(In) the Name of the Other; Albanian Migrants in Contemporary Greek Fiction and the Role of Naming

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Abstract: This paper explores the experiences of the main character in Michalis Malandrakis' short novel, *Patriot* (2018). The protagonist, an Albanian migrant in Greece, is compelled to change his name and (re) invent his identity to achieve his goals in the new country. Agim becomes Yiannis (John) and ultimately dies as Yiannis. The novel engages in an open dialogue with theoretical questions about the self and the Other, subjectivity and objectivity, as well as the feeling of "belongingness." This paper addresses several questions: What role does the self-narrator play in constructing an identity? To what extent is the protagonist welcomed into this new world after his name change? What must he sacrifice to become accepted? And to what extent can a person (re)invent their identity?

Keywords: Contemporary Greek Fiction, Albania, Other, Self, Name, Identity

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Introduction: Thirty years after

2023 marks 30 years since Albanian migrants crossed the border between the two countries and found themselves confronted with a new reality, which required them to reconstruct a new narrative around their identity. Greece, of course, had already begun accepting migrants from Eastern European countries such as Poland in the previous decade. The coming changes in the very structure of Greek society raised a series of questions around identity issues (Christopoulos 2002: 98-168, Christopoulos 2019), from issues related to the concept of citizenship, and questions about the formation of a state, to ethnic components, and concepts such as 'multiculturalism' or 'inclusion' (Taylor 1994). The ferment in the not-so-spacious Greek society is by no means unchanging; the migratory flows encountered several resistant ideological barriers and entrenched views and positions that were difficult to overcome.

However, even if relationships smooth out over time, it only takes one event to set or change the mood. Exemplifying this is the incident of 2004, when the national football teams of the two countries competed as rivals. On the afternoon of September 4, the Greek team was defeated 2-1 in Tirana. On the same evening, in many central places in the Greek capital, such as Omonia, but also in almost all cities around the country, the slogan "You will never be Greek, Albanian" dominated the streets (Golfinopoulos 2007, pp.151-152). Equally indicative is the broader treatment of immigrants as potentially being dangerous. Precisely because of this status, which in the rhetoric of many produces the dominant meaning here in Greece (Lymperaki and Pelagidis 2011, pp.11). The change that Europe had experienced a short time earlier was still not fully understood. "How prepared were we, the citizens of Europe, for this change?", asked the Polish writer Richard Kapuściński, only to reply, "Not so much, I am afraid. We see the Other above all as a foreigner (but Other does not necessarily mean from a foreign country), as a representative of a separate species, but the most crucial point is that we see him as a threat." (Kapuściński 2011, pp.66).

The conditions of the de-democratization of the Albanians in the period we are concerned with, the 1990s, are radically different from previous periods since Albania experienced its consequences already before "actually existing socialism." The first period of mass Albanian migration occurred before the Second World War, when a large productive part of the male population left the country due to unemployment. The second period, during socialist Albania, was much smaller in terms of population movement, precisely because of the strict framework of the authorities and is accompanied by the word "betrayal," since those who managed to cross the border could hardly return. The third period, the one that concerns us, is the period of mass migration. Albanians gathered en masse outside the embassies of Western countries, asking to find a better place within their own territories. As a result, in ten years from the beginning to the end of the 1990s, some 450,000 people left the country (Lambrianidis and Lymperaki 2005, pp.176-178). They are, to borrow the title of a recent work somewhere between history and fiction, the ones who grew up in the "End of History." (Upi 2022).

The Gaze of the Other

The *Other* within and at the same time outside the host country, whether from Albania, Iran, or Pakistan, is in almost all the projects under consideration difficult to access. Indeed, at some point, literature tries to work on the axis of facilitating this access; Telemachus Kotsias, for example, a writer whose main element in his poetry is to approach the Other, mainly Greeks of the minority in Albania, tries to show in his novel *The Last Canary* (1995) that we have more to gain than to lose, on both sides, from a harmonious cooperation and a seamless coexistence (Kotzia 2020, pp.349).

