

## “LENT VOICES”: THE POLITICS OF ROMANIAN MIGRANT LIFE WRITING

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this article is to propose a suitable framework for the systemic positioning and ideological interpretation of several autobiographical novels written by authors who have directly participated in the economic emigration from Romania. The common formal characteristic of these books is that they incorporate biographical elements from the lives of their empirical authors, using various types and degrees of fictionalization in this process. In a certain sense, the extremes of these forms fit within a broad spectrum of autobiographical writings, where the two poles might be, at one end, journals or memoirs, and at the other, autofiction<sup>2</sup>. Controversies surrounding the terminology used to describe these books will be sidestepped by using the more general term “life writing”<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, the books worth mentioning here are numerous: *Adio, adio, patria mea, cu î din i, cu â din a* [*Farewell, My Homeland, Farewell*] by Radu Pavel Gheo (2003), *Cartea tuturor intențiilor* [*The Book of All Intentions*] by Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari (2006), *Testamentul necitit* [*The Unread Testament*] by Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli (2009), *Zero grade Kelvin* [*Zero Degrees Kelvin*] by Adrian Schiop (2009), *El sueño español. Jurnal de căpșunar* [*El sueño español. A Strawberry-Picker's Diary*] by Albert V. Cătănuș (2010), *Căpșunarii* [*The Strawberry Pickers*] by Dani Rockhoff (2013), *Cireșe amare* [*Sour Cherries*] by Liliana Nechita (2014), *Badante pentru totdeauna* [*Forever Badanti*] by Ingrid Beatrice Coman-Prodan (2015), and *Gastarbeiter* by Mihai Buzea (2017). This list can be expanded. As a preliminary note in any analysis of the representation of the diaspora in Romanian literature, it should be mentioned that no reading of these books can ignore the relationship between the cause of emigration and the neoliberal policies after 1989/1991 that led to privatization, massive layoffs, and

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed theorization of the difference between autobiography and autofiction in Anglophone contemporary literature, see Hywel Dix, *Autofiction in English*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life Writing, Autobiografiction, & The Forms of Modern Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. See also Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu, Laura Cernat, Bavyola Shatro, “Cultural Memory In Eastern European Women’s Life Writing: Agency, Persistence, Legacies”, *Dacoromania litteraria*, 2023, 10, pp. 5-17, the introductory article of the edited issue “Women’s Life Writing in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe”

poverty in the semi-peripheries of Eastern Europe<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, an ideological analysis of this corpus will prove insightful for understanding and documenting Romanian post-communism, a period in Romania's history that has been marked by massive migrations to the West<sup>5</sup>. However, we will only refer to a subset of this list.

A very simple delimiting criterion divides these books into two categories: those published in the country of emigration and those that were not. We take this criterion as central, as it does not imply a translation motivated by literary success but rather one motivated by an extra-literary, political or even "civic" reason. From this perspective, only three books fit into a hybrid transnational configuration: those written by Bicec-Zanardelli, Nechita, and Coman-Prodan. These will be our focus in the following discussion. Surprisingly, all three books are written either by women working directly as domestic caregivers in Italy (the first two authors), or about the second-hand experience of Romanian *badanti* told by another migrant (Coman-Prodan), serving as significant sociographic documents for both economic migration in Italy and the broader field of reproductive labour today<sup>6</sup>.

Nonetheless, it is notable that the common denominator of these books is arguably their lack of popularity, prestige, or even relevance to an international reader of what has come to be called *World Literature*. What I mean by this is not necessarily that they have been ignored by the larger public. For example, Nechita's work is one of the most popular depictions of Romanian *badanti* writing, especially after she had been the main figure of the documentary series *Exodusul mamelor* [*The Exodus of Mothers*] from 2013, which was broadcast on both the Romanian and the Italian national televisions. However, all three authors are more relevant as public figures in their diasporic communities than as world-literary producers.

