

Balkan Reflections on some Moldavian Postmodern Writers

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Abstract: *Emerging from three different cultural strata the Balkans has a rich cultural heritage. Postmodernism with its taste for re-evaluation is the best frame for reconsidering the Balkan heritage. This paper tries to demonstrate the influence of Balkan mentality on Dumitru Crudu's and Nicolae Popa's recent novels. Both stories offer the reader a postmodern, bitter and ironic vision on the society of the Republic of Moldova after 1990. A deep view underlines the importance of mythical understanding in a society which ties to find its identity.*

Key words: *heritage, storyteller, postmodern frame, Balkan mentality, myth, cultural colonization*

1. Introduction

Every time Western politicians, scholars or writers sets out to debate on European culture the analyses will almost always focus on West European culture ignoring the rich heritage of the South-East part of the continent. Eastern Europe may only borrow and develop models offered by the Occident, especially during the last two hundred century. This attitude is analysed by British/Balkan writer Vesna Goldsworthy in her book *Inventing Ruritania* and she names it **cultural colonization** [Goldsworthy 2002] The dichotomy between the civilized West and the barbaric East is still a working concept. As some of the scholars from South-East Europe observed "All it can do is to add colour to the picture" [Dăncu, 2008, 10]. In other words all the interest concerns the picturesque aspects of that culture and the way in which it matches Western patterns. The communist regime largely contributed to underline the imaginary boundary, the differences between two parts of Europe and to maintain all the negative meanings concerning the term **Balkan**. Unfortunately the political changes which took part after 1990 did not contributed to change the attitude of Occident.

Beyond the borders of the Occident there is a marvellous world emerging from old cultural strata: archaic (old Greek and Roman), medieval (Byzantine and Turkish), modern (mainly French), voicing original aspects of interpreting reality, using its own old pattern to express aspects of a more and more globalize world. The Balkans is the land of legends, stories and story-tellers and as it was proved a good story can change the world. Ismail Kadare one of the famous Balkan writers believes that the legends and the fairy tales are the Balkans most important contribution to European culture. By helping to create language, literature creates a sense of identity and community [Eco, 2002] and after gaining their freedom from the Ottoman Empire the young states of the Balkan had to search for their identity without ignoring their roots.

What was postmoderism, and what is it still, I believe it is a revenant, the return of the irrepressible, every time we are rid of it, its ghost rises back. Romanticism, modernism, postmodernism, however, like humanism or realism will shift and slide continually with time, particularly in an age of ideological conflict and media hype [Hassan 1987, 67]. Those words written by Ihab Hassan about his favorite subjects postmodernism and postmodernity are may be the best reason for a serious reevaluation of balkanism and its importance for Romanian contemporary writers' main achievements where European literary forms are shapes for old traditions. Dumitru Crudu and Nicolae Popa, two writers from the Republic of Moldova are both representatives of postmodern tendencies in their country literature. Irony, parody and paradox are literary means which unable them to offer their reader a postmodern, bitter and ironic vision of the society of the Republic of Moldova after 1990. Under the satirical glitters of postmodernity, deep inside there are the mythical roots of archaic mentality as well as the Balkan way of facing important historical moments.

2. Balkan Mentality

The phrase Balkan mentality was coined by the Croat thinker Iovan Cvijić, in his study *La Péninsule Balkanique* published in 1918. The term reshaped in the along twenty century decades and now it designate "attitudinal and behavioural patterns that go beyond the level of ethno-social historical and political specificity. [Muthu, 2008,]. At the same time Maria Todorova, a well known specialist considers in her book *Balkanism and the Balkans*, that superficially talking about **Balkan mentality** can be a way of labelling all stereotypes that along decades have been associated with South- East European culture Nicolae Iorga, great Romanian scholar wrote in one of his most important books *Byzance après Byzance* about the common cultural features of all people living in the Balkan Peninsula, community due to the common background to a similar mentality, although he does not use the term Balkan mentality.

