BEFORE THE DEATH OF ROMANIAN FEMINISM

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Abstract: *This study is an attempt of feminist literary criticism applied to the novel* Fecioarele despletite (The dishevelled maidens) *by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu. Even if little is known about the information that Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu might have had in respect of feminism, however, just like many other writers who do not take an explicit feminist stand, she is seriously focused on issues concerning the women's experiences. The identity of her characters signals important issues of feminist debate and is part of the European literary context of fictional portrayal of women.*

Key words: *inter-war Romanian literature, literary criticism, feminism.*

Preliminary methodological approach

In literary criticism, the term "feminism" is used to describe a series of critical positions proving that the difference between "male" and "female" generate all kinds of discursive practices. Concerned to point out the characteristics of women's status in society, the feminism, in its attempt to change how people understand life and the relation between the two genders, actually has had quite a long history and can be found during the history in all types of writing having women as authors. And, since all literature is definitely gendered, feminist literary criticism is interested in analyzing the social construction of "femininity" and "masculinity" in certain texts. Therefore, the main point of interest of this genre of literary criticism is to show that the male fallacy of critical thought does not make an universal paradigm, and to also prove how the experiences communicated in literary writings are generated by specific "laws" of social nature, largely disseminated, with regard to gender differences and which move the text beyond any boundaries noticeable at the first sight.

What makes a particular writing feminist is still debatable, but it is obvious that the most important aspect to be considered is how women writers refer to their own experiences in literary texts. In this respect, there are **two perspectives of the feminist literary criticism**: **that of Elaine Showalter** (see SHOWALTER, 1977; SHOWALTER, 1979; SHOWALTER, 1985), who sees the role of women's writing in self-discovery, helped by a writing that speaks of the intrinsic nature of women's personal experiences in the society and that also reveals the oppressive social structures, and, respectively, **that of Toril Moi** (see MOI, 1985), who mainly supports the deconstruction of the idea of unitary self and rejects the dichotomy masculine / feminine in favour of an androgynous ideal.

This feminist project, by which women's experiences are rendered conspicuous, includes – literary texts *y compris* – the rediscovery of what history has not managed to record throughout the ages, namely such things that were omitted because of the general mentality: the less visible and lesser written "history" of women.

But where does "feminist Nory" come from?

Even if nobody knows precisely what Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu could know about feminism, however, just like many other writers who do not take a feminist stand explicitly, this writer is seriously focused – at least in her novel *The dishevelled maidens*, discussed in this essay - on issues concerning the women's experiences.

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The inter-war period, when Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu writes and publishes the novels of the *Hallipa* saga (*The dishevelled maidens* is brought out in 1926), makes an age in the history of the Romanian feminism, marked by a long fight for women's rights (see MIHĂILESCU, 2002; MIHĂILESCU, 2006). This fight was most definitely known to our novelist. The First World War had been the only moment when men had left the country in women hands, for women had become legal trustees of their mobilized husbands, taking in charge their administrative duties and supporting both agriculture and industry. In 1916, an employment office was created for the take-over by women of the positions held until then only by men, in enterprises and public institutions; women were also working in hospitals, taking care of the wounded on the front, preparing bandages and binding bands at their homes, which were then sent to the army. However, when the men came back from the war, they put women again to their so-called place, by denying their draft bill, submitted to the Parliament by the deputy C. Nacu, and which set forth the equality in rights for men and women. The disputes created by this refusal, as well as the feminist voices that could be heard in that time, gave birth to the "feminist Nory" and to all the issues around her, in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu' s novel *The dishevelled maidens.* But what the critics have not known or said until now is that, until the political instauration of communism, the feminists of Romania had brought out tens of publications, had written thousands of articles, delivered numerous conferences and organized themselves in several associations, of which numerous ones were affiliates of the international organizations in the field. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was not unfamiliar with this movement and with the ideas enlivening it. Subsequently, communism managed to wipe off the traces of feminism in our country, condemning it as a "bourgeois deviationism", while our literary critics have left unnoticed the feminist accents of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's literature, never asking who the "feminist Nory" was and where she came from. The intelligent and dynamic Nory Baldovin, a character moving in the world of Hallipa' s cycle, studied the Law and Political Economy, practiced the legal profession and was a social activist at "Asistența femeii" ("Assisting Women"). The only critic who accidentally approached some feminist issues in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu' s prose is Elena Zaharia-Filipaş (see ZAHARIA-FILIPAŞ, 2004: 63-67).

