# *THE UTOPIC REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE INTERWAR NOVELS*

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**Abstract***: Romanian literature assigns an important place to the condition of the woman only after the 19th century, until then this bohemian image was almost cauterized by the dogmas of society. Until then, the role of woman in society was only to obey the masculine mentality and the limited intellectual universe, conditioned only by the experience of their common experiences. As a matter of fact, it is easy to see that the presence of the woman was not even recorded in Dimitrie Cantemir's "Hieroglyphic History". With the rapid upgrading of society, the condition of the woman changes, but especially men's and social's attitude changes. This social emancipation arouses the new dares of femininity. In painting, the woman is revealed in bold nudes and in literature this evolutionary movement determines new writer's attitudes. The Belle Epoque, undoubtedly created a romantic, erotic image in which the feminine presence was contoured in mysterious suggestion lines. Thus, the period of 30 years before the First World War determined in the Romanian culture and art a first influx of feminine artistic capital. The woman's balding and childish air will perish after the Second World War, during which the woman will be presented in the rugged rural note, the harshness of the feminine existence lying in pain, sacrifice and exhausting work.*

**Keywords***: interwar, feminine, portrait*

The image of the woman entered literature first in poetry and only at the end of the eighteenth century. The Văcărești poets and Costache Negruzzi were the first to give life to a fake utopian, laudatory figurative, translucent muse that provokes lamentable feelings for the masculine world, an aspect that be found in everyday life. "Their presence and absence, alike, give lovers a faint state, dizziness, weakness that shows them as weak and effeminate as possible. Women inspire in this period, after centuries of absence, a series of whining of erotic essence, all in vain, for, in fact the authors of these lamentations and tributes were unproblematic epicureans" (Craia, 1999: 12). The years before 1850 outline in a romantic manner the beautiful woman, the praising, angelic and sensual worshiper. Being the generator of suffering and ecstasy, this romantic Eve is sometimes referred to as "cunning" but also divine and promising.

But if poetry idealizes this eternal feminine the romantics see her as a "virgin." In a totally opposite way, the prose and the theatre present another image of the woman, a vitalized, vivacious, healthy "female", guided by an unstoppable thirst for life and change. If in Vasile Alecsandri's work we meet all the hypostasis of the female character, imagining his virgin-angel, in the twentieth century it appears not only this pattern, but also the minx, the prototype of the fatal woman, the courtesan and the primacy of amorous. The first woman of this type is exactly Chera from the *Ciocoii vechi și noi* by Nicolae Filimon. Sadly, Chera, like most of the feminine characters, created by Nicolae Filimon is a bad moral example, a protagonist in a morbid sense.

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The emancipation of women at the beginning of the nineteenth century deeply penetrates into the literature of the time, giving rise to the independent and powerful female character. In Duiliu Zamfirescu's work, the woman remains anchored to a great extent within men's prejudices. For example, Sașa, the spouse who had inherited from her parents far too early an impressive fortune, but also the difficulty of raising her brothers, becoming for them "maman", manages with bravery to cope with the problems, but the living in the country makes her a provincial. In the world of the novel this becomes the first model of masculinisation of the female, playing dames as a man. Sașa Comănășteanu is easily framed among the emancipated of the women. On the other hand, Tincuța Murguleț, an angel child from Countryside Life, becomes a sensitive and always offended in *Tănase Scatiu* novel, and becomes the exponent of a hopeless existence when it extinguishes in an ambience without expectations.

