Towards an Epistemology of Longing: Gender Disruptions and Resistance in Cyprus Narratives of Displacement

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Abstract

Cyprus saw a troubled passage from British colonial rule to postcolonial statehood. Created in 1960, after the signing of the Zurich-London agreements, the Republic of Cyprus became an independent country that, ironically, developed an anxious and irascible dependence on its ‘ethnonationalisms’ (Bryant 3). In fact, the very independence of the island was loathed by those Cypriots of the Greek and Turkish communities for whom the only acceptable political settlement was union with the ‘mother country’: Greece for the Greeks and Turkey for the Turks of Cyprus. Indicative of the unease and, for some Cypriots, resentment at the birth of a republic out of Cyprus is the fact that Independence Day was not celebrated for thirty years after the event (Papadakis 2005 45). October 1 (and not August 16) was set as the national holiday and the celebrations on the Greek Cypriot side continue to include flags of Greece and the Greek national anthem since Cyprus does not have its own (Papadakis 2005 46).
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There is something of the other that cannot be transmitted unless there is a political revolution such that a masculine man will let go of his phallic position and accept, even without understanding, the possibility of something else. (Hélène Cixous 27)

Thus, the telling of refugee stories is at least sometimes also a radical reconceptualization of the very different definitions and ground rules of community or nation and of the roles of those who claim to speak for and from them. Refugee stories reconstitute, with a difference that is often ignored in official political discourse, boundaries and official and unofficial rules for crossing over them in ways that are only arguably unimaginable or impossible. (Mary Layoun 66)

INTRODUCTION

Cyprus saw a troubled passage from British colonial rule to postcolonial statehood. Created in 1960, after the signing of the Zurich-London agreements, the Republic of Cyprus became an independent country that, ironically, developed an anxious and irascible dependence on its ‘ethnonationalisms’ (Bryant 3). In fact, the very independence of the island was loathed by those Cypriots of the Greek and Turkish communities for whom the only acceptable political settlement was union with the ‘mother country’: Greece for the Greeks and Turkey for the Turks of Cyprus. Indicative of the unease and, for some Cypriots, resentment at the birth of a republic out of Cyprus is the fact that Independence Day was not celebrated for thirty years after the event (Papadakis 2005 45). October 1 (and not August 16) was set as the national holiday and the celebrations on the Greek Cypriot side continue to include flags of Greece and the Greek national anthem since Cyprus does not have its own (Papadakis 2005 46). The two predominant communities of the island each have their own landmark years: 1963 for the Turkish community and 1974 for the Greek — years when inter-communal strife flared up and led to hostility, atrocities, and great suffering (Bryant 2004; Layoun 2001). Following the violent and bloody clashes of 1963 and 1974, large numbers of Cypriots (Greek and Turkish) had to flee their homes and become refugees on their own island. In 1975, Greek Cypriots who had not been forced out of their homes by the war left their land in the north and came to settle in the areas administered by the
Republic. Similarly, Turkish Cypriots who stayed in the south were moved to the north side of the island to be under Turkish Cypriot administration. This population exchange was a ‘diplomatic manoeuvre that severed the very important Cypriot ties to land, and altered social relations within each community’ (Bryant 3).

