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INSTANCES OF FEMINITY IN THE NOVEL "VOICA", BY DE HENRIETTE YVONNE STAHL

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Abstract: *Feminism and femininity have often been confused in relation with literary works. The confusion consisted of attributing feminine characteristics to writings belonging to female writers. Literary criticism has managed to clarify these two distinct concepts, and even to identify elements of masculine writing in female authors. The novel under scrutiny, "Voica", by Henriette Yvonne Stahl displays a range of facets of femininity; nevertheless, the manner of writing is purely masculine, the author appealing to the psychological observation, using a masculine-like language for the novel's dialogues and preserving an external realism. Apart from the gender differences, absorbed by the supreme power of creation, the literature written by women offers a new perspective, freed from constraints, an inner image of the topic of femininity, an autonomous space, populated by original and very interesting characters, who appear to have been taken out from the real world.*

Keywords: *feminism, femininity, feminine writing, masculine writing, literary feminism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism and femininity are two distinct concepts disputing supremacy in the areas of ideology and literature, but which harmonize with each other due to their common concern to confer the woman a new identity and a visibly modified and improved status. Although femininity represents a social construct, it is made up of both social factors and biologically created ones. Based on the famous feminist manifesto, launched by Simone de Beauvoir, in 1949 - „Le Deuxième Sexe”¹, femininity has its origin in biology². If

¹ Although Mrs. de Beauvoir's manifesto appeared 25 years after the novel under our scrutiny was published, the saying "One is not born a woman, but becomes one" will be used for analyzing various literary works written by women, both from a psychoanalytical perspective and from socio-psychological or linguistic-semiotic ones.

feminism was a powerful movement and it advocated for vital rights, through appeal to numerous fields of activity, from mythology to psychoanalysis and sociology, femininity was accepted as a literary matter, capable of highlighting the colors of life and of providing women with their former charm and vitality. The vision of women was permanently influenced by ideologies and by the status that women held within the society of that time, so that feminist ideas also penetrated the literary field, but the aesthetic factor prevailed and the virulence of ideas was diminished to the point that they did no longer represented a purpose in itself. Literature that was written by women approaches femininity in a manner different from male writers' perspective. Subjectivity, sometimes excessive, turns into a negative

² "anatomy is destiny", in Sigmund Freud's acceptance

trait; the topic of femininity condition becomes a pursuit of happiness, in most of the cases, and this very instance leads to the replacement of the narrative by an array of sensations. The French feminist researcher, Hélène Cixous identified a “feminine writing” (“écriture féminine”) or a feminine expression at the crossroads of poetry, magic, madness, in other words, outside the dominant masculine logocentrism.³ Nevertheless, Cixous did not exclude the possibility, which was proved, through Joyce’s works, among others, that men writers could write in this manner, too. As long as the woman’s feelings are realistically rendered, the writers’ gender is irrelevant; the only relevant issue will be the aesthetic reception of such literary works. From this perspective, although all feminist novels focus exclusively on women characters, not all of them manage to highlight psychological figures, capable of walking out of the pages of the book and entering their readers’ minds, while remaining imprinted in their memory. And this happens because some of the writers struggle too much to catch the stream of consciousness of their female characters, to the detriment of the work of art, in itself.

In case of the Romanian literature from the beginning of the twentieth century, novels written by women writers did not enjoy an objective criticism. On the one side, this was due to that time’s reticence of the male criticism toward the women writers’ abilities to write “literature” (perceived as a male’s talent); on the other side, the very absence of women critics had led to that reality, and not the least, the social, economic and political factors contributed to the false perception that writing was the men’s job only. Nonetheless, women writers were tolerated within the world of letters, some of them were more intensely made public, whereas most of them got marginalized, then completely forgotten, even by the simple act of not republishing the works

that had enjoyed a positive reception at the time of their first publishing.

