

INTERVIEW

Critical voices, witch hunts and gatekeepers

Mark Vella spent two years as the book reviewer for *Illum*. Here he sits down with educator Daniel Xerri to discuss the latest controversy among Maltese authors, sparked by an anonymous literary reviewer who lashed out in a savage, even if unpolished way.

Daniel Xerri: What are your thoughts on the idea that contemporary Maltese literature seems to lack robust critical voices?

Mark Vella: It's never had robust critical voices. The usual excuse is that Malta is too small. There might be some writers who will hate you for saying something critical about their work. This is what we're seeing in The Malta Literary Review (MLR) controversy. Even though I believe that reviewers should show their face, I was quite happy with what was coming out from the MLR.

Not everything about its anonymous reviews was accurate or sufficiently polished, but there was this refreshing style, there was a bit of savagery, something similar to what we sometimes read in certain international newspapers and literary journals. There was an amount of irony in these opinionated reviews that hadn't seemed possible in Malta for a long time.

Is it that we're not used to this kind of caustic criticism?

I think the issue is deeply connected to the Maltese psyche. Beyond partisan politics, we don't criticise one another publicly. Everyone's a friend of a friend, and everyone gets easily offended. In Malta, there is a very strong link between business interests, political interests and personal interests. So, it takes a lot of courage to express what you want to say in the critical way you want to say it.

The irony is that it takes courage even to be anonymous. I speak to many people who say that critical reviews are needed in literature, in the arts, in theatre. And I've met many people over the years who expressed an interest in setting up a publication or website for such reviews. The initial discussion is always about whether it should be done anonymously or not.

I prefer putting my name to my reviews,



Mark Vella

but I understand people who would like to do it anonymously. I understand them perfectly because of the vindictiveness we encounter in this country.

Why do we need a critical review culture in the Maltese literary scene? Some people say there is too much mediocrity locally.

Rather than saying that we're mediocre a priori, I believe that many things go unchecked in the Maltese literary scene. For example, in one of the MLR reviews, the reviewer claimed to have inside knowledge of mismanagement, favouritism, or an unequal application of the rules regarding public funding.

An absence of checks and balances happens partly because there isn't an ecosystem of critical reviewing. There aren't different critical voices. If there were such voices, we would have someone who's appreciative of a piece of work and someone who's not, as well as someone who's got an alternative take.

Instead, what we have in some review outlets is akin to a pageant show. These reviews are written by people who do not know the first thing about how to produce a good critical review. They just give a summary of the book and use the same hackneyed phrases to say something about it. I'm not saying you need to be Harold Bloom to know how to write a solid review, but these people don't even have a grasp of the basics of reviewing. So, we remain where we are.

Another problem is that there is sometimes an incestuous relationship amongst the established authors. They promote one another and publicly claim that other people's books are masterpieces. Obviously, this is something that remains in a circle, especially if there isn't an external reviewer who can give an alternative opinion or at least confirm the authors' impression.

What are the implications of a critical voice like the MLR being taken down?

The silencing of these reviewers, whether self-imposed or provoked by the witch hunt conducted by those who sought to reveal their identity, is quite worrying. Despite being somewhat misguided, they still had the tools necessary for being critical reviewers. This wasn't a gratuitous blog vomiting over everyone.

After what happened to the MLR, how likely is it that others will find the courage to express their critical views given their awareness that they can ultimately be silenced?

Highly unlikely, especially after Immanuel Mifsud's statement on the young poet Jasmine Bajada. I was very surprised to see him demanding that she be fired from her job at the National Book Council just because she expressed a controversial opinion about Maltese writers. Mifsud and the other writers backing him were offended at being compared to whores. Now they are demanding their pound of flesh.

It seems that the writers who were once revolutionary have now become conservative. In the past, our generation was proud to criticise older writers for being gatekeepers. Now it seems that contemporary established writers risk becoming the new gatekeepers.

For me, it is an aspect of cancel culture. People who dare criticise Maltese writers are being cancelled. Bajada and the writer David Hudson are being cancelled for expressing critical views on social media. They're being made pariahs, they're being ostracised.

It's ironic that this is happening with the blessing of PEN Malta, the organisation that should preserve and defend free speech. It is very worrying that two young writers are being made to bear the brunt for their frank views on Maltese literature.

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