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TWO SAMPLES OF QUEER ECOLOGY IN ROMANIAN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE. FROM SILENCED WITNESS TO REDEEMER

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Abstract: This paper will analyse the intersection between two components (queer and ecological) by reviewing two texts, both describing themselves as “ecological queer,” therefore, settling a new paradigm in Romanian literature, aiming beyond the aesthetic sphere. The examples are *Copiii ecosistemului* (The Children of the Ecosystem) by Ilinca Mănescu and the anthology *Luminișuri* (Glades), published under Cenaclul X. The main stake of the thesis is to identify and detail the similarities between the two ideologies, as a new phenomenon in Romanian literature and anthropology (as these critical lenses have been used before in world literature). A central convergence comes as a result of capitalism and colonialism, expanding the violence in human and non-human forms. To simplify, the queer community and nature are victims of the same system, which explains the constellation between the two. The interdisciplinary conjunction “ecoqueer” stands against heteronormativity and embraces the diversity of nature, and this article will focus on its development in the Romanian literary space, through the two examples, concerning both poetry and prose. Furthermore, this literary form has been exported from the West to the East-Central European periphery, highlighting Romanian literature’s status as a semi-peripheral literature, but on the other hand benefiting from this import and broadening the progressive ideology in the cultural space.

Keywords: ecological, queer, Romanian contemporary literature, poetry, prose

The constellation between marginals (nature, queer, women)

The interdisciplinary concept of ‘queer ecology’ rejects the anthropocentric view by providing a voice both to nature and to marginalised groups who were victims of the emergence of capitalism and its intrinsic purpose to destroy human and non-human animals to produce wealth, responding to violence either with violence (in a radical “way of being”) or by deconstructing it in subversive manners. Firstly, this theory dismantles the image of nature existing only as man sees it, neglecting its right to represent itself, similar to the case of queer individuals being stereotyped. Queer theory deconstructs the view that “all homosexuals share a common core of experience” (Richardson 3), referring, more specifically, to any aspect that challenges the convention, everything that is viewed as *uncanny* by society. Furthermore, queer ecology stems from ecofeminism, based on an analogy, associating the patriarchy with the manner in which humans dominate nature, imposing their own expectations on a constantly fluctuant nature:

The development of plow agriculture and human slavery very likely took this connection of woman and nature another step. Both are seen as a realm, not on which men depend, but which men dominate and rule over with coercive power (Adams 15).

The adjective derived from it, “natural,” provides its own reductive perspective, referring mostly to the idea of heteronormativity. Queer ecology, as the queer phenomenon in its singularity, resists definitions (in Judith Butler’s perspective), but it surely includes everything outside cisnormativity and it keeps incorporating new nuances. Therefore, its components can’t be restricted to stagnant entities, but queer ecology is rather about the notion of “performativity” (Butler xiv), keeping up with the “naturalisation” of human and non-human animals. Diving further, one of the first constellations between queer and ecology is theorised by Catriona Sandilands as originating in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, including its inherent flaws:

Although Foucault rightly notes the tenuous early connections between the two discourses, the establishment of sex as a matter of biopolitical truth could not help but be connected to ideas of nature and especially to racialized, sexualized, and other anxieties over hygiene and degeneracy (Sandilands).

The only possible solution is providing justice, offering a voice to the marginals. The main issue here resides in the discrepancy between the ways of being “ecologically minded.” Yves Citton divides the way of taking action in “managerial ecology” and “radical (deep) ecology” (Citton 272). The first category highlights its opposition to capitalism, preserving the resources in order to economise, whereas radical ecology urges us to reconsider our relationship with nature. The texts chosen for the case study fall under the category of radical ecology, concerning, mainly, how marginals are connected and how they can access the force of the majority in order to serve their justice.

A crucial distinction between the two works lies in their respective forms of discourse. *Copiii Ecosistemului* (The Children of the Ecosystem) by Ilinca Mănescu is a prose work, whereas the anthology *Luminișuri* (Glades) by Cenaclul X, despite containing a few short prose pieces, primarily consists of poetry. An essential aspect of ecological queer thinking is the ability to represent the world. Timothy Clark explores this aspect, asserting that the ideal medium for representing the environment and its connections to both human and non-human animals is poetry. This preference is attributed to the “multiplicity, and even contradiction and indeterminacy” of poetry (Clark 59), possibly due to its subversive nuances that necessitate active reader participation, particularly in the absence of a clearly defined plot. Regarding form, prose also benefits from this phenomenon: “What the environmental challenge does achieve, however, is a continual probing of the inherited nature and limits of the novel as a form, the need for a newly urgent inventiveness” (Clark 110). Nonetheless, there are great ways to facilitate comprehension for the reader, using different subversive instruments, which will be highlighted in the analysis.

