

(Re)defining Culture and Identity across Borders The Issue of Ethnic Identity for Writers in Romania

*Ph.D Candidate Maria EPATOV
“ tefan cel Mare” University, Suceava
mariaepatov@gmail.com*

Abstract

In the context of globalization, the analysis of literature as a phenomenon has shifted from a historical point of view, that aims at organizing texts according to the genre and species, and time, to a more broadening vision that encompasses establishing principles based on a common cultural territory that most of the time transgresses the administrative territory. Cultural identity is no longer confined to the physical borders. What is the relation between literature of the majority and literature of the minority? How do we define the term literature of the minority? This paper aims at analyzing the concept of culture and identity across borders.

Keywords: *Identity, Borders, Ethnicity, Journey, Contemplation.*

The context of globalization changes the perspective of addressing the literary phenomenon. Phrases such as the *world republic of letters*,¹ *minor literature*,² *microliterature*,³ *marginal literature*, *postcolonial literature*⁴ broaden the approach and change the perspective of the literary phenomenon. The historiographic criterion, the diachronic analysis, the inventory of literature according to currents and literary species are replaced by visions that pertain to the literary phenomenon from an integrating point of view, on one hand, aiming to identify common principles that determine the value of the writings, and on the other hand, proposing a point of view that distinguishes literature according to the cultural and spiritual territory, and not the administrative one, given that over the past 100 years administrative boundaries have not overlapped the cultural ones.

¹ Pascale Casanova, *Repubblica Mondiale della Letteratura* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2007).

² Gilles Deleuze, *Kafka. Pentru o literatură minoră* (Bucharest: Art, 2007).

³ Mircea A. Diaconu, "Language, Ethnicity, and Polyterritoriality of a Central-East European Literary System," in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, eds. M. Martin, C. Moraru, A. Terian (Ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

⁴ Andrei Terian, *Critica de export. Teorii, contexte, ideologii* (Bucharest: Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013).

Analysis of the concept of identity is an increasingly difficult task, taking into account the many changes in the past 100 years. At the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, things seemed to have been set in an identity routine determined by the concrete establishment of cultural spaces, which were considered to be equal to those of the administration, thus writers were identified almost exclusively depending on the country of origin (obviously, exceptions exist, such as James Joyce's or Samuel Beckett's cases), since in the second half of the twentieth century it is increasingly difficult for a writer to fit into the safe and infallible frame of a country. It is clearly a matter of building a new identity that has to take into account the last 100 years, not to completely erase it from memory. Another factor contributing to the difficulty of establishing the concept of identity is the increase of migration. Does overcoming administrative borders also mean overcoming cultural boundaries? What are the effects of migration on the identity of writers? Is it possible to fully integrate them into the new space they choose to live in? Or is it a transcultural identity? Beckett's example comes to mind. Irish, then French, he writes in English, then in French, then translates into English again. What is his identity? How relevant is framing Beckett into a national identity in the context of a world space of literature? Another example is that of Eugen Ionescu, claimed by Romanian literature, but, in essence, a French-language writer. Is language of expression an important criterion in defining identity? What does identity mean in the 21st century? And where do we put writers belonging to ethnicities, but who choose to express themselves in the language of the country in which they live?

Any approach that seeks to analyze the concept of ethnic identity must start from the definition of criteria that define identity in general. First of all, we must admit that identity meets both the need for unity and the need for difference, being a relationship of similarity, of identifying with members of a community, but at the same time being also defined as a differentiation between individual and others, being "a permanent oscillation between radical alterity and total similarity".⁵ Identity is therefore a complex process that involves both generalization and differentiation. It should also be noted that identity, is often a fluid concept, depending on the historical, social, professional, and personal context. Thus, the same individual may have a certain national identity (Romanian), a social one (a people person), a professional (writer) and a personal one (hard to define), all of which do not excluded, but coexist.

⁵ Viorica-Cristina Cormo , *Migrație și Identitate. Schimb ri identitare, colective i individuale, ca urmare a migrației internaționale* (Suceava: Editura Universit ții "Ștefan cel Mare", 2011), 52.

We wish to analyze the construction of the national identity in conjunction with the personal identity, given that these two types are those that are the most interesting in the literary approach.

