

BETWEEN CENTRE AND MARGIN: THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN *GOOD NIGHT, CHILDREN!*

*Abstract: This paper uses some of the key concepts of cultural studies, dealing mainly with the issues of post-colonialism. Basically, this paper questions the degree to which Romanian post-communism can be considered a version of post-colonialism. Moreover, the aim of this paper is the investigation of a Romanian contemporary novel, Noapte bună, copii! as describing the relation between centre and margin, together with depicting the drama of the young person who decides to emigrate to the USA. Marius, Cristina, and Leo are not only characters of this trial, that of escaping from communist Romania, but also embodiments of some of the ways of addressing the issue of the new-comer to a world only known from movies and songs. The real question here is: Can emigration be a successful story? The novel tries to give an honest answer while telling a story full of mixed feelings.*

*Key-words: post-colonialism, post-communism, centre/margin, expatriation, United States of America*

Within the field of cultural studies, themes like centre, periphery/margin, the relation between them and the way in which the individual interacts with them represent essential points of interest, especially in the context of a continually advancing globalization and of the effacing of all types of borders. The thematization of these concepts is already a tradition in the case of Western literature, where it usually relates to questioning identity, especially within territories that were once part of big empires. If Anglo-Saxon literature comprises such names as Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Michael Ondaatje or, more recently, Jhumpa Lahiri, when it comes to Romanian literature these kinds of concerns are more recent and, of course, the focus, the themes and the specific points are different.

The present paper aims at analyzing Radu Pavel Gheo's novel *Good Night, Children!* (2010) from this perspective: the relation centre-margin and the adjacent themes. The border is a fundamental theme here, the border between childhood and adulthood, the border between a Romanian communist *here* and the much-dreamed American *there*, placed, by coincidence or not, exactly in the City of Dreams, or the border between the one who leaves and the one who stays. Moreover, this approach, descending from post-colonial studies, particularly Anglo-Saxon studies, is the only one profitable both in the Romanian cultural context and for the chosen novel.

We cannot speak of an efficient application of the concept of post-colonialism in the context of Romanian culture; therefore, real usefulness can only come from the sincere interrogation concerning what is valuable from what lies beyond the limits of the centre, beyond Western patriarchal culture's privileged position in history, whose representational apparatus constituted the source of the homogenous categories which are applied both in language and in identity. At this point, it is relevant to take into consideration the discussion about post-communism as post-colonialism, carried on by Ion Bogdan Lefter in the article "Can post-communism be considered a post-colonialism?," included in the first *Echinox*

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<sup>1</sup> Universitatea Transilvania Braşov

magazine (*Postcolonialism&Postcomunism*, 2001). The critic provides arguments both for and against this assumption, stating that Romania was not a proper colony and the language or culture of the empire (in this case the USSR) had not been imposed on it as it was the case with proper colonies. Additionally, Lefter notes:

Administered by local communist parties, with their own governments, with an autonomy of movement much acclaimed after Khrushchev's "defrosting" (see the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs" which the discourse of Ceaușescu's regime sustained permanently), the discussed countries were part of the "socialist concentration camp", but without being actually included in the Soviet empire".<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, there are arguments for considering post-communism as post-colonialism: there has never been an actual independence; the centre was in Moscow and the directing lines were drawn, more sternly or mildly, from there. A domino-type of consequence of the perestroika and glasnost policy was the fragmenting of the soviet empire at the end of the 80's. Moreover, the dependence that Ion Bogdan Lefter considered to be of a *semi-colonial type* manifested through the presence of Soviet troupes (in Romania only until 1957). Other arguments in favour of this idea are subordination to the centre, translated into a general passive attitude, fear of Russians, Russification attempts, the import of Soviet propaganda, and social realism. What is the critic's conclusion? The adequacy of the concept of post-colonialism to the Romanian reality is only relative, but its specific analysis may help in Ion Bogdan Lefter's vision meant to describe and comprehend recent history.

Moreover, in the case of the current approach, one can notice, once more, if there was any need, the fact that, in postmodernism, the distinction between centre and periphery is annulled; the distinction becomes null and voided of significance. What is truly interesting is precisely the observation of this continuous game of perspectives, of relating modalities, and of the way identity is constructed and deconstructed within this game, as if between parallel mirrors. The most productive theme for exploring this idea is by far that of the one who leaves Beyond; that equivocal Beyond, as the author explains: "I wanted a title which would contain the word 'Beyond,' because it is one of the novel's repeating motives: the world Beyond as a world of freedom outside Romania, but the beyond world of Romanian mythology, the world of the dead."<sup>3</sup> This is the theme of the one who chooses to leave behind a country, a culture, a miniature world, and dive into a totally new one. Subsequently, the main character returns to his native country, which constitutes an extremely fertile narrative technique for presenting the cultural shock the character confronts both when leaving and when returning. In Radu Pavel Gheo's novel, this character is Marius Albu, a representative character for an entire generation, who was 18-20 years old during the Revolution, full of dreams and expectations and who was probably most cruelly disappointed about what happened next.

