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## **EXPLORĂRI INAUGURALE**

**Actele Conferinței Internaționale „Text,  
Context, Pretext”,  
Ediția I**



**EDITURA UNIVERSITARIA**  
**Craiova, 2020**

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**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**

**Explorări inaugurale** / ed.: Cătălin Ghiță, Oana Băluică. - Craiova :

Universitaria, 2020

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-14-1688-2

I. Ghiță, Cătălin (ed.)

II. Băluică, Oana (ed.)

82

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## Cuvânt înainte

Conferința internațională „Text, Context, Pretext” este organizată, începând din anul 2019, de Facultatea de Litere a Universității din Craiova. Scopul acestei conferințe este de a reuni voci ale cercetătorilor din domeniul filologiei, fie ei deja consacrați sau în curs de afirmare, și de a le facilita astfel schimbul deopotrivă de informații și de idei. Specializările propriu-zise care intră sub incidența tematică a conferinței inaugurale acoperă, practic, întreaga paletă de investigație a Facultății noastre, de la literatură și studii culturale la antropologie și lingvistică. Mai mult, contribuțiile autorilor sunt redactate în mai multe limbi (engleză, franceză, germană și, bineînțeles, română), ceea ce mărește miza diversității.

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După cum se poate observa din Cuprins, studiile care compun materia intelectuală a acestui volum de *proceedings* au fost aranjate conform unui principiu democratic al distribuției alfabetice. Editorii au încercat astfel să sublinieze caracterul polifonic al acestui volum: deși, fără îndoială, inegale ca valoare sau ca întindere, toate contribuțiile merită ascultate, fiindcă ele fotografiază cu fidelitate harta preocupărilor de cercetare ale respectivului autor. În același timp, este de așteptat ca, pe măsură ce conferința se va dezvolta și va dobândi amplitudine, edițiile viitoare să evedențieze o și mai mare diversitate de preocupări investigative.

***Editorii***



# FEMINISM IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY: DILEMMAS, ANXIETIES, AND CHALLENGES

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## **Abstract:**

This paper shall focus primarily on the social standards and misconceptions regarding women's status in relation to marriage or economic issues, but feminism and its multiple dimensions is also taken into account. In her influential study, *Women in European History*, Gisela Bock has argued that a discourse concerning the rights of women should focus not only on equality, but on freedom as well, since this is the most important aspect of emancipation, and more recently, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie has claimed that, throughout history, parents have put children under a great deal of pressure by reinforcing gender bias in education and prejudices. Ultimately, since reality itself is a social construct, women's roles and image will change with each new approach or construction; hence, the task of reevaluating them constantly may prove difficult, but equally rewarding.

**Keywords:** status anxiety, feminism, social standards, gender, misconceptions.

## **1. Shakespeare's sister and her 'bitterness'**

In 1929, after a lecture given at Cambridge and upon discovering some of the disadvantages women were facing in that particular period – social and economic constraints, obstacles and domestic responsibilities – Virginia Woolf published her extended essay, *A Room of One's Own*, depicting all the inequalities she has witnessed, and thus establishing a new area of interpretation regarding her work: the feminist one.

In an attempt to respond to those patriarchal assertions regarding women and their lack of genius, Woolf invents Judith, a character playing the role of Shakespeare's sister, illustrating how, even with the same talent and the same qualities that usually make one a great writer, a woman would not have succeeded in this literary journey; the lack of formal education, a forced marriage and the impossibility to get any kind of training in her craft would have left her on the verge of despair:

It is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people [...]. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were force to it by their parents and

held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. Now and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper (Woolf 2014: 46-47).

Simply put, the echelons of creativity, science and generally all intellectual activities have been male dominated for centuries, since for a very long time women have been regarded as the ‘weaker vessel’ (Fraser 1984); and this has become obvious even for male writers – Umberto Eco has approached the subject of painting and the masculine dominance over this area, responding to those who have minimized the cultural role played by women; in an article published in 2003, the Italian writer has stated that it was not about women’s lack of talent or interest in the matter, but the *social milieu* of things – women could not have climbed the scaffold because it was considered indecent, and so was running a painting workshop, but as soon as easel painting has made its appearance, so did the women painters (Eco 2016: 161).

