

Roma Women and Meanings of Painting Walls Practice. Controlling Materiality and Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Roma women from a closed community in Southern Romania with their space and with materiality. It particularly analyses the domestic practice of painting interior houses' walls and the meanings it has, especially for the women, namely: the activity of painting walls as a way of reaffirming womanhood by successfully performing it, as a controlling space practice, and as a ritual practice with space purification effects and controlling perceptions intention. Furthermore, taking the painting walls activity as my outset, I tried to draw upon two transversal dimensions of the fieldwork I carried out. The first one concerns the way in which space, through the domestic practices the women engage with, expresses social dynamics in the community and social aspirations of its members. The second dimension I took into account is related to the project developed by a non-governmental organization that aimed to build and renovate houses for some of the local families. I particularly looked at the effects that were generated by these intervention activities at a small-scale practices level (such as cleaning the house).

Keywords: Domestic practices, space improvement, Roma women, social aspirations.

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Mujeres romanas y significados de la práctica de pintar paredes. Control de la materialidad y las percepciones

Resumen

El presente artículo examina la relación de las mujeres romanas de una comunidad cerrada del sur de Rumania con su espacio y con la materialidad. De manera particular, analiza la práctica doméstica de pintar las paredes interiores de las casas y los significados detrás de esta, especialmente para las mujeres, a saber: la actividad de pintar paredes como una manera de reafirmar la feminidad al realizarlo de forma exitosa, como una práctica de control del espacio y como una práctica ritual con efectos de purificación del espacio y una intención de control de percepciones. Adicionalmente, tomando la actividad de pintar las paredes como mi punto de partida, busqué usar dos dimensiones transversales del trabajo de campo que llevé a cabo. La primera se refiere a la manera en la que el espacio, por medio de las prácticas domésticas a las que se dedican las mujeres, expresa las dinámicas sociales en la comunidad y las aspiraciones sociales de sus miembros. La segunda dimensión que tomé en cuenta tiene que ver con el proyecto desarrollado por una organización no gubernamental que buscaba construir y renovar casas para algunas de las familias locales. En particular, observé los efectos generados por estas actividades de intervención a nivel de prácticas de pequeña escala (como limpiar la casa).

Palabras clave: prácticas domésticas, mejora del espacio, mujeres romanas, aspiraciones sociales.

Introduction

This paper is related to a smaller topic of my dissertation and some conclusions that originated from the fieldwork I conducted starting on February 2011 in a rural Romanian community from Prahova County. Approximately 34% of its population is represented by Roma people that live at the border of the village, most of them in extended families that occupy scanty and inappropriate dwellings. Since 2009 a non-governmental organization had been developing an intervention project aiming to build and renovate houses for some of the local families.

I once arrived there on a Saturday, one weekend before Easter. I took a walk through the village and the Roma community was bustling, everyone anxious to finish their work. I entered the house of one of my informants and I found all the objects and the furniture moved from their place, some of them covered with sheets. The mother and her 3 daughters, all of them young, not even 15 years old, were just starting to lime the walls, but the woman was obviously very tense. She was nearly crying because, while preparing the emulsion to lime, she realised that she did not have enough colour paints. Complaining and almost grumbling, she said: "What am I doing now? I went to the village to buy colours to merge with the lime, but they didn't have any left! Oh God... what am I going to do until Monday? How can I stay here with these half painted walls?" (April 16, 2011. 41 years old woman).

Being interested in domestic practices in a broader sense, I realised right there the importance of the painting walls activity in the lifecycle of homes and women. Thus I decided to continue the fieldwork after presenting the dissertation, but with a special focus on this practice. Therefore, I must mention that it is not a concluded research, as I am still following the dynamics related to painting wall activities.

The empirical results of the research are mainly based on data collected through qualitative methods. I treated *observation* as a methodological strategy since my work supposed a constant immersion in the interactions with the informants. This methodological approach corresponds to Davies's perspective on observation, who argues that "it is more properly conceived of as a research strategy than a unitary research method in that it is always made up of a variety of methods" (2002, p. 67). Therefore, I developed participative observations during my 3-4 days visits (approximately twice a month); I had several discussions with the women regarding their cleaning and painting walls activities and about women duties; using the fieldwork-diary method was also very important.

Given the described context, the main question that I wanted to answer was: what are the meanings of the domestic practice of painting walls? Before presenting the most important ideas that came out from the research, I will first start by providing some basic background information on the painting walls practice, its implications and women's perceptions in reference to it.

First of all, it is a vital part of the lifecycle of houses, as it is also a part of women's lifecycle. It was always referred to as an exclusively female activity, aiming to "clean" and renew the house. It is carried out at least two or three times a year and, in order to have the "ideal" result, a certain sequence of actions must be followed: moving all objects and domestic infrastructure out of the house; scraping off the first coat of paint, bringing proper soil from the forest to fill in the gaps, edging the walls, preparing the emulsion and melting it with the colours, overlaying the walls with the prepared lime. Some informants talked nostalgically about the time when they used

to paint colourful sketches/geometrical symbols on the walls so that the house looked “much better”. The last phase of this cleaning activity is putting in the objects and the furniture inside in a different way than it was before, just to make the house renewal more visible.

