

Antifeminist Ideologies in Romanian Popular Culture. Advertising, Power Discourses and Traditional Roles

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Abstract: The present paper concludes a multidisciplinary research on the appearance and popularization of traditional gender ideologies by means of specific public power discourses. While, on declarative levels, the Romanian establishment favors political correctness, freedom of choice and self-identity, there are subtle messages within power discourses that state the opposite and encourage the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, the stigmatization of those who do not observe them, as well as dangerous gender segregation. The research takes into account three levels of ideology-dissemination in Romania after the year 2000: product publicity, public speech of prominent representatives of Romanian politics and public messages of the cultural elite.

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Antifeminism and sexism are manifest in present-day Romania on more than one level: trivial contexts, records of everyday life, but also the most subtle levels of intellectual existence, public life and even elitist discourses. A great amount of offensive publicity still exists on media channels, both written and visual. Apart from that, a different kind of publicity serves the *status-quo*, coming from discourses which one might expect to initiate social change, not social stereotypes. Too many Romanian intellectuals or politicians find no reason why they should not make public their own judgments about how women should still happily take on *traditional* roles and places in contemporary society. Negative value judgments pass undisturbed, by means of public speech and visual publicity, to the mainstream, where the sum of these derogatory messages turns into ideology. This does not mean that Romanian participants to the public sphere are necessarily more misogynist than their peers in Western societies. Rather, while somewhere else organizations against discrimination have enough authority to be taken into account, at least with regard to public life and space, there are little sanctions in Romanian public life for gender offenses.

It is my contention that there are at least three discourses that bear equal responsibility for this state of affairs: 1) a great part of the advertising campaigns for consumer products, 2) public discourse of prominent representatives of Romanian politics and 3) written messages of the *cultural elite*. Derogatory speech and sexist

complicity seem to numb rational recognition of real-life gender roles¹ and expose Romanian society to an ideology of conflict, opposition to change and judgmental conduct. The three discourses that I have targeted above have different aims: the goal of the first one is to boost consumerism and give the best chance to a given product. This is why it is more susceptible to protect traditional and cliché representations, as long as they trigger identification² and desire. The second one aims to convince the electorate that a certain party ideology is trustworthy, regardless if this means to promote new representations or to endorse existent stereotypes. The third discourse is the most problematic one, because it belongs to the intellectuals, whose goal is identified by Foucault as the opposition to power discourses and the disclosure of ideologized tenets.³ Let's examine the three discourses one at a time.

1) Consumerist Advertising Discourse

Difference in itself does not imply any value judgment and does not state any gender hierarchy. Patriarchal thinking emerges when difference in constitution or existential evaluation is transformed into hierarchy and is understood in terms of value judgment. There is a silent complicity between popular culture (where unfair value judgments and politically incorrect statements are to be expected) and a sphere of representations of the mainstream culture (where public values are endorsed by official discourses, whether negatively or positively). As already demonstrated by Mikhail Bakhtin, there is a "popular culture of laughter"⁴, populated by masks: when the jester puts on his mask, he places himself at a distance from "the real world", becoming not only an *exterior* presence, but also an *alien* one. This way, he gets to say what nobody else is capable of saying, he gets to joke about things that nobody else is allowed to joke about, for fear of social disruption. However, while the jester is allowed his impropriety when wearing his mask, he loses this privilege once he becomes one of the "real", social persons again. This is the insertion point for many derogatory speeches outside the popular culture of laughter.

It is one thing to joke about blondes at a party, where it is assumed that speeches bear no axiological relevance and where the jester has his mask on, and quite another story to build an entire advertising campaign for the national telecommunications company (aired on TV and radio in 2004–2005⁵) on an anecdote about the blonde who asks the operator "how long does it take to go by fast

¹ Donna Gill, "REAL Women and the press: An ideological alliance of convenience," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 14–3 (1989).

² Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968).

³ Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and power", in *Language, counter-memory, practice*, ed. Michel Foucault and Donald Fernand Bouchard (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1977): 205–17.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Literature and Aesthetics* (Athens: Plethron, 1980), *passim*, especially Chapter VI of part three.

⁵ Doru Pop, "Birdie mnum-mnum. Visual Exploitation of Women in Romanian Media Representations", *Caietele Echinox* 10 (2006): 300–307.

train from Bucharest to Constanta?” and is satisfied with the answer: “Just one second.” In cases like these, the stereotype of the stupid blonde (that makes the delight of many other popular cultures) turns, from a manifestation of the “popular culture of laughter”, to a public statement. Even more, making these public statements on national TV is an option based on public expectancies and implicitly on the idea that they sound humorous, and not derogatory to the targeted audience. This kind of ideological connivance is bound to perpetuate gender-offensive speech in the public sphere.

Unfortunately, a public debate on sexual identity is largely missing in Romania, or takes place in unfortunate contexts, where informed opinion leaders are missing. For instance, since 2000, a number of TV talk-shows or reality-shows claimed to open the above-mentioned debate. Talk shows like *De trei ori femeie* (Three times a woman), aired on Acasă TV in the first part of the decade, or *Femeia e la putere* (Women in power) on Euphoria TV, of the same period of time were designed for majoritarian feminine audiences (as are the respective channels). However, they offered stereotypical images of women as well: the falsely independent woman, often a divorcée, who takes pride in her man-hating attitude, while at the same time has little education and parades, like spoils of war, her new gained fortune from the divorce; the hypersexed woman (possibly hyperemotional as well), modelled after her favourite heroine from the most recent soap opera, having no subject of conversation other than sex and fashion, maybe cosmetic surgery; the family mother, whose identity is entirely derived from her domestic value and who is lost once her children grow up. A reality show running at the end of the first decade of the new millennium, still broadcast today on channel Prima TV, *Schimb de mame* (Mother swap), presents two mothers, who do not previously know each other, exchanging families and lives for a few weeks. Designed to promote the image of the modern Romanian woman, who juggles a career and a family, this reality-show constantly promotes an intolerant traditional type of woman. Between their most precious values, that they would hopefully instil to the “other family”, the women shown value house order and tidiness before anything else. Very few of them are really preoccupied by something other than their domestic identity, than their kitchen rules or their regulations regarding cleanliness.

