

**MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI NAȚIONALE
UNIVERSITATEA „1 DECEMBRIE 1918” DIN ALBA IULIA
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE FILOLOGIE**

SUMMARY OF PhD THESIS

**POLITICS AND POETICS OF GENDER IN THE EARLY
20TH CENTURY.
CASE STUDIES IN ROMANIA AND THE UNITED
KINGDOM**

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ALBA IULIA

2019

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Key words: gender, politics, feminist movement, patriarchy, political rights, masculinity, femininity, objectification, European society, beginning of twentieth century, modernism, modernist literature, identity, male/female dichotomy, stereotyping, public and private spheres, feminist theory, gender roles, misogyny, self-reflection, discipline, confinement, enfranchisement.

The aim of this dissertation has been to discuss the most important aspects of women's status at the beginning of the twentieth century by drawing a parallel between Romanian and British feminism by means of analysing historical data and literary texts of the modernist period. The importance of this paper resides in the fact that it brings to light the historical filiations of gender and politics at the beginning of the twentieth century which might help us understand contemporary related gender issues. Even though women have the right to vote along with many other rights they did not have before, they still have to face misogynistic behaviours in a society where gender roles and prejudices still exist. The feminist movement at the beginning of the last century has changed people's outlook on life in general but it did not manage to obliterate centuries of stereotyping and confining women to the private sphere; it takes time to completely change mentalities and it is important that both women and men today embrace the ideas promoted by feminism. "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" is Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement which suggests that femininity is not based on biology or intellect but rather on the reflection of the fundamental differences in the status of men and women. Both men and women are shaped by their upbringing and the culture they are exposed to; the outcomes of feminist movement that started in the first decades of the twentieth century are tangible today: it was a movement primarily about challenging perceptions and breaking norms by means of deconstructing the way humanity has perceived femininity as being a lesser category than masculinity. The most important legacy feminism has left to contemporary societies is the ability to question perceptions at a very basic level: human beings transcend biology and even if men

and women are different from a physical point of view, they all deserve equal opportunities. The political struggle of women has stimulated the emergence of a wide spectrum of gender identities and helped us redefine the notions of the *Other* and subjectivity.

The main contribution we make to this field of study is related to the research of the beginnings of Romanian feminism which has not yet been sufficiently emphasised by other authors. Most of the studies published have taken as a subject of interest mainly the investigation of the feminist organizations which have emerged after the advancement of communism and the Romanian revolution of 1989. The documents (Romanian old journals, articles, diaries and declarations) as well as the period of time analysed in this paper- the first three decades of the twentieth century, with an emphasis on the interwar time- are highly relevant to the way Romanian feminism has evolved over the years because it represents the period when Romanian women were most active and the movement became more visible on the international arena.

In the prewar and interwar periods, authors wrote extensively upon the issue of identity in a society ruled by stereotypes, asymmetric power relationships and various forms of gender, racial and class discrimination in an otherwise rapidly changing world. In less than a century women moved from a claustrophobic domestic milieu into the Prime Minister's, magistrate's, or academic's chair. Double standards, discriminating categories and biased identity-kit are still there. Identity is manufactured in representations, images, slender words, that is, in language. Literature is still the battery capable to generate another world of representations. In my search for a relevant subject, therefore, I inspected the 20th-century literary canon of works in English and Romanian fishing for common subject matter.

The choice of subject has concomitantly circumscribed our method. Feminism was superseded in the nineties by the post-gender approach to identity which no longer privileges one factor over the other (male or female superiority). New is now the study of the "intersection of gender, race, class and sexualities through the notion of decolonial feminism [...] This theory provides us with an understanding of the complex interaction between economic, ethnicized and gendered systems that each colonized individual faces throughout their life. The analysis of these intersecting oppressions is the coloniality of gender and the opportunity to overcome it is what Lugones defines as decolonial feminism." (Indome 2018: 24). By colonized groups, Maria Lugones, quoted in the passage above, understands all minorities, the marginalised or oppressed categories of people subject to religious, racial, gender or class discrimination.

