

## The Feminine Character of the Central-European Literature between Parallel Mirrors

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**Résumé :** L'espace culturel du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle est configuré comme « une autre Europe » dont l'identité peut être définie, premièrement, par la littérature, parce que à l'intérieur de cette zone multiculturelle, « la république des lettres » en est son âme même. En ce qui concerne la femme, elle acquiert un rôle social, selon les mœurs de l'époque, les idéologies changent la vision artistique, en créant ainsi le réflexe artistique du concept de féminité. Notre itinéraire dans l'univers de la féminité réunit une série d'histoires, de vérités, d'images, d'hypostases, en brossant différentes facettes entre la réalité et la fiction. La femme est un personnage controversé et en même temps, incitant de la littérature central-européenne et non seulement. La condition de la femme dans l'espace de la littérature suppose un degré de complexité mais aussi une approche interdisciplinaire, en ouvrant ainsi de multiples perspectives dans sa réception.

**Mots-clés :** littérature de l'Europe Centrale et de l'Est, roman, personnage féminin, identité

Central Europe is a space reuniting countries which vary in number according to the moment as well as the criterion of definition, including or excluding a series of areas. This space of uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity perpetually underwent a process of successive creation and recreation which meant an alternation between continuous and discontinuous, unitary and fragmentary, dependent and independent, centripetal and centrifugal. Throughout the centuries, specialists wondered whether Central Europe as a mental representation is a concept, a notion, a paradigm or a syntagm, a cultural and spiritual model, a theme, a myth or perhaps even a nostalgia. This reality of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is idealized as a symbol of harmony among different peoples, a sort of “transnational paradise”, “a utopist potential for multiculturalism and multilingualism”, a realm of “thinkers and poets”, “a community of agony”, “a sacred territory”.

Central Europe ought to be understood by highlighting the spiritual documents of a world in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's fall. That is why writers like Krleža, Kusniewicz, Gombrowicz, Lucian Blaga, Ioan Slavici are considered to be Central-European as well as other Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian or Ukrainian writers.

Nicolae Breban and Sorin Titel are two of the novelists of the 60s who prominently define that peculiar spirit of Central Europe. The former rediscovers a profoundly spiritualised territory in Ardeal -“the centre of the world”, so that *Îngerul de ghips* [*The Angel of Plaster*, our transl.], *Bunavestire* [*Annunciation*, our transl.], *Amfitrion* [*Amphytrion*] can be received through the grid of the masterpieces of Mitteleuropa. The most important writer of the peripheral Central-European area is Sorin Titel. The tetralogy *Țara îndepărtată* [*The Remote Country*, our transl.], comprising *Țara îndepărtată* [*The Remote Country*, our transl.], *Pasărea și umbra* [*The Bird and the Shadow*, our transl.], *Clipa cea repede* [*The Fleeting Second*, our transl.], *Femeie, iată fiul tău* [*Woman, Here Is Your Son*, our transl.] depicts Romanians, Hungarians, Serbians, Polish who rediscover Vienna at the beginning of the century still under the impression of the imperial values. In the first series of novels and short stories the writer opts for the French modernizing model, and in the cycle *Țara îndepărtată* his models are peripheral writers ranging from Kusniewicz to Danilo Kis. Sorin Titel's narratives depict the life of the small urban settlements from Banat torn apart in the aftermath of the war.

*Țara îndepărtată* distinguishes itself through the well-individualized realistic depiction of a wide gallery of figures belonging to the urban universe of Banat. All these figures are projected on the fabric created by the feminine characters in their role of “detached commentators” of facts. The kitchen becomes an observatory and a genuine story depository for the Mother and the maid Eva Nada who travel back in time, judge people, exchange information and comment the events they witnessed from multiple perspectives while cooking various dishes. While fulfilling their daily chores in their allotted space, the two female

