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**FEMININITY UNDER THE SIGN OF EMOTIONS IN  
THE CONTEXT OF INTERWAR ROMANIAN  
LITERATURE. HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU  
PHD THESIS SUMMARY**

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Keywords: *femininity, feminism, emotion, the interwar period, women's literature*

The thesis *Femininity under the sign of emotions in the context of interwar Romanian literature*. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu identifies its research area right from the title, focusing its attention on the interwar context and the way in which a discursive and mental scaffolding imposes the exercise of femininity with the entire affective register that it implies. That is why we respected the usual meaning of a scientific discourse, following the transition from theory to application and analyzing the prose of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, the most visible female figure of the interwar literature.

The work is structured in four vast research sequences, each of which supports arguments that confirm the solidity of the hypothesis according to which femininity is a cultural construct, and the elements that compose it are extracted from the eras in which it manifests itself. The conceptual premise from which we started our scientific approach was that historical eras - in this case, the interwar period - are differentiated by recording the nuances of sensitivities, everything becoming a "study of mediations and the dialectical relationship between the objective conditions of people and the way in which they tell and even live"<sup>1</sup>. The theoretical and critical library was recovered rather for the fund of ideas, placing itself in agreement with the targeted objectives.

The inaugural chapter, *Feminist Discourse. Approaches to femininity in the European humanities*, proposed an approach to the feminist discourse, revisiting the key concepts of the current, affirming its principles, recognizing its limits and denouncing the divergences discovered even within its theorizations. We have refused to see feminism as a reservation where women discuss their condition 'among themselves', separating themselves from the rest of the world - and yet dependent on the structures of that world - or standing in undifferentiated opposition to the masculine universe – and, nevertheless, living with him. The focus was on understanding feminism, freed from the fiery force of advocacy and integrating the acuity of scientific analysis. A rejection of clichés, a questioning of axioms, an analysis of political, social, economic and moral resources offers a clear space in which the condition of women - without being separated from the human condition - justifies its truths about femininity. We discovered that feminism has, in fact, the advantage of bringing as a topic of discussion the emancipation of women, of requesting a settlement of the relations between the sexes in the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Vovelle *apud* Duțu, Alexandru, *Dimensiunea umană a istoriei. Direcții în istoria mentalităților*, București: Meridiane, 1986, p.9.

terms that the social context of the first half of the 20th century proposes. Moreover, we recognized the fact that feminism creates a dialogue space for Romanian writers from the interwar era, writers who propose, through the characters that evolve in the diegetic universe, more or less faithful embodiments of the doctrine. This chapter will be taken over by the next in observing how European feminism theoretically and practically reverberated in the Romanian space, challenging, questioning, but ultimately inviting to dialogue the scaffolding of the interwar ideology. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu will update a particular version of understanding of this doctrine, cautiously distancing herself from the activist form of feminism, but skillfully integrating its principles through the characters created. If we can talk about a feminism of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu - especially since she does not take a declared position in this direction - then we will recognize it in the subtlety of certain characters, in the author's daring to approach marginalized or limited thematic areas presented until that moment, but, above all, in the mental context of the interwar era, an effervescent one, which favors mutations in the way women writers record the nuances of femininity. The conclusion of this sequence is that the feminine spirit cannot be contained in a phrase or a pattern, but evolves according to eras, mentalities or means of analysis. Even the labeling of femininity by formulas like "feminine mystery" or "eternal feminine" could not capture the multitude of its manifestations, but placed it in an unfair Procrustean Bed. This structure - paradox of abysmal mediocrity - challenged us to discover its valences: why does woman become incomprehensible, what do men not understand about women, what is the meaning of female emotions, can we put in a rational equation the emotions that does it awaken their femininity? – questions that successfully ensured movement to the next chapter.

The second chapter, *The construction of femininity in interwar Romanian literature: theories and interpretations*, started from the observation that the lack of homogeneity of the existence of women in the interwar period weakens any analytical approach, one that aims from the beginning not to slide into common places, but to collect the folds of this existence, picketing his approach by appealing to the interdisciplinary character of the itinerary. So, we tried to fix the setting of ideas about interwar femininity, using the specific vocabulary of the era, one that operates with generic terms such as "Romanian", "man", "woman" precisely to reveal the mental apparatus of a historical stage whose tools persist and today. We reconstructed the political thinking of the interwar era by analyzing some discursive acts practiced by the agents who negotiate social, mental and behavioral contexts through words. In order to correctly calibrate the expectations, we considered it appropriate to take a kaleidoscopic approach to the

opinions about the emancipation of women from the interwar period, citing all lines of voices of the Romanian intelligentsia, from the ultra-conservative (Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Nae Ionescu or Nicolae Iorga), to the conservative (Duiliu Zamfirescu, Simion Mehedinți, Sextil Pușcariu, Tudor Arghezi, Garabet Ibrăileanu, Eugen Ionescu and G. Călinescu), reaching the ambivalent direction (Camil Petrescu and Eugen Lovinescu) and ending with the emancipatory voices of feminists Calypso Botez and Alexandrina Cantacuzino.

