**Filling the Void: Bulimarexic Characters in Postmodern Italian Women’s Writing[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

Bulimarexia, as defined by Marlene Boskind-Lodahl in 1977, is a pathology where gorging is followed by purging in an endless cycle that mirrors the medical descriptions of anorexia and bulimia. Many “disorderly eaters” experience both these phases and their body shape often communicates their relationship with food at different stages of their lives.

Italian women writers of the 1990s-2000s, such as Gianna Schelotto (born 1939), Alessandra Arachi (born 1964) and Michela Marzano (born 1970) have portrayed in their fiction and autobiographies a variety of characters who suffer from anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. In a desperate attempt to transform their unloved bodies and to lose weight, these characters try to express their dissatisfaction through food consumption, particularly their unhappy relationships with their mothers, fathers and lovers who often misunderstand the meaning of their anorexic struggle.  These young women engage in binging and purging, thus experiencing a bulimarexic existence; they believe that by acquiring a new silhouette, they will be able to overcome their frustrations and needs. Binging becomes a way to fill their emotional void, while starving can be interpreted as a way to escape their suffocating families and societal expectations.

This paper seeks to decode the multifaceted meaning of bulimarexia in *Una fame da morire* [Starving to Death] (Schelotto, 1992)*,* *Briciole* [Crumbs] (Arachi, 1994)and *Volevo essere una farfalla* [I Wanted to be a Butterfly](Marzano, 2011), with an emphasis on the complex and troubled relationship the protagonists experience with the members of their families and their absent men.

According to contemporary feminist scholars such as Kim Chernin, Marilyn Lawrence, Morag MacSween and Susie Orbach, anorexia, bulimia and binge eating are complex instruments of communication employed by women in order to say what they cannot express in words. [[2]](#footnote-2) They are self-destructive languages where the conventional alphabet is replaced by their bodies and the vocabulary is made up of starvation, binging and purging.

Present-day Italian women writers, such as Gianna Schelotto in *Una fame da morire* [Starving to Death] (1992),[[3]](#footnote-3) Alessandra Arachi in *Briciole* [Crumbs] (1994)[[4]](#footnote-4) and Michela Marzano in *Volevo essere una farfalla* [I Wanted to be a Butterfly](2011)[[5]](#footnote-5) have portrayed a series of bulimarexic characters whose shape and weight perception is related to their emotional fulfillment and their female identity in contemporary Italian society. Bulimarexia is a pathological cycle of binging and purging, as described by Marlene Boskin-Lodahl from the late 1970s onwards.[[6]](#footnote-6) The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* set the criteria to identify the differences between anorexia and bulimia;[[7]](#footnote-7) however, it also identifies several subtypes which share a number of overlapping symptoms and blurred boundaries. Individuals with anorexia may develop bulimic behaviours and those who are initially bulimic may develop anorexic signs, thus pertaining to a specific secondary category of these syndromes. In the novels I shall analyze today, the authors do not insert their protagonists into a specific subtype of the two disorders; however their young characters embrace both anorexic and bulimic attitudes. In this literary context I propose to adopt the adjective bulimarexic as an umbrella term which captures their multifaceted behaviours towards their body and food. My contribution to the debate on contemporary eating disorders and their portrayal in fiction aims to decode the meaning of these anorexic and bulimic struggles and to relate the protagonists’ paradoxical behaviours towards food and body to women’s socio-cultural position in postmodern culture and society.

