

Xiaolu Guo's *A Lover's Discourse*: Analysis of the Influence of Roland Barthes

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Abstract This paper aims to analyse *A Lover's Discourse* (2020), a novel by Chinese writer Xiaolu Guo, comparing it to *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978) by Roland Barthes and examining to what degree the French linguist and semiotician has influenced the author's work. The discourse between lovers developed by Guo resembles that of Barthes on a structural, linguistic, and thematic level, but is set in an intercultural and multilingual context. By reframing the discourse as such, Xiaolu Guo contemplates themes of love, wordlessness, and home, connected to the migrant's experience.

Keywords Xiaolu Guo. Roland Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse*. *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Chinese literature. Intercultural communication.

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Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-01-31
Accepted 2023-06-21
Published 2023-08-29

Open access

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Citation Giuliano, E. (2023). "Xiaolu Guo's *A Lover's Discourse*: Analysis of the Influence of Roland Barthes". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 59, 455-474.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2023/01/017

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1 Introduction

The literary work of the Chinese British-based multidisciplinary artist Xiaolu Guo has been at the centre of research interests of numerous scholars working in the fields of Sinology and English studies. Several of the papers written on this subject concentrate on the analysis of the language used by the writer, paying particular attention to the peculiar combination of English and Chinese, a hallmark of her literary style, and the themes of translation and self-translation (Doloughan 2018; Gilmour 2012; Shi 2021; Spyra 2016). Others, instead, focused on different aspects of Xiaolu Guo's narrative of migration: first, the concepts of linguistic and cultural identity (Rahbek 2012; Qiang, Xu 2020); second, the theme of dislocation and the representation of space (Doloughan 2015; Codeluppi 2020). Another central theme widely discussed by literary critics is the relationship between language and eroticism (Oboe 2013; Poon 2013; Rojas 2021).

A crucial subject that has not yet been discussed in detail is the role of the French linguist and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-80), and his book *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978). Analysing the theme of love in Xiaolu Guo's literary work *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), Hwang (2013) refers to the above-mentioned work by Roland Barthes, noticing the shared features in these two books.

Today there is the opportunity to unveil many more similarities between the two writers thanks to Xiaolu Guo's more recent book, *A Lover's Discourse* (2020). This article aims to discover to which extent Roland Barthes has influenced Xiaolu Guo's work, analysing and comparing *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Barthes 1978).

2 Love and Language in an Intercultural Context

Xiaolu Guo 郭小橧 is a Chinese writer and filmmaker, born in 1973 in the small fishing village of Shitang in Zhejiang Province. In 2002, having been awarded a prestigious scholarship by the British government, she moved to the UK to study film for a full academic year. After this period, she decided to stay and make a new home in this country (Guo 2017). From that pivotal moment on, Xiaolu Guo adopted this newly acquired language, English, to write her novels. In her memoir, *Once Upon a Time in the East* (2017), Xiaolu Guo informs the readers about her choice to use English in her writing, saying:

I could only see myself making a living through writing, as I had done in China. But should I write in Chinese here, a foreign land [...]? If I continued to write in Chinese I would have no readers here. [...] I would have to start writing in another tongue. I would use my broken English, even though it would be extremely diffi-

cult. And yet, more positively, I would be free from state and self-censorship. (Guo 2017)

The English language constitutes a way for the writer to start a new life in a foreign land. Besides freeing her from censorship, English gives her access to the British and international publishing markets. However, the writer often inserts Chinese characters and concepts in her novels, which help her to convey meanings and feelings that are difficult to express in a foreign language. For example, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), Xiaolu Guo's first novel to be released in the UK, is characterised by a peculiar use of the language. The author adopts a 'broken English', whose incorrect grammar, combined with Chinese characters, recreates the writing style of a foreign language learner. In her novels, English and Chinese combine through translation, creating "a text that is alive and true for both cultures" (Guo 2016). Xiaolu Guo engages with different worlds not only through her linguistic choices but also on a thematic level, building her characters from different cultural backgrounds. This combination of multiple linguistic and thematic features serves the writer to address cultural differences, bringing together her past in China and her present in Europe.

