

Environmental Threats in American and Macedonian Dystopian Fiction

Kalina Maleska

“Ss. Cyril and Methodius” University in Skopje

Department of English Language and Literature at “Blaže Koneski” Faculty of Philology

Goce Delcev 9a, 1000 Skopje, North Macedonia

Email: kalina.maleska@flf.ukim.edu.mk

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3656-0969>

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Abstract. Various environmental changes threaten local environments and the world at large. Some of these changes have visible immediate effects on people’s lives, as exemplified by the pollution in the Macedonian capital of Skopje, which for several years has ranked among the world’s most polluted cities. Additionally, global warming is estimated to have devastating consequences for all life on Earth. While American writers have increasingly incorporated discussion of climate change into their fiction, Macedonian literature has rarely delved into environmental issues. Therefore, this article aims to contribute by exploring specific environmental aspects in several previously unexplored Macedonian dystopian works by Branko Prlja, Ivan Šopov and Biljana Crvenkovska. These works are compared to the novel *Forty Signs of Rain* by the American writer Kim Stanley Robinson, analysing the approaches employed in addressing environmental threats. The comparative view, as well as placing all of these works in the context of existing factual information about climate change and pollution, indicates the cultural differences between the narratives, but also the common ground they share about possible responses that may be undertaken to tackle environmental problems.

Keywords: climate change; pollution; Dystopian literature.

Introduction

Numerous scientific studies and literary works in the United States are dedicated to exploring the phenomenon of climate change from various aspects, and examining environmental threats in general. For example, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), is one of the novels investigates the devastating impact of global warming on Earth.

The situation in countries like North Macedonia, which have limited production scale and financial power to affect significantly climate change or the attempts to slow it down, differs greatly. Taking this into consideration, it is understandable that hardly a few literary

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works in the country so far have discussed the theme of global warming. On the other hand, a growing number of novels and short stories focusing on other types of environmental predicaments, such as pollution, driven by the fact that the capital Skopje has been one of the most polluted cities in the past four years. According to media reports, on 18 January 2019, it was the most polluted city in the world. This article examines Macedonian literary works that tackle pollution issues, including Branko Prlja's dystopian novel *Апокалипса. мк* (*Apocalypse.mk*) (2017), Biljana Crvenkovska's *Куќа над брановите* (*House above the Waves*) (2020), and two of Ivan Šopov's stories in his story collection *Хрониките на Арслан Новинарски* (*The Chronicles of Arslan Novinarski*) (2018), in addition to *Forty Signs of Rain*.

What approaches do literary works employ in exploring environmental issues? In what ways do the society to which authors belong influence the themes they address and the techniques they use in constructing narratives that investigate the consequences of climate change or pollution? These questions are central to the discussion in this article. Environmental issues have been scarcely explored in the Macedonian context, particularly in the realms of literary theory and criticism. Therefore, this research aims to foreground the contribution that literary works, especially dystopias, can offer in underlining the importance of addressing the dangers of environmental threats by creating worlds where environmental problems have seriously affected the lives of citizens. Comparing Macedonian and American literary works which deal with various issues that concern the environment has also not been explored, and bringing together climate change and pollution sheds light on how these phenomena in such different contexts nevertheless affect each other both in reinforcing and in the possibilities of mitigating the negative consequences.

The research employs the comparative method to bring together literary works of two different cultures. It does so by discussing them in the light of factual evidence of the problem the works refer to. In that sense, *Forty Signs of Rain* is placed in the context of works that explore climate change from historical, political, social and scientific aspects, such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014) and David A. Collings's *Stolen Future, Broken Present: The Human Significance of Climate Change* (2014), among others. The Macedonian literary works are discussed within the context of news and political statements that relate to pollution issues. We discuss one American novel and three Macedonian prose works because, unlike Robinson's novel, which is focused on climate change, Macedonian literature barely tackles environmental issues. Therefore, only a few segments in the three analysed works deal with environmental threats.

