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THE ROMANI BILDUNGSROMAN – ON THE CULTURAL TRAUMA OF GROWING UP IN METI KAMBERI'S NOVELS

Abstract: The subject of this paper is the analysis of the articulation of the cultural trauma of growing up in the novels *City of Pain* and *City of Sin* by the young Romani author Meti Kamberi. In this paper, these novels are assessed through the perspective of the ethnic/minority bildungsroman with a particular focus on the described lived, personal experience of growing up as a member of the Romani national minority in post-socialist Serbia. The idea considered in this paper is that the literary and artistic creations of minority groups can be a valuable ethnographic source for the examination of their notions of themselves. The theming of life between two worlds, the duality between the community of origin and the majority of society, is the key feature of the Romani bildungsroman.

Keywords: Romani literature, Meti Kamberi, Bildungsroman, cultural trauma, Serbia

In celebration of thirty years since the establishment of the *Board for the Study of Life and Customs of the Roma* [Odbor za proučavanje života i običaja Roma] the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts prepared a monograph of the scientific work of this committee and its dominant research topics and approaches in that period (Varadi and Bašić 2019). In one of the four segments of this monograph, a paper titled “The Humanistic Methods in the Work of the Board for the Study of Life and Customs of the Roma” (Сикимић 2019), a deficiency in analytical works on the

subject of Romani literature is openly discussed, and awareness is raised that the Romani literature was given attention only in passing references, so “the reception of Romani literature in Serbia is very much falling behind the active interests for this topic in world Romanology” (Сикимић 2019, 77).

With only a few exceptions (Ђurić 2010; Acković 2014), the written Romani literature is one of the least studied aspects of Romani culture in Serbian Romanology.¹ So far, studies have shown that Romani people in Europe (but also in other parts of the world) are in a distinct position in relation to other national/ethnic minorities, because one of their characteristics is structural poverty (Ђorђевић 2010; Bašić 2010; Jakšić 2015). To Romani people, in most of the countries they inhabit, basic civilizational and developmental resources—such as education, work, health and social insurance—are unavailable, and so they are deprived of realizing their human rights (Bašić 2010: 14). Because of that, research in the domain of social and humanistic sciences that is usually of applicable character, is focused on examining their unfavorable social and economic status, as well as on different questions regarding the construction of the Romani ethnic identity (identity politics, ethnic mobilization, traditional forms of Romani culture, the question of standardizing the Romani language etc.) in the context of building a transnational Romani diaspora. The oral character of Romani culture, that is, the understanding that literacy poses a threat to traditional Romani culture and way of life, is frequently cited as one of the possible reasons for the lack of systematic research on written Romani literature (Ђurić 2010; Toninato 2006; Toninato 2013). To preserve their cultural identity,² Romani people adopted the practice of “restricted literacy” (Toninato 2006: 235). Written Romani literature appeared at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th

¹ Romanology is a distinct scientific discipline that studies the entirety of Romani history and culture (Vojak 2017). Ђorđević describes Romanology as an “umbrella” interdisciplinary science of Romani people that also includes Romistics which studies Romani philology and literature (cf. Ђorђевић 2010: 18-23).

² One of the most famous examples of “preserving” Romani identity is the case of Papusza, the most famous Polish-Romani self-taught poet. Bronisława Wajs Papusza was exiled from the Romani community for revealing Romani culture to non-Romani people through writing and publishing poetry (cf. Toninato 2013).

century³ (Zahova 2021a). And while written Romani literature appeared and developed relatively late, on the other hand, the figure of the gypsy was a gladly used trope in literary works—the stereotypical representations of Romani people were perpetuated through (Western) literature and art for centuries:

The “Gypsy” is often represented in literature as an exotic nomad, a “child of nature” aloof from settled society and subsisting by petty theft and fortune-telling...from Great Britain to Russia, writers, artists, composers, and filmmakers have been fascinated with the wandering, exotic, and dark “Gypsy” and have constructed images of Romanies that range from idealized free spirits to mere criminals. Their depictions as black outsiders represent strategies of exclusion and exoticization that have led to their continued marginalization and persecution. (Glajar 2008, 33)

Many Romologists think that the cultural function of contemporary Romani literature is to question and challenge such embedded, harmful representations. Romani authors oppose hegemonic images of the fictive Gypsy through autoethnography,⁴ which, according to Paula Toninato, is the way of writing in many works of Romani literature (Toninato 2006: 240). Autoethnography is the strategy which many Romani authors use to represent themselves, that is, their culture, through the referential

³ Romanologist Sofija Zahova separates the development of Romani literature into four periods. The first period, that started at the end of the 19th century and lasted up until World War II, is characterized by the appearance and shaping of Romani literature in accordance with ideas of romantic nationalism—the translation of religious texts into the Romani language and recording national oral creations. The second period, that began after the war, is defined by the advent of Romani authors in then border regions of national states. The third period started in the eighties, when European institutions became more interested in questions regarding the education of Romani children; the Fall of the Berlin Wall brought a great incentive to publishing Romani literature, coinciding with the rising interest of international organizations for the betterment of the position of Romani people and forming various donation programs. In the fourth period—at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, as Sofija Zahova writes, came a process of the internationalization, trans-nationalization and globalization of the Romani literary scene (Zahova 2021a: 7-8).

⁴ Here, autoethnography is not understood in its established meaning, as a research method which implies relying on personal experience in describing and interpreting culture.

relationship of negotiation with existing descriptions and representations in the domain of the culture of the majority. It could be said that, within the Romani cultural movement,⁵ Romani literature was given an instrumental role.

