**R E V I E W**

by Yura Konstantinova, Dsc, Professor at the Institute of Balkan Studies
and Centre of Thracology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

of the PhD thesis submitted by Neli Popova,

PhD student at the department of Classical Philology, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

The topic of the dissertation "Identity, Memory, and Otherness in the Novels of Rea Galanaki" is both interesting and challenging, making it an excellent subject for a doctoral dissertation. The topic holds significant research potential, particularly because the work of the Cretan writer has not yet been the subject of research in Bulgaria, despite her receiving numerous prestigious literary awards and her works being translated into 17 languages. Neli Popova successfully harnesses this potential, going beyond merely presenting the works of Rea Galanaki to deeply analyze and place them in the context of the development of contemporary Greek prose and studies on identity, memory, and otherness.

Popova’s excellent command of the Greek language enables her to grasp the essence of the author's messages, and her comprehensive linguistic preparation allows her to base her research on a wide range of Bulgarian and foreign bibliographies. It becomes evident from the introduction that Popova is well-acquainted not only with the works of Galanaki but also with extensive literature on related topics. She thoroughly presents and analyzes studies on each of Galanaki's works. The entire first chapter of the research, dedicated to theories of identity, memory, and otherness, is theoretical in nature, presenting the studies of Erik Erikson, Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, Paul Ricoeur, Jan and Aleida Assmann, Marianne Hirsch, Steven Frosh, and others. This theoretical chapter is directly linked to Popova's primary goal of tracing how the relationships between identity, memory, and otherness are developed and understood in Galanaki's novels (p. 4). To achieve her research goal, Popova focuses on Galanaki's first three novels: “The life of Ismail Ferik Pasha” (1989), “I shall sign as Loui" (1993), and “Eleni or Nobody” (1998), as well as the novel “Juda’s Fiers and Oedipus’Ashes” (2009), which she considers form a unique corpus where the themes of identity, memory, and otherness are most vividly present (p. 8).

In the introduction to her dissertation, Popova also clarifies the methods she intends to use to reveal the author's understanding of the identity-memory-otherness relationship. She chooses to interpret symbolic figures and analyze key motifs in Galanaki's novels: the figure of the exile, the figure of the mother (motherhood), the motif of return, memory and forgetting, loss and absence, trauma, grief, and melancholy. The doctoral candidate examines how the relationship between identity, memory, and otherness is treated in the novels, how Galanaki constructs her characters and narrative, and how her interpretations provoke readers to better understand the world they live in (p. 9).

An important contribution of the dissertation is placing Galanaki's work in the context of contemporary Greek prose. The first part of the second chapter presents the views of Greek literary critic Dimitris Tziovas on the trends in Greek prose after 1974 and Galanaki's novels, which he categorizes into three types: “narratives of the self”, “cultural allegories”, and those developing the theme of “identity-otherness” (p. 60). The second part of the chapter explores Galanaki's place in the rapidly increasing Greek women's literature post-1974. Popova argues that while Galanaki's work can be read through this lens, the author herself opposes any form of committed literature, including feminist literature and women's writing. A significant part of the second chapter is dedicated to the debate on the presence and manifestations of postmodernism in contemporary Greek literature. It is impressive that Popova not only presents the theses of Greek literary critics but also discusses them argumentatively. The idea to position Greek “wars” on postmodernism within the trends of other Western European literatures deserves admiration.

Popova's critical analysis allows her to conclude that there is postmodernism in contemporary Greek literature, starting with the fall of the Dictatorship in Greece (1974), when prose texts with postmodern characteristics began to appear, marking the transition from modernism to postmodernism, with its culmination in the 1990s, after which she asserts that there is undeniably a postmodern presence in Greek literature. She clarifies that even in this period, literature is not entirely postmodernist, as works with modernist characteristics and classical historical novels continue to appear alongside postmodernist works. Popova argues that “Greek authors do not merely adopt postmodernist topoi but adapt and modify them according to the specifics of Greek reality”, leading to what she describes as a unique Greek version of postmodernist literature (p. 80). This conclusion allows her to definitively categorize Galanaki's novels as postmodernist and highlight the strong influence of emotion as a prerequisite for creating literary texts and the focus on human drama as distinctive features of the Cretan author's poetics.

With a solid foundation in theories of identity, memory, and otherness, as well as concepts on the development of contemporary Greek prose, Popova moves on to the third and main chapter of her dissertation, entirely dedicated to Galanaki's work. This part showcases Popova's literary talent, confidently and eloquently guiding the reader through the “kitchen” of the Cretan writer without losing the red thread of her narrative. She analyzes the novels in the trilogy (“The life of Ismail Ferik Pasha”, “I shall Sign as Loui”, and “Eleni or Nobody”) individually and compares them with the novel “Juda’s Fiers and Oedipus’Ashes”, highlighting the similarities and differences. The main themes of the trilogy, which she focuses on, include the longing for return and its disproof in Ismail, the unattainability of the ideal and the connection between memory and hope in Loui, and the passion for art and the fragility of the soul in Eleni. In this part of the dissertation, Popova traces how the motifs (return, memory and forgetting, loss and trauma) and figures (the exile, the mother) fundamental to Galanaki's work unfold in each novel, and the meanings they generate, following the chronological order of the novels.

