

Romanian Migrant Women in Paris: Gender Representations in Angus Macqueen's *The Last Peasants*

Maître de conférences, dr. Gabriela Iuliana Colipcă
Université « Dunărea de Jos » de Galați, Roumanie

Abstract: Angus Macqueen's trilogy *The Last Peasants* (2003) aims at making a stand in the current debate on the causes and effects of migration from East European former Communist countries to the West. Focusing on the dramatic stories of several Romanian families from the village of Budești (Maramureș), the British director's documentaries foreground the picture of an old rural culture in decline; within this framework, individual portraits of characters desperately wishing to make a better living abroad are clearly delineated. As special attention seems to be paid to the re-negotiation of gender roles in Romanian rural communities 'lost in transition', two films of the trilogy (*Journeys* and *A Good Wife*) examine the re-shaping of women migrants' identity in the process of intercultural (Romanian – French) interaction. Based on research conducted in the framework of the EU-funded FP7 collaborative project, **Gender, Migration and Intercultural Interactions in the Mediterranean and South-East Europe: an interdisciplinary perspective** (Ge.M.I.C.) (2008-2011), the paper proposes an in-depth analysis of Angus Macqueen's filmic texts with a stress on representations of gender and cultural differences that influence, in the larger context of migration, the dynamics of established cultural practices and hierarchies in both the sending and the receiving societies.

Key words: gender, migration, identity, documentary, stereotype.

Against the background of significant economic, social and political changes in the aftermath of the 1989 Revolution, many Romanians seem to have considered emigration to different (non-)European countries as the only solution to their problems, in other words, the only means to counter the effects of unemployment, social marginalisation and impoverishment, and to attain the so-much-wanted financial security. Whether opting for the legal or illegal way out of their homeland, 'lost' in the transition from Communism to democracy and capitalist market economy, Romanian migrant workers have looked up to the Western mirage and hoped to fulfil their dream of finding well-paid jobs in countries where they thought they could more easily adapt owing to permissive legislation and/or migration-stimulating programmes, close cultural relationships and the fact that they could easily learn their hosts' language. Thus, four international migration trends have been established in time, namely: Italy – Spain – Portugal; Germany – Austria – Hungary; France – Belgium – the UK; and the USA – Australia – Canada¹.

Apart from sharing the same mainly economic reasons for migration, Romanian migrants have actually formed a highly heterogeneous group of 'adventurers' and/or 'exiles', differentiated by age, geographical area of origin, education, religion and, last but not least, gender. In particular, addressing more or less directly the intersection of gender and out-migration, certain academic and research studies that focused on delineating the profile of the Romanian 'wanderer' across national borders have managed to add further nuances to the description of the allegedly monolithic mechanism behind post-1989 Romanian mass emigration. They have pointed out that Romanian women's motivations in migrating seem to be at least partly related to the traditional patriarchal pattern that dominates the Romanian society. Thus, whereas men have migrated especially for financial reasons, women have chosen to migrate for personal domestic reasons mainly related to their family². Moreover, though the Romanian migrant has been predominantly represented as male, the same studies, supported by statistical data, have recorded a growing tendency towards the feminisation of Romanian out-migration favoured perhaps less by family reintegration and more by the significant demand on the informal market of domestic jobs (housecleaning, caring, babysitting, etc.) in some of the receiving societies³. Records of the Romanian Institute of Statistics indicate that, up to 2005, among the Romanian citizens who settled their permanent residence abroad, women were almost always more numerous than men; this trend of permanent migration has been decreasing in the recent years, which proves that women, like men, seem to have increasingly preferred temporary circulatory migration⁴. The result was

that, out of the millions of Romanians working abroad, a large proportion came to be represented by women⁵. Moreover, polls have revealed a significant proportion of Romanian women still wishing to migrate⁶. That has brought about an unavoidable change of power relations in many Romanian families, challenging the traditional encodings of femininity in the patriarchal masculine⁷ society that entail women's representation mainly in terms of passivity, domesticity, victimhood, sexuality, and motherhood.