It is probable that the cliché that says a good woman is a woman who keeps her house really tidy, so frequent in this particular reality show, has inspired advertisers to launch a promotion campaign in 2013 for two Romanian cleaning products (*Nufăr* and *Triumf* – a toilet detergent and a stove cleaner) on a line that too many mothers from *Schimb de mame* get to utter: “nobody tells me how to clean my house!” Imagined as an altercation between a housewife and a door-to-door seller of new, foreign cleaning products, the campaign promotes an idea of traditional Romania (both products were also used before 1989 in national households) in the same package as the idea of a woman whose identity is primarily given by her cleaning-related knowledge.

On channels like Antena 1 or Antena 3, frequently criticized for the poor quality of their programs and for the highly ideologized political commentaries, there are a few family shows which can be easily accused of harmful, stereotypical representation of women. In *Noră pentru mama* [A daughter-in-law for my mother],

the web of traditional complicities and Oedipal transfers between mother, son and daughter-in-law is so thick, the life standards so low, the language so defective, it becomes almost too hard to watch. While it could present contemporary, modern realities of the mother – daughter-in-law relationship, the show seems to be a collection of the worst stereotypes of the issue, starting with the fact that a young man does not just like a woman, but chooses his mother's "daughter in law".

It is probable that Romanian culture has given one of the most violent narratives of the relationship between the new bride and her mother-in-law in the tale entitled *Soacra cu trei nurori* (The mother-in-law who had three daughters-in-law), an ideological source of inspiration for this reality show. Originally a folk tale, the story was re-written by the storyteller Ion Creangă in the 19th century and is still very popular at a symbolic level. In the story, the mother-in-law has the attributes of the evil stepmother of folktales, psychoanalytically embodying characters of "the bad mother" (projection of the ordering, intrusive component of motherhood). First, the mother-in-law functions as a stepmother in the economy of the tale (the three brides come to live fraternally in her home; her sons help her reinforce the rules of the house, etc.). Then she deliberately makes up a monstrous image for herself (she exploits her daughters-in-law to exhaustion under the threat of her continuous wakefulness, she censors every move they make using her alleged "eye on the back of her head", a sign of a superhuman pervasive consciousness). Of the three daughters-in-law, two are "hard-working and submissive" and the third, chosen by the youngest son in an act of disobedience towards his mother, is cunning and proves destabilizing to the other two. In due time, they organize what can be described as a true Sabbath of witches, where they torture their evil mother. The detailed description of all the tortures is made to be entertaining and funny, possibly inspiring good cheer and empathy towards the vindictive girls. By this kind of images of women, the Romanian patriarchal world gives a problematic design to the relationship between husband and wife, fractured within the evil triangle in which not only the man is disputed by the two women of utmost importance in his life, but there is also a sacrifice needed: one of the two power poles has to disappear, although the war is never definitively won.

A large number of advertising campaigns still use this peculiar design of the relationship between the new bride and her mother-in-law. Although the tortures may be missing from the picture, there is still a cold war going on between the two: for instance, in a 2011 campaign for a wall paint (*Savana*), the dictatorial mother-in-law comes to the renovated apartment of her son's new family just to reject and criticize everything her daughter-in-law has designed. The one who makes things better between the two is not the missing son (who is absent from this picture, as he is absent from Creangă's tale), but the painter, who compliments and flirts with the old lady, who – as a result – ends her criticism.

Apparently, shows like the ones mentioned above rank high in public TV preferences. Therefore, they are efficient vehicles of ideological transfer: on the one hand, they confirm to the viewer that these representations are valid (since they are used as identifying marks); on the other, they reinforce the same representations as popular good choices to the new generations of viewers. While it is true that commercial TV was never preoccupied with education and that the goal of these

shows is entertainment, not education, it is equally true that this kind of representation of a stereotyped woman filling the life of a stereotyped man gains public power through publicity. This situation makes it even more urgent for popular Romanian culture to counterbalance these ideological images somewhere else. These prefabricated products of consumer culture should find counterpoints in more nuanced, more rational public stands. One might hope that the public discourse of politicians is the place to counterbalance politically incorrect and stereotyped gender representations, but let's analyze if this is the case.

2) Public discourse of politicians

Things do not radically change if one takes a closer look to the rational, educational side of the public life. At the National Conference of the National-Liberal Party in Alba Iulia, in April 2006, the Romanian MP Ludovic Orban publicly blamed three female colleagues, exposing them as negative examples of women who used their seduction to gain political promotion. When asked to withdraw his sexist accusation, due to a subsequent media scandal, his apology rather resembled the vaguely amused pose of a benevolent wise man, who does not begin to try to understand a whimsical creature like a woman, so different from him. The situation describes, fairly accurately, the extent to which a public intrinsic ideology, emanating from the highest poles of stately power, is detrimental to a fair representation of gender identity. Gender insult does not only come, in the above example, from the slanderous nature of such an accusation (which, to be fair, can be proven to be true or not, with due amount of evidence), but from the fact that the same member of the ruling party has never found it useful or relevant to talk in his public speeches about his male fellows' illicit ways of political ascension.

