

Gypsies in 19th-Century French Literature: The Paradox in Centering the Periphery

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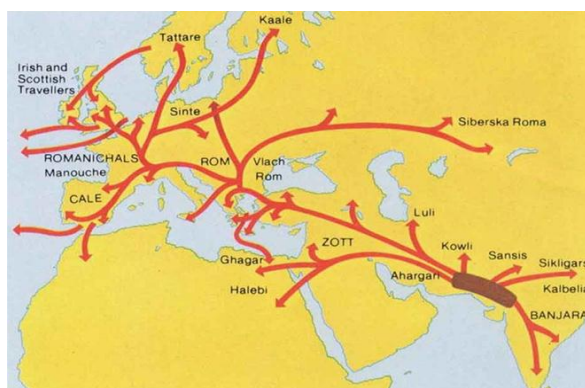
ABSTRACT

The issues of liberty and views of the “Other” were common in 19th-century French literary discourse. In many aspects, the “Other” appeared to hold a position of strength. In literature, Prosper Mérimée and Victor Hugo attempted to centralize gypsy women through their narratives, even though gypsies (as with Jews) had been marginalized (though present) throughout French history. Mérimée’s *Carmen* and Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris* presented new central perspectives on the peripheral, which in this context should be understood to mean gypsies. This research paper attempts to answer the following questions: What ideology lies behind both stories’ centralization of the peripheral gypsy women? How do the authors portray gypsy women? The goal of this article is to explore the operations of power in a gender-relations context, focusing on the construction of gypsy women in two 19th-century French novels.

Keywords: Gypsy; center; periphery; literature; France; 19th century.

INTRODUCTION

Gypsies, who were considered a symbol of absolute liberty and whose women were thought exotic, were commonly discussed in the writings of French literary figures during the 18th and 19th centuries. Numerous works of literature and art presented gypsies, defined as Bohemians (Santa, 2005) but also named by contemporary society as *Tziganes*, *Gitan* and *Manouches*. The name *gitan* reflected a common belief that they were a nomadic tribe originating out of Egypt, though some experts believed that they had come from India. The gypsies lived as nomads, wandering Eastern Europe and even the United States and Canada. Their origin is still a mystery for the European historians. Here is the map of their travel since 1400 years ago.



Courtesy: <http://www.abroadintheyard.com>

Here, the term *gypsy* is used in reference to the naming choice of the authors of the two novels studied: Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen* and Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*.

Gypsies’ status as a symbol of absolute freedom and female exoticism cannot be separated from the social situation at the time. The issue of liberty (*liberté*) had been subject to popular discussion even before 1789, and the French Revolution became a symbol which legitimized this institutionally and socially structured ideal of liberty. Meanwhile, France was slowly becoming open to persons of other ethnic groups. Trips to “exotic” nations and continents had sparked the French people’s imagination regarding non-European ethnic groups. In the 19th century many authors began writing tales of non-European women; for instance, Balzac and Count Ludovic de Beauvoir wrote of Javanese women (Udasmoro, 2009, p. 1). Balzac had never been to the island, but attempted to present imagined Javanese women through his works. This tolerance of other cultures was also reflected in the cultural exchanges popular in Europe at the time. For instance, women from Java were brought to France to dance at a cultural festival (Dorleans, 2002). These issues of liberty and views of the “Other” permeated daily life and literature. The slogans of the French Revolution broke through the barriers which had divided Europeans and non-Europeans for centuries. In many aspects, the “Other” appeared to

hold a position of strength. Jews, for instance, began to be dynamically and tolerantly narrated in 18th- and 19th-century French literature. After the French Revolution, the high degree of tolerance led to a large migration of Jews. Because of this tolerance, mixed marriage between Jews and Europeans became socially acceptable (Delmaire, 2009, p. 34).

One interesting aspect of *Notre Dame de Paris* and *Carmen* is that both works are considered masterpieces despite the thematic importance of gypsies, a trend more prevalent in contemporary works thought to have little literary value. A second point of interest is that both authors—Prosper Mérimée and Victor Hugo—attempted to centralize gypsy women through their narratives, even though gypsies, as with Jews, had been present yet marginalized throughout French history. Furthermore, Esmeralda and Carmen are second class citizens within their own social structure, originating from what Beauvoir terms “the Second Sex”. Their position as women of gypsy origin only marginalizes them further.

Given the apparent centralization of the peripheral in these works, there are several questions which must be answered. First, what ideology lies behind both stories’ centralization of the peripheral gypsy women? How are gypsy women portrayed by the authors? The goal of this article is to explore the operations of power in a gender relation context in 19th-century French literature, as presented through gypsy characters.

