Many are the texts of modern Greek literature in which immigration intersects with gender and sex or romance. Assuming that intimate encounters between a Greek man and an immigrant woman establish a dialogue between identity, otherness, and desire, this paper explores the ways in which the narrative, through its focus on intercultural romances, portrays the immigrant woman character and deals with themes involving the search for identity. Since the texts chosen for study have been written by Greek writers both male and female, I will endeavour to document my view that what such texts seek to harness is not so much the experience of immigration per se, as the anxiety about a larger crisis in the representation of the Self.

The large influx of immigrant women, especially from the Balkans and the former U.S.S.R. countries, has initiated in recent years in Greece a privileged field of research bringing to the fore the inferior and poorly-paid positions they occupy: the harsh working conditions, frequently as illegal employees; the often extreme conditions of coercion and maltreatment they experience as the usual victims of illegal human trafficking, often ending up with low status at the sex market, out of which they can escape only with extreme difficulty (Droukas, 1998; Fakiolas, 2000; Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000; Lazaridis, 2001; Lazos, 2002). At the same time, women immigrants provide multiple discourses, that are indicative of an extremely interesting ambiguity, as the signs produced and/or reproduced by these discourses confront us with images of women who suffer from exploitation or violence, but also become themselves sources of exploitation; women who become an object of admiration for their external appearance, but also an object of suspicion or doubt. A common component lies in all these discourses: the sexualisation of the particular female immigrant subjects; immigrant women who are simultaneously easy, subjugated, dangerous and manipulative.

A special interest in women immigrants is also exhibited by contemporary Greek literature. This paper analyses how texts written by Greek writers both male and female in the last two decades, through a narrative plot of an intercultural romance,
are establishing a dialogue between ethnicity and gender. More specifically, assuming that in their interplay ethnicity, gender, and sexuality create a locus for a continuous recurrence of stereotyping and of shaping ethno-sexual boundaries (Gilman, 1985; Hall, 1997; Nagel, 2003), I pose in the centre of my research interest a twofold question: Do Himonas’ Broken Greek, Kourtovik’s The Longing of the Dragons, Harpantidis’ Seven Changes of Underwear, and Stavrakopoulou’s The Drunken Lady reproduce or challenge stereotyped ideas about the immigrant woman? Do they shape or override boundaries — ethnic, gendered and psychological? My purpose is to demonstrate that the texts I have selected provide an ideal space for the representation of the Other upon which authors project their anxieties about identity and the Otherness of the Self.

In the novels Broken Greek by Th. Himonas, The Longing of the Dragons by D. Kourtovik, or the short story “Seven Changes of Underwear” by K. I. Harpantidis, desire is interwoven with love, and human emotions create an initially favorable framework for intimacy with an immigrant woman. In these stories, women from Russia or Albania, prostitutes, ex-prostitutes or house-keepers, are linked, in either main plot or in a sub-plot, with Greek men living in dysfunctional families, and experiencing the existential drama of the individual that feels he has lost, or has yet to acquire, internal unity with himself. In Himonas’ Broken Greek, desire functions as a starting-point for penetrating the space of otherness. The narrator and main character, Michalis, who at the outset of the story appears to be experiencing a state of foreignness at many levels (familial, professional, social, existential), appears by its conclusion to have succeeded in giving meaning to his own existence. In his existential journey, a defining role is played by his obsession with the Greek-Albanian Celine. The immigrant woman, mysterious and inaccessible to the end,1 gives Michalis a new reason for existence as her protector, helping him, thanks to her differentness, to come into contact with the entire parallel universe of foreign immigrants living beside and simultaneously removed from the inner group. This voyage through the world of the Other is by no means painless. As Michalis draws nearer to the immigrants, he draws further away from those who up to then had been his peers. The boundaries between Us and the

---

1 Celine’s ambiguity is depicted in the ambiguous way she employs the Greek language. Her “broken Greek” [“σπασμένα ελληνικά”] (Himonas, 2000:33) marks the initial phase of her Athenian adventure (abandonment by her lover, uncertainty, hostility); the observation “that her Greek was perfect” [“γα ελληνικά της ήταν τέλεια”, 108] marks the mysterious phase of her stay in the wealthy home in Ekali; the final sense of her once more becoming removed from the language coincides with her arrest on the charge of murder: “She spoke fearfully, and was on the verge of tears. With a heavy accent, and a little confused, as if she had forgotten her Greek”. [“Μιλούσε φοβισμένα, ήταν έτοιμη να κλάψει. Με μια βαριά προφορά και λίγο μπερδεμένα σαν να είχε ξεχάσει τα ελληνικά της”, 172–173.] It is interesting that all the immigrants who appear in Himonas’ Broken Greek sometimes speak broken Greek, while at others speak the language without difficulty. This is, as it seems, a conscious decision they make in order to take it upon themselves to decide when to enter, and when to depart from, the framework for their inclusion in Greek reality. Thus, they serve their own expressiveness in language as a means for shaping and reshaping the boundaries of “belonging”, reminding us of the preeminent role of language in marking out the borders of what it means to be a foreigner.
Other are shown thus to be exceptionally fluid, but it is just this process by which the Ego approaches the “other” part of Self — which makes Michalis renegotiate his own subject position, accepting at the personal level the “others” in his own family, and at the social level the need to return to collective action and experiencing.

