

## Family at the Cultural Crossroads

### Hannie Rayson's *Mary*: glimpses of family dynamics in a migrant community

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The dynamics of family is one of the oldest themes known to the stage. In Australian theatre also plays concerning the family are frequent, and some of the greatest Australian dramatists are recognized for the plays that are centered on family life. Hannie Rayson, a Melbourne-based writer who is widely regarded as the most influential female playwright of the contemporary Australian Theatre, believes, "we're all connected in some way to family" (Marriner, Web. 2010). Her works express a profound concern for the role of family in the Australian society.

Family issues are interesting because everyone in some way or the other can relate to them. As Sam Shepard, an American dramatist puts it: "Everything can be traced back to the family: what doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean? Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other – everyone is born out of a mother and a father and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle" (Bigsby 21). Family issues are intensely personal yet powerfully universal. Hannie Rayson's plays *Mary* (1982), *Hotel Sorrento* (1990), *Scenes from a Separation* (1995), *Life After George* (2000), *Inheritance* (2003) and *Two Brothers* (2005) are dramas of individuals and social dramas at one and the same time. Her plays are motivated by the idea

that pressures from the exterior world enter the family realm and may even contribute to the disintegration of the Australian family unit. Her plays show how modernization has affected the family in the Australian society. According to Rayson family means different things to different people. It is difficult to talk about the typical Australian family, especially as society and families change. She accepts that families may span several generations, several households, and may change in response to events such as divorce, remarriage and children leaving the parental home. The dramatist believes caring, supporting, protecting and loving are what all families have in common.

In *Mary*, Hannie Rayson gives us glimpses of family dynamics in a migrant community. In Australia, migrants came from different countries around the world and hence from different political, economic and social environments. As a result Australia became a multicultural society. The term 'multiculturalism' is used in two ways. First, it acknowledges the everyday reality of the diversity of cultures within Australia and the second: it refers to official policies on migrant settlement and integration, which support cultural diversity and help different cultural groups to maintain distinct identities while living together within a single society. *Mary* is written in response to the question as to how to maintain

family ties in a different country and in a different cultural milieu.

Mary was first produced by the Theatre Works Eastern Suburbs Community Theatre Company at Melbourne in December 1982 (directed by Susie Fraser). Prior to this, Mary toured to secondary schools in the Melbourne metropolitan area. A product of community theatre, it is a play that has been composed by working closely with members of the community over a twelve month period. The play received a “Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Trust award in 1980” (Jevons 24).

The play’s tours to Australian schools in 1981 served a dual purpose. It was an opportunity for the students (Several students in the group came from migrant backgrounds) (i) to work with professional theatre workers and (ii) to familiarize themselves with the theatre workers with the milieu of adolescence with all their the concerns, hopes, values, and attitudes towards school, family, life, sexuality, work opportunities, social life, etc. From this experience emerged the idea that rather than focusing solely on the experiences of a Greek girl within her own family setting, it would be interesting to juxtapose a Greek family with an Australian one. For the basic structure of the play, Rayson spent two months meeting and interviewing many Greek women, collecting hours of tape recordings related to their personal experiences of being Greek and growing up and living in Melbourne. This was followed by weekly meetings with a group of young people. The result is a play based on the personal stories and anecdotes of over fifty different women of all ages.

Mary is set in Doncaster: an outer eastern suburb of Melbourne. The set represents two modern homes in a newly developed residential area, separated by a garden fence. On

the one side of the fence lives an Australian divorcee and her adolescent daughter. On the other side lives a Greek family. As Leonard Radic observes, “The fence between them is a potent dramatic symbol. For while the Greeks have done well for themselves – well enough to make the jump from Richmond to Doncaster – they have yet to win acceptance from their Australian neighbours” (14). The play juxtaposes a Greek-Australian family with an Anglo-Australian one. There are five female characters in the play. Mary Stephanides is a teenager of sixteen years. Evdokea Stephanides is her mother and Menny is the grandmother. Mary’s family came from Greece but now the family has made its own house in Doncaster. In the Anglo-Australian family there is Gail Selwyn, who is a teenager of sixteen who is Mary’s friend and classmate. Carole Selwyn is Gail’s mother. Mary’s family has just moved from Richmond, an inner suburb of Melbourne to Doncaster.

Mary has just changed her school from Richmond, where she had many Greek friends, to Doncaster where she is the only Greek in the class. Mary’s friend Gail teaches her Australian ideas and Mary revolts against her mother’s Greek conservative ideas of motherhood. Now she wants freedom. She would like to go to party with her friends and wishes to take her own decisions. All these things are unacceptable to her mother, Evdokea and she tries to restrain her daughter from adopting Australian culture. This leads to tension between the mother and the daughter.

