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**ROMANIAN WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM
AT THE END OF 19TH CENTURY**

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Abstract

The current article focuses on the pedagogical dimension of the emancipatory discourses published by the Romanian novelist Sofia Nădejde in two newspapers, namely “Contemporanul” [The Contemporary] and “Femeia Română” [The Romanian Woman], at the end of the 19th Century. The interval covers the period associated with the constitutional monarchy, which began with the leadership of the United Principalities of Moldova and the Romanian Country of King Carol I, in 1866. At that time, women education became politically important for the shaping of national imaginary, yet of secondary importance in terms of access to knowledge. From a socio-political perspective, 1866 is the year when the first Constitution of modern Romania was issued, an act which stipulated free and compulsory education, regardless of social class or gender differences. From an educational perspective, the end of the 19th Century is dominated by the reform project initiated by Spiru Haret, through the Law of Secondary and Higher Education from 1898, and the Law of Vocational Education from 1899, prioritizing the population’s literacy, the establishment of the first schools for adults and the setup of the vocational schools for girls, who did not pursue an academic education. The literature in the field claims that studies on the topic centre on deconstructivism in order to annihilate and rebuild the image of women in society (Purvis, 1991; Howell & Beth, 2002; De Haan, Daskalova, & Loutfi, 2006).

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1. Introduction

This study approaches the topic of women's education in the Romanian society at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th century. We shall place our analytic approaches based on the pedagogic dimension of the discourses of publicist and novelist Sofia Nădejde in a larger context, starting from the analysis of the social, juridical and educational status of women, associated with the beginnings of women's emancipation.

The historical research aiming at establishing the role and implications of women's education in various cultural contexts and periods have more than often stressed out the fact that the woman is depicted in historical documents rather as an object than as a subject. The best supporting role of women can be traced in the 19th century (Pârvulescu, 2013, pp. 101-102). The woman is allowed to appear in five secondary positions: mother, wife, muse, daughter, sister – in this specific order. Taboos are similar to times tables, they are to be learnt by heart, in the right order and the results must be strictly memorized: you are not allowed to and there is no point in attending a university, as this is a man's job and it could drive you away from your woman's destiny; on the other hand, it is allowed and highly recommended to marry a well-educated or a rich man, as this will make you happy. It is forbidden for you to become a lawyer, a judge, a doctor, a priest, a conductor, a mayor or an engineer, because this would be unconceivable and people would be shocked. You are, however, allowed to become a pianist, an opera singer, a dressmaker, a maid, an innkeeper or a nun, because all these are suitable for the woman's nature. You are not allowed to earn your own living, because it would be senseless, but you are allowed and you must ask the man for money, for the household and for your own caprice. You must listen to and obey your father and your husband simply because your mother and your mother's mother and all mothers ever have done the same, you must take care of the house, of the children, of the food and of the servants, you are allowed to read and host literary soirees, you are forbidden to become a critic, but allowed to write poetry, you can either breastfeed your children or give them to a nurse maid, but you should not divorce your husband (Pârvulescu, *Ibidem*).

For a long period of time, until the democratic revolution opening the modern era, women had no reaction to the dominant male discourse shaping their identity; they generally preserved their object class status (Ariès & Duby, 1997). Towards the end of the 19th Century, due to the promotion of the new values, such as universalism and human rights, there emerge favourable conditions that place the woman in the position of subject and social actor. The desirable human type of the modern times has a sense of risk and responsibility, is a discoverer and an entrepreneur. Actually, modernity has introduced the *citizen* in history. This is not a return to the ancient concept of citizen, since in the case of modernity no exclusiveness is involved (Antonesei, 2015). All people are citizens, regardless of their race, gender, social origin or religious beliefs. The modern era adds to the classical values (truth, good, beauty and sanctity) the so-called social values: liberty, equality, fraternity - by means of the French Revolution, as well as legality - by means of Cromwell's Revolution in England and the American Revolution (Purvis, 1991, p. 103). Even if it's still believed that upper education might turn a woman infertile and educating a beautiful woman is like pouring honey into a fine Swiss watch - as famously stated by Jean Jacques Rousseau - the right to education gradually favours women's emancipation, so that educated women are the first to discuss the access into the public space. The image of the woman as a social actor is therefore related to a whole social and political context and a redefinition of social forces.

