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# Cultivating complexity: Maltese/Australian women in Lou Drofenik

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**ABSTRACT.** Most Maltese literature both before and after Independence has depicted women in stereotypical ways as weaklings who live in the shadows of their men or as mothers who are exclusively committed to their families and pass on the values and norms of the patriarchy from one generation to the next. Maltese-Australian novelist Lou Drofenik breaks with this narrative by giving a voice to the many women characters in her novels and explores the complexities of individual persons. She consistently refuses to repeat the commonplaces about womanhood and manhood and problematizes both the dominant sexual dualism itself and the positioning of woman as the privileged figure of otherness. Femininity is seen as constantly in process, and the subjectivity that most discourses seek to fix is open to dispersal. Like the young contemporary Maltese short story writer Clare Azzopardi, Drofenik tries to narrate the constantly evolving nature of becoming-woman, and sometimes becoming-man, and inevitably defies the stereotypes and the dualistic reduction of difference.

**Key words:** literature, Malta, Australia, Lou Drofenik, Clare Azzopardi, women, emigration, sexual dualism, feminism.

**RESUMO.** **Cultivando complexidades: mulheres maltesas-australianas nos romances de Lou Drofenik.** A maioria da literatura oriunda de Malta pré- e pós-Independência tem continuado estereotipando as mulheres como sujeitos fracos que vivem na sombra de seus maridos ou como mães que vivem exclusivamente dedicadas às suas famílias e que transmitem estes valores e normas patriarcais às gerações futuras. A escritora maltesa-australiana, Lou Drofenik, solapa este esquema narrativo dando voz às personagens femininas em seus romances e explora as complexidades de cada pessoa. A escritora recusa repetir os estereótipos referentes ao masculino e ao feminino e problematiza não apenas o dualismo sexual dominante, mas também a condição das mulheres como figura privilegiada da alteridade. A feminilidade é analisada como em processo constante e implode-se a subjetividade que a maioria dos discursos procura fixar. Semelhante à escritora maltesa contemporânea de contos, Clare Azzopardi, Drofenik narra a constante evolução de ‘tornar-se-mulher’ e, às vezes, ‘tornar-se-homem.’ Esse esquema desafia os estereótipos e a redução dualística da diferença.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura, Malta, Austrália, Lou Drofenik, Clare Azzopardi, mulheres, emigração, dualismo sexual, feminismo.

## Introduction

With few exceptions, Maltese literature, with its predominantly patriarchal outlook, has failed to tell the stories of real Maltese women, to deal with “the dense, deeply embedded oppression of women” (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 24). This is a serious lacuna, because as Peter 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 that is unable to know itself as it gets on busily with living the ‘splendid waste’ of its ‘real social’ life” (WIDDOWSON, 1999, p. 105). However, the emergence of women writers, in the late 20<sup>th</sup>

century, 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 experiences, perspectives and value systems can in turn help Maltese society to bridge the gap between what is narrated about it and the variety of experiences and perspectives that have transformed it in the past and continue to change it.

Because discourse is a structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, through feminist readings of Maltese literature it is possible to uncover the working of power on behalf of specific interests. Feminist poststructuralism “decentres the rational,

self-present subject of humanism, seeing subjectivity and consciousness, as socially produced in language as a site of struggle and potential change” (WEEDON apud FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 90). The poststructuralists argue convincingly against the assumption of humanist discourse that language is somehow ‘transparent’ and expressive of the ‘real’ world. Language is socially and historically located in discourses, and therefore meanings do not exist outside of their articulation in language. “Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power. The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist” (WEEDON apud FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 90). Because Maltese authors have become increasingly aware of the power of discourse as a structuring principle, their characters often struggle to appropriate their language, to create their own voice, and they refuse to reproduce hackneyed phrases conveying supposedly self-evident truths.

Two of the female authors writing in Maltese who offer engaging texts are the post-Independence novelist Rena Balzan, who, together with a handful of others, broke with the mainstream narrative of stereotypically submissive, male-dominated female characters, and Clare Azzopardi, whose compelling short stories are among the most significant works of the new generation of Maltese writers, both because of their stylistic and thematic audacity, and because they creatively explore and engage with the voices of different women. Some of Azzopardi’s unorthodox characters and narratives are bound to raise eyebrows and provoke eloquent silences: in *Il-Linja l-Hadra* (The Green Line) the protagonist tells us that her embarrassed mother denies that her daughter’s aunt is a lesbian and lives with her partner. The mother prefers to erase their experience, to silence them, but Azzopardi refuses to do the same.

Lou Drogenik, on the other hand, is a Maltese-Australian novelist writing in English for a mainly non-Maltese audience, whose work often deals with Maltese women in ideologically and thematically interesting ways. A reading of her first two novels, *Birds of Passage* and *In Search of Carmen Caruana*, gives some idea of what has *not* been written about Maltese emigration to Australia, and about Maltese women both in their country of origin and in their land of adoption. Her novels provide pictures of Maltese families struggling with a changing world that the value system that has shaped them cannot seem to cope with. Many of the women she writes about, burdened as they are with the responsibility

of transmitting the patriarchal values and codes of behaviour of their culture, either suffer in silence, or rebel. When they rebel they become a powerful force that undermines an unjust status quo.

Social scientists argue that the closely knit family institution was and still is deeply rooted in Maltese society (GRIMA, 2006). The Dutch anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain has observed that in the fifty years that he has known Malta, the family is one of those things that have not changed. It is still “the paramount point of reference and people still pride themselves on the strength of the family”; loyalty to the family is therefore a “fundamental and cherished value” (BOISSEVAIN, 2006). But this patriarchal model also means that women are poorly represented in the power structure of Maltese society (SAMMUT, 2005), and “men have glued themselves to a position within the society and family, namely as the ‘breadwinner’” (CARUANA, 2007). Their idea of the female position in society is that of ‘housewife’, which, according to the Maltese social scientist Frances Camilleri-Cassar, many women seem to consider acceptable. Like the progressive women of Drogenik’s novels, she believes that both men and women have to reform their traditional concepts of gender roles in society. “For cultural constraints to be changed, gender imbalance needs to be tackled because it is strongly reflective of a male-dominated society. To change this imbalance, women need to be seen in a new light within the family, society and labour market alike” (CARUANA, 2007) It is only after this is accomplished that Maltese society can move forward and free women from the cultural and institutional chains that have blocked their advancement for decades.

