

# Greek-Cypriot Children's Literature: A Small Literature and the Challenges it Faces

# In the Big World of Globalized Publishing for Children

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**Abstract:** Greek-Cypriot children's literature constitutes a minority literature, which exists in the periphery of metropolitan Greek Children's Literature, striving to establish its place within the European and international literature. The following discussion demonstrates how Greek-Cypriot children's literature has managed to progress through and despite of illiteracy, colonialism, war, identity crisis, language confusion, and marginal cultural status. The historical progress and future potentials of Greek-Cypriot children's literature reveal the strength of its minority culture and the will of those involved to help it achieve the status it deserves.

Key words: Cyprus, Greek-Cypriot, children's literature, minority.

#### Introduction

While other literatures for children have also been evolving on the Eastern-Mediterranean island of Cyprus (e.g., Turkish-Cypriot children's literature) the present discussion focuses on the literature produced by Greek-Cypriots. This is a minority literature, as it exists in the periphery of metropolitan Greek Children's Literature, while also striving to establish its place within the European and international literature. As systematic bibliographic reports regarding Greek-Cypriot children's books did not exist up until the 1980s, the information included here has been obtained from a combination of various individual sources. This information is fairly sufficient for drawing some conclusions regarding the historical development of Greek-Cypriot children's literature and demonstrating the challenges it has been dealing with.

# **Minority**

Here is one definition for the word *minority* provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "A small group of people differing from the rest of a community in ethnic origin, religion, language or culture" (Brown, 1993). And this is another definition by an on-line dictionary: "A group having little power or representation relative to other groups within a society" (*Your Dictionary*, 2010). Considering these, one could say that Greek-Cypriots constitute a cultural minority: Inhabiting an independent, small island with a population of 800.000, the Greek-



Cypriot community exists and creates on the south-eastern margins of the Greek-speaking region; they are thought to be different from Greeks in Greece and have little "cultural representation" within the Greek-speaking world. The group's language is also deprived: With "Standard Greek" and Turkish as the official languages of Cyprus, the Greek-Cypriot dialect is confined to everyday oral use and is essentially excluded from education and literature. Thus, the few publishing houses on the island tend to publish Standard Greek texts, and only rarely do they publish children's books in the dialect.

The challenges of publishing within the Greek-Cypriot book market are many and multifaceted. The market is small, addressed to an undersized reading public, in a language not widely used outside of Cyprus and Greece. The ability to distribute Greek-Cypriot books in Greece is limited, as Greek authors are numerous and prolific. Minimal print-runs and low "book consumption" equate to a high economic cost, which prevents the production of expensive and appealing editions. Moreover, loads of books originally written in Greek, Greek translations from other countries, and mass cultural products such as Disney editions are imported, flooding the Cyprus book market and leaving little or no shelf-space for Greek-Cypriot editions. The fact that Greek-Cypriot books for children are rarely translated or published in any other languages completes the picture.

As Niki Sioki observes, in the contemporary, capital-driven world "[f]or the first time in the history of western civilization, ideas are valued according to their economic yield and not by their importance and meaning or their contribution to culture and their influence on human activity" (2010: 6). Nevertheless, Sioki is optimistic about the future of Greek-Cypriot literature within the local, Greek and European contexts, as she supports that new technologies combined with Cyprus' recently attained EU membership can facilitate the showcasing of its strengths, which include "talented human resources," as well as "a complex and turbulent history and long cultural tradition, which constitute rich sources of inspiration" (Sioki, 2010: 7).

A brief look at the historical development of Greek-Cypriot literature reveals its aforementioned strengths and challenges. Katsonis (2003) and Papantonakis (2007) roughly divide its historical progress into three periods, which are determined by major social and political events in the island's history.



# [I] Colonial Period (1894-1960)

The first period begins with the publication of the first text addressed exclusively to children, in 1894, and spans until the end of British colonial rule in 1960. At this time, there were no publishing houses, no women writers, and no illustrators; nevertheless, the first texts for children, including the first novel, were published. The belated and slow development of Greek-Cypriot literature was largely due to British colonial oppression and hostility towards Greek language and culture: "The intense intellectual dependence of Cypriots on Greece caused the reaction of British colonialism that wanted to break this bond away" (Maratheftis, 1979: 40). Economic difficulties, social and political disagreements, linguistic and cultural confusion were some of the characteristics of the era. Education and literature functioned within three "languages": the purist Greek idiom, modern Greek, and the Greek-Cypriot dialect. Misguided perceptions of children's literature as didactic and inferior discouraged acclaimed authors from creating texts for children, while a widespread illiteracy limited the reading public.

