The Knot as Metaphor in Gillian Bouras’

*Aphrodite and the Others*

*Kathy Rozaklis*

This paper aims to discuss a central theme in the work of Australian-born author Gillian Bouras. The theme is the symbolic references to knots in her literature, in particular the text *Aphrodite and the Others*, and the use of the term *knot* as a metaphor for life’s experiences both from a Greek villager’s perspective and from a writer’s perspective.

Gillian Bouras was born in Melbourne in 1945. She graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in English and History followed by a Master of Education in History. From 1967 to 1980 she worked as a secondary school teacher, teaching English. In 1969 she married George Bouras, a Greek migrant. On 23 July 1980 she and her husband together with their two children Dimitri and Niko left for overseas to settle in George’s Peloponnesian village, near Kalamata. Her third child, Alexander, was born in Athens.

In Greece, Bouras developed a keen interest in writing, especially on the theme of the complicated experience of cross-cultural living. As an Australian migrant living in Greece, her writing reflects the trials and tribulations which confront migrants who have left their homeland for a foreign country. To date Bouras has written five texts which explore the theme of migration and cross-cultural living and which draw upon the author’s own experiences of living as a migrant. The texts are *A Foreign Wife; A Fair Exchange; Aphrodite and the Others; A Stranger Here; and Starting Again*.

My intention in this paper is to focus on the text *Aphrodite and the Others*, which was published in 1994. The text maps out the life of Bouras’ mother-in-law Aphrodite from her early years until her time of...
death. The author refers to it as a biography. I am not entirely convinced that it can be classified as a plain biography. The editor calls it fiction. Bouras confesses that her editor “slipped up” in labelling it as such. She states that a better label would have been biography/fiction. I agree. The text is part biographical, part fictional, due to the author’s use of fictional techniques as well as being part historical. As much as the book is the story of Aphrodite, it is also a historical account of Greece. It would appear at times as though one is reading a historical text, due to the fact that Bouras writes of an event with clarity and truth, providing real dates and real places. Bouras investigates the life of Aphrodite within a family, a village and a culture but always set against the backdrop of political and social upheaval. The central theme of the text is the exploration of the oral tradition and the literate person. For the purpose of this paper, I shall refer to the text as a biography.

The story of Alexander the Great and the Gordian knot is well known. The story has it that the King of Phrygia had the pole of his wagon fastened to the yoke with a knot that defied efforts to untie it. This knot was of cornel bark, and you could see neither the beginning nor the end of it. An oracle stated that he who untied this knot would rule Asia. According to legend, Alexander simply cut the knot with his sword and exclaimed “I have loosened it!”

Like Alexander the author has met a challenge in her writing, that of untying her own knots to create a unique literary writing style. At the same time she must do away with the knots to write the biography of Aphrodite. As Bouras states:

The threads, the strands, the knots. We are all, our young selves, not Aphrodites, but Ariadnes in possession of a ball of thread. We fix it to a lintel somehow, somewhere, and become like Theseus as we make our way into the gloom of the labyrinth, unrolling the thread as we move along (Bouras, 1994:24).

Generally speaking a knot has a variety of meanings. A knot is defined as an intertwining of string or rope; it also means a cluster or group of persons or things; it means a bond or close association; it also means something
which is complicated and not easy to solve, therefore an obstacle to be overcome. Throughout *Aphrodite and the Others* there are several references to knots, threads and combs. In fact, illustrations of knotted coiled ropes mark out the book’s chapters and sub-sections. One critic, June Factor, has said these illustrations look decorative, a mimicry of Greek folk art. She states that they are symmetrical, suggesting balance and order, here referring to a society which is balanced. Nonetheless, the society Bouras describes in the text is that of a village culture rooted in hardship, danger, isolation which has been tormented by a sea of change, far from anything which is balanced and ordered. Therefore we can agree with Factor when she goes on to say: “Ignore the illustrative decorations to this book: they mislead” (Factor, 1994:74).