The island’s division has been persistently referred to as ‘the Cyprus problem’ in the arena of international politics and by Cypriots themselves (Layoun 74). This problem remains not only unresolved but seems to lock itself even more tightly at every attempted turn. Even though in this introduction I cannot dwell extensively on the historical developments that led to the division of the island into a Turkish north and a Greek south, I will mention details useful in elucidating certain strands of my argument. The politics that I will discuss will be those apparent in the literature produced on the theme of losing one’s home and being forced to live the life of a displaced person in a place that will always remain foreign; indeed, has to remain foreign since the displacement inflects one’s memory in ways that come to determine one’s identity and relationship with place. In my exploration I will turn to individual modes of embodying refugee pain in Cyprus, focusing on how these modes negotiate the large scale national and patriarchal imperatives. ‘Patriarchal’ is a term that resonates anxiously in my thinking and my approach in this article. Having grown up in a family without a father, I have experienced patriarchy as an oppressive system in which I felt forced to operate and develop as an individual whose gender embodiment had to comply with particular parameters; masculine behaviour. Therefore, I understand patriarchy as an oppressive social imperative and as a system of hierarchical social organisation where masculinity is hegemonic and determines relations within the family, social groups, work environments, and personal relationships (Hadjipavlou 22–23). However, also pertinent to my argument here is patriarchy’s agency in shaping the language and performance of national identity. In fact, patriarchy has considerable control over the discursive topos of identity embodiment in contemporary Cyprus. Because I find this control often debilitating, I search for voices and images that offer possibilities that go beyond the established norms of national identity.

Motivated by my own oppression by patriarchal structures in Cypriot society and culture, I am interested in gender strictures and their close alignment to the workings of patriarchy. More specifically, I care about how gender negotiates strictures and how it performs various figurations but also its longing in narratives of loss and displacement; longing for home (nostos) and return, but also longing for psychic and even erotic fulfilment. Ultimately, I want to connect these narratives by Cypriots who have struggled to re-invent themselves as they flee, emotionally and sometimes physically wounded, from the whirlwind of crisis. By ‘gender figurations’ I am not implying some distinction between the way that women, Cypriot and non-Cypriot, feel the loss and displacement compared to the way that men feel them. Such implication would engender the risk of essentialist trappings. My understanding of gender in this discussion hinges on
two disparate but conceptually related fields: one informed by Judith Butler’s incisive, enlightening and also provocative theoretical assertions on gender and its performativity and, two, by Cypriot national politics and their disparate negotiations in literature. Butler’s assertions have proven extremely useful not only because they unsettle ideas of gender flowing ‘naturally’ from biological sex, but also because they underwrite gender’s performativity and historical contingency. In other words, following Butler’s ground breaking *Gender Trouble* we examine circumstances that surround the development of acceptable and unacceptable gender embodiments, with the confidence that its conceptualisation is not intrinsic but the product of a shifting historical context. This is a well-known argument with fascinating theoretical implications that I find applicable in this examination of gender in a literature of displacement. Cyprus’ national crisis (perhaps inevitably) resulted in a crisis in terms of gender embodiment and expression, and what are considered respectable modes of being a Cypriot man or woman. These modes have been decisively adjusted by the larger national issues.

In fact, contemporary Cypriot literature, very much like contemporary politics, has been plagued by nationalist narratives (Bryant 2004; Layoun 2001). I find that this necessitates an exploration of how gender is embodied in relation to desire; desire for re-membering the body and recounting narratives, as well as desire for creative re-negotiations of the dominant and oppressive paradigms of hostility and racism (certainly predominant in the case of Greek and Turkish Cypriot refugees). In the words of George Mosse, ‘Nationalism and respectability assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and loss of control’ (16). This is a cogent articulation of my point here. In these narratives, the adversity, that is invariably a corollary of forced displacement, occasions new approaches to gender embodiment with an eye to disrupting the dominant narrative that wants performance to stay on the path that agrees closely with the nationalist paradigm. As a Cypriot male who has done two years of military service, I have been inculcated with set ideas of masculinity and how to embody pride in my Greek heritage (these are components of what I call here ‘nationalist paradigm’). Subsequently, I struggled to unlearn these ideas and this embodiment and my reading of this literature is part of an effort to escape dominant nationalist logic, split open the closure of dogmas and revel in the possibilities of open-ended textuality (I am borrowing here from Toril Moi’s discussion of Hélène Cixous’ theoretical work, 106).

