

FEMININE FASCINATION IN PANAIT ISTRATI'S WORK

Gina Marian, PhD Student, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare Northern University Centre

Abstract: Thirsty of power or love, intriguing or devoted, faithful or misleading, seductive or pious, women can have multiple hypostasis in the literary works. In Istrati's work, the female characters illustrate several typologies: the fatal woman, the mother, "femme haïdouk".

Istrati's feminine ideal is the passionate woman, who celebrates the carnal love. Chira's hedonism is the very law of nature. Finally, her daughter, Chiralina, will turn out to be similar to her mother, a predestined victim, a toy of a world full of savage manners. Chira Chiralina is a voluntary odalisque, a courtesan, but at the same time she is also vulnerable. Her dream of being free ends in a harem.

When she becomes leader of the outlaws, lover and also mother of an outlaw/haïdouk, Floarea-Codrilor practically takes over the legacy from Chira's brother. The "femme haïdouk" sees the state of an outlaw as a state of freedom, but also as a warrant.

The figure of the "mother" is a recurring motif in Istrati's work and it has, up to a point, as a real model, Joița herself, the very mother of the author. In Codin, the 12 years old Adrian Zograffi is the son of a single-mother laundress, similar to Istrati's childhood situation.

Being an emotional temperamentally, Istrati looks for emotional reasoning, measuring the endurance capacity of the individual, in the troubled areas of the human nature. The writer believes that vice is an individual mischance, not an inevitable fate that threatens the human nature. The sexual wanderings of Istrati's characters were not his obsession, they were simply part of his human inventory. Besides, in spite of the appearances, the Eros has a secondary part in Istrati's work, his ideals are: freedom, friendship, justice, that all bear the visible marks of manliness.

Keywords: feminine stereotypes, courtesan, mother, "femme haïdouk", freedom

There is a mysterious correspondence between words and femininity, subsumed to the power of conceiving, as "the female soul is the closest to the sources of Genesis". Thirsty for power or love, intriguing or devoted, faithful or misleading, seductive or pious, women can have multiple hypostases in literary works. In Istrati's work, the female characters illustrate several typologies: the mother, "femme haïdouk", the fatal woman.

In Istrati's work most of the main characters are eponyms and they hold a special balance, detectable even from the title: *Chira Chiralina, Moș Anghel, Michael, Codin, Neranțula, Kir Nicolas*. On the one hand the heroes are not only of humble origin but also lowered in social class (Stavru- Dragomir is a homosexual lemonade seller, Cosma and Ilie are smugglers, Codin is murderer, Michael is a homeless wanderer, Bakâr, a forger), on the other hand, most of the female characters also have the status of prostitutes. The purpose of this work is to rehabilitate each of them.

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In Istrati's literary writings there is terrible sufferance and also love crimes. Through the reference to "the four categories of love, with eight or ten shades, established by Stendhal in *De l'Amour: l'amour – passion, l'amour-goût, l'amour-physique and l'amour de vanité*, we can recognize at Istrati his predilection for the former, in perfect agreement, as a matter of fact, with his passionate nature, sometimes with the minor registry of physical love and, maybe, only once, a special shade of love from vanity"¹ as it shows the exegetist Gabriela-Maria Pinteau in her monography dedicated to the writer.

The patriarchal and cosmopolitan world from Braila at the end of the 19th century seems a setting taken from *The Arabian Nights*. Born from one of the three wives of a Turkish father, the owner of an inn from Braila, Chira was particularly beautiful, made for the life in the Serai, in other words for a voluptuous and refined cloister. Married by her father to a blunt craftsman, the odalisk is not able to fulfill her duties as a wife so she improvises a harem. After she has escaped from the excessive authority of her father, Chira realizes that her husband's authority is no longer total, especially when she inherits the fortune. The only right her husband has over her is to beat the living tar out of her, and her revenge is to keep partying even more passionately. The more severely he beats her up the more euphoric the parties are. Finally when her beauty fades away she is disqualified from Serai, and then, unable to find a reason to live, she commits suicide. Unfaithful wife and a distorted mother, Chira's behavior is immoral according to the social rules, amoral according to the divine rules and perfectly normal according to her fatalistic belief that ignores the notion of the "sin": "God has created me for lust, the way as He created the mole to live hidden from the sunlight.(...)You, Chira, if, I suppose, you are not meant to live in that pureness that comes from God and bring happiness, don't be a honest hypocrite, don't act as a virtuous. Don't fool around with God, instead be what he made you to be: live your life the way you feel it, be even a whore, but a kind-hearted whore! It is better this way"².

