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THE BIASED REPRESENTATION OF CRIMINALITY IN TERMS OF REFERENTIALITY

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Abstract: *Mass-media are known for their representation function rather than their statement function as newspapers are means where reporting is the main activity. Yet, reporting presupposes an interpretation of somebody else's doings or statements which is far from being an objective perspective. Influenced by either personal factors (age, gender, education, social background) or institutional ones (editorial policy, political orientation) newspapers adopt certain biased attitudes. Gender is one of the elements likely to be represented in a biased way. And when gender is added the label 'criminal', biased representation is yet another situation which needs analysis. As this is the background of the research, the study compares the referential chains of two law-breakers in order to identify the existence, if any, of a different approach in representation between male and female criminals.*

Keywords: *criminality, referentiality, media discrimination.*

1. Introduction

The relationship between humans, language and ideology is to be seen and analyzed in this study. To begin with, the hypothesis of this study is that media have created and perpetuated a discriminatory attitude towards certain social categories from which immigrants, black people, gypsies, women, and criminals represent some favorite categories. The reason for which these categories suffer discrimination is because they fail to meet the criteria that have been identified to represent the norm: 'northern, white, male, heterosexual, middle class, politically moderate unlike a small majority of non-western, non-white, female, lower class, poor or otherwise different "others". (van Dijk 29). The reasons for media discrimination may be social (different social strata), political, ethnic, religious, economic, age or gender-based.

In other words, this study intends to prove that media narratives on criminals suffer '**gender alterations**' to the clear detriment of female criminals without ignoring though the gender of the narrative's producer (writer) on the one hand and the kind of publication that publishes the narrative on the other hand as

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they both affect the narrative structure and the content. Starting from the already known and largely accepted '**gender theory**' which claims women's being discriminated in and through language, criminals represent a special case as both males and females bear the blame of social disapproval which in women's case seems to add to the fault of being 'women'. In order to accomplish my purpose in terms of theoretical covering and practical illustration, the study will include both theoretical and practical aspects meant to offer an image as complex as possible on the phenomenon.

In short, the study focuses individually on three major areas of study - media, narratives and crimes/ criminals - and jointly on the three of them as they intertwine. By way of introduction, **media** are viewed as a ground where power and dominant ideologies are formulated and transmitted and which, by repetition, can be labeled as 'real', 'authentic', or 'undeniably acceptable' for the readers. The means by which this is done is language. Secondly, **narratives** are language-based, well-structured productions which are targeted at 'persuading' the receiver. Last, **criminals** represent a socially marginalized and lawfully convicted category for breaking the law. Criminality and criminals have proved to be a fruitful source for media as they generate interest, from where the appetite for negative news (van Dijk 88). When further divided into males and females, the category of criminals reveals discrimination on the criterion of 'gender' as supposedly a woman criminal is guiltier than a male one. In a joint approach of the three components (media, narratives, and crime), the scope of this study is to identify how and by what elements media try and apparently succeed in creating, perpetuating and imposing within journalistic narratives the male-female bias in a domain which is anyway marked by extensive social prejudice.

A special interest has raised gender-based discrimination. This interest is due to the feminist movement which, besides promoting women's rights and equality to men, postulated the historical discrimination of women. Though hardly unitary, two broad approaches have imposed their hypotheses. Firstly, the domination approach maintains that historically women have been dominated by men and that domination has been created in and perpetuated through language. Secondly, the difference approach purports that men have not dominated and do not dominate women on purpose, it is even claimed that the way men and women speak and are spoken about represent only different visions on the world based on obvious gender differences.

Yet, studies have continued to demonstrate that linguistically women are demeaned either in direct address or in media representation. Direct address is largely dealt with by pragmatics and will not be taken into consideration as it is not the interest of this research. Media representation is an indirect, filtered presentation which carries the imprint of the writer, of the newspaper's orientation, of the ownership's political and economical interests and of the context where women are placed.

