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ALLEGORY OF ECOLOGICAL THREAT IN KHOJIAKBAR SHAYKHOV'S STORY "PLANET OF HOPE"

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Abstract

This article examines the allegorical nature of the story Planet of Hope by the Uzbek science fiction writer Khojiakbar Shaykhov. It analyzes the literary device of defamiliarization through which the author reinterprets environmental issues, including the destruction of the atmosphere's protective layer, the irresponsibility of political institutions, and the inability of civilization to make proper use of scientific knowledge. The study identifies the parallel structure of the text the fate of the planet Nuvogap / the fate of Earth and reveals its function within the artistic system of the story. It is shown that Planet of Hope is one of the early examples of ecological science fiction in Uzbek literature and remains relevant in the context of contemporary environmental discourse.

Keywords: Khojiakbar Shaykhov; Uzbek science fiction; ecological allegory; defamiliarization; ozone layer; ecological catastrophe; science fiction as parable.

Introduction:

Ecological Science Fiction as a Genre Problem

Among the many functions that literary fantasy performs in culture, one of the most significant is its warning function. By transferring threats into imaginary worlds or onto the pages of alien chronicles, the author gains the opportunity to speak about urgent problems without the didactic straightforwardness typical of

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journalism and it is precisely this indirectness that often proves artistically more persuasive than direct statement.

Khojiakbar Shaykhov's story Planet of Hope is a representative example of such a strategy. At first glance, the reader encounters a standard plot about an interstellar expedition: an alien spacecraft explores a foreign planetary system in search of a new home for a dying civilization¹. However, even during the first reading, it becomes clear that behind the science-fiction setting lies a precise and carefully developed allegory: the Nuvogapians, flying toward a star with ten planets, are in fact looking at Earth, while the catastrophe of their home planet serves as a mirror reflection of the threat that in reality hangs over Earth's atmosphere.

The purpose of this article is to identify and describe the artistic mechanisms through which Shaykhov constructs this allegory: the device of defamiliarization, the principle of symmetrical parallelism, the image of the atmosphere's protective layer as the central symbol of the text, as well as the open ending as a distinctive means of conveying the moral message to the reader.

The story has not received broad literary-critical interpretation, although within the context of Uzbek science fiction it occupies a special place: it was written long before the destruction of the ozone layer became the subject of international conventions and widespread public attention, which gives the text the qualities of artistic foresight. The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer was adopted only in 1985, and the Montreal Protocol in 1987; Shaykhov's story predates these documents, articulating a problem that science and politics were only beginning to recognize.

¹ Аникст А.А. История английской литературы. М.: Учпедгиз, 1966.

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Defamiliarization as the Basis of the Allegorical Structure

The concept of defamiliarization, introduced by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay *Art as Device* (1917), denotes an artistic method of presenting the familiar as unfamiliar, removing it from the automatism of perception and compelling the reader to see it anew. In *Planet of Hope*, this device is employed with a consistency that gives the text the character of a methodically constructed allegorical design².

Shaykhov places alien observers the Nuvogapians, at the center of the narrative, whose biochemistry is fundamentally different: they breathe fluorine and perceive oxygen as a deadly poison³. This premise creates a radical shift in perspective: everything that for an Earth reader is a condition of life becomes a threat of death. In the Nuvogapians' perception, Earth is a world covered with "poison." Water is described through a chemical formula: "one atom of oxygen plus two atoms of hydrogen that is the formula of a molecule of this poison." The world ocean thus becomes "an entire ocean of poison." Even the planet's oxygen-rich atmosphere is perceived as a lethal environment.

The starship commander's initial reaction to the data about Earth is especially revealing for understanding the mechanism of defamiliarization. The electronic brain reports signs that the planet may be habitable and is immediately met with a sharp rebuke:

"Look, twenty percent of Degara's atmosphere consists of the most poisonous gas—oxygen, and most of the planet's surface is covered with a liquid that contains this substance." "But my program contains no indication that life cannot arise in an oxygen-saturated atmosphere." "You are beginning to irritate me!" replied the Incomparable. "No indication! Of course there is no indication! Why

² Ковтун Е.Н. Поэтика необычного: художественные миры фантастики, волшебной сказки, утопии, притчи и мифа. М.: Изд-во МГУ, 1999.

³ Кагарлицкий Ю.И. Что такое фантастика? М.: Худож. лит., 1974.

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specify what is self-evident? Fluorine—that is the gas of life; were you taught that or not!”⁴.