There are many differences between the society, culture and life style of the Australians and that of the Greek society. The play juxtaposes the Greek-Australian family with an Anglo-Australian one “not to make qualitative comparisons, but to highlight points of similarity

and difference” (Foreword). The play presents a contrast between the Greek and the Australian family units. A Greek family is a joint family. All the members live together under one roof. Parents, children, brothers and sisters, grandparents and grandchildren are all tied by kinship bonds and are accommodated under the same roof. Evdokea, in the play thinks about her four sisters and their children, who live in Greece. She tells the audience, “My sister, she could not believe when she see the picture of this house. She writes to me and say ‘Evdokea, you must be so rich to have such a house’. Is no good to be so long away from your family. I like them all to be here with me” (5). Gail though an Anglo-Australian, likes this idea of a joint family and longs for it, as she says, “Sometimes I think it’d be good to have a really big family. Lot of brothers and sisters” (27).

Mary’s grandmother Menny lives happily with her son and daughter-in-law. Greeks love to keep their elders with them. Generally Greek families care for aged parents. On the other side, Australian society is highly individualistic. Old people are generally put in the old people’s home. Hence one can understand Gail’s reaction when she learns that her grandmother is coming to stay with them for a few days. She feels sick.

CAROLE. Your Grandmother. She’s thinking of coming down next month for a few days with Auntie Lorna.

GAIL. Aw, Shit.

CAROLE. She has to see the eye specialist. Her eyes are going now, apparently. Poor old lady.

GAIL. Has Auntie Lorna put her in the Old People’s Home yet?

CAROLE. Well, she’s on the waiting list, but Lorna says she won’t go. She refuses. It’s a terrible business. I feel very sorry for them really.

GAIL. Stupid old stick. (32)

The Greek is a highly community based culture, where the extended family plays a major role in an individual’s life, a more community-oriented way of living exists, and there are strong family networks. Evdokea is a typical representative of Greek culture, and she considers Greek culture and values much superior than “Silly Australian ideas” (32).

By contrast, the Australian life gives lot of freedom to the individuals (to be what one wants). Gail takes her own decisions even though she is a teenager. Her sister lives with her boyfriend. For her mother, “It’s her life. Whenever she’ll feel comfortable she will marry. It’s her own decision” (12). Later on Gail’s mother Carole narrates to Ted, a man with whom she is engaged, “The only thing is I’m just a bit worried about Gail, my daughter. Yes. She’s sixteen. No, it’ll be ok. She can stay at a friend’s place” (12). Privacy is of utmost importance in Australian society. One can dress the way one wants, travels anywhere, be passionate about things one appreciates. As a social being individuals are less dependent on others in daily lives (While in Greek culture, an individual’s choices may be influenced by friends, family and society).

Another dissimilarity that is evident between these two cultures is the attitude towards divorce. In Australian society there is easy acceptance of divorce, while in Greek society divorce is considered a stigma because the Greeks give more importance to keeping the family together. When Gail tells Evdokea that her parents are divorced and her sister lives in Fitzroy with her boyfriend and her mother approves it, Evdokea is surprised, “What you mean your mother has no say with the boy friend?” (26). Evdokea is not comfortable with this position of a mother allowing her daughter

to stay with her boy friend. She thinks that Gail's sister is living in sin. For Evdokea a bad girl is one "who doesn't respect her mother, smokes cigarettes and uses bad language" (Hutton 8) and for her these are the qualities of a typical Australian girl. Gail tells her mother, "No, I don't think Mrs. Stephanides approves of us very much... you being divorced, and Merryl 'living in sin' with Marc in Fitzroy. She reckons, "What's your mother think about the boyfriend. She no like this, ah?" (26). Gail's mother Carole is a divorcee and now she is engaged to a man, called Ted McMohan. She goes out with him on Saturday nights. Carole shares all these things with her teenage daughter, "I'm going out to dinner with him Gail. What's wrong with that?" (15).

Essentially, Mary too is a family play. It throws light on the relationship between mothers and daughters and their quest for identity. It shows that after sixteen how daughters want to define themselves as a person other than their mother's daughters. It also assesses the role of a good mother and her obligations towards her daughter.

As the play opens, Menny: Mary's grandmother, is struggling to learn English. Evdokea, Mary's mother also has difficulty in speaking English. As it is a migrant family they are more fluent in their mother tongue, i.e. Greek. In fact the main problem the migrants face in Australia is their lack of proficiency in English. Even if migrants speak English, their accent or lack of fluency hampers their employment opportunities. Evdokea faces humiliation in the play due to her bad English. As in an intrrview Rayson herself tells, "When I was writing Mary I'd be with these grandmothers who did not speak English, I'd have a feeling for these women" (Varney 153).

