Ladies, Dames and Madams in I.L. Caragiale's Writings

Mariana FLAIŞER*

Key-words: *dame, madam, Caragiale*

I.L. Caragiale's female characters colour and stimulate the dramatic structure of the literary texts, playing a very significant role. The opinion according to which the playwright "portrays without satirical intent and sense of exaggeration women [that represent] serious types such as Zoe, Didina and even Ma'am Efimița... Comical being only Zița" (Ibrăileanu 1984: 302) seems to us too categorical, given that the author's irony and sarcasm are always present when he speaks of his world's *doamne* [ladies], *dame* [dames] or *cucoane* [madams]. In this paper, we will focus precisely on these issues, especially since in the Romanian critics' writings these characters were not given enough attention[1]. Among the studies that have contributed over time to the definition of the features of the female characters in I.L. Caragiale's work, one has to mention those belonging to Titu Maiorescu, G. Ibrăileanu, Paul Zarifopol, Pompiliu Constantinescu, Şerban Constantinescu, Şerban Cioculescu, G. Călinescu, Ion Constantinescu, Florin Manolescu, etc.

With some exceptions, almost all Caragiale's female typology analyses stress upon the "capital sins" of the ladies and madams of his plays or prose. These women are frivolous, treacherous, they "cheat" their husbands without feeling guilty (Zoe, Mița Baston, Didina, Veta, "the frivolous young woman" from *Luna de miere* ['Honeymoon'], Caragiale 1964 II: 313); they lie or fantasize excessively. In what concerns the latter feature, Caragiale suggestively notes that "suburb ladies are always extremely skilful in terms of imagining things" (*Gogoşi*, Caragiale 1962: 200). Single appearances or group portraits, women in I.L. Caragiale's writings identify themselves due to the pathos of chattering or through undisguised coquetry and mundane concerns. The author notices ironically all these elements of femininity: "it was found that the percentages of the dames passing by a mirror who can not withhold to look in it are twelve for a dozen" (Caragiale 1962: 197). The introduction to the ladies' dialogue from *Five o 'clock* brutally contrasts with the

* The "Gr.T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi, Romania.

[1] "The weight of the feminine element was not passionately enough observed" (Cioculescu 1971: VII, notes). In a recent work published in Cluj, *Frustrare şi nesaț - Personajul feminin in proza şi teatrul lui I.L. Caragiale*, the author, Ioana Blaga Frunzescu (2011), confessed that she was determined in her essayistic approach by the lack of concern shown by the literary critics in terms of Caragiale's female characters. Ioana Blaga Frunzescu's attempts to define Caragiale's female typology, present taxonomies based on various criteria of the female characters and give annexes of inventory for the feminine characters and feminine names in Caragiale, bring to light, of course, new information in the Romanian literary portraiture in general, and in the construction of the literary portrait of woman in particular.

„Philologica Jassyensia", Anul VIII, Nr. 2 (16), 2012, p. 41–46

BDD-A1069 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:59:58 UTC)

immediate reality; thus, one can not help wondering if the preamble statements were nothing but mere proofs of fine irony: "I enjoy... talking to dames from high society. I find in their conversation much more grace than in the conversation between men. Women know how to say extremely many little things in a way much more interesting than men tell the most serious things ever..." (*Five o'clock*, Caragiale 1964 I: 168).

The interest for the concerns of his characters is so strong in Caragiale that the author seems to identify himself with the feminine spirit even when describing ladies clothing. It is an exacerbated perception, especially visually, of the world motivated by the author through an anthological phrase: "I feel enormously and see monstrously" (*Grand Hotel Victoria Română*, Caragiale 1964 I: 44). Seen "monstrously" thorough is the clothing of Madam Georgescu from *Tren de plăcere*, ['Leisure train travel'] as well as the apparel of Madam Tarşiţa Popescu from *Art. 214*, Miss Henriette, Bonbon's mistress, etc. Women who pretend having skills of writer are the most ridiculed ones[2].

