

**„BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA  
FACULTY OF EUROPEAN STUDIES**

**Summary of Doctoral Thesis**

# **The Image of Roma in Literature**

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## Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 <i>Hypotheses and terminological explanations</i>	5
1.2 <i>The stage of research</i>	14
<b>2. In search of a framework. The identity of Roma: from the regime of representations to the political effects</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1. Identity and representation in the pre-modern era	21
2.1.1. <i>“What’s in a name?”</i>	21
2.1.2. <i>The Roma in medieval chronicles</i>	27
2.1.3. <i>In the religious imaginary</i>	31
2.1.4. <i>“Bogus pilgrims” or “genuine Egyptians”?</i>	34
2.1.5. <i>From constestation to repression</i>	37
2.2. The discourse of Enlightenment: from the recognition of alterity to assimilation practices	44
2.2.1. <i>The dawn of the Enlightenment</i>	44
2.2.2 <i>The ilusion of assimilation</i>	47
2.2.3. <i>About the aftermath of a cannibalism case</i>	48
2.2.4. <i>Grellmann’s Roma</i>	52
2.3. The Romantic discourse or the valuing of difference	57
2.4. The racist discourse	61
2.4.1. <i>Sources of modern antigypsism</i>	61
2.4.2. <i>Gypsies and racial hygiene</i>	65
2.5. The ethnicist discourse	71
2.5.1. <i>From race to the ethnic group: a “complicated” route in Roma studies</i>	71
2.5.2. <i>The Roma “ethnos” in postwar modern theories</i>	74
2.5.3. <i>Alternative voices</i>	81
2.6. A conclusion	86
<b>3. The Roma in Western literary representations</b>	<b>91</b>
3.1. Playing with identity in Renaissance literature	94
3.2. Between Enlightenment and Romantic utopia	107
3.3. The Romantic heritage	113
3.3.1. <i>A mysterious an problematic “race”</i>	115
3.3.2. <i>Romantic erotic fantasies</i>	129
3.4. In post-romantic literature	140
3.5. Sexuality and the intermediary in Modernism	148
3.6. An outlook of postwar literature	159
<b>4. In search of a bibliography. Romanian reserch on Roma</b>	<b>165</b>
4.1. An outlook of pre 19 <sup>th</sup> century sources	167
4.2. 19 <sup>th</sup> century research on Roma	175
4.3. The research in the between wars period	181
4.4. During the communist regime	193
4.5. After 1989	198
4.6. A conclusion	209
<b>5. The representation of Roma in Romanian literature</b>	<b>212</b>
5.1. The Gypsy in folklore	215

5.2. Ethnography and identity politics in <i>Ṭiganiada</i>	229
5.3. Between two dark periods: from slavery to deportation	241
5.3.1. <i>Abolitionist literature</i>	241
5.3.2. „ <i>It's a pity he is a Gypsy</i> ” or <i>the limits of acceptance</i>	257
5.4. An outlook of postwar literature	271
<b>Conclusions</b>	278
<b>Bibliography</b>	289

**Key words:**

*The Roma; literary representation; ethnic imaginary; scientific discourse; literary discourse; marginality.*

This aim of this thesis is to analyze the images of Roma in literature. Besides drawing a parallel between the representation of Roma in western literature and that in the Romanian literature, I discuss on the issue of the literary canon and its role in reproducing the popular stereotypes of Roma. My primary argument is that in the Romanian literature the *Gypsy* served as the inferior other rather than the exotic stranger like in western literature. In order to understand the literary discourse in its context, I offer an extensive view on the evolution of scientific knowledge about the real population and draw the connections between the scientific stereotypes and the literary motifs.

