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CULINARY PRACTICES, GENDER RELATIONS AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN FELICIA MIHALI'S FICTION OF MIGRATION

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Abstract

The paper analyzes portrayals of male and female Romanian – Canadian characters in recent novels by Felicia Mihali, a writer of Romanian diaspora in Canada. The analysis blends literary and cultural studies, relying on an interdisciplinary approach that fuses gender, diaspora/transnational studies and food studies. The essay will focus on Mihali's novel, A Second Chance (2014), paralleled by references to Bigama (2022), in order to explore the relation between cultural/gender identity and the main characters' culinary choices and cooking practices. By discussing aspects related to food preferences and patterns of consumption, the paper aims to establish whether one can identify ambivalent mechanisms of gender relations and hybrid cultural forces in the dynamics of the immigrant couples. Therefore, the paper sets out to answer questions like the following ones: in the context of displacement from Eastern Europe to North America, is cooking represented as an act of female submission? Do the characters' culinary choices modify after migration and if they do, does this process reflect a cultural change, as well? Which native cultural values are preserved/discarded through food choices and which new values are taken over by the female characters? The comparative analysis of these novels suggests that there is a certain degree of cultural change illustrated by the female characters' consumption choices and their attitude towards inherited patriarchal norms.

Keywords: cooking; gender; migration; patriarchy; Romanian; transnational.

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1. Introduction

The present paper explores two recent novels published by Felicia Mihali, a contemporary Romanian-Canadian author, whose fiction of migration is mostly published in French, but also available in English and/or Romanian translations. Research involving the links between the Romanian and Canadian spaces has focused on the status of Canadian studies as an academic discipline in Romania (Petru, 2015, Albu & Petraş, 2020), Romanian translations of Canadian literature (Bud 2014), studies on Canadian literature and its perception in Romania (Mudure 2020, Petru 2014), the history and patterns of Romanian immigration to Canada (Culic, 2019; Tudoroiu, 2007; Vieru, 2006). The body of research on literature by Romanian authors from the Canadian diaspora is still expanding; among the existing approaches one mentions Monica Bottez' study on Romanian-Canadian literature that analyzes fiction of diaspora from a transnational perspective (2014). (However, Felicia Mihali is not among the authors discussed in this paper). Although she is an active writer and translator, present in both the Canadian and the Romanian spaces, Felicia Mihali's work is in the process of receiving

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stronger critical attention. Studies of her fiction include analyses of her first novel *Țara Brânzei/Le Pays du Fromage* (1999) (Olujić & Džankić 2020), *Țara Brânzei/Le Pays du Fromage* and *Confession pour un ordinateur* (2009) (Ionescu 2013; Preumont 2011), *Dina* (2008) (Oktapoda 2010), *The Darling of Kandahar* (2012) (Eiben, 2018), *A Second Chance* (Bobariu 2023). Considering the status of the present research regarding Mihali's works, this article aims to add a new interpretative layer, by introducing a comparative perspective on *A Second Chance* and *Bigama* that blends gender, food studies and transnational approaches to migration.

Une deuxième chance pour Adam/A Second Chance/A doua șansă pentru Adam is a first-person woman's narrative that unfolds the quotidien life of an immigrant Romanian couple, made up of the (nameless) wife/narrator and the husband, Adam. Survivor of a stroke, Adam has permanent sequelae of memory and speech impairment, which render him dependent on his wife for most of his routine activities. *La bigame/Bigama*, published in French and Romanian, reiterates the theme of the Romanian immigrant couple in Canada, also narrated by the voice of an anonymous wife². This novel focuses on the female protagonist's dilemma, recounted in the first-person narrative. The woman's story foregrounds her struggle to abandon Aron (her husband) and start a new life with her Romanian lover, (Roman), also a member of the Romanian community in Montreal. Besides this obvious thematic similarity, these novels also share a focus on food, cooking, recipes, therefore presenting women in a deep connection with the kitchen space. Considering the centrality of the female voice as well as the abundance of gastronomical details in both novels, the present analysis sets out to establish the significance of food in relation to the gender conventions as shaped by the characters' cultural transplantation through their migration to Canada. Before proceeding with a close reading of passages from the selected novels, the following section will present an overview of the theoretical tools explored for the analysis.

2. Literature of migration through the lens of food studies, gender and transnationality

The present research relies on the widespread assumption shared by food studies, gender studies, anthropology and cultural studies that posit a connection between the gastronomical field and processes of (cultural) identity formation, fact that renders food “endlessly interpretable” (Eagleton quoted in Shahani, 2018, 3). The strong link between food and culture at large is also proclaimed by Roland Barthes, who defines food as “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situation and behavior” (qtd. in Counihan & Van Esterik 2012, 21), thus extending the meaning of food from strict materiality to a symbolic level. Coghlan considers that food represents a “cultural marker of complex and oft-conflicting desires, affiliations and identities” (2020, 1). The cultural studies perspective proposed by Piatti-Farnell and Lee Brien highlights the deeply resourceful signifying repertoire of food, remarking that “the protean abilities of food in narrative contexts give way for myriad interpretations” (2018, 2). Moreover, the same critics argue that the emerging field of literary food studies explores the ability of food to “convey cultural messages in a variety of literary-related contexts” (2018, 1). In her quest for an analysis of food writing via literary criticism, Anke Klitzing reinforces the fact that food is a carrier of “social and symbolic meanings” (2018, 4). Along similar lines, yet from a gender studies perspective, Sarah Sceats considers that “food and its activities offer multiple possibilities for expression and action”, therefore having the potential to become a “universal signifier” (2000, 8). Given the wide range of symbolic and cultural significance associated with food and food-related practices, it is no wonder that connections have been established between the field of gastronomy and the world of literary fiction, as the following subsection briefly discusses.

