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Feminity – An Image of Alterity in *The Girl from the Forest* by Ioan Slavici

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Abstract. The short-story *The Girl from the Forest* by Ioan Slavici emphasises, from a modern perspective, the encounter with the Other, represented here by the feminine character, Simina. *The Girl from the Forest* can be read as a drama of excessive beauty, taking into account the fact that, in Romanian literature, the beauty of the positive feminine character was a datum, harmonised with a matching character, until Slavici; with Simina from *The Girl from the Forest*, feminine beauty becomes, first of all, a source of self-confidence, it confers self-awareness and helps the woman to overcome the traditional condition of a passive individual.
A complex character, Simina transfigures her maternal vocation in an attempt to save the man she loves. This is the moment when the relationship with the Other (Man, Master, Father) reaches the point of conflict. Simina is a figure of otherness because, although all the characters belong to the same environment, the rural country, the economic and social status differences are obvious, and, in the encounters with the Other, the feminine character refuses to behave submissively; she is an active protagonist, who takes full responsibility for her desire to valorise her subjectivity.

Keywords: Feminity, the Father figure, The Other, Modernism

Slavici's heroines, as all his characters, seem detached from the achievements of the prose of those times, from romantic clichés. The woman of the 1848s prose and of the prose that followed was a determined reality, be it linear or contradictory, but strictly confined within the author's—narrator's theory. This was what Vasile Popovici, in his study *The World of the Literary Character*, called "a monologist character," incapable of getting in touch with the inner self and of manifesting genuine "dialogic reactions: bewilderment, doubt, fear, joy, loathing, love as a gradual and complex feeling" (1997, 54).[1] With Slavici, the moment the feeling creeps, like a mystery, in the heroine's life, the Other makes

1 The quotations from specialist literature as well as the literary fragments quoted in the article are translated by Anamaria Plescan.

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his entrance as well, as a distinct conscience to be faced, problematically, by the heroine. The realism of this prose brings a new, complex character on the stage of our literature—the *dialogic character*—as Popovici called it in the same study, a character who takes notice of both his/her own interiority as well as of the Other's. Slavici should not be analysed only from an ethical perspective, as he is interested, as a writer, in "human nature," a mix of the ethic, social and historic. "The works of Slavici are not mere copies of reality, accurate and meetly, but visions," Magdalena Popescu remarks (1977, 81). As a mental projection of the feminine universe, the writer does not make use of the irony we find in Caragiale's *Sketches*. A certain dynamics can be noticed in the construction of the feminine character. From *Folk Stories* to *Mara*, feminity is portrayed in the making. The woman, at Slavici, has the vocation of genesis; she is in search of purpose and meaning. Even more, she is aware of her need to search for a core, which is, after all, in direct connection with the rural, ceremonial world, but also with the decisive moments of feminine existence: marriage and maternity.

The woman, in the Romanian prose of the nineteenth century, had been, up to then, identified with the confined space of the house, an angel of the interiors. At Slavici, the woman is looking for the house in which to settle. His heroines are young lasses, fit for marriage, like Sanda from *Scormon*, Ileana from *At the Cross in the Village*, Marta from *The Village's Voice*, Simina from *The Girl from the Forest* and Persida, Mara's daughter; all of them are looking for a "nest." Sevasta from *A Wasted Life* and Ana from *The Lucky Mill* are the exceptions; although young, the two women do not perceive love as a new beginning.

The process of making a family is one of the favourite themes of Slavici's prose. It is the moment when the woman shows her adaptability, her extraordinary ability to mould after reality, her full vitality, and all these happen when the feminine character finds herself thrown in the arena. What happens to Slavici's heroines is not left unseen, chatted or judged. The more the feeling shakes the feminine inner self, the more life makes claims on her, the more visible intimacy becomes. Popovici identified a third person narrative apart from "Me" and "You"; the two involved, subjective consciences are watched, in the world as a scene, by "Him/Her," "the Stranger, a detached and objective spectator" (Popovici 1997, 75), the one who embodies the moral rule. The presence of this spectator is tightly connected to the emergence of love, a devastating energy, which leaves the characters uncovered. In the nineteenth century, placed under the sign of Prometheus, "the archetype hero of progress and effort" (Marcuse 1966, 154), the family becomes more important, as it illustrates what Michel Foucault named the "deployment of sexuality". The village is a closed community, ruled by unwritten laws which direct the individuals' behaviour. In this world, there is a "deployment of alliance" (Foucault 1990), a system of marriage, a system for establishing and developing kinship, to ensure the transmission of possessions

