



THE ROLE OF EXISTENTIALIST WRITERS IN THE CONTEMPORARY LITERARY PROCESS

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of the role of existentialist writers in the contemporary Russian literary process of the 21st century. It examines key aspects of their influence, including the exploration of post-Soviet identity, dialogue with global philosophy, the integration of existential motifs with postmodernist techniques, and the critique of social realities. Special attention is given to the works of authors such as Viktor Pelevin, Evgeny Vodolazkin, and Vladimir Sorokin, whose writings illustrate the combination of philosophical depth with experiments in form and content. The article highlights how existentialist ideas enrich the literary process, fostering reflection on the meaning of existence and expanding the boundaries of contemporary Russian literature.

Keywords: Existentialism, postmodernism, contemporary Russian literature, identity, philosophical reflection, literary process.

Introduction

In contemporary Russian literature, the existential tradition continues to evolve, often within the context of postmodernism, reflecting the complexities of societal and historical realities (revolutions, wars, totalitarianism). Postmodernism, with its emphasis on pluralism, fragmentation, and the absence of a single truth, aligns with existential themes that explore questions of the meaning of life, loneliness, and freedom in the absence of absolute reference points. Following the collapse of the USSR and the ideological vacuum of the 1990s, Russian society faced an identity crisis, which intensified existential quests expressed through postmodernist forms. As is known, postmodernism employs irony, intertextuality, and deconstruction, enabling existentialist writers to distance themselves from the pathos and dogmatism characteristic of the Soviet era. Through postmodernist techniques

(mythologization, parody, genre blending), authors explore the absurdity of existence and human disorientation. It is also worth noting that existentialism, with its focus on individual experience, seamlessly integrates into the postmodernist discourse. Russian literature, inheriting the traditions of F.M. Dostoevsky and Camus, utilizes postmodernist tools to reinterpret classical existential themes in the context of globalization and the information society. Thus, existential literature, relying on postmodernist techniques, reflects apathy, disillusionment, and the search for new meaning amidst instability and cultural relativism.

Main Part

Contemporary Russian existentialist writers occupy an important but relatively niche place in the broader process of Russian literary development. Modern existentialists in Russian literature continue the traditions of the classics but integrate them into new realities, specifically by exploring the human condition in the era of globalization, digital technologies, and social crises. They combine absurdity and philosophical reflections with playful elements, blending existential ideas with satire, historical chronicles, and science fiction. Writers such as Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin, through postmodernist techniques (mythologization, parody, genre blending), explore the absurdity of existence and human disorientation. The play with reality and metatextuality in their works becomes a tool for expressing existential questions about human nature and its place in the world. Consequently, postmodernism provides new opportunities for contemporary Russian existential literature, allowing it to remain relevant and multifaceted. Thus, modern Russian existentialist writers hold a significant place in Russian literature, continuing philosophical traditions while adapting them to the new conditions and challenges of the 21st century.

Results and Discussion

Let us examine in greater detail contemporary Russian writers whose works are deeply infused with existential themes.

Viktor Pelevin is one of the most prominent modern Russian writers, whose works frequently explore questions of human existence within a postmodernist framework. His novels, such as *Chapaev and Void*, *Generation P*, *Transhumanism Inc.*, and *Invincible Sun*, are permeated with reflections on reality, illusions, free



will, and the search for meaning in an absurd, consumerist culture. His characters often face existential choices, striving to understand themselves in a chaotic and disorienting world.

Vladimir Sorokin, a master of provocative prose, explores themes of human nature, violence, and the absurdity of existence in his dystopian works (*Day of the Oprichnik*, *Sugar Kremlin*, *Doctor Garin*). His characters frequently find themselves in situations where traditional values collapse, forcing the individual to confront an existential void or the harsh reality of free choice. Sorokin fearlessly exposes the darker aspects of existence, aligning his work with the existential tradition.

Evgeny Vodolazkin, the author of the novels *Laurus* and *The Aviator*, approaches existential questions through the lens of time, memory, and faith. His characters often seek the meaning of life amidst historical or personal crises, confronting the inevitability of death and the need to make sense of their existence. While his work is imbued with religious motifs, it resonates with existentialism in its reflections on personal freedom and responsibility.

