

Chapter 7

The Myth of Motherhood in Communist and Postcommunist Romania: From Pro-Natalist Policies to Neoliberal Views

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses how the myth of motherhood was construed and enforced on Romanian women in two recent epochs. While in the latter part of communism women were expected to be “mothers of the nation” and produce five or more children for the country and the party, due to an infamous decree passed in 1966, the postcommunist period saw the same pressure put on women to fulfill their “patriotic duty,” this time in the neoliberal logic and in congruence with the Western model. Women imagery is consistent with this role, and this chapter provides insights into how primary school textbooks, together with the main documents and legal initiatives of the two periods, impacted the social expectations of motherhood and affected the Romanian women.

INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich’s remark in her famous *Of Woman Born* (1976) “We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (p. 3) is the starting point of this analysis of the multiple facets of the myth of motherhood in communist and postcommunist Romania. Motherhood and mothering need both be considered, as they express two opposite notions, as Rich herself explains: if the former refers to institution and ideology, the latter addresses issues of experience and identity. Motherhood is an imposition, a way in which the oppressive patriarchal system ensures that

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women use their reproductive capacities to its benefit, and it is superimposed on the experience women themselves have, with its empowerment potential, called “mothering”.

In communist Romania, motherhood was the instrument with which the oppressive state and the communist party (one and the same in the context of a dictatorial regime) imposed a certain family model, as part of the patriarchal system. After the 1989 change of regime¹, the society continued to regard motherhood as an instrument of control over women, but this time presented from a neoliberal perspective as liberating and emancipating. The way in which motherhood has been translated and imposed to the Romanian women (and to the society in general) has attained myth-like qualities: being a mother is an ideal, an induced happiness and necessary personal development, a woman is not complete if she is not a mother, a family – “the cell of society” – does not exist without children, etc.

This chapter will explore ways in which the prevailing ideologies in communist and postcommunist Romania *translated* the myth of motherhood into the everyday life of Romanian citizens, by enforcing reproductive policies upon women or pressuring them into the mother role. Motherhood has been construed by the Romanian state in both periods through propagandistic instruments which reduced women to their reproductive role and imposed on them the production of children with the double aim of strengthening the nation-state and producing the necessary labor force. The propagandistic mechanism has been the same in the two epochs: the appeal to women’s duty, alongside the construction of a myth of motherhood, as an innate - and thus unavoidable - quality. This pressure to produce children came from the Party/state in communist Romania, and from all mainstream political parties, with the additional and relevant help of the main churches in postcommunism, and it is linked in the latter period with the neoliberal synchronic tendencies in Western (especially American) societies.

Moreover, the myth of motherhood has been supported propagandistically in the media, advertising, education materials, etc. This chapter will briefly discuss from an imagological perspective the textbooks for year one (with an emphasis on Romanian language textbooks) in both communist and postcommunist periods, as an illustration of how this propagandistic support has taken place. This is not by all means an exhaustive endeavor; its purpose is to introduce the topic to an international academic audience.

PERFECT WOMEN, PERFECT MOTHERS, PERFECT CITIZENS

The myth of motherhood is a reality accepted as such in contemporary Western societies, and we can look at ways in which “the good mother” (Thurer, 1995; Nathman, 2013) or the “mommy myth” (Douglas & Michaels, 2005) were construed by patriarchy in order to condition and control women into fulfilling often impossible social standards. The ideal mother is culturally and historically specific and has been extensively promoted in the Western world, so that women feel compelled to shape themselves socially and personally primarily according to this construct.

In the Forward to *The Good Mother Myth* (2013), Christy Turlington describes the ideal of the Good Mother as “the insidious burden working against our empowerment and freedom” (p. x). In the same vein as Adrienne Rich, quoted above, she separates women’s capacity to create a solidarity network and empowerment through motherhood from the constraints imposed to them by patriarchy, in the form of a myth:

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