

Roxana DECA

**Woman, feminism, femininity :
criteria for an ethnology
of equilibrium
in the Romanian traditional society**

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Foreword

Issues concerning the so-called “gender perspective” in traditional cultures have been authoritatively required in international anthropological, ethnological, historical and contemporary research and, in the last decade, in folklorism. However, Romanian experts involved in the study of traditional culture have shown little interest in this research perspective; thus, one may notice the lack of detailed studies regarding, for instance, the status of women in folkloric culture, the dynamics of roles, the women’s and the men’s statuses as they appear in forms of aesthetic expression (for instance, ritual or non-ritual poetry or prose texts) etc. From this point of view, the work of Dr. Roxana Deca on *Woman. Feminism. Femininity. Criteria for an Ethnology of Balance in the Romanian Traditional Society* is highly unusual. Since there is a lack of Romanian bibliography on the subject mentioned – other than the one referring to kinship, also rather fragile- one can easily understand the difficulty of the whole approach which Dr. Deca undertook in order to carry out the work.

Roxana Deca graduated the Faculty of Letters and History at the University of Craiova, in 1998. After a short period of teaching to middle-school pupils, she held the position of a museographer, by contest, at the Museum of Oltenia, in Craiova. In order to be a competent specialist, she also attended a postgraduate course, which resulted in her receiving a certificate in museology, ethnology specialization. As a museographer, she organized several thematic exhibitions, positively characterized by specialists. Her activity among the staff at the Museum of Oltenia and also an impressive family tradition make Mrs. Roxana Deca be the holder of some special and extremely various data regarding Romanian traditional culture, especially focused on Oltenia area. This subject offered her the opportunity of using and analyzing a significant number of data, proceeding from scholar sources or from her own collections made mostly in the southern region of the country.

The book is structured in four main chapters, one for conclusions, annexes and references. The first chapter, entitled *From woman to feminism*, consists of other five chapters: *Women in Romanian Middle Ages*, *Women’s right to inheritance in the Romanian traditional society* and *The status of the Romanian woman from 1848 to communism*. The author proves good knowledge of the social status of women in Romanian Countries; the study is based on reasonably selected and critically analyzed references. The chapter also includes a brief history of the international and Romanian feminist movement, also consisting of the themes which the author will analyze later, in the other chapters dedicated to the various cultural folk structures in which one can identify sources for defining the status of

women in Romanian folkloric tradition. In other three chapters the author reviews documentary sources – scholarly and folk- which make us understand, in a synthetic form, the role of women in the family life cycle, in the calendar custom cycle and how it is represented in the poetic text of family ballads and carols, which are the most representative species for the theme we are interested in.

The second chapter, dedicated to *The woman's role within the traditional family*, especially focusing on rites of passage, offers the author the opportunity of presenting, in a concise style and skillfully using the available documents, the dynamics of changing the social statuses of the woman and man by marriage and also the traditional Romanian norm which regulated the duty to fulfil this role. In Romanian rural world, singles were rare, in general, and were disregarded. Traditional institutions which were in charge and applied rules – the social meetings/evenings, controlled by women and the dance, controlled by men- hold a well-defined position in the chapter structure and so do the main functions of actors in transition moments: the groom, the bride, the godfather, the godmother etc. The manner in which the author presents this moment that attracts status and role changes in the position of the actors helps the reader to better understand the cooperation between the two sexes, interpreted as a “swinging of roles, masculine and feminine”, which she defines as a “balance of acts”. The “balance” mentioned in the title of the work is expressed in the rites of separation and aggregation or in the performing of apotropaic or propitiation practices, which the specialist identifies. *Procreation and the role of women in childbirth rituals* and *The role of women in ritual funeral practices* end a demonstration which the researcher makes directly by means of ethnological documents referring to the dominant role of the woman in the spiritual domain, especially in major “thresholds”: entering and leaving the “human world”, the “material world”, the “earthly life” and passing to eternity. For a society that arranges its existential structures around the concept of “after life” and post existence related to eternity, the role of the woman, as seen from the interpretation which the author makes to the available information, far from being limited or minor is dominant. *Women's role in performing ritual calendar customs* presents, with the same accuracy, some well ordered syntheses, from which, on the one hand, the roles of the masculine and the feminine, related to the various types of productive activities, characteristic to traditional communities, and on the other hand the “feminine preeminence in preserving traditional customs and implicitly, in preserving local identities stand out. The book also presents the manner in which the status of women reflects in the artistic folkloric creation; this expression embodies an exceptionally high degree of processing the information, since the sung versified epic was chosen; it is expressed mostly

