

The Unlikely Heroine beyond Family Trauma: Four Women's Fictions of the Second World War in Greece

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Abstract

My analysis of Victoria Hislop's *The Island* (2005), Leah Fleming's *The Girl under the Olive Tree* (2013), Sofka Zinovieff's *The House on Paradise Street* (2012), and Brenda Reid's *The House of Dust and Dreams* (2010) examines their treatment of the exotic setting of Greece in the specific historical context of World War II, while following the conventions of popular romance or popular women's fiction. As a consequence of the conflict, the traditional family structure is compromised. This is particularly evident in the case of the female protagonists, heroines who refuse to fall within the traditional happy-ever-after ending and opt for a fulfilling career, a long-felt vocation, singlehood or simply unusual friendships of their choice. As a result, even in novels categorized as "romances", the presence of a hero or lover is questioned and redefined. My analysis starts with Victoria Hislop's *The Island*, a historical narrative of the leper colony at Spinalonga, around the time of the Second World War. For comparative purposes regarding the treatment of popular fiction elements, Brenda Reid's *The House of Dust and Dreams* and Leah Fleming's *The Girl under the Olive Tree* are discussed as being more generically romantic. Finally, Sofka Zinovieff's *The House on Paradise Street* offers an example of a cohesive, compact combination of political confrontation and popular romance, while at the same time England appears as the counterpoint to the exoticism of Greece.

Keywords: Women's fiction, World War II, Exoticism, Greece, Popular romance.

La heroína inesperada más allá del trauma familiar: cuatro obras de ficción femenina ambientadas en la Segunda Guerra Mundial en Grecia

Resumen

Mi análisis de *The Island* (2005) de Victoria Hislop, *The Girl under the Olive Tree* (2013) de Leah Fleming, *The House on Paradise Street* (2012) de Sofka Zinovieff, y *The House of Dust and Dreams* (2010) de Brenda Reid se centra en su tratamiento de Grecia como *locus* exótico en el contexto histórico específico de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, mientras siguen las convenciones del romance popular o la ficción popular femenina. Como consecuencia del conflicto armado, la estructura tradicional familiar se ve comprometida. Esto es particularmente evidente en el caso de mujeres protagonistas, heroínas que rehúyen el tradicional final feliz y optan por una carrera profesional plena, una vocación, la soltería, o simplemente amistades inusuales. Como resultado, incluso en novelas categorizadas como “romances” se cuestiona y redefine la presencia de un héroe o amante. Mi análisis comienza con *The Island* de Victoria Hislop, una narrativa histórica de la colonia leprosa de Spinalonga, en tiempos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Al comparar los elementos propios de la ficción popular, *The House of Dust and Dreams* de Brenda Reid y *The Girl under the Olive Tree* se rebelan como más fieles al género romántico. Finalmente, *The House on Paradise Street* de Sofka Zinovieff constituye un ejemplo de novela que combina de manera sólida y convincente el enfrentamiento político y la novela romántica, a la vez que Inglaterra es mostrada como contrapunto al exotismo de Grecia.

Palabras Clave: Ficción femenina, Segunda Guerra Mundial, Exotismo, Grecia, Romance popular.

1. Introduction

Popular fiction in English set in Greece, dealing with events pertaining to World War II and its aftermath, is enjoying great acclaim at the turn of the twenty-first century. Examples of this are the four works analysed in this article: Leah Fleming's *The Girl under the Olive Tree* (2013), Brenda Reid's *The House of Dust and Dreams* (2010), Victoria Hislop's *The Island* (2005), and Sofka Zinovieff's *The House on Paradise Street* (2012). Written by and addressed primarily to women, these novels are examined as "women's fiction," an "umbrella term for books that are marketed to female readers, and includes many mainstream novels, romantic fiction, 'chick lit,' and other sub genres" (Goodreads). Particularly apposite to this article's corpus are the following defining features from different websites or sources specialised in this genre. Women's fiction in general and these four novels in particular revolve around "relationship stories, generational sagas, [or] love stories," "touch[ing] on subjects women can relate to in their real lives" (Craig), as is the case of Victoria Hislop's Eleni and Maria Petrakis in *The Island*, or Heavenly and Anthi in *The House of Dust and Dreams*. A prolific related type is "a woman on the brink of life change and personal growth," whose "journey details emotional reflection and action that transforms her and her relationships with others" (Romance Writers of America). Examples of this are Penny George in Leah Fleming's *The Girl under the Olive Tree* and Maud Perifanis in *The House on Paradise Street*. But perhaps the most fitting characteristic of women's fiction for the female protagonists of all four novels is that they "struggle with specifically 'feminine' flaws," or are "subversive" examples of "the damaged woman who never overcomes;" this presents these females as "humans instead of just role models" (Kay). It is this universality and commonality of the heroines portrayed in Fleming's, Reid's, Hislop's and Zinovieff's novels that make them appealing ones for an extensive reading public.

Women's fiction plots employ elements deriving from the "popular romance" genre, and indeed romance features in them, yet their focus is the development of the female protagonists towards an affirmation of their independence, be it emotional, financial or familial. This complies with the Women's Fiction Writers Association (WFWA) of America, which defines that works belonging to this fiction genre "may include romance, or they may not," and they "can be contemporary or historical

and have magical, mystery, thriller, or other elements.” Additionally, these novels do not use a love story as their “driving force,” but “the protagonist’s journey toward a more fulfilled self”. The latter point is actually the most salient thread running through the fictions studied here. Like many others by female writers, they reveal their authors’ preoccupation with urgent, up-to-date issues such as a woman’s definition of her own identity and vocation, played out against the context of World War II.

