

BAD MOTHERS AND MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE IN *CICLUL HALLIPILOR* [THE HALLIPA CYCLE] BY HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU AND *PATIMI* [PASSIONS] BY SOFIA NĂDEJDE¹

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Abstract

The article analyzes the symptomatic representations of maternal experience in the modern Romanian novel written by women. It aims to draw attention to maternal voices portrayed in literary texts across national contexts at the beginning of the 20th century. The two novels proposed for this study focus on two prominent Romanian women writers who held ideologically opposing views: Sofia Nădejde (1856-1946), a feminist and socialist activist, and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu (1876-1955), a well-established female novelist associated with the influential literary group which marked Romanian literary modernism during the interwar period – *Sburătorul*. This article examines the instrumental role of maternity and maternal ambivalence in these two novels. The often distant or even toxic relationship between mothers and children illustrates that maternity in this context is not a choice, but a question influenced by social demands and “female responsibility.” Thus, I explore significant aspects of “modern motherhood” as a gendered experience shaped by the social order: maternity as a matrimonial transaction, domestic oppression, social pressure, and finally, how the need for social emancipation and economic advancement interfere with the maternal role that women experience in terms of patriarchal constraints. This article aims to reflect on how these novels depict maternity as an experience beyond women’s agency.

Keywords: motherhood; Romanian modern novel; modern mothers; women’s responsibility; social and domestic oppression.

1. Introduction

In Romanian literary representations of the late 19th century and the early 20th century, female experiences, such as childbirth, menstruation, or even miscarriage, are considered to extend beyond what can be represented as such. Motherhood is conceived as an attribute of a traditional woman and contrasts with the image of emancipated, independent women at the time. Starting in the early 20th century, metropolitan global modernism and the values of a new capitalist society revolved around a different identity for women, who were defined outside the traditional private sphere. An image that became a referential representation of women in Romanian female writing during this period.

Studies on Romanian social history discuss the dichotomy concerning women’s emancipation, which, during the first half of the 20th century, was perceived as either “a

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relaxation of morals”² or “decadence”³ (Pippidi, 1988, p. 17). In the late 19th century, women were naturally associated with procreating and safeguarding the Romanian nation⁴ (Băluță, 2003, p. 63). The intersection of this principle with women’s emancipation and sexual liberation influenced societal perceptions of women at the crossroads of these two significant trends.

The concerns about women’s emancipation in the 19th century emerge in Mihail Kogălniceanu’s⁵ writing, who, in 1859, proposed a project aimed at the “improvement of the family,”⁶ emphasizing its importance for “moralizing society”⁷ (Vintilă, 2003, p. 269). In the early 20th century, the family crisis was associated with a moral crisis primarily attributed to the emancipation of sexual relations and women. Numerous conservative and reactionary voices (from the traditionalist movement opposed to aligning Romanian culture and society with Western values⁸) in the first half of the 20th century deemed women’s newfound freedoms a major cause of Romanian society’s moral decay. The moral corruption attributed to women became a significant topic by the mid-century, particularly during the interwar years, when women’s “excessive Europeanization” was still deemed a social danger (Jianu, 2003, p. 138).

Taking into accounts these elements, I aim to analyze the origins and dimensions of the tense relationship with motherhood developed by female characters in the novels of two authors, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and Sofia Nădejde, representative as female novelists in Romania in the first half of the 20th century. The representation of women as mothers emerges through the lens of monstrosity projected onto the children, constructed as a deviated identity, and onto the mothers whose experience is defined through subversive maternal desire (Goriss-Hunter, 2021, p. 20). Maternal subversion is characterized by two forms of rejection that are intensified in the two writings. Motherly experience is viewed either as an obstacle and failure that prevents women from achieving the social status they aspire to as independent bourgeois women or as a punishment for women who give birth outside of the normative social order. My argument is that the rejection of the maternal role and children reveals a gender crisis and a feminine anxiety against the background of social and economic changes at the beginning of the 20th century in Romania.

I aim to firstly examine the impact of self-desires and aspirations of women on the conflict between women as mothers and women’s agency, starting from the biographical data of the two authors. Maternal experience is illustrated through a radical representation of mothers who are either hypersexualized, hysterical, ambivalent, or even violent and monstrous with regards to their children. Female characters’ maternal posture inevitably turns into a spectacle meant to caricaturize them, on the one hand, and to replace their inability to express their fears and anxieties outside these radical behaviors.

Secondly, through a close reading focused on the mother–daughter relationship, the article examines radical representations of the mother–child bond as symptomatic of women’s internal conflict between motherhood, domesticity, independence, and economic aspirations. In the interwar period, the undeniably bourgeois institution of the family prescribed the terms

² Original source text: „o relaxare a moravurilor”

³ Original source text: „decădere”

⁴ The first Romanian-language magazine dedicated to mothers and raising children was founded in 1865 by revolutionary Maria Rosetti, in her advice to mothers, Rosetti says that the mission of mothers is to build good patriots.