Schelotto introduces the young protagonist of “La ragazza che mangiava la luna [The Girl Who Ate The Moon]”, one of the two short stories included in *Starving to Death*, by emphasizing her addictive behaviour towards food: “Did you eat some chocolate? Where was it? Where did you find it?”[[8]](#footnote-8) In this passage, Sara, a twenty-four-year-old bulimic, and her mother are arguing about Sara’s attitude towards food in front of an embarrassed shop assistant. Sara’s life is controlled by others and this confrontation is just one example of her daily routine. The young character’s decisions are often questioned; predominantly by her mother, who constantly denigrates her curvaceous silhouette and her disordered eating habits in public, and by her lover, who wants her to be fat. However, Sara has found a way to escape this suffocating environment. She believes herself to be Livia, an imaginary alter-ego who is as thin and light as a butterfly: “Livia is a very beautiful name, very light. You can say it in one breath, this is why I chose it for the thin girl hiding inside myself.”[[9]](#footnote-9) According to a young disorderly eater,[[10]](#footnote-10) interviewed by the British sociologist MacSween “Inside every bulimic is an anorexic trying to get out.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This mechanism is precisely what Sara is experiencing every day. Sara suffers from her relationship with her mother in the family environment as well as from the social stigma every fat woman experiences in the postmodern era; imagining herself to be Livia helps her to relieve the pain temporarily, but this relief is not sufficient and gorging helps her to cope with her unhappy existence.

Sarah realizes also that her fat body acts as a shelter to protect her fragile ego: “It protects me from almost everything. By losing weight I would enter into a world that my organs and senses would not recognize.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Orbach, in *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, makes similar statements to Sara, suggesting that fat is used to “provid[e] space and protection for the feelings. Without fat a woman might worry unconsciously that her feelings will be exposed. There would be no difficulty in getting thin if the competitive feelings could find no place to hide and just disappeared.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Sara experiences these mixed feelings every day and she believes that everyone perceives her as a loser. In accordance with Orbach who argues that contemporary society places cultural stigma upon overweight individuals – “everyone knows that fat women can’t win, in fact aren’t even in the same game”[[14]](#footnote-14) – I suggest that this situation is exactly what Schelotto describes in a passage when Laura, Sara’s best friend, takes her to a meeting with one of their professors, who both girls are infatuated with. Laura believes that bringing Sara with her will be indeed harmless; with her curvaceous body shape, Sara does not represent the contemporary ideal of femininity and beauty. She is almost asexual and therefore “out of the game”, as Orbach suggests. When the professor—who will become Sara’s unsatisfying lover—gives his whole attention to Sara, Laura thinks: “Ugly fatty”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Sara trusts food more than her best friend who, as we have just seen, is not honest with the young protagonist about her feelings.

The relationship with the young professor Giorgio Turro, which is central to Schelotto’s short story, increases Sara’s self-esteem only partially. Sara was infatuated with him since the start of her studies at the university while Giorgio is not in love with her; he is obsessed with her, and in particular with her fat body. The author does not speak openly about his psychopathology, but Giorgio’s sexual deviance emerges clearly page after page. At the start of their relationship Sara decides to follow a new diet and for the first time in her life she is able to lose weight. However, Turro does not want her to become thinner; their sexual encounters are characterized by sharing chocolates, pastries and desserts. Giorgio feeds Sara in a desperate attempt to feed his selfish ego; he forces the young woman to devour numerous high-calorie desserts, thus satisfying his perverse sexual needs. Turro has an egocentric, narcissistic personality and also, as is true of many individuals affected by borderline disorders, very fragile self-esteem which needs constant attention. Sara acquires enough confidence to start a diet and follows it diligently because she feels loved by someone and therefore does not feel the need to fill the emotional empty space anymore. Nevertheless this blissful scenario ends as soon as Sara feels forced to eat what Turro pushes her to eat. It is precisely in this moment that Sara starts to refuse to eat properly and to use the language of anorexia to communicate her unhappiness towards her boyfriend’s constrictions. Initially seen as positive, the start of a new relationship that could potentially boost her ego becomes a further suffocating liaison. Sara is obsessed by food, Giorgio by sexual encounters with fat women: they both suffer from a compulsion that is different and similar at the same time. Trapped in this obsessive-compulsive scenario, Sara decides to leave Turro and ironically she informs him about her decision when he is waiting for her at his house with some pastries on his table. Sara runs away from the perpetrator while he desperately cries: “Sara! Sara!” With a high dose of self-empowerment, she thinks: “But he is not calling me! I am Livia.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Turro’s sexual compulsion for fat women acts as a mirror for Sara; by decoding his obsessive behaviour, she understands the complex mechanism she employs with food. His lust is similar to her gluttony. Paradoxically, a toxic relationship with a man who is scared of intimacy with thin women and is able to enjoy sexual encounters only with fat women helps Sara to understand her illness.

