

THE CHILD'S VOICE IN MIGRATION LITERATURE: ON MIGUEL GANE'S *CÂND O SĂ TE FACI MARE / CUANDO SEAS MAYOR*¹

Maria BÎSCAL (OPREA)

1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba-Iulia, Romania

e-mail: moprea09@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article examines *Când o să te faci mare / Cuando seas mayor* [When you grow up] the debut novel of Spanish-language writer Miguel Gane, through the lens of child-centered migration narratives. The text offers an autobiographical portrayal of a Romanian boy's emigration to Spain and the emotional, linguistic, and cultural tensions that shape his formative years. Structured as a sequence of episodic fragments, the novel foregrounds the child's voice - fragile yet lucid - as a narrative instrument that renders the affective dimensions of uprooting, socioeconomic precarity, and identity reconstruction. Gane's use of lyrical language, confessional tone, and symbolic anonymity (the nameless village, child, and parents) emphasizes migration as both a social condition and an inner process of loss and adaptation. Positioned within contemporary literature of the Romanian diaspora, the novel reveals the child's oscillation between vulnerability and resilience, highlighting how memory, familial bonds, and the search for belonging constitute the core of the migrant experience. Through this perspective, the study underscores the originality of Gane's contribution to migration literature and the significance of childhood as a site of both trauma and transformation.

Keywords: migration literature; child narrator; Romanian diaspora; liminality; cultural adaptation.

Când o să te faci mare / Cuando seas mayor [When you grow up] is the first novel by Miguel Gane, a contemporary Spanish-language writer of Romanian origin and one of the best-selling authors of recent years. In 2017, Gane was nominated for Spain's National Poetry Prize, and in 2020 his third book, *La piel en los labios* [My skin on your lips], became the best-selling poetry volume in Spain, remaining for five months among the top titles in *El Cultural*. His poetry books have sold tens of thousands of copies in Spain and Latin America. His debut poetry collection, *Con tal de verte volar* [As long as you fly], published in 2016, has reached eighteen editions to date. The novel *Cuando seas mayor*, written in Spanish in 2019 and published in Romanian translation in 2025 by Alice Books in Bucharest, has enjoyed significant success both in Spanish and Romanian literary culture. A parallel can be drawn with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, as it "demonstrates the story's ability to convey emotion and generate empathy, thereby reinforcing the relevance of literature as a tool for reflecting on historical traumas." (Marchedon, 2025, p. 103)².

¹ Article History: Received: 13.12.2025. Accepted: 08.01.2026. Published: 15.05.2026. No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

² Original text: „demonstrează capacitatea poveștii de a transmite emoții și de a genera empatie, consolidând relevanța literaturii ca instrument de reflecție asupra traumelor istorice”. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the original texts are my own.

Când o să te faci mare is a narrative with a strong autobiographical dimension, recounting the story of a boy who emigrates to Spain at the age of nine with his parents and follows a difficult trajectory marked by the uprooting from his rural childhood and the challenges of integration into Spanish society. The novel opens with the depiction of a Christmas morning when the child discovers with disappointment that his long-desired gift is missing: “I did not understand what I had done so wrong for Santa Claus to ignore my letter” (Gane, 2025, p. 14)³, neither did his parents receive anything. After dinner, he overhears their heated discussions and learns they no longer have firewood or money. The child’s inadvertent breaking of a water jug further fuels their conflict. The small joys of childhood alternate with deeply felt hardships: his mother’s emergency hospitalization, periods of food scarcity, a teacher’s rigidity, the thrill of first love, his attempts to earn money by doing classmates’ homework, and the humiliating punishment imposed by the school principal, who fails to recognize that he is merely “a child playing at being an adult because he has no choice.” (p. 153)⁴.

With great maturity, the child understands that poverty compels his family to leave for Spain. The apartment in Madrid, furnished with items salvaged from dumpsters, becomes their new home. His father works on a construction site, the boy attends a day center designed to facilitate integration, and his mother works as a live-in domestic employee in a wealthy household until she is falsely accused of stealing jewelry.