This is one of the essential coordinates of the novel *Good Night, Children!* – a novel that can be also seen as a story of the Thing, of the Great Trial, of the run Beyond; not any Western Beyond, but an American Beyond, situated over the Ocean. The four friends, Marius, Leo, Cristina, and Paulică (three of whom managed to leave) build a mythical Outside, with a compensatory function in front of the communist reality. No matter how privileged their situation as residents near the border with Yugoslavia is in comparison with the rest of the country, the West/USA represents a Beyond in which they trust all their hopes and in whose name they risk everything.

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<sup>2</sup> Ion Bogdan Lefter, "Poate fi considerat postcomunismul un post-colonialism?," *Caietele Echinoc*, volumul 1 (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 2001), page 118. My translation

<sup>3</sup> Radu Pavel Gheo interviewed by Daniel Cristea Enache, "Romanul a încântat-o atât de tare pe Alina încât m-a făcut să mă simt ca o vedetă rock," 05.03.2012. [www.atelier.liternet.ro](http://www.atelier.liternet.ro). Accessed 30 May 2013. My translation.

For the teenagers suffocated by communism, Outside represents a territory that they can only approximate by means of what gets to them from the famous Serbian market (the privilege of the proximity with their border), the place where all products marked by the Western consumerist print gather:

and yet, there, at the market, the “Serbians”, meaning the “Yugoslavians” near the Romanian border; they were offering products that the ordinary Romanian citizen could not find or, if he was lucky and he persisted, he discovered them on the black market: coffee, beans or grinded, audio-cassettes and new vinyl discs with pop or rock music, sprays and perfumes, luxury soaps, hair spray, Coca-Cola, chewing gum, chocolate, cigarettes, such as Marlboro, Camel or Kent, or cheaper ones, such as Yugoslavian Vikend or Ronhill, cheerfully coloured cotton t-shirts with inscriptions and drawings...”<sup>4</sup>

The Occident also means the black t-shirt with *Thriller*, which Leo steals from the Serbian market for Cristina (t-shirt which, by coincidence or not, accompanies the girl both in the night of the Great Trial and in the moment she passes Beyond, but this time forever, when she commits suicide by taking some pills, accompanied by Michael Jackson’s music); the Chevrolet Corvette C5 poster (Marius’s dream, which he finally turns into reality); Prince’s song *Little Red Corvette*, the international top from the Yugoslavian radio station in ’82, white Addidas trainers, pirated cassettes, stickers and albums with World Cup footballers. All these elements taken together trace, in the mind of the four teenagers, the image, obviously naïve and holding a pregnant compensatory function, of a truly idyllic space that cannot be compared with anything they live in the 80’s communist Romania: But most of all, as Radu Pavel Gheo observes, they dreamed about that wonderful world Beyond, the free and prosperous world they imitated, that of Western Europe, with its paradise-like variant: America, The United States.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, with the help of this image, the four of them, but especially Marius, construct their identity in direct dependence to leaving Beyond. There is no other option, they make no plans for a future in communist Romania but, on the other hand, at no point do they make at least a concise plan regarding what they will actually do when they get there. This is another proof of their essential naivety and of the compensatory and illusory character of the Great Trial. Still, this is not the only space of this kind described in the novel. Before the West there is Teicova, the village where the grandparents of the four children live and the place where they meet (Cristina and Leo are from Timișoara, while Marius and Paulică are from Oravița). It is a protective and idyllic space: “Teicova truly had them all.”<sup>6</sup> The central idea here is that the village is a paradigmatic space, constructed very carefully and by entering a dialogue with the space of the Moldavian village Iacobenii Noi.

One of the most accomplished passages of the book, from the point of view of the relation centre-margin, is that in which the three friends (Leo, Marius and Cristina) translate into actions their plan to pass illegally the Serbian border, but they are caught, arrested, tortured and humiliated by soldiers. Ironically, the Great Trial fails, but the night between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> of May modifies their way of seeing and understanding the world. “That night marked the end of Marius’s childhood. But the brown-haired kid – actually the former kid – knew that this must have been true for Cristina as well.”<sup>7</sup> But Leo does not seem to be so changed on the inside. This is the moment that marks the limit between childhood and a quick-forced maturity, a night after which nothing stays the same, a true point of passage in the sense of a ritual, as found in folklore. For Leo and Cristina, the failure of the Great Trial is just a delay in their plan; they manage to leave quite soon after their first attempt. Marius joins them after some time, more precisely

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<sup>4</sup> Radu Pavel Gheo, *Noapte bună, copii!* (Iași: Editura Polirom), p.108. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Radu Pavel Gheo, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

after five years, when Cristina invites him (and after she persuades Leo too). This is another sign that the group's cohesion and understanding breaks after the failed attempt. Again, Marius's newcomer perspective is useful from a narrative point of view because, along with the main character, the reader too enters the Promised Land, in a world that was up to that point only dreamed of, approximated, idealized and, at best, only known through films.

