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**“THE ONLY ROLE AVAILABLE TO YOU IS TO CONFORM”:
WOMEN’S MIGRATION STORIES**

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Abstract: *this paper sets out to discuss the situation of Romanian migrant women as represented in their stories. A major issue the paper broaches is the degree of agency and choice migrant women enjoy and the strategies they seek to expand them. Other topics discussed refer to the dominant migration ideology in the source country as well as the restrictions writers have in dealing with more problematic aspects.*

Keywords: *agency, Eastern Europe migrant women, Romania.*

Introduction

Romania is currently experiencing an unprecedented wave of emigration, the largest in its history. Landmarks for dramatic increases in emigration were 2001, when the visa requirement for Romanian citizens travelling to the Schengen area was abolished, and 2007, when Romania

joined the EU (Sandu 2006, 2010). Out of a total of 19 million, which is the estimated figure for the population of Romania, more than 3 million are living and working abroad (Dragulin 2011:97). The percentage of women among those involved in this process was initially lower than that of men but has caught up with it in the past few years. Thus, the percentage of women among Romanians going abroad to work has tripled since 2001 and presently stands at 55% of all Romanian migrant workers (Sandu 2010). A large number of women migrants come from rural areas and are young, low-skilled workers, whereas women from urban areas tend to be more highly qualified and older. The job that the less skilled workers most frequently hold is that of domestic worker (60%) – cleaning houses or taking care of the elderly or of children (Sandu 2006:23). Workers in agriculture – what is widely known as “căpșunari” (strawberry pickers) – make up only 15% of migrants. The rest of the 100% are highly skilled workers in a variety of fields ranging from medicine, business and computer science to architecture (Dragulin 2011:97-100).

Most of the research studies of Romanian migration lack any gender dimension; it is mainly via the media or more recently in narratives posted on the internet that we are offered a fuller description of women’s experiences of dis- and relocation in host countries. Widely read women’s journals such as *Formula AS* have been publishing letters on the plight of being a Romanian emigrant and bemoaning the fact that no matter how hard a Romanian woman may try to integrate into the society of the host country, she still faces exclusion and discrimination.

Another category of letters and articles in the press is represented by the so-called “success-stories” frequently published in glossy magazines such as *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan* or the Romanian journal *Unica*, which tend to

foreground the glamorous aspects of the experience of highly skilled women working abroad. In the case of these successful women, migration is no longer a mere survival strategy but the result of a desire for mobility (Laliotou 2007:51). Access to the job market is facilitated by educational opportunities, such as scholarships to pursue Master's or doctoral degrees in Western countries. A new wave of success stories has begun to appear in on-line journals and forums, addressing issues of migration and enlisting a transnational audience located in the various host countries in the EU, Canada, the USA and Australia as well as in Romania.

Transnational experiences of migrants have increasingly become a favourite topic for fiction, displacing the earlier obsession with Romania's experiences during the socialist period. Fictional narratives, many of them written by migrant writers, can be looked upon as responses to transnational experiences as well as attempts to re-write and make cultural sense of the large number of non-fictional narratives that have been accumulating in the media and on the net.

This paper sets out to compare online non-fictional narratives with fictional ones, both dealing with Romanian women's migration. With regard to the online stories, emphasis will be placed on those posted on UK diaspora forums such as *Români în UK* and *Români online în UK* or in the online journal *Confluente*, where an interesting diary – "Jurnalul londonez" (*London Journal*) is posted. As for fictional stories, I will be concentrating on Ioana Baetica Morpurgo's novel *Imigranții* (The Immigrants) with some references to Aura Imbarus's autobiographical story *Out of the Transylvania Night* and to other novels written by East European migrant writers. I will be arguing that the audience the stories are addressed to (and indirectly the language the story is told in) play a decisive role in the attitude adopted towards the migration experience and in the value placed on the challenges and opportunities it offers.