The references to knots in the narrative can be viewed as a metaphor for the difficulties in life to be brushed out. The metaphor can be viewed as such in two contexts, one being the difficulties which the author must overcome to create her own writing style and secondly as obstacles she faces on a personal level to try and adapt to Greek village life. We can add here the obstacles Aphrodite has encountered in her life: “There it would be: a great knot sticking fast at the comb, bringing work to a temporary halt, sometimes more than temporary” (Bouras, 1994:168–69). In the narrative the knot is a metaphor of the threads of time, weighted by history; or as wound on the spindle which has become the symbol of the confinement in Greek village women’s lives (Sloan, 1995:35). The comb is a metaphor for life and each knot which becomes entangled in the comb is a significant point in the life of Aphrodite and the author when they each confront obstacles. Aphrodite describes the point where life reaches a difficult stage as a knot having come to the comb. As she plainly states: “Ἡρῆθη ο κόμπος στο κτένι” (Bouras, 1994:74). Aphrodite’s knots, or rather obstacles, have been the effects of war, widowhood and emigration, the last having robbed her of a brother and son who set off for greener pastures. Aphrodite’s brother Niko migrated to America, never to return. Aphrodite never learnt whether he was alive or buried in some foreign place. As the reader learns, it was difficult for Aphrodite to deal with the separation from her
brother, let alone the second time round when her own son George decided to do the same. This would surely have been a moment when the knot came to the comb. Fortunately, for Aphrodite the knot became untangled when George returned to his home to stay permanently.

The metaphor of the knot can also be attributed to the biographer’s own obstacles in becoming a writer. Just as it was important for Aphrodite to learn to weave from an early age and more importantly to weave her own tapestry (and when I say tapestry I refer to her life as well as the art of handicraft itself), it is just as important for Bouras to find her own unique literary style. Whether one is beginning to weave a tapestry or to write a biography there are obstacles to be overcome. It goes without saying that knots are unwanted in any form of tapestry, just as “writer’s block” is an obstacle for any writer. Writing is a weaving process, requiring thoughts and ideas to be transformed into words on paper, much like a thread being woven into a tapestry or the weaving shuttle moving back and forth. The same questions will be asked of the writer as of the craftsperson. Such questions as: What will be my subject? What materials will I require to form this biography or this tapestry? What will happen should the thread become tangled or the source of information cease to exist? Here, I am drawing parallels with the author and her subject who both have asked these questions time and time again. Aphrodite’s thread became tangled when she was faced with war and the loss of her son to the attraction of emigration. Likewise the author in writing about her subject faced obstacles:

Biographies are usually formal structures. [...] This biography does not fit that pattern, for Yiayia has no books, no files. [...] Writing about her life has necessitated, in a sense, a jolting and often unsatisfactory return to prehistory: the environment, the dwellings, and even the artifacts have had to be hard evidence. [...] It is the poet’s business and also the biographer’s, surely to write down the voices, to shape history and personality from the vibrations, to try at least to do these things (Bouras, 1994:3).

According to Donald Pease, the term *author* connotes the individual who has inventiveness and creativity (Pease, *ap. Lentricchia & McLaughlin, 1990:105). Quite simply, to become a writer all a person requires is a
set of tools which comprise imagination, creativity and originality, much like a craftsman who requires tools to create a project. Bouras certainly does not lack any of the abovementioned qualities in her ability to write. One necessary ingredient is to find an original story with an original cast of characters and settings. The author must then develop an individual style. Gillian Bouras has found a story. It is her story of living as a migrant in a foreign country. Her first two texts, *A Foreign Wife* and *A Fair Exchange*, are the autobiographical stories which detail the important stages of her life, particularly at the point when she became a migrant. In *Aphrodite and the Others* she has chosen to write the story of her mother-in-law. In *A Stranger Here*, and *Starting Again* Bouras continues to explore the themes of cross-cultural living, the interrelationships between foreigners and natives and the clash of cultures, by writing a fictional story with fictional characters. Therefore, once the writer finds a story and outlines the plot, the setting and the characters, the next task is to identify the audience and decide what message is to be transmitted. In addition, the role of the writer needs to be clearly defined – why are they writing? Bouras has taken on the role of interpreting in print all of the sounds and significances of a society which has become familiar to her.

In the case of the biographer their role is to uncover and convey the obvious truth. They must find the subject and have strong feelings toward that subject. Lomask is of the opinion that writing a life is a process, during which the author must cope with a variety of problems, problems which I would call the author’s knots:

The procedural steps to writing are well known. The author must find a subject. Then they must do their research. Next they will write – and rewrite. As this is the standard sequence, this would seem to be a useful order in which to discuss the techniques, methods, procedures, and principles involved (Lomask, 1984:4).