⁵ M. Kogălniceanu (1817-1891) was a liberal politician and chief editor at *Dacia Literară*, one of the most important political and cultural magazines in the late 19th century, and the third prim-minister of Romania)

⁶ Original source text: „îmbunătățirea familiei”

⁷ Original source text: „moralizarea societății”

⁸ The cultural synchronization movement led by E. Lovinescu was a real phenomenon of opening for Romanian culture in the interwar period. It manifested itself in literature, philosophy, politics, and social practices. The synchronism promoted by Lovinescu was strongly boycotted by conservative and traditionalist factions. Synchronism was at the center of polemics in the interwar years, E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne* [The history of modern Romanian Civilization], 2016.

under which women could participate in the public sphere and the extent to which they were expected to devote themselves to childrearing. Motherhood functioned to reinforce the social order embodied by the family, while women's social deviations and extramarital procreation were used against them. From this perspective, motherhood acquires a punitive dimension. The tension between motherhood and women's independence during this supposed era of emancipation is reflected in representations of children. The selection of the novels takes into account the authors' ideological positions and their relationship to writing. Both Nădejde and Papadat-Bengescu were mothers and wives; however, Nădejde, as a socialist intellectual, articulated proto-feminist sensibilities, whereas Papadat-Bengescu belonged to the aesthetic circle gathered around E. Lovinescu and *Sburătorul*. The works analyzed – Papadat-Bengescu's *Ciclul Hallipilor* [*The Hallipa cycle*] which includes: (*Fecioarele despletite* [Disheveled maidens], 1925; *Concert din muzică de Bach* [A concert of music by Bach], 1927; *Drumul ascuns* [The hidden road], 1933, and Nădejde's *Patimi* [*Passions*], 1903 – are particularly illustrative in this regard. Finally, the article explores the social and economic instrumentalization of motherhood. It examines the role of children within these fictional families to understand women's attitudes toward childbirth and childrearing, and how ambivalence—even repulsion—toward maternity may generate forms of violence directed at children.

Thus, the article proposes a socio-historical and contextual analysis of the tense relationship between womanhood and motherhood, as well as the shifts in mindset occurring in this Eastern European context as it opens up to modernity and socio-cultural progress. The condition of motherhood during this period is unique as it is situated at the intersection of two histories: the 19th century, when maternity became the ultimate social mission for women, and the new socio-cultural context of synchronizations that occurred in this era of women's emancipation.

2. Mothering and Women's Independence – the Maternal Ambivalence

Intellectual occupation and motherhood are not socially acceptable, whereas “in the life of a woman, mind and body, creativity and procreation, books, and babies, have historically been mutually exclusive” (Benedetti, 2007, p. 27). For instance, Papadat-Bengescu started to publish at an older age, nearly 40, and was the mother of five children and the wife of a man who scorned her intellectual and literary interests. In her autobiography and in the letters she sent to her fellow writers, she mourns the way her family and children hinder her writing. In her published diary fragments, she complained about her authoritarian husband who prevented her from writing: “[...] It is the realization that your whole life, for 45 years of marriage, has been destroyed by the selfishness of the man who was and is your husband, but the meaning of husband, companion, protector does not exist”⁹ (Papadat-Bengescu in Baltazar, 1962, p. 70, my translation).

Nădejde wrote numerous articles about motherhood and family, drawing attention to how motherhood is socially exploited. She frequently asserted that a woman has the social mission to give birth, which limits their role in society:

“So, what are we but just some slaves reduced to the role of giving birth? We give birth and raise our children through life's most demanding work and adversities! How many

⁹ Original source text: „E constatarea că viața ta întreagă, timp de 45 de ani de căsătorie (ba mai mult), a fost distrusă de egoismul felurit al omului ce a fost și îți este soț, dar sensul de soț, de tovarăș, de protector, nu există.”

sleepless nights! And how many things do we give up for that? [...] Happy should be the mother who is not sacrificed!”¹⁰ (Nădejde in Mihăilescu, 2002, p. 86, my translation).

For Nădejde, motherhood under the patriarchal constraints represents a form of subjugation akin to slavery. She equates bondage and motherhood, as neither circumstance allows individuals autonomy over their bodies.

For this writer, motherhood presented its own specific. According to her testimony, they were longing for independence, and their maternal feelings were rather related to the “loss of freedom of movement that led to deprivation” (LaChance Adams, 2014, p. 45). This fact determines the novelist have a rather ambivalent attitude towards motherhood; as a result, the author responded to these feelings through the impulse of fight or flight (LaChance Adams, 2014, p. 50). As we can further see, such a narrative follows all these impulses that characterize an “unconventional”, and ambivalent maternal experience.

3. Writing “Bad Motherhood”: Resentment and Failure in Mother-Child Relationships

Papadat Bengescu’s novels explore themes of monstrous motherhood and cursed children (Crohălniceanu, 1984, p. 159). Her family trilogy, which includes the novels *Fecioarele despletite* [The disheveled maidens] (1925), *Concert din muzică de Bach* [A concert of music by Bach] (1927), and *Drumul ascuns* [The hidden road] (1933), focuses on an urban upper-middle-class family story, more precisely on a rather harmful mother figure. This character often experiences anxiety in what regards female corporeality in a hostile society; the result is the representation of women as hypersexual and deviant mothers and wives responsible for the moral decay of the bourgeois family institution. We consider the entire trilogy for the proposed analysis since these novels are interconnected and present symptomatic representation of monstrous mothers across generations. In modern Romanian literature, parent-child relationships generally lack affection and romanticized portrayals of motherhood. Resentment and repulsion, bordering on disgust, grow between mothers and their children, and portrayals of children are often extreme. In Sofia Nădejde’s first feminist novel (Baghiu, 2022, p. 51), a hysterical mother’s behavior underscores the dominant patriarchal constraints on women’s bodies and maternal experiences, especially in the absence of a vocabulary to express women’s anger and fear outside of female sexual deviation and maternal ambivalence and rejection (Ransirini, 2021, p. 104).

