

The Metatext Function in V. Aksenov's "Moscow Saga" Novel

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Received: 23 July 2024 / **Revised:** 29 September 2024 / **Accepted:** 20 October 2024 / **Available Online:** 23 December 2024

SUMMARY

V. Aksenov's "Moscow Saga" is a multifaceted novel that blends postmodern elements into a realistic narrative. The author introduces "intermissions," which are sections that interrupt the main plot. Some of these intermissions draw from contemporary media, highlighting the reality of the events. They contrast with mythopoetic tales called "intermissions of incarnations." There are fifteen such tales, each reflecting plot details. The first fourteen are separate chapters, and the final one appears in the epilogue. All incarnated images are in connection with the history of the Gradov family and represent the links of the same chain, which explains the past and anticipates the future. The intermissions create a single semantic space in the novel. This paper aims to show how Aksenov develops a unique artistic reality by anthropomorphizing events and figures from Russian history and literature.

Keywords: Incarnations; Intermissions; Meta-text; Semantic Space

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Citation: Matevosyan E. The Metatext Function in V.Aksenov's "Moscow Saga" Novel. J Sci Technol Educ Art Med. 2024;1(2):32-36

Introduction

V. Aksenov's «Moscow Saga» is a versatile and variegated novel. It is often referred to as a "genre experiment".¹ Aksenov's novel was written during his emigration, a period in which he experimented with language, themes, and techniques. "Moscow Saga" has sparked diverse opinions among modern critics, with those praising it highlighting its echoes of Leo Tolstoy's narrative concepts and its adherence to classical family novel traditions. Special emphasis was placed on the attempt to seamlessly intertwine the destinies of individual characters with the history of the

country.

Aksenov interprets the novelistic foundation of the genre in a rather distinctive manner. He synthesizes, reworks, parodies, and as a result, introduces a new principle in portraying realities, actively employing narrative diversity and multilayered narrative. This principle forms the basis for recreating historical spaces, with the family unit at its core.

By depicting the Gradov family as a microcosm, fundamentally unified and unbreakable, Aksenov creates a new myth about family, where it is capable of standing against chaos and awakening a harmonious beginning. The



mythical aura surrounding the family essence is depicted in the novel through three generations of the Gradov family, who serve as the focal point of historical space, where the past, present, and even future are focused. The world of the family, as a social and moral substance, is universal. In the novel, it exists both within its mythical space and at the center of historical time. The cohesive picture of this world in the novel emerges through a fanciful interweaving of ideological myths and material realities, connecting seemingly disparate strands of meaning. The postmodern semantic retreats, which are called intermissions by the author, break into the plot of a realistic novel.

The subplot interludes complement the novel's reality towards a certain "objectivity," leading the reader beyond the confines of the Gradov family to the broader historical context. Some intermissions are connected with the modern press; by which they emphasize the reality of the events. By emphasizing documentary accuracy, Aksenov crafts his "artistic truth" about the continuity of history. ² These intermissions are contrasted with the other side of reality, which are reproduced in the mythopoetic tales, called intermissions of incarnations. The alternation of chapters and interludes defines the structural features of the novel. Chapters depict the world of classic characters in a realistic novel, portraying Russian intelligentsia through the Gradov family. Interludes, presented in press excerpts, depict the external world that intrudes into the lives of the main characters. These two forms of the realistic world are contrasted with another reality – the incarnational reality. This paper aims to show how Aksenov develops a unique artistic reality by anthropomorphizing events and figures from Russian history and literature. Such a peculiar structure of the novel not only brings the work to a new level among the family chronicles of the twentieth century but also significantly complicates the perception of the storyline by readers. Aksenov's artistic concept creates images and plots that require specialized knowledge of history, mythology, and the intricacies of Russian life to understand. The writer does not provide explanations, counting on the reader-intellectual, who will draw historical parallels and form his vision of the plot. This not only complicates the perception of the text but also somewhat complicates the perception of the author's intention, which, however, corresponds to the tendencies of

the literary process of the late twentieth century.

Methods

Literary review for the article on the functions of metatext in the novel "Moscow Saga" was based on the analysis of scientific articles and monographs devoted to the works of Vasily Aksyonov, with a special focus on his novel epic. In the process of the work, we also studied works that explore the theory of metatext, as well as materials concerning the history of the development of the genre of family chronicle in twentieth-century literature. The application of complex and systematic methods to the study of the novel allowed us to analyze both individual images and thematic lines and their relationship to the overall concept of the work.

Review

There are fifteen tales of incarnations in the novel, each of them reflecting some plot details. Fourteen incarnations are presented in separate chapters and the last 15th is presented in the last abstract of the epilogue. The incarnated images can be divided into four groups. The first group consists of real historical figures representing authority, such as Lenin, Stalin, Catherine the Great, and Russian princesses from the Rurik dynasty. The second group includes Russian writers, public figures, and literary characters like Kantemir, Radishchev, Khlebnikov, Alexandra Smirnova-Rosset, and Prince Andrei Bolkonsky. The third group consists of collective images of Russian national life, including university graduates, the army, the people, and party workers. The fourth group represents symbolic images of national thought, encompassing poetry and revolution. All these incarnations are in some way connected to the history of the Gradov family.

