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Research Article

Literary Geography: Applying Geocriticism in "The Mermaid Madonna" by Stratis Myrivilis

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Keywords

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Abstract

This study uses the Geocritical method, as systematized by Bertrand Westphal in 2007, and applies it to the Greek novel *The Mermaid Madonna* [Παναγιά η Γοργόνα] by Stratis Myrivilis for the first time. This novel uses as setting the settlement of Skala Skamnias or Mourias, which is located on Lesvos (an island of Greece in the North-Eastern Aegean Sea) after the Asia Minor Disaster in 1922 and after the arrival of the Greek refugees from Asia Minor to the island. The purpose of the study is to show how Geography is related to Literature and how the author deliberately chose Skala as the setting for his literary work in order to support his new perception of the concept of Greekness, as in his opinion it was formed after 1922. Thus, this article, first presents the Geocritical method and its use in the chosen novel and then applies it to the novel discussing how the author uses the place and time.

Highlights:

- Geocriticism studies the use of space in literature
- Space in literature is not just a setting for the plot
- The choice of place names in literature is important
- Geocriticism is applied to a Greek novel for the first time.
- In *The Mermaid Madonna* a great political change on Lesvos after 1922 is depicted



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1. INTRODUCTION

As Tuan (1978) points out, the relationship between Geography and Literature is an attempt to balance objectivity and subjectivity, as Geography is interested in being literalized while Literature is interested in being implied. It is what Lando (1996) among others calls a 'sense of place'; that is, the fusion of subjectivity and objectivity in literature. Moreover, because of this, Sharp (2000) argues that literature can be neither completely realistic nor completely fictional. Literature aims to present an experience by predicting the possible implications of events and, as Prieto (2016) argues, fiction does not reproduce the real but highlights aspects of the real that were previously left unformed, which after their literary representation interact with the real world and, to some extent, reshape it.

The close relationship between Literature and Geography is supported by Turchi's (2004) parallelism between the writer and the cartographer, a point that Tally (2014) also embraces as both the writer and the cartographer work, in the same way, exploring space, selecting and presenting elements. Hones (2011) believes it is difficult to distinguish geography from fiction in literature because the represented space is connected always with the meanings the author gives to the space. Furthermore, Hones (2014) considers that not only the author but also the reader takes part to the construction of the narrative space.

In general, readers tend to consider the fictional world as real not only because they can imagine it but because they want to invade it (Turchi, 2004). In this regard, Tally (2014) states that as readers we participate in the construction of literary representation by interpreting narratives and spatial representations in a way that makes sense to us. Thus, literary space is ultimately the result of a confluence of the text, the author, and the reader (Luchetta, 2018).

Massey (2005) argues that place is characterised by multiplicity; that is, the coexistence of different elements that are in constant negotiation and shapes its cultural and political identity. This multiplicity refers to fictional and real space. And, as Thieme (2016) points out everything is in constant movement and changes happen all the time. This has to do mostly with the human presence, since as people change so the places do.

As Chialant (2017) argues, places are always connected to human activity, and the observer's gaze turns the space into place. According to Agnew (2011), each place has three meanings: (1) its location in space and its relationship with other places; (2) the participation of the place in everyday human activity, that is, as part of the social environment (or milieu), for example, workplaces, homes, public buildings; and (3) its connection to a particular community so that each place is special and creates a strong sense of belonging to people who live in it.

The most common way of belonging to a place is to be considered a citizen of a nation-state. Indeed, in *The Mermaid Madonna* the place of Skala was a national place that was reconstructed after the Asia Minor Disaster in 1922. The arrival of the Greek refugees from Asia Minor, the strict border that was "built up" after that Disaster between the Aegean islands and Asia Minor, and the discontinuation of economic, social, and cultural relations contributed to this. Lesvos from then on no longer dealt with the coast of Asia Minor but with the Greek territory, of which it had been a part since 1912.

The reconstruction of the place brought about a corresponding change in the perception of space by the local inhabitants in both coasts, who until then had been moving freely to the opposite coast. Those inhabitants were now called upon to realize the great change, and they soon found the strictness of the Greek authorities as opposed to their Ottoman counterparts.

