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Marina Warner: Mythology, Fairy Tale and Realism

Abstract: The article explores the ways Marina Warner's novels reflect late twentieth-century literary and cultural debates and at the same time retain a realistic narrative mode and are concerned with the problems of the real world. The narrator of *The Lost Father* (1988) is writing a novel and commenting on its progress, which in turn mirrors the 1980s critical interest in the self-reflexivity of writing. The metafictional debate in the novel includes fairy-tale and diary narratives, all in interaction with realistically portrayed historical settings in the first half of the twentieth century. *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992) takes inspiration from postcolonial critical theory, merging and confronting historical, mythological and fairy-tale narratives with contemporary multicultural ideas and objectives. *The Leto Bundle* (2001) keeps retelling and restructuring a mythological tale as a palimpsest of texts in tune with the overwhelming sense of hypertextuality at the turn of the millennium. Still, despite the fantastic transference across temporal and geographical boundaries, the novels' characters and their stories are portrayed realistically and firmly rooted in the real and ultimately contemporary world.

Marina Warner's novels reflect their author's intensive involvement with late twentieth-century literary and cultural debates. This paper will point to some of the discourses that underpin the multifaceted concerns of Warner's last three novels and participate in their construction artfully built up from their plots, the characters with their individual story lines and the narrative voices as well as the fantastic aspects of the narrative. Warner writes with panache whether she is producing her non-fiction studies or creating fiction. The three novels of her fictional imagination which I am going to discuss here engage with the distinctive features of the literary interests of their time.

The self-reflexivity of postmodern writing in the eighties is foregrounded in *The Lost Father* (1988) while the metanarrative of *The Lost Father*'s novel within the novel also explores the fairy-tale and political narrative. Postcolonial reinterpretation of the past as developed during the nineties underpins *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992) and interlaces the postcolonial debate and elements of mythology and fairy-tale telling with contemporary multicultural objectives. The

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overwhelming sense of hypertextuality of the turn of the millennium informs the structure of *The Leto Bundle* (2001), which develops a mythological story over a palimpsest of recreations of the same sad fate of rape, expulsion and exile into a postmodern hypertext with resonances across the boundaries of time, geography and cultures. At the same time, Warner's participation in all of the above postmodern literary and cultural discourses takes place in a recognisably realistic narrative reflecting problems of the real world.

The narrator of *The Lost Father* is a young novelist beginning to write a novel composed and constructed from her mother's memories of her family history and childhood experiences. Neither the frame metanarrative nor the novel in the novel has the form of a memoir or (auto)biography, but both test how, as Warner herself puts it, "words, storytelling, remembering, also play their part in history as it is made" (Warner 2004: 264) and testify that there is "always another story beyond the story" (Warner 2004: 265). Although Warner refers the above comment to her following novel *Indigo*, it clearly applies to all of her writing as one of her chief arguments. The narrative voice(s) of *The Lost Father* are multiple by implication and seem to fit in with what James Wood terms "free indirect style" (Wood 2009: 10–17). Wood suggests that contemporary, postmodern writers are uncomfortable with traditional omniscience, as if unwilling to inhabit their characters' minds. In his view writers have therefore abandoned omniscient narrative in favour of a free indirect style where the language of reflection of what goes on inside and with the characters is shared between the author and the characters (Wood, 24). In Warner's novel, this kind of indirectness combined with several sets of two-tiered narrative self-reflexion results in a complex metanarrative debate on storytelling.

The first person narrator of the framework novel, the novelist Anna, reads to her mother extracts from her novel *The Duel*, which she is creating out of her mother's memories and half-remembered or reinterpreted facts of more distant family stories. Anna the novelist addresses her mother both directly and indirectly in the second person, while she reproduces the mother's responses as direct speech. Their exchanges always revolve around the issues of storytelling, of memory and of the faithful representation of facts, although they both largely agree that the mother's memories and knowledge of many of the facts are by necessity very incomplete and that Anna's novel must, to a great extent, rely on fictional imagination and completion. Such metafictional passages inserted in between the chapters of Anna's novel are, however, not the only sites of textual self-reflexivity. Anna's great aunt Rosalba, in Anna's novel a young girl living in the Italian South at the beginning of the twentieth century, is trying to adapt her favourite fairy tale to suit her own, at the moment very passionately perceived situation: will she be able to gain Tommaso against her mother's will just as in the fairytale Carmellina won her prince from the power of the witch Zenaida? Tommaso is accepted in the family as Rosalba's brother's friend, but deemed unsuitable as Rosalba's suitor because of his lower class background. Although Rosalba has a good relationship with