So, how can we recuperate them from a so-called "world-literary" perspective? Why should such "provincial" literary exercises – bluntly put, stylistically, formally, and even ideologically rudimentary – be discussed from a global, cosmopolitan perspective? Moreover, is this intervention yet another attempt to rehabilitate a peripheral product in the eyes of the geopolitical centre, adding to the long line of disciplinary critiques that note the fact that hierarchies have not

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<sup>4</sup> Swanie Potot, "Transitioning Strategies of Economic Survival: Romanian Migration during the Transition Process", in Richard Black et al. (eds.), *A Continent Moving West? EU Enlargement and Labour Migration from Central and Eastern Europe*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2010, pp. 249-270.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed sociological analysis of the Romanian emigration to Italy, see Cornel Ban, "Economic Transnationalism and its Ambiguities: The Case of Romanian Migration to Italy", *International Migration*, 50, 2012, 6, pp. 129-149.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care", *New Left Review*, July/August 2016, <https://-newleftreview.org/issues/ii100/articles/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>. Accessed November 6, 2024.

changed despite of the rise of postcolonial or postmodernist theories?<sup>7</sup> Aren't we, by opposing the homogenization and commodification of literary objects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, instead exoticizing a kind of literature that has the sole merit of being written by working-class agents?

Before answering all these questions, I will briefly outline the structure of my argument. In the first section of this article, I propose a shift in perspective toward the literary object, starting from a critique of Caterina Scarabicchi's positions and identifying the place of migration literature in Romanian within what Sarah Brouillette calls "the global literary marketplace". Here, the goal is to systematize this raw material from a world-literary perspective rather than to offer broader textual or sociographic interpretations. Ideological close readings of some of these books have been carried out in recent years<sup>8</sup> and will certainly be the subject of future studies. In the second section, I will address the problem of mapping these books' positions in the literary system, reusing and recontextualizing Tötösy de Zepetnek's terminology of "in-between peripherality", from which I will derive some narratological hypotheses which I will briefly exemplify. Instead of using their writing on labour from within a class perspective, these authors prefer to "lend" their narrative voice at a narratological level to legitimize themselves, as foreigners, to an Italian audience. This choice cannot be explained as a personal decision of the authors but rather as a systemic residue that perpetuates an educational preconception about the civic and ethical utility of literature as a global, liberal institution.

### *Romanian Migration and the Literary Marketplace*

Romanian literature about migration has two groups of literary representatives: authors who discuss migration from an autobiographical stance and those who fictionalize it, either as a central narrative focus or as a secondary plot in their novels. A brief look at the second category<sup>9</sup> confirms that these authors not only

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<sup>7</sup> See David Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical World," in Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2006, pp. 43-53.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ioana Pavel, "Literature and Migration: The Re-presentations of Italy in Contemporary Romanian Prose", *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 6, 2020, 1, pp. 147-163; Snejana Ung, "Should I Stay or Should I Move Back? Literary Representations of Emigration to the US in Postcommunist Romanian Literature", *Transilvania*, 2023, 9, pp. 1-10; Mihnea Bălăci, "The Unhappy Marriage of Care and the Global Market: 'Soft Backsliding' in the Narratives of Two Romanian *Badanti*", *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 10, 2024, 1, pp. 12-34; Adriana Stan, Cosmin Borza, "Labors of Love. Migration and Women's Work in Contemporary Literature from Romania and Republic of Moldova", *Women's Studies*, 53, 2024, 8, pp. 990-1009.

<sup>9</sup> When it comes to the issue of visibility and success, the data about the Romanian post-Communist migration novel that I have gathered together with Mihai Țăpuș is revelatory. The paratextual metadata

