# *SOCIAL IMAGINARY AND THE GENDER DIMENSION AS REFLECTED IN THE FEMININE MEDIA DISCOURSE*

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***Abstract**: The starting hypothesis emphasizes the idea that one side of the feminist/feminine press promotes a woman image which is built according to some particular social and cultural patterns. These patterns convey conduct traits which become more visible and gain more significance within a new type of media discourse, a discourse with a specific rhetoric and well-defined objectives. The so-called post-feminist discourse is well-established in the press, and it reflects a social imaginary where woman image depends significantly on a major attribute – power. The reflected media image links the social success and the role adaptation (not necessarily a role inversion) in an intricate social agenda: the powerful woman must prove to be intelligent, ambitious, competitive, less sensitive, self-controlled, careerist, self-seeker, responsible for many others when talking about a company leader, flexible, daring in the public life. Feminine press reflects a successful woman image connected to the authority status, the media discourse is an almost inspirational one, portraying the woman struggle in a men's world, and tracing models of success where the beauty myth has been replaced by the charisma myth, and the submission quality by the higher self-esteem. The study focuses on a theoretical perspective dealing with concepts like social/political imaginary, gender stereotypes, feminine assertive media discourse. The case study is exemplary of these approaches, and takes into consideration examples from different Romanian magazines and periodicals whose target public is especially the feminine one.*

***Keywords:** media image, charisma myth, feminist discourse.*

**Introduction**

The current speech of the feminist oriented press is in fact a strategy to confirm an *identity reconstruction* by promoting an image for femininity which stands out in the social and cultural imagination through features that bring it closer to an ideal success applicable a few decades ago that the social environment would only propose for men. The most frequent press material promoting such an image is the portrait-interview. The persons with whom the subject is speaking are emblematic for a certain profession or have a high social status, becoming icons in the political, or in the business world. Emphasizing the prestige of such role model-women becomes a mark for the encouraging speech of the process of self-exceeding. Female journalists ask questions suggesting answers which highlight the connection between success in the professional life and achieving public recognition.

**Theoretical contributions regarding a woman's stand in Romanians' imaginary. The media construction of the femininity image compared to the new trends in journalism**

Scholar studies have researched the gender size at the level of media representations and found that "it provides an infrastructure both for the issuing pole (producing the news, the show) and for the message (news with and about women) and the receiving end" (Frumușani, 2002 a: 165).

The common conclusion that research in complementary specialized area get to (sociology, cultural anthropology, gender studies, critical speech analysis) refers to the

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fact that certain aspects of the patriarchal system are still preserved in various stages in the society, while the daily media shapes up speech operational frameworks which strengthen the cultural traditional fund of building the feminine image. Various gender studies in the Romanian area of competence have underlined the persistence of a condescending attitude toward women from a protective but also inhibiting male perspective. This is about a type of protection with limiting paternal accents, unjustified when present in a cultural background in which women have become important social actors, whose voice has become quite distinct in fields which were once exclusively reserved to men. However, one can also notice that in the social and cultural imaginary of the Romanians there still exist the dichotomy trends regarding the positive character with a socially benefiting role – a woman with an accomplished professional life, with a praiseworthy career vs. the villain, the pseudo-star, the starlet, the rich business man's wife without an occupation.

Vladimir Pasti notices the existence of a "pressure" that the cultural model moulded by the traditionalist patriarchal ideology puts on the construction of Romanian reality, leading to constant gender discrimination and shaping this idea of one gender being inferior to the other (Pasti, 2003: 85).

In a paper on the political theories of feminism, Mihaela Miroiu follows the stages of the feminist movement at the European level – the three "waves" associated to the fight for equality, for freedom and autonomy – and how they are present on Romanian ground. The author has a negative critical attitude on involving media in promoting the issues raised by feminist followers, focusing on the fact that the media is responsible for adopting an "implicit anti-feminist policy" (Miroiu, 2004: 73). In the context of a post-feminism characterized by redirecting feminism to "understanding the popular culture and the language", the media builds an ironic perspective on feminism, seen now as a long faded "fashion" (*ibidem*, 75).

In a paper on the reconfiguration of the Romanian feminine identity in the context of the ever debated phenomenon of globalization, Mădălina Nicolaescu accentuates on the possibility that the role model proposed by the Romanian media immediately after the Revolution in 1989 was influenced by the ever most striking presence of the western woman on the pages of the *glossy* magazines, images which rendered her as "successful femininity in terms of desirable physical appearance" (Nicolaescu, 2001: 83). Such a take over of the western image model was motivated by the media attempt to render legitimate a higher status of Romanian women, magazines such as *Avantaje* and *Unica* with the credit of having contributed to adding a new *glamour* touch to the new type of feminine identity. One can notice that the researcher grants this type of media the major role of having promoted new role models, even if this attempt occurred under the direct influence of a foreign role model. Moreover, the author of the study underlines the close connection that she finds between "basic myths of capitalism", also imported in our country, and the new feminine identity, within an emerging consumerist culture which selects its success models depending on factors such as narcissism, insistence on self-presentation, and enterprising qualities (*ibidem*, 130). The women magazines have an educational and informative value, as the researcher finds, because "they play an important role in the construction of the new subjectivities, and set out to teach, mobilize and to shape new values and new identities", "projecting empowering modes of femininity" (*ibidem*, 175).

In the vision of most researchers "the daily press promotes a reductionist image of the (banalizing or negativizing) woman" (Frumusani, 2002 b: 60). We emphasize the ideea that the magazines targeting women as audience offer portraits which they



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propose as archetypes in the current society, sketched in the coordinates of *the positive heroine's myth*. These are press materials which suggest reading toward taking over role models, in the context of a value interpretation grid regarding the women's capacity to fight against physiological determinations, against social constraints and against prejudice. The stereotypes fought against regard the roles and the situation of women in society. It is not rare that news programs continue to promote stereotypes from a conservative and inhibiting social imaginary. The woman is presented especially in contexts found in chivalry novels, that *lady in distress*, subject to the aggressions of the male world, victimized by dogmas and customs that belong to long faded eras, in theory. By fighting against this excessive victimization and loss of value for women, the media speech in the magazines targeting women promote label-profiles, resorting to highly media-present images of women, women politicians, business women, women journalists, from the latter stemming the anchorwoman. The media feminist speech 20 statements which place women as winners of a symbolic struggle, influencing the reading grid toward overcoming any disadvantages generated by biological or social determinism.

In the study dedicated to the *Women's Identity Profile*, Irina Stănciugelu sees the "symbolism of the Romanian media market dominated by the woman as a victim or executioner, maltreated, beaten, thief or killer, cheated on or cheating, prostitute, pimp or easy, baby or husband killer, raped, unconscious, incapable or liar" and promoting a rather low number of highly media-present portraits: the woman as "the star", "the criminal", "the public figure" (Stănciugelu, 2004: 135). The author also adds, along the line of theories on the reification of the feminine identity, the stereotype of the women as an object, correlated with all the other roles associated as stereotypes to feminine representations in the media.

The theories through which the media is deemed responsible for building certain aspects of reality, through various means of selection and approach toward information, also confirm the women journalists' attempts to redefine the standards of measuring the involvement of women as social actors in the public life. The feminine media speech shall focus on the features that lead to undertaking a beneficial role. The image of the woman incapable of achieving more due to an inferior physical and psychological condition is replaced by a motivating image, repeating the structure typical for self-motivating manuals. Gender characteristics such as sensitivity, physical and emotional fragility can be turned into advantages and emotional strength and audacity become essential to the feminine ethos, by inoculating the idea that a woman is capable of acceding to positions of power and control which were once suitable and acceptable only for men.

Some researchers of the dominant cultural model in the Romanian society believe that it develops "a continuous process of the gender's physical weakening" (Dărăbeanu, 2000: 150) and we could state that the feminine press is trying to counteract the effects of such a weakening process for a woman's self-image by presenting a motivational, assertive speech of becoming aware of the qualities and overcoming weaknesses.