Finally, our comparative study in woman's position in the Romanian and Irish societies of the earlier half of the last century will also enable us to examine the effects of the concurrence of factors - such as the overlap of political, national, racial and gender conflicts - in pre-war

Ireland, a situation Romania did not face. Decolonial Feminism is thus for us in this context a critical theory which is both emulated and put to the test.

According to Mertz, men and women have the same cognitive and sensory apparatus, come into contact with the same objects, therefore they structure their abstract concepts similarly. So, if men and women experience the world around them in a similar manner, ***why is it that European societies developed according to a pattern specific to patriarchal cultures?***

The answer resides in the fact that gender roles are assigned to men and women according to their biological sex and this represents a sort of a mental by-product of human culture; this differs depending on the type of culture, traditions and collective mores people were born and live in. Each individual is shaped by these and, in turn, by the power of tradition, culture, art, and so on, they continue to pass them to new generations. This repetitive pattern predisposes individuals to the formation of certain inclinations and social connections with other individuals.

The stereotype of grouping people according to standard taxonomies presupposes the existence of certain antagonisms which includes questions about how identities are formed which can directly conflict or be supported by gender membership.

I have started my research from Mary Hawkesworth assertion that: “sex is a political category. . . that determines citizenship, rights, education, and employment opportunities, levels of income and wealth, and access to prestige and power”. Setting out from the suggested method of phenomenological variation on the grounds that “[n]o object can be assigned only one and exhaustive description, because, on the one hand, it appears to us under various phenomenal aspects, and, on the other, because it changes in time through interferences with new environments.” (Tupan 2016: 4), this thesis takes as a subject of discussion the notion of *Woman*, in some of its most important stances: women as fighters for their political rights, women as social outcasts, objectified women, women as writers and opinion makers, and confined women. The period I focused on was that of the first decades of the twentieth century, up until the 1930s, as it supports the modernized image that women seem to have created for themselves, despite the fact that the patriarchal system had kept them in a rather redundant position throughout the previous centuries.

The historical context is dominated by the First World War and its outcomes. In England, the war provided an opportunity to release some of the social tensions created by the workers’ strikes and by the emergence of the feminist movement. Meanwhile, Romania was not tormented by such social unease, but it was characterised by stability and progress and an unprecedented industrial expansion, a state which reflected somehow in the way Romanian women conducted their movement: unlike the British, Romanian feminists tried to focus mainly on the possibility

to offer women more social and civic rights, than political ones; their main objective was not enfranchisement, but social equity, through legal empowerment of women, access to education, and economic security.

Although the feminist movement was a women’s movement, about women and for the women and their rights, it had to address mainly a male public, because the authority to grant women the franchise belonged to men.

The specific characteristics of the feminist movement in each country were determined by the differences in their laws, constitutions, political developments and culture. Women were admitted to the political and public life especially in those countries where the tensions between the social classes were very low or practically inexistent. The table below provides a timeline which illustrates the enfranchisement of women in various parts of the world:

Period	Country
1860	Organised feminist movements started to appear
1869	Wyoming was the first American state that enfranchised women
1893	New Zealand was the first country in the world that allowed women to vote (although they could run for elections only in 1914).
1918	British women over 30 were enfranchised as recognition of their efforts during the war; women won a victory but it was granted on terms that were convenient to men
1929	Romanian women were granted the right to vote in local elections
1938	The Romanian Constitution gave women the right to vote in all elections
1971	Women in Switzerland were enfranchised

Table 1: Timeline of women’s enfranchisement throughout the world

While many of the arguments I make may be universally applicable, my main focus will be on those narratives specific to the United Kingdom and Romania because the first country

may be considered as a symbol or standard when speaking about the feminist movement to which we can compare the evolution of the movement in Romania, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a movement to which researchers have not yet dedicated enough studies. I have taken Britain as the main point of focus since this country is recognised for its tradition of affirming individual rights.

The idea that mental capacities were proportional to the size of an individual's brain was very popular at the beginning of the last century; the larger and heavier the brain, the more intelligent the person, and because women's physique rendered them as smaller and less stronger than men, the conclusion was that women were intellectually inferior to men. **Chapter one** discusses these notions and uncovers, at the same time, women's responses to this particular matter.

