The Greek domestic novel in the 1990s and after*

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According to several recent surveys of Greek fiction published during the last two decades,[1] a preoccupation with the private and everyday lives of fictional characters, in other words with issues related to the characters' immediate family, their love affairs, their personal and existential anxieties, or a combination of all these, seems to constitute the dominant thematic tendency of the period. This of course is not accidental but at the same time is a quite new phenomenon.

   This interesting preponderance of private affairs over collective ideals in the lives of fictional characters has succeeded several lengthy periods in the history of Greek literature when local politics and the immediate historical past were the dominant themes. This generally parochial tendency, which placed a particular emphasis on collective ideals and issues of national identity, was certainly the direct result of the particularly turbulent political and historical situation of Greece at the time: the last two centuries have not been at all easy and peaceful for the relatively new Greek state. Even fairly recently, that is for a short period after the restoration of democracy in 1974, interest in politics continued to be strong, since memories of the immediate historical past (civil war, the cold war period,

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[1] For representative overviews of contemporary Greek fiction, see Moullas 1999, Hatzivassileiou 1999 and 2002, Kourtovik 2002, Tziovas 2003, and Mackridge and Yannakakis (forthcoming, 2004).

dictatorship) were still fresh and painful. Since then, however, the indigenous literary production seems to reflect Greece's status as a peaceful, western-type and fairly affluent democracy which wholeheartedly shares the values of contemporary western culture in the homogenising process of so-called globalisation; literary themes have recently been very much in line with those popular in the rest of the developed world.

The development of a story that revolves around a particular family is one important aspect of the recent preoccupation with the private sphere of contemporary Greek fiction. However, the domestic novel has not been new in Greek fiction of the last two centuries, as it has not been new in western literature either.[2] What is new, though, as far as Greek fiction is concerned, are novels, mostly written by women, which critically scrutinise the relations between members of individual Greek families and particularly the role of the mother in these families. Thus, an important difference between these domestic novels and those of previous periods lies in the fact that in the recent ones there seems to be a reversal of the traditional hierarchical roles in families: here the image of the father is either weak or simply absent, so the key role, but also the blame for running a (dysfunctional) family, is placed on the mother. Moreover, in contemporary domestic novels there seems to be a strong and straightforwardly expressed criticism of the way

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[2] The large bulk of western fiction is domestic and is considered to represent a stage of maturity for the genre. Its peak period was the nineteenth century. However, the family model presented in those novels constitutes a reflection of family life at the time: the father is always at the top of the familial hierarchy, while there seems to be a special emphasis on the role of the daughter (to make up for the shadowy presence of the mother), at least in relation to the father. In the twentieth century, and particularly in its second half and down to the present, the domestic novel reflects the different familial relations in real life: single-parent families, change in the role of mother etc. Here, the most popular dyad now seems to be that of mother-daughter (Cohen 1991). As far as Greece is concerned, although there have been numerous novels that might be broadly labelled as domestic, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we cannot speak of a dominant category of fiction.

Greek families in general have functioned for several generations, in the context of a self-sustained, insulated and thus traditional culture.[3]

Several recent novels have dealt with family relations, such as Karystiani's *Little England* (1997) and *Suit in the earth* (2000), Triantafyllou's *Tomorrow another country* (1997), Thanasis Cheimonas's *Ramon* (1998), Nikos Michailidis's *The bitch and the puppy* (2002) and Ioanna Tombrou's *I'll call you life* (2002).[4] However, here I am going to examine and compare three novels, all written by women and published during the last five years, which I believe share several common features, not so much on the narrative level as on that of the subject-matter and more precisely in terms of the perspective from which the individual families are viewed. These novels are: Niki Anastasea's *This slow day was progressing* (1998), Ileana Chourmouziadou's *The personal secretary* (1999) and Marilena Politopoulou's *House of guilt* (2002).[5] The stories in Chourmouziadou's and Politopoulou's novels take place in contemporary Athens, while the plot of Anastasea's takes place in a small town in Northern Greece in the 1950s.

Besides the fact that all three novels were written by women, in two of them, those of Chourmouziadou and Politopoulou, the story is told through the single and limited perspective of two women (who are also daughters), while in Anastasea's novel the focalisation is multiple and also includes the mother herself; in all three, at the centre of the family saga is the mother, who, in two cases, dies (one suicide and one alleged murder by the daughter) and in the third is permanently paralysed after having been physically attacked by her son.

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[3] For an anthropological analysis of family structure in Greece, see Herzfeld 1991. For an analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in particular, see Dubisch 1991.

[4] Tachtsis's *To τρίτο στέφανι* (1962) constitutes a kind of predecessor of this recent group of novels, with the mother as the dominant figure.

[5] For the Greek titles of these works see the Bibliography.

In all three families, the mother-figure is both victim and victimiser: she is usually the victim of oppression, at the hands of either her own family or her immediate social milieu, and in turn victimises her children as well her husband. In all these families, moreover, the father is absent: after some years of married life, all three fictional fathers either run away from the family home to settle down somewhere else (in two cases) or simply disappear (in one case); in all three, the mother is more or less considered (mainly by her own children) to be responsible for the father's abandoning the family. There is also a strong tendency in these families for each generation to repeat the choices of the previous one, and this is due (as the novels themselves claim, at least) not so much to genetic inheritance but rather to an imitation of these same choices. Mental illness exists in two families and is presented as the result of oppressive relations, while in the third the daughter (the alleged murderer of her mother) reaches levels of manic obsession and paranoia with regard to her mother. Incest is implied in two of the novels, that is between mother and son in Anastasea's novel and between father and daughter in Politopoulou's novel.[6] Finally, politics still exist in some way, mainly as part of the parents' past, the consequences of which the children are called upon to face in the present: in two of the three cases, the fathers (and one grandfather) were communists who wasted the families' property by funding their ideological cause, or simply resisted the capitalist ideal of amassing significant property.

