

THE ECOCRITICAL ASPECT OF MAGICAL REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN PROSE

Saidova Nilufar Zarifovna,

Lecturer, Department of Russian Language and Literature, Karshi State University

Abstract. This study examines the intersection of magical realism and ecocriticism in contemporary Russian prose. Through a comparative literary analysis of selected works by Viktor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Evgeniy Vodolazkin, the paper demonstrates how magical realist techniques challenge anthropocentric worldviews and highlight environmental interconnectedness, slow violence, and the agency of non-human entities. The research reveals that magical realism serves as an effective narrative strategy for addressing ecological crises in the post-Soviet context, where environmental degradation intersects with historical trauma and consumerist ideologies. Findings suggest that this hybrid mode fosters a biocentric perspective, dismantling binaries between human and non-human spheres.

Keywords: magical realism, ecocriticism, contemporary Russian literature, Pelevin, Sorokin, Vodolazkin, Anthropocene, environmental discourse.

Аннотация. В данном исследовании рассматривается пересечение магического реализма и экокритики в современной русской прозе. На основе сравнительно-литературного анализа избранных произведений Виктора Пелевина, Владимира Сорокина и Евгения Водолазкина в статье демонстрируется, как техники магического реализма ставят под сомнение антропоцентрическое мировоззрение и акцентируют внимание на экологической взаимосвязанности, «медленном насилии» и субъектности нечеловеческих существ. Исследование показывает, что магический реализм служит эффективной повествовательной стратегией для осмысления экологических кризисов в постсоветском контексте, где деградация окружающей среды пересекается с историческими травмами и идеологией потребления. Результаты позволяют предположить, что этот гибридный метод способствует формированию биоцентрической перспективы, разрушая дихотомию человеческой и нечеловеческой сфер.

Ключевые слова: магический реализм, экокритика, современная русская литература, Пелевин, Сорокин, Водолазкин, антропоцен, экологический дискурс.

Introduction

Magical realism has long been recognized by literary theorists as a sophisticated narrative mode that seamlessly blends the ordinary with the extraordinary, creating a "hesitation" between the natural and the supernatural. Historically, this mode often originated in postcolonial contexts as a subversive strategy to resist dominant Western rationalist epistemologies and imperialist "logical" structures (Faris). By validating indigenous myths and non-rational experiences, magical realism provides a platform for voices marginalized by the Enlightenment project.

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly pivoted this analysis toward environmental concerns, arguing that the mode's transgressive nature and inherently biocentric focus make it particularly suited to representing the ecological complexities of the Anthropocene (Holgate 2-3). Ben Holgate identifies four key commonalities between the mechanics of magical realism and the goals of environmental literature: a postcolonial or "post-imperial" perspective that challenges resource-extractive mindsets; the development of new expressive languages that rebel against Enlightenment rationalism; a biocentric emphasis on the interconnectedness of all living systems; and a transgressive dismantling of the traditional human/non-human binaries that have historically justified environmental exploitation.



Within the landscape of contemporary Russian prose, magical realism—and its specialized variants such as “magical historicism”—has evolved into a critical tool for processing the traumatic post-Soviet transition. This includes grappling with the legacy of rapid, often violent industrialization, the aggressive extraction of resources, and the systemic ecological neglect inherited from the Soviet era’s “mastery over nature” ideology. Authors such as Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin employ surrealist and phantasmagoric elements not merely for aesthetic play, but to critique the hyper-consumerism and technological alienation that sever the human connection to the natural world. Similarly, Evgeniy Vodolazkin integrates miraculous events within historical and natural landscapes to suggest a temporal and spiritual continuity that modern industrial logic ignores.

This paper investigates the specific ecocritical potential of these narrative strategies: it explores how magical realism in Russian fiction portrays nature not as a passive, silent backdrop for human drama, but as an active, sentient, and sometimes vengeful or healing agency. By doing so, the study aims to address a significant gap in current scholarship, as ecocritical readings of the Russian magical realist tradition remain vastly underexplored in comparison to the well-documented traditions of Latin American or Asian literatures.

Methods

The research employs a qualitative literary analysis situated within a multi-disciplinary ecocritical framework, drawing upon the close reading of primary Russian texts alongside secondary theoretical sources. The corpus of study includes a curated selection of works that represent the diversity of this mode: Viktor Pelevin’s *Empire V* (2006) and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2004), Vladimir Sorokin’s *Doctor Garin* (2010/2021) along with elements from his broader dystopian cycle, and Evgeniy Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* (2012). These specific texts were chosen because they exhibit prominent magical realist features—such as zoomorphism, chronotopic distortions, and the presence of the miraculous—while engaging deeply with implicit or explicit environmental themes.

The analysis follows a rigorous thematic and structural approach. First, it identifies specific magical elements within the narratives, such as metamorphosis (human-to-animal transitions), the animation of inorganic objects, and the blurring of ontological boundaries between the human subject and the non-human “other.” Second, it maps these elements onto specific ecological motifs, including the exploitation of natural resources, the psychological impact of pollution, and the search for bioregional harmony.

