

## IMAGINING THE MOTHER TONGUE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE ON THE THEME OF MIGRATION. CASE STUDIES:

LILIANA COROBCA, DAN LUNGU, AND MARIN MĂLAICU-HONDRARI

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**Abstract** Leveraging the interdependence between literature and language and revealing the metaphorical transfer of meanings among them, this paper will attempt to demonstrate that migration literature constructs an area of images and symbols through language, which reflects the characters' attempts at integration into a different geography and the consequences of alienation both for them and for those remaining at home, especially for the children. For foreigners, the Romanian represents the Levant, the alterity, and their vision encapsulates a problematic *forma mentis* for the global space, as it betrays the hegemonic relationship between centres and peripheries. In this report, the mother tongue appears as a spatial metaphor, based on the junction of national and transnational, because it unites different mental grammars, offering an interpretation of migration through language that corresponds to the identity mutations suffered by the characters.

**Keywords** Migration, mother tongue, trauma, imagined language, centre, periphery.

### Language – A Polysystem

Starting from the interdependence between literature and language and revealing the metaphorical transfer of meanings between the two, this study aims to show that migration literature constructs a symbolic space through language. Within this space, characters' encounters with different geographies are outlined alongside their successive attempts to integrate into another cultural territory. At the same time, the literature reflects a distinct reality where economic hardships are mitigated, while those left behind – especially children – struggle more intensely, as they imagine, through language, encounters with their absent loved ones and learn

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to live in their absence. We will focus on the representations of the mother tongue, analysing it as a dynamic, fluid, (re)configurable system, depending on the tensions produced by the disjunction from the country and family, the contact with other cultures, and human interactions in general. In this sense, the literary reflexes of the migration experience must be viewed as a way of investing the mother tongue with profound meanings, with the aim of transforming it into a refuge of individuals settling in other cultural spaces, as languages are “more to us than systems of thought-transference. They are invisible garments that drape themselves about our spirit and give a predetermined form to all its symbolic expression.”<sup>59</sup>

Sapir postulates the existence of a close relationship between language and literature, insisting that “The literature fashioned out of the form and substance of a language has the colour and the texture of its matrix.”<sup>60</sup> However, the relationship between the two is not just a unidirectional influence, as his statement suggests, but a bidirectional one, because literature configures symbolic images of the migrants’ language, a framework containing “two layers, the latent content of language – our intuitive record of experience – and the particular conformation of a given language – the specific how of our record of experience.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, not only does literature move within language, but language is also articulated according to how literature uses it, as an oblique reflection of the characters’ experience.

Through a close-reading analysis of the novels *Kinderland*,<sup>62</sup> *The Little Girl Who Played at Being God*<sup>63</sup> and *The Approach*,<sup>64</sup> I will reveal the modalities and symbolic resources used for constructing literary images of the mother tongue in migration literature, by inscribing it within a complex matrix where it is not just “a passive instrument of expression, but [...] an active principle, which imposes on thought a set of distinctions and values, depositing accumulated experience,”<sup>65</sup> I will examine the images of the Romanian language in literature, highlighting its use by the characters in foreign territories, to see to what extent the dialogue between idioms can be viewed as an indication of identity loss or, on the contrary, as a means of its construction.

The mother tongue functions as a symbolic construct that captures the individuals’ encounter with a different geography and the attempt to articulate a new reality. Its projection into another territory is not built “in isolation, but also [...] within the cultural community of belonging, in its historical and social transmission,”<sup>66</sup> and especially in that encounter with other cultures, other idioms and traditions, in which otherness is perceived in a close relationship to the viewer’s subjective perceptions as illustrated through language.

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<sup>59</sup> Edward Sapir, *Language. An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921), 106.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Liliana Corobca, *Kinderland* (Iași: Polirom, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Dan Lungu, *Fetița care se juca de-a Dumnezeu [The Little Girl Who Played at Being God]* (Iași: Polirom, 2014).

<sup>64</sup> Marin Mălăicu-Hondrari, *Apropierea [The Approach]* (Iași: Polirom, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Elena Platon, “Patrimoniu și imaginar lingvistic” [*Linguistic Heritage and Imaginary*], in *Enciclopedia Imaginariilor din România*, vol. II (Iași: Polirom, 2020), 14: “un instrument pasiv de exprimare, ci [...] un principiu activ, ce impune gândirii un ansamblu de distincții și de valori, depozitând experiența acumulată.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 19: “izolat, ci și [...] în comunitatea culturală de apartenență, în transmiterea sa istorică și social.”

The phenomenon of migration specifically illustrates that the mother tongue is a protective matrix for the individual attempting to temporarily integrate into another culture, considering that they live in a universe of symbols, composed of myths, various languages, or arts. The connection “with the language we speak is one of the most special: it is intimate, downright palpable,”<sup>67</sup> an anchor in a foreign universe, and, at the same time, “a fundamental support for the idea of continuity in time and space,”<sup>68</sup> influencing the relationship between cultures.