According to Popova's analysis, in her trilogy, Galanaki addresses the problem of identity but focuses on the journey her characters undertake to achieve a conscious reconciliation between their dual existences rather than on some immutable core of the self. Besides having dual identities, the three characters have a unique relationship with time. It does not flow in the usual way—from past, through present, to future—but seems to spread entirely into the past. The past is the time they inhabit, and through recalling it, they attempt to reassess their lives. Memory, on the one hand, is the fabric that builds the separate narratives, and on the other, it is the connecting link between them, thereby constituting otherness as part of identity. For each character, the reason for dwelling in the past is different, as is the path to “freeing the times” (p. 85).

Among the interesting conclusions from Popova's analysis, I would highlight her theses: thanks to her choice of character and the way she constructs the image of Ismail (from the novel “The life of Ismail Ferik Pasha”), Galanaki changes the face of the historical novel and contributes to tipping the scales of collective memory towards “benevolent memories”, which have “therapeutic and moral value”, instead of “malevolent memories, which perpetuate offense, hatred, and violence” (p. 108); the Cretan author resurrects Loui from the novel “I shall Sign as Loui”, dedicated to the life of Andreas Rigopoulos (Loui), through the love of a woman, but primarily through her own text, i.e., through the “mediation of art” (p. 119); the resurrection in the novel “Eleni or Nobody” is once again granted by female love, where “the dead live next to the living” (p. 141); time in the novel “Juda’s Fiers and Oedipus’Ashes”, represented as a man with a “female face”, is time where death is not an end but a necessary stage towards a reborn life (p. 160).

In the conclusion of her dissertation, Popova abandons the chronological approach and makes her generalizations and conclusions on a thematic basis. She asserts that Galanaki's characters inhabit the “margins” of official history because, although they leave a mark in the tumultuous 19th century, they are forgotten by their successors, and through the act of writing, the Greek author rescues them from oblivion, restores their stories, and “resurrects” them, providing them with a refuge in the field of literature and in the memory of future generations (p. 165). Therefore, postmodernism in the Greek author's trilogy does not reflect the disappearance of the sense of history but uses the tension between history and literature, between historical truth and narrative truth, as “the main source of its narrative energy” (p. 170). Popova sees memory as the alloy that connects identity with otherness in Galanaki's novels. In her interpretation, memory frees and connects the streams of time, preventing the past from robbing the present and future (p. 168). Again, memory, with the help of the external and internal Other, supports the process of continuous reassessment and reaffirmation of the self, i.e., the construction of identity (p. 172).

It is important to note that the dissertation is logically structured. Even the appended interview with Galanaki continues the themes addressed in the research and confirms some of the author's key concepts. The theses are clearly formulated, the analyses well-founded, and the text is written with skill and expertise. It is impressive that at the beginning of each part of her research, Popova states her specific objectives, follows them through the exposition, and clearly defines her conclutions at the end. There is no doubt that the presented dissertation is an independent and original scientific study, which is the result of the doctoral candidate's long-term and in-depth interest in the works of Rhea Galanaki and the themes that concern the Cretan writer.

Evidence of this is Neli Popova's publications, six of which are on the topic of the dissertation. To meet the requirements of the current procedure, the doctoral candidate presents three of them: 1. Ο λογοτεχνικός χαρακτήρας του γενίτσαρου στα μυθιστορήματα „Ο βίος του Ισμαήλ Φερίκ Πασά - Spina nel cuore“ και „Ο Μανόλ με τα εκατό αδέρφια“ του Αντόν Ντόντσεφ, Ελληνισμός και Βαλκάνια – αμφίδρομες σχέσεις: γλώσσα, ιστορία, λογοτεχνία, πολιτισμός (1453-2019) Πρακτικά 4ου Συνεδρίου των Νεοελληνιστών των Βαλκανικών Χωρών (Κομοτηνή, 22-24 Νοεμβρίου 2019), Τόμος Α', editor/s: Μανόλης Γ. Βαρβούνης – Θανάσης Β. Κούγκουλος, Publisher:Παρατηρητής της Θράκης, 2022, 438-449; 2. „Лицето на времето“: прочит на романа на Реа Галанаки „Огньове на Юда, пепелища на Едип“, Литература, етнос и култура, редактор/и: Цв. Ракьовски, Ст. Стоянов, Т. Стоянова, Ел. Азманова, Б. Илиева, Ел. Калъпсъзова, М. Чорбаджийска, Ил. Недин, Н. Сотирова, В. Божинов, издателство: „Инфовижън“, 2021, 117-126; 3. Присъствие и проявления на постмодернизма в съвременната гръцка проза, „Език и литература“, 3-4/ 2019, 127-142. The dissertation summary presented by Neli Popova accurately reflects the structure and theses of the dissertation, and the contributions mentioned therein are correct and credible.

The above gives me reason to recommend to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Neli Georgieva Popova the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor".

Sofia, 08.07.2024 Prof. Yura Konstantinova