VISION OF FEMININITY IN THE NOVELS OF HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU

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Abstract: *In the interwar period, as well as afterwards, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was generally considered an antifeminist, but the articles she published in the magazines of those times, as well as her works bring forth the woman and her role in society, justifying therefore the special interest given to women. Even if the writer didn't assume this role with an exacerbated militancy, when she creates her characters she keeps the leading role for a woman to the detriment of a man, as he is rather the element that completes her image. In her prose, the feminine mystery derives of motives such as sickness, solitude, the search for happiness and love, the woman's condition in society. In what regards Hortensia Papadat Bengescu, we notice that she doesn't write in favour of women, and neither does she try to portray them favourably; however, for us, the concept of feminine literature starts taking shape in connection to her works.*

Keywords: *femininity, vision, solitude*.

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu can be considered a singular destiny in the Romanian prose: firstly, as the sole writer amongst the forefront prose men in the Romanian literature, secondly, as literary course configured later on, when the writer was 43 years old (the literary debut in 1919 with the short stories volume "Ape adânci" - "Deep Waters") and, thirdly, as evolution of the epic vision.

Referring to this last aspect, Eugen Lovinescu, the critic who played the role of a mentor for the author, considered that her work portrays at an individual level the meaning of the evolution of prose as global phenomenon within the Romanian cultural space: "within the course of the literature of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu we can see the course of the Romanian literature itself, within its evolution path from subjective to objective". (Lovinescu, 1929: 23)

The "Sburătorul" literary club critic explained this work path with the author fulfilling two norms: "dominating the temper by means of reflection" and "submitting to the obscure fatality of the literary genius allowing the creation". By enumerating other fundamental characteristics, as well, of the writer's work, as the "modernism of the intellectualism", of language, of an "accurate and interlinked psychologism", Lovinescu welcomes the "signs of a civilized literature" within the rural and nationalist context of the era".

Another great critic in Romanian literature, Tudor Vianu granted Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, alongside Liviu Rebreanu, "the statute of founder of the new novel" (Vianu, 1988: 226), for the concepts she put into circulation, for the depth of her analyses, the art of the characterisations she made, the techniques she used, that can be found in abundance in the writings subsequent to her period and played the role of a model.

The critics of the age received the novelty of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's writing by seizing coincidence of a feminine impressionism with the deep analysis, traits that E. Lovinescu synthesises as: "The literature of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu escapes to any formula. It is neither the creation of an architect imagination, nor

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sentimental creation. I suspect, nevertheless, that it shall become a creation of psychological analysis."(*ibidem*)

The characters in the novels are women on which the writer practices elaborate explorations, women of all ages, of the most diversified conditions and appearances, but each of them carrying a complex spiritual universe, complicated or unsuspected, representing the main topic. The writer explores with responsiveness and courage the depth of the feminine mystery. The language of its novels uncovers the almost obsessive concern for certain themes, connected to the sensibility of the woman's spirit. She approaches in her novels, from all points of view, the love, eroticism, family, the rise, snobbery, failure. The last of the themes, failure, includes the whole of all the other themes, especially in the author's vision on woman.

Her intent is obviously controversial and subtly indicates a reflection on the women's chance for self-affirmation in a petty, unscrupulous world, false values absorbing and suffocating aspirations. Valences of femininity in the modern prose, reaching ordinariness, lead to disequilibrium, to breakdown, defeat, failure. All these are interconnected in the novel "Roots" („Rădăcini"), where we find in the foreground Aneta Pascu, Nory Baldovin and Dia Baldovin, three maniacs, exposed to failure. Here, the human decline is even better exposed, stylistically translated through the metaphor of disease. The sanatorium, the hospital, the consulting room become locations of choice for many of the events seized not only in the novel "Roots" („Rădăcini"), but al so in "A Concert of Bach's Music" („Concert din muzică de Bach") or "The Hidden Road" („Drumul ascuns"), becoming spaces for dwelling for the real or would-be diseased characters. The Rim family opens their new residence at the same time exclusivist consulting room, destined for the feminine social elite in Bucharest. "The consultation room, very spacious, was fit up with all the comfort. The tables' and cabinets' crystal, the various tools were shining: there was an entire range of sofas with complex springs. Lina handled one to lift and extend exactly like an operating table." (Bengescu, 1972: 5). The image described shows that the author lays accent on the characters' morbid manifestations, drawing up genuine clinical observation sheets registering the declines of the physical body almost voluptuously. The psychic does not remain outside the general alteration of the being.

