

Andrada FĂTU-TUTOVEANU, *Personal Narratives of Romanian Women during the Cold War (1945 – 1989): Varieties of the autobiographical genre*, The Edwin Mellen Press, ISBN-13: 978-1495503733, 2015, 160 p.

Review by Eliza POP

Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University

Cluj, Romania

atropa91@gmail.com

A compelling book, abundant in scientific references, *Personal Narratives of Romanian Women during the Cold War (1945 – 1989): Varieties of the autobiographical genre* by Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu is the result of important research in interdisciplinary discourses, using methodologies such as gender studies, personal narratives, cultural studies, comparative literature and history. Despite the fact that personal narratives written under or about incarceration during the communist regime is a field of great interest among scholars, female personal narratives did not generate enough interest, thus the subject remained seriously uncovered. The author herself claims that the lack of studies and scientific articles during her research proved to be a challenge. Following this trail of thought Fătu-Tutoveanu's book, in spite of its shortness, aims to cover a gap and inspire further research in the area of female personal narratives in Romania under the communist regime.

In the introductory part, Fătu-Tutoveanu charts the territory from a cultural and literary perspective, pointing out the fact that, after the fall of the communist regime in Romania, the book market was flooded by personal narratives such as letters, biographies, confessions and autobiographies: "This phenomenon was based on a complex process that aimed at recovering the lost pieces of a historical jigsaw. It also involved the attempt to retrace the collective as

well as individual identities which had been deconstructed by the invasive regime that aimed at producing a totally different social category, the “New Man”.” (p.1)

Concerning the autobiographical genre, Fătu-Tutoveanu points out the fact that so far different types of personal narratives such as letters, diaries, memoirs etc. have been placed under the label of autobiographical genre, however she proposes that these writings should be read with great attention towards the subgenres in which they place themselves, preferring the term “personal narratives” rather than the other terms. An important aspect of these narratives is brought to the reader’s attention: these writings are not just historical documents but fictions as well; even a diary is written with some kind of composure and meditation, and certain styles are often adopted quite consciously. Nevertheless, the main attribute that each of these writings has is historicity, which the author describes as follows: “The traumatic experience under the dictatorship links these individual episodes as a red thread, contributing to recovering a larger, both internal and external framework.”(p.5)

The first chapter, “*Gender and genre*”: *women’s diaries and memoirs*, highlights the importance of female writings despite their small number, with a special emphasis upon the female voice as such, under the dictatorial regime. This way of approaching these texts is important in gender related studies. Thus the author considers that the relation between gender and genre is of crucial importance because in most cases the experience of women was even more traumatic in this historical period.

The same chapter offers an insight regarding the emancipation of women, which in fact only took place after 1989. A change occurred in women’s social and private lives, an added burden. It was expected of women to work and to have a share in political activism, just like men, the difference however occurred in their household activities, a domain still belonging to the wives. Moreover, it was also expected of women to have at least four children, abortion being illegal at the time.

In more radical cases, the personal narratives served as a steady point in the lives of women, especially those who have been persecuted or incarcerated. It represented “a crucial part during isolation”(p.16) for it was in close relation with their social and mental survival. In collective imprisonment they shared their narratives, as writing and reading were banned. This was the case of Alice

Voinescu who left a diary about her experiences during imprisonment in which she relates the role of the narrative in maintaining her mental health.

In the following chapter, “*The lives of others*” *Postcommunist publication and reception of female writer’s diaries and memoirs*, Fătu-Tutoveanu analyses the increase in personal narrative publications after 1989. As it is depicted in this chapter, there was a general need for filling in the missing pieces of the ‘jigsaw puzzle’ of that period, a general thirst for truth in other words. These narratives, even if they were deeply personal in whichever form they appeared, represented first and foremost a certain type of historical document, that was highly desired for the reading public. It was also a rush towards truth after a long period of deceits, half-truths, and lies.

The third chapter of the present book deals with “personal narratives encountering history” as the author points out and it is mainly concerned with Annie Bentoiu’s personal narratives *Timpul ce ni s-a dat (The time we were given)* relating events from 1944 to 1959. Bentoiu is especially important for her method of constructing narratives using both notes from her diary as well as historical accounts in order to give a more accurate view of the events. As a result, “This process de-structures and re-structures the female identity and the experiences later reassembled by her memoirs.”(p.32). The emphasis in Bentoiu’s case falls upon the grand narrative, and not the personal one, as she claims she is only an “eye”, a witness having the sole purpose to narrate what she had seen, often writing about memory and the importance of it in the process of writing. However, due to the censorship and constant surveillance silence came before everything else : “A compact, very deep layer of silence has remained inside us for the rest of our lives.”(p.40). In Bentoiu’s case the author depicts a double structure in her narrative: History, consisting of facts, and memory, which is Herstory, in this case. Her narratives are dominated by History being written upon a historical model as well.

After 1989, writing became possible once more and the personal narratives appeared in large numbers on the book market not only because they were requested but the writing process also acted as a coping mechanism with the experienced traumas and repressions. In most cases writing was a painful process but it also had a cathartic dimension.

