

Empowering Migrant Women Through Poetry

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It was a lovely summer day in Athens when I welcomed Alishba, Sahar, Mahdia, Sakineh, Fatima, Khadija, Mahboubah, Heba and Rahima in my poetry workshop. We shared tea and coffee, cakes and fresh fruit. The room was filled with laughter and vivid conversation in English, Greek, Arabic and Farsi. The women looked happy and relaxed, as we were ready to explore the poetry of the Nobel Laureate Odysseus Elytis (1911-1996). Selected poems from his *Orientations* (1940), *Sun the First* (1943), *The Sovereign Sun* (1971) and *Maria Nefeli* (1978) transformed the place into a hothouse of ideas and creativity. With the wings of our imagination, “we walked in the fields” and the sun found us “again on the sandy shores” untangling the nets of dreams. We “drank water” from the springs of ancient villages and heard sublime hymns as the wind loitered “among the quinces.”¹

This is the story of an art and poetry workshop I organised some years ago for migrant women in Greece. Going through my travel journal, I always stop with particular affection and fondness at this entry which brings back memories of joy and pride. At that time, refugee and migrant flows from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Syria and other countries had created an emergency situation requiring political leadership and voluntary action. People on the move face major difficulties and live under constant threat and fear: women and children are among the most vulnerable. Shelter, food and safety are priorities in these circumstances. Yet, they also need spiritual nourishment and moral support to overcome the adaptation difficulties and adjust to a new environment.

¹ All extracts from Elytis’s poems in this article come from Odysseus Elytis, *Selected Poems 1940-1979*, chosen and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard; trans. by Edmund Keeley, George Savidis, Philip Sherrard, John Stathatos, Nanos Valaoritis (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2011).

For many of the women in the poetry workshop, freedom of thought and movement, freedom of choice, gender equality, education, and personal autonomy were not rights that they undisputedly enjoyed in their home countries. Restrictions, stereotypes, prejudices, patriarchal structures as well as illiberal and authoritarian institutions had an impact on their life. Uprooting and uncertainty caused by war intensified their plight. I realised that the workshop became a sanctuary in which the women felt safe and empowered. Reading poems, exchanging views and drawing pictures had a therapeutic effect on their soul and unlocked their creative potential. We all participated in an activity which focused not only on play, learning and entertainment, but also on the ideals of community, inclusion, solidarity and friendship.

My idea to concentrate on the work of Odysseus Elytis was right. The volcanic reds, the bright yellows, and the olive greens of Elytis's poetry warmed the hearts of women and triggered their imagination. They liked the idea of freedom conveyed by his poetic images: rays of sun caressing islands; girls blossoming in mystical orchards; fragrances of honey and hyacinths enchanting the cosmic geography. The poetry workshop became an exercise in expression and self-affirmation. It liberated the women's ability to think in their own terms and relate the poetic narrative to their life. We immersed "in the gold of summer" and gazed infinity where "hope dawns with all its dolphins." We boarded a boat which had been "made of black stone and of dream" and sailed on it, drinking "the sun of Corinth." We saw "on a morning full of iridescence" seagulls flying into "boundless sky." "These are images of Greece," they told me, "where nature is beautiful and people smile." "Here, women wear what they want, they go out, they are happy," a lady dressed in a floor-length black garment whispered. "They study and participate in politics," a younger woman added. "That is true democracy!" a girl with hijab cried.

The socio-political connotations of Elytis's poetry, charmingly elusive, yet with a playful presence, were noticed. "The Mad Mad Boat" instantly became a favourite with the participants, proving that great art is for all people. What an experience to board on "this crazy ship" which "sails over the mountains" and "drops anchor among the pine trees"! It has been our vessel for years. "One thousand captains we've changed" and "we haven't sunk yet," we wondered. Everybody nodded. "Politics...and the strength of people..." a woman mused. "We were never afraid of cataclysms" and "we went through everything" – Elytis's words boosted the morale of the group.

His thoughts were quickly absorbed by the neophyte feminists! “Women are never afraid of cataclysms; we are strong!” our cook declared emerging from the kitchen door with a broad smile on her face. The fragrant smell of exotic rice, herbs and spices spread over the room and a sense of sweetness and peace embraced us. Out in the garden, “the cicadas in the ears of the trees” were happily singing. High above, there was the eternal source of life and light – “the Sun the Sovereign Sun!”

Spirits were high and laughter was all around. The women felt free to express their feelings, to chat and play. The creative ambiance of the workshop revealed the healing power of poetry. I recollect moments of bliss as we “read the shells, the leaves, the stars” and we drew pictures inspired by Elytis’s imagery. We heard the waves crashing against the seashore and saw the clouds travelling “on the sky’s highroads.” A marvellous horizon of pomegranates, fig trees and vineyards opened its magic gates for us to enter and explore. It was delightful to watch the girls experiment with colours and shapes in their sketches, trying to capture the vibrancy and mysticism of Elytis’s descriptions of the Greek landscape.

A refreshing breeze was blowing in through the open windows past the white curtains. The women drew lizards, rocks and wild lilies with unremitting enthusiasm and dedication. I was fascinated by their sensitivity, energy and imagination, as well as by their capacity to think positively and have a vision. Elytis helped us reach a higher level of awareness and understanding. His poems unleashed powers of inner searching and self-realisation and forged channels of communication and dialogue. We talked of freedom and justice, of love and hope. The workshop accomplished its purpose.

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