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## Female Detectives in Romanian Literature: Vitoria Lipan and Minerva Tutovan

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**Abstract:** The essay draws a parallel between two female detectives in Romanian literature: Mihail Sadoveanu's Vitoria Lipan and Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu's Minerva Tutovan. While Vitoria Lipan is not commonly regarded as a detective, Minerva Tutovan is a professional State Security officer and investigator. Mention will be made of their marital status, profession, pets, moral qualities and others, in an attempt to show that although they differ in many respects including education, background, social status, historical epoch and purpose, they are equally skilful in finding criminals and bringing them to justice. They will also be analysed as mentors: Vitoria for her son Gheorghiuță and Minerva for her subordinate, lieutenant Vasile Dobrescu.

**Keywords:** Romanian Literature; Mihail Sadoveanu; Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu; Female Detective; Gender Roles; Investigation.

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### 1. A Short History of Crime Fiction in Romania

The first mystery novels in Romanian literature were written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of the French sensational novels of the kind of Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1843)<sup>1</sup>. But the Romanian writers' productions of the period – G Baronzi's *Misterele Bucureștilor* (1862), Ioan M. Bujoreanu's *Mistere din București* (1862), Panait Macri's *Otrăvitoarea din Giurgiu* (1884) or Teochar Alexi's *Crima din Calea Moșilor* (1887) – did not represent the starting point of a viable tradition. Paul Cernat<sup>2</sup> considers that this happened because of both the writers' and the public's resistance to the characteristics of the genre, which demands the capacity to combine imaginative ingenuity and logical rigour, the art of creating and sustaining suspense through a blend of adventure, rationality and mystery, and the knowledge of how to build memorable situations and characters. Moreover, Cernat also contends that the poor assimilation of the genre in Romania could have been caused by the fact that its elements were taken over by

the canonical literature, in such works as Cezar Petrescu's *Aranka, știma lacurilor* or *Oraș patriarhal*, Mihail Sadoveanu's *Baltagul*, *Cazul Eugeniței Costea* or *Ostrovul lupilor*, I.L. Caragiale's *Năpasta*, Victor Ion Popa's *Velerim și Veler Doamne* or Liviu Rebreanu's *Amândoi*, the last two being detective novels in the true sense of the word. Anyway, in spite of these productions, the detective novel did not become popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century either, although the young generation had a taste for it and some even translated English detective novels into Romanian.

But the genre flourished during the communist period as a consequence of the political rigours of the new regime. The reasons can be found in the relative rejection of translations characteristic of the epoch, doubled by the strategy of appropriating the models of the Western entertainment culture, in the ideological rigourism of the period and in the educational propagandistic role that the detective novel could play. Moreover, the stability and predictability of the political system ensured the editorial stability and predictability of the genre, necessary if certain characters and fictional worlds were to make their way to the public conscience. Certain publishing houses established collections dedicated to this genre and a number of authors such as Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, Vlad Mușatescu, Nicolae Mărgeanu, Haralamb Zincă, Horia Tecuceanu, George Arion specialized themselves in crime and detection novels. According to Marian Popa, quoted by Paul Cernat, the detective novels of the period can be divided into criminalistic novels and novels of espionage or counter-espionage and, as Mihai Iovănel points out, they present the counter-intelligence

fight against the enemies of the communist regime who are opposed by heroic police and State Security officers, but also journalists (in the case of George Arion's or Vlad Mușatescu's novels). The positive characters try to find the assassins, or to protect researchers that make extraordinary and immediately applicable discoveries, or fight against the enemies of the communist regime that conspire to restore the previous one. Because in communist Romania the police was called *miliție*, i.e. *militia*, the genre has also been called *milițier* or *roman milițist*.

Mihai Zamfir expressed a different opinion about the popularity of crime fiction in communist Romania, claiming that it was not successful and that no author of Romanian detective novels could impose a truly memorable character. This happened, in his opinion, because of two factors. On the one hand, the censorship operating in the period could not accept the way in which the authors presented it – its monotony, dullness, ordinariness. On the other hand, the general public did not perceive the police as guaranteeing people's security, but as a source of fear, therefore rejected them as endearing characters.<sup>3</sup>

After 1989, the Romanian detective novels started to lose ground in favour of foreign ones mainly because they depended on characters that were *miliția* or State Security officers, who were loathed by the public. However, part of the techniques and structures of the genre have been absorbed by canonical literature, in different kinds of works written by such writers as Mircea Cărtărescu or Caius Dobrescu. In addition to that, authors like George Arion or Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, whose detectives were journalists or anti-heroic characters,

still resisted, and new genre authors like Eugen Ovidiu Chirovici emerged in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, we witness a revival of the genre in Romanian literature, represented by the more experienced George Arion, Stelian Țurlea or Lucia Verona or the younger Oana Stoica-Mujea and Bogdan Hrib.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Female Characters in Detective Novels