Maltese society’s identification of a woman’s identity with the family, and her secondary status in society, which Sherry Ortner sees as one of the “true universals, a pan-cultural fact,” is the consequence, amongst other things, of the perception of women as being “closer to nature” in their physiology, their social role and their psyche. Men are perceived as “closer to culture,” and are therefore more suited for public roles and political association (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 10). Writing in 1949, Simone De Beauvoir argued that the liberation of women depends on freeing women from the social construct of the “eternal feminine,” which has reduced them to a position of social and economic inferiority, but it does not depend on the denial of “men” and “women” as biologically distinct categories (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 14).

### Cleavage between beliefs and praxis

Forty-five years after having left Malta with her sister as an unmarried young woman to settle in Australia, Lou Drofenik returned to her country of origin, the tiny Mediterranean island-state of Malta, in October 2007 to read a paper about how she saw herself 'writing from the fringe', as an immigrant and as a woman.

Now I know that the decision to leave the island was a moment of rebellion, a moment where I rejected the culturally accepted prescriptions set out for my life in order to negotiate a new Self. From the moment I arrived in Australia I knew that I was in a place where I had a hand in forming my future. In this country I would own myself. Have a new identity, an identity which I myself would forge, unshackled by whose daughter or niece or grand daughter I was. Here I would be me. No one would ask me ever again 'What does your father do?' (DROFENIK, 2007b).

When she was a young woman in Malta in the fifties, Drofenik remembers how she was ashamed to say that her father was a stonemason who had to walk long distances to work with a hessian bag full of tools and return home covered in a fine white dust which infiltrated every orifice of his body. The question about her father angered her because it erased her identity as an individual. Australia liberated her because she felt that her credentials would not be subjected to the scrutiny of her locus of birth, her parentage or, worse still, her parents' political affiliations; "my credentials would stand on their own, signifying my effort or the lack of it" (DROFENIK, 2007b).

In the interviews she conducted with Maltese women in Malta in 1998 for her doctoral thesis, (DROFENIK, 2005b) almost forty years after she decided to leave Malta to break free from the restrictions of the staunchly Catholic society she lived in, Drofenik found that among the Maltese in Malta "there was a cleavage between beliefs and praxis". On one hand, she noted that there had been 'a definite change' in Maltese people's attitudes towards issues of illegitimacy, birth control and marriage separation, but on the other hand, only one respondent was critical of the Church's unchanging stand against them. The younger women she interviewed did not question or criticize the teachings that were 'diametrically opposite to their practices'. 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. Neither did they criticize its stand on sex outside marriage, even though they spoke freely

about their friends' sexual practices and teenage pregnancies. Drofenik noted that "individualism, consumerism and secularization" had opened "new vistas" for young Maltese living in Malta and unlike their predecessors they were able to "sample other value systems and listen to other voices", but they refused to confront the Church and its teachings (DROFENIK, 2005b).

The clash between the dominant patriarchal value system of traditional Malta and the 'new vistas' that opened up with the gradual spread of secularization is evident in Drofenik's *Birds of Passage* and *In Search of Carmen Caruana*. In this second novel, the sixteen-year-old Maltese immigrant in Australia Carmen Caruana rebels against her parents and especially against her father and the strict patriarchal code of behaviour he had imposed on her and her sister. He wouldn't let Carmen go on school excursions because like other "new Australians" he wouldn't let his daughters out of his sight (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 116). Mario Caruana tries to force his daughter into submission, but Carmen, who has now tasted freedom, refuses to be subjugated. In this she differs from her mother Nellie, who, on the one hand, shares her husband's views and, on the other, disagrees with his drastic, authoritarian methods but isn't strong enough to oppose them. Like Ceska in *Birds of Passage*, Carmen ultimately forges her own life, even though it is marred by the tragic events that are sparked by her father's intransigence. Drofenik seems to suggest that Carmen has to pay a very high price for her rebellion, because although she becomes a successful business woman, her opposition to the dominant family value system (not the business one) hardens her heart forever. There is no doubt that she has to struggle much harder because she is a Maltese woman in a conservative society who refuses to 'take her place'. She also refuses to 'resolve' the conflict with her family, and ultimately with her community, by paying lip service to the dominant beliefs and effectively behaving otherwise; Carmen refuses to negotiate her self in the shadows between community and individual, between conformity and freedom, between praxis and beliefs, and therefore chooses to stay on the fringe, at least until she can force the family/community into 'submission'.

Carmen is sixteen when her father forces the family to return to Malta. Lou Drofenik wasn't so unlucky, but that doesn't mean that in Australia she didn't have to struggle to forge her identity. Writing about her own 'moment of rebellion' when she chose, with the support of her mother and other women, to leave Malta, Drofenik both defines and

questions her position on the 'fringe' in terms of her status as an Australian born and educated in another country. "It is as if in migration I have split my Self. I set out to create a new wholesome Self and it seems that I ended up creating a split one, a hyphenated one" (DROFENIK, 2007b) But she writes from the fringe also because she is a woman. In *A Moment of Rebellion: Writing Fiction from an Immigrant Perspective*, she doesn't seem to acknowledge, explicitly, that her status on the periphery is also conditioned by her gender. One could argue that it is her origin as a Maltese woman from a patriarchal society that marginalizes her in an Australia that allows her much more freedom; one could also argue that most human beings feel that they live on the fringe, whatever that may be. What is clear is that Drofenik is fully aware that women, and as far as she is concerned Maltese (-Australian) women, have particular stories that have rarely been told, and she feels she has a responsibility, as a researcher and writer, to give voice to those stories.

Do I have a vantage point whereby my female characters can critique a culture which kept them bounded? Will their voices be able to subvert long-standing beliefs? Will Maltese women be better understood, here in Australia, by people of other cultural backgrounds and more importantly by their own sons and daughters, by their grandsons and granddaughters? Will a daughter or a son be able to say, 'Yes I know why my mother or my father acted like this or that towards me when I was growing up, I can understand. She, or he, couldn't help it, their culture made them what they were' (DROFENIK 2007b, online).

