

## The Marginalised Romani Culture in Greek Society and Its Portrayal in Greek Children’s Literature

### Abstract:

In Greek children’s literature, very few books deal with Roma children, especially in a protagonist role – therefore, the aim of this article is to examine literary representations of Roma children. The four books presented in this paper help the youngest readers understand how marginalised this social group is in the context of Greek society. Adopting the basic principles of multicultural literature as well as the method of imagology or cultural iconology, it can be said that prejudices and stereotypes are projected through literary characters. In addition, the perpetual persecution of the Roma people is revealed in the works analysed herein, including their genocide during the Second World War. The ideological stance of the books is one of friendliness towards Roma children, even though the racist and suspicious attitude of non-Roma is not in any way glossed over or concealed. In conclusion, according to the authors of the article, what is missing in Greek and European children’s literature is the authentic portrayal of Roma and the authentic voices of Roma writers.

### Keywords:

Angeliki Darlasi, authentic multicultural children’s literature, genocide, Maroula Kliafa, Philip Mandilaras, Pitsa Sotirakou, Roma children in Greece, racism, stereotypes

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## Marginalizowana kultura romska w społeczeństwie greckim i jej portret w greckiej literaturze dziecięcej

### Abstrakt:

W greckiej literaturze dziecięcej niewiele książek traktuje o dzieciach romskich, zwłaszcza w roli protagonisty – dlatego też celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie literackich przedstawień takich dzieci. Cztery książki przedstawione w tym tekście pomagają najmłodszym czytelnikom zrozumieć, jak bardzo marginalizowana jest ta grupa społeczna w kontekście społeczeństwa greckiego. Przyjmując podstawowe zasady literatury wielokulturowej, a także metodę imagologii czy też ikonologii kulturowej, można stwierdzić, że rzeczywiste uprzedzenia i stereotypy są projektowane poprzez bohaterów literackich. Ponadto w omawianych utworach zostaje ukazane nieustanne prześladowanie Romów, włączając w to ich ludobójstwo w czasie II wojny światowej. Analizowane książki pod względem ideologicznym są życzliwe wobec dzieci romskich, choć rasistowskie i podejrzliwe nastawienie nie-Romów nie jest w żaden sposób przemilczane czy ukrywane. Autorki artykułu dochodzą do wniosku, że w greckiej i europejskiej literaturze dziecięcej brakuje autentycznych portretów Romów i autentycznych głosów romskich pisarzy.

### Słowa kluczowe:

Angeliki Darlasi, autentyczna wielokulturowa literatura dziecięca, ludobójstwo, Maroula Kliafa, Philip Mandilaras, Pitsa Sotirakou, romskie dzieci w Grecji, rasizm, stereotypy

## Introduction

Although the Roma people are a minority group that has lived alongside the Greeks for centuries, their integration into Greek society has not been achieved, despite many educational programs and integration policies (Basketry Museum of the Roma, n.d.; i-RED: Institute for Rights Equality and Diversity, n.d.; National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, n.d.). An obvious example of this is the commonplace use of stereotypical names that carry a derogatory meaning. One such name is *tsinganoi*<sup>1</sup>/*tziganes*, a generalised term that totally ignores the different origins of Greek Roma. Another is *giftoi*, a politically incorrect term that non-Roma often use as a swear word (Gotovos, 2004; Sarantakos, 2013). Those two symbolic and stereotypical depictions, however abstract, are present in adult literature. In Greek folk songs, Roma are carriers of magic and

<sup>1</sup> The word *tsinganos* (plural *tsinganoi*) comes from Byzantine Greek *τσιγγάνος*. Also see the Italian *zingano*, German *zigeuner*, or Polish *cygan*.

evil, probably because, according to popular tradition, they manufactured the nails with which Jesus Christ was crucified. Another equally stereotypical depiction of Roma characters in literature has to do with Roma seen as nature lovers as well as a symbols of disobedience and anarchy due to their vagrant way of life. This is how a Roma character is portrayed in the most important work of our – Greek – national poet, Kostis Palamas, *The Twelve Lays of the Gipsy* (1906).

