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How to Cite: Fegitz, E 2019 The Dichotomy Karima/Ruby in Italian Online Newspapers: Exclusions and Inclusions of Muslim Femininity in Post-feminist Culture. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 39, pp. 1–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.428>

Published: 27 May 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

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MUSLIMS IN THE MEDIA

The Dichotomy Karima/Ruby in Italian Online Newspapers: Exclusions and Inclusions of Muslim Femininity in Post-feminist Culture

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This paper focuses on the representation of Karima El Mahroug, alias Ruby Rubacuori ('Ruby Heartstealer'), in the online editions of three Italian newspapers (*Il Giornale*, *Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*). Karima/Ruby, a young woman originally from Morocco, was placed in the media spotlight for her implication in a sexual scandal involving the ex-Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi. The analysis shows a dichotomy in the representation of the young woman: as an 'at risk girl' or as a 'post-feminist sex worker'. Karima's national and religious origins contribute to the construction of her as a vulnerable, voiceless and fragile girl, made so by a traditional and sexist culture of origin. However, as the trial proceeds, a different construction of Karima, now fully identified with the name Ruby, emerges: an agentic, determined and assertive post-feminist sex worker who knowingly employed her sexual desirability for her own personal gains. As part of this evolution, Ruby sheds her 'otherness', becoming not only symbolic of Italian younger generations, but of the moral degeneration of the whole country. The narrative parabola Karima/Ruby that is engendered in the newspapers sees the incorporation of the Muslim woman in post-feminist culture, as well as her naturalisation as Italian, as long as she subscribes to its specifically neoliberal gender relations. This article explores the inclusions and exclusions of post-feminist culture, by investigating the normative discourses employed to make sense of Muslim femininity.

In 2009 Karima El Mahroug, alias Ruby Rubacuori ('Ruby Heartstealer'), was cast into the spotlight when her liaisons with the ex-Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, led to his trials for exploitation of underage prostitutes, which ran from 2011 to 2015. Originally from Morocco, Karima moved to Italy as a child with her family, settling in Letojanni, Sicily. After running away from home, Karima entered the orphanage system, repeatedly fleeing from homes, surviving on odd jobs as a waitress, or, more often, as a dancer in night clubs and bars and committing small thefts. In 2009 she moved to Milan, where she made the acquaintance of Berlusconi under the pseudonym 'Ruby Rubacuori'.

The centrality attributed to Karima/Ruby in the case, and the remarkable attention given to her by the national newspapers, indicates a cultural fascination with young femininity, often framed in the media as a site of excitement, titillation, anxiety and fear, as remarked by Gonick (2004; 2006) and McRobbie (2004; 2009). Indeed, Gonick (2004; 2006) and McRobbie (2004; 2009) have indicated how, while youth has traditionally been associated with progress and modernity, becoming a symbolic register to articulate anxieties and fears about social and cultural transformations, it is only in post-feminist culture that young *women* have come to the fore as metaphors of progress and change. The case of Karima/Ruby brings another important aspect to this discussion, which is the way post-feminist discourses about female subjectivity and sexuality intersect with discourses about race and religion in a context characterised by fear toward the 'other', antagonism to immigration and Islamophobia.

Scholarship on post-feminism has been critiqued for focusing mostly on white Western femininity, neglecting how 'other' women may be included in post-feminist culture (Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015). Gill (2017) has also urged scholars to investigate other critical differences, such as religion and disability, and how they are constructed in post-feminist culture. This article responds to these critiques by exploring the normative discourses that are produced in relation to Muslim femininity and how they reproduce existing patterns of inequality and discrimination in relation to race and religion. This occurs through a dichotomisation of Karima/Ruby's subjectivity in the media construction of the case: as either an exotic victim of

a traditional, oppressive religious background, or as an autonomous and empowered post-feminist subject. Thus, the case study sheds light on the process through which 'otherness' is allowed (or disallowed) in post-feminist culture, where the ethnically or religious 'other' is either excluded from hegemonic national culture or naturalised through the erasure of any markers of difference (McRobbie, 2009).

Through a Foucauldian discourse analysis (that understands the single textual instances as practices of producing knowledge and meanings in concrete contexts and institutions) of the articles published on the online editions of *Il Giornale* (478 articles), *Repubblica* (516 articles) and *Corriere della Sera* (570 articles) between 2009 and 2015, this article explores the cultural discourses that have been employed to understand and describe Karima/Ruby's subjectivity and participation in prostitution.¹ The first part of the article sets the background to the case by providing a narrative of the events as well as contextual information. The article then briefly illustrates the scholarship on post-feminism as well as the critiques of ethnocentrism that have been moved against it. This is followed by an analysis of the discourses produced around the subjectivity of Karima/Ruby; this is further divided into two subsections: one that maps the trajectory of Ruby from Oriental 'other' to post-feminist femininity; and one that investigates discourses of female 'agency' and 'choice' and their use in defining national identity. Ultimately, this article shows that the ethnic and religious 'other' woman can be and is included in post-feminist culture, but only if she subscribes to its specifically neoliberal gender relations.

From Rags to Riches: the transformation of Karima to Ruby

Karima El Mahroug, born in Fkih Ben Salah, Morocco, in 1992, lived in Morocco until the age of nine, when she and her mother joined her father in Italy, where he had emigrated a few years before. The family El Mahroug settled in Letojanni, a small town near Messina, Sicily, her father making a living by selling cheap rugs on the Sicilian beaches. Karima fought incessantly with her father, until, aged 13, she ran away from home. From then on, she entered the orphanage system, repeatedly fleeing from

¹ All translations are mine.

homes, surviving on odd jobs as a waitress or, more often, as a dancer in night-clubs and bars and committing small thefts. In 2009 she moved to Milan. Shortly after she was invited to one of Berlusconi's parties in his house Villa San Martino in Arcore (often referred to as just Arcore in the press), where she made Berlusconi's acquaintance.

On 5 May 2010, Karima, who at the time went by the name Ruby Rubacuori, was involved in a violent fight with the woman with whom she co-habited. The police were involved and discovered that Ruby was known to them, having repeatedly fled from youth care homes and having been accused of theft three times. Only a few days before, on 27 May 2010, Karima El Mahroug was in police custody for the alleged theft of €3,000 and three Rolex watches; the Prime Minister himself had intervened by calling the police, requesting them to entrust the young woman to the politician Nicole Minetti. He claimed that the young woman was the niece of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Further investigation into the matter led to a series of interrogations in which Karima disclosed salacious details about the parties that Berlusconi held in his house in Arcore. His close friends Emilio Fede (director of the news program on one of Berlusconi's television channels), Daniele Mora (a professional agent, also known as Lele Mora) and Nicole Minetti (a politician in Berlusconi's party, *Popolo della Libertà*, with a past as a TV 'velina') were also involved, being accused of acting as intermediaries between Berlusconi and the women invited to the parties who were paid to have sex with him.²

The current legislation on prostitution in Italy dates to 1958 and has been relatively untouched since then. The 'legge Merlin' (Merlin Law), which takes its name from the Senate member who brought it forth, Lina Merlin, put an end to State regulation of the trade (which constituted keeping records of sex workers and enforcing sexual health screenings), criminalised the aiding and abetting of prostitution and outlawed call houses (on the grounds that they aided, abetted and

² The name *velina* originated within the popular comedy/news show *Striscia la Notizia* [News Slide] in the early 1990s, in which scantily dressed and voluptuous 20-something women would emerge, often in skates, to deliver the news (called *veline*) to the older male presenters. Since then, the term has become common place to refer to any young woman who participates in television shows without really contributing to the delivery of the program.

exploited prostitution). Hence, both men and women were permitted to engage in sex work, as long as they acted alone and did not solicit in public places. Breaches of legislation were framed in terms of crimes against 'il buon costume e la morale pubblica [decency and public morality]' (Helfer, 2007: 66). Since then not much has changed: commercial sex between consenting adults is not a crime, while commercial sex with a minor is, and any intermediaries between the parties are in breach of the law against aiding, abetting and exploiting prostitution, constituting crimes against public morality and human dignity.

Hence, following Ruby's allegations, the PM ('Pubblico Ministero' [public prosecutor]) Pietro Forno, with PM Antonio Sangermano (they were later joined by PM Ilda Boccassini), began an investigation concerning Emilio Fede, Lele Mora and Nicole Minetti, suspecting the three to be involved in a prostitution ring in the service of Berlusconi. Subsequently, on 21 December 2010, Berlusconi became implicated in the investigation and was believed to have pushed for the release of Karima El Mahroug from police custody to keep his relations with the underage sex worker a secret. Consequently, he was charged with underage prostitution and abuse of office. On 3 October 2011, Fede, Mora and Minetti were charged with aiding and abetting prostitution, specifically underage prostitution in relation to Ruby. Berlusconi, and Fede, Mora and Minetti, were tried separately, Berlusconi's becoming known as 'Ruby', while Fede, Mora and Minetti's, which happened later, as 'Ruby Bis' or 'Ruby 2'.

Berlusconi, Fede, Minetti and Mora's legal defenses were built around the same narrative: the parties did not involve sex, but were just elegant dinners; they denied that any of the women involved were paid escorts; and denied ever exchanging money for sexual favours. This narrative was confirmed by several witnesses, including most of the women who participated in the parties. Furthermore, Berlusconi asserted that he was not aware that the woman was underage, believing she was 24, adding that once he discovered her true age he put an end to all contact and communication. This version of events was later supported by Karima. While at the beginning of the trial Karima claimed to have seen the Prime Minister engaging in sexual intercourse with paid escorts, subsequently she described this narrative as a fabrication, claiming that she had never had sex with Berlusconi at the parties, nor had any other woman.

In 2012 Berlusconi was found guilty on both counts and given a seven year sentence, with the interdiction from public office; however, the sentence was overturned at the second level of judgement ('Corte d'Assise'), claiming that the abuse of office did not take place and that underage prostitution did not constitute offence, since the prosecution was not able to prove beyond doubt that Berlusconi knew Karima's age at the time of the events. This judgement was later confirmed at the third level ('Corte di Cassazione'). Nonetheless, at all levels and in both trials the juries agreed that Berlusconi's parties were not innocent dinners but constituted a prostitution racket for the benefit of one man, Berlusconi, and with Ruby fully participating in the activities that took place.

