

Final Version

## **“Fashioning” the Maltese Family**

Dr. Adrian Grima

Literature does not provide a mirror of society and does not pretend to do so either. But it does allow writers to explore the individuals and the community they choose to write about and their work often provides insights one would associate with qualitative research. Literature is essentially a “fashioning of language,” a “kind of aesthetic ‘forming’ [...] or ‘shaping’”. The genre of fiction in particular is “characterised by a more overtly referential modality in purporting to relate to ‘real life,’” and this is because it “seems to form or shape the raw material of lived experience into the ‘world of the book.’”<sup>1</sup> Art fashions “a perceptible reality for us in its textual ‘shaping’ of the inchoate into comprehensible designs or patterns.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, literary theorists debunk the myth that there is a clear distinction between reality and narrative; they remind us “that our comprehension of the world is constructed within discourse; that we are all formed by, and complicit in, ‘telling stories;’ that our systems of knowing, meaning and making sense are all textualised narratives.” “The literary” does not allude to a “real” material reality outside itself, because “*even at its most realistic the literary discourse nevertheless constructs the reality it purports to represent.*”<sup>3</sup> Peter Widdowson argues that a central point in literature’s generic self-definition as being “of the literary” is that works of literature “self-consciously” disclose themselves as being literary; even the most “real-world” allusive of novels or short stories, like Immanuel Mifsud’s *Kimika* or Paul P. Borg’s *Beżgħat*, present themselves as “based on” or “inspired by” “real-world” incidents or events but not as the “real-world” itself.

Widdowson argues that “the most important feature of literary ‘making’ [...] is that it creates ‘poietic realities’ which would not otherwise exist;” it brings

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London: Routledge, 1999) 102.

<sup>2</sup> Widdowson 102-103.

<sup>3</sup> Widdowson 103.

into view “newly perceptible ‘subjects’ from what Henry James, in his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* has called the ‘splendid waste’ of life. Writers interpret and evaluate; their work reflects what they perceive and value in the “real-world.” In *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams writes about “art’s ability to extrapolate a ‘sense of subject’ from the undifferentiated ‘inclusion and confusion’ of life.” The perception of “pattern” allows us to “tap into the ‘structure of feeling’ of a period, and experience ‘the particular living result of all the elements in the general organisation’ of a community: that is, its ‘culture.’”<sup>4</sup> Williams argues that through new perceptions and responses, art “creates” elements which society is not able to realise. This access is by way of fictional *fashioning*, that is forms and devices, “which produces new knowledge by ‘shaping’ a ‘pattern’ which ‘consciousness’ perceives ‘for the first time in this way’.” Therefore the literary “forms out of nothing,” “it makes for the first time’ new perceptual realities in its creative textuality.” Using Williams’ reading of George Eliot, Widdowson argues that the author extends the community of the novel, not so much by increasing its “real social range,” but by articulating it so that “the known community, *creatively known*” is perceived to be the “divided” relationship between the “real social” community and the ‘knowing’ of it by the novelist’s “signifying consciousness”: a consciousness “not of the known or the knowable but of the to-be-known.”<sup>5</sup>

This complex idea of literature, and fiction in particular, allows us to acknowledge the “ambiguous relations between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictive’,”<sup>6</sup> their dependence and independence from one another, and to send simplistic notions of literature as either mirroring or falsifying reality to the Recycle Bin. But even if contemporary Maltese literature provides us with interesting perspectives on the realities of the Maltese family of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one has to consider the influence that this new literature has on Maltese people and their perception of the family on the Maltese Islands. How does contemporary Maltese literature shape, if at all, our concept of the changing Maltese family? In terms of numbers, a leading contemporary Maltese writer from the new generation would probably sell something in the region of a thousand copies of his collections of short stories – and here I’m referring specifically to *L-Istejjer Strambi ta’ Sara Sue Sammut* and *Kimika*, two books that received “unprecedented” media attention; unless the publisher tells us, it is practically impossible to know exactly how many books have been sold. But one must also consider the wider impact of the writers and their work on the media and fellow writers, to mention just two influential mind-forming groups. If these

---

<sup>4</sup> Widdowson 104.

<sup>5</sup> Widdowson 105.

<sup>6</sup> Widdowson 103.

works are then read and studied in schools, as was the case with Paul P. Borg’s short story collection *Beżgħat* which often deals with the family, they reach a whole generation of youngsters. In concrete terms it is impossible to gauge the influence of these contemporary texts, but one shouldn’t underestimate it. Contemporary Maltese writers are receiving more and more attention abroad and if that is anything indication of their potential influence on a reading public that is often drawn to writers whose work has been acknowledged abroad, then these contemporary works certainly deserve the attention of social scientists as well as literary critics. Because while sociological books allow the general public the possibility to have a closer look at the general trends in Maltese public, literature gives people the possibility to delve into the psychological and emotional conflicts that we are all, in varying ways, facing.

Contemporary writers have the potential to provide new perspectives on Maltese lives, to explore voices and experiences that have been largely ignored throughout the rather linear development of Maltese literature that told a romantic, often nationalistic story of Malta and the Maltese up until Independence and only started taking stock of what was happening in the larger world with the arrival of the post-Independence, generally postcolonial poets of the so-called “modern” period. Many stories that do not conform to the romantic model of the Maltese Catholic, heterosexual, white, Malta-based family have yet to be told not only by our writers and but also by politicians and public officials, academics, mind-forming media personalities and by the Catholic Church.