In order to delineate an image of the mother idiom from the novels constructed on the theme of migration, my principal conceptual support will be the studies signed by Jean-Jacques Marchand, Roberto Merlo and Elena Platon. This is because, basing themselves on the existence of an interdependent relationship between literature and language, they insist that literature integrates language into a “communal imaginary universe,”<sup>69</sup> as a “means of expression [...] bearer of a collective imaginary,”<sup>70</sup> a “symbol with deep resonances.”<sup>71</sup>

A fundamental characteristic of migration literature is that it does not belong to a single culture, but is a “literature of ‘the relationship’ between different spaces, cultures, and languages,”<sup>72</sup> with its centre of gravity being the abolition of boundaries between them through hybridization. Viewed this way, migration literature is “trans-frontier, trans-cultural, and trans-linguistic, a signal of the shift, both individual and collective, from uniculturalism and unilingualism to pluriculturalism and dialogic plurilingualism – that is, to transculturalism and translingualism.”<sup>73</sup>

Migration literature is multidimensional; it is founded on dialogue, on the interaction between spaces, on the (un)mediated contact between them, offering a model of coexistence, since the boundaries between cultures delineate imaginary worlds that can exist simultaneously, dialoguing or entering into conflict. Nevertheless, the abolition of all limits provokes the decentring of the individual, manifested through the “double absence of identity,”<sup>74</sup> because the individual ends up belonging to neither space, merely transiting them.

Migration must be examined not only at the literary level but also at the linguistic level, given that it articulates a mechanism for knowing one’s own culture and other geographies, a mechanism that functions through dialogue with alterity. As a complex demographic phenomenon, migration presents multiple facets and forms of manifestation specific to the spaces transited, which

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 14: “cu limba pe care o vorbim este una dintre cele mai speciale: este intimă, de-a dreptul palpabilă.”

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 12: “un suport fundamental al ideii de continuitate în timp și în spațiu.”

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 25: “univers imaginar comunitar.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 24: “mijloc de exprimare [...], purtător al unui imaginar colectiv.”

<sup>71</sup> Roberto Merlo, “Literatura italofonă a migrației românești – repere și analize” [“Italian-language Literature of Romanian Migration - Benchmarks and Analyses”], in *Distorsionări în comunicarea lingvistică, literară și etnofolclorică românească și contextul European* [Distortions in Romanian linguistic, literary and ethno-folkloric communication and the European context] (Cluj-Napoca: Alfa, 2009), 469: “simbol cu adânci rezonanțe.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 473: “literatură «a relației» între spații, culturi, limbi diferite.”

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.: “trans-frontalieră, trans-culturală și trans-lingvistică, un semnal al trecerii la nivel atât individual, cât și colectiv de la uniculturalism și unilingvism la pluriculturalism și la plurilingvismul dialogic, adică la transculturalism și translingvism.”

<sup>74</sup> Abdelmalek Sayad, *La double absence: des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

also reflect upon the language used by individuals in the process of adapting to new, foreign territories. Mapping these facets offers a representation of the problematic insertion of the Romanian individual into the world and their contact with new civilizations, indicating, through language usage, the phenomena of identity attack that lead to its loss.

Thus, migration literature is an important source of images and representations of the Romanian language, which vary according to the authors' individual experiences and perspectives, because it proposes a complex vision of how the language is perceived and used by migrants and by other people in the communities where they live. The image of the idiom is fundamental, as its ambivalent nature, "its power to bring together the ephemeral and the perennial, the moving and the stable,"<sup>75</sup> lies at the base of cultural and linguistic hybridization, and also of identity (re)modelling, especially since the human being "has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, artistic images, mythical symbols, or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything"<sup>76</sup> except through language, through cultural dialogue, and through openness to the foreigner.

Leveraging the idea that the image of the mother tongue is closely linked to the image of the migrating individual, since it articulates a mental, collective, and simultaneously individual imaginary founded on elements from the surrounding reality and on representations of the self and the other, I will use the migratory experience developed in the volumes written by Liliana Corobca, Dan Lungu and Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari, to demonstrate that the Romanian language is articulated as a complex system that individuals constantly reconfigure based on contact with new civilizations. Once the characters venture into Italian or Spanish territory the mother tongue functions as an imagined language, as a refuge, as a tool for communication with other Romanians, or as a way of connecting with family. Thus, the (often tense) dialogue between the Romanian and the foreign language exhibits numerous aesthetic valences, as it involves a metaphorical transfer of meanings between the two idioms, offering a complex image of migration.

Although the social phenomena and the effects of post-December migration have dominated critical analyses of these three writings, a geography of the Romanian language can be clearly seen in the novels – the way it (self)represents itself in the world and is perceived from within. The linguistic mechanism that the characters create and use, based on integrating areas of reflection on memories into the word, involves constructing places of memory within the language as "entities that enable present generations to connect with previous ones, by relating to a common past from which they claim descent."<sup>77</sup> This is an attempt to order the universe and

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<sup>75</sup> Richard Black, Godfried Engbersen, Marek Okólski, Cristina Panțîru (coord.), *A Continent Moving West? EU Enlargement and Labour Migration from Central and Eastern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University, 2010), 11.

<sup>76</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Eseu despre om. O introducere în filosofia culturii umane* [An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture], transl. Constantin Coșman (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), 43: "s-a închis în așa fel în forme lingvistice, imagini artistice, simboluri mitice sau rituri religioase încât el nu poate vedea sau cunoaște nimic."