Thus, the authorities launched a new investigation, 'Ruby-ter', incriminating 32 people, most of perjury and corruption in legal proceedings, among them Ruby. Berlusconi was accused of corrupting legal proceedings and suppressing evidence, and Ruby's ex-partner, Luca Riso, was accused of corruption and money laundering. Luca Riso's accusations were in relation to the purchase of estates in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, the location in which he and Ruby were, at the expense of Berlusconi, at the time when she should have been in court testifying. Calculations are that Berlusconi gave at least 10 million euros to the women involved (seven million euros to Ruby alone), as well as being involved in other economic transactions for the benefit of some of the witnesses in the trial.

The case study is important not only for its role in the definition of post-feminist subjectivity, as well as commercial sexuality, but also for the intersection of gender, race and religion, personified in the figure of Karima/Ruby. Below I provide an account of the field of post-feminist scholarship, with a specific eye to the construction of normative white femininity and the critique of ethnocentrism that has been developed in relation to this body of theory.

Post-feminism, the media and 'other' women

Since the 1980s, the term 'post-feminism' has circulated in mainstream as well as academic culture. The concept was coined within mainstream media to describe a new phase for women, now liberated not only from the male domination, but also

from the constricting and dogmatic demands of a feminism considered to be too radical, too moralistic and too exclusive (Casalini, 2011). Cultural studies scholars such as McRobbie (2004; 2008; 2009; 2015) and Gill (2007; 2008; 2014; 2017), among others, have analysed this cultural shift and described it as a cultural context informed by feminist tropes, whilst at the same time claiming that feminism as a political movement has been disavowed and rejected.

McRobbie (2009) argues that a form of gender awareness has come to characterise many Western cultures. Feminist values (mainly liberal) are endorsed in a variety of institutions, such as education, law, employment and medicine and, to some extent, media (McRobbie, 2004). Furthermore, women's successes in the workplace and in education, and in society as a whole, are paraded as markers of equality and of meritocracy (McRobbie, 2009). This is representative of the way in which feminist discourses have been appropriated by the mainstream, where a feminist ethic has been substituted by a form of personal liberation, grounded on the tropes of 'empowerment', 'choice', 'agency', 'lifestyle' and an entitlement to sexual pleasure (McRobbie, 2009).

The government and the media thus appear to be working side by side in the promotion of post-feminism, especially in relation to young women, who become 'subjects *par excellence* and also subjects of excellence' (McRobbie, 2009: 15, emphasis in original). Hence, women are called forth into what McRobbie (2009) calls 'spaces of luminosity', which give them visibility, and cast them as symbols of progress and change. Ultimately, women are encouraged to enter a new gender regime, in which they are allowed some freedom, while at the same time being subjected to new forms of control. In other words, media and neoliberal politics have worked together in the creation of new forms of normative subjectivity for young women, while at the same time 'undoing' feminism, the space most fitting to threaten the status quo.

Gill (2007) also draws a connection between post-feminism and neoliberalism, arguing that post-feminism is a new, discursive phenomenon closely linked to neoliberalism. She argues that neoliberalism, with its emphasis on the rational, calculating and self-regulating individual, has become a form of governmentality

which participates in the construction of modern subjectivity (Gill, 2007). Post-feminist subjectivity, being framed in the mainstream as active, freely chosen and self-reinventing, bears a very strong resemblance to the ideal subject of neoliberalism, such that Gill (2007: 443, emphasis in original) is moved to ask: 'could it be that neoliberalism is *always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?'

While earlier work on post-feminism did not ignore differences in terms of class, race and sexuality, the widespread assumption was that post-feminist discourses interpellated mainly white Western women (see for example Tasker and Negra 2007). However, Butler (2013: 36) has challenged this assumption: by looking at 'the ways in which this body of literature privileges a white middle-class, heterosexual subject' she includes an intersectional approach 'to more fully understand how postfeminist discourses reproduce inequalities of race, gender, and sexuality'. Ultimately, Butler (2013) argues that the racial 'other' is not excluded by the interpellations of post-feminism and that race plays an important role in shaping post-feminism itself. The analysis of the newspaper representation of Ruby/Karima that follows is similarly committed to expanding this debate, to show the way in which race and religion contribute to the definition of the ideal subject of post-feminism.

While scholars have begun to investigate the intersections of critical differences in post-feminist culture, religion has, for the most part, been neglected (exceptions are Ferber, 2012 and Mirza and Meeto, 2018). Gill (2017: 615) stresses the need to theorise religion in relation to post-feminism, 'particularly at a moment in which religious visibility is so freighted'. While Gill does not name any particular religion, Islam has a long history of stigmatization in the West and several countries have seen increased Islamophobia since 9/11 (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2006; Esposito and Mogahed, 2007; Lipka, 2017; Sheridan, 2006; YouGov, 2019) with violent attacks on Muslim communities (shortly before this article was submitted, a terrorist attack on a mosque took place in Christchurch, New Zealand, which took the lives of 50 women, children and men). The media has had an important role in this increase in Islamophobia, with multiple studies showing how Islam is represented as a monolithic, undifferentiated, extremist and sexist religion (el-Aswad, 2013; Korteweg, 2008; Kumar, 2010; Powell, 2011; Poynting and Perry, 2007).

