

Book Review: MUŽAJČI tat-tafal

Joe Camilleri
Gozo: Horizons (2020)

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Human Nature Caught Red-handed

“Modern man,” the French philosopher-poet, Paul Valéry, once said, “no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated... It is as if the decline of the idea of eternity coincided with the increasing aversion to sustained effort.” There is a school of thought which holds that even storytelling has witnessed this destiny. It is a fact, however, that legends, fairytales, anecdotes and colourful gossiping – very often stories in a nutshell – have been with us long before the era which tentatively but consistently has been trying to send “eternity” into oblivion. There are, today more than ever, many nameless storytellers in the streets and squares of Malta and Gozo, in the wine shop at the corner of the village square, in the outlet of the local butcher or carpenter, at the tables of coffee shops and restaurants, and on the internet where experiences are exchanged and commented on. It takes, however, a sensitive and intelligent author to present a written version of such oral bartering of ideas and to analyse them with an insight into the depths of human nature.

Such an author is Joe Camilleri and such a written version is his latest publication, *Mużajči tat-tafal* – *Mosaics of clay*.

The “here and now” culture of instant information has induced and nurtured western societies to disregard intelligence coming from afar, in terms of space and time. This tragedy is compounded by the fact that too often even our inner “self” is deemed to be a far away phenomenon which we reluctantly approach. The short stories of “Mużajči” make the reader realise not only the discrepancy between the naked “self”, the core of the persona, and the performing “personality”, the public face, but also, in some circumstances,



make him or her aware of one’s own rejected thoughts. This is the leit-motiv of Mużajči” from introduction to blurb.

A disclaimer on page 15 points out that any resemblance between the characters in the stories and real personalities is totally incidental. This declaration is appropriate, for anyone reading these pages is bound to get an impression that somewhere, somehow, someday one has had some inkling of experience with such and such a person before, only that, unlike the author, one has not

got the sixth sense of recognition. It cannot be otherwise, since Joe Camilleri is discerning men and women beyond the mask of personality.

In most of these short stories, Joe Camilleri catches human nature red-handed in its deficiencies and inconsistencies, its foibles and hypocrisies, its discreet vices and its arrogant ones. The intoxication of alienating fantasies (which in Maltese, I would call “*is-sakra tal-istħajjl*”) has the power to heavily condition and disrupt the actual life of a person or of a community. However, with Camilleri, life’s vagaries never stretch credulity beyond breaking point.

The stories capture reality and are exquisitely balanced with a bittersweet flavour in a narrative with regular moods and modes... and some welcome interruptions as in “*Ftajjar tal-Makku*” which even though lamenting the loss of a pet kitten, draws out, in the innocent mourning of the altar boys, a smile from the reader, and in “*Kwestjonarju waqt X-Ray*”, a love story in prose poetry, ingeniously narrated. The narrative in “*Mużajċi*” is sustained by a language rich in metaphor, imagery and stirring detail. The author has the ability to catch the attention of the reader from the first simple sentence of the story and to keep him or her engrossed throughout. Camilleri is a master of the short simple sentence and uses it with good effect. The author leads the reader along, one step after another but in a way that the reader soon forgets the presence of the author and feels himself or herself among the people: those enwrapped in obsessions or prejudices, those anchored to their past tribulations or embarrassing memories, those in excessive fear of the future, those yearning for an intimate caress, those living in a day-dream of sexual fantasies, those victims of a disintegrating marriage, those being gnawed by conflicts of conscience and sense of guilt ...

The psychological connection of the events is not forced upon the reader. One can take it within one’s stride and, like some sort of detective, as in working out a crossword, anticipate the next move. But then, all of a sudden, the author has a way of upsetting the reader’s foreboding.

Joe Camilleri employs another interesting stratagem. Very often the story is left free from a

conclusion in the final scene. It is left open ended: “Did they live happily ever after or...?” “Were the protagonists brother and sister or...?” “Was it a murder or just a threat, exacerbated and overstated for an ulterior motive?” “Where does reality end and make-believe begin?” It is for the reader to interpret the chain of circumstances and excogitate for himself or herself how matters did end. In this way the narrative achieves an amplitude beyond the perusal and, moreover, it becomes related to the personal experiences of the reader. It pents up the reader in a state of discernment all along to the end of the story... and indeed beyond the end. The dialogue in these short stories is brisk, factual and to the point. In some of them, Joe Camilleri presents the Gozitan dialect – if one is born and bred in Gozo, somehow this is bound to surface. The detail in the descriptions of people and places betrays in Camilleri the discerning eye of the art critic. However, the clues deduced from conversations and relationships tell much more than meets the eye: from manners and mannerisms of religious practice or superstition to sexual innuendos, from ministerial idiosyncrasies to intimate postural attitudes in moments of love or lust – which in some instances may verge but never indulge in perversity. For this too forms part of that curious phenomenon called “Man” in whom according to orthodox Freudian doctrine, there exists a pressure of the unconscious upon conscious existence; and the unconscious is described as chaotic, primordial and instinctual. There is proof enough of all this in Joe Camilleri’s *Mużajċi*.

The poet Trilussa has some verses in Roman dialect: “*Adamo chiese: “E come voi che faccia / a conservarmi l’anima innocente / se Dio mi fabbricò co’ la mollaccia”* – “Adam asked: How can I preserve the innocence of my spirit, if God has produced me out of mud.”

The men and women in Joe Camilleri’s “*Mużajċi*” are not of “mud” but of “clay”. Civilisation and culture may have turned the mud into the nobler clay... but clay, like mud, still remains a derivative of earth and water.