

The Roma Woman: From Stigmatization to Affirmation Stories About the Struggle to Exist Throughout History

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Romani *Phen*

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1. Introduction

We are in the year 2021. I have been invited to a TV show about minorities broadcasted on the national television station to present the Roma Women Empowered project carried out on the occasion of International Women's Day, by the Foundation where I work. I am in the studio with one of the Roma women, the protagonists of this project. The moderator introduces us to the audience: "Here are two beautiful ladies who belong to the Roma ethnic group, but neither of them betrays the fact that they belong to this ethnic group." The moderator's remark, made of course with the best intentions, made me ask myself some questions regarding the image of the Roma woman in the Roma and non-Roma collective imaginary. Especially since this is not the first time I have heard such a remark from the people I interact with, be they Roma or non-Roma.

What and how much do we know about Roma women and Roma in general and what are our sources of information when it comes to Roma culture or their way of life? What kind of representations of the Roma woman do we find in the public space? What images automatically come to mind when we think of the Roma woman? Are we thinking about the so-called "fiery gypsy" as described by Bogdal[1]? Are we thinking of a woman in a vulnerable and marginalized position living on the verge of poverty and crime? Are we thinking of an uneducated and primitive woman, a victim of a patriarchal society within which she has no right to express her own views? Or maybe we're thinking about early marriages?

My research aims to investigate how this contradictory image of the Roma woman was built and if these images reflect the identity of the Roma woman, or rather a false image based on a perception that has been generated, mostly, by people who are not part of the Roma community? Moreover, I will discuss the impact of these representations on the identity of Roma women and how they affect their relationships with others and society's perception of them.

At the same time, I will present other perspectives of Roma women that do not fit into the figure of the Gypsy as she is perceived in the collective mind, contributing to the building of a balanced image that actual Roma women identify with and which resonates with them.

In the first part of the paper, I will analyze figures of Roma women in Romanian literature, taking as a case study several writings dealing with the period of Roma slavery in the Romanian Lands. Then, I will stay in the slavery period and present a few cases, extracted from archives about Roma women who, although they were slaves, fought for their freedom and the freedom of their children. I will present these cases in order to offer a different perspective on the image of the Roma woman and to deconstruct the literary discourse that presents her in the position of a victim without agency or in a romantic and passionate hypostasis.

In the second part of the paper, I will refer in particular to the image of the Roma woman from the contemporary period, analyzing cases from the media or contemporary literature which are perpetuated and still spread a distorted image of the Roma woman, such as the Gypsy Heart series, for example. But I will continue to present stories of invisible Roma women who do not fit into these prototypes and who fight daily to succeed in being themselves in a world that still frames them using externally imposed patterns.

2. The Roma Woman in the Collective Imaginary: A Short Introduction

Roma have lived among the majority for centuries, but continue to be underrepresented in the public sphere, remaining superficially understood and, in large part, invented according to the imagination and stereotypes about the Other. They still represent that “inner stranger” as Simmel describes in his article “The Stranger [Exkurs über den Fremden]”: being far and near at the same time.[2]

Besides, if we look at the image of the Roma throughout history in Europe—for example, in literature, painting, and the media—we can easily see a contradictory image of the Roma people. On one hand, they are presented as marginalized, extremely poor, vagrants, or uncivilized criminals. On the other hand, they are presented as bohemians, romantic and free. As Jean-Pierre Liegeois, affirms in his book, *Roma in Europe*, “the least negative attitude towards Roma was that of romantic sympathy influenced by folklore, but as soon as an opportunity arises, the most negative aspects of the Roma image are reactivated.”[3] Bogdal also states that the notion of Roma people was for the most part invented by modern Europe and represented by distorted images: “Roma are represented in Europe through stereotypes, behavioral patterns and legends developed during the transition period from the Middle Ages to the Modern period.”[4]

Concerning the Roma woman image in European literature, we find her in numerous literary works. I mention here particularly notable representations of Roma Women in well-known classics: the short story “La Gitanilla” by Miguel de Cervantes, the short story “Carmen” by Prosper Mérimée and adapted by Georges Bizet into the eponymous opera, the novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo, and the Russian poem “Gypsies” by A.S. Pushkin.

In all these literary works, the Roma women are represented simultaneously as the poor victim and the so-called “fiery gypsy” as described by Bogdal[5]. We find this woman's contradictory prototype in characters such as Zemfira from the poem “Gypsies” by Pushkin or Carmen from the well-known opera of Bizet, or even Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by Victor Hugo.

We also find the same stereotypical representation of the Roma in the European fine arts, if you look carefully at classic images presenting Roma people. Some examples include *The Fortune-teller* by Caravaggio painted between 1595-1598, or *La Zingarella*, painted by Correggio in 1515-1516.