receive the most generous reception within the literary field but also enjoy the most translations into other languages. Some examples include *Sunt o babă comunistă!* [*I'm An Old Commie!*] (2007) and *Fetița care se juca de-a Dumnezeu* [*The Little Girl Who Played God*] (2014) by Dan Lungu, *Kinderland* (2013) by Liliana Corobca, *Noapte bună, copii!* [*Good Night, Children!*] (2010) by Radu Pavel Gheo, and *Interior Zero* (2016) by Lavinia Braniște. The success of these fictionalizing stories highlights an issue in the literary representation of these social themes. A relevant framework for viewing this problem could be the one proposed by Caterina Scarabocchi. In her 2019 article, “Borrowed Voices: Narrating the Migrant’s Story in Contemporary European Literature Between Advocacy, Silence and Ventriloquism”, the Italian researcher questions the legitimacy of the artistic representations of immigration by cultural agents from European host countries. Drawing her argument on the case studies of the Italian poet Erri de Luca and the French novelist Laurent Gaudé, she states that “the major issue connected with these stories is the ventriloquism of their authorial voices, which fictionally borrow the point of view of the migrant, but actually remain framed within a European – and often Eurocentric – perspective”<sup>10</sup>. Scarabocchi identifies two tropes in the European texts (or spectacles, exhibitions, and performances) that intend to raise awareness about the situation of immigrants and refugees. One is the portrayal of the character as a victim, and the other is their unrealistic heroization<sup>11</sup>. The conclusion of her analysis is that individuals directly involved in migration are often deprived of narrative self-representation. The same can be said about the “second-hand” literary representations of migration in Romanian literature. In a context where European states are guilty of their “structural hypocrisy”<sup>12</sup>, combining socio-cultural racism with economic exploitation of transnational labour, migrant subjectivities can have emancipatory and progressive or, at least, authentic and documentary value.

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concerning the literary reception and the translations of the main migration novels in the Romanian language are to be found here: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1d5k9Jcu\\_VGAIUFQpTW-dyoEIn7J1TwR6Br-4PqIvxISA/edit?gid=0#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1d5k9Jcu_VGAIUFQpTW-dyoEIn7J1TwR6Br-4PqIvxISA/edit?gid=0#gid=0). Accessed November 6, 2024]. The data were presented at the International Conference for the Study of the Novel”, hosted by The Institute of Linguistics and Literary History “Sextil Pușcariu” in Cluj-Napoca in 21-22 June 2024, under the title “Modelling the Romanian Post-Communist Migration Novel: A Complexifying Approach”.

<sup>10</sup> Caterina Scarabocchi, “Borrowed Voices: Narrating the Migrant’s Story in Contemporary European Literature between Advocacy, Silence and Ventriloquism”, *Journal for Cultural Research*, 23, 2019, 2, p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> For a similar conceptual schema about the limits of romantic cosmopolitanism, see Galin Tihanov, “Narratives of Exile: Cosmopolitanism beyond the Liberal Imagination”, in Nina Glick Schiller and Andrew Irving (eds.), *Whose Cosmopolitanism: Critical Perspectives, Relationalities and Discontents*, New York, Berghahn, 2014, pp. 141-159.

<sup>12</sup> Remus Gavril Anghel, István Horváth (eds.), *Sociologia migrației. Teorii și studii de caz românești* [*Sociology of Migration. Theories and Romanian Case Studies*], Iași, Polirom, 2009, p. 26.

However, the Romanian case discussed in this article seems to stand out from Scarabicchi's ideal scenario. Moreover, Scarabicchi's argument raises certain questions, as it assumes that literary discourse can exist without any institutional, political, or educational mediation. How much of the immigrants' artistic discourse, for instance, would be subtly shaped by the presence of NGOs or other organizational entities<sup>13</sup> in the public space? Leaving this question open, my article returns to the semi-peripheral cases that I mentioned earlier, attempting to present a broader theory of literary mediation between the empirical author, the narrative voice, and the audience.

