

Representations of Femininity in D. Bolintineanu's Novels

Professeur des universités, dr. Floriana Popescu

Université « Dunărea de Jos » de Galați, Roumanie

Résumé : Ce papier se propose de faire une courte présentation de la personnalité d'un grand roumain, Dimitrie Bolintineanu, connu également comme un écrivain, diplômât et patriote, profondément impliqué dans les mouvements révolutionnaires du milieu de XIX^{ème} siècle. Fondateur du roman dans la littérature roumaine, Bolintineanu a été un publiciste passionné, en tant que directeur et éditeur de quelques journaux. Pourtant, l'objet de notre investigation se trouve dans la galerie des personnages féminines qui ornent l'univers du roman *Manoil*, publié premièrement en feuilleton (dans un seul épisode, malheureusement, à cause de la situation du journal en question) et, puis, un peu plus tard, dans sa forma définitive. L'introduction présente les directions d'investigation de l'œuvre de Bolintineanu et les deux sections suivantes, Dimitrie Bolintineanu in the Romanian culture et Dimitrie Bolintineanu as a novelist donnent des informations sur la position qu'il occupe dans la culture et la littérature roumaine. On présente ensuite les versions des romans sur lesquelles se base cette approche, même si la littérature roumaine possède plusieurs éditions de l'œuvre de Bolintineanu. Finalement, on fait un inventaire des personnages féminins et des techniques de narration utilisées par l'auteur dans la création des portraits respectives.

Key words: heroine, attitude, comportement, idéologies, formules descriptives

Introduction

The current approach focuses on the feminine characters in *Manoil*, Bolintineanu's first novel. The author's prominent literary and historic figure has been the object of literary criticism in chapters of histories of the Romanian literature (Ivașcu, Roataru, Al. Dima et al. 1970), in studies addressing specialists (Vârgolici 1985, Zăciu 1967) as well as in popularizing literature (Roman 1962, Vârgolici 1971, Vârgolici 1972, Vârgolici 1988) intended for the average reader.

Although very few mentions have been recorded with regard to Bolintineanu's creative force and active involvement in the social and historic events he witnessed, some of the responsibilities and positions held when he reached his professional climax are still mentioned in the literature of speciality.

1. Dimitrie Bolintineanu in the Romanian culture

Born and brought up to the age of ten in a modest family living in a modest place, close to the town of Bucharest, after this age he had to face numerous life changes in order to make his own way to a career. Bolintineanu worked long and hard to make his way to (literary) fame.

Little is known about his early years, but documents do attest that after his father's death, he was taken into custody by some close relatives and, thus, he moved to Bucharest. There he attended elementary and high school courses, working with famous teachers of the time, out of whom he expresses his gratitude and respect for Gherghe Lazăr.

Although he felt happy together with his friends, he often preferred isolation to any company, reason for which his friends had nicknamed him "Hermit" (Roman 1962: 15).

Noticing his special gift for literature, his friends had provided him a scholarship offered by "Societatea literară" to further his studies in Paris (Roman 1962: 30).

Unlike other young Romanians living and studying in Paris, Bolintineanu felt attracted to humanities and thus, he attended Jules Michelet's, Adam, Mickiewicz's, Edgar Quinet's and Saint-Marc Girardin's classes at Collège de France. Actually, Saint-Marc Girardin became the author's biographer. While in Paris he also breathtakingly read Lamartine and Victor Hugo and Goethe's, Shakespeare's and Byron's literary creations translated in French (Roman 1962: 35).

Living his life from one extreme to another (with a fall from the position of

governmental representative to the status of an exiled forced to leave his own country) Bolintineanu still remains among the pioneers of the Romanian literature.

Back in his home country, Bolintineanu hardly brought any testimonial or diploma in proof of his graduating from whatever Parisian or French higher education institution. Nevertheless, his knowledge of French and English literature alluded to either by his novel characters in various discursive situations or by literary historians and critics (Al. Dima et al 1970: 557, Vârgolici 1988: 325-6), does have its roots in this stay in Paris. In spite of his hard life with its numerous ups and downs, Bolintineanu remains an equally remarkable and controversial personality in the Romanian cultural and historic heritage. He was remarkable for the services he brought in Cuza's times, both as a minister in his own country and, later on, as a representative of the Romanian government in Paris. His literary merits unveil him as a remarkable writer of his two novels. Creative as he was, Bolintineanu also developed a peculiar interest for journalism. As a journalist he took upon himself both editing and producing journals, even if their existence was short-lived and writing brochures intended to popularize his country in Western Europe (Ivaşcu 1969: 463).

