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“Feminine Writing” in the Past and Present in Romania

Mihaela Dumitru Bacali^{a*}

* Corresponding author: *Mihaela Dumitru Bacali*, mihaela_bacali@yahoo.com

^aPhD, University of Bucharest, Romania; University Stendhal Grenoble 3, France, mihaela_bacali@yahoo.com

Abstract

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If we browse through the literary histories, we surprisingly notice that, at least until recent days, women writers are almost absent. What is the cause for such a phenomenon? Is there a feminine literature, or is it rather an invention of the feminists? If there is, is it a literature of the periphery? Is the alleged marginality a sociological problem or one of history of mentalities? Can we define it without making reference to the “masculine” literature? Here are some questions which prove the fact that the problem is a complex one that can hardly be put into strict conceptual frameworks. There are partisans of feminine literature, but there are also sceptics. We are going to try to define the concept reviewing different opinions that have been expressed starting with the beginning of the 20th century, when the first women writers made their presence known, until the present days, when the phenomenon of feminine literature became a very well-known one in the literary field. Abandoning the dichotomy masculine-feminine or even the lack of differentiation, ideas that were manifested in the writing field too, become a symptom of modernity. Confronted with the perspective of absolute equality, but also with her desire to still be a woman, the “female writer” must face the new challenges of today’s world.

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1. Research questions

If we look at the past we notice that most of the times men have held the supremacy in the realm of letters, while women have always remained in their shadow, practicing their anonymity as mere puppets on the literary stage. There were and maybe there still are many stereotypes on this topic, such as the one stating that “feminine” literature is a sweetened, soppy, sentimental one, with a great amount of subjectivity, emotion and lyricism. Feminine literature has often been placed under the sign of marginality and sometimes even mediocrity. What is the truth? Is there a “feminine” literature? The present article is the result of such interrogations and we will try to provide answers for them by analyzing the various points of view expressed on different occasions, over time.

1.1. *The first debates. Viața Românească (Iași, 1906-1916)*

The first debates on the existence of a typically feminine literature or type of writing appear at the beginning of the 20th century, in the paper *Viața Românească*. At least during the first stage of its apparition (1906-1916), the literary circle of Iași does not promote, but neither does it discourage women writers, who had started to make their presence known in our country starting with the second half of the 19th century. Feminine literature comes to be a reality that the leader of the paper, the literary critic Garabet Ibrăileanu, as well as other fellow writers or critics are forced to accept. In a review article on Elena Farago’s poems, he expresses the idea that, for a better understanding, in addition to a feminine literature there should also be a feminine critique, the only one capable of reaching the depths of a text written by a woman. In the article from the next issue of the paper he continues his discourse, thus being placed among the first to state that there is a feminine writing, an expression of “a feminine soul”, different from the masculine one. “Of course a woman’s soul is different from that of a man, most of all with respect to the sensitivity, namely the trait that a work of art usually results from. So, a woman’s work of art will be different from that of a man.” (Ibrăileanu, 1906, pp. 267-9)

The voice of a woman writer didn’t wait too long to make itself heard, also in the pages of *Viața Românească*. That voice belongs to the only female critic of the paper during those times, Izabela Sadoveanu. She takes as a starting point G. Ibrăileanu’s statement, in which he talked about the necessity of a feminine critique to objectively judge a feminine literary work, safe from the typical male temptation to treat feminine literature with a certain courtesy. Izabela Sadoveanu revolts against such a tendency, as she considers that literary critique, either feminine or masculine, must be objective. She talks about the existing prejudices that are recalled into question in society thanks to feminism. “So, the measure by which one evaluates feminine works has, of course, a fault: an excessive sensibility that makes him always hesitate more or less, according to various side-influences, with no connection to the value itself of the work that must be analyzed.” (Sadoveanu, 1906: 108) There mustn’t be different criteria. The social inferiority of women is a result of her nature. If physically she must accept the obvious inequality, spiritually this limitation is valid no more. She has “the possibility to create in art as man’s equal”. “We mustn’t prove an intellectual short-sightedness, demanding identification Women’s works of art may have other qualities than those of men; they bear the sign of

feminine particularity, but that doesn't imply that they are inferior to the masculine ones. "The error of the partisans, as well as that of the opponents of feminism is precisely this confusion between *equal* and *identical*." (Sadoveanu, 1906, pp. 108-12)

1.2. "Sburătorul" Literary Circle (1919-1943) and Eugen Lovinescu

The Literary Circle "Sburătorul" activated between 1919 and 1943 and it was concentrated around the emblematic personality of its mentor, Eugen Lovinescu. He was the one that brought together a group of women writers for who he provided the appropriate framework for their affirmation. Women's empowerment had become a reality and the numerous women that took part in the meetings of the literary circle prove it. It is here that the concept of "feminine writing" first takes shape.

