

# Diagnosing Malta's condition in the novel<sup>1</sup>

Prof. Charles BRIFFA

*Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies, The University of Malta*

e-mail: charles.briffa@um.edu.mt

**Abstract:** *Throughout the decades Maltese literature has reflected the Mediterranean environment to determine its influence on character. The use of harbour cities (like Birgu and Valletta) in different Maltese novels reflects the social behaviour of the inhabitants. For this presentation two major novels will be discussed: Anton Manwel Caruana's Ineż Farruġ (1889) and Oliver Friggieri's La Jibnazza Niġi Lura (2006). The former treats social life in harbour districts during the 15<sup>th</sup> century and discusses its similarity with 19<sup>th</sup>-century social behaviour; and the latter treats industrial life connected with the harbour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper discusses the relevance of urbanization in terms of these aspects vis-à-vis rural attitudes and way of life in a traditional Maltese environment with some implications of colonialism in Maltese fiction.*

**Keywords:** *Maltese fiction, socio-historical novel, urbanization, foreignness, colonialism, Malta's condition, harbour, social environment.*

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The novel, often used as a valuable resource for history, presents a view of events and experiences which otherwise tend to withdraw into oblivion in historical documents. It carries some of the weight of an eye-witness report in providing the historian with representation and particularity. And it does so, economically by presenting reality with the shaping force of the imagination, providing an instance for the individual and society to meet, and bridging isolation and crowdedness. The two novels discussed here reflect a colonial ethos that centres around two harbour cities in different eras. The first novel by A.E. Caruana is a nineteenth-century work that deals with fifteenth-century conditions corresponding to nineteenth-century ones; it is a colonial novel talking about colonialism in another era which encapsulates the medieval Mediterranean world. The second novel by O. Friggieri is a twenty-first-century one that presents a period in the early twentieth century to analyse the relevance of positive values to the third millennium; it is a

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<sup>1</sup> For further details, see Charles Briffa, *Id-Dinja ta' Ineż Farruġ*, Malta, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> This abridged paper was presented in full during the Mediterranean Studies Association 8<sup>th</sup> Annual International Congress held at the Università degli Studi of Messina, Sicily, 25–28 May 2005, on the theme 'Urban Sociability in Mediterranean Harbour Cities', part of the unit 'Sicily, Europe, and the Mediterranean'.

post-colonial novel treating an aspect of colonialism deeply marked by experiences of socio-cultural exclusion because of the empire's materialism.

### History in the novel

The first novelist who diagnosed Malta's condition (and he diagnosed it colonially) was Anton Emanuel Caruana (1838–1907) whose interest in contemporary affairs took him to analyse a part of Maltese history which contained relevant similarities with his own times. He too believed that history provided the necessary social basis for his literature. The result was the socio-historical novel of colonial times *Ineż Farruġ* (1889) published at a time when the political feelings about foreigners were at their height. However, it is set around 1421 to counterpoint the socio-political outlook of the late 1880s (when Malta was politically under British rule and culturally under Italian influence) against the historical attitudes of the early 1420s (when Malta was under the Aragonese). We can explain this in Lukacs' terms by saying that the writer's inventiveness is rooted in his narrative freedom and ability to control the imagination not to depart from the truth.<sup>3</sup> Caruana knew contemporary life sufficiently enough to devise situations in which hidden realities emerge clearer than in everyday life itself.

Caruana's literary invention must be understood as the product of an organic and an associative imagination as described by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). The literary invention in *Ineż Farruġ* assimilates history (i.e. the fifteenth century) with fiction to let them 'coadunate' (i.e. join or grow together into one) for the accommodation of the present (i.e. the nineteenth century). Caruana's imagination is a productive faculty<sup>4</sup> that juxtaposes ideas to recreate experiences moulded by an associative power, so that his view of Malta's contemporary condition is couched in allegorical terms that must lead, with a process of defamiliarization, to a definition of Maltese heroism as a moral nobility founded on integrity, resilience, and forbearance epitomized in the character of Ġużeppi. Caruana's literary task then was the portrayal of man in his social aspects: character as conditioned by extrinsic (mainly historical) forces and by his social role/s. This means that character, rooted in a context of tradition, had to face historical and social processes so that character made history alive in a narrative that absorbed part of the national experience relevant to the author's times. History became a mask for what Caruana wanted to say about his century. Literature gave him the licence to transpose

<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, translated by Hannah & Stanley Mitchell, London, 1989, p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> Coleridge, whose literary theory is often expressed in terms of growing plants, says that the imagination 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and to unify.' (*Biographia Literaria*, Ch. 13). I think this comment fits Caruana.

nineteenth-century attitudes to the fifteenth century and in this way he could deliver strong criticism towards all the foreign elements of his times without getting into trouble with State or Church.