I begin by emphasizing that the texts written by the three women authors occupy a liminal position between two national literary fields, corresponding with the demographic spaces of the groups they represent. Bicec-Zanardelli's book was translated with a changed title, *Cari miei figli, vi scrivo* [*Dear Children, I Write to You*], and published by Einaudi in 2013. *Cireșe amare* was published in Italian in 2017 as *Ciliegie amare* by Edizioni Giuseppe Laterza. As for *Badante pentru totdeauna*, it was originally published in a bilingual version as *Badante per sempre* by Rediviva, an Italian-Romanian small publishing house in Milan, in 2015, before being published in Romanian in 2020 by Eikon publishing house. Consequently, from the perspective of the literary system, this type of diasporic literature should create a literary category in itself. Hungarian theorist Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek offers "a theoretical and methodological framework"<sup>14</sup> that can properly describe this semi-autonomy from the host culture in the subsystem of migrant literature. He expands the concept of "in-between peripherality," initially referring to (semi)peripheral national cultures, to include the literature of the diaspora: "the diaspora author and text is 'in-between' the original culture and literature the author and his/her text emanate from, and both are 'peripheral' with regard to the original culture and literature and their location"<sup>15</sup>. In this sense, the Romanian *badante* literature most clearly exemplifies this concept.

However, although the Romanian ethnic minority is one of the largest in the Italian peninsula, discussion of the Romanian diaspora literature in Italy is limited. Its relevance in the Italian culture and market has been much lower than in Romania<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, reading these books reveals an interesting particularity, an element that differentiates them from other autobiographical works listed

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<sup>13</sup> For a telling example of this institutional mediation of literature, see Sarah Brouillette, *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Migration, Diaspora, and Ethnic Minority Writing", in Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, I-Chun Wang, Hsiao-Yu Sun (eds.), *Perspectives on Identity, Migration, and Displacement*, Taiwan, National Sun Yat-sen University, 2010, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> One relevant exception could be Andreea Simionel's *Male a Est*, Roma, Italo Svevo Edizioni, 2022. However, Simionel's novel is not relevant for our study, since it was written directly into Italian and the author is a second-generation migrant.

above: their “born translated” character, in the words of Rebecca L. Walkowitz<sup>17</sup>. Unfortunately, the system within which we operate is considerably more restricted than the one of the *world lit* superstars discussed by Walkowitz (i.e., J.M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Junot Díaz, Mohsin Hamid, etc.). More precisely, we are far removed from the main networks of what Sarah Brouillette calls “the global literary marketplace”<sup>18</sup>, i.e., the Anglophone and Western-centric space of *World Literature* that has shaped the careers of the most important writers from the world’s peripheries. This is a context where even postcolonial literature is structurally a product of global capitalism, with all the inherent advantages and disadvantages. The authors discussed here do not compete with these world-authors; they are not even symptomatic of the commodification of hybridity and nomadism in diasporic *World Literature*. Instead, they speak to two highly atomized literary spaces: the Romanian and the Italian one. Therefore, I retrace the question: why are these books important from a global perspective?

One reason could be that they are world-historical by default. We can always read these books as symptoms of how the crisis of global capitalism in Western states is stabilized by and begets the import and commodification of cheap migrant labour force from the Global South. The individual subjects of this process may not necessarily interpret their experience accordingly, but their disembedded narrations are nonetheless open to progressive and theoretically productive interpretation. However, this article has a more systemic, theoretical, and modest scope. Therefore, I believe that their marginal position on the literary market itself is also significant in how they are instrumentalized by non-academic consumers. Their lack of success confirms that “only some relatively privileged individuals are engaged in the production and circulation of literature”, which “positions world literature as an elite, homogenizing, complacent commodity”<sup>19</sup>.

Of course, reclaiming and revaluing them as exotic and “raw” literary products *à la* Scarabocchi, or as world-historical documents, would not change the logic of the market system itself. Their lack of market success is also tied to formal and ideological shortcomings that must not be ignored. Discussing these shortcomings in axiological terms prevents us from seeing the systematic picture. These literary products are rudimentary not because they are poorly written but because they are the result of a mechanism of power hierarchies in which “proletarianized” authors from Eastern European semi-peripheries lost the *World Literature* competition,

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<sup>17</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 15-43.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Brouillette, “World Literature and Market Dynamics”, in Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (eds.), *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, New York and London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 93-94

which is increasingly politicized in complex, self-reflective ways. While narrators in contemporary world postcolonial autofiction, such as those by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Justin Cartwright, are used as a “singular collective voice”<sup>20</sup> that speaks on behalf of a community to create awareness and even contest a transnational educated audience, the narrators in these *badante* authors’ life writings have more conformist stakes in relation to the *status quo*’s immigration policies. Even Coman-Prodan’s work, which seems to embody the scope of writing from a collective (even though ethno-national and religious) perspective when choosing to write from the point of view of a subjectivity different from hers, is doing so in order to “sell” the Romanian diaspora to the foreign public.

