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LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN "GURA SATULUI" BY SLAVICI

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Abstract: *Ioan Slavici's short-stories are his laboratory of creation, where the major themes of his writing are developed and explored. The love theme is one of the most poignant in his writings, as it is placed on the background of more complex phenomena, such as the ritualistic behaviour in the traditional community, the social and economic status of the characters and their relationship with 'the centre'. The love theme is also central in the creation of his female character, and here lies the modernity of his prose.*

Keywords: *love theme, traditional marriage ritual, the Other, the centre, female character, the outcast.*

1. Introduction

In *Gura satului* (*Village Gossip*), an aspect which is also present in other of Slavici's short stories is brought forward: the presence of the "outcast"(Boia, 121), of the Other which relates himself to the centre, but does not meet all the values and requirements of the centre.

2. Text Structure

The centre in Slavici's short stories is the village, the domain of norms and, implicitly, of sanity. The outcast is Pascu in *Scormon*, Bujor in *La crucea din sat* (*The Crucifix from the Village*), Miron in *Gura satului* (*Village Gossip*) and Simina in *Pădureanca* (*The Woodlander*). The happy end of those short stories reflects the idea that between "the centre and the periphery there is permanent exchange and no position is forever gained or lost" (Boia, 130). Pascu, Bujor, and as we shall see later on, Miron and Simina as well, are characters who are successful in their crossing from periphery towards centre.

Marta from *Gura satului* (*Village Gossip*) is not only uncle Mihu's "pride and honour", but, "as the household outspreads, there was no one above Marta" (Slavici, 322). The old women and the wives look at her with fondness and envy: "*The wives and the old women covetous for youth hurry to the gates and watch her pass by. It's nice the way she keeps her head, the way she moves her body and her lissom walk; her curly hair falls beautifully on her forehead and her rich necklace against her breast; beautifully wrinkle her embroidered sleeves on her arms and her embellished skirt wraps beautifully around her thighs. Even an old woman, you look at her and wish to look again*" (Slavici, 322).

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For such a girl, 'the centre' allots a matching husband: Toderica, Cosma Florii Cazacului's son – "father and son, when thy step, the floor cracks under their feet" (Slavici 323). The two youngsters are a well-matched pair, not only physically, by their 'stature' and 'look', not only in their village, but in seven villages. The youngster's parents have the same economic status. We find ourselves in the middle of an 'alliance machinery', riveted around the transfer and the flux of wealth, around the custom of turning over possessions by marriage. The behaviour of the individuals is so much ciphered that "the courting of the girl has a certain signification and it removes the other potential suitors while she has expressed her preference for a certain partner. When this ritual does not take place, suspicions are aroused and the village is prodded to gossip, to poke their noses, to turn things over"(Vintilă-Ghițulescu, 89). Here, the crack in this behaviour is not that the girl did not make her choice, but the fact that the spectator-character assumes that, due to the obvious match, the two young people also wish for themselves to be married to each other. This is, without doubt, 'the village gossip'. The pressure is huge, the vicinity behaves as an accomplice, but it is also hostile, if need be, and the parents are the first to react.

It is common knowledge that in the XIXth century the marriage was a contract, the union of two people was mainly arranged by the family. Most of the times, the aim was to ensure the social climb of the man or the welfare of the woman. This is not the case here. Marta and Toader are betrothed to each other because of their parents' equal social prestige. Their feelings are put aside:

- "*Toader! He said shortly, speaking with importance. I reckon it's time for you to get married.*
- *Yes, father! Toader replied. As you see fit.*
- *Very well! The old man said. What do you say? Do you fancy Marta, Mihu's Marta, Safta's Mihu?*
- *Well, father! Toader replied, and shrugged his shoulders.*
- *I'd say, than, this is settled, Cosma ended, than sat up, took his staff and went out with big steps*" (Slavici, 232).

To court Marta, Toader's parents carefully choose two "people of noble descent and well-seen by the eyes of the village". They inspect Mihu and 'auntie' Safta's household, who put on display their cattle, their staff and their grains, on one hand, and the bedspreads Marta sew, on the other hand. Every move the characters make is heavy with meaning; Marta's family offers and the emissaries of Floarea Cazacului judge and ponder what they see and what they hear. Under these circumstances, Marta "stood before them (the emissaries) and said that it was going to be as Mihu, the master of the household, wishes, as that was the proper way to answer for a girl of good family" (Slavici, 323). Magdalena Popescu analysed this scene masterfully, placing the stress on the role of the language "as a traditional custom and norm"(Popescu, 84).

