number of refugees arriving on the island of Lampedusa.

In their book, Bartolo and Tilotta (2018) demonstrate how the representations of the suffering of the immigrants and the compassion of the associated witnesses highlight each refugee's uniqueness and specific circumstances. Through this renewed perspective, they challenge the view that disapprovingly considers immigrants as a flood of individuals representing a threat for the host country and preventing its economic advancement.

The representations of compassion associated with the migrants' suffering call attention to the need to develop both an emotional proficiency that generates a tolerance towards difficult circumstances and an openness towards understanding others' plights rather than outright rejection, as well as a culture aptitude that fosters an awareness of and respect for individuals' different life conditions.

In the past 30 years, scholars have agreed that there is a lot to gain from learning how to accurately cope with individuals' emotions. As demonstrated by Noguero's (2016) widespread investigation has indicated that emotional education capability as well as building the appropriate emotional environment can impact leadership effectiveness and consequently produce positive effects generating superiority, improvement, and transformation. In a similar way, Mayer et al. (2008) affirm the constructive effect of emotional education. For them, emotional intelligence entails the capability to undertake a correct analysis about emotions and the skill to use emotions and emotional expertise to improve reflection. Also, Goleman (2019) affirms that emotional intelligence implies being able to acknowledge our own emotions and those of other individuals and to apply the knowledge gathered from this practice to offer a correct reaction to the circumstances. Thus, one could affirm that such emotional ability would greatly

serve our need to integrate large groups of individuals in different global communities.

With approximately one hundred and ninety countries on the Earth and seven billion people who progressively move in search of a better life for themselves and their families, there is an urgent need to develop a sensibility toward other cultural approaches. According to Craig (2014), cultural competency is “the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures.” He identifies four stages of cultural competence: awareness, curiosity, learning, and participation. In his view, achieving cultural competence is a progression more than an end point. In fact, what is significant in mastering these skills is the ability to acquire congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies coming together in a system that works effectively in cross-cultural situations. In a similar way, Mayfield (2020), recognizes the need to address culturally implanted narratives about racial order and to dismantle the systems of privilege and the institutions that propagate them with understanding, engagement, and activism. Axner (1993) stresses the significance of caring for others since that mindset produces positive outcomes. Specifically, she believes that establishing associations with people from different backgrounds can be key in making meaningful changes in our neighborhoods (Axner 2020).

The need to develop a different emotional and cultural approach toward the migrants arriving in Lampedusa emerges in several moments in Bartolo’s experience. For instance, the authors acknowledge that when a few refugees started to reach the island, it was a new phenomenon and the inhabitants were unaware of their provenience: “When the first migrants arrived more than twenty years ago, the Lampedusans called them ‘Turks.’ They were mostly North Africans who landed on the beach in dinghies or on life rafts, having made their way without the help of the smugglers” (24). The epithet ‘Turks’ utilized by the islanders expresses a sense of detachment, intimidation, and instability that the migrants’ arrival generated. In Italian popular culture, if someone is said to be speaking ‘Turkish’, it means speaking in an incomprehensible and impenetrable way. However, the authors of this book recognize that, after twenty years, the circumstances have changed drastically and that people have realized the significance of shifting attitudes: “But all at once, everything changed: many more refugees arrived, with many more reasons for fleeing home. And that is why I now need the support of the Lampedusans to do my job. When the despondencies threaten to get the better of me, they give me the strength to keep going” (24). *Tears of Salt* demonstrates that emotional and cultural abilities promote communication among individuals with diverse backgrounds, thus generating positive outcomes for peoples’ identity, assimilation, and development. These valuable approaches, far removed from assigning blame and provoking feelings of guilt, can lead to inclusiveness and practices for learning about differences and responding appropriately to them, which are imperative skills in our contemporary societies.

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