

## THE PORTRAYAL OF NATIONAL SENTIMENT IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN NOVELS



<https://doi.org/10.24412/2181-1784-2025-26-349-355>

**Liu Tao**

PhD, Associate Professor

Shanghai International Studies University

Email: liutao@shisu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** *Post-Soviet Russian novels vividly reflect the turbulent social reality and the desperate, frenzied national sentiment in Russia. Representative works include those centered on the theme of "despair," exemplified by the writings of Rasputin and Yekimov, and those exploring "madness," as seen in the works of Makanin and Medvedev. The desperate and frenzied national sentiment serves as the central theme running through post-Soviet Russian novels, widely manifested across numerous literary works. Scholars have reached a consensus on this observation.*

**Keywords:** *Post-Soviet era, Russian novels, national sentiment, despair, madness, Rasputin, Yekimov, Makanin, Medvedev*

*\*This article is a phased achievement of the National Social Science Fund - General Project "Study of Post-Soviet Russian Novels and National Psychological Portrayal" (24BWW059).*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian novels authentically captured the tumultuous social reality and the desperate, frenzied national sentiment. In the works of Russian writers, the harsh realities oppress people's hearts and lives, driving them to despair and robbing them of rationality. These novels reflecting the desperate and frenzied national sentiment can be broadly categorized into two types: first, those centered on the theme of "despair," represented by the works of Rasputin and Yekimov; second, those exploring "madness," exemplified by the writings of Makanin and Medvedev.

In the post-Soviet era, urban life became a focal point for the renowned writer Valentin Rasputin, with despair and destruction emerging as central themes in his works. In his short stories *The Burial* (1995) and *The New Profession* (1998), Rasputin depicts the plight of city dwellers in the post-Soviet era. The protagonist of *The Burial*, Bashuda, lived a comfortable life during the Soviet period. However, after retirement, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, she is forced to take

on menial jobs like dishwashing to make ends meet. Even such a job is eventually lost, leaving her threatened by hunger and cold. Through Bashuda's tragic life path, the author succinctly portrays the hardships faced by retirees in the post-Soviet era. At this juncture, her elderly mother passes away, but she cannot afford a proper Orthodox funeral. Consequently, she secretly buries her mother in a small forest on the outskirts. The author subtly indicates that this is not an isolated incident but a widespread social phenomenon in post-Soviet Russia. As the story notes, the kind-hearted people around Bashuda are equally impoverished, and even if she were to borrow money from everywhere, it would likely be insufficient. When Bashuda visits her mother's grave in spring, she discovers two new mounds beside it, suggesting that other impoverished individuals, like her, have secretly buried their loved ones there due to their inability to afford funeral expenses. One can even imagine that the number of such graves will continue to grow. What, then, is the cause of such widespread poverty and hardship in the lives of the Russian people? The author directs his criticism toward contemporary Russian society. Bashuda angrily remarks, "Now we have entered this hopeless era, where everything we once relied on for survival has vanished... Nothing is left... They should have poisoned all the people from the past before starting this shameless, conscience-less order" (Rasputin 1999:306). In the face of this cruel reality, the only solace she finds is in religion. At the end of the story, "Bashuda stops by a church. For the first time, she stands alone under the icon, laboriously raising her hand to make the sign of the cross" (Rasputin 1999:329). This moment fully demonstrates the social comforting function of religion, as Marx said: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions" (Marx 1972:2). It is noteworthy that while the Orthodox burial customs—"the ancient, stricter-than-any-law farewell ritual"—plunge Bashuda into difficulty, it is also Orthodoxy that provides her with spiritual comfort. This highlights the profound influence of Orthodox traditions on the Russian people. Although the Orthodox burial customs cause suffering for the protagonist, the author does not criticize Orthodoxy itself; instead, he condemns the post-Soviet Russian society that pushes Bashuda into despair.

