

THE FEMININE MYSTERY IN HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU'S SHORT PROSE

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Abstract: In the interwar period, as well as afterwards, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was generally considered an antifeminist, but the articles she published in the magazines of those times, as well as her works bring to discussion the woman and her role in society, justifying therefore the special interest given to women. Even if the writer didn't assume this role with an exacerbated militancy, when she creates her characters she keeps the leading role for a woman to the detriment of a man, as he is rather the element that completes her image. In the short prose, the feminine mystery derives of motives such as sickness, solitude, the search for happiness and love, the woman's condition in society. In what regards Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, we notice that she doesn't write in favor of women, and neither does she try to portray them favorably; however, for us, the concept of feminine literature starts taking shape in connection to her works.

Keywords: femininity, feminine mystery, feminine literature, love, solitude.

Dictionaries define feminism as a social movement which militates for the equality of rights between women and men in all areas of activities. Even if she declared: "I'm not 'a feminist'¹" and she considered that "everything is between a man and a woman, a report of possibility of intellectual work. Women are physically weaker. And because the physical sustains the intellect, it's only natural that she is intellectually placed on a lower level"², Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu also signs articles with feminist accents, as we notice in *The Veil Rises (Se ridică vălul)*, an article addressed to men, in which the writer tries to define the feminist movement, as well as to establish her role in the literature of this kind: "What is feminism? It's the mystery of a veil. A veil beneath which time covers the woman and one which hides the light of social realities from her. [...] Today the light broke forth triumphant. The woman only asks what can't be otherwise. [...] The feminism, so visible in her main desires, still fights the shadows of the public opinion's bewilderment. [...] In the shadows of the sheltered workshop, where I only ask the chisel to be faithful to the thought, I believe she asks to take nobody's place. She doesn't want to take – she wants to share – if it is true that she shared the concerns and the needs, and even the work. [...] Few are those who can carry the sword and the pen. In the war you carry, I'm no chief and no soldier, but still I think that I am naturally comprised in the peaceful lines of your army. And if out of the absolute retreat of the literary work, from where I will value your efforts, but from where I don't think I will exit to the public arena, I will be of no real use to you, maybe I am a small example that one can work outside the restriction of the household occupations, as well as beside it, without

¹ Dan Petrașincu. "Viața de taină a unei scriitoare nedreptățită de publicul românesc", in *Rampa*, year 19, no. 5489 (the 4th of May 1936), page 3.

² *Ibidem*.

these activities to become enemies.”³ The article is published shortly after the writer had published her first short prose volume, *Deep Waters (Ape adânci)*.

Even if E. Lovinescu declares that “literature is not generally a woman’s vocation”⁴, he writes the foreword to the first anthology of this genre, *The Evolution of the Feminine Writing in Romania (Evoluția scrisului feminin în România)*⁵, while feminine literature in the interwar period was not seen as a notion, nor did it have a good timing with the waves of feminism; on the contrary, it was even marginalized; Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s writing leads to a mental pattern of women’s literature, as Elena Zaharia-Filipaș states, so that “we can detect in Lovinescu the signs of an interest – weak and sporadic for us – for a theory of femininity in literature, and even for the definition of what we nowadays call ‘feminine writing’⁶.”

When they gloss upon the theme of women’s literature, Nicolae Balotă admits that writers such as Madame de Staël, Virginia Wolf, Katherine Mansfield, Simone de Beauvoir and, for us, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu are “intellectual writers, fully equal – with respect to their relation to the word – with men.”⁷

Although Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu doesn’t strike by adopting a definite feminist position, she tackles with themes and traits that connects her works to those of feminine literature in general, as the writer Olga Caba observed: “The best interwar Romanian writer was, no doubt, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu. She had the great worth of creating characters without necessarily planning to take her place among them by setting aside one or more of them, replacing them with her corrected *I*, a typical attitude of the feminine writing.”⁸ When she glosses upon the specific of feminine prose, Olga Caba states that “first of all, the woman will be deprived of the larger horizon of the masculine spirit. She will necessarily be ‘the second string’. However, first of all, she will try, according to her nature, to seduce through her writing too, through her personal style, through the absurdity that characterizes her, by the fact that she thinks of completely different things compared to those men think of, which leads her prose to whole other meanders, more unexpected.”⁹ In the same interview she gives to Liana Cozea, the writer makes a comparative study between Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and Emily Brontë, concluding that they both have common coordinates and they “don’t captivate only through style, but also through more substantial qualities which crept into the art of writing despite their femininity, in whose eyes the treacherous nature dropped, intentionally or by mistake, an ingredient usually destined to the male. They will not seduce through style, but they will find the right tone to create real living characters, justified to the last fiber, and they will take the storyline right from the hands of destiny to spin it on. These chosen women, these true writers are few. The others are only writers”¹⁰.

