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A comparative-typological analysis of female characters in Srpouhi Dussap's *Mayda*

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Abstract. The study focuses on a typological analysis of female characters in terms of their psychological features and self-identification strategies in the novel *Mayda* (1883) by Srpouhi Dussap, a Western Armenian author of the second half of the 19th century. Drawing on Lacan's concept of feminine subjectivity, the author analyzes the complex characters of Mayda and other female characters, namely Sira, Herika, and Houlianée to reveal how a non-binary female archetype demonstrates the blending of irrational and rational qualities of both the mother and the mistress. This approach highlights female subjectivity and its multiplicity through the Other. The author concludes that the tragedy of female self in *Mayda* lies within the patriarchal discourse, necessitating women to adopt different roles and masked appearances. This polyphony marks the female prose of the late 19th century through a gender prism.

Keywords: Srpouhi Dussap, *Mayda*, typology, tragic experience, subject, subjectivity, demonic woman, angel woman

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Научная статья

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Сравнительно-типологический анализ женских персонажей романа Србуи Тюсаба «Майта»

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Аннотация. Роман «Майта» (1883) первой западноармянской писательницы Србуи Тюсаб представляет собой уникальную попытку вынести в общественную сферу социально-исторические диалоги, которые были особенно популярны в Константинополе во второй половине XIX в. Цель исследования – провести сравнительно-типологический анализ психологических особенностей женских персонажей в романе «Майта», а также стратегию их самоидентификации. Задачи исследования: рассмотреть роман «Майта» Србуи Тюсаб в рамках концепции субъектности женщины, предложенной французским философом Жаком Лаканом, а также вне рамок понятия «субъект»; с помощью сравнительного метода проанализировать стратегии женской самоидентификации посредством главной женской героини романа Майты и трех второстепенных персонажей – Сиры, Эриги и Джулианы; используя графико-семантический метод презентации, составить представление о психологических и типологических характеристиках женских персонажей. Новизна исследования заключается в попытке нестандартного осмысления возможных путей женской эмансипации и развития. Актуальность исследования заключается в междисциплинарном подходе к рассмотрению материала. Это связано с необходимостью переосмысления «женского вопроса». Исследование носит междисциплинарный характер. Материал анализировался в контексте взаимосвязей литературоведения, психологии, философии и информатики. Данный вид типологического исследования позволяет, во-первых, выявить варианты архетипа женщины, которые с помощью сочетаний иррационального и рационального типов матери и хозяйки семьи дали автору возможность создать эмоциональные, рациональные, интеллигентные, ангельские, демонические и прочие образы, часто скрывающиеся под маской. Во-вторых, провозгласить женскую субъектность (включая неизбежную множественность) и проанализировать ее существование через посредство Иного. В результате этого анализа мы выяснили, что трагедия

женского «Я» в романе Србуи Тюсаб «Майта» заключается в патриархальном дискурсе, который одновременно символизирует власть социума (символический фаллос). В романе автор выражает также свои литературно-культурные, социальные и эстетические взгляды. Такой тип стратегии позволяет Србуи Тюсаб осознать, а нам проанализировать женскую прозу второй половины XIX в. через гендерную призму. Исследование романа является вкладом в изучение современного дискурса, связанного с «женским вопросом».

Ключевые слова: Србуи Тюсаб, «Майта», типология, трагический опыт, субъект, субъективность, демоническая женщина, ангельская женщина

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Introduction

Published in 1883, *Mayda* is a novel by the first Western Armenian female novelist Srпouhi Dussap [1]. Since then literary scholars have sought to interpret its genre and discern manifestations of opposition and binarity. According to Albert Sharuryan [2. P. 252], Arshaluys Babayan [3. P. 23–33], and Laura Muradyan [4. P. 22–40], Dussap's¹ opposition to the restrictive patriarchal society and the Ottoman dictatorial reality prominently manifested in the main characters of her novels *Mayda*, *Siranush* [5], and *Araksia or the Governess* [6], among which *Mayda*'s is the most vivid portrayal. Dussap's character construction revolves around

¹ Srпouhi Dussap (nee Vahanian) was born in 1841. She was the first Armenian novelist. Her work focused on female emancipation: socio-economic, legal, educational, political and national consciousness, their manifestations, and protection. Throughout her literary and cultural activity, Dussap tried to substantiate one of the most important prerequisites for female emancipation and independence – women's right for employment. Dussap authored the novels *Mayda* (1883), *Siranush* (1884), and *Araksia, or The Governess* (1887), journalistic articles, and poems. She died in 1901.

female subjectivity¹ and its associated experience [7]. This paper examines the female characters in *Mayda* through the lens of Lacanian concepts of female subject and subjectivity [5].

