

Greek history in kaleidoscopic vision of Maro Douka's characters: narrative strategies unifying individual and historical experience

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The research is devoted to the narrative techniques of contemporary Greek novelist Maro Douka. Her novels dwell mostly on women's way through the troubled years of the Greek history. They possess deep insight into the individual consciousness still keeping the social and political events in focus. Douka is free in integrating the Western European and Greek literary techniques upon which she builds on her own original manner of writing. Her works, being addressed to some burning and controversial issues, undermine the conventional opinion of women's writing as the one limited to themes of low social topicality.

The work involves the narrative and structural analysis as well as the comparative analysis that juxtaposes the works by women writers in Greek and Ukrainian. The research is based on comparing the narrative strategies of Maro Douka (in *Fool's Gold*, 1979) and famous Ukrainian poetess and novelist Lina Kostenko (in *The Notes of a Ukrainian Madman*, 2010) in order to find out the way the narrative strategies can serve different artistic purposes in reflecting social and historical events.

Both novels belong to the pen of contemporary women writers and dwell on the destiny of individuals against the background of social troubles and unrest. Both novels were written not long after the events described. Each writer chooses her own set of literary techniques, devices and imagery, and achieves creation of a certain picture. According to Argiro Mantoglou, «Today, much of women's writing can in fact be seen as an attempt not so much to define an isolated individual ego as to discover a collective concept of subjectivity which foregrounds the construction of identity in relation to the world» (Mantoglou 2002, 171). These features are definitely characteristic of the Ukrainian women writers as well as of the Greek ones.

The leading strategy of both novels is showing the events from the first point of view perspective which allows the reader to inhabit the world of one character (the autodiagetic narrator) fully, to experience the sense of immediacy and credibility. In both novels the first-person narrator is involved in the world of the story, and the *narrating I* is, in fact, the *experiencing I*. The narrative form is also very similar – a diary, with the only difference of the vantage point in terms of temporary distance: Maro Douka's character Myrsini Panayoutou, a student involved in the underground resistance against the dictatorship, describes the events of the past years trying to distance herself from them in order to understand them and analyse herself; Lina Kostenko's insane person (anonymous one) writes notes daily as the last chance of not to fall into the abyss of insanity which has gulped (as he thinks) the whole society.

Maro Douka's story also has a kind of framing: at the beginning Myrsini starts filling in a questionnaire for some political group which fascinates her as the possibility to sort out all the hows and whys: "Ever since I'd joined the Left, in the way of things at that time, I'd been constantly having to account for myself. To the point that even when nobody else bothered to cross-examine me I'd put myself in the dock, it had become second nature to me. There is truth in what they say: things hurt less if you talk about them, at least you don't feel so bad. I'd got into the habit of talking to myself constantly, like someone who's come to grief and can't accept

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the fact. So I keep on losing the thread, never quite get things right, and when I catch up with myself, by then it's too late. I'm hemmed in by the surface of reality that's none of my making. I don't try to prove a point, I just ramble on. The point is that if *I* can't work out what it is that makes me tick, I can hardly expect anybody else to do it for me. The more I talk the more futile the sound of my own voice becomes to me: a delicious panic takes hold of me, my pulses race; just around the corner I'm going to make the discovery that will change everything. I feel I'm circling closer and closer to something fantastically important – a sort of fatal attraction – but I would care to go too close. I'm marking time, it's a heady, intoxicated feeling – a touch of impatience too. How long can I expect to keep it up, this taut, suspended state, something to weigh in the balance against the idea of my own death?

That's putting it rather grandly. The honest truth is that during these last months I've kept myself on a pretty loose rein, I've enjoyed myself turning over the pages of the past" (Douka 1991, 9-10).

And after long ramblings over her life (occupying 300 pages) Myrsini comes back to the present reality understanding her inability to answer the questions: "It had given me a real shock, as though suddenly I'd seen my whole life simplified, implacably and absurdly, into a handful of questions" (Douka 1991, 311). Her answers fitted a single page without comments on her strengths and weaknesses: "Sometimes I feel like a god, and sometimes the merest creature" (Douka 1991, 312).

The presence of Maro Douka herself in *Fool's Gold* can be felt through some autobiographic details. Some critics (Αγγελος Φουριώτης 1980, 5; Κώστας Σταματίου 1980, 8) stress it out grounding their conclusions on the fact that the writer herself belongs to the antijunta youth and shares her experience and feelings, portrays the generation that «marked by blood their first steps on the roads to freedom» («...χάραξε μ' αίμα τ' αρχικά της στους δρόμους της ελευθερίας» (Σταματίου 1987, 57). The fact of the author living through the years of the notorious dictatorship of the "Colonels" and the bloody events of the 17th November 1973 with the tanks evicting the students from the Athens Polytechnic makes us believe the character/narrator who matures into an independent and politically aware woman throughout this period. The writer says that "the events of the historical past or actual present take part in creating characteristics and psychology of my characters, they are coloured by my own experience and adapted to my vision of the composition and type of narrative «τα γεγονότα από το ιστορημένο παρελθόν είτε από την ρευστή επικαιρότητα...συμβάλουν στην ανάδειξη των χαρακτηριστικών και του ψυχισμού των επινοημένων προσώπων, προσαρμόζονται στη δική μου αντίληψη αφήγησης και πλοκής»» (Δούκα 2006, 350).