In the portrait of the *Abracadabrant lady*, there are summarized antinomian characteristics on which the writer defines the woman through generalization, as a "very complex being, exposed as an illiterate child, blazed as an exhausted philosopher, both suburb and aristocratic woman, sometimes primitive, other times highly refined. I am crazy about sensational events... Ah! Slander, gossip, scandals... I have a mistress... Fashion! Should it impose me to wear huckaback in winter and fur during summer... I have no choice but to obey trends" (*Începem*, Caragiale 1984: 245 sqq.). The image of "*Românca*" and "*moftangioaica*" represents a "summum" of Caragiale's ironic attacks against the rube woman (*Românca*, Caragiale 1984: 124–127).

A fine typological delimitation of the female characters from his writings is done by the writer himself: using skilfully the appellations *doamnă*, *domnişoară*, *damă*, *cucoană* etc., Şerban Cioculescu perfectly intuited this: "Iancu... calls Miţa «*conița mea*» – as he would address a madam and when he wants to say that Didina, at night in bed, had refused him, he corrects himself twice, with a prudishness specific to a «gentleman», by periphrasis: «she, pardon my saying, had turned her face to the wall»". If one does not taste this fine language specimen of the high society in a suburb man like Pampon, it means that such a person is not a philologist and does not succeed in enjoying Caragiale's style when the writer wants to emphasize the ambition of suburb inhabitants to upstart in all respects, like the «high» bourgeoisie" (Cioculescu 1984: 396). The terms *doamnă*, *damă* and *madamă* are the ones mostly used by the writer to name his female characters.

Doamnă, both in Caragiale's time and nowadays, is a term extremely polite; when the author uses jointly determinations such as "*grațioasa, încântătoarea, splendida"* etc., we can only conclude that for these female characters the author feels a certain sympathy: "*grațioasa doamnă Guvidi"*, "*gentila doamnă Florica*", "*doamna Cuțopolu, cea mai splendidă, cea mai infatigabilă dintre elegantele bucureştene*" (*O blană rară*, Caragiale 1964 I: 182), "*Alheñáis Gregoraschko, tânăra doamnă, grațioasa doamnă, preaamabila doamnă*" (*High-Life*, Caragiale 1964 I: 150). Nonetheless, in the Baroque enumeration of compliments, one can discern subtle irony.

[2] See the portrait of Nastasia or Grațiela, the author of the study "Femeia în istoria şi poezia poporană a românilor in prezent, trecut şi viitor", from *Țal!* (*Lanțul slăbiciunilor*, in Caragiale 1964 II: 49–50).

BDD-A1069 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:59:58 UTC)

The word *doamnă* (Latin *dom(i)na*)[3], is unequivocally full of curtsey in general and certainly in Caragiale's writings. In tandem with the word *doamnă*, as a consequence of the linguistic fashion of the 19th century, appear also the appellative *madamă* and *damă* (French terms *madame, dame*), which are partially out of use today. While currently the mentioned words do not have the most elegant connotations meaning loose woman as explicitly expressed in the phrase "*damă de companie*", in Caragiale's time, *madamă, damă* were synonymous with *doamnă*, being very frequently used by the writer. Starting from the French word *madame*, Caragiale and his contemporaries adapted to Romanian the appellative which circulated under the form of *madam* Diaconescu, *madam* Piscupescu, *madam* Dăscălescu (*Lanțul slăbiciunilor*, Caragiale 1964 II); the venerable *madam* Trahanache, *madam* Cuțopolu (*O blană rară*, Caragiale 1964 I: 185) etc. in the stormy scenes from Caragiale's plays in which the ladies yell at each other: Mița: "What are you doing here, *madama!* Didina: But you, *madamo*, why are you here?" (*D-ale carnavalului*, Caragiale 1971: 245); both the vocative forms and the dramatic tension of the scene confer the words a suburb like connotation. Besides this, the appellatives *madamă* and *damă* were compromised in the 20th century and nowadays, currently having only connotations which are not extremely flattering.

In contemporary newspaper articles, the words *madamă* and *damă* are used just to taunt some female characters in pamphlets and disparaging critiques: "*Madamă derutată, săraca madamă*, *damele* lacking any kind of mystery, *o madamă* and *un madam* running for electoral college vacancies"[4], "Night Club Austria employs *dame* as *dame de companie*"[5].

The word *domniță* which in the old Romanian language means "the ruler's daughter or wife is derived from *doamnă*" (NDU, s.v.). It is found rarely in Caragiale's prose fiction, being used for local color purposes: "*domnița* remained still and started screaming", "Voda's daughter, *domnița* is whimsical" (*Kir lanulea*, Caragiale 1962). Today, the appellative *domniță* is rarely seen in the precious speech of some characters that resemble Iancu from *D-ale Carnavalului* ['Carnival time']... (see above).