The core of Lacan's theory lies in the subject's inherent decenteredness, multiplicity, instability, and binarity [8], which stems from the reflection on the concept of the *subject*. Importantly, binarity encompasses not only the interaction between the *self* and the *Other*² within the the personality system but also the interplay of masculine and feminine principles. For Lacan, woman's subjectivity is defined solely through her relationship with the *Other* – primarily with man. However, this theory maintains that the *Other* is not only always present within the inner domain of woman's subjectivity, but also <...> creates and leads it to all possible identifications in which woman's subjectivity is spontaneously realized. The *Other* is actively involved in the formation of woman's subjectivity. The female *self*, in turn, performs not only a function of a passive subject [9].

On the one hand, woman remains fundamentally dependent on the *Other*, mediated through the symbolic phallus; on the other hand, she may assume the position of the *Other*, becoming the object of masculine fantasy. In both cases, without the constitutive relationship to the *Other*, woman turns into a *lost object* (system), which is why Lacan defines female *subjectivity* through carnivalesque scenarios where woman appears through different *masks*. Consequently, to remain within the patriarchal system of signs, woman must perpetually change her modes of self-identification.

For Lacan, the body is the outward appearance of desire (the desire for the *Other* and the desire through the *Other*), with desire itself defined through the concept of *hysteria*³. Hysteria, however, contains an inherent tragic core which manifests itself through bodily symptoms and through *body language*. Though Lacan developed his theories in the 20th century and Dussap wrote in the late 19th century, Lacanian concepts remain instrumental in feminist literature. Indeed, feminist literature consistently provides fertile ground for examining gender relationships.

¹ A subject in its narrow meaning is an individual who possesses conscious experiences, such as perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and desires.

² A philosophical term first used by Simone De Beauvoir.

³ A psychological term first used by Jacques Lacan.

Methods and methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary synthesis of comparative, analytical, literary, psychological, philosophical, and graphic-semantic methods [10. P. 6–11; 11. P. 1944–1953]. Integrating Lacan's psychoanalysis and female subjectivity, we could trace the ontological evolution from female archetype to subjectivity, systematically categorizing them into a unified typological system, visualized through a *graphic-semantic representation*. Philosophical analysis, namely Hélène Cixous's concept of feminine otherness, has contributed much to our textual interpretation. Additionally, targeted divisions were implemented to elucidate core issues and facilitate ideological synthesis.

The ontological evolution from archetype to subjectivity

Dussap's *Mayda* employs a comparative structure that juxtaposes the depictions, actions, and fates of four female characters: Mayda, Mrs. Sira, Herika, and Houlianée. This framework systematically traces Dussap's female archetypification [12]. The contrast between Herika and Houlianée embodies the *demonic* and *angelic* (divine) feminine archetypes respectively. By comparing Mayda and Sira, Dussap articulates feminine *subjectivity* with its innate multiplicity. Finally, the novel renders each character's existential process and end-points as mediated through *the Other* [13. P. 56–63]. In *Mayda*, Dussap constructs no truly independent female character who would act as a full subject [14].

Thus, Herika's character remains incomplete, which is evident in her actions and appearance. This incompleteness underscores her mythical sphinx-like absorbing nature, defined by instincts:

(Herika to Petros T...) Prove to me that you are not ready to commit the same crime, but it's not what I long for. I want to take revenge, but not with death, which ends the torture, but with life, so that every day new portion of poison is instilled into my victim's soul and ravage the remains causing severe pain . . . I kept silent about what I saw, I kept their secret, I buried my pain in my heart, my revenge alone remained unchanged, and I vowed to separate the two hearts that adored each other and thought that no one was aware of their love [1. P. 94–96].

Mayda's regular letters to Mrs. Sira evolve into a ritual, rendering her appearance and personality, shrouded in a delicate veil of femininity¹, more perceptible.

In the novel, Mayda appears as the sole self-sufficient *goddess* who has a will; yet, in reality, she, like the other characters, is denied true autonomy. A Lacanian analysis reveals that Mayda's primary driving force, much like Herika's, is *the Other*. For Mayda, Dikran assumes this role, though his instinctual drives ultimately lead him to a far different fate.

