

Mihnea BĂLICI
Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
mihnea.balici@ubbcluj.ro

**THE UNHAPPY MARRIAGE OF CARE AND THE GLOBAL MARKET:
“SOFT BACKSLIDING” IN THE NARRATIVES OF TWO ROMANIAN
*BADANTI***

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Abstract: This paper encompasses an analysis of the novels written by two Romanian *badanti* who emigrated from Eastern Europe to Italy at the beginning of the 21st century, namely Liliana Nechita (Romania) and Lilia-Bicec Zanardelli (the Republic of Moldova). The reading grid of these narratives is a Marxist feminist one, as it continues the analytical framework of Lise Vogel and links it to the last decades’ “new gender arrangement” (Lutz) that emphasises the outsourcing of reproductive labour towards migrant and gendered labour-power. The work of these *badanti* partakes in the global care chain of our world-system, which privileges families in the West and affects poor households in the East. The novels written by the two workers show how agents directly involved in this global division of labour explain their own history, as it is shaped by their new working experience. However, their literary inquiry will circumscribe a contradictory rhetoric, also called “soft backsliding”, that combines emancipatory insights with reactionary ideologies related to the nation-state, family and Christianity. This study aims to explain them as both methods of subjective subsistence in capitalism and a virtual path to political radicalization.

Keywords: labour migration, new gender arrangement, autobiographical writing, Marxist feminism, nationalism.

Linking economic migration directly to the anti-feminist wave that has hit Central and Eastern Europe in the last decade might seem a questionable endeavour. After all, Eastern European diasporas in the West positively influence (i.e., “modernise”)

their countries of origin not only through capital flows and material remittances from the core to the (semi)peripheries (Glick Schiller and Thomas Faist 1-21), but also through “the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities” (Levitt 927), also known as socio-cultural or political remittances. From this perspective, migration generally seems to have a ‘civilising’ role for the home country¹, incongruous with the Eurosceptic isolationism that the new far-right political agendas have been proposing for some years now (see the case of Viktor Orbán's government, which is already blocking immigration in Hungary). It goes without saying that the assimilation of the migrant into a Western culture also comes with a high degree of liberal consciousness, as an effect of the “banal cosmopolitanism” (Beck 10) made possible by the repeated, daily interaction with a seemingly more progressive and permissive social environment. Furthermore, migration involves removing local women from the patriarchal mechanism of oppression that trapped them under both communism and post-communism in a maelstrom of unpaid domestic labour and underpaid productive labour. Migration suddenly introduces them into the international labour market, making them the main breadwinners in their families. In such a context, it could be said that migration participates in the formation of a semi-progressive consciousness which, although it takes on neoliberal overtones and may be criticised by the Marxist left for the contradiction encompassing “the way in which present-day capitalism emancipates proletarian women” (Cistelean), would nevertheless contribute to improving the lives of working women on the transnational market. This thesis is also supported by Saskia Sassen, who stated in 1998 that in a context of emergent globalisation and increased migration flow, “women gain greater personal autonomy and independence,” leading to “their greater participation in the public sphere and their possible emergence as public actors” (Sassen 27).

The two Romanian-speaking authors discussed in this article are symptomatic of this phenomenon. The two autobiographical books that thematize their direct experience as domestic workers in Italy are Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli's *Testamentul necitit. Scrisorile unei mame plecate în Occident* [*The Unwritten Testament. Letters*

¹ In the Romanian case, the victory of the current liberal president of Romania, Klaus Johannis, over the conservative, even if rhetorically social-democrat candidate Victor Ponta was interpreted by the Romanian sociologist Dumitru Sandu as the result of the Romanian diaspora's votes. According to Sandu, the local diaspora is also included in the elite category of “communities with a high level of education and cultural modernity” (Sandu 4). Obviously, it is debatable whether Sandu's pro-liberal optimism during the 2014 elections was justified or not, but the pro-Johannis vote represented a step closer to the neoliberal pole of the European Union, as well as a strategy to move away from the old political class of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), popularly associated with historical communism.

of a Mother Gone West] (2009) and Liliana Nechita's *Cireșe amare* [*Bitter Cherries*] (2014). Both are written in an epistolary formula, with the difference being that Nechita does not have a named addressee², whereas Bicec-Zanardelli addresses her own children. Clearly, the implicit purpose of these aestheticized “letters” is collective, as they construct an image of the migrant mother with which the local public can fully empathise and which can subsequently be used as identity templates within extra-literary, popular (or populist) discourses. A proof of this is the 2013 documentary *Exodul mamelor* [*The Mothers' Exodus*], directed by Irina Păcurariu for Romanian Television, which features Liliana Nechita herself in the first episode. The authors have also continued writing after the publication of these two books. Thus, Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli published the novel *Bumerang* [*Boomerang*] in 2016, which follows the perspective of a fictional daughter living in Moldova with her brother and father after their mother's departure to Italy, and a historical novel about Bessarabia in World War II called *Lagărul 33* [*Camp 33*] (2020). As for Nechita, in addition to two other books published in Italian (*Bambole di fango* in 2019 and *Piccola mamma* in 2020), she has also written the following novels in Romanian: *Împărăteasa* [*The Empress*] (2017), which features the migrant narrator's mother-in-law as a main character, combining a rural setting with a romanticised imagology of feminine strength; *Păpușa din noroi* [*The Mud Doll*] (2019), which includes a series of short stories about several Romanian children abandoned by their emigrating families; and *Pâine cu ceva. Amintiri, ca să se știe cum se trăia în comunismul oamenilor simpli* [*Bread and Something. Memories, That's How Life Was Like for the Simple Folk in Communism*] (2022), which reconstructs the narrator's family story during the totalitarian period. These latter books will come less into our focus, but the multiperspectival narrative offered by them will contribute to a more complex picture of their project.

