THE POLITICS OF RURAL/URBAN SPACE IN 19TH CENTURY ROMANIAN WRITING[1]

***Abstract**: The present article provides a study of 19th century Romanian writing, that would address changes, diversification and conflicts in women's private and public roles as part of a slow but steady process of emancipation - the move away from the Victorian cult of domesticity to a new awareness of the opportunities offered to women by the rapid pace of the country's modernization and economic growth. At the literary level, the study aims to connect the representations of women's roles with the idiosyncrasies of the transition from romanticism to realism generated by the endurance of the tradition of romance and the persistence of the deeply rooted cult of domesticity.*

***Keywords**: social and cultural identity.*

From historical, socio-cultural and literary perspectives the 19th century was a period of transition as well as of progress in women's status, with special emphasis on the transition from rural/agrarian to urban/industrial ways and life values, the erosion of conventions and stereotypes, the mutations produced in the representations of womanhood by the transition from romanticism to realism, and the forging of a distinctive tradition of literary and militant writing.

The process of male/female typologies identifications at the juridical level in Codul Civil (*The Civil Code*), *Codul Calimach* (*The Calimach Code*), and *Codul napoleonian* (*The Napoleonic Code*) simultaneously led to identifications at the character level: different typologies and hypostases of the male and female characters. While the private space has the woman at its center, the female character is analyzed as a social entity (on the axis private versus public, involving social spheres, legislation, institutions, the Church) and as a psychological entity (feelings, actions in definite circumstances, interactions with other characters, involving codes and plots). In my sociological research I have followed three classical co-ordinates: time (the beginning of the century – the dominant Oriental influence, the year of the 1848 revolution, – the end of the century – the dominant Occidental influence), the concrete space (urban versus rural, Ardeal versus Wallachia or Moldavia) and social classes (the lower middle class, manufacturers, industrialists, people from suburbs and outskirts, the peasantry).

The urban universe, which will develop in terms of literary representation only through symbolist poetry and prose, was perceived by many 19th century writers as a vicious environment, where the new comers and those regarded as persons without a value were immediately annihilated, because of ethnic diversities, blending of social classes, as well as continuous demographic transformations as Wirth Louis well remarks "Since the city is the product of growth rather than of instantaneous creation, it is to be expected that the influences which it exerts upon the modes of life should not be able to wipe out completely the previously dominant modes of human association.(Wirth Louis, 2010: 217).

The coexistence of different social environments in the space of the city makes their interference determine a typology of imitation. The women from the lower class of society imitate women from the high society and the other way around (in the case of rich women who "were compromising" themselves for gold and money). Moreover, the high-class society women are imitating each other in terms of fashion, interior

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decorations, children's education (by having a foreign governess who 'must' come from France), as well as household (especially the way of governing the house and the relations with servants). This reciprocal contamination of different social universes leads to a perfect osmosis of gestures and similar attitudes. Together with this interference of social universes, specific to the cities, there is a similitude of social environments, relations, spaces, preoccupations, and special clothing.

The type of female character that predominates in the writers' approach to the space coordinate urban versus rural, is the ingenuous, pure and innocent woman that comes in the city, being forced by the difficult circumstances and who usually loses all the attributes of the peasant education – honesty, virtue and diligence - in the contact with the corrupted city. She turns into "another" woman. She has to change her profession, learn other codes of conduct and other customs. Once in the city, she throws the "veil of oblivion"[1] (V. Alecsandri, *Margarita*) upon her past. In the same manner there acts the lost woman who must forget about the moral life in the countryside, in order to practice the new profession that she has chosen in the city. Also, the corrupted woman who returns in the rural environment must leave away her vicious past. Many writers chose the village as an idyllic background for love stories, according to the epoch's conception that was later developed by the adepts of the "Samanatorist" current that regarded the city as a place full of vices and corruption. Thus, the writings about the urban environment do not contain anymore images with young lovers who are meeting in places full of poetry. The feminine characters that are populating the urban environment are corrupted and vicious women that are neglecting their families, being in a constant search for money and pleasure.

Ioan Slavici was one of the writers who were often preoccupied by the uncertain status of the women who migrate from the rural space to the urban one, as well as by the consequences that occurred from the incapacity of women to integrate in the norms of the city life. Most of the female characters from his short stories that have an urban environment as background, are young women who are supported by rich old men, and in their turn they support young lovers, Marcelina, *Un sacrificiu al vieţii* (*A Sacrifice of Life*) and Evelina, *Pe povârniş* (*On the Slope*), Others are ordinary singers *O afacere galată* (*A Gallant Affair*) or vulgar actresses, Lina, *Comoara* (*The Treasure*) that subdue men and spend all their money.

