

L'ULTIMA SPOSA DI PALMIRA (THE LAST BRIDE OF PALMIRA)

Giuseppe Lupo

Analysis by Silvy Boccaletti

Social Novel, Historical Novel

Giuseppe Lupo's 2011 novel *L'ultima sposa di Palmira* (*The Last Bride of Palmira*) is set against the backdrop of the 1980 Irpinia earthquake that ravaged the regions of Campania and Basilicata. The narrative follows a young anthropologist's journey to the ruins of Palmira, a fictional village in southern Italy. By weaving together myth and historical accounts of the disaster, Lupo transforms Palmira into a universal symbol for devastated communities facing an uncertain future.

Year of Publication	2011
Publication Place	Venice
Editor	Marsilio
Entity	1980 Irpinia earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 1980 Irpinia earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	1980
Location	Campania, Basilicata Italy
Coordinates	40.816927, 15.318031
Impacted Areas	Cities, towns, etc..
Seismic Fault	Faglia dell'Irpinia

Magnitude	6.9 Richter magnitude
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Settlements
	"for the quake of 23–24 November 1980, around 200 municipalities affected in Campania and Basilicata regions, about 60 of that severely damaged, 2,914 deaths, 8800 injured, 280,000 displaced/homeless, 150,000 buildings to rebuild, 47.5 billion euro (currency evaluation at 2008) for the reconstruction of disaster areas, excluding other costs like mortgages and tax benefits, and 17.5 billion for Naples—the last funds were related to the earthquake, but linked to specific law 219/1981, urged by the social tension of the city" (Lombardi 3)
	Public Buildings And Sites
	"for the quake of 23–24 November 1980, around 200 municipalities affected in Campania and Basilicata regions, about 60 of that severely damaged, 2,914 deaths, 8800 injured, 280,000 displaced/homeless, 150,000 buildings to rebuild, 47.5 billion euro (currency evaluation at 2008) for the reconstruction of disaster areas, excluding other costs like mortgages and tax benefits, and 17.5 billion for Naples—the last funds were related to the earthquake, but linked to specific law 219/1981, urged by the social tension of the city" (Lombardi 3)
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes
	"The earthquake also induced numerous effects on the natural environment, both primary, i.e. surface faulting, and secondary, such as gravitational phenomena, fractures in the soil, liquefaction and numerous hydrological changes in the flow of springs and rivers" (Pizza et al. 78)
Social Impacts	Deaths
	"There were 2,914 victims" (Pizza et al. 78)
	Injuries
	"There were [...] 8,848 injured" (Pizza et al. 78)
	Destruction Of Dwellings
	"A total of 77,342 dwellings (4 per cent of the housing stock in Campania and Basilicata) were destroyed, 275,263 (15 per cent) were severely damaged and 479,973 (26 per cent) were slightly damaged" (Pizza et al. 78)
	Forced Relocation
	"There were [...] about 280,000 displaced persons" (Pizza et al. 78)
Earthquake 1980 Irpinia earthquake	
LITERARY EVENT	
Time	1980
Location	Italy
Impacted Areas	Cities, towns, etc..
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Settlements
	Public Buildings And Sites
	Streets
	Towns
	Religious Buildings And Sites

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

Social Impacts

Destruction Of Dwellings

Destruction Of Public Buildings

Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

Deaths

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name Vito Gerusalemme

Age Old Man

Gender Male

Native Place Palmira

Nationality Italian

Reactions Self-Absorption

Name Maresciallo Fortina

Age Adult

Gender Male

Native Place Non-indigenous

Nationality Italian

Reactions Intervention

Name Sandro Pertini

Age Adult

Gender Male

Native Place Non-indigenous

Nationality Italian

Reactions Distrust

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name The army

Reactions Distrust Intervention

Name Indigenous people

Reactions Distrust

Name The population

Reactions

Distrust

Name

Politicians

Reactions

Anxiety

Name

Humans

Reactions

Intervention

Name

The officers

Reactions

Intervention

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Metaphors

"Palmira è un'immensa catacomba" 'Palmyra is an immense catacomb' (Lupo 47; my trans.)