Speaking of contexts, criminality is one context women frequently seem to be the subject of. Criminals in general represent a social category that is negatively reflected in media due to their wrongdoings. Nevertheless, studies have pointed out that there is a double dealing with male criminals and women criminals. The

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difference consists in men's being fully responsible for their fault whereas women in most cases are denied responsibility, being presented as 'mad', 'irresponsible', or 'lost'. Oxman-Martinez & Marinescu & Bohard (2009 298) claim that research examining gender and crime has consistently indicated that most crimes involve male offenders and female victims. The cases when women are offenders are rare, but when they occur, they are more likely to be more newsworthy and definitely they will receive more media coverage. What this is actually hinting at is that, although less involved in crimes, when they do commit one, women are to be largely presented in the media, which has been defined as '**women demonisation**'. And this is so because, according to Graddol and Swann (141), women should take up 'gentle, nurturing roles while men should be dominant'. When they do not take up such roles they are likely to be judged as 'demonic'. Dale Spender (74) identifies in criminology a phenomenon which the author calls '**double-standard**' which stands for a double measurement unit in the case of men and women. Thus, male offenders are usually referred to as criminals, whereas female offenders are seen as sick or mentally disturbed. By considering female offenders as sick and mentally-disturbed, the intention is that of demeaning them, of reducing them to nothingness. Therefore, at times, their criminal deeds are reduced to silence.

Another study which came to similar conclusions is that of Cavaglion (270) who claims that public perception of criminal mothers, as reflected in the media and transmitted to the public as the only real, is that they are more influenced by mental disorders and that they deserve of cure and care rather than punishment. Cavaglion senses the danger in that media usually functions with stereotypes or simplified images reducing and compressing a wide variety of human individuals to an easily recognizable criminal pattern. Cavaglion (272) thus states that: "the desire of narrators to ensure coherence can lead to the use of stock stories and anecdotal details, some of which are familiar to their intended audience. One of the results of this cultural construction is the formation of scripts and their protagonists, where good and bad actors and specific plots are created and judged". Just as in Spender's case, Cavaglion argues that women are mostly identified with the unconscious; the irrational, irresponsible and disturbed are common stereotypes in both scientific and popular literature. Similarly, Cavaglion maintains that by claiming madness or sadness on criminals' side, women are actually losing their 'agency' not being thus given the chance of defending their actions.

2. Co-reference. A case study

Research justification

In order to check the double-standard in dealing with male and female criminals, I plan a research based on the study of co-reference. The purpose of this small-scale study is to check whether co-reference and naming contribute to the discriminatory attitude towards and representation of male and female criminals. For this purpose, the referential chain will be selected from the newspaper narrative, individually analyzed and then compared. This study does not try to generalize and does not claim that the current situation checks in all cases. The conclusions refer to this study only and they will be put in line with the theoretical approach for confirmation or infirmation purposes.

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2.1. Data presentation

The case that I chose is one which held public attention in the second part of 2009 and which was largely presented in written and audio-video media. Two students, Carmen Bejan and Sergiu Florea, killed an aged man, Trifu Schroth. At the time, several elements were of interest which might explain the attention they were given; first, the students were medicine students which is highlighted and which supposedly must have had an influence or might have had a great impact in taking the decision of killing the man. Second, Carmen Bejan seems to have had a financial interest in Trifu Schroth, who, in his turn, had a sexual interest in Carmen Bejan, which indicates Carmen Bejan's supposed prostitution. Sergiu Florea, Carmen Bejan's boyfriend, is supposed to have forced his girlfriend to have sexual relationships for money that they could have used to pay their examinations with. The killing occurred as the initial agreement 'sex for money' was intentionally broken, namely, Trifu Schroth refused to pay Carmen Bejan for her services. Both students were presented to have attacked and killed Trifu Schroth that they later on hid in a voyage trunk. Third, in Trifu Schroth's case, his ethnicity is explicitly presented with deep media implications for both victim and aggressors.

This incident was largely presented in media in both broadsheets and scandal newspapers. Yet, one newspaper, Adevărul, paid special attention to this case in a series of articles written by the same journalist, Cristian Poelincă. From among his articles, one of them was chosen for this analysis. It was published on the 7th of March 2010 in Adevărul. In order to reach my goal I identified the referential chains which refer to both aggressors.