Also in this chapter, exploring the moderate dimension offered by the social context, we discovered that the interwar period recognizes a mental climate within which masculinity and femininity are layered on levels such as: education, lifestyle, work, gender roles, clothing, youth, family, music, sport, dance, free time, holidays, morals - all shading the picture of a contradictory era, praised and criticized in equal measure. No longer accepting the status of a marginal being, the woman of the interwar period becomes an increasingly consistent presence, generating reactions, making the conservative mental scaffolding uncomfortable, affirming the need for a renegotiation of the status and a nuance of her femininity. The chapter ended with a short case study of the novel *Adela*, written by Garabet Ibrăileanu, because we discovered in it those stereotypical elements that clothe femininity, as it was mentally constructed during the historical period between 1871 and the beginning of the First World War ("*la belle époque*"), containing the seeds of a pre-eminent femininity from the interwar era. We considered such an approach appropriate to make room for interwar female literature, one that, from within one's own soul universe, will confirm or deny the stereotypes of male thinking.

The third chapter, *Feminine literature under the sign of emotions*, favored the idea of the existence of a cultural script of emotions, integrating all those rules about what individuals should feel, about how they should externalize emotions taking into account their logic, the social situation in which is manifested by the ideologies associated with them. We are therefore talking about embracing a constructionist position regarding emotions, one in which they "depend on cultural cues and their interpretation; therefore, linguistic practice, values, norms, beliefs constitute the substance of emotions"<sup>2</sup>. Martha C. Nussbaum constituted the methodological keystone that structured our understanding and reporting on emotions. Starting from the axiomatic statement "emotions are judgments"<sup>3</sup>, we started an investigation about how emotions are sculpted by society, emotions which, in turn, are forms of articulation of certain

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<sup>2</sup> Barbalet, J.M., "Emotion: cultural aspects", în G. Ritzer (ed.) *Blackwell's Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007, pp.1374-1377.

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C., *Terapia dorinței: teorie și practică în etica elenistică*, cu o nouă introducere a autoarei, Martha C. Nussbaum; traducere din engleză de S.G. Drăgan, București: Humanitas, 2022, p.12.

cognitions. The life and creation of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is based on this ideational framework, drawing its emotional palette not only from the biographical experience, but also from the circumstances of the interwar society. Subtly, in all her creations (both those qualified as subjective prose and those from the period of objectification), the writer reaffirms the cognitive dimension of emotions, challenging us to reveal femininity through the consciousness of a woman adapted to the era in which she lives and with its mental reflexes. Trying to outline a space for the reception of female prose in the interwar period, we discovered an intellectually fruitful theme, which leads to reflection on the criteria and mechanisms of exclusion, on the legitimacy of certain hierarchies, on the role of "minors" or "marginals" in the whole of a value system. The phrase "women's literature" was met with a wide range of reactions - from disbelief, irony, condescension, to enthusiasm and encouragement generating as a result uniformity, leveling, obsession with integration - all from the need to establish a comfortable label that refuses individualization and institutes the idea that all women writers are authors of variations on the same theme.

To color the context of interwar literature, we presented the male voices of literary criticism (Garabet Ibrăileanu, Eugen Lovinescu, G. Călinescu, Eugen Ionescu), who gave interest to female literature, retrieving trends and methods of approach extracted directly from the mental context of the era. We discovered common points, contradictory attitudes, but also condescending positions successfully taken over by contemporary critics. The painting also included several female interventions, both from the interwar period and later, who supported their opinions boldly, with irony against the "serious voices" of literary critics or with caution, justifying and, sometimes, bailing out the stereotypical approaches of women's literature. The aim of the chapter was to formulate an answer to the question of whether there is a specificity of female literature. Certainly, this is definable in the form of constants, such as: subjectivism, narcissism, instinctuality, sensuality, concern for the study of women, but everything is relativized in the realm of true art. Interwar female literature is an exploratory one, caused by a series of land recessions of the self, of reality, of language. Therefore, the work of women writers remains open by "closing" its language. The conclusions of this chapter favor the idea that the phrase "feminine literature" does not contain the idea of minimization, inferiority or precariousness, but only specifies literary themes and manners. We also discovered that the marginalization of women's literature is a sociological issue, as a result, assumed by the history of mentalities. Equipped with this reading grid, we encouraged an understanding of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's work against the backdrop of the interwar era, one of doctrinal tensions

and the need for expression in all its forms, enunciating the refrain that the literary text preserves what is specific to the era.