At the same time, there was a population reconstruction, since the Greek refugees from Asia Minor, who were persecuted by the Turks, suddenly arrived on the island of Lesvos. Then, within the context of the compulsory Exchange of Populations in 1923, the remaining Christians of Asia Minor were forced to move to the Greek territory and the Muslims of Greece were forced to follow a reverse course; that is to move what is considered Turkey nowadays. The newcomers from Asia Minor acquired the status of Greek citizens as the official state had taken on the responsibility to house them and integrate them

into Greek society. Thus, the population of Lesvos grew rapidly, and problems like housing were created in various town and rural villages, one of which was Skala. All those changes in the place, in the population, and in the perception of space are reflected in Myrivilis' *The Mermaid Madonna*, and indeed this is the author's primary aim.

Considering the aforementioned brief historical overview, this article makes an attempt to explore the relationship between real and fictional space in Myrivilis' *The Mermaid Madonna*, by applying the Geocritical method. Geocriticism is a method quite widespread, which is used within the context of Literary Geography, and it is usually presented as an extended form of the French term 'géocritique', a geocentric approach to literary criticism that bears many similarities to critical literary geography and to cultural geography, from a theoretical point of view (Hones, 2017).

More specifically, Literary Geography [or as Tally (2021) proposes the term 'spatial literary studies'] is a field of Human Geography that has experienced particular growth after the Spatial Turn and places the emphasis on the study of space in the Humanities and Social Sciences, replacing the study of time that had previously been the main focus of interest (Peraldo, 2016). Geographers' interest in literature was minimal until the 1970s when Humanistic Geography turned towards this direction (Brosseau, 1994). Mitchell (2017) notes that 'Literary Geography' emerged under this name as a subcategory of Geography in the 1970s. At first, geographers drew upon literary works for exemplary descriptions of places they used as models (Hones, 2014), and Literary Geography initially emphasized the relationship between fictional and real spaces (Hones, 2017). In other words, Literary Geography is related to the geographical analysis of literary works, and its purpose is to explore how works deal with the spaces of the outside world and how this affects their reading and reception.

From a geocritical and Literary Geography point of view, the present article studies how spatial, political, and social changes are represented in Stratis Myrivilis' *The Mermaid Madonna*. It is also examined the author's intention that prompted him to choose this particular place as the setting of the novel, especially in that particular period of time. It is well known that Myrivilis changed his political view after the 1940s and adopted a more conservative political position, which is obvious in his literary works. It should also be noted that the novel *The Mermaid Madonna* underwent at least three major modifications until its final edition, during which even the title was changed.

Therefore, in the remainder of this paper, after the Geocritical method has been presented, the application of the Geocritical method to the specific novel follows, so that it can be studied the author's intention that leads him to this choice of place and time and to a specific elaboration of the theme.

2. WESTPHAL'S GEOCRITICAL METHOD

As mentioned earlier, the Geocritical Method is considered one of the various methods available in Literary Geography. In particular, Geocriticism - as systematized by Bertrand Westphal in his work *La Géocritique. Réel, fiction, espace* published in 2007 and translated into English by Robert Tally in 2011 under the title *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces* - studies the relationship between real geography and geography of fiction (Westphal, 2011).

A key thesis of Bertrand Westphal's Geocriticism is that literature does not simply depict a space but, by placing it in the realm of the imaginary, it somehow transforms it; meaning that the real space is in constant interaction with its literary representation. As Saunders (2010) points out, a recursive relation between text and real space is created since, while reading, the reader has both the real and the fictional space, which are both imaginary, in his/her mind. So, this imagination affects the experience of space that the reader has in real life. Because of this, McLaughlin (2018) believes, along with Hones, that Literary Geography is a way of reading Literature with a focus on spatial information that allows the reader to constantly make new connections between Geography and Literature.

It is, therefore, conspicuous that the interaction between the real and the fictive world is very strong. As far as Geocriticism is concerned, this relationship is studied within the framework of Referentiality, one of the three basic principles of the Geocritical method. The other two are Spatiotemporality and Transgressivity. Spatiotemporality is close to the notion of "time place" (or "chronotope") as defined by Bakhtin, but it is clear that Westphal's concept of "spatiotemporality" prefers space. It examines the relationship between space and time in literary works and identifies the relationships that occur each time, which can be particularly complex.

Another object of study of the Geocritical method is the detection and identification of imposed power that exists in space. According to Westphal who follows the theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, there is a distinction between 'smooth' and 'striated' space. The former is a space characterised by freedom of movement and the absence of authoritative forces, while the latter is a space where power is exercised. In striated space there are borders and fences that prevent the free passage of the subject, there are rules imposed by an external power or an authority. When the subject moves from smooth into striated space or vice versa, he/she commits transgression.