This shows us that Tötösy de Zepetnek overlooks the fact that there are different types of “in-between peripherality”. From the perspective of the global *World Literature* market, this intermediate position can offer an advantage for delimitation and promotion, depending on the “technologies of recognition”<sup>21</sup> activated in a particular historical circumstance. From this perspective, Romanian *badante* literature becomes doubly marginal: both in terms of the national criterion and in terms of international capital. Thus, these voices cease to speak for a vernacular, hybridized, creolized, or migrant population. On the contrary, they prefer to systematically separate from other migrants. The narrative voices in the three selected books here emphasize the social, educational, and intellectual differences between these workers and the stereotypical image of the lumpen migrant, corrupted and bearing the marks of a class- or race-discriminated positionality<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, how should these books be read?

#### *Lent Voices: Who Are They Writing For?*

The three books discussed here follow the life stories of three women who leave Romania during the transition to capitalism, working in Italy as live-in caregivers, often without a work contract and in conditions of physical and emotional exploitation. In a sense, the three works share similar narrative structures. For example, their fables are built around the point of emigration by dividing the story chronologically into a period before leaving the country and one afterwards. The earlier interval is usually marked by late socialism and the first years of economic

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<sup>20</sup> Hywel Dix, “Autofiction, Post-conflict Narratives, and New Memory Cultures”, in Alexandra Effe, Hannie Lawlor (eds.), *The Autofiction: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 185-203.

<sup>21</sup> See Shu-Mei Shih, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition”, *PMLA*, 119, 2004, 1, pp. 16-30.

<sup>22</sup> See Alex Cistelean, “Cireșe amare și gogoși dulci” [“Bitter Cherries and Sweet Donuts”], *CriticAtac*, 2015, February 9, <https://www.criticatac.ro/ciree-amare-gogoi-dulci/>. Accessed November 8, 2024.

liberalization. The three narrators start from a socially favorable position: Nechita's character as a social service worker in Focșani, that of Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli as a journalist in Chișinău, and Coman-Prodan's narrator as a caretaker in an orphanage in an unnamed urban area of Romania. Soon, this material balance is disrupted by the wave of post-communist layoffs in the Romanian-speaking countries. Left jobless and in precarious domestic situations (we see, for example, how all marriages fail because of adultery or alcoholism), the three women are forced to leave Romania in order to support their children at home. The timing of the departure is important: the narrators of Ingrid Beatrice Coman-Prodan and Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli leave Moldova in the early 2000s, when the visa issue and Italian legislation were still hindering economic migration between the two countries; at this time, communism is still seen as the engine of capitalism's failure in this landscape, where anti-communism seems to be a constant narrative attitude in migration novels. From this point onwards, the life stories of the three narrator-characters resemble each other, as they are all, in fact, all pursuing family reunification in the state to which they have emigrated. The narrative climax is given by the reconstruction of the family in the Italian culture, this time in a single-parent form, which reifies the trope of the independent mother. This image is coupled with an attempt to legitimize Romanian migrants in the local civic sphere. The years in which the books appeared, both locally and in the Italian publishing world, correspond to a period of strong tensions between the Italian population and the Romanian minority, in which the latter is stereotypically seen as precarious, dangerous and violent<sup>23</sup>, referring to a very specific social group from which the three authors programmatically differentiate themselves. The image they create is that of a neoliberal, individualistic subject, whose social upward mobility is due to their ability to work without questioning their labour conditions.