To study the depiction of Roma children in Greek children's literature we have used four books: a novella accompanied by an informational text by Maroula Kliafa, a novel by Pitsa Sotirakou, a collection of literary stories from Romani history by Philip Mandilaras, and an illustrated book by Angeliki Darlasi. It should be noted that very few books in (not only) Greek children's literature deal with the Roma people, especially in a protagonist role. The methodological framework of this study draws upon the following principles of multicultural children's literature: Mingshui Cai's (2002) critical reflections on such writings, Hazel Rochman's (1993) "across cultures, against borders" concept, Maria José Botelho's and Masha Kabakow Rudman's (2009) "critical multicultural analysis,"<sup>2</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop's (1987, 1997) postulate of "authenticity" in literature, and Harris Violet's (1997) notion of "culturally conscious" literature. In our approach, we have also applied the method of Joep Leerssen's imagology, including his analysis of the discursive articulations of group characteristics, and Frangiski Abatzopoulou's cultural iconology. According to Leerssen (2016), imagology is a working method in the humanities, which seeks to understand the representational set of cultural and poetic conventions or, as John Stephens (2011) puts it, "imagology is concerned with representations as textual strategies and not as sociological data" (p. vi). Leerssen's typology includes three aspects of group characterisation: intertextual, contextual, and textual. In Greek imagology research, Abatzopoulou's 1998 *O állos en diōgmó* [The Persecution of the Other] studies the Others, mostly represented by Jews, and the way they are portrayed in literature. Her method of analysis (cultural iconology) focuses on three specific aspects: 1) the words that are used to describe the Other in a literary text, 2) the way relationships are prioritised (motifs and textual structure, e.g. the environment the Other moves in, the selection of gender and the age of the Other), 3) the story's scenario, if and how much it is based on cultural myths or stereotypical depictions of the Other.

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<sup>2</sup> Their critical multicultural analysis utilises literacy for: 1) reading the discourses that have created us, 2) aligning ourselves with subjectivities (ways of being in the world) and discourses that will mobilise us towards democratic participation in society (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 65).

*O kósmos variétai na diavázei thliverés istoríes* [The World Is Sick of Reading Sad Stories] by Maroula Kliafa and *To phoustáni tēs Kleopátras* [Kleopatra's Dress] by Pitsa Sotirakou

The first two books are Maroula Kliafa's 1993 *O kósmos variétai na diavázei thliverés istoríes* [The World Is Sick of Reading Sad Stories] and Pitsa Sotirakou's 1996 *To phoustáni tēs Kleopátras* [Kleopatra's Dress]. Both stories are set in the modern day and their central characters are Roma children who wander (either alone or with a Roma friend) through the streets of Greek cities. Written in the first person, the stories are told from a Roma child's point of view. Their ideological stance is a friendly one towards Roma children, even though the racist and suspicious attitudes of non-Roma are not in any way glossed over or concealed. Both books present narrative, literary, and sociological interest to the reader. As similar as they are, they also differ.

Kliafa's book is divided into two parts. The first part is a novella. Elpida, a little Roma girl, tells the story in first person, describing her everyday life, her fight for survival, and her feelings, initially positive and then negative, about the first Romani school that has opened next to the camp in which she lives. In the second part of the book, we read about the actual events that occurred, with documented proof, newspaper clippings, and other news items as well as pictures of the opening of the school for Roma children (in the Trikala region) and its destruction by the residents of the area. This part seems to have a purely informational character. Therefore, the story is told from two perspectives: that of the subjective literary character and that of the objective observer who recounts real events with a reporter's eye.

