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# Representations of Romani Women in Contemporary Polish and Romani Literature

**Justyna Matkowska**

justina.matkowska@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9006-4184>

Dr. Justyna Matkowska is a scholar, and activist. She has a PhD in Humanities from the University of Wrocław in Poland. She is the third Romani woman in Poland's history to receive a PhD degree. She has an MA and BA in Literary Studies from the University of Wrocław. She also graduated from the Postgraduate Romani Studies Programme at the Pedagogical University of Krakow, Poland, and the Hawai'i English Language Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, USA.



## Abstract

This paper summarizes and discusses the key findings of my research on representations of Romani woman in contemporary Polish and Romani literary texts. The first part of this paper discusses Romani women's roles and positions in the Romani community. While the subsequent part describes Romani literature in Poland, the main focus of this article discusses images of Romani women in Polish and Romani literature. The article aims to reveal the process of shaping their description in Romani and Polish literature. The research result shows how the perception of Romani women influenced the artistic imagination of Poles and Roma (female and male) and their literary discourses. The study also indicates the degree of durability or variability of the compared images. The research is significant because of its intent to deepen the understanding of Romani imagology, as well as promoting the discourse of Romani Literature Studies.

## Keywords

- Roma
- Romani woman
- Polish literature
- Romani literature
- Antigypsyism

## Introduction

The social and cultural image of Roma,<sup>[1]</sup> including Romani women, formed in Europe in the sixteenth century consolidates and strengthens over the following centuries.<sup>[2]</sup> The current situation of Roma in majority communities, including Poland, is as it was centuries ago. Roma are affected by marginalization, hostility, stigmatization, and discrimination.<sup>[3]</sup> Non-Roma often perceive Roma through a prism of negative, harmful, false stereotypes, and little knowledge of them.

For centuries, the stereotypical image of Roma (including Romani women) was perpetuated in art and literature.<sup>[4]</sup> Up until now, only external and passive observers of Romani culture (and not its active participants) created Romani characters in opera, art, film and literary works. The narrative of these works was usually incompatible with how Roma perceive themselves. Art has become a tool to promote and consolidate an image of the Romani community dominated by forceful stereotypes.

Michel Foucault defined representation as knowledge production and meaning throughout discourse. According to Foucault, the production of knowledge is connected with body and power (Foucault 1980). Stuart Hall describes representation as the “production of meaning through language” (Hall 1997, 16). There are three approaches to explain this process of representation production: reflective, intentional, and constructivist (also called constructionist). The reflective approach indicates that language shows the existing meaning “in the object, person, idea or event.” The intentional approach says that speaker (or author) dictates meaning by language. Finally, in the constructivists’ approach – which acknowledges the public and social nature of language – people “use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others” (Hall 1997, 24–25). In conclusion, meanings can impact the representation of a particular group in society (including Roma), as well as influence their identity.

Roma – among the other non-white communities – were impacted by power relations as well as the coloniality of gender, which emphasized the concept of intersectionality, and exclusion and struggles of women of colour (Lugones 2008). For centuries Romani women function in a patriarchal system, which performs differently in various cultures and nations, including that of Roma. Patriarchy refers to male domination over women in the family and in society, as well as to the power relations, by which men dominate women (Lerner 1986, 239).

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1 In this paper, I use the term *Roma* to refer to the community which is the topic of my research. The negatively connotative terms *Gypsy* and *Gypsies* occur in the text only when quoting historical documents and statements.

2 In this paper, in referring to the literature created by Roma, I use the term *Romani literature*.

3 The aim of the research is not to reinforce and strengthen the stereotypes of Romani culture, including Romani women.

4 See Jodie Matthews. 2018. *The Gypsy Woman: Representations in Literature and Visual Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris; Valentina Glajar and Dominica Radulescu, eds. 2008. “Gypsies” in *European Literature and Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, eds. 2016. *Roma Culture: Myths and Realities*. Munich: Lincom Academic Publisher.

The visual and cultural representation of Romani women, together with women of colour, has been stereotyped, exoticized, and sexualized; consequently, Romani women are misrepresented or often underrepresented in the areas of arts, media, and culture. Ian Hancock states that this process will continue, and it will take some time before the Romani representations perpetuated in societies change the real and true image of Roma. He also explains that society has started to recognize that the literary image of “Gypsies,” and the myth about them, have nothing in common with real Roma (Hancock, 2007, 188–190).

Other issues of visual representations of Romani women are related to the politics of representation. Moreover, the image of Roma dominated by (unconscious and unaware, or aware) antigypsyism has been problematized. Roma are seen as “other,” as criminals, thieves, nomads, and dirty people. According to Huub van Baar the process of the problematization of Roma increases due to the diversity of Romani identities and mobilities. Baar states that representation of the Roma in Europe “ambiguously transformed” and Roma “are now seen as a ‘European problem’ rather than a ‘European minority’” (van Baar 2011, 204).

