Дистопии и дигитален свят

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Cultural code of the non-human in Russian dystopias of the early twenty-first century

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Abstract: This article explores the cultural code of non-human entities within Russian dystopian literature from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century, with a primary focus on the representation of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain in Olga Slavnikova's novel *2017*. The study employs ecocriticism and Boris Uspensky's typology of points of view to analyze the ideological nuances surrounding non-human characters. It aims to unravel how Russian literature engages with the new method of ecocriticism, demonstrating unique ecocultural characteristics and offering alternative viewpoints that challenge prevailing anthropocentric perspectives. By merging Uspensky's method with ecocritical analysis, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between human and non-human elements in the narrative, enriching our comprehension of the ecocultural dimensions within Russian dystopian literature.

Keywords: Anthropocene, point of view, ecocriticism, dystopia, Mistress of the Copper Mountain, Russian literature, gothic

Резюме: В данной статье исследуется культурный код нечеловеческих сущностей в русской антиутопии начала XXI века, с основным акцентом на представлении образа Хозяйки Медной горы в романе Ольги Славниковой "2017". Исследование использует метод экокритики и типологию точек зрения Бориса Успенского для анализа идеологических нюансов, окружающих нечеловеческих персонажей. Цель заключается в раскрытии того, как русская литература взаимодействует с новым методом экокритики, демонстрируя уникальные экокультурные характеристики и предлагая альтернативные точки зрения, которые вызывают сомнения в доминирующих антропоцентрических перспективах. Слияние метода Успенского с экокритическим анализом способствует более глубокому пониманию сложных взаимоотношений между человеческими и нечеловеческими элементами в повествовании, обогащая наше понимание экокультурных измерений в русской антиутопии.

Ключевые слова: Антропоцен, точка зрения, экокритика, антиутопия, Хозяйка Медной горы, русская литература, готика

Introduction

The world has changed radically in the last two centuries due to human evolution, industrialization, and the implementation of information technologies in all spheres of life. Two striking examples of the negative human impact on the environment are the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 and the explosion at the Kahovka reservoir in 2023. The Chernobyl explosion resulted in the death of workers at the nuclear reactor, acid rain, and the establishment of the so-called exclusion zone in Pripyat, Ukraine. The Kahovka incident led to colossal losses, civilian casualties, and the destruction of biomass. These events confirmed the fears of scientists and the predictions of science fiction writers regarding the detrimental human impact on the state of the world.

The reason for human intervention in geological layers and its impact on the surrounding nature has been linked to an egocentric perception called anthropocentrism. Russian folklorist Svetlana Tolstaya (2017) defines the term "anthropocentrism" as the humanization of all things: humans look at the world subjectively from their own position and consider themselves as a measure or code for understanding the world. Timothy Clark writes that anthropocentrism "takes the human as the center or norm"; an "anthropocentric" view of nature exists only in relation to humans (Clark 2011: 3). Bryan L. Moore argues that, contrary to anthropocentrism, there exist ecocentrism or biocentrism, aiming to place "intrinsic value on all forms of life" (Moore 2017: 6). Yet, viewed in light of Clark's account of anthropocentrism, "biocentric" thought also develops with reference to human beings, and hence, it should also be considered "anthropocentric".

The Anthropocene is a term used to describe a proposed epoch marked by the significant impact of human activities on Earth's geology and ecology. In 1922, Russian, Ukrainian, and Soviet geologist Vladimir Vernadsky introduced the concept of the "noosphere", signifying a radical change in historical processes. According to Vernadsky, the entire biosphere undergoes restructuring in the interests of humans, making these the most influential geological force (Vernadsky 1989: 148-149).

In 2000, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and botanist Eugene F. Stoermer declared the conclusion of the Holocene epoch. They termed the emerging geological epoch "Anthropocene" due to the profound influence of human activity on Earth, encompassing the atmosphere and establishing humanity's centrality to the world's geology and ecology (Crutzen, Stoermer, 2000: 17-18). Subsequently, the Anthropocene Working Group was established with the objective of officially recognizing the Anthropocene as a new epoch,

considering that humanity currently resides within the Meghalayan Age of the Holocene Epoch.

