

**Engendering Borders:
Piccola Guerra Perfetta by Elvira Dones**
Silvia Camilotti

Università di Bologna

Abstract

Women's point of view is the key feature in the writing of Elvira Dones, an Albanian author who lives in the United States and also speaks Italian. Though she does not write essays, her works are imbued with documentary attention. Dealing with social, cultural and historical themes, especially those linked to her country of origin, Dones describes and denounces effectively severe situations of marginalization and violence against women, even if through the filter of fiction. A novel like *Piccola guerra perfetta* (Einaudi 2011) originated in the need to tell about war, violence and abuse from women's point of view. This is in line with historiographical trends developed since the Seventies, which have included in history the "inner front" of wars, that of the "civilian population". Moreover, in line with historiographical trends enhancing the gender point of view, Dones' writing weaves together individual and institutional dimensions, it overcomes the dichotomy between public and private and it allows a careful reflection on power relationships, social interactions, man's and woman's identity in a situation as extreme as war. The women in *Piccola guerra perfetta* live on the border from many

points of view: it is a material border since they have secluded themselves for fear of being killed or raped and it is also an identity border because they have to hide their belongings to save their lives; this context of deep subordination, always running the risk of being cancelled, contrasts with Dones' choice, which has focused on women by giving them their voice and body back. The last novel of this Albanian author shows how deeply a gender-based perspective can explore a phenomenon such as war, disclosing resistance practices and developing an unconventional point of view on a reality at risk of marginalization and oblivion, which in this way gains centrality and acknowledgement.

Key words: Italoophone Writing, Elvira Dones, Kosovo, Migration Literature.

Writing is precisely the very possibility of change,
the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought,
the precursory movement of a transformation
of social and cultural structures (Cixous 1976, 879).

1. Introduction

In this article I'm going to present the novel *Piccola guerra perfetta* by Elvira Dones, looking in particular at the female characters who live in a condition of imposed segregation during the Kosovo war. In her writing, Dones tries to inform readers about this recent conflict, which runs the risk of being forgotten. Dones interviewed lots of women who have survived: their voices are the starting point for her writing. Focusing on women's experiences aims at highlighting, on the one hand, the strength of women during that time and, on the other, their being victims because of their being women, in particular Kosovo Albanian women.

The first part of the article explains, by means of an extra-textual approach that takes into consideration above all the author's opinion, the reasons why Dones talks about women during the Kosovo war. The choice of giving so much space to Dones' words

aims at avoiding the risk for the critic of speaking for the “other”: as Linda Alcoff states in her essay *The Problem of Speaking for Others*, the awareness of the location where one speaks from is fundamental:

there is a growing awareness that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one’s location. In other words, a speaker’s location (which I take here to refer to their social location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech (Alcoff 1994, 286).

In literary terms, scholars have to be aware of their location and of the location of the subject of their research. In this sense, it might be useful to also refer to Adrienne Rich’s theory developed in *Notes toward a Politics of Location*, where she stresses the importance of being aware of gender, ethnic and social belonging in order to have a critical and complete vision of the self and the surrounding reality.

The critic who speaks from a privileged position on behalf of people belonging to minorities (like immigrants, refugees, exiled people) could run the risk of replacing their voices, thus maintaining, unconsciously, a condition of oppression:

not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for [...] As social theorists we are authorized by virtue of our academic position to develop theories that express and encompass the ideas, needs and goals of others. However, we must begin to ask ourselves whether this is ever a legitimate authority, and, if so, what are the criteria for legitimacy? In particular, is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me? (Alcoff 1994, 286).

These questions should represent the starting point for the present reflection; I have tried to respond by giving much space to the author’s voice, through the interviews’

tool. I believe that the only way to avoid the risk of speaking on behalf of the “other” is to create the conditions for his/her free expression and to speak to him/her. In the case of Dones, her experience of emigration and, in this sense, her becoming part of a minority (since every group of immigrants in a foreign country is considered a minority) could lead to speak on behalf of her. So, in the first part of the paper, the focus on her direct voice represents a methodological choice that aims to investigate the novel, starting from the point of view of its author. In this case, the role of the theorist would be to highlight the writer’s perspective in order to better investigate her writing. This approach avoids the risk of totally replacing the author’s voice by considering the writer an object and not a subject.

