

PLAY AND ROLE-PLAY AS RESISTANCE: EXPLORING SOCIAL PHENOMENA IN GABRIELA ADAMEȘTEANU'S *WASTED MORNING*



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Abstract: *Gabriela Adameșteanu's Wasted Morning (originally published in 2003) offers a nuanced depiction of post-communist Romanian society, capturing the everyday struggles of individuals navigating socio-political transformations. While the novel primarily delves into themes of memory, identity, and social upheaval, it subtly foregrounds the role of play—humour, irony, and triviality—as forms of resistance. This paper examines the novel as a literary manifestation of social resistance through the motif of play. By analysing the characters' engagement with play and humour amidst socio-political upheavals, the study explores how Adameșteanu employs these elements as subtle acts of resistance against oppressive societal structures. Drawing on theories of social resistance and performative agency, the paper argues that Wasted Morning reveals play as a vital form of social critique and resilience.*

Key words: play, role-play, memory, survival, humour, irony

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***Wasted Morning* by Gabriela Adameșteanu: Survival and the Performance of Memory**

In *Wasted Morning*, Adameșteanu presents a post-communist Romanian society grappling with its recent history, personal trauma, and the search for meaning. The novel's protagonist Vica Delcă navigates a landscape filled with fragmented memories and societal disillusionment, engaging in a "game" of survival that involves role-playing, memory reconstruction, and moral negotiation. She is a seventy-year old Romanian woman who lives in Bucharest (but not the centre) under the Communist regime. Based on the various dates, it seems to be 1975. She is married to a useless husband. He was dashing when she married him but now he sits in front of the television and expects his wife to wait on him. They are poor, living on a meagre pension and whatever Vica can hustle from others.

The Game of Historical and Personal Memory

The novel depicts memory as a battleground where individual and collective histories intersect. Adameşteanu emphasizes that survival involves not only physical endurance but also the repeated performance of roles—be it as a victim, a survivor, or a disillusioned witness. The protagonist's internal dialogue reveals a conscious act of role-playing, where reconstructing the past is akin to playing a game of chess—every move carefully calculated to preserve a sense of self amid societal chaos.

The Performative Role-Playing in *Wasted Morning*: Navigating Memory and Survival

The "game" of survival in *Wasted Morning* is also one of moral flexibility. Characters often assume roles dictated by socio-political circumstances, echoing Judith Butler's notion that identities are performative and constructed through repeated acts (Butler, 1990). The novel suggests that survival in a post-totalitarian context demands a performative resilience—adapting roles to fit the shifting landscape of memory and moral compromise.

In Gabriela Adameşteanu's *Wasted Morning*, the motif of role-playing emerges as a central mechanism through which characters negotiate their identities amidst societal upheaval and personal trauma. The novel depicts a post-communist Romania grappling with its recent history, where individuals are compelled to assume various roles—both consciously and unconsciously—to survive emotionally, morally, and socially. This performative aspect of memory and identity aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender and social roles as enacted through repeated acts, emphasizing the fluidity and strategic nature of self-presentation.

Role-Playing as a Survival Strategy

The characters in *Wasted Morning* often engage in a kind of "role-playing" that functions as a survival tactic, allowing them to navigate the complex moral and social terrains shaped by the communist legacy. For instance, Vica's internal dialogue reveals a conscious effort to adopt different roles depending on the situation—whether as a disillusioned former activist, a cautious observer, or a resigned survivor. This multiplicity of roles is not static but fluid, echoing Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, which conceptualizes social interaction as a performance where individuals assume roles to manage impressions and maintain social order.

Goffman's (1959) theory suggests that such role-playing becomes essential in environments characterized by uncertainty and moral ambiguity, as in post-totalitarian societies. Characters in Adameşteanu's novel perform roles that enable them to conceal vulnerabilities, maintain social facades, or preserve personal dignity. For example, characters may outwardly conform to societal expectations while

internally grappling with unresolved trauma, illustrating the performative nature of their identities.

Ivona for example is a sixty-ish "good family lady", where Vica used to work for her formerly wealthy family. The woman symbolizes the wisdom that comes with lived experience. Her role offers a critique of the youthful pursuit of identity, contrasting it with the acceptance of one's life choices. She represents the culmination of various roles and the reflections they leave behind, making the theme of role-playing resonate across generations.

Margot embodies the concept of identity fluidity. As a woman navigating personal and societal expectations, she often role-plays various personas — the dutiful daughter, the disenchanting partner, and the independent woman. Her internal struggle reflects the tension between her authentic self and the roles imposed by family and society.

Niki represents the male perspective on role-playing. He is trapped in traditional masculine roles, struggling between the expectations of being a provider and his desire for intimacy and authenticity. His attempts to uphold societal norms highlight the limitations and pressures of masculine identity, showcasing how he, too, engages in role-playing.