This scene is at once comic and conceptual. It is comic because the reader immediately recognizes the absurdity of the Incomparable’s position: life in an oxygen atmosphere is not merely possible, it is the norm for the reader. It is conceptual because it introduces the key theme of the story: the limits of knowledge as determined by initial axioms. This very theme will be developed in the ending, when those same Nuvogapians prove incapable of warning the people of Earth not because of technical limitations, but because of political and institutional barriers that reason itself has erected against itself.

Defamiliarization operates here in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, Earth itself is defamiliarized: the reader sees it through alien eyes, and the familiar becomes strange “an ocean of poison,” “poisonous gas,” “four white stripes above the ocean” (the contrails of military aircraft). On the other hand, through this very defamiliarization, the threat itself becomes newly perceptible: the ecological catastrophe, which the reader may know only in abstract terms, suddenly acquires the concreteness of an alien gaze that sees it from the outside and already knows its outcome.

The Principle of Symmetrical Parallelism: Nuvogap and Earth

The artistic logic of the story is built on the strict symmetry of two destinies: that of the planet Nuvogap, which has already undergone an ecological catastrophe, and that of Earth, which is only moving toward it. This symmetry is not merely a thematic device it constitutes the architectonic principle of the text, determining its composition and imagery system.

The central element of this symmetry is the image of the atmosphere’s protective layer. On Nuvogap, this layer consists of fluorine and is destroyed as a result of

⁴ Шайхов Х. Планета надежды: рассказ // Проза: [сб. произведений]. Крым: Пионер, 2024.

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industrial pollution and military testing. Shaykhov describes the mechanism of the catastrophe with the precision of a popular science text:

“It is well known that the radiation of every star, and therefore of Dega as well, contains ultraviolet rays that are deadly to life, destroying all living things. However, here on Nuvogap, nature took care to ensure that a reliable shield stood in the path of these lethal rays—a shell of pure fluorine, several millimeters thick, enveloping the planet⁵”

On Earth, the ozone layer plays the role of this shield. Nuvogapian instruments monitor its condition and detect exactly the same pattern: “the natural balance of the ozone layer on the blue planet had been disturbed, just as it had once been disturbed on Nuvogap.” The parallelism is expressed through the syntactic construction “just as,” which serves as the linguistic embodiment of the semantic identity of the two situations.

The causes behind the destruction of both shields are also symmetrical. On Nuvogap: “Day and night, thousands of factories poured out smoke; jet machines thundered across the sky, devouring many cubic meters of fluorine in a second. Almost every cycle, armed conflicts flared up in one part of the planet or another. Finally, in several states, the hyperon bomb was invented almost simultaneously, and its testing began at once: underground, on the ground, in the air, and in space.” On Earth, the Nuvogapians do not know the exact causes, but the list they assume reproduces the same triad: “wars, the testing of some kind of weapon, exhaust gases, pollution of the atmosphere by industrial waste.” Shaykhov deliberately leaves the earthly causes in a zone of uncertainty, thereby emphasizing that, for the Nuvogapians, the diagnosis is clear regardless of the specifics: they recognize the symptoms because they themselves have already lived through them.

The symmetry also includes a socio-political dimension. On Nuvogap, scientists’ warnings were ignored: “politicians and the military merely brushed the scientists’

⁵ Шайхов Х. Планета надежды: рассказ // Проза: [сб. произведений]. Крым: Пионер, 2024.

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aside, accusing them of disloyalty.” On Earth, the Nuvogapians do not know whether the local authorities listen to their own scientists, but they pose a rhetorical question: “where is the guarantee that they will be listened to?” In light of Nuvogap’s experience, the answer is obvious and the reader does not need to formulate it explicitly.

Political Irresponsibility as an Allegorical Motif

One of the most significant aspects of the allegory in the story is the depiction of the mechanism of political irresponsibility. Shaykhov shows that the ecological catastrophe is not the result of natural forces or technical accidents. It is the direct consequence of institutional decisions made in defiance of scientific warnings.

In the history of Nuvogap, this mechanism is described with a brevity that gives it the character of a law: “it was still not too late to save Nuvogap. It was necessary to equip all factory chimneys with filters, to organize the delivery of pure fluorine into the stratosphere, and, above all, to stop weapons testing... But politicians and the military merely brushed the scientists aside, accusing them of disloyalty”⁶ The phrase “accusing them of disloyalty” is fundamentally important: it indicates that the problem is not cognitive but political in nature. The scientists are not refuted, they are discredited. The knowledge exists, but the will to act is absent.