Cucoană (*cocoană*)[6] and the diminutives *cuconiță* and its variant *coniță* are as frequently used as the appellatives *doamnă*, *madamă*, *damă*. These words of Greek origin have circulated in the Romanian old language in various historical and literary documents. Thus, Caragiale speaks about *cocoana Acrivița*; *coconița* (Caragiale 1962: 169) Veta from *O noapte furtunoasă* ['A Stormy night'] is for Rică Venturiano, either *Madam* or *cocoană*: "*Madam, cocoană*, show mercifulness" (Caragiale 1962: 41). The young man Rică seems to prefer the word *madam*, as a proof of his French origin instruction. Sometimes the ladies appear in group (*Gogoși*,

[3] NDU, s.v., notes that "*doamnă* is a term of politeness used before the name of a married woman". Nonetheless, in the historical Romanian document, inversions were current: *Doamna* Zmaranda (1813), but also *Rucsanda Doamna* (1799) according to Ioan Caproşu (2009: 42, 243), Zoița *Doamna* (1808), but also *Doamna* Zoița (1808).

[4] See Bogdan Crețu, the article *Iubesc femeia*, in "Ziarul de Iași", 6 martie 2012, nr. 54, (6273), p.6A; 15 februarie 2012, nr. 37 (6256) p. 6A and the newspaper "Bună ziua Iaşi" (an 14, nr. 4149, 9 ianuarie 2012).

[5] "Evenimentul", 8 iunie 2012, an XIX, nr. 5813, p. 39.

[6] The meaning of this term is according to the already mentioned work *Dicționar universal ilustrat*, that of daughter of a ruler, woman from the high society, wife of boyar; it stands as a polite word for a woman from the high society.

BDD-A1069 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:59:58 UTC)

Caragiale 1962: 202), "*o sumă de cucoane*" with common interests (politics, loves, fashion). *Coana* Efimița makes politics (Caragiale 1962: 12, 95), but the most skilful politician is "*coana* Joița". She manages to change the election odds according to her own interests. What is interesting is that *coana* Joița, is *conița* for Pristanda, the tormented citizen and Dandanache while for Cațavencu, Brâzovenescu and Farfuridi she is *madam* Trahanache.

The instructed characters (Cațavencu is a lawyer, as well as Brânzovenescu and Farfuridi), who are French proficient characters or who are at least familiar with the politeness formulas, prefer the appellative *madame*, although they use in tune with the crowd's voice the words *coniță*, *coană*, *cuconiță*, assimilated especially from the colloquial language of the time since they are extremely frequent in the language of different social classes. That is why the policeman, the tormented citizen and the decrepit Dandanache use it preferably.

Therefore, criteria such as the characters' degree of culture, the local atmosphere influence the selection of the appellatives *doamnă*, *damă*, *cucoană*, so that words would match patterns, dressing them accordingly, adding additional elements to the female physiognomies portraying.

Domnişoarele and *madmoazelele* (French terms) also appear in Caragiale's writings "*madmoazela* chatted or froliced in the back stage *Lanțul slăbiciunilor*, (Caragiale 1964 II: 96, 43), "an alleged *demoazelă* of 20 years", *domnişoara Nina, a little devil*, *gentila domnişoară Florica*, *domnişoara Mari Popescu* (Caragiale 1964 II: 247), etc. It is common knowledge that the difference between *doamnă* and *domnişoară* resides in the social status of the married, respectively unmarried woman. With the same fine irony, the author comments on a letter of a *doamnă* or perhaps of a *domnişoară* "for we cannot know this for sure, it depends on how she feels" (*Art. 214*, Caragiale 1964 II: 300) and leaves unsolved the social "discrimination" issue which affects sometimes the female characters in his work. In the following dialog:

> **Lawyer:** Are you the reverend's daughter, *domnişoară*?
> **Young woman:** I am not a *domnişoară*, sir.
> **Lawyer:** *Damă*, then? *Damă!*
> **Young woman:** Indeed, sir, *damă*.
> **Lawyer:** So young! How old are you, *doamna*?[7];

it seems unacceptable to be a *damă* at 18 years old and, probably, *domnişoară*, at 60 years old. Therefore, the age criterion associated to the status of married or

