

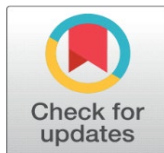
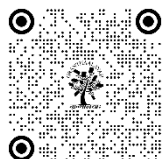
# SILENCING AND SURVIVAL: THE POLITICS OF SPACE, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN COLUM MCCANN'S *ZOLI* (2006)

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## ABSTRACT

In his novel *Zoli* (2006), Colum McCann intricately portrays the struggles of identity formation, building emotional intimacy, and fighting for survival. *Zoli* Novotna belongs to the marginalized Roma community that has experienced the systemic adversity perpetuated by the state. The text subtly explores the political exploitation faced by this community, which ultimately extends to the personal subjugation experienced by the titular character. Through her, McCann elucidates the inner conflicts of a young girl navigating the challenges of being Roma within the broader societal context and of identifying as a woman within her own patriarchal community. The article stems from this conflict. It studies the text from three apparently distinctive yet highly intertwined narratives. While the first narrative sheds light on the lived experiences of the Roma, offering insights into this academically ignored community, the second and third narratives delve into the complex power dynamics between the state and the Roma community, which has been manifested primarily in her subjecting experiences. As both a poet and a singer, she creates a space for exploring the multifaceted dimensions of the text. The paper argues that *Zoli*'s journey illustrates how personal and collective traumas are shaped by broader socio-political dynamics, reflecting the feminist adage that "the personal is political." By engaging with the intersections of identity, space, and power, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities faced by marginalized communities in literature and society.

**Keywords:** Roma, Woman, Subjugation, Agency, Power, Identity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"We came back to silence. He clapped his hand over my mouth" (McCann, 2006, p. 15). This line encapsulates the pervasive themes of silence and the loss of agency that have defined *Zoli* Novotna's life. Her journey commences amidst the lush landscapes of Slovakia, where she and her grandfather stumble upon a tranquil lake concealing a dark history. There, her family, along with all their possessions, had met a tragic fate at the hands of Fascist guards. These guards compelled her loved ones onto the frozen lake surface, encircling them with blazing fires, ensuring their entrapment on the ice. *Zoli*'s life sank beneath the surface as the thaw arrived, leaving her and her grandfather as the sole survivors. Any

experience can be termed traumatic, if: "1) It is sudden, unexpected or non-normative, 2) it exceeds the individual's perceived ability to meet its demands and 3) disrupts the individual's frame of reference" (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, p. 10). Witnessing the catastrophic death of her family marked such traumatic experience for her. It is from this harrowing experience that Zoli embarks on her journey of remembrance, retelling, and re-enactment.

Colum McCann's novel *Zoli* (2006), named after its eponymous character, takes inspiration from the life of Roma poet Papusza, also known as Bronisława Wajs. Papusza, like Zoli, faced the agony of banishment from her own Roma community, and the story unfolded against the backdrop of World War II. The novel is divided into seven distinct sections, each bearing the name of a pivotal year in Zoli's life. Intertwined with her story is the narrative of the Roma people, a community that has endured a litany of persecution and discrimination across Europe throughout history. They have been subjected to enslavement, expulsion, and a series of laws aimed at erasing their cultural heritage. In every facet of life, Roma individuals have suffered discrimination, enduring persistent social marginalization. The uniquely titled chapters within the novel portray the Roma community as faceless entities stripped of their individuality. Zoli's identity is reduced to a mere measure of years, dehumanizing her in the process. In addition to being faceless, the Roma people are also depicted as voiceless. Out of the seven chapters, only two are narrated by Zoli herself- one at the tender age of six and another at the ripe age of seventy-three. This narrative structure underscores the entirety of a life's journey, encapsulating the passage of time and the deep well of experiences that shape Zoli's existence. Zoli's traumatic start in life and the journey ahead give her unhealed scars on her body and psyche.

