

ABORTED MOTHERHOOD AND TRAUMATIC HISTORY. AN ANALYSIS OF SOME CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN NOVELS BY WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract

This article discusses the fictional transpositions of a traumatic event in recent Romanian history in some contemporary novels by women writers. Decree 770/1966 meant the brutal intervention of the paternalistic state in the private lives of its citizens and the redefinition of gender roles to the effect of translating reproductive roles into productive ones. The theme of abortion is analysed from the theoretical perspective of new historicism and cultural materialism and through a feminine and feminist lens in a number of works published by Romanian contemporary women authors in the past few years.

Keywords: motherhood, abortion, Decree 770/1966, feminism, new historicism, cultural materialism.

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1. Introduction

Fifty-five years have passed since the infamous Decree 770/1966, a political decision made by the Romanian communist party leader at the time, Nicolae Ceaușescu, in agreement with the medical and judicial authorities (or rather with no known opposition from those) to boost the population of the country, following a steep decline during the war and the period after. This Decree and its subsequent modifications in 1974 and 1985 (corroborated with the absence of any type of contraception) de facto forced Romanian women to give birth to at least four (five children) by the age of 40 (45) before allowing them to access legal abortion. This led to more than 10,000 women victims of illegal abortions (the official figure, but other figures, put forward by different organisations, are much higher), abandoned children, a disrupted social space, and has effects to the present-day Romania (such as in the pension system or the medical one).

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In the past few years, a number of writings – novels, short-stories, newspaper and academic articles, volumes of poetry² – have been produced, as part of a process of gendered collective healing from this past trauma, as well as an endeavour to present it to the newer generations and the wider community of women and feminists, especially in view of the recent backlash of conservatism, populism and neo-liberalism, which has arrived accompanied with attacks against women's reproductive rights³.

This article discusses both the Decree and its effects, as well as some novels recently published in Romania written by women novelists, with the aim of providing an enhanced feminist view of these co-texts and a coherent literary analysis and social perspective of the events. Hopefully the commemoration of 55 years since its adoption (and the celebration of its repeal in December 1989) will contribute to a better understanding of the effects of such reproductive policies on women and society at large.

2. Critical framework

The discussion of the literary and historic co-texts is made from a feminist perspective, one which focuses on the effects the state's reproduction policies had on women's private and public lives, their physical and mental health and how this has been transposed in some novels written in the past few years by contemporary Romanian writers of different generations. The traumatic collective history of recent pronatalist policies is mirrored in the (fictional) personal stories of missed motherhood and results in a number of recent writings on the topic. Romanian contemporary feminism is simply looking back at what happened in the construction of gender roles in the 1970s and 1980s, with no intention of dissecting them from the standpoint of intersectionality. Similarly, all the fictionalized history is owned by white, ethnic Romanian, middle class, and educated women (both the writers and the novel's protagonists). This constitutes a shortcoming in the analysis which will need to be addressed in further research.

² To mention just a few, the novels *Părinți* (Parents) by Diana Bădica (Polirom, 2019), *Ca și cum nimic nu s-ar fi întâmplat* (As if Nothing Has Happened) by Alina Nelega (Polirom, 2019), *Club 70 (Retro)* by Miruna Runcan (Cartea Românească, 2017) or Ioana Nicolaie's trilogy *Pelinul negru* (Black Wormwood, 2017), *Cartea Reghinei* (Reghina's Book) (Humanitas, 2019) and *Tot înainte* (Forward Going) (Humanitas, 2021); the journalistic project *Jurnalul Decretului* (<https://jurnaluldecretului.ro/>) or *Prematur*, Miruna Vlada's volume of poetry (Cartier, 2021) and also her 20 interviews around the theme of motherhood (<https://www.facebook.com/mirunaavladaa/videos>).

³ Such attacks include The Texas Heartbeat Act/ 2020 or the anti-abortion laws in Poland (2020), as well as Hungary's recent pronatalist legislation supported by the current Orbán government.