2.1 Literature and food

An emblematic analogy between literature and food is established by Terry Eagleton when he considers two conspicuous aspects shared by the two spheres, namely their capacity for infinite interpretation and their relational nature: “literature, like food, is endlessly interpretable... and food,

² For the present discussion, the quotations used for analysis extracted from the Romanian edition of the novel have been translated by me.

like literature, looks like an object, but is actually a relationship” (Eagleton, 1998, 204–5). Other critical voices have focused on literature as a suitable setting for analyzing the complex interplay between food and identity (Coghlan, 2020, 6). Another possible approach envisages an intersection between food studies and literary criticism that aims to investigate “the semiotic power of food in literature and culture” by applying ideas from the field of food studies to literary texts (Shahani, 2020, 29). In a fairly similar fashion, Tigner and Carruth’s model (2017) aims to blend directions of research from cultural history, archival studies and food studies. An equally appealing outlook, (Goldstein 2018), discusses how the dynamics of eating relations in literature delineates multiple borders of inclusion/exclusion by means of religion, class, race, sex (48). Considering this recent body of research in the fields of food studies and literature, one can state that it definitely shapes a fertile area of debate and study. Hence, the present paper sets out to situate itself along these lines of intersection, as it will analyze contemporary literature of migration through the lens of food and gender studies.

2.2 *Cooking and gender*

Since the main characters of the novels in question are women immigrants often portrayed in the kitchen space, the discussion will also rely on theoretical considerations that highlight the associations between prescribed female roles and patriarchal conventions (Keyser, 2018, 156; Piatti-Farnell & Brien, 2018, 3). The body of the paper will rely on close reading of specific passages in the novels, filtered through theories that connect ideals of femininity/masculinity with food related practices. In this manner, the argument aims to establish whether Felicia Mihali wraps the culinary-gender pair into an ambivalent package. To what extent does the association of women with cooking activities illustrate the idea of female submission? What kind of gender profiles and power relations, if any, are encoded through food acquisition, consumption, preparation?

2.3 *Food, migration, transnationalism, cultural change*

Another research direction I have considered is the link between food, cultural identity and change in the context of transnational migration. Given the multifarious symbolic repertoire of food, there is general agreement with respect to its importance as a strong identity marker in the context of immigrant communities (Dalessio, 2012). When discussed against the background of deracination, culinary choices may engulf various processes ranging from the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters (Shahani, 2000), to structures of memory (Tigner and Carruth, 2017; Kashdan, 2018), perceptions of belonging (Piatti-Farnell & Lee Brien 2018, 3) and feelings of (in)security induced by the immigrants’(in)capacity to adapt to a new culture (Klitzing 2020, 2).

Transnationality further nuances these inter-related aspects and I consider it relevant for understanding the cultural dynamics at play in Mihali’s literary work. Interestingly, this particular regime of cross-border mobility surfaces both in the author’s life³ as well as in her characters’ itineraries. The paper relies on a conceptualization of transnationalism as a special condition of multiple/simultaneous belonging to different nations (Vertovec, 2009) afforded by the immigrants’ ability to maintain various connections between the host country and their homeland (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc 2003). By integrating this dimension into the analysis, the discussion aims to establish whether the characters’ connections with their homeland (Romania), either through travel, memories or food consumption patterns also reveal manners in which their cultural outlooks have been reshaped as a consequence of migration. Are there cultural conventions regarding gender relations/roles that have been preserved/alterd in the transition from Eastern-Europe to Canada and how are culinary practices employed to convey these transformations?

³ Felicia Mihali divides her life between Canada, the country of permanent residence, and Romania, where she has been spending her summers for several years.

3. Gender relations, gastronomy and cultural change in Felicia Mihali's *A Second Chance and Bigama*

3.1 Women and cooking

The wife's reflections in *A Second Chance* provide frequent insights into the world of cooking, gender relations and cultural norms that function in this uprooted Romanian family. Besides working as a teacher in Montreal, the wife also looks after the husband, and therefore has taken over all the responsibilities of the household, cooking included. While this special situation seems to justify an imbalanced division of labor, the way things used to be before Adam's stroke provides a hint at the association between cooking and female attributions: "I chop. I grind. I mince. I fry. I boil ... *The kitchen has always been my domain.* Adam never much enjoyed everyday cooking, not for lack of interest but because he *thinks preparing food is women's work*" (Mihali, 2014, 20) (emphasis added). We also find out that Adam would cook on rare occasions, only when his wife was sick, very tired or when helping with Christmas preparation of Romanian traditional dishes in Canada (Mihali, 2014, 21-2).

Adam used to work in engineering and public management, he is a holder of an MA and a PhD degree, both obtained in Canada. While these details clearly point to his intellectual background, his beliefs about a woman's duty to cook indicate deep-seated patriarchal standards. If we couple this information with the fact that his seventy-seven mother in Romania is in charge of "feeding the whole family" (Mihali, 2014, 20), we may assume that his outlook echoes inherited cultural norms. This hypothesis is confirmed by his wife's bitter-sweet association between cooking and Romanian traditional values, as she invokes a cultural context where women do not seem bothered by this time-consuming role: "The women in my family had never complained about spending too long in the kitchen, and *I wasn't one to break with tradition.*" (Mihali, 2014, 20-1) (emphasis added). A similar conviction is held by Aron, the Romanian husband of the anonymous wife-narrator in *Bigama*, who clings to "a secular belief that the role of women is in the kitchen" (Mihali, 2022, 76, my translation). Interestingly, Aron is portrayed as an urban type of Greek ancestry, who despises Romanian rural population for their lack of sophistication, if not their primitive nature (Mihali, 2022, 47, 80). The irony of it is that his alleged standards of refinement go hand in hand with rural conceptions of female marginality.