Even though she abandons her children, the readers and the critics still sympathize with the courtesan and not with her honest husband. Attacking the authorities, Chira is looking for an antinomial freedom. Having a passionate nature, like Cosma has, she wants to live only for her pleasures. Chira's hedonism is her nature itself. Later, her daughter Chiralina, will take after her mother, a predestined victim, the toy of a world of savage morals. Chira Chiralina is a volutary odalisk, but at the same time she is also vulnerable. Her dream of being free ends in a harem. When she becomes leader of the outlaws (*haïdouk*), lover and also mother of an outlaw (*haïdouk*), Floarea-Codrîlor practically takes over the legacy from Chira's brother. The "femme *haïdouk*" sees the state of an outlaw as a state of freedom, but also as a warrant.

The figure of the "mother" is a recurring motif in Istrati's work and it has, up to a point, as a real model, Joița herself, the very mother of the author. In *Codin*, the 12 years old Adrian Zograffi is the son of a laundress single-mother, similar to Istrati's childhood situation. But this laundress is acting as some exiled princess: she is distant, proud, decent, interiorized and resigned in front of her fate. She constitutes the first model for Adrian, who

¹ Gabriela-Maria Pinteau, *Panaît Istrati*, Bucharest, Publishing House Cartea Românească, 1975, pg.153.

² Panaît Istrati, *Selected Works*, 1st vol. *The stories of Adrian Zograffi. Chira Chiralina*, selected works, foreword and notes by Al. Oprea, translated by Eugen Barbu, București, Publishing House:Editura pentru Literatură, 1966, pg.137.

will be “different” from the other children from Comorofca, the most notorious slum from Braila.

At the beginning of the novel the *Placement Office* Adrian Zograffi, the alter-ego character of Istrati, leaves his mother and begins his odyssey around the world, but not without heartache. If, in his childhood Adrian Zograffi’s mother is an exception sacrificing herself for her son and distancing herself from the world, when he becomes an adult, she becomes the exponent of the society who imposes severity. She is not pressuring her son she is just expressing her reproaches and her inducements. Her inducements aim everything that Adrian loves – rambling and his friendship with tramps. The price of freedom is the double suffering of his mother: first because he is leaving her, then because of his revolting attitude.

Attacking the forgiving person of his mother, Adrian becomes alike the prodigal son who left the citadel. Still, his mother is the anteriority that he needs for reference.

What is interesting about Istrati’s writing is the incapacity of the female characters to nurture maternal feelings, as Gabriela-Maria Pinteau remarks: “Besides Joita, a formless figure, but with an obsessive occurrence, dominating the author’s entire work, the other heroines, except the insignificant Lucia from *Le bureau de placement*, they are distorted mothers”³.

Codin’s mother is a monster, Nerantula’s mother is confused by the appearance of her child as if it were a miscalculation, and Chira and Floricica are missing maternal vocation.

In *Neranțula*, both the Eros and the friendship are under the sign of fatality. The beautiful servant, that receives the nickname Neranțula (in Greek meaning bitter orange, but at the same time the name of a song and of a dance of Greek origin) kisses and loves both boys (Marcu and Epaminoda), who will like each other, but in the presence of the girl their jealousy will be triggered. In the absence of *Neranțula*, who embodies their *ideal* for both of them, the two rivals become in a fatal way friends. For five years their common life it is nothing but the search and the evocation of their lover from childhood. When they find her in a brothel in Constantinopol, the rivalry between them revives. Neranțula embodies the *ingenue woman*. From the point of view of the two lovers, although she is admitting the sort of activities that she is performing in the brothel, Neranțula remains the same childish girl she once used to be, pretty, pure, with innocent eyes. She will have a dramatic ending the moment when Epaminonda, jealous, pulls her underwater and they both die together.

Istrati’s feminine ideal is the passionate woman, who celebrates the carnal love: “I like the woman when she is seething of passion. I give myself in with phrensy, without thinking”⁴.

His predilection for thin waisted women, elegant, refined coquetry suggest the author’s taste for women with a stylized appearance. Chira and Neranțula on the one hand, Floricica and Țața Minca on the other hand, define two distinct images of eternal feminine according to Istrati’s view. The first two are fascinating because of their temperament. They are erotic characters similar to those from the *Thüringer House*, embodying the female incontinence incapable of true feelings, because these imply a representation, and the representation implies reflection. Their emotional life reduces to basic instincts. The power of these characters is in their ability to keep their femininity pure, rejecting any alloy that might modify the substance.

Floricica and Țața Minca are the rational characters, capable of feelings and also to control them, even though they can represent their happiness, they will not manage to be happy. They want to influence their destiny but they only manage to have a sinuous history, with plenty attempts to adapt to the actual situation, and finally all their attempts fail.

³ Gabriela-Maria Pinteau, *op. cit.*, pg.178.