The child’s affective experiences form the connective tissue of the text. He oscillates between spontaneous moments of enthusiasm, such as embracing a stranger simply because he speaks his mother tongue, and the simple pleasures of tasting yogurt, having access to hot water, or owning a mobile phone. At the same time, the stigma of being an immigrant, internalized from an early age, prevents him from feeling accepted, and he comes to believe that he never will be among Spanish children. The narrative unfolds through a succession of traumatic episodes: the boy’s fear of encountering other children, the shame of not understanding them, and an all-encompassing fear—of looking, of speaking, of living, and of being separated from his parents. The pejorative “ru-ma-no,” uttered by Spanish children, becomes the first Spanish word he learns. He goes to school “with a heavy heart” (p. 262)⁵, as he watches his parents repeatedly fail to find work.

He begins sixth grade in early autumn and immediately observes the significant differences between the Romanian and Spanish education systems. He becomes aware that he can already speak Spanish without mentally translating from Romanian, although he still feels “the weight of the syllables on his tongue, the tip of his tongue brushing against his teeth” (p. 275)⁶. This moment marks his rebirth, and when his classmates applaud him, he realizes that he has finally been accepted. His friendship with Martín, one of his new classmates, allows him to join a new circle of friends and he gradually comes to accept the nickname he is given: “Ruma,” derived from *rumano*, which he embraces just “as one accepts certain things simply in order to feel a sense of belonging” (p. 279)⁷. His joy is rapidly overshadowed by the fear of losing his mother, who goes missing during the terrorist attack which took place in the city. He is provided with a sense of security, something he had never felt before, only when the entire family finally receives residence documents, ending their fear of illegality in Spain.

The boy eventually earns a scholarship to study law, and the university campus evokes, one last time, memories of his childhood, of the village and of the people he imagines would

³ Original text: „Nu înțelegeam ce făcusem atât de rău încât Moș Crăciun să nu țină cont de scrisoarea mea”.

⁴ Original text: „un copil care face pe adultul pentru că nu are de ales”.

⁵ Original text: „cu moartea în suflet”.

⁶ Original text: „greutatea silabelor pe limbă, vârful limbii lovind dinții”.

⁷ Original text: „așa cum accepți anumite chestii numai pentru a simți că aparții unui loc.”

be proud of his achievements. Now, arrived at maturity, he embraces this new identity, even as he grieves the loss of his language, his name, and the sense of stability he once knew. The novel's final sentence reiterates its central leitmotif—the words spoken by his parents during times of struggle: “When you grow up, you will understand why we left the village” (p. 333)⁸.

The novel illustrates how events are imprinted on a child's consciousness. The sense of “home” is constructed through memories and the presence, real or imagined, of the mother, “the most important person” (p. 26)⁹ in his life, from whom he always had something to learn. The child's recollections exude an authentic joy, experienced “in the midst of endless love and simple things” (p. 34)¹⁰. His mother appears almost from another dimension: “She was immersed in a world of her own, in which no one else existed” (p. 95)¹¹.

The novel consists of 62 chapters that interweave the innocent narrative voice with nuanced analysis of uprootedness. The child's liminal condition between Romania and Spain foregrounds the literary function of the child's perspective. He senses the tension between his parents and expresses a desire to reconcile them, perceiving himself as “the only link between them” (p. 49)¹². He internalizes their outbursts without resentment.

A discreet lyricism emerges from the innovative figurative language, metaphors, and repetitions that capture the child's perception of the world: “For they loved each other, they loved each other deeply” (p. 50)¹³; the child's despair in the face of suffering: “I don't want her to die. I don't want her to die” (p. 51)¹⁴; the fragility of family relationships and the role he feels he must play in maintaining cohesion within the fractured emotional universe of his home: “I was the small point of connection between them” (p. 49)¹⁵. All of these elements underscore the hyperbolic perception of reality characteristic of childhood.