Even on the level of national representations gender plays a crucial role. The island has been associated with the goddess Aphrodite, an association with orientalist overtones and great touristic currency that has been cashed-in many times over in Cyprus’ cultural transactions as a postcolonial republic. However, Aris, the god of war, would make a more appropriate divine representation of this troubled and troubling island since, sadly, the story of the Republic of Cyprus is
one of strife, violence and division. The island being the mythological birthplace of Aphrodite, her connection enjoys constant circulation because of the female gender of this divinity and her amorous nature. No male god of the Greek pantheon could generate the same discursive ornamentation that Aphrodite, as beautiful and scandalous sex goddess, is able to generate. In the masculinist imagination, her femaleness opens up great potential for manipulation. It bespeaks a desire to maintain the island’s patriarchal order while employing a female goddess in the service of a profitable industry, indulging in a complacent auto-exoticisation and spurious ‘autoethnographic expression,’ to use Mary Louise Pratt’s term (7). Because I find this particular indulgence objectionable and somewhat troubling, I am particularly taken by the Turkish Cypriot poet Gür Genç’s lines where any possible images of a laughing and amorous goddess are checked by a sobering critique:

To Cypriot Poets

Since Aphrodite this island has turned into a rubbish dump of love. Our feet tangled in the roots of invaders
bone piles crack as we move
under our weight.

The earth so over-saturated with death syrup
the only escape
is not poetry…

water!


The poet uses water as an agent of transformation, refusing the promises of a poetic tradition that cannot relieve the dryness and hardness of state politics. Aphrodite’s land is not an idyllic mythical landscape as depicted in so many tourist guides that orientalise the island in the process of making it attractive to Western tourists. It is, rather, a landfill of grief and inane discourse on love. Moreover, the sad results of Cyprus’s bloody confrontations are alluded to in the poem’s hard images. Revitalisation needs to happen through a flood that will change the course of the numerous destructive narratives that plague the land. The Greek Cypriot writer and critic Stephanos Stephanides aligns this quest for water with a ‘desire to be remembered by the sea, which is nostalgia for the permeability of borders’ (2007 10). ‘Borders’ is a term that may evoke all kinds of nightmares for the Cypriot subject. Apart from the more obvious and contested geographical border between the North and South sides of the island (that we were forbidden to cross for twenty nine years, 1974–2003), I interpret ‘borders’ as the discursive limits of gender and I search for those moments in refugee literature, Cypriot and other, when gender borders appear permeable allowing a large range of expression that takes us away from narratives that are religiously observed by the nationalist imagination — narratives such as military parades, huge flowing flags on the roofs of buildings housing football teams, national anthems and national holidays where the ‘glory of our past’ is reiterated with persistence and urgency. These
narratives, so common in the everyday life of the island’s communities, impose a stalemate in our understanding of loss and dislocation. In fact, they do not allow any space for contemplating ‘the possibility of something else’ as Cixous puts it in the epigraph.

**Nostalgia for the Future**

In this critical exploration of Cypriot literature of displacement, I will focus mainly on the texture and scope of pain and longing as these imbue the literature produced by the Greek and Turkish Cypriot refugees of the island. On the emotional side, the memory of home still erodes the psyche of the older generations of Cypriot refugees who have never accepted their violent uprooting. Indeed, their new place has to remain foreign since the pain of loss becomes the ultimate marker that references an origin elsewhere, a home whose memory delineates the boundaries of imagining and, as such, it inflects any form of longing and aspiration for the future. Strangely, in Cyprus this lost home also bestows an odd form of bruised privilege in its detachment from the displaced person’s present life. Nevertheless, what I find most noteworthy in the literature produced on this theme is that often the nostalgia that colours the images is not some longing for the past, predictable in the texture, intensity, and expression of its pain. As Inga Tatolytë observes in a discussion of Cypriot poetry, ‘so much unusual nostalgia, paradoxical, ironic and encouraging to evaluate critically the trajectories marked by one’s memory… It is nostalgia for the future in the poetics of displacement’ (71). In the process set up by this agonised longing for the future in looking to the past, gender often determines whether the narrative will open up artistic and political possibilities or shut them down.

