

**Bearing Witness to Racial Hatred and Challenging Patriarchy:
An Intersectional Approach to Violet Cannon's Migration
Memoir, *Gypsy Princess: The True Story of a Romany Childhood***

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Abstract

The paper explores how Violet Cannon, a Romany Gypsy writer, poignantly presents the saga of Gypsy life in her memoir *Gypsy Princess: The True Story of a Romany Childhood*. In her own inimitable way, she presents a 'subaltern' view of Romany life. She resists the silencing of Romany racial history. To her, writing is a kind of excavation and a means of offering correctives to canons of memory as well as to the strange ways of memory politicians. The paper also focuses on Violet's fortitude, as revealed in her bold decision to leave a loveless marital relationship and carve out her own path in life. She proves that a Romani woman can 'speak' for herself and challenge patriarchy. The way she speaks for herself and her community raises questions regarding the role of high-brow feminism and paves the way for 'Romani feminism'.

Keywords: Race, History, Migration, Gypsy Women, Patriarchy, Feminism.

Introduction

The Romani Gypsies have a long history of suffering, and the Gypsy women have suffered more terrible miseries than their male counterparts. They are believed to have started migrating to Europe from the northern parts of India sometime between the fifth and ninth centuries. However, there are different scholarly views regarding their period of departure, as illustrated by Professor Ian Hancock in his *On Romani Origins and Identity* (Hancock 2006, 5-7). The Romani Gypsies and their culture have received little attention, although they have been victims of racial hatred, class snobbery and gender discrimination. During the sixteenth century, at the beginning of capitalistic Europe, the roaming of nomadic tribes was declared

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illegal. Karl Marx writes in his *Das Capital* about “the criminalisation of itinerant people and the bloody legislation against those who did not have a fixed abode” during that time (Corradi 2018, xxvi). Anti-Gypsy regulations were issued, and they were persecuted.

The Second World War and the emergence of the Nazi party and Fascism brought harsher blows to the lives of the Gypsies. Like the Jews, the Gypsies became prey to the Holocaust; they were sent to concentration camps, tortured brutally, and killed mercilessly. “Almost three-quarters of the Romani population was murdered in the Nazi fascist era” (Corradi 2018, xxvii). “Security, social health, racial purity, and crime prevention were all used as rationales at one time or another to justify the killing of Gypsies as well as of Jews” (Tyrnauer 1989, 16). During this period, women became the objects of repression because of their gender as well as ethnicity, as they found themselves at the juncture of sexism and racism. Laura Corradi (2018, 21) comments, “Unfortunately, very few feminist theoreticians consider Gypsy women’s writings and Gypsy feminism in their works” as they are deemed ‘inferior’. Recently, some Gypsy writers have challenged the stereotypical representation of Gypsy life by mainstream feminists. Violet Cannon, a Romany Gypsy, through her extraordinary memoir *Gypsy Princess*, delves deep into Gypsy women’s questions, bearing witness to the actual events and touching experiences of her racially-segregated Gypsy life and explores the possibility of Gypsy Feminism. Using Violet Cannon’s account of travelling Gypsy women’s lives and her own life, this paper enquires about the oppression and marginalisation of Gypsies, particularly their women, and how they struggle to take control over their lives. The paper analyses Violet Cannon’s memoir at the intersection of racism, patriarchy, marginalisation, and modernity.

Witness Writing

According to the *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature*, “As the work of witnesses, Holocaust literature transforms its reader into a witness—one cannot engage it without being implicated by it” (Patterson, Berger and Cargas 2002, x). The process of reading a witness writing demands its readers’ active engagement in it. It is a kind of literature that bears witness to the atrocities confronted by a race or a certain section of society (Roy 2013, 114). In his essay “The Second World War and Postmodern Memory”, Charles Bernstein (1999, 277) speaks for poetry (for that matter, literature) to be an essential means of registering ‘unrepresentable loss’. The eyes must not be averted from the stark reality. A writer’s responsibility is to illustrate the barbaric truth. Witness writing, therefore, paves the way for a comprehensive identification with the ‘Other’, the marginalised, thereby establishing empathy rather than sympathy. It opens before us a vast arena of facts based on its extremity. Seamus Heaney terms it as literature’s solidarity with the destitute, the underprivileged, and the neglected (Roy 2013, 114). Witness literature is inseparably linked with the truth-telling impulse and the onus to identify with those on whom atrocities have been perpetrated. Thus, Violet Cannon’s memoir *Gypsy Princess: The True Story of a Romany Childhood* does not