In Poland, Romani artists and writers were admitted to the cultural mainstream in the second half of the twentieth century. The emergence of a written Roma narrative created the possibility to express culture and present the Romani perspective. It allows Roma to build the right self-image, consistent with their sense of identity. Today, Roma are gradually taking control over their image in the arts, politics, society, and the media.

This article brings new ideas to the debate on Romani Literature Studies by deepening research of Romani literature in Poland. The study contributes to Romani studies on Romani imagology, particularly Romani women imagology, through comparative studies of the images of Romani women in Romani and Polish Literature. Romani literature fights antigypsyism, negative stereotypes, prejudices, and stigma. Via the arts, Romani authors raise their voices and make an impact on their image in the arts and in a wide range of fields by telling their own stories and presenting their perspectives. Romani artists use art as a platform to discuss antigypsyism and to tell stories about the persecution of Roma during the Second World War. In addition, Romani literature creates an idealized image of Roma as a community (including women), which aims at improving the Romani image.

The theme of Romani literature and the image of Romani in literature is particularly important for me. I am the only literature researcher in Poland of Romani origin, and one of only a few in Europe and the United States. Romani literature and imagery research became an extraordinarily personal opportunity to voice, create and write about our (Roma) perspective and approach in academia. I hope that my impact will allow for change and, more importantly, improve the discourse of Romani literature in Europe.

# 1. The Role and Position of Women in the Romani Community

Roma who live in Poland are divided primarily into two culturally diverse groups: the Carpathian Roma, who long ago converted to a settled lifestyle, and Romani communities with long migratory traditions: Polska Roma, Lowarzy and Kalderasze (Bartosz 2004, 94–97). Over time, the lives of Polish Romani communities underwent changes caused by civic, political, social, and cultural transformations, which also included the Genocide. After the Second World War, there were radical lifestyle changes in the Communist system. The government forced Roma, who had been nomads, to settle permanently and swap their caravans for apartments. It banned the migration of Roma and traditional professions. In turn, some of the Carpathian Roma, including those leading a semi-sedentary lifestyle, moved to larger cities, including those in the “Regained Territories.” The Communist system gradually tried to assimilate Romani groups. The government did not aim to integrate them with Polish society, while respecting their cultural and moral identity. This situation led to more deep-rooted exclusion of Roma from society, as well as their stigmatization.<sup>[5]</sup>

The woman, called in Romanes *Romni* (woman, wife) or *Romni* (Romani woman), handles the family’s daily existence and survival, the household, and raises children.<sup>[6]</sup> She must pass on to the next generation knowledge of how Romani Women should behave as daughters, girls, wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers-in-law. For centuries (regardless of origin, social, and property status), the cultural role of women has not changed, and Romani women have a crucial impact on upholding Romani principles and values.

There is a clear distinction between men’s and women’s social roles among the Roma. Women play a crucial role in maintaining cultural content and cultivating tradition, and protect the customs, and family, at the same time shaping the awareness of the younger generation. The honour and survival of the group depend on women, because they embody Romani selfhood with their behaviour, appearance, and dress. The basis of Romani women’s actions is an observance of *romanipen*. Most of its principles regulate women’s daily lives and behaviour.

The social expectations of Roma towards women concern being a good wife, mother, and hostess. From a community perspective, this is only attainable by the woman’s allegiance to her husband and the elders. The woman should be modest, devoted, submissive, and faithful. All her attention should be directed at the family. Especially important is a woman’s good reputation: both before and after marriage. Women

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5 See Hristo Kyuchukov and Omar Rawashdeh, eds. 2013. *Roma Identity and Antigypsyism in Europe*, Lincom; Huub van Baar and Angéla Kóczé, 2020. *The Roma and their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe*. New York: Berghahn Books.

6 An important study of Romani women’s identity in Poland is the book *Życie w dwóch światach. Tożsamość współczesnych Romów* [Life in two worlds. Identity of modern Roma]. The paper is based on research conducted among the Polska Roma, Lowary and Carpathian Romani groups. See Marta Godlewska-Goska and Justyna Kopańska. 2011. *Życie w dwóch światach. Tożsamość współczesnych Romów*, Warsaw: DiG Press.

must control their behaviour and be careful of their opinions for the sake of the environment. In the case of a scandal, all families would be exposed to exclusion from the community. Appropriate behaviour (according to the rules adopted by the group) is socially supervised.

In most Polish Roma groups, the patriarchy still applies. The position of women – both societal and private – is still secondary to men. As mentioned above, Romani women struggle not only with patriarchy but also with the deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudices associated with them, as well as the structural racism against Roma. Antigypsyism is, in this case, an element of the system of domination of Roma female images. Marcus End defines antigypsyism as a component of two elements:

First, there is resentment against ‘the Gypsies,’ which involves a majority society sharing images and beliefs and projecting them onto specific social groups, among them mainly those which identify themselves as Roma, Sinti, Kalderashi, Irish Travellers, etc. The second element of antigypsyism consists of discriminatory and often violent social structures and actions with which Roma or other people stigmatized as ‘Gypsies’ are confronted. (End 2012, 7).

