FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN PROSE WRITTEN BY WOMEN: THE EDIBLE WOMAN

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Abstract

This essay attempts to analyze one of the representations of femininity in contemporary novels written by Romanian women writers: the edible woman. Today's fiction is suffused with images of women picturing themselves as edible things destined for male consumption. In order to gain a sense of human connection with their partners, the female characters passively accept to be devoured by men without concern about the loss of their psycho-physical integrity. The female protagonists surrender completely to male domination, control and abuse, defining themselves as victim-type personalities. The image of the consumable woman is a valuable image in which gendered relationships and the mechanisms of power which operate in them can be studied. The paper also makes a comparison with female protagonists in a few contemporary novels written by foreign female writers.

Keywords: feminine identity, food imagery, symbolic cannibalism, power(lessness), loss of identity, patriarchy

In many works of contemporary women's literature food and related imagery keep being associated with women. This association will never disappear for obvious reasons: food has related concerns with feminine identity and domesticity, with nurturing motherhood. The sourcing, preparation and serving of food is work that has traditionally fallen to women across most cultures. Besides, women's bodies have the capacity to manufacture food – they practically function as partially edible things for the embryo/fetus or baby that feeds on their nourishing liquids - blood or milk.

When you open the novel *The Gingerbread Woman* you feel as if you have entered a sweet gourmet paradise:

My mother makes jam.

Seasonal jam.

Raspberry, blackberry and apple, loganberry, marrow and ginger, golden crab-apple jelly and, of course, marmalade.[...]

She makes other thing too: shortbread biscuits, sponge cakes, rich fruit cake, brandy snaps...could go on for ever, but where's the point. I'm sure you get the message (Johnston 1).

It is a surprising beginning for a novel that will reveal extremely bitter stories. All the goodies are associated with Mrs. Barry's figure, being an expression of her love. Although she lives alone, she continues to prepare them in generous quantities and give

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them to her children after their short familial visits. Her kindness and generosity make her daughter, Clara, feel inadequate. The mother-daughter relationship is a type of competition in which Clara is always defeated. The mother is described as being a source of sweets and harmless advice. While advice is ignored by Clara, food is gratefully accepted.

Similar imagery rendered in realistic details can be found in Romanian writer Dora Deniforescu's description of the domestic space of her grandmother's pantry, which is laden with jars of quince or strawberry jam, syrup, stewed fruit a small bottle of rum, wine, grape must, eggs, bread, apples, pies and pancakes (Deniforescu 63).

These fictional accounts of food have visual and and gustatory impact, denoting coziness, a powerful sense of richness, an expression of overwhelming unconditional love.

Contemporary Romanian literature written by women is suffused with imagery in which women envision themselves as edible things to be consumed by men. Gastronomy and eroticism have become intertwined in these scenes, but food imagery does not refer to games of mere erotic interaction between men and women, but point at the cannibalistic nature of the relationships between men and women. Consumption of food, just like erotic activity, implies appetite, desire and pleasure. While eating embodies coded expressions of power, being eaten is employed as a metaphor for powerlessness and is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationships between women and men. Being eaten, like beingenslaved or being killed, is an expression of lack of power.

The female narrator in *Est-falia* reveals that one of her lovers, nicknamed the Yogi, sees women as juicy fruit to be picked and relished. He even knows which areas produce the most delicious women: "Pentru Yoghin femeile sunt fructele care țin cel mai puțin. Totuși e mai bine să le culegi din Est, acolo e mai mult soare, se coc mai bine, sunt mai zemoase"[2] (Mihalache 105). The female protagonist herself is a fruit that the Yogi picks easily. In their relationship, she has no difficulty in adopting an extremely humble behaviour, a position of inferiority which, in her opinion, is a very feminine one: "[...] probabil în toate viețile anterioare am fost femeie pentru că altfel nu înțeleg voluptatea asta de a mă dărui, de mă lăsa dominată, dorința de a fi călcată în picioare, vocația de a fi sclavă"[3] (Mihalache 20).

