

The Arretos Kore: Mythical Voices in Contemporary Greek Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways Ancient Greek myths are rendered in the fictions of two contemporary Greek speaking writers, Eugenia Fakinou and Antri Polydorou. Respectively, *The Seventh Garment* (1983) and *The Generations of Silence* (2008), deal with the transformation of Greece and Cyprus from rural to urban societies, the political transitions and the Voices of women in these metamorphic periods. In retelling the stories of the loss of Persephone and the prophetess Cassandra against contemporary settings, these two writers question some of the depictions imposed on women's discourse in different cases of enslavement and silencing. In conversation with Giorgio Agamben's interpretation of the Persephone-Kore myth, this paper traces the representation of women's voices in terms of speech and silence in two mythohistoric novels. The return of myth in these fictions aims at addressing a fundamental question: how do myths prompt us to address the unspeakability of women in modern history?

Keywords: Demeter, Persephone, Cassandra, Agamben, Unspeakable Girl, Magical Realism

1. The Return of Myth as a Feminist Narrative

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949), Eliade defines *eternal return* as "the motif of repetition of an archetypal gesture" (89). When an event, such as a ritual, "imitates an archetype—an exemplary event" the participants can communicate with the divine through this sacred act (90). Such sacred acts, which carry the potential of renewal and rebirth, have the power to transcend linear time and make time cyclical instead. For Eliade, the modern man lives in profane time rather than experiencing time as sacred. The contemporary man is thus able to find meaning only if the "void" of contemporary history is filled, through the return to a primordial, mythical time (90). Among various attempts

of restoring the mythical time for contemporary man is engaging with myths and rituals through literature; this also includes the retelling and reworking of ancient myths, an act which reflects the idea of going back to our mythical origins. “What has mythology to do with origins?” asks Karl Kerényi (3), suggesting that since mythical narratives always happen in a primordial time, the “return to the origins and to primordality is a basic feature of every mythology” (9).

Taking into account Kerényi’s aporia, and to explore Eliade’s concept of the eternal return of myths in narratives and its function in contemporary fiction, this study constellates two female writers from different settings of the Greek-speaking world, Eugenia Fakinou (Greece) and Antri Polydorou (Cyprus).¹ In retelling two stories of mythical women, Persephone and Cassandra, this paper argues that the writers in question challenge the depictions imposed on women’s discourse in different cases of enslavement and silencing. In conversation with Giorgio Agamben’s reading of the Persephone-Kore myth, the paper traces the representation of women’s voices in terms of speech and silence in these novels. Both texts are examined as magical realist due to their engagement with rituals and ceremonies as well as their approach to time as cyclical and repetitive.

In this paper, magical realism is considered as an all-inclusive genre that is not bounded by the well-established Latin American traits. Engaging with the genre by examining texts that can be considered peripheral to magical realism offers a global look to the use of myth within it. Fakinou and Polydorou are not the only magical realist writers who challenge male dominated discourses in their works. Rather, they are part of a trend: the 1980s, in particular, saw the emergence of significant female writers who used magical realism to expose the unheard stories of unusual and marginalised women. Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), for instance, both address the unspeakability of women in different contexts. Fakinou and Polydorou’s approach to myth is thus premised within a magical realist framework which will be explored in section 3.

Apart from their concern with myth and their use of magical realism, both writers, through their retellings, manage to give voice to women who have been historically and socially excluded. In her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), Hélène Cixous highlights the need for women to express themselves through the act of writing. She states:

it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than [...] silence (881).

Scholar Maria Anastasopoulou, building on Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, examines women’s writing in Greece during the 1970s and 1980s and notes that “for the first time, perhaps, in the short history of their literary existence [they] felt free to write about their, until then, unspoken experience as women in a male dominated society (260). Fakinou and Polydorou belong to the next generation of Greek women who write about women and explore the place they hold in society by challenging the silence imposed on them. Both writers inscribe their female protagonists space within the phallogentric narratives of their countries and transgress the silence which has been inherited from the previous generations of women. By rendering the myths of abused and silenced women, such as Persephone and

Cassandra, Fakinou and Polydorou empower themselves as creative voices in the patriarchal literary landscapes of modern Greece and Cyprus respectively.