Alexey Ivanov, known for works such as *The Geographer Drank His Globe Away* and *The Heart of Parma*, frequently portrays characters trapped in existential dead-ends. His protagonists are individuals searching for meaning in everyday life, grappling with alienation, and striving to find themselves in complex social and historical circumstances. For instance, in *The Geographer*, the main character confronts the absurdity of life but persists in seeking value within it.

Among contemporary Russian writers working in an existential vein, **Alexander Illichevsky** also stands out. His works, such as the novels *Matisse*, *The Persian*, *Newton's Drawing*, and his essays (*From Right to Left*), exhibit characteristics of existential literature interwoven with postmodernist and philosophical elements. The protagonists in *The Persian* or *Matisse* often face internal conflicts, striving to find their place in the world. For example, in *The Persian*, the main character undergoes a journey of maturation and self-discovery, which aligns with the existential idea of self-definition through choice. Illichevsky emphasizes that “literature is the production of the freedom of meaning. The point of choice must emerge within the novel, like a dew point. Literature quenches a person’s thirst for the authenticity of their existence. Literature is not obliged to teach; it is obliged to



foster freedom. The existential experience of making choices is the reward for reading”¹ which directly refers to the existential concept of freedom.

It is worth noting that these writers do not always strictly adhere to the canons of existentialism as a philosophical movement, but their works address its key themes: freedom, responsibility, loneliness, absurdity, and the search for meaning. Contemporary Russian literature often channels existential motifs through postmodernism, creating a unique interpretation of the philosophy of existence. In Viktor Pelevin’s works, the existential search for meaning is frequently expressed through postmodernist play with reality and illusion, as seen in *Life of Insects*, where characters seek their place in an absurd world. Vladimir Sorokin, on the other hand, employs shock and the deconstruction of social norms (*Blue Lard*) to expose the existential void. This is connected, as previously mentioned, to the historical, cultural, and social context in which this literature develops. Thus, postmodernism in contemporary Russian literature serves as a tool through which existential motifs take on new forms, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of post-Soviet consciousness.

Speaking of the role of contemporary existentialist writers in the Russian literary process of the 21st century, their significance is particularly notable. Through their works, they make a substantial contribution to the exploration of human existence, identity, and social transformations in the context of post-Soviet space and globalization. Their creativity enriches Russian literature by combining philosophical depth with experiments in form and content. Existentialist motifs in the works of authors such as Viktor Pelevin, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Vladimir Sorokin, and Evgeny Vodolazkin help explore the identity crisis triggered by the collapse of the USSR. They pose questions to the reader about the meaning of life, freedom, and responsibility in the absence of former values. In Vodolazkin’s *Laurus*, existential themes intertwine with reflections on time and purpose, while in Pelevin’s *Chapaev* and *Void*, they are linked to the illusoriness of reality. Additionally, Russian existentialist writers actively engage with Western philosophical traditions (Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard), adapting them to the Russian context, which makes their works part of the global literary process.

¹ <https://story.ru/istorii-znamenitostej/avtorskie-kolonki/aleksandr-ilichevskiy-tolstoy-kak-vozmozhnost-nevozmozhnogo/?ysclid=mb66valbx1477641640>

Conclusion

As previously noted, existentialism is often combined with postmodern techniques, allowing authors to create multilayered texts. V. Pelevin and V. Sorokin employ irony, deconstruction, and intertextuality to explore the absurdity of existence and human freedom. This makes their work innovative and appealing to the modern audience seeking unconventional approaches to traditional questions. Through their works, the authors encourage readers to reflect on their own existence, stimulating philosophical discussions. Their creativity often becomes a subject of analysis in academic circles, contributing to the development of literary criticism and cultural studies.

Existentialist writers experiment with genres, blending philosophy with elements of magical realism, historical novels, or dystopia. This enriches the literary process, making it more diverse (Vodolazkin, in "The Aviator," combines existential reflections on memory and time with nonlinear storytelling).

Summing up everything above, it is worth noting that contemporary Russian writers continue to develop existential traditions, exploring themes of human existence, freedom, and the meaning of life. They play a key role in the literary process of the 21st century, acting as mediators between tradition and innovation. They help readers and society to understand complex questions of being by adapting existential ideas to Russian realities and global challenges. Their contribution lies in creating intellectually rich texts that stimulate philosophical reflection and expand the boundaries of literary creativity.

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