1.3. The traits of feminine literature in E. Lovinescu's vision

In a series of articles published between 1922 and 1933, and later republished in *Critice 2*, analyzing the first writings of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, E. Lovinescu brings to discussion the concept of "feminine writing", the traits of which, in his opinion, are the following: *the presence of feelings*: "A woman lives in a world of feelings as in a world of her own. Her first function is to love. A lover and a mother – here are the two patterns of the eternal feminine essence (Lovinescu, pp. 124-5); *sensuality*: "Sensuality is a tone of a much more complicated feminine soul. (...) The feeling is pursued to its remotest ramifications. The heart is no longer the sacred cave of the Eleusinian mysteries in which the rites of love are codified (Lovinescu, pp. 129); *the feminine mystery*: "Since a woman doesn't talk, but whispers, doesn't pronounce, but suggests herself, her literature becomes a true *cryptography*, a rumor of mysterious words, of half-covered sensations, of vague poetry, a literature with a key (...), a literature of shadows and whispers, of mystery and of cushioned alcove (Lovinescu, pp. 125); *the contradictory nature of a woman's soul*: "The female writer's literature is a woman: she attracts, she promises a happiness that she never grants; she lifts obstacles that only few manage to overcome with the satisfaction of having surpassed a difficulty; she caresses by scratching and she leaves you with an obscure feeling of pleasure and discontent. So, the critic steps in, not without hesitation, in order to clarify things for himself and for others, trying to define the nature of the contradictory talent of the female writer (Lovinescu, 1982, pp. 122).

He allusively reproaches Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu her lack of epic sense. However, he notices the subjectivity that makes her book an impressionist painting where some pieces are prose poems that are rich in lyricism; others are a refined analysis of moods. "The writer heads towards the novel of psychological analysis, where the feminine soul is depicted with all the perversions and the temptations of the deep and troubled waters (Lovinescu, 1982, pp. 123).

1.4. A visionary opinion

In the same article, Lovinescu makes a prediction that the following centuries will confirm: that according to which in future times women will acquire the equality they long desired, but that at the same time they will lose that distinctive "something" that defines them, that poetry of mystery: "We

are heading for full feminism, so that our followers will live under the regime of total equality. We worship the inevitable. But there are romantics who believe that only when women are given all rights will they realize what they have lost, as their greatest treasure was precisely the inequality and the lack of rights, and it was with the charm of their fragility that they conquered the world. They will obtain all rights, but they will lose the only weapon of their sex: the majesty of their weakness. The day all of us, with no exception, concentrate on the same piece of bread, splashed with our sweat, human kind will have lost something of the poetry of femininity, (...) the stripping of the mystery from femininity.” (Lovinescu, 1982, pp. 129-30)

1.5. *The Evolution of Feminine Writing – a radiography of the interwar feminine literature*

However, Lovinescu’s stand as a devout supporter of feminine writing changes in time. In 1935, he signs the preface of an original work for those times, unique even in the following years. Here we refer to the anthology *Evoluția scrisului feminin (The Evolution of Feminine Writing)*, by Margareta Miller-Verghy and Ecaterina Săndulescu. The work contains a biographical and critical note for every woman writer and one or more literary excerpts taken from their works. What amazes us is the multitude of female writers included in the anthology: 34 in this volume and 38 more in the second volume that was never published. Some of them remained in the literary history, especially the ones that wrote in foreign languages, while others are entirely unknown. The selection criteria have been violated at times, but the work is still one of reference and, as far as we know, it is the only one of this kind in the history of Romanian literature.

What does Eugen Lovinescu state in the Preface? This time he is reserved, he almost opposes the notion of “feminine writing” because “art knows no gender, age, region or even, in the end, nationality; it is gratified through its substance and it organizes itself into groups and establishes hierarchies only according to aesthetic criteria”. However, he continues, although there is no question of establishing a hierarchy of the works of art according to gender, in order to make the understanding easier there are secondary criteria that make possible the existence of a literature classified according to region, gender, age. The relentlessness from the beginning starts to weaken, probably because of the necessities of the era.