Zalasiewizc, Waters, Williams, and Summerhayes (2019) acknowledge the significance of collaborative studies on the Anthropocene involving sciences, the humanities, art, and society. Therefore, the introduction of the new term and a conspicuous negative human impact, such as carbon emissions, sparked discussions across the humanities and social sciences. Natural scientists argue that social sciences play a pivotal role in redefining environmental studies and aim to "rethink the environment–humanity relationship" (Pallson *et al.* 2012: 10).

The problems in the environment find resonance both among writers and researchers. Typically, scholars employ the method of ecocriticism, which Cheryl Glotfelty explained in 1996 as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". This entails a reassessment of nature as a category and an exploration of literary-ecological connections in world literature. Scholars of ecocriticism incorporate not only nature but "the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body" into their research (Glotfelty 1996: 23).

Russian Literature and Ecocriticism

The exploration of Russian literature as a case study holds significant interest due to the uncontrolled Soviet past, which resulted in immense catastrophes and adverse consequences. The construction of military and industrial plants, along with the extraction of natural resources, led to severe chemical pollution. A notable focus for ecocritical work is the Ural region of Russia, recognized as one of the most polluted areas, with residents suffering from higher cancer rates compared to other Russian regions.

Situated between the Eastern European and Western Siberian plains, the Ural region is mostly occupied by the Ural Mountains, with a small part extending into Kazakhstan. The Ural River flows through the region, eventually reaching the drying Caspian Sea. The Caspian region requires separate environmental scrutiny. Anthropogenic pollution of the Ural River has been critical, resulting in its drying and rendering it unsuitable for use. Environmental monitoring indicates that "in the lower reaches of the Ural River, the content of readily oxidizable organic compounds ranges from 3.2 mg/dm³ (winter) to 7.36 mg/dm³ (autumn). The content of boron exceeds the maximum permissible concentration 1-3 times" (Tulemisova *et al.* 2017: 18). The degradation of the Urals' ecosystem causes harm to the water bodies of the Ural-Caspian basin.

The development of factories in the Urals originated with peasants in the seventeenth century. The residents of Rudnaya Sloboda engaged in ore mining and iron smelting using small furnaces. Preobrazhensky observes that the first state-owned plant commenced its operation in 1630 on the Nice River, sustained by the forced labor of peasant families. The seventeenth century witnessed an ongoing struggle among the Ural peasantry against exploitation. The peak of metallurgy in the Urals took place in the eighteenth century, with Russian metal becoming a crucial "raw material for equipping English industry" (Preobrazhensky 1989: 259). Nonetheless, the depletion of mine deposits necessitated the continual discovery of new ones.

In the nineteenth century, alongside ore, gold and salt extraction became prominent in the Ural region. During the post-reform period, following the abolition of serfdom as from 1861, there was a significant expansion of arable land in the Perm region, marked by the clearing of forests. At the dawn of the twentieth century, industrial development declined, but with the outbreak of the First World War and later the Second, the Urals evolved into the primary center of the Soviet Union's military industry. Post-war, the region became a major producer of uranium, which had a detrimental effect on the environment of the region overall.

The Ural geographical space became particularly relevant for ecological literary research following the release of Olga Slavnikova's novel *2017*, which narrates the story of two treasure hunters in the Ural Mountains from Yekaterinburg and their encounter with the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, a character protecting natural wealth. Decard situates Slavnikova's *2017* within environmental humanities and reads it as an "irrealist fiction" with "ecogothic motifs" (Decard 2015: 289). The scholar notes that the origin of the appearance of the image of the Stone girl lies in denouncing the Soviet regime of violence, radiation, and chemical pollution and predicts future environmental crises.

Lipovetsky and Etkind argue that contemporary Russian literature continues Solzhenitsyn's tradition of magical historicism (Etkind 2010: 11). The reason for such historicism, in the opinion of scholars, is post-Soviet trauma and mourning, and Etkind reads post-Soviet authors as "vehicles of memory" (Etkind 2010: 11). The authors emphasize the special internal colonial role of "Russian Beauty," transforming it into a monstrous entity. For example, they describe the Mistress of the Copper Mountain as "the most impressive image of the grisly in Soviet culture" (Etkind, Lipovetsky 2010: 21).