Of course, literature did not remain confined to this ethical framework. Responding to the ferment of the society that produced it, it also presented the *Other* as a potential threat,[1] as a body to be exploited (Paparousi 2012, pp.151-174), and as a pariah (Varika 2017, pp.117). All of this emanated precisely from the status of the immigrant, their distinctive difference from other literary (co-) protagonists. As Demosthenes Kourtovik points out, "[...] with a considerable delay and in only a few cases so far, Greek prose has provided complete characters of such people, that is, characters that are not entirely traceable to their migrant or refugee status" (Kourtovik 2021, pp.321-322). Indeed, there are very few works in which the immigrant acquires a voice of his own. Usually these characters are heterophonic, approached through the privileged and canonical gaze of the familiar. Thus, for example in Sotiria Stavrakopoulou's *Drunken Woman* (2005), Lela, the Albanian heroine, is described exclusively through the first-person narration of the Greek protagonist. The relationship, of course, between the two individuals does not seem at all optimistic about a common future.

The creation of this new diversity (Christopoulos 2002, pp.154-160) should not be missed by one's reading. New, as in the case of the immigrant, means reception implies subjugation. The Foucauldian thesis about subjugated bodies, bodies that, to enter the sphere of the useful and productive, must pass through the complementarities of subjugation, in the sense of investing themselves with relations of domination, is well known (Foucault 2011, pp.38). It is precisely in these relations that the bodies of the Others are imprisoned and literature becomes a privileged space for their expression. However, the question recurs and is differentiated: if the 'subject', a term introduced by Gayarti Chakravorty Spivak, can speak (Spivak 1985), what does that matter to us? This additionally adds to the speech of the *Other* immediately moving him from the position of object to that of subject since he can now freely (?) express

1 A typical example is Thanasis Chimonas' novel, Broken Greek (2000), in which a young trainee lawyer falls in love with an Albanian woman who seems to be taking advantage of him. In fact, later, we meet the Albanian woman accused of murder and the young lawyer struggling to exonerate her.

himself. It is this return of the *Other's* gaze to one that differentiates this literary work. The subjectification of the hitherto object raises, in turn, a series of questions about the familiar. What constitutes it? What are its endogenous pathologies that underlie it? How durable are some of the myths upon which a narrative is built? (Hobsbawm 2004: 24). All legitimate questions posed precisely because of the reception of the *Other*, in this case the immigrant within the fictional universe.

The Self as (the) Other

Reception, however, does not necessarily mean acceptance. The *Other* must be freed from some elements of their *otherness* to be accepted. The appropriation of *otherness*, then, a practice known since the ancient times of the Greek deities (Vernant, 1992), presupposes a series of actions that perform the familiar. They detach, in other words, the other from its *otherness* so that it becomes accessible and integrated, more or less. And one of these performers is grounded in identity. The constructability of identity is explored in a wide range of literary works. For the sake of space, I will adhere to a relatively recent text which, while not concerned with the migrant experience, is one that is nevertheless typical of the *process* required. The text is entitled *Change: Method* and was written by the French writer Édouard Louis in 2021. In its pages, readers follow step by step how the subject constructs a new narrative around his or her identity to integrate into the new environment.

The identities available in the new space exclude Louis' protagonist because the sought-after one is latent. Integration, therefore, will require re-framing and re-narration. Of course, the 'narrative self', or rather, the narrated self, the self-constituted within discursive practices cannot be seen independently of performance since *usus facit legem*. Thus it may be that in our own quest, gender is of concern to us, but the stakes are different for all of us. In the pages that follow, one will focus the reading on the case of a literary hero- the protagonist of a novel written in 2019 by Michalis Malandrakis entitled: *Patriot.* Malandrakis' protagonist is an

immigrant who comes from Albania to Greece in the 1990s. His name is Agim. This affirmation however is not entirely true. Agim crosses the border, but within Greek territory he disappears and is assigned the name Yannis. So, what is going on? One might question "How many protagonists are there?" One might be confused by the back and forth of names and thus, the role of the protagonist himself.

As is well known, Western culture places great emphasis on the practices of discourse, the most representational practices since antiquity (Foucault, 2008, pp.426). By naming something, I allow it to exist within and outside of discourse. Therefore, by naming a subject, I attribute to it characteristics that relate to a wider context of relations, cultural and otherwise. The acquired name functions within an organized social set, establishing constants and relations between individual and group (Georgoulas, 1997, pp.17). These constants, precisely through the process of deterritorialization, are changed, re- signified and in turn subjected to the normative principles and relations of subordination.

