

## ARIADNA ȘALARI: LAUNCHING AS A WRITER

Vladislav GHERASIM

PhD Student

("Alec Russo" Balti State University, Republic of Moldova)

[vladislav.gherasim@gmail.com](mailto:vladislav.gherasim@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9665-6585>

### Abstract

The autobiographical novel "Labirintul" represents an important source of information regarding Ariadna Șalari's biography, her debut in Romania and the environment in which she was formed as a writer. The parallel research and analysis of the novel "Labirintul" and the author's biography revealed the veracity of the events and happenings presented in the novel. The aim of this article is to create an overview of Ariadna Șalari's literary debut, her life as a student at the Bucharest Polytechnic, as well as her collaboration with the magazines "Orizont" and "Flacăra". Joining the editorial staff of these magazines contributed significantly to Ariadna Șalari's professional and ideological formation, as they positioned themselves as left-wing publications. Taking this detail into account, it becomes clear why the works published in the first period of her creation (1947-1949) have such a strong ideological theme.

**Keywords:** literary debut, autobiographical novel, biography

### Rezumat

Romanul autobiografic „Labirintul” reprezintă o sursă informativă importantă în ce privește biografia Ariadnei Șalari, debutul ei în România și ambianța în care s-a format ca scriitoare. Cercetarea și analiza în paralel a romanului „Labirintul” și a biografiei autoarei a relevat veridicitatea evenimentelor și întâmplărilor prezentate în roman. Miza articolului de față este realizarea imaginii de ansamblu asupra debutului literar al Ariadnei Șalari, a vieții de studentă la Politehnica din București, precum și asupra colaborării cu revistele „Orizont” și „Flacăra”. Intrarea în redacția acestor reviste a contribuit esențial la formarea profesională și ideologică a Ariadnei Șalari, ele poziționându-se ca publicații de stânga. Ținând cont de acest detaliu devine clar de ce operele publicate în prima perioadă a creației (1947-1949) au o tematică ideologică atât de pregnantă.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** debut literar, roman autobiografic, biografie

It is known that "an autobiography cannot be confused with a historical treatise. It represents a personal, sometimes subjective vision. But the great truths of history result from the summation and confrontation of these particular perspectives" (Râpeanu, 1972, p. XLIX). In this context, the comparative analysis between the author's biography, the autobiographical novel "Labirintul" and articles from the magazines of the time has the aim of establishing and presenting as thoroughly as possible the moments that configure the writer's life and literary activity.

According to the novel "Labirintul", Ariadna Șalari inherited her love of literature from her father, Nicolae Șalari, the Greek and Latin teacher. Oth-

erwise, she inherited his withdrawn character and appearance: "you look very much like him" (Şalari, 1990, p. 226). Her passion for reading bothered her mother, who was the soul of parties and the queen of balls. In the novel, the narrator presents her as a very beautiful woman, who always attracted everyone's attention. However, the writer did not inherit her audacity or her party spirit. Ariadna Şalari's creative process takes shape starting from her first years of college, but another detail in the novel shows us that since adolescence the narrator has been writing down certain experiences and feelings: "As a schoolgirl, she consumed many pages with confessional notes, which she would tear up afterwards. It was a way to unload her heart, to project into a separate, unique universe belonging only to you. There she found herself and those around her in other, more expressive, often more unexpected colors" (*idem*, pp. 121-122).

Later, during her university years, the priest Mircea, the uncle of her first husband, Teo, who had married them in secret and who hosted the newlyweds, was a source of inspiration for the future writer. Thus, her first fairy tale: "The Prince of Silence" was born. This was just a creative exercise, which apparently was never published. "She keeps writing. (...) Now here is Uncle Mircea who has come to populate her imagined universe in a mythical appearance under the guise of the "Prince of Silence". It is a fairy tale that she imagined as fierce and sterile. "Will he recognize himself?" - its creator asked herself in awe when she read it to her" (*ibidem*). Her colleague Margo, with whom she lived together (until marriage and after divorce), is the one who encouraged her to publish her notes, noting her abilities and talent for writing: "you have the grace to write better than you speak" (*idem*, p. 185). This entire evolutionary writing process comes against the backdrop of her divorce from Teo, which constituted a complicated period in the narrator's life. The young writer finds refuge and peace of mind in literature. "Just try, maybe you'll get lucky and it would be a shame to waste it on charity. Why don't you try to write something from 1940, when you were in Bessarabia and studied under Soviet rule. I'm sure such things would appeal to readers. Today, many are interested. The time has passed when you didn't have the right to breathe..." (*idem*, p. 186).