The analysis partially makes use of elements of new historicism, in the tradition of Stephen Greenblatt (2000), Louis Montrose (1986 & 2013) and Michel Foucault (1995), as the literary criticism which uses both literary and non-literary texts belonging to the same historical period, considered co-texts rather than contexts, to better grasp their meanings within a paradigm of the construction and maintaining of state power. Thus, to use Montrose's notions from his 1986 text "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History", "the historicity of texts" and "the textuality of history" are both considered, with the former referring to "the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing", while the latter deals with the way history is construed by historians through their documents. (Montrose, 1986: 8) Alongside those ideas, it is important to mention Foucault's vision of history as non-linear and his focus on the anti-establishment struggle vis-à-vis the power of the repressive state, envisaged in the image of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon: the state as the prison with the central tower as a metaphor of perpetual surveillance of its citizens (with the emphasis not so much on the surveillance, but on the feeling of its existence).

The British counterpart of new historicism, Cultural materialism in the vein of Raymond Williams (1977), with its attention to historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis, is also relevant to this analysis. Culture is understood in all its forms, including popular culture, and materialism is opposed to idealism, i.e., culture cannot transcend the material forces and relations of production. Reading of a literary text is done so as to enable us to recover its histories, meaning the context of exploitation from which it emerged, and also read it in its present context of transmission.

The literary corpus includes the following novels: *Fontana di Trevi* (Polirom, 2018) by Gabriela Adameșteanu (born 1942); *Toți copiii librăresei* (All the librarian's children) (Polirom, 2020) by Veronica Niculescu (born 1968); *Și se auzeau greierii* (And one could hear the crickets) (Humanitas, 2019) by Corina Sabău (born 1975); *Complezență. Înălțarea la ortopedie. Musafir pe viață* (Complaisance/ Complacency. Raising in Orthopedics) (Polirom, 2020) by Simona Sora (born 1967). It is interesting to note the date of birth of these authors, who belong to different generations, with Gabriela Adameșteanu in the age category for whom abortion could have been a real life situation, Simona Sora and Veronica Niculescu in the first wave of the *children of the decree* generation (*decreței* in Romanian) and Corina Sabău born immediately after the peak years of the decree.

3. History as co-text

As Mihaela Miroiu showed in *Drumul către autonomie* (2004), the communist period in Romania was characterized by an "excessive regulation of women's condition and gender roles in public and private spheres", with an emphasis on

women's productive role in its first part, due to the need of reconstruction after the Second World War and corresponding to Romanian's industrialization effort, and a total change in its latter part, defined by "a maternalistic-conservative ideology, encouraged by nationalistic communism." (195-213, my translation from Romanian) Indeed, looking at historic documents we find out that the abortion situation in Romania followed the general line of Central and Eastern Europe, by allowing women over the age of 16 to request termination in the first three months of pregnancy, safely performed in state hospitals throughout the country for a small fee (Decree 463/1957) and corresponded with the authorities' focus on women's productive role. However, this led to an increased number of legally performed abortions, so that the situation (considered worrying) was discussed at the Interregional Conference of Obstetrics and Gynecology (Timișoara, 1962). The conclusions of the presented report were published the following year and included some rather progressive recommendations, among which "the right of the woman to decide on the product of conception" and sex-education classes in state schools (truth be told, they were expected to be delivered by school doctors and had to be "in conformity with the high ideals of socialism, based on solid marriage, founded on the moral purity of the relationship between the spouses and the care for their children." (Doboș, 2017: 211, my translation from Romanian)

Nevertheless, this was dramatically changed in 1966, when Decree 770 was passed, as it transferred a private affair to the public domain, by mixing reproduction with production and expecting Romanian women to transform into providers of labour force from simple members of the labour force. Foucault's panopticon was put into place as a complete mechanism of supervision, control and discipline was set in motion through medical staff and power institutions (the militia, prosecutors, judges, party leadership and simple citizens) to make sure women submitted to their assigned role, that of *mothers of the nation*. This was within a conservative patriarchal framework, in which traditional gender roles of women as unpaid carers for the extended family were juxtaposed over those of wage workers, leading to what feminists name the double burden (and excessively so). Moreover, the state did not do its share of the deal; in the words of Gail Kligman "propaganda representations of the paternalistic state, who was supposedly taking care of the wellbeing of its citizens, the over praised optimal conditions to develop healthy and numerous families, were simply not there for most Romanians." (Kligman, 2000: 223, my translation from Romanian)