First, I wish to clarify my understanding of some of the concepts I employ in the thesis. Regarding marginality, my focus here is not on the condition of being marginalized but with the definition of marginality and its awareness in a particular literary *milieu*. Jonathan Crewe traces the beginnings of a discourse on marginality in the radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s, suggesting that the development of such a discourse was powered by “the ongoing performance of a cultural and political critique from feminist, African-American, third-world, gay, lesbian and other positions self-identified as marginal or capable of being so regarded”<sup>1</sup>. But no such critique would have been successful without the conceptual framework provided by Derrida’s deconstruction and Foucault theory of power relations. On one hand, Derrida made relevant the margin-centre opposition within culture and defined the tools of its deconstruction while Foucault has described how discursive power marginalized, and devalued what was and already regarded to be marginal.<sup>2</sup>

The trend to deconstruct and expose the mechanisms behind the negative representations of otherness is also visible in the case of Roma studies. However, the longstanding marginality of the field diluted the impact of such criticism. As Wim Willems puts it, the marginality of the Roma themselves made the studies about them to

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Crewe, “Defining Marginality?”, in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (Spring, 1991), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> *idem*, p. 122.

develop in a “splendid isolation”.<sup>3</sup> The cultural history of the populations labelled as Roma or Gypsy has rarely interested the visible, mainstream scholars. The entire scientific tradition about Roma under scrutiny is extremely heterogeneous (fragmented either by the focus on a single culture or by the methodological approach of a single discipline), thus further complicating its deconstruction.

Although not synonymous, *marginal* and *exotic* are contextually overlapping concepts. The marginal as *other* is defined in relation to the central or better yet the dominant, but still within the limits of a cultural space while the exotic infers an otherness beyond the confines of a culture. The difference does not arise only from the implied spatial distance but also from the cultural attitudes both the marginal and the exotic induce. The marginal is at best the one who lags behind the normal course of society, and is the object of discursive practices that expect, design, or enforce integration.

The representation of the exotic however requires a temporal sequencing. In the words of Chris Bongie, exoticism is "a discursive practice intent on recovering 'elsewhere' values 'lost' with the modernization".<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Bongie suggests that the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the impact of the French Revolution produced an ambivalent vision of history within exoticist discourse. One such vision, which he calls “exoticizing exoticism”, claims the "superiority of civilization over savagery" and the opposite, the "imperialist exoticism" predicate the "superiority of civilization over savagery".<sup>5</sup>

The first chapter *In search of a framework. The identity of Roma: from the regime of representations to the political effects* analyses the implications of scientific definitions of the populations labeled as Gypsy/Roma on their cultural representations and the politics regarding them I identified five intellectual discourses on Roma and I analyzed them conceptually and chronologically: the pre-modern discourse, the enlightened discourse, the romantic discourse, the racist discourse and the postwar ethnic discourse. My intention was also to identify the connections between the different

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Lucassen, Wim Willems și Annemarie Cottaar, *Gypsies and other itinerant groups. A socio-historical approach*, MacMillan/St Martin's Press, New York, 1998, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism and the Fin de Siecle*, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.

definitions and the evolution of institutional concern with the so-called “the Gypsy question

Chapter *The Roma in Western literary representations* follows the chronological and conceptual evolution of the way the group identity of Roma was perceived in representative texts of western literature. *At the same time, I analyze contexts such as political or personal that might explain the option of different authors for a Gypsy typology* (marginal/exotic). Lastly, my focus was also on the way literature relates to the scientific discourse.

Chapter *In search of a bibliography. Romanian research on Roma* traces the evolution of the Romanian body of knowledge about the Roma, from the medieval chronicles to the abundant literature of the post communist period. My main concern here was more than simple “accountings” of texts. Therefore, I aimed to identify a Romanian variant of the discourse on Roma identity, indicating its producers, its inner logic and the way this discourse related to the western one

Last chapter, **The representation of Roma in Romanian literature** analyzes the Romanian version of the literary of Roma’s group identity, beginning with folklore and ending with an outlook of the postwar literature vision. The aim here was to draw a typology of how authors relate to what they specifically or superficially define as a Gypsy *Weltanschauung*.

My conclusion is that it is not possible to explain fully the European or the Romanian stereotypes about Roma based on literature and cultural analysis alone. Roma’s historical experience of oppression and exclusion does not match their extraordinary inclusion in the “esthetic landscape”. However, not only the lack of political power accounts for the historically rooted structural weakness of Roma communities but also their lack of self-representation. This calls for interdisciplinary approaches that might have a better chance in revealing the intricate relation between the imagery of the *Gypsy* and the actual historical experience of real Roma.