In 1939, in the article “Notă asupra literaturii noastre feminine” (“Note on our Feminine Literature”), published in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*, he varies his position. First, he says, we must make the distinction between women’s literature, feminine literature and feminist literature. “Women’s literature is not exclusively feminine, namely a literature which reevaluates the essential elements of femininity”, because “art doesn’t know the laws of gender.” For instance, Hortensia’s novels “are not feminine literature, but only, by chance, the novels of a woman.” Only the first novels are exclusively feminine. (Lovinescu, 1939, pp. 179)

However, he returns to the ideas stated in the first articles and he notices that, although most of the times the writer masters the expression technique, “the femininity is a larval form of lyricism, of the transfiguration of the object through a high frequency emotion; it is the residuum of the combination of random things, reduced to the artist’s temperamental unit.” A “feminine” literature is centered on “the

only axis of a woman's life: love", with all its forms: "sensitivity, sensuality, which in literature are rendered in the sensorial and even ideological impressionism." (Lovinescu, 1939, pp. 180)

1.6. *A partisan of feminine literature: Camil Petrescu*

Around the same period, this time a novelist states his opinion on the existence of a feminine literature. We are referring to Camil Petrescu. In his article, he takes as a starting point the statement of an English critic who claims that in days to come literature will become mostly feminine, on one hand because women represent the highest percentage of the readers, and on the other hand because they have more time and a more varied receptivity than men. From the two ways of cognition, intuitive and rational, women will prefer the first. For Camil Petrescu, women are "these ever ailing creatures" and Proust, who the novelist quotes, he himself endowed with a feminine sensibility, observed the great truth according to which the sickly condition often develops the intelligence. (Petrescu, 1937, p. 400)

1.7. *The feminization of literature*

The author of *Patul lui Procust* notices the fact that great names that truly have something to say appeared in English literature, and the same thing happens in our country: women writers become an undeniable reality. The examples he offers are: Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Princess Bibescu, Lucia Demetrius, Anișoara Odeanu. He analyses the novel *Călător în noaptea de ajun* (*Traveler in the Night of the Eve*) by Anișoara Odeanu and he highlights the feminine sensibility that causes the story to become "a fabric of moods, endlessly nuanced, like an embroidery... one might say it is a sort of intuitive pointillism"; "everything has such a simplicity and such a veracity that is similar to the beginning of things." Most of all, he appreciates the analytical lucidity and authenticity, "the sharpness and the freshness of the descriptive vision." (Petrescu, 1937, p. 402)

Although sporadic, the articles on literary femininity emphasized the existence of this phenomenon that gained more and more ground in the Romanian literary landscape. The phenomenon of "feminization" of the writing appears and Camil Petrescu too mentions it in the cited article. The confrontation with the tightrope represented by illness causes the apparition of a "feminine" literature of the inside, of isolation, of intimacy, a "compensation" literature, where living between real and unreal replaces the epic. The "sick" writers of literature have a feminine composition par excellence. Camil Petrescu suggests a subtle convergence of *femininity* and *sickness* and of femininity and a certain spirit of modernity (and of modern literature). (Burta-Cernat, 2010, p. 35)

1.8. *A declared enemy of feminine literature: Eugen Ionescu*

But such a "feminization" of literature was not a phenomenon likely to be accepted by everyone. If there were passionate supporters, at the same time there were those that opposed it. Such a stand we see with Eugen Ionescu. Showing his habitual severity, in the article "Generația fetelor" ("Girls' Generation"), published in 1935, he declares himself a fierce enemy of the feminine writing and also of any other intellectual manifestation of women. Dominated by the spirit of total negation, Eugen Ionescu mocks any attempt women make in order to enter the area of the intellect. He deplores "the

ages”, the politicized contemporary society, in which writers can no longer find their place: being a writer and a contemplative person is nowadays a strange, out of place, ridiculous thing. Writers have become spiritually “weak” and they too ended up dealing with politics or, in the best case scenario, they are drawn towards “ethical concerns”. He notices “a cultural fatigue”: “Our weak culture cannot withstand the political present.” A symptom of the literary life is that young writers have given their place to girls. “From now on, literature and culture will be women’s concern or the pursuit of impotent and effeminate men. Besides, can’t you see that the literature of the youngest (of men) is sad, pessimistic and too disgraceful to be called literature? Instead, girls’ literature takes charge with optimism, love, morality, cheerfulness and, naturally, mediocrity.” With a passion worthy of a true pamphleteer, he continues: “So we no longer have young writers, but girls, only girls, hostels for girls, schools for girls, girls’ interiority, loving girls, girl students. On, girls! Take care of culture and of your kitchens! And there you have it – the kitchen becomes a cultural hall: Erastia Peretz, Anișoara Odeanu, Lucia Demetrius, Yvonne Rossignon, Sidonia Drăgușanu, Maria Rădulescu, Coca Farago, Elena Eftimiu, etc., etc.” (Ionescu, 1935, p. 1)