Many young women that have left the rural environment in order to have a better life cannot integrate and end up by considering the city a source of woes. Because they cannot face the mistakes that they have made, they either commit suicide, or manage to save themselves by returning to their home villages, Sevasta, *O viaţă pierdută* (*A Lost Life*) falls in love with a man that belongs to another social class and, in a moment of weakness, submits to the beloved one, believing his marriage promises. Under the influence of that unfulfilled love, Sevasta starts to drink, becomes a vicious woman, and with her lover in mind she offers herself to Costan, a servant boy that worked in the stable. Sevasta cannot bear the shame, but most of all cannot bear the pain of being abandoned. Following thoughts like "how good it would be if I died" or "I feel too weak to pass through life according to my own judgment", she gives up to the 'hopes of youth' and commits suicide.

Even when some women realize that their life is ruining and try to rehabilitate, they would have to pay for their sin. The embroideress Elena *Norocul* (*The Fortune*) commits suicide because she left the man she loved, the banker Barbulescu. Her

[1] my translation. All the references to the Romanian books or publications are in my translation

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deception is immense when she realizes the huge difference between her illusions regarding the man she loved, "her fortune", and the true reality. Her suicidal gesture could be the result of the fact that she gave up to a man that ousted his unfaithful wife and did not allow her to visit her daughter who, according to the law, remained with him.

A special situation is offered by the girls who come to town from the rural environment and, because of unfavorable circumstances, end up as prostitutes. The authors offer to these characters only two types of rehabilitation: either the girls return in their environment and continue their lives according to the rural moral laws, *Nuța* (*Nuta*) or they end up in a tragic manner, Sevasta, *O viață pierdută* (*A Lost Life*).

In the short story suggestively entitled *Pe bulevard* (*On the boulevard*), Edgar Aslan depicts the desperate situation of a prostitute who is searching in vain for clients, because she has not eaten anything for three days. She cannot return back home, in the village, because she is too ashamed. Around midnight, the blond Roza sits on a bench, after she had been wandering in vain for two hours, without anyone being interested in her. Frantic by hunger, she accepts to sell her body for a pretzel to a seller from a booth. Poesis, the heroine from the novel *Geniu Pustiu* (*The Wasted Genius*), written by Mihail Eminescu is supported by 'two of the most corrupted dandies in the city' in order to save her ill father. But even if her body is defiled, her soul has remained clean and after her father's death, full of remorse, she chooses the way without return.

Another theme in the 19th century literature is the rehabilitation through love of the decayed courtesans who become exemplary women. After having lived a life full of pleasures, these women try to find for themselves a new identity through love, Marcelina, *Un sacrificiu al vieții* (*A Sacrifice to Life*) written by Ioan Slavici, Eleonora, *Privighetoarea Socolei* (*Socola's Nightingale*) written by Nicolae Gane.

The ethics of men in the rural environment can also change in contact with urban civilization. Corporal Dragan bets with the boys from the village that he will conquer Sultanica, the heroine of the short story with the same title, written by Barbu Stefanescu Delavrancea.

By falling in love and being the mistress of the corporal, Sultanica is convinced that she will end up in hell for her sins. Marioara, the heroine of the short story with the same title, written by Sofia Nadejde, is also the victim of a bet. Although Nicu fells in love with the girl, he enforces himself to quit on her, in order to win this bet between men. Marioara shares the same tragic fate of the deserted women, which is a short love story with a predictable end just from the first signs.

On other occasions, the mentality of the society is the one that determines the husband to abandon his wife. In the short story *Diploma lui Guță* (*Guta's Diploma*), C. Mille depicts the case of a family that sends their son to study in Paris, but he does not succeed in finishing his studies not even in ten years and, therefore, his father refuses to send money any more, thus he is forced to return home. Meanwhile, the boy has been married a French woman and they have a child. His parents and his two sisters who remained unmarried because their dowry was used to pay Guta's staying in France try to determine him to leave his wife and marry a wealthy Romanian girl" (Mille, 1953: 45). In the end, they succeeded in separating them, and the whole society in the city of Iassy "praised his gesture in one voice.

On the axis of direct familial relationship, there are many identity representations: the *daughter* (obedient/independent), the *mother* (perfect/denatured), the *grandmother* (active/uninvolved), and on a collateral axis there are representations

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as the *mother-in-law* (bridegroom's mother/bride's mother) or the *daughter-in-law* (obedient/rebel).