In the case of literary representation of Romani women, it is crucial to mention levels of antigypsyism characterized by End such as social practice, historical and social framework, images and stereotypes, the structure of meanings, social norms, and values that involved the majority. All of them seem to be related to literary studies about Roma. End also stated that it is important to change the current approach and begin to study antigypsyism as deeply rooted in majority societies, not in Roma. (End 2021, 7–14).

The author pointed out that antigypsyism is based on stereotypes and false visual and cultural representations of Roma. End explained that antigypsyism is a “cultural tradition, an image, and a form of communication that is reproduced independent of the real-life of the people stigmatized as ‘Gypsies’ – construction in the minds and the cultural products of the majority society that does not require any relationship to real experience” (End 2021, 14). In that sense, the visual and cultural images of Roma presented among others in film, press, literature, created by non-Roma have been politicized, romanticized, and demonized. This image defines the majority societies rather than Roma.<sup>[7]</sup>

The meaning of gender in the case of anti-Romani racism and the importance of gender for the Roma movement are issues of debate among Romani women activists and human rights activists (Kóczé 2009, 19). Romani women are in a particularly difficult situation because they belong to a group exposed to repeated discrimination. At the same time, Romani women are stifled and stigmatized as women, and Roma, as well as disadvantaged people, who often function on the margins of social life. On the one hand, women are subject to restrictions within their own community due to gender. People see them negatively as “Gypsies.” Sławomir Kaprański notes that “the overlapping of both dimensions of discrimination is an added value, which means that the result of intersectional discrimination is not a

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<sup>7</sup> See Mihail Surdu. 2016. *Expert Frames. Scientific and Policy Practices of Roma Classification*. Budapest: CEU Press.

simple sum of its components but is often a total negation of the humanity of the discriminated person” (Kapralski 2014, 71). This situation affects limited access to employment, education, healthcare, or full participation in civic life. Romani women also experience discrimination in a majority society, in the context of xenophobic atmospheres. Besides, their situation negatively affects domestic violence, limited opportunities to decide their own fate, early marriage and motherhood, and total subordination to men. According to Angéla Kóczé, Romani, female activists are confronted with two major dilemmas when studying the intersections of sexism and racism: intra-differentiation and intra-group hierarchies (Kóczé 2009, 19–21). Kóczé also states that “the compound effects of racism, sexism, and poverty that comprise the social environment of many Romani women discourage them from taking a stance against internal gender oppression, lest they should suffer personally and stigmatize their families and communities even further” (Kóczé 2009, 23).

## 2. Romani Literature in Poland

The development of Romani literature in Poland may be divided into three periods.<sup>[8]</sup> The first concerns anonymous folklore literature. The second is the time of the most outstanding Romani poet in Poland – Bronisława Wajs. The last period, which is applies today, is the time for conscious Romani authors who have been creating and publishing since the 1990s. (Bartosz 2011, 52). The first known Romani writer in Poland was Bronisława Wajs, called in Romanes “Papusza” (born 17 August 1908 in Sitaniec, died 8 February 1987 in Inowrocław), belongs to a group of outstanding figures of Romani origin. Papusza learned how to read and write by herself. First, she started by asking children about letters. Afterward, she learned from a Jewish woman. In exchange for lessons, Papusza stole hens for her (Ficowski 2013, 336).

Papusza’s literary talent was discovered by Jerzy Ficowski,<sup>[9]</sup> who was hiding from Communist government persecution in her family caravans between the summers of 1949 and 1950 (Dębicki 2012, 54–58). He sent the first translations of her poems to Julian Tuwim,<sup>[10]</sup> which led to their publication. Papusza’s works (four poems) first appeared in the literary press in 1950, in the monthly journal called *Problemy* (No. 10/50). However, her official debut was in 1951, when her poem was printed in the journal *Nowa Kultura* (Kajan 1992, 107).

Bronisława Wajs is the author of three volumes of poetry: *Pieśni Papuszy. Papuśakre Gila* (1956), *Pieśni mówione* (1973), and *Lesie, ojciec mój* (1990). She was the first Roma, and simultaneously, the first Romani woman, admitted to the Polish Writers’ Union. Her works have been translated into many languages.

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8 Adam Bartosz, as the initial researcher, proposed the periodization of Romani literature in Poland in his paper “Literatura tvořena Romy v Polsku” [English literature created by Roma in Poland] published in 2011 in *Romano Džaniben*. (Nr 1. s. 51–62).

9 Jerzy Ficowski (1924–2006) – Polish poet of Jewish origin, writer and translator.

10 Julian Tuwim (1894–1953) – Polish poet of Jewish descent, writer, author of vaudevilles, sketches, operetta librettos, and song lyrics; one of the most popular poets of the interwar period in Poland.



