

The religious Dimension of Woman's Image in the European Mentality. The Case of the premodern Romanian Society

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Résumé: Notre travail présente la position de la femme dans la société roumaine pré-moderne, ayant comme repères les conceptions et les croyances religieuses de cette période. Le support des informations est fourni par les écrits des chroniqueurs roumains et les notes des voyageurs étrangers qui ont eu l'occasion de connaître les réalités roumaines. L'analyse de ces textes permet la mise en évidence des représentations sociales liées au statut de la femme, tant des points de vue personnels des auteurs étudiés que des structures mentales spécifiques aux communautés dont ils appartiennent.

Mots-clés: mentalité, religiosité, imaginaire

The more frequent presence of women in the writings of Romanian historians is perfectly justified by the influence of the so-called “*new history*” as it is by the fascination that women continue to exert on others [1]. The attitude towards the woman, the way how she presents herself among the others, her social status in general, are just a few instruments which indirectly contribute to knowing and understanding that type of society. Consequently, the way the extra-carpathian Romanian woman was perceived during centuries represents a difficult topic due to the current custom of reading historical sources in a different key than that of the military and diplomatic event. In our approach, we resort to *alterity* and *imaginary* [2], taken into consideration the fact that different social representations marked different perceptions and thinking stereotypes as well. Therefore, we intend to highlight some aspects pointing out that women were seen and judged in the context of religious sensitivity, or through the religious pattern. This way, people's representations turned into mental clichés, subordinated rather to the religious beliefs than to the socio-political conjuncture.

Having these observations as a starting point, our intention is to highlight a few aspects through which the premodern extra-Carpathian Romanian society depicted women. Therefore, in sustaining our ideas, we will formulate arguments often using excerpts from chronicles, foreign travelers' annotations, sermons, preaches and corrections of laws.

That's why we are going to use them as a source in order to complement the information, but also as a control agent for the statements from the first two sources previously mentioned. Trying to reconstruct the image of this social aspect, the notes of the foreign travellers are very usefull as an expression of the way the people who passed through or lived for a while in Romania appreciated us.

We believe that the perception of women as a distinct reality was influenced by certain thinking mechanisms that became stereotypes and prejudices, more often simplistic or fantastic. The situation is justified to some extent by three realities that characterized the socio-cultural background of those times.

1. **The privileged position of men in society and the male perspective on sensitivity** [3]. In this context, women representations were established in relation to man, due to the mechanism of gender otherness, bearing negative connotation (that could be due to man's inability of understanding the woman in her entirety).
2. **The presence of the Church in the community life**, marked by the increasing struggle to maintain exclusivity in managing the relationship between people and God. For the Romanian world of 16-17-th centuries, as well as for any medieval or premodern society, dominated by religious convictions, the main criteria for social and assessment perception in **the ethical-religious** one. Consequently, European society was dominated by the need of Christian doctrine.
3. **Acute religious sensitivity of the time**, driven by strong feeling of insecurity and by human fears such as fear of apocalypse, seen as an extremely painful divine punishment more than the End of the World. As a consequence, both in the Occidental and Romanian spaces,

women were perceived as embodiment of *evil* and *sexuality*, of course, in different nuances and intensities. The most responsible for this situation are the ecclesiastic conceptions (based on biblical texts and on Church teaching), but the masculine tradition of the society also (this is necessary into world of the violence, force and precariousness).

Therefore the idea of sin and its agents were dominant into people's way of thinking and feeling. That was a keen reason for filtering relations with others, and leading thinking stereotypes into dictating behaviour and attitudes. There is a habit both for the pre-modern and the medieval society as well to determine and transfer mental cliches in an attempt to make life easier and to achieve other goals such as self-protection. Therefore, these attitudes were encouraged both by the booming Western chivalric spirit and the Christian church, which apart from emphasizing the inferiority of women, promoted the idea of blurring the guilt of Eve, by honouring the Virgin Mary's divine mission, linked to the salvation of mankind through the birth of Christ the Saviour (the "Mariologie" [4]).

These prejudices developed by the individual, or by a group/community have different types of manifestations: verbal, symbolical, gestural, which, however, can lead to discrimination, avoidance or isolation, violence or even extermination. That is why it is not surprising that in the nowadays writings the image of the "woman" persists, and tends to resume to the significance of non-Christianity because it to escape the patterns. Associated with "*disbelief*", "*transgressions*" and "*enemies*", the image of the "woman" is simplified, discouraging the attempts. This labelling invites us to prudency, mistrust, isolation or hostility.