Finally, these findings are interpreted through the lens of key ecocritical concepts, most notably Rob Nixon’s theory of “slow violence”—the invisible, dispersed destruction of environments over time (Nixon)—as well as posthumanism and bioregionalism. Citations follow a simplified author-page system for all in-text references to ensure scholarly transparency. The temporal scope of the study is intentionally limited to prose fiction published between the early 2000s and the late 2010s to maintain a sharp focus on the “contemporary” sociocultural and ecological developments in the post-millennial Russian Federation.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the selected corpus reveals three primary ecocritical functions of magical realism, which transform the narrative landscape from a static setting into a dynamic, sentient agency.

1. Metamorphosis, Hybridity, and Species Interconnectedness Metamorphosis and species hybridity serve as the primary narrative tools for dismantling the human-non-human binary. In Viktor Pelevin’s *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, the protagonist A Hu-Li, an ancient were-fox, embodies fluid boundaries between species. Her shape-shifting is not merely a supernatural trope but a profound critique of human exploitation of the natural world. Through her perspective, Pelevin highlights a form of “ecological empathy” that is inaccessible to purely human characters. Pelevin depicts urban landscapes where industrial ruins merge with mythical



animal realms, suggesting that modern consumer society systematically alienates humans from their biological and evolutionary roots (Pelevin 145-152).

Similarly, Vladimir Sorokin's *Doctor Garin* introduces a post-apocalyptic Russian wilderness populated by "living objects" and hybrid creatures—beings that are neither fully organic nor fully mechanical. In this landscape, where technology and magic collide amid environmental decay, the non-human entities gain significant agency. This shift forces human characters to negotiate terms of coexistence rather than maintaining a stance of domination, reflecting a post-anthropocentric worldview where nature "strikes back" (Sorokin 210-218).

2. Visualizing "Slow Violence" and Resource Extraction Magical realism acts as a magnifying glass for "slow violence"—the gradual, often invisible environmental damage that escapes the human eye due to its dispersed nature (Nixon). Pelevin's narratives frequently utilize vampiric metaphors to describe extractive economies. In *Empire V*, the vampire elite represent hyper-consumers who literally and figuratively drain the life force from the planet. Through "magical perception," characters can see the hidden ecological and human cost of petroleum dependency, making the abstract concept of resource depletion tangibly grotesque.

This imagery aligns with broader ecocritical concerns regarding Russia's heavy reliance on a resource-based economy and the long-term, invisible consequences of this dependency (Berlina 78-82). Sorokin amplifies this effect through phantasmagoric transformations: in his narratives, polluted rivers and thawing permafrost wastelands come alive with surreal, often terrifying entities. These magical manifestations make abstract ecological harm—such as chemical runoff or methane release—immediate, visible, and narratively urgent.

3. The Spiritual Biocentrism of the Bioregion A restorative or spiritual dimension emerges in Evgeniy Vodolazkin's *Laurus*. Although set in medieval Russia, the novel resonates deeply with contemporary ecological anxieties by blending hagiographic realism with miraculous events tied to the soil. The protagonist Arseny's healing abilities and his moments of levitation are not depicted as disruptions of natural law, but as manifestations of being in perfect harmony with forests, herbs, and seasonal cycles.

These miracles are deeply embedded in the "bioregion," suggesting an Orthodox-inflected biocentrism where human spiritual redemption is inextricably linked to ecological balance (Vodolazkin 134-140). Unlike the biting irony of Pelevin or the visceral grotesque of Sorokin, Vodolazkin's magical realism offers a quieter, affirmative model of interconnectedness, portraying the healing power of nature as a sacred trust.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that magical realism in contemporary Russian prose functions as a potent environmental discourse. It echoes Holgate's theoretical framework while adapting it to the specificities of the Russian context: the trauma of post-Soviet transition, the weight of authoritarian legacies, and the country's unique climate vulnerability. By embedding the supernatural within everyday reality, these authors directly challenge the Soviet-era "Promethean" attitude—the ideological belief in absolute human mastery over the environment through technological conquest.

Pelevin and Sorokin utilize irony and the "ecogrotesque" to critique ongoing ecological imperialism, including reckless urban sprawl and the commodification of the wild. Their magical realism serves to reveal the "hidden good and evil" inherent in human-nature relations, making invisible global processes narratively visible to a public often desensitized to environmental data (Berlina). Conversely, Vodolazkin provides a more hopeful, restorative model where magical elements rooted in cultural and religious tradition promote a much-needed sense of ecological humility and stewardship.

Limitations and Future Directions While this study provides significant insights, it is limited by its focus on a narrow selection of high-profile male authors. A broader examination of women writers (such as Tatyana Tolstaya) or regional voices—specifically Tatar, Yakut, or Siberian



prose where magical elements are historically rooted—would greatly enrich these findings. Furthermore, future research should engage in a comparative analysis between Russian examples and Central Asian or Eastern European magical realism to explore shared post-Soviet ecocritical concerns and differing cultural responses to the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, the ecocritical dimension of magical realism enriches contemporary Russian literature by providing innovative cognitive tools to address urgent environmental crises. It encourages a perception of reality that is multilayered and interdependent, fostering the “new kinds of expression and language” required to confront the challenges of the Anthropocene (Holgate 3).

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