Carmen Bejan - referential chain

Carmen Bejan → criminala de la medicină (the murderer from medicine) → eleva (the pupil) → ea (she) → Carmen → studenta măcelară (the butcher student) → studenta ucigaşă (the murderous student) → ea (she) → ea (she) → Carmen → studenta ucigaşă (the murderous student) → Carmen → studenta ucigaşă de la medicină (the murderous student from medicine) → studenta criminală (the murderous student) → studenta (the student) → Carmen Bejan → fata (the girl) → ea (she) → Carmen → studenta criminală (the murderous student) → ea (she) → Carmen Bejan. → tânăra (the young woman)

Sergiu Florea - referential chain

iubitul ei (her lover) → Sergiu Florea → iubitul ei (her lover) → Sergiu → măcelarului de la medicină (the butcher from medicine) → iubitul(the lover) → Sergiu → Sergiu → iubitul ei Sergiu (her lover, Sergiu) → iubitul ucigaş (the murderous lover) → Sergiu

A first look at the two reference chains shows that, numerically speaking, Carmen Bejan is more often mentioned (23 reference elements), unlike Sergiu Florea (11 reference elements) in a proportion of almost ½ in Carmen Bejan's favor. This fact is the more surprising taking into consideration that both, Carmen Bejan and Sergiu Florea, were supposed guilty.

At a closer analysis of Carmen Bejan's referential chain, some elements seem to be recursive; Carmen Bejan appears three times (with four references which contain only her first name, Carmen). The student (studenta) seems to be the second most

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frequent element which appears either alone or qualified by adjectives: butcher, murderous [six times], (măcelară, ucigaşă/ criminală). The murderer (criminala) is used once only, being qualified by a prepositional noun phrase 'from medicine' (de la medicină) whose role is that of identifying the origin/ provenance of the doer. Carmen Bejan is also identified by the use of the personal pronoun 'she' (ea) which is a means of avoiding repetition and of facilitating communication. Somehow confusingly, Carmen Bejan is associated in turns to either 'a pupil' (eleva) or 'a student' (studenta), although it is clear that the author of the article is aware of Carmen Bejan's status and that he can make the distinction between a pupil and a student. The last polarity that the author creates is between 'fată' (girl) and 'tânăra' (the young woman) on the one hand and 'criminală' (murderer) on the other hand. The interpretation of all these findings will be done in the next subchapter.

As far as Sergiu Florea is concerned, his reference chain in only half long in comparison to Carmen Bejan's. As to the constituency of the reference chain, Sergiu Florea is identified by his full name (once) and by his first name (five times) of which one appears in appositional position. Equal to the situations when he is identified by his own name, Sergiu Florea identifies in the position of the lover, Carmen Bejan's lover, as there are five such situations. There are only two cases when there is a mention of his supposedly criminal deeds. Once, he is referred to as 'the butcher from the medicine' (măcelarului de la medicină) and second as the 'murderous lover' (iubitul ucigaş).

2.2. Data interpretation

The first element that is of importance is the quantitative unbalance between Carmen Bejan and Sergiu Florea's reference chains. Clearly, a greater reference chain suggests a higher interest in that person and a greater focus on him/ her. In this particular case, Carmen Bejan, as she is more focused on, seems to be the one who is held guilty for the murder.

Secondly, Carmen Bejan is presented in four different hypostheses: student, pupil, girl, young woman. The variation, at times surprising, shows a doubtful status which allows journalists to take a superior stance in relation to the woman. On the contrary, Sergiu Florea is either Sergiu Florea or Carmen Bejan's lover. The repetition of 'lover' highlights more his position of lover than his position as murderer. The unbalanced treatment is evident in the absence of the term 'lover' from Carmen Bejan's reference chain. The message that is actually sent is that she is the murderer whereas he is only her lover who is not entirely innocent, but the focus is placed elsewhere. The fact that he is the lover seems to place him outside the incident or to cast the blame on her. Carmen Bejan's having sexual relationship with the victim for money, although at her boyfriend's suggestion, makes her 'the prostitute', 'the whore'.

Without having any intention of generalizing, the simple analysis of the referential chain of the two murderers in similar positions, involved in the same case, receive differentiated media treatment on the part of a male journalist. This is just a situation which seems to concord with my hypothesis that in similar situations, criminal women suffer media discrimination which is actually extremely influential as it contours public opinion on criminals.

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