

The Artistic World of Russian New Realist Writer Roman Senchin

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Abstract

“New realism”, emerging at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, stands as a significant literary movement within contemporary Russian literature. Its inception occurred in a culturally diverse and liberated milieu, targeting reviving critical thinking and meaning-seeking within the realm of traditional realism poetics. This all-encompassing literary trend incorporates diverse avant-garde techniques, including elements of postmodernism, all while maintaining a foundation in the principles of realism. Roman Senchin, a representative writer of Russian “New Realism”, epitomizes the creative ideas and aesthetic features inherent in this movement. Senchin’s narratives are crafted through autobiographical writing and the portrayal of the ebb and life stream. This article provides a concise overview of Senchin’s thematic presentation, character portrayal, and artistic expression, shedding light on the creative style and literary aspirations of ‘New Realism’ as exemplified by Senchin.

Key words: New realism; Roman Senchin; Autobiographical; Art world; Contemporary Russian literature

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, Russian literature has witnessed a

significant shift towards realism. The new generation of Russian writers is exploring ideological, intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic attitudes in the cultural space, marking a transition to a new phase in contemporary Russian literature. Postmodern cultural thought features the declaration of Roland Barthes that “the author is dead” and Julia Kristeva’s statement that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1986, p.37). Nevertheless, these ideas are gradually losing their relevance. In the context of the drastic transformation of contemporary Russian social reality, a new form of literature, known as “neo-realism”, is emerging. It is mainly characterized by objectivity, a documentary style, and a lack of sentimentality. This innovative approach to writing distinguishes itself from traditional forms of realism, given the fact that authors strive for the utmost authenticity and precision in depicting reality.

The term “new realism” has sparked intense debates and discussions in publications like *Literary Russia* («Литературная Россия»), *Literary Newspaper* («Литературная газета»), *Banner* («Знамя»), *New World* («Новый Мир»), and *Literature Questions* («Вопросы литературы»). Critics held varying opinions, but many acknowledged that literature took an unforeseen path: ‘...the 2000s turned out to be vastly different from what was anticipated. It is doubtful that anyone in 1999 could have foreseen the emergence of the literary trend that now appears evident and organic in 2009...the enchanting trend will lean towards realism’ (Danilkin, 2010, p.142).

The ‘New Realists’ criticize postmodernism as a distinct movement in art that fails to address the fate of the modern individual. These writers defend the interests of classical Russian literature, concentrating on psychological anthropocentrism. The prose of “New Realism” aims to rely on a “human document,” reconcile Soviet and anti-Soviet discourses, and explore “avant-gardism in conservatism” (Kovtun, 2018, p.320). In this movement, the representatives include S. Shargunov,

A. Karasev, A. Babchenko, G. Sadulaeva, Z. Prilepin, M. Elizarova, R. Senchin, I. Abuzyarova, and others. They meticulously describe their ‘new reality’. Without idealization, without symbolism, without generalization, at the level of physiological sketches, they describe the dirty real world of today’s youth” (Bondarenko, 2003). The characters of the new generation are held together by a thirst to escape modernity (through revelry, drunkenness, and drugs) into another reality, which turns out to be even more unacceptable and vile. They lack confidence in people, especially in themselves, and are alienated from the world. External confusion, complexes and internal dissatisfaction constitute the portrait of the hero.

Roman Valeryevich Senchin (1971-) is a renowned contemporary Russian novelist and literary critic, representing the epitome of ‘new realism’ literature. Born in Kyzyl, the capital of the Tuva Republic in Russia, Roman Senchin is a representative of a new generation of Russian writers whose formative years, high school, and army service were spent under the Soviet regime, while the start of his writing career coincided with the collapse of the USSR. There are primarily two features that distinguish Senchin’s work from that of his contemporary writers: a Siberian background, and a consistent use of *chernukha* or “black realism”. The term originates from the Stalin-period prohibition to *ocherniat*, “to slander” (literally “to blacken”) Soviet life. To be specific, *Chernukha* is characterized by an unsentimental exploration of the most repellent perspectives of Russian life—alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, gratuitous violence, rape, bleak drudgery of work and family life, and characters defined (Pavlenko, 2009).

