ECOLOGICAL MEMORY AND THE ETHICS OF DISPLACEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN PROSE: FROM RASPUTIN'S FAREWELL TO MATYORA TO SENCHIN'S THE FLOOD ZONE

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Abstract: This article examines how environmental loss becomes an ethical and narrative problem in Valentin Rasputin's Farewell to Matyora (1976) and Roman Senchin's The Flood Zone (2015). Drawing on ecocriticism, memory studies and close reading, it compares the literary representation of reservoir construction, village displacement, material heritage and the contested language of progress. Attention is given to the island and the flood zone as chronotopes, to domestic objects and burial places as media of collective memory, and to changing narrative techniques that expose the unequal distribution of modernization's costs. The comparison argues that both works refuse to treat landscape as passive scenery, while their different historical settings and narrative strategies register a shift from moral-symbolic resistance to an increasingly documentary account of administrative and social disintegration. The argument is qualitative and textual; it does not infer environmental or demographic measurements from the novels.

Keywords: Russian literature, ecocriticism, Valentin Rasputin, Roman Senchin, ecological memory, displacement, narrative space, environmental justice.

I. Introduction

The ecological crisis is not only a scientific or political problem; it is also a crisis of description. Decisions that transform rivers, villages and forests require languages of necessity, national benefit and technical efficiency. Literature can disclose what those languages compress: attachments to place, inherited practices of care, the texture of ordinary life and the unequal burdens of infrastructural change. This article approaches the Russian prose tradition as an important site for examining the cultural meaning of environmental transformation, without reducing fiction to an archive of factual evidence.

Valentin Rasputin's Farewell to Matyora (Proshchanie s Materoy, 1976) and Roman Senchin's The Flood Zone (Zona zatopleniya, 2015) provide a particularly productive comparison. Both concern places threatened by flooding and the displacement of their inhabitants in the course of hydroelectric development. Their literary worlds, however, are separated by nearly four decades and by different public languages of development,

property and social responsibility. Reading them together makes visible a continuity of ecological concern as well as a transformation in Russian narrative form.

The primary research question is how the two works translate physical submergence into a narrative of cultural loss. Three connected questions guide the analysis. First, how do space, time and focalization turn threatened settlements into ethically charged environments? Second, how are memory and belonging mediated through houses, graves, trees and everyday routines? Third, how does the language of public modernization encounter locally experienced vulnerability?

II. Literature Review

Ecocriticism studies the relation between literary expression and the more-than-human world. Buell (1995) helped establish environmental imagination as a major literary question, while Garrard (2012) clarified a vocabulary that includes pastoral, dwelling, pollution and apocalypse. These concepts are not templates mechanically imposed on texts. They invite attention to how particular narratives organize environmental values and who may speak on behalf of a place.

Heise (2008) argues that environmental imagination must negotiate forms of local attachment and broader ecological belonging. Her distinction is useful for Russian village prose because the local community may be rendered simultaneously as a morally significant world and as a site implicated in large-scale national development. A village is therefore neither an isolated idyll nor merely a subordinate unit of national planning; it is a meeting point of incompatible spatial scales.

Nixon's (2011) account of slow violence provides another interpretive resource. Environmental injuries may be cumulative, delayed or dispersed and thus less visible than sudden catastrophe. In the present literary corpus, the rising water is spectacular, yet the displacement process also consists of forms of attrition: bureaucratic uncertainty, interrupted agricultural routines, empty houses and the progressive loss of social infrastructure. Treating these as narrative processes clarifies why environmental harm cannot be confined to the moment of inundation.

Russian scholarship has identified the narrative and cultural specificity of Rasputin's treatment of place. Yureva (2019) examines the ethnopoetic significance of the chronotope in Farewell to Matyora, bringing attention to the conflict between temporal continuity and modern transformation. Tsvetova (2015) emphasizes the expressive significance of Darya's speech. These studies are especially valuable for connecting environmental

themes to the formal construction of voice and time, rather than interpreting the novella exclusively as an ideological statement.