For these authors, this project involves redefining their role in the household after working as care workers in Italy. By engaging in this work, they become noticeably more aware of their own social and cultural conditions, translating this newly acquired awareness into the codes of their home countries, a tendency visible in their works. Obviously, there will be ideological blind spots in the way the two conceive issues such as the professional relations between workers and employers or between workers and other migrants, leading to a so-called class-related “false

² This addressee might as well be the narrator herself: “I have owned you for a lifetime” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 94).

consciousness when addressing [their] own condition, which stems from a bitter disappointment in regard to the wasted potential of [their] émigré peers” (Baghiu and Olaru 77). However, this simplistic critique does not take into account the real evolution of these characters within the limits of their own life contexts and other preconceptions coming from their upbringing. The real problem with these narratives is the contradiction between the narrators’ seemingly emancipatory consciousness in their everyday lives (as they recognize their undermined position within the labour market) and the way they make sense of their own personal and collective histories. This often translates into a vague nostalgia for a powerful and self-sufficient, ethnically and religiously unitary state, and even for, if not predetermined, at least stable gender roles, suitable for sustaining a national labour market. I will call this contradiction “soft backsliding,” as it does not imply a sudden and total move to the extreme right, but rather a non-actualized tendency. This non-actualized tendency can be conceived as an inability to fully explain the material limitations of these care *badanti*’s familial and professional lives by avoiding reference to their complex set of causes, most of which stem from the systemic contradictions of the capitalist world-system. Instead, they try to solve this problem nationally, by criticising the nation-state’s opening to globalised capitalism and suggesting a turn towards state capitalism and, by default, national culture and spirituality.

Obviously, such a suspicious and critical reading of these seemingly innocent narratives written in the 2010s would not be necessary if it were not important for understanding the broader social mechanisms that have only made their full presence felt in the (post-)pandemic period. In the 2020 elections, the nationalist and far-right party called the Alliance for the Union of the Romanians (AUR) took third place in the diaspora's votes (23%), while also being the most voted party by Romanians living in Italy (Bonea). Today, the success of AUR among migrants (Soare and Tufiş 101-118) and/or young people (Isopescu) makes the consequences following the multi-election year of 2024 seem rather uncertain. As of June 2024, the European Parliament elections in Romania ended with AUR getting 14.9% of the votes, right after the National Coalition for Romania formed by the two biggest historical parties in Romania (PNL and PSD). The majority of the emigrant population in France, Germany, Spain, and the US voted for AUR, while the newly-formed right-wing party S.O.S. Romania, created by senator and ex-AUR member Diana Şoşoacă, managed to reach the majority of the Romanian diaspora in Italy and the UK (Ştefanof and Calangiu). This situation, although surprising in the light of Sandu's statements from

a decade ago, was predictable, as AUR has also defined itself in some instances as the “party of the diaspora,” and a significant part of their advocacy work takes place abroad. In this context, local feminism, consolidated through NGOs and other social movements, has come up against the distrust of a heterogeneous demographic group calling for a return to national roots. Thus, “hyper-masculinity and anti-gender diatribes in Eastern Europe at least in part arise from local perceptions that liberal feminism is an ideology of Western cultural and economic imperialism” (Ghodsee 15).

Nechita and Bicec-Zanardelli do not share these explicit positions publicly, neither in the past nor now. However, their narratives partially explain the subjective process behind the shift of the contemporary political centre to the right. For a more nuanced understanding of the historical mechanisms that brought us here, I consider that Marxist feminism, which has been repeatedly criticised by other radical and intersectional forms of feminisms, becomes important again, at least in such an ideological analysis of the Romanian *badanti*'s narratives. Moreover, this approach is generally useful to the study of migration in literary studies as well, as it contests the non-hierarchical metaphors that most social theorists use when discussing elite, academic, or simply upper-class migration from the point of view of postcolonialism or globalisation studies. Syntagms such as “hybridization” (Bhabha), “nomadism” (Said), or even “the decentering and dematerialisation of economic activity” (Papastergiadis 20) are unable to do justice to the material intricacies of contemporary economic migration.

Marxism and the ‘New Gender Arrangement’

This section proposes a theoretical framework suitable for encompassing the discussion on the care labour provided by migrant women from Romania. This synthesis is neither exhaustive nor free of analytical and political inconsistencies when compared to other feminist systems of thought, but it can be used by Eastern European feminism to better understand the labour of transnational care-workers. The hypothesis I construct finds its analytical and critical foundation in Lise Vogel’s pivotal 1983 study, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, which has also not been free of substantial criticism and revision (Brenner 698-700). Nevertheless, I find Vogel's model still provocative and constructive, as it opposes poststructuralist or decolonial attempts to think of modernity in a fragmented and depoliticized way, relying instead on a unitary Marxist theory of anti-capitalist struggle.