We shall now present plot summaries of the three novels. In Anastasea's novel, the mother, who, as a teenager, ran away from her Asia Minor home with her future husband, an officer in the Greek army, is later abandoned by him and left to bring up her two young sons alone in Northern Greece and within her husband's extended family; fifteen years later her elder son (a schoolboy) also runs away, to return ten years later, that is

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[6] Incest seems to play a crucial role in the development of the plot in Anastasea's novel; however, in Politopoulou's novel we are not told about its actual impact.

twenty-five years after her husband had left. Having chosen to remain confined in her husband's family home all these years and having refused to accept him back when he returns ten years after he first left, the mother finally resorts to a hunger strike a few weeks before the wedding of her second son, who is still living with her in the same house. When the wedding is cancelled and the relationships of both her sons with their girl-friends collapse, she hangs herself, full of guilt for the misery she has caused them. Incest is here implied but not witnessed clearly by the reader.

In Chourmouziadou's novel, the mother, the wife of a cap-tain and an extremely beautiful woman, is abandoned by her husband, who cannot tolerate either her lovers or her indiffer-ence towards him. She is left with a young daughter, Maria, to bring up. She chooses not to work but supports herself and her daughter with the money her husband sends from time to time, but mainly with the money her sister, Maria's godmother, pays her to look after their disabled father. Her sister dies of cancer, so the role of bread-winner is soon assumed by the daughter, who abandons her legal studies at university to take up work as the personal secretary of her dead aunt's brother-in-law. The daughter, who has grown up as a "mummy's girl", hates her mother for being more beautiful and desirable than her, but also for being financially dependent on her rather than taking a job. In her turn, the mother seems to cultivate this hatred by always comparing herself openly to her rather plain daughter. Finally, the mother is drowned together with two other people, one of whom was her lover (but also the lover of her daughter), in a supposed sea accident, which, according to certain clues in the text, was directly caused by her daughter. Three months after her mother's death, the daughter accepts a proposal to marry her boss (that is the brother-in-law of her dead aunt), and thus take the place her aunt and godmother used to have in this family of industrialists.

In Politopoulou's novel, the mother is abandoned, after twenty years of married life, by the father, who never appears

again and is treated by all as dead. She is left with three teen-
agers to bring up, two daughters and a son. The son, Yannis,
and one daughter, Marina, go away like their father, while the
other daughter, Eleni, who is the narrator, stays with the
mother until she starts her own family. After years at sea as a
sailor and following the death of his wife, Yannis returns for
good to bring up his own son; after the latter leaves, Yannis
looks after their mother. In a terrible row he shakes his mother
violently with the result that her spine is broken and she be-
comes permanently confined to bed. Guilt-ridden, Yannis goes
out of his mind and is undergoing treatment in a psychiatric
clinic. Eleni, who is now in charge of her disabled mother, is
writing weekly letters (which constitute the text of the novel)
to her absent father informing him about developments in the
family since his departure and asking him to return if he is still
alive. In this communication with her father she implicitly
refers to an incestuous relationship with him.

Are we justified in assuming that wives and mothers in
Greek families have been monsters of selfishness and manipu-
lation, at least according to the picture contemporary Greek
fiction draws of them? Things are not as simple as that and this
seems to be what these novels want to discuss.

In the rest of this paper I shall employ family systems
theory[7] to examine the function of these fictional families.
This is based on the theory of family systems therapy[8] – a
method of treating dysfunctional families which started being
practised in the United States and elsewhere in the sixties.

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[7] On family systems theory in relation to literature, see Cohen 1991,
Bump 1991 and 1997, Morral 1992, Shapiro 1994, and Knapp 1996.

[8] This is a development of general systems theory, which was pioneered
by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s and was based on the assump-
tion that life processes constitute hierarchically arranged, interconnected
and interdependent systems. Family systems therapy applies the epi-
stemology of general systems theory to the family as a way of tackling
mental illness; the basic view here is that the source of illness lies
within the family (Cohen 1991). For a comprehensive review of family
systems therapy, see Hoffman 1981.

Family systems theory is gaining ground over traditional psychological literary criticism (classic psychoanalysis, language-oriented Lacanian theory etc.) as it is also doing in real life: family systems therapy is becoming one of the most widely used therapeutic models for mental illnesses, including schizophrenia, in the western world.[9] In Greece, family systems therapy started being used around 1975, it reached a peak in the first half of the 1980s and in the 1990s it was in decline. Whether we can attribute the emergence of this type of novel directly to that is an issue that needs further research but which lies beyond the scope of this study. Regardless of whether the practice of this therapy in Greece actually contributed to the recent booming of this type of novel, we can still use this theoretical model to approach this group of novels more thoroughly and appropriately.

According to this theory, it is the family system and not the self that provides the source of identity for a person. So, in order to understand one or more members of a fictional family, one needs to understand the family system this member or these members belong to, just as with families in real life. As Shapiro (1994: 2, 5) observes,

> The basic unit of study is not the individual as a separate entity [...] but an interactional field [...] the psyche cannot be understood as a discrete, autonomous structure [...]. The person is comprehended only within the tapestry of relationships, past and present [...]. This relational model in the social and natural sciences has implications for the critical models and frameworks that we bring to the study of literature and the arts.

Families are considered to constitute a co-evolutionary ecosystem (Knapp 1997).[10] Within the family system, each

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[9] According to the school of literary critics that applies this theory to literature, it is not accidental that the sixties in America also witnessed the proliferation of novels thematising dysfunctional families.
[10] This idea originates from the "ecology" of Gregory Bateson, a scientifically trained anthropologist, which refers to the interconnectedness of life processes in the context of general systems theory. In the 1950s he

member is believed to affect, to a greater or lesser degree, the development of all the other family members. In its turn, the function of the family as a unit is affected by the surrounding socio-cultural system; so, according to this view, at the centre is the individual, who is surrounded in a system of concentric circles by both the family and the social environment (work, school, church, neighbourhood etc.) – with all of them inter-acting with and affecting the rest.

One of the most important functions of the family is to encourage both *integration* into a solid family unit and *differ-entiation* into relatively independent selves. In functional families members develop *solid selves*, that is they are able to keep intellect and emotions from becoming fused; in the op-posite case, members develop a *pseudo-self*; they are controlled by their emotions, act in a very demanding way, are ruled by anxiety and fear and take their core beliefs from outside the self and family, that is from some seemingly gifted and strong individuals who occasionally offer them patterns of behaviour (Bowen 1985). This integration/differentiation process is life-long, since members move from the family-of-origin to their own created families.

