

# LILIKA NAKOS AND OTHER GREEK WOMEN WRITERS

By DEBORAH TANNEN\*

MODERN Greek prose had a late adolescence. Because of foreign occupation, for centuries little got written, and what did was mostly poetry. When prose began, it was first historical and then "ethnographic," novels of manners dealing with the countryside. Women had no place in this literature even as subjects. They were sometimes the figures to whom men addressed poems, the idealized receptacles of the men's fantasies, but not living characters in fiction, with, however, two important exceptions: Frangoyiannou, in Papadiamantis' *E Fonissa* (*The Murderess*), and Roides' *Papissa Ioanna* (*Pope Joan*), a western rather than Greek heroine. Otherwise, women didn't count.

There were no women writers to correct this situation because women weren't educated. Shortly before 1900 there appear in Greek literature two unrelated women both named Papadopoulou.\*\*Alexandra wrote first historical stories and then ethnographic ones describing life in her native Constantinople. Arsenoe, an Athenian, wrote stories mostly aimed at young readers.

After World War I things began to happen. A feminist movement arose in Greece in response to the inequities in the lives of women. There was a newspaper published in Athens from 1923 to 1933 called *O Agonas tis Gynaikas* (*The Woman's Struggle*). At the forefront of this upsurge were women writers, most well-known perhaps the poet Myrtiotissa, who fought great opposition to have her work published, and Galateia Alexiou-Kazantzakis, of the extraordinary Alexiou family from Iraklion, Crete, which yielded three generations of writers, the most important of whom were the sisters Galateia and Elli. Galateia wrote poetry, plays, stories and novels in demotic, the language of the people, and, beginning a trend followed by many of the women who came after

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\*\*Talking about Greek women writers present a special problem: how to render their names. In Greek a woman's last name is the possessive of her father's or husband's—Lilika Nakou, the Lilika of Nakos. I'm going to do what is generally done in English and use the father's or husband's name, even though the women's name are known in Greece in the possessive case.



*Lilika as child*

her, wrote literature for children and young readers, and used women as subjects. With her husband Nikos, she was a bloodied fighter for the cause of demoticism and composed the first textbooks in the spoken idiom. Moreover, <sup>with her husband Nikos, she was</sup> ~~she was~~ the center of Greek literary activity, as writers and other artists clustered around them in their home and the cafe in Dexameni, Kolonaki.

Thanks probably to the presence of Galateia, this fiery group included a triumphant clutch of young women who were to take their place among the renaissance of writers that came to be called the Generation of the Thirties and who were responsible for developing the social novel in Greek literature. Three women in particular have had enormous influence: Tariana Stavrou, Lilika Nakos, and Galateia's sister Elli. Today, at eighty-four, the younger Alexiou is still sprightly, dynamic, and always busy. On Thursday evenings, the important and aspiring literati visit her salon, and she bounces to greet them with her chubby cheeks and neat row of tiny teeth, her hair, now thinned and grey, still ribboned into a little pony tail at the top of her head and divided into three little curls pinned out. Elli has been as versatile as Galateia and even more prolific. She was one of the first writers to introduce children as subjects. In a simple, straightforward demotic, she wrote stories and novels which present superb, psychologically astute characterizations of the poor children who had been her pupils when she was a teacher in Crete.

When I met Alexiou, I was stunned by her energy and thought this must explain how she managed to be one of the first women in Greece to make a career

of writing. But she assured me she didn't face impediments because of her sex. Her father, who had called Galateia by the name of French woman writer "George Sand" to tease her for her scribbling, had not discouraged his youngest daughter. As for her husband, Vasos Daskalakis, also a writer, she told me that one day she was telling him a story. He jumped up and left the house, insisting he wouldn't return until she had written it down. Thus it was he who started her on her career. More than fifty years later, and after seventeen years living abroad because of leftist ties, Elli Alexiou is still writing in Greece. Her latest book, *Rotao kai Mathaino*, (*I Ask and Learn*) published just a few months ago, is yet another contribution to desperately needed material for children.

The second woman of great importance, Tatiana Stavrou, like her forerunner Alexandra Papadopoulos, was born in Constantinople, where Greek culture had developed a level of sophistication far beyond that enjoyed by mainland Greeks. She too wrote stories and novels about children and women. Most strikingly, as in her first novels *Those Who Remained* and *The First Roots*, she examines women in the throes and the aftermath of the Asia-Minor disaster, the 1922 catastrophe which deeply affected the psychology of modern Greece by forcing a huge Greek community to abandon their homes in Turkish territory and relocate in mainland Greece. Among those uprooted was Tatiana Stavrou whose novels document the refugee experience at the same time that they explore the psychology of women.

