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DOCTORAL THESIS

**THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN
IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES.
CORRESPONDENCES WITH THE ROMANIAN IMMIGRANT
EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA**

ABSTRACT

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**The Quest for Identity in Norwegian-American Immigrant Narratives.
Correspondences with the Romanian Immigrant Experience in America**

“We have become strangers; strangers to those we left and strangers to those we came to.”

(Rølvaag, *The Third Life of Per Smevik*, 1971, 126)¹

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the Norwegian and Romanian immigrants’ quest for identity, the difficulties it implies, the inner conflicts that appear during the assimilation process, as revealed by the immigrant narratives of the Norwegian writers Ole Edvart Rølvaag and Knut Hamsun and of the Romanian writer Anișoara Stan, each author having a different perspective on emigration. Correspondences between the Norwegian and Romanian emigration to America from its beginning until the end of the Second World War will further support the idea that the problems encountered by the immigrants on their way to adapting to a new cultural environment were rather similar.

The myth of the American dream has attracted millions to the New World with the promise of fulfilment, of achieving success through determination and hard work, no matter the origin, the

¹ Original text in Norwegian: “Vi er blitt fremmede. Fremmede er vi for det folk vi forlot, og fremmede er vi for det folk vi kom til.” (Rølvaag, *Amerika-breve fra P.A. Smevik til hans far og bror i Norge*, 1912, 171).

ethnicity, or the social-class of the one attempting to accomplish it. Although the promise of material plenty must have contributed greatly to its widespread appreciation, 'America' became synonymous with 'opportunity', luring immigrants from all over the world, particularly from Europe, with the promise of providing conditions for the individual's development, free from the restraints of class, or from the barriers typical of the Old World. Yet, the dream could neither be achieved by all, nor without struggle. As the immigrants stepped on American shores and began to face the challenges of dealing with a new language, new people, new mentalities, as they internalised the myth, it often lost its shine, leaving them prey to inner conflicts.

No matter how strong the incentive to emigrate, the phenomenon of migration leads to an identity crisis. Acculturation takes place, inevitably, at the convergence of the homeland culture and the culture which would eventually become dominant. Individual experiences or those of immigrant communities are different: as W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki mention in the acculturation theory they propose, we can meet the bohemian, who chooses to abandon the homeland culture and embraces the culture to which he emigrated, the philistine, who sticks to his homeland culture and does not succeed to adapt, but also the creative type, who successfully adapts to the new culture, but not giving up on his birth culture (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958, 1853-1854). However, even the immigrants who succeeded to adapt and not give up on their cultural heritage still faced inner conflicts and difficulties.

Until now, most research has focused on comparing similar ethnic groups, or related ethnic groups, but there are certain similarities even between immigrant communities that seem to be very different, which require our attention. Moreover, the social-scientific research, although rich and diverse, is often limited in its objectives as it focuses on single aspects of migration, such as the decision to leave, and fails "to capture the essence of what it is like to be a migrant; and be, or not be, part of a community, a nation, a society – cut off from history and from a sense of place. It fails to portray nostalgia, anomie, exile, rootlessness, restlessness." (King, Connell, and White, 1995, ix-x). Thus, the sociological research cannot illustrate the personal dimension of emigration. Migration literature comes to fill this void and fulfils at the same time a therapeutic function by enabling the immigrant writers to express their inner struggle, offering the immigrant readers reflections of their own experiences.

This thesis shows how identity became twofold in the case of Norwegian and Romanian immigrants in America as they no longer belonged to their homeland, while never really managing to adhere entirely to the New World. Moreover, this thesis attempts to look beyond the advantages of migration and the declared happy life in the New World and to see how much the immigrant narratives reflect the questions of identity and belonging.

Our research is innovative through its unique juxtaposition of three different authors, with different cultural backgrounds and immigrant experiences, particularly selected in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of what it feels like to be an immigrant in America.

