Geofeminism in Romanian Fiction. An Introduction

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Abstract: The relationship established between geography, literature, the study of space, and gender studies is one that generates increased knowledge regarding perspectives on literary works. From this vantage point, in the present essay we offer an analysis of several Romanian novels, temporally close to the beginnings of literature in Romania, from a geofeminist perspective, a hybrid concept which aids the mapping of literary territories. The maps thus resulted from this type of analysis offer a much more complex positioning within the European cultural space, even more so if one considers the surfacing of real historical elements, inserted into the novels analysed, which stand as samples for the present demonstration.
Keywords: geofeminism, Romanian fiction, character, mapping, gender studies, geocriticism

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Context

Discussing from the analytical point of view based on the interaction between literature and geography, literature and space, between the humanities and the science of mapping, means centralizing a real and imaginary representation of the topos. In the present study we do not set out to discuss the articulation of these concepts, but to prove the viability of the concept of "geofeminism". It is common knowledge that geocriticism and the study of literary space are considered to have multiple common points, included under the more ample common denominator of literary geography. In the latest issue of *Literary Geography* (nr. 6/ 2020) [1]., in a polemical dialogue, Sheila Hones and Robert T. Tally Jr. bring up the painfully fluid definitions of these concepts which Westphal had noted before: "Geocriticism will work to map possible worlds, to create plural and paradoxical maps, because it embraces space in its mobile heterogeneity"[2]. From the vantage point of the discussion undertaken in the present study, the most important conclusion is the one related to the scope of this research which is based on a "geocentered approach, which places place at the centre of debate"[3]. Geofeminism centralizes precisely the manner in which "the place" is mapped from the perspective of female characters / women in literary works. We can thus note the existing direct relationship between geocriticism and the concept of gender, an idea touched upon in various studies which offer different perspectives on this issue, such as: *Feminist Spaces: Gender and Geography in Global Context* (2018) by Oberhauser, Fluri, Whitson, Mollett, *Companion to Feminist Geography: Contexts, Work, City, Body, Environment, and State/ Nation*, by Lise Nelson and Joni Seager, *Mapping Women, Making Politics : Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography* (2004) by Staeheli, Kofman, and Peak. At the centre of feminist debates one can certainly find body and corporality, but which analysed in the context of the place they take up in a real or imaginary geography, determine a hybrid tool of analysis, geofeminism. By identifying the key topics of this approach such as: "space is gendered; "place produces gender"; one can identify in literary texts modes in which space is feminized or the manner in which space produces gender.

Literary Space – Gender – Women

One cannot tackle the relationship between space, place and gender without bringing up the theory of Doreen Massey, articulated in *Space, Place and Gender* which advances the interdependency between geography, gender and gender relations. The claim related to the role of women in British society, according to which "women are the domestic labourers" [4]recalls Călinescu's famous remark regarding the character of Ana from the novel *Ion* by Liviu Rebreanu: "women represent a work force, a dowry and a producer of offspring" (...). Massey notes that the place of women was closely tied to the realms of the domestic space, to housework, an aspect that changes along with the process of industrialization, and regarding Romania Miroiu observes "the beginnings of industrialization, the increase in culture, the revolt against the state of dependency and against the culture of gender inferiority" [5].All of these brought about ground-breaking changes. These changes can also be traced by studying the

manner in which female characters are constructed in various milestone novels in Romanian literature and the mapping of the space that these characters inhabit. The construction of the character by relating her to the space she belongs to can offer precious clues not only regarding the cultural area inhabited by the character, but also about the manner in which gender studies, by interacting with literary geography, can reveal further knowledge.

Romanian society with its predominantly rural character and agricultural preoccupations, witnessed a transformation along with the urbanization process and the migration to the cities, similar to other European areas, with space being shaped by political decisions and the particularities of the South-Eastern European region. Thus, the process of collectivization commenced after 1949, as massive industrialization, determined a population exodus towards urban areas, and thus a change in the manner in which women had access to work places otherwise reserved for men. The present essay chooses however to focus on the manner in which space influenced and interacted with the role that women at the end of the XXth century held until 1944, and how this role was mirrored in a changing way in literature. According to UN statistics[6], in 1920 Romania had an urban population of 1,4 million people, in 1930 of 2 million, in 1940 of 2,8, in 1950 of 2,9, and in 1960 of 3,9 (representing 32% of the entire population of the time, considering that the United Kingdom in 1960 had a 78.5% urban population, Germany 76,4%, France 61,2%, Poland 47,2%, Hungary 39,8%, Yugoslavia 27,8%). The data proves the preponderance of the rural population, an aspect which also had an impact on the evolution of the Romanian novel, and on the manner in which female characters are shaped and the spaces they inhabit.