*The New Profession* reflects the tragic situation of intellectuals in the post-Soviet era. The protagonist, Alyosha, was once a successful young scientist who headed a laboratory and owned a three-room apartment. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, misfortunes befall him one after another: his wife of seven years divorces him; the laboratory is closed, and he becomes unemployed; a second failed marriage costs him the one-room apartment from his first marriage, forcing him to move into a university dormitory. "Half his life has passed, and Alyosha has ended

up with nothing" (Rasputin 2000: 15). To make a living, he reluctantly takes on a new profession: impersonating a relative of the newlyweds at weddings to enliven the festivities. He attends various weddings and witnesses the disgraceful behaviors of the new Russian rich. He no longer harbors illusions about the future and avoids thinking about life to prevent sleepless nights. He contemplates that he might later treat insomniacs, as "nowadays, thousands, even millions of people suffer from deteriorating sleep quality" (Rasputin, *The New Profession*: 23). This is undoubtedly a vivid depiction of the hard times in post-Soviet Russia. At the end of the story, he mutters "worse and worse" as he falls asleep. The author connects Alyosha's personal fate with the fate of the nation, revealing their interconnectedness. Alyosha's first divorce coincides with the collapse of the Soviet Union: "Their divorce happened just as the country, the land, faith, history, laws, and viewpoints—all were being divided, everything fell apart, half the world was overturned. Their family disintegrated along with it. Thus, there was no point in asking whose fault it was within the family. What did it matter? Everything had collapsed, everything had fallen apart. People from different constellations madly hated each other, and the ending millennium carelessly revealed the beginning of another. Universal panic drove everyone insane. They were doomed; it was providence" [Rasputin, *The New Profession*: 14]. This carries a hint of fatalism, as the author views past events as "providence." In reality, Alyosha's rapid descent into poverty after the Soviet collapse is an inevitable consequence of Russia's economic collapse. As the saying goes: "When the nest is overturned, no egg remains intact." If the entire nation is in crisis, how can individuals emerge unscathed? In post-Soviet Russia, intellectuals like Alyosha are everywhere. The author expresses not only humanitarian concern but also deep anxiety about the fate of the Russian nation: "Perhaps, it is not only people who suffer from cancer, but also cities and countries" [Rasputin, *The New Profession*: 21]. In the author's view, Russia is already afflicted with cancer and on the verge of death.

Rasputin's other stories from the 1990s also critique reality, such as *In the Hospital* (1995), *Completely Unexpected* (1997), *The Wooden House* (1998), and *In the Hometown* (1999). "The author views contemporary Russian society and authorities with a 'catastrophic mindset,' and the negation of Russian social reality constitutes the base tone and passion of Rasputin's novels from the nineties" [Ren Guangxuan 2000:25]. In the author's view, post-Soviet Russia could easily be reduced to a shell, like the "wooden house" burned down. Deeply concerned for his country and people, the author uses his stories to warn against disaster and destruction.

Boris Yekimov approaches life from different angles in his short stories,

reflecting the crisis-ridden reality of Russia. In *The Kitten on the Roof* (1996), the male protagonist loses his job and income due to a factory closure. His only way out is to go to Chechnya to fight. He knows full well that he will "likely not return alive," but he has no other choice. He adopts a homeless kitten. A week later, "the kitten disappeared. Having grown stronger, it left. Since it was free-spirited, let it go freely. Besides, the weather wasn't too cold yet. The sun still provided warmth, and the trees were still green. It would survive" [Yekimov 1999:17]. The male protagonist cares about the kitten's survival. However, readers cannot help but wonder: if the kitten can survive, can the protagonist—the "male protagonist" who went to Chechnya—survive? If he meets an untimely end, can his wife and daughter survive? The contrasting situations of the cat and the humans evoke the sigh: "Born in troubled times, humans are worse off than dogs." The author uses generic terms like "male protagonist," "female protagonist," and "daughter" to refer to the family members, clearly intending to show through this vague generalization that this family's tragic situation is not an isolated phenomenon but a typical and widespread one in post-Soviet Russia. Thousands of Russian families experience similar partings and tragedies, thousands of men take similar risks for livelihood, and thousands of women and daughters struggle helplessly against reality, awaiting their fate. This profound concern for survival undoubtedly resonates strongly with Russian readers.