Overall, the primary concern revolves around the dehumanisation of humanity and the purported “solutions” devised to address the destruction of nature, as well as the challenges faced by women and queer societies. According to Clark, ecocriticism plays a crucial role in bringing attention to a catharsis that may be necessary for restoring balance. This perspective can be observed in texts that create a dystopian world only to subsequently deconstruct it:

In the humanities, most readings of the sources of human destructiveness will trace it to some social or cultural dysfunction – say to modes of exploitative hierarchy – often

with the implication that some more ecologically benign form of human nature exists to be restored (Clark 149).

A dystopian queer ecology

One of the main purposes of *Copiii Ecosistemului* is to highlight the anti-capitalist view of the world. Even though the society (the ecosystem) is constructed on anti-capitalist principles, it ultimately succumbs to the encroachment of capitalism. The author, masquerading the satire as a eulogy to the dystopian world named Multicellular 451, instruments the twist wittily. The number 451 might serve as a tribute to *Fahrenheit 451*, reuniting the characteristics of a dystopian novel but with the lack of values and morality. The protagonist, Nora, does not fight for any cause. The symbol of fire in the aforementioned reference can be linked with the light in *Copiii Ecosistemului*, producing katharsis by constructing a new world. Notably, in the denouement, this new world prevails. It is not governed by people or by nature but by the resulting hybrid — a new species known as the lightmen, referred to as luxes.

Irony toward human animals pervades the entire novel. The new implant, Biolux, involves injecting light through them, effectively using humans as “lab rats” this time. They are compelled to endure all the secondary effects and potential disasters, with no animal testing involved. The dominance of natural forces over humanity is evident through the invertebrates that shape the habitat (doors can only be opened by telepathically communicating with these creatures) and their attire. The ecosystem exploits the system created by humans, turning it against humanity and generating hallucinations that display advertisements for new products at every turn. Power dynamics are also subverted; time restrictions are imposed by the (eco)system, adoption is allowed only on its terms, and the choices available are limited to interactions with wild animals. The text systematically deconstructs reality, particularly in ecological aspects. In the context of adopted animals in the novel, they serve as “totems,” illustrating the “way the human mind logically works” (Levi-Strauss xi), influencing the thoughts, the anxieties, living in tandem with its human partner, revealing its personality traits. For example, the protagonist, Nora, owns a Nutria, a herbivorous rodent, illustrating her own need to stay underground and avoid any contact.

Society is segregated between the embracers of this invention, Biolux, and the activists who militate for people, accusing the ecosystem of destroying humanity (reversing again, ironically, the situation from realia, where activists militate for the ecosystem, against the people). Centred on this play of inversions, within this ecosystem, it's not the plants that reside in greenhouses, but rather the people. They wear masks to facilitate breathing. Not only human animals are affected, but even their artificial replicas — the mannequins are colonised” by corals and anemones. This phenomenon of satirising a flaw has been a common practice in Romanian post-communist literature, in order to deconstruct the same capitalist system — for example, in *Sunt o babă comunistă* (I'm an old communist hag) by Dan Lungu.

The secondary effects of the ecological implant are addressed through practices associated with the realm of magic realism. There is that mystical neighbour, Mrs. Mela, who had “shamanic inclinations, weird remedies which she provided with generosity to the Supervisors, for breaking curses, for the saleswomen from Go, for matters of the heart” (Mănescu 79).¹ Her cures always consisted of mixtures of plants, which were meant to alleviate the wounds of men inflicted by men. The implant was meant to provide uniformity, both the marginals and the “centrals” could benefit from it, yet the marginal had more to suffer from the implant's double purpose. It was meant to make the pathology visible (the depressed characters were lacking light), and it also served as a source of energy, limiting the use of “artificial” sources. The desired effect was not accomplished, creating segregation between those who were bathing in light and those who were not able to generate enough light to function. Furthermore, women were involved in sexual work in a marginalised area, paying for services with their light, in order to sustain that certain area by providing electricity. The service is accentuated to be especially detrimental to women, statistically revealing that the majority of the “lab rats” were women, either volunteering or forced by circumstances.

The queer relationship between Nora and Ilora illustrates the impossibility of such a love story to function in a conventional society. Ilora is ashamed to be seen in public with the protagonist, Nora, and their relationship develops in the novel mostly through memories. The problems encountered by the female protagonist carry a

¹ “Înclinațiile șamanice ale doamnei Mela și despre toate remediile ciudate pe care le oferea cu generozitate ba Supraveghetorilor, pentru dezlegarea blestemelor, ba vânzătoarelor de la Go, pentru probleme în dragoste.” (All translations from Romanian to English are mine, if not stated otherwise)

subtle feminist thesis — she reveals that she was a victim of rape by her own father, with the agreement of her mother. Therefore, the narration fixates on all forms of human destruction, even within their own species: “The question of environmental ethics ultimately leads back into questions of harm, potential harm, exacted by the human species on the human species, on other species, on systems of species, on landscape, atmosphere and bodies of water” (Azzarello). Making use of the values of the system, which allows euthanasia, she manages to get her revenge by using this law on her parents (if you did not visit your relatives in hospital for three months, they were automatically euthanized).