Also, in cinema, we find a marginalized but, at the same time, exoticized image of the Roma. For example: *The Time of Gypsies* (1988) and *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998) by Serbian director Emir Kusturica or *I Met Happy Gypsies* directed by Aleksander Petrovic in 1967, or the classic *Şatra* (Queen of the Gypsies)—a Soviet film about Roma by the Moldovan director Emil Loteanu, in 1975, based on writings by Maxim Gorki.

Regarding the image of the Roma in Romania, it is not very different from the European one. The presence of Roma in the Romanian space goes back centuries, but Romanian society seems to know very little about them. The first documented attestation of Roma in the Romanian space is made in 1385 when Dan I of Wallachia donates 40 gypsy families to the Tismana Monastery.[6] The liberation of the

Roma takes place in 1856, so we can speak of a period of 500 years in which the Roma were enslaved in this space. But what is known in the public sphere about this period by Roma and non-Roma?

Roma history has been recorded and interpreted not by those who lived it, but by those who were its spectators. Those who were attracted to writing about the Roma often did so because of the Roma exoticism. Thus, while the Roma are mentioned by foreign travelers and various chroniclers, for a long period, the Roma did not have the opportunity to represent themselves.

3. Abolitionist Literature: A Case Study

It is through literature that we are able to know about the slavery period, having it in the public conscious for a long time. Nevertheless, it has almost exclusively been written from a perspective external to the Roma community. Most of the literary texts on slavery were written by the boyars of the time—i.e., by the “masters” of the slaves—who presented a romantic perspective on Roma slavery and implicitly on the Roma woman of that period.

In the following section, I will do a brief analysis of the image of the Roma woman from the slavery period, as it is presented in some of the most important and well-known literary works that deal with this subject. These include the poem by Cezar Bolliac “The Boyar Girl and the Gypsy Girl” (1843), Radu Rosetti's texts: “Păcatele Sulgeriului”(1924), or “Tigăncușa de Iatac” (1921), or the Gheorghe Sion story “Emanciparea Tiganilor” [“The Emancipation of the Gypsies”] (1888) from his book “Suvenire Contimpurane.”

Considering the time of their publication, some of these writings are part of the abolitionist literature that presents negative experiences of slaves as well as their desire for liberation, trying to cast them in a favorable light.

Therefore, these texts aim to convey a positive message and are written by boyars and intellectuals of the time who supported the abolition of slavery and the rights and freedoms of slaves. Some of them had even released their slaves without compensation[7]. But these Romanian boyars had not yet moved away from a colonial mentality, because they make part of boyar families who had Roma slaves, as we can see in their writings. They position themselves, probably unintentionally, within the perspective of the master—merciful, but remaining in a superior position—and present the Roma and especially the Roma women as victims who cannot, or simply do not want, to oppose the master. An example of this figure is Maria, a character from “Emanciparea Tiganilor” who knows her place and her condition as a slave. When Madam Profirita discovers Maria's love affair with the boyar and marries her to the old coachman, Maria does not mount any resistance, even if she was in love with the boyar.

Maria, who traditionally knew that God made misery, deprivation, and suffering only for the gypsies, comparing herself to others, acknowledged that she was not on the last step of wickedness. Despite all the mistakes she felt she had made, she still saw that she enjoyed the mercy of her masters for whom she did not know how to thank God.[8]

In the case of Catinca, Ion Tiron's wife, from “Pacatele Slugerului”, we see the same situation of the slave who is reconciled with her condition of ownership by the boyar and does not even raise the issue of opposing such a relationship even though she is married and loves her husband. We see the same lack of reaction in the case of her husband. Even if he were jealous of what was happening between his wife and the boyar, “the thought of revolting against his master [...] remains a stranger to him”[9].

Also, this type of relationship between the boyar and his slaves is not always presented in a completely negative light. In fact, the authors also find explanations for the boyars' behavior, excusing the facts and presenting the economic and social advantages that the slaves and their families enjoy as a result of having extramarital relations with the boyars.

For example, Anica from Radu Rosetti's story, "Tigancusa de Ietac", who, even if "she knew what job she was going to do next to boyar", she was satisfied and it didn't even cross her mind to revolt. Anica's parents were also overjoyed to hear such news: "Anica's mother and her husband could not be happier"[10]. They rejoice because they knew that Anica will get out of doing hard work and will receive privileged treatment.

Maria from the G. Sion story received a letter of liberation from the boyar after her affair with him, and mother Irina from "Pacatele Sulgeriului" explained to Ion, whose wife was in a relationship with the boyar, that such a situation could be beneficial for a slave and could help him to develop economically and socially, and even to achieve the much-desired liberation.