Here is what Emilia Humpel (Titu Maiorescu’s sister) wrote, a distinct public voice, generic for the entire plethora of the women that were aware of the fact that change comes with education: “The more solid instructed the woman is, the more her judgment will be more developed... the less she will settle for the conventional quirks of the past to appreciate things and their placing among the high or the low ones.”¹¹ Certainly, from the orientation of women

³ Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu. “Se ridică vălul”, in *Sburătorul*, year I, no. 38 (the 3th of January 1920), pages 282-283.

⁴ E. Lovinescu: *Aqua forte*, Editura Contemporană din București, 1941, page 317.

⁵ Mărgărita Miller-Verghy, Ecaterina Săndulescu, *Evoluția scrisului feminin în România*, foreword by E. Lovinescu, Editura Bucovina, București, 1935.

⁶ Elena Zaharia-Filipaș, *Studii de literatură feminină*. Editura Paideia, București, 2004, page 5.

⁷ Nicolae Balotă, *Artă lecturii*, Cartea Românească, București, 1978, pages 349-350.

⁸ Olga Caba, “Specificul prozei feminine”, in *Familia*, series V, year 25 (125), no. 4 (284), (April 1989), page 11, reproduced in Liana Cozea, *Prozatoare ale literaturii române moderne*, Biblioteca Revistei Familia, Oradea, 1994, pages 268-269.

⁹ *Ibidem*, page 268.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, page 269.

¹¹ Emilia Humpel, “O pătrime de secol”, in *Unirea femeilor române*, year I, no. 1 (the 24th of January 1909), page 14, reproduced in Alin Ciupală. *Femeia în societatea românească a secolului al XIX-lea*, Editura Meridiane, București, 2003, page 64.

towards education, reading and the study of foreign languages, in the 20th century the feminist movements in Europe started to grow. With Virginia Woolf's essay from 1929, *A Separate Room*, the existence of a feminine literature starts being taken into consideration. Later, Simone de Beauvoir, along with the philosopher Anne Zelenski, the lawyer Gisele Halimi, the writer Claire Etcherelli and the actress Delphine Seyrig, launches with a fervent activism the idea of *The Manifest of the 343* (the 5th of April 1971), by which 343 women signed admitting they had had an abortion. From here to the legalization of the abortion in France (The Veil Law in 1975) not many steps were made. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir had created a revolution by the book *The Second Sex*, which quickly became a bedside book of feminism. In those one thousand pages she wrote she circulates sayings such as: "We are not born, but rather we become women" or "If the woman wants to be equal to the man, she must become a man", this is why "With women we witness, right from the start, a conflict between their autonomous existence and their request to be something else; they are taught that, in order to be liked, they must try to be liked, they must turn themselves into objects, to give up on their self-sufficiency. They are treated like living dolls and they are denied their freedom; this way, a vicious circle looms, because the less they make use of their freedom to understand, the less resources they will find in it, the less will they dare to assert themselves as subjects; if they would be encouraged, they might prove the same living exuberance, the same curiosity, the same spirit of initiative, the same boldness as men. This often happens when a little girl is given a manly education; she is then spared of many problems."¹²

Even if for us the concept of feminine literature starts taking shape with the works of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, we must mention that up to her there were other texts too that tackled with a woman's condition in a hostile society. A relevant example is that of Sofia Nădejde, who defends women's rights and, as Elena Zaharia-Filipaș thinks, she is the author of the first feminine novel¹³; despite the fact she didn't achieve the same notoriety as other international supporters, we must mention that Sofia Nădejde appears now in a dictionary that reunites the offices of the European feminism from the 19th and the 20th centuries¹⁴.

