The Evolution of Greek Identity through the Study of Selected Short Stories of Greek Australian Writers: 1901–2001

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This paper draws from a larger project on the diasporic and transnational identities in the writing of Greek Australians. It examines the diasporic notions of Greek identity in Australia through the analysis of selected short stories written in Greek by first- and second-generation Greek Australian writers. Moreover, it focuses on the evolution of Greek identity in Australia during the twentieth century. The short story is deemed to be the most representative type of genre in regards to the themes explored by writers. The selected short stories reflect aspects of Greek community life in Australia and the diaspora in general, giving expression to issues regarding identity in its diasporic and transnational context. A model of “identity indicators” is used to uncover a wide range of symbols, revealing an identity which is rich and complex in socio-cultural, linguistic and other characteristics relating to the Greek immigrant experience in the diaspora.

Introduction

The sunset of the twentieth century found the Greek migrant community in Australia already settled with an active involvement in mainstream society. Undoubtedly, the Australian way of life has been influenced in many ways by the Greek culture brought to Australia. Similarly, the Greek community has been influenced by the Australian way of life. As a result, the original Greek identity has moved through stages of metamorphosis, so that today it can be referred to as the Greek-Australian identity. This multifaceted identity which is made up of a mixture of shifting identities proves what many scholars agree on: that there exists not one identity but many for each and every individual.

The concept of identity constitutes an essential issue that can be researched through the study of ethno-cultural behaviours. While during the twentieth century, social research on migration generally focused on the ways migrants adapted themselves...
to, or were excluded from, the place they emigrated to, a new perspective has been introduced recently. This approach, namely transnationalism, “accents the attachments migrants maintain to families, communities, traditions and causes outside the boundaries of the nation-state to which they have moved” (Vertovec, 2001:574).

Transnationalism and globalisation have had considerable impact on human societies and identities at varying levels. Notwithstanding the already existent forms of migrant connection to their homelands, the “current transnational approach underscores numerous ways in which, and the reasons why, today’s linkages are different from, or more intense than, earlier forms” (Vertovec, 2001:574). Thus, the new transnational trends create links across different parts of the world, establishing an intercultural network that embraces a whole range of community groups. As a result, these groups, including the Greek diasporic communities, are brought closer together.

**Multicultural literature in Australia**

Australia has influenced migrants in many ways, cultivating particular patterns in their behaviour and attitudes and entrenching in them questions about identity and belonging. Through varying levels of nostalgia for the ancestral home, migrants often reflect on their experiences, searching for answers that might bond together fragments of self. In shaping and reshaping within them a world of emotions formed through the inner struggle of survival in a foreign and often hostile environment, a large number of migrants find refuge in writing, a means of documenting their experiences. As a result, multicultural or diasporic literature is born. This literature can have many definitions according to its national contexts and is represented by those who create it, the “migrant writers” who are sometimes referred to as “ethnic writers” or “minority-group writers” (Gunew, 1994).

A detailed study of migrant literature reveals an abundance of issues related to gender, class, ethnicity, religion, communication barriers and survival in the host-country. In addition, the needs and aspirations of individuals, the difficulties in adapting and surviving in a new environment, the consequences of dislocation, the grief of being detached from homeland and coming to terms with severed family ties, as well as other nostalgic recollections, provide an incentive for expression through artistic creativity. The most convenient way to escape these dilemmas is through the forming of sub-groups within the wider community, where the migrants generally feel comfortable and secure, and where they can communicate in their own language. That writing becomes soothing when the feelings of frustration or disappointment and the longing for loved ones and places in the homeland are affirmed socially. Writing allows the release of the emotions and has much to reveal.
Greek literature in Australia

Greek literature in Australia, with oral poetry appearing early in the twentieth century (Kanarakis, 1991:3; 2003a:53), and the first written publication appearing in 1913 (Kanarakis, 2003b:66), provides unique examples of texts that can be used as substantial data to be studied. This literature is rich in literary content, and is associated with family life, local and global issues, community activities, and a wealth of migrant experiences and adventures. Greece is often the central point of reference, usually imagined as the way it was before the migrants departed. Quite often, however, Greece appears in its present state, illustrated by Greek migrants who were either impressed or disappointed after returning home. References to Greece such as these are made by the characters in the stories through their struggles to connect the present with the past through memory. As such, the writers express a surge of emotions reflecting identity in its ethnic, diasporic and transnational contexts.

