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The Acceptance of Roma Identity

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In this paper I will explore the path of self-acceptance of the lead character from the play *I Declare at My Own Risk*, the autobiographical work of the actress and director Alina Șerban, which can be interpreted as a reflection on the condition of what it means to be a minority. In order to accurately follow the sinuous journey of Alina I will first discuss a few technical terms which will provide the right context for this analysis, after which I will take into consideration the steps she follows throughout her life, the possible reasons why she didn't accept her identity, along with what made her accept who she is in the end. Furthermore, I will end this paper by expressing my own views over the point in which Alina is situated in regarding her ethnic identity at the end of the play.

What does the term "identity" mean? Identity is an ever-present concept which can be found in a wide range of associations due to it representing a set of data by which a person identifies themselves. Sometimes the areas can overlap, for example Alina is a Romanian woman of Roma ethnicity, the distinguished spheres of identity are: gender, nationality and ethnicity. With regard to ethnic identity there are multiple debates on the matter since it is not something that can be precisely pointed out. These contradictory discussions have their origins in the assumed positions of researchers, and they took the shape of two perspectives: essentialism and constructivism. The first one understands ethnic identity as being something obtained at birth, it puts emphasis on the blood ties and the physical traits of an individual and less on the cultural and linguistic elements. The latter shifts the focus on the social actor, being considered that ethnic identity appears, is built and gains relevance under social interactions. In fact, the ethnic identity is ambivalent: both a state of being and a process.

The manner in which the Roma are perceived by the other members of society, how they are categorized and defined by them, plays a critical role in the manufacturing and reproduction of the social and ethnic identity of Roma people. For a long period of time the Roma identity was imposed from the exterior by the centers of power through public discourses which established a negative portrait,

the one of Roma people as: deviants, anti-system and difficult to *integrate*; an image that still persists. Only in the last decades Roma activists have started to self-define in the public space, among them we can find Alina Șerban. Collective identification gains the meaning of the process through which a social actor assumes certain traits that he recognises, rationally and emotionally, as being similar with those of others. This process is one of negotiation that depends on the given social context. Therefore, the Romany identity is a hybrid one: both what is built by the exterior- the identity of Gypsy, and what is built internally- the identity of Roma.

The play begins with the starting point of Alina's story on the path full of twists and battles, both interior ones and with the exterior, which is the acceptance of Roma identity. She is a "normal" child who goes to a school full of Romanian children, but the financial problems of her family bring her in a new environment towards which she is hostile. The traditional yard of her father's relatives is filled with unknown elements to her: the big hats, the floral skirts, a weird language, the "dirty and bare-foot" children who laugh about her jeans, the shared bread and tea, the position of a woman in this space, the low level of education of the adults; they were all making her feel "like an alien". Alina didn't identify with her relatives to whom she has a physical resemblance and their lifestyle was shocking to her. The next scene presents the moment of dread which she feels at the thought that someone might see her looking in trash cans with her mother, she doesn't tremble because of the cold but out of fear. In Romania it is considered shameful to be impoverished, this becomes even more disreputable if you are of Romany ethnicity, and she feels the ramifications of this attitude.

When Alina makes a new friend she wants to deny that she lives in "that Gypsy yard", but the positive reaction and the interest that Mona shows for what's happening in the yard takes her by surprise since she is "100% Romanian". From the window of her friend Alina can see the yard, but she refuses to look outside because she is horrified by how horrifying it looks. She considers that Mona helps her the most by keeping the secret of the frightening yard. Alina still feels shame

about her way of living. We can interpret the discrepancy between the homes of the two girls as a depiction of Alina's feelings, she is becoming more aware of her position in society and thus the profound feeling of inferiority is born.