Concerning the cultural roots of Greek-Cypriot children's literature, Katsonis states: "As it happens with other peoples, in the case of Cyprus as well, the roots of its children's literature can be found in the infinite and not fully explored – unfortunately even until this day – treasure of our folklore" (Katsonis, 2003: 72-73). During these 66 years, only 20 books and 17 magazines for children are documented as having been published. Most of the texts were published in children's magazines which were distributed in schools, as there were no other means to reach the juvenile public (Figure 1).



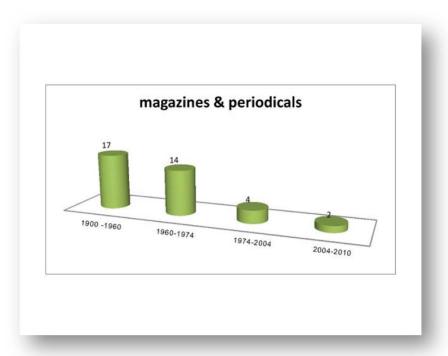


Figure 1

Writers in these early years found refuge in magazines for children, since publishing a book was more difficult, but as this situation changed, the publications of magazines decreased.

#### [II] The Period of Independence (1960-1974)

This second period spans from 1960, the year Cyprus became an independent state, to 1974, year of the Turkish invasion on the island. The founding of a new state and economic development were accompanied by political problems and instability. These negative factors affected the production of children's literature: Only 4 novels and a small number of fairy tales and short stories were published; most of historical content, such as the anti-colonial straggles. The newly founded state provided no incentives for authors, and still, besides 3 printing houses, no actual publishers existed. Authors functioned as their own editors and no illustrations were included in the books, other than some black-and-white sketches by the authors or rarely by well-known painters; when the technology allowed it, book covers featured a coloured image.

Standard Greek dominated and the Greek-Cypriot dialect was not used. This fact, along with the marginal status of Greek-Cypriot culture within the broader Greek culture, reinforced in the creators what we could call an "identity anxiety", to some extend still felt by authors.



# **[III] Forming period (1974-2004)**

In this postwar period, the tragic events of 1974 (military coup and Turkish invasion and occupation of part of the island) changed the course of children's literature. Ironically, one of the darkest moments in the modern history of Cyprus brought the booming development of its literature. Passing through stages of anger, mourning, and hope, numerous authors were inspired by the tragic stories they had witnessed and the difficult times that followed. As Aggelopoulou explains, however,

It is impressive that while Cypriot writers speak of a crowd of dramatic events, hate is nowhere to be found. Everywhere emerges the wish for coexistence. How can you turn yesterday's friends into enemies? This theme functions very positively. Firstly, it keeps the memories of recent past alive and secondly it passes messages capable to inspire kindness and love in a spirit of peace in the citizens of tomorrow (Aggelopoulou, 1990: 75).

Authors and publications increase dramatically. During this period, 314 editions by 88 Greek-Cypriot authors are documented, covering the entire spectrum of literary genres. Most authors were women teachers. Greek-Cypriot literature for children finds its identity, escapes its geographical border and gets published in Greece. A few folktales are published in the Greek-Cypriot dialect; some as multilingual editions with captivating illustrations by the acclaimed engraver Hambis Tsaggaris.

Despite the challenges, many improvements take place during this period. The Cyprus Board of Books for Young People (CyBBY), founded in 1974, creates a bridge of communication between Cypriot creators and the international literary world. Children's literature awards are established in 1976, publishers are sponsored by the state, and Children's Literature is taught at the Cyprus Pedagogical Academy. In 1984, the IBBY Congress takes place in Cyprus and in 1989, the official journal of CyBBY, *Anemi*, is founded. More systematic research and documentation of children's literature is being done, but there is still no systematic promotion and distribution of Greek-Cypriot children's books.

### [IV] The era of Europe (2004 - )



Viewing the entrance of Cyprus in the EU in 2004 as a touchstone, some scholars purport that Greek-Cypriot literature has now entered a new, fourth period. Even though it is still too early to draw any safe conclusions regarding the effects of this fact on Cypriot literary production, a second booming in children's publishing can be identified. It is noteworthy that the number of books published during the past 6 years (2004-2010) is almost equivalent to the number of books published during the preceding 30 years (1974-2004) (Figure 2).