The axes of study in the present essay were aligned along three major coordinates, with geofeminism becoming the primary research tool: the first refers to the individual role, the intimate space and the family relations of women in the novel, the second presents social interactions and the connections with other individuals in the community, while the third focuses on the manner in which female characters evolved and how they relate to the narrative space in the texts analysed. The texts taken up for discussion are representative for the period at the end of the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth century.

The Beginnings. "It Was Woman Who Banished Man from Paradise".

Setting up a geography of feminine spaces, the way it appears in early Romanian literature, is related to the fact that in some XIXth century writings (such as the first novel considered of importance by Romanian criticism, *Ciocoii vechi și noi (Upstarts Old and New)* by Nicolae Filimon), the image of women is created through the eyes of men, and thus objectified. The dominating stance is the one that also forms the title of a chapter and is related to a sacred space: *Femeia a scos pe om din Rai (It Was Woman Who Banished Man from Paradise).* Consequently, women appear as a disturbing element, which seduces and destroys balance in a man's life. Narrative events place her within a malefic, orgiastic space: for the sake of "luxury" "the proud and feeble-minded woman defiles the vows of faithfulness she has made to her husband", and the supreme labelling is the one according to which luxury is considered to be "invented by Satan in order to bring about the fall of man by means of women, even though it had been brought to our country by the Phanariotes" (the Phanariotes – Greek rulers (from Fanar) imposed by the Ottoman Empire as rulers of the Romanian principalities, as vassals of the Turks). On the one hand, the text contains the idea of female weakness for wealth, but which had been previously established by the "European manufactory". As an element of imagology, we can note that the foreigner – the Greek ruler, as well as European merchants, are the ones who bring about destruction, by tempting women and "making them succumb to sin". Mieke Bal in *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* brings up the manner in which violence interfered in family relations in religious texts, and the component of female submission and its secondary role in social life[7].

With Filimon, space is shaped in accordance with concrete geography: "The opening of the Cișmeaua Roșie club and its transformation into a theatre hall later on, led to an even greater proliferation of luxury"[8]. The feminization of space caters to the idea of damnation. "There was no family where this theatre hall was not a topic of conversation along with the outfits women required to attend it. Women were mortifying their husbands, and youngsters their parents, to buy them new attire, diamonds and perfumes"[9]. In fact, as noted in official archives, Cișmeaua Roșie was "the first theatre hall in Bucharest", built on Calea Victoriei at the intersection with Berthelot street. The initiative belonged to princess Ralu, the daughter of the Phanariot ruler Caragea, and she is the one who signs the official establishment papers which gave birth to a creative space of representation and staging. In the narrative text of Filimon however, the authorial voice perceives the theatre as a "luxury" meant to corrupt women and, above all, to drive men into poverty. The separation of genders is obvious, without resorting to artistic means, thereby producing a type of resistance Rose mentioned regarding the exclusiveness and proliferation of elements of novelty. Spatial geography is modelled by the presence of femininity, viewed as exaggerated and vulgar sexuality, which almost always entails male damnation. Cities such as Paris are also described by relating them to women of loose morals, which bring about destruction of reason through tempting the senses:

> "as soon as they reach the gates of Paris, they fall prey to women and youngsters of loose morals which further deprave them; and upon their return to the homelands, instead of bringing with them the enlightenment of civilized Europe, they bring only vice and depravity or if one of them manages to learn anything there, this intellectual education, not sustained by a moral component, causes more harm than good to this wretched country that feeds such vipers in its bosom"[10].

