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THE WOMAN IN "THE MOMENTS"

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Abstract: *The **Moments** appeared twenty years after his **Comedies** and many critical voices perceived Caragiale's sketches as an inferior type of literature, not because of the change of genre, but due to the erroneous interpretation of the relationship between these short stories and the immediate reality, reproving the writer for his focus on the momentary, on the fugitive events which impregnate the text with an ephemeral character. Although the main character is the petty bourgeois, skillful in all, the female figures are not missing, on the contrary, they are desired and sought in "weakness". The world of the heroes and heroines of these sketches, be it the capital or the province, is mainly the city.*

Key words: *the city, femininity, the periphery, the media, short stories.*

1. Introduction

Caragiale's short stories, his sketches, are first published as feuilletons in "Universul" (1899 – 1901) and "Moftul român" and collected, afterwards, in a volume, *Moments*, published in 1901.

In 1899, in his *Preface* to *Notiţe critice* (*Critical Notes*) in "Universul", the writer reiterates his predilection for "the literary representation of the common daily life" of the Romanians as a polemic with the literature of grand themes: "I cannot think lofty when I walk barefooted on nut shells. The common life is mine, it is ours, of every Romanian, this is what I'm interested in, this is what appeals to me."

The *Moments* appear twenty years after his *Comedies* and many critical voices perceived Caragiale's sketches as an inferior type of literature, not because of the change of genre, but due to the erroneous interpretation of the relationship between these short stories and the immediate reality, reproving the writer for his focus on the momentary, on the fugitive events which impregnate the text with an ephemeral character.

The world of the heroes and heroines of these sketches, be it the capital or the province, is mainly the city.

2. Text structure.

The writer is interested to create the picture of "a genuine phenomenology of the Romanian society, in its urban-bourgeois variant and in some of the areas where it is easier to decipher: the family, the school, the bureaucracy, the press, the justice"(Manolescu 2000).

Although the main character of the *Moments* is Mitică, the common bourgeois, the Jack of all trades, the national omniscient, there is no shortage of feminine figures; on the contrary, they are wanted and sought after out of "weakness". We are at the end of the 19th century, "a hypocritical century, which represses the sex, but is obsessed with it. It bans nudity, but looks through the keyhole". At a close examination of the

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Moments, one can easily observe the writer's interest for the image of the woman, surprised in some postures which are specific to the 19th century, those of wife and mother, and, to a smaller extent, unmarried young woman. No matter in what role he distributes his feminine character, Caragiale is preoccupied with undermining its dominant image in the literature of his century, which is, on one hand, that of demonic womanhood, capable to lure the man into perdition, and, on the other hand, the angelic feminity, the woman which is the angel of the house, priestess of her home, completely dedicated to her husband and children.

All of Caragiale's sketches depict the universe of a "small reality", as Ioana Pârvulescu calls it, where no drama happens, only "dramolette, farce" (Pârvulescu 2007).

An edifying example is, in this instance, *Groaznica sinucidere din strada Fidelităţii* (*Terrible Suicide on Fidelity Street*). The sketch is included, in Pompiliu Constantinescu's opinion, among the texts dedicated to the "frivolous press", while Ioana Pârvulescu opines that these writings mirror the Romania as it was in the media of Caragiale's age, including the newspaper he used to write for (Pârvulescu 2007).

The writer analyzes the relation between the centre and the periphery. A model which, at some point, was representative for the centre in the highest possible manner, suffers a dilution and "slides" towards periphery. The significance given to the periphery by the author must be specified here: it is the space where the action takes place, but it also is the last human space, represented by the inhabitants of the slum, the receptacle of a literary topos tending to become obsolete.

It is known about the peripheral space that it is a place "populated by the marginal people who want to pass as important, mimicking the high society in exaggerated gestures" (Majuru 2003). Here, Porţia Popescu lives "a sensational passionate drama", differently reflected by the press: there is, on one hand, the "Aurora" newspaper, which clings to the dated pattern of the angelic woman, an innocent victim of a deceitful love, and, on the other hand, the tabloid "Lumina" ("The Light"), where the myth spoken of above is torn down, as the same event is presented in a realistic and ironical manner.

Thus, according to "Aurora", Porţia Popescu is a desperate young lady who, "several weeks ago, had fallen into such melancholy and dejection of the soul that she could not eat, drink, or sleep at all"(Caragiale 1994). The cause of this profound suffering is, obviously, the romantic deception and Porţia makes an unequivocal decision: "Tonight, while her brother was away as usually and her mummy was asleep, Porţia took off the heads of a dozen boxes of matches and threw them into a shot of grape brandy. While waiting for the phosphorus to dissolve, the poor girl sat at the table and, gathering all her wits, wrote a letter to her mummy and brother to beg their pardon for the pain she caused them and to declare that she wished for her death because young Mişu Z …, the former medicine student and present county doctor, had left her" (Caragiale 1994). The solution chosen by the young lady doesn't seem unusual at all, knowing that love suicide as a form of redemption is one of the most frequent themes of the romantic literature (Minois 2003).

The girl's portrait is only suggested: a young girl, from a modest family, who lives for the first time one of those passions which decides a woman's life. Between Porţia and the "very lively and urchin, garrulous and comical" young Mişu Z, takes place "a mad romantic relationship" (Caragiale 1994), due to the fact that Mişu, the poor medicine student, the friend of Cicerone Popescu, Porţia's brother, lodges, during his medical studies, in the house of Zamfira Popescu, Porţia's mother. When he graduates from the university, Mişu wants to leave the girl in

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order to present himself at his job. The flirt-courtship-marriage scheme is reduced to a convenient relationship, which helps the young man survive during his university years.