In her novels, Lou Drofenik attempts to tell the stories of those Maltese women who feature as flat and feeble characters in pre-, and sometimes even in post-Independence Maltese literature. Her novels are not stylistically or ideologically radical – she's not out to totally unnerve her readers or herself as a writer. But she tells her stories with the honesty and competence that her characters, and the real men and women who have inspired them, deserve.

#### Other spaces, other people, other lives

The powerful ending to Drofenik's *Birds of Passage* unsettles the entire novel and forces the reader to rethink the various interlocking stories and themes as one narrative about love. Grandma Ceska's head is 'in turmoil'. At 73 she has just discovered that her first love Luigi had committed suicide in Malta some 43 years before because he was barred from marrying her by his noble family, and she shudders as she thinks of all the years she has "wasted imagining him alive, marrying, raising

children, getting old like herself". She remembers how many times, in her new home in Melbourne, Australia, "she had picked up a pen to write to him to tell him to be happy", unaware that he had taken his own life many years before, and how each time she had put pen and paper away, she scolded herself for "her thoughts and the longings she could barely still at times. Feeling disloyal to Charlie and her children" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 392).

Luigi was her first, and perhaps her only, love. In bed, that night, her husband Charlie "gathered her in his arms and rested his chin on the top of her head as he was wont to do". She "nestled in the familiarity of his body". And then, referring to Luigi, she said out of the blue: "I loved him, you know". Charlie replies that he had "always sensed something", that he "always knew there had been someone", and this makes Ceska turn her attention to him: "You never said anything". His unsettling, perhaps what some would deem unsatisfactory reply, hangs over the novel and over our clichés about first loves and true love like a heavy shadow: "Why should I? All that mattered for me was that I have always loved you" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 392).

Charlie's reply unsettles the reader because it oscillates between selflessness and egocentrism, or even egoism. It's almost as if he has always viewed her unsettling story from a certain distance, because nothing is more important to him than keeping her as happy as possible so that he would be able to love her, "making allowances for her headaches and her fits of depression, buying her flowers, cheering her up, talking her out of the depths of her miseries" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 392). On the other hand, there is the strong feeling that in Australia, away from the myths and the unnecessary obstacles to building relationships in Malta, the protagonists can revisit their complex lives and loves and observe the ghosts from the past and the contradictions that inevitably inhabit them. The ending begs the eternal questions about love and infatuation, about dreams and reality, about what could have been, what 'has' been, and the way we view, and therefore live the two. Had Ceska married Luigi, would their relationship have fulfilled both of them? Had they known each other enough to be able to decide whether they loved each other? Was it just infatuation or the joy of breaking social rules? What part does time play in building (or breaking) a love relationship? The stories of *Birds of Passage* are often those of women who show strength and resilience, stories that are both insightful and moving. There is a special bond, for instance, between Cecilja, who has lived in the city in Malta, and Susanna: when the niece is in hospital recovering from a failed suicide

attempt, she tells her aunt that she doesn't want to 'stay home'. "You went away and you mixed with people and look at you". Susanna explains that "One day I want to get married and have a house and children but now I want to do things" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 186).

Much of the novel is narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator, 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". She rhetorically asks who 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?" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 186). When she was fifteen, Victor Grima started paying court to her but she told him that she needed "to have a life" "to see, to hear, to experience" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 188). In another scene she tells her sisters: "how good it is to be free, to be answerable to no one but myself" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 162). Her twin brother Paul warns her that "When a woman marries she becomes a slave. You'll be a slave to a man" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 188). He himself was dying to leave Malta, and they eventually reunite in Australia where Cecilja runs a boarding house in Port Melbourne and remains single while he marries an Englishwoman, Virginia Talbot Smith, the 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". In a similar passage, another character, Fina Grima tells herself that men "always get the best deal in life" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 98). Thanks to her determination and courage, Cecilja is able to appropriate her own story; likewise, her brother clearly does not enjoy the roles assigned to him by Maltese society and their reunion in Australia is a triumph for both of them. Femininity and masculinity have "no fixed or knowable meanings" and it is vital for the critical reader, but also for the nonconformist writer, to "deconstruct the processes" whereby certain qualities come to be defined as feminine or masculine (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 90). The feminist critic Rosi Braidotti believes that

In so far as the male/female dichotomy has become the prototype of Western individualism, the process

of decolonisation of the subject from this dualistic grip requires as its starting point the dissolution of all sexed identities based on the gendered opposition. In this framework, sexual polarisations and gender-dichotomy are rejected as the prototype of the dualistic reduction of difference as a subcategory of Being (BRAIDOTTI, 2001, p. 393-394).

Cecilja, Paul and Virginia refuse to get caught in this male/female 'dualistic grip' that Braidotti writes about and they choose to see and realize their selves beyond the straitjackets imposed by the patriarchy. It's not only about traditional Maltese society – Virginia and her husband are British; Braidotti sees "the persistence of sexual dualism and the positioning of woman as the privileged figure of otherness" as "constitutive of Western thought" (BRAIDOTTI, 2001, p. 393-394). In the process of deconstruction of "phallic identity" and the dualistic grip, sexed identities are foregrounded because of history and culture and not for biologically essentialist reasons (BRAIDOTTI, 2001, p. 394). Cecilja, Paul and Virginia deconstruct this dualism by thinking beyond the male/female polarity.

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 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 soldier Jack MacDonald again, this time in Australia, far from the stifling Maltese society, she chooses to marry him, even though he is divorced and her community in Malta would never agree to such a union (DROFENIK, 2005a). 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 from 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 to his wife and his daughter Erica, Nada's mother. Nada does not fight against the patriarchal society that turns Lou Drofenik's Cecilja, Paul and Susanna away from Malta. Their lives are reconstructed in Australia, where they create their new centre, while Nada's return to Malta is a return to the centre which she doesn't find particularly oppressive. Erica rebelled

against her father and ran away to another country, but she continued to seek the security of a male figure and her failure to find him means that she sees her entire life as a failure. Rena Balzan herself states that “Erica always let her life be led by the men she loved” (GRIMA, 2003, p. 198-206), even though she was perhaps unaware of this dependence. Nada, on the other hand, has more of a grip on her life, and the very fact that she narrates her own story is an indication of her assertiveness. This is the Nada Rena Balzan wants us to see, a self-confident, independent woman.