In this context, the opposition and subversion of the system was assumed by women, role recognized by the authorities, which transcribed illegal abortions in the hospital official papers and other official documents as "due to women's fault". (Doboș, 2015: 171-200) Women were the ones who owned the act of aborting motherhood, either on their own, by ingesting dangerous substances, or by submitting themselves to physical strain or self-inflicting harm, or by accessing illegal abortions from medical (or not) staff.

4. Traumatic (his)tory and personal (fictional) abortion stories

In the literary analysis of the contemporary novels in the literary corpus, it is important to emphasize the relevance of the collective gender trauma of the memory of the Decree and the personal stories of aborted motherhood. Trauma is the phenomenon to take into consideration in connection to the feelings and behaviour of the victims; it is “not experienced as a mere repression or defence, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. Trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site.” (Caruth, 1995: 10) Moreover, it is not only to be found in the violence of the past event, but in the way its unassimilated nature comes back to haunt the victim(s); it is linked to what is known, but also (and especially) to what remains unknown. (Caruth, 1996)

4.1 Oppressive patriarchy

The panopticon-like supervision of the patriarchal state, connected to this gendered trauma, is present in all the novels under discussion. *Și se auzeau greierii* mentions the monthly gynecological examination working women were submitted to (Sabău, 2019: 19 and 35), as well as the intimidation scenes, which lead to the protagonist’s death, as she cannot come with a credible story about her aborted motherhood in face of the prosecutors and the militia men. Both *Fontana di Trevi* and *Complezență* have such interrogation scenes, in the first case, the young woman prosecutor is recognisable in the postcommunist human rights activist and minister of justice Monica Macovei. The consequence is that, as in the historic co-text, the woman takes it upon herself to find a solution, and the husbands or partners are kept in the dark (*Fontana di Trevi*) or at best turn a blind eye (*Complezență*); in the worst case scenario they even worsen the situations of their wives, by delaying calling for help (*Și se auzeau greierii*). „Eu am greșit, eu am să rezolv” (the repeated resolution from the protagonist in *Fontana di Trevi*) reverberates in her memory even years after the fall of the communist regime and the repeal of the decree, when she comes back to Romania to visit old friends and reminisce about her past life.

The patriarchal society is present through the novels; a relevant episode is in *Și se auzeau greierii*: a young woman is taken to hospital with acute apendicitis, but the woman doctor mistakes that for a self-intervention to terminate a pregnancy and mentions that in front of her father; at her return home she is brutally beaten by her father, who imagines himself a guardian of her virginity and the author clarifies the

socially perceived gender differences: a man can be ill, but for a woman any pain means you had lost your purity.⁴ (Sabău, 2019: 65)

Another relevant episode reeking misogyny is the joke made after the 1977 devastating earthquake in Bucharest, and it involves textile workers from one of the largest Bucharest factories who had to be evacuated, as their vagina openings were too large and the factory was in danger of collapsing (!). The women at the protagonist's office (a publisher's) giggle when the joke is told, making her reflect about their inclusion in the "ridiculous multitude of anonymous pussies" (Adameşteanu, 2018: 144-145, my translation from Romanian)

4.2 Good and bad doctors

Gabriela Adameşteanu manages to skillfully describe the terror women felt in those years in the hospital scenes in *Fontana di Trevi*, in the description of the other patients: a woman with a little girl, whose uterus had been extirpated; two students, who had the misfortune of coming to the hospital when obedient doctors were on duty, who called the prosecutors and then left the patients to bleed to death for not telling how they had managed to do the abortions and also left them in the hospital morgue while interrogating their relatives; a 27-year old woman with two other children at home who the police officers beat up to tell them about the intervention and then left to die of sepsis; other women who were saved and were awaiting trial along with the doctors and nurses who had helped them. (Adameşteanu, 2018: 212) In opposition to these is the portrait of the woman doctor who saved her from imminent death and who is also traumatised as she had to remove her patient's uterus and inform her the fetus was a girl and that she would never be able to have children again. (216) The doctor is caught in the same system of repression and supervision and is eventually informed on and imprisoned, which Letiția finds out accidentally. (249)