Based on these observations, we present a brief inventory of **different hypostasis** in which women are to be found in the pre-modern Romanian collective mentality. In this respect, we may say that the religious factor had a primary role in the formation of collective representations, which worked the social imagination.

1. *The devilish hypostasis (Satan's godless servant)*

The mentality of the middle Ages has preserved the image of the temptation-woman or that of the sin-woman (one of the *Satan's most dangerous agents* [5]). Therefore, she was involved in a series of gestures, attitudes and facts which reinforced her condition. This tendency of the woman towards to the hidden energies which ("demonization woman") healing, harmful and prophetic power, facts that, of course, being unexplainable were scaring; witchcraft, fortune telling, white magic are occupations for women especially. In premodern Occident persists yet the conviction that the *că* woman's body was the *devil's place*. This "*sinful flesh*" (the woman) brings only the sin, which comes from devil. Is not an accident in European mentality the fact that Satan deceived Eve; Eve is a parte of Adam and she spread the evil in man [6].

2. *The detestable hypostasis (the sinner by weakness)*

The women was guilty for the sexual manifestation of man, also (this were associated to their sensual, provocative dimension). Sometimes the woman was presented as having a immorality and theft conduct (debauchery, drunkenness and theft).

Tradition is working together with the law, this time, also: the immoral or vicious woman could be chided by the man by beating her "as a measure for her guilt" [7]. Women "should be judged mercifully, because they are more stupid and easily fall into sin than the man did" [8].

Not accidentally, in *Cazania* (in Varlaam's Homily- in the 1643 year) [9], most often the woman's sins are: slander and fornication ("îndrăcirea"- "Satan possessed", "when a human being wanders on Earth without shame and respect"). But worst than these, incriminated by the church iconography as well, is the killing of infants. If the woman reaches

such a divine miracle as giving birth to children, she is also the one to be guilty of murder, either culpable infanticide or negligence. *Îndreptarea legii*, gives sufficient examples in this direction.

Women's *law morals* had been mentioned frequently by the foreigners, a fact that had been enforced by the measures taken by the reigns against "the sin of adultery". Paul of Aleppo wrote about the lack of "the honour" of the Moldavian women. He said that it may be justified by the cruel actions against them taken by Vasile Lupu [10]. The Turkish traveller, Celebi Evlia, appreciates the presence of these women as unique in Europe [11]. It is interesting that the disclosure of their morality was betrayed by clothes worn and the place where they were seen, public places, of course, often circulated by foreign travellers: markets, taverns, inns, fairs, etc., areas with a motley population, not only Romanian. These women had a single goal, that of obtaining some revenue for daily existence no matter how small.

Even if it does not enter the sphere of actual sin, the woman was punished whenever she failed to comply with her condition in a men's society. She was repudiated in case she didn't have children and she was punished if her children happen to die. She was robbed, violated, humiliated and locked up in monasteries whether his family had come in disgrace. This happened also to Elisabeta Movila, who, after she gathered an army, she believed in the Turkish leader's words, waiting a flag for reign; but she has been attacked, her camp destroyed, her and her sons being made Turkish". Sometimes, women chose themselves to get isolated. However, D. H. Mazilu, analyzing the chronicles of the time, observed that women forced to live in monasteries were not to follow the monastery life and duties, but continuing their specific way of life [12]. Another guiding principle was that the divine will was the one that required compliance of the human being with his/her role in the world, and any attempts to overthrow this state of facts were always punished. That happened every time that a woman had political ambitions, mixing in "the affairs of the country" to impose or maintain their own family to the throne.

Women were severely punished if they used "herbs", spells, charms, poisons to change what was given to them. These facts were not seen as desperate gestures to maintain the condition of mother, wife, and "master of the house" and have been attributed to their close relationship with the devil forces rather than on their fear of being sidelined by the community and wear the public opprobrium. Last but not least, women were blamed for concealing the commission of other sins of mankind. Although apparently they are not serious, being committed by a weak thread, which easily falls into sin, and to which you have to have leniency, in reality they prove to be extremely serious because they lead to what the Church condemns most: temptation and corruption (intervention against nature and the order established by God). There are also many circumstances given by historians.

