

LIZOANCA, WOUNDS AND CRUEL REALITY¹

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Abstract

Physical and mental aggression constantly inflicted on an individual at any age is associated with the concept of torture. Torture, in its inherent sense, refers to the physical suffering caused by repeated aggression. While from the 13th to the 17th century torture used to serve the church or the army, it was later adopted for private situations as deliberate suffering inflicted by one person on another. The deliberate infliction of physical or mental suffering on an individual, especially a child, extends far beyond the public sphere and may be explained by inhumane impulses that are either pathological or hereditary.

Doina Ruști's novel, "Lizoanca at 11", is a very good example in this sense. It follows the destiny of a child, wounded both by her parents and by Romanian society after the communist period; this child's trauma is connected to those experienced by the other heroes. By repetitively returning to the age of 11, they relive their own unhealed wounds, affording us to talk about a rather serious problem: the persistence of trauma across generations and its social implications. Starting from the theoretical references offered by Cathy Caruth, we intend to underline that trauma is not understood as a wound inflicted on the body, but on the mind. It is not an event that, like a wound, heals over time, but something that imposes itself, repeatedly, returning to the brutal event which provoked this trauma and maintaining it.

Whether read for the first time or revisited, the story of the 11-year-old girl in Doina Ruști's best-known novel, continues to shock its readers. It is a story that transcends realism and naturalism, fitting into the genre of childhood trauma literature, a field that is attracting increasing attention from researchers today. Viewed through this lens, Doina Ruști's novel offers profound insights. The narrative is realistic, with vivid characters and a portrayal of poverty and lack of education intertwined with corruption, selfishness, and neglect. This creates an atmosphere that drives Eliza to run away from home and become a prostitute. The novel aims to present the characters' actions and behaviours from an external perspective, without delving into psychological interpretations or explanations. This objective, almost camera-like focus, gradually reveals the unfolding events, with the characters portrayed as neither entirely positive nor negative. The emphasis is placed entirely on the transformations in the child's psyche, shaped by her interactions with a predominantly adult environment. This allows readers to trace the thought processes of the novel's central female protagonist. In its third re-edition, the novel introduces a significant addition, concluding the previously 'indecisive' open ending with an epilogue where hope no longer has a place, and Lizoanca's 'mute scream' fills every space.

Keywords: Doina Ruști; Lizoanca; trauma literature; childhood trauma; post-communist society.

1. Trauma Literature

Physical and mental aggression constantly inflicted on an individual at any age is associated with the concept of torture. Torture, with its meanings, refers to physical suffering

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caused by repeated aggression. If from the 13th to the 17th century torture was used by the church or by the army as an instrument supposed to make people confess the truth under extreme pressure, it was later adopted for private cases as well, becoming a suffering deliberately inflicted by one person on another (Marchedon, 2021, pp. 188-193). The deliberate infliction of suffering, especially on a child, transcends the public sphere. It may stem from inhumane impulses, which are either pathological or hereditary. In Romanian literature, “the effects of existential traumas on large communities”² have often been investigated (Ilie, 2022, p. 74). The analysis of individual destinies, particularly in the context of what is termed trauma literature—or, in this case, childhood trauma literature—is gaining increasing interest.

Generally, “after enduring traumatic episodes, both verbal and especially physical”, victims “may experience states of depersonalization, accompanied by a sense of lost identity. They become vulnerable, inert, and may undergo a metamorphosis.” (Chiciudean, 2023, p. 382). Thus, when tracing the sufferings or fears of infantile identities, quite numerous in Romanian literature, one can discover that they are “captured in their transformations or decompositions due to the unfavourable impact of adult alterity, finding themselves in borderline situations, their attitude often generating chaos and self-destruction” (Chiciudean, 2023, p. 380). In this respect, besides Doina Ruști’s *Lizoanca la 11 ani* [*Lizoanca at the age of eleven*], the novels of Radu Aldulescu, Ioana Nicolae or Doina Ruști are revealing. Generally speaking, through her prose, Doina Ruști ranks among the writers in whose work we discover images “of the external, historical and cultural determinations that have influenced the imaginary explored by the authors /.../ authors who reveal an ideology rooted in the motivation to draw inspiration from the brutal reality of the times they are living through” (Marchedon, 2023, p. 178).

The aforementioned theme is approached with a fair amount of imagination, with the more or less explicit aim of shocking the audience, either to raise alarm or to inform new generations—who are far more vulnerable and exposed to various temptations. In fact, literature generally legitimizes itself as a container of experiences, including traumatic ones, and can be interpreted, in C. Caruth’s terms, as a return to the brutal event that produces trauma. (1996, p. 3).