The parallel with earthly reality is constructed through the commander’s reflection on the impossibility of warning humanity. His detailed and последовательное reasoning constitutes one of the central monologues of the story:

“Let us assume that we make a safe landing. Let us assume that we succeed in overcoming all barriers and establishing contact with the inhabitants of the planet. Let us assume that we manage to explain to them the nature of the danger threatening them. But where is the guarantee that they will listen? Where is the guarantee that our message will not provoke hatred toward us from certain

⁶ Нурғалиев Р. Казахская фантастика: истоки и развитие. Алма-Ата : Жалын, 1986. – С.84.

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circles? And where is the guarantee that we will not be destroyed as disturbers of the peace?”⁷

The threefold anaphoric repetition of “where is the guarantee” creates a rhetorical structure that does not merely enumerate obstacles, but models the very logic of a political system hostile to inconvenient knowledge. The phrase “disturbers of the peace” alludes to a well-known practice: those who warn of danger are branded as alarmists, provocateurs, or agents of hostile forces⁸. This is precisely what happened to the scientists of Nuvogap, and, in the commander’s view, this is exactly what would happen to anyone who tried to convey the warning to the people of Earth.

Thus, Shaykhov constructs an allegory of double blindness: a civilization fails to perceive the threat not because it lacks knowledge, but because it has created institutions that block this knowledge from reaching those who make decisions. The allegory is directed not against any particular state or political system, but toward a universal mechanism that reproduces itself in different worlds and on different planets.

The Image of the Protective Layer as the Central Symbol

The atmosphere’s protective layer fluorine-based on Nuvogap and ozone-based on Earth, is the central symbol of the story, carrying both literal and metaphorical meaning. In the literal sense, it is a physical reality: a thin оболочка separating life from death, a fragile balance of chemical processes sustained by nature over thousands of years. In the metaphorical sense, it is an image of any protective mechanism that civilization destroys without realizing the consequences.

Shaykhov describes the natural equilibrium of the fluorine shield with deliberate precision: “although the thickness of the protective layer remains unchanged, its molecules are constantly changing some react with hydrogen, nitrogen, and

⁷ Шайхов Х. Планета надежды: рассказ // Проза: [сб. произведений]. Крым: Пионер, 2024.

⁸ Шкловский В.Б. Искусство как приём // О теории прозы. М.: Федерация, 1929. – С. 7–23.

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chlorine and leave the оболочка, while others, under the influence of Dega's radiation, break their usual bonds and enter the layer. This balance was created by nature and carefully maintained for many centuries." The word "carefully" performs a key function in this description: nature is portrayed not as a mechanical process, but as care, as protection and this makes the contrast with what civilization has done to that care all the more striking.

The phrase "an attack from the most unexpected direction from the planet's surface" is one of the most precise figurative formulations in the text. For many centuries, the protective shield had withstood blows from outside "cosmic particles bombarded this shield from beyond" yet it was unable to resist destruction from within. The allegorical meaning is transparent: the threat comes not from an external enemy, but from the very civilization that the shield is meant to protect. It is an image of self-destruction, realized through a concrete physical mechanism.

The description of Earth's ozone layer is built on the same figurative logic, but with emphasized uncertainty: the Nuvogapians see that the layer is thinning, yet they do not know the speed of this process and cannot determine its exact causes. This uncertainty is artistically functional: it reproduces the real situation of scientific knowledge, in which the threat is already visible, but its full scale is not yet entirely clear. The story thus appeals not to a catastrophe that has already occurred, but to a process that can still be stopped and therein lies its warning intent.

The Open Ending as a Moral Question

The ending of Planet of Hope differs fundamentally from most examples of Soviet science fiction, which tended toward an optimistic resolution of conflict. Shaykhov does not provide an answer to the question of whether the Nuvogapians will succeed in warning the people of Earth, or whether those people will heed

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the warning. The text ends with a dialogue in which the decision is only just being made:

“Shall we look for a way to warn them of the danger?” -“Yes.” - “And we are duty-bound to find it. We will find it.” - “Yes,” the First Invaluable sighed.”⁹

This ending is ambiguous. On the one hand, it contains a moral imperative: the word “must” points to a duty that exists regardless of the chances of success. Knowledge of a threat creates an obligation to act such is the ethical law affirmed by the story. On the other hand, Nezamenimy’s sigh after saying “Yes” introduces a bitter note into this imperative: the commander is not confident of success and, apparently, knows that the attempt is most likely doomed.

The openness of the ending redirects the question to the reader. The story does not ask, “Will the Nuvogapians be able to warn the people of Earth?” it asks, “Will the people of Earth listen to the warning?” And this question is addressed not to the characters within the text, but to the real reader living on a planet where the destruction of the ozone layer is happening right now. The fantastical distance is reduced to zero: the Nuvogapians look at Earth, and the reader looks into a mirror.

