

# Queer Romanian Literature

A Selection of Gay and Lesbian Characters  
from the 20th Century to the Present

## ABSTRACT

Romanian literary accounts of queer characters are scarce, and the few critical texts that do address them often dismiss the discourses revolving around the author's or the character's sexuality. The Romanian academic community still expresses virtually no interest in studying queer aspects of the humanities, and there are a very limited number of articles written on this theme by Romanian scholars. Even these were mostly published abroad, not in Romania.

Therefore, I aim to present and analyze a series of literary works beginning with Panait Istrati's novel, *Adolescența lui Adrian Zografi* [*Adrian Zografi's Adolescence*] to contemporary writings by Ioana Baetica Morpurgo, Cristina Boncea, Ana Maria Sandu, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, and others.

I will discuss the mechanisms through which queer stories are constructed and how the stereotypes concerning non-normative sexualities function inside the texts, as these are mainly authored by heterosexual persons.

The memory-related value of the primary sources is of great importance to this paper. At the same time, the literary characters, which I encountered in my research can be read from a queer perspective (in some cases, their sexuality is only presented in the subtext). Through the interplay of these fragments – of lives and of fictions – I aim to nuance the local expressions of queerness. This analysis is strictly connected to the socio-political and legal contexts of our local history and will be conducted using a feminist approach and perspectives from the field of literary studies.

**Keywords:** queer, Romanian gay, lesbian, and bisexual literature, LGBTI+ memory

**THIS ARTICLE AIMS** to present an overview of themes and motives in Romanian queer literature, a topic that up until recently attracted little or no interest from Romanian scholars. Focusing on the representations of gay and lesbian characters in the selected corpus, consisting of the writings by Panait Istrati (1884–1935), Ioana Baetica Morpurgo (b. 1980), Cristina Boncea (b. 1998), Ana Maria Sandu (b. 1976), and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (b. 1964), I wish to nuance a few of the local traces of queerness in literature. These texts are mainly contemporary works (except for Panait Istrati’s novel, *Adolescența lui Adrian Zografi*) and the analysis of them takes into account the socio-political contexts in which they were written and published, and offers a preview of what one would call *queer Romanian literature*. I suggest that investigating the mechanisms by which these texts are constructed, and highlighting the stereotypes and the particularities of the gay and lesbian characters that are presented, as well as presenting the overlap of the author’s experiences and the fictionalized accounts, will contribute to the field of literary studies and, by the nature of this subject, to a queer cultural history that is yet to be written.<sup>1</sup>

The first section is dedicated to the representations of cisgender male homosexuality. Gay characters seem to be more complex, usually constructed as amalgams of political ideas, sexualities, and experiences. The second part of the article describes lesbian characters (less visible and fewer than their gay counterparts), who are often treated as objects (following the patriarchal norms in our society). As their depiction is mainly focused on their sexuality and relationships, they appear to have limited or no political opinions and interest in a larger socio-political framework.

As mentioned above, the study of queer characters in Romanian literature represents a novel and uncharted territory. One exception is a short study by Angelo Mitchievici, which appeared in the cultural magazine *Dilemateca* in 2010, “Sexualitatea damnată și literatura gay românească” [“Damned Sexuality and Romanian Gay Literature”]. In this piece, novelist and literary critic Mitchievici briefly presents some classic works where gay and lesbian characters can be encountered. He

highlights the reluctance of Romanian writers to discuss matters related to sexualities, and points out that the mores of the time did not encourage such depictions (Mitchievici 2010, 15). Mitchievici mentions a few canonical and non-canonical texts, which feature characters of non-heterosexual sexualities: Geo Bogza's (1908–1993) "Poemul Invectivă" ["Invective Poem"] published in 1933, Mateiu Caragiale's (1885–1936) novels *Craii de Curtea-Veche* published in 1929, and *Remember* in 1921), Ionel Teodoreanu's (1897–1954) *La Medeleni* (this novel is part of the school curriculum and contains references to a lesbian relationship between Ioana Pală and Adina Stephano, whose relationship is regarded as disgusting by the war veterans that the two women are treating). Another novel of lesbian interest, *Fata din Zlataust* [*Girl from Zlataust*] published in 1932 by Ionel Teodoreanu introduces the reader to the main character, the pupil Stănescu, who confesses her love for a fellow pupil, Enăchescu, and she is rejected for this, as her desire is considered "monstrous" (Mitchievici 2010, 17). The critic adds to the list Panait Istrati's novel, which I will discuss further below, as well as Eugen Barbu's (1924–1993) *Principele* [*The Prince*] from 1969, which takes place in the Phanariote period that predates modern Romania, and is abundant in homoerotic scenes and dialogues. Other mentioned writers are Ion Negoitescu (1921–1993) author of *Straja dragonilor* [*Guarding the Dragons*] from 1994, Mircea Cărtărescu (b. 1956) and his novel *Travesti* from 1994, with its androgynous main character, and the third volume of the *Orbitor* trilogy: *Orbitor: Aripa dreaptă* [*Blinding: The Right Wing*] from 2007, Adrian Schiop (b. 1973), and Cecilia Ștefănescu (b. 1975).<sup>2</sup>

Another example of an article which discusses queerness in Romanian literature is "Gay/Queer în literatura română contemporană" ["Gay/Queer in Contemporary Romanian Literature"] (2015) by Gabriela Glăvan. The author analyses two contemporary novels, *Legături bolnăvicioase* from 2005 by Cecilia Ștefănescu and *pe bune/pe invers* from 2004 by Adrian Schiop. If the first work is constructed in an esthetic manner and the writer distances herself from the two main characters, in Schiop's case the narrative becomes a way for him to reflect on and affirm his own homosexuality (Glăvan 2015, 71). Glăvan sees both these

novels as authentically queer, even if Ștefănescu does not identify as queer and only chose to write a story that is outside the parameters of (her) heterosexuality.

