

MYOPIA AND HYPEROPIA IN SHAPING CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: *In this article our aim is to discuss the importance of cultural identity shaping and to raise the flag with regard to perceptive dystopias deliberately maintained by various actors through a colonization of the imaginary aiming to trigger the creation of certain cultural identities, more often than not in the logic of cultivating inferiority. We understand myopia and hyperopia in a metaphorical sense – as maladies that are perceptive towards a healthy perception we consider a road to success. From our point of view, cultural identity represents the critical emotional infrastructure for the development and survival of a nation who, if altered, can easily play the game of other actors and serve other interests.*

Keywords: *cultural identity; national identity; imagined geographical space; self national image*

1. INTRODUCTION: EMANCIPATION OF THE MIND AND DEVELOPMENT

Talking about the measures the Chinese strategists had in mind in order to develop China, Andrei Marga writes that “the Chinese refer to their type of reform as a model of emancipating the mind. China adopted the method of changing people’s minds” (Marga 2015:62). Backwardness of a society is perceived as being linked to a prevalent mentality. Chu Yu (2009) is an author who explores the shortcomings of the Chinese traditional models of thinking. Chu Yu minutely analyses the mindset that is susceptible to correction (Marga 2015:65). His recommendations include the idea of cultivating a feeling of satisfaction. Changing the prevalent mentality, which was understood as a prop for failure, became a strategic objective of utmost importance. A recent cunning explanation given by Wu Xiaobo says that the beginning was based on other premises: it was a beginning whose momentum was a new perception of reality, it was a beginning triggered by ordinary people. Extreme leftist theory was replaced by a new concept of truth, supported by a new perception of reality (Marga 2015:163-164).

Understanding this essential facet of development that mindset and national culture represent the secret ingredient of rebirth and success of a nation, is not a new endeavor. Max Weber placed the protestant ethics within the development equation thus highlighting the

cultural values that represented the “invisible” infrastructure that paved the way to success in Western cultures.

In a reversed approach, recent postcolonial studies in international relations focus on identity constructions that rendered domination and imperialism possible (Smith & Owens 2008, 187). A plethora of researchers analyzed the relation between the new forms of power and systemic inequalities, i.e. the continuous domination of “subalterns” in Gramscian terms. An important claim in postcolonial studies is that global hierarchies that render subordination and control possible are facilitated via certain social and identity constructs. Representations of cultural and identity differences, especially formulated in terms of inferiority or superiority, are not innocently wrought, but carefully cultivated. It is absolutely crucial to understand, Smith and Owens insist (2008:189) that the forms of power and imperialism act at the crossroads between gender, race and class. Western nations see themselves as civilized, while the enemies/ the others are seen as barbarians. As a means to justify British Empire’s ruling over India racist and sexist claims were used in “describing” the uncivilized manner in which Indian women were treated by men. The strategy aimed at putting Indian behavior on an inferior position and British behavior on a superior one, and considering the latter a civilizational standard, a benchmark of civilization. The objective here was to create a network of inferiorising significations. At a discourse level it was not relevant whether this was

appropriate or inappropriate relative to reality; it was enough to merely utter them and present them in pejorative terms, as well as to increase the topics or criteria presented as “underdevelopment”, “inferiority”, “abnormality”, “powerlessness”, “inability”, “lacking”, “savage”, etc. We are witnessing the construction of an exogenous identity of an actor, circumscribed to the logic of inferiorisation towards a self-assumed superiority of the “colonizing” actor. Postcolonial researchers resort to the phrase “colonizing ideologies” in order to describe the type of discourse instrumented to reach their objectives, but at the same time they are also interested in discovering the forms of resistance to the colonizing ideologies and illustrating the response strategies to this offensive (Smith & Owens, 2008:189).

2. MYOPIA ȘI HYPEROPIA OF IDEOLOGIES

From our point of view, colonizing ideologies could be understood as discourses that target the creation of hierarchies, more precisely the cultivation of a feeling of “inferiority” through finding and disseminating certain negative narratives. An eloquent example could be the reinterpretation of historical events from a positive key to a chiaroscuro light, or even a negative key, in other words a mythicized one. If a people is proud of their history or it has certain heroes, these narratives need to be changed and “spiced up” with uncertain aspects. As historian Ioan Aurel Pop said (2014:VII),

mister Lucian Boia brings an opinion that cuts through flesh: past is dead, it cannot be known and becomes in historians’ writings a narrative full of myths, biases, lies.