The first part of Chapter one presents the historical explanations for the patterned gender construction. The labour division in certain economic systems (for example the household, where the man acts as a "breadwinner" while the woman is the "homemaker") suggests that humans have developed an ability to construct gender as a binary system. As a result, gender has been regarded as the key concept to what it means to be/ behave appropriately masculine or appropriately feminine. Traditionally, the family was perceived as a socio-economic unit made up of a male, whose role was that of providing financial means for the other members of the family to survive on, and a female, who functioned as a care-giver, nurturer and home-maker. This disjunction can be considered an artificial one since both men and women perform a multitude of other roles. But it provided the feminists with a platform from which to formulate their theories.

Politics and feminism are strongly interconnected since the feminist theory presents itself as a political theory through its claims related to women power and rights. By exerting absolute dominance in politics, men were provided with an advantage that allowed them to have free access to decision making and to particular ranks of higher hierarchies. This patriarchal structure of power, although non-palpable, was ubiquitous and forced women into submission and confinement.

The present thesis also researches the misuse of two fundamental terms: *sex* and *gender*. At the beginning of the twentieth century people did not yet make the difference between the biological sex of a person and their gender. Sex is determined by the reproductive structure and biological functions of men and women, as a result of chromosomal, genetic, neurological, and hormonal differences between them, while gender represents a very fluid concept and its expression does not rely on a specific gender identity. Gender is a social construct which refers

to the roles men and women are taught to perform since childhood and to the specific tasks and duties ascribed by society to both sexes inside and outside the typical family; “gender” is a fluid category as it is subjected to permanent changes under the influence of cultural, social, historic, and economic factors.

The epistemology of gender is a construct based on two complementary yet divergent paradigms: gender is socially determined, in the sense that it is society that assigns gender roles to each biological sex, while at the same time, each person constructs his/her gender reality, independent from societal norms and regulations, according to personal preference. While the first reality is stable and foreordained and it can be observed through theoretical and scientific methods, the second one can be understood only by analysing individual behaviour concerning its environment and establishing one’s sense of belonging to one sex or the other. Here, I take into consideration Judith Butler’s argument that “man” and “woman” represent two distinct performances of humans based on the assumption that men are generally masculine in appearance and women are generally feminine; therefore one can argue that gender represents a social performance of the human body. This chapter explains that the biological bodies of both men and women perform the role of “man” and “woman” on the basis of most individuals’ belief that we are born either masculine or feminine. The manner in which people “wear” their bodies is culturally generated and represents a result of social interaction and imitation.

This aspect was important to research because it is fundamental to our claim, i.e. women’s history has been determined by the traditional manner that society has perceived gender roles, thus leading to the discrimination of women. People are socialised from an early age in accordance to certain cultural dictates which lead to a perpetuation of gender stereotyping; for most people the notions of *male* and *female* often come associated with preconceived ideas about certain personality traits and behaviours: for instance, men are considered to be more outgoing, aggressive, objective and rational while women are weak, subjective, warm and emotional. As society is a biased sphere, both men and women are expected to act according to the characteristics they have been designated. The feminist movement not only managed to enfranchise women but it most importantly rose awareness for both women and men that people’s ordinary lives were affected by certain norms that supported male dominance; through its actions, the feminist movement also challenged both cultural and social traditions regarding gender and sex. The true meaning of women’s fight to unchain from the subordination induced by a male dominated society resided not in gaining the right to vote but in making women themselves realize they had internalized this state of subordination to the point it became second nature to some of them.

In **Chapter two** I argue that the necessity to clearly distinguish the masculine from the feminine stems from the patriarchal stereotypes that governed human society throughout its history. Humans have been guided into typifying individuals according to a gender pattern which is mainly based on the existence of a set of physical features which distinguish men from women and divide them into a two-sided standard category system. The main focus here is on the works of those writers and philosophers who influenced society at the beginning of the twentieth century, in their attempt to show that gender is either biologically generated or socially constructed. From Plato and Aristotle to the classical thinkers, such as Schopenhauer, all men linked the rational and the mind with maleness while the irrational and the body were characteristics associated with women. The linkage of the natural world with the female and of rationality with male was established during antiquity and it has ever since influenced the philosophical ideas of the western world. This gendered polarity inevitably implicated a hierarchy which positioned women on the same level as nature and animality while men were placed on a higher level due to their rationality and nobler qualities of the soul and the spirit.