Author Lisa Craig stresses that “though there’s not always the standard ‘happy ending,’ there’s a life-affirming resolution even if the story’s somewhat tragic”. My focus in this article is, indeed, the female protagonists’ search for autonomy and self-fulfillment, and the emphasis placed by the authors on that “life-affirming” process of acquisition of independence and maturity by the heroine, in times of dramatic paradigm shifts affecting the social, ethical, political, etc. spheres of the countries involved in the Second World War. In the case of Reid’s, Hislop’s, Fleming’s and Zinovieff’s novels, that process is played out against the conflict in Greece or Crete.

The pre-conflict social and familial structures had safeguarded the unspoken intergenerational pact that placed parents in positions of authority, earned or not, and children—in particular daughters—in positions of conformity, as late as adulthood. The upheaval brought about by the war changed that, and as a result sons and daughters refused to return to the moulds allocated them before 1939. The heroines in these four novels, therefore, metonymically represent within their Second World War context “a powerless undervalued section of the population [who find] empowerment and [cope] with the hegemonic patriarchy to establish a sense of value and worth” (Berberich 66-67). These female protagonists thus embark on remarkable life journeys, triggered by their experiences during the war, as we shall see. Such life journeys range from extramarital motherhood, and social or political ostracism, to revenge murder or foreign acculturation, and often end in independence and renewed identities, whether these females are accompanied by a male figure or not. Rather relevantly, Reid’s, Hislop’s, Fleming’s and Zinovieff’s “stories [are] about sisters, and women’s friendships” in pairs or trios, which “seem[s] to be a current trend,” according to editor Micki Nuding (quoted in Craig).

2. Greece in the (Reading) Eyes of the British: Historical Exoticism

Popular fiction of World War II has a further element of interest for readers: the progressive amendment of the historical record. The participation of the British in the Cretan campaign in particular is often covered, at best, in a couple of paragraphs in history books on the conflict. The reason for this may lie in Britain's shameful withdrawal from Greece and Crete, in first place, and the dubious ethical correctness of Britain's later meddling with the region's politics, examples of which are given below. Such blunders seemed to have been virtually obliterated from Britons' collective memory, but the new millennium sparked the authors' interest in the Second World War in general, and the Greek and Cretan campaigns in particular, even if that interest brings home a number of unpalatable historical facts.

The four novels analysed in this article share their geographical setting: Greece, a country suffused with alluring historical nuances for the English reading public. During the Second World War the two countries' special relationship even affected the decision-making by top British personalities (Clogg 192, Sfikas 24-25). Today, the shared history between both territories heightens the appeal that the Mediterranean islands have exerted on British tourists decade after decade since the late 1950s. Where Britain stands for hominess, civilisation and rigidity, Greece offers cultural, climatic, gastronomic, linguistic, religious and racial exoticism. Indeed Reid's, Hislop's, Fleming's and Zinovieff's explicatory accounts of the events of Greece and Great Britain in World War II constitute testimony of the remoteness already operating between those events and readers, in particular of the younger generations. The term "exotic" can therefore be eloquently applied to this emphasis on the past, for World War II is rapidly becoming a myth in its own right. It is this very exoticism which, three quarters of a century after the Second World War, impels British readers to consume these novels eagerly, irrespective of their familiarity with the events. The same rationale explains the frequent dual timelines in women's novels of the Second World War, the perfect narrative expedient to allow generations to connect and half-a-century-old conflicts to heal.

A parallel phenomenon occurs in the case of the authors. For British writers who are now in their 50s, 60s or 70s, their parents' and grandparents' participation in the conflict is merely a childhood memory,

if at all, but one which shaped all their lives. While many of those of the older generations retain a distinct recollection of the conflict due to their direct involvement, currently authors tend to rework their indirect experience of it into “overly romanticised historical exoticism,” as Nick Bentley argues. The appeal of such “site of collective trauma might also explain the continuation of the popularity of the Second World War as a subject and setting for contemporary fiction” (139; 155). Additionally, as Kristin Ramsdell affirms, “as we become more removed from the first half of the twentieth century, particularly after the millennium, it is likely that these years will begin to take on a more charming glow and lend themselves more easily to Romance” (112). With the new millennium came the 9/11 Islamist terrorist attacks on the United States and their social and geopolitical aftermaths, which provoked a drastic paradigm shift in our perception of history: the twentieth century, and with it World War II, became firmly lodged in the past, as 2001 ushered in not only a new century, but a new era.

The occupation, resistance, civil war and dictatorship sequence in Greece during World War II has inspired numerous authors, among them Fleming, Reid, Hislop and Zinovieff. In 1939 Benito Mussolini’s troops invaded Albania, but they were defeated by the Greek army. Subsequently Greece was invaded by the Italian army, followed shortly afterwards by the Nazi forces. In the winter of 1940–41 Britain and Greece had famously —if not altogether accurately (Donnelly 91–96)— “stood alone” against Adolf Hitler, so when Greece fell, Winston Churchill felt the moral and historical obligation to come to their help (Clogg 137). This is the temporal starting point of Victoria Hislop’s *The Island*, the novel with the longest historical span of the corpus commented on here. In 1941 the British Expeditionary Force was shamefully overrun and forced to withdraw from Greece, in a sad replica of the retreat from Dunkirk: the British troops were evacuated from Greece leaving their equipment behind, and subsequently also from Crete (Marr 397–398; Purdue 71–72). These events constitute the setting of both Brenda Reid’s *The House of Dust and Dreams* and Leah Fleming’s *The Girl under the Olive Tree*. The Greek people felt a mixture of secular admiration for Britain, incredulity and resentment, although the British command tried to compensate by helping Greece avoid disintegration in the forthcoming civil war. Britain’s policy was also in its own interest, given Greece’s strategic geographical position. The fratricide confrontation for

power after the war was inevitable and started raging even before the end of World War II.

