

POSTMODERN EROTOLOGIES OF TRAUMA IN ROMANIAN LITERATURE FROM BESSARABIA

Nina CORCINSCHI

Researcher, PhD

("Bogdan Petriceicu-Hasdeu" Institute of Romanian Philology,
Moldova State University)

ninacorcinschi@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4903-4477>

Lilia PORUBIN

Associate Professor, PhD

(Technical University of Moldova)

lilia.porubin@lm.utm.md, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3601-9013>

Abstract

The article explores how post-2000 Bessarabian prose links erotic imaginaries with trauma, memory, and social legacies.

Keywords: *trauma, memory, Eros, Romanian literature, Bessarabia, psychoanalysis*

Rezumat

Articolul investighează modul în care proza basarabeană post-2000 leagă imaginarul erotic de traumă, memorie și moșteniri sociale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *traumă, memorie, eros, literatură română, Basarabia, psihanaliză*

After the 2000s, Romanian prose from Bessarabia has become increasingly interested in the subjective relationship between humans and social structures, as well as the dynamics of history. The autonomy of the aesthetic had lost its relevance back in the '90s, making room for new ideologies that were open to societal representations. Writers feel the need for truth more prominently than for aesthetics. The meanings of the present demand to be deciphered with the hindsight of the past, to identify the echoes of history in individual and collective consciousness. The erotic imaginary in the prose of the last decades no longer represents – as in the interwar period – an autonomous, "psychocentric" stake (Mihaela Ursa) detached from historical contexts. Almost no canonical love novels focused on couple dynamics and following Western chronotopes are found. Once the adventure of body language is exhausted, with all modesty and taboos removed until sliding into the "delirium and frivolization of love" (Mario Vargas Llosa), literature in recent years seeks to identify the psycho-social engine of the "amorous disorder" (Bruckner, Finkielkraut) and resumes the lost thread of cause and effect in interpersonal relationships. Why are we not happy as a couple, despite obtaining so many rights and freedoms after the fall of the Iron Curtain? The question that has generated a multitude of self-help books and professional

coaches seeks its answer not only in artistic literature, not necessarily erotic, but addressing human condition and touching on the semiotics of couple relationships. Sasa Zare, Constantin Cheianu, Tatiana Țibuleac, Dumitru Cru-du are some of the prose writers who place couple relationships in the mirror of a specific historical and cultural context, rich in psycho-emotional interpretations. These authors configure an erotic imaginary of unhealed traumas with which characters enter the stage of love. The imaginary of trauma activates memory mechanisms and involves the analysis of the repercussions of the concrete event on individual and/or collective consciousness, these "two types of semantic basins" being interdependent (Goldiș, 2020, p. 387).

Novels that bring erotic scenarios to the forefront negotiate representations of the present with the legacy of an individual and/or collective past. Under a psychoanalytic lens, the erotic conduct of adults sheds light on the dark corridors of personal memory. Man is not merely a sum of principles and rationalities that order his existence, but a "vessel" of emotions agglomerated during his formative period, responsible for shaping scenarios of intersubjectivity. Abusive erotic relationships, disproportionate encounters, and erratic behaviors often carry the stigma of unresolved childhood traumas.

For literature in Bessarabia, the psycho-social effects of the set of erotic alienations are found primarily in the Soviet legacy, in the adult-child relationship during the (post-)Soviet period – one that is deforming, confusing, and lacking in genuine intimacy. On one hand, and on the other hand, the challenges of Western civilization, the unabashed flow of freedoms, maintain a state of confusion and a constant anxiety of non-adaptation for those in Moldovan transition.

This article will attempt a phenomenological and imagological illustration of the relationship between the imaginary of love and the social and individual traumas of childhood, with reference to two novels in Romanian literature from recent years in Bessarabia: "Uprooting" (2022) by Sasa Zare and "Dependency" (2020) by Constantin Cheianu.