The Greeks' migration to Australia started with the first fleet in 1786. After World War II the civil war took its toll on the Greek economy and the government encouraged emigration as a way of solving problems of poverty and unemployment. Between 1947 and 1982 many Greek families migrated to Australia and in the play Mary's family was one of them. For many years, Melbourne was said to be the fifth-largest Greek-populated city in the world, and today it is the largest Greek-populated city outside Greece. Many of the Greeks who came to Australia are associated with the emergence of a café culture. Milk bars, cafes and fish and chip shops enabled generations of migrants from Greece to establish themselves in cities and towns all over Australia.

Life was not easy for the new arrivals. Women had to work also in order to keep the family afloat financially. In the play Mary's mother works in a restaurant and her father works in a factory during day and drives taxi at night. Like other Australians, migrants need a level of emotional stability and at the same time, the maintenance of their own culture is equally important as it provides a sense of belonging and identity.

Mary explicates the relationship between mothers and daughters. The mother-daughter relationship is one of the most long-lasting and emotionally intense social ties. Although often positive and supportive, this tie also includes feelings of irritation, tension and ambivalence. Evdokea is more emotionally invested in this relationship than her teenage daughter Mary. At Richmond, Mary was among Greek friends, but in her new school she has no Greeks in her class. Her Anglo-Australian friend Gail teaches her some Australian values which are different from Greek culture. Initially Mary misses

Richmond and her Greek friends. In a letter written to her friend Roula, she recalls her old house and her life she has just left behind:

That's something that bothers me about this house. It doesn't seem to have any memories. No Greek has ever lived here, I can tell. The walls seems shocked to hear our Greek music this afternoon. And when I went to the milkbar – I had to walk nearly a mile – I didn't see one Greek face ... Remember how we used to play 'Spot the Aussie'? Mum is worried that we might lose ourselves here. Of course, I reassured her, yet inside me I understood her fear. She is frightened that Stavros and I will forget our Greekness. It's silly of her, I know; how could one 'forget' such a thing. (6)

In the new school, since the rest of the students are all Australians in her class, she starts avoiding morning assembly in the school and spends more time in school toilet. Slowly she starts telling lies to her mother. Once Mary and Gail go to town for shopping after school and Mary does this without taking her mother's permission. When Evdokea gets worried and inquires, Mary replies, "she had a late class" (20). In Greek families after the school hours Greek children are expected to partake in family activities.

Although, Mary's mother Evdokea says that they have moved for the sake of the children, yet, she cannot help but to fear that it might not be a good thing for Mary and Stavros. Evdokea came to Australia with an arranged marriage, and has worked hard with her husband to give the family all the things they wouldn't have had in a Greek village. She is frightened that teenager Mary, who is just starting to find her own way will grow away from her, and lose her Greekness. She needs Mary to promise that she will stay close to family. Being a good mother,

Evdokea worries about her daughter's habits, life style, how she spends her time and money and other health-related concerns. Every now and then she tries to teach her right from wrong. She expects Mary to make a career and gain financial independence. When Mary and Evdokea return home after Sophia's party they have a talk about Nicholette, a girl in the party, over smoking a cigarette.

EVDOKEA. Did you notice Nicholette smoking the cigarette?

MARY. Sure.

EVDOKEA. Her poor mother. She was so ashamed. Ever since Nicholette been to the university, she doesn't respect her mother. She's turned against the family.

MARY. Mum just because she had a cigarette.

EVDOKEA. She wear Jeans, she use bad language, she go out at night with the boyfriend, she smoke cigarette. A good girl doesn't do these things.

MARY. She's only trying to live her own life.

EVDOKEA. Live her life and bring shame to everyone else. Con say she always criticizing the Greeks, that girl.

MARY. You will never understand, will you?

EVDOKEA. I understand all right. I understand that you work all your life so your kids can go to school and have the books and the toys and the nice clothes and plenty of food to eat. They go to school and to the university and they get silly Australian ideas. They think they know everything. Just because they read the books. They think their parents are stupid. But you don't learn about life from reading the books, Mary. That's where you're wrong. That's where you're wrong. You learn with age. Always respect age. Mary. (32)

Evdokea is always nice and polite to her daughter. She takes a promise from Mary not

to change herself as 'another' due to influences drawn from the Australian society. True to the cultural mores of the Greek society, she does not allow her daughter to grow up on her own and to take her own decisions. On the contrary, Mary fails to understand her mother's emotional map. She wants freedom. She feels the need to spend more time with her friends. Gail asks Mary to go for a party on Saturday night at her friend's house. Evdokea doesn't allow Mary to go to the party and Mary starts resenting that she's the only one not being allowed to go for a party at night.