To better explain how this differentiation occurs at a narrative level, I will draw on several interpretive tools proposed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. In addition to traditional narrative instances like narrator and narratee, they introduce other aspects that become significant in the act of storytelling, such as *sites*, *media*, *consumers/audiences*, *strategies of self-inquiry*, *patterns of employment*, and *coaxers*<sup>24</sup>. This landscape illustrates not only the fact that a literary product is not the result of a single authorial voice, but the fact that life-writing can be

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<sup>23</sup> Probably the best known and the most intensely mediatized case is that of Romulus Nicolae Mailat, a Romanian Roma migrant that was tried for sexually assaulting and murdering an Italian woman in 2007. This event contributed to the rise of a wave of racist and anti-Romanian feelings in the Italian public sphere in the early 2000s. For more details about the Mailat case and its mediatic portrayal, see Teodora Popescu, "Immigration Discourses: The Case of Romanian Immigrants in Italy", *The Journal of Linguistic and Intercultural Education*, 2008, 1, pp. 31-43.

<sup>24</sup> Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 50.



interpreted as a performative act. Following a similar narratological approach in “Telling Sexual Stories”, Ken Plummer states that “there is much in common here with what is often called postmodern social theory except that this sociological approach offers distinctive advantages because it does not stay at the level of textual analysis”<sup>25</sup>. In the case of the three books that I am discussing, it is essential to note that each has an explicit, albeit abstract audience, which obliges these authors (as *coaxer*, *coacher* or *coercer*) to narrate positive and dramatic *badanti* stories either to confirm or to combat structural racism in Italian society, as well as an implicit, imagined and textually constructed audience, which the authors seek to persuade. Literature thus serves as a mediator between these two levels. This mediation is rudimentary and, arguably, ineffective. However, this is less important than the fact that it is built on narratological tropes that emphasize the exceptionality of the migrant subject.

One element that contributes to this impression is the form. In the works of Liliana Nechita and Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli, the dominant strategy for constructing this textual “audience” is embedded in the epistolary form of these books. *Testamentul necitit* is structured as a series of letters from a mother working abroad to her children. Clearly, this construction is only a textual pretext, and the “you” employed by the narrator has a clear rhetorical function: “Hello, my dear children! Who else could I be so sincere with, if not you? And to avoid talking to myself in vain, I thought it would be good to write to you again”<sup>26</sup>.

In *Cireșe amare*, the narratee is not identified, and its rhetorical function is maintained throughout. However, occasionally, the second person appears in the textual construction as an “autobiographical you”, implying a doubling of the narrative instance as addresser and addressee: “But I have two children back home, a little grandson like the Little Prince, and I’ve had *you* by my side for a lifetime”<sup>27</sup> (e.m., M.B.). This type of storytelling strategy may have had a therapeutic function, but the publication of these books in this letter collection form implies that a persuasive function is at work as well. The empathy generated by such phenomenological identifications is structured according to which side of the border the reader resides. For a Romanian audience, the goal is a direct identification with the biographical and familial trauma. For the Italian audience, the mechanism is almost voyeuristic, aiming to humanize the caregiver character. I won’t discuss the hierarchical relations that this second perspective entails at this point.

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<sup>25</sup> Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*, New York and London, Routledge, 1994, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul necitit [The Unread Testament]*, second edition, Chișinău, Cartier, 2019, p. 141.

<sup>27</sup> Liliana Nechita, *Cireșe amare [Bitter Cherries]*, București, Humanitas, 2014, p. 94.

In the case of Ingrid Beatrice Coman-Prodan's novel, the narratological structure is even more tendentious. Constructed as a fast-forward *Bildungsroman*, *Badante pentru totdeauna* begins its transnational plot only halfway through, from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter (out of 26) onwards. The first part of the novel prepares the "legitimacy" of the narrator-character by following her journey through the last years of communism (where her father is portrayed as an anti-communist dissident), through her family's sacrifices in Ceaușescu's last years, finally creating an idealized, romanticized profile of the care worker: "Without realizing it, I had become, without notice, a *badante*"<sup>28</sup> well before emigrating, as an employee of an orphanage in late socialism.

