

# Otherness of Roma in Inclusive Education of Roma Pupils in Slovakia

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**Abstract**—The Slovak Republic is a democratic and plural society consisting of people differing in language and culture, and its citizens should already be well prepared for the coexistence of multiple nations, nationalities or ethnic groups. Reflection on culture, art and literature of the Roma minority has taken on a new dimension in Slovakia in the past two decades when it comes to social, cultural and arts integration of this ethnic group with the plural society. Non-Roma view Roma as a specific ethnic group with their own culture, language, customs and traditions, social norms and coexistence that has retained archetypal qualities of Roma identity (*romipen*) in their real lives as well as in the literary world. Roma characters in works of art are specific and distinguishable from other literary characters simply by being Roma, that is, of a different origin and social status, they represent a different way of life, a distinctive hierarchy of values. The portrayal of Roma and the life of Roma ethnic group in the most dominant genre of Roma literature for children and youth, a Roma fairy tale (*paramisi*), can work as a suitable means to learn about, accept and tolerate the otherness of Roma in the conditions of school inclusion of students coming from the Roma ethnic group, and to support their identification with their own ethnic group and its cultural traditions. The paper aims to point out not only the specific nature of Roma identity (*romipen*) through the selected Roma fairy tale (*paramisa*) – Children of the Sun, but also the diversity of its uses in the educational process within primary education of pupils at elementary schools, advocating the philosophy of inclusive education. Through the suggestions of multi-cultural, emotional, and language and communication education of pupils through the work with the selected Roma fairy tale (*paramisa*), the author is exploring ways to overcome the issues stemming from the coexistence of Roma and Non-Roma pupils, which are burdened with prejudice, intolerance, aggression and racism on both sides, in the education process.

**Keywords**—Inclusive education, otherness, Roma Pupils, Roma identity, Roma fairy tale.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE Slovak Republic is a democratic and plural society consisting of people with various languages and cultural differences, which should have already prepared us for the coexistence of multiple nations, nationalities and ethnic groups. In this context, the current school practice in Slovakia puts the need of social inclusion of pupils coming from the Roma ethnic group to the fore. Compared to integration, this process tries to achieve more extensive elimination of inequalities and differences between pupils as early as at the primary grade. The term *integration* is related to the establishment of the most optimum conditions for integrated

pupils to be able to easily assimilate or adapt to the environment. The term *inclusion* refers to the “*creation of such autonomous environment, where no one needs to adjust, because any kind of diversity is accepted.*” [1] Employing multicultural, emotional, and language and communication education within primary education of pupils, we could create an optimum environment for effective school inclusion of pupils coming from the Roma minority, whose specific culture could be effectively integrated into the curricula of the Slovak Language and Literature classes in the sense of using cooperative and integrative strategies, innovations, and implementation of cultural peculiarities of the Roma ethnic group. This approach stems from the current reflection of the Roma culture and art which is taking on a new dimension within the social, cultural, and artistic integration into the plural mainstream society in Slovakia. Non-Roma people consider the Roma people to be a peculiar ethnic group with their own culture, language, customs and traditions, social norms and coexistence which has managed to retain their archetypal Roma identity (*romipen*) in their real lives as well as in the literary world [2]. Roma characters in the works of art are specific and distinguishable from other literary characters of Roma as well as non-Roma authors simply by being Roma, that is, of a different origin and social status, they represent a different way of life, a distinctive hierarchy of values. Therefore, the works of Roma and non-Roma authors who try to promote the Roma identity in the art of writing are coming to the fore in contemporary literature for children and youth in Slovakia. The Roma literary writings are becoming a tool to understand the otherness of Roma people, and this including their behavior and conduct, thinking and emotions, way of life and the philosophy of their lives.

Taking a look at the history of the Roma literature for children and youth in Slovakia [3], we see that the Roma literature has a stable place in the Slovak literature for children and youth. The most dominant genre is the Roma folk-tale. It seems that Roma authors confirm that

*“The wealth of Roma people lies in a unique world: the world of folk-tales... The folk-tale became the bread and butter for the Roma people, a limpid spring of water quenching the thirst of the generation although their settlements were very often built on black and murky waters.”* [4]

Folk-tales have always had a unique position and have always been of a special importance for the Roma people in their everyday lives and many Roma communities used to hold a public folk-tale telling for adults several times a week in the biggest room. These serious as well as comic stories

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from the Roma life or fantastic fairy tales about kings and various supernatural beings could only be narrated by males (women could narrate folk-tales to their children at home). The Roma poet and writer D. Banga [5] describes in his Roma folk-tales (*paramisi*) the greatest wealth of the poor people brought by the Roma people from India, their home country.

