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КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

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ВО МЕЃУНАРОДНОТО НАУЧНО СПИСАНИЕ „ПАЛИМПСЕСТ“

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## ECOCRITICISM: EXPLORING THE NON-HUMAN WORLD IN AVRAMOVSKA'S NOVEL *ВОДНИ ТЕЛА*

**Kalina Maleska**

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**Abstract:** This article explores how a small-scale utopia can be envisioned and constructed within a dystopian world affected by a gradual environmental catastrophe. The novel that depicts this dystopian setting is *Водни тела* (*Water Bodies*) by the Macedonian diasporic writer Ana Avramovska. The novel is focused on a woman coming back from Australia to her native town of Kumanovo, after many years abroad, to encounter how the town has changed as a result of the long-lasting effects of pollution. Searching for various unconventional ways to mitigate the pollution and find the sources of a river bank that has existed long ago, according to the grandmother's stories, the narrator and her friends unconsciously search for their own beginnings. In line with previous research of ecofeminist fiction and dystopic perspectives, the novel explores and even insists on the possibility of enacting a utopian vision of a better world even in the middle of the environmental calamity. The main thesis explored in this research is that *Water Bodies* is an eco-critical novel, in accordance with Lawrence Buell's criteria for evaluating a text as embodying environmental consciousness. All elements discussed in the article, such as the environmental problems, the importance of the nonhuman environment, and the search for an eco-utopia are arguments that support such thesis.

**Keywords:** *ecocriticism; eco-utopia; ecofeminism; nonhuman; Avramovska; Водни тела.*

### Introduction

In the era of the Anthropocene, when the negative effects of human activities on nature have increasingly been emphasized through indicating climate changes, excessive pollution and other environmental hazards, there have also been attempts to redefine the role and place of human agents in the world and nature as only one of the numerous agents that coexist in nature. Traditionally, the human subject has been prioritized and placed highest in the hierarchical positioning of species. Ecocriticism attempts to combat anthropocentrism through focusing on narration and shift of discourse that would place nonhuman entities on an equal scale as the human entities. "As opposed to anthropocentrism's privileging of homo sapiens, the human becomes one species of animal among many materialities from a nonhuman perspective, becomes a feature of a period of time (such as the Anthropocene) against geological or cosmic scales, and becomes at best a

threatening or at worst a parasitical presence when considered in ecological terms” (Colombino and Childs, 2022, p. 356). Thus, to move away from the cultural prioritization of the human subject signifies repositioning of humans as one entity among many other entities.

This article discusses how a small-scale utopia can be envisioned and constructed within a dystopian world affected by an environmental catastrophe. The novel that depicts this dystopian setting is *Водни тела* (*Water Bodies*) by the Macedonian writer Ana Avramovska. It is focused on a woman coming back from Australia to her native town of Kumanovo in North Macedonia, after many years abroad, to encounter how her native town has changed as a result of the long-lasting effects of pollution. Searching for various unconventional ways to mitigate the pollution and find the sources of a river bank that has existed long ago, according to her grandmother’s stories, the narrator and her friends unconsciously search for their own beginnings.

*Water Bodies* can be considered an ecocritical novel, as it draws attention to the relationship and mutual influence of humans, other living beings and nature. As Nayar (2009) suggests, the task of ecocriticism “is to see how theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute not only to consciousness raising but also look into the politics of development and the construction of ‘nature’” (p. 329) Analysis and interpretation of texts necessarily entail readings that include not only the aesthetic dimensions of texts, but also comments on the political and social circumstances of those texts. “Ecocriticism focuses on the material contexts of industrialization, development, pollution and ecocide while developing a frame for reading.” (Nayar 2009, p. 329).

I explore the novel as a deliberately constructed possibility of enacting a utopian vision of an ecological world even in the middle of an environmental calamity. I suggest that it is a “constructed possibility” because, at times, the novel goes into improbabilities in terms of the plot and stereotyping characters in order to put forward an idea, which is more foregrounded than the storyline.

I draw on Lawrence Buell’s (1995) criteria for evaluating a text as embodying environmental consciousness, which include: “The non-human dimension is an actual presence in the text and not merely a façade; The human interest is not privileged over everything else; The text shows humans as accountable to the environment and any actions they perform that damages the ecosystem.” (pp. 7-8). In this context, I explore how *Water Bodies* presents the human and the nonhuman world as integrated, and how it makes distinct human actions that affect the environment.

### **Environmental calamities**

Pollution is a serious problem in several Macedonian towns, and this is the background on which *Water Bodies* is created. It represents images of urban toxified landscapes, as well as of toxified natural spaces that show potential for revival.

