Discourse on the traumatic experience of Ukrainian internally displaced and refugee women: *A Foe – A Friend – A Family* by Iryna Feofanova

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War. Ukrainian women. Internally displaced women. Refugee. Traumatic experience.

The article deals with the discourse on the traumatic experience of Ukrainian internally displaced and refugee women in Iryna Feofanova's debut collection of short stories, *Chuzha-svoia-ridna* (A foe – a friend – a family, 2023). The analysis is rooted in the interdisciplinary fields of contemporary humanities and trauma studies, alongside approaches developed by feminist criticism. Feofanova's stories are structurally heterogeneous but interconnected in three dimensions: 1) the common theme of war, which the writer always presents as a reason for her characters' traumas; 2) the perception of war not only as a tragic problem of Ukrainian society as a whole, but also as a tragedy of a particular Ukrainian family or individual – a child, a woman, or a man; 3) the protagonist is a refugee or internally displaced woman who, regardless of the circumstances or location, draws on inner strength to cope with pain, despair, and anxiety.

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Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a growing number of artists, including writers, have addressed the implications of this war and its impact on all spheres of social, economic, and cultural development. They not only record and analyze the tragic events of the war, but also look for ideas and forms that can help people understand, at least on an emotional level, the ongoing crisis and how Ukrainians are experiencing these traumatic events. Unlike the initial hostilities in 2014, which were geographically localized and therefore relatively remote for a large part of the Ukrainian population, the new phase of the war is a profoundly different experience that has affected nearly every Ukrainian family.

Ukrainian researchers emphasize the significance of literary discourse in times of war. According to Oksana Pukhonska, war fiction "breaks with the traditional framework of its usual role and significance in the arts" because it is "functional literature, which often, at the cost of aesthetic and literary techniques, offers a cultural and analytical interpretation of a particular event in its present and historical dimensions"[1] (2022, 106). Interest in the relevant topics in Ukrainian prose is intensified by "the increase of nation-building processes and the sharpness of the national identity of Ukrainians against the background of Russia's current war of aggression against Ukraine" (Grebeniuk 2022, 110). Thus, literary works reveal the true face of the Russian-Ukrainian War by showing people in particular spaces, on or off the battlefield, thus demonstrating the nature of this conflict for millions of people around the world. Ukrainian and foreign writers have interpreted it in different ways, through fiction, reportage, memoir, fiction-documentary, satire, and irony. These include works such as *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* by Serhii Plokhy (2023); *Shchodennyk viiny* by Yevgenia Belorusets (2022; Eng. trans. *War Diary*, 2023); *In the Hour of War: Poetry from Ukraine* edited by Carolyn Forché and Ilya Kaminsky (2023); *Invasion: The Inside Story of Russia's Bloody War and Ukraine's Fight for Survival* by Luke Harding (2022); *The War Came to Us: Life and Death in Ukraine* by Christopher Miller (2023); and others. These works are filled with personal stories that bring the human side of the war experience closer for international readers. Thus the literary portrayal of the Russian-Ukrainian War reveals not only national, but also individual traumas, which are metonymically projected onto social problems in the stories of the characters. It is crucial to examine the representations of Ukrainian women, whose roles as wives, mothers, and daughters have been transformed into those of warriors, refugees, and internally displaced persons.

The focus of this study is Iryna Feofanova's debut collection of short stories *Chuzha-svoia-ridna* (A foe – a friend – a family, 2023), which examines topics such as forced displacement and refugeeism, national identification, and the peculiarities of Ukrainian women's lives before and after the start of the war. It also portrays their adaptation to the traumatic reality brought about by Russia's military aggression. These texts feature realistic descriptions and dialogues that organically combine personal experiences with the shared experiences of Ukrainian women. However, the author has emphasized during numerous presentations that her texts are not based on actual events, but on real women's thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Each short story is full of pain and tears, and the rare moments of light humor can be seen as "a transition to a new level of understanding the events of the turbulent times" (Kotsarev 2015). This article aims to analyze the discourse on the traumatic experience of internally displaced Ukrainian women and refugees and their views on the Russian-Ukrainian War in the collection.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE CONCEPT OF TRAUMA