Role-Playing and Memory Reconstruction

Furthermore, role-playing in *Wasted Morning* is intricately linked to the reconstruction of personal and collective memory. The act of remembering is portrayed as a strategic performance—characters selectively recall, suppress, or reinterpret past events to fit their current roles and emotional needs (López, 2004). This aligns with the concept of "narrative identity," where individuals craft coherent stories about themselves to sustain a sense of continuity and agency (McAdams, 1993).

For example, Vica's revisiting of childhood memories involves adopting different narrative roles—sometimes as a victim, other times as an observer—highlighting how memory itself is performative and malleable. Such role-playing acts as a form of psychological survival, allowing characters to negotiate their pasts without being overwhelmed by trauma. This aligns with Cathy Caruth's (1995) assertion that traumatic memories are often "disowned" or repressed, but can also be actively reconstructed through storytelling, which involves performative acts that define identity.

Moral Flexibility and Role Fluidity

The novel also underscores that survival often entails moral flexibility—characters adopt roles that may conflict with their moral convictions, reflecting the performative negotiation between personal integrity and societal survival. This is

evident in characters who compromise their principles to adapt to new socio-political realities, like Maya and Olga, exemplifying Butler's (1990) idea that roles are not innate but enacted, contingent upon context.

Moreover, the act of role-playing becomes a form of resistance—an assertion of agency within oppressive structures. By consciously choosing how to perform their roles, characters challenge the deterministic narratives of history and society, asserting their capacity for moral agency even in compromised circumstances.

Play and Resistance in Post-Communist Context

The post-communist transition in Romania, as depicted in Adameșteanu's *Wasted Morning*, was marked by pervasive socio-economic instability, disillusionment, and a loss of collective trust (Vasiliu, 2007). In such contexts, the act of play—humour, irony, and triviality—becomes a vital form of resistance, enabling individuals to subvert dominant narratives and cope with oppressive realities.

From this point of view, Vica plays a crucial role in framing the post-communist experience. Through observational insights, they challenge the characters' internalized roles. The reflective passages reveal a sense of disillusionment with the superficiality of post-communist life: "Freedom felt empty, like a playground with no children" (Adameșteanu, 2003: 48). This commentary underscores the struggle against the nostalgia for a stable identity and the uncertainty of newfound freedoms, highlighting resistance through critical reflection.

Lady Ioaniu offers a generational perspective on play and resistance. Her presence serves as a reminder of the past, embodying the resilience of those who lived through the regime. She engages in playful storytelling, saying, "Every tale is a thread stitching together the fabric of our lives" (Adameșteanu, 2023: 37). Through her narratives, she resists the simplification of history and calls for reflection on the complexities of their shared experiences, emphasizing the importance of memory and continuity in the face of change.

Margot's journey mirrors the struggle for self-definition in a transformed society. Her playfulness often acts as a form of resistance; she navigates personal and societal constraints through various identities. For instance, her moments of rebellion against traditional gender roles can be seen when she states, "I refuse to be just a shadow of someone else's dreams" (Adameșteanu, 2003: 156). This declaration signals her quest for autonomy in a landscape where societal expectations continue to weigh heavily on women's identities.

Ivona presents a more subdued form of resistance. Her negotiation of friendship and loyalty often reveals the constraints of post-communist realities, where individual desires are subverted by economic and social pressures. She reflects on her choices, saying, "In a world of chaos, I balance precariously on the edge of my own decisions" (Adameșteanu, 2003: 89). This acknowledgment of her struggles

highlights her subtle rebellion against a system that seeks to dictate her worth based on material success rather than personal fulfilment.

Last but not least Niki struggles with traditional masculine expectations in the post-communist landscape. His profession and relationships become a stage for performance, illustrating both participation and resistance. When he expresses frustration, saying, “I want to break free from this façade of a perfect life” (Adameşteanu, 2003: 102), it reveals his inner turmoil and desire to resist societal pressures. His play, often seen in his romantic escapades, underscores a rebellion against conventional roles that limit male vulnerability.

Play as Everyday Resistance

In post-communist societies, daily routines often become sites of subtle resistance. The act of joking, gossiping, or trivial playfulness creates spaces where individuals can momentarily escape the pressures of social control (Foucault, 1978). Adameşteanu captures this through scenes where characters engage in humorous banter, which not only alleviates tension but also undermines the legitimacy of authority figures. Such acts echo the concept of “micro-resistances,” small-scale acts that collectively challenge hegemonic power structures (Scott, 1985).

