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**Femininity Expressions between Reality and Propaganda during
Nicolae Ceaușescu Regime (1965-1989)**
Doctoral Thesis Abstract

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This paper entitled *Femininity Expressions between Reality and Propaganda during Nicolae Ceaușescu Regime* (1965-1989) addresses the theme of female representations, of feminine expressions during the communist period, more precisely during the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime, from the perspective of the relationship between reality and propaganda. The term *expressions* used in the title of the paper implies cumulative manifestations, expressive aspects found in both the written and oral code, as well as various images about women and femininity. The entire paper is built around this term, which encompasses the various ways in which *woman* was perceived by contemporaries, the ways in which *woman* has become a means of achieving political goals and the daily actions a *woman* could perform.

The two approaches that I had in mind when developing the thesis, *reality* and *propaganda*, are also announced in the title of this paper. The real-world approach includes, in the case of this material, women's day-to-day activities, the situations to which they were exposed daily, their passions and their preferences, the impressions that women had about themselves, the ways in which they managed to evade politics. This approach has been formed mainly on the basis of information obtained from the *interviews* applied in the research and also on the basis of published and unpublished sources, such as diaries, biographies and memoirs.

The term *propaganda* used both in the title of the work and in its content, is the one that could be defined as „an activity carried out systematically and persistently for the dissemination of ideas, political, economic, philosophical, moral doctrines among the masses, with the help of which individuals form certain attitudes, opinions and social behaviours”, as defined in a communist-era dictionary. The approach from the *propaganda* perspective includes both the mentions of *women* and their various activities, as evidenced by the documents of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, the Propaganda and Agitation Section, the Chancellery Section or the Central Party Committee Section, and the various materials broadcast in the Press or television during the period 1965-1989 and the diverse writings from the era.

Women's emancipation and their equality with men (much promoted at the level of the communist discourse) represented only a trick of the regime, a double or triple burden on women, less a real change for the better, an increase in the quality of their lives. Communist women, as they appear in all propaganda media, have been wives, mothers, workers, being involved in political life. It was a picture of the perfect woman that had no corresponding reality. Gender inequalities continued to exist during the communist regime regarding women, both in the private and public spheres, despite what was officially presented.

The idea of the research has been an older one, when, attending various discussions in the circle of my family or friends, I have noticed that the life experience of some of my interlocutors represents a true historical source, which came to confirm in most cases what I knew from documents or specialized literature. Thus, the desire to develop a questionnaire that was to be applied to my different collaborators (from my family environment, in the first phase) was born, as well as the intention to conduct interviews with the people in question, in order to use the information obtained for research.

A first research attempt had as a field of study the period 1947-1989, encompassing both the era of Gheorghe Gheorghiu - Dej and that of Nicolae Ceaușescu, with a comparative approach to the periods in mind. However, the large period of time that should have been covered, the immense volume of information, the impossibility of conducting interviews with a significant number of people who lived through the early period of Romanian communism, along with the indications from the Doctoral Guidance Commission made me narrow the time period and focus on drawing an image of women, as revealed by the sources used, during the Ceaușescu regime, balancing the way in which the communist propaganda used and presented women and the reality they lived and their individual life experiences. Upon the recommendations of the Doctoral Commission, in order to be able to treat the subject in the most efficient way possible, I have reduced the field of my research to the period of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime (1965 -1989) and I have decided to build the discourse on the antithesis between women's everyday reality and their image used by communist propaganda.

Such an approach, in my view, has brought together both archival sources, specialized works, and contemporary publications aimed at women, and, especially, oral testimonies obtained from people who lived during the communist period. In the first instance, I set out to interview only women, considering that they represented the

target group of my concerns. However, following the recommendations received during the meetings with the supervising professors, I extended the interviews to men as well, although the number of these interviews is significantly smaller. Nevertheless, the interviews with the male collaborators have offered me a new perspective, that of the way in which contemporaries perceived women and their opinions about the situation of women during the Ceaușescu regime.

The interviews took place between 2020-2024; they were organized with a number of sixty-five people, women and men, from various socio-professional categories, mostly from urban areas and from rural areas, as well. The interviews were initially based on a questionnaire with twenty-one questions that formed the core of the discussions with my interlocutors. In most cases, the interviews were not limited to the application of the questionnaire, but continued in the form of discussions, confessions, the so-called "life stories". My interlocutors were initially chosen from the circle of close friends, family and relatives, so that later, through their recommendations, I could also interview unknown people. This technique of establishing a sample is known as the "snowball effect". In this way, I gradually created the sample for my research. What all my collaborators have in common is that they were contemporaries of Nicolae Ceaușescu's era, that they are people from the middle social class, and above all, that their confessions were recorded for the first time for the purpose of historical research. Thus, the story of their lives became a source of information for the historian I am, in the position of the researcher.

