

July 2015

Partnership Studies: A New Methodological Approach to Literary Criticism in World Literatures, Languages and Education

Antonella Riem Natale
University of Udine

Follow this and additional works at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps>

Recommended Citation

Riem Natale, Antonella (2015) "Partnership Studies: A New Methodological Approach to Literary Criticism in World Literatures, Languages and Education," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 3. Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/vol2/iss1/3>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

The *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing. Authors retain ownership of their articles, which are made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial license (CC BY-NC 4.0).

PARTNERSHIP STUDIES: A NEW METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM IN WORLD LITERATURES, LANGUAGES, AND EDUCATION

Antonella Riem Natale, MA

Abstract:

This article briefly describes the innovative research undertaken by the Partnership Studies Group based at the University of Udine (Italy), which, since 1998, has been investigating the possible configurations of a partnership model within contemporary world literatures, language, and education. Partnership Studies draw upon non-binary and trans-disciplinary paradigms as propounded by Riane Eisler, and have been demonstrating their strength and potentialities as epistemological and methodological instruments of transcultural consciousness and awareness, capable of fostering harmonious understanding and relations of reciprocity rather than domination among different cultures.

Keywords: literary criticism, methodology, partnership studies, world literatures, languages, education.

Copyright: ©2015 Riem Natale. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Noncommercial Attribution license (CC BY-NC 4.0), which allows for unrestricted noncommercial use, distribution, and adaptation, provided that the original author and source are credited.

Epistemological and Methodological Background

According to Eisler and other scholars¹, human behaviour is not pre-set genetically but is the result of a multifaceted interaction between biological and socio-cultural dynamics. In this sense, poetry, narration, music, and all other forms of art have a relevant role because they influence our world-view and therefore our present and our future, and can even reconfigure our past beliefs and transform our lives. Our reading of historical events operates through the coloured lens of our views and ways of life; there is an important interaction between communication modes and cultural backgrounds and the system of ingrained

¹ See, among others: Ashley Montagu, *The Nature of Human Aggression*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976; R.C. Lewontin, Steven Rose & Leon Kamin, *Not in Our Genes*, New York, Pantheon, 1984; *The Chalice and the Blade*, note 8, 2016; Ralph Abraham, Terence McKenna & Rupert Sheldrake, *Chaos, Creativity and Cosmic Consciousness*, Rochester, Vermont, 2001 (<http://www.sheldrake.org/>).

beliefs that, in an unconscious manner, conditions our life². Indeed, wherever we focus our attention, this is what our mind ‘believes’, and we also have the intellectual capacity to shift our beliefs according to our ideals and thus transform our limiting world-view. Therefore, if we consciously choose to focus our attention on peace, beauty, love, harmony, and art, this is what we creatively activate in our lives.

However, our Western cultural and psychological super-structures tend to systematically ignore peace and beauty, and focus on war, violence, and conflicts, as we can see daily through world news and mainstream media. This focus is systematic because, as Eisler explains, war and violence are the founding elements of what she calls the dominator paradigm, which has been governing what we would define as the Western world for the past six thousand years, permeates some aspects of globalization, and is being reinstated in more rigid forms today in dominator fundamentalist societies. She notes:

From a conventional perspective, Hitler’s Germany, Khomeini’s Iran, the Japan of the Samurai, and the Aztecs of Meso-America are radically different societies of different races, ethnic origins, technological development, and geographic location. But from the new perspective of cultural transformation theory, which identifies the social configuration characteristic of rigidly male-dominated societies, we see striking commonalities. All these otherwise widely divergent societies are not only rigidly male dominant but also have a generally hierarchic and authoritarian social structure and a high degree of social violence, particularly warfare³.

According to Eisler’s Cultural Transformation Theory⁴ – an interdisciplinary theory which examines cultural differences, gender relationships, and, more extensively, creative processes and story-telling – cultural paradigms are constructed in our

² See, among others: Paul Watzlawick, *et al*, *The Language of Change. Elements of Therapeutic Communication*, New York, W. W. Norton & co, 1967.

³ Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1987, p. xix.

⁴ Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, *op. cit.* p. xvii.

everyday reality and are heavily influenced by what ‘stories’ we are told. A dominator model, popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the ranking of one half of humanity over the other – is characterised by technologies designed to destroy and dominate, symbolised by the Blade. In a partnership paradigm, represented by the Chalice, instead, “social relations are primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking”, and “beginning with the most fundamental difference in our species, between male and female – diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority”⁵, and ‘difference’ therefore is positive, creative, and fruitful rather than problematic, and is an opening toward manifold different stories.