This logic of sexual politics¹ is quite transparent: it is as absurd as it is useless to stigmatize a man who uses unethical means to get into politics, because the practice is commonly (thought tacitly) accepted and recognized as a "natural" reality in political combat. However, political wars excuse any means only as long as they are fought by male politicians. Seen as a modern, social form of competition (which, in primitive communities, passes as a natural call), political struggle with illicit methods is only denounced if it involves women, since their illicit weapon is sexuality (belonging to one's private life) and so they can be blamed for mixing it with political activity (belonging to one's public life). The more a woman is active politically, socially and publicly, the more she is subjected to accusations involving her "femininity" or possibly her sexuality – this is a sad, but obvious, conclusion on the power of sexist ideology in present-day Romania.² The episode cited above is even more important once we look at how it was reported by the media: with almost no exception, the news reports were clearly empathizing with the politician and his all-too-human "blunder", and often sarcastic towards the three female politicians

¹ Robert William Connell, *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics* (Stanford University Press, 1987.)

² Doru Pop, *Alegerile naibii. Fals tratat despre metehnele imaginarului politic autohton* (Hell's elections. A false treatise on the lacks of Romanian political imaginary) (Cluj: Editura Indigo, 2007), 81–92.

whom Orban had accused of prostitution on political currency, often represented as ridiculous ladies throwing a fit of hysteria.



Irina Dumitrașcu Măgurean, *Travesti*
10,8 cm x 8,5 cm, polaroid, 2015

The series of examples that one can use in support of the idea that Romanian political discourse (even the liberal one) perpetuate dangerous clichés about evil actions of evil women is too large to be accommodated in this article. At times, the examples imply outrageous conduct, such as the one of the mayor of Constanța, Radu Mazăre, a prominent member of the Social Liberal Union. While a socialist,

according to his party's doctrine, Mazăre is well known for entertaining an opulent life-style, with many scandalous ideological options: from parading as a Nazi officer at a public event, to posing for *Playboy magazine* as a sultan surrounded by women who are ready to please him or as Napoleon having won the sexual submission of a large number of women, this politician has violated lots of rules of political correctness and insulted different social communities.¹ His public conduct was sanctioned by the press on occasions, but was never amended by his party, who did not express any public blame and – even more – did not expel him for the party.

One last example should be invoked here, since it features a very important character of Romanian politics, Antonie Iorgovan, who died in 2007. A member of the Social Democratic Party, he is best remembered as “the father of our Constitution” and, as such, functions as a symbolic father substitute in Romanian politics, which is known to have had such “fathers” during and after the fall of communism. In a radio interview,² Antonie Iorgovan was invited to state his position on women in politics and women in public life in Romania. The MP seemed initially to sympathize with women whom he depicted as victimized by Romanian public parochialism (“we believe that we have a problem: we cannot overcome this mindset, that women should know their places”). Up to this point, he stuck to the usual doctrinal declarations of his party (and most others). Later, however, his personal misogynist views became clear. Iorgovan believes there are two types of women (both of which will prove to be unmistakable antifeminist stereotypes). The first one is the “good woman” (i.e. passive, submissive, solely preoccupied with home and her family), and the second one is the “bad woman” (i.e. seductive, bringing misfortune on a man she exhausts through sexual magnetism). The “father of our Constitution” has no doubt that “real women”, the “nice ones” are “the majority in Romania”, dealing with the roles assigned to them by tradition. In contrast, seductive women are described as “parachutes”, “mistresses of trade”, and are considered to be using their erotic potential to go into politics at the expense of naive career diplomats who accept the role of sugar-daddies. Towards the end of his speech on the radio, Iorgovan quotes a poem by Marin Sorescu that we should quote and analyze for a while.

Entitled *Rânduiești* (Right Ways), the poem nostalgically and comically reveres, in the colourful words of a peasant, about the good old days when women were women and men were men: “Where I come from, women kiss their men's hands / Or so they used to - said Marin son of Peter/ And do not ever call them by their first names./ Women made their men three or four kids, but never dared to call them by their first names./ There were of course the prouder ones, who had ambition, and these did not call their men anything./ A woman here knows the right ways, she can hold her plates,/ And her pots by the fire, squatting by the fire place,/ And she can leave politics - that's our concern, this is for us men - / Woman, what

¹ For a briefing on the matter, see: <http://www.gandul.info/magazin/galerie-foto-radu-mazare-spartan-maharajah-ofiter-nazist-si-aviator-avatarurile-primarului-constantei-9920955>

² Entitled “Questionnaire on women”, the show was broadcast on Radio InfoPro on the 10th of May 2006.

does the woman know?”¹ If we take a closer look at this poem, we can easily spot the antagonistic views on women and their roles: on the one hand, the traditional woman, who “kisses her man’s hand”, is understood as an incomplete man. She lacks all knowledge of “politics”, that is to be left in men’s care. She freely admits to her enslavement, as an eternal male pupil in the care of male rationality. In this ideological view, female subordination to men is *structural*, professed as *natural* and justified by the comparison between a full term (man) and a derealized one (woman), in a system with comparable terms.

