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Boys and girls as characters between stereotype and unconventional representations

Diana RADU TĂTĂRUŞ[1]

This paper consists of a succession of four case studies on autobiographical and fictional novels. We have chosen modern and contemporary Romanian authors. Our purpose was to analyse how male and female stereotypes are reflected in the literature that explores the childhood. We were interested in how stereotypes influence this type of literature and how the literature breaks them and works on people's mentality.

Key-words: *stereotype, femininity, masculinity, human genre, identity, childhood*

1. Genre stereotypes

Representing a series of particularities accepted as the *general view* or the *view of a majority*, male and female stereotypes finally carry a descriptive and normative dimension defining not only the way women and men are but also how they should be. Consequently, the society projects some expectations, assigning different roles/functions to women/ men and creates a negative perception on those who do not meet them. At the same time, the stereotypes have impact on the self-image of each individual who, being driven by the society, is trying to shape his identity according to a well-regarded pattern.

Sociological researches mark two types of gender representations: the active-male type, defined by 'self-assurance, independence, control' and the empathetic-female type, whose features include kindness, generosity and the care for others. These types are transmitted to us together with the associated roles and become questionable because of the public valorisation of one against the other. As it is presented in the field, the male stereotype is associated with some labels such as head of the family, competitive, rational and focused on finding solutions to problems. The woman, on the other hand, is empathetic, carrying, creative and emotional. These genre-based models are being induced since the early childhood by the use of different colours or toys for boys and girls (blue/pink, cars/ dolls). Often, even without a direct influence, the child is propelled by social external inputs (movies, animations, images) to choose the toys considered to be adequate for his sex, based on a gender induced complex. Also, he/she is tempted to make similar

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, diana_bv15@yahoo.com

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choices to others, proving an infantile conformism, which usually grows with the age. Set by historical, social and cultural background, stereotypes determine our perspective on life despite our conscientious will and we certainly evaluate the others through them.[2]

2. Starting points

Literature is an area that reveals the genre stereotypes, but also shows some of the incongruities, at the same time having the courage to explore taboos. A character is more interesting if his/her complexity makes him/her impossible to be framed. Therefore, literature has the quality to mark out the eccentric representations, the atypical ones. We will try to determine out how the children characters reflect the genre preconceptions. How do they define themselves in terms of genre? What kind of deviations appear? Do they have any potential to change the mentality and the common system of representations? Another aspect that we are interested in is the acceptance/ rejection of their genre, the indifferent attitude or the aspiration to the other genre.

3. Two boys and two girls...

3.1. A feminine boy

Întâmplări din irealitatea imediată (Adventures in the Immediate Unreality) by Max Blecher is a novel that evokes, in its first chapters the childhood of a lonely delicate boy who has a strange imagination. In the incipit of the story the narrator remembers his childhood 'crises', suggesting the idea of a feminine frailty. Even if the child as a cultural emblem is perceived rather like having no genre or anyway the sexuality is not a focus when it comes to children, the real child (and thus the literary character), identifies with a genre, first of all based on the resemblance to one of his/her parents.[3] The narrator of *Adventures…* remarks: „În niciun moment al copilăriei n-am ignorat diferen ța dintre bărbați şi femei.(...) Secretul sexual a fost întotdeauna aparent." (Blecher, 2011:49)[4]. He remembers his first erotic experience that led him to be beaten by his father. Very young, he had played with a little girl, under a blanket, both being naked, and had been caught. Having no moral consciousness yet, the child doesn't understand the *bad* part of his behaviour (if there is one). This

[2] The ontological legitimation for the occurrence of the stereotypes is the fact that the human mind needs some patterns that create the world's illusion of coherence. Human civilisation seems to be the result of the effort to create stable structures whose contents are periodically organised/ reorganised.

[3] To read Freud theory about the infantile sexuality, Oedipus complex and the castration complex

[4] Not even once in my childhood have I ignored the difference between men and women. The sexual secret was always clear.

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episode reveals the infantile curiosity towards the opposite sex and, on the other hand, it shows the social suppression of behaviour which starts in the childhood. After this first adventure, the child goes through new ones that define him. He meets Walter, a strange red tunic boy who draws him to a basement and displays a homosexual predisposition: „Walter stătea aplecat peste pubisul meu, cu gura strâns lipită de sex."[5] The boy is shocked; his reaction is quite repulsive, because this is totally against what he expected. Walter had told him that the basement was the place to take girls in and play the feather game, a sort of erotic initiation. The feather was the instrument of sensual touching. This particular moment in the novel has the role to minimize the value of stereotypes. Although it could pass as accidental, the episode suggests that sexual normality is very disputable and the fact that a person physically belongs to a genre doesn't necessary mean she/he is attracted by the opposite sex. Furthermore, these inclinations could be precocious and rather than to criticising them, we should try to understand them.