The following analysis is rooted in the interdisciplinary fields of contemporary humanities and trauma studies, alongside approaches developed by feminist criticism. There are several types of trauma as well as varying definitions of the concept of trauma. The phenomenon of trauma and the factors that determine it are currently the focus of research by scholars, namely Michelle Balaev (2008; 2018), Magdolna Balogh (2023), Jeffrey H. Hartman (1995), Tetiana Grebeniuk (2022), Tamara Hundorova (2014), Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996), Bessel Van der Kolk (2014), Dominick LaCapra (1999), Renos K. Papadopoulos (2021), Yaroslav Polishchuk (2016; 2018), Oksana Pukhonska (2022; 2023), Eric Wertheimer and Monica J. Casper (2016), and others.

The complexity and impossibility of finding a generally accepted understanding of the concept of trauma even within a single discipline is described by Renos K. Papadopoulos in *Involuntary Dislocation: Home, Trauma, Resilience, and Adversity-Activated Development* (2021). The primary meaning of the term trauma, which originates from the Greek language, means a wound inflicted on the body. However, in later usage, particularly in medical and psychological literature, and mainly in the works of Sigmund Freud, trauma is understood as a wound inflicted on the mind ([1920] 1955). For Cathy Caruth, trauma is more than a pathology; trauma is "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (1996, 4). As she states, "the traumatized […] carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (1995, 5). Michelle Balaev defines trauma as "a severely disruptive experience that profoundly affects the self's emotional organisation and perception of the external world" (2018, 360).

Dominick LaCapra views traumas as events raising "the problematic question of identity", which call for "more critical ways of coming to terms with both [a person's – S. H.] legacy and problems such as absence and loss" (1999, 724). LaCapra emphasizes two approaches to dealing with trauma: acting out trauma, which is melancholic and destructive, and working through trauma, which entails a critical analysis of trauma in the context of the past, present, and future. In this second approach, following critical analysis, the traumatized person undergoes constructive grief, which further mitigates the trauma (1999, 716–717).

The Ukrainian literary scholar Tamara Hundorova argues that "trauma means not so much the painful event as its transmission – its echo, its transmission through generations, and other places, and other times" (2014, 31). According to Caruth, Freud also focuses on the delayed traumatic moment, emphasizing that trauma is neither simple nor a one-time experience of events, but rather that these traumat-

ic events gain power precisely in their temporal delay (1995, 9). The same opinion is shared by Jeffrey H. Hartman, who argues that knowledge about trauma, or derived from trauma, consists of two contradictory elements: first, the traumatic event, which is not so much experienced as it is registered, entering the psyche directly, and second, the memory of the traumatic event, which is in the form of a constant experience (1995, 537). In other words, traumatic experiences do not disappear without a trace, but instead remain in our minds in the form of "scars", affecting our emotions, our lives, and our ability to perceive ourselves and coexist with others.

While analyzing a wide range of extreme situations (including war, earthquake, violence, and famine) and equally diverse individual and collective reactions to these situations, the above-mentioned researchers have expanded the concept of trauma, which can now be seen simultaneously as "a socio-political event, a psychophysiological process, a physical and emotional experience, and a narrative theme to explain individual and societal suffering" (Balogh 2023, 87); "an image that evokes a host of emotional responses", "a phenomenon with manifold contributing factors and consequences" or as "a normal response to abnormal circumstances" (Papadopoulos 2021, 210–211); and as "a cultural object" or as "a product of history and politics, subject to reinterpretation, contestation, and intervention" (Wertheimer and Casper 2016, 3). In other words, the focus of trauma studies is shifting from the psychiatric and biomedical fields to the humanities and social sciences.

