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**FROM ROMANIAN COMMUNISM TO CAPITALISM: THE  
REPRESENTATION AND IDEOLOGY OF WOMEN'S BODIES**

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the representation of women's bodies in the narratives of *Și se auzeau greierii* (And Crickets Could Be Heard) by Corina Sabău, *ca și cum nimic nu s-ar fi întâmplat* (as if nothing has happened) by Alina Nelega, and *Viața e a mea* (The Life is Mine) by Emilia Faur. It explores how the portrayal of maternity, sexual abuse, abortion, and gender identity changes from Romanian Communism to the capitalist democracy. If the socialist women were submissive to the pronatalist desiderate, being oppressed because of the insalubrious abortions (Sabău) or because of the fear to affirm their gender identity (Nelega), the capitalist advertisement with its sexist standards of beauty, doubled by the postnatal depression, imposes the fatality of death (Faur). My objective is to connect feminist aesthetics with ideological critique by identifying the abstract model of a feminist Bildungsroman (Rita Felski) in the three novels under consideration. However, on a formal level, I will analyse how in the case of Faur's and Nelega's novels, the free indirect style, a blend of affect translated into impersonal form (Moretti), mediates a socio-political commentary for increased awareness and active engagement in dismantling the adaptable patriarchy inherent in any political system, while the first-person narrative (Sabău) shows how the social fabric is internalised by the narrator, following her inner turmoil.

**Keywords:** feminist aesthetics, maternity, sexual abuse, abortion, female corporality, the socialist women, the capitalist women.

### **Premises. Conceptual landmarks**

In this article, I aim to delve into the specific challenges faced by feminism in post-communist Romania, moving beyond general critiques such as academic obstacles or prevailing prejudices like the perceived “battle between women and men.” By conducting a comparative analysis between the portrayal of the *communist woman* (as depicted in the novels of Alina Nelega and Corina Săbău) and the *capitalist woman* (represented by Emilia Faur), with a focus on corporeal injustices (including abuse, rape, unsafe abortions, and the mishandling of motherhood), I intend to address two key aspects. Firstly, I observe that regardless of the political or ideological context, the female body, both biologically and sociologically, is often internalised within a framework of naturalised male dominance, underscoring the necessity for a coherent feminist discourse to challenge and eliminate such perspectives. Secondly, I explore potential solutions or alternatives for communicating feminist ideology in a more accessible literary manner, “utilising the terminology of feminism and transparently portraying characters whose experiences evoke empathy and understanding from readers, thereby enabling the internalisation of feminist theory through a narrative lens”<sup>1</sup> (Vîrban, “Viața e a mea sau tutorial despre cum o reiei în posesie”). In summing up, I consider, on the one hand, a contextualization of feminism both as a movement in its own right and in line with its Marxist articulations, and, on the other, the way in which the discourse on female corporeality is trans-ideologized in the transition from communism to capitalism.

Since its inception, the feminist movement has faced criticism for various reasons, some more valid than others, often stemming from a misinterpretation of its principles, frequently reduced to a simplistic portrayal of a battle between genders. While it’s accurate to acknowledge that the beginnings of feminism were framed within an anti-male paradigm, fuelled by justified anger preparing the women’s liberation

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<sup>1</sup> “care să împrumute terminologia fenomenului, transparentizat prin intermediul unor personaje-manifest, menite să suscite empatia și înțelegerea publicului cititor, acesta din urmă reușind să internalizeze un fundal teoretic printr-un filtru narativ” (My translation).

movement, it evolved as it became evident that even those marginalised can exhibit sexist attitudes that further disenfranchise others, irrespective of gender: “As contemporary feminism progressed, as women realised that males were not the only group in our society who supported sexist thinking and behaviour – that females could be sexist as well – anti-male sentiment no longer shaped the movement's consciousness” (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* 3). Deconstructing such biases, like the misconception of feminism solely as a vehicle for visceral hatred aimed at male dominance, requires a more nuanced discussion that clarifies all the implications – ideological, political, and social – of this struggle and its targets. This approach should aim to democratise discussions originating from feminist circles, which are often confined to the elitist realms of academia, despite the fact that feminist ideology is promoted as a grassroots movement by activists. The real problem is the lack of synchronisation between the theory and practice of feminism, which is the main obstacle to the perpetuation of this movement:

Ironically, revolutionary feminist thinking was most accepted and embraced in academic circles. In those circles the production of revolutionary feminist theory progressed, but more often than not that theory was not made available to the public. It became and remains a privileged discourse available to those among us who are highly literate, well-educated, and usually materially privileged (hooks, *Feminism is for everybody* 4-5).