Another strategic element is the hagiographic construction of the character. The professional and class trajectory of the three narrators follows a descending path of gradual "proletarianization". Coman-Prodan's narrator starts from a state-funded professional position in the late socialist years, after which the post-communist privatizations force her to emigrate<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, the characters in *Cireșe amare* and *Testamentul necitit* both start from relatively privileged and educated positions, the former as a civil servant in Focșani, Romania, and the latter as a journalist in Chișinău, Moldova. Unfortunately, the migration experience entails the loss of professional security in favour of caregiving jobs in which these narrators often work without a labour contract and face intensified exploitation. This commodification of domestic labour does not lead to a class consciousness or solidarity with the workers' cause; on the contrary, the narrators seem to naturalize their position at work and in relation to their families, explaining it as an issue rooted in gender essentialism: "We are mothers, or daughters, or wives, or grandmothers. We are the heart of a family; everything revolves around a woman"<sup>30</sup>.

Furthermore, their differentiated profile is created either through culture – Nechita leaves home with volumes of Romanian poetry, a novel by John Steinbeck, and the Bible, while Bicec-Zanardelli often fetishizes the nationalist figure of the poet Mihai Eminescu, "the Great Genius"<sup>31</sup> of Romantic Romanian literature – or through their inherent maternal nature, which makes them not just caregivers (i.e., actors on the transnational reproductive labour market) but spiritual agents: "Being a *badante* is not a job, it's a way of being in the world."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ingrid Beatrice Coman-Prodan, *Badante pentru totdeauna* [*Forever Badanti*], București, Eikon, 2020, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65: "What the hideous and inhuman monster of communism had failed to do, the powerful and destabilizing blow of savage capitalism was about to succeed, forcing us to redefine and reformulate our rules of survival".

<sup>30</sup> Nechita, *Cireșe*, p. 118.

<sup>31</sup> Bicec-Zanardelli, *Testamentul*, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Coman-Prodan, *Badante*, p. 157.

Their relationship with their employers is “personalistic”<sup>33</sup> or even spiritualized, dematerializing any employee-employer relationship into a “humanist” rapport that is entirely depoliticized. Furthermore, it seems that the entire geopolitical disaster of transition and dependence on the West is sublimated into a religious narrative: “If God placed me there, in the home of an elderly lady in northern Italy, there had to be a reason. A bond was created in a still mysterious and unknown way, one not entirely in our hands”<sup>34</sup>. This appeal to a pan-Christian sensitivity adds a further persuasive nuance to the discussion by shifting the focus to a shared Italian-Romanian spirit<sup>35</sup>. It seems to suggest that both the Italian public and the Romanian good migrants shared the same values, as well as the same enemies:

What do you think is the biggest misfortune on the head of a Romanian emigrant? Another Romanian emigrant that has to live with the same host. Most of them are “Bucharest” shysters! Those from the slums, who think that the good man is the best prey, those who are ready to “fool” even their mother. They come, steal, rob shops, with the money they get they rent an apartment and lend it to other Romanians. [...] They sell and buy phones, drugs and girls. [...] A misfortune never comes alone... After being destitute, he has to put up with the bullying of the one who speaks Romanian but is not Romanian. Because Romanians are educated and with common sense, they mind their own business and are thinking of their families left behind. The others, the shysters, are rogues and profiteers without nationality<sup>36</sup>.

All of these downplays of class consciousness should not be understood as personal failures of the authors in question but as a direct effect of “in-between peripherality” in a marginal position in the “global literary marketplace”. The goal is to construct a civic consciousness aimed at persuading the Italian public to look beyond ethnic differences. Unfortunately, this kindness only applies to a “special” subset of the migrant demographic in the host country: one that is educated, conformist, and with civilizing values.

### *Conclusions*

By analyzing their narratives within frameworks of “the global literary marketplace” and “in-between peripherality”, this study uncovers the way in which Romanian “badante” literature occupies a doubly marginalized space, straddling both Romanian and Italian literary spheres yet largely remaining on the periphery of global literary markets. These works underscore the distinctive tensions faced

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<sup>33</sup> Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica. Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, p. 201.