The other novelist treated here is Oliver Friggieri (1947– ) whose literature is a persistent call on humanity to respect honesty. His interest in history is from a social (non-political) point of view as he attempts to redeem positive moral values. His novel *La Jibnazza Nigi Lura* (2006) depends upon and is peculiarly defined by the mutual adjustment of the private factor and the public aspect. When Stiefnu disclaims the village for the port (a private factor), it becomes an illustration of a general social tendency (a public aspect); and Susanna's private problems and decision become a reflection of the required positiveness as a general social attitude. There is a sense in which private experiences become historical (in the sense that they acquire social importance) once they move towards a desired degree of typicality. Katarina's maternal love – characterized by dedication and generosity – attains a certain amount of exemplary significance and becomes a desirable value in a materialistic world that often discards its infants.

The inward world of the characters is emphasized against the social aspect of events. Friggieri is concerned with the intimate to improve the outward and the typical, but, as his narrative deals with the past, it witnesses and inspects the coming into being of attitudes.

The novel, whose running philosophy is that marriage is permanent, is about the practical love of a mother (Katarina) who feels spiritually hopeful in re-uniting her daughter's family. After her husband's death, she undertakes this mission, with the help of her favourite saint (St Joseph), in three phases. She must first of all restore the seven-year-old child (Wistin) to his mother (Susanna, who is her daughter). Wistin was snatched at birth before Susanna could see whether the child was a boy or a girl. Susanna's father, a staunch traditionalist, had opposed his daughter's pre-marital pregnancy and so he had deprived Susanna of the joys of motherhood. Then Katarina must contrive to make Stiefnu (the young man who made her daughter pregnant outside marriage) leave Susanna for good because he never married her and is the one who denied the village of his birth. Finally, she must reconcile Susanna with her husband Arturu after they had been separated from each other for some time.

There is a fault-line in contemporary society between regard for individual freedom and the abandonment of essential qualities: a fault-line that often leads to a tendency for society to disown moral principles in an attempt to please a diverse social component, especially when policies stop being based on moral principles. Friggieri represents all this with the main situation of his novel which sees Susanna married to Arturu (who accepts her even when she was pregnant by another man)

with a son from Stiefnu (the young man who never married her). Susanna's dilemma is: does she follow nature and go with Stiefnu to give her child his natural father? – Stiefnu has opened himself up to the harbour city and is fast becoming prosperous. Or does she stick to the permanency of marriage and go with her husband who, after all, loves her and loves the child as well? Susanna realizes that Stiefnu has become a free man – free from the traditions of the village. He explains to her that he works hard as a boatman from dawn till night because he must always respond to the call of his business, and this is an idea that is foreign to the village. He must seize every opportunity to earn a penny, otherwise it could mean an empty stomach. She realizes that her priorities are different from his. She could not love such a man who dedicated his sole life to his work not to his family. Psychologically she believes that '*There was a great distance between the village and the Harbour*' (Ch. 11) Stiefnu, with a relativistic mentality brought from the harbour area, tries to impose himself on Susanna and Arturu; whereas the latter is understanding and tolerant, and his priorities are towards the family. Although Arturu is socially of a higher class than Susanna, he remains faithful to the village.

History is a vehicle for what Friggieri wants to say about his own times. Literature gives him room for intellectual discussion and his novels become agents for the moral imagination. He often pours his controversial draught on society to drench it and shock it into realization. He still respects traditions but is unafraid to break some of them. His task is not to encourage man to hope for a better environment but to encourage man to face reality and to still his soul to bear evils and shortcomings with fortitude and determination.

### **Different social backgrounds**

Caruana's society can be divided into rural and urban as he juxtaposes city life with country life to present as complete a picture of Malta's colonial condition in the first half of the fifteenth century as possible. He presents two families coming from these two different social backgrounds. *Inez Farruġ* presents a coherent human context in so far as the rural and the urban sectors interrelate with elements of fantasy in the narrative to display the condition of the islands.

Part of this period novel is set in rural Malta represented by the exurban village of Hal Far, situated in the south-east. The Farruġ family, an agrarian family with landed property, hails from this area and most of its members express a rural mentality and show rustic characteristics: the reader, for instance, cannot fail to notice that there is an aura of bucolic simplicity in Inez's mind style. On the other side, we find the urban aspect in the novel subdivided into two different areas: one administrative and conservative represented by the old city of Mdina, in the west of the island and considered as the capital of Malta from where the local nobility

controlled internal affairs; and the other one maritime represented by the new city of Birgu situated in the southern harbour district, a maritime city that tends to be rather progressive and liberal in outlook, so much so that it is often seen as a distinct social and economic unit in Medieval Malta. 'These centres [Mdina and Birgu] accommodated shopkeepers and artisans, traders and administrators.'<sup>5</sup> The Qormi family with a lineage of the medical profession comes from the busy city of Birgu which exhibits a metropolitan atmosphere. And it should also be noted that the Farrug family has close connections with Mdina because of an uncle priest whose church is in Mdina.

