

# The Representation of Psychological War-Related Traumas in the Literary Works of Contemporary Burundian and Ukrainian Writers: African and European Perspectives

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## Abstract

The article explores the representation of psychological traumas afflicted by war in contemporary literary writing by Burundian (African) and Ukrainian (European) authors who were witnesses of the events described in their works. Based on the existing linguistic and psychological theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of a mental wound, a comparative perspective is provided on the nature, literary, and linguistic manifestations of psychological trauma in Burundian novels by Antoine Kaburahe and Marie-Therese Toyi, presenting the tragic, but stoic experience during the civil war in the East African country, and the shocked, but resilient experience of Ukrainian civilians during the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation in the Ukrainian diary (Serhiy Zhadan) and essay writing (Ilya Kaminsky, Ludmila Khersonsky, Zarina Zabrysky, Elena Andreychykova, Andrei Krasniashikh) available in English translation. The implemented analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the effects of wartime psychological trauma on the lives of an individual. Due to a more distant time perspective, the protagonists of Burundian texts reveal both the tragedy of the interethnic civil war conflict and the importance of addressing the causes of the conflict to prevent its replication in the future. In the Ukrainian texts, the initial stage of psychological trauma obtaining can be observed, which accounts for a range of the related emotional states among the characters who do not fully realize yet the traumatization process they have been going through during the first days and weeks of the Russian military invasion. The narrative structure of the Burundian and Ukrainian texts was also highlighted, which helped identify traces of oral story-telling tradition (African texts) and broad allusions to the historical and cultural phenomena (Ukrainian texts).

**Key Words:** Burundian literature, Ukrainian literature, wartime experience, psychological trauma, resilience



## Introduction

The large-scale loss of life resulting from war as the act of ultimate aggression and violence is one of the greatest tragedies for humankind. At the same time, those who

survived through war—both the military and civilians—”can experience a wide array of interwoven posttraumatic mental effects.”<sup>1</sup>

The Greek trauma, or “wound,” originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body, today in the fields of psychology and psychiatry is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind and the heart. The origins of trauma theory are traced back to Freud’s psychoanalysis. The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, or natural disaster. Reactions such as shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and physical symptoms.”<sup>2</sup>

Hence, trauma of the mind is recognized to be a very severe shock or very distressing experience, which may cause psychological damage. Stressors and traumatic experiences are inevitable parts of any war which cause mental suffering and have an impact on individual and collective memory.

Trauma research considers traumatic memory as a special type of activity. Van der Kolk argues that “the imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narrative but as fragmented sensory and emotional traces.”<sup>3</sup> Traumatic memories of arousing events that are not necessarily available to conscious memory may return, often suddenly and unexpectedly, as flashbacks, overwhelming emotions, or “speechless horror.”<sup>4</sup>

Trauma, like other intense experiences and feelings, touches at the limits of the sayable.<sup>5</sup> Literature provides a space for revealing the inner world of a person, for flashbacks and memories that are colored by the pain of psychological traumas. As a concept, “trauma” has attracted a great deal of interest in literary studies. It is a concept that applies to individuals, cultures, and nations.<sup>6</sup>

Cathy Caruth theorizes the concept of trauma in the light of literature saying that literary texts are means through which the nature of trauma is revealed by its witnesses. She argues that literature enables us to bear witness to events that cannot be known and introduces us to experiences that might have otherwise stayed unspoken and unheard. Cathy Caruth says:

“What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us,  
and what is at the heart of Freud’s writing on trauma, both in

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1 Jaimie L. Gradus, “The Tragedy of War Also Extends far Beyond Loss of Life.” Boston University School of Public Health, accessed October 1, 2023. <https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2022/war-and-health>.

2 “Trauma,” American Psychological Association, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>.

3 Van der Kolk Bessel A., *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 176.

4 Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 43.

5 Brigitta Busch and Tim McNamara, “Language and Trauma: An Introduction,” *Applied Linguistics* 41, no. 3 (2020): 323–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amaa002>.

6 J. Roger Kurtz, *Trauma and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), i.

what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.”<sup>7</sup>

Michael Roth, exploring the representation of trauma in literature, also states that “Trauma, like utopia, designates phenomena that cannot be properly represented, but one characterized by radical intensity.”<sup>8</sup>

In different manners, the increasing interest in trauma was a response to concerns about memory, politics, representation, and ethics that became prominent at the turn of the twentieth century, and which have mainly focused on the extreme forms of violence and victimization that came to light after World War II.<sup>9</sup>

The reflections of literature on the post-independence wars in Burundi and Ukraine, the representation of war-related psychological traumas, and war memories in literary works have been a focus of research in literary studies. Jodi Mikalachki points out that the twenty-first century of new Burundian literature focused almost exclusively on genocide and civil war.<sup>10</sup> Dominated by life writing and fiction, it engages the cycles of violent conflict that have shaped Burundi’s post-independence history, in particular the 1972 genocide and the 1993-2005 civil war. Jodi Mikalachki is interested in strategies for narrating youth violence, and she argues that Burundian youth is humanly present in 21<sup>st</sup> century Burundian literature and speaks with their authors to the world about their nation’s costly experience of genocide and civil war. Exploring Roland Rugero’s 2012 novel *Baho!* Jodi Mikalachki examines how Rugero embodies trauma in his narrative and explores literary strategies for imagining a future beyond the impasse of recurrent national violence.<sup>11</sup>

Audace Mbonyingingo, a Burundian researcher, stresses that during the late twentieth century, numerous Great Lakes countries witnessed and experienced massive killings, disappearances, torture, and tremendous suffering.<sup>12</sup> Exploring Marie-

7 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 4.

8 Michael S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2.

9 *Ibid.*, 1.

10 Jodi Mikalachki, “Narrating Violence in Burundian Genocide and Civil War Literature: Pacifique Irakunda’s ‘Playing at Violence,’” essay, in *Emerging Trends in Eastern African Literatures and Cultures* (Glienicke: Galda Verlag, 2020), 137.

11 Jodi Mikalachki, “Embodying Burundi after War: Roland Rugero’s *Baho!*” *Gender Questions* 10, no. 2 (2022), accessed October 8, 2023. <https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/GQ/issue/view/538>.

12 Audace Mbonyingingo, “War Memories and the Refugees’ Representation in Marie-Thérèse Toyi’s *Weep Not, Refugee*,” *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018), 55.

Therese Toyi's 2014 novel *Weep Not, Refugee*, A. Mbonyingingo investigates trauma-related memories of the refugees with a focus not only on how memories re-construct their traumatic experience but also on how refugees are represented. He argues that Toyi, in *Weep Not, Refugee*, "captures the horrific civil war in Burundi and grapples with the refugees' experience by actively engaging events, discourses and remembering the past through its multiple facets."<sup>13</sup>

The Russian Federation's ongoing unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, which started in eastern regions of Ukraine and Crimea in 2014, and since February 2022 has been covering the whole of Ukraine, and the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian army and people are being depicted in life writing and fiction of Ukrainian writers. Oksana Pukhonska in her paper "Literary Dimensions of Trauma in the Context of War in Donbas" examines a novel written by a soldier who was a participant in the war in Donbas and memoirs of the prisoner of one of the concentration camps for Ukrainians created by the Russian occupiers in Donetsk.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on the traumatic experience of both authors in the analyzed texts and Ukrainian society, in general, is particularly important. The researcher tries to establish how the reflection of war in literature changes over time. It is initially presented because of the conflict of post-totalitarian memories in Ukrainian culture, later as a social national trauma, and finally as a personal trauma at the level of a separate destiny and a separate experience. In her monograph "Outside of Combat. In the discourse of war in Modern Literature," Oksana Pukhonska considers the 1990s Yugoslav wars and the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian war, and she argues that wars create specific cultural wounds that manifest themselves for decades as traumas not only for those who had direct experience of war but also for future generations.<sup>15</sup> The main subject of the study by Dmytro Prysivok is the topos of war in combatant prose written both by the military who have no writing experience and by professional writers who participated in the war in eastern Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> The study concludes that the topos of war in combatant prose also appeared as a space of change in addition to the space of trauma and death: the inner world of characters changes, and those changes are irreversible.

