

Contextualizing the Terms “Road” And “Home” in Romani Poetry

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Abstract:

Nomadism has been romanticized and regarded as a trait tied to the Romani or ‘Gypsy’ lifestyle. It has also been held in opposition to the idea of settlement. The paper explores the concepts of movement and settlement in selected Romani poetry to establish that the preconceived meanings of certain notions are built due to the influence of literature produced in the previous era and the implications of the terms "road" and "home" are not so apparent when it comes to Romani writing. In an analysis of Romani poetry, "road" and "home" are perceived in their history and association with the non-Roma.

Keywords: Roma, road, home, poetry, diaspora

Introduction

The concept of movement is a loaded one when Romani identity is contextualized. With the attribution of mysticism, primitivism, and romanticism to the existence of “gypsies,” nomadism is perceived as bearing the newest elements of human nature. Literature produced till recently has nevertheless confirmed people's assumptions of the experience of nomadism, a term allegedly glued to the Romani lifestyle. Settlement is often held in opposition to nomadism. The paper contextualizes the idea of road and home to the related essentialities of existence as perceived by Romani poets. Though the poets analyzed here belong to different countries, there is linearity in the expression of thought, especially about the past. This is not to establish that every individual who identifies as Rom or Traveller has had the same experience. But the paper argues that when it comes to Romani poetry, "road" and "home" drive into the centrality of thought. Trying to neither challenge nor reaffirm the stereotypes, the paper takes an objective standpoint in analyzing the description of migration and settlement as rendered in the poems.

The essentialist discourse formed over the idea of nomadism being an element characteristic of an idealized life has started being a subject of criticism since the advent of Romani writing. The literature lovers will not be unfamiliar with the dramatic depictions of the

vagrant 'Gypsy' framed by the literary masters of the previous era. Perhaps the most popular among them is Mathew Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy*, wherein the scholar escapes the ennui and perils of conformity by "roaming the world with that wild brotherhood" (line 38). Various other writings that span different genres have contributed to this romantic fixation on the itinerant lifestyle of the Roma. Without this glorification, the depictions of Gypsies merely ventured into the threats these vagabonds posed. But do these renditions align with Roma's perception of movement and thus their perception of reality? Can one draw a parallel between Roma's narrative of travels and the histories of migration as experienced by other groups? If so, in what ways will be the point at issue in this analysis?

In an intimate exploration of the selected poems by Romani poets from different countries, it is impossible to overlook the recurrence of the term "road" and other similar words. In contradiction to the popular image of the stretches of road that takes the traveler to a horizon where a plethora of possibilities awaits and excites the human soul, the road rests as a symbol of many aspects of Romani life that have so far remained untouched in narration. History is one such aspect, as rightly pointed out in Ian Hancock's introductory note to *Roads of the Roma: A Pen Anthology of Gypsy Writers*, which ought to be discussed in understanding Romani poetry. Having traced back Romani origin to India with linguistic similarities, Romani poets made it their subject to peregrinate into the idea of the first road their ancestors took. Road, an inevitable part of their memory of the past, takes Leksa Manus's poetic faculty into an inquiry into their ancestors' homeland in "The Roads of the Roma ." But where, my God is the long-lost road, / the one right road, the one first- traveled?" (lines 3-4)

As the search culminates at the banks of the Indus river in the poem, the poet devises the tool of the road to trace the geographical route the Romani ancestors undertook centuries ago. They carried on with migration for various historical and political reasons, subverting the widespread belief that Roma moved from place to place because their transient nature is inherent. However, more than attempting to establish a solid ground to their origin, the poems about the past are inked in explorations of several experiences when that "distant land" has been left behind. According to Saban Iliaz, "The Long Road" they took led them towards "night"; night is indicative of a life devoid of happiness. The impoverished group having had nothing to satiate their thirst and hunger "got up again and continued along the road" when morning came. Being on the move does not project as a choice in this description. At times, the titles alone accredit this notion, like when Dezidar Banga chooses to call them tramps. The lines do not surfeit with excitement in treading into unknown destinations; instead, they signify an indefiniteness and confusion about the fate of their people. Saban Iliaz, in yet another poem titled "I was Born in Black Suffering," also equates their movement to tramping when he writes:

