But here I become uncomfortable with the language of truth.  
Nancy Hartsock

The need for change

All knowledge is culturally, socially, economically and politically situated, this is common knowledge and there is no doubt about it. And there is also no doubt about the fact that this particular “situatedness” is pervasively male. Since we have the “facts”, the given situation, there are at least two paths to follow. One, which I would call the pessimistic endeavor, is the search for the roots or the desire for reasons, and consists in the analysis of the particular conditions and reasons that led to this male standpoint of the production of knowledge. This means an attempt to recover the “origins” of knowledge and through them, the understanding of the fundamentals of the male locus of science. Another path of exploration, by no means divorced from the first, is the optimistic one, and consists in the attempt to imagine a reversal or rather an equilibrium in the production of knowledge. The act of naming or labeling oneself as “feminist” can be considered to belong to this second path, as it means recognition of one’s affiliation, and it is a heavily political act that attempts to subvert the system, to create a space for women and women’s production of knowledge.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the importance and consequences of self-naming and self-labeling for one’s personal and political identity. I particularly dwell on the label “feminist” and its use/misuse/refuse in the context of identity building and formation for women and men who are engaged in or deal with women’s issues, either in feminist activism or in academia. My analysis is mainly theoretical, although I realize that such a topic should be illustrated with and draw heavily on examples and testimonies. However, as it is, it can be seen as a theoretical tool for more extensive research and analysis that would inquire about the acceptance or rejection of the “feminist” label in a particular cultural and temporal context.

In order to understand and analyze the importance of labeling and naming, I will first tackle the relationship between language, knowledge and power, as well as their influence on the process of defining one’s identity. To this end, I will try to give some reasons for the non-arbitrariness of some words, as well as of the grammatical gender in Romance languages, namely Romanian and French. I will focus on a few linguistic structures and use of particular words in these two languages. I will particularly deal with the construction of a third grammatical gender, the neuter, in Romanian, in comparison to the two grammatical genders existent in French. I will also deal with definitions and understandings of feminism(s) and feminist(s) as such and their shifting meaning over time and in particular cultural contexts. In this respect, I will inquire into the reasons why the label “feminist” has been and still is rejected by some women and men who are involved in gender issues and the meaning of this rejection for the formation of their private and public identities.

The power of naming: language and the construction of meaning and knowledge

Adam named his wife Eve.
Gen. 3:17, 20

Much feminist criticism has dealt and continues to deal with sexist aspects of language. For “[language] encodes the culture’s values and preoccupations, and transmits these […] to each new generation” and, furthermore, “linguistic representations both give a clue to the place of women in the culture and constitute one means whereby we are kept in our place.” Most of these critiques of language conclude that the languages we use are sexist, that it is not reality, as loudly claimed, that shapes languages, but, on the contrary, languages are those that shape the reality thus perceived according to a masculine stereotyped perspective:

Many feminists have made the claim that the names we give our world are not mere reflections of reality, nor arbitrary labels with no relation to it. Rather, names are a culture’s way of fixing what will actually count as reality in a universe of overwhelming, chaotic sensations, all pregnant with a multitude of possible meanings.

Feminist critiques and views on language are diverse and complex, a thing that in itself suggests the profound importance and influence of language for feminist theory and therefore for a knowledge production that would make visible women’s experiences. They are centered

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3 Ibid., p.10.
4 Ibid., p.10.
on aspects varying from the vehement rejection of the (mis)use of the generic *he* and *man* or the titles which indicate women’s marital status (“Miss”, “Mrs.”, arguing for the introduction of the neutral “Ms”), as formal forms of address, and the informal forms of address (“baby”, “chick”, “bitch”, “honey”) to the women’s dissatisfaction with the language of literature. Feminists’ quest for new ways of expressing experiences and feelings specific to women in literature revealed the incapability of the male language when it came to conveying female experiences. The challenge faced by women was one of inventing a new language that would allow them to represent themselves, a different language, free of male forms and structures. For “‘difference’ in women’s writing does not only refer to what is written about, but also to the language in which it is written”⁶. Thus, a new way of writing would emerge, a writing specific to women, metaphorically named by Hélène Cixous “writing in milk”⁷, as opposed to men’s writing, which I would call, for the sake of parallelism, “writing in sperm”.

Linguistic structures and grammar were exposed as carrying and reproducing sexist stereotypes. Thus, a critical study of grammar and linguistic patterns emerged as a *sine qua non* condition for a true understanding of language and the way in which it creates and perpetuates biased views of the world in those who use it.

