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MIGRATION IN CONTEMPORARY MALTESE FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

This short chapter introduces a little-known national literature from a Mediterranean island-state which has had an intense experience with migration. In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s Malta had one of the highest rates of emigration in the world.[1] At a structural level, emigration during this period was thought to be stimulated by the archipelago's narrow natural-resource base, by its very large mean family size, and by difficulties encountered in restructuring the economy away from the country's main colonial function as British naval garrison and dockyard.[2] Most of the migration literature referred to in this chapter dates from this period of maximum mobility of the Maltese population when people were moving in large numbers not only to foreign destinations (chiefly Britain but also Australia and North America) but also internally within Malta (from rural to urban districts). The insularity of Malta – both of the island itself and of individual rural communities within it – is a characteristic which also infuses some of this literature, and conditions the experiences and perceptions of the migrants themselves. This insularity – in particular the isolation of *self* – can hardly be quantified, but is a recurring theme in Maltese literature, as we shall see.

BACKGROUND TO MALTESE LITERATURE

Although the earliest Maltese writers were the product of an Islamic culture and used Arabic as the medium of their literary production,[3] Maltese literature has, until quite recently, generally followed the prevalent cultural and literary trends of the nearby Italian peninsula. Dante's tongue played a very important part in Maltese linguistic history. As Latin started losing its multisecular importance, Italian became the regular language of Maltese culture, and remained so until the early twentieth century.[4]

As regards the traditional Maltese novel, the model has been Walter Scott's historical romance, filtered through the pen of Alessandro Manzoni. With

Malta having become a centre of activity for Italian intellectuals, especially after the granting of the freedom of press in 1839, Italian contemporary thought and ideals were to become more readily accessible to the Maltese. Hence the enormous impact of Manzoni's famous *I Promessi Sposi* on the Maltese intelligentsia.[5]

The Italian *romanzo storico*, which is always set in the past, is meant to be a blend of fact and fiction, with the private drama of individuals overlapping into the historical (thus public) events of a particular period. Depicting the oppression of *past* tyrants seemed to be the ideal way of highlighting the political tyranny of the various *present* dominations (the French, the Austrians, the Bourbons, the Pope) that were hindering Italy from becoming one nation. The parallel situation in nineteenth-century Malta – British domination preventing a serious constitutional emancipation of the archipelago – certainly contributed towards the success of the historical novel. This genre became very popular on the island, thanks also to, amongst others, the Italian exiles Ifigenia Zauli Sajani and Michelangelo Bottari, the Maltese philosopher Nicola Zammit, and Ramiro Barbaro di San Giorgio, a Maltese who spent much of his life abroad, mostly in Naples.[6]

Towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, this genre had definitely established itself. The time was now ripe for local writers to start producing historical novels with a local setting, and written in Maltese. A.E. Caruana's *Ineż Farruġ* (1889), S. Frendo de Mannarino's *Barunissa Maltija* (1893), Ġ. Muscat Azzopardi's *Ċensu Barbara* (1893) and *Nazju Ellul* (1909), were amongst the first of a long series of popular historical novels that continued to thrive until the 1960s. Amongst the best of the more recent novels of this genre are those written by Ġ. Galea, such as *Żmien l-Ispanjoli* (1938), *San Ġwann* (1939) and *Meta Nħaraq it-Tijatru* (1946).

The changing pattern of Maltese society in the 1950s and 1960s, with the development of tourism and industry on the one hand and the creation of new urban agglomerations such as San Ġwann and Santa Lucija on the other, brought about a new kind of Maltese writer. The generation born in the 1930s and 1940s was no longer concerned with the narration of the collective saga of a people yearning for nationhood (political independence became a reality on 21 September 1964); instead the hero of the modern novel became the individual self, desperately trying to cut himself off from the rest of society and striving to distance himself from its traditional beliefs and dogmas, the fossilised remains of a rapidly disappearing past.[7]

In this battle between the values of tradition (represented by society) and the non-values of the present (personified in the figure of the ever-dissatisfied *self*), it is the latter that turns out nearly always to be the loser.[8] Friggieri and Massa have pointed out how the defeated 'self' has only two options left to wash away the wounds brought about by this defeat: suicide or emigration.[9] Eschewing the morbid, the remainder of this chapter takes a closer look at

the causes and characteristics of the Maltese migratory instinct as expressed in a selection of recent novels.