These two short studies I have outlined, only present examples of queer literature in Romania, without seeking to further explore the socio-political links between this type of literature and the various social contexts in which the different texts appeared or to further analyze – if only on a comparative note – these queer characters. In the absence of in-depth studies, this paper seeks to fill some of the many gaps in the academic literature dedicated to this field.

## Research Methods

In the process of selecting the literary works for this article, I have chosen to present and examine cultural products of different genres (novels, poetry, and a film script) because I aim to show how queer universes are constructed in divers manners. I also need to underline the reality that, if local gay literature is scarce and lesbian and bisexual writings are even scarcer, there is no frame of reference for transgender persons in any Romanian literary genre.

The texts that will be further discussed are Panait Istrati's novel *Adolescența lui Adrian Zografi* [*Adrian Zografi's Adolescence*] (1927), Ioana Baetica Morpurgo's *Imigranții* [*The Immigrants*] (2011), Cristina Boncea's novel *Becks merge la școală* [*Becks Goes to School*] (2016), Ana Maria Sandu's poetry volume *Din amintirile unui Chelbasan* [*From a Chelbasan's Memories*] (2013), Cristina Nemerovschi's (b. 1989) novel, *Păpușile* [*The Dolls*], (2014), Daniela Rațiu's (b. 1968) novel, *In vitro* (2006), and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi's film script, *Moartea lui Ariel* [*The Death of Ariel*] (1997).

By offering a brief review of each work analyzed followed by references to the socio-historical context and the main reactions to the texts, I seek to construct an overall image consisting of singular instances of queer depictions in Romanian literature. To these I will add a literary analysis from a feminist and queer perspective (more oriented toward the message and the background of the authors and the characters, than on the form and “literary value” of the texts).

Norman Jones (2007) proposes a definition of gay and lesbian history:

[T]he attempt to chronicle the experiences of people who were sexually attracted to people of the same sex, especially in terms of how they negotiated that attraction relative to the (often various) assumptions and stereotypes about human sexual behavior circulating in their particular environments. (Jones 2007, 7)

Each of the following examples or references contributes differently to the construction of a still absent local queer history – from established authors whose sexuality, although bursting from their writings, has been almost obliterated from literary history to authors who write their autobiographies, to people who get to relive their lives through the narratives of the former secret police's files, to accounts based on public dramatic stories headlined by the media, and, finally, to very recent publications that attempt to approach sexuality from more poetic, social, or even more exploitative or commercial points of view.

### **A Heterogeneous Corpus**

As the historical aspect is relevant to my research, I have also chosen to include an analysis of a novel by Panait Istrati *Adolescența lui Adrian Zografi* [*Adrian Zografi's Adolescence*], first published in France in 1927. Compared to more recent works, Istrati's novel may initially seem the story of two friends from very different backgrounds, but it is, in fact, a closeted gay relationship. Bearing in mind the fact that it was published more than seventy years before the other texts I discuss (in which the queer component is openly presented), I find Istrati's novel to be a very good text for exercising, what we can call, queer reading (or more specifically, *queer reading between the lines*) as a reading approach of a classical text in which the homoerotic component has been neglected.

The novel takes place in the early 1900s. Adrian Zografi is a young man from the city of Brăila, Romania. His mother's name is Joița and his father was a Greek man. These details correspond to Istrati's biography, as is the case with some of his other works, therefore one can read the

novel as being semi-autobiographic. Adrian is raised in an ethnically diverse city, but one in which he witnesses bursts of *patriotism* and *xenophobia*. For example, on the Romanian Independence Day, he questions one of his former classmates, who is showing his patriotism by chanting anti-Semitic slogans. After Adrian states that if this is what it means to be a patriot, he is not one of them, he receives an: “Out with the phanariots<sup>31</sup>” in reply, as a reminder of his Greek origins (Istrati 1996, 12). This short episode encapsulates the spirit of the time and situates the story in a context where difference was met with suspicion and opposition, resembling, I might add, the tendencies in our current society. The first obvious hint regarding Adrian’s sexuality is when he sees a man reading in a pie shop: “For the first time, Adrian felt like he was burning from Love’s fire, the one that surmounts life and survives the death. *The friend, his friend* was there.” (19) His *friend’s* name is Mihail, a poor man who worked in that shop, with uncertain origins and life story. Adrian decides to help and to befriend him. He asks Mihail’s master to lend him Mihail for some work, thus hoping to spend some free time with his new interest. But this gesture is seen by Mihail as a way of imposing his will over him: “[I]n your country, ‘the dreamers’ themselves ask the patrons for their servants, as if they were a horse or a donkey, regardless of the servant’s will.” (21) Adrian confesses his love for him and tries to convince him to run away with him and live freely. Mihail refuses, as he is unsure if the other loves him or just wants to help him out of compassion.

