

## HOMELAND IN ROMANIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE WRITTEN IN THE DIASPORA

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### Abstract

Romanian children's literature has always been situated at the crossways of cultural ideologies. The Romanian texts for children lack innocence due to the implicit level of cultural, social, and historical knowledge they mirror at different epochs. In this paper I investigate how literary texts for children written in Romanian communities living abroad present the idea of homeland. I examine literary works written by three contemporary Romanian writers living in Romanian communities in Serbia: Ana Niculina Ursuleanu, Radu Flora and Slavco Almăjan. My selection includes books published in between 1970 and 2010: *Cu Soarele-n Creștet* [With the sun on the head], (2006); *Soare, Bună Dimineața!* [Sun, good morning!], (1998); *Cărățile Nilului* [The paths of the Nile], (2008); *Piticii au Uitat să Crească* [The dwarfs forgot to grow up], (1987); *Pianul cu Păienjeni* [The piano with spiders], (1991); *Când Vine Primăvara* [When spring comes], (1970). In my analysis, I focus upon the role of settings in building the image of an eternal Romanian homeland that transcends the national borders. Thus, I discuss three main types of settings that shape the fiction imagined by the proposed authors, related to the following environments: landscape, family, and school. My analysis considers the theory of landscape proposed by Mitchell (2002, p. 5) in *Landscape and Power*. According to it, landscape implies the interaction between the human, the natural, the self and the other. For each novel, I analyse the role of settings within the literary texts. I explore Radu Flora's novel in connection with two elements of setting, landscape and school, respectively. In Ana Niculina Ursulescu's books I look at the bond between family and landscape, while in Slavco Almăjan's literary work I highlight the importance of landscape in building the image of childhood. These functions are classified according to a sophisticated range, from the purpose of clarifying the conflict or its function as a symbol (in *When Spring Comes* by Radu Flora), to the task of mood intensifier attributed to setting (in *Balul Strugurilor* [The party of grapes] by Slavco Almăjan).

My conclusions validate the idea that literary texts constantly build and convey an image of the Romanian identity and a sense of belonging to the Romanian homeland as marked by borders. I focus on nostalgia and irony as the main feelings the authors transmit about the image of homeland. On the one hand, the image of homeland in the literary works written by these three writers implies nostalgia, a feeling conveyed through an adult's perspective of childhood. On the other hand, sometimes, as it happens in the case of the novel *When Spring Comes*, the narrator adopts a humorous perspective on history and human interactions among characters. As a final remark, I show that the selection of these three settings (landscape, family and school) creates the image of homeland in connection with a nationalist ideology. More precisely, children's books reinforce the idea of unity between the two Romanian speaking communities (in Romania and Vojvodina) that share common cultural values. The representation of homeland reiterates a history-oriented ideology and legitimates the assimilation of nation to childhood.

**Keywords:** childhood; ideology; idealised image; patriotic feelings; nationalism.

### 1. Introduction

Artists mirror the cultural trends of the epoch they live in. While surrealist artists as Salvador Dali are preoccupied by the horror installed by war in artworks like *Guernica*,

contemporary artists such as Marina Abramovich question today's topics related to gender, feminism, body, sexual orientation, or boundaries between public and artist during a performance. Literature is also open to the spiritual voice of the era it belongs to. In this context, writing for children cannot remain an innocent gesture. It always has a purpose, and it is always the result of an aesthetic wish. Therefore, children's literature has always been situated at the crossways of cultural ideologies. Creating the image of a peculiar space or time implies the author's desire to convey a message. For instance, the main character in *Fram – The Polar Bear*, the novel written by Cezar Petrescu, is still regarded as a very beloved hero of Romanian literature for children. But he also stands also for a voice of the alienation, the core feeling that the cultural trend of *Sămănătorism* theorizes. The Novel *The Dance of the Bear* masterfully discusses the question of liberty and childhood against the background of the Second World War. At the same time, the novel for children written by I. D. Sîrbu skilfully suggests a criticism against the politics of the Soviet Union. In my paper I will look at literary ways of representing the homeland, and their possible effects upon the children intended as audience. My selection includes literary texts written by authors belonging to the Romanian speaking community living in Vojvodina (Serbia): Radu Flora, Ana Niculina Ursulescu and Slavco Almăjan. These books, published between 1970 and 2010, are the following: *When Spring Comes* by Radu Flora, *With the Sun on its Head* and *Christmas is Coming* by Ana Niculina Ursulescu, as well as *Pianul cu Păienjeni* [The piano with spiders] and *Piticii au Uitat să Crească* [The dwarfs forgot to grow up] by Slavco Almăjan.