<sup>77</sup> Cosmina-Maria Berindei, "Limba ca loc al memoriei" ["Language as a Place of Memory"], in *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România* [The Encyclopedia of Romanian Imaginaries], vol. II (Polirom, 2020), 210: "entități

stabilize principles and values in an unknown country, “in a world where centrifugal forces can easily detach the individual from the trajectory of an identity-defined destiny.”<sup>78</sup> For those who have left to work abroad, “language is one of the assumed symbols of national construction,”<sup>79</sup> an “essential instrument for finding individual meaning in this composite world,”<sup>80</sup> and for children, a means of getting closer to their parents.

By examining the common aspects and differences in vision among the three novels, it can be observed that the way the Romanian language is constructed in other cultures is the result of the alienation of migration, while the image of a belonging language is closely linked to migrating individual. At the core of the process of rendering the mother tongue, discernible in the analysed novels, are the human presences – the characters – who convey the relationship between the native and the foreign cultures. The linguistic mechanism of the characters, marked by the alternation of multiple linguistic codes, is the result of a complex process of interaction between languages, forming a superordinate linguistic system built through the tension between the two – a polysystem.

Throughout the present paper, I will consider language a polysystem (in the sense theorized by Itamar Even-Zohar<sup>81</sup>), constructed through the interaction between multiple linguistic systems and the dialogue between geographies. Being a complex phenomenon with numerous socio-cultural implications, language must be inscribed within such a polysystem because it is dynamic, fluid, and modifies itself based on contact with other idioms. Furthermore, it must be considered that any semiotic (poly)system (such as language or literature) is only a component of a larger (poly)system with which it interacts.<sup>82</sup> Zohar himself states at the beginning of his study that semiotic phenomena, including language and literature, can be viewed as systems to be more easily studied and understood.<sup>83</sup>

Through this polysystem I will thus designate the linguistic matrix used by Romanians who have left the country, which unites two systems, two different codes: the Romanian one and that of the host culture. Although they are not equal, but are positioned in a hierarchy within the system,<sup>84</sup> we should not view them on the unidirectional centre – periphery axis, given by the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures, because each language plays a major role for the migrating individual; they coexist.

The migrant’s language and the imagined language is such a polysystem, because the focus is not on the processes that occur at the linguistic level, but on the “actual” constitution of

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ce fac posibilă conectarea generațiilor prezente cu cele anterioare, prin raportarea la un trecut comun de la care se revendică.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.: “Într-o lume în care forțe centrifuge pot desprinde ușor individul de pe traiectoria unui destin definit identitar.”

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 212: “limba este unul dintre simbolurile asumate ale construcției naționale”.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 210: “esențial pentru regăsirea sensului individual în această lume compozită”.

<sup>81</sup> Itamar Even-Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Studies,” *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 14.

products (e.g., lingual utterances, literary texts).<sup>85</sup> The language of belonging and the language of the host country form a complex mechanism that is functional precisely because they relate and can substitute one another. Any utterance in the resting language (or mother tongue), constructed in a foreign geography, becomes a means of (re)connecting with the homeland and a refuge – a way of escaping the sinuous process of integration. Meanwhile, sentences formed in the foreign language are an actualization of the patterns formed in the first language, coupled with the “moment when the other is discovered.”<sup>86</sup> Faced with identity decentring, the characters attempt to configure a meta-identity, born precisely from the dialogue between the native and the foreign culture.

In order to capture the way the mother tongue is used as an instrument for the individual's identity construction once it is inscribed within a polysystem, I will examine it on three fundamental levels: a social and cultural level, where it is used as a tool for relating to other Romanians; a formal level, where idiomatic words or utterances are tracked; and most important, a symbolic level, where the Romanian language becomes an identity imprint or a form of imagining foreignness and migrants. By correlating these three levels, I will attempt to demonstrate that the protean nature of the Romanian language, given by its numerous facets, leads to the formation of “imagined communities,”<sup>87</sup> while the migrant, although disoriented and decentred in identity, becomes “an agent involved in the wider process of cultural transformation,”<sup>88</sup> and not merely one “seeking economic rewards.”<sup>89</sup>

Since migration literature constructs multiple images of the mother tongue, mapping the way the Romanian language (self)represents itself in the world and is valued from within—as the language of childhood and play, the language of complicity and suffering, the language of the foreigner, the language of helplessness, of the unspeakable—the polysystem allows us to explore and relate all these metaphorical micro-centres of the mother idiom. In accordance with polysystem theory, literature does not have a single centre but operates with the help of multiple sub-centres that communicate. If we integrate the idea that literature is constructed with the help of language, and that literature can be inscribed within such a polysystem, it follows that language can also be viewed as such a polysystem, as Zohar<sup>90</sup> himself states that polysystem theory cannot remain limited only to literature.<sup>91</sup> The polysystem theorized by Zohar<sup>92</sup> facilitates the integration

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>86</sup> Alexandru Duțu, *Literatura comparată și istoria mentalităților* [*Comparative Literature and the History of Mentalities*] (București: Univers, 1982), 2: “momentul în care celălalt este descoperit.”