Roma folklore, their traditions, their perception of the world and the philosophy of life are an integral part of the Roma identity (*romipen*) [2] which is passed down in the community from generation to generation. According to [6] the term *romipen* has many meanings. *Romipen* does not represent only the Roma culture, tradition, and mentality, but also the abidance by unwritten laws, such as generosity, support, and cohesion between the Roma people, etc. According to [7] Roma identity (*romipen*) could be identified based on anthropological characters (they show distinctiveness of their face and livery; they act as an apparent confirmation of something totally different), but also based on ethnic characteristics (their own language, norms, values, culture, traditional way of life) which set the members of the minority apart from other social groups, and particularly mainstream society.

The historical investigation into Roma identity (*romipen*) through Roma folk-tales (*paramisa*) [2] shows that Roma folk-tales entail the characteristics of Roma identity (*romipen*) and the archetypes of the Roma social group which represent from a historical point of view the signs and characteristics typical for the primary way of life of the Roma ancestors in tribes. They were identified based on historical and ethnographic research of the Roma people by [8] and the research on Roma folklore by [6] and is briefly presented in the following outlined thematic areas.

#### *A. External and Internal Characteristics of the Roma Characters [8]*

Regarding the external appearance – a swarthy face, black eyes, long nose, usually curly black hair and symmetrical body; internal features and characteristics – narrative arts, courage, caginess, sense of humor, fussiness, laziness, talent for music, dance, and singing; typical Roma characters – chiefs and witches who had special and unique standing in the Roma community.

#### *B. Images from the Lives of Roma Characters [8]*

Tracking the Roma identity (*romipen*) in the Romany folk-tales (*paramisa*), we focused on various areas of the Romany characters' lives – nomadism, housing style, handcraft skills, the different way of life, artistic inclinations, home economics, food and clothing which are mutually interconnected and bring a complex portrayal of the Romany life.

#### *C. Interpersonal Relations of the Romany Characters [8]*

We were also interested in interpersonal relationships of the Roma characters in the Romany folk-tales (*paramisa*) in typical life situations within a close community (Romany family) as well as a wider community (Romany nomadic or settled group, extended family), but also in atypical life situations – ancestral bond, internal rules of the Roma people, status of

women, status of men, naming the persons in the family relations, names and nicknames, common sittings, sense of cohesion and cooperation, mutual solidarity, respect for the elders, aggressive behavior, passive behavior.

#### *D. Spiritual World of the Romany Characters [8]*

The spiritual life of the Roma people was very peculiar, based on visions, emotions, and feelings. The nomadic way of life, travelling from village to village, and particularly the absence of a fixed home had an influence on the spiritual world of Roma people. Dominant were specific visions of values, belief in God, and various supernatural creatures. The spiritual world of the Roma people reflects their historical development, low level of knowledge, but also objectionable life conditions on the margins of society which also contributed to their simplified understanding of the natural and social phenomena, and to the peculiar opinion on mainstream society and their place in it. The materialization of visions reflected in a complex manner their general view of the world, led to superstition and various magic tricks they employed to secure success, avert danger, illness and poverty, provide for sustenance, or win the love of someone they loved.

#### *E. Genres of the Romany Folklore in the Romany Folk-Tales (Paramisa) [6]*

According to the romologist E. Davidová, the Romany folklore is “one of the most characteristic ethnical determinants of the Roma people.” [10]. M. Hübschmannová [6] focused in her research on the folklore of the Slovak Roma people and found out that their folklore consisted of formalized genres (they have their own names and formal rules, repeated and generally known contextual types) and non-formalized narratives (part of formalized genres based on a certain topic).

#### II. CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMA IDENTITY IN THE ROMANY FOLK-TALE *CHILDREN OF THE SUN* BY DANIELA HIVEŠOVÁ-ŠILANOVÁ

Characteristics of Roma identity in the Romany folk-tale *Children of the Sun* by Daniela Hivešová-Šilanová

The author's long-lasting personal and professional interest in the Roma ethnic group [11] materialized in the book of folk-tales titled *Nestling Little Beads/Čirikloro Mirikloro* with the subtitle *Author's Folk-tales Inspired by Roma Songs*. Music forms and the Roma-Slovak mutation of the fragments of songs are incorporated in the plots of folk-tales in which the story unfolds embraced by song. The aesthetic and ethnic archetype of fantastic folk tales and the methods of modern folk-tales serve as the genre framework for the authentic author's narrative about the origins of the Roma people, their social status, way of life, and the peculiarities of their hierarchy of values. The creative method and the intent contemplated by the author aim to reach a better mutual understanding, to achieve cooperation on the elimination of racial prejudice which are revealed in the introduction and appear again in the conclusion of the tale.

