# *FEMININE REFLECTIONS IN THE MEMOIRS OF COMMUNIST DETENTION*

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**Abstract***: The women which rejected the communist regime and fought against it after its installation in Romania after World War II sometimes showed more courage, dignity and faith in their detention than some of the men that populated the political prisons.Though imprisonment was hard and they were treated in the same way the men were, womanhood, through its intrinsic power and sensibility, often brought light and, thus, hope in the bleak cells. Memoirs written by some of these feminine heroines manage to reflect, as much as literature is able to, their life as it was back in those days – filled with suffering and hardships, but also with the joy of rediscovering themselves through this suffering and through faith. The present paper proposes a journey into some of these disturbing writings, as we discover what kept these women going through that materialisation of hell represented by political detention.*

**Keywords***: detention, womanhood, memoirs*

On the literary ground, detention memoirs manage to offer of real characters, if we are allowed to refer to them in this way, a situation which increases the drama and the tragic of the narrated events.

Thus, prison life resembles a way out of the proper course of an existence, as the punished individual is placed into a reality that permits him very few activities of those displayed in a free life.

Hence, a new and distinct istance may enter into discussion, the prisoner imposing it as a means of resistance:

> For a political prisoner, conviction is something that can take place or not. So we can serve all of our punishment given to us or not. More troubling is the fact that it is possible to serve additional time. To be convicted again and maybe even to die in prison. Our time in prison isn't decided in a definitive way. We come from a world that was taken away from us by human hate maybe forever and we enter another – this one. This and only this is from now on our world. For us, there is no other world except the one we are in (Bordeianu, 2014: 70-71).

Furthermore, Galina Răduleanu mentions a "previous life" (marked with inverted commas in the original text), also referring to "the outside 'prison'" (Răduleanu, 2013: 329).

Inside this new *modus vivendi*, naturally, the incarcerated contribute to its creation through their behaviour, feelings, interactions etc. Thus, every personality influences the atmosphere and completes this world that unfolds in confinement, but also in the intimacy created by the wall that separates it from the outside.

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Starting from this reality, it should be noted from the start that – as it easily deduced – political detention was different from the point of view of gender segregation, though the treatment of the interrogators and guards was the same for both genders. The same long and painful interrogations, the same atrocious tortures (foot beating, whipping etc.).

But the feminine element represented a special category, considering its characteristics, and the scenery, as it will be shown, presented different elements from those proper to the male political detention.

Thus, as literary critic Dan C. Mihăilescu well states, it was "much more degrading, hard to imagine and to bear spiritually" (Mihăilescu, 2013: 169). Also "some of the feminine attributes – grace, stylishness, frailty, menstruation – infinitely increase the possibilities of humiliation of the human being in a prison regime" (*Ibidem*) . The presence of these physical, psychological and, most importantly, spiritual elements increase the drudgery of imprisonment of those who, in one way or another, opposed or brought inconveniences to the system.

Stylistically, according to Ruxandra Cesereanu, "the spectacle of detention has a harsher hue than the male memoirs, probably due to the feminine calling to more vividly express pain" (Cesereanu apud Mihăilescu, 2013: 173). Moreover, Nicolae Manolescu also mentions the fact that women tend to be more impressed by details due to their sensitivity (Manolescu, 2008: 1419).

Starting from those stated above, it is to be mentioned that Lena Constante is the one which chooses to describe such rough images in her memoirs:

> One night, a woman from the ground level was woken up by a rhythmical spillage, falling with a faint annoying noise on her blanket. Coming through the mattress of a young peasant woman, a great amount of blood was dripping. Due to e heavy hemorrhage, the poor woman shoved hopelessly between her thighs all of her clothes, including the bed sheet, because she was ashamed to wake her neighbour and ask for help (Constante, 2013: 62).

Stylishness, which has been mentioned above, was also present, somewhat surprisingly considering what life in confinement represented. Proof of this aspect is found in the memoirs of Galina Răduleanu, referring to Mrs Bădescu, the leader of room 44 within Jilava prison, which was trying hard to maintain her beauty for which she was well-known in the free world: "she had a real cult for her complexion, which in prison she cared for using cracklings" (Răduleanu, *op. cit.*: 220). As for love, "she was dreaming of of a husband or lover, naturally, younger than her. This was followed by a 'hi, hi', coquettish and alluring, that later managed to scandalise everyone" (*Ibidem*: 222).

In contrast to those stated above, the filth described in Lena Constante's memoirs comes to show how hard it was to maintain your dignity through personal hygiene, the moment of bathing being more of a torture than a joyful experience:

> […] all this time, the door remained half-open and a warden would watch me. Always. I used to pretend not to see him. Still, some gestures were hard to make in front of those eyes spying on me. When I did not have time to clear up the foam on my body, I used to



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> remove it with one of the wet sheets that were there, thrown on the floor. I wasn't the first to use it (Constante, *op. cit*.: 91).

Moving forward, the specific feminine rituals that gained a whole new importance in prison also need to be pointed out. The same Lena Constante manages to make a rigorous description of such a pursuit:

> For two days, my hands, without any activity, affectionately cut and sowed the skirt. To put the thread in the needle, to twist the head of the thread in order to make a knot. To thrust the niddle into the cloth. To bring it back to the surface three millimetres further. To turn back three millimetres. To thrust the needle again and to pull it out six millimetres further now and again three back and again six forward… To cautiously keep going. With carefulness. So as the seam should be decent. As made by made by a sewing machine […]. After the two blessed days in which the skirt was sewed, time started moving again, with its halting steps (Constante apud Mihăilescu, *op. cit.*: 175).

Thus, the imprisoned woman, fleeing inside this specific feminine work, transports herself into a micro-existence that is proper only to her, outside time, but temporary, because as soon as the process reaches its end, time once again starts to grind existence.

In her turn, Galina Răduleanu also mentions a "ritual" that was taking place when the prisoners received once or twice a month a box filled with needles, scissors and thread in order for them to mend their clothes: „the needle would begin its activity from one side of the cell and the scissors from the other one" (Răduleanu, *op. cit*.: 195). Through this description, the organisation that was necessary for every activity in the cell is brought into attention.

For Galina Răduleanu, these breakaways represented a new life, according to her confession:

> […] gradually, I entered a wonderful existence, unseen and true. An existence of the soul, rich and intense, o! (*sic!*) much more intense than the life I was to lead in the 'outside world'.
> […] Between the four damp and heavy walls, with the light bulb that would scratched your retina, I had found that joy that nothing and no one could take away from me. In fact, I had everything. I was missing only one thing: the certainty that after leaving prison, in 'the other world', between the so-called free, I will be able to preserve this feeling (Răduleanu, *op. cit.*: 76).

Unfortunately, as she confesses through the entire volume, this profound sentiment of existence could not be maintained in the world of the free.

Galina Răduleanu also states that "In prison, more than in your entire life, if you failed to excel yourself, if you failed to settle yourself within a state that could transcend you, you would became a toy ruled by instincts, impulses and circumstances" (Răduleanu, *op. cit.*: 304-305).

Preserving this interior freedom was difficult also in confinement, mostly because of the tumult made by the roommates and due to the mentality and spiritual differences found in all of the cells.



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Thus, feminine communist detention memoirs succeed in bringing forward distinct characteristics both stylistic and thematic, completing this universe of confinement which at first sight is one of dismay, but as you look into it more deeply, you can acknowledge its soul-saving importance.

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