characters narrate, interpret and comment the town life. As they evoke more or less recent events, they project a complete picture of life in its meandering flow. *Țara îndepărtată* represents the novel of “escaping from patriarchy” as well as the novel of a world in which innocence is assaulted by numerous major threats. The island, a symbol of isolation, creates the illusion of an everlasting happiness, of a domestic tranquility due to the minute and affectionate depiction of the minor family preoccupations. In *Proza românească de azi* [*The Contemporary Romanian Prose*, our transl.], the literary critic Cornel Ungureanu points out the fact that the Son’s departure from home is described in tens of pages as if it were similar to Ulysses’ adventures. Furthermore, the critic emphasizes that it is the heroines’ conversation which transforms an ordinary task of making marmalade into a remarkable act like the kidnapping of the beautiful Brizeis. Another female heroine in the novel is the young primary school teacher, the future wife of Mr. Cristea who is an agronomist in Margina. Their elopement acquires a special connotation similar to the theft of the beautiful women which led to the foundation of Rome. The family concept lies at the heart of the novel and therefore the female character – the Mother can be analysed from this perspective. Dana Dumitriu, in her study entitled *Piéta* (*Caiete critice*, no. 1-2/1984) underlines the fact that there is only one positive deity who masters the human turmoil, namely the Mother. It is not the almighty Father who sometimes overlooks his creation, but the saddened and humbly grateful Mother who sitting on a “sovereign cloud” has a panoramic understanding of those destinies that are troubled in their cradle by worldly feelings, desires and uncontrollable flaws; “On her celestial throne, Mother has a virginal demeanor and a gesture or word of hers reestablishes the simplicity of feelings and emotions.”

Under the scrutiny of an in-depth analysis, *Țara îndepărtată* as well as *Clipa cea repede* are the most serene novels dominated by the feminine soul capable of soothing vicissitudes and torments whereas *Pasărea și umbra* and *Femeie, iată fiul tău* bring forward the sinuous, problem-solving, vulnerable destiny subjected to a different psychology. The author himself is aware of the feminine or masculine perspective that he alternates, seemingly meditating upon the fundamental differences between the psychologies of the two sexes: “After fully understanding a woman, I have realized that only a woman is endowed with the ability to attain the true knowledge of this world and grasp its essence so that no discrepancy or disconnection, not even the slightest or most insignificant misapplication might appear.”

In *Lunga călătorie a prizonierului* [*The Prisoner’s Long Journey*, our transl.], the character’s evolution is marked by the female prototype. The opening of the novel is dominated by the woman who is feeding her baby and her serenity and cheerfulness foreshadows a separation, a matrix disconnection. Throughout the terrifying journey made by the three characters, the feminine projection of mother and lover is obsessively reiterated. The obsession of the sensual and maternal femininity: the prisoner is seeking for Maria and her offspring whom he discovers in the dream world or in reality, in all the women encountered along his journey (that from the old man’s boat, the deserted inn or the cart) can be identified in the depiction of the house from the grotto, that “warm and hospitable land” where the prisoner can shelter at the end of his initiation journey. The prisoner permanently dreams of returning home and rejoining the mother, an attitude similar Sorescu’s protagonist: “I was happy thinking that they will certainly lose my track and thus I will get rid of their embarrassing presence and be able to return home. I will return to my beloved mother, I told to myself, my beloved mother who has been waiting for me, I told to myself gazing at the amazingly clear sky [...] God, it is so nice or how nice to have a mother who has been willing to wait at a window.”

The novel *Femeie, iată fiul tău* evokes events from Banat villages at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as the image of Paris in the 70s. The protagonist coming to Paris is a painter and bears the same name as the hero from The First World War who is to find his death on the battlefield in Galitia. The latter will be continually mourned by the “sublime” mother who cannot accept the destiny while former is healed by his mother who comes from

the Danubian region in order to look after her seriously injured son. Due to the epic fabric of the two novels as well as the depicted times, one may mistake one protagonist for another, both mothers' confessions being strikingly similar. Since the two protagonists bear the name Marcu, they are both sons of the same destiny marked by solitude and dominated by misfortune. The first Marcu is the Mother's archetype and the whole novel is in fact a creation of maternal love, highlighting the worldly sacred mission of a woman.

*Femeie, iată fiul tău* depicts some of the most common existence: Sofia, an elderly woman does not neglect her son and continually relives the memories of her distant youth, thus emphasizing the almighty force of a predestined life of commitment and sacrifice. In the opening of this literary work there is a dream of an old peasant woman.

