Modelling Factors in Constructing Female Characters in 19th Century Fiction

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Abstract: 'Hardly any short story or a novel fails to represent the woman under various facets: main role, secondary, in absentia or barely mentioned. Her presence triggers the ‘mise en scene’ of a character type that is subjected to the feminine gender. Thus, each feature – highlighted as a result of certain fact-like predicaments – exposes a hypostatization. Here, the woman may turn into a tool of fate, through determination, self-determination, randomly or well thought about.

Key Words: Modelling Factors, Constructing Female, 19th Century Fiction Writers

1 Introduction
The female characters are showcased in a process of change, into better or worse, from different perspectives. The dominant ones are the omniscient and psychological perspectives, as she is identified with her main roles: lover, spouse, wife and a mother. A lot of ink has flown about the female character as a lover. For the most part of the 19th century fiction, romanticism was the key word, and therefore, the examination of the female soul has acquired a certain structure. For instance, the fiction on the onset of the 19th century bears the romanticism features, and many female characters act melodramatically: they do a lot of crying, weeping or fainting for no reason. In two of his short stories, Zoe and O alergare de cai (A Horse Race), C. Negruzzi introduces to readers two young ladies, Zoe and Olga. Sketchy characters, solely identified by their melodramatic behavior and nothing else, they fall in love passionately, are cheated on and kill themselves, in an attempt of revenge.

2 Problem formulation and solution
Toward the end of the century, Ioan Slavici brings in new female characters. These women will be looking for a new social identity to match their individual one, by rejecting the repressive conventions. For this purpose, he was joined by other writers who tried to partake with the women who were trying to pinpoint their identity. Mihai Eminescu creates a unique female character, the « ideal woman », blonde, blue- or green-eyed, with her snowy or marble-like skin. This woman will love as an angel and will follow her lover to the moon (Maria – Sărmanul Dionis/Poor Dionis) or onto the island of happiness (Caesar – Caesara). The myth of androgynous is, though, present. And the readers also come across the myth of androgynous person in the « Caesara or Caesar » character (transl. note: Caesara is the female for Caesar) in Avatarii faraonului Tlà (The Personifications of Pharaoh Tlà).

For their narrative discourse, most of the writers are trying to depict a psychological analysis for the characters that usually fails; but, sometimes, we encounter descriptions of the physical appearance, where many authors choose to present their female characters – at least the main ones – as being outstandingly beautiful (Mârgărita, the woman figure in the homonymous short story of V. Alecsandri, is «the most beautiful among the Moldova aristocrats»); for this purpose, some of them find all kinds of epithets, comparisons and metaphores, sometimes ridiculous (see N. D. Popescu, Sora de caritate/The Sister of Charity).

The mimetic in the physical description of the 19th century works (namely, the writings of N. D. Popescu, an author of novels written in instalments, supposed to be an audience magnet) may be felt on the one hand, in the closeness to the famous artists in the Ancient and Middle Ages, in their eclectic composition [a frequently style during that time] of an ideal of beauty (here, the readers encounter the 16-year old Mimica), and on the other hand, made explicit by this comparison as an identical mimetic manner, instrumented by different tools – the literary description: “The finest and brightest California’s gold, in a wreath of tinsel strings covering the head of that gorgeous fairy, the ripest Bengal rays and the whitest Lebanon lilies were gracefully weaving on

1 The motive of ‘Lebanon lilies’ can be also found in the
that godly face, and the bluest sky blending in with the quietest sea, soaked in two milk puddles hiding between two rows of silky eyelashes – and all these combined to give the best décor – two eyes that would have made even Venera jealous. A blooming carnation as her mouth, two milky pearls peeking through her crimson lips and a piece of Carrara carved by the chisel of Canova to be her neck. Costache Negruzzi also turns for help the same sculptor while describing Olga, who was like a ‘statue of marble, right out of the hands of Canova’. (O alergare de cai/A Horse Race).

Even later on, both the realist and naturalist writers focused on the physical description, we find it very rarely and with its significant details only. The issue of beauty is connected to the one of desire, image, fashion and all types of makeshifts.