According to family systems theory, the ability to love with a detachment which encourages the individuation of child-ren is one important feature of a functional family; others in-clude equality between parents, the adoption of open rather than closed family systems, clear and honest communication and emotional expressiveness, in other words flexible bound-aries among the family members.

Families have subsystems: (a) that of spouse-spouse (at the top of the hierarchy), (b) that of parent-child, and (c) that of sibling-sibling. The family, which usually starts as a dyad, will soon become a triad, and so on. In some families the dyad de-velops into a triad ("triangulation" – which implies not only the birth of a child but also its involvement in the parents'

developed some pioneering views on the treatment of schizophrenia (Bateson 1972).

problems), in an effort to reduce tensions between the couple caused by the inevitable pushes and pulls to establish a balance between intimacy and self-sufficiency.

Moreover, an important principle in family systems therapy is the existence of "intergenerational transmission of beliefs, attitudes and symptoms" (Framo 1996; Kerr and Bowen 1988); according to this, the partners in a marriage bring with them their internalised paradigms of "family", derived from the structure of the family-of-origin as armour in the power struggle that is bound to ensue at a certain point in the relationship. Therefore, the emotional system of a certain family includes processes and patterns copied from previous generations and which most probably will be transmitted to future ones. On the other hand, people often choose partners who resemble one of their parents in an attempt to heal, through replication, childhood wounds inflicted during the power struggle between their parents. A similar phenomenon is that of "familial repetition compulsion" (Bump 1997: 334), according to which members of the same family repeat the same mistakes again and again without being able to escape.

The role of family in the development of the children's personalities is directly pointed out in Politopoulou's novel when Eleni, the narrator and main character, says:

> Από την πράξη της καθημερινής ζωής και τα όνειρα των γονιών φτιάχνονται τα παιδιά, πατέρα. Η πραγματικότητα είναι το αλεύρι και το όνειρο η μαγιά. Έτσι και δεν τα ζυμώσεις καλά, πάει κάθισε η ζωή. (104-5)

This belief seems to dominate all three novels or even to be the very motive for their writing, that is to show the effect of dysfunctional families on their children and ultimately to criticise traditional Greek families for failing to offer a healthy environment for the family members to develop in.

As may be expected, none of the criteria of a functional family suggested by the exponents of family systems therapy seems to be encountered in our novels: there is no equality, no

emotional expressiveness or frank communication between the parents, while love, when it is allowed to be expressed – fathers for some reason fail to show their emotions to their children, let alone to their wives – is oppressive and suffocating in all three cases and communication is one-way and biased.

In all the novels the problem seems to originate at the spouse-spouse level, as would be expected, and is mainly a problem of integration/differentiation, inclusion/autonomy, in other words a problem relating to the boundaries of the self: who is going to have control in the power struggle of their marriage. In all three marriages in the respective novels, there seems to be a lack of balance in the relationship between the spouses: they do not appear to form a tight unit as they should, since each member of the couple does not fully accept the other, seems to have been disappointed by the character and actions of the other, to have been actually deceived into marrying somebody not worthwhile, with the result that he/she attempts to minimise the role of the other in the family and to impose his/her own will. Interestingly enough, in all three novels the strong partner in this power game appears to be the woman. It is the wife who oppresses husband and children and it is the wife who stays behind when the husband and, often, the children have gone.

In *This slow day was progressing*, Amalia, the mother, is depicted as being the victim of her husband's irresponsible be-haviour but also, crucially, herself the victimiser (according to the views of those characters, mainly male ones, who are focal-ised), who never allowed her husband to return and who main-tained a very tough line in bringing up her children. However, in the only chapter in which Amalia is focalised, we learn that she had actually been deceived by her husband, who had prom-ised her a life of love and affluence in order to persuade her to abandon her parents and run away with him; after herself being abandoned by her husband, she is left alone with her remorse for inflicting such sorrow on her parents for no serious reason, and with no one (apart from her children) to turn to. In her

husband's hometown and his extended family, with which she spent her whole life, she is always treated as an outsider, especially after she decided never to go out again. Her husband's behaviour, but also that of the members of her immediate social environment who criticise her, contributed to her low self-esteem, which is becoming worse because of her self-enclosure and also because of her elder son running away. Feeling that she is about to be abandoned by the last person left to her because he is getting married, that is her younger son (for whom we have reason to believe she also has incestuous feelings, though possibly unconsummated), she goes on hunger strike.[11] Guilt, however, together with lack of self-esteem, makes her commit suicide when she finally realises that she has gone too far.

For the other two mother-figures we have to rely on their daughters' views since they themselves are never given a voice in the relevant novels. In *The personal secretary,* Savina is presented as an immature and irresponsible woman who has never come to terms with the loss of her own family's property, because of her father's wrong decisions in business, and also because he used to fund the families of exiled left-wingers; when her father ends up living with her (though in his own house) she victimises him by assaulting him on a daily basis. They live together, since her sister does not want to reveal the existence

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[11] The resort to hunger strike is an overused theme in western literature, especially in the nineteenth century. Traditionally, it is used by the fictional adolescent daughter in response to her repression by her family. In the context of family systems theory, anorexia is viewed as a family disease, both in real life and in fiction, in the sense that the anorexic localises, in the form of her symptoms, a family trauma; in its turn, the family unites to face the illness suffered by one of its members. In Greek fiction, the heroines of Xenopoulos in *Stella Violanti* (1909) and Karystiani in *Little England* (1997) are two representative, though chronologically distanced, examples. Here, Amalia is neither a daughter nor an adolescent but rather a mother; however, Amalia had been thought of as behaving like a stubborn teenager all her life; on top of that, she is now in danger of losing her son, for whom she has erotic feelings, to another woman. As expected, the family unite again to face the problem of her self-inflicted illness.

of their disabled left-wing father to her husband's family and so pays her sister to hide him from them. In addition, Savina never comes to terms with the fact that her husband has never been able to offer her the affluent and glamorous life that would suit her beauty; thus, she prefers to live in the world of her imagination (a world similar to that in which her sister has managed to live in reality) and be flattered by lovers who appreciate her beauty, rather than simply being the ordinary wife of a low-paid sailor. In this sense, Savina is also a woman with low self-esteem (albeit for different reasons from those of Amalia in the previous novel), who does not accept either herself for being what she is through her marriage or her impoverished and disabled father, or even her rather plain daughter (who has inherited her husband's looks).

