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IV. Visual Representations of Roma Marriages



“We Start Our Lives from Different Positions.” A Dialogue¹

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ABSTRACT

Alina Șerban is an award-winning film and theater actress, playwright, and emerging director of Roma origin. Born in Bucharest in 1987, she overcame poverty and discrimination, becoming the first in her family to graduate from university and to continue her studies abroad. She pioneered Roma feminist political theater in Romania with her one-woman show *I Declare at My Own Risk*. In cinema, she had leading roles in Marta Bergman's feature film *Alone at My Wedding*, which premiered at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2018 and earned her several Best Actress awards, and in Huseyin Tabak's *Gipsy Queen*, which had its premiere in 2019 and earned her, among other awards, The Best Actress in Germany in 2020. She has recently debuted in film directing with a short about Roma slavery. In the interview conducted with her, this issue co-editor Cătălina Tesăr followed three lines of inquiry: (1) how ethnicity influenced Alina's life trajectory and her career, (2) how Alina perceives the representation of Roma in art and public spaces, and (3) how she perceives early age marriages. The interview was conducted on the phone, and Cătălina and Alina had not met in person prior to the interview.

KEYWORDS

Roma identity, representations, early age marriages, discrimination, Romania.

1) This text has been edited for brevity and clarity.

2) I am grateful to Ciprian Voicilă for transcribing this interview, and to Ioana Miruna Voiculescu for translating it from Romanian.

Cătălina Tesăr: I'd like us to discuss about the representations of Roma and Roma marriages, as well as your views on early age marriages. But until we get there, I'd like you to reflect a bit on your own life story. Because, as I see it, it relates to questions raised in the current issue of *Martor* journal, which includes accounts of both communities where marriages are arranged and more “assimilated communities,” which appear to be more open, mixed, and to be living somehow in-between. On a related note, I feel that in *I Declare at My Own Risk*—your one-woman show that I so greatly admire—you speak precisely about your experience of being in-between. You tell, for example, of how you had a Romanian boyfriend and you were anxious about bringing him home to your family and disclosing your

ethnicity, or how you embraced education, a thing which was seen as not very Roma by the traditional side of your family. Can you tell me how it feels to aspire to the *gadge* world while being a Roma? What was your experience of living in-between? Last but not least, it seems to me that lately you've been in a position where you want to embrace your ethnicity very openly, haven't you? I don't perceive anymore the uneasiness of being Roma that you expressed ten years ago, in *I Declare at My Own Risk*. But then there are many who want to escape their ethnicity. Do you feel 100 percent Roma? I imagine it is difficult to draw the line.

Alina Șerban: Right, you've touched several topics, and I'm not sure I can give you rational answers because they are about the processes that a person has to go through



Alina Șerban. Photo credit: Denisa Silas.

before embracing an identity, and these are pretty complex. This identity is never fixed, it is constantly changing, and anyway you cannot distance yourself from it. About the question whether I feel 100 percent Roma or not, I believe this is not something you can quantify... Now, whether you make war with these things or you openly embrace them, you cannot change your background, where you were born and raised. Even if I no

longer live with my father's family, I still live in Romania and in the world, where being Roma is not something enjoyable—whether as an artist or whatever else.

I say this because, above all else, I believe in representation. Growing up, I couldn't find any people that looked like me or my family and that I could admire portrayed in the media. So I can only hope that things will change and the next generations will

feel better about their identity. In the audience to my play *The Great Shame*³ today, I saw Roma girls much younger than me, who knew about Roma slavery and were aware that the big problem is that we're not put in a context. That the position of the Roma in society is not necessarily the one they chose, but the result of a racist, classist, etc. system. And they also knew that the Roma have made their contribution to this country and that things are not what they're said to be: there is no black and white, as the media would have it. So, about my being in-between, this is to some extent true, at least as an artist.

