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**The Occidental/Western Myth
as a Form of Mental (Self) Colonization
in the Eastern European Discourse
about Communism. A Case Study on
Radu Pavel Gheo's *Noapte bună, copii!***

Abstract: Even though its historical experience cannot be framed exactly into the postcolonial framework, Radu Pavel Gheo's *Noapte bună, copii!* demonstrates the effects of a cultural and psychological "colonization" that is typical for the Eastern European postcommunist space. In this study, I argue that Radu's text is situated at the juncture between the postcolonial and postcommunist studies. To that extent, I concentrate on how the idyllic projection of Western spaces colonizes the minds of the novel's protagonists through the power of the infantile myth.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; American Dream; Psychological Colonization; Nostalgia; Communist Childhood; Projection.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2026.50.05

In the present study, I show that, even though it has not usually been classified as a postcolonial narrative, the novel *Noapte bună, copii!* showcases the many overlaps between postcommunist fiction and the postcolonial problematics. As a writer who grew up in Banat, an Eastern region close to the border with Serbia, under the communist regime, Radu Pavel Gheo became part of the Polirom generation of writers who processed their communist memories through autobiographical lenses¹. His novel, therefore, is part of the wave of postcommunist childhood narratives, placing its author among the important figures in mapping the traumatic discourse of its time. I believe Radu's book is the best suited for my analysis due to its geographical setting (the proximity to the border as a gateway to the Western world), its binary timeline structure, which offers the readers a solid representation of the way in which the regime affected the Romanian youths. Due to

its structure and narrative, I consider *Noapte bună, copii!* as the best illustration of the experience of the people who reached the Western space and lived the dejection of their illusions and unfortunate projections.

Radu builds the story of four friends: Marius, Paulică, Cristina, and Leo, the girl's boyfriend, who is never fully accepted as a member of the small group. The author's narrative is constructed on two timelines: the past, in which the young friends are plotting and trying to cross the border, and the present, in which Marius, the only member of the group who succeeds in migrating successfully, revisits his home country, looking for closure and for revenge for Cristina, who was raped while trying to escape the first time.

After getting into the States, we can see Cristina and Leo, who are the first to succeed in crossing the Romanian border, getting jobs as a seller and a security guard, but are still unsatisfied with their finances. After Marius' arrival, the friends' dynamics begin to shake, especially after Leo's proposal to his girlfriend to start being an actress in the adult movie industry, and her acceptance. Marius takes distance from the couple and is even more affected after finding out that Leo started trafficking illegal substances for extra income. Leo cheats and runs with the gained capital, leaving a heartbroken Cristina, who refuses to move on from the tragic events by committing suicide. Later, Leo is caught and killed by the LePendu, the French trafficker to whom the Romanian man owes money. The novel finishes after Marius dies, killed by the train while being in Romania. Paulică is the only one among the friends who chooses to stay in their home country while being a teacher in Iași and pursuing

his long-time dream of being a writer after winning a special scholarship. The tragic narrative of the novel draws the story of a whole generation's deception, bringing into light the aftermath of the post-communist regime.

I will thus start by reviewing Bill Ashcroft's definition of postcolonialism as a process that "deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies"². Ashcroft aptly notes that the meaning of this term was broadened to encompass the influence exerted over a particular nation or population in cultural production, as well as across a range of economic, cultural, political, and sociological aspects³. Based on the core semantic meaning of postcolonialism, I argue that the Western space had a massive cultural and psychological impact on Romanian people living during late communism, which developed into a form of colonialism, as shown by Radu's young protagonists. This way, even though *Noapte bună, copii!* does not narrate a typical experience of colonialism; it underscores several features of the postcolonial novel as discussed by Ashcroft and Piret Peiker. In Peiker's view, postcolonialism can also be understood philosophically⁴, as a mindset that transcends geographical confines. This idea comes across in Radu's novel, which shows the way in which American culture and society shaped the characters' dreams and expectations from afar.