The young protagonist of Alessandra Arachi’s *Briciole*, Elena, shares with Sara a similar attitude towards food, eating disorders and affection: she engages in a series of unsuccessful love affairs which do not help her to fill her emotional void. Throughout her bulimarexic experience Elena meets numerous men who do not satisfy her hunger for affection and protection. They are absent lovers and often self-centered, who do not pay attention to her needs: Saverio is addicted to heroin, Giorgio is a narcissist and Franco, her future absent husband, is more devoted to his work than to her. Elena persistently sends verbal and non-verbal messages about her feelings to all her lovers, but as intimacy-disablers they are unable to understand her struggle with food. She starves, binges, vomits, purges, and exercises excessively under their distracted eyes, but they cannot see the self-destructive reality she is experiencing. Furthermore, in her article on eating disorders in Italian women’s writing of the 1990s and 2000s, Grazia Menechella suggests that Elena experiences also a troubled relationship with her mother who would like her to be a perfect middle-class daughter; after her studies Elena is supposed to find a suitable husband and abandon her career path to look after her new family. Significantly, at the beginning of the novel, Elena is able to vomit three meatballs in tomato sauce, a gesture that represents her rejection of her mother in the initial stage of her illness.[[17]](#footnote-17) The meatballs are synonymous with her mother’s affection in the collective Italian imaginary: a kind of metaphorical love that she rejects. Elena does not want to be fed with food but rather with feelings, but initially her mother and later her husband Franco do not understand this need and are unable to help her to fill her emotional void.

Schelotto’s short story focuses mostly on the dynamics of the toxic relationship between Sara and Turro, thus portraying Sara’s eating habits in a more backgrounded way while Arachi’s novel also depicts the bulimarexic routine that Elena follows religiously every day, sharing numerous details about her binging-purging cycle. Arachi’s novel resembles a diary of a present-day anorexic while Schelotto’s short-story and, as we will see shortly, Marzano’s autobiography focus mostly on the description of their protagonists’ feelings rather than their detailed food routine. Elena’s pathological attitude towards food is accompanied by four hours of running every day and long afternoons at her desk to study to become “the pride of the institute,”[[18]](#footnote-18) as her school principal expects. While Elena is studying to fulfill her role as the best student of the school, she dreams about food all the time: “on each page, on each line, tons of puddings and chocolate cakes appear.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Later, after her marriage to Franco, whom she does not love but who her parents consider to be the perfect guy for her, she spends her days binging and purging. The marriage has satisfied her mother and father’s expectations but it has not filled her own personal void:

I had never thought, not ever for a moment that I loved Franco. I did not hate him, it did not make any sense to hate him. […] Now I was on my own among the pots and in the pantry of the big kitchen I had all the time to choose food, to cook it and maybe to eat it while sitting at the table and watching tv. […] On my own in the kitchen I attacked the food in their pots, whatever their stage of cooking. […] I spent the first weeks of my marriage almost always by the stove preparing five, six but also seven times the same lunch and the same dinner.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Anorexics and bulimics crave food most of the time, even if they are usually regarded by friends, family members and acquaintances as women with a strong will and high self-control. Their favorite recipes for themselves are usually those which require a quick preparation and do not involve too many ingredients; by contrast, anorexics love feeding others. Furthermore, throughout their anorexic experience, “disorderly eaters” restrict significantly not only their food intake but also the number of dishes that they eat, allowing themselves to eat everything they wish only if they can eliminate it by vomiting, purging or exercising excessively, exactly as Elena does.