In Sotirakou's novel, the main character is a Roma boy. He lives in a man's world: he smokes cigarettes, steals, drives a car without a license, gets into fights, lies, and swindles non-Roma for money. Reading first-person narration, we perceive the world through the little boy's eyes. We witness his reactions to the offensive behaviour of non-Roma and see that although sometimes he finds fault with his own people, he is always proud of them.

By applying the cultural iconology method through the use of examples, we can take a closer look at how those three aforementioned aspects of a narrative are echoed in the text (Abatzopoulou, 1998, pp. 253–254). Let us consider the following words used to characterise the Roma child and the Roma people:

- Can you fill up our thermos with water, uncle?
- Get lost, damn Gypsies. Go away, now.
- Just some water, uncle, bless you. We're only asking for water. We'll die of thirst.

– I don't care if you burst open. Get lost. Go away, you filthy Gypsies (Sotirakou, 1996, p. 26).<sup>3</sup>

And:

I'm thinking about the dream. I was in town. Everything was quiet. Suddenly two dogs dashed out in front to me. They started chasing me. Then came the people. I was happy. They'll save me, I thought. I stopped and waited. The dogs stopped, too. They were growling and I could see their teeth. 'Get the dogs,' I shouted. The people shook their heads. They knelt and picked up some stones. They started throwing them. Not at the dogs. At me. 'Scoot,' they shouted. 'We don't want you. Go away!' (Kliafa, 1993, p. 37).

The vocabulary being used is typical of the hostile way a non-Roma speaks to Roma. The second excerpt shows us how this type of behaviour has been absorbed in the subconscious mind of the Roma people. The offensive language and the downright rejection that the Roma experience serve to awaken the reader to the type of racism that other groups living right alongside them experience on the fringes of Greek society.

As to the question of how relationships are prioritised or what literary choices are made regarding the gender and age of the literary Others (Abatzopoulou, 1998, pp. 254–256), we will take a closer look at how childhood of the two protagonists is depicted. Valanti in *Cleopatra's Dress* is a young boy who breaks the law, something which is totally reprehensible to non-Roma. For Greek Roma, though, this is the typical way their children are raised in order to survive in their childhood years. Valanti is too 'old' for his age, something he has no control over because of the poor conditions he and his fellow Roma face. Elpida from *The World Is Sick of Reading Sad Stories* has also grown up too fast. Even though she is just a child, she wanders through her days begging. The basic right to an education is taken away from her after the makeshift Romani school is destroyed. The opportunities for Greek Roma to attend school exist, but many difficulties remain. As William New and Michael Merry (2012) remark: "The psychological consequences of stigmatization for youth are many, but all converge in decreasing material opportunities to learn, and further, disincline stigmatized Romani students to engage in school learning even when it is available" (p. 636). Dimitris Zachos (2017) completes the above view by saying: "Roma are viewed as an insubordinate

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<sup>3</sup> All translations, if not indicated otherwise, are made by the authors of the paper – Meni Kanatsouli and Rosy-Triantafyllia Angelaki

'race,' the members of which, free of commitments and conventions, fail to adjust to institutions and activities that require a minimal amount of discipline and focus. Even educated Greeks [...] tend to believe that Romani children are less educable" (p. 1667).

Even though both children, Valanti and Elpida, break the law and are denied their childhood years, this does not mean that all Roma communities have similar experiences and should be viewed as a homogeneous group composed of stereotypical law-breakers. There are gender, financial, and social differences that should not be overlooked; in Leerssen's (2016) threefold analysis, the context refers to "the historical, political, and social conditions within which a given ethnotype is brought forward" (p. 20). For instance, today's Roma either hold on entirely to their cultural traditions (their manner of dress, the nomadic way of life, travelling in wagons), or seem to have been urbanised. Many of them have given up their nomadic way of life and wish to settle in one place permanently (Lydaki, 2000). Also, in Greece, Roma women experience gender-based discrimination not only in Greek society but also within their communities. As a general rule, girls are confined to the house and are not expected to attend school or to seek employment (Makris, 2015, p. 9). Leerssen's (2016, p. 21) imagology can also address the interaction between social or political realities and literature (while his textual analysis is the actual study of the text itself and can reveal, for example, which genre-conventions govern the text in question). In this respect, Elpida, being a girl, stereotypically wants more than anything to get married, while Valanti has a different moral code and only cares about working hard just about anywhere, under any conditions, so as to raise enough money to get his mother out of jail.

