Summary of the PhD thesis

The representation of the communist dictatorship
in novels written by contemporary female authors from Romania.
Language, identity, memory

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Research topics and hypotheses

In my doctoral thesis, I have interpreted three contemporary novels in which the representation of the communist dictatorship in Romania plays a central role.

Since the era of state socialism started in 1948 and ended in 1989, it was necessary to narrow down the focus on a shorter period of time; I have chosen the 1970s and 1980s, the years called "epoca de aur" ["The Golden Age"] in communist propaganda. The last two decades of the dictatorship were dominated by the Ceaușescu couple's cult of personality, brutal oppression against any form of dissidence, the presence of the secret services Securitate in both public and private life, as well as an economic crisis which caused severe precarity and scarcity of products of everyday necessity.

I have no direct experience of this era, however, for many years I have been very curious about the events that took place in the 1970s and 1980s, and the memories of the people who lived then. One of the central questions in my research approaches the ways we can learn about a past era indirectly, through testimonial narratives and artistic interpretations. Therefore, in my thesis I have followed the relation between historical events and their representation in fiction, and, with the instruments of discourse analysis, I reflected upon the modalities of how the image of an era is constructed in collective memory.

When I started gathering information from different sources and selecting the fictional texts to work on, I have noticed that many novels, graphic novels, children's books published between 2010 and 2021, as well as movies, plays, series of photographs and illustrations from these years were dealing with the "Golden Age" of Romanian communism, even museums were opened to present this era. The approach of the times of the dictatorship varies from the expression of constant fear and threat to nostalgic, even amusing interpretations. This topic is very popular both among artists and their audience. Considering that over thirty years have

passed since the fall of the regime, I was wondering what the origin of this lively interest could be. My first hypothesis is related to this situation: I supposed that in Romania, the public discourse (politics, official press, historiography) does not offer sufficient answers to the questions regarding the "Golden Age" of communism. Therefore, the need to process the events of this era loaded with many conflicts is manifested in subjective forms, and the audience resonates with the artistic representations of the "Golden Age", since people are looking for coherent narratives that could give a sense to their own past or the one of their parents, grandparents (depending on which generation they belong to).

My second hypothesis is based on the approach of discourse analysis and reflects upon the different media of remembering historical events. Throughout my analysis, I argued that literary texts construct a fictional framework, which becomes a space of imagination, of play, of possibilities – and a safe space to address different issues, to feel and process intense emotions. If we observe the past through the prism of literature, paying attention to our reactions and feelings, we can empathise with the fictional characters and we can understand events and situations instead of judging them.

This aspect seems important to me, because the era of communist dictatorship, whenever remembered, brings up intense rage, hate, fear and disgust, and this shows us that many people have conflicts related to this time. These tensions originate in the need for safety, because it is essential for our survival that we know the (physical and cultural) space we live in. For me it was crucial that my research would be useful for the community I belong to, and I would like to contribute to a healthy dialogue and to the processing of these emotions. For this, it is necessary to look with honesty at the problems exposed in the novels I have chosen to analyse. I have formulated the third hypothesis concerning these issues: I think that these literary works are popular and wake a nearly obsessive interest in many readers because they approach problems that are still prevailing (even acutely so) in our community. Such issues are sexism, the tensions related to traditional family models, homophobia, corruption, the culture of violence and silence, or dramatic experiences of migration.

Selecting the research material

The material selected for analysis consists of *Herztier* [*The Land of Green Plums*] by Herta Müller, *ca şi cum nimic nu s-ar fi întâmplat* [*as if nothing had happened*] by Alina Nelega and *A hóhér háza* [*The Hangman's House*] by Andrea Tompa. I have chosen these works for several

reasons. All three novels were published after 1989, which means that they provide a more distanced perspective towards the represented historical era. This allows us to shift from immediate reaction and judgement towards deeper knowledge and understanding. The novel as a genre presents the events and the characters' development on a longer period of time, so the reader has the occasion to observe changes and build up a more complex image about the fictional universe.

Another reason why I have decided to write about novels is that I consider this is currently the most popular genre. As I have mentioned before, I find it important that my research would be relevant for as many people as possible, and the chosen texts probably reach many readers – even more so because the authors were awarded prizes that brought them great visibility in the public space: Herta Müller won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2009, Alina Nelega was awarded the prize for prose of the magazine *Observator Cultural* in 2020 and the Sofia Nădejde Prize for female authors in 2021, while Tompa Andrea won prestigious prizes in Hungary (Artisjus Prize in 2014, Libri Prize in 2017) and Poland (Natalia Gorbaniewska Award in 2017), and she is a prominent public intellectual in the Hungarian cultural life.

I have chosen novels written by women. Doing so, I did not aim to identify features or techniques of "feminine writing", because their definition seems to me rather vague, but to concentrate on the activities which are traditionally considered "feminine" and, as a result, are granted less visibility in the public space, especially in historiography, which is the enumeration of men's apparently heroic deeds. In the chosen novels, reproductive work is represented: household chores, childcare, emotional labour, as well as creative solutions found by women in crisis situations which are often forgotten. Therefore, the everyday life, simple events which took place in marginal spaces are at the core of the novels, instead of emblematic turning points of history occurred in iconic locations. This gives a more detailed image of the represented era, and our knowledge of it becomes more personal.