### **A Cleavage Between Beliefs and Praxis**

The stylized Maltese nuclear family constructed by Dun Karm and other romantic poets and novelists has survived the social and cultural changes brought about by World War II and Independence. Even those post-Independence writers like prose writer Paul P. Borg, who “rewrote” the Maltese family in their poems, short stories and novels, have not really undermined the basic model but they have questioned our certainties about it. In *Beżgħat*, a collection of short stories that pre-University students and undergraduates today find particularly insightful, Borg makes us question our cosy certainties about the “purity” and “peacefulness” of the Maltese family, but he doesn’t question the composition of that family. If anything, the stories take the model of the idealized nuclear family for granted: the patriarchal father solidly at the helm; the dedicated but ultimately submissive mother tied very much to the home (she is the family’s “unsung hero” and its “moral pillar”); lively but ultimately submissive children who adopt the value

system they receive from their parents, their community and the conservative Maltese Catholic Church, including the code of honour and shame. A very recent study seems to confirm this position. In his preface to Saviour Rizzo’s analysis of the *The Dual Worker Family in Malta* (2006), Edward L. Zammit notes that the “traditional, sharp demarcation between gender roles, particularly within the family,” is still widely held in Malta. Males are the main bread winners and females are the main family carers. “Any divergence from these stereotypes is generally seen as peripheral, transitory and undesirable.”<sup>7</sup>

The difficulties that characters in mainly post-Independence Maltese literature encounter derive precisely from the fact that they are not able, or sometimes willing, to live up to the expectations established by *the* model. In Oliver Friggieri’s *Il-Gidba* (1977), Natan and Anna’s marriage breaks up and no amount of pressure applied by the Church and the community can bring the couple back together; however the community does manage to abort the relationship between Natan and his new partner Rebekka by informing the young women’s mother of her daughter’s misbehaviour and allowing her to do the rest. Like other female characters in a Maltese literature dominated by male writers, Rebekka gives in to the pressure almost immediately and leaves Natan, even though her honour and that of her family has been tarnished forever.

These and other works of Maltese post-Independence literature reflect the process of secularisation within Maltese society that started slowly after World War II and gathered pace after Independence in 1964. The Maltese-Australian writer and academic Lou Drogenik notes that in her interviews with Maltese women in 1998,<sup>8</sup> she found that “there was a cleavage between beliefs and praxis.” There had been “a definite change in Maltese people’s attitudes towards the issues of illegitimacy, birth control and marriage separation though only one respondent was critical of the Church’s unchanging stand against them.” The younger women she interviewed did not question or criticise the teachings that were “*diametrically opposite* to their practices” (my emphasis). For example, none of the young women she spoke to criticized the Church on its stand against contraception, “even though they stated that their friends used some form or other of limiting their families.”

---

<sup>7</sup> Saviour Rizzo, *The Dual Worker Family in Malta* (Malta: Centre for Labour Studies, University of Malta and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2006) 3.

<sup>8</sup> Lou Drogenik, “The Filo Pastry of Identity – Lifting the Many Layers of Maltese Cultural Identity.” Paper read at a seminar on Maltese Australians at Victoria University, Australia, on 6 September 2005. This research originally appeared in her unpublished PhD thesis: Ludgarde Drogenik, “The Effects of Maltese Cultural Identity on a Group of Maltese Women” (Bundoora, Australia: La Trobe University, 2000).

Neither did they criticize its stand on sex outside marriage, even though they spoke freely about their friends’ sexual practices and teenage pregnancies on the island. Drogenik writes that “individualism, consumerism and secularisation have opened new vistas for young Maltese living in Malta today and unlike their predecessors they are able to sample other value systems and listen to other voices.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Idealized Home of the Romantics and the Nation-as-family**

Dun Karm’s poem “Kewkbet is-Safar” (1933) (“The Pole Star”) deals with the plight of those who sail the seas and the role of the Pole Star, or the Mother watching over these brave men. The poet pleads specifically for the safety of the man who has left his land to earn a living for his family; Dun Karm asks the star to guide him back home. As in other poems, the journey in “Kewkbet is-Safar” is, in a sense, a non-journey, a refusal to distance oneself from one’s “*oikos*,” one’s home or point of reference. Dun Karm brings out the precariousness of the voyage at sea, as he does in two of his masterpieces, “Il-Ġerreġja u Jien” (1933) and “Żagħżuġħ ta’ Dejjem” (1933): The dangers of the voyage at sea are set against the warmth and unity of the home dominated by the conventional image of the rural family gathered at table, as in “Ġunju” (1914) (“June”), or the idealized unit consisting of the father, mother and son in his intense sonnet “Univers Ieħor” (1930) (“Another World”).

Dun Karm sees the traditional, God-loving family of poems like “Ġunju” and “Lid-Dielja” (1913) (“To the Vine”), both as a synecdoche and as a metaphor of his ideal Malta. There are interesting similarities between this early twentieth century vision for Malta, still present in post-Independence romantic writers like Pawlu Aquilina, and the beliefs of the Christian Right in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century who want to reclaim America as a “national small town” for “people like us.” George Lakoff describes what he calls the Strict Father Model as a traditional nuclear family with the father having primary responsibility for the well-being of the household. The mother has day-to-day responsibility for the care of the house and details of raising the children. “But the father has primary responsibility for setting overall family policy, and the mother’s job is to be supportive of the father and to help carry out the father’s views on what should be done. Ideally, she respects his views and supports them.”<sup>10</sup> Linda Kintz uncovers the networks of “familiarity” and “structures of resonance,” “that move

---

<sup>9</sup> Drogenik, “The Filo Pastry of Identity.”

<sup>10</sup> “Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals In the Dust,” by George Lakoff, 1995. <http://www.wgcd.org/issues/Lakoff.html>.

minds by moving hearts, that turn bigotry into a perfect expression of God's love.” In her introductory chapter, Kintz figures her structure of resonance as “a set of concentric circles stacked one on top of the other and ascending heavenward: God, property, womb, family, church, free market, nation, global mission, God.” What keeps “the circles from sliding off their neat stack” is the “symbolic figuration of the proper woman” and her activism on behalf of a gender purity – for its own sake, and for politics. In other words, the religious Right believes in the traditional, heterosexual family with the mutually exclusive roles of the woman as mother and the man as father.