Stephanides offers a cogent articulation of this concept of a blossoming nostalgia and porosity in gender embodiment that rejects a rigid, nationalistic posturing. In his critical introduction to *Cultures of Memory/Memories of Culture* he clarifies that, ‘nostalgia need not signify real longing for a real state of affairs, for the past, but can be a coherent critique of the present and a call for a different future, a nostalgia that enables the future’ (2007 10). In Stephanides’ poem ‘Requiem for Trikomo’ I discern a divergence from masculine tropes of nostalgic reminiscence anchored to place. This anchoring is anticipated in Cypriot literature of displacement where the connection with the land is religiously evoked as a defining agent of subjectivity. ‘Requiem for Trikomo’ projects an openness to experience that flows through the male body imbuing it with a richness of emotions and sensations. Trikomo is the poet’s village in the north of the island and was completely inaccessible to the poet for several decades (it still remains inaccessible today in the sense that the poet would not be allowed to resettle in the house where he was born). In this important poem, the poet narrates memories from his childhood in the village, his subsequent departure, and the various narratives that became the confluence of his own world consciousness. I quote a long excerpt:
I stretched in all directions
Rolled off into the plains
Up to the mountain and the skies
Then the seas
Stole me away

…

Eleni retelling
How she lured Stephanos of Alexandria
With her swing song

…

In his silence I travelled with the name
Laid my body out in the immensity of the earth
Exposing it to oracles
Looking for a special divination
Voices saying don’t forget
Let memory decompose
Spread like a virus
In the intent look of strangers
Filling crevices moistening protrusions
Rehearsing to absorb and expel the world
Experience its infinite flesh without words (2005 23)

In this moving poem, with the term ‘moving’ deployed in its multiple agencies, the male body journeys through its experiences in a spirited and adroit manner and in complete defiance of traditional masculinist tropes that often harden the texture of so much of Cypriot poetry. Cypriot poets, male and female, often assume a posturing that is quite rigid and create images that contribute to and further strengthen those parameters of gender expression that are deemed acceptable by the dominant narratives of national identity.

**The Posture of Grief: Pentadaktylos and Male Pain**

I will illustrate my point here with a paradigm that is absent from Stephanides’ poem but is very popular and dominates much of the poetry produced by Greek Cypriot refugees. The northern mountain range of Pentadaktylos often appears in verse as a revered subject of apostrophe. The name literally means ‘Five Fingers’ (‘Beşparmak’ in Turkish) and refers to a rock formation of five peaks that resembles the fingers of a hand. Indeed, it is a magnificent and compelling geographical feature of the landscape and the site of interesting folklore. Tragically, it is also the place where battles were fought and many people lost their lives. Greek Cypriots always gaze at this mountain range with a sense of loss and longing. No other frame of reference could be possible and the enormous Turkish flag that dominates the mountain side — a clear sign of Turkish nationalism — directs Greek Cypriot sentiment with great precision. Demure and mournful, the poet sees him/herself reflected against the imposing mountain range that becomes emblematic of the
enormity of loss; a bleeding, doleful, and tragic giant with the wound of the enemy’s flag on his side. I can demonstrate this relationship with the mountain with a brief mention of a collection by Claire Angelides, a contemporary Cypriot poet who is particularly fond of Cyprus’ Greek past. Ubiquitous in Angelides’ poetry are particular images and characters, mythological and historical, whose function is to evoke a heroic and valiant past that is distinctly Greek and Christian Orthodox. This past contrasts bitterly with the present occupation of the northern part of the island by Turkish troops. Angelides was so inspired by the mythopoeic possibilities of the mountain that she imagined a poetic persona that, like an archetypal mother, gave birth to the mountain itself; hence the title of the long poem, *Pentadaktylos My Son* (1991, reprinted in 1994 in a bilingual edition):

My son was open-hearted;
Shaggy-breasted Mount Pentadaktylos
Offers a home to the wolf
Lined with down feathers of snow.