After all, the author wonders,

why do Romanian personalities, presented in a positive light before 1989, suddenly become condemnable, insignificant, enshrined in mythologies and ancestral, especially nationalist, flaws? (Pop 2014:10).

We do not speak of appropriating facts to realities, but of the way facts need to be interpreted. And the key to understanding this is ideology, negativity or positivity register. Following the red line of postcolonial studies, discourse cultivating “inferiority” and approaching various topics are reaching a certain target: the “small” powers to remain “small” and the “strong”

powers to remain “strong” through destroying the winner mentality, through cultivating feelings of powerlessness, of belief in a destiny of failure.

We understand myopia and hyperopia in shaping cultural identity as distortions of a healthy view, of a resilient identity and cultural self-perception. When we see reality through the lens of hyperbole or litotes, thus straying from the “*aurea mediocritas*”, “the royal path”, we may adopt extreme views, the all-or-nothing kind, and miss the opportunity for a normal view of reality. When we discuss the necessity of “demythization of history”, for instance, the stake is not necessarily linked to the possibility of settling the historical truth but to the “severing” of national pride or self-confidence. Not feeling self-confident translates into a paralysis of the decision-making ability

3. CULTIVATING IDENTITY INFERIORITY

Cultivating identity “inferiority” is done via selecting those criteria that pave the way to the image of absolute failure. For instance, Ioan Aurel Pop writes:

we have the feeling that mister Lucian Boia makes a 180 degree change in the glorious nationalism that some of us may have experienced, turning it still into a kind of nationalism, but reversed, a nationalism of hate, of darkness, of hopelessness (2014:XVII)

and we may add that this discursive retroversion has its own stakes! What if these stakes depend on the cultivation of an imaginary of the grotesque and implicitly of a solution to save ourselves by leaving the country because here we are damned, here we can do nothing because the past and present reality is “black”, the country is “black”? We no longer lend an “ear” to slogans such as the Romanian proverb “bread may taste bad but still it’s better in my country”, since they are assimilated to a communist slogan, therefore implicitly rejected.

Resorting to history, in the logic of postcolonial studies, there is no innocent but only canonical interpretation of titles such as: *Is There True History? On the “General Relativity” of History* (Djuvara, 2008), *Two Centuries of National Mythology* (Boia, 2012), *Why Is Romania Different?* (Boia, 2012), *A Game without Rules: On the Unpredictability of History* (2016). If in the communist era there was a “saint factory” and an ever-growing number of Boverist readers, hungry for the literature of escape of any kind, where Romanian literature was a fragile national product,

where “masterpieces” and “classics”, directors of conscience, brilliant princes, clan leaders and protectors, deception and seduction techniques, protochronist temptations were published (Negrici, 2017), in the same logic, can we ask ourselves what is the purpose of today’s negative cultural activism? Shall we no longer love our country? There is no surprise, given the historical circumstances mentioned above, that it is people over 60 that project a positive light on the cultural identity of Romanians (David, 2015:284).

Could we identify an involution from grandeur to the grotesque, from a “petrification in respect” to a dissolution of respectability, from an Eminescu emerging from a profane time to lusty poets, from the “rain of superlatives” (Negrici, 2017:73) to “Hotel Transylvania” and Dracula cartoons? Was the unpaired poet, the national poet replaced with a “post-revolutionary asphalt tango¹”?

What we can barely see nowadays is the moderate discourse. Vladimir Tismăneanu, writing about *The Devil in History* (2013), places Romania in an implicit extreme space of unfortunate Soviet influence whose effects still linger in the Romanian psyche. Romania’s lack of reaction to this replacement is the embodiment of the other extreme compared to, for instance, the Muslim world that violently reacted to Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, the author being accused of blasphemy (Erhan, 2018, 227).

