THE OTHER WORLD IN THE ROMANIAN FOLK TALES[1]

Abstract: *The paper focuses on the feminine representations of the other world in the Romanian fairy tales. A gender approach of this literature reveals the complexity and the variety of these characters that are assigned power positions in the other world. Be they fairies or dragon ladies, saint women or great mothers, these feminine representations of the fairy tales contradict the stereotypes associated with women in the traditional culture and anticipate an identity profile that is common rather for our contemporary women than for the society that imagined them. The structure of the relationships that govern the realm of the other world is one of a matrilineal type, where women are superior in hierarchy. Analyzed in comparison with other cultures, the features invested in the feminine characters of the other world in the Romanian fairy tales are to be found as embodied in male representations / deities of different cultural / traditional societies.*

Keywords: *Romanian folklore, cultural anthropology, gender studies.*

Introduction

The fairy tales are holding reminiscences of ancient eras when the myths and the rituals were still alive and were functioning with the purpose of integration of the human being in the Universe by relating the man to the sacred (*apud.* Mircea Eliade, in Barbăneagră 1990). The fairy tales are preserving and presenting the characteristics of the traditional Romanian way of thinking in representative samples. They constitute themselves in a corpus for the cultural anthropology research. Being just a social and cultural artifact, internalized and naturalized by both men and women, I considered interesting to research, at least from some points of view, the vision offered by the Romanian folkloric fairy tale to the feminine identity.

Corpus of the study

This study has the Romanian fairy tales (Bîrlea 1966; Ispirescu 1989; şăineanu 1895; *Antologie de literatură populară* 1965; *Romanian Folk Tales* 1979) of the folkloric heritage as a corpus of the anthropological research.

Methodological approach

The applied methodology – connected with gender studies – takes into consideration those types of studies that envision a research based on the feminine representations of the Other World in the fairy tales.

Research assumptions

The Other World is a place where an ideal world exists, next to the human beings' world. It is a world that doubles the mortals' world, in this world its inhabitants can enter or exit freely and they can also invite the mortals there. By definition, the Other World belongs to superior beings, divine or semi-divine, and it is basically opposed to the human world.

These representations of the Other World are: the fairies, the women saints named with the same name as the days of the week (Saint Wednesday, Thursday, Friday etc. / Sfintele Miercuri, Joi, Vineri etc.) and their corresponding mothers (i.e. Saint Monday's Mother, Saint Wednesday's Mother etc. / Mama Sfintei Luni, Miercuri etc.),

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Icy Storm's Mother (Mama Crivățului), Stormy Winds' Mother (Mama Vântului Turbat), Spring Winds' Mother (Mama Vântului de Primăvară), Dragon Ladies, Forests' Mother (Muma Pădurii), Sun's Mother (Mama Soarelui), some malefic feminine representation as Gheonoaia, Scorpia, Vâjbaba etc.

Research hypotheses

The most feminine representations of the Other World in the fairy tales are manifestations of a feminine divinity or, at least, of a super-human order, as it is in the archaic conception of the Romanian man.

Even though we do not know how old the fairy tale is, the feminine subjects from the Other World are catching the attention more than the masculine ones, being more numerous, more complex, and various. Their integration in the world of mortals (occasionally) presents deviations from the known gender stereotypes.

Fairy tale analysis from the feminist perspective

The feminine representations of the Other World have, with little exceptions, **power positions**, of which the masculine opposite like the Emperor's son, Prince Charming (Rom. Făt-Frumos), has not yet access, but ultimately he accedes to. It is about the power position conferred by the high level of spirituality found in the feminine characters of the Other World as a result of the highest initiation. The fairies from the tale entitled *Prince Charming with the Hair of Gold* (*Făt-Frumos cu părul de aur*) own the Bath that turns the hair of the person who dips in it into gold. The Bath is the place of the spiritual purification, of magical transformation, and the hair of gold symbolizes the divine spiritual forces, initiation, superiority, spiritual elevation and maturity.

The animist myths, assumed that had generated a part of this imaginative feminine, confer feminine personifications to the Life and Death forces and to the Nature's and Universe's forces as well.

The power position occupied by these feminine representations is illustrated by the fact that they can serve as *a guide* to the Hero in the Other World (as some of those feminine characters listed above usually do), or as *a goal* of the heroic acts done by the Hero with the purpose of his initiation. Finalizing the initiation makes Prince Charming able to form a couple with Ileana Cosânzeana, Zâna Zânelor (Fairy Queen) or Doamna Chiralina. Most of the time, the fairy tale is the story of the couple formed by role-models, feminine and masculine personifications, couples which finally are recognized and accepted by the human mortals community of which the Hero belonged initially and in which the newly formed couple has to adapt. This is the main source of joy and happiness for humans who establish in essence the balance and the homestead characteristic to the world in the folkloric imagination.