There is an intimate relationship between language and knowledge, between the act of naming and that of knowledge production, a relationship in which the former influences, structures and constructs the latter. Knowledge is a finite (however large this may be) block of accumulations and can not be (and it is not), as claimed by men, universal or all-encompassing, the so-called “view from nowhere”⁸. Unlike it, language, whose most important feature is its capability (at least claimed) of infinite combinations and therefore conveying infinite meaning and representations, should really be the “view from nowhere”. But this is not true for language either, as it has a specific location, it is socially, culturally and politically located, and this particular locus of language is male.

It is generally accepted, since Ferdinand de Saussure forward, that the linguistic sign, i.e., the word, is arbitrary⁹, that there is no internal pre-existing connection between the signified *sister* and the sequence of sounds (significant) *s-i-s-t-e-r*, the signal or the word designating it¹⁰. It could be represented by any other sequence of sounds (letters, for the written word), and the

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⁶ Cameron, p. 8.
⁸ I am referring here to the concept introduced by Thomas Nagel (1986) in his *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
proof of this fact is the difference between languages and the very existence of different languages. If there are different words for the same concept, sister in English, soeur in French and soră in Romanian, then no one can possibly deny the arbitrary of the linguistic sign. Similarly, no one can deny the arbitrary of the word man and the non-arbitrary of the word woman, seemingly derived from man, therefore defined in relation to it, and meaning wife of man. Woman has always been defined in relation to a man, be it her father, brother, husband and even son. And this dependence of women on men is reflected in language, in the words and the grammatical structures of language.

It is not by accident that language is constructed in such a way as to place women in the inferior position, to depict them as dependent, secondary, subordinated. Men have always appropriated the higher position for themselves, no matter which field this might be, and the same thing happened with language. Since language is one of the most important “battlefields” of power, as it is through language that one perceives reality, it became vital for men to construct it according to their need for primacy. One need only do a study of several languages in order to realize the profound gendered character of words and language structures and their influence upon the construction of knowledge.

Feminist critiques have argued that women should work to name their specific experiences, that until language became free of sexist implications there would be no knowledge that truly conveyed and represented women. It is therefore evident how and why it became necessary for women to name the world according to their reality, for the word is not a mere instrument that makes the dialogue possible, but a powerful means of structuring the world and rendering it available to inquiry and knowledge production by those (men until recently) who are in the privileged position of using it to their advantage. In this light, naming is a vital precondition for knowledge production, and since “knowledge is power”, it follows that naming is power as well. But naming is also an action that occurs in a political context and therefore naming is a political action.

Luce Irigaray made a pertinent remark in that “[t]he grammatical gender is neither motiveless, nor arbitrary […] the distribution of grammatical gender is based on semantics and

10 Saussure: “The link between signal and signification is arbitrary. Since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, we can express this more simply: the linguistic sign is arbitrary.” (p. 87).
11 Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913): woman, womman, wumman, winman, wifmon, w[=i]lmann, w[=i]lmann; w[=i]f woman, wife + mann. In this respect, feminist critics of language pointed out that the mere “naming” of woman as “woman” leads to the subordination of woman to man, puts woman in the position of being juxtaposed to man, not full and complete in herself, but a prefix to man. I would give another interpretation to this, maybe a more optimistic one, arguing that, on the contrary, “woman” is the whole from which “man” was extracted, thus “man” is part of “woman”, and a part is always less than a whole.
it has a meaning related to our corporeal and sensory experience.”12 Although most linguists consider the grammatical gender to be arbitrary, totally independent from sexual connotations, feminist linguists proved in their analyses that in fact words are profoundly sexed and, moreover, those words whose grammatical gender is masculine are usually more highly valorized, have positive connotations and meaning, whereas the feminine words are devalorized and ranked lower:

To guarantee loyalty to its authority, the male people consciously or unconsciously represents whatever has value as corresponding to its image and its grammatical gender. Most linguists state that grammatical gender is arbitrary, independent of sexual denotations and connotations. In fact this is untrue. They haven’t really thought about the issue. It doesn’t strike them as being important. Their personal subjectivity, their theory is content to be valorized like the masculine, passing for an arbitrary universal. A patient study of gender of words almost always reveals their hidden sex. Rarely is this immediately apparent.13

