

A VILLAGE FOR AN ISLAND: MALTA IN FRANS SAMMUT'S NOVEL SAMURAJ

ADRIAN GRIMA

Abstract – In Frans Sammut's novel Samuraj, the village in which most of the action takes place, is a metaphor of post-Independence Malta that is trying, and more often than not failing, to come to terms with what has been called the "severity of independence". The isolated, backward Village is plagued by the bipolar nature of its social make-up and strangled by its overpowering Church. Its 'moral' community takes the protagonist's refusal to toe the line as an affront to its authority, and its aggressive reaction forces him to turn to the painful, but fond memory of his battered mother for comfort, echoing independent Malta's inability to wean itself away from its colonised past.

Introduction

Written a decade after Malta became an independent state in 1964, the novel *Samuraj* by Frans Sammut (1975) can be read as a political narrative about Malta and its need to become truly independent. *Samuraj* recounts the story of a lone bachelor, Samwel, whose relationship with Żabbett, a young woman in her twenties is deemed highly improper by the tightly knit community of their traditional rural village. When the young woman walks out of the oppressive environment of her parents' home and moves in with the as yet unprepared Samwel, who is still tormented by his difficult childhood, the village community decides it is time to intervene and Samwel loses both Żabbett and what was left of his self-esteem and his desire to live. Perhaps not enough attention has been given to the political aspects of this novel since *Samuraj* can be read as the story of a group of people who are trying to get to grips with their identity as individuals and as part of a nation.

The indications of this dual search for identity first surface in the opening chapter in which Samwel, the protagonist, observes that "*in this land*", it is always "*either summer or winter*" (p.5). Autumn does not exist. "*It's either sunny or rainy. You either go to Hell or to Heaven*" (p.5). It is not even possible to end up in limbo because newborn babies are immediately taken to church to be baptised.

At least two points emerge from these initial observations made by the protagonist: the bipolar nature of Maltese society (Samwel is not referring to a particular village but to the country in general) and the great influence of the Catholic Church on the people's lives. These comments regarding the identity of the Maltese people are not random observations but seminal points that will be developed throughout the novel.

The institution of the Church emerges as a powerful force that suffocates the individual because it uses its moral authority and extensive resources to control the community. In *Samuraj*, the Church is not really interested in people's lives and loves, in their griefs and beliefs. All the Church seems to want is to guarantee and consolidate her privileged and domineering position by, among other things, supporting the *status quo* and enforcing obedience to the accepted norms of behaviour. In dealing with Samwel and Żabbett, the Church ignores what their relationship means to them and demands nothing but unconditional obedience.

In the novel the institution of the Church is represented by those who play a leading role in its organisation, namely Dun Vinċenz Abela-Tanti, the parish priest, and Sa Rożann, the puritan lay volunteer who herself takes the responsibility to make right whatever is wrong in the Village. She considers herself to be the parish priest's right hand, and a mother figure to all the unmarried young women of the Village. Ironically, the parish priest himself can't stand her intrusions: he labels her egocentrism and the way she tries to dominate other people's lives *Sarożannċentriżmu*, but at the end of the day, the two of them agree on the most important matter, that the relationship between Samwel and Żabbett is unacceptable and has to be stopped.

In his study of the village of Hal Kirkop carried out in the late 1960s, Boissevain observes that all visitors to Malta are struck "*forcefully*" by "*the importance that religion occupies in its many aspects, as a system of belief and action.*" In Hal Kirkop, religion not only orders the rhythm of the villagers' lives but it also "*provides the structural form of the community in which they live*". As in Sammut's anonymous village, the religious belief of the villagers "*defines and enforces the moral limits of their behaviour*" and influences their relations with others (Boissevain 1980 : 56).

In *Samuraj*, the pressure of the Church and the moral community on the young couple takes the form of what Gilmore (1987a : xi,11) has called "*symbolic forms of aggression*", that is, "*non-violent acts with injurious intent*". Gilmore's point is that although these acts are usually deplored, they are "*essential for the unfolding of that in-group feeling of belonging*"

that Durkheim in another context called the “*group mind*”. Gilmore argues that aggression is the human motive underlying the action of “*cultural superstructure*” or “*shared frame of mind*”. An aggressive public opinion, like the one that is present throughout *Samuraj* and is epitomised by Sa Rožann, “*holds the group together by disallowing deviance, by punishing solecisms, and by rectifying*” what the anthropologist calls “*disturbances in the fabric of tradition*”. Symbolic aggression becomes “*a force that binds*”, not only in the small Andalusian town of Fuenmayor that Gilmore studied, or in *Samuraj*’s Raħal, but in all small-scale moral communities.