⁴ Panait Istrati, *Selected Works*, the 6th vol. *Neranțula. Perlmutter Family. The Thistles of Bărăgan*, Romanian version by Eugen Barbu, edition and notes by Al. Oprea, Bucharest, Publishing House: Minerva, 1974, pg.23.

Florica realizes that the biggest enemy of the happiness is the absolute: "I am the one who wished absolute happiness, without any boundaries, who wanted to dream looking at the sun with opened eyes and I've got my eyes burnt! You Cosmo were my sun for a moment from a memorable night, and you are the one who thought me to clearly see in the real life. Since then I am following my own path, carrying my cross, I have learnt many things and I am returning to you more guileless than ever: I do not want boundless happiness, the whole of it, just for me"⁵.

As much different they are the characters that populate the Istratian feminine gallery, their role compared to that of the men is most of the time evil, embodying the fatal woman or the "dionysian woman(...) is projected as a threat to the masculine identity(systemic, apollonian, rational). The wives of Moș Anghel or Kir Nicola, the lovers of Codin or Cosma, Nerranțula, Florica and Isaac's fiancée they all cause desisters. This is the reason why the sublime heroes are chaste.

On the other hand, the same way as Octavio Paz shows: "the eroticism is, first of all, thirst for alterity"⁶. Without The cOther, the Istratian heroes are incomplete. The lust for love becomes a perpetual thirst, a poetic metaphor of self pursuit / discovery. This is in our opinion the sense of the multiple sides of the Istratian Eros and of the femininity hypostases drawn from the writer's work.

Whether they are called Anastasia, Adela, Chira or Floarea, they all show free and absurd hatred towards their children, they are atypical and as also Kim Song Sou shows it "contrary to the stereotypical image that maternal figure may have, the mothers from Istrati's work do not belong to the category of those who always sacrifices themselves for their children" but they embody the "abandonment of motherhood".

The symbolism of these names support their metaphoric or metonymic value. Thus, as Cristian Ionescu shows, the name Adela "is of Germanic origin and had a clear meaning, since it corresponds to the German word *adal* (germ. *Adel* 'nobility', *Edel* 'noble'). The metonymic negative suggestion is obvious, as mother Adela determines in her relationship with Neranțula an unfair report of forces: fear, terror, anguish and anxiety determining an obedient behaviour of the child to the brutality of her mother.

Codin's evil mother, Anastasia, has an old name, of Greek origin, "based on a technical ecclesiastical term, *anástasis*, used also in pre-Christian era with the meaning of 'resurrection from the dead', but consecrated by the Church to denote 'Resurrection of Christ'. The Greek noun is formed from the verb *anasta-anistánai* 'to stand up, to raise' and consists of *ana* 'up' and * *-sta-* an Indo-European radical, represented in almost all languages of this family (lat. *stare* și rom. *a sta*, gr. *histánai*, v.sl. *stati*, sanscr. *stha-*). It will bring death to her only son, pouring hot oil down on his throat, but she will also free herself of the immense hatred acquired and thus symbolically it will rise again.

Mother Chira leads a passionate life, being her own master, despite her husband's violence. She lives as she wishes, right in front of her two young children (Chira and Dragomir), inciting them to take after her: "I must say that, in my mother's house, I was living in the hell of love. Everything was love: the two women, their lovers, the toilets, as well as

⁵ Panait Istrati, *Selected Works*, 2nd vol. *Adrian Zograffi's stories. Moș Anghel*, selected works, foreword and notes by Al. Oprea, translated by Eugen Barbu, București, Publishing House: Editura pentru Literatură, 1966, pg.287.

⁶ Octavio Paz, *Duble flame. Love and eroticism*, translated from Spanish by Cornelia Rădulescu, Bucharest, Publishing House: Humanitas, 2003.

the liqueurs, perfumes, songs and games. Even the funny and dramatic escape of the courtesan seemed voluptuous and passionate; it had begun a life full of parties, pleasures and wild love, that I was witness to and that my father could not prevent inspire all his brutality".

The Hypocoristic Chira entered the Romanian language in the XVth century, through Slavic intermediary, but its etymology can be found in ancient Greek, where " *kýrios* means 'patron, master' and was often used as an epithet for various deities, especially for Zeus (as it appears since Pindar); in Judeo-Hellenistic and then Christian period, *Kýrios Theos* becomes identical with *Theós God*." The metaphorical meaning of the name of the two characters, mother and daughter, is eloquent. Both Chiras (mother and daughter) become true masters of physical pleasures.