Furthermore, the dichotomy between reformist and revolutionary ideologies further muddles the true objectives of feminism. On the one hand, the reformist approach, which primarily emphasises gender equality, tends to confine itself to superficial adjustments and opportunistic manoeuvres, often hindered by class dynamics. In this context, women may overlook systemic patriarchy as long as they can “break free of male domination in the workforce and be more self-determining in their lifestyles” (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* 5). The core mandate of feminist (revolutionary) ideology is to dismantle sexism and unravel its mechanisms of perpetuation among both women and men: “Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives” (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 26). The fading, even overshadowing, of

feminism's initial focus has also bred hesitancy toward the ideology, particularly in post-communist nations. Once the quest for workplace gender equality is achieved, anti-sexist fervour tends to dissipate: "Reformist feminist thinking focusing primarily on equality with men in the workforce overshadowed the original radical foundations of contemporary feminism which called for reform as well as overall restructuring of society so that our nation would be fundamentally anti-sexist" (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* 4). Feminist ideology faces demonization as it appears to challenge the bedrock of enduring values like family and religion, which regulate the harmonious social, economic, and cultural fabric of the nation.

Concerning the relationship between Marxism and feminism, it has undergone various mutations over time, with disjunctions often arising due to Marxism's materialism, which prioritises solving class problems over addressing the real shortcomings affecting women's lives in both private and public spaces (Hartmann 3-4). The centre of gravity is precisely the obsession with class struggle and the ways in which capital, whether economic or symbolic, is configured. For example, early Marxists like Marx and Engels envisioned the liberation of women by integrating them into the workforce alongside men, imagining that domestic duties would be eliminated by dissolving the distinction between public and private space (Hartmann 4). However, this vision did not prevent the intensification of sexism with the rise of capitalism, which reinforced the dichotomy between men's paid work and women's unpaid domestic labour, even though the latter still serves capitalist aims (Hartmann 6). Finally, even when feminist Marxists like Dalla Costa propose solutions such as paying women for domestic chores and reproductive activities (childbirth and childrearing), women's issues remain entangled in the anti-capitalist struggle, which obscures other issues that are at least as important as the class struggle (Hartmann 8).

One of the most symptomatic examples of the refunctionalization of Marxist feminism, through the harmonisation of its theoretical and practical sides, is the solution of intersectionality. This demonstrates its effectiveness by incorporating a multifaceted approach to the discussion of women's oppression, extending beyond class oppression to include dimensions such as race and gender. An example is the practice of intersectional organising led by poor black women in the US during the 1960s (Armstrong 14). They questioned reproductive rights and access to reproductive politics

while simultaneously challenging the obsession with heterosexuality, an inherent mechanism in the consolidation of a carceral state that allowed capitalism to exercise its power. Additionally, they revealed other forms of oppression obscured by the class struggle while maintaining the stable relationship between reproduction and production specific to capitalist societies:

In addition, it linked reproductive justice to dismantling the carceral state that strictly policed (as it constituted) the class politics of gendered, raced and ethnicized embodiment within capitalism. The welfare rights movement demanded a basic income from the US state that historically had excluded them from the postwar social wages for single mothers. These sites of praxis further pushed Marxist feminism to analyse different histories of oppression as co-constitutive in sites of reproduction and production (Armstrong 14).

As far as the Romanian space is concerned, the coagulation of feminism is difficult both on a literary and ideological level, as Teona Farmatu points out. From a literary point of view, Romanian feminism was somewhat naïve in the early 2000s, taking shape only when the Romanian press began to promote international female figures from the mainstream, such as Doris Lessing and Kate Millet: “It is therefore quite difficult to discuss a feminist literature like that of the 2000s in Romania: is it not a feminism *avant la lettre*, but rather an ingenuous feminism that found its purpose and explored its methods and its strategies only later, when mainstream international female authors became a central focus of the Romanian literary press” (Farmatu, “The Double Marginality” 142). However, both the association of Western feminism, in the local perception, with the rather aggressive and militant second wave of the 1960s and 1970s, and the self-sufficiency resulting from a quasi-solution of the class struggle after the fall of communism by making women's paid jobs more accessible (Farmatu, “The Double Marginality” 143), have become unavoidable obstacles. They shape the positioning towards this movement within the Romanian literary field, where, on the one hand, we retain socialist feminists such as Laura Sandu, Medeea Iancu, Iulia Militaru, and others from frACTalia, seen as radical, and, on the other hand, neoliberal feminists such as Mihaela Miroiu, Laura Grunberg, and Ștefania Mihalache, seen as conservative. Thus, novels such as those in the selected sample trace different ideological positions towards