The traditional family of Maltese literature is essentially a closed Christian unit with well-defined roles assigned to the members of the in-groups, whether or not they like it, and with a clear theocentric point of reference. It would be misleading to continue to perceive this traditional unit as the locus of some political utopia: like all figures, the identification of Malta with the traditional discourse of mother-family-home presupposes an identifiable ideological standpoint. The maternal figure that Malta is identified with is the mother who sacrifices herself for her children and nurtures them all the way to adulthood, but the social and political rules she teaches them are laid down by the colonial master and by the powerful, male-dominated Catholic Church. These are not *her* rules, these are the rules that society expects her to teach her children. The mother is subservient to the father and is expected to support and carry out his decisions; in many novels she seeks to influence the final decision taken by her husband, but she also seems to find comfort in the fact that she doesn't have to be the one to shoulder the responsibility of that decision that will necessarily bind all.

The nation-as-mother metaphor of Maltese pre-Independence literature hides the deeper nation-as-family metaphor with the Catholic Church (and the colonial rulers) playing the role of the strict father. It has been argued that Dom Mintoff, arguably Malta's most influential post-war political leader and the ideal consort of the traditionally submissive nation-mother, behaved like the traditional Maltese father: he was “aloof, manly, harsh and looked after his own.”<sup>11</sup> Boissevain argues that this authoritarian figure was familiar to all Maltese, because most of them had grown up in and formed part of families dominated by such a figure. This familiarity of the Mintoff model may explain, at least in part, his ability to influence the political, social and cultural life of the Maltese Islands for half a century. Mintoff, the nation's father substituting, perhaps, the foreign or ecclesiastical paternal figures, is described as hard-working and often “harsh, even cruel, verbally lashing and

---

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Boissevain, “A Politician and His Audience: Malta's Dom Mintoff,” *Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry*, ed. Ronald Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino (Malta: Mireva, 1994) 411.

battering, punishing where he encountered opposition or incompetence.” Like many traditional fathers he was both respected and feared; “above all he was firm, rarely admitting error [and] consulting with few.” Of course he could also be “immensely charming and hospitable” and “radiated an aura of confidence, of knowing exactly what he wanted and what he was doing.” Another aspect of his personality that Boissevain brings out is his *machismo*, his reputation for being tough, an important characteristic of the image of Mediterranean men. There are many similarities between Mintoff and his archrival, Archbishop Mikiel Gonzi: they were two strict father figures destined to clash in the same way that like poles repel one another.

Like the respected priest Dun Karm in Ġużè Ellul Mercer’s novel, *Leli ta’ Haż-Żgħir* (Leli of Haż-Żgħir) (1938), the ideal conservative father “embodies the values needed to make one’s way in the world and to support a family: he is morally strong, self-disciplined, frugal, temperate, and restrained.” He sets an example by “holding himself to high standards,” as Dun Karm does when he answers his priest friend’s call to assist the soldiers on the frontline during the First World War in Belgium. “He insists on his moral authority, commands obedience, and when he doesn’t get it, metes out retribution as fairly and justly as he knows how. It is his job to protect and support his family,” which in the case of Dun Karm is his village community, “and he believes that safety comes out of strength.”<sup>12</sup> Despite the respect she enjoys, the idealized conservative mother, Sa Marjann in Ellul Mercer’s novel, cannot bring about any real change in the role of women in society because she is expected to conform to the patriarchal culture that she supports and that supports her.

In the Nation-as-Family metaphor, the nation is seen as a family, the government as a parent and the citizens as children. George Lakoff explains that “this metaphor turns family-based morality into political morality, providing the link between conservative family values and conservative political policies.” The Strict Father model, he writes, “which brings together the conservative metaphors for morality, is what unites the various conservative political positions into a coherent whole when it is imposed on political life by the Nation-as-Family metaphor.” In post-Independence Maltese poetry, Daniel Massa’s “Monologu mill-Gżira ta’ l-Isponoż,” Victor Fenech’s prose poem “Samuraj,” and Henry Holland’s “Is-Salvatur,” deal with the “mythical” figure of Dom Mintoff, the “Saviour” or “samurai.” Massa’s poem depicts Mintoff (the unnamed protagonist of his poem and model of all authoritarian leaders) as the typical national strict father figure whose primary duty, in addition to support and protection, is to tell his

---

<sup>12</sup> “Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals In the Dust,” by George Lakoff, 1995. <http://www.wvcd.org/issues/Lakoff.html>.

children what is right and wrong, to punish them when they do wrong, and to bring them up to be self-disciplined and self-reliant. According to the model described by Lakoff which is evident both in the , “through self-denial, the children can build strength against internal evils.” In this way, the strict father teaches his children to be “self-disciplined, industrious, polite, trustworthy, and respectful of authority.” Like the priest Dun Karm in Ellul Mercer’s *Leli ta’ Haż-Żgħir*, he “provides nurturance and expresses his devotion to his family by supporting and protecting them, but just as importantly by setting and enforcing strict moral bounds and by inculcating self-discipline and self-reliance through hard work and self-denial. This, according to the model, “builds character.” For the strict father, strictness is a form of nurturance and love – tough love;” he himself is “restrained in showing affection and emotion overtly, and prefers the appearance of strength and calm. He gives to charity as an expression of compassion for those less fortunate than he and as an expression of gratitude for his own good fortune.” Once his children are grown – once they have become self-disciplined and self-reliant – they are on their own and must succeed or fail by themselves; he does not meddle in their lives, just as he doesn't want any external authority meddling in his life.<sup>13</sup>

