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### **WOMEN AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

#### **Abstract:**

Based on the idea that autobiography (in any form we find it: literary texts, reality-shows, press articles, forums, social networks) is increasingly more attractive to the people all around the world in these latter days, this study tries to demonstrate that there is a special connection between the economic, cultural and intelligence level of a country and its citizens ability to speak in their own names, using the autobiographical expression. More than that it seems that there are some groups, especially women, which prefers the subjective speech for expressing themselves in public. Not only in the Eastern Europe, but all across the continent, there is a special interest into autobiography and intimacy speeches nowadays. Women, less prudish by nature, are finally finding the best way to speak about themselves to the world. The paper will focus on the sphere of literature, but the conclusions it applies to other fields too. Also, this paper intend to present the differences between the autobiography practiced today and the autobiography used by the 20th century writers. Starting from the hypothesis of Ortega y Gasset, who speaks about the intimacy with oneself and about the intimacy with others, we connect the intimacy with the autobiographical discourse because writing at first person is the more appropriate and adequate way to speak about the intus and to show some parts of the hidden dimensions of the self/ego. The people from around the world has different ways to do this. In the second part of this paper, we discuss two interesting theories of some British and Romanian theorists, who says that before 1991 (when the iron curtain falls) a lot of the literatures of the world witnessed the pure autobiographical discourse and after that date it has been seduced by autofiction. Despite these ideas, we believe in an époque of bildungsroman autobiography, specific tot the 19th and 20th centuries, and in an era - which is the contemporary era - characterized by an mock-autobiography.

#### **Keywords:**

autobiography, contemporary literature, mock-autobiography, intimacy discourse.

#### **JEL Classification:** Z11, Z00

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A Romanian author (Simion, 2002, pp. 24) once said that women and young people are more inclined to autobiography than men. This study tries to demonstrate the evidence of this idea in the European literature of the last two centuries. Of course, our study will refer to few commonly known names from literature to express its basic ideas. Literature is full of images of women talking about their lives. We might say that, informally, women had invented the autobiography, the writing about self. But things are different official. Several authors assert that the first autobiography writer in the history of the modern world is Saint Augustine (Marcus, 1994, pp. 15; Simion, 2002, pp. 21-22). Nowadays, men are more interested in the impersonal objective discourse, considering it more appropriate to express their thoughts or their outlook on life. Mutually formalizing this belief, men have left lately the subjective expression in the hands and words of women. And that is not only a matter of gender or belief, but it is also an affair of fate because we will see that fate is more involved in the acts of the writers than we supposed.

First of all, we must make some remarks about the idea of autobiography. This idea is closely related to privacy and intimacy issues. Although there are many other approaches of the concepts of intimate and intimacy – the studies in this area being on the increase in contemporaneity – the closest of what this paper intends to demonstrate is that belonging to Ortega y Gasset, presented in his two already very well-known essays: the first one presented at the Conference in Valladolid, on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1934, entitled *El hombre y la gente* and the second having been written as a part of a series of lectures held in Buenos Aires, in 1939, entitled *Ensimismamiento y alteracion* (in Romanian, included in the book entitled *Omul și mulțimea*, translated by Sorin Mărculescu, published in 2001). By making the distinction between an individual and the collectivity, in other words between the intimacy with oneself and the intimacy with others, J. Ortega y Gasset defined intimacy as “a hidden facet of the self”, which “is never present, but is co-present, in the same way it is the hidden facet of an apple” (Ortega y Gasset, 2001, pp. 20). This facet of the being makes man substantially different, first from the animals and then from the other people, adds Ortega y Gasset. In order to gain access to “the essence” of the human being, a withdrawal in oneself is required, a flee from the world, so as to live only in one’s own shell, idiom, by applying what the author called *ensimismarse* (*ibid.*). Through this, the author wants to say that there is another world, real, true, but that can only be individual, personal, like the deepest states that a man is able to experience: pain, suffering, love (those can be experienced only in the *single* mode). This world is the inner world, the ‘space’ from that the individual may withdraw from the world outside. This space is definitely one of solitude. In art and literature, human loneliness and intimacy are closely related to the personal and subjective art/writing – how else? – as it is already known. *Ensimismamiento* is – Gasset says – the human capacity to take refuge in yourself, to meditate, to do nothing, concretely. Autobiography is nothing else then this state. Autobiographical discourse is therefore the most strongly linked to the *ensimismamiento* and to the forms of expressing intimacy. The autobiographical discourse sets in motion only the absolute being, the inside ego, the multiple self. Therefore, this is requiring sustained and general effort of the psyche, memory and imagination. *Ensimismamiento*