Secondly, fictional and non-fictional stories will be considered in terms of their handling of major issues in transnational migration, such as citizenship, agency and empowerment, the desire to return to one's home country, and the utopian desires associated with the West.

Women authors writing on migration

One important element that the non-fictional and fictional stories discussed in this paper have in common is the fact that they are written in Romanian and are designed for Romanian audiences. Thus, they are different from stories written in English by diaspora women writers living in the USA, such as Domnica Radulescu (*Train for Trieste*) or Aura Imbarus (*Out of the Transylvania Night*), or in French and English as with Canada-based Felicia Mihali. Mention could also be made of Gabriela Melinescu writing in French, Leyana Galis in Italian and Alina Diaconu in Spanish. Morpurgo shares her ground with other Romanian writers belonging to the diaspora (Dani Rockhoff, Bogdan Suceava, Sanda Golopentia, and to some extent Mirela Roznoveanu) who live and work in Western countries but continue to write in Romanian for a Romania-based audience. At the same time, the category of stories written in Romanian also exhibits significant variation depending on the audiences targeted: the online stories are written for transnational communities of Romanian migrants or pre-migrants, whereas Morpurgo's novel is addressed to an audience that is only tangentially transnational as it is made up of a readership living in Romania.

It is the contention of this paper that the location (geographical or media: online or offline) from which the transnational stories are produced has important effects on the narrative and the ideological positions adopted in these migration stories. Life stories published in Romanian for a Romanian public represent the migration from altogether different

perspectives than is the case with stories representing Romanian migration to an American audience. Morpurgo, writing for a Romanian audience located in Romania, is faced with different challenges from, for example, Aura Imbarus, who has to win over a “foreign” audience and meet the expectations of the American fiction market. Morpurgo does not have to comply with the convention, widely accepted in the USA, of presenting migration as a journey of acculturation and assimilation. Nor is she under pressure to make her voice legitimate vis-a-vis other American writers (whether they belong to ethnic minorities or not).

At the same time, the differences in the medium in which the narratives are made public are as important as those produced by different cultural locations: a life story posted on a forum for an audience who will provide immediate feedback and who may well expect to derive psychological and moral support from it differs radically from fictional narratives published off-line to a traditional, more heterogeneous and non-interactive public.

What topics and areas of concern do fictional and the non-fictional online narratives have in common? One cluster of issues can be grouped under the heading of citizenship. There is widespread complaint in all women’s narratives that women migrants in Europe are treated as second class citizens and that the universal rights guaranteed by European citizenship are not applied to Romanian citizens living and working outside Romania. The recent anti-migration discourses in such countries as the UK, France and the Netherlands have led to the racialisation of Romanian migrants in the EU, their being discriminated against in the job market and by government organs being a blatant transgression of EU norms. Romanian women share this position with women from Ukraine and Moldova. As they are associated with poverty and poor countries, they are treated worse than workers from Poland or Lithuania and are considered “not quite white”.

Women writing to journals such as *Formula AS* often stress their low social status in the host country, describing it as that of servants: "suntem slugi la străini" ('we are servants to strangers'). Frustration and resentment caused by the injury done to both their self-esteem and their sense of national pride are recurrent in all types of migrant narratives.

Lavinia, the author of the online *London Journal*, is particularly disappointed with the British authorities, who seem to give priority to non-EU immigrants, whereas she, an EU citizen, has to wait months on end to receive the longed-for NINO [National Insurance number] and thus be able to work in the UK.

