

# MONSTROUS WOMEN: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON VASILE VOICULESCU'S AMPHIBIOUS CREATURES

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## Abstract:

Romanian lore describes *știma* as an archaic deity that dominates the aquatic stability of flowing waters, such a creature being ascribed to every body of water. It has the power to overthrow this stability by conjuring either floods or severe droughts. “*Știma*” -s are described as women of unearthly beauty that take the shape of a fish (a huchen or redfish) when in water.

This paper opens up for examination a somewhat neglected aspect of Romanian literature, i.e. literary works that take as their subject matter the nautical realm and the creatures that populate it, with V. Voiculescu's “*Loștrița*” and M. Sadoveanu's “*Zâna lacului*” as exemplification.

Canonical nautical literature works, such as “*Moby-Dick*” (Melville, 1851) and “*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*” (Coleridge, 1798), focus on the sea or the ocean and the creatures, either real or mythical, that dwell underneath their surfaces or in the air. Romania has not been a maritime nation per se, hence the scarcity of nautical literary texts. The narratives discussed focus on naturally flowing watercourses and the creatures specific to them. The authors in question have no first-hand knowledge related to either sailing or seafaring, which is precisely why they both focus on the mythological creatures that populate the rivers of Romania. Their short stories also display strong elements of romance intertwined with powerful forms of fantasy and the supernatural.

**Keywords:** water creatures; amphibious creatures; Romanian folklore; redfish; fantasy literature; nautical short stories.

## Introduction

Our world is mainly made up of water, and, according to scientists, we have only been able to explore about 5% of it, which leaves 2/3 of unidentified deep ocean species. This has inevitably led to the creation of many legends and stories that revolve around mysterious water beasts or even shapeshifting creatures. The 1970s

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and '80s saw the rise of the "aquatic ape theory", popularized by Elaine Morgan, which states that millions of years ago, the primates that humans diverged from were forced to live in water at least part of the time in search of food. These primaevial hominids' aquatic existence explains some of the traits that our bodies have developed, such as the ability to breathe underwater or our hairless bodies, which makes it easier to dive and swim. Some of those primitive hominids adapted to living underwater, hence the existence of mermaids and other aquatic creatures.

Water plays an important role in the local folklore of many countries. Water, either in the form of still bodies or moving water, contains both harmless and malevolent energies. Water can be calm and bountiful, it can amass darkness and fear, or it can become untamed, hostile, and threatening since it acts as a repository of our common collective unconscious, as Carl Jung points out.

Deep waters have always been used as metaphors for both the toils, the troubles, and the profoundness that afflict the human soul. At the same time, water could represent a real danger for humans; thus, water crates fear, which could give a reason for supernatural explanations for mishaps of all kinds, including the evolution of amphibious creatures. The descriptions of these fictitious creatures vary according to local lore and traditions, as do their names. They are the object of countless sightings and are always mysterious and attractive to members of the opposite sex.

These water creatures are of unusual beauty and very lethal in their temptation. They are present in the mythology of different European cultural groups, varying from the *Kelpies*, in Celtic mythology (form-changing water spirits that would take the shape of beautiful naked women), to the *nymphs* of ancient Greece (*naiads*- divine creatures/minor deities that differed from the gods since they tended to dwell in fixed places, such as fountains, wells, springs or brooks, and other bodies of freshwater), to the *villas* of the Slavic people (fairy-like creatures, similar to the nymphs). In Slavic mythology, we can also find the Rusalka, a water spirit that was once thought to have roamed the dry land, giving life to crops and vegetation by spreading moisture. The Rusalki were thought to be the unresting souls of young women who died (either committed suicide or were murdered) near a body of water that haunted lakes and rivers until their death was avenged. In the

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beginning, they were not considered dangerous, but throughout time, their image has changed to that of an undead aquatic demon with hollow eyes and long hair, regarded as evil and feared by all.

Romanian lore describes *știma* as an archaic deity that dominates the aquatic stability of flowing waters, one such creature being ascribed to every body of water. It has the power to overthrow this balance by conjuring either floods or severe droughts. They are described as women of unearthly beauty that take the form of a fish (*lostriță*) when in water.

This paper opens up for examination a somewhat neglected aspect of Romanian literature, i.e. literary works that take as their subject matter the nautical realm and the creatures that populate it, using V. Voiculescu's *Lostrița* as exemplification.