One more factor that contributes to the full-blood image of the main character is the inclusion of her body, physical life into the story. We see a sincere account of Myrsini's sexual affairs, revelations about losing her virginity, sexual compatibility with different partners. Her body life is a great part of her life experience. The heroine recollects her first meeting John, the man she adored: "From the first moment I'd set eyes on him I'd wanted him; I felt wild, and tensed all over like an animal caught in a trap" (Douka 1991, 12). And then admits her later disillusion: "I'd have had more pleasure from the scent of shampoo in his hair than from his odourless caresses" (Douka 1991, 15). Due to such scenes the whole novel is emotionally charged. Most of the allusions (to Elytis's poetry, Ritsos' Moonlight Sonata, as well as to Western European poets and writers) are on the emotional side, too.

The heroine is emancipated enough living independently, obtaining higher education and having her own political convictions she is ready to go through tortures for. Myrsini breaks the conventional image of a patriarchal type of a woman though she has to admit she has to break through the demands of the others and her pretensions. She does not allow the men (her father,

fiancé, friends) manipulate her in any way. As Maro Douka admitted herself (the letter to L. Banakh of January 20, 2006), «το θέμα της γυναίκας για μένα είχε να κάνει με μια βαθύτερη πολιτική συνειδητοποίηση» (Δούκα 2006). Myrsini strives to free herself of the will of her parents and the beloved man, of the ideological and social labels and stereotypes. She is self-sustained: «Μου αρκεί το πρόσωπό μου κι έτσι θα ζήσω» (Δούκα 1979, 271). Her voice is mostly calm but rising sometimes from reflective tranquility to rare outbreaks of anger. The character of Myrsini has a distinct personality with definite values and motivations. The language she speaks – with many youth colloquialisms and idioms – is appropriate for her social status and family background and contributes to her sensitive and economical portrayal. Even sentence structure is peculiar: variety in sentence length creates powerful writing showing some rhythm changes while the narrator's shifting from reflective mood to describing some actions.

Myrsini – the narrator – presents a great variety of other characters (family members, relatives, friends, comrades) with their unique life stories; their voices can be heard and distinguished.

Lina Kostenko describes the recent events in the political and social life of the Ukrainian society (President Kuchma's rule and the Orange revolution), but she distances herself from her character who is a 35-year-old computer programmer with a painful consciousness about everything that is going on. The man claims that he has always been a sane person, has no hereditary lunatism (no phonies among the relatives and ancestors), but before the beginning of the millennium he feels that he goes crazy: "Wanted to go to the Canarias Inlands. Not because of the resort, the ocean, exotics. Because I read in some magazine that there, somewhere high in the mountains, in evergreen forests, there is a tribe that do not speak to one another but whistle. So I thought – if only we would not speak but whistle. As we've said so much that absolutely lost the sense" (hereinafter – the translation is done by the author of the article). – "Захотів на Канари. Не тому, що курорт, океан, екзотика. А тому, що вчитав у одному журналі, що там десь високо у горах, у вічнозелених нетрях є племя, яке не говорить між собою, а пересвистується. І я подумав – от якби й у нас не говорили, а пересвистувались. Бо стільки вже наговорено, до цілковитої втрати смислу" (Костенко 2011, 6). Lina Kostenko creates this bizarre situation in order to diagnose the whole society instead of psychological portrayal of her miserable hero. That's not for nothing that most of the allusions in the novel to great Russian satirical writer Gogol.

In an ironic and pessimistic manner the main hero takes down all the catastrophes, accidents, advertisements, horoscope predictions spotlighted in the news (which he picks out at random) and some details of his uneventful life. As Ivan Dzuba puts it, "it's a striking chronicle of an intellectual soul in the world of absurdity", "lived through individual consciousness, the events boost emotional and intellectual tension" (Дзюба 2010). The character's insanity is somehow symbolic stressing the lack of true communication as the cause of social malaise and intimate problems. Kostyantyn Rodik calls it a "reflective story dominated by "phantom pains of a soul" (Kostenko), but criticizes the hero's psychology as unconvincing (Родик 2011). The critic is right putting down the psychological aspect of the novel, but he does not take into account the artistic purpose. The writer is a recorder of the spirit of the times illuminating the secluded facets rather than a psychologist. The strange, trans-psychological character with his superior insight defamiliarises the vision of the world and challenges our views. The story is presented in the text through the mediation of some prism of the narrator's insanity. His emotive language is highly charged with metaphors ("centrifuge of idiocy"), puns ("I lose my grounds, she loses her temper") and other stylistic devices, and contributes into creating a certain atmosphere. Lina Kostenko uses internal focalisation locating the perspective within the character and limiting the information to his perceptual and conceptual grasp of the world.

