

**Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu, *Das problematische weib in Heinrich Manns frühlwerk*, Hartung-Gorre Verlag, Konstanz/ Germany, 2021, 220 p.**

The book can be regarded a valuable contribution to the surveys focusing on the semiotics of bodies since the author shows the readers how women's bodies 'talk' to men in Heinrich Mann's works and it also employs some animal metaphors to further depict the female characters. The semiotics of bodies is a field which seems to interest Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu as she has already published other papers and book chapters dealing with this topic (we mention here "Female Bodies in Interaction: From Figures in Children's Literature to their Animated Representation" at Cambridge Scholars Publishers or "Sprechende Körper – eine Semiotik der Körper" at Hartung-Gorre Verlag) in which the author discusses how the woman's body becomes a potential vehicle for different semiotic signs. Focusing on Sebeok's and Chandler's theories on semiotic signs, Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu analyses how the women's body parts develop their own language if or when the female characters are silenced or suppressed by male authors.

The women's bodies in Heinrich Mann's *fin de siècle* literature are carefully examined and their bodies 'mirror' the social and cultural values of the German society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they manage to 'talk' about the power of a gender over the other, thus the women's hair, face, legs, arms or shoulders become semiotic signs (indices, symbols, icons). The women's social identity is constructed through their gestures and even through proxemics to other characters which illustrate their social roles based on gender stereotypes. The women's social status, their education or cultural background are mirrored in their clothes and in the hygiene of their body. Moreover, Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu emphasizes how the characters' attitude and posture transmit the difference in status, or authority between men and women. Other semiotic indices for the women's social status can be their hairstyle and make-up, as women used them to express themselves if they could not use their voices in front of men. The analysis of Heinrich Mann's new 'language' becomes a topic of interest for Bălinișteanu-Furdu because she is aware that women have always been defined as the Other and patriarchy has always intended to marginalize and ostracize them, as Simone de Beauvoir clearly demonstrates in her book *The Second Sex*. Power, strength and reason have always been considered the men's attributes, whereas women have always been dependent on men, hence their obvious categorization as the Other and their objectification and marginalization. So, the author of this book suggests that this new language consists of any attempt of making women transgress boundaries and overcome their enclosure in traditional gender roles.

"Die Sprache der Körper", one of the chapters of *Das problematische Weib* shows how Heinrich Mann's women in their struggle for a better social position 'speak' to the men in their lives through their corporeality: they flaunt their legs, arms and breasts defying social norms and the hypocrite morality; they let their colourful stockings and attractive petticoats to 'express' their sexuality; they uncover their arms and shoulders to deride other virtuous ladies; they dye their hair red which 'speaks' their need to be perceived more sexualized, more sensual. Starting with Claudia Bork's theory on *femme fatale*, Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu demonstrates how Rosa Fröhlich – Heinrich Mann's female protagonist from *Blue Angel* – can be fatal to any men in the novel, illustrating her tendency to be decadent, to seduce, revealing her wish to satisfy her sexual needs and to demean men with their corporeality. Rosa is

compared to Salome, the ultimate femme fatale because her dance moves grant her a superior position to all men – seduced by her curves. Consequently, Rosa's dance becomes the woman's language in her ways of interacting with men. Heinrich Mann uses certain animal metaphors to compare women to various felines, thus the female characters gaining both grace and aggressivity. Using Carl Schorske's theory on *femme tentaculaire* (1998: 212), the author further highlights the women's beautiful hair which lures and seduces men, submitting them; so, the hair 'speaks' what Heinrich Mann intended to express through his female characters: the language of seduction.

"Degeneration der Körper", another chapter in *Das problematische Weib* shows how women's clothes and make-up, through Heinrich Mann's use of metaphors and epithets, 'talk' to men and to the readers – voices/words are replaced by the women's nightgowns, petticoats, dresses. Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu uses Charles Baudelaire's, Stefan Fuchs' and Walter Benjamin's theories which make the woman's body resemble a corpse and her face to a mortuary mask because *fin de siècle* fashion favours the artificiality of the make-up and rejects the natural freshness of a young woman's body. The author emphasizes how the mask, by framing the woman's face, helps the woman's body "speak" a different language than it used to before 1900's: a living body reflects sensuality, whereas the decadent make-up (specific to *fin de siècle*) transmits dread, disgust, sometimes horror. The women's old age or tiredness is often concealed through make-up, however, according to Bălinișteanu-Furdu, Heinrich Mann's female characters use make-up only when they intend to cheat on their husbands/ partners – consequently, the women's sexualized body again 'speaks'/ transmits their desperate wish to ignore the traditional moral values.

Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu's book about Heinrich Mann's female characters can be considered an attempt at highlighting the new language employed by silenced women at *fin de siècle* who manage to express their sensuality by flaunting their bodies and by allowing certain body parts 'talk' for them. Through his use of the women's corporeality, the German writer points out the importance of the human body as a signifying system at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## References

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