THE MYTH OF THE FAMILY IN TRANSYLVANIAN LITERARY DISCOURSES

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Abstract

Ioan Slavici's *Mara* and János Kemény's *The Witch of Waters* are two Transylvanian novels which deal with the topics of Family and Womanhood in the context of the Transylvanian small town or rural society in the second half of the 19th century. In this article we approach issues like single parenthood, male and female roles, family interactions etc. In Slavici's and Kemény's fiction the traditional patriarchal family pattern is still very strong, but symptoms of its alteration become visible.

Keywords: patriarchal family pattern, monoparental family, shifting roles, absent father, mother with masculine identity, self-made woman

The 19th century was one of the most dynamic periods not only in point of social and economic changes imposed by growing capitalism, but also in point of the shifts that occured in family life, family roles and patterns. The population of Transylvania in the XVIII-XIX centuries was very heterogeneous in social status, ethnicity and religion. In the four decades prior to the Big War a dense railroad network was constructed, with a direct impact on migration patterns too. The changes that affected other Central European regions were present there too, along with them the changes of traditional family patterns. Old assumptions, absolutes, norms, values started to be questioned, especially in the second half of the long 19th century. "The Industrial Revolution profoundly affected the modern family, relieving mates of many burdens, yet also placing many extra strains upon them: a person's role was no longer something automatic, unquestioned, pre-determined by a static social order and by prearranged manners and customs, roles often had to be learned anew for new situations. Worth had to be earned. It did not come as birthright. Even if it did come by being earned, it was still uncertainly relative. Old patriarchal definitions of the male as the head of the house and the female as belonging in the home went through a re-evaluation. Confused men and women, reacting to the new equalitarian ideals, found themselves questioning and worrying about everyday family tasks and roles" (Satir, 1983: 30).

We will try to make a short comparison between two literary texts, Ioan Slavici's *Mara* and János Kemény's *The Witch of Waters*, two novels that share numerous common features, mainly in point of themes and motives. They both refer to the same Transylvanian milieu of the second half of the 19th century, and they launch the figure of the self-made woman, who is trying to be a single mother and a successful businesswoman in the same time, but forgets to be a woman. The world around the main

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characters changes, along with it norms, values, roles and functions start to take up new facets.

According to D. Vatamaniuc the action of *Mara* takes place around 1848-1860. Slavici's characters are average people. Mara is the first self-reliant woman figure in Romanian literature. She begins as a humble, impoverished widow and mother-of-two. Later she turns into a resourceful businesswoman, who manages to escape her condition and class. *Mara* is also a Bildungsroman, as it chronicles the way Mara's two children, Persida and Trica grow up, turning into young adults. The action takes place in a small rural town in 19th century Transylvania. The key feature of this period is the interpenetration and interdependence of the human beings and the social norms and values that shaped that specific context.

In the 19th century Transylvanian society, that was midway between *preindustrial* and *industrial* phase in Mendas's terms, or *traditional* and *modern* in Vedinas's words, one of the basic values was represented by the Family. One could refer to a cult or a myth of the Family. The business and the crafts were kept within the family: the examples of Huber and his son, Natl or that of Bocioaca who choses Trica to become his son-in-law are relevant. In the same way, Marci from the other novel learns the trade to continue Jolka's business, and the old *witch* marries little Jolka to one of his business partners, not only because that man loves the young girl, but also for family business reasons.

The theme of the Family is a basic one in Slavici's fiction. The Romanian novelist presents two families, two different family types that foreshadow the future changes that will take place later, in the next century. Mara's family is, in a sense, the monoparental family of the 20th century, that is centered around the figure of the mother, as the head of the family. Maternal role is strongly altered by the role of the money-earner. Mara's family evokes the birth of a new world. The other family is the Huber family, they symbolize the old patriarchal family that is gradually falling apart. Cornel Ungureanu makes some very interesting remarks related to the fictional world Slavici creates: it is a women's world, in which the fathers die or decay, and women overtake the power men used to hold. And due to this very power, women finally fail their destiny. „In her own way, Mara would like to protect her children. Her secret is the treasure-the money that will protect them in the absence of the Father. Deprived of the father-figure, her children will experience a different kind of relationship with the world. Persida is beautiful, she receives good education, but she is frightened by the presence of men. She fails the relationship with Codreanu, then she fears Natl" (Ungureanu, 2002: 165). Mircea Zaciu seems to share the same opinion, as he calls Slavici one of the greatest Romanian novelists, with a dramatic call for failure (Zaciu, 1996: 109-121). Later, in her married life, Persida will have a lot of conflicts. Within the young couple the presence of differentness in another – in point of wishes, habits, tastes, expectations, opinions – is used destructively, rather than as an opportunity for enrichment: disagreement is often seen as an insult.