She became an authority and inspiration for a young generation of Polish Roma<sup>[11]</sup> and for the authors of movies, plays, and literature,<sup>[12]</sup> as well as scholars.<sup>[13]</sup>

Thanks to Papusza, Romani literature entered Polish literary circulation. However, apart from discussions of her work, and above all, her tragic fate, it is difficult to find information in Polish studies about other Roma authors and Romani literature. Yet, Teresa Mirga (Carpathian Roma), Izolda Kwiek (Kalderash), Karol Parno Gierliński (Sinti), Stanisław Stahiro Stankiewicz (Polska Roma), Jan Mirga (Carpathian Roma), Don Wasyl Szmidt (Polska Roma), Tadeusz Kamiński (Kalderash), Edward Dębicki (Polska Roma), Edward Grafo Głowacki (Lovari), and Miklosz Deki Czureja (Carpathian Roma) all belong to the group of Romani literary authors living in Poland and writing in Romanes and Polish. Most of them are part of the last generation of Roma, who had a nomadic lifestyle, were born in caravans and, at the same time, the first, which took up a sedentary lifestyle.

Poetry and other short literary forms were for years printed in the first Romani journal in Poland, *Rrom p-o Drom* (in the Romani poetry section), which has been published since 1990. The periodical published works by the poets mentioned above, and by people who had not published books, their output consisting of one or more poems. This group includes Adam Andrasz, Sylwester Masio Kwiek, Dariusz Mirga, Bohun Moradziński, and Andrzej Wiśniewski.

The contemporary development of Romani literature, and with it, Romani Literature Studies, is closely related to the political situation. In Poland, it is not by chance that most volumes of Romani prose and poetry published so far have been issued by the Tarnów Regional Museum, as part of the “Romani Library” series, co-financed by the governmental Programme for the Roma Minority in Poland. Roma expert, Adam Bartosz, who directed the Museum for many years, contributed to the popularization of poetic work by Roma in our country.

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11 In 1995, the Association of Artists and Friends of the Romani Culture, named after Bronisława Wajs Papusza, was registered in Gorzów Wielkopolski. Streets in Gorzów Wielkopolski and Inowrocław are also named after Papusza. There is a monument to Papusza in the Spring of Nations park in Gorzów Wielkopolski.

12 See the novel *Zoli* by Collum McCann and documentary films: *Papusza* (1974) directed by Maja and Ryszard Wójcik, *Gypsy Songs of Papusza* (1984) by Grzegorz Dubowski with music by Edward Dębicki, *The Gypsy Story* (1991) directed by Greg Kowalski, *Papusza* (2013) directed by Joanna Kos-Krauze and Krzysztof Krauze, the symphonic poem *Papusza's Harps* by Jan Kante Pawluśkiewicz, and the musical *Papusza* by Edward Dębicki, produced by the Gypsy Music Theatre “Terno.”

13 See *Papusza, czyli wielka tajemnica* by Krystyna Kamińska (Wielkopolski, Gorzów 1992); *Papusza, czyli wolność tajemna* by Leszek Bończuk (Wielkopolski, Gorzów 1996); *Bronisława Wajs – Papusza: między biografią a legendą* by Magdalena Machowska (Kraków 2011); *Bronisława Wajs – Papusza (1908–1987): biografia i dziedzictwo*, edited by A. Dariusz Rymar, (Wielkopolski, Gorzów 2017); *Papusza. Granice przynależności* by Adrian Zawadzki (2017); *Papusza* by Angelika Kuźniak (Wołowiec 2013).

### 3. Representations of Romani Women in Polish and Romani Literature

Romani women became an inspiration for many contemporary Polish and Romani authors. Poetic and prose portraits of Romani woman characters brought a touch of exoticism and mystery to Polish literature. Polish writers, by raising Romani issues in their works gradually became conscious recipients of Romani culture. Polish authors often touch on issues of Romani traditions and customs, or try to identify cultural elements. Their awareness of Romani culture is due to knowledge of Roma and Romani literature, as well as contacts, and even personal acquaintances, with Roma. However, Romani literature does not draw on the richness of Polish literature at all. The only known Romani writer who made reference to Polish literature was Sinto – Karol Parno Gierliński.

The Polish authors who created Romani protagonists in their literary works are Maria Ziółkowska, Jan Ziółkowski, Zdzisław Olszewskiego, Magdalena Kozłowska, and Wojciech Chmielarz. This includes various genres novel, including crime fiction, as well as stories. Romani characters appear in many volumes of poetry by authors that include Jerzy Ficowski, Emilia Zimnicka, Dariusz Cezary Maleszyński, and Jan Zych. Roma also feature in literary reportage by Lidia Ostalska and travel writing by Andrzej Stasiuk.

The subjects of the Polish and Romani texts analysed are set in the period of the Second World War, postwar caravan travels, and the present-day. Romani and Polish texts show two diverse cultural contexts. Comparative transcultural studies allowed for an in-depth analysis of literary endeavour by Romani women. The collected material was divergent in terms of imagology. Examples of images of Romani women in Polish and Romani literature were assigned to six key semantic fields, within which more detailed images were pointed out. The confrontation of diverse cultural contexts and perspectives on perceptions of the same phenomenon is an interesting collision of the two ways of thinking (Romani and Polish) about Romani women.