The Seventh Garment (Το Έβδομο Ρούχο) (1983), follows its protagonist, Roula, a woman in twentieth-century Greece, in her quest of discovering a family secret while attending her uncle's funeral. Her visit is marked by her experience of the pagan funerary blood rituals practiced by her family and the magical gifts the women in her family possess. *The Generations of Silence (Οι Γενιές της Σιωπής)* (2008), records, in magical realist fashion, life in an unnamed village in Cyprus during the early decades of the twentieth century through a long family history of four generations of women who also possess unusual gifts.

Polydorou's story begins around 1910, with the reader being introduced to the inhabitants of a rural area, a village in the region of Pafos, set "amphitheatrically, between two mountains" (11). The opening scene encapsulates the difficulties of rural life, poverty, and strict morality while it sets the dark tone of the narrative as different families struggle during a storm to protect their land and houses from flooding. The flood carries mythical significance; it "puts an end to an exhausted and sinful humanity, and a new regenerated humanity is born" (Eliade, 87). Within this setting we are introduced to the grandmother, Anastasia, a wise old woman, her daughter Anna, and her granddaughter Anastasia. Anastasia sets in motion the regeneration of the rituals and mysteries within the family. In an effort to save her firstborn who suffers from a blood disease, she visits the secluded magus Arkos (meaning *wild* or *savage* in Greek). She later gives birth to a girl, Anna, who possesses the prophetic gift as well as the ability to communicate with fairies and spirits. Anna develops a bond with Arkos which remains strong throughout her life and strengthens when she discovers the family secret that she is indeed his granddaughter.

Echoing directly Cassandra's ominous visions of death in the House of Atreus in Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon* (Smyth, 1090), Anna predicts the death of her own mother and her unborn baby. When her mother goes into labour, Anna whispers in her grandmother's ear "my mother and the baby will leave tonight," meaning they will both die (Polydorou, 154). With the death of her mother, Anna falls under the protection of her grandmother Anna and Eleni, a family friend. The two women, worried about Anna being stigmatised as a "mad woman" and the villagers calling her "moonstruck," conceal her gifts and find ways to keep it a secret even from her father (Polydorou, 149-150).² Their main concern is that if anyone discovers that "she sees fairies, she will be alone for the rest of her life" (Polydorou, 150). Prophecy is a form of knowledge, both in the text and in the myth of Cassandra, thus the patriarchal societies from which both women come from, enforce a silencing of this power by associating it with madness.

Despite her gifts, Anna is still restricted by the female body. Polydorou highlights that Anna's generation is unable to accommodate important aspects of femininity such as pregnancy, alongside empowering traits such as knowledge. Through her sexual awakening, Anna loses her ability to communicate with spirits and her connection to her grandfather, Arkos, is terminated. When Anna finds out the monk she was in love with has committed suicide, she arranges to marry someone willing to raise her child and keep her secret safe; thus, she enters a cycle of secrecy that defined the previous generations. Her daughter,

whom she names Anastasia, does not share any of her mother's gifts and grows up to be a wicked woman. When Anastasia gives birth to her daughter, Cassandra, the cycle of silence is broken, an event symbolised by the breaking of the tradition to name every granddaughter by her grandmother's name.

Names play an important part in the understanding of the use of myths in Polydorou's story. Firstly, the name Anastasia derives from the verb *anastainomai*, which means to come back to life and carries connotations of rebirth. Thus, with every Anastasia in the story, a new generation begins. The cycle of resurrection concludes with Cassandra's birth. Cassandra's name is attributed to a doctor named Odysseus. There are several parallels between the different versions of the mythical Cassandra and Polydorou's Cassandra. While in the hospital, Cassandra's parents and the doctor discuss different names for the newborn. The father declines the name Aphrodite who "loved all the men" (345) because he believes his daughter will inherit similar attributes to the goddess through the namesake. The mother then settles on the doctor's suggestion of the name Cassandra after he recounts the mythical Cassandra's prophetic gifts and her royal descent as a Trojan princess. When Odysseus realises how both parents love the name, "he omits to inform them that Cassandra predicted only ominous things about the future. He also skipped the part about her enslavement" (345). There are also striking similarities between the king of Troy, Priam, and Cassandra's father, Stratis. Both men divorced their first wives to marry the mothers of Cassandra and their marriages were undermined by their infidelities. Stratis is often the one silencing his daughter based on her mother's accusations. The first time Cassandra defies the parental authority and vocalises her thoughts, Stratis "[grabs] her by her neck and [forces] her to kneel," making her apologise to her mother who claims that her daughter has gone mad (467). While the mythical Cassandra is abused and captured as Agamemnon's slave from Troy to Greece, the nature of her abuse resonates in Polydorou's Cassandra.