Most metaphors used in the portraits of women, both physical (beautiful /ugly), moral (honest / hard-working / prostitute), social (daughter / mother / grandmother) or psychic (greedy, coquette) have a rich semantics and make us think of various image of a flower (suggestive for their decorative role), bird (the idea of freedom), colors (along with their relevant significance) or to the four matter elements: water, air, fire, earth.

A lady writer, hiding behind the pen name of Octavia, announces the readers that there are, thirty signs of beauty that make a woman perfect: three white things: skin, teeth and hands; three black ones: eyes, eyebrows and eyelashes; three red: lips, cheeks, nails; three long: body, hair, arms; three short: teeth, ears and legs; three large: chest, forehead and the space between the eyebrows; three small ones: mouth, waist and foot; three thick: arm, hip and thigh; three thin things: fingers, hair, lips; three little ones: head, chin and nose.²

The norms of the 19th century beauty requested that the authors let themselves guided for the description of the female characters by two coordinates: the human [female] beauty and the moral beauty, which always functioned complementarily. Thus, if the female lead was not beautiful, she somehow had to be chaste, wise, kind hearted and hard working, instead.

During the 19th century, beauty represented a pivotal criterion in building the female characters. In the short story called Stărostii/Wooing a Girl, Iacob Negruzzi suggested ten categories of beauty, where superlatives are next to the entire sensitivity range, up and down: „1-very beautiful, 2-cuddie, 3-neat, 4-quite a good piano player, 5 - so so..., 6 - funny, 7 - not bad, 8- dwarf, 9-ugly, 10-hideous”; he states that, whenever you are inquiring about whether a girl is beautiful, and the answer reflects that she plays the piano quite well’, the suitor must quit soon or take his hat and run anywhere his feet will take him.³

In Istoria unui galbân/The Story of a Golden Coin, Vasile Alecsandri, by the Dutch Ducat, decides – in order to describe women - to follow those authors who, in their desire to make a portrait, they use the standard face in the passports...

“Eyes, like the after-rain sky or a chicory flower. Eyelashes, long as a silk veil. Eyebrows, sharply arched as Cupid’s. Cheeks, round-longish, slightly blushing with the daybreak lights, spread in a smile for the poetry sake and the poets’ pleasure. Mouth, a rose bud, half-open. Teeth, skinless apple pits, or pearls. Hair, see above. Neck, a swan, like the old times. Breast…”⁴

Here, the description stops, cause the standards of those times would not allow that. Mihail Kogălniceanu is trying an idealizing metaphor while describing Niceta’s breast, which was like in paradise, and even the angels would not have chosen another resting place, if they were permitted to leave heaven behind and look for an earthly spot,⁵ and N. D. Popescu turns to a famous Greek sculptor to paint perfection: “Her breast [Mimica’s] was more perfect than Phidias art ever created.”⁶ In order to depict the excitement that Caezaera feels when she sees Ieronim, Mihai Eminescu says that “her breast had so much flourished that a button just popped up off her little too tight black velvet singlet...”⁷

⁴ Popescu, N. D. Sora de caritate (The Sister of Charity), Bucharest, H. Steinberg Publishing House, 1892: 6
⁵ Eminescu, Mihai. „Avatarii faraonului Tlà”/”The Story of Pharaoh Tlà”, Opere (Complete Works), vol. II. A selected text, introductory study, notes and comments by Eugen Simion and Floria-Ştefania Ştefănei, with an introductory study of Eugen Simion, Bucharest, Publishing House for Literature, 1964: 92

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Song of Songs, Chapter 4: About the Mystery of Marriage, The Beauty of the Bride

² Octavia, Despre frumuseţe (About Beauty), Craiova, 1891, p. 17

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1891, p. 17

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authors, for instance Gr. Grandea, uses the syntagm ‘boob’, but not erotically: “Zoe fondled her jumping breast with her crossed arms”\(^8\) Costache Negruzzi makes an allusion, from the anatomic point of view, when he tells us that Zoe shot herself, and the bullet entered under her left boob, broke a rib, through the heart and came out in the back.\(^9\) Describing his mother, the child-narrator, Nică, uses both syntagms: “I remember well, cause her arms rocked me to sleep while I was sucking on her sweet booby [motherly milk] and I was coddling at her boob [protection], babbling and looking dearly at her.”\(^10\)

