

The Critical Ones: Another Tale of Slavery

Mihai LUKACS

Open Society Institute, Academic scholarship program for research of Roma slavery

mihai@actoriromi.ro

Abstract

This paper draws on stories of slavery that emerged from the three-issues journal, *Nevi Sara Kali* (2009-2011), exploring the conceptual construction of Roma feminism from Romania and the systematic historical devaluation of Roma womanhood as a complex and calculated mechanism of social control and inequality. The silence of Roma women has historical causes connected to the general hostility in relation to people perceived as inferior and functions through fantasy, fake images, stereotypes and clichés. The still present idea of authenticity and the romantic image of the eternal Gypsy woman have direct connections to the Gadje / non-Roma portrayal of Roma people in the nineteenth century, as a caricatural visibility of Roma people: the connection between ideological, economic and political oppression put Roma women under a strict social control and the existing stereotypes function as material mechanisms of protection and promotion of Gadje interests and world-view.

Despite the limited amount of written materials, the perspective of Roma feminism echoes the history of Black feminism and intersectionality. Building on the existing literature and on the close reading of the articles from *Nevi Sara Kali* which include the topic of Roma slavery, this paper provides an analysis that reveals the connection between a critical perspective on slavery and the articulation of a Roma feminist discourse by trying to answer the question of the possibility of a coherent vision of social equality through an intersectional perspective on Roma slavery and its demise.

This paper aims to raise awareness of contemporary issues related to the silence around the slavery from Walachia and Moldova and invites reflection on how a Roma feminist world-view truly acknowledges the deep significance of 500 years of Roma slavery.

Keywords: slavery, intersectionality, early marriage, multiculturalism, Roma feminism

Not accidentally, the Roma feminist writer Galina Trefil, uses as a motto to her novel about a Roma woman slave from Walachia, a quote from Harriet Tubman, an African-American woman born into slavery and one of the most important abolitionists in United States, a strong inspiration to all intersectional feminists: “I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive.”¹

Part of a complicated history of feminism, intersectionality is the theoretical approach that brings together gender and race as analytical categories of social reality. As a conceptual framework that started to be used at the end of the 1980s, intersectionality followed previous research which looked into the connection between race, gender and class. Nevertheless, after the emergence of black feminism in United States, intersectionality became a serious analytical tool. The idea of intersectionality as the analysis of multiple inequalities can be traced much earlier: “one may trace genealogies of the idea of intersectionality back to the entanglement of nineteenth century women’s movements and anti-slavery movements, focusing on gender and race,”² being the main approach and most accurate direction in Roma feminism from Romania.

The starting point of intersectionality is “the convergence of sexism, racism and classism and its effect on the status of black women during slavery, civil rights movement, black nationalism and as well as inside the feminist movements from suffrage to the seventies”.³ In the US academic context, there was a rejection of the analysis of oppression of women of color during slavery, a similar process taking place in connection to Roma slavery from Romanian states, a reaction by the scholars which connects their own social status and their participation in the gendered and racialised oppression.⁴

Slavery offered the context for a particular way in which women were perceived by men: if Gadje womanhood was idealized as we can see in Romantic literature and art of the nineteenth century, the negative stereotypes of womanhood were displaced by Gadje men onto Roma women, a symbolic devaluation of non-Gadje femininity that continued until today. This conditioning of perception, produced during slavery, affected Gadje people of noble or modest social positioning but also the Roma slave sub-culture, which was internalizing Gadje ideas about Roma women, for an illusory acceptance and inclusion into the Gadje world.⁵ The systematic devaluation of Roma womanhood was not a simple form of proto-antigypsyism, but a complex and calculated mechanism of social control and inequality.

If intersectionality is the tool of choice when addressing the multiple inequalities experienced by Roma women in Romania today, then the analysis of these inequalities can go back in the past and has to look at the connection between the anti-

¹ Galina Trefil, *The Incomplete Ones: A Tale of Slavery* (2014), Kindle edition, 6.