From a historical point of view, there are many factors building into the argument that communist Romania underwent a Soviet colonization. As David Chioni Moore makes clear in his famous article,

By most classic measures – lack of sovereign power, restrictions on travel,

military occupation, lack of convertible money, a domestic economy ruled by the dominating state, and forced education in the colonizer's language – Central and Baltic Europe's nations were indeed under Russo-Soviet colonial control from roughly 1948 to 1989 or 1991.⁵

Through his intervention, Moore explores a gap in the field studies for the Eastern postcolonial framework at an international level: the intentional exclusion of the post-Soviet space from the theoretical space. Two other scholars who support the critic's point of view are Cristina Șandru⁶ and Bogdan Ștefănescu, both claiming that the postcolonial framework can be applied to the post-communist Eastern European space. While Moore's perspective remains an active one in the Romanian studies, Radu Pavel Gheo's novel proposes a diagnosis regarding his characters' idealization of the Western space, not as a simple longing, but as a fatal flaw in their narratives.

Many historians have pointed out that Romanian communism confiscated the cultural identity and the collective thinking of a large segment of the country's population, thus enabling Western influences to make their easy imprint on the young and naïve minds of the teenagers living before 1989. In this respect, Mircea Martin speaks of the relationship between colonialism and communism and how it can be traced through the presence of Soviet oppression in Romania.⁷ Especially during the first part of communism, due to the restrictive rules imposed by the state on its citizens, the Russians exerted their power even beyond actual political control,

through language (Romanian students were required to learn Russian in schools), customs, and societal norms and practices.

Looking closely into Radu's novel, we can observe the way the communist regime affected the characters' lack of liberty and their way of perceiving not only their own country, but the peripheral spaces as well. Thus, we find a space and time where the idealized standards of a Western life and the lack of pragmatic information led the young generation into a terrible deceit and false nostalgia. Therefore, the colonial direction overlaps on an abstract level with the communist one, leading to the phenomenon of a self-colonization of a persecuted generation. This concept was first conveyed by Alexander Kiossev, who suggested that "cultures having succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the West without having practically been invaded and turned into colonies"⁸. Following his argumentation, we can notice the tendency of the subcultures to turn to the "progressive nations", so that they could become part of the "enlightened humankind"⁹. Kiossev observes the way the non-members of the dominant cultures used imagination as a way of conveying the desired values and attributes, and the way this practice led the individuals to a self-traumatizing experience¹⁰. This effect was due to the lack of actual military and political power that characterized the typical colonizer populations, a fact that is also reflected through Radu's characters.

In the sixth chapter, "Nostalgia and Post-Communist Memory" of her book, Svetlana Boym describes the way the American land functioned as a "lost homeland that never existed" during the communist period, creating a dangerous

fantasy that ceased in the moment of regime collapse¹¹. Boym analyses the way nostalgia was carefully used as a weapon and as a defense mechanism against the rapid economic and political changes, trying to manipulate the masses into falling into a melancholy loop that would preserve the politicians' power. Therefore, we can see that the concept of nostalgia is not limited only to the projection of childhood memories, but also to economic struggles. This "infantile myth" is present in Radu's novel through the characters' desire and longing for America, while being trapped in the memories of their teenage years. This emotional turmoil turns out to ultimately alienate the three friends who cross the borders successfully: Leo, Cristina, and Marius. The characters find themselves caught in a mental projection created from their childhood hardships.

Drawing on Kiossev's self-colonization standpoint and Boym's framework of postcommunist nostalgia, I argue that due to the fragile historical period and the weak traces of Western influence, the young Romanian generation suffered not only the regime austerity and economic deprivation, but also the crashing of their youthful and hopeful projection upon their freedom. Therefore, my present study supports and follows Kiossev's framework and theory of self-colonization using Boym's lens of nostalgia as a way of reading the psychological process of Radu's characters.