The first group of incarnations is related to the theme of power. The image of the Ficus is an incarnation of a princess with Byzantine roots from the Rurik era. The capricious and whimsical flower preferred proud solitude and turned away from the people, represented by the unpretentious geranium, preferring proud solitude. By not bearing fruit in that first life, by remaining inactive, the princess predetermined her fate. The Ficus perishes ingloriously in the fateful year of 1942.

In life, Vladimir Ilyich had a political



pseudonym, but here he appears as "Белк" instead of "белка," which doesn't align with the typical Russian lexical-semantic structure. This form emphasizes the illogical, unnatural essence of the image. He was connected to his past life, remembered a lot, and the Silver Forest, where "Белк" lived, reminded him of his office in Gorki. He did not lose his hunting instinct and ruthlessly dealt with his enemies, but in this new guise, amidst new struggles and victories, he became calmer. But he is not destined to solve the next riddle of history. The mistakes of his former life, termed by the author as the "Satanic Quake," were atoned for by the squirrel-like incarnation of his image.

The next incarnation related to the theme of power is revealed in the chapter "The Horse with the Plume," which tells the story of Grishka, a circus gelding. Catherine the Great, depicted as a circus gelding, clearly yearns for her past splendor, and the text reflects a nostalgia for the golden age of Russian nobility. But what was once the greatest empire now exists in the astral depths of the subconscious of a forgotten circus horse. Grishka, being a horse, also did not escape the dreadful slaughter. The feminine-horse nature meets a dishonorable end. This vivid, intense essence is once again associated with the illustrious name of "Circus Russia."

The culmination of the theme of power is represented by Stalin's transformation into a stag-beetle, an incarnation depicted in the novel's epilogue. This transformation underscores the author's deep disdain for the figure being incarnated. The leader, once revered as the "father of nations," is now depicted as a beetle—"large, magnificent, jet-black".³ He appears as an unwelcome guest: small, inconspicuous, yet still "well-armed." The description of the beetle reveals overt sarcasm, with Aksenov even employing unconventional vocabulary. The beetle-leader evokes hatred, disgust, and fear, and is deprived of the most essential quality—memory.

In the incarnations exploring the theme of power, the intensity of emotion increases with the sharpness of the author's perception. While the ficus evokes pity and the squirrel and gelding are described with irony, the depiction of the stag-beetle is marked by outright sarcasm. If the previous characters are forgiven to some extent in an astral depth, the beetle is punished by being deprived of memory. The incarnated images are equally symbolic: the ficus embodies beauty, and the

squirrel and circus gelding, in their animal forms, evoke a sad smile, unlike the repulsive insect. The stories of all these incarnations end with a foreboding of demise and death, reflecting the author's concept of the struggle against power.

The second group of incarnations mainly includes animal forms. Here, the image of the Russian poet Antioch Kantemir emerges as a nightingale, the writer Alexander Radishchev is represented as the elephant Hannibal, and the poet Velimir Khlebnikov is depicted as a cat. The interlude "Nightingale Night" is dedicated to the skillful song of the nightingale. Kantemir the Nightingale, who is remembered in Russian literature as one of the brilliant satirists and innovators of the genre, used satire as a means to express the progressive ideas of his time. The nightingale's song is powerful and vivid, unaffected by time or history. The nightingale's singing has transcended the ages, carrying a powerful energetic charge that could not be countered by new laws, orders, or even war.

Radishchev's ideas of fighting tyranny are incarnated by Aksenov in the form of the elephant Hannibal. Radishchev, known in Russian literature as one of the prominent free thinkers, retains his essence even in this new form, becoming even more powerful. In his modern guise, Radishchev remembered how he had once challenged and criticized Empress Catherine herself. Awakening his fighting spirit, the elephant, named after the great general, challenges Stalin himself. However, Aksenov depicts yet another failed rebellion of the free thinker. In the chapter "Kremlin Master," the elephant is executed. But the elephant's thought (the interlude is called "Hannibal's Reflections") "which had gathered into a knot after the shot, unwound and corkscrewed its way out of the old fortress into freedom."³ An animal can be shot, but no one can kill free thought, especially when it springs from the depths of Russian classical literature.

The futurist poet Khlebnikov is incarnated by Aksenov as the cat Velimir. Aksenov even kept the poet's name unchanged. Khlebnikov sought to create the art of the future. As one of the most idiosyncratic poets of the Russian Silver Age, Khlebnikov was original in every aspect, yet he was also highly independent and passionately loved Russia. This incarnated image was the most closely connected to its previous life: the cat behaved like a human. This can be explained in two ways: first, the



time between the two incarnations is the shortest, as the poet died in 1922 and the action of the interlude takes place in 1951; second, the cat, being the most sensitive of animals, is more attached to humans than others.