The aim of this paper is to conduct a first-ever comparative analysis of the literary works dedicated to the post-independent wars in Burundi and Ukraine. From a rhetorical perspective, the paper considers how the narrators use linguistic and non-linguistic means to verbalize their identities and the war-related traumatic experiences.

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13 Ibid., 55.

14 Oksana Pukhonska, "Literaturni vymiry travmy u konteksti viyny na Donbasi" ["Literary Dimensions of Trauma in the Context of War in Donbas"], *Acta Polono-Ruthenica* 2, no. XXVI (2021): 63–74.

15 Oksana Pukhonska, *Poza mezhamy boiu: dyskurs viiny v suchasni literaturi* [Outside of Combat. Discourse of War in Modern Literature] (Brustury: Dyskursus, 2022).

16 Dmytro Prysivok, "Topos viiny v suchasni ukrainskii kombatantskii prozi" ["Topos of War in Modern Ukrainian Combatant Prose"], *Literature and Culture of Polissia* 106, no. 20f (2022): 32–41.

This research reflects the ongoing paradigm shift of comparative literary studies from a focus on European traditions to a global awareness to encompass a worldwide range of languages and cultures to enter a far-reaching inquiry into the variety of the world's literary cultures and their distinctive reflections.<sup>17</sup>

The research data includes Antoine Kaburahe's 2019 novel *Hutsi. In the Name of Us All*<sup>18</sup>, which gives an account of Burundi's tragedy of civil war. The novel was written in French and later translated into English. Another text is Marie-Therese Toyi's 2014 novel *Weep Not, Refugee*<sup>19</sup>, a novel on the problems of the civil war and refugees' experiences from Burundi. This novel was written in English.

The Ukrainian data comprises the literary works that belong to the life-writing genre and were written during the first days and months of Russia's full-scale invasion unleashed on February 24, 2022. It includes six essays: *Silence and Air Raids* by Ilya Kaminsky, *Cat Beneath a Birdless Sky* by Ludmila Hersonsky, *I Will Buy Sperm Whale Teeth* by Zarina Zabrisky, *Return To Sea* by Elena Andreychukova, *In the Frame* and *Kharkivites* by Andrei Krasniashikh,<sup>20</sup> and Serhiy Zhadan's diary *Sky Above Kharkiv. Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front*.<sup>21</sup> The literary works by Ukrainian authors were written in Ukrainian and Russian and translated into English. The literary works from both Burundi and Ukraine were analyzed in English translation.

Psychological trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies. Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma on literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. Researchers operating within a rhetorical perspective are looking for cues of how language choices made by narrators are used to reconstruct the traumatic experiences in their narratives. In particular, researchers are searching for various linguistic devices that may have been used: keywords, tropes, and verbal symbols as well as non-verbal means.

### Trauma representation in contemporary Burundian literature

Since its independence from Belgium on the first of July 1962, Burundi has experienced several waves of violence and instability, with a peak in 1972 and after the October 1993

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17 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (S.I.: Princeton University Press, 2022).

18 Antoine Kaburahe, Jodi Mikalachki, and Gaël Faye, *Hutsi: In the Name of Us All* (Bujumbura, Burundi: Éditions Iwacu, 2019).

19 Marie-Thérèse Toyi, *Weep Not, Refugee* (Benin City, Nigeria: Good-Book Publications, 2014).

20 Ludmila Khersonsky, Ilya Kaminsky, Zarina Zabrisky, Elena Andreychukova, "Silence and Air Raids: 4 Essays from Wartime Ukraine," *Orion Magazine*, November 23, 2022, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/ukraine-russia-war-invasion-essays-2022/>.

21 Serhiy Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv: Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

assassination of the country's first democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, the leader of the Front pour la Démocratie au Burundi (Front for Democracy in Burundi, or FRODEBU). The country plunged into chaos, although, remarkably, not all-out chaos, with an intensification of armed opposition against the government. The protracted negotiations that resulted in the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi (Arusha Agreement) in August 2000 led to the establishment of a transitional government in November 2001.

The conflict configuration in Burundi is multidimensional and compounded by several different sources of conflict. The 1972 events unleashed a cycle of violence which continued until 2015. During these cycles, periods of relative calm and security have been replaced by periods of killings and disorder. The conflict has an ethnic profound base between Hutu and Tutsi populations and is one of a set of regionally connected conflicts also addressed in the Great Lakes process. Indeed, since independence in 1972, the Burundian political landscape has been polarized and marked by ethnic-based tensions, political assassinations, and large-scale violence. For the following two decades, three Tutsi military regimes associated with the Union for National Progress (UPRONA) ruled the country. During these military dictatorships, numerous waves of mass violence resulted from the attempts of various opposition rebel groups to destabilize the three regimes, and the regimes' use of violence to repress these attempts. Despite a wave of hope in the early 1990s, Burundi entered a decade-long civil war in 1993.

In 1998, the Arusha Peace Talks commenced and, in August 2000, international pressure resulted in the signing of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi. However, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNND) did not sign. Additionally, the Party for the Liberation of Hutu People (Palipehutu) did not participate in negotiations. These outsiders continued sporadic violence until 2008. In 2015, a new wave of political violence took place after President Nkurunziza, from the CNDD-FDD which has been in power since 2005, won a contested third-mandate.

The complexity of the ethnic interrelations and civil war in Burundi has been reflected in the modern Burundian literary texts, often created or inspired by authors who were direct witnesses of the tragic events and thus by those who went through real-life traumatic experiences. It is characteristic for such texts that their main heroes have real-life prototypes. In the latter case, the text from a personal narrative turns into a broader mixed genre of writing.

Antoine Kaburahe is a Belgian-Burundian journalist, writer, and editor. The protagonists of his 2019 novel *In the Name of Us All* are Aloys Niyoyita, an expatriate journalist from Burundi, and the members of his family. Introducing the protagonist of his novel, Kaburahe stresses the deep personal nature of the story to be told:

“Aloys Niyoyita is a journalist. But let us warn the reader from the start: anyone hoping to find a scoop in this story can keep moving. It's much more, or rather, much worse. Here you will

simply find the cry of the loving heart of a profoundly wounded man whose childhood was violently wrenched from him, yet who does not want to shut himself up in pain.”<sup>22</sup>

Like many of his other Burundians, this person has lived in exile from his native country since 2015. A child of a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother, he recounts the fear, misunderstanding, despair, and broken dreams of a whole family after the hidden assassination of his father in 1972, a dark year that profoundly marked the history of Burundi.

Kaburahe tells the true story of Aloys Niyoyita, who told him about his personal experience, but still uses the first-person narrative, which adds to the credibility of the presented events and feelings: “I decided to tell the story of Aloys’s life in the first person, as though he were me, as though I were him. It’s his story; they’re my words.”<sup>23</sup>

It was hard for the author to share the Civil War-related traumatic experience with the world. Although he had the conscious intention to tell the story of Aloys, the words were lacking to express what had been confined in the (sub)-consciousness: “Speech has been *liberated*. For the worst. The *implicit* becomes *explicit*.”<sup>24</sup>

However, it is typical for a person who obtained a traumatic experience to find it hard to present such an experience to the outside world: “Avoidance of painful intrusions as a measure of self-protection is only one of the reasons that make it difficult to share a traumatic experience with others.”<sup>25</sup>

The war is a lifelong trauma for the protagonist of the novel *In the Name of Us All*. The protagonist, Aloys Niyoyita, received psychological trauma in his childhood when his father tragically disappeared in 1972, which meant being killed in that ethnic war. The hero keeps all the tragic events of his life, the life of his family and country in his memory. He sees his entire life through the prism of the childhood trauma of war. The fragments of his traumatic memory are narrated through stories. This way of presenting personal experience is culturally determined since oral stories are a traditional form of Burundian narratives: “In a country with an oral culture, what happens when speech is padlocked? What happens when orphaned children no longer have access to the stories of their parents?”<sup>26</sup>

In spite of fragmented narration, the novel creates a coherent holistic picture of the life of the protagonist and his family, reveals his inner world and the depth of his psychological trauma. The narrative is multimodal, in which two semiotic modes interact to create meaning: the text is interacting with the authentic portrait photos of the main protagonist and the members of his family.

