

For Melbourne readers who may not be as familiar with this important writer, some more information will enlighten further. Yota Krili was born in Kerastari of Arcadia, Peloponnese and migrated to Sydney in 1959. She has lived through all the remarkable changes in modern Australian society from the assimilation years during the sixties, to the period of multiculturalism in the seventies and eighties, slowly arriving at a rather watered-down form of multiculturalism in the nineties and beyond. Needless to say, that all these stages, philosophies and policies were politically motivated and not always reflecting reality.

When most immigrants in the fifties and sixties went straight to the factory floor and did not leave until retirement, Krili went on a different trajectory. Despite the enormous obstacles, she enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1967, while also working in the Public Service. Most of her studies were on a part-time basis, as she had to work in order to support herself, as well as pay university fees. (Ironically, fees were abolished when the Whitlam Labour Government came to power – 1972-1975). Krili graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Diploma of Education, enabling her to teach at high schools. In 1974 she started teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) and from 1976 she taught Greek as well – when ‘community’ languages were introduced in secondary education. In the early eighties she edited successfully a series of books, titled “Konta sti Glossa” – books appropriate for the teaching of Greek in Australia. The signs of a bilingual person were by now evident.

Simultaneously, Krili was developing her creative talents by writing poetry in both her native Greek but also writing, re-writing, or translating each poem into English. She is unique in this, as most first-generation writers wrote in Greek while very few (e.g., Dimitris Tsaloumas) wrote in English later on. As such, Krili represents an important phenomenon of bilingualism against enormous difficulties which impact the lives of most migrants in a new country. When a voluminous collection of poems had been amassed, she felt ready to proceed to publication. Several contingencies came into fruition and I was privileged to work with her as an editor and publisher (Owl Publishing) of her first book titled *Triptych*, in 2003.

## Women

*Triptych*, as I wrote in my Introduction to this book back in 2003, includes a volume of poems

which astound us with their power through both words and images. They touch our intellect and our emotions because the poet has employed both in crafting these poems... poems which are memorable by either implicitly or explicitly telling a story. Indeed, there is nothing more seductive than a series of poems as a grand narrative. This narrative has ‘woman’ and a woman’s perspective at its epicentre: from a child in rural Greece to immigrant, mother, teacher, traveller, writer in Australia. She does more for rural women through her poems than she would through wordy protestations about women’s oppression. Such people, activities and life cycles as those depicted in *Triptych*, if not recorded by Krili’s generation, would be lost, as those rural women could not by themselves record their life. Her descriptions of village life are so vivid that only one with such a deep affinity with it could give.

Even if a reader were to only read one poem by Krili, titled ‘Portrait of a Woman’ – which depicts the lives of a mother (in the village back home) and a daughter (a migrant in Sydney) who begin to know and understand the impact of centuries-old patriarchy on their roles in life – that reader would be given a comprehensive picture of the history of Greek women through the ages. This poem, apart from featuring in *Triptych*, can also be found in the anthology *Re-telling the Tale* (Owl Publishing 1994). High praise was bestowed upon it from various critics, among them from Greek-American academic, Helen Koliass (JMGS, vol 15, No. 2., 10/1997).

She was born before the dawn  
of a bloodthirsty century  
in a village perched on the limbs  
of an Arcadian mountain,  
guarded by the country chapels  
of four stern male saints.  
Girls were not registered at birth,  
but that year was marked  
by the war of 1897.

A deserving daughter,  
pliant and diligent;  
hard toil became her halo  
from the age of three,  
a mother to her mother’s children.

.....  
Seven times she was with child...  
The pangs of labour would linger on  
every time the newly-born was a girl.  
The sixth child was a God-like boy;  
alas, he died. Heartbroken she tried

to bring him back but gave birth to another pariah,  
and if they had not been in fear of damning their  
soul,  
they would have let it die.  
She used to say:  
“God gave me only two children.”  
The girls did not count, fate had cheated her.

In this poem, Krili sees her mother not only as her own mother, but as a product of a long patriarchal tradition and culture. In the poem, she is trying to work through the complexities of both the mother’s life and the mother-daughter relationship, to finally make a deeper connection with the mother – an ‘archetypal’ mother. She succeeds in this poem in giving us the history of rural women in Greece: marrying very young, becoming mothers to their mothers’ children, becoming servants to their fathers and brothers, not receiving the nurturing and love they needed because women were not valued in their culture.

She was 83 when I visited her...  
She was my mother but I did not know her then.  
She had no time to mother her girls...  
She enchanted my daughter  
with her spinning of songs and folktales,  
and was perplexed with the state of my marriage.  
I did not dare to shock her.  
Finally, I had to say:  
“Mother, I don’t need a man,  
I am capable of supporting my child  
and living my life on my own.”

‘Portrait of a Woman’ takes us through the various stages of womanhood, first in rural Greece whereby girls do not receive love and affection as their brothers did, to the ‘physical’ absence of mother, through migration, to the mature ‘feminist’ stage whereby the poet reflects on her mother not as an individual person, but as a product of a male society where daughters were a burden.

This long, narrative poem, as well as other shorter poems with ‘mother’ as a central figure in *Triptych* (and there are many), show the far from idyllic lives of women and girls then. Such poems are an evocation, a hymn and a tribute to the life of women in earlier times. They are also an attempt to validate the experiences of the poet’s mother’s generation; to re-connect past and present, urban dwellers with rural ones: the mother in Kerastari, Arcadia and her daughter in the urban, multicultural suburb of Glebe in Sydney.

In telling such a story well, and reflecting the

stories of women through the ages, Krili’s poetry captures not just the essence of her own life and her own times, but reflects a woman’s life of all times. Such a heavy, albeit pleasurable burden falls on the shoulders of writers like Krili to bring them to our attention and record them for posterity.

It is abundantly clear that *Triptych* has now withstood the test of time by breaking new ground – in its themes and its linguistic form – and deserves to be considered a classic text of Greek-Australian and diasporic literature.

*Note:* For a more detailed analysis of Yota Krili’s bilingual poetry book *Triptych*, refer to my extensive *Introduction* in the book. To get a taste of Krili’s prose on the topic of mother and daughter see her story “My Mother’s Shoes” in the anthology *Mothers from the Edge* (Owl Publishing 2006) together with many other stories on the same topic by women writers.

## Language

Bilingual poetry is an intercultural journey. Living, working and writing in the suburb of Glebe in Sydney – home to artists and intellectuals, its main street full of book shops, cafés and the like, Krili fits perfectly in this cultured environment because, unlike many fellow-immigrants, she has carved a life for herself, from being an outsider at first, to a life of activism on social and educational issues, to a life of books and learning, teaching and writing.

An interesting and important aspect of Krili’s multicultural trajectory is that of integrating into the host Australian society, while still ‘cultivating’ her Greek language and culture. She succeeded in immersing herself in both languages and cultures and receive influences from both, which enriched her achievements. In turn, she greatly augmented the number of readers who could enjoy her poetry and learn about aspects of Greek life which would otherwise have been closed to them.

Krili writes and/or translates in both languages. Sometimes in English first, other times in Greek first. In studies of Greek diasporic writers, Krili is likely to be classed as a first-generation poet. Unlike Krili, the fact is that most of the first-generation write in their native tongue, either through adverse circumstances, or through a passion for the mother tongue and personal will (e.g., Dina Amanatides). As mentioned above, Krili grew up to adulthood in Greece but was educated and nurtured by the English language and literature. As a result, she has a foot in both camps. A huge achievement?