

WOMAN AS AN OBJECT VS. WOMAN AS A SPIRIT- THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN A FEMININE NOVEL: *BOGDANA* BY IOANA POSTELNICU

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ABSTRACT:

THE AIM OF THE PRESENT STUDY IS AN INTROSPECTION IN IOANA POSTELNICU'S NOVEL, BOGDANA, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN IN A NOVEL CREATED BY A FEMININE MIND. IN 1939, IN A LITERARY WORLD DOMINATED BY MEN, IOANA POSTELNICU PUBLISHES HER FIRST NOVEL, BOGDANA. THE WRITER CONSIDERED THAT HER NOVEL WAS VERY WELL RECEIVED BY THE FEMININE READERS DUE TO THE FACT THAT WOMEN RECOGNIZED IN IT A VOICE THAT RESEMBLED THEIR OWN. THE MAIN CHARACTER, BOGDANA, IS TRAPPED BETWEEN TWO DIMENSIONS OF HER EXISTENCE. ON ONE HAND SHE IS AN OBJECT, PROPERTY OF HER HUSBAND AND, ON THE OTHER HAND, IN THE DEEPEST PLACES OF HER CONSCIOUSNESS SHE SEEMS TO BE A FREE SPIRIT CAUGHT IN A CONFLICT BETWEEN THE INNER AND OUTER PARTS OF HER BEING.

KEY WORDS: FEMINISM, IDENTITY, FEMININE WRITING, INTERIOR CONFLICT, EXISTENCE, PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS.

In the essay named *Women and Fiction*, published in March 1929, Virginia Woolf analyzed the behavior of female writers of the time. The author noticed that the subjects of the novels written by women had suffered several mutations:

„they are less interested, it would seem, in themselves; on the other hand, they are more interested in other women [...] Women are beginning to explore their own sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before; for of course, until very lately, women in literature were the creation of men.” [1]

Ten years later, when the Romanian literary field had already greeted and recognized the writing skills of female writers such as Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, in 1939, Ioana Postelnicu's first novel, *Bogdana*, was brought out. It was a novel which paid tribute to „the literary genre encouraged by the circle and magazine *Sburătorul*.”[2] E. Lovinescu, the mentor of *Sburătorul*, was of the opinion that this novel was a display of a great artistic sense in the realm of feelings. As a matter of fact, in an interview published in 1978 in a magazine named *Orizont*, a seventy-

years-old Ioana Postelnicu tried to somehow account for the positive feedback her first novel had received:

„First of all, I was of interest to people because I was one of Lovinescu’s apprentices. A debutant who had come into the world of writers bearing the laudatory endorsement of E. Lovinescu. It was the feminine audience that highly appreciated the novel. The women recognized within it a voice that resembled their own.” [3]

As it appears, after almost four decades since she had set foot into the Romanian literary arena, Ioana Postelnicu spoke about a certain recognition as a means of decoding the success of the novel among female readers. A very relevant explanation, if we take into account, on one hand the social context and, on the other hand, the status of women writers of the time. In respect of this sensitive issue, Lovinescu, the one who indisputably had shown a generous consideration to any talented person, regardless sex, considered that literature was not a prototypical feminine vocation, but a manly one. Actually, Ioana Postelnicu herself remembers an interesting fact about the one who had chosen her pen name: „I have to mention that, at first, he had named me Sergiu Dușescu, believing that it was better for me to sign my works with the name of a man.”[4]

Bogdana received different reviews from literary critics. G. Călinescu considered it to be just another work resembling the novel *Tinerețe* that Lucia Demetrius had written. In Călinescu’s opinion Ioana Postelnicu’s novel contained „no significant indecencies, but only a few delicate erotic states.”[5] Lovinescu, on the other hand, approaches this novel completely different. To his mind, *Bogdana* was an unique, original novel. Later on, another review of *Bogdana* came from Elena Zaharia-Filipaș, who in her work named *Studii de literatură feminină* claims that:

„*Bogdana* fulfilled Lovinescu’s expectations as it was telling the story of a woman trapped in her own tragical erotic obsession. The author probed into the field of the glorification of senses proving a rare artistic experience.” [6]

