

## **Womanhood in „Pe strada Mântuleasa” by Mircea Eliade**

### **The Answer to Communism’s Agression: Love at the Center of the World**

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**Abstract:** *Some children searching for mystery and its signs on Mântuleasa street, a story teller who defends himself from an unknown aggression, by inventing the facts, by trying to escape from the main story, by building a labyrinth from his memories, an author, Mircea Eliade, living in Chicago, longing for the fairy tale space of his childhood – those are the ingredients of the most complex short story of the writer, “Pe strada Mântuleasa”. At the center of the story, womanhood interferes with an ancient curse that leads to uncanny events. Women like Oana, Arghira Zamfira, Marina, Leana, or Anca Vogel represent together the changing face of womanhood in Eliade’s short story. The narrative voices, the appeal to Romanian or universal myths and symbols, unexpected characters, the text’s plans, epic developments, configure a unique text in Mircea Eliade’s works panorama.*

**Key-words:** *Mircea Eliade, feminine character, fantastic narrative*

The story starts with the visit that the primary school teacher Fărâmbă is paying to one of his students (or the man whom he believes to be his former student). It is woven against the background of the early years of communism, in Bucharest, where the primary school teacher Fărâmbă – the Mântuleasa’s school principal – is arrested by the political police, for the guilt of trying to visit his former student, nowadays a major in the same political police of the repressive system. Fărâmbă (the name is well chosen as it means “bit” suggesting from the very beginning the humble condition of the principal) is questioned about some things that the agents of the political power presume he knows.

Very quickly, the story develops along two plans: one concerning Fărâmbă’s “visit” to the national security police, the second – the stories that come from Fărâmbă’s memory. The frame story tends to be very simple: thinking that Fărâmbă “knows something”, Dumitrescu arrests him, keeping the teacher inside the security building (or prison) for a year, trying to find out what the former director has to say. After meeting Economu, Anca Vogel, feeling cold and receiving warmer clothes, while the interrogators change several times, Fărâmbă is set free. One day, he walks along Mântuleasa street, sits on a bench, two youngsters sit beside him and try to question him about something. Nobody seems to find what Fărâmbă knows, and the interrogating characters change as the space of the interrogation also changes.

The objectives of these interrogators – Dumitrescu, Anca Vogel, Economu, others – are different. As the last interrogators say, Anca Vogel and Economu believe that Fărâmbă can reveal to them where the Polish national treasure is hidden, in order to take it. Dumitrescu also wants to find out what the position and the origin of Vasile Bogza is and so on.

The second plan consists in Fărâmbă’s memories. They focus on Oana’s image. Fănică’s daughter is the main character in this story. The family lives under a malediction: every male child that is born in the family would be abandoned by his wife and every female child would have gigantic sizes and would have sex with animals. By the time of the early years of the children that search through the Mântuleasa cellars, Oana fulfils only the first part of the curse: she is gigantic. Very beautiful, she looks like a statue, compared by Fărâmbă to Venus or to the Jewish people that crucified Jesus the Savior, because only they could have had such sizes or such power, as the shepherd women say.

But Oana is not the only strange female in the text. She is anticipated by Arghira, the wife of boyar Calomfir, very beautiful, very clever, loving the arts, especially the theatre, but also blind. Her loving husband tries all sorts of medicines in order to find the cure for the blindness of his wife, but Arghira will only be cured by a woman, Zamfira.

The latter is paid for her service with the Mântuleasa street properties. She is also the grand-grandmother of Calomiferscu, Marina's cousin, the ageless woman Darvari falls in love with. All of the women are familiar to the mystery, so that Leana, the singer-forecaster would prevent everybody from making mistakes.

The four women are anticipated in the frame-text by the faces Fărâmbă sees in the block where Vasile Bogza lives. They are the opposite of the women in Fărâmbă's tales: pale, fearful, without life, they seem more like phantoms of pale memories than real persons. They do not remain forefront long enough to become characters, although their image is strange enough.