2. Historical context

The period under investigation is characterized by major social and political changes that imply a redefinition of social forces and hierarchies as well as a reconstruction of gender identity. Even if the traditional dichotomies are occasionally mentioned, they are re-validated from the perspective of social ideologies and philosophies of the time, serving, in turn to the substantiation and legitimization of the new political and social order. The Romanian education history texts thoroughly analyse the Law of Education from 1864, which stipulated for the very first time mandatory free-of-charge primary education for both boys and girls aged between 8 and 12, for a period of four years (Diac, 2004, p. 55). More than that, article 61 stipulated the foundation of an equal number of schools for girls and for boys, both in the rural and urban areas, precisely tracing the premises for the foundation of secondary education for girls. Differences occur, however, in the structure of the school years and the educational contents: secondary education comprised a period of study of five years for the girls and seven years for the boys (Diac, *Ibidem*). As well as this, girls studied fewer subjects. These differences, which were detrimental to the education for girls represented a significant impediment as far as their access to upper education was concerned, and fuelled numerous debates and protests at the time. The Law of Education from 1864 actually preserved certain experiments and traditions of education at the time, namely offering less instruction to the girls in comparison to boys (the secondary school for girls had two years less than the secondary school for boys).

Subsequently, the education reform elaborated by Spiru Haret (1898; 1899) also targeted the schools for girls, with the provisions included in the Law regarding the Secondary and Higher Education and the Law regarding Vocational Education. The former divided secondary schools into two categories: 1st degree schools with a duration of 5 years and 2nd degree schools with a duration of 6 years, the graduation certificate being the equivalent of the baccalaureate diploma and allowing thus girls to enrol in universities. Moreover, a Normal Superior School with a duration of 3 years was founded in Iași, aiming at training teaching staff for secondary schools for girls (Ciupală, 2003, p. 56). The courses studied in this school were not correspondents of university courses, but were divided into two sections, a literary and a scientific one, to which mandatory pedagogical practice also added. Taking into account the already existing normal schools for girls, where the new primary school teachers were trained, we note that by the end of the 19th century the number of women choosing a didactic career had increased considerably. Thus, as in the case of men, where the number of public clerks was higher than the positions available in the public administration, a similar phenomenon could be noticed in the case of female teachers, their number exceeding the number of positions available in the education system. Haret's Law of Vocational Education from 1899 stipulated the foundation of vocational school for girls who did not want an 'academic' career along with granting subsidies from the state willing to sign a five-year contract to be part of small associations and open various workshops after graduation. Spiru Haret's reform at the end of the 19th Century is based on his social and pedagogical concepts according to which no reforming measure can be truly efficient in the Romanian modern society unless all social classes can enjoy its benefits and unless all social categories contribute to its practical accomplishment.

The preoccupation regarding a practical training for young girls did not belong exclusively to the state, but it equally belonged to girls. It was going to be put into practice in schools sponsored by either feminine, or by different personalities belonging to the royal family or the bourgeoisie. King Carol the 1st

himself (1897) pleaded for the necessity of female education in a discourse held within the Society for the Education of the Romanian people:

In the attempt to solve such an important and difficult problem, namely the public education within a state, women education is a central issue. At the heart of the family life, as generator of the noblest feelings, the woman has always played and will continue to play the most significant mission in a human societies.

Beyond these notable evolutions in the field of educational policies destined to girls and women, there can still be noted the discrepancy between girls and boys as far as their access to upper education is concerned, the latter receiving a more consistent support from the authorities, mainly through scholarships. Such an example is the Junimea Society who collaborates with talented women writers, yet “Convorbiri literare” never offered financial support to women, while sponsoring male writers such as A.D. Xenopol and Mihai Eminescu (Ciupală, *Ibidem*). Young women were generally offered support by the state only if they pursued a didactic career, the Ministry of Education being constantly preoccupied with training specialists in the field of pedagogy. The idea to offer support to young women in order to provide them with access to education was mainly the concern of the specific segment of female population who due to various opportunities, family environment, talent or financial situation were well aware of the benefic role of education in changing the woman’s status and moreover in changing the Romanian society.

