

THE UNVEILING OF THE BODY: RETHINKING INTIMACY IN THE MODERN ROMANIAN NOVEL

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Abstract This study investigates the literary representations of intimacy and the body in the modern Romanian novel, with a particular focus on works by female authors affiliated with the *Sburătorul* literary group. Drawing on theories by Virginia Woolf, Pierre Bourdieu, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler, the article examines how corporeality is constructed and contested within narrative discourse. Through analyses of novels by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ioana Postelnicu, Cella Serghi, and others, it reveals how intimacy becomes a means of articulating female subjectivity and resisting patriarchal norms.

Keywords Intimacy, corporeality, subjectivity, Romanian novel, femininity.

1. Introduction

The modern Romanian novel, particularly in the interwar period, emerges as a fertile domain for exploring the intersections between gender, intimacy, and corporeality. While the *Sburătorul* literary group has long been recognized for its avant-garde contributions to Romanian modernism, the works of the female writers associated with the group — often overshadowed by their male counterparts — remain insufficiently examined. This study endeavours to fill this gap, directing its attention to the literary representations of intimacy and the body in the novels of authors such as Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ioana Postelnicu, and Cella Serghi. These works invite an engagement with the bodily and intimate dimensions of subjectivity, which, far from being mere private experiences, are reconstituted as sites of social negotiation and narrative transformation.

At the core of this inquiry lies a reconsideration of intimacy — not as a realm isolated from public discourse, but as a performative and multifaceted construct, inscribed within both the individual and the collective. The female body, as represented in the works of these authors, becomes a space not only of external imposition but of internal resistance, where personal

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identities interact with and at times subvert the prevailing gendered expectations of the time. Through close readings of novels such as *Concert din muzică de Bach* by Papadat-Bengescu, *Bogdana* by Postelnicu, and *Pânza de păianjen* by Serghi, this study seeks to illuminate the manner in which these authors deploy corporeality as a medium for articulating female subjectivity, presenting the body as a site of both confinement and agency within the larger socio-cultural and political framework. This research draws upon an array of feminist and gender theories that have significantly informed the study of literary representations of intimacy and the body. Virginia Woolf's seminal works, particularly *A Room of One's Own*, offer a foundational understanding of the connection between space, autonomy, and the female body. Woolf's exploration of the intersection between the female artist and societal constraint resonates with the narrative strategies employed by the *Sburătorul* writers, whose protagonists, often caught between desire and repression, challenge the boundaries set by gendered norms.

Further theoretical depth is provided by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and cultural capital, which reveals how social structures shape the individual's internalized experiences of the body and intimacy. Bourdieu's understanding of symbolic violence helps to explain the subtle but pervasive ways in which patriarchal ideologies manifest in the representations of female bodies in literature, both in public and private spaces. His insights into how societal expectations are ingrained and perpetuated through everyday practices are essential to understanding the constraints placed upon female subjectivity in the works of these authors.

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman"¹ provides another critical theoretical lens through which to understand the constructed nature of femininity. In the novels of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ioana Postelnicu, and Cella Serghi, the body emerges as a battleground where societal definitions of womanhood are both embraced and contested. The protagonists in these works navigate the tension between personal identity and the externally imposed roles of femininity, echoing Beauvoir's concept of gender as a process of becoming.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further enriches this discussion by offering a lens through which gender is seen not as an inherent characteristic but as a series of socially scripted actions. Butler's concept of the body as a site of performative acts allows for a more nuanced analysis of the female bodies in these texts, where the characters' actions, desires, and physical transformations are not merely expressions of identity, but acts that resist, negotiate, and sometimes transform the cultural scripts imposed upon them.

In situating these texts within a broader literary and cultural context, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on gender, intimacy, and corporeality in Romanian modernist literature. While scholars such as Bianca Burță-Cernat and Elena Zaharia-Filipaș have begun to explore the contributions of female authors to Romanian modernism, there has been limited attention to how these authors represent the body as a dynamic, contested space. This study seeks to bridge that gap, offering a fresh perspective on how the body and intimacy function not only as themes but as narrative strategies that challenge the gendered structures of the time.

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2010), 293.

By examining the novels of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ioana Postelnicu, Cella Serghi, and others, this paper intends to show that the female body is not merely an object of male desire or cultural control, but a locus of resistance and redefinition. Intimacy, in this context, ceases to be a private or sentimental notion, instead emerging as a powerful narrative tool through which female subjectivity both questions and reimagines the boundaries of the personal and the public. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide a reconsideration of modern Romanian literature, one that places the representation of intimacy and corporeality at the forefront of the literary discourse.

2. Theoretical Framework: Intimacy, Body, and Gendered Subjectivity

Intimacy, traditionally confined to the private sphere, is increasingly viewed in feminist theory as a socially constructed and performative space. Judith Butler, in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), argues that gender is not an inherent trait but a *performance* enacted through repeated acts, including those within intimate relations. Butler asserts, “gender is a performance with clearly consequences,”² emphasizing that intimacy, like gender itself, is not simply a matter of personal expression, but a series of acts that reproduce, reinforce, and sometimes challenge societal norms. For Butler, intimacy is not only shaped by societal norms but is also a space where gendered subjectivities are *performed*, reflecting and sometimes subverting these norms. In the works of *Sburătorul* authors, intimacy becomes a site where women’s subjectivity is constructed and contested, a performance that challenges patriarchal expectations.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* offers a valuable framework for understanding the embodied dimension of social structures, including gender roles. In *Distinction: A Social Critique Of The Judgement Of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu argues that social class is not only expressed through cultural preferences and behaviours but is also inscribed on the body itself. As he famously puts it, “the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste.”³ This insight underscores how corporeality becomes a site where social hierarchies — particularly those related to class and gender — are not only mirrored but reproduced. Within the literary works of the *Sburătorul* writers, female characters often embody these tensions: their bodily comportment, illnesses, desires, and constraints reflect both external pressures and inner resistance, thereby exposing how classed and gendered identities are simultaneously performed and policed.

Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking analysis in *The Second Sex* (2011) complements both Butler’s and Bourdieu’s theories by positioning femininity as a socially constructed phenomenon. Beauvoir famously declares, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, emphasizing that womanhood is not an innate characteristic but a product of social conditioning. This concept of *becoming* is key to understanding how intimacy and the female body are constructed in the narratives of *Sburătorul* writers. In Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s *Concert din muzică de Bach*, for instance, female characters undergo processes of self-definition and bodily

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 139.

³ Pierre, Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique Of The Judgement Of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 190.

awareness that reveal the tension between internal desire and external expectation. The body, for Simone de Beauvoir, is not simply a biological fact but a lived experience shaped by cultural scripts. In these novels, the female body emerges not as a passive object, but as a space of negotiation — between societal constraint and individual agency — illuminating how womanhood is constantly being reshaped within patriarchal structures.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), this section situates the female body within the modern dispositifs of power that govern intimacy, desire, and reproductive agency. Foucault contends that in contemporary societies, power functions not only through repression or legal authority, but through subtle mechanisms that regulate life itself — what he defines as *biopower*. These mechanisms shape bodies, behaviours, and forms of subjectivity by embedding normative discourses within everyday practices. Within the narratives of the *Sburătorul* writers, the female body emerges as a critical site where such forms of power are both inscribed and challenged. Their novels depict intimacy not as an apolitical domain, but as a space deeply entangled with social expectations and institutionalized forms of control — particularly those surrounding femininity and sexuality. By foregrounding corporeality as a locus of negotiation and resistance, these authors echo Foucault's insight that power operates through the management of life itself, yet also allow for moments of rupture, agency, and redefinition.

Anthony Giddens' *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) offers a key framework for understanding how modern intimacy evolves. He argues that intimacy in late modernity has shifted from traditional, institutional roles to fluid, self-reflective relationships based on mutual self-disclosure and individual desire. Intimate bonds are no longer defined solely by marriage or societal roles but are actively constructed by individuals navigating changing norms. Giddens also emphasizes the body as a central site of intimate self-definition. It becomes both a medium for expressing desire and a space where cultural norms and personal agency intersect. This is echoed in the works of *Sburătorul* authors like Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and Ioana Postelnicu, who portray the female body as both constrained and empowered. Their characters use intimacy and the body to challenge traditional roles, negotiate identity, and assert autonomy within a shifting social landscape.

In *Regăsirea intimității* (2008), Simona Sora highlights the body's central role in constructing literary intimacy. It is both a symbol and a medium through which characters express vulnerability and connection. In interwar prose, authors like Camil Petrescu and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu explore intimacy through psychological depth and inner conflict, portraying the body as a coherent, self-reflective entity—a "soul-body" that unites physicality and spirit.

Sora contrasts this with post-1989 literature, where intimacy becomes fragmented, shaped by social transitions and identity shifts. Authors such as Mircea Cărtărescu and Gabriela Adameșteanu use experimental forms to reflect instability and reconfigured subjectivities. Intimacy here can also serve as resistance against censorship, affirming personal freedom.

She further suggests that literary intimacy operates on two levels: an inner-textual dimension built through affective realism and authenticity, and a relational one between reader and text. This duality invites readers into private fictional worlds while prompting self-reflection, creating

a layered, reciprocal experience. Intimacy thus unfolds between introspective inner worlds and external, bodily expression—revealing a complex, pluralistic spectrum of the intimate.

3. The Sburătorul Group and the Female Voice

Founded in the late 1920s, the *Sburătorul* Group became a key force in shaping Romanian interwar literature, emerging during a period of intense cultural and intellectual change. Influenced by European modernist and avant-garde movements, the group sought to break with 19th-century realism and romanticism, embracing innovation, psychological depth, and experimental aesthetics.

Their goal was to modernize Romanian literature by challenging conventions and exploring bold, often taboo themes. Inspired by symbolism, expressionism, and futurism, the group aimed to create a literature that was both nationally distinct and in dialogue with European trends.

Central to the group was critic Eugen Lovinescu, whose theory of synchronicism advocated aligning Romanian literature with contemporary European movements. Through his journal *Sburătorul* and critical work, Lovinescu provided the theoretical foundation that guided the group's modernist vision and cultural direction. At the heart of the group's ideology was a commitment to breaking from the past and forging new paths for literature and art. This was reflected not only in their writings but also in their critical and theoretical contributions. The *Sburătorul* writers, including figures such as Felix Aderca, Camil Petrescu, and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, were instrumental in establishing the intellectual groundwork for a more dynamic and modern literary landscape in Romania. Their work was not only a response to the cultural stagnation of the time but also an effort to align Romanian literature with the major intellectual currents of Europe. Through their efforts, they bridged the gap between local traditions and the European avant-garde, establishing a new literary paradigm that would influence generations of writers and critics to come.

The *Sburătorul* Group's influence extended beyond literature into broader cultural discussions, positioning itself as a catalyst for change in Romanian art and intellectual life. Its members were deeply engaged in the social and political debates of the time, challenging the status quo and advocating for greater freedom of expression, both in art and in society at large. Their work often confronted issues such as individualism, the role of the artist in society, and the tensions between tradition and modernity, marking them as central figures in the cultural evolution of Romania during the interwar period.

Within the *Sburătorul* group, women played an essential role, even though the group was predominantly dominated by male figures. While the male figure was dominant in literary circles of the time, the presence and contributions of women within *Sburătorul* cannot be underestimated. They were actively involved in literary discussions and brought their own perspective on Romanian modernism. In an era when most literary groups were often reserved for men, and women were marginalized, the *Sburătorul* group provided a significant space for their participation, even though their contributions often remained overshadowed by those of men.

