

## THE FEMINIZED OUTCAST: GENDERING MALE MARGINALITY IN PANAIT ISTRATI'S *KYRA KYRALINA*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper examines the construction of masculinity in Panait Istrati's *Kyra Kyralina* (1926/1971) through a gender-critical lens, focusing on the largely neglected queer figure of Stavro. While existing scholarship has predominantly addressed the novel's exoticism and autobiographical elements, or the transgressive femininity of Kyra, comparatively little attention has been paid to the gendered complexity of its male protagonist. By foregrounding Stavro's life narrative, this paper seeks to reassess *Kyra Kyralina* as a significant early twentieth-century exploitation of subordinated and queer masculinity. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990/2006) and R.W. Connell's model of hierarchical masculinities (1992/2005), the article conceptualizes masculinity as socially constructed, performative, and coercively regulated rather than a stable identity. Butler's framework enables an analysis of Stavro's repeated failure to embody hegemonic masculine norms such as authority, autonomy, and heterosexual dominance, while Connell's typology elucidates the structural mechanisms through which such failures result in subordination, stigmatization, and vulnerability to violence. Together, these perspectives illuminate how masculinity is constituted in Istrati's text through marginalization. The paper offers close readings of key episodes from the novel, including Stavro's exposure to sexual exploitation, his homoerotic desire, and his social marginalization. These experiences are analyzed not as incidental biographical details, but as formative processes through which Stavro's gendered identity is produced. Rather than presenting suffering as character-building or redemptive, Istrati depicts trauma as central to the formation of masculinity, challenging dominant literary tropes that equate male hardship with moral or heroic development. Most importantly, the paper argues that Istrati does not moralize or sensationalize queer desire. Instead, homosexuality is portrayed as intertwined with longing, confusion, and affective attachment, while social condemnation and coercion are shown to originate from surrounding patriarchal order. In this respect, the novel anticipates later queer trauma-informed approaches to gender by exposing the human cost of rigid normative frameworks. By repositioning Stavro at the center of gender analysis, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that reconsiders early twentieth-century literature as the site of critical engagement with masculinity. It ultimately argues that the text offers a prescient critique of gender norms, revealing masculinity as hierarchical and unstable, an insight that remains highly relevant to contemporary gender studies.

**Keywords:** Panait Istrati; *Kyra Kyralina*; gender performativity; male marginality; subordinated masculinity.

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## 1. Introduction

Panait Istrati occupies a paradoxical position in Romanian literature, situated simultaneously at the margins and at the crossroads of national, linguistic, and ideological traditions. As Rodica Grigore (2023, p. 52) observes, his work has elicited deeply polarized critical responses since the beginning of his career. While critics such as Nicolae Iorga or Ovid Densusianu, regarded his work as insufficiently aligned to the Romanian national spirit, other prominent literary figures – including E. Lovinescu, G. Ibrăileanu, and T. Vianu – praised Istrati for the orientalism, narrative vitality, and picturesque quality of his prose. His international success contrasts sharply with his unstable canonical status in his native country, a tension that mirrors many of the thematic preoccupations of his fiction.

Istrati became a well-established writer quite late in his life, first in France and later in Romania. Born in the Danube port of Brăila in 1884, Istrati experienced a fragmented formal education and relied largely on self-instruction. Despite the economic hardships of his youth, he taught himself French while working various modest jobs to support himself, cultivating an early passion for travel. His journeys took him as far as Egypt and through Western Europe, including Switzerland and France. As Lucian Chișu (2019, p. 102) notes “although he started from the bottom and was educated at the school of misery and humiliation in life,” Istrati was always driven by “his aspiration to overcome his own condition”, an aspiration that would later be transposed into his fictional characters.