The apparent demiurgic figure is the doctor, a man who invented the light implant. His discourse is never marked; it is lost throughout the action, and he seems to be making decisions for the (eco)system. The outcome reveals that the society will no longer govern itself autonomously, as supposed in the ecosystem. Instead, it will be governed by the luxes, the first 'lab rats' in cabinet 0. Here, the satire culminates— the luxes were created to solve the emergence of capitalism, yet they ended up contributing to it, under the imperative of creating new corporations specially destined for the new race. There are also hints of critique in this dystopian world of a totalitarian system where individuals were constantly monitored through a bracelet, being prohibited from removing it.

Regarding the reception of the novel, it is considered a failure in terms of enforcing the ecological queer paradigm, due to the fact that “Mănescu doesn't manage to establish the structure of the society she is trying to create²” and “interpersonal relationships seem to have solely a performative purpose³” (Paraschiv). Even if the novel doesn't proclaim itself as “ecological queer” (the affirmation is made by the coordinator of the collection, Eli Bădică), *Copiii Ecosistemului* isn't ecological queer in intention but in realisation through the subversive critique of the abuse inflicted simultaneously on queer individuals, women, animals, and nature.

Glades – a space of reconciliation

In antithesis, the anthology *Luminișuri* (Glades) begins with a manifesto for the ecological queer phenomenon, announcing its intentions from the very beginning.

² “Mănescu nu reușește să pună la punct suprastructura societății pe care încearcă să o creeze.”

³ “Relațiile interpersonale par să aibă doar un rol performativ.”

Not only does it formulate a program, but it proclaims itself as a pioneer of queer ecology in the Romanian space. In the introduction, it focuses on both components (queer and ecological) and on the constellation between the two. They state their conventions of using the letter ‘x’ in Romanian to dissolve the idea of gender and introduce the concept of non-binary. As Clark theorised, aesthetically speaking, the anthology is full of stylistic artifices, yet the narrative character of the poems makes it easy for the reader to comprehend the environmental ethics. The phenomenon of ‘ecopoetics’ is common in this form, sustaining a thesis: “A striking feature of poetry with an environmental ethic, however, is that a lot of it seems to arise as a result of public or academic expectation, or from institutional initiatives such as commission for an anthology or a journal” (Clark 57). The anthology then proceeds with a selection of texts, poems, and a few short stories, each preceded by a brief description of the writer. In this context, the message becomes clearer, leaning more toward dissidence than subversion, explicitly opposing capitalism and the destructive impact caused by dehumanised human animals. Expressions of a strong affiliation with the movement are evident in the authors’ personal descriptions, such as “Andrei is an herbivorous mammal” (Cenaclul X 25).

The deficient ideology is often challenged through the emergence of Animal Studies, preserving the ambition of “rephrasing (contracting) the humanities and social sciences under the sign of dehumanisation” (Pick 6). The injustice towards non-human animals is consistently tied to the process of dehumanisation of human animals.

sharks kill approximately 10 people in a year
 people kill from 11000 up to 30000 sharks in an hour
 only as a so-called fishing subproduct
 millions of bodies caught aleatory in profit’s fishing net (Cenaclul X 80)⁴

The patriarchy is challenged by a form of matriarchy, using the image of mother-nature by reinterpreting it:

⁴ “rechinii omoară aproximativ 10 oameni într-un an
 oamenii omoară între 11000 până la 30000 de rechini într-o oră
 doar ca așa-zis subprodus pescăresc
 milioane de corpuri prinse aleatoriu în plasele profitului.”

since I've realised
that you, mother-nature
you're not really like a mother to me
you are (actually) a dominatrix⁵ (Cenaclul X 64)

It is crucial that the position of nature shifts from the “witness” to a “redeemer of justice.” This time, it can be used as a form of protection and reconciliation for the queer individual, surmounting the heteronormative stereotypes. Human animals need to marry each other, in the spirit of cisnormativity, they cannot align with Mother Nature and they cannot get rid of conventions: ‘we don't have a house/we'll never get married’⁶ (Cenaclul X 65), but they can unite against the perpetrator. This antagonist is personified through the collective force of consumerism, which is heavily critiqued throughout the anthology:

how are we writing about freeing all species when
corporations which
 fabricate our rice milk
clean vegan belong to the biggest distributor of
dairy products (Cenaclul X 42)⁷

Overall, the anthology *Luminișuri* provides a space for reconciliation, where the marginalised reclaim their ‘natural’ rights. Furthermore, it stands as the first militant queer ecological text in the contemporary Romanian space, aspiring to be a pioneer in the interplay between queer, feminism, anxiety, depression, and global warming. It addresses the destruction of the environment and its species, sharing a common adversary – capitalism and colonialism.