The female narrator in *Cercuri de frig*, who reminisces about a long series of lovers, is also associated (partially) with a fruit – her buttocks are a peeled, sweet, fleshy peach (Deniforescu 131). She sees herself with white, cake-like shoulders in Mircea's eyes and remembers that Otti once likened her to a green walnut preserve, whereas in the erotic

[2]"The Yogi regards women as the least long-lasting fruit. However, it is better to pick them from the East, where it is sunnier and women ripen better and are juicier" (my translation).
[3]"I must have been a woman in all my previous lives, which explains the voluptuousness I experience when I give myself to a man and let him dominate me and the desire to be trampled on, the vocation of slavehood" (my translation).

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encounter with Teo she takes the shape of a devourable white cream cake (Deniforescu 10, 52, 78).

In *Ochelari de damă* the female body also turns into an inanimate, edible object when it comes to sexual interaction. The dead meat of Eva's cold, numb body is kneaded and moulded into puff pastry by her lover – an Italian man Eva does not love, but whom she has to accept - hence the lack of erotic sensations: "[...] trupul Evei era ca o masă întinsă cu feluri de mâncare reci, iar pentru Alberto asta era destul. […] Era ca și cum ar fi fost o bucată de carne, cu care Alberto se juca privind-o prostit, de parcă satisfacția o simțea în globii oculari"[4] (Raţiu 79-80). Eva's pastry-like body becomes animate only in the arms of the man she loves, Mihai. Eva feels like a woman only when she is loved by him (Rațiu 136), but the price paid by a woman who sincerely loves a selfish man is abortion. Eva is reduced to the status of a consumable object that, if marred by pregnancy, can be repaired by abortion. The traumatic experience of abortion, described in the chapter entitled "Pink" - the pink of the mutilated soul and flesh – places Eva in the category of the non-human, making her feel like an animal that is being eviscerated: "Femeia asta îmi scoate măruntaiele din mine. Nu mai pot. Am să mor pe masa asta ca o capră idioată ce sunt. Sunt un animal întins pe o masă rece și tare. Femeia asta mă întoarce cu dosul în sus, ca pe o învelitoare de plapumă"[5] (Raţiu 164). While going through the suffering of a meaninglessly sacrificed victim Eva addresses her thoughts to an ignorant, unsympathetic Mihai: "Sunt una dintre femeile tale. Acum, doar o bucată de carne desfăcută și sângerândă. Sângele meu murdărește cuțite, tampoane, bucăți de vată moale și pufoasă, sângele meu aproape negru. Sunt una din femeile tale, care și-a scos măruntaiele pe tava de inox dezinfectată pentru ca tu să te uiți liniștit la televizor"[6] (Raţiu 164-5). Eva's sacrifice is meant to enable Michael to evade the responsibility of own sexual behavior, to maintain his cozy sexual relationship without any obligations. This fictional situation reproduces a real situation that is perpetuated in contemporary Romanian society where, in a dramatically large percentage, women are pressed to have an abortion by their partners, who are eager to escape responsibility.

The association of the female body with enticing pastry also appears in the novel *Poemele secretarei*. The female narrator, Andrada, is head over heels in love with Alex, her boss and lover, who compliments her on tasting like sweet dough made from milk (Mihalache 169).

[4]"[...] Eve's body was like a table laden with cold dishes, which was enough for Alberto. [...] She felt as though she was Alberto's plaything, a piece of meat Alberto was gazing at with satisfaction in his eyeballs" (my translation).
[5]"This woman is eviscerating me. I can't stand it anymore. I'm going to die right on this table, like an idiot goat. I am an animal lying on a cold, hard table. This woman is turning me inside out, as if I were a duvet cover" (my translation).
[6]"I am one of your women. Now, just a piece of chopped up, bleeding meat. My blood is staining knives, swabs, pieces of soft, fluffy cotton, my blood almost black. I am one of your women, whose entrails have been taken out on a disinfected stainless steel tray, so that you can comfortably watch TV" (my translation).

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In a momentum of deep, devotional dedication, Andrada gives voice to a stream of tumultuous exhortations, using a mixture of terms that evoke both gastronomy and eroticism and betray her longing for total, passionate fusion with the male other: "Ameţeşte-mă, leagă-mă, strânge-mă, îndoaie-mă, apleacă-mă, rupe-mă, ridică-mă, varsă-mă, soarbe-mă"[7] (Mihalache 69).