‘I laid my son to sleep on down feathers,
I danced him in my arms,
How I spoiled him!’

Digenis the hero came
And seized the boulder
Standing with one foot here on Mount Pentadaktylos
And the other on the highest peak in Crete;
And the trees smiled
When they awoke at dawn. (1994 21)

Costas Montis is another Greek Cypriot poet who finds in Pentadaktylos the ideal metaphor for articulating a recurring theme in his work: the enslavement of his motherland. Montis is one of Cyprus’ most acclaimed Greek Cypriot poets, a Nobel Prize nominee, and a ‘Corresponding Member of the Academy of Athens, the highest honour conferred upon intellectual creators living outside Greece’ (http://www.costasmontis.com/index.html). One of the poems in his 1975 collection *Πικραινόμενος εν Εαυτώ* (translated as *Grieving Inside Myself* on the official Montis website, http://www.costasmontis.com/books.html) is particularly representative of what has become a tradition in contemporary Cypriot literature of the post 1974 period. The poem is part of a series entitled ‘Moments of the Invasion’ with ‘invasion’ being an obvious reference for all Greek Cypriots of the Turkish military operation of July 1974 (that followed the coup d’état organised by the Athenian junta and assisted and supported by EOKA B, the right wing Greek Cypriot nationalist group):¹

| Είναι δύσκολο να πιστεύω          | It is hard for me to believe |
| πως μας τους έφερε               | That they were brought to us |
| η θάλασσα της Κερύνιας             | By the sea of Kyrenia       |
| είναι δύσκολο να πιστεύω          | It is hard for me to believe |
| πως μας τους έφερε               | That they were brought to us |
| η αγαπημένη θάλασσα της Κερύνιας   | By the beloved sea of Kyrenia|
Towards an Epistemology of Longing

Ανασήκωσε την πλάτη
κι αποσειέ τους Πενταδάχτυλε μου
ανασήκωσε την πλάτη
κι απόσχισέ τους
(Raise your back
And shake them off dear Pentadaktylos
Raise your back
And tear them off
(my translation)

The poetic devices are plain and straightforward: simple language to express unspeakable pain caused by an un-namable male enemy (in Greek the pronouns are male); repetition as an element from folkloric poetry that renders an incantatory but also mournful quality. Furthermore, the poet’s familiar seascape of Kyrenia (the port city on the island’s north coast where the Turkish warrior ships landed in 1974) is violated by this disgraceful deed but also inadvertently and innocently implicated in it. And, of course, the most prominent force in the poem expected to counter balance this tragedy is the giant and cherished mountain range. Pentadaktylos is forced to become the unwilling host of invaders and the poet calls upon him to employ his might and simply shake them off; tear them off so that Cyprus will be rid of them. Albeit plain, the poem’s language and structure delineate strongly the dichotomy between ‘them’ and ‘us’; the un-namable invaders and, on the other side, us, the children of Kyrenia and the brothers and sons of Pentadaktylos. Even the poet’s great disbelief that the sea of his beloved town acted as the passage of the enemy’s ships implies that this sea is only good and the evil travelled here by force.

In my estimation, Pentadaktylos as a heroic character with might and grandeur who is not defeated, only mournfully subdued and thought capable of shaking off the enemy, is a product of a masculinist imagination that employs prefabricated images in order to secure great support and circulation in the Cyprus Republic because of their ideological currency in Greek Cypriot nationalism. In simple terms, it is easy to write about Pentadaktylos in a mournful mode that recalls a pain that must remain ‘pure’ (meaning loyal to established national ideologies) and immutable. These poetic efforts remain impermeable to any creative and sophisticated re-workings of sadness, loss, and nostalgia. Rather, this masculinist imagination (exercised not only by male but female poets who imagine archetypal mothers giving birth to the mountain) attempts no ideological critique and, instead, remains invested in a perpetuation of the same points of reference and a consciousness that has to be preserved in the face of change.