I refer to Schopenhauer's work which was highly influential at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. His writings were misogynistic and they set the tone for the literary and philosophical discourses of the next period. Another philosopher, whose body of work is not very dense, but who also influenced public opinion was Otto Weininger, who anticipated the concept of gender in his work *Sex and Character*. Here he argues that there are no "pure" masculine and feminine forms but only intermediate ones and women who possess a higher amount of masculinity within themselves are more likely to display rationality and thus achieve emancipation. Weininger's work is important to discuss because he undertook to demonstrate that the feminist movement was not something new and that similar actions have been repeated throughout history being the result of an increase in what he calls "sexual intermediate forms."

Chapter three starts from the assumption that no work of art (including literary texts) can exist without its historical context. Narrative fiction holds power over its readers and, as a result, it becomes an active agent of implementing and shaping ideologies. Literary texts have a great influence on human perceptions, beliefs, and experiences because "they take on a phenomenological reality, becoming a materially embodied (which is to say a real) component of the individual's emotional, psychic, and somatic life." (Boone 1998: 2) Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* remains one of the milestones in the process of making us aware of the extent to which sexuality represents one of the main functions of power, a factual manifestation of institutional forces that regulate knowledge and even desire through textual power. Foucault

holds that all circulating discourses “write themselves *onto* human subjects, implanting the very scripts by which we recognize ourselves as sexual subjects.” (Boone 1998: 8) At the same time, Judith Butler has further condensed Foucault’s theory of discursive power in order to validate the idea that the body performs certain roles as a result of the enactment of certain social constructions upon it.

Literature had a particular significance for feminism as a political movement because it “has used literary texts extensively in making and disseminating its meanings” while giving importance to writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf whose “work spans both feminist polemic and fiction or poetry.” (Sellers 2010: 142)

The artistic culture of the post-war era was dominated by modernism. In some ways, the term reflected both the traditional ideas of male/female dichotomies and the new imbrications of gender and sexuality. Romantics had turned inside for a banquet of personal feelings and emotions, realists had looked outside; modernists were shuttling between the inside and the outside of the human personality in their aspiration towards what Wolf saw as the authentic discovery of the individual’s selfhood. The projections of the inner self onto an objectified image for the public consumption is achieved in modernist fiction through the doubling of the narrative voice and by communicating the character’s thought processes and sensations. *The mirror* is the symbol of this meeting between the self and others, it is the figurative arena of the encounter between the inside and the outside dimensions of the self. Reflection in the mirror has a revelatory function, whereas objectification hides away the essence of female personality under the thingness of her body or material existence.

Women have always been seen and used as objects of male sexual desire and, because of their long-standing submission to men, they were coerced to participate in the implementation of the patriarchal ruling system. This system promoted male power over women through withholding them from participating in the public sphere by denying their access to education and confining them to the private sphere. Although in theory both men and women can be objectified, in practice women are more prone to objectification since men use visual examination of the female body based on physical attractiveness as the main criterion for selecting possible mating partners. Objectification represents a social phenomenon that usually occurs in environments that are embedded in traditional gender roles and it is closely related to the idea of heterosexuality, having as a central notion the concept of femininity, a cultural construct which concerns the interests of patriarchal ideology. Thus, by being equalled to objects, women become subject to a loss of personality which forces them to live in what Beauvoir calls “immanence”. This concept refers to the static aspect of women’s lives: they are

confined to the limited space of their homes and cannot access public life, a privilege reserved only for men. Since masculinity conjures up notions of power and authority, it is related to the idea of “transcendence”, i.e. the ability to enter and monopolize the society and the whole humanity as a matter of fact.

Some argue that objectification does not necessarily represent a harmful element it does not involve dehumanising through using people as means to one’s ends; people can be objectified as long as we “respect their integrity as agents with their own purposes.” Martha Nussbaum introduced the term of “positive objectification” which indicates that objectification does not lead to dehumanisation because it can be combined with ideas of “equality, respect, and consent.” To exemplify this, she speaks about “Laurentian objectification” which refers to the type of objectification that occurs between the lovers in D.H. Lawrence’s novels. These protagonists regard each other as sexual tools at the same time respecting one another as human beings; therefore they are equal and the action of objectifying does not have devastating consequences on their humanity.