Canonical nautical literature works, such as *Moby-Dick* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, focus on the sea or the ocean and the creatures, either real or mythical, that dwell underneath their surfaces or in the air. Romania has not been a maritime nation *per se*, hence the scarcity of nautical literary texts. The narrative discussed focuses on flowing watercourses and the creatures specific to them. The author has no first-hand knowledge related to either sailing or seafaring, which is precisely why the story centres around the mythological creatures that populate the rivers of Romania.

It appears that Voiculescu's tale has its roots in the story of Melusine, an aquatic feminine spirit who dwelled in springs or rivers. This legendary figure, which is common in European folklore, is usually depicted as a mermaid, and her tale is similar to those of the Swan Maiden and the Valkyrie from Norse mythology. In these stories, a mortal man marries a supernatural woman, betrays her, and then has to go through a series of quests to win her back.

According to Paracelsus, a water spirit is an elemental spirit that can breathe both underwater and on land. Such shapeshifting creatures are harmless on the condition that humans leave them alone. Talking about the creatures that populate the aquatic realm, C.G. Jung remarks that Melusine "comes from the same category as the nymphs and sirens." (Jung, 1970: 143) He mentions the theory postulated by Paracelsus in his *De pygmaeis*, that Melusine was originally a nymph who was seduced by the devil and persuaded into taking up witchcraft. This is visible in

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Voiculescu's story since he openly states that not only did Aliman get the woman through witchcraft, but that she came from a family of sorcerers herself. Jung states that Melusine "can be interpreted as a spirit, or at any rate as some kind of psychic" and that she "appears in the mind." (Jung, 1970: 143-144). All throughout the story, the fantastic fish appears to be showing itself only to the brave hero, tempting him to catch it. It sometimes seems that the fish is just a figment of Aliman's imagination since he is the only one that encounters it so often. Jung also mentions Conrad Vecerius's hypothesis that Melusine comes from an island in the middle of the sea, which is home to nine shapeshifting sirens. They can be both charitable and malevolent since they can both cure incurable diseases and conjure up storms.

Unlike the mermaids or the sirens, the fish-woman in Voiculescu's story is a full shapeshifter; she can be either a fish or a woman. The fish described in the story is closely related to the trout; it dwells in mountain streams and rivers, and catching it represents the ultimate quest for any fisherman. The story is composed of two levels, the physical and the magical/imaginary, which at some point interweave and become blurred. Magic permeates the physical realm even from the beginning, and it retains a double purpose, that of projecting the story into the fantastic sphere and of formulating a warning. The story is built around Aliman's primordial desire to catch the fish. This desire is built, in turn, around the absence of the fish, which represents the impossibility of fulfilling this longing.

### **Female aquatic monsters**

How has the image of the female been linked to the image of water, and how was it shaped by its essence?

Water abundantly accumulates symbolic meanings in many different cultures; it represents not only the source of life, vitality, and purification but also fear, darkness, and destruction. Water is a recurrent motif in many mythological stories and fairy tales, and therefore it is not surprising that it is rich in symbolism. Most often, water is associated with the notion of the source of life, and subsequently, it is repeatedly superimposed over the Mother image. Because water mimics the image of the mother body, it also acquires a maternal quality that preserves the perception that it reflects the experiences of a psychological transformation, helping

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us to become reborn since water represents the beginning of life or the vessel for the birth of all life forms on Earth.

Since the dawn of humanity, people have strived to control and dominate nature, which was generally perceived as unintelligent and inert. The Cartesian view promoted a division between the self and the world, holding intellectual knowledge in high regard and appraising things according to how useful they proved to man. This attitude led, in turn, to a worldview that was depleted of its sense of magic and that largely contributed to a schism between humans and nature. *Man* was made according to the image of God; the surrounding nature is subsequently inferior to man. Nature has been historically related to the idea of the feminine. The image of nature that Bacon created and that remained influential throughout the centuries was that of a female entity awaiting to be dominated. Nature has been tied to the ideas of “mother” and “nurturer”, thus leaving nature and the feminine to be subjugated by the masculine.

The female creatures that are derived from aquatic culture are inherently monsters; therefore, they should be feared. In his *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen developed six theses regarding monsters and the way they were created and perceived:

1. The monster's body is a cultural body;
2. The monster always escapes;
3. The monster is the harbinger of category crisis;
4. The monster dwells at the gates of difference;
5. The monster polices the borders of possible;
6. Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire.

According to the first thesis, monsters represent a way “of reading cultures” because a

“monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy. [...] The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read.” (Cohen, 1996: 4)

Cohen also points out that monsters can be understood only if we interpret them in the complex context of social, historical, and cultural relations that generate them. Voiculescu's story should be read according to this paradigm. It represents the

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subjugation of nature (which is inherently feminine) by the Man (as a symbol of patriarchy and masculinity).