Since the monstrous is closely linked to the feminine (Goriss-Hunter, 2021, p. 23), maternal ambivalence is also shown in Papdat-Bengescu’s trilogy through the figure of a monstrous mother and daughter. Elena, along with her sister, Mika-Lé, and their mother Lenora, is mischievous in similar ways. Meanwhile, their sons become victims of maternal cruelty. The sons of these monstrous mothers’ end by killing themselves (as in the case of Elena’s son) or are characters worthy of pity, suffering from various pathologies. They are disabled and powerless in the face of the complexity of mothers’ drives, and they also tragically end, as it happens in the case of Elena’s twin brothers. The violence that characterizes the mother-child relationship appears in many social and intimate forms and interactions. Such violence aims to create space for “alternative” maternal aspirations and desires (Goriss-Hunter, 2021, p. 21), thereby challenging the traditional, male-centered view of the maternal experience in family and society. On the other hand, the monstrous portrayal of children signifies the

¹⁰ Original source text: „Așadar ce suntem noi decât niște sclave menite a perpetua genul omenesc? Noi naștem și creștem copiii prin cele mai mari munci și necazuri. Câte nopți nedormite! De câte plăceri nu ne privăm! Ferice de mama care nu este sacrificată!”

rejection of the maternal role. These monstrous children work as a language of negation, reflecting the mothers' attempts to assert their agency.

In Papadat-Bengescu's third part of her trilogy (*Drumul ascuns*, 1933), Elena Drăgănescu, the "good daughter" of Lenora Hallipa, who is a "fruit" of her marriage with landowner Doru Hallipa, faces a dramatic experience as a mother, which forms the main tension in the novel. Nothing tender or comforting happens in her relationship with her son, only resentment and indifference; she became a mother dominated by desires outside of her marriage. Elena has never seen him as a person, but rather as someone she controls to fulfill her desires and ambitions:

"Elena was shaping her heir according to her own preconceived ideas; she loved him because she could fulfill them [...] through him. She could multiply her ambition, [...] she could add him to her possession, through him she could represent herself once again, this was the great motivation of her affection."¹¹ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 947, my translation).

Elena and her partner instrumentalize the child as an economic mobility mechanism. Since the goal has been achieved, the child has become a subject who has fueled the mother's anger.

Along a similar line of thought, *Patimi* [Passions] (1903) focuses on sexual sin and the grim fate that "frivolous" women, who seek sexual pleasure, may face. In the rural aristocracy, Matilda, the main character, marries a landowner and has a child with him. As well as Elena Drăgănescu's experience as a mother, Matilda's daughter ends up serving as a representation of Matilda's inability to enjoy unconventional desires. When she falls in love with a man who represents the bohemian, civilized, urban world, the child becomes an obstacle to her freedom to evolve into an emancipated woman who can embrace the urban and cosmopolitan lifestyle. In Matilda's marriage, motherhood plays an instrumental role imposed by the prevailing sentiments of the rural community, against her desires. The presence of her daughter provoked Matilda's fury and repulsion. When the little girl spontaneously appeared in front of her and her lover, Matilda denied the filiation with her own daughter, treating her as if she were a stranger (Nădejde, 2021, p. 51). This harsh behaviour questions the interpretation of motherless feelings as a gendered attitude of resistance in front of an asymmetric distribution of power in the family.

From one generation of mothers to another, in Papadat-Bengescu's trilogy, as well as in the feminist novel by Nădejde, women contest all definitions of mother as a person "who meets child's demands for preservation, growth, and social accessibility" (LaChance Adams, 2019, p. 19). The unconventional desires of mothers are rendered through their *hypersexual* behaviour that diminishes familial ties and affection. *Fecioarele despletite* [The disheveled maidens] (1925), the protagonist, Lenora Hallipa, mother of Elena, illustrates femininity: she is candid and voluptuous, and she is described as looking like a "Nuremberg doll", which has a sexual connotation itself (Bryan Ganaway, 2010, 217). The level of affection between mothers and children is determined by the sexual tension that occurs in their relationship. For instance, Elena is desirable to her mother because she is no competition for her: "She is a lifeless mechanism, porcelain complexion, earthenware eyes, and a rigid body"¹² (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 431, my translation).