Pompiliu Marcea considers, in the volume *Ioan Slavici. Evaluări critice* (1977: 27), Mara not a miser, but rather very practical, which is normal for a poor widow like her. But

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for her practicality, she could have ended a beggar. The critic says that her sense of perspective is a defensive mechanism against a society which did not favour single mothers of modest condition. Money can pervert people if it is not used for the progress of the Family (Natl spends a lot of money on gambling because he cannot get used to living in poor conditions and becomes more and more irrascible, Marta Bocioaca, who spends money to save Trica from the army and to ease her preplanned adultery, will see her plans ruined).

Family ethics is very strong and maternity reinforces this ethics. One's primary responsability is towards one's family that belongs to an ethnic and religious community.

The newborn even manages to mature his father, Natl, and the young family reintegrates into society, as their married status is revealed. Being married is still an important attribute of social legitimacy. After all, Slavici is said to have been a moral writer, and each of his writings hides a moral teaching. The supreme values for Slavici, the moralist, are Family, Duty and Traditions. That is why those who ignore family values are punished: Huber is killed by his illegitimate son, Bandi, just when the father absenting from his childhood decides to make it up and take care of his illigitimate son. Nevertheless, the elements that will structure the 20th century family patterns and functions, and the symptoms of the decay and alteration of the traditional patriarchal family are all present.

As Magdalena Popescu puts it in her volume *Ioan Slavici. Evaluări critice*, not only does Slavici undermine several aesthetic and literary conventions of his time, but he also changes the conventional way of perceiving Tradition and Family. He discovers new ways of fulfillment for the individual. Financial and emotional security make an independent woman, in this sense Mara, her replica, Persida and Kemény's heroine, Jolka announce the Woman figure of the next century – socially succesful, reaching motherhood, yet alienated in many ways. Mara can perfectly master her economic decisions, Persida does so with her emotional options. Slavici's feminine characters have the courage to go against the stream and act in ways and manners nobody would have expected. Mara does not learn a trade, and she does not send her daughter to the monastery in order to become a nun. Basically, they avoid all the carreer options available for women in that time, and they become businesswomen, who still consider motherhood important. It is the fictional portraying of the present day dilemma career versus family.

In the literature of the 19th century, male characters were in central position. Female characters appear in the frame of their family and household, and the classical feminine types of the 19th century fiction were those of the muse, wife, mother or lover. With Mara, females leave the private space and step into the public space, previously controlled by men. Slavici introduced a number of elements indispensable to modern fiction, i.e. „a focus on human interiority, a strong aesthetic-formal concern, and a phenomenological rather than merely historical description of reality... Slavici insisted that events and characters be true to the circumstances of a certain place. He also asked that every word contibute to a consistent narrative atmosphere" (Pope-Neubauer, 2002: 444).

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Gavril Scridon thinks that the female character of *The Witch of Waters,* Jolka is, up to a point, a kind of Mara (Scridon, 1996: 144). Kemény's heroine is different in the sense that the *demons* of wealth and money change her profoundly, alienating her not only from people, but also from her former self . The action takes place between 1834-1914, a time when capitalism was penetrating Transylvanian economy and the old world was slowly sinking.

The witch of waters is the story of Jolka, the 16 year-old daughter of a forester, who lives in the mountains of Maramures. One day, she meets Manoila, a poacher, instantly falls in love with him with teenage fascination. When she hears her father's plans of capturing Manoila, she runs to warn him, manages to save his life, but radically alters her own. She ends up horribly beaten up by her father and has to run. Jolka leaves her mountain home, spends the summer in the cottage and under the protection of old Ilia and his shepherds. When the time comes, the sheep go down in the valley, and she travels down the Big River (i.e. the Tisa) on a raft that transports wood to the lowlands. She finds work in the house and inn run by Mr. Szénási, the port administrator in Vadu Mare.

She grows into a beautiful young woman who catches the eye of the middle-aged widower. She becomes his wife, they have six children, and Jolka becomes a good wife, but not a loving one. After Mr. Szénási's disperate affair with a fair-haired woman of bad morals, Jolka is made to confess her long-time repulsion for her husband, and ends up being almost beaten up, the scene echoing the situation in her mountain home. As she cannot tolerate violence, she takes her children and the money she saved, and runs back in the Maramures mountains.