These two novels share an erotic imaginary of trauma. The characters become entangled in punitive relationships, where he and she take on the roles of a terrorist master and a terrorized victim. To heal their wounded selves, the characters turn to a psychotherapist and unravel on his couch the pivotal moments of their childhood, which may contain explanations, resolutions, and ultimately, healing. The recourse to the past is accompanied by the confession of the self, which seeks in the recesses of memory the winding paths of becoming.

In both novels, the characters develop a relationship with their mothers centered around the feeling of guilt. Between the children Dinu and Sasha and their mothers, there are psychological and moral cleavages created by

the social context in which their generations were formed. These women are the expression of Soviet-style educational ideologies, in which affective intimacy was replaced by rhetoric. Unhappy in their marriages, misunderstood by their husbands, forced to take on the entire burden of the family, mothers unconsciously transfer their emotional expectations from their spouses and society to their children. With alcoholic or immature, absent, autistic husbands – in other words, disconnected from the responsibilities of being a spouse and parent – mothers take on the role of the normative authority in the family. They become the "dispatch center" of the family, developing hyper-protective or tyrannical, masculinizing postures, which are actually signs of neurosis, indicators of inner fragility.

In this Oedipal scheme, children become compensatory "curatorial institutions" for their own parents. Both Dinu and Saša see their unhappy mothers as upset, angry little girls who need to be loved and protected by their own children. In an attempt to make their mothers "happy," the children amputate their childhood and unconsciously take on the unbearable task of filling the emotional void of their mothers.

In "Uprooting," Sveta, the mother of Sasha, loves her children, especially her daughter Sasha, but is incapable of understanding that her love is toxic and crushing. Sveta is the unhappy and unfulfilled woman from Bessarabia, seeking her only confirmation in the role of the mother of three children who have become the "meaning of life" for her. Lacking emotional intelligence, she turns love into abuse, irrationally intruding into Sasha's intimacy, controlling her body and mind. This woman confuses control with love, just as she cannot discern between the public and private space of her child: "- You talk as if you're not my child! How can I not interfere with my own child?"

Sasha's relationship with her mother is a turbulent mix of desperation, guilt, and shame intertwined with love. The daughter feels responsible for her hypochondriac mother's sufferings, often hospitalized, dominated by the fear that something might happen to her. However, when they are together, she feels overwhelmed by her mother's hyper-protective control. The therapy that Sasha undergoes in Camelia's office helps her understand and accept that her mother's emotional abuse is caused by the loss of the sister born before her, the unhappiness in the marriage, and the lack of emotional intelligence in a mother who shifted the burden of love, illness, and the fear of death onto the fragile shoulders of the child.

The position of objectification, the critical distance, is a solution for Sasa to bring balance to her relationship with her mother. "Yes, believe me, Mom, my intention is to genuinely observe you and protect myself simultaneously, to understand myself and you, and at this distance between us, I am at my best. It's the place from where I can embrace your humanity without hurting myself, without hating you" (S. Zare, *Uprooting*, p. 110).

The novel "Dependence," by Constantin Cheianu, adds another piece to the chronicle of the anti-utopia of Moldavian childhood. There's nothing

idyllic or sweetened in the childhood of its characters. In order to understand himself, the adult character delves into psychoanalytic incursions into the past, identifies childhood traumas, and investigates their effect on his existential journey. Danuț comes from a family like many other post-war rural families: a mother tormented by work and beaten by a drunken father, grandparents who reject the idea of divorce - "you married him, live with him!" From the perspective of this individual destiny, the Moldovan (post-)Soviet society is largely outlined. Furious, hysterical, defeminized mothers, drunken and abusive fathers, children treated with aggression, raised in a prison-like system where no individual freedoms are accepted, only bizarre rules imposed by adults.