3. The godly hypostasis (the Christian and faithful woman, the good-Christian Woman)

Opposite these (the detestable hypostasis), it stands the virtuous woman, faithful, capable of much "charity" for the Church. Donations, church foundations and gifts for the churches have been just a few examples of good conduct accrediting women. She dedicated herself to Jesus through charity acts, donations, church foundations, donations to churches, or through wearing the nun clothes. The good-Christian woman (especially the wives of the boyars) was remarked by the chronicles for her acts of generosity towards the church, also due to the women that had brought myrrh to Jesus' tomb, from the New Testament. For example, Ruxandra, Alexandru Lapusneanu's wife, her mother, Elena, Petru Rares's wife (hey were the most active ones), Chiajna together with her son Peter the Young, Dafina Ignatie Dabija's wife, Safta Gheorghe Ștefan's wife etc. [13].

However, it is noted that most of the donations to churches and monasteries have been made after the death of their husbands or occasioned by their entering a nun. In the first case, the act of donation enclosed the women's requirement the deceased was written in the

"diptych", in order his soul to be reminded, but also to eternal charity. In other cases of donations, women were listed alongside their husbands in claiming the heavenly mercy. This legal position is closer to the idea of social equality. Consequently, a reverent attitude favoured their social status. Another aspect that could become an advantage for women was their role in educating their children. It appears that focusing on their school training and education, the mother does not neglect any of her children's religious education. She participates with the children at religious services (the most important of the year), trains them in the celebration of religious holidays and strengthens them by using herbal remedies and ancient practices into healing them. Another episode reminded of the faith of the boyards' wives who, on their knees, would listen to the patriarch after asking him to "read a prayer for the forgiveness of their sins" [14].

Having as a duty the maintenance of the family, of its cohesion and importance, the woman was often seen as legally and socially responsible for the family's dissipation. One last aspect of our discussion is that women's status, although not fully rehabilitated, has been linked to managing relations with divinity, having a fundamental role with the "passing rite" (preparing the funeral and honouring the deceased after death). Moreover, pre-modern women demonstrated a great appeal to the principle "love thy neighbor" dedicating themselves to Jesus through acts of charity and forgiveness [15]. Here we must mention that the first pilgrimage to the Holy Land, noted by historians, was made by a woman, Lady Elena, Șerban Cantacuzino's mother.

In conclusion, we may claim that women were disciplined by the Church, their inferiority often being attenuated by Christian piety and charity. Her social ascension and rehabilitation being a process that coincides with the secularization of society, observable in legal requirements, they also lost Church protection alongside reforming church morals.

Notes

- [1] Romanian historiography contains remarkable studies signed by N. Iorga, Sarolta Solcan, Violeta Barbu etc.
- [2] To see Chiciudean I., Halic B.A., *Imagologie. Imagologie istorică*, SNSPA, București, 2008
- [3] To see Duby, G., *Evul Mediu masculin*, study translated by C. Oancea, S. Oancea, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1992, p.130
- [4] Radfor Ruether R., *Godnesses and the Divine Feminine, A Western Religious History*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 159
- [5] Delumeau, J., *Frica in Occident (secolele XIV-XVIII). O cetate asediata*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucuresti, 1986, p. 82. Tzima Otto H., *The Role of Women in the Church, according to the Scriptures*, The Verenikia Press, U.S.A., 2001.
- [6] The idea is found in the Romanian society, to see Mazilu D., H., *Lege și fărădelege în lumea românească veche*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 360. See to Fodor G, *Perspective asupra feminității medievale românești. Ipostaze ale femeii în familia medievală românească*, in *Studia Universitatis Petru Maior*, no 9, Târgu-Mureș, 2009, p. 15
- [7] *Indreptarea Legii, 1652*, ed A Radulescu, Bucuresti, 1962, glava 285, p. 182-183.
- [8] *Ibidem*, glava 211/6, p. 217.
- [9] Varlaam Mitropolitul Moldovei, *Cazania, 1643*, Ed Pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1943, p. 213.
- [10] Paul of Aleppo, *Travel to Moldavia*, in *Foreign Travellers through the Romanian Principalities*, VI, study translated by Mustafa Ali Mehmet, București, 1976, p. 125.
- [11] *Foreign Travellers through the Romanian Principalities*, VI, p. 485; Mazilu D. H., *op. cit.*, p. 410-413.
- [12] Mazilu, D., H., *Lege*, p. 127, 130, 373, 405.
- [13] For more, Solcan S., *Femeile din Moldova, Transilvania si Tara romaneasca in Evul Mediu*, Ed. Universitatii din Bucuresti, Bucuresti, 2005.
- [14] Paul of Aleppo, *op. cit.*, p. 125,128.
- [15] Mazilu, D., H., *Văduvele sau despre istorie la feminin*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2008, p. 35.

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