The image of the son who says in agony to his mother: you should know, mom, it is really hard, it is not easy at all to feel alienated and estranged from everybody! I suppose wherever you would go, you would hardly find any other man as lonely and dogged by misfortune as I am." 9 His mother who grasps his sufferance lost her youth and is now old and isolated in a tragic memory.

Mothers are always the same; both Sofia and the school teacher's wife are animated by a profound feeling: maternal commitment. That is why Titel's work is a eulogy delivered to women in general and mothers in particular: "Because, Ivo Filipovac says, only a woman can truly understand the world and grasp its essence so that no discrepancy or disconnection, not even the slightest or most insignificant misapplication might appear. She will always find it easy to find her place in the world, feeling like home wherever she may go." (our transl.)

Marcu, the painter had seen a symbolic icon in a church – "Virgin Mary who holds her heart in her hands", this image possibly signifying a plunge into the abyss. The critic Eugen Simion in his work, *Scriitori români de azi* [Contemporary Romanian Writers, vol. III, our transl.] observes a fictitious polemic regarding the theme of insignificant existence with the French writer, Jean-Paul Sartre from the perspective of the feminine embodiment. However, Sorin Titel points out that when you respect "the great history" 10 you cannot sympathize with a bereaved mother. Nonetheless, the mother's sufferance is more relevant to the whole existence than a philosopher's concern over humanity. "Just because we consider that mothers sacrifice themselves for humanity, perpetuating life however harrowing the calamities would be."

*Femeie, iată fiul tău* is not only a novel about love and life, but also about solitude and death. The novelist does not analyze femininity but observes the life in which the woman is a deity, Sofia for example transcends time, being the embodiment of duration and love in the universal solitude. Her grand-grandchildren and grandchildren visit her, a child humiliates her by asking her to sing but the elderly woman forgives absolutely everything. All these minute depictions create that archetypal image of the Mother surrounded by relatives, aunts and cousins with their histories and prominent events.

*Clipa cea repede* is regarded as a delightful idyll of Banat. The novel opens with Miss Ana's dreaming about her parents' wedding. The dream ensures both the access to and the exit from Titel's world and as for the protagonists the dream state and the reality intermingle. The stories told by Nușca and Anna about the two weddings recreate a nuptial atmosphere: Having to accept that she is offered the gold coins and sells her heart to someone else, the bride dances with the mugger Coroambă and his accomplices. Nușca and Persida, just like most of the women from Sorin Titel's novels, are the depositories of memory, being considered real agents of time. It can be highlighted the fact that Titel portrays a woman able to have access to that absolute knowledge of the most profound mysteries. This is the case in the vision of the fortress on the foundations of which twelve precious stones lie, with pearls on its sides and the street made of gold. The female character in her double status as a virgin and junior school teacher can aspire to transcend reality while the male character is predestined to profane order. The accounts given by the two protagonists can be read from different perspectives: the literal meaning according to which a woman can tempt even the

Devil; at the deeper level it can connote the knowledge and Epictet's quote about moderation handed down from the Mother to Ana and then to Nușca. The hidden meaning relates to the Apocalypse which is to be understood as revelation, the visionary capacity being allotted only to the female innocent being.

An in-depth analysis of Milan Kundera's work reveals a load of subversive and provocative elements, his well-written stories being both captivating and amusing. The innocent depictions from his books are strikingly different from the Romanian textural artifices. Kundera's novels and short stories highlight the author's attempt to silence his moral standards and dissimulate his exigencies under the pretence of mildness and insidiousness.