The narrative discourse has only one dominant component, the

ethical one, associating cities to spaces of doom, where women represent the supreme evil that contaminates the minds of the young generation. The sententious and sarcastic tone is meant to condemn the behaviour of men sent to study in the West, and who end up falling prey to the charms of Parisian women. A double-edged conclusion appears here: the first is related to the fact that the female element is merely an erotic tool, immorality being the direct result of it, and the second, which we will encounter in various novels, is the one according to which women did not have access to education. In a literary chronicle of the XIXth century in Bucharest, Ioana Pârvulescu notes that women had two types of roles in society: a secondary one, under the form of five pillars, "mothers, wives, muses, daughters, sisters" and an episodic one: "mistresses, servants, daughters of pleasure"[11]. In the traditional Romanian society of the XIXth century, seduction implied a negative component, one of turning away from the moral codes imposed by society. The paradox was that usually the seductive, thus evil, element was woman, who disrupted the man's equilibrium.

The discourse of power is constructed by means of the male character who, paradoxically, uses seduction of women as a tool for obtaining power. We are witnessing here a type of sabotaging power through power, through enforcing one's own position of force by means of a constant considered to be weaker. Jane Miller notices that, in actual fact, women are not seduced by men, but by "stories men have told about these seductions"[12] and by female imagination which arises from such stories. For her, seduction is the manner in which power is manifested in "societies based on inequity"[13]. Thus, one of the upstarts, Andronache Tuzluc, who will be sabotaged in his turn by Dinu Păturică, concludes that power can be seized by seducing the daughter of the man holding supreme power, the ruler Caragea: "he knew from experience that the key to the worldly and the other-worldly heaven was held by women; this is why he channelled all his efforts of intrigue towards the lady companions of princess Ralu, the beloved daughter of prince Caragea"[14].The reader is informed that he got to know the princess through one of her maids of honour, used by Tuzluc as a tool to reach his scope. The law which acted as a Civil Code, during Caragea's reign, in its first chapter entitled "Pentru bărbați și femei (For Men and Women)" stated that "only men can be noblemen and judges and administrators. Only men can become bishops, priests and deacons. Women are forbidden to enter any political positions, positions of authority or other public positions", and in chapter XIV, marriage is defined in the following manner: "Marriage is the union of the man with a woman in order to produce offspring". Inheritance was also not exempt from these rules: "Under the Caragea code girls did not inherit their parents, only boys did, with the obligation however of ensuring a dowry for their sisters."[15]

Women are always pictured in reclusive spaces, which imprison them and where they perform household tasks such as: "two were spinning, one was combing linen and the other was knitting a sock"[16].The female character, Maria, finds out that "the prince had already decided who her future husband was going to be", which in its turn implies a discourse of power, firstly directed at the father, and secondly at the woman, who had to get married at the age of fourteen. Another hypostasis of womanhood, painted in contrasting shades to the angelic figure of Maria, is Chera Duduca, Andronache Tuzluc's mistress, characterized by vanity and greed: "The female heart, even if it can sometimes get drunk on ambitious aspirations of grandeur, wealth and other vanities so beloved by the female gender, will at some point still awaken to other stronger, more overpowering pleasures"[17]. Attitudes such as "a guilty conscience" by means of which the narrator tries to impose his ethical views, represent a weak point: "let us leave this type of weakness to hysterical women, and us men should do what everybody else is doing". Gender roles in the Romanian society of the Phanariot era were strictly set out, and one can observe this from the delimitation between genders. The space of lavish feasts and merrymaking is enriched by female characters, included in order to raise the revellers' spirits, because "nothing can be complete if women are absent from the midst of men, the most pleasant of caresses in such cases. The revel that lacks women is like a wedding lacking musicians! Chioftea claims"[18]. Recurring to such statements is yet another power display, with the man holding the instruments of force, provided to him by his gender.

