

“If you can’t go through the door, you go through the window”: Three Gozitan Women, their Passions, and Creativity

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This is a brief overview of a paper based on fieldwork conducted in July 2012 in Gozo¹, a small island northwest from the main island of Malta. During my time there I became interested in exploring the lives of Gozitan women, looking at their professional and creative lives. It so happened that I met a woman named Diane² who gave cooking lessons, owned a restaurant, and who had put on a photographic exhibition in Victoria, the capital of Gozo. Through her I became acquainted to her mother, Maria, her aunt, Sylvia, a young Gozitan painter named Lucie, and many other women of the community. The focal point of this ethnography is the life of Diane, Sylvia and Lucie as passionate and creative professional women. Although the situation of women in Gozo has transitioned through time, this change should not be conceptualised as a dichotomy in which women in the past were powerless and women in the 21st century are completely emancipated. Diane, for instance, does not believe that Gozitan women generally suffer from oppression: she told me that, “They are the ones that call the shots in the household,” or, “The glue that holds the family together.”

Diane is a single mother with a successful culinary career: she opened a restaurant in Victoria five years ago. She is a photographer for several Maltese food magazines and, recently, a Gozitan cookbook. She also organises culinary trips to Italy. Although she is happy about her life achievements, she told me from the start of my research that opening the restaurant was “a great sacrifice.” Her aunt, Sylvia, who is now retired, had a career as an educator, becoming the headmistress of an institution in Valletta. She is also the mother of two; on the day I met her, she told me that, “Children are hard work [and] once women start having them they realise that work equals independence.” When I asked her about the course of her professional life she told me it was “never meant to be a career” that “it just happened.” Lucie, the painter, is also Gozitan, although she spent part of her childhood in Canada. She studied fine

¹ Available from <http://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0066.pdf>

² All informants’ names have been changed.

arts at the University of Malta and she now works for the restoration and conservation sector in Valletta. Painting is a passion, although it is a profession difficult to exercise in Malta, even more so because her art isn't considered "traditional enough." When I asked what it is like to be a Gozitan woman painter, she told me that she found it strange to even think of herself as one because there aren't many.

Pursuing one's passion thus represented a challenge to my informants. Indeed, the notion that Gozitan women have a 'hard life', that they have 'suffered' or 'sacrificed a lot', was prominent in the narratives of all the women I spoke to. By extension, Diane thinks this makes women "very angry" and that some of them use this anger to get ahead in their lives. Sylvia would one day tell me that, "women become responsible through suffering."

The factor identified as the cause for women to have a hard life in Gozo, is Gozo itself: its condition as the nation's smaller island is a hindrance. 'The hard life' begins with the desire to attain a higher education, with the associated need to commute to Valletta daily to attend schools at a higher level: this problem is by no means restricted to the female gender. However, as was explained by my informants, the hardships begin when one wants to start working and forming a career. In Diane's view, the government is cautious when it promotes initiatives that make the professional world more accessible to women, because "they don't want to mess up the integrity of the family." The issue is exacerbated by the lack of 'culture' regarding women in the business world. Despite these difficulties, some women in Gozo successfully manipulate their available resources to achieve what they want; it just takes longer and, as agreed by my informants, it is "very difficult." Yet, as Maria once merrily told me, "If you can't go through the door, you go through the window. There is always a way".

What I'd like to argue is that the biggest problem for working women in Gozo is that a professional life moves them out of the private space of the household into the public sphere. In Gozo, increased visibility equals more vulnerability. Already within the ambit of one's house-keeping skills there is the fear of being criticised. Diane added that similar ideals of perfection are also applied to the appearance women are

expected to have. Thus, my informants brought up the issues of gossip and reputation as some of the primary concerns one faces in Gozo. In Diane's narrative, 'being strong' meant getting ahead in life, as well as not being intimidated by rumours. There is also a general consent that gossip is somewhat of a local pastime, or a way to "keep oneself afloat." Undoubtedly, gossip also seems to exert a degree of social control over women's lives, particularly those who do not assume a passive household role. Lucie who is, to a great extent, subverting the role of a 'typical Gozitan woman' said that, "you can't get away with anything" because "people will always know." This point of view is perceivable in her art. One painting in particular caught my attention: the canvas showed a tree trunk covered with the shape of eyes, making a contrast between dark colours and a bright, almost neon, green. Of this piece Lucie said: "And these could be the Gozitan eyes...always looking at you."