Luce Irigaray’s illustrates this point by the example14 of “un fauteuil” (a sofa) and “un château” (a castle), both masculine words in French, according to their grammatical gender, on one hand, and “une chaise” (a chair) and “une maison” (a house), feminine words, on the other, one could argue that there is no implied (or gendered) meaning in these words. But at a closer look, as Irigaray pointed out, the first two words refer to “higher-class” goods, are luxurious, elegant. The latter pair of words, whose grammatical gender is feminine, represents common things, with nothing special, mere tools at the use of men (I purposely used “men” in this context, because it is men who have “the privilege” of owning objects15). So those words, marked as masculine by the “arbitrary” grammatical gender, are valued far more positively than the words perceived as feminine. For men have always tended to appropriate for themselves those objects of higher value and give them their own “sex” (or “gender”), they have therefore tended to sexualize the objects around them. And Irigaray argues that this example of different and I might say hierarchized valorization of masculine and feminine words is not a unique or isolated case, and that a thorough analysis of the lexicon would reveal the words’ sex and therefore their gendered semantics.

From this “work” of engendering the words, and therefore the objects, through assigning them a grammatically inscribed gender, one more aspect in which language is proved

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13 Ibid., p. 69.
14 Ibid., p. 69.
15 Irigaray argues that because of the fact that in French (and this is true for Romanian also) the possessive adjectives have to agree in gender and number with the object and not person who owns the object, women can not own objects whose grammatical gender is masculine. For a more detailed explanation, see below.
to have sexist implications emerges. Luce Irigaray speaks about the possibility and impossibility of owning objects through language. Since in French, and also in Romanian, the possessive adjective agrees in gender (and number) with the object possessed rather than with the possessor, as in English, women find themselves in impossibility of really owning objects:

Owning a few goods equivalent to those men have doesn’t solve the problem of gender for women who speak Romance because these goods don’t bare the mark of their owner’s subject. We say mon enfant (my child) or mon phallus (?) (my phallus) whether we are men or women. For valuable “objects”, then the mark of ownership is the same. As for other “objects”, they are generally devalorized when they are likely to be used or appropriated by women alone. The problem of the objects and its conquest can not therefore solve the problem of inequality of sexed rights in all languages.16

A third grammatical gender: the “neuter” in Romanian

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Sophia is a man.17

What I would argue, with respect to Irigaray’s argument about the gendered character of substantives, is that in Romanian there are three grammatical genders, which makes the analysis more difficult and therefore the result controversial. So, although for the singular form of the above words in Irigaray’s example, the argumentation would not only be valid and pertinent, but also revelatory, when it comes to the plural form of the very same words, the situation seems to change. “Un fauteuils – des fauteuils” (a sofa – sofas) in French is still masculine, but in Romanian “un fotoliu – fotolii” is neuter, and a neuter noun in Romanian is defined by the fact that for the singular form, the noun’s grammatical gender is masculine, but in the plural form it becomes feminine. The same can be said about “un château – des châteaux” and “un castel – castele”, in French is masculine, whereas in Romanian, when it comes to the plural form, it is feminine. So there is a different situation here, somewhat puzzling and unexpected, a word that is masculine for the singular form becomes feminine when it is in plural form. How can this be interpreted from Irigaray’s perspective? Are we to conclude that Romanian is a less sexist language due to the fact that there is, besides masculine and feminine, one more grammatical gender, called neuter? I think an analysis of this aspect, on the very name and existence of this “extra” gender would reveal interesting things, for the dichotomy masculine/feminine seems to be broken here by the interference of a third gender. What is the corporeality, the referent of the neuter grammatical gender? What kind of “reality” does it point to?

16 Irigaray (1993), p. 73.
17 Moulton, p. 133.
There is one more aspect, rather contradictory, revealed in this example. This is the fact that when it comes to the plural, the words become feminine. And this seems to contradict the grammatical rule of making the plural in Romanian, as well as in French. Because in Romanian, similar to French, the plural retains its gender mark, *ei* (they), the masculine form in Romanian, and *ils* (they), the masculine form in French, are used for both an exclusively masculine plural and for a plural constituted by masculine and feminine nouns. While *ele* (they), the feminine form in Romanian, and *elles* (they), the feminine form in French, can only be applied to exclusively feminine nouns. So, if there are one thousand women and one man the masculine form *ei* or *ils* will be used to refer to them. Why does language allow such a disproportionate ratio and makes a rule out of it? One sexist explanation is that the quality rules over quantity!

