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Felicia Mihali Beyond the Pleasure Principle

Felicia Mihali was born in Romania in 1967. She has a BA from the University of Bucharest and an MA in postcolonial studies from the University of Montreal. Since 2000 she has been living in Canada. In 2003 Mihali travelled to China and this voyage is the substance of her book *Sweet, Sweet China*. Mihali's books cannot be separated from her condition as a nomadic subject, an expat in the globalizing world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Without ever forgetting her Eastern European roots, Mihali is both a citizen of the world and an individual who used to live in a totalitarian regime, then found the taste of freedom and even dared to start a new life as an immigrant.

With *The Darling of Kandahar*, her 2012 novel, Felicia Mihali proves that she is becoming more and more Canadian. This is the first novel she wrote in English, a literary enterprise that is not quite easy for someone who started writing in French. Mihali shows the literary world that Nancy Houston is not an exception. The ease with which this female writer dares to move from French to English points to her cosmopolitan personality eager to feel the world all over the world.

Felicia Mihali is one of those contemporary writers whose works are increasingly attracting the literary critics' attention. Her migrant identity has often been an element that helps the critic construct a comparative exercise or inscribe her in wider contemporary tendencies. For instance, in her 2008 book, the Italian scholar Gisèle Vanhese draws an interesting comparison between Felicia Mihali and another Romanian author who wrote in French, namely Panait Istrati, the vagrant with leftist ideas. Vanhese's aim is to point to the existence of a Francophone literature by Romanian writers. This corpus of texts has its own history, its own traditions and proves the existence of a Romanian diasporic literature in-between and against the narrow limits of nations and nationalities. Another comparative frame also constructed by

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Vanhese makes use of certain traditional, folklore structures from the Balkans (the haunting brother) as they appear in the work of Felicia Mihali and Ismail Kadare¹. In the same spirit, Mahy makes a comparison between Mihali's *Sweet, Sweet China* and Amélie Nothomb's *Stupeur et tremblements*. Both are considered "intercultural novels" (34) that render very well "the feelings of the wandering, the floating and the instability typical of the contemporary traveller" (34)². Another literary critic who has commented on Mihali's writing about China is Éloïse Brière. She considers Mihali "one of the new voices that transforms the literary discourse of Quebec" (227)³.

Gabriela Iliuță also finds that the comparative exercise is the most adequate in order to define Mihali's literary personality. Iliuță compares Matei Vișniec and Felicia Mihali and finds that both writers "reject the totalitarian identity discourse according to which the individual must belong (at least, in his soul) to only one motherland. They denounce this totalitarian identity myth and claim their right to a decentralised identity which is no longer part of a national typology" (684)⁴. In a very inspiring interview, Steiciuc succeeds in convincing the reader about Mihali's dedication to the French language which has become her second mother language. Consequently, identity problems create a sort of in-between space that is shared by Mihali's novels and influences the construction of her fictional selves, according to Daniela Tomescu.

Mihali's work has also been evaluated by Jean Levasseur in his overview of Quebec fictions. Levasseur comments on Mihali's 2007 novel *Confession pour un ordinateur* which he sees as a quest for freedom, namely for sexual freedom in post-Ceaușescu Romania, "the symbol of the quest of a whole people for a new ascertainment of itself" (186)⁵. The Romanian researcher Carmen Andrei focuses on woman in Felicia Mihali's fictions. Andrei genderizes her approach relying on well read bibliography and nuanced understanding of the text. Another gendered reading of Mihali is offered by Efrastia Oktapoda, who analyses power relations and their impact upon gender the novel *Dina*. Another critic interested in the female presence in Mihali's novels is Mariana Ionescu who focuses on woman as victim of history. Finally, last in this paragraph, but certainly not least is Yannick

¹ See Vanhese's 2009 article.

² "les sentiments d'errance, de flottement et d'instabilité propres au voyageur contemporain"

³ "une des nouvelles voix qui transforment le discours littéraire de Québec".

⁴ Matei Vișniec or Felicia Mihali "refusent le discours identitaire totalitaire selon lequel tout individu doit bien appartenir (du moins dans son âme) à une seule patrie. Ils dénoncent ce mythe identitaire totalitaire, revendiquant le droit à une identité décentralisée, qui n'est plus enchaînée dans une typologie nationale."

⁵ "le symbole de la recherché de tout un peuple pour une nouvelle affirmation de lui-même".

Preumont who takes the notion of family novel and applies it to the study of Mihali's fictions.