This paper demonstrates that Colum McCann's *Zoli* (2006) exquisitely delineates the intersection of trauma, gender, and cultural marginalization. It illustrates how the identity of the titular character is shaped as a Roma woman in the crucible of patriarchal constraints within her community and the oppressive forces of state politics. By examining the silencing and exploitation that Zoli endures from both Roma and Gadze men, the work highlights the ways in which personal trauma is inextricably linked to broader socio-political dynamics, and how the struggle for self-expression becomes a quest for survival within these intersecting forces.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing body of literature that exists within the Roma corpus of writings provides a noticeable gap in scholarly attention towards Roma literature. While considerable efforts have been directed towards policy-making endeavours, this essay seeks to address a different aspect of Roma studies: literary investigation and analysis. The examination of Roma literature is crucial as it not only serves as a medium for amplifying the voices and perspectives of marginalised communities but also offers valuable insights into the societal mechanisms that perpetuate their silencing. Through literature, the strategies employed by marginalised groups to navigate the oppressive structures can be discerned to varying degrees of success. Moreover, literature facilitates a form of dialogue between the marginalised and the privileged majority, allowing for nuanced exchanges without succumbing to the dynamics of subjectivation. Roma literature, hitherto untouched, especially in English, serves as a repository of narratives that challenge mainstream narratives and offer alternative perspectives on history, identity, and belonging. This article aims to unravel the complexities of Roma's experiences, shedding light on the struggles, resilience, and aspirations of a community often relegated to the margins of society.

The present text acts as an attempt to fill the gap in Roma literature. Despite being a work of fiction, *Zoli* (2006) was soon recognized as a significant historical narrative. Ian Hancock, a prominent Roma scholar and political advocate, remarked, "I review numerous Roma-themed manuscripts for publishers, but none has ever moved me as deeply." Similarly, Santino Spinelli, an Italian-born Roma professor at the University of Trieste, praised the book as one of the most significant contributions to Roma culture in recent years (Cusatis, 2011, p. 151).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilises a textual analysis approach to examine the representation of trauma in Colum McCann's *Zoli*. The research involves close reading and thematic analysis of the novel, focusing on passages that depict Zoli's interactions, thoughts, and behaviours related to her survival. The analysis is guided by the feminist therapy theory by Laura Brown, incorporating Maria Root's (1992) concept of "insidious traumatization" and Judith Herman's (2015) concept of "complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CTPSD).

The analysis then interprets these excerpts within the broader context of Zoli's psychological development, taking into account the novel's narrative structure and its key themes of trauma, subjugation, and personal resilience.

## 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 4.1. THE ROMA COMMUNITY: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The Roma, historically marginalized and often misrepresented, are one of Europe's most persecuted ethnic groups, with a legacy of displacement and discrimination that has spanned centuries. They are believed to be a group of people who migrated from the Indian subcontinent approximately a thousand years ago (Hancock, 1987, pp. 7-10). The historical narrative suggests that the Roma's journey from India to Europe marked a profound cultural and social transition, shaping their distinct identity within European contexts. Somewhere else, the Roma people have been historically known as "Gypsies," or bands of travellers that journey across the land without a permanent home. The word "Gypsy" comes from the English word "Gyptian," short for "Egyptian" (Okely, 1988, pp. 3-4). The European Union describes the Roma in its strategic framework for their equality, inclusion and participation titled 'Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU' published on its official website as,

The Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority. Out of an estimated 10 to 12 million Roma living in Europe, approximately 6 million are citizens or residents of the EU. Many EU Roma are still victims of prejudice and social exclusion, despite the discrimination ban across EU Member States. The umbrella term 'Roma' encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romachels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.). EU policy documents and discussions commonly employ this terminology.

There are shared experiences that most European Roma have faced at one time or another: discrimination, exclusion, and persecution. These hardships stem largely from xenophobic sentiments towards perceived outsiders prevalent throughout Europe. Petrova (2003) delves into the enduring impact of centuries of discrimination, exclusion, marginalization, and persecution on Roma communities.