The distinction between 'smooth' and 'striated' space in literary works can explain the attitudes and behaviours of the heroes. The characters in literary works, like people in real life, can choose between submitting to the imposed authority or resisting it with all the consequences that there can be. This authority can be political, social, cultural or any other kind.

In Geocriticism, transgressivity has two meanings: one is the crossing of spatial boundaries that most people do not dare to do, or the crossing of physical boundaries or simply human stamina boundaries. The other is crossing moral boundaries which is considered *hubris* (ancient Greek word *ὑβρις*) and brings punishment. In these cases, the subject's action is directed against the established values of the society in which he/she lives, which he/she actively and openly calls into question. When a violation occurs, the space is no longer the same. Space is 'de-territorialized' and 're-territorialized', thus the representation of space is fluid.

But, as Westphal points out, there are transgressions that are acceptable to society. In other words, every society has its own limits to what is acceptable or not. That threshold is called "epistrata"; for example, nobody in Myrivilis' novels is annoyed with smuggling between Lesvos and Asia Minor, although they know that it is illegal.

In the remainder of this article, the Geocritical method is applied to Stratis Myrivilis' novel *The Mermaid Madonna*. By using this method, this study aims to show that Myrivilis carefully chose the place of Skamnia where a huge political change occurred after 1922 in order to (re)present the new transformation of the national space.

3. APPLYING THE GEOCRITICAL METHOD TO THE NOVEL THE MERMAID MADONNA

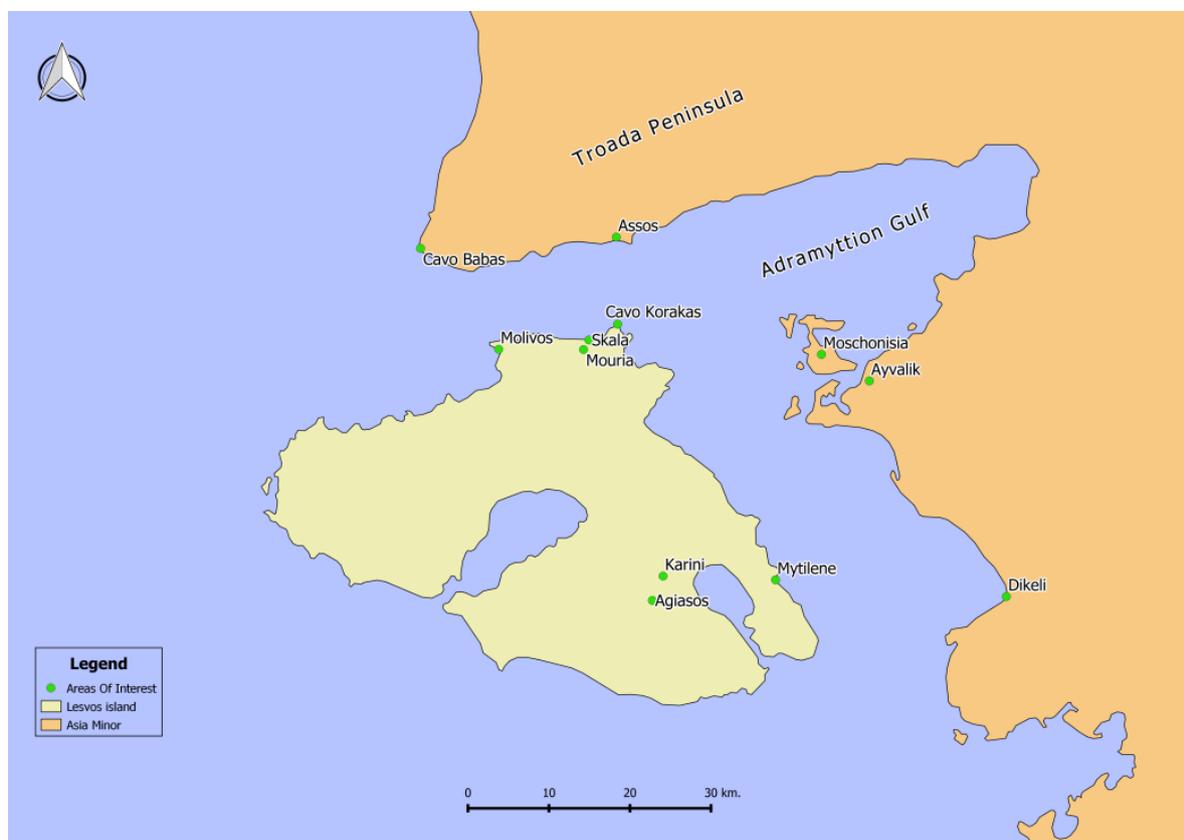
3.1 Mouria and Skala in Myrivilis' works

