FROM SLAVERY TO CIVIL RIGHTS AND SOCIAL EQUALITY: THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIBERATION – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE STAGES OF FORMATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND ROMA LITERATURE

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Abstract: The artistic struggle of a people for whom the art of writing represented, at times, a crime, for whom the power to create valuable artistic works was seen as biologically impossible, and which, for several centuries, was perceived as one without a language, without writing, and without history started to take shape as a collective enterprise in the first half of the 20th century and still continues today. In the attempt to gain a better understanding of what the concepts of African American literature and Roma literature mean today, and, most importantly, to identify the stages of their formation as well as their permanent relationship of mutual influence with the socio-historical reality from the United States of America and the Romanian territories throughout time, the present paper will provide a non-exhaustive presentation of the directions followed by the various forms of African American and Roma cultural expression both as part of the oral tradition and of the written literature of these two minority groups. The focus of the paper will be to comprehend, through the comparative method, the degree to which the formation and the evolution of ethnic literature created by writers of African American and Roma origins was influenced by the legal and social position of each minority group inside the host nation and, in this way, to trace the similitude as well as the differences between the literary contributions of the two groups in certain moments of history.

Keywords: African American literature, Roma literature, slavery, race, ethnicity

The African American and the Romanian Roma communities have been the victims of the slavery system for two and a half and five centuries respectively. Both systems had their roots in the ancient and medieval European practice of enslaving primarily war prisoners and pagans (non-Christians). Once they were captured, these persons would commonly become the legal possession of a master or be sent to populate certain areas after being, of course, Christianized. The practice of holding African and Roma slaves was established on the basis that it was both legally and morally right to do it: "it was a holy cause in which they had the blessings of both their king and their church" (Franklin, 29). The first African slaves were brought to Europe by Portuguese and Spanish explorers around the end of the 14th century and, about two centuries and a half later, the African slaves would arrive in the New World. While the African slaves were taken to the English colonies in the context of the European slave trade, the Roma people arrived in the Romanian Principalities throughout the 14th century as part of the long migration process that had started in India centuries before. There are multiple theories regarding the status of the Roma people at the moment of their arrival in Wallachia: free or as the slaves of another people. Nevertheless, both the African and the Roma slaves had a great contribution to the economic growth of the two nations, both categories being used both in agriculture and in numerous other crafts – and always for the tasks that other people would not willingly perform.

The lives of the African slave in the US and the Roma slave in the Romanian Principalities were extremely similar in terms of the kind of work that they had to do, the social position in relation to their master and the dominant population, the obligations that they had towards their owners and the rights of the latter over his slaves, or the freedoms that they could enjoy. The *Slave*

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Codes (in the US) and the *Organic Laws* (in the Romanian Principalities) gradually restricted their rights and multiplied their obligations and responsibilities until the slave was no longer physically or legally able to protect his life or his family. The emancipation process followed a different course of events in the two countries. While in the USA the contradiction over slavery between the North and the South led to the Civil War that offered the context for the Emancipation Proclamation from 1863, in Moldavia and Wallachia, the three main categories of slaves (owned by the state, by monasteries, and by boyars) were emancipated in several stages in the fourth and fifth decades of the 19th century. Immediately after the emancipation, both groups of former slaves found themselevs in a theoretically better but traumatically confusing situation in which they had to make a living for themselves and their family in a society that was not yet ready to accept them.

The history of the literature created by the members of a particular nation or of a racial or ethnic group follows closely the historical evolution of that group. Generally speaking, the connection between a text or any form of artistic manifestation and its socio-cultural context is easily seen especially when referring to minority groups such as the ones represented by African Americans or by the Roma people. Getting a complete understanding of the real artistic value of a literary work (oral or written) is, to some extent, rendered impossible without any access to the background of the creative process, to the historical reality of its creators, and to the values and ideology of the larger group to which they belonged. In this way, in the attempt to identify the original sources and influences that laid the foundation of what is today known as *African American literature* and *Roma literature*, it is important to understand the multicultural character that these racial and ethnic groups have in common.