Stephanides resists these uncomplicated binaries with their straightforward patriotic, heroic and orthodox pronouncements. He is deeply mindful of the tragedy of the island but he also resists Pentadaktylos’ anthropomorphic posturing. In striking contrast to poetic depictions of the mountain, the male body in Stephanides’ ‘Requiem for Trikomo’ is keen to dissolve and flow through experiences with striking flexibility. This is not a male body that seems encumbered by set patriarchal imperatives — heroism, orthodox tradition, sternness — but a male body that longs for exposure to the elements of experience, eager to ‘absorb and
expel the world’ in rigorous processes of shifting, growing, amassing memories, and shaping present and future. Trikomo, the village of origin, although enslaved and inaccessible, does not inflict a debilitating sorrow and does not provoke the inertia of a sober and nationalist posture. Rather, this specific geographic, emotional, and anamnesiac location engenders a listening and acting male body that choreographs its exploration of the world in a mode that remains fully permeable to the translational dimension of sensibility; in contrast with a hairy chested mountain of a son.

HAGS AND A QUEST FOR HOME

Turkish Cypriot writer and critic Mehmet Yashin offers an intriguing articulation of the Cypriot’s concept of displacement. Yashin writes about his homeland skewed by a border that marks violence. However, in ‘The Wednesday Hag’, he scripts nostalgia in an attempt to recreate a writerly home: ‘I was hoping to meet my writer in the buffer zone. But then I decided that what I was doing in this textual realism framework was searching for my home’ (14). In this profoundly political piece, the metafictional character of the narrative creates a multi-dimensional possibility for the expression of violence and conflict in a striking blend of contradictory images, at once comic and horrifying; and circling the heart of this narrative are images of deserted homes and their screaming ghosts stranded in the gothic environs of abandonment. Here the writer sets up a residence. In alignment with my argument here, Yashin explores gender possibilities in order to escape from the dominant modes that lock subjectivity into specific frames that eschew the potential for creative and alternative embodiments. In fact, Yashin’s piece seeks to veer away from literary patterns that might indicate some dependence on literary orthodoxies. Rather, he ventures into a postmodern realm where borders of gender, genre, and language are creatively unsettled:

The Wednesday Hag opened the door before I knocked. In the quivering light of the gas lamp she held in her hand she looked like an apparition. She turned the knob gently to make the wick slightly bigger. Holding the now brighter lamp up to my face, she said ‘You must be Misail Oskarus, the character in the late Mehmet Yashin’s novel’. (4)

This striking introduction signifies in multifarious ways. The Wednesday Hag is herself a character that defies a solid form or ‘real’ identity and suggests a trans-ordinary embodiment. The opening of the door indirectly references the threshold, a liminal space of expectation and prospect, and marks the opening of a mythopoeic process with a promise for an unusual journey. The quivering light and the image of the apparition introduce an equivocation in the narrative, which is necessary for the incantatory tone that allows for possibilities. But, it is the character of the Hag, with her strange and unorthodox femininity, and disruption of all acceptable tropes of female representation, that allows for the imaginative possibilities the writer longs for in order to rethink the past and, in the process, re-configure his present and future. In another sense, Yashin’s character negotiates
between formidable contraries thus becoming an at once frightful and comic manifestation. This process of becoming also reveals a certain absurdity in the interethnic conflict that continues to keep the island divided.

HANNEH

My final literary illustration concerns the work of Lisa Suhair Majaj, a poet and short story writer with roots in Palestine and the United States who has been living in Cyprus for a number of years. Majaj went through the misfortune of experiencing and subsequently writing with great acuity on the politics of exile and dislocation, introducing a much-needed dimension to this particular theme in the contemporary writing of Cyprus. She is one of the island’s most poignant poetic voices thematising displacement, loss and conflict. Her lines draw the geographical contours of the region but also of the politics, personal and international, that the speaker contends with in the poems.