### **Questioning the Model: Domestic Violence and the Voice of Women**

In traditional Maltese society, the individual, especially the woman, normally acquires her identity from her group. The Maltese-Australian writer and academic Lou Drofenik recently referred to the significance of her family ties and how they give her an identity in Malta when she was speaking about Maltese cultural identity at a seminar on Maltese Australians in 2005. Dr. Drofenik explained that when she visits Malta today, 45 years after having emigrated to Australia, people from Birkirkara, where she was brought up, are able to identify her family’s social position from the family nickname of her father and mother; “they pinpoint the street and the house where my family lived, name the network of my relatives, know their occupations and be able to recall some misdemeanour by one of my family members or would be able to relate some piece of my family’s history. My identity as a member of a collective,” writes Lou Drofenik, formerly Zammit, “was strong, and I can still call upon this form of identification whenever I return to the island after many years in Australia for it is still held within the memory of those who knew my family.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> George Lakoff, “Metaphor, Morality, and Politics.”

<sup>14</sup> Drofenik, “The Filo Pastry of Identity.”



Post-Independence Maltese literature has questioned not only the idealization of the traditional Maltese family of most pre-Independence Maltese literature, with its religious beliefs and affiliations, but also the identification of the individual with the group. The stories it narrates reflect the changes that have been taking place in an increasingly secularised Maltese society and that are finally being recognized. In J. J. Camilleri's novel *Il-Għar tax-Xitan* (1973), Jumi Ħarr and Petriga, who have had to move to the more liberal city (presumably abroad) in order to escape the stifling, asphyxiating bigotry of the village of San Rokku (the village, named after St. Roque, the patron saint of victims of the plague, and more recently AIDS, is a metaphor for Malta) dominated by an overpowering Church, live together for a year, during which Petriga gets pregnant, before they decide to get married. Petriga tells Jumi Ħarr that although they are not married she is already his wife; but she prefers to get married because she doesn't want her child to suffer the way she herself suffered; she doesn't want their child to be “without a name and illegitimate.”<sup>15</sup> And ironically, the couple decide to return to the village that was bent on destroying their lives to get married there, a return that can be read as an attempt on their part to normalize their status in the eyes of their estranged community and return within its fold.

As Lou Drogenik pointed out after she read an earlier draft of this paper, this return can also be read as their inability to cope outside the confines of a rigid and moralistic community which rendered them in a state of childlike dependence. “I have interviewed migrant women who are still suffering from great depression because they were cut off from their community,” writes Lou Drogenik, “a community which in Malta had spelt out exactly what moral choices they had to make.” In Australia they had to make moral choices without the community's strictures and rigid guidelines and therefore they themselves had to shoulder the responsibility of their decisions and live with the consequences of their choices.<sup>16</sup> In her doctoral dissertation, Drogenik noted that some women, “yearned for the reconnection to the remembered moral community where there was direction and thereby they felt safe and secure.”<sup>17</sup> The migrant women's feelings of grief for the loss and disconnection from the moral community to which they had belonged are still felt after three decades of migration. “The customs, traditions and actions of a past collective 'we' are constantly referred to when speaking about the present. Their past Maltese community is viewed with nostalgia; its actions are romanticized and valued. Its safety and caring aspects are compared with contemporary Australian community which is seen to be immoral and

---

<sup>15</sup> J. J. Camilleri, *Il-Għar tax-Xitan*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin [1973] 1982) 111.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication via email dated 3 March 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Drogenik, “The Effects of Migration on a Group of Maltese Women,” 264.

dangerous.” Drofenik’s research concluded that the inability of some of these migrant women to disengage themselves from the past to take up the moral values of the new collective, has led to what she calls “a lifelong sense of mourning for the losses they incurred in their adolescent years.”<sup>18</sup>

Like Natan of *Il-Gidba* and Petriga of *Il-Ghar tax-Xitan*, Samwel, the protagonist of Frans Sammut’s novel *Samuraj* (1975) has had a very difficult childhood. His father, like many paternal figures in Maltese literature, is violent and insensitive towards his wife and his son, and Samwel’s aloofness and low self esteem in his adult life is a direct result of the dysfunctional family in which he was brought up, his unresolved oedipal complex, and the absence of his mother, who has since died, and towards whom he feels guilty for not having been able to protect her. This unfinished business cripples his relationship with a young woman in her twenties that is considered scandalous by the tightly knit community of their traditional rural village. When she walks away from the violence of her father and her mother’s intrusions into her life and moves in with the as yet unprepared Samwel, the village community, dominated by the Catholic Church, decides it is time to intervene and Samwel loses both Żabbett and what was left of his self-esteem and his desire to live.

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 it seems to want is to guarantee and consolidate its privileged and domineering position by, among other things, supporting the patriarchal *status quo* and enforcing obedience to the “accepted” norms of behaviour. It doesn’t seem to have intervened in support of Samwel and his mother when they were being physically and psychologically battered by an unrestrained macho. But when it comes to dealing with Samwel and Żabbett, the Church ignores what their relationship means to them and, like their repressive fathers, demands nothing but unconditional obedience.

In general, Maltese men and the Church, as shown by a pastoral letter written by the bishops of the Maltese Islands in 2000,<sup>19</sup> have retained a traditional view of the role of women in society. Younger generations and women with a

---

<sup>18</sup> Drofenik, “The Effects of Migration on a Group of Maltese Women,” 267.