is a form of looking in/on himself/s, which is a very special type of communication with the *intus* (ibid., pp. 15) and also a form of hasten into intimacy for the purposes of rediscover of the self. Autobiography explores the intimacy, the memory and the psyche filters it, the imagination makes it more pleasant and more spectacular or it simply adds the secret ingredient that makes the subjective writing a growing attraction since the last century. That is the connection of this study with the theory of J. Ortega y Gasset. He is also acknowledged for highlighting that the most relevant quality of intimacy is meditation, reflection with/upon the self. That being said, it appears that intimacy is an area which cannot be addressed otherwise than through a confession, a contemplative, especially autobiographical discourse.

On the other hand, the autobiography is a confession, a subjective discourse, which has been used ever since St. Augustine. A quick observation has to be done regarding contemporary literature, for it brings an interesting, but not very surprising change, in autobiographical writing. The latter seems to have been left in the hands of the female authors, both at the level of our culture and in terms of the overall European literature, bearing in mind that “young men and women have a propensity for introspection and confession” (Simion, 2002, pp. 24). Less tempted to publish their diaries, memoirs, letters, impressions or any other form of autobiographical antum discourse, Romanian authors and authors from everywhere as well had really had a moment which corresponds to the ‘80s<sup>1</sup> when they were seduced by autobiographies, biographies and monographs. In recent years, the first-person-singular discourse became more disinhibited, more expressive in the sense of unmediated exposure of both intimacies and intimacy, and women writers – by nature more shy – started to feel more at ease with it. Of course, this is not a rule, but just an observation. Autobiography is also a special feature of the certain humanism which postmodernity contains, taking into account the expected connections of autobiography with a return to the Topic in the present age. Autobiography, as a discourse on the intimacy, is the closest expression of the postmodern Topic, but also the most popular writing `technique`. Of course, people have been writing autobiographies from ancient times, so nobody claims that this genre belongs to the postmodernism or that it is the actual foundation of the recycled humanism of the present. However, it can be noted that barely in our times the autobiographical discourse is about to irretrievably mark its way to legitimacy (ibid.), while, until recently, it has been situated at the periphery of literature, among the ‘borderline’ genres. This situation is a result of that autobiography was always a problem for academics forasmuch it doesn’t follow a pattern and it is still a flexible genre. Either way, for the present paper, it is significant the fact that the autobiography is the most honest discourse of the self, contemplative *volubilis* about the subject as object.

That being said, we can now assert that women from every European culture are certainly more interested about autobiography than man. Despite the belief of George Gusdorf, according to which autobiography denies women (Gusdorf, 1956, pp. 30) and

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<sup>1</sup> See also Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, p. 4.

any minority simply because 'autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where a consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist' (ibid.), we believe nowadays this possibility is not available anymore. In 1956, when GUSDORF wrote those words, many nations were still under communist regime and if it wasn't so then it was still a time when women and minorities were just beginning to fight for their inclusion. So GUSDORF was not bad intentioned, he just spoke about his reality. In order that intimacy is a way to speak with yourself in the deepest silence, a kind of soliloquy about the human nature, it can be said that autobiography is the right Word for expressing that silence. Long time being denied by the public sphere, woman had her personal time in the middle of her family and she felt the intimacy in a different measure than man, which, by the need to be always in action, lost the meditation exercise on the self. Some texts from the universal literature, commonly (un)appreciated as feminist, are also relevant for observing the connection between women and autobiography. When wrote *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf was not totally conscious about the consequences of her work. Beyond some reflections on the rights of women, she was also speaking in her text about the special bearing between woman and fiction, woman and intimacy or woman and autobiography. Woolf believed that literature of women is a literature about them or about "what they are like" (Woolf, 1929, pp. 1). Any fiction of a woman is a product of her reality, any writing about the self is an act of fiction and her essay is the best example. Woman can't write without anchoring herself in her limited reality. But it needs two things for woman to do literature, says Woolf: private space and money (ibid., pp. 2). That means escape from the real world (!) and financial stability. These two things are strictly related to the economic position of a woman. Virginia Woolf is among the first writers who speak accurately about the issue of the economic status of a woman who wants to do art or literature. And she was not wrong at all. A woman must do a more intense effort than a man to write. She must first take care of her family and then of her needs or wishes. Things are not very much different now from the era of Woolf. Still, her essay is not significant only for that mentioned connection between women and economic status, but it is also relevant for the definition of the autobiography. Unlike other subjective writings, autobiography means to speak about yourself including not only the interesting episodes, but also those common, negligible moments of your life. Autobiography gained another status when Woolf spoke about the relevance of the small things or scenes in the subjective writings. Without meaning it, she simply modified the way we should see them. From St. Augustine to Sainte Beuve, autobiography meant an array of the most glorious moments of the life of a subject and the author's purpose was to make that subject a hero. Woolf ignored this objective, considering that at <a luncheon the discussions are not the only important things, also is the food>. So she shifted the focus on the <minor> issues, those which were important for a woman. In other words, her essay is a very typical autobiographical text or, better, is an example of what Serge Doubrovsky (Doubrovsky, 1977, on the back cover) called 'autofiction'. Ironic and postmodern rather than modern and realistic, *A Room of One's Own* is questioning the social and economic posture of a woman and changes the way that an autobiography should be written. It is obviously that Woolf highlights the idea that only a woman with a certain position in the society can do literature and, more than