In 1921, Istrati found himself in Nice, France, penniless and on the verge of despair, even attempting suicide. Rescued at the last moment, he almost miraculously met Romain Rolland, the esteemed French writer and Nobel laureate whom he deeply admired. Rolland encouraged him to begin writing in French, which led to the publication of *Kyra Kyralina* in 1923. The novel was met with immediate acclaim, securing Istrati’s status as a professional writer. As Mircea Iorgulescu (2004, p. 20) observes, rather than dying in obscurity, Istrati became a celebrated writer first in France, and subsequently across Europe, Russia, and even the Americas. Nevertheless, his reception in Romania remained ambivalent. As both Grigore and Chișu emphasize, Romanian audiences often regarded him primarily as an “example of exotism” (Grigore, 2023, p. 53), a perception shaped by the fact that he wrote his oeuvre in French and only later translated it into Romanian. This linguistic and cultural mediation arguably attenuated the perceived artistic quality of his works in his native literary milieu. His recognition mostly came from his “fellow French writers,” while “he was not properly accepted by his native country” (Chișu, 2019, p. 103).

Istrati’s marginal position was further intensified by his political trajectory. At the turn of the twentieth century, he developed a keen interest in the socialist movement, actively participating in strikes and protests. In 1927, he traveled to the Soviet Union as a self-proclaimed Bolshevik sympathizer, despite never having been an official member of the Communist Party. This visit, however, exposed him to the stark realities of the regime, which sharply contrasted with his earlier ideological enthusiasm. In response, he authored *Spovedanie pentru învinși* [Confession for the defeated] (1929/1990), a work in which he ardently dismantles the utopian promises of Bolshevism. The publication of this book eventually triggered severe backlash, subjecting Istrati to sustained campaigns of denigration (Crăciun, 2020, p. 44), resulting in the loss of the support of many of his former promoters and further marginalization within both political and literary spheres (Gavril, 2023, p. 176).

Published in French in 1923, *Kyra Kyralina* is framed as a collection of three interlinked stories: *Stavro*, *Kyra Kyralina*, and *Dragomir*. The story opens with Adrien Zograffi’s encounter with Stavro, a once notorious and charismatic character who is now reduced to a marginalized figure. Through Stavro’s retrospective narration, the readers gain insight into his

family background, particularly the influence of his mother and sister, Kyra, and his gradual descent from a comfortable life to one shaped by adversity. The second part reconstructs Dragomir's childhood in a turbulent domestic environment marked by paternal violence, maternal neglect, and moral instability. His mother leads a life of pleasure, and she often neglects him while hosting numerous lovers and encouraging an unrestrained lifestyle for herself and her children. Kyra is portrayed as a beautiful, passionate, and uninhibited young woman who mirrors aspects of her mother. After a violent episode involving their father and elder brother, the mother disappears, leaving the two children effectively orphaned. Dragomir and Kyra run away from home and become the victims of a Turkish man who manipulates them into believing that he offers an apparent opportunity, while basically kidnapping and taking them to Istanbul, where Kyra is sold into a harem and Dragomir manages to run away from the ship where they were being held captive. Stavro/Dragomir's narration establishes the emotional and psychological roots of his character and the deep attachment he feels toward his sister, even as her fate becomes increasingly precarious. Dragomir himself suffers grave abuse aboard the ship and is used as a sexual object, a detail that marks a rupture in his innocence and contributes to his deep cynicism and mistrust of humanity.

In the final part, the narrative returns to the present timeline of Adrien Zografii as the listener to Stavro/Dragomir's testimony. Stavro revisits his own experiences of wandering, searching for meaning, and confronting the consequences of his earlier choices. After the traumatic events following his separation from Kyra, Dragomir wanders across the Middle East, from Istanbul to Damascus, experiencing further hardship and sexual abuse from those in power. Stavro recounts the closing chapters of the life story that shaped him, while his tone becomes more meditative and introspective.

Through Stavro's story, the condition of marginality is not limited to Istrati's biography but is reproduced at the level of his fiction. Stavro's exclusion from normative masculinity reflects a broader exploration of social and existential displacement that parallels Istrati's own position as an outsider within literary and political institutions. Both figures occupy unstable positions within dominant hierarchies, reinforcing the novel's sustained concern with vulnerability and exclusion.