The novel draws inspiration from the intertwinement of the author’s biographical experience (Dones is from the Balkans as the women she has interviewed) with the historical context (the Kosovo war), which affected her so much. So, in order to better understand the text, the first paragraph focuses on the pathway which led Dones to write *Piccola guerra perfetta*. In many cases, the writer’s location corresponds to the female characters’ location: her being Albanian, her suffering from the Kosovo war, her considering that war so close lead to an identification of the author with her writing: this doesn’t mean that only women are allowed to speak for other women, but that *some* women, due to their biographical and cultural belonging and to their actual experience, have the possibility to speak with a more qualified and competent perspective on some issues, thus giving deep insights to readers who, otherwise, would hardly be able to understand certain social, cultural and political dynamics. In the case of the Kosovo war this aspect is much more pregnant, since what occurred during that conflict was quickly forgotten and the public opinion has not had the chance to understand deeply its meaning and its effects on Kosovo people, in particular on women.

In the second part, a close reading of the text will allow a better comprehension of the dynamics of building borders on women during that conflict: the concept of border acquires several meanings in the novel, both physical and metaphorical. For women, the construction of new borders implies the impossibility of moving and the risk of death simply because they are women with a particular ethnic identity, an identity imposed by the enemy in order to justify the war: before the conflict the characters were not aware

of their supposed difference, which now could turn into a real cause of death. Identity borders can in fact be material and have practical consequences.

Finally, the climax of constructing borders on women's bodies is the practice of rape – a risk often run by the female characters – which was widespread in Kosovo as in many other modern conflicts, since it aimed at cancelling the enemy by attacking their women.

Thus, *Piccola guerra perfetta* shows how all these different forms of border affect women's lives in wartime, making them potential victims. Dones' narrative stresses the risk they run, but also the dignity and the strength they try to maintain despite everything.

1. Towards *Piccola Guerra Perfetta*

Elvira Dones was born in Albania and raised in Tirana; in 1988 she left her country for Switzerland and now she lives in the US, dividing her time and her languages between the US, Switzerland, Italy and Albania. Her first novel, *No Baggage*, was published in 1997 and since that time she has never stopped writing: Dones has published seven novels, two collections of short stories, a few screenplays and she has also directed and produced documentary films. The languages of her writing are Italian, English and Albanian. Her last novel, *Piccola guerra perfetta*, (Einaudi 2011) was written in Italian and then translated into Albanian.

The story narrated in *Piccola guerra perfetta* is set in three different locations: one is an apartment in Pristina, where Nita, Rea and Hana are waiting for the end of the 1999 Kosovo conflict, a conflict that should have ended quickly and painlessly, and instead ran on for 78 days, killing thousands of Kosovo Albanians.

The second setting is outside Pristina, where lots of people (among which there are many friends and relatives of the three women in the apartment) try to flee Kosovo crossing the border. Nita, Rea and Hana cannot have news on what is happening out there, since their only source of information is in fact the television, which only broadcasts pro-Serbian propaganda. The three women can also receive some calls, moving to another apartment, from people who left Kosovo before the outbreak of war and moved to Switzerland and the United States.

Switzerland is the third setting (here we find some autobiographical traces) where Arlind – who has been living there for many years – tries to understand what has happened to the rest of his family in Kosovo, especially to his brother Bexhet's children, Fatmir and Blerime.

Lives in the three sets are all connected by ties of kinship and friendship. In particular, Rea and Nita are friends, they met at university where Nita was a teacher. Rea is 24 years old, Nita 34. Hana, the third woman in the apartment, is Nita's sister and Fatmir and Blerime's mother. Her husband Bexhet has left the apartment to find their children, taken away during a Serbian raid. Bexhet's journey will soon find its end, few kilometers out of Pristina, where he is killed in a road block: the three women will never know about his terrible death.

The three levels of narration alternate, the external narrator tells the events that occur in each set, involving the reader in a crescendo of empathy and involvement with the characters' destinies: they are all people under the illusion that the war will just be a «festa breve però, giusto per far rinsavire quel pazzo di Milošević. Quarantotto ore in tutto, al massimo settantadue, tanto sarebbe durata la guerra. L'America garantiva un intervento breve e indolore. Settantadue ore passavano in un baleno» (Dones 2011, 15)¹.

In this regard, the titles of the 18 chapters of the book are significant: eight titles mark the passage of time («Primo giorno», «Cinque giorni prima dell'inizio», «Il proseguimento della prima notte», «Ottavo giorno», «Sedicesimo giorno», «27 aprile e dintorni», «22 maggio», «Sabato 12 giugno»)². It is a formal choice which reveals the broken promises crushing the illusion that a war can be painless and as quick as the blink of an eye: there are no perfect little wars, female characters seem to cry silently.

