A new cultural canon in a new multicultural world: Identity, diversity and multiculturalism between past and future in Romania's Banat

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Abstract

The region of Banat has been a meeting place and a melting pot of peoples and cultures. The result of immigrations was the birth of a diverse ethnic and linguistic region, cultural diversity marking the place and the region imposed its identity through an authentic multicultural canon. This multicultural canon, defined as a set of cooperation principles, a model norm for other cultures, an example of citizenship, functioned, for centuries, but after the disappearance of minorities as a result of communist political persecutions and the uniformity of the values, the multicultural canon started going through real identity crises.

This paper sets to analyse the actual image of cultural identity in Banat, comparing it to the canonical lost one. There are two aspects: a historical analysis of the canon in the region in the context of European transformations, taking into account 3 periods: Habsburgic colonisation; communist period; post-communist era. The second stage refers to literary representations of the image, at the confluence of history, nationalities and languages. We are searching for the significance of terms such as identity, diversity, multiculturalism in four significant texts: Nicolae Stoica, 'The Chronics of Banat'; Livius Ciocârlie 'A Provincial Burgtheater'; Herta Müller, 'Everything I Possess I Carry With Me', Daniel Vighi, 'The Mysteries of Solitude Castle or about Solitude in Winter Time'.

Keywords: *cultural canon, identity, diversity, multiculturalism*

Theoretical background

Banat region- a particular/global model of citizenship?

The Romanian Banat is considered a real example regarding the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural impact, searching for a local, yet global identity. Observing Banat's history and the city that coagulated its identity, Timişoara, we can observe as successive historical waves determined its multi-ethnic configuration and contributed decisively to creating both a global and a local identity.

The historical Banat is a territory that had an area of 28.526 km2. Today 18.966 km2 belong to Romania, 9.276 km2 to Serbia and 284 km2 to Hungary. Geographically, Banat is

surrounded by 4 rivers: Tisa - west, Dunărea/Danube - south, Mureş – north and Cerna/Timiş - east. The Banat region was under Hapsburg domination from the 18th century.

Situated in the margin of the empire, the Hapsburgs wanted to colonise it for political and economic reasons, to realise a community based on multiple ethnics in search of a unique cultural syncretism. Therefore, in the Hapsburg period Germans, Italians, Alsatians, Tyrolese, Hungarians, colonised the region. The result of immigrations was the birth of a diverse ethnic and linguistic region, a cultural diversity that would mark the place. Therefore, the region Banat imposed its identity through an authentic multicultural canon, of the democratic dialogue between its inhabitants. This multicultural canon, defined as a set of cooperation principles, as a model norm for other cultures, as an example of citizenship, functioned, for centuries, as a result of the search for identity of a heteroclite population, a true *Weltanschauung*.

An analysis of demographic evolution in Banat offers essential information regarding the multi-ethnic configuration of the region, but also its evolution at the interference with history. Statistical data show that over twenty ethnics lived in Banat, expressing themselves in twenty languages and belonging to eight different religions.

> This New World, at the margins of Central Europe, the province and its capital transformed step by step from a wild Terra incognita to an authentic Garden of Eden, was born, in the purest Enlightenment sense, from a mixture of political pragmatism, rationality, emancipation, modernising effort (Babeți, 2008: 25).

The inhabitants of the region were able to speak several languages, had access to a diversity of schools, many young people continuing their studies in Budapest, Wien, Berlin. They had access to multiple publications, theatres, cultural institutions. All these brought about a sort of emancipation and enlightenment that was not found in other areas of the country

The philosopher Lucian Blaga, analysing the specific elements of Romanian culture, does a relevant analyses of multicultural identity. His theory talks about 'modulator and catalytic influences' (Blaga, 1985: 311-327), prefiguring a dynamic philosophy of culture. It is the first time that identity is seen by reporting it to diversity and cultural influences. In his *Trilogy of Culture*, Blaga speaks about the two main influences on Romanian culture: the French one, imposed as a model (Be as I am!), and the German influence, leading to an individual becoming (Be as you are!).

> The difference between the French gothic and the German one, between the French classicism and the German one, between the French baroque and the German one is to be found in an equalitarian formula: the French are in all their styles more measured, more sober, more discreet, more classical than the German. The German, in all their styles, are less measurable, more excessive, more particular, more romantic than the French. The German gothic is more romantic than the French one; the French baroque is more classical than the German one. The German classicism

is more romantic than the French one, which classicism is almost academic (Blaga, 1985: 313-314).