The world of adults is perceived by the child as false and loaded with resentment. The mother who incites the child against the father, a few days later "betrays" him by reconciling with the renegade father. The child lives simultaneously in two worlds: one of senses that do not lie to him and another of reality full of contradictions that overturn all his representations of people. As the mother holds his hand, he anticipates with precision what she is about to communicate to him. The gestures, looks, and even the silence of adults are reliable compasses that guide his behavior. On the other hand, the mother's emotional autism is overwhelming. "She always passed by me like that," meditates the child hidden in a pile of wood about the mother who cannot find him. Over all these traumas and abuses, a breeze of tortured tenderness passes, an echo of the mother desperately seeking her lost child, memories of harsh caresses that come after episodes of punches. Both Sasha and Dan feel guilty about their mothers' unhappiness and abandon their childhoods, "working" on the impossible project of "matching up" to unrealistic family expectations.

What was utterly lacking during the Soviet era was intimacy. The system devised methodologies and tools to obliterate individuality, private space, and the human right to privacy. Society was constructed without authentic relationships between people, "a kind of dance of death, where a numinous self cannot be distinguished from others" (Scruton, 2019, p. 399). The aim was to mold the Soviet individual attached not to family values but to state values, with the human being replaced by the term "citizen" - an instrument of the social machinery, a cog in the ideological construct. Citizens, especially intellectuals, were engaged in civic and social activities that minimized time spent with family. Alongside the six working days, there were party gatherings, "subotnitsy," or civic activities that involved individuals in the ideological construction of society, increasingly alienating them from their intimate space and family values. The limited time spent with family was also permeated by the party's normative ideology: Soviet films, music, and broadcasts were artistic representations of official slogans, and family out-

ings often turned into attendances at rallies and party festivities. Once privacy within the family was annihilated, relationships between relatives became formalized, adopting the clichéd form of party assemblies. The absence of private spaces for discussing couple issues, debating intimate conflicts, compromised communication within Soviet families, standardizing it and reducing it to the wooden language of slogans. This situation persisted into the post-Soviet transition period. Adults lacked emotional intelligence to communicate with each other and with their children, as well as to understand their traumas. Lastocica, a character in Tatiana Tîbuleac's novel "The Glass Garden," provides an accurate analysis of the Soviet society's educational system, geared toward producing mechanisms rather than individuals. "I had to make a chocolate sausage – one of the absurdities required of girls in the fourth grade. That's all I remember from life preparation classes: the chocolate sausage and sewing in a tiny cross. In other words, I came out of school prepared for life like concrete. As for the rest – silence. No one prepared me for rape. No one prepared me for betrayal. Washed, eaten, slept – that's what a woman should know. Nobody told me that there would come a day when my husband – one of the boys who carved admirably in wood during the same lesson – would defecate in my food and cleanliness and leave. That's how it was with our life preparation. You get beaten – you rub a chocolate sausage. You give birth to a sick child – you sew a handkerchief in a tiny cross" (T. Tîbuleac, *The Glass Garden*, p. 146). Pain, shame, the desire to die are the emotions experienced by Lastocica, violated while resting under a tree. A pain deeply buried in the girl's soul, an experience that, during the Soviet era, had no right to be voiced. Because "if a girl ended up being raped, even in broad daylight, the blame was all hers. It means she didn't dress properly, it means she smiled, it means she had breasts that were too big. And good girls never had breasts that were too big" (T. Tîbuleac, *The Glass Garden*, p. 78). Human sexuality is a project "both individual and social" (Benoit, 2008, p. 29), and for a society that repudiated the body and sexuality, there were no mechanisms of control other than repression and silence.