The choice of focusing on women and war is consistent with Dones' previous literary work: she has always been interested in women involved in tragic situations; in particular, Dones' commitment has often looked to her fellow countrywomen, denouncing smuggling and trafficking for prostitution and the conditions of

¹ «A short party, only to sober Milošević down. Forty-eight hours altogether, seventy-two at most, this would be the duration of the war. America assured of a quick and painless intervention. Seventy-two hours would flash by».

² «First day», «Five days before the beginning», «The continuation of the first night», «The eighth day», «The sixteenth day», «Around April 27», «The 22nd of May», «Saturday, June 12».

subordination into which women have been forced at home and abroad. *Piccola guerra perfetta* gives further evidence of this commitment and it was written, as the author repeatedly declared, after listening to the stories of women met at the end of the conflict³.

I would like to consider first the reasons that explain still further the choice of the topic, the Kosovo war, reporting the writer's extra-textual opinions. Giving voice to her aims to avoid the risk of much literary criticism, i.e. replacing the author and making him/her an object and not a subject of the reflection. Moreover, in a case like this, where the spur to writing originates from a specific historical event, an extra-textual approach could offer more insights into the analysis. The concept of location, in the sense that Adrienne Rich gave to it, can be useful: Dones is perfectly conscious of her location and writes this novel in the name of it: she is a woman from the Balkans who has the chance to speak, from abroad and in different languages, for other women who cannot express their voices. The condition from which one speaks and his/her biographical experiences and belongings influence the writing activity and call for a full self-awareness and greater responsibility towards what surrounds us. Following Rich, it's fundamental to have a deep consciousness about our own location in terms of racial, gender and class belonging in order to develop a critical vision of the self and reality. Dones starts from the awareness of being a woman, an Albanian woman, sensitive to the conditions of other Balkan women. As Ponzanesi wrote, «the location is not spatial but also ideological. To avoid recreating a hegemonized position, women must specify the material and geopolitical condition from which they speak» (Ponzanesi 2004, 23). Dones speaks from a privileged condition to cast light over women who experienced the war but didn't have the same opportunities as she. Dones has a clear view of her location and this surfaces in the interviews where she speaks about *Piccola guerra perfetta*:

³ It's worth mentioning the book *Women's Side of War* published by Women in Black from Belgrade, in which they have collected many experiences of women during the Balkan war: the tool of interviews has been fundamental in order to give them voice and confirm that «this hunger to know and exchange wartime experiences never ends» (Women in Black, 2008, 9). In Dones' work we find the same aim and needs.

ho deciso di scrivere questa storia dal punto di vista delle donne perché sono una donna io stessa.⁴ Questo può anche non voler dire niente, si può scegliere di scrivere una storia da qualsiasi punto di vista; a me è venuto naturale perché scesi nel Kosovo a seguito di un invito da parte di un'associazione di donne legato a un altro mio libro, *Sole bruciato*. Era l'inizio di dicembre del '99, quattro mesi dopo la guerra, ed era inevitabile che se ne parlasse. Era talmente fresca da non essere nemmeno una cicatrice, il bruciore di guerra era dappertutto. Era inevitabile che a tavola se ne parlasse: tutti mi raccontavano pezzi di storia. Mi colpì soprattutto la sobrietà delle donne: quello fu l'elemento che mi fece capire che se mai avessi scritto della guerra, l'avrei fatto dal punto di vista delle donne. Erano sobri i loro racconti, non c'era enfasi: queste donne straordinarie, dopo così poco tempo erano capaci di una straordinaria bellezza nel racconto. Anche nei Balcani, come altrove, le guerre le hanno sempre fatte gli uomini, ma a mantenere una parvenza di sanità mentale sono sempre state le donne (Blasi 2011)⁵.

Piccola guerra perfetta, here and also in other interviews, is «un libro inevitabile»⁶ (Rukaj 2011, *on line*); putting the Kosovo war at the centre of Dones' new novel helps to keep memories fresh, to spread the awareness that every war is followed by other wars. To an editor who was doubtful about the idea of publishing a novel on the topic of war, Dones answered that just because it was a war, it was necessary to narrate it: «perché alle guerre seguono altre guerre, e alla fine si dimenticano» (Dones 2011, 166)⁷. Speaking about wars allows one to raise public awareness about them and their awful effects.

⁴ It's much evident in this case the identification of Dones with her characters: her being woman is the first condition that has allowed her to write about women like her, in terms of nationality and cultural belonging.