Rent by ideological hatred, Greece saw herself swamped once more with bloodshed by the numerous guerrilla factions, the most prominent of which were EDES (non-Communist) and EAM/ELAS (Communist). Britain continued to tend to its own interests, by favouring the return of King George II to the Greek throne, regardless of the anti-monarchic wish of the people. To make matters worse, and unbeknown to the Greek communists, Churchill agreed with Stalin on the “spheres of influence” each of them were to exert over certain nations: in Greece, Churchill was to have ninety percent “influence,” for Stalin’s ten percent; this would be offset by the opposite balance of ascendancy in other Eastern European countries. For historian Richard Clogg “the communist leadership [in Greece] appears to have been unnerved by the apparent indifference of the Russians to the situation,” and by 1947 “Greece had in effect become a key battleground in the Cold War” (151; 162). The situation exploded in the *Dekemvriana* events of 1944, when British military, local police forces, and some guerilla fighters fired on demonstrators in Syntagma Square in the heart of Athens. The monarchy was restored in 1946 until in 1972 a new referendum abolished it, superseded by the so-called Colonels’ Junta which took power. These rapid changes of regime were the perfect context in which political retribution and score-settling were constantly applied. These events constitute the core narrative conflict of Sofka Zinovieff’s *The House on Paradise Street*. Below follows, then, an analysis of how these four female writers use some of the main events of Greece’s involvement in the Second World war and its aftermath to focus on the heroines’ harrowing circumstances and tests.

3. Frustrated Romance: Leah Fleming’s *The Girl under the Olive Tree* and Brenda Reid’s *The House of Dust and Dreams*

Leah Fleming’s *The Girl under the Olive Tree* (2013) makes use of the Cretan campaign as historical background, focusing on Chania, Crete’s second largest city, and the resistance fighters hiding in the hills. With this novel Fleming vindicates the strong-willed, independent heroine, who “by making a choice about her life [...] is presented as a neo-liberal and self-governing individual” (Arvanitaki 10). Penelope Georgioiu, or Penny George, depending on the applicability of her double British

and Greek identity through ancestry, takes advantage of the turmoil of war to become that type of woman: leaving behind the drabness of the English climate, she travels to Athens to train as a Red Cross nurse, in the process unshackling herself from the expectations of her landed gentry family. Had it not been for the war, Penny's society-obsessed mother would have expected her to be "finished off" (*Tree* 36, 69) —a weird sounding phrase— in preparation for her "coming out" as a prospective prize wife. This caricaturesque mother indoctrinates Penelope that "girls of your class don't do... they just *are*, future partners to the great and good of the country," who must marry young and "never read a book," a "time-wasting" habit (*Tree* 15; emphasis in the original). Penny soon ends up not speaking to her mother; her father dies; and the family nucleus is only reconstituted with the following generation. These features, in particular the last one, recur in similar women's fiction, as we shall see below.

Penny's first platonic attachment is to Bruce Jardine, a dashing New Zealander with "black eyes flashing with enthusiasm" and "whisky fumes on his breath" who "talk[s] to her like an equal" (*Tree* 20) and later becomes an Allies' Secret Serviceman and resistance fighter. He inspires her to visit Athens first, and then Crete. Before that break with her past the novel employs elements reminiscent of the Regency romance, a genre in which often, according to Hsu-Ming Teo, "an encounter between hero and heroine either at the beginning of at the end of the novel takes place in a ballroom in London, while the landed estate in England provides safe haven and financial security" for the female protagonist (Teo 160). At the Georges' Highlands estate Penny complains that "nobody ever listened to her at home," but Bruce transforms her reality: "It felt so safe with him next to her, the fire cracking in the hearth and the lamps flickering, a world away from the noisy ballroom upstairs" (*Tree* 21).

Hence *The Girl under the Olive Tree* is exemplary in its use of exotic locale (Crete) to signal the heroine's departure from monotony and gloom (Britain). The "world away" for her and us readers is of course Greece, where Penny aspires to become an archaeologist. Athens in these novels is unfailingly exotic, multicultural, and alien to the British characters (Vivanco 95): Penelope feels "the first blast of heat as if someone was blowing a hot-air fan into her face" (*Tree* 33), as she arrives in this "small elegant city shimmering white in the sunlight" where "everywhere a

blaze of colour feasted the eye" (*Tree* 34, 35). Clichés abound, as in "the peacock-blue Aegean," the "superstitious" people, and the "metropolitan crowd" (*Tree* 54) which constitutes a "melting pot of different peoples, religions, costumes and languages in the bustling streets and markets" (*Tree* 89). After cosmopolitan, stuffy Athens, Crete is similarly enticing with "those vibrant colours of [...] the ripening apricots, the turquoise sea, the sandy ochres of the monastery towers, the cerulean sky" (*Tree* 269). It is the cultural remoteness, in particular their stress on religious liturgy—the "processions, chanting, candle-lighting and icon-kissing"—that suffuses these exotic fictions, "so different from the simpler English way of doing things" (*Tree* 285).

The cultural and historical abyss that separates Britain and Crete is what appeals to the female protagonist as it does the readers, and ultimately what facilitates the heroine's forging of her new independence and identity. Caught up in the devastation of the Battle for Crete (1941), Penny undergoes a complete transformation, to the extent that she refuses to leave during the evacuation of British nationals from the island in 1943: "what hold had this island on her to make her risk her life for it?" (*Tree* 318) She has become "too proud, too angry and shocked to care what happened to her any more," (*Tree* 380) as the "good Nazi" Rainer Brecht (who has hovered above Penny's actions throughout the novel) realises. She would rather "exist without wretched papers and numbers" (*Tree* 383) even as the few survivors from Chania are being identified by the Allies, supporting herself only on her vocation as a Red Cross nurse.