Studies dedicated to Anglo-American crime fiction point out that for a long time it was characterized by conservatism in what concerns the roles assigned to their male and female characters. Analysing seventy-one characters who are protagonists as paid professional women detectives in almost three hundred novels written by male or female Anglo-American authors, Kathleen Gregory Klein came to the conclusion that the heroines of detective novels were sabotaged.<sup>6</sup> Following the demands of society, the authors created heroines that were not proper detectives or not proper women or neither. In his turn, Otto Penzler noticed that female characters and writers of crime fiction appeared about a quarter of a century after their male counterparts and stated that novels written by women got to feature tough female detectives only after the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that there is a contradiction inherent in the syntagma *female detective* is consistent with the gender stereotypes according to which men are rational, objective and aggressive, while women are intuitive, subjective and passive.<sup>8</sup> The job of detective, therefore, would be more appropriate to a man, requiring what are deemed

masculine virtues – physical strength, logical thinking, wordly experience – while women may be amateur detectives, relying on intuition and gossip talents.<sup>9</sup>

The Romanian authors of the genre probably shared these views, as most often the female characters that are present in our detective works play the role of victims (as in *Aranka, știma lacurilor*), murderers (as in *Amândoi*) or avengers (as in *Năpasta*), roles to which they are relegated on account of their supposed passivity and helplessness, respectively irrationality and passion. It is not very common for female characters to appear as investigators, but this happens in *Baltagul*, in Oana Stoica-Mujea's *Indicii anatomice* or in several of Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu's novels.

## 3. Essay Motivation, Scope and Objective

The present essay focuses on two figures of female investigators from Romanian literature: Vitoria Lipan and Minerva Tutovan. The former is the heroine of Mihail Sadoveanu's novel *Baltagul*, published in 1930 and translated into English by Eugenia Farca as *The Hatchet*.<sup>10</sup> The latter is the investigator in several novels written by Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu mainly in the 1970s and 1980s. Two of them in particular offered the material for the present work: *Spionaj la mănăstire/ Espionage at the Convent* (1972), the first novel featuring the character, and *Nopti albe pentru Minerva/ Sleepless Nights for Minerva* (1982), in which at times she also assumes the role of narrator. The two characters have been selected for several reasons. Firstly, because they are women, which makes them surprising choices as

investigators, not so much in the case of Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, herself a woman writing in a period that entertained equalitarian views, but more in the case of Mihail Sadoveanu, who wrote in a period of mysogyny, when women's passivity was opposed to men's intellectually creative energy.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, because they are apparently totally different from each other: Vitoria Lipan is an illiterate and untravelled housewife forced by circumstances to investigate her husband's murder; Minerva Tutovan is a university graduate and a professional investigator, with a track record and obvious qualities that make her fit for the job. Thirdly, because in the case of both women, their value is additionally proven by the fact that they impart their knowledge to two young men, which is not often the case in novels that present young people's initiation. Fourthly, because while *Spionaj la mănăstire* and *Noști albe pentru Minerva* are detective novels proper, *Baltagul* is a canonical literary work that has been analysed more as a social novel, as a monograph on the Moldavian village or as an initiatic, mythical tale<sup>12</sup>. This is quite paradoxical, since the novel's surface and immediately obvious structure is that of a detective story, which hides its mythical substratum. However, the novel has started being discussed as a policier and feminist novel only rather recently<sup>13</sup>.

My research will be qualitative and analytical, searching for meaning in the narrative. I shall explore the two characters in parallel in order to show that, in spite of the differences between them – in physical appearance, marital and social status, education, background, historical epoch and purpose – they are fundamentally alike, employing the same efficiency, power of

dissimulation and perceptiveness when solving their "cases". Thus, I shall prove that the woman that investigates only once, without benefitting from specialized training and specialized help, in a remote and patriarchal region of the country where women have traditional gender roles, and the one that investigates repeatedly, after having been trained to do it and acting in a milieu that favours women's initiative and has empowered them, need and can muster the same qualities and skills if they are to succeed. The differences will be pointed out and analysed before the similarities in order to emphasise the latter and to offer them as reasons for the choice of the two women not only as investigators but also as mentors for two young men: Vitoria for her son Gheorghiuță and Minerva for her subordinate, lieutenant Vasile Dobrescu.

#### 4. Vitoria and Minerva as Characters Evolving in Different Milieux. A Psychological and Sociological Approach

**I**n point of physical appearance, one of the women is charming, the other is not, and that is made clear from the first scenes in which they appear. When Sadoveanu introduces Vitoria to his readers, he mentions her "hazel eyes, in which the chestnut glint of her hair seemed to be reflected"<sup>14</sup>. As a matter of fact, her eyes and her look are the ones that draw people's attention most frequently. Besides, though no longer young, she is still a beautiful woman and likes to be admired. She likes to smell and look nice: when she goes to see the village priest, she rubs basil between her palms and passes them over her eyelids. But when she attracts the wrong

kind of attention, like the attention of a traveller who makes advances to her, she knows how to reject it irrevocably.

Minerva is not good looking and does not seem to care about it. Her most striking feature is her nose, long, thin, darting like a spear from under her fringe. She has round dark brown eyes and rugged cheeks, devoid of any femininity, frequently compared by the author to Pinocchio's. She never looks in the mirror. But she is very sensitive when it comes to her age. "Usually, people's allusions to my age make me stiff. I, Minerva Tutovan, single and enjoying being so, who have never bought a face powder box in my life, who have no idea what is fashionable – stiletto heels or peasant shoes, white or indigo lipstick – and look in the mirror once a trimester, do not like to tell people how old I am."<sup>15</sup> That happens because she thinks people consider old age a shameful disease. When she is considered younger than she actually is, she smiles "as she imagines it suits her"<sup>16</sup>.