On the other hand, the first concept is dislocated by the intervention of “prouder women”, who appear later in the poem, in the unquoted section of it, as “women of today” who cannot even “properly bear your kids as they should”.² This second configuration of women (unreasonable, stubborn, conniving) is possible to associate with the metaphor of the complete Other, of a woman who, given her alien nature, lives in conflict with man. In the world of the poem, the servant-woman clearly belongs to a golden age of man, identified with a primitive patriarchy, whereas the alien-woman, who refuses her traditional place, is the sign of a breakdown of the right ways, a sign of man’s entry into an iron age of his glory, an obscure matriarchy. Gender hierarchy is untroubled even in the second case, although the ideology changes. No longer comparable terms (since woman appears to man utterly “incomprehensible”), the two are hierarchized by means of the axiological privileging of those terms pertaining to the semantic field of the masculine and by ridiculing corresponding terms in the field of the feminine.

In the same poem, there is an overlapping mechanism whose relevance goes far beyond the framework of text analysis. It is the mechanism by which male values become generic terms. The most obvious example is to be found in: “this is for men”. The overlap of “man” (*homo*, generic term for all humanity, regardless of gender) and “man” (*vir*, selective denomination of a single sex) is neither new, nor incidental. It echoes in many cultures at a linguistic level (see Engl. *Man* or Fr. *Homme*, or regional Romanian “om”). A less visible overlap is that of the semantic sphere of “politics” and a much broader content than that justified by the explanation in the dictionary. Here, “politics” means *rational discourse*, male esoteric knowledge. It is not by accident that such a term contributes to further ostracism of those women fleeing from the private sphere to the public one. That women should leave politics to man, in this poem, actually means women should be excused from exercising their reason, being incapable of rational actions and of public impact.

In his interview, Antonie Iorgovan actually uses poetic speech and the above quoted poem just as he would use ideological speech, assigning it a doubtless truth

¹ Marin Sorescu, excerpt from “Rânduiești” (Right Ways), a poem of the cycle *La Liliiec* (1973, 111). My translation. Original version: “La noi muierea pupa mâna bărbatului/ Până mai adineaori – zicea Marin al lui Pătru,/ și din dumneata nu-l scotea niciodată,/ îi făcea trei, patru copii, dar nu-ndrăznea să-i zică *tu*./ Cele mai mândre, care se ambiționau, nu-i ziceau nicicum./ Femeia are socotelile ei, ea să țină de coada cârpătorului./ Să țină oala de mânășă, la foc, să stea ciucită la vatră/ și să lase politica – de-asta ne ocupăm noi, asta e pentru oameni -/ Femeia, ce știe femeia?”.

² Original version: “nici copii nu-ți mai face ca lumea”. My translation.

value, although poetry should be “freed from truth criteria”.¹ This is why I have conducted the textual analysis of this poem on improper ways, namely those of ideological interpretation. My justification is given by the fact that more than once, literature dealing with women and men is read (especially by the large public) ideologically, much in the way one would read and adhere to ideas from sapiential texts. For this particular case, I agree with Kenneth Burke² and his proposition to replace “ideology” with “philosophy of myth”, since Iorgovan’s aim is not a change in social consciousness, but the condemnation of a certain philosophy of public action. “Let mistresses stay just that, mistresses”, Iorgovan decrees when quoting Sorescu’s poem, “and let them leave politics to us men”. This way, the politician uses the term “politics” just like Marin son of Peter, the rural character speaking in Sorescu’s poem would do. Going further than Ludovic Orban, Iorgovan has the nonchalance or the cynicism to explicitly say what the other MP did not follow through, that *all women* should know and observe their traditional places.

Few noted the paradox that, while in most areas of life urban Romanians want to see some changes, mostly understood in terms of Europeanization, as far as gender relations are concerned, change has the resonances of a shaking threat. While, as we have seen in the examination of the first level of discourse, the perpetuation of traditional gender representations is somehow inevitable in consumerist publicity, for reasons that belong to audience expectancies, one can only deplore the fact that public discourses and ideographs³ of Romanian politicians (investigated at the second level of discourse) are no different. The kind of publicity they make through sexist endorsement of dubious gender representation, while being less explicit and hidden in certain rhetorical mechanisms, has dangerous impact upon mainstream representation of gender and of the relationship between them.

What about the third level? Can Romanian culture put its hopes for a fair public representation of gender in the intelligentsia and in the messages coming from cultural elites? One could think so, but it is worth taking a closer look.

3) Public messages of intellectual discourse

In a well-known book entitled *Şase maladii ale spiritului contemporan* (Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit), the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica defines “todetitis” as “the malady caused by a deficiency in assuming individuality”.⁴ According to him, all spirits can be affected by one or more of the

¹ Gilles Deleuze in Foucault and Deleuze, “Intellectuals and power,” 207.

² Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 197–203.

³ In the sense given to this term by Michael Calvin McGee, in “The *ideograph*: A link between rhetoric and ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (1980): 1–16. The author’s definition suggests that a description of political consciousness is possible from the structures of meaning exhibited by a society’s vocabulary of “ideographs”, where ideology and mythical symbolism meet.