All in all, he expressed his creativity through several species and genres, i.e., poems, (historic) legends, travel writings, novels and plays and he tasted both sweet success with his poetry, in particular, and bitter failure with his drama. He was controversial not in himself as a writer or in his literature, but in the opinions of several literary critics who, when placing him among the other Romanian writers, may broadly be divided into those who appreciate and those who minimize his role and literary contributions in general, and the novelistic production, in particular. Critics describe his "inventiveness to be factual, his sense of observation to be almost next to nothing, despite the author's insistent trying to cross the social layers but lacking the required method(ology) and detachment" (our parenthetical addition and our translation from Rotaru 1972: 183).

2. Dimitrie Bolintineanu as a novelist

Although the Romanian critical literature admits Bolintineanu to be among the pioneers of novel-writing successful accomplishment in our culture, his merits have been continually and insistently ignored. Thus, in Rotaru's opinion, as a novelist, Bolintineanu "has the merit of the beginning and that's about all (1972: 184). On the other hand, certain of the Romanian literary critics had high consideration for Manoil and Elena which enjoy "the merit of priority in a genre never tried before" in the Romanian literature (Vargolici 1988: 325). In their epoch, they could hardly find their proper match (Cioculescu et al. 1971: 111). After all, being a pioneer in no matter what the field may be about or deal with, as a pioneer, all you have to do is to take responsibilities upon yourself which, as time passes by grow more and more important to literary criticism than the very ideas you advance towards the world you live in. That is why, we consider that, first and foremost, it is of tremendous importance to take upon oneself the task of being a pioneer.

It is only late in the 20th century when Vargolici ascertains Bolintineanu's great success which is the creation and eventually the successful publication of *Manoil*, acknowledged as the first novel in the Romanian literature, although other previous attempts did exist but, which, for one reason or another, ended in failures.

While creating and making his literary production public, Bolintineanu reveals himself to have been fully aware of his pioneering role in the discussions about literature, the national education system, the poet's role and the importance of knowledge acquisition by each individual which unfold here and there in Manoil's letters.

The two novels "bear the mark of pioneering works in this literary genre" and "they are still of interest not only as a literary experiment but also for their notes of observation and social critique, springing from the author's tendency to propagate the ideal of social and national emancipation" (Ivaşcu 1969: 465). According to Ibraileanu, the two novels are

indeed revealing with regard to the evolution of the feminine psychology, to the women's priority in social emancipation (Ibraileanu 1979: 364). Approaches to Bolintineanu's novelistic universe were, with some literary critics, biased by the ideology prevailing the intellectual life and attitudes during their publication years. In addition, this universe was explored from a larger perspective, being discussed in terms of novel publication chronology or in terms of novel structure.

The Romanian literary criticism has hardly been generous towards Bolintineanu's novel heroes who were taken and described in bulk. They were considered to "lack epic substance" (Ivaşcu 1969: 465), or to "have a fuzzy outline, not resulting from the inner logic of the way events keep unfolding (Al. Dima et al. 1970: 556). Their characterization was rather minimalistic and bulky, revealing them to be situated at extremes, and thus, involving an "irreducible contrast: positive heroes who embody only qualities in the superlative (i.e., Manoil in the first part of the novel, Zoe, Smărăndița and Ana) and negative and mean persons summing up only vices, in the superlative, too" (Al. Dima et al. 1970: 556).

Nonetheless, critical literature offers refined statements regarding the feminine figures of the novels. Thus, as early as Bolintineanu's times, Alecsandri noticed that in his contemporary literature "women got civilized ahead of their men" (and this idea was assumed by Ibraileanu as well, who also states that with us "it was the women who got civilized more easily soon after the first contacts with western civilization" (1979:364).