<sup>19</sup> “Women in the life of the church.” Pastoral letter by the Archbishop of Malta and the bishop of Gozo on the occasion of the feast of the assumption 2000. Archdiocese of Malta - Press Release 2000/127e (12th August 2000). Full text published in *The Sunday Times* on August 13, 2000.

higher standard of education, however, do not adhere to this view. In a study published in 2000, sociologist Anthony M. Abela concluded that although the Maltese still value marriage and the family very highly, when their expectations are not fulfilled, they are not as reluctant as in the past to resort to separation and annulment. Violence and unfaithfulness are the two main factors leading to marital break-up.<sup>20</sup> Generally speaking, young people and women believe that both women and men should have equal opportunity to participate in the labour market, and equally to share financial and child-rearing duties. The author observes, however, that relative to their European counterparts, the Maltese have a traditional outlook on family issues.<sup>21</sup> In 2001, Abela pointed out that “until recently,” Malta has been an “outlier on the map of European values, identified as a ‘fortress-convent’ for its strict non-permissive morality. Malta is fast changing into a modern Mediterranean and European city-island. He noted a shift from the values of the family and traditional morality to individualized values and lifestyles.<sup>22</sup>

Towards the end of Clare Azzopardi’s “Rasi ġo l-Ilma” (“Immersed”),<sup>23</sup> Gordon visits his estranged, violent father Djego Grech who is being treated for terminal cancer at a specialized hospital. He refuses to pass on his father’s message to his mother that her husband would like to see her before he dies. It’s not clear why he chooses to visit his father in hospital and yet deny him this last wish, even because his mother is a strong woman, the only person Djego was ever afraid of we are told, who is perfectly capable of taking care of herself and making her own decisions. Gordon decides to shield her from the despicable man she once married: it’s probably his way of doing something for the mother he has set as his role model. The story ends with Gordon observing his mother who has finally found the love she deserves. She is not the weakling the widow Pawlina turns out to be in Ġużè Diacono’s important play *L-Ewwel Jien!* (1963). Unlike the great majority of female characters in Maltese literature, many of Clare Azzopardi’s protagonists are strong women who have a mind of their own and refuse to be patronized by others. “/No adjective describe story/,” for example, deals with a whole range of issues,

---

<sup>20</sup> Anthony M. Abela, *Values of Women and Men in the Maltese Islands, a comparative European perspective* (Valletta: Commission for the Advancement of Women, Ministry for Social Policy, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> “Shifting Maltese Values” by Josann Cutajar (*The Sunday Times*, March 18, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Anthony M. Abela, *Youth Participation in Voluntary Organisations in Malta: A comparative analysis of European Values Studies* (Malta: Parliamentary Secretariat, Ministry of Education, 2001) 80.

<sup>23</sup> “Rasi ġo l-Ilma” by Clare Azzopardi translated by Albert Gatt as “Immersed.” Clare Azzopardi’s collection of short stories will be published in July 2006. Translations of her work have appeared in printed and online publications abroad. “Immersed” appears in Clare Azzopardi, *Others, Across*, trans. Albert Gatt (Malta: Inizjamed, Midsea, 2005).

from racism and human trafficking in Malta to the age-old issue of language and its ability, or inability, to express, or perhaps intimate, the inexpressible; but it also about young assertive women coming to terms with themselves as independent beings, and sometimes choosing, like Marisa, an assertive police inspector and cultured mother. and perhaps her friend Ruth, the narrator, to do away with men.

“/No adjective describe story/” explores the relationships that some of the female characters have with their families. The young Eritrean female asylum seeker Adiam arrives in Malta as a clandestine immigrant with her sister and brother and ends up locked in a detention centre for over a year. Eventually, Adiam, her sister and other asylum seekers are smuggled to Pozzallo in Sicily by a trafficker called Ġorġ, the father of Rachel, Adiam’s best friend in Malta. In her letter from Italy at the very end of the story, the only instance in which we have unmediated access to her words, Adiam speaks almost triumphantly of her arrival in Italy and the reunification of what’s left of her family – it’s mostly a letter about family: she and her sister Sania have joined her brother who lives in Italy and now has a child. Sania is told that her husband has died. Their parents, like their other, desperate brother who committed suicide while in detention, are dead.

Rachel’s relationship with her violent father is turbulent and occasionally one of convenience. When she decides to leave Malta to join her mother in Manchester she takes nothing with her: “I’m not even carrying any luggage with me. Just a handbag. ‘S all I need, like.”<sup>24</sup> There’s no talk of trying to reunite her family or anything of the sort, because it’s completely irrelevant to her in the same way that it is irrelevant and undesirable to Gordon in “Immersed;” all she wants is to get away from her father and the bad influence she knows he has on her despite the fact that she despises him.

The little Ruth the narrator tells us about Marisa, her best friend from their days at school, is just about enough to grab our attention. Marisa is the unmarried mother of a little boy, but there’s none of the soppy self-pity or “paternalism” that normally accompanies such characters. Marisa is six foot three and “weighs in at 75.” Ruth tells us, with more than a hint of admiration, that “Marisa doesn’t give a damn about anything,” and that she probably “undertakes her work with a strong sense of duty – I mean both as a mother and as a police inspector.” Ruth proudly states that she loves Marisa to bits. “Maybe that’s just because we’ve known each other for so long. Maybe it’s

---

<sup>24</sup> “/No adjective describe story/” in Clare Azzopardi, *Others, Across*, trans. Albert Gatt (Malta: Inizjamed, Midsea, 2005), 27.

because she likes French cinema. Or maybe it's because she's capable of taking the piss out of any man, which scares them shitless every time.”<sup>25</sup>

Like other women in Maltese literature, especially that written after Independence, the protagonist in Immanuel Mifsud's powerful short story “Sonia,” inspired by a case reported in the papers a few years ago about a young woman recovering from a drug addiction who died after an overdose and was dumped in the sea by her boyfriend,<sup>26</sup> leaves home because she cannot accept her father's patriarchal attitude and violent nature and the way both her parents decide about her life without letting her participate in any way in their design; but she runs away to another man, who is the product of the same patriarchal culture, because she is incapable of conceiving her relationship with the world outside the terms of this particular culture. Although she has the strength to escape from her childhood home, Sonia is mentally and culturally ill-equipped to consider other solutions to the problems that have been imposed on her by her abusive parents and all she can think of is to set up an “alternative” family dominated by the same oppressive “culture” that she is escaping from and that eventually leads to her psychological and physical death. Sonia runs away into the arms of the same abusive male-dominated culture that has ruined her adolescence.