Dumitru Tucan, in his paper "The Adaptability of Theory: Postcolonialism vs. Postcommunism in Romanian Literary Studies", comments on Bogdan Ștefănescu's take on colonialism, "as a paradigm of collective subordination, which has an impact upon discourse, upon

institutions and social behaviors, and thus upon the socio-cultural imaginary"¹². This aspect of subordination to the dominant cultures through imitation is reflected as well in the lives of the novel's protagonists, Marius, Paulică, Cristina, and Leo, who try to emulate Western culture and make it their own, despite failing to do so eventually. Instead, their future lack of integration into the American culture will lead the three friends who get there towards an impending sense of alienation, as I will analyze later in my study.

Even though Anca Băicoianu¹³ claims that postcommunism and postcolonialism are incommensurable historical experiences that can hardly be studied together, I retain my belief that this discussion is a relevant one, especially regarding Radu's *Noapte bună, copii!*. I will try to demonstrate that the experience of colonization recounted in the novel is not, in fact, directly connected to the Soviet influence from the communist period, but rather to an American self-colonization unfolding on a psychological level, as Kiossev demonstrates. This type of colonization has proved to be voluntary through the way in which the teenagers depicted in the novel sought to self-identify with an external reality that remained totally foreign to them, despite the austere conditions imposed by the communist regime, characterized by well-known restrictions and deprivations. However, for many Romanian people, such identification was necessary for survival as well, as it provided the citizens hope and a promise for a possible, better world, even if it was one much beyond their reach.

Writing on this phenomenon of Western nostalgia, which they term *westalgie*¹⁴, Cosmin Borza and Claudiu Turcuș describe

a reality where the audiovisual materials brought from the West helped primarily shape an idealist projection of consumer capitalism. This applies as well to Radu's characters, in the way that the four friends were longing and craving to own a Michael Jackson t-shirt, American jeans, music tapes with American bands¹⁵, and, as Marius dreams, a red Chevrolet Corvette, reminiscent of a famous American song.

The Yugoslav Hit Diskomer made the three friends feel the fragrance of the Beyond, from the world that was forbidden to them. They listened to and discussed about music that the German, English, or Dutch teenagers were also listening to, so they were feeling somehow there too, as if the Iron Curtain raised just a bit and let the youngsters from the Eastern bloc, so hungry after that colorful world, and obviously, with so many more fun things and liberties, to at least dream that they are There.¹⁶

As Bogdan Ștefănescu claims as well in his book, the communist period let the people deal with "colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality"¹⁷, establishing a fragile ground for the traumatized citizens. Being raised in such a frail mentality, Radu's character's desire to escape beyond the borders does not come as a surprise. Even though the analysis between colonialism and communism has been generally dismissed by critics, Ștefănescu argues that this absence in research is a failure in historical acknowledgement and suggests even an underlying feeling of "embarrassment" in the second chapter of his book¹⁸. More than shame, the critic

supports Kārlis Račevskis' point of view on extending this movement to the status of denial¹⁹. Therefore, I want to argue that the four friends who decided to escape illegally were, in fact, victims of a vulnerable historical period.

Thus, we can see the way the strong desire to live like "across" the Atlantic and to fully share in the American dream evoked a dimension of freedom, which was idealized precisely against the austerity of the communist regime. Radu also observes that the proximity to the Yugoslav territory is another reason for the projection of this idealization. Regarding this, Borza and Turcuș²⁰ highlight the way in which the novel's main characters were "connecting" with the Western space through the Serbian radio or through the *ocksa* square, where they could access Western goods.

It was worse when they were leaving from here, from the bar, from the Hit Diskomer, and they were torn from the world at which they were dreaming for so long, the world in which the cinemas were rolling Conan The Barbarian, Grease, E.T., Flashdance, and Star Wars 3 – Return of the Jedi, or Star Trek, where the clubs were open every night and were closing only in the morning, where you could find in any shop jeans, cool t-shirts, dresses, leather jackets, and sport shoes, coke, chocolate and bananas as many as you liked, tapes and records with the latest pop and rock albums, where you could buy elegant and fast cars and where you were free to do as you pleased.²¹

These nostalgic, dreamy moments shaped in the young kids' minds the

idealistic dimension of the Western capitalist world. These infantile experiences led the protagonists in the end to a failure to adapt and integrate into the Western world once they got there. Not coincidentally, Radu himself writes in his autobiographical account that, "I am afraid that many of us were impacted in adolescence with an idealism that harmed us terribly."²² More than that, he recognizes a self-deception in his own departure from the country, stating that, "the Revolution did nothing else but let us build up our hopes to turn our ideals even more. It fueled our desires. Then it burned us."²³ Therefore, we can trace the author's experiences and frustration permeating into his characters' narrative development.