The quest for intimacy and for a satisfying relationship with her family and lovers is central also to Marzano’s *Volevo essere una farfalla*, in which the protagonist embarks on a long journey, parallel to her anorexic experience, in order to understand her needs and to find a suitable partner. The young Michela desires love, but, similarly to Sara and Elena, is trapped in unhappy and unhealthy relationships. As the protagonist reveals: “I convinced myself that if I had become as light as a butterfly, everything would have worked out.”[[21]](#footnote-21) By metaphorically transforming into a butterfly, a symbol of lightness *par excellence*, and therefore losing most of her body weight, the young Michela believes that she will be able to gain happiness and to fill her emotional void. As a result, her desired body shape becomes for her a tool to reach something else. As we have seen, in the development of anorexia and bulimia as well as other food-related disorders, such as binge eating, the body plays a key role: firstly, it is the focus of attention of those who suffer from these pathologies; secondly, it is regarded by sufferers as something to be venerated, feared and hated at once. However, the body acts also as a barometer of the illness for family members and friends, who can see the physical outcome of the compulsive-obsessive behaviour towards food displayed by those who suffer from eating disorders. As the young protagonist of *Volevo essere una farfalla* states: “Anorexia is the symptom of a word that cannot be spoken in a different way,”[[22]](#footnote-22) thus resembling contemporary feminist thought on eating disorders, body and food politics.

 In her autobiographyMarzano also questions the traditional narratives of what it means to be an anorexic or a bulimic. Psychological research considers the symptoms of anorexia to be an attempt to accomplish the social construction of femininity, while those of bulimia are read as unconventional. As I have already highlighted, anorexics are perceived as women with self-control towards food, while bulimics as those who lack it and indulge constantly on eating. Since the nineteenth century, indeed, middle class women have been constructed in medical discourse as unstable creatures whose nature should be regulated by following a series of rules, including diets which could control their nervous nature. In postmodern times and in western cultures it is still considered more traditionally feminine to lack appetite, rather than to eat too much and consequentially to have a thin body shape rather than a voluptuous one.[[23]](#footnote-23) Marzano, however, suggests that “anorexic women and bulimic women do not exist, but rather many people - who use food to say something – do exist.”[[24]](#footnote-24) For Marzano, similarly to Sara and Elena, her relationship with food is a kind of language and it is not important to focus on the means – starving, binging or a mix of them – employed to voice this protest, but the meaning of that particular protest.

Marzano responds to ambivalent and contradictory attitudes to women and to womanliness in postmodern society, by building a career in academia, thus attempting to forget her personal problems. Dedicating herself to her job, she feels in control of her life and independent; her success in academia fills the emotional void temporarily, although she constantly looks for a challenge. As her analyst suggests, her attitude recalls the Greek Myth of Sisyphus: “To push a stone up the mountain and then watch it while it falls down and to start it all over again.”[[25]](#footnote-25) In *Volevo essere una farfalla*, Marzano declares that—after many years—she recovered from eating disorders and she has now a better relationship with food; however, her autobiography is once again the product of her compulsive attitude towards achievement. Her book is a groundbreaking publication in which an acclaimed academic describes her eating disorder, a subject that has been explored by Italian women writers before, but never as directly. In writing it, she still employs her attitude towards challenges that her analyst explained through the myth of Sisyphus.

At war with themselves, their families, their unsatisfying men, postmodern ideals of femininity and socio-cultural expectations placed on women, the protagonists of Schelotto’s *Una fame da morire*, Arachi’s *Briciole* and Marzano’s *Volevo essere una farfalla* talk about themselves by binging, purging, starving or vomiting. They ask for help, love and attention. They attempt to transform their bodies into utopian silhouettes that will allow them to partake of the illusion that they have separated themselves from their real selves, thereby finding some happiness. Anorexia, bulimia, binge eating and other atypical relationships with food in these narrative works become problematic, paradoxical, harmful instruments of self-empowerment, a metaphorical language which helps these women to find a way to question the social constrictions and cultural contradictions of Italian women’s position in postmodern, patriarchal culture. Through a self-destructive bulimarexic path, Sara, Elena and Michela look for their real selves in a quest motivated by their hunger for love, affection and protection.