As cultural texts embedded in the social matrix, documentary films have – next to other media texts – contributed to (re)tracing the major patterns underlying the debate on the causes and consequences of migration for the sending (here, Romania) and the receiving countries while raising issues related to self/other perception and the (re)shaping of imaginative geographies. In this light, Angus Macqueen's trilogy *The Last Peasants* (2003: *Journeys*, *Temptation*, and *The Good Wife*) appears as yet another expression of a long-pursued interest in the metamorphoses of post-Communist, East-European societies after 1989⁸, and is endowed with a specific educational function:

With *The Last Peasants*, I set myself the task of making an audience fall in love with an illegal immigrant. In Britain, they are usually the subject of lurid headlines about invasions and scroungers. Yet these are the people who clean our houses, dig our gardens, and generally do the jobs we no longer want to. I wanted to understand what drove them from their own homes to the urban squalor that so many live in on the edges of our cities. [...] So documentary has become the way I have found to talk about that world out there.⁹

Having “faith in the absolute relevance of his subjects’ remarkable lives, faith in the ability of his audience to absorb the subtlety and import of the experiences they relate”¹⁰, the British director aimed at achieving a double goal: at a micro-level, to uncover for the world the dramatic stories of several Romanian peasants from the village of Budești (in a remote corner of Maramureș), trapped between their centuries-old rural culture and the mirage of the consumerist society of the West; at a macro-level, to invite reconsideration of the dissolution of the Romanian rural community, Romanian emigration, in general, and illegal labour migration, in particular. That accounts for the fact that all three filmic texts are uniformly underlain by the dichotomic oppositions: old/young, experienced/unexperienced, man/woman, married/single, rural/urban, East/West, legal/illegal.

In particular, Macqueen's focus in *Journeys* and *The Good Wife* on Romanian migrant women's stories, metonymically foregrounded through Maria Damian's and Mihaela Marinca's experiences in Paris, brings into discussion the impact of social and cultural factors on gender hierarchies and identity (re)construction within a border-crossing dynamics.

Maria, Petru Damian's wife in *Journeys*, is not the type of migrant who crosses national borders out of the desire to challenge the gender role system in the Romanian patriarchal society, besides that of improving her financial status. In a certain way, her behaviour rises up to the expectations suggested by the very connotations of her name, which is “the prototype of the patriarchally constructed obedient, hard-working woman from the countryside”¹¹: separated from her husband after they illegally migrated to Paris together with their son Adrian (Petru was to be deported to Romania, but he somehow managed to escape and made it to Dublin), she remains faithful to her husband and behaves according to the principles of the large power-distance society¹², showing her elderly in-laws due respect. Moreover, she actually appears as the perfect illustration of the good mother type. She strives to make a living on her own in Paris, working as a housecleaner, and to properly provide for her son Adrian who is integrated in the French school system. Even if she gets to see Adrian only on weekends and on holidays, she feels proud that she can offer her son the education he needs in order to make a better living as a grown-up. It is her desire to offer him a better life and education that keeps her going, even when, as a migrant, she has to assume the risk of experiencing humiliation and violence.

As an illegal migrant, she has to constantly live with the fear of being arrested by the police because she does not have a residence permit. Her interview and the images that show her taking the underground train to go to work, always travelling mostly in the company of other (black, Asian, Arabian) migrants/representatives of marginal social groups, foreground her sense of insecurity. Subject to double victimization – as a migrant and as a woman –, she assumes, mostly for her son's sake, the risk of becoming a victim of violence: she tells some of her friends how she was attacked, robbed and beaten in an underground station; unable to ask for help from the police or the medical system, because she is still an illegal migrant, she had to manage on her own and she bitterly remarks she did not get much help from other people.

In order to suggest the indifference of the receiving society to the migrants' problems and the isolation/marginalisation that it condemns them to, the filmic text never shows Maria (or any other migrant figure) interacting with the French hosts. She socializes with other Romanian migrants (she is shown having a chat on the balcony of one of her Romanian friends' flat) and keeps in touch with her family only by phone.