Balkan mentality is a concept which operates with oral traditions of rural essence, blossoming with huge paremiological lore with almost the same moralising finality by all people in the region, because up to the XIX century Turcocracy maintained a unitary sense of the cultures of the European South-East. This aspect as well as the universal model of Byzantium and the Orthodox Church established a common background. One of the main characteristics is a general scepticism concerning the progress/changes of mankind, and a continuous fight for surviving between empires, characteristic leading to a special attitude which is mirrored in the structure "as if". All the above mentioned aspects helped the Balkan individual to achieve a sense of great inner freedom. And the capacity to take control of all sort of historical events [Dutu, 1997]

An out standing characteristic of Balkan mentality is the way in which oral communication shapes people attitude. In the analysed novels gossip is stronger then any other type of communication. Like in many former communist countries, people do not trust official communication channels but they trust each other, even if some times real events are described in a hyperbolic way. Gossip is a perfect land for irony and that is why sometimes a very sad reality is turn into a joke. Irony and satire are Balkan ways of escaping a hard reality.

Looking over this very brief description it is obvious that irony, paradox, parody and re-interpretation are common aspects for Balkan mentality and postmodernism as well. The two authors that have become the subject of this analysis have a postmodern vision on society and have to deal with Balkan mentality of Moldovian different social categories, because their novels are social novels describing the fabulous adventure of people struggling to live in a country, which can not avoid deep transformations but have to take care of its tradition as well..

3. Myth And Postmodern Paradox – Nicolae Popa’s Novel *The Plain Smells Fish*

Well known in his country as a poet, Nicolae Popa turns to prose writing and offers to his readers a very interesting postmodern novel *The Plain Smells Fish*, a metaphorical description of Moldovian contemporary society. The story starts as a thriller. Two young men live together some where near the capital city of the country, on a lake border, taking care of a plantation. None of them is a bodyguard or a peasant but they had run out of money and had been forced to accept humble jobs (a social reality in the country economical life) Soon after the first chapter one of them is mysteriously killed. The author gives the illusion that the main character can be the killer and because he can not remember what happened in a terrible night when he drunk a lot he himself seems to believe that he accidentally killed his friend. He looks like looser, who lost his job as countryside teacher, his wife (who left for Italy searching for a better life) his poetry is not published, his father considers him a great disappointment. All those data makes him the perfect victim. The detective story is just the starting point, the perspective of the story changes all the time the author being a hero or just the story teller, using alternatively the

first or the third person. The national aspects of Moldovian life are just suggested, but this way of presenting them underlines their importance.

Dumitru Popa concentrates on the relationship between the main character, a writer himself, who has to work in a different field in order to survive and various representatives of the Moldovian society. Except him the others are less real prose characters and more symbolical images. The feminine character a former prostitute who married a priest, (a former member of the local Mafia) now a religious woman who does not hesitate to use her former mafia connection in order to build a church is a symbol of a society full of contrasts, paradox and false values. Another interesting figure is one of his uncles, a patriot who fights for Romanian values and dies when he finally gets the Romanian citizenship. From time to time the story is interrupted by short fragments about a plane which has to take fish from Africa to Moldavia. Only in the end the reader understands that the plane is a metaphorical image of a country situated at weathering heights, forced to maintain its equilibrium and to fight against all sort of enemies.

This is the first strata of the novel that where one can recognize all the bad stereotypical images used to describe the Balkans. Fortunately this is only appearance, because there is another strata, the most interesting and valuable one from the literary point of view, that designed by the mythical thinking, the deep and real mentality of the Moldovians. The postmodern interpretation, the paradox consists in the opposition between social reality and the fantastic world coexisting under appearance. From the very beginning the writer includes the old myth of the *rohmani*, an imaginary population that lives along rivers, has a gentle nature, very peaceful and very religious behavior. In Romanian folklore the first Sunday after Easter is dedicated to those imaginary creatures, the holiday being an original way of remembering the ancestors. In Popa's novel they are a symbolical image of the Moldovian people, well known for their gentle nature and peaceful attitude. History was hard with them but they still have serene attitude hoping for the best, waiting for better circumstances. The suggestion about the ancestors is a poetical link with their rich and brave history to which the contemporary society has to pay respect.

The relationship myth postmodernism is quite strange because what else is postmodernism if not a protest against great narratives and the myths are great narratives. Using inter textual techniques the novelist underlines the major role of mythical thinking in shaping collective mentality of a people that is still searching for its own national identity. Precise social details, accurate dialogs between the main characters, realistic description of capital city Chisinau are but elements of a picture of a society that can be understood by decoding the mythical symbols of aquatic legends. The most important is the symbol of fish interpreted according to the folklore and biblical beliefs as a regenerating and fertile symbol. Last scene of the novel gives the real key for decoding its various symbolical value and an optimistic end. The author believes in his people capacity to regenerate no matter how hard life is now.