The functioning of the system with good and bad doctors in a small town hospital is described in *Complezență*, with dr. Bochiș (who opposes the prosecutors, who do not dare contradict him as they recognize him as superior in the unofficial town hierarchy) and dr. Țiņăreanu – who also had helped the prosecutor's wife; and also some bad ones, who call the prosecutors and the militia officers when they are on hospital duty. The action takes place in a small provincial town in *Toți copiii librăresei*, too, hence the enhanced shame and blame of the protagonist's father, when she is examined by a midwife who brings the verdict, which falls "like a guillotine from the sky": "Yes, I was pregnant and I was seventeen." (Niculescu, 2020: 71-72, my translation from Romanian) Later we find that this kind midwife,

⁴ In the original text: „ca bărbat îți permiți orice fel de junghi, dar ca femeie un junghi înseamnă că n-ai fost cuminte...” (Sabău, 2019: 65)

who refused “to help” Sonia as it was too late for the procedure to be done safely, will not escape the system and will also do prison time. (204)

Și se auzeau greierii includes a bad doctor who humiliates the protagonist at her arrival at the hospital, instead of helping her – she is made to stand and tell her story, which he makes clear he does not believe, while letting her bleed, and a nurse secretly gives her a sedative or an antibiotic (Sabău, 2019: 83). But Corina Sabău restores our trust in humanity by also including the portrait of a good doctor, who attempts to save the protagonist by operating on her without anesthetic, an episode described in a long first person monologue, with different voices and the main character’s observations crowded in the same page-long sentence, with all sorts of details and characters mixing, to realistically paint the scene and the protagonist’s state of confusion due to the unbearable physical pain and mental strain she was under. (87)

5. Aborted motherhood

Aborted motherhood is the theme which is present in all the literary texts under discussion, and which connects them with the other type of co-texts, the historical documents of Decree 770. It is a very powerful theme and the different angles in which abortion is presented, together with its life-changing effects, are read through a feminist lens, as a type of gendered oppression and violence the patriarchal state performed against half of its population.

5.1 Abortion stories

In *Și se auzeau greierii* a self-performed abortion is described, after a review of other abortions known by the protagonist: colleagues, neighbours, a hair-stylist (Sabău, 2019: 74). The family had a nine-year old daughter and the woman takes it upon herself to get rid of the situation, as suggested by her husband. The first-person narrative of the scene adds to its dramatic effect; the juxtaposed, long sentences, the crowded details, mixing exterior factors and the feelings and physical pain of the protagonist in page-long sentences contribute to its alertness. The outcome is tragic, the woman is left to die in the hospital, with her husband arguing about her lack of organisational skills (82) and the final scene of the novel is written from the perspective of the now orphan daughter, who blames herself for her mother’s death, shows how this trauma is perpetuated cross-generationally.

Letiția Branea, the protagonist from *Fontana di Trevi*, has an abortion performed by a nurse at her house the night of the 1977 earthquake. Letiția’s abortion ultimately leads to her hysterectomy and impossibility of having children. It is also a trauma for the female doctor who defends her in front of the state representatives and who tells her she hopes never to be put in this situation again (we will eventually find out

she had been imprisoned for these illegal abortions and left the country when liberated from prison). Scenes from the past come back to the protagonist's memory and are counterposed to present-day scenes (the novel is written from a postcommunist perspective), she remembers her youth as a bleak period. Abortion was and is still regarded as the only choice, as the baby was the result of an affair in the absence of her husband who had fled the country, and her "track record" ("dosarul") would have been impossible to uphold. Letitia never thinks of the possible child, she repeatedly refers to it as "her problem"; she attempts to abort it despite all personal health considerations: she has panic attacks, she hides in the toilets at work on other floors, she imagines everybody is aware of the "situation", she only wants to see the problem solved. The novel balances present episodes with past scenes, and the protagonist tries to justify her past decision: "Later on I kept asking myself whether I had not mistaken taking my pregnancy as a flu I had to get rid of, no matter what..." (Adameşteanu, 2018: 162-163, my translation from Romanian), and gives herself the same arguments over and over again: the scandal, the husband as an asylum seeker in Germany at the time, the lover who could not be counted on, who already had moved to another lover (whom he would eventually marry and who also had a missed motherhood episode).