The novel *Voica* by Henriette Yvonne Stahl, the author’s debut work, was met with enthusiasm by Mihail Sadoveanu and Garabet Ibrăileanu, both writers sensing a promising artistic potential in the young woman writer. At the time of Stahl’s issuing her second volume, of short stories, *Aunt Matilda*, Perpessicius joined the criticism of the epoch, in the manner of appreciating and confirming Henriette Yvonne Stahl’s talent, while almost fifteen years after the publishing of her first novel, Eugen Lovinescu included the writer in the third volume of his *History of the Contemporary Romanian Literature*, in the chapter dedicated to “The stream of consciousness epics”. Still, certain nuances of misogyny are present in the critical works of the above mentioned critics, not in the mode of a negative association of the writing with its author’s gender, but, on the contrary, in the meaning of a recognition of the power of Stahl’s pen, of her power of impartial, distanced observation, of her psychological introspection, yet, in a masculine manner. This approach is extremely interesting in relation with Stahl’s perception among her male peers of the time. Sadoveanu, Ibrăileanu or Perpessicius never made any reference to femininity or feminism when writing about Henriette Yvonne Stahl; only Lovinescu did mention about a “feminine plot, in what femininity holds as its most specific trait, in its sexual pathology, with all of its wanderings and nervous shocks, with all the absurdity of opposite attitudes, yet, treated in a virile manner, without romance or sentimentalism”, but his appreciation was in relation with Stahl’s novel *The Star of the Slaves* (1934).

Even so, the novel *Voica* displays a broad range of instances of femininity, femininity perceived as a sum of feminine feelings and social behaviors in relation with the place, the time and the human interaction.

2. INSTANCES OF FEMINITY

Generally, in Henriette Yvonne Stahl’s novels or short stories, feminine characters display a crisis of identity, namely the crisis of

³ Hélène Cixous was the first to coin the phrase *feminine writing* in her essay “Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), in which she asserted: “A woman must to write her self: she has to write about women and to bring women back within the art of writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.”



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their feminine identity. The author's merit is to have managed to depict, in a very realistic and genuine manner, this crisis generated, in many instances, by the heroines' own figment, although most female characters possess a strong, sharp lucidity. On the other side, characters' crisis is related to their need to reach the depth of self. The lack of prejudice of the female characters in Henriette Yvonne Stahl's novels, their fragility in front of public judgment, confer them a certain feminine dignity. In relation with the masculine world, feminine characters possess a specific self-sufficiency, which stands for a quest for their own identity. In their relation with love, one cannot even affirm that these characters are disappointed. They manage to overcome the border of disappointment caused by random love that was offered to them. Suffering, sadness and disappointment are but various manners of profoundly searching for the self.

In *Voica*, Henriette Yvonne Stahl presents the instances of femininity both from a feminine perspective and a masculine one; still, the manner of her writing is doubtlessly masculine, characterized by objectivity, realism, psychological observation, emotional impartiality, and schematism. Thus, from the masculine viewpoint, we have identified the instances of the ordinary woman (mother, wife, sister-in-law, virgin), of the devil-woman (temperamental), those of the adulterous woman, the materialist woman; whereas from the feminine perspective we have recognized the instances of the fertile/sterile woman, the impure/victim, the woman victim of prejudices, the emancipated woman. Apart from these instances, and beyond gender-related appreciations, we could add an instance of the woman that behaves socially, in relation with her time, with the place and interaction with other human beings.

Hence, the *ordinary woman*, in her

posture as a mother, represented in the novel by Ana and Stoiana, holds the role of satisfying the needs of the *other people* surrounding her: these needs manifest at the same time with this woman's power of self-sacrifice (for her children and husband). The wife satisfies the worldly craves of her husband, without any opposition, with a sense of resignation and consolation that "it is supposed to be like this", "for he may find some other woman, maybe a virgin". Voice, for example, is not concerned about the fact of being "used" (in fact, there is not explicit mentioning of this attitude), but she is worried that the mere fact of neglecting her husband and household may lead to "separation", and through this, to the loss of commonly acquired goods with her life partner. Her sister-in-law, the wife of Dumitru's brother, temporarily replaces the runaway wife, yet, it is not because she would like to consolidate family relationships, but out of mercantile interests, for the sake of obtaining something from the more affluent relative.