Inspired by Riane Eisler’s ground-breaking anthropological and socio-cultural work, I have been developing new analytical, methodological, and epistemological approaches toward a rethinking of literary studies in order to respond to the need for exploring the variety of cultures, customs, and beliefs beyond Euro-centric prescriptive cultural definitions. From a methodological point of view it has been necessary to intertwine postcolonial approaches with Eisler’s Cultural Transformation Theory. My focus is on those texts showing a self-reflexive preoccupation with the art of storytelling and enforcing a discursive resistance to biased, colonialist, dominator, and patriarchal ideologies, founded on a critique of Western totalizing narratives that project onto other cultures their own world-view as the only really civilized, possible, and ‘reasonable’ world-view.

I therefore have been offering new perspectives grounded in humanism and cooperation which contribute to a more egalitarian study of world literatures, postmodern/postcolonial theory, fables, archetypes, and myths connected to diasporic artists and writers, native peoples and other ethnic and linguistic ‘minorities’. In many cases these interests extend well beyond the borders of English literatures and involve me in debate and discussion with colleagues of other disciplines at my university and abroad in order to effectively go beyond and transform the idea of an English literary ‘canon’ and promote an awareness of present-day forms of trans-national dialogue, on modalities of cooperation and

⁵ Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, *op. cit.* p. xx.

dialogic dialogue within a common ground of shared values. By insisting on the cross-cultural nature of the Humanities, I have been making a conscious break with the old dominator paradigm that dichotomically focuses on the ‘canon’ and what is ‘other’, by recognizing the partnership model as a fundamental critical tool in contemporary literary studies. This has allowed my research to progress transnationally across sociological, educational, anthropological, historical, linguistic, and philosophical boundaries.

One of the many fruitful results of this new critical approach was the founding in 1998 of the *Partnership Studies Group (PSG)*⁶, a community of international scholars, of which both Riane Eisler and David Loye are part, based at the University of Udine. The PSG networks with a series of interconnected partners all over the world and has been making original contributions to the Humanities, thus offering an extensive scrutiny of non-binary and inter/multi-disciplinary cultural paradigms. Initially, the PSG focused on the literatures in English of Australia, India, and Canada, and on applied linguistics and education; in recent years the focus has been expanded to include other literatures in English and a more interdisciplinary range of intercultural studies, social and educational fields. Now, the theoretical and methodological foundation of Partnership Studies intersects literature, linguistics, applied linguistics, neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics, education, sociology, visual arts, anthropology, history of religions, psychoanalysis, economics, and law, in order to identify the configurations of beliefs, behaviours, relations, and institutions that support and sustain a caring and peaceful culture. The group has been especially active with funded projects, conferences, and seminars⁷, the international online journal *Le Simplegadi*,⁸ the *ALL* book series (Udine, Forum University Press)⁹, and international publications.¹⁰

Progressing from Eisler’s *partnership (gylanic) model* as an effective way of relating to others that is more equitable and caring, the Partnership Studies Group has been investigating the presence and meaning of partnership/dominator

⁶ PSG official website: http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195.

⁷ PSG funded projects: http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=197.

⁸ *Le Simplegadi*: <http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi/>.

⁹ *ALL* book series: <http://www.forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/?text=all-english>.

¹⁰ PSG publications: http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=198.

configurations within World Literature, Language, Education, and the Arts. Our research group particularly aims at investigating the relationship between dominator and partnership models within textual phenomena of different natures, because it is primarily in texts of all kinds that ideologies are institutionalised and re-produced in more or less explicit ways. The PSG therefore studies the text as a privileged 'con-text' through which changes of the *status quo* are envisioned. We select and analyse texts belonging to different genres (fiction, drama, poetry, journalism, advertising, politics); we also examine the different gender relations ('traditional' hierarchies of male/female as well as gylanic configurations), discriminations (institutionalized social violence), social structures (hierarchical and authoritarian or gylanic, cooperative and peaceful social and political organizations), and those semiotic and narrative codes that reinforce and strengthen them.