Another episode with a close up view on the genre is when the narrator recalls how, as a child, he pulled up the dress of a little girl from nearby, in a dark alleyway. This time we recognise a standard, quasi-cinematographic image.

The proof of his masculinity comes along at the age of 12 when the boy experiences the physical love with Clara, a girl who keeps a sewing machine shop with her brother. The attraction to Clara is culturally mediated by an image. Clara resembles to a half-naked woman who the boy once had seen on a postcard. This picture illustrates a negative stereotype that still dominates our system of representations. We love, as René Girard states, what the others tell us we should love. Regarding the love that the adolescent feels for Edda, we notice his feminine nature.[6] Now he exhibits his hyper sensibility, he is frail, emotive and powerless in showing his feelings for older married Edda. His unfulfilled love turns into a sickness, affecting his body. These aspects turn the main character of the novel in a complex personality that escapes the stereotype.

3.2. A real man

Goma's autobiographical character, the child of *Din Calidor*, understands and assumes very early and seriously the man's roles, especially in his brave and erotic dimension, acting as Don Juan[7]. He develops the wish to be *with the men* and thinks he is able to protect his mother and his house against the Russian danger. The boy is a victim of a strong oedipal complex, so, in the absence of his displaced father, he involuntarily starts feeling quite comfortable with the *little orphan* status, mostly because he feels like the only and absolute possessor of his mother. This is why he sees himself as the guardian angel. The imminent Russian fire makes women run into the woods. Just before that, the boy expresses the wish to stay with the men in

[5] Walter lay over me, with his mouth firmly touching my sex.
[6] To read the Anima's theory (Jung)
[7] In Jung's psychology Don Juan is one of the boys' maternal complex

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order to keep a watch on the houses, proving that, despite his young age, he had already learnt the man's roles. Therefore, the representations of house and family protection have to do with men. The old man Iacob nourishes this perception, because he wants the boy to be secure. That is why Iacob tells the boy that the women need him in the woods to protect them against the bandits. They need a real man, there Iacob says. And as it turns out, the boy will prove his courage being ready to act against Ilie Schilodul, a coward who tries to rape his mother:

> „Eu scot furculița și zic, cu glasul meu cel mai gros: -Nu te teme, eşti cu mine. Când îi dau una..."; „ce bine că am venit în pădure să le apăr pe femeili-istea di tal'ari, să le apăr de jefuitori!" (1990: 82).[8]

However, the gender features are obviously displayed within the boy's early erotic actions, partly naive, because, like Blecher's character, he didn't internalise any sort of moral limitations. He relates to these as to a game, a tense, passionate and strategic game. So his first love is Duda, an older girl who knows some things that 'should not be seen', so the boy has to look down every time they explore each other's bodies. In the woods, they have the chance to stay together under a cover. Their touching is interrupted by the mother, who calls Duda a ,,stricată", meaning immoral/slut as a secondary sense. But the boy only knows the literal meaning (broken/damaged), thus he cannot see anything bad in their game. Still, he has the intuition that *broken* has to do with the erotic acts too. There in the woods, he suffers a huge disillusion when seeing Duda with Gligor making love. The boy now redefines the word „stricată".

Nora's story is different. She is a girl of the same age of him, who he'll try to impress. She is blonde, wears a blue ribbon and still plays with dolls. She is the daughter of a teacher and she likes books. Trying to win her sympathy, the boy invites her to a foot race, but the answer he gets reveals the stereotype. Nora says that girls don't run and they don't climb trees, because they don't want the boys to see their intimate parts. Still, the boy pretends he is an expert, making the girl curious and so the game starts, both being keen to find out how the other looks like. Nora teaches him how to *sit*, the way boys and girls do and the sitting impresses him, even if Nora 'doesn't have boobies like Duda.' Meant to clarify the way men and women look, their conversation is natural, innocent, spontaneous and childish. There is no vulgarity, nothing to be blamed or anything unnatural.

His record also adds in other girls: Tuza, Tecla, Lina, Bălana with whom the game becomes a ritual. These are older girls, young ladies, incestuous fairies who offer themselves to be loved, for free and without any moral dilemma. Thus he hides naked under a blanket with Tuza, the young teacher from Ardeal. He loves and touches Tecla, the maid, near the stove. She is caught into little Don Juan's trap after trying to make him eat breakfast. Under these circumstances she promises some beads,

[8] 'I take out my fork and tell her using my lowest voice: - Don't be afraid. You are with me. If I kick him…'(…) 'Good that I have come in the wood to protect these women from bandits and thieves!'