Michel Foucault defines the monster as being a

“mixture of two realms, the animal and the human [...], a mixture of two species [...], a mixture of two individuals [...], a mixture of two sexes [...]. Consequently, the monster is the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classification, of the table, and of the law as table: this is actually what is involved in monstrosity.” (Foucault, 2003: 63)

These female monsters represent what Jess Zimmerman calls “bedtime stories patriarchy tells itself.” (2021: 7). Patriarchy revolves around the idea that women, their bodies and behaviour, are subject to males’ definition of feminine. In *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*, Zimmerman argues that

“women have been monsters, and monsters have been women, in centuries’ worth of stories, because stories are a way to encode these expectations and pass them on.” (2021: 8).

### **The story**

Right from the opening paragraph, the author warns the readers about the fact that the water realm has always been propitious as a hiding place for the devil and all its servants. Evil could take many forms to lure people, from flickering lights that trick the travellers into drowning to beautiful women who were nothing else but chimaeras. The Bistrița River was one of those places where the devil had set one of its evil fabrications to dwell in the form of *lostrița*, a sly fish that could change its size to lure fishermen. Many men, both old and young, were deceived by the enchanted fish that sometimes lay on the banks of the river resembling a beautiful damsel and ended up drowning in their foolish attempt to catch it.

Soon men started to realize the danger and avoided the devil’s concoction at all costs. But the fish was hungry for human flesh, so it became bolder and more luring by the day. One young fisherman, however, continued to chase the fish, hoping that one day he would catch it. One time he even succeeded in catching it and holding it in his arms, but the cunning beast managed to

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escape. From that day on, Aliman couldn't take his mind off of it, and he became more and more troubled by the idea of catching it.

The young fisherman was fearless and, despite the fact that many people advised him against it and that he almost drowned several times, he continued his chase. When winter came, and the river became covered in ice, Aliman had no option but to stop his maddening hunt; the inability to see the fish and the longing that he felt made him physically sick and almost drove him mad. Spring came, and the ice melted, but the enchanted fish was nowhere to be seen. After a while, the young fisherman spotted the woman-resembling fish again and he felt revived. Desperate that all his traps and attempts to catch the fish proved futile, Aliman decided to seek the help of a sorcerer who was known among the locals as a fish whisperer able to command the waters and whatever inhabited underneath their treacherous surfaces. High up in the mountains, he spent some time with the wizard, and upon his return, he brought home a wooden fish that greatly resembled the real one. After performing a certain ritual at night, in which he renounced the world of God, Aliman released the fake fish into the waters of the river and then went to bed as taught by the sorcerer.

The next day, the raging waters of the river flooded the surrounding area, bringing a lot of debris and remains of both men and animals. People struggled to save whatever they could, but nature proved stronger. Aliman arrived late, so there was not much to be saved. In the middle of the whirling waters, he saw a raft with something in the shape of a human lying on it. Aliman was preparing to enter the dangerous river to save the person caught in the current when the raft somehow miraculously steered toward him and came ashore. From the wreckage, the Aliman picked up an unconscious young woman who quickly came to her senses. The villagers, who were watching the scene in complete astonishment, saw how the woman's clothes dried almost instantly, as if she had never been wet. Her eyes were big and round and of the most intriguing colours, resembling those of the fish that Aliman had been trying to catch: hazel and green, blue and gold. Her eyes were cold, as though they were made of glass. People noted, not without a trace of dread, that her teeth were white and sharp as those of the animals. The woman's beauty was alluring, her body slim and long as that of a good swimmer.

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Upon seeing the woman, Aliman forgot all about the enchanted fish and the spells. It seemed that the woman was everything he had ever longed for. He took her home, and they spent all their time together, walking through the woods during the day and swimming in the river at night. Rumours soon spread throughout the village, and people started to whisper about the happy couple. Some said that the girl was a poltergeist that fed on Aliman's blood, but the young man had never been healthier or happier before. Some weeks passed, and Aliman talked to the girl about marriage and settling down, but she laughed; she did not care about traditions, only about love. The young man did not even know her name, and he found her wild and difficult to understand. Summer came, and with it, a woman took the girl away. She was her mother, and she had been looking for her everywhere. According to her, the girl came from a well-off family, and she brought disgrace to her kin when she left home to associate herself with some low-born man. As if bewitched, Aliman did not do anything to stop the woman from taking his lover away. For months, he walked up and down the river banks and through the mountains to find her, but she was lost forever.