¹¹ Original source text: „Elena își pregătea moștenitorul pentru ideile ei preconceptuate, îl iubea pentru că i le putea satisface. (...) prin el își putea multiplica ambiția, (...) îl putea adăuga drepturilor ei de proprietate, că se putea, prin el, reprezenta o dată mai mult, era argumentul mare al afecțiunii ei”

¹² Original source text: „Este un mecanism lipsit de viață, piele de porțelan, ochi de faianță și un corp rigid”

Lenora's second daughter, Mika-Lé, born of an extramarital affair, appears as a "monstrous doll,"¹³ characterized by sexual deviance and corporeal excess, traits presented as inherited from her mother. (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 437). Mika-Lé illustrates her mother's sinfulness, and her sexuality is seen as a moral depravity that weakens the family. Mika-Lé has an affair with her sister's fiancé, a fact that led to the separation of the couple, as well as with all men who enter the family's house. She is treated like a servant, and, in turn, she "profits" from the fragile morality of her family's members, although she is rather a victim of sexual violence, as a way of expressing her feminine anger. This is why her sexuality is concerning and dangerous: "Mika-Lé speculates everywhere on her mysterious and harmful instinct"¹⁴ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2019, p. 1045, my translation). Mika-Lé's physical description, "deformed creature, degeneracy of nature"¹⁵, "trash-face good only for lay"¹⁶, highlights the fact that she embodies an unconventional and undesired femininity of "a prostitute"¹⁷ who provokes fear and anxieties for other women, and violent behaviour and fascination for men. Lenora is punished for the first time by giving birth to unofficial, thus, cursed children, and, secondly, through illness, as the cancer will attack the reproductive part of her body. In a depraved and "commercialized" society, women's ability to reproduce provokes doubts and anxiety; instead of affection, maternity raises fears and hate as a response to the new capitalist world (Baghiu, 2022, p. 51; Rogozanu, 2024, p. 114), defined by the struggle for social advancement. The legitimate daughter, Elena, is described as the opposite of her mother, who is an "instinctual, passionate and beautiful woman"¹⁸, unlike the daughter, who is a "rigid and lifeless figure without senses"¹⁹ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 419, my translation). The first novel of the trilogy presents the tension between women's aspirations for economic and social advancement and the conservative forms of the bourgeois family. The *hypersexualization* is embedded in the profile of bourgeois women who respond through the sexual spectacle to the dichotomy between agency and constraints that marks ambivalent maternal experience.

The same sexual desire will take possession of Matilda's body. It is ingenious how Sofia Nădejde explores the entrenched patriarchal biases regarding women's roles as mothers. Nădejde shows that the refusal of maternity is a socially unacceptable gesture, whereas it represents a boycott of the patriarchal structure of society. Mothers and children have an important role in the communal economy. They must serve the social and economic interests of the father (Mihăilescu, 2002, p. 286). Matilda falls in love with a dandy lawyer who seeks her husband's fortune²⁰, and she becomes a victim of her desires and, in this way, a social pariah: "Matilda was one of those women destined to fall prey to love! In middle age, when passion knows no bounds and borders on madness"²¹ (Nădejde, p. 42, my translation). A caricatural representation of clandestine affairs is common for both writings. For instance, Matilda, every time she saw the family friend, the ambitious lawyer, "felt a pleasant softness; she lacked the strength to resist the alluring love, the hidden passion that consumed her"²² (Nădejde, p. 49, my translation). In fact, Matilda's passion does not belong to the sphere of

¹³ Original source text: „păpușă monstruoasă”

¹⁴ Original source text: „Mika-Le specula pretutindeni misteriosul și nocivul ei instinct”

¹⁵ Original source text: „creatură diformă, degenerescență a naturii”

¹⁶ Original source text: „față de gunoi mic care duce la tăvăleală”

¹⁷ Original source text: „a prostituatei”

¹⁸ Original source text: „O femeie, frumoasă, pasională și instinctuală”

¹⁹ Original source text: „O figură rigidă, lipsită de viață și fără simțuri”

²⁰ Original source text: The phenomenon of *thruster* is symptomatic for the economic development of Romania in the first part of the 20th century, as a new class that interestedly oscillated around the old aristocracy., see Ștefan Baghiu's preface (2022).

²¹ Original source text: „Matilda era din acele femei menite a cădea pradă iubirii la vârsta de mijloc, atunci când patima nu mai cunoaște mărgești și esoră de aproape cu nebunia”

²² Original source text: „a simțit omângăiere plăcută; nu avea tăria să reziste iubirii seducătoare, pasiunii ascunse care o mistuia”

pure desires, but rather to her aspiration to advance in the social hierarchy represented by her clandestine lover.

Nădejde critically highlights how female characters in Romanian literature are put in a dishonorable light. Thus, “Matilda had been a poor girl; she got married and gave birth to secure her life, not out of love, and since she was very young when she told her friends that she would marry out of financial interest”²³ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 32, my translation). Mothers are depicted as self-absorbed and infamous, while fathers are more responsible and victims of monstrous mothers, in the context that both mother and father’s aim is the same: economic gain and social prosperity. Matilda’s husband, a landowner who is dealing with significant financial issues, is shown in the background. His generosity, devotion, and patience highlight the asymmetric involvement in their child’s education: “Oh, if only I didn’t have a baby! I’d shoot myself or disappear from the country, nobody would know me, and it’d be easier than here”²⁴ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 46, my translation). Thus, she is not only indifferent, but she betrays her husband and daughter by eloping with another man. The radical gesture of abandonment hides indifferent women in front of the institution of family, qualified as a male property, social expectations, and women’s attempt to accede to the values promoted by the new society, connected to the values of global capitalism defined by individual gain and wealth. Matilda’s husband represents the decline of the “old world” and of the landowners in rural areas. She flees from the fear of social decline and of ending up back among the peasant class, so she implicitly flees from her family, which is an extension of this rural world, contrasted by the new urban capitalist society represented by the lawyer.