Let us follow, for a few paragraphs, Adrian’s thoughts on love and friendship, and his feelings for his new *friend*, which were more powerful than those for Leana, his girlfriend. He considers himself and Mihail as being part of the same “soul race” – a possible allusion to their sexuality (26). As the two start to share their stories, Adrian grows fonder and fonder of his *friend*. People start gossiping about their relationship, the author inserts this phrase, resembling an antique chorus: “You ingenuous, who love Mihail with a ‘suspect’ fondness, keep being deaf and blind, continue on your way.” (74) The two are not named as gay, but the whole atmosphere around them, from Adrian’s family’s reactions and other people’s reactions (suspicious stares, even name-

calling), form a universe where this subject is not discussed, yet still judged. His mother tries to convince Adrian that Mihail is just a friend and that he will need a woman by his side. The implied homophobia even takes the form of an assault: three men recognize the lovers and beat them up in the streets. Adrian and Mihail receive support from another similar character, the painter Petrov, a friend of Adrian's. Petrov shows his support and dreams of becoming close to Mihail, as he finds him "an interesting person."<sup>4</sup>

Unlike most queer stories found in Romanian literature, Adrian and Mihail's story seems to have a happy ending. As Adrian's mother accepts Mihail as her son's *friend*, the two decide to leave the city and travel the world.

*Adolescența lui Adrian Zografi* represents a singular story of homoerotic relationship between two well-constructed characters. The dialogues between them often take a philosophical form, as they experience the world through their similar views, while their sexuality never becomes the sole defining trait of their characters. As we will see, the tendency in contemporary queer Romanian writings is to have complex (gay) male characters at the expense of less complex (lesbian/bisexual) female characters, the latter often fitted by their authors within a hypersexualized frame and showing a tendency to be defined by their sexuality or sexual encounters.

In her novel, *Imigranții* [*The Immigrants*], published in 2011, Ioana Baetica Morpurgo constructs one of the very few queer characters in Romanian literature whose voice manages to articulate a coherent discourse on matters of social (in)justice, prejudice, and reflections on contemporary politics (both Romanian and foreign). Răzvan is a young, left-leaning intellectual working on his PhD in London. His thesis is about the secret CIA prisons around the world and the political implications of the actions undertaken by the USA and other states with regard to areas like Irak, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. His views include skepticism concerning how the USA acts under the "war on terrorism"-umbrella and the "so-called tolerant societies." Talking to several other characters, he often mentions his opinion on torture, as he is opposed to all kinds of induced mental or physical suffering. The narrative is

sometimes fragmented by facts and data, such as quotes from officials on matters of torture, historic decisions issued by Romanian officials concerning NATO and its military bases, references to articles that appeared in international newspapers, notes on euphemisms used by the Bush administration,<sup>5</sup> Guantanamo poems written by the detainees, and reports. These fragments are interwoven with erotic fantasies and memories, new love interests and their stories and family-related issues. Răzvan's mind and political opinions are captured by the narrator through the character's diary and his dialogues. For example, while discussing with Julian, the ex-lover of his new love interest, Ravi, Răzvan criticises what he sees as the passivity and compliance of gay persons (or maybe queers as a whole) toward the state:

How is it possible that a homosexual is siding with the establishment while the entire gay culture tradition, from Socrates to Lorca and Pasolini were rebels? Homosexuality is not about politics, it is about eroticism, he replied as if he was sharing a big mystery. I hoped you could see the difference, my dear. It would be advisable not to put them in the same boat. Otherwise, you might lose your reasoning for political ideas and your pleasure for erotic practices. Back then I hadn't yet figured it out. English private schools have a very affectionate relationship with both the establishment and homosexuality. (Baetica-Morpurgo 2011, 15)

Sexual depictions alternate with political discussions, in a realist manner and anchoring the characters in the contemporary context. Ravi is a man Răzvan encounters through common friends. The two enter a relationship, which is marked by Ravi's uncertainty concerning his future. He is pressured on one side by his family to marry a young woman of their choice and, on the other side, by his lover who tries to convince him not to marry. In a conversation with his lover, Ravi weighs the possible outcomes of coming out to his family: either his father will throw him out, or they will force him into marriage in order to be "cured" or at least for the sake of appearances. These two possibilities may seem to fit the Romanian context as well, but the difference would be that the



novel is placed in contemporary United Kingdom. The characters have different backgrounds and they are not constructed as representative of one cultural space or another. For example, Răzvan's mother shows her racism toward the Roma community and her homophobia by stating that homosexuality is reversible, while his father, himself a member of a minority in Romania (he is Hungarian) expresses no racist views and is accepting toward his son's homosexuality: "If we have raised him to be himself, and now he is himself, what do you want from him now?" (45)

*Imigranții* may be the first queer-themed Romanian work where one can find an explicit passage about the connection between intolerance toward Roma persons and nationalism:

Nationalism and its expansive formulation – imperialism – are rooted in racism. As a matter of fact, nationalism is only a sophisticated formula of cultural purism. Romania is in this phase: it is elaborating its sophistication strategies. (77–8)

Although when referring to the most discriminated "categories" in Romania, various surveys<sup>6</sup> still place Roma persons along with queer persons at the top of the list, the echoes of this systematic oppression are still weak in public discourse and in literary works including Roma characters. An example of this is Adrian Schiop's novel, *Soldații: Poveste din Ferentari* [*Soldiers: A Story from Ferentari*] (2013) where Adi, a white intellectual who moves to a poor area of Bucharest to study for his PhD thesis on manele, a music genre specific to the Roma community, starts a relationship with a Roma man. The novel has no references to, nor makes any connections between, the multiple layers of discrimination a queer Roma person might face in this context.