When Neda, the narrator of Avramovska’s novel, arrives at the airport, she is greeted by her close friend Gavril, they drive to Kumanovo. The narrator’s

reiterated question to herself is “Why am I here”, which is directly connected to the later possibility to construct a small-scale utopia. The setting at this point is clearly dystopian. It is cold and dark, there is smoke along the whole road to Kumanovo, and when they enter the town it is covered in even denser fog and smoke. There is an abundance of images of “fog”, “smoke”, “darkness”, “pollution”, “garbage”, “plastic bottles”, “plastic bags” thrown around, “cans” being carried through the streets close to the market, “frozen mud ponds”, “exhaust gases”, and reference to the responsibility of the “human factor”. “I have never seen the city like this” (Аврамовска, 2022, p. 28), says the narrator suggesting that the deterioration has taken place in the last several years while she was away.

“From the car’s window, the greyness is now intertwined with distant, pale light. A swarm of plastic bags reel around them. They pass through the dumping ground... The stench slowly enters the car” (Аврамовска, 2022, pp. 23-4). Kumanovo is a desolate town, people do not go out unless they have to, and only with masks.

In reality, in the winter months in Kumanovo are indeed marked by polluted air, but the novel’s setting is certainly dystopian in the sense that it shows pollution on a much higher scale than it is, and in presenting the people walking the streets in masks worn to protect themselves from the pollution. The atmosphere is also dystopian – the conversations between the characters are also slow, there is a constant sense of nausea and focus on the polluted environment.

There are numerous indications that the dystopia is a result of the patriarchal system and values, in which successful businessmen embody the principle that is highly unsettling in its negative environmental impact. One of the most direct indications is the scene in which the narrator meets a man who throws a bag of garbage into the river. The man is described as having strong and sharp facial features, robust body. “But what she finds most striking is the large watch... and the enormous Gucci belt with an equally enormous buckle in the form of the word Gucci.” (Аврамовска, 2022, p. 97) He also carries in his hands a key pendant with the marks of BMW. When the narrator asks him not to throw the garbage into the river, he says: “Why not? Does it belong to your father?” (p. 97) So, his arrogance, even impudence, his lack of concern for the environment, his rich attire suggest that he is some kind of prototypical representative of a machoistic man in a patriarchal society. Unlike him, the four main characters (Neda, Gavril, their friend Jasna, and the grandmother) are constantly aware of the human negative influence on the environment and act in order to mitigate it.

### **The non-human environment**

“Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 3) This is how the book *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh begins, in which Ghosh manages inventively to show the interconnectedness between climate change, literature, history and politics. What the question in the beginning of the book refers to is that not only humans, but everything in nature – regardless of whether it is a living being or a climate phenomenon – can become an active force that

affects its environment. This, according to Ghosh, is well known to all residents of the Sundarbans, the large mangrove forest of the Bengal Delta, where tigers incessantly lurk – the human does not see the tiger, but only its prints in the mud, and feels its presence. If the tiger attacks, the human will not see it until the last moment. Seeing the tiger is the moment of recognition of the presence of a conscious being that has existed even before that moment of recognition. Something similar happened to Ghosh himself when, faced by an unexpected hurricane in Delhi, he recognized this weather phenomenon as an active force. The novel by Avramovska expresses such moment of recognition of the animals as active beings with their own consciousness.

In his study of climate change novels *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, Adam Trexler (2015) points out that they usually represent apocalyptic scenarios or employ literary strategies connected to human psychology. *Water Bodies* is concerned predominantly to the non-human context. The non-human world is foregrounded in the novel, thus becoming a part of the author's representation of the negative effects of the human presence on the environment. In this way, Avramovska draws the attention to what is a rarely treated theme in Macedonian literature. Namely, the four main characters of the novel are the ones who realize the devastating effects of humans on nature, and the healing effects that nature can have on humans provided that it is protected.

This becomes obvious in many scenes in the novel: some of the most important and recurring leitmotifs are those of the goat and the fairies. Gavril, a cab-driver who works illegally, has had an accident which became a turning point of his life. He tells the narrator about the accident, suggesting that he must have hit something, an animal of some kind, which the people who were with him in the car suggest was a goat. The scene is described at length with details that emphasize Gavril's feeling of responsibility and regret. He searches for the goat for a long time, pacing through the environment with care and respect.

Other animals also take up an important part in the novel. And so do supernatural creatures, such as fairies. It turns out that the fairies are in fact the rays of sun peeking through the shadows of the poplar trees by the river, forming patterns that resemble fairies. Thus, they serve as metaphors of the clean environment in the past.

The grandmother's stories about fairies appearing on the river in Kumanovo, and Jasna's photographs capturing water bodies and various type of trees point out to their quality of providing connection between the human and the natural world.

Dreams also play a very important part in the novel, turning away from the rational industrial progress into the role of spontaneity and sub-consciousness in protecting the environment. Gavril's frequent dreams of the accident link the goat to a fairy, bringing up the theme of fairies as metaphors of the clean environment in the past. The grandmother's stories about fairies appearing on the river in Kumanovo, and Jasna's photographs capturing water and sometimes fairies point out to their quality of providing connection between the human and the natural world.