Read in this broader biographical and narrative context, *Kyra Kyralina* emerges not merely as an exotic or autobiographically inflected text, but as a sustained meditation on marginality and vulnerability. Stavro's life story, structured on abuse, displacement, and social exclusion, exposes the fragility of normative masculinity and challenges literary models grounded in male authority and autonomy. This paper argues that Stavro embodies a subordinated and queer masculinity that destabilizes hegemonic gender norms. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990/2006) and R.W. Connell's concept of hierarchical masculinities (1992/2005), the analysis demonstrates how Istrati anticipates modern gender theory by portraying masculinity as performative, coercively enforced and sustained through violence rather than naturalized power.

From a trauma-informed perspective, Stavro's subjectivity develops under conditions that repeatedly undermine his bodily autonomy and sense of agency. While queer theory interrogates the instability of gender as socially constructed (Butler, 2006, p. 174), trauma studies examine the psychological and temporal disruptions produced by experiences of violence, abuse, and coercion (Herman, 1997; Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001). According to trauma theory, trauma is not viewed simply as an external event but as a disruption of subjectivity that continues to affect the individual long after the original disturbance has ended. Judith Herman (1997, pp. 51-53) argues that trauma produces profound and lasting effects on identity, particularly by undermining the survivor's sense of bodily autonomy and safety which determines experiences of shame, emotional numbing and difficulty in sustaining interpersonal

relationships. Similarly, Cathy Caruth (1996, p. 4) emphasizes that trauma is characterized by its belated impact, as the traumatic experience cannot be fully processed when it occurs but returns later in intrusive forms, including emotional disturbance, compulsive repetition, and disconnection from the self. Dominick LaCapra (2001) further notes that trauma destabilizes the relationship between past and present, leading to a dissociation of the individual as a protective response that allows subjects to endure overwhelming violence.

Within this framework, we do not argue that queer identity is caused by trauma. Instead, trauma theory makes it possible to analyze how repeated violence affects the subject's sense of autonomy and identity, while gender theory explains how these disruptions destabilize normative gender performance. This approach makes it possible to demonstrate how Istrati's narrative represents masculinity as formed under conditions of violence and marginalization. While queer theory provides the conceptual tools to understand the instability of gender norms, trauma theory clarifies how repeated violations shape the subject's relationship to the body, agency, and intimacy, thus allowing for a more precise reading of Stavro's masculinity as a literary representation of gendered vulnerability.

Despite the novel's evident gender complexity, scholarly engagement with the queerness of Istrati's character remains limited and fragmented and has generally tended to privilege the figure of Kyra in discussions of sexuality and female agency, while Stavro's masculinity has received comparatively little sustained attention. Ramona Dima (2018), for instance, posits that the narratives included in *Kyra Kyralina* can be situated within the framework of queer literature; however, her analysis focuses predominantly on the figure of Adrien Zograffi, adopting a broader comparative perspective that surveys diverse representations of sexuality across Romanian literature, rather than offering a sustained reading of Istrati's text as such. In a more conservative interpretive vein, Angelo Mitchievici (2010) approaches the homoerotic subtext present in Istrati's prose as a form of moral and social deviance, framing homosexuality as a corrupted manifestation of normative human behavior. Such readings tend to reproduce dominant heteronormative discourses, thereby limiting the critical potential of Istrati's text to be examined through contemporary queer theoretical frameworks. Consequently, the absence of in-depth, text-centered analyses that address the narrative, ethical, and affective dimensions of the queerness in Istrati's fiction points to a significant gap in existing research, one that calls for a reassessment of his work beyond reductive moral and biographical interpretations.

## 2. Performing Masculinity and Queer Vulnerability

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, outlined in *Gender Trouble* (1990/2006), offers a productive framework for understanding the instability of masculinity in Istrati's *Kyra Kyralina*. Butler argues that gender is not something we *are* (so it is not an innate or essential identity), but rather something we *do* repeatedly and under social pressure. Therefore, the behavior men and women display (that is considered the heterosexual normative) represents, in fact, a performance or enactment of "an internal core or substance" that is a response to external anticipation; as a result, these behaviors are "produced *on the surface* (original emphasis) of the body" and are effects and functions of a "decidedly public and social discourse" (p. 178).