[7] In the article *Oraşul fără domnişoare* (in "Ziarul de Iaşi", 13 ianuarie 2011, nr. 9, 6228, p. 8A), there are stated the following things: "in a small locality in France, it was prohibited the use of the appellative *domnişoară* (*mademoiselle*) as it was considered to be discriminatory. At that moment, in this small city from Britanny, there were no *domnişoare*, adolescents, grandmothers and unmarried women over 30 years being named *doamnă* (*madame*), in the same manner in which men of all ages were called *domn* (*monsieur*). This decision questions the use of the word *mademoiselle* in French. Germans renounced to the equivalent in their language, *fraulein* in 1972, while in Anglophone countries the use of the appellative *Miss* is in decline, being preferred the abbreviation Ms, both for *domnişoare* and *doamne*. Nonetheless, in France, Spain and Italy, where are being used the appellatives: *seniorita* and respectively *signorina*, this differentiation between married and unmarried women is still kept... Waiters can compliment a woman passed of a certain age, calling her *domnişoară*, while in the same time, the same appellative coming from officials may express condescendence".

BDD-A1069 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:59:58 UTC)

unmarried woman and *damă, domnişoară* appellatives can lead to embarrassing situations (*Teatru la ţară*, Caragiale 1964 II: 300)[8].

Caragiale's irony is found also in the association of the names of misses and madams with surnames with a grotesque, rough sounding: "*Dame: Zamfira Zămbatu, Sultana Buleandra, Stanca Boaica, Smaranda Poblete* and *domnişoarele*: *Niţa Şontoroaga, Ancuţa Fleaşcă, Ilinca Zămbatu, Sultănica Pârţan*" (Caragiale 1964 II: 276, 192 and *Lanţul slăbiciunilor*, Caragiale 1964 II: 233, 209). Attributing such great importance to proper names, we cannot believe that the appellatives *doamnă*, *damă*, *cucoană*, etc. which, usually precede the names were used by the writer by chance. In order to reflect the local colour or the realism of the dramatic scenes, I.L. Caragiale also uses other appellatives: *babă*, *băbuţă*, *soră*, *signorina*, *fătucă*, *fetică*, *chera*, *fetiţă*, *ţaţă*, *maică*, *granmama* ("*mamiţica mamiţicii puiului*"), *mamiţa*, *mamiţică*, *puică*, *fă!*, *tanti Lucsiţa*[9], etc.

Caragiale's preference for words such as *madamă, damă, madmoazelă* has also stylistic motivations. The aforementioned appellatives, neologisms of French origin, were used to bring in the 19th century also an air of modernity. Although Caragiale also used older words such as *cucoană* (Greek) and derivatives *cuconiţă*, *coniţă*, he avoids the appellatives *jupâneasă* (with the derivatives *jupâniţă*, *jupâneşică* (Creangă 1961: 220) and *duducă*, *duducuţă*, *duduie* (from the Turkish *dudu*[10]).The author felt that those words were unfit for his characters. The same fine perception of the "right words" is found in Mihai Eminescu. His female character has an image that the appellatives *duducă*, *jupâneasă*, *coniţă*, *damă* would deprive it of dignity"[11].

In conclusion, in I.L. Caragiale's writings, the protagonists' language has an essential role in defining their character. The appellatives *doamnă*, *damă*, *cucoană* are not only meant to socially identify female characters among other characters, but also enhance the stylistic charm of the literary text. In this regard, Titu Maiorescu's observation about the language of Caragiale's characters seems highly relevant:

> The types of characters present in Caragiale's comedies must speak as they speak since only in this way they can preserve the illusion of the reality they emerge us to (Maiorescu 1967: 196).

[8] In terms of "proper names in Caragiale's comedies", one has to mention the article of G. Ibrăileanu in which is being stressed that the "name is part of the creation process" in Caragiale. Names in Caragiale's work must characterize social class, old or new of the characters, their ethnic origin, their social role. Names in Caragiale's work illustrate in their own way the history and sociology of Romania in the second half of the last century, being summarizing formulas" (according to Ibrăileanu 1968: 292).