The end of the film reveals, however, the fact that Maria's sense of identity has undergone significant changes within the five years she had to live away from her husband and from the rest of their family. She seems to have learned to enjoy her independence (her way of dressing is not very sophisticated, but quite elegant and completely different from the traditional folk costume she probably used to wear in the village) and she has finally found the courage to challenge her husband's authority as the head of the family. She is outraged that Petru will not join her and Adrian in Paris, and that, given the circumstances, she is the one gossiped about back home, forced into a new stereotypical frame, that of the easy woman (she is rumoured to have filed for divorce). She is supported in liberating herself from a marriage that has not brought her much satisfaction by her friends in Paris, who encourage her to divorce Petru and get on with her life, and whose families have evolved towards a more balanced distribution of gender roles in the domestic sphere. (The husband of one of Maria's friends takes care of the children while the women chat on the balcony.) But, through all the hardships that her life as an illegal migrant and ultimately as a woman challenging traditional behavioural patterns, Maria remains the epitome of the good mother, holding a strong emotional bond with Adrian as the final scene of the film shows¹³.

Part of the more in-depth investigation of patterns of behaviour related to Romanian peasant women's identity, with an aim at providing the answer to the question 'what makes a good wife', the last film of the trilogy follows one of its protagonists' – Mihaela Marinca's – gradual transformation from an 'adventurer' and 'prodigal daughter' (at the beginning of her 'quest' for better financial gain in Paris) into an 'exile' and 'victim of violence'¹⁴.

Mihaela migrates to Paris and puts up with humiliating living and working conditions to provide for her family and unemployed husband back home. That may account for her mother-in-law's initially supportive attitude as she describes Mihaela as "a good girl" who "won't do anything stupid". As a matter of fact, the film plays beautifully on spoken text and visual strategies in suggesting the breach between what people say and what they may actually think. A good case in point might be the juxtaposition of Mihaela's conversations over the phone with her husband and in-laws and her voice-over on the videotape that she sends home, in which she tries to convince the family (and perhaps, herself¹⁵) that she is fine, with the sequences that visually dwell on the dirty, decaying warehouse from a probably deserted industrial facility, in the Parisian periphery, where Mihaela lives. These sequences are recurrently brought to the foreground as if to enhance their shocking effect on the viewers, with whom Mihaela's husband, relatives and friends identify at some point. In addition, a similar divorce between words and images emerges in two other sets of sequences: some reveal Mihaela's in-laws sinking in somewhat accusatory silence when reference is made to the benefits of emigration, as they remain attached to a simple, though poor, way of life that endured in time and, therefore, appears most appropriate to them; others show Mihaela's

husband, Vasile, difficultly coping with their separation and change of roles in the family and bitterly joking about her faithfulness in an attempt at saving face in front of the villagers who question maliciously her allegiance to their marriage vows, when she refuses to return with her sister Mariana and her brother-in-law. It is obvious that, without openly admitting it, Mihaela conceives emigration as the only opportunity to get more independence and to break through the constraining roles that the rigid patriarchal pattern of the rural community imposes on her. But, as in Maria Damian's case, such a daring attitude will not be left 'unpunished': Mihaela may have been 'lucky' and succeeded in migrating, but the miserable living and working conditions, and the stigma of bad reputation at home make it impossible for her to 'enjoy her success.'

The re-negotiation of the relationship with the rural community at home is not the only source of psychological pressure that the Romanian migrant woman – here, Mihaela Marinca – must cope with. As in Maria Damian's case, the status of an illegal migrant entails living in fear of imprisonment and deportation for lack of a valid residence permit, and being subject to violence; Mihaela is deprived of all she had managed to gather by hard work in her small miserable room when a gang of violent migrants attacks the colony in the warehouse. Then, silences, close-ups on blank staring or tear-shedding eyes sustain, at the level of the filmic discourse, the representation of her vulnerability and suffering.