In *Psychology of the Romanian People*, Daniel David reached the conclusion that when we compare ourselves to other ethnics living in Romania, we consider ourselves “civilized”, but when we compare ourselves to other peoples of the world, we consider ourselves as “uncivilized” (David, 2015, 283). The results might be due to a carefully wrought postcolonial discourse that caught on precisely due to certain traits that turned into fertile soil for a certain cultural identity mindset. There is no clear, focused, well-defined opinion on national traits referring to behaviour, character or attitude. Probably it is a lack of gauging standards that cultural myopia and hyperopia manifest that obviously in the mindset of Romanians. Maybe a deeply-rooted inferiority complex that triggers a distorted view on our closer or distant neighbours is actually part of our nation’s

DNA – is Dan Alexe’s main thesis on Romanian identity (Alexe 2015, 283). Hedonophobia, another characteristic typical of Romanians, according to the author, might explain the permeability of our cultural identity.

4. CULTIVATING THE BALCANIZATION OF THE BALKANS

In the perspective of symbolic geographies, our positioning in the Balkans might provide us with an a priori inferior identity. In Maria Todorova’s semi-Orientalist interpretation, the Balkans represent “a bridge between various development stages, echoing labels such as *semi-developed*, *semi-colonial*, *semi-civilized*, *semi-oriental*.” (Todorova, 2000:34). During the Cold War, the tone used to denominate the Balkans softened, making way for choices such as East Europe, but in the aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain, the term Balkans was reinforced and its discredited meaning was kept (Andraş, 2008:37).

The phrase “the imperialism of the imagination” found in Vesna Goldsworthy’s title (1998) expands the semantic field of the concepts imperialism and colonialism. While conventional colonists are interested in natural resources and their exploitation (1998), neo-colonization is soft nowadays (discursive, metaphorical, cultural). Balkanization of the Balkans means attributing characteristics to this space, creating symbolic geographies, creating an imaginary correlated to this geography, more often than not by using litotes in contrast to the civilizational space.

Similar to Larry Wolff’s ideas, i.e. inventing East Europe and investing the space with attributes of submission – dominated, effeminate, passive, inferior, falling out of history space – is the result of an intellectual action, attributing identity traits to people living there (Wolff 2000). The colonization mentioned by Larry Wolff is an imaginary one, a symbolic one. A divided Europe is an intellectual project, an imagined and invented reality.

Placed in the logic of social constructivism, imaginative colonization is opposed to essentialism, as Benedict Anderson (2003) also said: the nation is first imagined (by others included) and then promoted until it is internalized.

5. CULTIVATING SEPARATION AND DIVISION

An example of identity construction can be seen in Herta Muller’s literature, where divisions are reiterated. Being a minute radiography of the

¹ *Asfalt Tango* is a 1995 Romanian road movie, which pokes bitter fun at the disastrous situation of post-revolutionary economic and cultural transitional state of the country, including an extremely poor road infrastructure, hence the title of the movie. *Asfalt Tango* was directed by Nae Caramfil.

subtle effects of the Iron Curtain, even if concentrated on presenting the political totalitarian experiment in Romania, her books can be read as well as a translation of the barbed wire into the intimate universe of the Self. The author suggests that the Berlin Wall is living inside us producing a lot more than separation, “the green plums” or *Herztier* in German language, but the “the animal of the heart” in the Romanian translation.

Her writings reflect the profound influences of the divided world on every aspect of personal life leading to an inner universe made up of paradoxical inclusions and exclusions, it could be characterized as well as a personal confession about living in a concentration camp and expressing the confrontation between intimate personal identities and prefabricated political identities organizing the world. The idea of the divided Self and the schizoid personalities is writ large in the Herta’s Müller prose, there are many issues and characters related to the idea of separation: the razor blade, the seamstress, the hairdresser, the barber, the scissor, the hack, the incision. For instance, the title of a short story in the volume *The Fox was Ever the Hunter*, “The razor blade”, awakes the idea of division, and the main character takes care of the razor blade more than anything else. Similar to that, another short story from the same volume has as title “The nails grow” and a pair of scissors is the instrument observed and put next to the teeth brush. The scissors are very important within a universe in which you listen out of breath (in the Romanian language a verbatim translation for *out of breath* would be *to listen with the breath cut*). The events of a day are correlated with the noise made by the scissors or there are descriptions of a nail falling after being cut. Another example, in the novel *The Green Plums*, one character is the seamstress, a woman renowned more for telling somebody’s fortunes from cards than for sewing dresses. The seamstress used to say that, even if the people pay a lot of money to find out their destiny, she is not able to change it.