Finally, in *House of guilt,* the unnamed mother, according to her daughter – again the narrator and the only character focalised in the novel – is the down-to-earth and practical person in the family who loves but oppresses her children, even when they have become middle-aged. Though left-wing herself in the past, she has compromised and adjusted to the capitalist world and its requirements and she rejects her husband for sticking to his ideological beliefs. She is described as a person full of fears and with a low self-esteem who, in her daughter's words: "έφερε [τα παιδιά της] στα μέτρα του φόβου της, γιατί βαθιά μέσα της πίστευε πως τίποτα δεν της άξιζε" (102). Similarly, her husband did not respect her for her beliefs though he was emotionally dependent on her – an indication, according to the text, of his own insecurity. Both parents are here described as people who never showed their real feelings to each other, as also seems to be the case with the other two couples in the novels we are examining.

Having low self-esteem in a marriage and not accepting the other partner implies that, in the power struggle which is certain to ensue, each partner will try to satisfy his/her own needs at the expense of the other, since each partner feels that he/she

gets too little from the relationship to sustain himself/herself. That is how Satir and Baldwin (1983: 15) explain it:

> Because they lack trust, certain areas of joint living which especially challenge their ability to take into account the individuality of the other are especially threatening to them. These areas are: money, food, sex, recreation, work, child-rearing, relations with in-laws.

Most of these areas seem to be problematic in our novels too, and particularly the issue of money, as we have already seen – one of the main, if not the main, reasons for friction between the partners. Child-rearing is definitely another of these areas, and one which not only constitutes a cause of conflict in itself, but, in a kind of vicious circle, is directly affected by conflicts caused by other reasons.

We will move now to the next subsystem in a family, which is that of parent-child. Child-rearing is usually a source of anxiety for dysfunctional families, in spite of the fact that triangulation is used by the partners as a means of rescuing their relationship, as we have already discussed. Instead of improving the situation, however, child-rearing usually becomes an area of conflict because it requires increased responsibilities from the two partners, who are already unable to satisfy their personal needs, but also because, in their power game, each parent attempts to have the child or children on his/her own side; far from being a unifying factor, the child thus estranges the two partners even further. The narrator in *The personal secretary* presents a very telling picture of the situation:

> Εμείς είμαστε ένα πορτρέτο κανονικής τριμελούς οικογένειας. Λίγο πιο πίσω μας δυο παιδιά παίζουν με ένα σκοινί, κρατούν το καθένα από μια άκρη του και τραβάνε με δύναμη. Η λεπτομέρεια τώρα μεγαλώνει κι έρχεται στο πρώτο πλάνο, καθώς για πρώτη φορά αντιλαμβάνομαι ότι ήμουν το σκοινί που ο Ιππόλυτος κι η Σαβίνα τραβούσαν ο καθένας προς τη μεριά του. Εξακολουθούν να τραβάνε ακόμη και τούτη τη στιγμή. (111)

This is a very painful situation for the children, especially if
the mother is not happy in the marriage because of the nature
of the relationship between mother and child. According to
Napier and Whitaker (1978: 119-20):

> Because the mother-child relationship is the primary model for
> intimacy in our lives, it forms the basis for the deepest levels of
> intimacy in marriage. It is this early relationship that appears to
> set the tones in our lives for profound issues like the degree to
> which we trust and care about the Other and trust and care about
> Self and the degree to which we distinguish between Self and
> Other as separate, yet related entities. Fathers are certainly
> important in many ways in the early lives of their children, but
> this influence is expressed most crucially in the kind of parti-
> cipation they have in the marriage. If the relationship between
> husband and wife is good, the relationship between mother and
> child is likely to be good. But whatever the situation in the
> family world, this world is most intimately communicated to
> the child by the mother. It is the mother-child relationship that
> is later transferred most powerfully to the marriage.

This seems to explain to a great extent the reason why all
three of the novels we are examining focus on the mother-
figure and blame is addressed directly to her: this special
relationship makes the mother become, among other things,
the transmitter of the good or bad image of the family's func-
tion to the children, and also the person who often has to give
account for its failures; therefore, she herself may ultimately be
charged with these failures.

There is no doubt that all three mothers in our novels at-
tempt the same thing: to get their children on their own side,
to control their children's emotions but also their choices later
in life, which will be more or less copies of their own choices
and of the broader family pattern they have brought to this
family from their own families-of-origin. They definitely love
their children, but this is a suffocating love which does not
leave them any space for individuation. Above all, the main
target in their minds is always how they will manage to estrange

their children from their ineffectual fathers. In Anastasea's novel, Amalia unreservedly accepts that:

> Όταν οι γιοι μου ήτανε μικροί τους έδειχνα την πολυ-
> θρόνα μου μπροστά στο παράθυρο κι ύστερα τη δικιά του
> άδεια θέση στο τραπέζι για να μπορέσουν να καταλάβουν
> κι εκείνοι, ποιο είναι το δικό μου μερτικό, κι αυτό που
> ήταν του πατέρα τους και το δικό τους. Όχι πως είχαν
> κανένα άλλο φταίξιμο πέρα από το αίμα τους, που είναι
> τόσο δικό του όσο και δικό μου. Το 'καμα για να τους
> μείνει χαραγμένο στο μυαλό γερά, κι ας ήτανε μικροί, ότι
> ο άνθρωπος, από την ώρα που γεννιέται, κουβαλάει μέσα
> του αυτό το σμίξιμο σαν σερμαγιά, κι όλα τα υπόλοιπα,
> όσο να 'ρθεί ο καιρός ν' αναπαυθεί, πάνω σε τούτο αυγα-
> ταίνουνε, έτσι καθώς το 'λεγε η μάνα μου, και το κακό και
> το καλό, εδώ μπαίνουν τα πανωτόκια και το διάφορο.
> Τούτο τους το 'μαθα πρώτα απ' όλα. (282)