In what regards the literary space and its significance in Romanian children's literature written outside the borders of Romania, several important topics need to be considered: a possible national ideology disclosed within the texts, the authors' intention to preserve or to construct a national identity with the help of literature, especially by means of the story's settings, and, last, but not least, a feeling of nostalgia that dominates the stories/literary texts. There are three main settings that build up the image of homeland: family, school and landscape. Settings matter because they are the core cultural instruments for constructing a story with meaning. Choosing the settings for a story is never an arbitrary operation. Settings could be related to nationalistic feelings the characters express, or they could refer to imaginary or exotic places where the protagonist lives. At the same time, settings could connect the protagonist to the memory of the place where he/she was born or educated, and in this way become an agent of creation of the image of childhood. Additionally, meaning in children's literature is a cultural construct. The literary texts discussed here reflect a sustained message of devotion for the Romanian cultural heritage.

For my analysis, I employ several theories regarding the status of children's literature, and the importance of choosing the settings in a literary text for children. Stephens (1992, p. 8) argues that "A narrative [for children] without an ideology is unthinkable." He further assumes that both authors and child readers share a set of social and cultural values:

Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some social-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience. These values include contemporary morality and ethics, a sense of what is valuable in the culture's past (what a particular contemporary social formation regards as the culture's centrally important traditions) and aspirations about the present and future (Stephens, 1992, p. 3).

The children's literature texts convey a message for the readers of all ages, no matter the country they live in. The role of the children's literature created by the writers belonging

to the Romanian community in Vojvodina mainly consist of the storage of several landmarks of Romanian culture (religious rituals for Easter and Christmas, together with various cultural elements incorporated within the mainstream culture). The stories and the poems written in Romanian by writers of diaspora in Vojvodina help the children readers integrate themselves within the Romanian mainstream culture and develop a sense of belonging to a cultural space outside the geographical borders.

In a story, landscape used as a setting is crucial. For Mitchell (2002, p. 5), landscape lays on the crossway between the human, the natural, the self and the other: "Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other." The relationship between humans and the external world begins in childhood. It is the culture that mediates this meeting: "Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 5). It is by culture that land changes itself into landscape: "Landscapes are at once geographical and historical, natural and cultural, experienced and represented, and present a spatial interface between human culture and physical terrain (...). The interaction between geography and human culture transforms land into landscape" (Carroll, 2012, p. 2). The relationship between humans and the external world begins in childhood. In this respect, the literary texts in my selection create a cultural representation of childhood as a defensible space and time. The literary imagery also links the idea of a secure and ideal childhood and the creation of Romanian identity.

In a literary text written for children, Lukens (1999, pp. 159-169) identifies five types of settings, and, with them, five functions of settings: setting that clarifies the conflict; setting as antagonist; setting that illuminates the character; setting as mood and setting as symbol. The first type of setting may refer to time, and space of the action. In other cases, setting acts as an antagonist that opposes the protagonist and makes the conflict believable. The third function of the settings in the list above implies the example when the character is overwhelmed by the environment. Settings can be described in a sentimental way, giving too much importance to emotions, and thus having an influence upon the mood of the character. Finally, once the settings in a story or a poem are repeated and emphasized, they become symbols, and they can act both at the literal and the figurative level of meaning.

## 2. Landscape and School in *When Spring Comes*

*When Spring Comes* is a novel published by Radu Flora in 1970 at *Libertatea* Publishing House<sup>1</sup>. The author is a prominent personality of Romanian culture in Vojvodina, and, probably the most popular amongst the writers mentioned here. He is both a writer and an academic figure. He taught Romanian language and literature at the universities of Belgrade and Novi Sad, and he made an important contribution to Dialectology by studying the Romanian language spoken in ex-Yugoslavia. He also founded (in 1962) the *Association of Romanian Language in Vojvodina*, the most important organisation for promoting Romanian language and culture in Serbia. Radu Flora published several books at *Libertatea* Publishing House: *Capcana* [The trap] (1978), *Vârtejul* [The vortex] (1980), *Zidul* [The wall] (1983), *Copilăria din Amintiri* [The childhood from memories] (1983).

The novel *When Spring Comes* reconstructs the life in a boarding-school in Vojvodina. The main character is Bujor Bogdan, a young boy whose father dies when he is in the 4th grade in high school. There is not much information about the place and the time of the action. Still, the reader finds out the birthplace of the main character (Bujor Bogdan is

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<sup>1</sup> Several books I include in my article are published by Libertatea Publishing House. This is a publishing house established by the Romanian community in Vojvodina. Libertatea Publishing House proves the high interest of the community (writers, intellectuals and audience) in publishing books written in Romanian.

born in the village called Văleni) and is given suggestions about the time of action probably the interwar period.<sup>2</sup>