THE MIGRATION THEME IN MALTESE FICTION: SOME EXAMPLES

At a psychological level, emigration is usually intended to be a definitive form of escape from a society whose values are unacceptable to the individual self. Sometimes, it is seen as the ultimate solution after various other attempts at 'escaping' from the problems of life prove unsuccessful. A good illustration of this is found in Sant's novel *L-Ewwel Weraq tal-Bajtar* (The first fig-leaves)[10] where Raymond is passing through a profound identity crisis. He first attempts to combat this crisis by trying to force himself to study and find refuge in work. This having failed, he goes a step further and isolates himself from his classmates; he also refutes the traditional values of religion and the family. At a certain point, he even tries to conform by completely divesting himself of his individuality at a disco, and abandons himself to the anonymity of the dancing crowd. But all to no avail: the only apparent solution to his *malaise* is the complete recision of his national roots and total immersion in an unlimited and anonymous new world (England).

The final scene, on the boat to England when Raymond vomits violently,[11] leaves the reader sure of one thing: Raymond has freed himself of his 'undigested' Maltese past. Yet, a stronger doubt remains: will the 'liberated' self ever adjust to, and be accepted by, the new world? Sant provides no definite solution to this query. The answer is left completely to the individual reader's interpretation and/or imagination.

Incidentally, in *L-Ewwel Weraq tal-Bajtar* we are presented with three different members of the same family who, at one time or another in their lives, have to deal with the problem of emigration. The reason behind Raymond's urge to go is his feeling of being unfulfilled as an individual. His decision to leave the island is, therefore, ultimately a conscious, responsible and *self-chosen* one. On the other hand, his uncle Peter's decision to emigrate and his father's near-emigration are *imposed* on them respectively by the ethical rules and the economic and labour policies of Maltese society. In fact, Peter had no other choice left but to abandon the Maltese shores after he had been involved in a homosexual affair with a young lad.[12] For the close-knit Catholic society of Malta, Peter could be none other than an outcast, forced to give up his past roots and to build himself a new life (and virginity) in a foreign land. As for Raymond's father, Saver, he seems to be very happy with the workings of Maltese society and in fact does his utmost to become part and parcel of it. Being elected on to the committee of the local football club is the greatest ambition of those people who, like Raymond's father, are glad to conform. This is because the local club – whether football, band, political or social – is the central hub of Maltese village or town life.[13] However, the

threat of unemployment forces Raymond's father to take into serious consideration the prospect of emigrating. The reader is thus presented with a situation where Saver, totally happy with his environment, is forced to abandon it, while Raymond, totally unhappy with Malta, is obliged to stay there to support his family in his father's absence. It is only towards the end of the novel that the situation changes: Raymond's father finds alternative work and can thus stay in the land he feels at home in; Raymond gets a positive answer to his request for help from the other rebel of the family – his uncle Peter who had not conformed to the sexual norms of the community – and has the opportunity of moving away from the restricted (and restricting) Maltese sphere to embrace the open-minded way of life of an international community (the British one) that might not even be prepared to accept the provincial islander amongst its fold!

In Frans Sammut's *Il-Gaġġa* (The bird-cage), written in the form of a diaristic flashback, the hero, Fredu Gambin, comes to the same conclusion as Sant's Raymond: emigration seems to be the only apparent cure to the tormented self's *mal de vivre*. This ultimate solution is reached only after the hero's various attempts at fighting his *malaise* fail. Fredu first tries to broaden and reform the restricted mentality of the local village community by suggesting that the works of progressive writers such as Ibsen, Chekhov or Brecht be put on in the parish theatre.[14] His idea being rejected, he starts divesting himself of sincere emotions and lets himself go to the materialistic and transient pleasures of lust. In doing so, Fredu himself becomes a symbol of that hypocrisy which he had originally intended to combat: 'what might be unattainable in the future is mine today.'[15] However, he himself soon admits: 'I've become the hypocrite I used to detest so much.'[16]