During her early university years in Beijing, she read Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, a text which particularly influenced her view on love and language:

I think I was very much attracted to that book [...]. What fascinated me that time was [that] love is a complete lie, love is such a construction, reconstruction. [...]. It's a violent book to destroy. As some kind of complete romantic and nonsense mind, [coming] from a little place, you believe love conquers all [...]. But I think that's so profound about the effect of that book, when you read [it] when you were very young. I thought about the construction of language and that [of] the language direct to the subject of love or hatred. (Guo 2020a)

Roland Barthes' (1978) *magnum opus* aims to determine how amorous discourse works or, more generally, how discourse between lovers develops through language, demonstrating the limits of language itself. The reflection on love and language, specifically the communication between the two lovers, made Xiaolu Guo decide to 'replicate' Barthes' work. For this reason, the two discourses share similar characteristics. *A Lover's Discourse*, however, was not Xiaolu Guo's only attempt to reproduce Barthes' book:

I have to mention the first novel I wrote in English, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. I wrote in broken English, and I was making an attempt to somehow make my own 'lover's dis-

course,' [of] when I first came to London, 18 years ago. In a way, *Chinese-English Dictionary* is a kind of naive attempt to record my journey in England, and to somehow pay homage to the certain Western writers I was so much in love with when I was in China. I just continued to write other books after that [...]. And therefore, I began to write this one. It's a return to my earlier attempt—this is my continuation of the concerns in *Chinese-English Dictionary*. I thought, after all these years, perhaps I can court *myself* and court Barthes again to write this book. (Guo 2020b)

According to this extract, *A Lover's Discourse* (2020) is to be understood as a rewrite of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). The rewriting is a pretext to express the contents of her first book in a new key and to deepen it through a more adult voice that is more aware of the dynamics between languages and lovers, 'paying homage' to Roland Barthes.

The protagonist of Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* is a Chinese woman who moved to the UK to start a PhD in visual anthropology during the Brexit referendum. Her knowledge of English is undoubtedly better than that of the protagonist of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). However, the linguistic and cultural differences are nevertheless highlighted through her love affair with a man of German and Australian descent. The fundamental theme of the novel is the (in)communicability of love between people who represent two different worlds. The two protagonists have contrasting visions of the world related to their personal, professional, and cultural backgrounds. This contrast is also accentuated by their mother tongues and the constant exchange of English, Chinese and German. Using one's mother tongue often translates feelings that would otherwise be difficult to express in another language.

Language and communication between lovers are fundamental elements of Xiaolu Guo's (2020) text. Barthes' discourse, however, as Hwang (2013, 73) notes, was confined to lovers belonging to "a homogeneous group", not taking into consideration interlingual and intercultural communication. In this regard, Hwang (2013, 73) states that communication difficulties do not depend solely and exclusively on language but also on other "external factors", such as "social and cultural conditions and differences". Xiaolu Guo's novels can be considered an attempt to rework Barthes' lover's discourse to place it in a contemporary multilingual and multicultural context.

3 **Rewriting Roland Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*: Fragments and Nameless Characters**

The two works share a similar structure that can be detected by looking at the internal organisation of these two works. In Barthes' (1978) work, the prologue, or introductory chapter, titled *How This Book is Constructed* (3-9), provides the key to understanding his work. The term 'discourse' in the title is defined as the "running here and there" (Barthes 1978, 3) of the lover who discusses through "outbursts of language" (3). This discourse is presented as a monologue of the protagonist, Goethe's young Werther, who addresses the loved object,¹ never obtaining a response. The 'fragments of discourse', on the other hand, called "figures" by Barthes (3), explore feelings and actions common to lovers.

As Barthes (5) explains, each chapter comprises a headword that "is not its definition but its argument". It does not refer to characteristics inherent in the lover but represents words, phrases, or statements typical of their speech. The subtitle, on the other hand, is in a dictionary form, with the word juxtaposed to a sentence – what Barthes (6) calls "matrices of figures" – that is not a definition but instead aims to explain a particular attitude or feeling of the lover. In the text, however, Barthes (1978) develops the subject in different ways: he imagines archetypal situations, such as a date between lovers, discussing potential developments and circumstances; he reflects on phrases or words that have to do with love, such as the expression 'I love you' (147-54) or the concept of 'adorable' (18-21), examining their meaning and use.

The choice in the succession of the chapters is arbitrary; they are organised much like a dictionary, following the alphabetical order of the words to avoid any possible logical succession between the figures, which, according to Barthes (1978, 6-8), cannot be ordered.²

In *A Lover's Discourse* (2020), as in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), Xiaolu Guo imitates the form of Barthes' (1978) text by adopting similar choices. The two titles are almost the

¹ In an interview conducted by Philippe Roger for *Playboy* in 1977, Barthes justifies using the term 'loved object' by stating that "the amorous feeling is unisex, like jeans and hair"; consequently, the term has a neutral meaning without any gender connotations (Barthes 2014, 231; Author's transl.).

