

# Prolegomena for a Comparative Approach to Cypriot Literatures

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se concentre sur les concepts de littérature et d'identité. L'auteur soutient que les «littératures chypriotes» sont incluses dans une région de contacts plus large du Moyen Orient. De plus il suggère que le modèle périphérie/centre s'applique parfaitement aux littératures chypriotes, selon lui, quand il s'agit d'une approche comparative.

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the concepts of literature and identity. The author advocates that “Cypriot literatures” are included into a broader contact area of the Middle East. Furthermore, he suggests the periphery/centre pattern which, according to him, perfectly applies to Cypriot literatures in a comparative approach.

## 1. Literature and Identity

When using the plural form “Cypriot literatures” (also “Literatures in Cyprus” might be employed) I am referring to both Greek and Turkish Cypriot literature. This can be considered a compromise between two extreme points of views: the recognition of the two Cypriot literatures as one common multilingual “uncanonized” literature (see the introduction to Yashin 2000), which seeks to set a distance to both Hellenism and Turkishness, and the complete exclusion or ignorance of the “Other”, widespread in both Greek and Turkish Cypriot comprehension. The latter attitude is an already stereotyped rhetoric device in both communities. On one side, most Greek Cypriot literary historians when using the term “Cypriot” very simply mean “Greek Cypriot”. As has already been stated elsewhere (Yashin 1997: 223-224 or Yashin 2001: 34-35), you will hardly find an “Ιστορία της ελληνοκυπριακής λογοτεχνίας” (History of the Greek Cypriot Literature) or

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“Ιστορία ελληνοκυπριακής γραμματείας”(History of the Greek Cypriot Letters), but a lot of works, books, essays, anthologies about “Κυπριακή λογοτεχνία” as a self-sufficient term, excluding from “Cypriot” any literature written in other languages than Greek. The inverse procedure with the same result is represented by the official Turkish Cypriot attitude, which, on the contrary, overstates the autonomy of Turkish Cypriot literature with terms such as “Kıbrıs Türk Edebiyatı”, while “Kıbrıs Edebiyatı” is not used by this ideological stream, as if there never existed any contact between the various forms of expression of Cypriot literatures. The same is true when speaking about language: the ideological and political concerns dictate the terminology of “κυπριακή διάλεκτος” or “κυπριακά”, for “our”, i.e. the Greek Cypriot’s way to speak, the Others speak “τουρκοκυπριακά” or just “τουρκικά” (since the mere existence of a Turkish Cypriot dialect is, interestingly enough and in contrast to all the scientific linguistic findings, been denied by some Greek nationalistic circles and amateurish ‘pseudo’-scientists), just as for Turkish Cypriots the Other’s language is “Rumca”, and not “Kıbrıs Ağzı”, reserved for “our”, i.e. Turkish Cypriot speech only<sup>1</sup>.

Operating in terms of “we” and “the Other”, borrowed from stereotypology, the first approach of analysis that comes into mind is the issue of identity as a research option from the imagological point of view, analyzing the image of the “Other” in the two respective literatures. An extensive monography (comparable to Millas 2002 for the Greek image in Turkish novels) on this topic does not yet exist for Cyprus, although attempts have been made<sup>2</sup>. Such an approach for a comparative analysis of Cypriot literatures is not without problems, since the issue of identity apparently seems to be of different or even divergent nature in the mutual stereotypical image of the Greek/Turkish “Other”, but in the same time presents stunning structural similarities and convergences in the two communities when it comes to the self-definition towards the respective mainland literature. The traditional and nationalistic device of both Hellenocentric and “Anatolian-centered” literary rhetorics consists in seeking its root in the origin from (and dependence of) an idealized and rather abstract “motherland” (see for instance Panagiotounis 1981: 5, 60 and Serdar 1993: 1-6 respectively). When it comes to contemporary literature with the rise of critical approaches and currents, the image is, of course, more complicated. The seek of identity in Greek Cypriot literature lies still in Hellenism, somewhat “overdetermined” in postcolonial Cyprus (according to Stephanides 2000: 160)<sup>3</sup>. A very recent example, interesting

also because of its subtly discriminating attitude towards the “Other”, is the wording used in the advertisement for a translation program launched by the Ministry of Education, where Greek Cypriot literature is termed “Ελληνική γραμματεία της Κύπρου” (“Greek literature of Cyprus”) whereas Turkish Cypriot literature is “only” “τουρκοκυπριακή γραμματεία”<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, the identity quest of contemporary Turkish Cypriot literature in its relation with Turkish literature seems to be more conflictual (see Mehmet Yashin 1990 and 1997). However that may be, we roughly have the consciousness of Greek Cypriot literature as a part of Greek literature and of Turkish Cypriot literature as referring to models, themes and forms in the literature of Turkey. This cannot be questioned or denied, but such a conception disregards important historical and cultural factors which unite the two communities in terms of colonialism, post-colonialism, migration and periphery/centre-structures and which, on the other hand, imbed the two communities and their literatures into an intercultural sphere outside the Greek and Turkish contexts, call it Levante or Eastern Mediterranean or Middle East, with considerable socio-economic and cultural implications. It is therefore inevitable to include Cypriot literatures into a broader contact area and to compare the role of identity and of periphery/centre-structures in both literatures with the literatures not only of the respective mainlands, but also with those of the adjacent Near East, especially with literatures (in different languages) of Lebanon/Syria/Palestine and of Egypt.