Morpurgo's characters similarly emphasise the restricted agency available to them in the host country, where they feel relegated to a subordinate position. As a Romanian in the UK "the only role available to you is to conform, not to change anything," admits one of Morpurgo's characters, Maria (Morpurgo 2011:187). Sabina, a domestic worker in the novel, though she takes devoted care of her employer, cannot overcome the stigma attached to being a migrant. Even Traian, the successful broker working in the City, suffers from negative stereotyping; he is called either Dracula or a communist by his British-born colleagues. The positions of inferiority the women in this novel find themselves in affect their chances of success. The only viable alternative accessible to them is to put their bodies up for sale – either as orientalised wives of exotic beauty (Maria), as domestic workers (Sabina) or as sexual workers (Alina). The very mentioning of one's nationality is traumatic, as Maria confesses:

I have already reached the third stage in stating my citizenship. The first stage lasted a little more than a year after my arrival to the UK: I used to say I was Romanian with a certain pride. I don't remember why. During the second brief

stage, when somebody asked me I would answer apologetically, as if I was sorry I had to admit to where I came from. Now as I said, I have reached the third stage, where I take my: “I am from Romania” out of my pocket like a knife and wave it defensively in front of whoever happens to be inquiring. “I am from Romania, so what?! Do you have a problem with that?!” (Morpurgo 2011:142)

Maria thinks that Romanian migrants will forever be mere “venetici” (a derogatory term for ‘strangers’) who “keep knocking at the honeyed doors of Western Europe and will not be let in” (Morpurgo 2011:187).

No significant differences regarding the issue of acknowledging one’s national identity can be found in non-fictional online stories. Laura in the forum *Români online UK* similarly admits that “I am looked at as a stranger here in the UK, everywhere I go, because I *am* a stranger”. Ruxandra Trandafiroiu quotes another female participant in the forum discussion as stating that “I have been avoiding confessing that I am a Romanian because the reaction is so great” (Trandafiroiu 2013:67). However, complaints about second class citizenship and the discriminatory treatment of Romanians do not fare well in online forums, which endorse the assimilationist and even racialising dominant discourse of the host country. The online community of such forums tends to dismiss complaints as symptoms of failure in the process of integration. Individual grievances vented by some participants are often dismissed as the result of the migrants’ own moral or intellectual inadequacy.

Interestingly, Aura Imbarus, the author of *Out of the Transylvania Night*, adopts a similar position towards success or failure in integration. The narration of her life story as an immigrant in America has to compel the audience’s belief in a context in which, as Sidonie Smith has pointed out, life stories that are critical of the American reality stand fewer chances of

acceptance than do assimilationist stories, where immigrants refashion themselves as new American citizens. (Smith 2012:106). It is fiction addressing a public “back home”, like Morpurgo’s novel, which can afford the “luxury” of being critical of both the Western host society and the dominant ideology of migration in the country of origin.

For all the dwelling on discrimination and second class citizenship, fictional and non-fictional narratives share a persistent positive assessment of the act of migration. The stories insist over and again that success in the host country is possible, that everyone “can make it” provided they work hard and do not give up the fight. Lavinia in her *London Journal* considers the obstacles encountered as challenges to her personal growth and development. All the suffering is worthwhile; it is part of a rite of passage and is invested with the moral significance of personal development and enrichment. She comes to learn the importance of self-reliance and independence, thus cutting herself loose from the collectivist mentality she was raised in. Determination and courage (involving action and responsible risk-taking) come next. Lavinia’s narrative comes close to being a Bildungsroman in which the Romanian migrant is eager to learn the values and lessons of Western individualism. An important template for organising Lavinia’s migration experience is the Western myth of emancipation and of the self-made man. Arguably, this template was already available to her in Romania as a component of the dream of migrating to the “West” and has been reinforced during her stay in the UK. The discursive insistence on the need to “make it” in the host country is enhanced by the participatory structure that the net-stories are embedded in. The transnational audience of Lavinia’s stories encourages her in her determination to “stick it out against all odds”, rather than admit defeat and return home.