Throughout his literary career, Senchin has published a large number of short stories and collections, including “Athens Nights” (2000), “Minus” (2001), “Nubuck” (2002), “Onward and Upward on Dead Batteries” (2008), “The Yeltyshevs” (2009), “The Information” (2011), “Tuva” (2013), “Whaddya Want?”, (2014) “Flood Zone” (2015), “Rain in Paris” (2018), as well as “Russian Winter” (2022) and “Tenth: recent prose”(2023). He is probably best known for *The Yeltyshevs*, a 2009 novel depicting the demise of a provincial family. Many readers deem *The Yeltyshevs*—a dark novel fitting squarely into a naturalistic genre known as *chernukha* that inventories societal and personal ills of post-Soviet life—as Senchin’s breakout novel.

Widely acknowledged as a prominent figure in contemporary Russian literature, Roman Senchin is described by Aleksey Rekemchuk as “offering social resistance to the turbulent world of the present.”(Rekemchuk, 2000, p.32). Rekemchuk even coined the term “Senchin phenomenon” (феномен Сенчина) to encapsulate his impact on 21st-century Russian literature. Despite this, critics who oppose this perspective highlight that Senchin mainly revolves

around disenchanted “outsiders, criticizing his novels for being extreme both in form and content, and some even view him as lacking the necessary intellectual depth. Moreover, detractors even categorize him as a writer devoid of creativity, imagination, and, in the view of some people, the fundamental ability to create.”(Belyakov, 2009, p.14) Despite Senchin’s consistently independent stance, debates surrounding his creative persona, aesthetic inclinations, and the intrinsic value of his works have consistently placed him in the literary limelight. As said by S. Chuprinin, “Senchin can be considered one of the most controversial contemporary writers.” (Chuprinin, 2007, p.371) Nevertheless, the fact that a writer’s body of work can provoke such fervent debate underlines the inherent value underlying his creations.

Senchin staunchly opposes literary falsehoods, viewing faithfulness to reality as the paramount principle of literary creation. He contends that a work can only possess literary spirit and national significance when it remains true to reality. Senchin asserts, “New realism can also be referred to as brutal realism, depicting subjects that we can genuinely feel in our reality. If fiction is indeed necessary, then the fabricated content must also align with real circumstances.”(Spiridonov, 2004) As a writer who came of age during the Soviet era, Senchin went through profound inner turmoil under the country’s upheavals. His literary journey began within society and finally returned to society, embodying life ideals and a sense of mission through serious real-life subjects. In addition, he approached the world with an uncompromising attitude, revealing the harsh subjugation and relentless devouring of individual personalities by the mundane and trivial aspects of life.

2. SENCHIN’ AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

Autobiographical fiction is a genre of novels that is constructed, imagined, and processed through artistic techniques based on the author’s personal experiences. Despite being categorized as fiction, autobiographical novels require the protagonist to closely align with the author as the prototype, and the plot should have a certain degree of authenticity. Readers can gain insights into the author’s personal life through the work, as the protagonist is expected to be modelled after the author, and the narrative must possess a certain level of truthfulness.

The infusion of “autobiographical” elements into the creation of novels has shown up as a distinctive feature within contemporary Russian realism literature, notably evident in the early works of Roman Senchin. These literary pieces present abundant instances of autobiographical writing, skillfully weaving together the author’s personal background and life experiences. Senchin authentically “speaks from experience” when

shaping characters, at times equating or closely aligning them with the author, and occasionally maintaining the protagonist's name the same as his own. Alternatively, authors may partially embody themselves in the roles of the characters, seamlessly integrating real experiences into the narrative. In this way, plotlines can be deeply rooted in reality, intertwining the fates of the author and the characters, thereby blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional within the text. At the same time, such an approach brings novels closer to literary forms like biography and memoir, diminishing the distinction between fiction and these genres.

For instance, in "Nubuck", the protagonist embarks on a quest for self-discovery in the metropolis, facing adversities in the business realm before returning to his hometown in the end. "Onward and Upward on Dead Batteries" intricately probes into the delicate equilibrium between life and the challenges confronted by emerging writers. The narrative of "Inspiration" delineates the impoverished circumstances of a student relocating from a province to pursue writing studies at the Gorky Literary Institute in the capital, offering objective insights into life and the craft of writing. In "The Information", Senchin meticulously chronicles the transformation of values and perspectives on love experienced by an affluent husband following his wife's betrayal. Via these diverse narratives, Senchin's literary works adeptly capture the struggles, realities, and existential reflections of characters navigating the intricacies of life and creative pursuits.