Eleni, in Politopoulou's novel, feels that only with her mother confined to bed, as she is now, does she dare to talk directly to her father about her deeper emotions and feelings for him – that is by addressing these letters to him – something which she would never have done if her mother was well and able to walk. Moreover, Savina, in Chourmouziadou's novel, did not allow her daughter to get close to her father, who, before he ran away, used to return home after each journey; she even hid the presents he brought her, while she always claimed that Maria was "her little girl" (το κοριτσάκι της). She finally manages to estrange her daughter entirely from her father. The mother in Politopoulou's novel has a similar attitude; her daughter (the narrator, Eleni) says:

> Έγραψα <<δε με άφηνε>>. Δεν είπε ποτέ βέβαια <<μην πας>>.
> Έλεγε κάτι άλλο, πολύ φαρμακερό. Έλεγε <<το Λενάκι δε
> θέλει>>. Έλεγε <<το Λενάκι δεν μπορεί τα ταξίδια, ζαλί-
> ζεται>>. Έλεγε <<το Λενάκι κρυολογεί εύκολα, άφησε, μιαν
> άλλη φορά, έχει ψύχρα>>. Τέτοια έλεγε. Κι εγώ έγινα σιγά
> σιγά εικόνα και ομοίωση του λόγου της. Δεν μου αρέσουν
> τα ταξίδια. Είμαι μονίμως κρυωμένη. Ζαλίζομαι στο αυτο-
> κίνητο. (46)

This patronising attitude extends to other more serious aspects
of the children's lives, such as the choice of a profession (in
the same novel), when the mother pressurises her son, Yannis,
to study engineering and advises her daughters how to become
"little witches" in order to cope in a man's world.

In Anastasea's novel, Amalia manages to destroy her two
sons' relationships with their girlfriends and cancel the immi-
nent wedding of one of them, while Maria, the daughter/
narrator in Chourmouziadou's novel, knows that her mother
would only approve a marriage for her similar to that of her
aunt, Nana, and this is the type of marriage Maria finally
chooses to have.

The transmission of stereotypes of the two genders, as an-
other means of undermining the position and authority of their
husbands, is one more aspect of the mothers' manipulation in
these novels. Feeling unhappy in their marriages, they all
appear to put the blame on their husbands, while they con-
sciously try to erode the image of the father/husband in the
eyes of their children; they often try to achieve this by attrib-
uting most of the blame to gender rather than to individual
personalities and choices. Since there is no daughter to speak in
Anastasea's novel, we have no repetition of stereotypes of
men (on the contrary we have stereotypes of women from
male members of the broader family), apart from Amalia's
systematic efforts to blur the personality of her ex-husband in
the eyes of the boys.

By contrast, the two daughters in the other two novels
have been made to feel differently. For Eleni, the daughter/
narrator in Politopoulou's novel, men are neither bad or good:
they are simply irresponsible; they are like cats, she says:

Κατά βάθος, να ξέρεις, πιστεύω πως οι άντρες είναι γάτοι.
Ούτε περιστέρια, ούτε λύκοι, ούτε καν κόκορες. Κεραμιδό-
γατοι είσαστε όλοι, που σας φορτώσανε ευθύνες που δεν
αντέχετε. Και μας φορτώνετε τη δυσαρέσκειά σας που σας
κατεβάζουμε εμείς οι γυναίκες και τα παιδιά από τα
κεραμίδια σας να βοηθήσετε στην περιπολία και στο

τάισμα. Και πάντα ανάμεσα στη μητέρα και στον πατέρα τόση ένταση! Η ένταση που φέρνει η απαίτηση του άλλου να είσαι καλός σ' ένα ρόλο που δε θέλεις να παίξεις. Τη μισώ αυτήν την απαίτηση που μέσα της μεγάλωσα. (30)

For Maria, the daughter/narrator in Chourmouziadou's novel, fathers are simply ineffectual:

Οι πατεράδες δεν έχουν απάντηση για όλα, ακόμα κι αν είναι κοσμογυρισμένοι. Δεν έχουν απαντήσεις, αλλά ξέρουν να κουνάνε το κεφάλι ή να ειρωνεύονται νομίζοντας ότι έτσι καλύπτουν την αδυναμία τους. Κι ο δικός μου ήταν τόσο αδύναμος που τότε τον λυπόμουν. Τώρα μπορώ να θυμώνω μαζί του. (92-3)

However, in all three novels, fathers (and consequently men in general) are presented as sentimental, prone to the pleasures of life, faithful to their personal ideology, though not necessarily faithful to their wives, and generally as weak and ineffectual characters who would rather escape than stay and face the difficulties of family life. On the contrary, women are presented (here by their children, of course) as strong, rationalistic, practical and efficient, though manipulative, who take full advantage of their husband's absence or limited presence in order to influence their children's views to their own benefit.[12]

As a result of the generally unpleasant familial situation described so far, but also the little room left to them for sufficient individuation, most of these fictional children (as undoubtedly happens with children of similar families in real life) develop low self-esteem themselves and seem to repeat their parents' mistakes to a large extent. More precisely, as we have already said, it is the primary "triad" that offers the necessary source of identity to the self. Based on the learning experience while belonging to this primary "triad", the child determines his/her place in the world and how much he/she can trust other people

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[12] One gets the impression that not only the male characters but also most of the female characters in these novels tend to be stereotypically constructed.

in his/her relationships with them. This learning experience is based on the types of communication he/she gets used to as a child. If the type of communication encountered in his/her family is full of inconsistencies and contradictions and aims to repress rather than build up a relationship that would ideally be based on equality, then he/she learns that he/she cannot sense the plain truth of what is said and will have to look to the "meta-communication" level[13] for the interpretation of what the parents really mean. This lack of openness feels like a rejection for the child: he/she feels that he/she is not worthy of his/her parents' trust and of a fair and straightforward communication; thus he/she develops low self-esteem. Satir and Baldwin (1983) see four possibilities for this child: first, he/she may try to be a nice, docile child or adult who always placates others by feeling that he/she has no worth; second, to be, on the contrary, a person who blames everybody in order to boost his/her self-esteem; third, to deny his/her emotions for fear of becoming uncontrollable; or finally, to act erratically, unpredictably and inappropriately.