Radu Flora's story insists upon two settings: school and landscape. School is a prominent institution in a child's evolution. It should be understood as an outdoor space, opposed to the inner space of home. Life of the young Bujor Bogdan in the boarding-school goes according to certain rules concerning the religious habits. Describing the whole school ritual, Radu Flora builds up a religious identity, which demands the pupil to be a good Christian practitioner. In the morning, when having breakfast time, Bogdan and his colleagues must thank to the Lord for the food, make the sign of a cross in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and say the prayer: "Mulțumim, Ție, Doamne, că ne-ai săturat de toate bunătățile Tale, cerești și pământești, acum și pururea și în vecii vecilor" (Flora, 1970, p. 16)<sup>3</sup>. The same prayer is repeated after lunch time (Flora, 1970, p. 148). The author also recalls the ritual of Lent and Confession. For example, both teachers and pupils observe Lent and make their confession (Flora, 1970, p. 213). For the young adolescent in high school, Lent is an incentive to understand the meaning of life. He goes through changing moods. In high school, Bujor Bogdan lives the Lent days as ordinary days, with no feelings of guilt, but, instead, with a strong desire to become a forgiving person (Flora, 1970, p. 212). While being a child, on the contrary, he relates the idea of sin to the ordinary facts: fighting the other boys, eating the forbidden jam or sausages, or quarrelling with his cousin, Neli.

The rituals observed in school shape the religious identity of the main character. However, school life influences the adolescent by other means, too. The official curriculum builds up the cultural identity and a sense of belonging to the other country (Romania). In the high school where Bujor Bogdan studies, reading the book *România pitorească* is mandatory. The book authored by Alexandru Vlahuță is listed in the catalogue of the high school's Romanian library, which contains 2000 titles. The main purpose of selecting the bibliography for children and adolescents is to construct the image of an ideal country, Romania: "România a devenit pentru copii, de fapt, o Românie pitorească. O țară în flori, unde curge, cum s-ar zice, lapte și miere" (Flora, 1970, p. 98)<sup>4</sup>. The image of Romania is far away from being neutral. The country is evoked as an idealised land, or, even more, as the promised land. Mentioning this book creates the perception of Romania as a biblical paradise, where all individuals can have the life and the fulfilment they desire. By introducing this religious element (the land of Canaan that God promises to Abraham) the description assumes the idea that the Romanian children living outside the Romanian borders build up a relationship of noble descent with the inhabitants living inside the Romania's borders.

The second important setting in Radu Flora's novel is that of the landscape. The author mentions three elements in connection to landscape: a river, a town, and an island. Several place names are mentioned in the story: Văleni, Belgrade and Cladova. Cladova suggests duplicity. This is because Cladova names both a place in Romania and another in Serbia. Additionally, in the novel, Cladova, the Serbian place, is the destination for the pupils in Bujor Bogdan's class. They decide to take a two-day trip on the Danube River to Cladova and to have a stop in Belgrade. This journey is a pretext to revisit a cultural, nation-related leitmotif: the idea of a national and cultural limit, which is both material, or visible, and

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<sup>2</sup> Mozor (2020: 40) argues in favor of the interwar period as the time settlement for the novel's action. He also notices that there is no place named Văleni in Serbia and that Radu Flora probably creates the name by taking Vălenii de Munte, the place in Romania, as reference.

<sup>3</sup> 'We thank you, Lord, for you have fed us with all the spiritual and earthly goods, now and forever, Amen' (Translation mine).

<sup>4</sup> 'In fact, for children, Romania became a picturesque country. A country in blossom, where milk and honey flow' (Translation mine).

invisible. The description of the town reveals a poor place, resembling more a village than a town, and preserving an oriental atmosphere (Flora, 1970, p. 275) Cladova connects with the Romanian town situated on the other side of the Danube River, Turnu-Severin. The Serbian town mirrors the Romanian place and stands as a symbol for the material and visible border. In this way, a physical journey to a Serbian destination turns into an imaginary visit to a Romanian place: “De altfel Cladova era aproape. Pe malul celălalt se arătau în zarea străvezie formele oraşului Turnu-Severin” (Flora, 1970, p. 275)<sup>5</sup>.

During the trip, the ship named *Sava* goes to the Ada-Kaleh island. The island situated on the Danube, whose name means *the fortress of the island*, was situated between Drobeta Turnu-Severin (15 km downstream) and Orşova (9 km downstream). In 1970, when the Iron Gates 1 hydroelectric plant started to function, the island disappeared under the waters of the Danube. The island was inhabited by a Turkish population, and it seemed to have the appearance of a town with a small power plant, textile and cigarettes factories, a school where pupils were taught up to the fourth grade, and a cinema for watching the newest films. A part of its heritage was moved to the inhabited island of Şimian, 14 miles downstream. The plan of the relocation was led by Professor Constantin Nicolaescu-Ploşor, a well-known archaeologist and ethnographer. In 1968, when he died, the plan was abandoned, and the survivors of the island moved to Turkey or to Romania. The island was always the border for two civilisations. It has been claimed by the Ottoman Empire and the Austrian Empire. The latter built a fortress on the island in 1689, but the island was controlled by the Turks until the First World War. In 1923, the island became part of the Romanian territory.