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22 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 19.

23 Ibid., 24.

24 Ibid., 20.

25 Busch and McNamara, “Language and Trauma,” 329.

26 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 16.

Leeuwen<sup>27</sup> analyzed the following relations between visual and verbal elements: elaboration, which included specification (when the image makes the text more specific or vice versa) and explanation (the text paraphrases the image or vice versa); and extension, including similarity (the content of the text is similar to the content of the image), contrast (the content of the text contrasts with that of the image) and complement (adding further information).

The embedded photos in the novel elaborate the verbal elements since the photos make the text more specific: they help readers visualize the protagonists of the traumatic family chronicle. The degree of the reader's involvement depends on the angle from which the character is viewed, and the readers have a maximum sense of participation when characters are presented facing them 'front on.' Vertical angle is the realization of power: what the reader/viewer looks up to has power, and, on the contrary, everything he or she looks down on is considered to be weak.<sup>28</sup>

The main characters of the novel *In the Name of Us All* by Kaburahe are presented facing the readers "front on" in the photos. Hence, the author creates a multimodal image of his protagonists for the readers to be entirely involved in their traumatic experiences and feel the pain of ordinary Burundians.

Aloys, the hero of the novel, narrates the story presented in the novel when he is already middle-aged. Time has helped him to understand that he experienced a deep psychological trauma of the civil war in his childhood. In his narrative, the protagonist uses the lexeme *trauma* in the sense of 'psychological trauma': "No one will ever know how to evaluate the damage caused by such trauma in the head of a kid of? my age."<sup>29</sup>

It is not only the main character who got traumatized but his loved ones, too. The author uses the lexeme *wound* to describe the trauma not only for him but also for his family members. While doing so, he creates a deep metaphor of a wound that is never healed: "Mama lived with an open wound, never bandaged."<sup>30</sup>

The individual traumatic memory of the novel's protagonist is intertwined with the Burundians' collective memory traumatized by the civil war and generalized through the persuasive metaphor *letters of blood*:

"Ikiza (tragedy). Igihuhusi (tempest)." 1972: this dark year is always classified in the lexicon of death and devastation. A cursed year. A year written in letters of blood across the collective memory of Burundians. Let us simplify: it will always be confusing to speak of this dark year and its numerous grey areas."<sup>31</sup>

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27 Theo Van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 2005), 230.

28 Kress Gunther van Leeuwen Theo, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Canada: Routledge, 2021), 140.

29 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 63.

30 *Ibid.*, 67.

31 *Ibid.*, 37.



In other words, an individual trauma of the protagonist is, at the same time, a collective one related to the collective memory of the whole society: “The term collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect a historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people.”<sup>32</sup>

It suggests that the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it. Collective memory of trauma is different from individual memory because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events and is remembered by group members who may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space.<sup>33</sup>

Although Burundi is a multiethnic country, the characters feel their identity as “Hutsi” (a neologism blended name derived from the names of the two biggest ethnic groups “Hutu” and “Tutsi”), as representatives of the entire country – Burundi. Despite these divisions, Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi reject being referred to by these ethnic names. They simply call themselves Burundians:

“Burundians know how to be distant, spiteful, immured in silence”<sup>34</sup> or “In Burundi, death is greeted with a certain restraint, meekly. Mama was a Burundian through and through.”<sup>35</sup>

Since the novel depicts a civil war in Burundi from a multiethnic viewpoint, the image of the enemy is absent. However, it is implicitly inferred that the war was caused by the political mistakes of the country’s leadership: “Taught by a history written in letters of blood, a history of purges and other summary executions, Burundians don’t neglect any alerts. Over the years, they’ve acquired an animal’s ability to sense danger, an ability forged in pain. They trust no government, whatever it is. Because Burundian governments have been killing them for a long time.”<sup>36</sup>

The hero feels a heavy burden of the unsolved questions related to the war, its causes, and tragic consequences. He has been searching for the answers to these questions all his life; that is why the questions in the novel remain rhetorical ones: “In my Burundi, from north to south, from east to west, we are a single people. My head was spinning. I asked myself, why these tens of thousands of deaths? These hundreds of thousands of refugees?”<sup>37</sup> and “Why did they kill you, papa?”<sup>38</sup>

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32 Gilad Hirschberger, “Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning,” *Frontiers in psychology*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6095989/>.

33 Ibid.

34 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 52.

35 Ibid., 53.

36 Ibid., 127.

37 Ibid., 160–1.

38 Ibid., 46.

In his reflections on the civil war in Burundi, the main hero chooses the path of *understanding and forgiveness*, which is also revealed in his personal relationship<sup>39</sup>. Thus, when Aloys, from a Tutsi family, was studying at university, he had a girlfriend of Hutu origin. When the civil conflict burst out, she decided to break up their relationship explaining that they represented two opposing ethnic groups. Such a tragic ending of the protagonist's first love was very disappointing to him, as he could not understand what their ethnic identities have to do with their intimate feelings. In the end, it took him quite a long distance to internally reconcile with that decision: "But today, I've understood and forgiven her."<sup>40</sup>

It is not apparent to Aloys, the protagonist, who had to witness the atrocities of the ethnic genocide and go through the loss of his parent and the breakup of his personal relations, that the fear of war has been accompanying him all his life: "I belong to a sacrificed generation. I'm fifty years old, and ultimately, I've spent most of my life in fear and war."<sup>41</sup> Fear is typically connected with a threat that can lead to trauma. However, trauma and fear are not the same. As Mikael Rubin, Maya Neria, and Yuval Neria explain, "the primary difference between fear and trauma is that fear is a response to an event, while trauma is the event itself; moreover, fear may be a response to a traumatic event."<sup>42</sup>

Eventually, the hero of the novel *In the Name of Us All*, escaping the danger to life, had to emigrate, together with his children, from his native Burundi to a neighboring country, Rwanda. The decision was hard for the protagonist, and so immigration becomes an additional trauma to him:

"I was depressed. Questions banged into each other in my head. I missed my country. I turned on WhatsApp, the umbilical cord to my battered country. Like a shipwreck survivor who clings desperately to a life buoy, every refugee belongs to one or many WhatsApp groups in the country, in Rwanda, in Uganda, in Europe, in Canada, in the United States."<sup>43</sup>

The above confession of the novel's hero confirms the observations made by researchers on the devastating psychological impact of displacement or forced migration on individuals who become refugees, because "refugees are also people who have survived the severe trauma not only of whatever caused them to flee their homelands in their first place – things like war, famine, genocide, natural disaster—

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39 See also: Mbonyingingo, "War Memories," 55–75.

40 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 110.

41 Ibid., 110.

42 Mikael Rubin, Maya Neria, and Yuval Neria, "Fear, Trauma, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Clinical, Neurobiological, and Cultural Perspectives," *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture* (2016): 303.