Another important difference between Nada and Drofenik’s Maltese-Australians is the fact that she comes across as more of a thinker than they are. However, if we agree with Freedman that “feminisms concern themselves with women’s inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex”, and that all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 1), this novel, published in 1987, is not “feminist” and, to be fair, doesn’t purport to be. Nada tells Claud, the other half in a rather improbable “love” affair, that for the emancipation of women to happen, men must first emancipate themselves because they have the leading role in society (BALZAN, 1998, p. 89). She seems to give little thought to the fact that man’s predominance is wrong and profoundly unjust. Neither Susanna nor Cecilja or Virginia are ready to wait for those who effectively oppress them to come to: they simply decide to get away from the oppressive patriarchy that suffocates them, even if it is their mothers who represent that system in their everyday lives. 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. 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) too.

This is not to say that Lou Drofenik’s female characters, women like Susanna, Cecilja and Virginia, are feminists: if one were to follow Judith Butler’s definition of “feminists everywhere” as those who seek both “a more substantial equality for women”, and “a more just arrangement of social and political institutions” (BUTLER, 2001, p. 414), one would have to conclude that these women, like Nada, deal almost exclusively with their own lives. Judith Butler also notes, however that, “as a

democratic enterprise, feminism has had to forfeit the presumption that at base we can all agree about some things [...]” (BUTLER, 2001, p. 415). This diversity comes across as a strength rather than a weakness, because feminists refuse to ignore “the irreversible complexity of who we are” (BUTLER, 2001, p. 416), a position that undermines the commonplaces typical of the patriarchy. Rosi Braidotti highlights the constantly evolving nature of “becoming-woman” which defies stereotypes and “the dualistic reduction of difference” (BUTLER, 2001, p. 393-94). The midwife Marija Micallef has a social conscience, but this does not propel her onto the public stage where she can engage in the kind of grassroots politics that can change unjust structures and institutions. These are women who shape their own world and often that of their family, but that is, generally speaking, as far as they go. It is more in the act of writing these stories that one can see an element of feminist public engagement.

The stories of women like Carmen Caruana and Vicki in Drofenik’s second novel highlight the issue of a woman’s right over her own body which, in the patriarchy, is expropriated from her in order to establish the authority of the Father. For some feminists, sexuality and the issues surrounding it are less central to women’s oppression than other economic and political factors, whereas for others, as Carmen’s story suggests, sexuality is the “very key to men’s domination of women”. Sexuality is seen as constituting gender in such a way that “male and female do not exist outside of the eroticization of dominance and subordination”. Catharine Mackinnon’s position that sexuality is the “linchpin of gender inequality” has been criticized for dismissing the importance of other articulations of male power not primarily through sexuality (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 60), but hers remains a powerful argument that is corroborated, for instance, by the experiences of some of Drofenik’s women. Feminists insist that women should have the power and the knowledge to enjoy their sexuality and to have children if and as they wish (FREEDMAN, 2001). This is a global issue that was dealt with eloquently in the outcome document of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing held in 1995:

the human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect,

consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviors and its consequences (BUTLER, 2001, p. 430).

Drofenik's assertive women rebel against the dominant values and norms because they feel that their fundamental rights are being ignored and the writer herself leaves Malta precisely because the patriarchy is stifling her. Clare Azzopardi's Rachel in *No Adjective Describe Story* and Gordon's mother in *Immersed* abandon their oppressive father and husband respectively in order to free their body and their spirit and reconstruct their lives.

The brave decision by Drofenik's women 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 in the first part of *Birds of Passage*, 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, without the constraints that they had to deal with. And when she tells Ceska, her grandmother, that she has decided to go out with him, Ceska is clearly supportive, despite the fact that the tragedy of her own life was brought about by the violent interference of her parents in her life and this could have blinded her emotionally. Like Aisha in Leila Abouzeid's novel *The Last Chapter* (2000), who can choose to ignore the patriarchal maxim that "A woman's kingdom is her home" and that women are nothing without their men (Abouzeid, 2003, p. 133), Angela is her own mistress.

At the launch of *Birds of Passage* at the Maltese Community Centre in Parkville, Victoria, on March 15, 2005, Dr Robin Burns, feminist author of books and articles and researcher at La Trobe University in Melbourne, described the novel as an account that is "frank and warmly human" (Burns, 2005). Through the characters Lou Drofenik "interweaves the vexed issues of female servitude in a strongly male dominated world, the dominance of tradition and the tragedy of female oppressions". However, in the novel there are also "some wonderfully independent women, including the mother superior of a convent, who lead self-determining lives". Burns believes that "in the end, the main female characters are all triumphant", although it is not clear what triumph she is referring to in the case of Ceska. This novel, unlike, in a way, Rena Balzan's *Ilkoll ta' Nisel Wieħed*, is not an in-depth study of the psychology and inner vicissitudes of the

many characters, and yet Burns argues that Drofenik's women are "much, much more than women of their times and culture, for they come to life with the details of their daily lives, their fears and hopes, their girlish dreams, and their mature passion, for this is indeed a passionate novel" (Burns, 2005, online).

Burns draws attention to

the whole gamut of complex migration experiences that is so lovingly depicted. We feel with Cecilja as she experiences the dull grey flatness of a Melbourne winter's morning, of the seeking out of fellow nationals, of the struggle to make good, and the eventual settling, not throwing off their past but enabling it to grow in the new country.

She writes that she "had a wonderful sense of freedom through the women in their new lives, whatever the material hardships they were enduring". This is coupled by a sense of continuity, "in names and ways of being in the new land". Her perspective adds a new dimension to the experience of reading Drofenik's novel because she highlights the "virtual" intimacy that is created among a particular community of readers (BURNS, 2005). This is inspired by and coherent with the sense of community between the women in the novel. This sense of communal friendliness was an integral part of the village life that Drofenik remembers from her childhood and youth in Malta, and this is why she chose to give Teresa Mallia, who is unrelated to any other character in *Birds of Passage*, the same surname as Susanna Mallia, one of the protagonists. Drofenik seems to suggest that the common surname was a kind of metaphor of community to show the closeness of the place and the interrelationships which existed in such a small crowded place, relationships which perhaps are formed not just by blood but by a certain kind of neighbourliness.