The third giant among these women, Lilika Nakos, is now a round child-sized woman whose legs barely hang over the edge of the couch. But her blue eyes shimmer like the summer sky and sparkle with intelligence and wit. She is still, as she laughingly characterized herself, "the first hippie in Greece," surrounded in her home in Halandri outside Athens by a flutter of young girls from the island of Ikaria. Nakos had a special background which permitted her to become educated. Her father was a wealthy Member of Parliament and the Minister of Agriculture in 1929. Her mother, from a renowned, philanthropic and literary Athenian family, was the sister of the already mentioned Arsenoe Papadopoulos. Yet, despite this privileged background, Nakos had to struggle all her life. Her father vigorously opposed her education and her writing when he was alive, and when he died he left her penniless. She was obliged to work to pay off his debts and then to support herself and her mother, with whom she had lived in Geneva from the age of twelve when they moved from Athens. Educated in Geneva, she began writing in French. Her first stories, published in Parisian and Swiss magazines and newspapers, were also about children, but strange, haunted ones who played out hostile fantasies.

It was Galateia Kazantzakis who introduced Nakos into Greek letters by translating one of these stories and having it published in an Athenian newspaper. It depicts a little girl who hates her upper-class parents and is disgusted and driven mad when she lies awake listening to them make love in the bed

beside her. In 1930 Nakos moved back to Greece and rewrote her novella *Le Livre de mon Pierrot* (*My Peter's Book*) in Greek, about a young woman secretly raising her illegitimate child. Then Nakos, while working days teaching music in a boys' high school, evenings as a journalist, and weekends running



*Authoress Nakos and her mother*



*Little Nakos with her mother*

a puppet theater in Zappeion, woke at 4:00 a.m. to steal the hours to write her first long novel in Greek: *Oi Parastratimenoí (The Lost)*. It had resounding impact, as it continued her unabashed, frank treatment of the most intimate details of a young woman's inner and outer life as she grows up and comes of age, recounted in nearly conversational demotic, which was perfectly suited to the first person point of view of her astoundingly innocent heroine. Nakos was especially equipped to mold the spoken idiom into a literary one, for it was the only Greek she knew. She had not been educated in Greece where students had their heads crammed with the synthetic *Katharevousa* (puristic or "learned"). Furthermore, Nakos' French/Swiss education had immersed her in the European novel tradition which most Greek writers had to discover later in life and then usually in translation.

Like Alexiou, Nakos has been a faithful observer of society for over half a century. In one book she recreates the pre-World War I province of Leivadia, and in another, Athens and Geneva of the same period. Then *E Kolasi Ton Paidion (The Children's Inferno)* depicts the harrowing face of hunger on the children who starved to death in the hospital at Rizario where Nakos was a volunteer nurse during the German occupation. Smuggled out of Greece and published abroad, these stories were responsible for the first shipments of milk by the International Red Cross. Her later books of social protest have subjects ranging from the Metaxas dictatorship in Greece to the Vietnam war. *Oi Oramatistes tis Ikarias (Ikarian Dreamers)* is the drama of Greek-Americans returning to their homeland, the island of Ikaria, where their regained peace is threatened by the fear of atomic annihilation, as the island is rocked by United States atomic bomb tests.

It's interesting to see how Nakos deals with women in her novels. She is not a feminist in the contemporary militant sense. She does, however, expose injustice against women. Her early works, especially, insist that women must be independent. In a short, lyrical novella, *Nafsika* recalls that her mother had based everything on her husband's love. When she realized who the man she so adored really was, she was devastated. It seemed to her that the earth had opened and swallowed her up. To escape her misery, she takes her little girl and goes to Marseilles, where she becomes the virtual prisoner of her rich uncle. When he tells her that she should be grateful because he's going to leave her his money, she counters that she wants no one's money. She wants only to work so she can earn her own, and she wants her daughter to have a career so she won't be dependent on any man.

Women who are trained to do nothing end badly. Two other mother figures, Christina in the pair of novels *E Ge Tis Voioteias (The Boetian Earth)* and *Yia Mia Kainouryia Zoi (Toward a New Life)* and Nitsa in *The Lost*, are women who were taught only to make themselves beautiful and behave daintily. When they no longer have rich husbands to escort them through the upper-class life, they are broken and helpless. Christina and Nitsa, luckily, have daughters to support them. Young women in Nakos' fiction who

were brought up in this tradition have even more humiliating fates. For example, Adamian in *The Lost* and Vartoui in *Le Livre de mon Pierrot (My Peter's Book)* are forced to what amounts to prostitution to get men to support them. The exploitation, however, is mutual. As Adamian puts it, "When I reach fifty, then it'll be a different tune."