This state of affairs has definitely changed since then – women have gained control over their bodies<sup>1</sup>, they have received higher education, the right to vote and to expect an equal treatment of their role in society, their domestic lives have improved significantly due to technological advancement and the law has changed accordingly.

Furthermore, this emancipation of women subjects has led to some major changes in family structures as well; in their impressive volume entitled *Familias. Historia de la sociedad española*, the two editors – Francisco Chacón and Joan Bestard – have depicted a few of these changes caused by the new order of things, among them – a new dynamic of the relationship and whole new anxieties caused by the multiple roles that women have to assume at their place of work and at home (Chacón, Bestard 2011: 1028-1029).

However, far from tipping the scale entirely in their favor, the victories of feminism have also brought to surface new forms of anxiety, most of them related to the movement itself and the way men usually perceive the so-called feminists and, on the other hand, by establishing a new and equal range of expectations, some social issues have been perceived as gender biased, starting with education – which is still very different for girls. In this regard, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie has pointed out how girls are still under a great deal of pressure:

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: ‘You can have ambition, but not too much’. You should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man. If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, pretend that you are not, especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him (Adichie 2014: 12).

The concept of ‘emasculatation’ in fact has a long history throughout this fight for equality since – as Virginia Woolf has put it – ‘the history of men’s opposition to

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<sup>1</sup> Although the depressing problem of abortion is still under debate in some countries.



women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself' (Woolf 2014: 53). Thus, the concept has come to be linked to almost every demand, struggle and achievement insofar. In her well-researched and lucid volume, *The Terror Dream* – which explores the reaction of American's media to the 9/11 attacks, deciphering the mechanisms of American culture – Susan Faludi has shown how the myth of heroic maleness was reinforced, whilst female subjects were, once again placed under a spectrum of vulnerability and the paradigm savior/victim has been shared constantly by the media (Faludi 2008: 368). But somehow, when women protested against such a limited vision, they were accused of 'emasculating America', as Geraldine Bedell has stated in an article published in 2008:

The attacks on the Twin Towers left America feeling exposed [...]. The media responded by re-framing the attacks and their aftermath as an atavistic myth of virile maleness and female vulnerability. In reality, men and women were equally powerless that September morning. But in the retelling, the firefighters (increasingly referred to as firemen) became heroes. The fact that many of them felt uncomfortable with this designation was ignored [...], and rescue pictures almost invariably showed women being carried out of the World Trade Centre, even though three times as many men were in the buildings and three times as many died. Any women who attempted to present a more nuanced view (Susan Sontag, Arundhati Roy and Barbara Kingslover in particular) were demonized and accused of emasculating America (Bedell, 2008).

In 1929 Virginia Woolf thought that, at least in 100 years the anxiety that women have been sharing regarding their desire for equal treatment would end and, in the same time, women will have ceased to be the 'protected sex' (Woolf, 37). However, even if women's roles have changed and their rights have gained substance, their social status remains a problematic issue, especially when trying to advocate for an equal status to that of males. They are therefore demonized through derogatory terms, malicious observations and irony. This should also explain the need that most women feel to clarify their position as feminists, and one could observe this train of thought in several circumstances: not long ago, a public figure like Emma Watson was appointed as Goodwill Ambassador for UN Women, and she has started her speech by defining the word 'feminist', since its connotation is known to be a negative one, especially in today's world (Watson, 2014). Feminists are usually ridiculed, called 'bitter', 'frustrated', 'Feminazi', and the male reluctance to accept their rights and their idea of emancipation is not a new one.

In fact, all women engaging in this difficult journey have felt the same way; Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie has stated that she has felt the same way when a journalist told her that she 'should never call herself a feminist since feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands' (Adichie, 8).

Some of these ideas, most of them still gender-orientated in the form of social misconceptions (sometimes supported by acclaimed scientific theories) regarding women's status in relation to marriage and economic issues will be discussed – shortly – in the following lines.

## 2. Marriage and Career

‘Men don’t want the freedom that women are thrusting upon them. Men want the sense of power more than they want the sense of freedom. They want the feeling that comes to them as providers for women more than they want the feeling that comes to them as free men. They want someone dependent on them more than they want a comrade’ (Dell, 2014)<sup>2</sup>.