Leaving these philosophical and practical issues aside, Vogel's study can be usefully placed in a historical relationship to the "new gender arrangement" (Lutz 11) that defines the social role occupied by women workers in late capitalism, which oscillates between the Global North's ideal model of the "two-earner household" (Fraser, "Contradictions") and the Global South's transnationalized model of "paid domestic service" (Safuta 17-38). We can interpret the subjective position of the Romanian *badanti* as a way of mediating two contradictions specific to contemporary capitalism's social relations: (1) the gender division of care labour, both in the open space of capitalist accumulation and inside the private space of the household; and (2) the commodification of labour-power on the market (Marx 270-280) which has now become global and has also incorporated reproductive labour, i.e., the expansion of wage labour towards reproduction.

As the main agents in capital's search for a solution to self-regulate amidst multiple crises by importing cheap labour to the core from its peripheries (i.e., economic migration), Liliana Nechita and Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli aspire to an unnamed, ideal time (which may or may not be the interwar interval), in which the Romanian state would not have allowed this kind of social trauma to occur. That is, a period in which the *national* labour-power would be used strictly by *co-nationals*, and the division of domestic labour between men and women would be stable to facilitate the biological and social reproduction of an – equally – *national* labour force.

What needs to be reaffirmed is that for both the Old and the New Left movements, the main issue has never been the supremacy of one category (class vs. gender, sexuality, race, etc.) over another, but rather how gender/sexual/racial oppression relates to capital's mechanisms. Regarding patriarchy, this controversial argument started as early as the nineteenth century in the works of Emma Goldman and Alexandra Kollontai. More recently, in the third and most recent stage of capitalism, perhaps the main text marking feminism's break from the Marxist tradition was Heidi Hartmann's 1979 essay, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in which she criticises the preconception of many Marxists who privilege "the relationship of women to the economic system, rather than that of women to men, apparently assuming the latter will be explained in their discussion of the former" (Hartmann 2). The insistence that patriarchy emerged and continues to operate alongside and partly dislocated from the capitalist model of exploitation forms the basis of other important analyses in gender

studies³, further suggesting that “men exploited women just as capital exploited labour and that this exploitation of women was caused by the sexual division of labour, itself underpinned by the social construction of gender” (Kofman and Raghuram 45).

Expectedly, this thesis—associated with the “dual-systems perspective” (Vogel 133-140), as opposed to the “social reproduction perspective” (Vogel 141-156)—is contested by the author of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. Her argument highlights not a trans-historical and irreconcilable debate between identity politics and Marxist politics, but a nuanced incongruity between the texts of the two original pillars of Marxism: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Exploring the gap highlighted by Vogel in the history of Marxist theory, we find that the dual-systems perspective originates in Engels’ famous 1884 text, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, while for the social reproduction perspective “the rudiments of a usable approach lie buried just below the surface of Marx’s analysis of social reproduction in *Capital*” (Vogel 142).

The difference between the two is that the former suggests that “women’s oppression derives from their situation within an autonomous system of sex divisions of labour and male supremacy”, while the latter insists that “women’s oppression has its roots in women’s differential location within social reproduction as a whole” (Vogel 134). While at first the two perspectives operated simultaneously, “the unrecognised gap between the two perspectives widened as the struggle between Marxism and revisionism intensified in the Second International” (Vogel 137). In this article, I will not choose one analytical grid over the other, but I will mainly

³ For example, Gayle Rubin is among the first to distinguish between “sex” and “gender” in her 1975 article “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” analytically separating the Marxist problem from the feminist or queer problem. Thus, “‘class’ will serve as a reified identity marker on par with race, sex, sexual orientation, and so on, a stand-in for ‘socioeconomic status’ – which in small part it was for Marx, but not only or simply so” (Beloso 53), an argument that would later form the basis of intersectionality theory. In a similar vein, Catharine MacKinnon would propose in her 1985 essay, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” a strictly formal analogy between Marxism and feminism (MacKinnon, 515-516), pointing out that the former is concerned with the control exercised through the unequal class system and the latter with heteronormative control over individuals. Subsequently, Brooke Meredith Beloso would refocus the two’s discussion of gender and sexuality in an article that “[invites] class into the feminist debate on prostitution” (Beloso 61), redefining sex as work and rethinking gender and sexual identities through the Marxist value theory. Another scholar that will insist on the need to analytically relegate identity struggles to the mode of production is Nancy Fraser in her 1997 study *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the ‘Postsocialist’ Condition*. Fraser’s argument follows the redistribution-recognition dichotomy that she would later develop and underlines the difference between cultural emancipation and economic emancipation, the latter of which would prove more urgent for the social theorist. This difference will be questioned by Judith Butler, who will criticise Fraser’s association of heterosexism with a “merely cultural”, non-material issue (Butler 265-277). Of course, a response written by the first author will clarify this problematic dichotomy (Fraser, “Heterosexism” 279-289).