In relation to the representation of Muslim women, scholars have found that they are mostly constructed as oppressed, victimised, vulnerable and passive (Al-Hejin, 2015; Eltantawy, 2007; Falah, 2005; Haque, 2010; Jabbra, 2006; Mishra, 2007; Navarro, 2010; Raouda, 2008). In her research on UK news, Al-Hejin (2015: 30) shows how, while Muslim men are understood as having agency, Muslim women are conceived as passive, merely 'moving with the tide'. When different representations occur, they often represent individualised stories of liberation, where women have challenged the restrictions imposed on them by the religious tradition, often by their rejection of the hijab (Al-Hejin, 2015: 30). This difference in representation is relevant to the analysis of Karima/Ruby that follows, as her subjectivity is similarly dichotomised. Ultimately, as Navarro (2010) argues, these representations contribute to the production and reproduction of Islamophobic ideas and attitudes, playing a central role in the growth of discrimination against Muslims.

Young femininity in the spotlight: competing discourses for making sense of the Muslim girl

The representation of Ruby Rubacuori in the online editions of *Il Giornale*, *Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* is the focus of the rest of the article. The use of these three publications for the analysis of this case study is particularly interesting since they have expressed different attitudes towards Berlusconi throughout the years. *Repubblica*, a newspaper aligned with the political Left, has been one of the harshest critics of Berlusconi since his entrance into politics. While *Corriere della Sera* has also been critical of the ex-Prime Minister, its tone has not been as explicit; nonetheless, it was *Corriere della Sera* that exposed the 'bunga bunga' parties, becoming one of the main outlets for the discussion of the interlinking of sex, money and power that followed.³ Finally, *Il Giornale* has always been extremely partisan to Berlusconi, unsurprisingly so since the publication is owned by his brother Paolo.

³ In the past five years, Berlusconi has been involved in a number of scandals which have attracted enormous national and international media attention. These include: parties in his Sardinian villa, where prominent political figures as well as attractive younger women participated in 2007, and being transported there via institutional means; 'bunga bunga' parties (also spelled as 'bunga-bunga') in his villa in Arcore from 2008 to 2013, where escorts, showgirls and *veline* (for a discussion of the term see previous note) alike all performed and entertained the ex-Prime Minister and his associates; suspect

The articles analysed have been retrieved through the newspapers' online archives, via the use of keywords related to the case, between the year Karima/Ruby was arrested (2009) and the year of Berlusconi's final acquittal from the charges (2015). The search produced 478 full articles in *Il Giornale*, 516 in *Repubblica* and 570 in *Corriere della Sera*. These have been analysed employing a Foucault-inspired discourse analytical method that focuses on how language works to engender certain truth claims and secure dominant relations of power. The objective was to explore the cultural discourses that have been employed to understand and describe Ruby's subjectivity and participation in prostitution, and to explore the way these discourses participate in defining intelligible forms of subjectivity, those that are sanctioned, as well as those that are deemed unintelligible.

A Foucauldian discourse analysis of the newspaper articles in the three publications shows a very ambivalent representation of Ruby: sometimes as naive, sometimes as crafty; fragile at the beginning of the events, ruthless towards the end; the ethnically and religious 'other', the representative of Italian youth. These representations lead to the understanding of Ruby's engagement in prostitution through dichotomised cultural discourses about 'us' and the 'other'. Indeed, although such representations seem to be opposing, competing and contradicting, their effect is to place Ruby in a dichotomous representation as, on the one hand, the rebellious, problematic, vulnerable and sexually exploited 'other' girl, and on the other hand, as the individualist, agentic, sexually 'liberated' post-feminist Italian sex worker.

These discourses were present not only in the newspaper coverage of the case, but also employed by the prosecution: PM Pietro Forno described Ruby as 'extremely fragile' and 'a distraught and suffering adolescent' (Anonymous, 2011a); while PM Ilda Boccassini talks of 'a young woman, gifted with Oriental astuteness [...] whose objectives are not work, effort, education, but access to mechanisms that will allow entry in the show business' (Pennucci, 2013).

illicit liaisons with minors, first with Noemi Letizia (his attendance at her 18th birthday party in 2009 led to the breakdown of his marriage to Veronica Lario) and then with Ruby Rubacuori in 2009–10.

This apparent dichotomy, between a discourse of vulnerability and one of agency, has been identified by Gonick (2006) as the 'Reviving Ophelia' and 'Girl Power' discourses. Gonick (2006: 2) claims that these are two of the cultural discourses about girlhood that have emerged in mainstream media and culture: 'Girl Power' represents a discourse about girls as 'asserting, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of passive femininity', while 'Reviving Ophelia' represents a discourse about girls as 'vulnerable, voiceless and fragile'. The three publications vary in the degree to which they portray Ruby as one or the other, swinging between the two representations even within the same publication according to the angle given by the article and the evidence and stage of the events. However, as Gonick (2006) argues, rather than contradicting each other these two discourses contribute to processes of individualisation that obscure structural inequalities and unequal power relations, focusing instead on personal histories and personality traits. On top of this, they contribute to creating a difference between 'us' and the Islamic 'other'. These two issues are explored below.