In *By the Cold Water* (1996), the author portrays a homeless man from the Caucasus, Sashka. He originally worked at a hydroelectric power station in the mountains, but the Chechnya war took his wife and children from him, forcing him to leave his homeland. Consumed by hatred for the "murderers," he plans to blow up the dam so that "those who shot and those who didn't... those who killed and those who sent them to kill" [Yekimov 1999:8] will all perish. However, the author does not state this directly but implies it through subtle hints, allowing readers to deduce these details themselves. The author also does not explicitly state Sashka's whereabouts after his disappearance, merely noting: "Later Sashka disappeared, leaving behind a strange gift—a magazine illustration pasted on the wall: a tall dam, water, mountains. Mikhalych began to fantasize" [Yekimov 1999:9]. He imagines that Sashka might blow up the dam. Thereafter, Mikhalych turns on the radio every night before bed, "listening and fearing. It seemed like the disaster would be announced any moment. It hasn't been announced yet, thank goodness. Not yet..." [Yekimov 1999:10]. Although the disaster has not happened "yet," it could occur at any moment. And even if not by Sashka, someone else might initiate large-scale destruction, for there are too many people like "Sashka" who have lost loved ones and are filled with hatred due to the war. In Mikhalych's nightly radio-listening

habit, the author captures and conveys the social panic of "impending storm." Through his seemingly impassive narration, it is evident that the author sympathizes with Sashka to some extent but does not endorse his violent retaliation. The author aims to expose and criticize all "those who kill and those who send them to kill," including Sashka himself.

If these two authors depict reality through realistic techniques, then Makanin and Medvedev use absurdity to allude to reality. This is not merely a matter of creative technique but is related to the authors' worldviews. In their view, Russian reality has transcended the boundaries of rationality, becoming impossible to comprehend through reason—it is entirely a picture of madness.

In his novel *The Hole* (1991), Vladimir Makanin fabricates two worlds connected by a "hole": the above-ground world and the underground world. The above-ground world is a mad, irrational world: open robbery, street rape, paralyzed transportation, dysfunctional telephones, material shortages, "no movies, no entertainment." The underground world has a stable life order, superior material conditions, and people live comfortably and freely. The above-ground and underground worlds clearly allude to two distinctly different states of life. At the end of the story, in the protagonist Klyucharyov's consciousness, the two worlds merge into one. "It was as if he was simultaneously in both spaces, but since it's the same nation, the same land, what's strange about two spaces overlapping into one location?" [Makanin 1999:117]. Thus, the above-ground world likely refers to Russia, while the underground world represents the Russian émigré society in the West. However, even people in the underground world hold no hope for the future. In a social survey conducted in a café, people one after another return their "tickets to the future," stating, "Too much blood has been shed, too many tears have been flown, so we no longer believe, no longer harbor any illusions about that future full of blood and tears" [Makanin 1999:122]. Faced with this hopeless future, what should be done? Klyucharyov has a nightmare in which thousands of blind men's canes are pulled up through the hole. He comprehends the profound meaning: "These are canes for the blind emphasis in the original. When darkness completely descends, please tap the asphalt road with your cane and move forward. That is the entire answer" [Makanin 1999:131]. This inevitably brings to mind the saying, "A blind man rides a blind horse, approaching a deep pool at midnight," and the final scene of Akira Kurosawa's film *Ran*: a blind man taps his cane as he walks toward the edge of a bottomless cliff. Could it be that, in the author's view, this is the true portrayal of Russians in the post-Soviet era?