The themes explored in these novels are intricately entwined with the author's well-documented life experiences. To illustrate, in the early 1990s, Senchin engaged in a series of occupations such as a stevedore, assembler, and janitor. Additionally, he ventured to St. Petersburg for business. Subsequently, in 1996, he successfully secured admission to the Gorky Institute of World Literature, marking the commencement of his literary journey. Thus, it can be said that Senchin's creations are everywhere taken from his personal experience, but everywhere, through the assumption of a fictional character, he elevates his personal experience into the universal experience of Russians and even of mankind.

In most of his works, R. Senchin chooses a stable form of contact between the author and the protagonist: they come closer, often coinciding in the name and key events of the biography. For example, the protagonist in the short story "Marvelous" is named Roman Valerievich Senchin, identical to the author's name, patronymic, and surname. In other works, protagonists often have names like Roman (Роман), Roma (Рома), and surnames such as Senchin (Сенчин), Svechin (Свечин), Chashin (Чашин), etc. Establishing an evident link between character names and the author's name plays a critical role in reflecting the author's inner emotions in the work. In the world of R. In

R. Senchin's world, the central position of the "I", which echoes the author's personality in many perspectives, is obvious. The artistic text in this case turns out to be a way of self-discovery for the author. Through the events experienced by characters, the words they say, and the reflected psychological aspects, one can more or less see shadows of the author, either overtly or subtly, and feel the author's presence. Nonetheless, this does not suggest a direct equivalence between Senchin and the characters. Although the writer utilizes himself as a foundation to unfold the story, the various details interwoven therein undergo condensation, deduction, extension, and exaggeration, creating a distinct literary atmosphere more concentrated than any individual's real experiences. The narrative logic is entirely structured through literary creation, establishing both a certain connection and a noticeable distance between the author and the lyrical protagonist (Zhang, 2019, p. 130).

Senchin frequently engages in discussions surrounding literary creation and life circumstances within the confessions of characters who resemble authors in autobiographical novels. By incorporating concise and fluid narratives with interspersed psychological self-disclosures from characters, he intends to realize the internal reconstruction of their minds. This technique is effective in depicting the intense psychological changes of characters and cultivating a sense of solitude, highlighting their sense of isolation in a succinct and smooth narrative.

Here is my truth. My pure, unreserved truth. Truth without illusions, without mirages, without protective bunkers for the artillery bombardment of life. I have no reason to hide: the more fragments pass through me, the more pleasure I will achieve. The more I will learn. I laugh at your foolish attempts! Families! Children! Duty! Eight-hour workday. Income tax. Private property. Cooperative, communal, personal. A giant spherical anthill, where all ants are alone. A wasp's nest, and wasps sting each other. This is your system, your principles, your traditions, and I am, I am outside (Senchin, 1997).

This type of character refuses to succumb to worldly pleasures and materialistic pursuits. Tormented by the noisy and urbanized city life, they confront reality with clear-headed rationality, peering into the depths of their true selves. In the harsh living environment, they take literary creation as their ideal pursuit and are akin to warriors steadfastly holding the literary fort in the brutal battlefield of life, motivated by a strong spirit of rebellion. In spite of this, the monotonously barren material life and the challenging pace of societal dynamics constrain their imagination, which gives rise to spiritual fatigue as they day by day fall into the mundane cycle of life. The discussion of whether life confines their sources of creativity or offers inspiration for their objectively direct writing style permeates the introspective narratives of these characters.