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Ever since the beginning of the capitalist regime, labour-power has been a “special commodity” (Marx 270), since it is capital’s main condition of possibility as the only commodity that can produce surplus-value. Obviously, the labour concerned here is productive labour. In the early days of capitalism, it was performed mainly by men. At the other end of the scale, reproductive (or domestic) labour, which is necessary for the creation and maintenance of labour-power, was performed mainly by women and was completely removed from the process of commodification, since it was only destined for use-value within the armoured interior of the household and has always operated “according to a distinct pre- or non-capitalist logic” (Ferguson and McNally, xx), through a process of primitive accumulation specific to earlier modes of production (Federici). Despite its pre-capitalist origin, this black box within capitalist production cannot be thought of as isolated from it, as it is one of the main ingredients that balances back the internal contradictions of capitalism, in the same way that colonial accumulation did during 19th century monopoly capitalism (Luxemburg). Although “any production is, at one and the same time, reproduction” (Vogel 143), and the difference between the two is theoretically problematic, capitalism relies on a strategic separation of the two, so that the latter remains unpaid, unrecognised, and therefore dominated by the former, allowing surplus-value to thrive undisturbed.

The inclusion of women in the labour market has not led to a significant change in the social hierarchy between genders, which is why combating the “double working

day” is now central to feminist praxis. However, even if by greatly simplifying the historical discussion, it is essential to point out that the states at the core of the world-system and particularly their more advanced social strata have also found strategies to outsource reproductive labour, the most effective of them being that of “importing migrant-labour from outside national boundaries” (Vogel 162). Thus, “to fill the ‘care gap’, the regime imports migrant workers from poorer to richer countries” (Fraser, “Contradictions”). At the time of writing Vogel’s volume, “the abrupt opening-up phase in the 1980s and 1990s” (Melegh 16) in which migration became a global phenomenon of a distinct intensity compared to previous historical periods had barely taken place. Therefore, this idea would only prove central later, in the context of the emergence of the “new gender arrangement”, that is, “the redistribution of domestic/care work, in which the ‘female’ part of the arrangement remains in female hands”, but “not those of the woman herself, but of some (ethnically and socially) other woman to whom this work is passed on [my emphasis]” (Lutz 11). In the 21st century, “reproduction involves, as we shall see, the global transfer of different kinds of reproductive labour from one class, ethnic group, nation or region to another” (Kofman and Raghuram 3), being paid, commodified and “consumed” as wage labour. The same happens to Lilita Nechita and Lilita Bicec-Zanardelli, who leave two countries impoverished by post-communist deindustrialization to provide paid domestic services to upper middle-class families in Italy. Thus, care work is detached from the domestic and closed space of their own dysfunctional families and gradually integrated into the global free-market. This is all the more understandable since “Europe abandoned its non-capitalist mixed-economy experiments and embraced a quite fundamentalist version of the free-market model as early as during the late socialist era” (Melegh 344).

So what are the effects of this “new gender arrangement” on the two authors’ (personal and literary) consciousnesses and why is the Marxist interpretation of social reproduction important? In what follows, I will look at the migration of the two *badanti* as a bifocal phenomenon with contradictory effects. On the one hand, the two women’s invisible and unpaid labour suddenly became visible and paid after migrating, completely overturning hierarchies within their families and communities of origin, where they became the main actors of development by means of material and cultural remittances. The men in these families—who are generally violent, abusive, and alcoholic—are abruptly or gradually removed from the household. This emancipation is taking place both in the labour market and in family life, and it is

visible in the heroic self-image that the two narrators (not unconvincingly) construct. Following such a climactic, happy-ending narrative, the subsequent reunification of their families in Italy is a common narrative high point in both authors' biographies.

On the other hand, the Marxist perspective can make the reader aware of the contradictions behind this historical mechanism. Besides the fact that "domestic helps of the twenty-first century are women who are better educated than all their predecessors, having not only passed advanced school leaving qualifications but even gained university degrees" (Lutz 14) and that we are therefore witnessing an objective and often humiliating debasement of the two authors, in their novels we can also see the migration from an undesirable life to an equally miserable one: from the systemic oppression stemming from the gendered conditioning of domestic labour in a conservative society to the economic exploitation of Eastern and Southern women in Western "democracies." This movement is specific to the global care chain that only finds its "ending" amidst the material scarcity of the peripheral countries.

In fact, nothing changes because everything gets worse on a supra-individual level. In these transnational families, unpaid reproductive labour will be taken over by the daughters, grandmothers, or other female relatives left at home. Even after the families' prior reunification, the domestic labour-power of the migrant mothers will be doubled and thus divided between two opposing values (exchange-value at work and use-value at home). Caught up in this chain of contradictions, the origin of which is not very clear to either, the two women will concentrate neither on the crises of capital (as Vogel) nor on patriarchy (as Hartmann), but on the failures of the nation-state. The populist opposition to the weak state is primarily voiced by conservative factions: "Right-wing populism aims for restoring order through constituting the bourgeois 'strong state', as it is aware of the indispensability of the state for capitalist economy" (Azeri 352). The *badanti*'s solution can only be read between the lines: "soft backsliding" towards nation, family, and God.

The Will is Strong, but the State is Weak

Before noting the similarities between the two authors discussed in this article, it should be pointed out that they come from very different socio-political backgrounds, despite sharing the same language and national heritage. This is important because, although a similar image of the unity of all Romanians in the diaspora underlies their literary projects, this trope has different weights and stakes depending on the geopolitical situation of each writer. Liliana Nechita is from the small urban area of Romania (Focşani), while Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli is from rural Moldova (Viişoara).