As for the scenario (Abatzopoulou, 1998, pp. 256–258) and how much it is based on cultural myths or stereotypical representations of the Other, it is obvious that both books, to a degree, realistically project stereotypes and prejudices on both sides, as well as depict the harsh realities of the incompatible cohabitation of Greek Roma and non-Roma. As Jan Yoors claims:

By force of adverse circumstances some Gypsies are forced to practice subsistence thieving – that is, taking their minimal daily needs from the land or its lawful owners [...]. As with all legends, that of the Gypsies as thieves has been exaggerated. If they were guilty of all the thefts blamed on them, they would have to travel with moving vans or settle down under the weight of their possessions (as cited in Stevens, 1974, p. 15).

Since both books address children, they have the didactic importance. They aim at cultivating the principles of multicultural literature whose goal is to promote respect and mutual understanding among different national, religious, social, and other groups. According to Deborah Dietrich and Kathleen Ralph (1995), “[w]hen multicultural literature becomes an integral part of the curriculum [...], classrooms can become arenas for open exchange. Literature and the ensuing discussion permit students to read, think, and become actively engaged with the texts. As a consequence, it should be easier for students to cross cultural borders” (p. 1).

In trying to view Greek Roma society in a positive light, both authors are in effect addressing their young non-Roma readers. Their goal is to find ways to present the oral Romani culture in all its contrasts and peculiarities to modern-day society. In so doing, they inevitably create enchanting, exotic literature that sheds light, through exaggeration, on the cultural peculiarities of the Roma people. In *Kleopatra's Dress*, we read:

Granny's dress [...] is a secret hiding place, a nest, a storeroom, it can turn into anything you can imagine. And methinks she sews her dresses like this on purpose – she makes her own clothes – so that they can hold everything, from Nargis<sup>4</sup> to chickens and cauliflowers from the open market. Never mind that she can use them to fan the flames when she lights a fire! When she does this, we can see her red underpants – she still wears red underpants, my granny (Sotirakou, 1996, p. 19).

Their colorful dresses, their bloomers, and their jangling bracelets are typical items in the physical portrayal of Roma women who, in literature and cinema alike, represent a happy, adventurous nomadic way of life that is free and seductively alluring.

### *O megálos ískios kai oi Tsingánoi* [The Big Shadow and the Gypsies] by Philip Mandilaras

The third book is different from the other two. *O megálos ískios kai oi Tsingánoi* [The Big Shadow and the Gypsies] by Philip Mandilaras (1999) is made up of two parts. The second, much shorter part, recounts the history of the Roma people as they left India from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century and their migration to various parts of the world – it is a history of nomadic people and their

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<sup>4</sup> Famous Indian film actress.



persecution. The book recounts their history as thoroughly as possible based on a limited amount of written information. There are two chronological tables: the first contains historical information about migration, persecution, etc. of the Roma people, and the other the titles of Romani tales that are chronologically related to events in Romani history.

The first, extensive part of the book consists of 12 independent narratives with fictional characters who lived in different periods. The narratives recount events that we know about from the history of the Roma people, their expulsion, and their way of life. For example, there is the mediaeval legend of the Gypsy Morgana who twice saved the life of the king of Scotland, Jacob, using her herbs. Thanks to her, Roma were allowed to live undisturbed in the land. We also read about the great violinist Yiotzi the musician Franz Liszt wanted to appoint his principal violinist, but who refused the offer as he could not live with the limitations of this kind of life. There is also the story of little Rosa who during the Nazi period was sent to a concentration camp but through sheer luck, thanks to a lizard,<sup>5</sup> was able – as the only one of her family – to escape death.