² Popa, Raluca Maria. “Meanings and uses of intersectionality in public policies”, *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal* 1 (2009): 73.

³ Alis Costescu et al., “Approaches towards intersectionality”, *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal* 3 (2011): 88.

⁴ see bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black woman and feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

⁵ for a thoughtful exploration of this aspect, see Trefil, *The Incomplete Ones*

slavery movement and women's activism in the nineteenth century.⁶ Reading the Roma slavery abolitionist literature, one can observe the lack of women politicians, writers or campaigners being directly involved in the struggle for the liberation of the Roma slaves in the nineteenth century Romanian principalities. Nevertheless, women without a name are present in this literature as elements in the development of the movement. As Vasile Alecsandri wrote in 1862 in an article titled "Nicolae Bălcescu în Moldova", the influence of women in the struggle for progress (of which slavery abolition was a main demand) was crucial but kept the whole social debate as a boyar family issue, out of which, correctly thought by Alecsandri, the winners were the same social group:

"In each family, one could find face to face the practices of the past and the ideas of modern civilisation. Therefore, even the holiness of the most intimate relations was exposed to a flowing of a very delicate and mostly critical state of things. And here I am happy to declare, to the honor of the ladies from Moldova, that they had a providential role in the middle of that social drama!

As mothers and sisters, under the counsel of their loving heart, they knew how to prevent, how to extinguish fatal misunderstandings between parents and sons, sweetening on the one hand the sometimes despotic harshness of the old ones, and on the other hand, how to calm the restless speed of the youth. They were the guardian angels of family peace and they contributed a lot, through their admirable tact, to ease the triumph of progress.

<<Be happy! said a wise mother to her husband, be happy if you are defeated, because the winner is our beloved son!>>"⁷

Even if the support in the anti-slavery movement of the Gadge (Non-Roma) women can be questionable historically, intersectionality gave a tested method to Roma feminists in understanding "who can speak for whom, what should be a legitimate and just representation of political interests, or what constitutes a politically relevant social group."⁸ As an answer to the pressure of identity politics and universal assimilationist politics, intersectionality moves beyond the fake choice between universalism or difference, both putting in the centre the mandatory experiences of the most privileged group. From the point-view of most marginal positions, a vision of social equality can be offered through the perspective of intersectionality, which can also be a useful tool in analysing Roma slavery and its demise.

Before the 1860s, Roma women started their life in the Romanian principalities as slaves, working in oppressive situations. They were caught up in unjust situations, their access to the society resources were denied systematically and over a very long period of time. Their relationships to their Roma families and communities, to their owners and to one another were shaped by "the convergence of race, class, and gender

⁶ Noemi Magyari, "A Project for Social Justice", *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women's Journal* 2 (2010), 161.

⁷ My translation, originally published in *Revista Română* [Romanian Magazine], July 1862, Vasile Alecsandri, "Nicolae Bălcescu în Moldova" [Nicolae Bălcescu in Moldova]. In *Proza* [The Prose] (Bucharest: Editura pentru literatura, 1967), 316.

⁸ Popa, "Intersectionality in public policies", 73.

oppression⁹ and the continuity of this oppression also gives a political context for Roma feminism today.

P. N. Panaitescu explains the long existence of Roma slavery through the economic logic of the slave owners and their need of cheap labor force that was very much needed in Romanian principalities in the Middle Ages.¹⁰ The Romanian states were involved in the East-West trade but the lack of peasants and especially craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, encouraged feudal masters to enslave Roma people and take away their freedom in order to supply the demand of goods. Viorel Achim writes on this topic that “the importance of the trade route passing through the Romanian states, especially in the second half of the fourteenth century, and the relative prosperity generated by trade for more than a century are historical realities that are beyond question. It is, therefore, natural that there would have been need for labor force on the great estates. The donations and purchases of slaves are proof of this state of affairs.”¹¹ Even if the importance of economy in the perpetuation of slavery is in many cases neglected, another aspect that is missing in the abolitionist literature and the Roma slavery historiography (as well as in Achim's writings), is the presence of Roma women in the narration. The exploitation of Roma women was essential to the economy of Romanian principalities and fixed them in the service occupations. Survival in times of slavery was a life-long activity and expressed the lack of opportunities for Roma slaves to overcome their given oppressive condition. For the period of slavery abolition, the poverty of “free” Roma women continued the struggle for survival of former Roma slaves, fixed in the same geographical location of the slavery-time ghetto, *Țigănie*. The existence of Roma ghettos and the similar social condition and image of free Roma women demonstrate the continuity of economic exploitation by the former slave-owners.

