

Romani Identity in Literary Practices

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Long before the development of the alphabet, storytellers have carried the tradition of preserving stories. Written language allowed scribes and educators to interpret those narratives. Passed between the wordsmith and the teacher, storytelling gave birth to cultural memories. It is not a coincidence that in hierarchical civilizations elites have acted as the gatekeepers of this knowledge. After all, these dominant narratives have been responsible for shaping our cultural identities across centuries of strife and progress, evolutions and languages, political upheavals, and great renaissances.

However, if most societies' knowledge is forged from the philosophies of the powerful, how does that particular dynamic affect marginalized groups like Roma, and how is our identity as a people shaped by it?

In stories, Roma have played a role unchanged for millennia – that of a conflicted character: impetuously dissident and admirably protective of their freedom. Romani characters are resistant to any attempts at becoming civilized, remaining as wild as its most recognized literary companion – the undomesticated horse. Even when placed within the boundaries of a refined society, between the pages of literary works a Gypsy never truly abandons what is perceived to be their fundamental nature, their identity. Yet, as remarkable as that image may appear, it does not describe a human being. Not one fully realized. Or as writers like to say, it is not a fleshed-out character.

Real people are different from story people, yet, in narratives which have been written primarily by a non-Romani contingent, Roma lack the luxury of such distinction. In stories, we have remained unreal, our identity artificial and static. This skewed representation has, in turn, contributed not only to how Romani culture is perceived by others but also to how we perceive ourselves.

Every writer knows that humanity is far too complex to be frozen on the page. Not one of us is entirely good or bad, our lives steered continuously by the reins of fate and free will. We are unpredictable; universes spun of contradictions, equally capable of tyranny and love.

What is a writer to do? How do we make our protagonists more palatable? Typically, we prescribe to them a manageable list of traits. We settle on a general idea of what the character is made of at their very core, and then we make our readers believe us. In short, the power to create a character's identity is immeasurable. Life molded out of nothing – a true Pygmalion experience. The writer carves out a personality until it begins to evolve into a living soul full of angst and dreams.

Can the final product be considered a real person?

No.

Is it enough?

Generally, yes. Readers are quite good at acknowledging the boundary between life and fiction.

Except for when the character is a Gypsy – nearly always presumed to be a figment of the writer's imagination. Without context, the reader is led blindly into thinking a Gypsy shares the field with dragons and leprechauns in that they do not exist or evolve.

This raises an important question, addressed repeatedly in the papers and stories in this issue. How do Romani writers gain agency in establishing identity long misused and manipulated in Western literature?

Before we explore this question further, we must remember, a character's hypercentricity on the page – that easily manageable cluster of attributes picked by the writer and isolated from the bigger context – seldom appears in living beings.

In actuality, everyone shares some essential qualities. We are in a constant flux of progression and regression, life and death, and in that very process, we are as one. We relate to one another through our collective experiences, and what unites us as real-life people is our diverse ordinariness.

In other words, a pen is no match for the abundance of human experiences, and yet Roma are described in literature more like cardboard cutouts than human beings. In fiction as in reality, we are rarely allowed to be ordinary, nor are we given permission to learn from our experiences – a self-discovery that readers would expect from fleshed-out characters. A Romani protagonist often lacks self-awareness and instead acts upon impulse alone. Heathcliff comes to mind. Driven by his emotional tempest, this tortured anti-hero damns himself and those he loves.

It follows that in written depictions and across most art mediums, Roma have remained a caricature, robbed of the opportunity to be ordinary. Ordinary is good, however counterintuitive this may sound. It is a more accurate representation of humanness than labels such as “bohemian” and “mystical.” Ordinary comes with a multitude of human capabilities, presenting a rich spectrum of feelings and temperaments, and most importantly allowing room for the sense of identity to change as is its natural inclination.

Everyone evolves.

We lose and gain convictions. Life keeps us peculiarly unstable however steadfast in our individual quests. Story people share this with their real-life counterparts. Yet Roma have been typecast in literature and reality without remorse, never permitted to deviate from the obsolete narrative of long-dead scribes.

For centuries Romani misrepresentation has been deeply ingrained in the Western storytelling modes to such a degree that – short on role models – many young Roma grow up believing some of the traits assigned to them in historical and literary descriptions. They subconsciously absorb the identity prescribed to them.

We could go so far as to say that in some cases these clichés have had a detrimental influence on legislators who create social policies that further underserve and ostracize Romani communities around the world. In Canada, Romani asylum-seekers are often unlikely to be accepted. They are often criminalized and linked to gangs, human trafficking, forced childhood marriage, and so on. In the U.S., student truancy policies target Romani families. Better examples are in Europe where Romani neighborhoods are segregated by physical barriers, in classrooms, in schools, and where Romani workers are excluded from the labor market. Their homes are bulldozed, they are put into permanent exile, and then their homelessness is attributed to allegedly natural Gypsy identity.

