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**THE GENRE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND WOMEN'S
WRITING. THE BOUNDARIES OF GENDER,
GENRE AND POLITICS:
THE CASE OF LENA CONSTANTE**

The autobiographical genre became an important literary form within the Romanian literary system after 1989 from two standpoints: as a main way of depicting former political prisoners' horrifying experiences in the Communist prisons, as well as exploring the conditions of many intellectuals under political oppression. On the other hand, these topics have nourished and contributed to legitimizing the agenda of post-December 1989 Romanian anti-Communist movements. Nevertheless, the prominent position of the testimonies did not involve a significant symbolic recognition of the genre within the economy of the post-Communist literary production, although many writers such as Mihail Sebastian (1907–1945) or Nicolae Steinhardt (1912–1989) earned their long-term recognition and are mostly present in the contemporary literary scene due to their published diaries. Autobiographical practices, mainly those works that are focused on revealing either carceral experiences or the oppressed condition of intellectuals under Ceaușescu's regime have been contextually well-received, as they represent a form of free speech about the terrifying Communist past after more than four decades, a period during which the literary evolution had been on a declining trend as an effect of censorship.

Considering this, I will analyze how the practice of testimonies contributed to increasing writers' visibility within the post-Communist cultural context, with a special focus on the most important female figures who were consecrated for memoir writing and who published acclaimed books on this topic during the 1990s. The present article proposes a survey of the role of testimonies among former female prisoners who established themselves in the field of carceral literature while practicing this genre, paying special attention to Lena Constante's works. This paper mobilizes a sociological approach and aims to advance some explanations for the contextual visibility of the autobiographies while highlighting the dimension of gender and the level of the evolution of gender identity during the last decades of Romanian Communism (the 1970s and the 1980s).

In the same vein, the article involves a thematic exploration of these terrifying confessions as they not only provide testimonies of traumatic experiences but also present the potentiality of being a real form of recovery of women's identity in the local literary field. One of the most important perspectives is related to the

peripheral position of women within the local literary system. At stake is the marginal position of the autobiographies and autobiographical genres against the backdrop of their feminization; the symbolic gain as well as the literary prestige; and the political contextual connotations of this genre. Finally, I will investigate possible reasons for these writers' minor status, as they currently constitute a forgotten fraction. The article mainly focuses on autobiographical patterns inspired by the terrifying experiences of female political dissidents in prisons during the Communist regime. The solidarity of women under these harmful conditions leads us to an approach that analyzes the influences of coercive environments and especially carceral spaces on female autobiographical writing. This solidarity turns into an ethos of womanhood emblematic for Lena Constante's writing and consequently, into a token of the singularity of women's representation in carceral writing.

The Position of the Autobiographical Genre within the Romanian Literary System

According to the studies dedicated to the phenomenon of women's writing, the biographical genre has become established as a gendered literary practice. In this respect, Jennifer Milligan, while researching French women writers' condition during the inter-war period, concludes that autobiographies, along with romance, are implicitly related to the problematic concept of femininity¹ and it has served as a way of exploiting women's intimacy:

The literature written by women during the inter-war period was an object displayed for the pleasure of the voyeuristic male gaze [...] The critical reception is governed by 3 principles: women are feminine, the genres that they use are linked to femininity, and these genres are the second-rate importance in literary hierarchies [...]. Literary historians would have one believe that their governing criteria are related more to genre than to gender [...] An overview of entries on Inter-war female writers in literary histories reveals that the notion of femininity, whether it be attributed ironically, disapprovingly [...] is consistently twinned with one of two literary genres: the autobiography or the romance².

Thus, this genre has worked as an established form of writing among women, being also mostly encouraged in women's literary writing. In spite of that, the confessional and biographical genres, implicitly related to a rhetoric of intimacy, have paradoxically served as the main principle of exclusion of female writers from the circuit of legitimation and from the list of consecrated works due to the habit of practicing a marginalized literary formula. In other words, the fact that

¹ Jennifer Milligan, *The Forgotten Generation. French Women Writers During the Inter-war Period*, New York, Berg, 1996, p. 70.

² *Ibidem*, p. 65, 73.

prominent female figures aspiring to a literary career were mainly practicing a confessional formula (perhaps also inscribed into a romance plot) reveals a strategy of male dominance through which men defend and preserve their positions in the literary field.