The German culture influenced mostly the Banat and Transylvania regions, during the 18th and 19th centuries and had a catalytic influence, giving the local culture a particular, less conformist original character. Therefore, the cultural canon created had some essential elements: multiculturalism, diversity, tolerance, cooperation, different identities, a common identity.

Literature – form of reflection of identity discourse

The hybrid elements of Banat's cultural model had a major impact not only regarding the cultural diversity of the region, but also in its consolidation through cultural expression, organizing forms of institutional expression, in rural and urban areas (Babeți, 2008: 23). These cultural practises were based on early learning of the German language, in a significant number of schools since the 18th century. These can also be proven through the large number of publications in the period – 100. Through culture - schools, manuals, newspapers, theatres, clubs, associations, laic and religious celebrations created a proper climate in Banat (Babeți, 2008).

The social imaginary is reflected in the regions literature, a series of authors identifying the features of Banat's multiculturalist model, creating a radiography of the evolution of the space from the perspective of multiculturalism and identity. Validating Banat's Weltanschauung can be done through literature, which represents this collective imaginary, using the tools of literary imagology.

a) Nicolae Stoica de Hațeg – searching for multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism

Speaker of Romanian, Serbian and German, Nicolae Stoica de Hațeg was born in 1751 and died in 1883, being 'the last chronicler of Romanian literature' (Ungureanu, 2007: 123). This, added to his Renaissance culture, helps him become an interpreter of Emperor Joseph II during his visit in the province in 1773. His education in German school in Timişoara, his vast readings, his experience of limit historical situations, recommend him as a humanist, an open mind regarding identity issues.

The Chronicle of Banat (1825-1827) is his most important work in which he tries to distinguish the tumultuous destiny of the people in the region and their specific elements. He looks attentively to the ethnics living in the region and the way they relate to each other. For example, the visit of the emperor Joseph II is very plastic, regarding the situation of the colonised Germans, considered pretty good.

The image offered by the chronicler is that of a space of contrasts, but also of unity: Romanians, Germans, Serbians, Hungarians, Gypsies coexist together. Stoica de Haţeg offers a complex image of the ethnical flux that animated 18th century Banat. The author mentions Banat's colonisation: after its devastation, it is colonised with Germans, Italians, Spanish, these changes bringing rural and urban development, the economical one being followed by cultural changes.

The region of Banat as described by Nicolae Stoica de Haţeg is a frontier territory, a colonial experiment, going through lots of changes, illustrating its multi-ethnic and multiculturalist society.

b) Livius Ciocârlie- from equilibrium to disequilibrium

Livius Ciocârlie, another important Banat writer, is also one of the most important representatives of post-modern chronicles. He spent most of his life in the region, being born in Timişoara in 1935, a space that will definitely mark his career as prose writer. One of his central themes, obsessively appearing in his books is the relation centre -margin. His literary texts, confessing literature, are concerned with identity issues. From *A Provincial Burgtheater* to his journal *With Woollen Teeth*, his characters seem taken out of Stoica de Haţeg chronicle, but more complex, more problematic, marked by modern anxieties, but living in the same multicultural world.

In *A Provincial Burgtheather* the author plays a post-modern game, proposing his image as a 20th century chronicler, in the manner of his precursor, Nicolae Stoica de Haţeg. His prose becomes a collage of different styles of the epoch, imitating documents, newspapers, journals or even chroniclers. The names of the city Demeşkar, Temesvar, Temeszwar, Timişoara are meant to show the historical transformations, but also the multicultural evolution. He follows the transformation of the space (churches, parks, opera, schools), but also those of people of different origins. He claims that he sees the city as a palimpsest (Ciocârlie, 1988: 209), people are living in an multiethnic and multicultural equilibrium, although communism is starting to change perspectives. *The Sunken Bell* shows a different image, communism, historical changes bringing disequilibrium, xenophobia and despising of the other. Ciocârlie's writings become impregnated by nostalgia for a lost Paradise, the writer evoking imaginary scenes with characters from other times. Multiethnic equilibrium of the 18th century is replaced by difference, failure, contrasts.

c)Herta Müller – the loss of identity

The Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2009, Herta Müller was born in 1953 in the same Banat region, Niţchidorf village, near Timişoara but moved to Germany. From a family of Germans colonised in the region, who also went through deportation in the Soviet Union, she

is considered today a German writer of Romanian and German languages, a writer vividly depicting the traumas of German communities in Banat after communist deportation.

