RONALD LEE: A CANADIAN ROMA WRITER

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Abstract: *Ronald Lee relives ten years of his life as Canadian Roma in his autobiographical novel Goddam Gypsy. The wealth of Gypsy lore and the individualistic and quirky characters set this novel apart in the rich production of Roma literature. This is an honest, non-apologitic account of the outsider among outsiders, of the marginalized by the marginalized, of a special subaltern type.*

The author tackles the inevitable poverty in the Roma milieus as the police close up the fortune telling joints (which the author admits rely on tourists's naivety) and of the mafia taking over the used car dealings eliminating the Roma people's sources of economic support. Ronald Lee does not offer us any lachrymose literature, his book is rather the brutal telling of truth about the Roma community as the author sees it and of society pushing the Roma to the edge.

From the artistic point of view this autobiography is more than the story of an individual self, it is the story of a community. Diaristic strategies are used in order to give more verisimilitude to this, ultimately, fictional account of fight and resistance to prejudice and discrimination.

Key words: ***Roma, tolerance, autobiography.***

The Roma people have lately become a "problem" for the xenophobic and racist voices in Europe. The eastward expansion of Europe led to the increased visibility of this minority which lived in large numbers, in Eastern Europe, for centuries. All of a sudden, the Roma who seemed to be, from afar, i.e. for the Western European general public, the victims of discrimination and abuse in countries which are not very able to handle democracy and/or human rights, became cumbersome asylum seekers, or even worse EU citizens. Noisy and gregarious, these new comers to the European banquet seem a threat because they are difficult, if not impossible, to "tame". More and more, the persistence of the problems the Roma people have to cope with rather point to serious weak points of European strategies, policies, and even official ideologies.

But Roma people do not live only in Europe. There is a certain Eurocentric perspective in Roma studies which this paper is trying to dwindle while also making a contribution to Canadian Studies.

The Roma migrated from India firstly to the Middle Eastern countries, then to Eastern Europe, and went slowly but surely westward. Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, they were ruthlessly rejected by the centralized monarchies from this part of Europe. The epitome of cruelty in this fight against these strange newcomers who pretended to be "Egyptians" was the great round up from Spain in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment did not seem to include the Roma as well. But this did not prevent the Roma exodus westward into the new territories discovered and conquered by the Europeans. According to Jimmie Storrie, an Australian researcher of Romani culture (http://www.pomsinoz.com/forum/chewing-fat/66251-does-aus-have-pikies.html), there were four Roma on the first ship taking convict to the penal colony which was then Australia. Undoubtedly, more must have followed as they were marginalized individuals, prone to crime. In New Zealand there are housetruckers who travel in convoys and also travelling Gypsies who live on selling their market goods. In the USA the Roma lived for centuries. Most of them are Vlax-speaking Roma.

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However, they were not officially recognized as a minority in the USA until 1972. Ann Sutherland explored this minority, which she called "hidden Americans" in a very well documented book than insists on the invisibility of the Roma in American culture and society.

The Roma became boisterously visible in Canada in 1997, during the well-known episode of the Roma exodus to Canada. Hundreds of Roma literally flooded into Canadian airports asking for asylum and looking for a better life. Some Czech mayors even paid the Roma their flight considering that this was the best solution to dwindle poverty and crime in their communities. Finally, Canada accepted about 200 refugee claims and sent the other applicants home.

Ronald Lee is a member of the Roma community and Canada and his autobiographical novel *Goddam Gypsy* is an excellent source if you want to understand this segment of the Canadian ethnic puzzle. Ronald Lee was born in Montreal, in 1934. He is a writer, activist, and linguist. Lee's father was a Kalderash musician. He immigrated to Canada and married in this country, taking his wife's surname, Lee. In 1939 Ronald Lee visited Great Britain and was unable to travel back home until 1945 because of the outbreak of World War II.

When Lee was 18, he started to travel with a Kalderash family from Europe plating mixing bowls, servicing restaurant kitchens, etc. Later he worked with his uncle, in the summer, at fairs and in amusement parks. During the other seasons he attended night school in Montreal.

Lee began his work as an activist in 1965 with Kris Romani[1]. He tried to make Roma and Gadze[2] understand each other. One of his most important concerns is that the Roma should represent themselves. He helped Romani refugees from Eastern Europe before and after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1978 he was part of the delegation that presented a Romani petition to the United Nations. In 1997, he was one of the founders of *Roma Community and Advocacy Centre* (based in Toronto) and the *Western Canadian Romani Alliance*, based in Vancouver, in 1998. At present Ronald Lee teaches a course on the Romani Diaspora at the University of Toronto.