In the French literary system during the inter-war period, confessional genres were mainly related to the female writers' community, due to the lack of real writing competencies, and to stereotypes about femininity. These mentioned aspects constituted the main reasons for excluding women from the established literary scene, and, conversely, for excluding the autobiographical genre from the corpus of consecrated and aesthetically relevant texts. As symbolic gain and wide recognition among female writers had constituted an important goal even for aspiring female authors, this fact involved a clear demarcation of this category from the general women's writing. For instance, Marguerite Yourcenar or Rachilde (Marguerite Vallette-Eymery) distinguish themselves from their peers by placing their writing in a different category in comparison to the feminine paradigm that defined French women writers' narratives during the inter-war period³. As an effect, they will link their writing to the dominant discourses, because "linking women's names to the names of male writers carries with it the implication that these women have achieved a degree of recognition because of the link rather than because of the quality of their works, which is discussed only in second place"⁴. In this respect, both authors will emphasize the differences between their autobiographical work and testimonies of personal emotions as well as the lack of intellectual weight of women's writing in general⁵.

As in the case of the French literary field, in the Romanian literary system, the autobiographical genre and testimonies were subjected to a similar destiny. The marginalization of intimate diaries and autobiographical literary practices is an endemic fact of literary critics' resistance to the embedding of confessional writing in the literary and aesthetically relevant system of writing. Thus, in the local context, E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu, the most prominent excluders of women from the literary field, were at the same time the most prominent enemies of diaristic writing. For instance, in the French literary space, Roland Barthes' early position regarding the genre is articulated unequivocally, as he considers diaristic writing false and unable to accede in a different way to the status of writing⁶. Also, in the local literary field, it is worth noting that the confessional genre is not deemed as part of an eligible literary material for consecration, especially during the inter-war period.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 71-73.

⁶ See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*. Translated by Annette Lawers and Colin Smith. Preface by Susan Sontag, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977.

Thus, this genre carries a feminized dimension as the same close relationship between the fraction of female writers and autobiographical genres is reiterated as well in the case of local literary history. The closeness between female writing established during the inter-war period (confessional, weak, sentimental, naïve writing)⁷ and genres such as sentimental novels or even autobiographical writing occurs in the Romanian literary field, too. In this way, confessional genres, which were rather frequented by women writers during the inter-war period⁸, in the post-Communist context reshaped the status of autobiographical work within the economy of the literary production against the backdrop of the importance of depicting and highlighting the injustice of the local past and the terrifying conditions endured during the Communist regime.

Many women writers have mostly contributed to the local life-writing canon, without obviously reaching a symbolic consecration over the practicing of autobiographical writing. Thus, we should advance here some prominent examples such as Jeni Acterian's biographical work, *Jurnalul unei fete cumiști* [*The Diary of a Teenage Girl*], the work of Alice Botez, *Cartea realităților fantastice. Jurnal* [*The Book of Fantastic Realities. A Diary*], or even Nina Cassian's testimony, *Memoria ca zestere* [*Memory as Dowry*], or Lucia Demetriu's work as well as Gabriela Melinescu's, along with those female authors' works who had provided an account of the lived experience of imprisonment and oppression during Communism, such as Lena Constante.

This aspect will constitute one of the most important reasons for their legitimation and for the increased visibility of their titles among their female peers during the 1990s. In comparison to the autobiographical literary practices from the inter-war period, during Communism, especially in the Socialist-realist era, this genre was banned against the backdrop of abolishing all those genres that could not adhere to the formula of Socialist-realist orthodoxy. The analytical⁹ formula and any type of self-inspired literary materials or autobiographical allusions were deemed completely outlawed from the ideological perspective. For instance, any descent into an intimate or confessional style was sanctioned and authors were harshly criticized for their inappropriate gesture of writing an intimate poem

⁷ See Elena Zaharia-Filipaș, *Studii de literatură feminină* [*Studies in Women's Literature*], București, Paideia, 2004.

⁸ Nonetheless, many important figures of the field (such as E. Lovinescu), who did turn against the autobiographical writing, were practicing this genre in their turn.

⁹ In France the analytical novel was related by the critics to the women writers – see E. Abry, P. Crouzet, C. Audic, *Histoire illustrée de la littérature française*, Paris, H. Didier Éditeur, 1942, p. 805; a similar situation occurs in Romania through the subjecting of women's writing to the narrow interpretation grid of personal and self-centered literature.

instead of praising the benefactions of the party, especially in the Socialist-realist literary contexts¹⁰.