Xu (2024) offers a directly ecocritical reading of Farewell to Matyora, focusing on relationships among nature, society, generational values and moral responsibility. Remonato (2025) specifically compares Rasputin's novella with Senchin's The Flood Zone in the context of Siberian dams and displacement. The present study develops this comparative field with a narrower literary emphasis on the interaction of narrative perspective, material memory, administrative vocabulary and the representation of ethical agency.

The affinity between the two novels should not obscure differences in their compositional systems. An ecocritical account that reads them simply as repeated denunciations of dam building would flatten the literary transformation between the Soviet 1970s and the post-Soviet twenty-first century. The distinction between a compressed, symbolically charged island story and a broader socially distributed flood-zone narrative must remain central to interpretation.

Environmental justice contributes a final conceptual distinction. A public project may be defended by reference to aggregate benefits, while the lived costs are imposed on specific communities. In literature, this

imbalance becomes legible through characterization, narrative duration, naming and the selection of significant details. The analytical question is not whether fiction supplies an engineering verdict, but how it distributes sympathy, knowledge and the capacity to contest decisions.

III. Methods

The study employs qualitative comparative close reading of two primary literary works: Rasputin's Farewell to Matyora (1976) and Senchin's The Flood Zone (2015). The corpus is deliberately small because the investigation concerns how literary form shapes the understanding of environmental displacement. It does not claim to measure the frequency of ecological motifs across Russian fiction or to represent all contemporary Russian environmental writing.

The analysis proceeds along four axes. Spatial analysis considers island, village, house, river and inundation zone as organized narrative environments. Temporal analysis examines generational succession, anticipated disappearance and the relation between remembered continuity and project deadlines. Character and voice analysis focuses on how affected residents, officials and other social actors are positioned as interpreters of change. Finally, the study analyzes the narrative status of

objects and sites such as dwellings, household belongings, trees and graves.

The comparative procedure distinguishes explicit plot premises from interpretations of their symbolic and ethical effects. It also separates literary representation from empirical accounts of dam construction. The selected theoretical sources provide terms for reading; they are not used as substitutes for textual evidence. Quotations from the novels are avoided where edition and translation pagination cannot be reliably standardized, and the discussion instead identifies scenes, motifs and formal patterns.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. The endangered settlement as a literary chronotope

In Farewell to Matyora, the island is neither a neutral geographical coordinate nor a decorative pastoral background. Its limited boundaries make the threatened community apprehensible as a concentrated world. Houses, pathways, fields, the river and ancestral burial places form a continuous spatial pattern. The impending flooding reorganizes this pattern around a finite future: the village has a history extending backward through generations, yet its anticipated destruction imposes an abrupt temporal limit.

This tension is central to the novella's chronotope. Cyclical practices such as seasonal work and the upkeep of familiar places encounter the linear schedule of infrastructural completion. Characters do not merely disagree about the practical advantages of relocation; they inhabit differently structured experiences of time. For an administrator, the approaching deadline can be treated as a measurable stage in a collective project. For residents whose identities are embedded in place, the same deadline appears as the termination of relationships that cannot be transferred intact.

Senchin's The Flood Zone enlarges the threatened space and changes its narrative atmosphere. The zone is not a single unified island-world but a set of settlements, households and social trajectories affected by decisions located elsewhere. Its very designation in administrative language defines people by their projected removal. The phrase flood zone simultaneously announces environmental change and classifies existing homes as territories marked for erasure.

Where Rasputin can intensify the symbolic integrity of Matyora, Senchin is interested in fragmentation. The threatened environment is experienced through scattered practical difficulties, contradictory expectations and uneven capacities to respond. This difference affects the reader's experience of ecological time: instead of approaching one final symbolic

farewell, the narrative allows deterioration to be observed as an extended social process.

