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## **PhD THESIS**

TRAUMATIC AFFECTS IN THE POST-COMMUNIST  
ROMANIAN LITERATURE OF MIGRATION

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## Summary

The fall of the communist regime causes a period of significant restructuring, especially at the political and economic level. Once with the global scale of capitalism, an international division of labor is being formed and it becomes specific to neoliberal countries. On the background of anti-communist attitudes and of the need for individual freedom – of movement, circulation and expression –, Romanians choose the path of the West out of certain personal or individual ideals of evolution and prosperity, which, in the post-communist economic-social system of the country, cannot be achieved. However, the path towards more developed Western countries/economies does not prove to be an easy one, especially in the global context before 2007, when Romania was not yet an integrated part of the European Union, and citizens did not have the right to a complete freedom of movement and social integration within western countries or overseas. Emigration, therefore, becomes a source for identity crises, as well as for the breakup of millions of Romanian families, which suffer because of the departure of at least one of their members.

Assumed as a thematic representation within national literature, the integration of the social reality of post-communist migration in the area of aesthetics facilitates both the shaping and the transmission of its authentic imaginary. Due to the exposure of the cases of economic or academic emigration, the Romanian literature (of migration) achieves a global character, as it outlines realistic places and transnational movements within the literary works. The situations of migration – individualized or collective – are placed at the literary level in destinations of adoption, thus forming, in an overall vision, an entire *affective geography*<sup>1</sup> of the post-communist literature of migration.

Even if the number of literary texts that thematize the social aspects of post-revolutionary migration is still a reduced one, if related to the social phenomenon, they deserve a broader attention from the specialized studies. Since the resurrection of affective studies is also a topic of actuality, their transfer in the direction of the post-communist literature of migration offers a psychological, humanizing perspective on literary examples of emigration. *The Affective Turn*, with application in the field of migration literature, denotes the “binomial” of the affect that is formed at the level of a migratory entity, through the connection between

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History*, London, New York, Verso, 2005.

the body in transnational movement and the mind that experiences identity ruptures and personal crises.

Generally considered melodramas, in the research that addresses the subject, literary works that thematize post-communist migration designate a dramatic background. Whether it is personal/individual or collective dramas, from my point of view, this affective substrate can be seen beyond the simple appearance. This implies a more involved reading of the literature of migration, in terms of the traumatic effects that migration causes, because the process transposes those who leave into a proletarian imaginary in which they face the violation of their legal rights, with difficulties in identity adaptation, as well as with the affective distancing from home, elements that definitively mark their evolutionary path. Whether they are directly exposed by subjective narrative voices or deduced through other elements specific to literary prose, the traumatic affects of emigration are present at the level of dedicated literature. Seeing trauma as an affect represents a singular conceptual perspective, which helps investigating the way the migrant entity relates to identity splitting, as well as to the change of the social position.

Thus, the literary analysis of the thesis begins with the autobiographical narrative of Liliana Nechita (*Bitter Cherries*), as well as with that of Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli (*The Unread Testament..*), which both become writings of the trauma of female emigration, since they expose, on the background of personal experience and suffering, both the social universe of the immigrant carer in Italy, decisive from the point of view of peripheral positions, and the family universe in the country, marked by the abandonment trauma. Their works attest the proletarian and peripheral imaginary that the female migrant faces in Western society. The peripheral status of Eastern European workers, as well as the differences in economic and social development between the two countries, accentuate the traumatic framework of uprooting, family separation, and multiple identity crises.

Taking over striking elements of the post-communist social reality, determined by the massive emigration of women and, respectively, of mothers, the (post)2000s Romanian literature registers several fictionalizations of the phenomenon. One of the Romanian authors who focuses on this social background is Dan Lungu. In *The Little Girl Who Played at being God*, the binary narrative structure reflects both the story of the mother, who suffers from the *badante* peripheral position in Italy, as well as that of Rădița, the little girl who remained in the country, traumatically marked by her mother's departure to work abroad.

A similar narrative evolution is offered to the characters in Lilia Bicec's novel, *Boomerang*. Left in the care of the alcoholic father, the daughter misses the maternal figure, taking over her duties along the way. The father's irresponsibility causes serious material

shortages, which the two children experience through hunger, cold and unsanitary living conditions. This time, the father's incestuous abuses are more emphasized than in Lungu's novel, the narrative option also illustrating a continuation of the children's journey in Italy, together with their mother.

The social image of the abandoned children as a result of economic emigration also appears in *Kinderland*, Liliana Corobca's novel. The work exposes a "universe of children" deeply affected by parental migration. The subjective narrative voice of the protagonist illustrates the traumatic implications of abandonment, rendered, this time, from the singular perspective of the child who becomes a parental substitute and who also suffers especially affective deficiencies due to the absence of parents, whose return to the country is only illusory.