women and their bodies, opting either for an oblique discourse (Sabău) or a militant one (Nelega & Faur), thus showing the lack of ideological homogeneity regarding feminism in the local space.

### **Feminism in Post-Communist Countries: Transitioning from Communist to Capitalist Women**

Prior to delving into the case studies and examining the selected texts, it is crucial to explore how the portrayal of women in society was shaped by socialist propaganda and how this dynamic shifted with the emergence of capitalist-style liberalism. Within the communist framework, two factors demonise feminist expressions: firstly, a linguistic rationale prevails, where the term 'feminist' is deemed pejorative as it appears to solely address women's concerns: "The whole situation is additionally complicated by the very complex attitudes toward feminism in this part of Europe. The very word feminism is perceived as a pejorative one, and it is considered political suicide for a woman active in public life to identify herself primarily with women's issues" (Matynia 352).

Women in Eastern Europe, who were highly engaged in political and public life during the communist era, perceive this as a form of self-vulnerability. This mindset undermines the semblance of gender equality, as they seek validation from men to compete professionally. Another factor contributing to the resistance to feminism in Soviet countries revolves around the illusion of gender equality that surfaced in the 1950s. Despite significant employment of women in heavy industry and political spheres during this period, emancipation was essentially illusory. The communist state's primary objectives were either industrial development (LaFont 205), aimed at empowering the labour force, or propagandistic in nature.

While advocating for both spouses' involvement in the collective efforts to sustain their family's well-being, the disparities become evident. Although women enter the workforce, they are not relieved of their domestic roles and responsibilities, whereas men are not expected to assume such duties in private life. Thus, the dominance of patriarchy persists: "Pre-communist patriarchy remained intact, with women shouldering the burden of economic and domestic labour. Instead of truly liberating women, state communism turned into a system that doubly exploited women in their roles as producers and reproducers" (LaFont 205). The link between patriarchy and

communism (even capitalism) is maintained in this sense by male domination, which is reinforced by the solidarity between men, who benefit from a material base that allows them to consolidate a hierarchy between themselves and women (Hartmann 14). Consequently, the portrayal of the communist woman showcases a double objectification. Not only is her biological body commodified, but so too is her symbolic identity, torn between the imperative to contribute to (economic) capital on par with men and the obligation of reproduction. This obligation entails fulfilling the roles of mother and dutiful wife within the confines of the private sphere, which, in the context of the pronatalist agenda, becomes inseparable from the public domain:

The political implications of this first Marxist approach are clear. Women's liberation requires first, that women become wage workers like men, and second, that they join with men in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Capital and private property, the early Marxists argued, are the cause of women's particular oppression just as capital is the cause of the exploitation of workers in general (Hartmann 5).

Pronatalism serves as a cornerstone of the communist regime, aligned with the objective of bolstering the nation's labour force and ensuring a prosperous future. These aspects are also confirmed by the requirements of Decree No. 770 of October 1, 1966, where the only situations that offer the possibility of abortion are those related to the possibility of hereditary transmission of a disease, the advanced age of the mother, or putting her life in danger in the context of maintaining the pregnancy. By instilling in women a sense of duty encompassing various aspects of life, the oppressive regime effectively normalises these internalised practices. Women come to believe that by adhering to these expectations, they not only contribute to class equality but also elevate themselves above men, as the demands placed on them have no male counterparts:

From the end of the 1950s until the end of Communist rule, the ideal socialist woman was a good worker and competent professional, a caring mother and wife, and enthusiastic comrade. A woman was complete only if all these roles were filled. Women were perceived as having a maternal role, a worker role, and a family role, multiple demands which had no male equivalents (Occhipinti 14).