WOMEN AND SYMBOLIC ANNIHILATION

Narrations of women were frequently discussed during the second wave of feminism. Betty Friedan explored the apparent powerlessness of women in narration in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 2001, p. 57). In this book, she explained that those with power had silenced women in narration through a constructed social and institutional system, a social structure which only legitimized men’s narrations. For centuries, French literature was an assertion of power narrated through authors’ works. Meanwhile, women’s narratives were hidden and marginalized. As such, feminist movements in both France and the United States, even during the first wave, had to fight for the right of narration and “*the vindication of woman*”. In other words, women had historically been rendered powerless, and their narrations absent from social discourse. Historical narration continuously emphasized the actions of men, such that the word *history* itself can be understood as *hi(s)tory*, emphasizing the lack of women in the narration.

Though she wrote with equal fervor, Gaye Tuchman (1978) did not wholly support Friedan’s position. She argued that women had indeed been narrated, but differed in stating that women had been positioned in entirely different spaces than men in these narratives. They were consistently positioned as objects, rather than subjects. They were rendered as mothers, monsters, and machines—particularly reproductive machines (Braidotti, 1997), as powerless princesses (Udasmoro, 2013, p. 68), or as exotic Others (Said, 1993). They were narrated as objects, and this objectification continued through time and space. According to Tuchman (1978), this was an attempt at the symbolic annihilation of women.

The concept of symbolic annihilation was first presented by George Gerbner (1976) in his exploration of the appearance and disappearance of certain groups in the media. Symbolic annihilation, for our purposes, can attempt to explain the absence of women’s representation or their disappearance. It is not only limited to women, however; the concept also explains the lack of representation of other social groups based on their ethnic, economic, or social status (Klein & Shiffman, 2009). The goal of symbolic annihilation is the perpetuation of social inequality.

Gaye Tuchman adopted the concept of symbolic annihilation for her book *The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media*, which examines the image of women constructed by dominant men’s groups through their narratives. Using Gerbner’s concept, Tuchman developed her approach using feminist theory. She argued that symbolic annihilation was an attempt to stereotype and to deny certain identities, thus ensuring that marginalized groups such as women would have unequal relations with dominant groups like men. Tuchman describes three aspects of symbolic annihilation: omission, trivialization and condemnation.

Omission is the removal of marginalized groups. For instance, in nearly all presentations of world history, the role of women is omitted. Gypsies, despite their lengthy history in Europe, were rarely noticed; they only became part of narratives during the 19th century. They were considered unimportant because of the prioritization of narratives of the European nobility. These upper-class nobles dominated the narratives and history of Europe before the 19th century. As with the gypsies, women, who worked within the domestic sphere, were thought to have no influence on the decision-making process, and as such they were not depicted in the constructed history. This has continued until present time; second wave feminists criticized the thousand names engraved on a monument in the

Champs Elysée, questioning why not a single woman was among the thousand French heroes listed. No women were recognized in the French concept of nationhood owing to women's omission from public discourse.

Trivialization is the positioning of certain groups' roles as minimal or insignificant in discourse. Trivialization is plainly evident in literature and film. In literature, particularly classic-era French literature from the 16th- to 19th-centuries, women's active roles were erased. They were presented as individuals only when it served the authors' purposes to do so, such as in correcting the immorality brought on by women's bodies. Women's bodies were used as a basis for their trivialization (Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury, 1997). Meanwhile, condemnation is when a group is presented or narrated, but in a way which objectifies, judges, or marginalizes them. According to Tuchman, such a presentation of women is equivalent to not including them at all, for such depictions present women as unable to meet social standards. Esmeralda and Carmen are examples of this, as we shall show below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In 19th-century art and literature, gypsies were used to entice contemporary readers and art connoisseurs. In visual art, for instance, numerous works were exhibited in the museums of France, including Eugène Giraud's *La Jeune Bohémienne* in the Mandet Museum and Gustave Doré's *Les Saltimbanques* in the Roger Quillot Art Museum (Cussinnet, 2005, p. 315). Meanwhile, 18th- and 19th-century literature is replete with tales of gypsies. These include, among others, Paul Féval's *La Capitaine Fantome* (Santa, 2005, p. 183), George Ohnet's *La Comtesse Sarah*, and numerous works by Ponson du Terrail, such as *Les Bohémiens de Londres*, *La Reine des Gypsies*, *La Bohémiens du Grand Monde*, *Les millions de la Bohémienne* and *La Justice des Bohémiens* (Radix, 2005). However, the majority of these works focusing on Bohemians and gypsies was only rarely discussed by literary scholars, as they were considered to have little literary value and be incompatible with the refined tastes of French readers, who remained dominated by bourgeois views.