All incarnations associated with Russian writers embody the ideas of freedom and struggle, steadfastness, and the eternity of the art of words. This theme is also explored in the incarnations that continue the literary motif. In the interlude "The Flight of the Owl," the incarnated image represents Russian classical poetry from the late 18th to early 19th centuries. Transformed into an owl, poetry seemed to have fallen asleep, only occasionally awakening at night to avoid being noticed, as the day was filled with mediocrity. The open opposition of Russian poetry to contemporary Russian proletarian art is expressed in the owl's disdain for the poet Demyan Bedny. The wise and sensitive owl, a creature of the night, did not fit into the modern day and was rejected, but it would still awaken from time to time at night, reminding everyone of its greatness.

One of the most intriguing literary incarnations is the incarnation of a literary character: the three-year-old German shepherd Pythagoras, the Gradov family's favorite, was Prince Andrei Bolkonsky in a past life. This incarnated character, more connected to the past than to the present, found it difficult to perceive modern reality. The character, fervor, temperament, and even appearance of Pythagoras resembled that of the handsome young hero Andrei Bolkonsky. The hero of the 1812 War found no place among human incarnations, as the concept of loyalty was most fully embodied in the image of a dog. This incarnated image is more closely tied to the compositional structure of the novel than others. He is one of the main characters throughout all three parts of the novel. His inner, incarnated essence strangely anticipated the fate of the younger generation of the Gradov family. The Battle of Austerlitz repeatedly surfaced in the dog's consciousness: there, Bolkonsky was reborn, and in the Silver Forest, Nina Gradova was reborn. Prince Bolkonsky heroically perished for his homeland on the Borodino field. From the very beginning of the novel, the incarnated image of the prince foretold the downfall of the war hero, Russian officer Marshal Nikita Gradov.

The Russian nobility theme is continued in the interlude "Golubka-Rosset". Alexandra

Smirnova-Rosset was a source of pride not only for the imperial court but also for the literary salons of the early 19th century. There were outstanding poets in her circle such as Zhukovsky, Pushkin, Lermontov, Vyazemsky and Gogol. The brilliant intellect, passionate imagination, keen observation, and elegance of manners attributed to Rosset embodied the spirit and mood of an entire era. Alexandra, absorbed by grand ideas and sensitive to beauty, dreaming of the Library of Alexandria, found herself as a dove in besieged Moscow during the harsh winter of 1943. After witnessing the horrors of wartime, she gathered her courage and decided to seek happiness again where she had once been cherished. She alone challenged the war and negotiated a separate peace. She flew across Europe, carrying the idea of peace, and was embodied in Picasso's painting "Dove of Peace." Alexandra Rosset was the muse for Lermontov and Gogol, and the dove-Rosset became a muse for Picasso.

Two incarnations—the fireflies and the geese—represent the younger generation. Fireflies symbolize graduates from all schools and universities across all times and nations. They represent the fleeting nature of life, with its rise and fall. ⁴ Fireflies embody youth that recognizes no boundaries, no war, no defeat. They have their struggles and paths, illuminated by their inner light. The geese appear precisely when the Gradov family expands. They returned on the night of the grandson's birth — not just as a symbol of a promising future but also as the hope for the medical dynasty. Interestingly, both incarnated images hover in the air, highlighting their superiority.

Separate among the incarnations is the image presented in the intermission "The noise of the oak tree". It is a symbolic image of national thinking connected with the theme of revolution. An eighty-year-old oak tree was growing in the Neskuchny Garden in Moscow. "Its upper branches were murmuring "Batushevich, Batushevich!"; the middle and lower branches were singing Petrashevsky, Petra-shevsky, Petra-shevsky, the clingers in the branches were whistling "Dost! Dost!". ³ The oak tree seemed to remind us of Russian freethinkers, utopian socialists Petroshevsky, Batushevich, and Dostoevsky. The oak encouraged thoughts of revolution and change, and in the shade of its branches, bold ideas were brewing. The noise of its branches pushed the brave and young officers

towards each other. But the oak was lonely, no one supported him: “treacherous dampness” reigned around and the ideas of great changes were not realized. And although the old oak tree did not find like-minded people, it continued to stand. This unwavering resilience of the oak symbolized the enduring strength of Russian revolutionary thought.

Conclusion

The interludes in the novel reveal a striking resemblance to mythological and fairy-tale texts. They create a unified semantic space within the novel. Each interlude is interconnected with the others through thematic oppositions, merging them in various ways. The interludes contain a deep semantic structure that interacts with the novel's plot. The interludes in the "Saga" seamlessly integrate into the broader narrative. While each interlude may focus on a specific aspect of the plot, collectively they create a mosaic that reflects a world built on mystification. The creation of a new parallel reality, where incarnated images coexist with realistic characters, defines the metatext of the novel. The intermissions create a single semantic space in the novel. V. Aksenov creates his model of artistic reality, resorting to the anthropomorphization of events and personalities of Russian history and literature.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, it is recommended to investigate how metatext influences readers' perception and interpretation of the novel and how it shapes their emotional and intellectual appreciation of the work. It is also recommended to use metatext in the "Moscow Saga" for educational purposes to study complex literary devices and their influence on the structure and content of literary works.

Funding

None

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

None

Ethical Consideration

Not Applicable

Informed consent

Not applicable

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