Considering the husbands' common assumption regarding women's relegation to the kitchen space, one may assume that Felicia Mihali aims to foreground (and eventually question) the strong patriarchal core of Romanian culture. Recent research on gender studies in Romania (Hurubeanu 2013; Pop, 2016; Rusu & Baboş 2019; Vlad, 2022) confirms the lingering effects of patriarchal norms and macho standards, despite the infusion of more progressive Western values generated by Romania's adherence to the EU in 2007. Among the most common gender stereotypes derived from the dominance of "traditional-patriarchal cultural models in our society" (Hurubeanu, 2013, 3), we retain the association of women with the industrious housewife condition, domesticity/household care (Pop, 2016, 305; Vlad, 2022, 32) and the private space (Rusu & Babos, 2019, 332), as well as the proliferation of an "arrogant and aggressive type of masculinity" (Pop, 2016, 302).

Apart from their affiliation to the domestic sphere, both women created by Mihali perform activities that connect them to the public domain; while the wife in *A Second Chance* is a teacher of French, the female protagonist in *Bigama* is enrolled in an MA program in comparative literature at the University of Montreal, where she develops an interest in postcolonial studies. Alongside their professional aspirations, both characters appear to have internalized the patriarchal set of duties, despite their intellectual background, that one may correlate with an emancipated condition. The awareness of this contrast seems more pronounced in *Bigama*, especially after the wife decides to leave Aron and move in with her lover, Roman. Despite the sudden shift from wife to mistress, the protagonist maintains her domestic household routine, although there are no hints that Roman may impose these duties on her. Hence, the character's days in the "new suburban home" (Mihali, 2022, 86, my translation)

include a repertoire of never-ending chores, minutely rendered in her recollections. The wide range of activities associated with cooking and cleaning deplete her creative energy and are presented in stark contrast with her academic ambition: “After such housekeeping work in this vast America, reading seemed simply discordant with the setting (Mihali, 2022, 87, my translation). The character is perfectly aware of the time-consuming dimension of these domestic tasks, yet she neither stops doing them, nor thinks of a solution to manage them differently. I would say that the perpetuation of this exclusively domestic condition leads to an erosion of the character’s self-esteem, as illustrated by the way she describes her uninviting appearance:

Busy from morning till night with housekeeping, I was disgraceful to see, with my pants deformed at the knees, my headscarf faded on my head, my blouses bought for a few dollars from the Salvation Army, unpicked at the sleeves. In my behavior and dress, I *resembled the women of my village, overloaded with work ...* In the face of the smallness of my new life, reduced once more to *household maintenance*, I felt cruelly that I had passed by a great destiny. I was built to make revolutions, because I was brave and tenacious. I should have spent my life fighting for a good cause, burning for great ideas. Instead of fighting injustice, I was fighting dust, traces of soap and dirty linen. *My struggle was limited to making dinner after lunch*” (Mihali, 2022, 92, my translation) (emphasis added).

Ironically, her new life as a mistress comes along with this frustrating dimension, which represents a continuation of her wifely duties, rather than a freeing experience, as one would expect after her stepping out of marriage. Therefore, an important aspect for analysis is why she clings to these routines that interfere with more ambitious plans and make her feel miserable. I suggest that part of the answer lies in the parallel she draws between herself and fellow Romanian women from the rural space. At this point, I argue that the transnational dimension of Mihali’s novel provides an important lens for understanding the predicament of her character.

From the very beginning, the protagonist is presented as a person with no strong attachments to either places or people. At some point, the narrative voice informs the reader that the character has never been truly happy, which allowed her easy transition from rural to urban Romania and eventually to Canada (Mihali, 2022, 12-13). Notwithstanding the absence of an explicit nostalgic disposition towards her homeland, the character maintains certain connections with her family from a Southern Romanian village, (phone calls, but also travelling back home). The most important visit depicted in the novel is triggered by the death of her mother, that causes the character’s temporary return. Apart from the normal sadness inherent in the event, this episode is used by the writer as an opportunity to paint a gloomy and, at times, grotesque picture of postcommunist rural Romania. The rustic setting appears populated by toothless old women, spiteful relatives and shady officials, all playing some part in the organization of the funeral. Since certain rumors render her mother’s death suspect, two policemen and a coroner arrive at the place, they remove the body (surrounded by pink ribbons) from the coffin and perform autopsy on a table improvised in the middle of the yard. The exposed naked body, the savage procedure and the people’s eagerness to witness the act render a mixture of indecency and cruelty. Moreover, in a tragicomical manner, the coroner threatens to expose the peasant who has illegally injected formalin into the body, but his eagerness to make justice is quickly appeased by a bribe. Likewise, the priest demands immediate payment of the late mother’s unpaid debts to the church, without issuing a receipt. At the end of the funeral feast, the protagonist covers all the expenses without asking for any receipts, either. The second visit, after her father’s death, culminates with the protagonist’s and Roman’s arrival at her parents’ ransacked home, emptied of all the valuable goods by thieves in the village. All these details are meant to illustrate the coordinates of a corruptible world, characterized by low living standards and lack of civilized norms. By the same token, her mother’s destiny illustrates the hardships inherent in the woman’s condition in this type of society. Since her father had been ill for 15 years, the mother had been in charge with all the household responsibilities as well as various agricultural works until her death. The only possible outlet available in this context was a lover from the village, who used to spend the woman’s money on alcohol.

Research on gender identities in rural Romania confirm the “predominantly patriarchal family relations” (Anghel & Dobay, 2019, 119) that characterized the country before joining the socialist sphere of influence. The communist focus on collectivization contained the promise of women’s emancipation, afforded by their “participation in paid labor and liberation ... from household duties” (Anghel & Dobay, 2019, 119). However, the project of modernization via transition to industrialization simply recast Romanian women in the position of submissive mothers working tirelessly in the fields (Anghel & Dobay, 2019, 120), therefore failing to generate a real sense of empowerment. Along similar lines, the forced urbanization dictated by the communist regime could not remove the “village power structures and rituals” (Anghel & Dobay, 2019, 121) of the new city inhabitants. Consequently, the entire socio-cultural edifice relied on the disjuncture between surface level modernization and the parallel survival of rural patriarchal standards. As Anghel and Dobay rightfully assert: “Culturally speaking, Romanian women did not fully leave the village memory, their encounters with modernity being limited in subject of autonomy, familial duties, social networking and economic mobility” (2019, 124).