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her mother, the strictly social considerations of the issue which ignore Rosalba's feelings and autonomy drive them apart, with Rosalba seeking her empowerment through adapting the fairy tale. Here Warner is obviously working with her claim that fairy tales, rather than being misogynist, played a liberating role for women as their tellers, and this is confirmed by her pointing to the existence of various versions of well-known fairy tales retold against the background of various realities (Warner 1995: xvi). In this manner the voices of the silent, or the silenced, can be heard. Fairy tales and fairy-tale elements in Warner's novels participate in her insistent debate, where, in Lisa G. Propst's words "Warner explores how voicelessness and self-empowerment can interweave" (Propst 2009). Moreover, the short episode with the retelling of the fairy story in *The Lost Father* brings up another frequently debated and contested aspect of fairy tales, i.e. their didactic and instructive purpose. In fact, Warner rejects the claim that fairy tales instil authoritative, patriarchal values and takes a much more generous view that "the stories are not only fantastical … they also encode a great deal of experience and knowledge from among the usually unnoticed and voiceless groups — women, children, the poor" (Warner 2010). And much like she also shows in Rosalba's case, fairy tales and their tellers offer guidance in matters of sexual behaviour and relationships. Warner even speaks of "the genre's power to illuminate secret aspects of experience — unspoken, disavowed desires and deeds" (Warner 2010), which again seems to be in tune with Rosalba's unravelling of the fairy tale about Carmellina and recreation of it for herself to match her feelings and position.

Another "text" discussed by Anna the narrator of the frame novel is the eponymous lost father's diary which she uses in *The Duel* — the novel within the novel. The voice of Davide Pittagora in his alleged diaries flows clearly and straightforwardly, rather unlike the voice of the narrator in the novel as well as Anna's voice: as if the plain and orderly masculine tone was to contrast with the somewhat complicated and chaotic structures of the feminine narrative. This may be what Anna is implying when she admits that it fell to her to translate the diaries from the Italian and that we are therefore reading her version of them. Nevertheless, at the same time she voices her doubts when she asks: "Would Davide, my Italian grandfather, have appreciated this migration of race memory, of the spirit of the southern patriarch into the voice of the English granddaughter?" (Warner 1989: 192). Anna's metafictional musing reflects Warner's self-reflexive debate about the authenticity of the narrative voice as well as the interpretative power of retelling.

At the end of the novel Anna learns that her version of the family story as she has heard it from her mother and reshaped and retold it in *The Duel* differs substantially from another version of the story passed down in the American branch of the family whom she and her mother visit. In this manner, throughout the novel, Warner keeps reinforcing the self-reflexivity of her text by undermining the fictionality of it, while debating the possibilities of the historicity and authenticity of the narrative. This side of the debate is backed up by Warner's resolutely realistic

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mode of portraying the times and settings of the protagonists' stories. In spite of the clearly fictitious place names on Warner's map of southern Italy or "the Noonday of Italy," as she calls it, realism is insisted on by a map being provided. On it Riba, Dolmetta and Rupe — the principle places of action — are supposed to lie on the Adriatic coast and may just stand for Bari, Molfetta and Ruvo on the real map. The map and the beginning of the narrative are preceded by a kind of family tree cum list of characters, complete with their birth dates and some marriage dates, all of which underpin the illusion of reality.

Warner, or rather Anna, the narrator-author of *The Duel*, the novel she is writing, portrays town life (Riba) and rural life (Rupe) impeccably realistically and in particular social customs and family life at the beginning of the twentieth century and the change in atmosphere with the rise of the Fascists in the thirties. Rosalba cannot be allowed to think of marriage to Tommaso due to his low class origins. Whatever has happened between them must be resolved by a duel in which Rosalba's brother Davide cleanses her, or rather the family honour. Although duelling had at the time been outlawed for over a hundred years by the King of Naples, the myth of honour and revenge still survived, as did other barbaric customs. After the procession of the feast of the Madonna della Bruna, the local men hack to pieces the poles on which they carried the statue of the Madonna, in a wild scramble for possession of the splinters to bring them good luck. Sensing the sexual overtones of the clash between the brutal destruction of the pedestal and the lofty virginal statue, Rosalba is puzzled and disturbed by the traditional event. Rosalba's traditional religious upbringing and her thoughts on it as a young adult echo Warner's study of the cult of the Virgin Mary (*Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 1976) and its effects and influences on everyday reality and particularly on women's lives.