The advent of written Romani literature was of key importance in creating diasporic conscience between heterogeneous Romani communities that do not share a common territory, religion, or speak the same language/dialect, because writing was seen as a peculiar expression of ethnic empowerment and a political act (Hertrampf 2020: 45). Romani literature is understood as “a multidimensional communicational platform with an aim to inspire and encourage self-confidence and pride of Romani self-identification” (Zahova 2021a: 6). Ethnic discourse is at the base of contemporary texts of Romani literature, in which problems tied to Romani history, collective conscience, human rights, and Romani culture are processed (Sevillano 2020a: 190). Today, contemporary Romani literature is characterized by an extremely versatile corpus which includes a wide specter of genres—from writings of oral literature (myths, legends, fairytales, traditions), and autobiographies and memoirs, to novels, short stories, drama and poetry (Toninato 2013). As Toninato states, it can be said that a common denominator of Romani literature (regardless of existing cultural differences between Romani communities) is the similar sociopolitical position and writing about the neglected or wrongly represented aspects of Romani history and culture. Questions and problems most often thematized through Romani literature are racial discrimination, Romani genocide (“Samudaripen”),⁶ nomadism as a way of life, violence and social marginalization.

In historical international overviews of Romani literature, Romani authors from countries that were part of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia take an important place. The advent of written

⁵ The international Romani movement is focused on dealing with a number of social, economic, political, and other questions important for the recognition of identity and betterment of the socio-economic status of the Romani people and it is characterized by the fact that finding a solution to a national problem is not conceptualized on a territorial basis (Bašić 2010: 28, 38).

⁶ For more on the Romani genocide in Serbia during the Second World War, see Pisari 2014.

Romani literature in Yugoslavia represented “a key incentive in the ethnic awakening of Romani people” (Toninato 2013). According to Rajko Đurić, the beginning and the development of contemporary Romani literature in this area is tied to the national and cultural Romani movement that took place at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies and to the work of the Yugoslav Romani poet and publicist Slobodan Berberski, who was the first president of the World Roma Organization (Đurić 2010: 89). Contrary to that, some authors believe (Zahova 2018; Zahova 2021b) that the roots of written Romani literature go back as far as the interwar period, more precisely, the year 1935 when the newspaper *Romano Lil* was first published in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. According to Zahova, Romani works published in print periodicals in interwar Yugoslavia represent the typical example of the early development of national literature (Zahova 2021b, 87). The founder and editor of this newspaper was Svetozar Simić (Zahova 2021b: 71). Besides the editorial and feuilleton whose author was Simić, every issue contained stories of the cultural life and collective memory of the Romani community, as well as content regarding contemporary problems (Zahova 2021b: 71). When it comes to the folklore creativity of the Romani people, songs, short stories, and anecdotes were published in the Romani language alongside a Serbian translation, while fiction stories that were the work of Simić in which different topics and events that the author heard about or participated in were processed in a satirical way (Zahova 2021b: 78).

Until the publishing of Meti Kamberi’s novel, Romani literary creativity in Serbia consisted mainly of poetry. It would certainly be important to mention here that in our country, besides Zlatomir Jovanović’s novel *The Sin of a Romani Woman* [*Greh jedne Romkinje*] from 2015, other prose by Romani authors was also published—such as Alija Krasnići’s dramas and short stories, Bajram Haliti’s dramas, etc. However, it could be said that works signed by Kamberi were the first to reach wider audiences.

In the last couple of years, Meti Kamberi, a young man of Romani heritage, the author of autobiographical novels *City of Pain* [*Grad bola*] and *City of Sin* [*Grad greha*], has become almost a “literary sensation”⁷ in

⁷ A term which Meti Kamberi is usually introduced with or described as in Serbian media.

Serbia. These novels apostrophize subjects, or rather problems that concern growing up in the bounds of the social and cultural region of the Romani mahalla. Even if the Romani question is not set in the ideological basis of these novels in the political and identity sense, it certainly is the contextual frame in which they should be read. In this paper, the novels of Meti Kamberi are observed through the perspective of ethnic/minority *bildungsroman* with a special focus on the described lived and personal experience of the cultural trauma of growing up as a member of the Romani national minority in post-socialist Serbia. Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander thinks that cultural trauma represents the reflection on some traumatic incident from the past that is an integral part of the collective identity:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander 2004: 1)

According to some authors, cultural trauma is a significant aspect of the construction of a collective identity and memory of minority and racialized populations. For example, the trauma of slavery was, according to Ron Eyerman, key in forming a collective identity and memory of Afro-Americans (Eyerman 2019). Eyerman writes that cultural traumas reflect deeply experienced emotions and identities that are publicly expressed and presented in different discursive processes. According to this author, cultural trauma as a discursive process that was born out of extreme violence establishes individual and collective identity, and at the same time represents the articulation/representation of that emotional establishment, but also the processing of it, the attempt to search for a collective improvement (Eyerman 2019: 11).

The experience of trauma is a key subject in Romani literature—Romani authors contribute to the strengthening of the feeling of a distinct ethnic identity, or rather the belonging to the transnational Romani diaspora through narrative strategies of self-representation—the display of the inner worlds and feelings of characters that are faced with discrimination, marginalization, and everyday scorning by the majority population: cultural memories, the reminiscence on collective traumatic experiences

through fictionalization of historical events (Sevillano 2020b: 28). That is why trauma is one of the key subjects of Romani autobiographical works (Sevillano 2023).

Meti Kamberi–“A Boy of the Street”

The centuries-long life of the Romani people in Serbia, between the tragedy of everyday life and the frequent despondence, created a tragic and poetic, almost surreal universe (Jakšić 2015, 7).

We find out about the life of Meti Kamberi mostly through media. The “author’s notes” section at the end of his first book *City of Pain* provides very little biographic information. Because of this, the meager official biography of this young author will be enriched by information from media and internet sources. Meti’s story is similar to a number of other life stories of members of the Romani communities in Serbia whose lives are marked by structural poverty and discrimination (Jakšić 2015). The situation of Romani people in our country was perhaps best described by a sociologist and Romologist from Niš, Dragoljub Đorđević, who claims that “Romani people in Serbia are an ethno-class, those third ones who have nothing or have very little, they live on the line of destitution and are dependent on social support, without any status, hated and degraded and without a chance to achieve their interests despite the resistance” (Đorđević 2010: 36).

In Serbia, Romani people are often accused of being at fault for their own fates, of being incapable of changing their reality, so that no one can help them in any way (Todorović 2014: 62). They represent a highly deprived social group: “unbearably bad living conditions, high unemployment rate, insufficient participation of their children in the school system, poor communication with the majority population, bad hygiene and health” (Jakšić 2015: 26). Simply, the Romani people “turned the fight to stay alive into a lifestyle” (Jakšić 2015: 22). Kamberi writes in that socio-economic climate, in which Romani people are spatially, culturally, and economically marginalized, with little chance for change of their undesirable social status.