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and names. This "deployment," where the partners have a well-defined social status, is instituted on the laws which govern relationships, and it is organised around economy and the circulation of goods. Superimposed on the "deployment of alliance," the "deployment of sexuality" is concerned with the complex control of sensations, laying the spotlight on issues of body and flesh. We are able to best observe the interconnection between the two "deployments" in the works of Slavici, especially because here irony has no place in the separation of the heroine from the romantic model. The writer is a master of the complex technique of rendering the passage of feminity from one existential status to the other.

The Girl from the Forest, published in 1884 in the "Tribuna" Magazine from Sibiu, is ascertained and analysed for its true value with delay by literary criticism. Seen as a "drama of election" (Popescu 1977, 90), *The Girl from the Forest*, labelled as a tragic story, together with *The Lucky Mill* and *A Wasted Life*, develop a theme which is also common for Slavici's idyllic short-stories—*At the Cross in the Village, Scormon* and *The Village's Voice*: love and starting a family.

Similarities and differences between this story and the others can, of course, be found. The idyllic element is present in the description of the reaping scene, an archaic work, done according to ancestral rituals, which causes the foresters to migrate to the plains. This time, the scene of the action is much more ample by comparison with the idyllic novels, where everything is confined within the village.

The son of "wealthy" Busuioc, Iorgovan, goes through the villages to gather people for the harvest, although an epidemic of cholera was spreading across the country and the authorities forbade the celebrations. Iorgovan had dreamt of these celebrations all through the winter. Celebration time is the period when "most of the love scenes take place and the vehemence of the gestures is much more visible," Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu states in *Love's Labors* (2006, 47). The young lad thinks about Simina, the girl he would have liked to kiss the previous year, but didn't dare, for fear that she might have found out that he wanted "even more." Simina's image is reflected in Iorgovan's mind as a blurred, hazy image: "It was not only Simina Iorgovan was thinking about, rather a certain kind of Simina, who comes and goes and what is left behind is a vague feel-good impression of presence" (Slavici, 1977, 105).

The face of the forest girl gives him a sour taste "as the sour taste of freshly-made wine, still thick". This comparison contains, in fact, the hero's destiny, which is the reflection of what Baudrillard called the "becoming-feminine of the masculine" (2008, 31); the constant absence of clarity, as induced by fresh thick wine, marks Iorgovan's attitude. At the same time, Simina is a beautiful girl, fully aware of her beauty:

> Beautiful, that's what Simina was, and she knew it. Even when she was a little girl, she felt the looks of everyone on her, and when she became a lass,

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> others were telling her every day she was beautiful, and she could see it herself in the lads' eyes. And beautiful girls have plenty to choose from. (Slavici, 1979, 105)

The Girl from the Forest can be seen as a drama of excessive beauty. Simina—and, from this point of view, she prefigures Persida, the heroine of the novel *Mara*—is "wondrously beautiful". Up to this point, the beauty of positive feminine characters was consistent with a matching character, while in the case of demonic feminity, it was an instrument of manipulation and perdition.

For Slavici, beauty confers self-confidence and deepens self-awareness, without being a weapon against men. Simina is able to choose because she is good, hard-working and very beautiful. And she would choose, if not for the traditional condition of the woman, that of passivity and waiting: "A girl has to be passive, to wait, to watch and recognise the signals sent by a potential suitor" (Vintilă-Ghițulescu 2006, 14). So, Simina can do nothing but wait: "Nevertheless, lasses cannot follow their minds, as lads, but they sit, and think, and wait and cry" (Slavici 1979, 115–116).

The girl is desired by other men, but although "it isn't her who chose Iorgovan," there is something in the scarce words he addressed her in the three months they saw each other during the field works the previous year. This something, a hidden grief, draws Simina to Iorgovan.