Besides his novel, *Goddam Gypsy* published in 1972 and translated into Spanish, German, Italian, Serbian, Czech, and Russian, Ronald Lee also published a textbook for Romani language at University of Hertfordshire Press, in 2005 (*Learn Romani: Das-duma Rromanes*).

Ronald Lee relives ten years of his life as Canadian Roma in his autobiographical novel. The wealth of Gypsy lore and the individualistic and quirky characters set this novel apart in the rich production of Roma literature. This is an honest, non-apologetic account of the outsider among outsiders, of the marginalized by the marginalized, of a special subaltern type.

The author tackles the inevitable poverty in the Roma milieus as the police close up the fortune telling joints, which the author admits, rely on tourists' naivety. Mention is made of the mafia taking over the used car dealings and eliminating the Roma people's sources of economic support. Ronald Lee does not offer us any lachrymose literature, his book is rather the brutal telling of truth about the Roma community as the author sees it while society pushes the Roma to the edge.

From the artistic point of view this autobiography is more than the story of an individual self, it is the story of a community. Diaristic strategies are used in order to

[1] A kind of Romani court.
[2] Non-Roma. The word is very similar to meaning of "Goy" for Jews.

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give more verisimilitude to this, ultimately, fictional account of fight and resistance to prejudice and discrimination.

The text is a very interesting combination between the verbal text and the visual text represented by the Tarot figures naively drawn by an uncle of the author's. The tarot figures mix/mate with the deities that survived the religious acculturation of the Roma. Representative in this respect is Mundro Salamon, the Roma hero, who overcomes his enemy simply by turning the greed, ignorance or carnal desires of the enemy back against him" (I). Mundro Salamon is represented as in a mirror. His left hand holds "the magic wand of illusion" (I) and his right hand "points to the earth" (I). This is contrary to the Gypsy religious beliefs who consider that the left is evil and the right is blessed. This mirror-like, deceitful representation is meant to protect Roma true and secretive identity from indiscreet non-Roma glances. The Roma should never tell the truth to the non-Roma, a whole history of discrimination and prejudice is taking its toll.

For Ronald Lee, nomadism is one of the most important values of Roma identity. Foolishly people have forgotten this value, they look down on it. Ronald Lee meets, in this respect, in spirit, of course, the Australian essayist Bruce Chatwin who also cherished the values of nomadism and its contribution to culture and civilization. According to Ronald Lee, the Roma is, for ever, "the elusive and eternal Gypsy. He remains aloof, a child of former age of nomadism, long before sedentary man foolishly allowed himself to create a society in which he was either one of a privileged handful of rulers or one of a mass of ruled and exploited" (I).

The Roma identity becomes the result of a *bricolage* process where the kitsch, the authentic, the extravagant, the violent, and the carnal combine in a specific and unique way that tells us a survival story and a very special gradient of abomination and humanity. Few are the books that justify more dramatically the ancient saying: "I am human and nothing that is human is alien to me".

The narrative is linear – influenced by the picaresque *peripateia* – namely, a collocation, a string of episodes that convey an impression by accumulation. The Gypsy picaro goes through the usual experiences – prison, sex – his existence is framed by the same coordinates – destiny, fatum, and economics – money, the quest for a job, for a social placement are overwhelming. Besides all these classical characteristics, the Gypsy picaro has a very firm ethnic determination and he also evolves in parallel with another modern picaro – the Beatniks, the hippies of the twentieth century. Let us not forget that Jack Kerouac, the author of *On the Road*, that classic text of the Beat generation, was a French Canadian himself, by origin. Encounters and influences between these two picaresque existential patterns of life are, therefore, possible and sometimes even unavoidable. They both rely on the existence of a powerful counter culture that defies the comfortable but shallow conformity of the middle class. The following dialogue is relevant in this respect.

" 'I am a Gypsy. That's something you don't know about me.'

'She didn't really understand but took it like a typical Canadian, thinking I meant a person who travels a lot like a salesman, folksinger, or prostitute.

'Have you gone beat? she asked.

'What's the difference? I philosophized. 'Gypsies, beatniks, we're all outcasts' " (23).

Both the Gypsy and the hippy are characterized by their amazing mobility which is a defiance of the static bourgeois world fearful of change and movement. They both live on the margin in a perennial fight to value the moment and forget about

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duration because under duress. The difference between them is the long tradition of nomadism for the Gypsy and the novelty of this condition for the hippy. This different historical framing creates traditions which lack for the hippy. The Gypsy are a tradition. The hippy are a tradition-in progress. The road is existential for the Gypsy and a challenge for the hippy, "the leather-jacketed motorcycle enthusiasts" (1).