Despite all hardships, the upper classes residing in Mdina and Birgu and the significant wealthy foreigners involved in the administration of the country (Ch. 22: pp. 144–5) could afford to have a summer resort.

The novel exposes and juxtaposes characteristics of these localities to examine the condition of the nation. It is, however, quite interesting to note the linguistic distinction (which must have been in the author's mind) between the names of Mdina and Birgu, a distinction that symbolizes the juxtaposition of the old and the new as a major condition of Malta throughout its history. In the beginning of Ch. 5 Caruana, conscious of this symbolism, states that '*In the time of Farrug, Birgu was generally called by the title of "the New City"*.' Significantly the noun 'Mdina' is Semitic in origin (from Arabic *madina*, 'town or city')<sup>6</sup> and 'Birgu' is romance (from Sicilian *burgu*, village or suburb).<sup>7</sup> The Semitic nature of the language bears living witness to a forgotten change and the romance admixture is a proof of the new change. Furthermore, towards the end of the fifteenth century Mdina, then the capital city of Malta, was called *Città Notabile* and after the building of Valletta in the sixteenth century it was referred to as *Città Vecchia*. The historical name of Birgu, after the victory of the Maltese on the Turks in 1565, was *Vittoriosa*. Now, the interesting point to be made here is that when Guzeppi tried to settle in Mdina

<sup>5</sup> Charles Dalli, 'Siculo Ingenio, Afro Confuso: Malta in the Later Middle Ages' in Kenneth Gambin, ed., *Malta: Roots of a Nation*. Malta, 2004, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Godfrey Wettinger, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300–1800*, Malta, 2000, pp. 367–68; J.G. Hava, *Al-Faraid Arabic-English Dictionary*, Beirut, 1970, p. 712; Joseph Aquilina, *Maltese–English Dictionary*, Malta, 1990, p. 800; Erin Serracino Inglott, *Il-Miklem Malti*, Malta, 1979, Vol. VI, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Wettinger, pp. 54–5. Antonino Trania, *Vocabolario Siciliano*, Palermo, 1868, p. 133, gives the meaning of *burgu* (Sicilian) as *borgo* in Italian. In Spanish *burgo* includes the idea of a *fuerte*: Joan Corominas, *Breve Diccionario Etimologico de la Lengua Castellana*, Madrid, 1987, p. 111. Cf. English *burg*, a medieval fortress or a walled town: C.T. Onions, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Oxford, 1987, p. 253. Medieval Latin was *burgus*. An interesting point is made by Sir Themistocles Zammit, *Malta: the Maltese Islands and their History*, Malta, 1971, p. 98, when he says that 'The town (Vittoriosa) is to this day called Birgu by the Maltese, and the name is probably derived from *pirgos*, the specific name of all sea coast castles, common to all the islands of the Greek archipelago.'

(the old city) from a pleasant life in Birgu (the new city), he found it extremely hard (Ch. 6), implying the incompatibility of the old and the new. It was only when he met Ineż (who came from a rural area) in Mdina that the ancient city started having a meaning to him. And love germinates here: urban boy meets rural girl. This time the two elements of urbanity and rurality are compatible but a foreign element disturbs their harmony to such an extent that after the girl's kidnapping that compatibility can never be realized into actuality: the marriage between Ineż and Ġużeppi never takes place but their love-bond is frozen in literature. Maltese urbanity and rurality can relate and mix: that is the solution for economic harmony. But such a fusion has historically been upset by the colonizer or foreigner on the islands so that at the end we are only left with resilience, integrity, and forbearance.

### A Maritime City – Birgu

Malta, like other Mediterranean islands, was a much harassed territory because of the constant threat of famine and the warlike risks from the sea. So an essential element like a seaport had to be constantly defended with fortifications erected and equipped with artillery. In the novel, Birgu is a medieval fortified harbour town<sup>8</sup> with special duties and privileges and its own organization. 'Sheltered by the sea-castle, the island's major stronghold, Birgu's castle garrison and mix of local and foreign seafarers distinguished that seaside community from the rest of the island, which was mainly agrarian in character.'<sup>9</sup> There are certain characteristics that relate to the islands as a whole but there are aspects that relate to it as a harbour city. A distinct socio-economic element, Birgu's character is seen to be dynamic and forward-looking. 'The inhabitants of the town [of Birgu] lived largely by trading and many foreigners, particularly merchants and craftsmen, made their homes in the settlement.'<sup>10</sup> Birgu was linked to the rest of the island by a major road that branched off to the inner regions and to Mdina (Ch. 5). At the same time Birgu was affected by the harbour events as it handled imports and exports.