Roma women historically experienced “the political dimension of oppression”,¹² not enjoying the social advantages extended through time to non-Roma population, not enjoying the benefits of education and being denied the benefits of literacy. The fact that many young Roma women from poor neighborhoods in cities or rural areas are dropping out of school before attaining literacy represents the efficacy of this long term political dimension of oppression.

The 500 years of Roma slavery left deep marks on the Roma communities that can be observed even today. The need for survival in the most difficult conditions (when even the value of being alive was not applied to Roma slaves) took different forms which affected Roma women differently than Roma men or Gadge population. One historical mechanism of survival to racism and slavery was the practice of early marriages, a

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁰ P. N. Panaitescu, “Le Role économique et social des Tziganes au Moyen Age en Valachie et en Moldavie”, in XVII-e Congrès International d'Anthropologie et d'Archéologie Préhistorique. VII-e Session de l'Institut International d'Anthropologie. Bucarest, 1-8 Septembre 1937 (Bucharest, 1939), 933-942; P. N. Panaitescu, “The Gypsies in Wallachia and Moldavia. A Chapter of Economic History,” *JGLS* (3), 15 (1941): 58-72.

¹¹ Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 30.

¹² Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 5.

practice that was heavily analysed and criticised by Roma feminists.¹³ During slavery, in order to avoid the sexual abuse of slave owners, who had the priority over the bodies of young Roma women, marriage as early as possible was the most accessible solution for Roma parents, in order to diminish the sexual interest of the slave-owner. On the other hand, the early marriage was not a new practice for Roma population from the south of Danube before slavery, child marriages have existed for centuries in India, from where the Roma population migrated. During slavery, the practice intensified in the north of Danube as a form of protection for young girls against sexual abuse. But also, in the same social context, giving birth to as many children as possible, as early as possible, was constructed as an imposed identity or destiny for Roma women,¹⁴ for pure material purposes and for the benefits of the slave-owners, who wanted as many slaves as possible.

Nowadays, the practice of Roma early marriage has to be connected to early marriage practices globally and not presented as an anomaly, it has to be connected to how marginalisation works economically and historically from a global perspective. Presented only as a cultural practice or as a Roma tradition connected to Roma slavery by its defenders, early marriage of Roma girls is nothing more than a falsification of tradition. Seen as a general practice of traditional Roma communities, early marriage actually differs from community to community and from region to region, as well as in terms of the social status of the families which practice it. There is no single narrative concerning its reasons and history or values within the community.

Also, by looking at early marriage only from the perspective of the human rights narrative, researchers and activists are limited in perceiving it only as a damaging cultural practice, as a human rights violation which goes against European norms and values, with the effect of constructing those norms and values as the only ethical possibility. A UN study on early marriage mentions that “there are also negative consequences for society at large, from overpopulation to perpetuation of gender oppression”,¹⁵ as early marriage would influence the larger population and encourage those who do not practice early marriage to oppress based on gender. Early marriage is addressed only from a moral perspective, with no direct implications for the affected girls, families and communities, as a new condemnation for a *primitive* and *unconceivable* social group, a perspective which barely changes anything in the lives of those affected. Early marriage is usually presented in stereotypical ways by constructing a dichotomy between educated and civilised Roma and Gadje and the cultural *primitive* traditional Roma communities. This condemnation of the traditional Roma communities as cruel and unthoughtful, devouring their young members, extends the already negative

¹³ Morteau, Crina Marina, “A General Perspective on Early Marriages in Romania”, *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women's Journal* 1 (2009): 101.

