EXPLORING DEPRESSIVE REALISM IN "CÂT DE APROAPE SUNT PLOILE RECI" BY BOGDAN COȘA

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Abstract: The following paper centers itself on depressive realism, rooted in psychological and psychoanalytic studies, which presents as a pessimistic worldview where life is seen as inherently negative. This perspective is often characterized by feelings of emptiness, nihilism, and a general sense of despair. Bogdan Coșa's " Cât de aproape sunt ploile reci " reflects the trend of depressive realism in contemporary Romanian literature. Through bleak depictions of rural life, the novel explores characters grappling with trauma, isolation, and societal pressures. The novel's pessimistic tone and focus on the negative aspects of human existence align with the characteristics of depressive realism.

Keywords: depressive realism, Romanian Literature, depression, alienation, contemporary literature

„After the miserable realism of the 1990s, structured by a victim-centric sociology (reflecting the perspective of the marginalized), a trend among prose writers in the latter part of the 2000s and 2010s can be noted, as they aspired to give their characters more urban-sophisticated professions,"[1] Mihai Iovănel defines in *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature 2000-2020* the new wave of millennial prose.

Romanian realism was a literary and artistic movement that emerged in the 19th century as a reaction to Romanticism. Influenced by European realism, particularly French and Russian, it focused on faithfully reflecting everyday problems and Romanian society. Some representative characteristics of the realist current are verisimilitude, the concern with truth presented in the fictional world based on strong, historical categories and principles. Truth can be proven, so we speak of an absolute truth. The world prevails, and the individual is subordinated. These elements rely on a model of causality, a cause-and-effect relationship. Attention to detail builds an exact image of things, characters, and situations. The characters are complex and well-drawn, representing real people with virtues and flaws, influenced by their social and economic environment. Romanian realism also includes a profound critique of the social, economic, and political problems of the time, such as equality, poverty, and corruption. Realist writers seek to present reality objectively and impartially, without idealization or exaggeration.

The concept of depressive realism emerged and is predominantly used in psychological and psychoanalytic studies, determining the permanently altered perspective of the individual concerning the reality they experience. More specifically, it represents a way of observing the world through a permanently pessimistic lens, exploring the negative events and influences around them. Depressive realism does not deny that life includes or sometimes seems to include positive values, but it is based on the assertion that life is generally more negative than positive. [2]

A broad definition of depressive realism, provided by Colin Feltham in his work *Depressive Realism: Interdisciplinary Perspective*, concludes that it represents a vision of human existence as essentially negative. To clarify this aspect, depressive realists view the "world" (in its entirety) as entirely negative, a burdensome absurdity, while some limit the

[1] Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2021, p. 290.
[2] Colin Feltham, *Depressive Realism. Interdisciplinary perspective*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 3.

negativity to human experience or certain aspects of humanity's ability to feel life. Depressive realism, transposed from psychology to philosophy, assumes that the overall view of the world is predominantly negative, with every element interpreted as such.[3]

Some synonyms reflecting the states of depressive realism include absurdism, anthropathology, anti-humanism, cynicism, depression, disappointment, emptiness, existential anxiety and depression, futility, meaninglessness, melancholy, misanthropy, miserabilism, nihilism, radical skepticism, rejection, tragedy, and tragicomedy. Feltham introduces philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Gautama Buddha, Thomas Hardy, Sigmund Freud, Giacomo Leopardi, Samuel Beckett, Thomas Ligotti, E.M. Cioran, and Michel Houellebecq [4]as promising representatives of this genre of realism.

The assumption I start with is that the social environment we find ourselves in has left its mark on the literature I follow, leading authors to approach a writing style closely tied to the self, subjective, and autofictional. The embedding of cynical elements or traumatic events in the text offers the opportunity for a new direction in literary studies, with the potential to create a network of similarities between them—a relatively underexplored interdisciplinary aspect.

The elements I propose to analyze concern the traumatizing and impactful experiences in the biography and events of the characters. At the same time, the descriptions of external or internal spaces, viewed from the pessimist's perspective, constitute a point of interest in this hermeneutic endeavor. Possible examples at this stage include the fear Sasha feels in the countryside house, as a recollection of traumatic experiences from her childhood home, Aleksy's disdain for the apartment where he lives with his grandmother and mother, or the cold and perpetually cloudy sky in the mountain village of Bogdan Coșa's novel.