Skala Mourias became famous worldwide by the Media in 2015 since it was an entry point for refugees of various nationalities on the island of Lesvos [On contemporary immigration in Greece see the article 'Attitudes Towards Refugees & Immigrants in Greece: a national local comparative analysis' by Arvanitidis et al. (2021)]. However, this is not the first time that such a thing has happened historically, as the Greeks who lived in Asia Minor (see Map 1 below) passed through at the same point about a century ago as refugees. The novel *The Mermaid Madonna* by Stratis Myrivilis refers to the arrival of the Greek refugees from Asia Minor in Skala in 1922, describing their daily life in the area and eventually their permanent settlement.

It is known that Myrivilis was born at the village of Mouria (or Sikamia or Skamnia), which is located in North Lesvos. In fact, until 1932 he lived on Lesvos and later moved to

Athens with his family, but he never broke the ties with his homeland, which he often visited. It is, therefore, expected that Mouria (he uses this name) and its port of Skala should appear many times as the setting in his literary works.

Map 1: Lesvos and the coast of Asia Minor (created by Georgios Margaritis)



Mouria and Skala are used as the setting in one novel (of a total of three Myrivilis wrote) and two novellas. Of course, it is also present in many of his short stories, but only his extended works will be mentioned here. The novel is *The Mermaid Madonna*, the third book of an informal trilogy on war. The books of this trilogy are: (1) *Life in the Tomb* [*Η Ζωή εν Τάφω*] (1924) which was the first to be published and deals with life in the trenches of the First World War, in which the author took part; (2) *The School-Mistress with the Golden Eyes*" [*Η δασκάλα με τα χρυσά μάτια*] (1933) was the second to be published and which deals with the return of a warrior to his hometown after the end of the Asia Minor campaign; and (3) *The Mermaid Madonna*, which deals with everyday life in the seaside settlement of Skala Mourias after the Greek refugees from Asia Minor arrived in 1922.

In the first two novels, the space is unclear. In particular, in *The School-Mistress with the Golden Eyes*, the description of the place reminds us of Mithymna [Μήθυμνα] on Lesvos with its Genoese castle on the top, despite the fact that Valetas (1970) claims that it is Skala. In the novel, however, the village is called Megalochori [Μεγαλοχώρι]. Only in *The Mermaid Madonna* the place is clearly stated: it is Skala, the little harbour near Mouria. In general, almost all the place names mentioned in the novel *The Mermaid Madonna* are real and the descriptions are accurate.

Skala also appears as a setting in the novel *Pan* [Παν] (1946). Myrivilis narrates the story of Tsalekos, a character from *The Mermaid Madonna*. However, the novel focuses on the psyche of the hero Tsalekos without making specific references to the place unlike in *The Mermaid Madonna* where spatial references are frequent and purposeful.

Furthermore, the village of Mouria appears as a setting in *Vasilis Arvanitis* [Βασίλης ο Αρβανίτης] (1943), where the plot of the novella is set before 1912; that is, before Lesvos

became part of the Greek territory - when Christians and Muslims coexisted peacefully in the village. At that time the settlement of Skala had yet to be built, since it was built after 1922 to house the refugees.

Therefore, it is only in *The Mermaid Madonna* that the gradual transformation of the port of Skala into a settlement to accommodate the newcomers from Asia Minor is described. The precise geographical and historical references in the novel are impressive. However, Myrivilis had already referred to the theme of the next day after the collapse of the Asia Minor front in *The School-Mistress with the Golden Eyes*. Why, then, did he write *The Mermaid Madonna* and set the plot in Skala? This question will be answered in the next subsection.

3.2 Why did Myrivilis choose Skala as the setting in the novel *The Mermaid Madonna*?

The novel *The Mermaid Madonna* was published in its final form in 1949. Its first publication was in the newspaper *Asyrmatos* in 133 issues from June 1939 to November 1939 with the title *The Virgin Mary The Fishwife* (Dimadis, 1991). From 1939 to 1949 Myrivilis made many changes to the text. One of them was to change the title in order to put emphasis on the chapel named Panagia Gorgona.

