

# Literature Written by Women in the Romanian Curriculum

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**Abstract:** This paper dwells on the rather outdated Romanian curriculum in the study of Romanian language and literature and its purpose is to raise awareness of the names of salient female writers that are missing from the curriculum. We consider that feminism is a dual process which operates both on a social and educational level of society. The structure of society is reflecting on the structure of education where sexism is currently being perpetuated through the absence of female writers in the literary canon. Our research is didactic because we want to improve the curriculum and it is also a longitudinal research, since we propose to highlight the theoretical framework of the research during a year. The fields of research are education, philology and sociology. The methods chosen are: the survey method, the psychopedagogical experimental method, the sociometric methods, as well as the examination of curriculum documents and of other school documents.

**Keywords:** feminism, gender equality, feminine literature, literary canon, sexism

## 1. Introduction

The Romanian curriculum serves as the study's first reference point. We found out that the Romanian Baccalaureate exam does not require any texts published by female authors. Furthermore, since feminism and the emancipation of women are now more important than ever, literature written by women is also a highly debated subject everywhere in the world. Literature, as a tool used in educating the next generation of adults, is one the

domains that require radical changes: “Education looked upon as an investment must represent a key point in promoting human values” (Eşi 2010: 140). If the pupils continue to follow a school curriculum that is built upon a patriarchal mentality, no change will be possible in the near future.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Criticism**

Feminism is a movement that seeks to “reconstruct society in a way that patriarchy is eliminated and a culture created that is fully inclusive of women’s desires and purposes” (Edgar, Sedgwick 2008: 124). As previously mentioned, feminism has been a highly debated topic in the last years and it has slowly made its way in every aspect of society. However, Romanian literature has rejected major changes in this respect. The purpose of this study is the familiarization of the high school students with the literature written by women within the Romanian literature class. By using study domains such as education, philology and sociology we want to demonstrate that the prejudice and stereotypes perpetuated by the school program can be stopped by acknowledging literature written by women in a new curriculum. Gender equality is another key concept that becomes relevant when discussing this topic. As one of the main goals of feminism, gender equality refers to the ability to have access to rights and opportunities regardless of one’s gender. In opposition to gender equality, sexism is a form of discrimination that generally targets women. Sexism can manifest itself in every aspect of society, even in the literary canon which consists of a list of carefully selected authors that have enriched literature with their originality and influence. The problem with the literary canon, as Harold Bloom put it, is that it belongs to the “dead great white male Europeans” (Bloom 2018).

We started our research from a macro level, analyzing the feminist critical perspective that is gaining momentum in the European space, but also at the global level. This is not only manifested in the social, economic and cultural field, but also in the educational and institutional fields, with a view to implementing gender equality policies in organizations and school institutions (gymnasium, high school and university). Such policies are meant to challenge the traditionally marginal role women have and to bring them to a position of equality with men in a society that is mostly dominated by white and *civilized* men (Lykes, Moane 2009: 284).

When it comes to the image of women in today's society, it is still perceived as otherness, and in social structures men relate to women from a phallo-centric perspective, with women only having the quality of OTHER (Shefer, Munt 2019: 146). A striking perspective is that of the article *We've Come a Long Way, Guys! Rhetorics of Resistance to the Feminist Critique of Sexist Language* in which the authors emphasise the fact that society is structured around the dominant discourse, and mentalities are formed by a discourse centered on the male vision. (Kleinman, Copp, Wilson 2021: 62). According to the same authors, the patriarchal society is a continuous entity, and most realities are likened to the idea of masculinity, therefore patriarchy will perpetuate itself if the change does not begin by developing a new discourse. From the social level, where the movement for the emancipation of women is most poignant, we slide towards the micro level of literature, where there is a tendency to acknowledge women's role in literature, after centuries in which they were overshadowed by male writers.

### 3. Feminism in Romania

Romania is placed between the West European countries and the Oriental ones when it comes to the applications of feminist principles. We are stating this because there are a lot of inequalities in the present day Romania, because there is a polarization between the rich zones and the poor ones and because women play an important part in the development of the society as a whole. It's an inevitable truth that the macro level is influencing the micro level and the lack of the feminist movement in the inner structure of Romanian society is reflected in the educational system with all its components.

The article written by Anca Elena Puha Alecse named *Ipostaze ale feminismului și literatura feminină în spațiul românesc* (Hypostases of Feminism in Feminine Romanian literature), published in *Meridian Critic*, gives us details about the unfavorable situation of the female writers in Romania at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when gender difference represented a disadvantage and a constraint. Mircea Cărtărescu analyzes the difference between Romanian culture and the Western one, where attention is turned towards the marginal groups of society, including women. Monica Dana Căndea, in her article *Etică și comunicare. Scriitura feminină și jurnalul intim* (Ethics and Communication. Women's Writing and The Private Diary) published in *Buletin Științific* continues to develop the idea of literature written by women as a case of literary marginalization. Although it is not radically different from the literature written by men, it is considered inferior. Nina Corcinschi in her article *Literatura nu are sex* (Literature has no Gender) published in *Metaliteratură* reinforces the same idea, because literature written by women has always been subject to misogynistic prejudices.

When it comes to the image that women have in Romanian literature we can affirm that is a biased one because women

always occupied a marginal position and they were considered as being the other in Todorov's terms. This has been valid until now, when Romanian curriculum promotes only male writers. It's true that in the past years the curriculum has been changed and some texts written by women were introduced for study, but it is the teacher's choice whether they will be studied in class. Thus, in our paper we want to demonstrate that women's writings are valuable and are a must in a healthy educational system.

#### **4. The Romanian curriculum**

Gender inequalities in the Romanian Curriculum are even more obvious when one analyses it against other school curricula in Europe. We compared the school curriculum in England with the one in Romania, because the social mentality manifests itself most strongly in schools. In England, women writers have a privileged status, their number is equal to that of male writers. For example, the *Cambridge Assessment International Education* offers for study an equal number of women writers and men writers. In contrast, in the Romanian curriculum for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, female writers are completely absent, we can not even speak of representation, let alone equality.

#### **5. Literature written by women**

Literary criticism has it that literature written by women is strikingly different when it is compared to literature written by men because women are more sensitive, emotional and their literary themes are mainly based on love and affections. In fact, the stereotypes are derived from the history of women when they were considered incapable of creating art or it was considered that they are not worthy of superior forms of thinking. (Wigginton, Lafrance 2019)

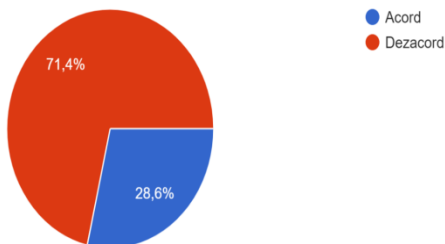
For instance, the Goldberg study from 1968 demonstrates that a group of students (180 girls and 180 boys) evaluated papers which they were told that had been written by men and women and the papers that had allegedly been written by men were better evaluated than those which were written by women. (Paludi, Bauer 1983). Another study showed that male editors are inclined to select books written by male writers and that male researchers are keen to cite only books written by men: “Male science writers might also seem more credible than female science writers do” (e.g., Marchant 2011; Vivienne 2011). Female science writers have said that many women do write on popular science, but are not well-represented in top-tier magazines or as candidates for awards. According to Marchant (2011), of 144 books shortlisted for the United Kingdom’s Royal Society Winton Prize for Science Books over 24 years, only 11 books (7.6 %) had a woman author, of which only one won the prize (Oggins 2014: 185).

## **6. Investigation**

In order to back up our hypothesis we conducted an investigation under the form of a questionnaire that was filled in by 28 freshmen, pupils in the 9th grade, with the ages between 14-15, from a highschool with an economic profile. 71,4% of the students are females and 28,6 males; 63,3% grew up in the countryside and 35,7% in the city; 64,3% of the students have parents that only graduated highschool, 10,7% graduated only middle school and 21,4% have higher education; 67,9% identify as orthodox, 28,6% as protestants and 3,6% as catholics.

Sunteți de părere că modul în care societatea tratează astăzi femeile este corect?

28 de răspunsuri

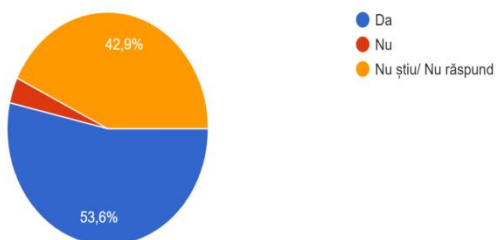


*Chart 1*

When asked if they consider whether the way in which society treats women is right, 71,4 % of students answered in the negative and 28,6 % in the affirmative.

Cunoașteți o scriitoare/autoare sau mai multe din literatura universală?

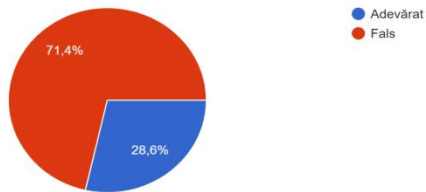
28 de răspunsuri



*Chart 2*

To the question “Can you name one or more female writers from world literature?” 53,6% of the students answered in the affirmative while 42,9 % answered in the negative.

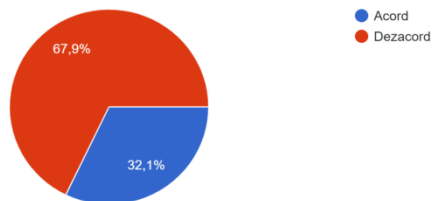
Considerați că bărbații sunt superiori femeilor?  
28 de răspunsuri



### Chart 3

71,4% of students said they don't believe that men are superior to women while 28,6% of the students said that they do.

Considerați că există diferențe între literatura scrisă de bărbați și cea scrisă de femei?  
28 de răspunsuri

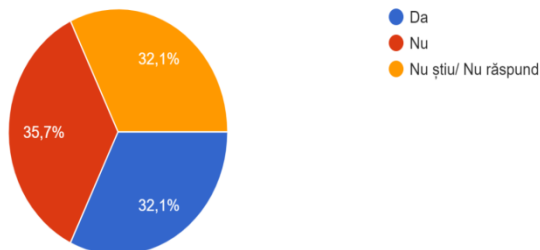


### Chart 4

When asked if there are any differences between the literature written by men and that written by women, 67,9% of students answered in the negative and 32,1% in the affirmative.

Sunteți de părere că programa școlară de limba și literatura română se situează la standardele societății actuale?

28 de răspunsuri



*Chart 5*

When asked if they believe that the Romanian curriculum fits the standards of contemporary society, the percentages were almost equal: 35,7% answered in the negative, 32,1% of the students in the affirmative and the same number of respondents did not answer at all.

## **7. Conclusion and possible solutions**

This article was written to draw attention to a problem that represents a real obstacle to the healthy development of Romanian society and is related to the fact that there is a complete lack of female writers in the Romanian curriculum. We have shown that school is the place where people are formed as future citizens and that the things they learn there often define both their worldview and the way they treat others.

In order to see the consequences of this fact, to understand how Romanian students perceive the position of women in society and what they think about the value of literature written by

women, we applied the questionnaire presented above. As you can see, it shows that about two thirds of the respondents feel that their society is still patriarchal. About 70% believe that the way women are treated today is not right. The same percentage also think that men are not superior to women, therefore neither can literature written by males be considered better or more valuable than that written by females. But we must also take into account the 30% of others who do not see things the same way, thus denying or ignoring the existence of a problem.

As far as the Romanian school curriculum is concerned, only one third of students consider that it meets the standards of today's society. Due to the fact that literature written by women is neither required for the Romanian Baccalaureate exam nor studied in class, half of those questioned admitted that they are not familiar with works by any female authors of world literature. This situation becomes quite concerning when compared to that in other European countries, where half of the authors included in the school curriculum are women.

Consequently, we have to admit that there is indeed a great need for change. In order to eliminate ignorance, gender inequality, sexism and misogyny from our society, first of all school activities must be reformed. The solution we propose is to gradually expose and familiarize students to more literary works written by women. We have selected several authors according to several different criteria. We took into account these women's origins, nationality, religious beliefs, the historical period they lived in, the culture they lived in, the way they were treated by the community they were part of etc. We also thought about the themes that are discussed in their literary works, about the position and image of female characters that are placed at different times at different corners of the world.

We first decided to suggest two Romanian women writers, since they come from a background well known to the students. These are Sofia Nădejde, who was a novelist, translator, playwright, journalist and women's rights activist, nowadays we even have a Literary Award named by her, which is given annually to the Romanian female authors, and Nina Cassian, a poet, essayist, translator and composer of Jewish origin.

Then we would like to introduce two great classics of English literature, which are already studied in many European countries. The first one is Jane Austen, who was a 19-th century novelist, extremely famous nowadays for she explored in her plots the social position of women at that time, and Virginia Woolf, who was one of the most important modernist English writers that also supported the women's rights movement and the reforms which had to do with women's education.

We have also included two American women writers who have won Pulitzer Prizes and Presidential Medals of Freedom for the topics they have approached in their novels, depicting the life and condition of black people in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. These are Harper Lee and Tony Morrison.

And the last two names we would like to add to this short list are Malala Yousafzai and Isabel Allende. We thought it would be great for the students to also get to know some women writers who belong to totally different backgrounds and cultures. Malala Yousafzai, the world's youngest Nobel Prize laureate, is a Pakistani female education activist known for dealing with this issue in the Islamic society and Isabel Allende is a Chilean-American author who writes in the style of magical realism and is considered to be one of the first successful female writers in Latin America.

We believe that these works will give students a new perspective, a female perspective on the world and life. With their complexity and diversity, they will demonstrate that the value of a literary text is defined by talent, work and skill and not by the writer's gender.

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