The Idealized Nation-Mother of the Romantics and the Status Quo

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Abstract: *One of the key metaphors in the construction of the Maltese national imaginary through literature was that of the nation-mother who served as a conservative reference point to the male writers and the national family. She is essentially a construct of the patriarchal society that shaped most pre-Independence Maltese prose and poetry. The traditional family of that literature is a closed unit with well-defined roles assigned to the members of the in-groups, whether or not they like it, and with a clear theocentric centre. Like the static mother who is subservient to the strict father and is expected to execute his decisions, Malta is plitically subservient to the colonial master and morally subservient to the patriarchal Catholic Church.*

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Anthony D. Smith criticizes the view held by many scholars that the nation is a social construction, an artefact of cultural engineers, like influential writers. He argues that Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept of 'invented traditions' ignores or simplifies the complex interweaving of relationships between old and new cultural traditions. Writers can select and rework old traditions, but this process must take place 'within strict limits' if the new 'invented' tradition is to be on the wavelength to which the public is ready to tune in. These limits, argues Smith, are set by the culture, or cultures, of the public: its language, law, music, symbols, memories, myths, traditions, and so on. To be successful, 'construction' and 'fabrication' need to 'base themselves on relevant pre-existing social and cultural networks.'[1] On the other hand, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.'[2] It is imagined because its members will never know, meet or even hear of most of their fellow-

[1] Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*, London and New York, 1998, pp. 129–130.
[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed., London and New York, 1991, p. 6.

members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion; it is imagined as sovereign because nations want freedom; and it is imagined as a community because the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.[3]

Metaphor plays a leading role in the way 'Malteseness' has been created, reproduced, disseminated, modified, and challenged. The 'innocent' reader who is unaware of the dynamics involved in the construction of identity and nation is systematically exposed to these metaphors and takes them to be 'real;' the culture constructed by writers and other influential figures comes to be reality and develops into something that is strongly resistant to change because over time it becomes firmly rooted in the popular imaginary through the written word.

Writing about the cultural construction of identity, Julia Kristeva sees the French nation as constituting 'a totally discursive being,' a nation 'welded' by 'culture and its institutions,' a process that equates the national and the cultural in an overt way.[4] Art and literature, writes Kristeva, are the signs of recognition with which the most unassuming citizen identifies. One can describe the Maltese nation as 'a language act' and Maltese literature allows the national community to turn and return to a structured, often coherent and conservative representation of the 'totally discursive being' that is the nation.

Through conceptual metaphors like those of Malta as mother, home, village, traveller, and sea,[5] Maltese writers have elaborated social, cultural and political discourse about the nation and allowed the people to take part in the process of nation-building through discourse. The use of metaphor made it possible for the people and the writers who extended the conventional conceptual metaphors of the nation to reorganize their discourse about and concepts of the nation and to create a new intimacy among those who shared the views and the attitudes of the cultural élite expressing themselves in the Maltese language.

Perhaps the most significant metaphor of Malta is that of the mother which lies at the conceptual heart of many poems about the nation both in pre- and post-Independence literature. In a poem by Dun Karm called *'Kewkbet is-Safar'* (1933), 'The Pole Star' is likened to a prudent mother who guides the brave mariners towards the safety of the land.[6] Because it is the star towards which the north pole of the earth very nearly points it seems fixed and immovable in the sky; figuratively, it serves as

[3] Smith, 132.

[4] Julia Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, pp. 43–44.

[5] See Adrian Grima, 'Dominant Metaphors in Maltese Literature', unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Malta, 2003.

[6] 'Kewkbet is-Safar', *Leħen il-Malti*, April, 1933, p. 20. English translation by A. J. Arberry, *Dun Karm Poet of Malta*, Cambridge, 1961, p. 67. The English names of the Maltese poems set within quotation marks refer to published translations. English translations of titles not set within quotation marks are my translations of the title.

a guide, a lodestar, a governing principle; a centre of attraction; a cynosure. A closer reading of this poem in the wider context of Dun Karm's poetry reveals that this 'prudent mother' is also Malta, the nation-mother guiding her children, the Maltese, in the journey of life and praying that they may return home to safety.