Minerva is actually so masculine that she is taken for a man by several characters in the first novel in which she appears, *Spionaj la mănăstire*. The fact is that, while Vitoria relies on her femininity to help her in her quest, hiding behind her feminine weakness, Minerva does not need that in order to succeed, relying instead only on her cleverness. Which serves her well, we might consider, if we take into account these remarks made by her superior, colonel Ionaș: "In fact, after you came to know her, it was impossible to keep thinking that she was not snub-nosed and that her thin, long-limbed body suggested a clothes stand or maybe a heron."<sup>17</sup> So her mind is more impressive than her physical unattractiveness, which Minerva wears proudly

after all, seeming very comfortable with herself. Moreover, she entertains the opinion that the truly dangerous spy, the ideal one, is an insipid creature that keeps a low profile, is very kind and has a common face that nobody notices and can remember.

The characters' appearance is probably also related to their marital status. Vitoria has been married to Nechifor for twenty years – a marriage with ups and downs, as both spouses are presented as highly temperamental. Nechifor is not always faithful to his wife and she fights for him and with him literally when she feels cheated on. As for him, he considers her sometimes possessed and in order to drive away her demons he thrashes her. She bears his violence without flinching and remains unchanged. It is when Nechifor goes missing that his wife realizes that she still loves him with the same passion of her young years. Later on, when she finds his dead body she confesses to Mistress Maria, the character who has helped her the most with her investigation, that she lived only for him and and it was only with him that she was happy and blooming. That is why the rest of her days will be sorrowful and the only way in which she can feel relieved is by hitting his murderer with the same hatchet and in the same place where he hit Nechifor. Notwithstanding her natural beauty and inclination towards looking and smelling good, Vitoria had to do so if she wanted to preserve the love of a man who liked parties with good food, wine, and beautiful women. Her "efforts" paid off because he always returned to her.

Minerva, on the other hand, has no husband whose passion she might want to keep alive. Neither does she care about winning anybody's heart. And when

engineer Georgescu manifests an interest in her and invites her to dinner, she panics and announces him that she will delegate this responsibility to Dobrescu, her male lieutenant.

When it comes to the two characters' profession, we have to point out that Vitoria's is that of a wife and mother. It may not be a job proper, most certainly not a paying one, but it is something that Sadoveanu's characters take very seriously. And it does pay off in the end, since it leads to their family being respected and their children becoming responsible people.

As a wife, Vitoria helps her husband in running the household. While he deals with the exterior world, she takes care of the house. As such, she knows exactly what their possessions are, how many objects of each kind can be found and where. Sometimes she goes by herself to fetch flour from the villages in the plains, but most often she does not go anywhere and all she knows about the wide world and about her husband's dealings comes from the stories he tells her when he returns.

She has from the very beginning a global view of this world, with the always repeated passage of the flocks from the plains to the mountains and again to the plains, through lonely regions, paths on the edge of abysses and waters, stops at inn-pubs and in villages or towns; without seeing it, she knows the entire ritual of this simple life, dictated by the natural cycle marked, to be better remembered, by the celebration of certain conventional saints. She, a woman-mother, has been, since time immemorial, [...], the manager of the household,

responsible for the static part of the family fortune and responsible for the children that are not ready yet to face the vicissitudes of adult life. She has been for thousands of years in imaginative, affective and subconscious communication with her travelling man; for millennia, she has travelled herself across spaces – staying home.<sup>18</sup>

From her husband's stories, Vitoria knows exactly how long it takes him to carry out his different chores, and when he is absent for far more than the necessary time, she starts being worried. She will have to abandon her house in order to look for him, by following a route that she only knows from hearsay, a journey that sometimes takes her to places she has never even heard of. But she manages nevertheless, though she admits feeling shy when facing a world she does not know from direct experience.

As a mother, her main preoccupation is taking care that her daughter behaves according to custom and to the rules of common sense. Minodora is a teenager that has been too quick, in her mother's opinion, to adopt the new ways so much appreciated by young people. "Yes, I know, you keep smirking at one another and no longer like our peasant skirt and blouse; and you go all soft when the gipsy musicians play a German waltz. I'll teach you to put your hair in a bun, dance waltzes and wear town blouses, you miserable little hussy, you! I didn't know such things, nor did your grandmother nor mine either – and you shall live according to our way, or I'll tie a stone around your neck and drown you in the Tarcău"<sup>19</sup>, Vitoria tells her daughter. Her anger is triggered by the fact that her daughter received a love postcard addressed

to “Miss Minodora Lipan”, a title that she does not approve of, considering that by using it, her daughter will put her to shame and make her the laughing-stock of the village. Neither does she approve of the young man who sent the postcard.