As a person, I have much more to say about that. Whether I like it or not, I cannot renounce my identity. It is what it is, I remain Roma, no matter what. I've been born and I've lived with this knowledge. Like in London I could have passed for just Romanian, not mentioned my ethnic identity. This is a kind of choice some can make, others can't, in a given context maybe. But in practical terms making this choice wouldn't sever me from my past, even if I changed the story I told the world, you know? I don't know how to explain that. Even if I had told my course mates at the Royal Academy "I'm just Romanian," this wouldn't have changed in any way the fact that I had spent my formative years in the traditional household of my father's Spoitori (Tinker) family, and that I knew how it felt to be rejected because of your ethnicity, etc. Trying to manufacture a new identity for myself, I expect would have been even more tiring, I don't know... (laughter)

Cătălina Tesăr: Come to think of it, you were a success in all the films you acted in, but most of them were not produced in Romania. I saw you in that Romanian short film, *Written/Unwritten*⁴, which I think is amazing. Yet I'm not sure how many people this short has actually reached. On the contrary, I feel that the foreign films you were in, like *Alone at My Wedding* and

Gypsy Queen, had more impact. Do you think that your being sought by foreign directors more than by Romanian directors has to do with Romanians' attitude towards Roma compared to a more open attitude in the West?

Alina Șerban: Do you mean more open to the subject or to me as an actress? Because these are different things. In Romania, they aren't producing films with non-stereotypical women as leads. They're starting to make films featuring the odd Roma kid character, but I think we're far from doing it on a regular basis. Diversity isn't really a subject for Romanian films, plays, or the media. So first it would have to become something regular—to see ads featuring Roma eating cookies, biscuits, beats me...

There are no normal representations of us out there. We are either portrayed as criminals, like when the Romanian media make sure to mention the criminal's ethnicity, or as exotic people, like when they say, "OK, let's listen to them too," but this representation isn't any more human. Hence the lack of empathy for Roma, Roma kids. If we hear of forced evictions of Roma people at the height of winter, we don't really feel sick in the stomach. If that happened to some dogs, we'd jump to save them, you know? Because we've lived with the same portrayals of Roma for centuries. Indeed I was lucky enough to be able to show the grey area, the things left unsaid about the Roma. Now, about this area, about what it is to be in-between, the fact that I try to bring in this human side, and I am one of the first voices to do it, well, I try to do it against stereotypical representations. I've never made use of my ethnic traditional clothing, although I could've done it. I've never talked about early marriages in my own family to draw your attention, to make everybody feel good that we're the savages, so different from you. On the contrary, what I mean to convey is that we're as human as you are, only that we don't have equal access to resources, historically, we were placed on a different floor, in the basement.

3) A play written and directed by Alina Șerban, drawing on the history of Roma slavery.

4) A short drama by Adrian Silișteanu (2016).

5) An exhibition based on my (Cătălina Tesăr) PhD research, opened from September 24 to October 25, 2020, at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest.

Cătălina Tesăr: Coming to the topic of marriages, Alina, I'd like to bring in what I do. If you have the time, you might want to see this exhibition I made, *Tokmeala. A Bride and Wealth in the Bargain*,⁵ which might or might not be about marriages since I like to present it as being about marriage alliances and politics. I don't aim to exoticize, but I believe that you need to show things for what they are sometimes. If you make sure to show things from a human perspective, I'm not sure it's about exoticizing so much.

Alina Șerban: What bothers me the most about the topic of early marriages is that it is never put in its historical context. Now, if we don't talk about how it has come to early marriages, we can only judge the people and blame them. If it weren't for Roma slavery, we wouldn't have early marriages. I don't approve of early marriages, I believe they should be stopped. To have underage persons entering into marriage is clearly a crime. And I don't believe either that objective research of the phenomenon is possible, especially if done by non-Roma. Anyway, this is a very sensitive topic. But again to study Roma like animals, that's really problematic. I think it is very difficult for a Roma to present the issue of early marriages, let alone for a non-Roma! Because unless we put it in a context and explain where it originated, namely in the non-Roma oppressive system, I'm not even remotely interested in starting the conversation. What I mean is that unless we explain that it originated with Roma slavery and that the whole Romanian system is to blame for tolerating it, I believe we're not really dealing with it.

Cătălina Tesăr: Just to clarify, how are in your opinion early marriages connected to slavery?

Alina Șerban: This goes back to the times when the boyars, the state, everybody owned Roma as if they were things—many rapes and mixed marriages between Roma

and non-Roma, which weren't necessarily marriages, happened then, generations of mixed Roma and non-Roma children resulted from them. Also, when the same boyars would bring in Roma virgin girls at their parties, the excuse of the betrothal was used to protect them: "No, boyar, she's betrothed." "How can she be betrothed? She's only thirteen." "But she's married, boyar. I lie you not." Not that this would save all of them, but we need to explain that the practice is connected to slavery and the non-Roma, even if today the Roma are still the ones to get blamed for it, while we're all oblivious of the context.