When discussing with the parish priest about the repercussions the scandalous behaviour of Samwel and Żabbett might have for the community, Rožann speaks in the first person plural, deliberately promoting herself as the spokeswoman of the village community. Her false humility only makes her arrogance as opposed to the vulnerability and acquiescence of the community more evident.

Concentric circles

The anonymous traditional rural village where almost all the action takes place seems to be a metaphor of Malta as a whole. It is more likely a metaphor than a metonymy or synecdoche because the text does not focus on its role as part of the whole that is Malta. The Village is a whole in itself, with its own insularity, its own social and religious organisation and hierarchy, its own politics. According to Oliver Friggieri (1979 : 329), the ‘Village’ is the whole of Malta, a “*metaphorical substitution of the real name*”. The Village becomes part of a whole, so to say, in relation to the city, represented by the Count, but then even the Village has its own Count in Pankraz Mifsud Manara. The Village has the quality of being “*variously interpretable*” or indeterminate, a quality which is associated with fresh metaphor. Following Aristotle’s lead, contemporary scholars have resuscitated the role of metaphor as metaphor for the non-literal in general. In fact, Aristotle’s own examples of metaphor include what later rhetoricians would have called metonymy, proverb, hyperbole, catachresis, and so on (Cooper 1986 : 13; 77). This political interpretation of the ‘Village’ represents one possible reading of the novel without claiming, of course, that this is the only legitimate interpretation.

One of the first indications of the metaphoricity of the Village is its namelessness in a context which is explicitly Maltese. The initial capital

letter (*ir-Raħal*, the Village) gives the reader the impression that this is *the* Maltese village, what Friggieri (1979 : 332) has called the national Village. Samwel's Village is Malta writ small because like Malta, the Village is a small island made of the same social, political and religious fabric of the Maltese Islands.

The bipolar nature of Maltese society is depicted with scathing irony in the sub-plot about the rivalry between the Village's two band clubs. The narrator calls the existence of two, and only two, band clubs in Maltese villages a 'tradition' (Sammut: 1975 : 128). The bipolar social organisation of Maltese villages, with their two rival band clubs and their two feasts is a microcosm of the bipolarity of Maltese national politics. Henry Frendo's book about *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience*, claims that this political division, "*blurred from time to time at the edges by additional groups*", runs back to the 1880s and beyond. In his Foreword, Dennis Austin (Frendo 1991 : xi) asks whether this division was once "*a reflection of colonial collaboration versus colonial dissent, or (more subtly) of constitutional arrangements*", or whether it is "*the effect (more simply) of ins and outs – government and opposition – under rival leaders*". Independence has not really challenged this bipolarity. Recent attempts by third parties like the local green party (Alternattiva Demokratika) to make any headway in the general elections have all but failed.

Most of what goes on in the novel takes place in the anonymous Village, and this gives the impression that, like Malta, the village is an island, a world in itself. The Count who lives in the city describes it as "*remote*" (p.122), situated on the other side of the hill (p.118). The "*great*" distance between the Village and the rest of the island resembles that between Malta and the rest of the world because the Village has the same quality of insularity that characterises Malta. Moreover, like most islands, the Village is considered backward, or as Count Pawlinu Pessina-Triganza describes it, cut off from civilisation (p.121).

This distinction between village and city, which is being likened to the difference between Malta and foreign lands, is understandable, because at the time the novel was written it was quite pronounced. Even though he originally wrote in the late 1960s, Boissevain (1980 : 2) notes the "*marked difference in values, dress, and even speech between those who live in [the great urban agglomeration surrounding Valletta and the Grand Harbour] and those who live in the villages*".