Furthermore, the Roma lack a documented history or genealogical records, rendering it susceptible to manipulation by external forces. Their historical illiteracy has deprived them of the opportunity to observe and respond to portrayals of their community in mass media or literature (Matras, 2015). Additionally, the Roma have historically lacked agency to rectify injustices perpetrated against them or to challenge mainstream representations. This absence of a platform for self-advocacy has perpetuated distorted narratives and marginalised their voices within broader societal discourses. Consequently, the Roma have been subjected to external interpretations of their history and identity, often influenced by prevailing biases and stereotypes. The absence of a written record exacerbates this vulnerability, as it allows dominant narratives to shape perceptions of the Roma without meaningful input from the community itself. These historical challenges not only sculpted the Roma community's cultural practices but also set off the alienation and silencing of individual voices like Zoli's. To completely understand Zoli's journey, this paper emphasizes that it is critical to explore how trauma and gender further complicate her position, both within her community and in the broader societal context.

### 4.2. TRAUMA, GENDER, AND SILENCE: A PERSPECTIVE ON ZOLI'S EXPERIENCES

Zoli's experiences of trauma are not solely personal; they are deeply intertwined with her gender and cultural identity, reflecting the intersection of systemic and insidious forms of oppression. Feminist therapy theory conceptualizes the experience of trauma—whether personal or systemic—within the framework of the surrounding social, emotional, and political contexts. Feminist therapy theory postulates that the overarching goal of feminist treatment is that clients develop feminist consciousness (Brown, 1994). This is defined as the awareness that one's own suffering arises not from individual deficits but rather from the ways in which one has been systemically invalidated, excluded, and silenced because of one's status as a member of a non-dominant group in the culture (Lerner, 1993). This article takes into account the concept of "insidious traumatization". Maria Root, who coined the term insidious trauma described the concepts as follows: "Traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit (Root, 1992)." Root further argued that in the lives of many target-group individuals, such as women and men of colour; lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and transgendered people; poor people; and people with disabilities, daily experience is replete with subthreshold traumatic stressors. These come in various forms, including exposure to (a) news that a member of one's group has been the target of bias-based violence or discrimination; (b) negative and stigmatizing images of one's group in media, textbooks, and discourse of peers or coworkers; and (c) various forms of institutionalized racism, heterosexism, and other exclusionary systems of value in which the individual is denied access to material or human resources solely on the basis of group membership. Root (1992) suggested that over the lifetime, these exposures create both unique coping strategies and unique vulnerabilities as evidenced by the textual analysis of *Zoli*.

Feminist theorists have also critically examined the diagnostic terminology used to describe the effects of trauma. Herman (2015) introduced the concept of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) to characterize the enduring intra- and interpersonal consequences of betrayal and prolonged, subtle traumas. CPTSD is distinguished by a spectrum of intrapersonal challenges, including ineffective self-care practices and difficulties in managing overwhelming emotions. This framework highlights how trauma can lead to persistent issues in personal well-being and emotional regulation, reflecting the profound and often multifaceted impact of such experiences. By addressing these dimensions, feminist theorists provide a nuanced understanding of how trauma manifests and affects individuals, emphasizing the need for comprehensive approaches to treatment and support.

This article advocates asserting that "the personal is political," a notion that becomes particularly relevant in the context of trauma. Feminist trauma treatment consistently seeks to uncover how cultural factors can intensify the impact of traumatic experiences. This perspective is crucial, given that clinical studies have historically marginalized women's voices, focusing predominantly on white, middle-class women while neglecting women of colour. Despite the political use of their narratives at pivotal historical moments, these marginalized voices often remain underrepresented. Feminist approaches recognize that trauma is not solely an individual experience but also a reflection of broader socio-cultural dynamics. The literary process plays a vital role in counteracting survival mechanisms that promote forgetting and cultural forces that fail to validate these experiences. Through literature, there is an opportunity to confront and reframe the complete scope of trauma, ensuring that diverse experiences are acknowledged and integrated into the broader understanding of trauma. These forces of trauma and gender are most visibly enacted in *Zoli's* relationship with masculine forces in her life, whose influence significantly shapes her journey and quest for identity.