There was a double challenge that the first generations of African and Roma groups, once they were forced to leave their homeland, had to overcome in the attempt to preserve elements of the cultural tradition from their place of origin. First, there was the evident acculturation process and the inescapable influence of the dominant group: if in the case of the African slaves brought to the American colonies, the influence was a slightly homogenous one (White population of European origin), the Roma people adopted and adapted different cultural, linguistic, and literary elements from all the peoples that they came in contact with on their long way from India to their place of destination. Secondly, it was a challenge for the first generations of Africans and people of Indian origin to maintain their authentic lifestyle and tradition alive on the new continent given the extremely diverse character of their places of origin: as an example, "the indigenous people of Africa did not identify themselves as *African*; they saw themselves as Ashanti, Fante, Yoruba, or anyone of a number of other ethnic groups with differing cultures, languages, religions, and political systems" (Vincent Carretta quoted in Jarrett, 12).

Though brutally removed from their communities and their homeland, the African slaves carried across the Atlantic the memory, language, and tradition of the social group in which they were born and raised: "Traumatic as this [Middle] passage from life to death was, this moment of the slave trade did not exactly leave people bereft of memory or their culture. The view that the enslaved arrived in the United States as hopeless pagans is being slowly dislodged" (Graham, 2). The origins of the African American literature were established in a literary tradition from the African continent prior to the first years of the Atlantic slave trade but it is important to comprehend the heterogeneous aspect of the African cultural and literary history in order not to "perpetuate the unfortunate idea that literary traditions emerged from the imagination and adaptive strategies of a more or less unified race of people" (3). While it is clear that the African culture, generally speaking, persisted in the New World through language, religion, and, particularly, through songs and folktales, the diversity of this cultural heritage was, in the early decades, heavily felt among the African slaves.

Thus, there was no single, unified image of the African motherland among the earliest forms of the African American literary practice. Furthermore, these literary depictions were heavily influenced by the general image of the African continent that the Western society shaped and perpetuated throughout time. The first writers of African origins were indirectly affected by this

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general view in their creative process: "they did not succumb to prevailing views of Africa, but neither could they fully escape the negative connotations associated with the continent, in part because they worked within Western literary and cultural traditions" (James Sidbury quoted in Jarrett, 26). Consequently, the *Africas* mentioned in the literary works of the African American writers were diverse and even contradictory at times: from a place where only evil things happened and that everyone should stay away from, a "fallen paradise", or the only remembrance of a home. Unlike the first generations of writers, the African American writers from the 19th century gradually stepped away from the received image of the African people and started to include it in their works by presenting it from new perspectives according to the personal vision of each and every one of them.

The Roma people, whose ancestors are known to have left the Indian territories more than 1000 years ago, is perceived as one of the few groups that, despite everything, managed to preserve a common tradition and, to some extent, lifestyle. However, maintaining the old cultural heritage was definitely a challenge considering the long history of the process of wandering across different countries and continents and of coming in contact with so many dominant, usually oppressive cultures. There are many sources describing the importance of the pure-impure principle in the cultural identity of the traditional Roma communities. Even in present times, "the preservation of the purity laws is one of the most important factors in protecting the intra-community cohesion of the traditional Roma society" (Grigore, 24). This need to stay away from *the impure*, *the unaccepted*, that was inherited from the old Indian life philosophy of the pure (*shuci*) and impure (*ashuci*) (Cherata, 36), functions at the physical, moral, and spiritual levels and, according to Gypsiologists, it contributed to the preservation of the unique (but not homogeneous) identity of this group. This characteristic of the traditional Romani culture is seen as one of the factors that helped the group preserve their unique lifestyle as well as their language, their customs, and authenticity throughout so many centuries: "the Gypsies retain the prejudices and the outlook on life which their ancestors brought from Asia" (Mayall, 141). Thus, the common perception of this foreign group emphasizes the unchanging nature of *the Gypsy people* for which the old Indian life and tradition continued to play a defining role, both consciously and unconsciously, even hundreds of years after their ancestors left their place of origin. But how much is India and the Indian life actually present in the common Roma tradition and ideology?

As previously mentioned, there are multiple elements of Indian origin in the social organization of the traditional Roma communities as well as in their religious beliefs. Not surprisingly, India is also present in the Roma oral tradition. Some of the most popular Roma legends describe the Indian origins of this troubled people, presenting the country as *the lost land* from where their ancestors were forced to leave. There are also contradicting opinions regarding the Indian elements of the Roma literary tradition. While some specialists deny any connections that might be drawn between these two groups - even contesting the originality of the Romani folktales and songs (Djuric, 19), others talk about a clear resemblance (or, in some cases, about an equivalence) between Indian and Roma literary forms as much in terms of structure and devices as in themes and tropes. According to the German folklorist, ethnologist, and ideologist Heinz Mode, a surprisingly large number of Romani stories strictly followed the Indian, Persian, and Turkish models (Wogg, 5). At the same time, Milena Hubschmannova, a Czech professor of Romani studies, in her endeavor to identify and describe the moments of evolution of the Romani tales from the Indian to the European stage, drew attention to a series of characters and themes that are common in both Indian and Romani tales.

