EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL DYNAMICS IN TRANSYLVANIA: IRINA GEORGESCU GROZA'S *THE LAMBS' EXODUS*

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Abstract This article aims to explore intercultural dynamics in Transylvania as presented in Irina Georgescu Groza's latest historical novel, *The Lambs' Exodus*, published in 2021. Set against the backdrop of the Second Vienna Award and its aftermath, the novel bears testimony to the re-emergence and intensification of the conflict between the Romanians and Magyars of Northern Transylvania. In our contribution, we will examine intercultural relationships, hybrid identity and the cultural negotiations prompted by the traumatic events of the Treznea massacre. The contemporary portrayal of historical and cultural trauma is one of recent literary contributions that seek to re-evaluate, conserve the memory, and, finally, popularise, beyond nationalism and propaganda, the diverse and pluricultural past of Romania in the first half of the 20th Century.
Keywords Hybrid identity, Treznea massacre, memory, contemporary Romanian fiction, interculturalism.

While during the 1990s and 2000s, most literary works and films sought to come to terms with Romania's communist past, the past decade has seen a rise in historical fiction that takes on the ethnic relationships and challenges faced by Romanian society during the interwar period. Cătălin Mihuleac's extensive literary project portraying Jewish experience in novels such as *America de peste pogrom* (2014), *Ultima ţigară a lui Fondane. Istorii de Holocaust* (2016) or *Deborah* (2019), as well as Lionel Duroy's *Eugenia* (2019), have been received with enthusiasm by both the domestic and international public. Another recent example is Irina Georgescu Groza's *The Lambs' Exodus,* published in 2021. It was shortlisted for the 2022 European Union Prize for Literature on Romania's behalf and was a joint winner of the "Discreet Book of the Year 2021" award, presented by the Romanian Association of Cultural Creators and Artists, which aims to promote books that, although valuable, have received too little attention. The novel explores the conflict-ridden days following the Second Vienna Award, thus being an excellent example of contemporary literary works that

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deal with the shifting relationship between centre and periphery, or majority and minority, from a modern perspective. On this basis, we can explore the question of what continuities and bridges can be drawn between the literary representation of intercultural relations in the interwar period and how they are addressed today. The reemergence of interest in minority and interculturality is not incidental but tied to current political developments, such as those within the European Union, which have sparked renewed enthusiasm for supranational entities.

Postimperial reality of newly formed compound states

The formation of identity in modern Romania is closely tied to the country's historical developments, particularly the nation-building process and the social and cultural challenges that accompanied it. The formation of Greater Romania not only represented a major political gain, securing unprecedented territorial growth, but also the integration of several new ethnic groups, which quickly triggered a series of identity issues. In this context, the newly founded state faced the challenge of creating a new cultural narrative that would promote national cohesion while also addressing interethnic negotiation processes. Particularly in the newly acquired regions, such as Banat, Transylvania, and Bukovina, Romanian, Hungarian, German, and Jewish population groups encountered each other in a complex field of tension between assimilation, coexistence, and separation. In the case of the newly added territories, an immediate process of role reversal began, with many ethnic majority groups now assuming the role of minorities. Oliver Jens Schmitt's concept of the post-imperial compound state appears as an appropriate theoretical starting point, as it proposes a welcome re-evaluation of the relationship between nation-states and the empires from which they have claimed territories. In the aftermath of the First World War, nation-states have sought to delimit themselves from their imperial legacy, striving to achieve legitimacy and promote themselves as a political form of historical progress.[1] Although the Ottoman, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires had dissolved, their legacy had not suddenly vanished, as their social, political, and, not least, ethnical influence still endured, despite the centralist claims from Bucharest of a radical rupture. Despite consistent governmental efforts, the complex ethnical situation persisted, and the minority question was not a resolved relic but an active, structural issue embedded in the post-imperial identity-making process.[2] The animosities mainly arose from the unkept promises regarding minorities' rights, as provided by the Alba Iulia Declaration, which had created the expectation of many rights and freedoms for ethnic minorities. Moreover, old state frontiers turned into new internal socio-cultural dividing lines, as the former Austrian-Hungarian territories had not only a higher rate of literacy, but also a stronger political self-organisation into associations, and press.[3] In the context of the analysed book, one must also bear