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but the boy cuts her off: 'I don't need beads, I am a boy!'[9] Lina, named Muta (meaning dumb), is the one who lets him explore her femininity in lofts, unheated rooms or directly in the hay. The erotic game becomes now more and more sophisticated. Bălana's red boots are used as changing coins and allusive gesture that announce a new love episode. Even though Bălana knows she deals with a child, she accepts the game for fun and lets him admire her nudity. He negotiates with Bălana:

> „Când mama e la şcoală, dimineaţa, eu mă aşez la masă şi spun că nu mănânc. Ea mă întreabă de ce. Eu răspund că aşa, ca să mor. Ea plânge şi mă întreabă ce să-mi dea ea mie ca să nu mor. Şi eu: - Nu mai plânge că- ţi dau ciubo- ţelele. Ca să am ce-i da, îmi dă ea mie. După cuptor i le dau."[10] (Goma, 1990:123)

They invent a code language, and the boy enjoys these moments. They are both happy with this crying-laughing-giving boots situation.

In conclusion, for Goma's character the genre identity is not problematic. He is a boy and acts like one; he feels comfortable with himself and his personality is strongly shaped by ste reotypes. This is also due to the fact that he is a countryside boy and in the traditional, less flexible communities, the stereotypes are very well preserved, because of their firm rules and roles.

3.3. A girl made of many

Exuvii of Simona Popescu pictures the perpetual changing femininity.

The narrator- main character- is a dynamic and plural being, reuniting past and future representations. Her complete image is also made up of childhood and teenage stages. The first one is a genderless self-portrait, drew at age of four: a kind of hybrid, with big round head and thin legs. This is the age when the child is prone to an outward experience, orienting more to the exterior. But, later in the book she goes back to the age of four to awake the romp she then used to be. She analyses herself at many ages:

> „ momâia de la 6, fetiţa ambiţioasa de la 9 ani, tocilara de la 11, leneşa de la 16, slăbănoaga de la 15, grăsana de la 17, anemica de la 19, vitala de la 21, urâta de la 10, frumuşica de la 13, visătoarea de la 16, proasta de la 15, eleva, profesoara, fecioara, femeia, îndrăznea ţa, timida, revoltata sau fricoasa, isteaţa nesuferită, încrâncenata confuză."[11] (Popescu, 2011:12)

[9] The expression of a male stereotype

[10] In the morning, when mum is at school I sit at the table and tell Bălana I won't eat. She asks me why. I answer that it is because I want to die. She cries and asks me what she could give me not to die. Then I tell her: - If you stop crying, I give you the boots. But first she gives them to me, so I could have something to give to her. I give them back to her under the stove.

[11] The six-year-old scarecrow, the nine-year-old ambitious girl, the eleven-year-old nerd, the sixteen-year-old lazy girl, the skinny girl of fifteen, the fat one of seventeen, the nineteen-year-old anaemic, the vital girl of twenty one, the ten-year-old ugly one, the nice girl of thirteen , the sixteen-year-old

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All these labels define a complex personality that understands her femininity, also illustrating features associated to the male stereotype: ambition, intelligence and courage. Once in a while they show and they are meant to temper the femininity 'excess' which we can easily notice in her maternal effusions. She tells herself that she had been a great mum-sister. Sometimes she sees herself as the mother of her own mother, but also the mother of the girl that she had been. Therefore, her femininity is totally assumed, still she has some sort of male consciousness, always associated especially with the intellect area (resembling Leontina, Pupa Russa's main character).

> „mă simt un fel de matrioşkă, un fel de mamă uriaşă, o mamă-copil, care ține în creierul ei masculin (...) o grămadă de homunculi, de păpuşi, de creaturi care nu mai există, care nu există încă, din ce în ce mai bătrâne şi într-un fel din ce în ce mai copilăroase, poate până la baba măruntă, scofâlcită, mai copil decât toate (...)"[12] (Popescu, 2011:16)

Amazingly, the ageing as a woman's drama is recurrent in this novel about childhood. Its presence marks out the idea of feminine vulnerability, validating the common system of representation.

So far, the review has been made from the perspective of a mature woman who comments on her childhood, revealing its sense. Still, there are memories in the book which are not explicit. These are relevant too, because they use conventional/ unconventional images of the genre. One of these episodes is the magic moment when little Simona discovers her mother's wardrobe. Wearing mum's dresses, lipstick and mascara, the girl tries on the woman costume. She is fascinated by all these feminine accessories: laces, bracelets, silks. Simona enjoys touching these glittering objects, feeling the power and sensuality they offer. She lets herself hypnotised by brooches, sequin dresses, handbags, velvets and buttons. Mum's closet is a special place that Simona keeps in her emotional memory as the space where she understood her genre identity.

Simona's childhood crosses two levels which in fact are two of her essential stages: from the little boy-girl to the complex, moody young girl. At first, she would rather play outside with the tribe's children, she would climb hills, she would get hurt in the games. As she grows up, she discovers the books and she moves inside, literally (she stays inside reading in the house, in the loft or even in the bed's storage box) and metaphorically (she becomes introspective, trying to discover her identity, keeping diaries).