⁴ Constantin Noica, *Spiritul românesc în cumpătul vremii. Şase maladii ale spiritului contemporan* (The Romanian spirit in the thinking of the age. Six illnesses of the contemporary spirit) (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1978), 50.

six philosophical maladies he makes up in this beautiful essay, but *todetitis* is sure to affect the spirit of each and every woman. Consequently, even if the above mentioned text does not hold an explicit antifeminist tenet, the reader is faced with a double simplification. On the one hand, Noica's text operates the typical reduction of essentialist discourse when it levels the diversity of what he names "the female half" of mankind to a single generic term ("women"). Besides, there is an implicit condemnation involved. Although the book is not explicitly incriminating or openly ideological, since it merely states that there can be described a certain pathology of "the contemporary human spirit", in the chapter on *todetitis*, "women" are set to illustrate an unfortunate case-study: "this is a typical disease for half of humanity, that is, for women, who constantly seek to fix the generality of the species in something individual: a love, a child, a home."¹ In other words, the "contemporary spirit" under study in Noica's book is, excepting its part affected by *todetitis*, the masculine one, since the female spirit is, as we can deduce, afflicted, with no exception. In some other text, the same philosopher wishes one of his disciples – a male one, of course – "the good fortune of having a single vocation", that is of going through a minor (preferably zero) series of failures in different areas. Altogether, the two references - seemingly insignificant - lead to the perception of the female gender as a fatal sentence to imposture.

That conviction is based on at least two biases: on the one hand, "the woman" imagined by Noica is meant to be a housewife, is natural by conformation, as well as emotional and erotic by structure (love is her main existential purpose). She is born necessarily equipped with maternal instinct and a wish to serve (spending all of her self-identifying efforts inside the *gynceum*). The existence of this woman is impossible to imagine *per se*, since it makes no sense outside a relational context: love, family, motherhood, home-making. The presence of man is the *sine qua non* that enables both her love and the appearance of children or the transformation of her house into a "home". The stereotype of a natural woman is probably the most common of all the gender *clichés* in the history of the intellectual Western world, being the source of a hierarchical ideology based on a Romantic philosophy of systemic oppositions. The immediate implication of conditioning women biologically leads straight to the second bias. Descriptions of a natural vocation of the domestic woman imply that any other vocation or career would mean missing "what is right", or taking an inappropriate – if not counterfeit – identity.

The above example is not as benign or as minor as one may think, since it has a value of generalization. Noica's book matters a great deal in almost all canonical libraries in the formative path of young Romanian intellectuals of both sexes (or so it did until the new millennium), so its real impact can only be measured in time. To be fair, Noica's understanding of the role of an intellectual, conforming to his generation's understanding, does not recommend a politics of social action, but rather an elitist, individualist stand. However, the intellectual is already politically involved,² by means of his position within a given society and a given ideology and by means of his discourse.

¹ Noica, 54.

² Foucault and Deleuze, "Intellectuals and power," 205–07.

As a woman in present-day Romania (or elsewhere, for that matter), one is hardly given “the good fortune of having a single vocation” (even if we consider housekeeping to be a matter of “vocation”, some other callings hide behind this domestic investment). This statement should not be read as fatal determinism. Rather, it is likely that women may not favour such a “good fortune”, since they may not value themselves by the standards of a single-path career or life choice. Some women may find excellence in one single area to be neither interesting, nor stimulating. Continuing to play the tune of sexist reductive discourses, we may have to accept different ways of evaluating one’s own sense of identity and self-value: while someone’s sense of identity may come from excelling in one field, someone else’s may just as well come from “sampling” different abilities at multiple levels, by assuming multiple tasks.

Proponents of the idea that a woman has no place in politics and public discourse should know that antiquity had invented an institution to deal with this particular form of censorship, that is, the institution of the *gynaiconom*. The *gynaiconom* used to regulate public women behaviour, but also public conduct of those men who were “lacking in manliness, controlled by passions and feminine irreverence in times of mourning”.¹ This refers to the few men who mourned like women, by scratching their faces to blood, singing mourning verses, openly grieving at the grave of persons other than their relatives or coming to their graves after the day of the funeral. In other words, the penalty did not only apply to women who acted “like men”, but also to “men who acted like women”.

How comfortable can the experience of gender identity be in present-day Romania? How acute is the discomfort of gender hierarchy? Possible answers cluster around the negative pole: too many women feel discriminated in Romania, or not at all comfortable in their gender identity. Stereotypes, however, bias both female identity and the male one. Quite a few of the Romanian men live under the pressure imposed onto them by a sort of manly totalitarianism, which dictates, rather than states, the content of male identity. Among the prejudices surrounding feminine identity, perhaps the strongest is the cliché of a natural woman, who is designed to fulfil a procreative destiny and to fit, without deviations, the traditional role of wife and mother. This stereotype stands on one of the two following basic ideologies: the idea of a masculine universalism where man is the ultimate achievement of an ideal design, or the idea of a perpetual war, conflict or opposition between everything male and everything female. According to the first ideology, woman becomes – inside this male universalism – an incomplete, deficient man, whose destiny is to function as a pupil besides the “real man” (and to seek the protection of a father, a big brother, or finally her husband). The second ideology imagines an ancillary woman born solely to be helpful to her husband (who cannot be absent, even in this case, from her destiny).

Examining the latter, one realizes that much of the feminine “blame” comes from an ideological reading of religious posits, such as Christian messages, within

¹ Plutarh, *Vieți paralele* (Parallel lives), vol. I, Introd., trans., and notes prof. N. I. Barbu. (Bucharest: Editura științifică, 1960), 221. My translation of excerpt.

church ritual.¹ It is ironic that some passages of sacred texts, where both husband and wife have equal status to martyrs and are seated in a relationship of mutual dependence, as well as in one of vertical dependence to God, have come to be invoked as doctrinaire excuses of domestic violence. The justifying of a husband's brutality towards his wife is absurdly inferred from the privileging, within the public reception of the Orthodox celebration of the wedding union, of the excerpts which state the subjection of woman to man. By comparison, the excerpt referring to the husband's duty, although bearing equal importance within the sacred text, is much less visible or known in public reception of the same ceremony. This way, the fragment that states that all of man's actions come from the love he must have for his wife, equal in amount and quality to self-love, bears no public value.