The single female character that draws our attention in the real world of Fărâmbă, is that of one of his interrogators, Anca Vogel. State secretary, she tries to find out, as mentioned above, what has happened with the Polish treasure. She uses all the female strategies in order to accomplish her goal. She extracts Fărâmbă from the confinement space, makes him feel comfortable, pours him champagne and serves the teacher "Lucky Strikes", waiting for her own "lucky strike". Yet the strike is not lucky, as other interrogators are searching for the same treasure. Anca Vogel and Economu will be arrested. She is the only female character that reaches a bad end in the novel.

The main motif of the short story is the search. Every character in the text searches for something. The boys are looking for the passage to the other world, Fărâmbă searches for his former student, supposing that he could find some information about other students, but he also believes that he could understand what happened in the childhood of the students, Oana searches for a suitable man, Calomfir searches for a cure for his wife and so on. The search is associated with the motif of the mystery. Mysteries are all around: the cave where the passage is hidden, the Polish treasure, the knowledge of some people. But the main mysteries are carried out by the women in the story. The number of female characters, their importance, tells about the significance of womanhood in this strange text.

The main character carrying mysteries in Eliade's short story is Oana. Resembling a goddess, she is cursed to be giant and have sex with the animals: "her destiny is rooted in some magic background – the curse" [1], as Sergiu Pavel Dan postulates in his book. She searches through caves with the boys, but she doesn't recognize the signs the boys know. She goes to the mountains two times: first, when the Magician takes her and the boys and second, when she goes to the mountains searching for the suitable man. But before that she has to fulfill the curse. So she is raped by the shepherds, than she becomes insatiable. The shepherds' women come to her asking Oana to search for a really suitable man, as the shepherds are suitable only for them. Oana climbs to the mountains and finds a bull, fulfilling thus the curse. The village people usher the police and when they come to take her, she observes a man riding horses. She recognizes the last sign of her destiny, but the first sign of a hidden world: the man who is to be her husband and who takes her to be his wife. The story kinks here several times, as Fărâmbă doesn't remember everything that happened at that time, he doesn't understand all the events or he loses contact of some of the participants.

But the main mystery of the story goes on with the dream that reveals the passage to the other world, before Oana's wedding. Oana dreams about a diamond sparkling cave, the gate to the other world, as the signs show. The signs themselves are revealed by Abdul, the young tartar who chases away the flies. He tells them to the boys, but they are also revealed to the women in the story, as Leana asks Fărâmbă not to let Darvari go down into de cellar. Marina also understands the signs as she tells the boys that her name is not real, but that she has borrowed the name of the woman who healed Arghira from her blindness. She claims that the reason for her coming into the world was that she had to teach

manhood to see. She means that she wanted to teach the people to see beyond the surface of reality.

Reminding of Minas wife, Oana is the expression of a strange and overflowing sexuality, fascinating for the former teacher as well as the shepherds. She is cursed, but she manages to escape the evil, by meeting her giant husband. Otherwise, her destiny would have been to give birth to a monster. But in order to heal from this curse, she has to set herself free from the temptation of a low spirit. She has to set herself free from the ties of instincts and primary feelings, in order to gain a special communication with the sacred. After breaking free from the prison of the body's necessities, Oana is able to accede to the sacred. Only at that time could Oana have the revelation of the diamond cave, the gate to the other world, a world, reminding, in Sergiu Pavel Dan's words, a world of the meek, an underworld that Romanian legends speak of. The revelation can only take place in a monastery, as a place of abstinence.

But Oana carries also a mythological track in her height. She is giant, reminding of the people who lived on earth in the early years, coming from the union between angels and women. She has therefore an angelic side. Her size also symbolizes height, as Gilbert Durand [2] mentions, also sending to the sacred communication between man and god.

The short story contains other similar symbols, as Lixandru's arrow which never comes back after it is thrown into the sky. Other women carry other forms of sacred communication: Zamfira, calling herself Marina is one of them. She claims to be the granddaughter of Marina, the female that healed Arghira of her blindness. But, as she says, she came into the world in order to teach the people how to see. She doesn't speak about the real eye and real sight, as her grandmother did, but about a special eye, an inner one. The one that should help the people see the sacred – hidden into the real world, one of the main theories of Eliade.