Oh yes, that's me, all right
tramping along the road
barefoot, ravenous-
and on bad days
the wind blows
rain pours
and there's nowhere for me to shelter... (lines 1-7)

They were forcefully evicted from their encampments which left them with no option but to be on the move. "Gypsy has become a synonym for the nomad in western Europe. However, it is not certain that all Gypsies were nomadic by choice in the past... Often Gypsies moved because they were forced to do so" (Kenrick, 179). Many western nations held them as a threat to mainstream society, and this prejudice extended to their actions, both subtle and severe, in their encounters with the Roma.

The lack of acceptance from the non-Romahas been marked in the stories of Roma in different forms. In some cases, they have been denied encampment; at other times, the persistent intolerance ended only in pushing them to concentration camps. The journey from the past to the present was not a walk in the park, and that has been reflected in expressions like "dirt road" (Krasnici), "dark road"(Ilias), and "journey of sorrow" (Ilias). Having been burdened with experiences of oppression for centuries, this ethnic group bags a history like no other. This could also be why the poetry is filled with incertitude about the future or the road ahead. Nevertheless, one can find a determination to reconstruct narratives about them with their own stories by embracing the past, which has undeniably been influential in forming Rom's identity today. In establishing Jimmy Story's take on reality about the Roma, he asserts:

If we reconstruct the history
from dust and ashes
it is because this dust
came from our own feet
and the ashes from our bones. (lines 40-44)

Even in accepting how things have span out for them in the past, Roma's engagement with the non-Roma is complex. In "I am the Common Rom," the narrator is forced to hide his identity from others because he believes coexistence with the non-Roma is possible only in attempting to entirely assimilate to the existent culture and veil the Romani one.

I told you, kids, not to speak Romanes in front of the gadget.
Now it's time to move again.
And why did you go and wear a long skirt, girl?

The gadget knew right away we were from;
now we'll never get an apartment. (Kwiek, lines 30-34)

Most of the Roma have adapted to the culture of the country they live in. Though in the particular poem, adaptation does not come out as a choice. It is identified that cultural adaptation, otherness, memory, etc .are common themes in Romani poetry. So is it in the writings of other migrants? There have also been discussions about holding Roma as the first ever diasporic community abroad. But is it possible to draw a parallel between Romani writing and diasporic writing? For example, Indian Diasporic writing in its thematic content is filled with memory, nostalgia, a sense of yearning, rootlessness, otherness, cultural clash, etc..... On a surface level, Romani writing also seems to manifest similar themes. But the expanse of time folded into Romani history is incomparable, affecting the negotiations of each theme aforementioned on a different level in Romani writing.

When a theme like memory which has a direct association to the past, is explored, the poems that have been analyzed before show how it plays out in writing. The memory of a homeland and a sense of longing as it is expressed in diasporic writing is invalid here. Romani authors who live in different countries are not even third or fourth-generation immigrants in their respective host countries. Their memory is not tied to a specific homeland. It doesn't rest upon a definite place. But neither can it be said that Romani's writing is devoid of memory. Memory is one of the most prominent themes here. It is mainly about the experiences they had once traveled and life on the road began. In the sense that home is also a symbolic space of belonging and not just physical areas, it can be noted that Romani poets feel connected to what constitutes their heritage. Romani language, wagon, dance, music, nature, and most importantly, road thus again gain prominence in poetry.

Being pushed to the margins for centuries, Roma is not unaware that they are discriminated against on racial grounds. Ian Hancock's enlightening poem, "You smug bastard," is all about the discriminatory and racist measures taken at a standard Rom just because of the "Romany" tag. The poem shows that Roma is still perceived as Other, even in a country that is assumed to be inclusive. Hancock twice experienced racist encounters with Canadian immigration officials since his papers had the Romany label.

To hear again, I'm not suitable
for your precious Canada?
"Not our type of immigrant"?
Too righteous for words.
No thanks.
We live our lives hearing this shit
from people like you.
Jailers, immigration officers, policemen.