Moreover, until the masculine initiation is ended, the women with whom the Hero has contact in fairy tale do not equate the nowadays gender stereotypes. They are independent personalities (often singles), they do not need protection, they provide protection and because of their status being initiated, they possess a highly rational knowledge and also knowledge that is by far beyond the rational one. All these attributes allow them to impose the norm and the full domination in the other world.

Another surprising detail which alters our perceptions about gender stereotypes is the sexual behavior of some Fairies. All the norms of bashfulness are disappearing in some of the fairy tales. The Fairy is not shy at all, she is the one that takes the erotic initiative, the active factor, the main reason that starts the Hero's future search – the

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Hero's obsessive quest – extended to the limits of the possible human effort (Prince Charming wears and tears one pair of sandals made of iron and a stick in his long trip to find his love, as it happens in the fairy tale *Ileana Cosânzeana*). The Hero, sleeping on the shore of the Fairies' Lake, does not feel the cuddles of Ileana Cosânzeana who descends in the humans' world. Prince Charming's chariot driver is the one who sees and tells what happened to the Emperor son, Prince Charming, while he was asleep. This way the chariot driver's story helps Prince Charming and sets off his erotic quest. The vision of the anonymous author of the fairy tale does not attribute false shame to the Fairies. The woman, namely the Fairy of the fairy tale, is not shy, has no complex at all facing the man (at least in the premarital timeframe). This fact proves that the old patriarchal mentality does not work in the fairy tale; the woman is not submissive to the man's display of power.

The erotic quest has different meaning for the Hero and for the Fairy. For the Hero it is an initiation adventure, for the Fairy, who is already initiated, it is her conquest, her submission and her placement in a masculine domination pattern. Moreover, in some cases, as for example the fairy tale entitled *The Arăpuşca's Kingdom* (*Împărăția Arăpuşchii*), the marriage between the Hero and Arăpuşca and the fact that he took her most important possession (that is a sword, a phallic symbol) are meant to transform the world into a civilized one.

> After the marriage, they went to the Boy's kingdom and on their way there they saw houses, people, and cities. It was thought that Arăpuşca hated people and, with the power of her sword, she killed them and now, because she didn't have the sword any more, all the things were settling in their own place.[1]

Here we have another example of bending the gender stereotypes: before marriage, Arăpuşca is the embodiment of the destructive, aggressive and tyrannical forces.

The marriage at the end of the fairy tale marks the entrance of the woman under the masculine domination and it is seen in the Romanian folklore, mainly in fairy tales, as beneficial, normal, of course also because patriarchy is dominating the archaic culture that gave birth to this literature.

Before the marriage, often happens that the Fairy undergoes a damaging masculine domination and she is expecting to solve the problems in two different ways: in the first case she succeeds by defeating and imprisoning the Monster, or in the other case, when she has been kidnapped by the Monster, she is expecting to be saved by her real partner.

In the first situation, we are dealing with the strong type of woman, and in the other situation we have a weaker form of woman whose only strength is cunning, subtlety and intelligence, which are different forms of power. She finds out which are the weaknesses of her kidnapper and gives to the Hero the chance to surpass and defeat the Monster. By destroying it and dominating the Monster, the Hero allows life to follow its normal course, all the things are falling into their own places, balancing the entire world and closing the circle.

[1] "După cununie plecară să vie în împărăția băiatului, şi pe drum ce să vezi? Case, oameni, oraşe în toată rânduiala. Pasămite Arăpuşca ura oamenii şi, cu puterea paloşului ei, îi prăpădise, dar acuma, fiindcă nu-l mai avea, toate lucrurile îşi veniseră în fire" (Stăncescu 2010: 24).

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In the fairy tale entitled *The Waters' Fairy* (*Zâna apelor*), the mermaid that was "destined by God" to be Alexander's wife comes to the mortals' world with a divine mission, meant to transform the human order and restore the justice. In this particular case, the Fairy is not losing her powers and status as an initiated by marrying a mortal. She remains superior to her husband to the end. On the other hand, the husband does not want to achieve her level. Her divine mission leads to eradication of slavery. Here we have illustrated an aspect of justice brought by the creatures of the Other World to this world, in moments of decline and crisis for the mankind. The conclusion drawn from here is that the divinity is perceived as responsible for the human destiny in the simple popular mentality and it is an active factor in the real life because of its justice spirit and equilibrium sense. Its creative and protective attributes that we can find in our masculine God we are finding them transferred to a feminine divinity. But we have no way to know or to prove, we can only suppose that all these feminine representations from the Other World – in their benign or terrifying version – are reminiscences of an extremely important cult in the history of mankind, namely the Great Goddess's cult. This cult is present in all the authentic traditions of the universal spirituality of the world, the essence of the highest cult (sometimes the only cult). The Goddess cult exists before the masculine God's cult and it is characteristic to the matriarchal type of the society. The Christianity's influence is also felt in these feminine representations' patterns by the frequent presence in the fairy tale of Virgin Mary as a guide and help of mankind in the humans' challenging phases that they need to overcome in their lives.