Vitoria’s preoccupation with her daughter’s behaviour is determined by her desire that the girl finds a good and appropriate husband. A young girl who knows how to spin, cook and take care of the household in general is more likely to marry well than one who has no idea of such things. But in addition to that, a girl also needs a good reputation, especially in the world of the village where people talk and say all sorts of things. A young girl who is more preoccupied than necessary with her appearance or who adopts the married women’s hairstyle before being married, who is more inclined to spend money on fashionable blouses than to stitch traditional ones and who prefers dancing to cleaning the house is not likely to be considered a good wife and may not get to marry at all, which is an absolute disaster in traditional mentality. That is why Vitoria rejects Minodora’s “emancipation” and teaches her practical activities.

She is not prevented from exercising her traditional duties as a wife and mother by the fact that she can neither read nor write, as it was the case of many women of her condition in the period. She is helped in this respect by Father Dănilă. The priest not only reads to her the letters she receives, but also writes her letters for her, listening to what she wants to transmit, then shortening the message and making it clearer.

Minerva does not need this kind of mediation. Not only that she is not

illiterate, but she is a university graduate, a mathematics teacher, who after ten years of working with children became a State Security major. In this new capacity she met and became the superior officer of her former pupil Vasile Dobrescu, at that time a recent graduate of the Faculty of Law. It is also through Dobrescu’s eyes that we see both the former teacher and the present major Minerva Tutovan.

As a teacher, she was not very nice and understanding, but she had the merit of making her pupils actually learn mathematics – through her own means, of course. “[...] Dobrescu used to say that whoever spoke of torture without having met Minerva had no sense of reality whatsoever. Her former pupils, except for those nominated for the Nobel Prize, could be included without additional verifications in church calendars as martyrs”<sup>20</sup> and still had nightmares long after their school years ended, provoked by her unannounced 15-minute test papers, by her “helping” questions, by her terrible irony and by her lynx eyes during term papers. “Nobody copied and her weakest pupil could pass the entrance examination at the Polytechnic University while whistling *The Blue Danube*.”<sup>21</sup> Nicknamed the Samurai, she was an old-fashioned teacher who rarely gave a mark higher than 7+ and never a 10 and who considered it absolutely unpedagogical to praise her pupils.

As an officer, Minerva Tutovan is equally capable and strict. When she turns forty she decides to start writing her memoirs and states on that occasion that she has worked as an investigator for ten years, during which she solved about thirty files. She admits having been lucky in the case of eight or nine but whether she is

realistic or modest we cannot tell. Anyway, she also worked with foreign investigators, like inspector Stanley from Scotland Yard, who offered her a bagpipe as a sign of his gratitude for being helped to catch a drug cartel.

Minerva was Dobrescu's mathematics teacher for 7 years and never lets him forget that. The lieutenant had to lean against the wall when he learnt that he would work with her. He is never called other than *Dobrescule*, *Dobrescu Vasile* or *Vasile Dobrescu* and he stands to attention when he communicates to her the results of his investigations, in the same position that he adopted ten or fifteen years before when he was her pupil and was always intimidated by her. The geometry, algebra and trigonometry problems he had to solve then did not simply disappear, but have been replaced with others, of intuition, perspicacity and common sense. Minerva herself feels sorry for him sometimes and she admits that she would regret having to part with him. Although pretty satisfied with Dobrescu and with his progress, she states she will not praise him because she does not want him to become conceited and consequently self-sufficient and lazy.

Vitoria Lipan is deeply rooted in the village world. Not only that she never left it until Nechifor's unexplained delay, but she knows its rules, its customs, its mentality and knows how to function in it flawlessly. Her village is a remote Moldavian mountain one, in which people have lived the same kind of life since ancient times. Personally, Vitoria would have preferred a milder climate, though not as hot as that of the plains, but she lives there anyway. In this world of her own village and its whereabouts Vitoria and her husband are known

and respected as people who pay their debts and who give everybody their due.

For Vitoria the not so distant town of Galați is the edge of the world, therefore she is quite reluctant to leave her home and does so only when she realizes she has no choice. Her journey will take her to distant places, some of which she has not even heard of, but she will manage the situation firstly because she has no reticence about asking for directions and secondly because she is aware of the fact that she has to pay for every service. Regarding this, she can appraise at one glance how much she has to pay and she does not negotiate.

On her way, she comes across a baptism celebration and across a wedding, not to mention her husband's funeral that she has to organize in the end of the novel. On all these occasions, happy or sad, she knows what she has to do – what gestures to make, what words to say – and behaves according to custom. More than anything else, she knows that in order to be able to perform her duties she has to leave her sorrow aside. In this respect, Mircea Tomuș notices that in Vitoria's case, we deal with a genuine pain and with a ritual manifestation of it.<sup>22</sup> She gives free vent to her anguish only towards the end of the funeral, after asking Mistress Maria to accomplish certain ritual actions instead of her, who will use the time to say good-bye to her husband whom she will never see again. Until then, she only cried because and when she felt that was appropriate, but most of the time she abstained from it, concentrating instead on watching, observing, finding and arranging things.

Minerva Tutovan is a city dweller to the bone, not only living in Bucharest, which is not strange for someone with her



job, but also preferring to spend her holidays there, which is not a common choice for people actually living in the city. "Her ideal holidays were those spent in Bucharest, behind drawn curtains, solving higher mathematics problems. She loved the city, the city in its most condensed form, and nothing relaxed her more than a torrid summer afternoon spent in an overcrowded trolleybus at the peak hours. She accepted at most – a supreme escapade – a week in Mamaia, obviously in a perfectly equipped hotel."<sup>23</sup> The only exception was a holiday spent together with her eccentric aunt Caliopei in a cart pulled by one horse.

