

## **Collective memory and amnesia: Gender in the Siege narratives.**

The 8<sup>th</sup> of September is a National Day that kindles narratives of suffering, boundless patriotism, victory and redemption. It is a unifying symbol of our nationhood that is clearly forged in the collective memory of the Maltese people. Yet women and their historical role in social and political processes are mostly omitted from the prevailing narratives that reinforce our sense of nationhood.

Raised in post-Independence Malta, from my early days, I was fascinated by stories that featured in school books and Maltese literature. Some of these novels were read on the radio in daily episodes by two main male narrators Twanny Scalpello and Charles Arrigo, who capably mimicked female voices to emulate the speech patterns of their female characters. Most of the female persona were fragile and emotional characters who featured merely as victims of evil villains or as the love interest of male protagonists.

In post-Independence Malta we avidly followed stories of heroes who fought to save the islands from the clutches of the cruel invaders (namely the Ottoman flotillas and the Axis warplanes). There was reference to the suffering and perseverance of people that remained loyal and were subsequently rewarded by success. These Sieges became a point of reference point that illustrate the values and strengths of the people. It gave impetus to one of the smallest islands in the Mediterranean to become the only sovereign micro-state in the whole Mediterranean Sea.

Notwithstanding the limitations of our small island existence and in spite of the power of our previous foreign occupiers, Maltese leaders had long seemed self-rule possible. In my school book there was a captivating narrative of the 15<sup>th</sup> rebellion against the cruel feudal Lord Gonsalvo Monroe. Then the poor population embarked on a gargantuan effort to raise 30,000 Aragonise florins, in four months, in order to redeem their land.

While none of us were present during this rebellion, this but for my generation this narrative forms part of our Collective Memory, an arena of political contestation where narratives, official monuments and ceremonies tend to promote a selective memory.

It was in 1923 that the September 8<sup>th</sup> was first commemorated as a National Day. At that time the Great Siege was invoked by Maltese leaders in their struggle for self-

determination. The Great Siege of 1565 by the Ottoman flotilla coincided with the peak of Suleiman the Great's reign. It was a devastating invasion that reinforced the resilience of the Maltese islands and shaped their physiognomy. It added value to national pride as Maltese is deemed to have blocked the Ottoman advancement in the Western part of the Mediterranean.

In the post-war, the Great Siege and the lifting of the air-borne Axis siege in World War II became symbols of the power of the islanders' determination vis-à-vis the might of foreign powers. Hence Maltese politicians reinforced the narrative that extolled the courage of men who fought for their motherland, their Faith, their women and children. However, the providential lifting of both sieges was also attributed to the holy intervention of *il-Bambina, il-Vitorja* that is passionately celebrated in four parishes of the Maltese islands.

In rituals and symbols the allegory of Malta is portrayed as a female figure, that is almost reminiscent to the statues of the Virgin Mary and is commonly found in those towns and villages that celebrate *il-Vitorja*. I first came across the statute of "*Malta Rebbieħa*" in Mellieħa. As a child I was fascinated by the monument to the lady donning a white gown and a golden crown. Backed by the national flag, she towers over the figure of Grand Master Jean Perisot de La Valette who led the victory against the Ottomans and laid the foundations of the capital city Valletta.

The allegory of Malta honours him with a wreath on his head while the Knight bends his leg preparing to kneel before her. In both Senglea and Kalkara "*Malta Rebbieħa*" wears a shiny armour under a red tunic; both figures wield a sword in their right hand and a flag in the other; in Senglea the flag of the Order of St John, in Kalkara the national flag of Malta. This gendered imagery that is employed in story-telling about the nation and its history is important. It seems that in popular culture the female allegory, born out of imagination and brought to life in the town square by the *Għaqda tal-Armar* (club responsible for street decorations) seems to play a more influential role than that played by officialdom and academia. In fact, outside the religious/quasi pagan symbolism of the village *festa* there seems to be a collective amnesia about the role played by women in the historical trajectory towards national sovereignty.

It seems that selective memory has served the patriarchal patriotism of the past where official lines also tended to discount the raw personal tragedies and devastation of these two wars in order to advance the official myth of national triumphs.

Where were the women in the narratives that have woven the fabric of our nationhood? What was the role of women and how did they cope with their everyday struggle for survival? I sometimes wonder what it was like for my grandmother to twice give birth in a hospital at the other end of the island during war time ... and whether she would have survived had she not suffered childbirth complications while the Siege of 1942 was in full force, when my dad was just 11 months old.

As we are faced by proposals for a national dialogue aimed to trigger processes that lead to a Second Republic, we need to keep in mind that full citizenship entails rights, participation and inclusion. We need to understand why our parliamentary system continues to discourage women. Thankfully we are now lamenting Maltese women's stark under-representation in politics. We need to shake the tree and in order to do so without further delay, positive measures are necessary. This year we are celebrating 70 days of universal suffrage and history has shown us that without positive action we cannot expect progress. Indeed the percentage of female parliamentarians has not increased since 1947 and in the case of local council elections their numbers were actually shrinking!

The dearth of female representation in the public sphere is partly the result of, and it is being reinforced by, the invisibility of women in the narratives that are transmitted through national commemorations, rituals, monuments, text and the images that people are exposed to. Collective memory is mirrored in discourse, literature and the media that shape our perceptions of national events that we did not directly experience. Hence we often end up adopting the interpretations that may have suited previous generations but not necessarily cater for the aspirations of contemporary life and the hopes of future generations.

Moreover citizenship rights and responsibilities cannot be taken as a given, but are contested concepts. There are clearly initiative that we need to take in order to win this struggle. *Il-Vitorja għada ġejja* [Victory is still pending]. We need to construct new relevant symbols for a fast changing world. Most of us have already slowly realised that a siege mentality inhibits positive growth. It might as well be that for some of us the primary blockages to our advancement is not 'the enemy' outside the wall but the familiar structural arrangements that are very close to home.