THE CHARACTER ALTERITY. THE FEMININE

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Abstract: The recent resurfacing of the concept of the Other has influenced the research of the feminine alterity phenomena seen as a body, edge or unknown. More or less critical debates put forward the need for a classification where the feminine is a marginal determiner. Philosophically speaking, the second term (irrelevant or just complementary) is treated in analogy with the feminine[1] *in any relationship and brings in sight the fact that the woman is unconditionally projected in regards to the male alterity, regardless of the form in which it manifests itself: family, religion, politics. The woman was placed under the concept of the Other, thus not being able to appear before the norm.*

Keywords: alterity, the Other, the woman, mentalities.

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Philosophically speaking, the *second term (irrelevant or just complementary) is treated in analogy with the feminine*[2] in any relationship and brings in sight the fact that the woman is unconditionally projected in regards to the male alterity, regardless of the form in which it manifests itself: family, religion, politics. The woman was placed under the concept of the Other, thus not being able to appear before the norm.

Set under the *prejudice of the father's will*[3], the woman had adopted the male values and repressed her affective side, thus becoming like a robot in her attempt to be equal if not higher than the male prototype. This virile protest (Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu) did not come as an influence over the male element. Evolution has concluded that rights *cannot be conceived similarly to the male ones, not as opposite to male injustice*[4].

Postmodernity along with its transformations has lead to changes in life and in literature. Within the social universe, the feminine dimension maintains its enigmatic statute as a contrast to the mundane masculinity. We have, on the one side, the theoretical feminine identity and on the other, the approaches which harvest mentalities, attitudes and vices.

We may notice the intentions made on behalf of alterity in order to become more valuable, in order to rise in so as to fulfil the pre-defined roles. Thus, the need to build relations as well as the approach of certain attitudes in an equal fashion are born. The suggested discourse leads to a rebirth which does not take into account patterns and the dynamics have an identity of their own.

Strictly literary speaking, the woman can impose a re-examination from the point of view of some complex aspects such as: centre/edge, order/chaos, spirit/body, emancipation/sexuality. The appeal towards the concept of order, meaning, image has lead to

[1] Gatens, Moira, *Feminism şi filosofie. Perspective asupra diferenţei şi egalităţii,* Traducere de Olivia Rusu-Todoran, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2001, p. 12.
[2] Gatens, Moira, *Feminism şi filosofie. Perspective asupra diferenţei şi egalităţii,* Olivia Rusu-Todoran, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2001, p. 12.
[3] Ibidem, 13
[4] Updoke, John, *O lună de duminici*, traducere de Teodor Fleșeru, Ed. Univers, București 2009, p. 132.

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the appearance of a positive cultural construct and a relative authority. Evolution is also owed to divergent elements, tense periods and undermining.

Feminine alterity has a catalyst role in the evolution of various spheres of knowledge and *between his-story and her-story there will still flow a lot of ink and blood...*[5]

Regarding images of alteriy, we can encounter quite a few characters which were built to shape a complex and modern problematic landscape in the works of Eugen Barbu.

One of the relevant themes from the works of Barbu is that of the construction of the Edge seen as a reflection of the middle world, individualised and cultivated. Along with this theme, the narrator also puts forward an image of the Other seen in the construction of the characters, places, events. Those who cannot find their role in the centre of the world retreat towards the edges in order to better fit into the setting. *The author reveals the secrets of a world – of a world found (apparently?) at the edge. Here the competition for power goes through moments which we can find in the centre of the world [...] constructs cornerstones, techniques, symbols of power which hold the balance between centre-margin.*[6]

In the novel Groapa, the theme of the *Margin* – of the other *centre* portrays Stere who *will build a home here, will discover his wife, will gather all sorts of characters around him who will make the setting more lively. But also the thieves will make their appearance, will create a hierarchy – will establish themselves as holders of a science of life.*[7]

The founder of the Edge – the vast and empty field of Cuţarida is Grigore together with his wife, Aglaia: when Grigore brought his wife here and a shovel to dig shelter there was nobody around. For an entire year he guarded by himself the surroundings of the pit and its deep mouth.

Literary critics consider Grigore to be a founder or a master of this settlement, leaving Aglaia in the shadow despite the fact that she, by means of her actions, is the one who contributes the most to the area's evolution. The feminine presence is foreshadowed by the male counterparts.

Instances such as her participation as a matchmaker for Stere or at the wedding or as the parson gathering the gifts are the ones that turn Aglaia into a positive copy of the sense of closure brought about by the presence of that place filled with negativity

The character is always in relation to her original space, namely the *pit*, everything is put into perspective based on the desired social opportunity. She always sees in Stere an extension of herself and fights for his wellbeing. Although a feminine character, Aglaia, channels her lacks and frustrations into Stere so as to perceive him as an extension of life itself in that marginal space which was artificially built due to the evolution of the *centre* and the movement of the waste towards the edge of society, both material and social.