The last chapter, dedicated to *Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu*, starts from a statement by the author herself - "My literary and personal autobiography are inextricably intertwined"<sup>4</sup>, announcing the intention to bring into dialogue the two postures that ensure the writer's identity: the artistic self, on the one hand, and cursive existence, on the other. This coexistence of the years of life with the years of the book, often tense, generates the subtlety of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's work and challenges us to discover, beyond the text itself (analyzed, labeled, successfully interpreted by literary criticism), a complementary text, that of the author's biography (formulated in letters, interviews or autobiographical fragments). It should be mentioned that, at this point in the thesis, we tried as much as possible not to be discouraged by the natural question: what would be the point of another research approach on Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's work, especially since all the fundamental things have been said already?

In order to build the thread of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's biographical and literary existence, we used both works of literary criticism dedicated to the author in the form of monographs, as well as sequences distributed in extensive analyses. However, the exercise of recovering the biographical element through the voice of the author herself, who formulates the most authoritative sketch of a self-portrait, seemed challenging to us. The approach continued with a navigation through the exegesis of the era, profitable for the understanding of Bengescu's creation because it cancels the temporal interval and conveniently installs us in the horizon of the first public, the writer's contemporary. We discovered and questioned the labels given to his works, taking, this time, the necessary distance for a wider analysis. We understood the femininity of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's writing, assumed or denied, and I searched in the order of the discourse those behaviors, those scores, emotions or identities that reveal the mentality of an era.

Advantageous through the multitude of affirmed positions, the interwar discursive framework can be reduced to two dominant directions: we discover, on the one hand, an encouragement of the affirmation of women, stimulated to speak, to assume language as a form of articulation of a social identity, of reflection of one's own dimension of existence; on the other hand, a conservative and ultra-conservative line is shown that prefers the already existing

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<sup>4</sup> Vancea, Viola, *Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu interpretat de...*, Antologie, studiu introductiv, tabel cronologic și bibliografie de Viola Vancea, București: Eminescu, 1976, p.34.



social scaffolding, condemning any exit of the woman from the space reserved for her and encouraging silence as a manifestation of female identity, of course with the argument of preserving an eternal feminine and a secret that does not allow disclosure by word. Respecting this argument, we divided Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's creation into two stages: we studied the early prose (the volumes *Deep Waters*, *The Sphinx*, *The Woman in front of the Mirror*), discovering a femininity willing to confess, one that will elevate experiences to the level of themes feminine such as love, the body, motherhood, beauty, seduction, escape; followed by a research of *the Hallipa Cycle* in terms of a femininity under the sign of silence, sometimes more eloquent than words. We discovered how the female characters in *the Hallipa Family Cycle* become the "voices" of silences fueled by suffering, shame, contempt, guilt, seduction, missed maternity, illness, snobbery or refusals of a social construction. The analysis was carried out by borrowing the author's vision according to which "for a woman, any suffering enhances her emotional capacities"<sup>5</sup>. The thread that connected the entire analytical approach was represented by emotion, in its tones, in noises and silences, in looks and gestures.

The idea from which we started and which was confirmed by the corpus of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's texts included in the work was that emotions cannot be separated from the mental context of an era, that their exercise is done exclusively in the register codified by the discourses of the era and that the woman, In particular, she has the ability to understand and internalize social norms, not departing from the gestural and affective pattern that the period makes available to her. The bitter taste of negative emotions - claimed also from a certain affective constitution that the author herself assumes, declaring that "I, moreover, am seriously affected by misanthropy (...) because of it I see a bit gloomy"<sup>6</sup> - connects the narratives of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, regardless of whether they manifest themselves confessionally (as in the writings of the first stage) or hide behind the silences in *the Hallipa Family Cycle*. Although accused of stealing the feminine mystery, that the soul surgeon's scalpel penetrates too deep, evacuating every woman's secret, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's prose does not lose its femininity, but, borrowing the vision of Constantin Ciopraga, we will say that "femininity is only deafened, not absent"<sup>7</sup>. On this calapod, "reflections are associated with details that highlight the woman's soul"<sup>8</sup>, thus increasing her mystery.

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<sup>5</sup> Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu *apud* Ciopraga, Constantin, *Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu*, București: Cartea Românească, 1973, p.51.

<sup>6</sup> Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu în Vancea, Viola, *op. cit.*, p.32.

<sup>7</sup> Ciopraga, Constantin, 1973, *Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, p.230.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

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