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section is organized into three primary segments. The first segment explores the significant and multifaceted influence of both Roma and Gadze men on *Zoli's* life. It examines how their actions, decisions, and societal roles directly shape her personal development and the course of her experiences. The second segment focuses on the Roma community as a crucial site of trauma in *Zoli's* life. It delves into how the community's internal dynamics, cultural expectations, and historical context contribute to her sense of identity and emotional struggles, highlighting the profound psychological impact this environment has on her. The final segment critically analyzes the state's interventions in *Zoli's* life, portraying them as politicized actions rooted in patriarchal authority. This section extends beyond mere state actions to explore how these interventions reflect broader ideological frameworks and power structures that seek to regulate and control marginalized populations, particularly through the lens of gender and ethnicity. The discussion in this section aims to provide a thorough understanding of the complex and intersecting forces that shape *Zoli's* lived experiences, considering both individual and systemic factors.

### 5.1. GENDERED SUBJUGATION IN ZOLI NOVOTNA'S JOURNEY

The protagonist, *Zoli*, belongs to a population that characterizes itself "primarily through kin structures, strict community values, and a niche service economy that resists assimilation into the majority culture" (Matras, 2015, p. 22). This sense is echoed in the text as "pride, tradition, heritage, that sort of thing" (McCann, 2006, p. 10). This close-knit Roma community is the first level of masculine silencing in the life of *Zoli*. In several instances, *Zoli* has been silenced by a male agency in this traditional setup. In one of the chapters narrated by her, she recalls a pleasant childhood memory of playing in the field early in the morning with her friends when her father immediately silenced them. "Shut up! he shouted" (McCann, 2006, p. 21). After his horrendous death at the hands of Hlinkas, it was *Zoli's* grandfather who had direct control over her. She was left with him after her family's death; he nurtured and influenced the kid in the best possible *gypsy way*. When *Zoli's* curious mind would seek innocent answers, "Grandfather said no more questions"



(McCann, 2006, p. 18). On another occasion, "He clapped his hand over my mouth" (McCann, 2006, p. 15). Zoli is a six-year-old kid at that time whose tumultuous self is suffering the loss of her family. Her resilience is shown to the readers through the act of chopping her hair "off with a very sharp knife" (McCann, 2006, p. 17). However, again, "When Grandfather saw me, he slapped my face twice and said, What have you done" (McCann, 2006, p. 17). The backing for all such acts originates from the gypsy laws, "it was not a good thing, it was against our laws" (McCann, 2006, p. 17).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that whenever Zoli has afforded an opportunity to express herself, it is invariably through a 'masculine' conduit. Zoli received her name from her grandfather, and notably, it was a name associated with male Romas (McCann, 2006, p. 20). This nomenclature imparts a semblance of safeguarding her identity with a masculine realm. Again, it was her grandfather who made her learn to write, reinforcing the influence of a male figure in shaping her ability to express herself through writing (McCann, 2006, p. 24). The endowment of a voice to Zoli assumes paramount significance as a recurrent motif in the narrative. This thematic element gains particular salience as: "There are no words in Roma proper for 'to write' or 'to read.' Gypsies borrow from other languages to describe these activities" (Fonseca, 1995, p. 11). In a cultural context where these expressions may not find explicit articulation, the act of inscribing words becomes not only a tool for individual expression but also a subversive act challenging normative linguistic boundaries. Even within that setting, the literary work given to her for reading is a work tailored for boys: "For a long time, I remember, the only book I had was *Winnetou*... It was about Apaches and gunfighters, a volume for boys" (McCann, 2006, p. 58). This encounter serves as a poignant reflection of the entrenched gender dynamics that shape her literary experiences and, by extension, her understanding of societal norms in her community.