The immovable star is immediately associated with, or rather set against movement: the Pole Star appears to the poet in the 'clear', pure sky every evening when he 'flees' from 'the furnace of the towns.' In line 7 of this Petrarchan sonnet, very close to the volta, or turning point, the Star is likened to a seated 'prudent mother' who controls the 'dance' of the universe 'with a queenly glance'. The mention of the 'queen' is, amongst others, an allusion to the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ. So when he 'travels' from the city to the country, Dun Karm meets the Pole Star, the all-encompassing mother. It is the journey, the risky act of leaving his 'home' and venturing out, that allows him to appropriate for himself the wonderful spectacle of the bright, authoritative star and to reconnect with his beloved mother who he associates both autobiographically and spiritually with the idealized countryside and village.

Dun Karm's idealized rural Malta is an extension of the maternal figure, not only because he loved his mother dearly and saw her as the main inspiration of his love for his country, but also because together with the father figure of God and himself as the only child, the nation-as-mother reconstructs Dun Karm's ideal family as depicted in his intense sonnet, *'Univers Ieħor'* (1930) ('Another World').

In the nation-mother, the (inevitably male) romantic poet sees all that his mother represents. She was his 'anima', the source of the feminine component of his personality. According to Prospero Grech, himself a priest, Dun Karm's mother 'assumes a supra-personal character' in his poetry. This anima, 'together with an intense love of Christ, produced in Dun Karm – to make further use of Jungian terminology – one of the finest examples of an 'integrated personality'.[7]

Positing the Metaphorical Home

It would seem, at first glance, that Dun Karm 'travels' to the countryside to reconnect with his true home, his true Malta, and that this 'reconnection' is his reward for taking the risk of 'travelling'. But there is more to it than that. Dun Karm 'flees', as he himself puts it in *'Kewkbet is-Safar'*, from the stifling heat of the towns.[8] Poems like *'Xenqet ir-Raba''* (1926) ('Country Yearning'), *'It-Tifla tar-Raba''* (The Country Girl) (1915), 'In-Nissieġa' ('The Weaver') (1913) and *'Lil Malta ta' Llum*

[7] A. J. Arberry, *Dun Karm Poet of Malta*, p. 31.

[8] This is what Dun Karm himself writes about the 'escape' mentioned in this poem: *'L-iżjed li nista' u li nħobb ngħarrex lill-kwiekeb hu fix-xhur tas-sajf meta mmur ngħaddi l-btajjel tiegħi fil-berah tal-Qaliet fid-dahla tal-bahar ta' San Ġiljan.*' ('I can and like to observe the stars best in the summer months when I spend my holidays in the open air of Il-Qaliet in St. Julians Bay.') Ġużè Cassar Pullicino, *Dun Karm: Tagħrif Ġdid u Noti Kritiċi*, Malta, p. 58.

u ta' Għada' ('To Malta') (1934) make it clear that the poet is actually *escaping* from what for him is an alien city. As he himself wrote in a letter to a friend, in the small apartment in Valletta where he lived after he was told to leave his residence at the Archbishop's Seminary in 1910, Dun Karm felt 'buried alive';[9] In *'Lill-Kanarin Tiegħi'* ('To My Canary') (1915), a poem heavy with the solitude he felt in the first years of life in the city, he describes what for him, a country person, must have been the unusual routine of locking the door behind him when he went out in the morning and unlocking it when he returned to his apartment and his solitary canary. He locks the door behind him because of what he calls the 'deceit and fighting' going on outside the house; his journey to the country is really a *return* to the home from which he has been forced out, not an outward journey.