The literary representations of Roma in this book are rather exotic. They positively reproduce certain stereotypical perceptions about Roma: they are taught to live freely, both men and women are seductive – the women thanks to their beauty and the men thanks to their music, and they have secret and magical charms. As Gail Kligman (2001) argues: “Gypsies or Roma [...] are simultaneously among history’s most romanticized and reviled of peoples. Stereotypically racialized and eroticized as ‘other’ wherever they are located, Roma, whether male or female, young or old, are both seductive and feared” (p. 62). Laura Laurušaitė (2018, p. 13) concurs that various prefabricated images generalising (exaggerating or simplifying) certain aspects of people – cliché, prejudice, stereotype – are like ready-made mental items providing a framework for our perception of the Other. In *The Big Shadow and the Gypsies*, despite the stereotypical images which, to some extent, correspond to some aspects of reality, the stories are well-written, colourful as fairy tales, and appeal to the reader’s emotions. Above all, however, they give the reader a broad view of the Roma culture in Europe.

### *Apó makriá* [From Afar] by Angeliki Darlasi

Angeliki Darlasi’s 2021 book *Apó makriá* [From Afar], which is illustrated by Vasilis Koutsogiannis, differs in many ways from the other Greek children’s

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<sup>5</sup> Tiny lizards in Greece, and especially in Crete, are considered to bring good luck.



books about Romani children. Text and illustrations complement each other in a double modality.

Thematically, the book deals with a very real and current problem in Greece today, the verbal and physical bullying of children of different ethnic groups. The young heroine, accompanied by other people of the same ethnicity, arrives in a provincial town. Right from the start, she draws the attention of the other children because she looks different. She speaks a different language and dresses oddly. They begin to treat her as a plaything: they blindfold her and treat her like a showpiece they cart around the town. This lasts until one day she enchants them with her native song and lures them to the funfair where they all get on the merry-go-round.

The book reproduces two different ideologies concerning the Roma people. The first one presents the Otherness as being exotic and enticing to the children from a different cultural background, while the other one views the Otherness with suspicion. Roma are people who break the law and prey on others and so should be kept 'afar,' as the title of the book indicates. This is an often-repeated stereotypical portrayal of Roma in Greek society. The outcome is a type of racism whereby Roma are presented as being both victimisers and victims. At this point, it is worth mentioning Hugo Dyserinck's (2003) opinion that "images and imagotypical structures manage to stay alive for generations by their very consistency and resistance. And above all, we could not forget the fact that those images, by their sheer existence, nurtured up to the present day, either directly or indirectly, [...] irrational and wrong ideas" (p. 6).

The central character embodies two ideological stances. The name Ali, when misspelled, means 'the Other' in Greek. She also represents the exotic, as her name is reminiscent of the fairy tale *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. The exotic element, on the one hand, and the cultural Otherness, on the other, give rise to racism as witnessed in the way that the Roma people are portrayed, especially through the personage of Ali. The text has no didactic purpose and claims are implied rather than outwardly stated. The book's illustrations function in a similar way. Like the text, they also capture the exotic element with the help of the setting and time. Everything happens one night at the funfair where the merry-go-round's lights and the shiny beads on Ali's red dress create a magical, fairy-tale-like atmosphere. The black or dark blue backdrop against a brightly lit surface (Figure 1) is impressive and done in a Fellini-like manner, nostalgically reminiscent of *Amarcord* or *Nights of Cabiria* (Cramp, 2020).