Although both areas are poor, one is undeniably more marginal than the other. Romania and the Republic of Moldova outline two relatively distinct systems, not only on a literary level (Bâlici), but also in historical and economic terms, especially when it comes to local emigration. Thus, Attila Melegh includes them in two supra-statal groups with different development patterns, where Romania is included in the same category as most of the (non-Vișegrád) Eastern European countries which have a high ratio of outmigration to the West, such as Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, and Poland (Melegh 211), while Moldova is associated with former USSR countries such as Armenia and Georgia, which “comprise a particularly vulnerable periphery that is enmeshed in multiple migration regimes, while facing bitter struggles in terms of demographic issues, depopulation, nationalism, and economic challenges” (Melegh 232). The figures confirm Moldova’s demographic vulnerability, as it “has one of the highest levels of migration, around 25% of its population migrates abroad temporarily or permanently” (Plopeanu et al. 2). The timeline of the two women’s departures is also different: Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli left Moldova before the Bossi-Fini law’s implementation in 2002, which finally legalised the immigrants’ mobility in Italy (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testament* 109), whereas Nechita moved abroad only in 2006, long after the 2002 abolition of visas for entry into the Schengen Area for Romanian citizens and shortly before Romania’s entry into the European Union (Nechita, *Cireșe* 58). However, despite the objectively different contexts, Bicec-Zanardelli’s narratives do not differ substantially from Nechita’s from an ideological point of view, as they both emphasise the need for a self-sustainable nation-state.

The main and more general driver of migration in these novels is poverty. The provincial imaginary from which they claim—“My town is poor and small. Without industry, with an army of 6 o’clock commuters” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 11)—highlights the pauperization that deindustrialization and mass layoffs in the 1990s created in the economic landscape during the transition to capitalism: “The dismantling of factories and plants through so-called privatisation, wages forgotten, schools unheated and total poverty” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 7). Even if the two narrators’ positions prior to emigration were advantageous (Nechita’s narrator was initially an administrative clerk, while Bicec-Zanardelli was a journalist), the country’s economic situation no longer offered them social safety nets: “For me, Italy was like a black hole that swallowed everyone. I didn’t know then that it would swallow me up later” (Nechita, *Împărăteasa* 101).

Another common element in the two bodies of work is the way in which the family space contributes to women's decision to emigrate, as household management, which limited women's work to the mere reproduction of labour power in the first stage of capitalism and doubled her working day in communism, becomes increasingly dysfunctional in post-communism as the possibilities for paid productive work become more limited. Men's alcoholism and poverty become intertwined: "Ruin comes from lazy, drunken men, proud of their foolishness" (Nechita, *Cireșe* 123). Thus, the migrant mothers' economic over-responsibility makes sense. Nechita's character is the head of a single-parent family: "I brought up my children alone, mother and father together; I sawed, I split wood, I plastered, I cooked thousands of pots of food" (Nechita, *Cireșe* 7). Similarly, Bicec-Zanardelli's narrator, a victim of domestic abuse (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 125), is forced to take on the role portrayed as 'male', as the father character contributes nothing to the productive work of the household either before or after emigration: "Perhaps I shouldn't write to you about money, but what drove me to leave was to a large extent the lack of it. You were growing up, Daddy wasn't working, and with my salary I was making ends meet" (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 66).

The mothers' departure abroad is meant to solve two fundamental problems: the financial gap in the household as a whole and the (physical or symbolic) lack of a family member to do the dominant productive work: "We became providers of money for the children's studies, for the parents' treatment, for better houses and, why not, even for the maintenance of the husbands left at home so that they would not sweat too much" (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 113). Obviously, this logic follows the traditional distribution of gender roles and should be looked at critically, but it circumscribes the reason why the two women later show reluctance towards relationships with men⁴, especially Romanian ones⁵. Ironically, the male ideal remains the bourgeois, interwar one (Nechita, *Pâine* 44), while the Romanian female ideal is constructed by excluding characters who are promiscuous or lack maternal qualities (Nechita, *Împărăteasa* 85). Moreover, Italian women are criticised for their "laziness" (Nechita, *Cireșe* 36), which translates, sometimes explicitly, to "too much emancipation" (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testament* 121).

Thus, the proto-feminist problem raised by the two authors is a *contingent* one: it comes from a certain historical circumstance related to the nation-state's unlucky

⁴ "We, women without a *fatherland* [my emphasis], are accustomed to humility, accustomed to be purveyors of money to those who do not deserve our greetings" (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 116).

⁵ "You see, I'm sorry to say it, but 70% of Romanian men are incapable" (Nechita, *Cireșe* 123).

history, but not systemic patriarchy. The economic problem is considered similarly. The authors replace “global capitalism” or at least “neoliberalism” as the main causes of the “new gender arrangement” with other avatars such as corruption or the communist past: “A small country infected by communism and flourishing corruption” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 113). The naturalisation of capitalism is the most obvious problem with these narratives, but we should understand it through the prism that the narrators are neither social theorists nor activists. However, what is particularly striking is the juxtaposition of a nuanced social consciousness on one subject with a rhetorical defusing of social contradictions on another. The *badanti* stories oscillate from moments of socio-economic clarity, such as criticism of multinational firms (Colgate) moving their headquarters to poorer countries such as Romania or Bulgaria (Nechita, *Cireșe* 122), to rudimentary explanations of differences between geographical areas: “in the south laziness and disorganisation are due specifically to the Arabs, who were a nomadic people, without stable values”, while in northern Italy “the industriousness and the housekeeping spirit of the natives is due to the Austrians, an organised, thoughtful and economical people” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 190).