In contrast with Papadat-Bengescu’s trilogy, which establishes maternal ambivalence as pathology, Nădejde takes a critical position in front of women’s constraints, and sheds a different light on maternal ambivalence seen as a paradoxical dimension of motherhood, split between women’s agency and separation from their desires and social aspirations. The attitude towards maternal ambivalence of these authors became evidence of the ideological beliefs of these two writers.

4. Spectacular Mothers and Dramatic Motherhood

In both writings, at the debut, the female character follows the social norms of femininity and responds to social expectations about women’s roles in national imagery. They get married for interest; they are feminine, obedient, flirty, and very kind to men. They play their roles as mother and wife in a very spectacular way. Motherhood stands for an institution that women honor without being truly familiar with because men appropriate motherhood to respond to their social assertion needs (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 176). In these novels, dichotomic feelings concerning children and family life determine that spectacularity replaces an articulate vocabulary of representation of women’s needs and voice. The most common representation of a mother oscillates between obedience and hysteria, which contains their fear and anxieties (Ransirini, 2021, p. 111).

In Nădejde’s novel, Matilda aspires to a bohemian, cosmopolitan, urban life, and her lover is the only reference she has to this world. In the way of her path, the child is a hindrance in her attempt to achieve these goals. Her reactions are more radical when the clandestine lover is around. Her sharp dialogues on the role of women in society with her husband and friends are partially fueled by her inability to live independently from the family. Matilda is spectacular

²³ Original source text: „Matilda fusese o fată săracă. S-a măritat și a făcut un copil pentru a-și asigura viața, nu din iubire. De când era foarte tânără, le spunea prietenilor că se va mărita din interes”

²⁴ Original source text: „Oh, dacă n-aș avea un copil! M-aș împușca ori m-aș duce în lume, să nu mă cunoască nimeni și mi-ar fi mai ușor decât aici!”

as she plays a role. Her attitude is flirty; she is showing off continuously and always looks exquisite. She is described at the beginning of the novel as a very irritable person, like a smoldering fire: “she was like a smoldering fire, smothered under a layer of ash; all it took was a gust of wind for the fire to burst forth furiously”²⁵ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 42, my translation).

Matilda’s political beliefs and position regarding women’s roles are truly scandalous for her husband’s friends, who frequent their house. She is harshly boycotting the institution of marriage and the traditional gender role (Nădejde, 2021, p. 133). In her daily life, Matilda is very apathetic, except when it comes to the presence of the men she desires, and through him, the social ascension she aspires to. All her gestures are a spectacle in those circumstances. Matilda desires to enjoy secret feelings at the expense of her family. Her younger sister, Maria, provokes jealousy (p. 62), and her daughter and husband provoke repulsion. Sarah Ruddick questions the “natural inclination” of mothers to care for their children, and finally, she delimits two phases of mothering marked by the act of birthing. The first one, pregnancy, which involves an unconditional tie with the fetus and embryo, and after birthing, which is, in fact, a rupture. Thus, mothering implies the adoption of the infant after giving birth, and this adoption determines the care of the child (Ruddick, 1995, p. 62). This is why mothering is not a gendered act. In Nădejde’s novel, for instance, the father fully adopted her daughter and provided care and resources for the child. Moreover, in these families, children are identified by mothers as an extension of fathers, as Matilda bluntly states: “She totally takes after her father”²⁶ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 78, my translation). This is happening with Lenora Hallipa’s unofficial daughter, Mika-Lé, who is seen as an extension of her father; she is a “flith”²⁷, and her infamous nature is the “hereditary dowry passed down to her by her real father, the Italian vagabond”²⁸ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 410, my translation). The division between mothers and children after birth is common in both writings, as maternal experience is marked by the mother’s struggle to defend her own space, violated by expectations and constraints. From such a perspective, the mother-child relationship is defined by hysteria, violence, and repulsion, altogether inserted into the spectacular representation of female weakness.

Excess defines the characters’ journey in Papadat-Bengescu’s trilogy. In the second part – *Concert din muzică de Bach* [A concert of music by Bach], motherhood is experienced in the context of organizing a large-scale soirée. Women live intimacy in salons and gatherings that are more or less out of interest. Everything is excessive and spectacular. The description of the main female character, Lenora Hallipa, is emblematic for the spectacular representation of women, who are not only hysterical, anxious, and hypersexual, but they are also seen as objects too. Thus, Lenora is perceived as a doll. Women pay a lot of attention to dressing; they are flirty, as the conventional code of femininity imposes on them, involved in romantic drama, and cruel to their children. The intrigues and conflicts between mothers and children sometimes border on the limits of a drama with burlesque overtones.