⁵ “de când am realizat
că tu, mamă natură
nu-mi ești chiar o mamă
ești (de fapt) o dominatrix.”

⁶ “n-avem o casă
nu ne vom căsători niciodată.”

⁷ “cum scriem despre eliberarea tuturor speciilor când
corporațiile care
ne fabrică laptele nostru
curat vegan de orez aparțin de cel mai mare distribuitor de
produse lactate?”

Conclusions

The prevailing neoliberal world is in a state of “mourning,” seeking reconciliation through nature. Consumerism emerges as the mutual antagonist in both literary examples. The traumatic intersection binds both queer individuals and nature under the same umbrella of abuse from which they cannot escape:

Overall, these subjectivities intertwine, and we end up being witnesses to a complex cycle of perpetuating abuse, an arrangement in which many of us are ensnared, affecting our mental health profoundly. As a queer person surviving abuse, I empathise with this perspective, prompting me to observe how women and queer individuals with traumatic histories are exposed to carrying and internalising the oppressive and/or violent pressures of the state, capitalism, and climatic destruction⁸ (Sgârcitu 2022).

Thematically, the common *topos* is the vendetta of the marginals. In order to defeat the antagonist, the marginal abandons, in both prose and poetry, the position of the witness and becomes a redeemer, providing punishment to the oppressor. This mutation instigates justice in a performative act of redefining the term “natural” and incorporating all human and non-human animals that defy it. The hybridisation between the two phenomena in the two works can be justified through this common “villain” – capitalism, focusing on the fact that the capitalist discourse is attempting to undermine both the idea of ecological and queer:

The concept of ecocentrism gets tricky, however, when we consider the related problems of altruism and self-interest. If one can argue that to protect the environment is to protect oneself, and consequently that altruism is in truth its opposite in disguise, can one also argue that ecocentrism is simply anthropocentrism for an age of environmental crisis? (Azzarello 58).

Will to power, in all its perverse naturalness, becomes an articulation of the queerness of the world in its taxonomical problematics and sexual charge. One can never know exactly what it is or how it operates. Will to power seems to answer the question of life

⁸ “În mare, aceste subiectivități se întrepătrund și ajungem să fim martore ale unui ciclu complex de perpetuare a abuzului, un angrenaj în care multe dintre noi suntem prinse în feluri care ne afectează profund sănătatea mintală. Ca persoană queer supraviețuitoare de abuz, am empatizat cu această perspectivă și m-a făcut să observ mai mult în jur felul în care femei și persoane queer cu istorii traumatice sunt mai expuse la a purta în spate și a internaliza presiunile opresive și/sau violente ale statului, ale capitalismului, ale distrugerii climatice.”

is essentially, to “get to the bottom” of things, but ironically, it exposes the chaotic complexity of all organic composition (Azzarello 11).

Sexuality and ecology merge in a social organisation, providing a voice for the marginal to overcome the capitalist hegemony: the protagonist from *Copiii Ecosistemului* regains her voice through the punishment of human animals, using the means of nature, evoking the queer component through the nature of her relationship and her position as a woman; the anthology concentrates on giving voice to the non-human animals, whereas humans, due to their misanthropy, merge with nature, evoking the ecological component.

The following ideas can be drawn from the study of these two samples of queer ecology: there is an emergence of the import from core literatures, and there is an ideological opening in the Romanian literary space that allows new forms into it. The idea of the marginals importing a marginal form of literature is also crucial to contemporary literature, and this import places Romanian literature in a wider chain, associating itself with the paradigm of World Literature through this literary form of queer ecology. The first forms of “queer literature” were embraced in poetry, while prose tended to be more conservative in the Romanian literary space. These phenomena of rejecting queer literature is theorised under the idea of “de-contemporizing” (Moraru). However, it is only through the publication of such works that the conservative canon can be surmounted. The “door” for queer prose has been opened through the great success of Adrian Schiop’s works and *Dezrădăcinare* (*Uprooting*) by Sașa Zare. However, there is a notable absence of studies concerning the ecological queer phenomenon, both in prose and poetry. Additionally, there has been limited reception from the public, materialized through literary reviews in cultural journals. The only exception is a review on *Copiii Ecosistemului* in *Echinox*. This article serves as a starting point for theorising the concept in the context of Romanian literature and underscores its importance in positioning Romanian literature within the framework of World Literature.

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