Finally, another stereotypical gender image, frequently found in the Romanian public sphere is the woman as the Other. Both the metaphor of a "bad" or even "evil" woman and the metaphor of "the witch" come from this ideological source, but also apparently "positive" terms like "the feminine *je ne sais quoi*" have their roots here. To explain, this is just another name for a mysterious occult essence, an unknown energy or fluid, which turns women into entities completely unknown and foreign to men. This second cliché is still very active in present-day urban Romania, where the public activity of women cannot be ignored. The greatest danger of this stereotype is that it clearly supports the ideology of a permanent war, a conflict between sexes that both men and women may fuel.

In an inquiry conducted among women-writers on how they perceive the masculine and feminine in Romania,² some well-known woman writers have provided extremely relevant answers. Here are some excerpts: "Only when I got to Western Europe I realized that being born a woman is not necessarily a handicap. Oh, of course, not all men I know are misogynistic and rude. There are, thank God, normal men, too. Around them I feel good and feminine. And happy." (Marta Petreu); "I have for a long time been lacking female solidarity, so to speak, perhaps as I have let myself be convinced by the cultural environment in which I was beginning my own development as a young intellectual. [...] Today, I believe in the need for female solidarity – not against something, not against men, just solidarity." (Simona Popescu); "I am not a feminist, [...] but I wouldn't dislike to be considered an Amazon" (Aura Christi); "I am not a feminist. [...] The typical lover of the Romanian novel loves by despising the very woman he loves." (Doina Jela); "As long as boys know from their mothers that school failure is explained by the fact that girls are just hardworking (nerdy), while boys are the ones who are really smart, that [...] no girl is good enough for them and that when they get married they practically give themselves to some women who clearly do not deserve them, the intention to educate mature men, full of resentment and frustration well planted in them by their

¹ See the excellent commentary of Mihaela Miroiu, in *Convenio. Despre natură, femei și morală* (Convenio. On nature, women and morals), 2nd ed. (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2002).

² Ruxandra Cesereanu, ed., "Masculin versus feminin în literatura română" (Masculine vs. feminine in Romanian literature) *Steaua* 5–6 (2001), thematic inquiry answered by Marta Petreu, Simona Popescu, Aura Christi, Doina Jela, Sanda Cordoș, Irina Petraș, Saviana Stănescu, Irina Nechit, Magda Cârnci, Ana Blandiana.

own mother, is largely bound to fail” (Sanda Cordoș); “I wish I were a feminist, that is I wish I could bluntly claim, knowing that I speak for an entire community, equal treatment for equal competence” (Irina Petraș); “I am not an advocate of a conservative, dogmatic feminism; [...] the Romanian intellectual is, by definition as we know it, a man, and the woman is generally his inspiring muse. [...] Either that, or the prostitute who relaxes the same deep thinker of existential crises” (Saviana Stanescu); “traditionally, writing is a male occupation – a manifestation of spiritual and physical virility, and when a woman masters the art of words, the glow of her writing makes subtle changes in the phenomenology of creation” (Irina Nechit); “maybe it’s just a late balancing of the sexes in an aging humanity and excessively calibrated on the hard, tough, possessive, rational values of the Power dimension of generic human nature.” (Magda Cârneci); “I am not a feminist, [...] I have never thought of my books as being written by a woman” (Ana Blandiana).

Most quoted writers have carefully included in their statement some form of dissociation from feminism. The first reason may be that feminism has connotations of a reversed sexism in Romanian public perception, as an aggressively egalitarian ideology, that irritates men and makes women virile.¹ An important vote against feminism, given by women from Eastern Europe, may be due to the fact that the professed emancipation has been negatively associated with the professed emancipation imposed by communism. Forcing women to leave their traditional domestic role in order to work alongside men to build the new communist world meant operating two different roles at the same time, resulting in a serious identity fracture. Yet another reason for the resistance to feminism is the resistance to any visible ideology, gained by the East-European woman through the communist ideology-vaccine. Regardless of its particular manifestation, the ideological agenda of feminism includes change and aims to alter social, political and cultural roles, etc.

Beyond that, one can also notice within the statements of the above-quoted women-writers a tendency to adopt the role of a bold woman, who breaks access to cultural creation. The woman-writers either eliminate the perception of gender and claim they are just authors, or perceive the field of cultural creation as a battlefield, where victory belongs to the one who really makes the effort (the case of those who refute the common perception that the Romanian intellectual is male by definition). We can also take into account that a few of them enjoy radical images like the Amazon, or antimasculine idiosyncrasies that echo in linguistic harshness. Finally, one notable aspect is especially the quasi-unanimous need for feminine solidarity, a solidarity whose aim is not belligerent (in preparation of a world war against men), but relational. This conclusion appears both in their wish to speak on behalf of a class, and in the attempts to restore a flawed communication between different generations of women.

¹ Further development on the reasons for oppositions and resistance to feminism, as well as a good typological understanding of feminism vs. antifeminism vs. nonfeminism, in Lori J. Nelson, Sandra B. Shanahan, and Jennifer Olivetti, “Power, empowerment, and equality: Evidence for the motives of feminists, nonfeminists, and antifeminists,” *Sex roles* 37/3–4 (1997): 227–249 and Susan E. Marshall, “Ladies against women: Mobilization dilemmas of antifeminist movements,” *Social Problems* (1985): 348–362.