This article aims to explore the non-human character of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain in Slavnikova's novel *2017* as having a dual meaning of protector of the natural treasure and a cyborg because it represents not only the uncanny Soviet past but it appeals to

legends of indigenous people. Below, I will explain how Russian literature engages with the new method of ecocriticism and demonstrates its unique ecocultural characteristics, applying Boris Uspensky's approach to the point of view. The Uspensky's method allows one to see not only the awful, gothic, and magical in the character of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain but as also the protective and fair.

Boris Uspensky primarily explores the typology of compositional possibilities, and in my research, I extend this concept within the framework of ecocriticism. I will examine various perspectives, emphasizing two non-human entities and the author's viewpoints regarding them. This approach aligns with Donna Haraway's concept of the essential blurring of boundaries between humanity and nature, recognizing both as crucial centers of the Universe.

Boris Uspensky identifies four types of points of view: ideological (or evaluative), phraseological, special-temporal, and psychological. According to the scholar, the ideological point of view is the level where the author unveils their general system of an ideological worldview. In contrast to Bakhtin's formal method, relying on the ideological level requires the reader to employ serendipity, but it also opens the door to the possibility of "polyphony" (Simpson 1993). The ideological difference becomes apparent when the hero assesses the surrounding reality. Through this distinction, the reader can perceive the uniqueness of the cultural code of the narrative. The ideological level enables us to comprehend the writer's stance toward ecology and scrutinize boundaries. To gain insight into cultural dynamics, it is essential to turn to Lotman's *Semiotics of Culture*, which explicates the process of cultural dynamics. Lotman introduces the concept of center and periphery within the semiosphere, defining the periphery as more dynamic and possessing a greater potential for development.

The second type of point of view, according to Uspensky, is phraseological, where the author uses diverse language to describe different characters. It is at this level that shifts in the author's perspective become evident. Wendy Steiner (1976), in her analysis and comparison of Uspensky's work with American scholars like Henry James, highlights a significant difference in their approaches to analysis. She notes that Anglo-Americans almost never examine the technical issues behind categories like reality, mimesis, and truth, but Uspensky, in her opinion, ignores the effects of point of view in relation to the cognitive roles of the reader (realism, surrealism, symbolism.

The third level, according to Uspensky, is spatio-temporal, which he defines as the constructional perspective of narrative. This can be broadly understood as a system for conveying the depicted three- or four-dimensional space through artistic techniques within the

art form. The author's position in relation to ecology is also evident through the spatio-temporal characteristics.

Russian scholar Bakhtin explains the category of time and space as part of the chronotope, where, in his view, time holds a more conceptual meaning. However, modern literary scholars argue about the equality of time and space or claim that space plays a decisive role in meaning. Paul Smethurst (2000) contends that Bakhtin's essay *Forms of Time and Chronotope* is not relevant in postmodern literature, asserting that the reading of time is not the dominant principle in postmodernism. A significant contribution to this discourse comes from the study of German literary critic Timo Müller (2016), who explores the categories of space and time as a method of ecocriticism. He considers Bakhtin's concept of chronotope particularly useful to the ecocritical agenda when combined with Zapf's ideology of cultural ecology.

The fourth plane is the psychological one, which is made manifest through objective and subjective perception and transmission of events. This type of point view is the most researched, especially in American linguistic, psychology and literary theory. According to Simpson the psychological point of view refers to the ways in which "narrative events are mediated through the consciousness of the 'teller' of the story" (Simpson 1993: 11).

The non-human in Slavnikova's *2017*

The novel I have chosen for analysis is peripheral and suitable for interdisciplinary examination. It addresses the environmental problem of water and land pollution by chemicals. Slavnikova incorporates specific elements from the Russian cultural code by using the folklore image of the protector of nature from Slavic mythology – the Mistress of the Copper Mountain. This character is an ambivalent mountain spirit that assists people working in mines but also causes harm, even death, to miners. According to Elena Levkieyvskaya, "spirits keep order at the mine, show people places with rich deposits of ores, and arrange blockages and deaths of miners in the mines" (Levkievskaya 1995: 248).

The origin of the legend of the Stone Maiden is rooted in Russian folklore about creatures inhabiting the Urals before the region was conquered by Russians. Tales of peculiar individuals "covered with wool" were crafted by Russians and brought to the Ural region in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Preobrazhensky suggests that the creation of legends about an old woman, the wealth of the Urals, and stories of miracles occurred after the Russians discovered numerous traces of disappeared tribes (Preobrazhensky 1989: 240, 241).