I have chosen three novels written in three different languages. On one hand, I wanted to work on a corpus which would mirror the multiculturality of Transylvania. On the other hand, I intended to highlight the experience of minorities. This aspect is obviously present in the case of Herta Müller and Andrea Tompa, since they come from minoritarian communities from Romania. In Alina Nelega's novel there are some characters who belong to ethnic minorities (Hungarians, Romani people, Saxons, Jewish people), or sexual minorities, as well as people living with disabilities. As one of the characters points out, even women can be considered a minority, because this category is not necessarily related to number, but rather to power. Therefore, my interpretation involves an intersectional perspective which defines identity as a

sum of many different factors (nationality, ethnicity, language, social class, language, religion, sexual orientation etc.). This is relevant in understanding life under dictatorship, because the people who belong to several minorities at the same time, are always the most vulnerable to oppression, discrimination and precarity.

Theoretical framework and research methods

The issue of understanding the past and processing it in a fictional space, among the three hypotheses I have presented above, gave the main outline in the interpretation of the three novels. In the chapter dedicated to the theoretical framework, I have presented some topics which were crucial in my analysis, as well as ideas which guided me while carrying it out.

The three notions highlighted in the subtitle of my thesis – language, identity and memory – are the keywords of my work. This is why the most important theory I have based my research on is that of cultural memory, as it appears in the books by Ian and Aleida Assmann, because these authors explain the interdependence of these three notions. They define memory as a collective and communicative process, constructed in speech and writing, i.e. in language. At the same time, identity is anchored in language and memory, because while selecting the events we remember and talking about them, our values are crystalised, and through them we can develop a sense of belonging to a community and of course also delimit ourselves from certain groups. However, language also allows us to reframe events and reconfigurate memory, making us able to overcome trauma and build a new identity through healing commun(icat)ion with those around us. Language is the environment of processing the past and constructing collective memory by outlining the image of past eras.

As I have mentioned, I aimed to focus on marginal events and narratives. This brought me to the concept of oral history, used in ethnography and historiography. This consists in recording and analysing interviews with people who tell about their life experiences, constructing a coherent narrative of their own biography and, at the same time, recalling historical events they have witnessed or in which they have participated, from an intimate perspective. I have transposed this model on the interpretation of fiction. This means that in my thesis I focus on the everyday life and the way in which major historical changes or decisions can impact simple people. Furthermore, I have concentrated on text passages which describe immediate perception and embodied experience (i.e. sensations in the body, visual, olfactive or tactile images). These are often extremely difficult to articulate in language – however, they grant us access to the

depths of human experience, to our understanding of the environment and the self, as well as the ways we are able to process trauma. Trauma is a key concept in my thesis, since it is dedicated to the representation of a dictatorship which violated the individual boundaries, penetrating even the bodies of citizens.

Other theoretical approaches of my research are related to the spatial turn and affective turn. I have paid special attention to the spaces in which the action of the novels takes place. First and foremost, there are many everyday spaces, which, according to Henri Lefebvre, would deserve more attention, since we spend most of our time in such places. Through observing the description of these spaces, I tried to understand and imagine the everyday life during the 1970s and 1980s in Romania. Another aspect of my analysis is the interpretation of spaces as metaphors or projections of emotions and mental processes. For instance, in Alina Nelega's novel we can follow how dictatorship contaminates the cities, the apartments, the cultural institutions, but even the landscape, the nature and the wildlife. In *The Hangman's House* the spaces embody the omnipresence of oppression and the suffocating nature of dictatorship.

Affective turn is a tendency in art studies and social sciences which highlights the role of emotions in the construction of narratives and identities. Spatial turn and affective turn meet in the theory of affective and narrative cartography, which views spaces as recipients of emotions which, at the same time, shape those spaces.

The main method of my text interpretation was the inductive one: in the first phase, I read the chosen novels several times, paying attention to the narrative structure, the metaphors and the representation of the dictatorship. Afterwards, I read reviews and theoretical texts, looking for connections between other authors' observations and my own perspective. The greatest challenge was to find balance between my subjective views and the theoretical framework, so that the interpretation doesn't become arbitrary, but is not dominated by the theory either.

Interpretation of the three novels

In the three main chapters of my thesis, I discussed the chosen novels, regarding their reception and the theoretical aspects sketched above.

In the case of *Herztier* [*The Land of Green Plums*] by Herta Müller, the main theme was language. The author is well-known for her original style and reflects in many works on the way in which dictatorship impacts the use of language. In *Herztier*, language appears to be occupied by the power which misuses it and reduces it to the level of a mere instrument, restricting the freedom of expression. In the fictional world, oppression is materialised in an

omnipresent state of fear, constantly threatening and endangering life. The protagonist of the novel can only survive this permanent anxiety through a counter-language: she looks for words which she can free from the clockwork of oppression, building up a safe space.