Women in *Sburătorul*, such as Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ioana Postelnicu, and Cella Serghi, had a considerable influence on interwar literature through their innovative approaches to

female subjectivity, interpersonal relationships, and the psychology of their characters. Papadat-Bengescu, in particular, was known for her analytical and introspective style, which opened new perspectives on the complex nature of women and their relationships. Their contributions were not only related to literary modernism but also to a reconfiguration of the perception of the role of women in Romanian literature.

In comparison to other literary groups of that period, where women were often relegated to marginal roles, *Sburătorul* was a context where they were not only accepted but also appreciated for their essential contributions. For instance, in many interwar literary circles, women were often reduced to the status of muse or were overshadowed by prominent male authors. In contrast, at *Sburătorul*, women not only participated actively but also shaped the literary directions of the period. However, Eugen Lovinescu's position on female literature is more complex. In *Aquaforte*, he makes a rather straightforward statement: "Literature is generally not a female vocation, but a male one. Here, I only know of a few cases of female vocation — beyond sentimental relationships. Usually, it is just a brief stop between two adventures, an unused force momentarily unoccupied by more essential concerns"⁴. While this statement seems to reflect a more traditional view of literature, in practice, Lovinescu was not an advocate for such a delimitation. In fact, he opened the doors of his cenacle to women, and his support for female literature is well-documented. Moreover, he was one of those who affirmed that "art knows no sex, age, region, and, even in the final analysis, nationality; it satisfies itself through its substance and is grouped and ranked according to exclusively aesthetic criteria"⁵ (Lovinescu, 1935: V-VI). Thus, while Lovinescu's view on female literary vocation may seem restrictive, in reality, he was a proponent of promoting literature free from constraints related to sex or age.

Although Eugen Lovinescu is rightfully recognized as a supporter of the affirmation of women's literature within the *Sburătorul* group, his position is not without critical ambivalences. In his volume *Critice*, he formulates a series of traits that he attributes to female writing — instinctuality, pudor, the feminine mystery, sentimentalism, lyricism and subjectivity — but he does so in a predominantly negative evaluative register. These traits are seen as structural limits of female creation, deriving, in his view, from the biological and psychological condition of women, whom he considers more prone to disordered confession, lack of intellectual rigor, or an excess of sensoriality. This perspective is especially evident in his reading of the debut novel by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, *Ape adânci*, a text he criticizes precisely for the manifestations of these "characteristics" considered inherently feminine. In his analysis, Lovinescu notes a lack of logical construction, an

⁴ Original text: "Literatura nu e în genere o vocație feminină, ci bărbătească. La noi nu cunosc decât puțin cazuri de vocație feminină — dincolo de relații sentimentale. De obicei e un simplu popas între două aventuri, o forță neîntrebuințată momentan în preocupări mai esențiale." E. Lovinescu, *Aquaforte* (Bucharest: Editura Contemporană, 1941), 317.

⁵ Original text: "arta nu cunoaște sex, vârstă, regiune și, chiar, în ultimă analiză, naționalitate; ea se satisface prin substanța sa și se grupează și ierarhizează după criterii exclusiv estetice." E. Lovinescu, "Prefață," in *Evoluția scrisului feminin în România*, coord. Mărgărita Miller-Verghy și Ecaterina Săndulescu (Bucharest: Editura Bucovina, 1935), V-VI.

oversaturation of lyricism, and an exacerbated subjectivity, all attributed to the fact that the author is a woman and, implicitly, closer to the emotional realm than the rational one.

Lovinescu's statement about the "instinctuality" of feminine literature reflects a deeply misogynistic and reductive comparison between women and female animals. The quote "Lover and mother, these are the two archetypes of the eternal feminine. Between a dove and a woman there are correspondences that, in some respects, bring them closer than the correspondence between a dove and a man; the same powerful instincts dominate and guide them: women and females love the same way, and, in the face of danger, they protect their young with the same maternal devotion. If doves had a literature, it would resemble the literature of the greatest contemporary female writers"⁶ is based on the idea that women are primarily governed by instincts, and that feminine literature, just like the behaviour of female animals, is dictated by these fundamental instincts.

Lovinescu's comparison reduces women to instinct-driven beings, implying their literature is mere emotional expression, akin to "the literature of doves" — a dismissive metaphor that ignores the intellectual and cultural depth of female experience. He confines women to biological roles like motherhood and love, reinforcing a patriarchal view where men embody reason and women instinct. He sees *pudor* (modesty) as a social imposition that suppresses natural female instincts, reinforcing the emotional-rational divide and constraining women's literary expression. Lovinescu's idea of "feminine mystery" further exoticizes and distances women, framing them as unknowable from a male rational standpoint — not as complex individuals, but as aesthetic clichés.

A critique of this stereotype is clearly articulated by Elena Zaharia-Filipaș, who observes that the stereotypical portrait of the "mysterious" woman bears "a whiff of another era — somewhat outdated and obsolete."⁷ In other words, this idea of the "feminine mystery," so prevalent in early 20th-century modernist discourse, appears as an anachronism — revealing more about the masculine critic's limitations than about the female subject. The woman is thus portrayed not as a subject, but as an enigma, a position that conveniently justifies her marginalization in the literary field: it is easier to label her as unknowable than to acknowledge her as an equal participant in literary creation.

