# ROMANIAN WOMEN AND THEIR EXILES

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**Abstract**

*The paper is about a short survey of the status of Romanian women before and after 1989, both in the country and abroad, from inner and other perspectives. Thus the feeling of alienation / exile is underlined throughout a whole epoch.*

All arts have their geniuses,
only politics gives birth to monsters (Saint-Just)

**Under the dictatorship…**

More than 50 years ago, when Europe was divided between the two superpowers, Romania, lying on the border of the Soviet Empire, became a victim of the Stalinist communism. Although on the periphery, during the following years its people lived in a kind of hell. In Romania, Stalinist communism had no limits and got so fierce that its citizens were denied any vestige of the free market or private property, ending with the insidious cult of the leader. Violence and lies could not hide the impotence and failure of the initial social leveling plan. In this kind of society, excessive lying becomes accepted as truth. Irrationalism promoted for decades becomes rationalism, and the unreasonable becomes reasonable. The communist societies were not anomalous or illogical, they had their own intrinsic reason and ethic. By abusing its rules and principles the communist leader becomes a tyrant and dictator.

Everybody knew that Ceausescu's: "cea mai buna şi mai dreaptă societate", (translated it comes over as "the best and right society"), did not exist but its people sold their souls for mean and unsure privileges, such as a job to do in the party which was continuously under threat from someone higher up. You could live in your lies more easily than in jail. People were linked by fear, stronger than love or trust, frightened that you could die, be annihilated without a noise, a trace, or proof of your existence. They were frightened not of ordinary death but of meaningless death, which does not change anything left behind you. The instrument of overseeing and maintaining the



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system was the political police, the organization which was answerable only to “cel mai iubit fiu al poporului”, that is “the most beloved son of the people”.

Inner freedom was also lost because people were lonely and, living alone in a generalized abnormality, they did not know whether it was right or not. Communist power meant totalitarism having its own implacable principles: based on Marxist ideology, the one party system, the final victory of this new society. Thus the crises in national identity of minorities for example Hungarians, Germans, Russians and others appeared. In this way a new form of communism sprang up in Eastern Europe in the early 70’s: the nationalist communism.

All its degrading features could be found in the unfortunate Romanian example: the so-called separation from Moscow. History was used for authoritative leadership, which involved the revival of the Byzantine rituals, which in turn was supported by an atmosphere of a military campaign against external dangers (like the Soviet invasion) and internal dangers (like the Hungarian nationalism), including the arbitrary and corrupt characteristics of the incredible absolute power.

According to Mihai Botez, the Romanian crisis was the most serious in the history of the European communism. It began with fraudulent elections held at the end of the Second World War and continued with Stalinism in the 50s. At the end of the fifth decade and the beginning of the next, there was a relative independence and prosperity. After 1965, when Ceausescu proclaimed himself President and Leader, the decline in civilized behaviour began, at a slow pace in the 70s, rushing to the insanity of the 80s.

During this decade pure communist goals were borne in mind, in striking contrast with the nationalist tradition: churches, old monuments and town districts, having the history of the people engraved in their stones were demolished to make way to the new society; in the name of a bizarre community spirit, individual lodgings, witnesses of a traditional lifestyle and ancient Jewish-Christian social philosophy, which sustained the uniqueness and autonomy of man, were pulled down and replaced with standardized buildings. They were meant to level, in the Orwellian sense, town people. Old villages were destroyed and replaced with hybrids dormitories which were to change the countrymen into paid workers. Into this anonymous blocks, numbered to identify them, were homed people who lived in the conditions where there was no running water (unless it had been built specially for the nomenclature), no toilets or heating (heaters were just for show), and lighting hung dim at dark.

The economy and culture of the country were in ruins for years to come. The natural environment was violated, and the soil damaged. Food slowly disappeared, goods like soap, detergent, toilet paper, items of clothing couldn’t be found, people thus standing in a queue for hours, day and night, for their basic necessities. Wages were not paid on time, public transport was deficient, either to work or home, medicines were lacking and the hospitals were badly equipped.



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The only concern of the party was to destroy, at all costs, everything that existed before Nicolae Ceausescu, in order to divide history into two chapters: before and after Nicolae Ceausescu. Party meetings were used to extol the leader, problematic issues being ignored, as if they did not exist. The criticism accepted by the communist society did not reach the taboos of the regime. Instead, it created a false atmosphere of social activity to hide the actual essence of dictatorship.

**…the condition of women**

Women in Romania slowly lost their identity, femininity and dignity. They were no more women but individuals without sex in a working community. No woman was allowed to be more attractive or more intelligent than the first lady of the country: "cea mai iubita fiica a poporului" that is, "the most beloved daughter of the people."

