MEETING THE PENETRATING SIGHT OF THE GYPSY WOMEN SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

Somewhere in the Middle East during journey we can meet Gypsy women. Their penetrating sight clenches their entire existence. This stare shows their struggle with life, the everlasting roam and the mysterious knowledge contained in their nature. Who is the Gypsy woman in the Middle East? Gypsy is primarily a vagabond, a woman responsible for divination but very often the beggar and also unfortunately a thief. How we can recognize her from other women? The presence of Gypsies in the Middle East, as it is in European countries, cannot remain unnoticed. Gypsies encountered mainly in the suburbs, but also the bazaars and places where they can easily practice their professions - divination, commerce, dancing and singing. The living presence of Gypsies in the Middle East and numerous controversies about how their lives is often the cause of reluctance on the part of the Arab. The pejorative thinking about Gypsies is also well seen in the proverbs, which are a significant example of xenophobia. In my presentation I would like to show different ways of thinking that are harmful for the Gypsies society in the Middle East. I would like to answer the questions about the position of Gypsy women in the Arabic world. In the end of my presentation I will describe how looks reality of these situations nowadays.

KEYWORDS: Gypsies, Middle East, stereotypes

INTRODUCTION: The world of Gypsies in the Middle East

Somewhere in the Middle East during journey we can meet Gypsy women. Their penetrating sight clenches their entire existence. This stare shows their struggle with life, the everlasting roam and the mysterious knowledge contained in their nature. Who is the Gypsy woman in the Middle East?

Gypsy is primarily a vagabond, a woman responsible for divination but very often the beggar and unfortunately she is also associated with thief. How we can recognize her from other women? Gypsy very seldom wears “burkas” or “veils” (Newbold C., 1856 p. 285) to cover her face, which is bronzed by exposure. Due to their unveiled faces and resignation from dresses typical for Arab women Gypsies are easier to distinguish from Arabs. Another distinctive sign of her appearance in public space like bazaars, where she attracts the attention of pedestrians, is unpleasant, piercing interjection – “Come, come and see your fortune!” (Newbold C., 1856 p. 285) - which in Arabic sounds like that – “Tʽālī, tʽālī šuṭ al-baḥt!” (Newbold C., 1856 p. 285) - which is also a significant sign for the most part of Gypsies around the world. That is why, they are identifiable mainly with divination. She is often insistent in many areas of her activity, primarily in selling different products, begging and arguing. That behavior is also typical for her character and temperament. Gypsy woman is very often “extremely jealous and suspicious of any inquiry into her habits and mode of life” (Newbold C., 1856 p. 286) as it is seen in plenty of stereotypes around the world. Moreover, she is associated with anger, unpredictability and all negative personality traits that can be easily bound to her and unfortunately functioning as stereotypes.

The presence of Gypsies in the Middle East, as it is in European countries, cannot remain unnoticed. Gypsies are encountered mainly in the suburbs, but also the bazaars and places where they can easily practice their professions - divination, commerce, dancing and singing. The living presence of Gypsies in the Middle East and numerous controversies about their lives are often the cause of reluctance on the part of the Arab. For the most discussed issues (often unverified) should be pointed – supposed female promiscuity, frequent suspicion of theft, manipulation by divination. It should be noted, that the Gypsies retain their identity through language which is unknown to the Arabs, their own customs and traditions and life in their own clusters in order to avoid close
contact with the rest of society. Their well-known practice is palmistry and divination with shells. How it looks like? (Newbold C., 1856 p. 285-286)

“Gypsy seats on a mat or carpet on the foot on the divan or on the floor and empties her gazelle-skin bag of a portion of its contents – small shells, broken bit of glass, small colored stones, agate, jasper and basalt etc., colored bits of wax. She throws the shells repeatedly on the carpet, after much jugglery, grimace, repeating spells, and from the position they chance to lie in she draws her inferences, much in the same way as the servant girls in England tell fortunes from the arrangement of the grounds of the at the bottom of their cups.” (Newbold C., 1856 p. 288)

The payment is necessary on every single step of her fortune-telling. From shells or bits of wax, Gypsy woman makes charms which also have to be paid in order to avoid the curse. Furthermore, Gypsies can also be found in different kinds of artistic activities as dancers, acrobats or musicians. It is consider to be a great entertainment for the audience to see such performance and Gypsy women who seem to be born for that. However, it is seen as improper occupation for a woman who has to respect her honor in the light of Islamic rules.