Although the bulk of Greek Australian literature has been written in Greek, a constantly increasing number of literary texts written in the English language have appeared in recent years. This is due to the fact that the number of first-generation writers is declining, allowing new-generation writers, who are naturally more fluent in the country’s dominant language, to take precedence. The themes dealt with by the second-generation writers include significant social elements pinpointing identity problems that are difficult for them to overcome, such as the dilemma of living between two worlds, and surviving in a modern society whilst still bound by the conservative attitudes of their parents.

Greek-language literature in Australia is composed of works produced by writers who have come from different parts of Greece and other centres of the Greek diaspora such as Cyprus, Egypt, and Asia Minor. The Greek Cypriots in particular have been significant contributors to this literature: the very first Greek language publication was written by a Greek Cypriot (George Nicolaides) in 1913, while many others followed. The hyphenated identities of the writers, that is, Greek-Australian, Greek-Cypriot-Australian, provide examples of diversity, and in the contexts of transnationalism and globalisation, are becoming all the more common. The plethora of linguistic elements in the selected short stories reflects the language and backgrounds of these Greek communities, which in turn gives an insight into their social life in Australia.

A “diachronic” study of the literary productions of Greek origin writers reveals that this literature is characterised by time span, volume, variety of genre and quality (Kanarakis, 2003a). This paper covers the Greek language literature produced in Australia over a period of 100 years, beginning early in the 20th century.
Methodology

The main research question is: How do first and second generation Greek-language writers in Australia perceive multifaceted notions of identity in their ethnic, diasporic and transnational contexts, and how are these expressed in their short stories?

The research methodology undertaken involves a content analysis of the multifaceted notions of identity in selected short-stories, written in the Greek language by first and second generation writers in Australia.

A model consisting of seven identity indicators was developed specifically for the purposes of this study, in which seven indicators, acting as factors of identity formation, are used. These are:

i) place;
ii) language;
iii) socio-cultural elements;
iv) core values;
v) religiosity;
vi) family bonds; and
vii) national symbols.

The literature is examined in three periods according to the Greek migratory stages in the twentieth century in Australia. These periods are:

a) First period: The Early Greek Migrant Presence in Australia — Transplanted Identities (1901–1951);
b) Second period: The Greek Mass Immigration in Australia — Migrant Identities (1952–1977);

Criteria for selection and classification of the writers and their stories

The short story writers included in this study have lived or are presently living in Australia. They have published at least one short-story, even though some of them have also written other forms of literature such as poetry, novels, travelogues or theatrical scripts. The classification of the writers in each period is based on the year in which they first published a literary work (See Table 1).
Table 1. The Selected Short Stories and the Writers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of writer</th>
<th>Title of short story</th>
<th>Place and date of publication</th>
<th>Year of first literary publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. George Nicolaides</td>
<td>To Grammat tis Manas [Letter to Mother]</td>
<td>“Afstralia” (No. 5, 4th July 1913)</td>
<td>1913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Andonis Fatseas</td>
<td>Tilemachos [Telemachus]</td>
<td>“Krikos” (Year 8, No. 79–80, 1957, pp. 120–122)</td>
<td>1948</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The short stories classified in the First Period were accessed in Kanarakis, G. (1985, 1991⁴ and). 2003b). All other stories included in this study were accessed in books published by the writers themselves and in literary periodicals.
Nine writers were selected according to the criteria set out above. The themes, as they are revealed, are related to the migrant experience and the various stages of adaptation to the host society. They often deal with the problems of alienation and the difficulties faced by Greek migrants in settling in and beginning a new life in Australia. These themes reveal a wide spectrum of issues, such as family relationships, employment conditions, social relationships, community life, and the dilemmas of identity. A prevalent issue is homesickness and the resulting nostalgia which occurs as a result of the long distance from the place of origin. The consequences of “xenitia [exile]” play a major role in the wellbeing of the migrants who struggle to survive between the two worlds, the homeland left behind and the reality of living abroad. The results of this condition generate feelings of nostalgia, as mentioned above, guilt, remorse, fear, isolation, and psychological encapsulation problems, as well as determination, perseverance, and economic success, for some. The analysis of the themes reveals issues that are representative not only of the Greek diaspora but also of other migrant communities, irrespective of their ethnic background.