[9] Used by Caragiale as *slujnică*, barely is *jupâneasă* appellative used in the writer's works ("jupâneasă bătrână mi-a deschis poarta", according to Caragiale 1962: 109).

[10] NDU, s.v. In D. Bolintineanu, V. Alecsandri, B. Petriceicu Hasdeu et al., *duducă* appellative is quite frequent. "For the short novel *Duduca Mamuca*, Hasdeu was dismissed from his position of history teacher, being accused of indecent behaviour" (according to Hasdeu 1970: LXIII).

[11] When the poet wants to get the woman off from the pedestal, depriving her of the image of *înger, copilă, crăiasă, doamnă,* he calls her *damă:* "Dedicând broşuri la *dame* ale căror bărbaţi ci speră/ C'ajungând cândva miniştri le-a deschide carieră"; "şi când dama cochetează cu privirile-i galante..." (according to Mihai Eminescu, *Scrisoarea II, Scrisoarea V*, in Eminescu1964: 142, 161).

BDD-A1069 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:59:58 UTC)

Bibliography

Blaga Frunzescu 2011: Ioana Blaga Frunzescu, *Frustrare şi nesaţ – Personajul feminin în proza şi teatrul lui I.L. Caragiale*, Cluj, Editura Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă.
Caproşu 2009: Ioan Caproşu, *Însemnări de pe manuscrise vechi din Ţara Moldovei*, Iaşi, Casa Editorială Demiurg, vol. III.
Caragiale 1962: I.L. Caragiale, *Opere*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură, 1962, vol. III.
Caragiale 1964 I: I.L. Caragiale, *Căldură mare*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură, vol. I.
Caragiale 1964 II: I.L. Caragiale, *Lanţul slăbiciunilor*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură, vol. II.
Caragiale 1971: I.L. Caragiale, *O scrisoare pierdută*, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva.
Caragiale 1984: I.L. Caragiale, *Teatru*, Timişoara, Editura Facla.
Cioculescu 1971: Şerban Cioculescu, *Prefaţa*, in Caragiale 1971.
Cioculescu 1984: Şerban Cioculescu, *Elemente patetice în comedie*, in Caragiale 1984.
Creangă 1961: Ion Creangă, *Povestea lui Stan Păţitul*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură.
Creţu 2012: Bogdan Creţu, *Iubesc femeia*, "Ziarul de Iaşi", 6 martie 2012, no. 54 (6273), p. 6A; 15 februarie 2012, no. 37 (6256), p. 6A.
Eminescu 1964: Mihai Eminescu, *Opere alese*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură (ediţia Perpessicius), vol. I.
Hasdeu 1970: Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, *Etymologicum magnum romaniae*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură.
Ibrăileanu 1968: Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Scriitori români şi străini*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură.
Ibrăileanu 1984: Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Comediile domnului Caragiale*, Timişoara, Editura Facla.
NDU: Ioan Oprea, Carmen-Gabriela Pamfil, Rodica Radu, Victoria Zăstroiu, *Noul dicţionar universal al limbii române*, Bucureşti–Chişinău, Editura Litera Internaţional, 2010.
Maiorescu 1967: Titu Maiorescu, *Comediile domnului Caragiale*, in vol. *Critice*, Bucureşti, Editura pentru Literatură.

Abstract

The literary critics and historians that have reviewed I.L. Caragiale's work have repeatedly suggested that Caragiale's heroes are "*types*" or "*symbolic characters*" who were said to originate in various characters specific to the Romanian folk plays, or to the *Commedia dell'Arte* or even to Molière's plays. Among these heroes, a very significant part is played by the feminine characters whom, in G. Ibrăileanu's opinion, Caragiale "paints with no satirical pretensions [...]. His women are serious types such as *Zoe*, *Didina* and even *Ma'am Efimiţa*". Considering G. Ibrăileanu's statement as a starting point, the purpose of this paper is to prove the opposite. Therefore, the examples that regard both the character of Caragiale's heroines and their language, i.e. the way they address one another and the names used by the other characters when talking about them: *lady*, *young lady*, *dame*, *madam*, *etc.*, support our assumption according to which language serves not only to socially identify the speakers, but also to satirize them. The outcome of all these verbal expressions is language comicality, which is a fundamental stylistic trait of Caragiale's work.

BDD-A1069 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:59:58 UTC)