### Search for an Eco-Utopia

*Water Bodies* examines the concepts of interconnectedness between dystopia and the possibility of a utopia within this dystopian setting. The utopian space is predominantly marked by ecofeminism, as evident in several aspects:

- The stories of the existence of a clean river bank in the past are orally transmitted from the grandmother to her granddaughter, so via the female line of predecessors.
- The utopian space is a subject of quest inspired by the woman narrator, and although previously a few other characters, both male and female, have heard of the nostalgically clean place of the riverbank, it is only after the arrival and initiative of Neda that the search for the utopian place actually begins.
- Additionally, the unpolluted place that existed in the past but can also be revived in the future is symbolically represented through the symbol of fairies.
- The hope expressed in the novel and the connection to the non-human are new in comparison to the previous dystopian novels (in N. Macedonia) written by male authors, which are predominantly pessimistic and human-centered.

As Axel Goodbody (2007) suggests, “The ecocritical approach is not necessarily rooted in a perception of crisis in the sense of impending global environmental collapse, but it is driven by concern about the unviability of our current treatment of the natural environment in the longer term and by conviction of the need for an ongoing re-examination of our underlying attitudes towards nature.” (p. 21) The re-examined attitudes towards nature are present in the novel in Gavril’s deeply felt grief for accidentally hitting the goat, in the quest of the characters for the river bank, and in Jasna’s exhibition of her photographs whose motif are water bodies and trees.

According to Justyna Kostkowska (2013), “Val Plumwood has pointed out that the rationalist, androcentric master narrative that had served to support patriarchy must now give way to multicentric pluralism. The way we use language must be carefully scrutinized and reformed to eliminate old hegemonic patterns and to promote modes of linguistic expression that foster connectivity instead of separation, equality instead of hierarchy, diversity instead of homogeneity.” (p. 8) “Old hegemonic patterns” and “androcentric master narrative” are also present in the novel, especially in the narrator’s analysis of the actions of the so-called Gucci man. In reexamining his actions later, she says:

The Gucci-man does not see himself as part of the world in which he exists, but as his external manipulator. He thinks that he affects the environment, and is himself untouched by his effects over the environment... He thinks that since nature, air, streets cannot be bought or possessed or exploited, they disappear, fall into a perceptive black hole. The bag, the cans, the garbage are objects that do not belong in his car, his yard, his house, but belong to the ‘not his’ street, not his river, not his country. (Аврамовска, 2022, p. 111)

Here, the narrator uses language precisely to foreground the connectivity between human and nature, and the Gucci-man's lack of awareness of that connectivity.

### **Discovering the potential of an eco-utopia**

Finally, when the narrator, her grandmother, Gavril and Jasna arrive on the river bank – although the river is so filled with garbage that it seems to have disappeared, they all see the potential of clean environment. They see it in their imagination and the awakened urge for action. For example, in the river's murmur, the narrator tries to hear the fairies' speech. She imagines children holding hands, and the darkness coming "not with a bang, but with the gentleness of snow" (Аврамовска, 2022, pp. 122-3). The clouds clear and the sun's rays fall through the branches, so that "the river with the garbage covered with snow reminds her of images of distant galaxies". The river flows on "carrying not just human poison, mire and malice, but also its clarity and persistence" (p. 123).

What happens in this scene is a changed perception of the existing pollution. It is a vision of a world that could be transformed, an eco-utopia that could be created, and which is created by the small company standing by the river. It is reinforced by the exhibition of Jasna's photographs at the end that points to a possibility of implementing the changes in practice.

### **Conclusion**

The three main elements in the novel are the dystopian setting, the emphasis on the non-human environment and, through it, the possibility of creating an eco-utopia. In this sense, and referring the Lawrence Buell's criteria, the novel foregrounds the integration between the human and non-human world; the human interest is not privileged; the events display how the humans are aware of their accountability to the environment. Thus it could be stated that the novel *Water Bodies* embodies environmental consciousness.

In terms of the turn towards the nonhuman part of nature, with the focus on the goat, the trees, the fairies, as well as the dogs and cats that surround Neda's grandmother – all of them treated as important agents of action and change themselves, the novel represents an ecocritical attempt to undermine the high hierarchical positioning of the humans. Such attempts, as Colombino and Childs state, are "in part ethical, in part political, in part cultural, but fundamentally philosophical" (2022, p. 355).

In *Water Bodies*, human agency appears as part of a broader context in which a variety of agencies act and influence each other, rather than humans exposing domination and lack of concern of the environment, as represented by the critical examination of the Gucci man. From the criticism of the polluted environment in which the narrator finds herself, and which is affected by human activity, the novel moves into exploring possibilities and awareness of mutual interactions with other parts of the world, both living (the animals and plants) and non-living (the river). The entanglements between them shift and make porous the boundaries between landscape and bodies. Thus the novel challenges the traditional position of placing human interests at the center.

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