I think the same premise applies to the main character in *Bigama*, as it accounts for her inability to shun inherited cultural values. Considering that her parents are still living in a village while she is in Canada, we may assume that Mihali’s immigrant female character in the *Bigama* belongs to the first generation of rural women transferred to the urban space. As a product of a traditional patriarchal culture, the character is a carrier of these cultural values that she cannot discard, because of their being so deep-seated. At some point, she clearly associates the refuge into chores with the Romanian traditional remedy against women’s unhappiness, a lesson taught by the Romanian mothers that proves its validity even across the Ocean (Mihali, 2022, 119). Therefore, her constant focus on the domestic sphere, notwithstanding her writerly and academic ambitions, demonstrates the resilient nature of village memory that survives the character’s cultural transplantation. At this point, one may state that both novels present the conservative approach to gender roles as an ongoing process of Romanian culture, whether at home or abroad, although the association between patriarchy and the Romanian rural world is not apparent in *A Second Chance*.

3.2 Weak masculinities

In this context, an intriguing aspect that surfaces in both novels is an image of masculinity that seems to contradict the ideal of dominant manhood inherent in patriarchal thinking. Designated as either hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), or orthodox masculinity (Anderson, 2009), the ideal of normative masculinity shaped by the patriarchal discourse relies on “sexist and misogynistic tenets” (Anderson, 2009, 36) that reinforce men’s patriarchal dominance over women. Among the features associated with hegemonic masculinity one mentions “heterosexual virility, power” (Zarkov qtd. in Norocel, 2015, 145), being a breadwinner, taking risks (Urdea, 2020, 273-275). Research on Romanian masculinities point out that, although Romania cannot be referred to as a Western country, its hegemonic model of masculinity is defined along Western lines, involving whiteness, physical strength, heterosexuality and ruggedness (Phua qtd. in Bartoş et al., 2010, 121).

Considering the desired attributes prescribed by normative masculinity, it becomes clear that the husbands in *Bigama* and *A Second Chance* fulfill only the ideal of whiteness. On the one hand, there is Adam, reduced by illness to an infantile condition, that renders him incapable of taking care of himself. On the other hand, although a healthy man, Aron voluntarily withdraws into the private sphere, aiming to undermine the Canadian system by his own version of civil disobedience (Mihali, 2022, 21) (he refuses to get a job, drive a car, make a credit loan or pay taxes). Instead, he prefers to spend most of his time at home or going shopping (for bargains). Albeit for different reasons, Aron and Adam represent versions of weak masculinities, whose lives unfold predominantly in the private sphere. Moreover, both male characters are characterized by a condition of helplessness that renders them dependent on their wives. In Adam’s case, this dependence is generated by his physical disability, which justifies his complete reliance on his wife. By contrast, Aron’s example paints a

satirical picture, as his dependence appears to be a direct effect of his patriarchal expectations from a woman, coupled with laziness, as the analysis aims to demonstrate.

As well as her mother, the wife in *Bigama* has taken over all the household roles, including those associated with male responsibilities: “In our couple, I was the repairman, the dyer, the carpenter” (Mihali, 2022, 79), “the man in the family” (Mihali, 2022, 83), or “In our couple I was playing the male’s role” (Mihali, 2022, 45). I find it significant that the last things the wife does before leaving Aron is to cook his favorite dishes, change the bed linen and the towels in the bathroom, and vacuum the entire house (Mihali, 2022, 68). Doing these chores willingly, on the day of her planned escape, reinforces the claim that rural structures of patriarchal thinking are so deeply engrained that they survive one’s cultural transplantation, at least in the initial stages of emigration, as this character is presented. (By comparison, Adam’s wife seems to limit her activities only to the necessary chores and therefore she seems less burdened by domestic responsibilities. At the same time, her connection with a rural Romanian background is not alluded to, so one may assume that she is more detached from village patriarchal norms. Moreover, the Romanian family in *A Second Chance* represents an example of a longer exposure to Western norms, unlike the couple in *Bigama*, depicted in the early days of migration.) This difference may also account for the women’s different attitudes to traditional gender roles prescribed by Romanian patriarchal discourses, fashioned away from the city space. Coming back to Mihali’s portrayal of masculinity, one may argue that it acquires caricatural dimensions in *Bigama*. After the wife decides to move in with her lover, Aron becomes completely helpless, as he is unable to handle the chores usually done by his wife: cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, etc. This situation is described in humorous tones as Aron calls his wife daily, asking for recipes that she dictates to him over the phone. Likewise, another example of Aron’s utter dependence on his wife is the fact that he does not manage to do the cleaning and the laundry and therefore his wife has to leave Roman’s place in order to save Aron from physical dirt.