As Jennifer Brinkhoff has pointed out in her investigation of digital diasporas, a major role of this type of internet communication is to facilitate psychological empowerment and confidence building, to ease the stress and cultural anxiety migrants might experience (Brinkhoff 2011:52, 208). It should therefore come as no surprise that Lavinia's stories both provide and elicit support in coping with the difficulties of migration. Isolated critical positions that could fuel doubts about the advantages of such an enterprise are quickly dismissed by most of the participants, who remind all "nostalgic" people of the poverty and squalor in Romania and suggest that to admit defeat is tantamount to committing suicide.

Many of the participants in the *România online in UK* and *Români in UK* forums admit that their decision to migrate was prompted by a collective dream that defined the West as a land of plenty and promise. This dream was first articulated by the dissident diaspora during the socialist period and was later reinforced by the first success stories that migrants told to their compatriots back home. Refashioning one's experience in the West as a success story became a must. It legitimated the act of migration and consolidated the higher social status that people living and working in the West were granted in their home country.

Lavinia writes in her *London Journal* that what determined her to migrate was a desire for mobility that would give her the opportunity to enjoy the much-praised freedoms and opportunities British society could offer. Though she keeps repeating that she might just as well go home if she fails to get a job in London, she acknowledges that she has staked everything on making it in the UK. Migration is a life project rather than merely a temporary exposure to another civilisation.

The dream of the West as a utopian site of personal realisation and material plenty was what motivated the characters in Morpurgo's novel as well. Maria relates how the dream of migrating developed from an obsession with the empty shelves in the stores of her socialist childhood. By deciding to marry a well-off Brit, Maria also fulfills her parents' dream. She reaches the conclusion that she has married these dreams:

I married a dream that was not even my own. I married the oranges that never reached us in Tulcea. I married because [...] of the empty shelves in the superstore which was silent, somber and deserted...I married my mother's phantom furcoat and my father's expensive tobacco, the tennis rackets he never had...I married my parents' wasted youth... I didn't marry Dorian but a symbol, a projection. I'm now living in the tepid shadow of a satisfaction that is foreign to me and belongs to someone else. To mother and father who wanted me to experience what was out of their reach. And they nudged me onto it. (192)

Even if the migrants become painfully aware of the gap between their initial dreams and the reality of migration, they do not express a desire to return to Romania for good. They are determined to live out the story of personal development and success against all the odds and in spite of all their sacrifices, as they are convinced that Romanian society holds no convincing future for them.

As Cristian Bocancea points out, the migrants are strongly attached to the ideals of liberty, equality and personal development and are ready to accept the sacrifice of these principles in the present so as to recover them in a not very distant future (2011:5). Returning to Romania, by contrast, would signify a return to prison and hopelessness (Trandafiroiu 2013:38-40). Morpurgo's characters reject all possibilities of returning to Romania other than as tourists or researchers. Traian, the successful City broker, goes back

to Romania to dig up the remains of his idyllic childhood in the hope of curing his experience of intense estrangement and isolation. Back in Sibiu he cannot connect with either his family or his friends, nor can he resonate with their political concerns and interests. He has a nightmarish vision of his split self, one part of which re-settles in Romania. In his dream he is unemployed, doesn't know how to deal with the authorities and has very grim prospects. Maria and Sabina do not even go back home but arrange for their families to come over to visit them, or in Sabina's case to join her for good.

Morpurgo's novel echoes the undoing of the myth of the great Return ironised in Kundera's novel *Ignorance*. Traian's crisis during his temporary return home shares much of the disappointment and alienation that Kassapova's narrator in the novel *Street without End* experiences on revisiting Sophia. The narrator (Kassapova) has a similar nightmare: the reality of her home country is assimilated to the experience of drowning and she ends up gasping for breath, desperately trying to escape from it.

So far this paper has been dwelling on the convergences between online and offline migration stories. What differences can be noticed between fictional and non-fictional narrations? First of all, fictional stories seem to be lagging behind reality as represented in the net-stories. In Morpurgo's novel characters conspicuously lack the social network that is key to the success of the migration enterprise Lavinia's stories testify to the strong psychological support of the participants in the forum and to the material and moral help she has been receiving from the network of Romanians living in the UK and their British friends. Lavinia repeatedly expresses her gratitude to her friends, whose help has enabled her to "survive in the London jungle".