Thus, in the light of this grammatical rule of forming the plural in both Romanian and French, it is even more puzzling and contradictory that when it comes to neuter nouns in Romanian (French only allows, as grammatical genders, masculine and feminine) the plural is feminine. It seems that the grammar is not consistent: on the one hand it favors the masculine, as the prevalent gender, the one that reduces the feminine to itself, and on the other, in a different context, also when it comes to forming the plural, it is the feminine that prevails. How can one understand this? What does this linguistic “fact” prove? Can it be said that Romanian is “less coherently sexist” than French?

It would be difficult and dangerous to conclude from only one example that Romanian is more “sensitive” to gender. But there are some more aspects that seem to support this view and I will try to analyze some of them.

Much criticism of language, as I have already pointed out above, refers to its inability to convey experiences specific to women, emotions that are considered to be specific to women. One of the means suggested by feminists of overcoming these disparities and this lack was to create a new language\(^\text{18}\), sensitive to women’s experiences and feelings. However utopian these attempts might seem, they should not be totally ignored, because they emphasize, at the same time, the lack of words and the need for them. And this is not utopian, as long as there are languages “richer” than others with respect to their capability of expressing certain feelings and emotions.

For example, the word *dor* in Romanian has no correspondent in English or French and a translation in only one word would be impossible. *Dor* is the conveying of the feeling of “I miss you” (or should I say “I miss to you”\(^\text{19}\)), just like love is the conveying of the feeling of “I love (to) you”.

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18 As, for example, in Triechler and Kramarae, *A Feminist Dictionary* or Mary Daly, *Intergalactic Wickedary*.
19 I am referring here to Irigaray’s “I Love To You” in *I Love To You – Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, New York & London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 109-113. Irigaray argues that the preposition *to*
Furthermore, the word “dor” has a special resonance, the resonance of love and pain because of love and missing (!). The word *durere* (pain) has the same etymological root as *dor*, and the verb *a durea* (to hurt, to be in pain), when conjugated at the third person plural, becomes *dor*, like in “mă dor ochii” (my eyes hurt). Thus, the only way of intelligibly translating into English the Romanian “Mi-e dor de tine” is “I miss you”. But this is not what it literally means, for in English, as well as in French, “I miss you” and “Tu me manques” involve a feeling of missing something or someone, but no pain is conveyed in it, you can as well miss a book because you do not find it. “Mi-e dor de tine” means “I am (in) pain of you”, you are so important to me and I feel pain when you are not with me.

In English, as well as in French, “I love you” and “Je t’aime” is the way of expressing love. Irigaray argues that this way is reductive and subjugating, the person who expresses it subordinates and appropriates the other to him/herself. The introduction of the preposition “to” in English and “à” in French would soften or even elude this aggressive appropriation, would allow subjectivity to the one loved, would confer each of the subjects in love the same position and would allow them to retain their own, unconditioned identity. The “to” and “à” break the relation of dependency, the intent of reduction, function as a “guarantor of two intentionalities: mine and yours”.

It is true that the Romanian “Te iubesc” (I love you) has the same restricting, appropriating and objectifying meaning as its English or French equivalent. However, not the same can be said about “Mi-e dor de tine” (I miss you). For “Mi-e dor de tine” means more “I miss to you”, than “I miss you”, the preposition “de” can be said to have the same role as “to” from “I love to you”. “De” is the mediation between the I and the You, between my feeling of “dor” and you, as a subject, it is the “guarantor of two different intentionalities”, each with a recognized right to self-determination, autonomy and non-objectifying. What is unique about “Mi-e dor de tine” is that this is and has been the way of expressing the feeling of missing (to) someone long before the emergence of the critiques of language.

Again, the question whether Romanian is a language more sensitive to gender emerges, and no answer can be given. Are these examples enough to conclude that a language is more favourable to women, to their need for expressing feelings? For there are many sexist aspects in Romanian that would contradict an attempt to describe it as gender sensitive. But for each example, a counter-example comes to my mind.

“maintains the relation of indirection” between the two subjects involved, it is the guarantor of indirection, of non-immediacy, the mediation between you and me, the sign of “irreducibility and potential reciprocity”, of intransitivity.

20 In Romanian, similar to French, when conjugated, verbs have a different form for each person and also for singular and plural.
21 Mi (I) e (am) dor (pain) de (of) tine (you).
For instance, the French “le livre” (the book) is masculine and Irigaray argues, as I have pointed above, that it is so because the book is the asset of the privileged ones, of men. And women speaking Romance languages can not appropriate a book for themselves, as the possessive adjectives in French (and in Romanian) retain the gender (and the number) of the object possessed, and not the one of the possessor, like in English. Therefore, a woman would say “mon livre” (my book), but the adjective “mon” is masculine, so she would never succeed in totally appropriating, completely making the “masculine” object her own.