Research Topic

In view of the perspectives presented above, this thesis focuses on identity with reference to immigration and culture, discussing the Norwegian immigrants' experiences in America and how immigration shaped their identities. From a methodological point of view, the analysis concentrates on the descriptions of the elements that make up one's cultural identity, on the sense of belonging as it is reflected in the narratives.

The present analysis does not claim focus on objectivity or on historical truth, but chooses instead to concentrate on the personal experience of migration. Our thesis should be approached with this in mind, starting from the premises that historical truth tries to serve objectivity, whereas fiction and other immigrant narratives make no such claims as they are expressions of subjective, personal views on migration.

There are several noteworthy contributions of our research that cover the gap in knowledge related to understanding immigration from two distinct viewpoints: the Norwegian, on the one hand, and the Romanian, on the other hand. Our language competence in Norwegian allowed us to read literature directly in Norwegian and, thus, to have a first-hand experience with the resources. Moreover, the historical perspective upon emigration represents the backbone of the thesis.

Previous studies of identity in migration literature have not sought correlations between immigrant narratives belonging to very different cultural backgrounds. We have initiated an in-depth study of the Norwegian and Romanian immigrant quest of identity in the nineteenth

century and the first half of the twentieth century as illustrated in migration literature, which is grounded in the historical perspective that illustrates correspondences between the two emigrations. Moreover, the present research provides additional evidence with respect to the way different ethnic groups perceived the immigration experience in America.

In order to provide background for our analysis of two different cultures, we have identified several points of convergence between the two countries for the period we have selected for our analysis, namely from the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War. The first refers to the marginality of the two worlds, as, geographically, both Norwegians and Romanians are inhabiting lands marginal to Europe, although at opposite ends. The geographical location has had influence on the development of culture in these areas, as elsewhere. Thus, being on the outskirts of the continent meant having limited access to the centre of Europe, and playing a less prominent role in the international context. Nevertheless, the fact that Norway is located in the western part of the continent, having a huge coastline was essential to its development, accounting for the earlier character of the Norwegian emigration, whereas Romania's eastern position, in the way of migratory peoples, as well as the limited access to the sea, were decisive for its fate. Moreover, Norway's physical features offered limited arable land for agriculture, a harsher climate, hence. The Romanians in the mountainous areas of Transylvania also faced such difficulties. In addition, the economic situation, one of the push factors of the emigration, was difficult in both lands. In Transylvania, however, the socio-political situation had an even greater importance, as Romanians were a tolerated nation, excluded from the government of the province, and therefore could not possess land, which generated additional difficulties in surviving. A second point of convergence is the political situation, as Norway had not been an independent state for hundreds of years, and the national consciousness awakened at the beginning of the nineteenth century was built throughout the one-hundred-year period, while Transylvania, the region of origin of the large majority of immigrants in America, was under foreign rule until the unification of Romania in 1918. Lastly, both countries had large rural populations, with strong rural traditions, which generated similar cultural patterns. This also entailed a close relation to nature and a strong appreciation and thirst for land, which provided the impetus for emigration for both nations. Thus, the economic and socio-political context of the two countries was highly relevant for how the emigration evolved.

Context

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in addressing issues related to multicultural societies. In a globalized world, identity is not confined within physical borders. It is dynamic, undergoing constant changes, and its many valences reveal the complexity of life experience. Although migration is a phenomenon as old as our species, its impact has never been greater due to its almost universal character, generating myriads of experiences and interpretations. Naturally, displacement and uprootedness cause questions of identity and belonging, and migration literature has become the means of expression for all those seeking a better understanding of emigration, completing the socio-historical perspective by focusing on the individual experience.

The importance of identity becomes even more prominent in the case of second- or third-generation immigrants. One such example is provided by the Norwegian TV series *Alt for Norge* (“All for Norway”), a production that involved Norwegian-Americans who returned to the homeland to discover their roots. The immigration experience of their forefathers more than a hundred years ago is brought to life through the very letters that have travelled for months from the New World to the Norwegian shores. The America letters that were the sole contact between members of the same family divided by the Atlantic Ocean are now used to create bonds between relatives living on different continents, raising awareness of the immigrant life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, revealing that the questions of identity and belonging are as valid today as they were in the 1900s. Furthermore, another dimension to consider when it comes to the visibility of our research topic is its relevance for understanding the multicultural society in which many of us live. When referring to Norway, “although the context and conditions can be very different in many ways, I believe that such things as uprooting, displacement and cultural conflicts in the new society have not changed that much for the people involved.”² (Kongslien, 1989, 14). The questions of identity, the immigrants’ need to belong are the same for the twenty-first century immigrants as they were for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries immigrants.