² Interestingly, when comparing different versions of the text in translation, the English version (1978) follows the same order as the French one (1977). In contrast, the Italian version (2014) differs from the original. In this case, the text is organised according to the alphabetical order of the words translated into Italian. This type of structure reflects what Barthes stated in the introductory chapter, i.e. the impossibility of arranging the figures in any particular order other than the arbitrary one described above, avoiding any possible creation of meaning between chapters. Changing the order in the Italian version creates no problems for the reception of the text, given the independent nature of each figure.

same except for the word 'fragments', which has been removed by Xiaolu Guo. The omission of this word, however, does not imply uniformity within the text. Even if it follows a chronological order of events, it presents a fragmented structure. In other words, in Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, fragmentation as a literary technique does not presuppose a story that can be read starting from any chapter, as in Barthes' work. However, it can be defined as the chronologically ordered succession of fragments of discourse which recount a specific event or explain a particular state of mind at a specific time.

The subchapters of Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* differ from those described above while retaining the same layout: the title is either a word or a phrase – such as *The Elderflowers* (25) or *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* (5) – which anticipates the topic that will be dealt with in the text. The subtitle, on the other hand, is not the etymology or a brief explanation of the topic but is a meaningful extract (fragment) taken from the body of the text, usually a conversation between the two lovers that summarises the content of the passage. These extracts immediately highlight the focal point of the discourse, informing the reader of the meaning they propose to convey. Given the intimate and fragmented style, the text appears like diary pages. In Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, most of these subchapters reflect more deeply on the protagonist's psychology, offering several passages in which the reader is brought into close contact with the protagonist's feelings, reflections and sufferings.

In the epigraph of the book (Guo 2020), the author has decided to include a quote from Barthes' (1978) *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, highlighting the importance of the model. The epigraph reads:

language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire. (Guo 2020)

This passage introduces both the themes of language and love through the metaphor of the skin. The discourse between lovers is understood as an intimate and almost erotic exchange between the two, in which language succeeds in replacing skin and fingers by touching the loved object. In this sense, the need for dialogue, for communication between lovers, plays a fundamental role in the relationship.

The fragmentation of the text is also rendered by the seemingly arbitrary organisation of its chapters, designated by the four Chinese cardinal points – *xi* 西 (West), *nan* 南 (South), *dong* 东 (East), *bei* 北 (North) – and the four main directions: *xia* 下 (below), *shang* 上 (above), *zuo* 左 (left) and *you* 右 (right). The use of characters juxtaposed with their translation is a theme that has already been addressed by Doloughan (2015) in her studies on literary space. Specifically, Doloughan (2015, 8) does not see space only as the story's setting but also as a

“conceptual space”, i.e. those parts in the text written in Chinese. According to Doloughan (2015, 8), this practice aims to make the monolingual English readers acknowledge their linguistic limitation by entering “an incomprehensible textual space”, even though aided by translation. Following this perspective, the indications of direction inserted in the paratext could create a sense of bewilderment in the readers and, at the same time, act as a compass to help them orient themselves in the text through translation. These seemingly arbitrary terms, however, could be seen as a means used by Xiaolu Guo to convey a symbolic meaning. A preliminary explanation for using these elements could be found in the concept of ‘discourse’, which, as mentioned above, indicates the wandering of the lover who can only express himself through language. The cardinal points and directions could therefore symbolise this continuous movement of the lover from one side to the other, and the ‘outbursts of language’ could be represented by the writer through the fragments of discourse in each subchapter. On the other hand, it is interesting to analyse the use of these expressions in modern Chinese. The combination of the four cardinal points – in the sequence *dongnanxibei* 东南西北 (East-South-West-North) or *dongxinanbei* 东西南北 (East-West-South-North) – is used with the meaning of ‘everywhere’ or ‘direction’ (Chen 2009). The different anti-clockwise arrangement of the characters in Guo’s (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, in the order West-South-East-North, and the prioritised position of the term ‘West’ over ‘East’ could indicate where the story began and where it will end, in England. Through these symbolic interpretations, the inferred meaning could be related to continuous wandering of somebody who moves in all direction to find his/her place in the world. Similarly, these concepts reflect the condition of the migrant, who has travelled a long way before arriving in a new, disorienting country, a sentiment that is made explicit in one of the opening sentences of the book:

I got off the bus, and stood in a place called London Wall, but only found myself under a bleak-looking bridge with traffic lights in all directions. [...] I had to walk, but in which way? (Guo 2020, 10)