The very first words set the tone for the whole of the novel. "I, Katerina Constantina Zerafa, was born on the island of Gozo, at a time when educated men from my beloved birthplace argued and fought for rights that had been taken away from them by the British occupier". The voice is that of a self-confident Gozitan woman who is now in Australia, telling her own story and placing it in the context of the story of the Maltese Islands (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 52). She is dealing with the politics of colonialism, challenging right away the myth that the British occupation was some kind of unending honeymoon between the willing Maltese and Gozitans and the selfless, philanthropic British; the English arrived on Malta to help the islanders and "then claimed it for their own as was their custom" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 68; also p. 189). Katerina



describes herself as a “precocious” child who at seven is grappling with big issues such as “what is destiny” and asks why we don’t know what our destiny is (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 19). She is unwilling to accept that our life, ‘her’ life, is somehow planned elsewhere and that we are all destined to suffer as her equally philosophical mother tells her. If we knew our destiny, she’s told, “we wouldn’t even get out of bed in the morning”. It’s a line that reverberates throughout the novel. Katerina refuses the priest’s convenient argument, relayed by her mother, that we are all destined to suffer alike in this “valley of tears”: there are those, argues the alert seven year-old, “who do not suffer, there are those who are rich, who have people working for them making their life easier, maybe it is the destiny of the people born in the village to suffer and to die” (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 20). The first few paragraphs of the novel challenge the typically flat female characters of Maltese literature because Katerina comes across as a child and mature woman with a mind of her own, with the ability to tell, and own, her story; she’s into big philosophical issues and politics, and she’s not brooding over some man or other, waiting for him to give her a life, a name, a position in society as often happens in Maltese pre-, and sometimes post-Independence literature.

Marija Micallef, the midwife, is engaged in issues that go beyond the confines of the ‘kingdom’ of the home assigned to women by chauvinist men. She “was angered by the blatant cruelty she saw around her”, like that against animals, by the poverty she witnessed around her and by the hypocrisy of those in power. She was angered when she saw women giving birth to child after child, unable to feed them, clothe them, educate them. But she was especially angered when she came across pregnant children: “If I find the man who did this, I am capable of tearing him to pieces with my bare hands” (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 51).

### Free to do what they liked

It would be interesting to listen to the daring voices of women in Clare Azzopardi’s short stories against the background of the narratives of Drofenik’s increasingly assertive women, if anything because their first works of fiction, Drofenik’s *Birds of Passage* and Azzopardi’s *Others, Across* (2005) and *Il-Linja l-Hadra* (2006) were published at the same time. These two writers were brought up in very different Maltas: Azzopardi was born in 1976 and has lived mostly in Malta. Lou Drofenik migrated to Australia on the Single Women’s Migrant Scheme in 1962 when she was in her early twenties and has

returned to Malta for short visits. These two writers have therefore acutely different experiences of their country of origin – at times, Drofenik tends to romanticize and sometimes idealize Malta, while Azzopardi is more often than not harshly critical, and sometimes cynical – but they are both profoundly aware of the limited space allowed to the voice of women in Maltese society and literature. They are not after some elusive common female identity: many of the women they write about are owners of their own particular stories; they are Maltese and non-Maltese; they are on the Maltese Islands but also elsewhere. Rosi Braidotti believes that if the twentieth-first century “is to go down in history as the century of women, then diversity and the respect of differences among women” are “a real epistemological and ethical necessity” (BRAIDOTTI, 2001, p. 381). Although Drofenik and Azzopardi do not set out to realize an overtly feminist project, their writing often unveils power relations and reduces power differentials, which is what Braidotti requires of the feminist project in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (BRAIDOTTI, 2001).

Azzopardi’s use of language and her range of themes mark the further emancipation of female characters in Maltese literature. Many of the protagonists of her collection of stories *Il-Linja l-Hadra* are strong women who refuse to be patronized. *No Adjective Describe Story*, for example, deals with a whole range of issues from the perspective of various female characters, from racism and human trafficking to the issue of language and its ability to intimate the inexpressible; but it is also a story 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 Ruth, to do away with men.

Towards the end of Clare Azzopardi’s *Rasi go l-Ilma (Immersed)*, Gordon visits his estranged, violent father Djego Grech who is being treated for terminal cancer at a specialized hospital. He refuses to pass on to his mother his father’s message that he 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; after all, his mother is a strong woman, the only person Djego was ever afraid of. It’s probably Gordon’s way of doing something for the mother he has set as his role model and also to spite his despicable father. The story ends with Gordon observing his mother who has finally found the love she deserves.

*No Adjective Describe Story* explores family relationships through the eyes of strong female characters. The young Eritrean female asylum seeker

Adiam arrives in Malta as a clandestine immigrant with her sister and brother and is 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" (AZZOPARDI, 2005, p. 27). There's no talk of trying to reunite her family 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.

From the little Ruth, the narrator tells us about Marisa, her best friend from their days at school, we know that Marisa is the unmarried mother of a little boy, but there's none of the sentimentalist self-pity or moralism that often accompanies such characters in Maltese literature. Marisa is six foot three and "weighs in at 75". Azzopardi's discreet irony immediately dispels any trace of stylization. Ruth tells us, with more than a hint of admiration, that "Marisa doesn't give a damn about anything", but 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 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" (AZZOPARDI, 2005, p. 36-37).

Maltese readers are probably struck by the moral and intellectual strength that allows Clare Azzopardi's women to seek paths that are true alternatives to a patriarchy that oppresses them. *No Adjective Describe Story* is also characterized by real dialogue between the female characters, because as Patricia Hill Collins points out, one must not

confuse dialogue with adversarial debate (HILL COLLINS, 1997). Dialogue is a discourse that focuses on the speaker as interlocutor, as someone who takes active part in a conversation; and 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 (MARCHESE, 1991). 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 an engaging 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 meaningful questions that are not empty rhetorical devices. There are instances in which Ruth, the narrator, addresses the reader; and 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.