The teachers that accompany the group of pupils evoke the topic of the island in their debate. Mister Iovan Bumbici, the teacher in history, and Mister Ion Pleşoianu, the teacher in natural sciences, argue over the possession of the island. It is the teacher in Romanian language, Miss Sofia Pleşoianu, who resolves the historical matter, by saying that the island belongs to the Turkish heritage:

Înspre stânga se profila o insulă. Domnul Bumbici a ieşit iarăşi din muţenia sa: Ada-cale! Tu su bile beogradske dahije. Aici erau dahii. Domnul Pleşoianu a înţeles aluzia: –Spune-i, te rog, Sofia, că acu insula este a noastră. (Flora, 1970, p. 274).<sup>6</sup>

The island of Ada-Kaleh stands for the idea of intercultural exchange. When evoking the image of the island that does not exist anymore, the novel (published in 1970, the same year when the island disappeared) supports the idea of a cultural bridge between nations. It is only the cultural heritage that makes the communication possible between different civilisations. Radu Flora uses the image of the lost Ada-Kaleh also for arguing in favour of the cultural dialogue of the communities that share the same origin, but are located in different territories. The island, the home of a Turkish population separated from their native country, becomes the symbol of a duplicity-based existence: distinct territories, united due to sharing the same culture. The teacher’s debate over the Ada-Kaleh hints at an allegorical discussion about the relationship between centre and periphery, and between the Romanian community in Vojvodina and the Romanian community in the country of origin, Romania, respectively.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘However, Cladova was close. On the other riverside, within the transparent horizon, the silhouette of Turnu-Severin was visible’ (Translation mine).

<sup>6</sup> ‘There was an island to the left. Mister Bumbici interrupted his silence again - Ada-cale! Tu su bile beogradske dahije. There were the Dacians. Mister Pleşoianu understood the allusion: -Tell him, please, Sofia, that the island is ours nowadays’ (Translation mine).

The study trip includes another key landmark: the Danube River and the Danube's Cauldrons. The third element of landscape is the Danube River, which is evoked twice, in contexts related to the scenery. First, the river is mentioned at the beginning of the travels, when describing the specific wind that whistles at the place where the river Sava joins the river Danube. The Danube is but a pretext to suggest the idea of union. The confluence of the two bodies of water is an allegorical one, recalling the idea of another meeting, both cultural and national, between the two Romanian communities, which are separated by being placed in distinct countries.

Secondly, the Danube functions as a decorative element in the landscape design. It acts as a character that interferes with the scenery. The author uses personification to create a dramatic moment of the encounter between the river and the natural obstacle – the Carpathians Mountains, at the entry of the Danube's Cauldrons. The sequence precedes the evocation of the island Ada-Kaleh and reveals the image of the river as a hostage, caught by the natural gutter formed by the cliffs. The image of the Danube as a captive also has an allegorical function. It recalls, through implication, a different image of captivity – that of the Romanian speaking communities living abroad:

Și iarăși vaporul și-a reluat lunecatul ușor deasupra apei liniștite a fluviului care venea din departe, grăbit, dar nu agitat. Intrarea în Cazane a fost acompaniată de uralele elevilor. Dunărea s-a strîmțat dintrodată, iar malurile înverzite și șesurile s-au transformat brusc în rîpe prăpăstioase. Abrupte. Canioanele danubiene închideau fluviul într-un jgiab enorm (Flora, 1970, p. 275).<sup>7</sup>

In Radu Flora's novels, the two predominant settings play different functions in constructing the image of an idealized Romania, and a sense of belonging to it. The landscape elements clarify the main conflict. The mention of the two towns (Cladova and Turnu Severin) in the sequence of the trip mirrors the idea of their relationship and clarifies the main topic of the pupils' visit: that of their becoming aware of the existence of the two Romanian communities and construction of a common heritage.

In the same sequence, evoking the island of Ada-Kaleh underlines the novel's main purpose: the construction of a cultural heritage that could be shared by the two Romanian speaking communities. The Danube River has the function of scenery, and it stands for the idea of border. It represents the background of this trip. The description of the river is neutral from the point of view of the narrator, but it requires the attention of the reader, who is invited to contemplate it. The sequence requires more than contemplation from the part of the readers. It demands a high degree of active emotional participation of the readers who could manifest it through patriotic feelings.