The writer created Cuţariada as a degraded universe, where the social laws do not apply, but only in passages where it is seen as an alternative of the civilized world, for example, of the next door neighbourhood Griviţa. Next to Aglaia we find Lina, a character whose evolution can been followed throughout the novel, from the fragile girl being raised under her father's authority until *coana Lina* who ends up representing (as G. Călinescu notices while analysing *)* two working arms, a small fortune and a baby maker. Lina, as a character, does not evolved by herself, but only as a couple together with Stere. The two form an entity which in the novel is presented under the form of the base, a base which would be useless without the human element.

It is with a rare capacity to conceive a world that the author creates Lina out of the most humble of fabric, giving her life within the pages of the story, when she is either seen up

[5] Pop, Delia, *Alteritatea feminină în epoca postmodernă* in „Nord Literar", noi-dec., 2009.
[6] Ungureanu, Cornel, *Istoria secretă a literaturii române*, Ed. Aula, Braşov, pp. 380 – 382.
[7] Ibidem, pp. 380 – 382.

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close and personal or from a distance as part of the general setting of ghetto colonists. The place kills all hopes and Lina can only submit to this rule.

The feminine element is always part of the greater relation established for every character between *harshness* and *kindness*, *ideal* and *real*, between the *mask* the characters wear and their true nature; the character is seen from the point of view of this *tragic horizon* and less from the image of social reconstruction, with all the picturesque and colour this involves: since this novel is about analysis, with a realist form which only helped at the beginning when a new epic space and identity was for out contemporary epic prose was set. The truth of the souls can survive longer than the social structure , which is constantly submitted to change and made in actual due to the social evolutions.

In *Principele* Barbu creates an alternative, a parallel world; although filled with details of the respective epoch, the novel does not offer any precise coordinates, no real names, no chronology, no determinations of any kind. The space becomes a place of the worldly, properly adapted at that time. We have the worldly on the one hand and the lack of spirituality on the other and these two aspects create the sensation of a time which is undefined as being modern, open and current. Even if the space is a vast one, we are dealing with an *Edge*, the place where the fanariot era rulers are dumped and where they build a world as they see fit, according to their often sick mind. History is used only as a pretext and the result is a parable in order to make the moral that more bitter and the geographic space, which is a mixture of byzantin-fanariot elements as well as western influences becomes an object of multiple prospects.[8]

The novel can be seen as a syntheses, a story where the historical data gives emotional value. What really shocks us is not the historical fabric, but the way in which the author sets it into reality, the contrast between luxury and decadent love, with a hint of animality while the breath-taking situations lead to agony and collective death. The essence can be found on the symbolic and metaphoric level.

The characters are build with great attention to details, being most often seen during their moments of vice, covering the filth with velvet and the vices with refinement. What is interesting is the name given to the characters: năimiții (the servants), scurșii (the leaches), invertiții (the gays), tălănițele (the whores), cățelele (the depraved, evil women). The feminine element is constantly oscillating here between traits belonging to the newly rich and and moral decay; nothing is based on rules or norms and the despair in the face of death brings out the *monsters* within. Moral decadence can be followed throughout the novel and under the most diverse of ways thus representing the change of rhythm and causing the evolutionary process to stop.

By using the antithesis from the first to the last page, the writer creates a world of contrasts from the beginning of the novel when the closeness of death is in contrast to the characters' reactions. The despair becomes grotesque; prisoner of a strong *historical curse*, this world is one of endless fall, transcendence and infinite collective loneliness. Sick to its core, it finds itself completely seduced by the perverted results, by the dissolution of its final principles. One can truly find here a late Byzanthium after Byzanthium, fermenting in useless cravings for vanished glory and filled with vice, boiling in *sleep* and *death*, slowly drowning into nothingness.

With no past, future or real connection to the present, the feminine appearances in the novel are only cold shadows, aware however of the brief existence, the living dead, who long after damnation and personal hell with an intensity worthy of Dante which at times leads to madness and despair. Caught in their nuptial dances, overwhelmed by their lust, these characters evolve in a *tempo* pase which provide a hint of colour to the story, but the sex, gold

[8] Ciopraga, Constantin, *Princepele sau despre tragicul istoriei*, in „Romania literară", nr. 21, 1971.

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and power are only useless attempts to break the monotony of their horrid condition. Although they appear in memorable portraits, the characters ar not just the backbone of the book, but also a paste meant to fortify, in a subtle and discreet manner, elements from which a new *round* yet *open* world is revived.

Barbu attributes the characters to the identity theme. Everything is possible since the action is not submitted to the *norm* of reality: the apparition of the *messer* represents the projection point of alterity, as opposed to Malamos. The messer is the *fatal man*[9], his forces are a result of feminine attributes; his feminine grace is a projection in the sphere of alterity of the masculinity of the Prince, the person in control. The moment of their meeting is a *coincidentiaoppositorum*[10].