The same is true for Romanian, with respect to the masculine nouns: “copilul meu” (my child) in which “meu” is masculine, in opposition to “copila mea” (my baby-girl), where “mea” is the mark for feminine. But in Irigaray’s example with the book, if applied to Romanian, the situation is again rather strange and unexpected, because “cartea” (the book) has a feminine grammatical gender, as opposed to French. So, not only that the book, in Romanian, can be successfully appropriated by women, but it belongs to women, if I were to follow Irigaray’s argumentation, because it is feminine from the beginning, it does not have to “become” feminine through the use of a possessive adjective.

Furthermore, I would suggest an exercise of imagination. Can one imagine the phallus as being feminine? Can one imagine the word “penis” to have a feminine gender (even a grammatical one)? Can one say “la penis(e)” (the penis - feminine)? I doubt that the English linguists or the French Academy would accept such an outrageous “appropriation” of masculinity’s most valuable asset. It is true that in Romanian the word “penis” has also a masculine form for singular, but it is in fact neuter, because the plural is feminine. So, when there are more penises, they become feminine and when referring to them one would use the feminine form of the third person plural, “ele” (they). That is not maybe to say that the penis can actually be considered feminine and that Romanian culture is less sexist or less male-oriented than others; on the contrary, I might say. But the existence of a third grammatical gender makes it difficult to analyze and interpret the gender of words in Romanian and such examples as the ones above can only prove the manifoldness and controversy of the use of words.

One more aspect I would like to briefly discuss in this paper is the “sex of occupations”. There are professions and words to name the people performing those professions that are only used in the masculine form, although there are a lot of women in that particular branch. And the

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25 It is useful to mention that in Romanian a feminine form for the word “child” exists, as opposed to French, where “l’enfant” (the child) is masculine and it designates both, boys and girls. However, it is uncommon to say, in Romanian, “am o copilă” (I have a girl-child), because the word “copila” has a different meaning than simply baby-girl, its connotation being of naïve, not responsible for her acts, like in “e o copilă” (she is a girl-child), meaning she is naïve, she can not be made responsible for what she does, she is not an adult.
26 See the discussion about the neuter nouns in Romanian in this paper.
Romance languages seem to be more sexist than English, for instance, from this point of view, because the existence of grammatical genders allows an even more pronounced segregation of the sex (sexes?) of occupations.

In Romanian, as well as in French, there are many professions in which there are many women, but there are no words to designate the women who perform these occupations, at least not accepted ones (meaning not official ones, that one could find in the dictionary). For example, avocat (lawyer), ministru (minister), decan (dean) etc., are all masculine names of professions used for both, men and women who perform them. In the few cases when there is a feminine correspondent for that particular profession, it usually has a negative connotation, as in “doctorită” (female medical doctor), a word formed through the linguistic process of derivation with the suffix “-ită” from the word “doctor” which is the masculine name for the occupation. The derogatory connotation of the word “doctorită” lies in the fact that the suffix “-ită” is a diminutive suffix, which therefore diminishes and lessens the features or the qualities of the “original” word that is added to, thus a “doctorită” is not, according to Romanian language, a real physician, she is less than a physician. Furthermore, the language is also “sexist” in that it concerns some predominantly (not to say exclusively!) female occupations, where there is only the feminine word for it: femeie de serviciu (cleaning lady). It is obvious why no male critique of language would ever argue for the introduction of a male correspondent word for this profession!

One more impediment faced by women in their attempt to introduce a feminine name for the profession they perform is the fact that often there is no available feminine word for it, because it has already been taken up and used for something else. Irigaray argues that men have attributed subjectivity to themselves and reduced women to the status of objects or to nothing. This is true for actual women as it is for the gender of words. *Le moissonneur* (a harvester) is a man. But if, in the line with current debate on names of occupations, a linguist or legislator wishes to name a woman who harvests *la moissonneuse*, the word is not available for a female subject: *la moissonneuse* (harvesting machine) is the tool the male harvester makes use of, or else it doesn’t exist in the feminine.27

Living beings, the animate and cultured, become masculine; objects that are lifeless, the inanimate and uncultured, become feminine. Which means that men have attributed subjectivity to themselves and reduced women to the status of objects or to nothing. This is true for actual women as it is for the gender of words. *Le moissonneur* (a harvester) is a man. But if, in the line with current debate on names of occupations, a linguist or legislator wishes to name a woman who harvests *la moissonneuse*, the word is not available for a female subject: *la moissonneuse* (harvesting machine) is the tool the male harvester makes use of, or else it doesn’t exist in the feminine.27

The same thing happens in Romanian for certain professions where the feminine word is used for the machine: semănător is the masculine word for sower, while semănătoare28, the feminine word, designates the sowing machine, not the woman who sows. And this is not an isolated example in Romanian.