### 3. Family and the Sun in Ana Niculina Ursulescu's Literary Works

Ana Niculina Ursulescu is a very talented writer, actress and editor. She was born in 1957 in Urzin. Since 1985, she has been working for Radio Novi Sad, where she prepares the Romanian broadcasting for children and youth. In her books, the most important settings for constructing the image of homeland are family and landscape. *Cu Soarele-n Creștet* [With the sun on the head] is an autobiographical short-stories book. The story *Washing the Fleece* commemorates a sad event in the main character's childhood – the day when Ana was almost

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<sup>7</sup> 'And again the boat easily slipped over the calm waters of the river, which arrived calmly from far away, fast, but not exactly in a hurry. Its entry in the Danube's Cauldrons was met with cheers by the pupils. The Danube suddenly got tight, and the green sides and the plains suddenly turned into steep cliffs. Abrupt cliffs. The canyons of the Danube enclosed the river into a gutter' (Translation mine).

about to drown. All the peasants in the village are gathered on the Timiș riverside to wash the fleece. It is very hot and the heat creates an optical illusion: the child sees the dwarfs at the root of the suspended trees on the riverside. The child (Ana) tries to cross the river, but she falls, tripping over the roots. She is about to drown in the fleece surrounding the trees. The child is saved by Cea Ghiță to the great joy of Nana, the child's grandmother.

The story underlines the presence of a landscape element – the Timiș river. The river stands as a symbol for the border. It rises in the Cernei Mountains and joins the Danube River in Serbia. In the story, Timiș acts as a character that opposes the main character (Ana the child). The name of the river is used as a metaphor for sadness and relief. It describes the feeling of relief the grandmother Nana experiences when Ana is saved from drawing to the deep waters of Timiș: “un Timiș de lacrimi” (Ursulescu, 2006, p. 21).<sup>8</sup>

The story *Misterul din Soba Mare* [The mystery from the big stove] reveals a malefic side of the Timiș river. This time the river acts as an evil force that influences the life of the village's inhabitants. On Easter Day, the child crosses the Valley together with her friend, Viorica, in order to visit her aunt. This is the moment when she remembers the Valley, and she associates crossing the river with a feeling of pleasure: “În Vale, pe timpuri venea de inundau apele Timișului. Atunci să vezi veselie!”<sup>9</sup> Finally, the inhabitants build up the fence to protect themselves against the flooding river.

The story about the Timiș River in *Cărările Nilului* [The paths of the Nile] reveals an opposite dimension. The Timiș river is revealed as a protective character that helps the community, but also as a wise instructor that teaches the child to free herself of the fear of water. The book is a diary type of journey, and develops a river mythology that is explicitly linked to birthplace and personal identity:

Noroc în Timișul lângă care mă născusem și care, cu toate că avea treabă până peste cap când spăla lâna femeilor din sat, ba chiar și picioarele vacilor pe care Moș Sima Văcariu le mai lăsa, cu dinadinsul, scăpate în valuri, mai găsea vreme, acest Timiș al meu, să-mi legene verile încă destulă vreme și să mă dezbrace, săracul, cât de cât, de frica bezmetică ce mă cuprindea dacă mă lua, în vreo barcă prăpădită, vreun pescar...

Noroc în Timiș, că se dăduse de ceasul morții să mă facă să prind drag de apă, taman atât cât să mă pregătească pentru captivanta, seducătoarea, fascinantă întâlnire de neuitat cu sufletul Nilului...

Se prea poate că mă amăgeam, cu bună știință!’’(Ursulescu, 2008, p. 68).<sup>10</sup>

The very deep relationship between the child (that is the author and at the same time the character) and the river Timiș is created by the use of personification (the river as instructor) and of words related to possession (possessive adjectives – my Timiș).

The second important landscape element in the design of homeland representation is the sun. The celestial body is evoked in the title of the eponymous story. The setting element is portrayed as a positive and powerful character that is invoked by the child Ana during hard times. It is the sun that the child Ana in *De la Oaie se Trag Toate* [Sheep causes everything] (a story included in *Cu Soarele-n Creștet* [With the sun on the head]) invokes when she is almost about to get drowned and cannot breathe:

<sup>8</sup> ‘one Timiș river of tears’ (Translation mine).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Long time ago, the Timiș river flooded the Valey. What a joy!’ (Translation mine).

<sup>10</sup> ‘It was a chance that the river Timiș- where I had been born, even if it was very busy washing the fleece/ wool of the village women and even the foot of the cows that Moș Sima the Cattleman allowed on purpose to bath- my river Timiș had time to cradle me during summer and to free me of the terrible fear I was experiencing when a fisherman took me in his humble boat. I had the chance with Timiș that desperately tried to make me love water so that I could be prepared for the charming, captivating, exciting, and unforgettable meeting with the soul of the Nile’ (Translation mine).