The sea is Malta's conditioning environment in the 'historical Mediterranean'<sup>11</sup> and *Ineż Farruġ* epitomizes this historical fact to such an extent that the sea can be depicted at times in the psychology of the characters. The details of the novel are all rooted in the most palpable kinds of the geopolitical reality that shaped the

<sup>8</sup> Wettinger, p. 4: 'Birgu: the oldest surviving seaport of Malta situated next to the medieval Castle-by-the-Sea, now Fort St Angelo.' An excellent account of this aspect of Birgu is L. Bugeja, M. Buhagiar, S. Fiorini (eds), *Birgu: A Maltese Maritime City*, Malta, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Dalli, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Blouet, *The Story of Malta*, London, 1972, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> This expression means the historical role of the Mediterranean environment in terms of geopolitics and economy, and is borrowed from Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, translated from the French by Sian Reynolds, London, 1986, p. 167.

life of the inhabitants. The picture that Caruana paints of an island preoccupied with poverty and insecurity, is that the sea was traditionally part of the Maltese consciousness that allowed the transmission of two mental images simultaneously in opposite directions. This duplex perception, which he kneads into the anti-foreign sentiment of the novel, made the sea concurrently an ally and an adversary: traditionally the Maltese depended on the sea for fishing and trading, but they also looked at the sea with a sense of fear as it seemed a traitor that brought corsairs to their shores to pillage and rape. The sea was a means of livelihood, the means for relaxation in summer, and an important commercial factor with neighbouring countries. It brought food, rest, and trade but it also brought terror, death, and separation – separation in the sense of both slavery and emigration.

Migration was often the solution to the problem of Malta's lack of social facilities like formal education, specialized employment, political openings, and opportunities for the old and the unproductive members of society. Emigration was part of the islands' ethos considering their limited resources. It was for education and for political reasons with Sicily being the major attraction. Alfonzu Farruġ (Inez's brother) was sent to Catania for his education and he spent years there; others could go to Rome or Spain to study. Malta also exported its old people and prisoners to Sicily in time of war. Birgu was the place where one could keep a lookout for returning relatives or friends.

Birgu swarmed with foreigners because another feature of this port city – reflected in the character of Don Josè as explained in Ch.21 – was indispensable immigration:<sup>12</sup> that is, the city's dependence on immigrants for skilled and unskilled labour and commercial and administrative services to maintain its urbanization. The typical immigrant – apart from the undesirable clandestine visitor – was a Sicilian or a Spaniard who brought necessary techniques and commercial products to the islands. An example of the indispensable immigrant was the professional soldier who contributed to the islands' defence. 'There was constantly in the Island a Spanish Garrison under the Governor of the Castello a Mare (now Kastell Sant Anġlu).'<sup>13</sup> This Spanish garrison was assisted by the Maltese militia (the *dejma*), a standing army composed of every male aged between 16 and 60 for whom military service was compulsory.

The importance of the Malta in the Central Mediterranean is similar to most other islands in the region, namely to provide 'indispensable landfalls on the sea routes and affording stretches of comparatively calm water to which shipping is attracted, either between islands or between island and mainland coasts'.<sup>14</sup> The novel

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>13</sup> Zammit, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Braudel, p. 149.

registers the fact that the islands were not completely isolated worlds in the fifteenth century. Although in times of war and natural disasters, the sea cut them off very effectively from the rest of the world, yet they were integrated into shipping routes, making Birgu actively involved in international trade.

Within the context of the novel's central argument exposing foreign intrusion on the local way of life, there are two antithetical aspects. On the one hand, foreignness brings social innovation: the fact that Malta was under Spanish rule and the fact that its inhabitants commuted frequently with Sicily, brought to the shores different attitudes and customs which reflected an entirely different way of life – these are evident most particularly in the two characters Alfonzu Farruġ and Don Josè. On the other hand, foreignness emphasizes the traditional elements of the local folk who want to preserve their ancient character.

Foreign trade could also bring undesired results, like the plague. An epidemic created hardship at a time of very little medical knowledge. In the novel, Ch. 15 also refers to the plague which many believed had been brought from abroad by a Spanish ship that had left some slaves in Malta or by a Sicilian *felukka* which carried a dead sailor. Combined with famine, the plague was a frightful visitor. As a measure of control, the authorities enforced quarantine regulations for all visitors. At the first signs of plague, those who could afford to moved to safer areas in the countryside. The spread of epidemics contributed to the insecurity of densely populated towns.