At risk girl: the troubled and vulnerable 'Oriental other'

Because of Ruby's troubled past, having left her house at a very young age and lived in foster homes, she is described as a girl who had to grow faster than most other girls (Gua & Berni, 2010), as having a 'stolen' childhood (Merlo, 2011), as an 'adultised minor [sic]' (Colaprico, 2013) and as an adolescent who plays at pretending to be an adult (Filippi, 2010). But Ruby is also described as 'rebellious' (Redazione, 2010), 'difficult' (Colaprico, D'Avanzo & Randacio, 2011), 'out of control' and 'out of her mind' (D'Avanzo, 2011), 'wild and alone' (Anonymous, 2010), 'without any reference point' (Redazione, 2011), 'a risk for other girls' (Sannino, 2010), a 'misfit' (Berticelli & Santucci, 2014) and many other ways to indicate a 'lost girl'.

Comparing Ruby to the character played by Audrey Hepburn in 'Breakfast at Tiffany's', *Il Giornale* (Macioce, 2013) writes:

Have a look at what is hiding behind Holly's dark sunglasses, observe what there is beyond Audrey Hepburn's Bambi eyes and you'll find the wilted face of never-ending nights, you'll find a cynical and sharp girl fleeing the

suburbs, and the fear of a stray life, and the desire for pay back because of that wrong hand picked at the beginning of the game. It's the desire for security, the one that arrives only through money and luxury and jewellery and forget about the rest, whatever it takes. The truth? Underneath the glasses there is Ruby Rubacuori.

By comparing Holly Golightly, the protagonist of the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and Ruby, *Il Giornale* alludes to the themes of Ruby's story: the flight from poverty; the use of her beauty and sexual desirability for her own advantage; the desire for symbols of wealth, such as jewellery; her desire for actual wealth; and her fragility and loneliness, and the risk of being taken advantage of. However, this poetic and romanticised analogy works to isolate Ruby from the social context in which she was brought up, deflecting attention from the poverty, marginality and disadvantage which characterised her upbringing, in favour of an individualising narrative of subjectivity and life choices.

Furthermore, all three publications employed metaphors taken from popular folk stories (either 'Cinderella' or 'The Little Match Girl') to describe Ruby's ascent from nothing. Both narratives are about social mobility, where the happy ending consists of the integration of miserable and mistreated femininity into a higher social setting. Very importantly, in both stories the antagonists are members of the family: the evil step-mother and step-sisters of Cinderella, and the violent and abusive father of the child in 'The Little Match Girl'. Similarly, this negative role was given to Karima's family, whom Karima described as profoundly religious, chauvinist, repressive and abusive. In an interview given to Alfonso Signorini on 19 January 2011, Karima disclosed that she was raped when she was nine by her two uncles and that when she told her mother, her reaction was to silence, rather than protect, her.⁴ Karima also claimed that her father would not let her study, despite her insistence,

⁴ Alfonso Signorini is the director of the gossip magazine *Chi*, published by *Mondadori*, Berlusconi's publishing house. Evidence has emerged that he 'educated' and trained Ruby for the interview, polishing her image and suggesting the right answers to protect Berlusconi.

and when she asked to change religion and become Catholic, he threw a pan of scalding hot oil on her.

Thus, one of the intelligible subject positions that is made available through the representation of Ruby Rubacuori is that of the vulnerable, victimised, 'other', 'at risk' girl. This gender discourse normalises a representation of femininity in terms of vulnerability, fragility and voicelessness, and implies a diminished agency in the face of events and people. As shown above, the encounter with Berlusconi followed a 'from rags to riches' narrative, often compared to 'Cinderella' or 'The Little Match Girl'. Indeed, Ruby described her familial situation as impoverished, miserable and violent, just as the stories' heroines' ones. This narrative is important for the discursive parabola that is enacted, showing Ruby to have fled a regressive, oppressive and sexist Islam, for the more liberating, empowering and progressive Italian culture. This dichotomising discourse was accepted in both *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale*, participating in the 'Orientalism' (Said, 1978) that Western societies have constructed to represent the East and maintain its hegemony over it.

While it is hard to establish whether Ruby's claims were true or a construction, it is nonetheless interesting to analyse the discursive parabola that is engendered, one that Berlusconi used to justify his actions towards the young woman.⁵ By describing Ruby's culture of origin as backward, traditional, sexist and constricting, Italian culture is placed as the liberating terrain through which Karima can establish herself as a modern, autonomous, sexually empowered woman. This dichotomy is to be understood through the work of Said, specifically in *Orientalism* (1978: 300), in which he argues that the West has constructed a system of knowledge about the East, that stands in binary opposition to the West and contributes in the definition of what the West itself is: '[T]he West [...] is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient [...] is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior'. This relation justifies and supports Western dominance of the East. Especially since 9/11, Islamic religion and culture have become for the West a monolithic entity, stretching over from

⁵ *Repubblica* for example is much more sympathetic to Karima's father, including in some articles the father's objections to the representation of Karima's past as violent, patriarchal and oppressive.

Afghanistan and Pakistan to the whole of North Africa (Aly, 2007; Eltantawy, 2007; Richardson, 2004; Schiffer, 2008), coming to represent what Said (1978) called 'the East'. The associate PM Ilda Boccassini's comment about Ruby's 'Oriental astuteness' was undeniably a racist remark, but rather than being geographically inaccurate, as *Il Giornale* (Pennucci, 2013) pointed out, had to be understood through the work of Said (1978).