O ultimă viziune (...) Nu pot să respir. Miroase a oaie, a umezeală, a ploaie...Și încerc din rășputeri să ajung cu nasul la aerul rece din cameră. Ceva greu, străin, mă apasă. Ceva care face să doară plămânii. Mă doare că nici măcar soarele pe care mi-l închipui nu poate să-mi ajute” (Ursulescu, 2006, p. 18).<sup>11</sup>

In *Cu Soarele-n Creștet* [With the sun on the head], the sun is the symbol of both the natural and cultural family. The description of the cousin Marinică (the main character’s cousin) incorporates a mythology of the sun. First, the sun is mentioned in order to highlight the small physical size of the child – Ana’s cousin is small in height: “Verișorul meu cel cu soarele-n creștet era mic de tot, așa de mic că nu aveam ce face cu el” (Ursulescu, 2006, p. 48).<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the sun acts as a mythical deity that has supernatural powers and causes the freckles: “Soarele, pentru că e soare, ca să nu se dea bătut, lasă sulițele lui lucitoare să cadă ușor, pe obrajii acestui pui de om. Din fiecare vârful de suliță, se naște un pistrui” (Ursulescu, 2006, p. 48).<sup>13</sup>

The image of Ana’s cousin bathing in the sun creates the perfect opportunity for a retrospective moment. Watching the sunny portrait, the child Ana remembers the main character in Ion Creangă’s stories and the figure of her mother - the storyteller. The sun illuminates the past and coagulates the cultural heritage via a reference to the eternal fame of the national storyteller, Ion Creangă:

Râdea soarele în creștetul lui și mie îmi amintea de copilul din poveștile lui Ion Creangă, pe care mamei îi era permis să mi le povestească de mai multe ori. De câte ori voia. Avea privilegiu mare, moșul Creangă, dar asta pentru că îl iubeam nespus.<sup>14</sup>

The book *Soare, Bună Dimineața!* [Sun, good morning!] concentrates upon the sun as a sacred topos as well. Ana Niculina Ursuleanu clearly associates the sun to the image of childhood. The childhood is made of sunpieces:

În zilele copilăriei desprindem mari cioburi de soare și le rânduim frumos, lângă noi. Cum de putem? Și cum se țin, oare, ele de noi? Și cum ne ținem noi de ele, până la adânci bătrâneți? Simplu! Ne uităm în apele copilăriei, ape ce se zămislesc în palme de copil și se preling pe cioburile noastre de soare. (Ursulescu, 1998, p. 48)<sup>15</sup>

Within the Romanian culture the image of childhood is associated (at least for the period of classics) to the idea of perfect time and space, the gold epoch of human development. The representative book for this approach is the autobiographical volume of short stories *Memory of My Boyhood*, written by Ion Creangă.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘A last vision (...). I cannot breathe. It smells like sheep, like moisture, like rain. And I do all my best to reach the cold air in the room with my nose. Something hard, strange, puts a pressure on me. Something that make my lungs hurt. It hurts me that not even the sun that I imagine cannot help me’ (Translation mine).

<sup>12</sup> ‘My cousin, the boy with the sun on his head, was very small. He was so small that I could not do anything with him’ (Translation mine).

<sup>13</sup> ‘The sun, because it is the sun, in order not to give up, leaves his spears to fall step by step on the cheeks of this small creature. A freckle is born in every spear’ (Translation mine).

<sup>14</sup> ‘The sun was laughing on his head and this reminded me of the child in the stories of Ion Creangă, stories that were allowed to be told many times by my mother. As much as she wanted. Father Creangă had a great privilege, that is why I loved him so much’ (Translation mine).

<sup>15</sup> ‘During childhood, we take pieces of glass and we arrange them next to us. How is that possible? And how do they follow us? And how do we follow them until we grow old? Easy! We look at the waters of childhood, waters that are born in the hands of children and trickle down on our pieces of sun’ (Translation mine).



#### 4. Childhood and Landscape

Slavco Almăjan's books deal also with the image of homeland. His biography is similar to that of Ana Niculina Ursulescu. He was born in 1940 in Vârșeț and he is a radio editor for Radio Novi Sad. He has an impressive collection of books and literary prizes. He is a translator and a filmmaker, too. His two children's books, *Pianul cu Păienjeni* [The piano with spiders] and *Balul Strugurilor* [The party of grapes], imagine a possible home / homeland by underlining the importance of landscape.