### Colonial perceptions

*La Jibbnazza Niġi Lura* embodies the imperialist point of view manifested mostly in economic superiority concentrated in the Valletta harbour area. This is quite evident in the reference to the beggars. 'The spread of poverty is best reflected in the hordes of beggars, male and female, roaming the streets of towns, particularly Valletta ... Beggars were an unpopular sight with the British authorities and there were various attempts to control them.'<sup>15</sup> Friggieri depicts the difficult life of the beggars in the harbour area as they wait for some form of charity from the sailors ashore in Ch. 4. But there is nothing more humiliating than the idea of *gaxin* which word is derived from 'gash', an informal term for rubbish or waste, a kind of swill, which saw its origin in the twentieth century in nautical areas.<sup>16</sup> The novel's description of hungry locals eating *gaxin* in Ch. 11 is very vivid. The whole idea of people eating the leftovers of others is rather degrading and debasing. It subjected

<sup>15</sup> Carmel Cassar, 'Everyday Life in Malta in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries' in Victor Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *The British Colonial Experience 1800–1964: The Impact on Maltese Society*, Malta, 1988, p.104.

<sup>16</sup> Judy Pearsall (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford and New York, 1999, p. 585.



the Maltese mind to imperial rule. In rural areas, the land provided all the necessary food for its inhabitants. As Susanna watches the gash trade in front of her, she recalls her father's words: *'I've always given you good food! Not gash!'* (Ch. 11) For Saverju (Susanna's father) *gaxin* was dishonourable because a real man works hard for his food and tills the good land. Saverju's *gaxin* argument is a means of not allowing his mind to be colonized by imperial rule. But, for the port workers *gaxin* was appetizing and nourishing and it kept them going in their hard work (Ch. 12).

The novel is also concerned with inevitable colonial perceptions about work: perceptions that re-shape the dominant meanings of traditional life and lead Stiefnu to abandon the village and its mores for a productive life at the harbour. He seeks to take his place with the colonizer and becomes a servant of the Navy, even though he believes that he has attained his freedom from the village. A real villager would never accept such a position. Ch. 11 and Ch. 12 are deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion from the village mentality and division between the village and the harbour city. As a matter of fact the harbour, representing a new emerging colonial attitude that was taking over young villagers and forcing them to deny the village's principles, becomes a symbol of the colonization of Stiefnu's mind. *'Susanna, you remained a country girl and I became a man of the city. Our paths do not cross'*, (Ch. 11) he says. And when he compares the valley at the village with the harbour he finds only one difference: *'in the valley there are villagers, and in this Harbour there are foreigners. Money, that is, wealth!'* (Ch. 11) In his mind the foreigner became synonymous with prosperity.

Friggieri's novel deals with Malta's change of perspectives in a previous era. The presence of the British fleet brought a new awareness to the Maltese: there was a living to be made, a living different from anything they had ever known. The fleet represented a sense of permanence and left a strong imprint on the minds of many locals. Employment with the Admiralty was the best-paid job and no other employer could possibly match its standards of work. Even ancillary work was quite profitable not only for the tradesmen who carried out their business directly on the ships, but even for people like the boatmen who served the fleet and earned a decent living – the latter often supplemented their earnings with items from the ships' messes which could be sold or taken home for the family to eat. All this brought a pro-British loyalty that could not be easily dismissed. And it also brought a cultural change of attitudes that was quite different from the traditional perspective of the native mind. The novel juxtaposes the native sentiment and attitude (the true villager) and the colonized mind that accepts gash as providential (the boatman). The clash is between the village's mode of existence and the harbour's standards of living.

This is reinforced by the contrast between the harbour bar and the village wine shop (Ch. 12–13), a contrast that immediately shows that morality in the harbour area had a different face from that of the village. The bar was full of posters advertising beer and spirits, people playing cards, people waiting for something; there were lots of unfamiliar faces and the air was filled with tobacco smoke. A band played as four women danced to the hungry eyes of the men, contributing to the bar's amoral atmosphere, and adding further to the glamour of the night life in the harbour's inexhaustible activity. On the other hand, the simple wine shop only saw the usual few clients sharing their moods and memories. It was a sort of emotional shelter and, at the same time, it was unpretentious and plain with clients who needed several explanations to understand even simple scientific ideas. Memories here were re-creations of experiences that kept moral stability in the village and formed impressions: they were essential to the ethos of the place. Whereas the bar (where the staple drink was beer) concentrated on total absorption in materialism and was full of colour, lights, noise, activity, different people, and dance, the village shop (where the staple drink was wine) concentrated on not changing and it was full of memories and gossip representing the village mentality and morality in miniature.

### **Different social environments**

These two types of environments are therefore the village representing, more or less, the voice of nationalist self-articulation and the harbour city reflecting the colonial situation at a microcosmic level.