The another issue that is barely known is the fact that Gypsies often make tattoos and are responsible for a kind of sacred tattooing which is only done by them in the Middle East. This practice has had a long tradition dating back to ancient times, now it is less popular. The question is - how long they practice it and from where they bring the tattooing customs to the Middle East? The most research shows that this practice comes from India where tattoos are being made by “Gypsy-like class”. (Sinclair A., 1908 p.362) They seem to be specialists in that field and the best tattoo makers in Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina, as far as we know from ancient documents. Sometimes the problem appears with making the tattoo because not everyone wants to be touched by them who are calling them “Gypsy dogs” (Sinclair A., 1908 p. 366). In that case, Gypsies who are often Christians or Muslims do not show their origin and live in hiding. (Sinclair A., 1908 p. 366)

The sacred tattoos are sings which reflect belonging to the religion. Moreover, the tattoos protect a person from evil spirits during the journey. It can also show the belonging to classes or high or low status in the society. The most common practice was the necessary tattooing for all pilgrims who were visiting the sacred places mainly Jerusalem. The interesting point is that “(...) Armenian word for pilgrim is māhēdsī (māh - death, dēsī’ - I saw). Hence, this name is applied to a tattoo mark done in Jerusalem. It is also spoken “mūksī, mūkdiși, mūkd’esī. Since such pilgrims are virtually the only Armenians tattooed, it has become the ordinary and indeed only word for tattoo mark in Armenian. Occasionally an Armenian is seen who when a boy had a dot or a minute cross made on his hand, but hardly one in a hundred. Even then, however, he calls it “mahdesi”. The Armenian women as well as men make this pilgrimage and are all tattooed there in the same way”. (Sinclair A., 1908 p. 362)

The Arabic language uses the word da’qqa, which means “striking”. (Sinclair A., 1908 p. 363) Muslims believe that before enter the Paradise they will be purified by fire and then all signs for example like tattoos on their bodies will disappear. This tradition is typical for Oriental Gypsies. European one are never seen tattooed. (Sinclair A., 1908 p. 363, 366)

“At Jerusalem it is now as for centuries the custom for all pilgrims to be tattooed, with the date of pilgrimage, name or initials, and holy devices. Some Africans whose skin is too dark to show tattooing have three gashes made on the right cheek, which were the tribe mark of Mahomet. The tattoos were made on the forehead or wrist. Sometimes it was just a simple sign like cross or crescent, sometimes more special, beautifully decorated sign. It indicates the careful cultivation of the art and a very general practice”. (Sinclair A., 1908 pp. 362-363)
Arabic proverbs about Gypsies

The perception of Gypsy women in the Arab world is extremely bad. Their social status is very low and they are often defined with the name - “Gypsy dog” (Sinclair A., 1908 p. 366). Moreover, word “Gypsy” is replaced with the word “beggar” or “opprobrium”. (Sinclair A., 1908 p. 362, Walter Z., 1970 p.425) Besides, they are also very often a present character in Arabic proverbs which contain date found in rural areas but also jokes and folktales which are functioning in the society and which give the vent to all the negative stereotypes and prejudices.

Firstly, I would like to present the proverb which one part can be replaced by different words. The proverbs that shows Gypsies in a good light.

*To meet a Gypsy (devil/monkey/Jew) early in the morning is better than meeting a priest (monk/beardless person).* (Walter Z., 1970 p.419)

This proverb is functioning in different versions and can be found in the Middle East. The interesting fact is that Gypsy, together with devil, monkey and Jew is better than priest, monk or beardless person. It is surprising statement that puts the Gypsies, higher in the social hierarchy against priest or monk who are seemed to be the people of the book like Muslims. In addition, in the proverb appears conversion element. We can replace the gypsy, devil, monkey or Jew, all of them for the average Arab standing low, and bring negative associations - the devil which reduced man astray, monkey – that all the time is playing tricks and Jew – who is seen as the eternal enemy. We have also an element of surprise similar to the punch line in a joke. In that proverb we can see not only big anticlericalism but also attitude towards honor outline in the word - beardless person – who is seen as a person deprived of honor.

There is also another interpretation which says that appearing of Gypsies in the public sphere was connected with moments of happiness such as wedding or birth of a child. Gypsies were beating on drums to announce these good news. On the other hand, meeting the priest in the early morning can soon bring bad information. Moreover, it easily shows this big anticlericalism which was mentioned above.

Gypsy women very often appears as the subject of comparisons concerning their character and style of life.

*Like an old Gypsy woman, neither good health nor good sight* or
*Like a Gypsy woman who has lost her bucket.* (Walter Z., 1970 p.425)

In the first one we can notice old woman who can also be characteristic for most of old women, not only Gypsy. In the second proverb, woman who lost bucket is probably very angry, starts to shout and waving her hands in anger which brings associations with the lively temperament of Gypsy woman.

In all that negative picture of Gypsy in the Middle East we can also find quite positive comparison concerning the following:

*Like the Gypsies, they have little but are always happy.* (Walter Z., 1970 p.425)

Gypsies are always seeing positive aspects even in hard moments. They believe that once the sun will appear on the sky and all that dark clouds will pass away. Despite the poverty, continuous wandering, living conditions, often appallingly low, Gypsies cannot be denied optimism and ability to enjoy the moment by dancing, singing, but also relaxed attitude to many temporal things. This proverb can also be seen in a different way, searching for the irony in it. In the situation when the poverty reached us should we be
happy because of that? However, it would be inclined more toward the originally proposed interpretation - a real joy even in a situation of the poverty.

Another proverb is completely different and refers not to Gypsies but to their horses:

_Eating and frolicking like horses of the Zuṭṭ [Gypsies]._ (Walter Z., 1970 s .425)

Only horses of Gypsies are frocking. It is probably another association to their temperament which is reflected by behavior of horses. This proverb is full of irony - Gypsy horses make the biggest noise. Only Gypsy horses are heard throughout the village. Such is the fate! What can we do about it?

