

# REFLECTIONS AND EMOTIONS IN THE WORKS OF THE ROMA AUTHORS IN BULGARIA<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The paper attempts to provide the best possible idea about the presence of the original Roma poetry and prose in Bulgarian literature. Emblematic names of Roma artists are introduced – from those who first started to actively write to current-day authors (from Usin Kerim to Hristo Hristov); several authors who can be referred to as unfamiliar and waiting for success are also covered because of their correspondence to the thematic fields of the study. The Roma writers' agitations concerning the particular issues they are interested in and reflected in their works are traced in the study: their affection to family and relatives, their sense of being ethnically different and the dramas representing the way they are treated by the others, their search for roots of ancient origin and language and their love experiences. The interests of the Roma artists regarding topical issues of their lives in Bulgaria are studied from the perspective that they are an inextricable part of the Bulgarian national literature and authors who share European values.*

**Key words:** Roma writers/authors in Bulgaria, Roma poetry in Bulgaria.

After the fall of a nearly fifty years of communist rule, formally announced on 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1989, a change in the social-political situation occurred. The importance of what had happened led to a series of considerable changes in all spheres of life and the arts. The Roma people, as an inextricable component of the Bulgarian society, have been compelled to endure the hardships of a changed situation, to survive in times of strenuous struggles for existence, competition and market economy. For the larger part of the Roma to bridge over the difficulties of Bulgaria's transition turned out to be a rather dramatic experience. The arts, though, are one of the fields in which the Roma reveal the best of their true nature. During socialism, there were very few Roma writers who found their place in the Bulgarian literature along with their Bulgarian colleagues. Since 1989, and especially in recent times, the situation has been changing and the opportunities for expression/appearance gradually increase. This is how Bulgaria's national literature gets enriched and it can be definitely argued that the Roma presence brings in a colourful vigour mostly because of the unique way they use a specific range of motifs and themes, of experiences which are far away from the thinking of the Bulgarian writers. And that is definitely a pride for every nation which respects its authors because of the diversity of their creative styles regardless of their ethnicity.

One of the earliest contributions of a Roma representative to the Bulgarian literature dates back to the Post-Liberation period (after 1878), namely the German

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translation of Ivan Vazov's classical work *Under the Yoke*. The name of the translator was Dr Atanas Dimitrov from the village of Gradets. He was a highly educated Roma who graduated from the University of Jena, Germany, and later taught German language at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". In our days, however, the strength of the Roma presence in Bulgarian literature is not anymore in the translators' skills of few representatives but primarily in writing of poetry and the publication of the first Roma novel written by Georgi Parushev. The first impressive and generally acknowledged name of a renowned Bulgarian poet of Roma ancestry is Usin Kerim. His voluminous works cover themes and problems beyond those related to his closeness to the Roma travelling camp. When it comes to the Roma presence in the Bulgarian cultural space, in terms of diversity and contents, Kerim's work could be compared to Vazov's literary achievement. Later, Usin Kerim played a similar to Ivan Vazov's role for the next Roma (literary) generation. He lived and worked in the times of a political regime with strict rules for writing, obligatory plots and themes and controlled regulation whether the requirements of the socialist realism were observed so that a given work could be published. There was no way for the young and ambitious author to avoid his participation in the victory of the communists on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1944, the young- brigade movement and the respective works glorifying them which were to be obligatory written. There was no way for him to avoid the cultural activities and the collaboration with the then newspapers via writing commissioned articles. The already acknowledged father of a whole generation of Roma poets had a difficult creative life. Beside the obligatory works of compromise, dedicated to the joy of the new political regime and a glorification of the totalitarian leaders, he managed to preserve an innermost spiritual territory, specifically his and unique, which was immediately noticed not only by the Bulgarian critique and his colleague-writers but also by the Bulgarian reading public. It was not the fragment from his poem *250 000*, published in the *Narodna mladezh* newspaper in 1948, but the fascinating in every aspect his first book, entitled provocatively *Songs from the Travelling Camp*; the idea for that book was given to Kerim by Boris Delchev, an active and merciless critic of those times (the hard to please Delchev became the editor of Kerim's second book *The Eyes Speak* in 1959)<sup>3</sup>. The initial lines of the poem *Songs for Ata* are moving because of their strong emotion:

My Ato  
Black-eyed,  
Swarthy,  
Tall,

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<sup>3</sup> Here is what Delchev noted down in his diary:

"6<sup>th</sup> January [1955]

At lunch time, I attended a session at the Union of Artists in connection with the forthcoming monographs (which I am editing).

In the afternoon, I met Usin Kerim at the Club of the Journalists where we ate together. I looked through a part of his poems and we set off to arrange the details concerning the contract with *Balgarski pisatel* [Bulgarian Writer publishing house]. Besides that, of course, we asked for an advanced payment. Emil Manov was very considerate and arranged the whole thing at one scoop despite the resistance of St. Lilyanov.

I offered Kerim the title *Songs from the Travelling Camp*. He readily accepted it but we were unaware what the people from the publishing house would say"... (Delchev 1939-1987: unpublished pages).