The early literary practices of these two minority groups have in common their position in relation to the dominant, national body of literature to which, for a very long time, African American or Roma writers did not have access but which represented the norm that they chose to follow or not. A characteristic that can be noticed both in the case of African American literature and Roma literature is that they can be seen as existing inside and, at the same time, outside the established corpus of national literature. This dualism becomes obvious when talking about the

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literary contributions of African American writers that are an integral part of the framework of American literature while also being perceived as *distinctive* in the broad American context. But the situation is more complex in the case of Roma literature which is the result of the work of authors from different countries and speaking different languages or dialects. Thus, understanding the position of African American and Roma literary works in relation to the unique traits of the minority group, to their cultural heritage, as well as to the dominant social group can play a central role when trying to analyze its content and style because, as Kenneth W. Warren explains, all these elements had an undeniable impact on the literary forms created by the members of the subordinate group: "The pressure exerted by these instrumental or indexical expectations shows up not only in the way that writers and critics regard African American literary texts but also within the works themselves" (10).

The attempt to analyze and comprehend the formation and historical evolution of the formal concepts of *African American literature* and *Roma literature* also depends on the attention that is given to *orality* as the basis of all natural languages. The oral mode had a dominant role in the cultural and linguistic behavior of the groups that were to become the present day communities of the African American and Roma people. When talking about the oral literature of these two minority groups, it is important to analyze it, first, as part of the cultural heritage from the home country and, secondly, as the common core that kept the members of the group connected throughout time and across different states, territories, and even continents. The study of the earliest forms of African American literature, or, as Kenneth W. Warren calls it, "the literature of Africans in America", emphasizes the central role played by the sound, the orality of the language (as it can be noticed in spiritual songs and narratives). The language as well as the cultural and religious implications of the early African American literature can be studied in the works created by the first African American writers (or, more accurately, the English-speaking authors of African descent) such as Briton Hammon, David George, Olaudah Equiano, Boston King, John Marrant, Phillis Wheatley.

Until the end of the 18th century, we witness the formation of both oral and print literature "as it was created by African slaves, free blacks, and mulattoes for whom the memories of Africa were essential to their psychic and social survival" (Graham, 8). The first publications of African American authors date back to the second half of the 18th century: the autobiographical account written by Briton Hammon, a former slave of African origins that fled to British North America (*A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man*), Phillis Wheatley, American slave that was captured from Africa at the age of 7 and emancipated in her adult years (*Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*), and the first African American authors of works of fiction such as William Wells Brown (abolitionist writer who, in the novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*, approaches and explores the destructive effects of the slavery institution), and Harriet E. Wilson, the first African American writer to publish a novel in North America, *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, in 1859) (Graham, 140). A special category of the African American literature is represented by the genre known as *slave narratives*, which includes the fictional and non-fictional written accounts or testimonies of free or enslaved Black Americans of African origins. The genre was established by the autobiographical accounts of African Americans (who only narrated or personally wrote them) who accepted to share their personal experiences in order to inspire both the individual progress and motivation of the common Black American and to contribute to the anti-slavery movement. Through the direct accounts of the life inside the slavery institution and, especially, the self-representation of the direct victims of the racist system, the African American writers played a fundamental role in the pro-abolitionist struggle of the White activists and human-rights defenders that characterized the American society in the first half of the 19th century.

The first half of the 19th century was also the time when the spirit of a Black nationalism started to be expressed and manifested in literature through the idea of "a Black Nation within the American nation". The literary nationalism as presented by American writers of color was not a

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simple or a homogenous enterprise, including a variety of opinions regarding the real meaning of the concept of "home country": "What is the "nation" in African American literary nationalism? Is it the US nation, the nation within a nation (e.g., the black community within the US nation), or an African diasporic black "nationality" unbounded by national borders?" (Jarrett, 119). African American nationalism was directly linked to the project of Black social elevation in the United States and it was characterized by the idea that literature and the diverse forms of artistic expression would help, empower and unify the African American community. David Walker, the African American anti-slavery activist who promoted in his articles and literary works the necessity of *black unity*, argued, at that moment, that "blacks would be mocked by whites if they failed to display their capacity for literary achievement, insisting that it was precisely whites' derision, violence, and oppression that made it incumbent upon African Americans to work for the acquirement of both literature and property" (Walker quoted in Jarrett, 120). The active stand taken by the members of the oppressed minority shaped the African American literary nationalism during the slavery period and built the needed basis for the literary progress of the African American community in the post-emancipation era and throughout the 20th century:

> It is evident we must be our own representatives and advocates, not exclusively, but peculiarly – not distinct from, but in connection with our white friends. In the grand struggle for liberty and equality now waging, it is meet, right and essential that there should arise in our ranks authors and editors, as well as orators, for it is in these capacities that the most permanent good can be rendered to our cause. (Frederick Douglass quoted in Jarrett, 122)

After the Civil War and until the first years of the 20th century, the African American community - forced to face a new wave of racial discrimination, social and legal oppression, and severe financial problems - started to create new forms of literature meant to "(1) promote racial and moral uplift, social progress, and solidarity; (2) gain an identifiable, if not authoritative presence in mainstream America; and (3) exercise greater control over the representation of self" (Graham, 9). The first two decades of the 20th century brought significant changes in the institutional life of the African American community "in demography, the increase in literacy, the activities of women's and literary clubs, and the revitalization of an independent black press" (10). These changes determined the emergence of new fiction and non-fiction literary works that gradually led to the New Negro Renaissance.

This is the time when two of the most prominent voices of the Black American community started to be heard both by its members and by the White population: Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois. Though, to some extent, they followed different paths and promoted divergent attitudes, they had an unprecedented contribution to the education and, especially, the cultural and artistic revival of the African American community. The dynamics of the African American literary culture would be permanently changed during the years known as the Harlem Renaissance (the concept used to describe the period of literary productivity manifested between 1920s and 1950s). The 1950s are often considered the beginning of a well sustained tradition of black writing, being marked by the literary works of the "first generation of black writers to come of age reading other black writers whom the broader society would soon acknowledge as extraordinary" (Graham, 12). The evolution of the African American literature in the last decades of the 20th century was, unsurprisingly, influenced by the social, political, and ideological changes that the African American group went through and reflects the educational reforms of these decades marked by the emergence of the Black Arts Movement and the rise of the academic field of Black Studies.

In a society that is based on the idea that the White, dominant population has the legal, moral, and spiritual right to enslave other human beings, the literary representations of the subordinate community by the members of the oppressive group do not always reflect the reality. This is where the literary self-representations and the collective efforts for self-improvement and for establishing a common sense of identity of the ones that had no legal or political voice become a necessity. While in the case of the African American community of the 19th century these efforts manifested in the form of slave narratives or the African American nationalist literature, the first

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literary self-representations of the Roma community as a sustained attempt to create a common, transnational consciousness came relatively late – many decades after the abolition of Roma slavery in the Romanian Principalities.

The literature produced by the members of the Roma community was exclusively oral until the 20th century and it was consequently transmitted only in spoken form from generation to generation or by special *story-tellers* from each group. However, as it happened in the literary history of each people, the oral literature was often considered inferior to the written one both in terms of artistic quality and cultural value. Furthermore, understanding the real, authentic and original texts that formed the oral tradition of the Roma community is almost impossible for mainly two reasons: first, the illiteracy of most story-tellers who struggled – not always successfully – to learn by heart the text of the stories, poems or songs and, secondly, the fact that a large part of the collection of Roma traditional literary works were collected by persons from outside the ethnic group: "stories told in natural narrative situations often differ from tales which (non-Roma) collectors had Romani storytellers dictate to them in unnatural circumstances (Wogg, 4). However, the existence of certain constant topics, devices, and of recurrent themes brings us closer to understanding the oral culture of the Roma people. The traditional myths, legends, fairytales, proverbs, and songs of *the Gypsies* started to be of interest for non-Roma people as early as the 17th century in the attempt to discover the origins and past experiences of the group. For this reason, but also out of a certain unexplainable fascination with the marginal, exotic people that refused to adhere to the culture of the majority population, various collections of Roma poems, tales, and songs – as told by Roma people but edited by non-Roma persons – were published. Among the most common themes of these texts were the origins of the group, their tragic destiny, their relationships with God, the fight between Good and Evil, the use (and necessity) of magic and supernatural forces.

