Chapter 2
Representative Figures Outlining the Romanian Women Imagery:
Synthesis Study on the "Romanian Culture and Civilization" Courses for Foreign Students

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on a gallery of representative figures of Romanian women imagery, with a view to fostering the cultural dialogue. It is an approach to understanding Romanians in general, with their history, traditions, symbols, and myths, seen from a women's studies point of view. The women who are chosen as examples are real personalities, such as historic characters, creators of Romanian symbols, past or present public figures who have had a significant impact on the women's national imagery. The chapter also uses fictional examples, eg. protagonists of folk or cultured literature or national legend heroines. Through these female figures, the author aims at assembling an image of the Romanian society with a focus on women's representations, in order to "decode" key cultural and civilizational elements, explain attitudes, and thus, guide non-native learners through their understanding process of Romanian culture and values.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on disseminating specific aspects of the Romanian culture, more precisely on the typology of women that can be identified in the collective representations present in the Romanian society. It is a theoretical approach which can be used as a synthesis and an input in designing courses on Romanian Culture and Civilization for foreign students.

Thus, the aim of the chapter is to briefly introduce seven Romanian feminine portraits, representing certain typologies which are meant to give foreign students an overview of some of the most important representatives of Romanian women imagery; in other words, a collection of models that Romanians have in mind in the play between myth and reality in outlining female symbols. The author starts by pointing out the two main types of imagery of women – traditional and modern – in present day Romania. Then, she selects some examples of famous Romanian women of all times, usually studied in Romanian schools and also presented in the coursebooks for foreigners. She analyses who they are and how they arrived at the point of becoming engraved in the Romanian collective representations. The conclusion points out to the connection between present day imagery about women and these portraits.

Thus, starting from a number of female symbols, this research suggests a different kind of key in understanding Romanians' collective representations, taking into account the ways of thinking and acting under the influence of cultural models. This approach may help students to analyze existing elements in a different manner, with new and interesting results, in order to discover how women are perceived in this culture, i.e. to identify and interpret the stereotypes, myths, collective representations of women in Romanian society, the evolution of mentalities from historical and legendary times to the present day, in order to better grasp the target culture.

BACKGROUND

Present day representations of women in the Romanian society come from a normal evolution of mentalities, influenced by both Oriental and Western models. These mentalities are enhanced by multiple factors, such as: geography (Romania is considered a "borderland of Europe" (Boia, 2007)), history (oriental domination in the Ottoman Empire's time, with all its heritage, and orientation towards Western values, especially from the 19th century onwards), culture (different models adopted in arts, manners, everyday life), and politics (50 years of communism), etc.

Throughout the last 30 years one can find frequent debates in the public space about "the two Romanias" (e.g. Adameșteanu, 2000): traditional vs. modern, rural vs. urban, educated vs. uneducated). This dichotomy can also be identified in the way women are seen in the Romanian society, as presented by specialists in different fields. For this chapter, the author refers especially to Ursa, 2006, an authority in the field of women imagery in Romania, who presents this dichotomy very clearly, illustrating it with interesting examples. This researcher, specialized in compared literature and cultural studies, identifies two categories of stereotypes of women in contemporary Romania:

In general, the stereotypical descriptions of (men and) women in Romania can be found at the crossroads between two types of gender imaginaries. Firstly, there is the Western imaginary – the active woman, with multiple competences (…). This Western imaginary (used especially by women) is short-circuited in Romania by another one, which, for the moment has a stronger influence: the Eastern-European, or even the oriental view, in which gender images are strongly segregated and well polarized. In this stereotype, the woman is a domestic and passive fantasy (positively viewed by male psychology) and a seducing, erotic presence (often blamed, as she tries to usurp the public role, reserved to men (Ursa, 2006, p. 16) [my translation from Romanian].

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