

“Myth of a Gypsy Woman” as the Quintessence of the Dream of Freedom in the Works by A.S. Pushkin and P. Merimee

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Abstract—The article deals with the problem of how the character of a Gypsy woman appears in the creative work of A.S. Pushkin and P. Merimee. The article reveals the impact of Gypsy culture on poets and writers of the 19th century through the analysis of cultural and historical prerequisites of the appearance of this character in the works of authors belonging to different literary schools and temporal coordinates. The purpose of this study is an analysis of peculiar Gypsy women characters of 19th century literature – those of *Zemfira* and *Carmen*.

Keywords—*Gypsy culture; Gypsy woman character; cultural and historical prerequisites; romantic heroine; conflict; myth of a Gypsy woman*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gypsy culture is an organic part of world culture. Gypsy love songs, from as early the beginning of the 19th century, have become an inseparable part of Russian folklore and are loved ‘til this day. Spanish flamenco music and dance are fascinating for spectators until now.

Gypsy poetry and dance have attracted poets, writers, musicians and artists, but all of their efforts to grasp the enigmatic, mysterious power and wisdom of these people have been difficult to grasp.

Taking up the theme of Gypsy culture, poets and writers created an utopian character of a Gypsy woman as being the quintessence of the romantic dream of freedom and their own understanding of these mysterious people. N. Bessonov called this phenomenon “myth of a Gypsy woman” [1].

One of the first notable Gypsy woman characters appeared as early as the 18th century in M. Cervantes’ short story “Beautiful Gypsy Girl”. Further genesis of this character can be traced to: *Zemfira* (“Gypsies” by A.S. Pushkin), *Sara* (“Gypsy Woman” by Ye.A. Baratynsky), *Carmen* (“Carmen” by P. Merimee), *Esmeralda* (“Notre Dame de Paris” by V. Hugo), *Radda* (“Makar Chudra” by M. Gorky). Writers and poets also turned to the Gypsy theme in their works – be it a general description of Gypsies or a

creation of their own original image of a Gypsy: I.S. Turgenev, L.N. Tolstoy, N.S. Leskov, G. Sand, B. Stoker, G. Markes, T. Gotier, F. Lorca, Ya. Polonsky, M. Yazykov, V. Benediktov, A. Fet, A. Block, M. Tsvetayeva, S. Marshak.

The author tried to touch upon various strata of the 18th and 19th centuries’ literary material due to the fact that a major task of this study was conducting a literature review on Gypsies within world literature. However, the limited framework of the article does not make a detailed analysis of the large number of texts available. The study’s accent is made on reviewing the most impressive characters created in the 19th century that are now part and parcel of the world classical literature and culture in general. It is the analysis of cultural and historical prerequisites for creating literary works and characters of *Zemfira* and *Carmen* that will facilitate a better understanding of the nature of romanticization of the Gypsy theme within world culture.

II. CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL PREREQUISITES FOR THE CREATION OF THE POEM “GYPSIES”. RUSSIA, THE 19TH CENTURY

Gypsies appeared in Moscow and St.Petersburg as early as the beginning of the 19th century. They were choir Gypsies of count Orlov-Chesmensky whom he liberated from serfdom. It was this count who introduced “the Gypsy fashion” back in the 18th century. Count Orlov’s choir was directed by I.Sokolov. Its soloist was the famous Stepanida Soldatova, called Russian Katalani by her admirers.

Moscow and St.Petersburg Gypsies’ occupation was singing and dancing, forming professional Gypsy choirs. Many Russian aristocrats would visit the Gypsies quite often to the point that it became a beloved pastime. Moscow and St. Petersburg Gypsy choirs’ repertoire, from their very inception, has consisted of Russian songs. Gypsy band songs entered choir repertoires later. “Ardour for Gypsy songs has lasted for nearly a century. Not without reason, a sincere and passionate tribute was made to this entertainment by two greatest Russian individuals of the 19th century: one-illuminated its beginning, the other one –crowned its end. One

is Pushkin, the other one is Tolstoy" [2]. The time we saw the opening of popular taverns with Gypsy orchestras in was in Perovo, Moscow suburbs. Later, choirs came to perform in restaurants such as "Yar", "Strelna", "Mavritania", "Eldorado".