Sonia lacks the moral and intellectual strength that allows Clare Azzopardi's women to seek paths that are true alternatives to the patriarchy that oppresses them. “/No adjective describe story/” is also characterized by dialogue, real dialogue, between the female characters, because as Patricia Hill Collins points out, one must not confuse dialogue with adversarial debate.<sup>27</sup> Dialogue, writes Angelo Marchese, is a discourse that focuses on the speaker as interlocutor, as someone who takes active part in a conversation; there are many references to the locutionary situation. Dialogue is active on a number of reference planes simultaneously; it is characterized by the presence of metalinguistic elements and by the frequent use of interrogative forms.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Azzopardi, “/No adjective describe story/,” 36-37.

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Mifsud, *Kimika* (Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin, 2005). In an interview with Gillian Bartolo (“Immanuel Mifsud and His Controversial Book *Kimika*, *The Malta Independent on Sunday*, 19.2.2006), Mifsud explains that the setting in the short story “Sonia” “is based on a bar in Valletta that I used to frequent, populated by unemployed Arabs or ones illegally employed, around whom hovered Maltese prostitutes. I never spoke to the people there. I simply observed them.”

<sup>27</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology,” (198-206), in *Feminisms*, eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 203.

<sup>28</sup> Angelo Marchese, *Dizionario di retorica e di stilistica* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1991) 79. “[...] il dialogo come un discorso che: mette l'accento sul parlante come interlocutore; si riferisce abbondantemente alla situazione locutoria; gioca su più quadri di referenza simultaneamente; si caratterizza per la presenza di elementi metalinguistici e per la frequenza delle forme interrogative.”

And this is precisely what happens in the various exchanges in Azzopardi’s account. In six out of the nine parts into which the short story is divided, there is explicit use of dialogue between the various female characters who tell, and want to be the protagonists, of their own story. And the various dialogues are riddled with questions, meaningful ones not rhetorical devices. There are also instances in which Ruth, the narrator, addresses the reader; and one must also say that Adiam’s strings of words are clearly addressed to someone who is listening carefully: within the diegesis it would probably be Ruth, because she is the one who is relaying them to herself through her own, highly subjective memory – but possibly also Rachel. Nevertheless, Adiam’s words are addressed to us too, because Azzopardi wants her to tell her own story, even if she has to do it in her absence, through a trusted mediator. This, after all, is a characteristic of most clandestine migrants, and similarly of many female characters in Maltese fiction: their reluctance stroke fear stroke inability stroke desire to tell their own story.

Many of the women of *Birds of Passage* (2005), the novel by the Maltese-Australian writer Lou Drogenik which is so much about (different conceptions of the) family and which was inspired by research carried out by the author among Maltese and Gozitan migrant women in Australia, have a mind of their own and their life does not dissolve into that of their male companion, or father, or family. Much of the novel is narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator, a narrator who is not a character in the story but hovers above it and knows everything about it. But there are also many individual, first-person voices, both in letters and in sections in which a character tells her or his own story. Cecilja says that she was born and raised in the (fictional) Maltese village of Mintafuq “but, as luck would have it, I escaped its confines, its strictures and its people. Who, tell me, would want to spend all the years of their life in the same house where they were born without experiencing other spaces, other people, other lives?”<sup>29</sup> When she was fifteen Victor Grima started paying court to her: “I need to have a life,” she told him. “I wanted to see, to hear, to experience.”<sup>30</sup> In another scene she tells her sisters: “[...] how good it is to be free, to be answerable to no one but myself.”<sup>31</sup> Her twin brother Paul warns her that “When a woman marries she becomes a slave. You’ll be a slave to a man.”<sup>32</sup> He himself was dying to leave Malta, and they eventually reunite in Australia where the unmarried Cecilja runs a boarding house in Port Melbourne<sup>33</sup> while he marries an Englishwoman, Virginia Talbot Smith, the

---

<sup>29</sup> Lou Drogenik, *Birds of Passage* (Victoria, Australia: L. Drogenik, 2005) 186.

<sup>30</sup> Drogenik, *Birds of Passage*, 188.

<sup>31</sup> Drogenik, *Birds of Passage*, 162.

<sup>32</sup> Drogenik, *Birds of Passage*, 188.

<sup>33</sup> Drogenik, *Birds of Passage*, 363.

liberated mother of two children, who left her husband and the Navy he lived for back in Malta. When they were younger, Cecilja used to tell her brother, with a “heart full of jealousy”: “You’ll be a man and you can do whatever you want.”<sup>34</sup> But she was able to appropriate her own story too; and her brother clearly did not enjoy the role/s assigned to him by Maltese society either and their reunion in Australia is a triumph for both of them.