<sup>87</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Comunități imaginate. Reflecții asupra originii și răspândirii naționalismului* [*Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*], transl. by Roxana Oltean and Ioana Potrache (Bucharest: Integral, 2000).

<sup>88</sup> Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, Nikos Papastergiadis, “The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity,” in *Contemporary Sociology*, no. 30/3 (American Sociological Association, 2001), 34.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Studies,” 7.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

of the Romanian idiom into an intercultural dialogue and the correlation of all its symbolic facets, regardless of who uses it, where, or how they do so. This polysystem is outlined by the interaction between multiple linguistic systems and the dialogue between geographies, articulating the linguistic matrix used by Romanians who have left the country, which is based on the union of two systems, two different codes: the Romanian one and that of the host culture, which are visible especially in the sub-centres of the characters' symbolic discourse.

Thus, the metaphorical images of the Romanian language configured in the novels by Liliana Corobca, Dan Lungu, or Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari demonstrate that literature and language do not exclude one another, but rather support and complement each other, being two symbolic structures for modelling the world. The analysed texts show that language becomes a connector between spaces, cultures, and people – a support for the human being in the process of adapting to another geography, or, conversely, an instrument for the oblique denunciation of reality and of the foreigners' perception of Romanians. The idiom used by migrants is a dynamic, fluid system that is constantly (re)configured following intercultural dialogue, with the mother tongue maintaining a close relationship with the individual, the foreign language, and the space they migrate to.

### The Language of Childhood and Play

Next, I will focus on the images of the mother tongue, analysing it as a dynamic, fluid, (re)configurable system, because it functions as a symbolic construct that captures the individual's encounter with a different geography and the attempt to articulate a new reality.

Within the linguistic polysystem, an important sub-centre is represented by the symbolic discourse of children, which appears as "an interpretation of the world through the language, specific to a certain community."<sup>93</sup> The functionality of this sub-centre is ensured by a series of symbolic linguistic micro-centres that are constantly interfering: the language of games, the language of dreams, the language of suffering, the language of yearning (*dor*), all of which are salient in the identity formation of the child, a process carried out in the absence of the tutelary figures, the parents.

These facets of the Romanian language can be observed in the novels by Liliana Corobca and Dan Lungu, in the world of the child characters who, after their parents' departure, try to adapt to a new reality. The symbolic charge of their language, imbued with both reproaches and memories, is due to the fact that the mother tongue is, by definition, a multifaceted matrix, generating a parallel dimension closely linked to the maternal figure, which they constantly try to reclaim. Through language, the characters build protective *topoi* or horizons of possibility – fictional constructs based on imagination, with the natural naïveté of their age – which reveal the variety of the word and the shifting perception of memory and play. The child's speech is, itself, a speech imagined by an adult, even if the little one reflects on how adults speak and write. It does

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<sup>93</sup> Elena Platon, "The thread metaphor in the linguistic imaginary," in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai-Philologia*, no. 66 (Cluj-Napoca: Babeş-Bolyai University, 2021), 258: "o descriere în oglindă a lumii în limbă şi ca o interpretare a lumii prin intermediul limbii."

not matter that he is not the speaker of the language, but the fact that the mother tongue becomes the metaphor of the connection with the mother. The child left alone at home is the one who imagines the discussions, precisely because he does not have access to them, having only the freedom of imagination. The issue of language is central in all three volumes, being a multi-layered language that condenses various tensional areas in relation to migration, regardless of whether it is the one who experiences it directly or the one who imagines it.

The migration experience, symbolically captured in the two novels, constructs an imaginary of the Romanian language closely linked to the memory of the mother who left to work in Italy. With the mother's relocation to another space and the loss of the family unit, Cristina and Rădița helplessly witness the irreversible disenchantment of reality, trying to recover the enchantment and unity of the family framework through an appeal to memory, through the letters they send, the diary in which they note their feelings, or by building a parallel universe with the help of play. These two writings construct (re)humanizations of the narrative on the theme of migration because, beyond the social and ethical stakes, they coalesce a universe of children marked by the departure of their parents who cannot decipher a reality suffocating in its complexity, so they construct refuges through the word. The child's discourse is a discourse imagined by an adult, a form of imagining the mother tongue as a link between them and the mother who has left for another territory. The child constantly awaits a response from the mother, a response that takes the form of a letter in which the child, in turn, imagines the parent's words. While Cristina's and Rădița's mother already belong to another geography, the girls are the anchor-instance between the two geographies, as they try, on one hand, to recover the maternal figures through discourse, and on the other, to imagine the foreign land. The point of convergence of the two volumes is the thematic resonance: the imagining of the foreign land with the help of language. The narrative strategies used are multiple, and the choice of a child who imagines the foreign land without experiencing it herself is not a weak point of the novels; on the contrary, the problematic of language is central.