As stated before, the present article supports the view that Myrivilis deliberately chose Skala and chose to set the plot of the story of *The Mermaid Madonna* in this specific place after 1922. And he did that, because this particular place and time symbolized the realization of his new perception of Greekness that he wanted to support in his work. In other words, Myrivilis believed that after the collapse of the Asia Minor front, the Great Idea that imposed the expansion of Greek territory was put aside. The Asia Minor Disaster, which occurred in 1922, was a blow to the national pride and at the same time an unhealed wound. Therefore, the aim of this novel was to heal the wound by cultivating the idea of collectivity, to highlight the popular culture and continuity of the Greek nation, which was still there, thriving despite the hardships.

Skala is a settlement that was built to house the Greek refugees from Asia Minor who from there on have coexisted with the local population. It was a new settlement, a new beginning. The place is described as a virgin: ["σωστή αμαλαγιά" (Myrivilis, 2018, page 37)]. The initial differences between the two peoples, that is, the Greek refugees from Asia Minor and locals, were soon put aside and a village was created that acted collectively. It was a Greek village in the countryside that lived by respecting its traditions and customs without being different from the other villages on the island. The absence of homesickness [νοσταλγία] for the lost homelands contributed to the support of Myrivilis' position. For in *The Mermaid Madonna* the expectation of the Greek refugees to return to Asia Minor lasted very little as those refugees were integrated into the Greek society very quickly, and their interest turned to the problems of everyday life, livelihood, and progress. Only the teacher Augoustis remained attached to his former life and soon collapsed physically and mentally. In short, Myrivilis, unlike other writers who have dealt with the subject of the Asia Minor Disaster, idealizes the situation.

By choosing Skala and representing it in this way, Myrivilis wished to put a closure to Asia Minor's case and leave behind what remained there. What mattered to him was the present and the future. It should be noted that Myrivilis was not an Asia Minor resident but a Lesbian citizen. His gaze is, as Westphal calls it, "endogenous point of view" [ενδογενής] which means he is a local. In the new reality of Skala, everything that mattered was in this place, the popular culture, Ancient Greece that came from the past centuries, and Christianity that gave hope. All were in this place so that a new Greece could be reconstructed, emerging from the depths of the summers that illuminated the islands of the Aegean, since nature, especially on the specific Greek Aegean Island (i.e. Lesbos), could also be part of new Greece, authentic Greece, with its long history and rich culture.

Thus, Skala, the seaside village of Lesbos, functions as a symbol of Greekness. Its transformation is visible in *The Mermaid Madonna* where the gradual changes that took

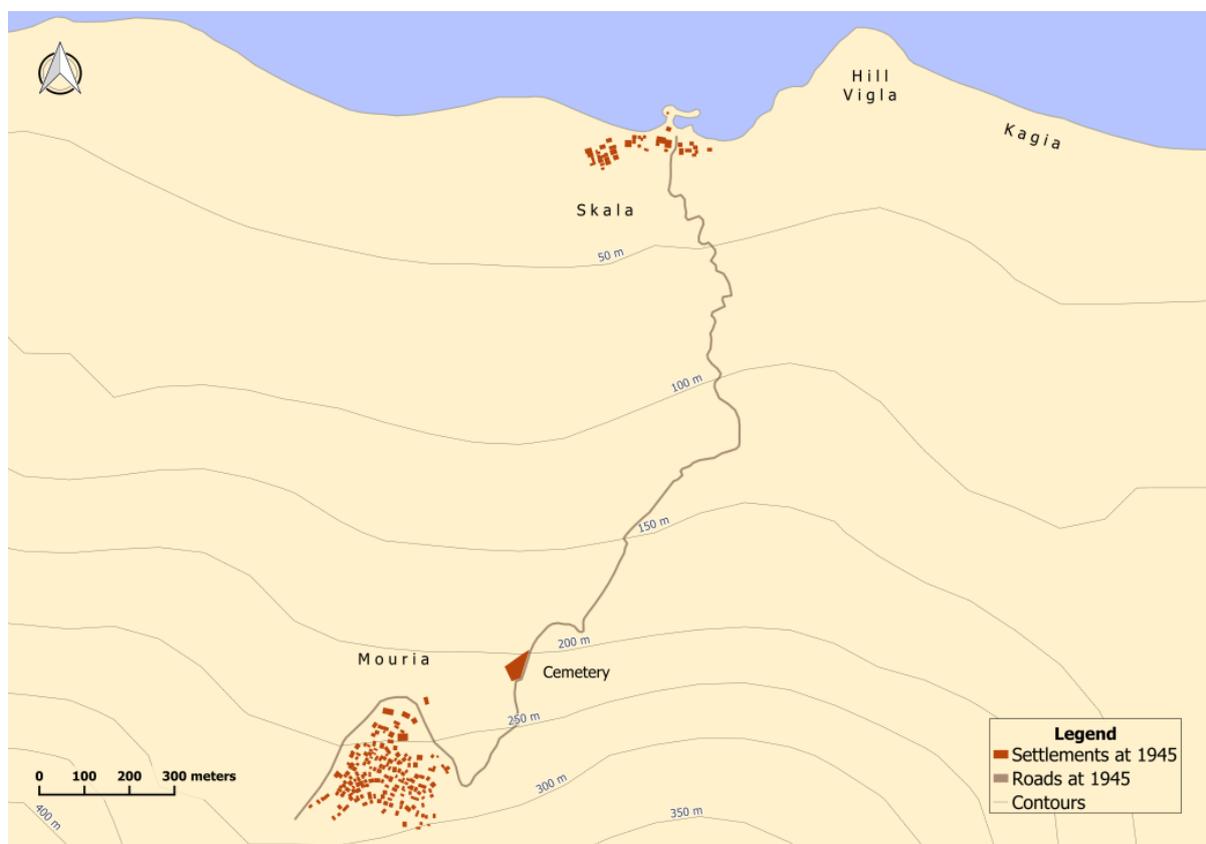
place in the area, are described in the novel, an issue that is addressed in the next subsection.