To return to our three novelistic families, Chourmou-ziadou's heroine (the daughter) appears to be the most complex, the most fully-developed and thus the most interesting case of a child of a dysfunctional family. Having experienced the deficiencies of her parents in their own relationship but also in their relationship with her, Maria learns to keep a low profile and be a seemingly nice, docile child who never reveals her own feelings, as a way to survive in this troubled family with the fewest possible traumas (much in line with the first of the above possibilities). Hiding her feelings and pretending not to have complicated thoughts become the main features of the pseudo-self she develops, which will follow her throughout her life. This may render her an efficient personal secretary but not a happy person. Feeling that it is unwise to show her emotions and at the same time that other people's emotions are not real,

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[13] For example, eye-rolling, shrugs, tonal qualities, facial gestures etc.

she cannot develop fair and honest relationships with either friends or lovers (she believes for instance that intimacy is the enemy of love and that friends become dangerous if they are allowed to come too close); consequently she has no stable partner or close friend she can really trust. It is a vicious circle, the main feature of which (being both cause and effect) is her low self-esteem. Her feeling of not being worthy is exacerbated by the fact that her mother continually compares her un-favourably with herself, and she is repeatedly told that she will never become as beautiful as her mother had been. She feels that men are not attracted to her because of her poor looks, while they are still attracted to her mother, despite her age.

While still a child, she learns to accept her mother's assaults silently, though in her turn, she assaults her disabled grandfather (who is also assaulted by her mother) since he is the easiest and most obvious target. Not daring to escape, even when she is an adult (it is well known that assault often binds the victim to the abuser), she starts assaulting her mother when she herself takes up her mother's role by becoming the bread-winner of the family (though her mother had never provided money through work).[14] By assaulting her mother she is cutting her off – she is no longer her little girl – through the anaesthetisation of her hidden feelings (the third possibility according to Satir and Baldwin); she is thus gaining the auto-nomy she has always been desperate for. These assaults build up and reach a culmination with the murder of the mother. Maria has by now developed into a cool-headed and cruel manipulator who will not hesitate even to kill her mother in order to fulfil her ambitions. However, strangely enough, even this murder is a way of conforming to her mother's dreams and ambitions about her which for years Maria was subconsciously internal-

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[14] This is a stage in a family's life called, according to family systems theory, *parentification* (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Framo 1965), in which a child becomes the strongest member in a family and has to look after the parent(s).

ising, being unable to follow a route of her own in life. But we will come back to the episode of the murder.

In Politopoulou's novel, the development of the three children is also of great interest. The reader is given a lot of information about the personalities of two of them, namely Eleni, the narrator, and Yannis. We also learn a few things about Marina from her sister Eleni, though not enough to form a clear view of her. An interesting detail about the life of that family which is closely relevant to the development of the children's personalities is the fact that, according to Eleni, their mother denied them and their father the right to speak; this of course does not mean that she literally forbade them to speak but that they were always told off when they expressed a view different from hers, so they gradually developed the habit of keeping their thoughts to themselves: only the mother spoke in that family, and she spoke on behalf of everybody else, including the father. Similarly, both children (Eleni and Yannis) developed a tendency to withdraw into silence and possessed a low capacity for communication. Eleni, who is confined to the world of her imagination, first started "talking" (that is writing) to her father only after her mother became incapacitated. Eleni thus also develops a low-key personality by not revealing her feelings (not daring to speak) and tries to pass as unnoticed as possible in the family.

Yannis, on the other hand, though never able to communicate properly, literally lost any ability to speak after his mother's injury, for which he was responsible; now in a mental hospital, he communicates with his sister only in the sign language he used when he worked as a ship's telegraphist. According to Eleni's interpretation, he left like the father in order to distance himself from the mother he very much loved. It was after he moved to live with his mother that he started paying her back for the assaults he had received as a child:

> Μα το καημένο το κακό της το αγόρι θύμωσε τόσο πολύ
> όταν δεν μπορούσε να συνεννοηθεί, οργίστηκε τόσο με την
> έλλειψη εμπιστοσύνης, επειδή εκείνη δεν πίστευε αυτό που

της έλεγε, που την άρπαξε και την τράνταξε και της έλεγε:
«Μόνο εγώ σε αγαπάω! Μόνο εγώ σου λέω την αλήθεια.
Είμαι ο τελευταίος επισκέπτης. Μετά θα έρθει ο χάρος».
    Και μετά κατάλαβε πως δεν αντιδρούσε πια, δεν προ-
σπαθούσε να σηκώσει το μπαστούνι της και να τον χτυ-
πήσει, όπως παλιά σήκωνε την ξύλινη κουτάλα και τον
βαρούσε. Κατάλαβε πως κάτι είχε συμβεί, την άφησε, και
το γέρικο κορμί έπεσε κάτω. Είχε σκάσει. (141)

Thus, from being a person initially belonging to the first of
Satir and Baldwin's possibilities above, as an adult he develops a
personality of unpredictable behaviour.

Interestingly enough, the assault in Yannis's childhood was
also related to food:[15] Yannis was once forced to eat his vomit,
while all the children were forced by both parents to eat things
which they did not want. According to Eleni, this assault over
food, but also the craving they developed for particular types
of food, was a kind of communication between the members of
the family and particularly between parents and children, as
there could be no proper communication. The result of all this
is that both Eleni and Yannis are now bulimic and obese. Their
need for huge amounts of food is due, according to Eleni, to an
emotional hunger (συναισθηματική πείνα) or, according to
family systems theory, to "father hunger". Whatever the term,
there is no doubt that their bulimia is the result of an emotional
gap, opened in childhood, and a sense of worthlessness which
they attempt to cure through the pleasure of eating.

Finally, Marina, is considered (by Eleni) as the only
member of the family who survived all these experiences with
minimal psychological losses and without bulimic tendencies.
However, the fact that at some point she left (like the father)
and never returned means that she does not feel absolutely safe:
she needs the physical distance in order to remain emotionally
distant and, thus, sane.

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[15] Catering is included in the everyday practices of a family and is also
one of the various obligations of parents to their children.

In Anastasea's novel, the two boys are described, through the different perspectives employed in the novel, as strange and as rather unsociable characters – a quality that can be easily attributed to their specific familial conditions. In the beginning they are presented as being very attached to each other, since they never had their own friends, but after Petros abandons the family, they no longer appear close to each other and they develop different personalities.