“The feminism that dare not speak its name” 29

I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat
Rebecca West, 1913 30

Some words simply seem not to need any definition, as if their meaning is so obvious and uncontestable that an inquiry about their definitions is regarded as redundant. Among such words are “feminism” and “feminist”, which, for so many unknowledgeable but vocal people is a common word, most often derogatory, that by no means needs further explanation. This approach and attitude towards feminism and feminists is profoundly harmful for both the one who names and the one named. The mere existence of so many different factions of feminisms, such as liberal, socialist, marxist, eco-feminist etc, should in itself point to the diversity and complexity of the movement, which, by no means should be taken for granted.

In this view, what feminism means and the way it should be understood and explained points to a diachronic rather than a synchronic approach, to a historical rather than a definitional endeavor. It is by now a common place that there have been many debates and controversies over the concepts of “feminism” and “feminist” and their use all over the world ever since their emergence. Some prominent women activists and theoreticians working and writing about women’s oppression denied the label “feminist” and the use of the term “feminism” for their activity:

Since its origins in the late nineteenth-century France, the word “feminism” (in French féminisme) has been controversial. In the twentieth century, distinguished writers such as Virginia Woolf wanted to incinerate the word “feminism”; Simone de Beauvoir disclaimed the term for decades. What can explain this phenomenon? Why did this word seem so explosive? 31

Indeed, what was it about the word “feminism” that made it so controversial and difficult to accept, even by those whose work was explicitly feminist? The answer lies in the different definitions and understandings of the word “feminism” during time, and the meanings

28 The suffix “-oare” is added to the masculine noun in order to make it feminine.
31 Offen, p. 243.
assigned to it by feminists themselves and by others, including those who were against feminism. Moreover, what might appear strange is the fact that the denial of feminism as a name for the activity seems to have been the product of the very accomplishment of some of the first goals of feminism, namely the suffrage and the legal and material subordination of women to men. The meaning and interpretation of feminism shifted in close correlation to the changes that took place in international politics during the first half of the twentieth century:

[D]ebates erupted during the 1920s, particularly in the post-suffrage climate of English-speaking activities. These debates took yet another turn during the 1930s, with the threat to democracy posed by fascist and Nazi states and the attempts by the Third Communist International to spearhead an antifascist struggle. To this day, the long shadow of socialist and communist antagonism to “feminism” as “bourgeois” and “separatist” still hangs over European discussions of feminist history and action.32

It was in this context that a new name emerged trying to replace the old, superannuated “feminism”, and that was “humanism”, which seemed to be far more appropriate for the emancipatory goals of some of the women’s organizations of the time. “Humanism” had, in the words of Henri Joly, “among other advantages, that it did not postulate any separation between the interests of men and those of women.”33 However, other activists were not at all satisfied with this shift and voiced their worries about the humanist and social tendencies that were taking over the women’s movement and which constituted a threat to feminism as such. In 1945, after the war, the attention focused again on “human rights”, as an outcome of the atrocities committed during the Second World War.

However, this did not mean the demise of feminism, on the contrary, in the second half of the twentieth century debates over feminism continued, maybe even more fervently. Women’s movement took yet another visible turn in the 1960s and 1970s, in both North America and Europe with the feminist “disorders” produced by public “performances” of denial of traditional womanhood by such acts as burning of bras, girdles and false eyelashes, crowning a sheep Miss America or the laying of a wreath dedicated to the “unknown wife of the unknown soldier” at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Along with these clearly politically symbolic acts, sustained campaigns for women rights were going on all over the world, dealing with equal pay and equal opportunities for women, discrimination against women, domestic violence, sexual

33 Henri Joly, Le Droit Féminin, in Offen, p. 244.
offenses, paid maternity leave, protection from unfair dismissal during pregnancy, abortion etc.