43 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 157–8.

but of all of the trauma associated with fleeing.”<sup>44</sup> The protagonist further concludes that a refugee is a person who is trapped between two opposing poles of emotional states: “Refugees weave a web made of fear and hope.”<sup>45</sup>

The novel *Weep Not, Refugee*, written by Marie-Therese Toyi, a University of Burundi lecturer and writer, tells the story of Wache Wacheke Watachoka. He was born after his mother, Kigeme, was raped. At that time, she was a Burundian secondary school girl. Kigeme had to flee to the refugee camp of Wirodi (a place that resembles much Tanzania, which, ever since 1972, has been receiving Burundian refugees) for her safety, due to the outbreak of the Hutu-Tutsi war in Burundi. On her way to exile, she had her mother raped in the open and drowned in a river, her father chopped, and herself raped. Out of this sexual assault, Wache Wacheke Watachoka was born and raised in the refugee camp in Wirodi, in conditions of extreme poverty. Daily suffering in the camp caused him to understand the true face of the world around him and gave him the stamina to struggle for his own survival.

Marie-Therese Toyi uses a first-person narrative to depict the hardships of the main protagonist, Wache Wacheke Watachoka. We meet the protagonist when he is already 27 years old. He starts his narrative with revealing the inner world of his mother and her sufferings after she had to flee her country because of war:

“Our country had just vomited us out of its bosom, with machetes and bullets, and the hosts had nothing to love in those fugitives, all poor and hungry-looking with no car, no house, nothing.”<sup>46</sup>

Wache Wacheke Watachoka realizes that the war not only brought to his mother physical sufferings but also caused deep psychological traumas, which he inherited when he was born. The writer creates striking metaphors to reflect the horrors of the war consequences: “to carry wounds in a precarious body; damaged soul; penetrated deep into her heart, carving there a deep wound: “When she gave birth to me, her pain was no longer written on her face. I am not saying that all her pain had gone. It had penetrated deep into her heart, carving there a deep wound which I inherited at my birth.”<sup>47</sup> The metaphor *wound*, in the meaning of *psychological trauma*, is a key to understanding the life of a refugee: “I grew up with a wound, the wound of being a refugee. This wound bled as often as crises emerged.”<sup>48</sup>

Like the protagonist of the previous novel, the hero of the novel *Weep Not, Refugee* also finds it hard to start talking about his traumas: “At fourteen, Kigeme learned to suffer in silence. She learned to carry her wounds in a precarious body and

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44 Gail Theisen-Womersley, essay, in *Trauma and Resilience among Displaced Populations: A Sociocultural Exploration* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021).

45 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 158.

46 Toyi, *Weep Not*, 15.

47 *Ibid.*, 14.

48 *Ibid.*, 28.

a damaged soul.”<sup>49</sup> Psychologists regard silence as “a key to the unspoken world,” as a natural modality of the existence of a traumatized individual. At the same time, being silent in a metaphorical way pre-conditions the revelation of the inner self.<sup>50</sup>

Like Antoine Kaburahe, Marie-Therese Toyi also emphasizes the role of oral stories as a traditional form of Burundian narratives. She defines them as ‘folktales.’ Burundians raise very important issues in folktales such as ethnic relations. The protagonist’s mother is afraid to discuss the ethnic issues with her son, but Wache Wacheke Watachoka already knows folktales where the relations among the ethnic groups are discussed:

“..In our country, and even here in this camp, if you discuss too much about our three ethnic groups, others may think that you are an extremist, and it may endanger your life.”  
“But these things are openly discussed in folktales.”<sup>51</sup>

The traditional song culture of Burundi also finds its reflection in Marie-Therese Toyi’s novel. She uses “*the old good day’s song*” about the attitude to hate among people in her novel:

“I hate whoever hates you;  
May he never get food for himself,  
May he never get food for a friend,  
May he never get food for a kid.”<sup>52</sup>

The sufferings and *tears* of the protagonist’s mother are in his memory, and they come to his consciousness as flashbacks: “My mother’s tears come back into my memory.”<sup>53</sup> A flashback in relation to a psychological trauma is a period of repeated living through a traumatic event by an individual. According to psychologists’ observations, “This could be via intrusive memories, but it could also be via reliving certain emotions or physical sensations from the event.”<sup>54</sup>

When going through the hardships of refugee life, life threats, and instability, the main hero of the novel faces the question of identity: “Identity. You have your identity, don’t you? Not that piece of paper with your name and a small photograph of yourself on it. You are a human being in your flesh and your blood; you have a language and occupation.”<sup>55</sup> Similar to the protagonist in Kaburahe’s novel *In the Name of Us All*,

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49 Ibid., 5.

50 Maria Ritter, “Silence as the Voice of Trauma,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24882074/>.

51 Toyi, *Weep Not*, 57.

52 Ibid., 23.

53 Ibid., 24.

54 “What Are Flashbacks? Symptoms, Causes, and Coping,” *Medical News Today*, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-are-flashbacks>.

55 Toyi, *Weep Not, Refugee*, 52.

Wache Wacheke Watachoka in the novel *Weep Not, Refugee* condemns the ethnic considerations and divisions in society at the end of the novel: “If you keep judging people on absurd ethnic considerations, you are yet to make greater mistakes.”<sup>56</sup>

Both Burundian writers, Antoine Kaburahe and Marie-Therese Toyi, create striking metaphors to characterize the overwhelming and painful feelings caused by the war. For Antoine Kaburahe, war is attributed with the images of blood, natural disasters, and merciless evil forces:

“The fish-rich shores of Lake Tanganyika were colored with blood.”<sup>57</sup>

“A bit as in fairytales, something evil came along, an ogre. Here, we call the ogre “1972”.”<sup>58</sup>

“Ruvubu valley, fertile valley, watered with the blood of my father.”<sup>59</sup>

Marie-Therese Toyi often uses metaphors built on parallelism of folklore images and local geographic features, such as “bleeding mountains” and “lakes of tears” to emphasize the enormous and devastating effects of war on the human soul and feelings:

“Listen and hear the message of trumpets and drums they announce another war, the nth war. A time for the ground to open and engulf corpses, and for the mountains to bleed again, for the nth time. Great Lakes have formed in Africa. Lakes of tears of countless refugees on the move since times immemorial, repeatedly starting from scratch works shattered by merciless wars.”<sup>60</sup>

It should be noted that both novels, although narrating highly personal stories of resilience of their protagonists and the people around them, include a broader appeal towards broader Burundian society. In this sense, the novels can also be read as warnings to the contemporaries, as a message to the entire country. This rhetorical feature also allows for viewing these novels as literary texts of a mixed genre which combined the elements of a personal narrative, family chronicle, and even epic features. In the epilogue of her novel, Marie-Therese Toyi expresses her hope for a bright future:

“Many refugees are still sinking in deep rivers oblivion. Oxygen is not food, tears are not a drink... I see their tomorrow bright, very bright...”<sup>61</sup>

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56 Ibid., 168.

57 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 43.

58 Ibid., 35.

59 Ibid., 99.

60 Toyi, *Weep Not, Refugee*, 3.

61 Ibid., 169.

The protagonist of Antoine Kaburahe's novel makes an appeal to all the Burundians. In the name "of us all," he invites Burundians to overcome ethnic and political tensions and to build a secure country:

"Let us worthily bury our dead  
Let us definitively lift our mourning and live  
Let us leave to our children a Burundi that I did not know  
A country that is secure, fraternal, open  
To all senses and to all bloods  
A country open to all possibilities  
But only to the best of all possible things."<sup>62</sup>

Both writers envisage a peaceful Burundi, free from ethnic rivalries, and, in their narratives, the writers settle on reconciliation as a guiding motif of their imaginaries. This is informed by the peaceful negotiations that were between politicians representing the country's ethnic, political, religious, and civil societies forces that were held in Arusha and reached a peaceful agreement in the year 2000.

