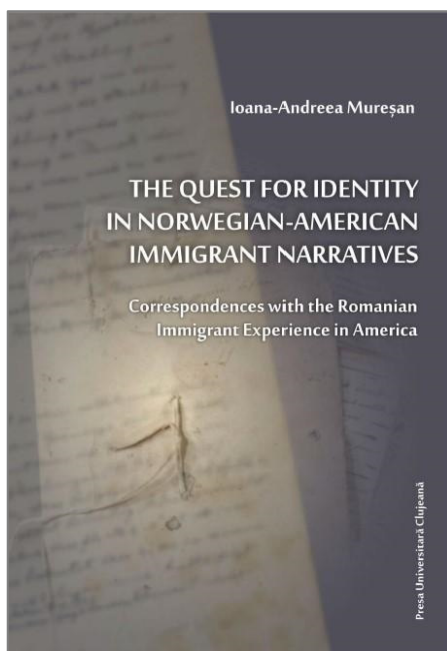


BOOKS

Ioana-Andreea Mureșan, *The Quest for Identity in Norwegian-American Immigrant Narratives. Correspondences with the Romanian Immigrant Experience in America*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021, 296 p.

Migration is a natural phenomenon that has had a tremendous impact on humanity throughout world history and has become even more relevant in the last decades due to increasing mobility and changes at societal level that have brought multiculturalism to the forefront. The complexity of migration could greatly benefit from in-depth analyses that focus on its intricate implications, as well as on questions of belonging and identity, as revealed by migration literature. Narratives of displacement come to complete the socio-historical perspective on migration as they concentrate on individual experiences.

This is the underlying idea of an innovative research on the individual experiences of migration that compares the stories of migration of two seemingly very different peoples, Norwegians and



Romanians, who emigrated to America in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, namely the volume *The Quest for Identity in Norwegian-American Immigrant Narratives*.

Correspondences with the Romanian Immigrant Experience in America. Ioana-Andreea Mureșan, the author of the e-book, which is her doctoral thesis conducted at Babeș-Bolyai University, portrays the twofold identity of Norwegians and Ro-

manians who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of a better life, focusing on questions of belonging and identity. This book is of particular interest due to the unique perspective provided by an analysis of three different authors, two Norwegian authors and a Romanian one, in an attempt to achieve “a more comprehensive understanding of what it feels like to be an immigrant in America” (11). Hence,

the exploration of Norwegian and Romanian immigrants' quest for identity reveals the difficulty of assimilation and acculturation, phenomena which occur naturally when two different cultures collide, when immigrants try to adapt to a new culture while trying to preserve their homeland culture. By analysing the immigrant narratives of Ole Edvart Rølvaag and Knut Hamsun, Norwegian writers, and of the Romanian writer Anișoara Stan, Mureșan reveals the complex picture of the individual stories of migration, the inner conflicts experienced by these immigrant writers, as well as the fact that the stories of migration were rather similar, despite the different homeland cultures.

The theoretical framework of the book relies on an interdisciplinary approach that discusses the concepts of identity and belonging from a sociological point of view, providing a historical perspective on migration that constitutes the backbone of a complex analysis of immigrant narratives. The result is "a mosaic picture of the immigrant experience stemming from a Norwegian-American and a Romanian-American perspective" (14). When it comes to the choice of the selected authors and texts, Mureșan proposes three different perspectives: that of Ole Edvart Rølvaag, who writes for his fellow Norwegian-Americans in Norway, depicting the struggles of Norwegian immigrants on their way to becoming Americans while trying to preserve their cultural legacy; Knut Hamsun's perspective, who has had two unsuccessful attempts in America and writes a bitter and highly subjective negative account of the American society for the Norwegian public. In addition, the perspective provided by the Romanian author, Anișoara Stan, comes to complete the analysis of the immigrant narratives

with her autobiography, written in English. This autobiography illustrates her love for Romanian traditions and folklore, as well as her faith that knowledge and understanding of other cultures is essential for achieving cohesion and world peace.

The Quest for Identity in Norwegian-American Immigrant Narratives is structured in order to reflect the double perspective proposed by the author, namely the historical overview on migration and the various perceptions of the immigrant experience as emerging from the selected narratives of migration. Mureșan discusses identity and its manifold valences and interpretations in connection to migration literature in the first chapter of her book, while focusing on the concept of cultural identity and the immigrants' sense of belonging, which succeeds to highlight the twofold identity of immigrants, highly relevant for this research. Furthermore, she then discusses these concepts in relation to migration literature, providing a personal perspective on the process of migration.