Herta Müller writes that everybody lived with a mind to emigrate. They wanted to swim across the Danube until the water transforms itself into the foreign. In her Nobel awards speech, the artist speaks about split words, double-edged meanings, as “every word knows something of a vicious circle”. The world is cut into pieces and even gestures deceive.

In the first novel written after escaping from the Dictator’s country, *Traveling on One Leg*, Irene is not truly able to escape as the Other

Country is still present, as the Other Irene is still present. The duality of her personality is reflected in many images encountered in the new country. In this book, the Berlin Wall is presented as the space where dead people are still living but metamorphosed into dark-brown rabbits, who live in holes next to the Wall. Those are scarier than guns (Müller, 2010:188).

The Berlin Wall condensates multiple divisions. It may be perceived as the global segregationist nucleus, specific for the Cold War era, since it was separating the world in two ideological blocks: the European continent into Western and Eastern Europe, a country into West Germany and East Germany, a city into West Berlin and East Berlin and continuing separating families, human beings or words. The prose metaphorically reveals the impact of the political culture of segregating identities upon an artist’s consciousness, one who hallucinates as a consequence of a world that is deconstructed and organized in squares, a world imagined as white and black territories separated by concrete walls. The implicit artificial inner personal identities, enshrined by global structures of interests and identities are perceived as fake and unnatural, the artist has the feeling that the whole world was upside-down and perverted: an incoherent labyrinth and a prison in which the inquisitor was asking despitely “Who do you think you are?” and she used to reply that she was a human being as any other (Müller, 2005:59).

6. SHAPING MULTIPLE PERSONAL IDENTITIES

Being illustrative of the unsettled equation regarding the relation between personal identity and collective/national identity, her literature reiterates the question Maria Todorova (2000:25) evokes: can we carve up humans and endure beyond the consequences of that cleavage on cultures, histories, traditions, societies or races? Just like in the Heisenberg effect, people’s inner Self is modified dramatically following the organizing political principle of separation based on certain identity features, Müller’s writing is the radiography of that effects, the implications for an individual of the world built on the assumption of separation and differentiation.

The paradoxical aspect of our multiple social identities is reflected in our deeper self and conscience and needs an integrating principle, a coherent meaning. Natural identity categories, such as mother, father, brother, sister, friend are at the

intersection with political and ideological identity categories, such as killer, Nazi, enemy, bourgeoisie, proletarian, inmate, fanatic, etc. In her Nobel Lecture (Stockholm, 07.12.2009), Müller perceives those multiple and overlapping identity categories coexisting within one person's mind as a paradoxical situation, a combination understood only by God:

For my grandmother this photo was a combination, too: on the white handkerchief was a dead Nazi, in her memory was a living son. My grandmother kept this double picture inside her prayer book for all her years. She prayed every day, and her prayers almost certainly had double meanings as well. Acknowledging the break from beloved son to fanatic Nazi, they probably beseeched God to perform the balancing act of loving and forgiving the Nazi.

7. SHAPING IDENTITY CONFUSION

The artist cries for coherence in a world made up by double pictures and displaced meanings, where there is no normalcy and the natural roles are changed. The replacement and confusion of natural roles are expressed in many ways: the fox is the hunter, the car is looking for the pits in the street, this too is a contradiction, and contradictions connect themselves, white-black sky, we should bite, chew, swallow and close the eyes until the quince moves from hand into stomach...to be somebody who never eats a quince.

The absurdity of life is portrayed in images such as: "The seamstress spoke the whole summer about the legless hen. She was saying, I had to cut it, it was like a child." (Müller, 2009:138). In searching for a subjective coherence, she discusses the issue of a senseless world revealed by contradictions and tries to delineate an idea of normalcy or the natural. The state of a deeply unnatural world is revealed by insisting on the fact that the very natural things are incriminated: there is a forbidden way to breathe or a crime for *abat-jour* (lampshade).