In Dun Karm the mother-home oikos at the centre of his poetic world acts as a transcendental point of reference that organizes and domesticates the mental and metaphorical space in which he travels by defining all other points in relation to itself. If, however, a voyage can only be conceptualized economically in terms of the fixity of a privileged point, the positing of this 'home' can only occur 'retroactively'. In a strict sense, writes Van Den Abbeele, 'home can only exist as such at the price of its being lost'. Like many other poets, Dun Karm (re)creates his idealized home after he has lost it. The oikos, which in Dun Karm's poetry is his mother and childhood home, 'is posited *après-coup*' because the voyage has already begun. Because of 'the concomitant temporalization of space', the home that one leaves is not the same as that to which one returns. Every time he returns to his childhood home in *'Waħdi'* (Alone) and elsewhere he at the same time creates and recreates it, progressively idealizing it and setting it against his bleak, solitary present. The 'radical noncoincidence of point of origin and point of return' is brought to the fore by the disorientation that follows his nostalgic return home;[10] the departure from 'home' both creates and upsets it. Despite his frequent mental return journeys to his oikos, and despite (or perhaps because of) his progressive idealization of 'home', Dun Karm feels more and more disorientated, because the 'forced' distancing from home has both instituted his home and changed it. 'If the oikos does not remain selfsame, how can one feel secure in it, especially given the fact that this identity of the oikos is what is necessarily supposed by the economic view of travel, the only way we can think a voyage as such?' Whether they are real or imaginary, voyages seem as often undertaken to restrain movement as to engage in it, to resist change as to produce it, to keep from getting anywhere as to attain a

[9] In a letter to Ġużè Aquilina dated 25.9.1933, Dun Karm writes that he felt 'buried alive ['*midfun ħaj*'] in three small rooms in Valletta where I knew nobody and nobody knew me.' Quoted by Oliver Friggieri in *Dun Karm: Il-Bniedem fil-Poeta*, Malta, 1980, p. 43.

[10] Georges Van Den Abbeele, *Travel as Metaphor: From Montaigne to Rousseau*, Minnesota, 1992, pp. xviii–xix.

destination.' The establishment of a home or *oikos*, writes Van Den Abbeele, places conceptual limits on travel, supplies it with a terminus *a quo* (a point of origin) and a terminus *ad quem* (a final limiting point in time, a destination or purpose)

> which allow one to conceive of the potentially dangerous divagation of travel within assured and comfortable bounds. The economy of travel thus domesticates the transgressive or critical possibilities implied in the change of perspective travel provides. Nevertheless, the very activity of traveling may also displace the home or prevent any return to it, thus undermining the institution of that economy and allowing for an infinite or unbounded travel.[11]

'Kewkbet is-Safar' is not an adventurous journey into the unknown. Dun Karm's mention of travel right at the start of a poem that deals with seamen and the perils of life at sea is really a return home, a refusal, almost, to stay away.

The first tercet deals with the plight of those who sail the seas and the role of the Pole Star, or the Mother watching over the brave ones. In the second tercet, the poet pleads specifically for the man who has left his land to earn a living for his family; Dun Karm asks the star to guide him back home. This means that the journey in the second part of the poem is again, in a sense, a non-journey, a refusal to distance oneself from one's oikos. Dun Karm brings out the precariousness of the voyage at sea, as he does in two of his best-known poems, *'Il-Ġerrejja u Jien'* and *'Żagħżugħ ta' Dejjem.'* 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'* ('June').

Travel poses the danger of loss but it also carries the potential of gain, 'whether this gain be in the form of greater riches, power, experience, wisdom, or whatever.'[12] His two most common forms of travel are the physical journey that starts at the home and returns to it, and the mental journey into the past to visit his childhood home.

One can argue that Dun Karm's lack of daring and risk seriously limit his potential for gain. Because he doesn't risk enough, because he doesn't really distance himself, he cannot gain much and he is destined to remain caught within the confines of his own little world in which he himself feels he is 'buried alive'. In *'Kewkbet is-Safar'*, the poet implies, like Rużar Briffa in *'Lil Ommi'* ('To My Mother') (1928), that ideally, a man would not allow himself to venture far from his mother. In Dun Karm's poetic world-view, the mother is just that, a point of reference, a guide.[13] In *'Otia Aestiva – II'*, the poet describes the home that a person loves (*'dar għal*

[11] Van Den Abbeele, pp. xix–xx.

[12] Ibid., p. xvii.