This latter point touches a sore spot, that is, the myth (probably of Oriental origin) of the conflicting archetypal relationship between mother and daughter-in-law (i.e. between the woman who gives birth and then educates the future man and the woman who psychoanalytically takes her place). In many products of the Romanian popular cultures, as I have stated before, the two women not only hate each other and place themselves in perpetual conflict, but also are presented to find supreme joy in their mutual annihilation. The fact that the popular culture of the Western societies does not support this conflicting archetype and that the incidence of conflicting relations between mothers and daughters-in-law is much lower should give food for thought to women in Romania: they could see that, instead of an immutable archetype, we operate with a variable – and therefore modifiable – representation.

4. Stereotyping men

In the Western world, the crisis of male identity – exacerbated in the 70s – has led to the development of hundreds of departments of Men's Studies.¹ In Romania and Eastern Europe, being feminist is tacitly frowned upon by members of both genders. As seen above, creative women who act on the public scene feel the need to detach themselves from feminism, although not being a feminist is already a sign of retrograde conservatism in the Western world. To my knowledge, there are no departments of Men's Studies in any of the Romanian universities, even if Gender Studies professors sometimes approach this topic, too. This is a clear indicator that male identity is assumed without much dilemma in this cultural space.

One of the most authoritarian stereotypes of men, at work in contemporary Romanian culture, is the "tough man", which brings together qualities of the macho man, of the provider and of the family protector, possibly of the rational head of the mystical union that the couple is perceived to be. The Romanian man is asked, first of all, to fulfil a heroic fantasy. Should one read into this that female imagery is somehow haunted by a premonition of violence, always seeking a rescuer and a white knight? It is my contention that there is a clear correspondence between domestic violence (whose frequency makes Romania one of the most conflictual countries of East-Europe in this respect) and the need to imagine a providential man, a saviour who will offer protection. In most cases, in crisis situations, Romanian women expect a man's intervention. I do not just refer to social conflicts here, when regardless of who is responsible, regardless of the size of the problem, a very dear form of protest is to call for the President of the country or the Prime minister to be present in person wherever something goes wrong. I indicate strictly minor incidents, like having to fix a doorknob, to change a flat tire, to make an important family call, to calm a daily turbulence of pubertal children ("wait 'till your father comes home"), to fight a small social battle. The solving of these small disasters is still expected to come from a man, in an overwhelming number of cases.²

¹ Cf. Elisabeth Badinter, *XY. De l'identité masculine* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1992), 15–18.

² See a detailed analysis in Mihaela Mudure, *Feminine* (Cluj: Napoca Star, 2000).

The female psyche responsible for this mechanism is marked by insecurity and convinced of its weaknesses. The situation is no different in Romanian daily life than in Romanian literature. When figures of “weak men” appear as characters in Romanian modern novels, they are depicted as entirely obnoxious and ridiculous. No amount of psychological depth seems able to save them from the predicament of an aprioric negative value judgment. Ladima, a classic example of masculine character, created between the two World Wars by the writer Camil Petrescu, is a perfect example. Some critics say he was inspired by the real poet Mihai Eminescu, whose status is still monumental in the national culture. In Camil Petrescu’s novel, the virile ideology makes Ladima not only problematic (in psychology), but also doomed to social and erotic failure for not following the pattern of a “tough”, manly man. In contrast, the equally dilemmatic Apostol Bologa, of the psychological novel of Liviu Rebreanu of the same period, *Pădurea Spînzuraților* (Forest of the hanged), is a military and, in his way, a tough man, keeping his heroic aura to the end, where he is given deep moral justification for his choosing his conscience over his obedience to the military law. The first, Ladima, inspires pity at best, if not a kind of repulsion, while the second, Bologa, demands at least respect, if not admiration.

An indicator of the Romanian obsession for virility is also the frequency of daily sexual swearing. Being used in almost any context, sexual bad language loses the imprecation value, rather approaching the semantic neutrality of verbal tics. Results are often hilarious: men sexually threatening inanimate objects (cars, ATMs and so on), but also women proffering borrowed male swearing, untroubled by the absence of the corresponding genitals from their own anatomy, using them as symbolic objects, invested with phallic power. The image of a tough man (protected, in Romanian popular culture, by both masculine and feminine options) also goes through a negative update, when men are discriminated. Discrimination is not practiced only by the major protagonists of the public space: there is also a marginal discrimination which occurs when the awareness of one’s own marginality motivates the formation of a caste spirit. A good example can be found in popular culture when the female community treats men as enemies, intruders of the private sphere: for instance the discriminatory counterpoint of the all too sexist idea that “man is the head of the family” is: “yes, but woman is the neck of the family”. The same name can be applied to a material in a women’s magazine entitled: “how to fuck them up”.¹ Both examples support the idea of an animal man, a rudimentary being, whose brute force can be channelled towards the fulfilment of the goals of women, through sexual manipulation (in fact, the theme of women withdrawing sexual privileges from their husbands has made a career in classical literature since Aristophanes onwards).