As for an explanation of the boyars' attitudes on having relations with Roma slaves, Radu Rosetti in the short story "Tigancusa de Ietac" tells us that, "because of the morality of the time, the boyars were forced to look for tools of pleasure in the people below, especially among the many gypsy slaves filling their yards." [11]

But with all the explanations and the positive aspects, these relationships often have a tragic end for the slaves in question. For example, Anica commits suicide when she is left by the young boyar, Vasile, with whom she is in love, and Maria from "Suvenire Contimpurane" receives a letter of liberation in vain because she can't actually use it. Maria's son commits suicide and he also kills the woman with whom he was in love, not being released from captivity by Profirita, his mistress and the wife of the deceased boyar with whom Maria had had a child.

Another victim of slavery is the character in the poem "The Boyar Girl and the Gypsy Girl", written by Cezar Bolliac, one of the abolitionist writers of the time. Trying to sensitize the boyars and especially the young boyars' women about the status of slaves, Cezar Bolliac draws a contrasting parallel between the experiences and the way of life of a slave and a boyar girl. Bolliac highlights the deprivations of slave women in contrast to the advantages and opportunities of free women. While free women enjoy love, family, travel, and a life of comfort, the slave women experience only a lack of love and insecurity of tomorrow. They don't even have the right to start a family. Even if the character in Cezar Bolliac's poetry mourns her fate and verbalizes her anger concerning her status, she does not go any further and does not react to free herself from the condition of slavery under which she suffers. Moreover, it seems that she has no tools at hand to do this—she is still at the mercy of her masters.

Furthering the analysis by looking at the physical features of these women, we can easily observe the stereotypical discourse used by Romanian authors. All the characters, no matter how unhappy, are portrayed as the object of male sexual desire, with anti-bourgeois behavior, "natural" femininity, dangerous savagery, and promiscuity mixed with a kind of primitivism. When G. Sion describes Maria, he takes care to mention that she had the features of a "true gypsy beauty". [12] Even Caesar Bolliac's "gypsy", no matter how unhappy, is first of all praised for her physical beauty, and then the author discusses the suffering she endures secondarily [13].

Therefore, from all these writings emerges the prototype of the victim who does not have the power to choose or react in any way to the injustices she suffers, leading, in most cases, to part of a tragic end.

4. About Anonymous Heroines: Another Perspective on the Enslaved Roma Woman

But do these depictions/writings reflect the true image of the Roma woman? Do they fully correspond to the reality of those times? Or is it a perspective predominantly imposed by the dominant culture alongside which she lives? In this section, I will present another perspective on the Roma woman and I will demonstrate that Roma women, despite the persecution they suffered, refused to be relegated to a passive role. Starting from the case of Ioana Rudareasa[14]— who fought for nine years for her freedom and her children's freedom—in the following I will discuss the cases of three more Roma women slaves who find the power to fight for their freedom and the freedom of their children.

The first woman is Maria[15], who, being a slave belonging to the state, was freed in 1843. But since she is married to a slave of the Bistrita monastery, the monastery does not want to recognize Maria's status as a free woman, nor that of her four daughters[16]. But Maria does not give up and goes on to file a complaint stating that she and her daughters possess the right to freedom because the law is on their side[17]. Thus, Maria's case comes before the Logofetia Pricinilor Bisericessti where the Minister of Finance, Iancu Filipescu, argues for Maria's right to freedom and that of her daughters, asserting that the state has already determined her freedom through the 1843 law of liberation of state slaves, and that the church is now in breach of the law. Happily, Maria's efforts are not in vain and her case ends well. But not all cases end in this way. For example, in the case of Bucura[18], the state slave who accidentally ended up serving the boyar Pavlache, the process remains unfinished and Bucura and her husband give up on their trial in the end, remaining enslaved.

The story of Bucura is as follows: She is a slave who belongs to the Royal Court from Germany and she was brought by boyar Nicolae Bazoeanu as a nanny for his children. But meanwhile, she lives with a slave who belongs to sardar Pavacle. Because of this, Bucura remains a slave of the boyar Pavacle even after 1843 when the liberation of the royal slaves took place. After the death of the boyar Pavacle, in 1846, she claims her status as a free woman, demonstrating that she was a slave belonging to the Royal Court and demands her liberation and that of her children—a boy and four girls. She mentions that she would prefer to pay tribute, as her brothers and cousins do, just to be free, especially since she is unlawfully enslaved. Furthermore, in her complaint, she mentions her husband, Nita Jugureanu, who is ruman[19] and unjustly enslaved. Bucura's and her husband's complaint is registered, and the court says that it will investigate the case, applying the legislation in force. But soon thereafter, Bucura and her husband send in another document withdrawing their initial complaint. Unfortunately, in the archive documents, the story of Bucura stops there and I never found out what factor(s) determined her not continuing her trial for liberation. However, I considered it necessary to present the case of this woman to prove that the slaves were not only passive victims, but that there were also cases in which they took a stand against enduring suffering. As Bucura points out, she would rather pay tribute than be a slave, a testament to how slavery was the most undesirable condition imaginable.