[13] Anthropologist David Gilmore, amongst others, has written about the strong bonding between sons and their mothers in the Mediterranean. 'Introduction: The Shame of Dishonor', *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore Washington D.C., 1987, pp. 14–15.

qalbu'), which he consistently associates with his childhood and mother, as the heel of a person's life. 'The heel of life / Is a home you love' (lines 49–50) where 'you gather your thoughts, and where events / come over you softly' (lines 51–52).[14]

In the same vein, Maltese men should not venture far from their homeland. The home is every traveller's point of reference, and the land is every seafarer's ultimate refuge. In Dun Karm, as in many Maltese writers, the sea is a powerful and fascinating, but capricious and often violent male element. The nation-mother is the male traveller's home, shelter, point of reference, refuge, hearth; and land, like the nation-mother, is feminine both in Dun Karm's poetry and in the Maltese language. This romantic figure is related to the metaphor of Nature as Woman; but Woman is also a metaphor of 'what has been lost (left behind)', and that 'place called home' is 'frequently personified by, and partakes of the same characteristics as those assigned to, Woman/Mother/lover.' The woman is expected to

> preserve the sphere of the intermingling of mind and body, to which the Man of Reason will repair for solace, warmth and relaxation. If he is to exercise the most exalted form of Reason, he must leave soft emotions and sensuousness behind; woman will keep them intact for him.[15]

But this view of place does not represent the lives of real women because the home may be as much a place of conflict (and work) as of repose.[16] Generally speaking, the romantic view of the home, first challenged in a systematic way by Ġużè Ellul Mercer's novel *Leli ta' Haż-Żgħir*, is that of an idealized microcosm where love, honest hard work and unshakable Catholic faith prevail. Evil is brought into the home by outsiders and therefore evil outsiders must be purged.

While the adventurous male traveller is at sea, the feminine element, represented by the sedentary, immobile star is tied to the land. In Dun Karm's poetic world-view, Malta is consistently portrayed as a wise and loving mother. The Maltese citizen is typically a travelling man whose oikos, as the etymology of the word itself indicates, is the home, with the mother as the central figure. In this conceptual scheme, he conceives of Malta as a sedentary, immobile, home; maternal Malta is the fixed point of reference in relation to which any wandering can be *comprehended*, that is enclosed as well as understood. According to Van den Abbeele, 'travel can only be conceptualized in terms of the points of departure and destination and of the (spatial and temporal) distance between them.'[17]

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[14] '*Il-għarqub tal-ħajja / Hi dar għal qalbek*' ('Otia Aestiva – II,' lines 49–50); '*Fejn jinġabar il-ħsieb, u fejn il-ġrajja / Tgħaddi minn fuqek ta' kull jum ħafifa*' ('Otia Aestiva – II,' lines 51–52).

[15] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 10–11.

[16] Massey, pp. 10–11.

[17] Van den Abbeele, p. xviii.

In *The Journey is Home*, feminist theologian Nelle Morton points out that 'ordinarily a journey takes us over roads that have been well laid out and well traveled, moving steadily toward a destination.' It begins at 'one's first home'.[18] The 'positing of an *oikos*', or its Latin counterpart the *domus*, which in the case of *'Kewkbet is-Safar'* is Malta and the mother, 'is what *dom*esticates the voyage by ascribing certain limits to it'.[19] By examining the limits of the metaphorical journey of the nation, the points of departure and destination and the spatial and temporal distance between them, one can understand the limits within which it exists. As in similar nationalistic romantic poetry, Dun Karm's ideal Malta draws its inspiration from the glories of an idealized past in which the nation is seen as inextricably linked to the Catholic religion; after all, religion is 'that spiritual refuge and buttress of identity'.[20] The idealized past and the Catholic Church are two monoliths in Dun Karm's narration of Malta: they are clearly defined, solidified entities, rather than realities in a constant state of flux.

Dealing with the Father

Nations themselves are narrations,[21] and Dun Karm is a central figure in the 'writing' of the Maltese narrative. In a few years, writes Rużar Briffa, 'Dun Karm became the national poet and thanks to him Maltese national culture was born.' Briffa wrote these words in a speech entitled *'L-Iżvilupp tal-Letteratura Maltija'* (The development of Maltese literature) which he delivered in 1949, 14 years after Laurent Ropa had called Dun Karm the national poet of Malta for the first time in an article called 'Malta et sa littérature' which was published in Paris in the November 1935 issue of *La Grande Revue*.[22] 'I do not believe,' writes Edward Said,

> that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure.[23]