One of the tropes Fleming uses to signal Penelope's evolution throughout her ordeal in Chania, culminating in her professional and vocational liberation (in later life she spends years teaching in Africa; see Vivanco 82), is her Red Cross nurse's cloak. Translatable as a powerful symbol, "it had been, in turn, a screen, a blanket, a makeshift shroud, a uniform and a shield, and she didn't want to be parted from it" (*Tree* 132). Traditionally used in literature to illustrate shifts of identity, clothes in this novel signal Penelope's identitary revolution. Once Crete has surrendered to the Axis, Penelope literally has nothing to call her own but the ragged clothes in which she stands. When Rainer Brecht finally comes to her rescue, Penny "had nothing but the sorry outfit they'd cobbled up for her" (*Tree* 381). The love-hate tension between

Penelope and Rainer culminates in traditional—even clichéd—romance fashion, and yet her position as a doubly defeated British and Greek citizen is subverted to one of emotional domination over the German occupier: “she’d never looked as awesome, in his eyes, as she did now. How he wished he could dress her in silk, with a corsage of orchids on her shoulder, and whisk her off to a fine restaurant to fill out those gaunt cheeks. He flushed at his ridiculous fantasy” (*Tree* 381). The fantasy, all the same, reinforces the clothes trope, equating Penny’s strength of character and feminine stature with the luxuriance of silk.

The novel at this point reveals its employment of conventions of romance fiction, since it “portray[s] women as heroes” and “invert[s] the power structure of a patriarchal society because they show women exerting enormous power over men” (Krentz 5). For it is not merely sexual attraction that pulls Rainer to Penny, but a deep feeling of respect and even admiration: He is “curious to know more about her before he let her go,” and wonders about her family, “the people who had reared such an iron-willed warrior” (*Tree* 380, 381). For her part, she wonders “how could she look with lust on the enemy?” as she notices “his broad shoulders and slim hips, the solid muscle of his thighs,” and what it would be like “to be crushed between them” (*Tree* 431). Yet she also sees herself as “currency” (*Tree* 433), giving herself up to Rainer partly out of gratitude. Such duality in Penny’s inner self reflects the tensions inherent to many examples of romance fiction: according to Arvanitaki, their heroines “on the one hand [...] wish for individuality, agency and the reconstruction of identity. On the other, they appear to secretly wish for a romantic relationship. They seem aware that by choosing the latter, they accept the ideological consequences (the imprisonment of the self) and permit the imposition of men’s dominance over them” (7-8), a conundrum which is painfully intensified in the context of the chaotic battle for Crete. Not wishing to commit her female protagonist to either solution, Leah Fleming leaves the likely reunion of Penny and Reiner sixty years later unconfirmed, lying as it does beyond the narrative frame. Their concurrence on the island happens on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Battle for Crete in 2001. At that point in time in 2001, however, both Penny and Rainer would be octogenarians, and so their autumnal romance would work as a postscript rather than centrally to the narrative. Leah Fleming thus focuses on Penelope’s evolution

rather than her romance with Rainer, and the same emphasis may be argued for the following novel.

Family dislocations and female redefinitions triggered by events related to World War II are also among the main thematic concerns in Brenda Reid's *The House of Dust and Dreams*. Protagonist "Heavenly" in 1936 sets about rebuilding her husband's dilapidated family house in Panagia, a small Cretan village, while he is called away to business in Athens, related with the impending war.

Reid uses the armed conflict as a force of change, both personal, for Heavenly and friend Anthi, and collective, for the islanders. Like Fleming, the author uses the Battle for Crete for its exotic historical allure, while highlighting through Heavenly the island's eternal, humble appeal: "there is careless history in every stone and fractured pillar. Round every corner not only sweet-scented flowers, but the sudden chink of an ancient pavement under one's feet, preserved for who knows how long" (*Dust* 18-19). The war of course ruptures this, and once it is over, "Panagia, like all the villages that survived, would never be the same again" (*Dust* 371), a transformation that extends to the people. It is again the womenfolk that benefit the most from unshackling themselves from pre-war restrictions, as exemplified through Heavenly (Cretan phonic adaptation of "Evadne") and Anthi (short for "Antigone"). Since their actions clash with the ancestral social mores and ideas on femininity in Cretan villages in the conflicted 1940s, *The House of Dust and Dreams* is a good example of how romance and women's fiction often "[reflect] both the patriarchal oppression of women and women's strength in resisting, in forging appropriate forms of heroism" (Strehle and Carden xviii). Reid actually provides readers with an interesting dichotomy in terms of the resistance displayed by her two heroines, and developed through an equal number of chapters for each.

The House of Dust and Dreams starts like many popular novels with an unhappy marriage for Heavenly, whose English husband Hugh is characterized as an unmitigated fool. Romance ensues, also rather conventionally, with the appearance of her soul mate, Christo, described in exaggeratedly glowing terms: "a ray of brilliant sunshine came through the high window at that moment, [...] lit up his face" and "followed him as he walked" (*Dust* 79-80). Christo conforms to perfection with the "sentimental hero" of romance-novel theory: "still

strong, virile, manly [...], but he is wounded physically, psychically, or emotionally. The heroine must heal him” (G. A. Starr quoted in Regis 113). Christo’s involvement with the *andartes* (Greek guerilla fighters) and his traumatic experiences during the German occupation of Crete qualify him under all headings. Heavenly “heals” (to use Starr’s term) Christo through fatherhood, although she abandons their baby after they had become estranged. Their parting becomes irreparable when the novel ends, somewhat hurriedly, in their almost simultaneous deaths: Heavenly having “been ill for a year,” and Christo of heart failure (*Dust* 372-373). Anthi for her part eventually marries and lives a happy life with her sentimental hero, New Zealander Jack, whom she also “heals” through marriage and fatherhood. This romantic plotline, however, is secondary to the harrowing family trauma that characterises Anthi as a heroine. Until her marriage to Jack, her life had been nothing short of hellish: destroyed by the realisation of her husband Manolis’s sexual abuse of their own daughter, Anthi fatally poisons him.