Most part of proverbs concern their profession - fortune-telling. The first example of it is:

_If the Gypsy woman would live in a hundred palaces, she would remain a Gypsy, put out her hand and ask for a contribution._ (Walter Z., 1970 s. 426)

Reach out the hand is one of the most characteristic gestures that can be assigned with beggar Gypsy women. It is interesting to contrast the first part of this statement - if Gypsy would live in 100 palaces, she would remain Gypsy. The nature of belonging to this ethnic group seems to be perceived as unchangeable. This proverb also indicates a reluctance to contain closer contacts with Gypsies. Even her high position by having numerous palaces, would not be able to change her personality. It will not influence the people to forget about her true identity, which seems to be perceived as evil. Begging is an unworthy act, treated here as the lowest activity, a complete fall of a man.

Another proverb shows the relations among profession and the way of its inheritance.

_My mother was not a Gypsy, so I cannot tell fortunes._ (Walter Z., 1970 s.426)

It is assigned that Gypsy fortune-telling is exclusively female occupation. If you do not have a Gypsy mother, you cannot dabble in preaching fate. It is also easy to feel the irony which flows from that sentence. The person uttering the words mocks magic, does not believe in it, it has a negative attitude, puts it low. Moreover, we can notice that only Gypsies are familiar with fortune-telling. It seems to be an essential and constant element assigned to Gypsy women. Men is never seen in that sphere which shows that it is only female profession. There is a hard border between fortune-telling and religion which in Arabic world prohibits such practices.

The last example in the field of proverbs is:

_Life is like a fortune-telling of a Gypsy woman._
_[She says:] someone loves you, someone hates you._ (Walter Z., 1970 s.426)

Does Gypsy really have the ability to foretell the future and the fate which awaits every man? Her answers are never precise, which is outlined on the basis of the above-quoted proverb. This example tells about obvious cases, which do not require Gypsy cognition. The negative approach to magic is easily seen. The person who says these words mocks of the low status of the Gypsy profession.

In these proverbs we can find some characteristic elements - the most common figure is a woman seen in everyday life, her violent temperament and bad reputation.
which is characterized by sexual promiscuity) are typical drawbacks found in that sayings. Furthermore, these proverbs refer mainly to divination - Gypsy classes, poverty - defining their living conditions, which are usually equated. It also seems that sayings, in which there are these stereotypes are moving only selected issues, in other problems they are silent.

Nevertheless, through these proverbs it is possible to see the insight into the Arabic folklore, human thought, perceptions of foreign culture and minorities who live together with the Arabs in the same area. Gypsies in the Arab proverbs are a frequent subject of ridicule and humiliation of contemptible people. The above-mentioned lack of tolerance is implied by their individuality and because they are rooted in their own culture. Many of the features relating to Gypsies, could be directed to other people who have similar weakness. Anger, pride are after all the features that can be found in many people not only Gypsies. Nevertheless, they appear as characteristic for them, what can be explained by seeing only the negative aspects of that group. Moreover, the aversion to Gypsies expressed in proverbs is also often reflected in the cold personal relations in public life.

Conclusions

To sum up, despite that, Gypsies have more liberties than Muslim women but on the other hand they are very often abased and become the object of ridicule. They are hermetically rooted in their own culture which is still unknown to many people outside their environment. That is also because of their language which is very complex. Making research about that, we can notice that most of the words come from Hindi or Sanskrit. Nevertheless, Gypsy also use languages from areas where they have been living for some time for example Persian, Turkish or different dialects of Arabic. They change words existing and functioning in other languages by adding prefixes, suffixes, changing vowels. Their use their own speech between each other, in public places when they want to be misunderstood, to curse someone or to scare someone by saying strange words. The Arabic is used in common public sphere for selling or making different professions. Sometimes they use it to say bad words and vulgarisms.

The pejorative thinking about Gypsies is well seen in the proverbs presented above. All that arise from the way the people who live outside their community perceive them. As we know it is hard to change the stereotypes which are deep entrenched in the society and often used in a speech in proverbs or comparisons. Nevertheless, the number of organizations that are ready to present their heritage and help them to fight against bad perception, low social status, lack of education and not trustworthy professions. Recently, we can observe the changes in people's thinking due to journeys all over the world, making new relationships with people who present different points of view, religions, traditions, who have different color of skin. All these aspects are extremely important for us to be more open, to gain knowledge about different cultures while misunderstanding is a simple path to xenophobia and making harm to another person.

In conclusion, I would like to say that during our journey to the Middle East we can still meet Gypsy women. Their penetrating sight clenches their entire existence. This stare shows their struggle with life, the everlasting roam and the mysterious knowledge contained in their nature. Let us have the courage to look deep into her eyes, to make an effort to verify heard opinions, stereotypes about her. It can also be a step to know her culture and make it more open to share her traditions with others. Let us see the beauty of penetrating sight of Gypsy women, somewhere in the Middle East.