Ariadna Şalari's letter to the Writers' Union of the MSSR brings to light some important details that played a key role in her path to a literary career: "Having a sad experience in the past, when almost a child, at 17 years old, I knocked in vain on all the doors in search of a publisher and met only sour or amused faces at the sight of the two thick notebooks in my hands - by contrast, the care and love with which the communists received me, the attention with which they read my first pieces, the confidence they awakened in my own powers and the light they lit in my soul, guiding me towards the true sources of art, the life and struggle of the working people - were the be-

ginning of the brightest days that opened before me. They taught me to search tirelessly, to work hard and to see things differently. As a result, no effort seemed too difficult for me, because I got used to squeeze the most out of every useful moment" (Donos, 2000, p. 60). This experience justifies the way she promoted ideas specific to this regime in her works, because she was formed as a personality in the atmosphere of that socio-political structure.

Dadaism was the literary movement that had a strong impact on the writer, influencing her decision to write literature: "Here, this sparkling aesthetic 'dictatorship', which those rebellious visionaries dreamed of, carrying out an incendiary activity, and which I detected in their nonconformist past, compensated me in that troubled time for the need for good cheer and sealed, I would say, my future destiny, pushing me to devote myself exclusively to literature, and not to the activity of a chemical engineer for which I had prepared myself" (Şalari, 1997, p. 3).

From the novel "Labirintul" we discover what that confessional work contained. "Sent by mail, the narrator confesses, to this magazine's address a few handwritten pages with memories from that unique year - 40! She had avoided the shadows and had made youth talk about youth: school, teachers, first impressions. She had deprived herself of the other visions, preserving only one, widely reflected against the background of a sad and bitter thought, because somewhere, behind the scenes, the infernal war that would crush all the buds of new life, barely sprouting, was already lurking" (Şalari, 1990, pp. 229-230). She meets Saşa Pană for the first time when she goes to the editorial office. Being moved by this event, the narrator still has those moments vivid in her mind, mentioning details such as: where she got the address of the editorial office, how she got there, the fact that it was a gloomy day, that a cat had met her at the entrance to the block, and that the editorial office is located on Dogarilor Street (at this address Saşa Pană lived). She continues this story with a detailed portrayal of the editor-in-chief who had fascinated her, while also highlighting the strong emotions that had overwhelmed her in those moments.

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In her letter to the Writers' Union of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, Ariadna Șalari reviews the important events of her literary career in Bucharest: "I was studying at the Bucharest Polytechnic and at the same time I was collaborating on the first progressive Romanian magazines ("Orizont", "Revista literară", "Licurici"), and in 1948, after defending my diploma project, I was called to be part of the editorial staff of the magazine "Flacăra" (Donos, 2000, p. 60).

In "Literary Review", No. 12 of May 4, 1947, the veracity of the information presented in this novel regarding Maia Radovan's first attempt at writing and publishing is confirmed: "She debuted in the magazine "Orizont", in June 1946, with a page of "Memories of Student Life in the U.S.S.R.". But her special talent was noted in the fairy tales published later in the same magazine as well as in "Înainte" in which a fantasy of a amazing poetess dressed in the garment of the freshest images. She herself wrote the following epigraph to a text: "I would like you to read it 'seeing' it as if it were a *movie*" (*Revista literară*, 1947). The editor-in-chief, comrade Alec (Sașa Pană), reading other notes and fairy tales by the young writer, was impressed, and he informed her that he would publish her notes in the next issue of the magazine. He highly appreciated the notes, discovering her talent and creative potential: "He found that fairy tales denote a genuine talent and imaginative vigor. They are wonderful daydreams written for young and old. He especially liked the enchanting allegory "Conștiința", addressed to those children who know how to discover the hidden meaning of stories that are also something else: the mirror of a writer's imaginations ..." (Șalari, 1990, p. 235). A feature of her style is to convey educational messages and instill different moral values in readers. The works are easily accessible and captivating through the manner of what is presented, this style of writing is present throughout her literary activity.