This statement is not made by a woman, but it resembles very much the thoughts expressed on this matter by a well-known feminist as Emma Goldman, who has described the institution of marriage almost in the same terms, stating that ‘it makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent’ (*apud* Schneir 1994: 322).

This may not always be the case, of course, and the term ‘parasite’ may seem exaggerated, but there is an immutable truth: for a long period of time – and some may include the present times also – women have been scared into marriage under false pretenses, under the illusion of security and financial stability and under a lot of pernicious ideas.

Although the times and mechanisms may be different, women are under a lot of pressure today also: we can see it in newspapers, talk-shows, magazines, advertisements, movies etc. – the idea that a woman is not complete without a ‘soul-mate’, the dangerous warning that she might reach the age of 30 or 35 alone, the studies spreading concerns about her fertility after that age, bad statistics regarding the likelihood of marriage at 40 etc.

At the same time, social standards are also gender biased – ‘our society teaches a woman at a certain age who is unmarried to see it as a deep personal failure. While a man at a certain age who is unmarried has not quite come around to making his pick’ (Adichie, 13). And the epithets used to describe a woman’s marital status have a very long range, varying from ‘a little mean’, offensive, to disturbing and sometimes vicious. In her influential volume, *Backlash*, Susan Faludi has tried to offer a perspective upon this discrepancy between the great achievements of feminism and emancipation and the extremely anxious emotional state of women today and, among a variety of things she has depicted a ‘bulletin of despair’:

This bulletin of despair is posted everywhere – professional women are suffering burnout and succumbing to an infertility epidemic. Single women are grieving from a man shortage. *The New York Times* reports: Childless women are depressed and confused and their ranks are swelling. *Newsweek* says: Unwed women are hysterical and crumbling under a profound crisis of confidence. The health advice manuals inform: High-powered career women are stricken with unprecedented outbreaks of stress-induced disorders, hair loss, bad nerves, alcoholism, and even heart-attacks. The psychology books advise: Independent women’s loneliness represents a major mental health problem today [...]. The prevailing wisdom of the past decade has supported

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<sup>2</sup> The affirmation belongs to Floyd Dell; for more details see Susan Faludi, ‘Feminism for Them?’ *The Baffler*, <http://thebaffler.com/salvos/feminism-for-them>.

one, and only one, answer to this riddle: it must be all that equality that's causing all the pain. Women are unhappy precisely because they are free. They have grabbed at the gold ring of independence, only to miss the one ring that really matters (Faludi 2006: 1-3).

Needless to say, this propaganda, which rapidly becomes a way to reduce women's confidence in their own abilities is inextricably linked to other sectors, such as the economic one, and studies have shown an increasingly number of women who, despite their leadership aspirations or their chances of succeeding in a highly competitive environment end up staying at home or working part time (Wilson, 2003). And although all of these actions are categorized as free choices, few of them really are, and women become tied to the domestic sphere even if financial independence might be at stake. Moreover, this has placed women under a situation currently known as 'The Mommy War Machine' (Graff, 2007), a conflict between career-driven women and their counterparts, that have chosen to stay at home, producing more anxiety among women, especially considering the fact that this is really a sensitive matter. How much freedom of choice is there for women if they are constantly reminded of the fact that they have to play all these roles imposed by society – working woman, mother, wife – preferably without missing any of these points? The truth is that women are still judged differently than their male counterparts, as one could read in an article written by E.J. Graff:

Women *do* feel forced to choose between work and family. Women *do* face a sharp conflict between cultural expectations and economic realities. The workplace *is* still demonstrably more hostile to mothers than to fathers. Faced with the 'choice' of feeling that they've failed to be *either* good mothers or good workers, many women wish they could – or worry that they should – abandon the struggle and stay home with the kids (Graff, 2007, *Columbia Journalism Review*).