Returning to Sasa Zare's novel, one of Sasha's traumas is related to the image of Colea, a teenager who tried to molest her when she was about four years old. As an adult, Sasha remembers how Kolea takes her from kindergarten and takes her to a designated place, where she undresses and urges the child: come and kiss the cuckoo. The girl's stupor worries him and Kolea tries to prevent the consequences, she proposes a pact of silence: to tell her stories in exchange for hiding her deed from Sasa's parents. The child escapes from the abuser late in the evening and the psychological crisis is somatized with a high fever. The girl does not tell her parents about the incident (she had promised Kolea), but she tells her grandmother. The grand-

mother tells the parents, however, and Kolea receives two slaps from Sveta, with the threat not to pass in front of their gate again, otherwise Sasha's father "doesn't know what he will do to her". The occurrence is not out of the ordinary. Abused girls and girls, groped by naked men, the multiple cases of rape are part of the crucible of patriarchal mentality and primitive sexual perception, deeply rooted in the psychic habitat of the place. That's why Sasha's father has a reaction in passing "I told you not to let her walk around with all the rubbish", and the mother is content to punish the perpetrator with 2 slaps and a threat. After 2 years, the parents completely forget the incident and welcome Kolea into the house, and the mother bakes him a bread oven, as a reward for the help in rebuilding the house. The 6-7-year-old girl is tried by the sense of stupor of her parents' inadequacy to her trauma. The wound of the past is deepened by confusion, guilt, self-doubt. The girl is crossed by a lot of contradictory states: she understands that, however, something serious did not happen to her, such as rape, physical violence, at the same time she is opposed to her parents' lack of care ("when I think about that evening on Camelia's armchair, what I don't understand is why they didn't look for me"). The betrayal of the mother, who after 2 years forgets everything and accepts the aggressor during the construction of the summer kitchen, makes her doubt herself ("It was as if he wiped away everything I had been through with a cloth, as if I no longer mattered. And if he erased, if she received him in her arms and baked him bread, then in fact I had not suffered anything, I had made it up"). The inadequacy of the adults in the girl's crisis is internalized and becomes her own inadequacy ("I thought that something was wrong with me, how I felt, if there was no problem for the rest of the family"), culminating in the feeling of guilt ("I felt wrong"), of force and shame ("Suddenly I was disgusted with myself, with my fear of him").

"In adolescence, when the childhood event retreats into the depths of one's being, Kolea revives the trauma with the sexually suggestive remark, 'You've grown up now.' With a perverse and sardonic smile, he 'referred to our secret and wasn't afraid at all, wasn't ashamed, it wasn't a teenage mistake, a slip-up by a hormone-driven boy that he wanted to bury in the murky past, no' (S. Zare, *Uprooting*, p. 157). The trauma is reawakened with increased force, shaking Sasha. Since she is forced to share a house with him, the girl spasmodically protects her intimate space, using whatever means she has at her disposal. The memory of the trauma accelerates and exaggerates the contours of the danger. Sasha isolates herself, barricades the door so that the man who in her mind identifies with a dangerous aggressor cannot enter. Sasha's discussions with the psychotherapist Camelia seek out the inner sources of this old trauma, trying to decipher the mechanism of the states of fear, guilt, disgust, and sexual attraction. Behind it all, it's not Kolea

who is the main character, but the betrayal of her parents. The absent presence of the parents. Kolea was merely the one who triggered the trauma, but the parents didn't know how to empathize and protect the girl's intimate space, making themselves complicit in the act of wounding the child's inner self. They, through their inability to fuse with the victim, amplified the crisis".

"This child doesn't experience something gravely malforming in terms of traditional, 'legitimate' violence (rape, beatings, starvation, etc.), but rather 'small' traumas that weaken and destabilize the self, and crush the fragile shell of trust in others and in herself. 'It's one of the many stories where I was assaulted by men and wasn't protected by my family, but this seems somehow more special because I was very young and because that's when I internalized certain things about myself. Back then, I would have needed a parent most of all to tell me no, you're not wrong, it's wrong what happened to you. Maybe because I know that almost all girls in the world experience similar things, not serious enough for the world around them to take notice, but serious enough to make them believe there's something wrong with them (...). The problem is that many people are raised from a young age as if they have the right to use girls' bodies, and there's a world around them that encourages them to do so. We all participate in perpetuating it' (S. Zare, *Uprooting*, p. 160).