Our analysis will focus on Doina Ruști’s *Lizoanca la 11 ani* [*Lizoanca at the age of eleven*], the most representative novel in this respect. As already mentioned, the main character’s trauma begins at the age of 11, the author attempting to follow the destiny of a child wounded both by her parents and by the Romanian society, socially and morally transformed after the communist period.

2. A Novel in its Third Edition

The republication of the novel *Lizoanca at the age of eleven* (Ruști, 2023), as well as its translation into numerous foreign languages, becomes a living proof of its narrative value. Its literary and documentary quality has been confirmed by many critics, including Antonio J. Ubero who wrote in the Spanish daily newspaper *La Opinión* that, although “painful”, heartbreaking and “uncomfortable”, it reveals

the corruption of an entire society, weighed down by a terrible past that has morally degraded it. /.../ Ruști transforms her work into a fierce critique of depravity and moral

² All translations in this paper belong to us.

decay. Beyond its documentary value, it is a novel with remarkable literary qualities.³ (Ubero, cited in Ruști, 2023, pp. 275-276).

Doina Ruști's activity as a writer is intense. Being constantly connected with her readers, with their expectations, she has written numerous novels of a great variety and novelty. "Ever since her debut in prose in 2004 with *Omulețul Roșu* [The little red man], the word most often used in connection with her novels is vigour"⁴ (Radu, 2009), underlines Tania Radu, while Nicolae Breban states that "In my opinion, the certainty, the mastery of portrayal, the exact and original description of the environment, the pursuit of a subtle crescendo in the epic with a false air of static situations, make of Doina Ruști a first-rate prose writer of the current literature"⁵ (Breban as cited in Ruști, 2023, p. 272).

Whether read for the first time or re-read, *Lizoanca at the age of eleven* continues to shock. It is the story of an 11-year-old girl that fits not into realism or naturalism, but into the literature of childhood trauma—a field that is increasingly drawing the attention of researchers and offering surprising insights.

3. A Construct Dominated by "Wounds"

Following the theoretical and applied research emerged after Cathy Caruth's initiative and having in mind Doina Ruști's novel, Emanuela Ilie notes that literature is a favourable ground in "exploring the unspeakable, in representing, through words, the constitutive wounds, be they individual or collective"⁶ (2022, p. 74).

Having as a starting point a news item read in a newspaper (Ruști, 2023, p. 7) and being primarily concerned with the message she would convey, the author confesses: "At the time, I never imagined that this novel would become my well-known work or be translated into so many languages. /.../ I simply wanted it to be read and to connect with readers."⁷ (Ruști, 2023, p. 7).

The image of *Lizoanca*, the 11-year-old girl living in a small village called Satul Nou, is built against the backdrop of the corrupt Romanian society, transformed in the last decades of misunderstood freedom. The young girl inadvertently comes to the core of national public attention, under the accusation of spreading a disease. The novel thrives on "a cruel and heartbreakingly present reality in Romanian society"⁸ (Boldizar, 2020), namely the fact that "an 11-year-old prostitute /.../ has spread syphilis throughout the entire village"⁹ (Boldizar, 2020). First, the girl's age shocks, since "the age of 11 /.../ 'is one of awakening lucidity' and the justification for this statement will leave you stunned after encountering *Lizoanca*"¹⁰ (Boldizar, 2020). Equally shocking is the world in which *Lizoanca* moves, a "chilling, agitated

³ Original text: „corupția întregii societăți, împovărată de un trecut terifiant, care a doborât-o moral. /.../ Ruști convertește romanul său într-o acțiune furioasă îndreptată împotriva depravării și a decăderii morale. Dincolo de valoarea documentară, e un roman cu extraordinare calități literare”.

⁴ Original text: „De la debutul în proză în 2004 cu *Omulețul roșu*, cuvântul cel mai des întrebuințat în legătură cu romanele ei este vigoare”.

⁵ Original text: „Siguranța, măiestria portretizării, descrierea exactă și originală a mediului, urmărirea unui crescendo subtil al epicului cu aerul fals al stării pe loc, fac din Doina Ruști, după părerea mea, un prozator de primă mărime al literaturii actuale”.

⁶ Original text: „a explora indicibilul, de a reprezenta, prin intermediul cuvintelor, rănilor constitutive, fie ele ale individului ori ale colectivității”.