Stanislaus cultivates in Zoli a strong sense of self-reliance, resourcefulness, and pride, equipping her to navigate the challenges posed by both her own people, who strike her upon discovering she is attending school as well as the white children who spit on her in her new classroom. Zoli finds solace and expression in song. She starts to liberate her people's traditional art form from its conventional boundaries, reinterpreting and revitalizing old themes.

When the question of the wedding emerges at the age of fourteen, it is her grandfather who assumes a decisive role in selecting a prospective groom for her: "Stanislaus had picked him out for me. I had no choice" (McCann, 2006, p. 54). Despite Petr's considerable age, described metaphorically as "older than a rock," Zoli does not contest the decision. "I wanted to make my grandfather happy, that has always been the Roma way" (McCann, 2006, p. 54). Her acquiescence reflects a profoundly ingrained Roma cultural ethos. This portrayal illuminates the intricate interplay between personal desires and communal expectations within the context of Roma traditions, where individual agency often yields to communal harmony and familial bonds. Following her grandfather's demise, her locus of authority transitions to Petr; thereby rendering the agency of her voice once again 'masculine.' Zoli's adaptive resilience is evident as she embraces the transformed dynamics: "I would still be allowed to guide the pencil" (McCann, 2006, p. 57). This acknowledgement signifies her acceptance of a nuanced form of agency within the prevailing gendered framework.

Despite occasional moments of agency, Zoli's life is frequently shaped by external male control, leaving her voice, both literal and metaphorical, silenced. This male supremacy is not just personal but communal, as her community also emerges as a site of tension and conflict in her quest for freedom and identity.

## 5.2. COMMUNITY AND CONFLICT

An additional layer of 'masculine' silencing is imposed on Zoli by the *Gadze* (non-Roma), assuming a prominent role in her life both as publisher and translator of her writings. In the Roma community, where oral traditions hold considerable sway, music takes precedence, and writing assumes a less important role to play. This is encapsulated in the observation, "Music is a binding factor among Roma communities that have dispersed" (Matras, 2015, p. 90). This factual detail of Roma culture is brought emphatically into the text by McCann when he writes, "It was an oral culture, they had no books or written-down stories to speak of, they distrusted the unchangeable word" (McCann, 2006, p. 78). Consequently, the intrusion of 'masculine' influence into Zoli's literary pursuits underscores not only a gendered dynamic but also a clash with the Roma cultural emphasis on oral traditions and the primacy of music as a unifying force among dispersed Roma communities. Zoli's experience of the inherent tension between personal agency and communal expectations is intensified when she is compelled to seek approval from her own community to publish her poetry by the *Gadzes*: "A week later she came back to say that the elders had accepted it and it could be published" (McCann, 2006, p. 95). While narrating her memories of being able to write poetry, she recalls, "it was one of the happiest times I remember, daughter" (McCann, 2006, p. 65). Regardless of the origin of the voice bestowed upon her, she finds joy in

embracing her identity as a poet, acknowledging the significance of being someone who holds value. She recalls: "I stood there in the silence and it seemed to me that the spring of my life had come. I was a poet. I had written things down" (McCann, 2006, p. 65). However, Stransky, her publisher, reiterates over and over that he bestowed a voice and an identity to Zoli. The conversation between him and his translator depicts her perceived status,

"We'll be the first to give them a value. We make life better, we make life fairer, it's the oldest story of all."

"She's a singer," I said.

"She's a poet," he replied. "And you know why? He raised his glass and prodded my chest. Because she's called upon to become one. She's a voice from the dust" (McCann, 2006, p. 89).