Dussap's characters are fundamentally distinct. Mayda's female *self* does not submit to the male *Other*, Dikran, despite her love for him. However, Herika's *self*, driven by instinctive impulses, becomes captive to the same *Other*, Dikran, succumbing to psychological dependence, which unfolds through the principle of sexual polarity and interplay of attraction and repulsion:

He treated me with brotherly respect and nothing more. Yet my heart would burn with a terrible fire, my mind would rave: how often I longed to confess my feelings to him, but when the moment of confession came, my tongue would grow heavy and motionless in my mouth, so much I respected him. <...> He was the object of my dreams day and night, and no other image could displace his" [1. P. 95].

The conflict in the novel, instigated by Dikran's actions, is mediated not only by Mayda, the woman he loves and for whom he commits murder, but also by Herika, whose interests, ambitions, and views are opposed to his own. Mayda, too, loves Dikran, and this love is seriously tested over time, although in her letters to Sira she frequently resists, doubts, and even attempts to disavow this feeling.

Dikran is drawn to Mayda – to her beauty and her body – and, to assert his control over her, he seeks to manipulate her fate by killing Herika [1. P. 95]. While Dussap tries to convince the reader that Herika conspires against Mayda out of jealousy, leading to her own downfall, one thing is clear: Dikran kills Herika to affirm his masculine *self* (the symbolic phallus) in love. His decision is unilateral, driven by power.

In this way, Dussap presents a *feministic* discourse, not a *feminine* one, where the full realization of the feminine *self* requires the masculine *Other*

¹ This is evidenced by Sira's and Mayda's correspondence.

[15. P. 701], while the realization and affirmation of masculine *self* requires the feminine *self* (the rational *Other*). Therefore, it is through the combination of feminine multiplicity and her *self* (the rational *Other*) that subjectivity can be formed. The tragedy of the feminine *self* in Dussap's *Mayda* is the patriarchal discourse within the novel, where the significant element is the symbolic phallus, to which Herika instinctively submits, thus losing her own *self*:

When I satisfy my thirst for revenge, when I see my hated wife fallen into the precipice of suffering and feel happy at heart at the sight of her miserable look, when I am no longer forced to show my bitterness in order to kill her heart, then *I will consider you as my master, submitting to your law* [1. P. 95].

To uphold the system of signifiers of the discourse under study, woman in the novel adopts various roles and tries on different masks. This technique produces the symbolic character of the multi-faceted woman-sphinx with Mayda's, Sira's, Herika's, and Houlianée's common features.

Plot transformations as a revelation of woman's otherness

The novel is particularly remarkable for its plot transformations, driven by the archetypal perceptions of its female characters. Initially, Dussap guides the reader along her intended narrative path¹. The portrayal of Herika's appearance (a defining trait) becomes increasingly vivid and striking when she feels rejected. Therefore, Herika's intention to kill Mayda, the woman Dikran loved, should not be seen as a mere act of vengeance against Mayda herself, but rather as an internal alternative – retribution against Dikran for his rejection. At first glance, Herika seems to be dependent on Dikran. However, Mayda serves as a catalyst to Herika's *hysteria* and aggressiveness. Thus, over time, she gains a better understanding and tries to realize the geography of her own feelings towards Dikran.

A typological examination of the novel's female characters shows that Dussap both legitimizes and contrasts four distinct types of women through Mayda, Sira, Herika, and Houlianée. Though each woman wears a societal

¹ The description of Herika's extreme beauty somewhat disorients the reader at first.

“mask” [12], they represent a specific archetype [12], realizing their internal practicality. Despite Herika’s foreign origin and Sira’s life in Greece, Dussap unconsciously guides them towards life experience and the wisdom it imparts. All the four women are shaped – whether willingly or not – by the patriarchal society that determines their fate. They are all *unhappy women* who have learned to live amidst the perpetual turmoil of life. Gradually, they merge into a unified entity embodying the quintessence of femininity, each carrying a common trait: *an unhappy woman embodying femininity within herself* (Fig. 1).