Another case worth mentioning to show that these women were not mere spectators of their lives—even if they were slaves and did not even have the right to have a family or a free marriage—is that of Paraschiva[20]. In 1848, according to the law of the liberation of monastic slaves, Paraschiva claims her liberation, showing that she is unlawfully enslaved by the clucer[21] Preda Savulescu, because her mother had been a slave to the monastery of Saint John of Focsani, but is now free. Paraschiva is now a

slave of the boyar Preda Savulescu, because after the death of her father, her mother re-married to a slave of the boyar Barbu Catargiu who later became a slave of the boyar Savulescu. The last one extended slave status to Paraschiva, even if, according to the legislation in force at that time, she was a legally free woman due to her mother being a woman freed from slavery.

I have presented these cases to demonstrate that Roma women—despite the oppression they suffered throughout history and their status as slaves without any rights—hadn't just remained “passive objects” and “poor victims” as depicted in literature. I also intend to reduce the gap in existing knowledge and restore Roma voices in 19th-century debates concerning the adoption of emancipation laws.

5. Roma Women Nowadays

Unfortunately, these stories about Roma women who fought for their freedom are not very well-known in Romanian historiography and Romanian society and have remained largely unexplored. The Roma women's struggle in resisting enslavement has not been preserved, but instead the descriptions of Roma women encouraging erotic fantasies about them continue to be perpetuated in Romanian society.

Thus, in the second half of the 19th century, in the works of famous painters such as Theodor Aman, Nicolae Grigorescu, or Ludovic Basarab and in the views from the beginning of the 20th century, we find Roma women in very exoticized and eroticized hypostases. I am referring to these famous works: Tiganca from Ghergheni, by Nicolae Grigorescu, Safta Florareasa by Stefan Luchian or Tiganca cu carti de joc by Octav Bancila. Furthermore, these paintings can still be found in national museums accompanied by descriptions such as the one below:

The painting presents a young Roma woman with a vigorous and optimistic expression. It is highlighted her insolent posture in line with her negligent attire. A white shirt rolled up at the sleeves and unbuttoned at the chest covers the young, robust bust with the shiny skin. The facial expression is playful, the attitude daring, expressing a kind of virginal, proud naughtiness, to which the expression of the crossed hands on the chest contributes. At the neck of the girl, under the bright yellow shawl that covers the head, there is a gold necklace, contrasting with the modest outfit of the young woman. Her head, slightly tilted to the left, seems to launch an invitation to the viewer, fixed by the penetrating gaze that the girl throws at us. The light is intensified on the face and bust, strongly revealing their materiality[22].

As we can observe, there is no critique of the exoticism of the painting or about the position of superiority from which the Roma are viewed and represented in Romanian society. We don't find in this description any information about the sexual objectification of Roma women by the Romanian painters. Nor is it mentioned anywhere that this painting is a stereotypical image of the Roma, a gaze that belongs to the dominant culture within which the Roma live, thus not representing an authentic Roma perspective. This exemplifies how Roma women and Roma people in general continue to be represented in a distorted way in Romanian cultural public spaces. We still do not have balanced images of the Roma or works of art by the Roma contemporary artists in the national museums of Romania.

This type of representation of the Roma woman is frequently found in literary works written during the 20th century. Some examples include the poem "Tigani" by George Coșbuc, Mihail Sadoveanu, "Fântâna dintre plopi" from the frame story "Hanul Ancuței", George M. Zamfirescu, the novel Maidanul cu dragoste, the Poem "Rada" by Tudor Arghezi or the novel Ambigen by Octav Șuluțiu, or even the novel Șatra, by Zaharia Stancu, or the short story "Sakuntala" by Vasile Voiculescu. In all these works, Roma women are portrayed as existing on the periphery of society, somewhere on the edge of the civilized world, savagery and primitivism. Also, these works emphasize the division between the majority and the Roma population, creating and developing labels for Roma women such as: prostitute, marginal, opportunistic, ignorant, or victim of domestic violence. These are labels that end up manifesting in real life through the phenomenon of discrimination and social and cultural marginalization.