Criticising the “true racism [...] directed against the poor” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 170), the same narrators will resort to harsh judgments regarding co-nationals from other social strata⁶ and will even make the apology of a capitalism with a human face⁷. The relations with the patrons are even more subtle, where it seems that the main issue is their behaviour, not their professional status or class. The friendly patrons (Nechita’s Bocio and Maria, or Bicec-Zanardelli’s Francesca) are the most appreciated. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo will call this process the transition from a “maternalistic” and abusive relationship with the employer to a “personalistic” one, but which “can also emphasise the employees’ inferiority and the employers’ sense of superiority” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 201). Obviously, all these contradictions can be explained by the formula of narrative and affective immediacy of the autobiographical genre, but they also reveal something else: namely, the belief that democracy and equality are *merely*

⁶ “What do you think is the biggest misfortune for a Romanian emigrant? Another Romanian emigrant to be hosted by. Most of them are tricksters “from Bucharest”! Those from the slums, who think that the good man is the best prey, those who are ready to “fool” their mother too. [...] [T]he Romanians are educated and with common sense, they mind their own business and are thinking of their families at home. The others, the tricksters, are swindlers and profiteers without nationality” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 60-61).

⁷ Italy’s industrialised North differs from the poverty of the South by the fact that “[its citizens] reached this level of living through sacrifices, through the ability to save and invest rationally” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 190).

cultural issues that can be resolved through an “ethical” and apolitical resizing of everyday life (hence all the discourse about morality, kindness, and faith in the authors’ novels), but which Romania and the Republic of Moldova have not yet had time to practise because of a historical delay with a very concrete identity: historical communism. Liliana Nechita emphasises this at length in the novels *Împărăteasa* and *Pâine cu ceva*, while Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli does the same in the multiple analepses regarding the history of her family of former “kulaks” from *Testamentul necitit*.

The nation-state has thus been weakened by repeated transgenerational traumas, starting from the socialist past and escalating throughout the present’s economic “disembeddedness” (Polanyi). Therefore, the feeling shared by the two emigrants is that of abandonment by their origin countries: “Now I wonder, what has the Motherland done to us? She abandoned us, left us to our fate, like a mother would leave her children! But how can it be that a mother would abandon her offspring? Where? It was unbelievable” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 112). Nechita condemns the neoliberal regime of the Romanian president Traian Băsescu (2004-2014), which oscillated between supporting Romanians who had left the diaspora to send remittances during the 2008 crisis⁸ urging them to return when the national labour-power became insufficient (Nechita, *Cireșe* 87-88). Ignoring the fact that these political fears appear at the moment when immigrants from the Global South start coming to Romania⁹, connecting the latter to the global labour chain, the attitude of the worker is disconcerting: “Politicians from my country, I’ve been here for 20 years of sadness! Let us blush and laugh! Do something so that these citizens will return, everyone will put their shoulders to the wheel and Mr. President will also be happy that he finally has labour-power” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 89). The need for a home-country is also felt by Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli: “I feel like leaving everything behind and running home to my poverty, where I feel honoured to have a Motherland and there no one considers me a foreigner” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 107). This tendency remains central, despite the cosmopolitan tendencies that guide their new transnational life: “The tragedy of the Romanian nation is under our eyes” (Nechita, *Pâine* 14). Equally central is the need for a strong and disciplined state. From the women’s point of view, Italy is not such a state, not only because of its systemic

⁸ “The country needs the money you regularly send home. With your help, many houses are built and it maintains a certain industry of consumption” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 178).

⁹ “It is said that other workers have come from China and Pakistan, that the president went to a large oil rig in God-knows-what-country and personally asked the Romanians to return” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 87).

racism, but also because of the “much too mild laws that the Italians have” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 63)¹⁰ and the local political class’ corruption (Nechita, *Cireșe* 158). Therefore, the Italian, late capitalist state is not exemplary either, despite its cultural, ancient values, which both migrants fetishize out of a snobbish reflex, specific to their middle-class position in their countries of origin. This double social disappointment will be regulated by “soft backsliding.”

Soft Backsliding: Nation, Family, and God

In reality, the narrators do not ideologically position themselves against exploitation or oppression, but tacitly endorse their predetermined roles in the household and within the nation-state. Changing these roles allows for a certain social emancipation: recall that narrator Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli re-enrolls in college (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testament* 148), changing her career path. At the same time, the image of the “catchy woman” that Alex Cistelecan conjured up in a 2015 article in the Romanian left-wing magazine *CriticAtac* is not as real as some Marxist critics would like to believe. Fundamentally, the marriage between care and the global market turns out to be an unhappy one. The novels of the two authors are testimonials of social decay¹¹. However, their solution does not come from either communism or feminism. Their uprooting is seen as a family, national, or spiritual trauma rather than a social (class) or identity (gender) one. Following this triad, we can identify three fetishized elements in the novels of the two authors: nation, family, and religion. Inside this schema, culture plays a dual role. On the one hand, it has a cosmopolitan value, as it carries the liberal ideal of humanism: fraternity between migrants, tolerance towards the Other, and individualism, but also unquestioned respect for the receiving country's patrimony, its archaic history, and its employers. By these very last tokens, on the other hand, culture is complementarily subsumed to the Romanian nationalist agenda, as we will see below.