In the writings of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, this alleged "mystery" is deconstructed from within: her female characters, far from being opaque or inexplicable, are explored with psychological precision in moments of vulnerability, contradiction, lucidity, or crisis. Instead of mystery, Bengescu offers a model of femininity that is complex, multilayered, and in constant transformation. Therefore, what male critics of the interwar period perceived as "mysterious" is,

⁶ Original text: "Amantă și mamă, iată cele două tipare ale eternului feminin. Între o porumbiță și o femeie sunt corespondențe ce le apropie, în unele privințe, mai mult decât pe porumbel de bărbat; aceleași instincte puternice le stăpinesc și le conduc: femeia și femela iubesc la fel, iar, în fața primejdiei, își apără puiul cu același devotament matern. Dacă porumbițele ar avea o literatură, s-ar asemana cu literatura celor mai mari scriitoare contemporane." E. Lovinescu, *Critice 2* (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1982), 124.

⁷ Original text: "un aer de epocă, ușor vetust și desuet." Elena Zaharia-Filipaș, *Studii de literatură feminină* (Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2004), 9.

in reality, the result of their lack of genuine interest in understanding female subjectivity — not an essential trait of femininity.

Sentimentalism, in Eugen Lovinescu's view, is another trait he attributes to feminine writing, which he perceives as stemming from a supposed natural inclination of women toward affectivity. In contrast to men — presumed by the literary criticism of the time to be guided by reason, lucidity, and objectivity — women are seen as being dominated by emotions, affective impulses, and unfiltered feelings. Lovinescu argues that this predisposition toward sentimentalism undermines the literary quality of women's writing, leading to an excess of sensitivity, pathos, or emotional expression, to the detriment of rational construction and stylistic clarity. In this framework, a woman's writing is often interpreted as an affective journal — a space of emotional confession and intense experience, yet lacking in aesthetic discipline. Lovinescu views lyricism and subjectivity in women's writing with ambivalence. He praises Elena Farago's lyrical sensitivity as fitting for poetry and "feminine nature," but criticizes Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's *Ape adînci* for excessive lyricism, seeing it as a weakness in prose. For him, such traits reflect emotional overflow and lack of structure, reinforcing a gendered contrast between feminine subjectivity and masculine objectivity.

The *Sburătorul* group was a major force in Romanian literary modernism and a rare space that welcomed female writers. Key figures included Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, a pioneer of the psychological novel; Cella Serghi, known for her nuanced depictions of femininity; and Ioana Postelnicu, who addressed moral and social issues through realist prose. Critic Bianca Burtă-Cernat also notes the contributions of Ticu Archip, Sorana Gurian, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, and others, who enriched the female literary voice despite limited recognition. These writers explored themes like gender, intimacy, and public-private tensions, shaping complex female characters and challenging literary norms. Their presence in a male-dominated cultural space signalled an important step toward legitimizing women's writing in modern Romanian literature.

4. Synthesis: Rethinking Intimacy in the Modern Romanian Novel

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's work represents a turning point in the representation of feminine intimacy in interwar Romanian prose. Far from reproducing the "feminine" traits that Eugen Lovinescu identified as limitations of women's writing — lyricism, sentimentalism, subjectivity, instinctuality, pudor, mystery — the author reconfigures them, transforming these features into tools for investigating identity fractures, pathological corporeality, and affectivity as a source of alienation.

In the *Hallipa* cycle, intimacy is not idealized, but rather pathologized or examined with critical lucidity. The female characters are marked by emotional discontinuities, by illnesses of both body and soul, and their relationships are often strained by class hierarchies, rigid social codes, and repressed desires.

In *Fecioarele despletite*, we encounter a complex gallery of female characters, among whom Mini stands out — a reflective character and the author's alter ego — who voices disdain for rural life and a strong aspiration toward modernity and urbanism. Mini not only judges from within but also observes from the outside, and her voice serves as a bridge between psychological

and social narrative. Mika-Lé, on the other hand, embodies a femininity that defies the norms of the time: she is nonconformist, rebellious, and defiant of class and gender conventions. By contrast, Elena Hallipa chooses marriage out of convenience, demonstrating that intimacy can also function as a form of strategy, an adaptation to the dynamics of a society that imposes marriage as a solution for survival and social mobility. Also in this novel, Hallipa Lenora — who embodies a fragile, ailing corporeality — highlights the way in which the female body becomes the locus of suffering and repression.

In *Concert from Bach Music*, intimacy is depicted more as a space of alienation, diseased corporeality, and social anxiety than as a site of personal or emotional fulfilment. The character Leonora Hallipa exemplifies this vision most vividly. Her familial and romantic relationships are marked by imbalance, lack of authenticity, and a persistent inner unrest. Despite an appearance of social stability, Leonora experiences a profound rupture between the image imposed by social conventions and her own sense of self.

This tension can be interpreted through the lens of *habitus*, as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, since Leonora internalizes a set of social norms and expectations related to femininity and motherhood, but cannot authentically assume them. Although she performs the roles of wife, mother, and fashionable woman, these identities are not embraced as genuine expressions of the self, but rather as mechanisms of adaptation to a world governed by rigid conventions. In a society where prestige and status are reinforced through alliances and appearances, intimacy becomes a mask, and human relationships — especially romantic ones — are transformed into simulacra that no longer sustain genuine emotional life. Moreover, as Virginia Woolf observes in her reflections on the condition of women, the domestic space in which women carry out their lives is not always a protective or meaningful environment, but often a constraining one — an enclosed space that isolates them and reduces them to predefined roles. Leonora is a prisoner of this space, and her intimacy is not a realm of inner freedom, but a site of tension and alienation, where she fails to find herself either in relation to others or to her own inner world.

In contrast to Leonora's tense vulnerability, her daughter, Elena Hallipa-Drăgănescu, appears to embody a model of balance, self-mastery, and social refinement. However, beneath Elena's cold elegance and distinguished calm lies another form of alienation — more subtle, yet all the more sophisticated: an aestheticized intimacy, almost ritualistic, emptied of authentic emotion and transformed into a simulacrum of emotional stability.