⁷ Original text: „Nu mă gândeam atunci că va deveni romanul meu cel mai cunoscut, că va fi tradus în atâtea limbi /.../. Voiam doar să fie citit, să mă conectez cu cititorii”.

⁸ Original text: „o realitate crudă și sfișietor de prezentă în societatea românească”.

⁹ Original text: „o prostituată de 11 ani /.../ a umplut un întreg sat de sifilis”.

¹⁰ Original text: „vîrsta de 11 ani /.../ 'este una a trezirii lucidității' și dreptatea pe care o dai acestei afirmații o să te arunce cu capul de pămînt după ce ai cunoscut-o pe *Lizoanca*”.

one, drained by alcoholism, depravity and social frustrations, whose vitality has a profoundly negative meaning, all the more frightening for its verisimilitude”¹¹ (Radu, 2014).

Lizoanca is part of a family in which physical and mental abuse is legalized by a community in which children are frequently subjected to all kinds of aggression. The girl is a victim who defends herself against her father, Cristel, an alcoholic keeping his entire family in terror of verbal and physical abuse. It seems that he “inoculates [the girl] with the morbus of self-destruction”¹² (Ilie, 2022, p. 77). The description of the beatings to which he subjects Lizoanca is significant:

The man’s hand had grasped her ear and a few tufts of her hair and was now pulling her through the holes in the fence /.../ The man jerked the red, tear-soaked head that was struggling in the fence’s hole and quickly administered a fist across her head. Then he clamped her mouth between his fingers, as in a pair of pliers, and finally half dragged her into the courtyard grass¹³ (Ruști, 2023, p. 27).

Lizoanca defends herself the best she can, most of the time without success, “screaming at the top of her voice: - My God, you ox, eat yourself to death, what have you got against me? Damn you and your father and mother together!”¹⁴ (Ruști, 2023, p. 27). One saving method, which sometimes worked, was to feign fainting:

Lizoanca lifted her eyes from the grass just in time to see the sole of the sneaker, as she felt the impact, stopping her breathing without warning. She could not feel her left jaw, but she knew that drool was dripping through the threads of the ivy. Five or six more kicks to go, and if she played dead, she might escape.¹⁵ (Ruști, 2023, p. 27).

Torture generally causes trauma to both the victim and the executioner. In Cristel’s case, one observes obsession and unjustified cruelty, but also a minimal emotion generated by his daughter’s suffering. Although not empathic, he is not a sociopath. Some theory illuminating the fine line between being a sociopath and beating one’s children is necessary for the overall understanding. In this respect, Dr. Bandura’s concept of moral disengagement (2016) explains how individuals justify harmful behaviours to reduce cognitive dissonance. For a parent who beats their child, moral disengagement might occur through rationalizations like “It’s for their own good” or “I’m teaching them discipline”, even though such acts are clearly abusive. Sociopaths may take this further, not needing such justifications due to their lack of guilt and emotional disconnect. Lizoanca’s father exerts his power simply because of the prevailing mentality in Romanian society at the time. As the head of the family, he holds the right over life and death, and thus everyone is expected to obey him.

Thus, Eliza Niță lives in a world which is “creepy, agitated, drained by alcoholism, depravity and social frustrations, with a profoundly negative sense of vitality”¹⁶ (Radu, 2014).

¹¹ Original text: „înfiorătoare, agitată, secătuită de alcoolism, depravare și frustrări sociale, de o vitalitate cu sens profund negativ, mai înspăimântătoare încă prin verosimilitatea ei”.

¹² Original text: „îi inoculează [fetei] morbul autodistrugerii”

¹³ Original text: „Mîna bărbatului îi apucase urechea și cîteva smocuri de păr și-o trăgea acum printre ulucile gardului. /.../ Bărbatul trase c-o zvîcnitură căpăîna roșie, îmbibată de plîns, care se zbătea în gaura din gard, și-i rase rapid un pumn în creștet. Apoi îi cuprinse gura între degete, ca într-un clește, și, în sfîrșit, o trase pe jumătate în iarba din curte”

¹⁴ Original text: „urlînd cu toată vocea: - Dumnezeii mă-tii de bou, mînca-te-ar viermii mort, ce-ai mă cu mine? Fire-ai al dracu’ tu cu ta-tu’ și cu mă-ta la un loc!”

¹⁵ Original text: „Mîna bărbatului îi apucase urechea și cîteva smocuri de păr și-o trăgea acum printre ulucile gardului. /.../ Bărbatul trase c-o zvîcnitură căpăîna roșie, îmbibată de plîns, care se zbătea în gaura din gard, și-i rase rapid un pumn în creștet. Apoi îi cuprinse gura între degete, ca într-un clește, și, în sfîrșit, o trase pe jumătate în iarba din curte”.