Starting from the Latin etymology of the term nation, in which *natio* means “people”, “tribe”, we must distinguish, from the very beginning, the relation between the nation and the state. The synonymous confusion of the two terms is generated by the involuntary association (but historically determined) between the territory / state and the nation. Thus, a state = a nation, a discourse that determines the association of the nation with an ideology that sustains the state, a concept associated with the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century, accompanied by the formation of new states, which must create their nation. Thus, we find that *nation* is a modern concept, being the “formula of solidarity and identity belonging to the modern age”,⁶ and “ethnic consciousness, or national consciousness of a society, was the decisive engine for collective identity, independent of the fact that this collective identity is found or not in a politically constituted state.”⁷ So does *state* mean *nation*? Not at all. The boundary-identity equation separates between real, geo-political, and intellectual, ideological, symbolic boundaries. The contemporary viewpoint rejects this unifying vision of the nation-state, and even more, the question arises as to what extent national and ethnic semantics are relevant in the context of a globalized world.

What are the factors that generate the feeling of belonging to a nation? National identity is built on shared memory and history, as well as the existence of shared political projects, if we discuss it in a general way. Particularly, M lina Ciocea asserts that nation is built around a value core, which includes traditions, aspirations, common visions, ethnic, linguistic and territorial character.⁸ Is it national identity or, in fact, cultural identity? We tend to believe that the listed factors are those that contribute to the establishment of cultural identity that transcends the national factor.

The most delicate issue is to establish what does national and ethnic character mean. Most opinions state that national identity is defined by common language, territory and history. What is Ethnicity? Lucian Boia defines it as a family, economic, social structure, with common language and culture. To what extent are the two concepts synonymous? The same Lucian Boia notes that “there are a number of elements that ethnicities share, to a varying extent, with modern nations: founding

⁶ Lucian Boia, *Două secole de mitologie națională* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017), 11.

⁷ Georg Weber and Renate Weber, “Identitatea etnică. Exemplu: sașii transilvăneni. Observații și argumente sociologice,” in *Identitatea românească în context European*, coord. Vasile Boari, Ștefan Borbely, Radu Murea (Cluj-Napoca: Risoprint, 2009), 169.

⁸ M lina Ciocea, *Securitatea culturală. Dilema identității în lumea globală* (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2009).

myths, historical memories, cultural values, a particular language, a territory or a name”⁹. What is the difference between nation and ethnicity? The human being belongs to a nation by birth or by choice, and ethnicity is a concept that precedes the nation. So, the concept of nation is a modern one, artificially built, responding to the need for integration, assimilation with a group. The concept of ethnicity is preceding the nation. Both have in common a series of features, already listed, being differentiated by the idea of territory and the majority-minority ratio.

Conceptually, territory must be differentiated into: administrative territory, the one subjected to the boundaries of the borders, whether state or regional, and the cultural territory, the one influenced by cultural conventions and preferences. The issue of territory, administrative and cultural, and its influence in the literary space, has been an intensely debated topic in recent years, especially from the perspective of minority-majority dichotomy. The relationship between the center and the periphery generates a series of interdependence relationships, which make their mark on the literary phenomenon. Is this report one that leads to a massive differentiation or, on the contrary, to a hybridization, a cultural mix, a puzzle called the *world republic of letters*, whose pieces represent the minor, minority, marginal, postcolonial literature that Andrei Terian speaks about in the *Export Critique. Theories, Contexts, Ideologies, or microliterature* that Mircea A. Diaconu speaks about in *Language, Ethnicity, and Polyterritoriality of a Central-East European Literary System*, in the recently published volume of *Romanian Literature as World Literature*? Where and what is the place of majority literature? Our approach is to study the literature of ethnic writers, their place in the literary space.

Identity, in the case of ethnicity, is a permanent fluctuation between languages, “an entire intimate, secret, tension, and crossing experience”.¹⁰ Beyond interesting cultural mixture, obtained as a result of bilingualism, which is the place of ethnic literature? Does it belong to the literature of the majority as a part that ensures the originality, the new wave of the writings, through permanent innovation? Does it create a minor literature, different from the canon of the literature of the majority? What happens if writers belonging to an ethnic group choose to express themselves in the language of the majority? Can we consider language as a fair and complete criterion of classification? Or the territory? Mircea A. Diaconu proposes the term *microliterature* to designate the literary approaches that emancipate, frees itself from most of the literary structures, distinguishing between intra-territorial and extraterritorial literature, defined either by reference to the majority context or to the

⁹ Boia, *Dou secole de mitologie*, 17.

¹⁰ Guy Scarpetta, *Elogiu cosmopolitismului* (Ia i: Polirom, 1997), 19.

ethnic center, by adding bilingualism, as the choice of an ethnic writer to choose as a language of expression the language of the majority.