In a short elegiac prose piece, ‘Hanneh’, Majaj tells the story of a ‘tiny, ferocious woman’ (76), her physical smallness in sharp contrast with her cultural significance and great humanity. Hanneh, who is displaced from Palestine to Jordan, is at once a repository and purveyor of culture. She offers to teach the author Arabic, the language itself being a home and a place of belonging. The piece is autobiographical and the author openly regrets her lack of attention to these lessons that deprived her access to this place. Not only is Hanneh a purveyor of culture and tradition, she also gives a stern example of excellent housekeeping that fully respects all available resources, as opposed to a materialistic appetite for selfish exploitation of resources. And what a gracious paradox that Hanneh embodies all these while being an unmarried woman, a state that remains aberrant and unforgivable in many Middle Eastern cultures, including Cyprus. As if spinsterhood is not enough, Hanneh is also an avid traveller at a time when ‘women often stayed home’ (76).

She was a Palestinian from Jerusalem; living in Jordan, where she spent much of the year, was a compromise. She never forgot where she came from, or where she belonged. From her I learned about both dignity and caution. Occasionally she would tell stories about the history she’d lived through, offering details that were few but chilling; how survivors of the Deir Yassin massacre were paraded through Jerusalem streets on trucks; the devastation of napalm. But when I arrived in Jerusalem from the U.S. on a lecture tour, she took me to the side and admonished me to watch what I said in public. ‘We have to live here,’ she said flatly, not needing to say the rest: that I did not. (77)

Hanneh’s circumstances bring home the tragedies and horrors of historical contingencies that motivate much of refugee literature where they become hardened sediments. However, Majaj’s portrait is so lyrical, so personal, so replete with compassion and also admiration for a figure that profoundly impacted her imagination, that what she offers is an account of memories where the gender performance appears familiar and urgent but also gestures towards a futuristic investment. The woman she writes about emerges from the narrative as someone
Cypriots know and have some kind of relationship with. She is bound by the exigencies of a hard life, but emanates a certain didactic disposition whose value is in revising our present and expanding the potential of various identity and gender embodiments. Hanneh is single, thrifty, caring, wise, austere, and loving.

When the news came that she had died, I was on my way to an airport in a foreign country. Perhaps it was fitting that knowledge of her passing reached me in that liminal space between borders, the space Palestinians are so often forced to call home. From the departure lounge I dialled Jerusalem unsteadily. The familiar voice on the other end of the receiver confirmed my sense of loneliness, the knowledge of a generation slipping irreversibly away. (77)

This moving passage underscores the loss of a significant person, yet it also seems as if Hanneh herself has come to represent a home, a place of belonging despite the paradoxes, or perhaps, precisely because of the paradoxes of her identity (single, unorthodox, uncompromising, set in her ways and ecological in her everyday conduct). Her passing, therefore, comes to signify a loss that is reminiscent of the pain of homelessness.

**Conclusion**

On the level of official state politics, the refugee issue has brought about the creation of a complex government apparatus involving special funds and parliamentary committees passing various forms of legislation that protect but also set the limits to refugee entitlements. Greek Cypriot refugees have been issued with special identity cards that signal the ontological nature of refugee status: it is not just what has happened to you but what you have become. Although motivated by a desire for crisis management and fair treatment of afflicted people, these mechanisms and policies imbricate intriguing gender politics. For example, until quite recently (June 2010), the children of a second generation father with refugee status were entitled to a state subsidy for the building of their home. Patriarchy, in other words, endowed male refugee status with a validity and entitlement denied to females, since a second generation female refugee with children married to a non-refugee man was not eligible for state support for her children. In 2011, thirty-six years after the 1974 tragedy, the issue of second generation refugee entitlement was brought before the Cyprus parliament where it was legislated to be extended to refugee mothers as well.