Furthermore, her narration is a testimony, keeping alive the memory of the victims of the dictatorship. The novel presents the biography of the protagonist's closest friends, who lost their lives because of the brutality of the regime. In order to tell these stories, Herta Müller invents her own language, full of images which encapsulate and process the trauma experienced during those hard times. Therefore, in this chapter I referred to translation in a wider sense, meaning the transposition of hardly expressible emotions into intelligible language.

In order to take a deeper look on the representation of dictatorship in Herta Müller's work, I completed this chapter with an excursus about the narrative cartography of the Banat region, as it appears in her essays and short stories. Here I wrote about the rural environment and the descriptions of family, which become a miniature of dictatorial regimes. The urban spaces are suffocated in fear and lack of trust, however, there is a resistance against oppression.

As for Alina Nelega's novel, the core theme was identity. I consider this text a feminist intersectional novel, because it depicts oppression from the viewpoint of ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as of marginalised communities, giving a voice to silenced narratives and contributing to the process of understanding an era full of conflicts and changes. In my thesis, I discussed the crises faced by the characters in their personal lives, but also on a community and even on a state level. These crises occur in the first place in the expression of individual identity: the protagonists are two lesbian women who go through a deep interior conflict because of sexism and (internalised) homophobia, finding different survival strategies. The whole community is impregnated by a culture of silence and violence, which provokes fissures in family models and small groups. The state's authority imposes uniformization in the name of equality, hence Transylvanian multiculturality is reduced to a mere appearance, masking the crisis of communication between different groups and the lack of knowledge about other cultures. The state itself goes through a crisis, which culminates in the revolution mentioned at the last scenes of the novel – leaving the reader with the question if this event, considered a major historical turning point has really succeeded to overcome the crises, or they are still present in our everyday life in the region. Alina Nelega's novel constructs a complex subversive discourse, rethinking gender roles, family models, and deconstructing stereotypes which define to this day our personal and public communication.

In *A hóhér háza* [*The Hangman's House*] by Andrea Tompa the key notion was memory. The protagonist of this novel explores the past of her community in order to construct her own

identity, becoming aware of the patterns in history and family. I aimed to understand the ways in which local historical events are recalled, thus I observed the relationship between documentation and fiction. The everyday objects, such as clothing items or groceries, are reconstructed in fiction with photographical precision. However, they are not only important as the traces of a past era, like museum exhibits, but also as metaphors which structure the process of rememorating. Similarly, the places where the action unfolds, can be identified with real locations, but are also transformed into projections of emotions and mindsets.

In my analysis I focused on the ways of structuring time while recalling the past: in the constant flow of events, experienced moment by moment, the occurrences which change the course of history can only be identified later on, once they are concluded, and, more importantly, once they are processed in community, in a coherent discourse. This structure anchored in language is actually what we call history, or the representation of history in fiction.

In Andrea Tompa's novel the tension is constructed between narration and silence, because certain traumas are hard to put into words. Therefore, the fictional framework offers alternatives of processing them, such as releasing these emotions through movement or in a meditative state. *The Hangman's House* is a remarkable novel because its flowing, dynamic rhythm of narration, and the texture of language used which expresses the polyphony of minoritarian identities. The reader is fascinated by the ability of this novel to express joy and vital energy despite the underlying trauma.

Conclusions

After a close look on the three novels, I returned to the initial questions which catalysed my research, and I evaluated the hypotheses.

Regarding the possibilities of getting to know the past, the focus of my analysis has shifted from the case study of the 1970s, 1980s' Romania towards a more general reflection upon the modalities of talking about the past. This is to say, instead of looking at fiction as the representation of actual events, it seemed more important to me to analyse how the image of the era is constructed in collective and cultural memory. The three main topics – language, identity, and memory –, as well as the model of cultural memory, the instruments of interpreting oral history and discourse analysis have proven extremely useful research tools.

As for the still prevailing nature of the issues touched in the three novels, I have come to the conclusion that these can also be seen in a wider, more general context, because they are linked

to universally present human needs. Therefore, the representation of the dictatorship highlights values such as freedom, trust, belonging to a community, love, and dignity, since their lack becomes acutely painful under extreme circumstances. This is why the novels can be read as testimonies which enhance us to appreciate these things as long as we still have them, and support us to recognise the events of any era which put them in danger.

The purpose of my thesis was to serve my community, so that there can be a dialogue about past events. As I have formulated in one of my hypotheses, fiction offers a safe space in which we can look at issues from a certain distance, which permits us to understand them instead of judging them or their actors. At the same time, throughout my research I have assessed that fictional texts are an inexhaustible resource of imagination, which can reveal many solutions and strategies of surviving hard times. The most important of these is present in all three novels: the protagonists choose to tell their own story, constructing their inner freedom through creativity, testimonial writing and expression.

Keywords: post-socialist literature, language, identity, cultural memory, history novel, feminine perspectives

Table of contents of the thesis

I. Introduction

IV. Patterns of memory and the processing of the past in *A hóhér háza* [*The Hangman's House*] **by Andrea Tompa**