There are two elements of landscape that recurrently appear in his books: the river and the town. The story *Afion* [Opium] recalls the image of the Caraș River. Originating in the Anina Mountains, the Caraș River runs through Banat for 50 km and marks the Romanian-Serbian border. In Slavco Almăjan's story, the Caraș river shapes the author's childhood and stands for a cultural bridge between the two Romanian communities:

Nimeni nu știe unde și când dispăre copilăria himerică! (...) Apele Carașului au lăsat amprenta lor precum fosilul în argilă. Aci mi-am revăzut fața în apă și nu o dată m-am identificat cu scurgerea neoprită a râului: aici am cunoscut misterul celuilalt mal (Almăjan, 1991, p. 9).<sup>16</sup>

In the story *Gheața* [The ice], the river is frozen and becomes the place where children of the village skate: "În iarna aceea a înghețat Carașul. Era o mare bucurie pentru viscolul de dimineață. Carașul a înghețat noaptea, pe liniște și pe furiș și pe neauzite"<sup>17</sup> (Almăjan, 1991, p. 9). The river acts as a fabulous creature whose powers can predict the future: "Carașul era înghețat și sub geana lui am găsit o potcoavă de cal și o mărgea. Va fi o vară lungă și caldă, a spus bunicul" (Almăjan, 1991, p. 25).<sup>18</sup>

In the story *Exercițiul Imperfect* [Imperfect exercise], the river functions as an agent to illumination. The Caraș river is the instrument of desire. It helps the child to imagine a moment of unity between the people populating the two Romanian communities, separated by the Caraș river.

Era duminică; era cald și era vară. Lumea se ducea la Caraș. Eu încă nu văzusem Carașul, dar mi-l închipuisem ca pe un desen pe nisip. La noi în curte era o movilă de nisip iar eu eram cel mai mare desenator în nisip dintre toți copiii din strada noastră. 'Trebuie că râul este un desen', zisesem de mai multe ori. 'Nu poate fi altceva decât desen.'  
Îmi închipuisem că există multe mese și scaune, de o parte și de alta a malurilor și că femeile, oamenii și copiii beau sucuri din păhărele făcute din scoici. (Almăjan, 1991, p. 17)<sup>19</sup>

The second landscape element is the town. The book *Piticii au Uitat să Crească* [The dwarfs forgot to grow up] the town as an incentive for fantasy. In *Balul Strugurilor* [The

<sup>16</sup> 'Nobody knows where and when the chimeric childhood disappears (...) The Caraș River made its mark as the fossil on argil. Here I saw my face on water and more than one time I identified myself to the eternal tickling of the river: here I knew the mystery of the other riverside' (Translation mine).

<sup>17</sup> 'During that winter, the Caraș river got frozen. It was a great joy for the morning snowstorm. The Caraș river got frozen during nighttime, quietly, secretly, and silently' (Translation mine).

<sup>18</sup> 'The Caraș river was frozen and under its waters I found a horseshoe and a bead. 'It will be a long and hot summer', my grandfather said' (Translation mine).

<sup>19</sup> 'It was Sunday. It was hot and summertime. People went to Caraș (to take a bath), but I imagined it like a painting on sand. In our garden there was a sand heap, and I was the greatest painter on sand amongst all the children in our street. The river must be a painting, I was telling myself many times. It can be nothing but a painting. I imagined that there were a lot of chairs and tables, on both sides of the river, and that women, people and children drank juice in shell glasses' (Translation mine).

party of grapes], the town creates the mood for non-rational side of life. It gets asleep and, in this way, it opens itself to a non-rational experience. The town is also associated with the idea of celebration. The grapes take the power over the town and turn the ordinary day to a celebration. Life in the town becomes similar to life in a circus:

Într-o zi-n Vârșețul beat/Adormiră toate drumurile din Banat/Strugurii ieșiți la plimbare/Făcuseră din ziuă sărbătoare/Deasupra de oraș o parașută/Se făcu văzută apoi nevăzută/În acest oraș cu vis modern/Gînditor se-nalță un munte cu joben<sup>20</sup> (Almăjan, 1987, p. 22).

The similitude relies especially on the fact that both circus and town imply the idea of living in a chaotic style. But the chaotic style of living is only a superficial characteristic. Actually, both living in a town, or a circus requires discipline and a set of daily routine operations. It is this regular procedure that the fantasy imagined by Slavco Almăjan desires to break.

In Slavco Almăjan's literary works, the settings representing the homeland have specific functions. For instance, the Caraș river, that marks the border between the two countries Romania and Serbia, plays distinct roles in the stories. In *Exercițiul Imperfect* [Imperfect exercise], the river illuminates the character. For the child, the Caraș river is a drawing, and it thus becomes an instrument of desire. It helps the child to imagine a joyful moment of union/unity between the people populating the two Romanian communities separated by the river. Secondly, the river is a symbol for both memory and homeland. It stores the childhood of the character and the whole knowledge about the existence of the other riverside. Thirdly, the river is a sanctuary, where village people can make predictions about the summer.