*Imigranții* shows a mixed world of experiences and references. On one occasion, while watching an aggressive, muscular man arguing with a woman, Răzvan compares him to a Nazi and calls him a misogynist who resembles the kind that caused the feminist movement. This image is by no means an account of the feminist struggles and movements; it is, instead, on a humorous note, a short critique of a type of masculinity

that is often encountered in public space. Even if very briefly, it is rare in Romanian literature to read about a man who critiques another man's violent masculinity. Răzvan's friendship with a poet, Martin, starts with a spirited wordplay. A common friend introduces Răzvan as a "Romanian activist" (for human rights), while the other corrects him "active, you mean" mentioning that he understood the meaning, but prefers "active Romanian" (Baetica 2011, 17). The difference in opinions between the two unfolds in terms of life philosophies as they argue about religion, love, pleasure, and death. Martin's last poem is constructed as a testimony for the causes of his suicide:

[...] I will do it because of the police who inhibit the protest march I will  
do it for the gay men in Saudi Arabia, because of my father [...]  
because of the sex tourism in Cubathailandmoldavia I will do it because  
I am one of them  
I am part of all all all all that is happening (97)

Let us turn now to a film script written in 1995, *Moartea lui Ariel* [*Death of Ariel*] by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi. This script is loosely based on a real story that made the headlines of the Romanian media in 1993: the assassination of the famous gay Romanian pop music composer and choir conductor, Ioan Luchian Mihalea (1951–1993), called Anton Marcu in the text. Mungiu-Pippidi's script is a fast-paced, concise account of a murder investigation, which brings to the surface strong characters and sketches an image of police abuse, homophobia, racism, censorship, and the mass media's rush for sensationalism regardless of ethics in Romanian society. The story begins with the friends and co-workers of the composer Anton Marcu, waiting for him at his own show. As they had no success in finding him, they start to think about possible explanations for his absence, and to worry. The mystery is soon solved by Adi, a TV reporter working for the national channel who insists on interviewing a woman: "Breaking news, Channel one! Now is your chance to become a celebrity. At what time did you find the body?" (Mungiu-Pippidi 1995, 151)

The intrusiveness of the reporter is constant through the story, making him a representative and somehow a symbol of the local media, shown as avid for exclusivity at any cost. As the mass media rapidly starts to cover the story, the police are pressured to advance the investigation. The records show that Marcu was an informer for the communist secret police, Securitate. While prosecuted together with other gay men for his sexuality, on the basis of Article 200,<sup>8</sup> which was still in place at the time when the script was written, he was recruited by the secret police, a usual practice regarding public figures with a good reputation and many connections within the intellectual, artistic world. The colonel who is involved in the investigation tells this story to Filip, the investigator, who is astonished and points to the fact that the victim had a wife and a child. The colonel's reply shows his discriminatory views on gay men: "It was someone from their clique, for when they are jealous they act like hell." (157) This stereotype is later reiterated during the reporter's discussion with the victim's wife. Based on the *knowledge* usually available to the public in societies where such topics are taboo, Adi expresses the heteronormative view typical of an uninformed and biased person: "[H]omosexuals kill each other. I've read books, I've seen movies." (162) At the composer's funeral, Adi is told about the victim's sexuality by a make-up artist and friend of the deceased, who talks about a group of gay men of which "only one was obvious, the rest are like him, but they look ordinary" (157). The reporter finds this information very useful and begins his own investigation. He visits the victim's wife and asks her why she married a *homosexual*. The same question, formulated in a more obvious homophobic manner ("Why did you marry someone that was not a man?"), is repeated by the investigator who is sexually interested in her (160).

A glimpse into the legal struggle of the local queer community is offered when Ionescu, the representative of a gay association and a human rights activist, visits the investigators and asks them not to repeat the history of arresting all the gay men under the pretext of an investigation. As this paragraph suggests, these arrests happening in the early 1990s might resemble the secret police's procedures before 1989, which

included blackmail by police based on one's sexuality, the use of violence to extract confessions, etcetera (Human Rights Watch 1998, 79). Since the Criminal Code still penalized *homosexual* acts, one of the investigators emphasizes the fact that he actually could arrest him for *confessing* his sexuality. The response anticipates what would happen several years later, when the act was completely repealed: "Not for long. You know that international bodies are pressuring you to drop this article from the Criminal Code, which persecutes a sexual minority." (163) He argues that *homosexual* relations between consenting adults should be legalized, because their criminalization only leads to blackmail and persons holding important positions in the state can easily be manipulated. Article 200 was repealed in 2001, after a decade of lobbying and international recommendations. During the 1990s, stories similar to the one in *Moartea lui Ariel* were often reported as the Romanian police kept hunting for queer men under the threat of prison. In 1995 Mungiu-Pippidi was a member of the human rights organization APADOR CH, a supporter of the struggle for decriminalization led by Bucharest Acceptance Group (later Accept Association), therefore she was familiar with these police abuses and the tedious legal transformations borne (see note 8) by Article 200 throughout the 1990s. From this perspective, the script she authored, which never became a film, constitutes both a literary first (in its openness about the topic of homosexuality) and an activist plea for change.

As Adi's superior refuses to air facts related to the victim's sexuality on national TV, as they fear public disgrace both for the victim and the channel, the reporter reorients himself toward a private competitor. The main suspect (a young man named Cris) is arrested and the footage is shown on TV, thus outing Cris in front of his mother and girlfriend who knew that the victim was his friend, but knew nothing about his sexuality. Life as news, presented in prime time, is the *leitmotif* of the script.

