THE IMAGE OF THE MOTHER IN HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU'S PROSE

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Abstract: *Although in men's literature mothers are memorable characters, in the feminine one they are far from being given the same status, at least in the works of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, a reference writer of Romanian literature. The author caused the critique to record the existence of the feminine literature and, thanks to her, a mental pattern of the works written by women was formed. Going back to the mothers in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's prose, we notice that they are not seen in a positive light, nor are they marked by the biological custom of maternity, but they are rather governed by various obsessions, among which that of the bastard is worth mentioning. Therefore, children are unwanted not only by society, but also by their own mothers, who prove to be downright miserable and odious – mothers that lack the maternal instinct.*

Keywords*: image of the mother, maternity, feminine literature.*

In Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's short prose the mother-character is almost non-existent. The children-characters haven't caught the author's interest too much either; when in her short prose she briefly talks about "the human baby", his portrait is not necessarily sketched in a positive way, as it appears to be a burdening image rather than a pleasant one:

> Generally, she didn't love children. Of all the creatures, the human baby seemed to her to be the ugliest. Powerless, dirty, whimpered, he presented the inferiority of the mature human being. On their dirty cheek, on their filthy fingers, she could see all the stains that would later be imprinted on the inside of their soul. The baby bird, the puppies, the lambs, even the little green frogs are more beautiful, more sturdy. No one carries them, no one waists his or her life caring for their helplessness.[1] (*Femeia în fața oglinzei – The Woman in front of the Mirror*).

Still, there are also situations in which the author smiles remembering her own childhood – a happy one too –, when she makes use of the image of a little boy playing on the beach:

> Only one little child was left – who was playing with the ball. He was tiny, very tiny, he might have been four years old – it was a little boy. […] His face was fat, rosy, round, childish and naughty, bold and naïve; he had a small mouth with ends that would voluntarily rise or that would go down, ready for a cry. He was playing with a ball, pushing it with his foot, throwing it, and it was hard for him to throw it with his small hands, concentrated to catch it. […] It took my breath away and my soul was running also. What a heart throb all of a sudden! (*Marea – The Sea*).

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[1] All the excerpts from the author's works are taken from the volumes *Opere* (*Works*), vol. I, edition and notes by Eugenia Tudor Anton, foreword by Constantin Ciopraga, Minerva, București, 1972, *Opere* (*Works*), vol. II, edition and notes by Eugenia Tudor Anton, Minerva, București, 1975, *Opere* (*Works*), vol. III, edition and notes by Eugenia Tudor Anton, Minerva, București, 1979, and *Opere* (*Works*), vol. IV, anthology and notes by Eugenia Tudor Anton, selected text by Viviana Șerbănescu, Minerva, București, 1980.

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We can also see the same image of the beautiful child in the prose *Vision* (*Viziune*): "I like beautiful children!... Just now the child was playing by himself; now, next to him, kneeling on the sand, a white shadow was leaning down. […] When the glitter of the ray that envelops it became more vivid, the one that was caressing the child seemed to resemble me […]"[1]

An entirely atypical and unique image for all the bengescian prose results in the character Mrs. Da**Voinea**mian from *The Dragon* (*Balaurul*), who opposes the other mothers in the author's novels. She experiences a dramatic situation when her little girl Mioara (The Little Lamb) dies on a refugee train and the people in the wagon decide to throw her body out of the train for fear they might be contaminated:

> Laura would avoid the mother with dexterity, as if she were some peril. She felt she couldn't be touched yet. It was like a bad bruise. Slower, much slower, that shaken mechanism would straighten its pieces. She was still standing on the edge of the chair of the mind, staggering, ready to freak out. (*Balaurul – The Dragon*).