The "Agim" as a signifier differentiates the bearer from the other subjects with which he is called upon to coexist in the new reality of the host country, and therefore, it must be eliminated and its place taken by a new signifier. In the case of Agim, the naming will be full of irony. "Agim" in Albanian means dawn, dawn, sunrise, sunrise. And the Agim of Malandrakis' novel, once he leaves the name behind, will enter, (thanks to his talent for music), the world of the night, but as John. The name, then, as Roland Barthes puts it, attributes to the literary character who deservedly bears it a main characteristic that complements him, completes him fictionally (Barthes, 2007, pp.208).[2] How to read on a first level, this renaming, then? Malandrakis takes care, before allowing his protagonist to enter the nocturnal territory, to rid him of the light

2 Summarizing the findings of the literature on character names, Spyros Kiosses writes: "Reading experience confirms that 'declarative' names of literary characters, that is, names that seem to have a particular functional value in the narrative, may refer to some particular trait or habit of the character, emphasize some aspect of the character that will play a role in the plot, function as symbols, metaphors or metonymies, or refer to some other literary or mythological character/type (or natural person/type) from which they derive clues about their character" (Kiosses, 2018: 240).

that accompanies his name; of course, it should be noted, the invention of the name does not belong to the protagonist. The novel begins with the meeting of Agim, who plays the clarinet in the street, with Anthony, also an Albanian, one whom we assume has changed his name. Antonis has already been living in Greece for ten years and takes care to introduce the young musician to the "ways" of survival.

However, the scene of the two men getting to know each other, which takes place in the first-person verbal, as the whole novel is written from Agim's point of view, is about identity as an idiomatic difference. Anthony watches Agim playing and approaches, addressing him directly in Albanian:

> – Pse po vrapon patrioti? Nuk je Patriot? I look at him in horror. He laughs.
> – Why are you running, brother? He reaches out his hand to pick me up. [...]
> – [...] Where are you from? I knew you the moment I saw you. I said he's a patriot. We look like it from afar. You're a patriot, aren't you?
> – Yeah, but...
> – I knew it. Hey! I'm telling you... he's patting me on the back, I can spot us a mile away. (Malandrakis, 2019, pp.10-11)

What is not said at the beginning, the affirmation of common origin, the proof of paternity, will be said in the language of the *other*. Agim will not speak Albanian, as he will almost never speak it in the entire novel, apart from a few phrases he will exchange with his two homeland roommates. The acquaintance will quickly turn into a job offer, since Antonis seems to be better versed in the night world of Athens, to which he introduces Agim. Initiation, however, requires sacrifice.

> – And how much do you have in Greece?
> – Eleven years. Twelve years old I came. My name is A...

– Hey, he cut me off. Did I ask you what your name was? What are you telling me? Listen to me. You can tell me your name. But if you wanna make money here, you gotta be awake. You're not some whore advertising your name. Just answer only what you're asked, okay, patriot? Now tell me your name.
– My name is Agim, but I don't understand anything. (Malandrakis, 2019, pp.12)

Antonis' ban, seemingly, does not concern the origin of his interlocutor, but it is indicative of his attitude towards Agim. The name, it has been said, in Western culture has great value, as several codes, social and cultural, are inscribed in it. Agim, then, the bearer of these codes, must discard them, at least for the moment, to communicate with his interlocutor. Later, of course, Antony, for reasons we will understand before reading, will intervene in Agim's main signifying tool, his name.

– So, I'm supposed to be in the shop at six o'clock the day after tomorrow?", I asked him.
– Yes. And as we said: you will introduce yourself as Yiannis from Ioannina or Patra or Arta, I don't know, something like that, Greek. The boss there is weird and doesn't want Albanians. I'm sure they won't understand you; you speak better Greek than they do. But keep in mind: you don't tell anyone where you're from. Yannis from Ioannina. (Malandrakis, 2019, pp.13)

What, then, does Agim lack from the moment he receives the significant "John"? The signifier "Agim" is a way of contacting the bearer with the nation to which he belongs, that is, with the identity we can call national. An identity that, in turn, performs; it provides the subject with a sense of belonging to a social subset (Smith 1991), as it attributes to him some social characteristics associated with it, making him acceptable and secure within it (Taifel,1981). Agim, for almost the rest of the novel, will constantly straddle between two selves. So which group does he belong to? Probably, neither, since he is constantly wavering about

the actions he (will) take, which is directly related to the performance discussed.[3] As Agim, he (must) act differently than as John.

John, now protected under the umbrella of the new name from experiencing otherness as a stigma (Papageorgiou, 2011, pp.391), will be able to enter the night world, will be hired as an organist in a nightclub and will be able to improve his living conditions. Malandrakis will several times call upon his protagonist to categorically confirm this new identity.