It is not necessarily women who call out for their own independence. In *The Boetian Earth* the child protagonist, Barbara, lives with her grandparents. Her grandfather is eloquent about the need for her to be educated, while her mother's dream is for her to become a lady-in-waiting at the palace. Happily, the grandfather also believes that girls as well as boys need freedom so he lets her roam the land. If his wife had her way, the girl would stay at home learning to cook and sew—this, despite the fact that Grandma herself is bitterly frustrated because she wanted to go to the university but had to work to send her brothers instead. She must limit her passion for politics to simply maintaining the home of her rightist brother. Grandma and Grandpa, like all the couples in Nakos works up to then, are outrageously, tragically mismatched.

*Toward a New Life* abandons this anti-matrimonial and manifestly feminist stance. It is positively romantic about Barbara's affair with her childhood friend Thanasis. Whereas Alexandra in *The Lost* vows that she will never seek to marry the man she loves, Barbara longs to marry Thanasis, and their engagement is downright mushy. The inimitable Victoria, an umbrella-wielding "battleship" who charges about administering "Swift Justice" is an independent, self-sufficient midwife. In the happy ending, however, she abandons her career and is apparently satisfied to be confined to the country estate of her new husband,



Lilika Nakos today

a skinny little university professor with whom she strolls off like a well-fed cat.

*Ikarian Dreamers* is the most traditional in its portrayal of love and marriage. It is the one novel that ends with the happily-ever-after marriage of its main hero, but then it is the one book with a hero rather than a heroine, and even a feminist might not dispute that marriage is good for men. Moreover, this relationship is more symbolic than real. The wife, Despoinio, is a kind of spirit who represents the Ikarian earth with which Kosmas is reunited. Nonetheless, other women in the novel are treated badly by their husbands who habitually address them generically as "Woman!" A "loving" young husband is typically scornful, saying to another man in front of his new wife. "Look what women come up with if you discuss serious things in front of them!"

This subtle exposure of the position of women in society is typical of the fiction of these women writers. It can be seen also in many of the Chekhovian short stories of Ioulia Persakis, whose favorite characters are the villagers of Aegina where she has a home. In one of these, an unsympathetic man struggling to fix a ceramic heater and telling his "troubles" unknowingly reveals how he has exploited his daughter-in-law, having used his connections to force her guardians to let her marry at sixteen, to get an early start on the killing life as servant to him and his son, whenever she is not ill with a new pregnancy.

Another woman of this generation who began writing much later in life is Ioanna Iordanidis, also from Constantinople. Like Stavrou, she has rendered her experience into a significant as well as moving social document. In *Loxandra* and *Diakopes ston Kafkaso* (*Vacation in the Caucasus*) she recalls a lost

world of Hellenism. Other women of this ilk are Eirini Galanos, who also has a bibliography reaching back to 1924, and Sofia Mavroeidis-Papadakis, another Cretan schoolteacher who has written in many genres, most notably poems and fictionalized versions of mythology for young people. Melpo Axiotis is the only member of this illustrious group who is no longer alive and productive, having died only last year.

On the heels of this pioneering troupe have come a flock of excellent women prosewriters, including Galatea Sarantis, Tatiana Gritis-Milliex, and Kostoula Mitropoulos. Three writers have appeared in English: Margarita Liberakis and Nelly Theodorou in translation, while Kay Cicellis writes in both languages. There are now, of course, many young craftswomen and hotblooded experimenters, far too many to list, but certainly important are the stream-of-consciousness novels of Glafki Daskalopoulos and Ioanna Karatzaferis plus the stories of Ersi Lange and Maro Doukas. Moreover, there is much to be said about women poets—poetry has always been favored in Greece, and the names of Myrtilotissa, Zoe Karelli, Melissanthi, Rita Boumis-Pappas, and Maria Polydouris are probably more familiar to the average educated Greek than the names of any of the prosewriters mentioned here. But poetry is another story, or perhaps a poem.

This panorama of courageous and talented writers belies the stereotype of the Greek woman confined to the home, even in our grandmothers' generation. Today, encumbered by fewer and less implacable role expectations, a great number of young Greek women are proudly and skillfully wielding their pens beside the men in the struggle for artistic expression, taking their rightful place as fully developed and multifaceted people contributing to our complex society.

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