Meti Kamberi was born in the year 2000, in a Romani mahalla in Niš, known as the Belgrade mahalla,⁸ in a big but poor family. He never met his father, nor does he know who he is. He is the seventh child in the family. Meti's mother is an illiterate Romani woman displaced from Kosovo—she begs on the streets and collects secondary raw materials. He grew up on the streets, begging for money with his brothers. By the age of twelve, he had already been through three different foster families and five elementary schools. He says that he was a problematic child and besides begging for money he was also stealing. In one period of his life he also had a gambling problem. He didn't learn to read or write until he became a ward of a children's shelter in Niš:

I was problematic and, so to say, literally uneducated until the age of a fifth-grader. I started adjusting only when I got to the "Duško Radović" children's shelter. One teacher shoved a book into my hands. (Stanković 2014)

In interviews, he emphasizes the transforming experience of staying in the shelter and the crucial influence of his teacher Emilija Đurović who taught him to read and write, as well as the importance of books that "changed his very consciousness" and "taught him how to think" (Kamberi in Hajrizaj 2020); "When I discovered the world of books I was born again. That is actually when I started to understand life and the world around me" (Kamberi in Čolović 2020). After he successfully finished elementary school, he enrolled into a school of fashion and beauty studying to be a tailor, and then extramurally into the fourth year of high school in Niš. He spent seven years in the shelter. After leaving the shelter, he worked for minimum wage on construction sites and other blue-collar jobs, sometimes ten hours a day, just so he could survive.

⁸ The Belgrade mahalla is the biggest and oldest Romani mahalla in Niš. Besides the Belgrade mahalla, Romani people in Niš also live in neighborhoods such as the Red Star, the Čair mahalla and Livestock square. The main characteristics of urban Romani neighborhoods in Niš, according to Todorović and Đorđević, are bad hygiene, lack of communal infrastructure, run down dilapidated houses which are built from waste and materials such as sheet metal, nylon, and cardboard (Тодоровић, Ђорђевић 2022: 29).

Writing his autobiography about growing up on the streets, the neglect and abuse he suffered in foster care, and his stay in “Duško Radović” took him eight months, and he usually wrote at night. His first novel *City of Pain* was published when he was nineteen years old, in the spring of 2020. The novel, whose printing was funded through donations, was published by “Nova Poetika.” The book was sold online, through personal social media accounts of the author, and it could later be ordered directly on the author’s website.⁹ All money went to Meti Kamberi. Almost four thousand copies were sold in the first year, and today the novel has seven editions. The promotions of the book that were organized in a few cities in Serbia had relatively big audiences—considering it was the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, and different media outlets covered them with great interest. Besides that, *City of Pain* was nominated for the NIN award in 2020. A year later, Kamberi published the sequel, *City of Sin*, in the edition of the publishing house “Makart”. Shortly after the relatively great success and his second novel (a third edition was in print), Kamberi published a collection of poetry *Breathe While You’re Still Here* [*Diši dok te ima*] (2023), as well as his first non-autobiographical novel *The Waltz of the Rejects* [*Valcer odbačenih*] (2022). Today, Meti Kamberi lives in Zrenjanin with his (non-Romani) wife.

Considering that Romani people in Serbia are much less represented in media compared to other national minorities and even when they are, it is usually with a negative, stereotypical omen, it would be fair to ask why our media suddenly showed such interest for the life and work of this young man. The answer to this question lies in the way this young Romani author and his literary creativity are presented, that is, discursively positioned in the public sphere. As stated by Todorović and Simeunović Bajić (2020: 755), texts and insets about Romani people in our media mocked and strengthened these embedded stances of the majority population: Romani people beg on the streets, they are dirty, they do not work and they are criminals, Romani people are like animals. On the other side, Meti Kamberi was presented as an exemplary Romani person.

⁹ See: <https://novapoetika.com/knjizara/grad-bola-meti-kamberi-hit-izdanje/> and <https://metikamberi.com/>

Newspaper titles and television announcements emphasize his painstaking efforts and tenacious work and point out the unexpected progress from the bottom of the social ladder, while he himself is described as “a street boy”, “millionaire from mud”, “a child from the ghetto”, “a renegade from the Niš favela”. He is represented as a (respectable) example of the social mobility of Romani people that illustrates the importance of formal and informal education as a basis of emancipation and integration of Romani people.¹⁰ The story about the fast and unexpected success of a poor and disenfranchised individual, a member of the marginalized minority population, is the local contemporary version of the myth of success¹¹ in the time of neoliberal capitalism.

Meti Kamberi mastered the skills of marketing: in only three years he sold tens of thousands of copies of his novel, gave many interviews in daily and weekly newspapers, and appeared on different television shows and YouTube podcasts. However, this example also shows that the media representation of Romani people and their culture is still mostly stereotypical and generalized, “filtered through sensationalized matrices” (Todorović and Simeunović Bajić 2020, 762), which media titles about the life and work of Meti Kamberi also confirm. Media attention was mostly directed towards the successful process of becoming “a true citizen”, because young Kamberi and his literary works represent a tangible proof that socio-economic and cultural integration into the majority population is possible, even if reserved for a few individuals who are sufficiently assimilated into the values of the dominant culture.

¹⁰ According to the Strategy of Social Inclusion of Romani people until 2025 that the Government of Serbia adopted in 2016, education is one of the five key areas of interest (alongside employment, housing, social care and healthcare). The EU framework for national Roma integration strategies determines the approach to education to be the priority area of the integration of Romani people and it implies that all Romani children have access to quality education, as well as that they are not exposed to discrimination and segregation; providing at least elementary school education; expanding the access to quality early education; lowering the rate of students that withdraw from high school level education and motivating Romani students to continue on to higher education. See: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2016/26/1/reg>

¹¹ This myth is well-known to the wider audience, primarily as a basis of the plots of many literary works and films, it is based on the idea that dedicated work and ambition are key to an individual's success. For more on the typology of myths of success and the conceptualization of the idea of a “self-made man”, see Ковачевић 2007.