In this highly political and reformist oriented site of what was considered to be “women’s movement” and “feminism” it is important to mention that an overwhelming number of women uninvolved in actual activism identified themselves with the goals of feminism and, more importantly, with the label feminist. An opinion poll conducted in Canada in 1986 revealed that 47 per cent of the women asked were willing to identify themselves as feminists; in the United States in the same year 56 per cent of the women interviewed considered themselves feminists and 71 per cent of them thought that the women’s movement contributed to the improvement of their lives. Similar polls in some countries in Europe also found favourable results among the women interviewed.34

A second apparent “death” of feminism as such, at least for the public, seemed to have taken place in the mid-1980s, when several once prominent women’s movements became outmoded.35 The younger generation in North America and Western Europe claimed to belong to another “era”, that of “postfeminism”, manifesting indifference and even disinterest to what previously feminism meant and even to the feminist goals and aspirations.36 However, this “decline” of feminism was only apparent and meant only a change in the place, means and concerns of the “battle”. The public outdoor demonstrations that used to attract wide attention in the late 60s, 70s and early 80s were replaced by more quiet and less visible, but by no means less ardent or committed debates in indoor settings, such as political and academic halls:

A quarter of a century after the highly visible feminist resurgence began, as the conditions in which that resurgence first took shape have altered and as feminists’ concerns and resources have evolved, so, too, the loci of feminist activities and the characteristics of feminist practices have changed.37

It is therefore in this context of the changing nature of the feminist definitions that the shifting feminist identifications should be addressed. Since it is by now obvious that there is no such thing as one feminism, but there is a plurality of feminisms, an often contradictory and opposing plurality, there is also no one monolithic definition of what it means to be feminist. It is vital, in this light, that before using or rejecting the feminist label, one has to define what one

36 Idem.
37 Ibid., p. 531.
uses or refuses. Otherwise, we would be facing a use-misuse-refuse paradigm that would render the label itself meaningless and useless.

**The feminist label – private and political identity**

Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute.
Identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic.
Donna Haraway

Labels give opportunity for creating a dialogue between me and myself (a Platonic dialogue in itself) but also between the self and the others, the society, the world. And this dialogue thus created is essentially polemical; one continuously negotiates the terms of the dialogue and one’s own changing identity in the process of negotiation and dialogue. Therefore, labels, through their creation of a dialogical relation between one’s thought and the thought of the world, are a means of escaping solitude (a solitude that was previously seen as beneficial in the Cartesian sense, as the only way of acquiring knowledge through a process of self-reflection and reason, which was by definition a solitary act) which paralyzes faculties.

In a discussion about the concept of humanity and the possible misunderstandings associated with it, Hannah Arendt discusses Nathan the Wise’s answer to the command “Step closer, Jew” to which he responds “I am a man”. She considers this statement to be “nothing but a grotesque and dangerous evasion of reality.” Her own identification with the Jews, when she answers the question “Who are you?” with “A Jew” represents the acknowledgement of a political fact through which her being a member of this group “outweighed all other questions of personal identity or rather had decided them in favor of anonymity, of namelessness.” I think the same discourse can be used for the question – answer “Who are you?” – “A woman”, or even “A feminist”. It is not enough to answer “I am a human being”, for not all human beings are the same and refusing to acknowledge one’s identity as a woman or even as a feminist amounts to willingly choosing anonymity and namelessness, amounts to denying one’s identity and rendering the category “woman” unimportant, meaningless, futile.

The act of self-labeling is empowering; when identifying with the label “feminist”, one is choosing a path, a way of seeing, understanding, interpreting and even attempting to change

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39 Hannah Arendt (1983) *Men in Dark Times*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, p. 10. Arendt’s argument refers to Lessing’s concept of thought, but I think it can be very well applied to naming and labeling as well, for labels are also thought, a thought of myself and the world that places the self in a constant dialogue with me and the world.
the world, one is committing oneself to women’s betterment by acknowledging and criticizing patriarchal domination. Self-labeling is both a personal matter and a political act, one that goes beyond and blurs the boundaries of the dichotomy private-public. For it functions concomitantly at both levels, shaping one’s perception of oneself and of self-identity, as well as the perception of the world, in Arendt’s sense, and the perception of the one by the world.

The world’s perception of labels is often contradictory, varying from warm acceptance to fierce rejection. The label “feminist” is a heavily charged label; in the words of a leading Romanian feminist, women who identify themselves as feminists are often considered by the society as “women who deny their femininity, not allowing men to open the door for them, not shaving their legs, very probably lesbians or women who do not take care of their families and children.”\(^{(42)}\) This misperception of the label “feminist” is not an isolated misreading of Romanian society, it is pervasively valid and also pervasively harmful for those who use it to describe themselves, and often hinders them to embrace it wholeheartedly. The derogatory connotations of the label are the reason why so many women refuse to accept it, women who are aware of the oppressive character of the patriarchal society they (and we) live in and who agree and even contribute to the accomplishment of the goals of women’s movement. The reasons for such statements as “I am not a feminist, but…” or “I am a feminist, but…” should be searched in people’s (mis)perceptions of the label “feminist”, rather that in the actual meaning of the word itself; it is often not feminism that these women refuse, but the image of feminists constructed in the backlash public discourse about feminism and feminists.