*How can one explain homosexuality to a child?* One of the most common clichés, used by persons who discriminate against LGBTI+ people when asked about their opinion on the matter, is to bring into discussion their children (or children in general) who supposedly have to be *protected* from such topics and who cannot understand explanations re-

garding other sexualities. The scene between the victim's son and his mother is an example of an alternative answer to a question, which is merely rhetorical:

The child: Is it something wrong to be homosexual?

Ms. Marcu: No. Only that it is very rare and uncommon and then people are scared when they hear that someone is homosexual, as if they would be a... kangaroo. (the child laughs) (177)

Later on, the child is attacked in the school's bathroom by a group of boys, who motivate their action with the fact that he is the son of a *homosexual*. This short scene can have a great impact, especially because it is one of the few occasions when the subject of school bullying on the grounds of sexual orientation is tackled. The list of abuses continues with Cris being raped by the policemen until his forced confession.

Romania has a long history of systematic persecution of queer persons, especially gay men, on which there is still a limited amount of research. The historical background can be found in the vice police's files, in newspapers, in informers' notes or scattered throughout the memoirs of intellectuals such as Ion Negoițescu (1921–1993), Petre Sirin (1926–2003), George Bălan (b. 1929), among others. If one tries to look further back in time, toward the history of the Holocaust in Romania, the facts are much more diffuse, as the first official report on this topic was published in Romania only in 2004, *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*. In its 313 pages, the word “homosexual” only appears three times. Going back to the story, we encounter an emblematic dialogue for the state of oblivion in which Romania seems to have been dwelling; the protagonists are two of the investigators:

Filip: Those people deserve to be gassed. They really should have gassed them.

The lieutenant: Well, they've tried. Hitler was very rough with them.

Filip: How do you know?

The lieutenant: I've read it in today's newspaper. (178)

Once the second suspect is arrested, the racist public opinion comes into action, as the young man is part of the Roma community. The interviewed persons state that they do not feel safe on the streets anymore, that Roma people steal and kill and that the death penalty should be reintroduced (192–4). These statements are all based on opinions one can still find in Romanian websites and in the commentaries following articles on Roma persons. In fact, much of Mungiu-Pippidi's script brings together a collection of clichés of hate, which illustrates the various layers of intolerance at work in society.

Matters of ethnicity, race, sexuality, and class are interwoven in the few examples I have previously analyzed, thus offering a vivid image of the Romanian context regarding homosexuality (before, after, and during the communist period). The intersection between the depictions based on real facts and fictionalized events contribute to the authenticity of the presented stories, even if the authors are heterosexual women (except for Istrati, present in this article for historical references) and, of course, they do not share the same experiences and face the same oppression as the one faced by queer authors.

I chose to analyze mainly texts written by women who do not publicly identify as queer because I am interested in the particular manner in which these persons (who themselves face sexism) are framing queerness in their work. There are still no queer women writers (who assume this identity) although a few openly gay cismale writers have become quite visible in the Romanian literary field in the recent years. Their presence is therefore quite visible and their voices are usually the ones, which are being heard in the intellectual milieu; the way they construct their literature may be a subject for a separate article. For the present one I have chosen to focus my attention on the representations of queer affects through the heterosexual point of view.

### **Where Are the Queer Women?**

A strategy often used by lesbian authors in order to challenge the stereotypes revolving around non-normative sexualities is to write autobiographical fictions that are more sensitive to discrimination than the

literature of their heterosexual female counterparts. By writing and publishing within the dominant culture, they try to deconstruct and oppose the mythology and prejudice connected to sexuality (Brimstone 1990, 25). Nonetheless, the patriarchal and thus sexist dynamics have functioned, and continue to function, as a tool for regulating women's sexualities. Regarding this matter, lesbians and their own experiences as reflected in literature often act as a counterpart to this patriarchal and heteronormative view in which someone must play the role of the (generic, socially gendered) *man*. By contrast, this happens less in narratives involving cis queer men, where roles are less gendered. Extending this dynamic to heterosexual authors, we find this pattern in their construction of lesbian characters. Diane Hamer (1990) explains:

In the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of this one, scientific research into sexual deviance – a category into which lesbianism was firmly placed – regarded female homosexuality as an expression of gender dysfunction and the lesbian as a masculine persona contained within a female body. This assessment of lesbianism has been problematic for contemporary lesbian readers for several reasons. Firstly, because it regards lesbianism as a pathological condition, rather than a positive lifestyle or sexual preference. Secondly, while scientific research sexualised bonds between women, homosexual desire became an effect of the lesbian's masculinity – being “like a man,” there was a cultural assumed logic in her desire for women as sexual partners. Thus lesbian relationships have historically been interpreted through a heterosexual frame of reference, a framework that feminists have correctly regarded as oppressive to women. (Hamer 1990, 48)

Lesbian relationships and characters in the Romanian literature are still built and interpreted according a heteronormative logic (regardless of the author's gender), as we will observe later. As the authors mentioned below do not identify as lesbian or bisexual, I have chosen to analyze their works in relation to the dominant culture in which the texts appeared and to highlight the heteronormative traces that permeate them.

Lesbian and bisexual characters are the protagonists of only a few Romanian novels and poems. Unlike male protagonists, they are constructed in a less complex manner and usually the entire plot revolves around their fantasies, experiences, and sexuality; very often they end up being hypersexualized.