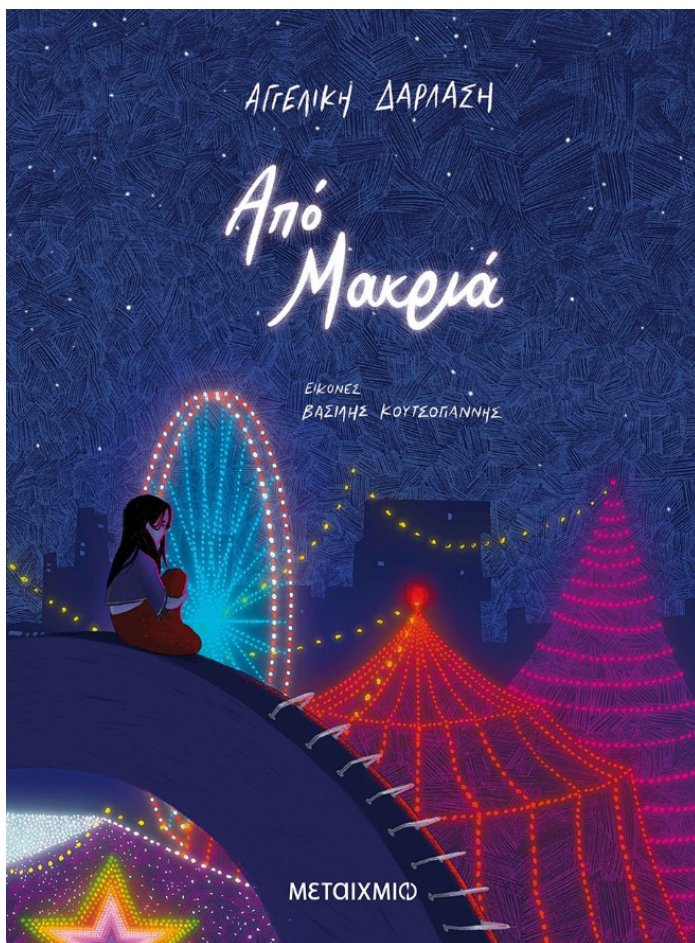


FIGURE 1. *Από μακριά* [From Afar] (2021) – cover

What Darlasi omits in the literary text is said in the illustrations and in a peritextual note at the end where she reveals how she came up with the idea for her book. On the right page of the two-page illustrations, there are small shadows of adults who remain hostile towards Ali throughout the whole book. On the left page (Figure 2), there are huge shadows wearing swastika arm bands, thus shedding some light on this dark time in history. The book also deals with the very current and much discussed in children's literature theme of bullying, but a particular focus is on the perpetual persecution of Roma during the Second World War, known as Porajmos (Genocide of European Roma, n.d.).