### **Initial exploration of war trauma in Ukrainian literary texts**

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked an outburst of the centuries-long attempts of the Russian empire to conquer Ukraine. The roots of Ukraine's statehood identity have origin in the state of Kyivan Rus', which emerged as a powerful nation in the 9th century with the capital of Kyiv city preserving its capital status in today's Ukraine. The state of Moscow was shaping in the 12th century on the outskirts of Kyivan state, and since its emergence Moscow politics has been the politics of imperial military aggressor. Russian propaganda ferociously attempts to appropriate the long and rich Ukrainian history from its medieval period, represented by the ancient Kyivan Rus and up to the present, to justify the existence of the imperial Russian state. The history of Ukraine reflects "the centuries of Ukrainians striving for freedom and independence despite constant repression by Tsarist Russia, the USSR, and the Russia of today."<sup>63</sup>

Right after the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in 2014, the Russian federation occupied the Crimean Peninsula and started a creeping invasion of Ukraine's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The most acute, and as many agree, crucial phase of Ukraine's struggle for its independence began with the unprovoked full-scale invasion of the Russian federation of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. As the historian Serhii Plokhy put it in his book on the struggle of Ukraine since 2014, "The democracy

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62 Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 28.

63 Michael M. Naydan, "Literary and Historical Sources for Understanding Ukraine: A Recommended Reading List," *World Literature Today*, July 20, 2022, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org>.

peacefully acquired in the final days of the Soviet Union and the independence won at the ballot box in December 1991 would now require defense not only with words and marches but also with arms.”<sup>64</sup>

The war that has been outraging in Ukraine since February 2022 has already become the biggest war in the world since World War II and the Cold War period. The Russian invasion has caused tens of thousands of human deaths among civilians and the military, many more wounded and left with disabilities, millions of people displaced internally and abroad, ruined housing, industrial, energy, agricultural, and transportation infrastructure, thousands of destroyed civilian objects including schools and hospitals, and enormous psychological and emotional suffering of the population.<sup>65</sup>

The heroism of the Ukrainian army in fighting back the Russian aggression, backed by great volunteer movement and support of patriotic civilians, has been crucial not only for the resistance of the entire country against the aggressor, but for the raising international financial, military, and humanitarian support of Ukraine by the coalition of democratic countries.

The whole Ukrainian nation has been witnessing wartime events since the first days of the invasion. It is evident that persons of letters were among the first who have been documenting both the criminal deeds of the aggressor and their own and people's reactions and responses. Professional writers, poets, bloggers were forced to observe the atrocities of war and how they themselves and other people react in the real-time mode. Such responses are very much personal and direct, as most authors have experienced the events, they reflect on by themselves.

Among the primary artistic reflections of the tragic realities of the war since its very first days, one can observe that the genres related to one's personal accounts prevail – diaries, essays, poetry, or short stories. It is not surprising since such literary genres are typical to provide a quick reflecting response on personal traumatic experiences.

The focus of this research is Serhiy Zhadan's diary "*Sky Above Kharkiv. Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front.*" A diary, as a "form of autobiographical writing", is unique in its ability to express the deep personal feelings and emotions of an author with "a frankness that is unlike writing done for publication."<sup>66</sup> In addition to rendering the author's personality, diaries also "have been of immense importance for the recording of social and political history."<sup>67</sup> Both prominent Ukrainian literary figures and many ordinary citizens were keeping their diaries when the war in Ukraine began. The initial

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64 Serhii Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2021), 337.

65 Ukraine: Civilian casualty update 24 September 2023 | Ohchr, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/09/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-24-september-2023>.

66 "Diary," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed September 23, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/art/diary-literature>.

67 Ibid.

and, probably, the fastest way to share one's diary observations, if the author wanted to share them, is through social media, as was the case with the writings of, for instance, Serhii Zhadan, whose collection of personal war-time narratives first appeared as posts on his Facebook page.

The data of this research also includes six essays written by well-known writers and poets: *Silence and Air Raids* by Ilya Kaminsky, *Cat Beneath a Birdless Sky* by Ludmila Khersonsky, *I Will Buy Sperm Whale Teeth* by Zarina Zabritsky, *Return To Sea* by Elena Andreychykova, *In the Frame* and *Kharkivites* by Andrei Krasniashikh, and Serhiy Zhadan's diary *Sky Above Kharkiv. Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front*. An essay, as "a minor art form," is valuable for rendering one's own experience combined with the reader's engagement since, by definition, an essay always contains "a direct and even intimate appeal to the reader." At the same time, while "*engaging the reader in the interpretative process*," this genre allows for expressing a certain persuasive position of the author.<sup>68</sup>

The Ukrainian texts which are analyzed in this article were created by civilian writers living in various regions of Ukraine, specifically in Odesa (south) and Kharkiv (east), who were witnessing the full-scale Russian invasion since the very beginning of the war on February 24, 2022. As a result, the texts that were created in line with the unfolding real-life tragic events allow for retrospective tracing of getting the psychological traumas by the narrators. These texts emerged as online reflections on the war raving in the lives of ordinary civilians. Zarina Zabritsky wrote her essay *I Will Buy Sperm Whale Teeth* one hour after an air alarm notifies the Ukrainian citizens about the danger of Russia's massive attacks on cities and villages of Ukraine by drones and rockets, and thus her essay renders a stir of emotions of the shocked and nerved protagonist:

"I'm writing this at six in the morning on July 16. I woke up just past 5 a.m. when Odesa got hit by yet another missile. Black smoke rose over the city. We don't know the details yet. Last night, the sirens howled a lot."<sup>69</sup>

Serhiy Zhadan, a well-known Ukrainian writer, poet and singer, also started recording the wartime experience since the very start of the invasion. His diary *Sky above Kharkiv: Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front* consists of the texts originally posted in Ukrainian on his Facebook page between February 24 and June 24, 2022, during the first four months of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the introduction to this book, S. Zhadan explains his writer's intentions as, on the one hand, to document the acute wartime brunts and thus make them fixed in time and memory and, on the other hand, to communicate and speak to his readers:

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68 Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, "Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms by Peter Childs," Open Library, January 1, 1970, 72-3, [https://openlibrary.org/books/OL33588873M/Routledge\\_Dictionary\\_of\\_Literary\\_Terms](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL33588873M/Routledge_Dictionary_of_Literary_Terms).

69 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabritsky, Andreychykova, "Silence and Air Raids."



“Naturally, these posts were not written as a book. That just came down to the need to remember the faces, names, attitudes, hopes, and disappointments I encountered these past few months. My greatest fear was that this temporal and spatial content, this bulk of joy and misfortune, faith and pain would simply evaporate in the past, like a chunk of March snow in running water. So I wanted to capture and preserve all of this, keep it written down, articulated, as something that receives another chance—a chance to be heard, a chance to be understood.”<sup>70</sup>

As was in the case of Burundian texts, Ukrainian authors who are directly living through the wartime experience also find it difficult for themselves and their protagonists to narrate their traumatic experiences of war. This experience had such a strong impact on Ukrainians that they at times felt that language was not enough to express what they were feeling when the war burst out in Ukraine:

“War contends with language. During times of war, you constantly catch yourself thinking that you lack words. *It’s like you’ve had your breath taken away*, the wind knocked out of you, so words get lost, spill all over, and seem misplaced. This is a very strange feeling.”<sup>71</sup>

For writers and poets, the ability to put one’s feelings and emotions into words is an essential need, so that language itself is compared to the process of breathing. Serhiy Zhadan creates a characteristic metaphor of *language in the lungs* when narrating his experiences in the early days of the war. Thus, with the help of bodily and physiological metaphors, traumatic psychological experience is objectivized:

“Turns out *that language rested like a March cold in our lungs*, weighing them down like clothes on fugitives swimming across a frozen riverbed.”<sup>72</sup>

Another writer, Liudmila Khersonsky, also metaphorically talks about breathing difficulties in wartime in her essay “*Cat Beneath a Birdless Sky*.” Moreover, a direct reference to physiological process turns into a symbolic tool for diagnosing the mental and emotional state of other Ukrainians:

“The war erodes your breathing. It becomes hard and cloddy, like damaged soil. I will find it hard to breathe later. My

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70 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, ix.