⁵ «I decided to write this story from women's point of view because I am a woman myself. This may not mean anything, you can choose to write a story from any point of view; it was natural to me because I was invited in Kosovo to present my book, *Sole bruciato*, by a women's association. It was at the beginning of December 1999, four months after the war, and speaking about it was inevitable. It was so fresh that it was not even a scar, the bitterness of war was everywhere. It was inevitable that we spoke about it: everyone told me stories. I was particularly struck by women's sobriety: that made me realize that if I ever wrote about the war, I would do it from women's perspective. Their stories were sober, there was no emphasis: so soon after the war, these extraordinary women were able to tell stories beautifully. Even in the Balkans, as elsewhere, men have always been at war, but women have always kept an appearance of soundness of mind».

⁶ «An inevitable book».

⁷ «Because wars are followed by other wars, and at the end they are forgotten».

The will to tell in order not to forget that war surfaces in another interview:

la guerra del Kosovo non era una guerra altrui. Era la nostra guerra. Io l'ho vista come una guerra albanese. In maniera emotiva intendo. [...] Penso che la guerra fosse di tutti noi, perché siamo due gemelli divisi, ma non possiamo negare di avere la stessa lingua, la stessa cultura. Ci sono delle differenze. Ma ci capiamo molto bene» (Rukaj 2011, *on line*)⁸.

Dones is familiar with that conflict, she feels close to Kosovo people and she tries to give them voice. In another interview she says:

nessun soldato occidentale perse la vita in combattimento, nella guerra del Kosovo; fu una guerra combattuta dal cielo. Ma ciò che accadde in terra fu atroce. Andai nel Kosovo pochissimo tempo dopo. Feci ritorno più volte. Fu una meticolosa raccolta di testimonianze: a casa avevo tonnellate di materiale 'ufficiale' dai media di mezzo mondo. Percorsi tutto il Kosovo. Donne e uomini si fidarono, mi misero il loro cuore sul palmo della mano. Quando mi sentii pronta scrissi il libro. Sotto forma di romanzo (Campolongo 2011, *on line*)⁹.

The experiences collected by Dones showed her that nobody can become used to pain: she has always written about painful situations (exile, prostitution, subjugation) but this was not enough to protect her from the new pain arisen when meeting women who survived:

quando fai tutte queste esperienze, ti sembra di aver acquisito familiarità con il dolore, di essere diventata immune, si sviluppano alcuni meccanismi di autodifesa,

⁸ «The Kosovo war was not other people's war. It was our war. I saw it as an Albanian war. I mean in an emotional way. [...] I believe that the war belonged to all of us because we are separated twins, but we cannot deny that we share the same language, the same culture. There are differences. But we understand each other very well».

⁹ «None of the Western soldiers was killed in the Kosovo war; it was a war fought from the sky. But what happened on the ground was cruel. I went to Kosovo shortly after. I returned several times. It was a meticulous collection of witnesses: at home I had tons of 'official' material by worldwide media. I travelled all over Kosovo. Women and men trusted me, they opened their hearts to me. When I felt ready, I wrote the book. In the form of a novel».

credi di aver visto tutto, ma non è così. C'è sempre un nuovo dolore e nel caso del Kosovo è stato ancora più difficile. Non scorderò mai quando alcune donne decisero di raccontarmi la loro storia. Era una giornata freddissima, le trovai sedute su neishilté ('materassi sottili di tradizione ottomana da mettere sopra i divani o per terra', ndr). Con me c'era anche uno psicologo. Parlarono per ore. Il sole tramontò, scese la notte e rimasero solo le loro voci al buio, che raccontavano le atrocità della guerra e come sono riuscite a sopravvivere in condizioni disumane. Parlavano con dignità e sangue freddo, a stento trattenevo le lacrime. E' stato difficilissimo rispettare il loro dolore senza patetismo (Rukaj 2011, *on line*)¹⁰.

The risk of being pathetic always lurks when talking about a topic like this, but it is avoided by Dones, who keeps a sort of emphatic distance from her characters. She is able to arouse the readers' indignation, not by using a pathetic language or describing many scenes of violence. It's the description of everyday life in wartime that makes readers aware of the meaning of war. Roberto Saviano, in the preface to the novel, talks about the normalization of the absurd during a conflict. Some examples of this normalization are the obligation to go out with the pockets full of money to save life in case of meeting Serbian soldiers, not to open windows in daytime, to look at neighbours taken away during raids without being looked at.

Life conditions of women as described in *Piccola guerra perfetta* can be summarized in the concept of border, since their bodies, their cultures, their languages strongly marginalize them.