From a theoretical perspective, I propose to integrate theories offered by Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher concerning the influences of capitalism on contemporary society and its effects on the psychology and economy of the characters' worlds analyzed. Finally, throughout the analysis of the novels, I will use the intersectionality principle articulated by Patricia Hill Collins and Salma Bilge in the eponymous volume as a form that "investigates the influence of intersecting power relations on social relations in various societies and individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among others—as interconnected and mutually influencing each other."[5]

The expected conclusion after a detailed analysis of the corpus of texts is to observe and create links between contemporary society, the chosen text sample, and psychological disorders, reflecting the influence of adverse events at the level of creation or interpretation of the world from the perspective of the characters or the author in the case of autofiction. The methods and strategies I propose to use in the analysis of the novels include close reading, therapeutic writing as a method of coping with trauma and accepting the past, interpretation, inductive and deductive techniques, gender studies, transnationality, in the case of Tatiana Țîbuleac's or Sașa Zare's novels, highlighting the effects of society on the individual, and psychology studies, essential in the work's approach, exploring works focused on trauma, its effects, and ways of coping and accepting it.

The concept of depression, as a distinct mental disorder, has evolved throughout history in various forms, from ancient descriptions of sadness and melancholy to the modern understanding of clinical depression. A chronological perspective on this concept begins in Antiquity. In ancient Greece, Hippocrates described "melancholia" as a state of profound and

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 3.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 6.
[5] Patricia Hill Collins, Salma Bilge, *Intersecționalitate,* Sibiu, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, 2021, p.1.

persistent sadness, which he attributed to an imbalance of the body's "humors." Later, the concept of melancholy persisted through the Middle Ages, associated with humors and often considered to have spiritual or demonic causes. Deep sadness was often seen as either a form of divine punishment or a demonic influence.

During the Renaissance, interest in melancholy grew. Melancholy was often associated with creativity and artistic genius. Writers and philosophers, such as Robert Burton in his 1621 work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, explored the causes and treatments of this condition. Later, during the Enlightenment, rational and scientific approaches began to replace spiritual explanations for melancholy. Physicians and scholars began to study the symptoms of depression and seek physiological and psychological causes.

In the 19th century, psychiatry began to develop as a medical discipline. Physicians like Emil Kraepelin classified mental disorders and differentiated depression from other mental conditions. Kraepelin introduced the concept of "involutional melancholia," which described depression in the elderly. Sigmund Freud made a substantial contribution to understanding depression through his theory of the unconscious. In Mourning and Melancholia (1917), Freud explored the link between loss, mourning, and depression, suggesting that depression could result from internal conflicts and significant loss.

In the 20th century, specific criteria for diagnosing depression were cataloged in various specialized books, standardizing the criteria for major depressive disorder and other forms of depression. Research in neuroscience and psychology has advanced the understanding of depression.

Depression is a severe mental health condition that negatively affects an individual's perception related to feelings, thoughts, or actions. It can lead to a wide range of emotional and physical problems and decrease a person's functional capacity in both professional and personal environments.

Cât de aproape sunt ploile reci, the volume to be analyzed, was published in 2020 by Trei Publishing and represents a crucial component in shaping the characteristics of depressive realism, as I propose to analyze it.

The causes that can trigger depressive disorders can be biological. People with depression appear to have physical changes in the brain. Brain chemistry, naturally occurring neurotransmitters in the brain that affect mood, can play a role in depression. Hormones and changes in the body's hormonal balance can be involved in triggering depression. Genetics also play a significant role, as depression can be passed down in families, suggesting a genetic component.

Psychological factors such as trauma, stress, and personality greatly influence people predisposed to these disorders. Traumatic experiences in childhood, such as abuse, neglect, or the loss of a significant person, can lead to an increased risk of depression. Chronic stress or stressful life events like losing a job or divorce can contribute to this. Additionally, certain personality traits such as pessimism, low self-esteem, or a tendency toward self-criticism can predispose a person to depression.

The concept of trauma has relatively recently entered Romanian criticism and literature, with little theoretical development. There is discussion about the presence of pathology and depression, but without a separate in-depth analysis of the events or experiences leading to that state. Psychologically, trauma is defined as an event or emotion with a significant impact on its subject, altering their personality and sensitizing them to similar emotions, causing them to react differently.