Once there, she starts to put into practice a plan she had made. Jolka seems to love power and the only way of getting this power and security for herself and her children is to make money. By all means. She obtains the concession of a remote valley, obtains a deforestation and transportation licence, finds the best workers and starts exploiting the big forrests, transporting high quality wood down the Big River. She becomes, in some years, the most influential person in the woodcutting and rafting business. She proves to be as brave and as daring as a man, doing jobs that had never been done by women, earning the nickname she'll be proud of-*the witch of waters*. The people around her either fear or admire her, but very few people love her. Except for old Ilia, aunt Sara and her two elder children, nobody loves her and she loves nobody.

Jolka fills six boxes with money and valuables for her six children, as Mara fills the socks with money for her offsping. The world around her starts to change, the railway network is spreading and the end of he 19th century is nearing. Together with it, the end of rafting and water transportation is on te horizon. Jolka does not have any regrets, and adapts to the changing world. She organizes the last rafting season, and secretly builds a sawmill. If the world is changing, she is ready to change with it too, the same way as Mara has a remarkable sense of adaptation to the needs of the surrounding world. Destiny strikes, and her beloved son Marci dies during the last travel down the river. After three days of mourning she is back in business, and, even if she does not admit it, this will

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prove to be the turning point in her life. She makes the arrangements she wants to make, marries young Jolka's daugther, her granddaugther to her businesspartner. Then she takes the six boxes filled with valuables, goes high up in the mountains and gets rid of the wealth she had gathered during a lifetime, spreading it into deep clefts and dark caves.

János Kemény's novel is a *Bildungsroman*, the story of eight decades: it is also a success story, but a success story with nuances. Jolka becomes rich and enjoys the power she has longed for and the independence her wealth has brought, but her personal life is marked by a long list of failures: she is expelled and cursed by her father, not looked for by her mother (one of her greatest disappointments), her unhappy marriage, the death and the betrayal of the only man she loved (Manoila becomes her lover after escaping from prison, but she wants to keep the relationship secret, and when he is finally killed, she is deeply hurt: not only because of his death, but mainly because she finds out that all this time she has been *the other woman*). The tragic death of her son and the failed relationship with her other children can only add to her drama.

The 19th century promoted a very intense cult of the Family and of the so-called *privacy*. Family was expected to be a closed space, a kind of *hortus clausus*, where people's true virtues were stimulated and protected from the dangers and violence of the outer world. After 1880 a new category of successful people emerged, that of entrepreneurs, who were almost exclusively men (Frevert-Haupt, 2002: 36). Women could inherit big fortunes or businesses, but hey did not administer their wealth. Yet, Frevert and Haupt mention that in rural Austria, for instance, peasant women had the freedom to spend the money they earned through selling different products the way they wanted. The liberty of making money and spending it was not completely unfamiliar for women in Central Europe. So what Mara and Jolka will do in terms of making money might not be completely odd. Both women use, basically, the good old survival ethics of their peasant ancestors.

What is new in the literature about women of that time is not merely the fact that they want and do make money, but the fact that they restructure or at least announce the restructuring of womanhood, women's roles and the whole family pattern. The Catholic canon of the *exemplary wife* and *mother* or the bourgeois feminine ideal of *mother, wife and angel of the house* is not validated in our two texts. Mara and Jolka leave the private space that used to be occupied by women and enter the public space that used to be reserved for men.

In patriarchal paradigms women hold a secondary position, and their access to financial resources usually takes place with the mediation of men. In Slavici's and Kemény's fictional world the situation starts to change, and mothers become money earners. "In the case of monoparental families the authority is exercised by the single parent. From this viewpoint, monoparental families resemble the authority model that is specific for the 20th century, where authority is held by the person who earns the living (Stefan, 2006: 45). If the monoparental family reproduces the relations functioning in a patriarchal society, that parent becomes supreme authority in the family. When women

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are socialized in such a model, they tend to reproduce it in their own families. The family system is the main learning context for individual behaviour, thoughts, feelings, and a child learns how to structure the world in the family. The adults provide the blueprint by which the child grows from infancy to maturity. Once a child grows up in a dysfunctional family, he is likely to form the same family pattern, as an adult. That is why Jolka becomes the replica of her ruthless father, and that is why Persida becomes the authoritative Mara in her adult life.