2. Living on border in wartime

In Dones' novel the concept of border could be approached through gender lenses, since it achieves multiple meanings if it is read through a careful perspective on

¹⁰ «When one has all these experiences, he/she thinks he/she has become used to pain, immune, he/she develops some self-defense mechanisms, you think you've seen everything, but it's not so. There's always a new pain and in the case of Kosovo it has been even more difficult. I'll never forget when some women decided to tell me their story. It was cold, I found them sitting on neishilté ('thin Ottoman mattresses to be put over the sofa or on the ground'.) There was also a psychologist with me. They talked for hours. The sun sank, darkness fell and there were only their voices in the dark, which told war's atrocities and how they had survived in inhuman conditions. They spoke with dignity and self-control, I could barely hold back my tears. It was very hard to respect their pain without sentimentalism».

women's social and cultural conditions.

Their being bordered originates in their being women who belong to an ethnic group that has been suddenly construed as an enemy. The Kosovo war, as many other conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century, has been depicted as an ethnic conflict in which people who had been sharing their language and culture for a long time were separated and pitted against each other.

Looking at the meanings that border takes on for women in this novel allows to rewrite the history of the Kosovo war in a gender perspective: the feminist approach has helped to reconsider, generally speaking, the role of women in history, in particular in wartime; hence the so-called "home front" of wars, i.e. civilians, was included legitimately in the historical narration. We could say that the attention to children and women marks the passage from history to *herstory*. Following Joan Wallach Scott, writing *herstory* has meant «to give value to an experience that had been ignored (hence devalued) and to insist on female agency in the making of history» (Scott 1988, 18). Dones writes an alternative version of the history of the Kosovo war, by collecting women's voices and turning them into fiction. That conflict has been considered part of the so-called new wars, since it involved many civilians, was fought by combinations of state and non-state actors and the reasons of state were overtaken by identity reasons. Violence was directed against civilians, women and children in particular (Kaldor 1998, *passim*). The imposition of borders on women is one of the forms of violence that the characters suffer from, it's a way to put enemy's power into effect.

Acknowledging the existence of those women and their condition of internal exile through the voice of another Albanian woman allows one to focus on a long-neglected category (as the feminist approach shows) and to denounce the ethnic and gender hierarchies that were built into that war, as in many other new conflicts. So, women have become both the object and subject of historical and fictional narration: it's no surprise that the expression *Women's Studies* includes both studies on women and by women (Baccolini 2005, 16). In *Piccola guerra perfetta*, women are narrated by a woman, they are object *and* subject of the narration and they represent an example of what it means to be marginalized and live on a border. As in history, women have suffered the experience of being bordered; taking the Kosovo war as an example, Dones

shows how the bordering process works in the life of women. As Scott states, one of the meanings of gender is the knowledge about sexual difference, through which power relationships are constructed (Scott 1988, *passim*): in the case of *Piccola guerra perfetta*, power is based on imposing borders on a specific group of women.

They live in a forced exile, in the sense that Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram have given to this concept in *Women's Writing in Exile*: not only in a physical way, but also in a psychological, ethnic, interior way. The perception of being bordered can occur even in one's own home and country when ethnic identities are imposed and constructed.

Rea, Nita and Hana live in a forced confinement, without any kind of certainty. The situation is extreme, every day they run the risk of being killed, even though they don't go out. There's no pathetic language describing them, and the image of these women is strong and not moving. Let's see some descriptions:

i Gashi sono gente con i piedi ben piantati in terra, Nita ha ereditato frammenti di quella ruvida terra. Si avvolge in colori scuri: nero o marrone. Solo di rado e dietro insistenza delle amiche indossa un tocco di verde ma niente di più, nessun colore acceso. Ha gli occhi enormi e neri, e una bocca voluttuosa. Una bocca che smentisce la sua inclinazione all'austerità» (Dones 2011, 23)¹¹.

Nita, an upright woman, voices her tiredness only at the end of the war: «pianse come non aveva pianto mai in ottanta giorni. Lasciò uscire tutta la voce, piena rotonda, là sul balcone, appoggiata alla spalla ossuta di Rea che tratteneva le sue lacrime in segno di totale rispetto» (ivi, 163)¹². Rea is «un fiume carsico, pacatamente matura, con un carattere sobrio» (ivi, 87)¹³, the same characteristics that Dones found in the women she met. Besa, Nita's friend, is «alta, maestosa, la trasposizione umana della Torre Eiffel»

¹¹ «Gashis are people with their feet to the ground, Nita has inherited some fragments of that rough ground. She wraps herself up in dark colours: black or brown. Only rarely, when her friends insist, does she wear a touch of green, but nothing more, no bright colours. She has got huge black eyes, and a voluptuous mouth. A mouth which belies her leaning towards austerity».