Until the end of the 19th century, more precisely until Freud, methods of analyzing interiority could be summarized into three languages, as Corin Braga explains in *Psychobiographies:* Christian anthropology, where psychological complexes were typically analyzed from a multiple perspective; esoteric thinking, through sciences such as magic; and

philosophical-literary analysis. The first of these is relatively easy to understand, being probably the oldest of the three. Esoteric thinking emerged as a novelty in the 19th century due to Oriental influences. The third one emerged due to Romanticism and the philosophical movements derived from it, introducing a new type of language, namely the philosophical-literary one, as follows: "Placed at the readers' disposal, the psychological analysis perfected by writers became a powerful instrument of self-knowledge through projection into characters, through the in vitro expression that is artistic fiction."[6]

Freud is credited with founding the psychoanalysis we know today, focused on the external actions that occur throughout life, shaping your personality in adulthood, but this has metamorphosed over time. The principle is the same, but the methods of approach and analysis are different. The specific language appeared with the prose of "psychological analysis," and here Corin Braga mentions Dostoevsky and Proust as "masters" of this practice, with their works marked by detailed analyses, perhaps in some sequences biographical, in Dostoevsky's case. This type of philosophical-literary language will nevertheless remain in the shadow of scientific language due to its subjectivity.

To be able to perform a competent analysis of the relationship between the author and the text, it is necessary to insist on the complex interdependencies between individual memories and social structures. Characterizing a person as traumatized implies, as Cathy Caruth theorizes, "being possessed by an image or an event," [7] usually for a very long period, bringing with it multiple distortions of lifestyle and interaction with other people. This type of experience will also have an ethical and social component, determining two major categories of trauma: individual and collective. Individual trauma has a singular character, referring to a single person who has experienced a traumatic situation, for example, the loss of a loved one or any kind of abuse, while collective trauma is based on an event of much greater magnitude, affecting a significant mass of people, such as war or the experience of camps.

With the perspective of this novel, Bogdan Coșa revisits rural prose from the point of view of the third millennium. The author describes the world of Țara Făgărașului, a micro-society whose life unfolds exclusively within the borders of Dumbrava Fericitei, simply called Dumbrava. The locality is located in a mountainous, humid area where the main professional activities available involve working in the forest, selling in small enterprises, or being a pharmacist. The action is limited to exposing over a period of about twenty-five years, with large time ellipses, the lives of the two main families: the Toader family, consisting of the elderly Aurelia and her five children, Dana, Dumitrița, Nuțu, Nicolae, and Doina, plus the extended family, grandchildren Petru and Mădălina, and in-laws.

Structurally, the novel consists of two main parts: the first half of the novel, with mostly fluid action, focuses on Petru's childhood, Aurelia's grandson and Nae's son, who prefers the life and holidays in Dumbrava over participating in his parents' dysfunctions. These two, Nae and Sanda, went through several episodes of quarrels and separations that also left their mark on the child. In a passage from a phone conversation with his father in adulthood, Nae reproaches his former wife for imprinting a negative image of him on the child, instilling fear of his father. After the divorce, he chooses to return to his parental home, but what should have been a happy family reunion proves to be an even greater decline for Nae. During his stay at home, he begins to adopt his family's habits, of neglect, self-abandonment, lack of motivation, alcoholism alongside his brother, etc.

Each character faces their own anxieties and repressed feelings. For example, Nuțu, the son who stayed in the village, works in the forest, at the sawmill, dissatisfied with his

[6] Corin Braga, *Psihobiografii,* Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011, p.9.
[7] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* Ed. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p.5.

situation. Although alcoholism existed in the family, Nuțu's drinking worsened due to the cold encountered at work, and the management chose to ignore this problem due to his performance.

Nuțu succumbs to alcoholism, which causes him to lose both his wife, who throws him out of the house, and his son, whom he abandons at an early age, leaving him to be raised by Casiana and her mother. He has a few episodes of abstinence that vary, the most significant being represented by the accident he suffered during a work shift, resulting in a long recovery period and withdrawal episodes: "Nuțu had great pain, as if after surgery. He ached where his father had ached and was cared for by the same three women. He rarely managed to sleep more than an hour; he had time to think in detail about everything, about his father, Ionică, and his childhood, about himself and his childhood, about Ionel and the future." [8]After this episode of abstinence, we are faced with the depressing scene where, while waiting for the bus to return to Casiana with noble intentions, he sabotages any chance of redemption: "and Nuțu remembered Casiana's thin body, her white, boyish chest, and ordered another brandy."[9] In the end, he ends up moving into the dog's kennel.

Dana's narrative thread is flatter, without major fluctuations. Not wanting to marry, she works as a salesperson at the local grocery store, spending the rest of her time with her daughter Mădălina and her family. The only times she leaves the village are for supply trips to the store, alongside her boss: "On the way back, he would grope her thighs; he would stop at a disused gas station and masturbate looking at her, when she sat motionless, red to the tips of her ears, on the high seat of the van, and sometimes he would ask her to do it, but nothing more ever happened." [10]This sequence denotes the power position that the aggressor is aware of and the fatality that losing her job would have on Dana.