These scenes show how deeply women have internalized the historically exercised male eye that sees women as objects, that analyses the physical appearance of women as a primary condition for assessing and valuing them. In accordance with the contemporary consumerist universe subordinated to the concupiscent eye, the female characters represent themselves fictionally as desirable, edible objects. Thus, they are vulnerable and exposed, placed in the position of prey, sacrificed victim (consumable object), whereas men are placed in the position of victimizer/predator/cannibal (consumer).

The physical interaction between Andrada and Alex is a malignantly erotic scene where a ferocious animal immobilizes and rips its easy prey. Alex is described as an aquatic predator with tentacle-like hands, or as a carnivorous beast:

> Alex se încovoaie peste mine ca o panteră, ca un ghepard, aproape că nu mai recunosc faţa lui în intuneric, e o strălucire care nu e a unui chip. Ca şi cum ar fi devenit un dragon Alex, aşa mă cuprinde, amestecându-mi plămânii, ficatul, limba, părul, saliva, ca şi cum ar fi fost un blazon totemic de tron regal şi-ar fi înviat într-o răsuflare de flacără gata să înghită toată viaţa omenească pe care o putea găsi într-o secundă"[8] (Mihalache 143-4).

His predatory attitude and exacerbated appetite refer not only to eros, but also to something more sinister. Subjugating her erotically, Alex aims to deliver her to Ling, a Chinese business partner, so that he can (ab)use her as a sexual slave. Everything happens against Andrada's will and the rape scene is narrated in terms that evoke the chopping of meat in a kitchen or butchery:

> "Ling îmi desparte coapsele cu ambele mâini, ca atunci când tranşezi un pui, mama mi-a arătat odată cum"[9] (Mihalache 249).

Women and animals have long been portrayed as edible pieces of meat. Feminists like Andrea Dworkin or Carol Adams have noted that advertising industry and pornography represent women as pieces of female flesh. *The Pornography of Meat* is teeming with fascinating images in which we see animals feminized and women animalized. In *The Pornography of Meat* and *The Sexual Politics of Meat* Adams draws connections between how

[7] "Thrill me, bind me, squeeze me, bend me, fold me, break me, lift me, pour me, sip me"(my translation).
[8] "Alex is bending over me like a panther, like a cheetah, I can barely recognize his face in the dark, it all looks like a faceless glow. Alex is grabbing me like a dragon, mixing my lungs, liver, tongue, hair, saliva, like a totemic, royal coat of arms resurrected in a flame of fire ready to swallow in a second all the human life he can find" (my translation).
[9] "Ling separates my thighs with both hands, like you do when you dismember a chicken, my mother once showed me how" (my translation).

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people treat non-human animals and how men treat women and examines the way human consumption of animals is culturally related to the ongoing subjugation of women. Meat consumption is associated with coercive power – the culture of meat consumption is an expression of male power, an intrinsic part of patriarchal society. Adams gives examples of animal bodies presented in ways that invoke heterosexual pornographic representations of women and describe women as meat destined to be consumed by virile heterosexual men. Adams argues that men see life on earth as a hierarchy in which women occupy a higher place than animals ("non-humans") and in which they reign over both categories.

Although violence against women and violence against animals are clearly not the same thing, they are rooted in the same desire to satisfy physical urges without regard for the physical integrity of another.

Another association of woman with meat appears in the novel *Tricephalos* by Ruxandra Cesereanu, where the elusive female character that bookishly nicknamed herself The Unicorn - eccentric cocotte in Paris - was coveted precisely for the taste of her Vlach flesh (13).