Furthermore, since the early 2000s Islam has recurrently been related to women's oppression (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2006; Esposito and Mogahed, 2007; Lipka, 2017; YouGov, 2019), Western countries even employing this discourse to justify military aggression of Afghanistan and Iraq (Finlay, 2006; McRobbie, 2009). Symbols of Islamic faith, such as the hijab, have been deemed sexist and oppressive by governments, as well as some feminists (Pogliano and Gariglio, 2013). Farris (2012) has called this mobilisation of feminist issues for nationalist and neoliberal ends 'femonationalism', whereby a notion of women's equality is employed instrumentally to demand that migrants adapt to Western culture and values. Ruby's life-story tells a tale of escape from such a repressive and constricting culture, in search for the empowerment and liberation promised by Italian post-feminist culture. As McRobbie (2009) claims, participation in post-feminist culture is liberated from traditional limitations such as race, class, ethnicity and religion, but on the condition that women abandon any markers of their 'otherness', in Ruby's case the most important being the Islamic religion.

This discourse was repeated ad nauseam by Berlusconi (2012), who described the encounter with Ruby during his voluntary declarations in these terms:

On that occasion Ruby attracted the dinner guests' attention while narrating her story. [...] She told us of her father kicking her out of the family home and that he also used to beat her, she showed us a big scar on her head that her father inflicted to her by throwing boiling oil on her, all because, she told us, of her decision to convert to the Catholic religion. She told us of many sad vicissitudes and lastly she recounted of having arrived in Milan a month before and of having co-habited with a friend. [...] This was the story that she

told us crying, moving many among my guests. I immediately offered an economic help for her sustenance and for her to find a house to rent and I assured her she could trust that I would have continued to care and help. [...] I did so convinced that this was the means to help her have a respectable life, without having to undergo again the trials and tribulations that she had told us. Exactly the opposite of what I am paradoxically accused of.

This narrative, however, was not taken at face value by all newspapers, *Repubblica* being the most critical, while *Il Giornale*, showing a clear bias towards Berlusconi, fully embraced the claim. *Il Giornale* went as far as calling Karima's father an 'Islamic fundamentalist' (Fazzo, 2012), when no evidence about his alleged fundamentalism was brought forward. This understanding of Islam is in line with Pogliano and Gariglio's (2013) research, which found that Italian media representations of Muslims are divided between fundamentalists and moderates, failing to account for the many different versions of Islam that exist throughout Italy and the world at large. A father such as Karima's, with regressive ideas about femininity and discipline, could not classify as a 'moderate' Muslim, and therefore was necessarily included within the fundamentalist category.

In contrast to *Il Giornale*, *Repubblica* was more suspicious of Ruby's story. The publication blatantly denounced the alleged creation and manipulation of Ruby's image by Alfonso Signorini, the TV show presenter, by writing:

[r]aped at nine by her uncles, battered by the father who pours hot oil on her head, child victim of Medieval Islam. Signorini put in her mouth all the positive and politically correct stereotypes. Her Ruby is the identikit of a champion of modernity, a heroine of the Left, democratic, laic, emancipated, a small Lady Gaga, a small Madonna, one of those myths that allows us to shake off the unrefined Italy of machismo and repression. [...] When she was nine she was a little feminist among the boys of Marrakesh: 'I rebelled because us girls could not go swim'. At twelve she rejects Mahomet: 'I told my father that I did not believe in his religion'. At sixteen 'I secretly went to

school'. She dreams of culture, education, 'they did not let me study and so I focused on easy money in the world of the show business' (Merlo, 2011).

In this quotation *Repubblica* not only criticises the crowd-pleasing dichotomy between regressive Islam and progressive Ruby, but also spells out the strategies of reintegration of Ruby within normative femininity, namely the ideal post-feminist Italian woman: an individualising story of strength, defiance, perseverance, desire for education and culture and a strong work ethic. To this, *Repubblica* adds 'an Italian family, three children, true love, marriage with Luca' (Merlo, 2011), continuing, ironically, the construction of normative femininity. This is the end of the parabola that sees the young woman at the centre of the case move from narratives of 'at risk' youth to the agentic, assertive, choosing subject of post-feminism, which is explored in the next section.

The post-feminist sex worker: negative and positive portrayals of agency and choice

While not all publications analysed accepted the discursive evolution of Ruby's subjectivity, in all of them the representation of Ruby changed from 'at risk' subject to agentic post-feminist subject as the events unfolded. The representation of Ruby as the 'Italian sex worker' contrasts with the 'at risk girl' discourse analysed above. While the 'at risk girl' was infantilised and victimised, and her agency diminished, as a 'post-feminist young woman' she was depicted as being fully in control of her actions and decisions, autonomous and agentic.

As a matter of fact, it was quite quickly that in *Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* the position of actively choosing subject appeared, alongside the agency-diminished position as 'at risk' girl. Interestingly, *Corriere della Sera* made a shift between positions very early in the case, moving on from a description of Ruby as an 'at risk youth' as early as November 2010 (a month after the beginning of the media case). This brisk change in the representation of a still quite young woman (she turned 18 in 2010) goes to show how from very early on Ruby was not only described as an 'adultised minor' (Colaprico, 2013) but treated as an adult woman. The publishing of revealing photos and sexy shots taken from her Facebook account, as well as pictures in which

she appears fully 'made up' at events and celebrations, worked to reinforce her adult status, as well as placing her in the position of object of desire for heterosexual male viewers.