Likewise, Romanian writers, such as Camil Petrescu and Anton Holban, use the objectification of women in their novels. Women characters have nothing to say in their works because they represent simple, flat, bi-dimensional images; they are the creations of men who falsify their real image; the relationships work as long as women are or seem to be subjected to men, as long as they are obedient but the moment they start showing even the slightest sign of independence, men perceive them as impure and traitors and seek to humiliate and punish them. Overshadowed by men, women become palpable presences only through their relationships with men. The Romanian literary texts we have discussed (*Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război, Ioana, O moarte care nu dovedește nimic*) represent samples of social contexts and ideologies from the period we have researched. Such literary works dating from the beginning of the last century, are important to study since they introduce accounts and discourses that have perpetuated up to contemporary times, thus contributing to the definition of a specific Romanian identity when it comes to defining women and their status in society (power, as a construct central to patriarchy, is defined by the relationship of subordination that exists between men and women). Both Camil Petrescu and Anton Holban present women as object-characters who are adored and criticized at the same time and who are used as a source of veneration of male characters. The male gaze that is almost always present throughout these texts functions as a sexist mechanism aimed at diminishing the personality and importance of the female protagonists.

Many of the novels of the time revolve around women's gender and sexuality and what would be considered as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The tone of the literary works is no longer moralizing towards individuals such as transvestites or homosexuals who, during the previous period, would have been called social outcasts. Writers drew upon their personal experiences in order to oppose the framing of individuals as representations of certain types of gender/sexuality. Their textualisation of gender trouble offers a rather comprehensive view of the cultural practices of the era.

The modernist literary texts I chose for discussion range from the canonized narratives of Woolf and D.H. Lawrence to Romanian authors such as Garabet Ibrăileanu and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu who wrote highly praised novels by local critics but which were virtually unknown to the European readers of the time. Ultimately, I argue that these authors attempt, through their texts, to free the idea of femininity and the female body from the patriarchal stereotypy. At the same time, one must also note their inability to firmly establish ways through which femininity could resist and fight the system, thus displaying uneasiness in conceiving new possibilities of female identity.

In Chapter three, I also analyse the debates about the cause of male and female homosexuality and illustrate how they reflected in the literary texts of the era. For a long time homosexuality was considered as an anomaly and the newly created discipline of sexology embarked upon mapping human sexuality. The interwar glorification of traditional marriage and heterosexuality had generated a disquieting new reality: public odium against those involved in same-sex relationships. Governments passed laws that forbade these liaisons and sociologists and psychologists started to research into the roots of what was considered as deviant behaviour. Therefore, the problem of same-sex love began to be collectively codified as perversion and anomaly by a traditional and exceedingly moral society. As a result, some of the most prominent writers of the time, such as Virginia Woolf, started to experiment in their works with androgynous characters, in an attempt to question the conventional categories of "male" and "female".

One of my main objectives when writing these pages was to observe the social relations between men and women and to establish women's position at the beginning of the twentieth century. What was their status as compared to that of men? How did women relate to their own position and how did they use it? **Chapter four** deals with the gendered barriers women had to break down in order to be able to enter the public sphere which, not long ago, was considered at odds with the domestic role women have traditionally been assigned. Although the *Woman*

Question started in the late Middle Ages, it was at the beginning of the twentieth century that women were finally able to lawfully claim their political and civil rights, all over the world.

In Chapter four I try to determine whether women have yet come to fulfil their dream of achieving equality with men. The fight for their rights guided women through a political and social process which transformed them from what Woolf called “step-daughters” of their own countries into what we might call “full-daughters”, from being confined to being able to actively participate in public life. Women’s history of confinement starts with the social position they were forced into even from primitive times, when they were at a disadvantage since childbirth and motherhood constrained them to the limited space of their homes thus depriving them of the opportunity to affirm themselves as heroes just as men were able to do.

Up to modern times, European societies in general were governed by both canonical and civil laws. According to these, marriage was the epitome of heterosexual relations which represented the ideal of all politically healthy societies; governments started to place high value on marital obligations and, as a result, women’s bodies became subject to surveillance and control since they were the ones responsible for ensuring the perpetuation of the human species. Western European civilizations were characterised by a massive intrusion of Catholic dogmas in day-to-day life.