In socialist Romania, propaganda about the role of women in communist society can be divided into three categories: 1. propaganda utilising women as conduits for dissemination; 2. local and international propaganda about women; and 3. propaganda tailored specifically for women (Olteanu & Gheonea 86). These three types of propaganda, revolving around the communist woman, converge in their portrayal of the objectification of the female body as a means of production, spanning both private and public spheres. This holds true whether addressing the dissemination of notions concerning the significance of the mother's role—depicted as “the primary educational influence relied upon by the state to instil patriotic fervour and communist ethics in children”<sup>2</sup> (Olteanu & Gheonea 86)—or emphasising a woman's obligation to bear numerous children and actively contribute to the nation's industrial growth. The state incentivized such contributions by 'simplifying' domestic chores through the sale of household appliances at “housewife-centric stores”<sup>3</sup> (Olteanu & Gheonea 89). Lastly, magazines aimed at women's entertainment raised a suite of pseudo-activists who instrumentalized the USSR-ist ideological doctrine, filtering it through an apparently feminist lens, trying to convince citizens of the socialist state that in the 1950s “women emerged from a long bondage in which they enjoyed no rights whatsoever”<sup>4</sup> (Olteanu & Gheonea 91-2), and that the fulfilment of current tasks should be seen as a recognition of their liberation.

With the transition from communism to capitalist democracy, emergent issues such as unemployment, restricted abortion rights amidst a resurgence of extremely conservative and religious traditionalism, domestic violence, the erosion of social services, and the dwindling representation of women in political spheres did not signify an improvement in the status of women in society. Consequently, feminism became demonised, particularly as it was perceived as a fully Western ideology, fetishized by former communist bloc countries even after the collapse of the regime:

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<sup>2</sup> “primul factor educativ pe care statul miza atunci când dorea să insuflă spiritul patriotic și morala comunistă în rândul copiilor” (My translation).

<sup>3</sup> “magazine de tipul «gospodina»” (My translation).

<sup>4</sup> “femeile au ieșit dintr-o îndelungată robie în care nu beneficiau de niciun fel de drepturi” (My translation).



Women are bearing a heavy burden in the so-called transition to democracy. They are experiencing a disproportionate level of unemployment. Their rights to abortions are threatened. A rebirth of traditionalism uses them to symbolise the values of home, hearth, and religious revival. They have lost social services. Their number has drastically dropped in parliamentary institutions. They still struggle with the burdens of the second shift, they have experienced high rates of domestic violence, and, in the war zones of the former Yugoslavia, they have been subjected to systematic campaigns of rape as acts of war. In addition to this well-known list of burdens, the very act of constituting the new democratic polities has involved gross injustices to women democratic heroes (Goldfarb 235).

Hence, the incompatibility of Western feminist waves with the archetype of the post-Soviet woman is justified. On one hand, the challenges faced by Western women differ from those encountered by their Eastern counterparts (Funk 87). On the other hand, there is a perceived inadequacy of the feminist phenomenon in the Romanian context. Here, Western feminism is often equated with the assertiveness characteristic of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, despite subsequent refinements. Additionally, another contributing factor could be the sense of newfound freedom experienced after the collapse of communism, leading to a perception of feminism as futile or, worse, as associated with totalitarian ideologies, thus sparking a visceral rejection of the movement (Farmatu, "The Double Marginality" 144). Romania's case is not unique, as most Eastern European countries have undergone the same cultural and ideological transfer, as Alena Heitlinger points out in the case of the Czech Republic:

Thus Czech post-communist and western feminist frames lack alignment. As we shall see in more detail below, western feminism does not resonate in the Czech Republic because most Czechs (1) mistrust utopian and emancipatory ideologies, (2) associate concepts such as "women's emancipation," "women's equality," and "women's movement" with the policies of the discredited communist regime, (3) are disinclined to engage in collective action, (4) resent presentation of women as victims, (5) assign highly positive meaning to motherhood and the family, and (6) uncritically accept the stereotype of feminists as men-haters (Heitlinger 81).

From this perspective, I argue that the integration of feminist principles into the local context cannot rely solely on conveying pure ideological discourse, although it is essential. Instead, it requires a method of representation that avoids the perception of “indoctrination”. I advocate for the importance of feminist literature that embeds feminist ideology within various literary frameworks. These frameworks, while employing different narrative techniques such as free indirect style (Nelega & Faur) or first-person narration (Sabău), aim to evoke empathy and encourage social engagement from the reader. All these facets will be explored through the case study dedicated to the chosen sample of texts, where narrative options may serve not only as a means of identification but also as a potential for exoticization. The objective is to inaugurate a feminist Bildungsroman (Felski, *Beyond Feminist*), which aims to both educate the reader about the significance of the feminist movement and elucidate the ethical-aesthetic shift that contemporary literature has embraced, with a particular focus on marginalised or vulnerable communities (Lupaşcu 158). This aspect is relevant since the Romanian post-communism period, where literature becomes more and more interested in an ethical side, through which it can also democratise the place of the marginalised on the social scene, responding to the urgencies of their contemporaneity (Mironescu 109-10).