Although many works of literature were written about gypsies in the 19th century, only two works with such themes are considered masterpieces. This is, in part, because of the contemporary respect for their authors. Victor Hugo wrote *Notre Dame de Paris* in 1831, while Prosper Mérimée wrote his novel *Carmen* in 1847. Both novels focus on ethnic Romani

(frequently termed *gypsies*) characters, though they are presented differently. Carmen, the title character of *Carmen*, is a Romani gypsy from Spain, whereas Esmeralda is a Romani gypsy in Paris.

Prosper Mérimée and Victor Hugo take different approaches in their narrations of gypsies. In his letter to the Countess of Montijo, Mérimée wrote that *Carmen* was a true story, told by Carmen herself when Mérimée visited Spain in 1845. As with Mérimée's other works, which are based on his own experiences during his journeys *Colomba*, for instance, is based on Mérimée's trip to Corsica (Udasmoro, 2015, p. 2), *Carmen* is based on Mérimée's journey to Andalusia, where he met Carmen, a Romani gypsy. This novel's other central character is another marginalized individual, Don José, who is ethnic Basque.

Meanwhile, Esmeralda is the main character of *Notre Dame de Paris*. This novel tells of Esmeralda, the daughter of a woman named Paquette whom Hugo labels a prostitute. Esmeralda is kidnapped and she lives with the gypsies of Paris. When she is kidnapped, the gypsies exchange her with the hunchbacked Quasimodo, whom Paquette leaves at the church of Notre Dame. Quasimodo shows heroism in defending the gypsy Esmeralda, who is often harassed by upper-class men, including the archdeacon of Notre Dame. A paradox of gypsy women's exoticism and peripheralization is apparent in both novels.

The Paradox of the Exotic Gypsy

In a purely denotative sense, the term *exoticism* does not suggest sensuality, but simply that something is not held by the culture creating the narrative of the exotic. The "Other" in literature is most clearly seen in postcolonial literature, which explores why they become subordinated, powerless, and voiceless. In literature, natives are often considered barbaric and cannibals. Regarding the Other, Emmanuel Levinas writes "I am defined as subjectivity, as singular person, as am I", precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that take me an individual "I" (Levinas, 1986).

Levinas' position has been criticized by many scholars, including Drabinsky (2011, p. 8) who argues that Levinas' argument shows his Eurocentrism and proposes instead a sense of identity as entanglement. Drabinsky redefines the idea of a Europe bound only to itself, deriding the existence of 'others' as separating from a European identity as an imagined fantasy.

The exotic nature of “Other” women has been presented in a variety of manners, including in 19th-century French literature. Post-colonial literature has shown them to be presented as the Exotic Other and the Inferior Other (Said, 1993). Their exotic nature is not defined by their representation of a culture unlike the dominant culture which defines them. Borrowing the concept of Gaye Tuchmann about Symbolic Annihilation, Carmen and Esmeralda as gypsies are narrated but they are still objects of those narrations. Rather, they are viewed as exotic because they are considered sensual, exploitable both culturally and economically. They are simultaneously presented as the Inferior Other as they are non-White women under the dominance of White men. In this context, authors act as White men attempting to save them from the savage world dominated by non-White men. Esmeralda and Carmen are representative of an exotic and contested “Other”. They are symbolically annihilated because, although they are narrated, the narrations only position them as sexual objects. They are centralized, but this centralization simply emphasizes their position as marginalized objects. They are contested by the White men who fantasize over them, over the “Other”. In *Notre Dame de Paris*, Esmeralda is the object of White men’s contestation. Meanwhile, in *Carmen*, the central woman character is contested by both White and non-White men from a number of ethnic groups.

This exoticization of “Other” women is important for several reasons. First, literary works in the 19th century attempted to abandon the upper class stories which promoted the narratives of the elite. Authors wrote fervently in an attempt to create new, innovative characters. Gustave Flaubert presented a woman of controversial sexuality in his *Madame Bovary*; different women characters drew readers with their own characteristics (Udasmoro, 2011). Second, the public discourse of the time, which focused on the exoticism of such women, led numerous authors to write about gypsy women in a variety of ways. Such women were present in everyday life and the contemporary social context but rarely narrated.