that, only some states from this world allows women to write about themselves, that is to talk at the first person and to question the identity. Of course, it is about the richest nations in the world. This is the reason why women from England, Germany and France were the first to speak about their rights and about their wishes to do literature, art, science. Next came Spain, Italy, Portugal and lastly came the South-East-European countries, as Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Kosovo. The economic reason is, as it seems, a very important one, closely followed by the political reason. Women from the highly developed countries are also those who had first the courage to speak about their rights and to use the first person to do that, which means to speak without fear and in an honest way about the personal identity and about the national identity. Autobiography, like any other form of literature, was denied to women for a long time. In the last century, things started to be different. The first works of literature written by women were third-person fictions and belonged to some wives or daughters from the upper strata of the richest societies (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Maria Edgeworth, Lady Callcot, Christina Rossetti, Isabel Allende). Shortly, they started to consider the autobiography a better and more honest way to express them selves, so they began to write at first person. The other nations were following the same path, but with delays of some decades/centuries.

Elaine Showalter also considers – in her book published first in 1977 – that women start to do literature because they did not really had something else to do. She also sustained the idea that woman needs money to live her wishes, and especially to do literature (Showalter, 1978, *passim*). Showalter gave the example of some British novelist from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century who did everything they could to earn the necessary money to publish their novels (they used false male names, they have agreed to be paid with very little amount for their articles in newspapers, they made compromises or concessions to their husbands or families). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was difficult to write autobiography if you were a woman. Next-century female writers had something more will and courage, but the environment too was somehow better than it has been for their forerunners from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. First of all, autobiography is a question of identity. That is the reason why Gusdorf believed in 1956 that autobiography is denied to women and any other minority. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, a woman's identity was still an undefined fact, considers Gusdorf (Gusdorf, 1956, pp. 29) and other authors too. But we think he was wrong. The identity of a woman or the consciousness of her self is not a matter that changes overnight. Women has always had a strong identity (see the literature of Jane Austen or Emily Brontë), men simply ignored this. In 1988, Shari Benstock, in her book *The Private Self*, speaks about the way in which autobiography is connected to the female nature, demonstrating the opposite of the words of Gusdorf: 'in the word <autobiography>, writing mediates the space between <self> and <life>' (Benstock, 1988, pp. 3). But, unlike Gusdorf, Benstock noted that the self is a fluid concept, not a granted one: 'fragmented by the light, unnamed even by herself, this <self> escapes any prefabricated notions of itself imposed by cultural definitions – even those of gender, race, ethnicity, historical moment, or social contexts' (*ibid.*, pp. 21).

Therefore, autobiography is writing about *self* and *life*, about identity and social position, but both concepts must be understood beyond their ordinary meaning. They are flexible ideas and they are different from man to man so we can't read anymore the autobiography as a discourse on the <sameness> (ibid.). If men and women are different so are their literature, so are their autobiographies. And there is nothing wrong in that. This certainly maintains diversity. My point is that autobiography is a genre studying the fluid self and if initially was only a technique of the high developed nations, now it is more a question of the multiple self, of which spoke writers as Gasset, Woolf, Benstock and many others. Women are, no doubt, more attracted nowadays by this genre for a simple cause: their right to speak in their own names was prohibited for so many years. The history offers them a vengeance.

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