Russian elite of the 19th century was fascinated by Gypsies and, especially, Gypsy women. Poets praised beautiful Gypsy women in their poems (G.P. Derzhavin, N.M. Yazykov, Ye.A. Baratynsky, V.G. Polonsky, A.A. Fet). A.I. Kuprin writes: "Let us recall many nobles who put their coat of arms and family fortunes to Gypsy women's feet, who abducted them from Gypsy camps, who fought duels over them... Which means that there was some invincible, spontaneous charm in Gypsy songs, a charm that made people cry, rave, go into raptures, make princely gestures and perform cruel actions." [2]

Many nobles and wealthy people married women from Gypsy choirs: S.N. Tolstoy, brother of Leo Tolstoy, married M.M. Shishkina, (with whom he had lived previously in common-marriage), D. Danchenko got married to prince F.P. Masalsky. L. Morozova became wife of prince Vitgenshtain. A.S. Pushkin's friend, P.I. Nashchokin lived with Olga, daughter of the famous Stesha Soldatova.

This was the cultural and historical environment where the character of Zemfira appeared in the poem "Gypsies".

It is interesting to trace the evolution of interest in Gypsies and the Gypsy theme in the life and creative activity of A.S. Pushkin. At 14, he wrote his novel "Gypsy" which has not survived. Pushkin often visited Gypsies, both from choirs and camps. Before his marriage to N.N. Goncharova, he celebrated the New 1831 Year Day, not with her, but in the company of Gypsies. At that time, he became the godfather of the famous singer, Stesha's granddaughter.

In 1832, Pushkin tried to translate Cervantes' short story. M.F. Muryanov notes: "The rough draft of his test translation of Cervantes' short story "Gypsy Girl" is the only document testifying to Pushkin's study of Spanish" [6].

Several episodes from Pushkin's biography give a more vivid description of the poet's attitude towards Gypsies.

When in Kishinev, he was in exile between 1820-1824. He got acquainted with Bessarabian Gypsies. Muryanov writes: "Consciously damaging his already flyblown reputation of a Foreign Office executive, he dances to Gypsy music in outdoor fetes, and once he disappears for several days during which he leads a nomad's life with a camp in Budzhak steppe..." [6]. There is a reminiscence of Pushkin's acquaintance recorded by Ralli-Arbore – the woman tells of a young Gypsy, Zemfira, who Pushkin was in love with. The great poet spent three weeks in a Gypsy camp. He lived in the leader's tent and courted his daughter. Their love affair ended in nothing because the young Gypsy ran away with her Gypsy lover who later, allegedly, cut her out of jealousy. Accurate data about these events does not exist, but the

famous literary scholar B.A. Trubetskoy thinks it is plausible. In the year of 1824, the poem titled "Gypsies" was written.

When living in Moscow at his friend's (P.I. Nashchokin) place, Pushkin got acquainted with Gypsy Tanya Demyanova. She was a soloist in I. Sokolov's choir and a friend of Gypsy Olga, Nashchokin's lover. Tatiana made friends with Pushkin. She recollects: "Since then he would often visit us, he would often come alone at any time he chose – in the evening, or in the morning. He devoted time to me alone, making me sing, or just chatting, he was laughing fit to kill himself when learning the Gypsy language. And we all were reading how he described nomad Gypsies in his poems" [4]. Pushkin promised to write a poem about her as well. It was Tanya Demyanova who told his fortune before his marriage and sang a song. Contemporaries note that he sobbed, clasping his hands around his head. This is what Tatiana herself says about it: "As I was singing I felt so sad, and I conveyed this by my voice, and I didn't know what to do, I didn't raise my eyes from strings... Suddenly I heard Pushkin sobbing loudly. I raised my eyes to see him clasp his head with his hands sobbing like a child..." [4] Gypsy Tanya remembered Pushkin all her life. She lived to a great age and always remembered him with tenderness and tears.

III. THE CHARACTER OF GYPSY ZEMFIRA

There are many real stories and interesting legends confirming the poet's profound entrainment in this nomadic people. The result is obvious – in 1824 he wrote his poem "Gypsies" which "crowned" his Southern poems and marked a transition from the great poet's romantic creativity to a realistic one. This is stipulated by the poem's close connection with the original idea of interpretation of the romantic canon.

Within his Southern poems, Pushkin was striving for the poetry of the extraordinary, in the "Gypsies" he was attracted, mainly, by the poetry of everyday life. The Gypsy people are described in the poem with extreme accuracy and vividness. Gypsy characters are presented in detailed and typical circumstances:

The loud crowd of Gypsies
Is a nomad in Bessarabia.
They will spend a night
At a river in ragged tents.
Like freedom, their overnight stay
And peaceful sleep are joyous;
Between their carts' wheels
Half hidden by rugs
There is a fire; a family, in a circle,
Are cooking supper; in the field
Horses are grazing; behind the tent
A tamed bear is lying [7].