### III. RESULTS

Research on the Roma literature for children and youth from the 1960s until now has shown that the Romany folk-tale (paramisi) has a stable place in the Slovak literature for children and youth [12]. However, it is not represented in reader textbooks for students in the primary education (the only literary sample is the Romany folk-tale *Children of the Sun* by D. Hivešová-Šilanová from her book *Nestling Little Beads/Čirikloro Mirikloro*, 1996) [13]. Here, attention is paid to the educational use of this Romany folk-tale within the primary grade in Slovakia in the context of inclusive education of pupils from the Roma ethnic group focusing on the interpretation of the characteristics of the Romany identity (*romipen*) in the Romany folk-tale *Children of the Sun* by D. Hivešová-Šilanová.

#### A. External and Internal Characteristics of Romany Characters

The folk-tale is about the main child protagonist – a Roma boy Lavutaris (Violinist), with supporting characters – adult Roma people (men and women) who live together in a Roma community.

- External characteristics of Romany protagonists in the folk-tale include the anthropological features –color of their skin and hair. The faces of the Roma people were “tanned and bronze” by the kiss of the Sun. Another anthropological feature of the Romany character – Lavutaris (Violinist) is the color of his hair – “Frost – Fad’in ... blew on Lavutaris’ black hair and turned it silver...” [9, p. 117].
- Internal characteristic of Romany protagonists is their “hot hearts” – “And I will give you one more gift. I cannot turn winter into hot summer, but I will give you a hot heart full of songs. I will put one small, hot heart – khamoro into the heart of every Roma man. It will keep you warm even in the coldest winters. Your warm heart will teach you to sing beautiful songs like no one else in this world ... their warm hearts and songs kept them warm all the time. Since then, there is no Roma in the world who cannot sing, Khamoro beats in every one of them.” [9, p. 119-120].

#### B. Images from the Romany Protagonists’ Lives

##### 1. Nomadism

The lives of Roma people in past are portrayed through their nomadic way of life – “... travelled plains and mountains, sunny and snow countries, from town to town, from village to village ... they slept under the open sky. They had nothing. Only what they could carry, load in small cars, or pack on horses... But their lives were not sad; were free and beautiful.” [9, p. 116].

##### 2. Housing Style

“A long, long time ago Roma people had no houses or settlements, only the wide world and the endless roads in it. They traveled plains and mountains, sunny and snow countries, from town to town, from village to village...

*they slept under the open sky. ... While other people were dreaming their dreams behind closed windows in the world – they talked to the limpid and endless Sky. They talked to stars and the moon, listened to crickets, fireflies, and birds and maybe even understood their language. Certainly they understood, because when they played the violin people used to say that they can hear the birds trilling, wind rustling, rain whispering and spreading the glitter of stars when they listen to their music. In the evening the families sat together by the fire and listened to the tongue of flame, light, and wood. The girls weaved flowers in their hair together the heat of embers and sang quiet songs of meadows and forests.”* [9, p. 116].

##### 3. Artistic Inclinations – Music, Singing, and Dance

“... Sleep, Lavutaris, sleep. When you wake up, you will play your ice violin for me and dance on an ice floor. ... He put the violin to his chin and played the most beautiful song he has ever heard. All of the Roma songs met in this one! Then he breathed in and sang...” [9, p. 118]. “The Sun heard Lavutaris ... the Roma people have a special place in my heart. I like to hear you play your violin. When you dance, I feel the joy of life, because I can see how you enjoy it.” [9, p. 119].

##### 4. Clothing

Clothing of the Roma people was very modest, which corresponded to their poor and needy way of life.

“... in the winter ... Roma people suffered from cold, Even the fire they huddled around could not warm them. The violin, although playing beautiful, chilled their palms. ... Leaves were falling down from the trees, animals were moving into their winter stashes, but the Roma people had nowhere to go. There was no warm home or a cozy room lit by the fire. Only the long, exhausting road in the snow and frost...” [9, p. 117].