¹⁶ Original text: „înfiorătoare, agitată, secătuită de alcoolism, depravare și frustrări sociale, de o vitalitate cu sens profund negativ”.

Her portrait is achieved in full accordance with the plastic atmosphere of the village situated on the Neajlov river, namely “a furious savagery, fled to the coves because of the daily ritual of extermination: beatings, scandals and drunkenness, a mother reduced to the status of an animal through years of uninterrupted fear, a primitive, alcoholic, cruel, resentful father, born of a rape and raised by an unhappy nymphomaniac”¹⁷ (Radu, 2014). In fact, Doina Ruști frequently shocks with mainly plastic comparisons, such as: Cristel’s head twisted by a “rashy wart”¹⁸ (Ruști, 2023, p. 27); Eliza’s eyes, “large and deep”¹⁹, “looked like two holes cut out on paper”²⁰ (Ruști, 2023, p. 56); Gica was a “woman with the face of a fly, rather dirty, with a snout tightly pursed”²¹ (Ruști, 2023, p. 87); Grecu had the face of a “broken snowshoe”²² (Ruști, 2023, p. 127), Nuțica’s hair looked “like a nervous hedgehog, and her face looked like a stretched muslin”²³ (Ruști, 2023, p. 113); Goarne’s palms were “as long as carpet beating paddles”²⁴ (Ruști, 2023, p. 31).

The story is believable, with vivid characters, where poverty and lack of education are deeply intertwined with corruption, selfishness, and neglect. Eliza runs away from home to escape her father’s beatings. Her nickname, Lizoanca—slightly inappropriate, as such augmentative nicknames were typically given to large, tall, or annoying people—was given to her by the other children “for the devil she was. They could have called her Eliza, Eli, or Lizica, but none would have suited her. Lizoanca fit like a glove; she appeared bearish and hard to shake.”²⁵ (Ruști, 2023, p. 45). Thus, in a makeshift camp on the banks of the Neajlov river, together with three other orphaned or abandoned, hungry and unloved children, Goarna, Titoașcă and Nuțica, Lizoanca ends up prostituting herself for “10-20 lei”, for a “croissant” or a pair of pink sneakers, for waffles or for an hour on television. It is the only way these children may survive, and the scenes created by the narrator are compelling: Goarna becomes pregnant, Titoașcă will be abused by “Belgian pedophiles”, while Eliza contracts syphilis and passes it on to those who, she believes, offer her some protection. In the girl’s mind, “Those men were nothing but good hosts who had sheltered her in the cold nights and fed her”²⁶ (Ruști, 2023, pp. 132-133).

The fact that her father beats her and does not care if she goes to school or not, represents the root of her rebellion against him and against the world. Eliza Niță endures three types of abuse and experiences intense emotional turmoil, without receiving any real support from the adults around her. To her father’s aggressiveness and the indolence of her mother – humiliated and molested every day in front of her children –, we can add Eliza’s humiliation and even aggression at school, which she will finally refuse to attend (Ilie, 2022, p. 75). Even more damaging is the authority of adults who believe they are entitled to act as they do, provoking and encouraging the girl’s impulse to flee from home and escape the destructive environment.

Several men in the village benefit from Eliza’s “services”, and things get complicated when the nurse discovers that Lizoanca has syphilis. Aside from the shock caused by the girl’s

¹⁷ Original text: „o sălbăticiune furioasă, fugită pe coclauri din pricina ritualului cotidian al exterminării: bătăi, scandaluri și beții, o mamă redusă la stadiul de animal prin ani de spaimă neîntreruptă, un tată primitiv, alcoolic, crud, resentimentar, născut dintr-un viol și crescut de o nefericită nimfomană”.

¹⁸ Original text: „vînă rîmoasă”

¹⁹ Original text: „mari și adînci”

²⁰ Original text: „păreau două găuri decupate pe hîrtie”

²¹ Original text: „femeie cu fața de muscă, murdăricioasă, cu botul strîns punga”

²² Original text: „șoșon spart”

²³ Original text: „ca un arici nervos, iar fața-i arăta ca o mușama întinsă”

²⁴ Original text: „cît paletele de bătut covoare”

²⁵ Original text: „de-a dracu’ ce era. I-ar fi putut zice Eliza, Eli ori Lizica. Dar nu i s-ar fi potrivit. Pe cînd Lizoanca era ca o mînușă: o arăta ursuză și greu de clintit”

²⁶ Original text: „Bărbații ăia nu erau decît gazdele bune care o adăpostiseră în nopțile friguroase și-i dăduseră să mănînce”

age, there is an intense curiosity about the names of those who exploited the child. Only when the girl arrives at the hospital does the legal issue of sexual intercourse with a minor arise, and an investigation begins.