For the narrators, the difference between a local and an “*extracomunitara*” is still hierarchical, as both internalise the axiom of the right to property for the states’ ethnic members: “I was in her country, in her house, drinking tea from her cup. I had nothing” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 33). For this reason, the national uprooting is compensated by the need to access the lost national heritage: “I want to be able to see the news in

¹⁰ After a paragraph in which she denounces Italian racism, the same narrator adds that “I don't take the side of the Romanian criminals, but I wonder why they don't arrest them” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 153).

¹¹ “My Romania is an open wound! I miss the one I was there, but I can never be that person again!” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 192).

Romanian, read Romanian books (I miss *Moromeții*) and pray in a Romanian church, with my children” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 43). Moreover, for Bicec-Zanardelli, accessing this heritage is all the more passionate, since the problem of the union of the two Romanian states is central in the Bessarabian imaginary. Thus, the national poet Mihai Eminescu has a leading place in the worker’s spiritual life: “I miss many things and not all of them can be packed and sent in a package, as you did with the book of *Poems* by Mihai Eminescu. My book of poems, the Great Genius’ poems, that I’ve read again and again” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 67-68). The issue of national identity is urgent for the Bessarabian author, who criticises Soviet communism for alienating the Romanian population in Moldova from its identity roots: “When you wrote to me that you were studying the *Daciada*¹² at school, I thought that you would not be infected by the communist virus, that you will have access to all the right information, even more, that you will know the true history of our nation” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 69). Both narrators thus dream of a strong state. On the one hand, this powerful state is built through historical analepses. Bicec-Zanardelli returns to the interwar period and to the image of Greater Romania as the last period of freedom in the vulnerable history of the Bessarabian state: “In 1941 Marshal Antonescu liberated Bessarabia again. But the freedom lasted only three years, because in August 1944 the Soviet army occupied it again, and in a few days the border with barbed wire appeared between Romania and Bessarabia, separating many families from children, brothers, and sisters” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 72). Ion Antonescu’s extreme-right militarist regime is not directly glorified, but the narrator’s avoidance of expressing any critical position towards the ethnocentric plan of Greater Romania (also exploited by the AUR’s agenda) is problematic. On the other hand, another nationalist trope is that of the independent, decolonized state, with its refusal of the Western lifestyle. Instead of accepting “the jeans and the perfumed soaps, McDonald [sic] and the American wafers” (Nechita, *Pâine* 13), Nechita wonders: “Why don’t they look around to see how many productive factories are carelessly closed? Why do we have to eat someone else’s bread when Romania was the granary of Europe? Why are we the ones who need to send money into the country?” (Nechita, *Cireșe* 178). The “granary of Europe” image is also taken from the interwar nationalist mythology and engages in a similar

¹² *Daciada* is a series of textbooks for the primary school learners in the Republic of Moldova, written by the Romanian authors Nicolae Dabija and Aurelian Silvestru in the 1990's. They include folkloric legends and historical stories adapted for children. These texts mainly aim to reconstruct an unitary, ethno-national past for both Romanians and Bessarabians in a popularised and pseudo-scientific fashion.

endeavour to Bicec-Zanardelli's stance against economic dependence: "Isn't this EU the same as the USSR? The EU states gather in Brussels and decide everything as it used to be done at the political office in Moscow" (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Bumerang* 89-90). Although the union of Romania with Moldova and their independence are not in themselves right-wing ideals, their political and historical instrumentalization has been dangerous, especially when attached in the same equation with the thorny issues of family or religion.

The two women seem aware of the systemic injustices of patriarchy. The communist period, despite its attempt to include women in the labour market, is criticised because it ended up reproducing the same gender norms as in previous periods: "Men led families, wives did laundry, cooked food and badmouthed their husbands" (Nechita, *Pâine* 85). From this point of view, the narrator's mother-in-law in *Împărăteasa* is portrayed as a heroine precisely because of her refusal to conform to these hierarchical gender roles, capitalising on a ruralist proto-feminist consciousness. However, there is a certain unquestioned internalisation of women's predetermined roles in the household. For example, instead of focusing on the lack of support from her husband, Bicec-Zanardelli blames herself exclusively for her children's poor education and hygiene, shifting the focus to the mother's role in properly performing the reproductive work in the family's black box: "It's once again my fault, given my absence from your side" (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul* 133). The law that all this reproductive work will also be taken up by the female figures left at home (for example, the daughter in *Bumerang*) is not deconstructed at any point in the life stories of these housewives. Nechita best sums up this essentialist attitude: "I don't understand [the women who want to stay]. We are mothers, or daughters, or wives, or grandmothers. We are the heart of a family; everything revolves around a woman" (Nechita, *Cireșe* 118). Later, the stories from *Păpușa din noroi* highlight the fact that the absence of women from families is directly correlated with the most violent social dramas. The poverty in which children are abandoned by migrant parents in Romania, in fact, circumscribes a message about the need to reunite broken families. The solution does not lie in changing the perspective on the family, but in maintaining predetermined roles, so the reproductive work still belongs to the woman. In other words, we observe the imposition of a conservatism with a human face, which accepts "deviance" (in the form of single-parent families or even civil partnerships between homosexuals) but nevertheless prefers heteronormativity. These archaic family structures are validated even in *Împărăteasa*, which refers to

the village not as an arena of social contradictions in communism and post-communism, but as a refuge in the path of modernization and urbanisation: “The village holidays were those of the Church [...]. The soul of the village had nothing to do with that of the city” (Nechita, *Împărăteasa* 90-91).