by the family ballad that, taking into account its “thematic and expression”, belongs to the “domain of the social and the masculine”. The woman is “desired as a wife” (the types: *Three Brothers with Nine Dragons*, *The Sun and the Moon* and *Iovan Iorgovan*), “submits her suitors to love tests” (*The Rich Catholic*, *Ghiță Cătănuță*, *Milea*); she is also present as „the old mother” (*Miorița*, *Dăian*), as the „treacherous woman” – the unfaithful wife, the treacherous mother (*Vartici*, *Marcu*, *Femeia necredincioasă – The Unfaithful Woman*); she also appears as „the victim” (*Cicoarea*, *Moartea drăguței – The Chicory*, *Death of the Sweetheart*), as a „criminal woman” – the poisoning sister, „the bad mother-in-law”, „the fugitive wife” etc. This image, of a particular behavioral and characterological complexity, stands on a different level of traditional culture, both as a moment of elaboration – a vision of the feminine dominated by the medieval perception is easily identifiable – and especially functional. A social category *par excellence*, with a moral and educational function of enlightening, an artistic creation whose messages are transmitted by means of mechanisms, other than the ritual ones, the „family ballad” expresses a „recent” attitude, a relative „recent” at its best; of course, in terms of tradition, this „recent” means something different from what we are accustomed to perceiving today. When „life and death”, the essential parts of existence, are not in the formula, security, integrity, consistency, the continuity of descents and of the human group, in general and the attitude towards women undergo some mutations; the woman’s „shortcomings” and vulnerabilities are observed, not necessarily to accuse or blame her, but to educate and control by „examples” which should or should not be followed. As a predominantly ceremonial category, the ballad held a special role in the ritual of marriage and other reunions. It may be considered an expression of masculine authority expressed in the social domain, different from the ritual one, which no one, within traditional society, would have dared to negotiate upon. The conclusion to which the author gets is that „the image of the woman in Romanian society is that of a factor of stability in the household, in the domestic field, whereas the man acts in the public domain and has relationships with the exterior./.../ The reflection of the feminine role in the passage rituals within traditional society and also in those related to the customs throughout the year – she asserts – led us to conclude that Romanian women have always been able to maintain the connection between terrestrial and sacred spaces.

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Argument

In this theoretical approach we intend to make an analysis of the role and the position held by women in the Romanian traditional society, as they emerge from ethnographical, folklore and historical documents.

The purpose of this book is to discover the causes that contributed to the change of the woman's status, whether or not we are able to talk about equality between women and men in the Romanian traditional community. The analysis of the folklore texts extracted from the "passage" customs held in the family and the calendar cycles will be the starting point for all of these.

Since documentary materials on Romanian feminism are rather sporadic and cannot confirm the existence of a feminist movement in our country similar to the Occidental one, we shall turn to tradition, to the social reality of the XVIIth - XIXth centuries, in order to set up the foundation and the framework on which we shall build up an ethnology of the balance between man and woman; further on, we shall "finish" this book by means of a study upon women's emancipation movement within the Romanian borders.

Taking into account historical and ethnographic documents, at first we shall analyze and establish the role played by women's right to inheritance and ownership in the individual life.

Therewith, we intend to identify outstanding female hypostases through which to outline a portrait of the traditional Romanian village woman, her status in the community, her rights and duties within and outside the family and how her relationships with the society have evolved in time, then why she rebelled and what she managed to change through her revolt.

Thus, this work will focus on the theoretical (historical and ethnographic) and artistic reflections of the woman in the Romanian society, taking into account the various types of roles and the historical metatext (documents).

Chapter 1. From woman to feminism

Over time, as a consequence of defining the feminine identity in the context of patriarchal societies, on the one hand, and, on the other hand of certain feminine manifestations which required certain themes of reflection and analysis on the position and role of women in family and society, it was found that the differences between man's and woman's social statuses, starting from their biophysiological natures, haven't been able to entirely explain the emergence and persistence of the mentality concerning gender inequality and woman's inferiority in relation to man.