Let's also talk about today's social context. After all, the lack of education, resources, the poverty, they're all connected with early marriages. And I'll give you an example that shut me up completely, and I hope it would many others. I'm talking about the early marriages made in my family's courtyard, I'm talking about my family, I'm not talking from books or just showing off that I know. No, I have the legitimacy of my own and my family's experiences. They were my own cousins that I had grown up with, and as they were about to enter their teen years, I was aware of the danger they were in to be married off and leave the courtyard. So, I wanted to protect them but I had no way to do it. What could I change about that context? And second, when I asked my aunt Mariana, their mother, "Aunt, what are we doing? She's thirteen! This cannot be!" "And how am I supposed to provide for them, my girl?" she replied. "Can't you see I don't even have bread?" So, in that situation, I couldn't show them a way out of the riddle, give them or their family that bread. I wasn't in a position of power that would allow me to say: "I'll give you the solution."

Cătălina Tesăr: And what is in your opinion the connection between today's Roma social context and early marriages?

Alina Șerban: I don't think the two can be separated. The position of Roma in society

is, as I said, marginal, not least in terms of their ability to maintain their culture. And speaking of culture, this also applies to the topic of early marriages. You cannot say, "Oh, this is a purely cultural thing. How 'nice' that they're meeting and making these early marriages." But when your language, your clothing, your culture are so important to you, what's going on outside of that culture is relevant too, don't you think? Outside of our context, we cannot speak our language everywhere, we cannot wear our traditional clothing because they wouldn't even let us go into a café. I believe that outside pressure, poverty and the lack of access to the same resources as the others lead to increased pressure inside the closed community. "No, we need to hold on to what we have, we have to do it our own way, because the others won't accept us anyway. There's no way we can make it through with them around. They've always hated us and they always will." This is pretty much how it goes. If you feel rejected your whole life, you'll never believe that you'll make it through the first chance you get.

Look at me. I'm the first in my family to have graduated from high school. I come from a traditional family. My father was a traditional Roma man, and I used to live in a traditional household. And then there was my Rudari⁶ mother. In my formative years, eleven to seventeen, I lived in a traditional Roma courtyard. At eleven, when I first moved there, I looked at its members with non-Roma eyes and I blamed them. "Why don't you send your children to school? Why do you have early marriages? Aunt, why are you doing this?" And I tried to understand these mechanisms from inside, to see how they are all connected. Because I had someone to help me with my homework: my mother. I used to play the lazy girl, "No, mommy, I'm too sleepy, I have a belly ache." And my mum would make me do it, saying, "No, you have to do your homework. Come on, I'll help you do it." My mother can read and write and understands the importance of education.

This wasn't the case for my male cousin, who lived two houses away from us. So the way this die is cast depends on so many things: your living conditions, and so on. They married him very early, and a boy being married in fourth grade did become the talk of the school, and I, who lived in the same courtyard, would hear it.

Cătălina Tesăr: And how are you now perceived in that traditional family? Since you're not married, you didn't follow the customs?

Alina Șerban: I was perceived positively all the time. When I was studying for the high school admission tests and living in that courtyard, they'd turn down the music, keep quiet, because "Alina is studying." They had some sort of respect for my determination to do this. Now, you shouldn't think aunt Veta didn't send my cousin to school. She did. She'd wake him up in the morning and tell him, "Come on, get up, school is starting!" The problem was, as I said, that within the family, among our own, some had privileges that others lacked. My parents could read and write. But aunt Veta couldn't read or write, she couldn't help Bebi with his homework. But in that whole context, I was perceived positively. Although I was constantly rebelling against them: "Why do you do that? Why is he like that? I don't want to speak your language. I don't want to wear the skirt." I was their niece, we were blood relatives. My father was Veta's brother, we were all blood relatives. I could see that our faces looked alike. There was no doubt in my mind that I was related to these people. But I did it out of self-loathing, because I wanted the Romanians to like me in school and to stop calling me a "crow"—my skin was much darker back then.

And my family's situation wasn't exceptional in that, I think. It was the same for other families. There are still lots of Romanians living in villages who cannot read and write and marry their girls off at

6) Population who have never spoken Romani and who do not acknowledge their Roma origin living in Romania, as well as in Hungary and the Balkans (where they are known as the Boyash).

thirteen or fourteen. I don't think this topic is more taboo among Roma than among Romanians living in rural areas today. Let's not forget that non-Roma aren't faring too well either when it comes to early marriages. On the whole, Romania has the highest rate of teenage mothers. So this effectively takes us out of the paradigm of ethnicity. It is a country-wide problem that we don't have sex ed in schools, that the Romanian Orthodox Church exerts control over many issues still, and we're still not out of the cave on this topic and others. I mean, we cannot have the fastest Internet connection and the highest share of underage mothers at the same time.