The commander’s bitter generalization “Reason destroys itself. Could this truly be a universal law?” Is not a rhetorical embellishment. It is a philosophical thesis around which the entire allegory is constructed: reason, having created civilization, also creates the mechanisms of its destruction. Yet the story is not pessimistic, otherwise, the Nuvogapians would not have decided to seek a way to warn the people of Earth. Shaykhov sustains the tension between the awareness of a catastrophic logic and the belief in the possibility of overcoming it, without resolving that tension in either direction.

⁹ Шайхов Х. Планета надежды: рассказ // Проза: [сб. произведений]. Крым: Пионер, 2024.

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“Planet of Hope” in the Context of Ecological Science Fiction

Shaykhov’s story belongs to the tradition of ecological science fiction, which became widely developed in world literature in the second half of the twentieth century. Among the best-known examples of this tradition are Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), in which questions of planetary-scale ecology are central, the novels of Ursula Le Guin, which explore the interaction between civilization and the natural environment, as well as numerous works of Soviet science fiction concerned with themes of the technogenic destruction of the biosphere¹⁰. Within this context, *Planet of Hope* occupies a special place as an early example of ecological allegory in Uzbek literature.

A distinctive feature of Shaykhov’s artistic method in this story is the precision of its natural-scientific foundation. The description of Nuvogap’s fluorine shield and Earth’s ozone layer is based on real chemical and physical principles: the instability of fluorine and ozone, their reactivity, the mechanism of ultraviolet radiation absorption, and the disruption of this balance under the influence of anthropogenic factors¹¹. This makes the allegory not merely an artistic metaphor, but also a model of a real process, which intensifies its impact on the reader.

The historical context in which the story was written is also of considerable importance. At the time Shaykhov wrote *Planet of Hope*, the problem of ozone layer depletion remained on the periphery of public consciousness. Scientific data on the destructive impact of chlorofluorocarbons on the ozone layer had emerged in the early 1970s, yet more than a decade would pass before this threat gained broad recognition¹². The story thus anticipated not only public debate, but also the international legal regulation of the issue. In this sense, *Planet of Hope* fulfills one of the fundamental functions of science fiction, the extrapolation of existing

¹⁰ Ammons E. *Brave New Worlds: Eco-Fiction and the Environment // Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. 2010. Vol. 17, No. 2. – P. 231–246.

¹¹ Buell L. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. – P.586.

¹² Glotfelty C., Fromm H. (eds.). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. – 415 p.

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tendencies into an artistically convincing image of the future and does so in a context where that function carried genuinely cautionary significance¹³.

In Uzbek literature, the story also holds a special place because it addresses global issues without confining itself to a regional framework. The Nuvogapians and the people of Earth are universal figures; their story is not tied to any specific geography or culture. This makes Planet of Hope part of the broader world literary conversation about civilization's responsibility toward the natural environment. A conversation that was only beginning in Uzbek science fiction.

Conclusion

Khojakbar Shaykhov's story Planet of Hope is an artistically mature example of ecological allegory, in which a fantastic plot serves as a precise instrument for exploring a real threat. The device of defamiliarization the view of Earth through the eyes of beings who perceive oxygen as poison allows the author both to defamiliarize the familiar and to expose the hidden catastrophic logic of earthly civilization. The principle of symmetrical parallelism (Nuvogap / Earth) gives the allegory its structural completeness: the fate of one planet becomes a proof by contradiction for the other.

The central symbol of the story the atmosphere's protective layer, carries a double significance. As a physical reality, it accurately reproduces the mechanism of the destruction of Earth's ozone layer. As a metaphor, it signifies any protective mechanism that civilization destroys from within, either without noticing it or without wishing to notice it. The image of "an attack from the planet's surface" serves as an artistic formula for the self-destruction of reason¹⁴.

The story's open ending, which refuses any comforting resolution, turns the text into a question addressed directly to the reader. The moral imperative ("we must find a way to warn them") is combined with bitter skepticism ("where is the

¹³ Suvin D. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. — New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

¹⁴ Garrard G. *Ecocriticism*. London : Routledge, 2004. — P.208

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guarantee that they will listen?”) and this combination precisely reflects the real state of affairs: knowledge of the threat exists, while the will to act remains uncertain¹⁵.

The significance of Shaykhov’s story is determined not only by its artistic merits, but also by its historical context: written before the ecological problem of ozone layer depletion received international recognition, it demonstrates that Uzbek literature was capable of raising global questions ahead of its time and in a form that remains relevant to this day.

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¹⁵ Murphy P.D. Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature. — Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 2000. — 257 p.

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