3.3 Skala before and after 1922

Skala Skamnias, as mentioned in the novel, before 1922 was just a small harbour with a few shops where professionals of all kinds left their work paraphernalia. Higher up there was the village of Skamnia or Mouria, a village built amphitheatrically on a slope of the mountain Lepetymnos of North Lesvos, a short distance from the sea, facing the Adramyttion Gulf (see Map 2 below). Between Skamnia and Skala was the cemetery of AgiaSotira. In addition, there was the chapel of Panagia Gorgona (or The Mermaid Madonna) which was built as early as 1912 so that the liberation of the island from the Ottoman Empire would be celebrated.

Myrvilis describes the arrival of the refugees in Skala in Chapter 2 of the novel and explains how a small harbour for the fishermen became a temporary shelter and, eventually, a place of settlement for the new inhabitants. Once the shock of the sudden change in their lives had passed, the refugees were forced to adapt to the new conditions of everyday life. In the narrator's opinion, the little port of Skala was a place unexplored, where they could make it all over again. From this account, it is clear that the little port of Skala had not been inhabited before the refugees arrived there, but was used occasionally by various professionals, and only after 1922, it was formed into a community.

Map 2: Settlements Mouria and Skala in 1945 (created by Georgios Margaritis)



What is of particular importance is the close economic and social relations that Lesvos maintained with the Asia Minor coast, which are described at length at the beginning of the

novel (The pages refer to the 2018 edition of Myrivilis, S., *The Mermaid Madonna*, Athens: Estia Publications, and the extracts have been translated by the author of this article.):

"The people here knew the opposite shores of the East as their own as the island's coasts. People said, 'we will go beyond' [...]" (p. 24).

"The place had a great deal of trade with Turkey" (p. 25)

Of course, their visits were frequent on the occasion of events and celebrations:

"In the old days, before the war spoiled people's lives, people came from the East to celebrate on the island, people whose grandfathers were born in this land [...]" (p. 263).

The incorporation of Lesbos into the Greek territory in 1912 did not affect the relations between the two coasts at all, which continued unhindered until 1922 when a strict border was set between them and movements on both sides were prohibited. The situation was consolidated with the compulsory Exchange of Populations in 1923 when the Christians of Asia Minor were forced to leave their homes and go to Greece, just as the Muslims in Greece had to follow the reverse course; that is, to go to Turkey. It is mentioned in the novel that the new reality was difficult to be accepted by the inhabitants of Skala since it was for the first time that they were confronted with prohibitions in their wider maritime area, such as not to fish in Turkish territorial waters as they were no longer allowed.