There are some historical explanations regarding the spaces those women of loose morals belong to who were invited to these parties: "In those times, and henceforward, harlots were the most degraded and vulgar of women; the Scaunelor ghetto was the place of residence of such women". From the Bucharest city archives we find out that the Scaunelor ghetto was also referred to as Caravanserai (the Romanian language features the verb a *curvăsări* with the sense of leading a life of loose morals), using a Turkish term, denoting an inn located at the side of the road. This space is a frontier one, at the limit between two worlds, with people from all walks of life having access to it. The association of the transit-space with the women present at the party denotes a complete integration of these women in the zone set out by the author, a part of medieval Bucharest. We encounter passages featuring historical figures such as Tudor Vladimirescu (a revolutionary of the year 1821) or Alexandru Ipsilant. The brief insertions regarding women are related to the abuse committed to them by soldiers, and the incidents are treated with benevolence, while condemning the harsh punishment instilled upon the soldiers by the captain:

> "Tudor simply had to be less harsh with a group of youngsters who had abandoned the sweetness of a tranquil life in order to fight for the liberation of their homeland, often bereft of food and other basic necessities; he however had served in the Russian army and had inherited from it that unmatched harshness which was to become the main cause of his downfall; shoplifting, rape and other such examples of disorderly behaviour, and even less serious offenses, the captain was punishing by beheading or hanging".[19]

Stealing and raping are seen as similarly grave offenses, being

referred to as "disorderly behaviour", which testifies to the dominant attitude of the era regarding women. As a member of society, women are almost entirely absent, surfacing only when they function as erotic instruments, meant to aid the manifestation of power and pleasure. On a symbolic level, the situation mirrors a patriarchal mindset, which created certain patterns encountered in the collective consciousness. The XIXth century, with its Balkan influences and the Ottoman rule, was dominated by a social matrix which advanced the total submission of women, where women had no access to education, critical thinking was entirely eliminated, in the face of a total phallocentric subordination. In these terms, between periphery and centrism, women take up a marginal position, the only spaces accessible to them being the bedroom, and even if they possessed some dignity, being the wives or daughters of powerful men, they were under constant surveillance of other women or of a trustworthy servant. Jean Baudrillard, in the essay *Seduction*, argues that "All masculine power is a power to produce. All that is produced, be it the production of women as female, falls within the register of masculine power. The only, and irresistible, power of femininity is the inverse power of seduction. In itself it is null, seduction has no power of its own, only that of nulling the power of production". He advances an interesting hypothesis, of inversed poles, by means of the concept of seduction. In order to achieve this, "[the] feminine [must be] considered not as a sex, but as the form transversal to every sex, as well as to every power, as the secret virulent form of in-sexuality". Seduction is more important than phallic power, because it becomes a power in itself "The seductive form prevails over the productive form"[20].

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A singular case in the canonical novel of the XIXth century is *Mara* by Ioan Slavici, where the actions of the female character are not related to seduction, but to forms of production, because Mara is a tradeswoman who makes money. Many syntagma were used in order to describe "the first businesswoman in Romanian literature", "the capitalist woman"[21], and the space in which the character moves is shaped by her actions. Aware of the importance of education, Mara sends her daughter to Lipova, to a convent, in order to be educated. The novel features various female typologies: the first time when Nați travels to Buda, his mother believes that "some women must have robbed him of his senses", for him to abandon his home. About Reghina, Bandi's mother, "a servant at Radna, a sturdy, beautiful and mature woman" it is known that she wandered through the "Cladova woods", before giving birth and had become an invalid. Marta is described by relating her to her husband, Bocioacă: "She was constantly trying to please him and be to his liking, but above all to keep him away from temptations. This is why she felt more at ease among men than women, she hated beautiful women, she could not stand those that were liked by their husbands and was taking any woman as an enemy that was praised by her husband"[22]. After marrying Nați, Persida faces the hardships of life, "sitting alone in her room and thinking about all affairs of life"[23]. Virginia Woolf wrote in her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own* that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved"[24]. Persida has the seeds of the power of seduction within her: "That she had been beaten by him, seemed quite normal to her; but her mind stood still upon realizing that she herself had been capable of slapping him, that she had been capable of marrying a man who had stripped her of her true self"[25]. Mara advices her daughter, just like Dinu Păturică does in the aforementioned novel, that the supreme value that shapes the world is money: "Money, my dearest, she said, money is a great power, it opens all doors and destroys all laws, and you have money, enough money, a lot of money"[26]. "Mara travels the world, vividly running, bargaining and arguing with people", and the markets she visits are sources of income: "from the right-hand shore of the Mureș river, where the locals gather for the weekly market from as far as Sovârșin sand Soboteliu and the vintners from as far away as Cuvin. On Thursday morning she crosses the Mureș and sets up her vending stalls on the left-hand shore, where the Banatians from Făget, Căpălnaș sand Sân-Miclăuș gather. Friday night, after the cocks crow, she leaves for Arad"[27].