Aliman finally returned home, where he slowly became the shadow of the man he used to be. He lacked strength and vitality. A young woman who liked him took advantage of his sluggishness and convinced him to get married. While at their wedding, Aliman heard that the enchanted fish had made its appearance again. It was lying in the sun, on the banks of the river, as if it were asleep. Upon hearing the news, the fisherman left in a hurry and went to the river, hoping to catch the fish. A flood wave was coming, but Aliman did not care about it. He saw the fish steering toward him and jumped into the waves. People tried to stop him but to no avail. Swimming against the current, Aliman was last seen holding the fish in his arms as if he was trying to protect it from the raging waters.

### **Subjugation and entrapment of the feminine**

The story constructed by Voiculescu details not only men's fear but also their desire for women. The idea of men both fearing and longing for monstrous women has been inscribed in various myths and legends since ancient times. For example, Homer's



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*Odyssey*, written somewhere during the eighth or seventh century B.C., chronicles the ordeals of the Greek hero Odysseus who has to choose between fighting a six-headed monster (Scylla) and a twelve-legged creature (Charybdis), two sea monsters of doom that are unambiguously identified as female. Likewise, in the first century A.D., the Roman poet Ovid described Medusa in his epic poem *Metamorphoses*. This abominable creature, with serpentine tresses, possessed the ability to turn anyone who looked at her into stone. Medusa is also identified as female.

Voiculescu uses the same idea of a monstrous woman capable of subjugating a man, a concept that is imbued with patriarchal symbolism; the fisherman's struggles represent the ideas that sit at the core of patriarchy and which are essentially based on constraints placed on womanhood. These monstrous concoctions were not abhorred because they contradicted what society deemed normal and acceptable but because they were both deceptive and alluring and capable of annihilating men.

The history of the West has been recorded mainly by males, and, as a result, women have repeatedly found themselves transformed into monsters because patriarchy attempted to validate specific arrangements that favoured masculinity. The terrors that hide in deep waters and the strange water creatures that take nightmarish forms are central to many stories that circulate in various cultures. The only thing they have in common is that these monsters are unmistakably feminine, while the stories are invariably told by men. In the patriarchal society, the feminine is monstrous enough in itself, and it has to be castigated when it becomes threatening to the privileged position of masculinity. The stories that we still consume today, either based on folklore or mythology, have all been constructed around the patriarchal notion of male domination and superiority over women. It is difficult both to construct and consume stories about valorous women who embody the seeds of true heroes.

Aliman is courageous, determined, and intelligent. These are all traits that the classical Western era has associated with masculinity. The woman-fish, on the other hand, is temperamental and unpredictable, and she requires to be rescued; therefore, she is seen as feeble. These are all feminine traits.

Voiculescu's story exemplifies the third thesis put forward by Cohen. According to this premise, a monster always escapes

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because it “refuses easy categorization.” A monster becomes dangerous because it is a “form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.” (Cohen, 1996: 6)

Voiculescu places the monster in his story between a woman and a fish and, therefore, between a person and an animal. The whole story is very ambiguous; the author never explicitly illustrates the idea that the fish is actually the woman who had metamorphosed. The fisherman's longing places her between seduction and danger, love and death. This ambivalence turns her into an enigma which suggests the representation of a woman who is trapped somewhere in between the image of a woman imposed by traditional culture and that created by nature.

The woman positions herself at the border of discernment, and she stands as a symbol of the man's loss of mobility, both intellectual and sexual. Ever since Aliman had rescued her from the turbulent waters of the river, he had not been as vivacious as before. Cohen speaks about the monster and society as being antagonistic entities since the woman “enforces the cultural codes that regulate sexual desire”. (Cohen, 1996: 14) The couple in Voiculescu's story lives in a world of their own that does not seem to preserve any connection with the real world. The couple is joined through a pagan ritual that suggests an unearthly kind of love. Under the eye of a fantastic and demonic moon, they recreate the myth of the first sin committed by men. The fish, now turned into a beautiful woman called Ileana (the name of a well-known fairy in Romanian lore), awakens the young man's yearning and desire; people in the village see her as evil, a kind of poltergeist that drains Aliman of his vitality.