### **Symbolic and Ideological Depictions of the Female Body in Romanian Prose**

Women’s narratives are not isolated from social realities, nor are they mere aesthetic indulgences. Instead, they require a reading lens positioned at the intersection of social and material circumstances that shape the status of women in both public and private spheres. These narratives also grapple with dominant cultural representations of gender, often internalised at a deep, psychosexual level. There is a direct correlation between the evolution of female identities and the narrative plots crafted to depict them authentically. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the structure of novels written by women, with a heightened focus on individual subjectivity.

These narratives often revolve around themes of self-discovery within oppressive environments marked by pervasive male dominance (Felski 127-8), as seen in the three novels under consideration: *Și se auzeau greierii* (And Crickets Could Be Heard) by Corina Sabău, *ca și cum nimic nu s-ar fi întâmplat* (as if nothing has happened) by

Alina Nelega, and *Viața e a mea* (The Life is Mine) by Emilia Faur. Furthermore, aligning with feminism as an ideological movement, feminist fiction reveals two distinct vectors of action. One is outwardly focused, addressing social and political emancipation, while the other is inwardly directed, aiming to transform subjective consciousness: “Feminism and feminist fiction point outward and forward, into social activity and political emancipation, but also backward and inward, into myth, spirituality, and the transformation of subjective consciousness” (Felski 128).

In this context, I aim to delineate the representations of female corporeality across the three aforementioned novels, considering various dimensions such as motherhood, experiences of sexual abuse and rape, depictions of homosexuality, portrayals of abortion, and the absence of comprehensive sex education. Methodologically, my exploration adopts a sociological perspective, drawing from the insights of Pierre Bourdieu while also intersecting with the theories of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. This approach seeks to unravel the complexities of the female body and sexuality as sites of negotiation within power dynamics:

The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is an historically specific organisation of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity. As such, sexuality is understood by Foucault to produce “sex” as an artificial concept which effectively extends and disguises the power relations responsible for its genesis (Butler 117).

Simultaneously, my objective is to demonstrate the emergence of a new form of subjectivity in feminist literature by analysing the narratological structures employed. I seek to illustrate how feminist Bildungsroman are crafted, characterised by a reversed trajectory of the protagonists’ fate compared to narratives centred on male heroes. In this scenario, the main characters in the analysed novels – Cristina Nemeș, Angela Pop, and Ecaterina Creangă, along with other female figures inhabiting the narrative – are not depicted within an idealised universe where self-discovery leads to personal growth and social advancement. Instead, they inhabit a world marked by negative polarity, ensnared by patriarchal structures. Tragic destinies loom large due to the inherent impossibility of breaking free from dependency and powerlessness: “The beginning of the traditional Bildungsroman is clearly gender determined; the hero is free to journey

into the world in his quest for self-knowledge. The situation of the contemporary female protagonist is quite different in being marked by acquiescence, dependency, and powerlessness” (Felski 137). On an aesthetic level, the quintessentially misogynistic genre of the Bildungsroman undergoes deconstruction. Traditionally, this genre portrays male protagonists on journeys of self-discovery, relegating women to fleeting, episodic roles or as mere rewards for the protagonists’ achievements, often symbolised by marriage.

In Corina Sabău's novel, the protagonist, Ecaterina Creangă, embodies the archetype of the ideal communist woman, holding the position of head of the Adjustment Department at the People's Silk Factory. Despite accolades from her superiors, she faces objectification whenever she advocates for the rights of her female colleagues. This objectification is exacerbated by her involvement in a stocking advertisement, a requirement imposed to promote the factory's image within the party's ranks:

[...] at first, it was the foreman Dimache who came to see me, then Lică from Finishing, and finally, the director himself summoned me to his office. For an entire month, the factory management showered praise on my legs, hinting that they were indispensable. 'The world craves beauty,' they said. 'If it's about your husband, just talk to him; he'll understand. We're boosting the factory's reputation. This calendar will even land on the party secretary's desk,' they assured me<sup>5</sup> (Sabău 15).