Since we are strongly convinced that it is not as difficult to analyze and characterize an author's style insisting on drawbacks, as it is to create it, we share those opinions which prize Bolintineanu's literature in general, and his novels, in particular.

3. Materials and method

Our research is based on Bolintineanu's novels, *Manoil* and *Elena*, in their 1988 edition, published by Minerva, the Bucharest publishing house.

We started with the novel reading, with the collecting and processing of the data relevant to our approach and it continued with an exploration of the critical attitudes regarding the novels and their characters. The extreme critical opinions regarding these heroes have been expressed in the foregoing. In what follows, only those facets of femininity which were revealed in Bolintineanu's first novel will be considered. Femininity is uncovered directly through mentions referring to each heroine of importance to Manoil, who according to literary critical resources, is the author himself. It is also characterized indirectly, through Manoil's thoughts or considerations through the heroine's overtly expressed attitudes almost always regarding the Romanian culture (i.e., concerns about the national literature, the woman's role in the society, the system of education, etc.).

4. Faces of femininity in *Manoil*

Bolintineanu's novelist world is populated with women belonging to all walks of life.

Technically, the representations of femininity in Bolintineanu's novels, in general, and with a particular view on Manoil, were performed through direct and indirect approaches. In the case of direct approaches, the novel produces specific descriptive patterns, simplified into:

- (a) brief or actually one-sentence presentations;
- (b) sketchy descriptions;
- (c) detailed portraits.

One-sentence descriptions appear to have been preferred in those particular situations where the heroine has an insignificant contribution to the plot. This would be the case with Elena, who is Smărăndița's sister and who is simply "beautiful and in love with her husband" (Bolintineanu 1988: 10)¹ or with Lady S., who, in one letter only (Bolintineanu 1988: 7), is mentioned to be "a famous intermediary" for those interested in finding an occasional partner

to have intercourse just for the fun of it and with no other consequences.

There have also been recorded instances where one-sentence references play the introductory part for a request. For one example, in the message to Duduca (Bolintineanu 1988: 89)² asking for shelter for a misfortunate young lady, the author begins his letter with "This little girl is the personification of virtue..." (our translation).

Our (b) division considers those brief portraits of less significant heroines whose presence appears only once along the whole novel. The descriptive pattern consists of some introductory references which concern (1) the heroine's age and physical aspect; there follows (2) a personal consideration, which, most frequently, is a comparison and in some few cases (3) the concluding line of the portrait which, as a rule, has a negative connotation. An illustration is that of Zlatca, the Jewish woman, who is given only one description which is typical for Bolintineanu's pattern: "She was a beautiful woman; she had an elegant posture and an expressive face with noble and proportionate features; but she was whitened like a wall" (Bolintineanu 1988: 87)³.

Sketchy portraits based on a descriptive pattern are also provided to heroines more important to the novel. Thus, Smărăndița "... is 25 years old and she represents a special kind of beauty; without any exaggeration, is a rare beauty resembling a flower which takes a melancholic bow in the morning of her life!" (1988: 7)⁴. Zoe "... is a fifteen-year-old child; the very image of her aunt but glowing with freshness. You would compare her with a rose budlet, which is still ignored by butterflies, but who is witty and kindhearted" (1988: 8)⁵. Mărioara is "a friend of Smărăndița's; she is the daughter of a great boyard; she is not too beautiful but she is as cute as the month of May!" (1988: 8)⁶. The feminine characters presentation continues with Duduca whose portrait is the most elaborate of them all and it is imbued with Manoil's personal thoughts and comments.

Bolintineanu's last type of narrative technique depicting femininity is, in our opinion, the creation of minute portraits. These detailed portraits were 'drawn' to those heroines whom the main hero felt important to himself. Three heroines enjoy this status, Duduca, Mărioara and Tudora. Manoil induces the reader to understanding that Duduca is his trustworthy friend whom he respects and whole-heartedly entrusts with the protection of Ana, the above-mentioned personification of virtue. As Manoil's first love, Mărioara is present throughout the novel, either involved in actions of great importance to Manoil or when describing episodes in her adventurous life. Symbol of pure countryside lasses, Tudora shares with Manoil the belonging to the poor classes. Probably this is why, Tudora, whose only richness is her beauty and her virtue, is photographically described to be "... a peasant lass, who is fair-haired with rosy cheeks, full of freshness and health ... Tudora's full-size portrait shows not only her clothes but also her blue eyes covered by long and golden eyelashes...". In her dialogue with Manoil, Tudora admits, "Well, sir, you see, I am a stupid girl; I don't know what to say, I don't know how to thank you..." (1988: 15)⁷.