Whenever she feels threatened, Sasha isolates herself. Doors locked from the inside, barricaded with chairs, cupboards, to prevent any potential aggressor from entering her intimate space. Covering the windows with sheets to stop the night from creeping in beyond the glass, the axe under the bed, the insomnia-inducing belts are fears that have become an overwhelming, depersonalizing mega-fear.

Similarly, in Constantin Cheianu's novel, fear, anguish, and shame are the driving force behind the character's actions. In the brutal and violent world in which Dan grows up, nuances are omitted, the "humanity" of developed socialism has its distorted contours shaped by hate. The mother shouts for the neighbors to hear that the "bed-wetter" has wet the bed, as if in a public trial of shame. It doesn't seem to occur to her that her son is dealing with an illness; the social mentality is too rudimentary to accept such a thing. The mother is a stranger, and the child constantly struggles to "make a mother out of her".

"The atmosphere in the post-war village is tense, the threat of violence hangs in the air everywhere, and signs of aggression are everywhere. Beating is the generalized way of expressing anger, releasing tension, and correcting behavior. Children are beaten by parents, teachers, other children, and strangers. 'Beating is something that shows that parents care about the child. That's why only they are allowed to hit you. Strangers can't. Some-

times they can too. When you do something stupid, a stranger can slap you. After that, your dad will give you another one, as a lesson. And your mom will also scold you. And that's how the child understands that they must not disobey. But stupid things are like that, when you stop doing one, others always appear that you don't know are like that. You commit them and don't even realize it. And then there's more beating. At school, each teacher has their own way of beating. One uses a stick, another a fist or palms, a third a ruler. Some resort to all of these. When a new teacher comes to our class, the first thing we want to know is if 'he's bad or good'. That is, if he beats or not. Those who don't know how to beat never have order in the class' (C. Cheianu, *Dependence*, p. 106).

"Mutilated at the school of falsehood and pretense, Dan strives to 'conform,' meaning to be duplicitous, to organize his social behavior according to the expectations of those around him, to save appearances, to do anything to gain the goodwill of adults. Although he feels that he will divorce anyway and that he is entering a life project that is foreign to his inner self, he does not want to disappoint those close to him and marries the first girl who accepts him. His career as a famous journalist, relentless against the mafia, has the same psychoanalytic underpinning. Dan Matasaru vents a righteous spirit that has been too camouflaged and, at the same time, compensates for an old lack of affection from those around him. 'In childhood, you exposed yourself to danger by going to steal apples to please your mother, now you do the same thing by criticizing dangerous governors to gain the public's appreciation,' the psychoanalyst explains. The public becomes his great family, which offers him the appreciation and warmth absent in his small family."

"The characters of Constantin Cheianu and Sasa Zare create relationships in adulthood that are directly linked to their childhood trauma. The masochistic integration of erotic experiences, a delay in suffering, continuous victimization, and a desire for flagellation are consequences of a guilt-ridden consciousness, altered by a utopian 'guilt' of the 'wrong child'.

Sasha turns her passion for Alice into an alienating obsession. The image of Alice becomes the constellation around which Sasha's entire energy gravitates "...I lived only the sharp pain of abandonment and in me yawned the gigantic withdrawal, the obsession, to look for her, to bang my head against the walls, to find her now, to take a little bit of her, to kiss her, to fill my eyes, to fill my nostrils, to calm myself. And it would never have been fulfilling, total, enough, just as you cannot extract presence from absence, at most an ugly surrogate. And of course, my internal wounds were untied by her, they were old, but she fit into them perfectly and her abandonment did not cauterize them, on the contrary" (S. Zare, *Uprooting*, p. 318).