¹⁴ Larisa Poșircă, “Managementul riscurilor culturale în integrarea femeilor rome pe piața muncii” [The Management of Cultural Risks in Roma Women's Integration into the Labor Market], *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women's Journal* 1 (2009), 188

¹⁵ Child, *Early and Forced Marriage: A Multi-Country Study -A Submission to the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OCHCR)*, 15 December 2013, 39. Accessed September 24, 2016. <http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/UN%20report%20final.pdf>

portrayal of Roma non-assimilated communities, but this time with a veil of outside concern and knowledge concerning those communities.

Early marriage is an interesting case of perception: through its connection to Roma slavery, it can bring us back the unfinished practice of emancipation as it was exercised by non-Roma abolitionists: as a process of extraction from barbarism of a population morally underdeveloped which has to be forcefully Romanianized, to abandon its language and culture, to be assimilated by the larger Gadge population. We have to keep in mind that as during slavery, Roma nation is a cultural construction of the media of the time, the state and its bureaucrats (even if we talk about researchers, sociologists or Roma representatives), a moral construction that can be quite far from reality.¹⁶ This perception is also influenced by the isolation of Roma people from society, the lack of their valorisation and promotion, the blockage of their participation in society. This isolation produces the fake dichotomy between two parallel worlds: Roma and Gadge culture, Roma tradition and Gadge modernity, Gadge feminism and Roma minority.¹⁷ In this context, the practice of early marriage, and even slavery as such,¹⁸ can be perceived as a main trait of Roma culture and its caricature *barbarism*.

Early marriage, even if perceived through its connection to protection from slavery, is presented still as a specific Roma tradition over centuries, because slavery is perceived as a Roma business with no implication from the Gadge slave owners and their heirs. The application of human rights standards does not take place in Roma communities and this argument is used in a superficial way and in a perverse manner: the human rights standards are deliberately used as arguments against Roma people who are supposed to solve their own issues in their own communities which are continuously ridiculed and humiliated by media, the state and progressive activists alike.

What is missing from the neo-progressive perspective is precisely the self-reflexivity of the Gadge, as it was missing during the Roma emancipation period together with the complementary look back from a Roma point of view, an exercise of gadgeology. Trefil writes in her novel the story of Marioara, but her story is also the collective story of Marioara's mother and her whole family, a genealogy of pain that is described by her grandfather in a conversation which give voice to the relations between Roma family members and the Gadge world, a world where there is no place for the Roma and can only become a ruin:

“My poor daughter screamed when she was sold,” her grandfather had murmured, eyes misting over. “My poor, dear daughter just screamed...and screamed.... And, in those screams, there echoed the cries of all our dead...going

¹⁶ European Roma and Travellers Forum and the Informal Platform of Romani Women “Phenjalipe”, *Making Early Marriage in Roma Communities a Global Concern*, 2014, 9. Accessed September 24, 2016. <https://cs.coe.int/team20/cahrom/7th%20cahrom%20plenary%20meeting/item%2004%20-%20ertf%20and%20phenjalipe%20joint%20paper%20making%20early%20marriage%20in%20roma%20communities%20a%20global%20concern.pdf>

¹⁷ Morteau, “Early Marriages”, 104.

¹⁸ Especially after the Berevoiesti case, 2016, where with the support of Romanian local authorities, Roma families were involved in modern slavery as slave owners. Nevertheless, this case provoked a media frenzy which reconstructed slavery as a Roma cultural value, completely neglecting the implication of Romanian slave owners in 500 years of slavery

back centuries.... When I die, I will curse this land for what it has done to our family. I will curse it with the last breath I breathe!"

"This is our country, Grandfather. We were born here. It is not right to curse it."