The village is almost another character whose identity is based on its simple but stable traditions. It has a mind of its own and is self-sufficient (Ch. 1). In a quiet sort of way, there is a lot of interaction between the villagers in a compact residential area with its intimate community lacking outsiders or foreigners. But it is a docile atmosphere – quiet, except for the bells which were part of their daily routine from the cradle to the grave (Ch. 2). The small shops serve as important meeting places for the women while the wine shop is the place where the men pass the time in the evening talking about village affairs and commenting on the activities of those villagers not present in the shop. The local church maintains hegemony over most village matters. The villagers' mentality gives expression to and stimulates concern for the village's identity and traditions, revealing a sense of belonging to a conventional culture.

Everything contributes to the simplicity of the village: bells, little sins, feasts, etc. The humble character of the village is explained in terms of the church bells announcing different times of the day. It had its own rhythm controlled mainly by these bells which enhanced respect and delivered a sense of solemnity. Katarina's

homely and simple gestures in the church – as when we see her very finicky with arranging her veil not to let her hair be visible in church because that would have amounted to a sin – epitomize the unaffected and modest character of the plain village woman for whom little things could easily create little sins. And the importance of the local *fiesta* – at one moment Dun Grejbel notices the lavishness of this parochial ritual to celebrate his return from abroad – in such a closely-knit community is emphasized because it promotes a sense of communal identity, enhances a feeling of togetherness, and creates solidarity.<sup>17</sup> It was a village without any ‘*ambition of glory. From it no one ever went to extremes: no one ever rose to very high limits and no one ever fell very low. All the villagers were somewhere in the middle, and in the middle there was virtue*’ (Ch. 1).

Friggieri reactivates (almost nostalgically) the simple mentality of a former life in an unpretentious community. The social fuss the villagers do on the return of the native is part of this simplicity. Dun Grejbel, the simple humble priest who a few years back had been wrongly suspected of sexually abusing Susanna, returns after having been ‘exiled’ by his bishop to another diocese abroad. The truth finally came out and the gentle forgiving priest finds, to his surprise, a village feast to welcome him home. The villagers were alien to the life of the sea and the harbour was strange and remote to them. They were afraid of the sea and only went to the harbour on very rare occasions. Besides, village life was slow-going and calm whereas Valletta was a bustling place with all of the ancillary maritime businesses operating, such as ship chandlery and ferrying.

Friggieri’s novel is a call for society to hold fast to its important traditional values amid the materialism of social pressures resulting from the colonialism implied in the social behaviour of the harbour.

### **Magic realism**

The harbour was held in awe by the villagers. In their imagination it sometimes grew beyond proportion and the novel often gives us a feeling of magic realism. Those who live away from the harbour region have got their own tale about a ship arriving at the village from Heaven with children – just like storks bringing babies. At the institution for the care of unwanted children, the child Wistin was told that there was only one way from Heaven (for which read the institution) to the village where a family to adopt a child could be found, giving the impression that children came directly from Heaven by ship. And this tale stuck to his psychology so much that he told it to his mother when he was finally reunited with her (Ch. 5). The idea of the harbour attracted the village children as well. After the rains they used to go

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Boissevain, ‘Looking Back: an Anthropologist Perspective’ in P. Catania, L.J. Scerri (eds), *Naxxar: A Village and its People*, Malta, 2000.

to the valley to watch the stream of water moving and they used to throw paper ships to see them move downstream as if they were in the harbour. That is the way Susanna explained it to her son in Ch. 7.

Susanna wants her son to understand the importance of the harbour: '*Some people go to sea, others come from the sea. The harbour is open. The harbour salutes those who leave, and greets those who arrive*' (Ch. 7). It is at this point, when Wistin is really worried that his father (whom he has never seen) is taking so long to arrive, that ships and the harbour assume a magical dimension. Susanna tells him: '*In the world, outside our village, there are many people who want to sail, but there are few ships. That's why they take long to get here*' (Ch. 7). The child's perception has been moulded and he creates a fairy tale (Ch. 7) and later he believes there is a place with a ship ready to bring his father to him. He wants to fly away on his paper kite to reach that ship before it departs so that he could be with his father sooner than expected (Ch. 9).

### **A Port of Call – Valletta**

The port was more varied than the rest of the islands<sup>18</sup> because it was a trading centre, an important coaling-station, a naval base, and a hive of activity for uniformed personnel on shore leave filling all the bars and restaurants in the area. The harbour was the centre of opportunity and the gusts of prosperity were unpredictable, so men had to work hard for their livelihood. Friggieri depicts the animation and activity of the densely populated harbour area – sometimes more bursting with people than the countryside – as a dynamic urban network and a centre of pro-colonial sentiment. The novel depicts the difference between the moral relevance of the islands that centred on the village and their commercial progress centred on Valletta. The Grand Harbour was generally used for the Royal Navy fleet which attracted a lot of traders, suppliers, and ship chandlers. Most maritime business centred on the Valletta marina and the neighbouring streets. 'The wharves of the port of Valletta were a hub of activity. As ships navigated the entrance to the harbour, further up in the city streets the profits from a successfully concluded voyage would be calculated as bales and barrels were unloaded to be weighed and tallied.'<sup>19</sup> Bars were full of sailors and soldiers and prostitution became another way of earning a living, especially for the single female. Furthermore, in the harbour there was a lot of coastwise traffic and business from one creek to another, and the place was a coaling station in the era of the steamship. Ships called at the harbour