On the other hand, between the villages of the Maltese Islands

Boissevain observes “*a remarkable cultural homogeneity*”(Boissevain 1980 : 99). This is chiefly due to the unifying influence of a strong church in a small relatively isolated island society. The parish church towers over the tightly clustered houses and dominates social relations within the village. The Church “*has been for centuries the focal point of power and authority*” (Boissevain 1980 : 99) within the village and the source for moral guidance. But the author also attributes the villages’ cultural homogeneity to their similar cultural values, including language, moral values and factors on which prestige and class are based. This analysis supports the interpretation of *Samuraj’s* Village as a metaphor of rural Malta, but it doesn’t necessarily rope in urban Malta too, unless one perceives *Samuraj’s* urban society as *essentially* similar to the rural society. Oliver Friggieri (1979) claims that in *Samuraj*, all Malta, even urban, ‘civilized’ Malta, is seen as one village. Count Pawlinu Pessina-Triganza, who is stereotypically presented as the epitome of the city, has much in common with Pankraz Mifsud Manara who is the President of one of the village band clubs. Both think highly of themselves and have particular surnames that prove their uniqueness; both occupy positions of power; both are cunning and skilful in the way they deal with the parish priest. In a sense, Pankraz Mifsud Manara is simply a smaller, or more modest version of the Count. Otherwise they are quite similar and this resemblance confirms one of Sammut’s points in *Il-Gagga* that Malta, city and all, is one big cage, or village.

At one point in the novel, the two lovers, Żabbett and Samwel, are walking in the countryside when Samwel sees the lights on the cliffs through the sides of the hills (p.85). The impression that the village is surrounded by hills is reinforced by the fact that the village is cut off from the rest of the island, an enclosed space within a larger enclosed space. This worldview made of concentric circles is reminiscent of Dun Karm’s poetic view of the world that could be described as common in traditional Mediterranean society, with the home at the centre and the Mediterranean region as the outermost circle. Samwel views the world in very much the same way: the most serious violation of his privacy, the greatest affront to his individuality and independence takes place when the parish priest appears at the entrance to his farm. It is clearly an intrusion, an unacceptable act of aggression by an “*outsider*”, and Samwel’s hand reaches instinctively for the folding-knife in his pocket (p.6). He only pulls it back when he realises that the parish priest is not an enemy.

While the hills mark the edge of the Village, the cliffs characterise the edge of Malta. Significantly, here the novel refers to the name ‘Malta’.

The fact that the novel is set in Malta is clear from the very start, so that cannot be the reason why the text chooses to mention 'Malta'. With one arm around Żabbett who is standing beside him, Samwel looks at the "edge of Malta" and "sees" beyond it "the sea and the freedom of the open space". This makes him want to walk to the cliffs and to see whether "the black space hides inside it any sign of what the future has in store" (p.85). Unlike Dun Karm who yearns for the return of his sweet past, Samwel is tormented by his difficult childhood and his only hope is for a better future. This hope is associated with the open space beyond the Village and beyond Malta, and this is no coincidence, because Samwel feels oppressed by the stifling Village that he lives in and by the larger, but similar village that is Malta. When Żabbett leaves her parents' house and turns up on the doorstep of Samwel's house in the Village, the couple decide to move to Samwel's farmhouse on the outskirts of the Village to leave the "ugliness" and the "bitterness" of the "cursed" Village behind them (p.170).

But Samwel's uneasiness in the Village is evident right from the start. One evening, as he opens the door of his village house to go out into the deserted street, he feels trouble and deceit walking beside him and the walls of the quiet houses look black with weariness (p.11). It is not only an instance of pathetic fallacy; Samwel does not feel at ease when he is outside his home. The only place where he really feels at ease and happy is at the farmhouse when he decides to clean it up so that he can eventually go to live there with Żabbett. But his plans for a new beginning are dashed by the community's pressures and by the couple's inability to deal with their own and each other's anguish. Besides, for Samwel, even the environment of his safe haven becomes oppressive and unbearable and he feels that this time he has nowhere else to go.

In other post-Independence novels, many protagonists either choose to emigrate or consider leaving the island. In Alfred Sant's *L-Ewwel Weraġtal-Bajtar* (1968) (The First Fig-leaves) and in Frans Sammut's first novel *Il-Gaġġa* (1971) (The Cage), the (male) protagonists decide to abandon the asphyxiating atmosphere of the island. In *Il-Gaġġa*, Fredu Gambin himself describes Malta as a cage in terms which are similar to Samuraj's mention of hills "surrounding" the Village. Moreover, the last sentence of *Il-Gaġġa* is reminiscent of Samwel's mention of the "open space" beyond the cliffs: "In front of me," writes Fredu Gambin, "lies the openness of unending space" (p.150); both Samwel and Fredu Gambin long for open air and open space. In an introductory note to the text of *Il-Gaġġa*, Frans Sammut points out that the characters in his story are fictitious but

the cage is real. In *Samuraj*, when the parish priest visits Samwel's farmhouse to take the sick and depressed Zabbett away, he convinces Samwel to "let her go", so to say, by telling him that it was for her own good that he wanted to take her back to her parents' home. Samwel calls this argument "a trap", which is an individualised, tighter version of the collective cage that Fredu Gambin wants to get away from in Sammut's earlier novel *Il-Gaġġa*.

There you are, that's the trap. You've laid the net and now you've caught me in it. You're worse than the spiders that were hanging from the arch in the shed (p.183).

Sammut's shift from a collective cage to an individualised trap marks his change in focus from the collective to the individual but it does not alter the essence of his interpretation of Maltese society.

Ins and outs

Although the text is not aware of it, *Samuraj* tackles two elements which have been associated with Mediterranean cultures namely, the relationship between insiders and outsiders and the central role of the mother, especially the strong relationship between mother and son and the real or virtual absence of the father in the rearing of his young children (Grima 1997).

Fear of the outside and the outsider is not uncommon in the collective unconsciousness of a small Mediterranean island that has witnessed so many evils come ashore from the sea that separates it from larger, more powerful lands. Despite the fact that the Mediterranean Sea has been described as a "sea of closeness" (Matvejevic 1991 : 22), a sea that brings people together, in Maltese literature it has often been portrayed as a powerful, dangerous and capricious force. For Dun Karm and Karmenu Vassallo, to mention just two major Romantic poets, the sea often arouses a deep sense of fear and it is frequently used as a metaphor of, or in association with, powerful, negative forces. So for a small island surrounded by a much larger sea, this "sea of closeness" is often seen as a violent, impulsive force that fills the islanders with both awe and fear of the irrational and the unknown. On an island, the outside cannot but be associated with the sea.

The closed nature of Maltese society is as protective as it is oppres-

sive; to many post-Independence novelists the island fortress of Malta, with its real and metaphoric hills and cliffs, is almost exclusively oppressive. In *Il-Gidba* (1977) (*The Lie*), Oliver Friggieri attacks the hypocrisy and double standards of Maltese society. The protagonist, Natan, does not feel safe anywhere, not even inside: his obsession with closing windows and keeping out of sight is symptomatic of the uneasiness and vulnerability that render him homeless in a crowded land where the home is the only true refuge. At one point, Natan and Rebekka, the young woman he is having an extramarital affair with, discuss leaving the island, but they never get down to it, probably because of their inability to cut the strings that tie them to their community and start all over again somewhere else. Their relationship eventually founders and Natan ends up not only spiritually but literally homeless.

In *Il-Gidba*, the protagonist moves to another village to get away from his wife and from the oppressive eyes of his inquisitive neighbours, but Rebekka's village is the same as his. This fact makes any form of escape impossible. After all, the pressures of social control follow him wherever he goes, even when he visits his friend Indri in the countryside. Malta is one village. Friggieri even ignores the distinction examined by other writers like Frans Sammut, Francis Ebejer and J.J. Camilleri between the village and the city. Malta is perceived as one crowded village where the individual is simply expected to toe the line. Whereas the romantic historical novels that dominated the Maltese literary scene before Independence gave the impression that the Maltese Islands were physically boundless, many post-Independence novels have highlighted the claustrophobic nature of life on crowded Malta and focused on their characters' need to make enough space for themselves to develop their personalities.

In the claustrophobic atmosphere of the Village, Samwel realises that it is impossible for him to feel at ease, to come to terms with his past and the anguish that it has burdened him with, and to plan his own future. On the other hand, Samwel is not interested in changing the way the villagers think. Jumi Harr tries to do that in J. J. Camilleri's *Il-Għar tax-Xitan* (1973) (*The Devil's Cave*) but Samwel is a very different character and he does not have Jumi Harr's experience of the 'city'. Samwel is no hero and he has no interest in becoming one either. All he wants is to live peacefully. The pressures of the environment in which he lives are not the only reason why he cannot live the way he wants to live, but they play an important part in stripping him of almost all control over his life. Put differently, Samwel does not commit suicide because he refuses to, or is unable to

behave like the other members of his community. But his story is an attempt to understand what it means for an individual and for a Maltese to live in the village called Malta.