Dun Karm was instrumental in establishing the metaphor of the nation-mother in 'high' literature, but this figure must have already been part of the common conceptions of Malta. In the poem *'Lill-Maltin'* (To the Maltese) which was presented, but perhaps not written by, Luigi Bellisario in 1852, Malta is 'this generous mother'.[24]

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[18] Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*, Massachusetts, 1985, p. xviii.
[19] Van den Abbeele, p. xviii.
[20] Amin Maalouf, *On Identity*, trans. Barbara Bray, London, 2000, p. 74.
[21] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, 1993, p. xiii.
[22] Rużar Briffa, *L-Aħħar Poeżiji u Taħdita Letterarja*, ed. Oliver Friggieri, Malta, 1973, p. 34.
[23] Said, p. xxiv.
[24] Oliver Friggieri, *Il-Ktieb tal-Poeżija Maltija – L-Ewwel Volum*, Malta, 1987, pp. 84–85.

A variation on the Malta-as-mother metaphor which retains the privileged position of the maternal figure as guide and 'home', is that of the city of Mdina as mother. In his sonnet *'L-Imdina'* (1944), Rużar Briffa calls this city the 'Mother' of all of our cities because *she* is beautiful, even though she has lost the 'flash' of her 'youth' (or rather 'maidenhood,' '*xbubitek*'). Now Mdina will be remembered forever, writes the poet, by those who sought refuge within its walls against the fierceness of the corsairs who frequently raided the Maltese Islands. Briffa attributes both 'motherhood' and 'maidenhood' to Mdina, because she behaved lovingly like a mother who protects her children but she was also beautiful and chaste as a young female virgin, and beauty and purity are associated with virginity: chastity, in the sense of abstaining from unlawful or immoral sexual intercourse is the closest the mother can get to the purity of the 'real' virgin. This beauty and purity give the old capital city the right to play the privileged role of the (immobile) mother for her children, like Dun Karm's polestar.

The traditional family in Maltese literature is essentially a closed 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 a 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 powerful, male-dominated Catholic Church and by the colonial master.[25] These are not *her* rules, these are the rules that society expects her to teach to her children. In this sense, in the same way that the mother is subservient to the father and is expected to support and carry out his decisions, Malta is politically subservient to the colonial master and morally subservient to the patriarchal Catholic Church. The Maltese citizen in this deep structure family metaphor readily acknowledges the nurturant role of the *mother* land but is probably not wholly aware that she is a pawn in the hands of the colonial-religious *father*. It is he who can give the colonized *mother* freedom, and this, of course, only on his terms. With the important exception of the 1919 riots, almost every time the motherland fought for her freedom she was spurred on by this 'father', either the Church, as in the uprising against the French in 1798, or the colonial master, as in the Second World War against the threat of invasion by the Italian-German axis.

[25] Throughout this study, 'patriarchy' refers to any 'social order in which male interests and power are privileged and women are subordinated to male authority'. Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction*, Oxford, 1993, p. 198. This patriarchal social order, a designation that applies to 'almost all human societies, past and present,' allows for 'institutionalized male dominance, operating through structures like the law, education, employment, religion, the family and cultural practices'. Morris, p. 4.

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.[26] 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'.[27] 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 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 stereotypical Mediterranean men.

The ideal conservative father, like the respected priest Dun Karm in Ġużè Ellul Mercer's novel, *Leli ta' Haż-Żgħir* (*The Shadows of the Truth*) (1938),[28] '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 the call from a friend, a priest, to assist the soldiers on the frontline in Belgium during the First World War. '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'.[29]

In the novel, Dun Karm is a 'strict father', a man who loses his temper quickly, especially in the face of hypocrisy, but he is also a kind-hearted, generous man (and father). He is an upright man with a strong dose of social consciousness and

[26] George Lakoff, 'Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals in the Dust.' http://www.wwcd.org/issues/Lakoff.html#LIBFAM ©1995. Accessed on 13 October 2008.

[27] Jeremy Boissevain, 'A Politician and His Audience: Malta's Dom Mintoff,' *Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry*, ed. Ronald Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino, Malta, 1994, p. 411.

[28] Ġużè Ellul Mercer's novel was translated as, *The Shadows of the Truth*, by Godwin Ellul, Malta, 2003.