Eugenia Fakinou has, likewise, explored a version of mad women possessing the prophetic gift in *The Seventh Garment*. By doing so, she attempts to write herself, and in extension, women, as active members of Greek society. Women are the embodiment of powerful mythical figures and become storytellers in a society which has excluded them from participating in its history. By retelling the myth of Persephone and Demeter, Fakinou carves out a space within contemporary history for women's voices. Key events of Greek history are exposed—from the Ottoman occupation to its entrance in the European Union in 1981—from the perspective of women who remain *arretai* or unspeakable throughout them. The madwomen of the texts discussed in this paper serve a similar function: they are magic, mantic bridges, a "[repetition] of the mythical example" (Eliade, 4) which re-negotiates the place of women in contemporary fiction.

Both Fakinou and Polydorou expose versions of Agamben's *arretos kore*. Considering Agamben's discussion of the unspeakable girl in the Eleusinian mysteries and the prohibition of uttering these mysteries, both texts engage with the idea of female silencing and the involvement of women in mythical rituals. The sacred relationship between the divine and women prophetesses is uncovered from the very first page of *The Seventh Garment*, wherein

a sacred oak speaks. The narrator-Tree informs the reader how women used to consult it in the primordial past:

in the old days, the maidens from the distant North would come, and we would talk together. Then came the priestesses, clad in white, with their copper gongs, and garlands in their hair. In their white robes they would lie down and wait and listen for the whispering of my leaves. They would ask me of things both great and small. And I would tell them (Fakinou, 7).

Fakinou's story opens, thus, with a magical realist monologue which conjoins women-priestesses, rituals and the sacred, as represented by the Apollo-like Tree, a symbol of regeneration. In a similar fashion, Polydorou begins her narrative by exposing a protective ritual practiced only by women during floods. While the men fight the flood with manual labour, the leading woman of the house lights three candles and keeps them "lit for as long as the evil lasted" and the ritual needs to be taught to the younger generations of women (Polydorou, 17). Women act as priestesses in Polydorou too. Arkos explicitly refers to Cassandra as a "priestess" conjugating her with the mythical Cassandra by remarking that "since then most of them have been lost, but now another one has been born without anyone knowing" (Polydorou, 365).

Following the Tree's monologue, we are introduced to Demeter, who is always referred to as Mother in the novel. She is the first woman of her family to interact with the Tree. "I lay down to ask questions. I felt if it was a man on top of me. A god-like man" (Fakinou, 28). While Demeter's interaction with the divine proves helpful, years later when her daughter Eleni takes up her place, the Tree drives her mad, confirming the ambivalence of the prophetic gift: "it is both a blessing and a curse for the Tree to speak to you. It can be a great burden. Some women were able to carry it, but others went crazy" (65). Thus, clairvoyance in Fakinou bears similarities with the curse placed onto the mythical Cassandra by Apollo and also with Cassandra's curse in Polydorou's story. Fakinou gives us a reason for this madness implying that the cause lies in the disenchantment of modern man with the sacred: when Eleni goes to the Tree for help, the oak "said that palaces have fallen. And some 'Apollo' has no house anymore, nor a prophesising laurel... nor a talking spring... 'The waters that once spoke,' he said, 'are now gone' (31).