Both women must therefore perform a hideous task averse to traditional womanhood: Heavenly abandons her child by Christo, a crisis that signals the symbolic, ritual death characteristic of romance novels (Regis 54); and Anthi commits spousal homicide. As Janice Radway argues, “rape and physical torture [...] are obviously objectionable because the readers are seeking an opportunity to be shown a happier, more trouble-free version of existence” when they pick up women’s fiction; however, such occurrences are also eloquent in their “exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women” (75). Manolis, an utterly disgusting specimen of a man, and the equally revolting parish priest Papa Yannis, are ferocious monarchists and anti-communists. This is in common with other popular fictions on similar Hellenic themes: the communists are presented as honourable, brave, handsome men of their word, who even smell of “the sunshine outside and fresh grass,” and Christo more so than any other: “The scent of the mountains, the thyme and wild garlic, the rosemary and cypress trees, all are here in this man, along with the rough sweat of his labours” (*Dust* 80; 359). By contrast, Manolis, Papa Yannis and the Nazis invariably carry rancid smells.

Heavenly and Anthi diverge on their respective processes of acquisition of experience and self-knowledge: whereas by returning to Hugh, after Christos’s death, Heavenly betrays her previous female

independence, Anthi by killing her husband and breaking with her geographic and ancestral roots takes a leap forward that culminates her transformation into the “angel” that Jack sees in her. More importantly, Heavenly’s blithe forgetfulness of contraception—such as it was in the first half of the twentieth century—and her daydreaming reveal her impractical nature; by contrast, Anthi throughout the novel proves sensible and reliable. And she represents an interesting character feature in women’s romantic fiction: unloved by a despotic mother (responsible for her arranged marriage to the despicable Manolis), Anthi is practically orphaned and defiantly free from the day she buries her husband. This storyline provides confirmation of how orphanhood for Pamela Regis increases the protagonist’s psychological stature and resourcefulness: “The orphan’s lack of human attachment makes virtually every relationship a choice, thus increasing the scope of her freedom” since “there are no parents to object or interfere” (91).

Conversely, Heavenly’s return to Hugh, together with her abandonment of her and Christo’s baby, is unrealistic. Hugh has been characterized as a stuck-up, class-conscious, unfaithful and hard-drinking bore who derides even Heavenly’s humble Cretan cooking and refurbishment of their Cretan house in simple local colours and fittings presented by neighbours: “[Hugh] didn’t need to use words; a slight sniff, the way he ran his fingers over tables and chests was enough for me to feel sad and embarrassed” (*Dust* 247). Homes in women’s fiction (and other genres) are used extensively as metaphoric of identity. Drawing on both the myth of domesticity but also of potential independence and a search for individuality, the heroines of popular fictions embark on the refurbishment of dilapidated houses, or have to plunge into a massive effort of adjustment when they need to emigrate. Still Heavenly relapses, and after nearly four hundred pages of disparaging the life of window-shopping and hair-spraying of the diplomats’ wives in the big European capitals, she returns to Hugh and the same Athens she had loathed before. Heavenly therefore illustrates the “contradictory impulse” inherent to most romantic stories: “on the one hand, the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalizing patriarchal models of gender that project women’s destined and desirable end in the family; on the other hand, the narrative talks back, revealing women’s frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions” (Strehle and Carden xii).

Through both heroines, Reid presents the female struggle for autonomy and their harrowing moral choices, in very difficult circumstances of war and occupation. Reid implicitly argues that there was no easy choice that would end happily for them in those days.

4. Family Traumas: Victoria Hislop's *The Island* and Zofka Zinovief's *The House on Paradise Street*

In *The Island* Victoria Hislop lays her focus on the Cretan island of Spinalonga in the period 1939 to 1958, but the narrative time frame reaches to a present-day family conflict whose poignant roots extend back to the war and its aftermath, and a dreadful illness: Spinalonga was historically a leper colony until 1957. Hislop skilfully weaves the theme of leprosy into the Petrakis family saga, starting with exemplary Eleni and her devoted husband Georgiou, parents of Anna and Sofia, two sisters of radically opposed natures. Alexis, the daughter of Sofia, in the present-day narrative must play the role of “a natural historian” (*Island* 37) to uncover her family's secrets, a documentary process which she finds superior to traditional forms of historiography: “why examine the cool relics of past civilisations when she could be breathing life into her own history?” (*Island* 38) Hislop's use of the contrast between Lyotardian master- and micro-narratives gives the novel a harmonious combination of the major events in World War II history and the private crises of Alexis, whose mother Sofia had refused to acknowledge her own relatives, out of shame for the “stigma” associated not only with leprosy but all the other family skeletons: “A disfiguring disease, an immoral mother, a murderer for a father” (*Island* 457).

Alexis functions as the expedient through which decades-old generational crises are resolved in the present time, the twenty-first century, some of which had been conditioned by the Second World War. However, it is only chapters 6 to 9 that chronicle the progress of the German occupation of Crete and Greece. Paradoxically, the self-imposed quarantine of Spinalonga is what makes it a much more peaceful and prosperous home for its inhabitants, by comparison with nearby village Plaka and the mainland: “Throughout the war, the only place that remained immune from the Germans was Spinalonga, where the lepers were protected from the worst disease of all: occupation” (*Island* 161). Essentials like electricity and foodstuffs continue to be

supplied in Spinalonga, making it the envy of Nazi-occupied areas (*Island* 116). Yet that very seclusion transforms “the havoc being wreaked throughout Europe” (*Island* 123) into a distant echo. Even the iconic German flag flying over the Acropolis in Athens is given just a cursory mention; then Crete is overrun by a Nazi occupying force, and their overbearing presence is felt even in Plaka, to the excitement of Anna (*Island* 144-148). From this point onwards, Hislop lets her research into the history of the period seep through, as she highlights how “the Germans have never before encountered the kind of resistance they are meeting in Crete” (*Island* 150). Somewhat superficially, the author packs this complex period of occupation and reprisals into a few pages (*Island* 156-158; 165-166), and includes references to two historical myths of the island: how it “owes [the English] so much” (*Island* 160), and the sensational abduction of the Luftwaffe General Karl Heinrich Kreipe out of Crete into Egypt (*Island* 177-179). Hislop makes the German defeat and the end of occupation coincide with Eleni’s death (*Island* 176-182), but other than that, this part of the novel is strangely devoid of sentiment, among an overload of historical data.