[1] Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Balcanii în secolul XX. O istorie postimperială*, trans. Irina Manea, Andrei Pogăciaș (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2021), 7.
[2] Ibid., 11, 85.
[3] Ibid., 94.

in mind that the Hungarian minority had opposed joining Romania, as this change automatically represented a role-reversal in the hegemonic relationship between the two ethnicities.

Understanding interwar Romania as a post-imperial compound state enables one to fruitfully employ an interdisciplinary approach, combining methods from literary, historical, and cultural studies to analyse the novel. Concepts such as Homi Bhabha's 'hybridity', 'cultural difference', and 'third space', as elaborated in The Location of Culture (1994), may gain particular relevance when contextualising the effects of post-World War I territorial shifts. While Bhabha's framework originates in colonial and postcolonial encounters, his insights into cultural negotiation and interstitial identity can be productively applied to the multi-ethnic borderland of Transylvania, where political realignments determined the need for recurrent interrogation of shifting identities. In his seminal work, Bhabha challenges the notion that culture is 'pure' or indeed stable, pointing out that "the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweaving of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood."[4] Also key is the idea that cultural difference can be conceptualized not as a static dividing line, but rather as a frame of reference, enabling one to see past hierarchical dichotomies (East/West, coloniser/colonised, or in our case Romanian/Hungarian) and recognise other forms of agency in the cultural negotiation process.[5] Hybridity implies a creative process of reshaping identities that lead to the actual emergence of new forms, with inherent conflicts, ambivalences and differences. Thus, identity becomes impossible to attribute to one culture or another, in a classical, closed understanding of culture.[6] The concept of a "third space" represents a cunning conceptual metaphor that describes a theoretical, non-fixed realm, where rigid cultural identities are destabilised, while avoiding synthesis into stable outcomes. It highlights ongoing, unpredictable processes of negotiation in which meanings and power relations shift, particularly against colonial authority. Within historiography, this approach undermines linear national narratives while foregrounding minority perspectives that transcend territorial boundaries. The Third Space also reveals new forms of subject agency, enabling solidarities and communities that move beyond traditional notions of nation or people.[7] How can this concept be applied to literature? "For the literary scholar Bhabha, Third Space describes the process in which meanings, attributions of sense, and powerful constructions of meaning are negotiated. In this way, power positions and ascriptions of meaning are set into motion, always also directed critically against the side of the (former) colonial power."[8] The attractiveness of Bhabha's proposed concepts stems from their wide applicability, as they provide a theoretical framework for overcoming well-embedded dichotomies and hierarchies, and opening new spaces of negotiation. The novel demonstrates how borderland inhabitants occupy

[4] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.
[5] Karen Struve, "Homi K. Bhabha," in Dirk Göttsche, Axel Dunker, Gabriele Dürbeck (ed.), *Handbuch Postkolonialismus und Literatur* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 17.
[6] Ibid., 17-18.
[7] Karen Struve, "Third Space," in Dirk Göttsche, Axel Dunker, Gabriele Dürbeck, 226-227.
[8] Ibid., 226. Translated from German in the original by the author of this paper.

a hybrid, in-between condition that destabilises national and transcends categories. Both Romanian and Hungarian characters often display an ambivalent attitude towards the other culture, thus moving beyond a classical hegemonic dichotomy of oppressor-oppressed. One of the merits of Irina Georgescu Groza's *The Lambs' Exodus* is its ability to render complex identities and pluricultural attachments convincingly, without falling into clichés.