From an ethical point of view, I resolved the situation by signing research participation agreements, which, by the way, some of the collaborators did not even want to sign in the first phase because they did not consider it necessary. I respected their wish, as I also respected the requests of some of my interlocutors who wished to remain anonymous, or to appear in the research only with their initials. Since we are also talking about aspects of private life, such a requirement is understandable, so I decided that the interviews would be used as sources, partially reproduced in the work and a table was drawn up that would include information regarding names (initials or anonymous, where applicable), sex, age, location, date of interview, etc.

The veracity of the stories entrusted to me, their authenticity, could have represented a "problem"; but I have tried to solve this shortcoming by the fact that all my work of collecting information and processing them materialized around a "research conglomerate", as I called it, in which the stories complement each other, are combined,

thus creating an objective basis, verifiable also by calling on other sources. At the same time each story, narrative, of course, retains its subjectivity and originality.

The interviews have been conducted, for the most part, at the homes of my collaborators, were audio recorded and then transcribed for research purposes. A small part of the interviews, a number of thirteen, was represented by e-mails in which the collaborators answered me punctually to the questions in the questionnaire and added various other information that they considered important for our approach.

I considered that from a methodological point of view it was appropriate for my approach to apply both the questionnaire and to use the “life story” type interview, especially because during the meetings with my interlocutors, I noticed that it was much easier for them to communicate in this way. The “life stories” focused on everyday experiences, my collaborators shared with me their memories regarding the situations they experienced daily, how they managed to combine their profession and family life, how much of what was broadcast as propaganda was found as a counterpart in the reality they lived under communism, fashion, inspirational models, the impact of pro-natalist policies on their lives.

Without claiming to have covered all levels of interest, this work aims to be a contribution to the history of women in Romania, the approach to the subject being a personal one, and it does not exclude other visions on the same theme. The bibliography used when elaborating this work is not exhaustive and was compiled and used according to the necessity justified by the author. It comprises two sections, one of unpublished sources and one of published sources, bringing together a significant number of documents from the archive funds, interviews, press, memoirs, general or special works that deal with themes of women's history, history of Romanian communism, various studies and articles related to the theme considered for the preparation of this thesis.

In this paper, both the documents researched in the archive funds and the interviews that I conducted for the purpose of documentation are treated as relevant sources, of the same level of importance. This work falls within a broader direction of research on the history of women in communist Romania, which has developed considerably especially during the last three decades. This direction combines historical and sociological research and brings to attention themes related to the daily life of women, their representation within the Romanian Communist Party, femininity in communism, stages of the process of women's emancipation, the ways in which women were used in communist ideology and propaganda, women's intimate lives and pro-

natalist measures, etc. Although the work addresses a theme that centres on the image of women, between reality and propaganda, it is rather an attempt to contribute to the history of women during the communist period, not to that of communist propaganda.

The use of interviews and oral sources as a working tool places the research embodied in this thesis in the *socio-historical category*. Some of the sources used in the preparation of my thesis are archives documents, the ones found in the funds of the Central National Historical Archives (CNHA), in the funds of the National Council for Studying the Securitate Archives (NCSSA), or the funds of the Romanian Academy Archives. These are complemented by memoirs, biographies and diaries, some of them unpublished. I include in this category Victor Săhleanu's Journal, available in the funds of the Romanian Academy Library, Manuscripts-Rare Book Service. Other memoirs, diaries and biographies used are also those such as: Ecaterina Oproiu, Journal, volumes I-III, and *3x8 plus infinity. Dialogues about the Woman's Condition*, Violeta Năstăsescu, *Elena Ceaușescu, Confessions without Boundaries*, Ariana Rosser Macarie, *Houses, trains and Kitting Needles*, Annie Bentoiu, *The Time We Have Been Given*, Delia Budeanu, *Live*, etc.

Also, in order to document aspects of *propaganda*, I used as sources the publications for women of the communist period, especially the magazines *Femeia* and *Moda*, and other publications of general interest, as well as some artistic films, documentaries or television reportages made during the period that is the subject of this thesis. From a methodological point of view, I have carried out a comparative analysis that marked, on the one hand, the aspects revealed following the interviews and those obtained from diaries and memoirs, and, on the other hand, the information from the communist press and from the archives materials, which constitutes the official framework.

This thesis is structured in four chapters, each chapter being divided into two to six subchapters. An *Introduction* provides details about the motivation for having chosen the mentioned research topic, the stage of the research in the field of interest; the resources used in the development of the research are also displayed and the working hypotheses considered are mentioned. The section devoted to *Conclusions* brings together the findings that the author extracts after having carried out the research and after having written the thesis. There is also an *Appendices section* that includes photocopies of various documents, drawings, published studies, as well as photographs from the personal archive, other materials considered significant for the present

endeavor, as well as the questionnaire that was used as a support for the interviews conducted for the purpose of the research.

The section including the *Case Studies*, in the final part of the thesis, shows some of the interviews conducted by the author during the period 2020-2024 and are presented in full. These interviews are unpublished, presented for a better understanding of the present approach. The interviews that we have considered the most complete and conclusive have been chosen to be rendered. Most of the information obtained during the research is included in the corpus of the work, within the relevant sections.