With respect to Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, we notice she doesn't write favoring women, nor does she try to present them in a favorable position. The woman from the early prose of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu doesn't follow the road (at least the mental one) that those times still enforced on her, so she doesn't necessarily dream of marriage and maternity, but simply of love, whether it feeds out of imagination, as femininity means more than love, more than maternity: this is why for Bianca Porporata the soft blowing of the wind is an alluring caress that turns it into the lover to which the feminine character obediently responds: "I have a lover, Juan! He was with me tonight. He came, without me taking any notice, through the dark garden and he took me from behind my forehead, gentle, as the thin hair dispersed and the toil of the day scattered. He kissed my neck without me being able to reprimand him, on my bare neck, where I get upset and I don't want to; he walked without permission, before I could stop him, and he slowly slipped under the large sleeve up to the shoulder, he made me shudder when he gripped my breast, he glided along my ankles like a shiver, through the opaque pores of the coat, he slipped everywhere, young and refreshing, like a shield bearer from northern lands, and I stood on the spot where he got hold of me and, defenseless, I let him play as he wished. [...] He rarely holds me in deadly arms of destruction, hits me and banishes me, but tonight I am barely touched by the wind as sly as a

¹² Simone de Beauvoir, *Al doilea sex*, vol. I, translation by Diana Bolcu and Delia Verdeș, foreword by Delia Verdeș, Editura Univers, București, 1998, page 274.

¹³ Elena Zaharia-Filipaș, *cited work*, page 4.

¹⁴ Francisca De Haan, Krasimira Daskalova, Anna Loutfi, *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*, Central European University Press, Budapest & New York, 2006, pages 360-362.

squire.” (*To Don Juan, to Eternity, Writes Bianca Porporata – Lui Don Juan, în Eternitate, îi scrie Bianca Porporata*).

Glossing upon the fight against the feminine mystery, E. Lovinescu admits that Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s literature is “feminine by the object of its study [...], manly by the strict scientific process, by the tone and by the elimination of sentimentality and sentimentalism¹⁵.” Despite this, when she writes about the conception of passion, the reviewer thinks that “however, Mrs.’s H.P.-Bengescu’s heroines are not feminists. Their only concern is the spasm of the heart, which the writer’s ear perceives and decomposes, while the eye pervades to the depths of their souls, unveiling the delicate game of emotions.”¹⁶ Tudor Vianu doesn’t neglect the subject of feminism in the writer’s literature either, asking rhetorically: “So: ‘feminine literature’? Yes and no. Because, by the intellectual force of the analysis, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu surpassed the somewhat narrow frames of what she called, with the tone of an obvious underestimation, ‘feminine literature’.”¹⁷

Analyzing the aspects of femininity in the writer’s works, Tania Mușina states that “no discussion that has women or femininity as a subject can ignore the roles that women have with those around them – relatives, friends, acquaintances. Because beyond the eternal feminine there are relations, conflicts with the exterior world.”¹⁸

In Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s prose, the man is not only the relative, the friend or the acquaintance, but also the betrothed, sometimes the husband or the lover; there are situations, namely in the short prose, when the man is a projection that is part of the woman’s imagination. Anton Holban emphasizes that in a completely feminine environment the male is seen as an intruder: “The atmosphere in *Women, Among Themselves (Femeile, între ele)* is completely feminine, whence the boy who comes to invite Mary to play tennis is thrown back like a ball with an invisible tennis racket.”¹⁹ The feminine route from the novels is a winding one, as the character experiences tangled situations of a questionable morality; the roles follow one after another with great speed from mothers with illegitimate children to women who marry and remarry, then become lover-wives in love or they are only greedy for wealth.

As Florin Mihăilescu remarks, “Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s characters impress right from the start in two apparently contradictory ways: by their unity and by their variety. Especially in the period of her first creations, the unity was ensured by the quasi-singularity of the perspective. The storyteller identifies most of the times with the writer herself. The exterior realities were fully reported to only one consciousness.”²⁰ In her first works, the feminine characters tell their stories either directly, by monologues or dialogues, or indirectly, by means of letters, but the masculine projections are mostly imaginary.

If femininity defines the overview of features that make the specific of the feminine nature, the question that inevitably rises is this: what kind of character renders the early works of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu?

As in the first works prevails the introspective discourse, we can’t always follow the character’s classification in certain typologies, but there are situations in which details about the socio-economical or socio-cultural position they have are disclosed; for instance, Alina

¹⁵ E. Lovinescu, *Scrieri I. Critice*, edited by E. Simion, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1969, page 344.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, page 343.

¹⁷ Tudor Vianu, *Scriitori clasici români*, anthology, chronology, critical references and bibliography by Ion Nistor, foreword by Ion Biberi, Editura Albatros, București, 1998, page 259.

¹⁸ Tania Mușina, *Ipostaze ale feminității în romanele Virginiei Woolf și ale Hortensiei Papadat-Bengescu*, Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, București, 2013, page 134.

¹⁹ Anton Holban, *Opere*, vol. III, introductory study, edited, notes and bibliography by Elena Beram, Editura Minerva, București, 1975, page 28.