For the two girls remaining in their native country without their parents, the mother tongue functions as the resultant of several vectors: a substitute for happy times spent with the family, a means of connecting with those far away, a mechanism through which the image of the mother is (re)constructed, an instrument for ordering the desacralized universe, or a space of memory. Thus, a language of childhood and play is articulated, which becomes the foundation on which the children's identity formation rests, and which functions as a stabilizer of the mother's image. This can be observed in the careful rendering of the two girls' experiences, a process that lends "psychological depth to a prose of social observation."<sup>94</sup>

The gravity centre of the novels is constituted by the subversive positioning of the girls, who deconstruct reality by establishing a linguistic matrix marked by reproach and bitter irony, setting two worlds in antithesis:

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<sup>94</sup> Bianca Burța-Cernat, "România profundă. Destrămări, deziluzii" ["Profound Romania. Breakdowns, Disillusions"], in *Observator cultural*, no. 756 (2015), <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/romania-profunda-destramari-deziluzii/>: "adâncime psihologică unei proze de observație social."



"Wait, Mom, you spend day and night with foreign children, you take them out, you play with them, you feed them, you tell them bedtime stories. But no one stays with us, we eat whatever we can get. [...] What do the kids eat there? Avocado spread on bread, with red fish on top? [...] When you come home, bring us a mango too. I heard it's good, but I haven't tasted it yet. Though they say it can't possibly be better than our juicy, fragrant pear."<sup>95</sup>

"Anyone who goes to Italy never comes back, even if they promise to return. From there, you can only speak on the phone. [...] Italy is a country shaped like a telephone. All the mothers scream into the receiver that they're coming right away, and none of them keeps her word. Anyone who stays in Italy for more than two days becomes a liar and there's no escape."<sup>96</sup>

In both writings, the language of childhood is closely linked to the figure of the mother and involves the construction, through discourse, of spaces of memory, of a return to the happy times spent with loved ones, or attempts to configure a parallel dimension where happy experiences can be continued:

"She remembered how all four of them went to the park and rode in the boat [...]. Mama smiled expectantly, pulling the edges of her shawl. [...] She would have liked to have a photo of this moment, which always came to her mind when she thought of happiness and of her mother's return."<sup>97</sup>

From time to time, we go into the living room and look at your dresses [...]. We smell the clothes. The hat smells of Dad and the dresses smell of Mom. [...] Mom smells of cozonac (sweet bread) and pies, Dad smells of milk after he milks the goats and hay after he feeds them. Mom smells of noodle soup, and Dad of mushrooms when he goes to the forest.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Corobca, *Kinderland*, 22: "Stai, mamă, cu copii străini zi și noapte, îi plimbi, te joci cu ei, îi hrănești, le spui povești la culcare. Iar cu noi nu stă nimeni, mâncăm ce apucăm [...] Ce mănâncă acolo copiii? Avocado uns pe franzelă, cu pește roșu deasupra? [...] Când vii acasă, să ne aduci și nouă o mângă. Am auzit că-i bună, dar nu am gustat încă. Cică oricum nu poate fi mai bună decât para noastră mustoasă și înmiresmată."

<sup>96</sup> Lungu, *Fetița care se juca de-a Dumnezeu [The Little Girl Who Played at Being God]*, 107-108: "Cine se duce în Italia nu se mai întoarce niciodată, chiar dacă promite că vine înapoi. De acolo nu se poate vorbi decât la telefon. [...] Italia e o țară ce are formă de telefon. Toate mamele țipă în receptor că vin imediat și niciuna nu se ține de cuvânt. Cine stă mai mult de două zile în Italia devine mincinos și nu mai are scăpare."

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 110-111: "Și-a amintit cum au mers toți patru în parc și s-au tras cu barca [...] Mama zâmbea în așteptare, trăgând de urechile șalului. [...] I-ar fi plăcut să aibă o fotografie cu acest moment, care-i venea în mereu în minte când se gândea la fericire și la întoarcerea mamei."

<sup>98</sup> Corobca, *Kinderland*, 44: "Din când în când, ne ducem în salon și ne uităm la rochiile tale [...]. Mirosim hainele. Pălăria miroase a tată și rochiile a mamă. [...] Mama miroase a cozonac și a plăcinte, tata miroase a lapte, după ce mulge caprele și a fân, după ce dă de mâncare. Mama miroase a supă cu tăiței, iar tata a ciuperci, când se duce la pădure."

Cristina and Rădița constantly invent spaces of memory using the mother tongue to find their mother again, and the letters they write to her are attempts to fix her in their memory by appealing to the stream of consciousness or by imitating her behaviour. The fluidity of the narrative discourse, created by the overlapping of the diary and epistolary styles, facilitates the permanent actualization of the maternal figure through memories, by creating the possibility of reuniting with her, or by taking on her role: "On Sundays we sometimes have a concert, we play 'family'. I wear your dresses, which fit me, they're a little bit loose, but next year they'll be just right."<sup>99</sup>

The image of the mother thus becomes an identity support, and the language a matrix that preserves an implicit, constant reference to a (nearly) happy family, even though the children suffer under the assault of identity deconstruction caused by their parents' migration. In this sense, language is a decisive vector for expressing the children's inner world, being marked by bitter irony and antiphrasis, by reproaches, rhetorical questions, and melancholy: "Mom consulted with Dad, then with me, and said she was leaving for a year or two, until Dad paid off his debts. And she left, and that year or two just never ends,"<sup>100</sup> "Anyone who goes to Italy never comes back, even if they promise to return. From there, you can only talk on the phone."<sup>101</sup>

The centring of the discourse on the absent figure in Cristina's and Rădița's lives constitutes a narrative strategy to stabilize the mother's image in their consciousness, so they can use her as a model in the transition from childhood to maturity. Cristina's identity trajectory is based on assuming a new role, being forced to become an extension of the mother who left for work: "In the evening I read them books [...]. Luckily for them, otherwise I'd forget the letters, since I don't have time to read anymore."<sup>102</sup> "I proceeded correctly and pedagogically - I educated him. When I have children, I will educate them in the spirit of gentleness."<sup>103</sup> Unlike her, Rădița evolves "from a thwarted innocence toward an outraged innocence,"<sup>104</sup> because she loses her points of reference and support with her mother's departure, and her only refuge lies in reinventing reality through the game of playing God.