However, going beyond the amusing effect, my claim is that Mihali foregrounds male helplessness in order to unmask the paradoxical effects of patriarchal thinking that comes to erode the very idea of strong masculinity. If patriarchal conventions relegate all the domestic chores to women, men become devoid of any motivation to act in this sphere, therefore completely dependent on their spouses. Whether we talk about disease (Adam) or laziness/passivity (Aron), Mihali’s fictional husband characters share the condition of weakness/vulnerability, which I interpret as a way by which the author aims to highlight the unfortunate consequences of patriarchal outlook on both men and women. One may be tempted to say that by creating these couples, Mihali attempts a reversal of the binary female-private sphere-domesticity/male-public space-breadwinning, but is it case? Not really, since the binaries are not reversed, but definitely disrupted: while the men are indeed helpless and mainly associated with the private sphere, the domestic tasks are still reserved to women, although they are also active in the public space. Another important detail related to this aspect is the fact that both female characters are anonymous/nameless. This may be a way to suggest an erasure of women’s individuality and a sense of universality with respect to the idea of female oppression: these two nameless protagonists may stand for all women who have been internalizing patriarchal standards of subordination, along with their efforts for emancipation. In a sense, what Mihali seems to imply is that the effects of patriarchal subordination are still in place, given that women do not relinquish their domestic roles. And perhaps the men’s vulnerable status may indicate a “crisis of masculinity” (Edwards, 2006), engendered by their excessive (patriarchal) reliance on women to fulfill tasks considered undignified for them: (cooking, cleaning).

If the two Romanian husbands are depicted as examples of helpless masculinities, it would be relevant to examine the profile of the Romanian lover (Roman) whose presence eventually triggers the end of a marriage. The wife’s reflections establish a clear opposition between Aron and Roman and the most significant difference seems to be (surprisingly) the men’s different ethnic backgrounds: Aron’s half Greek ancestry makes him despise his wife’s Romanian ploughman origins, considering them backward, unsophisticated and obscure (Mihali, 2022, 46-7). By contrast, Roman’s profile seems to facilitate her contact with the rustic Romania with its rigid morals typical of all primitive, patriarchal

and agrarian societies (Mihali, 2022, 44). This suggests that in the early days of her deracination, the woman migrant needs the comfort of cultural familiarity; hence she is happy to see that Roman has a small garden where he grows tomatoes, parsley, lovage, peppers and wild mint (Mihali, 2022, 44). She is also moved by his habit of smoking barefoot on the porch, as her father used to do in the village. The fact that they share the same values as the Romanian peasants from the Southern part of the country strengthens their attraction, making the female character feel accepted for what she is, and not be looked down upon, as she is her marriage. At the same time, unlike Aron and Adam, Roman is an active type: he has a job at a multinational company, he has properties in Canada and he is involved in the Romanian community's life where he tries to promote artistic talent. Moreover, Roman is perceived as an ancestral warrior/hunter (Mihali, 2022, 84) male type, with whom a woman could "easily recreate the originary family, the one from the Biblical beginnings" (Mihali, 2022, 84). I would say that Roman's masculinity resembles the hegemonic type, given his dynamic performance in the public space, as opposed to Aron's and Adam's passive stance. I interpret the woman's attraction to this male model as further proof of her alignment with a patriarchal model that promotes hegemonic masculinity as an ideal. In the next part of the paper, I will correlate the characters' eating preferences with the dynamics of gender relations, aiming to establish whether their choices of food express certain power relations within the couples.

3.3 *Cooking, masculine and feminine foods*

Apart from the patriarchal dichotomy that associates women with food preparation and men with food consumption (Dalessio, 2012,10) (Adams, 2010, 56), an analogous distinction advances the idea of "strong foods" that are destined to men and "weak foods" that are considered suitable for women (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, 52-3). Interestingly, studies regarding food symbolism in the Western paradigm associate meat eating with aggression and virility, hence hegemonic masculinity, and a plant based-diet with patterns of women's consumption (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Adams, 2010). Considering these food/gender stereotypes, Adams goes further to suggest the embrace of feminist vegetarianism as a way to reject the values of a patriarchal society and its patterns of consumption (2010, 231).

Starting from these premises, this essay continues by discussing how/whether Mihali positions herself with respect to these discourses, considering the abundance of cooking details in the novels. Are these stereotypes present in her work and if so, what message do they convey regarding conventional gender roles in a Western society? It appears that the above-mentioned dichotomies do characterize Mihali's male and female characters, considering their choices of food. Adam and Roman represent the male taste par excellence, given their explicit preference for meat dishes. Before the stroke, Adam used to eat meat every day (Mihali, 2014, 91), while Roman is a passionate fan of meat (especially lamb), cold cuts and sausages. However, Aron seems to slightly deviate from this pattern, as suggested by his favorite dishes: dumplings soup, eggplant stew (Mihali, 2022, 67), green peas and dill, marinated olives and eggplants (Mihali, 2022, 108). Relying on the previous remarks, I would say that Aron's meatless tastes remove him from the category of hegemonic males. This aspect is also reinforced by his passive/lazy behavior and the refusal to become a responsible Canadian citizen. By contrast, the meat-eaters —Adam and Roman —are examples of active men and breadwinners (before the stroke, Adam used to work in a multinational company). Interestingly, the wives eating preferences also situate them in a traditional paradigm as both of them prefer a predominantly plant-based diet. Thus, Adam's wife likes "eggplants, tomatoes, marrows, radishes, and cabbages, all in their season. We eat light soups, mashed zucchini, barbecued eggplant, fruit compôtes" (Mihali, 2014, 91), and she reduced meat-consumption at one time per week and on special occasions. Similarly, Aron's wife cooks mainly soup, lovage borsches, eggplant stews, breaded zucchini, roasted peppers, eggplant salad, all seasoned with basil, wild mint, dill, thyme (Mihali, 2022, 76-7). If the spouses in *Bigama* share their eating habits, things are not the same in *A Second Chance* or in the relationship between Roman and his lover. I would argue that Felicia Mihali manages to render the conflict between genders by means of consumption patterns and cooking strategies in a nuanced manner, relying on the ambivalence of cooking as a female role.