She admits being sensitive to the beauty of nature, but she also confesses that after five minutes of admiring a landscape she loses interest in it, having noticed all its details and particularities. She cannot identify the most common plants, like a walnut tree, and she hates insects and sitting or lying on the ground. Consequently, she shudders at the thought of sleeping in a tent, which she associates with dirt, spoiled, bad food and ants.

Minerva seems thus as reluctant as Vitoria to leave her home, and, also like Vitoria, she does it only if and when she has no choice. Her cases take her not only through various places in the country, but also abroad. In *Spionaj la mănăstire* we see her both in the convent of the title, near Râmnicu Vâlcea, and in Paris. She can speak French, and, though in an unfamiliar milieu, she manages to discover what she needed to and to collaborate effectively with the French police.

Vitoria has a dog, Lupu, a grey long-haired mastiff with cropped ears and tail. It is actually her husband's dog, that accompanied Nechifor on his way until he met his

death. A dog is an animal that is necessary to a shepherd, helping him gather the herd, but Lupu is more than a tool to its owner. The mastiff witnesses Nechifor's murder and even tries to defend him against his assailant. Not managing to prevent his death, however, it guards his corpse until it almost dies of cold and hunger, then looks for human protection in the nearest village, where it knows how to ask for shelter and food and how to make friends with the other dogs in the household. It does not actually abandon Nechifor's dead body until late in winter and periodically leaves its new home in order to return to the scene of the murder. Vitoria finds the dog in the yard of its new master and recovers it. It is Lupu that takes her to Nechifor's remains and it is Lupu that kills Nechifor's murderer after it breaks its chain. The motto of the novel, "Master, master dear/ Call a large hound near"<sup>24</sup>, taken from the Romanian ballad *Miorița/ The Little Ewe* also draws its readers' attention to the dog.

Minerva has a caniche, Spiridon, and an imperial parrot, Keops that can actually say part of a mathematical formula but does not manage to learn it all in *Spionaj la mănăstire*. Minerva cares for them to be properly fed and plays with them, but they seem to exist for the only purpose of entertaining her.

Lupu cannot perform amusing tricks, but the connection between it and Nechifor is stronger than the connection between Minerva and her pets, and what it can do is far more valuable. Lupu helps Vitoria find her husband's remains and punish the murderer, while Minerva's dog and parrot have no contribution to the solving of her cases, at least not in the two novels under analysis.

## 5. Vitoria and Minerva as Investigators: Efficiency, Power of Dissimulation and Perceptiveness

Vitoria Lipan becomes an investigator when forced by the circumstances. Her husband left their home in order to go to Dorna to buy some sheep and he does not return and does not motivate his absence in any way. After conferring with the priest and with the witch of the village, Vitoria informs the authorities, and the prefect is the first to voice what are actually her innermost fears: that her husband was robbed and killed. Certain that the prefect is right, the woman decides to go and find him. She does not expect anything from the authorities and as a matter of fact cannot leave this to them. It is her duty, as a wife, to find Nechifor's dead body, bury him and avenge him. Actually, it would have been the duty of their son, but he is too young and inexperienced, therefore his mother decides that they should do it together.

It is not easy for her to leave the familiar and plunge into the unknown, but she does it without flinching, for the sake of her husband and out of a sense of duty. Moreover, as we have seen, the unknown is not entirely frightful and she proves she knows how to make it familiar and helpful. In the end of the novel, after she fulfils her duty, she returns to her traditional preoccupations.

Minerva Tutovan is a professional investigator. Unlike Vitoria, who becomes a detective for the sake of her family, Minerva does it for her country. In *Spionaj la mănăstire* her aim is to protect Dr. Luca-ci, who works on an anaesthetic that, in a certain dosage, can become a dangerous

hallucinogen which induces a state of euphoria, paralyzing volition and the capacity of discernment. As she fails to do it, she will have to investigate his murder, but she does it undercover, helped by lieutenant Dobrescu who acts as a prosecutor. In *Nopti albe pentru Minerva* she will have to find the murderer of engineer Trăilescu and the identity of the person(s) who wreak havoc in his town in order to take advantage of the chaos to steal classified documents from the airplane factory.

In order to be able to fulfil their missions, both women need certain qualities and, as a matter of fact, both evade their status as women and confront men on equal terms, though Vitoria constantly hides behind the fact that she is a woman. Three of their characteristics shall be pointed out and analysed in the present essay because they are considered the most important: their efficiency, their power of dissimulation and their perceptiveness.

From the very beginning of the novel, what strikes the reader about Vitoria is not so much her being a traditional peasant wife and mother, who can spin and who is very preoccupied with her daughter's education, as the fact that she is a very well-organized person, capable of solving any problem of the household with minimal excitement and maximal efficiency. Whether it is about feeding their domestic servant Mitrea or moving things in the house because winter is coming, she utters short commands, with no attempt of feigning benevolence, that are quickly carried out by her daughter or by Mitrea. She can take quick decisions and her domestic authority goes uncontested.