The theme of the fundamental contradiction – the state who was supposed to protect its citizens had become the main perpetrator of violence – is addressed in many of her writings, including the consequences of her refusal to cooperate with the communist oppressive apparatus. The moral purpose of the state to protect its citizens is perverted and the state produces the main aggressive tools against its citizens who have but a *handkerchief* to fulfill a lot of duties. The totalitarian political universe produces

contradictions as well: the scrub has the biggest truncheon and the fox was ever the hunter. The walls are full with bugs but the windows have nothing to say about it.

The artist's literature is asking loudly and clearly: Who am I? Who are the others? Herta Müller answers:

I do not understand the world. That is why I write, because I do not understand the world... literature too is a way of searching... we are all a mystery, even in our body... Alongside all these existential problems, which automatically concern us all, the dictatorship introduced political surveillance that you have to fight against... all I have understood is that freedom is important. Literature is paradoxically born out of your belief that there is a disconnection between thoughts and words. You start writing precisely at the moment when you believe that words have lost their power. I am a writer only when I am alone with myself. Writing is not a pleasure for me, I only write reluctantly and after much hesitation. I do not understand the world. That's why I write, because I do not understand the world.

8. DISSOLVING COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

In an interview with G. Liiceanu (2011), expressing the idea that each person is unique and has a unique relation with the world, the writer believes that who we are is not determined by the language we speak but by what we say. Our actions are determined and understood in certain words, but "silence lies and lies within ourselves and smells like home." There is no such thing as language, there is no language something that accompanies what we do, or what we think or what we don't do. It happens but what was experienced doesn't want to be written down – what was experienced has nothing to do with language. When discussing identity, she finds that silence is also relevant for who we are. *Silence smells like home*. Even though the artist has no intention to create a comprehensive theory of identity, she mentions:

Homeland is a word that has been overused for ideological purposes. Whether in German history, National Socialism, the Stalinism of East Germany, or in the other socialist countries, this word has *been used very often. Home means a lot less but also a lot more: if you feel at home I think that is enough.*

The Romanian language has a twofold relevance for Herta. Firstly, it allows the revelation

of a linguistic universe different from the native and when exposed to a new language, one realizes that the world looks different in another language than it does in one's own: "In every language there are other eyes." (Müller, 2005:5). Prior to learning another language, Müller says, one's native tongue appears as something natural. She mentions that Romanian words were migrating into German words and that another language gives you another dimension of the self. The images from Romanian language are accompanying the images from the other language.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The principal aim of our article concerning myopia and hyperopia in shaping cultural identity was to reveal the very importance of building perceptive biases. Frequently deliberately orchestrated by various actors, through a colonization of the imaginary, aiming to trigger the creation of certain cultural identities, more often than not in the logic of cultivating inferiority, identity biases should be a major concern and food for thought in Romanian scape and in the Balkans as well. We should learn to see myopia and hyperopia in a metaphorical sense as maladies that are part of a *guerre cognitive*, a *guerre du sens* against a healthy perception that is a prerequisite for victory. We highlighted that cultural identity represents the critical inner infrastructure for the development and survival of a nation. The narratives recreate symbolic geographies, be they utopian or dystopian, and may spread confusion and cultivate absurdities by presenting people as being psychotic, dehumanized.

Romania is again portrayed in the same negative light even in the writings of our only Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, Herta Müller. The dictator's country breeds a suffocating atmosphere, sinister characters, metamorphosed dead, like Dracula. Even if Romania is not an insane asylum, by promoting such images and stereotypes the result might be a self-fulfilling prophecy, a distorted and perverted cultural identity.

Yet, in the light of conceptualizing human beings (Parekh 2006, 114), the separation between West and East, sane and insane, myopia and hyperopia, exceeds the symbolism of the Berlin Wall: it was more than an architectonic monstrosity made of concrete or wire fence, 2-3 meters high, signaling system in the floor, contact wire fence with barbed wire fence, kennels for dogs, equipment and trenches to stop vehicles and

tanks, watchtowers and searchlights, metallic fence, the death strip, strips of sand where footprints could be detected... surrounded by a system of guns that people had risked their lives to climb over.

Myopia and hyperopia, like the Berlin Wall, are in fact prefabricated identities in political laboratories whose core idea was a principle of exclusion through an inferiorisation that generates multiple side effects, such as alienation or nuttiness. The Berlin Wall is less than the very monument of the limits of the political imagination relying too much on principles of interdiction and segregation, and more the barricade between the victorious and the losers.

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