

THE HOUSE AS SUPPORT OF GENDER RELATIONS

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Abstract: The article examines the relationship home – gender, using a fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2011 in the Romanian village of Marginea, a rural community strongly affected by the international migration. I show that migrants from Marginea, even by changing the configuration of their homes, still continue to preserve some old practices related to gender relations such as the responsibility of the man and his family to build the new house or the newlyweds' settlement in the boy's house. While home furnishing and decoration are supposed to be performed largely by women, the construction process is related to men. However, today, with the feminization of international labor migration, women are taking a more active role in both house design and construction process.

Keywords: Marginea village, gender relations, migration, new houses, old practices

INTRODUCTION

The multitude of studies that analyze the house in relation to gender may be explained by the fact that home is closely linked to marriage (Brettell 1987, Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 1999, Tan 2001) and gender relations (Segalen 1980, Pinson 1988, Madigan et al. 1990, Madigan and Munro 1991, Shaw and Brookes 1999, Ségaud 2007). In fact the woman-house relationship is found in all traditional cultures around the world, the space of the house being segregated in some cases according to gender relations - as in Maghreb (Pinson 1988) or in the traditional French society. In this respect, Segalen (1980) observes that in the traditional French society, the rural house was strongly feminized, the garden, the house and the yard, all these being maintained by the woman, while the field and the barn were associated with man. This aspect is also formulated in the Romanian ethnographic literature (Moisa 2010). With her attitude towards the family and home, the woman could build or ruin the reputation of her

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husband and household. Thus, the diligence and prudence of the woman were qualities that would bring her honour before the community, fact actually observed in proverbs that were circulating on the topic: “A woman makes a house and a woman ruins it” or “What makes a good home is an economical woman” or “The house of a woman who spends too much time out of it, is not solid” (Segalen 1980, 130; 131; 149). The Romanian proverb “The house is in the image of the woman” (Moisa 2010, 436) also emphasizes the relation between the woman and her house.

Concerning the gender roles within the modern household, Shaw and Brookes (1999) note that home furnishing and cleaning are supposed to be performed largely by women. Besides, in an ethnological fieldwork dedicated to the working class from Asketorp (Sweden), Lofgren (1993) discovers that the interior decoration of the house - except the garage which is used as a workshop by man – bares the exclusive influence of the wife. Indeed, even in the Japanese contemporary houses we witness a “feminization of the domestic environment” (Kurita 1993, 178). Here, the women, mostly housewives, leave their mark on the interior decoration, the man being mostly absent. Thus, the living room becomes a space destined to women and children, as confirmed from the many ‘signs’ left by them – e.g. toys, drawings attached to walls (Kurita).

Despite the fact that home is often associated with women, certain spaces have a masculin imprint. Likewise, Hamlett (2010) records that in the nineteenth century, the living space belonging to the British middle-classes (and especially to the high-middle class segment or to the household where husband worked at home) was segregated. The interior decoration and furnishing reflected the gender of the person to whom that room was intended. Thus, the author notes that in the British writings from the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, the drawing room destined for middle-class women was “of a light colour and furnished with delicate objects and drapes”, while the living room designed for men had a finish in “dark and gloomy colours with oak furniture” (Hamlett, 122). Even in the socialist Cuba, “while the revolution had promoted significantly the women’s participation and equality in work and ‘public sector’ in general, had much less success in addressing the gender divisions from home” (Hamilton 2010, 157).

In the case of the Norwegian society, Gullestad (1993) notices the involvement of the couple in the interior space decoration, both helping and completing each other: she takes care of the aesthetic and

financial details while he is responsible for technical tasks; the DIY being 90% a male domestic activity (Segalen and Le Wita 1993). Nevertheless, the acquisition of important things is made by the couple (Gullestad 1993). Concerning the purchase of decorative objects and furniture, Halitim (1996) observes that small things are chosen by women, while the important elements (both size and price) are purchased with the participation of either partners or the whole family. Similarly, in a rural area of Romania, the researcher observes that:

women are more involved in decision-making regarding the selection of colours, while men focus more on the technical part of building a house [...] The division of labour within the family would accordingly suggest that the woman of the family assumes the role of ‘architect’ and the man that of ‘building engineer’ (Iancau 2011, 91).