Through this character, Simona Popescu creates a very precise description of the feminine concept, shaping shades that confirm the common thinking, but at the

dreamer, the silly fifteen-year-old girl, the student, the teacher, the virgin, the woman, the fearless woman, the shy woman, the revolted or coward woman, the smart woman, the confuse one.

[12] I feel like a matrioshka, a huge-mother, a child-mother, who keeps in his male brain (...) a series of homunculi, dolls, creatures that don't exist anymore, that are older and older, but at the same time more infantile, up to the small hollow-cheeked old lady more than anything else like a child.

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same time, she suggests that each woman is somehow unique and her personality is marked more or less by the other genre's features.

3.4. A girl who hides a boy

For Leontina, Gheorghe Crăciun's character, the genre identity is problematic. The way she is shows how reductive the stereotypes are. Leontina is a woman and a man at the same time, an androgynous being, and becomes conscious about this nature early in her childhood. At the beginning she is a sensitive child, very impressed by the language world. Her name reveals her dual identity, reuniting the boy's name Leon and the girl's name Tina. She says her name is 'like a womb with two children'. She thinks it would have been proper that she had been named Leon, 'a girl like a demon boy'. In her childhood, she realises that 'her right hand has boy's instincts and the left is weaker, lazier and fragile' and this makes her feel uncomfortable. However, Leon 'hidden inside her body' seems to claim some moments, making her feeling as if she had lost control:

> „Tina simte că Leon e acea parte din corp şi din creier de care ea se teme. Pentru că Leon cuvântul e în realitate Leon-băiatul din pielea ei pe care ea îl recunoaşte imediat după dorinţe şi stări." [13] (Crăciun, 2007: 48)

The inner confrontation is suggested by the narrator through a brutal image: 'When Leon met Tina, her name suddenly exploded like a big belly whose bowels came out'. Her entire destiny is based on this permanent fight between feminine and masculine principles, between the two parts of her being, parts that try to act more spectacular each time.

> „Venea vacanţa de vară şi Leon se retrăgea în peşterile lui neştiute cu pereţi translucizi, se ascundea în coridoarele reci ale min ţii şi atunci Tina apărea din ceaţa ei luminoasă ca un fel de regină."[14](2007:62)

Thus, Leon is the intellect, the rationality while Tina is the irrationality, the emotional part, the obscure, the inclination to daydream, the seduction. To abolish Leon, the character will use her femininity and sensuality to exhaustion, wishing to rediscover herself as a complete woman. Even her teenage look is in a way claimed by Leon. Leontina is a sportswoman with perfect body, with firm muscles, inspiring strength, domination far away of the so-thought woman frailty. Again, her decision to stay emotionally uninvolved (in the relations with men) reveals Leon, the same way it illustrates the calculate way of achieving her targets, without reflection or

[13] Tina feels that Leon is the part of her body and brain that she is afraid of (…). Because of the fact Leon the word is in fact Leon the boy of her skin that she recognises by his wishes and moods.

[14] There was the summer break and Leon was withdrawing into his unknown caves with translucent walls, he was hiding into the cold corridors of mind and then Tina arose from her bright mist like a queen.

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self-imputations. Leontina's femininity is all the time crushed by the opposite instinct. So she is not an ordinary woman, although she can be associated with a promiscuous one. Leontina becomes a woman who fights against herself and reaches self-destruction, being unable to solve her identity problem. She allows Hilde's sexual games; she then sleeps with several men, getting to play the unhappy role of a doll: empty inside, attractive, but weak-willed, like an object, the instrument of man's pleasure. This is a negative stereotype that Leontina confirms to a certain degree. In fact, she is very complicated and profound on the inside, suffering from a real identity drama since her childhood. Leon is her half-being that does not correspond to the feminine stereotype of the world she lives in. She subconsciously creates him and then tries to keep him captive. She fears to let him show especially because she knows that she will be blamed by the collective standardized perception of the communist regime.

4. Conclusions

The characters' analysis shows that they could represent the expression of the stereotypes, but they can also give a new perception on the understanding of the femininity/ masculinity. Some writers had the courage to reveal the unspoken genre's issues, breaking the clichés. Others just use the stereotype successfully. Anyway, the precious idea suggested by literature as well as by psychology is that femininity and masculinity should be seen as principles which act together in the human personality, despite the sex. The potential offered by these and other literary characters is that it produces changes in our mentality; it educates according to the tolerance and also erases the inferiority complexes of those who don't fit into the social stereotypes. Therefore, the literature re-defines the normality by minimizing the preconceptions. Literature states implicitly that it is normal/ acceptable not to be like others, to be different, encouraging everyone, man or woman to be themselves, promoting an *authenticity ethic*.

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