/nobody say my story/nobody say/long story very long story/six month long/from Eritrea to Malta/you know Eritrea?/I Barentu/Eritrea/near Sudan Ethiopia/you know Sudan?/you have idea of map?/Red Sea?/we Italian colony/long ago/after English/we fight long time/Ethiopia/independence/I am Adiam/please to meet you/ (AZZOPARDI, 2005, p. 24).

Adiam's words are addressed to the reader 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 is a characteristic of most clandestine migrants, and similarly of many female characters in Maltese fiction: their reluctance stroke fear stroke desire stroke inability to tell their own story.

Like Rachel, Lou Drogenik's Carmen Caruana rebels against her domineering patriarchal father, but in her case the reader has the advantage of seeing where that rebellion takes her. Her father's imposition and the tragic consequences that ensue from it turn Carmen into a "hard-hearted and tough" woman. Her son describes Carmen as an extremely successful business woman, as a "hard-working, indomitable woman with a focus so strong that no one, not her husband, her sister nor anyone else was able to side track her from the path she had chosen". Although her husband works beside her, and is the "visible head" (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 205).

she was the brains, the one who had sat late into the night with a pencil pad and pencil in front of her on the kitchen table, making calculations, teaching herself bookkeeping, traipsing to the bank with payments, dragging her husband so she could talk to managers as if she was their equal (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 204-205).

Her son Laurie attributes her assertiveness, coupled with her initiative and tenacity, to the years she had spent in Australia; he sees the same qualities in his Australian girlfriend Vicki, "That eye-to-eye quality which said, 'Yes I am a woman and yes I am your equal'" (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 205). When her family emigrated to Australia, Carmen went to an all girls' High School and loved its mix of children from all over Europe. "She desperately wanted to be like them – good at all kinds of sport, open in the way they talked and free to do what they liked – because her parents' restrictions suffocated her" (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 259). Lou Drogenik's novel claims that early 21<sup>st</sup> century Malta is still a patriarchal society and that women are freer in Australia, so Carmen Caruana is presented as the exception, not the rule. According to Carmen's sister Caroline, apart from his mother Carmen and his Australian girlfriend Vicki, "no one has ever said no to Laurie. He's always been able to get his way." Although Laurie's Maltese daughters think they are emancipated women, they "kowtow to him, and get their way by manipulation"; and his Maltese wife in Malta "never contradicts anything he says because she is terrified he'd leave her" (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 354).

The last part of *In Search of Carmen Caruana* is much shorter and stylistically different from the four other parts of the novel. Drogenik abandons her heterodiegetic narrator and assumes a first-person narrative to explore the mind and emotions of Carmen Caruana, and partly those of her granddaughter Cathy, who is besieged by her memories and a newly discovered, overwhelming present which is the direct result of an unpleasant past, and allows the reader to see the emotions behind the facade. Carmen breaks once again with tradition by effectively rejecting her daughter born out of wedlock in Australia and dwelling on the memory of her lost lover. "Yes, I did have a daughter but, to tell the truth, I did not dwell too long on her existence" (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 367). It was the "memory of the other", her lover, "that "haunted" her: "His long limbs wrapped warm around my body. His lips seeking mine. His fingers roaming". Carmen defies the role of the chaste mother wholly dedicated to her children and concentrates, instead,

on the pleasures of the body, on human touch. "Yes, I did have a daughter. Once, aeons ago. But it is him I remember" (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 367). When she looks at her newly discovered grandchildren, she immediately feels an affinity with the adventurous and passionate Cathy who is, inevitably, Australian; Carmen remembers herself laughing at her Slovenian-Australian lover because he was "terrified at her daring" in the ocean (DROFENIK, 2007a, p. 369). The final paragraphs, like most of the novel, are full of the voices of various women.

### Cultivating the art of freedom

One of Lou Drogenik's most unconventional women is Teresa Mallia in *Birds of Passage* a character set in Malta at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She's over 40 and like Cecilja, who lives in the city and eventually emigrates to Australia where she chooses to remain single, describes herself as "single and happy" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 161). Teresa lives alone by the sea, but this loneliness gives her strength and encourages her to do things her own way (DROFENIK, 2005a). The main source of her inner strength and independence is the memory of her father, who could imagine his daughter soaring in the sky, above the restrictions imposed by the world of humans. Sometimes,

when he was in a poetic mood he would say, "Teresa, if you were a soaring eagle gliding up there in the currents of the air you would think the islands of Malta, Gozo, Comino, Kemmunett and that much beleaguered rock called Filfla were brown desiccated leaves floating in a vast stretch of blue water" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 112).

She drinks contraband whisky and has inherited her father's gun to protect herself and her sheep. When Carmelina states categorically that men can't look after children, Teresa objects. "When my mother died, my father looked after me". If it wasn't for him, she says, she would have ended up with the nuns, a prospect she didn't seem to find particularly inviting. "You were lucky", exclaims Cecilja (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 161). Both women seem to see life with the nuns as a serious obstacle to their personal development and freedom, perhaps because their institution obeys the rules of the Church's patriarchy which exerts strict control over the lives and aspirations of women.

When Teresa suggests, in front of the young Italian man Giancarlo, that she should give Lippu Attard an enema to empty his blocked guts and relieve him of the great pain he is in, Lippu feels greatly humiliated and it takes him "a long while" to get over it (Drogenik, 2005a, p. 136), if he ever does.

As a man he feels that he should not be subjected to the indiscreet hands and authority of a woman and he is particularly unsympathetic towards Teresa because he hates her guts. On one occasion he walks down to the beach and there he sees Teresa, "her skirt immodestly tied to her waist, her legs bare to her plump thighs", and "her bottom facing the heavens". To him her behaviour is "disgusting", not least because she thinks that "she can display herself without a thought to anyone" (Drofenik, 2005a, p. 137). He cannot fathom the fact that this woman lives and behaves as she wishes, without seeking the permission of society and the men who control it, and this is why he sees her as "ignorant" (Drofenik, 2005a, p. 138 and p. 151) and hates her "impertinence", the cheek with which she takes liberties in front of a man. To Lippu, Teresa, or any other woman for that matter, is not free to behave as she pleases, especially when this has to do with how she exposes her body and how much control she has over a public space, like the beach where she lived alone, without the protection and authority of a man over her. His assessment of Teresa's behaviour, which he dares not express in the open, reflects his prejudices about men and women: "Ah the life of a single man is not easy, but thank God I am not a woman. God has given man strength in his arms to earn a living and a brain to work out problems". Teresa, on the other hand, "lives in this place because she hasn't got a man to look after her, to provide a house and a decent roof over her head" (Drofenik, 2005a, p. 133). Teresa's parallel assessment of this pathetic man is nearer the truth:

'Ah!' she thought, 'the life of a single man is a hundred times worse than that of a single woman. Nature has given women all the brains. Brains to look after themselves, brains to raise children, brains to make a meal out of nothing and brains to keep things in order. Now look at him. From this distance he looks desiccated and shrivelled, like an olive that has been squeezed out of all its oils and juices' (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 132).