<sup>34</sup> Coman-Prodan, *Badante*, p. 89.

<sup>35</sup> For more details about the religious theme in the works of Nechita and Bicec-Zanardelli, see Bălici, “The Unhappy Marriage”, pp. 26-30.

<sup>36</sup> Nechita, *Cireșe*, pp. 60-61.

by migrant authors whose narratives are shaped not only by personal experiences but also by systemic hierarchies and market expectations that often prioritize more commercially viable or politically compelling diasporic literature. Through examining the autobiographical novels of Romanian caregivers in Italy – *Testamentul necitit* by Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli, *Cireșe amare* by Liliana Nechita, and *Badante pentru totdeauna* by Ingrid Beatrice Coman-Prodan –, the article illustrates how the narratives diverge from conventional World Literature paradigms. Rather than advocating for collective migrant solidarity or a broader class consciousness, these works emphasize conformity with the host country's expectations, and exceptionality regarding other migrants, thus shaping a distinct diasporic narrative that should appeal to the Italian audiences while preserving cultural ties to the Romanian heritage. Ultimately, the article argues that these narratives' marginality in both Romanian and Italian markets speaks of the broader systemic hierarchies that determine the visibility and success of migrant voices, raising questions about the representation and validation of peripheral literary voices in a globalized world.

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“LENT VOICES”: THE POLITICS OF ROMANIAN MIGRANT LIFE WRITING  
(Abstract)

This study explores the way Romanian literature written by authors who directly participated in the Romanian emigration to Italy is positioned in the world-literary system, by employing Sarah Brouillette’s concept of “global literary marketplace” and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek’s idea of “in-between peripherality”. My main argument is that these authors’ marginal position in the literary market is doubled by a reactionary understanding of the function of the literary institution: not as an emancipatory endeavor, but as a site for self-legitimation to the Italian public. Consequently, (semi)autobiographical novels by Romanian *badanti* in Italy – Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli, Liliana Nechita, and Ingrid Beatrice Coman-Prodan – emphasize migrant exceptionality over solidarity. Their strategies aim to persuade Italian readers by presenting a “special” subset of educated, conformist migrants, while downplaying class consciousness and structural racism. However, these ideological and aesthetic choices cannot be properly understood without a systemic view of this type of literature.

*Keywords:* migration literature, life writing, World Literature, in-between peripherality, class consciousness.

„VOCI DE ÎMPRUMUT”: POLITICA SCRIERILOR AUTOBIOGRAFICE ALE  
EMIGRANTELOR DIN ROMÂNIA  
(Rezumat)

Acest articol valorifică teoretizările lui Sarah Brouillette despre „piața literară globală”, respectiv ale lui Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek despre „condiția periferică intermediară” pentru a analiza modul în care literatura română scrisă de emigrante economice în Italia se poziționează în sistemul literar mondial. Argumentul central al studiului este că poziția marginală a acestor autoare în cadrul pieței literare este dublată de o înțelegere reacționară a funcției instituției literare: nu ca un demers emancipator, ci ca un mijloc de autolegitimare în fața publicului italian. În consecință, romanele (semi)autobiografice ale scriitoarelor de origine română care lucrează ca *badante* în Italia – Lilia Bicec-Zanardelli, Liliana Nechita și Ingrid Beatrice Coman-Prodan – evidențiază excepționalitatea experienței emigrantelor în detrimentul manifestării solidarității între emigrante. Strategiile literare dezvoltate de aceste autoare urmăresc să atragă interesul cititoarelor și cititorilor italieni prin prezentarea unei categorii „speciale” de emigrante educate și conformiste, minimalizând totodată conștiința de clasă și efectele rasismului manifestat structural în societatea în care au emigrat. Totodată, articolul demonstrează că aceste alegeri ideologice și estetice nu pot fi înțelese adecvat în lipsa unei analize sistemice a tipului de literatură elaborat de respectivele autoare.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* literatură a emigrației, autobiografie, literatură mondială, condiție periferică intermediară, conștiință de clasă.