"Abandoned by her beloved, the 18-year-old adolescent experiences an erotic delirium that makes her physically ill. The excruciating headaches

cannot be alleviated even with tranquilizers. She lies in the hospital, sick, just as Florentino Ariza lived his love-cholera in Gabriel García Márquez's novel. But unlike the character in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Sasha realizes (after the fever of the illness subsides, with the suspicion of meningitis being a kind of virus) that her passion is linked to her childhood trauma. 'At the beginning of those fateful months when I met Alice, a traumatized part of me was activated and that traumatized part spread to my entire being and I lived only from there, but the rest of my parts continued to exist, only they were not illuminated, as if their batteries had run out (...) Perhaps I (re)lived the trauma more than the actual relationship' (S. Zare, *Uprooting*, pp. 379-380).

"In the novel *Dependence*, a captive of his childhood's trauma of being unloved, Dan is drawn into punitive relationships that recreate his relationship with his mother: gentleness coupled with cruelty, affection coupled with rejection, kindness associated with malice. His romantic relationships with women tend to always bring these opposites together. His first wife, for example, is abandoned only after he reads hatred and repulsion, disappointment, in her eyes. The same is true with Blonda 1, for whom he develops a morbid dependence. He is aware that he is indulging in a toxic relationship. Only willpower cannot help him break free; he needs to drink the cup of the poison of disgust and hatred to the bottom. He delves into her immoral past to disgust himself with her promiscuity and to make her repulsive to himself. This internal imbalance, which creates his dependence on unsuitable women, can only manifest through external imbalances. Only scandal, expressed hatred, bring liberation. The relationship with Sonia seems, at least initially, to heal the wounds. It finally connects him to a woman with intelligence, intellectual compatibility, and mutual feelings. In fact, the reciprocity of these feelings is tarnished by the patina of old frustrations. 'You can't love a woman in pure gratuity! You can't lose yourself in love with your eyes closed!' the woman accuses him. She speaks to him about love in terms that Dan Mătăsaru, fixated on what love should be in his Procrustean bed of love, doesn't understand. Instead of building on the foundation of their passion, he seeks out the cracks in this foundation, analyzes it mercilessly, rummages through it with the assiduity of a detective. He is tormented by jealousy, doubts, and turmoil. Sonia proves to be an indecipherable equation for Dan. The psychoanalyst cannot heal the journalist's emotional traumas. Murder - the violent and definitive solution - is the only path that frustration, suffering, and dependence on drama force him to take. In an abrupt and shocking ending, the woman is lured into the woods and cold-bloodedly murdered by a hired killer. Hidden behind a tree, Dan Mătăsaru reveals the true measure of his love and, above all, of his illness".

Conclusion

In this work, we draw attention to a social "construct" of an erotic imaginary of trauma, which can be explained by alienating social mechanisms.

The motivations behind this trauma are precise and clear. Lack of emotional intelligence, abandonment, and childhood abuse can lead to states of erotic mania in lovers later in life. The recourse to a psychotherapist, the search for the psychological roots of trauma in the scenery of the child's affective memory, demonstrates a "post-psychocentric" age of the theme of eros. Couples in contemporary literature seek to explain their erotic obsession not through the metaphor of illness, as lovers of the 20th century did, but through specialized self-examination (with therapists and psychoanalysts) of their own past.

References

- Benoit, C. (2008). *Erotic Dreams and Fantasies*. Translated by Toader Saulea. Minerva.
- Bruckner, P., Finkielkraut, A. (2005). *The New Disorder of Love*. Trei.
- Goldiș, A. (2020). Trauma and Memory in Post-December Romanian Literature. In: Braga C. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Imaginaries in Romania. Literary Imaginary*. Polirom (pp. 377-390).
- Scruton, R. (2019). *Sexual Desire. A Philosophical Investigation* (T. Nicolau, Trans.). Humanitas.
- Ursa, M. (2012). *Eroticon. A Treatise on Love Fiction*. Cartea Romaneasca.

Texts

- Cheianu, C. (2021). *Dependence*. Cartier.
- Tibuleac, T. (2018). *The Glass Garden*. Cartier.
- Zare, S. (2022). *Uprooting*. Fractalia.