In Broken Greek the ever-elusive relationship between the narrator-protagonist and Celine affords an opportunity for a dialogue between the Other and the Same that moves beyond ethnic and cultural polarities. Nevertheless, the gendered dimension of otherness remains trapped within a conventional framework. In this text written from Michalis’ perspective we read about Celine as a woman simultaneously powerless and powerful, as a victim at both personal and social level, and as a dominatrix of the main character’s existence. She is burdened, in other words, with stereotypes bearing connotations of desire and danger, that is, with stereotypes echoing the primal emotions of attraction/fear that imbue the attitude of the (male) Self towards the (female) Other.

In Kourtovik’s “cultural allegory”2 The Longing of the Dragons, we find ourselves confronting an exemplary version of idealised otherness, while at the same time reading a text in which the narrative design permits, and simultaneously impedes, the immigrant woman from going beyond the level of stereotypical type-casting. Irina embodies both the archetypal female roles of prostitute and Madonna, through a narrative desire for the de-articulation of this stereotypical, oppositional bipolarity. Irina, “who had studied classical ballet in the former Leningrad, and worked for a time in Tunisia and Israel before ending up in the ‘house’ on Didymou Street and subsequently in the two-room apartment that smelled of incense” [“είχε σπουδάσει κλασικό μπαλέτο στο αλλοτινό Λένινγκραντ και είχε δουλέψει ένα διάστημα στην Τυνησία και στο Ισραήλ, πριν καταλήξει στο ‘σπίτι’ της οδού Διδύμου κι έπειτα στο δυάρι πού μύριζε θυμίαμα”] (Kourtovik, 2000:36), was rescued from prostitution by the story’s protagonist, Professor Ionas Drakas, and transformed into the “angel of this house”: she is the one who listens to him (37), who shares his interests and concerns, who brings him psychic relief and cares for him in a self-denying fashion: “she had become his only link to the outside world” [“είχε γίνει ο μόνος σύνδεσμός του με τον έξω κόσμο”, 35], since in this case as well, the protagonist carries within himself the soul-destroying signs of total alienation (at professional, familial, and social levels).

The image of the ballerina–prostitute–Madonna, a metonym for the hybrid nature of the gendered immigrant subject, doubtless brings into question the impermeability of boundaries of any sort. The immigrant Irina comprises a further version of the multiple meanings of the immigrant subject, of all those who cross geographical, cultural, socio-economic borders and find themselves between past and present, in their past self and in the self that has been created through the experience of immigration.

---

2 The term is borrowed from D. Tziyas (2004:33) who characterises as “cultural allegories” many contemporary Modern Greek novels that focus their interest on otherness, identity, and cultural communication.
Irina as a woman, on the other hand, presented from an entirely idealised perspective, in the end becomes non-real, “exotic”. She looks more like an alternative version of femininity; a sexualised, and ethnicised version of an “angel of the house” coming from Eastern Europe, who functions as the opposite pole for the female protagonist, the energetic and active police lieutenant representing Greek women. It is interesting that although we find ourselves in the presence of a text in which the sense of ethnic otherness is counterbalanced by love, in the final analysis the text reflects traditional views of gender, which in the way they are invested in the figure of the immigrant woman, perpetuate the sense of otherness.

The figure of the ideal woman coming from Eastern Europe also makes its appearance in Harpantidis’ short story “Seven Changes of Underwear”. Irina, as the idealised emotional construct of her aged Greek lover, is presented as a devoted mother, and passionate mistress who stimulates male egoism. She comprises thus the locus for projecting his deepest fears and desires as well as his ethno-sexual fantasies which include visions of women from Russia as passionate and patient:

He loved Irina not only because she looked into his eyes and he discerned her longing, mingled with the forbearance and passion of the Russian soul, which transported him to deep forests filled with birch trees and gurgling waters, to boundless expanses, but also because she gave him her superb body with especial warmth and uniqueness, providing a tonic for his male egoism, telling him that she and her daughter were alive because he had wished it, and helped them. And this stimulated him; he drew strength from it. He performed well on all fronts, even in bed.