Legends about the Ural Mountains were also present among the Mordovian people, who referred to the highest peak of the Urals as "Denezhny Kamen". According to their beliefs, God exiled Shaitan to a dark fortress. Mishanin notes that the name of the Mountain was "Denezhny Kamen" because those who gave their soul to Shaitan supposedly received a significant amount of money (Mishanin 2020: 241).

In Slavonic folklore, the mountain "is the place of evil spirits". Accordingly, Serbian and Bulgarian folklore depicts *vily* living in the mountains. Polans refer to them as forest mermaids protecting mountain herbs, and Banats call the spirit the Planina Mayka – mountain woman (Levkievskaya 1995: 520). Bazhov uses in his *skazah* the image of the mountain woman and the Mistress of the Copper Mountain. Slavnikova unites Bazhov's character of the Stone Maiden with a historical image, both sinister and protective, as the author alludes to the plot of the disappearance of the main character, who leaves her home empty. There is a parallel between Russians coming to the Urals and the discovery of the dwellings of the indigenous population being empty.

In this context, Etkind's and Lipovetsky's assertion regarding the historicism of modern Russian texts is entirely justified. Deckard's Gothic description is also mirrored in the novel through the ominous atmosphere in the mountains and the dual, incomprehensible image of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain. However, it is sensible to acknowledge not only the magical historicism or the Gothic but also the fact that Slavnikova's novel is a hybrid dystopia, embodying the main pillars of dystopian literature.

Present in the narrative is a solitary character, Krylov, who lives in a confined space and works with metals. His involvement with an unusual girl triggers a series of events, akin to the trajectory of D-503 after meeting I-330 in the Zamyatin's *We* (1924). There is a veiled revolution, "ряженая револяция," in the novel, presented as a sham, resembling a carnival (Slavnikova 2006: 177). The fear and the sinister air present in the novel are not only key to the Gothic but also to the dystopia because "monstrosity defines a space of fear, which provides a key prototype for dystopia in contrast to the ideal good spaces of paradise and Heaven" (Claeys 2017:58). The novel depicts a social crisis, and although its timeframe is set in the future, the life of the characters unfolds in a contemporary historical setting, bringing the novel closer to postmodernism. The essence of postmodernism lies in the amalgamation of layers and heterogeneity.

This article shows the duality of the Mistress of Copper Mountain character in the hybrid ecological dystopia. Slavnikova begins her narrative by introducing the concept of the non-human as a "symbol of the Rifei spirit," for which a building known as the "poganka" was

constructed. The author affectionately refers to this building as the "beloved monstrosity," adding an evaluative dimension to the narrative. The non-human character is also embodied in the figure of the "Great Serpent" which "moves beneath the ground, like underwater," and whose body is described as resembling "a stream of thundering gravel unloaded from a dump truck." (Slavnikova 2006: 36, 41, 226)

At times, mountain spirits may bear little physical distinction from humans, such as the Stone Maiden, also known as the Mistress of Copper Mountain. To fully grasp the image of the Mistress, the author adopts a psychological subjectivity, viewing the character through the eyes of gold miners, for whom she may appear quite ordinary. The author then takes the perspective of the Mountain Mistress herself, endowing her with characteristics that reflect the author's own viewpoint. The Stone Maiden does not attempt to stay close to the forest and the mountain wilderness; she is not a wild animal.

On a phraseological level, the author employs a technique of piling epithets upon each other, describing the character as a woman, then one with a native appearance, a marvelous creature, and finally a stranger. Notably, when the author refers to the Mountain Mistress of the Copper Mountain as the Stone Maiden or a woman, it reflects the author's position and the use of personification in depicting the non-human spirit. However, when Slavnikova presents other viewpoints, such as those of the gold miners, she is often perceived as a fantastical being or a spirit.

In describing the demise of the gold miners, the author refers to the character under investigation as a "nice lizard". This raises the question of the author's own stance towards the protector of treasures. The positive epithet suggests an acceptance of a special mission to protect natural resources, which foreshadows the author's perspective on ecology. However, the author's viewpoint becomes apparent when she connects animal instinct to the act of killing.