Another peculiar element of Guo’s (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* is the absence of references to names: the two characters are nameless. Doloughan (2021) has described this practice, typical of Xiaolu Guo’s fiction, as a way of

focusing on the dialogic interaction between characters whose positions are representative, rather than unique, and may reflect more generalizable philosophical and existential concerns. (Doloughan 2021, 36)

As Doloughan (2021, 36) states, the omission of names serves the writer to break down the correlation between the characters and their place of origin and culture. Through this interpretation, it is possible to connect the intent of Xiaolu Guo (2020) to what Roland Barthes (1978, 2) affirmed in the epigraph to *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* regarding the need for a text on love discourse "spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?)". Barthes' (1978) love discourse does not refer to any character specifically but gives voice to all those lovers who share the same type of feelings, practices, and language. Looking more generally at Barthes' theory of names, it is possible to identify other elements that may have influenced Xiaolu Guo's (2020) writing. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes (1977, 51) relates the use of proper names to love by saying: "how can one have an erotic relationship with proper names?". Therefore, to create the love story, Xiaolu Guo (2020) seems to follow Barthes' 'advice' by dealing with love through nameless characters. Furthermore, in *S/Z*, Barthes (1990) links the use of personal pronouns to names by saying:

in principle, the character who says 'I' has no name [...]; in fact, however, *I* immediately becomes a name, his name. In the story (and in many conversations), *I* is no longer a pronoun, but a name, the best of names: to say *I* is inevitably to attribute signifies to oneself; further, it gives one a biographical duration, it enables one to undergo, in one's imagination, an intelligible 'evolution', to signify oneself as an object with a destiny, to give a meaning to time. (Barthes 1990, 68)

The proper name is not a necessary element in fiction, as even a simple personal pronoun or an epithet can simultaneously define a character and distinguish it from another (Chatman 1978). In Barthes' (1978) *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, it is possible to identify two practices of character designation: on the one hand, characters are described and distinguished through the epithets 'amorous subject' and 'loved object'; on the other hand, the writer uses 'I' as opposed to 'other'. The distinction between 'I' and 'other' is similarly employed by Xiaolu Guo (2020), who defines the two protagonists by using the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you'.

A complementary analysis is the one conducted by Qiang Yun, Xu Junnong (2020), who studied the contrast between the concepts of 'self' and 'other' in Guo's (2007) *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. Specifically, Qiang Yun, Xu Junnong (2020, 155; Author's transl.) focused on the power of cultural translation and interpretation that, through contact between "heterogeneous cultures", allows the creation of "one's own identity", leading to "self-understanding". Following this theory, the analysis of cultural differences, such as thematic issues or linguistic aspects, enables the protagonist to con-

struct her own identity. This type of approach, consequently, is also applicable to the characters in Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*. The 'self' of the female protagonist is represented by the personal pronoun 'I', as opposed to the 'other', the 'you' referring to the male protagonist; the two characters are thus not well defined because they do not represent any person specifically but embody, more generally, the confrontation between two different cultures.

4 Shades of Meaning: Love, Belonging and Alienation

On a linguistic-thematic level, Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* provides several Chinese concepts, making it possible to broaden thematic boundaries and discuss various topics fundamental to the writer. A key element that contributed significantly to the development of this analysis is the concept of 'adorable', is the concept of 'adorable' in Barthes' (1978, 18-21) *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. This term is employed out of necessity, as the lover is considered incapable of expressing clear and detailed feelings towards the loved object through language, condensing them into a single word with no precise meaning. Barthes also provides a similar explanation for the expression 'I-love-you':

the word (the word-as-sentence) has a meaning only at the moment I utter it; there is no other information in it but its immediate saying; no reservoir, no armory of meaning. (148-9)

Barthes (149), therefore, defines this expression as a 'proffering' without a precise meaning. The ideographic and pictographic nature of Chinese, as opposed to an alphabetic language such as English, allows Xiaolu Guo to compensate for expressive difficulties:

the fundamental problem with English for me was that there is no direct connection between words and meanings [...]. When you write the Chinese for *sun*, it is 太阳 or 日, which means 'an extreme manifestation of Yang energy'. *Yang* signifies things with strong, bright and hot energy. So 'extreme yang' can only mean the sun. But in English, *sun* is written with three letters, *s*, *u* and *n*, and none of them suggests any greater or deeper meaning. Nor does the word look anything like the sun! (Guo 2017)

Including Chinese characters and concepts in her text makes it possible to convey deeper meanings tied to her cultural background and to

express more authentic, clear, and comprehensible feelings.³ Though these concepts may be obscure to a reader without knowledge of Chinese, they represent an attempt at linguistic and cultural mediation.