Indeed, the house-gender relationship is reflected not only in the arrangement and the destination assigned to the space, but also in the tasks related to the design and construction process. Thus, the Romanian sociologist Stahl observes that:

As all women learned to weave and sew, in the same way, every man learned to use an axe [...] These works were carried out by a group more or less numerous, working even when a carpenter was directing the work, surrounded by family members [...], men and women working together, with different tasks for each, the toughest being assigned to men. They would cut the wood, wrought beams and planks, and assemble the whole. Women would cover the walls with a layer of plaster, paint it and then decorate it at regular periods of time (Stahl 1978, 98-99).

The close relationship between the woman and her house has consequences upon its furnishing and the relation to the public space (Ségaud 2007). Indeed, the transformation of the rural house in the village of origin of Portuguese migrants happened not in the first stage of migration (in which most migrants were males), but in its second stage, with the emigration of Portuguese women, as “migrant women are more open to change than their husbands” (Schiltz 2003, 62). For example, during their stay and work as housekeepers or in the elderly care system of the host country, migrant women from rural areas experience a different organization of the domestic space, becoming acquainted to new culinary models and to the use of performant domestic appliances (Moisa 2010). This transformation occurred through migration and women contact with Western civilization. However, women adapt these models from the host country according

to their local patterns, because these practices are so deeply rooted in their behavior that it is difficult to change (Kaufmann 1997). For example, a “double kitchen” emerges: a modern, western-style kitchen, placed in the new house, and an ordinary kitchen, with multiple uses (living room, dining room and bedroom). The latter is used to prepare the food in order to protect the modern kitchen of dirt. Moreover, kitchen design and furnishing may be considered an objectification of woman’s mentality and preferences, the open kitchen pointing to the emancipation of the woman and of her new status within the public space (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 1999).

DATA AND METHOD

The paper uses a fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2011 in the village of Marginea, a locality strongly affected by international migration. The research was based on direct observation method and on informal (qualitative) interviews. I used the technique of the comparison (Herseni 1982) of the past (the rural household until the year 1989) with the present (the migrant household since 1989, the fall of the communist regime), in order to better understand their similarity or their differentiation. The number of persons concerned by my investigations is around one hundred (migrants and non-migrants from Marginea). The sample is based on those found and interviewed on site, as well as on the existing networks in the community (e.g. kinship networks, friends, and neighborhood), therefore the sample is not representative for Marginea. Among the interviews conducted, 45 were in-depth interviews: 35 with migrants and their relatives, and 10 with non-migrants. The research analyzes only the data collected for 50 migrant households (including their homes). Most of these households were composed of married couples, more than half having at least one member who has lived abroad (usually Italy) 10 years and over (continuously or with interruptions). However, 31 families were still living abroad and 4 households had a member who returned home and another still working in the host country.

Marginea is a village in northern Romania (Suceava County), close to the Ukrainian border. In 2011, according to the census, the number of migrants reached 2153 persons (without counting the persons temporarily absent from the locality) out of a total of 10529 inhabitants. The emigration rates in Marginea (about 28%) are among the highest in Suceava County, Marginea occupying the second position after the city of Cajvana (33%). Italy was the most searched

destination country. Indeed, on January 1, 2011, despite the economic crisis of recent years, Romania held the first place as total number of immigrants in Italy (968 576 – 21.2% of all immigrants), out of which 54.6% women, ISTAT). Women are well represented in the group of Romanian migrants, about 50% (Diminescu, 2003), the reason being both the nature of Romanian migration in Italy (a family migration) and the job offer in the elderly care sector.