² Own translation from: “Sjølvs om omstenda og vilkåra på mange måtar kan vera ulike, trur eg at slike ting som å rive opp røtene, omplanting og kulturkonfliktar i det nye samfunnet ikkje har endra sef så mykje for dei menneska det gjeld.” (Kongslien, 1989, 14).

Method

In order to achieve our purpose, we make use of a theoretical framework constructed on an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates a sociological analysis of the concept of identity and a historical perspective on migration into a qualitative analysis of immigrant narratives. Thus, in our discussion on the questions of immigrant identity and belonging we closely analyse the selected immigrant narratives in order to render a mosaic picture of the immigrant experience stemming from a Norwegian-American and a Romanian-American perspective.

Choice of texts

Three authors have been chosen for analysis in order to render a comprehensive and diverse perspective upon immigration as it was experienced by individuals. Ole Edvart Rølvaag writes in Norwegian for the Norwegian-Americans illustrating their struggle to preserve their identity as he depicts the hardships encountered by a family of Norwegian settlers in Dakota in a saga-like series of four novels, translated into English in three volumes. He embodies the successful immigrant, since he had left Norway for America as a fisherman, and had succeeded in becoming university professor and writer. Knut Hamsun writes for the Norwegian and European audience after he returns from two unsuccessful attempts to bring poetry into the lives of his fellow Norwegian people who had chosen to leave the old continent for the New World. The book is a documentary-like account of America, abounding in bitter evaluations of the cultural and spiritual life of a society he could not understand and in which he could not fit in. Anișoara Stan intended to temporarily emigrate to America to ease her family's economic situation, but also to valorise the traditional folk art of her country, being determined to show that each of the peoples that make up America has a cultural heritage that is worth known and that can be used to bring cohesion and tolerance to a culturally-diverse environment. She eventually remained in America, and wrote the autobiography of a visionary that dreamt of achieving world peace through a better understanding of the diverse cultures.

Structure

Since this thesis focuses on various perceptions of the immigrant experience as they emerge from migration literature, with an additional historical overview of the Norwegian and Romanian immigration in America, its structure was designed to reflect this double perspective.

The first chapter opens our analysis by discussing the concepts of identity, cultural identity, ethnicity, and belonging in connection to immigration and migration literature. As the existing literature on the concept of identity in particular is extremely diverse, the first step is to explore the valences of the term which are appropriate for the immigrant experience in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, the elements pertaining to cultural identity and ethnicity are also analysed with reference to the American migration. The immigrants' sense of belonging is an important dimension in our discussion as it reveals the costs of emigration, the dual existence of the immigrants, who struggle to find their place in the adoptive country and realise they no longer belong to their homeland, nor to the new one. Finally, the concepts of identity and belonging are discussed in connection to immigrant narratives, that are analysed as reflections of immigrant experiences. Special attention is given to the role of migration literature in the study of emigration due to the personal perspective it illustrates.

The second chapter presents a consistent historical overview of the Norwegian and the Romanian emigration to America, focusing on identifying correspondences between the emigration from the two marginal European countries. After an introductory part that describes the wider European context of mass migration, the three subchapters focus first of all on the evolution of the emigration, with reference to the causes of the emigration, both socio-economic, demographic, and religious. The immigrant communities built by the two ethnic groups are also discussed, referring to the settlements they established, the immigrant organisations and their role, the churches and the schools, as well as the press. The last subchapter analyses the letters sent by the immigrants to the homeland, the so-called America letters, as we argue they need particular emphasis for a comprehensive discussion of migration. These letters are first-hand accounts on the immigrant experience which, despite their inherent dose of subjectivity, were considered by their readers as the most reliable sources of information, as they were written by people they knew. More than that, America letters speak of the hardships, the longing, the joys of immigrant life, revealing how the difficulty of adjusting to a new culture was common to all immigrants, no matter where they came from.