The Western model of couple life brings a pressure that Romanian men are barely beginning to feel. It can be defined as the pressure of entertaining a schizoid manhood. If we consider the ideological power of publicity, than we must take into

¹ “Cum să-i facem pe bărbați” (How to have men), see analysis in Mihaela Ursa, 2Portrete de femei, portrete de bărbați” (Women portraits, men portraits), in *Tzara mea. Stereotipii și prejudecăți* 9My country. Stereotypes and prejudices), edited by Ruxandra Cesereanu (Iași: Institutul Cultural European, 2006).

account the challenges in store for representations of male gender identity. Here is an excerpt from a women magazine publicly speaking about a possible identity change: “More and more men claim that couple life is in an impasse and that women are responsible for it. Women offer less and less while asking for increasingly more. Men feel deceived in their expectations, their desire is slowly dying, and they cannot communicate. So, man is in pain, couples are agonizing. [...] Their companions ask them to take on too many responsibilities: to succeed professionally, to be perfect lovers, tender and virile at the same time ... So they live in constant fear of not being good enough. The result? Three quarters of our men are simply afraid of their women. At least so the statistics say.”¹

A first difficulty in assuming masculine identity today comes from the collision of two opposite imperatives: “be a man!”, which asks for the macho man action hero, and simultaneously “be nice and sweet!”, which requires a change of content that men have not agreed upon, even if occasionally they consent to it in spite of their own agenda, for various reasons. A second difficulty comes from the assertion of some form of female aggression (a *vagina dentata* - type of image), resulting from the replacement of traditional feminine values (passiveness, patience, silence, obedient nature) with modern values (activism, determination, overt rapacity, refusal of “love sufferings”).

Holding on to a conflict between the sexes is not entirely manmade. In 2005, a Romanian literary review called a response² to a popular volume of short stories by Mircea Cărtărescu, entitled *De ce iubim femeile* (Why we love women). The review issue consists of the interventions of women of culture, meant to illustrate “Why we love men”. In her speech entitled “Why we don’t love men” Alexandra Olivotto writes one of the most virulent anti-masculine texts of our culture, composed, basically, of the sequencing of all the negative stereotypes about men: “Because they smell of sweat, cheap tobacco or their upper lip sweating make them feel not unsanitary, but increasingly virile. Because they can only smile to all small children passing once they have planned to perpetuate the species. [...] Because hypochondria was invented by and for them, but they endure it with unexpected courage. Because they go to bed with you like a summer rain, to show you that they love you. Because if they take care of all the nagging and petty chores of the house, they have either beaten you, or cheated on you the night before. [...] Because they always have the simplest orgasms and because post-coital sadness is just a myth that assures us of the depth of their feelings,”³ and so on. A small percentage of Romanian men (slightly higher among educated men⁴) do not feel at all comfortable in the position of being daily forced to “be” something. While a woman is never asked to “be a woman” (but possibly “be a good /nice woman etc.”), her identity as a woman being unquestioned, as hard evidence, the fact of being a man seems to

¹ Mihaela Spineanu, “Imposibila iubire” (The Impossible Love), *Elle* (February 2003): 47.

² Alexandra Olivotto, “De ce nu iubim bărbații” (Why we do not love men), *Vatra* 11–12 (2005), themed issue “De ce iubim bărbații” (Why we love men), edited by Nicoleta Sălcudeanu.

³ Olivotto, “De ce nu iubim bărbații”, 113.

⁴ See issue “Fii bărbat!” (Be a man!) of magazine *Dilema* (2004).

demand further efforts. “It is never enough to have a chromosome formula of the XY type and a functional penis to feel you are a man” (Badinter 1992: 59). Since he is considered mature enough, man must assert himself by dissociation: he is ordered not to be a woman, not a child, and finally, not a homosexual. If most Romanian men accept the challenge (at least theoretically), there is a more radical solution in the Western world, where male identity is no longer measured against the virile illusion. There is also the possibility to be a “soft man”. This should not be confused with the “weak man”, who represents a failure in the virile challenge. Rather, the “soft” model eludes the virile illusion altogether.

This proves that clichés about men roles are diversifying. As it has been discovered by anthropological research on islands¹, gender stereotypes are variable (only in some of the analyzed populations man is associated with heroic hardness, in others he is associated with a pronounced erotic shyness or with a good aesthetic sense). Also, they are movable (i.e. unstable). In the meantime, however, in the East-European world, a man who takes the place of his wife, asking for his two-year leave of absence for childcare makes it into the evening news and, almost certainly, must be prepared for a long ridicule in his circle of male friends.

Several conclusions

In general, the stereotypical description of man and woman in Romania happens at the intersection of two gender representations. Firstly, the Western frame represents the woman with multiple skills and the man outside the illusion of virility, no longer under the obsession of macho hardness. Secondly, these images suffer the by-pass of another, far more authoritative frame, the one coming from traditional Eastern Europe and even the East, where gender images are strongly segregated and well polarized. In this second case, the woman is still either domestic, passive (“good”), or seductive and erotic (“bad, evil”). The man is in turn represented as the manly, rational dictator head of the family and the couple.

As I have stated before, the representations by themselves cannot be accused of being true or false. However, they never appear alone in an empty space.² These ideological representations populate the public sphere and bear public truth value. Whether they come within product advertising, political discourse or elite culture, they can affect social and cultural change, delaying the solutions that could be given to serious problems like domestic abuse, implicit gender segregation, social discrimination, manipulative rhetoric or simply stereotyped understanding of gender roles.

¹ Margaret Mead, *Coming of age in Samoa: A psychological study of primitive youth for Western civilisation* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

² Melvin J. Hinich and Michael C. Munger, *Ideology and the theory of political choice* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996).