There is a vocation of maternity at Slavici's feminine character, present in Simina, but most distinctive in Persida, two of the most complex feminine characters in Slavici's writings. Sensible to male suffering, Slavici's women want to save the man and courageously assume his weakness. This is the force which "pushes" them towards the "unfit" man. The girl's love undergoes a reversed process to that of "crystallization," the famous love theory of Stendhal.

Arriving at the girl's house after an intended two-day detour, Iorgovan asks her to go to the harvest. But Simina wouldn't like to. Neacşu, her father, is not feeling too well, and the girl has her own reasons to avoid Iorgovan. The two heroes have a decisive discussion:

> 'I meant to ask you, she said, and I don't know why I didn't: what do you want with me?'
> He shrugged.
> 'Nothing. I just know that I have a fancy for you like my life's over.'
> 'Dry love. Me fancied, and it's still me who's left dry.'
> 'True—the lad answered—I know you're right.'
> 'Then leave me be!'
> 'Why don't you leave me be?!' (Slavici 1979, 117)

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"What I call 'crystallization' is the operation of the mind that draws from all that presents itself the discovery that the loved object has some new perfections," Stendhal says in *On Love* (1968, 78). Simina does not discover "new perfections" in the beloved man. He shows his indecision from the beginning. And the girl is aware of that. Throughout the whole story, Iorgovan shows his incomplete personality. He desires the girl: as soon as he sees her, he feels like "putting his hands around her and hugging her," but he doesn't look "straight" at her. After he brings her in his father's courtyard, he regrets his gesture, not only because she is the Stranger, the Marginal who reaches the "centre"—the rich and well-kept household of Busuioc—but because he is afraid that someone could figure out that he loves her but does not want to marry her: "He wouldn't have liked them to think that, God forbid, he was thinking of taking Simina as his spouse, but he loved her; and even less would he have liked someone to get that he fancied her but he didn't want to take her" (Slavici 1979, 124).

Iorgovan is a "projection," an aspiration to overcome his parents' social status, wealthy peasants, but peasants still, Magdalena Popescu demonstrates. As his parents' aspiration, he fails. But the young man knows the same failure for himself. Unable to rise to the other's expectations, Iorgovan permanently relates himself to the "projection" and not to reality.

Şofron is a powerful, fully developed individual: "Şofron, a man in his thirties, served in the imperial army and was, a few years now, a paid servant, but he knew what duty and the master's command was" (Slavici 1979, 110). The servants, who have left their homes, keep the place of the boyar's court, where they eat and sleep, with their families, as this place is their refuge in tough times and their joy for holidays, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu affirms in the previously mentioned book (2006, 51).

Şofron falls for Simina as well: "When Şofron saw Simina, he only looked at her by chance, then tentatively, then he was struck dumb and, finally, he felt like the life still left in him was wasted, and his whole soul was clenched in one thought: to hide her away, known only to himself" (Slavici 1979, 118).

"To love someone is to isolate him from the world, to wipe out every trace of him," Jean Baudrillard meditated in *Fatal Strategies* (1996, 115). This is what Şofron wants, who, similarly to Simina, is aware that Iorgovan is incapable of taking the decision. Unlike the rich man's son, Şofron is his own master; he is at peace with himself. He works as a servant in Busuioc's household, but he is well-off, at least he has enough to start his own family. The "misfortune" which hits him hard is not his love for the forest girl, but his rivalry with Iorgovan.

Vasile Popovici demonstrates the theatrical character of this short story, which places the spotlight on the three characters: Simina, Iorgovan and Şofron, who find themselves "thrown in the arena"—the vast fields where the reaping takes place, the barn, the stable, the house (Popovici 1997, 38). Their meeting uncovers,

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on turns, the deep structure of the characters. One of the fundamental scenes is the one of the kiss between Şofron and Simina. Simina's motherly instinct, impulsive, triggers Şofron's uncontrolled reaction. Let us follow the scene:

> Women are weak-hearted by nature, and seeing the stair curbing under Şofron, Simina felt the whole weight of the sack and the fright drove her near.
> 'Come down, or I'll be sick', she told Şofron. You'd better go help them. Şofron stopped for a moment, embarrassed, then he got down and dropped the sack. He was glad that, early in the morning, Simina saw him and told him to do something; he had to talk back to her. But it's hard to put the thought to proper action. He took her both hands and looked puzzled at her face.
> 'Do you know I feel like kissing you?!' he then said to her. (Slavici 1979,129)