The exoticization of gypsies is ever-present in both *Notre Dame de Paris* and *Carmen*, though it takes a variety of forms. The exoticization of the Gypsies is an important point in an article by Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov (2011), who argue that in most anthropological research, gypsies are positioned as exotic because they have never been integrated with the environment in which they live, especially Western European culture. The authors instead show that gypsies have always been part of the Eastern

European societies in which they live, becoming exotic only when approached as an isolated community without taking societal context into account (Marushiakova & Popov, 2011, p. 97). Gypsies become exotic because they are narrated using Western ideals.

In both stories, the gypsy women, Esmeralda and Carmen, are narrated in the same way as the above anthropological approach. Both stories exhibit a paradox in the depictions of their exoticism. Esmeralda and Carmen are presented as symbols of unbound liberty. They are gypsies, able to come and go freely, wherever they wish. Carmen, for instance, refuses to join Don José on his journey to the United States for fear that she should lose her freedom.

"I said to her: 'Be rational, I implore you; listen to me. All the past is forgotten. Yet you know it is you who have been my ruin—it is because of you that I am a robber and a murderer. Carmen, my Carmen, let me save you, and save myself with you.'

""Jose,' she answered, 'what you ask is impossible. I don't love you any more. You love me still, and that is why you want to kill me. If I liked, I might tell you some other lie, but I don't choose to give myself the trouble. Everything is over between us two. You are my *rom*, and you have the right to kill your *romi*, but Carmen will always be free.

In a contemporary French context, no-one and nothing could have greater liberty than a gypsy. The vagabond lifestyle of gypsies was envied by French artists and authors. After the French Revolution in 1789, the greatest desire was for liberty (*liberté*), a term which retains considerable currency today. However, this liberty becomes a representation of evil when it is sought by a woman. Trivialisation and condemnation are implied in Carmen’s liberty. It is trivialisation because liberty becomes a valuable experience for a man, but for a woman it has a different meaning. It is a condemnation because such liberty was not, in the author’s mind, supposed to be practiced by women in the 19th century.

On the other hand, Esmeralda was positioned as an object by the male and female characters of the story as well as the author, who considers her a *filledelicieuse* (literally a “delicious maiden”, emphasizing her sexuality and beauty). Gypsy women, represented by Esmeralda and Carmen, concurrently fulfill two functions, as both subjects and objects for men. This reflects the authors’ equation of gypsy women with their bodies, and is symbolized through their sensual dances. Both Carmen and Esmeralda are gypsy dancers, widely admired by men.

The two novels depict their characters as subjects in different manners. If Esmeralda is presented as a *filledelicieuse*, then Carmen is a strong beautiful female figure. In *Notre Dame de Paris*, Esmeralda becomes a subject because of her beauty and her skill at dancing. In this novel, nearly all of the men want her as the exotic "Other". Esmeralda and Carmen become subjects because men bow before the power of their beauty. However, as explained by Tuchman's symbolic annihilation, their beauty is in fact condemned by the author by positioning them as sexual objects of men. "This word produced a magical effect. Everyone who was left in the hall flew to the windows, climbing the walls in order to see, and repeating, "La Esmeralda! La Esmeralda?"

Owing to the polyvocalization in the text, the author cannot stop himself from objectifying Esmeralda. Esmeralda becomes an objectified subject owing to her status as a gypsy. This is shown in the novel. The character Gringoire, though interested in Esmeralda, ultimately realizes that her ethnic heritage as a gypsy leaves her unequal to him in terms of social class.

"In truth," said Gringoire to himself, "she is a salamander, she is a nymph, she is a goddess, she is a bacchante of the Menelean Mount!"

At that moment, one of the salamander's braids of hair became unfastened, and a piece of yellow copper which was attached to it, rolled to the ground.

"Hé, no!" said he, "she is a gypsy!"

All illusions had disappeared.

There is a paradox here. Esmeralda, as a much-admired beauty, appears to be depicted as a subject. However, in reality this is but the illusion of those who see her. Once they realize that Esmeralda is a gypsy, she no longer takes the position of the subject. Her status as a gypsy repositions her as an object. Her social class and gypsy heritage mean the author can only make her equal with one other character, her "guardian" Quasimodo, who protects her and is in return welcomed with open arms despite his disability.

Gypsy women, in this situation, are narrated, but their narration is still that of man's fantasy. Hugo even depicts a woman's disdain of Esmeralda with the following lines:

"Will you take yourself off, you Egyptian grasshopper?" cried a sharp voice, which proceeded from the darkest corner of the Place.