Both Mary and Gail wrestle with their responsibility towards their mothers and their desire for independence. They want to live life other than their mothers' daughters. Mary does not attend the party and becomes more rebellious. Gail advises her, "You've got to stand up to her [Evdokea] more. You let her push you around. She treats you like you're ten years old. No offence or anything but she does and you let her" (34). Mary likes Gail's suggestion and starts answering back to her mother. When Evdokea asks Mary to join uncle Con's party, she straightaway rejects. Gail instigates her to remain firm on her decision. Mary replies to her mother "I can't. I can't do it" (35).

At the end of the play Mary wants to attend a concert at her school one night, but, her mother does not allow her. Mary openly revolts against her mother,

MARY. You won't let me do anything. It's not fair. Everyone else is allowed to go except me.

EVDOKEA. I don't care about everyone else, Mary.

MARY. Well how come other kids' parents let them go out at night? I'm sixteen, Mum. I'm not a baby.

EVDOKEA. You still my baby. (38-39)

Evdokea thinks Greek culture is the best culture. She does not want Mary to go out for the concert because she thinks that there will be

no Greeks. Moreover Evdokea does not approve of Mary's friendship with Gail as she believes that Australian culture would have a bad influence on her daughter. She is unable to understand the rebellious behavior of her daughter. She feels helpless.

Mary was a different girl at Richmond when she was among her Greek friends. When she changes her school in Doncaster she finds no Greek friend and under the influence of Australian culture she starts finding the shortcomings of her own culture. She feels suffocated as she is not allowed to out on her own. When she goes out, it must be with her family or with Greek friends. Her Australian friends, and their values, are suspected by Evdokea:

MARY. You see. You'll never change. You make life impossible for me.

EVDOKEA. A good girl doesn't talk to her mother like this.

MARY. I don't want to be a good girl.

EVDOKEA. Well, go, then go!

MARY. I am going.

EVDOKEA. Go. But forget you have a family. And don't come back to this house.

MARY. You make me hate Greek.

[She storms out]. (39)

Mary experiences psychological ambivalence. She experiences simultaneous feelings of love and irritation about her mother. At the end of the play Mary writes an essay on "The changing role of women from the village to the factory and how it has affected one family – my own' My mother, no... Evdokea Vardaki..." (40). In the essay Mary acknowledges her mother's sacrifices and accepts that her mother's life has been guided by Greek values and traditions. She considers her life different from her mother's. "And I

understand why she cannot see it any other way. Yet, because my life has been so different..." (41).

One of the advantages of exploring another culture is that it invariably provides clearer insights into one's own. For this reason Rayson has juxtaposed a Greek family with an (Anglo) Australian one. Her intention in no way was to make a qualitative comparison, i.e. one is better than the other, but to highlight points of similarities and differences of lifestyle, attitude and values.

The Greek mother, doing what is expected of her according to the time – honored traditions of her birth place, is drawn with sympathy and understanding. But so too is her daughter, trapped uneasily in a no-man's (or no woman's) land between her mother's unbending discipline and her Australian friend's more relaxed way of life. The title of the play is rightly chosen. It is Mary, the Greek teenaged school girl, who is the central figure, too old to accept her mother's hard line Greek disciplines which alienate her from her friends, too young to defy her parents and choose her own path. Her one explosion of frustration comes in a brief outburst to her mother: "You make me hate Greeks" (39). The mother's dilemma is also presented beautifully towards the end of the play when Evdokea says to Mary:

There are times when I look at you, little girl of mine.  
When you seem like a stranger to me  
Who have you become, little girl of mine  
Someone so different to me. (41)

As a family play, Mary focuses on the mother-daughter relationship. Due to her mother, Mary is always in a state of doldrums about what she should do: to do as her mind directs her, or, adhering to the practices that her

mother approves of. As she grows up, she wants to be her own person by coming out of the shadow of her mother. The relationship becomes even more fraught with ambivalence when cultural conflict among the migrant communities also adds to the tension. The play with an open ending is, above and all, about the quest for identity. It is the quest of a mother to prove she is a good mother. It is a quest of a daughter also to define herself as a person other than her mother's daughter. The play throws light on the relationship between a mother and a daughter. The play does not take sides with any one of them; that, in a way, is one of its strengths.

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