Petros paid his mother back for the assaults he had suffered as a child, such as when she used to smear their lips with pepper if they said something against her behaviour (her self-enclosure in the house for instance) or, even worse, when she informed the school about his arrest by the police for gambling.[16] According to what other people think of him, but also according to his own thoughts when he is focalised, he is a person who wants to enjoy his life, who changes choices and decisions very often, and who does not trust or forgive anybody.

In contrast, Argyris, the younger son who stayed with the mother, is presented as an extremely weak personality who never managed to rid himself of her influence – and her oppression – never assaulted her and allegedly developed an incestuous love for her; the only decision he managed to take in his life, which his mother apparently disapproved of, was to get engaged to Elli. However, on the very night of this engagement, Elli caught him playing an erotic game with his mother in her embrace. Finally, Argyris cancelled his wedding and split up with Elli because, when he had to choose between the two women, he chose his mother. Thus, Petros is considered as acting erratically and unpredictably in his life up to now, while Argyris is another case of a low-key and introverted character.

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[16] Unable to withstand the humiliation the headmaster had inflicted on him in front of the school assembly, and his mother's treachery in informing his teachers, he left her and returned ten years later, that is approximately at the onset of her hunger-strike, demanding his share of the family property.

What is striking in all these stories, however, is that, in their own lives, these children, or at least the majority of them, have copied the actions and behaviour of their parents, who had themselves copied them from their own parents and so on, since it is stated clearly in these texts that their personalities changed in response to their family experiences. This is actually the very assumption Chourmouziadou's novel seems to have been based on and which it attempts to prove. This is how the novel starts:

Λένε ότι δεν μπορεί παρά να τους μοιάσεις. Ότι κάποια στιγμή σκίζουν τη λεπτή μεμβράνη που θεωρείς εαυτό σου, βγαίνουν στην επιφάνεια και σου γνέφουν θλιμμένα. Μπορεί όμως και να γελάσουν χαιρέκακα μαζί σου. Αν τους έχεις αντισταθεί, ίσως σου πουν: Βλέπεις; Την πάτησες! Τώρα θα καταλάβεις πώς νοιώσαμε κι εμείς! Λένε πως ο αγώνας εναντίον τους είναι άνισος και πως ό,τι σου έκαναν αυτοί θα το επαναλάβεις κι εσύ στα δικά σου παιδιά. Κάποια ανθεκτικά χαρακτηριστικά θα διυλίζονται από τους προηγούμενους στους επόμενους. Κάποιες κινήσεις θα επαναλαμβάνονται στο διηνεκές, κάποιες πολύ προσωπικές εκφράσεις θα μεταφέρονται στην αιωνιότητα. Ασφαλώς μπορείς να τους αντισταθείς, να τραβήξεις άλλο δρόμο και να τους προδώσεις. Μπορείς τουλάχιστον να το προσπαθήσεις, δίνοντας μάχες μέρα σε μέρα, χωρίς να ησυχάζεις στιγμή, αφού ποτέ δεν ξέρεις ποια γωνία θα διαλέξουν για να πεταχτούν ξανά μπροστά σου, ποια ώρα της μέρας ή της νύχτας θα σε πλησιάσουν αθόρυβα από πίσω και θα βάλουν το χέρι τους στον ώμο σου. (9)

Instead of attributing the development of a character to genetic inheritance, family systems theory would see it as the result of the impact of the family (and by this we mean mainly that of parents) on its members; in real life, of course, this view is extremely important, in the sense that the development of

character is viewed through a dynamic and not a static per-
spective and thus as being susceptible of improvement.[17]

Thus, the "transgenerational transmission of beliefs, atti-
tudes and symptoms", which we mentioned before, seems to
appear in all three fictional families at different levels. In
Anastasea's novel, Amalia chooses a particular attitude towards
her husband because her mother did exactly the same after
Amalia abandoned the family home. We learn that after her
escape, Amalia's father gave up his work, and both parents,
following her mother's advice, remained confined to their
home; they did not come out of the house even when the city
was on fire, during the Asia Minor disaster, with the result that
they were burnt alive. Moreover, when Amalia gives an account
(the only one in the whole novel) of her actions and choices in
life, it is the memory of her own mother's words that she
seems to be following faithfully.

Her elder son, Petros, appears to be the one most prone to
follow this pattern of "transgenerational transmission". He is
obstinate and tough like his mother, but also prone to pleasure-
-seeking like his father (always according to what the other
characters accuse him of) and he follows the example of both
by running away. He comes back like his father (who also
wanted to settle property issues upon his return), but unlike
what had happened to him, Petros is now allowed to stay.

In Politopoulou's novel, all the children seem to be
following in the footsteps of their parents as the parents them-
selves have done. More precisely, the children's maternal
grandmother had always felt that her husband was not up to the
standards of her own wealthy family; as we have seen, that is
precisely the case with the children's mother, who constantly
complained at her husband about money matters. It may also be
the case that the children's mother chose such a husband so
that she could create a family similar to her own family-of-

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[17] However, even within family systems theory, there are those (Bowen
1985) who believe that the biological make-up of each person makes
him/her more or less prone to follow the family's paradigm.

origin. Likewise, the children's paternal grandfather had frit-
tered away much of his fortune on gambling and prostitutes; we
know that Eleni's father also visited brothels.

To come to the children themselves, Marina repeated her
father's actions by running away and never returning. Of the
other two, Yannis kept on leaving for place after place,
though, unlike his father, he returned in order to bring up his
own child. Eleni, however, stayed, as her mother did; actually
she settled down with her new family in the same neighbour-
hood and to some extent repeated her mother's life, as she her-
self accepts. Unlike her parents, she managed to have a
functional relationship with her husband; she, however, man-
aged to amass considerable wealth much in line with what her
mother would have wanted and, as her mother had done to her,
she made her daughter obese. Her friends consider her as being
"down-to-earth" like her mother and she invents fairy-tales
just as her mother did.

Finally, in Chourmouziadou's novel, the repetition model is
particularly interesting, even though it does not involve three
generations as happens with the other two fictional families.[18]
As we have said, the writer attempts to show that people
repeat, with some variations, the lives of their parents, even if
they are determined not to do so. What Maria, the main char-
acter and narrator, does by the end of the novel, and contrary
to her initial intentions, is exactly what her mother wanted her
to do; she has done this with such commitment that she does
not even spare her mother's life in order to achieve it; on top
of that, she is even certain that her mother would be com-
pletely happy with the outcome.