"A land that calls me a slave and sells my wife and my children off one by one would not be my country, even if I was born here a hundred times...and I will pray that it's swallowed up by its own hate and left to ruin every day until I am rotted and my belongings burnt!"¹⁹

As Letiția Mark explains, "the long period of assimilation, annihilation, ignorance or refusal and discrimination had a negative impact on their (Romani people) social and political life." The process of assimilation into Romanian society, a mandatory but artificial feeling of belonging, which was not easily inserted into the Roma identity, started during the period of slavery abolition, as a required condition for being a free person. In order to be perceived as a non-slave, Roma people had to renounce their language, way of dress and identity. This idea of Romanianization as part of the process of slavery abolitionism was not thoroughly implemented by the authorities, in many situations the authorities were overwhelmed by the new conditions which were so foreign to them. Another material effect of slavery abolition was the massive migration of liberated slaves to the West. The Romanianization process was continued for a long period of time, and as Mark observes, the rediscovery of identity is only a recent development in Roma history: "Roma self-affirmation after the collapse of communism consists among others in re-discovering Roma identity and re-evaluating the non-material Romani patrimony, like the Romani language, the organisation of family, the maintenance of traditions. For Roma intellectuals this patrimony constitutes the base for claiming recognition and dignity while rejecting the interiorization of the stigma put on them by the "Others".²⁰

Multiculturalism is read by Mark as a discourse which goes beyond tolerance, because Roma people were "tolerated" in the Romanian space during slavery. They were tolerated by monasteries, by rulers and by slave-owners. The institution of slavery was perpetuated with the mechanisms of brutal oppression and coercion, as the literature and historical documents show. Tolerance and respect for Roma people was not the main engine of abolitionism, as Mark suggests, but the anachronism of this institution which was not fit for a new modern nation, as it was understood in the West. The local awakening of the abolitionists, Moldavian or Wallachian politicians and boyars, is perceived only as a drunkenness of words, without a real object, as their influence was extremely limited. By reading multiculturalism (and multicultural feminism alike) through Roma slavery, one observes the maintenance of the same Gadge standard, even in the form of a diverse and integrative culture, which still neglects or undervalues Roma culture, seen only as a vulgar, kitsch or ghetto subculture. When it is not completely ignored, neglected and shamed, Roma culture is added in a redefinition of culture as racially and ethnically diverse through the contribution of an *inferior native* coloured population. The multicultural discourse is still constructed on the European white

¹⁹ Trefil, *The Incomplete Ones*, 11

²⁰ Letiția Mark, "Re-descoperirea valorilor identitare" [Re-discovery of Identity Values], *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women's Journal* 1 (2009), 118

colonial standard, but it brings the concept of hybridity as the incorporation of the marginalised groups into this standard.²¹ Mark sees the argument of historical oppression as central in recovering equality, which was denied to Roma women, and in correcting the social disadvantage between the Roma and the Gadje as well as the need for reflection on differences.

Roma people are still seen as unitary, with no differences between them: they are perceived as authentic and traditional, coming from another world or from a mythical past - this perspective denies one thousand years of cohabitation in Europe, it forgets the tough relationship between the Roma and the Gadje, it forgets the forced assimilation, it forgets 500 years of slavery in the Romanian principalities, it forgets the genocide and daily exclusions. In an extreme form of amnesia, Roma people are discovered now, they are filmed, photographed, wrote about and praised as the exotic and the primitive, the *neo-noble savages*. This sudden interest is ephemeral and mercantile, if it is not pure entertainment. The idea of authenticity and the romantic image of the eternal Gypsy (especially) woman have direct connections to how timeless Roma people were portrayed in the nineteenth century, they demand Roma women to act in this pattern to satisfy the desire of the consumers of Roma images, to wear colourful clothes, to sing and dance, to bear children in their arms, to beg, to expose their rags, otherwise the Roma women do not receive the medal of authenticity.²² These images give a fake visibility to Roma people, in media, TV shows and festivals especially, as a show of comedy, burlesque, a travesty, spoken in an imitation of the pejorative linguistic stereotypes and full of caricatured behaviors.