The extra-marital affairs have become a casual alternative for emotionally unsuccessful marriages. Thus, Lenora gave birth to monstrous children resulting from an extramarital tragic accident. Nevertheless, Mika-Lé serves as a concrete presence of her sin of having been a “lustful”²⁹ woman. As such, Lenora punishes not only herself but her daughter, too. She calls her daughter a “degenerate creature who does nothing but disturb any trace of harmony”³⁰ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 348, my translation). Unlike Matilda, in Papadat-Bengescu’s

²⁵ Original source text: „Era ca un foc care ardea mocnit, acoperit de un strat de cenușă; a fost de ajuns o rafală de vânt ca focul să izbucnească cu putere.”

²⁶ Original source text: „Seamănă leit cu tatăl ei”

²⁷ Original source text: „târfa”

²⁸ Original source text: „Zestrea ereditară pe care i-a lăsat-o tatăl ei, vagabontul acela italian”

²⁹ Original source text: „desfrănată”

³⁰ Original source text: „creatură degenerată care nu face nimic decât să distrugă orice urmă de armonie”

novels, mothers are not only ambivalent and unconventional, but they are also *uncanny* in their monstrosity. In both writings, motherhood is feminized as women somatize their anxieties and fears through hysterical, hypersexual behavior, and even physical or mental illness. Lenora Hallipa, along with her daughter Elena, acts irrationally in their maternal experience. This irrationality does problematize the interpretation of “radical deviations” as a response to the emotional emptiness, male gaze constraints, as well as social and economic aspirations.

5. The Social Role of Children in the Family’s Economy

It is not by chance that not one novel dating from this period and written by women depicts a serene relationship with children - motherhood is a social fact, and the fact of having children belongs to men. The conflict of motherhood faced by the protagonist in Nădejde’s novel is partly determined by this dominant quality of the father who rules over the family and the body of the wife who is meant to serve him.

Women have the wrong upbringing; men, when they marry, are of good faith, they want a mother for their children, but most women do not want to fulfill their duties. For them, the man is a banker; he must give without expecting accountability in return, and they consider marriage and children slavery.³¹ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 114, my translation)

In the Romanian world – both rural and urban – children are meant to provide family security for fathers and prevent mothers from immoral deviations: “Master Todiriță had not had the good fortune to be blessed with five or six children in his marriage, as, perhaps, the care of them would have saved Matilda from many falls and sins”³² (Nădejde, p. 165, my translation). In the rural novel, the female body is a reproductive object. For mothers who betray the social norms imposed by family law, the insurrectional gesture turned against them. Nădejde’s main character left her family to be seduced by a lawyer, who promised her the life that she aspires to, but her love story is predictably doomed to fail. When pregnancy occurs outside the social order, out of feeling and not reason, then it is damned to a tragic end. Unlike the standard profile of a woman vitiated by moral depravity in the modern Romanian novel, who fails in the role of mother and wife, here, the protagonist does not submissively admit her mistake of stepping outside the social order but critically relates to social constraints:

No, said Matilda to herself, our faults and even the crimes of a few are not able to atone for all the wrongs done by men. We are miserable like the servant who steals or even kills his master, but the sufferings of thousands and thousands of men are avenged in one man.³³ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 494, my translation)

A marriage succeeded by motherhood is established as the main goal for women (L. Benedetti, 2007, p. 27). In Papadat-Bengescu’s writing, mothers and their bodies are deemed as instruments of servitude to society, and they are meant to reinforce the social order ruled by male domination. The novel’s main conflict revolves around social constraints, self-desires, and aspirations. Under the family’s pressure, legitimate children, especially daughters, have to look for a “good catch” – just as their mothers did. The legitimate daughter of Lenora, Elena, is already matrimonially settled. Her marriage is endangered by her vulgar sister, Mika-Lé, who

³¹ Original source text: „Femeile au o educație greșită, bărbatul când se însoară este de bună-credință, el vrea să aibă mama la copii, dar cele mai multe nu vor să-și îndeplinească datoriile. Pentru dânsule, bărbatul este un bancher, dator să le dea fără socoteală, căsnicia o socotesc robie.”

³² Original source text: „Conașul Todiriță n-avusese noroc să-i fie căsnicia binecuvântată cu vreo cinci-șase copii, grija de aceștia, poate, ar fi scăpat-o pe de multe căderi și păcate.”

³³ Original source text: „Nu, își zise Matilda în gând, greșelile și chiar crimele noastre ale cîtorva nu-s în stare să răscumpere tot răul săvîrșit de bărbați. Sîntem mizerabile, ca robul care-și fură ori chiar omoară stăpînul, dar suferințele a mii și mii de inși se răzbură în unul singur.”

is not a viable option for the creation of a family that would enforce the family's fortune because of her origin.

Women's natural tendency toward maternal affection is dismissed as an outdated concept unfamiliar to middle-class women in Eastern Europe. In these authors' novels, children do not engage in activities typical of bourgeois families, such as education, having governesses—characters absent in these novels—or taking piano or French lessons. The birth and presence of children reflect fears shaped by a new society where everything has become commodified. The anxiety women experience is specifically tied to Eastern countries, particularly the fear of falling back into the rural class (a class that is almost nonexistent in Western capitalist societies at that time), and into serfdom or poverty (Rogozanu, 2024, p. 115). The rejection of motherhood as an inherent part of womanhood stems from a desire for Westernization and socio-economic mobility.