## 2. Periphery and Centre(s)

The above mentioned periphery/centre-pattern, well-known from postcolonial studies (Ashcroft et al. 1989, in particular pp. 3-4, 7-8; Gandhi 1998: 161-163 and *passim*), perfectly applies to Cypriot literatures when it comes to a comparative approach. According to this theoretical framework, a marginal periphery “converses” in an often conflictual literary dialogue with the metropolitan (in former times imperial) centre. Again, the use of the plural form (“centres”) should be preferred here, since the concept of “centre” of Cypriot literatures cannot be confined to one or two metropolises only, because it has been multiplied according to the diachronic development and historical displacement of the two societies: Istanbul/Constantinople and London for both, plus Athens, Alexandria and Cairo (and even Venice) for the Greek Cypriot society/literature, thus a “polycentric” structure being valid especially for the Greek Cypriot literary

production. This approach seems to be particularly suitable for the analysis of Cypriot literatures during the Ottoman period, when there was a well-established imperial centre (Istanbul) sending impulses to both communities of the island (see for an attempt in this direction Kappler 2004). By using a comparative research orientation, the Greek and Turkish literatures of Cyprus can be fruitfully analyzed as two corresponding and antagonizing voices from the periphery to the centre. It is necessary, however, to draw a line between “folk” and “learned” literature which, in the case of Cypriot literatures, only partially overlap with oral and written literature respectively. In each of the two literary categories, symmetrical and asymmetrical correspondences in the narrative discourse may be discovered: the Turkish *Gazevât-nâmes* and the Greek genre of “Lament” (Θρήνος) immediately after the Ottoman conquest; the various “epic” texts (*destan*) of the “Dragoman-tradition” produced in both Greek and Turkish during the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries; centre-oriented vs. centre-opposing literary production during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. Hilmi Efendi (1782-1847) or Âşik Kenzî (1795-1839) and Vassilis Michaelides (1851/53-1917)<sup>5</sup>. The periphery/centre-pattern might be a useful framework to work on texts of the following (late Ottoman and British) period, too; under this light of analysis apparently divergent literary topics and settings might suddenly converge as a parallel manner of speaking and expression<sup>6</sup>. Concerning contemporary Cypriot literatures, especially after 1974, when identity becomes a decisive issue in defining literature (and society) in a new context of “Cypriotness”, a combinational methodology constituted by the analysis of the understanding of herself/himself against the “Other” (or the “other side”) and by the definition of links and (self)-references to the centres (now undoubtedly Athens and Istanbul respectively) could be a promising approach for a modern comparative analysis. The research in this direction for contemporary Cypriot literatures has not yet begun, perhaps simply because of the researchers’ general lack of competence in both literatures and languages, or because of a certain resistance against a holistic interpretation of texts which might not be in line with the still dominating ethnically defined patterns of literary history in Cyprus.

## NOTES

1. To confuse even more this somewhat absurd image in mutual stereotyping, we might add that apart from the self-denomination “Kıbrısca” for Turkish Cypriot, some parts of the Turkish Cypriot society use also the expression “kibriyaka” (in Greek!) for their own (Turkish) speech variety!
2. For the images of Turks/Turkish Cypriots in Greek Cypriot poetry see Pieris 2006, in Greek Cypriot prose writing see Papaleontiou 2005. Cf. also the M.A. thesis by Maria Kallousia (supervisor Dimitris Tziouvas) “Strangers at Home: Images of Turkish-Cypriot ‘Others’ in Contemporary Greek-Cypriot Fiction” (University of Birmingham, 2006). As far as I know (and also according to information provided by Neşe Yaşın) there are no published studies on the opposite phenomenon, i.e. the image of Greeks/Greek Cypriots in Turkish Cypriot literature; an unpublished conference paper “From Turkishness to Hybridity: the Evolution of ‘the Other’ in Turkish Cypriot Poetry” was presented by N. Yaşın at the symposium ‘Mare Nostrum III’, Nicosia 2004. Cf. also Azgın 2000 for a general overview, but with only some hints at the concept of the ‘Other’.
3. For an extensive discussion of contemporary Greek Cypriot literature in the context of periphery/centre in relation to Greek literature see Kechagioglou 1992.
4. The advertisement is dated 17.5.2007 and has the file number 14.13.30.5, see [www.moec.gov.cy/announcements.pdf/17\\_5\\_2007metafrasaeis\\_tourkikon\\_ergon.pdf](http://www.moec.gov.cy/announcements.pdf/17_5_2007metafrasaeis_tourkikon_ergon.pdf) (“metafrasaeis”: sic!). The committee members mentioned at the end of the document have apparently not been consulted for the wording of the advertisement.
5. For all these examples see Kappler 2004: passim.
6. See for such an attempt in the framework of postcolonial theory the article “Cypriot literatures as part of the Eastern Mediterranean contact area (1850-1960)” in the present volume.

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