Demeter escapes from the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922. During the transition from Asia Minor to mainland Greece, she loses her first-born daughter, named Persephone.³ By adapting the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Fakinou draws our attention to women's abuse and silencing during violent changes. While searching for her daughter, Demeter encounters a man named Demos, who repeatedly abuses and rapes her, taking advantage of her status as a refugee and her necessity in the search for her daughter. After giving birth to eight children, only the twins Eleni and Fotos survive, who are both likened to the twin gods Apollo and Artemis, as well as one daughter, named Archontoula. While Eleni and Fotos remain in the village and maintain close links to the family rites being performed by Demeter, Archontoula flees to Athens. Archontoula's daughter, Roula (a name deriving from Demeter), returns to the village to attend the death and funeral of Fotos, wherein the family rites are revealed to her. A funerary ritual must be carried out to

ensure the dead's entrance to the Underworld that requires the blood-stained garments of the family's dead male ancestors to be laid around Fotos, but one of them is mysteriously missing. After the ghosts of the ancestors are summoned through the prophetess Eleni, Mother offers her own blood-stained garment to replace the missing shirt, literally adding her own life to a long lineage of male ancestors and positioning herself within a male dominated past.

2. The Return of Mythical Voices in Fiction

Chorus: I think that she is about to prophesy about her own miseries. The divine gift still abides even in the soul of one enslaved (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, l. 1214).

In Aeschylus's trilogy *Oresteia*, the Trojan prophetess Cassandra sees the past and foresees all the crimes at the House of Atreus. Able to see the ghosts of the slaughtered children that haunt and will continue to haunt Agamemnon's house, Cassandra does not just prophesise about their death but also experiences the deaths in vivid hallucinations, thus crossing the realm of the living and the dead as well as the time boundaries of past, present, and future. Although she is possessed by Apollo's divine gift of prophecy, Cassandra's first words in *Agamemnon* are incomprehensible cries of agony; they foreshadow and foreground her tragic fate: the circumstance that her prophecies would always be dismissed by mortals and she will be viewed as a "madwoman." She is not taken seriously by the Chorus either, whose remarks on her enslavement by Agamemnon allows us to explore Cassandra's story in relation to women's historical enslavement and exclusion from society. The latter has been revisited by a number of Greek women authors across the twentieth century, such as Maro Douka in *Fool's Gold* (1991), Ioanna Karystiani in *The Jasmine Isle* (1997), Margarita Karapanou in *Kassandra and the Wolf* (1997), and Rea Galanaki in *Helen or Nobody* (1999), who as Dimitris Tziouvas argues, belong to the "female narratives [that] map out the shift from politicization and social responsibility to self-discovery through a process of separation from male-defined values" (49). These fictions aim to present female characters as valid agents in society, despite the silencing and vanishment that history has imposed on them. Their writing becomes a feminist act that challenge the idea that reliable versions of history are told by men while female accounts are dismissed or not given any space at all.

In *The Generations of Silence* Polydorou utilises the mythical narrative of Cassandra and her framing as a mad woman in Aeschylus' version to address the suppression of female voices in recent history. Polydorou's re-telling of Cassandra focuses on four generations of women with the gift of prophesy, who are ignored or unable to communicate their valuable insights within an empty space of history and myth, set in Cyprus.⁴ While the women of the family have been repeatedly ignored and condemned to silence, the last daughter, Cassandra, interrupts the cycle of invisibility by using her prophetic gifts to "[find] herself and survive" (Polydorou, 598). Her mythical gifts are translated into modernity through her studies in medicine which allow her to abjure the cycle of abuse that women before her have experienced (598). Keeping in line with the Aeschylian Cassandra, the grandmother Anna warns her mother: "you will scare her, you will make

her crazy, you will make her dumb, she will stop speaking” (Polydorou, 360). The presence of myth in Polydorou’s narrative and its retelling in a setting that is both timeless and modern is what Eliade calls the eternal return. Cassandra is an *arretos kore*, who has been denied her gifts, her prophesies, and essentially the control of her own life. Descending from a bloodline of seers, Cassandra embodies the transition from rural beliefs to modern medicine.