These images of the Roma woman continue in contemporary texts. One of the books that caught my attention is Mircea Cărtărescu's "De ce iubim femeile"[23]. Among other stories about famous women, the author brings to the public's attention "The True Story of the Beautiful Zaraza" (set in Bucharest during the interwar period), a Roma character who has long entered the Romanian collective urban mind as an ultra-sexualized cultural product.

As the Roma author Daniel Samuel Petrilă asserts in his article titled “From Being Tolerated as a Species, as a Kind of Subhuman Form, to Being Seen as They Are”[24], in the Zaraza story, Cartarescu uses anthroponomy with generic value in the Roma community, in order to develop a pre-fabricated and ultra-sexualized image attributed to the Roma woman. For example, he tells us that Zaraza is a traditional Roma name that means “wonderful”. However, as the Roma author Daniel Petrilă explains, this name does not mean wonderful at all, but is a play on words based on the term “zar” in the Romani language which translates to “pubic hair”.

Beyond literature, distorted images loaded with stereotypes of the Roma woman are also found in media discourse. The most common prototypes of characters illustrated in the media in the case of Roma women are fortune tellers, witches, beggars, criminals, victims of domestic violence and they are usually associated with sensational topics such as early marriages, begging, extreme poverty, or crime.

This is demonstrated in some of the Romanian news headlines from the last 20 years: “Gypsy Wedding: The Scandal of the World,” published in Sibiul.știrilocale.ro (October 2, 2003) or Ana-Maria the “King’s Little Girl Ran Away From the Altar,” published in curierulnațional.ro (September 29, 2003), or “What a Palace the Witch Vanesa Built After the Scandal with Zăvoranca,” published in click.ro (May 1, 2017).

In addition to the press or literature that may be less read by the general public, stereotypes about Roma women and the confused image generated of them is also present in entertainment and film productions. In search of the sensational, the spectacular, and a wider audience, television and cinema expose the public to images of Roma characters that are increasingly exoticized and controversial.

Some examples include the well-known Romanian series *Gypsy Heart*, *State de Romania*, *Regina* [The Queen], *Moștenirea* [The Legacy], made by Media Pro studios and broadcast by the national television station Acasă TV. International series include *Peaky Blinders* broadcast on BBC and streamed through Netflix, *Hemlock Grove*, a Gaumont International Television production, streamed on Netflix since 2013, and *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, broadcast on Channel 4 in the UK and on TLC in North America and Southeastern Europe.

And even if it’s not their explicit aim, in searching for an audience, film and TV producers can encourage speech and images that lead to xenophobic or racist attitudes or even internalized racism. TV productions, once emitted, also have effects on those represented in the cultural production—the Roma themselves end up assimilating these stereotypical representations of their own culture, internalizing racism from the outside, and then denying their own belonging to the Roma ethnic group.

In *Race and Representation*, bell hooks tells the story[25] of an African-American girl who becomes obsessed with her image and that of African Americans—how they look and how they are viewed by others, i.e., the external gaze. The girl internalizes the values and standards of beauty presented in film and on television, having low self-esteem because her appearance does not match the standards presented there. Bell hooks states that she is no stranger to this story, and that she also had these feelings during her childhood. I did too. And many other Roma girls also face this situation. We don’t find models in which to find ourselves. And it is very difficult to build our identity when we are represented by others and in the end we end up with a stigmatized identity, predominantly imposed by the dominant culture within which we live.

But where are the Roma models in which Roma girls can find themselves? Are there balanced models for Roma women to relate to and identify with? The answer to this question is a clear yes, but they are not available to everyone and are not as easy to find as the distorted prototypes we can find everywhere and are available to anyone. A simple Google search does not find Katarina Taikon, for example, as representative of the Roma woman, but rather we find Roza from Gypsy Heart or Rada from the movie Satra that promotes characters like the exoticized Roma woman, consolidating an image that is agreeable to the general public because it resembles their own mental maps about the Roma. Unfortunately, the balanced Roma models to which young Roma refer are not mainstream. They are not on TV, nor on Netflix, or in the educational space.

In the history books, for example, we still do not find much information about Roma. Only a few case studies about slavery, the Roma Holocaust and the International Roma Day were introduced into the textbooks two years ago, but they are not very well documented.

All these case studies are lacking in details with which the reader can empathize, and they do not detail the sufferings of Roma, and especially of Roma women. I would have loved to be able to also read in the textbook during the Holocaust lesson, alongside Anne Frank, the story of Constantin Anica, a Roma silversmith who was just a little girl when she was deported with her family, or Settela Steinbach, a Roma girl from Germany who was gassed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. I would also have liked to find in the lesson about slavery, the story of Ioana Rudareasa and other stories about the resistance of Roma women to the suffering of slavery, and their contribution to its abolition, because this type of story already exists.