6. Violence Against Children and the Rejection of Mothers

Maternity is shaped as a violent experience in both rural and urban novels. In the Romanian rural world, women are often animalized, as are their children. For instance, one of the most common sentences that defines the act of birthing in the rural world is *dropping her litter* (“să fete”) (Parvulescu & Boatcă, 2020, p. 132). There is in Romanian culture a violent image regarding women and birthing. Women are often associated with animals (dogs, doves, cows etc.) whilst men are compared with more powerful creatures such as bulls or dragons (V. Bopp-Filimonov, 2024, p. 20). A pregnant woman is often called “grea” or “borțoasă”, which is a rather trivial term and means “gestating.” In the language of the early 20th century, violence was used to animalize women's representation. Romanian studies on the history of sexuality showed that Romanian writers and intellectuals were mostly influenced by theories that established the consubstantiality of women's reproduction with the reproduction of animals or plants: “Human sexuality entails the sexuality of animals and plants”³⁴ (Oișteanu, 2016, p. 78, my translation). Women's sexuality was deemed essential for animals' fertility (Eliade apud Oișteanu, 2016, p. 79). These “philosophical reflections” are intertwined with local misogynist beliefs promoted and established in that period. Worth noting that women, especially those women who are out of the social order and morality, as we can see in the case of Mika-Lé or Matilda, were conceived as otherness; they are harshly judged, and they have non-human and almost animalistic features. For instance, Mika-Lé “is not used to the forms of human sensitivity”³⁵ (Papdat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 819, my translation), and she is called by her family “insect,”³⁶ “mosquito,”³⁷ “grasshopper”³⁸, and “cockroach”³⁹ (p. 427, 435, my translation). These women's socially undesirable positions are seen as disability (Tova, 2020), a presence that loses its human traits and becomes animalized.

Physical violence against children consisted of emotional trouble generated by the mother's attitude toward their social role. Mathilda wants her daughter to die rather than share her fate. Moreover, when the little daughter suspects her mother's infidelity, and she is berating her mother for that, Matilda beats her daughter cruelly:

³⁴ Original source text: „sexualitatea umană este asimilată sexualității animalelor și a plantelor”

³⁵ Original source text: „nu este obișnuită cu formele sensibilității umane”

³⁶ Original source text: „insectă”

³⁷ Original source text: „țânțar”

³⁸ Original source text: „lăcustă”

³⁹ Original source text: „gândac”

Matilda grabbed her little daughter by the hand like a hawk and dragged her into the house. When she reached the house, she started hitting her on the head, on the back. The child didn't say anything; she did not whimper or cry⁴⁰ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 171, my translation).

The mother's cruelty towards the little child drives her to extreme gestures. Even though she does not understand what is happening to her parents, she feels misfortune with her instinct, not her mind (Nădejde, 2021, p. 171). As such, Matilda's daughter decides to commit suicide, so she almost drowns in the nearby lake but is rescued by her dog and by a friend of her father's. In this case, passionate love for a man equals violent hatred for the child. Matilda callously leaves her family without looking back. According to the principles of the traditional community: "the woman who is passionate is a thousand times more heartless than the man who is passionate"⁴¹ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 289, my translation), as monstrosity is mostly related to the feminine identity.

The pity for a man is stronger than maternal feeling, and this sin is turned against them by disqualifying the woman from being able to bear children or to bear healthy children. As such, Matilda's violence against her daughter turns against her in the form of rejecting her as a mother. She becomes pregnant a second time with the man for whom she left her family. Her attempts to get rid of the pregnancy prove fatal. The feminist commitment of Nădejde's novel is apparent from this point. Matilda's drama of keeping the pregnancy, against the will of her partner, generates real female cohesion. For instance, the midwife says to Matilda:

I did not want to commit myself to anything in front of the gentleman until I knew your will. Although I tell you, abortion would be impossible. The pregnancy is advanced. I know many men force women to take this step. That's why I usually ask women first, they are the ones who suffer, they are put in danger, and her will is what counts⁴² (Nădejde, 2021, p. 471, my translation)

In the end, beyond the prejudices of society and the misogynistic condemnations to which she has been subjected, only death makes her aware of the regret of not having fulfilled her role as a mother: "The more she looked at herself in the mirror, the more she mourned for the past, the past she had so cruelly mocked"⁴³ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 534, my translation).

In Papadat-Bengescu's novel, the violence directed toward children is more verbal, psychological, and emotional rather than physical. They are also victims of fate, paying for their mother's sins. The main character, Lenora, gives birth to "a monster" because of an embarrassing affair. She calls her daughter a "blackguard, bastard, degeneration of nature, instinctual creature,"⁴⁴ and her daughter acts like "an animal in heat"⁴⁵ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 439, my translation). Additionally, many children are the result of failed abortions. Abortion is a significant theme in modern Romanian novels written by women. How women view abortion reflects the patriarchal control over women's pregnant bodies. Abortion is often seen as available only to women who are denied the right to become mothers by men or society. For instance, Matilda can no longer give birth after her failure, as judged by the community. Lenora and her illegitimate daughter are considered unable to bear children from a maternal

⁴⁰ Original source text: „Matilda o apucă de mână, ca un uliu, și o târî în casă. Ajungând în casă, începu a o bate cu palmele peste cap, peste spate. Copila nu zicea nimic, nici nu se văita, nici nu plângea.”