Many of the European governments started a series of ideological campaigns that were meant to increase morality among their citizens. The most representative case is that of Ireland, a country which, through its architecture of confinement (Magdalene laundries, mother and child asylums, reformatory schools), managed to control and discipline a class of women who were considered socially dysfunctional. This resulted in a double strain for women: on the one hand they became idealized mothers and wives who had to act in a respectable manner, on the other they became objectified since they had to conform their bodies to the moral paradigms enforced by the government and the Catholic Church.

The binary system of the separate spheres was created in order to keep women away from public life or, in other words, to maintain their state of immanence. Women were placed in a hierarchical pattern, where the attributes of men (intelligence, power, courage, capacity of understanding, reason etc.), or their transcendence, were always situated above those assigned to women (instinct, chaos, instability). This customary classification has guaranteed the gendered nature of social life and led to the inequitable distinction between the public space, male dominated, and characterised by reason, and the private space, destined to women, and characterised by irrationality.

The Victorian conventions included the separation of the private and public spheres and promoted the image of the pure woman, with high moral values and defender of mores, culture and religion, which quickly spread across Europe. It was also combined with notions referring to women's dignity and their roles as wives and mothers.

In Romania, rigid laws, some of which were derived from the ancient Roman laws that stated the supremacy of the masculine sex, similar to those in Britain, gave women no civil rights. At the beginning of the 20th century, relationships between men and women, both the private and the public ones, were based on the justification of patriarchal authority through theological notions. Romanian society was still dominated by the obsolete ecclesiastical view which stated that Adam had been the first created by God, therefore men are superior to women and women must let themselves be led by men.

The Victorian ideal was remodelled as to exclude all notions related to the idea of home as the fundamental space designed for the use of women as opposed to the public sphere, destined for the use of men. The New Woman led an active way of life and manifested independence seeking to actively get involved in the political process that affected her life and freedom. The New Woman ideal was that of fashionable and somewhat masculine yet not mannish, sexually daring but not to the point that she would become an invert.

The re-evaluation of domesticity in the 1880s and 1890s inspired many debates which imagined the modern woman either as a threat to social stability and morality or as a figure driven by the desire to explore the world and improve her own self. After the Great War, an imagery based on the blurring of gender lines introduced a polarization between the sexes as men began to perceive women as responsible for "emasculating" them while they had to fight in the trenches while women took over their jobs. A wave of misogyny and a crisis of masculinity followed the New Woman leading to an acute feeling of decadence throughout Europe. The New Man, or the "bright young things", i.e. those who were too young to fight during the war, showed a biological maleness while affecting feminine behaviour. Society started to slowly change in regard to the traditional sexual hierarchy by making a clear division between men who participated in combat and the non-combatant ones.

Most discussions focused on the idea of breaking conventions regarding traditional family and heterosexuality, while also bringing forward issues related to homosexuality, a concept around which some of the *fin-de-siècle* feminist movements pondered. This period was characterised by the constant improvement in women's status and also by a crisis regarding gender, accompanied by a destruction of the binary system of separate spheres.

The outbreak of the Great War somehow decreased feminist activity and the movement slowly lost visibility during the war years only to be resurrected after the war ended. We can note that although the feminist movement had an international dimension, most of the actions were mainly nationalist. After the war, most of these movements achieved, even if partially, their primary goal, i.e. the enfranchisement of women. The interwar era revived the traditional idea of the separation of the private and public spheres; many advocated for the return of the woman to motherhood and wifeness; nevertheless, there could be no return to the past and even though interwar society promoted the cult of family and home as the governments made desperate attempts to promote traditional marriage as a means of replacing the lost population, to re-socialize the war veterans, and to eradicate spinsterhood, the views on marriage, sexuality and childbearing shifted fundamentally.

Through this research, we have been able to find out that the Romanian cultural space, and the feminist theory specific to it, was under the influence of liberal politics; but this did not turn Romanian feminists into avant-gardists but merely synchronised their movement to those that had already occurred in other European countries. For Romanian women, the main goal was not represented by enfranchisement as for the British ones, but their interest resided in achieving active participation in public life through women's education and civil and economic emancipation.