With the help of a local woman in Plaka, the family’s hometown, Alexis pieces together a distressing family history marked by the contrasting lives of her own grandmother Anna, Sofia’s mother, who refused to live by any societal or moral rules; and Anna’s virtuous sister Maria. Anna, already married, seduces and becomes pregnant by the man who, having become engaged to Maria, was originally to become her brother-in-law. Anna’s husband finds out and reacts by murdering her, while Maria must cancel her wedding when she contracts leprosy, and is exiled to the leper colony at Spinalonga. At first Sofia, the daughter of Anna and (possibly) her lover, “was utterly repulsed” and “her ignorance had been nothing less than bliss” (*Island* 457). Then through Alexis’s mediation as family historian, she is made to “look at these ancestors of hers as though they were characters in a drama.” And in a somewhat abrupt *volte-face*, “at last she saw not humiliation but heroism, not perfidy but passion, not leprosy but love. [...] There was no shame in any of it” (*Island* 472). Thus Hislop’s narratives fall clearly within Kristin Ramsdell’s category of more up-to-date romances which “are increasingly dealing with serious social issues such as spousal or child abuse, alcoholism, racism, and mental and physical illness” (20). As this critic argues, the inclusion of such themes may set these romances apart

from the feel-good, happy-ever-after-resolution tradition, but they are appreciated by readers who “confront real-life problems through fiction” and “envision healthy, hopeful, and successful solutions to them” (20).

Hislop’s family saga in *The Island* shines in the passages dealing with local tradition and those devoted to protagonist Maria (Alexis’s great-aunt), despite her overload of virtues, from her virginal name, through how her future husband, the doctor at the leper colony, compares her to Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*: “with the grey-green sea behind her and her long hair caught by the wind, Maria strongly evoked the painting” (*Island* 312). The two sisters, Anna and Maria, can be seen therefore as a classic example of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy (Bareket et al.). Originally constructed around the Christian antithesis “Virgin Mary vs. Eve,” in British literature it was adopted to set the docile Angel in the House in opposition to the free-thinking and independent New Woman. Today it is one of the patriarchal stereotypes that dominate the contemporary British romance novel, in which the hero will frequently choose the “virtuous” woman for her associations to domesticity: matrimony, children, parenthood and respectability (Bareket et al.). Despite falling victim to leprosy, Maria remains the keeper of the essence of family life: “One of Maria’s most important jobs between late autumn and early spring was to keep the home fire burning. It [...] kept the spirit of the house alive” (*Island* 215). In the absence of mother Eleni, also exemplary and also a victim of leprosy, Maria by default takes on “the role of mistress in her own household” (*Island* 212).

By contrast, the wilful and rebellious older sister Anna wishes to use marriage as “her route out of Plaka” (*Island* 196), their home village. Hislop characterises the two sisters as opposite ways of conceiving domesticity. One, even while struggling with her own leprosy (of which she is eventually cured) is portrayed as angelic, virtuous and devoted to her father, surrogate son (a leprous boy), and husband. The other is selfish, irate, unfaithful in marriage and ultimately tragically murdered by her husband. Neither Anna nor Maria is turned into the conduit for any ideological agenda on Hislop’s part. However, the author intensifies the traditional, domestic elements around Maria’s virtuous character, whose reward is to be cured of her disease and to enjoy a life of marital stability with Kyritsis, her doctor husband. Anna, by contrast, is horrendously murdered by her cuckolded husband, which provides

the whole village with “speculation and gossip” (*Island* 456) material for generations. Throughout the confessional conversation between Sofia and Alexis, her daughter and granddaughter, Anna is censured as “weak but [...] rebellious,” “flawed,” or not having “fought harder against her natural instincts,” in order “to do what she was meant to do” (*Island* 464). The Manichean interpretation seems inescapable, although that does not imply that readers will sympathise with saintly Maria more than *femme-fatale* Anna: according to Strehle and Carden “a narrative that strikes one critic as honouring women’s empowerment may impress another as endorsing women’s complicity with systemic limitations on their freedom” (xviii). Both Anna’s free spirit and Maria’s virtues endorse such ambivalent readings.

There is no ambivalence in the case of the “Angel in the House” Eleni, the mother of Anna and Maria. She is closely associated with domesticity, a powerful symbol of which is the crockery she passes down to her daughters, although only partially since she had taken some with her to Spinalonga upon her reclusion as—also—a leprous patient. When Maria too must move to the island colony years later, “the familiar set of flower-sprigged china plates [...] ranged on the rack” indicates continuity, despite the obvious break-up of the family by leprosy. Maria finds the plates, kept for her by a family friend, awaiting her: “Inside one of her boxes Maria would soon find some matching ones and the parts of the service would be united once again” (*Island* 402). Far from shattering as might be expected, the delicate china signals the eventual reunification of the Petrakis family, despite its traumas.