Şofron's decision to kiss the girl from the forest is the equivalent of choosing the beloved one, but it is also a pattern of male behaviour, which shows fighting spirit, courage and boldness. Şofron kisses her not only because he loves her, but also because he knows they are watched, he knows that Iorgovan might also watch and, by his gesture, he intends to provoke him, but nothing happens. The consequences of the gesture are different for each of the protagonists: Iorgovan watches, but he is content to see the girl's reluctance, who allowed the closeness without wanting it. Simina painfully grasps Iorgovan's ambiguous attitude. She knows that if a girl is chosen, she should have protection: "You should make others afraid to kiss me" (Slavici 1979, 129). In his turn, Şofron considers Iorgovan a mollycoddle, as he accepts such jokes when he loves the woman.

All the key scenes have witnesses. The kiss scene generates a discussion between Simina and her father, Neacşu. We notice the weak figure of the Father, the instance/institution that enjoins the children's lives, as it appears in *The Girl from the Forest*. Neacşu and Busuioc see themselves transformed into witnesses to their children's drama, but they do not meddle decisively. Busuioc is the victim of his own aspirations to be more than a peasant, which he projects on Iorgovan. Neacşu knows that Şofron wants his daughter, that Iorgovan is weak-kneed, while with Şofron, one can do anything.

They all talk about the social differences between the two young people, differences which, theoretically, annul the marriage. On the one hand, Busuioc sees the girl from the forest in his courtyard and realises that Iorgovan did not make all that way to bring her to the harvest—of all the foresters—for nothing. Worried, he seeks the help of the priest, Father Furtună ('storm'), to pick Iorgovan's brains, to clarify what he intends with the girl. If he were a widower, Busuioc would have taken the girl for himself, because she is "smart, well-built and mighty fair", but she would shame him as hiss daughter-in-law. On the other hand, Neacşu counsels his daughter:

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> Do not make yourself, my girl, a cuckoo's egg in a crow's nest, 'cause you're not built for it. You slept here last night, on a bed of straws, and you slept well, but they slept in beds with down pillows and will not forget that you have slept in their barn. (Slavici 1979, 135)

In the end, Busuioc would go with Iorgovan's choice, as he is his son, and Neacşu believes in destiny, which can make one's luck. From this perspective, Magdalena Popescu underlined the story's "purity." Unlike the other writings of Slavici, here the social constraints are less visible in reality; they do not come to surface "for fear of causing harm" (Popescu 1977, 191). More precisely, the social constraints are manifested on the mental level. Simina would be a servant for Iorgovan, because he is "good-hearted," while, for him, she should be "daughter-in-law to my parents, and one of them to my relatives, and it should be hell" (Popescu 1977, 192). This is the fundamental gap between the two protagonists, magisterially rendered by Slavici, who places the "heroic/erotic triangle" in "the arena": Simina, Iorgovan and Şofron. At Simina's initiative, the first two have a meeting by night. The weakening power of the father can be noticed again. Neacşu knows what his daughter is up to. He would stop her, but he knows how strong-willed his daughter is.

Şofron interferes between Simina and Iorgovan. Their retorts, followed by the explanations Neacşu asks from Iorgovan, underline the modern structure of the feminine character:

> 'What do you want with that girl?' Şofron asked quetly, very quietly.
> 'What do you want?' Iorgovan asked.
> 'I want to marry her!' Şofron answered.
> 'I don't want that!' Iorgovan said, frankly.
> 'Then, leave her be!'
> 'She doesn't leave me!'
> Şofron took a step back. That was that: what was left for him to do?
> 'You lie, he shouted, liar, liar!'
> Simina, panicked, took a step forward and placed herself between them.
> 'He doesn't lie, Şofron, she said, raising her hand. He speaks the truth, as God is my witness.' (Slavici 1979, 145)

The process of seduction, as it was pictured in the prose up to then, is cracking. The declaration of love, associated with the woman's praise, was followed by the marriage vows. Here, this promise is excluded from the start. More than that, instead of backing out, Simina courageously announces her initiative.