Lizoanca is innocent; she is “brave, darting /.../ she enjoys the taste of her first croissant with that child’s pleasure, but /.../ she also knows how to fight back when necessary and is cunning enough for things to turn out the way she wants”²⁷ (Bratu, 2015). The girl will be hospitalized for treatment in Brănești, where she will learn about hygiene, wear clean clothes, and hear kind words. Wickedness takes many forms in the novel, and the only acts of kindness and tenderness shown to the 11-year-old are those of Ion Greblă, who buys her croissants, clothes, and a pair of pink sneakers. Eliza Niță learns the meaning of the word prostitute only at the end of the novel, when she questions a teacher about it.

Scenes like the one in the novel's beginning, in which the girl fights her father almost to death, are fairly common. Following a similar confrontation, the girl ends up in a Bucharest childcare centre, disfigured. This final beating, to which she can no longer respond, will have tragic consequences for her understanding of life.

Lizoanca was out on the porch, as usual, just sitting. /.../ It was more than Cristel could bear. This girl had destroyed his life and turned his name to shit all over the village. In two strides, he was next to her and grabbed her by the ear:

- Fucking bandit! Your mother is digging in the garden, and you are gawping on the porch, like in a hotel!

He kept beating her for one hour²⁸ (Ruști, 2023, p. 240).

After a month of hospitalization, the girl ends up in a centre for abused children. The new stages of initiation demonstrate her ability to survive. She is called the Prostitute, but is accepted with sympathy. Therefore, she thinks “her new life was not bad if so many people knew her”²⁹ (Ruști, 2023, p. 248).

4. The Cinematic Technique

Doina Rusti uses the cinematic technique to expose an 11-year-old child's innocence and inability to understand the meaning of sexual intercourse and distinguish between right and wrong, with no intention of moralizing. The author's style is that of the camera, with the narrator rendering what he sees without emotions or feelings, without interpreting or intervening in any way, a technique that feels “more stop-frame/static than unfolding”, as Radu (2014) aptly suggests. The external focus or camera perspective, which seeks to render the facts and gestures of the characters seen from the outside without any attempt at interpretation or psychological explanation, allows for a gradual revelation of events, with the characters appearing neither positive nor negative. In *Lizoanca at the age of eleven*, neither the press nor the society are directly condemned, and the narrator

... has abandoned the positive or hostile character type of writing; he does not moralize or thicken situations, and he does not even have a reversed vehemence that condemns the press and journalists. Lizoanca is a credible character. This absence of pathos, this

²⁷ Original text: „curajoasă, dîrză /.../ se bucură de gustul primului croissant cu acea plăcere de copil, dar /.../ știe să și riposteze atunci cînd e cazul și este suficient de șireată pentru ca lucrurile să iasă așa cum își dorește”

²⁸ Original text: „Lizoanca era pe prispă, ca de obicei, fără treabă. /.../ Era mai mult decît putea să suporte Cristel. Fata asta îi mîncase viața și-l făcuse de căcat în tot satul. Din doi pași fu lîngă ea și-o și săltă de-o ureche:

- Bandita dracu! Mă-ta sapă-n grădină și tu caști gura pe prispă, ca la hotel!

O bătu fix o oră”

²⁹ Original text: „noua ei viață nu era deloc rea, dacă o cunoștea atîta lume”

refusal of exaggeration, together with the tight thread of the story, deprived of useless digressions and philosophizing, bring Lizoanca close to us.³⁰ (Șimonca, 2009).

The focus is on the changes in the child's psyche, triggered by interactions with a predominantly adult environment. This allows us to trace the thought process of the main female protagonist. With an aggressive father and an absent mother, and growing up in an inappropriate social environment, the child is unable to form her own identity. Her surroundings shape her identification with the significant people around her, influencing her perception and acceptance of reality through their eyes. Drawing on the theory that space affects human beings, Vasile Băncilă distinguishes between inherited space and space acquired at birth. Both types of space influence a person's future orientations, character, and ability to make decisions and act in life (Băncilă, 2000, 4).