From Milan Kundera's point of view, love is nothing else but diaphanous dreaming or profound sighing which can be so palpably powerful. The protagonists are not magnetized by some haunting phantasms or some obscure pulsations due to the fact that there is a straightforward communication between the lovers. By the use of lucidity and irony, the writer describes the daily mechanisms of the couple life which are often so hilarious that they provoke roars of laughter. The skillful insight into all the erotic tribulations represents in fact the mean strategies used for dissimulation and survival, thus revealing the true dimension of man's failure. The cycle *Iubiri caraghioase* [*Funny Loves*, our transl.] delineates the female character and her allotted marital role. The woman is often perceived as a mere instrument that a man can easily replace. The short story *Nimeni nu va râde* [*Nobody Will Laugh*, our transl.] depicts the couple formed by professor Klima and Klara, a dressmaker who sought to get rid of her humble social status. The attic of the professor's dwelling was the place where the two lovers secretly met. Klara came from a well-off family [...] an excellent family, her father was an ex-bank manager (13), but she wasted her beauty poring over her sewing machine, comments the protagonist who wished she had become a fashion model.

The couple's life is affected by Mr Zaturecky's appearance. This person wishes he had his mediocre article published and needs the famous professor Klima's reference. Klima tries to postpone him, hoping that he will eventually be discouraged. Zaturecky sticks to the idea of having his article published and professor Klima uses his girlfriend to get rid of his insistence. Things get worse as Zaturecky's wife intervenes to defend his husband's honour. She was a tall woman, a very tall woman [...] her blue eyes being in sharp contrast with her thin face. Her stiff demeanour was highlighted by her garment, a long brown overcoat which looked like a military cloak. The attic seems besieged as soon as she scours the professor's dwelling so as to identify him and his lover, the dressmaker and that is why their relationship is deteriorated. The young woman pleads that she is a prostitute as long as she may keep coming secretly there. The young professor Klima's cowardice estranges the ingenious lover who breaks up with him, which emphasizes the fact that women loathe dishonest men. The role she plays and assumes up to a point determines her to be more unselfconscious than she used to be since this game offers her a totally unique feeling, the feeling of a carefree irresponsibility. The hitch-hiker felt as if she had no restriction: she was allowed to say, to do, to feel whatever she felt like. This sort of cheeky pleasure rendered by the consciousness of pervades her body; therefore the culpability of indecency eventually overwhelms her, now considering herself only a hitch-hiker, a character with no future. The game she had started was in a way weird due to the fact that the man was not able to see the hitch hiker but only his partner who was now trying to win over a stranger, thus having the opportunity to see how she acted under such circumstances. The young man treats her as though she were a loose woman, crossing the forbidden line and the initial game turns into a sheer disappointment for the young woman who tries to cast the role away, however feeling that she has no credibility and consequently the couple's holiday becomes an unbearable nuisance.

The myth of eternal femininity stems from archetypal representations, which from Yung's point of view incorporate both external and internal experiences of humanity in its evolution and are manifested in different situations, dreams, neurotic experiences or artistic creations. The Mother's Figure is the reference point for different female archetypes embodied by Magna Mater Deorum, Isis in Egypt, Istar Manu on the Euphrates River or Gaia in the Greek's culture. Cosmogony requires the

unification of the female and the masculine principle just because only this unification makes creation and the existence of the mythical female representations possible.

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## Notes

- [1] Ungureanu, Cornel, *Europa Centrală. Memorie, paradis, apocalipsă*, Polirom, Iași, 1998, pag. 9.
- [2] Dimisianu, Gabriel, *Nouă prozatori*, Eminescu, București, 1977, p.145.
- [3] Ungureanu, Cornel, *Proza românească de azi*, Cartea Românească, București, 1985, p. 512.
- [4] Dumitriu, Dana, *Pietă*, in „Caiete critice”, no. 1-2/1984.
- [5] Ibidem.
- [6] Titel, Sorin, *Femeie, iată fiul tău !*, Cartea Românească, București, 1983, p. 145.
- [7] Titel, Sorin, *Lunga călătorie a prizonierului*, București, Eminescu, 1981, p. 224.
- [8] Simion, Eugen, *Scriitori români de azi*, III, Cartea Românească, București, 1984, p. 529.
- [9] Titel, Sorin, *Femeie, iată fiul tău!*, op. cit., p. 135.
- [10] Simion, Eugen, op.cit., pag. 548.
- [11] Idem.
- [12] Tomuş, Mircea, „Clipa cea repede”, in “*Transilvania*”, no. 9 / 1979.

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