The second chapter of the book conveys a complex and consistent historical overview of the Norwegian and the Romanian emigration to America, as well as a highly interesting comparison of the two migration stories. The European context of mass migration to America is the starting point of the historical analysis that comes to identify correspondences between the two countries at the margins of Europe (15). Each emigration is discussed based on the same pattern, namely their evolution, starting with the causes that generated the emigration, and the emergence of the immigrant communities of the two ethnic groups. A very interesting and commendable approach in this book is the choice to focus on America letters, the letters the immigrants sent to

their families and friends in the homelands, which represent first-hand accounts on the immigrant experience (16). The author argues these letters have had a significant role in the evolution of the mass migration, particularly from Norway, as they were more likely to be taken seriously by the family members of the immigrants, who were eventually persuaded to emigrate themselves. Thus, the analysis of these immigrant letters conveys even more strength to this research on the personal stories of migration.

Mureşan analyses in the third chapter the narratives of Ole Edvart Rølvaag, who emigrated from Northern Norway and succeeded in becoming the iconic representative of the Norwegian-Americans, as he wrote about the Norwegian experience. His lines on the immigrant experience have been chosen as the motto for the book: "We have become strangers; strangers to those we left and strangers to those we came to" (Rølvaag, *The Third Life of Per Smevik*, 1971, 126). Again, Mureşan's endeavour is all the more commendable due to the fact that she quoted both the original Norwegian version of the selected novels, as well as their translation into English. Moreover, the complexity of the endeavour is revealed also by the volume of work, namely the two novels – *Giants in the Earth* (1924-1925), *Concerning Our Heritage* (1922) and the fictive/fictitious volume of letters *The Third Life of Per Smevik* (1912), which all provide a comprehensive perspective on Rølvaag's perception of the immigrant experience and on his struggle to preserve the cultural heritage of his homeland (17, 163).

The fourth chapter illustrates Hamsun's perception on immigration, which is beneficial for a more compre-

hensive overview of the immigrant experience emerging from immigrant narratives. Thus, Mureşan focuses on the volume *The Cultural Life of Modern America* (1889), but also on two sketches, "Fear" and "On the Prairie" (1903), that illustrate the years Hamsun has spent in the American prairie. She also discusses some letters and the article "Festina lente" (1928), which reveal his view on the American culture (17, 196, 215).

A novel analysis of the Romanian writer Anișoara Stan's autobiography, *They Crossed Mountains and Oceans* (1947), renders the multicultural perspective over the immigrants' quest of identity complete. The Romanian perspective of an author who had been hardly known in her homeland before this research was written has been called by Mureşan "the autobiography of a dreamer" (17, 38, 231). It illustrates Stan's belief that cultural heritage needs to be preserved and treasured by the immigrants, who should not break ties with the past. Moreover, Anișoara Stan can be considered a visionary, given her thoughts that "the reminiscences of the Old World culture, as well as the preservation of the cultural heritage can bring cohesion within an immigrant community, making it distinct and appreciated in the larger American culture" (17-18).

The book also contains an interview with the Norwegian contemporary author Edvard Hoem, who published four novels between 2014 and 2017, in which he recreates his Norwegian-American family saga, revealing, at the same time "the tremendous amount of interest regarding the immigrant experience and migration literature that has become almost universal during the last decades" (38). Hoem's insight into migration and

immigrant narratives renders a contemporary perspective on the personal stories of migration illustrated by Mureșan in her book.

The Quest for Identity in Norwegian-American Immigrant Narratives is a book that invites both scholars, those passionate about the migration literature, and all readers to immerse themselves in the personal stories of migration. The immigrant experience can be regarded not only as a success story in pursuit of achieving the American dream, but also as a story of displacement, uprootedness, that generated questions of belonging and identity. Mureșan proposes an analysis of (be)longing of several Norwegian and Romanian-American immigrant narratives that are as relevant today as ever.

Her research on immigrant narratives comes to complete the historical perspective on migration, which focuses on statistics and numbers, rather than on people and their stories. Her conclusion is representative for the manifold perspective on migration illustrated in her book: "The immigrants are bound to possess a double consciousness, as they were shaped by the Old World and ventured to face the challenges of the New World, trying all this time not to forget who they were and where they came from, struggling to preserve their identity. Their ambivalent nature makes them resemble Janus, the god of beginnings, with one face looking at their past, and the other at their new beginnings" (255).

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