The diversity of the various Roma groups, with its origins during slavery, a classification according to the identity of the slave-owner and the fixed trades according to an economic slavery rationale, is constantly neglected in the abolitionist literature and the modern representation of the Roma woman. A simplification, schematisation or conformity is perpetuated in representation until today: the negative (and sometimes positive) stereotypes infuse the area of legends, sayings, fairytales and romantic clichés: “the artistry and magic of the Gypsies, the free and happy Gypsy, the exotic and erotic beauty of the Gypsy women, the enchantment, the witchcraft, the magic and the mystery of their dark lives.”²³ The nineteenth century literature which focuses on Roma women present them dominated by old superstitions, violent death and consuming passion. Even if there is a large amount of writing, the images are very similar and detached from Roma people. What we are left with is a Gadje fantasy of what Roma women should be like and this line of thought is still functioning, even if its romantic undertones are not so much present in contemporary narratives.

The still popular images of Roma women as romantic stereotypes, easily under the control of the modernist painters (such as Nicolae Grigorescu and Theodor Aman), originate in the image of the Roma woman of the slavery period and have the effect of controlling Roma women through the ideological dimension of oppression. Their romantic aspect incorporates the nostalgia for a bygone era, when the portrayed women were slaves under the absolute power of the non-Roma slave owner. Ideology is present in these popular representations as a body of ideas which reflect the sole interest of a

²¹ Id., 118-128

²² id., 124

²³ id., 125.

specific group of people (which in this case are not Roma and are not women). The high Romanian culture is infused by this racist and sexist ideology, transmitted historically also during state socialism as a form of adopted modern nationalism, a hegemonic (read as natural, normal and inevitable) perception of the past. In what was praised as the very first social novella, Vasile Alecsandri's popular "History of a Gulden", the Roma woman is presented as the quintessential slave who is completely available to the non-Roma noble (in this case, a noble Dutch coin who tells the story): "what measured and agile figures one can find between their (Gypsy) women"; "since I am in the Romanian principalities, I have never found such dainty, so well jointed and, in one word, so agreeable features such as those of Zamfira." The unspeaking character of the novella, the Roma slave Zamfira, is only sixteen, having, as Alecsandri, a slave owner himself, writes, "that childish freshness so priceless in the adornment of a woman, but then all her movements, her looks, her voice had something special, an air of charming wilderness, which would make her similar to an agile deer at the moment of feeling the presence of the hunter in the forest." Her objectification is completed in the description of the novella in images such as: "her raven hair was braided with silver coins and flowers; she was wearing a choker made of red and white beads and rubles, which was bouncing on her breast at each step, creating a delicate clatter and distinct beaming under the rays of the sun."²⁴

Roma women as fortune tellers, exotic dancers, beggars, door-to-door sellers, mothers of many children (the profitable breeders of slavery), noble and accessible savages of the Roma camp, or contemporary non-citizens, women without papers or hated state benefit receivers – all these stereotypes are applied to Roma women as factors of their oppression. Far from the deceiving "positive stereotypes" of Roma freedom in late modernity, the connection between ideological, economic and political oppression put Roma women under a strict social control and their social position is one of subordination. All these stereotypes function as material mechanisms of protection and promotion of Gadge elites, their interests and their world-view.²⁵ The historical exclusion of Roma women, with its origin and practice in slavery, is continued today and is present also in the ways that Gadge popular culture and polices imagine Roma women.