The narrative structure is largely episodic, yet it is held together by an identity-centered thread that traces the protagonist's childhood experiences. Neither the village nor the boy or his parents are given names. Their identities remain deliberately symbolic: the migrant child and the migrant parents. Rather than reconstructing the past as a coherent whole, the narrator relives it, with each fragment marking a return to a specific emotional state. The narrative does not unfold in a strictly chronological manner but is instead composed of fragments, confessions, brief reflections, and short monologic passages, each functioning as a self-contained poetic narrative moment. Cohesion is achieved through a lyrical narrative voice and a set of recurring motifs that reflect socioeconomic precarity and the condition of the immigrant: “Mother, why are these people giving us food? We have food” (p. 229)¹⁶. The narrative explores the tension between childhood and growth, the relationship with parents, and the search for meaning in conditions of uprootedness. This sense of displacement is poignantly expressed in the child's observation, “Mother, there are no mountains or beautiful trees here,” to which the mother responds, “That's how it is, child; we must adjust” (p. 229)¹⁷. The loss of home and the need to adapt to a new culture are further articulated in the anxious question, “Mother, how will we learn Spanish?” (p. 229)¹⁸. These moments foreground the experience of a fractured identity and the gradual process through which the self is reconstructed.

⁸ Original text: „Când o să te faci mare, o să înțelegi de ce am plecat din sat.”

⁹ Original text: „cea mai importantă persoană.”

¹⁰ Original text: „în mijlocul dragostei nesfârșite și a lucrurilor simple.”

¹¹ Original text: „Era adâncită într-o lume din care nimeni nu mai făcea parte.”

¹² Original text: „singura legătură dintre ei.”

¹³ Original text: „Căci se iubeau, se iubeau mult”.

¹⁴ Original text: „Nu vreau să moară. Nu vreau să moară.”

¹⁵ Original text: „Eu eram micul punct de legătură dintre ei”.

¹⁶ Original text: „Mamă, de ce ne dau mâncare oamenii ăștia? Că avem ce mânca.”

¹⁷ Original text: „Mamă, aici nu sunt munți și copaci frumoși. Asta e, copile, trebuie să ne adaptăm.”

¹⁸ Original text: „Mamă, cum vom învăța să vorbim spaniola?”

In Gane's novel, migration is driven by economic necessity, a phenomenon characteristic of the Romanian diaspora in recent decades. The family's relocation from Romania to Spain unfolds gradually; the trauma is primarily emotional. The child experiences the loss of language, precarious living conditions, and social shame as formative moments in his integration into Spanish society.

The novel's originality within migration literature lies in its use of a child's voice—fragile yet lucid—through which both the child's own experiences and those of the adults are observed and interpreted. By engaging with themes recurrent in contemporary prose, the novel aligns itself with works that construct a realist vision of the family as a space for critical reflection. As in the work of Florian Zeller, where the family, traditionally conceived as a space of safety, becomes the stage of complete vulnerability (Nanu, 2025, p. 229)¹⁹ M. Gane likewise warns that, in the context of migration, the family—long associated with security and stability—comes to be reconfigured as the site of a profound and pervasive vulnerability. Gane's narrative stands out for its portrayal of a child caught in the very process of growing up, one that coincides with the painful and laborious experience of uprooting.

References:

- Gane, M. (2025). *Când o să te faci mare* [*When you grow up*]. Alice Books.
- Marchedon, R. (2025). Traumă și suferință între pagină și ecran – *Băiatul cu pijamale în dungi* [Trauma and suffering between the page and the screen – *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*]. *Incursiuni în Imaginar*, 16(2), 93–115. <https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2025.16.2.4>
- Nanu, P. (2025). Teatrul lui Florian Zeller [Florian Zeller's theatre: An aesthetics of loss and confusion]. *Incursiuni în Imaginar*, 16(2), 326–336. <https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2025.16.2.16>

¹⁹ Original text: „Familia, acest spațiu tradițional al siguranței, devine scena vulnerabilității depline.”