The Lambs' Exodus: Stories of Romanians Caught in the Web of History

More than 80 years later, Groza fictionally explores the assignment of Northern Transylvania to the Kingdom of Hungary and its consequences, as told through personal stories from both sides of the divide. The novel is structured into three parts ("The Dictate", "The Underrealm" and "Fragile Bridges, Deep Waters") and unfolds on two intertwined levels: the level of grand history and that of personal experience. While the individual level is developed through a series of characters, the focus is primarily on the experiences of a Romanian family (Domnica, Romi, and Miculuș), who work for Hungarian nobles and escape amid the escalation of ethnic conflict between Romanians and Hungarians in Northern Transylvania. We aim to provide a close reading of some of the most representative chapters, which capture key ideas regarding intercultural dynamics, cultural negotiations and hybridity.

The opening chapter of the first part ("The Death of Bujor") sets the sombre tone for the entire book as it depicts the death of an innocent Romanian child, Bujor, killed by a drunk driver, Bela Teleki, a young Hungarian nobleman. Bujor's death, a bad omen for the community, draws a parallel between the fate of an innocent child and that of the Romanian population in Transylvania. The lengthy chapter also serves to depict the status quo of Uioara, a village in Transylvania, that serves as an exemplary melting pot of ethnic coexistence. The villagers' reaction to Bujor's death at the hands of a Hungarian nobleman reveals their embedded sense of irreparable injustice and inferiority, as well as mistrust of the judicial system, seen as controlled by the Hungarian upper class. Their wariness is heightened by the priest's lack of compassion towards the mother and admonition of the people for suggesting the young nobleman is to blame for the accident ("You must pray now, not upset the nobility with assumptions and quarrels, because you don't even know who it is for sure, do you? Those who forgive will reach the kingdom of God!"[9]). This enrages the villagers, who only dare make snide comments about the priest's son's friendship with Bela and their taking up bourgeois pastimes such as gambling, but do not dare challenge him more directly.

The second part of the first chapter is set in the Teleki Castle and depicts local Hungarian noblemen coming together to celebrate the Second Vienna Award the day after its signing. The Second Vienna Award (30th August 1940) stipulated that large parts of Transylvania (Maramureș entirely and certain regions of Crișana) would become Hungarian territory. Following these provisions, Hungary should receive 43,492 km^2 and a population of 2,667,007, of which 50,2%

[9] Irina Georgescu Groza, *Exodul mieilor. Povești ale românilor prinși în Istoria mare*. (Bucharest: Nemira, 2021), 22. All translations from Romanian were made by the author of this paper.

were Romanians, 37,1% Hungarians and the rest Germans, Jews and other nationalities.[10] Preparations were made in advance for reclaiming the territories:

> "Simultaneously with the diplomatic actions and military preparations against Romania, based on the support of the other revisionist states, the Horthy regime carried out in the summer of 1940 a strong diversionary activity in the north-western territory of the country, in order to prepare the intervention of its troops. Thus, numerous terrorist groups were organised for the right moment to carry out the mission to destroy railways and roads, to burn Romanian forests and villages, to poison wells, to blow up ammunition depots and airports. These teams were also tasked with setting fire to villages with German minority populations and blaming the Romanian authorities in order to attract German retaliation and military intervention against Romania. Members of the terrorist groups were also supposed to collect and pass on secret information needed by Horthy's troops and revisionist propaganda."[11]

The Award and its material consequences are illustrated from the perspective of the Hungarian nobility, who are enthusiastic about regaining their lands "twenty-two years after the injustice suffered" and "the tragic loss at Trianon."[12] They seem convinced that "there is no war here, nor will there be, thanks to us. We take care of Transylvania, as we have always done, and that is why this land has prospered only under Hungarian administration."[13]