As I stated at the beginning of this article, the two *badanti* will never fall into the trap of obvious reactionary discourses. Often, they prefer tolerance over bigotry. The most interesting narrative from this point of view is Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli's *Bumerang*, which tells the story of a daughter in Moldova after her mother left for Italy as a care-worker. The first half of the novel is uncomfortable, given the focus on incestuous rape and the explicit abuse committed by the narrator's father. The second part covers the period after the parents' divorce and the family's reunification in Italy. In this part, the reader will be surprised by the empathy with which the same conservative author of *Testamentul necitit* talks about drugs, (gay and straight) sexuality, the controversial experiences of a troubled adolescence, and the youth's political struggles¹³. However, the last sequences of the novel highlight a mutation in the consciousness of the teenage narrator, who, following repeated traumas, finds refuge in religion after going on a Catholic pilgrimage to Lourdes:

Mother Mary, I never had the courage to confess and not to repent in front of anyone... But I think the time has come. You are the only one who can listen to me. Many are my sins, some made from weakness, others from youthful curiosity and naivety, from ignorance and recklessness. I'm not looking for the reasons that pushed me to do them, nor the culprit, I don't want to accuse anyone. Just to free myself from the burden of these guilts. (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Boomerang* 178-179)

This 180-degree route change is obviously a narratological trick by which the implicit narrator (the migrant mother) tries to sublimate her ideological contradictions with the explicit narrator (the seemingly progressive daughter). Religion has a central component in the novels of the two *badanti*. It represents the bridge to a cosmopolitan pan-Christianity, where the differences between Catholicism and

¹³ “Are there only in Moldova young people who die from beatings in prisons? The same happens in Italy, and in France, and in the USA. Recently Stefano Cucchi died in the Italian prison after being arrested for drugs, he died from torture; Carmelo Castro, who died at the age of 19, committed suicide in prison because of the strange laws of his country. It's the 21st century, but young people continue to die in the 'Arab springs', fighting for freedom and democracy. In this century young people still throw themselves from the windows for not being understood by their colleagues because they have a different sexual orientation. Women continue to be mistreated by their boyfriends and husbands; daughters to be raped by fathers. In this chaos and injustice, where everything is bought and sold, where justice is given to those who have a full wallet, my truth was not recognized” (Bicec-Zanardelli, *Boomerang* 141).

Orthodoxy are blurred in favour of a spiritual cohabitation with the population of the host country. Padre Leonello, the priest from Perugia, is a central node in the life of Liliana Nechita's narrator, while the mother from *Testamentul necitit* chooses to bury Stasic, her own son, according to Catholic rites after his social and spiritual assimilation into a new community. But more than this supranational role of Christianity, it also functions as an indicator of national identity. Liliana Nechita's novel ends with an exhortation to the solidarity of Romanians in the diaspora under the Church's symbols:

The God of the Romanians and the smell of incense, the drawn-out and sweet speech of our priests... It exists! Here, in Italy, after a personal search of three years, I found a Romanian church! [...] We have to get out of our tight circles. We must search, talk more among ourselves, help each other more, and not close the door to trouble ourselves! The Romanian Church exists in Italy! (Nechita, Cireșe 189-190)

Conclusions

To sum up, implicit nationalism, the fetishization of family and gender roles, and pan-Christian mysticism function as adjuvants in the face of the contradictions that mark both authors' private lives, representing both methods of subsistence in globalised capitalism and a virtual path to radicalization, as I have argued in the introductory section. This path to radicalization can be explained by its relation to socio-economic factors stemming from the poverty of post-Communist, neoliberal Romania during the 1990s and the 2000s, the emergence of a "new gender arrangement" on a global scale, and the coupling of care labour to the international market. Fortunately, the stories of the two narrators remain in an ambiguous and liberal, but all the more contradictory zone, which I called "soft backsliding".

This contradictory nature of Bicec-Zanardelli and Nechita's writings is best explained through the Marxist feminist frame, which is both counterposed to the liberal or radical feminist method in discussing reproductive labour, underlying the fundamental separation between two analytical systems (feminism and Marxism) and their subsequent objects of critique (patriarchy and capitalism), and postcolonialism and globalisation studies in discussing the theme of economic migration in the 21st century, which promote a dematerialized and culturalist image of the diasporic subject. The results of such a materialist analysis show that this "soft backsliding" means the mixing of a so-called "emancipatory consciousness" on a micro level with reactionary macro-explanations, that refer rather to a right-wing conception of

ethnopluralism than to any form of Euro-Atlantic cosmopolitanism. That is, as Bicec-Zanardelli and Nechita become more tolerant, aware of their social condition and working status, and critical of the myths relating to migration (the voluntary nature of migration, the migrants' opportunism as seen by both Italians and Romanians, etc.), they become increasingly more prone to embracing an isolationist and nationalist politics for their home country. Blaming the state and its complex communist history for the contemporary exploitation of local women workers abroad is the most convenient explanation in a country where anticommunism and neoliberal propaganda have been the main ideological focuses. It is becoming more clear that the need for a repressed left-wing and internationalist political pole is backslashing into its reverse for these victims: a Romanian nation for a Romanian family under the Romanian Church.

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