

Introduction. From Home into the World: Women Who Inspire

Mihaela Gligor

I grew up in a small village hidden into the forests of the Apuseni Mountains, in Romania. As a young girl, my first hero was my grandmother, Zorița, a simple woman who dedicated her life to caring for her family. I admired my grandmother for her strength and for her stubbornness – which I’ve inherited – in doing difficult things. As a teenager, I learnt that my grandmother had, in fact, a very difficult life. She was born in October 1919, in the aftermath of the First World War. She was just starting a family when the Second World War began and her husband was taken to the front line, leaving her with two small children. He never came back, and the children died of various diseases, leaving her all alone and discouraged. Then she met my grandfather, Gheorghe, who survived the war. They started a new family, and soon two girls were born. When they were young, she got sick and the doctors removed one of her kidneys. But this didn’t stop her. She continued to take care of the household. And she did that until the year she died.

When my mother, Viorica, graduated from high school, she got married and decided to start her own family, in the same village. But then, her husband got sick and he died, widowing her at only 22. It was then that she decided to

take her life in her own hands and she moved to the city. She found a job and oversaw her life, which was not easy for a young, single woman during the communist times. Then she met my father, Traian, a former colleague from high school, and they started their family.

When I was only a few months old, my grandmother took me to the village and took care of me. It was there I started to walk and talk. When it was the time for me to go to school, my parents brought me back to the city, but all my vacations, from first grade to the last year of high school, I spent there, in the village, with my grandparents, living a simple life in accordance with nature, observing the strength of women and their ability to overcome all the tragedies of life.

Having models like these in my own family, I knew that a woman could do anything she sets her mind to, because there is a power within each of us that transcends difficulties. Strength comes out of pain and loss. If my grandmother reinvented herself and started her life again and again, overcoming war, the loss of her husband and children, and then a terrible illness; if my mother passed through the trauma of being a widow at such a young age and found a job in the city, started a family, and built a house, then I, too, could do something great! I was – and still am – the first girl from my extended family to graduate from college, pursue a PhD, and write a book.

From the very beginning, my parents encouraged me to follow my dreams. As a child, I read pretty much everything I could get my hands on, especially novels. On payday, my

father would take me to the bookstore and buy me a lot of books, especially those included in the supplementary reading list for school, but also novels from world literature or history books. At the end of sixth grade, during the summer vacation, I read *Gone with the Wind*, the famous novel by Margaret Mitchell, in just three days. *Quo Vadis*, by Henryk Sienkiewicz, was my favourite for a long time. I dreamed of visiting the places described in it and seeing the cypress trees. Among Romanian prose writers, I fell in love with Liviu Rebreanu from the very first page. His novel, *Ion*, was the novel of my childhood, describing exactly the world in which I grew up. And Ion Agârbiceanu's *Fefelega*, whose action takes place right in the hidden village in Apuseni where I grew up, was the story that taught me to move forward, regardless of the difficulties that may arise in life.

Maitreyi (Bengali nights),¹ written by Mircea Eliade immediately after his return from India, literally changed my life. Like Eliade, I chose to study philosophy and dreamt of visiting Calcutta someday. After many years of hard work, I did just that, and the encounter with India led to other incredible meetings. For years, India was my biggest dream, the first one I managed to transform into reality. It was inspired by a remarkable woman: Maitreyi Devi,² who

1 The first edition of the novel was published in 1933: Mircea Eliade, *Maitreyi* (București: Editura Cugetarea, 1933).

2 I wrote about Maitreyi Devi's influence many times, more recently in my chapter "Maitreyi Devi – *Na Hanyate* – The Story Behind," included in Mihaela Gligor and Lipi Ghosh (eds.), *Between Two Worlds: Romania and India: Essays on Expanding Borders through Culture* (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2023), 143-74.

changed paradigms and imposed herself on a society that, for years, considered women inferior to men. She was born into a well-educated family, as her father, Surendranath Dasgupta, was a philosophy professor at the University of Calcutta. Maitreyi had the chance to grow up among artists and writers, and at only 16, she published her first volume of poetry, with a preface by Rabindranath Tagore, the first Nobel laureate of Asia. She became a renowned writer and, in 1976, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, the most important distinction given by the India's National Academy of Letters, for her novel *Na Hanyate* (It does not die).³ Maitreyi was also a social activist and she founded, in 1964, the Council for the Promotion of Communal Harmony and was vice president of the All-India Women's Coordinating Council. Marked by the drama of children left on the side of the road as a result of territorial divisions and political struggles, Maitreyi set up an orphanage⁴ and attracted significant funds for educating and empowering young people coming from disadvantaged environments. Maitreyi was the first from a very long series of remarkable women that inspired me during my life and career.