We have already seen that her mother would very much
have liked to be in the shoes of her sister, Nana: while Nana
was still alive, her mother used to cut out photos and gossip
articles about Nana's social life from newspapers and life-style

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[18] We could say here, however, that Savina's husband closely resembled
her father, as far as personality and behaviour are concerned; thus he
might have been chosen by her because of this.

magazines and collect them; she also always dressed in Nana's second-hand clothes until the day of her own death. She repeatedly told Maria that she would like her to follow in the footsteps of her own sister (and Maria's godmother, in other words of her spiritual mother), since she considered herself unable to act as a life model for Maria. In this sense, Nana functions here as the double of Maria's mother.

Maria plans all her moves meticulously and carefully: in order to ensure that she could successfully take the place of Nana, she had to get rid of her mother, for fear she might attempt to attract the interest of her future husband as she always did in the past with other women's lovers: while on holiday on the island of Patmos, Maria arranged a trip on a sailing-boat for her mother and Maria's latest lover (whom her mother had just taken from her) on a day with a rough sea; Maria was supposed to go with them, but at the very last minute she failed to do so. Although there were traces of a gas explosion on the boat, the police, having searched the wreckage afterwards, did not suspect anything and attributed the wreck to the extremely treacherous weather conditions.

Therefore, in the same way that Nana "buried" her father in her sister's house so that his political past would not cast a shadow over her bright future in the family of her tycoon husband, Maria literally buried her rival – her mother– in order to materialise her own dreams of affluence in the same family – which, ironically, were precisely her mother's dreams for her daughter. Maria herself accepts that she follows her mother's choices and behaviours; in essence she copies her mother's substitute (that is her mother's sister), closely following her mother's desire.

To conclude, the three texts we have examined here constitute part of a large group of novels which focus mainly or exclusively on the characters' private lives, that is on their personal or family problems and not on those caused by a hostile society, political regime or historical events, as was the case with the great majority of novels until the beginning of

the 1980s – and this in itself constitutes an innovation in the history of Modern Greek literature. Here, politics, when it exists, is a minor decorative element that contributes to the weaving of the story's general context rather than a crucial and decisive factor in the development of plot; in fact, in the three novels we have examined here, involvement in politics and particularly in the Left is considered an out-of-date attitude that has negative effects on the families' transgenerational development. More precisely, in *The personal secretary* and *House of guilt*, several misfortunes are attributed to the left-wing political past of parents or grandparents; interestingly enough, the character/narrator in Politopoulou's novel chooses not to vote in elections, while she advises her own twelve-year-old daughter to give money to charities like UNESCO; this latter choice is promoted as an alternative to involvement in politics, since it appears in the same semantic and textual context in the novel. Thus, international and private initiatives seem to have replaced local and political ones.

Greek families seem to have been going through a period of significant changes recently, at least according to these novels; this may be due to several internal and external reasons, which include the ease with which Greeks get to know non-Greek cultures through various channels of information such as the media, travel, the accommodation of immigrants and tourism. The attack on the structure and function of the Greek family in these novels appears to be sweeping and at the same time unique; moreover, what is also striking is the fact that these novels, which fiercely attack not merely the Greek family but particularly the role of the mother in it, are written by women. Apart from treating it as an accidental phenomenon, which we undoubtedly could, we can also easily attribute it to the fact that it is chiefly women as daughters who have so far been the main victims of their mothers' oppressive role in their families, given the special status of the mother-daughter relation-

ship in Greece;[19] this role involved, among other things, the reproduction and transmission, generation after generation, of a culture of social stereotypes, which has itself contributed significantly to the continuation of women's subordinate position in society. In this sense, it is not simply the family structure that is attacked here but society itself, since it is through traditional social and cultural practices that this family structure is transmitted and perpetuated, generation after generation, without the circle ever breaking. It does not seem accidental, however, that all three mothers in the novels – the main transmitters and continuators of culture – either die or become incapacitated and are thus no longer able to intervene in the lives of their family members.

The Greek family needs a considerable amount of change at any cost, according to the message – or even the wish – of these texts, and this change will take place only if and when the traditional role of the Greek mother changes. In the words of Eleni, the daughter-narrator of Politopoulou's novel:

Μπορείς να μου πεις πώς θα γλιτώσει από αυτά τα δεσμά η ελληνική οικογένεια αν δεν ειπωθούν τα πράγματα με τ' όνομά τους; Αν δεν βγει προς τα έξω αυτό που μας βασανίζει; Οι πιο πολλοί σώζονται αναπαράγοντας την ίδια κατάσταση; (52)

Έτσι κι εμείς, και μόνο με την ιδέα πως θα άνοιγε το στόμα της για να κατηγορήσει, να βρίσει, να εξευτελίσει, προτιμούσαμε όλοι να κάνουμε το γρηγορότερο αυτό που ήθελε. Που στο βάθος δεν ήταν αυτό που ήθελε βέβαια, αλλά αυτό είναι μια άλλη μεγάλη ιστορία. [...] Έτσι αντέγραψε, όπως κάνουν τόσες, το πρότυπο της μητέρας αράχνης που ήξερε απ' το σόι της. Η αυταρχική εξουσία της Ελληνίδας που φορτώνει τους άλλους ενοχή και στέρηση. Και που

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[19] According to Dubisch (1991), the mother-daughter relationship, as well as that of maternal grandmother-granddaughter, is particularly strong and able to form a kind of atypical alliance within families. Viewed as a cultural phenomenon, the rupture in this relationship presented in these three novels and the attack on the mother by her own daughter may be another indication of a recent change in Greek culture.

κανείς δεν τολμάει να μιλήσει για το πόσο υπέφερε στα χέρια της ιερής μητέρας. (51)

At least these women writers, however, have finally dared. They have dared to defy the taboo and speak in favour of more functional families and thus of a fairer society. They have dared to speak against their own gender, though, and against the only unquestionable authority women in Greece still seem to possess, that is their authority within and over their families, and this definitely involves a certain amount of courage. Besides, questioning the very familial authority of Greek women seems to constitute the only ideological stance of these novels in the absence of any other serious preoccupation with political ideology. Are we entitled to conclude by asking whether contemporary Greek fiction has recently moved from state politics to the politics of the family?

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