In Romani and Polish literary texts, we find images of Romani women as devoted wives, mothers, and caretakers of the family, mothers of the victims of Romani extermination during the Second World War, and figures of Our Lady of the Gypsies. Motifs include the chicken thief, the fortune teller, and the faith healer. Romani women as the objects of love and delight, as well as artists – dancers, singers, poets, appear in both types. There are also many references to Bronisława Wajs – Papusza. Despite the revolutionary change in the lives of Roma in the twentieth century, motifs of caravan dwelling, including images of traditional nomadic Roma, are invariably present in contemporary Polish and Romani literary texts. The few exceptions, present exclusively in Romani literature, include the personification of Mother Nature and the “Gypsy” traveller.

#### *Mother Nature*

The key image in Romani literary discourse is Mother Nature as a protectress of Roma. Such an image does not occur in contemporary Polish literature. Polish authors, when using the Mother Nature motif

refer to a tradition of Slavic beliefs, or Mediterranean culture, whilst Roma look to their cultural beliefs. Romani authors strongly emphasize the attachment and inseparable emotional bond, connecting Romani community with the surrounding nature. Mother Nature is a mighty, omniscient mother goddess, as well as an extraordinary parent, host, guardian, trustee, friend, and confidant, loving and devoted to her forest protégés and sheltering them. Poets use personification, anthropomorphism, animation, idealization, and the mythicizing of the image of Mother Nature. The texts hold sentimental and nostalgic memories full of respect for centuries-old traveling and caravan dwelling in nature, and dependence on its gifts. Roma, as a community living for centuries on the border between nature and civilization, saw themselves as an integral part of nature and considered themselves children of deities and the elements. The literary approach to Mother Nature, and especially the forest, is a great longing for the past as a lost paradise. Roma have also creatively adopted the stereotype of happy, free travellers in European culture. Roma authors, who refer to the image of Mother Nature, were born and raised at a time when Roma led a nomadic lifestyle.

#### *Wife and mother*

Another great literary image of a Romani woman is the wife and mother. Over the years, the woman's position has evolved and changed, influenced by cultural, political, and religious factors. The functions performed by women, however, have always had a significant bond with nature, consisting of building marital, maternal, and intergenerational relationships. On the other hand, women were subject to constant social control imposed by the family and group system. The woman's attitude, behaviour, skills, scope of work, and responsibilities, are continuously assessed by her husband, mother, mother-in-law, or other relatives. A Romani woman's fundamental and unquestioned mission is to be an obedient daughter, then a devoted wife and caring mother. The images of women performing such roles are timeless and present in all cultures. In both works of literature, there are images of women as fully devoted and loving wives and parents and guardians of the home. These images are enriched with references to the Romani cult of Our Lady of the Gypsies and the threads of the suffering of Romani mothers whose children died during the Second World War.

This image of the devoted Romani wife in Polish and Romani literature corresponds to the traditional role of women in culture. In both literatures, the features of a woman's character are depicted and shaped by Roma: purity, faithfulness, loyalty, patience, eternal love, constant affection, and boundless devotion to her husband, enduring all suffering in the name of love and Roma principles, and often also renouncing their own happiness in the name of tradition, duty and respect for elders. So, in both literatures, there is a manifestation of the reinforcement of a cultural pattern, often idealized, as well as the positive stereotype of Romani women as devoted wives. This idealization is particularly visible in Romani literature. Polish writers also try to emulate this pattern. Only in Izolda Kwiek's poetry do non-idealized images of women appear, who renounce happiness in the name of duty and respect for the family. This sacrifice is based on a fear of breaking *romanipen* rules.

The universal and timeless perspective of motherhood, also typical of Polish poetry, is present in Romani literature. Literature strengthens the positive stereotype and idealizes cultural ideas about the mission of the Romani wife and mother. Romani literature presents a woman as a mother and caregiver of the family from a universal and timeless cultural perspective based on family values and the traditional role of Romani women

(taking care of the daily existence of the family). The analogous image in Polish literature – with the exception of non-fiction – is the result of established literary patterns, and even clichés, embedded in the stereotype of the “Gypsy woman.” Authors from both types of literature present mothers and homemakers in an idealistic way, as women capable of any sacrifice, caring, and supporting their children, surrounding them with boundless and unconditional love, hardworking, trying to provide for children every day, to create a dignified life and, above all, a better future. Nonetheless, this idealization hides Romani woman’s full subordination to men and their exploitation, which she experiences for herself and the whole community in areas such as work, education, decision-making, and personal life, body and sexuality, early marriage and motherhood.

Images of Romani woman as a mother of the victims of the Romani Holocaust during the Second World War, suffering from the death of her children, appear in both Romani and Polish literature. Authors recalled tragic and very realistic scenes of the pain, suffering, and despair of Romani mothers, whose children became defenceless victims of the war. Only in Romani literature, apart from the Nazi Holocaust, are threads of the murders of Roma carried out in Volhynia. Polish literature touches on the issues of harm and cultural taboo, and more specifically – the painful detachment of Romani women from tradition, dignity, respect, and identity in the extermination camps, which is absent in Romani literature. Romani writers limit themselves only to a description of internal pain and despair that haunt mothers who were direct witnesses to the death of their loved ones and children. Romani authors adopt the domestic and community perspective of the representatives of minorities. According to the traditional Romani approach, Roma do not violate the cultural taboo of Romani women’s traumatic camp experiences of. A woman’s real (not idealized) experience in Romani culture has a lower status and priority than a good and a positive image of the Romani community.