This is effected in Part 4 of the novel, the last one, devoted to the reconciliation of Sofia with her past and her family secrets. Once her father is sent to prison for the murder of her mother Anne, Sofia is adopted as a little girl by her aunt Maria and Kyritsis, who cannot have children of their own. Effectively an orphan, as she defines herself (*Island* 461) like Anthi in *The House of Dust and Dreams*, Sofia honours her mother’s rebellious nature by refusing to stay close to her adoptive parents. As the permissive 1960s flood Crete with Northern European influences and tourists, she decides to go to university in Athens or Thessaloniki, not in Crete, because those big cities “connect with the rest of the world” (*Island* 446). At the same time, however, she refuses to “connect” with her own family and history, whom she reduces to a picture

in whose frame she hides some newspaper clippings: “This record of their happiest day now lived by Sofia’s bedside and was all that remained of her past” (*Island* 463). Eventually, these mementos are also destroyed, as Sofia wishes to break entirely with her ancestors. As in many women’s novels, it is the younger generations who erase the board; when Sofia inevitably confesses to her daughter Alexis that she was too cruel in her abandonment of her family, Alexis applies a pragmatism that is free from generational conflicts or the need to ask forgiveness. As she summarises with impeccable emotional economy, “It’s the past” (*Island* 465). This manner of generational reprieve is equivalent to that experienced by one of the protagonists of Sofka Zinovieff’s *The House on Paradise Street*, and equally at the hands of the youngest female family member.

In the fourth novel analysed in this article, Sofka Zinovieff’s *The House on Paradise Street* (2012), the general tone and the treatment of family traumas and female redefinition are much more sombre than in the three fictions above, in particular due to the pervasiveness of political conflict. First-person narrator Maud, the recently widowed English wife of Greek husband Nikitas, uncovers his real provenance as the result of rape. The assaulted mother is Antigone and her attacker, her own sister’s husband, Spiros. This family trauma takes place during the tragic decades of Greece’s occupation by the Nazis (1941-1944), followed by Britain’s political double-dealing during the aftermath of the Second World War, and eventually Greece’s civil war (1946-1949). Sisters Antigone and Alexandra have taken irreconcilable paths in life, as one becomes a staunch communist and the other a devoted monarchist. An early victim of this family feud is their only brother Markos, killed during the *Dekemvriana* events of 1944: a series of extremely violent clashes that erupted after the evacuation of the Axis powers from Greece, between the Greek government, several communist and non-communist guerilla factions, and the British army. To Churchill’s (and Britain’s) shame, the British army supported the same monarchists who only months previously had collaborated with the Nazi occupiers.

The political abyss rends generations apart, in a novel where mother-children relationships are tragically altered by war and ideology. After Markos’s pointless death, Antigone’s mother parts with her on a vengeful note: “You can come home when you bring me my son” (*Paradise* 222). Her indictment returns decades later to chastise Antigone, through the

tragic loss of her own child, Nikitas: first she abandoned him, then he died. In the present narrative time, Maud becomes a family historian, and while investigating Nikitas's last moves before he dies, she wonders "how it was possible that [Alexandra] and Spiros had taken in her hated sister's child as their own, after all that happened." Alexandra explains how she refused to let "a child [...] an innocent creature of God" go to an orphanage, but she also admits that "Nikitas was trouble, right from the beginning" because "there are some things that are passed on in the blood" (*Paradise* 256). She is of course ignorant of the irony of her words, since "the blood" in Nikitas is that of her own husband, Spiros.

Zinovieff's handling of the political theme is skilful and poignant, as we perceive the various lifetime's disillusionments of Antigone. Her first rupture is with her own biological family, who, she accuses, "*have deceived me and acted as my enemies. I never want to see them again*" (*Paradise* 314; italics in the original). Afterwards, during the brutal reprisals of the monarchists, Alexandra's husband Spiros takes his revenge for his own humiliations by raping Antigone, which results in her pregnancy and the birth of Nikitas. This child, the innocent victim of hatred, is abandoned by Antigone when she exiles herself in Russia on ideological grounds. Finally, Antigone is betrayed by the Communist Party, her metaphorical surrogate family. In that climate, monarchists applied all manner of abusive methods in order to "undermin[e] party morale." They would for example "releas[e] communists from detention provided that they would sign a humiliating declaration, renouncing [...] their political past" (Clogg 134-135) exactly like Antigone: "I was misguided into the National Liberation Front by deceptive words without being aware of its anti-national activities and its treasonous and destructive actions against my Fatherland. I renounce the organization as the enemy of my Fatherland, on whose side I stand..." (*Paradise* 312) Antigone knows that this recantation not only signals her ultimate political defeat, but it will also mark her as suspicious for her comrades, although the general feeling was of disillusion, in particular "after 1956 and Khrushchev's revelations" (*Paradise* 188) about Stalin's purges.

The novel's twofold focalization (Antigone through her life-story, and Maud in the narrative present) reminds readers of the complexity and vagaries of historiography. As Antigone admits "the victors writ[e] history, but those who win have the luxury of forgetting. It's the losers

who remember—those who experienced the humiliation of defeat” (*Paradise* 192). Alexandra, one of the “victors,” indeed remains ignorant of her husband’s crimes and paternity of Nikitas, and comments during her sister’s funeral that death is “sweet” only “when we lie in our fatherland” (*Paradise* 367). This final return home at least is granted to Antigone. Apart from death (fittingly, both Spiros and Antigone die at the end), resolution to family trauma is suggested through compromise and a hope that the future generations will attempt a renewal. In Greek tragedy fashion, Antigone had entertained a fatalistic, tautological stance to history and family life, repeating throughout the novel that “It is what it is.” Her conversations with her namesake granddaughter Tig, however, convince her that although “the past is done and there’s nothing we can do to change it [...] now it’s different, you can leave all that behind. You own the future” (*Paradise* 370). The same trajectory is evident in Greece’s own history: according to Richard Clogg, Greece was “a divided nation” as a consequence of the two World Wars and the Civil War, and it was this latter conflict, as illustrated in the novel by the two sisters, which “was to leave a legacy of bitterness that was to cast a long shadow over Greece’s post-war political development” (Clogg 164-165). This “long shadow” is only now beginning to lift, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the context when Zinovieff is publishing her novels. And it is in Tig’s generation “owning” the future that readers may perceive the “life-affirming resolution” alluded to at the opening of this article, characteristic of women’s fiction.