Barbu Streănescu Delavrancea is credited with a poetic attempt to diversify the feminine attributes when he describes Sultanica dancing in the ring dance. Other daring initiatives are nowhere to be found. Before the woman body takes its clothes off in fiction (Camil Petrescu, Ion hiding under dresses, Cassandra (Oasele de la Mitropolie/The Relics from Patriarchy) has a black and thick hair “covering her head as dark clouds in the night, better showing her rosaceous, oval and full face. Her black eyes were reflecting all her soul moods: sometimes gentle, other times dreamers or showing crazy desires of lust. Her mouth and chin looked like nests of kisses, and the neck was so beautiful that you would have cared less if you died hugging it.”\(^11\) Here, the physical description ends all of a sudden, even if Cassandra “was offering her favors among the Turkish officials and the handsome monks at the Patriarchy, she was only undressed down to her neck for the eyes of the readers. When the authors try to describe the woman’s waist, they want it look perfect: “her waist [Mimica’s] was beyond any roundness and thinness” (N. D. Popescu, Sora de caritate/The Sister of Charity, p. 6), or “her waist [Olga’s] who had that offhandedness shared only by the Oriental women” (O alergare de cai/A Horse Race).\(^12\) or the fact that “the sun has never seen such a graceful waist like Niceta’s” (Iluzii pierdute …Un întâi amor/Lost Illusions… A First Love).

The hands had to be delicate and tiny, and as white and translucent as possible: “her hands [Mimica’s], white as cottage cheese, were smaller than a 10-year old girl’s.” (Sora de caritate/The Sister of Charity). When they had to describe women’s feet (as much as you could see from under the dresses), the writers were careful to say that they were extraordinarily small: “her skirt was made of a clear sky colored atlas, and a small and fat foot was coming from under it” (Zoe) or her feet [Olga’s] seemed to play in those tiny shoes (O alergare de cai/A Horse Race). The cliché of those times requires that the hair be as blond ‘as gold’ (ironically described in Un întâi amor/A First Love), where the blonde woman was the positive character versus the brunette, which was the negative (Ursita/The Fate). But there are a lot of exceptions, Elena had to free her hair to smoothen it and then to tie it up again. “It was so nice to see that abundant hair [the appeal to the elements of nature], long, thick, bright and so fine that each hair seemed unreal, spreading and waving [nature, again] on her white neck [chromatic scale] as snow [nature], in natural and gracious rings.”\(^13\) In all his writings, Grigore Măruneanu uses the same elements while describing a woman; she is ‘funnily brunette’, ‘cute brunette woman’ or ‘funny blonde’.

As far the color of the eyes, it must be blue, even to have a shade of ‘bluest sky color, mixed with the sea blue’ (Sora de caritate/ Sister of Charity). But, even for this standard, we have exceptions, like ‘bulging hazel eyes, shadowed by long eyelashes and dipped in a sea of pleasure (Zoe) or Veta who had her eyes ‘kind of small, but moving swiftly like the lizard’s’ (Ioan Slavici, Spiru Călin). For Ioan Slavici, we hardly cross into descriptions that would present the physical or moral aspect of the character, in a detailed way; on the contrary, the writer catches all in a full close-up: ‘When Marta goes out to dancing and walks down the roads, the wives and old ladies yearning/craving hurry to the gates and check her out. How nice she holds her head up, how she walks and plies at every step; and how her wavy hair rests on her forehead, and the rich necklace on her neck, the blouse ornaments on her arms and the skirt moulding after her thighs. No matter how old you would be, her sight is a forever pleasure.”\(^14\)