The fairy story *Ileana Cosânzana, the Flower That She Has In Her Braided Hair Is Singing, Nine Kingdoms Are Listening* (*Ileana Cosânzana,din cosiță floarea-i cântă, nouă împărății ascultă*) portraits Ileana Cosânzana as a patroness of arts, in general and of music, in particular. She possesses a flower that has "the spell of unbelievable magic song". Once the flower is placed in **her blond hair-lock**, it starts – as it touches the locks – "to sing as if the angels were partying in Heaven to the praise and glory of the Lord".

> Even the Holy Sun stopped in his burning way to chill a little by listening the amazing song, the birds were stoned and mute amidst the green foliage of the trees, and the waves of the silver brook that was running in the nearby stand still and mount on the top of each other forming water hills only to see the marvel and not to miss its charming sound.
>
> Nine kingdoms were listening to the sound that was coming out from the flower, the emperors that were at war, as soon as they listened, they signed their rise of the peace and brotherhood flags an ordered the stop of the hatred and the enmity. The ones that were in the middle of the forest hunting dropped their arches from their hands and laid on the green moss, having their mind enchained by the sweet burst of the far away song.[1] (Sfântul Soare se opri în calea sa aprinsă ca să se mai răcorească la ascultarea cântecului amorțit de atâta vreme, paserile

[1] "Sfântul Soare se opri în calea sa aprinsă ca să se mai răcorească la ascultarea cântecului amorțit de atâta vreme, paserile ședeau încremenite și mute în sânul verde al frunzișului, iar valurile pârâului de argint, ce se strecura pe aproape, stau locului și se suie unele peste altele, de se făcea movile de apă, numai ca să vadă minunea și să nu scape glasul ei fermecător. / Până la nouă împărății se auzea glasul ce răsărea din floare. Împărații ce se aflau în războaie, cum îl simțiră, făcură semn să rădice în văzduh steagurile de pace și frăție și să curme vrajba și dușmănia. Cei ce se găseau prin codrii pustii la vânătoare scăpară arcurile din mâini și se lăsară pe mușchiu' verde cu gându'-nlănțuit de dulcea revărsare a cântecului de departe" (*Antologie de literatură populară* 1965: 123).

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In this case, the flower symbolizes the scepter that grants its owner with the divine power over Mother Nature and also over humankind. It is interesting that the Romanian cultural inheritance preserves the feminine version of this kind of omnipotent deities which in the case of other mythologies is a masculine representation (Pan from the Greek mythology, Lord Krishna in the Hindu mythology). The flower's song is nothing but the metaphor of the universal love that flows, of that love capable to harmonize all kinds of human relationships. Moreover, by studying the etymology of the name Ileana Cosânzeana, we find out that she is a selenar Goddess who personifies the Moon, and the fact that nine kingdoms are listening her song suggests an astrological symbolism (our solar system – as we know it – has ten planets). It is about cosmic harmony, a cohesion that bonds our solar system in a Whole that defines itself as unique and coherent.

The Fairy of the Dawn (Zâna Zorilor) is a personification of the sunlight and of the everlasting youth, a kind of an Aurora (the Fairy of the Daybreak), sister with the Sun and the Moon, who was harnessing the horses at the Sun's chariot. Normally this job is done by men and in this case it is done – as we observe – by a woman. Even though the Fairy of the Dawn has such a significant status in the Cosmic order, judging by her looks, similar to a Sphinx (eyes that are stealing people's minds, eyes as an owl, face as a fox, claws as a cat), she gives us the impression of a malefic symbolism of her or anyways we may say her aspect suggests that we are dealing with an inaccessible, very powerful and frightening deity. Fairy of the Dawn's powers resides in three symbolic objects: the Healing Water (Life Giving Water) from the fountain she owns, the Ring of Power and the Wine of Youth. All of the above are conferring her most power, the highest rank among the feminine characters of the Other World. Saint Friday herself wishes to possess a part of the power of Fairy of the Dawn: she wants some water from the Fairy's fountain. Is this about the Saint Friday's tendency to undermine the power of Fairy of the Dawn or is it about a higher initiation that Saint Friday knows she is going to need that water especially for whoever will be send to bring it to her?

Conclusions

In the fairy tales we notice that the relationships between the creatures from the Other World descend in a matrilineal manner and the woman has a superiority in the hierarchic position and consequently in power.

These folk stories are rich sources of positive female imagery and have the advantage of being rooted in Romanian ancient tradition. The feminine representations of the Other World are messengers of the Other Realm to our mortals' world and represent role models that the Romanian traditional society imposed through its oral, folk literature.

If we reduce the essence of these representations to the image of the Divine Mother, with her benefic and malefic aspects, we find the embodiment of an archetype and the expression of *anima* (in Jungian terminology), the manifestation of

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unconsciousness in these feminine characters of the Other World portrayed in the Romanian fairy tales.

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