Many of the characters in the author's novels are physicians, nurses, nursing aids, midwives (Lina, Rim, Walter, Pejan, Mari etc.). Lenora from "The Dishevelled Maidens" („Fecioarele despletite") marries Doctor Walter after divorcing the gentleman farmer Hallipa. The new residence in Borodin palace is described as the actual luxury clinic it really is, as it has become as an annex to the palace. Lenora, the ex owner of Prundeni, becomes an instrument of failure as the jaws of death grasp her life. As the cancer swipes the essence of her femininity and exuberant being, she shall languish in agonizing humiliation in the palace turned from home into hospital and tomb.

The domain of the pathological unfolds with diversity and complexity. Physical pathology and psychical pathology. From this point of view, the feminine characters are inventoried and exposed as in a giant insectarium of abjection, degradation, falseness and immorality. The sketch of this gallery is seized by Constantin Ciopraga: "Pragmatically, almost, she investigated a vast gallery of female characters, portraying "The Dishevelled Maidens", demimondaines, extravagant women or bearing neurotic stigmas, snobbish, enigmatic, defeated appearances or denaturated specimens, woman between sexual frenzy or frigidity; a series of characters succeed in her novels acting with the blind power of the instinct (Mika-Lé) or cultivating an abstract love (Dia Baldovin), vulgar women (Moşica Mari) or eye candy women (Coca Aimeé)". Within

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this landscape, only one character seems to escape the tendency: Elena Drăgănescu, but here as well appear many deviations from what should have been a model.

Coming to an end in the process time, alternation of the angle, deviation from the initial path of the characters, search for unconscious loops are the means by which the writer faces us with discontinuous characters, indefinite from a typological point of view, untypical, lacking the aspect of an active and functional social behaviour. Involving positions and placements in the high society, Hallipa, Drăgănescu, Rim, Walter, Marcian hold titles, professions, attributions merely enunciated, without ever forming into aspects of opposition or refuges, to complete them or give them balance. Their knowledge is often mediated by the optic of a witness character, as Mini, playing the role of an "informant" of the reader, but who also comments on the situation, by himself or with another character. This method made G. Călinescu state that: "Almost all the work does not exist by actions, but as a genuine work of a woman by making news circulate. The heroines pay visits to one another and gossip, giving birth to the literature of bedroom secrets, of scandals and calumnious rumours". The prose woman makes no concession to typologies, is permanently preoccupied by the evolution of a femininity marked by age aggregation and disaggregation, as well as by social ones: "Delayed, therefore, from making aggressive ravages, the decay was latent, the afflictions suppressed, but a morbid discomfort incarcerating the entire body was replacing them. That condemned body did not feel as such neither the energies of a pain capable or relieving it through death, nor the hope for healing. The episodes of the fight between body and distress were stalled, the attack powers reduced to infirmity, the resistance was missing as well."(*ibidem* 183-184).

If in the traditional novel, the woman identifies with the love itself, and the couple relationship is based only on true feelings, the writer's prose modifies completely the vision on love. The signs of the pathological prove it, either by exacerbated instinctive manifestations (Lenora, Mika-Lé, Sia), phantasmagorical erotic mania (Aneta Pascu), or by Elena's frigid coldness or the sexual uncertainty manifested by Nory Baldovin. The rhetoric of the interwar novel disapproves the direct approach of such subjects and the allusive language of the characters makes transparent references to themes inaccessible for the respective period. But Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu breaks the boundaries and stands outside the patterns of the era.

Another theme is the family, as the main apparent structure of the world in the Hallipa cycle, although inside each of these families an irreversible degradation process is created, whose initiative devolved upon a member of this micro group: Elena Drăgănescu, Ada Razu, professor Rim or Doctor Walter. Despite an authentic net involving the characters either through their blood connections, or by human relations, the solitude is their main state. Seizing her characters in this solitude, the writer is preoccupied with deciphering their inner mechanisms. The evocative power of the images used by the author subsists in the capacity of reviving a certain aspect, but also in that of creating a perspective of deeper meanings. The widest forms of the family decline are revealed here. Victor Marcian is an international career musician, cousin of prince Maxenţiu. His encounter with Elena Drăgănescu is premeditated by Ada Razu, Maxenţiu's wife, interested to ensure this way her way in Elena's house, occasioned by the concert she was to host in her guest halls. For Elena, meeting Marcian produces a deviation from the trajectory established by her in compliance with her aristocratic ideals, that of a perfect woman, whose flawless image is to be perceived by anyone around her as role model. Elena elaborates a wrought image for herself, repressing any outbreak from the obscurity of the human being and her impeccable appearance