Cătălina Tesăr: I'm not sure we are really ranking first. When I was studying in the UK, I'd read the press there, and I remember they had their own problem with teenage mothers. As you say, this problem is a structural one, being caused by the lack of sex ed in schools, by poverty...

Alina Șerban: By poverty, by the lack of education. Romania has the highest rate of mothers aged ten to seventeen. When we talk about early marriages and Roma, I'm interested in looking at how they are tied to a context, namely the Romanian racist and classist context. Besides this system that we're still fighting, to put it that way, there's also a past of genocide and suffering that also impacted early marriages. I mean, first people were enslaved and never had the same rights as the other citizens, then came the Holocaust, then the communist period when you couldn't be Roma, you couldn't be any ethnicity other than Romanian... Bearing all this in mind, can we really say that Roma were ever given equal opportunities?

Cătălina Tesăr: I wonder if the age at marriage and age of first birth haven't in fact dropped after the fall of communism and the arrival of democracy. From what I've

seen in the community where I do research, they married and had children later under the communist regime, because it forced them to finish eighth grade. Currently, it would be the responsibility of the state to come into the family and inquire why people are pulling their children out of school after a certain age. Legally, the mandatory eight grades system is still in force today. Apart from the state's lack of involvement, I see it as a malfunction of the educational system that it cannot take action when children drop out of school because of poverty. The issue seems to be very complex, and, indeed, we have to consider the social and historical contexts too.

Alina Șerban: Right, you mentioned the malfunctioning of the educational system, and I can tell you that there are huge problems in the child rights' protection system too. I mean, they're supposed to protect the rights of the children, right? From what I see, this system is often more interested in having as many children as possible in its care. And there are many more institutions... As for you and I, as humans, we cannot cut ourselves off from the context we lived and developed in. I am who I am today because I went through some specific experiences, I was there, I knew X and Y, they helped me... If I make a mistake today, you'll have to judge me in a context, to say, "Look, she made this mistake, but let's see what it was that made her end up like this." Like this woman who was trafficked and ended up in the US, and she killed her kidnapper in self-defense. Instead of trying to understand what she had been through, that she had been kicked out of her home early in her life, when she was a teenager, or how she ended up working as a prostitute, how she ended up getting in that man's car, she was simply charged with murder. We don't see that it was self-defense, we don't consider the wider context of her life. Or when we speak of some men—I'm talking about the American system here but also the Romanian one. If a man from a good family rapes a girl at a party, he'll get a less



serious punishment because he has his life ahead of him. "Let's not ruin the poor boy's future," they say.

That's how it goes. We start our lives from different positions and we lead very different lives depending on the color of our skin, what family we happened to be born in, if we were lucky to meet someone who believed in us in school, who didn't force us to sit in the last row. That's yet another topic. "Look at them, Roma kids, they just don't want to go to school." Are you kidding me? How are they really treated in school? Are they treated well? And is education really free? It's not exactly free. It's free on paper, but in practice, it's not. Everything costs. Let's compare a Roma kid to a non-Roma kid. A Roma girl and a non-Roma girl sharing a desk. If the non-Roma girl wants to be friends with the Roma girl, she'll get told off, "Why do you play with that Gypsy girl (*țigancă*), that crow? Her people are always up to something bad." That's what you hear all the time. And how will that make the Roma girl feel? Of course, feeling rejected, she'll either withdraw or attack in her turn. And the girls will grow up. Which one of them will be most likely to go to university? And which one will be most likely to become a teenage mother? It's obvious.