3. Women’s emancipation through education. Sofia Nădejde’s discourses (1879-1895)

In Romania, as well as in other Eastern-European countries, the beginnings of the militant discourses for women rights were rather shy, mainly because the highest percent of the population was living in the rural area and the industrialization process had a less significant impact as compared to the Western countries (Miroiu, 2004). Despite all these aspects, liberal Romanian feminists such as Adela Xenopol, Maria Buțureanu, Calypso Botez, Eugenia Reuss-Ianculescu, as well as the socialist feminists such as Sofia Nădejde activated in the urban centres, managing to obtain important victories, due to their brave public interventions and the foundation of magazines (Vlad, 2012). Sofia Nădejde was the first Romanian woman who was granted the right to pass her baccalaureate exam in a highschool for boys, Glowaska Boarding School, Botoșani, as well as the author of the first Romanian feminist novel, *The Passion*. Publicist, novelist and playwright, Sofia Nădejde became well-known because her public polemics with Titu Maiorescu, Romanian literary critic and politician, in which she aimed at proving that women’s intelligence as well as their rights are nothing but equal with those of men. Born in 1856, she was the daughter of two peasants from Botoșani, Vasile Băncilă Gheroghiu and Profira Neculae. She got married at just 18 years of age, in 1874, with Ion Nădejde, the head of the Social Democratic Workers Party of Romania, settled in Iași and began fighting intensely for women’s rights.

Sofia Nădejde presents a moralizing, deeply social discourse schematizing the moral universe of the Romanian society at the end of the 19th Century, according to a series of dichotomies: the village vs. the town, man vs. woman. The structures of the new capitalist economy were already emerging, the author recording the echoes of the new civilization: the modernization of education and its scientific fundamentals, and about women’s rights. In fact, the element that constantly fuelled her militant discourse and which she

constantly explores in her texts can be simply described as the equality of rights for women and men in a juridical, social and educational context. Because Iași did not have a paper that could promote her new ideas, the young writer appeals to “Femeia Română / The Romanian Woman”, a publication from Bucharest whose motto read *Libertate prin lumină!* (*Liberty through Light*) – which was managed by another woman, Maria Flechtenmacher. Interested by the articles sent by Sofia Nădejde from Iași, the manager of “Femeia Română” announces her readers: “We are happy to publish on our first page the letter we received from a well-educated intelligent lady from Iași, Sofia Nădejde” (Flechtenmacher, 1879). *Chestiunea femeilor* (*The Women Issue*) represents the extremely impetuous debut of Sofia Nădejde in “Femeia Română”, on March, 25, 1879.

We are being accused of not learning. But do we have schools? In order for a woman to have her baccalaureate she has to be extremely rich. We are being accused that our only interest is to be liked and beautiful, that we are not concerned with serious matters. But what are we taught in our childhood? That we have to be beautiful so that our fathers can find rich husbands for us. Give us better education, give up the idea that a woman’s role is to be liked, give women back their personal dignity by educating them. End this childish behaviour that you display in our presence, stop paying us compliments, fulfil all our caprices just because we are women, kiss our hands and compare us with angels while refusing us our rights in our absence! (Nădejde, 1879a, p. 179).

From a legal point of view, Romanian women were denied the right to ownership or heritage (both rights were transferred to the husband by marriage), as well as the right to have custody of their children in case of divorce. They did not have the right to conclude agreements, or the right to access upper education, well-paid jobs or political affiliation. These measures were installed during the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, stipulated by the Decree-Law no.1.655 of December, 4, 1864. Despite the fact that the first Constitution of modern Romania had been issued in the meantime, in 1866, during the reign of king Carol the 1st, there were no significant changes in the provisions regarding women’s social status. This is why Sofia Nădejde’s first discourses were related to the legal subordination of the wife to her husband and aimed at reforming the provisions of the Civil Code regarding mainly the spouses’ rights within the marriage.