The next scene presents the trauma experienced by Alina around the age of 14 when she lived with her mother in the house of an old woman she was taking care of. The elderly woman shows aversion towards their ethnicity, and when she dies Alina's mother is taken away by the police. She moves back into the yard, here she feels her mother's absence and starts to write in a journal. When she turns 15 she goes to meet her favorite band and she is excited to tell her father about "the best birthday ever", but the evacuation notice from his hand brings her back to reality. Time passes by and the young girl falls in love. After 8 months she feels obliged to present her boyfriend to her father. She wants everything to be perfect, her desire to overcompensate for the shortcomings indicates to the viewers her inferiority complex. Things don't go according to her plan and Alina bursts out. She confesses to her father how much she hates "neamul ăsta de oameni jechoși" (translation: this nation of filthy people) and how embarrassed she is in regards to his lack of education. She also tells her father how she blames him for everything that had happened to her mother. Alina is still hostile towards everything in her life. Later on she regrets these words because her father was a loving parent.

In high school Alina dreams of going to college but she knows that reality will not permit this and reveals to the public that she is tired of living in the fear and shame induced by her lifestyle. The next bit coincides with the play's title: *I Declare at My Own Risk*, this statement is in fact a request made to appeal Child Protection Services so that she could continue her studies. Alina finds herself attaining the New York University Tisch School of the Arts in 2009, here she experiences new impactful social situations. She recounts to the public how two years before this she attended the Roma Art Festival, an important part in her journey of identity acceptance since this is where she sees for the first time how the Romany dance and music are celebrated. Additionally, she describes to the spectators how she used to pray to God to make her a Romanian girl: "God, I beg

you with all my heart and soul...change me. I don't want to be a Gypsy all my life, I want to be a Romanian: I want to have whiter skin and to have many friends, and especially a boyfriend". Alina didn't want the "Gypsy identity" enforced by non-Roma because it means something bad, and the profoundly racist sayings and jokes which she was hearing affected her greatly although she tried to ignore them. However, at this festival she feels safe and says aloud, for the first time, that she is Roma.

At the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Alina works hard so that she can be as "impeccable" and well prepared as those around her. When her traditional scarf accidentally catches onto a man's briefcase she feels overwhelmed and is shocked when he doesn't have a negative reaction towards her. Alina feels like she is choking because of her ethnic identity in this world: her constant attempts to prove that she is as capable as others, the shame and the guilt with which she lives, the exasperation felt towards the stereotypes, along with the feeling that she does not fit into the norms because of her behaviors; they are all indicators of her inferiority complex. She seems to be in a constant battle with the identity enforced by outsiders. Alina wishes to be able to be proud about the Romany culture and her identity, to not feel the need to make herself smaller each time someone passes by her, but daily occurrences teach her that the Roma people cannot simply be, they can only be delinquents or individuals who overcame their condition in an exceptional way.

The next scene presents the uncomfortable interaction with a child, the stereotypes learnt on the playground take her by surprise. Alina tries to explain to the little boy that the Roma are people like any others, but she feels like she lost to the playground. The jester costume she quickly puts on indicates to onlookers how she truly feels, her efforts seem to be as futile as Sisyphus' work, thus she starts to ask herself which are the rules of being an adult.

Alina claims that angels are real because she met a few of them: Issa who always took her on trips, Neda who helped her when she felt sick at the airport right after a surgery, and the taxi driver who offered her something to eat. I believe

that the kindness of these people provided her with enough faith to make her feel like a human again. The play ends on a positive note with the line: "Roma means human. We are just human".

The reasons why Alina didn't accept her identity are numerous and complex, but we can say for certain that they can be found under the umbrella of anti-Roma attitude which is deeply rooted in the collective mind. She feels like a stranger when she moves into the traditional yard and internalizes the negative attitude developing an inferiority complex due to her new socio-economic environment, but over the years she becomes a part of the community and begins to regret the prejudice she had. I consider that the experiences she accumulated over time are what gradually made her accept her Roma identity, because each one of these events helped form a strong desire to be understood as a human: Alina wished for society to understand that the Roma people have both positive and negative traits like any other category of humans, and that being Roma does not mean that you are a delinquent or an exception from the rule.

I believe that Alina is a lot more comfortable with her ethnic identity than she was in the beginning, but not entirely, because the process of self-defining as being part of the Roma community is still unfolding. It is most likely that she is still met by the anti-Roma attitude, by the identity of "Gypsy", and the case gets complicated when this sphere of ethnic identity overlaps with other types of identities which have an impact on her interactions with other members of society. I would say that the relief she has right now is granted to her interactions with "angels" and the hope that from her bad experiences something positive may take shape.