A CASE STUDY IN THE VILLAGE OF MARGINEA, SUCEAVA COUNTY

In the Romanian rural society, a woman could not have a house of her own, unless she would get married, because the building of a house was usually the responsibility of the man and his family, the construction process starting before the time of marriage. Indeed, as Paul H. Stahl noticed, in the Romanian rural areas “the obligation to build a house was, in a general line, of the boy’s family” (Stahl, 96). The houses built by the parents for their sons, and even the houses built by migrants themselves (unmarried men), remain unfurnished until the time of marriage, because it is a matter of the woman to invest in the decoration and furnishing of her new home, as another Romanian proverb states: „A house without a woman is empty on the inside, a house without a men is like a barren place”.

In the village of Marginea, it was rare for the parents to build houses for their daughters, except when their only child is female: „those who have only one girl, surely built a house for her [...] I’ve met such cases ... more rarely” (interview A.P. Marginea, 2011). Formerly, it was the woman’s dowry (Fig. 1) who decorated the house of her husband. Mothers prepared the girls’ dowry many years before the marriage time. These practices also survived after 1990. Thus, G.M. had in her courtyard 30 geese because, as far as she could recall:

I was making pillows for the girl ... when I started to make the dowry she was [...] about three years old [...]. When she married at 20 [...], it was then when I sewed the pillow buttons. I sewed then one hundred buttons (interview G.M. Marginea, 2010).

The girl was born in 1977 and married in 1997. The dowry consisted of:

[...] all kinds of blankets, as they were that time: folding bed couch, sofa [...] six eiderdowns, fourteen large pillows, ten small, fifty meters of carpet by meter [...] and fifty meters cloth of patches... three blankets, three wardrobes, a pair of kitchen furniture, two sewing machines, two showcases, a mirror, ten chairs [...]

armchairs, seven tables, a truck [...] plus her clothes [...] in the showcases she had glassware, what must be, full showcases [...] then dishes [...] she took pots, she took everything that is absolutely necessary, also needles and spools of sewing silk, everything (interview G.M. Marginea, 2010).



Fig.1: The dowry (author photo, Marginea, 2010)

Mrs. P. practiced „suitcase commerce” in Serbia when she was younger (42 years old), immediately after 1989. She bought goods from other towns of the country and sold them to Serbians: „I stayed there for two weeks and then came back home, I stayed at home for a short time, and again took little merchandise, then ran again [...] I went for the corn harvest [...] I stayed there two-three weeks, and then returned home with some pennies” (interview P. Marginea, 2011). Since the first children were two girls, P. invested a part of the money earned in Serbia in their dowry: „pillows, cloths, clothes, beds, carpets” (interview P. Marginea, 2011).

In the case of M.A. (a woman that worked in Italy between 1999 and 2001), the dowry was made by her mother and later by herself and her sister. The new house (where she is living now, together with her family) was built by her husband before getting married (they got married in 2001):

So I contributed financially too little to what can be seen here [...] only the finishes [...] my husband managed well, [...] earned lots of money [...] then he went to Turkey [...] he did it well (interview MA. Marginea, 2010).

Thus, she came with the dowry and he had the house: „I married with a dowry. I bought bedroom furniture, [...] carpet, linens [...] I also had pillows” (interview M.A. Marginea, 2010). The bedroom on the

ground floor is furnished with items from her dowry: „from me, from my money [...] I spent a lot of money on it” (Ibid.).

In another situation, M.M. got married in 1996 and brought with her furniture, linens, and needlepoints „once they were sewn”. M.M. recounts she had as dowry „bare necessities: linens, beds, pillows, cabinets and a kitchen table, four chairs and he [her husband] had that house over there [an old building]... and then we worked and built it [the new house]” (interview M.M. Marginea, 2010). Today, however, the obligation of the girl to come with a dowry and even of the boy’s to have a house before getting married is less strong: „Formerly it was customary in this place that the girl has the dowry and the boy has the house, now they get married and make it together; now they are modernized” (Ibid.). Indeed, as A.P. recounts, these practices related to dowry has been maintained until the end of the 90s:

[...] the dowry was put in the cart [...] and depending on the number of carts one was more or less appreciated in the village [...] people went down in the street, you can imagine, the dowry was carried away [...] the wedding guests went by cart with the bride, music team, the singers were shouting exultantly [...] but after people started to go to the West they gave up on these customs, traditions that seemed uncomfortable to them. Namely it seemed embarrassing for them to expose themselves. People became more introverted. Once they were more open, so to speak, from all points of view (interview A.P. Marginea 2011).