Stransky's assertion not only highlights his belief in shaping her identity but also introduces a discourse on the transformative power of literature, positioning Zoli as a symbolic "voice from the dust" (McCann, 2006, p. 89). The dialogue encapsulates the complex interplay of agency, representation, and the external construction of identity within the context of Zoli's creative expression. Stransky manipulates her into being a tool to meet his agenda, as evidenced by the statement, "he thought he'd come upon the perfect proletarian poet" (McCann, 2006, p. 79). On another occasion, he calls her "the new Soviet woman" (McCann, 2006, p. 81). The characterization suggests a deliberate framing of Zoli's identity and creative expression to suit a particular socio-political narrative, emphasizing the subjugation of her artistic authenticity for external gains.

Quite evidently, Zoli's voice has either been silenced or shaped by external masculine influences and during her brief moments of utmost joy in composing poetry, it is noted that "her penmanship was shabby" (McCann, 2006, p. 80). Initially deprived of an outlet or medium for her expression, Zoli's predicament reveals the challenge she faces when finally given a voice. The observation that her penmanship is "shabby" underscores her unfamiliarity with the tools of written expression, highlighting the disjunction between the inner creative impulse and the practical execution. This nuanced exploration underscores the complexities of finding one's voice and the learning curve that accompanies the acquisition of a medium for self-expression. Nevertheless, Stransky insists on moving beyond a mere chapbook and publishing a whole book with Zoli, "a real volume" (McCann, 2006, p. 115). The power dynamics between Stransky and Zoli reveal the imbalance where Zoli's artistic expression owes validation through extensive format. Swann narrates that "he was convinced that she had a vision that would lift the Gypsies out of their quandaries" (McCann, 2006, p. 115). Zoli's art is but a mere instrument to meet an end.

Zoli's people are impressed with the celebrity she attained after the publication of her first book. For Stránsky and Swann she is the perfect illustration of the effectiveness of socialism. Zoli, however, begins to tire of the clamorous outside world, and, after a reading one day, remarks to Swann, "I want to go home" (McCann, 2006, p. 96). Swann remarks, "It was, of course, the oldest idea: home. To her it meant silence" (McCann, 2006, p. 96). Soon her people are wary of her becoming "too gadz'ó" (McCann, 2006, p. 99), and their antipathy for outsiders manifests itself one afternoon when they give Swann a beating, cursing him and all his "pale pieces" (McCann, 2006, p. 101).

Zoli's voice, initially celebrated as a tool for societal upliftment, becomes a double-edged sword. She is banished from her community in response to her perceived betrayal. The fictional account of Zoli converges with the description given by Isabel Fonseca in her acclaimed account of the Roma people, *Bury me Standing* (1995). She contributes to a deeper understanding of Zoli's position in the multifaceted landscape when she writes:

Papusza was soon identified among Gypsies as a culprit in the campaign to cancel their traditional way of life. Her stature as a poet and singer, and the love for her people expressed in decades of work, meant nothing. Papusza had done something unforgivable: she had collaborated with a gadjo.

*No one understands me,  
Only the forest and the river.  
That of which I speak  
Has all, all passed away,  
Everything has gone with it-  
And those years of youth.* (Fonseca, 1995, p. 8)

No one can estimate the psychological toll of being ostracized from her community. Having witnessed the tragic loss of her family members, Zoli experiences a final devastating blow through her banishment. The profound and devastating

effects make Zoli silent yet again. In the far-reaching consequences, Zoli loses her identity both as a poet and a Roma. Zoli is unable to comprehend her present state.

Zoli treats the questions of loyalty that face children who grow up in primitive, patriarchal societies but who are tempted by the modernizing influences of the mainstream world, to the chagrin of their elders. For Zoli, the ways of her early childhood will always have the strongest appeal to her, and she spends her life trying to regain a measure of the joy she experienced then, or, as McCann would have it, she tries to go home (Cusatis, 2011, p. 158). Zoli, who realizes that she has been betrayed by both whites and Gypsies, admonishes herself for expecting too much from either: "Where happiness was not a possibility, the illusion of it was always more important" (McCann, 2006, p. 146).