Sandra Chait explains the significance of retelling a myth in a transitional period of history by arguing that “the appropriation and reworking of mythological material” during a shift of power from the oppressor to the oppressed, is used by novelists to ‘explain what went wrong’” (18). While Chait explores the transfer of political power between coloniser and colonised, her remarks are applicable to different forms of oppression such as the male dominated narratives and the oppressed female voices. Both Fakinou and Polydorou’s novels translate age-old myths of female exclusion in contemporary literature to explore such a shift of power. The re-visiting to these myths with the aim to address “what went wrong” resonates with aspects of Eliade’s eternal return and its manifestations in contemporary fiction.

Alongside the re-working of old myths, tracing mad and socially unconventional women back to the most ancient of narratives, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, a motif emerges of gifted women interrupting male narratives. Simone de Beauvoir, and scholar Louise M. Pryke after her, explore Ishtar’s marginalised place within a male-dominated narrative. Ishtar is perceived as an irrational yet powerful woman whose divine authority is dismissed by Gilgamesh in the same way that other powerful, gifted women have been, and still are, condemned to silence (Pryke, 195). Beauvoir writes that the woman of Ancient Greek myths could communicate with the divine in various ways: “she heard the subterranean voices, she caught the language of trees: the dead and the gods spoke through her mouth,” noting that although these powers have returned in modern age in the form of women seeing “apparitions” and hearing voices, women’s narratives are still dismissed as not worth-mentioning (182).

The Seventh Garment focuses on women who communicate with the divine. The language of trees re-emerges as an agency for “women who write History” (Fakinou, 7), as both the Mother and her daughter interact with the sacred Tree. Echoing the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” Fakinou’s Demeter experiences the loss of her daughter whose assumed death connotes Persephone’s descend to the Underworld, and the event sets in motion the establishment of Demeter’s bond with the divine. She encounters a woman accompanied by dogs, a figure who looks like the Underworld goddess Hecate, and whose “face had no eyes, her eye sockets were empty! Just empty, black holes” (27). The blind woman shows Demeter the Tree, and as Eleni recalls “it was the woman with the metal sandals who taught Mother to listen to the leaves of the oak tree” (26). Demeter’s initiation as a priestess of the Tree mirrors the events recounted in the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter” wherein the mourning goddess comes to Eleusis (Nagy, 96-97).

Demeter’s revelation in Eleusis is a confirmation of the sacred character of the Eleusinian Mysteries in the centre of which Persephone or Kore is placed. Agamben has explored the

importance of the mysteries and the agreed silence around the specific rituals in terms of Persephone's presence. For Agamben, Persephone is an *arretos kore*, an unspeakable girl, an existence for which we cannot speak.⁵ Drawing upon various studies on the archetypal figure of Kore, such as the one by Kerényi and Jung, Agamben notes the "unsettling" ambiguity of Kore, as a figure which embodies both the mother and the daughter/girl (3). Persephone is the *girl* par excellence, a Kore, who is not supposed to "be spoken about" but also escapes any categorisation "by age, family, sexual identity or social role" (7).

Agamben's line of enquiry is to interpret the unspeakability of the Kore as identical to the agreement of silence surrounding the mysteries, since the initiates were not encouraged to speak about the details of the rituals (Agamben, 12). In "Image and Silence" (2012), Agamben highlights that "etymologically speaking, *myein*, the root of the Greek word *mysterion*, means "to close the mouth, to silence" (94). While the impossibility to speak can be seen as joyful due to the sacred nature of the mysteries, silence can also be disturbing due to its associations with Persephone's abduction and rape. "In every one of these cases silence is the painful experience of a privation of speech, of being unable to say what one wishes to say" (Agamben, 95).