Elena does not live affectively — she performs an idealized, noble femininity, without fissures. As the narrator notes: “no sentimental element entered her judgment”⁸ — a clear indication of the divorce between emotion and reason, between interior life and social appearance. This emotional discipline stems from trauma: the betrayal of her fiancé, Prince Maxențiu, with her own sister, Mika-Le. After this episode, Elena permanently renounces all intense passion, cultivating a lifestyle governed by decency, control, and emotional caution:

⁸ Original text: “nici un element sentimental nu intra în judecata ei.” Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, *Concert din muzică de Bach* (Bucharest: Editura Albatros, 1990), 90.

“Passion was only admissible in one area: music.”⁹ Like Leonora, Elena is a perfect product of the *habitus* described by Pierre Bourdieu: she has internalized the aristocratic norms of a distinguished femininity, of a respectable wife, and of an impeccable hostess. Her marriage to George Drăgănescu — a wealthy industrialist of lower social rank — is a strategic alliance, not an emotional union. “He loved her as one loves an inviolable divinity,”¹⁰ while she maintained within the marriage the calm and self-confidence that define her. Conjugal intimacy, far from being a space of emotional connection, becomes a stage for mutual respect and assumed hierarchy.

From the perspective of Virginia Woolf’s theory of “*a room of one’s own*,” Elena does not construct an authentic inner space, but one dedicated to appearances — the musical salon. Music becomes a refuge and a domain for the expression of repressed affect: “The studious preference Elena had for sonatas had transformed into an artistic snobbery—a snobbery which, concentrated on such an object, quickly became a profession of faith.”¹¹ It is, perhaps, the only domain of intimacy she claims for herself, but even here, it is filtered through aesthetics and social normativity rather than free emotional experience.

Her relationship with the musician Victor Marcian produces a crack in this system of self-control. He is “the only one in her relationships with whom she felt such a simple bond of equality”¹² — and the only one capable of reactivating Elena’s repressed sensitivity. Yet even in this relationship, Elena never fully abandons the mask of rationality. The acceptance of a bond with Marcian comes only when “her will rose from deep within, firm and confident in itself.”¹³ Emotion is not experienced spontaneously, but validated by will and filtered through conscious decision.

In this light, Elena’s intimacy is never a space of vulnerability, but an aesthetic, symbolic, and controlled territory. Her alienation is all the more profound because it is disguised as nobility: a refined form of emotional isolation that functions as a survival mechanism within a social universe obsessed with reputation, hierarchy, and appearances. Whereas Leonora struggles with the contradiction between convention and desire, Elena has chosen to triumph through renunciation, cultivating an inner life reduced to a well-directed artistic performance — yet devoid of genuine intimacy.

Mika-Le is undoubtedly the most enigmatic and disruptive character in the novel *Fecioarele despletite*. Born from an adulterous relationship between Leonora and an Italian mason, Mika-Le becomes, from an early age, the living sign of her mother’s guilt, which is why she is isolated in the uninhabited wing of the Halippa family estate. This physical exclusion becomes a metaphor for her symbolic exclusion: Mika-Le is neither fully a daughter, nor a sister, nor a legitimate heir — she is a liminal presence, a “foreign body” within the family structure.

⁹ Original text: “Pasiunea nu era admisă decât asupra unui singur subiect: muzica.” Ibid., 56.

¹⁰ Original text: “El o iubea ca pe o divinitate inviolabilă.” Ibid., 55.

¹¹ Original text: “Predilecția de elevă silitoare, pe care Elena o avusese pentru sonate, se transformase într-un snobism artistic — snobism care, concentrat asupra unui astfel de obiect, devenise repede profesie de credință.” Ibid., 56.

¹² Original text: “singurul cu care să simtă o legătură de la egal la egal.” Ibid., 109.

¹³ Original text: “voința urca fermă, sigură de ea însăși.” Ibid., 173.

From the perspective of Judith Butler's theory, Mika-Le is an example of a female subject who escapes normativity. She does not internalize the dominant values of aristocratic femininity — modesty, decency, submission — but undermines them through an ostentatious, seductive, and shameless behaviour. Her femininity is not an essence but a constant performance, a spectacle that irritates and disrupts the social order. The seduction of Prince Maxențiu and the breaking of Elena's engagement become not only acts of personal rebellion but symbolic acts of sabotage against convention, a challenge to the balance of the dominant class.

At the same time, Mika-Le can be interpreted through the lens of the *woman-excess* concept (cf. Julia Kristeva), embodying the abject: what society cannot assimilate, but cannot completely eliminate either. Her exotic body, provocative attitude, and ambiguous relationship with her siblings—all these transform her into a character who defies not only the norm but the very idea of a stable identity. In contrast to Elena, who aestheticizes alienation, Mika-Le embodies it. While Elena is the cold mask of normativity, Mika-Le is the uncovered face of chaos: corporeality, instinct, aggression. She lives outside any fixed identity scheme and, for that reason, she attracts and disturbs everything she touches.

In contrast to the characters in the works of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Cella Serghi offers a more nuanced and subtle vision of intimacy, particularly in her novel *Pânză de păianjen*. Although the themes of alienation and inner conflict are present here as well, Cella Serghi delves deeper into how women construct their identities in relation to their desires and social conventions, as well as personal traumas. Unlike Leonora Hallipa or Mika-Le, the characters in *Pânză de păianjen* face a quieter, often internalized struggle, which places their analysis within the realm of introspection and a rejection of rigid social norms. In this context, Cella Serghi stands out for her introspective approach to intimacy, where human relationships are marked by vulnerability and emotional fragility.