Feminist elements of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu' s writing

The feminine characters discussed of the novel *The dishevelled maidens* are more numerous than the masculine ones (and obviously with more literary weight) and are associated with a particularly feminine discourse about **loss** (of freedom, by marriage) (Lenora Hallipa), about **guilt** (good Lina, but also Lenora), **betrayal** (Elena Drăgănescu-Hallipa, betrayed by her father) or **isolation** (Lenora, Mini [1]), all within the limits imposed to their lives by the social conventions or by the men's behaviour and attitudes. By turns, mainly through the two reflecting-characters – Mini and Nory, the feminist – we are depicted the situation of some women, who, by marriage or filiation (recognized – the case of Elena Hallipa, or not recognized – the case of Mika-Lé), lose their freedom, becoming dependant by, and subjugated to men. It is all about material dependency (illustrated by Lenora and by Elena Hallipa), as well as about affective dependency (Lenora's case), about

[1] Mini "liked to show up alone in the middle of people, separate from any of her accidental dates" (Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, 1986: 58);

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enslavement[1], about the inculcation of the feeling of guilt and about verbal or harmful aggression and ignoring attitudes (that good Lina suffers from), about the social pressure that patriarchy puts on women[2], as well.

Good Lina, the "family's boy" as compared to her other sisters, although she had won – thanks to ambition – her freedom, by professional affirmation (in a job meant for women), up to the point of supporting her own husband, doctor Rim, in his career, is however a "modern serf", her shoulders a little bit hunchbacked[3], as she is found under the total domination of her husband. Her isolation can be discussed in relation right to the man who has completely closed all the possibilities of understanding the character of this woman (of probably frustrated masculine reasons, also of ethnic origin): "It was obvious that Rim could not understand the only charm of Lina' s, that is her autochthonous sweetness. Her kindness was good like hot cakes, her labour looked like that of a faithful rip and her humour was « *à la* Tecuci »"[4].

Madness is a recurrent theme of the feminist writing, as it is deemed a refusal to conform oneself to an imposed social identity, and it can become a potential symbol of the revolt against oppression. I would dare call the novel *The dishevelled maidens* also a novel of Lenora Hallipa' s madness, speaking of a strong and courageous woman who fights with the weapons of beauty and coquetry to fulfil herself in love (see the affair with the Italian), and also in a social and material plan (through her marriage to Doru Hallipa); at a mature age, she has the power, given her so-called madness, to break the chains of the existential level that she was caught in like in a net, to establish sort of a matriarchy, in a first stage[5], and eventually to get free by turning Doru Hallipa bankrupt and by getting divorced in the end of the novel. "Lenora has disclosed the «secret of the Castle» (…) in full awareness", in order to break her last connection to the past and to end the "novel of her marriage." Doru Hallipa, ruined and abandoned by his wife and daughter, with no home left, is now – according to Elena's words – in a serious crisis of identity: "Who am I? What am I doing? Where am I going?" The description of this situation will provoke jubilation[6] and admiration[7] to feminist Nory. And this is not the only occasion when Nory, with her typical feminist portrait – "she would usually yell on principle and was aggressive in attitude" – hunts the men's

[1] Nory explains: "Good Lina (...) seems to have entered, as early as from the time of her marriage, into the servitude of the illustrious professor who had been so kind as to grant her the honour of his name and to receive the fruit of her professional and household work. This regime prospering with time, his tyranny was continually growing(...)", while Mini notices that Lina "has some moments when her zeal seems unwilling, like a serf's". In the past, when she met her, single and alone, Lina "used to be cheerful and fresh" (*Idem:* 50).