¹² «She cried like she had never cried in eighty days. She let all her voice come out, a full, round voice, there on the balcony, while leaning on the bony shoulder of Rea, who held back her tears as a mark of profound respect».

¹³ «A karstic river, quietly mature, sober».

(ivi, 3)¹⁴, «solida roccia, l'ancora dell'intero gruppo di amiche. [...] Nessuna delle amiche muove un dito senza prima chiedere il parere di Besa Ajeti (ivi, 49)¹⁵. And even more, the young Blerime, Nita's niece, who disappeared during a raid:

è un giunco di ferro, Blerime, i suoi occhi scuri scrutano il mondo con una curiosità scintillante. Niente che le sfugga, nulla che le interessi sapere. È decisa a diventare un giorno docente universitaria e traduttrice di letteratura come Nita. Le ha confessato che non si sposerà. [...] 'Mamma può sbuffare finché vuole ma io non mi sposo. Se mi sposo mi tocca fare tanti figli e non posso più leggere i libri perché le donne sposate nella casa del marito devono fare solo lavori domestici. Io invece faccio come te, zia Nita, compro tanti libri e ascolto musica e sto in una piccola casa tutta per me e i figli di mio fratello Fatmir verranno a trovarmi' (ivi, 43)¹⁶.

Dones' women are not depicted in a stereotypical way, each one is different from the others, with her own fears and desires: some of them are educated and ambitious, others more liable to patriarchal tradition. The result is a heterogeneity that doesn't level women on a stereotypical image.

All these women have one thing in common, as the author said: «queste donne hanno portato avanti tutta la società kosovara. L'hanno cambiata con l'olio di gomito, con l'intelligenza, la lungimiranza e la generosità» (Blasi 2011, *on line*)¹⁷. Besides the experience of borders, they share the willpower, they find ways to resist and not to give up, despite their material and psychological condition.

The first and most apparent meaning of border is literal: this implies reclusion in the apartment in Pristina, difficulties to go out since crossing that physical border could signify death. The war in Pristina makes the three women prisoners in their own

¹⁴ «Tall, majestic, she is the human transposition of the Eiffel Tower».

¹⁵ «A solid rock, the anchor of the whole group of friends. [...] None of the friends lifts a finger without asking Besa Ajeti's opinion».

¹⁶ «Blerime is an iron reed, her dark eyes scan the world around with sparkling curiosity. Nothing escapes her, nothing that she wants to know. She's determined to be a university teacher and literary translator like Nita. She has told her that she will never get married. [...] 'Mum can grumble as long as she likes, but I won't marry. If I get married, I will have many children and I won't be able any more to read books because wives can only do the housework. I will do like you, aunt Nita, I will buy lots of books and listen to music and stay in a small house just for me and my brother Fatmir's children will come and see me'».

¹⁷ «These women have brought forward the whole Kosovo society. They changed it with elbow grease, with their intelligence, far-sightedness and generosity».

apartment and every day could be their last day: the fact that, one night, light does not stop makes Nita believe that Serbs are coming. The material boundaries of the walls don't allow the three women to move and, at the same time, they don't protect them from the outside: borders are imposed by enemies and every day they reduce the physical space and the hopes to survive: even food starts lacking, but it's too dangerous to go out to find it. Borders, in the literal sense, could kill the three characters.

Their being women represents the second reason for their confinement: enemies in the novel are mostly men who threaten women and being women could mean risking violence and rape. Only in a few cases are women depicted as enemies too, for instance when one of them refuses to sell Nita some bread, since she is not Serbian. However, on another occasion, an old Serbian woman is depicted as an ally, who saves Rea when the Serbs come, by pretending to be her mother: «fai finta di parlare con me, – mormora, – sei mia figlia. Dimmi qualcosa, fra un minuto è finito, ragazza. Hai avuto un bel fegato» (ivi, 83)¹⁸. On the contrary, men are always hostile, with the exception of a soldier who lets Rea live. In those cases Dones doesn't generalize and creates interstices of hope that break the homogeneous and polarized vision between the good and the wicked, thus offering a complex version of reality.