Western culture has broadly associated the feminine with wilderness and uncontrolled nature. The waters that the woman emerges from are storm-fueled; Aliman ignores the threat and manages to subject the hostile river to his will, saving the woman and thus making her his own property. The female-fish monster acts as an epitome of the patriarchal anxiety related to men's inability to control the uncontrollable and possibly threatening nature of the female sex. After bringing the woman home, Aliman becomes obsessed and absorbed with her and ignores the rest of the world. Thus, the female is further linked to the idea that men can become emasculated and disempowered if they allow women to have an effect on them.

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Within patriarchy, women are described as irrational, emotional, and weak. They are seen as the nurturers in a family, while men are rational, protective, and strong. This construction of gender roles in binary oppositions has enabled the expansion of the idea that the dominant poles (males) are entitled to subordinate the weaker poles (females) and use them as commodities to be traded according to necessity, which represents an even further devaluation of women. Aliman wants to marry the woman he had saved from the waters of the river but she refuses this pairing, which could be interpreted as a woman's attempt to free herself from patriarchal oppression. Lévi-Strauss was the first one to notice that marriage represents yet another layer in the network of patriarchy. He points out that marriage represents a contract between two men (the father and the husband) who trade the woman as a commodity or a "thing" to be exchanged so as to strengthen an alliance. The bride was used as property and passed from the hands of one group of men to another; she did not have an identity of her own, and she was valuable as long as trading her consolidated kinship relations.

The identity of the woman in Voiculescu's story, however, is as amorphous and treacherous as water itself and as slippery as a fish. It is the frame of Aliman's own mind and imagination that gives her shape, contour, and specificity. The question that the readers cannot but ask themselves is whether this creature is a monster, a mistress, or a real woman. She may be all of these put together depending on the individual that comes into contact with her. *Loștița* is demonized as being monstrous by the villagers, while Aliman is drawn to her as irresistible and seductive despite the fact that she might be potentially deadly.

Beyond the magic the story was built on, it provokes a desideratum to re-examine our cultural beliefs not only about differences but primarily about gender and the ways it is expressed. This tale is explicitly gendered. The man catches the woman and brings her to his house, against her will or without her consent. He uses witchcraft to trick the river into giving him the woman, and he removes her from her family.

For the fisherman, the confrontation with the fish represents not only a challenge but also an attempt to demonstrate his prowess. Catching the fish means men triumph over nature or the masculine ability to control the feminine.

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During the winter, the river freezes, and Aliman cannot continue his quest. He is confined to the land and becomes feeble and apathetic. In spring, he regains his vitality and seems to be ready once more to tame nature.

As a figment of imagination, Voiculescu's monster female codes men's inherent fear of the destructive capacity of women. This story epitomizes, to a certain extent, men's inclination to conquer and subjugate the female. As a symbol of the feminine, water is being tamed by the masculine, represented by Aliman. The man traps the maiden on land and tries to persuade her to marry him, but she refuses.

Patriarchy has imposed a certain standard of how all biological women should present themselves to society. Women have been constructed by men as the *Other* and have been stereotyped either as *good* (those women that conform to a patriarchal gender role, that of wives and mothers) or *bad* (those who refuse to accept a role that has been prescribed to them). Consequently, any woman who refuses to comply with these standards and with the role she has been ascribed upon her birth is seen as unnatural and even dangerous.

A woman that shatters to pieces her gender role becomes demonized, which on the one hand, signifies that a woman is chastised because she does not correspond to her expected role, and on the other, it allows women to break with conventions and norms both from a social and a sexual point of view. While women are condemned to adhere to social norms dictated by patriarchy, monstrous women, being outside this system, are free to transcend gender stereotypes. However, these women are castigated for living outside of society. In their role as the *Other*, they become the male-constructed frame of reference that maintains the stereotyped definition of what a woman's role should be.

The story does not highlight how the woman feels about the arrangements made by the fisherman or by her mother. This kind of story rarely does. The fish woman will never sit still, and the fact she does not want to marry or have children makes her seem unnatural. The story changes form just as the woman-fish does. Ambivalence raises suspicion and underpins the idea that, even if women might seem harmless, they can become ferocious monsters if one looks carefully under the waterline. Their ambition must be disciplined in order to prevent men from falling

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victim.

The fish-woman is a subversive element. She attracts the fisherman in a whirlwind of emotions and threats to damage his integrity. The woman represents the locus of sexual desire, and her abnormally enhanced sexual drive and the fact that the couple lives out of wedlock make her dangerous, and the villagers associate her with male failure and death. Thus, by overstepping the boundaries of the role that has been assigned to her, the woman becomes monstrous, and, as a result, any woman can eventually transform into a Scylla, Lilith, Medusa, or Melusine.

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