The ultimate irony is that Lippu, who has inherited an official *certificato* to manage prostitutes from Nicola Sabatino, an Italian man who was in charge of prostitutes on a small island north of Sicily, is himself humiliated by a woman who eventually forces him away from the contested space of 'her' beach. Lippu has to give way because here he cannot benefit from the authority given to men over public space.

Characters like Teresa and Marisa show that unlike most Maltese writers, both Drofenik and Azzopardi refuse to force their female characters into some kind of universal female mould: after all,

the universal is often "a cover for a certain epistemological imperialism, insensitive to cultural texture and difference" (BUTLER, 2001, p. 423). Most of their women are individuals with a complex story and a mind of their own. They reject the commonplaces about women being submissive to and dependent on their men (husband, father or brother), sentimental, emotional, non-intellectual, weak, loving mothers [...]. Many feminists reject the simplistic notion of sexual difference, that nature moulds women and men in significantly different ways and that women have similar characteristics. Judith Butler describes sexual difference as "the site where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed, where it must and can be posed, but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered". She sees it as a permanently open question that allows us to inquire about our sexuality without requiring a conclusion. "Understood as a border concept, sexual difference has psychic, somatic, and social dimensions that are never quite collapsible into one another but are not for that reason ultimately distinct" (BUTLER, 2001, p. 437). Butler insists that sexual difference remains "a persistent and open question", a question that is meant to be left "open, troubling, unresolved, propitious" (BUTLER, 2001, p. 423).

The Catholic Church, whose presence as a reactionary, hypocritical force is felt in the works of Drofenik and Azzopardi and throughout Maltese post-Independence literature, seeks to replace the language of 'gender' with the language of 'sex' because it wishes "to rebiologize sexual difference, that is, to reestablish a biologically narrow notion of reproduction as women's social fate". Although feminists like Judith Butler reject this patriarchal straitjacket outright, as do some of Drofenik and Azzopardi's stronger characters, they are positively aware that the notion of sexual difference poses "the permanent difficulty of determining where the biological, the psychic, the discursive, the social begin and end" (BUTLER, 2001, p. 426). This they see as an opportunity to understand women and human nature better, rather than as an immobilizing force that acts against their rejection of the patriarchy.

In preparation for the United Nations Meeting on the Status of Women in Beijing, the Vatican denounced the term 'gender' as a code for homosexuality and insisted that the notion of 'sex' be used instead. Butler describes this move as an apparent effort "to secure a link between femininity and maternity as a naturally and divinely ordained

necessity" (BUTLER, 2001, p. 423). Even Rena Balzan's Nada, who is by no means a militant nonconformist and believes that a woman, unlike men, must choose between having a family and a career, rejects this imposition. In Beijing some women activists argued that the Catholic Church's attempt to replace the word 'gender' with 'sex' was an "insulting and demeaning attempt to reverse the gains made by women, to intimidate us and to block further progress". They refused to be forced back into the "biology is destiny" concept that seeks to define, confine, and reduce women and girls to their physical sexual characteristics. "We will not let this happen - not in our homes, our workplaces, our communities, our countries and certainly not at the United Nations, to which women around the world look for human rights, justice, and leadership" (BUTLER, 2001, p. 423). In their statement quoted by Butler, these women activists explained that the meaning of the word 'gender' had evolved as differentiated from the word 'sex' to express the reality that the roles and status of women and men are socially constructed and subject to change. "In the present context, 'gender' recognizes the multiple roles that females fill through our life cycles, the diversity of our needs, concerns, abilities, life experiences and aspirations". They also called attention to the fact that the concept of gender is embedded in contemporary social, political and legal discourse (BUTLER, 2001, p. 423-424).

The open nature of sexual difference leads Judith Butler to the conclusion that it "is not a given, not a premise, not a basis on which to build a feminism; it is not that which we have already encountered and come to know". She believes that as a question that prompts a feminist inquiry, sexual difference "is something that cannot quite be stated, that troubles the grammar of the statement, and that remains, more or less permanently, to interrogate" (BUTLER, 2001, p. 418). Braidotti has a similarly dynamic and unsettling notion of feminism that undermines further the fake, convenient certainties of the patriarchy that harm women and ultimately even men. She rejects the idea that feminism may have the answers to all the questions about human nature and human culture. "Feminism is not about a quest for authenticity, or the Golden Fleece of truth". She argues that feminists need to acquire "a flair for complicating the issues so as to live up to the complexities of our age". In this sense, she calls for a feminism that avoids "the flat-out recomposition of genderized and racialized power differences on the one hand, and, on the other, the equally unsatisfactory assumption of a triumphant feminine as showing the way to the future". She

believes in "cultivating the art of complexity" and the specific aesthetic and political sensibilities that sustain it and pleads for "working with an idea of the subject as the plane of composition for multiple becomings" (BRAIDOTTI, 2001, p. 410).

Rosi Braidotti's alternative to the kind of unjust and oppressive value system that women like Erika (*Ilkoll ta' Nisel Wiehed*), Carmen Caruana (*In Search of Carmen Caruana*) and the unnamed protagonist of *Il-Linja l-Hadra* are up against is the open and creative process of 'becoming-woman'. Braidotti highlights the intransitive nature of this process of becoming: it's not about becoming anything in particular, of following some predetermined path all over again, but rather exploring what one is capable of and attracted to. Her idea of 'becoming-woman' is 'not deprived of violence, but deeply compassionate'; it's an

ethical and political sensibility that begins with the recognition of one's limitations as the necessary counterpart of one's forces or intensive encounters with multiple others. It has to do with the adequacy of one's intensity to the modes and time of its enactment. It can only be embodied and embedded, because it's inter-relational and collective (BRAIDOTTI, 2001, p. 397).