If Duduca and Mărioara are minutely portrayed in full passages or with frequent references to their personality, thus having their image completed here and there along the novel, Smărăndița, is very frequently referred to either for her beauty and numerous talents or for her ideas regarding the position of women in the contemporary Romanian society, the attitudes towards education or literature or the importance of poetry.

The indirect approaches to femininity will be found in:

- (a) inner monologues or the description of the main hero's thoughts or insights and
- (b) the characters' gestures or attitudes pointing to their own nature or beliefs.

Inner monologues and the main hero's personal thoughts as this one referring to Ana, "she seemed to be blushing of the job she was plotting to carry out... ... and all these for just some bread crumbs." (Bolintineanu 1988: 87)⁸, reveal him to be a sympathetic and understanding nature.

Some women in this novel make noble gestures or overtly show their own attitudes. Out of these, an instance where a special feeling of duty, honour and equality between men

and women is obvious, i.e., where Frosa tells Manoil (Bolintineanu 1988: 83) “you have saved my life and I owe it to you to save yours, so that we could be even.”

Compositionally, the faces of femininity may have their overtly expressed or hidden identity. The identity is hidden either behind initials, behind synecdochical representations or behind groups of people labeled with generic nouns. of interest to this analysis are the feminine groups referred to as “the society of beautiful and witty women” (Bolintineanu 1988: 7), or simply “the women” (Bolintineanu 1988:7), “our dames” (Bolintineanu 1988: 22) or “the dames” (Bolintineanu 1988: 24). So far in the foregoing, many feminine names have been mentioned, the use of initials is a practice in Bolintineanu’s novels, where, in addition to the enigmatic Mr. B., Manoil’s friend, the reader will find Mrs. S, for one example only. There have been noticed synecdochical uses of plain women or men: “two dames from Bucharest”, “a Romanian dame in Paris”, “a nun” or “the postilion”, “the Russian general”, etc., for the masculine representations.

All in all, Bolintineanu’s representations of femininity are portrayed as they appear in the eyes of the beholder, who is actually, Manoil, the shrewd observer of his contemporary society.

Women may stand for a whole typology. They may be respectful ladies and beloved wives, such as Smărăndița thoroughly described in the beginning of the novel and Zoe in its end, who are worthy of the admiration of the smaller or larger community they are part of. And they may equally be just an element in a larger group, as that of the nuns in the monastery, or that of Tudora, who embodies the young and very beautiful peasant lasses, who are defenseless in their relationships with rich males. Frosa in turn, is the typical representation of all girls of middle-class family extraction who are deprived of their rights by their elderly brothers, absolute heirs of the family fortune. Strong-willed, ambitious and very clever, she understands her position, takes things for what they are and gradually changes her life to make it fit and up to her ideals (i.e., being unable to fight her brother, she accepts to become a nun, but she eventually leaves the monastery to get married to the man she had loved long before becoming a nun). Contrary to Frosa, her sister who is facing the same situation is almost ready to commit suicide, but she is prevented from that in the nick of time.

. This society gradually gets some identity which begins with the introduction of Smărăndița, “Mr. Colescu’s wife who calls me her favourite poet...” (Bolintineanu 1988: 7), and furthers with Zoe, Smărăndița’s niece, with Mărioara and Duduca, who are Smărăndița’s friends.

All these types of women are strongly connected to the countryside universe, which is situated far from the noise and debauchery felt in the descriptions of the urban episodes. In Bolintineanu’s viewpoint, this urban world allows for the prevailing of promiscuity and prostitution, for the distortion of motherly feelings, once Ana’s mother decides and acts so as to force her daughter into practising prostitution, we may infer the author’s conviction that a woman’s nature may be influenced by the circumstances she lives in. Ana represents the virtuous young lady who fights by all her means for her social position and who is favoured by fate since Manoil is willing to find a solution to prevent her from becoming a prostitute.