71 Ibid., vii.

72 Ibid., 172.

breathing will become bumpy, I will pant and wait to breathe out. That's how breathing resists pain and despair. Look at other people to see how they breathe, and you can tell right away how troubled or untroubled they are. Some people develop unnoticeable breathing as if they are not there anymore." The writer concludes with a very succinct, but expressive verdict for what is happening around: "Wars are unfit for breath."<sup>73</sup>

A different metaphor related to the notion of breath can be met in Zarina Zabrisky's writing. The sordid everyday realities of war, such as constant air sirens, continuous threat to life, ongoing psychological stress, are inevitably accompanying a person in wartime. In her essay *I Will Buy Sperm Whale Teeth*, Z. Zabrisky, in a mythopoetic way, compares the war and its inevitable companions of fear and destruction to a terrifying monster with *putrid breath*:

"Their <of air sirens> wailing always makes me think of a bloodthirsty, senile dragon rising from a dark, damp cave in the depth of an ocean, blazing through the sky and scorching the earth with its *putrid breath*. It wants to devour us. It snatches children. It loses its rusty teeth."<sup>74</sup>

It can be said that the above-mentioned difficulties of writers in finding the appropriate language to describe the surrounding wartime madness and the repeated feeling of the lack of words/breathing ("unsaid moments", according to Ilya Kaminsky) was very characteristic for the first days and weeks of war. As it was stated earlier, these obstacles faced by the authors of the analyzed texts manifest the initial stage of trauma, which could be felt at both psychological and physiological levels. However, the writers are eager to share their experiences. They even feel obliged to document the new abnormal and tragic processes surrounding them. As Liudmila Khersonsky explains in her essay, "I go outside. The sky brightens, the white-and-blue sky of the first war morning—so far and so close. Every tree in the garden witnesses us. I need reliable witnesses to tell the story of the early morning rocket explosions."<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Serhiy Zhadan, after acknowledging the initial difficulty of verbal expression, moves on to state that the power of words outweighs the fearful feelings: "...it turns out that language overpowers the fear of silence. Maybe this is it – our fear, our despair account for the furious silence of bitter eyewitnesses..."<sup>76</sup>

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73 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychykova, "Silence and Air Raids."

74 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychykova, "Silence and Air Raids."

75 Ibid.

76 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 171–2.

The protagonists of the Ukrainian literary works express their mutual understanding of the nature of full-scale Russian aggression since the first day of the war: it is a colonial, genocide-based, and existential war: “On February 24, 2022, a full-scale war began in Ukraine. The regular army of the Russian Federation appeared on Ukrainian territory, the shelling of Ukrainian cities began, and the destruction of our country began. We faced a choice – either hold out and *survive or be annihilated*.”<sup>77</sup> The Russian invasion brought terror, violence, and cruelty into a peaceful country, putting all its population under continuous threat: “<...> *the cruel war* is going on now,” Elena Andreychukova says in her essay, and Ilya Kaminsky writes about “moments of terror at what is done to Ukraine while the world watches on.”<sup>78</sup>

The enemy’s attacks on peaceful population – shelling of cities, launching of rockets at civilian facilities, and victims among the civilians – generate many images and metaphors related to blood, pain, destruction, and death: “The kid is dragging his neighbor’s bodies,” Zarina says. “Adults, children, all morning. He’s dragging them from the rubble of a bombed-out building...”<sup>79</sup> What is more, rockets, missiles, and shellings are perceived not only as military weapons but also appear in the texts as immediate materialization of cruel and aggressive enemy intentions, of the “*bloodthirsty dragon*.” The very notion of Russian rockets becomes a penetrating symbol of the direct threat of killings across the entire territory of Ukraine: “the sick, *bloodthirsty dragon* keeps howling and howling and the sirens do not stop...”<sup>80</sup>

In contrast to the analyzed Burundian literary texts, the works by Ukrainian authors depict a clear and specific image of the enemy:

“The explosion. *Russia* has finally decided we are too unimportant to let live or sleep. Or have happy, unscared pets.”

“*Enemy forces*’ primary energy is directed towards preparation for the resumption of offensive actions to surround and seize the city of Kharkiv.”<sup>81</sup>

The aggressor and its army are the focus of not only righteous and mobilizing anger among Ukrainians:

“The Russians are barbarians. They’ve come here to destroy our history, our culture, and our education, because all those things are alien and hostile to them. We have to protect all that, restore it, keep developing it.”<sup>82</sup>

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77 Ibid., vi.

78 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychukova, “Silence and Air Raids.”

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Andrei Krasniashikh, “Life in Wartime Ukraine: Two Essays by Andrei Krasniashikh,” Literary Hub, September 15, 2022, <https://lithub.com/life-in-wartime-ukraine-two-essays-by-andrei-krasniashikh>.

82 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 10.

but also, their contempt of the enemy:

“I pass by the only patriotic casino I have ever seen in the world: “Glory to Ukraine!” reads the electronic sign, changing right away to “*Russian military ship go f\*\*\* yourself*” and by an open sex shop called Strawberry. (The sign on the door has a joke about palianytsia, a Ukrainian word for strawberry no Russian can ever pronounce right.)”<sup>83</sup>

If mentioned in the analyzed texts, the image of russian dictator v. putin is portrayed in a generalized way as a sinister embodiment of evil, pain, and terror, brought to Ukraine by russian military: “Nadya doesn’t finish her food, leaves it on the plate. Forces it on my wife. Even feeds her. “Don’t want it.” “Just a little bite.” “I don’t want it.” “Come on, come on. So *Putin* dies.” “Where’d you hear that?” “I made it up.” Doesn’t even matter, everyone is thinking it now.”<sup>84</sup>

The outrageous wartime events and experiences explored in the analyzed texts have such a strong impact on the Ukrainian authors that they are pushed to seek parallels in the collective memory of the Ukrainian nation. As Gilad Hirschberger explains, “Collective memory of trauma is different from individual memory because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events, and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space.”<sup>85</sup> Specifically, today’s war in Ukraine evokes allusions to World War II due to some obvious similarities – its total nature (full-scale war), the need for mobilization of the entire country, and fighting for existential survival. The allusions to World War II can be based on the memories rooted in the personal experience of narrators’ senior family members: “My mom lived through *World War II*. She understands.”<sup>86</sup> or intermediated memories acquired through textbooks, fiction, or movies: “Reminds me of *the Second World War*. I’m referring to the occupiers’ ideology and moral imperative, first and foremost. They’ve come here to liberate us from us.”<sup>87</sup>

The scene of the destroyed city calls an allusion to war footage, which stresses the complexity of understanding for the protagonists that such are real pictures of their lives: “We’re driving. Mom looks out at the destroyed city and says: “Like in the movies. And we’re in the frame.”<sup>88</sup>

The war also evokes allusions to Ukrainian historical personalities preserved in the memory of the literary protagonists. Ukrainian historical personalities serve as symbols of resistance against Russian military and cultural aggression and help the citizens of Ukraine survive the most recent traumatic experiences. For example, the

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83 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychukova, “Silence and Air Raids.”

84 Krasniashikh, “Life in Wartime Ukraine.”

85 Hirschberger, “Collective Trauma.”

86 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychukova, “Silence and Air Raids.”

87 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 11.