If in speeches used for advertising, television news, daily press studies have found the existence of gender stereotypes emphasized through visual symbols and devalorizing clichés, the feminine press selects and reinforces the stories of success women, presented as models of achievement both in the personal and the social life.

The imagology studies and media speech analysis have often underlined the very low presence of women in news programs, a predilection to flaunt the private



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space, circulating this phrase of “media passivism” (Bulai, 2004: 112), in relation to this disadvantage that part of the media has with respect to the “social representation roles” of women (*ibidem*, 92).

The various gender studies proved that the feminine press has a major role in correcting the stereotypical image present in other types of press. Profiles of successful women have succeeded in attracting public awareness to social problems specific to the feminine segment. Other lines of research have accused the magazine press of offering “utopian versions of the superwoman”, those “ideal-type women” advertised by *glossy* magazines, attractive, active women with successful family lives and careers (Frumuşani, *2002 b*: 60). However, one did not omit the positive function that the same press with women target audience has in configuring a feminine “counter-culture”, exposing specific projects and dilemmas (*ibidem*, 61).

Studies and statistics on the gender dimension and its reflection in the media speak about the sexist speech of the press, a speech which circulates conservative and patriarchal patterns, appealing to visual and linguistic methods of “ridiculing, stigmatizing and ignoring the exaggerated value of the masculine” (Saharneanu, Ungureanu, 2007). The speech for promoting the image of an accomplished woman in her personal and professional life is blamed for gender misrepresentation because this type of speech would not in fact build a real feminine identity but it would resort to a forced allocation of masculine features to the feminine character, who became “the embodiment of the woman braver than the men” (*ibidem*) . Such studies are based on the theory through which the media reflects reality, underlining that the press copies the existing social and cultural model with a schematic functioning, according to the gender prejudice which claims that success and visibility in the public space are opportunities reserved exclusively to men. Along with academic studies, many projects carried out by various organizations analyze based on statistical data the level of media discrimination highlighted in the presence of gender stereotypes, in the quasi-absence of women in informative shows as important social actors etc. In 2011, the Project *ALTFEM – A campaign for changing the image of women in society* has highlighted stereotypes regarding subordination and inferiority of the Romanian woman by wasting time with household matters, stereotypes often circulated in the televised advertising and shows as well as in the pages of the written press. Other value judgments relying on stereotypes targeted the physical aspect – attractive women lack intelligence or the imputable character features such as duplicity and pragmatism.

In the study on feminine speech in the context of media globalization, Margaret Gallagher notices that women magazines in the `80s-`90s, with their pages filled with recipes and advice on maintaining the household, the “glamour and gossip” magazines built the image of career women, mothers and housekeepers alongside celebrity profiles and features about “enterprising women”, which made available success stories for their readers (Gallagher, M., 104).

Anna Gough-Yates studies the importance of media image of the so-called “New Woman”, starting from the strategies of identity construction in the production of women’s magazines of the 1980s and 1990s, magazines deemed to be a “culture industry”, but also an economic and cultural phenomenon (Gough-Yates, 2003: 26). The author reviews the previous feminist studies that focused on women magazines, studies which drew the alarm on the distorted, unrealistic image of women built by the pages of said publications.

Very reflective approaches to women's identity as constructed in mass media acknowledged the rigid views on gender roles, and, as Georgia Warnke put it: “Men can



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be man, it seems, however they act. Women can be women only if they act in an appropriate way" (Warnke, 2008: 32). The researcher underlines the "socially constructed status" of gender (*ibidem*, 154), and here we can add the major role mass media plays in shaping this construction, since all means of mass communication still bear influence in the current society.