As for me, I have always lived the complex of not presenting as a Roma in public space. I do not identify myself at all with the gypsies and their always marginal and unimportant presence. I didn't want to be a fortune teller, or a beggar, or a prostitute who does not even have a name. I wanted an identity that I would be comfortable with, that I would accept and embrace. I felt estranged from everyone and everything, because I couldn't really locate myself in the society in which I lived. I wondered for a long time what I was doing wrong and why I was experiencing all of this.

It was at the age of 21 that, after graduating, I started working for a Roma non-governmental organization that deals with the promotion of Roma cultural identity in public space. It was the first time that I learned about Roma culture and history. I was so surprised and happy when I saw the international Roma flag, and that the Romani language is not a language spoken on the street corner, but is being studied at the University.

I then went on in search of myself and came to study the Romani language and culture at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest. Here I discovered Roma literature in which Roma authors talk about Roma culture and its depth. For the first time, I read the poems of Luminița Cioabă and of the sensitive Polish Roma poet, Bronislawa Wajs (Papusza), which I consider the first Roma feminist. I learned about Katarina Taikon's struggle and I understood that the Roma have a rich and complex culture and history.

But my journey was long and painful, with many obstacles. Not all Roma children get this far, and I don't think we should have to make this much effort to regain our identity. This process should start in school by introducing coherent and consistent information on Roma history, culture, and literature in the

compulsory curriculum. Probably if all of these things had been explained to me at school, I would not have gone through this suffering of not knowing who I am, I would not have grown up with this inferiority complex, and I would not have developed a stigmatized and confused identity.

6. Invisible Roma Women:

I later discovered that I was not the only Roma woman who went through these complexes. I even discovered that there are many women like me who struggle every day to be themselves. But, unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to meet them so that we could talk about our experiences.

It was in 2011 when I saw the first Roma social play ever done in Romania. It was called *I Declare at My Own Risk*, written by and starring the young Roma actress, Alina Serban. Alina tells the story of a Roma girl who struggles with her family's poverty and with the marginalization and discrimination from others. But, even more, she struggles with herself to discover who she really is and accept herself as a Roma in a world where they are disrespected and ostracized. I truly found myself in Alina's story. I recognized in the story she presented the same torment that I had gone through and was still going through due to my ethnicity.

I Declare at My Own Risk is the first, but not the last, Roma play that tries to transform an identity built by others' negative views into a mobilizing identity that determines social change and builds an alternative to the exoticized image of the Roma created by the dominant culture. Another character facing the marginalization and discrimination due to her ethnicity is Szomna Grancsa, from the play *Who Killed Szomna Grancsa?* written by Mihai Lukács, Mihaela Dragan, Zita Moldovan, and Liana Ceterechi, and produced by the Romanian independent theatre company, Giuvlipen. Szomna, a Roma student from a traditional family, is trying to leave the protective space of her community and go to school—a non-Roma space that doesn't belong to her. Unfortunately, Szomna doesn't find herself anywhere. This feeling becomes unbearable for her and she commits suicide.

Nor is being a Roma woman easier for Maria, Calomfira, or Roxana (the characters of the play *Del Duma*, written, performed, and produced by the Roma actress, Mihaela Dragan), but none of these women want to camouflage or deny their ethnicity; they want to learn what defines them as Roma women. They want to have the opportunity to decide for themselves.

The Roma characters like Alina from *I Declare at My Own Risk*, Szomna from *Who Killed Szomna Grancsa*, and Maria, Calomfira, and Roxana from *Del Duma*, tell us stories about what it means to struggle with yourself to rebuild your Roma identity, and present us invisible Roma women who try to be ourselves in a world where our identity is still imposed by the dominant culture we live in. These characters do their best to embrace their identity no matter how complex or incoherent it may be and try to create balanced spaces in which Roma women can freely express themselves and develop their inner potential, building a real identity, free from the influence of any kind of stereotypes.

These stories are inspired by real life and contemporary Roma women whose lives do not appear on the front pages of mainstream newspapers nor are they presented as scandals in the tabloids. Rather, they live their lives in peace, and struggle to find solutions to be themselves in a world that labels and marginalizes them. Each of these women has a difficult life story. And this story is primarily due to the fact that belonging to the Roma ethnic group creates barriers for them which they had to fight against in order to create spaces in which they could find themselves. None of these women are perfect and do not intend to be, but they do not fit into the patterns in which society tends to frame them. Like me and other Roma women, they try to rediscover their Roma identity and struggle with themselves and with others to define

themselves as Roma. They try to rebuild their identity which has been imposed on them by others for centuries.

Besides the characters from the Roma Theater, we meet invisible Roma women everywhere. These women are single mothers, wives, single women, Romani language teachers, writers, teachers, researchers, social workers, or even Roma women's rights activists.