Undoubtedly, the most dedicated literary critic to Felicia Mihali is Neli Ileana Eiben. Her articles could easily make up a whole monograph dedicated to the Canadian-Romanian writer. Eiben deals with Mihali as her own translator in *Le Pays du fromage* (2009), she compares Mihali and Tsepeneag as writers who translate their own work (2013), she practises "illustrative criticism" in analysing *Le Pays du fromage* (2013), or finds meaning in the encounter of the author, the translator, and the editor in *Le Pays du fromage* (2009 and 2013). An interesting comparison between Mihali and Marie-Claire Blais as writers of the countryside is drawn by Eiben in an essay published in Brno, in 2007. Finally, in her 2018 article Eiben focuses on the French version of *The Darling of Kandahar* in order to "measure" the fictionality of the text, the authorial borrowings from reality and finally, the strategies of narrativization through paratextual elements. Eiben does not mention Brian Bethune's review of 2012 but, in fact, she develops in a much more sophisticated way, abrupt, but accurate statement "Art imitates life."

The Darling of Kandahar, this most recent novel by Mihali, is inspired from a real incident. Kinga Ilyes, a Hungarian-Canadian young woman who was born in Romania, has her photo appear on the cover of *Maclean's*, a magazine that is seen by Sergeant Christos Karigiannis, a Canadian soldier in Afghanistan. The young man is fascinated by her beauty. The two young people exchange letters through the magazine which finds, in this in-between position, an excellent opportunity for a kind of journalistic *Reality* show. The lack of actual presence and physical contact increases the erotic tension within the couple. Desire is inevitable but brutally forbidden by the reality of war. Karigiannis is killed in Afghanistan and is buried as a hero. The journal sends a reporter to Kinga to find her reaction to this tragedy. Bethune writes down concisely and abruptly the end of this love affair *in nuce*¹. "The young woman, shocked and saddened, withdraws from the public eye".

Five years later, Mihali resumes the story changing names. Kinga becomes Irina. Christos becomes Yannis, a Greek variant of John² and the magazine becomes *Maclear's*. And this time it is Mihali who is visited by the reporter after the publication of her novel. The cycle resumes. It is this repetition that inspired my approach to the *The Darling of Kandahar*. The problem of Eros and Thanatos has already been dealt with by Rita Graban in

¹ In a nutshell.

² Is this a reference to John the Baptist? We doubt. The Biblical John was a revolutionary, a revolted spirit against authority and royal abuse. Yannis becomes a soldier as he believes in the righteousness of the cause he represents in Afghanistan. His absurd death becomes an indictment of war as a solution to political problems but Yannis is rather the sacrificial lamb than the vociferous and radical insurgent against Herod.

an article published in 2010 but from quite a different perspective. Firstly, Graban uses *Le Pays du fromage* and *Dina* as the literary material for her analysis. Secondly, she deals with the wording of love and how love and the avoidance of death by love sends us to the original union of man and woman. According to Graban, the couple is a failed attempt to reconstruct the initial androgynous human being¹.

Our approach relies on Freud's well known essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* from two points of view. On the one hand, we use Freud in order to understand the affair between Irina and Yannis. Secondly, we analyse the other two narrative threads of Mihali's novel which are literally beyond the pleasure principle in the sense that they sometimes encompass the erotic story, sometimes interfere with it creating a complex perspective and a narrative that moves freely from the present to the colonial past of Canada creating connections, associations, a whole network of events and meanings.

For Freud, death is "the termination of individual development" (41), while Eros is "the preserver of life" (46). Life is nothing else but the fight between these two principles that clash violently. The erotic climax reminds one of death. The pleasant calm brought about by the appeasement of the senses is a kind of premonition of death in our unconscious. As we are afraid of death, we want to avoid death. Consequently, hardly had we satisfied ourselves and our senses with sex, that we need again that irritating itch that leads to copulation. In this respect, we behave like drug addicts. In Freud's words, "[w]e thus reach what is at bottom no very simple conclusion, namely that at the beginning of mental life the struggle for pleasure was far more intense than later but not so unrestricted: it had to submit to frequent interruptions. In later times the dominance of the pleasure principle is very much more secure, but it itself has no more escaped the process of taming than the other instincts in general" (57).