A key component of Butler's argument is the concept of *performativity* which differs from *performance* in the theatrical sense. Gender performativity does not imply conscious role-playing; instead, it refers to the compulsory repetition of gendered acts that create the illusion of a coherent and natural identity over time. These acts are compelled by what Butler terms the "heterosexual matrix", a regulatory framework that links biological sex, gender identity, and

heterosexual desire into a seemingly natural and unified system. Within this matrix, certain gender expressions are rendered intelligible and legitimate, while others are marginalized, pathologized, or even erased.

Butler (2006, p. 37) further argues that gender norms are maintained through mechanisms of social sanction and exclusion. Subjects who fail to conform to normative gender expectations risk becoming socially unintelligible or abject. However, Butler also identifies this instability as a site of potential subversion. Because gender must be constantly reiterated, it is never fully secured; deviations, failures, and repetitions that expose its constructed nature can destabilize dominant gender norms.

Within this paradigm, masculinity must be continuously performed in ways that align with culturally sanctioned expectations, such as authority, physical strength, sexual dominance, and emotional restraint. Stavro struggles to ‘perform’ masculinity correctly because he cannot embody strength or authority, and his desires do not align with heterosexual norms. Thus, his body becomes a site of control for others. This vulnerability is explicitly articulated in Stavro’s own reflection on his bodily submission: “I was ready, without knowing it, to sacrifice my body which had accommodated itself to the corrupt life I was leading. One gets used to everything in life and to vice most easily” (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 130). The passage underscores the extent to which Stavro’s body becomes a site of inscription of external power relations, and it reveals a process of psychological adaptation to coercion. Rather than expressing a stable or coherent sexual identity, his reflections suggest a subject marked by shame, resignation, and emotional disconnection. In Butlerian terms, this illustrates how gender subjectivity is produced not through inner truth, but through repeated submission to normative constraints.

Unlike the traditional male protagonist who masters circumstances and exerts control over others, Stavro occupies a position of exposure. He does not act upon the world but is acted upon by it. This subverts the conventional literary equation of masculinity with agency and dominance, replacing it with a model grounded in dependence, emotional intensity, and corporeal vulnerability. Masculinity, in Stavro’s case, is not a source of power but a condition imposed upon him – a role he is expected to perform yet structurally prevented from fulfilling.

The spaces in which Stavro’s sexuality is formed vary from the comfort of his childhood home, where his mother had him perform “the Arab stomach dance” (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 79) while entertaining her lovers, to those that are explicitly violent. His confession that he “had to submit to the pleasures of our respectable benefactor and was irrevocably corrupted” (p. 123) highlights the asymmetry of power underlying his sexual experiences. Later, his incarceration exposes him to further abuse, described in dehumanizing terms that erase ethnic and cultural distinctions in favor of shared degradation: “The most appalling things went on in full sight of everyone; Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and Arabs ceased to be human beings and yet no animal could have indulged in such indescribable degradation [...] Into this earthly hell I was thrown one day, and for one horrible month I suffered the most unbelievable insults at the hands of those degraded men” (p. 203).

The pattern of recurring victimization corresponds to what trauma theory identifies as the compulsive repetition of traumatic structures. Sigmund Freud first observed that traumatic repetition often manifests not as deliberate action but as passive experience imposed upon the subject. He notes that psychoanalysis understands traumatic recurrence as a result of “early infantile influences” (Freud, 1920/1961, p. 15) which gives trauma survivors the impression of frequently experiencing events that “seem to be entirely outside their wish or control” (Caruth, 1996, p. 2). Stavro’s experiences do not result from his own choices but reflect what trauma theory identifies as the enduring impact of violence on later vulnerability.

Stavro’s homosexual inclinations are not framed as a coherent or affirmative identity. Early in the narrative, he insists: “I’ve always been surrounded by perversion and outrage and

vice; the very air I've breathed from youth onwards has been tainted by them. And in spite of all this I never indulged myself voluntarily" (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 26). This statement reveals a subject caught between desire and denial, internalizing moral condemnation while attempting to disavow agency. His queerness is framed not as an essence but as an imposed condition, emerging from environments marked by exploitation, secrecy, and coercion.