The third level of border concerns the identity sphere since suddenly the three women feel themselves as foreigners in their own country. As it happens in many new conflicts, the ideological construction of ethnicity creates the enemy: Balkan wars have been a sad example of this construction of identities in order to label and kill the enemy, as the volume *Women's Side of War* witnesses. Nita, for instance, «era di etnia albanese ma nata in un villaggio fuori dal Kosovo; era docente a Belgrado e perfettamente bilingue, innamorata in ugual misura dell'albanese e del serbo; da sempre gli abitanti del suo paese di origine avevano convissuto senza nessun problema» (ivi, 9)¹⁹. She has a double belonging, she speaks and loves two languages, but this doesn't matter to Serbian soldiers. Nita had also a Serbian boyfriend, but when the war started, they broke up, «da

¹⁸ «Pretend that you're speaking to me, – she whispered – you're my daughter. Tell me something, in a minute everything will be over, girl. You've been brave».

¹⁹ «She was Albanian, though born in a village outside Kosovo; she was a teacher in Belgrade and perfectly bilingual, equally in love with both Albanian and Serbian; the inhabitants of her home village had always lived together without any problems».

persone molto razionali quali erano» (ivi, 53)²⁰. Becoming a mixed couple would be silly and «una coppia mista come la loro sarebbe stata ridicola» (*ibid.*)²¹. Even in this case we witness a process of normalization of the absurd: people who would have never perceived themselves as different before the war are now on opposite fronts. Ideologically imposed borders produce material division between people. Identity borders cage women, who have no chances to act differently. Their new ethnic belonging is created ideologically by enemies who consider them different and in the name of this difference they feel legitimized to kill or abuse of them. Nita becomes aware of this constructed new ethnic border and consequently she decides to break up her relation with the Serbian man. All three women acknowledge their racial difference that keeps them stuck in the house and prevents them from going out. A metaphorical border shows its material effects in the real life and relations of the three women.

The climax of the process of constructing borders around women and their bodies is represented by rape. Since post World War II, scholars have recognized an increase of violence against women through the use of rape and ethnic cleansing (van Creveld 2001). In the Balkans, as in the Kosovo conflict, rape was a common practice²². In the novel, the risk of violence exists for the female protagonists, and in the case of the young Blerime it happens. Reading contemporary wars and genocides through the lens of gender allows one to consider rape as a way to fight and defeat the enemy, since women, as bearers, are exposed to a particular risk: «wartime rape is about taking the enemy's territory, as it has been made patently obvious by military discourses equating enemy territory with a woman's body in need of (both military and romantic) conquest» (Lentin 1999, *on line*).

It is clear that this applies to Kosovo too, a territory Serbs believed to be theirs and whose Albanian population had to be cancelled: therefore, in this plan rape figures as one of the practices to achieve this goal. Lentin adds that, «wartime rape is not only about sex, nor only about power, but about the social construction of gender and, in times of war, about the gendered constructions of ethnicity and nation» (ivi).

²⁰ «Since they were very rational people».

²¹ «A mixed couple like theirs would be ridiculous».

²² See on this topic the Issue n. 15 of Ca'Foscari DEP review http://www.unive.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=84744

In fact rape can be intended as the most extreme form of construction of a border on women's bodies. In *Piccola guerra perfetta* it is not separated from ethnicization processes: violence is accompanied by racist insults, aimed at confirming the inferiority of Kosovo Albanian women. The construction of ethnicity involves women's bodies, which have to be marked by rape: it's a common strategy in many new conflicts, where the possession of women's bodies seems to guarantee the defeat of the enemy. It's worth mentioning the essay by Patrizia Dogliani in which she stresses the importance of gender approach in studying violence against women during wartime: rape becomes a tool of ethnicization processes that aims at destroying and contaminating the enemy (Dogliani 2005, 314 ss.). In the novel rape is what the characters fear above all, they would prefer been killed instead of surviving a similar tragedy. The narrative choice that makes the youngest woman, Blerime, victim of rape is terribly hard to accept and witnesses the writer's purpose of denouncing the level of anger and nonsensical violence that can be reached in war. There's no exaggeration in the depiction of the rape, but the awareness that an event like that happened thousands and thousands of times: in the Kosovo war it became a part of everyday life for many women. Without running the risk of being pathetic, Dones narrates it leaving a sensation of indignation in the readers, who probably cannot imagine that what happened a few years before in the Balkans exploded again in Kosovo. It's another way to show that little perfect wars cannot exist.