As discussed earlier, cooking is associated with a patriarchal norm that assigns this role to women's activities in the private sphere. Notwithstanding the connotation of female submission involved in this task, some critics also talk about the idea of "female agency in the kitchen" (Tigner & Carruth, 2017, 26) conceiving cooking as "a medium of protest" (Keyser, 2018, 156). Could it be the case that Mihali's wives undermine patriarchy from within, by the very act of cooking? I think the answer is partially affirmative, since both female protagonists manage to impose, even if not completely, their vegetarian tastes upon their partners. After Adam's stroke, the wife is in total control of what they eat and she almost eliminates meat from their diet: "Since he had his stroke, we've been eating what I like" (Mihali, 2014, 91). Even if this change of eating habits is to Adam's health benefit, as suggested by his improved blood test results, the adoption of mainly vegetarian dishes is also a sign of female control: "Adam now eats whatever I prepare without any fuss [...] Whatever I recommend, he accepts unquestioningly" (Mihali 2014, 91). Along similar lines, but in a subtler manner, the mistress in *Bigama* succeeds in modifying Roman's strong appetite for meat, by adding lots of vegetables to his diet: "For Roman, meat was still the equivalent of a good meal. But the smell of oil flavored meat juices was now seasoned with plenty of *eggplant, zucchini, even sliced aniseed*. Cuisine remained a Romanian woman's most potent *weapon*" (Mihali, 2022, 120-1) (emphasis added). Therefore, a symbol of female relegation to the private sphere, cooking may also function as a mechanism of women's control within the couple. These examples suggest the ambivalent manner in which Felicia Mihali approaches the delicate topic of male-female interaction within the domestic sphere. While she definitely disapproves of the patriarchal system that generates female oppression, she also registers the cracks that may empower women; at the same time, she indirectly criticizes women for their complicity with the very patriarchal norms that suffocate them, even when away from their traditional homeland culture. The following part of the paper aims to capture the degrees of cultural change experienced by Mihali's wives as a consequence of migration to the West, as reflected by their attitude to food types, consumerist practices and sexual taboos (*Bigama*).

3.3.1 Seasonal and seasonless food, female thrift vs male consumerism

An interesting aspect raised by *A Second Chance* is the choice between seasonal and seasonless food, that seems to be gender-oriented, as well. Adam's wife is deeply attached to what she calls "nutritional history" (Mihali, 2014, 82) or "heredity theories" (Mihali, 2014, 91). More specifically, although in Canada, she clings to an eating system that includes only items that are in season in Romania, which are minutely listed according to specific months and Romanian rural traditions (Mihali, 2014,86-88). Before Adam's stroke, the wife's preferences were met with irony by him, a supporter of the eternal plenty provided by the Canadian supermarkets (Mihali, 2014,89). On the one hand, one may assume that the woman's preference for the food of her ancestors is a manifestation of homesickness, although there are no other elements that point to a strong nostalgic disposition towards Romania. On the other hand, the "tropes of seasonal and seasonless eating" (Tigner & Carruth, 2017, 26) have been associated with patterns of consumption prior to and respectively after industrialization and colonial expansion. While local consumption was the only available option before the era of European colonial conquests, out-of-season eating was made possible by industrialization and Western imperialism that led to "the rise of consumer food markets" (Tigner & Carruth, 2017, 35) and finally created the "globalized food marketplace" (Tigner & Carruth, 2017, 36). A similar distinction is noted by Beardsworth and Keil (1997), as they compare the features of traditional and modern food systems. While the former category is characterized "by patterns of local, relatively small-scale production" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, 34), the latter represents an industrial system of food production, distributed through the commercial market, characterized by large scale, choice and variety, operating at an international, global level (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, 34). Considering these reflections, I would argue that the wife's choice of seasonal food may represent a form of protest against the process of "delocalization" generated by "global system which provides food choice and variety for industrialized societies at the expense of economically marginal peoples" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, 43).

An interesting detail is the fact that both wives are characterized by a sense of thrift that is contrasted with Adam's and Roman's inclination to spend and consume. Adam's wife mentions his "taste for luxury" (Mihali, 2014, 159), distinct from her frugality: "I was raised to believe that women should be thrifty" (Mihali, 2014, 159). The same opposition surfaces in *Bigama*, where it represents one of the major clashes between Roman and his mistress. The protagonist feels that her prudent spending is an outdated practice in Canada, hence it may turn into an obstacle to integration, given that she cannot share the values of the "ideal citizens as uninhibited consumers" (Mihali, 2022, 88, my translation). For example, she is shocked by Roman's habit of spending money on expensive meals, while he cannot understand her contempt for the "rules of a society where everybody enjoyed the universal happiness of services" (Mihali, 2022, 35, my translation). Similarly, Roman condemns her habit of buying large amounts of food items, in order to save money. However, while he considers her stingy, she believes saving is a virtue embedded in her mores and genetics (Mihali, 2022, 111). These antipodal attitudes to spending and consumption, common to both couples, suggests that women have a critical outlook on excessive Western consumerism, while male characters (Aron excluded)⁴ tend to easily accept the consumption credo; moreover, both characters imply that saving is a trait inherited from their upbringing, therefore a link to the culture of origins. Interestingly, these women's pattern of consumption in the West can actually be an echo of the ideologies of thrift, scarcity and frugality disseminated by the state-socialist discourses of economic behavior (Hájek & Samec, 2017, 805) in the context of "generalized shortages" (Sucala, 2018, 176) and "chronic shortages of raw materials in Romanian economy" (Sucala, 2018, 156). If we couple this historical fact with the patriarchal emphasis on women's household responsibilities, we may assume that in communist times women would be more responsive to notions of "consumption reduction" (Voicu, 2018, 158) in order to manage the family's daily nutrition. By presenting different patterns of consumption within diasporic Romanian families/couples, Felicia Mihali implies that the Romanian women migrants are more likely to cling to their native practices, while the family's breadwinners seem more inclined to accept Western norms of excessive consumerism. The next passage of the paper discusses the degrees of cultural change experienced by the Romanian wives in their transition from Romania to Canada, as illustrated by their gastronomical choices, consumer behavior and the pursuit of freedom.