Archetypes, Myths and the Creative Word

What is central for the PSG is the study of myths, archetypes, and symbols as instruments for creating and reinforcing a specific cultural paradigm, and how changing the founding 'myths' is an effective way to build a different future. The canonical dominator patriarchal paradigm shows a binary counterpoint between dominated and domineering, between 'Anglo-Celtic' or 'Euro-centric' and 'Aboriginal', between power and slavery, and between men and women. On the other hand, the PSG has been investigating the need for transcending the old binary oppositional systems and giving legitimacy to a more dialectical, equitable, and truly democratic approach in the pursuit of Humanistic studies. Just to mention an example, we studied the archetypal figure of the Goddess as a symbol of a more caring and eco-sustainable world, as a central 'caring' archetypal figure in all world cultural traditions, thus showing how a partnership paradigm may successfully be the foundation of a different, more equitable, gender-balanced, caring, and peaceful society. We studied the ancient Triune Goddess and other feminine archetypes in different literary periods: from Renaissance/Late Renaissance British literature to contemporary literatures in English (Australian, Indian, Canadian, South African, and West-Indian). This study of the Goddess in multi-dimensional and 'ambiguous' texts shows how the Feminine Divine

powerfully ‘resists’ the univocal interpretations of the *Logos* of the Empire/s as well as representing other possible mythical patterns of construction of the self.¹¹

Partnership Studies also analyse the problematic and empowering aspects of communication: changes in language and other codes are important steps towards the creation of *partnership* societies, and effectively move away from those expressions (in verbal and non-verbal communication) that unconsciously reinforce *dominator* stereotypes, constantly re-idealised in modern times by means of mass media representations (press, film, radio, television, internet) and underlying dominant world-views. This is particularly evident in the study of literatures produced by the ex-colonies of the Empire/s, in which societies are often analysed as ancient or modern, technologically developed or undeveloped, Eastern or Western, religious or secular, capitalist or communist. These categories, though, only describe particular features of a social system rather than its underlying character: they do not show how key institutions and human relationships are structured, and thus fail to describe the kinds of relations – from intimate to international – they support or inhibit.

The ‘creative word’ in particular, with its symbolic, poetic and dialogic power, is a useful critical tool when reading texts, and allows networking across the web of life, connecting, bridging, and filling the hiatus between the self and the other, subject and object, the individual and the world – a gap created by the dualistic culture typical of Western scientism born within dominator models. As Riane Eisler points out, “To create new realities, we need new words: social categories that describe new possibilities. Categories describing societies are particularly important because they either expand or constrict our consciousness of what is possible”.¹² Considering the great importance of the words we use to define and imagine ourselves and the world, both the Italian edition of *The Chalice and the*

¹¹ See: Antonella Riem Natale, L.C. Camaiora & M.R. Dolce (eds.) *The Goddess Awakened. Partnership Studies in Literatures, Language and Education*, Udine, Forum, 2007.

¹² Riane Eisler, “The Power of the Creative Word: from Domination to Partnership”, p. 34. In Antonella Riem, M.R. Dolce, S. Mercanti & C. Colomba (eds.) *The Tapestry of the Creative Word in Anglophone Literatures*, Forum, Udine, 2013, pp. 33-46.

Blade and Sacred Pleasure are now enriched by an invaluable glossary compiled by Stefano Mercanti.¹³

Partnership Studies are oriented toward a ‘de-construction’ of dominator modes and models of behaviour, teaching strategies, and being, as well as a cultural ‘re-construction’ based on partnership systems from which we can productively support, rather than inhibit, our enormous human capacities for consciousness, caring, and creativity. The concept of *partnership* is investigated from a range of perspectives offered by the contributions of scholars and researchers in various disciplines as fostering a culture of partnership in an open and dynamic approach. This also involves processes of meditation and awareness on present-day forms of social cohesion, on common good and modalities of caring and cooperation.

PSG Publications: Book Series and Online Journal

We need to assess what kind of balance can be achieved in the future among information, data, education and learning, personal experience, feeling, knowledge, and thought. In the field of education and training, it seems more and more urgent to link basic aspects of knowledge, intercultural horizons, and skills needed in various contexts, with one’s personal biographical dimension. With this purpose in mind, as a director of the book series *ALL* (Udine, Forum University Press), I have been working within the partnership paradigm, crossing disciplinary boundaries in literary criticism, linguistics (theoretical and applied) and creative writing in order to explore complex and fast-changing cultural landscapes and map out new paths in different territories by means of experimental, interdisciplinary, poetic, and artistic studies in which cultures of *partnership* can be developed. *ALL*, the acronym of *Associazione Laureati/e in Lingue* (Association of Graduates in Foreign Languages) means *everything* and *everybody*: this is our starting point in an open journey of discovery. Within this series, we have recently reissued the third Italian edition of *The Chalice and the Blade* (original ed. 1987, first Italian

¹³ Dr Stefano Mercanti, post-doctoral fellow at the University of Udine, holds two PhD, one in Foreign Languages (University of Udine, Italy) and the second in Postcolonial Literatures (University of Bangalore, India). He has published two books and many important essays and articles in refereed journals world-wide. See his glossary on partnership language, now available online: <https://sites.google.com/a/umn.edu/ijps/home/vol1-iss1-art4>

translation 1996, second 2006, third 2011) and the second Italian edition of *Sacred Pleasure* (first ed. 1995, second ed. 2012).