In *Pânză de păianjen* by Cella Serghi, the introspective perspective of Diana Slavu, the protagonist, is built around an intimate journal that becomes a space for self-exploration of her identity. Writing in notebooks that she gives to her close friend Ilinca Dima before leaving for Paris, Diana reflects on her life and how it was shaped by social conditions and interpersonal relationships. "When I think of Petre Barbu, I cannot detach him too well from the rocky coast of Mangalia. He was copper-colored, like it, and, like it, hardened by the sun and the wind. When I want to remember his voice, I find it almost completely covered by the noise of the waves."¹⁴ These words not only evoke a significant moment in Diana's life, but also suggest an intimate connection between her identity and her native places, an important element in the formation of her personality.

This form of introspection can be viewed through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, which emphasizes how life conditions and early experiences shape an individual's perceptions and behaviours. Diana, having grown up in poverty, learns to rely on the advantage provided by her

¹⁴ Original text: "Când mă gândesc la Petre Barbu, nu pot să-l desprind prea bine de coasta stâncoasă a Mangaliei. Era arămiu, ca ea, și, la fel ca ea, călit de soare și de vânt. Când vreau să-mi amintesc de vocea lui, o găsesc aproape cu totul acoperită de zgomotul valurilor." Cella Serghi, *Pânza de păianjen* (Bucharest: Editura Cartea Românească, 1978), 113.

physical beauty, which becomes a tool through which she tries to transcend her precarious social status. “What does shelter mean? All of this together, and especially the feeling I have next to Michi that the world, however cruel, cannot touch me.”¹⁵ This desire to attain security through a relationship that offers “shelter” can be linked to Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic capital* — in Diana’s case, her beauty becomes a form of capital that grants her access to a more comfortable life, even in the face of emotional disappointment.

In *Pânză de păianjen* by Cella Serghi, we can also observe the tension between the protagonist’s inner space and the external pressures imposed by social norms and her family. Diana is caught between the desire for personal fulfilment and the societal expectations to conform to the roles traditionally assigned to women. This conflict between internal desires and external reality is illustrated through her relationships with Petre Barbu and other men such as Michi and Alex. “I will never know the moment I fell in love with him. My love for him was perhaps born out of the need to love. Alex was only the grain of sand in the shell ready to give birth to the pearl. But now I love him.”¹⁶ This love, a mixture of the desire to love and to be loved, reflects a constant struggle between personal needs and external constraints, highlighting the concept of gender as performativity, as theorized by Judith Butler. In this ongoing struggle for self-definition, Diana confronts the patriarchal pressures that define women through their relationships with men and through their ability to conform to societal expectations. *Pânză de păianjen* thus becomes a critique of these norms and of the ways in which they limit women’s possibilities for self-realization. At the same time, the novel underscores the importance of sentimentality and subjectivity in the process of self-construction. As Eugen Lovinescu argues in *Critice*, sentimentality and subjectivity are not weaknesses but vital resources for self-definition. In Diana’s case, these traits are essential in understanding her quest for meaning in both life and love.

Moreover, aligned with Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” Diana represents a woman in the continuous process of becoming — fighting to assert her identity within a society that imposes rigid rules and roles. “I hoped to be happy.”¹⁷ This hope for happiness, which permeates the entire narrative, is an act of reclaiming her identity and a rebellion against the fate that confines Diana to a limited role.

In contrast to the inner turmoil and introspective voice of Diana in *Pânză de păianjen*, Ioana Postelnicu’s *Bogdana* offers a different perspective on femininity and the process of self-becoming. While Diana constructs her identity through reflection and resistance to social expectations, Bogdana’s journey is marked by silence, submission, and resignation — revealing another facet of the female condition in postwar literature. This transition from Serghi to

¹⁵ Original text: “Ce înseamnă adăpost? Toate astea la un loc, și mai ales sentimentul pe care îl am lângă Michi că lumea, cât de rea ar fi, nu mă poate atinge.” Ibid., 302.

¹⁶ Original text: “În care clipă m-am îndrăgostit de el nu voi ști niciodată. Dragostea mea pentru el s-a născut, poate din nevoia de a iubi. Alex a fost numai firul de nisip din scoica pregătită să dea naștere mărgăritarului. Dar acum îl iubesc.” Ibid.

¹⁷ Original text: „Nădăjduiam să fiu fericită.” Ibid., 314.

Postelnicu highlights the diversity of female identity narratives and the complex interplay between individual agency and societal norms.

Under the tutelage of the Lovinescian school, Ioana Postelnicu expanded the thirty pages she had presented at the *Sburătorul* literary circle, eventually publishing her debut novel *Bogdana* in 1939. The literary critic Vladimir Streinu praised the novel, noting: “There is, throughout *Bogdana*, a maturity of expression — gentle or firm as needed — as well as a penetrating interior observation, whether of the most fleeting sensations or of nearly hallucinatory emotional developments. It is a craftsmanship undoubtedly remarkable and implies, behind it, unknown youthful exercises.”¹⁸ Streinu also emphasized the clear influence of the *Sburătorul* group, particularly that of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu — visible in “the suppleness of the expression to the point of formal incorrectness, following the shifting contours of the soul”¹⁹ — and of Eugen Lovinescu, “in the overuse of stylistic suggestiveness.”²⁰

Likewise, literary historian I. Negoîtescu noted the striking resemblance between Postelnicu’s debut and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s *Femeia în fața oglinzii* (1921), describing *Bogdana* as follows: “The introspection is imbued with lyricism, and the narrative structure disintegrates under a harsh technique; the characters’ profiles remain tentative, the narrated events drift, and the epic presence—like a voice in a telephone receiver—is merely accidental, lost in the thin, transparent web of analysis. Too feminine, the novel is woven from subtle euphoria, through which the thread of lucidity barely glimmers.”²¹ This affinity with Papadat-Bengescu is also strongly evident in *Bogdana*’s treatment of female corporeality, often evoking the notion of the “soulful body.” The bodily metaphor signals, among other things, a stylistic transition—from a lyrical and subjective register typical of early 20th-century women’s prose—to an analytical mode marked by narrative rigor and objectivity. A more contemporary perspective on Ioana Postelnicu’s debut novel comes from Bianca Burța-Cernat, who identifies it as the closest expression of “feminine writing.” She describes it as “an uneven novel, written feverishly, with a joy of writing that yields both pages of clear analytical insight and pages of excessive lyricism.”²²