There is a striking resemblance between the anonymous village of *Samuraj* and the village of San Rokku in which most of *Il-Għar tax-Xitan* is set. In the second paragraph of his novel, Camilleri describes San Rokku as a small village hidden away in a valley surrounded by hills, cut off from the world and very far from the nearest large city (p.7). The village is a metaphor of Malta in the same way that *Samuraj's* Village is Malta writ small. The remoteness of the village is indicative of its insularity and the distance from the nearest large city calls forth the distance between the Maltese Islands and the nearest land mass. "*The long road [from the village to the city] was never ending. To Petriga the city was the other side of the world*" (p.102). In *Il-Għar tax-Xitan* the city is foreign, profoundly different from the village of San Rokku and Jumi Harr's return to his native village from the city is really a metaphor of the return to Malta of a Maltese person who has lived abroad and absorbed other ways of thought. The insider has now become an outsider and this makes his challenge to the accepted norms of the village's closed community more palatable if still unacceptable. While his advantage is that as an outsider he is not expected to behave as an insider, his disadvantage is that his attempts to challenge the world-view and ways of the villagers are perhaps considered irrelevant because insiders do not think that outsiders can really know or understand what is going on inside. The novel gives us the impression that Jumi Harr fails to leave any positive lasting impression on the villagers of San Rokku, probably because "*the villagers hardly ever feel the need to take the long, rough and winding road over the hills to the city*" (p.8). San Rokku is another world, closed inside a circle "*as strong as iron*" that reminds us so much of Fredu Gambin's cage. In *Samuraj* it is only Xandru the Poet who tries to challenge the status quo but he is written off as mentally ill (which he probably is).

In *Il-Għar tax-Xitan* the portrayal of the city is plagued by stereotypes that are reminiscent of Juann Mamo's caricature of the way illiterate Maltese emigrant villagers view the United States of America in his satirical novel *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (1930) (Grandma Venut's Children in America). Some of these stereotypes are included intentionally. In Camilleri's novel, the parish priest, for instance, "*frequently described the big city as eroded by incredible evils and scandals*" (p.17). The city was the "*model of the world*", one of the three fierce enemies of human beings,

the others being the Devil and the body (p.17). Jumi's father Sidor echoes this view when he concludes that the city "ruined" his son (p.29), and made him "lose his faith", while his mother, echoing Dun Iddew's own convictions (p.101), fears the magic spell of the deceptive city (p.24). The novelist is certainly aware that these are misconceptions about the city. But he may be less aware of the superficial way in which he makes Jumi's girlfriend Petriga view the city as a place where there is little room for values and morals (p.102).

Another element of Camilleri's narrative which was not meant to be a stereotype is the ease with which the unmarried couple settle down to life in the city. This contrasts far too sharply with the complexities and conflicts of life in the village. The novelist's unintentional idealization of life in the city is perhaps most evident in his idealization of the people who live in the city (p.106). This stereotypical portrayal of the city is a metaphor of the superficial character of some Maltese perceptions of life outside Malta. These stereotypes do not help the Maltese to understand themselves or others any better and many characters in the post-Independence Maltese novel hide behind these convenient stereotypes to avoid the destabilising challenges of an honest search for one's own identity because understanding others is also understanding oneself.

Notwithstanding its generally incisive analysis of life in Malta, particularly rural Malta, and despite its portrayal of truly rounded characters, at certain moments *Samuraj* makes the same superficial portrayal of the city that appears in other Maltese novels:

Below him were the houses and the streets full of people busy doing the tasks that filled their pockets and made them richer than before: below him were the revelry and the wealth of a rich city (p.122).

These thoughts of the parish priest come from someone who should have a much better idea of what the city is really like. The parish priest and the Count are on the terrace of the Count's house and the host is urging his guest to get away from the remote Village and return to the city where he can make a name for himself. Although the parish priest does not altogether agree with his host's line of thought, he certainly feels he is missing something: this particular context may explain why the priest's thoughts about the city are superficial. Besides, the novelist wants to contrast the frugality of Dun Vincenz's life in the Village with the richness of life in the city. But ultimately, the impression one gets from his thoughts is

that he is being more rational than nostalgic or sentimental. The priest really thinks that the city should be identified with wealth, greed and a capricious way of life.