Words are often used with different shades of meaning, such as, for example, the word 'love', which can refer to different types of love, romantic or erotic. Similarly, the expression 'wordless' also contains a series of feelings typical of the migrants' condition, who, once set into a reality very different from their own, feel lost and alienated, both socially and linguistically. This feeling is found throughout Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* and exemplifies the hardships of foreigners integrating into a new country.

Another fundamental element for this type of analysis is the polysemic nature of the Chinese language, which allows the writer to convey different meanings, developing the discourse from multiple points of view. Concerning amphibology, or polysemy, Barthes explains:

the word 'intelligence' can designate a faculty of intellection or a complicity (*to have intelligence that...*); in general, the context forces us to choose one of the two meanings and to forget the other. Each time he encounters one of these double words, R.B., on the contrary, insists on keeping both meanings, as if one were winking at the other and as if the word's meaning were in that wink, so that *one and the same word, in one and the same sentence, means at one and the same time two different things, and so that one delights, semantically, in the one by the other. [...] I can actualize their amphibology, can say 'intelligence' and appear to be referring chiefly to the intellectual meaning, but letting the meaning of 'complicity' be understood.* (1977, 72)

The use of these 'double words' presupposes the possibility of expressing several concepts at the same time. A similar process takes place in Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*. The theme of 'home' provides a significant example of the amphibology described by Barthes. The Chinese character *jia* 家 is used with three different but related meanings, such as home, family and motherland, symbolising a more profound, multi-layered sentiment. The analysis of these concepts, and their relation to Roland Barthes' literature, aims to raise and highlight the most important thematic and linguistic issues dealt with in the text.

3 Regarding the Chinese language, Barthes (2012, 192) said: "we think that the Chinese language is very precise; that one can express precisely what one thinks".

4.1 Love

In the prologue of Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, the writer starts with the following quotation from Barthes' (1978, 189): "love at first sight is a hypnosis". In the subchapter, the writer develops a dialogue between the two lovers, who discuss whether their love affair began at first sight:

wasn't it clear the moment you picked the elderflowers by the park and we looked at each other? [...] I think when we are young, our impulses take over our mind. Romantic love is always an impulse in my case. (Guo 2020, 1-2)

In this passage, Xiaolu Guo seems to express the Buddhist concept of *yuanfen* 缘分 (fate), which designates the love between two people (Lv, Zhang 2012, 358), as she had already explored in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007, 279-80). Falling in love is perceived as a result of destiny, a predestined relationship between lovers. Similarly, 'love at first sight' presupposes the birth of romantic love spontaneously, almost automatically, as a process that does not depend on the will of the two protagonists. Barthes (1978) describes the concept of 'love at first sight' (also called *enamoration*) as something that "falls over me, without my expecting it, without my wanting it" (190), it is like "a hypnosis" (189) in which "the amorous subject is 'ravished' (captured and enchanted) by the image of the loved object" (188).

In the same chapter, Barthes (1978, 188) continues on the concept of ravishment by correlating love and war, saying that "in both cases, it is a matter of conquering, ravishing, capturing, etc.". To do this, Barthes (1978, 188) uses a comparison between ancient and modern myth to explain how 'ravishment' – conceived as falling in love – works. In particular, Barthes believes that from the past to the present, there has been a reversal of roles in which the ravisher became the loved object and the 'prey' becomes the amorous subject. In Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, the female protagonist is the subject, and her lover is the object. Insisting on the association between love and war, Xiaolu Guo develops the theme of erotic love using warlike language. In the chapter entitled *Penetrative Sex vs. Non-penetrative Sex*, the protagonist confesses to her beloved: "it's like you're intruding, forcefully. I can't then *feel* love any more" (Guo 2020, 51). The term 'forcefully' refers to a power struggle between the two lovers, in which one must make up for the conquest of the other.

About power, Barthes (1978,121) says:

subjection, though, is my business: subjected, seeking to subject the other, I experience in my fashion the will to power, the *libido dominandi*. (121)

The desire to dominate, then, is a typical characteristic of the sentimental relationship, which Barthes (2014) explains in more detail in an interview:

the lover feels dominated, imprisoned, seized by the loved object. But, in reality, the one who loves also exerts a tyrannical power over the one who is loved. [...] The lover struggles not to be subjugated. But he fails. [...] The solution is to place oneself in a state of non-will-to-seize. (235; Author's transl.)