Mrs. Damian inscribes in the category of a unique mother in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's works, the mother that loves her child and is hurting for him. The tragedy of the child's death combines with that of his little brother Dorel's death, leading to suicide, a gesture seen by the character as an act of salvation:

> Hostile towards everyone, maybe she wanted to keep only him; she would wait for him as if he were the only one she could finally talk to, in front of who she could come out of the sinister grip and free her mind of all troubles. He was not only the beloved little brother – he was the one that was supposed to execute judgment, to lift the curse, to bring the acceptance of the ill fate in the house of hatred; he was the ally with the support of whom Mrs. Damian could give up her hostility towards the close ones. Dorel was Mioara's godfather! Dorel had the right to forgive! And Dorel had died. (*Balaurul – The Dragon*).

The path of the mothers from Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novels is a sinuous one, since the feminine character experiences tangled situations, morally doubtful; the roles rapidly follow one another, from mothers with illegitimate children to women that marry and remarry, and then they become mistresses-wives in love with or just eager for fortunes. No matter the masks they wear,

> Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's characters impress right from the start in two apparently contradictory ways: by their unity and by their variety. Especially for the period of the first works, the unity was ensured by the quasi-singularity of the perspective. Most of the times the story-teller identifies with the author herself. The external realities were fully related to one single conscience. (Mihăilescu, F., 1975: 54)

In Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's view, the woman is seen as a sick animal that experiences cyclic situations (birth, menstruation, miscarriage). The author herself had a failed intimate life, which probably led to the apparition of some errors in the evaluation of life, of people, of love and understanding. Therefore, the woman with desires is looked at almost as if she were a prostitute. The keystone in the path of the women from the bengescian prose is represented by maternity and miscarriage, with the suitable extensions: midwives, gynecologists, bastard children.

[1] The text was published in *Viața Românească*, Year VII, No. 1, the 1st of January 1913, p. 44, and it was not introduced by the author in the volume *Ape adânci* (*Deep Waters*).

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The woman in the bengescian novel is negatively marked by her biological aspects of maternity, living in promiscuous conditions, suffering from the lack of control on her sexual life or being tormented by the obsession of the bastard, of the unwanted child in society. As a matter of fact, the condition of the mother is annulled because the women in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novels deny their maternity, thus becoming miserable, terrible, almost odious mothers.

It's only natural for the questions to arise: "Why are these mothers like this? Why don't these mothers live with the regret of not having children, but rather with the regret of having them?" This regret is probably due to a biographical detail: Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, mother of five children, cannot find allies in the feminine characters because they don't believe that "every wife must one day become a mother" (Adler, L., 2003: 97).

Another type of mother present in the author's novels is represented by the woman that brings into the world a child outside a marriage – a woman seen by society as *a disheveled maiden*. This is the case of Ancuța, daughter of Priest Cristea, who "had no idea about Christ... He would mechanically mutter the Gospels, which had no meaning for him. He only knew the dogmas of priestly conduct for the gain of his domesticities." (*Balaurul – The Dragon*). The child she gives birth to doesn't live much time, and then she is forced by her parents to marry a German surgeon-assistant. Pregnant again, Ancuța feels as if bad spirits are coming over her:

> For some time, Ancuța's pace had slowed down, her waist became larger and she had fallen to disgrace with the priest's blessing. […] Laura could not comprehend, she could not understand that way of living, one that roughens the hands, abases the body, decreasing her value and her defense. She could not attain the knowledge of what promiscuity means; she could not weigh well enough the brutal sufferings of Ancuța's life, in which all her virtue could barely save the soul... She knew that Ancuța loves faithfully, profoundly, to the point of suffering and death... (*Balaurul – The Dragon*)

Ancuța is not moved by the death of any of her children, but when she finds out that her lover died on the battle-front "she stands still... It was terrible! The stillness is the most desperate form of pain. How could she shake her to stop the pain from thickening inside of her?" (*Balaurul – The Dragon*).