During this time, she combined literary activity with laboratory work, working for a short time as a chemical engineer producing phenacetin for the black market. "She also allowed herself to be converted to work as a laboratory assistant, until the beginning of her courses" (*idem*, p. 262). It was also during this period that she defended her diploma project with Professor C. Nenițescu.

In the discussion with Alexandru Donos, the writer lets it be understood that her love for the art of writing was stronger than her love for chemistry: "The passion for letters pushed me to leave the path I had prepared for in university, but I never had time to regret it. I fell in love with the intense life of a journalist, with its overwhelming problems, with the duty of being eter-

nally at the recognition station of life, 'a singer who always goes one step ahead of the hero' (Donos, 2000, p. 60).

The strong impact produced by the first published texts made her the subject of contradictory discussions among her colleagues at the editorial office, some who noticed her writing talent and called her Creangă's granddaughter: "Some were destroying her, others were glorifying her! You gave the world a hard time with the wonderful language of "Miorița" and the master from Humulești. They called you Creangă's granddaughter!" (Șalari, 1990, p. 290).

The success of her first published works paved the way for her to become a member of the "Flacăra" magazine staff: "Then, after she had defended her diploma project, she committed to working on a literature and art magazine (...) The staff of the "Flacăra" magazine, where she was invited to work, gave her the impression of a domain in a colonial empire, after it had freed itself from autocratic demagoguery" (*idem*, p. 303). The prose writer remembers that she felt good in the midst of this staff. At that time, the editorial staff included the editor-in-chief comrade Alec, the writer Petru Dim, the journalist Jano, the poet and editor George Dan, and the newly hired future poet Dan Deșliu, comrade Mișu (who was her compatriot from Cetatea Albă), the ideologist N. Mardaru, the poet Victor Tulburaș, and others.

A document through which we discover the veracity of A. Șalari's activity at the magazine "Flacăra" is the minutes from a historic editorial meeting, dated August 20, 1948 (Ilie, 2005, p. 431), in which we attest several names that correspond to the characters in the novel, including Janot Popper (Jano), Sașa Pană (Alec), Nina Casian, Petru Dumitriu (Petru Dim), Victor Tulbure (Victor Tulburaș) and others.

An important episode from her debut as a writer is her participation in the 1947 electoral campaign together with the editor-in-chief Alec and the poet Victor Tulburaș. Thus, in Brăila, in front of a large audience made up of "workers and porters from the harbor, with many young girls dressed cheaply and flashily" (Șalari, 1990, p. 314), barely controlling her emotions, she reads the story "Ciubotele fermecate". To her surprise, the audience was delighted with the text she heard.

About the emotions of speaking in front of an audience, A. Șalari confesses to us in the article written about Vera Malev: "As curious as it may seem, the shock of sudden silence also sapped any courage I had to speak. And on the contrary, when there was commotion around, the chatter heated up, the atmosphere of active tumult captured me provocatively, and not annihilatingly" (Șalari, 1997).

Another meeting with readers took place during the visit of the debutant writer with a group of colleagues to Mogoșoaia, where the former palace had been turned into a home ("Donca Simu") for war orphans.

Her work in the editorial office was quite appreciated. Being knowledgeable in Russian, she was responsible for taking care of certain translations, and sometimes had to write several articles a week under different pseudonyms. In addition, she "received the duties of secretary in the children's committee, where Elena Pătrășcanu was the president" (Șalari, 1990, p. 323), thus having the opportunity to collaborate with the magazine "Licurici".

After the editor-in-chief, Alec, is transferred to the army magazine, she resigns from the magazine "Flacăra" because their love affair had become the subject of gossip and jokes. The history of literature, however, remembers the fact that they managed to write several works together: a play "Așa întrecere, înțeleg și eu!", the short stories "În toiul treieriișului" and "Într-o fabrică de 11 iunie 1948". However, Sașa Pană mentions only one work written in collaboration with Maria Radovan, "Așa întrecere înțeleg și eu", published in 1949 in Bucharest.

