

'DISSIDENT READING' OF ROMANI FOLK LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Dissidence operates, necessarily, with reference to dominant structures. Dissident reading uncovers those structures to oppose them and almost reinscribes them. The idea is to show the possibility of subversion which is only possible with respect to hierarchy. The term was coined by Raymond Williams and became popular through Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's collaborative work Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism (1985). The article uses the concept of dissident reading to locate the potential of subversion in Romani folk literature by analysing two Romani folk tales. It attempts to locate the points of disparities and persecution implied in the tales and thereby using them to uncover the dissidence.

Keywords: Dissidence, Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore, subversion, Roma, hierarchy, Established.

Introduction

Dissident reading is a mode of practice doing two tasks simultaneously:

- To interrogate the hidden political agenda and power structures in the text,
- To look for the possibility of subversion of the power structure.

Although dissident reading looks out for political agendas in the text yet it is not a compartmentalised method because social, economic and cultural factors are interlinked while studying about a community marginalised for centuries. The purpose of the article is to show the various structures at play, employed in Romani folk literature, to address the concerns of a community of dispersed and homeless people; their political powerlessness and their persecution and genocide under Nazi rule rendering them voiceless. Being a part of Cultural Materialism, dissident reading focuses more on canonical texts because these have the potential of political intervention rather than the obscure ones. However, the article makes a digression and acknowledges the fact that folk literature is no longer an obscure area to study. Especially for a historically persecuted and migrant community telling stories is an inter-subjective experience, a dialogic performance that shapes and constructs their culture and identity. Given the importance of folk literature in handing down the traditions as a way of keeping them lively, the diasporic nature of the community and its culture and folk literature makes the identity a "production which is never complete always in process and always constituted within, not outside" (Hall 222).

Dissidence addresses the ideological construction. Marx and Engels declare in *The German Ideology*:

The class which is the ruling material force is, at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production. (61),

that is, groups with material power will dominate the institutions that deal with ideas. That is why people can be persuaded to believe things that are neither just, humane, nor to their advantage. This ideological constructedness controls our subjectivities and the scope for dissident thought and expression. Then the question arises if one's language follows the power structures that sustain the social order, how can one conceive, let alone organize, resistance.

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Raymond Williams observes that ideology has always to be *produced*:

Social orders and cultural orders must be seen as being actively made: actively and continuously, or they may quite quickly break down. (201)

This is because the conflict and contradiction stem from the very strategies through which ideologies strive to contain the expectations of the marginalised class. This tension creates failure—inability or refusal—to identify one's interests with the dominant may occur, and giving way to dissidence.

Alan Sinfield proposes the term *dissident* rather than *subversive*, since the latter incorporates the sense of achievement. But, since mostly the dominant structures do not fall, containment occurs. Hence,

Dissidence, I take to imply, refusal of an aspect of the dominant, without prejudging an outcome. This may sound like a weaker claim, but I believe it is actually stronger insofar as it posits a field necessarily open to continuing contest, in which at some conjunctures the dominant will lose ground while at others the subordinate will scarcely maintain its position. (49)

As Jonathan Dollimore has said, dissidence may provoke brutal repression which shows that "the challenge really was unsettling" (Sinfield 49). A formal textual analysis cannot determine whether a text is subversive or contained but the historical conditions surrounding it are decisive. The text is always a site of cultural contest, but it is never a self-sufficient site, independent of the context. Similarly folk literature holds a community together under a collective identity through folklore-in-practice. What is essential for the perpetually marginalized people is the shared conception of their cultural identity. Stripped off of their nationalities and legal rights, they are left with traditions which require preservation and re-creation. Hence, folk literature offers them imaginary fullness against the bitter reality of *Porrajmos* (Romani word for Holocaust) and nomadic life to see those fine lines of significance, hearing the silence which is not easily heard because so much has happened.