As the trials went on, and in relation to the Ruby 3 trial especially, phone tappings documenting the bribing of witnesses, among them Ruby, were made public. While *Il Giornale* published very few of these conversations, to hide Berlusconi's corruption, *Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* did, providing audio files that online readers could listen to. A now fully agentic Ruby, with clear objectives and aims, began emerging in these two publications, but attached to negative connotations as materialistic, avid, ruthless, cunning and cynical. Ruby, 'who could play any role besides the one of the poor fool' (Avallone, 2011), 'bombarded' Berlusconi's financial manager of requests for money (Ferrarella & Guastella, 2011), being 'heartfelt, pushy, at times even menacing' (Razzi, 2012).

On 28 March 2014, *Repubblica* titled an article 'Ruby's new life from bunga bunga to Dubai with two million in her pocket' (Berizzi, 2014) and described her and her new entrepreneurial spirit as such:

But the 'new' Karima El Mahroug, alias Ruby Rubacuori, appears to be the living proof of the applicability of two aphorisms: 'Homo faber fortunae suae' ('every man is the architect of his own fortune' Appius Claudius Caecus); and 'money is better than poverty if only for financial reasons' (Woody Allen). [...] It's the same old Ruby with only one, substantial difference: life is now truly 'far from poverty'.

This description of Ruby, 'who has never been a fool' (Berizzi, 2014), completely forgets, and is profoundly different from, those made of her at the beginning of the events, in which she was described as vulnerable, troubled and confiding. She is accorded agency, entrepreneurial spirit and autonomy, almost described as a self-made woman, even if within the same article she is criticised for splurging the money, as 'in two weeks she makes herself known for her purchasing compulsion' (Berizzi, 2014), instead of investing the money.

The connection between entrepreneurialism and neoliberalism was explored by Foucault in his *Lectures on Biopolitics* (2010). According to Foucault (2010: 226) neoliberal governmentality produces the *homo œconomicus*, a subject that thinks of her/himself in terms of human capital and manages her/himself as an enterprise, 'being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings'. The body itself becomes a means to an end, contributing to the overall human capital possessed by human beings. This conceptualisation of the self and one's body favours an understanding of sex work as an enterprise: the sale and purchase of a service for economic remuneration, which is perceived to be on an equal ground, and not characterised by power relations.

In fact, *Corriere della Sera* brings substantial evidence of Ruby's past as a sex worker, positioning her as having made the conscious decision to engage in commercial sex because of her desire for riches and fame. It writes:

This adolescent girl who used to watch Italian variety shows from Morocco and dreamed of a shining future in TV seems to have completely mistaken reality for a reality show. Hers is a fluid and changing identity, there is no boundary between truth and lies: honest because it is fake and fake because it is honest. A designer brand, a fleeting apparition on TV, a few thousand Euros for a night, a luxury mansion and a party with a powerful man: these are the ultimate desires and dreams of the Arcore girls (Avallone, 2011).

Hence, Ruby's is accorded agency and choice, having chosen to engage in sex work in order to achieve success and financial gain.

On this topic, the article by Vittorio Sgarbi (2011), an art critic and politician well known in Italy for his quick temper, coarse language and liaisons with beautiful women, is very important.⁶ He writes:

⁶ Sgarbi emerged in the late 1980s as an art critic, appearing in television and publishing several monographs on some of the most important artists and works of art in Italian history. His political career, which began in the early 1990s, is characterised by inconsistency and mutability, aligning himself with the centre-left as well as the centre-right. As a public figure and as a politician he often offers controversial and provocative views and initiatives. He has repeatedly been involved in

It is blatant that the two major protagonists, Silvio and Ruby, have never aided and abetted anyone, if not themselves. [...] If we overcome the idea that Ruby is a naive young woman overwhelmed by a situation bigger than herself, it is not clear whether the three indicted [Fede, Mora and Minetti] as procurers have favoured her or him or prostitution with her [sic] (Sgarbi, 2011).

And later:

Where is the crime? There is no difference between giving a blow-job and giving a conference. You can give a conference for free, you can give it and be remunerated. It is a performance that can be given for generosity, pleasure, gratitude or even for work. Prostitution is work too and if you do it autonomously it does not involve exploitation (Sgarbi, 2011).

Sgarbi fully subscribes to a liberal understanding of prostitution, whereby both parties enter a communal agreement, are assumed to have equal power in the transaction, hence the same power of negotiation, and to respect the agreement made. However, sex work researchers have shown how structural power inequalities play a role in the sexual exchange, starting from the imbalance of power in the transaction between sellers and buyers (Sanders, O'Neill, and Pitcher, 2009).

Eventually, in all three publications the representation of Ruby that prevails is the one of a fully agentic sex worker. However, this discourse needs to be interpreted via an approach that considers not only gender, but also its intersection with race and religion. Indeed, the construction of Ruby as post-feminist sex worker relies on her detachment from Islamic culture and full integration within Italian post-feminism, to the extent that Ruby becomes symbolic of Italian culture at large. This shift extends McRobbie's (2009) argument, which states that young post-feminist femininity has

scandals in regard to his use of public funding and resources, and resigned after accusations that his administration, when mayor of Salemi, had liaisons with the mafia.

been 'democratised' such that 'ethnic' women are encouraged to integrate with the majority and abandon multi-cultural differences.