The struggle for pleasure and the avoidance of death is much stronger with Yannis (he is on the battlefield), but it haunts Irina as well. The interruptions created by the span of time between letters increase the tension of the erotic. The feeling that love can protect you against death becomes even more overwhelming. Unfortunately, war does not allow the two lovers to get more secure about their possibility to find pleasure together and, consequently, tame their fear of death. The absurdity of war does not allow them to grow

¹ "Au cours de cette analyse, nous espérons avoir démontré que pour les narratrices de Felicia Mihali, l'amour et la prise de parole se présentent comme des espaces privilégiés, témoignant du difficile processus de reconstruction de l'union originelle. Le détachement du négatif et du fini n'est possible que par l'amour ou par la parole/l'écriture" (Grabban:71).

completely and fully together. The erotic story must end tragically in order to preserve its tension and appeal.¹

Initially, Irina's best friend was Marika. As Irina grows up, they separate, they take distance from the women's bonding or the lesbian continuum, in Adrienne Rich's terms². In the absence of a father, Irina experiences no complete Electra complex. For the first time she has sex with Henry, but it is not the great revelation of her body, it is much more "shame, religious shame in the face of sin" (62). The media which facilitates her relationship with Yannis becomes a kind of symbolic father and the mother is afraid of these changes. "She was detaching herself from me, her child. I was blossoming, I did not belong to her anymore" (48). The daughter betrays the mother and starts asking questions that would bring her into the symbolic vicinity of Freudian theory. "Do human beings ever understand what they do for pleasure or by force of habit? ... Do we ever know what we deeply love?" (57).

To this erotic script, Mihali adds a second and even a third layer which add meaning to the Freudian kernel of this fiction. One such layer is the story of immigration and the accidents of integration, another layer is a story of post-immigration and globalization. Yannis, a Greek-Canadian, an immigrants' son, fights Canada's wars. The three stories do not interweave like the threads of a fictional carpet, they are constructed palimpsestically.

Irina is the daughter of Transylvanian immigrants to Canada. Her mother is Romanian and her father is Hungarian. Of course, Dracula cannot be absent³. Mihali expresses here the Romanians' annoyance at their being associated with "the character imagined by the Irish writer Bram Stoker" (7). Irina is a convincing voice in this respect, even with a touch of humour. "My parents had always thought the Dracula story was nonsense. ... The day before they separated, there was only one point they still agreed on, and that was that Vlad the Impaler ended up not as a vampire, but in the hands of the Turks" (11).

As immigration does mean an automatic rebirth of a new self, as "immigrants always bring their problems with them", Irina's parents also bring with them their Transylvanian identities. The Romanian province is presented as a kind of multicultural heaven without having experienced multiculturalism as a state policy. "In Transylvania, people were no too worried about

¹ Can you imagine Romeo and Juliet in the old age, full of rheumatisms and artroses and nagging each other? Horrible! Shakespeare must kill his characters in order to save their love. And so must Mihali.

² See Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian existence".

³ Let us not forget this is a book written for a North American readership. But it is Mihali's merit that she is able to get distance from stereotyping Eastern Europe, and from stereotyping in general.

metaphysical differences. All they knew for certain was that every Romanian family considered a Hungarian lad was a good choice for their daughter” (10).

Fighting stereotypes, even Western stereotypes, is an important issue in this layer of the novel. Irina’s mother wants to educate herself just for the sake of studying. Unlike the Canadians, she does not want to get a good job as the prize for her education. For her, education is just developing her human potentialities and home is no oppressive space. On the contrary! Without mentioning them explicitly, Mihali argues against the radical feminists of the West. “All my mother wants is to be educated, stay at home, and dedicate herself to her work. Isn’t that wonderful? When you think that women in other parts of the world are forced by their men to stay at home and are unhappy about it” (13). Coming from Europe, a continent maybe too much concerned with its history, Irina is also very aware of the Canadian future-oriented view of the world. “Ancestors and the past are dangerous, for they make you look back, and people here are always looking ahead. Memories are just B-movie plots” (15).

The Freudian pattern is influenced by the new way people conceive their personality in the twenty-first century. “As individuals we’re not much more than a bunch of connections with others” (14). We are no longer coherent wholes but webs contacts, networks.

Soon after immigration, Irina’s parents get divorced. The couple does not resist the many changes. Irina remains with her mother who soon gets a boy-friend, Pierre. Humour spices these adjustments to the new Canadian life. “In Quebec, the need for a male partner is clear, especially in winter, although there is no entrance here to clear of snow, since we live in an apartment block” (17). Life in the new country is based upon individualism. Freedom has a price to pay. “I found my mother’s presence and my father’s money reassuring. In Quebec many children expect no more than that” (24). Irina and her mother look down upon the North America standards of respectability. A house in the suburbs is not their dream. “In our small family, we despise people living on the outskirts, those green suburbs with tiny yards and a wooden patio where the neighbours stare at you in the swimming pool. The biggest problem with these houses is that they remove you from downtown, the kingdom of theatres, art galleries, libraries. A house in the suburb means a life of slavery” (25). We feel this is not only Irina’s feelings but the author’s as well.