The language of childhood and play, visible in the protagonists' discourse, delineates a world of children who imitate adults, who "put into practice quite brutally nearly everything they hear and see the grown-ups do,"<sup>105</sup> considering the fact that the discourse is created by an adult

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 44: "Duminica facem concert uneori, ne jucăm de-a familia. Eu mă îmbrac în rochiile tale, care îmi vin, un pic sunt cam largi, dar la anul îmi vor fi tocmai bune."

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 21: "Mama s-a sfătuit cu tata, apoi cu mine și a zis că pleacă pe un an-doi, până își dă tata datoriile. Și a plecat, iar acel un an-doi nu se mai termină."

<sup>101</sup> Lungu, *Fetița care se juca de-a Dumnezeu* [*The Little Girl Who Played at Being God*], 107-108: "Cine se duce în Italia nu se mai întoarce niciodată, chiar dacă promite că vine înapoi. De acolo nu se poate vorbi decât la telefon."

<sup>102</sup> Corobca, *Kinderland*, 99: "Seara le citesc cărți [...]. Noroc de ei, că așa uita literele, că nu mai am timp și de citit."

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 36: "Am procedat corect și pedagogic - l-am educat. Când voi avea copii, îi voi educa în duhul blândității."

<sup>104</sup> Burța-Cernat, "România profundă. Destrămări, deziluzii" [Profound Romania. Breakdowns, Disillusions]: "dinspre o inocență contrariată spre o inocență ultragiată."

<sup>105</sup> Purcaru, "Cristina, un copil prea adult" [Cristina, an overly adult child], in *Observator cultural*, no. 684 (2013): <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/cristina-un-copil-prea-adult-2/>: "pun în practică destul de brutal cam tot ce aud și văd că fac cei mari."

as a form of imagining language. Thus, we can observe how “a world enclosed in its own patterns and prejudices transmits the same prejudices to children with maximum efficiency.”<sup>106</sup> The only instrument for (re)organizing this hostile world is play, which becomes a mirror of her own existence for Cristina, a way for Rădița to get closer to her mother who left for Italy, and, at the same time, a tool for ordering their suffocating reality:

“We thought kinder meant egg. Then a foreign child told us it means child and taught us the game of Kinderland (child-land), meaning the little ones play as the grown-ups [...] Yes, Kinderland is our favorite game. We play after lessons, in the evening, on holiday. The little Kinderland, the big Kinderland. The one for laughing and the one for crying. We also play hide-and-seek, tag, emperor and soldier, we skip rope, we build in the sand.”<sup>107</sup>

“That's how she invented another game, all her own, that the other children knew nothing about. When she feels boredom approaching, she imagines what the people she knows are doing at that moment, especially her mother, father, Mălina, Grandma and Grandpa, but also other people on the street.”<sup>108</sup>

If Kinderland is a metaphor – paradox of the three siblings’ lives, the game of playing God is nothing but a cry for their parents, an attempt to mitigate the distance from them, and an instrument for preserving their protective figure. Thus, language fulfils multiple functions, being at the same time a projection of the world of childhood, a tool for ordering a suffocating reality through play, or a space of memory that transforms depending on the user.

### Language – A Bridge

Within the aesthetic object produced by language, the protagonists participate in the construction of signs belonging to a mental universe, subverting their own idealizing representation of the foreign culture through discussions in Romanian. At the same time, the novels configure the foreign land through an interpretive intuition, and the mother tongue acquires the function of a mediator between two geographies. Thus, a symbolic meta-discourse is born that encapsulates Romanian and foreign mentalities – two mental grammars held in tension. Letiția and Adrian generate a symbolic meta-discourse about the mother tongue only after they distance themselves from the native culture

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.: “o lume închisă în propriile tipare și prejudecăți transmite copiilor aceleași prejudecăți, cu maximă eficiență.”

<sup>107</sup> Corobca, *Kinderland*, 131: “Credeam că kinder înseamnă ou. Apoi un copil străin ne-a spus că înseamnă copil și ne-a învățat jocul de-a kinderlandul, adică cei mici se joacă de-a cei mari [...] Da, kinderlandul e jocul nostru preferat. Ne jucăm după lecții, seara, în vacanță. Kinderlandul mic, kinderlandul mare. Cel de râs și cel de plâns. Ne mai jucăm și de-a ascunsă, de-a prinsă, de-a împăratul și soldatul, sărim coarda, construim în nisip.”