If this interpretation of the priest's perception of life in the city is correct, when the stereotypical distinction between the Village and the city is transferred to that between Malta and foreign lands, the sharp contrast emphasises not only the superficiality of this particular perception of the 'other' but also the divide or distance, which some anthropologists have described as common in the Mediterranean, between insiders and outsiders. Because if the city, that is the foreign country, is perceived in a stereotypical way, then it means that the Maltese person does not really know the foreigner; this inevitably keeps foreigners 'outside', even when they are physically inside. In modern Maltese, 'foreigners' and 'outsiders' are both "*barranin*". Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, this cliché about the foreigner exposes the inability of the parish priest (and other Maltese people) to understand other ways of being and other ways of living. For those who make eager use of them, stereotypes have the advantage of simplifying what is complex and reinforcing accepted norms and perceptions. Taking a good look at what things are really like would challenge those norms and force the person to reinterpret the world. Most of the characters in *Samuraj* are unwilling and perhaps even unable to take the risk of invalidating key elements of their neat, if unsatisfactory, world-views. The parish priest and Sa Rozann, in particular, move quickly to undo the illicit relationship between Samwel and Żabbett, but they are not at all interested in understanding the behaviour of the couple or the relationship that has developed between them; they are only interested in invading their life to re-establish normality, that is adherence to their 'norms' and to their collective code of behaviour.

The severity of Independence

The oppressive behaviour of the villagers who make optimum use of gossip, that sharp weapon of social control, and of the Village establishment, which also includes the police sergeant and Doctor Hili, renders the Village sterile. Samwel himself thinks about the "*parched up roots of this village*" (p.28). Sa Rozann is unable to have children; Samwel refuses to have children and consequently Żabbett, who wants children, is unable to have them too; and the intrusive farmer Beneditt il-Laqxi does not have any children. The infertility of Sammut's characters is reminiscent of Rita's

frigidity in Francis Ebejer's play, *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt* (1973) (Sunday on the Roof). As in the case of Rita, the sterility of Sammut's Village is a metaphor of Malta's inability to give life, to be creative, to become truly independent. This theme is also associated with the way first his father and then Samwel himself neglect their arable land. When Samwel decides to breathe new life into his farm and its uncultivated land, he has to deal with the strong opposition of the Village community, the fragility of his relationship with Żabbett and his own deep anguish. These are too much for him and, abandoned by everyone, he chooses to reattach himself to the soothing, though painful memory of his mother.

In *Samuraj*, the characters' strong attachment to their mother, which is also evident in other Maltese novels, even in one like *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* which has seemingly little to do with mothers, can be seen as a metaphor of the attachment of post-Independence Malta to its old mentality and its old ways. This is consonant with the pre-Independence, romantic personification of Malta as a loving mother who has sacrificed herself for her children. One of Samwel's biggest problems is that he is unable to cut the umbilical cord that binds him to his mother, even now that she is no longer alive. His strong attachment to his mother is understandable not only because Mediterranean boys are traditionally close to their mothers, but because he has suffered together with his mother the battering of his violent father (Gilmore 1987b : 14-15; Grima : 1996, 1997). This is a lot like 'new' Malta's inability to disengage itself from its colonised past. The emotional and ideological cord that keeps Rita tied to her mother in Ebejer's play *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt* only starts to tear when her mother dies; in Samwel's case, however, time does not loosen his hold on his mother but actually makes it stronger. At first he thinks of her occasionally, but gradually he comes to think of her all the time, in such a way that it seems to him that he has become pregnant with her in the same way that she was pregnant with him years before. But like independent Malta, Samwel realises that sooner or later he has to wean himself away from his mother in order to give her "*the death she merits and to leave her in peace*"(p.53). He knows that his pregnancy is not a natural one, because it has lasted far too long.

Like Cooper's 'indeterminate' metaphor or Eco's 'open' text, *Samuraj* is a novel that affords many possible readings that do not exclude each other but rather flourish in the presence of each other. This particular reading of *Samuraj* (and of other post-Independence Maltese works of literature) sees it as a narrative about Malta's challenge to survive what Dennis

Austin has called “*the severity of independence*”, but this reading is not meant to, and cannot, exclude other simultaneous readings (Frendo 1991 : xiii). In his last moments, Samwel sees a young boy picking flowers for his mother and he longs for his own mother’s “*kiss to cover his face*” (p.200). Almost ten years after Independence, *Samuraj*’s new Malta is finding its comfort in the warmth of its battered past.

Adrian Grima obtained his B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. from the University of Malta and teaches contemporary Maltese literature both at the Junior College and at the University of Malta. Mr Grima is currently working on a book about the Mediterranean in Maltese Literature with a foreword by Jeremy Boissevain. He has presented papers on Maltese culture and literature at a number of international conferences.

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