CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Kallia Papadaki

Dendrites

Δενδρίτες / Dendrítes

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The life of Antonis Kambanis and his son represents the experiences of thousands of Greeks who arrived in the United States as economic immigrants in the early 1920s. In Dendrites, their story questions the notion of the “American dream”, the idea that every individual can successfully fulfil their aspirations through their own initiative, hard labour, and effort. Papadaki explores the world of Greek immigrants who continually struggle to forge a better living in a foreign land. They face the hardships of creating a new life from scratch, confronting racism and xenophobia, while historical forces shape their destinies. The narrative draws attention on the lives of ordinary people that often remain unseen.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a dendrite is, in science and medicine, a branching configuration; it also depicts the structure of a snowflake. As the novel’s title, the term vividly conveys the narrative form in which the story of a Greek immigrant family unfolds from the early years of the 20th century to the 1980s. Across twenty sections, we follow, in parallel, Antonis’ struggle to make a decent living alongside the life of his son, Basil (Vassilis), who, being born in America, feels he has no ties to his fatherland and, in turn, also strives for a better life. Their stories unfold alternatively. In each section, small events are first presented as separated fragments that eventually interconnect and converge, as dendrites do, into a larger construction deafeningly silent yet unique in its composition, like a snowflake’s structure that is never repeated.

Antonis Kambanis is one among the thousands of Greeks who, due to poor economic prospects at home, immigrated to the United States in search of individual prosperity and the seemingly infinite opportunities the New World offered. Born on the island of Nisyros (a small island in the Dodekanese), he arrives in the United States after twenty-two days aboard the ocean liner Patris (Homeland) in 1922, at the age of 19. New York was “one vast construction site” (36) aimed to “house a crowded dream” (36) of people who did not even know the local language. Settling in the industrial area of Camden, New Jersey, Kambanis feels a stranger in “a city whose name carried no memories, only the present” (39); there is no Greek community yet, no church that could bring Greeks together. He works as a welder at the Camden shipyards of the New York Shipbuilding Corporation. Soon, especially after the death of his mother, he realises that “there was no turning back, that he’d have to figure out how to build a life here in this strange, foreign place” (39). Home becomes a symbolic place: one that is felt, remembered, and could be called “his own” (39), yet no longer exists, and one that he needs to build anew. He has to break with his past and become someone else, negotiating a new identity. Eventually, he becomes disconnected from events in the homeland, which appear increasingly distant. He will learn of the Asia Minor catastrophe from the front page of The New York Times. Moreover, years later, whilst the Second World War rages across Europe, the harsh German occupation of Greece becomes merely a topic of discussion at the Greek kafeneio (coffee house) ‘Niagaras’ [169].

By chance, Antonis ends up at the funeral parlour of Tony Mecca, an Italian immigrant aspiring to become mayor. Thereafter, he would go “where the wind blew him” [183]. His life would unravel, as did those of many immigrants who initially undertook various jobs at the lower social strata. He becomes involved in bootlegging with local Italian immigrants, and comes face-to-face with the racism and xenophobia expressed by the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan. Following a rupture with the Mecca family, he must start anew. He establishes his own small business as a street vendor, survives the 1929 economic crisis and the ensuing depression, and seizes a second opportunity, as the name of his chain of shoe repair and clothing alteration shops, ‘Second Chance, indicates. The end of the war, however, challenges the survival of his business. It gradually declines and is eventually sold. Following his wife’s death, he ends up in a nursing home, where he dies without ever having visited his fatherland, having “never found the courage to return” (208).

Antonis’s son Basil, named Vassilis after his grandfather, as was customary, pronounces his first words in perfect American English at the age of three. He is “a native of this country” (169), insists on being called Basil as “he wasn’t Greek, didn’t feel Greek” (169), and wishes to be different from his parents with “their heavy accents” and “awkward manners” (169). Despite his father’s dream “to see his son to achieve a bit more than he has” (184), Basil abandons his youthful dream to become a journalist and ends up running a diner called “Ariadne”. Amid the harsh economic conditions created by the oil crisis in the 1970s and early 1980s and the everyday struggle for survival, he decides to sell the business, pay his debts, get a divorce and move on, despite his fear of change.

How is it possible for a person to rebuild themselves from the ground up”, he wonders (86). He decides to relocate to his unknown homeland, where changes in government (this is 1981 and a newly elected socialist government creates an optimistic atmosphere) offer him a well-deserved second chance in life. Basil does not belong to those successful third-generation Greeks who “speak perfect English, […] earned degrees, opened businesses” (140), serve as a living proof of the American dream and are proud of their parents’ decision to be uprooted in search of a better life.

This is not a glamorous and successful story in which the protagonists overcome every obstacle and finally fulfil their dreams through hard work and effort against all odds. In a rare literary achievement, supported by a writing style characterised by rhythm and musicality, Papadaki brings out of the shadows the complexity of immigrants’ everyday lives: their unremitting struggle for survival amid fragile and unstable economic conditions, their inner strife over identity, their aspirations and expectations, but also their fears, disappointments and defeats. Amid the various stories, there are also those that challenge common social norms bringing female characters to the fore: the forbidden affection of the Italian Constanza Mecca for another woman, and the disgraceful end of their relationship; Basil’s wife, Rallou’s, alcoholism as a means of tolerating her married life and her repulsive feelings for motherhood; and Antonis’ violent behaviour towards his wife and his sexual assault of a deaf young maid, an act that remains unpunished as the victim is characterised as a hysterical lunatic.

Dendrites offers a view from below of the Greek immigrant experience in the United States across two generations, shedding light on stories usually discarded by mainstream narratives. Papadaki does not narrate mere survival stories. Representing the immigration experience as the weaving of unique individual lives opens a space for reflection on belonging, identity and the human condition, marked by failures and small victories. The book was first published in 2015, when Europe confronted a refugee crisis and thousands of displaced people fleeing war conditions arrived at its borders. Drawing on the past, the novel invites a deeper understanding of the present. Receiving

the EU Prize for Literature in 2017 opened the way for the book's translation into foreign languages.

LANGUAGE: Greek/Ελληνικά

This title was not censored before publishing