No faces:

Twelve million soundless throats
a thousand years of being pushed away
by your fathers and children. (Hancock, lines 6-17)

It is an emotional outburst for having been treated in condescending ways repeatedly. The poem shows that a country that accepts immigrants refuses to open its doors to Roma. Like other migrants, Roma experiences otherness. But according to this poem, they are pushed to the extremities.

Romani authors, unlike diasporic writers, do not seem to dwell on the goodness of the past. Neither do they express a longing to go back to an imaginary homeland? The reason probably lies in Ian Hancock's statement, "Nostalgia, they say, is for those with happier histories ."Their history is stained with grief, especially in the poems "Only ashes remain" and "The terror years ."The poet evokes life in concentration camps where thousands of Roma were killed. Roma's experience of the holocaust is widely unknown, and it is in the writings of Romani authors that they come to the forefront. What is interesting in these poems is that the poets use the word 'house' instead of 'camp.'Rom who "is drawn by the promise of a land" and a roof is delivered the most terrifying of encounters. The irony is all-out when Rajko Djuric writes, "Our house is Auschwitz," because a house is supposed to be a haven. But in the case of Roma, the only promised house turned their bones into ashes. This brings into the contest the question of how they perceive home or the idea of settlement with these many complexities attached to their migration history.

Romani poets bring into discussion two dimensions of the subject. One is about homelessness, and the other is about forced assimilation. If compared to familiar diasporic writing, Romani poetry also laments rootlessness. When the diasporic subject finds it difficult to feel a sense of belonging towards both the homeland and the host country, Roma's rootlessness stems from the absence of a physical place to call home. Diasporic subject undergoes a psychological dilemma, and Roma undergoes more of a material one. Roma's rootlessness translates into homelessness in Rajko Djuric's "Without house or grave ."He calls the Roma "toys of the wind" because his father is "graveless," his people are "homeless," and in the face of helplessness, he leads

... a life
forwards, backward
along the roads
that time forgot. (lines 23-26)

The issue of homelessness is grave and is rightly reflected in several other poems. In the face of such a bearing, yet another dimension is presented to the readers in "The stone":

Take away the stone
That holds back our freedom

Killing the only life

We've ever had. (Ward, lines 12-15)

In the Republic of Ireland, camping grounds were made inaccessible by blocking them with large stones. This was also done intending to force the travellers into houses. The poet expresses his disapproval of barring their movement. The prospect of settlement is equally loaded as any form of decision the state or authorities takes conflicts with Roma's preferences. Alexian Santino Spinelli takes it to his poetry about the confinement felt under a roof as opposed to living in harmony with nature.

The roof protecting me now
makes me small
and these walls
with the windows
trap me behind flowers:

A prison with bars. (lines 15-21)

Whether in the dispute embedded in homelessness or forced sedentarisation, Roma is seldom given a choice about their own life. These poems put forth different issues that can be rounded to a single notion: one of choice.

Conclusion

The implications of certain concepts like "road" and "home" are not as apparent as they appear. The image of the road has been romanticized to a more significant extent, especially when it comes to Roma or 'Gypsies'. The portrayal of nomadism in literature reminded one of the exciting adventures on the long roads. But an analysis of Romani poetry elucidates that the word "road" is a loaded one, and it is strongly connected to Romani history and non-Roma's attitude towards them. The term has been used in both literal and metaphorical senses. Similar is the case with "home". "Home doesn't only act as a shelter for the group. It expounds a whole arena of complex dynamics related to settlement choice. Romani poets have devised the images of "road" and "home" to explore themes that have appeared central in other migrant narratives like Indian diasporic writing. In attempting to understand if their narrative affixes their reality to other migrants' as we know it, it is observed that though specific themes like footlessness, racism, alienation, memory, and cultural adaptation are common derivatives, Roma's experiences are unique and varied. And so are their renditions. The dichotomy of home and foreign land, familiar and strange, does not operate on the same level as it does in diasporas writing. The recurrence of the terms is indicative of the experiences of the past Roma encountered. An exploration of Romani poetry focused on these notions that had been misconceived till now validates Roma's take on things.

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