Like in Mircea Eliade's short stories the hero of the Moldovian writer has to pay attention to all details of an absurd reality because real and fantastic aspects live together, evil and hell may look alike in a world where the archaic way of thinking has not disappeared yet.

4. A Drama - Language as a National Identity Mark (D. Crudu Massacre in Georgia)

As in the case of Nicolae Popa's book *The Plane Smells Fish*, at first sight the title is not very helpful in decoding the message of the novel. This is not a story about war experience or a story about Georgia. Some of the scenes are set in Georgia and the explosions are part of the audio background but the main characters are taken from Moldovian capital city Chisinau. Actually it does not matter if the action takes place in Moldova or in Georgia, or in another country in the former Soviet region, in the 90 all ex

Soviet republics had to face similar problems concerning the use of their national language instead of the common and handy Russian and the development of a new national identity.

The novel starts with a scene from the army, probably somewhere in Georgia, but then goes back to Chisinau at the beginning of the '90, during the demonstrations in favor of the Latin alphabet and the Romanian language. The plot looks like a closed space, a circle where people are running again and again without any logical ending because the absurd is so obvious and all the events do not have a realistic and positive ending. The heroes' efforts to free themselves seem to be in vain.

The writer plays with different mirrors that show different realities. The characters are wearing masks which change according to political situation but also due to their personal interests. Georgiana, one of the main characters is a beautiful dark hair young girl. She is a symbol, an embodiment of Romanian language, something that everybody uses and takes advantage in personal or political circumstances. She loves many young writers and all of them love her. The main hero always has been in love with her and in the end they leave Georgia together and go to Moldavia to fight for real freedom.

The novelist's attention is focused on the literary milieu, which becomes a background for the destiny of the main hero. He is a poet, well known for his talent, but a poet without published books, carrying everywhere a copy book with his verse. He goes to Tbilisi, capital city of Georgia to study "the traditional friendship between Moldova and Georgia" a subject which is an irony concerning the useless research of the cultural institutions in both countries. The grotesque of the situation is underlined by the fact that he lives in a student hostel with writers belonging to different nationalities from ex-soviet republics, such as Armenians, Uzbeks or Kazaks reading and writing their works in their native language. For Dumitru Crudu's hero writing is a way of escaping reality, a kind of therapy.

Like a real poet he escapes the grotesque by finding an old manuscript, a legendary one written in Romanian with Georgian characters. Nobody believes in its existence. When he finally finds the manuscript and decodes it the great discovery is just another disappointment the text consists of a repeated symbolical sentence written on several pages: *Nothing can be changed*¹. This is the bitter conclusion of the author concerning his country. As many other postmodern writers, Dumitru Crudu chooses to wrap his bitterness in irony and parody.

5. Conclusions

Story telling is a great tradition in the Balkan world and modern prose writers inherited the technique from their ancestors and one has to remember that the *Seherazade's* myth, the myth of perfect story teller was born in the Orient this special gift has found the perfect frame in postmodernism. Both novels are a story about identity searching. The main characters are young artists, poets (as the novelists themselves when starting to write) looking for their place as artists or as simple citizens of a new born country which tries to recuperate its history.

Umberto Eco wrote a nice and ironic article *The portrait of the artist as bachelor*, in which he discusses the main four meanings of the word, underlining that even if they look different the terms have something in common: "*bachelor* is, then someone who has not yet reached a state of maturity" [Eco, 2002] the author analysed in this paper have long ago reached their artistic maturity but their main heroes are young *bachelor* artists still unmarried, who have just obtained their first degree but did not find their way in life, their place versus a changing society. As a conclusion one may consider them quite immature.

Stylistically, both novels belong to postmodernism and this aspect enlightens the Balkan traces of Moldovan post-communist society. Irony, parody and paradox seem to be the natural way of expressing in this world on the edge of reality. As it was underlined in

¹ Translated by Maria Alexe

the analyse this is only a superficial face of reality, a very Balkan way of covering sadness and bitterness, sometimes a hopeless attitude. Although the future seems uncertain the final message is a metaphorical optimistic one.

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