²⁰ Florin Mihăilescu, *Introducere în opera Hortensiei Papadat-Bengescu*, Editura Minerva, București, 1975, page 54.

from *The Sea (Marea)* is a wealthy woman: “Then, a friend of mine, Alina, invited me to get accommodated on her estate, at the town’s outskirts, although she was unable to keep me company, as she only stays there during the six warmer months of the year.” Adriana from *Adriana’s Novel* is also a well-circumstanced woman, even if that is not enough to make her happy; “from the society’s elite, the wife of a prefect from a large province, the object of contemplation, admiration and envy of sixty people that formed the top of parasitism of provincial nobility, then gradually decreasing to the different classes towards the town’s outskirts, known to everyone because her man was strong and rich and because she was elegant and proud, one day she eloped with someone unknown, a petty employee, a small musician who added his insufficient art to his modest job as a clerk in a bank. How? Why? Since when?” Manuela from *The Woman in Front of the Mirror (Femeia în fața oglinzii)* is also part of the same high society, she goes to soirees, even if they don’t please her: “During the day of the soiree she lounged quietly, because everything that could stop her could not displease her. She would have gladly given up; that is precisely why nothing ever happened.” In Sultana Craia’s opinion, the novel characters too “can’t be placed in a ‘table of elements’, strict and encompassing, but most of them can be inserted. In Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s literature, women are not angels, nor demons, but only females. Built on canvassing seasoned with introspection, the novels of this writer have a feminine perspective – sometimes also feminist – but not essentially different from that of male writers.”²¹

In Simone de Beauvoir’s opinion, the woman’s way of dressing “has a double nature; it is destined to show the woman’s social dignity (her standard of living, her wealth, the environment to which she belongs), but at the same time it materializes the feminine narcissism; her apparel is a uniform and an ornament.”²² Moreover, the woman is defined through her clothing, she is made complete by it because “to care for her beautification, to dress oneself is an effort which allows her to assimilate her own persona, just like she assimilates her home through her housework; then her self seems chosen and recreated by her.”²³ In Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s novels, the clothes and the ornaments are a subject that gets a clearer contour than in the short prose: for instance, Ada Razu had rings with stones as big as a tunic’s button on her black hands with shivering fingers” (*The Disheveled Virgins – Fecioarele despletite*); Mini Persu is captivated by some jewels in a show-window: “the emerald was truly amazing, the filigree was an ethereal lace, and the bracelet was a hand cuff of massive gold. A delight for a greedy look at beautiful and expensive objects.” (*The Disheveled Virgins – Fecioarele despletite*), and Lina from the same novel “would randomly buy today a ready and untried dress, usually green or blue, tomorrow a silk or a velvet cloak, according to the season, and hats that, truth be told, always had red feathers or flowers.” However, we cannot state that in the author’s early prose the subject is a totally neglected one; in her short stories there are some situations in which we observe that the charm of the character is rendered not only through the description of the woman’s body, but also through the pieces of clothing and the accessories; for instance, Mrs. M. wears a purse “with a rim of old silver polished in a strange lizard emblem” (*Women, Among Them – Femei, între ele*), while Manuela from *The Woman in front of the Mirror (Femeia în fața oglinzii)* “puts on the black ‘mousseline’ dress that encircled only the waist in a netting of small black pearls” or “enveloped too in supple fabrics, she softly sways inside the rustling folds. The dark velvet, that of the small hat, would place a strip on the forehead, whitening it. A sneer would crush the mouth without breaking its arch, under the short veil that was barely touching her lips.” In the letters in *The Sea (Marea)* too the author glosses upon the clothing and the accessories: “Last night I wore a black dress. It is not new, on the contrary, but there is something in its

²¹ Sultana Craia, *Îngeri, demoni și muieri*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1999, page 76.

²² Simone de Beauvoir. *Al doilea sex*, vol. I, cited edition, page 274.

²³ *Ibidem*.

shape that is harmonious. I like black: it's like a background canvas on which the face emerges. One of my own said to me: 'You have a low cut, aren't you going to put something around your neck? You have a golden thread, with an enamel butterfly, it's nice. Yes, it's nice, but I won't put it on. Why? Because an uncovered neck is prouder, it's like a swan's neck.'” On the opposite side we also notice the character that lacks grace not because of her age, but mostly because she doesn't know how to dress herself, like Lady Ledru from *Women, Among Them (Femei, între ele)*, who has “two locks of brown temples, smooth as always, her coil of well-combed pigtail, her dress with a white collar and her sanguine face. [...] Swiss and a widow. As a Swiss, she dresses disagreeably, as if she intends in every detail of her apparel to take any charm away from the clothes and from the body.”