The concept of non-will-to-seize (or non-will-to-possess) is taken from Eastern philosophy. Barthes deals with this topic in both *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978) and *La Préparation du roman: Cours au Collège de France* (2015). Regarding the former, the author states that in the love relationship, the subject constantly wants to conquer the loved object, but, realising this personal attitude, decides not to will to possess. In the second work, on the other hand, the term is juxtaposed with the Taoist concept of *wuwei* 無為 (non-action), which Barthes (2011, 156) describes as "a 'sort of humble passivity', removed from any desire for violence or rivalry", which allows one to "experience a state of mobility, of non-struggle, of non-action, of non-will-to-possess" (Barthes 2015; Author's transl.). Although Xiaolu Guo's lovers demonstrate this struggle, the 'non-action' seems to be put into practice at the end of the book, when the author suggests a possible coexistence, a balance, between the two lovers and their cultures.

4.2 Wordless

The concept of alienation, both on a linguistic and social level, is one of the fundamental themes of Xiaolu Guo's (2020) novel, and also relates to a sense of belonging to a specific place or group. The expression *wuyu* 无语 (wordless) in Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* encapsulates the protagonist's feelings, such as the difficulties in integrating into a new country. The expression *wuyu* is taken from Roland Barthes' (1982) *Empire of Signs*: a text dedicated to his trip to Japan. In the chapter titled *Without Words* (9-10), for example, Barthes perceives the "unknown language", Japanese, as "a delicious protection" that "envelops the foreigner" (9). In *A Lover's Discourse*, Xiaolu Guo (2020) picks up on the passage from Barthes' (1982) *Empire of Signs* when the protagonist, on a trip to Rome, declares that she does not feel this sense of protection mentioned by Barthes:

this language was not too foreign for you [...]. But it was foreign for me. Even though this culture uses the same twenty-six Latin letters,

just like most European languages – the same alphabet. But I didn't come from this alphabet. I came from the non-alphabetic. [...] The only protection for me would be to really try to understand the foreign language. [...] But I knew that even if one day I could master a foreign language – one of the major European languages – I would still not become a primary citizen of the West. (Guo 2020, 198)

The protagonist perceives the Italian language as 'foreign', as just another alphabetic language that does not belong to her. This sensation brings her face-to-face with her position as a migrant and causes her to reflect on the connection between language and belonging. The protagonist has an excellent knowledge of English, yet, she believes that this will not lead her to become "a primary citizen of the West", retaining the status of 'foreigner' forever.

Barthes (1982, 5), moreover, dedicates an entire page of his *Empire of Signs* to the Japanese *kanji mu* 無 identical to the Chinese character *wu* 无 defined as 'emptiness'. In this regard, Barthes (4) proposes a parallelism between "writing" and the "*satori* (the Zen occurrence)", which "causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate", provoking "*an emptiness of language*" (italics in the original). Although writing and emptiness seem to be opposite terms, according to Barthes, they are related. He states that "it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing" (4). Similarly, this sense of 'loss of words' leads the protagonist of Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* to express her feelings and describe the sense of loneliness and alienation she experiences in England:

I owned nothing in this country. Come to think of it, I didn't even own myself in this country. My visa, my non-existent income, or my supposed doctor's degree – none of these belonged to me, even though they might temporarily belong to me. Every morning I woke up with anxiety. [...] Then there was an ambulance rushing down the road, its siren shrieking. [...] Before I could escape from the horror of the open-door life, a police car zoomed past, with an even louder siren. Everything seemed to be sending out a message: 'Go home, jobless people. Go home, foreigners. Go home, losers'. [...] Perhaps, I should talk to people, speak in some language, any language, and hear the language of others too. Any language. [...]

'I am feeling wordless. I call it *wu yu*. It's like I have lost my language'.

You wrote back:

'Why lost? If you have really lost one language, aren't you gaining another?'. (Guo 2020, 43-5)

This significant excerpt provides several insights into the condition of the migrant, dealing with different aspects of the topic. The first re-

lates to the individual's sense of belonging to a specific place. Moreover, the 'signals' sent by the ambulance and police car sirens are used as a metaphor for the growing feeling of alienation in the migrant, who experiences a sense of estrangement from a context different from her own. The hostility represented by these signals makes the migrant feel neither welcome nor included in this new environment from a cultural, social, and linguistic point of view.

Another aspect concerns the linguistic sphere and, more specifically, exclusion from language. The concept of 'loss of words' plays a fundamental role in the life of the migrant, who finds herself speaking a language other than her mother tongue, leading to the loss of the language itself and the acquisition of a new one that, however, does not pertain to her.