The attitudes of the characters reflect the acceptance or non-acceptance by the migrants of the changes that occur concerning both the country of origin and the country of residence. A range of issues concerning first-generation Greek migrants are revealed in the stories: the problem of aging; the fear of dying far from the homeland; adaptation and acculturation problems, communication difficulties; misunderstanding and conflict between parents and children; and various physical and mental health problems that the individual writers present through their protagonists, directly and indirectly. In addition, the lack of proficiency in the English language remains a major thread in the stories.

The issues in the stories regarding second-generation Greek persons vary. They range from problems of communication between the young Greek-Australians and their parents, the degree to which the younger generations adhere to Greek customs and traditions, the use and maintenance of the Greek language and culture, the dilemmas of dual identity, inter-marriage situations and the generation gap.

**Analysis framework**

The manifestation of identity is explored through a model of “identity indicators” which has been discussed earlier. In the analysis, a number of key characteristics are considered for each short story, including:

a) the *setting* (when and where the story takes place);

b) the *plot*;

c) the *characters* (the persons depicted in the story through the characters and possible interpretations of their identities);

d) the *style* (examining whether this is strict, humorous, depressive or happy);

e) the *themes* (and *sub-themes*) that are present in each story.
Conclusively, any messages that are conveyed through the story-lines are important findings as they can be used to understand the intentions of the writers in the historical period in which they lived.

The analysis approach is:

a) Structural;

b) Socio-linguistic; and

c) Thematic.

The structural approach examines whether the structure of each story reflects any characteristics of the corresponding historical period, lifestyle, migration patterns, educational level of the writers, or the degree of Greek identity portrayed in the story. For example, the short stories which were written in the early twentieth century were generally short in length, such as George Nicolaides’ stories, whilst those of the late part of the century or the beginning of the twenty-first century are longer. Another characteristic of most of the early stories is the concluding paragraph which finishes with a philosophical statement, reflecting the writer’s intention or message to the reader. This can be seen as a distinctive feature of the Greek short story as it was developed in Greece in the late nineteenth century, and later adopted and taken by the migrant writers in their new lands.

The socio-linguistic approach examines the social trends in Australia, Greece, Cyprus or other parts of the Greek diaspora which influenced the writers or the portrayed characters, and it also examines the language used by the individual writers, detecting dialectic, regional and other linguistic characteristics. A given fact in regard to the language used in the selected short stories is that the mere use of the Greek language denotes a strong aspect of Greek identity. A significant characteristic of the works that were written before 1983 is the use of the diacritics orthography, and in some cases, especially the early twentieth century ones, the use of katharevousa, as opposed to the demotic language which appeared in the later works.

The thematic approach examines the themes presented in the short stories. Some of the themes are:

i) social (revealing aspects of the social life of migrants);

ii) familial (related to family bonds and celebrations);

iii) religious (referring to the Greek Orthodoxy faith);

iv) cultural (relating to customs and traditions);

v) occupational (informing about the migrants’ employment);

vi) patriotic (expressing devotion to the homeland);

vii) heroic (eulogising heroes and heroic historical events); and

viii) anti-military.
This approach is the most commonly used as the themes form the main points of interest regarding the short stories because they provide rich data for analysis. A detailed description of the main themes and sub-themes appearing in the texts provides insights into identity. The social theme appears to be the most powerful expression of Greek identity due to its multidimensional character, broadness and multifacetedness. There are three points of reference: Greece or Cyprus; the Greek community of Australia; and Australia, which provide a plethora of contexts in which aspects of the social life of Greek migrants take place (also Kanarakis, 2003b:128).

The sample of stories included in the study reflects the evolution of Greek identity in Australia in one century’s period (that is, the twentieth century) and each of the texts is characterised by the unique style of the writer.

Findings of this research

The most emphasised elements of Greek identity appear to be: language; attachment to place; family bonds; and socio-cultural elements. The less emphasised elements are: core values, national symbols; and religiosity.

Family appears to be a core in all of the short stories. The religious themes appearing in the stories refer to mainly marriage and baptismal issues. The strong desire of parents to see their children married to Greek Orthodox persons, and disapproval of inter-marriage, is well illustrated in Andrew Fatseas’ (1956) and Katsaros’ (2001) stories. However, the issue denying inter-marriage is becoming less and less dominant, as many of the first-generation parents are now beginning to accept the fact that the chances of their children becoming married to someone from their own cultural background are lessening with the years. Baptism of children and grandchildren in an Orthodox church is also important for Greek families. Galanis’ (1953) story is an example of the desire of early Greek families to have their children baptised by a “proper” Greek Orthodox priest, not just any priest, and in this way pass the Greek Orthodox identity onto the next generations. Observing religious traditions and rituals associated with the Greek Orthodox Church is also shown to be very important for Greek families, especially the first-generation.

