

Book Review

Yosanne Vella (ed.) (2024). *Bringing Women to Light. The Task of Women's History. Discovering Women's History in Malta*. Malta University Press. ISBN: 978-9918-0-0732-5.

What is it to encounter women who have long been gone and to hear of their stories and of their actions? It is to imagine where they lived, what they did, what was going through their minds and perhaps, at times even understand them. For although their contexts of life are blurred by the distance of time, one can feel their anxieties, frustrations, successes and joy and at times feel for them, and for the injustices they suffered.

This is possible because the authors of chapters in the book *Discovering Women's History in Malta*, edited by Prof. Yosanne Vella, bring the accounts about these women to light. They bring them alive through their scholarly works that give meaning to women's past lives in Malta, while identifying the various discourses and conditions that shaped their lives as feminine subjects. The hard labour of the authors of this book in searching for documents seem to match the arduous labour of the women protagonists of history, who through their sometimes unexpected and subversive actions, show us who they are.

The collection of articles in this book asserts that women do have a history; that they produce history, and that writing history of women is an essential political and responsible task for the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' to use Foucault's politically charged phrase. They put the lives of women on the agenda of history that has frequently disqualified their experiences and knowledges as unimportant and naive or at times, as Vella herself was told when she expressed her academic interest in studying women's history. The patriarchal perception that women never actually did anything of value annihilates their experiences, their work, their ideas and values.

Rightly so, the authors in their various styles of writing, are very much preoccupied by the origins and reasons for women's domination or marginalisation. In the book we encounter stories that present women as victims; beaten, humiliated, deceived also by other women; women who were poor or sick; those who were literally enslaved, others facing conditions of war at the same time as bringing up children, taking care of their families, working in and out of their homes. These accounts are read and interpreted through the prevalent colonial and religious discourses that tried to channel women's lives into domestic spheres and 'natural' functions such as childbirth, mothering, and childrearing, which are thought of having no social or cultural symbolic value.

Our attention is also drawn to resilient women; active and rebellious, intriguing. Women who set up their own successful dressmaking businesses, women making political alliances either out of self or public interest, generous women who used their money to finance charitable institutions. Some women used their femininity to attempt to be released from enslavement, to acquire a decent living for their families and children, by prostitution or wet nursing even though these put them in complicated situations.

This book is to be read to appreciate the task of doing women's history. Yosanne Vella and the other authors have not simplistically categorized women into the binaries of dominion or freedom, the powerful or powerless. Neither have they sought to reinforce their alliances to nature or culture or to the domestic or public. What they have successfully brought forward to make us reflect about is the quality of the powers of women who have survived in the archives, how they have sought to use their social and cultural positions as women to rethink and redefine the idea of 'woman' in the historical periods they lived as well as for our time.

Simone Galea

University of Malta

simone.galea@um.edu.mt