The connotations of the derogatory label, Gypsy, are usually escorted by stereotypically insidious reactions. What is troubling is that a number of highly regarded writers are oblivious of their part in reinforcing these marginalizing typecasts. They do not see the crippling effects of rendering an entire ethnic group as a stylized archetype, nor do they attempt to reform the unbalanced representation of Romani identity in literature. Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen* corrupts a good man into becoming a murderer, Charlotte Brontë’s *Mr. Rochester* disguises himself as a Gypsy clairvoyant. The list is long.

Using materials found in Western literary traditions, writers and educators continue to contribute to the skewed perception of Romani culture. Over time, this practice has led them to become conduits of this harmfully stagnant view of our diversity, fueling a fixed idea of the “Gypsy Other” who is far removed from and resistant to “cultured” society at large.

Unruly Gypsy
 Stupid Gypsy
 Impulsive Gypsy
 Seductive Gypsy
 Lawless Gypsy
 No roots
 No cares
 Dangerous
 Aggressive
 Uneducated
 Unwashed
 Free-spirited
 Unhuman

The above images are links in the chain of the fixed “Romani Identity” shackled to our ankles for centuries.

It has been said we fear what we do not know. The other side of fear is fascination. In a formulaic Romani character, we find both, someone to fear and someone to desire; a notion taught to us by countless examples: Caliban, Esmeralda, Heathcliff, Paprika. None are ordinary. Removed from society by way of their idiosyncrasies and attitudes, such characters are doomed by their refusal to conform, and in doing so they mesmerize the reader because they act in ways most of us are too afraid to act. They are the ultimate nonconformists.

Upon closer examination, one thing becomes clear. Romani characters of the Western literary discourse are not human at all, but ideas and metaphors – lenses that help readers glimpse their own uncivilized and savage natures. It is a convenient literary device for storytellers, one used for centuries and across cultures and languages. However, it fails to advocate for a deeper understanding of an ostracized culture – the case with Romani people – when there is no contrast, nothing to offset a damaging or romanticized depiction.

One could argue that readers need characters who are driven by their ungovernable urges. While the contrast between hero and anti-hero has always captivated this world, is it ethical to cast Roma as the latter, time and time again? What happens when an entire group’s identity is entrenched in the belief that Romani people lack multidimensionality of experience, that every individual in their midst is a thief, a witch, a brawler, or a free-spirited nomad?

Moreover, when an overwhelming majority of Roma depicted in books are insubordinate and untrustworthy, can the reader who meets a Romani person for the first time judge them to be otherwise? Considering the severe deficit of positive or even realistic Romani protagonists, unlikely. The tropes have been set in place since antiquity, and the motives behind this misdirection are numerous. From ignorance to political choreography. Against common sense, these narratives endure.

Some might assume today’s intellectual community is better informed, resistant to the dated models of cultural misperception. No matter how tempting this idea may sound in theory, it fails in practice, as is evident in the perpetuation of the Gypsy stereotypes in creative and scholarly forms.

Bearing in mind that even the most intellectually progressive individuals fall victim to latent racism and xenophobia, how do we find a way to leave behind the archaic depiction of the Romani character in creative and, by extension, social discourses? Can we teach the reader to understand and respect the people behind the stereotype, and if so, where do we begin?

The most effective solution might lie in the very place where the static Romani image was first established – creative arts. To reverse the chronic biases embedded so deeply in the psyches of our readers, the aim of any writer and educator considering this subject matter is not only to engage readers and students in a critical examination of cultural stereotypes within the established canon but also to actively replace the archaic image of the “Gypsy Other” with more sophisticated and informed models. A Romani literary canon is the most vital player in this endeavor, specifically in its role as the tool to convey a Romani identity as complex as its diverse culture.

We cannot ignore the fact that Romani-made narratives have been absent from the Western literary canon, our greatest intellectuals seldom read or studied. We are absent from libraries, classrooms, conferences, and traditional publishing mediums. Our voices, though never silent, have not been heard. In literary, pedagogical, and cultural discourses, we have remained powerless observers as others continue to shape assumptions of our motivations and histories, as others shape our identity and take credit for its questionable truth. Even as the underrepresented voices of many are finally being heard today, we are often excluded from those conversations, barely acknowledged.

Often but not always.

A change is coming.