Some are of the view that the best subject for a writer to base their biography on is a person whose likes and dislikes, interests, attitudes, background, and dreams are roughly consonant with their own. However, Bouras has chosen her Greek mother-in-law as her subject. It is evident...
from the two previous texts of the writer that Aphrodite is far from being an individual who has similar interests and a similar background to Bouras. If anything, the two women are from completely opposite environments. “Two women: Aphrodite and Gillian, who are also Yiayia and myself... Chalk and cheese. She and I” (Bouras, 1994:1). Nevertheless, it is probably the fact that Aphrodite is so different from the author that made her such an interesting subject and even more of a challenge for her writing.

As with the subject, the structure is also an essential element of any writer’s work. It is particularly relevant to biography and autobiography. In Aphrodite and the Others it would appear that Bouras has a combined topical and chronological structure. The portrait of Aphrodite’s life is mapped out from her early childhood to the final stages of her life, but the narrative is divided into topics, beginning with the chapter headings.

An important step in the process of writing a biography is undertaking the research. Essentially, the biographer is also a researcher. The process of research is an extensive beginning with a series of questions which the biographer must ask themselves, such as “What do I need to know to bring this subject alive on the printed page?” (Lomask, 1984:15). If one is fortunate enough to have the assistance of libraries, archives and museums then it makes the biographer’s task somewhat easier. In the case of Bouras, she had a more difficult task. The subject she chose to write of is an ordinary individual who lives in a small Greek village most people would never have heard of. There were no primary or secondary source materials to rely upon for information, apart from the oral tales of the village. Clearly, the method which Bouras uses to describe Aphrodite’s life is by ascertaining what she did, with whom, when, where, how and why. Given that Bouras did not have the luxury of relying on primary source materials to construct the story of her mother-in-law, she has to some extent gone further and made up various bits along the way, very much like knotting loose ends wherever they existed as obstacles in her research. These so called made up bits are useful fictional techniques. In a paper which Desmond O’Grady wrote, comparing his writing with that of Bouras, he states that Bouras, whilst she is more of an autobiographical
THE KNOT AS METAPHOR IN GILLIAN BOURAS’ APHRODITE AND THE OTHERS

writer, has in Aphrodite and the Others employed fictional techniques (O’Grady, 1998:51–52). A clear example is in the Epilogue of the text:

The first woman fears she is getting old. [...] She thinks back over her life. [...] She is ill, weakening ever so slowly, while the other woman, in a strange way, seems to be growing stronger. [...] The first woman] has [...] given up actual weaving. [...] But there had been a pleasure in it, she supposed a pleasure in seeing the cloth grow, in stopping to check the selvages, making sure they were not unravelling, in deciding how close or loose the weave should be, in choosing the colours for the pattern. [...] She has not had her parents’ life, although they did their best to ensure that her life would be theirs, almost sketching out the cartoon, trying to ensure that the strings and threads would be taut and even, but there had been many more knots than they had anticipated...

The brown eyes, for the first time, are a mirror: the older woman sees herself clearly in them, clearly and easily. And it is a deeply strange thing, but in that moment of seeing herself she knows that her carpet, her tapestry, wall-hanging, whatever it is, has been woven. [...] The work has been done, even if not as she would have done it herself, and somehow all those troublesome knots have been untied and smoothed out (Bouras, 1994:172).

In this passage along with the remainder of the Epilogue, Bouras speaks in the third person, narrating the events that have shaped the life of Aphrodite Bouras. Bouras maintains that the Epilogue to the text was an “imaginative glare and an attempt to see things more clearly by creating the personae of the older and younger woman”.¹ She did this by stepping aside and becoming more detached. One will note the references to the knots which resurface ever more forcefully in these last passages of the text. They are symbolic of the accomplishments which Aphrodite has made in her lifetime. Bouras describes this life through the use of a tapestry as the backdrop:

The dream-tapestry is so huge that it is still not finished. It cannot be finished, because it is her life. In the dream she sits, sending the shuttle back and forth, and slowly the people, the places, the colours take shape in

¹ Letter sent to me by Gillian Bouras dated 3 September 2000.
front of her, building bit by bit, row upon row (Bouras, 1994:169).

However, at some point Aphrodite’s tapestry has been completed and the obstacles she was faced with in her life have been defeated. At the same time, the work of the author has been accomplished. Bouras has completed a unique literary piece. The author’s own tapestry has taken shape and the story has been told.

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