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**THE POST-COMMUNIST TRANSITION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF
WOMEN IN EASTERN EUROPE
A CASE STUDY ON TATIANA ȚÎBULEAC AND DOROTA MASŁOWSKA**

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Abstract: Fiction depicting the post-communist transition has been little discussed with the focus on the representation of women. At the same time, there is a lack of comparative studies that analyze these fictions produced in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The article aims to discuss the representation of the transition in the novels of two contemporary female writers from the Republic of Moldova and Poland respectively. *Vara în care mama a avut ochii verzi* [The Summer When My Mother’s Eyes Were Green] (2017) by Tatiana Țîbuleac and *White and Red* (2002) by Dorota Masłowska are analyzed from the perspective of *World-Literature theory* (Warwick Research Collective) to see how the impact of the transition to neoliberalism produces new representations of women in the novel, questioning traditional gender codes. The women as commodities and the women as entrepreneurs, who adapt to the capitalism of the 90s in Eastern Europe are two symptomatic representations in the two novels, which offer, without an explicit feminist stake, a more complex mapping of the post-communist transition.

Keywords: post-communist transition, representation of women, world-literature theory, combined and uneven development, national identity

After the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the literary systems registered an emergence of transition novels. Its stakes were to record the reality of the period immediately after communism, with all its paradoxes. The transition novel is generally defined by the plot – even if it does not constitute a novel genre, it is a functional category (see Mironescu 167). However, the critical discourse has rarely addressed the representation of women in these novels, nor has it undertaken a comparative analysis of these novels produced in different literary systems, from the perspective of inter-peripheral relations. In this article, I propose a comparative analysis of two contemporary novels, one from the Republic of Moldova, *Vara în care mama a avut ochi verzi* [The Summer When My mother's Eyes Were Green] by Tatiana Țîbuleac (2017), and one from Poland, *White and Red* by Dorota Masłowska (2002), with a focus on the representation of women in relation with the process of transition. The novels are discussed comparatively in order to see in what way the transition period is depicted and how two writers from (semi)peripheral literary systems reflect on the image of women, interrogating, at the same time, the existence of inter-peripheral correspondences. Not only are the two novels contemporary and written by female writers but, at the narrative level, both are written from a male perspective: the narrator is a young man, performing some very specific codes of masculinity. However, the narrative style and the way the transition is represented diverge, and, while the two writers have different stakes, they capture the same impact of transition on the representation of women in society.

These two novels are discussed using the World-Literature frame, as defined by the Warwick Research Collective, “as the literature of the world-system – of the modern capitalist world-system” (WReC 8). Because they record the transition from communism to neoliberalism, these two novels are also novels of combined and uneven development. The narratives capture the openness and interaction of Eastern Europe with the Western, capitalist world, an interaction that brings the awareness of social inequalities, which are reproduced, in turn, through gender inequalities. Both novels capture not only the manner in which the transition was experienced in the local context but also the way in which the Eastern European *local* scene interacted with the *global* one, trying to define a new position in the current economic and cultural context. Comparatively analyzed, the narratives can provide a significant picture of the post-

communist transition, in general, and the representation of women, in particular. As argued by WreC,

But if we put various (semi-) peripheral European works - set in different places and written at different times - into conversation with one another and read them together without ignoring what we might call their non-simultaneous simultaneity, we begin to discern the ways in which they typically register the 'local' and 'global' aspects of modernity as at one and the same time traumatic, destructive, stimulating and profoundly transformative. (WreC 127)

The capitalist modernity of the 1989 moment is also traumatic and transformative in terms of gender dynamics. Opening toward the Western world brings feminist theories and trends into the Eastern European public space, but, as it be implicitly shown in the two novels, they also result in the amplification of conservative and nationalist attitudes, as a reaction to the Western neoliberal world. As Mihaela Miroiu points out, “[p]ractically, feminism had to be reinvented and rediscovered after 1989, in the same way in which liberalism and democratic socialism had to be. The reinvention of these ideologies was the initial stage of this process” (Miroiu 94). Their reinvention triggers certain conservative attitudes, which can be seen especially in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes.