The stakes of testimony during post-Communism are radically changed, insofar as it is practiced by those authors who are not necessarily accounted for in the production of fictional materials, and their testimony is mostly inspired by carceral experiences. This is the case with Lena Constante's diaries, but we can mention here Paul Goma's books, as neither body of works is related to a consistent literary career. Moreover, the carceral experience narrated by Lena Constante (*L'évasion silencieuse* and *L'évasion impossible*), as well as Madeleine Cancicov (*Le cachot des marionnettes*), had been published in French. Only Doina Cornea publishes her confession about the prisoner experience in Romanian (*Jurnal. Ultimele caiete [Diary. The Last Notebooks]*). Worth mentioning is that both authors (Constante and Cancicov) contributed to the "internationalization" of the local Communist past as they mainly published abroad and in foreign languages (especially French). Nonetheless, both writers had become public figures during the 1990s and their autobiographical works were constantly discussed within the intellectual and cultural debates, even though Paul Goma had capitalized on the image of the Communist victim until his gradual dismissal from the field because of his irritating attitude¹¹ towards the local intellectuals.

Looking back, as it could be noticed, none of these authors were revisited after the 1990s, although the topic of the Communist past still feeds into the local literary production. From this standpoint, the reason for forgetting these authors becomes quite clear. Indeed, it becomes apparent that it is not the topic itself that is at fault, but rather it is the genre that does not favor a long-term adherence to the field, in addition to gender identity as a criterion of exclusion. Many male authors belonging to those fractions of writers whose diaries are mainly inspired by the memories under the Communist regime, such as N. Steinhardt or I.D. Sîrbu, are still frequented, and their works are re-edited. While these authors are still present in the current cultural and literary awareness, most female authors are not. From this vantage point, we can ask a question: are these women writers victims of their gender identity, of the practiced literary genre, or their works were merely involved in a political act of establishing the new post-Communist ethos?

A third possible explanation for their forgetting can be related to the political dimension of their postures, as all these authors depict the terror of Communism and Ceaușescu's dictatorship, without having a political/institutional/public

¹⁰ In 1952, Maria Bănăș, as well as the literary magazines where her intimate poems were published, for instance *Viața Românească*, were blamed for publishing a deviant text that contradicted the literary standards of the regime – see Marin Radu Mocanu, *Cazarma scriitorilor [Writers' Barrack]*, București, Libra, 1998, p. 285.

¹¹ See Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane (1990–2020) [History of Contemporary Romanian Literature (1990–2020)]*, Iași, Polirom, 2021, pp. 671–673.

position. They are minor names in comparison to the paramount visibility of Gabriela Adameşteanu or Monica Lovinescu, for instance, who are the most important figures of the institutionalization of the anti-Communist ethos exercised through their position within important cultural (and political) institutions (The Group for Social Dialogue – Gabriela Adameşteanu and Radio Free Europe – Monica Lovinescu). Former women dissidents and prisoners in the Romanian Communist prisons were “literally locked in a cage being out of law and out of time”¹², despite the fact that the confessions of these women, including Lena Constante, Madeleine Cancicov or Doina Cornea, Monica Lovinescu’s diaries, have remained points of reference as they embedded the intellectual dissidents’ struggles against the political system under the oppressive regime.

As they did not occupy a consistent political or institutional position, their anonymity can be attributed to their lack of public engagement regarding the building and reinforcing of the political ethos and contributing to the dominant political constructs during the 1990s. Moreover, regarding Lena Constante, it is well-known that she was part of the local Communist movement during its illegal phase, along with Elena Pătrăşcanu. At the same time, she was in a very close relationship with Elena Pătrăşcanu as well as with her husband, Lucreţiu Pătrăşcanu, one of the most important figures in the early phase of Communism. All these names, including Constante’s, had become quite questionable in the political context of the 1990s due to their Communist ideological affinities before the establishment and institutionalization of the Romanian Communist dictatorship.

Attempts at Carving a Space for the Specificity of Women’s Autobiographies

In a 2008 issue of CoNTEXTES dedicated to the biographical and autobiographical genre, Vanessa Gemis approaches the relationship between gender and genre, especially between women writers and biographical projects. According to Gemis, the main function of auto/biographical works is to recover the great female figure and, in this way, to counteract the patriarchal literary tradition in France. In this respect, she points out how every feminist movement is accompanied by the gesture of reshaping the importance of women through instrumentalizing the biographical tool which mainly works as a strategy of edification of these marginalized identities, and finally constitutes a subversive act:

¹² Ilinca Barthouil-Ionesco, “Femei în închisorile comuniste româneşti” [“Women in Romanian Communist Prisons”], *Cronica*, 1991, 23, p. 4. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