bother about the question of ‘illusion of reality’ or ‘truth to life’. We cannot verify the truth stated in it because the memoir itself is a trace—a piece of evidence, an infrangibly valid life testimony. It exists for us as a storehouse of data regarding discrimination, racial as well as patriarchal, and resistance against the same. Shoshana Felmen, in her essay, “Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching”, significantly points out, “A ‘life-testimony’ is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life* (author’s emphasis)” (Felmen 1992, 2). Again, her view regarding Freudian psychoanalysis and testimony seems too relevant in this context when she says, “The testimony will thereby be understood, in other words, not as a mode of *statement* of, but rather as a mode of *access* to, that truth” (1992, 16). *Gypsy Princess* represents that ‘conflation’ and brings the truth to the fore. Therefore, Violet’s memoir is evidentiary rather than representational in nature. It is more authentic than any historical account because the dominant ideology can easily influence history, but witness writings never suppress political history. Rather it recounts a problematic relationship between literature and politics. The word ‘politics’, according to the accepted domain of knowledge, is viewed as a contaminant of a ‘pure’ literary work. The writers are expected to remain unabated by the socio-political forces they are located in. They are expected to remain within a hermetic sphere of aesthetic expressivity and linguistic art. But is it impossible to imagine a writer who professes to be without politics? Second World War veteran and pacifist Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s manifesto poem “Insurgent Art” conveys his belief that literature has political agency. Much earlier, Keats expressed his hatred towards poetry that had a ‘palpable design’ upon the readers. Shelley proposed radical political thought but ended up becoming an ‘ineffectual angel’. Tennyson as well as Arnold escaped from the annoying glitches. For D.H. Lawrence, poetry professes a ‘stark directness’ without allowing space for untruth. Pound-Eliot’s ‘High Modernism’ underlined the alienation of poetry from the public sphere on the grounds of accessibility and social utility. It is after the First World War and, more significantly, after World War II and the Holocaust that we witness an altered literary sensibility that speaks against the silencing of political history and recounts the slaughter of people pointing out the truth. Violet Cannon bears proof of the saga of Romany life. In her own unique way, she presents a subaltern view of racial history. She resists the silencing of Romany’s history. To her, writing is also a kind of excavation and a means of offering correctives to canons of memory as well as to the strange ways of memory politicians. Here lies the significance of memoirs in general and Violet Cannon’s *Gypsy Princess: The True Story of a Romany Childhood*, which is the focus of this paper.

Setting the Context: Racial Prejudices and Hatred

Laura Corradi states, “Gypsy still represents the radical Other” (2018, xv). Violet Cannon writes, “As free as we felt as Gypsies, we are trapped by other people’s prejudices” (2011, 171). She talks about the two sides of their life. On the one hand, she describes her love for open-air life, “We grew up to think that the outdoors was our indoors, the grass was our

carpet and the sky was our ceiling. The sun was an alarm clock and the moon our night-light. Being sat inside all day just didn't happen" (2011, 51-52). On the other, she illustrates her experience of discrimination in the chapter titled "Miracles and Discrimination", "we knew we were social pariahs" (2011, 171).

This issue leads us to look at the 'Racial history' which tends to prioritise the suffering of the Jews. During Second World War, the concentration camps saw the tortures inflicted not only on the Jews but also on the Gypsies as an alarming number of Romani migrants, too, were victims of the Holocaust. "An unbiased version of the holocaust should tell humankind the systematic liquidation of communists, the Romanies and the handicapped people," says C. R. Sridhar (2006, 3569). Unfortunately, the issue of genocide of the Romani Gypsies has largely been side-lined, "The dominant narrative of the holocaust by historians and scholars of the Nazi era is imbued with the sense of the exceptional and unique suffering of the Jewish race" (2006, 3569). Long before the Nazis came to power, the Romanies had been considered outcasts and excluded from mainstream society on the grounds of inferiority, criminality and strangeness. Violet Cannon gives a brief account of the oppressed Gypsies:

And oppressed we have been, throughout history. The first recorded persecution took place in the Middle Ages. Gypsies enjoyed freedom in Spain until the Christian *Reconquista* (re-conquest) in the thirteenth century, but since then my people have been killed, forced to flee their homes and even been made slaves in Hungary and Romania, right up until 1855. As recently as the 1970s, in Switzerland and Scotland, Gypsy children were taken away and adopted. (Cannon 2011, 5)

They were represented as "debased creatures, inferior even to the animals" (quoted in Hancock 1987, 17). Attempts were made to stop the further breeding of this community as they were deemed to have a 'criminal' lineage. The 'nature of race' question prevailed as a relevant issue. Ward Churchill recounts (what Johannes Behrendt of the Nazi Office of Racial Hygiene circulated in a brief in February 1939) that "all Gypsies should be treated as hereditarily sick; the only solution is elimination. The aim should be the elimination without hesitation of this defective population" (quoted in Sridhar 2006, 3570). C. R. Sridhar illustrates the poignant truth:

In the Poland, the Netherlands, Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia and Albania many Romanies were shot or sent to death camps where they were killed. In the Baltic states and German-occupied USSR, Romanies were killed along with Jews and communist leaders by the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units). In France, the deportation of the 'Gypsies' started in 1941 from the German-occupied territories and those areas under Vichy control interned some 3,500 Romanies and sent to the death camps operated by the Germans (2006, 3570).

While the Jews' carnage was much talked about, the Romani genocide was neglected perhaps because their oral culture was not conducive to hype and publicity. Excluded as they were, their Holocaust was not worth being the stuff of history. Romany saga has been marginalised by Jewish history. The result of the search for the term 'Gypsy' in any leading archival repository would yield the same result. According to Ari Joskowitz, "Results of a search for the term 'Gypsy' or its equivalent in the catalogues of Holocaust archives such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem or the Centre Juive de Documentation Contemporaine will inevitably bring up mostly Jewish testimonies" (Joskowitz 2016, 111). Some Romani women writers like *Elena Lacková*, *Papusza*, and *Philomena Franz* made pioneering attempts in their writings by depicting their experiences as Holocaust survivors. *Lacková's* short stories like "Dead are not Coming Back," "White Ravens," and "Life in the Wind" are regarded as documentation of the consequences of the Holocaust on the Gypsies. *Danger: Educated Gypsy!* (2010), an edited volume, introduces us to the overall contribution of Professor Ian Hancock regarding Romani studies.

Violet Cannon writes, "Romany Gypsies are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Europe, so it's incredible that many governments still don't record us in their census" (Cannon 2011, 4). The German linguist Rüdiger proposed in 1782 that Romani does have Hindu origin and this idea became well-accepted throughout the nineteenth century, especially after Max Muller's work popularised the idea that South Asia was the home of a parent language, Aryan, from which most tongues evolved (Behlmer 1985, 241). They are thought to belong to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family and it is thought that the Romanese language has similarities with Sanskrit. Violet Cannon also mentions this point (2011, 3). Travelling was inseparable from their lives. The Europeans erroneously supposed them to have come from Egypt and accordingly called them 'Gypsies'. Explaining the reasons behind these misconceptions, Violet Cannon writes, "Few books have been written about our culture, and the lack of written records means that most of our knowledge of the past is learned through word of mouth and not recorded like in other cultures" (2011, 43). As a result, the source of knowledge about Romani Gypsies is the official history and archival records which tend to serve the interest of 'power'.

But the uniqueness of literature is that it bears 'witness' to atrocities suppressed in official history. It is good to see that Romani memories have begun to come out of the state archives and are finding vivid expression in literature and culture. Nowadays, few Gypsy writings are selling very well and the reason is, according to Gill Brown of the London Gypsy & Traveller Unit, "For years, they have been reluctant to put their heads above the parapet, because they often face a vicious response. That still exists, but Travellers are now creating a climate in which they are willing to speak openly. It's about time that Gypsies and Travellers had a proper profile in the culture of this country"¹. Violet's remark is also worth quoting: "Some Gypsies see all this recent publicity as a good thing. After all, if public starts to understand us,

the government can't oppress us so easily...and oppressed we have been, throughout history" (Cannon 2011, 5).