The transition as hybridization of identity

Tatiana Țîbuleac is one of the most important names in contemporary Romanian and Bessarabian literature. Moreover, she is one of the most translated writers from this semi-peripheral literary system, gaining critical recognition from both local and international literary public, since her debut with the novel *Vara în care mama a avut ochii verzi* [The Summer When My Mother’s Eyes Were Green] (2017). Her writing cannot be framed easily in a local literary tradition or labeled as part of a generational direction. Due to the biographical context, Tatiana Țîbuleac does not belong to a single literary system – originally from the Republic of Moldova, she lives and writes in France. On the contrary, what stands out to foreign audiences is the exoticism of her writing:

Considering the theory of distinction and inequality between the two literary systems [Romanian and Bessarabian one], we notice that the tendency of the Bessarabian authors is to approximate the formulas that circulate inside the West Romanian space. But in the case of Țîbuleac, the formula is exotic for both literary systems: due to her affinity for lyricism and the refinement of the ellipse, the author is closer to the communist and postcommunist Russian literary system (Bâlici 102).

The writer's movement and presence in several literary systems are among the factors that helped the author to gain symbolic capital, visible both in local and international reception, as Iulia Vîrban shows (see Vîrban 2023). The movement from one cultural space to another can be seen as a process of hybridization of identity, this hybridization being depicted in the background of the novel *The Summer When My Mother's Eyes Were Green*. The plot and the exoticism of the narrative code fall beyond the simple category of a novel of the transition, in the way the concept is typically used in Romanian literary criticism. But transition appears in the background of the narrative and has a decisive effect on the novel's plot and the character's psychology.

The novel follows a teenage protagonist, Aleksy, who is taken in by his mother from what appears to be a center for mentally disabled children. Aleksy shows from the beginning a cynical attitude towards the world around him, through hateful gestures towards his mother. She suggests that he spend one last summer in rural France, taking into consideration her impending death, caused by cancer – in this context, the holiday in France would make some sort of compensation for her absence from her son's life and an attempt to recover the toxic mother-son relationship. Aleksy accepts, and the novel unfolds as the retrospective remembrance of this summer from the present perspective, after the protagonist has become a famous painter in Western Europe.

There is neither a specific space, nor a specific time at the beginning of the novel. Apart from the “Eastern European” resonances of the names, there are hints throughout the novel about the Polish emigrant origin of the main characters, who seem to live in England. This lack of temporal and spatial specificity is a particular mark of Tatiana Țîbuleac's style: nevertheless, the “Eastern European” identity of the characters and their relationship with the capitalist consumption world of the West are overlooked in the narrative, although at first glance they seem elliptical.

The relativization of Eastern Europeanness, through the lack of problematization of the post-communist transition strictly from a single unidirectional national perspective, can also be observed in the theater play debut of Dorota Masłowska, which bears the suggestive title of *A couple of Poor, Polish-Speaking Romanians*. Here, the Romanian identity of the protagonists is a generic Eastern European one. As the Polish writer mentions, “So Romania – in this play – is rather not a popular country in South-Eastern Europe, but a state of social weightlessness, when suddenly all costumes, props, ideas, definitions, and honorary decorations become unverified and unimportant like tickets” (Masłowska 6). This discursive strategy can have at least two stakes: on the one hand, to take a distance from the idea of national identity, emphasizing the fact that the Eastern European countries experienced the transition in similar ways, although after 1989 there is little reference and interconnections between one and other in the cultural and public discourse. On the other hand, the choice to use a generic Eastern European identity instead of a national one, can be interpreted as an implicit criticism of the image that the Western public discourse has of Eastern Europe after 1989: Western thought has often operated with an essentialization of the Eastern European identity (See Buden 2012), an essentialization which intensified (based on economic inequalities, especially) with the intense migration of Eastern Europeans to Western countries in the post-communist period. More specifically, in the case of Tatiana Tîbuleac and Dorota Masłowska, the choice to transform the national identity into a non-operative concept is also motivated by the post-communist transition event: their characters are confused from a political, social, and ideological point of view. This confusion is caused by the brutality and trauma of capitalism that prevails in these countries. In this context, national and even gender identity must be reinvented and reinforced, precisely within the parameters of the capitalist Western world: against this backdrop, Eastern Europeans become a generic branding for consumers and cheap labor.