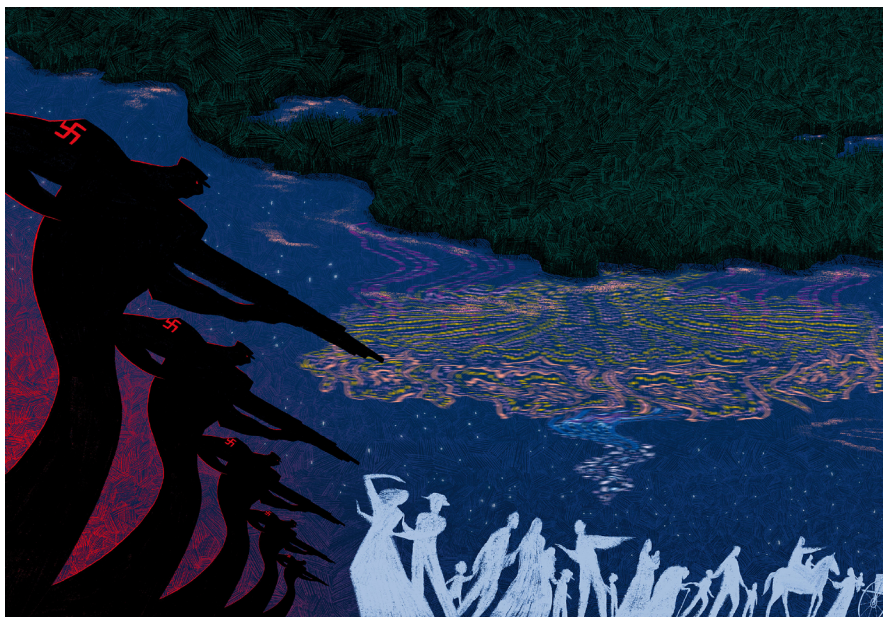


FIGURE 2. Illustration from *Apó makriá* [From Afar] (2021)<sup>6</sup>

*From Afar* deals sensitively and compassionately with both Ali and the other, non-Roma children. Nevertheless, this book was written and illustrated by a non-Roma and, however enlightening it may be, we still know very little about Roma culture and even less about their mentality. Katerina Taikon, a Swedish Roma writer and activist (Famous Gypsies, n.d.), wrote thirteen children's books known as the *Katitzi* series (1969–1980), inspired by her traumatic childhood. Greek children's literature does not have anything similar. As far as we know, neither does the rest of Europe.<sup>7</sup> As Olle Widhe (2021) points out: “Taikon’s child-hero and alter ego, Katitzi, belongs to the most iconic and beloved characters in Swedish children’s literature,” and she gives “voice to a previously ‘voiceless’ and ‘subaltern’ position from a community historically not authorized to speak” (p. 59–60).

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<sup>6</sup> Copyrighted material of the book *From Afar* written by Angeliki Darlasi and illustrated by Vassilis Koutsogiannis published by Metaichmio Publishing, Greece, [www.metaixmio.gr](http://www.metaixmio.gr) (retrieved July 6, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Some Romani works, either monolingual or bilingual (written in Romani or in the language of the majority in the country of publication), have been released under various circumstances. For more information visit Sofiya Zahova’s website *Children’s Literature – RomArchive* (<https://www.romarchive.eu/en/literature/childrens-literature/childrens-literature/>; retrieved December 15, 2021).

## Conclusions

All four books are written by non-Roma authors whose point of view is, despite their good intentions, inevitably that of an outsider unassimilated into Romani culture. Greek Roma writers possibly do not exist and thus cannot provide us with an authentic inside look at their ethnicity and culture.

The authors, despite their sincere intentions to respect the Otherness of the Roma people and to create interesting stories, do not project the authentic way the Romani people think. According to Cai (2002), “cultural authenticity is the basic criterion for evaluating multicultural literature. The purpose of authentic multicultural literature is to help liberate us from all the preconceived stereotypical hang-ups that imprison us within narrow boundaries” (p. 38).

In Greek children's literature, the world of Roma and the world of non-Roma, are completely separate. The boundaries between the two are clear and do not allow one group to share their lives with the other. Cai (2002, p. 118) says that there are three types of borders: physical, cultural, and inner. The inner border exists in our minds. It can be marked by feelings such as fears, bias, or prejudice. We still have not managed to eradicate these inner borders, since reality and the social differences prevalent in Greek society come before literary depiction. Although Greek children's books reflect some aspects of the reality of the Roma people and do adopt a sympathetic stance towards them, that is about as far as it goes. If we view multiculturalism as a life position and everyday practice of reaching out, then it should be noted that Greek children's literature takes a one-sided approach to the Roma people and culture. Thus, we have to agree with Rachel Dean-Ruzicka (2014), who states that “acknowledging the value of human life in the abstract merely serves to instill a normative version of what a life is. If we do not allow for the particularities of human experience, it is all too easy to elide marginalised groups and the practices that lend their lives significance” (p. 214). Representations of often-elided Others reveal an underlying problem in multicultural educational practices: not only “how to include more people within existing norms”, but also “consider how existing norms allocate recognition differently” (Butler, 2010, pp. 5–6).

Even though Greek writers and illustrators may be making progress by dealing with sensitive thematic matter, it is necessary that a voice be given or, better still, be created for authors that represent multicultural minorities from within and not ‘from afar.’



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