As I have mentioned previously, the verbal text interferes, exemplifies, samples the visual text made up of a succession of Tarot cards painted in a significantly Gypsy syncretic way by an uncle of the author and presented to the author's wife. The autobiography receives, in this way, another characteristic – it is not an individual text but a communal one. It is not an individual text but a communal one, it not a singular text – unlike the nihilist revolt and quest of the Beatniks – it is a communal story. The figures of the Tarot painted in a "naïve" fashion have several levels of meaning – they are survivors of the Indian deities, they are ordinary individuals, they are signs that allow a certain entertainment, a game. The myth is individual life and the individual life is myth and everything is controlled by the merciless laws of the big game. Janko, the main character, is, at the same time, Mundro Salamon, the ethic and brave man, who can converse, at the same time, with God and the Devil "whom he considers as some kind of beloved enemy" (I). He is surrounded by four hands which represent the four basic human races: white, black, brown, and yellow that constantly reach to absorb and assimilate. Only the Gypsy can escape this constant trapping and entrapment.

The *peripateia* of Janko, the Gypsy from Quebec, has a texture like structure, with several recurrences which constitute a refined texture of meanings and recurrences. What are these recurrences?

(1) The invisibility of the Gypsy people. Unlike in Eastern Europe, here, in the

country of the immigrants, the Gypsy wants to be as invisible as possible because he is the foremost immigrant. He alone is able to appreciate the nobility of this condition because he doesn't want to assimilate.

"The greatest strength of the Gypsies is their invisibility. It is not without good reason that many people consider them to be extinct, for the Roma themselves do everything in their power to perpetuate the myth of their non-existence. Unlike hippies, Gypsies do not flaunt themselves. In the immigrant districts where they normally live, they merge into the mass of strangers on the street. The men wear conventional clothes and work usually at some conventional trade: mechanics, auto body work, renovation of restaurant kitchens, house painting. Some are salesmen and handlers of imported goods, some are musicians and entertainers. The aim of every Gypsy is to be self-employed; seldom will a Gypsy take a regular full-time job in a factory or office" (IX)… "Socially, the Gypsies remain totally aloof from the world around them. They use what is useful in it – telephones, refrigerators… They take no part in political movements, citizens' organizations, protest groups. Since they own no property, they have little legal identity. They change their names as often as their houses" (X). The Gypsies invisibility goes hand in hand with their adaptability, like a chameleon the Gypsy adapts to the situation and adopts the strategy he considers best. His versatility, however does not make him a trickster. The trickster laughs, he does not want to leave the world, he wants to re-form it. The Gypsy rarely laughs. He enjoys and creates the fruitful instability of categories with a view of informing the world about how he is in-formed. That is all. Forcible resistance is rare, and when it occurs it is very cruel and one of the few borrowings the Roma made from other peoples. "Now the Gypsies started singing a defiant battle song. It told of how they had escaped from the camps and

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joined the partisans; of the Nazis they had killed to avenge their dead families, and of the German women they had raped, and the German babies they had killed, so that they wouldn't grow up to be soldiers. They were savage Magyars now with the blood of warriors in their vein" (44). Power is natural and coming from the body. Sexuality is the most impressive expression of power for the Gypsy. Janko's sexuality is heavy and discreet. Rarely manifest, it never fails to bring women into submission and turn them into addicts. Cherie is such a case

(2) The fascination with the road and the encounter, the influences from the other

road lovers of America, the Beatniks. Ronald Lee demonizes the moon in an episode that has the fascination of the Gothic with Gypsy touch. The moon arouses Cherrie, Janko's lover, but it can also hypnotize the careless driver into suicide turning an ordinary road into the uncanny.

"We left the city on the Laurentian Autoroute. There was a full moon and I thought of how many times Kolia and I had driven along the same highway, to and from jobs in the country.

"Sober, Kolia was a good driver, but now he was weaving from one side of the road to the other. He almost sideswiped two cars as he stepped on the accelerator, forcing the needle up to ninety.

"Then he turned on the car radio. The strains of 'Proud Mary' broke into the night as we drank, laughed and threw the empty bottles onto the soft shoulder of the highway.

I studied Kolia's face in the rear mirror window. He seemed hypnotized and a tingling sensation ran through the back of my neck.

'Kolia, our souls will wander for ever in the darkness of Kalisferia,' I said in Romany, reminding him of the Gypsy belief about suicide.

"He slowed down" (131).