#### C. Interpersonal Relationships of Romany Characters

##### 1. Romany Family

The Roma boy Lavutaris (Violinist) lives in a Roma settlement with his relatives and he shares all his joys and concerns with them. What troubles him the most is that the Sun does not shine in winter.

“Lavutaris ... was very sad. Why is the Sun not shining in the winter? Can’t it see how it makes my brothers and sisters ill and the horses shiver? How our marquees turn to the ice caves. ... Lavutaris felt so much emotion, happiness, and warmth that he started to sing immediately. With the singing in his heart, on his lips he ran down to the Roma camp. As he approached the camp, the stronger he could hear how his brothers, sisters, parents, aunts, uncles, friends, all the Roma family sang the same song.” [9, p. 117, p. 120].

##### 2. Ancestral Bond

Lavutaris (Violinist) “decided to convince the Sun to shine also in the winter. At least a little bit. Also on the Roma. Can’t

it see they live under the endless cold frosty sky! ..." [9, p. 117].

### 3. Naming Relative Persons

Lavutaris was most worried by the cold winter making his "brothers and sisters, parents, aunts, uncles, friends, all the Roma family" [9, p. 117-118, p. 120].

### 4. Names and nicknames

"Young Lavutaris, who could play the violin since he was such a little boy and therefore he got this name – Violinist." [9, p. 117].

The name of the Roma boy Lavutaris, coming from the Roma language (transl. Violinist), represents his unique skills (*nomen omen*). In the folk-tale there are also other protagonists whose names are derived from their skills and abilities in the Roma language, for example Wind (Balva), Frost (Fad'in), Snow (Niv).

### 5. Common Sitings

Roma people used to spend time together, especially "in the evening the families sat together by the fire and listened to the tongue of flame, light, and wood. The girls weaved flowers in their hair together with the heat of embers and sang quiet songs of meadows and forests." [9, p. 116].

### 6. Sense of Cohesion and Cooperation

The Romany boy Lavutaris (Violinist) could not watch any longer how the Roma people in the community suffer from cold, therefore he decided to help his family and "Lavutaris said that he cannot wait any longer! He is going to find the Sun right now and tell him everything! The Sun is kind and warm, he will certainly help them." [9, p. 117].

### 7. Mutual Solidarity

Lavutaris was most concerned because of the Sun not shining in winter. "No, I cannot fall asleep! I must talk to the Sun! I must bring warmth to my Roma family," whispered Lavutaris and ran on to find Sun." [9, p. 118].

### 8. Respect for the Elders

Lavutaris was very exhausted on his way to the Sun and wanted to cry, but then he "remembered as his grandpa once told him "A Roma man never cries with ordinary tears and sobs like a little boy. He cries through his violin. Such a cry will be heard even by the hardest heart." [9, p. 118].

#### D. Spiritual World of Romany Characters

##### 1. Belief in the Supernatural Powers

Lavutaris wants to help Roma people in the community who are falling ill and shiver from cold, therefore he decides to "find the Sun and tell him everything! The Sun is kind and warm, he will certainly help them." [9, p. 117].

##### 2. Superstition, Magic, and Witchcraft

The belief of Roma people in witchcraft is also present in the folk-tale. "I will put one small, hot heart – khamoro in the heart of every Roma. It will keep you warm even in the coldest

winters. Your warm heart will teach you to sing beautiful songs like no one else in this world." [9, p. 119].

### 3. Life Philosophy

Roma people lived under the open sky, but "their lives were not sad; were free and beautiful." [9, p. 116]. Their philosophy was to live here and now.

#### E. Genres of the Roma Folklore in the Roma Folk-Tales

##### 1. Formalized Genres

Romany folk poetry – phurikane gil'a – halgato (a song for listening):

"He put the violin to his chin. And played the most beautiful song he has ever heard. All of the Roma songs met in this one! Then he breathed in and sang:

"Sun

You shine all over the world

But do not care for the Roma people

Why do you hate us?

Do you not see how we suffer?

If you once looked at us,

You would not leave us

But would stay with us through the winter

Why are you so selfish?

Why do you dislike Roma people?" [9, p. 118].

Roma folk prose – wise words

The words of the grandfather which Lavutaris remembered when he was exhausted and wanted to cry: "A Roma man never cries with ordinary tears and sobs like a little boy. He cries through his violin. Such a cry will be heard even by the hardest heart." [9, p. 118].