The Greek government and the new policy of integration of populations through the Committee for the Rehabilitation of Refugees (ΕΑΠ in Greek) played an important role in the construction of the settlement for the newly arrived Greek refugees, which generally undertook the housing of refugees and planned and carried out eventually the construction of the settlement of Skala. As stated in the novel, the original site for the construction of the settlement suggested by the Committee was not accepted by the refugees because it was far from the sea since most of them were fishermen. It was therefore decided to build the settlement next to the coastal road in Skala. Here is the relevant quotation:

"The National Bank gave an exchangeable (which belong before to Muslims that left Greece) piece of land, there in the dock, land to build on. It was a beautiful plot full of large olive and fig trees. Well, suddenly one day the engineers came from the Country (Mytilene) to do the studies and to mark out the plots [...]" (p.77).

The settlement was built, the houses were given to the refugees and slowly the integration of the newcomers into the local population of the island took place.

3.4 Mobility: borders and transgressivity

3.4.1 The role of the sea

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the sea in *The Mermaid Madonna* functions as an extension of the land. In other words, the inhabitants of the village are just as often active in the sea as they are on the land. First of all, almost all arrivals and departures at Skala are done by sea: Varouchos travels by boat to the town of Mytilene, refugees come by sea, Smaragdi comes by sea, and civil servants and fishermen from Kalymnos come by sea.

However, Myrivilis does not emphasize the importance of the sea in Skala because there is no satisfactory land transportation but because the sea functions in *The Mermaid Madonna* primarily as a 'smooth' space, as Westphal, calls it, in contrast to the land which is a 'striated' place. Indeed, Smaragdi, a mainly transgressive character in the novel, who opposes the dictates of patriarchal society, worships nature and spends many hours at sea. The sea is a symbol of her freedom. That's why when at the end of the novel she feels guilty for Lambis' suicide, she leaves her boat and her house at the seaside. Moreover, the sea is

a place where numerous illegal activities take place despite the strictness of the Greek authorities and the new borders: torpedo fishing (which excites Smaragdi), illegal fishing in Turkish territorial waters, and, of course, smuggling, the well-known as 'contraband' [κοντραμπάντο], which still exists. As mentioned above, the villagers seem to have difficulty understanding the importance of the maritime borders established after 1922 since they know that the sea has no borders. The sea is generally represented as a place of free movement.

3.4.2 Transgressions

In the novel *The Mermaid Madonna* transgressions are committed personally and collectively. The character that is mainly transgressive is Smaragdi who refuses to marry someone, in contrast to the role of the female in a patriarchal society and uses to work as a fisherman among other men. But because of her modesty, remains part of the society without being expelled. Another transgressive person is Varouchos who tries to rape his stepdaughter, Smaragdi. The villagers attack him and finally, he manages to escape secretly. There are also other transgressive characters like doctor Platanas, Lambise.t.c. committing minor transgressions.

Regarding the transgressions committed by the entire population of the village, villagers keep doing illegal activities, such as: smuggling and illegal fishing. Additionally, the attitude of the society of Skala towards the police authority is strange. They do not seem to have confidence in the police officers, and are willing to cover up illegal activities. This is what Westphal calls 'epistrata'; that is, a society's margin of tolerance towards delinquent behaviour which differs from society to society.

What is also important to be mentioned as transgression is the icon of the Mermaid Madonna itself, which is in the chapel with the same name. The icon of the Madonna depicting her as half woman and half mermaid is not in keeping with the Christian Orthodox Tradition. Scholars believe that this icon symbolizes the new discourse of Greekness (Boubas, 2018) that was composed after the Asia Minor Disaster and the defeat of the Great Idea that aim to gather Greeks into an extended Greek territory.

3.5 The church of Panagia Gorgona (or The Mermaid Madonna)

Almost all the places mentioned in the novel are real. For example, the cemetery of AgiaSotira is located at a point on the road connecting Skala Mourias with the village of Mouria as well as the church of AgiaFotini in the village of Mouria. The olive mill referred to in the novel is located next to the refugee settlement of Skala, which still retains its original area today, regardless of the hotels for tourists that are built in the area nowadays. Other places mentioned, such as the beach of Kagia, Ammoudelli, Cavo-Korakas, etc., are also real place names. So, according to Westphal's theory, there is a "Homotopic Consensus" because the representation of space in the novel is similar to real space.

Myrivilis in *The Mermaid Madonna* is accurate when describing the geography and history of the place of Mouria and Skala by using the real place names. But there is a notable exception: he gives the name "Panagia Gorgona" [Παναγιά Γοργόνα] to the chapel on the rock, which is not its real name, and furthermore, he places inside the chapel also a fictitious image of the Virgin Mary depicting her as half woman half mermaid. Paraskevaidis confirms the fact that such an icon of the Mermaid Madonna never existed (Paraskevaidis, 2000).