<sup>108</sup> Lungu, *Fetița care se juca de-a Dumnezeu* [The Little Girl Who Played at Being God], 13: “Așa și-a inventat ea un alt joc numai al ei, de care ceilalți copii habar n-aveau. Când simte că se apropie plictiseală, își imaginează ce fac în acel moment oamenii pe care îi cunoaște, în special mama, tata, Mălina, Buna și Bunu, dar și alte persoane de pe stradă.”

and begin to use Romanian as a support for learning the foreign language, as an instrument for criticizing the new reality, or as a means of escape from a new, unknown world.

The metaphorical representation of this idiom is the image of language as a bridge, which captures the agglutination in the characters' consciousness of two tense mental spaces – the Romanian space and the foreign space – as well as the relationship established between the two territories. The experience of estrangement imprints a symbolic charge on the characters' discourse, and the infinite possibilities of language allow for the institution of a dialogue, even a tense one, between Romanian culture and Italian or Spanish culture, between the Romanian language and the foreign language. It is as a result of this dialogue that the metaphorical image, language as a bridge, is delineated. This representation does not just reflect the phenomenon of migration *in* language, but offers an interpretation of migration in and through language, which corresponds to the identity shifts the characters undergo.

Language as a bridge can be seen as a spatial metaphor, in the sense theorized by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,<sup>109</sup> based on the junction of the national – transnational, because it unites two different mental grammars whose interaction is triggered by a social phenomenon: migration. The difficulties of adaptation and positioning in relation to employers, experienced by Letiția and other characters in Dan Lungu's novel, construct, through a language of suffering and helplessness, images of Romania seen through the lens of alterity, and indicate that the process of integration for Romanians in another country involves marginalization and, at the same time, the acceptance of this marginalization. Here we can see a particularization of the power relationship mentioned, between Western and peripheral cultures – an intellectual authority over Romanian culture – even though it concerns a "Europe coming from Europe:"<sup>110</sup> "I was looking to rent something [...] They always asked me: you have a special or nice accent, as the case may be, where are you from? When they heard Romania, something always intervened."<sup>111</sup>

Analysing the image of Romanians through the eyes of the Western observer, with their prejudices, emphasizes a series of characteristics of the women who have left for work, all of them (false) hypotheses of alterity. For foreigners, the Romanian is the Levantine, the other, the alterity, and their vision encapsulates a *forma mentis* problematic for the European, even global, space, as it (still) betrays the hegemonic relationship between centres and peripheries. For this reason, the mother tongue becomes a critical instrument, used to denounce negative stereotypes about Romanians:

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<sup>109</sup> George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, *Metafore după care trăim* [Metaphors We Live By], transl. Alex Văsieș, Vlad Pojoga (Sibiu: Universitatea Lucian Blaga, 2022).

<sup>110</sup> Merlo, "Literatura italofonă a migrației românești – repere și analize" [Italian-language Literature of Romanian Migration – Benchmarks and Analyses], 22: "Europă venită din Europa."

<sup>111</sup> Lungu, *Fetița care se juca de-a Dumnezeu* [The Little Girl Who Played at Being God], 59: "căutam să închiriez ceva [...] Mereu mă întrebau: aveți un accent special sau drăguț, după caz, de unde veniți? Când auzeau de România, mereu intervenea ceva."

"They knew almost nothing about Romania! Dracula, Ceaușescu, at most Nadia Comăneci, Ilie Năstase, *pour les connaisseurs*. Instead, they were willing to imagine the most appalling things. A world of primitive people, their stomachs rumbling with hunger, who had escaped a tyrant and were now scratching around for food across Europe!"<sup>112</sup>

The reticence of foreigners in the face of truth, the prevalence of clichés through which they disregard Romanian culture, and the reduction of Romania to well-known historical or sports figures, map an imaginary scheme that links truth and fictions about Romania in the Western mentality, which is now being attacked by Romanians living within it. Thus, one can observe a self-sustaining linguistic construct that orients the perception of reality so strongly that it ultimately removes reality from the equation.

The characters, through their discourse, indicate a polemical position against the stereotypes related to Romanians. This is visible through the denunciation of the preconceptions ingrained in the consciousness of foreigners, aiming to reveal an image of migrants who are fighting to offer a better life to their children and those left at home. In this sense, Letiția is a contrapuntal presence because she does not fit the foreigners' prejudices about the Romanian world. By contradicting their expectations, she frustrates and puts the foreigners in a difficult position: "But you know how to write and read? [...] *Sì, Signora*, she answered, tightening her lips. I finished high school."<sup>113</sup>

If, for Letiția, the discovery of Italy represents an incursion into a hostile world that leads to the estrangement from family and identity decentering, for Adrian, the move to the Spanish space involves the reconfiguration of identity and integration into a geography of love and stories, of imagination and freedom, marked by attempts to recover lost inspiration. The experiences of integration into another geography lived by Letiția and Adrian are in antithesis, because the male protagonist perceives the Western space as a new matrix, willing to offer him possibilities for evolution and overcoming limitations, not as a place of marginalization and injustice. Even though he migrates to Spain, he is integrated by Rafael, Vanessa, and later by Maria into a territory of (re)discovery of the self and love. Despite his reticence and inability to order the new world he enters, but fascinated by the mirage of the foreign land, he witnesses the transformation of alterity into true "pillars" of his life.