The attitude of the obedient daughter brought into subjection by her father or by both of her parents is a characteristic of many girls, and the most obedient one is the princess in Ion Creanga's *Povestea porcului* (*The Story of a Pig*), who does not revolt when she arrives at her future parents-in-law's palace and sees her pig-husband. The rebel and independent daughter is a study of character (Jean de la Bruyère) in opposition with that one described above and it refers to the girls (daughters) who choose to elope with their lovers as a result of political reasons: Anca, *Doamna Chiajna* (*Queen Chiajna*) by Alexandru Odobescu, religious ethnic reasons, Armina, *Radu Buzescu sau Han Tătarul (Radu Buzescu or The Tartar Khan*), by Ion Movileanu – Dumitrescu, financial reasons, Ana, *O fată de măritat* (*A Marriageable Girl*) by Nicolae T. Orăşeanu or to run away from a monastic life imposed by a fanatical religious mother, Elena: *Călugărița* (*The Nun*), by Grigore Alexandrescu.

In the 19th century patriarchal society, maternity is respected and admired only in the case of a married woman. The teenager-mother is despised and repudiated, and her child is stigmatized for all his life. As a rule, the writers choose to present these typologies in antithesis: the perfect mother (poor, but having many moral qualities, and rearing her child without any help) and the denatured mother (rich, but having only bad habits, and letting her child in an old nanny's care: Ioan Slavici, *Gogu şi Goguşor* (*Gogu and Gogusor*), or Sofia Nadejde, *Două mame* (*Two Mothers*). If mother passes away, the big sister replaces her in all the house chores, Saşa (Duiliu Zamfirescu, *Viata la țară* (*Life in the Countryside*), Zoe (Sofia Nadejde, *Părinți și copii* (*Parents and Children*), and the youngest sister, who is an orphan now goes to live in her elder sister's house to take care of the household and children: Anicuța: I. A. Bassarabescu, *Casă grea* (*The Crowded Home*).

Another narrative identity is represented by the relationship between the daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. In most of the writings the mother-in-law is defined by vices: Coana Prohira (Duiliu Zamfirescu, *Tănase Scatiu*) is drunk almost all the time, the mother-in-law in Ion Creangă's stories is lazy and the mother-in-law in Sofia Nădejde's writings is a slanderous woman *Soacră, soacră, poamă acră* (*Mother in Law, Mother in Law, You, Sour Fruit*)*, Schițe din viața de la țară* (*Sketches of Peasant Life*)*, Un sfârşit* (*An Ending*). The representative typology of *mother-in-law* is realized by Ion Creangă in his story *Soacra cu trei nurori* (*A Mother with Three Daughters-in-Law*), an authoritative woman who chooses by herself the first two daughters-in-law, two submissive young women. But her power is diminished when her youngest son brings his wife home. This rebel daughter-in-law instigates the other two to kill their mother-in-law and teaches them in cold blood how to do it.

In the 19th century there was a real cult for the family and we can see in many writings pleadings for keeping the marriage intact, regardless the condition in which the marriage was carried on. For example, Ioan Slavici asserts in the short story *Puişorii* (*Little Babies*) that "woman must be an icon of patience and must hide her husband's sin" or that "as long as the woman can bear, marriage works by itself" This short story pleads for the moral-home life. A gentle and devoted wife, Zoitica, is undecided between the love for her husband who has the 'weakness' of drinking and her children – to which it is added "the gossip of people" – gets sick and dies. In fact, Zoitica sacrifices her life for the sake of her children, after she endured insults and beatings from her husband. The prototype of the *obedient young wife*, totally submissive to her mother-in-law appears in most of the writings and follows the traditional everyday life

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pattern when the wife is controlled by her husband and her mother-in-law, Tincuța (Duiliu Zamfirescu, Tănase Scatiu) or Ileana: Ioan Slavici, *La Răscruci* (*At the Crossways*).

'Article 63' of the *Calimach Code* stipulated that: "The bonds of the family are created by a marriage bargain, through which two persons – the male party and the female party – show in a legal way their commitment and willingness to live in a legal communion with love, with the fear of God and with honesty for an inseparable camaraderie, in order to give birth to babies, to bring them up, as well as to help each other in all the happenings that would come." Although the man was the head of the family, the woman was in charge of the household, which gave her a special status. Her presence is recognized in the couple, even if it seems that the family is created and resists through the man rather than through the woman. This fact sends to article 1215 from the *Calimach Code*: 'The woman gets the name of her husband's family and obtains rights on his wealth; her duty is to indwell with him, to help him as she can with the household, and to comply with his decisions.'