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Apocalypse

Syntax

Hypotaxis, Complex Noun Phrases

Punctuation

No Peculiarities

Morphology

Preference For Verbs Adverbs

Giuseppe Lupo's *L'ultima sposa di Palmira* (*The Last Bride of Palmira*) is a historical novel in which social issues intertwine with myth, memory, and history in a Mediterranean setting marked by cultural transitions and symbolic landscapes. Set in a fictional town in Southern Italy, the narrative follows the life of a mysterious woman whose destiny is tied to the ancient city of Palmira, serving both as a metaphor for lost civilizations and enduring female resilience.

With lyrical prose and a dreamlike tone, Lupo crafts a tale where past and present, East and West, reality and legend converge, offering a reflection on identity, storytelling, and the power of imagination in shaping collective memory.

Lupo's novel, published by Marsilio in 2011, narrates the journey of Viviana Pettalunga, a Milanese anthropologist and scholar of Mediterranean civilizations, who travels to the fictional village of Palmira – perched in the mountains of Basilicata – in the aftermath of the Irpinia earthquake of November 23, 1980. This catastrophic seismic event affected nearly 200 municipalities across Campania and Basilicata, leaving approximately 2,914 dead, 8,800 injured, 280,000 displaced, and requiring the reconstruction of over 150,000 buildings, at an estimated cost of €47.5 billion (in 2008 currency value) (Lombardi 3). The earthquake also "induced numerous effects on the natural environment, both primary, i.e. surface faulting, and secondary, such as gravitational phenomena,

fractures in the soil, liquefaction and numerous hydrological changes in the flow of springs and rivers" (Pizza et al. 78).

Viviana's motivation to visit Palmira stems from both her academic interests and personal history, as her father hails from the Region of Irpinia. During her stay, she seeks to investigate what remains of the village's memory amidst the physical and symbolic ruins left by the earthquake. In Palmira, she encounters Vito Gerusalemme, an elderly carpenter who, seemingly undisturbed by the devastation around him, continues to craft furniture commissioned for the wedding of the town's last bride, Rosa Consilio. His craftwork – which consists in engraving genealogical stories into wood – functions like a narrative device that enables the transmission of Palmira's oral histories and collective memory.

Lupo structures his novel by developing different timelines: some chapters are set in 1980 and take the form of dialogues between the anthropologist and the carpenter; others are set in a mythologized past, evoking a hybrid space where legend, folklore, and memory blur. These stories progressively involve representatives of Palmira's generational lineage, from the city's founding patriarch to its contemporary symbolic figure, namely Rosa Consilio.

The novel presents detailed depictions of the earthquake's impact, not only in terms of material devastation, but also its psychological and socio-cultural consequences. Landscape transformations are emphasized, as the text evokes a region turned spectral: "Anche l'Irpinia, come la Basilicata, è una nazione di fantasmi: case strappate alla terra, campanili squagliati, montagne scivolate a valle, famiglie che aspettano i prefabbricati e morti di tutte le età, vecchi, bambini, ragazzi, infossati senza ceremonie e benedizioni" 'Irpinia too, like Basilicata, is a nation of ghosts: houses torn from the earth, bell towers melted away, mountains slid down into the valleys, families waiting for prefabricated homes, and the dead of all ages – old people, children, young people – buried without ceremonies or blessings' (Lupo 118; my trans.).

Particularly striking is the focus on the collapse of public and private structures, such as the newly constructed hospital: "l'ospedale nuovo di zecca aveva ceduto ai primi sussulti e non bastavano gli scavatori per tirare fuori i morti" 'the brand-new hospital had collapsed at the first tremors' (26; my trans.) and entire residential complexes are "sfarinati come castelli di sabbia" 'crumbled like sandcastles' (25; my trans.). The imagery of disintegration is vivid and persistent, culminating in a vision of the city as a disordered graveyard: "finestre scardinate, ringhiere penzolanti, pavimenti sventrati, lenzuola al vento, tombini otturati dai detriti" 'rubble worse than a garbage dump: ripped-out windows, dangling railings, gutted floors, sheets flapping in the wind, manholes clogged with debris' (26; my trans.).

The loss of human life is dramatized through the use of poignant descriptive details, such as the corpses of elderly people among the thirty-seven bodies found by the rescuers under the roof of a collapsed church. Equally emphasized is the displacement of the surviving population: some abandon Palmira in search of refuge with their relatives; others are relocated in government-assigned hotels. Disaster survivors leave behind a desolate tent city with only a few families and elderly individuals lingering in a kind of post-traumatic inertia.