Tired of village life, Fredu develops a love–hate relationship with the 'glamorous' city life: he finds fault with the people from the rich Maltese suburb of Sliema, but is at the same time attracted by their lifestyle which is something totally alien to provincial villagers: 'Leaving the village and settling down in Sliema is like settling down in another country.'[17] His move to Sliema virtually implies migrating to a totally different place where 'customs are different. Language is different. People are different too.'[18] Such was the disparity between city and village life in the Malta of the 1960s!

Yet, internal migration does not solve Fredu's problems. In Malta, it seems, one is always doomed to be marked by one's birthplace: 'I realised I was born a villager and a villager I still was.'[19] His ultimate conclusion is that he cannot do without emigrating from the island that imposes its restrictions upon him; not before, however, having toyed with the idea of committing suicide.[20] As with Raymond, emigration means 'endless stretches of open space',[21] but, again as with Raymond, whether this 'vastness' will be ready to assimilate the solitary islander within its framework remains a question. The reader is left with the impression that no matter how much and how far Fredu tries to escape, his problems and dilemmas survive and thrive within him.

Sant presented us with a hero who emigrates abroad; Sammut with one who first migrates internally and finally settles down abroad. In J.J. Camilleri's *Il-Għar tax-Xitan* (The devil's cave)[22] the peregrinations of the hero, Jumi, are even more complex: Jumi leaves his home village for the big city at the age of 20, comes back after eighteen years to reform his people and their superstitious beliefs, gives up and leaves again for the big city after having been defeated in his aims, but in the end returns a second time to his home village to regularise his position in life through conventional marriage.

In *Il-Għar tax-Xitan*, village and city life stand at the opposite ends of people's scales of values. The San Rokku parish priest, who represents tradition, believes that whoever is attracted by the glamour of city life is forever doomed. For him, any type of contact with the city is bound to become dangerously contagious. Young Jumi not only refutes this attitude but actually finds in the city his only refuge from the pettiness of the village, where everything about one's private life is general knowledge.[23] The enormous difference between the near-dormant village life and the excitement of city life is conveyed by the author's mythical description of the city, as seen through Jumi's eyes, which depicts a gap between city and village out of all proporation to geographical distances in little Malta. What Camilleri actually does is to render concrete an abstract reality: the mentality gap between city and village is so wide that the author can render it on the page only by amplifying the physical (and mythical) distance between one place and the other.[24]

Jumi's first departure from San Rokku signifies his rejection of the community's traditional beliefs, deeply embedded in past history. His return after several years (this is practically where the novel starts) is an attempt at reforming this mentality, after he has seen the light in the big city. However, the close-knit 'primitive' community is much stronger than the 'enlightened' individual, who is again forced to escape from the village in order to survive: first by finding temporary refuge from the narrow-minded villagers in the solitude of an isolated country abode; then by returning to the city he had come from. Having defied the ethical rules of the community, by living together with the village sinner Petriga, Jumi is left with no option but to abandon his native village.

The moral of the whole story is 'conform, or be defeated'. Jumi is totally defeated in his aspirations, not only because he is twice forced to flee his home village but also because in the end he actually returns to his birthplace to adjust to the norms of the local community in the most conventional of ways, that is, by getting married to Petriga. For a person who had already changed his place of abode three times in the relatively short span of eighteen years, the final settling down in his place of origin can only signify the ultimate defeat.