Of women's age one speaks indirectly²⁴, as the author says, giving the impression that she is trying a projection of the character who doesn't say her age. Actually, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu classifies her heroines from this point of view. Sephora from the short story bearing the same name is a young girl who “is 19 years old, confesses she is 16, and the person listening to her could swear she's lying and that she is no more than 14. She's a child! She's always laughing lively and the timbre of her laughter is crystalline”; about Mrs. M. (*Women, Among Them – Femei, între ele*) the author says: “I used to contemplate with sympathy that odd autumn beauty of hers, apparently even more delicate now, with the tones of faded petals on her face, with the admirable body under smoky veils, a color adopted by the simple and deliberately blackened elegance of the lovely woman who seemed to surround herself with the melancholy of gray clothes to be in harmony with the delicate sunset of life.”

When she brings to discussion the subjectivism from Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's short stories, Anton Holban highlights that the author brings forth theories that find their echo in the objective texts. “She also tries harmless little theories, usually graceful, sprinkled everywhere, which sometimes may have been agreeable if reduced to a single phrase and which, however, by the detailed exposure, by the excessive insistence, burdens.”²⁵ Moreover, he strengthens his statements by some examples drawn from the author's texts themselves. For instance, “The woman and the man do not love in the same way. The woman forgets all that happened before” – an excerpt that can be found in *Women, Among Themselves (Femei, între ele)*, as well as in *The Woman in Front of the Mirror (Femeia în fața oglinzii)*; other times we find the same idea in different words and texts: “In the middle of the crowd, speaking, laughing, I feel alone, I isolate myself and I reflect clearly within myself, I lie in wait and with an amazing quickness I judge, I weight, I think, I dream... and I cannot mix my life with theirs in a homogeneous paste; something odd always comes off, something with other substance, which cannot be combined” or “in the middle of the world you are no longer the person you are in your intimacy, I almost don't recognize you anymore – you have a grain of misanthropy. You say: ‘I feel great and perfectly well by myself’... By yourself. Such flexible words!” (*The Sea – Marea*), a theory that can also be found in a fragment from *The Woman in Front of the Mirror (Femeia în fața oglinzii)*. “Manuela was now watching absent-minded. From the place she was in, as well as from the middle of the dance, she was watching as if from a great distance and she was watched the same way. A free circle was mapped around her, one that separated her from the crowd. And in this isolation there was contentment, as well as pain.”

An opinion at least different from that of those that talk about the subject of femininity is developed by Sorin Alexandrescu in the article “The Slippery, the Feminine Necessary”

²⁴ Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, *Opere*, vol. I, critical edition and notes by Eugenia Tudor, foreword by Constantin Ciopraga, Editura Minerva, București, 1972, page 176.

²⁵ Anton Holban, *cited work*, page 15.

(“Alunecosul, necesarul feminin”), in which he starts with the idea of Toril Moi²⁶, according to which the woman is a biological concept, the feminism a political one and femininity a cultural one, and he concludes that in the Romanian culture the empowerment of some specific categories, like that of women, didn’t start yet. Moreover, with respect to Romanian literature, in this case Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, the becoming of the author took the form of a “castration”: “How else could we name the process by which Lovinescu corrects the ‘wrong’ beginnings of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s first works, bringing her on the right tracks of the objective prose? A ‘maturation’ welcomed by the Romanian criticism in the Romanian – why not call it *phallocratic* – culture, but its analysis might reveal unexpected axiomatic structures in its interpretation, of which we are not even aware (any longer).”²⁷

In the interwar period, as well as later on, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was considered, almost without appeal, an antifeminist²⁸, as Bianca Burța-Cernat observes, but the articles which bring to discussion the woman and her role in society that she published in the magazines of those times, as well as her works, justify the interest given “to the second sex”. Even if the writer didn’t assume this role with an exacerbated militancy, when she builds her characters she keeps the leading role for the woman to the detriment of the man, as he is rather the element that completes her image.

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²⁶ Toril Moi, “Feminist, Female, Feminine”, in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, New York (1989), pages 117-132.

²⁷ Sorin Alexandrescu, “Alunecosul, necesarul feminin”, in *Secolul XX*, no.7-9 (1996), pages 17-20, reproduced in *Identitate în ruptură: mentalități românești postbelice*, Editura Univers, București, 2000, pages 306-311.

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