The cultural shock the character undergoes is the same for any immigrant. He notices that the America known from the music he listened to as a teenager, from films and magazines that circulated under the counter in communism, is totally different from the world he enters:

Yes, it was an alien world. Only at this point he could see just how alien America could be. He recognized it because he had seen it hundreds of times in the movies from the Yugoslavian television, and from the illicit sessions of video watching in Oravița, but what surrounded him now was a totally different thing. It was only the images that resembled. The big picture had different internal rules and he could not really understand why, or what logic functioned there.<sup>8</sup>

Inhibited by his lack of linguistic abilities, Marius realizes that knowing the lines from tens of songs known by heart is of no use; they do not help him communicate with people on the street or in a shop. This makes him hide even deeper in his protective shell: "This is why he didn't feel at ease when going outside, when going shopping or anywhere else if he wasn't with Leo and Cristina. [...] Outside, there was an alien world, an American world which he avoided to face for the moment."<sup>9</sup> Marius displays an almost desperate dependence on his friends, whom he sees as the only ones who can help him get by. He is also dependant on the Romanian language, which is, in fact, part of his identity. He is on his own, even more than other immigrants, because immigrant specific loneliness goes together, in his case, with a profound feeling of estrangement from Leo and Cristina, who have jobs, routine, plans, and even life conceptions that are different from his. Additionally, his friends are neither the ones he knew them to be, nor what they seem to be. Although Cristina resembles the Cristina Marius knew since the days they played together in Teicova, and the fresh immigrant can communicate with her easily, she reveals to him her dream to become an actress in Hollywood (the City of Dreams, by coincidence or not, is exactly the city where the three characters live).

In Leo's case, the most pregnant degradation is visible: from assertive as he was inside the group, he becomes manipulative and violent in America; he traffics marijuana and later cocaine and forces Cristina to become an actress in adult films, being aware all the time of the trauma she lived when the three of them were caught and assaulted by soldiers. Finally, as a final proof of his degradation, Leo empties their common account, where they had saved some thousands of dollars; he leaves Cristina, who had made plans for a common future, and therefore determines her to take her own life. Marius can do nothing but witness all these events powerlessly, having no right to say anything from his inferior, dependant, powerless position before Leo. Marius also finds Cristina dead and arranges her funeral ceremony, and this episode probably represents the final stage of his growing up, the moment when he becomes not only an adult, but a totally independent one. The story of his adaptation to the American life is over too because, after Cristina's death, the last chapter of the story worth telling to Paulică (the adventure of the Great Trial and the American adventure are actually narrated from Marius's perspective), the main character becomes a prosperous business man and returns to Romania ten years later. He does not say anything about these years, saying just that he managed to buy the much-dreamed car and a house, and that he succeeded to take his mother with him in the USA. The American dream, embodied according to Le Pendu exactly by the immigrants who arrive in the United States with an enormous desire to survive, seems to be possible only for Marius, but with the price of losing his own identity, and especially with that

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<sup>8</sup> Radu Pavel Gheo, p. 262.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

of losing Cristina. The moment of the return to Romania after fifteen years since departure demonstrates that, in *Good Night, Children!*, success stories, which may be encountered in other novels concerned with immigration, are not possible here.

Ironically, it is the one who remained at home, Paulică (who becomes the professor and writer Paul Găitan) who realizes that Marius somehow remained suspended between worlds:

And Paul suddenly realized what prevented him from vibrating along with his friend, and from letting himself caught in his story. He understood the reason why they didn't manage to get along: even if he lived his life far away, in Los Angeles, or wherever he said he lived now, Marius still lived there and then, in the Teicova of their childhood and of their teenage years. Even the Red Corvette had its origin there, in the dreams of those years<sup>10</sup>

If he had taken his conclusions further, Paul could have seen that the road taken by someone who chooses to leave Beyond is not much different from the one towards the world without desire, the world of the dead: once departed, one can never come back and can never choose to be what one once was. Not truly. At least, this seems to be the idea with which Radu Pavel Gheo infuses the end of the book and especially the meaning of its ending. Although Marius thinks that his return home is only temporary, he misses his departure when he decides to visit, on his way back to America, Orșova and, more importantly, Teicova. He does not manage to reach the first and only place truly paradise-like for him because he has a heart attack on the railway while driving his Corvette. This is Marius's own way of failing; because of the fact that he always lies between worlds, he does not entirely leave, nor does he entirely arrive anywhere, his identity is a permanent oscillation between centre and margin, the two modifying constantly as well. The dialectics centre-periphery reveals its significance in this way, not only to Marius's character, but to hundreds of thousands of immigrants, whose identity is suspended; it becomes ambiguous once they leave their native space.

Radu Pavel Gheo's novel is not unique; it becomes evident there is a tradition of this type of novel which has in its centre the image of the immigrant and his problems. Another useful example is Rose Tremain's *The Road Home*, which received the Orange Prize in 2008, a novel which presents the success story of an Eastern-European immigrant who comes from an unnamed territory. Returning to the Romanian cultural space, it is clear that such an analysis, subsumed to this particular type of enterprise specific to cultural studies, is beneficial for a better description and understanding of recent history and the questions it implies.

## References

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<sup>10</sup> Radu Pavel Gheo, *Noapte bună, copii!* (Iași: Editura Polirom), pp. 402-403.