From a Butlerian perspective, Stavro's gender queerness emerges not as an inherent identity but as the cumulative effect of repeated performances shaped by vulnerability. The theory of gender performativity emphasizes that gender is constituted through reiterated acts that are socially regulated, rather than through any stable inner essence. Stavro's life trajectory exemplifies this process of constrained repetition. During his childhood, his rejection of masculinity does not stem from physical harm inflicted upon him by his father, but from his inability to endure the spectacle of patriarchal violence directed at his mother and sister. His aversion to his father's and brother's brutality and the fact that the only examples he could guide himself after were his mother and sister, transformed him into a feminized version of himself. This interrupts the normative script that would align masculinity with authority, replacing it instead with an ethics of emotional responsiveness. This early disidentification with authoritarian masculinity marks the first rupture in his gender performance.

Subsequent experiences further sediment this deviation. Repeated sexual abuse by adult men transforms Stavro/Dragomir's body into a site of coercion rather than agency, producing fear, shame, and dissociation that fundamentally reshape his capacity to perform heterosexual masculinity. His later inability to engage in marital intimacy with Tincoutza, who remains a virgin even after ten months of marriage, cannot be read as individual failure but as the embodied residue of trauma that disrupted his heterosexual normative. The idea that gender norms are enforced through social exclusion is particularly relevant here as Stavro's fear of intimacy with women and his discomfort with sexual exposure reflect a body disciplined by past violations rather than a refusal of normativity *per se*.

Thus, Stavro's narrative reflects his queerness not as deviation from gender norms but as an effect of their violent enforcement. His identity emerges through a series of thwarted performances that expose the fragility of heteronormative masculinity itself. Istrati does not romanticize queer desire, instead foregrounding the ways in which it is distorted by systemic violence. Rather than presenting masculinity as an innate or stable identity, Istrati represents it as emerging through social regulation. Masculinity, for him, is associated with fear and submission rather than agency. This supports the idea that gender identity is shaped by material conditions, not inner essence. The text therefore does not reduce sexuality to trauma but depicts a subject whose gendered identity develops under conditions of structural vulnerability.

The pivotal episode involving Stavro's attempted sexual advance toward Adrien crystalizes these tensions. The scene is narrated from Adrien's perspective, marked by confusion, fear and disbelief:

Adrien could not have said what time it was, but at a certain moment during the dark night, he felt a hand touch his shoulder, then his face. Opening sleepy eyes for a second, he could scarcely remember where he was. He slept again for a moment, but the hand kept wandering over his face and he felt a hot kiss on his right cheek. This time Adrien woke fully but he didn't move. What the devil did it mean? As he lay there blinking in the dark, he remembered his companions' position. To his right and in the middle there was Stavro; the other side of Stavro, Mikhail.

A horrid thought entered his mind but he brushed it aside.

'No, surely I must be dreaming; it's not possible!'

Again he felt Stavro's hand on his chest and asked in a voice which he succeeded in making fairly deep in spite of his fright and bewilderment:

‘Do you want my tobacco-box, Stavro?’ (Istrati, 1926/1971, pp. 23-24)

Stavro’s gesture, although hesitant, silent, and furtive, constitutes a failed performative act, suggesting that even he is not sure of his own intentions. It is neither a straightforward nor an overly explicit action in which the “natural body” could be “permanently breaking loose from patterns” (Tupan, 2021, p. 43). It neither achieves intimacy nor affirms identity; instead, it triggers moral panic and social sanction. Mikhaïl’s reaction is particularly revealing, because, during the heated argument that ensues this scene, he frames Stavro’s act as immoral contamination:

Mikhaïl, who had regained his control by now, put in:

‘It’s worse than dishonesty; it’s perversion. Everything was going so smoothly and you spoiled it all by doing this outrageous thing; you’ve contaminated the atmosphere. The worst crime of all is to try to spread a vice like that...’ (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 26)

Here, queerness is constructed as infectious and destabilizing, necessitating immediate containment. Mikhaïl thus assumes the role of normative enforcer, attempting to restore heteromale order through verbal condemnation.