I was lucky that my parents, although my father was a traditional Roma man and my mum a more progressive Roma, they understood the importance of education. And there are many other Roma parents right now who do the same—lots and lots of parents in villages who deprive themselves to make sure their children don't end up like them. It's all you want, something better for your children. On the other side of my family, my mother's side, our relatives are, as far as I know, Jehovah's Witnesses. They also had many children and managed to send them all to school. These children all have jobs today. My cousin's daughters, for example, they weren't teenage wives. They all married after turning nineteen—and this is the same family we're talking

about. These girls have their own children, although they're younger than me, they're in their twenties. One of my nieces, the daughter of a first cousin, she's twenty-two and already the mother of two, both of them going to kindergarten. In the village of Gălbinași, lots and lots of Roma go to school, they don't fit the stereotype this way, plus they have their own tradition due to their religion, which adds this extra dimension to their lives. They have values that, even if I don't practice them myself, I understand and value. It makes me happy to see how they grew a community of their own—which is not covered in the media since it's not exotic enough for the media. But I'm still very happy that they have this tight community. And if their relationship with God, their religion, makes them develop their own identity and community, why not?

Cătălina Tesăr: That was one intense interview, Alina. You're probably quite used to interviews by now, as you are involved in many film and theater projects at this point in your life. You have what it takes to both be a role model for the community and speak to the world about slavery and about Roma in a way that is new for the majority.

Alina Șerban: I'm used to speaking more about my artist work. As for the things we say about Roma, I believe that we all have to be incredibly responsible. I got a lovely message the other day from a Roma woman—I don't even know where she lived. This goes to show how much this means to me but to other Roma too. I get this kind of messages quite often, and this is what actually makes me go on. The fact that I'm shown by people that what I do makes things a little bit better.

Cătălina Tesăr: What I admire most about you is that your work is focused on doing away with prejudice, stereotypes using not so much discourses as life stories. I admire



you for being honest, but also for being able to work with yourself and tell your own life story and to reveal the human side of your and your father's family's experiences. Though you didn't agree with them, you succeeded in conveying the human side, making the viewer feel closer to and want to get to know the Roma. I believe that much of the rejection comes from a lack of social interaction or the fear of the unknown. That's why getting to know the people and getting closer to them matters so much.

Alina Șerban: Right, that's the source of all problems. We don't know each other. The Roma do know Romanians, trust me they do, but not the other way around. I know my privileges, how I get to go places where I'm clearly the only Roma in the room. *It's lonely*, and it comes with responsibilities, and so on. I realize that I shouldn't be the only Roma in the room. If only we knew more about each other, we wouldn't be afraid of each other. That's precisely what's missing: representations of Roma as human. And this is what I'm most interested in. Of course, I have the legitimacy of speaking from my own experience, which is both traditional and more or less Romanianized, to call it that way.

There are still many stories to tell. We need allies aware of the responsibility that comes with representation. That's why I'm happy about the projects I worked on, where I was given the opportunity, or claimed it for myself, to have a say in the work, to have creative and decision-making power over the stories I told about the Roma. This is what I mean by the responsibility that comes with representation, as it shouldn't forgo complexity. If you look at Romanian films, you'll find portrayals of all sorts of Romanians. They cry, they have desires, they have defects. But the Roma are not portrayed the same way. Like it was a normal thing to *deport* them at 5 a.m., in December—because that's what happened when three hundred people were forcefully moved from Cluj-Napoca to the Pata Rât landfill. How was that normal? Don't they

feel pain? How is it normal that those children have to live next to an eight-story high pile of garbage? Just because they're Roma, they have no feelings, they're not human like us.

This representation of Roma as savages who refuse to send their children to school, who choose to live on the margins of society feels dated, unrealistic to me. You're supposed to perceive other humans just like you perceive yourself, right? Bottom line, when I see someone rummaging through garbage, it hurts as if he or she were my brother or my sister. I can't look at that person and say this one is a Gypsy woman (*țigancă*), the other is Romanian. That's a suffering human being in front of me. That's what it is. And it is the responsibility of us all to build a better life for the generations to come. If I ever have children, I hope with all my heart that they won't hate their roots the way I hated mine. And I didn't hate them because of my family, but because of what I heard from those outside my community, because I knew they wouldn't accept me. Even today, after Cannes and the Royal Academy, I'm still not perceived as 100 percent Romanian, although I'm a Romanian citizen. The phone doesn't ring for me as an artist but as a Roma artist. We don't get to see any diversity on TV—gay, black, disabled people, Muslims—life as it really is, instead we only see the same few types of people. This obviously distorts our self-image and our image of what normal, beautiful, etc. is. In Romania, being poor is still shameful, as if it were your fault. I can only hope that, after some years will have passed, many more diverse voices will take the mike, and together we'll propagate this message of a new normal that comes in all possible colors and shapes. Because that's how life actually is. A message of solidarity that we still lack here. There is still so much to do.