In an interview (Zabus 1994a) Warner confesses that *The Lost Father* copies the structure and chronology of her mother's life and that the historical nature of it inspired her to explore various topics which interested her. They include the Italian migration to America and fascism in the south of Italy. In keeping with Warner's family experience and official statistics which record and confirm the flow of emigration and re-emigration of the time, the lost father Davide Pittagora emigrated to America in 1912 and his widow with their five children returned to Italy to be despised and threatened as "foreigners" by the fascists in the 1930s. The historical facts and experience of the early decades of the twentieth century are depicted accurately and credibly, thereby reinforcing Warner's realistic style of writing.

Warner is progressively adventurous in applying and developing various postmodern narrative tools in her further novels. In *Indigo* she starts from a postcolonial perspective on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She reached for the play, as others have done, because in her view "Caliban has passed into the common mythological lexicon; *The Tempest* offers itself as a pattern book, from which to cut new clothing" (Warner 2004: 262). This is what she does when she makes Sycorax

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a human inhabitant of a Caribbean island, a healer and an indigo maker, who becomes a witch in the coloniser's interpretation of their fatal encounter. Caliban, too, only becomes disfigured in the process of colonisation. In *Indigo*, Caliban is Sycorax's adopted black son whom she rescued from his drowned mother's womb. The dramatic scene of the miraculous rescue marks Sycorax's first brush with colonial practices: unfit Africans were thrown overboard from the slave ships bringing them to the Caribbean — the first of several terrible accusations to come in the novel. Later, when the English begin to colonise the island, Sycorax is burned out of her tree house and badly burned, she dies in pain and is feared thereafter as a dangerous witch. Her other adopted child, the Arawak girl Ariel, becomes the coloniser's mistress and is taught to swear in English to give him a reason to despise her. Caliban has his hamstrings severed for rebelling against his master. By adopting a postcolonial approach and underpinning it with Shakespeare's dramatic figures, Warner contributes with her novel to the recent historical study that in her words "has established the crucial operations of fantasy in the story of the Caribbean conquest" (Warner 2004: 260). By demythologising the supernatural character of Sycorax, Ariel and Caliban and by deconstructing their otherness, she helps to explode some of the myths of colonisation, because she believes that "it is as important to tell the ugly story as it is to tell the reparatory tale" (Warner 2004: 264). However, in trying to shed light on history, she does not want to "suggest that an original truth exists, which could be retrieved and retraced. But there is always another story beyond the story" (Warner 2004: 265) — there are many stories which she imagines as different colours and shades intermingling. Although Warner's inspiration to rewrite Shakespeare's *The Tempest* clearly comes from postcolonial theory and discourse, it also ties in very well with her interest in myths and fairy tales. She even states that she "constructed *Indigo* as a classic fairy tale [because she] wanted it to speak in the way fairy tales do, for hope, against despair" (Warner 2004: 265). Besides scattering fairy-tale patterns throughout the several stories of the novel, she foregrounds a strong story-telling woman's voice. There is a fairy-tale countryside with bubbling cauldrons of indigo, there is a European fairy godmother at a little girl's cradle whose prophesy comes true, mixed together with a Caribbean mythological sea creature Manjiku who has his awesome hand in it.

The fairy-tale elements seamlessly connect the early seventeenth-century story of colonisation with the scene of late twentieth-century multicultural London aided by the old Black nurse Serafine, whose continuity from Sycorax is mysteriously suggested not least by her storytelling, mingling Caribbean and European fairy stories and mythologies with family stories and histories. Women as fairy tale tellers to children and particularly women as family history tellers are fairly stereotypical figures. In Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*, "the ladies, the Keepers of the Tales" (Rushdie 2009: 129) are sought for advice on matters of family secrets and forgotten history. Chantal Zabus interprets Serafine as the return of the indigenous female subject (Zabus 1994b: 140) in relation to postcolonial theory,

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but within both Warner's fiction and non-fiction oeuvre there appears to be no need for such distinctions, because storytelling is always shown as travelling across all kinds of temporal and geographical boundaries, although it is mediated by very different tellers. The combination of postcolonial and fairy-tale structures in *Indigo* has resulted in the surprising amount of originality which Caroline Moore accords the novel, although she fears that its synopsis may "sound like the blueprint for a trendy … work" (Moore 1992).

The transformation of Sycorax, Caliban and Ariel from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into the realistic and real historical scene of the seventeenth-century colonisation of the Caribbean island sheds the fantastic in favour of the realistic. The fantastic and mythological features of the story tend to be explained away rationally, while the realistic detail and overall realistic floor-plan predominate. In Propst's words "vivid descriptions … create an illusion of immediacy and presence" (Propst 2009), although the seventeenth-century Caribbean setting possesses a strong estranging effect.