The young girl turned round in affright. It was no longer the voice of the bald man; it was the voice of a woman, bigoted and malicious.

Esmeralda is central to the story, but this central position is developed by the author without giving her room for self-narration. She is centralized to serve as the victim of the dominant narrative structures which continued to view gypsies as peripheral.

Carmen—as with Esmeralda—is a dancer who draws the eyes of many. What differs significantly in her character is Carmen's attempt to live a free life as a "true" gypsy. Carmen refuses to abandon her "gypsy-ness" and acts as others do out of fear of losing her freedom. Carmen is depicted as a person with power. First, she is a gypsy woman capable of killing a soldier, her boyfriend. Don José, a soldier, is sent to arrest Carmen for the murder, but falls in love with the gypsy and lets her escape from the police pursuit. Second, Carmen leads her husband to be killed by Don José in a fit of jealousy, and then leaves with another man, Lucas, who is subsequently murdered by Don José. Out of guilt, Don José surrenders himself to the police and is sentenced to death.

Below is an example of how Mérimée depicts Carmen as a demon, as explained by Don José—who still loves her;

"Then, do you love Lucas?" I asked her. "Yes, I loved him as I loved you for a moment, perhaps less than I loved you. Now I no longer love anything and I hate myself for having loved you." I felt at her feel. I took her hands, I moistened them with my tears. I reminded her all of the moments of happiness we had spent together. I offered to remain a brigand to please her. "Anything, señor, anything!" I offered to do anything for her. If only she would love me again! She said "To love you is impossible. I do not want to love you." Fury gripped me. I drew my knife. I would have killed her to show fear and beg for mercy, but that woman was a demon.

The polyvocalization of the author in this instance is manifested in the depiction of the angel and demon within Carmen. In the novel, Carmen is said to show considerable agency by rejecting Don José, a Basque-born French soldier, because she is unwilling to abandon the liberties she has as a gypsy. Symbolic annihilation, however, arises through the narrated depiction of Carmen as not only a beautiful woman admired by many men, but also an emotionless monster who feels nothing when her husband and lovers are killed by Don José or when she left Don José for another man. She is both an angel and a demon.

In both stories, tragedy results because of one man's jealousy of another. In *Notre Dame de Paris* all of the

male characters show jealousy in their attempts to win Esmeralda, even father (the Archdeacon Claude Frollo, a religious leader), and his adopted son, Quasimodo. This jealousy ends in tragedy as Frollo; Esmeralda and Quasimodo all die at the end of the novel. In *Carmen*, the fighting of male characters—Don José, Carmen’s husband, and Lucas—over the titular character likewise leads to tragedy, including the death of Don José. The gypsy women, depicted at the beginning of their novels as angels, bring disaster as the story closes.

Both authors utilized the same space, the space for free expression which emerged in the 19th century after the French Revolution led to social movements promoting liberty and solidarity. However, this space was only used to find a new angle considered hitherto unknown in literature. Furthermore, discourses in other arts, including the visual arts, influenced the creation of narratives about gypsy women in these works of literature. However, the gypsies remained inconsequential characters. Their narratives were not central. Though they served as central characters, they were but objects in their own stories.

CONCLUSION

Victor Hugo and Prosper Mérimée’s creation of gypsy women characters, who concurrently and paradoxically served as subjects and objects, as seen above, cannot be separated from the contemporary social reality in which liberty was a prominent issue in literature and everyday discourse. However, it is important to question whose liberty is being promoted through these two stories. Almost all works of literature discuss liberty, be it personal liberty, sexual liberty, or women’s liberty. However, such liberty remained unattainable for groups such as gypsy women. Gypsy women were rendered “Others” who, though they invigorate the freedom of the narrative, continued to reproduce the stagnant discourse that gypsy women cannot be subjects in narratives. They were narrated, and when narrated only their failings were brought forth. They were narrated but when narrated they only become male sexual objects.

Gypsy women remained peripheral despite serving as the central characters—or even title characters—of these two novels. They are present, but overwhelmed by the narrative. The symbolic annihilation of these gypsy women occurred because the structure for their narration remained limited to representation, not a personal struggle. They were presented by these two French authors not to fight for their own rights, but to ensure that the literary works appeared innovative, a form of innovation demanded by the 19th century

literary scene which had tired of the false niceties of the bourgeoisie. In their contestations with other characters, these gypsy women only served to cause social inequality because of their “sins” of beauty and exoticism. They may appear centralized by the authors, but this appearance is deceiving; they are omitted, trivialized, and condemned, and left defenseless by their authors.

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