The Roma have a palpable presence in many countries today and are generally known everywhere with the misnomer 'Gypsy'. From the moment they set foot in Europe, they were exiled, enslaved and exterminated continuously and have been relegated to the margins. One 'Gypsy' proverb speaks volumes: "bury me standing for I've been on my knees all my life." Their roots have been evidently established in India- north-western region, specifically through various linguistic mappings and genealogical experiments with the closest kinship to the nomadic tribe of Banjaras of Rajasthan. The serological analyses by the geneticist Vijender Bhalla have established a common ethnic substratum in India that Romanies share with Jats, Punjabi Sikhs and Rajputs. Writers (for instance, Barany 2002; Hancock 2002) arguing in favour of the military expedition date their departure in the sixth century. These captives were further brought into the Byzantine Empire by the Ottoman Turks after defeating Ghaznavid conquerors and used as direct participants in their militia, mainly as servants in auxiliary detachments and later degraded to the position of slaves till the advent of Industrial Revolution.

Such findings are particularly important since they challenge the myths and stereotypes attached to their name and culture, If the generally accepted, largely hegemonic Eurocentric view of the origin in a low-caste group of wandering musicians can be correctly replaced by a paradigm of origin in a warrior caste based on scientific analysis by Indian and Romani scholars, the contemporary Romani population can be accorded "a verifiable and demonstrable origin and identity" (Hancock and Dileep Karanth 101).

In his bid to create "a newly-shaped...and especially...deserving Aryan race" (Hancock 35), propounded by Houston Chamberlain in *The Foundations of Nineteenth Century*, the infamous Nuremberg laws were passed "for the Protection of German Blood and Honour". Punished for not having jobs or homes, for not enlisting in taxpayer's registers, tracked down in Gypsy hunt, driven out of forests by setting them on fire, mass deportations to Auschwitz-Birkenau for extermination, using them as guinea pigs to test the efficacy of cyanide gas chambers- everything was legalised. Called by various names like vermin, disease, and plague- all aimed to dehumanize them and benumb the general public- they became the 'lives undeserving of life', a phrase that became a common identification in Germany. The carefully formulated anti-Gypsism, initially based on biological inferiority, was later supplanted with a cultural basis as well. Due to the growing unrest, Roma lived with self-imposed nomadism; the reluctance of officials to assimilate them acted as the catalyst.

Studying Romani folktales in the light of this context and instances of ideological construction by the dominant structures creates "new articulations of perspective" (Felman and 110 Laub, xv) on the importance of folk literature for a community constantly on the routes.

Why Gypsies are scattered about the Earth (Romani tale)

A gypsy family was travelling with its wagon and a skinny horse. While travelling for many months, his family grows and the wagon is full of children "tumbling over one another" that the horse could barely manage to pull. As they go along the rutted track pots, pans and children would go tumbling out. During the daylight, the children are found but due to the dark they could not be found and the gypsy leaves them behind. So everywhere the gypsy goes he leaves a child behind and that is how they are scattered on the earth.

The tale is a satirical rendition of the stereotypes spread among the non-Roma about anti-sedentary and nomadic lifestyle. However, the comic satire also shows that the Roma have heard and internalised these stereotypes far too long that the stigmatisation tactic of the established has now diminished in impact. On the other hand, comparing gypsy children to pots and pans is the internalising of the collective disgrace largely occurring due to the uneven balance of power. Due to the imbalance, the social slur enters the self-image of the outsiders, weakens and disarms them. Their very outsider position engenders them with inferiority.

This is also governed by certain aspects which are found common in the whole of the targeted population. Poverty is one example as shown clearly in the tale as well. One aspect is used to symbolize the entire community, also called "anomie" (Elias xxv). Anomie, literally meaning, is lawlessness associated with bad integration and disapproval in the eyes of the established social and cultural structure which is associated with good integration and approval. One random gypsy family is used to establish a general outlook towards all the gypsies- the tale starts with "a gypsy family" and ends up making a norm with "that's how gypsies are scattered". Moreover, when the outsider internalizes them, it seems ordained by Nature. The tale of gypsy wandering comes close to the observation made by a psychoanalyst to a survivor at the Yale Video Archive that "Hitler's crime was not only the killing of the Jews but getting them to believe that they deserve it" (Laub 79). The internalising of the gaze of the established carries the potential for dissidence but at the end it also reinscribes the power structures. The gaze of those in power is not a passive viewing but creates such an environment around the weaker ones that they start to interpret it as their own world. Of course there are multiple actors involved in the circularity of the interpretation of gaze.