This is not an isolated course of events; in 2013, BBC's '100 Women Series' has initiated a dialogue on what is it like to be a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, involving women all around the globe, with different social and cultural backgrounds. Many of them have acknowledged that society in itself is gender biased, and gender equality has not been accomplished yet; their opinions and their answers to different questions draw a complicated picture of society today: a 27 years old politics graduate from New Zealand has stated that is much harder for a woman to be promoted at the workplace than for a man, a 33 years old marketing analyst from Japan has said that getting married in Japan is still very important, and women, even if they are more educated and ambitious now do feel pressured to take this step; a 32 years old anthropologist living in Mumbai has described the physical and psychological violence that women endure on a daily basis, and a 56 years old former journalist from Brazil has shared her anxiety about living in a patriarchal society – 'when you go to the mechanics, they always think women are gullible. Even at the

gas stations they try to make you pay more. In business too, women can hold the same position as a man and will be paid less money for it' (Peek, 2013).

And the last statement is actually a socio-economic reality in many countries: 'in Europe, women earn 16.4 percent less than men, according to the European Commission, and in the United States, women earn \$0.77 to every \$1 men earn for the same amount of work' (Sanchez, 2014). According to the World Economic Forum, 'there is no country on earth where women make as much as men for the same work. WEF research has predicted that it will take 81 years at current rates of improvement for women to reach parity' (Lartey, 2016). It becomes obvious that this situation leads to dependency and economic protection, since the higher salary and the financial security of a household belongs to men. Given this unfortunate situation, it is not surprising that a lot of women have endured or continue to endure physical abuse or domestic violence from males and refuse to report it or, that a lot of them decide to stay in an unhappy marriage.

The wage gap becomes more relevant when factoring in other issues – 'women pay more for health insurance, they have a lot of out-of-pocket expenses for basic things as contraception and maternity care' (Gibbs, 2009), and for all kinds of other products, including beauty products. Canadian psychologist Susan Pinker has been concerned with this pay gap and with the fact that, after decades of feminism, very few women are in a position of leadership and very few women run important corporations. Unfortunately, the premise of her book – *The Sexual Paradox* – is based on a false dichotomy (success vs. empathy) and her conclusions are, therefore, inaccurate (Pinker 2009: 336). Basically, Pinker has argued that 'women are built for comfort, not speed', and therefore, few of them can deal with the stress of leadership and with a high competitive environment as well as men, and this is because testosterone and oxytocin are very different hormones, which stand for very different results: 'men are more vulnerable but also more risk-taking', and women are 'empathetic'. But neuroscience, hormones and biology cannot explain everything, of course, especially now, when we live in a universe dominated by media, social pressures, cultural baggage and inherent inequality. In fact, in a review of the book, Geraldine Bedell has explained this in a convincing manner:

Susan Pinker's obsession with hormones as destiny assumes women make choices unhampered by cultural baggage. This is allied to a touching faith in market economies; in her world, there are no decisions based, for example, on the assumption that men generally still find it easier to earn more. She offers no challenge to the way corporate capitalism is organized and nowhere suggests that women's frequent decisions to work outside big companies or part-time might be indicative of a structural inequality that could perhaps be worth addressing (Bedell, 2008).

The statement made by the Kenyan Nobel peace laureate Wangari Maathai – 'the higher you go, the fewer women there are' (*apud* Adichie, 11) – is very true in its simplicity. But it is not because of the hormones.

## Conclusion

History itself has not been very fair to women: a recent article published in *The Guardian* regarding the forgotten African American women behind Nasa's space race might prove enlightening in this matter, telling the story of brilliant female scientists that 'were the human computers behind the biggest advances in aeronautics' (Saner, 2016). Despite all forms of discrimination, many women around the world, in the entire history have decided, along Betty Riggs, that 'there was no place to go but forward' (Faludi 2006: 461). However, in order to keep moving forward and in order to achieve true gender equality without having to wait 81 years, we must do something now. Maybe the simplest (but not the easiest) solution would be to eliminate gender biased education; because, as many feminist authors have pointed out, we may raise girl to be feminists, but as long as we keep reinforcing masculine and sexist values in the process of a boy's education, nothing will truly change. Each gender should be allowed to create its own views, to settle its own prerogatives, to define and to try to achieve its own goals, without having to measure constantly its performance by the standards imposed to it by another one. John Stuart Mill has put it very simply: 'The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual' (Mill 2001: 16).

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