The age of marriage for lads in the village varies much more than the one for the girls. They are considered *old maids* at the age of 22. The lads can marry until they are 25-28 years old, as well as when they are 16 or 18 years old. In *Povestea lui Stan Păţitul* (*The Story of Stan Who Gets into Trouble*), Ion Creangă recollects an old saying: 'someone gets married by himself/herself until 20 years old, starting with 20-25 years old he/she is married by others, starting with 25-30 he/she is married by an old woman, and starting with 30 he/she is married only by the devil.'

The family abandonment is qualified as an act worse than death, and the woman who leaves her home or her children will be forever an outcast of the society. Generally speaking, the women who abandon their families come from the urban environment or from the outskirts of the city, being lured by the mirage of the huge town, by an easier life, by fancy clothes and parties, Sofi, *Iancu Moroi*, Sevastița and Saşa, *Paraziţii* (*The Parasites*) short stories written by Barbu Stefanescu Delavrancea.

In the 19th century, marriage was considered by parents as a family arrangement, and very rare they agreed with their children's choices. Many writers will debate upon this topic from adverse stances. Dadiana Maxentian, *Subprefectul* (*The Under Prefect*) is Duiliu Zamfirescu's ideal for beauty and femininity. Through gestures, gentleness, behavior, she anticipates Saşa Comăneşteanu, who is, according to many critics, the most well achieved feminine character in the 19th century Romanian literature. Dadiana is married with a cruel and brutal husband much older than her. No one wondered that she fell in love with the new under prefect, a shy and sensible young man that loves her very much. Their love is depicted with finesse by the author: gestures, smiles, notes, random meetings. But, unfortunately, Duiliu Zamfirescu does not quit the Romantic cliché when he constructs his main feminine character – as he would later do with Saşa – and the short story ends with Dadiana's death.

Ioan Slavici is also approaching the theme of conventional marriages that can take place even in the rural environment: in order to save her family from bankruptcy, Ileana - the heroine of the short story *La Răscruci* (*At Crossroads*) - accepts without any protests the marriage with a wealthy man. Accepting this marriage, Ileana seems resigned: "It will be as my father and mother decide […], she said to herself with a clear voice. I will go with him because my parents want me to, and I will buckle down to live properly with him" (p. 456).

Ion Creangă defines the profile of the most obedient girl in the Romanian literature, the emperor's daughter in *Povestea porcului* (*The Story of A Pig*). This

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daughter does not rise up when she gets to the palace of her future in-laws and sees her pig-husband. On the contrary, as if something normal has happened, the daughter of the emperor starts to do the household. "When she first saw the groom, she remained dumbfounded, but lately she said to herself, making an effort: "If this is what my parents and God wanted for me, so be it! And, afterwards, she started to do the housework." (p. 195)

Yet, there are also situations in which the woman sees in marriage a social label and chooses a husband only to modify her social status, Aristita, *Căpitanul Stănilescu* (*Captain Stanilescu*), by Sofia Nădejde, in order to save her family from bankruptcy, Madam Dochia, *În ciuda Coanei Dochia* (*In spite of Madam Dochia*) or in order to abandon her family environment which did not correspond anymore to her aspirations, Maria from the sketch *De pe culme* (*From the Top*), by I. A. Bassarabescu.

The legitimate child has the significance of a symbol, its birth sensitizing the most deep and complex sentiments. Margarita, the heroine of the short story with the same name, written by Vasile Alecsandri, marries, according to her mother's wish, with Mr. M, although she loves Alexis, whom she will try to meet again at the persons that she visits, or at the theatre. Meanwhile, she sends him letters. Yet, the romance will be over, when she has to choose between her duty as a mother and her love: "Forget Margarita, that from now on won't exist for you anymore… I'm a mother! *Let's lay a black veil both on the past*, and on the promises about the future." (p. 190)

Although he succeeded through the character Mara to define the prototype of the widow that managed to bring up alone two children and collect money for their future, Ioan Slavici analyzes in the short story *Vatra părăsită* (*The Deserted Hearth*) the life of another widow that has four kids. Ana does not represent the greedy type of woman, but the widow who saves money for her children. Yet, trying so hard to make money, she neglects her children most of the time. She weans her youngest child, Silea, before time, because it was difficult to walk with him into her arms, and "the other children were also unwashed, sallow and dissipated, so that it was hard to look at them" (p. 295). As in other cases, when the women characters in his writings have gone out of the common pattern, Slavici sanctions Ana for depriving her children from maternal love and she is punished when Silea, the youngest child, dies. This tragedy afflicts Ana, and makes her understand that happiness and contentment cannot be measured in money.