The themes relating to customs and traditions detect cultural characteristics and traditions brought by the migrants from their region of origin in Greece or Cyprus. Thus, the way traditions are maintained and celebrated may vary significantly between regional groups. Themes on family entertainment, community celebrations, and religious feasts portray lifestyles that are embodied with rich cultural and religious elements, associated with life in the various geographical areas of Greece or other parts of the diaspora. These themes are intertwined with life within the Australian multicultural society and its influence on the different cultural groups, thus generating a unique and complex type of Greek identity.

The male writers included in this study deal with issues such as loneliness, gambling, difficult jobs, unemployment (Nicolaides, Georgantopoulos, Piperis), the life of
unmarried men (Nicoilides, Georganopolous, Andonis Fatseas, Piperis), the emotional disturbance of unemployed males (Piperis), the struggle to maintain the Greek ethnic identity (Andonis Fatseas, Katsaros) the strictly traditional family structure and the generation gap (Andrew Fatseas and Katsaros), and the longing for return to the homeland (Georganopolous, Andonis Fatseas, Rakis, Piperis).

The female writer (Mousourea-Tsoukala) explores the journey of young families to Australia in the Greek mass migration period and the striking of illness (cancer) in female characters. The emphasis is placed on the sacrifice of mother and wife who struggle to overcome the many sufferings and hardships of “xenitia”, and who eventually become a symbol of return or of successful adaptation in the new land.

Occupational themes are evident in most stories, revealing the kinds of jobs the migrants have dealt with. These entail mainly factory labouring (Georganopolous, Andonis Fatseas, Piperis, Katsaros), small business ownership such as running a milkbar (Andrew Fatseas, Galanis) and delivery of goods in country towns (Galanis).

A prevailing theme appearing in the latest works is the reconciliation between first and second generations and the acceptance of Australia as home (Mousourea-Tsoukala and Katsaros). This is contrary to the early short stories (Andrew Fatseas) where second-generation persons (especially females) were victims of isolation and conformity to the stereotyped ideas of their parents.

Some of the writers (Nicoilides, Georganopolous, Andonis Fatseas and Piperis) deal with the issue of unmarried men and the unfortunate fate of some experiencing symptoms of emotional impairment. Intermingling with other Greek friends is also an issue. While the main character in Nicoilides’ “The Letter to Mother” goes overboard with socialising with friends, and to the point where he becomes addicted to gambling, the main character in Piperis’ “Ithaca, so far away” becomes a victim of marginalisation, poverty and unemployment.

The Cyprus issue and the Greek-Cypriot identity is well discussed in Rakis’ story “O Sotiris o Kadenas”, where the main character cannot bear the uprooting from his beloved village in the northern part of the island of Cyprus in 1974. In this story, a persevering type of identity is revealed, as the protagonist makes the decision to return to his island, even though this is still divided. The symbolic image of home empowers the main character with the ability to recall a peaceful life in his ancestral village, sojourning between the past and the present in a state of equilibrium.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that during the twentieth century several factors have impacted on the nature of Greek ethnic identity. These include: the multilingual and multicultural nature of Australia; the long distance from the homeland; the conditions faced by the migrants on their arrival in Australia, the reasons which caused the migrants’ decision to seek a new life in a far-away land; the new reality in which they had to raise their children; the degree to which they adhered to the Greek customs and traditions; the
extent of their faithfulness in Greek Orthodoxy, and so on. All of these suggesting a transformation of the original rigid Greek identity, which was confronted by the once mono-ethnic local identity, into a multifaceted, rich and compromising identity. This is in contrast to the findings of earlier studies that “the moulding of ethnic identity [being] seen in terms of ‘them’ and ‘us’ and [...] confined to a somewhat narrow interpretation, not moving towards a broader idea of the Australian identity nor related to a global identity” (Cahill and Ewen, 1987:24). It can now be suggested that Greek identity has actually proven to be shifting slowly and steadily towards the mainstream Australian identity and subsequently, towards a global identity.

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