As far as the second element of landscape, the town, is concerned, representing the urban space has a particular role. This role refers to the mood it calls forth. The image of the town of origin, Vârșeț, in *Balul Strugurilor* [The party of grapes], is associated with the idea of escaping the real world. The town is the land of fantastic experiences.

In his literary texts, Slavco Almăjan creates an idealized image of Romania. The common element of this representation in *Exercițiul Imperfect* [Imperfect exercise] and *Petrecerea Strugurilor* [The party of grapes] is imagination. The child imagines a moment of union between the two Romanian communities, while the poem reinforces the idea of breaking the rules of the visible world by sleep and alcohol. In addition, the image of an ideal Romania also appears as the result of the recall of the child's memories in *Afion* [Opium].

## 5. Conclusions

Radu Flora, Ana Niculina Ursulescu, and Slavco Almăjan emerge from the Romanian speaking community in Vojvodina. Their works have an intrinsic value due to the cultural context they belong to. The books in my selection are autobiographies, except for *Piticii au Uitat să Crească* [The dwarfs forgot to grow up] and *Cărățile Nilului* [The paths of the Nile]. Therefore, the representation of homeland is based on books that deal with autobiography, not with fantasy. The three authors attempt to link the image of childhood to the image of homeland. In this process settings are important. The most important recurrency in creating the image of homeland is that of landscape, family, and school.

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<sup>20</sup> 'One day in the drunken Vîrșeț / All the ways in Banat got asleep / The grapes walking turned the day to a celebration / A parachute over the town / Became seen and then unseen / In this town with a modern dream / A mountain with top hat is rising in meditation' (Translation mine).

The literary landscape supports the idea of belonging to a homeland both by horizontal and vertical elements: rivers (Timiș and Caraș), islands (Ada-Kaleh), and towns (Vârșeț), respectively, as well as a solar system component (the sun). Elements of landscape that focus on the idea of border are privileged, which is the case of the two rivers, Timiș and Caraș.

The family is the representation of homeland on the smallest scale. The stories depict characters in their relationship to family members. Ana Niculina Ursulescu even uses photographs of her family to document the stories and to create a feeling of authenticity. Radu Flora imagines a character that experiences the saddest moment of a family crisis – the death of his father. The novel can be regarded as a bildungsroman that mirrors the growth of Bogdan Bujor, the main character. Family is also the smallest social unit to preserve the tradition. Some stories recall traditions related to Christmas and Easter (Ana Niculina Ursulescu) or the death ceremony (in Radu Flora's novel, the scene of the death of the father with the cry of mourners).

In his school life, the character in Radu Flora's novel experiences an important marker of religious and cultural identity of homeland. This setting creates a bridge for the individual to connect to eternal values of the national heritage: religious values (faith, obedience to religious habits) that create an ideal religious practitioner, as well as cultural values (history, literature) that ask for an ideal supporter. In the novel the setting of school shapes the relationship of the individual with the major culture (in Romania). This relationship is depicted in terms of power between a minor and a major culture, respectively.

The literary image of homeland reveals two main traits as far as the historical time is concerned. First, it created by memories. The stories are remembered from the adult perspective. Thus, the image of the homeland is associated with the idea of a past life which the communities shared at a certain moment in their history. Secondly, the image of homeland is a stable one. Surprisingly, the texts have no reference to the future. The stories create an immobile picture of homeland, that focuses on the past.

The writers reinforce the idea of belonging to a major culture (Romanian culture in Romania). Nation is assimilated to childhood. Describing childhood becomes a way/a tool to imagine a national identity. Constructing the image of homeland implies both nostalgia (conveyed by an adult perspective of childhood events) and irony (the humorous perspective of the narrator when it comes about talking about the Ada-Kaleh island and possession in Radu Flora's novel). By using elements of landscape as settings, the stories construct a reader that is aware of the importance of the national heritage.

Given the selection of settings (landscape, school, family) in these works, it results that these literary texts do not imagine a possible country but describe a real one. The depiction of this real and unique country (Romania) highlights two main traits. The first major trait is associated to the idea that the Romanian cultural communities are separated and, at the same time, united. The other characteristic deals with a center-periphery relationship within the same culture (Romanian culture). Children's literature written by these three authors living in the Vojvodina community strongly assumes a history-oriented ideology. The core element of this ideology consists of the nostalgic idea of the existence of a possible moment of union between the Romanian community in Vojvodina and the origin country, Romania.

Their books stand for a testimony about the cultural values that the two Romanian-speaking communities share: religious and cultural rituals for the Christmas and Easter, the perception of childhood as the golden age of human development, the importance of imagination and fantasy for breaking the daily routine, a sense of communion between human beings and nature.

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