The presentation of the results will flow according to the three important meanings I found regarding the practice of painting the walls. Accordingly, first I will focus on how the activity of painting walls becomes a way of reaffirming womanhood by successfully performing this domestic work. I will then continue with talking about it as practice of controlling space and how it reflects the emergence of certain dynamics in the community. Lastly, I plan to illustrate the painting walls activity as a ritual practice which purifies the space and which is intended to control other people’s perceptions.

Reaffirming Womanhood by Successfully Performing Domestic Work

Similarly to Iulia’s Haşdeu considerations on gender relations among *căldărari Roma*¹, there is also a certain traditional division of domestic labour. However, although they are also involved in the activities that generate income (e.g. they help their husbands in the manufacturing of tin kettles), it is generally assumed in the community that all house-cleaning activities are reserved for women. The fact that “producing money” is considered by men and women to be a “man’s responsibility” gives women the feeling of responsibility for everything concerning care of children and of inhabited space:

Well... obviously (painting walls) is a women’s activity. The man goes to work, brings money and the woman is the one who has to take care of everything in the house: bring chucks, do laundry, clean everything, prepare the food... everything has to be in place! (...) That’s the normal way, isn’t it? (...) The things you have to inquire about: looking after children, washing, cleaning... In the end... it is your home, isn’t it? And the man should bring in the money. This is how it goes in our community (October 14, 2011.52 years old woman).

This explanation allows us to understand that cleaning activities are perceived as women’s input to the household, their way of compensating for not generating economic value to the family. Therefore, the painted walls are a statement about the values of being a good wife and mother. Talking about the practice of preparing *obento*, Anne Alisson (1997) argues that, by doing it, mothers affirm they are good mothers. *Obento*, which are those “highly crafted elaborations of food: a multitude of miniature portions, artistically designed and precisely arranged” (1997, p.298), are not only a gift for their child, but also a representation and product of the woman herself. In a similar way, the painting walls activity and its accessories express and implant cultural behaviours, talking about what a woman is in the household and which are her duties. It shows what a wife and a mother should be like and what young females should become.

In my interpretation, the painting walls activity is an expression of the relationships between women and the household inhabitants, as well as with the members of the community itself. How? This seemingly simple action of transforming the domestic space expresses the norms and values that govern the community and are respected, enforced and transmitted to the following generations. Such norms relate to the women’s morality and are always associated with the extent of the care provided to their family and house.

A Practice of Controlling Space and Materiality

Since the painting walls activity has so far been analysed as a way of reaffirming womanhood, I will proceed to show how it becomes a practice of controlling space and an activity that reflects the emergence of certain dynamics in the community.

According to my informants, the building activities carried out by the NGO that aimed to improve house conditions of the locals, were developed with “modern” tools and emulsion paints. Thus, the builders employed to renovate the houses from the community did not use the classic lime with which local women used to paint the walls; they instead used *water-based emulsion paints*. Owing to this, the new painting element, considered to be a “modern” one, started being used by the Roma women we are talking about too.

Engaging new painting walls products supposes changes of the practice itself and implies a transition towards a new way of cleaning and improving space. But the question is, what changes does it generate in terms of the women-space relationship? In order to answer this question we have to look at the emergence of the processes that the new water-based emulsion paints implies: the women’s process of rethinking their relation with space and the one of evaluating their relation with the non-Roma side of the community (that is to say the majority). While some women have more “pro water-based emulsion paints” attitude, others rather criticize them. Next I will develop the two attitudes that intermingle in the women’s discourses about how the painting walls activities take place.

“They want to modernize us!”. This very simple, but spontaneous statement by a 25 years old informant accurately shows one of Roma people’s perceptions regarding the NGO’s intervention in their community. Building new houses or renovating the existing ones with new and “modern” tools, materials and emulsions, foreign to the members of the community, seems to be perceived as an intention of updating them in terms of housing and home-improvement practices. In other words, the members of the community are shown what nowadays “normal” and “beautiful” houses look like. The Roma community is being acquainted with new reference points concerning housing strategies, and it refers to the way in which the majority/the Romanians/*the others* use to improve their houses nowadays.

However, despite a certain reluctance from some women, the enthusiasm and contentment shown by other women regarding use of the new emulsion paints is supported by two main arguments: being in fashion, “up-to-date”, and the fact that it is assumed to be more practical.

At this point, I would like to argue that, by engaging in new painting walls practice, women gain the feeling of being part of the larger community constituted by the non-Roma majority; meanwhile, the sense of control over space and over the perception of others regarding their morality seems to be threatened.

On the one hand, regarding what they gain from this quasi replacement, women talk about the advantage that these new paints bring in terms of durability and practicability. One informant shows a great satisfaction because of the easiness of “repairing” the damages that may occur between two painting wall sessions.