The characters in the *Notes of a Ukrainian Madman* are not given names, they are marked as types (wife, father who belongs to the generation of the 60's, step-brother called Teenager, mother-in-law, etc). Even the body life of the character comes to nothing: "At night she [wife] asks: – Do we have love or sex? – I keep silent, I don't know, for me it has always been both, now it is somehow separate things, I'm afraid I can be "switched off", though I like to see my wife's happy eyes, but she is so irritable now, and we do not recognize each other." – "Вночі вона питає: це у нас секс чи любов? – я мовчу, я не знаю, у мене це завжди було разом, тепер це чомусь окремо, боюся, що перемкне, а люблю, коли в жінки щасливі очі, а вона тепер така роздратована, і ми одне одного не впізнаємо" (Костенко 2011, 9). The hero is no longer a stronger sex in his wife's eyes, she is not really a weaker vessel in his.

So we can observe the estrangement of the "insane" hero in most spheres: in his private life ("we don't recognize each other"), in his social life ("they substituted our Ukraine"), even in his language (the hero can speak the language of computer programs easily, but he is not welcomed speaking his native one; he feels his beautiful native language is abused and detrimented by people – "the language is like nightingale singing, but they twitter god knows what").

As Wolf Schmid states, "one of the dichotomies of narratology is the opposition between "events" (happenings) and the narrated story (Шмид 2012, 158). So each narrated story is the result of selection of separate elements out of infinite number of "atoms" of events and the meaningless number of events turns into the meaningful story (Шмид 2012, 159). Heiden White points out the similarity of the work of a historian and a writer (White 1978). These ideas are especially relevant when applied to *Fool's Gold* by Maro Douka. The selection is done by the narrator (Myrsini) through her perspective and point of view. The events/happenings narrated belong to several planes (where even time and space are subjectively perceived): political life, private life, life of the subconsciousness. Thus, the historical events are given mostly in chronological order with several references to the distant and non-distant past. Dates and historical realias (1974, 1967; eve of the coup d'état, Dictatorship) are exact. Though there are some time-shifts when diverse stories are presented. The time of emotional life is marked differently being subdivided, for example, into "Before Paul" and "After Paul". The nightdream plane is anachronical, mixing everything into quaint images. The heroine's dreams serve as a symbolic interpretation of her inner tensions and may foreshadow some events. Some dreams can be interpreted in the psychoanalytical terms revealing her Electra complex (about women soaping her father in a tub) or her feeling of insecurity (nursing a bird with a broken wing), some dreams are of a general symbolism – about her grandmother Myrsini, a woman of breathtaking beauty: "...But I often dream about it. Stepping lightly among the honeysuckle and ivy, and then I find myself in the little room with the young woman at her weaving. I catch my breath at the radiant beauty of my father's mother, so I awake. Sometimes in fear, sometimes in embarrassment. Many things are said about my Grandmother Myrsini" (Douka 1991, 37). That archetype of a weaving woman known from Homer mingles into a grandmother's image stressing on the one hand the unbroken thread of history, on the other – our ancestors' souls living in us. The heroine is involved in all the planes/spheres. Her vision presents a kaleidoscopic picture: different separate pieces create a unified picture without mingling into the whole. Myrsini is entangled in her world trying to sort out and define her political convictions, personal inclinations and likings apart from the influence of her family background and her surrounding, she goes through a painful process of self-identification.

Nevertheless, the novel is something more than the presentation of self-revelations of a student who found herself "staring the dictatorship in the face" (Douka 1991, 61) and still remaining a

feeling young female longing for love. Her story includes numerous stories of other people, of both their private life or political struggle. Myrsini is positioned within a constellation of believable, engaging figures. Myrsini finds it hard to define her place among them: «Με μένα δεν ξέρω πού στράβωνε κι είχα τόσες δυσκολίες. Απ'τη μιά απωθούσα το περιβάλλον που μ'ανάθρεψε, απ'την άλλη μ'απωθούσε ο χώρος όπου προσπαθούσα να ενταχτώ (Δούκα 1979, 248).