Evanghelina, who sees messer Ottaviano as a woman by blood, is loyal to him. The mistress of the palace and the shaper of the Prince gives up in the face of a greater but also more dangerous force. The *charm* of the messer stands perhaps for the most important power, that of convening by means of sexuality because it brings together male violence and female persuasion.

In order to see her son on the throne, the *sublime lady* must give up on her own identity and make numerous compromises. In order to reach her goal, in the suburbs of Fanar, she sells herself for *pleasure*, using any means necessary to succeed through her son and ends up projecting her dream onto her only heir.

The *goal* – understanding and living up to it, submission and domination of a *conscient* and *instinctual* nature – create distances between the social and political levels and also from knowledge itself; thus, perspectives relating to the moment of power manifestation divide the characters in *experienced* and *novices*. The *messer's* achievement for the Prince is the *feast* at Mogosoaia which represents a *triumph of intelligence*, of the conceptual model devised by Ottaviano in his room whereas for the spectators the *pagan carnival* is a *show*, an entertainment devised to satisfy the eyes and instincts. Two typical reactions from two typical characters are: *This will be liek a fairy tale! Whispered the mouths of the women* and *Did we pass the Styx? Asked the messer*. Between the reactions of the participants and the Prince's question: *Did we pass the Styx?* lie two categories of characters – experienced and novices which stand for the dynamics of transforming the work in a *piece of art*. It is within this sphere that all the gestures of the characters and they conducts are recorded.

Decadence is the main word used to describe the characters, especially the feminine ones, which lack a moral compass, a knowledge of good and evil. It is in this pit of history that prejudice is not assimilated in the process of socializing, of claiming norms, values, models of thought and conduct. The *Self* represents the edge of the individual and in this case it is synonymous with a dehumanizing process. The setting becomes shapeless as the participants become lost in the pleasures of the body.

The instance of the messer, this time a masculine one, it that of a leader in the rite of passage over the Styx[11], much like Charon[12]. The failure is due to his falseness. He is like a *catfish*, an ideal towards which the Prince is inclining but which can bring him his doom.

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[9] Holban, Ioan, *Profiluri epice contemporane*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 1987, p. 43.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 44.

[11] The Styx is a river whose name is known by many but the story behind it is not that popular. It is a river which separates the living from the dead. Styx is said to go around the realm of Hades (hell or the underworld) nine times. Its name comes from the Greek word sturgeon, which means hate. Styx is the river of hatred. The river is so respected by the gods in Greek mythology that they make life oaths just by mentioning its name. One such instance can be found in the story of Bacchus-Ariadne where Jove confirms with an irrevocable oath, mentioning the river Styx.

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The internal alterity of the messer must be understood as a disparity between the real attitude and the amplitude of emotions towards which he is opening up as a sign that we are dealing with a plural number of meanings, therefore alterity. The other would be the image which is eluding, of that which is hidden in the depths of the being or, as Henry Wallon names it, „ce fantômed'autruiquechacun porte en soi". This internal duplication is considered, psychologically speaking, an internal system differentiation which represents one of the dimensions of the personal identity and brings forth the problem of existing bonds between the unity/diversity of the self, based on multiple identities.

Both perspectives can be found in equal measure in the field of the character's *internal* alterity. The freudian concept of personality division is representative for the first instance. The existence of other personalities, apparently separate and autonomous, who alternate their control over the individual's conduct, such as the inclination towards drag raises questions regarding the psychological unity and the structure of the conscience. These conducts are part of a series of anomalies and diseases thus giving birth to the revelation of the alterity.

Such alternations between male and female can be found in the case of the creative act where inner alterity of the self is particularly understood as a creation game, playful in nature[13]. The analysis of this aspects puts forward a theoretical block which derives from the traditional approach of the problem, according to which the creative artist, psychologically speaking, cannot be anything other than divided, and a division of the self cannot exist from an axiological point of view thus becoming a medical curiosity. Man's internal alterity must not be mistaken for the external one of the artist, of the creative self. The second may be alienated, thus raising questions regarding the psychological unity of the person, the second is a release, a catharsis, and remains faithful to the unified self.

The two functions of society: *to integrate and to humanise*[14], raise the ethical issue of alterity, of the individual relationship between I and Other, a relationship which is analysed in contradictory terms. Despite the differences, there is a *general need for the Other*, defined by St. Augustin-Doinaş in terms of a paradox which surprises the dimension of the original alterity, an inner alterity: *we are not truly social until we admit the influence of others within us*.[15] Apart from revealing this conflict between society, alterity also refers to an entire body of differences: different spaces and landscapes, a fact which has determined Lucian Boia to define alterity as one of the basic structures able to cover the essential of a paradigm which was applied to historical evolution.