Later on, when a journalist named David Smolenak mentions the name Zoli in the settlement to inquire about her, he is met with hostility: "I don't know that name," Boshor retorts, adding, "Do you understand me, fatneck?" (McCann, 2006, p. 11). This response sharply challenges the journalist's assumed moral superiority and, by extension, that of the race he represents. At the same time, Boshor's remark reveals the problematic sense of justice and the oppressive influence of tradition that fueled the Roma's enduring animosity toward Zoli. In the end, the very community that once celebrated her success becomes a site of rejection, leaving Zoli banished from the cultural heritage she once held dear.

### 5.3. THE STATE, POWER, AND PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY

The ultimate layer of silencing is imposed by the nation-state, assuming a patriarchal role. In this context, the woman, positioned as a citizen, encounters a dual marginalization, with the state acting as a perpetrator of both forms of societal marginalization. "Applied to the state, all state body politic becomes the women and the children under the man, who is the state" (Togarasei, 2022, P. 217). On one occasion, Zoli recalls the atrocities done by the state to the Romas. One fine evening, Conka's mother was apprehended by the Hlinka guards. They mock her for her extended fingernails, subject her to sexual assault, and brutally extract her fingernails. Zoli describes, "One held her arm. Another held the pliers. The nails came out one by one, though they left one little finger alone- they said it was so she could please herself if she got a Gypsy itch" (McCann, 2006, p. 45). She used her long fingernails to play the harp. The Hlinkas silenced the voice she used to express through the harp and yet imposed a voice of crying loud in pain, "Conka said it was not the pain that made her mother wail, but because she would never be able to pluck the harp again" (McCann, 2006, p. 46).

When the world war ends, the Roma people are fooled into the arrival of the "new tomorrow" (McCann, 2006, p. 63). It was the time when Roma were considered people worthy of inclusion in mainstream society. Zoli narrates,

The churches were used for food stations and sometimes we were allowed to stand first in line, we had never seen that before, it seemed a miracle. We were given identity cards, tinned meat, white flour, jars of condensed milk. We burned our old armbands. The soldiers called us Citizens and handed us cigarette cards. Films were shown, projected on the brick walls of the cathedral- how huge the faces looked, chonorroeja, on that wall. We had been nothing to the fascists, but now our names were raised up... The farmers no longer called us a pestilence. They addressed us by our formal names (McCann, 2006, p. 63).

Just as Stránsky had aimed to "put manners on" Zoli's poetry (McCann, 2006, p. 88), the government aims to refine the fiercely self-reliant Gypsies in ways that are unwelcome to them. Zoli and her compatriots harboured aspirations for a more promising future, a yearning that had persisted over centuries. However, the ensuing pages dispel this flickering hope as the state seizes control of their narrative, stifling their ability to express themselves. The introduction of the new Law 74 specifically targeting the Romas mandates their relocation to state-provided towers, signalling the abandonment of their nomadic lifestyle (McCann, 2006, p. 119; p. 127). Zoli, who has evolved into a cult figure (McCann, 2006, p. 113) for the Romas, reacts with a wry amusement to phrases like "Allow us to halt" and "The troubles of primitivism" (McCann, 2006, p. 114). Summing up her distress, she questions, "How is it that some people always know what is best for others?" (McCann, 2006, p. 119). The state's way of changing them and making them give up on their identity of being Roma is the extreme form of silencing. The state doesn't leave any space for them to be them: "Don't try to change us. We're complete. Citizens of our own space" (McCann, 2006, p. 127). Zoli's narrative of seventy years reveals a morally conflicted world into which the older woman was born.

As Zoli crosses unknowingly into Hungary, she marvels at the power of boundaries, yet another aspect of the authoritarian State; and the scene that follows underscores the novel's concern with both the irrationality of man's hatred and the unpredictability of fate: "Borders," she remarks, "like hatred, are exaggerated precisely because otherwise they would cease to exist altogether" (McCann, 2006, p. 198). Hiding from the border patrol, she wonders, "How many

dead bodies lie along these imaginary lines?" (McCann, 2006, p. 199). Suzanne M. (2016, p. 480) emphasizes that second-wave structural-feminist theory analyses how patriarchy has been maintained and reproduced through cultural ideology, laws, policies, and political, legal and social institutions.