**Media discourse and redefining the feminine identity by building the image of the powerful woman. Promoting the *heroine* model – the successful woman**

The media image promotes features which define a social status acquired by cultivating traits related to domination and authority. This promotes the myth of the powerful woman capable of success in fields of male competence, today's successful woman being characterized by audacity, intelligence, responsibility, self-control. The beauty myth is replaced by the charisma myth which, along with flexibility, is the key to a successful public life. The feminine media discourse now gives a different meaning to certain specific feminine features in order to overcome the gender stereotypes in the Romanian social and cultural imaginary. Interviews focus on successful women both in their careers and in their family life who are asked to give advice, to provide success recipes. The image of the successful woman is built with qualities necessary for fighting in the jungle of the current society: ambitious, charismatic, intelligent, confident in her own strength, with attitude. She is authentic, energetic, determined to stand by her beliefs and life principles.

From the perspective of defining the media speech as a "coherent social narrative inducing issues and thematic hierarchies, borrowing the characteristics of myth, legend and offering a summary, an acceptable social and cultural micro-universe because it undertakes and confirms a common *Weltanschauung*" (Frumușani, 2005: 121), we can state that the image of women in media tends to be built especially in agreement with theories which match a rather conservative colective mentality, in the virtue of that *acceptability* that the theoreticians speak of. While the predominant values of the media constructed femininity converge toward a stereotypical portrait heading for vilification – women are sensitive, emotional, more capable in the private circles than in public ones, there also exists a press speech highlighting features that generally accompany the male portrait. In being socialized into the successful women one has to prove that she is first of all a strong woman. This is the type of image that part of the current feminine media promotes.

Gender studies in Romania, from the interdisciplinary perspective, along the lines of the media speech analysis, have often emphasized "the dominance of conservative representations", "the flattening of the feminine issue" in a media background with a major role in setting the coordinates which depict the public interest by focusing it toward certain social actors (Frumușani, 2002 b: 36). The respective studies brought to the attention of researchers media structure issues which targeted the distorted image, "rendered anonymous", allocated unevenly in the editorial space, of a social actor - the woman - who, as "discursive identity", is by far inferior to the man (*ibidem*, 41). There was talk about "limiting the roles" in relation to the small number of women who are promoted by the media with a positive image, usually persons with a high social status involved in activities which also become appreciated due to excessive media coverage: show-business, sports, politics (*ibidem*, 54), other times with the use of the "image asymmetry" phrase for the image deficit that women suffer from (Surugiu, 2002: 36).



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The speech of the feminine press focusing on determining women to use in an intelligent manner their native abilities and their capacities acquired through experience in more or less male professions appears in the specialized literature with the term of *empowerment*. In a study called *Gender and Empowerment: Definitions, Approaches and Implications for Policy*, Zoë Oxaal and Sally Baden review the main definitions of the concept, focusing on the theoretical perspectives that state that this "bottom-up process" "challenging oppression and inequality" (Oxaal, Baden, 1997: 2) which involves first of all the notion of contribution is in fact a "feminist vision of development" (*ibidem*, 4), dealing with the ability to make choices.

The speech of the feminine press is a way through which this process gets a more emphasized visibility. The social legitimacy that women acquired relies on a media image in the televised news or advertising which exceeds the traditional frameworks, the cultural model of obedience, dependency and intellectual inferiority.

In the current Romanian press, be it paper or virtual, there are very many materials with titles which highlight the authorial intention to promote the typological oversized feminine image. The following examples are a representative selection, variations of the same topic of mobilizing inner strength to overcome the gender handicap: "We Are More Powerful than Men", "How Does a Powerful Woman Look Like", "Six Qualities that Turn You into a Powerful Woman", "Reasons for which Men Love Powerful Women", "Five Romanian Women More Powerful than Their Men", "How to Become a Powerful Woman", "The Most Powerful Woman in Romania Handles 5 Billion Euros", "Women Are More Powerful than Men", "Are You a Weak Woman? Find Out How to Become More Powerful", etc.

It is interesting to take the case of *Capital* magazine, publication meant for readers interested in economic issues and the business environment which published, in annual editions in the interval 2004-2008, a *Top 100 Successful Women in Romania (*www.ziare.com), selection criteria being success, career, social involvement, notoriety, financial status. The market success was obvious, the 4th edition having a circulation of 68,000 copies. The fields in which women acquired notable performances were business, management, culture, media, medicine, sports, politics and diplomacy. It is worth mentioning that one of the criteria, notoriety, is in close relation with media visibility, with promoting one's image.