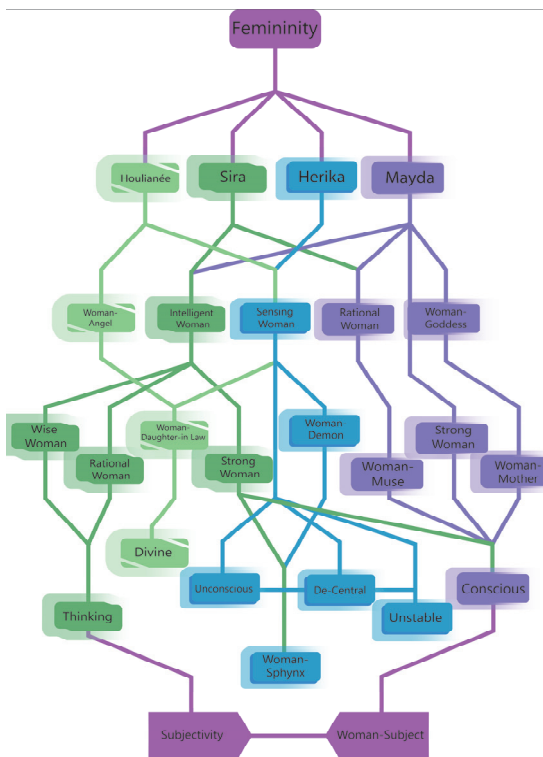


Figure 1. Typological and psychological features of female characters in Dussap’s *Mayda*

Upon initial observation, Mayda seems not down-to-earth, since her life is somewhat determined by Sira, Herika, and Houlianée. Here we can refer to French psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray's essay "Speculum of the Other Woman" to distinguish and interpret Mayda's character [16. P. 365].

Irigaray creates the concept of woman's otherness by turning to ancient mythology and reinterpreting the characters of Ariadne, Athena, Clytemnestra and others. Yet, the main character that Irigaray creates is Antigone. By developing the plot of Antigone's forced withdrawal from the state and social life, Irigaray reinterprets Antigone's fate, questioning the system that rejected Antigone as an embodiment of otherness. For Irigaray, Antigone epitomizes a woman with a *binary nature* and an *anti-woman*, fulfilling her feminine role to the end – she resists the system that has determined that role for her [16. P. 365].

Dussap's *Mayda* can be analyzed through a feminist lens by juxtaposing with Antigone. Mayda challenges the patriarchal system that ostracizes divorced women, isolating and alienating them from society. She defies the standards of the closed society with its rigid patriarchal norms, constituting the unwritten ethical and moral laws of the society. Here, the primary focus is not on the rational-*Other*, but on the instinctive, unconscious discourse. So, the patriarchal discourse functions as a social signifier and a symbolic phallus, representing power within the social hierarchy.

Mayda's antagonist, Herika, with her weak will and passive aggressiveness, adheres to the essence of a woman marked by multiplicity and emotionality. Yet, she turns vengeance into a tool, thereby expressing her protest. The conflict between Mayda and Herika is also well-founded from the perspective of *subjectivity*. According to Dussap, female *self* cannot be forcibly subjugated to *the Other*, though the opposite is possible.

The opposite side of the mirror: The hysterical body as a psychological mask

The main idea behind revealing the archetype of a woman is to hide her body, when the character either displays herself or comes into the focus of those who attempt to see her true face behind the mask. The gaze from behind the mask is always the gaze of the *Other* upon the woman's *self*, or the hidden influence of that *self* upon *the Other*. That is why, beyond the

bounds of hysteria, in a fit of madness, Herika does not feel her body, as she approaches her death. Even in this state, Herika does not accept the idea of *desire* per se, but skillfully exploits the idea of being desired by *the Other*. Herika's ontological time is conditioned by her extraordinary attitude toward objects and phenomena. She is emotional, which means that she derives her own existence from her own mirror. Simultaneously, all actions and identifications are mediated by the worldview as seen by Mayda and Dikran. In Lacan's terminology, Herika's body can be described as *hysterical* from which all psychological masks are born [9. P. 150]. Herika uses them all, especially that of the *demonic woman*, to achieve her own goals – the ritual of revenge.

Herika's body is an object of desire in itself (one for oneself). Each of her masks represents its own manifestation of femininity. However, no one recognizes the true Herika. *The Other* cannot complete the creation of woman's *subjectivity* and her further existence. Since the woman's subjectivity is self-sufficient only within the process of desire, it lies outside the boundaries of woman's subjectivity. Herika's *hysterical* body can also be interpreted as a tragic experience arising from the unconscious.

The protagonist, Mayda, uses her body rather than language to express the tragedy of losing her daughter, Houlianée. In Dussap's novel, this tragedy is distinctly gendered. All the male characters (Dikran, the Count, Houlianée's husband, Petros) have absolutely *non-tragic* experiences. They live, discover, and act by their own rules, unburdened by societal expectations.