City of Pain—learning, reading and writing as overcoming traumas of descent

All that anger, rage, sadness, the pus of life that was collecting for years had just burst and I began to write. I was ready to die for the book. I spent my birthday writing, and I didn't even have money for a loaf of bread. I was hungry. I slept through New Year's Eve, I didn't have anything to put into my mouth. I told myself that God was testing me, that he wants to see how much I want it. I wrote the book with calloused hands. I wrote on a broken computer, on my phone, I was mixing mortar on the construction site and working over the themes in my head... (Kamberi in Preradović 2020)

The novel *City of Pain* is an autobiography with a tinge of fiction. The second novel *City of Sin* is also based on autobiographical elements and it represents the author's looking back on the experience of writing the first novel. *City of Pain* and *City of Sin* are viewed as a whole, not only because the second novel is the continuation of the first one, but also because some scenes from the past, that are only hinted at or not represented enough in the first novel, are elaborated on in *City of Sin*. When set in a timeframe, they tell us about what happened before Amiraga's success (*City of Pain*) and what came after it (*City of Sin*), and together they illustrate the developmental journey of the main character. The novels are distinguished by a first-person narration of the character's own life, his coming of age and maturing. In short, it is an upsetting story about a boy from the social margins and how he came to be a "real" person.

In *City of Pain*, Kamberi writes about his earliest memories, that is, he follows his life trajectory from the end of September 2008 up until the present. Even if these romanticized autobiographies differ only slightly from the events in Meti Kamberi's real life, the content of the two novels will be presented in short. In the first novel, the eight-year-old Amiraga lives in a Romani mahalla in the city Emilet, with his mother and three brothers. The eldest brother Silman physically and mentally abuses his younger brothers Amiraga and Jagmur, constantly beating them and making them beg on the streets instead of him. After a serious theft in a department store, social workers place Amiraga and Jagmur in different

foster homes. The Romani foster family that Amiraga was assigned to neglect him both physically and mentally—they starve him, beat him, and belittle him. Even though he is a bright and talented boy in his fifth year of elementary school, Amiraga does not know how to read or write. His classmates bully him, belittle him, and insult him on account of his ethnicity. One night, the boy manages to run away from his foster family and return to his mother in the Romani mahalla. The mother, upon seeing him, calls social services and reports him. The social services place Amiraga in a children's shelter where he meets a teacher named Mirna, who teaches him how to read and write, and other children in the shelter who he gets close with. That event completely changes the path of his life.

During the seven years he spent in the children's shelter, Amiraga finishes elementary school and high school with excellent grades, he befriends many people, mostly other children in the shelter, he gets a job as a gardener for a wealthy family and meets Bela, a rich non-Romani girl, who becomes his romantic partner. In his free time, Amiraga writes stories. Teacher Mirna encourages him to write a book. The second novel, *City of Sin*, follows Amiraga after he leaves the shelter. Amiraga published a book and returned to live with his mother, stepfather, and the family of his brother Jagmur in a dilapidated hut. It is an intimate and resentful retrospect on the social and financial success he reached by publishing the novel. Amiraga has a new partner, a Romani girl named Amel, who does not speak the Romani language and who, judging by the descriptions, comes from a financially stable Romani family. The second part of the novel shows Amiraga after moving to Belgrade, where he lives a gallant life after separating from Amel. However, even if the second novel shows a moral and mental/emotional downfall, *City of Sin* still ends with the main character's peaceful acceptance. The memories of childhood and inner monologues make up a substantial part of the second novel as well.

The common feature and the strong conceptual link between these two novels is that both thematize childhood and growing up of the main protagonist through a personal perspective, and so they belong to the genre of autobiography and bildungsroman. As stated by Jerome Buckley, a typical novel about youth is exceptionally autobiographical, which means that it is strongly shaped by the author's experience (Buckley 1975: 23).

Fundamental Features of the Bildungsroman

The classic bildungsroman takes a central space not only in literary history, but also in our entire cultural heritage (Moretti 2000: 432). Even today, bildungsroman undoubtedly represents one of the most popular genres, because it speaks of the challenges that a young person faces while coming of age (Graham 2019: 1). In different literary traditions, different terms were used to describe a novel about growing up, that is, forming of the individual, and so Buckley lists novels about youth, novels of education, novels about learning a trade, novels of initiation, novels about life (Buckley 1975: vii). In the *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, the novel of education is defined as

a type of novel about education in which the spiritual development of the hero is shown through studying and life experience, and is followed from childhood to the point when he reaches a certain education and becomes capable of fulfilling moral obligations towards himself and his society (Živković 1986: 669).

According to Jerome Buckley, the fundamental elements of a novel of education are childhood, the clash of generations, provinciality, larger society, being self-taught, estrangement, relationship problems, search for a calling, and the philosophy of work (Buckley 1975: 18). When it comes to the novel of education in a broader sense, in it

is shown the course and the way of education of the hero, representing the forming of his character in ethical lighting. Showing the innate characteristics of the hero, the influence of his surroundings, social understanding and institutions on his maturing, his spiritual and social development, the forming of his character (Živković 1986: 670).

The clear presence of educational motifs and elements, such as being put in the children's shelter and meeting teacher Emilija who is represented through the character of Mirna in the novel, categorizes *City of Pain* as pedagogical fiction. The forming of a closeness between the twelve-year-old boy and Mirna, thanks to whom he develops a love for books and studying, is a decisive moment in his development and maturation.

The bildungsroman, simply said, is a novel about formation, or rather, about socialization (Moretti 2000). The classic bildungsroman represents a synthesis of the *Entwicklungsroman*—a novel about development and the subjective formation of individuality, and the *Erziehungsroman* – a novel about education, the objective process from the point of view of the educator (Moretti 2000: 427).