Roma define the Mother of God as *de Dewleskeri* or *Dewlikani Daj*. Roma believe in her intercession and protection. Images of Our Lady of the Gypsies in Romani literature correspond to the cult that Roma have for their guardian and confidant. In Polish literature, we do not find many references to the image of the Our Lady of the Gypsies. The examples show the figure of the Madonna as a unique character embodying a Romani woman and, at the same time, standing out from other images of the Mother of God.

### *The Gypsy*

The extensive section on literary images of Romani women focuses on the portrait of the “Gypsy woman.” In Polish and Romani literature, there are images of Roma fortune tellers, chicken thieves, and faith healers. However, only in Romani literature do references to the figure of the caravan’s “Gypsy women” appear. Presumably, the reason for Polish authors’ failure to specify the discrete image of the traveller is the close connection between the portrait and the association of Romani Women in Polish culture with fortune-telling, chicken theft, and faith healing. The literary images of caravan women mostly harmonize with the traditional social role of Romani women leading nomadic lifestyles. Women, often under challenging conditions, had to show much strength, perseverance, patience, obedience, and dedication, whilst caring for the family.

The image of a traveller Romani woman, as a resourceful, devoted family member, brave, loyal to the rules in force, trying to ensure the family’s existence, appears only in Romani literature. This image corresponds to the traditional social role of women. There is also a picture of a Romani woman expressing longing for

caravan existence and freedom, as well as a life full of joy and music. Romani literature creates the myth of a free traveller devoted to Romani traditions. Unfortunately, the reality of Romani women was not always so ideal. Taboo and social position radically limited their freedom. So, the myth creates the migrating reality of the traveller as full of meaning and values as professed by the, which strengthen their identity. It is reflected in literature in the form of parables, metaphors, and cultural symbols. The myth is for Roma themselves, as a means by which the community keep its identity and collective memory.

One of the most stereotypical images of Roma is the chicken thief. In groups that led a nomadic lifestyle, the ability to obtain food was a critical factor in choosing a wife. Thanks to this skill, Romani women were able to fulfil their obligations to support their families. The motif of the Romani chicken thief appears in the memories of Roma and older inhabitants of Polish villages. A typical image of a Romani woman who “near the forest [...] cooks a stolen hen” (Gierliński 2001, 31) appears, amongst others in Gierliński’s poem “Ta scena bez kurtyny...” or “Zagubiony w lesie” a short story by Kamiński. However, it was not always possible to obtain food in the ways described above, especially in the realities of war. In the Papsza poem “Ratwałe jaswa – so pał Sasendyr pszegijam apre Wołyń ‘43 i ‘44 bersza” a picture of desperate women is painted: “Gypsy women are crying, begging God / they are going to steal at night / rarely they bring something” (Wajs 2015, 67).

Despite the change in the locum and lifestyle of the Romani community, the literary image of a Romani woman as a chicken thief occurs in both Romani and Polish literature. Here, we can find descriptions of women preparing meals using stolen hens. Also, in Polish literature, there are scenes of the unjust accusation of Roma for poultry theft, excused theft, descriptions of the shame accompanying the robbery, as well as village inhabitants and farm owners’ fears of chicken theft by Romani women. For traveling women, chicken theft was an everyday occurrence, by which they could guarantee the existence of the family and feed hungry children. Nonetheless, this manifests as simple theft and, from a religious perspective, a sin according to Polish community and Polish literary principles.

The motif of the Romani fortune teller appears extensively in European prose and poetry, including Polish and Romani works. Polish literature presents images of Romani women from the perspective of those who used their services. Romani literature focuses on moments of future prediction and the laying out of cards. Fortune tellers appear in texts as manifestations of intelligence, sharpness, perceptiveness, wisdom, confidence, the logic of thinking, mystery, insight, and extraordinary intuition. The protagonists of the texts believe in its truthfulness and divination fulfilment. However, only Polish literature presents scenes fearful of “Gypsy” spells and even folkloric means to counteract them. In both cultural views on representatives of the Romani community, the theme of magic is an integral element, shaping the overall image of the figure of the Romani fortune teller. Moreover, these ideas are primarily consistent with the traditional cultural perception of Romani women. In addition to portraits that convey the belief in the extraordinary talent of Romani women, it also appears in mythicized images in which fairies assign magical powers. The presence of Romani women in the literature stems from the stereotype of the “Gypsy,” deeply rooted in the consciousness and culture of both Poles and Roma.