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enforces respect to those around her. In spite of this severe program, Elena still has weaknesses and Marcian's apparition provokes an outbreak from the pattern: "She was not used to the phenomena of the sensitivity, she tolerated them innocently and visibly, without the control of the "self-consciousness". Active, cerebral, annoyingly fair and rigid, Elena becomes disagreeable with her aristocratic air, the snobbery she displayed and through her excess 'of qualities'".

In return, Ada Razu integrated perfectly in the category of snobs and newly enriched. She is characterised by an extraordinary ambition to gain access to the aristocracy. Parentless, but owner of a considerable fortune, Ada Razu – "the queen of flour" marries the death-marked prince Maxenţiu. The physical Portrait of Ada Razu is simply grotesque: a devil-like dried gipsy, with lips as red as the frozen blood and with a pair of ardent eyes beneath the leather bonnet she was embellished with, edging even more her chin. Her black hands, with flax-like fingers, wore rings with stones as big as a "tunic button". In spite of the fragility her body inspired, Ada Razu was a champion tennis player, dance champion and a very good horse rider, adhering easily to any social event. Full of energy and unscrupulous, Ada knew how to make her way into life. From time to time she was taking her husband out of the house, to show the world he was still alive.

Temperamental and changeable, Ada Razu lays eyes on the handsome suburb "don Juan", Lică, the distant relative of Elena Drăgănescu, the ex fiancé of her husband. Without thinking twice, she will introduce Lică into her house, under the pretext that he shall take care of the prince's thoroughbred horses. Knowing that Lică is the uncle of the arrogant Elena Drăgănescu, Ada Razu plans how to gain access to her snobbish society. With a great amount of ruse, she succeeds to convince the great musician Victor Marcian, cousin of Maxenţiu to take part to the concert organized by Elena Drăgănescu. As a sign of gratitude, Elena Drăgănescu resumes the relations with Ada, her old school colleague, although she doesn't have a good opinion of her. The death of prince Maxenţiu gives back to Ada the right of "free pass" in the fashionable society which, in fact, she had never left.

The heroines of the novels of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu often come from broken families which are in the centre of the action or in the background, and the relationships within the families can be classified into two categories: matrimonial or filial. Broken couples built on materialism, enrichment and mistrust that can be found in her novels: "A Concert of Bach's Music" („Concert din muzică de Bach"), "The Dishevelled Maidens" („Fecioarele despletite"), "The Hidden Road" („Drumul ascuns") or "Roots" („Rădăcini") which are revealed in their deepest dissolution. On the other side, the filial relations are the most labyrinth-like relations ever encountered in the literature. The mothers portrayed in the novels are almost completely deprived of motherly love, they manifest openly their repulsion towards their own sin, as Doctor Rim, Lenora or Elena Drăgănescu-Hallipa, who is hardly concerned with her son's emotions, Ghighi, and sacrifices him for the return to the ground, to the roots. Her ambition to make him a good landlord shall bring the boy on the verge of depression and determine him to hang himself. It is here also that the accent is laid on the situation of orphan or bastard child. Orphans are usually the "illegitimate daughters" seeking for a protector male or woman. Born out of momentary incestuous liaisons, they represent the shameful secret of good families, carefully hidden, but testifying for past mistakes. Girls disowned by parents bear in their behaviour or appearance the signs of the grotesque giving life to them. Their entire existence lies under the sign of the existential failure even from their birth, because of their obscure origin (Nory Baldovin, Sia, Mika-

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Lé). The bastards are the twins of evel destroying the happiness and apparent harmony of the domestic couples. In society, they are spiritually and even physically (Sia) malformed individuals, solitary, detested by the other members of the clan.