Community life is not idealized and the standard immigrants who are eager to get “heavily into debt with their big homes and their two cars” are presented as pathetic beings. The concentration on material wealth suggests a poor spiritual life. The immigrants’ possible previous frustrations might explain their materialistic philosophy. Irina (and, implicitly, the author) deplores the lack of true ideals in North American society. “Why were people’s standards so low? They naively trusted the propaganda of the

consumer society that turned them into slaves in a cycle empty of value and personality” (66). Paradoxically, in this materialistic society even food seems to dematerialize. Mass production makes food cheap but a surrogate. Everything seems more or less to become a simulacrum. “Food was kept far from the sense of smell and the sense of touch: it was nothing more than images printed on paper boxes” (73).

Life within the immigrant community is not very easy as the pressure to conformity is much bigger than outside the group. “An immigrant community is a sort of enlightened socialist world in which a human being dedicates himself to the community’s interests while the community itself takes care of protecting us, keeping us on the right path, and giving our voice authority” (27). Irina and her friend Marika think with nostalgia of the first immigrants to the New World and their community: “the brave men and women linked together in a genuine congregation, where people called each other sister and brother, where rules were unwritten, and where there were neither records nor saving accounts” (41). And they achieved a lot, these first Canadians when you think that Montreal, for instance, exists because of “the devotion of a soldier and a nurse” (44). The Canadian experiment with immigration does not seem to be too successful. Not much of an Adamic return to paradise!

Religion is very important for keeping Irina in touch with her Eastern European roots. The mother is extremely conservative, in this respect. Religion is something too important to accept any “hybridization” (28). The absence of the iconostasis which makes transubstantiation visible to the believers secularizes the whole ritual, with important existential effects. The mother abhors these changes in Canadian Orthodox churches. Under these circumstances, preserving the few objects brought from the previous country is very important. They are the material signifiers of old memories and these recollections are very important for the children of the next generation. “For those who arrive with their entire fortune packed into two suitcases, children’s memories are all that matter” (31). Irina’s integration story, as well as her mother’s, have a historical background. Irina, the narrator, feels comforted to find out that other Europeans who had immigrated to New France long before them, experienced the same hardships and asked the same questions. They try to understand the Jesuits’ zeal and the “need to implant a piece of France among the Natives” (34)

As the exchange of letters between Yannis and Irina begins, the love story insinuates into the immigration story. Irina becomes a student. Higher education is a must in order to get a good job in the new country. “For most, the department was a transit stop between their native country and the new one” (52). Subtle irony accompanies Irina’s description of the university system and we feel the authorial approval of this attitude, too.

Multiculturalism is the buzz word in Canada. At the university, Irina has a “huge number of classes on racism, colonialism, and hyphenated identities” (52) but theory is one thing and reality is another. They do not always overlap. “This country was not multicultural enough to allow them [the students] to forget their parents’ suffering and humiliation” (52). As the erotic story between Yannis and Irina has a tragic end, Irina feels the need to give a happy end to the story of the first immigrants to Canada, a story that she stages with several friends. The New World cannot miss the happy-end.

The third story in *The Darling of Kandahar* is about post-immigration and the duty one has towards the new homeland. Yannis, an immigrants’ son feels he has the duty to show his gratitude and love for Canada by going to fight in Afghanistan. The story gets global and colonization is seen as an event of the past but also of the present. The heroic ideals and dreams of Yannis are cruelly contradicted by reality. Afghanistan is “a nightmare” (81) for Yannis. On the other hand, because of the media, for Irina and for many other people, Afghanistan is a “mirage” (81). Hypocritically, the Canadian society refuses to treat its soldiers like warriors. These young men and women are over there to do good, to help. But Yannis, the actual participant, screams,

“We are not ‘social workers’ ”(98). He wants society to recognize they are there in order to impose a certain order.

Yannis realizes that the conflict in Afghanistan is a kind of symbolic war between the East and the West. The East does not want to be helped on the West’s terms. “What is good for us is not good for them, that’s what a good soldier ends up understanding” (84). Actually, the West is still there in that Asian country because of “the shame of being so powerless” (84). At moments, communication seems impossible, “we will never know the truth about them” (84).