The feminine population of Romania could be divided into 3 groups: the woman of the countryside, the middle schooled woman living in town, and the highly educated woman. Even nowadays the conditions of the woman of the countryside are not very different from those during the old regime: she is subject to man, first as a father, then as a husband and eventually as a son. Although in some counties the woman seems to have the same rights, she is often thought of as inferior: her opinion is never asked for, she is married at her parents' will, and her main duty is to give birth to children that she has to raise and then work for their dowry. Obeying these unwritten rules she has never thought that she could live in another way, always accepting the second place in the family hierarchy, at least until the first son is born. We can say that the woman of the countryside has been living in an eternal inner exile, hiding her feelings, thoughts, frustrations, and dreams. Her inner richness is given to her children and to the Romanian folklore, which is outstandingly beautiful and sensitive.

The second group comprises women who have rural roots but live in Ceausescu's towns. They attended secondary or high school, usually a vocational school, learning their job while working and employed by two masters: the factory and the family. In the 80s when we had no free time, Sunday being a weekday, the woman had become a robot. Her only joy was the success of her children, but even this was rare. Even if they wanted to improve their knowledge and get more information there was no chance to do it so. No books other than those churned out by the party related to Ceausescu and his wife were published. The same happened with the newspapers and magazines, which were mouth pieces and even cronies about the Ceausescu couple. Television broadcast two hours daily on one channel and was covered by the court poets who praised communism and its leader. You could not travel abroad thus people were prevented from being able to compare Romania to other countries, other worlds.



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The inner thinking was taken away from you. Instead you had to use patterns, borrowed ideas, and act as you were told. Nobody had any time to talk to their own souls. People were not their own masters. They were figures in statistics which Elena Ceausescu wanted to increase, forcing them to give birth of four children at least. Nobody knew anything about family planning or contraceptive methods. Resorting to illegal abortion more than eleven thousand women died from 1966 to 1989. In fact, it was women who hated the Ceausescu regime most.

The third group of women is the university educated. Whereas the first two groups suffered from the inner exile and alienation more or less unconsciously, the third group was well aware of all the fears, helplessness and wounds inflicted by communism, which was from the beginning totally anti-intelligentsia. During the 50s the intellectuals' access to the power was rather accidental. The educational reforms in the satellite states, like China, were attempts of the communist elite to nationalize the brains of society. The intellectuals adjusted to the discipline and control with difficulty. The communist party was in control of the intelligentsia deterring their free speech, applying the overt censorship or manipulating them, whose controller it was, thus leading to self-censorship. Even after signing the treaties of Helsinki, the communist power maintained the right of controlling people and ideas.

Usually the dissidents from the communist countries were the intellectuals. They did play an important part in the mass revolts of 1956 in Hungary and Solidarnost of the 8$^{th}$ decade in Poland. But the educated could accept the communist regime and benefit from its privileges, turning themselves into conscious slaves and prostituting their talent, proclaiming ideas in which they did not believe. Thus some scientists could at least take part in a professional life at an international level. But sooner or later, the drama of disillusionment, of inner conflicts and self alienation took their toll. Not accepting the regime, you could condemn yourself to social estrangement in your own country, to internal or external exile. You had to pay a lot for the former: it was difficult and sometimes impossible to have a normal professional life, continually fighting against the whims of those in authority.

External exile was painful too, because in the free and democratic world the opportunities were offered in terms of their countries' needs: there were more opportunities for scientists than for artists. The Romanian exile has been weak and dissipated, concerned only with its inner struggles and not an effective support for the fight against communism. The scientists at home integrated more easily into the society, the communists accepting and promoting them, especially in mathematics, physics or biology. For the artists, mostly women, the ideological and behavioural limits were harder. For them, belonging to a small culture, the rejection of the regime and the acceptance of the two kinds of exile meant silence and quite often professional suicide.



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**After the revolution…**

It's fifteen years now since the revolution. The most important gains were a vocal respect for human rights and the feeling that you are part of a wider human society again. We are free to utter our opinions, free to choose our place of living in our own country, which was denied by the communist party, free to go abroad. After the fall of the iron curtain, when the former communist countries were laying the foundations of real democratic societies , the educated dissidents from Eastern Europe achieved successful political careers (V. Havel in the Czech Republic and J. Jelev in Bulgaria).

In Romania, many of whom are ex-members of nomenclature, have got the political and economic power, mostly men. Whereas in communist times women were promoted according to a false leveling policy, elected by the party, no matter their competence, or only to be a percentage in statistics, nowadays nobody even thinks of this. No such policy of assuming that women make up a percentage of the work force exists.

The conditions of the country and middle educated women have changed, but not too much. Now women are surer of their households and do not fear uprooting. The second group has suffered most because, due to the new mechanism of the free market and new relationships between employer and employee, they are the first to get fired. In 1993, 60% of the unemployed were women. Having no job and no hope they resort to prostitution to keep their jobs or to support themselves and sometimes their families.

The university educated women struggle hard to get a decent place in the society. They are largely excluded from political life, too. In the early 90s parliament only 3% were women and there was none in the government. At least women are not yet discriminated against in terms of the wages, being paid the same as men for similar jobs, even though the choice of jobs still remains unequal. Like in every post-revolutionary stage the main issues addressed are the economy and politics while social issues take a back seat.