Aleksy appears as a constantly dislocated character: from the center for disabled children to his home, from the country in which he was supposed to live to a summer in France. The displacement and mobility of the character contribute to the dissolution of his national identity. In front of the consumption opportunities that the Western reality offers, the national identity of Aleksy is not a coherent one. At the beginning of the novel, we know that he was planning a holiday in Amsterdam with his friends, where he

would enjoy all the consumption possibilities that the Western world could offer: “I started counting the money for Amsterdam – I used to do this every day, as if from counting they multiplied.”¹ (Țibuleac 10). The very idea of mobility suggests that the action of the novel could be placed in the transition period: for a teenager like Aleksy, the world has become a consumption market – he can go with his friends to Amsterdam (or only plan it, even though the materialization of the plan would be improbable) or with his mother to France, because “*modernisation* is phrased, in these terms, as a powerfully seductive millennial dream, the shimmering illusory (and compensatory) projection of an alter-world in which equality and wealth are offered and afforded.” (WReC 118).

Aleksy is not, however, a naive spectator of the capitalist world, but he is perfectly aware of the illusion. As the main character in *White and Red*, Aleksy has the tools to interpret the current global reality, with its inequalities: “Kalo's mother had gone to Spain to massage a Russian oligarch - his version, of course. Apart from Kalo, everyone knew what his mother was really up to, but they kept quiet because he was a normal boy. He really was. Retard but good”² (Țibuleac 6). His cynicism appears as an effect of the new capitalist world’s violence. It can be noticed that implicitly the novel depicts a gendering of consumption: while Eastern European men adapt and become consumers, Eastern European women themselves become commodities in the Western market. Aleksy already has the model of this masculinity in his family: “Dad had gotten rid of his mother, leaving her for a Polish woman with an earring in her tongue”³ (Țibuleac 9). Therefore, his desire to go with his friends to Amsterdam is also an act of proving his independence (masculinity), a simulation of free access to consumption.

This superior, masculine perception of the capitalist world is also visible in the attitude towards the idea of spending a holiday with his mother in France: Aleksy finally accepts, but only as a compromise, while keeping his ironic attitude. For him, the mother appears as a captive of the Western myth of the holiday seen as reconciliation, peace, and relaxation. Having access to a holiday in rural France, i.e. imitating a social

¹ “M-am apucat să număr banii pentru Amsterdam – făceam asta zilnic, de parcă de la numărat aceștia s-ar fi înmulțit” (Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Romanian are mine).

² “Mama lui Kalo plecase în Spania ca să îi facă masaj unui oligarh rus – varianta lui, desigur. În afară de Kalo, toți știau cu ce se ocupă de fapt, maică-sa, însă tăceau, pentru că era un băiat ca lumea. Chiar era. Retardat, dar bun.”

³ “Tata scăpase de mama, părăsind-o pentru o poloneză cu cercel în limbă.”

construct that the mother imagines to be typically “Western”, brings her the illusion of reconciliation.

Therefore, even if at first glance the East and the West are fluid notions in Tatiana Țîbuleac's narrative, they are articulated through the social determinisms to which the characters are subjected: the dysfunctional relationship in the family can be seen as an effect of migration; Aleksy's confusion, cynicism and social inertia can be seen as effects of the violence of capitalist modernity; the desire to escape to Amsterdam reproduces the illusions of Eastern Europeans about the possibilities of escape in the Western countries. Aleksy's Polish identity is not a coherent one, because the post-communist transition makes this identity more visible as a node in the network of global capitalism. Local identity, however, provides him the lenses through which he sees reality, a violent, combined, uneven world where in order to survive, he chooses to perform a cynical and violent form of masculinity.