Romani writers, artists, and scholars are speaking up, louder than ever, and that is exactly what we need to reclaim full ownership of our identity. Tradition rich in storytelling, poetry, music, and folk art awaits to greet the world, ushered in by established and emerging artists. Papsza (Bronisława Wajs), Katarina Taikon, Matéo Maximoff – all created meaningful works during the times of greatest persecutions and strife because they believed a word could change the world. Along with more contemporary writers such as Cecilia Woloch, Ronald Lee, Hedina Sijerčić, Jo Clement, and Damian Le Bas, to name a few, they constitute the foundation of Romani literary tradition. Our narratives are emerging, giving way to opportunities for dynamic discussion of issues that impact Romani societies today. In the process, our identities are emerging, too, stronger and more diverse than anyone could ever imagine.

To better understand what defines Romani identity within the context of literary tradition, let us take a closer look at the creative materials in this issue. What is unique about the writers here in these pages is that, together and from a distinct creative artists’ perspective, they address a scholastic audience. The two worlds, creative and academic, rarely find themselves in direct conversation.

Creative writers, regularly examined through the lens of literary criticism and theory, are seldom given the opportunity to enter into a dialogue. Here, we have the opportunity to experience, side by side, these two counterparts of the literary domain communicate and express their perspectives.

The question posed to each contributor in this issue was simple and yet one that still evades a definitive answer: What does Romani identity mean to you?

The necessity for such inquiry is an obvious one.

The clichéd identity designated to us by non-Romani academics and writers, no longer stands. It never did. Fundamentally, what this question asks of our writers is to reach beyond those clichés, beyond generic identity markers we all share in the forms of careers, gender labels, class associations, and such. Rather, the writers are invited to contemplate how an evolving Romani cultural history effects a sense of familial kinship, and since the tool utilized to form the answers is writing, it would be remiss of us to ignore that the stories in this issue are also a study of how a written language, in its own right, shapes identity.

The responses are fascinating in that they are vastly different and yet maintain several unifying truths:

Contemporary Romani particularities are difficult to pin down, made so by the fact that identity is fluid by nature.

Romani identity is often found in memories.

Romani identity is often contained in its language.

Romani identity is often observed in the traditions passed on from the elderly to the young.

More often than not, Romani identity seems to reside in the writer's attempt to either preserve it against all odds or find a way home, to stay on some barely defined path that promises agency of Romani experience. The latter marks a return to either a culture one left behind as a child or discovered as an adult.

Romani identity is often unearthed in reclaiming oneself and one's place of home. Or rather, it brings shape to that path home, and through that process, shape to the writer's sense of self that for various reasons hasn't been given permission to thrive. This is often true for writers, regardless of whether or not they come from a traditional Romani household. The Romani writer seeks to either preserve, reclaim, or uncover.

Most of all, the Romani writer seeks kinship, to feel a part of a community that reaches across the entire globe like a net cast far and wide. The breadth of our narratives is fascinating in that even when fragmented, the roots we share seem to hold stronger than geographical or cultural boundaries.

Our stories are vastly unique, and yet the ideas explored point to two common themes: belonging and acceptance.

Ironic, since nomadic proclivities have been written into our stories generously by interloper literary figureheads. Ironic but also expected, since for centuries, systematic and systemic erasure of our identities has rendered Romani populations less likely to verbalize who we ourselves believe we are and what we desire.

The reclaiming of self and the search for belonging to that self and its origins is a necessary step for Romani writers in resurrecting our public cultural individualities.

The writers who contributed stories and poems to this issue had a difficult task ahead of them, but the work has resulted in a generous sharing of intimate journeys: tales of children who know they are losing parts of their culture with the passing of their elders. Accounts of descendants salvaging family histories, reminding the rest where those stories belong – with family. Poems of vivid beauty and enduring generational trauma.

While reading the collection of voices in this issue, one can easily grasp the immense latitudes of Romani experiences and narratives. Yet again, at the beating heart of these tales is a recurring cohesion, perhaps one that holds the response to the inquiry this issue had originally posed.

What is a Romani identity?

It is undeniable that Romani people are pulled to a Romani ethos. We carry with us, across millennia, across borders and continents, across generations, across tragedy and hope, an innate sense of belonging to our culture. Without land, without physical boundaries, our origin stories and the heritage spun from them are faithful companions, even to those of us who have been robbed of the opportunity to grow up with an insight more practiced traditions generally provide.

This fascination seems to transcend our upbringing, whether we're orphans, slaves, full-blooded, or mixed, whether we grew up in a rural Romani village or met our distant Romani cousins for the first time as aging adults.

The Romani characteristic we seek to define might just be in the very act of our search for it – of the collective desire to know our identity intimately, to redefine it if needed, to understand the past in order to find ourselves in our present and our future.