Vlada in *Fişă de înregistrare* is a type of submissive woman locked up in a victim mentality, who demonstrates lack of power in her relation with food. As she is being absorbed by Craig, she unconsciously stops eating. While she is being consumed, she becomes unable to eat, while she is being eaten, she is not in a position that enables her to eat. Her self-starvation is consistent with her consuming hunger for love. Her body speaks through anorexia, articulating a mute form of feminine self-expression, a protest against the emotional deprivation she has been enduring: "Am slăbit nouă kilograme. Fără să-şi fi propus în mod conştient, Vlada a intrat într-un fel de grevă a foamei. Și va rezista până Craig o să-i spună că o iubește. Încă puțin, câteva saptămâni, și o să se facă mică, mică de tot. O să încap într-o farfurie"[10] (Baetica 82).

Vlada's desire to be eaten, to be incorporated orally, symbolically, is a way to bond with her boyfriend, a desperate attempt at making him assimilate her, that is accept and love her: "Aș vrea să mă fac mică de tot și să dorm pe o farfurie, între șervețele de hârtie, cu capul pe o bucată de pâine. Și el să ia farfuria, s-o așeze pe masă la prânz, să înfiga furculița și să mă înghită"[11] (Baetica 95).

This vision is reminiscent of the novel *The Edible Woman*, in which the main character, Marian, bakes an "edible woman" for Peter, her fiancé. It is a symbolic cake meant to test his ability to devour her completely. The cake woman is a metaphorical double of Marian as object of patriarchal consumption. Peter fails the test, because he refuses to eat her after Marian accuses him of trying to "assimilate" her. Suddenly becoming hungry, Marian consumes the cake herself, devouring the woman others want

[10]"I've lost nine kilos. Without consciously setting herself to do it, Vlada has gone on a sort of hunger strike. And she will resist until Craig tells her that he loves her. In just a few more weeks she will become tiny, really tiny. I will fit into a plate" (my translation).

[11]"I wish to become really tiny and sleep on a plate between paper napkins, my head on a piece of bread. And he will take the plate, lay it on the table at lunch, stick a fork into me and swallow me" (my translation).

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her to be. Her gesture is an act of resistance and protest against traditional femininity, against the conventional feminine roles that Marian has to play after marrying Peter. Unlike Vlada, Marian is a woman who refuses to consume and be consumed, who rebels against the feminine destiny represented by marriage, husband, love. Her anorexia has other significance than that of Vlada's. At first, Marian feels revulsion against meat - "a symbol of patriarchy" - and excludes it from her diet. Marian's progressive rejection of various foods symbolizes the rejection of the male-dominated social order in which women feel compelled to to marry and even give up their careers, devoting their lives to the profession of housewife.

In contrast to Vlada and Marian, Lilian from *Lilian's Story* deliberately increases her body mass, so as to avoid being consumed. Lilian overeats in order to feel strong, to become too big and strong to be grabbed, moved, beaten or controlled. She uses her obesity to create a barrier between her and her father, to defy the tyrannical authority and cruelty of her physically and sexually abusive father. Her physical largeness is meant to convey the message that, although she is a woman, she is not invisible and therefore she cannot be ignored or abused.

Unlike foreign female characters, the Romanian ones often wish to become small(er) and even disappear. The feminine wish for dissolution into nothingness, for a return to a state of utter meaninglessness, undifferentiation, anonymity is not uncommon in contemporary Romanian women writers' prose. Here's how Vlada expresses her desire for self-disintegration: "Vreau să alerg, să dansez mult pe străzi, până mă prefac într-unul dintre fulgii de zăpadă"[12] (Baetica 95).

According to Hélène Cixous, woman is capable of "adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself: because she is a giver." Although woman's corporeality is not "undifferentiated magma", "she doesn't lord it over her body or her desire", which makes her guilty of insatiable, "cosmic" libido (270).

In *Arhanghelii nu mor* the female narrator's longing for union with her significant other is expressed in the desire for infiltration and dissolution into the other. The phantasm of complete incorporation and assimilation into the other's organism is articulated in imagery reminiscent of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*:

> [...] îmi imaginam că mă fofilez, că-i pătrund pe sub piele și-l colorez cu toate culorile cu care ar fi vrut să mă simtă. Prin golul dintre clavicule m-aș fi strecurat, aș fi alunecat ușor, mai întâi în plămâni, lăsându-l să mă respire în voie, când mai incet, când mai repede, l-aș fi lăsat să se sufoce de câteva ori, să mă tușească și atunci, printre mușchii încordați, să pătrund în inimă, să împing sângele prin toate arterele, și să-l primesc prin aorte, să mă împrăștii în tot trupul lui, cartografiind fiecare suprafață și să revin apoi. Din inimă să

[12]"I want to run, to dance away in the streets until I turn into a snowflake." (my translation).

