

BOOK REVIEW

„Nașterea. Istorii trăite”, by Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir (Eds.), published at Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2010.

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LEAVING THE TABOO

Perhaps one of the most common critiques formulated against feminism in Romania deals with its excessive propension towards theoretical enquiry. The various intellectual endeavors regarding gender and/or feminism were either exclusively theoretical (mainly political theory or political philosophy) or were constituted as country or situation reports that x-rayed the Romanian society through acid, feminist lens. Unfortunately, neither approach managed to stimulate a growing interest for the domain. The medium reader felt as if facing a wall of aridity in relation to the Romanian feminist discourse, perceiving it as radical or as excessively academic. The main result of this particular state of affairs was that not only the public at large wasn't encouraged to develop a keen interest on the issue, but also that it inspired a plethora of stereotypical images regarding feminism and feminists – “hair-chested women” shouting hysterically western-borrowed slogans from their academic ivory tower.

Nevertheless, once is translated in common-sense language, the supposedly radical feminist programme turns out to be surprisingly unradical: a fairly simple agenda, comprising human and political rights and underlying the principle of recognizing the differences between the sexes. Bluntly put, just as winter is not like summer, nor men are like women. We have essentially different needs and experiences which, once understood by both parties, can and should constitute the basis of a real partnerial model. Undoubtedly, the cold academic discourse, no matter how strongly supported by arguments, will not be able to link the theory

with people's everyday experiences. For feminism to escape from this *cul de sac* of misperception, a completely different approach is needed.

Sharing experiences are in my opinion the best way to relate with an unspecialized public that has a predominantly patriarchal upbringing. Those experiences may constitute the necessary bridge between culturally constructed prejudices and the reality of various differences that define our daily existence. *Birth. Lived histories* presents such an endeavor, trying to offer to both sexes the unbiased access to the most powerful experience in a woman's life – that of maternity in general and of birth in particular.

The book consists of 20 life histories, in which women of very different origins, age and professions depict vividly their maternal experiences. From a methodological standpoint, this is more than a simple collection of personal accounts, but also a historical puzzle comprising an impressive selection of social, ideological and cultural dynamics seen in their diachronic aspects. From this point of view, the volume is an introduction – though timid and singular – to the social history of the last 60 years in Romania, from the early communist period to the years 2000.

Reading the confessions, one realizes that birth is much more than a simple physical act or event, but is fundamentally charged with profound significances both at an individual and at the larger, historical level. It is an act of life, of will and of love of oneself and of the other, within a broader context involving a profoundly emotional redefinition of the self through the subtle dialectics of mother and child.

The umbilical cord that unites the two in one single being is transfigured from the simple material reality into the spiritual one, bounding for life through birth both mother and child. And, contrary to the common sense perception, the reader will be surprised to learn that the symbolical cutting of the umbilical cord signified by the emancipation processes of adolescence is more difficult for the parent than for the child.

Birth. Lived histories challenges perhaps one of the oldest taboos existing in Romanian society – that of birth as a specific, intimate feminine experience and therefore forbidden to men. Instead, it offers a different view, that of a fundamentally social experience which surrounds the physical act itself, charging it with meanings and making it part of a much broader process, involving both men and women: parenthood. Thus, the actors and institutions involved are not confined to the mother and the medical personnel (a relation that undoubtedly is shaping maternity), but also involves the husband and the family itself as a network of human interactions.