Another type of mother who refuses this role is that of "kind Lina"; living in fear of losing her condition as the wife of "Professor Rim", stumpy Lina sacrifices her own daughter (Sia) refusing to hospitalize her when her life is in danger after an abortion. She had also refused to raise her, developing a true hatred towards her. Still, she brings her into her home as a nurse for Rim, her husband. Lina's portrait is the least attractive:

> Her shape as a nice whisk, her short and thick neck, her short and large bosom, her plump waist, her ugly face, of course, with her small and shortsighted eyes, colorless, with deteriorated skin, a good nose, a little flattened at the top, and the wide mouth hiding some teeth that were not visible, although durable when cracking peanuts – this whole was not just as imposing.

In the end, the woman who didn't know how to be a good mother will become a bad person:

> Kind Lina, by a terrible overthrow of values, becomes evil. The wickedness of the kind ones, fresh, tireless, thoughtless, always susceptible, always aggressive. Like someone trapped in an unknown house, mistrustfully trying to open the doors and

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> the windows, with the eyes of an assassin; lurking at the corners ready to strike, with confused, intemperate movements, groping in the dark – that's how Lina's wickedness was like. (*Fecioarele despletite – The Disheveled Maidens*).

The image of the mother is generally sketched, as we have noticed, in relation to the daughter: Mrs. Damian – Mioara's mother, Lina Rim – Sia's mother, then "the Madame Midwife", the mother of a little girl. "Madame Midwife" is a widow who doesn't allow herself to be troubled by her social status at all. Dressed "with her white apron, with the head kerchief tied in her own personal way, as she always wears it and as it looked good on her..., she never misses an opportunity that could remind her she was funny and a widow" (*Balaurul – The Dragon*). There are also situations in which the image of the mother is shaped in relation to a son. The feminine character illustrated by Elena Drăgănescu Hallipa doesn't succeed in being a good mother this time either; she is doing more harm than good to her son, Ghighi, not out of wickedness, but out of a selfishness she doesn't even notice. Elena experiences a frantically joy at the general rehearsal of the concert:

> She hadn't noticed the precise succession of the items on the programme, nor the assistants' behavior during the breaks. A rustling of silk and delight enveloped her in its satisfactory signification. It was the soft throb of the ladies reverberated by the taffeta and crepe of China dresses. […] The applauses gave her an impression similar to the blade of a sea wave that is formed somewhere unexpected and that breaks against your shoulders that bend under the joy's threat. […] As in the auditorium there was a murmur of admiration, Elena looks around, surprised that the others are joyful too. She knew she hadn't overthrown anything out of the shells in which the melody would accumulate for her alone (*Concert din muzică de Bach – A Concert of Bach's Music*).

Because her son commits suicide, Elena bears the guilt all her life, even if at some time she had considered that "it's a crime to give birth to a baby that has the vulgarity and the slyness of the father inside". Elena Drăgănescu Hallipa had had a shaky relationship with her mother, but she didn't consider herself a good mother, which at some point makes her manage her flaws:

> How clumsy she had been and still was in her role as a mother! […] Maybe not so much as a wife, a lover, a daughter. […] The man she had been in love with in her youth years, Prince Maxențiu, she had thrown far away, to her luck. […] She had kept Drăgănescu, her husband, kilometers of cold, compressed air away. […] She had loved her mother so little that one could say she hated her […]. She had loved her father with distinction and measure, but now she loathed him. […] She liked her sister Aimée and she couldn't tolerate Mika-Lé. […]

After Ghighi's suicide, Elena is "cramped, frozen, left in the cold so many times because of the pain, of the humiliation, of the defeat. Also, it is only natural for the question to arise: why are there such children? The author regards her own childhood nostalgically and affectionately:

> I stopped here for a long time during my childhood. It's the era that shows the clearest expression of the decisive nature and conditions of my literary formation. I thought it was what was required of me... Whenever I look at my picture from back then, I feel sorry for the terrible burden of thought and soul that I placed on this poor child. (Papadat-Bengescu, H., 1937: 6)

To her parents she dedicates fragments that are full of gratitude:

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> [...] The only daughter of a brave soldier, General Dumitru Bengescu, and of a devoted and gentle Moldavian mother, drawing her roots from the elders of Iaşi, with teacher studies. Both of them intellectuals, they encouraged my predisposition towards study, taking care, at the same time, of the formation of my nature... My mother was the kindest being; she patiently taught me the letters, then reading in our sweet language, as well as in French, for she used to say: 'If you don't start learning a new language in your early years, you'll find it more difficult later'… Although very busy, my father still found time to talk to me about the Romanian and French writers and poets he knew, encouraging my inclination towards literary composition..." (Baltazar, C., 1962: 63).

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu will write too and when she comes to publish her first book, *Deep Waters* (*Ape adânci*), she dedicates it to her father, not necessarily because she felt in debt with him, but rather because she regarded the image of the father as a happy island in her life:

> Much later, when my first book was published, my father confessed to me his secret desire, which was now fulfilled; he confessed this with a joy mixed with a moving deception (in his voice, in pauses between words) – opposed to my empty thoughts. But I do not know if his torment was greater than mine, because of the same strange bashfulness. It would have been impossible for me not to dedicate to him – who I cherished so highly – this first book. (Papadat-Bengescu, H., 1937: 5)

The only trace of reproach noticeable in the memories she has of her parents is that they had resisted letting her go on with her studies:

> [...] Yes, my sweet and educated parents had decidedly refused to let me continue my studies at universities, in the country or (as I had the opportunity) abroad. I was their only child, mother was suffering from the heart and her weapons were enormous; she wouldn't confess the pain of seeing me leave abroad, but she would suffer from heart attacks, serious ones (for this reason, no doubt), and father was pensive. (Baltazar, C., 1962: 72-73).

Still, the children-characters from the author's novels are not inspired from her own childhood; so, we are witnessing the image of the bastard-children: "the hideous Mika-Lé" who troubles Lenora's memories and causes her neurotic states (she sets the bed on fire, she tears the lace of her house gown) because she doesn't find the courage to confess her sin. Another bastard is "the feminist Nory", conceived by the landlord Baldovin with bailiff Vasiliu's daughter, Cornelia. Nory is contemptuous towards her own mother and, although she militates for women's rights, she lacks femininity, assuming a manly behavior: "Here she would perorate, there she would inspect, she liked to stir, to impose her will on others, to always be among many people, or even be indispensable; to change place, to see, to hear, to be seen and to be listened to." (*Rădăcini – Roots*) Precisely because she's a bastard child Nory sums up many negative traits (pride, sarcasm, distrust, harshness, doubt) in contrast with those of Dia, Baldovin's legitimate daughter. Unable to bear being told what to do or depending on someone else, Nory Baldovin juggles between two professions:

> After obtaining her degree in Letters, she discovered she doesn't like being a teacher: '– You make others dull and they make you dull'. Then she studies Law; she wasn't planning to plead, but she couldn't bear being deceived by others. '– Better them than me!' Lucky as she was, she easily found an opening on both diplomas towards social cooperatives, where her initiative and organizing skills, her talent to improvise speeches had served her wonderfully. (*Rădăcini – Roots*)

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With her soul emptied of any kind of feelings, Nory Baldovin is not capable of resurrecting biographical episodes; as their reception regards quantity, and not quality, she can take an account of them, but she can't feel them: "For them to be memories, they lacked something essential, namely *the feeling*, no matter what that was: cheerful, sad, comical, endearing... They were just *photographical frames under the eyes of a neutral beholder*" (*Rădăcini – Roots*).

In the same way, the relationship mother-child is scanty because the bengescian feminine character doesn't usually see the child as an ideal; sometimes, the author creates contempt scenes for her feminine characters that she doesn't look at in a positive light; mothers are wretched, devoid of maternal instinct, and neither their children, bastards or legitimate, fit in the category of exemplary children.

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