These biographies of women thus join one of the traditional functions: the edifying function. The feminist project that underpins them, however, involves an implicit critique of classic female biographies. Whilst in the latter, women only appear because of their relationship with great men (daughter of so and so, sister of so and so, even mother of so and again or muse of so and so), feminists favor “their action, their independent professional or artistic activity”, thus modifying, as Eleni Varikas points out, “the criteria for selecting biographical subjects”, and proposing “a different selection and organization of the biographical materials themselves”. The edifying intention is thus manifested less by the choice of subject than by the highlighting of certain aspects of women’s lives: “Whether explicitly formulated or not, the function of these biographies is to prove that women are as capable as men of making history, of disputing with men the claim of being the sole creators of civilization. [...] These portraits reproduce the epic definition of history by contrasting the exploits of men with the exploits of women. [They constitute] an attempt at re-reading or subterranean subversion of the received models which suggests the search for another historical vision”¹³.

From this standpoint, (auto)biographical works have a paradoxical dimension. On one hand, as a confession, autobiographical practice is considered a minor genre assigned either to weak writing or to women and mostly to the notion of feminine. And, on the other, as a strategy of edification, it had been deemed the most viable means for recovering forgotten figures. The dual dimension of autobiographical writing emerges in Romanian women’s testimonies about their experiences in the Communist regime’s carceral spaces. The minor status of confessional writing about the painful experiences under the Communist regime is *volens nolens* confirmed as those testimonies are no longer revisited or republished.

The contribution of these texts cannot be seen as an act of recovering women writers’ forgotten figures or women’s literary tradition. The literary engagement of these testimonies is quite narrow in comparison to the social and political engagement, which had been mostly appreciated in these books. From this point of view, as the testimonies depict the painful condition of women and, in this way, they highlight the singularity of women’s bodies which are subjected to just as much pain as male bodies experience under political captivity, the gender perspective that arises from these texts is worth more attention. In this vein, these texts compete with fictional writing considering their engagement in differential rhetoric of women’s identity and their capacity to mobilize what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “dialectic of distinction”¹⁴. The terrifying confessions about the prisoner’s

¹³ Vanessa Gemis, “La biographie genrée: le *genre* au service du genre”, *CoNTEXTES*, 2008, 3, <https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/2573>. Accessed November 20, 2023.

¹⁴ According to Pierre Bourdieu, a minor fraction, that is involved in a competition with the dominants’ doxa, increases its capacity to acquire aesthetic attitudes over the distances from this dominants’ doxa. In other words, the capacity to adopt a favourable/aesthetic disposition is measured

experiences as a female political dissident involve a real engagement in terms of the rhetoric of differentiation of what is singular regarding the women's experience marked by a terrible condition of bereaved motherhood, acts of violence, and sexual abuse, all these terrible experiences being rendered into a very direct language¹⁵.

As the evolution of women's writing is subjected in the post-war period to political constraints, following the fights between autonomists' doxa and heteronomists', between the defense of aesthetic autonomy and maintaining the status of the writer over publication, the fact that writing as a profession becomes gradually more inaccessible, especially during the 1980s, as well as the erosion of the generous social conditions that were assured via the Writers' Union – a women-centered phenomenon within the literary discourse does not occur in this period. Against this backdrop, many female writers (including the most visible women writers from the last decades of the post-war period) missed the chance to invest their resources in establishing a parallel channel for female writing's affirmation in the literary field and its imposition in the domain of the literary profession. In this respect, their writing mostly revolves around the main topic of the literary recovery and ongoing economic and ideological constraints. As such, an articulation of a space for the recovery and imposition of women's identity over a differential rhetoric, as had occurred in the case of French women writers after the events of May 1968, does not occur in Romania.

Women Prisoners: Narratives about the Confiscation of Freedom and the Body

For analyzing the degree of engagement of carceral testimonies written by former women political dissidents in depicting socially and bodily what being a woman under the traumatic and miserable conditions of the Communist prisons involved, Lena Constante's confessions are among the most prominent. Lena Constante had been imprisoned for about 12 years for her involvement in the famous case of Lucrețiu and Elena Pătrășcanu, who, using their institutional power, guided the artistic activity in a systemically undesirable way, for which they were murdered and their accomplices, Lena Constante among them, sentenced to prison. Thus, Constante spends her first seven years in solitude, and her first book, *Evadarea tăcută* [*The Silent Escape*] is mainly inspired by this period, whilst *Evadarea imposibilă* [*The Impossible Escape*] is based on her last five

through what Bourdieu calls „the dialect of distance”, so that the distance becomes a manner of acquisition – see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated into English by Richard Nice, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 27, 61.

¹⁵ See Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One”. Translated by Claudia Reeder, in Elaine Marks, Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms. An Anthology*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1981, p. 99.

years' experience along with other imprisoned women, contributing to a shift in her autobiographical vision and writing. Among many women's testimonies who shared the same experiences such as Elisabeta Rizea, Oana Orlea, Anița Nandriș-Cudla along with Doina Cornea and Madeleine Cancicov, Lena Constante's diaries mainly stand out through the rough descriptions of the pain and emotional, psychological, or even physical suffering, and over those beliefs that are rooted in her artistically accomplished interior world serving as a platform for her survival – the faith in literature, in music, in the power of arts and the human: “I had not been a poet, nor a composer, but I was still composing poetry and songs; I had finally found the key to my escape”¹⁶.

Her belief in the power of words has brought her experience and her writer and dissident posture, at the same time, closer to some of the most famous cases like Maiakovski or Anna Akhmatova, who succeeded in surviving imprisonment due to the power of poetry, as Lena Constante herself acknowledges:

One day I had the joy of getting a booklet by Mayakovski, this small prosodical treatise made me happy. Brilliant, intelligent, spiritual, efficacious, it was very helpful. It taught me the first notions of my profession [...]. I have survived. I owe Mayakovski an enormous debt of gratitude¹⁷.

As can be noticed, the confiscation of freedom is compensated for by the power of words in the case of Constante's traumatic experience in the Communist camp, as she is even able to diminish the intensity of her pain reducing the experiences of her suffering to *nothing* and *nobody*; Lena Constante sees her prisoner's pain as “a piece of nothingness”¹⁸.

The most important part of her confession consists of the full engagement with the female gaze. In comparison to many women who were imprisoned, and found a “key of escape” through the patriotic, nationalist ideology (representative being here Anița Nandriș Cudla), or Christian faith (as is the case of authors such as Oana Orlea and Elisabeta Rizea), Constante focuses her experience on literature and the tenebrous female experience that assures a sort of cohesion which can be defined as women's power. Thus, many female fiction writers from the autonomist guild whose topic is mainly politically engaged but in an aesthetic way, or those female authors who are merely interested in immediate gains, dedicate their writing to either reinforcing the autonomist discourses or to serving political or pecuniary interests, especially in the last decades of the Communist regime. Unlike

¹⁶ Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută. 3000 de zile singură în închisorile din România [The Silent Escape. Three Thousand Days Alone in Romanian Prisons]*, București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 56.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Gulagul în conștiința românească: memorialistica și literatura închisorilor și lagărele comuniste. Eșeu de mentalitate [The Gulag in Romanian Consciousness: Memoirs and Literature of Communist Camps and Prisons. An Essay on Mentality]*, Iași, Polirom, 2005, p. 122.

the situation of fiction, the stakes of the autobiographical writings inspired by carceral experiences are different. As a disinterested form of writing, autobiographical works are mainly inspired by traumatic episodes which nevertheless lead to a real return to femaleness, to the woman's body. So, to the detriment of the literary aspect, Lena Constante's confessional books, *Evadarea tăcută*, first published in French in 1990 at the Parisian Publishing, La Découverte, and *Evadarea imposibilă* are both deeply engaged in exploring the women's body as oppressed by the cruelty of carceral life. From this standpoint, her texts maintain a wide distance from the whole tradition of women's writing in Romania.

The most prominent feeling that nourishes Constante's writing is the mercy for her peers whom she is sharing the same pain with. The vulnerability of the female body is not only highlighted, but also constitutes an important part of Constante's writing formula, remaining quite specific and relatable to her politically – and socially – engaged style:

the writer describes the larval condition of women dressed up in rags, with shoes made of twisted hairs, with long nails, with disheveled hair like involuntary witches. Lena Constante narrates all the elements of physiological misery neither because of a lack of modesty, nor for the sake of overemphasizing the grotesque already densely present within carceral spaces, but because of her honesty¹⁹.

The sincerity and honesty that are often evoked in the case of Lena Constante's confession mark her specific way of approaching roughly the condition of women under all aspects involved by the gender identity constrained to exist under a regime of terror. Against the backdrop of vulnerable bodies subjected to painful and cruel conditions, this phenomenon leads to the articulation of a sort of solidarity between women. The fact reveals a micro-social structure mainly mobilized by a principle of womanhood: "My neighbor S was trembling for me. After vain efforts she had tried to make me give up, bringing arguments like the sick lungs, anemia, etc. She has decided to help me avoid dangers, and thwart the surveillance of guards"²⁰. Therefore, she narrates the daily routines from detention without any heroic nuances, in comparison with her more acclaimed peers such as Paul Goma or even Nicolae Steinhardt²¹. Constante explores the women's psychologies, feelings, and bodies in their deepest details.

After having been imprisoned for almost 8 years in complete solitude, Constante was relocated to another prison with fourteen other women, a fact that will highlight a new dimension of her writing, as womanhood, assuring the cohesion of the group, becomes an important part of the confessions from

¹⁹ Ruxandra Cesereanu, "Doamna Gulagului românesc" ["The Lady of the Romanian Gulag"], *Steaua*, 1994, 6, p. 18.

²⁰ Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută*, p. 237.

²¹ Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Gulagul în conștiința românească*, p. 124.

Evadarea imposibilă. The narratives about the existence of these women were more important than a personal confession: “I have filled tens of pages with memories from the sixth jail. Re-reading them, I figured out that I have talked a lot about the jail in general, especially about every woman, about our different activities, and I have forgotten myself”²². The general attitude of the women is submission; they are mainly abulic due to their inertia which is, in her words, especially characteristic of women who have always been subjected to authorities, to the authority of the father, the husband, the priest, and not least, of public opinion²³, and they are mostly imprisoned because of their male relatives’ (sons or husbands) political activism.

Thus, Constante reiterates the violent language and terrifying treatment used against the imprisoned women; as such, her writing becomes one of the first texts that expose roughly what it means to be a woman, especially under these extreme conditions. The topics mostly explored regarding the women’s identity are the body and feelings. In this vein, motherhood obviously occupies a central position in female prisoners’ narratives. Mother detainees are subjected to the most excruciating conditions²⁴, as the most frightening threats coming from those in power are directed, in the mothers’ case, to their children. In this respect, Doina Ciurea’s and Madeleine Cancicov’s confessions will remain especially representative. Nevertheless, Lena Constante inserts a narrative about how she and her imprisoned peers were organizing the Christmas celebration in 1958, improvising within reach the scene of the birth of the Son of God:

Soaked and kneaded by water, the soap turns out into four centimeters of baby Jesus. We were touching our mattresses to take some pieces of straws out and so we built a miniaturized manger [...]. In the center, the manger and the baby are quite pale, the little poor creature. He was just born in a prison [...]. The celebration was cut short by an unwanted appearance [...] when the door had suddenly opened, and a guard came into the cell²⁵.

The close relationship that is established between the women and the theatrical representation of the Christian celebration can be related to their status as homemakers, a status especially emphasized by the association with Christmas. The act of birth is reclaimed by their condition as mothers, which results in a need of dramatical representation of the prototypal act of birth, the Nativity, albeit on a small scale²⁶.

²² Lena Constante, *Evadarea imposibilă. Penitenciarul politic de femei Miercurea-Ciuc, 1957–1961* [*The Impossible Escape. The Political Prison for Women in Miercurea-Ciuc, 1957–1961*], București, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1993, p. 86.

²³ Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută*, p. 33.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

²⁵ Lena Constante, *Evadarea imposibilă*, p.146.

²⁶ Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Gulagul în conștiința românească*, p. 238.

In comparison with the imprisoned man, the confiscation of women does not cease with the confiscation of freedom. On the contrary, in their case the surveillance is going much further, being extended to rigorous control of their bodies as well as their freedom. For instance, Constante narrates how one of the guards attempts to rape her. In this context, women's bodies become the most vulnerable as they are mainly seen as sexual objects. The only aspect that prevents the guard from acting is the fear of denouncement:

It was in the middle of the night [...] I feel how he slithers along on my skin, how he meanders on my thigh. The fright wakes me up. A man stands above me. He is getting up. The Guard! He sees my opened eyes, enlarged by fear. I am threatening I will scream. He is getting afraid. He creeps out. I am afraid to fall asleep again²⁷.

The misogynistic local cultural tradition reverberates through many forms of humiliating and degrading women, and one of them is the association of women with the representations of animals, which occurs at all levels of social hierarchies and cultural expression. For instance, within the literary field, women participants in the literary production were mostly associated by the literary authorities (such as E. Lovinescu) with a dove, as their literature is considered naïve, weak, and fragile like a dove, or, sometimes, female writers and their literary products are associated to a cat²⁸. In Liviu Rebreanu's most famous novel, *Ion*, the animalization of women mostly occurs through the violence of language. The plot of the novel is situated in Transylvania, at the beginning of the 20th century, in a rural area. The main female character of the novel is subjected to what amounts to statutory rape by the main male character, Ion, a poor peasant who attempts to become a landowner through ownership of Ana's body. Finally, "Ana's delivery is described from Ion's point of view as an inopportune act of 'dropping a litter' (*să fete*)"²⁹. As an instilled pattern, the animalization of women occurs even in autobiographical narratives. In this context, the lack of power and vulnerability accompanying the pain and trauma caused by the carceral experience, the weakness of women who are harassed and who are permanently feeling threatened by others contribute and accelerate the process of belittling the prisoners' identity and turning it into an animalistic level of self-perception:

²⁷ Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută*, p. 84.

²⁸ This type of appropriation between women and animals practiced by the most important literary critics during the inter-war period is analysed by Elena Zaharia-Filipaș in *Studii de literatură feminină*.

²⁹ Anca Parvulescu, Manuela Boată, "The Inter-Imperial Dowry Plot. Modernist Naturalism in the Periphery of European Empires", *Interventions*, 23, 2021, 4, pp. 570-595.

This jail is not a jail. They locked me into a cage. Into an animal cage. The animal is me. I am an animal in a cage. [...] Close your eyes. Think of the mouse. I am thinking of the mouse. You are the mouse. I am the mouse³⁰.

Moreover, Lena Constante does not hesitate to highlight in no cosmeticized terms what it means to be a woman in a political prison. The female and the male experiences are different, so her distinctive claim to womanhood starts by evoking the essential part a of woman's existence:

in prisons, and especially in those prisons with locked cells, women are hit by a much more difficult and vital situation, while men are shielded from that. Most women are young, they have not reached the menopausal age. Daily, many women were bleeding at the same time. We did not have padding or hygienic bandages [...]. As they were younger, they were more ashamed by their involuntary impudence³¹.

Aside from the vulnerability of women's bodies under cruel conditions, the body itself is also subjected to the surveillance of the political and institutional power of the carceral system. As an effect, women are even subjected to a "gynecological strip search", in the author's words, which did not have a medical aim at all. It had been integrated as an organic part of the female prisoners' strip search³², because, as women, they had a different status in comparison to the male prisoners. They are not only persons, but [different] bodies too, and their bodies could be tools of committing undesired acts against the regime³³.

Lena Constante's confessions explore this distinctive part of being a woman in the Communist political prison system as the violence committed against her body constitutes an important part of their narrative. From this standpoint, she succeeds in mobilizing what Pierre Bourdieu calls a *dialectic of distinction*. Nonetheless, what has been accomplished here is quite far from the sociological roots of the concept, mostly discussed in connection to cultural competition for legitimation. In Bourdieu's terms, the dialectic of distinction means differentiating oneself from the aesthetics and positions adopted by the dominated as a path of competing with the dominant. In the present case, the distinction arises through the differential manner of configuring the women's identity and body, but Constante's writing on being an imprisoned woman was not reflected in the established literary paradigms of women's representation, partially because Constante is not interested in literary prestige and recognition. In other words, her writing is withdrawn from the cultural competition for legitimation and assertion. As I have already mentioned, Constante is primarily a painter, and part of Dimitrie Gusti's sociological circle, so she was not an emergent writer and never aimed at literary fame. That can be one of the

³⁰ Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută*, p. 79.

³¹ Lena Constante, *Evadarea imposibilă*, p. 122.

³² See Ilinca Barthouil-Ionesco, "Femei în închisorile comuniste românești", p. 5.

³³ See Lena Constante, *Evadarea imposibilă*, p. 140.

reasons why her contribution to the process of differentiating women's identity in literature, situated far from the doxa's perception, has remained forgotten and unrecorded.

Lena Constante's Eclipse and Autobiographical Works by Women

In the cultural frame of the 1990s, the debates about the canon of post-war literature are mostly marked by political and moral considerations rather than literary ones. "East-ethical revisionism"³⁴ guides the phenomenon of literary recovery as well as the literary production in a symbolic order during the post-Communist decades. The anti-Communist ethos established the names of the majority of legitimized intellectuals such as Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca, and all intellectuals gathered around the Grupul pentru Dialog Social [Group for Social Dialogue] or Grupul de la Păltiniș [the Păltiniș Group]. Many others endeavored to establish an autonomist ethos centered around the literary act (Eugen Simion), a moralizing attitude regarding the former sympathizers of the Communist regime or current "neo-Communist" figures (Monica Lovinescu), and finally, an anti-Communist conception that guides the fate of literature and culture (Grupul de la Păltiniș). Against this backdrop, the autobiographical works of the former political prisoners are mobilized for the legitimation of the post-Communist cultural agenda and the new literary ethos established during the 1990s.