The scene of the abortion is humanized by a detailed description of the nurse's working-class apartment, her preserves on the balcony that the lady of the house was forced to make in order to feed her family in times of scarcity, the furniture and decorations typical for the period. The narration is in the first-person and includes the nurse's monologue in an attempt to ease the protagonist's pain and nervousness. The episode is continued with the aftermath, the hemorrhage and the intervention at the hospital after the nurse clarifies that she had slipped a piece of paper in her patient's purse with the name of a helping doctor that she can contact in case of an emergency. (Adameşteanu, 2018: 166-171)

Complezență is different in that it describes the post-abortion episode in the county hospital, with the focus on the aborted fetus who is found in the nurses showers in a small provincial town. The scene unfolds through the eyes of Maia, the main character, who found the fetus by accident and is interrogated together with the mother by the prosecutors and the police, as the guilt extends to the whole gender, any woman could have been in this situation, so any woman could be blamable.

There are other choices to aborted motherhood, presented alongside in *Toți copiii librăresei*: while the butcher's wife has an abortion, she loses her other child who drowns in a parallel scene; the protagonist, a highschool student, is sent to another town to live with an aunt and have her illegitimate baby, as the pregnancy is too advanced (the baby eventually dies). The alternative of raising the child with its father, a school colleague, is rejected by her traditionalist father, who considers that a shame. This is of course a social control mechanism, through which supervision and discipline against women were performed at the time. The communist state

wanted women to produce children, but only within the family unit (and only women of a certain background). Also in *Fontana di Trevi*, Sultana, the protagonist's friend, had a child as a student whom she gave up for adoption and never mentions.

Alternatively, there is another missed motherhood situation in *Fontana di Trevi*, some sort of reversed scenario, in which the decree from the latter part of communism gets its revenge in the postcommunist period. Alina Izvoranu cannot get pregnant, like all her friends in her social group, and calls Sultana (who had an illegitimate child due to the decree and gave it up for adoption) regularly to complain about that. For her and her social group of young upgoing professionals motherhood is simply a social convention, a sign of group belonging who puts pressure on members in the name of sameness of status. Not managing to get pregnant is also "the woman's fault", an inescapable gender blame. Alina feels she needs to conform to the group rules to be fully accepted, and state motherhood is simply one of these rules. Therefore she sees motherhood like a work project, part of a social norm to which she needs to conform. (Adameşteanu, 2018: 222)

5.2 *The fetus and the mother*

In *Complezență* the fetus is named „o păpușă însângerată” (a bloody doll), „mogîldeața proaspăt lepădată” (the freshly dropped piece) (Sora, 2020:17-18), „boțul de om” (the human piece) (Sora, 2020:33), but also „corpul delict” (the criminal evidence) (Sora, 2020:19). The first metaphors refer (with a nuance of candid tenderness) to a never fully formed, yet human, entity, whereas the last one is obviously the juridical term used by the repressive organs. The same image is invoked in *Și se auzeau greierii*: the fetus is state property and the woman is a murderer⁵ (Sabău, 2019: 93), but the communist party is generous and will help her go to her daughter if she drops the name of the person who helped her terminate her pregnancy. As her story is not credible, she is let to bleed to death, with only the other women in the ward and some nurses trying to alleviate her pain through sisterly support.

In *Fontana di Trevi* the unwanted pregnancy is simply the problem that needs to be addressed, some sort of flu one needs to cure of. Letiția never thinks of it in human terms and never contemplates the possibility of keeping the child. Her words to her lover “My mistake, I will solve it” receive his cowardly and non-committing reply “Do as you see fit.” (Adameşteanu, 2018: 107, my translation from Romanian) and an offer of money (108), which she refuses and uses her own money, from a loan she had taken to buy a typewriter (147).