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1. I presented *Filling the Void: Bulimarexic Characters in Postmodern Italian Women’s Writing* at the cross-cultural symposium “Paradoxical Languages: Eating Disorders in Contemporary Women’s Writing”, held at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women’s Writing on 16/05/2014. I co-organized the event with Prof. Gill Rye, Director of the CCWW, over the course of my visiting fellowship where I worked on my postdoctoral book project on anorexia in modern and contemporary Italian women’s writing (to be published by *Il Poligrafo:* Padua). I am currently working on a significant longer version of this paper which will contribute to the volume *Writing Separation* edited by Lizzie Towl (Victoria University of Wellington). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* (London; Virago, 1986); Marilyn Lawrence, *The Anorexic Experience* (London: Women’s Press, 1984); Morag MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies: A Feminist and Sociological Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Routledge, 1993); Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978); *Hunger Strike*: *The Anorectic’s Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (London: Penguin, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gianna Schelotto, *Una fame da morire* (Milan: Mondadori, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alessandra Arachi, *Briciole, storia di un’anoressia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michela Marzano, *Volevo essere una farfalla. Come l’anoressia mi ha insegnato a vivere* (Milan: Mondadori, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marlene Boskind-Lodahl, *The Definition and Treatment of Bulimarexia: the Gorging/Purging Syndrome of Young Women* (Cornell University, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. American Psychiatric Association, “Feeding and Eating Disorders” in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association 2013), 329-354. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Except elsewhere stated, all translations are mine. The paper was presented to an Anglophone audience; I chose to read my English translation and added the original Italian version in the footnotes, PowerPoint slides and handouts for those interested in quotations from Italian. “Hai mangiato del cioccolato! […] Dov’era? Dove l’hai trovato?” Schelotto, “La ragazza che mangiava la luna”, in *Una fame da morire*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Livia è un nome bellissimo, leggero, leggero. Si pronuncia in un soffio, per questo l’ho scelto per la ragazza magra che è nascosta in me.” Schelotto, “La ragazza che mangiava la luna”, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I am borrowing this expression from Lilian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham, *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment* (University Park, VA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “[M]i protegge da tutto o quasi. Dimagrendo dovrei entrare in un mondo nuovo che i miei organi e i miei sensi non riconoscerebbero.” Schelotto, “La ragazza che mangiava la luna”, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, 45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*,45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Brutta cicciona!” Schelotto, “La ragazza che mangiava la luna”, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Ma non è me che chiama! Io sono Livia!”Schelotto, “La ragazza che mangiava la luna”, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Grazia Menechella, “La rappresentazione dell’anoressia nel discorso medico e nei testi di Alessandra Arachi, Nadia Fusini e Sandra Petrignani,” *Italica*, 78, no. 3 (2001): 387-409 (393). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “l’orgoglio dell’istituto”, Arachi, *Briciole*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “ad ogni pagina, ad ogni riga, mi comparivano montagne di budini e torte al cioccolato.” Arachi, *Briciole*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “Non avevo mai pensato, nemmeno per un attimo, di amare Franco. […] Non lo odiavo, non aveva senso odiarlo. […] Adesso ero sola tra le pentole e nella dispensa della grande cucina avrei avuto tutto il tempo di scegliere il cibo, cucinarlo e magari mangiarlo anche seduta al tavolo guardando la televisione. […] Sola in cucina ora aggredivo i cibi nelle pentole, a qualsiasi grado di cottura. […] Passai le prime settimane di matrimonio quasi sempre davanti ai fornelli preparando cinque, sei, ma anche sette volte lo stesso pranzo e la stessa cena.” Arachi, *Briciole*, 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “Mi ero convinta che se fossi riuscita a diventare leggera come una farfalla, tutto sarebbe andato a posto.” Michela Marzano, *Volevo essere una farfalla*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “L’anoressia è un sintomo di una parola che non riesce ad esprimersi altrimenti.” Marzano, *Volevo essere una farfalla*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Burns Maree, “Eating Like an Ox: Femininity and Dualistic Constructions of Bulimia and Anorexia”, *Feminism & Psychology* 14, May 2004: 269-295. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. “[n]on esistono *le* anoressiche e *le* bulimiche. Esistono solo tante persone che utilizzano il cibo per dire qualcosa.” Marzano, *Volevo essere una farfalla*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Spingere un macigno su per una montagna per poi vederlo precipitare in basso appena raggiunta la cima e dover ricominciare tutto da capo.” Marzano, *Volevo essere una farfalla*, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)