## IV. DISCUSSION

The identified archetypal characteristics of the Romany identity (*romipen*) in the selected Romany folk-tale *Children of the Sun* by D. Hivešová-Šilanová [13] will be used in the multicultural, emotional, and language and communication education of all pupils, whether Roma or non-Roma, which allows us to highlight how the Romany folk-tale (*paramisi*) might become a suitable tool in the inclusive education of pupils coming from the Roma ethnic group. Attention is paid not only to the non-Roma students' understanding, acceptance and tolerance of the Romany otherness, but also to the search for something which is common to both the groups, something which connects, not divides, the members of the Roma and non-Roma population in Slovakia in terms of cultural customs, traditions, and the way of life typical for both social groups.

We followed the National Education Program for Elementary Schools in the Slovak Republic ISCED 1 – primary education [14] making multicultural education a compulsory component of educational programs and one of seven cross-sectional topics which permeate all educational areas, reflect current issues, and are a kind of manual for their resolution. The question of school success of Roma pupils, their relationships with non-Roma pupils, but also the coexistence of the majority and the minority in a wider context is one of the current issues. Application of multicultural

education within literature classes may help open the minds of pupils as early as at the primary grade, and may help them find the right attitude and values. Multicultural education allows the teacher to combine various areas of the basic curriculum, educate pupils in a complex manner, and positively influence the process of acquisition and development of the pupils' key competences. Employing multicultural education in the literature classes (within the Slovak Language and Literature classes) working with Romany literary texts in classrooms attended also by Roma pupils will allow pupils to jointly look for the values of the majority society and the minorities, understand mutual differences, and learn to accept them as a natural part of their lives. This is in line with the opinion of V. Lechta [15] who understands inclusive education as an education in which pupils are not divided into two groups (those who have or do not have a special need), but rather form one heterogeneous group of pupils with various individual needs within the group. Or, in other words, the author put it as follows: *in integration* we talk about adaptation of a child to school, *in inclusion* we talk about adaptation of the educational environment to children. According to L. Horňák

*“integrated education of the targeted group of Roma population comes from the understanding of the integration as a balanced and stabile option for the ethnic group to contribute on the social-economical life of a country on the basis of the equal opportunities without threatening their identity (language cultural), which contribute on the cultural wealth of the society.”*[16].

Since inclusive education deals with the possibility of optimum education of pupils with special education needs (that is why the pupils from the Roma minority group also come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds), its philosophy should be built on the respect and fulfillment of the needs of all pupils, and therefore be able to *“offer adequate education regardless of their individual differences, type of special needs, or current performance in learning.”* [17]

As has already been indicated, our work with the selected literary text within the process of inclusive education of the Roma pupils seeks to comply with the requirement to create an optimum education process including its actors (teacher – curriculum – student), i.e. professional and methodological preparation of the teacher, effective motivation of pupils, and positive emotional climate. As has already been indicated, in our work with the selected literary text within the process of inclusive education of pupils from the Roma ethnic group, we could meet the requirement of creating an optimum educational process and its actors (teacher – curriculum – pupil), i.e. the professional and methodological preparation of a teacher, effective motivation for learning in classes, and the positive emotional climate, from the teacher's abilities to guide and mobilize cognitive functions of all pupils, whether Roma or not, in the process of their learning, as well as from the selection of an appropriate form of cooperative teaching within the development of multicultural, emotional, and

language and communication education by the Frank E. Williams CAI program [18] for all pupils, whether Roma or and non-Roma.

## V. CONCLUSION

The paper has aimed to point out the otherness of Roma by way of identified features of the Roma identity (*romipen*) in the Romany folk tales (*paramisa*) and indicate the space for their application in the multicultural, emotional, and language and communication inclusive education of pupils coming from the Roma ethnic group in Slovakia which should be able to accept any type of otherness. The selected Romany folk-tale *Children of the Sun* by D. Hivešová-Šilanová, and the identified features of the Romany identity (*romipen*), [13] could be used to enable all pupils without exception (whether of Roma or non-Roma origin) to learn about the culture, traditions and the lifestyle of the Roma minority, opening a sufficient space for the members of the two different cultures for mutual communication and a creative dialogue with the goal of better understanding of each other, acceptance, and the overcoming of mutual biases and barriers which often stem from lack of knowledge. The application of the Frank E. Williams CAI program [18] could also help establish, in a playful and natural manner, the space for communication and friendships between Roma and non-Roma children, resulting in efficient social inclusion of pupils coming from the Roma ethnic group and evolving into natural respect of their differences.

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