The tabletalk amongst Counts Wass, Teleki and Horvath indicates their awareness of the future use of brutal force when seizing territories inhabited largely by Romanians. The three advocate for different approaches to regaining the land and display varying degrees of concern for the consequences of the Hungarian violence, while also betraying their convictions about the Romanian population in Transylvania. Throughout their discussion, the reader is reminded of the key moments in the Romanian-Hungarian dispute since 1918, especially of Ferdinand's agrarian law. Horvath, described as beloved and kind, is the most humanitarian of the three, advocating for a peaceful exchange of population or at least for a careful mitigation of the use of force ("However, I have heard, and I am very afraid that it may be true (...) that violent possession will nevertheless take place, even though we are not at war with Romania. If the Arrow Cross Party has given the green light to killings, as was the case during the Great War, we will once again have problems at the European Court"[14]). Moreover, he is the only one of the three to strive to see both sides of the dispute, and recognise the cultural importance of the territory for both nations ("We have all been waiting to recover our land. I understand the importance of this moment, but I have reservations about the methods by which this decision will be implemented"[15] and "There will be another great

[10] Mihai Fătu, Mircea Mușat (coord.), *Teroarea horthysto-fascistă în Nord-Vestul României. Septembrie 1940-Octombrie 1944* (Bucharest: Politică, 1985), 17.
[11] Ibid., 8.
[12] Irina Georgescu Groza, *Exodul mieilor*, 22.
[13] Ibid..
[14] Ibid., 27.
[15] Ibid..

bloodshed, which will not honour us! It could even overshadow our victory. It is about the national identity of both nations and on this territory where they coexist, both Romanians and Hungarians feel entitled to feel at home"[16]). Count Teleki, the master of the main characters (Domnica, Romi, and Miculuș), is a moderate whose wife is an engaged feminist, fighting for women's rights to vote and a member of a charity organisation that educates and provides jobs for local Romanian women. While Teleki is described by his servants to be a fair and honourable employer, his view of Romanians is less than flattering ("Since we are regaining our properties, it is our right to decide who will be part of Hungary (...) Cleanliness! That is what civilisation means. No more incompetent and wasteful Romanians!"[17]). Count Wass is the spitting image of a conservative ruler, being the harshest and outspoken of the three ("The Romans will not be conquered through battle, but occupied and annihilated as soon as possible! The treaty signed in Vienna gives us rights over a part—note!—only a part of our land, lost through abuse twenty-two years ago"[18]), becoming throughout the novel one of the unsympathetic characters, who roots for and takes joy in German power and aggression.

The Underrealm

While Irina Georgescu Groza generally does not deviate far from the historical truth, striving to offer a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on events, she introduces a pivotal fictional element that distinguishes *The Lambs' Exodus* from conventional historical novels: a network of tunnels spanning Transylvania, through which Romanian peasants flee Horthy's troops. This network, referred to as "The Underrealm" by the locals, is first mentioned in the table discussion between Teleki, Wass and Horvath, who are well aware of Romanian escape plans and of the amount of work that has been put into maintaining and expanding it. The three regret that the Hungarians did not seize the tunnels; Count Teleki concludes that this could have been a fine gift for Hitler — an easy and direct access point to Bucharest. This discussion further enrages the eavesdropping Romi, who decides to leave at once for Treznea, his native village, where his elderly mother resides alone. Romi, Miculuș and Domnica's journey is to be an exemplary one for the displacement and suffering of Romanians.

It is no coincidence that he is to make his way to this village, as it is one of the scenes of the most horrific massacres of September 1940. Although the exact numbers differ depending on the source, the Treznea massacre was grim. 263 Romanians, including women, children and the elderly, were killed or wounded. Between 68 and 87 people were killed and identified, and 47 households were completely destroyed.[19] Moreover, several sources indicate that the Hungarian noblemen Ray Ferenc and the reformed priest were involved in the massacre,[20] some going as far as to suggest that the carnage took place as a form of retaliation against the peasants, who, after

[16] Ibid., 28.
[17] Ibid..
[18] Ibid., 27.
[19] Mihai Fătu, Mircea Mușat, 66.
[20] Ibid., 67.

the Agrarian Reform, gained lands previously owned by Ferenc. This supposed instigation to violence by the Treznea nobleman is also reenacted fictionally, as again Romi eavesdrops on the conversation between the local nobleman in Treznea and a commanding officer.[21] One should note that the Agrarian Reform is often brought up in the conversation between the Hungarian noblemen, clearly representing a serious point of conflict with Romanian rule. Throughout their discussion, one can sense the deep dissatisfaction brought about by the territorial changes following the Treaty of Trianon.