With God's mercy, it is possible that this marriage could take place. Yet, it is possible that precisely the over-mediatisation of an act so well enjoined by the others to be the source of its failure. Between Mihu and Cosma there are the suitors; between Marta and Toader there is the whole community. When direct meetings take place, life, with complacencies and feelings, has a say in it and goes beyond the rigidity of the code. Marta feels at ease only beside Mihu, the shepherd, the 'stranger', the one who comes from the periphery towards the centre. The thought at Miron enthrals her. It is only now that emphasis is placed on

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senses, feelings and sensations. Marta secludes herself; she would like to escape the ritual: "*And again Miron's face came from within her heart; she could see him in her mind, so real, so vivid as if the sun would have cast its beams upon him and illumed him. So assuaged did she feel any time she lost herself in her thoughts about him, she felt so good to imagine him close, sitting beside her, speaking his clear and enticing words, taking her hand, coiling his arm around her and calling her: Marta!* "

"*But now, for the first time in her life, Marta felt that she could not tell a soul what was in her mind. There was no peace for her, she craved for solitude, her tears were choking her…*"(Slavici, 336).

The encounter with Miron is what brings forth the love, it is what Jean Baudrillard called in *Fatal Strategies* "free flow power device"(Baudrillard, 116). According to the archaic structures, the rite was esoteric and it presupposed that the rules were strictly followed. Love orders the events according to the affects and not to the rules. Marta and Miron declare each other their love and the girl is willing to courageously risk her reputation in order to see Miron: "*Allow me to always come to you, to spend time together, to complain, to speak of our love, Miron!*" (Slavici, 338).

Miron is more cerebral, and his pondering and virtue are manly features, which are domineering and also the ones which complet the leader's figure in Antiquity.

Apparently, the lovers' destiny is sealed. But here comes forth a dimension that is not in the slightest likely in Slavici's prose and that cannot be overlooked: the maternal dimension. Maternity was widely praised in the prose of Kogălniceanu and Bolintineanu. It was also ridiculed in the prose of the generation of after 1948 and in that of Caragiale, but, for Slavici, maternity is present not only at a discursive level, but it also acquires an active and modern significance.

The figure of the mother is present in short-stories as *Scormon* and *La crucea din sat* (*The Crucifix from the Village),* but here the feminine coalition between mother and daughter is fruitful. "The feeling is, for the first time, seen as an unknown variable which, coming unaware into a person's life, changes the way he relates to himself, the other, the others"(Popescu, 84), Magdalena Popescu remarks in her study about Slavici. The feeling undermines the ancestral order, based on ritual and ceremony and redefines the relationships between the characters. Safta's intense care for Marta gets Mihu, who believes at first that the girl's hesitations are the result of the same worries he has, thinking better: "*How comes that a lad should come, take his daughter away and that he himself, who raised her and thought the world of her, should say: Take her and be gone!*"(Slavici, 365).

When Safta lets him know that she does not want to wed Toader, Mihu loses his countenance. Two contradictory feelings gnaw at him: on the one hand, there is disquiet for his daughter's torment; on the other hand, his status in the village tickles his pride. His encounter with Cosma on the bridge is something that only deepens the crack in the "ritualistic" structure of his world. The glance of the village becomes now hostile to Mihu's family. The people exaggerate and even make up the reasons which could break the engagement of Toader and Marta. The peace is shuttered at macro-social level, in the village, as well as at micro-scocial level, in the house of Mihu, who finds out that his daughter 'is dying' for a shepherd who, feeling distress because of his lack of perspectives with Marta, decides to leave. Two years later, filled with bitterness and sorrow, the history repeats itself: Marta finds herself facing the choice of marrying Manea, ten years her elder, but a "gentleman, of good

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wealth and educated" (Slavici, 356); however, at a fare, Miron enters the scene again, coming with bullocks for breeding, and still very much in love with Marta. The two of them lay eyes on each other: "*their eyes meet and lock in a consuming gaze; both of them turn into stone*"(Slavici, 360). Love brings back together the "scattered world". Miron asks Marta to be his wife from Mihu, facing him with this option: "*so you should know, that your answer grants her life or takes it away*"(Slavici 365). The mother-daughter coalition, doubled by the young woman's unvoiced toughness shakes the position of the man as 'pater familias'.

3. Conclusion

Everywhere in Slavici's writings, the figure of the father, poignant and domineering in the XIXth century, is put to a tough test. This is another modern characteristic from the writer who truly introduces the woman's figure in our prose, through *Pădureanca* (*The Woodlander*) and *Mara*.

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