For Dussap, the true tragedy lies in the futility of resisting fate: what is predestined will inevitably come to pass. This fatalism is shared by all the female characters in *Mayda*, whose experiences are overly tragic compared to those of the male characters. Herika emerges as the most tragic figure, though Mayda and Houlianée endure their own tragedies. Their stories are instrumental for outlining the collective tragedy of patriarchal society.

Both Dikran and Herika are violent characters: masculine violence is expressed through Dikran, who kills Herika:

Suddenly, my eyes caught sight of a woman in an oriental dress, who calmly came towards us and attacked me at once, wishing to kill me with a sword. Dikran blocked the blow aimed at me, and snatching the sword, he thrust it hard into the woman's heart. She let out a scream that froze my blood, and I fell to

the ground while the blood flowed from the wound. Dikran pulled the white veil from her face and in front of me I saw, oh heaven... Herika! Recognizing her, Dikran shouted, "Justice has been done, Mayda, my beloved, I got a revenge for you" [1. P. 229].

Herika's violence manifests itself in exploitations and other violent acts throughout the entire novel. Though explicit, these acts remain unrecognized, including an incestuous¹ relationship with Dikran, which Mayda is aware of. Though a victim of patriarchy, Mayda is shown as a *woman-goddess* (for Dikran) and a *woman-muse* (for the Count). Although she challenges her fate, she still accepts things as they are.

In his seminars on psychoanalysis, Lacan discusses the tragedy of the loss of the symbolic phallus, which in this study represents the struggle to overcome patriarchy and violence [17. P. 199–278]. Both these tragedies are overcome through Mayda's unfulfilled dreams, which she confesses to Sira.

Another important way of establishing female subjectivity is Dussap's strategy as a novelist. Dussap's narrative strategy reveals an important way of organizing female subjectivity, which can be analyzed through the lens of feminist criticism. In general, regarding this strategy, critics of feminism suggest *double-voiced discourse* as a means of providing the narrative with imagery and descriptiveness [18. P. 401; 19. P. 125–137]. To achieve this, female authors have to adapt to the *androcentric* discourse, on the one hand, while on the other hand, express their *individuality*. This approach can also be precisely formulated through the phenomenon of *the binarity of the female voice*, when a specifically female hermetic text is created and interpreted within the domain of one's *own writing* or *writing for oneself*. In that case, what is mostly *socially unconcealed* or what is demanded by society is marked and comes to the surface of the historically encrypted text.

¹ In psychoanalysis, the incest impulse is not understood literally and is seen as a retrograde desire to find the security that the child had in early childhood. Jung noted some specific forms of incest expression during childhood, but he saw incest fantasy as a metaphor for the path of psychological growth and development.

Conclusion

Srpouhi Dussap's *Mayda*, as well as the literary works by other Western Armenian woman writers (Elpis Kesaratsian [20. P. 1–26], Sipil [21. P. 687–701]) engaged in literary, cultural, and social activities in the second half of the 19th century, demonstrate polyphony, simultaneously contrasting *women's writing* and *patriarchal discourse*. The epistolary novel *Mayda* becomes the most obvious expression of polyphony realized through the female characters, whose voices balance each other and, together with the author's voice (author-narrator), contribute to revealing woman's *subjectivity* in the inner domain of the novel.

Dussap also makes the most of her narrating strategy and opportunities. In the novel, there are three types of the narrative:

- a. *the teller* (who narrates through the letters written by Mayda),
- b. *the narrator* (who speaks through the letters of Sira and imparts her feminine wisdom),
- c. *the author* (who guides the reader with the flow of her consciousness throughout the novel).

All the three techniques have their image solutions, through which Dussap reinforces the ideas of female subject and subjectivity. Dussap's voice is quiet and slightly louder than the others'. That voice helped the first Armenian novelist to implement the idea of writing novels for women in the 1880s. *Mayda* also contains elements of Dussap's own biography, offering a unique perspective of the life of women in the late 19th century, from the vantage point of the 21st century. To fully grasp the concept of female subjectivity in *Mayda*, it is useful to consider Lacan's theory, particularly the notion of subject-object. While this conclusion is based on the prose of Western Armenian female writers of the second half of the 19th century, it is also relevant for female literature of the 20th – early 21st century.

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