After a short journey in the Underrealm, Romi arrives, accompanied by a stray dog, in his home village, only to discover shocking traces of the massacre, such as dead children and animals. While the soldiers are partying at the nearby castle, owned by nobleman Francisc Bay, Romi uncovers the devastation of his mother's house. The author gives the scenes a more dramatic and personal touch by mixing the description of the ravaged household with the character's memories of the place. Romi then heads towards the house of the old man Toader, whose experience during the First World War and Romanian-Hungarian War (April-August 1919) led him to have a cautious and suspicious approach towards Hungarians and history's vicissitudes ("Child, he told him when he had grown up and still went to help him chop wood for the winter, you will need a hiding place. The Hungarians will not give up until they take control of our Transylvania! I escaped with my life, but I cannot go to another war, he said, tapping his wooden leg with his cane"[22]). The old man is safe and sound, hiding in his secret cellar, surrounded by an impressive amount of food supplies, contemplating the meaning of the events in a mix of history, religion, and superstition – a typical combination of Romanian thought ("They took revenge because they lost the war with us in '19 (...) But son, I've been thinking, this is the devil's handiwork! (...) Well, do you know why this place is called Treznea? Because Saint Elijah woke up the place where the devil came out of the well to curse the earth. Well, what's happening now is the devil's revenge!"[23]). The beginning of the following chapter seeks to strengthen the verisimilitude of Toader's interpretation by recounting at some length the legend of the devil's well, the author transgressing and even indicating a book as a source. Although Romi is not interested in the old man's superstitious way of thought, he goes on to recount the Hungarian troops storming into the village. When one compares old man Toader's recollection to the historical descriptions of the Treznea massacre,[24] it becomes clear that the author has chosen to modify the events for dramatic purposes, retaining only the name of the priest and the fact that several villagers were shot on the outskirts. Finally, after listening somewhat unimpressed to the old man's recollection of the events, Romi manages to find out that his mother has fled to the Underrealm after hiding in the basement with Toader.

The second part of the novel breaks the fictional barrier at times, quoting parts of contemporary newspaper articles relating to the dramatic events that unfolded in Transylvania. The author's choice is certainly interesting as this represents an intersection of the main fictional,

[21] Irina Georgescu Groza, *Exodul mieilor*, 212-217.
[22] Ibid., 199.
[23] Ibid., 201-202.
[24] Mihai Fătu, Mircea Mușat, 63-67.

quasi-surreal textual element, i.e. The Underrrealm, with the stern depictions of massacres. The Underrealm itself is a space filled with a plurality of meanings: a place to escape in the face of undiscriminating ethnical repression, the spontaneous emergence of a tight community, a place of unconditioned kindness, a testimony of one's resilience. What Georgescu Groza creates is a melange of individual stories of the horrors that have unfolded and an outpour of mutual support as people share information and supplies. Romi's thoughts illustrate the sombre apocalyptic atmosphere in the Underrealm ("It is neither night nor day, neither death nor life. We are going to hell"[25]). The tunnels are associated throughout the text with the demonic, the first indication being the myth presented at the beginning of the chapter, which is reinforced throughout the text by the characters' beliefs or remarks. Once again, pervasive is the people's disappointment with the priests, who were expected to guide, organise and provide supplies in the tunnels, as was planned by local communities. However, they are nowhere to be found. Instead emerges the character of "Baciu", a common Romanian surname rooted in pastoral culture and suggesting exactly his role of shepherd, who is rumoured to help Romanians cross the mountains into the Old Kingdom.