In an attempt to find documentary details that would confirm the close relationship between these two literary personalities Ariadna Șalari and Sașa Pană, which would justify those recorded by Ariadna Șalari, journalist Mirela Nagâț, researching this subject, makes the following observation: "Knowing his discretion, we understand why an illicit love episode that he had with the Bessarabian writer Ariadna Șalari in 1947-1949, when they both collaborated on the magazine "Flacăra" and signed a theater plaque (she under the pseudonym Maia Radovan), is completely unknown. It would even seem, according to some family testimonies, that Ariadna Șalari's decision to repatriate to Soviet Moldova is not unrelated to this disappointment in love" (Nagâț, 2021). Lucia Țurcanu in the article "Ariadna Șalari. Plea for recovery" also mentions the following: "Therefore, "Labirintul" is also the story of a broken love, hidden until the end of Sașa Pană's life, revealed by Ariadna Șalari four decades later, when few remembered Maia Radovan and comrade Alec" (Țurcanu, 2023, p. 64). An idea that is also confirmed by A. Șalari's son, as the same literary critic states: "the art critic Constantin I. Ciobanu revealed a biographical detail that could have become a subject of sensation for the literary world on both banks of the Prut in the years 1947-1949, Maia Radovan would have had a relationship with Sașa Pană" (*ibidem*).

A. Șalari, in the same letter addressed to the Writers' Union of the MSSR, reviews the works through which she made herself noticed in the People's Republic of Romania. "The few books and brochures that were edited by me - "Împărăția Balaaurului" - a fragment of the life of political prisoners from Doftana, "Carnetul unui școlar carte pentru copii", "Ilie își croiește viață nouă" - a volume of sketches and short stories from the struggle of the peasants guided by the party against retrograde elements and scoundrels, "Așa întrecere înțeleg și eu" - a play from the working class, written in collaboration with Sașa Pană, "Costea s-a luminat" - a book dedicated to the anniver-

sary of the Romanian People's Republic, published in 1950, in my absence, I still consider them as explorations, thirsty searches for the true paths of creation, for that New that makes every honest soul vibrate with joy" (Donos, 2000, p. 60).

In the novel, the key role in breaking the love relationship that had developed between the young writer Maia and Alec (who was already editor-in-chief of the army magazine and had been given his colonel's epaulettes) is played by Niki, her university classmate, who suggests to her that through this love affair, comrade Alec's reputation was at stake: "Well, didn't you... destroy his family? Did you deprive him of his child? (...) Do you think that this divorce process, initiated in such a period when every party member is scrutinized in every detail from every point of view, including his moral profile, do you think that this divorce process won't harm him as much as it would an old party member?" (Şalari, 1990, p. 403).

On the other hand, in the Letter cited above, A. Şalari presents another situation that marked her and awakened her longing for her homeland. "An unfortunate event, she states, caused me to be struck by a cruel illness, following a car accident (...). But the state of depression during the illness awakened in me an uncontrollable longing for the places of my childhood, for the parents and siblings from whom the war had separated me, and it pushed me to request repatriation, which the Soviet State immediately granted me" (Donos, 2000, p. 61).

In "Labirintul", the last meeting with Alec takes place at the end of 1949, in the courtyard of the repatriation camp. He brings her her latest, freshly printed book. Here ends the stage of the debut, which culminates in three events of a strong emotional impact, the separation from the loved one, the appearance of a new book at the publishing house and the return to her homeland. The repatriation will be evoked in detail in the writer's second autobiographical novel, "Venetica". The situation at home was complicated, which is why the writer decides to take the road of wandering again, this time heading to Moscow.

The period of Ariadna Şalari's debut as a writer, which coincided with her student life in Bucharest, reconstructed in detail in a bildungsroman narrative in "Labirintul", was evoked by the writer in her old age in an interview given in 1998 to the writer Victor Prohin. "My first fairy tales-allegories", the prose writer recalls, appreciated and published in the Bucharest magazine "Orizont" (editor-in-chief Saşa Pană) were congealed in the fire of this omnipotent god who directed my laboratory work" (Prohin, 1998, p. 5). The author refers to the inspiration that came from the image of the bubbles produced by the chemistry laboratory experiments.

Another important detail that the narrator tells us is the fact that her first published texts were rejected: "Unfortunately, my first collection of fairy

tales-allegories, hosted in the pages of the magazine "Orizont" (1946), during my student years, was later rejected as inappropriate for the proletarian ideology" (Prohin, 1998, p. 5). We can intuit the ideas she addressed in these works if we pay attention to another sequence from the same interview, where A. Șalari, very directly, lets it be understood that her first literary texts did not conform to the communist ideology. "I did not want to slander anyone, because those people, enslaved to a utopian idea, believed in it. History condemned their ideal, and history is always right" (*ibidem*).