Dumitrița, after a toxic relationship and her family's attitude of accepting their precarious fate, chooses to cut all ties with them, emigrating permanently to Italy, no longer interested in any event in Dumbrava, including her mother's death, because "they hadn't heard anything from her for a few years, but except for the agitated days of some crime that happened in Italy or the disappearance of a Romanian woman, no one thought that the situation was not normal."[11]

The only characters who have the possibility of breaking this family pattern are Petru, Mădălina, and Ionel. Petru translates movie subtitles and occasionally works as a translator. He spends his life squeezed into an apartment with two other roommates, unable to buy or pay full rent. This picture is relevant and a stress factor for many young adults of the 21st century.

Mădălina, on the other hand, after finishing her studies, chose to pursue a career as a nurse in England. Her path, however, is different from that of her aunt. She does not intend to forget Dumbrava. Instead, she makes efforts to maintain a better relationship with her mother than the rest of the family. Personally, I believe that Mădălina is the only character saved from self-destruction in Bogdan Coșa's novel. Although she witnessed the degrading behavior of her family throughout her life in the village, which despised her at first for her illegitimate origin ("May the worms eat her"[12]), she was not influenced, partly due to Petru, by the hereditary toxicity. It is also she who will finally fulfill Dana's dream of escaping from Dumbrava once Aurelia dies, urging her to follow her to England: "Mădălina told her to call

[8] Bogdan Coșa, *Cât de aproape sunt ploile reci*, București, Editura TREI, 2022, p.135.
[9] *Ibidem*, p.149.
[10] *Ibidem*, p.155.
[11] *Ibidem*, p.200.
[12] *Ibidem*, p.208.

112 and to come to England, that she would buy her ticket right then. To wait for the ambulance, see him taken, pack her bags, and catch the first minibus to the city."[13]

In the last chapter of the novel, we are presented with Ionel's fate, abandoned by the father he did not meet again until adulthood. Uninfluenced by his paternal family, he became a dentist: "When he saw him, he was convinced that the man, with the cap perched on top of his head, with the edges folded, sitting like a forester's hat, had once been his father."[14]

When reading the novel, I engaged in a constant comparative process, recalling the family odyssey created by Marta Petreu in "Acasă, pe Cîmpia Armaghedonului." Similarly, the atmosphere Coșa constructs here is just as oppressive, an atmosphere in which the reader lives in a state of permanent anxiety conferred by both the emotional repression of the characters.

The first thirty to forty pages of the novel might seem challenging for any reader precisely because of this proximity to Marta Petreu. The web of characters and family ties represents a difficult process for the reader. Moreover, the ample descriptive passages efficiently outline this X-ray of the third-millennium village, frozen in time by the cold rains and the transition period from communism to capitalism, which was in no way favorable to it: "(which pushes them to perform the same hard, poorly paid jobs or to leave for Italy to do menial work) and their own problems (emotional inhibition, hidden depression, difficulty in communicating - all drowned in alcohol, the only antidepressant available in the masculine world of Coșa's novel: while women treat their loneliness and anxieties through work, men inherit alcoholism from generation to generation)."[15] The village itself becomes a character in this rapid decline of the village, of migration to the city or abroad.

A representative episode of the Toader family's dynamics is Aurelia's death. This is the trigger for the complete disintegration of the family. With her death, the ties between family members wither, each choosing to live in solitude with their own problems, burdens, and anxieties.

From the perspective of spatial imagery, the descriptions are very detailed, and the author uses this perpetually cold, rainy atmosphere, with too few sunny days even during the summer, to amplify the characters' turbulent inner state. The atmosphere is consistently pessimistic, even in moments of happiness. "The puddle in front of him grew murky, driving the sky away. On one side, over Margareta's house, a faint imitation of a rainbow had indeed appeared, dull against a leaden background. Nae had spat into the mirror of the water."[16]

Over events such as weddings, baptisms, or family gatherings, a cloud of negativity looms, from which immediate or future misfortunes pour out. In birth, one sees a financial gap; in marriage, the imminent immediacy of divorce. Thus, the external environment, through its at times naturalistic descriptions, reflects the emotional darkness of the characters' souls.

In this way, the volume analyzed in the preceding pages highlights the alienation of the individual through the self-isolation of its characters and their dysfunctional family relationships, while also utilizing the fitting natural setting.

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