THE SHOCK OF THE WAR EXPERIENCE

Iryna Feofanova's *Chuzha-svoia-ridna* (2023) consists of eight short stories that differ in style as well as in length; the story "Heshtalty" ("Gestalts") is four pages long, while "Viina, kukhnia i 8 vypadkovykh liudei" ("War, kitchen and eight strangers") is 41 pages. The stories are presented in various narrative forms such as monologues, descriptions, dialogues, diary entries, and WhatsApp correspondence. The plots also vary, with some stories ending happily and others more somberly. However, all the stories are united by a single theme – the painful experience of war and forced displacement and refugee status of Ukrainian women. Their trauma is caused by a single factor: the war, which draws a line dividing the characters' lives into *before* and *after*. This divide demonstrates a breakdown and change in how the characters perceive their future, sometimes leading to confusion due to an inability to navigate war demands. The stories also illustrate the opposition of happy/unhappy, light/dark, and calm/restless.

Analyzing Feofanova's collection, three factors that underlie the trauma of Ukrainian women refugees and internally displaced persons can be considered. Firstly, all the above-mentioned representatives of trauma studies mention the shock of the experience, which causes intense and specific emotional reactions. The stories convey the shock of the war experience when the protagonists and their children have to spend nights in the cold basements of Kharkiv, Odesa, Kherson, Bucha, and other cities. This shock has a particularly tragic impact on the behavior of Maryna, the protagonist of the short story "Chuzhesranka" (whose title, a vulgar pun on the word "foreigner", is explained below). While Maryna is fleeing from the iconic city

of Bucha with her children, she keeps hugging them and "repeating like a mantra: 'Now everything will be fine, as before'" (6). Moreover, for her six-year-old son Mark and four-year-old daughter Zlata, any loud noise, such as a plate falling to the floor, causes not only trepidation but an unusual reaction: "Mark and Zlata were frightened and immediately fell to the floor, covering their heads with their hands, just like their mother taught them in Bucha" (13). Maryna's aunt Olha from the village of Kalynivka, who is providing shelter and long-awaited peace for the family, is repeatedly frightened because she sees "so much pain in those children's eyes, God only knows what they saw in Bucha" (14). The Russian-Ukrainian War changes people not only externally but also internally.

"Trauma produces actual physiological changes" states Bessel Van der Kolk in the book *The Body Keeps Score: How to Leave Trauma in the Past* (2023, 14). Bodily conditions play an important role in revealing the crisis states of the characters' consciousness after they experience shock. Feofanova emphasizes both the soreness of her characters after 24 February, and their inadequate physiological reactions to external stimuli. Readers are introduced to the specific physiological reactions to the first explosions and the news of the outbreak of war. "Chervoni dni" (Red days) is written in the form of a short diary, with the first entry dated "24 February 2022, Thursday" (2023, 48). The protagonist refers to her menstruation as the "red days", the beginning of which she felt with her whole body on 24 February, but which will only begin on 8 April, when she crosses the border to Poland and feels safe for the first time. In the collection, physical and mental illnesses are another negative consequence of the war, adding to the many stories of Ukrainian women about the loss of material possessions. All these stories of Ukrainian refugee women can be seen as a search for self-therapy, "when the stories of others become an echo of your feelings and experiences" (Pukhonska 2023, 149).