Because youth/coming of age is a socio-cultural and relational category that depends on the historical, cultural and societal context, the bildungsroman is a culturally adaptive and contextually shaped genre. Hence, the protagonist in a European bildungsroman is the member of the middle class, while in the American version it is usually a hero from the working class; in American novels, in contrast to European ones, pessimism, disappointment, and resistance to the American story of progress and success are shown in coming of age (Graham 2019b: 119). In that sense, in the contemporary American context of the bildungsroman, representations of disenfranchised and marginalized characters function as a social critique (Graham 2019b: 141), which is especially evident in Afro-American novels of development, in which the problems of racism and discrimination take a central stage when describing the coming of age of the hero.

The Genre of Bildungsroman in an Ethnic/Minority Context

In contrast to the classic bildungsroman which showed the development of a young, Caucasian, privileged, heterosexual man, the framework of this genre today is used for writing about the formative experiences of women, members of the LGBT community and postcolonial populations (Graham 2019: 1). In the 20th century, with the rise of new social movements, the development of multi-cultural politics, decolonization and other phenomena based on the demand for recognizing the rights of different disenfranchised groups, the form of the bildungsroman becomes “a very alluring genre for expressing different marginalized subjects,” and consequently Caribbean, Asian-American, Chicano, and Afro-American bildungsroman novels appeared and developed (Bolaki 2011: 10-11). Post-colonial writers took on the genre, adapted and used it as an answer to

their traumas stemming from colonialism and neo-colonialism by placing the hardships of transitioning to adulthood and growing up in the context of racial oppression and discrimination (Graham 2019: 8). In other words, the development of feminist, postcolonial and ethnic studies during the eighties and the nineties influenced the establishment of the bildungsroman, and so today's broadened version of the genre also includes those narratives of growing up that have only a surface-level similarity to the 19th century European novel of development (Boes 2006: 231).

At the core of the postcolonial bildungsroman lies the question of identity: the questioning of the constructions of individual and collective identities in the context of building a postcolonial nation. The defining characteristic of the postcolonial bildungsroman is "remediation of the traumatic colonial heritage through the process of self-actualization" (Hoagland 2019: 219). In contrast to the European bildungsroman, in the postcolonial version there is no guarantee of a happy ending, or the fulfillment of the narrative (Hoagland 2019: 219). The central topics are hybridity, ambivalence and trauma, and the tragic representation of the colonized childhood is a frequent mechanism of articulation of political and ethical messages of the postcolonial bildungsroman.

Some authors think (Japtok 2005: 21) that the bildungsroman as a genre is quite convenient for questioning ethnicity because it processes the topic of the relationship between the protagonist and his surroundings. Because of that, autobiography and bildungsroman, in the hands of ethnic authors, usually thematize ethnic identity and answer questions of how conceptualizations of ethnicity influence the genre, and vice versa. In many bildungsroman novels about members of marginalized groups, the relationship between the individual and the nation is put on the central stage (Graham 2019b: 136).

The theming of life *in* and *between* two worlds, the duality between the community of origin and the majority population, is the key characteristic of novels about education and coming of age which Romani authors wrote from their own perspective, on the basis of their lived experience. Hungarian Romani author Menyhért Lakatos published the first Romani bildungsroman *Color of Smoke* in 1975 (Menyhért 2021).¹² This novel follows the coming of age and education of a Romani boy from a

¹² The novel was not translated into English until 2015, see: <https://www.neweuropebooks.com/color-of-smoke>

Romani neighborhood in rural Hungary just before World War II. Other autobiographical works of Romani literature that can also be read as novels about growing up were published more than three decades later. Their authors are Romani writers from the “Generation X”, who write about personal problems, hardships and dilemmas of growing up as a member of the Romani community today and in the context of Western culture. Sevillano points out that young contemporary Romani authors show “an unquestionable interest in representing different, flexible and complex conditions of being Romani, clearly opposing essentialist representations of the mainstream that still produce stereotypes and prejudice” (Sevillano 2023: 34).

In his works *Gypsy Boy* (2009) and the sequel *Gypsy Boy on the Run* (2011), British Romani author Mikey Walsh writes about his experience of a kind of double discrimination, about growing up and about violence he experienced as a homosexual man in the patriarchal surrounding of a traditional Romani family. According to some authors, the value of this work lies in the fact that, in an (auto)ethnographic way, it deals with a relatively neglected topic for that time: Romani people who are members of the LGBT community (Cittadini 2021: 105-106). The novel *American Gypsy* (2012) by the Romani-American author and activist Oksana Marafioti introduces memories of childhood and the experience of migrating from the Soviet Union to the United States. Marafioti writes about the way in which the experience of discrimination shaped her feeling of Romani identity and cultural heritage, as well as traumas of growing up in an alcoholic family (Sevillano 2023: 41). In short, these novels, as well as Meti Kamberi’s novels, describe the memories of coming of age and often “the conflicting search for identity in the context of Romani culture”—the authors reminisce on their formative years from a certain temporal distance and they consider the influence of an ethnic environment on their maturation and identity (Sevillano 2023: 35).

In the novels *City of Pain* and *City of Sin*, by describing his own youth and coming of age, Kamberi familiarizes Romani everyday life and the adversity which Romani people face as the most endangered national minority in Serbia.¹³ Romani authors and intellectuals quite often see

¹³ The status of national minority was acknowledged for members of the Romani community in Serbia in 2002, granting the right to protection of their national, cultural, and linguistic identity.

themselves as “cultural mediators,” that is, “cultural translators” and think that their primary goal is to teach all “gadja” (non-Romani people) Romani culture and social practices (Toninato 2006, 240). Romologists and sociologists from Niš, Dragan Todorović and Dragoljub Đorđević, point out that *City of Pain* can be read as a kind of “sociological adventure”, with

life in destitution, poverty and hunger in a Romani mahalla—in a Romani family, organized begging on the streets, the treatment of Romani children on the streets by the majority population, by the deputies from social services, relationship to foster families and treatment within those foster families, the relationship towards the children’s shelter, the relationships towards the teachers in the shelter, the descriptions of hierarchies within “families” in the shelter, the relationship of teachers and other students towards Romani children in the class, the schoolyard and outside of it. (Тодоровић, Ђорђевић 2022: 30)