In her subsequent article, *Starea femeilor și mediul local prin care se vor putea emancipa* (*Women’s status and the local environment where they will be able to emancipate*), the publicist focuses on the absolute priority of men in all aspects of the family life:

Here is how the law perceives us:

Witnesses to all register office actions can only be men. In case the mother does not express her consent regarding her daughter’s or son’s marriage the father’s consent is sufficient. The woman must follow her husband anywhere (legally, she cannot act otherwise even if the man chooses a location that can damage her health). The woman cannot enter a trial without her husband’s consent, even if she earns her own living. The father is the only one who can exert his authority upon the children until their adulthood (Nădejde, 1879b, pp. 297-298).

The woman’s precarious social condition is reflected in the area of education. The solutions proposed by the author target emancipation, by appealing to the educational argument:

Now, after exposing the miserable condition of the woman, we must seek the means to overcome it. The most natural solution is education, and this can be achieved by organizing clubs in every town where

women of all conditions could participate; we must unite in order to create funding for the education of all women. These funds must be used to open primary and secondary schools; we must send women abroad in order to have good teachers; we have to organize workshops where poor girls can learn a craft along with solid moral principles, so that they are not left on the streets. We must open schools for adults so that 18-19 year old women are not left in the dark (Nădejde, *Ibidem*).

These first publicistic attempts abound in pamphlet-like virulent elements, yet their moralizing pedagogical tone render the author's discourse accessible and popular. A century later, in a text attempting to recall Sofia Nădejde's contribution to the "accomplishment of the objectives of the Romanian Communist Party", mainly derived from the early socialist ideas expressed by the Nădejde family, Victor Vișinescu (1972, p. 51) does not hesitate to point to "important shortcomings in the political orientation of the young journalist who omitted the real causes of social inequity – the physiognomy of the capitalist production man, the division of society members in antagonist social classes – a perspective that was ideologically limited due to an insufficient Marxist reception".

In 1881, "Contemporanul. Revistă științifică și literară (The Contemporary. Scientific and Literary Magazine)" is founded in Iași, under the supervision of Ion Nădejde. Sofia Nădejde published during the next decade tens of articles, reviews, short-stories, plays and literary translations. She signs polemic articles centered on the women's education topic: *Către femei (To Women)* (1881-1882), *Femeia și legea (The Woman and the Law)* (1881-1882), *Educațiunea femeii (Women's Education)* (1882-1883). Her literary debut for "Contemporanul" takes place in 1895, when she publishes the short-story entitled *Două mame (Two Mothers)*. The journalist debates the issue of women's emancipation and its various social aspects, conducting polemics with her fellow journalists and giving accounts about the life of other nations. The achievements of women all over the world had to be made public in order to motivate and provide examples for the Romanian women. The journalistic discourse is animated by the same core idea: promoting women's right to education, the recognition of and respect for women's dignity and autonomy and partnership in their private life.

In the article entitled *Către femei (To Women)* (1881-1882), the author tackles the issue of the precarious education for girls, in comparison to the education for boys, reminding the readers of the useless contents taught in schools and proposing solutions that the readers were already familiar with:

What is our education all about? Speaking French, dancing, coming up with witty but senseless phrases; maybe some scarce knowledge of mathematics, natural sciences, history and geography. Yet they are taught in such a confuse manner by untrained teachers that they are readily forgotten. In the meanwhile our brothers of the same age spend 14-15 years in high-schools and universities with the best teachers. It is thus obvious that men who benefitted from superior means of education had a chance to develop their intellectual abilities and have better education and knowledge than us. Observing all these differences we started to reconsider our position, our education, its influence and our role in society. Public conferences provide very good instruction. They should be organized more often, people who have had access to science must understand their duty to disseminate it (...) Schools for adults are also extremely necessary, such a Society already exists, yet if we are to notice anything about it, it would be its complete lack of activity (Nădejde, *Ibidem*, p. 6).

This discourse targeted at the Society for the Education of the Romanian People that founded the first schools for adults in March, 1867. Until that date, although these schools were opened in the 23 locations in the country where the Society had its subsidiaries, they were only successful in the capital.

In 1893 the publication “Evenimentul literar / The Literary Event”, is issued in Iași, managed by Sofia Nădejde. Its pages paradoxically-and bizarrely, for the communist critics of the author (see Vișinescu’s study from 1972) host both Marxist and anti-marxist writings. In 1894, the magazine “Lumea nouă științifică și literară / The New Scientific and Literary World” is issued in Bucharest, as a supplement of “Lumea nouă / The New World”. The profile of this publication is a mixture between a popular and an encyclopaedic style journal. Among its articles there are quite a few that tackle the issue of women’s education in the schools of the time.