Literary images of faith healers and herbalists appear in Polish and Romani literary works. In both, we see the mythization of the image of a Romani healer by enriching it with supernatural elements: spells and healing magic. One of the Romani poems, “Zielarka” written by Karol Parno Gierłński, draws a sentimental picture lamenting the disappearance of this profession among Romani women. There is also, rarely, a more realistic, quasi-ethnographic image of the Romani faith healer (e.g., “Złoty kolczyk”). The gradual decline of herbalism as a traditional occupation is also true of other cultures and communities.

### *The object of love and delight*

In the eighteenth century a discourse on the eroticization and sexualization of foreign women – non-European – began to spread in Europe. Visual representations of Romani women have been exoticized and sexualized in Western Europe<sup>[14]</sup> (e.g., Carmen and Esmeralda). For centuries people accused Romani women of practicing spells and attributed them with magical powers to make men fall in love. The literary image of Romani women is certainly dominated by the discourse of *La Femme Orientale*. In addition to beauty, authors attributed to Roma women such features as wildness, sensuality, demonism, and freedom.<sup>[15]</sup>

Romani woman, as the object of love and delight, appear in the works of Polish and Romani writers. These are idealized creations of woman as perfect and gorgeous women with specific features: beautiful eyes, unusual looks, long black hair. In both literatures, there are threads of relationships between Romani women and non-Romani men and love scenes, often filled with suffering, disappointment, and longing for a life with another man. For cultural reasons, only common threads of infatuation and admiration for woman’s beauty appear in Romani poetry. In Polish literature, we find completely different images. There is objectification, stereotypization, erotization, and mythization of the Romani woman, as having natural abilities and magical powers to make men fall in love. Behind the above-mentioned images of Roma women, dominated by orientaling clichés and marked by attributes of sexuality (mainly in Polish literature), there is a view which devalues her spiritual, moral, or intellectual values and internal features. A Romani woman is principally portrayed as an erotic object, with emotional strength, and even a *femme fatale* that can lead a man to his death. This demonic and erotic image does not correspond to the traditional perception of women in Roma culture.

### *Artists*

The sexualized image of Romani women as talented artists – dancers, singers, and poets with extraordinary musical abilities – is one of the most colorful depictions found in Polish and Romani literature. Literature strengthens and idealizes the image of Romani women as talented artists. The authors emphasize a

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14 Ian Hancock. 2008. “The Gypsy’ Stereotype and sexualization of Romani Women.” In *“Gypsies” in European Literature and Culture*, edited by Valentina Glajar, Dominica Radulescu, 181. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

15 See Geoffrey Edwards and Ryan Edwards. 1993. “Carmen’s Transfiguration from Mérimée to Bizet: Beyond the Image of the femme fatale.” In *Nottingham French Studies* 32 (2): 48–54; Joseba Gabilondo. 2008. “On the Inception of Western Sex as Orientalist Theme Park: Tourism and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Spain (On Carmen and Don Juan as Femme Fatale and Latin Lover).” In *Spain Is (Still) Different: Tourism and Discourse in Spanish Identity*, edited by Eugenia Afinoguénova, Jaume Martí-Olivella, 19–61. New York: Lexington Books; Ian Hancock, 2008. “The Gypsy”. Stereotype and sexualization of Romani Women.” In *“Gypsies” in European Literature and Culture*, edited by Valentina Glajar, Dominica Radulescu, 181–191. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Romani woman's innate talent and unique musical ability. The most common is the literary image of a Romani dancer. Motifs of lively Romani dances, the feline movements of the dancers, and accompanying emotions appear in both Polish and Romani artists' work. In Polish literature, the image of Romani dancers is objectified and dominated by their sexuality and sensuality, which directly touches on cultural taboo and perpetuates a stereotypical image of women as talented artists. In the Polish cultural circle, the image of the Romani artist is dominated by erotic and sexual overtones, which objectifies Romani women. However, for example, the theme of Romani songs sung by Romani women only appears in Romani poetry. Ethnic Romani songs mainly addressed existential issues: poverty, hunger, love, death, and traveling.

### *Papusza*

The name of Bronisława Wajs – Papusza is permanently inscribed in the collective memory of Poles and Roma. Papusza is portrayed as an extraordinary, subtle, delicate, pleasant, talented, and inspired woman, as well as loving and respecting all creatures and gifts of nature. Both Polish and Romani writers express undisguised admiration and respect for the Romani poet and emphasize her intellectual independence and artistic individuality. Both literary canons present the legend of a stigmatized Romani woman, preserve the memories of Papusza, threads of rejection, alienation, her underestimation, as well as the tragedy of an unjustly accused, tried, and lonely woman. There is also the myth of Papusza as the first Romani poet in Poland and, at the same time, the first Roma *poète maudit* in Poland, who betrayed the secrets of the Romani community, which she paid for with defilement and poor health. Many works contain descriptions of pain, suffering and injustice towards the poet, and a lack of understanding and recognition in the eyes of Roma.