The *devil-woman* is not depicted by Henriette Yvonne Stahl in a romantic manner, but a very realistic one. This category also includes Voica and old Ioana. Voica is a temperamental woman, in her relationship with Dumitru she will not accept his refusal to give her those two acres of land in exchange for her taking care of his illegitimate child, whereas toward her sister-in-law, Floarea, Voica does not manifest any understanding, compassion or mercy at all, so long as the latter "aspires" to her social status and goods. Old Ioana is sold to money and for the money sake, she is ready to intervene in the destiny of marriage between Voica and Dumitru, although "indirectly, through a man she knows...". The instance of the *adulterous woman* is concisely presented by Anca, the little girl who looks after her step brother. This time, the young lady's

intervention and supplementary questions come to render the cruel truth: the little girl has a step father and does not manage to understand why her natural dad died. From the perspective of her tragic experience, she speaks about her woman neighbor Floarea's runaway with Vasile, as about trivia, but still, she is influenced by the comment of the adults around her. Therefore, Anca perceives the fact that Floarea's cheated husband got crazy as something natural and a good reason for his running away, too. The *materialist woman* is portrayed against the severe life conditions, immediately after the First World War. Voica defends her possessions with an animalic obstinacy, sister-in-law, Floarea takes advantage of the domestic shortcomings of her brother-in-law, Dumitru and hopes to obtain something in exchange for some house chores, old Ioana keeps her money at her breast – for rainy days-, and even the doctor's wife does not refrain herself from taking away everything that comes to her hand, from the sick woman's house. The doctor's wife also displays a cheap careerism, she dresses herself without refinement, but she pretends to belong to the high class: a "lady".

The instances of the *fertile woman* or her opposite, the *sterile woman* are this time presented from a feminine perspective. Stoiana gives birth to a child every year, whereas Voica cannot give birth, just like her sister. Fecundity and sterility make victims of both two women, equally: Stoiana suffers from child delivery and she would like some advice not to remain pregnant again; Voica knows her handicap, she is aware of a woman's nature and the role she holds in her home, and, consequently, she has to accept her usband illegitimate child. The *impure woman*, victim of emotional blackmail and equally of the rural community's prejudices, the bride without a name, accept with resignation to be married to a widowed man, with two children. Mention should be made at this point that the bride is the only woman in the novel who is not given a name. it is possible for the author to have intended, by this, to generalize the sensual woman's victimization, through the prejudices of those people composing a patriarchic

society, insensitive and loyal to some primitive mentalities.

The instance of the *emancipated woman* is proved by the manner of action of the young Lady, in relation with the other women of the village: detachment, superiority, education, belonging to a superior social class; but also by the presence, in the middle of peasants, of Maria, the young Lady's personal servant, a young woman, aspiring to a social status which she will never reach. Maria's superiority is reflected only by some items of "town-like" clothing; by wearing them Maria differentiates herself from the vestimentary kitsch of the local women peasants.

Henriette Yvonne Stahl manages to depict these facets of femininity through psychological observation, using a masculine language for the dialogues of the novel while preserving that external realism mentioned by the Garabet Ibraileanu. Inner introspection differs radically from the one used by Virginia Woolf, by appeal to the interior monologue, steady time-mobile space; Stahl rather uses relations between characters; she uses nature description to complete her feminine characters' feelings in the novel.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Beyond the gender differences absorbed by the stupendous power of creation, the literature written by women offers a new vision, freed from constraints, an inner image of the topic of femininity, an autonomous space, populated by original and interesting characters that appear to have been cut out of the real life.

Although Henriette Yvonne Stahl did not manage to be remarked within the Romanian literature of the interbellic period at the same value as Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, maybe that the appreciation of her writings would have been different if she had been lucky enough to have her works republished. Some of her novels were only printed in the edition princeps, and her tumultuous private life, the influences and consequences of her cohabitation with her two husbands – Ion Vinea and Petru Dumitriu- contributed to the superposition of the author's



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public image over her image as a writer, which was to the detriment of the latter.

The novel *Voica* is not necessarily a work of art, yet, it holds the merit to have been among the first works created by the woman to whom the label of "literary feminism" was associated.

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