In Marginea, the custom related to the newlyweds’ settlement in the boy’s house (Fig.2), is still in place, both in the case of endogamous and exogamous marriages:

[...] where the boy is, there the girl should go, it is not the boy that goes to the girl, but the girl to the boy, this is the normal way [...] if I am from here, the girl comes here, normally [...] it is hard for her too if she comes here [...] but women think differently, adjust differently, it is easier to them [...] (interview C.B. Marginea, 2010).



Fig.2: House built by the boy (before marriage) and his parents (author photo, Marginea, 2010)

Thus, N.M.'s wife, native from Bacău, will live in Marginea, with her husband, in the new house that is to be built in the proximity of N.M.'s parents household. The young migrants build their house in Marginea and not in Bacău, having the consent of girl's parents, as „[the girl's] parents came and liked it [the village]” (interview M. Marginea 2010). However, there are cases (for serious reasons) when the husband moves in his parents-in-law's household: „I came to my wife ... I got married [like a woman] ... this is not a problem, I do not mind” (interview F.S. husband, Marginea, 2010). His parents' house is situated toward the limits of the village and, though after marriage they lived in their household, the young couple decided to build the new house (Fig.3) on the plot of the wife's parents. The motive is mostly economic: here the land is situated in a strategic position for the new restaurant they plan to open, in a space specially arranged downstairs.



Fig.3: House of young couple that decided to build it on the plot of the wife's parents (author photo Marginea, 2010)

Although the custom obliging young men to build a house before getting married is still actual, more than a half (25) of the analyzed households that benefited or were to benefit from a new or converted house (47) had completed it or were to complete it after marriage, generally working together, husband and wife, abroad (this situation being met even when the husband had a house built by him or by his parents before getting married). Thus, as Villanova points out, “Emigration has rapidly favored the nuclear family’s autonomy” (Villanova 1994, 60).

Therefore, if before 1990, women’s role in choosing the external shape and interior configuration of their future home was poorly represented, once the female migration has taken place, their influence and preferences are felt more in the domestic sphere. For example, M.C., a young mother, about 23 years old, explains the roles division in designing the shape of their new home, a refurbished traditional house (Fig.4): „It is more me with the ideas and he [the husband] put them into practice [...] if it’s good he put them into practice, if not, he says it’s not good because I cannot do it” (interview M.C. Marginea, 2010).



Fig.4: the house of M.C., a refurbished traditional home

Instead, in Mrs. S.N.’s answer concerning the person that was responsible for the design (Fig.5), it is difficult to determine the role of each partner: „We were in Italy drawing. Here we place the entrance, here we place a room, here we place the bathroom, there we place the stairs [...] all Sunday we were drawing” (interview S.N. Marginea, 2010).



Fig.5: House of Mrs. S.N. built by both spouses and their children (author photo, Marginea, 2010)

However, in some situations, builder S. noticed that the woman's opinion carry no considerable weight with the husband, concerning the design of the new house:

generally, people are more refined, but there are still [...] too many if, in his presence, you fix his wife and ask her something [...] she tries to get busy, because otherwise she knows things are going to get worse [...] I realized the fact that in many situations she has no right to express her opinion (interview S. Marginea, 2010).

Despite this, builder S. tries to talk with both spouses before starting the building work: „until I realize who the boss is, I call both of them” (interview S. Marginea, 2010).

Today, the contribution of women regarding the design of the new houses is particularly manifested in obtaining the planning permission, the preparation of inheritance or concession/purchase documents, the supervising of the construction site, in the interior design of the domestic space (Fig. 6), as well as the selection of the materials and appliances.