Orientalization is not a mechanism of power; it is a manifestation of epistemic defeat. The only thing that this country offers to foreign soldiers is the strange beauty of the desert. “Behind its usual dryness and dull colours, one autumn morning the desert thrills your heart with a fresh and amazing face” (85). Still, gradually Yannis comes to a more comprehensive understanding of the Afghan people. Because foreigners usually came as conquerors, the Natives learned centuries ago “to distrust anything that comes from the outside world” (87). On the other hand, “their ability to survive is unequalled” (87), “their endurance is just a form of survival” (103). The West calls them barbarians. Yannis thinks they “are simply afraid to long for things they are taught to despise. While staring at us, their eyes reflect hate and nostalgia at the same time” (87).

Each side has something to give to the Other, each side experiences nostalgia, but they are different nostalgias. The Western modernity and even postmodernity have their paraphernalia of machinery but they have lost

contact with nature surrounding us and with the nature that lies deep in us. On the other hand, the glorification of the apparently simple Afghan has some notes that naturalize him to the level of basic biology, even basic instincts, which is a problematic compliment. “We trust numbers and maps; they only trust their instinct. Their intuition is their own and it’s their best weapon. Their human skin is just a thin layer that hardly hides their terrible ancient being, ready at any moment to come out. Sometimes, I think even deaf and blind people feel our presence. We are woven out of doubt; they are woven out of passion” (89). The Western “doubt” comes from the lesson of the Enlightenment and its compulsory exercise of reason. The Natives’ “passion” comes from a remote time that is before the beginning of recorded history.

Slowly, Yannis realizes that lessons could be taught and learnt reciprocally. The West can unlearn the zest for accumulating things, the source of so many artificially created neuroses and frustrations. Yannis believes, therefore, that “[t]he contact with them should cure us of nostalgia and uproot our soul’s neurosis. We should learn how to start a new life, without useless desires” (88). With his mind’s eyes, Yannis sees himself more and more in Canada, during a post-war cleansing period. The end cannot be far away and it will not be a Western victory, in the military sense. Whereas the Canadians’ motivation is vague and diluted, the motivation of the locals is clear and strong. “We are losing the final battle as we steer clear of what motivates their hatred and their actions” (101). In fact, “Canada continues the British invasion of their territories” (102). It is not the first time in history that Canadians are asked to shed their blood for imperialisms that did not belong to them. They merely want to belong to a certain circle of power and this is the price they are asked to pay.

In spite of so many differences, there is, however, a common point between Canada and Afghanistan: their ethnic diversity. However, in Canada society wants to be inclusive – it needs new labour force to maintain its prosperity which relies on the enthusiasm of the newcomers who want to buy houses, cars, send their children to the university. In Afghanistan “nobody thinks it is important to live and build together. ... Nationality and identity have no great value. What matters is to eat and be warm” (104). Paradigms are completely different. The friendship that bonds Rasul, the Afghan, and Yannis, the Greek-Canadian humanizes the entire story and reminds us that we all are human beings.

The woman problem is not absent from Mihali’s novel. Yannis tells Irina some awful stories about female subordination and oppression, including the custom of *zina*, namely the wife’s obligation to accept sex with her husband in all possible forms. Yannis realizes that the solution to the woman problem, which is fundamental in levelling the gap between the Western culture and the Afghan culture, can only come from inside the Afghans

themselves. “The harsh reality is that we came from afar just to watch them through sunglasses, as we can do nothing. And the truth is that women must liberate themselves before they can free themselves from the tyranny of man” (110).

The epistolary exchange and the romance end up abruptly. The media announces that “Corporal Yannis Alexandridis died in a bomb blast while he and two other soldiers were on a mission to provide food to a garrison in a nearby village” (118). Canada does not mourn for long. It is eager to resume the Freudian cycle of quest for pleasure, climax, closeness to death and again quest for pleasure.... Canada is afraid of death. But for Irina there is no afterwards. She does not think she will ever be able to love anybody else. She becomes a kind of nun in memory of the man with whom she never actually made love. Irina’s mother gives the story a more global meaning connecting the past and the present. “Her firm conviction is that the effects of war and migration on the human species are ways the past imposes itself on the present” (122). It is another way of thinking and accepting life and history beyond the pleasure principle. Enveloping the whole novel in a kind of frame story, Freud’s essay can add new meanings to a rich novel that is not only about Canada, but about all of us.

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