But history is stubborn. An expert in the problematic Anglo-Greek relations, Nikitas had resented Britain’s mistreatment of Greece, starting with the romanticised myth of Lord Byron’s support against the Ottoman Empire: “if it hadn’t been in their interests, the English would never have backed us against the Turks in 1821,” and in any case Britain “spent the next hundred years trying to foist atrocious foreign kings” on Greece. Maud, an English national with Greek citizenship, laments that “each new scandal he uncovered was like a black mark against me personally” (*Paradise* 277). Nikitas’s rant about “the Ionian Isles [which] were little English colonies for quite a time” and where “they still play fucking cricket” (*Paradise* 97) contrasts with official promotions like those by the Greek National Tourism Organisation, addressed in great part to the faithful British market. The 2008 campaign, a hugely successful one, encouraged visitors to “Live Your Myth in Greece,” a

slogan Zinovieff uses as a chapter title (*Paradise* 296). Maud's portrayal of "the good life in the Mediterranean" which she had enjoyed as a PhD student in Athens is not at all dissimilar from the familiar clichés, still endorsed by British tourists in Greece, and by extension the readers of this novel and similar fictions: "beaches and buckets of bright pink taramasalata [...] mustachioed men dancing, the twang of bouzoukis playing *The Boys from Piraeus*, and a Kodachrome backdrop of the sun-drenched Acropolis" (*Paradise* 34-35; see Vivanco 90-91).

Maud had indeed "lived her myth in Greece," since her PhD research stay and later naturalisation as a Hellene had allowed her a degree of freedom she could not have imagined in England. This idealisation of all things Hellenic contrasts sharply with the suffering undergone by generations of Greek nationals during the Second World War, the Civil War and their aftermath. Antigone's life is a harrowing example: her personal choices, far from a redefinition, implied a sequence of symbolic deaths, having had to abandon family, motherland and son Nikitas due to political, rather than social, imposition. Her eventful life trajectory, in sharp contrast to her monarchist sister's easy life, only comes full circle when she returns to Greece to bury her son, and eventually to die herself.

5. Conclusion

Brenda Reid's *The House of Dust and Dreams*, Leah Fleming's *The Girl under the Olive Tree*, Victoria Hislop's *The Island*, and Sofka Zinovieff's *The House on Paradise Street* are shown in this article to be eloquent—if metonymic—reflections of how the Greek islands and their history around World War II have become a site for contemporary British women writers to explore issues of female independence and redefinition of their identity. In what has become established as a winning commercial formula, the reader's present combines successfully with the temporal remoteness of the Second World War, a time traditionally—perhaps misleadingly—suggestive of national pride and a kind of "we-never-had-it-so-good" nostalgia. This manner of historical exoticism which the authors enhance in their novels is juxtaposed on the one hand to the geographical exoticism and allure that Greece exerts on the potential fiction buyers, in particular the British market, which has been for over half a century one of the most faithful ones to Crete and other islands. On the other hand, both geographic and historical exoticism are deeply

interrelated by these authors with their discussion, through the heroines, of women's autonomy and how their attempts to live meaningful lives had to be traded off against the demands of family and social mores in the decades around the Second World War. Romantic love, within such a framework, is not the end-goal of female self-development, but often an accessory to a narrative which focuses on fully female concerns such as motherhood, a profession, or autonomy.

All four novels therefore illustrate the currently preferred “critical readings” and “writing against the grain” to which Susan Strehle and Mary P. Carden allude: “Where both romance and history could once be imagined straining to achieve ‘happily-ever-after’ closure, critical readings are now skeptical of pat endings, open to ironic undercurrents, and attentive to the historicity of narratives” (xxv). Throughout their journeys of self-fulfilment some women like Penny, Anthi or Maud struggle for purpose and achievement, while others like Heavenly or Antigone feel they have little choice—given the societies in which they live—but sacrifice their autonomy and sense of worth for what they believe to be a “greater good” at the time, e.g. the stability of the family or their own social position. Reid, Fleming, Hislop and Zinovieff through their alluring Mediterranean-based novels not only eschew the superficial traditional happy ending, but in so doing contribute to the ongoing transformation of women's fiction.

Notes

¹ A search in the British Library catalogue throws over 420 results for fiction related to World War II in Greece or Crete, published since 1985, while GoodReads lists 173 titles liked by readers on the same topic.

² See <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/gallery/2014/nov/11/holidays-in-greece-history-in-tourism-posters>.

³ As the critic Randall Stevenson affirmed at the close of the twentieth century, contemporary authors “were inevitably drawn to reflect or explore in other ways [...] the war's foundational influences on life in later years,” since the conflict remained “for novelists throughout the period, a moral centre of gravity as well as a historical one” (Stevenson 441; 443).

⁴ Parenthetical references to the novels throughout this article will use abbreviations of their respective titles, as follows: *Tree*, *Dust*, *Island* and *Paradise*.

⁵ The assertion by fashion history expert Shahidha Bari that “our clothes can also provide refuge, acting as a canopy under which we shelter our most secret agonies” reads very appositely for Penelope.

⁶ See Vivanco (88) for an analysis of how the luscious Greek setting is conducive to “physical awareness” of the desirable hero.

⁷ The notion of the Cretans’ debt to the English is, however, debatable (Dear 213-215; Donnelly 95).

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