Nevertheless, all over the world, the cliché of the subordinated human being has been perpetuated over time, and woman has always assumed the status of an inferior and "sinful" being as a result of the original "sin" that stigmatized her. Her status was thus underbid on behalf of her natural condition. Her inferiority has been handed down by the power of tradition. Nowadays, for example, by this power of tradition, behavior and relations among family members remained the same in almost all rural families, and also in a good part of those living in cities, except in families in which both spouses have a high intellectual level. As rightly asserts the anthropologist Nicolae Panea in *Asphalt Gods*¹, today's block of flats is in fact the old lane, strung vertically, whereas the families living here are subjected to rules of coexistence specific to the old village. People know one another in detail, hardly can anyone enter or leave the block unnoticed, news seekers know what happens in each and every family; norms of separation by age and sex work well.

There are certain factors, such as: stereotyping human relations, the existence of a hierarchy of family relationships, the discrepancies between wife, who exerts her role as the mother, the housewife, the employee, and her husband, in the role of the father, the family authoritative representative and the employee; these factors are also due to frustration, unemployment, lack of opportunities for youngsters and the example provided to them by their parents. These are the children who, having reached maturity, act in family and society like their parents. Status differences between spouses are also due to "the system pressure, which is so high that attitudes are hard to change and, as a result, attitude automatism persist."²

¹ Nicolae Panea, 2001, *Asphalt Gods. Anthropology of the Urbane*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House

² Alina Ioana Ciobănel, 2002, *Relationships and Identity. Studies of Folklore*, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing House, p. 82

The creation of a feminine identity, subject to the masculine supervision, was also perpetuated due to certain scenarios launched by scholars, philosophers, men of letters and politicians, cultural models from ancient times until now, who contributed to the opinion formation and the configuration of mentalities of some ages, also influencing the course of history.

Therefore, starting from the first scholars who excelled in explaining the native inferiority of the “weak” sex (a concept sustained and strengthened by moralists and doctors in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries), namely ancient philosophers, it comes out that, in their opinion, the feminine body is “the gloomy part of the Divine Creation, closer to Devil, unlike man, inspired rather by God”; woman was seen as “an unfinished creature, an incomplete man...”³.

Aristotle, for instance, considered woman to be “an error of nature” in his work *Politics*, concluding that “woman’s silence is her glory”⁴. Aristophanes, in his *Lysistrata*, speaks about woman as a “thing” meant to fulfil man’s needs and, since she was part of his inventory, “man has the right of life and death upon his woman”⁵.

Pythagoras expressed mathematically and conclusively his view upon what woman meant, namely: “The good principle creates order, light, man; the evil principle creates chaos, darkness and woman.”⁶

The ancient woman’s inferiority was enacted, although woman’s vices were considered relative, as man’s bad habits were also reprovved in philosophers’ writings.

Because of anatomical differences, maternal function, psychological drawbacks and other peculiarities of the feminine gender, ancient people perpetuated the latter’s negative dimension and the conviction that, on the one hand, the uterus determined and expressed femininity and, on the other hand, as being imperfect, “impetuous, insolent, dishonest, superstitious and lusty by nature, the woman just changes depending on the movements of her matrix (womb), where all diseases, especially her hysteria, come from”⁷.

3 Robert Muchembled, 2002, *A History of the Devil. The Occidental Civilization in the XII-XXth Centuries*, Bucharest, Cartier Publishing House, p. 98-99

4 Paul Evdokimov, 2004, *Woman and the Salvation of the World*, Iași, Polirom Publishig House, p. 199

5 Ibidem

6 *Idem*, p. 198

7 Mihaela Grancea, 2003, *Foreign Travellers’ Accounts on the Woman Status in Romanian Traditional Family in the 18th Century*, in „Historical Anthropology Notebooks”, a semestrial magazine published by the Historical Anthropological Seminar, „Family and

Along with the switch to the monotheist religion, in the Christian faith and not only, the woman was also given a subordinate position.

