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## Female Archetypes in Panait Istrati's Work

Ionela Cernat-Mihai<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This study aims to highlight an important dimension of Panait Istrati's work, the aspects of femininity in short stories and representative novels, created according to the exoticism of the Balkan environment evoked and the militant, idealistic nature of the writer, permanently open to the social problems of the beginning of the XXth century, interested in knowing the depths of the human being in general and otherness in particular. Sensitive to the affirmation and consolidation of the women's emancipation movement, having the cult of friendship, freedom, beauty and truth, the narrative voices within Panait Istrati's creation bring an unusual note by rewriting the archetypal patterns. Thus, *the femme fatale*, a tempting, passionate woman, but rejected by a hypocritical society, educates her children in the spirit of moral purity, even if life imposes other rules on her, an exception from a certain code of ethics. On the other hand, far from the well-known stereotype, *the mother figure* surprises through an atypical behavior, abandoning motherhood in favor of social commitment (*the heroine/outlaw woman*) or adopting the shape of a brute that induces fear, anxiety or causes death of her own child. Regardless of the situation, the women in Panait Istrati's work represent the expression of the craving to escape, incessant search, freedom of spirit and external display of the good, humanistic values the purpose of any existence.

**Keywords:** aspects of femininity; archetype; the femme fatale; the mother figure; the outlaw woman

### 1. Introduction

The picturesque Danubian and Oriental landscape, the local color of the ports throughout the Balkan Peninsula and the atmosphere of the Mediterranean basin highlight a temperamental humanity with an overflowing vitality, outraged against the humiliating condition of the anonymous mass, in accordance with the militant nature of the writer Panait Istrati who's susceptible to the social problems of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gymnasium School No. 128, Bucharest, Romania, Address: Ion Creangă Street 6, Bucharest 050864, Romania, Corresponding author: ionela.mihai1512@gmail.com.

twentieth century's beginning and interested in exploring the depths of the human being in general and otherness in particular.

This exotic context is dominated by unusual silhouettes (outlaws, smugglers, adventurers, noblemen and greedy clerics etc.), portrayed through narrative voices sensitive to the manifestation and consolidation of the women's liberation movement, worshipping friendship, freedom, beauty and truth and who are given the opportunity to rewrite the consecrated archetypal patterns. Thus, *the femme fatale*, *the mother-figure*, *the outlaw woman/ the heroine*, *the female master/mentor* appear under a changed sign, as a distinctive note of the short prose and of the representative Istratian novels, evoking the writer's poetics: the desire to escape, the ceaseless search, the freedom of the spirit and the necessity to spread the good.

A significant component of the female archetypal image is the symbol of water, "origin of life, means of purification, center of regeneration" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1995, p. 107), a fundamental component of the narrative topos, recurrent both in relevant events of the literary works analyzed, as well as an element which brings colour to the female soul, considered "closest to the sources of Creation" (Evdokimov 1995: 158). For instance, in "Adrian Zografi's Stories", the crucial events take place at the confluence of waters flowing into the Danube: the beginning of Groza's outlaw activity is "through the parts of Brăila, towards the mouths of Buzău and Siret", where he meets Cosma, the outlaw, while Floarea Codrilor calls the four captains of the outlaws "at the mouth of the river Șoimul in Tazlău", the last one being a tributary of Trotuș, in its turn a source for Siret, secondary water of the Danube.

## 2. Female Archetypal Projections

The narratives included in "Adrian Zografi's Stories", with easy-to-notice temporal inaccuracies, visible in the juxtaposition of landmarks that place the epic thread either near 1859 or a few decades earlier, combined with the real-legendary mixture create the first archetype meant to present an unusual image of *the outlaw*, bringing, beyond the specifics of a female character, a note of exemplarity through the daring deeds that demonstrate the "evolutionary zeal". Such a unique choice is likely generated by the need to create a human being with a superior understanding of reality, doubled by intuition, selflessness, spirit of sacrifice, built on the scaffolding of the male model's failure, consumed by his own pride and "burned" inside.

Like Prometheus, who brought the light of knowledge to the people, Floarea Codrilor, the new "echo person" in which "everything resounds", claims, in the

speech given in the Tazlau Mountains, in front of the outlaws known for their deeds of bravery (Iancu, Groza, Bujor and Codreanu ) the transformation of the brute force, of ferocity, of the internal combustion generated by the desire for revenge, into an “outlawry of the spirit”, encompassed into a noble finality: “The outlaw doesn’t forget, above all, that he is a generous rebel: for him, murder and plunder is not a goal [...] What we need is the land that was stolen from the peasant and good laws for everyone. Such a thing can only be done by replacing today’s absolutism with a fairer state of affairs, based on the people themselves” (Istrati, 1984, pp. 129, 134).