The novel "A Concert of Bach's Music" brings in the foreground a social class seeking to be acknowledge as having a certain image, fighting to enforce it, especially as behind the sumptuous façades of the houses it lives in, scenes and fact take place that violate the norms of the class. In order to reflect these two contradictory aspects, essence and appearance, the author resorts to differentiated techniques: group conventions corresponds to the auctorial, summarising and precise analysis, "as a code of mandatory manners and as a pure supra-individual exteriority", the original authenticity, the individual; wishes and sentiments, still alive and animated corresponds to the multiplicity of voices, "the alternation of angles and reflectors". Usually, one sees into Elena's world by means of the author's comment, whereas in Maxenţiu's or Rim's inner universe the approaches are diverse: there is either self-analysis, interior monologues, even if the character's way o f thinking seems narrated by someone else trying to keep its authenticity although is not translating it accurately, either reflectors through the voice of other characters.

In Hallipa cycle, only in "The Dishevelled Maidens" we have this unique reflector, Mini, a marginal character in terms of action, but who reflects it through his consciousness doubled by an equal sensitiveness. In the other novels, the investigation technique is changed. In "A Concert of Bach's Music" the unique reflector disappears, the perspectives are multiplied and alternating, but in the same time the author intervenes from outside of the characters, as instance expressing the outer point of view. Nicolae Manolescu explains this hybrid method by appeal to the novel's substance, who's object is "the psychological and social mechanism of a fresh class" (Manolescu, 1981: 24), searching for its façade, the ostensive and impenetrable image. But its members did not come yet to dissimulate perfectly the essential outbreaks, the process take generations, "the masks don't cover impeccably the faces and the rule of the class game is always attacked from inside by the chaotic outbreaks, by the rebellions and desires not complying with the code". These two conceptions are revealed through adequate techniques: the personal desires and feelings are communicated by alternating the angles and reflectors, group conventions, by analysis.

The novel "The Hidden Road" marks the stage of the class installing within the boundaries of an equable conventionalism, which doesn't allow for the freedom of expressing a driven spiritual content. From the technique point of view, this novel recurs to omniscient classic analysis.

For the feminine characters in the novels of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, an important role is played by stating one's personality on a social and cultural level. This aspiration is stressed in several directions: in the profession, in the public life, in art. Nevertheless, for the many, the social success is more important than the professional one. In the Hallipa cycle, the superiority of the landowner aristocracy is underlined, even if it's an imposture on the uncivilized middle class. The reflex of the social rise is the snobbism, a mask of miming the refinement, the good taste and keeping the appearances of impeccable virtue. Almost all the feminine characters pay the price with their lives for this masqued ball. The peak of the refinement is the classic music culture, thus the concert is the event allowing for an incursion in the lives of those attending to it, it's a conventional event whose monopole, the planner, Elena Drăgănescu, does not want to lose because its success implies her confirmation as a leader inside the class.

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In the end of the novel, in spite of all obstacles, from which the most threatening was the death of Sia, the concert shall take place as a way of erasing the unpleasant reminder of the accident menacing to compromise the façade, the order dictated by the courtesy and the conventions. A world is therefore represented which, in order to survive, "must golden its emblem", always and unceasingly. Approaching the snobbism and the life in Bucharest, the novelist reflected in her work a newly-formed middle class society, dispersing either socially, or biologically. The moral and spiritual degradation of the society appears to Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu as result of an inner consumption, by hereditary causes, as suggested here and there. The logical explanation is the lifestyle the characters adopt, the limited and cruel horizon of their preoccupations, the permanent obsession of preserving their social position, wherefrom the social rivalry of the couples. Death and disease bear symbolic significations, as almost all feminine characters are deprived of humanity, reaching the threshold of disequilibrium, of the failure and unaccomplished self.

Of significance is not only the vision of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu on the idea of womanhood, but also her image, as reflected in the consciousness of her contemporaries and of the posterity, innovative ways of personating the creative femininity, transcending the condition of the common existence and rising through literature, through her work.

The novels reflect the author's image, aspirations, obsessions, author who, in the process of time, in the arbitrary memory of the descendants, becomes an "everlasting young Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, goddess from a Greek frieze". This is why, while other feminine figures "have vague shapes and cannot compete with their novelist projections, granting their requital, bring them in the foreground and give a consistence, a complexity and a beauty greater than those of the masculine character", the great lady of the Romanian literature transcends her condition, at the confluence between life and creation, becoming a prototype of femininity in this small island of time between the two great wars the humankind fought. (Pârvulescu, 2007: 316).

Consequently, this fascinating journey in the universe of women, setting off from myth, cumulated an entire series of stories and truths, images and personifications, managing to reveal as such multiple aspects of the woman, the one remaining forever, between reality and fiction, the most controversial and inciting character in the history of life and the world of art.

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