Violet rues how the popular notion conceives them as 'dirty', 'vicious' and 'strange'. In her school, her classmate Edmund used to taunt her addressing her as "Stinky dirty Gypsy" (2011, 113) because of racial segregation, Maria, Violet's sister, "was regularly coming home in tears" (118). At the age of twelve, when Violet's mother once again decided to send her to secondary school, one of her 'Gorja' classmates, Kerry addressed her as 'stinky gypo' in their introductory conversation and told what they thought about them, "My mum says all gypos stink and you're just the same. Give us nits and all" (Cannon 2011, 144). Someone else laughed at her, saying, "You eat disgusting things like spiky hogs, you dirty gypo" (115). Her experience of being forbidden to enter the cinema hall reminds us of caste-based Indian society where Dalits, the untouchables, are similarly discriminated as illustrated in the autobiographical works of Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Urmila Pawar and others. When they (Violet, Maria, Joanne and Sarah) asked for tickets, the man at the counter replied, "You're not coming in. We don't have Travellers in here" (2011, 170) and again he retorted, "Well it is full for you, as you're Gypsies and you're not welcome here. Please leave" (171).

When she is in search of a job or she is in a shop, her Gypsy identity creates problems in her life and things get delayed, "even on a trip to the local supermarket, we'd notice security guards mooching round after us" (2011, 171) and while walking on the road, the outspoken Gorja teenagers would be "shouting abuse and giving us the finger or other unpleasant gestures" (173). They could not escape discrimination in their innocent childhood as well as maturity when they keep their feet in the world of experience, "Although we'd finally escaped the misery of school days with all bitchy comments thrown at us by other pupils, we still had to deal with other kids in the real world, who we soon learned could be just as cruel" (2011, 172).

She recounts how according to popular belief, Gypsy women are thought to be practitioners of black magic and fortune-telling, "Such is the stereotype that Gypsies can tell fortune" (2011, 64). She has written in her memoir how the term 'Romaphobia' has been accepted in racial discourse. She recounts one of her interesting experiences of how she frightened the Gorjas by uttering nonsense words in self-defence at school when Edmund wanted to call her 'gypo' again, "Then before he opened his gob to call me a 'gypo' again, I spat out the words: 'Shimmerdimmberflabbertygabji!' Of course it was sheer nonsense I'd made up as I went along but by closing my eyes as if half possessed and holding out the palms of my hands, it seemed to do the trick" (2011, 114). As a result, "a look of panic flitted across his once smug face" and Edmund cried, "you've placed a curse on me! Take it off. Take it off" (114). This is a peculiar means of racial stigmatising and marginalisation. McGarry thinks that this stigmatisation of the Roma people is "not at all different from Islamophobia, anti-Semitism" (McGarry 2017, 7). But, for the Romani people, "We are all wanderers on this

earth. Our hearts are full of wonder, and our souls are deep with dreams”, as the old Romani proverb goes (quoted in Editors 2019, 4). They love to stay under the open firmament; they enjoy their liberty in the lap of nature and the life of endless journey and adventure.

Challenging Patriarchy

Ethel Brooks, in her essay “The Possibilities of Romani Feminism”, has said that Romani women have been painted as “sexually available objects of fantasy and as old witches” (Brooks 2012, 3). They have been passive victims of patriarchy. The title of Brooks’ essay is suggestive of the possibility of ‘Romani feminism’ which brings to the fore two sides of the issue—the truth behind the wrapper of *gadji* (non-Gypsy) opinion and the possibility of resistance on the part of the Gypsy women against both patriarchal and racial segregation. Can Gypsy women determine how to live their ‘Gypsyhood’ as feminists? It is a pertinent question postulated by Trinidad Muñoz in her article “Gypsy Women in the 21st Century: Crisis or Opportunity?” This essay heralds the dawn of new critical perspectives on the Gypsy women’s question (Corradi 2018, 17).

Patriarchy prevails in almost all sections of society across the world, irrespective of race, colour, caste and location. It is all-pervasive. It debars women from leading their lives on their own terms and forbids women to enjoy the bliss of other basic human rights as human beings. It is patriarchy that prohibits women from following their dreams. Gypsy communities are no exception. Though all Gypsies are racially segregated, humiliated, and brutally massacred at some points of time in history, Gypsy women face more difficulties than men, remaining doubly marginalised. However, this also creates the possibility of resistance. The 21st century has opened a new vista for them and sometimes they also raise their voices and resist patriarchal oppression in significant ways.