This aspect of femininity, courtesan, excited the most the imagination of men. Desired and blasphemed, adored and cursed she would always remain a challenge, no matter what form it would take: the splendor of old times, involving beauty, grace and spirit, triviality and vulgarity. In this sense,

Simone De Beauvoir shows that: "For the timorous puritan, the prostitute embodies the evil, shame, disease, damnation, she inspires fear and disgust; does not belong to any man, but gives herself to all and earns her living from this; through this she finds the redoubtable independence of the goddesses - primitive mothers and embodies the Femininity that the male society has sanctified, which remains full of evil powers". But the man needs the woman's evil power, spell and curse in order to project on her screen those shadows of mystery that surrounded the story of the passion and death of the soul thirsty of the nostalgic androgynous reunification.

Florica Floarea Codrului she also gives up her son, Irimia, when he is only two years, abandoning him in a forest. Specific to the Romanian antroponymy, the feminine Floarea is a local creation. Floarea is attested in Romanian language as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century continuing the latin form Flora (there is no historical or phonetic impediment), which, moreover, is a 'Christian' name.

In Latin onomastics the names Florus, Flora are attested long before the Christian era and are closely related to the well-known name of the goddess Flora from the Roman mythology, goddess of flowers and vegetation. Similar meanings are assigned to this name both by Domnița Tomescu, quoting Al. Philippide, Ștefan Pașca and N. Drăganu and Aurelia Bălan Mihailovici. By repeating the radical Flor- also in the diminutive Florica it is emphasized the metaphorical value of the character's name who becomes the mistress of a nobleman after being the lover of an outlaw, then finally she will return back to her life in the forest. The nickname Floarea Codrului emphasizes the beauty of the woman and her social role, becoming, after the death of Cosma (at the end of the story Moș Anghel), captain of the outlaws, aspect that is found plenary.

The only protective and loving mother who sacrifices her own happiness in favor of his son, is Joița devoided of sensuality, eroticism and selfishness exacerbates of the other Istratian hypostasis of motherhood. As in other writers case (Ion Creangă, Gorky) this is modeled after the very real mother of the author. Autobiographical transcripts, including his mother's real, support the documentary value and also the authenticity of the pages dedicated to her: Mihai, The Placement Office, In The Mediterranean World, Sunset. The old form of the hypocoristic Joița dates from the fifteenth century and came to us through Slavic intermediary. The metonymic connotation suggests the etymological meaning of the name Zoe, whose folkloric and diminutive is this name of "Indo-European origin, gr. *zoe* belongs to the same family as it falls gr. *bios* (→ Zenobia), lat. *vita* and rom. *viață*".

Regarding the fatal-woman, this typology can be illustrated by the eponymous characters: Chira, Neranțula, țața Minca, but also by Roza (from the *Perlmutter family*) and Sultana (from *Presentation of the Outlaws*).

The carnal passion, orgiastic pleasure, luxury, the sensuality of the clothing and that of the perfumes, the disobedience to any social, family or moral norms are some of the features of both Chiras.

The metaphorical appellation Neranțula (gr. '*little bitter orange*'), given by Marco and taken over by the Greek Epaminonda and also the nickname obtained through antonomasia, Sacagița - as orphan who strayed into one of the slums from Brăila was carrying water all day supplying it for the houses from the neighborhood - do not seem to hinder the little girl who is unwilling to unveil her true identity to anyone.

The three children fly the kite, run together, throw stones, lie on the grass in the Greek neighborhood, frantically singing and dancing on the lyrics: "On the seashore, on gravel / Neranțula fundoti" and the girl shares a brotherly innocent kiss, arising jealousy between them. Five years later, when they find her in a brothel in Constantinople, Marco and Epaminonda suffer again. Epaminonda, cannot recover from grief and existential emptiness that overwhelms him, and one evening, while Neranțula is singing the same refrain "Neranțula fundoti!" in an outburst of madness, he stabs her. Although she survives, a few years later, in front of the terrified Marco, Neranțula who meanwhile had become Anicuța, will perish in the waters of the Bosfor drawn down by Epaminonda, who "grabbed her waist and disappeared with her in the black waters".

The tendency to mystify the image of women, thus the idea of femininity, is the result of the perception of the women as an alterity. Pointing out that the man projects in the woman all his anxieties, dreams and fantasies, trying to find himself, as a projection in the other person: "Appearing as the Other, the woman appears in the same time as a plenitude being in opposition to this existence whose nothingness the man feels inside him; The Other, being stated as an object in the subject's eyes, it is stated that in – itself, as a conclusion, is a human being. The woman positively embodies the absence that any creature carries in his soul and, trying to retrieve it through her, the man hopes to fulfill himself".

An entire mythology is shown in this point of view: the androgynous perfection, the nostalgia of searching one's soul - mate, the biblical idea of male – female communion, which are visible in the entire creation of Istrati.

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