1. Climate change and integrating rationality and sensitivity in *Forty Signs of Rain*

In the context of climate change perils, such as the melting of the northern ice cap and all its consequences, the expected floods, the endangerment of the Sundarbans and

other areas being flooded due to the rise of sea levels, anticipated drafts and more extreme weather conditions, that are likely to bring about starvation and forceful migrations, Ghosh states that artists and writers generally, with some exceptions, fail to address the climate crises. Although he does recognize that there are literary works which convey a sense of anxiety and apocalyptic visions, it is “when I try to think of writers whose imaginative work communicated a more specific sense of the accelerating changes in our environment that I find myself at loss” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 115). Noting several English novelists that have engaged with this topic, Ghosh states that even if there were many others, it would still be true that “the literary mainstream, even as it was becoming *engagé* on many fronts, remained just as unaware of the crisis on our doorstep as the population at large” (2016, p. 115).

In this context, it can be said that Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Forty Signs of Rain* is one of the examples of novels that focus on climate change, discussing it realistically, offering feasible possibilities of how it can be addressed rather than presenting dramatic apocalyptic images or easy and improbable solutions. Within the fictive story of *Forty Signs of Rain*, there are parts that provide scientific explanation of certain phenomena related to global warming. It also directly draws attention to existing environmental threats that can be compared to research and media reports. Pessimism in regard to how much can be done to stop the effects of global warming is pervasive in scientific findings and, likewise, in literature. Referring to several different sources, Collings suggests that in 2007 the threat of northern polar ice cap melting “was real but not absolutely imminent”, and it was believed that there would be time to fight for change through “public debate, the gradual formation of public opinion, the eventual forging of a coalition for Congressional action, and the patient negotiation of an international treaty”; only two years later, however, such “estimate turned out to be much too optimistic” (2014, p. 9).

Written in 2004, Robinson’s novel draws on the possibilities, although certainly not seeing them as naively optimistic, that there is time for the authorities to undertake comprehensive measures for change. Namely, Robinson’s protagonists – Charlie Quibler, Anna Quibler and Frank Vanderwal – are scientists actively involved in undertaking action to improve the situation and mitigate the effects of global warming.

The other protagonists are the Khembalis, Buddhist monks working in the newly opened embassy of the fictional nation of Khembalung in Washington, whom Anna meets and become friends with. Khembalung are an island nation, whose survival is endangered by the rising sea levels threatening to flood the country. Thus, the Khembalis represent the people who are in a way the most direct victims of global warming because the sea is already overflowing their living space (League of Drowning Nations), and they also attempt to do something about it.

The presence and importance of the Khembalis in the novel can be discussed through an issue that is explored both by Robinson and by N. Klein in regard to the role of the smaller nations in climate change, and how they are left to deal with its consequences. Remembering a meeting with Angélica Navarro Llanos, Bolivia’s ambassador to the World Trade Organization, Klein refers to their conversation in which Llanos explained

how Bolivia is highly dependent on glaciers for drinking and irrigation water “and those white-capped mountains that tower over its capital were turning gray and brown at an alarming rate” (2014, p. 12). Emphasizing that countries like Bolivia had done almost nothing for the alarming rate of greenhouse gases emissions and were, therefore

in a position to declare themselves ‘climate creditors,’ owed money and technology support from the large emitters to defray the hefty costs for coping with more climate-related disasters, as well as to help them develop on a green energy path (Klein, 2014, p. 12).

This issue of small countries being victims of climate change without actually being responsible for its devastating effects, as well as of the opportunity to contribute to its mitigation, is likewise explored in the novel, precisely through the attitudes and viewpoints of the Khembalis.

The contact with the Khembalis brings about change in the perceptions of the protagonists. “Symbolically, the displaced island delegation also unsettles the lives of the characters in Washington, causing them to question their own work routines and disciplinary work ethics” (Mehnert, 2016, p. 153). Thus, Charlie and Anna start questioning their routines and focus on their emotional side after the meeting with the Khembalis. In contrast, the political administration is described as utterly rational, yet, paradoxically unaware or unconcerned about the consequences of their actions. In the lectures that the Khembalis – Rudra Cakrin, Drepung – give at the National Science Foundation (NSF), they state that “[a]n excess of reason is itself a form of madness” (Robinson, 2004, p. 119). Extreme rationality, as referred to here, is related to the authorities’ focus on generating money, ignoring the devastating impact of global warming on life on the planet.