<sup>18</sup> Cassar, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Wickman, 'Maltese shipping up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century' in First International Merchant Bank's *Annual Report & Financial Statements* (Malta, 2001), p.v. An excellent exposition of port facilities may be found in John Debono, *Trade and Port Activity in Malta (1750–1800)*, Malta, 2000.

to coal and we see the hard life of the dirty men coaling a ship: coalers putting coal into bunkers or stores. *Coal did not only move ships; it provided the daily bread for many men and their families* (Ch. 12).

In the nineteenth century, Valletta started adapting to the needs of the new age that reflected the great navigational transformation from sail to steam. ‘The harbours, cities, and even the small fishing ports of the sea were now ineradicably changed by the industrial age and the advent of the steamship. Old methods of ship construction and repair that had hardly altered in thousands of years were adapted from canvas and wood to coal-fired boilers and iron. Great coaling stations like Gibraltar, Malta, and Port Said adapted themselves from sail to steam without much difficulty, because the presence of the Royal Navy and British capital made such changes not only necessary, but also comparatively easy to effect.’<sup>20</sup> Another major change occurred in the Valletta harbour when, by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was consolidated as a naval base for the Royal Navy, and ‘the last vestiges of a commercial harbour disappeared’<sup>21</sup> and the livelihood of almost all the families around the harbour area became dependant on the requirements of the British fleet. ‘From the dockyard worker or naval rating, to the dghajsaman or the washerwoman scrubbing away at the coarse sailor uniforms, the control over the fortunes of these people was absolute and so was the control over their minds.’<sup>22</sup>

The description of the harbour in Ch. 11 is impressive with its introductory emphasis on orderliness because of the warships and uniformed personnel. The port was full of activity. Ships entered and left the harbour in a very neat way, as if following an invisible plan. Despite the fact that all battleships seemed alike, yet the frigates had their own individual character. There was movement everywhere, day and night, even on land because sailors on shore leave meant a lot of business. Life depended on the sailors, soldiers, and officers who found their freedom in the streets. They kept the atmosphere very lively and spirited with their singing, drinking, and girl-chasing. With every warship, the locals found new life, because these uniformed people were very generous and lavish. The boatmen were continuously busy ferrying passengers to and from the ships. The chapter then turns its attention on the boatman’s job. The tough boatman, with his livelihood tied to the boat, was well aware of the double meaning of the sea. In Stiefnu’s words: ‘*This water can mean prosperity and life, and it can also mean want and death*’ (Ch. 11). He often

<sup>20</sup> Ernle Bradford, *Mediterranean: Portrait of a Sea*, Malta, 1989, p. 515.

<sup>21</sup> Mario Ellul, ‘Maltese Imperial Mentalities: Subjecting the Maltese Mind to Imperial Rule’, in H. Frendo (ed.), *Storja ’98*, Malta, 1998, p. 95. Of interest, also, in this connection are Henry Frendo, ‘Life during the ‘British’ Period: Strains of Maltese Europeanity’ in Gambin, pp. 101–18; and Francis Ebejer, *The Bilingual Writer (Mediterranean-Maltese and English) as Janus* (The Foundation for International Studies, Malta, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Ellul, p. 95.

felt insignificant besides those huge warships and he often risked his life to earn an extra penny. For him, it did not matter whether the sea was rough or calm. He had to be always hardy and strong. But his life was rather lonely, often finding himself talking to his boat which he kept in good shape and treated as a woman. The boat itself expressed its sympathies for the Royal Navy because at the stern very often there was 'a carving portraying Britannia or St George',<sup>23</sup> a symbol of loyalty to imperialism.

The boatman<sup>24</sup> could act as a ferryman carrying sailors, soldiers, and officers to and from ships, or as a trading agent operating as a dealer at a time when 'the prevailing economic attitude of Maltese politicians and businessman was... merchandizing principally through retail outlets, through ship chandling, and through supply and servicing contracts with the army and navy.'<sup>25</sup> There were two types of trading boatman: the ship chandler who dealt wholesale with the ships' authorities and the bumboatman who dealt retail with sailors on board<sup>26</sup> and who, at the same time, obtained gash to be sold on shore. Stiefnu becomes a bumboatman or, as he calls himself, a businessman with the boat (Ch. 11).