Like Nada in Rena Balzan’s novel *Ilkoll ta’ Nisel Wiehed* (1987), Cecilja’s niece Susanna fights her way out of the unnecessary constraints imposed on her by her family and she learns from her own mistakes what kind of life she wants to lead and how she can go about becoming the person she wants to be. When she finally meets the Australian former First World War soldier Jack MacDonald again (she had had a love relationship with him in Malta), this time in Australia, far from the asphyxiating Maltese society “back home,” she chooses to marry him, even though he is divorced and her community in Malta would never agree to such a union.<sup>35</sup> These are the limitations she left behind when she chose to travel to Australia to look for her lover, despite the opposition of her family which is compounded, without her knowing, by the opposition of Jack’s Australian mother. The difference between Nada and Susanna is that Nada, who admires her rigid, paternalistic grandfather partly because he has treated her differently than the way he has treated his wife and daughter, returns to her country of birth after she has finished her studies and she seems to be unaware of the irreparable harm that his attitude and behaviour have caused on his wife and his daughter Erica, Nada’s mother. Nada does not fight against the patriarchal society that turns Lou Drogenik’s Cecilja, Paul and Susanna away from Malta. Their lives are reconstructed in Australia, where they create their new centre, their new family, while Nada’s return to Malta is a return to the centre which she doesn’t find particularly oppressive. Her mother Erica rebelled against her father and ran away to another country, but like Immanuel Mifsud’s Sonia she constantly looks for the security of another male figure and her failure to find that male companion means that for her, her entire life is a failure: she seems to be unable to live her life outside the framework of a (protective, paternalistic) relationship with a man. Rena Balzan herself states that “Erica always let her life be led by the men she loved,”<sup>36</sup> even though she was perhaps unaware of this dependence. Nada, on the other hand, has more of a grip on her own life, and the very fact that she narrates her own story is an indication of her

---

<sup>34</sup> In another passage, Fina Grima tells herself that men “always get the best deal in life.” Drogenik, *Birds of Passage*, 98.

<sup>35</sup> Drogenik, *Birds of Passage*, 364.

<sup>36</sup> Intervista ta’ Adrian Grima ma’ Rena Balzan (Marzu 2003).

[http://adriangrima.250free.com/rena\\_balzan\\_intervista.htm](http://adriangrima.250free.com/rena_balzan_intervista.htm) u *Il-Ġensillum*.

determination to take her life in the direction that she chooses to follow. This is certainly the Nada Rena Balzan wants us to see, a self-confident, assertive and independent woman. She is an “improvement” on her mother, so to speak.

Another important difference between Nada and Drofenik’s Maltese-Australians is the fact that although she comes across as more of a thinker than they are, her thoughts about women (and family) are not particularly feminist. She tells Claud, the other half in a rather improbable “love” affair, that for the emancipation of women to take place, men must first emancipate themselves because they have the leading role in society.<sup>37</sup> Neither Susanna and Cecilja, nor Virginia are ready to wait for those who effectively oppress them to “come to”: they simply decide, for a number of reasons, to get away from the oppressive patriarchy that suffocates them, even if it is their mothers who represent that patriarchy in their everyday lives. Even Paul can’t wait to get away from the closed society that has been portrayed so powerfully by Maltese fiction. Nada, unlike her brave but unprepared mother, has been allowed enough space to be able to do her own thing without having to confront the patriarchy head on. Susanna takes on the patriarchy from a safe distance: Australia has allowed her the space that she could never carve out for herself in Malta. Distancing herself from Malta she is liberated, and her liberation, like that of Ceska, presumably liberates her daughters (and sons).

The women’s brave decision to leave the protection of their island home and emigrate to Australia is vindicated by the success of their daughters and their daughters’ daughters. The three trapped women who dominate the first part of the novel, Katerina Zerafa in Gozo, and Fina Grima and Virginia Talbot Smith in Malta, become brave and determined birds of passage that are vindicated by Angela Spiteri. Like Nada she takes the opportunity to reconstruct the story of her family. But Angela is also able to *reconstruct* her story in another, highly symbolic way: unlike her grandmother Ceska and her lover Luigi, she can start a relationship with a young man, whose great uncle was Luigi, in whichever way she likes. And when she tells Ceska that she has decided to go out with him, Ceska is clearly supportive, even though, or perhaps *precisely* because the tragedy of her own life was brought about by the violent interference of her parents in her life. Like Aisha in Leila Abouzeid’s novel *The Last Chapter* (2000, translation published in 2003), who can choose to ignore the patriarchal maxim that “A woman’s kingdom is her

---

<sup>37</sup> Rena Balzan, *Ilkoll ta’ Nisel Wiehed* (Malta: PEG, 1998) 89: “Biex issehh l-emancipazzjoni tal-mara,” Nada tells Claud, “l-ewwel trid titwettaq l-emancipazzjoni tar-raġel għax hu qiegħed f’ras is-soċjetà.”



home” and that women are nothing without their men,<sup>38</sup> Angela is her own boss.

Family features prominently in Clare Azzopardi’s “Il-Linja l-Ħadra,” (“The Green Line”),<sup>39</sup> in which a journey on the Underground in London between Stepney Green and London Victoria serves as a frame for the protagonist’s recollections about her relationship with individual members of her family, two of whom, her brother, who is sick with cancer, and her sister, and has broken up with the first boyfriend she had after the failure of her three-year marriage, she is travelling with: every stop marks the beginning of short “flashes” of memory about specific moments in the life of their family. But her brother and sister cannot, or simply refuse to remember the often difficult moments she refers to and we are not quite sure whether the protagonist is making some, or even all of it up; however, despite the protagonist’s own psychological troubles, we suspect that the sister and brother, who make it clear right from the start that they have come to London to *be* tourists, have chosen to forget because they don’t want to think of the bleaker sides of their family story. Nicola King notes that family secrets highlight “the centrality of memory to our experience of plots and lives - our own and those of others, real or imagined;”<sup>40</sup> Like a number of stories by Paul P. Borg, such as especially “Milied man-Nannu” (1973) (“Christmas with Grandpa”),<sup>41</sup> and Trevor Żahra, such as “Is-Siġra taż-Żebbuġ”) (“The Olive Tree”),<sup>42</sup> “Il-Linja l-Ħadra” is all about remembering, in the sense of reconstructing (childhood) and trying to come to terms with the bleaker sides that every family inevitably has. Mario Azzopardi looks at childhood and a difficult family story with an unsettling mix of nostalgia and bitterness in his poem “Demgħat tas-Silġ” (“Tears of Ice”). “My people never knew me / neither my father / nor my mother / no my brothers know me.”<sup>43</sup> His is one of the poems that marks a clean break from the idealized family of the romantics and ushers in a much-needed rethinking of the story of the Maltese family that had been left largely untold.