In the end, the *Bibliography* presents all the material used in writing this thesis, the sources of inspiration considered and consulted. It is displayed alphabetically, by category, indicating the sources from the archival funds, periodicals, general and special works used, memoirs consulted, filmography, documentaries, online sources accessed, etc.

The first chapter of the work is entitled *Women in communist propaganda* and aims to expose the way in which communist propaganda used the image of women to implement the new political and social realities. The chapter provides a brief explanation of the term *propaganda*, general details about its use throughout history, in general, and in Romanian communism, in particular. In the first chapter, we have delimited the period of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's regime, in order to provide a comparative framework with the period that is the subject of our thesis.

The second chapter of the work, *Models of femininity in communism between reality and coercion*, presents some of the female examples of the moment, from various fields of activity, who became sources of inspiration for women in Romania. These models entered, with or without their will, the area of competence of *propaganda*, which used them for ideological purposes, depending on the interests of the party-state. We have included, in the mentioned chapter, examples such as actresses, models, pop or popular music artists, television presenters (RTV presenters), sportswomen or intellectuals from various fields, the way in which they were used for *propaganda* purposes and the real aspects of their lives.

The third chapter, *Fashion in communism between the impositions of the single party and elegance*, is dedicated to aspects related to fashion during communism, how it was used in order to standardize individuals, how women during the communist period managed to maintain a touch of originality and elegance, while politics imposed various ideological norms. The chapter gives details regarding the situation of the

clothing industry in the years before and immediately after World War II, fashion at the beginning of the communist period, clothing during the ideological *détente*, and finally, fashion of necessity and the constraints of the 1980s.

The fourth chapter, *Women and motherhood under communism*, is the one with the greatest emotional charge, and it has also been the most difficult to write and document. It has taken into account the pro-natalist policy of the Ceaușescu regime and the ways in which the lives of Romanian citizens were affected, especially the lives of women, who became laboratories for producing children during the communist regime. The chapter contains data on the post-war birth rate, the particularity of the Romanian case in relation to neighboring states, aspects also mentioned in the works of other historians, anthropologists and researchers, Romanian or foreign ones. The Romanian socio-political situation from the moment of the adoption of Decree no. 770/1966 is exemplified, the immediate impact of this decree on the population and also the ways of adaptation, respectively of avoidance, that people subsequently developed.

The subchapters containing testimonies of the collaborators who participated in the research were difficult to manage, due to the emotional factor that these confessions involved. Moreover, due to aspects of intimacy, of private life, some of my interlocutors refused to answer, or gave general answers, to the questions regarding pregnancy terminations or contraception. Another part of the collaborators, offered, not easily, the requested answers, but in this case it was opted for maintaining anonymity (either by using initials instead of the full name, or by completely anonymizing the respondent). I have respected the requests of my collaborators as they have expressed them, being deeply indebted to them for the effort they made. Without the interviews conducted through the kindness of those persons with whom I have collaborated for the purpose of the research, the present work would not have existed.

When I started my doctoral research, I set out to bring as a novelty regarding the history of women in the communist Romania (1965-1989) - the unpublished experiences discovered through interviews or through research of memoirs and notes of people who lived during the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime. These testimonies were to be the basis from which I was to start the entire research. I have intended to outline the entire work around the core formed by the life experiences of real people who lived under communism, because I have considered that such an approach is still necessary, oral history being an inexhaustible source.

I focused on the female side of the history of life under communism because, on the one hand, it covers an area of personal interest from a research point of view and, on the other hand, due to the conviction that women have represented a category that suffered the most under Ceaușescu's communism. Propaganda had two characteristics in the years of the communist regime regarding women. Thus, the image of women was used in various ways to serve the purposes of propaganda, but women were also the beneficiaries of propaganda, with scenarios and stories for them being constructed with a moralizing purpose. The mass of women in the country were served examples of exemplary communist women, whom they should have followed, but they were also offered a multitude of articles that warned them about the dangers that lurked outside the protective communist world. As a way of taking their existence beyond the pattern established by the regime, women in Ceaușescu's Romania created their own valves, resisting by adapting to the existing situation.

From the accounts that were entrusted to me, I can conclude that these forms of resistance did not only include actions such as revolt against the system, few in number and inhibited by fear, but also the circumvention of the norms drawn up at the political level. The personal regrets of my collaborators do not come from a nostalgia for the communist past, but rather for a period of their existence, the years of their youth, the complete families that they had and that, over time, they lost. Given this, we conclude that the image of women exposed by communist propaganda is one that is in antithesis with reality. Everything that was broadcast at the propaganda level, with and for women, was an ideologized and censored version of reality.

The present work aims to delimit the ideological sphere from the real one, bringing in this sense testimonies that combat the official version promoted under communism. Most of the testimonies are unpublished, processed and published for the first time in a research. The main concern in developing this work was to answer the question *How much and what was real in communism?* and for this it was necessary to combine the two planes, reality, as it emerges from the experience of ordinary people, and propaganda, from the perspective of the communist regime.

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