⁴¹ Original source text: „Femeia pătimașă e de o mie de ori mai fără inimă decât bărbatul pătimaș.”

⁴² Original source text: „N-am vrut să mă angajez de față cu domnul la nimic înainte de a ști voința dumitale. Deși îți spun, avortul ar fi imposibil. Sarcina e înaintată. Eu știu că mulți bărbați silesc femeile să facă pasul ăsta. De aceea obișnuiesc să întreb femeile mai întâi, ele sunt cele care suferă, sunt puse în pericol, prin urmare, voința ei contează.”

⁴³ Original source text: „Cu cât se privea mai mult în oglindă, cu atât o năpădea jalea pentru trecut, acel trecut de care și-a bătut, cu atâta cruzime, joc!”

⁴⁴ Original source text: „ticăloasă, bastardă, degenerescență a naturii, creatură instinctuală”

⁴⁵ Original source text: „animal în călduri”

perspective because they have also “failed”. The failure of maternal responsibility is marked by the mother through the sin of giving birth to an illegitimate child, and Lenora’s daughter, Mika-Lé, misses out on motherhood because of her status as a “bastard”⁴⁶. Lenora calls her daughter “a fiend, a mutant, a woodland creature”⁴⁷ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 481, my translation).

The narratives of the time poorly address the absence of medication and contraception. As a result, the pain of abortion and its fatal nature are blamed on female sin and the deprivation of women’s right to become mothers because of their perceived “betrayal” of social norms. When Lenora’s daughter, the “fruit of sin”⁴⁸ and the “cursed child”⁴⁹, becomes pregnant from a secret affair, her baby is stillborn, “mort-né” (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 470). Nădejde and Papadat-Bengescu’s female characters reject this submissive role and their children because motherhood occurs beyond their control. In the face of the terrible acts committed by Mika-Lé, one character recalls the well-known Romanian proverb: “What is born of a cat will eat mice”⁵⁰ (Papadat-Bengescu, 2012, p. 491, my translation). What she shares with her mother is the inability to give birth due to moral punishment, as they can no longer be accepted as mothers by society. In this vein, Matilda’s final reply is emblematic: “Today, your man will not even let you be a mother”⁵¹ (Nădejde, 2021, p. 507, my translation). Matilda’s assertion can be tied to Ruddick’s take about the prenatal relationship between mother and child, when motherhood does not raise a matter of “inclination”. The fetus is part of the mother’s body. This is why Matilda protests against the violation of her choice and her body when she contests her partner’s decision to have an abortion. Instead of adoption and providing care for their children, maternal experience reminds them that they are “weak, miserable creatures that men do whatever they want with”⁵² (Nădejde, 2021, p. 511, my translation).

7. Conclusions

Romanian scholarship dedicated to realistic and social novels has avoided the topic of motherhood, even though mothers’ practices in fiction remain dependent on social changes at the time. Ambivalent motherhood is inherently connected to the social nature of these novels. In a society newly integrated into the capitalist system, the experience of motherhood and the act of having children become part of a logic of transaction and commodification, obtaining or reinforcing goods that are both assured and threatened by the birth of children—this aspect shapes the true social character of novels. This reading applies both to Nădejde’s novel and, especially, to Bengescu’s novel, which is mostly regarded as a psychological analysis.

This research aims to open a dialogue on the mechanisms that have placed the figure of the mother in the spectrum of monstrous agents in social and realist narrative from the beginning of the 20th century. Maternal ambivalence and the monstrous figure of the mother have become, in the novels of Papadat-Bengescu and Nădejde, not just a fictional representation but also a language of resistance. The significance of these works lies in their depiction of the tangible, material aspects of maternal experience, which extend beyond being a metaphysical idea to include political and social implications. Female characters experiencing motherhood in these novels exemplify the subaltern, and their children are often victims of uneven economic and social forces. The often-overlooked issue of dysfunctional motherhood reflects

⁴⁶ Original source text: „bastardă”

⁴⁷ Original source text: „pocitanie, spurcăciune, o făptură pădureață”

⁴⁸ Original source text: „fructul păcatului”

⁴⁹ Original source text: „Copil blestemat

⁵⁰ Original source text: „Ce naște din pisică, șoareci mănâncă”

⁵¹ Original source text: „Azi, bărbatul nu te lasă nici măcar să fii mamă”

⁵² Original source text: „creaturi mizerabile și slabe cu care bărbații fac ce vor”

the troubled state of women in Romanian society of that time, where childbirth, children, and family are framed as male possessions used to assert male social capital, as Pierre Bourdieu discussed in *Masculine Domination* (2001). If this perspective emphasizes the link between the monstrous portrayal of the mother, maternal ambivalence, and a gender identity crisis – particularly in this region of Eastern Europe where tradition and modernity, emancipation and conservatism intersect – the question remains: to what extent does the ambivalent discourse on motherhood and childbirth influence the development of a general violent imaginary directed against both children and mothers in the narratives of this period?

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