The transition as a Polish-Russian War

Dorota Masłowska published her first novel, *White and Red* in 2002, and was considered “an author who speaks on behalf of the young Poles confused and frustrated by the less-than-perfect post-socialist reality” (Koronkiewicz, Kaczmarek 186). The novel, as in the case of Tatiana Țîbuleac, focuses on a male protagonist, Nails, who faces a violent reality - both personally and socially. Nails tries to sort out his toxic relationship with Magda and his other girlfriends, while all around him is talk of *a Polish-Russian War under White-Red Flag* (which is the literary translation of the novel title, *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną*).

Unlike Tatiana Țîbuleac's prose, where ellipses and a relativization of time and space prevail, the plot of Dorota Masłowska's novel is very clearly situated, as can already be seen from the title: the action takes place in contemporaneity, that is, in the period of post-communist transition, and the space is a city in Eastern Poland. Nails, like Aleksy, is also between worlds: between the country's communist past, which haunts the present through the power of “Russia” as a symbol of communism, and populism, and the “European” future towards which Poland is moving, associated at the level of imaginary with democracy, neoliberalism, prosperous capitalism. Thus, although the novel is geopolitically situated, there is also the idea of an identity in

transformation, hybridized. Moreover, the author's stakes are not only social ones - the novel is not only political -, because Masłowska, like Țîbuleac, is interested in language and style. In *White and Red*, the literary critics praised the postmodern discursive strategies: “Polishness was never intended as an object of full-fledged authorial commentary, and served, instead, as merely a stepping stone on Masłowska's path toward dramatically different themes and issues, such as the nature of fiction and the possibility of true control over language”. (Koronkiewicz, Kaczmarek 189). The language that Dorota Masłowska uses seems to imitate the “lowbrow” language of the Polish young generation, with all its violence and acuity, that is, opposite to the lyrical and elusive style of Tatiana Țîbuleac. However, the novel language has no intention to realistically represent a social group from a linguistic point of view: language is rather a narrative construct meant to show that language as national identity in the post-communist world is deconstructed by the impact of the neoliberal market:

This is what happens subsequently to various languages sucked into Dorota Masłowska's word grinder: the language of advertising, of blood-sucking capitalism and consumerism, the language of the xenophobic Polish character, Polish bitterness, megalomania and imperialism, the language of anarchist, ecological and feminist leaflets, the language of Polish machos, the language of books from school reading lists, of youth and women's magazines, the language of avant-garde or decent students, the language of concerned literary critics... They are all spoken by people who cannot use words in the right way. They are not eligible for the right to genuine words. For this reason, all they can do is pretend, deform, passing off as someone else. (Snochowska-Gonzalez 3)

Nails, like Aleksy, is dominated by social inertia: immediate urgent situations distance him from the political situation, which is in the background, as a general state of confusion and instability: “So she told me that in town it looks like there's a Polish - Russian war under a white-and-red flag. I say, How do you know, she says she heard.” (Masłowska 30). The “ironic pseudo-realism” (Koronkiewicz, Kaczmarek 178) of the novel articulates very clearly the deconstruction of the capitalist myth. Nails is part of this consumption world, but, as in Aleksy's case, he is aware of the illusion, distancing himself ironically from both conservative and neoliberal, European slogans “to turn our fatherland into a typically agricultural fatherland that produces, even if only for export,

normal Polish sand that would have a change on the global markets in all of Europe.” (Masłowska 250).

This cynical and detached attitude makes it impossible to associate Nails with a political side, and the novel intentionally plays with the political and social aporia and confusion of the transition years. As Koronkiewicz and Kaczmarek point out, “Nails did not represent any coherent identity, any single class or demographic, and that to assume otherwise would constitute a clear “interpretive error” on the part of the reader” (Koronkiewicz, Kaczmarek 187). He is rather a representative of the generation produced by the transition period, and the stakes of the novel are to show how the social violence of capitalist modernity affects this social group.

Thus, the novel frames a precise geopolitical situation in the fictional scenario – Poland as a buffer zone between Russia and Europe, but these notions become fluid (mostly through discourse) until the end of the novel. Nails knows, implicitly, that national identity is being diluted in the face of the new reality, where his reality is becoming a node in the global network of capitalism. The more present in the public space are the speeches about Europeanization and neoliberalism, the more present will be the conservative counterpart, in opposition. As with Tatiana Țibuleac, the profoundly masculine, even misogynistic attitude of the protagonist is a strategy for adapting to the violence of global capitalism. In the absence of a clear political, social, or ideological identity, gender identity and its performance are imposed as the only stable ones.