Despite her efforts, Ecaterina finds her requests for administrative decisions consistently denied: “administrative problems don't concern beautiful women”<sup>6</sup> (Sabău 16). These fragments are symptomatic, as they highlight certain cultural associations ingrained in the patriarchal society of the communist regime. They underscore the perception that the realm of reason is inherently associated with masculinity, while the

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<sup>5</sup> “[...] la început a venit la mine maistrul Dimache, apoi Lică de la Finisaj, apoi m-a chemat la el în birou însuși directorul, o lună întreagă conducerea fabricii mi-a lăudat picioarele și mi-a dat de înțeles că fără ele nu se poate, lumea asta are nevoie de frumos, dacă e vorba de soț se poate vorbi cu el și sigur va înțelege, oameni suntem, ridic prestigiul fabricii, calendarul ăsta va ajunge și pe masa secretarului de partid” (My translation).

<sup>6</sup> “problemele administrative nu sunt pentru femei frumoase” (My translation).

domain of the body assumes feminine attributes, thereby perpetuating a gender hierarchy:

The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism. As a result, any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalised (Butler 17).

The notion that Soviet women are exploited both economically and psychologically in the workplace is further reinforced. Socialised within the sexist framework of patriarchy, they are conditioned to view their work merely as a necessity rather than a meaningful contribution. This is exemplified by Ecaterina's acceptance of her situation despite her principles:

Women are exploited economically in jobs but they are also exploited psychologically. They are taught via sexist ideology to devalue their contributions to the labour force. They are taught via consumerism to believe that they work solely out of material necessity or scarcity, not to contribute to society, to exercise creativity, or to experience the satisfaction of performing tasks that benefit oneself as well as others (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 101-2).

Similarly, the portrayal of women is exemplified in the case of Cristina Nemeş, the protagonist of Alina Nelega's novel. Despite her sexual orientation (Cristina is a lesbian), she finds herself repeatedly subjected to male domination orchestrated by the oppressive regime. A poignant episode is the rape she endures at the hands of security agent Traian Popa in exchange for a box of chocolates, as she believes it is the only way to secure them, helplessly witnessing her own violation:

His gaze trails her wryly, anticipating the inevitable. Sex for a box of chocolates – not a bad deal. Philo students are known for trading favours; some for a pack of premium cigarettes, especially the English ones. He casually tosses her soiled underwear towards the tiny bathroom door. Pulling her onto the small chair, she murmurs softly, 'I'm married.' Instantly regretting her words, he laughs. She berates herself for her naivety;

he already knows everything about her – maybe he's even seen her wedding photos<sup>7</sup> (Nelega 121-2).

The sexual relationship between the protagonist and her aggressor is depicted as consensual, rooted in the naturalisation of traditional and stereotypic gender associations: masculine-active and feminine-passive. This portrayal grammaticalises the notion that the desire for eroticized possession inherent in male domination finds its counterpart in the female desire to satisfy this hierarchical dynamic (Bourdieu 40). The only solace for Cristina amidst these harrowing episodes is the belief that once the regime is overthrown, she will have the opportunity to expose all these injustices through her writing. However, Cristina's rape transcends mere physical assault; it also shatters her intellectual integrity, particularly during the search of the 'secret room' – how the protagonist calls the room where she works and hides all these testimonies about the horrors she experienced: “The struggle with Popatraian could have been won in the realm of imagination. However, after he violated her sense of imagination, she was forced to confront him in reality”<sup>8</sup> (Nelega 299). In this sense, the predilection for traumatic experiences in Alina Nelega's novel also inscribes an aesthetic perspective of literary denunciation of these segments of recent history: “a gamble that we know post-war writers have lost since, after 1990, the literature written during the dictatorship did not really exist”<sup>9</sup> (Farmatu, “Resuscitarea mizerabilismului”).