However, when describing a usual day in a Romani mahalla, Kamberi focuses only on the negative examples—drunk husbands who beat their wives, neglected children who play in the mud, who beg on the streets or steal, fathers who sell their underage daughters, mothers who leave their children alone on the street to prostitute themselves, loud celebrations where members of the Romani community enjoy unlimited drinking and gambling. When he escaped from the foster home and returned to his mother, he described the sights of the Romani mahalla in the following way:

The street I went into was narrow and full of Gypsies. Children ran around naked, barefoot, muddy and snotty. I felt the stench that came out of the dug, long canal. It smelled of sewerage, the mud was a gray color, and the water in it was foamy and turbid. Down the street I saw a group of Gypsies loading straw mattresses and iron whatnots into a cart that was being pulled by a skinny horse. Beside the house the women were diligently washing laundry by hand. I saw, one had a shawl on her head and a dirty colorful skirt. The other had a scar on her forehead and bruises on her face. Her husband probably beat her, I thought. (Kamberi 2021a: 72)

The pages of this novel represent a space for articulation of ethnic (and racialized) trauma, caused by personal, but also transgenerational experience of discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization of

Romani people in these areas. The historical trauma of banishment and discrimination has an important role in constructing the Romani ethnic identity. Bašić explains that conflicts can have a key role in forming ethnic identification and that because of that slavery, genocide, conflicts and organized attacks on Romani people are one of the bases of identity for them (Bašić 2002: 70). In other words, the banishment and discrimination of Romani people throughout history contributed to creating a feeling of being different from others, strengthening of intragroup feelings and, in the end, creating an “us and them” dichotomy, underlining the differences compared to others (Mayall 2003: 265). Trauma is, according to Sevillano, embedded in the collective memory of Romani people and the narrative about trauma had an instrumental role in teaching new generations about the Romani past so they could begin to understand their present (Sevillano 2023: 32).

Both the first and the second novel begin with reminiscences of early childhood filled with abuse, belittling and humiliation. He was “a Gypsy dog” and “a Gypsy bastard”:

I didn’t speak to anyone from my class, those were kids from wealthy families. You could see and feel the enormous difference between them and me. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be equal, but they didn’t give me the chance. Since I started going to school, from the second grade, I was and still am unaccepted, and more than that—I was so discriminated against in that classroom, among those children, that being in school was the biggest misery of this world for me. (Kamberi 2021a: 27)

I turned my head. I could clearly see most of the kids drawing on my coat with chalk, after they came in. I saw that it wasn’t interesting enough to them, so they started to stamp and spit on it. How much of it was I able to understand, I don’t know. I didn’t protest. “Gypsy, this is how we’re gonna step on you on the recess. You know why? ‘Cause you’re stinking up this classroom. Don’t you see? You don’t belong here.” (Kamberi 2021a: 29)

Everyone was so unjust, unkind, unmerciful towards we when I was begging on the street and walking through the city. (Kamberi 2021a: 41)

And why the fight for justice when growing up for those with darker skin in this city of pain—will always be hard? (Kamberi 2021a: 148)

The universal exclusion and discrimination are part of everyday life for a great number of Romani people in Serbia even today. According to a report from 2021, Romani people face discrimination every day. Bašić concluded that employment, exercising the rights to work, social protection, healthcare and education are social activities in which they are most frequently discriminated against. Also, spatial segregation and segregation in education, as well as hate speech present a problem on its own (Bašić 2021). Residential exclusion of Romani people is another aspect of their social exclusion and, as pointed out by Petrović (Петровић 2017: 112), it represents “a process by which certain individuals/groups are pushed to the outskirts of society in which they live and by which they are prevented from having a full access to resources, institutions and activities of the wider public, because of poverty or a lack of knowledge, or as a result of discrimination.”

The context of the Romani mahalla is of significant importance for understanding the individual traumas of the writer, which have origin in the collective experience of the Romani community. The Gypsy mahalla, besides being the setting of a part of the novel, is a place to which the main character constantly returns in his thoughts. It is what haunts him. The traumatic memory of the Romani mahalla and belonging to it is what keeps the main character “stuck” in an emotional, societal and cultural sense. The Romani mahalla has a special symbolism in these novels. The Gypsy mahalla is a community, a Romani safe space, a world of its own and a world above the world. A ghettoized space isolated from the outer world, the world of non-Romanies, the Romani mahalla is also the place where his mother lives. She is described as a woman with tangled hair in old, ragged and dirty clothes and it is also noted that everything around her was dirty, messy and pathetic. Only the mother has no name in the novel.

The mother is always shown in the mahalla, except for two scenes which play out on the street: one is related to prostitution, and the other to digging through the dumpster. As we find out in the novel, the mother got married when she was thirteen, to a man much older than her, and she does not know who the fathers of her children are. She is an illiterate refugee from Kosovo. The figure of the mother in these novels is almost the symbol of the confrontation of the author with his own minority identity. In other words, she represents the personification of everything that the hero of the novel wants to distance himself from. Amiraga's painful

memories of his mother and the feelings towards her also summarize the relationship he has to his own ethnic origin. Because of that, the mother is essential for the feelings of self-worth of the main character, the source of his negative self-image and the feelings of inferiority. The mother is the cause of the unhappy childhood:

It's because of my mother that I don't even remember the toys and normal childhood. There are no memories of non-existent things... in all my life she didn't bring me anything but pain and suffering. (Kamberi 2021b: 34)

My mother is sly, she only looks after herself, by God, that's the reason she got married in the first place, or why she got married more than once, I have no idea. I only know she is gloom and misery. She had no choice, didn't know what to do with herself, she's been with everyone and popped out children on the way, horrible. (Kamberi 2021b: 35)

One time, after a couple of years spent in the children's shelter, he saw her on the street, and did not approach her, despite his nagging conscience and the hatred he felt towards himself then. Namely, as he explained, he was set on improving his life:

Just because I want to help her and change her life in the future. But how, if I can't change her inner aspects, how? [...] How should I help her when there is no help? There is, in that one moment, but that's all. The next day already my mother is stuck in a routine of a miserable, depressing life again. I could clearly see that. I knew her true self, her perception of the world. Are that one moment and a hug worth my downward spiraling into an abyss? (Kamberi 2021a: 200)