3.4 Migration and cultural change: consumerism, sexual liberation, food choices

As this analysis has so far demonstrated, both Adam's and Aron's wives display a sense of attachment to Romanian cultural practices, especially through their lasting reliance on a patriarchal model of gender relations that associate women with the area of domestic work (most apparent in cooking in Mihali's fiction). However, the novels also illustrate the fact that the Romanian characters' exposure to a different cultural background leads to a gradual erosion of some of their inherited values. I argue that a common direction of change is represented by both women's partial acceptance of their partners' consumerist leanings. I interpret this shift of attitude as a half-way discarding of their thrift mentality shaped for surviving in communist times. For example, Adam's wife confesses that at some point she has accepted his tendency to purchase things solely for pleasure, not for basic needs: "For the last few years before his stroke, though, I stopped checking Adam's bills. Mostly, *I stopped reproaching him for buying me expensive gifts*" (Mihali, 2014, 159) (emphasis added). While this character's acceptance of Adam's consumerism seems to illustrate a smooth cultural transition, the bigamous lady is more aware of her struggle with different cultural models, feeling tormented between the familiar ideal of thrift and the appetite for luxury that she discovers in Canada, mainly through Roman's example: "How I wish I could have remained the thrifty woman Aron appreciated! And how much I wish I had become the American wife Roman wanted me to be!" (Mihali, 2022, 131, my translation). However, as time goes by, the character seems to overcome her obsession with saving, accepting her lover's consumerist standards: "I was starting to stop worrying about money..."

⁴ In stark contrast with Adam and Roman, Aron strongly criticizes the Western food industry for its ideology of profit and mass consumption that involves the use of artificial colors, hormones, pesticides, and food preservatives (Mihali 2022, 19). By associating this character with an anti-consumerism attitude Mihali may wish to imply that Aron shares a more feminine philosophy, a direct effect of his weak/less aggressive and less potent type of masculinity, that places him in a different category from Adam (before the stroke) and Roman.

This life was too short to be so stingy. Roman was right” (Mihali, 2022, 130, my translation) (emphasis added).

If the partial adherence to consumerist values appears as a common vector of women’s cultural metamorphosis in both novels, I argue that *Bigama* presents yet another dimension of cultural change, through the protagonist’s affair with Roman. Her moving in with her lover generates a strong disapproval within the Romanian community in Montreal, which signals the fact that she has violated cultural expectations of female conduit: “A woman’s greatest virtue was to resist carnal temptation, her only chance of atonement” (Mihali, 2022, 63, my translation). More specifically, as an adulteress, the character strongly undermines the double standard of patriarchal discourse, also present in rural Romania: “According to the male script it is by default and natural that men to be accepted their infidelity, men are allowed to cheat while women are not. We may see it is a patriarchal cultural script perpetuated over generations” (Rada, 2012, 218). An element that indicates the strong patriarchal disapproval of women’s affair according to Romanian rural traditions is the fact that the protagonist’s mother could not be buried in the same tomb with her husband, given that she had an extramarital relationship: “by sharing her body with another man, she had suspended all connections with her husband’s family. It was cruel, but that was *the implacable logic of the village*” (Mihali, 2022, 128) (emphasis added). Her mother’s death represents a turning point for the main character in *Bigama*, especially since her parent’s unhappy life triggers the protagonist’s impulse to make the most of her own life. Accordingly, as soon as she returns to Canada after her mother’s funeral, she no longer hesitates to leave Aron. Her affair with Roman expresses both her attraction to an “Alpha male” (Mihali, 2022, 5), therefore different from her husband, and more importantly, her own change that involves the emergence of a sense of agency. More specifically, the protagonist confesses that she is passionate about Roman’s body and she craves the physical pleasure offered by their sexual activities:

I loved Roman’s body with a love filled with adoration. I studied him like a work of art, *I touched it, I devoured it*. I was grateful for the sincerity of his *pleasure*. Little by little, he had learned to let me do what I wanted, to free himself from all the constraints and taboos that had dominated his sexual life until then (Mihali, 2022, 95) (emphasis added).

The protagonist’s feelings strongly illustrate the manifestation of her “sexual agency” (Siekkinen, 2022, 3), i.e., the freedom to choose her partner and enjoy sexual pleasure, that has been repressed in her married life. Her focus on lust and the minute description of the physicality of her relationship with Roman suggests her liberation from the traditional values of restraint that have shaped her identity before emigration: “All the life of noble and wise precepts learned at home was reduced to nothing *before the passion of copulation*” (Mihali, 2022, 50-1, my translation) (emphasis added). Given these reflections, one may argue that freedom and sexual liberation are indicators of the character’s emancipation afforded by relocation into a different cultural space. (While do not have this freeing dimension in *A Second Chance*, the idea of affair is present here, as well, through an episode of Adam’s infidelity in his youth, before leaving Romania. This fact is revealed only at the end of the novel, allowing the story to be interpreted as one of female loyalty, love and care, rather than female overall control. However, I suggest that this aspect can be further developed in a different paper dealing with infidelity and gender roles in Mihali’s fiction). Last, but not least, one more indicator of the characters’ degree of cultural change is represented by their food choices. As discussed in subchapter 2.3, food is a strong identity marker, especially in the case of migrant individuals. Relying on this assumption, the following part of the analysis aims to establish whether the characters analyzed remain attached to traditional Romanian food/dishes or whether they incorporate foreign cooking practices into their routines.

