

Book Review

Alexandra Parrs (2018). **Gypsies in Contemporary Egypt: On the Peripheries of Society**

Reviewed by Danielle V. Schoon¹

Gypsies in Contemporary Egypt: On the Peripheries of Society, written by Alexandra Parrs and published by AUC Press, is one of only a few scholarly studies of the Egyptian Dom (“Gypsies”). As such, it is a welcome contribution to the scholarship in this growing area of interest. Although Parrs, as a foreigner, was unable to do a deep dive into any Dom communities and it was difficult for her to find many Dom interlocuters, her critical theoretical approach to the data she was able to collect is both refreshing and timely. At a moment when debates over the trajectory of Romani studies in Europe seem to be dominated by a few masculine voices, this female scholar articulates a strong argument and introduces a new voice to the emerging field of critical Romani studies.

Alexandra Parrs is a sociologist who has taught at American University, Washington DC, and American University in Cairo, and her work specializes in race and ethnicity, gender, and nationalism. Her most recent publications address refugees in Brussels and she has published several other books and articles in French and English on issues of identity and culture. *Gypsies in Contemporary Egypt* is based on two years of fieldwork in Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria). Along with a review of the scholarship on the Dom and an analysis of popular culture in Egypt, Parrs used ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews with government workers, people who regularly interact with the Dom, and some Dom themselves (although this is limited). She is aware of her own positionality as the researcher and reminds scholars to be

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attuned to the results of their academic work for the objects of their study. This approach aligns with a recent (and, to this author, welcome) turn in Romani studies that is critical of its own history and trajectory of knowledge production. By interviewing non-Dom Egyptians about their perceptions of “Gypsies,” Parrs was able to trace common outsider perceptions and their impact on insider identities. Through her review of the literature, she also sheds light on the role that Romani studies scholarship has played in shaping a global awareness of the Roma that largely leaves out other “Gypsy” groups.

Parrs’ theoretical framework takes a similar tack. It is a critical approach to the fragmented identities of the Egyptian Dom and the ways that those identities have been constructed, negotiated, and contested in the Egyptian national context, as well as via outsider portrayals in Orientalist literature, painting, film, and more recently, the media. Parrs demonstrates that the boundaries between Dom and non-Dom Egyptians are not clear or static – rather, they involve both outside representations and limitations, and inside responses and positioning. She argues that understanding the position of the Dom in Egyptian society not only offers insights on Dom identity, but also clarifies the markers of belonging in the majority population. In this way, Parrs avoids essentialisms; while she recognizes that the Egyptian Dom have not been well-researched in the past, she does not propose to ‘discover’ them.

Parrs’ most important contribution in this book is her discussion of the paradigm of diasporic identity as it applies to the Egyptian Dom. She notes that, while research has posited India as their country of origin, the Egyptian Dom generally know nothing or very little of this research and do not experience any meaningful connections to the Indian nation today or a collective memory of the homeland. Following Romani studies scholars like Willems and Lucassen, Parrs argues that the notion of a homeland and ethnic identity is rooted in hegemonic modern thinking that relies on the concept of the nation-state. Understanding how the European Roma have been conceptualized in Romani studies scholarship helps us to situate scholarly approaches to the Dom. Along with scholars such as David Mayall, Michael Stewart, Gay y Blasco, and Judith Okely, Parrs utilizes a sociohistorical approach that recognizes Dom identity as a socio-economic and social status marker more than an ethnic identity. Similarly, the work of pioneer scholars of ethnic studies, such as Rogers Brubaker, Federik Barth, and Stuart Hall, informs Parrs’ understanding of the maintenance of boundaries between Dom and non-Dom Egyptians.

After the introduction, the book approaches the subject from multiple angles. First, Parrs reviews the Orientalist accounts of “Gypsies” in the Middle East in order to



examine the role of Romani studies scholarship in constructing notions of Dom identity and “Gypsiness,” and to also recover some useful historical information. Recognizing that the Dom have never had the opportunity to own their own history, Parrs also offers some alternative narratives about Dom origins. This chapter is a great overview of the kind of work that formed the foundation of Romani studies, and thereby useful for scholars of “Gypsies” in any context. In the next chapter, Parrs analyzes the many “Gypsy” representations that have appeared in Egyptian popular culture, especially in cinematic depictions. She compares the figures of the Ghawazi and Ghagar in films of the 1950s and those of today, noting how they have been transformed in the collective imagination “From Belly Dancers to Thieves.” Chapters 3-6 are based on Parr’s fieldwork and examine encounters between Dom and non-Dom Egyptians, strategies used by Dom Egyptians to ‘pass’, the criminalization of Dom identity, and the impact of outside representations on traditional norms, such as marriage practices. In all of these chapters, the emphasis is on insider-outsider interactions and the mutual impacts these have on social boundaries and Dom identity formation. The ethnographic data that Parrs was able to collect directly from Dom interlocuters was limited, but the author makes good use of what she was able to gather and does not overreach in her conclusions.

Gypsies in Contemporary Egypt is a unique study of the Egyptian Dom and the society in which they live. It will be of interest to Romani studies scholars and scholars of the Middle East. It would serve as a useful text in college classrooms, particularly in ethnography and sociocultural anthropology courses. It should be read alongside the edited volume by Adrian Marsh and Elin Strand, *Gypsies and the Problem of Identities: Contextual, Constructed and Contested*, for a fuller picture of non-Romani “Gypsies” in the Middle East and the essential contributions of this kind of study to critical Romani studies.