The Romani poet – Papusza is present in many works by Romani authors such as Izolda Kwiek, Jan Mirga and Karol Parno Gierliński. Dębicki, who is a relative of Papusza, recalls in “Ptak umarłych” the story of her kidnapping by Dyżko Wajs (Tricked Papusza). Papusza's other relatives such as Don Wasyl Szmidt portrayed her as a dedicated auntie – a series entitled “Papusza” in his poetry volume *Pasażerowie niebieskiego taboru*, in which he expresses respect and admiration for the poet and her work. A collection of poems by Polish authors dedicated to Bronisław Wajs appears in the book *Papusza czyli Wielka tajemnica*, titled *Poeci – Papuszy*.<sup>[16]</sup> The image in these works looks at the poet's character and sensitivity. She appears in them as a compassionate being, talented, inspired, and loving all creatures.

Papusza is the greatest Romani poet in Poland. Papusza's exceptional talent manifests in touching, authentic poetry filled with simple images, but also with a surprising metaphor, far from literary norms and conventions. The poet's texts captivate us with truthfulness, honesty, freshness, and simplicity. Her work raised topics and problems significant from the perspective of this community, including the Romani Holocaust, the forced postwar settlement of Roma, and the need for education. Bronisława Wajs was a modest person. As she used to say, “I am a poet, and I do not know what this poetic means, I just don't know. I know it's a big advertisement and a small business” (Ochwat 2020). From a branded

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16 A collection of poems dedicated to Papusza contained the lyrics of Janusz Koniusz, Zdzisław Morawski, Bronisław Suzanowicz, Romuald Szura, Henryk Szyłkin, Czesław Kuriata, and Czesław Sobkowiak.

artist, she became a protagonist. The image of Bronisława Wajs in Polish and Romani literature adheres to her original form and corresponds to the poet's character and sensitivity. Artists who dedicate their poems to Papusza express respect and admiration for her person and work. Authors emphasize the originality and uniqueness of her poetry and indicate the great importance of Papusza's achievements for the Romani community. Poets also raise the issue of lack of understanding and recognition in the eyes of her Romani contemporaries, for whom Wajs has long been synonymous with betrayal and apostasy. In both literatures' threads of rejection, alienation, and misunderstanding appear, as well as the tragedy of a lonely and stigmatized woman. In this way, literature presents a realistic image of Papusza, although, at the same time, it mythicizes her as *poète maudit*.

## Conclusions

The cultural ideal of a woman in the Romani community is different from the stereotypical image of the "Gypsy woman." Literature strengthens but also disrupts stereotypes of Roma – including Romani women. Judith Okely described this as: "The Gypsy women especially have been the objects of the dominant society's exotic and erotic projections and disorders. Their image has been associated with non-Gypsies with sexual attributes beyond the bounds of Gorgio 'culture' and with certain animals. In Gypsy-Gorgio relations, the men of each group project the image of uncontrolled female sexuality onto the women of the opposing group" (Okely 1983, 202).

Comparative analyses of the images of Romani women in Polish and Romani literature between 1956 and 2016 showed similarities and differences in the functioning of Romani women's ideas in Romani and Polish writing. Both present descriptions of feelings and reactions that Romani women provoked among Poles and Roma themselves. Both textual canons reference the phenomena of mythization, idealization, and stereotypization of the images of Romani women and the consolidation of their cultural pattern as devoted wives and mothers. Realistic representations of Romani women are present in both kinds of literature, in line with their traditional role in culture and the family and the rhythm of the caravan existence. Visual representations of Romani women – contrary to those of white women – have not changed over time.

The differences in the literary depiction of Romani women are evident in approaches to tradition and Romani cultural taboos. In Polish literature, there is objectification, showing the sexuality and sensuality of Romani women and a description of harm and painful detachment from tradition, dignity, respect, and identity in the extermination camps of the Second World War. These threads directly infringe upon cultural taboos. Authors, who are also representatives of the Romani community, are subject to intra-group and community *romanipen* rules. Their perspective on cultural perception is Romani, and therefore internal, resulting in a total omission of banned topics and non-violation of taboo issues in the literature. Romani literature is characterized by captivating, often lyrical, comparisons and poetic formulations and emotional simplicity, as well as colorful imaging and originality. The difference between Romani female and male authors' perspectives is found in Romani women's duties and roles. Romani women authors touch on loyalty, renounce real emotions, and give up true love in the name of family obedience.



Romani literature focuses on self-presentation, issues of identity structure, and the cultural memory of the Roma. Both prose and poetry reflect Roma's reality and create idealized images that are directed at Polish audiences. It is a conscious process of the mythicization of specific threads to show other nationalities the culture and existence of Roma as beautiful, colorful, and idyllic. Thus, Romani literature becomes a weapon with which to fight negative stereotypes and prejudices, but at the same time create myths targeting Roma themselves as a community. Primarily, it is a vision of an idealized caravan reality and a longing for a nomadic lifestyle. This existence takes on characteristic features for the Romani community. Since the cessation of Romani migration and the change in lifestyle of Romani groups, the disappearance of centuries-old everyday Romani experiences, as well as of traditions and customs, a myth that preserves them in the collective memory to maintain an identity for future generations, has been maintained.

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