Maro Douka's character of Myrsini ignites some contradictions among the critics: some (Κ. Σταματίου) claim that the writer tried to create «a social, political, ideological book» («ένα βιβλίο κοινωνικό, πολιτικό, ιδεολογικό (Σταματίου 1987, 5) about a women of a new type, some saw her as «unadaptable», «disorganized», «miserable», reading Rilke instead of political pamphlets, and taking part in the resistance to overcome the boredom. Maro Douka writes: «Το μυθιστόρημα στην ουσία του δεν θα ήταν παρά η εσωτερική δοκιμασία και η προσπάθεια μιας νέας γυναίκας για αυτογνωσία μέσα στο περιβάλλον της, όχι μόνο οικογενειακό αλλά και το κοινωνικό» (Δούκα 2006, 135). Myrsini's self-identification undergoes physical and moral sufferings, re-estimation of some values. She comes to rejection of relations that are not based on mutual respect, of love that involves unfaithfulness and humiliation. She won't commit suicide as her mother did because of a man.

The specific narrative forms involved by Maro Douka are the entrusted narrative (the author's function is entrusted to the main character which makes the writing more plausible, impresses with the effect of authenticity of the described events), free indirect speech (when the narrator's voice merges with the voices of other characters) and indirect dialogue (that allows to perceive the character of the protagonist from different angles as well as reach authenticity in reproducing social dialects, individual manners of speech and create a polyphonic text). As Κ. Tsitsely points out, «το ιδιότυπο, τραχύ γράψιμο, ο άτακτος ρυθμός της φράσης, το λεξιλόγιο που δίνει την αίσθηση του τυχαίου, του «πεταμένου», όπως στον προφορικό λόγο» (Τσιτσέλη 1980, 14).

Maro Douka uses a unique approach which allows her follow the destinies of the individuals in tight connection with the history of Greece in the second part of the XXth century. Still the author herself manages to preserve an unbiased attitude never interfering with her commentaries and letting the action unfold and the characters present their own vision.

The "insane" hero, chosen by Lina Kostenko as the narrator, also presents several planes through his conscious mind. Events of the outside world presented as the flow, even enormous tide of information (political scandals about journalist Gongadze's assassination are mixed with reports about natural disasters, wars, diseases, funny facts, horoscopes). The message of the information flow cannot be grasped, it mingles with the external noises: "The kitchen loudspeaker is muttering and singing. The TV set is winking with a silver walleye. The telephone is jingling. Computer games are buzzing. The people next door are having their flat repaired, the brain is being drilled by an electric drill. I'm mined by those ringing and sounds. The megabits of my memory are under the heavy stone of information. I am floundering as in the sands" - "Репродуктор на кухні бубенить і виспіває. Телевізор підморгує срібним більмом. Деренчить телефон. Дзумкотять компютерні ігри. У сусідів ремонт, мозок просверлює електордрель. Я вже весь підмінований тими дзвінками і звуками. Мегабайти моєї пам'яті привалила інформація. Борсаюсь, як у пісках" (Костерко, 2011, 13). "Information used to be our loot. Now we are a loot of information" "Раніше інформація була нашою здобиччю. Тепер ми - здобич інформації" (Костерко 2011, 14).

According to the narrator, the politicians are piling lies upon lies: "Mud torrents of lies flood the society" – "Селеві потоки брехні заливають суспільство" (Костерко 2011, с.30). Не

considers we need political pathologists instead of politologists (Κοστέρο 2011, 47). All the citizens "manouvered in their words – maneuvered in their deeds" – "Заманеврували у слові, заманеврували в ділі" (Κοστέρο 2011, 80). "We have such freedom as if the sewage pipes have burst. – "У нас тепер така свобода, наче сміттєпровід прорвало" (Κοστέρο 2011, 96). So the hero distances himself from what is going on. Only several political events are marked as valuable for the narrator: these are the events of social unrest he participated in with his wife when he was young ("Revolution on the granite") and later ("Orange revolution"), though he is rather pessimistic about the consequences: "The people who have lived through the critical mass of humiliation (and tolerated it) can not be full-fledged citizens". – "Люди, які пережили критичну масу принижень (і стерпіли!), не можуть бути повноцінними громадянами" (Κοστέρο 2011, 96).

The character's family life is mostly uneventful, marked only by sad events like his mother's - in-law death, memories about his mother, sweet recollections of his students years when he met his future wife. The foreground is occupied by his insanity he plunges into.

As far as the ideological component is concerned Maro Douka presents a juxtaposition of different views. These views are understandable if we take into account the characters' social standings, limitations of vision, educational background, psychological traits. Douka does not interfere into the thoughts of the characters, even the narrator. While Lina Kostenko's authoritative narrator though claims himself a lost individual can be imposing sometimes and too critical of the others. Sometimes Kostenko speaks through her character, his response to what is going on comprises the reflexions of many people.

To sum it up, presentation of historical events in a work of fiction greatly depends upon the narrative strategy chosen by the writer: starting with the selection of the events, of the person who narrates (and select them for their narrative), the form and type of narrative, up to the interpretation and analysis of these events.

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