Starting with the year 1905, the author publishes in “Albina / The Bee”, a publication managed by Spiru Haret, the initiator of Casa Școalelor (The House of Schools), a preoccupation that is again misunderstood by the communist critics of the author, “the new publication being nothing but the tribune of monarchist propaganda in the rural area” (Vișinescu, 1972, p.127).

One of the most popular ideas of the time, supported not only by men, such as Spiru Haret or other clerks of the Ministry of Education, but also by some publications of the time edited by women, such as “Gazeta feminină” (The Women’s Gazette) was that “the schools for girls, as they were organized at the time, provided scientists, but failed to provide good mothers and housewives” (Teodoru, 1911). Moreover, it was believed that women belonging to all social categories who attend schools are driven away from the solid moral principles family is based on, a double consequence resulting from here: on the one hand, girls become estranged, and on the other hand the family is destroyed. The necessity of education is thus seriously questioned as a phenomenon, mainly because “women are more useful due to their virtues than due to their knowledge” (Manicatide, 1903). In “Albina”, Sofia Nădejde publishes several articles militating for the generalization of women education in the rural area, for the founding of schools, in order to fight ignorance and superstitions. It was not only the law that needed change, but also the mentality of the population with regard to women. Education represented a landmark in this respect. For Sofia Nădejde, the argument that women had to be educated in order to become good mothers and gain a sense of justice was absolutely irrelevant. “The ancient people educated their slaves in order for those to be able to raise the masters’ children.” This mentality reminds us of Napoleon, for whom women were possessions and they had to be treated as such. The woman is good as a mother, so she has to be educated in order to produce good sons for the country. Nădejde (1904, p. 121) believes that a woman should be educated because she is human, because she is equal to the man, not because she is a mother: “a woman is a mother only for a period of her life and it would be unfair to spend the rest of her life in the darkness of ignorance”.

The main characteristic of the publicistic discourse was its recognition and respect for women’s dignity and autonomy, promoting their right to education and partnership in their private life. The fact that masculinity and femininity appear as two social constructs has now become an obvious idea, mostly due to the beginnings of the feminist movement activities.

4. Conclusion

The literature in the field claims that studies on the topic centre on deconstructivism in order to annihilate and rebuild the image of women in society (Purvis 1991; Howell & Beth, 2002; De Haan, Daskalova, & Loutfi, 2006). However, by means of objective education, the individual is the one he finally gets the ability to decompose and recompose the world according to his/her own reason. Our opinion is that today we need a type of education and a way of understanding education that could provide the most accurate answers to the challenges of the contemporary world. Indoctrination and the omission of certain evidence from the past are opposed to genuine, authentic education, due to certain characteristics: you are taught without understanding what should be understood, the education abuses authority, starts from prejudice, favours ideologically certain values while denying others, excessively promotes particular facts, depicting them as universal (Cucos, 1997).

Why should we study the history of women's education? First of all because the historians of education have rendered women invisible, including them in generic categories such as children or people and focusing their research on boys and men education. Secondly, the present is a product of the past, and a democratic society must respect the autonomy and rights of all citizens, with a special view on the freedom of expression and equal chances for education. Studies focusing on the historical analysis of girls and women's education in the Romanian cultural context should neither merely explain or present the characteristics of the social elements during a given period of time, nor reflect social variables, the characteristics of a culture. These studies should induce action, by permanently relating to the present, defined context. From the way in which gender discrimination existed in certain historical context to a universal, generalized approach that explains, with historical arguments, the reasons for which gender equality encourages successful access to particular social functions/roles, studies on the theoretic aspects of gender equality in education can introduce subtle changes in the research paradigm (Momanu, Popa & Samoilă, 2018). Moreover, there are presently significant differences between men and women with regard to the equal access to the resources generated by the professional fields such as education, health, the political register. However, beyond all these aspects, conservative mentalities still persist in the Romanian mentality, which is still reserved regarding gender equality in the access to resources. Starting from this state of facts we do believe that the past must be studied and understood in order to provide the necessary background for real social changes.

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