**The 19th and 20th female model**

The 19th and 20th centuries bring a wave of feminine presence in Romanian literature and especially in the Romanian novel, a presence so indispensable for the innovative literary concentration. Mara from Slavici's homonymous novel is a broad-shouldered, heavy woman revealing a stern female model capable of generating wealth in spite of the poor appearance of the house. She behaves strictly masculine, creating to the reader the impression of imitative femininity, incapable of developing without losing its genetic substance. When Mara is mad, she does not cry but breaks, she is speculative and dissimulator and disregards the intelligentsia, seeing human existence only within the limits of financial dependence. On the other hand, Persida, Mara's daughter and the true heroine of the novel, does not deny her feminine origin and does not turn exponentially into a masculine existence, as her mother did, and she rather develops as all Slavici's characters did, the capacity to control her husband and to run the family. Persida responds especially to the sense of duty and embodies the woman winning and fighting, in spite of all, the prejudices, disappointments and injustices:"The others will obey the will of this determined and patient woman, victorious just when she seemed more vulnerable. The man, the parents-in-law, the nuns, the city will have to recognize the authority of Persida, strengthened by maternity, who imposes a new order, forcing the others admiration" (Craia, 1999:43). All the other female characters encountered in Romanian literature have a lack of conditioning. However, in the case of Liviu Rebreanu's work and especially in the novel *Ion*, we meet an exception, Ana. This is an exception even in rural areas because they are particularly strong, voluntary, dominant, decised. Ana, on the other hand, is submitted. She is the victim of men. She is the kind of woman who seems helpless and often powerless, but especially intelligent. Rarely, however, is this female type presented in literature, as a victim. Without being a society well-oriented in moral and social standards, the female character in Romanian literature has experienced a wide but chaotic development. The female character corridor features both independent beings as well as social and entrepreneurial assets, enthusiasts, feared, lovers, whose existence is rarely limited by men, as it is in the case of Ana. Although being scarcer than the male-woman or than the angel-woman, the demonic woman is much more surprising, though sometimes she is just an episodic character. This



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type of feminine character is encountered especially by Mateiu Caragiale. Raşelica kills Pașadia, Pena Corcodușa is the dead ones washer. In Mateiu Caragiale's writings there is no love for women, but they are rather appreciated as the devil's instincts, hostility to the masculine superiority.

In the case of Mateiu Caragiale's characters, we can discuss neither about the intellectual communication nor about the aspects of femininity such as affection, delicacy, tenderness. Eroticism in turn is completely purged of any natural trace of specific female behaviour. The demonic, fatal woman is rarely encountered in Romanian literature and that is why she remains so mysterious. We say that there is a typology of woman, nor can we include sporadic appearances in a family, a literary genre. I would rather say that their existence is so sporadic that their main feature is their strong individuality. Only fatality is the one that can unite them under the same dome. The role of this character is destructive and most often it leads to death.

Alba Ipsilat, the feminine character of Gib Mihăescu's *Fețele Orașului*, is an example of this kind of demonic female character. Although the author tries to describe her in terms of high etiquette as beautiful, tall, fancy, Alba proves to be a life-hijacker. Even her home, a sumptuous and luxurious residence, leads to the death. Just as Raşelica, Donna Alba, as Mihai Aspru, the male character of the same novel, called her, is more like a "stranger", a mysterious mixture of honey and venom, transforming love into death. For Gib Mihăescu the woman can represent both the beginning and the end.

The feminine characters, usually created by male authors, are not laden with misogyny, but they are rather projections of the dreamt, obsessive model of woman, that fascinates in the years of youth and later becomes mysterious. On the other hand, the old woman is actually a form of denial of the femininity and often has funeral attitudes or insignificant roles. By comparison with his mate, this old man is rather the illustrator of wisdom, greatness. Rarely does the old man appear as repulsive in literature.

**The woman in female author's view**

But how does a female writer perceive femininity? In the case of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, things are not radically different. In her case also the beauty is the most important later followed by personality. In her works, women can easily fall, as Sultana Craia said, only in the category of jades. "Built on an intimate collage, the novels of this writer have a feminine perspective – sometimes also feminist (...). She also has the same passion for physical beauty, the same <<imperial>> female model, or a brutish sensuality, and a horripilate refusal of lack of harmony." (Craia, 1999: 76). Typically, women's writers capture neurotic epochs, marked by confusion and illness, although they reference characters for the Romanian literature. In the work of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, the woman is deprived of the gift of giving life. Leonora is squeamish, incapable of maternal instincts, energy-free, and lacks the typical innocence of a feminine character. On the other hand, at the opposite side is Ada Razu, the landlady miller, characterized by vitality and health, able to control her life consciously. Ada does not live in the shadow of a male addiction, living independently and assumed.