When examining the portrayal of the capitalist woman in Emilia Faur's novel, particularly through the character Angela Pop, it becomes evident that while the ideological backdrop of the narrative differs, the objectification of the female body remains a constant theme. The protagonist, however, demonstrates a heightened awareness of this aspect, leading to increased frustration regarding the sexualized, objectified, or self-oppressed image of her post-birth body—a phenomenon exacerbated

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<sup>7</sup> “Privirea lui o urmărește ironic, știe la ce să se aștepte, sex pentru o cutie de ciocolată, nu e rău târgul, studentele de la filo au reputația că se fut și pentru un pachet de țigări fine, mai ales alea de la engleză, el se apleacă după lenjeria ei murdară și o aruncă așa, casual, spre ușa minusculei băi. [...] O trage deasupra lui pe scaunul minuscul, sunt măritată, spune încet, pe urmă regretă imediat, el râde, chiar că era proastă, păi știa tot despre ea, poate avea și fotografiile de la nuntă” (My translation).

<sup>8</sup> “Lupta cu popatraian din realitate putea fi câștigată în imaginație, dar, după ce el i-a violat imaginația, trebuie să se confrunte cu el în realitate asta” (My translation).

<sup>9</sup> “pariu pe care știm că scriitorii postbelici l-au pierdut, întrucât, după 1990, literatura de sertar scrisă în perioada dictaturii nu a existat de fapt” (My translation).

by postnatal depression, both of which are emblematic of capitalist society: “She used to have a flat abdomen. Before the baby. Those were the days. Now she walks with her back bent, only straightening it when catching sight of her reflection. And the fleeting thought that she might appear slightly slimmer this way? Just another disappointment”<sup>10</sup> (Faur 8). In neoliberal democracies, reification is perpetuated through the imposition of unequal beauty standards, leaving women feeling discontented with their own bodies as they strive to conform to the norms propagated by capitalist advertising: “Today's fashion magazines may carry an article about the dangers of anorexia while bombarding its readers with images of emaciated young bodies representing the height of beauty and desirability” (hooks, *Feminism is for everybody* 34).

When it comes to the theme of motherhood in the three novels, it is approached in distinct ways, both in terms of conceptualization and narrative structure. Let us delve into each one individually. In Corina Sabău's novel, the case of Ecaterina is intriguing, as the theme of motherhood is explored on multiple levels. Firstly, her strained relationship with her husband instils fear regarding his reaction upon discovering her pregnancy. Secondly, limited abortion rights during the communist era drove her to pursue a risky option, resulting in fatal haemorrhaging. Lastly, she finds a silver lining in her situation, viewing the impending child as a potential catalyst for recalibrating the dynamics of her marriage:

I would confront him head-on, speaking plainly, like a woman with her heart in her mouth finally addressing a man, just as Aura spoke to Iliuță... But what would I achieve by doing so? No one ends a conversation like he does. And really, what could I even blame him for? He married me, gave me his name, and blessed me with a child<sup>11</sup> (Sabău 56).

The domination over Ecaterina is obscured by her affection for her husband, which serves to blur the hierarchical relationship between the submissive and the dominant (Bourdieu 66-7). Additionally, her traumatic past, marked by the abuse and domestic

<sup>10</sup> “Avea și ea abdomen odată. Înainte de copil. Vremuri. Acum umblă cu spatele aplecat, numai reflexia o obligă să și-l îndrepte. Și gândul că așa arată ceva mai suplă – altă deziluzie” (My translation).

<sup>11</sup> “L-aș trezi și i-aș vorbi pe șleau, așa cum îi vorbește în cele din urmă unui bărbat o femeie care se trezește cu burta la gură, așa cum i-a vorbit Aura lui Iliuță, [...], dar ce-aș câștiga dacă aș face asta, nimeni nu știe să închidă o discuție cum o face el, și până la urmă ce i-aș putea reproșa, m-a luat de nevastă, mi-a dat numele lui și mi-a făcut un copil” (My translation).

violence inflicted upon her and her mother by her father, further complicates the dynamics of power within the relationship. Hence, women are conditioned by patriarchal norms to perceive marriage as a privilege and to endure any form of humiliation from their partners. Ecaterina's tragic demise is a result of the morbid bureaucracy of the communist regime, which, instead of addressing suspicions of abortion, ultimately transforms her into an anti-heroine. The only knowledge she is permitted to have is that of an unjust death. In Corina Sabău's case, the traumas endured by Ecaterina are narratively conveyed through the first person, imbuing the narrative with a potent tone. However, despite this narrative strength, it maintains a sense of passivity, reflecting the protagonist's fate. Conversely, in Alina Nelega's and Emilia Faur's works, the suffering and challenges of motherhood under Soviet and capitalist regimes are depicted through the free indirect style. The latter is seen as a method of capturing emotional tension in an impersonal manner (Moretti 100-10), exemplified in the case of Christine Nemeş through the discourse surrounding the hardship depicted in the scenes of Ştefan's birth:

Her body had acted independently, without her consent, producing that enormous belly that seemed to overpower her. It felt as though someone else was in control of her body, a body she had never before questioned as her own. She repeatedly lost consciousness during labour, soiled herself on the birthing table, and even the screams seemed to emanate from another throat. Her lungs felt foreign, and her body was handled like a senseless piece of flesh, reducing her to an animal in agony. That baby, it felt like an insult – an ontological insult – stripping away any semblance of dignity<sup>12</sup> (Nelega 166).

Lastly, Angela Pop grapples with motherhood through the lens of postnatal depression. This is fuelled, on the one hand, by the professional limitations she perceives, along with insecurities about her physical appearance, and, on the other hand, by the exoticization surrounding her husband when those around her commend his involvement in child-rearing. The protagonist navigates this issue with clarity, highlighting that such

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<sup>12</sup> “Corpul ei lucrase singur, fără s-o întrebe dacă era de acord, generase burta aia uriaşă care o domina, altcineva îi controla trupul despre care până atunci nu se îndoise că era al ei, leşină repetat în travaliu, se cacă pe ea pe masa de naştere, până şi urletele ies dintr-un alt gât, plămâniile ăia nu erau ai ei, manipulată ca o bucată de carne fără creier, animalul fată în suferinţă, copilul ăla e o jignire, o insultă ontologică, i-a luat orice urmă de demnitate” (My translation).



responsibilities are simply part of the normal duties of any parent. In this regard, it is evident that the traditional concept of fatherhood, which primarily emphasised authority, discipline, and the role of provider, has evolved, at least in theory. Angela Pop advocates instead for a redefinition of fatherhood as a nurturing figure, a source of support for the mother, rather than solely a provider and disciplinarian (Mander 65-6).

However, in her relationship with her husband, these aspects remain superficial, with their commitment narratively instrumentalized through the free indirect style. This narrative technique, while similar to that used in Ecaterina Creanga's story, takes on a different tone with Angela Pop's suicide. Unlike Ecaterina's death, Angela's suicide is intentional, which reframes her from being perceived as a victim. The portrayal of the corpse serves to deconstruct stereotypes surrounding the objectification of women in society while also serving as a defiant gesture against the capitalist neoliberal system. This system, by institutionalising various forms of sexism, abuse, and aggression, not only erodes the uniqueness of femininity, reducing it to a standardised norm, but also consolidates its power because it ensures the economic advantages enjoyed by various institutions that help maintain these beauty desires (fashion industry, cosmetics, plastic surgery, etc.). The act of suicide, in contrast, embodies a bold assertion of bodily autonomy and taking control of one's own life (Vîrban, "Viața e a mea sau tutorial despre cum o reiei în posesie"): "All women should take to the streets and proclaim: Life is mine! Mine, and mine alone!"<sup>13</sup> (Faur 139).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the comparative case study reveals that the ideological distinctions between the communist and capitalist portrayals of women merely shift the methods used to enforce patriarchal dominance. During the communist era, the illusion of liberation led to women being objectified through pronatalist ideals, as seen in Sabău's work, and pressured to hide alternative sexual orientations, as depicted by Nelega, to avoid undermining the state's heteronormative authority. In today's neoliberal democracy, women once again find themselves in subordinate positions due to capitalist advertising, postnatal depression, and economic disparities, as explored by Faur. This

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<sup>13</sup> "Femeile toate ar trebui să iasă în stradă și să strige: viața e a mea! A mea și numai a mea!" (My translation).

demonstrates how the body and its portrayal transcend mere biology, offering insights into complex hierarchies and power dynamics (Dragomir & Miroiu 61).

In literary terms, feminist narratives prompt a reevaluation of subjectivity. On one hand, they embrace the reappropriation of the body's autonomy and integrity through the use of the first person, delving into the inner struggles of characters while maintaining a subdued tone towards social engagement. On the other hand, the use of free indirect style, heightened through exaggerated miserabilism or other unsettling techniques, challenges the tradition of Bildungsromans centred solely on male protagonists' destinies. Instead, they present tragic female stories marked by defiance, as seen in Faur's work, aiming for self-awareness and fostering empathy.

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