Women have been forced into a state of subjugation because men exerted the prerogatives that patriarchy offered them throughout the centuries. Women had no say in their own lives and as such their preordained destiny was that of mothers, wives and care-givers. The beginning of the twentieth century represents an important turn point in women's history because it marks a switch, especially in Western European cultures, both in social mindset and in legislation which offered women increasingly equality in political and civil rights, education, and the job market.

We have demonstrated that gender is central to politics and that "inequalities are embedded in both the study and practice of politics." (Celis et al. 2013: 3) Up until the mid-twentieth century the majority of the legislators were male and this generated a type of family law that privileged men in all areas of life, starting from the right to inherit and ending with sexual rights. Throughout time, these rights began to be recognised as natural and unequivocal and "male authority in the family was seen as a biological necessity and mark of civilization." (Celis et al. 2013: 4) The exclusion of women from the public sphere turned politics into a male dominated sphere, proving that traditional governing structures were not only gendered but also gendering, in the sense that they gendered the very subjects of politics.

One of the central tasks of this research was the examination of representations of women within literary texts by both male and female authors. What can be noted is that literature written by women about women seems to differ from that by men about women; femininity and everything that it involves is perceived asymmetrically: female writers, such as Virginia Woolf and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, are more interested in replacing the narrative with the detailed description of feelings and inner thoughts. This thesis has demonstrated how the image of women has been shaped throughout the centuries by the deformed concepts imposed by male writers. My intention in this study was not that of deconstructing the male-female traditional dichotomy but that of analysing patterns of gender in a certain historical context and investigating the ways in which Western and Eastern European societies have depicted the opposing poles of the gendered system as being completely incompatible. I have also demonstrated how influential writers have shaped the public's opinion by promoting an ambivalence toward issues of gender.

Feminists hold that women are generally disadvantaged compared to men and therefore they need to “reclaim their history and to recognise and assert their time needs and interests.” (Bryce 2007: 65) They heavily insisted on Simone de Beauvoir's acclaimed affirmation that “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 2010: 330) underscoring that the differences between men and women- who are generally categorised in two distinct and mutually exclusive groups- are socially and not necessarily biologically determined.

Women had a subordinate place in European societies in general; we have been able to observe a difference in what concerns the legal capacities of women in the East compared to those in the West, in the sense that laws were more permissive in Eastern countries than in the Western ones. For example, Romanian women in the eighteenth century were allowed to appear in court without their husband's previous consent compared to women in Britain or Italy who could not even file a complaint without prior authorization (Ghițulescu 2004: 14)

Understanding behaviour is always related to analysing preferences; deviating behavioural patterns occur when personal preferences do not align with the social ones. Thus, society promotes heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy and having children as models of normal behaviour which individuals are expected to obey. These discourses have been shaped according to each historical era by the structures of power, laws, technological advances and media. To a large extent, these factors have created social taxonomies which have become universal and applicable to different cultures and which govern and control individuals' lives to produce the desired type of behavioural outcome that would eventually allow them to fit in the pattern provided by social conventions at certain times.

We have shown that the institutions and organizations supervised by states and governments are primary structures used to control cultures and societies. As a result, women have been subjected to a double type of confinement: on the one hand they had to submit to their husbands and families (which we might call private patriarchy), and on the other they fell under the coercive power of the structures of the state (that could also be referred to as public patriarchy).

The social hierarchies created throughout the centuries, which confined women to the private sphere and granted men the prerogative of controlling the public sphere, generated the gender discrimination that characterised human society for the most part of its history. The social rhetoric regarding the position of women has become a dominant one because it was supported and reinforced by the structures of power/policymakers which are essentially patriarchal. Rebelling against this rigid labelling and the normative standards causes judgement and women have been pressed into the pattern of socially dysfunctional categories; although they rebelled against the patriarchal system and its obsolete rules, patriarchy will endure as a relationship of inequality as long as it continues to be produced and reproduced by political activity. Through this research, we have determined that the “woman question” is not yet settled, since it recurs up to present day, under various forms; although the social changes specific to each historical period put an emphasis on different aspects of this question, its essence has remained the same.

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