In 2016, Cristina Boncea's *Becks merge la școală* [*Becks Goes to School*] was published. The story revolves around Becks, a young girl who leaves Romania to study in the United Kingdom. She is excited about the fact that she will be living with other girls and that she will be attending high school in a country that seems to be more open on matters of sexuality. She identifies as bisexual and, as soon as she starts having affairs with some of the girls, she also becomes the target of bullying because her sexuality. The novel has two main narrative streams: one concerning Becks' sexual encounters and her relationship with her schoolmate Natty, and the other depicting her revolt triggered by a book written by her uncle about Becks and other members of her family, in which they all are connected to murder, zoophilia, and incest. Due to the abundance of details in the description of the many sex scenes, the novel falls in the erotic category, and most of the time it seems like the characters are there only to fulfill some sexual fantasies about high school girls. The author of the novel is under eighteen, herself a teenager, and *Becks merge la școală* is the second novel of a trilogy begun with *Octopussy* in 2015 – the story of Becks' strange family, of Becks and her twin sister Hyena, both infected with the *octopussy* disease, a disease discovered by their uncle. Promising to be even more daring and to further question the idea of normality, this second novel shows its teenage heroine having sex with girls while assuming the role of the objectifier, primarily interested in the looks of the girls whom she plans to have sex with. In fact, she never asks for their names and just calls them *The First* and *The Second*. Her conflict with her uncle is resolved after their discussion. He apologizes and states that she and her family are more than just literary or research subjects for him and he also promises that his next book will feature her as a main character and it will compensate for the previous one.



The authorial artifice of this novel is not unprecedented: in the second novel of a series we begin to find out that the author of the first novel may not be the one whose name is written on the cover, but one of the voices of the story. In this case, Becks' uncle is credited with authoring *Octopussy* – this is the ending of the second book, the grand finale. And as she dies in a plane crash, her uncle, as promised, launches his second book. One could argue that the girl's story seems to be written from a heterosexual perspective, filled with sex scenes that are mere fantasies, which lack authenticity. It may be possible that the young author introduces the device of the male gaze to draw attention to this continuous process of objectification.

Turning now to another teen love story, that of Luna and Dora, as depicted in Cristina Nemerovschi's novel, *Păpușile* [*The Dolls*], we find it unfolding in a dynamic manner, as the two are searching and experimenting with their sexual identity. Dora is the one narrating the story, as a retrospective of their relationship before her lover's death. There are memories and sentimental depictions of Luna and the adventures they had together, erotic fragments, and brief interventions from the outside world. They seem to live in a bubble, which is sometimes perturbed by remarks of homophobic nature, for instance two old men react when they see them embracing on a bench: "They play hooky and kiss on benches in broad daylight. Without shame. [...] Nowadays girls are kissing girls and boys are kissing boys." (Nemerovschi 2014, 297) Those types of interactions are only part of the scenery, as the two protagonists do not feel oppressed and find support in the people around them. The public opinion and fear of repercussions are only taken into account when Luna's father, a public person, forbids Dora to attend his daughter's funeral, arguing that the media will raise questions and the rumors concerning their relationship would be confirmed. Their love story, which apparently escaped social pressure, is in fact, and in the end, completely marked by the heteronormative society which, in this case, uses mechanisms of silencing and erases lesbian experiences.

Another example of how heteronormativity and stereotypes concerning women and lesbian women are structured is Daniela Rațiu's novel, *In*

*vitro*. The story focuses on three women: Maria, a woman who has locomotor disability and whose thoughts revolve around killing her husband because she fears that he will abandon her, Gisela, a lonely musician, and Camelia who discovers her interest in women after a dysfunctional relationship with a married man. The three characters have something in common: they are all constructed in relation to their unfulfilled heterosexual relationships. Camelia embodies a series of stereotypes: lesbians “become” lesbians because of their heterosexual misfortunes, she is presented as being “masculine,” she becomes the active “subject,” and her sexual interests become “objects.” Camelia begins to fantasize about Ilinca, their new neighbor. She calls her *Beauty of the world* and tries to befriend her. The story ends with Camelia raping Ilinca, the author choosing to depict the scene on several pages. This text is a reiteration of normative patterns, where the oppressing power is transferred from the society and its perpetrators to the character that resembles them most.

From the realms of poetry, which is still underrepresented in terms of queer affects, emerged a poetry volume, republished in 2013 by Ana Maria Sandu, *Din amintirile unui Chelbasan* [*From a Chelbasan's memories*]. The first edition was published in 2003 and subscribes to the form and mechanisms the Romanian writers of *douămiiști*, “the generation 2000,”<sup>30</sup> often use: autobiography, realism, colloquial speech, and free verse. The protagonist is a woman who recalls various fragments of her life. The sexually connotative game with her friend, Giorgi, is a way to discover her own sexuality, as the two embody a boy and a girl. Twenty years later, Giorgi marries and this event is marked with regret and bitter feelings: “I would have liked to forget you, Giorgi, to burry you inside each of the people I have ever touched.” (Sandu 2013, 18) “Hear me, our stories went up in smoke, they went down the drain like the fluff of the dandelions we were blowing in the garden.” (30)

These examples are not an expression of a lesbian and bisexual women’s culture. It is of course possible that some of the accounts may be based on the authors’ own experiences, but they are never clearly described as such by the authors.