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trec în diafragmă, să îl fac să mă sughită până la lacrimi și apoi să cobor în stomac, să-i fiu singura hrană[13] (Mosora 66-7).

As some psychoanalysts claim, women tend to form relationships in which the boundaries between self and other are not clear. According to Nancy Chodorow, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. Whereas women tend to define and experience themselves relationally, men tend to supress relational capacities and needs (207). Femininity is characterized by flexibility, permeability and porosity of ego boundaries and even problems with the sense of self continuity.

In a gesture of (unrequited) love, the female protagonists offer themselves as meat, fruit or cake for heterosexual male consumption. The symbolic cannibalization to which the female body is subject is meant to annihilate the separation between self and other. To be devoured is an act that contains a codified, negative, regressive desire for plenitude of being. The yearning for an impossible state of wholeness is so overwhelming, that the dissolution of psychic and corporeal borders does not frighten the female characters.

In contemporary Romanian fiction written by women the relational needs of the female characters adopt pathological forms. The protagonists suffer badly from autophobia and lack of self-sufficiency and tend to experience a sense of self-exclusively-in-relation-to-men. Their psychic universe is centred on their relationships with men, on the merging of self and other.

The fictional feminine identity implies a self that loses shape within the context of intersubjective relations. In spite of this, the connection with the other is the most valued aspect, the "core" of the self.

The images of women picturing themselves as edible things are valuable images in which gendered relationships and the mechanisms of power which operate in them can be studied. The imagery of women as food conveys a negative condition. The female protagonists have a devalued perspective on themselves and define themselves as victim-type personalities.

The body as food becomes a site of powerlessness, a site of subjection for women. Subject to assault, rape, consumption, the female body is a territory of oppression, of male domination and control.

Unlike foreign female characters, who oppose (corporally) the ideological construct of woman as a socially digested/ digestible entity, the Romanian ones never consider rebelling against the way the male sex dictates their existence and function. The

[13]"[...] I imagined myself sneaking in, infiltrating under his skin and imbuing him with all the colours with which he wanted to feel me. Creeping in through the gap between the collar bones, slipping easily into his lungs first, to make him breathe me at ease, slower and faster, make him suffocate a few times and cough me out and then, through his tense muscles, trickling into his heart to push the blood into all the arteries and receive it through the aorta, dispersing myself into his whole body, mapping each surface, returning. Out of the heart and into the diaphragm, making him hiccup me until his eyes are filled with tears and then sliding down into his stomach, to become his only nourishment" (my translation).

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characters are essentially passive and dependent beings eager to please male expectations, mere embodiments of gastroerotic male fantasies.

They transform themselves into what Foucault called "docile bodies", allowing men to deprive them of power, autonomy and subjectivity, suffering disintegration of their sense self-identity. Their bodies are inert reduplications of weak, fragile spirits that long to melt into nothingness. The absorbed, consumed, ingested female body is a text of culture, a surface on which male expectations and patriarchal ideological constructions of femininity have been deeply inscribed.

Whereas in Romanian everyday life and mass-media the submissive woman, the housewife, the homemaker, the mother, the heroine are becoming increasingly substituted for images of the independent women, the seductress, the female opportunist, the successful businesswoman, in the fictional world woman is devalued, reduced to an entity meant to please male expectations and obey male authority. Andrea Dworkin's insistence that woman should resist the position of victim, rejecting the carving up of the self into roles to be consumed by the patriarchy - "Woman must serve herself instead of serving herself up like a turkey or duck, garnished, stuffed, sharpened knife ready for ritual carving" (70) - would have passed unnoticed in such a universe.

Using the image of the edible woman, contemporary Romanian women writers explore what it means to be a woman at the beginning of the XXI century in Romanian society where men still have considerable power over women, both in the private and the public spheres.

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