Everyday life and customs of the "wild tribe" are presented in brilliant, accurate, surprisingly brief and saturated descriptions. However, the Gypsies' life is not idealized. Pushkin more than once mentions their poverty:

The crowd roams through empty plains.
 Asses, in baskets, carry
 Playing children; husbands and
 Brothers, wives, young girls and
 The old people follow them;
 Cries, noise, Gypsy singing,
 The bear's roar, his chains'
 Ringing, colorful rags,
 Nakedness of the old and kids,
 Dogs' barking and howling,
 Bagpipes voice, carts creak,
 All is pathetic, wild, poor... [7].

Also, this debunks a romantic halo around the idea of absolute freedom and pathological love of freedom that is so typical for a romantic hero. In particular, this is true of the character of Zemfira. Let us look at it.

Almost in the first lines, the author introduces to us the freedom loving Zemfira:

His young daughter
 Went for a walk in an empty field.
 She's used to playful freedom... [7].

Immediately and willfully, she was attracted by Aleko, whom she had brought to the camp and became intimate with, without any rituals or obligations:

He will be mine:
 Who will keep him off me? [7]

For two years she had been his "girl friend", but then she got bored with his love:

I'm sick of his love.
 I'm bored; my heart asks for freedom... [7]

The character of Zemfira is devoid of idealization and is so typical for Preciosa from Cervantes' poem. Zemfira's ardent and willful character reveals itself only in her sensuous passion. In her love 'by way of joke' she is guided by spontaneous desires lacking mental control and moral obligations. Her father tells Aleko about such love:

You love in a sorrowful and hard way,
 And a woman's heart – jokingly. [7]

Absolute freedom in love, as shown in the poem in Zemfira's and Mariula's actions, turns to be a passion that does not create any spiritual ties between the beloved. Nor does it impose on any of their moral obligations. There is nothing exceptional in it. Zemfira just goes the way of her mother's, Mariula, whose inconstancy the old Gypsy comments:

...only for a year
 Mariula loved me [7]

Zemfira's mother, for the sake of love and passion, ignored her marriage, family obligations, and even her motherly duty, breaking the old Gypsy's life:

Having abandoned her little daughter,
 Mariula went away with them [7]

Aleko cannot accept and integrate this freedom that fills Gypsies' souls and lives. An eternal conflict of naturalness and civilization is vividly described by Pushkin in his poem. Unlimited freedom is alien to Aleko; he is an acquisitive man. Also, he is not familiar with forgiveness and non-resistance to life's events typical for the old Gypsy who tries to convince Aleko to treat life in a philosophic manner:

Why? Youth is freer than a bird;
 Who can hold love?
 All, in turn, are given joy;
 What happened will not come back [7]

But Aleko cannot cope with jealousy and distrust towards his wife. He says to Zemfira:

Oh, I don't believe anything:

Nor dreams, nor sweet assurances,

Nor even your heart [7].

As for Zemfira, she resists the loss of freedom that Aleko wants to limit her with, as well as family ties and obligations imposed on her by him. The young Gypsy woman's spiritual resistance is dramatically reflected in her song. She cruelly declares to Aleko "you are free to get angry, this song is about you" [7]. Zemfira's song "Cut me, burn me" is organically connected with the plot making personages and reveals the main heroine's nature. This song is a translation of a Moldavian folk song for dancing in a ring. It is not a Gypsy song, but it was the one that was very important for Pushkin to convey the heroine's strong and rebellious feelings. Even dying, Zemfira does not regret her actions:

No, enough, I'm not afraid of you! -
 I despise your threats,
 I condemn your murder...
 I'll die, in love... [7]

Zemfira, like her mother, perceives freedom as a natural permissiveness. Her natural instincts dominate her. She is a bearer of the ancient spirit of boundless primary freedom. Without thinking, she abandons herself to immense love passion first, to Aleko, then, to a young Gypsy. Zemfira is not just freedom loving and willful. She is the unrestrained freedom itself, unlimited by anything and untamable. She is a dream of this freedom. Aleko, by killing Zemfira, kills this dream of freedom in himself, forever. He, of his own accord, gives himself into the hands of the civilized world where absolutely everyone is deprived of the right to personal freedom and dreams.