4.2. Houses, graves and objects as carriers of ecological memory

Both narratives insist that a lived environment contains forms of memory not reducible to information. A house is a record of labor and family life; a grave joins kinship to specific ground; a familiar tree situates human duration within an older ecological rhythm. These sites matter because memory here is practiced through physical proximity. Recollection becomes embodied in repeated visits, care, gestures and routes through a known landscape.

Rasputin's Darya articulates the moral force of such attachments. Her resistance is not adequately explained as an abstract preference for the past. It develops from a felt duty to predecessors and to a place that has sustained communal life. The work's attention to the preparation and treatment of domestic space gives the house a ritual and ethical value. What modernization designates as a structure to be abandoned becomes, in the novella's narrative economy, an active witness to a human history.

The treatment of burial places intensifies the conflict between infrastructural rationality and intergenerational obligation. Relocation can in principle transport living people and some movable belongings. It

cannot straightforwardly relocate the meanings attached to ancestral ground. By representing such places as central rather than incidental, the narrative challenges an accounting model that equates compensation with the full replacement of loss.

In Senchin, material attachments remain significant, but the handling of homes and possessions is often subjected to more diffuse economic and procedural pressures. Belonging encounters property valuation, uncertain alternatives and the practical problem of what can be saved. The resulting narrative is less inclined to unify objects within one emblematic scene. Instead, the dispersal of material memory becomes a recurrent feature of social dislocation.

The two works therefore offer different narrative grammars of loss. Rasputin makes material objects dense with collective meaning; Senchin foregrounds the ordinary processes by which those meanings are fragmented, negotiated or rendered administratively invisible. Both question the assumption that physical replacement constitutes cultural continuity.

4.3. The rhetoric of progress and the distribution of voice

The legitimacy of large development projects is often narrated through future-oriented terms: necessity, improvement, electrification, public

benefit or economic opportunity. Neither literary text can be reduced to a simple debate between nature and technology. Rather, both stage an inequality in who defines progress and whose experience is admitted as evidence of its cost.

In Rasputin, the official future appears difficult to reconcile with the residents' richly remembered past. The ethical force of the conflict follows partly from narrative asymmetry: the threatened community receives sustained characterization and emotional specificity, while planning is experienced primarily through its consequences for that community. The novella thus relocates attention from the macro-scale promise of modernization to the irrecoverable specificity of the village.

This arrangement also has a potential limitation. The moral centrality of older characters and enduring practices can make change appear uniformly destructive, although generations may reasonably evaluate opportunity and attachment differently. A nuanced reading should not automatically classify every younger voice as morally deficient. The literary tension is more revealing when the competing temporal and social claims remain visible.

Senchin's narrative broadens the problem beyond moral disagreement to the functioning of institutions. The language of a designated zone can

become detached from the people who occupy it, and delay or procedural uncertainty can itself produce harm. The text's social density permits attention to differential vulnerability: residents do not possess identical resources, mobility, legal knowledge or confidence in authorities.

At the level of form, the contrast is between a relatively concentrated ethical dialogue and a more dispersed social critique. The later narrative can show how individuals are caught in systems whose decisions are not always embodied in a single antagonist. This offers a specifically literary account of structural power: what matters is the accumulation of constrained choices and the erosion of viable alternatives.

4.4. Ecological grief beyond nostalgia

A frequent risk in discussing village prose is to equate environmental ethics with nostalgia. Nostalgia is undeniably present where a known way of life is disappearing, but the texts also describe a more specific injury: the removal of the material conditions that connect past, present and future. The threatened place is not valuable solely because it was once familiar. It matters because human and nonhuman histories have developed together there.

Ecological grief in Rasputin is inseparable from obligations of remembrance. The narrative places emotional and ethical weight on those

who cannot detach themselves from the island. In this respect, the work refuses a vision of humans as endlessly mobile agents who can maintain identical identities anywhere. Attachment is shown as a relation, not simply an individual preference.