It is with the same efficiency that she will act outside the household as well, in

spite of the fact that she will parade as an unassuming, submissive, humble and un-knowledgeable woman, looking for her missing husband. Due to this appearance, she will be pitied for her troubles and people will do their best to help her, being requited accordingly. Behind her innocent façade however, she is ruthless, unforgiving and relentless. When she finds her husband's murderers, her conventional feminine appearance fades away, being replaced by a diabolical intelligence that helps her set traps, use doublespeak and ultimately catch the culprits and take revenge. As she cannot question people from a position of authority, she has to make use of subtle investigatory strategies. She plays with words, drops remarks, manipulates ideas and turns the conversation as she sees fit.

What strikes us about Minerva is also her efficiency, combined in this case not with the capacity of playing with words and ideas, but with a terrible, biting irony. This irony always comes into play when she talks to people. When she does so in her official capacity, she is brusque and impatient, mocking them and seeming to enjoy shocking them by a total lack of empathy. Actually, she is not empathic because it is not people's feelings that she cares about, but the facts that they can provide, as made obvious by the following dialogue she has with Grația Duma, one of the characters in *Nopti albe pentru Minerva*, desperate because she received a threatening note:

Minerva read the piece of paper twice, then threw it negligently on the table. 'Yeah... Do you have any idea who might have sent it?' [...]  
'Are you mocking me? The whole town is bellowing...'

'I don't hear any bellow. Sit down. I can follow you better if you do.'

'... and that bastard is walking undisturbed.'

'Has anyone seen him?' [...]

'He will kill me. You will see. He will kill me.'

Minerva asked coldly:

'What makes you think he might have a special preference for you?'

'Everybody believes it. Everybody says it.'

'Why?'<sup>25</sup>

Her instructions to Dobrescu are precise and well-organized, full of practical advice, but punctuated with humorous or ironic remarks as if meant to attract and keep his attention alive since only advice and indications, however well-intended and well-expressed, might make him drowsy.

She appreciates people who can narrate what had happened in detail, without omitting anything and from Dobrescu she asks succinct and precise reports, without unnecessary details, uttered with impeccable diction. But she is incapable of listening to them without interrupting constantly in order to ask questions and to make comments or observations.

Vitoria's power of dissimulation is obvious throughout her whole journey and throughout the whole novel. Quite early on her way, she realizes it is better to keep a low profile and not to attract people's attention. Taking a hint from the deputy county governor, she begins by telling people that she left her home in order to recover money from a debtor and only later does she start asking about her husband. She knows it is better to mingle among

people because you can remain unnoticed while noticing everything about them by watching them carefully, while if you are with few people, you are in the centre of their attention and they notice more about you than you notice about them.<sup>26</sup> We have already discussed the way in which she dissimulates her pain until her husband's actual funeral, feigning joy when she comes across the wedding and the baptism celebration, and about the way in which she dissimulates her true intentions and her true nature by pretending to be helpless and submissive, a poor woman in search of her missing husband.

Minerva is equally skilful when it comes to hiding her real feelings and intentions. She does that three times in the novels under discussion: when she works undercover as Jeni Cociășu and when she is caught by the negative characters in *Spi-onaj la mănăstire*, and when she pretends to be indifferent to everything and apparently catches the perpetrators almost by doing nothing in *Noapți albe pentru Minerva*. When being undercover, the officer prepares her role carefully, creating for herself a persona that is her total opposite. While Minerva is single and proud of it, Jeni is married, smitten with her husband Titi and willing to do anything to keep his feelings alive. While Minerva does not care about her physical appearance at all, Jeni uses curl papers and wears what she considers to be very feminine clothes. While Minerva is alert and attentive, Jeni is starry-eyed and is generally considered to be out of her mind. Under this cover Minerva adopts a behaviour that is quite similar to Vitoria's: she is naïve, submissive, ecstatic about absolutely ordinary matters, but she watches people closely and constantly sets

traps in which they fall inevitably, as they tend to open up and confess to such a candid person. She even plays the victim in relation to Dobrescu, who, in order to be more convincing, is quite abrupt to "Jeni".

Later in the novel, when caught while spying on Robert and *Îngerășul*, the perpetrators behind the criminal acts in the novel, she bluffs and takes over by telling them about how untrained and incapable their collaborators are. She does not show her fear of them and when taken prisoner she herself proves always prepared, as she has the objects that are necessary for her to escape and is intrepid enough to actually do it.

In *Noapți albe pentru Minerva* she does not seem to conduct an investigation at all, but under her apparent indifference to everything she notices people carefully and manages to infer what is going to happen and who is to blame for that.

A third characteristic that helps both Vitoria and Minerva to succeed in their enterprises is their perceptiveness. Both are capable of noticing and then interpreting facts, of going beyond appearances. But while Minerva relies more on logic in order to solve her cases, explaining in detail in the end of the novels how she managed to reach her conclusions as to the identity of the criminals, Vitoria relies more on intuition and only narrates what happened to her husband, without telling much about how she came to understand that. Or rather the explanation she offers is incongruent with a traditional, ordinary, realistic detective plot.