In Eliza Niță's case, we observe a type of altered personality, a restructured identity shaped by the circumstances of her life and the spaces she inhabits: her parents' house, the streets of Satul Nou, the banks of the Neajlov River, the hospital, and eventually the children's center where she will end up. Each environment leaves its mark on her. When her father demands she serve him, he establishes a specific atmosphere: "If he asks her something or sends her somewhere, it is as if he were throwing a bucket of dirt over her: dirty, humiliated, and above all with no desire to live"³¹ (Ruști, 2023, p. 100). On the other hand, on the banks of the Neajlov, she feels "chilled by the cool air /.../. From there her heaven began. She felt relieved of all burdens"³² (Ruști, 2023, p. 29). Alternatively, when she tastes her first croissant: "First the smell assailed her: it was familiar, warm, reminding her of her grandmother from her mother's side and her childhood days before starting school. As if their black oven had been opened /.../ from which hot waves came out, from the crust of bread or the pastry"³³ (Ruști, 2023, p. 83). Eliza does not choose prostitution; Goarna and Titoașcă prepare her for it. The child, who has become a victim, a stranger in her own world, without her parents' affection or support, will discover adequate landmarks, but only surrogates.

In studies related to trauma, it has been discovered that the deprivations and punishments intensely experienced before adulthood, together with various abuses, produce premature disillusionment, thus leading to the constitution of a false self and the acute experience of feelings of alienation and inner emptiness (Turlic & Măirean, 2024, p. 35). This is also the case of Lizoanca, who cannot adapt to the children's centre:

November had begun, and Lizoanca had not even caught the news. One morning, she breathed in the misty autumn air, and pain flooded her brain as if a raging river had rushed in from all sides and with it, one by one, all the delights of her past life had flooded in. She knew very well these things were not of great value, but they were glued to the walls of her soul, to the flesh of her flesh³⁴ (Ruști, 2023, p. 260).

³⁰ Original text: „a abandonat tipul de scriitură personaj pozitiv/ personaj negativ, n-are puseuri moralizatoare, nu îngroașă situațiile, n-are nici măcar o vehemență pe invers care să condamne oțova presa și ziariștii. Lizoanca e un personaj credibil. Tocmai această absență a patetismului, acest refuz al exagerării, firul strâns al poveștii, fără divagații inutile și considerații filozofante, ne-o apropie pe Lizoanca.”

³¹ Original text: „dacă îi cere ori o trimite undeva e ca și cum ar arunca peste ea o găleată cu zoaie: murdărită, umilită, și mai ales fără nicio dorință de viață”

³² Original text: „înfiorată de aerul răcoros /.../. Din acel loc începea raiul ei. Se simțea ușurată de toate poverile”

³³ Original text: „Mai întâi o asaltă mirosul: era ceva familiar, cald, care îi amintea de bunică-sa dinspre mamă și de zilele copilăriei de dinainte de-a începe școala. Ca și cum s-ar fi deschis cuptorul lor negru /.../ din care ieșeau valuri fierbinți, din coaja pîinii sau din cozonac”

³⁴ Original text: „Începuse luna noiembrie, iar Lizoanca nici nu prinsese de veste. Într-o dimineață a tras pe nări aerul brumat, de toamnă, și o durere i-a inundat creierul ca și cum ar fi năvălit din toate părțile un fluviu înfierbîntat și odată cu el pătrunseseră, una câte una, toate deliciile vieții ei trecute. Știa foarte bine că nu erau lucruri de mare valoare, dar erau lipite de pereții sufletului, carne din carnea ei”

Moreover, memories flood back: “She felt as if someone was holding her to his chest. Moreover, in this embrace entered sunny days and moments of humiliation, the light dust of the alley where her father had dragged her down, caught in the mulberry tree, the policeman’s homely face, the unsteady hands of Greblă”³⁵ (Ruști, 2023, p. 260).

5. “Shocking community”

The excellent prose writer builds her story “around traumatic individual experiences, seen, however, in close connection with shocking community blemishes, whose punctual analysis can be the pretext for other debates on post-traumatic memory”³⁶ (Ilie, 2022, p. 75). As the novel’s central character – the hunted, blamed and equally beloved Lizoanca – builds up, a series of secrets emerge, and the story becomes a chronicle of a rural community. Doina Ruști captures the moral decay of Romanian society immediately after the fall of communism not only through the abuses to which Eliza is subjected. In addition to the drunken father and insensitive mother, we discover that the law enforcement agencies – represented by the policeman Vică – are complicit, feigning authority, the deputy mayor turns out to be a coward who takes profit from the girls belonging to broken families, Titoască himself is cunning. Each character contributes, through hypocrisy or cruelty, to a change of mentality. Moreover,

alongside the prostitute and syphilitic little girl, there are Belgian pedophiles (!), gypsy child marriages, as well as the child-star industry as products of the horrible media industry, the obsession with going to work in Spain. The relations within the rural community, with their summary feudalism, in the process of substituting moral for media references (see the reporting feats, carried out with the efficient and prompt assistance of the villagers), broaden the perspective ³⁷ (Radu, 2014)