Altogether, the image of the emasculated Mihaela reinforces the misogynist myth of the Medusa to a certain extent, as she is portrayed as strong and independent on the one hand, and as broken by a society in which women (especially migrants) are only offered secondary roles as domestic labourers in a man's urban world. In addition, though she attains more autonomy, she cannot escape the 'long arm' of the patriarchal 'monster' from back home, as she is confronted with oblique, stigmatising suspicions of misbehaviour that diminish the importance of her success as a hard-working economic provider. Under the circumstances, her return to nature and local patriarchy becomes a highly desired alternative, especially for her husband, which, nonetheless, she continues to resist.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the questions regarding migration, identity construction, gender and cultural differences that Angus Macqueen's films leave open to further investigation must be considered in the wider framework of his melancholy exploration of the death of a culture. To a certain extent, the British director fails to detach himself completely from Western stereotypical representations of the East (Romania) as rural and, therefore, idyllic, yet primitive and still highly patriarchal at heart. Perhaps, this is also one of the reasons why his female protagonists are chosen so as to illustrate the traditional roles of mother and wife. However, two particularities of his perspective on the Romanian society affected by migration earn his work a particular place among the documentaries inspired by Romanians' (permanent or temporary) displacement to other foreign cultural spaces. On the one hand, "recording in elegiac detail a pastoral way of life that was once of all (...) European histories"¹⁷, Macqueen's filmic discourse draws the viewers' attention on the loss of a cultural heritage that belongs not only to the Romanians but to all Europeans. On the other hand, it endeavours to make the viewers see his protagonists as individuals whose stories of desperation, isolation, rebellion, confusion and identity loss/(re)construction are worth considering empathically. Thus, Angus Macqueen's trilogy could be seen as belonging to that category of media texts that urge for a more tolerant approach to and a positive change in the public understanding of the encounters with the gendered and cultural Other in the framework of migration.

Notes

[1] Cojocaru, M., A. Gulei, G. Irimescu, C. Luca, A. Lupu, and V. Miftode, "Migrația și efectele ei în plan familial", in *Migrația și traficul minorilor neînsoțiți: Măsuri urgente pentru minorii aflați în situație de vulnerabilitate extremă*, IOM (International Organisation for Migration), 2006, p. 5, available at http://singuracasa.ro/images/img_asistenta_sociala/pe_ntru_profesionisti/resurse_asistenta_sociala_copil_singur_acasa/abilitati/Migratia_si_efectele_ei_in_plan_familial_OIM2006.pdf. See also Colipcă, G. I. and I. Ivan-Mohor,