The Christian biblical sin, which caused the woman's fall from grace, is the temptation of Adam with the fruit of knowledge; therefore, the man's partner becomes a symbol of sexuality and, implicitly, of sin. Likewise, Tertullian defined the woman by an accumulation of vices, characterizing her as an "enemy of friendship, the necessary evil, the primary temptation, the home jeopardizing, the seductive misfortune, the essence of evil"⁸.

Medieval moralists believed that the woman, by her sensitive and loose nature, had to turn exclusively to the domestic, family life, devoting herself to household activities, where she could give value to her loving nature and qualities. For instance, Dante turns the woman into a religious cult, the fervor being pushed at a level at which the feminine ideal was assimilated to the cult of the Virgin. Woman signified everything in the world "when man needed a vision to complete him"; afterwards she meant nothing, "when woman embodied in flesh and blood", she had no value in herself, she was not even a human subject or a person⁹.

There were Medieval representations demonizing woman, taking her as a "cause of human weakness, distress in marriage, death factor, agent of Satan"¹⁰.

Thomas d'Aquino insisted upon the idea that women and men were equally made "after the image and resemblance of God and therefore as capable of salvation, but only under the condition of male authority exertion". The same philosopher considered woman to be "an imperfect, unsuccessfully built man"¹¹.

Some acknowledged writers of the time brought their contribution to the completion of the philosophical vision upon woman. For instance, in 1525, Galeazzo Flavio Capra wrote *Della eccellenza e dignità delle donne* (*About excellence and dignity of women*), and in 1509 Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim conceived *About nobleness and perfection of the female sex*, a paper translated in Latin in 1529 and later in other six European languages. The clergyman Giovanni Della Casa gave an exaggerated perception of women; he was the author of a classical treaty of

Morality – Studies of the Kind in Central and South-Eastern Europe”, year II, no.1(3), January-June, p. 18

⁸ Gisela Bock, 2003, *Women in European History*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, p. 10

⁹ Mihaela Grancea, op. cit., p. 204

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 18

¹¹ Gisela Bock, op. cit., p. 10

the Renaissance about masculine virtues and socializing. In his work, “woman is closer to the animal state than man; her body and nature make marriage unbearable and, since you do not even hear her before marriage, you marry her without even knowing what she looks like. Almost all of them are ugly; even though one of them is beautiful, you have enough of her after six months and only the charm of the new can drive your boredom away.” Once she gave birth, “you cannot even look at her: her breasts hang, her body is limp and faded.” She has periods, she is endlessly sick; she is ravenous for food and smelly; when she grows older she has no teeth and “her entire body is a frightening ugliness.” Women are weak, lazy, incapable of holding public positions and “even in war they are useless”, since their part is limited to “peace and silence”. They are proper for “only one function”, but “with your very wife this is the least pleasant thing to do”¹².

In the XIIIth century, Jean de Meun published *Le Roman de la Rose* (*The Novel of the Rose*), the most read book in Medieval France. *Le Roman de la Rose* was also followed by other writings which reiterated the Medieval feminine element. In the XIVth century, there were conceived some descriptions of women in *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer and in Boccaccio’s *The wife of Bath, Famous Women, The Decameron* (a reproachful satire addressed to women), and *Il Corbaccio* (an image of insatiable femininity). In 1672, Molière stultified women scientists and their reception halls, whereas Lope de Vèga outlined the theme of woman hostility towards man in *La vengadora de las mujeres* and in *Diablos son las mujeres*¹³.

An overview on Ancient and Medieval literary and philosophical writings reveals that many of them contributed to the identification of women’s inferiority, of the feminine in association: woman-nature, woman-matter, woman-body, woman- immanency and of the feminine seen as emotional, irrational, sensitive, dependent”¹⁴.

The Medieval woman was entirely devoted to her family, marriage and religion. The church advised her to be obedient to her father and husband; she worked together with her husband to earn their family living. Planned marriages were habitual all around Europe and they took place in stages: a price was offered for the bride and then the dowry papers were prepared.

¹² Ibidem

¹³ Gisela Bock, *op. cit.*, p. 13

¹⁴ Evelyne Berriot Salvadore, 1993, *Un corps, un destin. La femme dans la médecine de la Renaissance*, Paris, Champion, p. 135