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11 Grandea, Grigore Haralambie. Oasele de la Mitropolie/The Relics from Patriarchy in the cited work , p.231
12 Negruzzi, Costache. „O alergare de cai”/ “A Horse Race” in cited work: 112
14 Slavici, Ioan. „Gura satului”/The Gosip Village. Opere.
When the female characters do not exactly fall into this pattern, the lack of beauty is replaced with outstanding moral features. Veta (Spiru Călin) “was no beautiful, rather tall, wafer-thin and tall – as flat as a board – her face pale and square-cornered, cheek bones coming out and very wide jaws, rather moustached, her voice like a man, she was a kind of midget boy. The only thing to tell that she was a woman was her eyes, quite small, rushing like the lizard’s. And her mouth, too – rather big and prominent, but with the cleanest teeth ever. Something special in her posture and moves, especially when she was in a hurry or dashing, playing with the kids; she seemed a lioness attacking; and if you happened to see her in the dark or from behind only, you would followed her restlessly, to catch a glimpse of her face”.

Even so, this old maid, thanks to her moral features, mainly her brains, energy and generosity, succeeds to make the undecided Spiru Călin fall in love with her. As all the female characters of Slavici, Veta, in spite of her age, once she falls in love, she becomes quite lovey-dovey, graceful and exuberant. At the beginning, she is hostile, then shy, but finally she will express her feelings openly.

Leon Negruzzi does not have any problem to disclose a physical handicap of his character, Ana Petrovna, in the Serghie Pavlovici short story. She was “neither beautiful, nor ugly. But her eyes, dark blue, were shining like a smouldering and deep fire [fire, one of the four elements of the matter], that were surprising and luring in an unusual way. She was petite, her neck was short, her shoulders going up and the waist was bending. In one word, she was a hunchback [after that, the author fills in with her moral qualities]: But how many soul qualities were making up for these defects.”

The prototype of ugliness is quite rare in the 19th century literature. Irinuca’s girl was “hideous and sloppy, that you would never think to sleep under the same roof with her” (a portrait made by the child narrator Nica – Ion Creanga uses a paremiological paraphrase ‘ugly as the night’), and Veta (Spiru Călin) was called at as ‘the ugly of the fringe’. In Din durerile lumii/ The World’s Misfortunes short story, written by A. Vlahuță, we have a description made by Radu, a 17-year old student, who finds himself in the situation to decline the priest’s wife shameless advances, “he was listening still and gazing at this vulgar and nuisance woman. His look, cold and emotionless, would stop either on her flaked and swollen, or her ugly face, with her large and blushy cheeks, a big and wide-smiling mouth, with his small, Tartar-like eyes, colorless, stupidly gaping and deep in their sockets.”

Safta (I. Slavici, Vatra părăsită/The Deserted Heath), even if ‘ugly, poor and smallpox-bitten’, has many qualities, “hard working, strong and merciful, motherless in a house with her father always drunk, she kissed the ground (cause she had nobody else to kiss) when Ana took her in her house, to baby-sit for her kids and comfort them. She would not stop from work, running around, eating bits now and then, sleeping on the ground and treated badly – but still she was much happier than at her father’s house, who was not a human anymore.’

When Maria is brought on the stage as an angelic character, Nicolae Filimon eliminates the myth of the beautiful and mantrap woman like Chera Duduca, disclosing the real sacrifices that she had to go through to be attractive; even if in her prime, her shredded night bird life she was living made her call upon, early in life, to the not-hers lulus. So, her daily beauty routine included a whole series of grueling rituals that she would complacently follow, only to preserve that beatuosity that was making the seneschal to offer her all that he was squeezing from the poor country […] .

Every single evening […] she was rubbing her cheeks with aubergine-colored lotion; in the morning, she was wiping them with egg white, steaming with fire-warmed bricks sprinkled with acacia water, then she was rinsing with wormwood water. All these just to stretch her cheeks skin out and have the wrinkles vanish; after all that, she was swabbing with a sponge soaked in cucumber water to make the spots come off and putting on some lotion to whiten the skin. Then […] she would rub in the fake black ash for the eyebrows or for the phoney moles or beauty spots.  