Fakinou's retelling of Persephone is radical; while the actual Persephone is never found by the Mother, the second daughter, called Eleni, bears the same mark of the cross on her shoulder, identical to the one Persephone had (35). While for Agamben, "it is unthinkable that Demeter should get back another daughter as dear to her as the one she has lost" (211), Fakinou's rendering offers an alternative. Diverting from the narrative of the abducted girl, Fakinou explores the possibility of Persephone as Eleni, since Demeter's quest is fulfilled not by seeking her daughter in the Underworld but by having another daughter to replace her in the mysteries of the Tree. The substitution of the lost girl with Eleni enables Fakinou to offer a version of Persephone who is a gifted and empowered *kore*, and subverts her *arretos* nature. Eleni recalls how her father used to rape the Mother and hit her in front of their children. It is during these violent scenes that Eleni's prophetic gift is manifested through an epileptic episode: "this is when *it* got a grip on me. I was thrashing about like a mad woman, and my arms and legs seemed to have a life of their own" (18). Like Polydorou's Cassandra, Eleni's gift frightens the villagers, "I know what they call me in the village [...] 'moonstruck' they call me. Later, Mother used to say that it was because of this that I was able to hear prophecies" (18). Eleni's initiation to the mysteries and sacred rituals of the Tree confirms the sacred place of Persephone, the Kore, in the Eleusinian Mysteries: "I was the only one Mother used to take to the Tree with her. I was the one she taught. [...] I am the only one left who can hear the leaves of the Tree" (19).

Both *The Seventh Garment* and *The Generations of Silence* subvert the *arretos* nature of abused and silenced women. The joyful aspect of silence, linked to the mysteries, is manifested in the exposure of women's mysteries through narrative. By giving a platform to female voices, the two writers also expose the disturbing nature of silence through the vocalisation of rape and abuse. These fictions ask a fundamental question: how do myths prompt us to address the unspeakability of women in transitional periods?

3. Myth, Magical Realism, Transition

Transitional periods offer an opportunity for a close study of cultural reactions to the change that is taking place. It is a symptom of transition to give space to metamorphic writing and to give space to unheard voices. Arguably, one of the most extensive transitions in the history of humankind was that of modernity and alongside the transformation of rural communities into modern societies. This transformation is explored in *The Generations of Silence* and *The Seventh Garment*. The novels are not only associated by their use of myth and female characters that give voice to women through these metamorphic periods but also by their enquiry with the transition to modernity.

One genre of writing where we witness this engagement with transition in the twentieth century is magical realism. While magical realist fiction has appeared at all sides of the globe, and in both developed and developing societies, magical realist texts have particularly flourished in locations where historical, cultural, and political transformations were violent and traumatic. The genre appeals to a variety of writers from around the world because it expresses “a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement” (Boehmer, 235).

In the case of *The Generations of Silence*, Polydorou examines the violence with which change is imposed onto the inhabitants of rural areas through the British colonising power. News reach the remote village of the novel with a significant delay but the effects of the changes made by the colonial power are clear. The inhabitants soon learn that new roads are being built and new regulations on the material used for building houses are adopted. The inhabitants are thus forced to enter the modern era without being prepared for it (122). The writer also concentrates on the women’s inability to protect their land and sustain ownership due to their lack of education. When Anastasia, Anna’s mother, decides to take ownership of the family’s land she soon discovers that her mother and grandmother are unaware of the state of the land or which parts still belong to them, since this was her father’s job. Anastasia visits her uncle to inquire about a vineyard. Her uncle claims that Anastasia’s mother sold it to him for some flour, which turns out to be a lie. The exchange leads to her decision that her daughter will attend school in order to be able to defend herself because it was “unthinkable to allow the same thing to happen to her” (120). Throughout the story, land is sold or exchanged as the colonisers try to establish their power over the native population and the women realise how vulnerable they are against not only those in power but how defenceless they are when faced with the written word.

Fakinou concerns her narrative with the refusal and rejection of the modern eye – Roula– to acknowledge the existence of rituals as well as their power. The intentional choice of naming the village ‘Roots’ explains her attitudes towards her ancestral past and its links to one’s land. The dichotomy between the remote village and industrial Athens offers an opportunity to point out the country’s uneven transition from its pagan, ritualistic past to a Eurocentric and thus modern identity. Both writers employ the functions of magical realism, through their use of myth, to express their own ideas and attitudes towards the vulnerability of women when faced with the effects of modernity.

Carpentier's essay "On the Marvellous Real in America" (1949) focuses on the literary marvellous which "arises from an unexpected alteration of reality" and it is yet believable (86). Wendy B. Faris has identified five typical features of magical realist novels which all reflect the intrinsic ambivalences surrounding the genre (171). Drawing upon established and diverse magical realist writers, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, she places magical realism fiction under the wider category of world literature.