[2] In the visit that Mini and Nory pay to Elena Drăgănescu-Hallipa, Nory emphasizes how Elena, married with a child, "would turn her existence into a real captivity, burdened by plenty of domestic servitudes" (*Idem*: 109);

[3] *Idem*: 94;

[4] *Idem*: 75;

[5] The first stage of Lenora's madness is when, under the pretence of her sick moods, she takes control in the couple, manipulating her husband at her own discretion. The commentary related to Doru Hallipa's attitude/reaction at his wife's change of behaviour reflects the position and understanding – obviously feminist – of the author herself: "Now he (Doru Hallipa – *my note*) had an obstinacy against the regime that was destroying him. It was his ultimate resistance to save patriarchy" (*Idem*: 123);

[6] "And Nory laughed heartily, as if it were something very hilarious" (*Idem:* 123);

[7] "«Good for you, Lenora!», as Nory said." (*Idem:* 124);

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weaknesses: she will speak ironically and maliciously about Lenora's doctor (Walter), proving him incompetent; Rim, "that ugly German" – in Nory' s words –, is deemed an "enemy", because, through his statements ("women … deal with «secondary staff»"[1]) – so reported by Nory, again –, but also through his attitude and deeds, is a promoter of patriarchy, trying to induce the idea that women are second-degree citizens (a commonplace in the feminist debates); Lică Trubadurul, the "blackbird", is worthy of contempt because he "smells like no money and ladies' man". We can notice, therefore, in the construction of this character (invoked just like that -– *feminist* Nory), a good knowledge in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu of what the assumed feminism means, and also an obvious intention to bring it into light. The complementarity between Nory and Mini is not (in my opinion) but a literary device by which the author sheds some light upon the feminist issues. Indeed, Mini will confess that she feels "the need to take refuge in something" and is grateful to men because "They lit the first fire from pebbles… (…) *They* built the cities, with their minds, will and arms" (and so on), but Nory contradicts her, and says "You just get upset, Mini, but with no arguments". To Nory, men are "a precious auxiliary of the destructive work" (performed upon women, *my note*), they are those who "actually built our goals and gave us the fire to take care of … but only in the kitchen" (Nory's attempt to demolish Mini's myths), they are those who "enjoy all privileges", but "mock at them" and therefore "should be deprived of them".[2]

Mini will underline the take-over by some women of the patriarchal ideology, which has made and still makes possible their preservation, throughout the history, in a position of subordination and vassalage: "(…) men took the time and space of Big life, by conquering the fruitful science –, and also the time and space of our poor lives, as well". Between the two women a typical discussion is borne between a feminist and a defender of the values of patriarchy, with all the usual clichés (that were probably operating by then, just like in present, and had been remarked by the author). Also in one of her visits at Rim's, Mini is made to reproduce one of the patriarchal biases, namely that the woman was born for marital love and domestic life[3], as if she were a decorative plant.

The feminine characters of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, present in this novel, and especially Lenora, are a kind of Phoenix birds, with an amazing vitality and capacity to rise from their own ashes[4], which suggest a kind of superiority as compared

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[1] Nory explains that by repeating the words of Rim's students, namely that, according to the latter, "«the life's most important things»" for girls (*Idem:* 70) are contained in sexuality: "Applied anatomy! Nory used to joke." (*Ibidem*);

[2] *Idem:* 63;

[3] *Idem*: 68;

[4] "Lenora of Mizil took big leaps in the field of existence. The circumstances that were passing over her sensual and elementary body did not put her down. However, she was almost defeated, she had believed that her wealth of landlady was the ultimate stage and that she had spent all the energy for herself; but a strange wind had blown, and the new, cynical times had defied her with the pervert eyes of the Italian, as she had described them to Mika-Lé. Feeling the danger, she had thrown herself upon Mika-Lé, upon Doru, she had managed with the captivity of the Prundenis, but now she had been left in decay (an alusion to her physical decay - *my note*), she was all like a dead end. And then, eventually, when she was almost extinct, she had recovered. **Her spectacular vitality had found new resources** (*my underline*). What a long road run until then, what a long road left beyond her, from that state of self-abandonment, from her desuetude, to the «reeducation of her aspirations» in Walter's sanatorium!" (*Idem*: 124);