Significantly, the novel does not address the characters or the community's perception of seismic risk prior to the earthquake. By contrast, it concentrates on immediate reactions and post-disaster coping strategies. One emblematic example is the carpenter himself, who, so immersed in his craftsmanship, fails to notice the tremor's onset. Paradoxically, his survival is attributed to this risk unawareness: "Quando la terra ha cominciato a tremare [...] era impegnato a riprodurre sull'armadio i rami delle parentele [...]. Se si fosse trovato al piano di sopra [...] una cascata di mattoni l'avrebbe sepolto" 'When the earth began to shake [...] he was busy reproducing on a wardrobe the branches of kinship [...] Had he been upstairs [...] a cascade of bricks would have buried him' (36; my trans.).

Collectively, the response to the earthquake is portrayed as a mixture of solidarity and institutional disarray. While military forces, medical personnel, and volunteers mobilize to extract victims, the text critiques the poor coordination and confusion among authorities: "Le autorità militari non avevano capito da che parte inviare le ruspe, davano ordini alla rovescia" 'The military authorities didn't know where to send the bulldozers, they were giving reversed orders' (46; my trans.).

Stylistically, the novel presents lyrical and dramatic narrative prose, with predominantly hypothetic and descriptive syntactical structures;

Syntactically, these sections feature hypotactic constructions that reflect philosophical depth; morphologically, they rely on concrete nouns and actional verbs that contribute to shaping a vivid picture in the reader's imagination. The rhythm is solemn, underscored by precise punctuation and the expressive use of colons to highlight turning points.

The earthquake is metaphorically rendered as "un boato" 'a roar' (47; my trans.), while Palmira becomes "un'immensa catacomba" 'a vast catacomb' (47; my trans.), a powerful image that fuses the physical and metaphysical dimensions of the buried city. The dominant motif is death, not merely in its statistical dimension: death is the result of a social tragedy which caused the rupture of communal life and, on a higher level, the obliteration of civilisation in the face of nature's destructive powers. One particularly haunting tableau describes the congregation buried beneath a church, their hands still joined in the sign of peace, while the priest clutches the chalice: these images convey a sense of time suspension and impending doom. Indeed, one of the central motifs in the novel is the interruption of sacred rituals due to the occurrence of the sudden catastrophe. The collapse of the bell tower onto an embracing couple dramatizes the collapse of religious, civic, and intimate spaces all at once. This is not simply a portrayal of destruction, but an allegory of cosmic disintegration – an archetypal fall from order into chaos: "quando è scoccata l'ora maledetta [...] i cadaveri avevano le mani allacciate e il sacerdote stringeva il calice" 'when the accursed hour struck... corpses had their hands clasped and the priest was clutching the chalice' (47–48; my trans.). The tone here is elegiac and mournful.

The motif of ruins – walls marked with Xs, red flags, stretchers stained with lime and blood – reverberates through the text, shaping a semiotic landscape of trauma. The ruins are not just physical remnants, but symbols of interrupted lives and unprocessed grief: "muri segnati dalle X e destinati a essere abbattuti dalle ruspe, bandierine rosse per segnalare edifici transennati e volontari che fanno su e giù con le barelle sporche di calcina e sangue" 'walls marked with X's and destined to be knocked down by bulldozers, red flags signalling cordoned-off buildings and volunteers pacing with stretchers smeared with lime and blood' (47; my trans.).

Historical specificity, Palmira transcends its fictional geography to become a universal symbol of devastated communities. What remains most striking is the novel's ability to link the past and present, showing how the destruction of art and culture is not just a physical loss but a spiritual and existential one. The figure of the last bride Palmira becomes a haunting metaphor for the loss of connection, both to heritage and to the deeper truths that define us.

In conclusion, *L'ultima sposa di Palmira* offers not merely a chronicle of seismic disaster but a deeply symbolic meditation on memory, trauma, and communal identity. Through the deployment of recurring motifs (death, ruins, interrupted ritual), literary *topoi* (the desecration of the sacred, exodus), and mythologemes (martyrdom, sacrifice, fate), Lupo transforms the narrative into a mythic elegy for a lost world—at once singular and universal, local and archetypal.

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