The revelation of old events, carefully concealed by the protagonists, leads to a relatively detailed reconstruction of the decadent history of the last few decades. Lizoanca “is the innocent product of this stultified and hardened world – she appears as an aggressive and disobedient savage, who instinctively discovers, at the roughest school of life, what we pompously call ‘moral conscience’”³⁸ (Cernat as cited in Ruști, 2023, p. 279).

The analepses form a complex picture, with most of the characters recalling their own experiences lived at the age of 11, and these memories give the narrative a repetitive aspect, with several discourses evoking the same event. The age of 11 is a binder, creating links between the characters. Theorist C. Caruth explains in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996, pp. 3-4) that in Freudian terms trauma is not understood as a wound inflicted on the body but on the mind. It is not an event that, like a wound, heals over time, but something that imposes itself, repeatedly, returning to the brutal event, in fact, causing the trauma: “trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt

³⁵ Original text: „Se simțea ca și cum ar fi strâns-o cineva la piept. Iar în îmbrățișarea aceasta erau cuprinse zilele însoțite și clipele de umilință, pulberea ușoară a uliței pe care tatăl ei o țirise, prinsă în crăcanul de dud, fața omenoasă a polițistului, mâinile nesigure ale lui Greblă”

³⁶ Original text: „în jurul unor experiențe individuale traumatice, văzute însă într-o strânsă legătură cu tare comunitare șocante, a căror analiză punctuală poate constitui pretextul unor altfel de dezbateri pe marginea memoriei posttraumatice”

³⁷ Original text: „alături de fetița prostituată și sifilitică, apar și pedofilii belgieni (!), căsătoriile țigănești între copii, ca și industria vedetelor-copii ca produse ale oribilei industrii media, obsesia plecării la muncă în Spania. Relațiile din interiorul comunității rurale, cu feudalismul lor sumar, în plină substituție a reperelor morale cu cele mediatice (vezi făcăturile reportericești, realizate cu concursul eficient și prompt al sătenilor) vin să lărgască perspectiva”

³⁸ Original text: „este produsul inocent al acestei lumi abrutizate și înrăite - apare ca o sălbăticie agresivă și nesupusă, ce descoperă instinctiv, la cea mai dură școală a vieții, ceea ce numim pompos «conștiința morală»”.

to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Well, in the case of the novel under analysis, the repetitions are achieved by the heroes returning, one by one, to their own age of 11. The literary dimension of the texts, through the repetitiveness of their content, seem to bear witness to forgotten wounds, which show that individual trauma is integrated into collective social problems.

Thus, the heroes of the thirteen stories of the novel have been humiliated, mocked and marked by physical or mental suffering, yet they do nothing to save Eliza. In the case of the nurse, for example, the desire to appear on TV is stronger than protecting an 11-year-old girl. The retrospectives are easily categorized as forms of gloomy anamnesis. They actualize moments of a major identity crisis experienced several decades ago by today’s aggressors, but they only partially exonerate them³⁹ (Ilie, 2022, p. 86), Emanuela Ilie believes. Their excuses for the horrific gestures that lead to “the 11-year-old girl’s painful exit from childhood”⁴⁰ (Ilie, 2022, p. 86) do not impress, since “the reverberations of traumatic experiences will forever cloud not only her perceptions of corpor(e)ality, sexuality or love (with its many facets), but also her representation of family and even society, thus irreparably damaging her entire subsequent development”⁴¹ (Ilie, 2022, p. 86).

Conclusions

Literature, as a mirror of society, provides unfailingly relevant images also in the case of Doina Ruști's novel, *Lizoanca at the age of eleven*. The destiny of a girl wounded both by her parents and by Romanian society after the communist period is linked by the trauma experienced by the other heroes. As events unfold, each character relives its own trauma, unfortunately unhealed. Perhaps this can explain the indifference or lack of empathy, the inability to listen to the other’s “wound”. Through the so-called camera technique, the narrator reinforces this state of facts, rendering what he sees without emotions and feelings, facts and gestures are rendered without interpretation, everything is revealed gradually.