The role these letters played in the mass exodus to America is not to be overlooked, because they acted mostly as agents of emigration, convincing even the most suspicious that the

opportunities found in the New World exceed by far the ones from the Old World. Some of these letters, on the contrary, exacerbated the costs of the emigration, disclosing the hard work, the struggles, and the longing.

The following chapters focus on the three writers we have selected for our research. Two of them are Norwegian, as the focus of our thesis is Norwegian literature. It is also relevant to mention the fact that the Norwegian writers wrote their narratives in Norwegian, for the Norwegian-American community (Rølvaag), translating them into English soon after their publication in Norway, or for the Norwegians in the homeland, without the intention of translating them (Hamsun). We have quoted both versions for a more reliable perspective. Hence, the third chapter analyses two of Ole Edvart Rølvaag's books on the immigrant experience: the novel *Giants in the Earth* (1924-1925), which depicts the immigrant pioneer life on the Dakota prairie, and *Concerning Our Heritage* (1922), a collection of essays that reveal his belief that the Norwegian cultural identity, the cultural heritage needs to be preserved despite the desire to assimilate in the American culture. We also refer to *The Third Life of Per Smevik* (1912), the first volume Rølvaag published, as it completed the author's perception of the immigrant experience, as well as his strong attachment to his cultural heritage and to the Norwegian-American community.

Knut Hamsun is the second Norwegian writer discussed in our thesis. Hamsun made two voyages to America and experienced hardships, but did not succeed to integrate in the New World. However, his perspective on America and the status of the immigrant, different in many respects from that of Rølvaag's, is essential for a comprehensive overview of the immigrant experience as depicted in literature. Throughout the chapter we make reference to autobiographical data, as they come to enhance understanding of his immigrant experience. Thus, we concentrate on Hamsun's image of America as it emerges from *The Cultural Life of Modern America* (1889), a bitterly critic account of the cultural and spiritual life of the New World. Moreover, the American experience would exert influence on Hamsun's writing, so we chose to discuss some of the fiction he wrote, namely two sketches, "Fear" and "On the Prairie" (1903), illustrative for the years he spent in the American prairie. In addition, we trace his view on the American culture through some of his letters and the article ("Festina lente", 1928).

The immigrant experience that was illustrated by the Romanian writer Anișoara Stan comes to complete the multicultural tableau over the quest of identity revealed by our selection of immigrant narratives. Thus, we discuss Stan's *They Crossed Mountains and Oceans* (1947), the autobiography of a dreamer. Her perspective differs both chronologically, and culturally, as her experience was representative for that of most Romanians from Transylvania who left their traditional, rural milieus to settle in large industrial cities in America. Anișoara Stan is driven by her dream of promoting world peace thorough awareness of the cultural diversity of all peoples. Her autobiography illustrates in a somewhat romantic manner her love for the Romanian folk art and traditions, for the peasant that leads a peaceful existence, in harmony with nature and how the reminiscences of the Old World culture, as well as the preservation of the cultural heritage can bring cohesion within an immigrant community, making it distinct and appreciated in the larger American culture.

The narratives we analyse reveal that emigration in the 1900s was an experience that posed many challenges to those who ventured to unknown shores in pursuit of the American dream. Torn from the familiar surroundings of their homeland, separated from family and loved ones, the immigrants found themselves foreign in a foreign land, surrounded by foreigners of all cultures. As they started building their new life in the New World, their struggle was to find their place while trying not to lose their identity. In return, they gained a twofold identity that was both enriching and disquieting. If historians focused on offering objective accounts of what emigration entailed, writers told the personal stories of migration, completing the picture of a phenomenon that is inherent to human nature. In the end, we have gained a holistic perspective on the condition of immigrant in those times.

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