With passionate feelings of solidarity Violet Cannon says that Romany women cannot be beaten easily and, in her memoir, she has poignantly depicted how Romani women are countering the indignities perpetrated upon them by the culture-vultures of racism and patriarchy. Her creative skill is providing the sensitive souls “a searingly honest account of what life is really like for travelling communities, for girls in particular” (Cannon 2011, Blurb). The journey of her life from childhood to maturity—from an overcrowded one-roomed trailer to the time when she, rejecting the shackles of a claustrophobic patriarchal marriage boldly, can take her decisions on her own—captures the Gypsy life of travelling communities which is far removed from the representation of Gypsies in mainstream literature written by non-Gypsy writers. She unravels the pains of being a ‘Gypsy woman’ along with their resistance. While talking about her mother, she illustrates how different she is from other oppressed Gypsy women. She is an independent working mother who is the family breadwinner. Cannon writes how her mother encouraged her children to consider getting an education so that their lives would be different from others in her community. Her mother “went to school for a

short while” (2011, 43) and joined hands with the protesters in a march in London organised against discrimination. It is her mother who realised the need of the hour and gave importance to her children’s education:

But Mam believed it was important for us to get an education and took it seriously. She could see how rapidly the world was changing and she instinctively understood that people need to reach a decent level of literacy and numeracy if they want to get ahead. She followed her instincts and agreed to send us to school, even though she wasn’t thrilled about us mixing with Gorga people there. (Cannon 2011, 43-44)

An echo of Victorian feminist Mary Wollstonecraft is significantly visible in Violet’s mother’s approach. Wollstonecraft was radically seeking education as a means to improve women’s position in society (though in western white women’s context), where, she believed, “the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched...” (Wollstonecraft 2004, 11). Violet writes how all the Gypsies were deprived of education — “education for Gypsies was non-existent for generations...only in the most recent generation has education become widespread, and arguably a necessity” (Cannon 2011, 43). Violet longingly reminisces how her mother contributed a lot to giving basic education to her children, though, of course, the racial discrimination by the ‘gorgia’ or *gadji* (non-Gypsies) people against the Gypsies forced her to stop thinking of going to school at the age of nine and embrace the life of travel engrossing her mind in age-old Gypsy tradition. They had to tolerate the bullies and taunts of their non-Gypsy classmates, just like the Dalits in a caste-ridden Hindu society. Another writer Cecilia Woloch, an American- Carpathian Romani writer and poet, illustrates the Romani journey and identity and the forces that have designed the Roma people’s destiny and fortunes in her poetry collection, *Tsigan: The Gypsy Poem* (2002).

Laura Corradi writes significantly, “Before entering the field of patriarchal traditions and feminist research, it is useful to have more background to understand how women are often both the breadwinners and primary caregivers in contemporary Roma families” (Corradi, 2018, xxviii). The Romani women are doubly marginalised. In order to understand their condition, researchers should indulge in intersectional research. They suffer because of widespread racism and misconceptions surrounding the lives of Gypsies. Amnesty International emphasised that the violation of human rights experienced by Romani women is a product of discrimination based on their origin as well as their gender (Corradi, 2018, xxviii). Gypsy women become the bread-earners for their families. Fortune-telling provides women with the opportunity to earn money. Oskana Marafioti, a celebrated Gypsy writer, writes about the bad luck of the Gypsy women — how they depend on fortune-telling to earn some money so that they can avoid the imminent blow from their husbands because “most likely they had husbands back home who’d beat them if they didn’t return with enough earnings for alcohol and cigarettes” (Marafioti 2012, 56).

Bearing Witness to Racial Hatred and Challenging Patriarchy

“Training to be a mother and wife starts in earnest for girls as soon as you learn to play” (Cannon, 2011, 72). As in all patriarchal societies, playing with dolls for girls is common. It helps them nurture a woman’s role of being a mother from a very early age, as motherhood is considered the most important thing in women’s life. Motherhood is celebrated as bliss in women’s lives, and the education to become a mother must start very early. They become caretakers of their families by earning money and doing domestic activities, and they will become procreative machines. “She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female—this is sufficient to define her” (Beauvoir, 1956, 33) — this concept prevailed in society with extreme pomp and grandeur. Motherhood defines a woman’s identity in a patriarchal society. Quite ironically, it was a ‘norm’ prevalent among the Gypsy women to become a mother of a minimum of four to five children. They could not think beyond that. Marrying at a young age was normal in Gypsy tradition and having four to five children was common for all women. Violet Cannon’s mother desperately wanted kids as “she couldn’t imagine life without motherhood – to be fair, most women couldn’t” (2011, 19).