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In the XXth century novel one can witness the presence of female characters who perform multiple functions, in relation to the space they belong to: for example, a decorative function, through the addition of the erotic pattern, completing the narrative event, or in another novel the representation of different hypostases of womanhood, in different spaces, which generate different types of behaviour.

The first instance is related to Liviu Rebreanu's novel *Forest of the Hanged*, where the female space is limited, appearing only occasionally, in a decorative manner, whereas the male protagonist, Apostol Bologa, is searching for answers to the uncertainty generated by belonging to an Empire's army. The subject matter is simple: the main character, enrolled in the Austro-Hungarian army, because Transylvania belonged to this empire, is torn between his duty of faithfulness to the oath he took, and the pain of fighting against the Romanian army, located on the other side of the barricades. Within this dramatic historical context, the female character has an unimportant role in the narrative economy. The pattern constructed by Rebreanu is the one of the woman who sacrifices herself for the good of her husband and of her family. The first of these women is the priest's wife, seen as a fleeting apparition, in a domestic space, taking care of children: "a woman who truly loves you, even in the face of sacrifice" priest Constantin observes. Ilona, the woman he loves, after his break-up from Marta, is the one Bologa wishes to marry, promising her that "he will educate her, and dress her better than any lady"[28]. The lack of access to education is thus underlined, by referring to a general state of the society of the time. Similarly, the stereotype of the spinster is also present in the novel, when Apostol Bologa is hanged for treason. Published in 1920, the novel narrates the events of the First World War, while also inserting elements belonging

to the public space. The mayor's wife also appears briefly, almost as in a flash back, an opportunity for the narrator to remark "We men are of stronger spirit and can handle much, but women...", underlining the female character's sensitivity. Even the portrayal of the mother is sketched out by resorting to tiny details regarding the female condition: while studying in Sibiu, she is married to a lawyer in the headmistress' living room, even if she did not graduate yet, and the appearance of her child Apostol gives meaning to her family life.

The second hypostasis appears in relation to Camil Petrescu's novels, which were more often referred to as belonging to the European family than other post-WW I writers. The way in which the feminization of space functions and its transformation from the perspective of female presence are elements which associate Petrescu's prose to a new semantics of the narrative topos. Thus, in the canonical novel *Patul lui Procust (The Bed of Procrustes)*, published in 1933, femininity is perceived as an interaction with memory and space: "because of its prolonged stay in the other room, the woman's body regained its personality, its skin got aired, it has an element of novelty, an undefined impression of a new beginning"[29]. The intimate space manages to imprint a new vision into corporality, perceived however exclusively through the male senses. Female characters are either described within this intimate space, or in large spaces, such as restaurants, "all of them interesting due to their clothing and hair-do's"[30].The created space is an elusive one, "this hall with multiple, too glaringly lighted mirrors" becomes feminized, mirrors being objects belonging par excellence to the sphere of female beautification. A pretext for the description of a heterogenous world is also the act of taking part in shopping sprees: "groceries were always brim-full of people because there were women there, dressed in furs and slippers which allowed a view of the silk stockings beneath the tight coat"[31]. Described as an exclusively female activity, going shopping is an occasion to describe the female attire. The male gaze upon the passing women retains a few details which suggest femininity. The detail regarding Bucharest's population of "three hundred thousand people" constitutes an element of history of the Capital. In 1915, Bucharest had 378.867 inhabitants[32], and during the census of 1930, the population had already reached 570.881, due to the migration from the villages to the city. Urban life is populated by the "passer-by in a car", by the "commissioner delivering a package", and the woman occupies a limited, closed place: "anyone could have entered and seen this woman in her reddish cardigan and dress the colour of cafe au lait, talk to her, seen her boyish figure, always ready to morph into a smile"[33]. The feminization of space is produced through the introduction of significant details regarding the woman's clothes, but also through the added observations related to her body type and emotions (the smile). Mrs. T., whose real name is Maria Mănescu, reads, the author notes, anything from new models in foreign art magazines to books from various domains: law, medicine, sociology, history, and even aviation (alluding to the narrator's profession). The space of reading is extended, from the sentimental novels read by the female characters of XIXth century fiction, to the modern woman who "does not allow a single day to pass without reading a newspaper ... Someone once told her that this is a male preoccupation. -Excuse me, I resent attending five o'clock teas where society ladies exchange the newest gossip; and I am not interested in anything they have to say"[34]. The male hypostasis of "reading the newspaper" corresponds to the "boyish figure" previously described, and renouncing gossip, a trait usually associated with women, offers a new vantage point of construction of a female character. Not only does Fred Vasilescu, the male protagonist, observe such detail about gender in the intimate space, but he also inserts a few important details. Recalling that it was her who got him into the habit of reading "Nouvelles litteraires and Candide", the narrator brings up a text that promotes women's independence and gender equality, as discussed by Arthur Scherr in "Voltaire's 'Candide': A Tale of Women's Equality"[35].