Senator Phil Chase, is pushing for a climate bill, mostly under the influence of his friend and advisor Charlie. Charlie’s thoughts about the position of the administration are that the administration is much too concerned about financial gain:

Their [the administration’s] line was that no one knew for sure and it would be much too expensive to do anything about [global warming] even if they were certain it was coming – everything would have to change, the power generation system, cars, a shift from hydrocarbons to helium or something, they didn’t know, and they didn’t own patents or already existing infrastructure for that kind of new thing, so they were going to [...] let the next generation solve their own problems in their own time. In other words, the hell with them. Easier to destroy the world than to change capitalism even one little bit (Robinson, 2004, p. 73).

Charlie’s thoughts make clear his opposition to the administration’s approach to doing nothing – “an approach without any regard to consequences on future generations” (Maleska, 2020, 321). There is much rationality in the reasoning of their position, as the arguments they “find” indicate that no measures should be undertaken. Namely, according to the administration, one doesn’t know for certain if global warming is caused by humans, and it is much too expensive to change the already existing system.

In contrast to this excessive rationality, there are characters who genuinely worry about the possible threats of global warming on the lives of people. Anna's emotional side is predominately shown by her bond with her sons; additionally, Charlie is also represented as being very close to the children. This integration of emotions and reason puts these three characters in the group of people that understand science and its effects on the planet, understand rationally the possible financial losses if changes are made, but also understand that being too rationally concerned with the economic logic would bring about the destruction of human life as well as the life of other species. Consequently, the most sensible course of action for them is not to prioritise financial gain (Maleska, 2020, p. 327).

2. The pollution problem in Skopje

According to a 2019 *Al Jazeera* report, in 2018, "Skopje became the most polluted capital city in Europe, reaching the highest annual mean of PM 2.5, according to the World Health Organization" (Lee and Mickute, 2019). On 19 January 2019, according to the Macedonian Information Agency – MIA, Skopje was proclaimed the most polluted city in the world (Рид, 2019); for this information, MIA refers to the Switzerland-based organization AirVisual. In fact, every winter, the pollution in Skopje goes up to alarmingly high rates (Зивосовска, 2019), and the problem was beginning to be addressed more openly in the media since 2014.

There are many reasons for the pollution. The landscape is such that mountains surround Skopje, by, so a blanket of smog is often formed over the Skopje valley, trapping polluted air in the city. Regarding human factors, the most often cited include heating practices, factories and vehicular traffic. A significant number of the small factories in North Macedonia were built prior to the 1990s and burn brown coal (lignite) as a fuel source, which is cheap but highly polluting. The abundance of aging vehicles, many of which came when the import of old vehicles was allowed in 2010, are also highly polluting and are far from meeting EU environmental standards.

However, it is considered that the greatest culprits for pollution are the combustion processes, and they mostly include household heating. "Another reason for the pollution is that too many citizens, because of their financial situation, use firewood for heating" (Lee and Mickute, 2019). Jani Makraduli, the then Macedonian Vice Minister of Environment, stated for *Al Jazeera*. Most residents cannot afford clean energy heating sources; over 40% turn to firewood to heat their homes. The additional problem is that they burn wood tires and old furniture.

It is pointed out that 1.300 people die annually in North Macedonia (with a population of nearly 2 million) as a result of polluted air. The authorities have been talking about this problem for the past few years, but mainly during the winter, and there are no visible activities that would indicate that something is being undertaken to reduce the pollution.

Therefore, every winter for the past few years, the media are filled with information about the pollution, quoting authorities, and NGOs, surveying citizens about the pollution, protests are organized, and many people express their anger on the social media. However,

when it comes to literary works, the issue of pollution is not much tackled. Prlja's *Апокалипса.мк* and Šopov's *Хрониките на Арслан Новинарски* and Crvenkovska's *Куќа над брановите* are among the few prose works that consider this topic, even if it is not the central topic of either of them.