The short story "Hoida, Hoida-Hoi" ("Rock-a-bye Baby"), whose title is taken from a Ukrainian folk lullaby, is a continuous narrative about the lives of Ukrainian refugee women in Romania who display physical, embodied expressions of trauma. The protagonist, listening to the stories of other refugees from Ukraine, says: "We are all traumatized" (79). For example, after the outbreak of war, a young girl from Chernihiv develops a nervous tic, an adult woman from Ivano-Frankivsk has periodic amnesia, and a woman from Kherson has the first epileptic seizure of her life. The protagonist, a mother of five-year-old twins from Odesa, suffers from anxiety attacks, depression, and nightmares, which are exacerbated by watching news from Ukraine. For the protagonist, "war is not stories in books; war is Russian missiles that kill little children" (82). The news becomes a trigger for her traumatic memories because "traumatized people simultaneously remember too little and too much […] these [traumatic] memories are not subject to the 'wearing away process' of normal memories but 'persist for a long time with astonishing freshness'. Nor can traumatized people control when they will emerge" (Van der Kolk 2023, 196, 198). The protagonist understands that "these [nightmares] are the cries of my soul. The pain that breaks through" (Feofanova 2023, 84). It supports Freud's view that when a traumatic experience is constantly imposed on a person, even in a dream, it serves as "a proof

of the strength of that experience" , and one can say that the traumatized person is "fixed to his trauma" ([1920] 1955, 13). Like the protagonists of Feofanova's other short stories, the young mother of twins is an example of how, for most internally displaced persons or refugees, physical distance from Ukraine does not mean informational distance. Keeping up with the news creates the illusion of involvement and closeness to Ukraine.

THE LOSS OF HOME

Drawing on LaCapra's theory, the second factor that becomes a precondition for trauma is loss. In Feofanova's stories, the loss of home goes beyond the loss of a physical space such as a house or apartment. For the characters, home is also a container shrouded in complex and historically layered relationships, lived memories, and intangible elements that are dear and valuable to them, often beyond material possessions. All of the characters remember their homes with pain, and the trauma of losing their memory artifacts is quite acute. Fifteen-year-old Mila, in love with her boyfriend Dania, writes in a worried message on WhatsApp: "Dania, our block of flats in Mykolaiv... was raided by Russians. […] We have nowhere to go back to. My mother is crying – there was an album with old photos in the apartment, she is crying for that album. For her, it is a symbol of her past life. A life that will never exist again" (2023, 69). A loss such as these photographs "condemns a person to a memory crisis" (Pukhonska 2024, 7). For Mila's mother, the absence of photographs is a painful experience associated with the recollection of the prewar past, which contrasts sharply with the shock of the war.

Some protagonists in Feofanova's stories not only describe their abandoned apartments or houses in detail, but idealize the images of their homes, neglecting the realities. For example, the protagonist of the story "Viina, kukhnia i 8 vypadkovykh liudei" sighs as she recalls her quiet yard, her house, and the old renovation that she had been constantly complaining about, but which now all seem far away and desirable. This paradox confirms Papadopoulos's views about the home as "one of the most potent archetypes that impacts human beings" (2021, 113). Some of the short stories' protagonists even ignore the fact that the homes they have left behind are not only geographically distant but remain in the past, to which there is no return. The tragedy is that they continue to believe in the illusion that their homes still exist and remain unchanged. For example, after Russian missiles reduce Valia's apartment to a hole in the ground, she still imagines her home as "somewhere in that hole, on the fifth floor" (Feofanova 2023, 89–90).

THE DEVALUATION OF WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE WAR AND A COLLAPSE OF THEIR WORLDVIEW

The third factor that underlies the trauma of Feofanova's protagonists and divides their life into *before* and *after* is the devaluation of their lives in the war and a collapse of their worldview, which manifests itself as uncertainty and confusion about the present and the future, because "trauma radically changes people: in fact they no longer are 'themselves'" (Van der Kolk 2023, 254–255). Maryna,

the internally displaced person from Bucha, fears for the present and future of her children. She is considered a "stranger" by most residents of Kalynivka village in the Kyiv region. For example, to demonstrate her disgust, contempt, and hatred for Maryna, Pysanchykha distorts the word "chuzhestranka" (foreigner) by omitting a letter "t" and calling the internally displaced woman "chuzhesranka", a vulgar wordplay that, in Ukrainian, loosely translates to "foreign shithead". Furthermore, Pysanchykha's drunken son Valik threatens Maryna and her children with a gun, leaving Maryna anxious about the future because she does not know where she can flee to next.