Dana Radler’s (2021, p. 3) observation that each character’s response reflects “different levels of experience, expectation and inner struggle” is especially pertinent. Adrien’s bewilderment, Mikhaïl’s moral policing through his “attempt to restore order by making Stavro aware of his own actions,” and Stavro’s silence while facing his “own torment” collectively map a spectrum of male positions, none of which are fully stable or secure. As Radler further notes, the narrative leaves key motivations unresolved, most notably Stavro’s decision to travel with both Mikhaïl and Adrien despite the evident risk.

Through Stavro, Istrati thus anticipates Butler’s insistence on the instability of gender norms. Masculinity in *Kyra Kyralina* emerges not as an ideal but as a fragile performance enforced through shame, discipline, and social exclusion. Stavro’s queerness exposes the cost of this enforcement, revealing how bodies that fail to *do* gender correctly are rendered disposable within both social and literary narrative economies.

### 3. Hierarchical Masculinities

The previous section of this paper demonstrated how Stavro’s gender identity is constituted through trauma and failed performances. If Butler’s framework allows us to understand *how* masculinity is done, R.W. Connell’s theory of hierarchical masculinities (2005) explains *why* certain gender performances are sanctioned by society. Connell suggests that society has developed the “idea of a male sex role” (p. 21) as a “way of explaining social behaviour generally” (p. 22). It is also noted that being a man or a woman

means enacting a *general* (original emphasis) set of expectations which are attached to one’s sex – the ‘sex role.’ In this approach there are always two sex roles in any cultural contexts, a male one and a female one. Masculinity and femininity are quite easily interpreted as internalized sex roles, the products of social learning or ‘socialization’” (p. 22).

This claim thus further supports Butler’s theory of gender performativity discussed in the previous section. Connell conceptualizes masculinity not as a singular or universal ideal, but as a hierarchical configuration in which multiple masculinities coexist in relations of dominance and subordination.

Within this system, *hegemonic masculinity* – although “not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense” is “certainly normative” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832) – functions as the culturally exalted form (dominant, heterosexual, powerful, socially rewarded, not necessarily violent but supported by force), that “can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Connell, 1992/2005, p. 77). Other masculinities, defined as *subordinated masculinity* (often associated with weakness, dependency, queerness), are marginalized, with the most important case being “the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men” (p. 78). Furthermore, Connell explains that this subordination is not a simple cultural stigmatization of gay identity but the result of an array of practices which include “political and cultural exclusion”, “cultural abuse,” “legal violence,” “street violence,” as well as “economic discrimination and personal boycotts” (p. 78).

Using Connell’s theory of masculinities, Stavro can be read as an example of subordinated masculinity, whose vulnerability, homosexual desire, and exposure to violence reveal how hegemonic masculinity is maintained through domination rather than natural male authority. Stavro is introduced as a flamboyant, cunning, and paradoxical figure. He is playful, humorous, witty, and theatrically expressive, yet simultaneously morally ambiguous. He is both charming and pitiable, embodying a dual personality that fascinates Adrien:

Adrien had begun by liking Stavro on account of his fooling, but sometimes there were strange things about him which perplexed and troubled the young man. In the midst of some silly joke, Stavro would suddenly become serious and gaze at him with a look of calm superiority, whereupon Adrien would feel completely insignificant. Stavro was only an ignorant pedlar but Adrien was fascinated by him and could not tell why. This didn’t happen often, and never, as far as he could tell, to anyone else, so Adrien set himself to solve the mystery. He called these mysterious and upsetting experiences “the other Stavro.” (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 8)

Adrien gradually discovers that Stavro himself is haunted by the question of which version of his self – the virtuous or the corrupted – is the authentic. The narrative thus traces a symbolic transition from Dragomir, the naïve youth, to Stavro, the adult whose identity has been shaped by exploitation and displacement.

Stavro’s subordinated masculinity becomes particularly legible in early episodes that stage his encounter with hegemonic male figures, most notably in his first meeting with his uncles. Their bodies are described through a vocabulary of excess and animality – “beards and moustaches covered their mouths” and “their hairy hands looked like bears’ paws” (Istrati, 1926/1971, pp. 92-93) – which aligns them with a form of physically imposing masculinity associated with authority and dominance. Within Connell’s framework, these men embody a localized version of hegemonic masculinity, defined by physical strength, weaponry, and ease with violence. Dragomir’s reaction, however, is not admiration but fear as he is rendered speechless, immobilized by the presence of “too many guns and things” (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 94). His timidity and bodily vulnerability position him immediately within what Connell terms subordinated masculinity, a category that exists in a structural relation of dependence and inferiority to hegemonic male norms. However, this subordination is not corrected or disciplined into masculine toughness; instead, it becomes a stable aspect of Dragomir’s identity.