Cannon introduces us to other customs formulated especially for the girl child in the Gypsy culture. In her own words:

Coming to the question of the s-word (sex), again I feel very uncomfortable even mentioning it, same as with bodily functions. We never talk about it, as before marriage it is unthinkable. The consequences of it are so severe, it’s not worth even considering. All girls have to keep themselves ‘pure’ until their wedding night, which in most cases is aged around seventeen or eighteen. We weren’t allowed to attend biology lessons about the birds and the bees at school....for fear of being seen as ‘dirty’. (2011, 195-96)

Girls were not allowed to ride horses, in case it broke the skin below....For boys, things were seen a little differently. It’s never spoken about but silently accepted that Gypsy men might look for ‘it’ elsewhere before they were married, but woe betide anyone who was caught. Boys were not seen as needing to wait as much as the girls. (Cannon 2011, 196).

Finding a husband and marrying at a young age was highly expected among the Gypsy communities. But Violet Cannon violated that norm significantly by marrying a little late when she was ready. By doing so, she conformed to the challenges taken up by the Gypsy women activist group *Romni*, a network of Roma women who originated in Italy in 2010. Women from many other places like Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, Austria, Bosnia, Herzegovina and so on are associated with this group. The main slogan of this group is *sposati quando sei pronto* (‘marry when you are ready’), which is “formulated to battle with early marriage and also it deals with the questions of education and rights of Gypsy communities” (Corradi, 2018, 22). Needless to say, the slogan raised by Romany women should reverberate through

women of all marginalised sections of society in the world irrespective of class, caste and race.

For Cannon, who has spent her life in the one-roomed trailer travelling on the roadside of Yorkshire and her childhood in the typical traditional Gypsy way, life took an unconventional turn when she was around 13. She wanted to have an identity of her own, debunking the tradition. She says, “Around this time I was desperate to rebel.... My way of rebelling was to stand out from the crowd in the way I dressed I wanted to have an identity, away from the girly dolly dresses and the head of ringlet curls. So I decided to wear shapeless sweaters and baggy Joe Bloggs jeans. I also finally got my hands on a pair of Doe Martens boots” (2011, 177).

By the time she was thirty-one, she had a job and was divorced. Her memoir gives eloquent expression to her undaunted spirit to come out of a marriage which gifted her nothing but a claustrophobic life. Unlike many other wives within her community, who are speechless in the face of the stare and glare of patriarchy, she dared to sever all connection because the relationship meant nothing to her. This is significant given the fact that “no Roma wife went against her husband” (Marafioti, 2012, 146). Violet violated the norms of patriarchal society and swam against the current. Rather, she thought ending her relationship with her husband was the beginning of her freedom. At first, she tried to be true to the Gypsy tradition of not breaking marriage, but finally, the rebel in her could not give in. She rejected staying in that marriage when she was thirty, a decade older than most brides in her community. She celebrated her divorce; she celebrated her singlehood; she embraced her life of liberty after divorce. She did not pay heed to the Gypsy custom which believed that the breaking of marriage for a Gypsy woman is a matter of shame. Violet writes, “Coming back to my community as a woman who’d broken off her marriage wasn’t going to be easy... it’s not just what happens” (2011, 360) and “being a divorced woman in the Romany Gypsy world was isolating” (370).

Remaining loyal to one’s husband is what a patriarchal society demands from an ‘ideal’ wife and to be ideal is nothing but to follow the dictates of the ‘lawgivers’ of society. According to the Marxist view, “The ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought” (Marx 1986, 29). Violet Cannon’s approach to her own life is meant to empower Gypsy women; she proves that one can take her own decision. She is able to resist the atrocities she faced in life and can give memorable expression to her feelings: “Slowly, day by day, the sad, unhappy wife was turning back into single, confident Violet, who spoke her own mind and knew who she was. It was a struggle finding her, though” (Cannon 2011, 360). She even celebrated her freedom by arranging a ‘divorce party’ inviting all she knew and ordering “a pink cake with a bride wearing boxing gloves, standing over her groom with a foot on his chest” (368). The pink cake symbolically represents a Gypsy woman’s rejection of patriarchy and her resistance against gender-based difficulties.