- “Context Analysis and Methodology Review Report (WP2). Romania”, *Gender – Migration – Intercultural Interaction*, 2009, p.7. available at <http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/wp2romania.pdf>.
- [2] Cojocaru, M. et al., *op. cit.*, p. 10 and Colipcă, G. I. and I. Ivan-Mohor, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- [3] There are sources which acknowledge the fact that there is a certain pattern of distribution of male and female workers in relation to the nature of the labour domains most of them have been employed in, namely constructions for men, and domestic activities (housecleaning, caring, babysitting, etc.) as well as tourism (hotels, restaurants) for women. See Simina, O. L., “Next in Line – Romanians at the Gates of the EU (emigrants, border control, legislation)”, in *SISEC Discussion Papers*, No. II, Issue 1 (February), Universitatea de Vest, Timișoara, 2005, p. 14, available at http://aei.pitt.edu/4465/01/SDP_II-1-2005_Ovidiu_SIMINA.pdf and <http://ideas.repec.org/p/wpa/wuwpla/0510008.html>; Constantin, D. L. et al., *The Migration Phenomenon from the Perspective of Romania’s Accession to the European Union*, Pre-Accession impact Studies II, Study no.5, The European Institute of Romania, București, 2004, p. 51; Sufaru, I., “Economia migrației internaționale a românilor în perioada postcomunistă,” in *Barometrul Social*, nr. 20, septembrie-octombrie 2004, București, p. 76; and Colipcă, G. I. and I. Ivan-Mohor, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- [4] Institutul Național de Statistică, “Populație”, sections 2.29 and 2.43 in *Anuarul Statistic al României*, București, 2006, available at <http://www.insse.ro/cms/rw/pages/index.ro.do>.
- [5] “Migration in Brief: Europe,” 2006, www.unfpa.org/swp/2006/presskit/docs/factsheet_europe.doc.
- [6] Baldwin-Edwards, M., “Migration Policies for a Romania within the European Union: Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis”, in *Mediterranean Migration Observatory*, Working Paper no. 7 (December), Panteion University, Athens, 2005, p. 14, available at http://www.mmo.gr/pdf/publications/mmo_working_papers/MMO_WP7.pdf; Nițulescu, D. C. and A. Oancea, *Cu bine, din Europa! Studiu despre migrația forței de muncă românești în Uniunea Europeană*, Asociația Națională a Birourilor de Consiliere pentru Cetățeni (ANBCC), București, 2007, p. 15, available at http://www.robcc.ro/studii_bcc/880282470625000_ro.pdf.
- [7] According to Geert Hofstede, one of the main dimensions of a culture is given by its encodings of masculinity and femininity and by the social roles that men and women are expected to fulfil. In this respect, he distinguishes between **masculine** and **feminine** societies. The former value material and social success, and ascribe clear gender roles to their members, in accordance to which men are active and dominate the (superior) public sphere, whereas women are relegated to an inferior position and assigned domestic roles. The latter promote an overlapping of gender roles; both female and male members are assumed to be concerned with the welfare of society, encouraging modesty and sympathy for the weak, and aiming at the political ideal of the welfare state. Hofstede, G., *Cultures and Organisations. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival. Software of the Mind*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1991, and Gavrilu, E., *Theory and Practice of Imagology. Experiencing the Other in Anglo-Romanian Cultural Encounters*, Editura Fundației Universitare “Dunărea de Jos”, Galați, 2002.
- [8] Angus Macqueen’s ‘crusade’ against the indifference of the West-European neighbours towards the Eastern societies after the fall of Communist regimes started with a series of documentaries that lay special stress on “the Russia that was emerging from the break-up of the Soviet Union”. Among the most appreciated documentaries produced by Angus Macqueen about the legacy of the Soviet past and about Russia after the collapse of Communism, one could mention: *Second Russian Revolution* (1991), *Gulag* (1999), and *Vodka* (2000). See Macqueen, A., “Angus Macqueen by Angus Macqueen”, *The Second Annual Seattle International Documentary Film Festival*, 2004, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>.
- [9] Macqueen, A., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>.
- [10] Adams, T., “Angus Macqueen by Tim Adams”, *The Second Annual Seattle International Documentary Film Festival*, 2004, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>.
- [11] Colipcă, G. I., I. Ivan-Mohor, M. Praisler, G. Dima, A. M. Dumitrașcu, and M. Neagu, “National Case Study. National Identity and the Media (WP4). Romania”, *Gender – Migration – Intercultural Interaction. Ge.M.IC.*, 2010, p. 64, available at <http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/WP4-Report-Romania-final.pdf>.
- [12] See Hofstede, G., *op.cit.*, and Gavrilu, E., *op.cit.*, p. 11.
- [13] Colipcă, G. I., I. Ivan-Mohor, M. Praisler, G. Dima, A. M. Dumitrașcu, and M. Neagu, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.
- [14] *Ibidem*, p. 73.
- [15] Though she would not complain in front of the others, at some point, Mihaela privately admits that she is very disappointed by the living conditions that she is forced by the circumstances to accept: “My sister Mariana met the coach and warned me what to expect. I never thought it would be this bad.” See the script of *The Last Peasants: The Good Wife* (2003). Directed and produced by Angus Macqueen, October Films, the UK.
- [16] Colipcă, G. I., I. Ivan-Mohor, M. Praisler, G. Dima, A. M. Dumitrașcu, and M. Neagu, *op. cit.*, pp. 66.
- [17] Adams, T., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>.

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Filmography

The Last Peasants: Journeys; The Good Wife (2003). Directed and produced by Angus Macqueen, October Films, the UK.