Αγαπούσε την Ιρίνα όχι μόνο γιατί τον κοίταζε στα μάτια και διέκρινε τον πόθο της, ανάμεικτο με την καρτερικότητα και το πάθος της ρωσικής ψυχής που τον ταξίδευε σε βαθιά δάση με σημύδες και γάργαρα νερά, σε απέραντες εκτάσεις, αλλά και γιατί τον έδινε το υπέροχο σώμα της με ιδιαίτερη θέρμη και μοναδικότητα, τονίζοντας τον ανδρικό του εγχώσιμο και λέγοντάς του ότι η κόρη της κι αυτή ζούνε επειδή το θέλησε εκείνος και τις βοηθούσε. Κι αυτό τον τόνωσε, αντλούσε έτσι δυνάμεις. Απέδιδε παντού, ακόμη και στο κρεβάτι (Harpantidis, 2002:84).

Their relationship, established to the fact that Irina is the construct of a “romantic”, “exotic” approach, will soon be ruined for the same reason. It will be revealed that Irina is not only a music teacher but a prostitute as well — a “street Amazon” (“αμαζόνα του πεζοδρομίου”) (86). Her “sin” (“αμαρτία”) will subsequently despoil her “pure — as he had up until that time believed — beauty” (“αμόλυντη, όπως πίστευε μέχρι τότε, ομορφιά της”) with “traces of cheapness” (“ίχνη φτήνιας”) (86), and lead to loathing and abandonment — an inversion that brings to the fore, once again, the ambivalence that is at the heart of the immigrant woman stereotype.

The romanticisation of Irina’s otherness, her essentially inauthentic existence as the result of the projection of a spectral image of Greek man onto the immigrant

---

3 “This girl is a creature of the shady trees, like a fairy” (“Αυτή η κοπέλα είναι αλαφρούσκωτη, σαν ξωθιά”) (Kourtovik, 2000:345).
woman, makes her appear as the embodiment of a narcissistic desire that obscures the complex nature of Other’s identity. Stavrakopoulou’s The Drunken Lady, a text entirely different, leads to similar remarks, in the sense that while illusions of likeness (or difference) bring together individuals endeavouring to accommodate pending relations with themselves, the coexistence between Greek men and foreign women seems impossible. Stavrakopoulou, through her story of the failed marriage between a Greek man and his Albanian wife, assumes a critical stance towards ever more problematic and unstable concepts of “inclusion” and “exclusion” in contemporary societies (Pantaleon, 2005; Kourtovik, 2006), exposing at the same time the nexus of sex/ethnicity problems and their power to shape ethnic and sexual boundaries. What is more, her choice to afford the Greek husband the possibility of dominating the narrative, results in the autodiegetic narrator himself ending up the “victim” of his own discourse. While attempting to call attention to himself, and demonstrating all the negative aspects of his Albanian wife via a system of bipolar oppositions running through the text (social/unsociable, cultivated/uncultivated, neat and tidy/slovenly, and so forth), what he finally achieves through his monologue, is to project through the ethnic Other an inverted image of the Self, stripping it in the reader’s eyes of whatever he himself considers to be an advantage. In this way, the ethnic and gendered Other may be continually demeaned at the narrative level by the husband-autodiegetic narrator in his effort to consolidate her otherness, but the result is the reader’s questioning of the narrator’s truth and therefore his driving out from the symbolic space he has defined for himself. Considering that at the level of the story too, it is the woman, the foreigner, who achieves integration and manages to remain within established social formations, while the Greek husband slips gradually towards the margins, the redoubling of the relation between inclusion/exclusion makes even more resonant the effect of this particular authorial endeavor.

I have stated elsewhere that in narratives involving “love for hire” between a Greek man and an immigrant woman, a more general tendency on the part of the authors is to undermine the (Greek) man-victimiser/(immigrant) woman-victim polarity, and at the same time to reactivate the axis Us versus Others through the ambiguity that characterises the ethno-sexual encounter as a “locus” for the dissolution as well as for the strengthening of difference. The result is that although the ethnic and gendered Other may remain a foreigner, narration activates a more profound sense of estrangement towards representatives of Us who bring us face to face with various degrees of moral corrosion, social hypocrisy, and heartlessness (Paparoussi, 2007; 2008).