Created after the image and the spirit of this ideal, *the outlaw woman* marks a transition from material to spiritual, from the individual to the collective good by bringing into the spotlight the relationship between the strong and the weak, the people’s problems regarding their state of ignorance and “a much more useful duty-to raise our defeated brethren” (Istrati, 1984, p. 100). Such a perspective was announced by the anonymous outlaw in the story placed at the end of the six narrative core that form the “Outlaws” cycle, representing the transition from the personal, individualistic revolt enunciated by Irimia (“I am an outlaw for myself, not for my fellows”, Istrati, 1984, p. 93) to defend a wider category of the oppressed (“And I am an outlaw, to defend the slaves”, Istrati, 1984, p. 96).

Beyond the biographical shadows, the mysterious metamorphosis of a simple woman into an outlaw captain, then into “a great silk merchant of the Levant”, a woman with political vision and influence, Floarea Codrilor has the status of a hero for her unwavering morality demonstrated in crucial moments. All conflicts generated by the social, military or political context are created according to her unique destiny, forcing her to find a solution, a way out of the crisis for an entire community, for which she puts to use her fortune and “feminine cunningness”.

In a society divided into masters and subjects, dominated by various forms of evil, more specifically the double oppression (Turkish and Phanariot), the abuses of Romanian noblemen and clergy in the first half of the nineteenth century, this dynamic, proactive character, a projection of the desire for self-transcendence of each individual, “Domnița din Snagov”, shows them the “new way to follow” (Istrati, 1984, p. 136), acting on two levels: on one hand, her actions aren’t limited to share the wealth obtained illegally from the rich, but instead transforms the outlaws into contemporary heroes by sending them all over the country for the stated purpose of awakening the consciousness of ordinary people; on the other hand, she is a politician directly involved in the events concentrated around 1859, in the national cause and in the election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza.

A civilizing hero, she transforms the “nest of outlaws” from Snagov”(Istrati, 1984, p. 139) into a place of a festive society, with guests from the social elite and from the diplomatic sphere (abbot Uhrich and emissary Isidor), where unionist ideas are discussed and Western life models are offered. Although her intentions materialize, and Cuza becomes the ruler under whose leadership the Little Union of the Romanian Principalities is enacted, the end of the story shows the outlaw woman in a visible degraded state, of a defeated, marginalized hero: sick, pursued by Aga Arghiropol, she passes away after a few hours of continuous climbing.

Behind her it remains a complex projection that combines not only the archetype of *the outlaw woman/ the heroine*, a clear imagine of the writer’s intention to demonstrate “the superiority of the second sex in terms of struggle and leadership”(Babeți, 2013, p. 77), “with a heart in one piece”, “manly in decisions”, but still feminine: “She was a woman. Woman with Harem pants, but woman. And, on top of that, beautiful” (Istrati, 1984, p. 12). Due to this quality, she also embodies the archetype of *the femme fatale*, not hesitating to use her charms to save the lives of marginalized, of outlaws, a posture completed by *the master or sage aspect*, characterised by reflexivity, intuition, goodwill and guidance. Even if she doesn’t excel in maternal instincts, like Anica from “Ciulinii Bărăganului” or Joita, “Domnița din Snagov” compensates with the advice and example offered to her son, Irimia, clearly distancing herself from other characters (Anastasia or Adela), who manifest an absurd hatred of their own children.

In this order of ideas, it’s obvious that the *archetype of the mother* in Istratian works doesn’t fit into the established patterns of the devoted being, capable to sacrifice herself for the family. Pertinent examples of this are the two characters mentioned above: Anastasia, Codin’s mother, mentally disturbed, paranoid, who kills her own son by pouring hot oil down his throat, and Adela from “Neranțula”- brutal, abusive, causing inhibition, fear, anguish and ending with a suicidal act that also leads to the death of the girl’s father.

Another tragic story is that of Chira Chiralina, whose epic focuses on the *archetype of the femme fatale*, an enigmatic and misunderstood woman, with a strong will and a life lived to the fullest, in a story frame. The first name, derived from ancient Greek, where “kyrios” means “patron, master”, often used as an epithet for Zeus and later for God, suggests, metaphorically, the meaning of “mistress of bodily pleasures”, suitable for both mother and daughter (Ionescu, 2001, p. 96). Indeed, the two Chires have a hedonistic existence, the mother initiating her children in the secrets of the

alcove, of free love, carried out in a house where men were treated like royalty, and them, in return, being overwhelmed by attention.