¹⁸ Original text: “E mai pretutindeni, în *Bogdana*, o maturitate de expresie, unduioasă și fermă, după trebuință, ca și o pătrunzătoare observație interioară, fie a senzațiilor celor mai fugitive, fie a dezvoltărilor sufletești aproape halucinatorii, e un meșteșug fără îndoială notabil și care presupune, în spate, exerciții de tinerețe necunoscute.” Vladimir Streinu, “Ioana Postelnicu: ‘Bogdana,’ Roman,” *Viața Românească* 31, no. 8 (1939): 84.

¹⁹ Original text: “în ceea ce privește mlădierea exprimării până la incorectitudinea formală, după desemnul mișcător al sufletului.” Ibid., 86.

²⁰ Original text: “în ceea ce privește abuzul de sugestivitate a stilului.” Ibid.

²¹ Original text: “Introspecția e îmbibată de lirism și sensurile epice se descompun, datorită tehnicii dure, profilul eroilor se schițează timid, evenimentele narate se înscriu în derivă, prezența epică a unui glas în pîlnia telefonului fiind doar accidentală, rătăcindu-se prin pînza subțire și transparentă a analizei. Prea feminin, romanul se țese din euforiile subtile, prin care unda lucidității se prefiră.” I. Negoîtescu, *Istoria literaturii române*, vol. I (1800-1945) (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1991), 260-261.

²² Original text: “un roman inegal, așternut pe hîrtie cu febrilitate, cu o plăcere a scriiturii din care ies deopotrivă pagini de certă acuitate analitică și pagini de un lirism excesiv.” Bianca Burța-Cernat, *Fotografie de grup cu scriitoare uitate. Proza feminină interbelică* (Bucharest: Editura Cartea Românească, 2011), 289.

The intimate coordinate is strongly enhanced by the inner experiences of the female character, Bogdana, who borrows a number of attributes from the writer herself. Beyond the love story between Bogdana and Val Amaru, a considerable portion of the text is dedicated to evoking memories from the protagonist's childhood, actually highlighting facets of intimate space and time. The intrinsic moments, of inner analysis, are triggered in the early stage of her life by the acute feeling of fear: "She turned towards the pillows with a great light within her. Why had she been afraid? Why had she thought she was no longer in her room? Why had she been afraid that she had been torn from her daily routine and transported between other walls?"²³ Fear becomes a catalyst for Bogdana's inner feelings, amplifying those moments of constant identity search for the characters in Ioana Postelnicu's work. Bogdana's intimate space involves a complete disconnection from immediate reality and anchoring in introspection, in moments of self-awareness, of her own presence. The acute feeling of fear implicitly leads to the character's withdrawal from the community, offering her a space "just for her": "But nothing happens in the world with a single dimension. Up to her, no sound, no noise reached. Only rarely was the silence shattered by the honking of a car... She remained lost in the depth created by the nine floors, in a sort of aquarium with water transformed into air."²⁴

And in Ioana Postelnicu's work, we find echoes of Virginia Woolf's theories. Growing up in the shadow of her older sister, Bogdana often suffers from the lack of a room of her own: "But for that, she would have needed a room, which she would never have."²⁵ The departure of her sister Elena marks for Bogdana the transition to a new stage – that of intimacy, in Virginia Woolf's terms: "She remained alone in the house, alone in Elena's room, which from now on would be her room. Her room... This room she had longed for with fervour... She would be able to enter it alone as Elena did, she would be able to close the door, she could even lock it. No one would disturb her anymore... Now that she had a separate room, now that she no longer slept on the sofa in the living room, now that 'Ursu' would disappear with Elena's departure, now she would finally be someone. This room would be 'her little house', her good and dear thing."²⁶ The Woolfian reminiscences resonate loudly in Ioana Postelnicu's work. The lack of a "place just for her" weighs heavily on Bogdana until, in a moment of outburst, she confides in her husband, Adi: "I can't take it anymore, I want to leave alone, not to feel anyone behind me, to move as I wish, to sit at the

²³ Original text: "Se îndreptă între perne cu o lumină mare în ea. De ce-i fusese oare frică? De ce crezuse că nu se mai afla în camera ei? De ce i-a fost teamă că a fost smulsă din rînduiala de toate zilele și transportată între alte ziduri?" Ioana Postelnicu, *Bogdana* (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1979), 15.

²⁴ Original text: "Dar nu se întîmplă nimic în lumea cu o singură dimensiune. Pînă sus la ea, nu răzbătea nici un sunet, nici un zgomot. Doar rar de tot tăcerea era sfîșiată de claxonul vreunei mașini. [...] Ea rămînea pierdută în adîncul ce-l făceau cele nouă etaje, într-un fel de acvariu cu apă prefăcută în văzduh." Ibid., 16.

²⁵ Original text: "Dar pentru asta ar fi trebuit să aibă o odaie, pe care n-o va avea niciodată." Ibid., 43.