The normal migratory trend, from a small centre (the village) to a bigger one (city or foreign country), is reversed in V. Buhagiar's *Id-Dar f'Tarf*

l-Isqaq (The house at the end of the alley).[25] In this novel, the city girl from Sliema, Helen, behaves in such a way as to frustrate what would be the aspirations and dreams of Raymond, Fredu and Jumi. In fact, Helen abandons what is supposed to be *the* 'glamorous' city of Malta for an isolated country house because in Sliema too hypocrisy manifests itself at its highest level. On the surface, everything in Sliema looks nice, but when real problems crop up (Helen is raped by her fiancé Roger and left with child) everybody abandons her, including her own parents. While Fredu and Jumi do their utmost to leave the village for the big city, Helen does exactly the opposite because it is only in a secluded country house that she can find some peace of mind.[26]

The idea of a temporary isolated place of refuge seems to be a popular theme with contemporary Maltese novelists. While Buhagiar's Helen leaves the city for a secluded country house, Camilleri's *Il-Għar tax-Xitan* introduces us to the concept of a temporary transfer of domicile from the 'crowded' village to a 'solitary' abode, nearly completely cut off from any human presence (Jumi finding serenity in the country shack). For Samwel, the hero of Sammut's *Samuraj*, the happy moments spent together with his lover Zabbett can only be appreciated in the semi-wilderness of his farmhouse. So much so that when Zabbett is taken away from him back to the 'civilised' world by the representatives of the 'evil' village (the doctor, the parish priest, the police sergeant), there is no purpose left in life and Samwel abandons himself to violent acts of self-destruction.[27]

While in *Samuraj* the isolated farmhouse becomes an indispensable accessory for the consummation of Samwel and Zabbett's love, in Friggieri's *Il-Gidba* (The lie)[28] Indri's secluded farmhouse becomes an indispensable accessory for the hero Natan to escape from a wife with whom he cannot communicate. In Indri's humble dwelling, Natan can get away from his wife Anna and what she stands for (the hypocrisy of a village community). Ironically, in a civilised society (the village) and in the presence of human beings (Anna), Natan is totally uncommunicative; it is only away from civilisation (in Indri's farmhouse) and in the presence of an irrational being (his dog Fefu) that Natan can find his powers of communication. In this case a dog really is a man's best friend: Fefu is the only living creature Natan can actually 'speak' to.[29] Friggieri seems to be implying that only a temporary escape into isolation can create the necessary conditions for real communication.

There is still one other alternative left for those who need to escape from their natural environment: leaving one's village permanently for yet another village. In the Maltese case, this means abandoning one small centre where everybody knows you for another small centre where nobody yet does. This is Natan's choice in *Il-Gidba*, when he decides to cohabit with his lover Rebekka in her home village. But the migration from one village to another does not bring about any change either in Natan or in people's attitudes. Wherever one 'flees', things remain invariably the same.[30]

These different forms of 'escape' do not solve any of the heroes' problems. Frans Ellul, the hero of Zahra's *Ħdejn in-Nixxiegħa* (By the spring), sums it all up when, having abandoned his fishing village for the town of Hamrun, he goes back to his native settlement once again because that is where he really belongs:[31] 'This is the only place I belong to. This is where I can breathe the air that purifies me.'

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, therefore, not even the most radical solution adopted – complete departure from one's homeland (emigration) or total separation from this world (suicide) – bring about any solace. Luigi Pirandello once stated that every man is an island, but that Sicilians are doubly so because of their geographical isolation. I would add that the Maltese are thrice an island, being also physically cut off from the nearest mainland, which is . . . isolated Sicily! This triple dose of insularity cannot be escaped even by leaving Malta: the individual sense of isolation caused by the physical and geographical isolation of the country is something the Maltese are destined to carry within themselves inexorably. The *toccata e fuga* theme of contemporary Maltese fiction is the literary expression of a very tangible Maltese and, at the same time, 'eternal' reality: man's inability to understand himself.

NOTES

1 H. Jones, 'Modern emigration from Malta', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 1973, no. 60, pp. 101–20.

2 R. King, 'Recent developments in the political and economic geography of Malta', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 1979, vol. 70, pp. 258–71.

3 See M. Amari, *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, Turin and Rome, Loescher, 1880, vol. I, p. 241, and M. Amari, *Storia dei Mussulmani di Sicilia*, Catania, Prampaloni, 1939, vol. 3, pp. 773–4, 785.