One of the main questions raised by ethnic literature is who do they write for? Hence, a second question arises: to what extent do ethnic writers look for integration into the literature of the majority? And, of course, a third question: what does literature of the majority mean in the age of globalization?

Each writer is defined by reference to the others, but also to himself, proving a profound need for confirmation, but also for affirmation of his unique character. This is the big dilemma: how to be like the others, integrated and, at the same time, unique, especially in the case of an unfavorable historical situation?

Identity, in the case of ethnicities, represents a permanent pendulum between languages, “a whole intimate, secret experience of tension and crossing”.¹¹ Beyond the interesting cultural mix, obtained as a result of bilingualism, what is the place of ethnic literature? Does it belong to the *major literature*, being a part that ensures originality, freshness of writings, through permanent innovation? Does it create a *minor literature*, different from the major literature canon? What happens if writers belonging to an ethnic group speak and write in the majority language? Can we consider language a fair and complete criterion of separation? Or the territory? Mircea A. Diaconu proposes the term *microliterature* in order to designate the emancipated literary approaches that are released from the major literature structures, differentiating between *intra-territorial* and *extra-territorial* literature, defined by the relation either to the majority context or to the ethnic center, adding bilingualism, understood as an option of an ethnic writer to choose as the language of expression the language of the majority.

One of the main questions that ethnic literature poses is for whom do they write? From here, a second question arises: to what extent do ethnic writers pursue the integration in the literature of the majority? And, obviously, a third question: what does *the literature of the majority* mean in the age of globalization? Starting from the situation of the Jewish writers, it is difficult to define their place in relation to the literature of the majority, given that, before 1948, there was no official Jewish territory to refer to, which generated a certain identity, based on a space of spiritual voice, which reaches mythical quotas. Such is the case of Armenians – History has deprived them of the physical territory, thus they resorted to creating a topos, *mayr hayrenik*, to which all beliefs and hopes converge.

¹¹ Scarpetta, *Elogiu cosmopolitismului*, 19.

Carmen Mu at's remark, referring to Mihail Sebastian: "before being Jewish or Romanian, the writer was a man aware of the absolute uniqueness of each being"¹² can be extrapolated to the case of each creator in the literary space. Each writer is defined by the reference to the Others, but also to Himself, proving a deep need for confirmation, but also for affirming his unique character. This is the big dilemma: how to be like the others, integrated, and at the same time unique, especially in the case of an unfavorable historical situation, such as that of the Jews at the beginning of the 20th century? Ovidiu Morar, in the Argument that opens the volume *Jewish Writers in Romania*, summarizes the situation of these writers: "Note that, out of the Romanian writers of Jewish origin, few have been truly approved by the critics and literary history, but none has become so far canonical, though names like Max Blecher, Tristan Tzara, Benjamin Fondane (B. Fundoianu), Ilarie Voronca, Gherasim Luca, Norman Manea are much better known outside the borders of the country than many others."¹³ Is it to be the fate of ethnic writers, to write for others than their fellow citizens? The success of the avant-garde, especially abroad (Tristan Tzara's name is a reference), seems to confirm that the climate of the era in which the aforementioned writers publish is stronger than the criterion of value. Moreover, it should be noted that the literature of Max Blecher or that of Tristan Tzara are aligned / synchronized with the European climate, not necessarily with the Romanian climate, still subject to the canons of the past. Their modernism can be considered a form of revolt, asserting their independence from the majority literature.

The assumption of the Jewish identity does not exclude the integration in the Romanian cultural identity, in the case of Mihail Sebastian. The writer writes *like a Romanian*. His works are not impregnated by a marked sentiment that reflects the Jewish life, such as the novels of I. Peltz, Ury Benador or Ion C l u g r u , of which Camelia Cr ciun notes: "Coming from the monographic description of the traditional life from a small village in the north Moldova, Ion C l u g r u 's novel on the challenges of urban life in the legendary Jewish Cartier V c r e t i-Dude t i immortalized by I. Peltz, the variety of literary representations of the socio-cultural environment was also enriched, with the description of the Jewish neighborhood of Br ila, an important city in the east with a multiethnic structure, semi-urban on the outskirts of the poor and masterfully presented in Benador's work."¹⁴ Mihail Sebastian's novels pay "greater attention to creation at the expense of analysis,

¹² Carmen Mu at, "Mihail Sebastian și anxietatea identității," in *Identitate de frontier în Europa l r g i t* , coord. Romanița Constantinescu (Iași: Polirom, 2008), 237.

¹³ Ovidiu Morar, *Scriitori evrei din România* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2014), 15.