- John. My name is John [...]
- John. My name is John.
- Where are you from, Yankee?
- From Ioannina. I grew up there. Now I came down to Athens. [...]
- Sit down, he says and points to the chair next to me. Remind me your name.
- John. My name is John. (Malandrakis 2019, pp.15, 18, 36)

The magnifying "Yannare" can, of course, not sound ironic to the ears of the readers. Nevertheless, the further the action of the novel progresses, the more we see that Yannis is fully functioning within the confines of his new identity. The affirmative function of repetition, moreover, leaves no room for maneuver. This falsification of identity, which began with an external cause, now involves the subject himself. After all, as Anthony Giddens has shown, subjects in the spaciousness of the modern age are constantly called upon to make similar re-realizations of themselves. By "correcting" certain parts of his autobiography, John is free to taste the consequences of the new situation (Giddens, 1991, pp.72).

3 Agim, of course, does not seem to maintain, or at least this is not the case in the novel under review, strong ties with his country of origin. Apart from his roommates, with whom he occasionally exchanges a few phrases in Albanian, only at one point in the work do we see him refer to his past, recalling moments from his past summers. Again, however, we could not easily speak of an "Albanian identity" that would somehow appear otherwise beyond these. Similarly, unlike his other literary peers, he does not seem to be inspired by any myths surrounding Albania (Schwandner-Sievers, 2012).

Consequences, however, will not be limited to just fame and profits, but will soon prove to have another, darker side. Yannis will find himself facing a clash of identities, as his colleague Dina will end up in hospital when it comes out that she is of Albanian origin, which she has been hiding.

- At her house, she realized that Dina was from Albania. I know she told you she was from here, we didn't tell anyone, but she's from Albania. She had frames with pictures above of her family and some friends. Andricos pushed her and she admitted it.
- Before he left, was that?
- No, no, no, before they get laid. Then he got up to leave and told her not to say anything to anyone. He told her very badly, the asshole, you know the tone. Dina asked why, he asked back, and he turned around and told her it's because you're a dirty Albanian. He called her names, told her a few other things, and Dina reacted. She swore to him that she would tell everyone and even the boss would know. As soon as he said that, he jumped her. (Malandrakis, 2019, pp. 66)

The revelation of the identity, which Yiannis must avoid at all costs, has dire consequences for Dina. Earlier, Dina introduces herself to John as follows:

- Dina, where are you from?I ask her, since Maria has talked a lot about Tripoli, where she grew up.
- From Serres. Until fifteen that is. Then Kavala and now Athens. (Malandrakis, 2019, pp.34)

So, we see the same story again, only this time John plays the role of the spectator. Dina, since we learn nothing else about a different name, now John's object, is his potential mirrored image since he could have well been in her place. Concealment, then, is not always functional, since it seems memory reverses and betrays it (Papageorgiou, 2011, pp.195-203).

We can now attribute another signifier to the signifier Agim, that of necessary concealment, of necessary withdrawal from the light.

Play it again, Sam

Agim introduces himself to the readers of the novel by playing the well-known folk song "My John, your handkerchief," a song which will be constantly recurring in the pages of the novel and, indeed, in a circle format that was chosen as the most appropriate background music for its conclusion.

> My John, the, my John, the, my John, the, aide.
>
> Johnny, your handkerchief, come on.
>
> What's so dirty, my Giannis, my Giannakis.
>
> [...] Dirty, dirty, dirty, go on,
>
> ...the foreign country has made it dirty, come on,
>
> the desolate foreigners, you Yannis, my Yannakis,
>
> the desolate foreigners, my little fellow. (Malandrakis, 2019, pp. 81)

Agim dies as John. As John, fully integrated into the world of the night, who acts his own death, taking on the burden of the bomb he was handed. The choice of the song in question, inextricably linked to Agim's name, is no accident. In the lyrics of the folk song, John's handkerchief is "stained" by foreignness. In the case of *Patriot*, we can say, what is stained by the de-denaturalization is Agim's whole self. Ultimately, what is assigned along with the name is Agim's entire character. The other self, the one now called John, is the dominant one in the novel, eliminating Agim early on. The signifier "Yannis" corresponds to the lyrics of the folk song. Foreignness, to recall Vizyinos and his "Moskov-Selim", from whom Malandrakis distances himself, makes the Albanian die as a Greek; Agim dies under/in the name of the Other.

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