In the introductory text of an interview in *QMagazine*, August 6th 2012, with a Judge in the High Court of Cassation and Justice, it is mentioned that the interviewee is a "*strong character"*, the undeniable proof being her audacity to confront the President of the country himself in public debates. The journalist does not forget to refer to the "gorgeous, elegant silhouette*"* accentuated by the classical femininity of the attire consisting of a black jacket over a white blouse.

The interviews of the feminine magazine *Tango* are representative for the journalist species that promotes an image defined by qualities for success on all accounts. In an interview with a former spokesperson in the Ministry of Foreign Affaire, the *chapeau* consists of the same summary definition, listing the three essential features for a successful life: "She is beautiful, smart and strong. She is a successful woman who pulled through due to her strong character and inquisitive mind." ( www.tango.ro, February 20th 2013). In an interview with a journalist, book author, the introductory text provides a brief description of the successful woman, the basic recipe for succeeding in life: "Alice seems to have the recipe for the perfect balance. The woman with an impressive career. Family, career, glory. Yes, Alice really has it all." The journalist draws in the interviewee to share, focusing on the essential quality of a successful



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woman –power, equal to emotional strength to overcome the obstacles encountered in a men's world: "I would like us to discover the story of a powerful woman who is also an emotional trendsetter. A role model for many of her readers." (www.tango.ro, March 1st 2013)

The title of an interview with a woman - doctor in international economics, advisor in the Romanian Parliament, has all the clues that indicate emotional strength, the interviewee being referred to in a power metaphor as – "*the woman behind the iron mask*" (www.tango.ro, *April 4th 2013*).

In the women magazine *Carolina* (www.revistacarolina.ro., June 4th 2010), an interview with a head of Police has the same clue of the model features for the accomplished woman, the journalist stating that the interviewee can be "an example for any woman who wants to assert herself in a men's world."

A particular case consists in the image proposed by the *Tabu* magazine in the November 2011 issue, a symbol image for the main topic of the respective issue: *A World of the Powerful Women* (www.hotnews.ro, accessed on May 31st 2013). It is interesting to see the editorial option to recreate the image of personalities who influenced humankind history, Cleopatra, Eva Peron, Jacqueline Kennedy, Margaret Thatcher, using the very famous but also controversial image of the woman-politician running the Ministry for Regional Development and Tourism. The image selected for the cover of the issue is striking, with the head of the Presidential Cabinet dressed in a tight black latex dress, with high over the knee boots, copying the dominatrix posture of the pop star Madonna[1]. The symbolism of the clothes is easy to understand, while the image semiotics (the character has her back toward an Earth globe that she puts her arms around) highlights the intention to promote the idea of a universal female domination.

**Conclusions**

Given the conclusions reached by the imagology studies according to which the initiative of the media imagological message belongs 85% to the image producers (cf. Sireteanu, 2005: 38), one can state that the feminine press discourse which promotes the image of the powerful woman through repetitive narrative patterns which have almost turned into a cliché has the necessary influence to counteract the negative stereotypes in the social imaginary. The journalistic speech consists in influencing by triggering the identification process. The image proposed by the feminine press is built through linguistic procedures of repeating the adjective "powerful" and other adjectives from the lexical field of positive physical and moral qualities, through the narrative of the life story in which women proved to be tenacious and brave in a world of male domination, through the mythical approach of the power of example. The feminine media speech is feminist to the extent in which it tries to trigger a desire to copy among the readers. This occurs in a special context in which journalism is in general, a context analyzed by the field researchers from the perspective of the speech analysis. John Hartley highlights that many of the media studies regard image as "unreal, illusory, seductive, feminized" (Hartley, J., 2011: 136), noticing that among the trends of the post-modern media speech one also finds feminization (similar to emotivity, cordial language, close to the public).

[1] Mihaela Miroiu sees in the pop singer a typical post-feminist model promoted by the media (Miroiu, 2004: 75).



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