3 Maitreyi Devi, *Na Hanyate* (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1974). The English translation appeared two years later: Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die: A Romance* (Calcutta: P. Lal Writers Workshop, 1976). In 1994, the University of Chicago Press published a very special conjoined edition. Both stories were released as companion volumes: Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die: A Romance*, and Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights: A Novel*, trans. Catherine Spencer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4 In 1971, in Khelaghar, a few kilometres away from Calcutta, Maitreyi started a school, following Rabindranath Tagore's principles. A secular, charitable trust and welfare home and education resource centre, Khelaghar still exists.

As generally understood, women's identity is a complex, personal sense of self shaped by diverse cultural expectations, different social roles (like mother or professional), personal experiences, and biological factors, encompassing individual traits and group affiliations (ethnic, religious) while evolving through life stages, often contrasting internal self-perception with societal pressures for femininity or motherhood. It's not a single definition but a diverse, multifaceted experience, influenced heavily by history, culture, and individual choices, challenging or accepting universal moulds.

The most famous representation of femininity in ancient India is the renowned *Dancing Girl*, a fascinating prehistoric sculpture dating from the Indus Valley Civilization about 2500 BCE, one of the greatest achievements of the Mohenjo-Daro artists.⁵ In ancient Egypt, women enjoyed a remarkable legal status, being equal with men, owning property, inheriting wealth, and divorcing, becoming doctors, scribes, and musicians. Ancient Egypt is also renowned for its powerful priestesses and even female pharaohs like Hatshepsut and Cleopatra, demonstrating women's significant influence in religion, administration, and governance. In the fourth century CE, when the greatness of the Roman Empire was fading, a woman, Hypatia of Alexandria, emerged as a symbol of learning and science; she is the earliest female mathematician of whose life and work we have knowledge.

5 For a survey of how women are seen in Indian culture, see Mihaela Gligor, "Sati. *Devi*. Maa. Incarnations of Femininity in Indian Culture," *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* 9 (2025): 111-22.

In medieval India, wives and daughters could become ascetics if their lives were unbearable. This choice was possible because, much earlier, during the sixth and seventh centuries BCE, two religions developed in India: Buddhism and Jainism. At the same time, in medieval Europe, women were excluded from the universities that began to be founded from the late eleventh century onward, but Christian convents became places where women could become considerable scholars.

The history of women's emancipation is long and complicated. The truth is, it took a while for women to be respected and seen as equal to men. In some cultures, at least; as history demonstrates that even now, in many parts of the world, women face a kind of discrimination. However, when the situation was desperate, it was clear that women are as capable as men. During World War II, women undertook many roles that were previously exclusively male, including roles as scientific researchers. Beginning in the 1960s, when the women's movement in the twentieth century was nearing its peak, women campaigned for, and finally won, equal rights in education and employment.

In our modern world, women are not just wives, mothers, daughters, but educated researchers, artists, singers, educators, writers, or women who have embraced careers that were, until recently, reserved for men, such as pilot, officer in the army, engineer, physician, astronomer, astrophysicist, biochemist, neuroscientist,⁶ astronaut, priest, univer-

6 For a selection of women's contribution to science, see Georgina Ferry et al., "A Selection of Notable Women in Science," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (n.d.), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Women-in-Science-2100321/A-selection-of-notable-women-in-science>.

sity professor, prime minister, governor, or even president. But famous “firsts” are not that important if they don’t lead to continued expansion and success. Women from all over the world transform, every single day, the impossible into the possible.

The authors of this volume write about some remarkable women from their own culture (or that of others), from different times, from varied religious backgrounds, and from all over the world – but all expressing emotional stories about how they changed the perceptions and influenced the destinies of others. We read here about princesses, poets, artists, activists, politicians, survivors, or scientists who were, at least once in their lives, in search of their identity. They all expressed, as much as they could, their own opinions and also created something sustainable that lasts to today. Their legacy is more important as ever, and their stories can inspire the new generation of young women all over the world.

The chapters of this volume are written by women from different cultures. Each of them has had a unique professional path that has set them apart from other women in their own cultures. They won important scholarships, studied at renowned universities, and achieved international recognition for their research, being the first in their families to do so. They are as important in illustrating female power as the women they write about. I am grateful to each one of them for accepting my invitation to write about women that inspired them. In many ways, this volume is a celebration of women’s creativity, and the extraordinary lives of every woman described here is just a reminder of

their influence and their legacy in a divided world that, in many ways, has lost its direction.

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