The primary feature of a magical realist work is undoubtedly the presence of magic in the text, which is to be taken literally, not metaphorically. Fakinou's women engage with magic through their conversations with the Tree while Polydorou's women run with the fairies and "at night time wander around streams and rivers, without anyone seeing them" (178). Secondly, argues Faris, magical realist texts describe the external world in a realistic manner but these faithful representations include magical details or objects which point the reader towards the opposite direction. In addition to this strategy, history is manipulated or being retold so that these magical details are placed within a historical context. The retelling of history by Demeter plays a significant role in the structure of the narrative in Fakinou's *The Seventh Garment*. When she recalls the actual events, she does so not in a historical manner but in a ritualistic manner. Mother keeps returning to the beheading of her husband to enquire about their lost daughter Persephone. This action is repeated "again and again [...] and [he] never answers" (24). Polydorou's engagement with history is less extensive; while she refers to the anti-colonial uprisings, the clashes only reach the village in the form of soldiers trying to escape.

Thirdly, magical events often make readers doubt and unsettle the ontology of the text; Faris states that the confusion lies in whether the event should be perceived as the character's hallucination or as a "miracle". In both texts Eleni and Cassandra escape to a forest, a liminal place in which they lie under a tree and hallucinate the encounter with the god of the Underworld, a direct reference to Persephone's abduction. In Fakinou's narrative, Eleni spends a night in the forest wherein she hallucinates that a man on a chariot tries to abduct her. The Mother recalls how disturbed she was because "that was just the way [...] Persephone had disappeared" (98). In Polydorou's case, Cassandra intentionally tries to explore the possibility of her own death when a rider approaches. He is described as having "dark hair, dark skin and two shiny dark eyes" (530). She willingly follows the rider and Cassandra's hallucination is then interrupted by a projection of Arkos, who reverses the event. Magical realist novels concern themselves with boundaries –physical and metaphorical ones. Both Eleni and Cassandra bridge the gap between life and death.

The final distinct feature of magical realist writing that Faris identifies is the altered, distorted conceptions of time, space, and identity. The rules that govern time and space are broken in magical realist fiction, with time being unnaturally extended, shrunk and very often repeated, while spaces like houses are assigned a sacred importance. Both texts exist in cyclical time and, despite the references to historical events, time seems to extend through the rituals performed by the female characters. In Fakinou's story, the main plot, including the rituals, takes place in Mother's house. In Polydorou's novel, the women remain within domestic spaces. In *The Generations of Silence*, while the reader is aware

that the characters are growing up, hence time is passing, nothing else seems to be changing along. This idea of distorted time links with the concept of the eternal return which is fully manifested by rituals and ceremonies through an endless repetition. In other words, the process of regeneration is about bridging the primordial mythical time to the present.

Fakinou and Polydorou retell myths to express their views on the place of women in male dominated narratives. In her study *Realismo Mágico y conciencia mítica en América Latina* (1983), Graciela Ricci explores the mythical roots of the genre and affirms that the elements which compose magical realist texts are especially prominent in Latin America and reinforces the view that the magical roots of the genre originate in the shared “Latin America psyche” (Wen-Chin Ouyang, 283). Donald L. Shaw argues that myth is not only employed to “bring forth hidden truths”. Instead, he points out, those truths do not naturally belong to the myths themselves but “are devices employed by the writers in question to function as a relatively new and effective way of expressing their own attitudes and ideas” (46).

In the case of Fakinou and Polydorou, myth is reworked to express views on the voice of women and how these are empowered within mythical narratives. Our inquiry has two lines of argumentation, one following how the texts negotiate the unspeakability of women by creating spaces for them to tell their stories. The second line examines how the texts deal with the unspeakability of women as Agamben defines it – the inability to speak about women and their rituals. These novels creatively scrutinize women’s role in history and storytelling through their mythical rendering.