¹⁴ Camelia Cr ciun, "Apariția unei «literaturi evreie ti de limb român »," O abordare socio-cultural ,," in *Lumea evreiasc în literatura român* , ed. Camelia Cr ciun (Iași: Ed. Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2013), 69.

according to G. Ibrileanu's terminology".¹⁵ His writings become a weapon of defense against the hostility of time; the novel *For two thousand years*, beyond the intentional thesis, is also a form of knowledge and self-analysis, and next to the *Diary* "has a predominantly therapeutic and testimonial role, its value being mainly of an ethical nature."¹⁶ After all, Sebastian's vision lies between the two worlds that define his ontological horizon: to be Romanian and to be Jewish. Sebastian is proving to be well ahead of his time, proposing a unifying and pacifist perspective, in which the nation represents a *cultural reality*, and not an ethnic and religious one, as defined by Nae Ionescu, his professor.¹⁷

Who do the Jewish writers in Romania write for? Both for the Jews, their writings being impregnated with a feeling of the necessity of preserving Jewish traditions and images, as well as for Romanians who, from their pages, find out the aspects of what it means to be Jewish, how prejudices and stereotypes can be dismantled, how can one be different and, at the same time, integrated into the life of the majority, given that the Jews in Romania went through an acculturation process, creating a particular life model adapted to the Romanian climate, but preserving elements of the Jewish identity. Thus, "the literature written in Romanian and inspired by the Jewish world was articulated on a common basis, able to facilitate both the access of non-Jewish readers and of already acculturated Jewish masses".¹⁸

For whom does Herta Müller write? German writer, of Romanian origin, she is currently assimilated to the German literature. Her *linguistic homeland* is Germany, but her life experience, transposed in her writings, links her more with Romania, by revolting against a totalitarian system. The well-known political force that transgresses her writings can be put in relation with the theory of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, according to which the minor literature must be a political act, a revolutionary force, with a deep social character. Herta Müller's literary discourse questions history. The individual destiny of the four young people in the novel *Animal of the Heart* represents, on a small scale, the fate of a society under the heavy boot of totalitarianism. The minority identity of the four characters does not remove them from the mass of the oppressed majority. Not only the Saxons, the Swabians suffered during the communist period. But the ethnical identity of the citizen belonging to the nationality of the majority is the one that distinguishes the destiny of the four from the destiny of the Romanians, being the element that describes a

¹⁵ Morar, *Scritori evrei din România*, 20.

¹⁶ Muat, "Mihail Sebastian și anxietatea identității," 239.

¹⁷ Marta Petreu, "Eliade, Sebastian, Ionescu, Cioran, «copiii din flori» ai României interbelice," in *Identitatea românească în context european*, coord. Vasile Boari, Stefan Borbely, Radu Murea (Cluj-Napoca: Risoprint, 2009), 339.

¹⁸ Craciun, *Apariția unei "literaturi evreiești de limbă română"*, 76.

particularity of Herta Müller's writing. The integration of the writer in the German literature has its limits. What Herta Müller writes, feels, transmits is at the crossroads between the (linguistic) German and the Swabian identity, in which she mixes, involuntarily, the Romanian soul and feeling, through the particularity of the situations that the writer transfigures in her book. Mircea A. Diaconu writes: "The denial of ethnicity – the Swabian writer no longer wants to guard the community horizon, fatally a minority – and the destruction of any tutelage in most cases entails giving up writing. At the opposite end, Herta Müller takes the Nobel Prize,"¹⁹ thus summarizing the essence of Herta Müller's writings.

The destiny of the Armenian writers in Romania seems to be linked, historically and conceptually, to that of the Jews. Their fate was similar; the harsh historical conditions have imprinted a path in which their life has been determined between cruelty and adaptation. What unites the two people is the development of diaspora, whose voice is heard in the pages of the writings of ethnic Jews and Armenians. Their literary discourse is influenced by their eternal wandering condition, in search of a home. Monica Spiridon writes: "The Armenian is the one who paid the policy of history and diligently seeks his identity and purpose in a narrow space where certainties are driven by desire and imagination."²⁰ Always subjected to hostile alterity, the Armenian creates a mechanism of defense and survival. What are the marks of the Armenian identity, in the circumstances in which language (the assumption factor of an identity) of chosen expression is that of the majority? Is it enough to address some themes and motifs to place a writer in a particular ethnicity?