(3) The events of the road the encounters, the friendships, the enmities, the fights, the women, the jobs of the road, the moments of trust and mistrust, and particularly why you have to cheat the Gadze. This dishonesty, which, in its turn became the huge justification for mistrust, marginalization, and discrimination, comes from century-old spite between the sedentary and the nomad, between he who is inside and he who is outside, he who is perceived to be unduly empowered and he who is considered to be unjustly marginalized.

In another episode of this picaresque suite, Janko is taught how to cheat on the Gadze and why. Intelligence, ingenuity, sense of humour frame a situation which can be considered an identity marker. Kolia and Janko had to repair a barbecue pit but there were only broken bricks left. Janko got worried. What should they do? They did not want to lose the job.

Kolia "just smiled and started removing the bricks that were smashed. 'Boil some water and put lye in it.'

When I had the water ready he brought over about thirty bricks, all broken, and washed them with his tongs one by one in the bubbling water. Once washed, they looked like brand new bricks that had been smashed. Then he replaced them in the Bar-B-Q pit the other way round so that the broken ends were hidden to the rear of the wall. When he got through, even I could have sworn that he'd installed new ones. Now he could bill the restaurant for thirty-five new bricks at $2.50 a brick. He turned to me and grinned.

'*Gazhe si dilo* – The non-Gypsy is a fool" (12).

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(4) Ronald Lee pays special attention to the Natives – a group that signifies Stability, land, and the tragedy of their loss is bitterer than any other. Janko's wife, Marie, is a Native and she considers herself to be landless. Her land was stolen a long time ago. The configuration of homeland is very important for both groups these characters represent, nuances being taken into consideration as well. Hospitality is the same because both these peoples are old and they know that there is no stronger power than human solidarity.

"There was something genuinely sad about these city Indians. First, they had been pushed into reservations where there was nothing, but cold, hunger and unemployment. Then they'd come hopefully to the white man's cities, only to be driven into the slum ghettos.

'The Gypsies were different. If they'd ever had a land of their own it had been swiped so long that it had long since ceased to have any valid meaning" (32).

Both Natives and Gypsies should keep away from governments. Marie warns her husband's people of the danger of conformity and norm-alization that comes with assimilation. "As soon as the Government gets after you, you'll end up on reservation in shacks with a wooden shithouse outside" (87). The irony of the subalterization gets scatological nuances. Defecation in public is not only something accepted both in Native American culture and in Indian culture, it also signals a connection with their old home, distant both in space and in time, for the Gypsies. Defecation in public is also a challenge to the accepted code of behaviour, to the bodily functions as prioritized and symbolically loaded by the whites. In this context, Marie's bitter irony is irresistible. "Almost everybody in Canada's got flush toilets except Indians. It keeps them busy filling up the holes; there's not much else to do on the reservation except to go to church on Sundays" (47).

Ronald Lee envisages two solutions to the plight of the Roma. One is culture, cultivating Romany culture. Ronald Lee's book is such a cultural instrument. Writing a book as a Roma is not only a testimony but also extraordinary control of memory preserving means. Inside the book, as in frame of the frame, there is another book, the Romani dictionary that Janko worked on. Apparently useless, because the characters' roads send them back to Europe, it is still a statement in itself about the endurance of a culture.

The other means to alleviate the Roma's plight would be developing nationalism. Janko ironically and bitterly records the new frames of such a situation by comparing the nascent Roma nationalism and Jewish nationalism. "Why don't we fight for a country of our own like the Israelis instead of running all over the world to get away from people who are out to destroy us and our way of life. We think we're smart when we clip some *Gazho*, smart like hell. Why don't we take guns, bombs and fight for our own fucking country. Long live Romanestan! Freedom or death! To hell with the *Gazhe*" (144).

Another important recurrence of the text, the fifth one , is the target of the search. The aim, the target of the road are only vaguely suggested. Ronald Lee and his wife take the ship across the Atlantic in the direction opposite to that taken by so many immigrants. They go from Canada to Europe.

"I took the non-Gypsy road but I didn't go far

"I got into big trouble, big trouble

" I ate the leg of a goose and they threw me n jails,

"Then I ate the drumstick of a gander and they threw me in the dungeon" (211).

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The author discreetly suggests a possible return to Mother India from whose welcoming womb the Roma were expelled a long, long time ago.

However, in spite of the concrete circumstances of the road, Ronald Lee sends a message that we are all travelers, nomads, and Gypsies, from birth to death, beyond the limits of birth and death, we may also be travelers in other bodies and in other lives. And in this, we are all brothers and sisters, and brothers and sisters should we all be. Lobotomization should be forbidden and dehumanization a thing of the past!

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