IV. CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL PREREQUISITES FOR CREATION OF THE SHORT STORY "CARMEN". FRANCE, THE 19TH CENTURY

Several factors that influenced the writer can be identified when talking of how a Gypsy woman character appeared in Prosper Merimee's creative work. First, the period from 1830 to 1845 saw a great number of short stories devoted to the history and ethnography of other peoples that are different in their mentality and culture from Europeans.

Such works as “Mateo Falkone”, “Tamango”, “Colomba”, “Carmen” were written at that time. M.Yu. Lotman writes: “Merimee’s exotics, fantasy and mythology are always exactly tied up to geographical environment and invariably have distinct *couleur locale*.” Corsican myth, literary-mythological Spain, Lithuania, in turn, emerge on Merimee’s stories pages [3]. Merimee is not interested in the centers of civilization nor in large cities with their routine stereotyped high life. He is much more interested in wild original customs and characters free of prejudice. It is not just an idle interest in different historical and ethnographical curiosities. In his “ethnographical” works, the writings raise a number of acute, often painful, problems that confronted West European civilization in the first half of the 19th century. One of them was the problem of Western society’s consciousness with respect towards other cultures and mentality. The conflict of naturalness and civilization, of nature and society is viewed in the short story “Carmen”. This is what M.Yu. Lotman says in his article: “For Merimee there is no “education” and “prejudice”, but there is a singularity of various cultural psychologies described by him with an objectivity of an outside observer” [3].

Second, in “Carmen”, developments take place in Spain. Merimee’s Gypsy’s distinction is that she (like Cervantes’ “Preciosa”) is a Spanish Gypsy. The first P. Merimee’s trip to Spain was in 1830, and, in 1824, his story “Purgatory’s Souls” was published. In 1837, his story “Venus of Illes” displays his mastery in studying everyday Spanish life and customs. Naturally enough, Merimee, being a sophisticated connoisseur in his travels through Italy, Greece and Spain, studied their customs and traditions.

And finally, third, Merimee was a great admirer of A.S. Pushkin’s works. “Gypsies” was translated into French many times. Prosper Merimee was one of the translators. Translating the poem, he was struck by the extraordinary energy of the following lines not knowing that it was a Moldavian, nor a Gypsy song:

Old husband, formidable husband,
Cut me, burn me:
I’m tough; I’m not afraid
Of a knife or fire.
I hate you,
I despise you;
I love another one,
I’m dying, in love [7].

Zemfira gave rise to the character of Gypsy Carmen who can be killed but cannot be stripped of her freedom or coerced to love. N. Bessonov notes: “Prosper Merimee turned off the road of realism, being carried away with “Zemfira’s song”. In these words he saw the quintessence of a Gypsy woman character and embodied it in his short story that captured the world” [1].

V. THE CHARACTER OF GYPSY CARMEN

It can be said that the character of Spanish Gypsy Carmen was created on Pushkin’s tradition and was based on his character of Bessarabian Gypsy Zemfira. However,

despite the apparent similarity, these two characters differ considerably.

Let us view the character of Gypsy Carmen. The story presents itself through a combination of two opinions about her – that of the European traveler (narrator) and Don Jose, who is madly in love with Carmen. M.Yu. Lotman writes: “The acuteness is achieved by the literature geography’s invariable embodiment through a crossover of the two languages: that of the outside European observer (a Frenchman) and that of bearers of sharply different viewpoints destroying the very foundation of the European culture rationalism” [3]. But there is also the third opinion that embraces those of the two male heroes, but views everything from “above”, objectively – this is the author’s view.

The first appearance of Carmencita takes place on an embankment in Cordoba. Here, the narrator meets her: “There was a big bunch of jasmine in her hair whose petals exude a heavy scent in the evening. She was dressed in simple, rather poor clothes, all black, just like the majority of grizettes in the evening” [5]. The young Gypsy strikes the respectable traveler by her extraordinary look and extravagance. For him, she is just an alien child of an alien world: incomprehensible, mysterious, and hostile. She was an ethnographic curiosity. Carmen evokes in the learned Frenchman an interest mixed with fear and alienation: “It was a strange and wild beauty, a face which, at first sight, surprises you, but you cannot forget it. Her eyes, especially, had some sensuous and at the same time cruel expression which I had never seen in any human eyes” [5]. The narrator compares her look with that of a wolf thus emphasizing the heroine’s wildness and strangeness.