By contrast with this story, Morpurgo's characters never meet up with their countrymen, never network. Their isolation from their own people is highlighted by the very structure of the novel: it is organized in chapters dealing with one character at a time. They all live parallel and separate lives and intersect only accidentally without ever coming to have a significant interaction. There is no community (online or offline) of Romanians that Morpurgo's immigrants can find comfort in. Modern technology, such as e-mail, Facebook, Skype and other social networking sites, proves vacuous and disappointing. Neither Maria nor Sabina makes use of the net, as if they belonged to an earlier age. Sabina makes regular phone calls to keep up to date with her family's needs and wishes, only to be given a long list of commodities that she has to buy and send to Romania. Nor can trips back home fill the void that surrounds the characters.

Another area in which fiction lags behind the lived experience of migrants is that of women's mobility and their own gender definition. Whether virtual (on the internet) or physical, mobility seems to be a male preserve in Morpurgo's novel. Women stay put. Her female characters display a much more patriarchal gender identity than the one Lavinia adopts in her online stories. Along with being less mobile and less connected than their online counterparts, Morpurgo's female characters have a more limited scope of action as they are basically confined to the private space of a home. Whereas her male characters pursue Ph.D. degrees or have high-status jobs in the City, the female characters make a living in the UK either as wives or as domestic workers (to say nothing of Alina, who works in a high-class brothel). Morpurgo denies to her female characters the kind of determination to beat the system and get a decent job that makes Lavinia so endearing to her audience. One of Morpurgo's characters, Maria, is fully

aware that she is regarded as an exotic object to be looked at, yet she does nothing to change her status. She neither takes up any graduate studies nor tries to earn a living. Her passive position extends to her marriage relationship and results in her losing out in a competition with a more assertive British woman who starts a relationship with her husband. Once Maria has reached this crisis point, Morpurgo suggests that her character, aware that she is pregnant, is ready to rethink her position and somehow refashion herself.

Sabina, the other female character in the novel, is a conscientious, highly committed domestic worker who takes care of a terminally ill old man. Morpurgo's stress on Sabina's selflessness and sympathy provides a counterpart to the rapacious East European out to get a British husband portrayed in Marina Lewicka's *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*.

Morpurgo seems to be fighting the negative stereotypes of East European migrant women that are rife in the British press and its readership. While Sabina's positive qualities and virtues compel respect, they paradoxically reinforce the traditional patriarchal gender identity associated with East European women. Neither the sophisticated Maria nor the unassuming Sabina transgresses the limits of patriarchal gender definitions. They are either object of desire or other-oriented domestic help. However, as their stories develop along the lines of female emancipation, both characters become aware of the need to perform changes in their gender roles.

Conclusion

For all her postmodern approach to novel writing, Morpurgo's stories come close to the templates that inform the non-fictional stories

published online. Fragmentation, discontinuity, the use of multiple temporalities and multiple narrative perspectives (first person, third person), the inclusion of e-mails, diaries, and anthropological interviews, in short, all the stylistic devices common to migration literature are in evidence in Morpurgo's novel (Frank 2008:19-21). At the same time, Morpurgo does not shy away from using plots and narratives that recur in popular culture. The melodramatic plot style of soap operas seems to have been deliberately used to fashion the happy ending of Sabina's migration story: she inherits her employer's fortune, marries his son, and makes plans to bring her own son over to the UK.

However, what distinguishes Morpurgo's approach to the narrative of migration from her online non-fictional counterparts is her eagerness to undercut any utopian ending. To take the example of Sabina: she may have become financially secure, yet her status as an outsider is reasserted. Her former employer's act of leaving her his fortune is designed to emphasise the fact that she is still nothing but a pariah, only slightly better than her paedophile husband.

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