On the contrary, the twentieth-century multicultural London scene of the contemporary time layer of the novel appears unshakably real and realistic in spite of the fairy-tale prophecy at the cradle of Xanthe and its apparently cruel materialisation. Likewise Serafine's mysterious mythical connection to Sycorax's voice speaking from the Caribbean past remains linked to the mythological level of the narrative, but allows her to function within the realistic context of storytelling. Also, the echoes of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* have grown less distinct with the transition from the colonisation of the Caribbean Island to 1960s London and the issues of immigration from former colonies of the British Empire. Warner's Miranda is a young, independent woman, aware of her visible Creole heritage from her grandmother, while her father, Kit Everard, is the direct inheritor of the name of the first coloniser of the island. Warner has allotted Miranda a role in the act of reconciliation in Britain in the sense of the ideal of multiculturalism, perhaps also in the spirit of Shakespeare's Miranda impersonating a promise of a better future. Nevertheless, Warner's picture of reconciliation goes further than Shakespeare's romantic encounter of Miranda and Ferdinand. In *Indigo* Miranda's relationship with George/Shaka, an actor of Afro-Caribbean origin, comes to be consciously developed. Shaka not only plays Caliban in *The Tempest*, but has just been through the process of Black activism and "return to the roots," when he even replaced his English-sounding name George Felix with the African Shaka Ifetabe. Like elsewhere in *Indigo*, or Warner's other novels, such known aspects of contemporary or historical reality contribute to the realistic sense of the text. To give themselves a chance of having a lasting relationship, Miranda and Shaka set out on a journey of learning to know each other, just like in their chess game "crossing the lines, crossing the squares, far out on the board in the other's sea" (Warner 1993: 395). The idea of learning about and recognising the difference and otherness of others across

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distant cultural boundaries has a very urgent contemporary dimension and has been a core concept in the immigration and multicultural discourse. On the other side of the Atlantic in the story of *Indigo*, Warner does not neglect the realism of the post-colonial, post-independence scene either. She develops the story of Xanthe to point to the seamy side of postcolonial development in former colonies, showing to what extent it stems from the facts of colonisation and Empire as well as the insensitive approach to the countries today. Xanthe's death in the waters of the island may be read as a metaphor for the injustices of violent clashes of cultures.

Warner's first novel of the twenty-first century, *The Leto Bundle*, rewrites a classical mythological story which Warner recreates in a fragmented, hypertextual mode. In one sense Warner makes a leap forward into the electronic age, in another sense it is just another step along the timeless path of storytelling, which Warner, in all her novels, portrays as "survival through language, … the power of memory, transmuted into stories, to shape experience both fallaciously and truthfully, harmfully and helpfully" (Warner 2004: 301–302). The story of the Titaness Leto, raped by Zeus, driven out by Hera, giving birth to Apollo and Artemis and surviving in a she-wolf's lair, is re-experienced by other women across different times and places, and retold as well as recorded in many different ways. The same cruel story re-emerges from excavations, written on papyrus and mummy bundles, on tomb inscriptions and in chronicles, on items in museum catalogues and all this time also being replayed in reality until the present time of the novel, which could be some unspecified, but probably not very distant future.

Warner situates the modern layer of the novel in a country called Albion and a city called Enoch, which correspond to England and London respectively, with all their contemporary attributes. This also completes the list of the variety of texts and registers in the novel with electronic records, web pages and email messages, thereby suggesting the postmodern image of hypertext connecting all the texts available through cyberspace. At the same time, juxtaposed with the thrilling new idea of all-permeable hypertextuality, there is the traditional age-old figure of Sibyl — the sibylline, story-telling voice that Kim, the present-day protagonist of *The Leto Bundle*, recognises in Leto or Helen or the mummy missing from a museum sarcophagus. "She's always in time present cutting across ours that's always going by so she's of all time of our time or put it another way she's a story and stories have a life and a time all of their own when you read think how real the characters are" (Warner 2002: 139).

That stories like Leto's, of expulsion, migration, exile and need for (a new) home are of all time is confirmed by both the thematic and structural purpose of the novel. Moreover, and in tune with its hypertextual and temporal structure, the story of *The Leto Bundle* remains open-ended, suggestive of its timelessness. Warner's open-endedness therefore need not be seen in terms of the AfterMode desperation described by Lidia Vianu as resulting from today's wish to defer endings owing

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to the emptiness and uncertainty of expectations (Vianu 2009: 68). Warner, on the contrary, however grim her picture of the world in the past or the present may be, allows, as in her previous two novels, a glimmer of hope for the future.