---

<sup>38</sup> Leila Abouzeid, *The Last Chapter*, trans. by Leila Abouzeid and John Liechety (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003) 133.

<sup>39</sup> Clare Azzopardi, “The Green Line,” translated by Albert Gatt, in *Cúirt 21. The Cúirt Annual 2006*, ed. by Alan Hayes and Maura Kennedy (Galway, Ireland: Arlen House, 2006).

© Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity. Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000) 8.

<sup>41</sup> Paul P. Borg, *Beżgħat* (Malta: Bugelli, 1986). This was Borg’s first collection of short stories written between 1973-1981.

<sup>42</sup> Trevor Żahra, *Lubien* (Malta: Merlin Library, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> “Demgħat tas-Silġ” appeared in Mario Azzopardi’s poetry collection *Demgħat tas-Silġ* (1976). The English version, “Tears of Ice,” is from Mario Azzopardi, *Naked as Water*, trans. Grazio Falzon (Riverside, California: Xenos Books, 1996) 144.

## New Stories, New Perspectives

The family institution is still deeply rooted and closely knit in Maltese society. It is important to acknowledge the fact that the family of origin is “the main source of help” for those who are sick or under stress, and to a lesser extent for those with mental health problems, financial difficulties, long-term illnesses, physical disabilities or alcohol abuse problems.<sup>44</sup> Anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain has observed that in the fifty years that he has known Malta, the family is one of those things that has not changed. It is still “the paramount point of reference and people still pride themselves on the strength of the family” and loyalty to the family is a “fundamental and cherished value.” But Boissevain also argues that this leads to what some have called “amoral familism,” although “many would call it a highly moral form of behaviour.” Most Maltese hold that any action undertaken to benefit one’s family is justifiable, and that other people behave similarly; this set of values is widespread in Malta and in southern Europe and leads to “a disregard of the effects on others of your action to further the interests of your family – on neighbours, strangers, and future generations.” Family and party loyalty feed another characteristic of Maltese life, “the endemic patronage, clientelism, nepotism and the real and imagined network of friends-of-friends that can be mobilized to solve the problems of daily life.” Boissevain observes that another reality linked to the family that is still present, though weaker than it was, is “the fear of reprisal, retribution for family, party or government. This blanket of fear rests heavily on the shoulders of so many. It inhibits persons from standing up and disagreeing, or even just questioning someone more influential or powerful.”<sup>45</sup> These social and political aspects of family life on the Maltese Islands receive particular attention in post-Independence Maltese literature, especially, but not exclusively among the new writers of Sixties.

But there is more to the changing Maltese family of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> than has been narrated so far and writers of the new generation are starting to tackle issues such as gay and lesbian relationships, and also relationships and families in which one of the partners is non-Maltese, or even non-Catholic or non-white. Writers that provide new perspectives and explore new experiences allow us to understand our society better, especially if they

---

<sup>44</sup> Joseph M. Sammut, “Malta: Low participation of women in the formal economy,” *Social Watch Report 2005. Roars and Whispers. Gender and Poverty: Promises vs. Action*, ed. Roberto Bissio (Montevideo, Uruguay: Instituto del Tercer Mundo, 2005) 207.

<sup>45</sup> Jeremy Boissevain, “Malta: Taking Stock after fifty years. Where to Now?” Speech made on 26 March 2006 at the Today seminar organised by Mediatoday, at Palazzo Capua in Sliema, Malta. <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/2006/03/26/speech.html>

choose to stand outside, or even refuse, the logic and privileges of the patriarchy and its cosy stereotypes. These unorthodox characters and narratives are bound to raise eyebrows and provoke eloquent silences: in Clare Azzopardi’s “Il-Linja l-Ħadra,” the protagonist tells us that her embarrassed mother denies that her daughter’s aunt is a lesbian and lives with her partner.

Moreover, with a few exceptions, Maltese literature has as yet failed to “tell” the stories of “real” Maltese women. This is a serious lacuna, because as Widdowson argues, it is the vision of the writer, “articulated in and as the text, which defamiliarises habitualised sight, and so allows us to ‘know’ a community which is unable to know itself as it gets on busily with living the ‘splendid waste’ of its ‘real social’ life.”<sup>46</sup> Women in Malta still lag behind in gender empowerment and economic participation. The 32% that are economically active are mainly involved in “traditionally female jobs.” Women are also “poorly represented in the power structure,”<sup>47</sup> but much of our literature that deals with the family reproduces the mutually exclusive roles of the woman as (nurturing) mother and the man as (absent) father. Mary Darmanin writes about the benefits both for the workers themselves and for their families, including the men, when women and mothers have a job outside the house, and she urges the Church hierarchy to listen to what women have to say about their role in the family and in society.<sup>48</sup>

Fundamental changes to discourse about the family in Maltese literature can both reflect what is happening in everyday Maltese life and construct and articulate relatively new realities. In particular, the emergence of women writers who refuse to perpetuate the patriarchal culture on which much of Maltese literature has stood and propose a literature and a discourse about literature that explores other value systems, perspectives and experiences, would have a very positive effect on literature in Malta. This can in turn help Maltese society to bridge the gap between beliefs and praxis, between what society says it believes in and what it actually tries to achieve in its daily life.

13.2.06 – 22.5.06

---

<sup>46</sup> Widdowson 105.

<sup>47</sup> Sammut 206.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Darmanin, “Talba Biex Jinftiehmu Aħjar il-Bżonnijiet tan-Nisa Maltin,” *Orbis*, Vol.3/4, Dec. 04.