3. Fear of deterioration of environmental problems in Macedonian literature

Апокалипска.мк is a dystopian novel, one of the very few novels of this genre in Macedonian literature. It is not surprising, therefore, that it incorporates numerous aspects from other utopian works from the past rather than creating a future vision based on problems that exist in the current political and social context. However, the author tells us at the end that it was inspired by reality as the author writes in a note at the end, "New Macedonia" (the name of the country in the novel's future) „е тоталитарна држава во духот на Океанија од делото *1984* на Џ. Орвел и содржи елементи на прекрасниот нов свет на А. Хаксли“¹ (Прља, 2017, p. 235). Indeed, the society described in the novel bears a striking resemblance to that of Oceania.

The protagonists are Toma Hansov, a writer, and Nikola Slejt, a scientist. Both rebel against the system in different ways, but they are somewhat stereotypical as characters, and there is no convincing explanation of how they came to dislike the system among all the other citizens who worship it. Nikola Slejt is taken to an underground lab, managed by the state, where he is working on his machine, which is supposed to provide free energy. The focus on this machine addresses the theme of pollution most visibly. After a certain period, he uses a favourable moment to escape by using a teleportation option and finds rebels in the forests outside the city (very much like Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*). In the meantime, Toma Hansov is writing a book which is supposed to expose the oppressive system and encourage the people to rebel. Near the end, we find out that the fictional story that he invented in his novel actually describes the real life of Nikola Slejt, the explanation being that Nikola Slejt had somehow accidentally sent signals from a mindreading machine in the underground lab to Toma Hansov.

The element most closely related to the reality of North Macedonia is the emphasis on pollution. Pollution is one of many ecological themes that literary works can explore, as T. Clark suggests, referring to examples from parts of the world and historical periods. "A broad archive is now building up, tracing different conceptions of nature and their effect throughout the history and cultures of the world" (Clark, 2011, p. 20). Seemingly a local problem, pollution in Prlja's novel is placed in the general context of environmental change, especially the deterioration of this problem in all large cities, thus connecting it to global environmental perils. In fact, the cover of the novel shows a person with a gas mask and

¹ is a totalitarian state in the spirit of Oceania from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and contains elements of Huxley's *Brave New World*.

a background filled with smoke. This is a clear indication of the intention of the novel to foreground pollution. And it does make it clear on several occasions that „воздухот во мега-градот беше толку лош што никој со здрав разум не излегуваше надвор ако не мораше“² (Прља, 2017, p. 46). Although the most prominent issues are the political ones since the story mainly revolves around the characters who are in conflict with the dictatorial regime, still environmental problems are present. In that sense, the novel is an early example in Macedonian literature that brings to discuss them. Undoubtedly, this increasing interest discussing pollution in fiction is closely related to the dire situation in Skopje.

Thus, it is stated in the novel that

Маски можеа да се најдат по илегални извори, но никој немаше храброст да ги носи. Прво ќе го осудеа и ќе го исмееја од заедницата, да се плашиш за сопственото здравје е знак на слабост и недоверба кон Државата која совршено се грижеше за нив (Прља, 2017, p. 46)³.

The pollution is due to the fact that a mega-city, New Skopje, was created by connecting the capital with many nearby cities, and the large industrial zone in the western part of the country. The urban setting of New Skopje is described as being full of smoke as well as full of garbage. It is exactly because he wants to reduce pollution that the scientist Nikola made it his life goal to create a machine that was supposed to generate electricity in an ecological way through the soil (p. 80). However, in later developments, the government combines his machine with two others that have different functions (mindreading and teleportation) and creates a machine that controls people's behaviour. The novel also creates a dichotomy between the polluted mega-city and nature, the countryside with forests, which appears for the first time in the second half of the novel after Nikola is teleported to nature to join the rebels. It's significant that the other protagonist, Toma, along with his family, manages to escape the city and in the end, begin a new life in nature.