What do these women look for in this short story, one of Eliade's best? The theme is the search, the search for the hidden sacred, yet women don't have free access to the sacred. They have to pass through several stages of abstinence, in order to become virgin and able to communicate with the other world. So why do the women, not the men, carry out the mystery and the revelation, why does Eliade use a feminine model in his work (the story uses an oriental fairy tale model, *Seherezada's* story; in *Halima*, the woman is telling stories to the prince, in the hope that, by her narrations, she saves her life)? Is it only the need for a model, is it only the fascination of womanhood? Is it more than that? All the women in the story are very beautiful, very special: Arghira, Calomfir's wife loves arts, but she is blind; Marina has special gifts and can heal Arghira's blindness, even if Calomfir, in spite of all the research he carries out in the caves of his castle, couldn't. The cave fills with water, he has to ask his servant to clean it, but he can't heal Arghira. Even the love that he shows for his wife is useless in front of the woman's blindness. Marina does the miracle of giving Arghira her sight. Centuries after this story, Zamfira claims that she came into the world in order to help the people to see, to find the keys of the sacred, hidden in the world. Zamfira-Marina is an amazing woman: she can change her age. Darvari sees her as very young, but in the morning he flies away in his plane and never comes back; he sees the woman as being thirty years older than the young girl he slept with. Yet Marina isn't young, just as she isn't old. She is the age that she is, as she says, and we have to believe that she found the secret of eternal youth. She is out of time, condition that Darvari can't manage and that is the main reason for his departure.

But Marina is not only out of time: like Leana, she knows the signs to the other world, she also knows the consequences of the quest and that is why both women try to convince the men not to search for the underworld country.

Moreover, all these women are connected to the idea of love and sex. Arghira is the beloved wife of Calomfir, the woman to whom he builds the castle; Marina is the woman Darvari falls in love with; Oana is an interesting character also, associated with love and sex. They are therefore associated to creation. They rule the world through the mysteries they reveal and the force of love and fascination.

Does that mean anything? If we go back to the frame story, we can see that the interrogators of Fărâmbă are not interested in creation, mystery, love or any of the main ways of building a world. Communism is a world of destruction, not one of creation. Proof is Fărâmbă himself. As Sergiu Pavel Dan says, he enters the communist prison, tells the story, can't reveal the mysteries that the interrogators are interested in. Then he comes out. Other people (maybe his own beloved students) try to extract some information from him, but he is not the same talkative person anymore. He is rather quiet, so that the men sitting beside him on the bench can't have any conversation with him. Destruction is also proved by the aggression of the system, as Fărâmbă is taken from the street, he remains in the prison for a year, in an absurd way, for a guilt that nobody can tell. Among the interrogators there is only one woman, Anca Vogel, but in spite of her beauty, she is not seen by the former teacher as female. Her otherness is rather connected to the aggression of the system, to the fear for one's life. Anca Vogel is not very different from the men in the story. The women Fărâmbă meets in Bogza's block of flats are also very pale, very weak. They don't have sensuality or beauty, or female features that build the world.

This is why Fărâmbă has to build another world: sacred, mysterious, dynamic, special. At the centre of this world he places woman [3]. She is the goddess that organises the chaos, the being that reveals the mystery, the person who can bring light from darkness. The imaginary world is opposed to the real one: the first one is built on real sacred values, the second one is chaotic, without real values. The second one is an aggressive world. It aggresses the human being, his beliefs, his freedom, as well as his body. The fascinating world that Fărâmbă builds from words is thus the answer to the communist aggression, to the chaotic and absurd oppression. And it is valid for Mircea Eliade also: his short story, as many others he has written, is an answer to the absurd system his country was swept in. A sort of inner salvation. Through womanhood.

## Notes

1. Dan, Sergiu Pavel, *Povestirile în ramă*, Paralela 45, Pitești, 2003, pp. 153-162. (our translation)
2. Durand, Gilbert, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului*, Univers, București, 1978.
3. Eliade, Mircea, *Sacral și profanul*, Polirom, Iași, 2003.