In her review of Dubravka Ugrešič's volume of "revisioned myths," Warner points to the fact that now "writers have adopted a looser, secular conception of myth" and that the revisioned myths stir "resonances with contemporary matters" (Warner 2009). This is precisely how she herself approaches myth in her fiction and what kind of contemporary matters she makes her choice of myth resonate with. Not surprisingly, the contemporary matters of Warner's concern tend to be social issues, issues of human rights and human relationships, which in turn correspond with her views on the origins and the workings of myths and fairy tales and how and why they survive over centuries and millennia — what ensures their perennial presence in human society.

The mythological story of Leto is such a survivor, just like Leto herself is a survivor. Her story comprises a composite myth of exile alongside the myth of motherhood and harassed womanhood. The perennial parallels of then and now are obvious: there have always been women disadvantaged by the social structures and/or women harmed by men. Warner's Leto/Laetitia/Ella/Nelly in her various guises is always trapped by unfavourable social circumstances: as Zeus's rape victim, her guardian Lord Cunmar's pawn and later mistress, a stowaway, a refugee, and an asylum seeker. As a mother (of twins), she is always fighting for her children's survival: she gives birth in the wilderness, smuggles them as stowaways in search of a place to rejoin human society, saves them from slavery and from starvation in a war-torn country, takes them through years of endless exile when they are solely her own responsibility. She is thus always fulfilling the myth of the Invincible Mother fighting for her children and ready to sacrifice herself for them. The myth of exile supplies another powerful myth-making range of states of homelessness. In works of literature, exile seems to be more often portrayed in terms of nostalgia for the lost home. In this respect, although based on a mythological story, exile in *The Leto Bundle* resembles reality more closely in being about genuine homelessness and the search for (a new) home. Leto has no home to return to or remember fondly and her children have never known any home.

Despite the heavy mythological and fantastic/magical load of the novel, more so than in the previously discussed books, the narrative again preserves the essence of realism. A twelve-century version of the myth of Leto in Leto-Laetitia's story was chronicled by nuns and monks and later submitted as a document to support her canonisation. The chapters and passages of *The Leto Bundle*, marked as such chronicles which lay claim to being historical facts, reinforce the realism of the text. So also do the chapters which describe the discovery of Leto with the twins as stowaways on HMS Shearwater. The journey is exactly dated to 1841, when the ship was transporting archaeological finds to England, all the sculptures and small artefacts being meticulously catalogued for a museum, and in Warner's text

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presented with all the paraphernalia of catalogue numbers and a complex system of abbreviations attached. Leto-Ella's emergence with Phoebus and Phoebe in the twentieth century is quickly followed by the tragic reality of lethal weapons of mass destruction leaving Phoebe badly burned on the road. The realism of their struggle for survival in besieged Tirzah, plagued with an acute lack of medicine, food and water, cannot be doubted. Although we do not find Tirzah on the map of Europe or elsewhere, the place and what happened there could be anywhere in today's world. Even though Warner resorts to fictitious geographical names of countries and towns, in the case of Albion and its capital Enoch, the reader is left in no doubt that the criticism of the immigration and asylum laws and the negative attitudes of a part of the population towards immigrants are based on the British experience, albeit with similarities to be found in most developed countries, not only in the Western world. The disappearance of Leto-Nelly at the end of the novel resonates with her mythological being, but the setting of her last appearance is of our time, rendered realistically with a dense mosaic of the contemporary pop music scene, the idealism of various new movements or the ever growing violence with a senseless loss of life.

The contemporary literary and social discourse of Warner's novels does not lack realism and with it what James Wood calls the "thisness" — the palpability of detail (Wood 2009: 54–56) which makes the reader notice both concrete things and abstract ideas. As we have seen, in *The Lost Father* Warner suits the form of the novel to her metafictional debate about story (re)telling. In *Indigo* she constructs a multilayered historical and contemporary narrative on the basis of the post-colonial and multicultural theories which emerged in the 1980s and offered a new vantage point from which to view the colonial past. In *The Leto Bundle* Warner debates the contemporary issues of exile and asylum seekers in a hypertext of different narratives of various registers, where the form again reflects the timeless and multifaceted nature of the topic. In all three novels, mythological and fairy-tale narratives form an essential part of Warner's postmodern techniques and thought. By using the tools and methods of these discourses, Warner the novelist is also an active participant in the interpretation of her text.

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