88 Krasniashikh, “Life in Wartime Ukraine.”

texts include allusions to the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), whose literary heritage is regarded to be the foundation of modern Ukrainian literature, while his historical and political views contributed to shaping the Ukrainian national identity. Writing his poetry in the Ukrainian language, Shevchenko was convicted in 1847 of explicitly promoting the independence of Ukraine from the Russian empire: “For us Ukrainians, as soon as something big goes down, *Taras Shevchenko* quotes start popping up. That’s how it was during all of our revolutions, and that’s how it is today.”<sup>89</sup>

Among more recent historical Ukrainian figures, allusions to Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), a leader of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in the first half of the twentieth century, can be met in the analyzed texts. Stepan Bandera became a symbolic figure of Ukraine’s struggle for independence: “The Russians seriously think that *Stepan Bandera is alive*. Our zoo renamed the panther as *Stepan. Stepan Panthera*.”<sup>90</sup>

The protagonists in the Ukrainian texts often identify themselves with the whole country. Ukraine is a multinational country, with certain cultural differences between its regional parts; however, in wartime, it is the Ukrainian identity, and the sense of belonging to the Ukrainian nation that becomes crucial. This collective feeling is rendered through both direct generalizing statements, like “We are Ukrainians”, and the presence of a broad variety of linguistic and visual signs referring to Ukrainian language, history, and culture:

“It’s quite possible that on February 23, I would have found that kind of phrasing too pretentious, excessively emotional—perhaps even ideologically colored. But when you get a call and are told that your friend who received a vehicle from you the previous day has apparently been killed and can’t be buried because his head is nowhere to be found, you realize that these words are the most precise and truthful for all us *Ukrainians* these days.”<sup>91</sup>

“I walk to the baths, taking a long detour, passing by several wedding dress salons in a row: white lace, pearls, and diamonds, giant cakes, the blue-and-yellow *Ukrainian flags* playing in the wind outside.”<sup>92</sup>

“At Deribasovskaya, little girls in *Ukrainian embroidered shirts* ride feisty ponies with pink ribbons in their manes to the sound of air-raid sirens.”<sup>93</sup>

“I pass by the only patriotic casino I have ever seen in the world: “*Glory to Ukraine!*” reads the electronic sign, changing

89 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 19.

90 Krasniashikh, “Life in Wartime Ukraine.”

91 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, VI.

92 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychykova, “Silence and Air Raids.”

93 Ibid.

right away to “Russian military ship go f\*\*\* yourself” and by an open sex shop called Strawberry. (The sign on the door has a joke about palianytsia, a Ukrainian word for strawberry no Russian can ever pronounce right.)”<sup>94</sup>

Overall, the research reveals that Ukrainians do not yet have a conscious understanding of the obtained psychological trauma, since their literary works were created almost immediately after the war-traumatic events. Due to this, there are primary material images in their narratives – pictures of the ruining effects of missiles and the direct threat of annihilation, as well as bodily images. Accordingly, the lexeme *wound* is only used for denoting physical injuries, not psychological wounds:

“Most of them weren’t all that cheerful—*they were about wounded civilians*, women, and children.”<sup>95</sup>

“They’re certain that there’s still a chance to evacuate the defenders of the city, women, children, and *the wounded*, first and foremost.”<sup>96</sup>

The authors do not use the word *trauma* explicitly in the meaning of psychological trauma when talking about Ukrainians. However, the term *psychological trauma* is used when talking about russians. For instance, the russian occupiers painted over a poem on the wall, fearing, as S. Zhadan ironically notes, *traumatic associations*:

“In my hometown, Starobilsk, the occupiers destroyed murals made by local youth. A drawing with my poem on it wasn’t spared either—they just painted over it. By the way, the poem wasn’t about Stepan Andriyovych Bandera or Symon Vasylyovych Petliura, or any other Ukrainian political figure from the past, for that matter. The poem was about a fish. But they painted over it anyway. *The fish may have had traumatic associations with the Black Sea Fleet*, which is currently sinking in Ukraine’s territorial waters—I couldn’t tell you.”<sup>97</sup>

The Ukrainian authors also explore the feeling of fear, which is a natural feeling in wartime. The intensity of this strong emotion may have various degrees: from the strongest, almost panicking, but shameful fear when the Ukrainian heroine in Ludmila Khersonsky’s essay documents how the russian enemy is bombing her native city (“First, I listen to my body, to my chattering teeth. This chatter, *animal fear*, so shameful.

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94 Ibid.

95 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 76.

96 Ibid., 94.

97 Ibid., 177.

Should I hide under the sofa, too, and lie there flat as a pancake? A cat hides under the sofa, but where can a human creature hide when home is no longer safe? How soon do I disappear?"<sup>98</sup>) to tragic and gloomy incantation-like poetic reflections on the nature of fear between life and death in Serhiy Zhadan's words about fearless Ukrainian medical workers ("Get out of here, dead man, go beyond the banks, take your death and *your fear* with you..."<sup>99</sup>)

War dramatically sharpens the contrast between concepts, especially opposing ones, and the protagonists' perception of the reality around them. At the initial stage of trauma, it is notable that protagonists do not differentiate between material and non-material objects, while material things acquire symbolic meanings. Thus, the female protagonist in Liudmila Khersonsky's essay, when having to quickly collect her evacuation bag, wants to put her fear and other emotional states into her bag alongside with the essential possessions. The latter, although being material, are turning into symbols of her previous happy life before the war. Linguistically, a *zeugma* (the use of a word in the same grammatical relation to adjacent words which are not connected semantically) is built in the text:

"I need to find a flashlight. And a go-bag. It should be very small, but it should have all my life in it – everything I love and value and everything I might need—*family photos, books, documents, food and water, medication, cell phone, chargers, money, and my necklace, and warm clothes, and our collections of art, and my pillow, and my cashmere shawl, and my lipstick, and my husband's glasses, and my fear, and my grief, and my anger, and my hope.*"<sup>100</sup>

It can be noticed in the analyzed Ukrainian texts that the protagonists are at the stage of denial of their psychological traumas and in various ways resist the war and its devastating effects on their psychological state. As a result, the wish, often a conscious one, to continue one's usual life like before may become one of the forms of resistance to war. At the same time, it is not the only function of such seeming escape intentions – in this way, the Ukrainians demonstrate their strong collective desire to live notwithstanding all threats and show to the outer world that together they are invincible and not afraid of this war: "Odesa is not afraid of the dragon. It eats, drinks, dances, sings, and goes mad in between the raids."<sup>101</sup>

Among the consequences of war, the impact on the mental health of the civilian population is one of the most significant.<sup>102</sup> Ukrainians display high resilience in the

98 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychykova, "Silence and Air Raids."

99 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 150.

100 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychykova, "Silence and Air Raids."

101 Ibid.

102 See: Srinivasa Murthy and Rashmi Lakshminarayana, "Mental Health Consequences of War: A Brief Review of Research Findings," *World Psychiatry: official journal of the*

face of the worst trauma, the trauma of constant missile attacks on peaceful cities by Russians. The dictionary of the American Psychology Association provides the following definition of resilience: “Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.”<sup>103</sup>

As a specific mental coping strategy, citizens create parallel realities: life at war and life in peace where they keep on working and enjoying life, *life between air raids*. That strategy is reflected in the analyzed texts:

“The city was struck by incoming fire in the afternoon. At the same time, moms walk down streets in the city center with their children. Two realities reside here somehow: a vast, translucent sky and smoke coming from Saltivka.”<sup>104</sup>

The writers declare their desire to feel life because people have only one life:

“Every morning I come here to be given this wisdom and power. On the way back home, I pick the neighbor’s sour cherries. I purse my lips slightly, but then I smile. I feel it right now. *I feel life. And right now there is nothing more important. I would never want to be taught this kind of hedonism by war.* But it has already happened; nothing can be changed.”<sup>105</sup>

“At the event, she turns to me. “Odesa isn’t occupied like Kherson. So let’s come together and read poems. *We have only one life.*” And so we read along with the others, our words punctuated by air raid sirens.”<sup>106</sup>

Ludmila Khersonsky stresses that *life strives to be sane*, free from mental derangement: “Life strives to be sane, and people get up and go to work. Someone bakes bread.”<sup>107</sup>

Forced fleeing to a country that one liked before the war brings additional psychological trauma. The female character in Elena Andreychukova’s essay cannot enjoy life when her home and family are under the threat of war. She feels a wistful desire to return home:

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*World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, February 2006, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1472271/>.