Ioan Slavici did not see the widow as a symbol for pain and abdication. Left alone in front of life, she works like two persons, she is for her children both mother and father and she does not think to replace her husband. Through her abnegation and diligence, she proves that she is not a loser but a special human being, with a strong personality. Țața Melania, from the homonym short story written by Ioan Slavici, remains also a widow and "because she is still young, her defunct husband stated in the testament that she would benefit from all his wealth as much as she would be a widow, and as soon as she would get married, his wealth would go to his relatives." (205)

In the short story *Pe drezină* (*On the Hand Car*), I. A. Bassarabescu approaches the issue of the girls' lack of education, which is generated, in this case, by the conceptions of a widow mother who refuses to send her daughter to study, being under the influence of the bad mentality of those times, according to which the girl would have gotten there in contact with a corrupt environment. Therefore, her daughter did not take piano lessons anymore and was playing only by ear. She had the piano by accident. Her mother, Madam Luxita, the money lender, acquired it from a debtor that pawned the piano. She gave it as a dowry to the daughter, but "she did not hire a

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professor. Why should she spend money for this? At the conservatory she did not enroll her, in order for her not 'to get in contact' with all 'the tramps.' For the same reason, she did not want her to graduate the vocational school until the end, so she withdrew her." (p. 61) In exchange, she sealed her fate, marrying her with a station master: "My daughter has wealth: I won't make her neither a professor, nor a telegraph operator or an actress. May God give her a good destiny, without vices; because, the education she has and the piano that she knows today…it is enough for her. According to Luxita, *Fate* meant a husband." (p. 62)

In the short story *Amor cu cel de altă lege* (*Falling in Love with a Man of Another Religion*), V. A. Urechia presents two very young widows, the noblewoman Zoița, and a priest's daughter, Marioara, who fall in love with the same man, Naima-efendi, a young Muslim Albanian, a Turkish soldier belonging to the Turk leaders that were imposed by the Ottoman Empire to the Romanian rulers. This love triangle leads everyone to destruction.

The short stories *Călugărița* (*The Nun*) written by Grigore Alexandrescu and *Sora Agapia sau Călugăria şi Căsătoria* (*Sister Agapia or Monasticism and Marriage*) written by C.D. Aricescu, rise the issue of a new social aspect, that is aiming at the forced monasticism, considered an abuse committed by many parents.

While in other literatures, French, English or American, the *orphan girl* succeeds in getting along in life thanks to her qualities, in the Romanian literature, these kinds of characters are very rare. *The Orphans* are presented at the age of adolescence. The authors do not insist on their childhood. Their only way to survive is to live at the older sisters or brothers, that were already married and to take care of the household or the children, as Anicuta, *Casă grea* (*Full House*) by I.A. Bassarabescu, or to get tempted by a easier but compromising life, as Nuta, *Nuta*, by Ioan Slavici or Eleonora, *Privighetoarea Socolei* (*Socola's Nightingale*), by Nicolae Gane. Others take the path of outlawry, as Mina, *Mina haiduceasa* (*Mina the Outlaw Woman*), by George Baronzi or become lovers of robbers, as Ilinca, from the novel *Radu Anghel*, written by N. D. Popescu. In the epoch, *the little sister*, who is orphan, goes to live in her older sister house, to take care of the household or of their children, Ancuta, *Casă grea* (*Full House*), written by I.A. Bassarabescu.

Even if they have a model in the real life, the female characters in the literary work get autonomy against those models, and their novelistic destiny is different from that of the real women. The realism allows the writers to talk to the contemporary people and to write about them. It's not only about an exact account of the things that are seen, but also about a realist approach of the writer, which allows him to communicate both with the public and with his own characters. Matei Călinescu speaks about "the capacity of the term *realism* to express both limited and precise reports, strictly regarding the literary history, and very general reports, regarding the complex link between art and reality, makes out of it one of the most used terms of the artistic criticism. The big distance between the semantic poles of this word doesn't admit a limited number (it's impossible to determine exactly this number) of intermediate significance." (Călinescu, 1988: 49)

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