What supports her is the need for recognition, for affirming her "subjectivity." A flexible psychological structure, Simina converts her love into a maternal

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dimension, the only thing that confers the woman a heroic dimension, equivalent to masculine heroism. The episode that takes place at the pub can be interpreted from this perspective. In a traditional universe, ruled by firm and eternal laws, the girl takes the full responsibility of her gesture. As Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu writes: "The pub is a place of perdition, where no good girl would enter" (2006, 84). The girl from the forest risks her reputation, but she is so determined that her conduct uproots Iorgovan even more and utterly baffles Şofron. She does not leave with her father, but stays to bring back the equilibrium in Busuioc's "troubled" house.

Neacşu's death has multiple implications. The guilt felt for Iorgovan's inner mess stays behind. The rendering of the critical moment the heroine is facing shows the writer's modern intuition of the woman's power to adjust, to metamorphose: "The madness and the pain she left behind!—and still, feeling steady, Simina started to cry…." (Slavici 1979, 165).

From that moment on, Simina becomes a "third woman," ready to "appropriate her self-hood" (Lipovetsky 2000, 34). Magdalena Popescu sees in the death of the father the manifestation of a constraint which obliges the young woman to come back to her people, to be a forest woman by taking on the duties of her kind (1977, 193).

When Busuioc finally decides to ask her as daughter-in-law, his gesture comes as an effort to tolerate the other, as an attempt to control otherness. The woman, as a marginal being, an intruder, has brought too much disorder in Busuioc's family, and now that the girl is alone, the rich man feels obliged to give in, to give up his vanity of not taking a forest girl as a daughter-in-law: "If Neacşu were still alive, Busuioc wouldn't have yielded in front of his son" (Slavici 1979, 166).

But accepting Simina comes too late. Busuioc is incapable of understanding that he cannot just tolerate the forester. When the girl demands to be asked from her relatives, the old man considers it a woman's whim: "But Busuioc could not gasp that a girl left all alone could linger in thoughts when he asked her for his son. A woman's whim!" (Slavici 1979, 168).

In fact, the woman, who comes from the periphery to the centre, refuses to be marginal.Virgil Vintilescu in *Ioan Slavici – Critical Evaluations*, saw in Simina "a person like everyone, but crushed, in the end, between her inner world (the genuine and passionate love for Iorgovan) and the outer world, represented by Busuioc, the proud and hard man, who only gives in at the twelfth hour, after his son is marked by moral decomposition" (1977, 157). The affirmation must be nuanced: Simina is between two worlds, but it is not her who will be crushed. Built as a hard structure, Simina detaches herself from the "outer world" (Busuioc), and, in her inner structure, her passionate love for Iorgovan is, as we have said before, converted into maternal care and responsibility.

"Man lives for an idea that becomes obsessive and he is ready to die for it," but that drives him to solitude, while the woman connects the idea of existence

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indestructibly, "although fatal loneliness might mark her—she is never typically as solitary as the man; she is always at home, while the man has his 'home' outside himself," Georg Simmel remarked in *The Philosophical Culture. Adventure, Genders and the Modern Crisis* (1998, 63).

Iorgovan's "idea" is his belonging to a constraint which is long ago weakened. The obsession of incapacity of assuming his love throws him out of the centre. Besides, Simina is looking for her destiny, "at home" as an anchoring point, although she is deprived of the most important enjoining instance of her life: the father. After Neacşu's death, Simina enrols herself into penance, transferring the maternal dimension she discovered with Iorgovan towards Martin, a widower with four children. This is how Şofron finds her, who joins her patiently; this is how they find out that Iorgovan is dying. Simina runs to Iorgovan, but she only pours her soul to Şofron, who slowly and steadily takes over Neacşu's duties: "I have a weak spot for Iorgovan, Şofron! What can I do if I have, as for my child" (Slavici 1979, 200).

Iorgovan's death is a failure of the maternal energy of the woman who tried to sustain the weak and inconstant structure of the beloved man. At the same time, Iorgovan's death flattens Simina's way to Şofron, her other destiny.

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