The theme of language exclusion is taken up again later in the text concerning the German language:

You were deep in conversation with some German friends, moving quickly between English and German. I could not follow at all. I heard each word you spoke but I didn't understand any of it. (Guo 2020, 167)

At a New Year's party, the protagonist feels excluded from others' conversations. A passage explaining a similar feeling can also be found in Barthes' (1978) *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*:

any general conversation which I am obliged to listen to (if not to take part in) appalls me, paralyzes me. As for this language of the others from which I am excluded, it seems to me that these others overload it absurdly: they assert, object, argue, show off: what have I to do with Portugal, affection for dogs, or the latest Petit Rapporteur? I see the world - the other world - as a generalized hysteria. (Barthes 1978, 88)

It is as if Barthes staged the sense of alienation deriving from the 'language' of others. However, the exclusion from language mentioned by Barthes in the extract is not related to the language spoken but rather to the subject of the conversation. This theme, taken up by Xiaolu Guo (2020) in *A Lover's Discourse*, is built into the intercultural and interlingual context her book is set in.

These aspects exhibit the fundamental arguments explored and used by Xiaolu Guo (2020) to create a contrast between cultures and languages. From this contrast, the writer develops a broader discourse, which mirrors the society in which we live, characterised by multiculturalism and multilingualism.

4.3 Home

It's strange but accurate that English people use the word *flat* to describe a home. *Flat* is a sad concept of *home*. My flat did not feel like a home at all. It was more like a space defined by legal status, where I, as a foreigner, could cook and sleep *legally*. (Guo 2020, 43)

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Xiaolu Guo devotes an entire chapter to the concept of 'home' and the explanation of the Chinese term *jia* 家 (74-5). The latter is presented in the text by describing its constituents: the character consists of two components, the upper one, *mian* 宀 (roof) and the lower one, *shi* 豕 (pig). Although for the male protagonist in Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, the idea of a pig under a roof seems bizarre to describe the concept of home, the animal, explains Xiaolu Guo (2020, 74), represents a family's wealth. Thus, the term *jia* is employed with two meanings: home and family. On the one hand, the word represents home as a physical space; in fact, the term was used with the meaning of *anjia* 安家 or *dingju* 定居, i.e. 'settling' in a particular place (Liao 2020, 16). On the other hand, it represents the household, not only understood as the members of one family but also as a clan: "in the primitive period, families that had pigs were a symbol of the power and wealth of the whole clan" (Liao 2020, 16). The concept of family, therefore, was strongly linked to a sense of belonging to a social group. Moreover, in the Zhou period, *jia* was also used to refer to *guojia* 国家 (State) and *chaoting* 朝廷 (Imperial court/government) (Liao 2020, 17; Author's transl.), further emphasising the close link between individuals and their origin. This central theme of 'home' – understood both in the sense of 'dwelling' and 'family affection' – is fundamental to the unfolding of events in the story. The latter sense is crucial in the text and can also be linked, as we will see later, to Barthes' love for his mother.

The protagonist of Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* experiences a great deal of loneliness in her early London period, thinking about going back to China:

English nights were long, and they didn't belong to [...] foreigners, especially those friendless and familyless foreigners. [...] Should I just give up and fly back on the next plane? My parents were recently dead, so they could no longer say anything about it. [...] Everyone in China was either dying of cancer or suffering from some traumatic family history. And their children would bear the weight of that wherever they went, even abroad. (Guo 2020, 11-12)

The protagonist expresses her insecurities about her new life in the West, highlighting several crucial topics: on the one hand, the passage deals with loneliness and alienation; on the other hand, it intro-

duces the theme of family, the lack of roots in the motherland due to the death of her parents and their illness, which has influenced and continues to influence the protagonist's life even abroad.

The subject of parental influence and family ties resurfaces when the two lovers decide to buy a boat, making it their own proper 'home'. This decision leads the young woman to imagine her parents' judgement on her choice, demonstrating the importance of their opinion. She concludes that her parents would consider it 'insanity', but it is the validity of this choice, what she calls the freedom "to be insane, or stupid" (Guo 2020, 67), that the protagonist sees as "one of the positive things I had gained from losing my former Chinese life" (67).