In the end, the trauma revisits her when David Smolenak, the Slovakian journalist, introduces himself and is joined by Stephen Swann, Zoli feels as if the windows in the room have all closed, and her breathing sounds like that of "someone drowning" (McCann, 2006, p. 315), recalling her family's murder. She wishes the crowd would "part like water" (McCann, 2006, p. 317) so that she could escape. Cathy Caruth asserts that trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past" but only identified in "the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 1996, p. 174). Zoli tries, yet another attempt, to make herself free from all the shackles of restraints imposed on her. Arriving at Francesca's apartment she lets down her hair and stands naked, "all the ancient codes violated" (McCann, 2006, p. 321). By the end of Zoli's story, the combined forces of the state and her community have effectively silenced her, leaving her isolated, both as a Roma woman and as a poet.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Looking at *Zoli* (2006) by Colum McCann through the lens of trauma theory, feminist theory, and the complex socio-economic political history of the Roma community, this novel is an in-depth representation of individual and collective struggles. Zoli's identity formation and survival are deeply intermingled with a greater enclave of persecution and systemic marginalization of Roma. McCann masterfully displays the crossing currents of patriarchal structures in both Roma and Gadze; showing how these forces shape and often curtail Zoli's agency. As poet and singer, she navigates the treacherous tension between oral tradition and the written word, her voice alternately celebrated and silenced by outside forces. Her story is not only that of one woman but also symbolic, representing the voice of a community that has been marginalized and silenced within European history.

The analysis of Zoli's life underlines the duality of her existence. She is deeply rooted in her Roma heritage, with its patriarchal constraints and cultural expectations. On the one hand, she feels connected to an ancient world, while on the other hand, she is thrust into a very modern one where her artistic abilities are co-opted and manipulated by outsiders for political purposes. This duality creates ongoing tension as she seeks to reconcile her place in both worlds. Her character reflects the broader experiences of people from marginalized communities who stand at the intersection of tradition and modernity, always struggling to maintain their identity under external pressures. Additionally, the novel portrays how trauma in Zoli's life is layered. From the loss and displacement of her childhood through the systemic marginalization by both her own community and the state, Zoli's trauma is continuous, not confined to a single moment but a thread woven through her existence. It is not just personal trauma, but fundamentally political, as her story is shaped by the larger forces of fascism, socialism, and nationalism, all of which seek to define and control her identity. McCann invites readers to consider how trauma is lived and imposed by socio-political structures, emphasizing that individual suffering cannot be separated from broader systemic oppression.

It is here that the intersection of trauma and gender in the novel becomes particularly poignant. Zoli's experiences as a Roma woman highlight the compounded nature of her marginalization. Moving beyond the critique of patriarchal structures within her own community, the paternalistic state seeks to "civilize" and assimilate the Roma people, erasing their cultural identity in the process. Zoli's exile from her community, like her real-life counterpart Papusza, dramatizes the real costs of breaking with tradition and challenging authority. Her silence at the end of the novel is a powerful metaphor for the silencing of marginalized voices throughout history. In conclusion, McCann's *Zoli* is a complex narrative that invites readers to reflect on the intersections of identity, trauma, and marginalization. The novel poignantly critiques both the internal and external forces shaping Zoli's life and, by extension, the lives of marginalized communities. Through the character of Zoli, McCann explores the politics of voice and silence, showing how literature can serve as both an apparatus of empowerment and a tool of subjugation. The exploration of trauma, gender, and power dynamics ultimately challenges readers to consider how personal and collective histories are shaped by systemic forces, with survival and identity being an ongoing struggle for many marginalized groups.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.



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