Hybrid identity and cultural negotiations

A central aspect of the novel is the hybrid identity of the protagonists, who oscillate between different cultural and ethnic affiliations. *The Lambs' Exodus* illustrates this dilemma through the perspectives of various characters whose fluid sense of identity is influenced by institutional and social constraints. In addition to the societal and political dimensions, the novel also addresses the emotional and psychological aspects of identity construction. Domnica, a hardworking but uneducated and rather naive character, takes interest and pleasure in mundane and domestic tasks ("She liked being busy and enjoyed seeing the count pleased with the food she had prepared and the fresh air in the house"[26]), while being rather unimpressed by Olivia Teleki's commitment to women's universal suffrage:

> "Countess Olivia said that women have rights and that she would vote in the next elections (...) But when she got tired from all the work, she really wanted to tell him (...) What vote, what equality, when I can't see my head from all the work? And you left me with Bela and Suzana, who ate my soul! What do I know about voting when I'm busy all day (...) The whims of the nobles, leave me alone! I'll be a servant all my life, don't I know it?"[27]

Although deeply attached to her adoptive home, which she attentively cared for ("She loved to take care of the house, to clean the mirrors, windows, and beautiful old furniture, to shout at the cat when it entered the house, to dust the piano keys, touching them lightly, to listen to every

[25] Irina Georgescu Groza, *Exodul mieilor*, 234.
[26] Ibid., 89.
[27] Ibid., 88.

high-pitched sound"[28]), her sense of personal freedom is being master of her own household and married to Romi. Throughout the text, she projects her aspirations for the future ("When they have their own house, she will carry on the same and cook Hungarian food, because their food is better than what people in the village eat"[29]), and one can often note that her experience is heavily influenced by living in a Hungarian household. Miculuș dreams of a future as a primary school teacher and is saving up to fund his studies in Cluj, where he hopes to meet a young lady to marry. The central aspect of his fantasy is that the girl's family is wealthy enough to finance his studies, and maybe even have a servant. As time went on at the Teleki castle, Romi grew increasingly restless and stubborn, whilst his brother became more attached to Hungarian culture, contemplating a mixed marriage without much hesitation or thought ("The young lady definitely has a wealthy family who will pay for her studies. They could be Hungarian, why not? He gets along well with Hungarians, knows their customs, likes their food, fish and tender meat with sweet sauces"[30]). Miculuș and Dominica's projection of their own idealised future go to show the unassuming and organic way in which coexistence leaves its mark on the assumptions, aspirations, and selves of people living in traditionally pluri-ethnic areas.

After taking refuge in the mountains, Domnica and Miculuș oftentimes regret having lost their comfort at the castle. Miculuș often played the role of a companion to Bela Teleki, thus attaining a pleasurable lifestyle ("There is a deep anger in his soul. Why did Romi have to settle the score with the count? He was doing well, playing cards all day and keeping his master company, going truffle hunting with his dogs, and, if he was lucky, going wild boar hunting or sitting in the library reading."[31]). On the one hand, Irina Georgescu Groza subtly dissipates the notion that the Romanian servants would necessarily be oppressed or maltreated by showing their attachment to the castle and its customs; on the other hand, the three had worked for years for the Teleki family without receiving their promised pay. Before leaving, Romi settles the score with the count's son, Bela, only to later find out that the stack of money he received was lined with cut-up pieces of newspaper, thus rendering their years of sacrifice to gain a starting capital futile.