As my research progressed, I increasingly found that a large part of my informants, who had a professional life, were also involved in some artistic occupation. One night, during a dance show put on in Victoria, I saw one of Diane's photographic subjects, who is a school teacher, on the stage taking one of the main roles. I spoke to Anna, a lawyer working in Gozo, whose out-of-hours passion is ballet; she owns a dance school. She is also the childhood friend of one of Diane's sisters, who works as a hairdresser and has been a ballerina since she was eight years old. Yet, there is also the issue of creativity in one's profession. Besides her artistic talent behind the camera, Diane's cooking requires daily inspiration. Food itself is also the subject of countless of her photographs. Following these considerations, I began to think about Sylvia's narrative. How did the story of a retired woman fit my argument on the interconnectivity between passion, creativity and the subversion of tradition? After some reflection, I concluded that Sylvia's passion, the profession she dedicated her life to, was a creative process: a successful educator presumably needs enthusiasm and dexterity to perform the job adequately. Her art was teaching, whilst her career challenged tradition at a time when married women did not typically pursue a professional life.

That Sylvia had, in some way, transgressed the model of a 'traditional Gozitan woman' in the past was undeniable. Nevertheless, the question still remained about

how her role had evolved after retirement. Making the assumption that this had led to a role reversal—from unorthodox to more traditional—I enquired about any new pastimes she had acquired recently. Her new interests include “art history lessons and pottery classes.” To an extent, this answer reflected a return to tradition through art—the inverse of what Diane and Lucie achieve in the fulfilment of their own creativity. I draw from Kathryn Lichti-Harriman, who contends that;

“Makers [...] help us understand social-cultural discourses that arise from the conflicts between two different ways (or modes) of being creative” (2007: 2).

This notion seems to apply to Sylvia’s newfound creative outlet; in her explanation of the pottery lessons, she emphasized the importance she attributed to being able to have something in one’s life that “you can call your own”, as a direct result of one’s skills and to attest for personal creativity. Whereas before Sylvia’s ‘mode of being creative’ was teaching, now it is making ceramics—I believe this reflects a tension between subversion and compliance with tradition, whilst seeking self-fulfilment through one’s creativity. And, although Sylvia’s crafts are not created with the intention of being publicly displayed, like Diane’s or Lucie’s, her career had an important public element to it.

To end with, I’d like to argue that art can have an ‘emancipatory’ or ‘liberating’ function, as suggest by Herbert Marcuse (1978). I believe this notion is very much present in Diane’s photography and Lucie’s paintings, but also in the stories of other informants. The narrative offered by Anna, the Gozitan lawyer/ballet dancer, conveyed the parallel between her own creativity and self-liberation; although she has been married for eight years, she just recently had her first son, under the influence of her husband’s awakened sense of “fatherly instinct.” She told me she “didn’t want to study so hard [to become a lawyer] and then not do anything with it.”

Similarly, Diane’s photographs reject several Gozitan conventions. Some depict the desire to not be judged—many of the portraits show the subjects covering their faces. The most striking shots showed the defiant stares of all these women, young and older; a girl looked up from a sitting position, holding a pair of scissors about to

cut a lock of her hair, her feet up on a table—“She represents rebellion.” Diane asked her to put up her feet on the furniture, “the worst kind of disrespect in a house that isn’t yours.” Simultaneously, there is a nostalgic hint to her photos: one portrait in particular was very evocative of Gozitan tradition. It shows the image of a young woman standing at a door’s threshold—in the background, an old man is busy in front of a sewing machine and, behind him, there is a mannequin with a model of a man’s suit. Diane said that, “He is the ever present then, the fading now and what we will be missing tomorrow.”

Diane’s pictures converse with the audience, and tell us that beyond the images there are also voices, no longer afraid to speak and eager to challenge tradition. Again drawing from Lichti-Harriman, women’s art displayed in galleries (rather than closed shops) is separated from the realm of ‘hobby’, attributing it with a degree of legitimacy and agency, attained through the artist’s intention (2007: 3). The photographic medium is also relevant in a phenomenological analysis of art. As Mikael Pettersson argues, photographs provide “epistemic access to what they are of” (2011: 191). They imbue on audiences a sense of ‘proximity’ to the images, intertwining the subjectivities of the artist with those of the viewers.

It is thus in Sylvia’s, Lucie’s and Diane’s move into the public sphere that their passions become legitimate in the Gozitan context, challenging conventions by rejecting constraints otherwise imposed on them due to their status as Gozitan women. Passion, here, is a voicing of one’s interests and the expression of one’s talents. Art and creativity complement their professional lives, beautifying their careers.

Bibliography

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