In most of his texts, R. Senchin seeks to achieve the effect of maximum proximity between his own life and the life of the protagonist. Here, one can speak not only of the autobiographical method but also of the author's serious conviction that the artistic comprehension of the world is most effectively reached through life itself, preserved as a creative space and subjected to careful study. In this case, the artistic text turns out to be a means of self-awareness for the author. During their formative years, representatives of the generation to which Senchin belongs underwent a series of dramatic social transformations, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union, political regime change, economic crises, and acute ethnic conflicts. Confronted with the harsh reality of life, they did not abandon their dreams, but adapting to the new mechanisms of societal functioning was tough sometimes. Many people were forced to lead their lives in constrained circumstances, resulting in the formation of a closed internal world, and all their efforts to lift their living standards suffered serious difficulties, often ending unsuccessfully. Undoubtedly, such individuals are not marginalized at the bottom of the social hierarchy – they are simply ordinary young people who grew up in a challenging era and faced life's challenges on the expanses of Russia at the turn of the XX and XXI centuries. As a representative of this generation, Senchin sincerely empathizes with this group and employs the "contour drawing" method, attempting to delve into the minutiae of human life and honestly convey the spirit of the times.

3. SENCHIN' "LIFE STREAM" WRITING

The concept of the "life stream" in artistic creation stemmed from film theory and has been applied more and more frequently in literary works. It represents a creative approach where the artist, adopting a calm and objective stance, authentically portrays the raw essence of life. In his work "Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality," German contemporary film theorist Kracauer posits that film shares four affinities with photography, manifesting a tendency to depict unaltered and incidental phenomena, the boundless external existence, and the ambiguous (Kracauer, 1997). What distinguishes film from photography is its capacity to record the continuity of life or the "life stream" affinity. The "life stream" encompasses the fluidity of specific situations and events, in conjunction with everything implied through emotional significance and intellectual suggestions.

The conceptual integration of the "life stream" from its cinematic origins into the realm of literary creation marks a theoretical assertion within the contemporary Western new realism movement. Specifically, proponents of this literary school articulate a set of artistic principles, for instance, the avoidance of sensational events, the absence

of extraordinary hero figures, and a deliberate omission of conclusive resolutions within the narrative. The key to this approach is to authentically manifest the realities of societal life within the ordinary and unremarkable facets, portraying the destinies of human existence and unveiling the philosophical underpinnings of life.

Creators within this movement confine their characters to capturing and presenting slices of life with the utmost fidelity, intentionally leaving room for the audience to engage in contemplation. The objective is to prompt individuals to embark on their own introspective journeys and derive insights from the narratives. Consequently, the literary expression of the "life stream" predominantly underlines the progression of events and the external behaviors of characters, steering clear of a concentrated focus on the spiritual dimensions of human experience.

The narrative technique of the "life stream" has been applied widely by numerous foreign authors in their creative works. J.D. Salinger's novel "The Catcher in the Rye" is a notable example. The narrative is presented in the first person by the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, recounting his experiences and emotional reflections during nearly two days of wandering in New York City after being expelled from school. The novel vividly and meticulously depicts the existential angst and loneliness of a disenchanted middle-class youth, providing an in-depth exploration of the protagonist's spiritual world. The narrative method of the "life stream" is employed to convey the exploration of the protagonist's mental and emotional experiences through the portrayal of his life processes.

The narrative technique of "life stream" is extensively adopted in the genre of new realism fiction. For instance, in the work "An Annoying Life" by Chinese author Chi Li, the author nonchalantly records a day in the life of the male protagonist, Yin Jiahou, in accordance with the natural flow of time. The narrative unfolds an ordinary urbanite's life, uncovering the common troubles that many individuals may have experienced or known someone in their vicinity to have experienced, thus evoking a sense of familiarity. Simultaneously, the novel reflects the helplessness in the protagonist's life, shedding light on the urban challenges prior to the reforms.

Senchin's works are also characterized by the "life stream" approach in narrating people and events. They bear no sense of embellishment and lack any idealistic hues. He highlights the visible and tangible reality of realism while upholding the postmodernist ideals of equality and openness in art. In the meantime, Senchin regards literature as a self-neutral historical record, obscuring personal viewpoints, restraining self-emotions, and narrating in a subdued manner. His narrative style features a calm and detached tone, avoiding the stark moral dualism of black and white. Instead, he provides multiple dimensions for the interpretation of the text,

adhering to a nuanced and understated storytelling that further expands the depth of the narrative.