It is great because it is very easy to clean afterwards. Look... for example here... One day, my granddaughter came inside with her dirty hands and put them on the wall, right here! Can you see it? Here! But I immediately repaired it, I took a rag and with some cleanser I managed to abrade the blots. Now it is as clean as it was at the beginning! This? You couldn't do it with the old paints. (October 14, 2011. 52 years old woman).

This example allows us to understand the way this new element (the water-based emulsion paint) which aligns with the logic of pragmatism is being associated by the women to "modernity". In my opinion, since "modernity" seems to be correlated with the habits and practices of the larger community that encompasses theirs, using these new painting wall products becomes a way of aligning with the majority, with the Romanians. Doing things like them seems to give the feeling of being "integrated" and "accepted" by the majority, and thus acquiring the "up-to-date" condition.

On the other hand, new water-based emulsion promises an easy way to renew the house by the fact that the walls can be washed in order to have them clean, without requiring new liming. However, this compromises one of the most important means through which women make their efforts in the household visible. This new type of paint is promoted as an emulsion that, once used, spares inhabitants from the task of repainting the walls. As I see it, however, not painting in certain occasions, such as Christmas or Easter, could determine negative perceptions and critics regarding the accomplishment of her duties as a wife and mother.

Therefore, taking all these observations into account, it could be stated that the new water-based paintings - by producing changes in the process of improving and cleaning the household- may imply a loss of control over materiality, which leads to the loss of control over the perceptions of others (inhabitants or just other members of the community). By controlling the space I specifically refer to engaging in practices in which previewing the result is possible, and thus avoiding failure. Accordingly, painting walls, as a regular and recurrent practice, is such a controlling space practice. The emergence of the new water-based emulsion paint, proposing less painting walls sessions in time, seems to have the potential of disturbing this regularity by the new rhythm it supposes.

A Ritual Practice with Space Purification Effects and Controlling Perceptions Intention

Now that we have seen that the painting walls activity supposes certain regularity, I will focus on its specificity as a ritual practice with space purification effects and controlling perceptions intention. The women describe it as a house purification activity. From this point of view it can probably be understood as a rite of passage, as Turner (2001) describes it, the subject of transition being the house itself. It makes the transition from a dirty, unordered space, to a clean, ordered and well-painted home. As Mary Douglas (2006) puts it, it is a ritual practice that empowers the woman, making her the only one able to defend the house from potential dangers.

Furthermore, it may be considered a ritual practice because of its recurrence and repetitive character. It takes place mainly prior to the important religious celebrations of the year.

Therefore, they talk about Christmas or Easter “cleaning”, but also about “summer cleaning”. Showing her cleaning and renewing aspirations, Ramona, one of the main informants, stresses: “I would paint the walls every month if I had money to buy what I need ... it is great after that ... you can smell cleanness in the house. I also besprinkle the rear with it ... because it disinfects it” (June 5, 2011). What is interesting is how she expresses through the olfactory sense the purifying effects of classic lime.

In the same way, another woman expresses through the sense of smell her disapproval regarding the new element that interferes in her habitual way of performing the painting walls practice. In her view, the new water-based emulsion does not have a purifying power and agency, being rather perceived as opposite to the classic lime. While the former smells as cleanliness, the latter is associated to impurity since it smells “so bad, like urine” (June 5, 2011), as the 23 years old woman expresses.

At the same time, however, carrying out this purifying work is a way for the woman to protect herself from the dangers that exist outside and even inside the house. When talking about controlling perceptions I mean the fact that, by making the efforts of house cleaning visible, the woman makes sure that the family and the community will have positive perceptions on her. For instance, a 41 years old mother concerned about the perceptions of her daughter’s future husband and mother in law, states: “Of course I showed my daughter how to paint the walls, otherwise what will her husband and mother-in-law say about her? That she knows nothing!” (April 16, 2011).

Thus, not working and mainly not making that work visible puts the woman and her morality in danger by attracting critical voices from the women in the community or from the members of the household.

Conclusion

Three meanings of painting walls activity have been discussed here; firstly as a way of reaffirming womanhood by successfully performing this domestic work; then I continued by talking about it as a controlling space practice, which reflects the emergence of certain dynamics in the community; finally, in the last part I intended to illustrate its role as ritual practice with space purification effects and controlling perceptions intention. All these meanings lead us to the conclusion that the domestic practice of painting walls makes it possible to control both spatiality and sociality. The more a woman succeeds in making the painted walls look “beautiful”, the more she manages to have control over space, and also on the perceptions of the family and community members regarding her women and motherhood.

In the same vein as anthropologist Alison Clarke, I would conclude that through the painting walls activity women “mobilize their aspirations as individuals and mothers through the aesthetic of home” (2001, p. 32), thus emphasizing the space’s dispositions to illustrate the inhabitants’ aspirations. On this line, it makes sense to end with an illustrative statement by one of my informants: “Yes, we’re also using LAVABIL (the new water-based emulsion paintings); this is in fashion now, we have to be like the others, don’t we?” (June 5, 2011, 25 years old woman).

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Notes

- ¹ Roma people are divided in several groups distinguished especially by what it is or it used to be their traditional occupation. The ones living in the village where this fieldwork was carried out are called *ursari*.