Gendering transition

As seen above, Tatiana Țibuleac and Dorota Masłowska are not primarily concerned with creating a total novel of the transition, although the impact of this period can be felt in the background of their narrative constructions. At the same time, their novels are not manifestly feminist, in the full sense of the term. However, creating complex female characters is an important concern for the authors. I will further discuss the representation of women in these novels and the position they occupy in the post-communist transition literary field.

The narrator of the two novels is male. I consider that the choice indicates that the two writers differentiate themselves, even implicitly, from what was called “*Écriture féminine*”, or “women's writing”, and was promoted especially in the Second Wave of

Feminism (see Cixous 2010). If we consider Rita Felski's conception, which stands against the idea that there is a feminist aesthetic and states that “[f]eminism can in fact be understood as an example of a «postmodern » worldview which is fundamentally pluralistic rather than holistic and self-contained, embracing differing and often conflicting positions.” (Felski 13), Tatiana Țîbuleac and Dorota Masłowska could fit into this category of female writers who are concerned with social issues regarding the representation of women in the texture of their writing, rather than at the level of a performance that is visible on the external, textual and literary level. Rather than focusing exclusively on female characters, the two novels place women in a relation with the others. The neoliberal ideology of the transition period imposes a certain model of power relations between women and men, visible in the two novels: often, when female characters are empowered, it is in a neoliberal and dominant sense.

There are two main positions in which women are represented in both novels. First of all, the image of the young woman as an object of consumption emerges. In *The Summer...*, while on vacation in France, Aleksy falls in love with Moira. She represents a projection of Western womanhood – emancipated, independent. However, their relationship with her is perceived by Aleksy as the source of absolute evil. Moira is the one who will have a direct involvement in his accident which made him crippled. In *White and Red*, the plot of the novel follows the tumultuous relationship between Nails and Magda. She appears most often objectified in the protagonist's perception, but, like Aleksy, he feels addicted to her. If Moira can represent, on a symbolic level, the projection of the West, Magda, on the other hand, reflects the confused situation of the present Poland in transition:

Her face on the right, black tears flowing from her eyes. Like she's been fighting in the Polish-Russki war, like the whole Polish-Russki army had trampled her, running through the park. All my feelings come back to life within me. The whole situation. Social and economic in the country. It's the whole her, it's all of her. She's drunk, she's ruined. (Masłowska 117).

Although the protagonists are emotionally attached to their girlfriends, their objectification is manifested, especially in the Polish novel, by the performance of toxic masculinity. Aleksy and Nails perceive women as artificial and have a suspicious and

cynical attitude towards them. In a way, the relationship between them and these women can translate their relationship with the world around them – which is consumerist, hopeless, without a future. At the same time, both novels problematize the way in which the myth of emancipated new women is received in the Eastern European public discourse, namely as artificial, and part of the wider network of myths produced by global capitalism.

Secondly, another position in which women are represented is that of a single mother, who must find solutions for personal and social tragedies. In *The summer...*, the mother-son relationship is the main plot of the novel. The novel mainly follows how Aleksy perceives his mother and how, due to her impending death from cancer, the young man gives up the mask of the rebellious teenager and gives her a chance for reconciliation. However, the novel captures in the background the life of the mother and the grandmother, beyond this affective and psychological filter:

When my father abandoned us for good, I was the only one at home. My mother and grandmother had gone to the store in the morning to receive the goods and inflate the prices on the spot. Grandma used to say that prices should be set the same day the goods arrive, because only then - when you see the thing for the first time - you can tell how much a person would be willing to pay for it later. Grandma's intuition never failed, so of all the Polish émigrés in Haringey, we did it best. There were other shopkeepers in the neighborhood – Kasza's « Kalinka », a Ukrainian woman's shop - but the grandmother sold the most.⁴ (Țibuleac 68)