Хрониките на Арслан Новинарски by Ivan Šopov is not a dystopian work as the others mentioned. However, it employs an innovative literary approach. It is a collection of short stories that resemble journalistic articles that report about news in some kind of a parallel world, using humour, irony and hyperbolization of the reactions of the authorities to very real existing problems we face in daily life in North Macedonia. As Šopov says in the forward to the book, he has attempted „да бидам хроничар на перверзната стварност што ја живееме“⁴ (2018, p. 5). Thus, they are ironic and sarcastic responses to the political, social and economic situation in the country. This is also tackled by the author:

² the air in the megacity of Skopje was so bad that no rational person would go out if they did not have to.

³ gas masks could be found through illegal sources, but no one had the courage to wear them. Such a person would be condemned and mocked by the community, since being concerned with your own health is a sign of sickness and mistrust towards the State, which took perfect care to protect its citizens.

⁴ to be a chronicler of the perverse reality that we live in.

Понекогаш, беше премногу лесно да се исмева и пародира глупоста. Но честопати тоа беше речиси невозможно – сатиричарот е доведен во корсокак кога стварноста е пародија. Можно ли е да се пародира пародијата?! (p. 5)⁵.

One of the stories, „Поради загаденоста на воздухот, надлежните апелираат граѓаните да се воздржат од дишење“ (Due to Air Pollution, the Authorities Appeal to the Citizens to Refrain from Breathing), was originally written in 2013. After the introductory passage, the journalist quotes officials from the Ministry of Environment, saying

Би било идеално граѓаните воопшто да не дишат. Оние, пак, кои нема да издржат, треба да се потрудат да дишат што е можно помалку, само кога е навистина нужно (Шопов, 2018, p. 91)⁶.

The same officials expressed hope that the citizens would become resilient to the polluted air.

Во тек се преговори со повеќе скопски загадувачи [...] за воведување happy hour за дишење, кога тие треба да престанат со работа околу шеесет минути во денот, велат од Министерството за животна средина (p. 91)⁷.

The other story is a kind of continuation of the first one. Entitled „На токсикологија примени 246 лица кои претерале со дишење“ (246 Persons with Breathing Overdose Admitted at the Toxicology Ward), the report quotes Dr. Katran Belodrobchev stating: „Загрижени сме што од 246 лица, 200 беа малолетни. Трендот на предидување кај младите не е новина, но сè повеќе зема замав“⁸ (Шопов, 2018, p. 157). Belodrobchev considers that the authorities should take more serious measures towards the prevention of and raising awareness about the problem of breathing overdose, especially among young people.

Similarly, as in *Forty Signs of Rain*, the responsibility here is located in the authorities. Namely, the authorities are not taking any measures to tackle the pollution problem, leaving the citizens to suffer all the consequences, and only occasionally introducing certain short-term, ineffective measures such as providing free but transportation for a few days during the height of pollution. Imitating the objective journalistic style while parodying the situations and reactions has the effect of foregrounding the absurdity of the lack of concern for a phenomenon that often has serious, sometimes even fatal, consequences.

⁵ Sometimes, it was too easy to mock and parody stupidity. But often it was almost impossible – for the satirical writer is brought to a dead-end when reality is parody. Is it possible to parody parody?!

⁶ It would be ideal for the citizens not to breathe at all. Those who can't refrain from it, should at least try to breathe as little as little as possible, only when it's really necessary.

⁷ We are negotiating with several facilities that cause pollution in Skopje [...] for the introduction of *happy hour* for breathing, when they are supposed to halt their work for about sixty minutes a day, the Ministry of Environment officials say.

⁸ We are worried that out of the 246 persons, around 200 were minors. The trend of breathing overdose among the young is not new, but lately it has increased.

Pollution and climate change are brought together most closely, and their interdependence is explored in Crvenkovska's *Кужа над брановите*, a postapocalyptic novel that presents a devastated Earth as a consequence of global warming. The novel divided into three parts, narrates the story of Bela and Lukijan, who exchange messages in interplanetary space. Bela remains on the Earth, no longer recognizable as most life on it has been obliterated.