The Three Travellers (Romani tale)

An Indian, a Jew and a Gypsy travel together for a long time on the road. They stop one night at a farm and ask the owner for shelter. The owner provides them with two beds only and one of them had to spend the night in a barn. Indian traveller goes inside the barn but comes back that he cannot sleep with the cow. Jew goes inside and comes back that he cannot sleep with the pig in the barn. Finally, Gypsy goes inside but the cow and the pig come out saying "we can't sleep in that place with a dirty gypsy."

The story is an example of in-group poking fun at itself which is also an atrocity committed by oneself resulting from external stimuli. Even the animals keeping taboos on having contact with the Gypsy traveller signifies a means of social control through "blame gossip" (Elias xvi) automatically making him to feel inferior. Usage of animals for this purpose shows how deep the hatred goes among the non-Romani with which the younger generation needs to be made aware of. What starts as hate speech propaganda self-replicates and mutates and passes on from one person to another to form collective psychology.

Individuals are not born with built-in hate mechanism but the external environment can exert tremendous force in indoctrinating them. Legislating against the Romani way of life, restricting their freedom and mobility noticeably altered the public discourse about the populations and provided a catalyst for polarisation. This is accelerated by what Elias notes: "an established group tends to attribute to its outsider group as a whole the "bad" characteristics of that group's "worst" section- of its anomic minority" (xix). Added to this, the following comment puts the hate speech into action:

The difference between cattle and gypsies is that cattle are subject to veterinary control. Livestock cannot behave like gypsies but reverse can be allowed. (Kalin Rumanov, prize winning Bulgarian journalist)

When words come from the figure of authority, they quickly translate into a phenomenon where the majority culture is enshrined above lesser humans. This hate speech becomes internalized and even accepted as a truism when passed on from one generation to another as is this tale from the storyteller when he was pretty young and now to others after him. This self-categorization legitimises exclusion, sometimes wilful but imposed nevertheless.

Drawing on the valuable insights from Norbert Elias' work *The Established and the Outsiders*, the article highlights the role of ideological construction in dehumanising a whole community. It is fuelled by historical discrimination and the struggle to maintain power imbalance so as to permit partial and biased advantages with no alternative to the group on the harshly receiving end. As Elias says, "the structural characteristics [that help in faster progress] make the established feel impelled to treat those of another group with a measure of contempt" (xxi). This is achieved with the exercise of power in various ways. In medieval society, power had been consolidated in a sovereign authority who exercised absolute control over the subjects. In the modern era, this is done in a procedural and structural manner. Elias' premise is that individuals are bonded together in various ways through their interdependencies, which are always in flux. These fluxes generate identification and dis-identification at the same time. Both are emotional and cognitive processes with the potential for affective involvement or detachment. Emotions developed at the earliest level of interaction affect future transactions so much that any change in the conduct of either group will always be judged according to the earliest expression. The absence of face-to-face encounters between two different groups furthers the mutual identification regarding the other group. The symbols which become the basis of dis-identification are made popular with similar connotations in wider areas. For example, even for those who have not actually met the Roma, caravans carry the currency of an anti-sedentary lifestyle. As a result, bounded solidarity is developed in the group existing on the imbalanced side of power equation.

With the change in the political landscape of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the setting up of robust commerce and tax system with no financial contribution from the Roma towards society turned them into a threat to social control. State authorities felt the need to instil in the minds of the public that Roma were not making an equal share to public duties. Role of discourse emanating from media and political establishment are the effective authorities in creating what Nicholas Rose calls the "government of madness", which includes "press campaigns, pressure groups, local residents protesting" (Richardson 80). For example, in France, Louis XII banished Roma altogether; more than three or four Roma gathering was not allowed; being a 'bohemian was made a punishable crime; denounced as traitors to Christendom and as spies of Turks; in the enlightened Europe, the state sustained its position on slavery laws and even legalised it by racial profiling; prohibiting the use of the Romany language; mandatory interracial marriages to curb the physically defining traits; limiting the duration and location of stay in urban areas vs. legal obligation of children to attend school; legislations controlling the stationing of caravans. So even if the UN or human rights agencies of the EU consider them worthy of being granted legal citizenship, emotional revulsion against Roma still persists and manifests in public outcry.

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