We have said that Vitoria is illiterate, hence incapable of deciphering written words. But this is compensated by her ability of deciphering other signs. For the folk mentality whose exponent she is, all things

in the world, material or spiritual, are interconnected and intertwined, therefore any change, however minor, at any level is felt at all levels of the whole. The absence or degradation of one element perturbs all the others.<sup>27</sup> Nechifor's death, occurring before he had time to prepare his son for leading the family, leaves his place vacant, which disturbs the balance of the universe. The fact that his body is left unburied in the ravine is another infringement on unwritten, sacred laws. Consequently, the universe itself will contribute to the finding of the body and to the unmasking and punishing of the murderers. The universe sends signs, but they need to be noticed by somebody who is perceptive enough and, more than that, who is capable of grasping their meaning. So comes that Vitoria understands that the wind which starts blowing in a certain direction is an indication that they should follow track or that the wind which stops blowing indicates that they should stop. She considers these signs given by God or by St Ana to whom she prayed before leaving, and is grateful for such help. Moreover, she is capable of forecasting changes in the weather from certain smells or from the movement of the clouds and she can give meaning to things that happen in her household. The rooster, for instance, that crows facing the gate means that someone will leave the house. Consequently, Vitoria and Gheorghită will do exactly that, in order to look for Nechifor.

In addition, Vitoria also receives signs from her deceased husband. She dreams about him in various hypostases – crossing a water, with his back towards her or facing her and talking in such a way that only she could understand – and tries to conclude from these oneiric episodes whether

her husband is alive or not. There are some instances in the novel when she seems lost in thoughts, apparently trying to establish some sort of telepathic communication with Nechifor. Either because she has managed to do this or because she has an extraordinary intuition that helps her “see” what happened to her husband, in the end of the novel she tells the exact story of his killing, with details that not even the murderer and his accomplice can remember. She gives no explanation, as customary in detective novels, regarding how she came across these facts, other than repeatedly stating that the dead has spoken and has told her everything.

Minerva, on the other hand, discloses extensively, in the end of the novels discussed in the present essay, how she came to discover the identity of the criminals. In order to be able to find them she relies on a keen sense of observation and on logic, as befits a former mathematics teacher. She notices details, interprets them and makes logical deductions. She often has conversations about the cases with Dobrescu, sometimes subjecting him to genuine tests, as she actually knows the answer to the questions she asks, sometimes apparently thinking aloud and using him as a mere resonator for her ideas. Although she admits she has come across “mute” settings quite frequently<sup>28</sup>, she is quite matchless when it comes to drawing conclusions from analysing interiors. Besides, one of her favourite exercises is to try to imagine the kind of life lived by certain people that draw her attention. While these people are not necessarily involved in the cases she has to solve, the exercise helps her maintain and develop her sense of observation. Its benefit is seen by Dobrescu as well, who also does it from time to time.

## 6. Vitoria and Minerva as Mentors

The two women's inborn qualities and life experience qualify them to serve as mentors for two young men: Vitoria for her son Gheorghîță and Minerva for her subordinate, lieutenant Vasile Dobrescu.

In the traditional world of the village, the boys' education falls within their fathers' responsibility, and this has been Gheorghîță's case as well until his father failed to return home after his journey. With Nechifor missing, Vitoria has no other choice but to take her son's education upon herself. In the beginning, she would have liked to send him to look for Nechifor alone, but she sees that he is too young, inexperienced and insecure and she understands that she has to find a way in which her mind could help his arm to act. She accompanies him in order to offer a direct example of what he has to do, preferring this to teaching him lessons and giving him advice in the form of long sermons, as these might have had only the effect of boring him and making him roll his eyes, besides being forgotten as soon as he left the house. Gheorghîță generally obeys a mother who never speaks more than it is necessary and who can be ironic at times, and does not question her decisions. As a matter of fact, he does not even perceive her any longer as the mother he knows. She is more like a witch, capable of guessing his thoughts and she has detached herself from the world to concentrate on her mission. A mission that she accomplishes not only in point of observing the Law regarding her husband's funeral and the punishing of the murderer, but also in point of setting her son on the right track to becoming a real man.

Gheorghîță helps his mother only where physical strength is required, but he

manages to give a decisive blow to Bogza after the events of Nechifor's last hours are narrated by the latter's wife.

Minerva, on the other hand, has a long history as Dobrescu's mentor. Initially, as we have pointed out, she was his teacher, then she became his commanding officer. She knows him very well, and even remembers the marks she gave him in school and the instances when he managed to get higher marks than usually by copying from one of his colleagues. Minerva herself admits that she cannot forget having been his teacher and that she cannot let him forget that either. Not only does she keep reminding him of this explicitly, but she never ceases teaching him lessons and giving him problems to solve. The immediate effect of this is that, unlike Gheorghîță, Dobrescu does roll his eyes, but, on the other hand, he never stops wondering how the major can "see" so many things where he himself noticed nothing.