The passage from ‘Hanneh’ quoted above speaks to my concerns in this paper: that refugee literature existing in an in-between site achieves its greatest potential when it reveals ways to transcend the various ideological strictures and reach beyond the pain of a stagnating nostalgia. By stagnating nostalgia I am thinking of, for example, the repeated broadcasts of images of villages in the occupied north of the island, a slide show of sorts, accompanied by nostalgic music and the slogan ‘I don’t forget’ (Stephanides 2007 7). This offered very little in terms of a creative reworking of pain or coming to terms with history and understanding
the complex events that brought about the destruction of 1974. As it negotiates its pain and physical relocation, literature of displacement has to resist such visual articulations of loss. In the words of Djelal Kadir, a Turkish Cypriot of the diaspora, it is ‘the bulwarks of migration and memory management who calibrate and control the movement of peoples on the basis of biometrics and ethnicities in today’s world’ (55). Ethnic hatred and religious and racial intolerance force people on the move almost every day. In this article I have tried to veer away from national(ist) and patriarchal directives and their vigilant and intransigent ethnocentric agendas that have brought such suffering in Cyprus. These do not take us further in our thinking, serving rather to cement a consciousness that hardens and resists possibilities.

Nearing the conclusion of this article I feel more acutely the pressure of a certain frustration that I have suppressed till now. I have raised issues that relate to posturing (a term that I favour because I can imagine it as creatively histrionic and even campy), nationalist imperatives, normative nationalist gender embodiment, and the potential to transgress these. However, I am concerned that I may not have offered the reader ample clarity and I have resisted the most immediate way to do it: a detailed telling of my own participation in military parades where ‘nationalist posturing’ comes alive in a manner that I find crude and violent. I have also refrained from relating my experience as an army recruit where I have to attend military training in regular intervals and learn how to assemble and disassemble guns. There are also the national holidays with the overload of slogans about a heroic people and the usual litany of terms about the ‘sacred land’ that birthed us, ‘morality and values’ defined against an enemy always depicted as barbaric and insolent, our fathers’ ancient and revered traditions and so forth. This exploration into the literature I have read is motivated by the anecdotal desire of Cypriots to tell their problem in a ‘dreaded history lesson’ (Papadakis 2006 231), that involves a general unwillingness to listen to an other’s story, imagine other possibilities, or accept that the issue is more complex than this ‘history lesson’ outlines. The Cyprus of the Armenian, Maronite, Greek, and Turkish Cypriot communities (there may be more) has been turned into a tragic and divided island that insists, at least in the south where I live, on a monolithic identity: Greek Cypriot. Often on the radio I hear discussions about how Greek Cypriots are fast becoming extinct because of the influx of migrants and their children and the mixing that inevitably takes place. This nationalist paranoia presumes that Cypriots have always been an essentially pure, Greek race, and have not mixed with the Arabs, Lusignan, Venetians, Ottomans, and others who have passed through the island.

In reaction, then, my reading tries to explore the literary journey of those refugees whose writing has deployed idiosyncratic subjectivities able to illuminate pathways of resistance and reconfigure the body’s articulation in relation with its gender expectations and its new environment. These idiosyncrasies and reconfigurations are not the concern of merely the refugees writing their plight into
existence. They are immediate and in possession of cultural arsenal useful in the ongoing battles against some of the fronts I outline in the previous paragraph. I am fond of the idea of Aphrodite and I am not troubled by the Orientalist associations. But, if the goddess is to be invited for more entrances then she must not serve the inane needs of a patriarchal designation. Rather, she must emerge fresh as a goddess of hope, not in harmony with existing oppressive structures, those that also determine gender strictures, but disruptive and beautifully discordant.

NOTES


2 This problematic gender-biased construction of refugee status and its privileges became the subject of controversy. The announcement about refugee entitlements being extended to mothers met with opposition because of its financial burden on the state economy in 2011, a year of financial crisis of global dimensions. There was a fear that it would tax the state apparatus by a significant increase in the volume of refugee entitlement.

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