It is undeniable that the author's detachment from a specific standpoint does not imply a lack of position. The rational arrangement of the story plot is internalized as a form of positional expression within the narrative. In his works, Senchin embeds the simplicity and complexity of characters, the linearity and entanglement of events, and the routine and intentional aspects of life in concrete details. He portrays the most inconspicuous yet inescapable scenes, utilizing mundane details to underscore concealed contradictions. Details string together into both chaotic and reasonable segments, shaping the inherent rhythm of the novel. For example:

She woke up before seven and started bustling around. Slowly getting dressed, she spent a considerable amount of time meticulously grooming herself. Despite her carefulness, she still managed to make a noise while emptying the basin beneath the sink. She lit the stove, boiled water (without using an electric kettle), made tea, and spent a long time delicately sipping tea with bread. At this moment, it seemed as if she was accumulating energy for the upcoming day; indeed, throughout the day, she hardly ate or drank... Next, she went to feed the chickens, tore off a page from the calendar hanging on the wall, put on her glasses, and examined what was written on the back of the calendar paper. Afterward, she prepared breakfast (Senchin, 2011, p.71).

The author portrays the aunt's presence through her every movement and gesture, manifesting a sense of weariness and distinctive individuality. The narrative's emphasis is not on the significance of the storyline, but rather on the elevation of details to the primary objective of verbal expression. The interweaving of these details constitutes the main thread of plot development. Underlying the detailed exposition are the subtle linguistic and behavioral states of the characters, instead of the events and scenes themselves.

The protagonist in Senchin's work is described as being "overgrown with everyday life": "... *everything is measured, everything is predictable: five days a week, I run around the Southwest District, monitoring the sale of soft drinks in grocery stores, kiosks, and mini-markets, and spend two days with the family. I stroll with the child, tighten the cupboard doors, unclog the clogged sink, watch TV... And though it started not so long ago, it has already become annoying*" (Senchin, 2009, p.133-134). The characters in "Moscow Shadows" are hard to be labeled as losers as shown by external signs: the majority of them have jobs and families, but each of them is essentially equal to the sum of actions performed day after day, year after year. The dying while alive begins imperceptibly: with indifference and emptiness and ends with the automatism of existence. An attempt to break the automatism of existence is often the hero's reminiscence of the past. Nevertheless, the comparison with the past is always not in favor of the present: against the backdrop

of memories of youthful (albeit insignificant) successes, "there is always a sense of emptiness today" (Senchin, 2009, p.86). The emptiness of the hero's soul echoes the emptiness of the standardized space of the capital. Due to "overgrowing with everyday life," the key conflict of Senchin's "Moscow" prose is established: "Either live to the fullest, not paying attention to time, or work to live on the remaining strength and time?" (Senchin, 2009, p.285). In the struggle against time, the heroes always lose: giving themselves to work, they eventually discover that there is no other time (for love, creativity, friendship).

With his literary pen, Senchin documented the true nature of life on the scene, revealing the grey areas of existence and the helpless realities in simple and unembellished language. In this way, he recreated the spiritual emptiness and psychological traumas of a new generation, infusing his works with the individual's melancholy and anxiety, as well as the desolation of the times. In his opinion, the daily repetition of activities constitutes life, and his mission is to portray the essence of human existence. The author states, "My focus in writing is on things that literature often avoids—various problems, difficulties, chaos, not enough money, and unattainable ideals and pursuits in life..."

4. CONCLUSION

In the evolving landscape of Russian literature, Senchin's creative approach not only revolves around seeking and expressing inspiration but is also profoundly rooted in the quest for self-reflection. This thematic highlight on self-awareness is a deliberate choice, allowing Senchin to keep control over the individuality and autonomy of his narrative. By situating the perspective within the realm of authentic life, he deliberately avoids the manipulation of literary techniques, opting for simplicity, naturalness, and a rich atmospheric quality in his storytelling.

Senchin employs a straightforward narrative structure featuring linear storytelling, uncomplicated plots, and a limited cast of significant characters. His works give priority to the authenticity of details, steering clear of artificially contrived dramatic plots. Furthermore, he skillfully delves into the dramatic elements and conflicts hidden within everyday life, breaking away from the confines of traditional dramatic structures. His narrative structure is in line with the actual life stream, organized through the accumulation of scattered and unordered events, extracting concealed and often overlooked themes from ordinary life materials. Based on his observations, Senchin exposes the darker facets of life, not only displaying the introspection of the writer but also guiding readers to contemplate cultural, psychological, and moral perspectives.

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