In spite of Frosa’s claiming that “...man and woman are equal in front of virtue”, the faces of prostitution in this novel are feminine. Zlatca, the Jewish woman who is famous all over the country for her adventurous life, should be included into this type together with Mărioara, who becomes forced by her life ups and downs to make her living by her own means.

In spite of the P.S. which actually finishes the novel, and which is irrelevant to the main objective of the current approach, we could imagine that Bolintineanu’s novelistic world suggests a closed circle which starts with scenes of happy family life at the Colescu’s countryside mansion, which develops with all sorts of adventures and misfortunes, with episodes which have a happy-end (as Ana and Stănică’s love story with premises and promises to end in a successful and well-deserved marriage) and episodes which have a sad

end (as Mărioara's confessing on her deathbed of having committed murder). This imaginary circle ends with scenes of happy life spent in the same mansion which had belonged to Mr. Colescu and was bequeathed to Manoil, who is now Zoe's husband.

Final remarks

Irrespective of the critical literature emphasizing the inconsistency of Bolintineanu's novelistic characters, we consider their (in)direct portraits, their deeds and their attitudes as well as their opinions and impressions may still be a resourceful material inviting to new strands of exploration, further analysis and new relevant conclusions.

Manoil is a vivid fresco of the times and people pictured herein. There is an impressive gallery of characters seemingly creating a feeling of balance, since the number of heroines is almost equal to the number of heroes; their representations as individuals or as a part belonging to a certain group of people suggests the same concern on the part of the author to provide for equilibrium.

Notes

[1] Bolintineanu, D., *Manoil. Elena*, Minerva, București, 1988, p. 10, "Elena, sora Smărăndiței, ... frumoasă și amoroasă de bărbatul ei..."

[2] Bolintineanu, D., *Manoil. Elena*, Minerva, București, 1988, p. 7, "Smărăndița ... mă cheamă poetul ei favorit... Are 25 de ani și este un tip de frumusețe; fără exagerare, o frumusețe rară, dar seamănă cu o floare ce în dimineața vieții sale se înclină melancolică..."

[3] Bolintineanu, D., *Manoil. Elena*, Minerva, București, 1988, p. 8, "Zoe e nepoată Smărăndiței: o copilă de 15 anișori, chipul mătușă-sei, dar strălucitor de frăgezime. Ai asemăna-o cu un bobocel de roză pe care fluturii încă nu-l bagă în seamă, plină de spirit și de inimă..."

[4] Bolintineanu, D., *Manoil. Elena*, Minerva, București, 1988, p. 8, "Mărioara este o amică a Smărăndiței: o fată de boier mare, de 18-20 de ani; nu este prea frumoasă dar drăgălașă ca luna lui mai!..."

[5] Bolintineanu, D., *Manoil. Elena*, Minerva, București, 1988, p. 15 „Eu, domnule, vezi d-ta, sînt o fată proastă; nu știu să vorbesc, nu știu să-ți mulțumesc..."

Bibliography

- Cioculescu, Ș., et al., *Istoria literaturii române moderne*, EDP, București, 1971
Dima, Al et al, *Istoria literaturii române*, Vol. II, Editura Academiei R.S.R., București, 1970
Ibrăileanu, G., *Opere*, Minerva, București, 1979
Ivașcu, G., *Istoria literaturii române*, Editura Științifică, București, 1969
Roman, I., *Dimitrie Bolintineanu*, Editura tineretului, București, 1962
Rotaru, I., *O istorie a literaturii române*, Vol. I, Minerva, București, 1972
Vârgolici, T., *Dimitrie Bolintineanu și epoca sa*, Minerva, București, 1971
Vârgolici, T., *Introducere în opera lui D. Bolintineanu*, Minerva, București, 1972
Vârgolici, T., *Aspecte ale romanului românesc din secolul al XIX-lea*, Eminescu, București, 1985
Vârgolici, T., Postfață la *Dimitrie Bolintineanu, Manoil. Elena*, Minerva, București, 1988, pp 315-348

Corpus

Bolintineanu, D., *Manoil. Elena*, Minerva, București, 1988