**The exiled…**

There are Romanian women who have managed to distinguish themselves in exile. Our country is associated with the word "exile" as far back as the first century when Ovid Publius Naso, the great Latin poet, was exiled to Tomis, on the shores of the Black Sea. In the Middle Ages, three famous historians were politically exiled and wrote their literary work far from their country, in Poland and Russia.



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Little by little, the Romanian exile shaped itself in a cultural revolt against the political injustice and had its highest peak between the two world wars. It was the period when names like Eugene Ionesco, Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Paul Celan began to be known in the international literary world.

After the Peace Treaty in Paris in 1947, Russia took a northern part of the Romanian territory, thus creating an artificial Russian Moldova Republic where the Romanian language was banned although it was the language of the people. The Romanian literature here was exiled in its own country and after 1985, and especially after the glasnost attitude we could read writers like GrigoreVieru, Leonida Lari, Nicolae Dabija. Preserving its traditional character, the Romanian society has had not so many famous feminine personalities in exile. Although few, these names have got a European dignity and importance.

Elena Văcărescu (1864-1947) belonged to a famous Renaissance noble family of writers. After an unfortunate engagement with Ferdinand, heir apparent of the Romanian throne, she went into exile in Paris and Nice where she became famous as the author of "Chant d"Aurore". She was awarded the prize of the French Academy. She wrote poetry and prose, was translated in many languages, was awarded the prize Jules Faure and elected member of the Romanian Academy in 1925. Her work also comprises biographies about Victor Hugo, Marcel Proust, Paul Valery, R. Tagore, D"Annunzio, Miguel de Unamuno, Mihai Eminescu, I. L. Caragiale. She was the first woman ever to serve as a delegate to the United Nations, whose co-founder was the Romanian politician Nicolae Titulescu, to the Peace Conference in Paris 1919 and 1946. She died in exile, unhappy of the fact that Romania was abandoned within the influence of the Russian communism.

Another famous princess was Martha Bibescu (1889-1973), born in the noble family of Lahovary. In 1905 she married the Prince George Valentin Bibesco, who was a diplomat as well. After 1908, they established their residence in Paris where she made her literary debut with the travel book "Les Nuits Paradis", awarded a prize by the French Academy. She also wrote autobiographies, historical novels, and literary essays about early century personalities: Reiner Maria Rilke, Paul Claudel, Fr. Mauriac, who praised her as being "the most admirable feminine intelligence he had ever known", M. Proust. The autobiographical novel "Au bal avec Marcel Proust" (1928) was printed seven times in only one year. She founded the literary genre of the political diary, the most important period depicted being between January 1939 - January 1941, which was surprisingly translated into Romanian in 1976, approved by the censorship.

Being twice awarded by the French Academy and a member of Belgian Academy, Ana de Noailles (1876-1933) was a descendent of the prince martyr C. Brâncoveanu. She was a poet of transition from Romanticism to Symbolism and accepted as a member of the Romanian Academy in 1925. An early death interrupted her creative work, when it was in full swing.



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After 1947, the Romanian exile had a political background and people exiled were to be found on all continents of the world. A charismatic figure was the daughter of the great literary critic Eugen Lovinescu, Monica Lovinescu, born in 1921, one of the last educated gone abroad on legal basis before the final shut down of the communist trap. She has become famous from the Free Europe Radio Programme, when this was banned in Romania. She had a major contribution to reactivate people's consciousness about a normal democratic world, when Alfred Jarry's Ubu was the brother of Ivan the Terrible. Her radio comments were published in a series entitled "Unde Scurte" (*Short Waves*) in 1978 in Madrid and 1990 in Bucharest, her interviews including those with M. Eliade and E. Ionescu in 1992, and her eastern thoughts in 1994.

Another feminine personality of the Romanian exile is the poet Leonida Lari (b. 1949) who had suffered from the internal exile in the Russian Moldova for decades, where writers were forbidden to write in their mother tongue. Her work was published both in Bucharest and Kishinev. These two Romanian minds, one critical and western, the other one lyrical and with eastern melancholy influences are two contrasting examples of Romanian thought that opened its gate to the 3rd millennium. (Cristian Stamatoiu)

A remarkable artist is Dana Roman, a painter who proves originality of style and "introduces us to a magic, wonderful, harmonious world, both silent and resonant" (Mireill Bazin). She left Romania in 1968 and lives in France where she works and organizes her numerous exhibitions.

Other Romanian artists, famous in the world of music, are: Nelly Mericioiu, a soprano in England, Mariana Cioromila, a mezzo-soprano in Germany, Mariana and Magda Sârbu, violonists in Switzerland, Mihaela Martin, a violonist in Koln, Gabriela Ijac a concerto violonist in Hungary.

**Conclusion:**

Women have yet to be made aware of the power of organization, of getting together as a pressure group to claim equal rights and opportunities. We have still a long way to go before attitudes change and women are empowered to take control of their own destinies, before they can achieve as much at home as some of these women did abroad in exile.

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