The labor of Roma women during slavery and afterwards gave them a common experience by being involved in two specific fields: agriculture and domestic work. Roma women were ghettoized in domestic work during slavery, and this proximity to the Gadge elites and also the distancing from Roma men through the particularities of the domestic work, including the sexual aspects of this proximity to the Gadge masters, gave Roma women a point of view on the mechanisms of slavery from inside, and created other types of resistance, necessary for their very specific survival. Being inside and also completely outside the Romanian boyar families, Roma women had to take part into strong ties with their masters and their children. The topic of not belonging to the Gadge world but being part of it at the same concerned also Gadge writers and abolitionists and sometimes this paradox was used in literature to create romantic stories about Roma women who tragically (and unsuccessfully) try to move beyond their slave condition and fall in love with the Gadge seducer and master. This paradoxical social position is similar to that of the African-American domestic slave worker and Collins called it the

²⁴ My translation, Vasile Alecsandri, "Istoria unui galbîn" [History of a Gulden] in Proza [The Prose] (Bucharest: Editura pentru literatura, 1967), 20-21.

²⁵ Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 5.

“curious outsider-within social location”,²⁶ a singular marginality that gave birth also to a very specific perspective²⁷ of Roma women on this condition but also triggered a reaction from the Gadje families, especially the young women, who were seen as responsible for creating the social context for the abolitionist movement as Radu Rosetti, for example, explained: “Completely odious was the way in which were used the girls and women of those wretched men [Roma male slaves]. Starting from the principle that the body of the slave is a master's thing, Gypsy women, girls and fully married in front of the Altar women, were seen by the master as true meat for pleasure. They were used in this sense, with the knowledge of their parents and husbands.”

One particular custom from slavery, euphemistically called “the rubbing of the feet”, was performed by Roma women house slaves: “Until the rule of Mihai Sturza, the habit in the boyar houses from the countryside was to send to their guests when they were going to bed a young woman slave to rub their feet, to sleep faster and to have a calmer rest. And this practice stopped only when the boyar daughters, who were European educated in national or foreign pensions or by distinguished foreign governesses, opposed it decisively.”²⁸ But mentioning how Roma women were used by their masters and giving the details of the rubbing of the feet, Rosetti comes to a conclusion which sets the basis for contemporary negative stereotypes of the Roma people:

“Four hundred years of such abject obedience degraded so much those wretched people, killed to such a degree any feeling of human dignity in them, that they would see this horrible insult as natural, against which I do not know any example of opposition, revolt or attempt of revenge. The beating at the ladder was usual in all boyar houses, in those of the small boyars as in those of the big boyars, but I must add that on the other hand, in many of them this so-called Gypsy medicine was used moderately and on the other hand, the lived centuries of slavery made Gypsies lazy, drunkard, dirty people who opened their mouth only to lie, who were always ready to steal anything that they can steal to get their drinks.”²⁹

Understanding the logic of the Gadje thinking, one can track the genealogy of contemporary stereotypes to the times of slavery. The prejudices against Roma people constituted a permanent feature of Romanian history, considering especially the five centuries of slavery followed by the persecutions and deportations by the Antonescu regime, two crucial elements in the construction of the historical Roma identity.³⁰ The absence of Roma people from high-culture as well as from the studies and research on Roma issues can be explained through the silencing of certain oppressed groups by other dominant groups which impose their own perspective on all the aspects concerning the silenced. The silence of Roma women has historical causes connected to

²⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought.” In *Social Problems* 33 vol. 6 (1986): 14–32

²⁷ For a perspective on African-American women, see Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*. Boston: Beacon, 1986.

²⁸ My translations, Radu Rosetti, “Amintiri. Ce am auzit de la alții.” [Memories. What I heard from others.] In Vasile Ionescu, ed. *O mie de ani de singurătate. Romii în proza românească [One thousand years of loneliness. Roma people in Romanian prose]*, București: Aven amentza, 2000, 6.

²⁹ Mark, “Re-discovery of Identity Values”, 125.