Fig.6: Interior designed according to the wife's ideas (author photo, Marginea, 2010)

In some situations, women can take on responsibilities of men within the family, for example helping with the building works. It is the case of D., a migrant settled in France for 14 years, who built for herself a new house in Marginea with the help of her mother (while her father was still active). The building works started around the year 2003, the house (Fig. 7) being completed in the same year. D. sent money to her mother for the house construction. Her mother paid the builders and made the house sketch – D did not suggest anything to her as she was living in France and did not know the prices and the construction market in Romania. Her mother informed her that „with this money you can make such a house, with three rooms and a terrace” (interview D. Marginea, 2010). Again it was the mother who took care of the works supervision and land purchase for the homes of two other children, and even the layout of the house for one of them.



Fig.7: The house of D. built with the help of her mother (author photo, Marginea, 2010)

Similarly, G., a woman of over 60 years old, mother of three sons, tells us how she struggled to help them. She worked in Israel, for 5 years (in the '90s). She did not return at all in the country in this period. G. had also worked there during the communist regime (for periods between 1 month and 3 months). She invested the money she earned in the houses of her first two children: „I made a stone fence, the nice type. This cost me [...] I do not know how many thousands of Euro [...] I had to put a stove in the house [of the son], [...] it is still not plastered” (interview G., Marginea, 2010).

The majority of women I interviewed, who have migrated to Italy, admit to having changed their culinary tastes: they eat more pasta,

salads and grills. This transformation occurred through migration and contact with Western civilization, especially with some groups of the Italian middle class. According to D.B., a 39 years old migrant from Marginea, Italians eat well and cook rarely (they eat outside twice a day). It may be the desire to be like them that led migrants to adopt same culinary practices. In this respect, conducting a research on the differences between the “luxury” tastes of the upper classes and the “necessity” tastes of popular classes, Bourdieu (1979) shows that food is among the consumption patterns that differentiate French society strata. Thus, while the popular classes chose fatty foods and meals, those belonging to the upper classes opted for a light and refined food.

The inclination to simplify culinary products could be the reason for which the kitchens are well equipped (Fig.8) and neatly maintained:

We cannot eat fat food. We’ve slaughtered a pig but dogs ate it more than us ... we don’t cook [either] Italian, or Romanian style, but mixed... a little of this, a little of that. Otherwise, there you eat more vegetables ... a slice of meat, quickly prepared and you’re ready to eat ... it seems to be easier to cook in Italy than here ... it’s not so complicated ... I’ve got used with their food, their cooking ... here even when I read cooking books, it’s a lot more complicated ... there is easier (interview S.N., Marginea, 2010).



Fig.8: Kitchen (author photo, Marginea, 2009)

Moreover, many households (approx. 19) opted for a kitchen that opens (Fig.8) to the drawing room or dining room, as Mrs. S.N. explains: “This is the most common way, for this new style, on one side is the kitchen and the drawing room ... if I want to serve them the meal they could just move to the kitchen, if not they can stay in the drawing room” (interview S.N., Marginea, 2010).



Fig.9: New, modern kitchen that opens to the dining room (author photo, Marginea 2010)

CONCLUSIONS

Home analysis has many components, varying with the cultural specificity, but also with gender, age or marital and occupational status. In this paper I examine the relationship home–gender, using a case study in the Romanian village of Marginea, strongly affected by the international migration. I show that migrants from Marginea, even by changing the configuration of their homes, still continue to preserve some old practices related to gender relations. Indeed, these practices evolve slowly because they have been internalized by individuals over time, forming a part of their internal structure (Kaufmann 1997), unlike the architectural forms that are more unstable (Moisa 2009).

In past times, a house without a woman could not last, the rural home being strongly feminized. The house decoration and furnishing were associated with the woman, while house building with the man. Today, with the feminization of international labor migration, women are taking an active role in both house design and construction process. They tend to adopt new design solutions, viewed in the host country, abandoning the old ones. In some situations, women overtake men role regarding their responsibilities within the family, as in the case of the building works or the supervising of the construction site. However, tasks involving physical labor or technical skills (e.g. the choice of building materials and construction techniques) are more related to men's employment in the building sector, being a male activity.

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