In contrast, Lukijan has been sent to Jupiter's moon Callisto on a mission to observe an unusual black hole, which „како да одбира што ќе проголта“⁹ (Crvenkovska, 2020, p. 31). The third part, titled “Silence”, „од записите на Ал Арал во колективната меморија на Помначите“¹⁰ (ibid, p. 127) is composed of poems that resemble mythological narratives of the disappearance and renewal of life on Earth. Rather than stopping with the apocalyptic vision of devastation, this last part brings the story to a possible revival of nature and developing closeness between nature and humankind. A parallel can be drawn with several Haitian and Mexican dystopian works analyzed by G. Champion in “Ecopocalyptic Visions in Haitian and Mexican Landscapes of Exploitation”. Referring to the novels that she discusses in her chapter on *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction*, Champion suggests that

[t]he uplifting ending of each novel is possible because in all three works time is not perceived in a linear manner in accordance with the Western Gregorian calendar, which would make the apocalypse the end point, but is cyclical, promising a spirit of renewal” (Champion, 2020, p. 145).

The same is true of *Кужа над брановите*, where the spirit of renewal is expressed in the poems that compose the end of the novel. Bela lives on a small island, is one of the last remains of land on the Earth that has been engulfed by the Oceans. This imagery draws on the same assumptions indicated by Collings (2014), Klein (2014), and Ghosh (2016) of the precariousness of the northern icecap melting that is likely to cause a rise in sea levels. This topic, explored in *Forty Signs of Rain*, is brought here to a more extreme point, as the temporal setting of the novel is a more distant future. In this dystopian setting, the exchanged letters between Bela and Lukian tell the story of love, loneliness and despair. As A. Milner suggests, “[i]n climate fiction, the range of textual variants is not, however, simply a matter of eutopia or dystopia, but also of different responses to climate change itself” (2020, p. 80). Unlike the other two Macedonian literary works discussed here that only occasionally refer to environmental issues while their focus is on other political and social matters, *Кужа над брановите* is an instance of climate fiction, and therefore can be placed within the typology of responses to climate change that Milner proposes. “Instances of all six kinds of response – denial, mitigation as engineering, positive adaptation, negative adaptation, deep ecology, fatalism – can be observed in climate fiction.” (Milner, 2020, p. 81). While Milner places Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy, of which *Forty*

⁹ seems to choose what it shall devour.

¹⁰ from the written records of Al Aral in the collective memory of Those Who Remember.

Signs of Rain is a part, *Куќа над брановите* can be said to belong to the fatalism category, considering its postapocalyptic setting, followed by a promise of new life in the future, which, however, is not going to be created by the current undertaking of humans to stop or mitigate the consequences of climate change.

Conclusion

All four narratives discussed here, even when their setting is the future, are based on problems that are currently in focus, as was shown by the research on global warming and news articles reporting on pollution. In terms of literary response to environmental problems, we could deduce a few things from this analysis: in countries such as North Macedonia, where global climate changes are not thoroughly studied and which do not have any significant influence on either global warming or the efforts to reduce it, global warming is rarely discussed in the literature. In discussing environmental threats, writers are more concerned with problems that have a direct effect on the lives of people. In this case, it is the pollution which causes serious health problems among the population and reportedly, at least 1.300 cases of death a year are attributable to pollution. These books also show that, unlike the story in *Forty Signs of Rain*, the decisions and ways of fighting against pollution are much more in the hands of authorities (rather) than in the hands of scientists. Namely, developments in science in North Macedonia are also greatly dependent on the economic situation in the country and the distribution of resources by authorities.

Robinson's protagonists, such as Charlie, Anna and Frank, are all scientists actively involved in finding possible solutions or methods of improving the situation with climate change. On the other hand, Prlja's and Šopov's and Crvenkovska's characters are mostly powerless; they experience pollution or global warming but are unable to mitigate it or do not actively participate in changing the situation, except for Nikola Seljt. Even Nikola, who works on a machine that would provide clean energy (electricity), has his invention taken by the authorities, which use the machine for their own goals.

As Robinson's novel shows, in countries such as the U.S., where there is extensive research conducted on the phenomenon of global warming and where the phenomenon has a more prominent place in the media, it has become a focus in literature. *Forty Signs of Rain* suggests that scientists may be working on long-term solutions, although they, too, face conservative governing structures that make decisions based on financial interests rather than on scientific evidence, even when those decisions affect all people on Earth.

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