The spaces inhabited by the character are the town of Movilă, the road to Berlin, or Bucharest's summer gardens, such as the "Popovici". Party locations are judged by those who attend them. A line belonging to another one of the novel's male characters, Ladima, reads: "it is not appropriate for you to go there... impossible people will be in attendance: harlots and servants, I've been told, make up the majority of female guests"[36]. An interesting passage for the manner in which space is directly ordered by gender is the one describing the visit to "Tekirghiolul-Movilă". The manner in which men are separated from women makes the author digress on topics such as nudity and sexuality:

> "The so-called cold baths in the lake have separate changing rooms for men and women... a fence, prolonged ten feet into the water, separates the two empires of complete nudity. In the lake however, especially because of the husbands who are looking for their wives, this separation ends, even though people are not even wearing tops. Furtive glances directed towards the shore offer Edenic visions. No detail is lost, and identifications are not a difficult task. Well, in the evening I was dancing with the women I had seen in their full splendour, with the same feeling I had while attending any other dance. Transposed on another scale, life in a seaside resort is exactly the same as the corresponding life in a city: jealousy, friendship, joy, interests, admiration, emotion, psychological shame, if I may say so".[37]

The two models of femininity analysed by Petrescu are opposed, the main difference being the one related to a type of dynamics of the vital flux: "Emilia has something of a tool that improperly conducts electricity", a "powerless battery", while "Mrs. T. seems to be always powered by a flow which makes her excessively sexual. I believe that this continuous flow was actually her thinking"[38]. Having a living body is the same for the author as the flux of thoughts, as intelligence. The instinctual nature, the basic needs are observable only in the absence of female intelligence, when a sick body, "reminds

you, mercilessly, that the human being is made of guts".

The texts singled out for discussion and analysis through the lens of geofeminism propose different visions, conditioned on the one hand by the literary and cultural epoch they belong to, and on the other hand by the authorial view, determined in its turn by a novelistic literary formula which differs from one case to another. The early novel, written by Filimon, constructs a vision of boudoir femininity, where woman is a mere tool for seizing power, being thus dominated by the masculine element, in a Capital witnessing important political and social upheaval. With Slavici, also in a XIXth century novel, the vision becomes more emancipated, with the woman working in order to make a living, and the space is the one of the provincial market. Power is designated by money, as the supreme value of mercantilism, which decides destinies. The spaces described, such as the inn, or the church, integrate women without ever belonging completely to her. Education was very difficult to access for girls, and oftentimes did not lead to fruition, as is the case with Apostol Bologa's mother in Rebreanu's *Forest of the Hanged*. Even though the novel's map features places belonging to various areas, from Budapest, to Vienna, Zirin, Lunca or Făget, the female character plays a minimalist role, with only a few references to basic education, literacy, and the female way of dealing with the reality of war. In the last text discussed in the present study, geofeminism was used in identifying two different fictional spaces, inhabited by two opposed models of femininity: the one of the harlot, Emilia, pictured at the theatre, or in intimate rooms, and the one of Mrs. T., who travels, is in constant movement, her spatial dynamics equating for the author an exacerbated sexuality.

We can thus observe that the analysis which resorts to such instruments reveals interesting connections to the historical and geographical data of the space where narrative events are located, but it also becomes a mode of producing knowledge of the female space in the past centuries.

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Note:

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38. Ibid., 182-183.

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