It is then worth asking: whose stories are actually being told and in which context? In addition to their attempt to provide an alternative narration of the histories of their home countries, the magical realist mode attends to a supplementary task in Polydorou’s and Fakinou’s fiction: to narrate a her-story. Magic, and by extension myth, is a key narrative tool in this attempt to reintroduce women into the male dominated discourse of history: magical events happen around women, and women are the seeds of magical powers; the capacities of divination and creative thought.

Fakinou’s novel aims to find a place for women storytellers as narrators and active participants in modern Greek history by communicating solely the accounts of women. Why is it important to tell a specific her-story? The sacrifice of Demeter in the conclusion of the story ensures that she becomes part, literally and metaphorically, of the family’s ancestry that had, until then, only included dead men, which demonstrates the imperative need for a fairer shaping of history. “How large is the women’s space?” asks scholar Tatjana Aleksic in her study of Fakinou’s novel. In her discussion of this space, she argues that Fakinou does aspire to claim a feminine agency “over language, narration, and historical legacy” but the text should not be considered as an attempt to overthrow patriarchy (95). On the contrary, Aleksic states that in *The Seventh Garment* we can see a “fundamental healing of history” which equally includes both male and female discourse (97).

Similarly, Polydorou does not aim to replace history with a her-story, but instead tries to make rights out of wrongs through exploring parts of Cyprus’s past that have been ignored in male narratives. Cassandra symbolises the ability of the modern woman to

dictate her own place in history and to shape her own future. Interestingly enough, it is Arkos himself, a male character, who recognises this notable change while discussing with Cassandra's grandmother, Anna. He says "in all my life she is the only [woman] who wouldn't let me see her future. [...] where she is going, she doesn't leave an open door for me to look into" (367). The significance of these words is that Arkos and his father had in the past abused their abilities to predict the future and trace women to rape them, thus securing gifted offsprings.

4. Conclusion

As Cixous states, female authors are able to establish the place of women outside silence through the act of writing. Women in *The Seventh Garment* and *The Generations of Silence* start off as both unspoken, without a voice, and unspeakable, that is, not spoken about. Via the myths of Persephone and Cassandra, the writers negotiate female agency in male dominated societies. The writers create a space for the reader to experience the eternal return of myth in contemporary culture: through the retelling of rituals and myths. Fakinou and Polydorou return to myths, re-use and reshape them, within the context of magical realism in order to not only create new narratives for women but also to carve out spaces for themselves as creative voices of intervention in our literary mythical heritage.

The traces of Persephone and Cassandra tell a story of two extremes: of the systematic abuse and silencing of women through history or their marking as sacred and unarticulated entities *arretos*- whose rituals are to remain in obscurity. Fakinou and Polydorou re-negotiate this unspeakability, in both of its extremes, through the exposition of the sacred rituals practiced by women and via the revealing of their mistreatment by the dominant forces. By returning to rituals of seering, they refuse to confirm the narrow understanding of powerful women, as those are presented in myths. Fakinou and Polydorou invent their own rituals and replace the madness associated with the abilities of women, with knowledge and empowerment. It is through this engagement with rituals that women return to contemporary fiction and to an extent replace the profane, modern time with the sacred, mythical time.

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Notes

¹ Cypriot literature, or rather Greek-Cypriot literature, is often examined as part of Greek literature, which in itself has been in the periphery of global literature. In this paper, Cypriot literature refers to literature from Cyprus written in both Greek and the Greek Cypriot dialect with an awareness that Cypriot literature is an umbrella that includes works produced in a number of various languages and dialects.

² For the purposes of the paper, we rely on the meaning of “madwoman” as defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, that is “a woman who is or acts as if insane.”

³ The myth of Persephone’s loss is paralleled to the loss of refugees’ home during the Asia Minor Catastrophe.

⁴ Written in the tradition of magical realist genre history is viewed as cyclical but also empty in this novel. From 1910 and four generations onwards nothing in terms of the social or historical background seems to change. The events that shaped Cyprus during those years are not explored by Polydorou. The major historical events are mentioned as secondary in terms of plot but remain unnamed.

⁵ Agamben’s translator, Leland de la Durantaye, notes there is no implication of a malicious misbehaviour in the Greek original, which may be the case for the English translation of the word *arretos* as unspeakable (2).

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