²⁶ Original text: "Rămînea singură în casă, singură în odaia Elenei, care de aici încolo avea să fie odaia ei. Odaia ei. [...] Odaia asta o dorise cu înfrigurare. [...] Va putea intra aici singură așa cum făcea Elena, va putea închide ușa, o va putea chiar încuia. Nimeni n-avea s-o mai tulbure. [...] Acum că avea odaia separată, că nu mai dormea pe canapea în sufragerie, că 'Ursu' dispărea odată cu plecarea Elenei, că, în sfîrșit, va fi și ea cineva. Odaia asta va fi 'căsuța' ei, lucrul ei bun și drag." Ibid., 71.

table as I please. To remain dressed or undressed as I like, to turn off the light when I'm sleepy and leave it on when I no longer am. I want a little piece of space, that I don't have to share with anyone, where I know I am 'me', to no longer be suspected, controlled. The walls press on me with everything that's on them; I can't, I'm going crazy..."²⁷

The heroic gesture of the female character is immediately undermined by the amused remarks of her husband, thereby enhancing the "complex of claustrophobia", as it is also called by Bianca Burța-Cernat, which haunts all of Ioana Postelnicu's characters. Indeed, most often, Bogdana is depicted in spaces that amplify this claustrophobia spoken of by Burța-Cernat – the parental house, her sister's bedroom, the conjugal apartment – singular spaces, removed from the community, which lead to the character's (self)withdrawal, both physically and spiritually, from the social sphere to a place "just for her": "But nothing happened in the world with a single dimension. [...] She was so isolated from the world. In the empty rooms of the apartment."²⁸ Bianca Burța-Cernat observes how the instances in which she is placed in the midst of a social group (whether with her family, her school friends, or even her husband) always have a catastrophic outcome. Such narrative sequences actually nuance the character's distancing from the community in the process of self-building and asserting her individuality. The overly congested space, even if it consists of only one person, triggers the feeling of alienation that Bogdana feels intensely. Even the adulterous relationship that had provided her with such calm and security dissolves when she allows Val Amaru to physically enter this intimate space.

The moment when Bogdana leaves to meet the mysterious lover represents, for her, an attempt to escape from moments of intimacy, driven by her new marital status. Laura Ududec observes that "Femininity feels constrained in this new stage of life, freedom seems like a distant illusion, impossible to attain, and her identity is crushed under the weight of her new name."²⁹ The meeting between Bogdana and Val Amaru turns out to be a total failure for the protagonist, overwhelmed by guilt and fear. The repercussion of Bogdana's escapade lies in reconsidering her romantic relationship with her current husband, labeling it as the only space that offers the peace and security she needs: "Suddenly, Adi seemed to her like an invaluable good, like the horizon for which she had set out on the sea, something of hers that she now didn't want to let go. A good discovered suddenly, in this moment. Not a good. A security. A peace. A rest. A shelter. A buoy calling

²⁷ Original text: "Nu mai pot, vreau să plec singură, să nu mai simt pe nimeni în spatele meu, să mă mișc după cum vreau, să stau la masă după pofta mea. Să rămân îmbrăcată sau dezbrăcată după cum îmi va plăcea, să sting lumina când îmi va fi somn și s-o las aprinsă când nu-mi mai este. *Vreau o bucățiță de loc, pe care să nu-l împart cu nimeni, în care să știu că sînt 'eu',* să nu mai fiu suspectată, controlată. Mă apasă zidurile cu tot ceea ce stă pe ele; nu pot, înnebunesc..." Ibid., 141.

²⁸ Original text: "Dar nu se întîmpla nimic în lumea cu o singură dimensiune. [...] Era atât de izolată de lume. În încăperile pustii ale apartamentului." Ibid..

²⁹ Original text: "Feminitatea se simte constrînsă în această nouă etapă a vieții, libertatea pare o iluzie îndepărtată, imposibil de atins, identitatea îi este strivită sub povara noului nume." Laura Ududec, *Aspecte ale feminității în literatura română* (Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2016), 36.

her vaguely but unceasingly, a shelter on the crests of the waves, with small bumps when she distanced herself... Yet a platform, with the anchor firmly stuck in the ground.”³⁰

Ioana Postelnicu's *Bogdana* subtly explores the intimate complexity of the female character, blending lyrical introspection with emotional reality. Through fear, withdrawal, and the desire to assert identity, Postelnicu creates an introspective universe where intimate spaces become essential refuges. The influence of the *Sburătorul* group and Virginia Woolf's theory are evident, with themes of corporeality and self-discovery highlighting the internal conflicts that define the personal trajectory of her protagonists.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of works by writers from the *Sburătorul* group—such as Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ioana Postelnicu, and Cella Serghi—reveals a distinctive feminine voice in Romanian interwar literature. Their prose redefines feminine writing through a nuanced exploration of subjectivity, introspection, and corporeality. Female characters often inhabit intimate spaces shaped by solitude, autonomy, and the confrontation with personal vulnerability.

These inner experiences, conveyed through lyrical language and subtle psychological insight, are deeply embodied. The characters' bodies become sites where desire and social constraints intersect. Drawing on theories of intimacy and identity from Virginia Woolf, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler, the study highlights how these authors construct complex inner worlds. Woolf's concept of “a room of one's own” is central in examining characters' quests for personal space and self-discovery.

The tension between individuality and community is also key. Although isolated, these characters remain engaged with the world, navigating relationships that challenge and reshape their identities. Innovative narrative techniques—where gestures and settings reflect psychological depth—define their style, blending affective realism with introspection.

Ultimately, *Sburătorul* literature offers a space where feminine identity is reimaged through a delicate interplay of intimacy, body, and self-awareness—marking a significant shift in early 20th-century Romanian prose.

³⁰ Original text: “Îi păru deodată Adi un bun neprețuit, ca orizontul, pentru care pornise în largul mării, ca ceva al ei și pe care acum nu voia să-l scape. Un bun descoperit brusc, în această clipă. Nu un bun. O siguranță. O liniște. O odihnă. Un adăpost. O geamandură care o chema vag dar neîntrerupt, un adăpost pe crestele valurilor, cu hopuri mici când ea se depărta... Totuși o platformă, cu ancora bine înfiptă în pământ.” Ioana Postelnicu, 164.