There's more than a hint of 'becoming-woman' in the free spirit of Drogenik's unorthodox Teresa Mallia. She refuses to be conditioned by the presence of men or the code of behaviour they impose on the women of their community and she refuses to follow the predetermined path that would have her feeling like a failure for not having married into the guidance and protection of a man. She creates her own unusual space by the sea, and unlike many other women in her community she can swim and cherishes the adventure and sensuality of the sea. When Lippu turns up at 'her' beach, she does not let his increasingly unwelcome presence and the norms he brings with him deter her, and she tells him so:

'I'm going down for a swim,' she said looking at him with that bold look in her eyes, 'and if you don't like it you had better leave.'

'This is public property,' he said, taking umbrage at her words, 'and we both can do what we like.'

'All right but don't give me a sermon if you don't like what you see' (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 150).

In his presence she starts to unbutton her dress to reveal a short, sleeveless dress which serves as a bathing costume (DROFENIK, 2005a). Then she gladly, perhaps defiantly, announces "Here I go", and carefully slides down the slippery rocks and disappears in the water "like a plump fish". Between

her splashings, she calls out to him to have a swim too: "it will take that frown off your face"; and then adds cheekily: "Even if you can't swim, sitting in that pool over there is good for the soul". Lippu is immobilized and silenced.

When a group of female friends and their children join her for a day at the beach – the children call her *zija*, aunt, even though she was no relation (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 146) – Teresa confronts them on the way they treat their daughters. "What a disgrace your daughters can't swim". One of the mothers replies that it is the girls themselves who don't want to learn and another suggests that they're better off not learning so they'll never venture too far. Teresa points out, however, that their sons can swim and highlights the irony that they live so close to the sea and yet none of their girls can swim. A third mother reacts more fairly when she explains that if the men took some interest in teaching the girls to swim, as they did with the boys, she wouldn't mind. "But how can we teach them if we never learned ourselves?" (DROFENIK, 2005a, p. 160). It's a vicious circle of disempowerment.

#### **Conclusion: The presiding genius of her own body**

Despite the fact that they are aware of the injustice and oppression that they suffer because of their socially constructed gender, many of Drofenik's protagonists do not relinquish their power as individual agents. Moreover, her more assertive women do not reject the dominance of the patriarchy in order to follow some alternative, predefined model. They acknowledge their femininity as constantly in process, and their subjectivity, which most discourses seek to fix, is subject to dispersal. In Nira Yuval-Davis's model of "transversal politics," in which "perceived unity and homogeneity are replaced by dialogues which give recognition to the specific positionings of those who participate in them as well as to the 'unfinished knowledge' that each such situated positioning can offer" (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 92), contemporary Maltese writers like Drofenik and Azzopardi attempting to deconstruct the dualistic grip might forge discourses in which both authors and their characters recognize and explore their differences but also their common objectives.

Among the mothers in Drofenik, Balzan and Azzopardi there are those who have absorbed the patriarchy seamlessly, but there are also atypical mothers, like secularized Katerina and Marisa. Carmen Caruana's relationship with mothering, on the other hand, raises a number of questions about

the perception of the role of the mother by women themselves and by society in general. In Carmen's uncompromising rebellion against the values and norms of the patriarchy represented by her authoritarian father and acquiescent mother there is evidence that she has not overcome the anguish and betrayal by her own family and this unfinished business seems to lead her to fight the patriarchy by embracing it and becoming a strict father who has consciously rejected her role as nurturing mother. While for many Maltese women, the biological capacity to reproduce and the social roles and skills which it entails contain some valuable elements that constitute the core of women's difference from men (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 21), for Carmen this capacity to reproduce comes across as the key to women's oppression. For many of Drofenik's characters, mothering is not only about biological reproduction but about a set of attitudes, skills and values that accompany it which should be given a more central place in our societies. Carmen rejects this femininity that identifies itself with the potential to mother, whether she deems it to be biological or culturally acquired, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why she rejects the daughter she gave away for adoption. Her embracing of patriarchal values in her family and business affairs must also have helped to shape her son Laurie's male chauvinistic attitudes. Nancy Chodorow believes that women's desire to mother, which Carmen 'rejects' but lives in opposition to it and therefore within its scope, is part of their desire to be feminine which girls pick up at an early age and this must be mainly an unconscious choice conditioned by the sexual and familial division of labour. Girls, therefore, grow up to reproduce their mother's capacity to relate to others, to nurture, and to mother. Chodorow argues that if both men and women mothered equally, then girls and boys like Laurie would not grow up with these different qualities; men would be more loving and connected to others, and women would be more autonomous and competitive, (FREEDMAN, 2001, p. 21-22), which is what Carmen has become, but at the price of rejecting the other qualities that she displayed as a young woman before the patriarchy destroyed them. Because she has, generally speaking, rejected the qualities of mothering which are undervalued in a public sphere dominated by the patriarchy, even her son Laurie refuses to embrace or even respect them.

Carmen's traumatic experience as a teenage mother seems to confirm the distinction Adrienne Rich makes between the oppressive, male-controlled social institution of motherhood, which rejected her right to freedom over her own body, and the experience of

motherhood, which can be both pleasurable and empowering for women, but which Carmen's parents did not allow her to experience. Her experience, but also that of other characters like Virginia in *Birds of Passage*, shows that the institution and the experience of motherhood do not match up, and this often leads women to feel alienated from their pregnancy, birth and motherhood. Young women are expected to aspire to and become nurturing mothers, but the very society that gives them this responsibility betrays the experience of motherhood that it's meant to propose. Rich believes that women need to reclaim their bodies and their motherhood for themselves; they need to imagine a world in which every woman is "the presiding genius of her own body", in which women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children, if and as they choose, but "the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence – a new relationship to the universe". Rich imagines a world in which "thinking itself will be transformed" (Freedman, 2001, p. 72), a tall order, no doubt, for the Maltese society depicted by Drogenik and Azzopardi; but for many of their more assertive and crucial characters, women's reappropriation and reinvention of their bodies, and motherhood, is a significant place to start.

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