³⁰ Poșircă, “The Management of Cultural Risks”, 185

the general hostility seen as a natural and given element in relation to people perceived as inferior. In this location, silencing functions through fantasy, fake images, stereotypes and clichés. But the most used (and efficient) form of silencing is the denial of victimhood, as Alexandra Oprea observes:

“The denial of victimhood to Romani women is part of the general distortion of Romani experiences. Not only is police brutality merely “a fight”, but genocide was merely “persecution”, slavery was merely a product of the times, and instead of constructive expulsion Romani migrations are often attributed to their being “nomadic”. Discrimination in the market place against Roma equals “they don’t want to work” (i.e., lazy). Note that this does not mean that Roma are never seen as victims; what it does mean is that they are most likely to be seen as victims when the victimizer is also Romani. For example, Romani children who must beg in order for their family to survive are seen as “trafficked” by their parents. There it is less as a result of sympathy for the victim (Romani children) and more as a result of animosity toward the victimizing community and a reluctance to acknowledge the structural racism that leads to begging in the first place.”³¹

For Mark,³² the topic of silence hides the sadness of exclusion and of reduction to silence of a whole population which is paradoxically portrayed as too vocal, too noisy, in order to separate the Gadje from the negative loud Roma way of speaking and acting. The remedy for this situation can be found in a famous quote by Audre Lorde that was chosen to open the third issue of *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal* in three languages (English, Romanian and Romani): “The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.”³³

When thinking about enslaved Roma women, one has to take into consideration that all social groups have a particular world-view based on their historical experiences, a world-view that evolves in relation to other world-views and their new experiences.³⁴ Even if this particular perspective is not accessible or is not the main narrative concerning a particular period or group experience, this perspective exists and sometimes can be found hidden under layers of social deception.³⁵ For Roma people, different cosmologies, according to the diverse Roma groups, can offer explanations for slavery, which can be very different than those provided by the slave owners. Even if slavery literature remembers only the Gadje perspective, even if this perspective can be emphatic and can sometimes represent an effort to understand the atrocity of the slavery institution, it always misses the Roma perspective, which is still undocumented and completely ignored by historiography. Nevertheless, this world-view existed and still exists, producing a specific ethos which helped Roma communities to survive against all odds through language, religion, family structures and communitarian

³¹ Alexandra Oprea, “Reclaiming victimhood, rethinking agency”, *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal* 3 (2011), 185; for a constant denial of Roma victimhood for the period of slavery, see the writings of Viorel Achim, especially Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*.

³² Mark, “Re-discovery of Identity Values”, 125.

³³ Audre Lorde, *The transformation of silence into language and action*, paper delivered in 1977, quoted in *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal* 3 (2011): 3. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1997).

³⁴ Mechal Sobel. *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

³⁵ Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 10.

structures. Even if this ethos was so crucial for surviving through slavery, genocide and assimilation politics, and it had found diverse expressions from various Roma groups and individuals, this knowledge was hidden and suppressed by the Gadge, even in the very act of “discovering” the Roma people on Gadge terms. Roma knowledge, as a form of resistance, opposed historical injustice but was also silenced and subjugated by the Gadge world-view on the Roma.

As mothers, medicine women, women of faith and teachers in the urban Roma ghettos (*mahalale*) and isolated rural communities, Roma women had a crucial role in maintaining and updating the Roma ethos and world-view. Their participation in creating a distinct Roma culture as a compulsory form of survival, with its strict separate roles for men and women (as they were prescribed within the institution of slavery and its controlling mechanisms), produced historically an independent Roma women-centered world-view. Through their lived experiences, in strong connection to their extended families and communities, Roma women constructed individually and collectively specific ideas of what it meant to be a Roma woman in different time periods. Through these experiences and involvement in the life of the community, Roma women could find collective expressions and own definitions of the self and of their community, definitions which had the capacity to resist the all-present Gadge definitions of Roma womanhood, those negative images and definitions which had the role to assure the persistence of social exclusion, silencing and shaming. The recovery of this hidden culture of resistance produced and kept by Roma women was one crucial purpose of Roma feminism since the 1990s in individual or collaborative developments. In the Roma feminist literature, the mentioning of the Roma slavery is not accidental or just a historical footnote, but a critical element in defining the construction of Roma womanhood on non-Gadge terms.

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