2. Present tendencies

If during the interwar period the comments on feminine writing or literature were few and placed at a greater distance in time from each other and in the communist era they completely vanished, after 1989 they became rather frequent. We notice nowadays the more obvious tendency to conceptualize and also the firmly stated desire to recover a literature that most of the times has been ignored by criticism, as well as by the public. This time, women-critics themselves are the ones that fight, through their works, to impose this concept, by bringing to public or literary attention the images of forgotten women writers.

2.1. *Novelists of modern Romanian literature – the first study dedicated to feminine writing*

The first serious work dedicated to feminine writing is *Prozatoare ale literaturii române moderne (Female Prose Writers of Modern Romanian Literature)*, Biblioteca Revistei Familia, 1994), by Liana Cozea. She observed that there is a real tradition of feminine writing in the Romanian literary landscape and it manifested despite a negation tendency that made its presence known in time. The feminine prose represents a unique and inimitable voice that in the 20s or 30s excels in psychological analysis and the writing becomes a true observation of the self by the self. Most of the times it is sentimental, refined, erudite, analytical and speculative (Cozea, 1994, p. 12). The affirmation of this “feminine” writing doesn’t imply – Cozea continues – a tendency of isolation or separation, and neither of marginalization. She pleads for a balanced position: neither total negation, nor acceptance on the grounds of discrimination, but a choice made in full understanding of the situation, based only on aesthetic criteria. The acceptance “*de facto* of the ‘feminine’ field in Romanian literature must not be read as an act of discrimination with pejorative-isolating tendencies and it doesn’t mean a disqualification of value. The fierce and obstinate negation of the feminine essence of such a prose undeservingly takes away its intrinsic qualities.” However, the use of aesthetic criteria doesn’t rule out

noticing a unique and inimitable “voice” illustrated in the fictional prose or the essayistic works written by women.

Liana Cozea is therefore the first woman specialized in letters that proficiently deals with the phenomenon of feminine writing after 1989. Her name left its mark in the Romanian literary landscape also by various literary investigations (*Familia, Apostrof*) that she made on the existence of feminine literature.

2.2. The “voice” of a woman literary critic that pleads for “feminine writing”

Another “voice” that belongs to a literary critic which pleads for “the feminine writing” is that of Elena Zaharia-Filipaș, university professor, author of the book *Studii de literatură feminină (Studies on feminine literature)*, published in 2004. The study brings together critical essays about Romanian female writers, preceded by a comment on E. Lovinescu’s statements on feminine literature. The author draws her conclusions on the statements of the mentor from “Sburătorul” and she comments, sometimes critically enough, the attributes of the feminine writing he enunciated: the instinct that, in the author’s opinion, proves “a primitive masculine attitude”; the bashfulness, which appeared as women started to have access to education; the feminine mystery – a cliché that expresses men’s impossibility to understand the feminine soul; the sentimentalism – one of the most upsetting stereotypes, a result of the classical dichotomy between feelings and reason; the subjectivity and lyricism, traits of the feminine writing, as opposed to the masculine one, which is supposedly analytical and objective.

This way, starting from Lovinescu’s statements, Elena Zaharia-Filipaș builds a definition of the concept of feminine literature, a definition that will be completed by an illustration which gathers some portraits of women-writers (Zaharia-Filipaș, 2004). A pertinent remark is that many of our women writers are born under the care of a masculine figure: either a husband or a father. Such is the case of Hermiona Asachi, Iulia Hașdeu, Adela Xenopol, Sofia Nădejde, Veronica Micle, Matilda Cugler-Poni, Maria Mavrodin, etc. Another remark, just as interesting as the previous one, is that “women writers” are most of the times educated at a magazine, they are trained according to its ideas and they take advantage of it in order to succeed on the literary stage. As examples, the author gives us the following names: Matilda Cugler-Poni, who is cultivated at *Convorbiri literare*; Sofia Nădejde, whose name is connected to *Contemporanul*; Constanța Hodoș and Maria Cunțan, who collaborate at *Semănătorul*, which proves that, despite the independence that women shout for so decidedly, most of the times they need a support/a masculine helping hand in order to succeed in the literary world.