In their long history together, feelings have developed, but they are never admitted explicitly and are never allowed to interfere in Dobrescu's training. Still, when Major Tutovan leaves Dobrescu's side during the investigation in *Spionaj la mănăstire*, as she pretends to be one of the guests of the monastery and he plays the part of a young prosecutor, she watches him with unease, with "the worry of the mother duck that leaves its duckling on water for the first time"<sup>29</sup>. Then, when she suspects her lieutenant has fallen in love with another guest, she introduces ironical, but well-meant pieces of advice in love matters in the notes she writes to him about how to conduct his investigation. And later, when the respective young lady is apparently killed, she leaves her irony aside for a minute, showing genuine preoccupation

for her lieutenant's emotional condition. In the same novel, she brings him a present from Paris, a toy train, and though he seems more shocked than happy about it, the end of the novel finds them both playing with their trains, each in his/ her home.

Though Minerva hides her affection behind a cold and ironic façade, we can say that she views Dobrescu rather maternally. Dobrescu, on the other hand, does not seem to notice these feelings, being most frequently intimidated by her. He seems to be her only friend and companion and she definitely needs him if for no other reason than to have someone in front of whom she can think aloud. Sometimes she asks him questions whose answer she already knows, not just to test him, but also to have her views confirmed. The major's most frequent advice addressed to her lieutenant is "Open wide your eyes, Dobrescu", as he always needs to be shown what for her is absolutely obvious.

## 7. Conclusion

Two authors, two characters. One character representing ancestral mentality,

the other the exponent of modernity. Apparently, Vitoria Lipan and Minerva Tutovan could not have been more different from each other: one beautiful, the other not much so, one a wife and mother, the other single and proud of being so, one illiterate, the other a university graduate, one a homemaker, the other a State Security major. Society has changed and so has women's position in it. But the makings of a good detective have remained essentially the same. Because beyond these differences, we have seen in both female detective characters the same efficiency, power of dissimulation and perceptiveness put at the service of righting a wrong. Though Vitoria acts only once, and in order to solve what may be considered a personal problem, while Minerva acts repeatedly to solve problems related to public interests, both manage to accomplish their missions perfectly. More importantly, both have someone to whom to impart their wisdom. And although neither expresses her love or affection for the young man in her care, their feelings are obvious from their preoccupation with making "real men" out of them.

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## NOTES

1. Cf. Mihai Iovănel, „Literatura polițistă în România”, in Eugen Simion (coordonator), *Dicționarul general al literaturii române*, ediția a doua, vol. IV, București, Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2017, p. 777-781.
2. Cf. Paul Cernat, „De ce nu (mai) avem roman polițist?”, in *Observatorul cultural* nr. 864, 17.03.2017, available at <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/de-ce-nu-mai-avem-roman-politist/>
3. Mihai Zamfir, „De ce n-am avut roman polițist”, in *România literară*, nr. 43/ 2020, available at <https://romanaliterara.com/2020/10/de-ce-n-am-avut-roman-politist/>
4. Cf. Mihai Iovănel, *op. cit.*
5. Cf. Paul Cernat, *op. cit.*
6. Cf. Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender & Genre*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1995.
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8. Cf. Diane Keyser Wentworth and Robert M. Chell, “Gender Identity at Home”, in Janice W. Lee (ed.), *Psychology of Gender Identity*, New York, Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2005, p. 113-126.
9. Cf. Kathleen Gregory Klein, *op. cit.*
10. The translation was published in 1955 by The Book Publishing House in Bucharest and was reprinted several times in the subsequent years, by Romanian or foreign publishing houses. (cf. Rodica Dimitriu, “Translation as blockage, propagation and recreation of ethnic images”, in Luc van Doorslaer, Peter Flynn and Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Interconnected Translation Studies and Imagology*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016, p. 212.)
11. Cf. Mihai Iovănel, „Prefață” la Mihail Sebastian, *Femei*, Publishing Solutions, 2021, p. 5-9.
12. Cf. Petru Mihai Gorcea, „Basmul eternei repetiții”, in *Nesomnul capodoperelor*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1977, p. 5-109.
13. Cf., for instance, Eugen Istodor, *101 cărți românești de citit într-o viață*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2012.
14. Mihail Sadoveanu, *The Hatchet*, translated by Eugenia Farca, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1983, p. 15.
15. Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, *Nopti albe pentru Minerva*, București, Editura Nemira, 2015, p. 197, my translation



16. *Ibidem*, p. 198, my translation.
17. Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, *Spionaj la mănăstire*, available at [ojog-brasoveanu-rodica-spion.pdf](http://ojog-brasoveanu-rodica-spion.pdf) (wordpress.com), p. 5, my translation.
18. Petru Mihai Gorcea, *op. cit.*, p.17, my translation.
19. Mihail Sadoveanu, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
20. Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, *Nopti albe pentru Minerva*, p. 7, my translation.
21. *Ibidem*, my translation.
22. Cf. Mircea Tomuș, *Mihail Sadoveanu. Universul artistic și concepția fundamentală a operei*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1978.
23. Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, *Nopti albe pentru Minerva*, p. 83, my translation.
24. Translation taken from <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/miori%C8%9B-little-sheep-popular-ballad.html>.
25. Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, *Nopti albe pentru Minerva*, p. 79-80, my translation.
26. Cf. Mihail Sadoveanu, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
27. Cf. Ernest Bernea, *Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul român*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2005.
28. Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, *Nopti albe pentru Minerva*, p. 12.
29. *Idem*, *Spionaj la mănăstire*, p. 19, my translation.