The discussion about lesbians and the way in which they are depicted

both in fiction and in mass media is one of great importance in the context of framing a queer history. Queer communities and their history often lack experiences and historical accounts related to women. Rebecca Beirne (2008) points out:

It must be noted that lesbians exist in a somewhat precarious relationship to mainstreaming. During the advent of these debates, lesbians were used in various ways, though rarely were they seriously included in the discussion except in a tokenistic way. [...] Often also subject to economic and social disadvantages as women, lesbians are less likely to gain or benefit from “a place at the table” than the frequently wealthy white men who write such treatises, and lesbian mainstream visibility has not only arrived at a somewhat slower pace but is also fraught given the problematic issue that lesbian visibility in the mainstream can often be intended and utilized for mainstream heterosexual male consumption. (Beirne 2008, 23–4)

The absence of history (or *herstory*) regarding Romanian queer women is a particularly painful topic that permeates both mainstream activism and the (self)reflexive gaze of literature. Just as in the literary examples mentioned above, lesbian and bisexual women seem with rare exceptions to always be young, somewhere on the line between adolescence and adulthood. Even when they are the main characters, their opinions and thoughts fail to be further developed and their social interactions are limited to their partners or objects of desire. While in the gay narratives, references to the characters' homoerotic, social connections and to historical facts, actual meeting places, etcetera, are easy to find, when it comes to lesbian and bisexual women such references are almost non-existent.

While my selection of texts does present two such works, writings that include the topic of male homosexuality are, with very few exceptions, authored by queer male writers. In my search for local queer female literature, I am constantly drawn back to the gay male gaze. By force of research, the few gay writings that can be found in 20<sup>th</sup> century Romania have begun to coagulate into an incipient literature, one which

exists at the intersection between historical oppression, police and secret police files, and fictionalized selves. This has not yet happened with the writings about queer women. As seen in the few above-mentioned brief examples, the “lesbian” characters are still written by male hands – an uncle, a father, a former husband – although the authors are female. Contrary to their male counterparts, they seem to exist in a world of woman-on-woman peaks and pitfalls, devoid of any dimensions of class, race, generational differences, and the story never reach the point where these dimensions could entangle with the sexual narrative.

In an article published in 1995, Mona Nicoară writes about the invisibility of lesbians in Romanian society:

Surrounded by legal restrictions, oppressed by patriarchal stereotypes and widespread intolerance, obscured by gay men in the public discourse about homosexuality, deprived of an organized community, their existence is acknowledged only too rarely. If the post-communist period has brought about some visibility and attention upon gay men, lesbians have remained silent and silenced. (Nicoară 1995, 43)

With few exceptions, it seems that these remarks are still valid. Although small lesbian groups of women who share their experiences and political views exist, their representation in the “queer, homosexual” public discourse is often neglected.

The classic and sexist depiction of men as “dynamic, intellectual, active, politically involved,” etcetera is maintained, as opposed to the readings of what women should be and how they should relate to other characters (“passive, feelings-oriented,” and so on). Following the proposed texts and reading them in close connection, one can observe that female queer characters are less developed and lack political identity, which is not the case for the male characters. This corresponds to a tendency we can find in queer communities in Romania (and beyond): the voices of gay, white, middle-class cisgender males are often the ones that are being heard in the public space, still more often than the ones of lesbian, bisexual women or trans persons.

The heteronormative gaze is also more obvious in the texts that depict lesbian or bisexual women than in the ones related to male homosexuality and at this point, it seems that the author's heterosexuality does not strongly influence the latter texts.

## **Conclusion**

The texts I have chosen are not sufficient if one would aim to trace typologies or tendencies regarding queer literary affects, but they offer a glimpse into queer Romanian imagery, as the heteronormative structures blend with accounts of real events from Romania's LGBTI+ history.

Regarding the first three works included in my analysis, one could argue that we can find references to a gay community and this is not the case with the other works, which are constructed around lesbian and bisexual experiences. Adrian and Mihail from Istrati's novel find help and friendship from Petrov, forming a micro-community, Răzvan from Baetica's novel is surrounded by friends and other people with whom he can share his thoughts, and the composer's story by Mungiu-Pippidi, includes references to the gay community and interventions from one of its spokespersons. I observe the opposite when it comes to the queer female characters' stories: Becks does not relate to other girls other than sexually (her sole friend and lover is Natty), Dora is left alone with her memories about Luna, Camelia lives in a tight group of persons, none of them are sharing her preferences, and in Sandu's poem we only find self-reflections which are not connected to the broader socio-cultural context.

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Together with Simona Dumitriu and a few feminist friends she organized the *QueerFemSEE International Conference* (17–19 November, 2017), a first for the Romanian academic space. The conference seeks to explore various accounts of Eastern European researchers (and their Western peers with similar interests) concerning topics connected to media, cultural studies, and their intersection with gender and queer studies, all placed in the social and academic context of Eastern European countries and the Balkans.

More on their work: <https://queerfemsee.wordpress.com/>; <https://simonaramona.wordpress.com/> <https://poetrybody.wordpress.com/>; <https://localgoddesses.wordpress.com/>.