She rejects the stereotyped and accepted image of Gypsy women. Finally, she writes, “I still believe my prince will come, and one day I will have the children I long for. For Romany people are not beaten very easily and never give up the fight. We’re a race who’ve survived despite the odds for years and I am so proud to have their blood coursing through my veins. There’s no one else I’d rather be” (2011, 372).

(Mis)representation of Gypsy Life

Laura Corradi uses the term ‘queer’ while talking about the representation of the Gypsies (2018, 46), keeping in mind the definition of ‘queer’ as speculated by David Halperin, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (Halperin 1995, 62). According to Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, representation is of two types, *Vertretung* or political representation and *Darstellung* or re-presentation, i.e., ‘placing there’ and thereby, representing is ‘proxy’ and ‘portrait’ (Spivak 1990, 108). The cartoon representation of the Gypsies in *Viz*, a youth magazine, under the title “The Thieving Gypsy Bastards”, portrays them as ‘thieving’ and ‘dirty’. “Big Fat Gypsy Weddings”, a *Channel 4* documentary series, explored and featured the Romanichalⁱⁱ tradition and life, which evoked many controversies because of misrepresentations. Violet contests this popular ‘queer’ image about the Gypsies – the image of being odd and occult. Image making is a politics that helps in the process of ‘Othering’ of marginalised races.

In this respect, postcolonial thinker Edward Said’s views in his landmark work *Orientalism* (1978) are worth mentioning. Said talks about the misconceptions about the Orient generated on purpose by the West. The Orient is misrepresented by the Occident and is treated as the complete ‘Other’. Representation is a ploy to command power. The Romantics ‘sympathised’ the Gypsies and the ‘vagrants’. In Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”, we find a mention of ‘uncertain notice’ of ‘vagrant dwellers’ dwelling in the houseless woods and in the open air. Romantics have glorified their freedom of movement but have hardly captured their ‘condition’ in their writings. In Victorian England, literary representations of the Gypsies have been bizarre, outlandish and strange. There were many ‘wandering tribes’ and vagrants who “steadfastly refused to settle down” (Behlmer 1985, 231). Only at the end of the nineteenth century did government reports begin to divide the wandering population into classes, and the term Gypsy, a term loosely applied to all wandering people, began to be applied to a section of them. They were feared because habitual vagrants called no one master and could afford to flout the work discipline of industries. The government also nurtured the view that every worker was secretly prone towards wandering. Mainstream society was worried about them because they flouted conventions. This attitude had its counterpart in literary texts too. For example, George Eliot, in her *The Spanish Gypsy*, called them “A race that lives on prey as foxes do/With stealthy, petty rapine” (1886, 106). They were represented

'differently'. Deborah Epstein Nord writes about nineteenth-century women writers and their representation of the Gypsies:

In a cluster of works written by women in the middle decades of the nineteenth century—Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868)—Gypsy figures mark not only cultural difference but a deep sense of unconventional, indeed aberrant, femininity. (1998,190)

Virginia Woolf's hero/heroine Orlando, in her novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), goes to a Gypsy camp far away in Turkey and lives with them though their values do not match with him/her. Victorian writers like Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Bulwer Lytton, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Theodore Watts Dunton, together with the missionaries, created an obsession for the Gypsies. In her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852), the American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe took up the cudgel for the Gypsies and the slaves. George K. Behlmer, in his essay "The Gypsy Problem in Victorian England", writes about Rodney Smith:

Rodney Smith, born near the Epping Forest in 1860, argued that while his people may have been "pilferers" of fruit and potatoes, they observed a strict moral code in other respects. Reflecting over a period of forty years, Smith could not recall knowing even one "fallen woman" in a Gypsy tent. Furthermore, his people "always" took care to christen their babies, and revered the old. Smith's case can be corroborated with press accounts of stately funerals and shunning ceremonies in which Gypsy renegades were banished from their tribes. But the suspicion of sin died hard. Throughout the Victorian era, most local authorities continued to view Gypsies as outlaws. (1985, 235)

As a result, they were harassed by the rural people. In his semi-autobiography, *The Romany Rye* (1857), George Borrow illustrated the young man's meetings with strange characters and his views regarding Romani women. However, Nord makes a critical remark regarding this British obsession with the Gypsies:

Like the 'Oriental' or the colonised, racially marked subject, the Gypsy was associated with a rhetoric of primitive desires, lawlessness, mystery, cunning, sexual excess, godlessness, and savagery—with freedom from the repressions, both constraining and culture building, of Western civilisation...and in many important respects, fascination with Gypsies in Britain was a form of orientalism" as "the Gypsies functioned in British cultural symbolism as a perennial other, a recurrent and apparently necessary marker of difference (2006, 13-14).