A fuller and more vivid portrait of Carmen is provided by her lover, Jose de Navarro, who shares with the narrator the story of his fatal love. They met when Don Jose was just a soldier, and Carmencita worked at a factory: “She had a very short red skirt on allowing to see her white silk stockings, rather hole-ridden, and pretty shoes of red morocco, tied up by ribbons of fiery color. She threw back her mantilla to show her shoulders and a big bunch of acacia placed at the edge of her chemise. In her teeth she also had an acacia flower and she walked swaying her hips like a young filly” [5]. Carmen’s behavior eccentricity won the heart of the young soldier, and the acacia flower thrown to him completed the effect. At one time, Carmen seems a witch to him, and then – the devil himself: “If there are witches in this world, then this girl was a witch!” [5] It was she who made him break his soldier’s oath and leave his routine environment. However, Carmen warns Don Jose that he better forget her and tries to frighten him: “You know, sunny, it seems to me that I’m a bit in love with you. But this is not for long. A dog cannot get along with a wolf... No, my boy, believe me you got off easy. You met a devil, yes, a devil; he is in not always black, and he has not broken your neck” [5].

Don Jose is driven mad by his passion. However, this irresistible, juvenile and mysterious Gypsy is as alien to her lover as to the traveler who watched her for a short time. The heroine’s unpredictability, apparent alogism of her behavior,

her words, her way of living are viewed by Jose as hostile manifestations of the Gypsy way of life which is associated both with Carmen's infernal character and young Navarra soldier's superstitious fear: "-You are a devil, - I would say to her. - Yes, - she agreed" [5]. Carmen is not the most virtuous or innocent heroine of the world literature. She is hard-hearted, sly, and disloyal. "She lied, always lied" [5], - complains Jose. But it was she who became a victim of the loving hero, trapped by himself and by society in the framework devoid of freedom. Young Carmen's willfulness and love of freedom as a representative of the Gypsy people embodying naturalness and eternal human freedom scare the hero, causing a desire to subdue this passionate temperament and bring the freedom loving Carmen into so well known and familiar framework of civilization. The lovers' conflict (so brilliantly described by A.S. Pushkin in his "Gypsies") is connected with a tragic discovery of the impossibility of harmony between society and nature, naturalness and civilization. Merimee raises this conflict to a higher level in his short story - this is an eternal antagonism of masculinity and femininity.

Let us turn to details. When Carmen appears before the narrator for the first time on the embankment, she has "a big bunch of jasmine" in her hair. In Oriental culture, jasmine is a symbol of femininity, purity and grace. In Christian, it is a symbol of Virgin Maria. Before Don Jose, she appears with a big bunch of acacia. Acacia, in pre-Christian and Christian art symbolizes purity, immortality, holiness, and Platonic love. Night and water are the images that accompany the heroine throughout the whole story. Carmen is dressed in a red skirt and white chemise – the color combination symbolizing mortal pain and purification, blood and womanhood. The combination of holy womanhood and seductiveness, purity and devilish passionate temperament in Carmen's character broadens it up to a mythological, sacral meaning. She is a personification of Eternal Woman, womanhood, naturalness, and Nature itself – unpredictable and spontaneous.

By killing Carmen, Jose, just like Aleko in "Gypsies", kills a dream of freedom. He destroys Carmen the same way as Civilization destroys Nature. But Eternal Woman is immortal. Nature cannot be killed; it will be forever. It is higher and more pure: "Carmen will always be free. She was born Calli, and she will die Calli"[5]. She will remain a Gypsy, a symbol of freedom and naturalness forever. Freedom cannot be killed.

Thus, having analyzed the impressive characters of the main heroines of the poem "Gypsies" and the short novel "Carmen", we come to the conclusion that the 19th century writers on the basis of the previous generations (namely, Cervantes') created an ideal romantic character of a Woman-Gypsy which was so typical for literature of that time and so different from a classical romantic heroine. By exaggerating many realities of Gypsy life, and, actually knowing nothing about it because of its reticence and seclusion, the writers created a Gypsy woman character according to their dream of her but did not exist in reality, a Gypsy reality.

The great 19th century writers created a myth. Not just a myth of a Gypsy woman, but a myth of a perfect Woman in general. This was the Woman with a capital W: passionate, willful, freedom loving, desired. A woman that none of them or any other man would be able to live with.

A.S. Pushkin and P. Merimee created a myth of universal femininity, natural and spontaneous, instinctive and sacral which is eternally in conflict with masculinity, rational and social.

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