As seen before, Ioana Postelnicu considered that a certain *know voice* that women had discovered among the pages of her novel was the key ingredient to her success. Moreover, it is important to mention that the main character is a woman who is created by a feminine mind. Therefore, the authenticity of sensations, of feelings and emotions is guaranteed by the fact that they are all the fruits of a woman’s sensibility. Actually, the writer herself explains this idea by saying that writings like *Bogdana* were consequences of:

„a soul overflown with feelings. It was a treasury of dreams and desires which had to be consumed by means of introspection and subtle analysis. It was a solution to inner conflicts woken in the psychological boundaries of my being, in the boundaries imposed by the social status in which I was living. I was living, we were living, we, the women, bent over our soul as if we were searching for our face in a fountain, or even searching our lives’ purpose.”[7]

Regarding Ioana Postelnicu, Ion Dodu Bălan considered that she was far from being a common writer and, even more, he believed she was just like every original writer, unique, a distinct voice with a distinct perspective of the world. Through her most representative works, she fitted, in the beginning, in the line of psychological prose. *Bogdana* is, undoubtedly, a

psychological novel, as the author probes into a highly personal territory of her main character's mind, Bogdana, who also borrows her name to the novel. Bianca Burța-Cernat believes that *Bogdana* is „a novel with just one character: a woman who indulges herself in a disconcerting idleness. She felt her emptiness but was unable to fill it with anything else but memories, fantasies and vague desires.”[8] Bogdana, a young secretary becomes the wife of a successful lawyer, but in spite of this, she exists rather than lives in a material comfort which fails to fulfill her deepest desires. A serious emotional instability shatters the young woman's being, dismantles her existence and shapes her actions. Bogdana bears the burden of a wretched childhood shadowed by an unfriendly elder sister and devoid of any attention coming from her parents, a cold behavior that deeply marked young Bogdana's personality. Once she becomes Mrs. Drăguș, she is not able to leave behind all those sorrowful experiences which have left such strong marks on her:

„There were enough reasons for someone to stop and take a look at her. Bogdana knew it all too well. But as a being, as a spirit she had no shining adornment, not a single thing to make her worthy of a moment of undivided attention.”[9]

Among the male characters, Adam Drăguș, Bogdana's husband, stands out. Ioana Postelnicu creates for him quite a strong profile. The two of them, Bogdana and Adam, met in official circumstances, as Drăguș was the lawyer in charge of her legal problems. From the very beginning, their relationship is built on a significant difference of power:

„For a few weeks the girl had lived with the presence of that man, a man she hadn't seen yet and who, from the other side of the town, by means of papers, of his full, official signature laid near the scrawled one that belonged to her mother, was in command of their home, of her, of her mother [...] In her mind, the lawyer had become gigantic, powerful and to his feet her mother would bow with gratitude [...]”[10]

This way, Adam Drăguș, the lawyer, enters the young woman's life enjoying an obvious higher status. It's not only the difference in age that this advantage is built upon. The social and intellectual status are two important dimensions that kept on fueling it. As a matter of fact, their entire relationship can be defined as a dichotomous one. In other words, Adam represented everything that Bogdana didn't and vice versa. The confidence the man displayed, completely lacked to the young woman whose personality had been mutilated by the experiences of the past. Bogdana had never been the object of someone's attention, she had never known the confidence that came out of people's appreciation. Bogdana didn't belong to anyone, not even to herself, fact that renders her to be a perfect match for the „typology of the woman-shadow who, painfully but without any fight, accepts her condition.”[11] This human being, who Adam Drăguș considered to be stupid, becomes his wife allowing him to hold a great influence on her. Therefore, the male character enters a never-ending game of masks. He becomes, by turns, Bogdana's creator, owner and master but never once her partner in the real sense of the word:

„In the beginning of their marriage, Bogdana, numbed by her new condition, submitted to his will, and later on she just couldn't shake off her the armory she had voluntarily accepted. Adam Drăguș

was the stake she was chained to. And he was the one who decided the length of the strings. Over her ability to understand, Drăguș had thrown a veil which he would lift only when he felt like doing so.”[12]

The lawyer doesn't consider his wife to be a living, genuine soul. For him, Bogdana is more of an object at the service of the one that dominates her:

„Bogdana's feelings have never been of interest for Adam Drăguș. He had never tried to understand her, for there was nothing to be understood. Bogdana was his woman and he managed to find a balance between the fullness of his being and the emptiness of his woman. He had found what he had been looking for [...] The woman was beaming like a nice bulb attached to a chandelier at a ball. She was the way she was because he wanted her like that; her submission seemed natural to him, didn't come as a surprise at all.”[13]

Two very different aspects of the feminine presence give Ioana Postelnicu's female character her orbiting path. On one hand, Bogdana stands for the woman regarded as an object, property of her husband on whose domination she is completely dependent. On the other hand, though, Bogdana embodies the living spirit which finds its freedom only in the deepest and darkest places of her own being, as she can't find any strength to express herself in the presence of her husband. Bogdana's odd submission can be understood as her failure to create her own identity, a failure to cross the borders her husband's ego had imposed on her. Her insecurities are the chains that tied her will to that of Adam Drăguș. Besides that, her external appearance, the reason she becomes the object of the lawyer's desires, hides an internal maelstrom which collides with the total lack of emotion that she displayed:

„She had felt the oddness of this situation a long time ago, many years ago...In the first few month of their marriage. Back then, she wished for a fire to destroy her face [...] She hated her body, her tall, noble appearance - an attractive element -, the first attractive element of her being. It was a strong wall which rose with elegance and efficiency between her and the outsiders. No one had ever climbed that wall so far, not even Adi, especially not Adi.” [14]

In other words, Bogdana's real existence, the one supported by the authenticity of her feelings and emotions, unfolded in the inner territory of her being: unseen, unknown, undisclosed. Her outer existence, opposed to the inner one, came down to that of a valuable exhibit, worthy of envy, from Adam Drăguș's gallery of properties. Therefore, Bogdana was the prisoner of her own body, and her body, turned into an object, belonged to Drăguș.

The woman lives in a house that reminds the readers of a secluded space. The obsessing order of the objects, and even the objects themselves support this idea:

„she would look around the corners of the house mechanically, inspecting the objects which, since they had moved in, had never had their place changed. She would cast a brief and hateful look at the painting with the evil-boding owl with bulging eyes. It seemed that it was permanently following her, as if her husband was hidden behind those eyes. Then she would come near the fireplace and lean her back against it, waiting.”[15]

In fact, that painting is mentioned more than once in the description of the spaces in Ioana Postelnicu's novel. The owl, the symbol of sadness, darkness, solitude and melancholy

[16] is the guardian of the main character. It is also the one that seems to be marking the directory points of her destiny, for „Bogdana was scared by the darkness that came unexpected. She only liked the one that she made by herself.” [17]

The secret phone affair she steps in together with a stranger called Val Amaru represents her desperate effort to escape from the monotony of her marriage. The delusion of the power to be her own master, to be able to assert herself as a distinct personality is the one that constantly feeds Bogdana’s imagination:

„the man’s words had stirred up her imagination and the full, fruitful seed that spread in the sensitive, welcoming soul of hers gave her courage and power to decide. It seemed to her that there was no one else in the world, except for them and that her old existence had vanished. Whenever she saw Drăguș, she looked at him with wondering eyes, as if that was the first time she laid eyes on him, as if he were an intruder in her life. She felt strong, ready to face a conversation with him, no matter how harsh it might have got.” [18]

In spite of all these, her love affair was a failure. Bogdana didn’t manage to go through with it, to brake loose from the chains of her husband. On the contrary, all that that failed affair does is to alter the image Bogdana had on Adam Drăguș, to transform him, in her mind, in an „priceless asset”. [19] This experience, the bitter wave of a failed attempt to escape condemns Bogdana to a defeated return to the shore of her existence, eroded by unspoken thoughts.

In conclusion, *Bogdana* can be considered the novel of the existential emptiness of a woman on whom insecurities fueled by ghosts of the past have left their irreparable marks. Turned into a property of her husband, she experiments emotional scissions which go to the extent of provoking a conflict between the inner and the external territories of the same person. In this novel, Ioana Postelnicu manages to fathom dark regions of the spirit, presenting the readers pages of sophisticated psychological analysis.

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