In her analysis of Radu's novels, Ivana Olujić writes about the way in which Radu depicts the geographical space of the ex-Yugoslavia as a "metaphorical gate"²⁴ to the Western world and, more than that, as a dreamscape forged by the Romanians' fragile and fragmentary knowledge. Her argument demonstrates the ignorance of the novel's characters and their lack of a tangible truth regarding the unknown Occidental space.

Nevertheless, as we follow the novel's characters, we can sense a tension at the level of desired independence and the cultural attachment to their native country²⁵. Friction is present in the novel through the three friends' constant impostor syndrome and their inability to integrate into American society. Thus, despite having relatively stable jobs, we can see Cristina and Leo fighting and struggling to fulfill their dreams for which they risked their lives, without any success, though. The only one who gets to experience the embodiment of his dreams is

Marius, who is slightly disappointed when he realizes that his desires were only satisfied while he experienced them as a fantasy. Therefore, as Borza and Turcuș demonstrated in their article, "the more this Western dream was immaterial-phantasmal, the more powerful its fascinating effect, the more intense the hope it generated"²⁶, producing an even more damaging disintegration of the infantile fantasies.

Caught between communism and Western consumerism, the three friends decide to cross the border, which was keeping them away from the mental projection that they had built of the Western world. Finding themselves in the sheer disappointment of their fallen "American dream," the characters are in a cultural and identitarian confusion. The only one who remains faithful to his cultural identity seems to be Marius:

...he remained faithful to the one-color T-shirts, with texts or printed logos in English, which in his early Romanian teenage years meant upward mobility, the textile testimony of access to resources reserved only to the privileged.²⁷

Therefore, we can see the direct effects of Western and American self-colonization on the idealization created by Eastern European citizens. This fact is highlighted in Radu's text and in his characters' lives full of ambition. This is particularly true for Cristina, who chooses to end her own life when her mentally fragile reality stops corresponding with the dimension in which she had been living. Even though we can see Leo also being literally killed by his "American dream", by the desire to become

financially successful, I believe that Cristina is the best representation of the ultimate deception of the infantile myth in which they had been living. I would argue that Marius also dies because of his American dream, even though he appears to be the only one among his friends who manages to adapt and fulfill his early aspirations. We can observe him not finding real joy and happiness in his established American life. In the end, Marius is killed by a train, in his dream car, the red Chevrolet Corvette. Therefore, I would argue that, despite their best efforts, the three friends who left their country could never fully adapt to the dimension of their dreams, a fact that ultimately brought them death. The characters' fatal end is not just a narrative conclusion to his novel, but a larger conclusion to the self-colonizing process that started during their childhood and was unsolvable in the face of the pragmatic reality.

In conclusion, Radu Pavel Gheo positions Romanian literature through his novel

into the broader literary studies, connecting the postcommunist trauma to an American self-colonizing reality. His story does more than rewrite and find closure for the collective Romanian memory, it negotiates the causes that led the young generation to another unresolved emotional trauma and distress. The author's post-communist novel brings not only a beneficial understanding of the consequences of the regime for the new generation, but also a much-needed completion of the period studies through his angle and perspective. Therefore, *Noapte bună, copii!* brings a unique re-reading standpoint of the postcommunist framework through its self-colonization perspective. Rather than writing another post-communist nostalgic novel, Radu succeeds in constructing and bringing a deeper understanding of the Eastern European experiences, bringing the Romanian literature into the international light. His book has since sparked international interest, with translations into Italian and Spanish.

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