Indeed, the post-feminist subjectivity and sexuality condemned so harshly by *Corriere della Sera* and *Repubblica* comes to be representative of a whole generation of Italians, indicating the way in which young femininity has come to represent fears and anxiety about social and cultural changes due to neoliberalisation (Gonick, 2004; Gonick, 2006; McRobbie, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). Ruby, as well as the other women involved in the case, became the symbol of an amoral youth:

Should we be surprised of the moral decay spread among young people? Values reduced to zero, as a matter of fact, all of them, besides those of money and of visibility that can lead to success. Prostitution pretty much cleared – it's not a case that the term 'escort' cleanses and polishes the profession – violences, abuses, bullying, thefts being considered silly wrongdoings, if not even justified when there is a gain, even if just pure fun (Trocino, 2011).

However, this is not only a social commentary on youth: as young femininity has come to the fore as a metaphor of social change (McRobbie, 2004; McRobbie, 2009; Gonick, 2006), this anxiety is expanded to understand Italian society as a whole. Indeed, according to *Corriere della Sera*, the analysis of the behaviour of Ruby needs to be understood through the prism of '[T]his sick Italy that wants everything to be easy, that looks for shortcuts and thinks that everything can be bought and sold. Including women's bodies' (Trocino, 2011). These words, taken from an interview to Isabella Rauti on *Corriere della Sera* (Trocino, 2011), are part of a 'call to arms' by the politician to have working women (who belong to the healthy part of Italy) come forth to defend women's 'dignity'.

This attitude is shared by *Repubblica*, which similarly makes a social commentary about the state of contemporary Italy:

Aren't the 'bunga-bunga' girls maybe also the emblematic symptom of a world that is going really badly, because it has forgotten that, as Kant explained, only 'things' have a 'price', while people should always have a

'dignity'? [...] Today, youngsters are taught that what really matters is to 'make it' and that, to 'make it', the means justify the end. [...] Why study hard, if you only need to spend a few nights in Arcore to have a nice apartment (Anonymous, 2011b)?

Hence, as post-feminist sex worker, Ruby's subjectivity is not only normalised, but made to represent the moral degeneration of a whole country, if not the whole world, as in the extract above. This goes to show how young femininity has become a symbolic means to articulate and confront the anxieties and fears about social and cultural transformations. At the same time though, difference, in terms of gender, race or religion, is erased, in a way that individualises subjectivity, deflecting attention from unequal power relations and structural inequalities.

Conclusion: Post-feminism and the Definition of Cultural Boundaries

Scholarship on post-feminism has been critiqued for assuming that post-feminist culture's preferred subject is white, heterosexual and middle-class. This article has complicated these debates by showing how post-feminism is not only complicit in reproducing inequalities based on gender, race and religion, but also instrumental in the definition of national and cultural belonging. Indeed, the Karima/Ruby case analysed in this article shows how the Muslim woman may also be put under the 'luminosity' that McRobbie (2009) describes and be naturalised as Italian, provided that she conforms to dominant post-feminist subjectivity and sexuality.

The analysis also highlights the way in which young femininity has come to the fore as a source of anxiety, fear, excitement and titillation, in a context of rapid social, economic and political change. As an 'at risk girl', Karima embodies the anxieties and projections about immigration, particularly from Muslim countries, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while as a 'post-feminist sex worker', Ruby responds to social anxieties about the increasing commodification of most aspects of life, including sexuality. Karima's national and religious origins contribute in constructing her as a vulnerable, voiceless and fragile girl, made so by a traditional and sexist culture of origin. However, as the trial proceeded, a different construction of Karima,

now fully identified with the name Ruby, emerged: an agentic, determined and assertive post-feminist sex worker, who knowingly employed her sexual desirability for her own personal gains, as well as employing other 'feminine' characteristics (namely duplicity, cunningness and manipulation) in order to exploit the situation to her own advantage. As part of this evolution, Ruby sheds her otherness, becoming not only symbolic of Italian younger generations, but of the moral degeneration of the whole country.

Ultimately, the subject position which dominates is the one of the young post-feminist sex worker, social inequalities playing no part in processes of subjectivation and life choices. This finding not only confirms the normative subject position in neoliberal post-feminist societies, but also goes to illustrate what McRobbie (2009) has argued in relation to the UK: that participation in postfeminist culture has been 'democratised', but on the condition that 'other' women abandon multicultural differences. The narrative parabola Karima/Ruby that is engendered in the newspapers fits well within this framework, which sees the incorporation of the Muslim woman in post-feminist culture, as well as her naturalisation as Italian, as long as she subscribes to its specifically neoliberal gender relations.

Biographical note

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Veronica Barassi and Angela McRobbie for their guidance throughout the research project. They would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and Simon Dawes for their comments and suggestions on previous drafts. In addition, Helen Saunders worked tirelessly to improve the article and deserves a special thanks.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Fegitz, E 2019 The Dichotomy Karima/Ruby in Italian Online Newspapers: Exclusions and Inclusions of Muslim Femininity in Post-feminist Culture. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 39, pp.1–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.428>

Published: 27 May 2019

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