The *Other* is most often a real person or community seen through the grid of imagination. Beyond the real world, deformed by the imaginary, a fiction can exist.

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[12] Charon is the old oar who carries the dead into the underworld across the Styx where the doc Cerberus – having a dragon's tail, guards the entrance and allows entrance but not exit. This is a wrong conception. Actually, Charon goes across the river Acheron, where Cerberus stands guard for eternity. Also, Charon also leads the souls of those who are properly buried – with a coin (named oboe) placed in their mouth during the funeral.

[13] *Alteritatea ca joc creator*, in: *Secolul 21: Alteritatea*, nr.1-7, 2002.

[14] Solomon Marcus, *Sorin Alexandrescu, unul de-ai noştri* , in Observatorul cultural, nr.130, 2002

[15] Going from the idea that mankind is defined by a social dimension, which is necessary to the human being, Stefan Aug Doinas admits the existence of a fundamental alterity, which involves a relation with the Other. Society has a double role: to integrate, this meaning the individual can find among others what he is missing and thus can become more accomplished and to humanize, which means that man becomes whole by developing specific activities within the social realm. Ştefan Augustin-Doinaş, Eu şi celălalt în Secolul 21: Alteritatea, nr. 1-7, 2002.

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Regardless of this, the formulation of alterity always stays the same: *projecting upon the Other our own ghosts and desires.*[16] Eugen Coseriu's theory regarding alterity is supported by this new view, which defines the sense of *alterity* in different manner than the aesthetics of reception, where alterity means the fact of being something else : the Other is not foreign, it is another I.

The character's language is actually *for someone else and belonging to someone else*, it is the author's theme, and the subject which gives birth to language is not – like in science or art – an absolute and universal subject, only set in relation to the created object or which assumes responsibility for all subjects; actually it is both the *central subject* and acknowledges itself as the *I* in language and always admits the existence of a *You*[17] with whom it communicates. When the talking subject becomes the *Self*, as per Coseriu, the great mystery and the basis of language is created – a fact which leads to the overcoming of the rift between I and the Other.

Alterity, as a main theme of the author, can be found in *Amantul colivaresei* where Radu Aldulescu's wretchedness is of a political nature not because it is merely based on beautifying an obscene reality, but because it relies on the values of the style in a context where style is one of the author's least concerns. Aldulescu's text is not original, filled with changes in tone, using indirect speech and free in order to put forward expressive virtues and to generate a great narrative force.

Aldulescu builds marginal characters, a marginal world, a marginal setting. The entire narrative is a struggle for self discovery; both the main character as well as the others are in a strange situation, running through life without a specific goal. The bonds between characters are most often strange and illogical, from Limping Bica to Dorina – all the feminine characters are only complementary figures within the structure of the novel. They are build as expandable characters and lead their lives without any serious issues; the socializing effect is a welcomed one. The centre is made up of the character's mother, namely Aura Cafanu, who represents the support as well as the binding element in his life as she is the one who always provides help and to whom he always returns. Regarding the characters, the narrator does not criticize them, but only accompanies them under the form of a saddened *you* – he can also be found in their thoughts, trying to understand and, at times, provide excuses for their attitudes. The closeness is so great that it generates confusion and a general state of discomfort. Good and evil intertwine as the world becomes a homogenous mass, whom which one cannot escape. Good and evil cannot be found in their pure states in the text. They cannot be distilled or extracted as such. There is no struggle to find one's identity as this general state of being cut off leads to an identity loss. Events start to speed and the fiction tends to dissipate all facts in all directions thus making the rhythm and coherence of the narrative more visible: storms and fights, boxing matches in the ring and beyond it, episodes from the army as well as from other prison colonies (the Mosneni unit, Viezuroaia, Policolorul, 23 August), passing loves and speedy hook-ups, progressive starvation and sickening fullness, a whore, Bica, with a wooden leg who is marked by 40 soldiers and a circus artist, Athena, with this clenched who treats men like tamed animals, close friendships which become gay relationships and hatred; many memorable characters, starting, of course, with the protagonist, Dimitrie (Mite) Cafanu and ending with Carnu from Brăneşti, *beggar, would-be prophet and artist*. Put together, all these fragments and epic strips form a potpourris of colours without becoming a kitsch, as they all have the same texture. The epic consistency is all about talent, the writer's brute force

[16] Lucian Boia, *Pentru o istorie a imaginarului*, Bucureşti, Ed. Humanitas, 2000.
[17] Eugen Coşeriu, *Alteritate, toleranţă şi masochism*, in Revistă de lingvistică şi ştiinţă literară, nr. 3, 1997.

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and well as a bright mind without which it would have not been possible to build such a novel.

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