Post-communist Romanian literature also addresses the social reality of the "white orphans" through the literary formula of short stories. The one who illustrates this phenomenon is, again, Liliana Nechita, in the collective volume of stories *The Mud Doll*. Through several stories, each one being attributed to a child who experiences maternal or parental abandonment, Nechita fictionally transposes multiple traumas they face.

At the same time, the option for short prose in the literary illustration of the dystopian reality of (e/i)migration also belongs to Daniela Rockhoff. The author exposes the proletarian universe of Romanians who work unskilled in the German adoption space. The volume *The Strawberry Pickers* becomes a fictional set of traumatic stories, which circumscribe a realistic imaginary of Romanian immigration in the agricultural field.

At the level of national literary production, economic migration, of cheap, unskilled labour, has a greater representativeness than academic migration. However, the chapter dedicated to male migration captures (self-)fictionalizations of both phenomena, as both Radu Pavel Gheo and Bogdan Suceava expose their migratory path. In the autobiographical novel *Farewell, Farewell, My Homeland: With î From i, With â From a*, R. Pavel Gheo transposes his identity and adaptation issues to a completely unknown context. The hyper-developed American space is placed, for the authorial ego, in a strong contrast to the Romanian one, which has just passed through the straps of the former system. Marked by the traumatic reality of economic emigration, he thematizes the subject in the fiction *Good Night, Children!*. The novel exposes the dramatic story of three young people, originally from the Banat area, who illegally emigrate to the United States to solve their material deficiencies, and also to achieve their ideals of professional evolution.

As for the autobiographical account of Bogdan Suceavă, *Avalon. The Secrets of Happy Emigrants*, this illustrates the author's academic journey in the American space. Although it

creates an appearance of the well-being of Western emigration, the text captures experiences or events that betray the split and identity crisis of the confessional self. In the form of a fictionalized diary of emigration, Suceavă exposes the difficulties of adaptation to the American academic system, as well as those of becoming an integral part of it.

A special case is represented by Cătălin Dorian Florescu, who thematizes emigration in the form of a dystopia of what initially promises to be an American utopia. The autobiographical inspiration of personal emigration can be found in the case of the novel *The Time of Wonders*, in which the author inserts certain autofictional core. The American topos is prefigured as a destination of emigration in the novels *The Man Who Brings Happiness* and *Zaira*. Although it is illustrated as a multicultural and cosmopolitan universe, the American space remains an illusory destination, which reveals its traumatic aspects during its discovery.

Post-communist Romanian literature captures other hypostases of the dissolution of Western mirages. The Swiss space is predominantly in the diary work signed by Mirel Bănică, *Fake Diary of Strawberry Picker*, in which the author presents his autobiographical experience of academic migration. Even if, initially, the reason for leaving the country is to continue his master's/doctoral studies, the daily and economic difficulties in the Western space determine the young researcher to work in the field of unskilled work.

Albert V. Cătănuș presents, in *El sueño español*, the proletarian universe of economic emigration, as well as the dissolution of the Western mirage prefigured in the Iberian space. Through anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist visions, the subjective narrative voice criticizes both Spanish society and immigrants from different corners of the world, who sacrifice their dignity and integrity in exchange for (more) significant remuneration. The traumatic context in which most migrant entities find themselves also turns the “Spanish dream” into a dystopian one.

A similar imaginary of the migrant social class is outlined in Adrian Schiop's autofiction, *Zero degrees Kelvin*. Through the autobiographical account of the New Zealand migration experience, Schiop offers an additional sample of what illegal immigration entails, in the marginalized sphere of unskilled work. The ephemerality of the mirage of emigration materializes in a failure that the narrative instance feels/declaims.

As a fictional option of the disillusionment of emigration to Western European countries, Ioana Baetica Morpurgo's novel, *The Immigrants*, is representative. With a special narrative structure, Baetica Morpurgo creates a fiction in which multicultural Britain becomes the central universe of transnational migration.

In order to emphasize, within the research, other manifestations of the traumatic effects of emigration, in the last part of the thesis were included two case studies of the exile, dedicated to the analysis of the works of Aglaja Veteranyi and Sanda Nițescu, respectively. Thus, Veteranyi's autofictional novels, *Why the Child Boils in Polenta* and *The Shelf with the Last Breaths*, are established as interconnected autofictions of the same autobiographical migratory process. For Sanda Nițescu, on the other hand, the existence of an immigrant in the French space materializes through identity crises manifested at the gastronomic level. The autofictions *A Dill Thread and the Blue Sky* and *Café* capture, in different ways, affective geographies of Paris, in which the elements of the culinary sphere become true identity landmarks.

The thesis proposes, as a whole, a (re)visiting of the post-communist literature that thematizes (economic) migration from the point of view of the affective-traumatic implications it produces at the level of the (e/i)migrant self, ground by identity crises and adaptation difficulties born especially because of the marginalized position in the adoption societies. The post-communist Romanian literature of migration offers, through the specificity of the subject it thematizes, a global character to the national literature, which settles in a special place within transnational literatures, by bringing literary samples of international circulation and movement processes.

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