A similar dynamic reappears later in Beirut, when Dragomir feels ashamed when a male room-sharing companion remarks: “One would take you for a girl!” (Istrati, 1926/1971, p.182). The comment, prompted by Dragomir’s reluctance to undress in full light, functions as a moment of gender policing, in which masculinity is defined negatively through the rejection of femininity. Connell emphasizes that “from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity,

gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” (2005, p. 78). Thus, subordinated masculinities are often feminized, not merely symbolically but affectively and corporeally. Dragomir’s shame, modesty, and fear of exposure mark his body non-normative within a homosocial environment that equates male identity with bodily confidence. Stavro’s gendered position is thus not the result of individual weakness but of repeated confrontations with dominant masculine norms that render his vulnerability both visible and punishable. This process of exclusion reflects not only individual stigma, but collective enforcement of normative identity. As Aritina Micu observes (2023, p. 83), Stavro’s marginalization occurs under the pressure of the group that does not accept a deviation from what is perceived as normal behavior. This pressure reinforces his subordinated position within the masculine hierarchy confirming that his exclusion is socially produced rather than individually determined.

The narrator explicitly accounts for Stavro’s marginalization which was the result of his refuse to embrace the role that the traditional heteronormative society assigned to him, emphasizing that he had come to embody the social outcast as a result of leading an “odious life” (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 5). Even his attempt to conform to social norms through marriage fails. His marriage to Tincoutza does not rehabilitate him within the gender order; instead, his past resurfaces and ultimately proves fatal to their union: upon discovering his true identity, Tincoutza commits suicide, a tragedy for which Stavro bears indirect but inescapable responsibility. From a Connellian perspective, this episode demonstrates how subordinated masculinities are denied redemption because access to normative heterosexual institutions (such as marriage) does not neutralize stigma but rather intensifies the punitive consequences of deviation.

Beyond its social consequences, this failed marriage cannot be reduced to individual inadequacy but is must be understood as the psychological residue of repeated abuse. Trauma theory emphasizes that survivors of sexual violence frequently experience disruptions in intimacy, including emotional withdrawal, shame, and difficulty sustaining sexual relationships (Herman, 1997, pp. 77-79). Stavro’s inability to consummate his marriage reflects precisely this form of trauma-related disconnection, as his body functions based on his memories related to coercion and violation rather than on autonomous desire. This also reflects Caruth’s observations that past trauma persists by shaping the survivor’s present experience, preventing full integration into the present. Stavro’s failed marriage therefore illustrates how his earlier abuse continues to structure his present adult identity, interfering with his ability to perform normative heterosexual masculinity. His adult identity is therefore not simply unstable in abstract gender-theoretical terms but concretely structured by embodied memory.

Stavro’s masculinity is defined not by virile strength, but by passivity, emotional dependence, and vulnerability. He is deeply affected by his sister’s suffering, experiences guilt and grief as central components of his identity and repeatedly frames himself as morally compromised. Rather than acting as a protector or avenger, Stavro becomes a witness to suffering, including his own. This feminized mode of witnessing positions him outside the dominant masculine ideal.

Connell’s model is particularly useful in illuminating how Stavro’s homosexuality functions within the masculine hierarchy. Connell explicitly identifies gay masculinity as the most explicit form of subordinated masculinity, not because of inherent weakness, but because it destabilizes the heterosexual foundations of hegemonic masculinity. Stavro’s homosexual desire, compounded with his passivity and history of sexual exploitation, places him at the lowest end of gender hierarchy. Importantly, his queerness is not framed as a private orientation but as a public mark of exclusion.