Reading on this helps to better understand what living during a war means to women, a category which is often excluded from the mainstream narration of history, but which comes to surface thanks to this novel too, thus showing the resistance and dignity of the women involved. Women are victims in this novel, but they show a firm willpower: they bear that hard situation bravely, they encourage each other, they risk their life to go out and buy food or look for news; their ties of friendship overcome the fear of being killed.

The focus on female characters is pivotal in the novel, where men stand in the background. Enemy men don't have a name, the reader knows only they are Serbian and it's often impossible to distinguish if they are civilians or soldiers: another feature typical of new wars, where the front line is blurred and the conflict moves among

civilians. It seems that this war, as Dones herself has stated in one of the previous interviews, was fought by men («anche nei Balcani, come altrove, le guerre le hanno sempre fatte gli uomini, ma a mantenere una parvenza di sanità mentale sono sempre state le donne», Blasi 2011) but this didn't erase female agency. Despite their imposed internal exile, they don't give up, they keep «an appearance of soundness of mind» to quote Dones' words. As a matter of fact, they are victims since they cannot do anything, they cannot move and they risk their life everyday, but their resistance is tangible, concrete and evident in their capacity not to go mad. They try to lead an apparently normal life despite all: the choice of sobriety, in their characterization, overcomes everything. It's a feature that Dones discovered in the women she had interviewed and that she chose to maintain in her novel.

It's another way to express female agency, which shows women's capacity not to be overwhelmed by events.

At an extra-textual level, the same agency is expressed by the sense that writing takes on for an author like Dones and for all the women she speaks for: as Hélène Cixous states in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, writing holds the possibility of change. In this case, at the center of writing there's a recent war, a forgotten war, a little small war that killed thousands of people and marked bodies and lives of thousands of women. It's the acknowledgment of such events that can allow a critical thinking and movement capable of spreading the idea that perfect wars don't exist and that every war is followed by other wars, revenges, anger. Writing and narrating are other ways, for women, to express their agency, their thinking, their refusal of violence.

References

- Alcoff, L. (1994), "The Problem of Speaking for Others", in S. Weisser Ostrov, J. Fleischner (a cura di), *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood*, New York, New York University Press, pp. 285-309.

- Baccolini, R. (a cura di) (2005), *Le prospettive di genere. Discipline soglie confini*, Bologna, BUP.
- Blasi, G. (2011), *La guerra secondo le donne*, in “Style.it”, 21 giugno, <http://www.style.it/lifestyle/delicious/2011/06/21/la-guerra-secondo-elvira-dones.aspx> (consultato il 3 Maggio 2012).
- Broe, M. L., Ingram A. (a cura di) (1989), *Women's Writing in Exile*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press.
- Campolongo, S. (2011), *Elvira Dones. Una libertà senza sogni*, in “Rivistapaginauno.it”, dicembre-gennaio, <http://www.rivistapaginauno.it/Elvira-Dones-intervista.php> (consultato il 3 Maggio 2012).
- Cixous, H. (1975), *Le rire de la méduse*, trad. ingl. *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in «Signs», vol. 1, n. 4, pp. 875-893.
- Dogliani, P. (2005), “Il contributo dei *women's e gender studies* per lo studio delle guerre e della violenza del ventesimo secolo”, in Baccolini, R. (a cura di) *Le prospettive di genere. Discipline soglie confini*, Bologna, BUP, pp. 309-319.
- Dones, E. (2011), *Piccola guerra perfetta*, Torino, Einaudi.
- Kaldor, M. (1998), *New and Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Lentin, R. (1999), *The Rape of the Nation: Women Narrativising Genocide*, in «Sociological Research Online», vol. 4, n. 2.
- Rich, A. (2001), “Notes toward a Politics of Location”, in Ead., *Arts of the Possible. Essays and Conversations*, London-New York, W.W Norton & Company, pp. 62-82.
- Rukaj, M. (2011), *La “Piccola guerra perfetta” di Elvira Dones*, in “Balcanicaucaso.org”, 22 giugno, <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Kosovo/La-Piccola-guerra-perfetta-di-Elvira-Dones-96048> (consultato il 4 Maggio 2012).
- Saviano, R. (2011), “La guerra delle donne. Prefazione”, in E. Dones, *Piccola guerra perfetta*, Torino, Einaudi, pp. V-XI.

Van Creveld, M. (2001), *Men, Women and the War*; trad. it. *Le donne e la guerra. Ieri, oggi, domani*, Gorizia, Libreria Editrice Goriziana, 2007.

Wallach Scott, J. (1988), *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Women in Black, (2007), *Zenska strana rata*, trad. ingl. *Women's Side of War*, Belgrade 2008.