Senchin turns this concern toward the social consequences of displacement in a less ceremonially unified fictional world. Threatened inhabitants must confront the costs of transition while enduring uncertainty about their futures. Loss is not fully captured by the climactic image of rising water; it is also experienced in the period before departure and in the reduced possibilities that follow.

Nixon's notion of slow violence helps describe this narrative temporality. The effects of a project are distributed across sequences of decisions, the decay of confidence and the changing status of spaces once regarded as permanent. The comparison indicates that environmental literature can render diffuse injuries visible by slowing narrative attention to the domestic and administrative details through which transformation is lived.

4.5. Narrative form and historical difference

The historical distance between the works has formal consequences. Rasputin's novella draws on an ethically intensified mode of village prose in which a particular threatened settlement can bear the symbolic weight

of a civilizational conflict. Its imagery and characterization make the island an emotionally concentrated world, and its resistance is charged with meanings that exceed the immediate practical question of resettlement.

The Flood Zone is better understood through the narrative demands of a society characterized by multiple interacting institutions, differentiated resources and prolonged uncertainty. Its representational emphasis shifts from a primarily symbolic opposition to the cumulative realities of administered displacement. This does not make Senchin's writing less literary. Its aesthetic force lies precisely in selecting, ordering and juxtaposing ordinary circumstances so that a large social transformation becomes intelligible.

The two formal strategies produce distinct kinds of knowledge. Symbolic concentration can disclose ethical absolutes, the value of irreplaceable places and the difficulty of reconciling administrative reason with ancestral duty. Social dispersal can show the absence of one decisive event or agent and the ways in which hardship emerges from interconnected practical constraints. Their comparative reading is thus more productive than an evaluation of which text provides the more accurate policy account.

4.6. Implications for current Russian literary studies

This comparison demonstrates why ecocriticism should be integrated with narratology and memory studies. Identifying an environmental theme is only a first step. Literary analysis also needs to ask how a novel makes space perceptible, whose viewpoint governs interpretation, how narrative duration represents ecological change and which objects are rendered symbolically dense.

It is equally important to avoid the assumption that Russian ecological writing exists outside global debates. Questions of displaced communities, public works, cumulative harm and the right to define a meaningful environment are central to environmental humanities across many regions. Yet the Russian texts considered here organize these questions through their own literary histories, especially the ethics and aesthetics of village prose and later documentary social realism.

The findings are interpretative rather than statistical. The selected corpus does not establish a general evolution of all Russian literature, nor does it determine the economic benefits and ecological costs of any particular dam. The result is a more limited but valuable claim: across two historically separated narratives, the disappearance of inhabited space becomes a way to test the adequacy of public conceptions of progress and the resilience of cultural memory.

V. Conclusion

The comparative reading of Farewell to Matyora and The Flood Zone reveals ecological displacement as a problem of literary form, memory and ethical agency. In both works, flooding is not simply an environmental event. It threatens the relationship between communities and places through which experience acquires continuity, and it exposes the gap between the language of collective development and the situated lives of those required to relocate.

Rasputin gives this conflict a concentrated symbolic structure. The island chronotope, Darya's perspective and the narrative treatment of homes and burial sites transform the threatened village into a moral world. Senchin retains the concern for displaced communities while redirecting attention toward procedural pressures, dispersed social experiences and the extended temporality of loss. The movement from symbolic intensity to socially differentiated representation constitutes the key formal distinction identified by this study.

The article contributes to Russian literary ecocriticism by treating ecological memory as a relation among narrative space, material objects and unequal capacities to define the future. Further research could compare these texts with other contemporary prose about industrial

extraction, forest loss and migration, and could also study the differences introduced by translation and adaptation. Such work would extend the understanding of how Russian literature represents environmental changes whose consequences cannot be adequately expressed in purely technical terms.

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