Her central novel, *Everything I Possess I Carry With Me* is based not only on „depicting the landscape of the dispossessed with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose", as expressed in the explanation of the award, but functions as a metaphor of transfiguration of identity when interfering with history. It is a writing piece that ruins a Weltanschauung, a model of identity, cooperation, collaboration in historical Banat. After the disappearance of minorities, as a result of communist political persecutions, of uniformity of the values because of the crises in post-revolutionary Romania, the multicultural canon went through real identity crises.

The cultural mixture, the image of multicultural identity in Banat, that were expressed at the beginning in Nicolae Stoica de Hațeg's work, followed by Livius Ciocârlie's writings, but also the sense of a world coming to an end, turn to apocalyptic proportions in Herta Müller's novel. It is an actual annihilation of identities owed to the presence of gulag, prisons, torture and the Orwellian feeling of perpetual watching of the characters.

Here is what she declared in one of her confessions in *The Guardian*:

> The most overwhelming experience for me was living under the dictatorial regime in Romania. And simply living in Germany, hundreds of kilometres away, does not erase my past experience. I packed up my past when I left and remember that dictatorships are still a current topic in Germany. (Müller, 2009).

She talks about 1945 Romania, when one of the minorities in the region was deported in the Soviet camps. A world coming to its end, deprived by its essential value learned in years of living together: humanity. Instead, the characters isolate themselves in an interior world.

The novel, as the author confesses, is the expression of direct, real experience described by her friend, poet Oskar Pastior and other survivors of the experience. The decline of humanity, people s fragile identity when interfering with a totalitarian system, destroyed any form of multicultural cooperation and tolerance and brought an ethics of fear and fragmentation.

d) Daniel Vighi – a view from the present into past

The author, born and living in Banat, is one of the representative writers of present literature of the region, following the footsteps of Livius Ciocârlie. The space (Banat, Timişoara) and its people are present in all his writings.

Although the novel *The Mysteries of Solitude Castle or about Solitude in Winter Time* is set, initially, in a different place, the author nostalgically goes back to Timişoara, with its old

neighborhoods destroyed by the passing of time, the ethnically diverse city, with the new Italian and Arab immigrants. It is a world diverse ethnically and socially, multi-lingually and multi-culturally. But Daniel Vighi brings about new elements, as well, concentrating on marginal elements: different, strange characters that abound his writings.

A confessive type of writing, just as Livius Ciocârlie's, tries to recuperate the past, referring both to historical moments and personal ones. The author does not succeed to remain in the present, constantly going back to the past. The idyllic past multicultural, prosperous and tolerant society can not be forgotten. That is the reason for which not only Daniel Vighi, but also Livius Ciocârlie and Herta Müller keep going back to it, with regret and nostalgia. The present can not be compared to the lost idyllic Banat.

Conclusions

The circularity of the image, from the unity shown by Nicolae Stoica de Hațeg to the crepuscular atmosphere brought about by Livius Ciocârlie, to the annihilation of humanity by the forces of a totalitarian regime in Herta Müllers's book and the regret of the past, facing an incomparable present, demonstrate an alienated world, a failed project.

The past is characterized by multi-ethnicity, multiculturalism, unity, cooperation; the present: dissolution of the canon, uniformity, disintegration, loss of unity; and the future: hope that unity, cooperation and tolerance to be regained.

The sociological perspective, offered by Alin Gavreliuc (2003) in analyzing the same territory as our writers (Banat), confirms the elements of a fulfilled past, characterized by rich identity, responsibility, respect for own citizens and others, moral values, multiculturalism to a disappointing present in which all these values seem to be lost.

Victor Neumann, a historian, reconfirms these values and states that 'a historical model like that from Banat offers the advantage of creating a connection between the different multicultural, intercultural and anti-racist objectives' (1997:42). It is a model that should be preserved, offering a good example of co-existence for the present and future, as well.

> Through culture (in an extensive manner), natural, blood solidarities were surpassed, the effects of national ideologies, politically instrumented in different periods by almost all ethnic communities were attenuated, therefore tough enclavisation on ethno-linguistic reasons did not occur. The system of school organisation, manuals, newspapers, magazines, theatres, literary circles, cafes, clubs, women associations, cultural associations on professional grounds, tri- or quarter-lingual street inscriptions, but, especially, the suite of laic and religious celebrations created a proper climate for over 250 years not only for a multiculturalism avant la letter, as modern world defines it, but also of overcoming its limits through a fertile interculturality (Babeți,2008:23).

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