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In the work of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, we can also find the type of slander women, too insignificant, medium, with no defining structures. Nory and Mini, though intelligent and modern women, have nothing special, and there is only the need to divulge the family secrets of the Romans, Hallips, and Walters. The only character to be highlighted is Mika-Lé, Leonora's bastard, characterized by the "diabolic" element. In *Fecioare despletite*, she will take revenge, using all the opportunities. Rejected, criticised and bullied in her childhood, Mika-Lé awakens the interest of men and makes women dismayed. In fact, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu succeeds in giving life to a sort of Thackeray's Vanity Fair.

**The trivial woman**

The woman, strictly treated as a carnal resource, may well be found in the work of Camil Petrescu. For him, the woman is only an endless source of exasperation, but also of destructive attraction, bringing the anxieties. In Camil Petrescu's novels we find feminine carnality and animalism, male characters referring to women only in terms of "consumables". Including lexical selection is done in this sense. Emilia from *Patul lui Procust* novel says that Ladima "feasted herself too" knowing that for Fred Vasilescu she was nothing but a "meat feast." If from a carnal point of view, the woman is disintegrated into thousands of obsessive pieces from which the male character can surmise, from the point of view of personality, she remains an enigma. Both Ela from *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război*, and Mrs. T from *Patul lui Procust*, are presented to the reader only through male characters view, seeming to be the property of men. As soon as they tend to become independent both the vision of men, and also the way they are described, changes. If up to the time of independence they were objectively described, with the rebellion against possessiveness they become impure, trivial, treacherous.

In the case of G. Calinescu's work, we meet the angelic female presence, a nymph of the male imagination. Otilia remains in Felix's memory as an angelic woman, although her glacial image is endowed with intelligence and discretionary philosophy, which has energy and enriches the lives of everyone around her, devastating them. As she is getting mature, Otilia will lose all of these attributes that transform her into a romantic angel of modern design. Felix no longer recognizes her into Pascalopol's photo who is showing it to him, leaving only his enigmatic virgin childhood, and painfully witnessing the transformation of the angel woman into a female. In contrast to Otilia, Aglae, "the absolute crone," represents the woman in everything she has more detestable: she is evil, vulgar, selfish, mean, cunning, authoritarian, ugly, and old.

In G. Călinescu's work we meet a real spread of feminine types. Georgeta is Otilia's mirror, but with more education and self-control, a rewarding Otilia, capable of motherly fulfilment, loving the idea of safety, friendship and consolation. If Otilia is surprising, Georgeta is the type of modern woman that emanates certainty and comfort. The anti-woman, or the slander-woman, the old or the ugly one, is something horrid for G. Călinescu. That is why women in the *Casa cu molii* are repugnant and form a portrait gallery that is in opposition to the feminine ideal, outlining the enigmatic-fascinating personality of the feminine ideal, Otilia.



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**Second World War woman**

At the end of the Second World War, the woman is no longer of any interest for writers. Her image is blurred or even eradicated. The sensuality disappears and the woman are strongly masculinised and put on the same existential steps with the man, becoming just a companion, a companion overwhelmed by worry, humble, graceless and without any substance. The gallery of female portraits has long been a show of literature in all its splendour, and few are the writers who in the wake of the two world wars have not taken advantage of this nearly unexplored territory before the world's deflagration.

In the interwar literature, the image of a woman is a strong one, with few exceptions, regardless of the environment in which these characters are designed. Also during this period a new space develops on the background of which the existence of the characters is projected - the periphery. Even though female characters are almost episodic, especially due to the large number of characters on the stage of the novel, the image of the female shocks and sends the reader with the thought of a decadent society in which virtually no significant existence has been lost. Here the woman is illustrated by the prostitute type, a taboo social category so far. The characters are sketched out, drawn in obscure lines, and elude roughly into ridiculous behaviours: public beatings, reproaches, frivolous behaviours, and tortured lives. The virgin slut is still a child but decades by assisting with an erotic animal experience.

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