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## NOTES

1. As none of these works have been translated into other languages, all quotes from them in the article are the author's own translations from Romanian.
2. Ștefănescu is the author of *Legături Bolnăvicioase* [*Love Sick*] first published in 2005. This *bildungsroman* of two faculty colleagues, who enter in a lesbian relationship, was made into a movie, *Legături Bolnăvicioase* [*Love Sick*], by Tudor Giurgiu in 2006. See also Dima (2016).
3. This term is usually used to represent persons who had a high social status and power under the Ottoman Empire; its etymology is related to the Phanar quarter (modern Fener), an area in Constantinople. Although these persons had different origins, they were mainly regarded as Greek descendants. The quote in Istrati's novel represents a reference to the author's and his character's Greek origins.
4. Possibly due to Mihail's introversion and his intellect, but this might also provide a hint as to the character's sexuality.
5. One of them includes Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's remark about the Guantanamo hunger strike in 2005: "They are going on a diet to get press attention." (55)
6. "The results show that 95% to 98% of Roma in Spain, Portugal and Slovakia are covered either by the national basic health insurance scheme or additional insurance [...]. In contrast, only 45% of Roma in Bulgaria and 54% of Roma in Romania indicated that this is the case. The situation is worse with regard to access to clean drinking water through a connection to a water supply system with public access. EU-MIDIS II results show that, with the exception of the Czech Republic and Spain, the share of Roma living in households without tap water inside their dwelling is much higher than for the general population [...]. For Roma, this ranges from 10% in Greece to 67% in Romania. Regarding Roma persons who live in households without a toilet, shower or bathroom inside their homes, the rate ranges from 25% in Portugal to 65% in Bulgaria and 82% in Romania." (FRA 2016, 33)  
According to the Public Opinion Eurobarometer from 2015, 42% of the Romanian respondents declared that they would feel uncomfortable if they were to have an LGBTI+ colleague at work, and 43% of them would feel the same toward a Roma person (Special Eurobarometer 437, 2). When it comes to considering that LGBTI+ individuals should have the same rights as heterosexual people, 54% of the respondents totally disagreed, moreover, 69% think that non-heterosexual relationships are wrong and that same-sex marriage should not be allowed throughout Europe (Special Eurobarometer 437, 3).  
In a more recent study conducted by Pew Research Center, "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe" (2017), 85% of the young



Romanian adults interviewed consider that “homosexuality should not be accepted by society.”

7. This pun refers to the way some gay men define their sex-role preferences, in terms of active, passive or versatile.
8. Most significantly, Article 200, §1, of the 1968 Romanian Criminal Code stated: “Sexual relations between persons of the same sex are punishable by imprisonment of one to five years.” §2 dealt with homosexual relations with a minor or by force, establishing higher penalties than for heterosexual relations with a minor or heterosexual rape. Finally, §4 penalized “inciting or encouraging a person to practice” the acts described in §1 with 1 to 5 years imprisonment.

Instead of repealing the Article 200, Romanian politicians made several modifications to it. For example, in 1993, as the Council of Europe advised the Romanian authorities to end the imprisonment of LGBTI+ persons, the Romanian politicians changed the first paragraph of Article 200, using the same sintagm as in its previous version (from 1936) which stated that same-sex relationships were to be punished by prison if they caused “public scandal.” One year later, after more international pressure, the Romanian Constitutional Court admitted that some parts of Article 200 were breaking the provisions of the right of private life, but decided to maintain the sintagms “public scandal” and “public sex acts.”

In 1996, Article 200, §1 was amended to punish homosexual acts “committed in public, or if causing public scandal” with 1 to 5 years imprisonment. At the same time, a clause was also added to the last paragraph, to punish “inciting or encouraging a person to the practice of sexual relations between persons of the same sex, as well as propaganda or association or any other act of proselytism.” The Article kept this form until it was repealed 2001 (Human Rights Watch 1998).

9. The term is still debated in literary circles and refers to Romanian literature published around the year 2000 and later. Ovidiu Nimigean (Nimigean and Stănescu 2006, 179) claims that such terms use superficial classifications and he considers the term to be strictly related to chronology. For writers such as Cristina Nemerovschi, Gabriel Dalis, and Ștefan Manasia, this literary period is characterized by naturalism, neorealism, hyperauthenticity, and exploration of the virtual environments (*Revista Cultura* 2011).

## SAMMANFATTNING

Rumänska litterära skildringar av queera personer är sällsynta och de få kritiska texter som faktiskt diskuterar dem, avfärdar ofta diskurserna som rör sig kring författarens eller personernas sexualitet. Fortfarande visar det rumänska forskarsam-

fundet nästan inget intresse alls för att studera queera aspekter inom humaniora och det finns bara ett ytterst begränsat antal artiklar skrivna i ämnet av rumänska forskare. Merparten av dessa är dessutom publicerade utomlands, inte i Rumänien.

Jag kommer därför att presentera och analysera en rad litterära verk med början i Panait Istratis *Adolescența lui Adrian Zografi* [*Adrian Zografis ungdomstid*] och samtida verk av Ioana Baetica Morpurgo, Cristina Boncea, Ana Maria Sandu, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi och andra.

Jag diskuterar mekanismerna med vilka queera berättelser konstrueras och hur stereotyper av icke-normativa sexualiteter fungerar i texterna, vilka till största delen är skrivna av heterosexuella personer.

Primärkällornas minnesrelaterade värde är mycket viktigt för denna artikel. Samtidigt kan de litterära personerna som jag mött i min forskning, läsas från ett queert perspektiv (i vissa fall framställs deras sexualitet enbart i undertexten). Genom samspelet mellan dessa fragment – av liv och litteratur – avser jag att nyansera lokala uttryck av queerhet. Analysen är nära förbunden med vår lokala historias sociopolitiska och rättsliga kontexter och utförs med hjälp av en feministisk ansats och litteraturvetenskapliga perspektiv.