For the third Italian edition of *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler wrote a special endnote in which she exhorts the readers to be and make the difference, to believe in the possibility of a real transformation that may lead us to being more fully *human*. It is interesting to consider briefly how the previous Italian editions translated the original subtitle *Our History, Our Future*. In the first Italian edition (Parma, Pratiche 1996) the subtitle is *La nascita del predominio maschile [The Birth of Male Predominance]* sic. In the second edition (Milano, Frassinelli 2006) it changed to *La presenza dell'elemento femminile nella storia da Maddalena ad oggi [The Presence of the Feminine Element in History from Magdalen until Today]*. In our Italian edition (Udine, Forum 2011) the subtitle we proposed, enthusiastically accepted by Eisler, is: *La civiltà della Grande Dea dal Neolitico ad oggi [The Civilization of the Great Goddess from the Neolithic until Today]*. The choice of these previous subtitles illustrates clearly the intent to accommodate an obviously uncomfortable text for the entrenched dominator substratum, trying to hide Eisler's real intention and meaning, downshifting the impact of her life-transforming theories in order to better control them within the patriarchal dominator model.

Concluding Remarks

Within the Humanities, but also in our world societies, the above considerations have to be further addressed if we want to effectively move beyond neocolonial systems, which often cast non-Western cultures as inferior partners confined within asymmetrical power relationships. Partnership Studies thus responds to this increasing need for a different kind of *discourse* in order to move away from the cultural hegemony and ideology of the Empire and build a *partnership* future in which the inequities of our world can be transmuted. Here cultural differences are not obliterated but are seen as relational and dialogical, successfully celebrated in a real sense of shared humanity underpinning every pluricentric society. By situating cross-cultural encounters within the partnership model, the old dominator, in-group-versus-out-group rankings can be transcended by valuing

diversity and honouring equal recognition and inclusion of all cultures intersecting and cross-fertilizing each other.

References

- Abraham, R., McKenna, T., & Shelldrake, R. (2001). *Chaos, creativity and cosmic consciousness*. Rochester, Vermont: <http://www.sheldrake.org/>.
- Eisler, R. (1987). *The chalice and the blade: Our history, our future*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Eisler, R. (2013). The Power of the Creative Word: from Domination to Partnership. In Riem, A., Dolce, M.R., Mercanti, S., & Colomba, C. (eds.). *The tapestry of the creative word in Anglophone literatures*. Udine, Italy: Forum.
- Mercanti, S. (2014). Glossary for Cultural Transformation: The Language of Partnership and Domination. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, 1(1), article 4.
- Lewontin, R.C., Rose, S., & Kamin, L. (1984). *Not in our genes*. New York: Pantheon.
- Montagu, A. (1976). *The nature of human aggression*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Riem Natale, A., Camaiora, L.C., & Dolce, M.R. (eds.) (2007). *The goddess awakened: Partnership Studies in literatures, language and education*. Udine, Italy: Forum.
- Watzlawick, P. (1976). *The language of change: Elements of therapeutic communication*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Antonella Riem Natale, MA, is Full Professor of English Literature and Language, Deputy Vice-Chancellor International, President of the Italian Conference of Modern Languages and founder of the Partnership Studies Group at the University of Udine. She is also editor in chief of the series *ALL* published by Forum University Press, and of the online journal on World literatures *Le Simplegadi*. Among her recent publications: *The One Life: Coleridge and Hinduism* (Jaipur: Rawat), and, as co-editor, the volume *The Tapestry of the Creative Word in Anglophone Literatures* (Udine: Forum). She also edited the Italian publication of Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade and Sacred Pleasure* (Udine: Forum). She is working on a volume on the figure of the 'Goddess' in the literatures in English, both within the 'canon' and indigenous 'minorities'.

antonella.riem@uniud.it

<http://people.uniud.it/page/antonella.riem>

<https://uniud.academia.edu/AntonellaRiemNatale>