Once he realizes that ending the relationship with the girl is no easy task, the new "medico" contrives a "cruel plan": he invites Porția and her mother to theatre, where he puts an act in play: "A few minutes after the curtains were lifted, while the dames were excitingly watching the development of the comedy, he rose and, under the pretence of getting some cookies and cold water for them from the buffet, left the box nicely. (Caragiale, 1994). When the young lady understands what has happened, it was already too late; the "medico" had plaid his act wonderfully. Shocked, the abandoned young lady despairs and decides "to end her misery in death" (Caragiale, 1994).

At the end of the story, the indignation of the editorial staff from the "Aurora" is shaped by the code of the romantic love where the virgin is seen as pray, due to her innocence which turns her into the victim of the assaults of the experienced seducer: "When, we wonder, will those young gentlemen be made an example of, who, well acquainted by honest families, corrupt their young girls and throw them into the clutches of dissipation or even death, as in the instance we bring before your very eyes?" (Caragiale, 1994).

For more authenticity, the narrator, editor for "Aurora", plays the part of an ardent supporter of Miss Porția and removes himself to the hospital in order to inform the readers about her heath. The first hint of ambiguity is introduced here: the "little lady" has left home with her "mummy", because her poisoning with "less than a dozen of matches heads" was not serious enough and the young doctors at the hospital "were laughing to themselves about the misfortune of the poor creature" (Caragiale, 1994). The reporter leaves the hospital in an irritated state, and, on his way, he delivers an imaginary speech, intended to clarify the importance of the doctor's attitude, who, as it is known, should be an ally of the sensitive and emotional woman patients of that century: *"The doctor!... Well, he is a soothing confident, he must apply himself to the suffering patient with the gentleness our Lord, the Savoir, turned to Lazarus."*

The attitude of the doctors who see in "the girl's" gesture only the subject of their distraction arouses further suspicions of the girl's suicidal and throws into derisory her image of a lost and desperate virgin. In the present short story of Caragiale, derisory appears, as well, to the reader, the condition of the doctor as the one closest to the suffering woman.

On the other side of the fence, the "Lumina" newspaper brings to the readers the realist and demystifying version, where the „melodrama à la d'Ennery", "the passionate novel à la Ponson de Terrail" is nothing but "a comedy". More precisely, "the suicidal woman" wouldn't have had any reasons for going to hospital, as the quantity of matchstick heads she took was barely enough to cause her stomach aches.

Porția's portrait is a parodical reflection of an "ethereal" heroine from a romantic novel: "*the deceived, abandoned, unfortunate young woman has seen.* (Caragiale, 1994).

The romantic ideal of feminity, revolving around youth, purity, fairness and sweetness is gradually dismantled. Not only the lady is no longer "young", but her teeth are broken, she has "violet rings around her eyes" and "has taken the habit of smoking long ago".

Despite all these, she has a "fondness" for "bucks" and it seems that "like mother, like daughter". In her youth, the mother had the same interests.

Another important aspect is that Porția has a little fortune, unlike Mișu, a poor lad, forced to take whatever the chance presented to him in order to make it over the university years; he was blessed, together with a warm bed in the young lady's house, with the mad passion she

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started to feel for him. Among the three "key principles" guiding the life of the 19th century, "the declaration of love, the adoration of the woman and the marriage" (Lipovetski, 2000), only the last remains for Porția, whose behaviour has, for her times, all the features of an emancipated woman. The scandal breaks, overlooking the gossip, only when the woman is deserted: "dramatic scenes, heartbreaking pleas, terrible threats of suicide and even murder" (Caragiale, 1994).

In the end, the passionate love is reduced to a bargain. The woman has the money, the man has his youth. His running away from the charms of his ripe lover is flipped over into sensational by … the press. Indignant at the content of the article published by "Aurora", the medico assaults the director of the newspaper and, as a consequence, he is suspended from his position of county doctor and ends in Porția's arms for good. The bargain is struck, the scandal ends in revelry – "the tragic-comic topos of reconciliation", favoured by the author in his comedies, is also present in his short-stories.

"Aurora" quotes from "Lumina" the engagement announcement:

"We have the pleasure to announce the engagement of sweet Miss Porția Popescu, daughter of Zamfira Popescu and of the late professor, veteran of the didactic staff, Nerone Popescu, to the gorgeous medical doctor, Mr. Mişu Zaharescu" (Caragiale, 1994).

We are far from the usual ceremony of seduction or from the pathetism of the romantic love. This is another "adventure", as Baudrillard would probably call it, that of sexuality, which is focused on relationship (Baudrillard, 1999).

It is the same scenario in other sketches where the married woman, wife or mother, makes into the high life.

There are several layers, as Ibrăileanu observes, between Mița Baston and other characters from Caragiale's short stories, a gradation which shows the "elevation of the masses", the evolution of our bourgeoisie (Ibraileanu, 1930). But, no matter how high are the characters placed on the social scale, the same critic observed, the writer is more interested in "the slum as a category of the soul", and this can be also examined in the higher levels of the human society.

3. Conclusion

The feminine is still a category associated with the private life, but the woman's dependency on man is much reduced here; socially, the woman is perceived as more liberated. But the emancipation stops here for Caragiale's heroines, as they have no wish for self recognition, or to affirm their individuality. The woman in the *Moments* gravitates around the man (even when he is only a name in the story) and she has no intention of leaving his side, because this is the only stage for her willing existence.

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