As Tomka Béla puts it, at the dawn of the 20th century, the rate of divorces was very high in Hungary, and the number of births out-of-wed was even higher than in Western Europe (Tomka, 2000: 89). The situation must have been similar towards the end of the 19th century Transylvania too, so Jolka's attempt to separate from her husband must have been a familiar gesture. But the fact that she is not willing to face the Vadu Mare community and her husband only when she has reached success and the latter has left the village, is rather meaningful. Community censorship can explain many of such gestures. Sorina Bolovan emphasized the lower status of women within the Transylvanian rural community of the time we deal with, but also the existence of several forms of family life. „Despite all the negative side effects, divorce and concubinage offered the institution of marriage numerous variants of family organization, and led to a readjustment of matrimonial relation according to the ideals and the needs of the community members... the obvious differences fom other geographical areas emphasize the existence of different mental structures, which gave family life in Transylvanian villages specific characteristics. Marriage and family life were not just a personal matter. They involved the community" (Bolovan, 1994: 101-107).

The symptoms of the changes in Europe's population trends are the following: decrease in marriages, an increase in non-marital unions, cohabitation, the number of single people, increasing divorce, one-parent families, births out-of-wed, childlessness, and a drastic decline in fertility (Brigham, 1986). The pluralization of family life forms involves illegitimate births, alternative forms of cohabitation. Conjugal instability produces particular dynamics within the family, but also produces social changes and new family patterns (monoparental families, reconstructed families etc). According to Jack Goody, between 1750-1850 the number of illegitimate children soared all over Europe (Goody, 2003: 182). In both texts, there is a number of people of uncertain origin or who were born out-of-wedlock (the case of Bandi, Huber's illegitimate son, and the case of Mr. Szénási, who was born as an illegimitate child etc). Yet, having or being an illegitimate child was still shameful, that is why the pregnant Jolka fools Mr. Szénási into marriage, and Persida insists on getting married before running away from home.

Jack Goody asserts that the main variables of the development of the European family are the economic and the religious factors, these variables operating on a large scale all over the European continent (Goody, 2003: 25). Both factors have suffered radical changes in the two fictional texts we deal with: women have gained economic independence and they do no rely on men as money earners, and they do not turn to

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religion. Even though tradition is still very important, marriage is still seen as a haven of safety for the happy couples of the stories, and non-familiar forms are still not often favoured (Mara does not even consider that Persida might become a nun), adultery, premarital sexual relations are not accepted or publicly assumed, emotional betrayal is punished or regarded as blameworthy, child-rearing is still the mothers' responsability, but it seems to be equalled sometimes with the desire to work or to make money and the myth of the happy nuclear family starts to fall apart. Fathers start to be absent more and more often, thus they cannot serve as models for their sons. Mothers start to work, and the traditional gender roles start to change. In capitalism, instead of the nuclear family, as Jack Goddy puts it, we deal with smaller, more dispersed and more fragmented families. Family life changes in the 19th century, due to the changes that take place in the way men and women earn their living (Goody, 2003: 200). New problems arise, such as the issues of reconciling work and family roles or the problem of property, which is a key concept in the changes that occurred in this field. In the second half of the 19th century, for the first time in history women's work is conflicting their domestic and maternal duties (Goody, 2003: 187). Phenomena like marginalizing men or irresponsible fathers appear, and women become more and more important, assuming the role of the head of the family (Goody, 2003: 13). These are the phenomena that one can identify, while analyzing family patterns and roles within Mara's and Jolka's families. *Mara* by Slavici is a family novel that presents several family types, Mara's family foreshadows the single-parent households or monoparental families, Huber's family mirrors the patriarchal family pattern. Jolka's family is also the prototype of modern day monoparental family, where the mother works and assumes the role of the Absent Father.

Yet, neither Mara, nor Jolka is happy. They do not function as women any more, they are money-earners or working mothers, displayig very few moments of feminine tenderness. Mara is satisfied but often very lonely, and the only moments of true happiness for Jolka are the ones when she becomes, for a very short time, the woman she used to be, and not the male she has turned into. They are never seen living in a functional relationship, Mara is never mentionned as Mara Birzovanu, bearing her deceased husband's name, and numerous elements suggest a rather mediocre marriage, later beautified by Mara's incessant, self-pitying complaints. Jolka's marriage lacks personal fulfillment and satisfaction, and the only affectionate relationship she has (the one with Manoila) is never assumed publicly, and, what is more, ends in an awkward manner. They succeed as *men*, but fail as women.