Another equally absurd story is *An Absurd Story* (1992) by Sergei Medvedev, which consists of two absurd tales. In the first story, an accountant at a firm, Anton



Antonovich K, who is about to retire, cannot find his home one evening after work. He lives on the fourteenth floor, but the elevator only goes up to the twelfth floor. Outside the building, "he counted the floors of this building: there were only twelve, but he lived on the fourteenth floor" [Medvedev 1999:160]. Ultimately, the protagonist ends up on the open rooftop of the twelfth floor. Three days later, the building management workers discover his frozen body. Anton Antonovich's surname, K, is the same as that of the land surveyor in Kafka's *The Castle*, and they share similar experiences: the land surveyor K exhausts every effort but cannot enter the castle, while Anton Antonovich K cannot return to his own home. The fundamental difference lies in their goals: one aims for the castle, the other for his home; one is an external, never-attained illusion, the other is a lost self-root; being unable to enter the castle may be inconsequential, but being unable to find home results in death. Kafka's intended message in *The Castle* might be that human ideals are always unattainable. In contrast, Medvedev's *An Absurd Story* presents a portrait of Russians being homeless and losing their self-identity. The story's timing suggests it is a consequence of the Soviet collapse: Russians lost their former homeland, just as they lost their yesterday's home. The neighbors who pretend not to recognize Anton Antonovich K may allude to the former Soviet republics. The "I" in the second story, who "lives in solitude," might be the embodiment of a former Soviet republic. What "I" desires is solitude, for which "I" kills his girlfriend and two journalists and even shoots down a helicopter with a machine gun. A colonel sets up a defense system of traps and signaling devices for "I" and equips him with various weapons. This madman who craves "to live a quiet life alone" wants to use a "briefcase" (is it the one with the nuclear button?) to "make the world stay away from him" and bring everything to an end. Here, the author likely hints at the surging trend of ethnic independence and autonomy in the post-Soviet era, using metaphors to point out the madness and disastrous consequences of this tendency. The flames of war in Chechnya prove that the author's concerns are not unfounded fears.

Of course, the above works are not the only ones that express the desperate and frenzied national sentiment of the post-Soviet era. This sentiment is the main theme running through post-Soviet Russian novels and is universally reflected in a large number of works. As Professor Zhang Jianhua states: "'Death' as a state of mind is a 'cloud map' of the current transformation of the Russian national mentality. Blindness, loss, helplessness, rootlessness, and lack of goals and ideals characterize this spiritual death" [Zhang Jianhua 1999:90]. Professor Zheng Yongwang points out: "The literature of Fin-de-Siècle Russia is one that questions the crisis of death... For Russian literature at the end of the century, death is no longer an individual

matter but a state of dying condition built upon the overall crisis of the entire society, rather than death itself" [Zheng Yongwang 2000:25-26]. Thus, regarding the portrayal of desperate and frenzied national sentiment in post-Soviet Russian novels, scholars have reached a consensus.

### **Bibliography**

[1] Rasputin, Valentin. The Burial. Translated by Ren Guangxuan. In Zhou Qichao, Within Your Gates: Selected Novellas of New Russia. Kunlun Publishing House, 1999.

[2] Marx, Karl. Selected Works of Marx and Engels. People's Publishing House, 1972, Volume 1.

[3] Rasputin, Valentin. The New Profession. Translated by Liu Tao. Russian Literature and Art, no. 1 (2000).

[4] Ren Guangxuan. A New Rasputin Has Emerged: A Review of Rasputin's Recent Novellas. Russian Literature and Art, no. 1 (2000).

[5] Yekimov, Boris. The Kitten on the Roof. Translated by Yang Xiujie. Russian Literature and Art, no. 3 (1999).

[6] Yekimov, Boris. By the Cold Water. Translated by Sui Ran. Russian Literature and Art, no. 3 (1999).

[7] Makanin, Vladimir. The Hole. Translated by Dong Xiao. In Zhou Qichao, Within Your Gates: Selected Novellas of New Russia. Kunlun Publishing House, 1999.

[8] Medvedev, Sergei. An Absurd Story. Translated by Fan Jieqing. In Wu Zelin, Maria, Don't Cry: Selected Short Stories of New Russia. Kunlun Publishing House, 1999.

[9] Zhang Jianhua. Introducing a New Realist Novel of 1990s Russia: Do Not Die Before Your Death Comes." Foreign Literature, no. 6 (1999).

[10] Zheng Yongwang. On Fin-de-Siècle Russian Literature. Journal of Xinjiang University(Social Sciences Edition), vol. 28, no. 4 (December 2000).