It is important to underline that there is no single homogenous body of Roma oral tradition and that the art and literature of each subgroup reflects and is directly influenced by the history and social changes of the host country as well as by the relations between the majority and the minority populations. According to various Roma writers and activists, it is difficult to note with absolute certainty the first literary work written by a Roma person because, given the historical context in which they lived and published their work, they decided to write in the national language of the country and to hide their ethnic identity. This opinion is shared by Rajko Djuric, Roma writer from Serbia who wrote and edited the first *History of Roma Literature*:

> The Roma were persecuted and brutally punished in many European countries. Just like John Bunyan (1628-1688), other Roma authors obtained literary fame and entered the literary history of the countries in which they lived, such as Nikolaj Velimirovic (1880-1950), Velimir Zivojinovic Masuka (1886-1968) in Serbia, Milan Begovic (1876-1948) in Croatia, Ioan Budai Deleanu (approx. 1760-1820) in Romania, and others. (Djuric, 6)

On the other hand, the first texts in Romani language are translations of the Bible and other religious texts (Zahova, 16) written in the context of the South and East European struggles for national emancipation and religious freedom from the second half of the 19th century, when we also witness the first attempts of the Roma people to gain "church service and education in their own language" (9). Probably the first formally organized literary movement in the European Roma community dates back to the second and third decades of the 20th century and to the first *Gypsy organizations* that wanted to shape and promote ideas of unity and common identity among the Roma communities.

Following the African American example, in the 1920s and 1930s, the representatives of a newly emerged Romanian Roma intellectual elite started to invest in various organizations meant to represent and defend their interests. The main purpose of these organizations was to create better life conditions for the Roma community that continued to have a marginal position in the Romanian society by emphasizing the need of literacy, formal education, and cultural evolution and, above all, by trying "to inculcate the Gypsies with a consciousness of their ethnic identity" (Achim, 157). The

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leaders of this movement also promoted, for the first time, the idea that a common language among all the Roma groups and an official body of literature written in their mother tongue would contribute to the social and cultural advancement of the community. To disseminate and promote their ideology among the common Roma people, they published their written works in their own magazines or newspapers such as *O Rom* (Roma), *Glasul Romilor* (Voice of the Roma), *Neamul Țigănesc* (Gypsy People) and *Timpul* (Times) (Zahova, 12). The year of 1934 marked the publication of two important books for the cultural history of the Romanian Roma community: the collections of elements of Roma folklore entitled *Ghilea romane (Cântece țigănești)* (Gypsy Songs) and *Paramisea romane (Povești țigănești)* (Gypsy Stories), published both in Romanian and in Romani language. Though some use the term *Gypsy nationalism* to describe this cultural movement in the history of the Romanian Roma community, Viorel Achim is of the opinion that "the Gypsy movement in Romania in the 1930s cannot be considered a "nationalist" movement" because most activists adopted "integrationalist ideas, such as sedentarisation of the nomadic Gypsies at all costs" (Achim, 157-158).

To conclude, the evolution of *African American literature* and *Roma Literature* was closely connected to the social, political, and cultural changes that affected primarily the host-country and, consequently, the members of the minority groups, and, furthermore, it was influenced by the relationship between the White dominant population and the subordinated racial and ethnic minorities. Although the first formal attempts of the African American and the Roma people to establish a firm literary canon of their own only came in the first half of the twentieth century, both ethnic groups have a long history of artistic expression that, to a certain extent, goes back to the place of origin of their ancestors: the African and the Indian lands. However, the centuries of racial discrimination and oppression that influenced the emergence and, at the same time, were the result of the slavery institution turned each ethnic minority into a marginal people. In this context, the image of the African American and the Roma people as portrayed by the national body of literature of each dominant population was entirely shaped by the centuries-old stereotypical thinking regarding the life, customs, and way of being of the subordinated groups. The response and the position adopted by the victims of the oppressive system mirrored their experiences inside and outside their community. The literary self-representations and the collective efforts for self-improvement and for establishing a common sense of identity of the ones that had no legal or political voice were slowly seen as a necessity by the members of the two minority groups. While in the case of the African American community of the 19th century these efforts manifested in the form of slave narratives or the African American nationalist literature, the first literary attempts at self-representation of the Roma community as a way to create a common, transnational consciousness came much later – more than half a century after the abolition of Roma slavery in the Romanian Principalities. Furthermore, while the social movements that completely changed the American society throughout the 20th century slowly empowered the African American community and strengthened the consciousness of a common identity among the members of the group, the change of political regimes and the transformations that the Romanian society went through starting with WWII brought the efforts of the newly-formed Roma organizations to an abrupt end and turned the members of this ethnic minority, once again, into *victims of history* and pushed them to the same marginal position where they were forced to live until the last decade of the previous century.

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