[29] Lakoff, 'Metaphor, Morality, and Politics'.

he openly supports the poor workers and the many unemployed; but he also dislikes women and makes no secret of it.[30] This actually adds to his already good reputation among the village folk. His detachment from women, with the important exception of his mother whom he loves dearly, adds to his good name because he shows that he is free of women, independent of them in the way that every 'real' man should be. The narrator singles him out as the only man in the village of Ħaż-Żgħir who doesn't lust for Ċetta, the star of the village.[31] Despite his little defects, Dun Karm commands the respect of many people, even an anticlerical like Mr. Kelin Miksat. His most difficult moment comes when his mother dies, but his 'confession' of weakness sounds more like a male chauvinist attack on women: 'I feel very lonely', he tells Leli. 'I've become like a woman',[32] because now he takes 'every opportunity to chat with other people'. But in matters that have to do with religion and morals he admits no compromise: he is kind to Leli and to people who suffer but he is uncompromising in his assessment of what has brought about Leli's illness: according to Dun Karm, Leli's mental fragility is a direct consequence of the illness that has afflicted his soul.

In the same novel, the male protagonist's mother, Sa Marjann, is the counterpart of Dun Karm as the ideal Maltese mother. According to Ellul Mercer's brother, Ġorġ, her character was inspired by the author's own mother, whom Ġorġ describes as a 'very religious woman' who was held in high esteem by the author.[33] Sa Marjann is the loving mother of three sons, chaste, strong in character, wise, and thoroughly immersed in the life of her family. She is very much like her brother Dun Karm, especially in thought and behaviour. She is also a strong defender of the Catholic faith and she monitors her eldest son Leli closely to try to prevent him from reading anything that may cause him any kind of moral harm.[34] Like her mother-in-law Sa Marjann, Vira, the young woman who is full of the qualities that make of her a potentially ideal mother, is set *against* knowledge: Leli has to choose between his 'pure' wife Vira and the 'impure' books that are teaching him things that are turning his mind upside down;[35] and she confesses that she is jealous of his books, because Leli seems so strongly attached to them.[36] One of the qualities that would make Vira an ideal mother is her disposition to 'agree with her husband always and in everything'.[37] She resembles the male protagonist's girlfriend in Ġużè Muscat

[30] Ġużè Ellul Mercer, *Leli ta' Ħaż-Żgħir*, Malta, 1983, p. 1. '*Dun Karm lin-nisa ftit kien iġerraġħhom.*'
[31] Ibid, p. 137. All translations from this novel are mine.
[32] Ibid., pp. 193–194.
[33] Ibid., p. vi.
[34] Ibid., p. 21.
[35] Ibid., p. 73.
[36] Ibid., p. 84. '*Miklub hekk bl-ikrah għalihom.*'
[37] Ibid., p. 93.

Azzopardi's *Mattew Callus* (1878) who doesn't want to interfere in her lover's important affairs.[38] The ideal conservative mother cannot bring about any real change in the role of women in society because she is expected to conform to the patriarchal culture that has shaped her. Women, especially as mothers, do not only teach and transfer the cultural and ideological traditions of ethnic and national groups. Very often they constitute their actual symbolic figuration.[39]

There is much in common between Leli and Vira's marriage and the political situation in colonized Malta. The first months of their marriage are paradise on earth. He abandons his books and devotes himself to his job and to his wife, and she does the house work. In *Mattew Callus*, the novel's idea of joy in marriage means that she considers everything 'he does and says' as good and (literally) 'beautiful', while he considers everything 'she prepares and cooks' as exceptionally good.[40] So while the role of the husband is to 'do' and to 'speak,' the role of the wife is to 'cook' and to do the house chores: the traditional distinction between public and private roles for the male and female respectively, between intellectual and somewhat mechanical activity, cannot be clearer. The same applies to the relation between the Maltese and those who rule over them: like Vira, the majority of the Maltese (who were mostly uneducated at the time) are expected to do the chores, to take care of the everyday running of the nation-home; on the other hand, like the educated Leli and his uncle Dun Karm, the ruling classes, and that includes the colonial administrators, the local élite and the Church, concentrate on the more serious affairs of state, on governing the country and (paternalistically) taking care of the people.