After leaving her home on the banks of the Neajlov and taking control of her life, Lizoanca began to act like an adult, despite her young age. She made her own decisions, though they were influenced by the principles of the environment where she sought refuge. However, she feels out of her depth when treated according to her actual age once more. This becomes evident in the episode where, after being institutionalized, she struggles to adapt to the new, imposed way of life: “She was fine at school. But as soon as she set foot in the centre, she could not think about her own”⁴² (Ruști, 2023, p. 260). There, she did not have the privacy or the friends she had in Satul Nou, “they were directed like a herd to lunch, to school, to the reading room. Even the showers were scheduled. She was never alone. She never had any peace. No corner of that world was hers alone”⁴³ (Ruști, 2023, p. 260). Furthermore, since in Doina Ruști’s novel the external focus prevails, the camera does not directly render the heroine’s feelings and emotions; we are invited to make use of our own imagination and sensibility:

...there is no coincidence that the 11-year-old girl’s first menstruation coincides with the last appearance of the only man who, although unable to resist the sexual impulses

³⁹ Original text: „ieșirea dureroasă din copilărie a fetei de 11 ani”.

⁴⁰ Original text: „reverberațiile experiențelor traumatice îi vor întuneca pentru totdeauna nu doar percepțiile în privința corpor(e)alității, a sexualității sau a iubirii (cu multiplele ei fațete), ci și reprezentarea familiei și chiar a societății, marcându-i astfel iremediabil în rău întreaga devenire ulterioară”.

⁴¹ Original text: „reverberațiile experiențelor traumatice îi vor întuneca pentru totdeauna nu doar percepțiile în privința corpor(e)alității, a sexualității sau a iubirii (cu multiplele ei fațete), ci și reprezentarea familiei și chiar a societății, marcându-i astfel iremediabil în rău întreaga devenire ulterioară”.

⁴² Original text: „La școală era bine. Dar de cum punea piciorul în centru, nu putea deloc să se mai gândească la ale ei”.

⁴³ Original text: „le ducea cu turma la masă, la școală, la sala de lectură. Chiar și la duș aveau oră. Niciodată nu era singură. Niciodată nu avea tihnă. Niciun colțisor din lumea aceea nu era doar al ei”.

aroused by Lizoanca, had become attached to the girl who had at one point become a kind of community asset (intensely despised but used by anyone without remorse or compassion). Leaving a box of croissants and a pair of green shoes at the gate of the centre, Greblă unconsciously conveyed to the little girl not only his emotional support but also the importance of preserving the few moments of past tenderness in lasting memory.⁴⁴ (Ilie, 2022, pp. 93-94).

Emanuela Ilie views this gesture as a kind of promise that, following the forgiveness of “the many abusers”⁴⁵ (2022, p. 94), there will indeed be “a future after and even beyond the trauma”⁴⁶ (2022, p. 94). However, in this third edition, in *Sfârșitul unui Secret* [The end of a secret], Doina Ruști makes an interesting confession about the ending of the novel’s first edition, revealing that the “undecided” ending was left open at the publisher’s request. The author reveals that she kept the original ending and published it in the present edition as Epilogue 2 (Ruști, 2023, p. 7). It is an epilogue in which hope no longer finds its place, in which Lizoanca’s “mute scream” floods all spaces. Trauma, beyond the pathological, “is always the story of a screaming wound, reaching out to us in an attempt to convey a reality or truth that would otherwise remain inaccessible”⁴⁷ (Caruth, as cited in Ilie, p. 73).

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⁴⁴ Original text: „...nu este deloc înfăptuitor faptul că prima menstruație a fetei de 11 ani coincide cu ultima apariție a singurului bărbat care, deși incapabil să reziste impulsurilor sexuale stîrnite de Lizoanca, se atașase real de fetița convertită, la un moment dat, într-un fel de bun comunitar (profund disprețuit, dar folosit de oricine fără urmă de remușcare ori compasiune). Lăsînd la poarta centrului o lădiță de croasante și o pereche de pantofiori verzi, Greblă îi transmite, inconștient, fetei nu numai sprijinul afectiv, ci și importanța conservării, în memoria de durată, a puținelor clipe de tandrețe din trecut”.

⁴⁵ Original text: „numeroșilor abuzatori”.

⁴⁶ Original text: „într-adevăr, un viitor după și chiar dincolo de traumă”.

⁴⁷ Original text: „este întotdeauna povestea unei răni care țipă, care ni se adresează în încercarea de a ne vorbi despre o realitate sau un adevăr care altminteri nu ne este accesibil”.

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