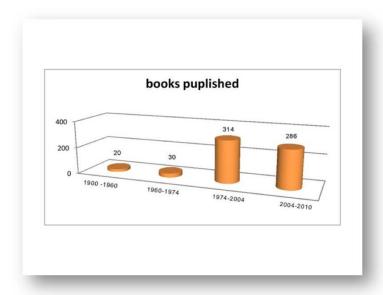


Figure 2

During these past few years, many new writers have appeared, raising the number of Greek-Cypriot authors to a total of 120 (Figure 3).



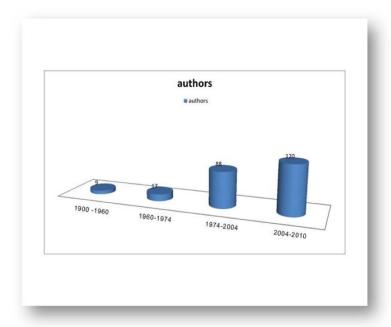


Figure 3

This new generation of authors engage contemporary issues such as ecology, multiculturalism, and emotional education, and write in styles that are similar to those found in other European literatures. Cyprus now has 20 publishers, 4 of them publishing children's books consistently, releasing 10 to 15 books per year. Some more systematic efforts are made to promote Greek-Cypriot literature. For instance, Strovolos Municipal Library organizes a programme to bring together young readers and authors. More authors are also now able to have their books published in Greece: "A closer look at the catalogues of well-known publishers in Greece proves the breadth and quality of Cypriot writing production (...)" (Sioki, 2010: 7). A small number of books have even won awards in Greece or elsewhere; for instance, the prestigious *Academy of Athens Award* was bestowed on Maria Pyliotou's book *M' agapas? S' agapo!* 

However, as mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, contemporary children's literature publishing in Cyprus still faces several challenges. Although Strovolos Municipal Library reports that 750 out of its 2875 books for children are by Greek-Cypriot authors (some titles appearing in multiple copies), small bookshops report they do not carry any Greek-Cypriot children's books, while big bookstores say that among the thousands of children's books they sell, they might sell a few or none authored by Greek-Cypriots. Unfortunately, market placement



is dependent on personal relations between book sellers, publishers, and authors. Organized local and international marketing policies are still absent and still only one book has been translated in another language: In 2008, Kika Poulcheriou's novel, *Ta Megala Papoutsia* [The Big Shoes], has been published in Bulgarian by the Foundation for Bulgarian Literature. During a phone interview, Greek-Cypriot publisher, Demetres Mpalaouras stated:

[T]he distribution of books abroad is very difficult; even in Greece because of the big number of their local publications. The competition is huge. Cypriot books do not get translated mostly because of their appearance and they are not sold abroad because of the language barrier (...) lately we have produced great, more attractive books that we are proud of and can stand in the international world of publishing but we need help with their promotion.

Even though contemporary authors and illustrators in Cyprus are "amateurs" – meaning they do not have the luxury to earn their living through their creative work – most of them do not create "amateur books". Cyprus has exceptional editions of children's literature that deserve to reach larger reading audiences.

The production and distribution of minority literatures, such as the Greek-Cypriot, need to be supported and promoted, both by local and international institutions, in more drastic, systematic, and efficient manners. If small literatures are to survive their greatest current challenge, namely the "Disneyfication" of global mass culture, then they need to match the powerful marketing techniques employed by Disney and other corporate producers of children's culture, with even better ones. The language barrier may be bypassed through the publishing of multilingual editions, while projects that promote cultural exchanges between linguistic communities are direly needed. Translation, with the ever more increasing attention it has been gaining within the EU is part of the solution. One positive step has been taken recently, with the Cyprus Government's decision to finance translations of Greek-Cypriot books by or for foreign publishers. Finally, more effective uses of modern technology (such as on-line publications) could bypass obstacles that small literatures have been encountering throughout the ages.

#### Conclusion

The present discussion has demonstrated how Greek-Cypriot children's literature managed to develop and progress through and despite of illiteracy, colonialism, war, identity



crisis, language confusion, and marginal cultural status. Cyprus, with no land border and no easy access to other neighbouring countries besides Greece; with an official language (Standard Greek) and a dialect that are not widely read; with scarce publishing houses and economic, political, and cultural complexities, still faces many challenges, even though noteworthy children's books by gifted authors and illustrators are increasingly being published. The historical progress and future potentials of Greek-Cypriot literature reveal the strength of its minority culture and the will of the person's involved with this literature to continuously uplift it, until it achieves the status it deserves, locally and within the Greek-speaking world, as well as within the European and international world of children's books.

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