Here lies the importance of autobiographies and memoirs which can ‘speak’ for oneself. Violet Cannon represents true accounts of her life as well as the life of her community. The first chapter of *Gypsy Princess*, “Twenty-first Century Gypsy Girl”, marks the difference as it paves the path for representing a ‘true’ account of a Gypsy life as she elaborates: “Growing up as a Romany, living on the edge of society, I’ve travelled from one end of the country to another, making my home on patches of wasteland, on disused industrial estates, in idyllic English countryside and even on the edge of a cliff” (2011, 1). For her, the representation of Gypsy life in *Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* is “a massively heightened version of Romany life” which they just “don’t recognise at all” and at the same time, “the cameras were only interested in portraying the stereotypes; they wanted to show poor Gypsy women who are made to cook and clean by their husbands, waiting on them hand and foot” (2011, 2).

Hers is as much autobiography as the biography of her race. She does not allow others to misrepresent them, so the following thirty-one chapters portray her as well as the Gypsy’s life minutely. Ethel Brooks recounts an incident that she faced when she talked about the possibility of ‘Romani feminism’ in one of her lectures:

A few years ago, as I was giving a talk on the possibilities of Romani feminism and the politics of recognition, a visibly agitated non-Romani woman in the front row raised her hand, saying in response to my talk: “I am sorry, but you can’t claim both: If you want to claim feminism, then you must give up your claim to a Romani identity. Patriarchy and oppression to women are central to your culture; to be a feminist means renouncing being a Romani woman.” For my would-be interlocutor, there was no question; to be Romani was to be antifeminist, and to be feminist was to be anti-Romani. (Brooks 2012, 2)

Thus, the above-quoted lines are suggestive of fissures within feminism. Feminism needs to be alive to the sufferings of racially marginalised women and take dissenting views into consideration. Violet Cannon not only raises her voice against racial hatred and patriarchal subjugation but also points out some of the limitations of mainstream feminism.

Conclusion:

The dawn of new thinking regarding the Gypsy women question has brought new perspectives and voices to the fore. Gypsies can be heard now. Their voices are not restricted now and appear to be part of larger issues. Alexandra Oprea talks about the ways of the Gypsy women’s movement:

The Romani women’s movement was never limited to the concerns of Romani women, particularly not at the expense of others. We never advocated the dismantling

of shelters catering to white women in favor of constructing Romani-specific shelters or for white women to be placed in inferior segregated maternity wards or for the police to start beating white women. (2012, 19)

The Gypsy women writers' and activists' move towards identity formation is one such significant attempt to make their unheard stories audible. Decorticating the peels of stigmatised and romantic representations of the Gypsies, they can exhibit unseen truths. Why should they always be represented by others? Why shouldn't their voice emanate directly from the recesses of their heart? Is it necessary to be seen as passive always? Questions like these are of paramount importance. Violet Cannon has not only provided us with some first-hand and unalloyed truths of Romani life but also has become an emblem of women's empowerment. She will be remembered as a pioneering figure in the field of witness literature. Papisza, one of the first Romani women to publish her works, radically paved the way for progress by illustrating the Romani culture and tradition through her poetry, though she had to pay the price for making the 'secrets' of Romani life public which goes against the Romani tradition. And she is considered the 'mother' of Romani poetry. Violet Cannon contributes to this long tradition. She is an author-activist. Like her mother, Violet Cannon has established her identity and fought for the travelling communities. She has lived the last eight years working with the Gypsies and for the Gypsies. Her memoir *Gypsy Princess* is a landmark attempt in women's struggle. Her endeavours contribute significantly to the emerging field of 'Gypsy feminism'.

Notes

1. "Why the Gypsy Life is Such a Bestseller." 2011. *The Guardian*, September 21. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/21/gypsy-traveller-life-bestseller-memoirs>
2. The British Gypsies are also called Romanichal. Romany (with a 'y') normally refers to the British Gypsies or the Romanichal which is an ethnic Romani sub-group living in England. The Gypsies are also known as Gitanos in Spain whereas Romani is an umbrella term

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