The protagonist delineates a different vision of migration and casts a revealing light on the meanings acquired by the mother tongue and the foreign language with his incursion into the Spanish space. This space exerts an ambiguous, bipolar fascination on him: on the one hand, the attraction of the unknown, of a different world; on the other hand, the uprooting from the family framework, only to reconstruct it in another territory through the love for Maria. The mother tongue fulfils the function of a language of formation, providing the mental schemata on which the language of the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.: "Nu știau mai nimic despre România! Dracula, Ceaușescu, cel mult Nadia Comăneci, Ilie Năstase, *pour les connaisseurs*. În schimb, erau dispuși să-și imagineze lucrurile cele mai îngrozitoare. O lume de oameni primitivi, cu mâțele ghiorând de foame, care au scăpat de tartor și acum scurmă după hrană prin Europa!"

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 103: "dar tu știi să scrii și să citești? [...] *Sì, Signora*, i-a răspuns, strângând din buze. Am făcut liceul."

host culture – which becomes the language of identity (re)construction – relies on. The Romanian language is no longer an anchor or a tool for escape, as in the case of the protagonist in Dan Lungu's novel, but a mirror of a dysfunctional society where values are overturned.

While in Dan Lungu's novel the mother tongue is the language of friendship and complicity, in Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari's novel a fundamental shift takes place, in that the foreign language becomes the language of all possibilities, while the Romanian language remains a mirror of deficiency and helplessness. More than a mere inversion of the relationship between the two idioms, between Western and Romanian culture, we observe an "ambivalence specific to symbolic logic"<sup>114</sup>, given that the two coexist in the individual's consciousness. For Adrian, the Romanian language becomes a bridge between him and his family, but also a tool for reconnecting with an identity he tries to suppress, a reflection of personal suffering and a disenchanting world, a symbol of revolt, of the inability to integrate completely into Spain, and an obstacle to the fulfilment of love. Meanwhile, the Spanish language is the language of love, art, and happiness.

Among the micro-centres of the polysystem in which we have inscribed language, there is an interstitial space where the migrants are placed—a zone of non-belonging to a social structure, coalesced through a language of silence and helplessness, the language of the foreigner. This facet of language is constructed through the tension existing between the two cultural geographies, through their constant alternation in the characters' minds. This is an aesthetic construct that encompasses everything that cannot be said – the yearning, disappointment, memory, or the trauma of uprooting from family – a metalanguage that outlines a meta-identity for the migrant, given that they no longer fully belong to any specific culture.

In the case of Letiția and Adrian, we observe that the obstacles placed in their path toward integration into another country coalesce into a hybrid, shifting idiom, marked by identity fragmentation, depending on the dialogue with alterity. The Romanian experiences a double marginalization at the identity level: they no longer belong to the native culture from which they migrated, nor to the host culture, where they are merely tolerated. The linguistic hybrid configured through the alternation of linguistic codes, or, conversely, through their suspension in a matrix of signs of the inner universe, suggests that the characters acquire a super-identity that encompasses two identities – Romanian and foreign. More than a language proper, the characters base their discourse on a hybrid construct that becomes the outer facet of the symbolic expression of the migration phenomenon.

## Conclusion

The main goal of the present paper was thus to demonstrate that contemporary literature on the theme of migration constructs, through the imagining of language, a matrix of symbols that articulates the inner universe of its heroes, their complex and difficult identities, as well as the equally

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<sup>114</sup> Elena Platon, "The representation of Ritual (Im)purity through meteorological metaphors in folkloric language," in *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai-Philologia*, no. 1 (Cluj-Napoca: Babeș-Bolyai University, 2023), 52: "ambivalență specifică logicii simbolice."

difficult relationships of individuals with the worlds they gravitate between: “home” and the “foreign land”. In order to delineate the interdependence between literature and language, I examined the linguistic system aesthetically constructed by the novels *Kinderland*, *The Little Girl Who Played at Being God*, and *The Approach*, stressing that this system obliquely reflects the insufficiencies of reality, the drama of children left without parents, the integration efforts of migrants in the Western space, the trauma of uprooting, and the helplessness of people to change their destiny. The corpus I worked with was selected for the included novels’ ability, on the one hand, to express the aesthetic construction relationship between literature and language, and on the other hand, to encode, through the linguistic dimension, the identity drama felt by those who have left to work in other countries, with the mother tongue being a structure that configures the understanding of reality.

Given that the mother tongue has numerous nuances and fulfils multiple functions (the function of substituting the Romanian space, the function of unifying the native culture with the foreign one, the function of mediation between Romanians and alterity, the therapeutic function, or the socialization function), and in accordance with the characters’ identity trajectories, I advanced the idea that the Romanian language itself becomes a complex literary image, a polysystem. The aesthetic reflexes of this image are the language of childhood and play, language as a bridge, the language of suffering, the language of helplessness, and the language of the unspeakable, as they emerge from the selected corpus.

This research, by focusing on the imagining of the mother tongue in contemporary Romanian migration literature, sought to apprehend the heterogeneous collage of meanings that the mother idiom integrates and to define the language used by the characters as a dynamic, fluid system where the mother tongue and the foreign language constantly alternate and converse, functioning on the principle of communicating vessels.