First, the chapel exists in real life. Before the church was built, the rock was called 'Virgin Mary's Rachta' (rachta means large rock in Greek). The chapel predated the settlement of Skamnia since it was built in 1913, as noted on the entrance canopy. It was originally named 'Temple of Liberty' to commemorate the liberation of the village from the Ottomans. This name did not prevail, and the church became known by the name 'Panagia

Gorgona' (means the Mermaid Madonna in Greek), as it contributed greatly to the novel by Myrivilis (Boubas, 2018).

Thieme (2016) speaks of nomenclatural practices, i.e., modifying place names or replacing them with others in order to erase the previous occupation. This seems to be the case here when the chapel on the rock is called the 'Temple of Liberty' to shake off the previous occupation by the Ottomans after the liberation of the island in 1912. Within the same context Myrivilis renames the chapel in his novel to put emphasis to his new perception of the place.

In the novel, as in reality, the chapel is located in the intersection of land and sea. So, it is between a smooth and a striated place, between reality and fiction. The name of the church is a symbol of Myrivilis' idea of the new Greekness because it combines Panagia, that is the mother of God and of all Christianity, with the Mermaid, which refers to Ancient Greece. It is also mentioned in the novel that the goddess Athena jumped from the opposite coast, from Assos in Asia Minor, and came to Skala. This reference creates a bridge between the two coasts while, at the same time, alludes to ancient Greece that coexists in the new reality. The chapel also stands between West and East.

Thus, Myrivilis uses the geography of Skala, and the space of the chapel Panagia Gorgona (or the Mermaid Madonna) to support his idea of Greekness. Within the novel, the chapel plays an important role so important that gives the title to the novel. First of all, it stands as the patron saint of the population who visit it on every occasion during festivals and social events. In everyday life it is also present: the inhabitants spread their fishing nets to dry there, the Asia Minor Greeks stand there to look out over the Asia Minor coastline, and even more, they hide their stolen goods there in case of a surprise inspection by the authorities.

Then, the chapel is the true protagonist of the novel *The Mermaid Madonna*, since the characters primarily act collectively, and the plot does not focus on any one person's story. Many scholars point out that the novel has no end because the story of this village with its chapel continues to exist in the cyclical time, the succession of seasons, the repetition of agricultural works, the repetition of customs and traditions; it continues to exist regardless of the life and death of the various persons who appear in the novel.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It is therefore deliberate that Myrivilis sets the plot of *The Mermaid Madonna* at Skala on North Lesvos. The protagonist in this novel is not a person who stands out from the crowd, but rather the place of Skala in general and, especially, the chapel of Panagia Gorgona. The novel describes the gradual transformation of the port of Skala into a settlement after 1922 to house the newly arrived refugees.

Myrivilis chose Skala because he wanted to show the great change in the geography of the place after the Asia Minor Disaster in 1922 and to associate the place with the new content of the term Greekness, which, from his point of view, consists of the triptych: Ancient Greece, Christianity, popular culture. Thus, Skala becomes a symbol of a new era for Hellenism, an era of introspection, where the Aegean is discovered a place of continuity of culture and history. Nature and geography participate in this metamorphosis as Greek nature is also part of Hellenism in the specific work written by Myrivilis.

Just as daily life in Skala continues unhindered, so Hellenism now flourishes on that coast, the Greek coast of Lesvos, and not the Asia Minor coast. The memories of Asia Minor are not lost but still linger in the new era. Refugees find an almost uninhabited, virgin place to start a new life there, leaving the tragedy behind.

Myrivilis in the novel *The Mermaid Madonna* places the refugees in the space in the same way he places them in the trajectory of time by mentioning only a short period of adjustment before integration and represents a harmonious symbiosis from there onwards in the novel. Time in Skala is cyclical, it is the succession of seasons and the repetition of habits. Refugees are introduced to space and time and become part of this cycle, they now

function as continuators of Greek culture. Their way of life close to nature is safe and authentic.

Therefore, Myrivilis uses the geography of his birthplace to support his ideology of the continuity of the Greek nation. Lesvos underwent a major political change as it was no longer dealing with Asia Minor, but being part of the Greek territory, had to be turned into a border region. It constituted a micrography of the new Greece in the authentic Greek countryside. It is an ideal way of life near to the nature, far away from the city.

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