2.3. The latest attempt to define feminine literature: Bianca Burța-Cernat

The latest attempt to define feminine literature belongs to Bianca Burța-Cernat. In her book, *Fotografie de grup cu scriitoare uitate (Group Photography with Forgotten Women Writers)*, printed by Cartea Românească Publishing House in 2010, a study that already represents an important reference in this domain; she brings back to present the concern for feminine writings, by drawing the readers’ attention on the notion of literary marginality. At the same time, this is also an attempt to place the feminine prose in the context of the interwar literature.

For the cited author, the traits of the feminine prose are: fragmentation, the "mosaique" construction, the method of inserting journal or epistolary excerpts, a narrative that has two or more "voices". If in the short prose the interwar women writers seem to like the narrative miniature best, the "quasi-photographic" snapshot, in the novel they hardly ever choose a solid-realistic architectural construction, preferring, possibly also because of a structural deficiency, the "mosaique" construction specific for the assemblage of testimonies or documents of the soul constituted in "life files"; the novel (genuinely) built according to the diarist notes type or the one using the journalistic, memoirist or epistolary insertion trick in a narrative that has two or more "voices". (Burța-Cernat, 2010, p. 31)

She highlights the process of "feminization" of literature in the interwar period, a process also noticed by E. Lovinescu and, later on, by Julia Kristeva. The focus on the inner life, on the mysterious world of instincts, of sensations, of feelings is associated with bringing to the foreground a type of hero that is "repressed, minor, oppressed, marginalized", "the ailing one". It is a modernity in crisis, marked by multiple neuroses, but also by the search for an identity (Burța-Cernat, 2010, p. 21). The "feminization" of the writing in modernity is linked to the fact that the male creator is now discovering within himself a feminine identity: weak, vulnerable, passive-contemplative. This discovery can be the result of his confrontation with the limits of the illness and his literature becomes a "feminine" one of the "inner world", one of isolation, of intimacy, "a 'compensation' literature in which the phantasmal feeling is a substitute of the epic itself" (Burța-Cernat, 2010, p. 35).

3. The genre studies – a challenge for modernity

If in the interwar period we can talk about "a feminization of literature", in modernity, on the contrary, we notice a "masculinization" of the feminine prose. Women writers get closer and closer to fields that not long ago were considered mostly "masculine" – for example, the pure epic, the objective prose.

In post-modernist contemporaneity, the idea that femininity is rather a social convention, that a person becomes a woman not just as a result of the native sex, but also as a result of a series of predetermined images and representations comes up by means of *gender* studies. The idea of complementarity of the genders, of abandoning the male-female dichotomy and, more recently, that of lack of differentiation, also manifested in literature, become a symptom of modernity. The so-called "feminine" traits (subjectivity, sense perception, introspection, lyricism) may be observed at a male-writer too, just like some traits considered to be masculine (objectivity, sensibility, the analytical, the epic) may become attributes specific for some female writers.

The first conclusion to our study is that most of the opinions are heading towards accepting the existence of "feminine" literature. Despite the thematic and stylistic diversity, there are certain traits that singularize the "feminine" writing: the preference for the unconventional genres, such as the journal, the letters, the biography and the autobiography (this "literary narcissism" might be the result of an inferiority complex), the ability to describe environments, the sensibility when facing nature (all these traits are also connected to a perceptiveness and a sense perception that perhaps are more significant than the masculine ones). Most of the accusations regard the lack of appetite for the epic or the inability to create grand literary structures.

Another conclusion we come to is that, as we have previously stated, there are periods in which one can notice a “feminization” of literature, as for instance the romantic or the interwar period, just as there are others, like the classical one for example, where the typically masculine rationality is predominant. The lack of differentiation becomes the most acute symptom of literary modernity and the dissimilarities become ever more blurred.

As for feminine literature (meaning “a literature written by women”), we notice that it finely came into prominence in the literary field, men’s supremacy was destroyed and the “women writers” became a reality no one can question. If during the 19th century the tendency to “differentiate” was required because it was part of society’s evolution, a society where women fought to come to the fore, once women are involved in all social domains the fight for “femininity” becomes evanescent and the centuries old dispute that had marked the history of mentalities fades away.

How can one reconcile the woman’s old dream of equality and the full affirmation of femininity with her desire to remain a “distinct” being, on all levels of existence, therefore including writing? Confronted with the perspective of an absolute equality, as well as with the hope of still remaining a woman, “the female writer”, who nowadays has become a constant presence on the literary stage, is forced to face the challenges of the modern world.

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Doctoral School “Literary and Cultural Studies”, University of Bucharest, Romania

Doctoral School “Language, Literature and Human Sciences”, University Stendhal Grenoble 3, France

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