What is particularly interesting is that after encountering the Mountain Mistress, some gold miners survive and cease their quest for precious stones. When the author describes a positive outcome, she refers to the Mountain Mistress of the copper mountain as the Stone Maiden.

The author's perspective changes depending on the setting in which the non-human is placed. When the author places the characters in the mountains, not only the Stone Maiden but also mountain spirits surround them. Slavnikova describes the mountain spirits during expedition in negative connotation, «Но горные духи проявляли своё присутствие: хитникам вот уже неделю не удавалось поесть горячего и просушить носки» (Slavnikova 2014: 116). A clear and favorable ideological assessment can be discerned in the role of lizards,

which serve as guards and are thus referred to by Slavnikova as "друзья рифейского человека, живые указатели подземных богатств" (Slavnikova 2014: 38). Symbolic meaning have other reptiles as well: «То же самое ужи и мелкие гадюки, отдыхающие в скалах маслянистыми колечками; при малейшей тревоге они напрягаются, делаясь похожими на стрелу, приложенную к тетиве, но обыкновенно утекают с миром в каменную щель, оставляя по себе лёгкое шевеление горько-зелёной травы" (Slavnikova 2014: 38).

The role of the non-human is particularly important when addressing the issue of environmental pollution. When contamination occurs in the north, the author introduces a new secondary character, Dronov, who calls the lizard a millipede. As previously described, Slavnikova typically employs the image of a lizard in a negative connotation. Therefore, when Krylov discovers toxins in the water, Slavnikova places special emphasis on the purity of nature. In reality, this purity is misleading and can only be perceived through an ideological point of view. For example, when describing the "драгоценных ящерок" who "совершенно не боялись человека и резвились," a warning associated with destruction is evident (Slavnikova 2014: 180). In this case, both humans and nature perish, and the water becomes unusable.

It is noteworthy that, through Dronov's point of view, the non-human entity in Slavnikova's novel transforms into a cyborg. According to Haraway, "contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" (Haraway 1991: 149). Dronov describes the creature as a centipede-terminator to which you can match the code:

"Она внутри как бы живая. То есть не записана в определенном месте, а все время перетекает, шевелится, снует. Ну, как ящерица или сороконожка. Места у нее много. Очень чуткая она у меня получилась: чуть тронь, она сразу – шмыг. И подранить ее никак нельзя. Там, в темном углу, сидит маленький, но злобный терминатор. Как только определит, что у ящерицы, к примеру, оторвали хвост, сразу набросится и сожрет. Дело ведь даже не в кодах, коды подберем…" (Slavnikova 2014: 226).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of non-human entities in contemporary literature, particularly within the cultural and environmental contexts of the Anthropocene, offers a rich tapestry of themes and perspectives. Through the lens of ecocriticism and point of view, I have delved into the portrayal of non-human character of the Mistress of Coper Mountain within Russian dystopian literature of the twenty-first century.

The fluidity of the author's viewpoint towards these non-human entities is a central aspect of my analysis. I observed how their portrayal could shift from being ordinary and human-like to fantastical and ethereal, depending on the perspective through which they are viewed. This dynamic relationship highlights the multifaceted nature of these non-human characters and their significance within the narrative.

The character of Mistress of the Copper Mountain is eclectic. It can be described as a gothic ghost, a formidable cyborg, and a Riphean fair spirit that protects natural resources. This diverse portrayal emerges in Slavnikova's novel as a result of delving into modern environmental issues the traumas of the Soviet past, and historical background of Ural.

The positive characterization of the Stone Maiden as a "gentle friend of the Rifei people" raises important questions about the author's stance on the protection of natural resources and the environment. The interplay between nature, humanity, and the non-human becomes a central theme, with the concept of the Anthropocene serving as a backdrop to my analysis. I also explored the implications of environmental pollution and the author's use of animals, particularly lizards, as symbols. The juxtaposition of "precious lizards" with the destruction they signal serves as a powerful commentary on the consequences of environmental negligence and the interconnectedness of all living beings.

In this dynamic narrative, the author skillfully weaves together different perspectives, ideologies, and themes, offering a complex and thought-provoking exploration of the relationship between humans and the non-human. As we continue to grapple with the challenges of the Anthropocene, this literary analysis reminds us of the importance of understanding our interconnectedness with the natural world.

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