The fact that at the time of her debut Ariadna Șalari worked in a collective that included fierce supporters of the communist regime was defining for the first books she would publish. "The publications "Orizont", "Revista literară" and "Flacăra" manifested proletarian cultist tendencies, and the metamorphoses she underwent reflect on a cultural and literary level the meanders that the proletarian cultist machine went through in order to get rid of any hesitations and function with all its destructive force" (Zotescu, 2017, p. 582). Therefore, A. Șalari was strongly influenced by the ideological context in which she found herself from the beginning of her career. This context, combined with what she would find in the USSR, would keep her in the area of communist ideology for a long time, although structurally the author was of a completely different make.

The members of the "Flacăra" collective that we get to know in the novel are promoters of communist doctrines. At their head are Sașa Pană and Petru Dim, whom the press of the time called "the spoilt of the regime" (Tudorancea, 2019), Mișu – also called the ideologist, etc. Discussions on ideological topics were a common thing in this collective. Jano, another colleague, characterizes the atmosphere that reigned in this team, calling it "an environment of "lost dogmatic illusions"" (Șalari, 1990, p. 307). The most widespread publications at that time, "magazines such as: "Contemporanul", "Flacăra", "Viața Românească", become platforms for official propaganda, promoting proletarian cultist dogmatism and Sovietization, presupposing compromise and abdication" (Zotescu, 2017, p. 582). It is no wonder why the magazine "Flacăra" criticizes Marin Preda's work, even though it is printed by its editorial office ("Because it is immediately severely criticized by the magazine "Flacăra", accused of "naturalism", "anachronism", lack of vision of the new and a host of other sins" (Prohin, 1998, p. 5)). The prose writer's evocations outline the context in which she "received her baptism" in the waters of communist ideology since her student days in Bucharest. During her stay in Moscow, in the period 1950-1951, following the trend of the period, the writer deepens her knowledge in the field of ideology, attending the Evening University of "Marxism-Leninism". The new social-political realities are nevertheless accepted with difficulty by the young writer. The problem that Maia, the protagonist of the novel "Labirintul" faces at the beginning of her

literary career is more of a problem of conscience, as she finds it difficult to understand how she could write about what she does not truly believe: "It is difficult to reconcile her with the imperatives of the present. The young literati tries to imagine what a communist Marcel Proust would look like! I wonder what his creation would sound like?!" (Şalari, 1990, p. 350).

Although, at the beginning of her career, A. Şalari considered that the creative process is one devoid of the shackles of any political or ideological factor, and the writer is free to shape the desired realities, later she collides with the cruel reality of a literature subject to the oppressive totalitarian system and censorship. "Art for her", the narrator observes, "was far from meaning a series of intentions with an ideological character corresponding to a dialectical formulation, in which history, class struggle and other identical motives of which she had no idea would be present!" (*idem*, p. 292). War, poverty and hard life make her understand that in such a situation you can only survive if you make compromises – a widespread conception for that period, an idea that the writer confesses to us, in order to justify the concessions made to ideology over time: "Dignity, however, cannot be conceived on an empty stomach. So material interests always take precedence and become the main factor that binds people!.." (*idem*, p. 293). It is likely that during this period the writer understood that in order to be able to publish her works and earn a living, she must make certain compromises with herself, she must keep pace with what her time dictates and with those who direct from behind the scenes the directions in which society should move. In fact, whether she wanted to or not, A. Şalari was guided by the model of the "man under the times" which, later, put her entire creative work in semi-obscurity. Reading the work through the value criterion is intended to bring to the forefront what resists in the writer's work, and the reevaluation of literature will not be done outside of contextual-historical analysis.

The exercise of literary archaeology aims to establish the elements of natural biographical fluctuation in the work. The step-by-step reconstruction of the path taken by Ariadna Şalari in the first period of her creation (1946-1949), highlighting the moment of germination of the creative germ and following its contextual evolution up to the point of repatriation to the Cetatea Albă, is motivated and constitutes an essential element of the research strategy of the life and work of a first-rate author from the 1960s generation.

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