Fascinating, imbued with the sensuality of the protagonists, the narrative presents a voluptuousness of disobedience to any social and family norm, lived in a “hell of love”: “Everything was love; the two women like their lovers, like the primping, like the liqueurs, the perfumes, the songs, the games” (Istrati, 1994, p. 99). The tribute of these pleasures paid by these two “beautiful women that drove you crazy” (Istrati, 1994, p. 93) were the savage beatings of an abusive husband and father, the last one disfiguring the mother and turning the other, defenseless, into a merchandise for the harems of Istanbul.

A vital principle, compulsion of creation, the Eros becomes a pretext for self-dialogue with the world, rejecting childish sensuality and saving their heroes from degradation, as reflected in the episode of separation from the two children, when Chira and Dragomir’s mother defines her own concept of existence, pleading for a life lived with passion, intensity, sincerity, unwritten law of moral purity, even if the way of life enforces other rules and an exception from a certain code of ethics: “Chira, don’t mock God, be what he made you to be: live your life as you feel it, be a riot, but a riot with heart! And you, Dragomir, if you can’t become a good man [...] make yourself a thief, but a thief with a soul, because the soulless man, my dear ones, is a dead man who hinders the world from living”(Istrati, 1994, p. 123).

The postulate of the “man with a soul”, presented in the form of the “passionate friend” in whose heart “the desolate passion of the flesh should be harmonized with the sublime friendship” (Alexandru Phillippide), also appears in the story “Neranțula”. The mentioned aspect is represented by Marco and Epaminondas, two young people in love with *the femme fatale* herself, a quality attributed as a result of the heroine’s option not to reveal her identity, a choice explained only near the end of the text: “I won’t tell you or God my real name. I’m sick of it. It reminds me of an ugly, painful childhood” (Istrati, 1984, p. 397).

The status of symbol allows her to change masks, starting from the impersonal name created by antonomasia, Sacagița, because the orphaned child carried water all day long, supplying the houses from a slum in Brăila, to Neranțula or Anicuța. The name attributed by Marco and adopted by the Greek friend recalls the Adamic gesture, marking the young woman’s destiny through an intuitive projection of the contradictory essence, both delicious and bitter, bright and poisonous, provocative and candid, recognized by the heroine: “this devil of Neranțulă which drove me crazy

and it almost cost me my life” (Istrati, 1984, p. 397). The statement really has prophetic resonances, because in the end she practically loses her life, fulfilling the prophecy of the gypsy who had warned her that she would die at the hands of a man from her father’s people. The disappearance of Neranțula is symbolic: if in childhood she saved herself from the fire caused by her own mother, in the end she perishes swallowed by the waters, as a result of the suicidal gesture of Epaminondas, an unfortunate episode linked again with this fundamental element of the universe, symbol of feminine principle, origin of life, but also the “primordial substance” in which “all forms ... return by regression” (Evseev, 1994, p. 16).

Beyond the relentless destiny, the *moira*, explicitly inserted in the text, one might think that the heroine would have been saved if she hadn’t forgiven Epaminondas, already alienated by jealousy the moment he stabbed her. A plausible explanation concerns the complexity of the representative female characters in Panait Istrati’s work, characterized by multiple archetypal valences: thus, along with the “maddeningly” woman, for whom the two friends and rivals “would have killed their parents” (Istrati, 1984, p. 364), there is *the archetype of the mother* in Anicuța’s aspect. The nickname of brothel, derived from the Hebrew “hannah”, translated as “mercy”, “grace” (Mihailovici, 2003, p. 29), hides a devoted face, willing to sell herself to improve the health of Aurel, a young man suffering from tuberculosis, to alleviate the pain of “mother Ileana”, a diabetic old woman, or to take care of her childhood friend with lost minds due to his obsession for her.

### **3. Conclusion**

Created as images of the dialectical coexistence of eros and thanatos, rarely devoid of sensuality and selfishness, socially involved or victims of abuse, seraphic or crude women who provoke fear, the female archetypes in Istrati’s work reveal a writer engaged in the realities of the time, creator of a prose with a strong ethical message, which “breaks” the chains of time and prejudices, offering a timeless dialogue with readers.

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