The passages in Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse* that describe the emotional relationship with the protagonist's parents are charged with melancholy, especially when talking about her father. In the text, the writer devotes three chapters to the concept of love expressed in Barthes' (1978) *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. When the protagonist learns about Barthes' homosexuality, she starts questioning her understanding of the author. His masterpiece was not dedicated to a woman, as she thought, but to a man. However, the most significant revelation is the figure of Barthes' mother, who was "the only constant love in his life" (Guo 2020, 83). In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Barthes (1978) repeatedly speaks of his mother, especially expressing his feeling of lack and separation. Reading about Barthes' attachment to the woman and the beautiful words he had devoted to her after her death (Guo 2020, 83-4) leads the protagonist to think about her parents, thus creating one of the most significant descriptions of parental relationship in the entire book:

my father was perhaps the only man I loved deeply, but I never expressed this love to him. [...] I was not so close to my mother, even during the final months before she died. [...] That was why, from when I was quite young, I had talked only to my father. But my attachment to him ended when he passed away. And when my mother died, my attachment to China began to die too. I came to Europe. I wanted my adult life to be in Europe. Now as I thought of my love for you, it was like an extension of my love for my father, or a father in a different land, who would teach me how to live, away from familiar landscapes and languages. (86-7)

The close relationship with her father and the conflicting and cold relationship with her mother is reminiscent of the writer's life documented in her memoir (Guo 2017). The protagonist's moving to Europe resulted from the loss of her parents and the consequent lack of roots that kept her anchored to her motherland. She defines herself as belonging to the "rootless generation" (Guo 2020, 116), which, once again, seems to emphasise the feeling of not belonging anywhere,

fuelled above all by the boat which, not being anchored to the ground, represents the uncertainties of a life without a fixed residence.

5 Conclusions

This article has focused on the analysis of Xiaolu Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, trying to unveil the close relationship with the homonymous book by Roland Barthes (1978). As stated by Xiaolu Guo (2020b) this novel is an attempt to pay homage to the French writer who influenced her view on love and language from an early age. Rooted in her personal experience as a migrant in the UK, Xiaolu Guo tries to build her own lover's discourse by setting it in a multilingual and intercultural context. This perspective offers different insights into cultural differences and the condition of foreigners in a new land while aiming at interlingual and intercultural mediation. The reflection on these themes from an international perspective is the core of her novel, in which love functions as a thread throughout the narrative.

The novel describes the amorous relationship between a Chinese woman and her German-Australian lover, often moving between different linguistic systems and cultural concepts. Her text's intersection of English and Chinese – as well as German in this case – is a hallmark of her literary style. This technique allows the writer to create contrast between characters, address cultural differences and mediate between two worlds.

At the beginning of this work, we analysed and discussed Xiaolu Guo (2020) and Barthes' (1978) books' similarities in structure and organisation: the chapters are both organised in the dictionary form, but Guo's (2020) *A Lover's Discourse*, however, appears more intimate, like pages from a diary. Furthermore, we have discussed Roland Barthes' (1978) use of personal pronouns and names to analyse the use of 'I' and 'you' in *A Lover's Discourse*. We have concluded that these pronouns act as proper names distinguishing the characters while not representing any person specifically but embodying different cultures and positions.

Lastly, by analysing the lover's language limitation and amphibology as expressed by Barthes (1978, 18-21, 148-9; 1977, 72), we have addressed a linguistic and thematic analysis of Xiaolu Guo's (2020) novel, taking into account the concepts of love, wordlessness and home. Chinese characters and concepts allowed the writer to discuss more relevant concerns to her, engaging simultaneously with her present in the West and her past in China. For the theme of love, we have seen the concept of 'love at first sight', taken from Barthes (1978) *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, connected to the Chinese concept of *yuānfēn*. The correlation between love and war, used by Roland Barthes (1978, 188) to describe the lover's feeling of subjection

to the other, is also employed in Xiaolu Guo's (2020) novel, using a warlike vocabulary that refers to a power struggle between the lovers. The concept of *wuyu* 无语 ('wordless' or 'loss of language') – taken from Roland Barthes' (1982) *Empire of Signs* – is also central in Guo's *A Lover's Discourse* and represents the characteristic feeling of migrants, who feel out of place in a foreign land where language and cultural practices differ from their own. The construction of a new life provokes a growing sense of non-belonging in the migrant, which leads to a deeper reflection on the concept of home. The term 'home' here takes on three different shades of meaning, which overlap in the narrative: house, family, and motherland. Difficulties in (re) creating a new home can cause migrants to falter and long for their country of origin, encouraging them to reflect on family ties and their sense of belonging.

By focusing on cross-cultural love in *A Lover's Discourse*, Xiaolu Guo (2020) takes up many of the themes discussed by Roland Barthes (1978; 1982), proposing similar examples but placing them in an intercultural context that offers new insights, not only on love but also on issues of more general concern. Love seems to be an expedient for binding the story together. A story that, however, deals with topics and themes that are much more intimate for the writer, often mirroring her own life experiences. These topics relate to the condition of all those people who leave one country for another, striving to build a new life, willing to feel part of it while being in some way still attached to their previous life, memories, and history.

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