Adameşteanu depicts characters engaging in trivial acts—gossiping, joking, or engaging in petty disputes—as acts of resistance. For instance, during a tense family gathering the characters indulge in humorous teasing about their neighbours’ misfortunes, which acts as a covert critique of social hypocrisy (Adameşteanu, 2003: 147). These moments of levity serve to reinforce social bonds and create spaces where resistance is enacted through shared laughter, subtly undermining the oppressive silence imposed by the societal upheaval.

Performative Agency and Social Commentary

Furthermore, the performative nature of play allows characters to perform social commentary covertly. The playful exaggeration or parody of societal flaws becomes a form of “performative resistance,” effectively critiquing political and social injustices without direct confrontation (Butler, 1990). This performative resistance is particularly evident in scenes where characters mimic or parody authority figures, thus exposing their absurdity and fragility.

A notable example occurs when the protagonist mimics and parodies the superficial politeness of bureaucrats, exaggerating their mannerisms to expose their absurdity. In one scene, she imitates an official’s stiff speech, turning it into a parody that highlights the disconnection between appearance and reality (Adameşteanu, 2003: 115). This performative act acts as a covert critique, exposing the fragility and pretentiousness of authority figures, and exemplifies how humour becomes a form of performative resistance.

Playful Subversion of Social Norms

In *Wasted Morning*, the use of humour and play disrupts the oppressive social norms imposed by the communist regime and its aftermath. The characters' engagement with trivial pursuits—such as gossiping or joking—becomes a form of everyday resistance. As noted by Foucault (1978), minor acts of rebellion can undermine power structures; Adameşteanu's characters exemplify this through their covert humour.

Play as Personal and Social Resilience

Furthermore, the novel illustrates how play fosters resilience—allowing characters to cope with the chaos of societal change. The recurring motif of shared laughter among friends signifies collective resilience and solidarity (Klein, 2018). This aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) notion of carnival laughter as a form of social levity that challenges hierarchical authority.

Humour and Irony as Subversive Instruments

Humour has historically served as a covert form of resistance against oppressive regimes (Bauman, 1990). Under authoritarian rule, overt dissent was often dangerous; thus, humour and irony provided safer avenues for critique (Miller, 2012). Adameşteanu's characters frequently employ sardonic remarks and ironic storytelling, which serve as coded language challenging authority figures and societal norms (Adameşteanu, 2003: 85). For instance, a character's dismissive joke about bureaucratic inefficiency functions as a subtle critique of the state's failings, circulating beneath the surface of everyday conversation.

In *Wasted Morning*, Adameşteanu employs humour and irony as covert tools to critique authority and societal absurdities. For example, in a scene where characters discuss bureaucratic inefficiencies, the protagonist sarcastically remarks, "The system is so efficient that it manages to waste everyone's time" (Adameşteanu, 2003: 102). This biting irony undercuts the legitimacy of state institutions, subtly resisting their authority. Similarly, the characters' playful exaggerations about their hardships—such as joking about the scarcity of basic goods—serve to normalize and mock the oppressive realities they face, turning despair into a form of communal satire.

Play as Psychological Buffer and Symbol of Solidarity against Societal Collapse

Throughout the novel, shared laughter among characters signifies resilience and collective endurance. For example, characters often exchange humorous anecdotes about their economic struggles, transforming personal hardship into

shared comedy (Adameşteanu, 2003: 189). This communal humour fosters solidarity, helping characters cope with the disillusionment and social disintegration around them. Such acts of trivial play serve as psychological buffers, allowing individuals to resist the oppressive weight of societal collapse.

Finally, the literature suggests that play functions as a psychological buffer against societal collapse. As social institutions falter, humour and trivial pursuits serve as coping mechanisms, fostering resilience (Klein, 2018). In *Wasted Morning*, shared laughter among characters symbolizes solidarity and collective endurance amidst chaos, illustrating how play sustains social bonds in times of crisis.

Conclusion

In *Wasted Morning*, Gabriela Adameşteanu demonstrates that humour, irony, and trivial play are vital forms of social resistance in post-communist Romania. Through subtle acts of parody and shared laughter, characters challenge oppressive authority, forge social bonds, and sustain resilience amidst societal upheaval. This portrayal underscores the power of play as a form of everyday resistance that persists even in times of profound social crisis.

The author also depicts role-playing as a vital performative act that underpins memory and survival. Characters navigate their fractured histories and uncertain futures by adopting multiple, fluid roles—acting as victims, witnesses, or survivors—depending on the demands of the moment. This performative process underscores the centrality of agency and strategy in the formation of identity within post-totalitarian contexts. As Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990) have articulated, roles are enacted through repeated performances; in Adameşteanu's narrative, this enactment becomes a crucial survival mechanism—one that sustains psychological resilience amid societal collapse.

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