Another telling example of an uninterrogated hybrid identity is the character of Timotei, a Romanian married to a Hungarian woman, who is faced with the choice of either being killed or helping the Magyars partially destroy the Romanian tunnels where thousands of Romanians have taken refuge in the face of political and military repression ("If I go up, they'll shoot me. If I go down, the devil will get me."[32]). This dilemma leads to an identity crisis and a series of questions about previously accepted truths. For example, he considers for the first time whether his children are Romanian or Hungarian and debates this with his wife, with the two coming to contradictory conclusions ("They never discussed like that in the house, you are Romanian, I am Hungarian, our children are both, or only one, or only the other. They got along well, without any arguments. Now

[28] Ibid., 69.
[29] Ibid., 54.
[30] Ibid., 150.
[31] Ibid., 62.
[32] Ibid., 245.

he quickly became happy that Transylvania belongs to Hungary. He didn't even know what kind of woman he had at home!"[33]). The character realises that such questions had never occurred to him before, let alone had any meaning. Disappointed by his decision to collaborate with the forces responsible for the massacre, Timotei questions his loyalty and considers committing suicide.

Language acts as an important means to showcase the inherent hybridity of the space, as short passages or even just a few words in Hungarian or regionalisms are often embedded in the Romanian text. Footnotes also play an important role in the historical fiction, acting as an aid for the reader, explaining the significance of historical figures, providing key historical information or a convenient translation for text sequences in another language. Significantly, some of the ethnic Romanian characters do speak Hungarian ("Romi and Miculuș learned to speak Hungarian at home, and they can write and read, because their father was a teacher."[34]), while others like Domnica barely understand a few words, despite their constant contact with the language and culture:

> "She learned many Hungarian words this way, from the letters on the jars and boxes brought by the count, but she did not understand a word of what the Hungarian masters were saying to each other. (...) She cannot write or read, but she has picked up a few things by guessing. (...) She often asked him to teach her to write. She would have loved to send letters to her mother, to tell her what the rich people eat and what wonderful things they bring back from Budapest."[35]

Timotei does understand Hungarian, but not perfectly, despite his marital situation. The Hungarian characters more often than not speak broken Romanian, although they can understand the language perfectly well. Domnica, for instance, is appreciative of Count Teleki's initiative to speak rudimentary Romanian ("He does not respond to Romanians, "Nem tudom oláhul", as most Hungarians do, because he understands Romanian—Romi believes that this is only to better control his servants"[36]), her thoughts revealing both the common horizon of expectations, as well as most Romanian servants' mistrust in the intention of the nobility. Although their experience at the Teleki castle has been mostly positive, Romi and Miculuș have also had another negative experience as they had a difficult time working for the Bay family, near their native village, as these nobles proved to be less supportive and disapproved of not speaking Hungarian:

> "He told him to speak only Hungarian while working for them, saying it would be good for him when he grew up. He stayed at their mansion for a while longer, but he went there reluctantly in the morning and returned home exhausted and fed up in the evening. (...) All the Romanians who had worked for them eventually left, because their behaviour was hard to bear. Especially the

[33] Ibid., 247.
[34] Ibid., 26.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 25.

> hatred and contempt with which they treated the peasants. He started speaking their language because they wouldn't even look at him and Miculuș if they asked something in Romanian."[37]

As Bourdieu points out, language is not merely an instrument of communication, but also carries a form of symbolic capital, which reveals power relations and social positioning.[38] Certain ways of speaking, or in this case, the level of proficiency in a certain language, carry more prestige; language being deeply intertwined with social structures. Linguistic competence as a form of "symbolic power" entails, most importantly, the ability to adapt to different social settings.[39] From this perspective, it is obvious that Domnica is limited in her abilities, while Romi and Miculuș can more easily adapt and switch code in different social settings, thus gaining significant social advantages. Interestingly enough, existing societal structures outweigh political changes and, from a linguistic perspective, Hungarian retains more "symbolic power" and its hegemony, despite the territorial changes and the reversal of the centre-periphery relationship between Romanian and Hungarian in the interwar period. This dynamic of power becomes especially clear in the Bays' attitude towards the Romanian peasants.