103 “APA Dictionary of Psychology,” American Psychological Association, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://dictionary.apa.org/resilience>.

104 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 182.

105 Khersonsky, Kaminsky, Zabrisky, Andreychukova, “Silence and Air Raids.”

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.



“I’m just passing through Istanbul. I just exist. I don’t love the taste of food there, although Turkish food was always delicious for me before. I don’t smell the greenery waking up after the winter. I force myself to look around and get distracted, but my eyes return again and again to the phone and the news. *How can I force myself to enjoy this exotic city when all I really want is to be home?* There is even the same Black Sea, but it doesn’t suit me. I need my Black Sea: my beaches, with my sand, which I walked on when I was a child. My seagulls cry differently, my algae has a higher concentration of iodine, and my shells are a different shape. Why didn’t I ever appreciate it the way I do now?”<sup>108</sup>

The nostalgia was so strong that the female character, her son, and her mother decided to return to their home despite the threat to their lives. The characters of the essay affirm that they are not afraid of war:

“At the end of April, I inform all my relatives that I am returning. My son, who is eleven, also demands to return to his grandmother’s house, which has a basement. “You know, I’m a brave guy,” he says. *My mother also insists on her return. She has her own arguments: her son (my brother) is at home; she is no longer afraid. But she really just wants to go to our sea.*”<sup>109</sup>

Many Ukrainians display resilience by becoming volunteers to help the Ukrainian army and civilians to withstand the invaders and cope with war hardships. Civilians in Kharkiv endured heavy shelling for days. Serhiy Zhadan became a volunteer on the first day of Russia’s invasion, and he gives accounts of his daily activities in Kharkiv city and Kharkiv region in his diary:

“March 12, 9:24 a.m.  
We bought equipment—almost 400,000 hryvnias’ worth—for a volunteer unit we’ve been working with, so thanks a lot to everyone who’s been helping out.”<sup>110</sup>

The text of the diary is multimodal. In addition to verbal accounts of his days as a volunteer, Serhiy Zhadan is using photographs. Although, as was noted above, at the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion, Ukrainians were on the stage of psychological trauma denial, certain features of the war-related traumas can be observed in the diary.

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108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 24.

Thus, Serhiy Zhadan feels psychological pain when he looks at the ruined building of the Literary Memorial Museum of Hryhorii Skovoroda. Ukrainian philosopher, theologian, and poet Hryhorii Skovoroda (1722–1794) influenced not only his contemporaries but many generations of Ukrainians as well. The Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum is a *lieu de mémoire* (a significant entity, which has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of the Ukrainian nation)<sup>111</sup>. The text is illustrated with the photograph which shows the destroyed building of the Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum by a Russian bomb. The building, which housed the Literary Memorial Museum of Hryhorii Skovoroda, was built in the 18th century. The photograph extends the text and serves as evidence in support of a message:

“May 10, 3:20 p.m.  
We just went to Skovorodynivka, dropped off two carloads of food for the locals, and visited our friends at the bombed-out Skovoroda Museum. Looking at the burned remains of the building is *painful*. And trying to process all this is *painful*. The photograph shows the destroyed building.”<sup>112</sup>

The new history of Ukraine which is being shaped by the war is painful for Serhiy Zhadan. The war situations can be so terrible that Serhiy Zhadan could feel deprived of speech:

“April 3, 7:36 p.m.  
We’ll get to everything else afterward. For now, we have to resist, fight, and support each other. *I’m speechless*. Simply *speechless*. Hang in there, my friends. Tomorrow, we’ll wake up one day closer to our victory.”<sup>113</sup>

Serhiy Zhadan’s text is illustrated with a photograph of the flag of Ukraine as the symbol of his belief in the victory of Ukraine.

Like Burundian writers, in his diary, Serhiy Zhadan, although narrating the personal stories of his resilience and the resilience of the people he meets, appeals to the whole Ukrainian society. On the first day of the full-scale war, February 24, 2022, Serhiy Zhadan urges Ukrainians to resist since the Russian war against Ukraine is a war of annihilation:

“All our concerts will come later after we win. For now, we’d like to encourage everyone to stay where they belong and do their work, to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and to

111 Pierre Nora, “Preface to the English-Language Edition,” in Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

112 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 112.

113 *Ibid.*, 63.

assist our fellow citizens, who need our help today. Remember one thing, my friends: *this is a war of annihilation*. We cannot afford to lose—we must win. So let's stick together. Glory to Ukraine!"<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion

The analyzed literary works reflect the consciousness and psychological state of the characters in wartime. The works from both countries – Burundi in East Africa and Ukraine in Europe – present the humanistic values of their cultures: the superiority of life over death, the unacceptability, inhumanity, and bloody absurdity of war as a state of society. The literary texts show the rejection of war by their characters. As Kaburahe's hero notes, "On every battlefield, you find the dead, the survivors, the wounded, and the aftermath. Always. War, under all skies and from the dawn of time, always leaves behind its hideous stigmata."<sup>115</sup> Serhiy Zhadan proclaims that "Human life is the most valuable thing, of course."<sup>116</sup>

The novels by Kaburahe and Marie-Therese Toyi, Burundian authors, show that the psychological trauma of war affects the rest of one's life, and psychological wounds hurt throughout one's existence. It can be explained by a more remote chronological position of the narrator to the events being recalled. Antoine Kaburahe believes in a better future for his native country: "I have faith in the future of Burundi"<sup>117</sup> and Toyi calls on the people of her country who suffered from war violence to "stand up and start again."<sup>118</sup> Overall, the protagonists in Burundian texts tell their stories from the standpoint of acceptance of their psychological traumas. Also, Burundian heroes and heroines are unanimous in their resilience to and condemnation of internal ethnic conflicts in Burundi, which explains the absence of the enemy image in the text. It is the madness and cruelty of ethnic rivalry that is to blame.

Burundian texts, representing East African literature, employ the national tradition of oral stories as a traditional form of narration, which extends the frames of the plot and roots the protagonists and narrators in a broader literary and folklore context.

Ukrainian texts demonstrate a very strong sense of outstanding resilience towards the war in general, the undeniable desire to live regardless of the adversary wartime forces, and the attempts of russians to ruin their lives. The analyzed authors express a common feeling among Ukrainian citizens that the war unleashed by the russian empire is existential, a struggle against the annihilation of the entire nation. Therefore, in the Ukrainian texts, one can observe explicit and implicit references to

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>115</sup> Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 23.

<sup>116</sup> Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 132.

<sup>117</sup> Kaburahe, Mikalachki, and Faye, *Hutsi*, 23.

<sup>118</sup> Toyi, *Weep Not*, 4.

genocide and the image of the enemy. Ukrainian texts, while sharing their authors' personal painful experiences of war, have many references and allusions to the Ukrainian historical and cultural leaders that serve as sources of inspiration and role models and strengthen wartime resilience.

The characters of Ukrainian texts that were created at the very beginning of the war do not yet realize the deep psychological traumas of war and their long-term effects on their personalities. The protagonists challenge the war and resist it physically and psychologically. The common thing among Ukrainians in these texts is their firm faith in the victory of Ukraine, which has been inspiring the heroes and heroines since the first days of the war. As Serhiy Zhadan says in his diary, "Tomorrow, we'll wake up one day closer to our victory."<sup>119</sup>

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119 Zhadan, *Sky above Kharkiv*, 63.

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