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White is the commonest color of the *chromatic range* used by the writers – the color of virginity and youth (for her first ball dance, the girl was supposed to wear a white dress). The color of white (the face as white as ‘marble’) obsessively shows in the physical description of the characters: Sultanica’s face ‘seemed painted in white’, Rezi was as tall as ‘a coast guard and delicate as a sylph [the words ‘coast guard’ and ‘sylph’, male attributes! are put together]; her skin was of the *most perfect white* color, and her eyes blacker (a few pages earlier, Rimatorian told us that her eyes were green!) than the berries [the vegetal spectrum], covered by eyebrows and eyelashes that would have made jealous even a Moor girl.’

Filimon, though, also turns this technique of portraying, so the reader finds out how Rezi was from Rimătorian’s love confession ‘by your face, whiter than the office paper […] your eyes greener than granite, your golden hair locks, flowery teeth and your lips brighter than the marble’.

The appeal to the *vegetal symbols* is a style artifice used by many writers in portraying the female characters, from a physical or psychical perspective: Silvia was “tall and pliant as a *hazelnut tree branch*” (Petru Vulcan, *Fata gazdei/The Landlord’s Daughter*), Eleonora showed up ‘in Iaşi downtown as a tiny *snowbell* in the field’ (Privighetorea Socoloi/The Nightingale of Socola), ‘A carnation in bloom for her little mouth [Mimica’s], (Sora de caritate/The Sister of Charity), Smărăndiţa looks like ‘a flower that wistfully bows in her first morning!’, Zoe is a ‘*rose bud* that butterflies can’t even see it’ (Manoil), Caterina is being courted by a man , who gets her dizzy with compliments … finally, as he did not know what else to compare her with, he tells her that she is as beautiful as a *pineapple*’ (Elena), and Ruxanda was ‘sad and droopy as a *flower* under the scorching sun, with nothing to shelter her under’ (Alexandru Lăpuşneanul), Ruxanda is ‘as white and serene as daybreak’ [nature elements], while Timuș, her would-be-husband ‘resembled the devil coming out of the church door’ (Domnița Ruxandra/Princess Ruxandra). Matei bares his heart in front of Sașa, complimenting her: “You don’t even know how much you look like a flower! Your clothes seem to have grown on you today, as the petals of the *lily-of-the-valley* from within.”

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18 Filimon, Nicolae – “Nenorocirile unui slujnicar sau gentilomii de mahala” *The Misfortunes of a Servant or The Gentlemen on the Outsskirts in cited work.*, vol. II: 392


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20 Ivanovici, Sofronie – *În jurul unei femei/Around a Woman*, Bucharest, Minerva Printing House, 1896: 31

21 Brill, Tony - *Legendele populare românești/Romanian Folk Legends*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1981, p. 464. Tony Brill explains the significance of the legend that says that God called all the creatures ‘to make them perfect’, ‘to give them human features’; the fox got the slyness, and the man the trade skills’.

bună/Good Night). Her wish for freedom is stressed by the comparison with a migrating bird: Aïşè “seemed to look somewhere, far away, into the blue sky horizon, and exactly like a featherless bird of the tropical countries, was trying to find the road of freedom she had come in” (p. 135).

3 Conclusion

It can be said that 19th century literature generally constructs female characters in parallel with their social status, presenting them either in imposed hypostases and/or as victims of their marginalization in a patriarchal society and, only rarely, as exponents of the resistance against the power structures. The literature produced in a society influenced by early capitalism inevitably offers a central position to the male character. It is the era of upstarts, nouveau-riche, tradesmen, industrialists, corrupt politicians, a new bourgeoisie for whom the novels, as Nicolae Filimon, Ciocoi vechi şi noi (Old and New Upstarts), Dimitrie Bolintineanu, Manoil and Elena, Nicolae Xenopol, Păsurile unui american în România (The Misfortunes of An American in Romania), are ideal spaces of representation.

References:
[12] Zaharia-Filipaş, E., Studii de literatură feminină, București: Editura Paideia, 2004 (Studies of Women’s Writings)