The fourth chapter depicts the case of Alice Voinescu and her type of narrative which was not intended for publication. Fătu-Tutoveanu considers this kind of narrative as being more personal, focusing on intimate events rather than historical facts, nevertheless covering an extended period from 1929 to 1961.

A significant part in her personal narratives is represented by the 19 months uncovered in her diary, time she spent imprisoned. It was a period in which, once again, memory was used as a technique in keeping the integrity of the human psyche. In the subchapter “*Waiting for Judgment Day*” it is analyzed the terrifying yet impressive part of Voinescu’s diary that depicts the installment of the communist regime from 1948 to 1953.

If the previous chapters dealt with the outcasts and the marginalized female writers of the communist regime, chapter five presents those “engaged” writers, like Nina Cassian, who wrote in favor of the regime. Choosing not to avoid discussing about this aspect of personal narratives, I think is very effective in creating an integral perspective upon the entire subject. This chapter focuses upon the social and financial privileges achieved by means of writing, as it is the case with Nina Cassian. The new intellectual elite was formed of those who let themselves being entirely modeled after the regime. Their position did not suffer as of the marginalized writers, it was however strongly expected of their writing to influence the readers in a certain direction, and everything was dominated by politics. “It is also relevant for the artificial manner of reorganizing literary life and publications as well as for the creation of a new – obedient and in many cases privileged – category.”(p.64)

Thus the main feature of literature and other cultural products is that they were infused with political ideologies and stereotypical typologies of both men and women, destined to “educate” the people reading it but also to diminish the resistance towards the authoritative figures. Writing became an act of obligation, and the right to choose disappeared as well.

In chapter six, Fătu-Tutoveanu discusses the new generation of communist female writers, mainly the case of Constanța Buzea as well as the gap “between the official communist ideology concerning gender and the Romanian social practice and mentalities.”(p.85) As it is depicted in this chapter the women writers were a necessary addition to the male writers, while their writing adopted the same

uniform style in a politically and ideologically oriented manner until the mid-1960s. While gender equality was proclaimed everywhere women were expected to support the political propaganda and to be morally pure as well.

Buzea's diary covers a short but intense period from 1969 to 1971, and it was only published in 2009 under the title of *Creștetul ghețarului [The Top of the Glacier]*. Fătu-Tutoveanu places the important aspect in Buzea's work upon the inner experience and upon the relationship between family members; nevertheless what is also important is the description of literary environment and its influential figures.

While many other writers have distorted events or even created a mystifying process in order to place themselves in a better light, Fătu-Tutoveanu observes the extreme, almost raw frankness in which Buzea describes events and her troubled relationship with her husband, who was also a writer. In Buzea's case the process of writing a diary was an escape for an introverted personality such as herself, while her husband gave up on writing the diary being too much of an extrovert. Another reason for writing was to preserve her memories for the future, and here the author compares Buzea to Isabel Allende because "writing is perceived by both of them as an antidote for suffering and forgetting"(p.92)

Another important aspect that is discussed here is of the woman's status in the society, which was maintained just as in the patriarchal societies. Despite the fact that some of these women were acknowledged writers, they were directly submitted to their husbands and lacked independence or a stable employment, as was the case with Buzea.

In the book's final chapter which is entitled *Collective memoirs: Female fellow travellers. Female experience under communism*, Fătu-Tutoveanu analyses the burdened state of women during a regime which constantly talked not only about the equality of people in general but about equality between women and men as well. In reality women were expected to work as much as men, to be politically active and in their domestic lives they were also responsible with the education of their children, being in charge of their households as well, not to mention the fact that they were expected to be the previously mentioned "heroine mothers" of at least four children. Even if they were expected to have at least four children per family, the state didn't offer enough support in their upbringing. Thus the best word describing women's status in those periods is "burden" and Fătu-

Tutoveanu goes even further, highlighting the fact that burden becomes a metaphor for History itself. In this chapter it is also analysed Babeți's meta-narrative which too deals with the need to narrate in order to understand the historical events as well as the personal ones undergoing in that period.

It is further discussed in the chapter the impact of Ceaușescu's 1966 770 Decree, according to which abortion and the use of contraception was banned, upon women and their mental and physical health. Many of them did illegal abortions which often led to added medical complications.

Fătu-Tutoveanu proposes a retracing of smaller personal narratives that deal with the female experience under communism, narratives which contribute to art of a larger perspective and which helps describing the roles, experiences and burdens of women in the absurd 1980 Romanian society. Authors such as Mihaela Ursa, Simona Popescu, Otilia-Vieru Baraboi and others are evoked with smaller narratives describing their experience as adolescents during the above mentioned period. All these narratives mirror a period where everything was rationed: heat, electricity, food and intrusion was perceived not only upon peoples mentality but also upon the female body - unwanted medical controls, abortion severely punished - all these aspects were seen as a siege upon their bodies which unavoidably led to different traumas.

Personal Narratives of Romanian Women during the Cold War (1945 – 1989): Varieties of the autobiographical genre is a more than necessary piece of the large and complex picture of life during communist times, gradually unveiled by interdisciplinary researchers like Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu.