

# AN ANATOMY OF TRAGIC FEMININITY INSOUTHEAST EUROPEAN LITERATURE

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## **Abstract**

*The present study aims to perform an analysis of the feminine typology in southeast European literature. We undertake a comparative study of productions depicting ancient times when women had to bear the burden of a sealed fate, but without overlooking succeeding literary works. Bovic, frivolous, atypical characters or widows, the women portrayed reflect a kind of personality touched by a tragic dimension inherited from myths and folklore and that finds fulfillment through metamorphosis (a dominant literary motif when we refer to southeast European feminine typology). They illustrate femininity manifested against the background of historical realities that have ravaged this area, but connected to an inside world rather than to immediate reality.*

**Keywords:** feminine typology, tragic essence, destiny, metamorphosis, southeast European literature

In southeast European literature, any contact with History has something of a retrieval, of a retrospection, and – beyond the dramatic side of events circumscribed to that geographical area –, the gesture of meeting with the past equals the “*reason of being*”, the “*literary balkanism*”. (Muthu, 1979, p. 214) Therefore, “*we retrieve nothing except ourselves, endlessly. (...) Thus we retrieve ourselves primarily by remembering those who existed in sound, in word, in color.*” (Muthu, 1979, pp 213-214) From the archaic beliefs and the

richness of signs, to the folklore era that recovers a series of myths – by reinventing them – and, furthermore, to the defining literary fictions of later times, the southeast European culture went from invocation to evocation in the light of the concept of “*unity in diversity*”. (Muthu, 2002, p. 7)

The shared historical destiny and the rural mentality induced by the peasantry as the dominant social stratum lead to typological similarities in literary fiction. The typological analogies are not, as Mircea Muthu states, the result of direct contacts, but rather a double consequence: both

in literature and in the common context that binds the literary productions of several countries experiencing the same political, economic and social issues. This is what led, in Mircea Muthu’s opinion, to relatively similar literary reactions. Thus, to the research into literary typologies, the Romanian literary balkanism contributes three axiomatic criteria that facilitate the understanding of esthetic values. The sociological, cultural mentality and human model criteria allow us to define a feminine typology representative for southeast European literature.

The **sociological criterion**, as a melting pot of historical, economic and political events, is reflected in the literary structures of this area. Structured as a field of ambivalence, southeast European culture becomes a confluence and “*coexistence of romanticism and realism*”. (Muthu, 2002, p. 7) Furthermore, the literary folklorism that Mircea Muthu explains through the presence of peasantry as the dominant social stratum materializes into a rich paremiological production. Folk idiom will become, as shown by Zoran Konstantinović (apud Muthu, 2002, p. 7), the origin of literary language, while the ballad, with its historical and mythical charge, becomes a medium for a common destiny and a means of expression that compensates for the delay with which this part of the world sees the birth of the historical novel.

“*The convergence of predominantly rural mentalities*” (Muthu, 2002, p. 8), together with tales of oriental etiology, led to narrative structures that would later on be reworked and used in literary productions exploiting the frame tale technique (**Hanu Ancuței** [**Ancuța’s Inn**] by Mihail Sadoveanu (1956) or – another one from Mircea Muthu’s examples - **Noptile de la Antimovo** [**Nights in Antimovo**] by Iordan Iovkov (1933)). Thus, Dumitru Caracostea was entitled to conclude that “*between folk and literary works*” there are but differences “*in standard, not in essence*”. (Caracostea, 1969, p. 62) Enriched with new attributes, characters such as the builder’s wife (**Meșterul Manole** ballad), Chira (**Chira Chiralina** ballad) or Ilincuța (**Ilincuța Șandrului** ballad) still make a successful comeback in cult literature promoted by Lucian Blaga, Panait Istrati etc. Mircea Muthu sees a link between these female characters and the masculine typology – both expressions of the same

southeast European mentality. “*The sacrificial entombment of living people in the foundation of a building in construction*” or the mythical topic of the “*young woman kidnapped by ogres*” (image to be found in southeast European paremiology, slightly altered, as the “*young woman chased by kidnappers*” – especially in pastoral poetry), they all become more than a simple source of inspiration for cult literature in Mircea Muthu’s opinion.

The female characters in folk literature share a tragic essence to be found in the subsequent literary works. For the southeast European femininity, tears are a consequence of archaic mentality, of history experienced dramatically, of salvation from a tragic fate taken on painfully.

For the analysis of typological similarities, **the criterion of human models** would represent “*a result of the interference between the sociological perspective and the study of cultural mentalities*”. (Muthu, 2002, p. 9) Centered exclusively on the literary perspective and some production belonging to southeast European folklore and ethnography, our study aims to identify a feminine typology in the works of several representative writers from this area.

## 1. The Bovaric Woman

The tragic destiny of the **bovaric woman** has its roots in the archaic mentality of oriental origins according to which the bride-to-be is married to a man chosen by her family. Symbol of an individual deprived of destiny, the character has no other option but to follow the path laid out by others according to the constraints of tradition and acquired social status. However, after a while, the same character disintegrates (sometimes only mentally, as in the case of Borioje (Galaction,1958) or of Zoia Popazu (Stancu, 1977), consumed tragically. Bovaryism, defined by Jules de Gaultier (1993) as “*sentimental bovaryism*”, brings up the Flaubertian character whose flaw is “*the ability*” or “*the power bestowed upon man to imagine himself different than he really is*”. The propensity to imagine oneself different from reality implies a profound dissatisfaction, an emotional vulnerability induced by a disappointing reality, as well as an energetic drive that consumes, virtually, the woman’s being. Usually, these characters embody women fallen prey to sentimental disillusionment, to emotional drift and to the torment between what their lives are and what they should be. For these bovaric characters, the fragile border that separates reality from imagination measures the deviation between desire and goal assumed voluntarily and their natural vocation.

Borivoje (Gala Galaction, **De la noi la Cladova**), Dafina (Miloš Crnjanski, 1993), **Migrații [Migrations]**), Zoia or Elisaveta (Stanev, 1966) are but some of the bovaric characters from southeast European literature that help outline a possible representative human model.

## 2. The Widow

The **widow**'s expression leaves a mark on the community to which she belongs. The pure energy emanated by this character is so strong that, most of the time, it is precisely the male absence from her existence that makes her visible to a judgmental community. The widows in southeast European literature are either mysterious (Surmelina (Nikos Kazantzakis, 1999)) or display a mixture of frivolousness and effort to survive in a patriarchal society (the widow innkeeper (Selimović, 1971) and Katerina, the prostitute widow (Kazantzakis, 2008)). There is also the atypical widow from Ioan Salvici's **Mara** (1983), who embodies the "homo economicus" as the woman entrepreneur whose frailty fades as she takes on masculine occupations.

## 3. The Frivolous

The rich imaginary promoted by southeast European literature abounds in **frivolous** female characters, distinguished by beauty as well as by the same tragedy that left its mark on southeast Europeans. These women display a kind of frailty that soon turns to coquetry, to mystery, to everything that relates to temptation. In seduction, the frivolous woman of oriental type (Chira Chiralina (Istrati, 1997)) and the dancer (Caliopi (Baştovoi, 2006)) are on a par with the professional prostitute from Ismail Kadare's **The General of the Dead Army** (2002), with the heretic Arma from **Antichrist** (Stanev, 1975), with Sara from **Mediterranea** (Istrati, 2001), as well as with "*the old actress of love*" represented by Madame Hortense (Kazantzakis, 1999) or Marta – the immature frivolous woman from **The Forest of the Hanged** (Rebreanu, 1963). The frivolous are those that abandon themselves, that tempt but also fall prey to their own temptations. Their tragedy manifests itself under the form of sanctions from society or from those once under their charm.

Unlike the bovaric or the widows, the frivolous women have the opportunity of metamorphosis in as much they are entitled to rehabilitation, even though it happens post-mortem.

## 4. The Rebellious

The category of **rebellious women** is either enriched with characters whose disobedience is the clear indicator of a tradition that commands respect (Anastasia (Popescu, 2001)) or becomes a typology where, through different elements, the widows, the bovaric and the frivolous women come together. At some point, each of these characters displays part of the attributes of the authentic rebellious woman. Could this negativity towards a sealed fate be the pinnacle reached by the southeast European feminine when forced to obey unwritten rules? Be that as it may, at some critical point, these characters sever the ties with everything that means acceptance, obedience to the patriarchal society to which they belong and, despite this often puny act, they regard their fight as a means of

deliverance. These actions diminish their vulnerability without impacting in any way on the predictable dramatic finale – given that their actions equal marginalization, even suicide through self-exclusion.

## 5. The Atypical Feminine

The novels mentioned also revealed an **atypical female character** represented by Ioan Slavici's Mara, whose vulnerability dissolves into preoccupation with her future and her children's future. A second example would be that of Zaharia Stancu's Uruma – the beautiful Tartar from Sorg –, a character in which oriental mystery and atavistic cruelty blend harmoniously. Finally, we can also mention the innkeepers in Sadoveanu's **Hanu Ancuței** who, through their magical presence, garner countless stories from travelers.

We embarked on this endeavor in an attempt to identify the attributes of a possible type of femininity in southeast European literature by referring to a vast literary production encompassing paremiological writings and some of the late fictional works. Without being deprived of the complexity that, according to Mircea Muthu's studies, defines male characters the feminine typology stands out due to its attributes, as well as due to the women's tragic destiny sometimes shared with their male counterparts in this "*literary geography*". (Ungureanu, 2005) Without being victims, they are a reflection of the historical background of their environment, and the essence of their individual background. From this perspective, their destiny is contaminated by the turmoil that plagues this area and all that condemns them somehow to an almost unconscious vulnerability.

*"The imaginary has a founding purpose as it imprints the character or the event in the collective memory"* (Muthu, 2005), and that overshadows individuality in favor of the mythical. Folklore brings myth back from archaic times and, through the myriad of variants released on a social level, it channels history in "*modern poesis*" (Muthu, 2005) by changing it into a resonance box for everything that belongs in the past.

With a keen interest in the feminine typology of southeast European literature, we will approach some of the paremiological writings which illustrate this typology deeply rooted in local mythology and history. In his so-called "prismatic" structure, Mircea Muthu identifies the "mioritical" legend (related to *Miorița* ballad), the semi-anthropomorphic myth and *Meșterul Manole's legend* [*Builder Manole*]. We will only focus our attention on these two last works, which, influenced socially and historically, left their mark on this cultural area as sources of inspiration for writers to come. In fact, due to this limitation to social aspects, history was constantly revisited and channeled into folklore. Thus, the women's involvement in the tumultuous events that shaped southeastern Europe became the subject of a distinct kind of epics and lyrics.

This channeling of history into folklore has been noticed by Mircea Eliade, in whose opinion, "*the mental universe of archaic societies as we know it today has not reached us dialectically through beliefs, but preserved by myths, symbols, customs, whose genuine meanings are still transparent, no matter how much decay they may have suffered*". (Eliade, 1992)

Speaking about the social function of folk music in relation to **Sora păcurarului** [**The Shepherd's Sister**] and **Chira Chiralina** ballads, Anton Balotă (1992) claims that, apart from a literary theme that nourishes its artistic form, every epic tradition has a story. It is our

opinion that this story would then represent its literary replica, on a much smaller scale. The literary theme would represent, in Balotă's opinion, *"the input due to the cultural background, be it the author's or that of the moment or the place"* (Balotă, 2005), whereas the facts depicted would constitute the society or the social attitude towards history.

Art did not fail to react in order to illustrate themes such as *"the young woman chased by kidnappers"* – with its underlying mythical layer and roots in the archaic belief in *"the young women kidnapped by ogres"* –, *"the sacrificial entombment of living people in the foundation of a building in construction"* and the idea of the *"ultimate sacrifice"* (some southeastern variants prefer the perspective of the *"minimal sacrifice"*). This corroborates once more Adrian Fochi's observations on the legend of *"the sacrificial entombment"* (1966, p. 378) regarding the unique option the southeast European faces when confronted with the binome history-fiction, reality-fiction. In the light of these aspects, among all the pastoral lyrics (Densusianu, 1923) centered on the theme of *"the young woman chased by kidnappers"*, **Sora păcurarului** stands apart. In it, the shepherd's sister is chased by an ogre that, according to some ethnologists such as Ovid Densusianu, could stand for the boyar (landlord) lusting after country girls.

In his study on the two aspects of tragic time, Mircea Muthu finds his analysis of this motif on the accounts of the Byzantine chronicler Procopius of Caesarea (1972) who pays close attention to that *"they say"* so characteristic of folklore. Procopius talks of *"a particularly beautiful wife"* accompanied by her husband on a boat journeying towards *"the realm beyond"*. While floating, they come across some rebellious men who kidnap the woman and threaten her. Before being kidnapped, however, the woman vows to her spouse not to lose honor and by that shame him. Instead, she throws herself into the waters to avoid letting herself captured.

In one of Anton Balotă's second variant of the same theme, the events are set during the Tartar incursions. The account is slightly altered in what the woman's attitude is concerned. *"This time, the kidnappers are Tartars, and the woman is Radu Negru's wife; the river will be named after her. The clearly although briefly explained plot sets the facts against the old times of the 13<sup>th</sup> century with its frequent Tartar incursions that were still vivid in the collective mind"*. (Cf. Bojan Angelov, *"Bulgarian ballads in the times of the Tartars and country life from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century"*, in *„Učitel'ski pregled"*, XXVIII, pp.1572-1602 (apud Balotă,2005).

While the shepherd's sister accepts her fate without a fight, the woman from the legend **Râul Doamnei [The Lady's River]** tries to gallop away from danger and, when faced with failure, finds salvation in the waters of the river (Rădulescu, apud Balotă, 2005).

The motif of “*the woman chased by kidnappers*” is revisited under Turkocracy in writings with reference to the Turks as oppressors. The **Ilincuța Șandrului** ballad with its Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian and even Slovakian and Ukrainian variants brings Adrian Fochi (1984) to support the hypothesis of a resurrection of the old myth involving “*the woman kidnapped by ogres*”. He relates the comeback of the myth to the Tartar incursions and, later on, to the Ottoman’s rule in the southeastern part of Europe. The Romanian variants of this motif show the young woman notice in the distance the Turks decided to kidnap her while she is carrying water from the fountain or sweeping the backyard. She warns her parents just in time for them to hide her so that, when the invaders arrive, they can inform them that their daughter passed away. Incredulous, the Turks torture them to learn the truth. Eventually, the girl is found and brought to a ship heading for the Turks’ country. During the voyage, she asks to be untied under the pretext of easing the pain caused by the restraints and, when that happens, she throws herself into the river’s waters to escape servitude. Adrian Fochi comments extensively upon this suicide (1980, pp 309-310). The idea of self-sacrifice has, in the researcher’s opinion, “*the character of a heroic choice [...]. Due to its great flexibility, this option appears in different epic contexts, but reaches the most stable frequency in the very ballad of Ilincuța Șandrului. This is a typically feminine solution; no man ever chooses this line of action*”, Fochi explains (1984, p. 98).

Suicide as a last resort is present in all southeast European folklore but, as Mircea Muthu mentions, Romanian variants are closer to their Serbian and Croatian counterparts (the girl plunges into the Danube) than to the Bulgarian (where the girl stabs herself). The motif is complicated further in the era of the Ottoman Empire, when elements from **Ilincuța Șandrului** are reused in **Chira Chiralina**. However, unlike previous variants of this motive, the ballad now has something of an oriental touch. Before kidnapping the girl, the Saracen’s tempts her as a means of seduction: “*Kira, Kiralina, / beautiful as a garden flower / ruddy and caressing / don’t hesitate to choose me / if you want a life of plenty / as I’ll make you / girdles and kerchiefs / scarfs and dresses / golden buckles / covered in dragon scales / and golden garments / covered in starlings’ feathers*” (*Popular Romanian Ballads*, 1977). Much more spectacular, the ballad complicates the motif through the Saracen’s attempts at seducing the girl, the latter’s obstinacy and mocking attitude, as well as through the drama that accompanies the kidnapping. Referring to the themes and motifs specific to Romanian ballads, Barbu Theodorescu and Octav Păun (1967) mention the novelty of Chira Chiralina. After the Saracen takes the girl to his boat and they begin sailing on the Danube, “*in order to avoid the girl’s attempt at escaping, he ties her to the mast with her long hair. When their mother informs them of the kidnapping, Chira’s brothers – ‘Brăila-s bandits / And Danube’s serpents’ – set on the seducer’s trail by swimming down the Danube, try him ‘as bandits do’ and kill him*”. The epilogue differs from one variant to another. In some, the girl is brought back home and married to the man of her choice. In others, suspecting that the girl was willingly following the kidnapper, the brothers cover her in crude oil and burn her all tied up at a stake.” (Theodorescu & Păun, 1967, p. 186)

It has been said about Chira Chiralina that it “*revisits the context from **Ilincuța Șandrului**, although with an increasing behavioral ambiguity*” in its depiction of “*the eastern woman’s destiny*”. (Muthu, 2005) Unlike the other ballads built around the same motif, we are here at the confluence of two mentalities: one that is rooted in the world of the Danube harbors, and another one of Ottoman origins according to which the young woman having dishonored her family must be killed by her father or by her brothers so that shame can be erased. This variant postulates the idea of the double drama on which the tragic femininity is built. In this respect, Mircea Muthu hypothesizes around the theory of the social and historical drama that meets in Chira’s character the drama of femininity. In time, in the literary productions that rewrote this motif borrowed from mythology and folklore, the Chira’s tragic character metamorphoses into a character of oriental origin that reminds of Fata Morgana and her mirage (see Panait Istrati).

The proximity between water and femininity, the mythical link between the two brings up another motif belonging to southeast European folklore – the semi-anthropomorphic myth and its importance as “*the main support for tragedy in our literature*” (Muthu, 2002), as well as in southeast European literature. There are half-fish half-woman beings – some sort of “*Nereids*” / “*Ladies of the Waters*” (Vulcănescu, 1987, p. 478) of surreal beauty – that, at night, approach the shores and, like ancient Sirens through their charming songs, draw fishermen and sailors to dangerous waters in order to drown them. Their image meets that of the “*otters*”, those “*nymphs of shallow and still waters*” that, like demigods of the aquatic world, are mythical beings living in a mythical Danube. “*In the mythical consciousness of the Romanian people*” – explains Romulus Vulcănescu in relation to characters belonging to aquatic mythology – “*the Danube is depicted as a sacred river, as an aquatic deity (similar to the ancient gods) and as a magical frontier*”. (Vulcănescu, 1987, p. 476)

Ilincuța Șandrului, Chira and other female characters from the ballads that portray victims of kidnapping from the ages of Tartar incursions or of Ottoman rule, they all have the chance of escaping through metamorphosis. Plunging into the waters purifies, and they become magic “*semi- anthropo-ichtyomorphic*” beings (Vulcănescu, 1987) to be found in the paremiological universe related to the cult of waters. Overcoming the tragic may equal a transfiguration in the historical and cultural southeast European context. Other opinions, such as Mircea Muthu’s, claim the opposite in what the Siren’s motif in modern literature is concerned:

“*[...] modern transliterations of the siren’s motif multiply its structural ambiguity. There is, on the one hand, the meaning derived from mythology: the siren is the soul of the deceased, unable to find the way to ascend and thus in eternal quarantine, suspended between heaven and earth, like an anthropophagous monster that at first charms, then devours living humans*”. (Muthu, 2005)



The leap from human to tragic becomes, for the inhabitant of this area, the expression of mythological retrieval of time and of a particular type of fragile relation between man and nature.

The southeast European tragic is enriched with new values of semi-anthropomorphism – the women metamorphosed into a building – through the motif of “*the entombment*”. Speaking about metamorphosis as a Romanian literary motif, Edgar Papu (1983, pp 60-61) goes beyond the literal meaning of the term (the transformation into “*a different plane of existence*” or a simple change of appearance, be it natural or artificial) and sees in this process, whose “*main object is always the human being*”, the transformation into “*something else*” or into “*someone else*”. Just as the motif of “*the young woman kidnapped by the ogre*”, the roots of the theme of “*creative death*” are to be related to the idea of “*re-mythification as survival*”, a form of philosophy the Mircea Muthu (2002, p 40) relates to the emergence of ballads meant to express the uncertainty of life under threat of the Turks. “*The heroic age*” becomes, in Mircea Muthu’s opinion, a characteristic of this turbulent area. As a product of folklore, the ballad stands at the confluence between archaic mentality (“*its magical expression*” according to Mircea Muthu (2002)) and Christian orthodox precepts, although the belief of sacrificial entombment of living people as a chance for survival is, according to Lazăr Şăineanu, “*a remnant of the most primitive times of civilization*” (2003, p. 31). According to researchers, in the archaic mentality, this belief was related to the superstition that, in order for a construction, a bridge or even a moat to be impregnable, an innocent child or a woman had to be entombed into the foundation itself. Through its folklore, southeastern Europe cultivates this type of mentality by preserving the central idea of the motif and by adding the flavor of each variant. Thus, the author of **Studii folclorice [Folklore Studies]** invokes, in relation to this motif, the Serbian variants about the city of Skodra or Scutari (Vuk Karadžić, **Srbske narodne pjesme**), the Bulgarian ones about the fortress Solun or Salonic (Miladinović, **Balgarski narodni pēsm**), the Greek about the bridge over the Arta (and from here it spread to the Romanians in Macedonia) or even the Albanian variants focusing on the bridge over the Dibra (**Vālyeta şkipātarā**, [**The Albanian Bee**], Alexandria, 1878, no. 12).

Adrian Fochi (1975, p. 383) goes even further in his research on the “*sacrificial entombment*” as a cultural phenomenon, and makes a few observations on the “*highly contradictory*” function of this custom. He mentions four general types of local forms under which the motif of the sacrificial entombment appears: (1) it is perceived as a compensation “*requested by the local spirit for trespassing on his domain*”, (2) as a trade respecting “*the do ut des principle*” [I give so that you may give], (3) as a means of transforming the person sacrificed into a protective spirit for the new building, or (4) it simply has “*a propitiatory effect*”. In what the artistic result is concerned, Fochi claims firmly that

*“what generates art is not the actual sacrifice, but the psychological adherence or lack of adherence of the victim and of the sacrificer to the idea of sacrifice (to its functionality, in fact), the torment of consciousness confronted with blind, merciless and obscure fatality”* (1975, p. 384) Beyond all this, unlike the Caucasian, north or west European versions that favor the *“minimal sacrifice”* (the victim has no relation to the builder, but is chosen randomly: a prisoner of war, a disabled person, a child bought from a poor widow or even someone simply passing by), those of southeastern Europe opt for the *“ultimate sacrifice”*. (Fochi, 1975, p. 119) In other words, the peoples living in this area manage to cross the ethnographic borders and, as Adrian Fochi observes, take the leap towards art because *“here, the subject has gained functional autonomy and has fulfilled its artistic destiny in the most authentic of manners [...]”*. (Fochi, 1975, p. 119)

In other words, the southeastern variants focus on sacrificing the woman, whereas in the Romanian versions, the builder’s artistic destiny may be fulfilled through the loss of his own life.

Dumitru Caracostea (1969, p. 220) identified a more recent Romanian version of builder Manole’s legend – different from other southeast European versions that end with the entombment of the builder’s wife, as it ends with the death of the architect himself. Regarding the destiny of the sacrificed woman, it can be traced due to a mapping of the existing local versions – endeavor undertaken by many researchers interested in identifying the similitudes and differences between them. In his comments on builder Manole’s legend, Mircea Eliade has extracted the most notable ones.

In Greek versions, the bridge over the Arta keeps breaking down, and the voice of archangels speaks of sacrificing a child at its foundation. The builder’s wife comes in the morning and informs her husband that she has lost her ring at the foundation of the bridge. While the woman goes down to look for it, she is immured alive. With her last sigh, she curses the bridge. In a Trabzon version, the builder chooses quite cynically to sacrifice his wife:

*“The builder hears a voice asking ‘What can you offer me so that the bridge stays erect?’, and he answers: ‘I can no longer have a mother and a daughter, but a wife, I might find a better one’”*.

Of all the Bulgarian versions, there is one that tells the story of the builder’s relentless ten-year efforts to erect a fortress, until he realizes that he cannot complete the task unless a sacrifice is made. He has his helpers swear to entomb the first wife to bring food the next day. Although he gives his wife several tasks in order to prevent her from coming (to winnow nine bags of wheat, to take them to the mill, to paint the dwelling etc.), the hard-working woman, who is also *“fearful of her husband”* (Eliade, 1992, p. 71), is the first to arrive. In order to lure her into the foundation of the bridge, the builder tells her that he

dropped his wedding ring at the base of the building and, when the woman climbs down to look for it, he entombs her. Realizing that her end is near, the woman screams and cries. In other variants, the wife begs that her breast be left untouched, so that she can feed her baby, or even curses her spouse or the bridge.

In Serbian versions of the legend, three architects try to build the fortress of Scandar, but the construction is broken down by a fairy that foretells the building will only be completed upon the entombment of the twins Stoia and Stoiana. As the two cannot be found, the fairy confesses that the effort can also be accomplished by the sacrifice of one of the builders' wives. The three builders make an oath not to tell their wives of the plan, but Goico is the only one who does not violate it. Thus, only his wife arrives bringing lunch. Her reason for hurrying into coming is particularly interesting: she does it instead of her mother-in-law lest the community should condemn her for letting the old woman make all the way to the fortress. Once arrived, she is entombed before she becomes aware of what is happening. When a mason reaches her chest and she realizes that her fate is sealed, she asks her husband to leave a window in front of her eyes and a second one in front of her breast, so as to feed her baby.

The analysis of these variants sheds light on a series of elements of tragic essence, which place femininity at the core of the motif. Mircea Eliade notices that the Bulgarian variants accentuate the genuine behavior of the builder's wife (she struggles, fights back, shouts, cries and even curses), whereas the Serbian variants insist on the woman's care for her gesture's echo in her community's mind (and the maternal instinct is part of that as well). In exchange, the Romanian variants emphasize a woman at peace with her fate, resigned to implacable destiny. Mircea Eliade even imagines initiation rites that prepare the builder's wife for the beyond.

It has been said about the sacrificial act itself that it belongs to ancient times, but "*for the ancient man [...], a thing or an act has no meaning unless prototypical or unless it recreates a primordial gesture*". (Eliade, 1992, p. 104) For the archaic mentality, the woman breathing inside the walls of the construction lives on another plane of existence, as her physical body becomes the stone of the church / bridge / fortress. Therefore, in Mircea Eliade's opinion (1992, p. 111), "*she is not meant to 'live' in the construction's walls, but, embedded, to 'become' the construction itself*". Her soul breathes life into it. Her death is perceived as ritual if one looks past the brutality of the entombment. In fact, Nicolae Manolescu (1991, p. 11) insisted that "*there is always cruelty in initiation*". The woman's disappearance means more than her becoming again one with the mythical cosmogonies; actually, if we were to dwell on Mircea Eliade's thought on the female character's initiatory voyage, her death would rather be perennial salvation. In this respect, her way of overcoming all the "trials", like the protagonists of tales, leads to believe that the immured woman goes from tragic to heroic in order to fulfill her destiny. The feeling of

tragic is directly connected with the actual sacrifice, and as far as the Romanian variants are concerned, Manole's death for creation closes a circle ("*nothingness-life-creative death*") (Muthu, 2002, p. 49). By closing this circle, Mircea Muthu wrote, the being becomes again one with the universe.

In this area, the double function of the tragic (active and with a "*retrieving purpose*") is, according to Mircea Muthu (2002, p. 49), at the base of what is called "*balkanism as aesthetic redemption*". The "*sacrificial entombment*" myth is to be found in later literary developments under the form of superstitions, whereas the archaic influences reworked by folklore will survive in popular accounts inspired by historical events (Muthu, 2002). Nonetheless, one must not overlook the fact that, whatever the aspects analyzed or the perspectives on semi-anthropomorphism, essential upon approaching the tragic dimension of the feminine typology in this area, is the compensatory function of the myth developed in the unstable and troubled context of southeastern Europe.

Bovaric, frivolous, widows or atypical, the female characters in southeast European literature form a complex typology of how femininity manifests itself against the troubled historical background of this area. Usually overshadowed by their male counterparts, these women prefer to relate rather to an inside world than to immediate reality. Their perception is integrated into the "*unstable balance*" of the area they come from. Fragile and, at the same time, highly emotional, literary femininity reflects a kind of personality tragically contaminated by myths and folklore and whose fulfillment can only be attained through metamorphosis.

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