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to Doru Hallipa's confusion when he is taken aback by Rim's debility (the latter is perceived as a profiteer – professionally and from the viewpoint of domestic comfort –, who takes advantage of good Lina). To better support the idea of an overwhelming vitality of women, the prose writer ends her novel with Mini's visit at the exhibition of artist Maria Başkirtscheff, who, although put down by illness, had fought to her last breath for the perfection and eternity of her art, with a force worthy of all admiration: "Maria had left behind still active energies. That force of her will, sent into space, had survived her. (...) Mini had tried to tell him (doctor Rim – *my note*) that the *feelings, superior to everything* (*my underline* – typical feminine thought) have *emanations*, too, that Maria's strong will was an organ that must have spent too much of this substance and must have let go much of those emanations, especially through those pages (drawings of the artist, now in doctor Rim's possession – *my note*), where her intimate psychic life was lying ... that those pages were therefore full of the exfoliations of will, of her ambition, as well …". When it comes to creation (speaking either of children or art), a woman seems to find unbelievable resources until the last minute.

Confronted with the "active contempt that Rim was ceaselessly showing to Lina"[1], Nory tries to help Lina, taking her part. On other occasion, Nory defends Elena Drăgănescu in front of Greg. Nory, just like Lina and Eliza (who go to take care and watch Lenora), prove in the novel what the feminists call "sisterhood": solidarity under pressure and the capacity to create mutual assistance feminine networks.

Another feminist issue of current interest (which made a career so far in gender studies), approached by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu in this novel, is the body issue, and moreover the sexuality itself, which in this case is a perverted one. A pioneer in the Romanian literature also from this point of view, the novelist speaks of such women who breach the social barriers and get "dishevelled" (undo their hair), bearing the consequences that this gesture will have upon their lives. The author suggests that this first attempt to release their freedom is actually a trap, a mistake with devastating implications in these women's lives. Beautiful and coquette Lenora, good Lina, Mika-Lé, here are only a few "dishevelled maidens" proposed by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu. The social practices are such instruments of power that inscribe the body[2] of these "dishevelled maidens", and they come to execrate their bodies and their productions. Through "dishevelling" or through sickness, the body becomes an expression of vulnerability, weakness and defeat. That is why the author feels like rehabilitating her characters through the theory of the spiritual body and through her insistence on the idea of women's vitality.

Last but not least, the opposition between the rural and, respectively, urban setting, the moving to town of the interest shown by modernist prose (see Lovinescu' s guidelines), make the "Living City" a symbol close to feminism, with Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu' s prose. We could say that, by this swinging between the significations vested in the city and those associated with the village, the author operates the same kind of polarity as between Nory and Mini. The landlord Doru Hallipa, a representative of the rural world, is (right through his urban relocation) "an agent of patriarchal tradition"[3]. The "Living City" will become to the end of the novel, right in Mini's mind, a nest of love, an oasis able to protect love (feminine projection),

[1] *Idem*: 73;
[2] As per the definition of body in *Lexicon feminist*, 2002, Polirom Publishing House, editors Otilia Dragomir and Mihaela Miroiu;
[3] *Idem*: 131;

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the "halt of love", and not the male establishment of a shepherd[1]. The town, where people can hide in their "large, indifferent, passing lives", will implicitly become a space able to witness, even though very little at the beginning, the women's liberation, and therefore a place where feminism can take off to the world: "Our friend Nory could not stand small towns of province. (…) Only the commercial and industrial centres could satisfy her, as they were favourable to feminism". The author's commentary related to Nory' s urban tastes adds: "She could not imagine how those mean and insufficient powers (of the province, *my note*) could reach even this place, the Living City".

Conclusions

All these aspects revealed by the novel *The dishevelled maidens* make important issues of feminist debate and are part of a larger European context of fictional portrayal of women. It is a pity and a lack of the Romanian literary criticism the fact of having ignored – so far – the reading of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu' s writings through the lens of a feminist literary analysis, perfectly applicable to the novels of this writer.

On the other side, this masculine and sometimes even patriarchal note of the literary critical thought applied until now to this novelist's writings is obvious, a fact that seems to distort the appropriate understanding of the author's vision[2]. But this should make already another discussion.

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[1] *Ibidem*;

[2] The literature of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is deemed by our critics (from G. Călinescu and Eugen Lovinescu to Şerban Cioculescu and Nicolae Manolescu) a feminine literature *par excellence* (Nicolae Manolescu, 2008: 610-619). Eugen Negrici (Negrici, 2008: 201-205) abolished, by a cold and blunt analysis, the concept of "feminine literature" and then, he could not see any trace of feminism in our literature.

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