The image of the grandmother and the mother as business emigrants reveals the effects of the transition on the position of women in society. Left alone because of the men who fell under the spell of capitalism, they become emancipated women, in the sense that they acquire financial and social independence, not only performatively, under the effect of feminist theories delivered by access to Western thought, but out of real need, under the pressures of the violent capitalist world. Aleksy seems to admire them and the way

⁴ “Când tata ne-a abandonat definitiv, acasă eram doar eu. Mama și bunica plecaseră de dimineață la magazin să primească marfa și să umfle pe loc prețurile. Bunica spunea că prețurile trebuie stabilite în aceeași zi în care ajunge marfa, pentru că doar atunci – când vezi lucrul pentru prima dată – poți să îți dai seama cât ar fi dispus un om să plătească pentru el mai târziu. Intuiția bunicii nu a dat greș niciodată, de aceea, dintre toți emigranții polonezi din Haringey, noi o duceam cel mai bine. Mai erau în cartier și alte magazinașe – „Kalinka” Kaszei, dugheana unui ucrainian – , însă cel mai mult vindea bunica.”

they lead their lives as immigrants. The grandmother is seen as a strong woman who survives and adapts to all crises, personal, social, or economic. Similarly, in *White and Red*, the image of the mother is also that of a businesswoman. Nail's mother seems to be lonely, more absent, and a source of conflicts between Nails and those around him: he is “accused” of the fact that his mother is doing business with the Russians and he feels as is his duty to protect her reputation:

Lefty yells into the handset then – The correct password is: Nails’s a motherfucker, and his mother takes off her panties for the Russkies. I can’t stand it anymore. I can’t stand it, mentally. I’m thinking about killing him. Serious. Because my mother, well whatever, you can say anything about her, but that she’d wear some kind of panties, that’s just base slander, she’s not a woman who’s been fucked, and certainly not pro-Ruski, and no one’s going to say anything perverted about her, and especially not Lefty. (Masłowska 211)

The mother represents, as in the case of Aleksy's grandmother, the image of the one who had to adapt to the violence of the free market. She is, therefore, still an emancipated woman from the social and political determinism of the present situation. Nails, like Aleksy, has an empathetic, admiring attitude towards her, in contrast to the attitude he has towards Magda and other girlfriends.

The mothers and grandmothers in these novels are central because they reveal to the confused, hopeless young male characters the social reality of the world. While Aleksy and Nails perform masculinity associated with independence, power, control, and wealth aspirations, their mothers adapt to the mechanisms of the free market, being a model of survival and stability for the protagonists. Through the female characters, both novels reveal the traumas and violence of capitalism in the post-communist transition, “translating hidden economies” (Doyle 167), if we were to use Laura Doyle's formulation, and show that the reality of the transition can be captured in fiction together with the awareness of the phenomenon as one with global resonance, not just local. From an economic point of view, the grandmother in *The Summer...* faces the power of the economic market in a Western country, while she has to overcome the competition of other emigrants, and the mother in *White and Red*, has to survive in her turn between access to commodities from the Western world and the Russian black

market. Just as the protagonists are caught between several worlds, they are also dependent on the women around them: if Moira and Magda represent, on a symbolic level, the projections and illusions of the new future capitalist world, towards which the protagonists are anyway skeptical, ironic, the mothers and grandmothers represent the current reality of the world in the post-communist transition, a world that is aware of its semi-peripheral condition and is forced to adapt in order to survive.

Tatiana Țibuleac and Dorota Masłowska capture in their novels the impact of the transition from communism to neoliberalism in Eastern Europe, registering how gender codes are transformed under the effect of social and political changes. Their literary works, as novels of combined and uneven development (although they share more visible aesthetic stakes than social, and political ones) produce some of the most symptomatic representations of women for the post-communist transition, at the same time questioning the idea of national identity and masculinity. In these novels, combined and uneven development is translated as the phenomenon of transition itself, visible in power relations both at the macro (social) level, and at the micro (personal) level. National identity in the post-communist transition seems more strongly represented through the lenses of masculinity in both novels. This narrative option can be seen as a way to deconstruct, implicitly, the neoliberal myths of equality and to criticize, in fact, the power relations that are maintained and supported by the system.

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