3.5 Food, ethnicity, cultural change

Apart its association with acts of daily family consumption, in both novels cooking is also connected with commensality practiced by the couples with other members of the Romanian community in Montreal. For example, the wife in *A Second Chance* cooks when they have Romanian visitors, when

they go to parties (St. Valentine’s party), or when they have guests on Adam’s birthday. *Bigama* presents cooking as a practice associated mainly with the family’s daily life, but occasionally members of the Romanian community also eat together when they gather. In both cases, the narrators are generous in their descriptions of the menus for each occasion, fact that makes it easy for the reader to establish the degree of their attachment/detachment from traditional Romanian cuisine. For example, when they have Romanian guests, the wife in *A Second Chance* cooks veal soup, and a main course of pork with peas and dill, a flan for dessert (Mihali, 2014, 37). For the St. Valentine’s party organized by a Romanian friend, the protagonist prepares “liver with tomato sauce and potatoes cooked the Transylvanian way – boiled in their skins, sliced into rounds, and fried with paprika” (Mihali 2014, 78). For Adam’s birthday, the menu includes a cream of pea soup, barbecued sausages and pork, leeks with olives, fried mushrooms with garlic and parsley, roasted peppers with vinegar and garlic (Mihali, 2014, 146). An autumn meal for her and Adam includes cabbage soup, grilled fish and vegetables (Mihali 2014, 139-40). In *Bigama*, we have a similar display of ingredients and dishes preferred by the Romanian couple: roasted eggplants, green beans, pickled onion, olives, pickled cucumbers with dill (Mihali, 2022, 19), roasted peppers, eggplant salad (Mihali, 2022, 77). This novel suggests that in the early days of migration, food appears to be the most accessible comfort for the deracinated characters: “Food was the pillar of our identity. The smell of a dumpling soup, a simmered mushroom veloute, baked eggplants were the national flag on our door (Mihali, 2014, 20).

The range of dishes and ingredients adopted by the characters in *A Second Chance* and *Bigama* predominantly reflect the Romanian gastronomic traditions with its multiple foreign influences and consequently regional characteristics (Turkish, Greek, Bulgarian, Austrian, Serbian, Byzantine) (SalaŃă et. al, 2015, 187; Simoni, 2017, 222; Voinea et al., 2020, 3). More specifically, the food choices presented by Mihali as daily habits of her Romanian immigrants in Canada mainly correspond to the culinary traditions in the Southern part of Romania, (the regions of Wallachia and Oltenia), mostly influenced by the Turkish, Greek, Italian, French and Bulgarian cuisines (Simoni, 2017, 224). Therefore, in these areas the predominant dishes are lighter (Simoni, 2017, 225) and consist mainly of boiled and baked vegetables, zucchini, peppers seasoned with the omnipresent onion and garlic, vegetable/meat borsches, mushroom veloutes, grilled sausages, vegetable stews, eggplant salad (Simoni, 2017, 224). In addition, the area of Oltenia registers the use of leek in various dishes, the preference for olives and various pickles (cucumbers, green tomatoes, bell peppers, celery). Soups and pork are more popular in Transylvania (Simoni, 2017, 225), beef in Wallachia and Oltenia, poultry in Moldavia, mutton in Dobrogea and fish in the south of the country (Voinea et al., 2020, 3) Another feature of Romanian cooking traditions involves the use of various herbs for flavoring many dishes such as parsley, lovage, dill, savory, celery, basil, caraway (SalaŃă et. al, 2015, 189).

While the characters’ culinary choices definitely indicate a strong attachment to homeland traditions, this element is not correlated with their longing for the native land or a desire to return. However, the preservation of Romanian gastronomic patterns represents a strong bond with the culture of origin, that may be linked with a conservative frame of mind, suggested by the reminiscence of certain patriarchal standards. At the same time, life in Canada does modify the protagonists’ gastronomic choices, hinting at the imminence of cultural change. For example, at the St. Valentine’s party, Romanians eat the traditional sauerkraut, mashed beans, salads, sausages, eggplant, Transylvanian style potatoes (Mihali, 2014, 81), but also the more exotic “rice with seafood, chicken curry” (Mihali, 2014, 81).

On another occasion — the wake of a Romanian friend — where one would expect a stronger alignment with traditions, people eat Greek and Middle Eastern food: “We’re happy to feast on taramasalata, oysters with cream cheese, pita bread with hummus, and sesame biscuits” (Mihali 2014, 184). The same openness to cultural difference through patterns of consumption is suggested by the gradual changes in the shopping habits of the protagonist in *Bigama*. While she still chases sales, at some point she starts adding less familiar and more expensive food items in her shopping cart: avocado, caviar, rare confits, exotic fruits (Mihali, 2022, 121).

4. Conclusions

The analysis of *A Second Chance* and *Bigama* through the lenses of cooking, gender and transnationality reveals how literature of migration deals with the interplay between cultural transplantation, gender identities and cultural change as illustrated by the characters' choices of food consumption and their patterns of domestic labor. We may conclude that the dynamics of the immigrant couples in the novels analyzed suggests a partial maintenance of Romanian patriarchal values, predominantly associated with the inheritance of rural conservative principles that survive the characters' journey across the ocean. Thus, the women protagonists in Mihali's novels are associated with the private home sphere where they are in charge with cooking and most of domestic duties, while also being active in the public space. By coupling the idea of women's simultaneous involvement in the private and the public spheres with the notion of vulnerable masculinities, the author cleverly undermines the assumptions of patriarchal discourse, hinting at how both men and women may be affected by this authoritative system. Moreover, by revealing the ambivalent nature of cooking, as a symbol of both female oppression and female control over the family, Mihali again disrupts the patriarchal connotation of woman as subservient entity. Another axis of cultural change displayed by the Romanian wife-characters is their gradual and partial adoption of Western consumerist standards, strongly upheld by their male partners. While this process of cultural metamorphosis characterizes both nameless wives, the wife-turned-mistress in *Bigama* experiences yet another dimension of cultural change as emancipation through sexual liberation announced by her decision to fully embrace the carnal pleasures of an extramarital affair. While this paper mainly considers aspects related to food, gender and cultural identity, further research can be done on Mihali's approach to adultery, cultural memory and gender in the context of cultural transition from a postcommunist society to a Western capitalist context.

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