For this project I spoke with some invisible Roma women and asked them what it means to them to be a Roma woman in today's Romanian society and how they are affected by stereotypical images about Roma women present in the media, literature and art.

I met Steluta, for example: a single mother and Romani language teacher who told me that she often felt judged by those around her and viewed through stereotypes. In fact, she has often suffered as a Roma woman in some of her jobs with people treating her in accordance with their pre-existing notions about Roma women, and without viewing her as a woman.

I also met Luminita, who works at a cultural institution and in her free time works at a kindergarten with young Roma mothers, trying to be a role model for them, offering them her life experiences, and guiding them as best as possible. Luminita is also a single mother, aunt, and also a grandmother.

Petronia told me how much she encourages her daughter to follow her own dreams. Petronia also supports all the children she works with, being a Romani language teacher and trying to be a role model for all her students. Petronia also told me how hard it was for her to go to school as a Roma student because she came from a traditional Roma family and all the children labeled and marginalized her because she was "a gypsy with skirts". Then it was the same for her daughter, but she tried to support her at every step so as not to be discouraged through being ethnically marginalized by her classmates.

Florica told me about the difficulties she encountered when she married her non-Roma husband. In fact, her husband's family never accepted her daughter-in-law because she was a gypsy, even though Florica is a teacher and her brother is a famous writer. All that mattered to her husband's family was that she was Roma. Now Florica encourages her daughter who is a student at the Police Academy, hoping her daughter does not have to face all the difficulties that she endured, while also knowing that society still needs to evolve.

Elena told me that when she was a student, she was ashamed of her father because he was brunette and she didn't want him to come pick her up from school because her classmates would laugh at her. She later realized that what she had been doing was not right and now she explains to all the children whom she works with that they should not be ashamed of their parents, while understanding that the stigma is strong and that the labels placed on us by others have repercussions on our behavior.

Angelica told me how hard it was for her as a teenager not to have a Roma role model. That is why she became a teacher in her village, so that she could support the children and so that they could see in her a model and a support at the same time. Now that she is also a school principal, she can support her students even more in the face of the injustices from non-Roma teachers.

These are just some of the examples of strong Roma women who struggle every day to be themselves in a world where our identity is still imposed on us from the outside. My mother and grandmother have been doing this all their lives and this is what they taught me to do as well. Unfortunately, we do not yet live in a balanced world that sees people in all their complexity, and instead pigeonholes them. When we think of Roma women we still think of this paradox between passionate/exotic but marginal at the same time. We don't think of women like Steluta, Luminita, or Crina who is a Roma social worker and single mother whose main goal is to make others understand how important it is to value the culture and way of life of the people they work with, especially in the role of a social worker.

Balanced perspectives and reconciliation still do not exist in our society, even if the premises already do. There are spaces like Roma social theater that try to help generate other, more balanced perspectives in society, but unfortunately, they are still underground and not yet mainstream. The one play featuring Roma experiences included in the repertoire of a state theater in Romania is Alina Serban's *The Best Child in the World*, only recently forming part of the repertoire at the National Theater. Even if we have valuable Roma actors who tell interesting stories about Roma culture and history and try to make Roma experiences known, they don't have regular access to state theaters yet.

I would love to see more Roma plays at national theaters, the stories of invisible Roma women brought more into the public sphere, to watch Netflix films about Katarina Taikon, Bronislawa Wajz, or Ioana Rudareasa and be able to mention these materials in discussion with my students. Unfortunately, young Roma people do not know these characters because they do not have access to them, and the only Roma characters they know and take as models are the Gypsy Heart characters, Roza or the Flacara.

Until we develop balanced perspectives in society in which we feel equally represented, we will not be able to develop harmoniously as a society. Only then will we be able to build healthy and balanced identities, leaving future generations a smooth path on which to shape their own story.