There are different, diverse and often contradictory reasons for women’s refusal of labeling themselves “feminists”. For some of them “feminism” is too wide a concept, not able to address their particular beliefs and concerns, according to class, race, sexual orientation or individual taste, for others, on the contrary, it is too narrow, eliminating aspects that are vital for them or centering “the fight” against oppression only upon women. Other reasons given are generalization, essentialism, extremism, separatism and the list could continue \textit{ad infinitum}. The media discourses also often present feminism and feminists in a deformed way, making women feel uncomfortable calling themselves feminists; as some women put it, feminism has become a “new f-word”.

\textbf{Conclusion}

There are two aspects revealed in my analysis. If Irigaray’s argument of the engendered character of substantives is true for French, the same analysis on Romanian nouns raises several questions. The third grammatical gender in Romanian, the neuter, does not exist in French and
therefore her argument is proved to be invalid for Romanian. But what corporeality does this third grammatical gender point to? How are we to consider the neuter words? Is this third grammatical gender, the neuter, a necessary and sufficient proof to consider Romanian a less sexist language? Is neuter the guarantor of impartiality and equilibrium in a grammatically gendered language? These are questions that can not be answered in only one paper, but a more profound and thorough analysis of the Romanian linguistics might shed more light on this issue.

A second outcome of my analysis is the apparent inconsistency of the grammatical rules in Romanian. On the one hand, it favours the masculine grammatical gender over the feminine form, with respect to forming the plural, through the use of *ei* (masculine form for *they*) when referring to a group of both masculine and feminine objects or persons. On the other, in the case of neuter nouns, the singular is masculine, whereas the plural is always feminine.

Moreover, through the existence of certain words and constructions that carry a heavy loud of emotions and feelings, Romanian seems to be a more woman friendly language, as women can better express themselves and find words that converse about their emotions. Again, the need for a more profound and extended analysis of Romanian appears as necessary in order to be able to draw a conclusion (if ever possible) whether it is or not a less sexist language.

Knowledge is both, discursively and linguistically constructed. Lorraine Code thinks that “[I]languages and discourses reflect, structure and are structured by embedded metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality.”

Language is not a neutral means of conveying reality and transposing pure experience into knowledge; the reality and the experiences thus conversed are not left untouched, they are shaped by the very medium of conversing, that is by language. It is therefore not surprising that feminist theorists exposed language as sexist and patriarchal, arguing that women have been excluded from language, from the process of naming and meaning construction and women’s experiences are excluded from everyday and philosophical vocabularies and distorted in the discourses built upon them:

Linguistically, it is a man’s world, where woman’s place is defined and maintained by ‘man made language’ in innumerable subtle ways. Hence women must learn to speak a language that does not, in effect, speak of ‘their own’ experiences. [...] [These analyses and critiques of language] open an area of discussion that is particularly valuable to feminist epistemological inquiry. [...] If the language is tailor-made to express those experiences, and if women’s experiences simply fall through the spaces in that same language, the androcentricity of the theory is scarcely a surprise.44

Therefore, it appears as vital for women to regain their voice by taking back the language and claiming the power to (re)name the world and themselves. And this is precisely what labels do, women who label themselves “feminists” choose an identity, affiliate and commit themselves not only to a certain group, but, more importantly, to a way of life and thought:

My choice of feminism was a logical one, a deliberate decision on my part to improve the quality of my life. I selected feminism as a way of life, as a value system and a means of explaining the world and my place within it; while my account of this process may have some cultural peculiarities I suspect that it is not an uncommon one in the white Western world. Many women have a similar story to tell.45

My attempt at an analysis of the role and importance of self-naming and labels is obviously incomplete and partial. Those who accept or reject the label “feminist” give different reasons for their acceptance or rejection, and these reasons depend on the particular cultural, social, economic, religious, temporal context and even individual of the person. A theoretical analysis can only address general issues and constitutes the basis for a more extensive analysis based on interviews with women and men concerned with and involved in women’s issues.

References


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