⁵ In the original in Romanian: „Știi că fetusul din burta ta e proprietate de stat, știi că dacă trăiești în RSR trebuie să respecti legea, de ce te-ai comportat ca o criminală.” (Sabău, 2019: 93)

The mothers who suffer the terminations are in the words of the male prosecutors and also of the doctor performing the procedure *a bloody whore* („*tîrfa dracului*”) who only think of sex, as described in *Complezență*. (Sora, 2020: 25) The case described involves a colleague, the chief nurse from Cardiology, and the hospital gossip cannot clarify who the father is: the Head Cardiology doctor, another one from Orthopedics or even the woman’s husband. Nevertheless, her image - still tied on the gynecological bed, where she had suffered the intervention without anaesthetic is incredibly powerful, especially as it is transmitted via one of the prosecutors, with all the credible swear words and imprecations that frustrated and non-empathetic males can use: she is obviously “a murderer”, “a whore”, as are they all, only interested in sex and then trying to get rid of children in various ways.⁶

The doctors and prosecutors are described as working together to either save a woman who belongs to their social group (including a prosecutor’s wife) or letting them die to balance the scales if not, or if the prosecutor or militia officer is not a group member, i.e. does not have any woman to be helped. The “circuit” is described – one had to be careful how to list the terminations, what was permitted and what not on the yearly changing medical lists as officially accepted conditions allowing a legal termination (Sora, 2020: 34-35). Maia takes care of the aborted fetus after she discovers it is a girl, she cleans it and baptizes it in a self-imagined ritual which is revealed to the reader little by little, like pieces of a puzzle over the whole novel. The explanation has to do with the recognition that the baby belongs to the same gender and to the same historic traumatic event, the Decree. (127-129)

6. Conclusions

In a recorded interview taken by Miruna Vlada for her collection of 20 interviews with Romanian women writers, feminists, journalists, artists or researchers under the title *Apropieri*, Gabriela Adameșteanu⁷ talks about how Decree 770/ 1966 showed its effects not only on the many women at the time it was in place, but also indirectly on their children and on their children’s children, through a collective trauma affecting so many generations, reason for which discussing it now from as many different angles as possible is extremely important. Also, very importantly, both Adameșteanu and Vlada mentioned the fact that the decree affected mostly vulnerable women, due to abortions’ illegal character, therefore the difficulty of

⁶ In the original in Romanian: “Poate o cunoștea pe criminala care stătea încă legată pe masa ginecologică, crucea mării ei...Toate-s niște curve nenorocite care nu vor decât să și-o tragă, iar după-ai a își bagă înăuntru pătrunjel și apă sărată, țuică, chinină, hrean, lămâie și oleandru, își bagă fusul și iglița, uneia îi crescuse țelină din pizdă, zicea unul dintre procurori. Cum de nu auzise toată noaptea urletele curvei aleia care-a crezut că scapă?” (Sora, 2020: 19)

⁷ The interview can be watched on Miruna Vlada’s facebook page at: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=673808253997861&external_log_id=5b9c7482-328d-4c4c-84bc-6ac600dae379&q=Miruna%20Vlada

accessing it under the counter approved “circuit”, and their prohibitive price. Accessing abortion networks which worked with the acceptance of (or in connivance with) party leadership and its repressive organs was obviously more difficult for ordinary or vulnerable women (women in situations of poverty, little or no education, disabled or very young, members of social or ethnic groups with no or limited access to power, etc.). Clearly, this point of intersectional identity of the women affected by the Decree deserves to be further researched.

This article connected the literary corpus and the historic one around the pronatalist policy of the Romanian communist state in its latter period, by analysing some novels which present stories of abortion and their traumatic collective memory. The two types of co-texts combine to unravel the gender oppression patriarchy exerted, and should function as a sort of trigger warning that such situations are unacceptable, in the context of the conservative backlash mentioned above. Decree 770/1966 proved to have a reverse effect as the one intended: the Romanian population did not increase and instead women were once again the designated victims.

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