If we try to explain Mara's and Jolka's maternal behaviour based on some modern theories and interpretations, we could state that they are authoritative parents. Gender-based schemata attribute roles: they are mothers and substitute fathers in the same time. According to J. E. Williams, cited by John Brigham, there are general pan-cultural sex trait stereotypes which are evident in all cultures, but can be modified to a certain degree by specific cultural influences (Brigham, 1986: 327). Applying the set of masculine and feminine traits to the two women subject of our analysis, we will clearly see that both

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Mara and Jolka display numerous traits associated with men (*active, autocratic, courageous, daring, dominant, enterprising, independent* or *inventive*), but very few female traits. Mara can be perceived as *complaining, curious* or *self-pitying*, and Jolka, in her youth, is *feminine*. But nothing else.

In this half rural-half urban Transylvanian milieu the life of a single mother would normally have been poor, or, at best, she should have asked for male relative's protection and help. In Sorina Bolovan's words, the 19th century Transylvanian widows' or single mothers' life was tightly controlled and censored by the community: "the written and the unwritten laws, the legislators and the moralists reserved for the woman or the widow a much harsher, unforgiving and closely controlled status….In the Transylvanian rural communities during the modern times, the woman's right to life was *buried* with the deceased husband… the widowed woman remained isolated, marginalized by the community, harshly sanctioned if she did not live in mourning for the departed one, suspected that she wanted to waste the wealth gathered by he late husband and his family" (Bolovan, 2001: 3-11). Cristina Stefan observes that the experience of single parenthood may "masculinize" women (Stefan, 2006: 48). When single mothers try to reestablish order by replacing the Father who has disappeared, they turn into *pater familias*, and their relationship with their children becomes difficult, due to the intersections of roles they assume (Stefan, 2006:133-134). In fact, the heroines cumulate multiple roles: that of the mother, of the father and of the divine element. "Mara is, in fact, a *pater familias* who watches over her children's destiny, an authority whose word must be listened to" (Slavici, 1985: 276). Things are similar with Jolka too, after a while she becomes more of a distant father for some of her children, and she never turns to God because for a woman who cannot forgive, a Christian God of forgiveness cannot exist.

In point of mating strategies, it is obvious that both mothers are willing to choose partners for their children, according to their own mate selection strategies (Jolka makes two exceptions, for her two favourites). They want an extension of themselves, a surrogate or substitute parent for their children, so Mara intends to see Persida married to Codreanu, and advises Trica to tactlessly submit Marta Bocioaca and fool her until she gets the Bocioaca girls as wife: this way, he'll have a well-off wife and a fearful mother-in law.

In Central Europe the traditional family pattern persisted for a longer period of time than in the west of the continent. The second half of the 19th century brought about some changes (urbanization, industrialization, railroad networks etc) that finally led to the modification of this family pattern. The Transylvanian rural family of that time, as seen by Ákos Egyed, was mainly the nuclear family type (Egyed, 1981: 262). There are several features of the society that was slowly becoming capitalist, among these one can mention the role of fairs (in *Mara* the main character is not a peasant who produces goods, but a retailer who buys and sells), or the presence of paid labour force in the family business, that exceeds the labour done by family members (Jolka has, at a certain moment some 240 employees). According to Ákos Egyed Transylvanian literature promoted the ideal of

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a specific Transyilvanian life standard and lifestyle which he calls *honest poverty* (Egyed, 1981: 227)[2]. Nevertheless, the two novels do not promote this ideal.

There are numerous and complex links between literary texts, the moment of writing and/or the moment they refer to. Texts can explain other texts, through intertextual mechanisms, but they also explain, if not mirror (in an aristotelian sense) the reality that generated them, the social context they belong to and they refer to. Therefore, it is remarkable that two works that were written at a seven decades' interval, present such strikingly similar elements referring to the topic of family and womanhood. What links them is the theme of the Family and the motive of the willful Transylvanian woman, the surprisingly modern motive of the single-mother-turned-businesswoman of the 19th century Transylvanian society. This might suggest, on te one hand, the moderniy of Slavici's novel (as it announces 20th century phenomena and characters), but also the persistence of the topic (the decay of the patriarchal family) well after World War II (Kemény's novel appeared in 1965). Without asserting the existence of a special type of Transylvanian woman, one could wonder about the causes of the constant emergence of Mara/Jolka-like women figures in Transylvanian literature(s). Ioan Slavici's *Mara* and János Kemény's *The witch of waters* equally „present a fairly unexplored realm of rendering the individual's emancipated will wrestling with the illusion of attaining plenitude of life in a changing world" (Jucan, 2004: 141-156). The families portrayed in these fictional worlds are still deeply rooted in the old patriarchal system, but they already present symptoms of the decay of this traditional pattern. Values start to change and roles start to shift, rendering people, especially women more and more independent and economically stable, but not necessarily more fulfilled.

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[2] He uses the expression *tisztes szegénység*

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