4 On the history of the Italian language in Malta see A. Cassola, 'Malta', in F. Bruni (ed.), *L'Italiano nelle Regioni*, Turin, UTET, 1992, pp. 861–74, and A. Cassola, 'Malta', in F. Bruni (ed.), *L'Italiano nelle Regioni – Testi e Documenti*, Turin, UTET, 1994, pp. 843–59.

5 On the activity of Italian exiles in Malta during the nineteenth century, see V. Bonello, B. Fiorentini and L. Schiavone, *Echi del Risorgimento a Malta*, Milan, Cisalpino-Goliardica, 1982; G. Mangion, *Governo Inglese, Risorgimento Italiano ed Opinione Pubblica a Malta, 1848–1851*, Malta, Casa San Giuseppe, 1970; O. Friggieri, *Movimenti Letterari e Coscienza Romantica Maltese (1800–1921)*, Milan, Guido Miano, 1979.

6 Ifigenia Zauli Sajani (1810–83), the wife of a lawyer from Forlì who sought refuge in Malta after the 1831–2 uprisings in Italy, was one of the first authors to publish historical novels in Malta. Her novels include *Gli Ultimi Giorni dei Cavalieri di Malta* (1841), *Il Ritorno dell'Emigrato* (1841), and *Beatrice Alighieri* (1847). Michelangelo Bottari (1829–94) first came to Malta in 1849, launching *Il Corriere Mercantile di Malta* in 1856 (with Gugliemo Finotti). He wrote many historical

novels in Italian, some of which were translated into Maltese. Nicola Zammit (1815–99), philosopher, doctor and architect, was the editor of *La Crociata*, *La Fenice* and *L'Arte*. Notable amongst his innumerable publications is the historical account *Angelica o la Sposa della Musta* (1880). Ramiro Barbaro di San Giorgo, a journalist, writer and politician, was twice forced to flee the island due to his journalistic and political activity. He was the correspondent of *La Gazzetta d'Italia* in various European cities including Berlin, Athens, Paris, Budapest and Vienna. Amongst his most significant literary works is *Un Martire: Romanzo Storico Maltese del Secolo XVI* (1878).

7 I use the male gender in this sentence simply because the heroes of these Maltese works almost invariably *are* male.

8 Contemporary Maltese poetry and fiction reflect that sense of *malaise* which had gripped European intellectuals about a century earlier. Basically, the *credo* of the French *decadent* movement of the late nineteenth century, filtered through the works of Marinetti and the futurist movement, but mainly through Anglo-American writers, started bearing its Maltese fruits in the mid-1960s. *Kwartett*, the first anthology of 'modern' Maltese poetry, was published in 1966; *Aħna Sinjuri* (We're rich), a novel by J.J. Camilleri, saw the light in 1965.

9 O. Friggieri, 'L-evoluzzjoni storika tar-rumanz Malti' (The historical evolution of the Maltese novel), in *Saġġi Kritiċi*, Malta, A.C. Aquilina & Co., 1979, pp. 295–312; and D. Massa, 'The post-colonial dream', in *World Literature Written in English*, Spring 1981, pp. 135–49.

10 A. Sant, *L-Ewwel Weraq tal-Bajtar*, Malta, Union Press, 1968.

11 ibid., p. 315.

12 ibid., p. 86.

13 See J. Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*, London, Athlone Press, 1965.

14 F. Sammut, *Il-Gaġġa*, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1971, p. 25.

15 ibid., p. 48.

16 ibid., p. 51.

17 ibid., p. 106.

18 ibid.

19 ibid., p. 81.

20 ibid., p. 18.

21 ibid., p. 133

22 J.J. Camilleri, *Il-Għar tax-Xitan*, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1973.

23 ibid., pp. 8, 101.

24 ibid., pp. 17–18.

25 V. Buhagiar, *Id-Dar f'Tarf l-Isqaq*, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1975.

26 ibid., p. 52.

27 F. Sammut, *Samuraj*, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1975, pp. 162–8.

28 O. Friggieri, *Il-Gidba*, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1977.

29 ibid., p. 15.

30 ibid., p. 101.

31 T. Zahra, *Ħdejn in-Nixxiegħa*, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1975.