7. Notes

- [1] “Particularly beautiful, brunette, with long hair, with an anti-bourgeois behaviour that transmits natural femininity but also a kind of dangerous savagery.” Bogdal, K-M (2012) *Europe invents the Gypsies. The dark side of modernity*. Eurozine, p. 5);
- [2] Simmel G. (1908) “*The Stranger.*” *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Leipzig, Duncker & Humblot p. 1;
- [3] Liegeois J-P. (2008) *Romii în Europa*, Bruxelles, Council of Europe, p. 141;
- [4] Bogdal K-M. (2012) *Europe invents the Gypsies. The dark side of modernity*. Eurozine, p. 2;
- [5] See the note above;
- [6] Petcuț, P (2015) *Rromii. Sclavie și Libertate*, București, Centrul Național de Cultură a Romilor;
- [7] In the article 2 of the Law of Liberation it was established the sum of 10 goldens for each slave as compensation for their owners;
- [8] Sion G. (2014) *Suvenire Contimpurane*, Iasi, Polirom, p. 3;
- [9] https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/P%C4%83catele_slugerului(my translation);
- [10] https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/%C8%9Aig%C4%83ncu%C8%99a_de_la_ietac (my translation);
- [11] https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/%C8%9Aig%C4%83ncu%C8%99a_de_la_ietac (my translation);
- [12] Sion G. (2014) *Suvenire Contimpurane*, Iasi, Polirom, p. 21;
- [13] https://www.titudorancea.com/z/cezar_bolliac_fata_de_boier_si_tigan.htm;
- [14] The case of Ioana Rudareasa was documented by the Roma sociologist Adrian Nicolae Furtuna and published in the volume *Re-thinking Roma Resistance throughout History: Recounting Stories of Strength and Bravery*, coordinated by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Jekatyerina Dunajeva within the European Rome Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) in 2020;
- [15] I found Maria's case in the work of Nicoleta Roman, *Femei Onoare si Pacat in Valahia secolului al XIX-lea*, chapter Roabele din casa. The paper was published in 2016;
- [16] In both Romanian Principalities, slavery as an institution was abolished by a series of laws that incrementally targeted first the slaves belonging to the state, then those of the monasteries, and finally of private individuals, adopted between 1843-1856. Thus, in 1843 slavery of state slaves was abolished, in 1847 the monastery slaves were released, and, in the last instance, the last law of liberation was decreed, resulting in the release of the boyar slaves in 1856;

[17] The Caragea Law (1818) clearly states in Chapter 6 that all children born to free parents are legally free, as are those born to a free mother. *Legiurea Caragea* (1818), critical edition, Romanian Academy Publishing House, Bucharest, 1955, p. 10);

[18] I found the case of Bucura in the Collection of Documents Sclavia Romilor în Țara Românească *Fragmente de Istorie Socială*, published by Adrian Nicolae Furtuna at National National Roma Culture Center, Romania, but also in the online database sclavia-romilor.gov.ro created by National Roma Culture Center, Romania;

[19] Name given, in the Middle Ages, in Wallachia, to peasants dependent on feudal lords. I present a summary of the rights and freedoms of Roma slaves in contrast with the rights and freedoms of the Romanian peasants dependent on feudal lords, to have a clearer perspective on slave's condition. Slaves were dependent on their master, unlike the peasants who were dependent on the land. The dependent peasants lived in their own villages. Slaves could be moved from one estate to another according to the interests of their masters or even sold. Slavery was hereditary. Until the 18th century, when a series of regulations began to be introduced in this regard, the marriage of a free man to a slave meant the enslavement of the free man, as well as of the children resulting from that marriage. Peasants had legal personhood, could testify and could not be punished without trial, unlike slaves who were owned by the master. The master's power over his slaves knew very few legal restrictions. Serfs could marry without prior permission and their children could not be taken away, whereas the marriage of Roma slaves was considered legal only with the consent of the master, or both masters when the slaves came from distinct estates. Compliance with this practice implied compensatory payments or exchanges between owners, likely to satisfy both parties. The serfs had work debts (burdens) and gifts to the master, the church and the state, but they could also work for themselves, they could own goods, own animals, and the houses they built themselves (with the permission of the land owner) belonged to them along with the goods in them. Unlike them, slaves had no property of any kind and belonged to their master.

[20] I found the case of Paraschiva in the same Collection of Documents and database where I found the case of Bucura: *Sclavia Romilor în Țara Românească Fragmente de Istorie Socială*, published by Adrian Nicolae Furtuna at National National Roma Culture Center, online database sclavia-romilor.gov.ro created by the National Roma Culture Center, Romania; <http://sclavia-romilor.gov.ro/items/show/2620>;

[21] Clucerul is a term that in the Romanian Middle Ages denoted a boyar court. The *clucer* was in charge of the storehouses and the princely warehouses.

[22] Description of the painting *Ursareasa din Bolduri* by Romanian painter Nicolae Grigorescu, exhibited at the Art Museum in Iasi;

[23] Mircea Cărtărescu, în *De ce iubim femeile*, Ediția a II-a revizuită, Colecția „Cartea de pe noptieră” [colecție îngrijită de Ioana Pârvulescu], București: Humanitas. 2005, p. 136).

[24] <http://pravaliaculturala.com/article/de-la-a-fi-tolerati-ca-o-specie-ca-un-fel-de-forma-de-subom-la-a-fi-priviti-asa-cum-sunt>; accessed on November 2021

[25] hooks 1992: p. 3.

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