The option to write in Romanian is an assumed mission: the desire, doubled by the need to testify about what happened, in order to never happen again, to disseminate a collective memory, in which individual history represents, on a small scale, the history of a community, why not, of humanity. The novel of Varujan Vosganian, *The Book of Whispers*, is a lyrical testimony of a past that still lives in the souls of present-day Armenians. The cruelty of destiny is sublimated in the power of survival, this being the core of Vosganian's book. In the writings of Bedros Horasangian, mainly the short stories from *The Encyclopedia of Armenians* there is a double function of writing: on one hand, the events by which the characters pass, with the role of activating the Memory, on the other hand, the transfer of narrativity in a symbolic plan, by emphasizing the meaning, in which Memory becomes History. The problem of historical accountability is the leitmotif that transgresses the pages of the two mentioned writers.

¹⁹ Diaconu, "Language, Ethnicity, and Polyterritoriality."

²⁰ Monica Spiridon, *Cum poți să fii român? Variațiuni pe teme identitare* (Craiova: Scrisul Românesc, Fundația-Editura, 2006), 71.

tefan Agopian's writings do not seem to reflect, at first glance, the Armenian identity. A writer from the end of the twentieth century, tefan Agopian is the typical representative of the '80s in Romanian literature. Included by Radu G. Țeposu in the category of writers who cultivate allegorical fantasy,²¹ tefan Agopian, along with writers such as Ioan Gro an, Daniel Vighi, Mihai M niu iu, creates a narrative speech that emphasizes the rhetoric of the story, the interest being focused on the details, the image, the visual. The technique used is parody, but in a strong note that portrays cultural allusions; allegory and parabola are two fundamental coordinates of the construction of this type of speech. Exploring fundamental themes leads to intertextuality, a concept that is increasingly brought to the forefront of literary space. The predominantly used methods are remembrance, alternation of narrative plans, inner monologue, investigation, tree phrase, which result in a strong story core that underlines the intuition of the eternal soul search. What is it that shows Agopian's belonging to the Armenian community? There are small details, *pour les connaisseurs*: one of the characters in *Manualul întâmpl rilor* is called the Armenian Zadig. Simple coincidence? Or is there a hidden symbol in an Armenian term? The character of Agopian's writing is a symbol of salvation, and the motif of the journey, which unites the six stories of the volume, may be the clue that points to the image of the ever-wandering Armenian in the world. Is the journey the ultimate escape from the rigorous network of History? And if so, what is the end point of the journey? The answer is also offered by Agopian characters: "We should go somewhere" says the Armenian, and John, his co-wanderer replies, "We have no place to go".²² Would this be another way of underlining the question of historical responsibility? Published in 1984, at Cartea Româneasc Publishing House, *Manualul întâmpl rilor* (The Book of Happenings), by tefan Agopian is a postmodern fairy tale that attempts to establish the rules that would underpin the good functioning of the universe. Slipping between real and fantastic, reality and dream, allegorical history and utopia, grotesque and sublime, sacred and devilish, Stephen Agopian's book explores, in a parodic key striking the absurd, the eternal death-life dichotomy, through a journey that breaks down the initiatory valence into a world that is evading time, recalling the verses of Salman Rushdie.

The territory of tefan Agopian's writing is no longer circumscribed to a concrete space, not even a quantifiable time in the established units of measure. The space of tefan Agopian's prose is the one belonging to imagination, eluding the real boundaries of reality.

²¹ Radu G. Țeposu, *Istoria tragic i grotesc a întunecatului deceniu literar nou* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1993).

²² tefan Agopian, *Manualul întâmpl rilor* (Bucharest: Cartea Româneasc , 1984), 65.

tefan Agopian's prose is in a state of permanent movement, continuous training and unpredictable transformation, constituting a new tempting and fascinating space to explore. The writer must have a certain comprehension of life, a much more open receptivity to the future, an understanding of reality involving the continuation of and the continuous restoration of society; contemporary literature introduces new dimensions of the human being in the immediate reality.

Literary space must be conceived as a global reality, in which each writer represents a microuniverse. The identity of writers builds the identity of the world literature. The destiny of writers circumscribes the impossibility of NOT to write. The case of writers belonging to ethnicities raises the issue of updating the vision of literature. Major-minor ratio is no longer strong enough to clarify, to customize the place of ethnic writers in the world republic of letters, and, in the context of globalization, the assumed ethnic identity becomes a form of rebuilding the map of the world literature. Paraphrasing the ideas presented in *Thousands of Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the identity of ethnic writers is like a rhizome, characterized by "lines of articulation and segmentation, layers, territoriality; but also escape lines, deterritorialization and destratification movements".²³

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²³ Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *Mii de platouri* (Bucharest: Art, 2013), 8.

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