On the other hand, the marriage of Leli and Vira is also a metaphor of the inevitable deep conflicts between the old and the new in Malta. Vira represents the traditional nation-mother to whom social and political change and intellectual challenge are completely alien, while Leli represents the young educated and engaged Malta that is struggling, and failing, to fulfill its aspirations by challenging the old, established morality and modes of thought to bring in new ideas. At first, like Leli's marriage, the old and the new set aside their different perceptions and aspirations, but gradually, the move towards social, political, cultural and intellectual emancipation has to challenge the status quo.

Leli and the 'new' Malta come into conflict with the figure of the strict father who is represented by Leli's uncle, Dun Karm. On a national political level, the

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[38] Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi, *Mattew Callus*, Malta, 2001, p. 15.

[39] Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Women and the Nation-State', *Nationalism*, eds John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, Oxford, 1994, p. 315.

[40] Muscat Azzopardi 139. '*Li jagħmel u li jgħid hu, kollu tajjeb u sabiħ. Li thejji u li ssajjar hi, ma hawnx aħjar minnu!...*'

emancipated Maltese struggle with the patriarchal figures of the institution of the Catholic Church, the local élite and the colonial rulers, who presented themselves as 'morally strong, self-disciplined, frugal, temperate, and restrained' and insisted on their moral authority. Both the Church and the colonial administration commanded obedience and meted out retribution 'fairly and justly' when their authority was challenged.[41]

Although Dun Karm Psaila's poem *'Lil Malta'* talks of Great Britain as a 'prudent mother,' the qualities it associates with this mother are more akin to those of the father in Lakoff's conservative strict father model of the family: she is strong-willed, able to defeat and pardon her enemies and she is a queen with a 'big heart' (line 8). Similarly, Ġorġ Pisani refers to Britain as Malta's mother: in a poem called *'Fil-Waqgħa ta' Tunes u Biżerta'* (referring to the Fall of Tunes and Bizerta on 8 May 1943), Malta addresses London lovingly as *'Omm minn tiegħi'* (line 5), my mother and *'Ommi ħelwa'* (line 13), my sweet mother; and in *'L-Għanja tal-"Coronation"'* ('The Coronation Song') the poet is full of praise for the British Empire and its leaders and Malta and London end up kissing each other lovingly. The poet's final pledge is that Malta will never be separated from London. There is a similar sworn promise ('*ħalfa*', line 13) in the sonnet 'Nelson': the poet asks Nelson to return to Malta to rid it of its enemies and the new Malta freed of its foreign invaders will promise to continue to 'embrace' ('*imħaddna*,' line 14) Nelson until its death.[42]

Conclusion

Both the mother and the nation-mother of the Maltese romantics is a static figure whose value is meant to lie precisely in her immobility, her seemingly free decision to stay put in order to serve as a reference point for her children. But this oikos can only exist as such at the price of its being lost, and the romantics have no intention of taking the risk of undermining or even questioning the status quo. The alternative is therefore to undermine the journey, to construct it as an extension of the home in a circular itinerary with return inscribed on it. In this way, rather than reinvent the home, the journey consolidates it. If anything it is those who the romantics loosely perceived as (travelling) outsiders who established the contours and character of the nation-home they constructed and established the prudent seated mother as the human incarnation of that oikos.

The idealized nation-mother of Maltese pre-Independence literature is a static entity with well-defined roles and a theocentric reference point in the form of a strict, if sometimes understanding, father figure. She is the guardian of the Catholic

[41] This analysis is inspired by Lakoff, 'Metaphor, Morality, and Politics'.
[42] Ġorġ Pisani, *Il-Għid taż-Żgħożija*, Malta, 1963, p. 61.

faith and whatever the romantics choose to define as Maltese tradition and culture against that which they perceive as foreign and change; she is the very embodiment of that which makes 'us' against that which makes 'them'. But she is also a nation defined by the (inevitably male) British colonial master, generally seen by the colonized natives as culturally superior. In the romantic nation-family, with the Catholic Church and the colonial rulers as the strict father, rather than subvert the established patriarchal order, the conformist indigenous mother as the oikos guarantees that nothing in the hierarchy of power will change.