Kamberi considers the Romani reality as destitution and misery and gives detailed descriptions of unsatisfactory conditions of living in unhygienic Romani neighborhoods:

A tiny mouse was going in and out of a tiny hole that was in the corner. Flies were standing on and frantically walking over dirty dishes. Coldness and stale air, misery, carelessness for and neglect of everything, it was a depressing sight of life. (Kamberi 2021a: 9)

Life in the mahalla was gloomy and pathetic, I can clearly see from this distance. Then, I surely wasn't aware of that misery. In the period of my

early childhood I lived and slept wherever I could, in dilapidated little houses and crumbling stables, in which malnourished horses were tied in. (Kamberi 2021a: 9-10)

The trauma of growing up actually represents the stigma of ethnic identity which is manifested through shame and self-hatred and the ambivalent relationship towards family and the community of origin:

I was ashamed of my name. (Kamberi 2021a: 10)

I am a prisoner in my own skin, I cannot escape this mold. (Kamberi 2021a: 67)

For a moment, I wanted to escape my own skin. But how would I? I'm trapped in it like a bird in a cage. (Kamberi 2021a: 224)

Everything in me was so toxic and polluted from pain and suffering, like it was constantly spreading. (Kamberi 2021a: 234)

My life is destined to suffering, from the sadness and the wounds, my soul died... How to describe the shadow from the childhood that follows us relentlessly throughout our whole life? (Kamberi 2021a: 242)

As noted by Sevillano (Sevillano 2023: 43), in contemporary works of Romani literature signed by authors of the younger generation, there is a phenomenon of double-consciousness, an idea that was developed by W.E.B. Du Bois to explain the ambivalent duplicity of racialized subjects, the conflicted inner speech of the victim of racial oppression. Double-consciousness implies the feeling of observing one's self always through the eyes of others, measuring with the tape of those who watch you, amused by hatred and pity. Afro-Americans always feel duplicity—an American, a black person; two souls, two minds, two unreconciled aspirations; two warring ideals in one black body... (Du Bois according to Pittman 2023). This tension, as Sevillano concludes (Sevillano 2023: 43), appears in Romani autobiographies where the authors are split in two: the narrator and the character, both racialized subjects and both immersed in values around which racial hierarchies are constructed.

According to Kamberi, "Romani people are unaware of life and their own absurdity" (Kamberi 2021b, 10). He thinks that his self-accomplishment, emancipation and socialization in the majority population are possible only if he leaves the mahalla and the Romani way of life and never returns:

I didn't feel the need for it—to go home and celebrate those holidays with my mother too. I knew my feelings would mix up if I saw her. I knew how she was, how difficult it was. And I wanted to forget about the tramp life, the one I used to live. I was managing it. I knew I had to give up Jagmur, mother and old friends so I could change my inner aspects and my state of mind. I knew that going to my mother, to that field of misery of her life, just nails me in place, not allowing me to break the chain of torment and step into a better life. I knew the price to pay for a better life and my vision—no going back to old ways and certainly no going back home. (Kamberi 2021a: 138)

My tribulations started with my first days in a small ruinous house deep in the Gypsy mahalla, when I was born. It started when I tried delicious food and sweets, not knowing that later I would need money earned with calloused hands for it, not knowing that life is hard. It started on the street with the naivety of a child that doesn't know, that is ignorant. It started with the neglect from my mother, who probably didn't even know any better. (Kamberi 2021b: 20)

The life I lived wasn't dignified or just, that's why I wanted to seize one small piece of the universe, that would be enough to give me sanctuary on the road of escaping my own city of pain, my own bad destiny, caused by birth. (Kamberi 2021b: 12)

He is aware of negative prejudices and generalizations of the Romani community, but even then he strives to show that discrimination is a constant in the ways the majority population treats Romani people:

But not all Romani people are the same. Not all of them are neglectful towards their children and their families, irresponsible towards life. Not all of them are simple, illiterate and uneducated. Romani people do follow social streams, but they're still exposed to the unjustness of discrimination from other people. (Kamberi 2021b: 143)

Kamberi frequently uses the third person plural form when writing about Romani people, especially in those cases when he wants to show a personal, inner critique of the bad in the community or to distance himself from certain negative aspects and situations, pointing out the importance of education and the belonging to the community of the children's shelter. In these novels, a tension between the primordial and

constructivist understandings of ethnic identity is present—the thoughts of the main character offer an almost ethnographic sight into the delicate weaving of the discussion about what an individual is by origin and what he/she is by choice, which paints the picture of all the complexity of minority (but at the same time also racialized) identity of a young being that wants to fit in and be accepted in the world of “white” people. As it was already mentioned, Amiraga’s origins are burdensome for him, and he wants to “write a new genetic code in the nature of his heritage” (Kamberi 2021b: 150).

This genetic heritage of ours is hard. Although, we ourselves contributed to that. Not all of us of course. Here, look at us two. Those who stayed at that bottom are illiterate, uneducated, they can hardly do any better. (Kamberi 2021b: 27)

Of course children shouldn’t even beg on the street, but our life consisted of that. They put this in our blood, that we have to beg, steal, reave, that’s our fucking life, written like so in our genetic code. (Kamberi 2021b: 46)

She was angry at Romani people because they breed so much and abandon their children and I agreed with her. You can’t pull your heritage out from the root so easily. By God, am I not an authentic example of that? (Kamberi 2021b: 143)

The Romani heritage and surrounding in these novels are represented as obstacles in the path of progress of a young individual who wants to abandon his previous way of life, that is, to not return to the old one—to poverty, violence and everyday discrimination. The Romani community (from the mahalla) is shown as a group which cannot and does not know how to do things differently, in an almost hopeless situation. That is why Romani people are, again and again, constructed as the problem population, as those who need help, which is why heterogeneous groups of Romani people are made one and the same, why they are additionally marginalized and stigmatized (Timmer 2010). In other words, as explained by Jarić and Milenković (2014: 145):

It is like Romani people take on the reflections of constructed identity markers of: (a) the victim, (b) the marginalized other and (c) the radically different other that could not be integrated even without

mechanisms of (auto)marginalization. That is how Romani people acquire properties of a “naturally” othered social group that is socio-culturally (“racially”, by class and by ethnicity) “predisposed” to be helped and so, seemingly perennially, is classified as a) a homogenous social group without the possibility of individual emancipation due to the grasp of tradition, b) a social group that is forever powerless to overcome its own marginalization and, above all, c) a social group that always stays in difficult situations they find themselves in “by their own fault”.

Writing and education in these novels is understood in a therapeutic sense. The process of writing about one’s self and one’s experiences turns out to be like a mechanism of overcoming memories of painful events from the past. Writing helped Kamberi to overcome his childhood traumas: “with every page of the novel, I took off wounds from my soul layer by layer” (Kamberi in Obradović 2020). In the same way, Amiraga looks back on the importance of education, writing and reading for the socialization and growing up of a young being, as well as for overcoming deep personal traumas and collective, cultural ones:

I feel and I know that my conscious awakening began when I heard a rap song for the first time in the shelter, when I started reading good books, when, with a pain in my chest and my gut—I typed out the first lines for my first book. (Kamberi 2021b: 20)

Final Considerations

In the end, we can ask ourselves what this novel tells us if we observe it as a specific type of ethnographic work which includes the traumatic experience of coming of age of the narrator himself, when made into a literary text? Of course, we need to consider that this work, however faithful to real life, is still the result of a process of artistic, creative stylization. What does one intimate insight into a poetic world show us, that we cannot know through standard research techniques such as deep, half-structured interviews? Romani people, as researchers already know, are a relatively closed-off group, they are distrustful towards “gadjas” (non-Romanies) and it is not easy to enter their world. In other words, they are

exceptionally suspicious towards other people and hardly ever agree to a conversation with them (Banić Grubišić 2013: 38-39). This confinement is not only a reaction to social isolation—it is, as explained by Sokolovska, “a type of protection of group identification, but also a way of keeping group order and structure” (Sokolovska 2014: 8).

That is why anthropological “immersion into everyday life” is not easy to accomplish if you are not accepted into the community of your interlocutor. The period of early childhood is first and foremost tied to the space of the home and family, but besides showing the social relationships inside the family and larger community, Kamberi also shows the hidden life of his community, firstly as seen through the eyes of a child, and then by a grown man. This display is more than a mere description of social relations, mental states or ways of life inside one culture that is most often exotic and strange to the majority population.

Like other literary works written by individuals from minority, marginalized and racialized communities, these novels are not only about personal history/individual past, but there is also a refraction of collective, transgenerational experiences and history seen through the individual and the personal experiences. That being said, the novels of Meti Kamberi at the same time represent a cultural reflection on the (self-) imposed position of identity of the narrator who undoubtedly writes under a “pressure of representation” (Mercer 1990; Банић Грубишић 2022; Banić Grubišić 2013). The moment a member of a minority group has space to “tell his/her story”, they are expected to be the spokesperson for the whole community (Mercer 1990). That is how artists who are positioned on the margins of institutionalized spaces of cultural production are burdened with an imposed role of speaking as representatives of a whole group, in the name of, and for, the community they originate from (Mercer 1990, 62). Meti Kamberi openly talks in his novels and interviews about the inner discomfort he feels because of that. In one interview he states:

I’m not an odd bird. It might be weird that there are no Romani writers, at least I haven’t heard of any, or because I’m young, but they’re exaggerating with how much they talk about that. Whoever you ask, I believe everyone felt discriminated against in some situations. (Kamberi in Tonić Stojić 2022)

This excerpt from the interview shows how the ethnic discrimination of Romani people is naturalized and not observed as such anymore, while at the same time the author wants to distance himself from his ethnic identity, in fact, to run away from the vicious cycle of identity (Banić Grubišić 2013), and so in another interview he says: “It annoys me when they persist I’m Romani, I’m just a nineteen-year-old boy” (Kamberi in Đuričić 2020). Through his writing Meti Kamberi ponders his own place and role inside the majority population and the community of origin, between urban cultural practices of young people and the modern way of life on one hand, and the essentialist traditional Romani culture on the other. Literary and artistic works of minority populations can be a valuable source of examining their ideas of their own selves.

The works of Meti Kamberi can be used as a subsidiary ethnographic source in which valuable information about internal and intra-group self-perception of members of the Romani ethnic group about their own Romani identity can be found. As such, those works can undoubtedly contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomena of ethnic mimicry and assimilation, ethnic shame and the practice of self-racializing, mechanisms of internalizing and perpetuating stereotypes inside the Romani community itself. Relating to this, possible answers to some of the important questions about the self-determination of members of a marginalized, discriminated against and ghettoized group such as the Romani population are implied in the novel. Even though they are based on a personal example of one individual and his testimony, more or less rounded off by elements of fiction, they represent an important starting point for considering such significant questions as: what does it mean to grow up as a Romani person in Serbia, how do Romani children and young people experience the relationship between the larger society and themselves and, more importantly, how do they experience their ethnic identity and the culture of their origin, as well as what are their hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears?

Here, it would be advisable to also look at the bigger picture, the consequence of the publication of the novels *City of Pain* and *City of Sin*, and that is the potential change not only on the personal, but also on the collective plane. Perhaps most importantly, this change does not only refer to the financial betterment, but it should also be viewed as a possible first step away from the unfavorable position in which most young

Romani people are in. In this sense, the aforementioned change implies the independence in decisions and in creative expressions, and with that also the possibility that they do not write and create their own cultural, artistic, and literary works only by demand and under the cover of the non-governmental sector (Banić Grubišić 2013),¹⁴ but to independently participate in creating, as well as in connecting and linking young people on a supranational basis.

Thanks to this, these novels can have a far-reaching influence—the success of Meti Kamberi could inspire other young Romani people (as well as those who are not necessarily members of minority populations), mostly pushed to the margins of social and cultural life, and encourage them to become writers or step away from their mostly unfavorable positions in any other way, making their voices heard.

Translated by Lenka Begović

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¹⁴ Regardless of whether they are local Romani associations or foreign foundations.

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