This dynamic is made explicit in Stavro’s confrontation with Mikhaïl, following the attempted kiss of Adrien. Stavro resists the moralizing discourse that Mikhaïl directed at him:

You talk about perversion, outrage, and vice, and you expect me to be overcome with shame [...] But perversion, outrage, vice – my dear Mikhail, they flourish all about us and no one objects. The laws and customs of our life are full of them, and I am one of life's victims (Istrati, 1926/1971, p. 26).

This statement constitutes a powerful critique of hegemonic masculinity, revealing it not as a moral ideal but as a structure that displaces its own violence onto marginalized men. Stavro's self-identification as a victim underscores Connell's assertion that masculinity hierarchies are sustained not through consent but through domination.

Violence plays a central role in this process. Connell argues that violence functions as a means of asserting masculinity in group struggles and that men who fail to meet hegemonic standards are particularly vulnerable to coercion and abuse. Stavro's narrative confirms this insight with striking clarity. He is not a perpetrator of violence; he is its object. This pattern of repeated victimization extends across Stavro's entire life trajectory. His childhood exposure to paternal violence establishes an early association between masculinity and fear, which is later reinforced through repeated exploitation by adult men and abuse during his imprisonment. As Judith Herman points out (1997, pp. 47-48), trauma survivors often remain vulnerable to further victimization because trauma normalizes conditions of domination. Stavro's experiences reflect this pattern and, as a result, he becomes deeply vulnerable in his lack of masculine power and marginal position within the masculine hierarchy.

Through Stavro, Istrati exposes the cost of hegemonic masculinity not only for women and queer subjects, but for men who cannot or will not conform. Stavro's suffering reveals masculinity as a stratified system sustained through exclusion. When read through Connell's framework, *Kyra Kyralina* emerges as a remarkably prescient critique of gender performativity and gender hierarchy, demonstrating how subordinated masculinities are disciplined.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The critical significance of Stavro/Dragomir's character within *Kyra Kyralina* lies in his capacity to expand and destabilize literary representations of masculinity while challenging the idea that men are naturally dominant or invulnerable. His story demonstrates how gender intersects with sexuality, class, violence, and it anticipates later queer and trauma-centered readings of male identity.

Istrati's portrayal of Stavro aligns with key insights of modern gender theory. Read through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and R.W. Connell's model of hierarchical masculinities, *Kyra Kyralina* reveals masculinity as a hierarchical, performative, and coercive system. Stavro's subordinated and queer masculinity exposes how gender norms are maintained through violence and non-conforming male identities are rendered vulnerable within patriarchal structures. Stavro represents subordinated masculinity. Throughout his youth, he is abused, exploited, and powerless, particularly within male-dominated spaces. He lacks social, economic, and physical power. His masculinity is defined by trauma and vulnerability rather than authority, which directly contrasts with traditional literary male heroes. Istrati thus challenges a long-standing literary trope in which male suffering is framed as formative and ennobling. In Stavro's case, suffering is not a catalyst for heroism but a mechanism of subordination.

The novel's sustained attention to sexual and physical abuse is central to this reconceptualization of masculinity. Rather than functioning as a marginal biographical detail, trauma functions as a central force in the narrative, shaping Stavro's relationship to masculinity.

His subjectivity develops under conditions of fear, underscoring the extent to which gendered identities are produced through structural violence rather than individual choice. Stavro's suffering comes not from his sexuality itself, but from a society that offers no safe place for it.

Importantly, Istrati resists sensationalizing or moralizing Stavro's homosexuality. Instead of depicting it as comic, monstrous, or purely immoral, the narrative intertwines queer desire with longing, confusion, and emotional attachment. This nuanced portrayal complicates early twentieth-century literary conventions and anticipates contemporary queer readings that emphasize vulnerability and relationality. Stavro's queerness exposes the fragility of rigid gender systems by revealing the human cost of exclusion and norm enforcement.

From a gender-critical perspective, *Kyra Kyralina* thus emerges as a remarkably forward-looking text. Through its protagonist, Istrati offers a literary exploration of masculinity shaped by trauma and defined by subordination. In doing so, the novel not only broadens the representational possibilities of male characters but also invites a re-evaluation of masculinity as a contested and unstable construct that remains acutely relevant to contemporary debates in gender studies.

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