Conclusion

In her remarkable novel, Irina Georgescu Groza achieves a fresco of interwar society in Transylvania by constructing convincing characters throughout the social and political spectrum, which lead the reader through a journey of rediscovering one's past. *The Lambs' Exodus* often remains faithful to the historical reality, especially in what concerns the central events of the novel and its social ramifications. What should be celebrated is the author's courage in tackling a sensitive, polarising subject with many political implications, which serves to raise awareness among readers regarding Romania's truly pluricultural past. The crimes committed by Hungarian fascists against the Romanian population of Transylvania during World War II were used by the post-1989 Romanian far right to fuel interethnic tensions and justify their xenophobic positions. There is no paradox here: the neo-Legionaries eliminated the social and political dimensions of this episode, focusing exclusively on the ethnic character of the conflict.[40] Particularly valuable is the author's sense for portraying both sides and their mutual influence, while striving to remain impartial:

> "Irina Georgescu Groza avoids the pitfalls of nationalism by recovering the social coordinates of 1940. The differences and tensions between social classes in Transylvania receive as much attention as the tensions between the ethnic groups who lived together in this area. Some of the most interesting moments in the novel are those in which the Hungarian aristocrats are pitted against

[37] Ibid., 211.
[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 37.
[39] Ibid., 76.
[40] Victor Cobuz, "Sfîrșitul unei lumi," in *Observator cultural,* No. 1096 (09.02.2022): https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/sfirsitul-unei-lumi/.

> the Romanian peasants, among whom there are also small officials and priests. The author intuits that the way in which ethnic discrimination has become intertwined with the exploitation of the poor by the powerful is one of the particularities of this case, but, unfortunately, does not dwell on this aspect very much, despite the fact that doing so would have enriched the novel considerably."[41]

Viewed through Homi Bhabha's hybridity—the idea that cultural identity is produced in the "third space" of encounter and negotiation between different traditions—Irina Georgescu Groza's book can be read as a narrative of displacement, a dramatisation of the instability of identity in moments of violent upheaval. The novel thus expands the reach of postcolonial theory into the context of Eastern Europe, showing how Bhabha's concepts illuminate the lived experience of dislocation, exile, and survival, thus testifying to the fluidity of human identity, especially in regions where national borders have often been redrawn and different ethnic groups have coexisted for centuries.

Animal symbolism is pervasive throughout the text, often ingeniously employed to illustrate power relations. In the sequence of the count's dinner, ample space is devoted to the cat chasing a mouse trying to feast on the crumbs from the noblemen's dinner. This scene is set on the backdrop of political discussions amongst Hungarian noblemen and may refer to the unequal power relations in Transylvania.[42] Another deliberate and telling detail is Bujor's deep friendship and connection with a white lamb, a symbol of innocence. The lamb's escape from the tragic accident, with only its fur covered in the boy's blood, creates an immediate and obvious reference to the book's title. Needless to say that the lamb also bears a clear Christian meaning as the eternal sacrificial animal, which takes away the world's sins, as oftentimes, Jesus is substituted for the lamb. Moreover, in Revelation 5:6, the Lamb is the one who opens the sealed scroll, initiating the end-times sequence. This later Christian apocalyptic reinterpretation of the Exodus lamb turns it into the agent of cosmic judgment. In Groza's work, the "exodus" of lambs may likewise signal the tearing away of an old world—an irreversible crossing into a harsher reality. The departure of "lambs" becomes not just a migration, but a metaphysical shift, the final farewell to a moral and cultural order that will not return. Groza's title evokes innocence exposed to annihilation, but unlike the biblical lamb, which saves through its death, these "lambs" seem to die without delivering redemption—underscoring a bleaker, more tragic apocalypse where sacrifice does not necessarily lead to renewal. This flips the Exodus narrative into something closer to Lamentations, where the remnant wanders without resolution. Furthermore, the novel as a whole portrays wandering as an existential and intrinsic aspect of Romanian identity.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.