Since he could not join the Navy or HM Dockyard, Stiefnu thought of trying his hand at an ancillary employment. He entered the new world that was, progress-wise, more forward-looking than his native village because it depended on the Navy for small mercies. The price he had to pay was, in conformity with his class of people, loyalty to the British. He became a boatman, one of many who depended on the fleet's presence in the harbour.<sup>27</sup> As a boatman, Stiefnu 'hung on tenaciously to his connection with the fleet'<sup>28</sup> and made the boat *his wife* (Ch. 11) as he carried out his business directly on Royal Navy ships trading goods and stores on board. His ambition was to become a ship chandler one day (Ch. 11).

There is a significant contrast between Saverju's family and Stiefnu. Saverju is the unambitious peasant whose country had known so many foreign overlords

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> The general term for 'boatman' in Maltese is *barklor* especially when he acts as a ferryman. The British services, however, used to call him *dghajsaman*, (*dghajsa* being the Maltese equivalent for 'boat'): *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> Salvino Busuttill, 'An Overview of Malta's Economic Development' in Mallia-Milanes, p. 157.

<sup>26</sup> Ġużè Galea, *Xogħol u Snajja' tal-Imghoddi*, Malta, 1972, p. 118. 'Ship chandler' is *gadraj* in Maltese but it was popularly uttered *xipxandler*; the 'bumboatman' was called *bambott* in Maltese. The 'bumboat' was a 'Boat used for removing refuse from ships, also for bringing stores to the ship': Henry Cecyl Wyld (ed.), *The Universal Dictionary of the English Language*, London, 1932, p. 135. In Maltese *bambott* refers to the man, so *id-dghajsa tal-bambott* literally meant 'the boat of the bumboatman' (i.e. the bumboat).

<sup>27</sup> Ellul, p. 106: 'Nigh on 1,300 boatmen were registered in the Grand Harbour alone in 1936 and hundreds of boats flocked like ducks after bread crumbs around every merchant and warship that entered the harbour.'

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

and conquerors that he has developed a cynical attitude and a resistance to the harbour mentality, whereas Stiefnu is the enterprising but arrogant ex-villager who succumbs to the imperial mentality. Stiefnu, representing the new mentality of the era, lets the naval requirements dictate his fortunes and he becomes fully dependent on what the imperial authorities could provide in the way of direct or indirect employment. For him, the village is *like a dress we've grown out of* (Ch. 11). At one moment, he says to Susanna: *'I'm no longer the country boy I was when you knew me. My life now depends on the sea,' he told her hurriedly. 'I don't like the village anymore'* (Ch. 9). For Susanna the sea was far from the village, and when Katarina learns that Stiefnu has become a man of the sea, she says: *'We don't know the sea, my dear. We are people of the earth. Our water comes from the sky, when the clouds burst open and it comes down. They call the water sea, and we call it rain. Do you understand?'* (Ch. 10) That is how Katarina explains the difference.

### Conclusion

British imperialism in Malta is different from Spanish colonialism not merely because of the historical difference, but because 'Britain was the first colonial power to come to the Islands from outside the Mediterranean'.<sup>29</sup> The cohabitation of the Maltese and Spanish/British elements was successful as long as one accepted an inferior position and the other a colonialist role. In the case of the British situation, it opened a panorama on Northern European way of thinking.<sup>30</sup> Historically the colonial experience in both cases imposed a sense of cultural inferiority and a feeling of economic powerlessness on the Maltese<sup>31</sup> but literature, indulging in a process of wishful thinking, redeemed the Maltese with a certain amount of psychological and moral superiority. Creatively the novelists' values are ordained by tradition and they take into their fiction a significant aspect of the national experience to treat it, in an invented world, with mundane common sense and creatively condition the minds of the characters. The fiction here presented is inspired by the life and history of the nation so that the past of the Maltese harbour comes to life in a sociological manner.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred Sant, 'Malta and the Mediterranean: A Change of Perspectives' (1974), reprinted in Stanley J.A.Clews (ed.), *The Malta Year Book 2005*, Malta, 2005, p. 593.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.: 'A unique effect of British rule was that it provided Malta with a window on Northern European attitudes. During the centuries, colonisers of the Island had been "southern" with mentalities that could not have been much different from those of the native population. While permitting a consolidation of the Maltese trading middle class and slowly undermining the Italian cultural influence, the British presence operated a new distorting shift in the Maltese mentality that was added on to some other peculiarities which already existed.'

<sup>31</sup> Edward L.Zammit, 'Aspects of British Colonial Policies and Maltese Patterns of Behaviour', in Mallia-Milanes, p. 179, shows how colonialism inflicted on the Maltese an 'inferior status to that of their colonial masters and an equally deep conviction that Malta was powerless to stand on its own feet in a hazardous world.' This comment is being applied here to both cases of Spanish and British colonialism.