It must be admitted that many former prisoners, such as N. Steinhardt, will reach long-term literary recognition, as his works are still widely read and present in the contemporary local editorial market through constant reeditions. Unlike the case of N. Steinhardt, while Lena Constante's confessions were involved in the local political and cultural debates in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, receiving slight recognition, her works had enjoyed only a temporary recognition, as her texts are too rarely revisited today. From this vantage point, several possible explanations for Constante's current anonymity could be advanced, considering three aspects: politics, gender, and genre, which together have contributed to the gradual exclusion of Lena Constante from the local literary scene.

Firstly, the dimension of genre marks the temporal prestige of Constante due to the framing of her works in so-called carceral literature. This is an aspect mostly related to the practiced genre and not as much to the topic, as the plot that revolves around the bleak local history during the Communist regime has been embedded in the fiction works (especially by the great novels about Communism written by very prestigious local authors such as Dan Lungu or Lucian Dan Teodorescu). The need for the absorption of this type of writing is highlighted by Monica Lovinescu,

³⁴ See Cosmin Borza, "Beyond the Myth. The Romanian Post-Communist Revisionism", *Diversité et identité culturelle en Europe*, 2015, 2, pp. 95-106.

who deplores the slight production of Romanian carceral literature in comparison to the production and circulation of this type of narrative in the Western literary network³⁵. Nevertheless, the contextual character of these repression system testimonies must be added to the minor status of the genre itself. As I mentioned above, in the economy of the local literary production, the status of autobiographies had often been connected to women's writing. Generally, memoir writing has occupied a minor status, as Monica Lovinescu also suggests, deploring the lack of confessions about the cruel past. These works' aesthetical and historical value is locally underestimated, as their value is hard to understand for "someone from Romania who is too fond of theoretical laziness to allow anything other than fiction to be called literature"³⁶.

Secondly, another criterion for the marginalization of Lena Constante can be related to her political position, as her socialist beliefs have proven unwelcome during the 1990s. As Vanessa Gemis pointed out in her study, the memoir, as well as biographical works dedicated to the ample experience of many women, contribute to the rehabilitation of women's identity within a patriarchal system of values. In the case of Lena Constante, her carceral testimonies did not succeed in assuring her long-term literary success. However, Constante established a tradition of women's representation in writing by mobilizing a differentiative ethos regarding the condition of women and what it truly means to be socially, politically and even bodily a woman in a terrifying context.

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³⁵ Monica Lovinescu, "Alice în țara sîrmei ghimpată" ["Alice in the Land of Barbed Wire"], 22, 1992, 21, p. 16.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

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THE GENRE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND WOMEN’S WRITING. THE
BOUNDARIES OF GENDER, GENRE AND POLITICS: THE CASE OF LENA
CONSTANTE
(Abstract)

Over the last century, and especially during the first half of the 20th century, autobiographical writing has acquired an unfavorable position in the economy of literary production, and it has been often related to a form of “feminine”, confessional writing. The cultural context during the Communist regime in Romania has reshaped the connotation of autobiographical writing, which was banned outright during the Socialist-realist era, and then became a pivotal way of surveillance for dissidents who were imprisoned mainly for political reasons during the rule of the Communist regime. Thus, the present paper aims to follow how the biographical works of former women prisoners, with a focus on Lena Constante’s autobiographical work, have contributed to a sort of differentiation of women’s writing, mobilizing in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms a “dialectic of differentiation”.

Keywords: communism, imprisoned women, autobiographical writing, autobiographies, dialectic of differentiation.

GENUL AUTOBIOGRAFIEI ȘI SCRITURA FEMININĂ. LIMITELE
IDENTITĂȚII DE GEN, ALE GENULUI LITERAR ȘI ALE POLITICII:
CAZUL LENEI CONSTANTE

(Rezumat)

Scrisul autobiografic a dobândit în ultimul secol, mai ales în prima jumătate a secolului al XX-lea, un statut minor în economia producției literare, fiind adesea asociat cu o formă de scriitură „feminină”, confesivă. Contextul cultural din timpul regimului comunist din România a remodelat conotațiile scrierilor autobiografice, acestea fiind de-a dreptul interzise în perioada socialist-realistă, iar apoi devenind o modalitate privilegiată de supraveghere a disidenților care au fost încarcerați mai ales din motive politice în timpul regimului comunist. Astfel, lucrarea de față își propune să analizeze modul în care operele biografice ale fostelor deținute, cu accent pe opera autobiografică a Lenei Constante, au contribuit la un fel de diferențiere a scriiturii feminine, care activează, în termenii lui Pierre Bourdieu, o „dialectică a diferențierii”.

Cuvinte-cheie: comunism, deținute politic, scriitură autobiografică, autobiografii, dialectica diferențierii.