---

4 In The Drunken Lady, the word “Albanian woman” (“Αλβανίδα”) serves as one element in which are condensed the utter alienation of the Greek husband from his Albanian wife, and her de facto depersonalisation, chiefly from the moment it is launched without warning to front and center of the narrative stage, replacing the character’s name, which had been employed up to that point: “But the Albanian woman was fickle” [“Αλλά η Αλβανίδα ήταν αλλοπρόσαλλη”] (Stavrakopoulou, 2005:131).

5 According to Mackridge and Yannakakis (2004:14) as well as Hatzivassiliou (2004:55), the Other appears in the majority of contemporary Modern Greek prose writings in a non-stereotypical manner.
Paparoussi, 2009; Paparoussi, 2010). In narratives that favour emotional exchanges of intercultural romance, love or marriage, the narration that organises these texts following the oscillation of men-representatives of Us between the multiple grades of attraction to and repulse from the female Other highlights situations of familiarity but also alienation, transcends but also re-establishes boundaries.

Sexual desire or love even if they ignore in the first place boundaries of ethnicity, end up sustaining instances of otherness through the use of stereotypes which are both gendered and ethnic; to put it differently, drawing from Nagel (2003:1), ethnicity, gender and sexuality join together to shape ideas, feelings, and stereotypes about the Other, to hold some people in and keep others out, to shape our view of ourselves and others. Thus, the portrayal of immigrant women simultaneously obscures and marks difference; what is more, it includes Otherness in the discourse of the Self. By making these female characters, who are the object of the male characters’ desire, an immigrant, that is, someone for whom the experience she is living through is defined “by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference” (Hall, 1989:80), narratives highlight the particular role of Otherness in negotiating subjectivity. Ethnic otherness becomes thus, a way to figure internal otherness and the male characters’ attraction to romanticised or mysterious immigrant women: it represents current anxieties about the subject’s place within the wider symbolic world, exposing various instances of self-alienation and self-reassessment.

In the final analysis, texts such as the above mentioned may have been an ideal site of portrayal of autochthonous Others in Greek society, but in doing so they do not depict the female migratory experience per se. Even if “migration has an internal literary justification” as a device for exploring the human condition (White, 1995:5–6), narratives featuring intercultural intimate relations tend to be a metaphor of inside/outside rather than an attempt at any careful treatment of gendered otherness or a real understanding of diversity and this points to the need for more creative ways of depicting the vicissitudes of women immigrants in Greece.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Harpantidis, 2002

Himonas, 2000
Θανάσης Χειμωνάς, Σπασμένα ελληνικά. Athens: Κέδρος.

Kourtotvik, 2000
Δημοσθένης Κούρτοβικ, Η Νοσταλγία των δράκων. Athens: Εστία.

Stavrakopoulou, 2005
Σωτηρία Σταυρακοπούλου, Η μεθυσμένη γυναίκα. Athens: Εστία.

Secondary Sources

Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000

Droukas, 1998

Fakiolas, 2000

Gilman, 1985

Hall, 1989

Hall, 1997

Hatzivassiliou, 2004

Kourtotvik, 2006
Δ. Κούρτοβικ, “Δαμέρικα αλά ελληνικά”, Τα Νέα, Σάββατο 27 Μαΐου.

Lazaridis, 2001
Lazos, 2002
Γηργόρης Λάζος, Πορνεία και διεθνική σωματεμπορία στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα. Ι. Η εκδιδόμενη. Athens: Καστανώτης.

Mackridge and Yannakakis, 2004

Nagel, 2003

Pantaleon, 2005
Λένα Πανταλέων, “Αλβανικά συζυγικά εγκλήματα”, Ελευθεροτυπία, Βιβλιοθήκη, 29 Δεκεμβρίου.

Paparoussi, 2007

Paparoussi, 2009
Μαρίτα Παπαρούση, “Αστυνομική Λογοτεχνία και Μετανάστευση”. In Διαπολιτισμική Εκπαίδευση – Μετανάστευση – Διαχείριση Συγκρούσεων και Παιδαγωγική της Δημοκρατίας, Πρακτικά 12ου Διεθνούς Συνεδρίου, τόμος II, ed. Π. Γεωργογιάννης: 326–340. Πάτρα: ΚΕ.Δ.ΕΚ.

Paparoussi, 2010
Μαρίτα Παπαρούση (υπό δημ.). Ξένες γυναίκες, Έλληνες άνδρες: αναζητώντας τα όρια του άλλου στη σύγχρονη ελληνική πεζογραφία. Στα ηλεκτρονικά πρακτικά του Συνεδρίου της Ελληνικής Σημειωτικής Εταιρείας Σημειωτική και Ιδεολογίες: Σέναρα, Περιφέρειες, Διασπορές.

Tziovas, 2004

White, 1995