For the heroine of "Chervoni dni", every day that follows is filled with anxiety for the future in anticipation of the "red days": anxiety for her husband, who has gone to war; for her native Kharkiv, which brings disturbing news; and for the whole of Ukraine, because on 26 March, Lviv was bombed. But most of all, the protagonist worries about the future of her family, because she wants to have children. She is afraid to take away her husband's greatest hope: his hope of returning home alive and having children.

It is not the protagonist's anxiety, but instead the reader's anxiety about the protagonist's future in the war that is evoked by the plot of the shortest story in the collection, which has an eloquent title: "Heshtalty". Until the last sentence or even the last word, the reader does not know where in Ukraine the unnamed female protagonist lives. In this way, Feofanova emphasizes the universality of the described experience for many women in Ukraine. In "Heshtalty", several factors increase the reader's anxiety about the protagonist's future in wartime. Firstly, she is young, pregnant, and divorced. Secondly, she considers hotels and maternity hospitals in Lviv or Ivano-Frankivsk (western regional centers of Ukraine) as possible places of refuge and salvation for herself and her unborn child. She keeps a printed list of these places in her "anxious suitcase", which offers clues about her current location. The heroine has a "clear plan of action, packed suitcases, closed gestalts" in case of trouble. However, on 24 February, due to the lack of fuel in the car, she is forced to return to her apartment with the hope that she will go to western Ukraine later: "She will have time. There is no way that she will not have time to leave Mariupol" (Feofanova 2023, 47).

THE INEFFABILITY OF TRAUMA

One of the challenges with Feofanova's discourse on the traumatic experience of internally displaced and refugee Ukrainian women is the problem of the ineffability of trauma when its very circumstances and consequences become the object of silence or unspoken taboo, because trauma is "an extremely complex object of verbal representation" (Grebeniuk 2022, 107). Analyzing the embodiment of trauma in fiction, Ukrainian and foreign scholars emphasize that the speaking or telling about the experience is "the way to recovery" (Balaev 2008, 151), because "silence reinforces the godforsaken isolation of trauma" (Van der Kolk 2023, 357). Moreover, an untold trauma becomes "an obsessive nightmare that does not let go of its grip" (Polishchuk 2016, 97).

The problem of the ineffability of trauma is encountered in the short story "Dizhonska hirchytsia" ("Dijon Mustard"), where none of the protagonists break the silence on the most sensitive topic – the death of neighbors with children who were hit by a mine while fleeing Borodianka by car.[2] This silence about trauma that "cries out" (Caruth 1995) only deepens the emotional pain of the character Valia, who wants to talk about the experience or simply to scream, as she sometimes does in the shower: "Hot water on full blast, tears streaming down her cheeks", as she lets out "a scream from the depths of her heart, which was even hotter than water" (Feofanova 2023, 86). After the aforementioned traumatic event, Valia's husband Borys, who until 24 February was the most famous toastmaster in Borodianka, stops talking. This "shutdown" (Van der Kolk 2023) indicates a deep trauma from the stress and shock he has experienced, which takes away Borys's ability to speak. His reaction is not only based on the phenomenon of "conspiracy of silence", which refers to a taboo that applies to any narrative or even question about trauma (Grebeniuk 2022, 107). In fact, these are the traumatic memories that are not verbalized but are present in Borys's memory, which negatively affect not only his life but also those of his family, particularly his wife. Despite the gender stereotypes that prevail in society, Feofanova shows the collapse of the ideals of male steadfastness and endurance during the war. Borys manifests a disrupted sense of gender identity, as he is unable to fulfil his traditional paternal duty to protect and support his family in a crisis. In contrast, Valia tries to adapt to a difficult life in a foreign country, accepts all the challenges of life that befall her after 24 February 2022, and insists that she will return to Ukraine at any cost. Nevertheless, despite her civic position and longing for her native land, the protagonist remains loyal to her family, not daring to leave it. The status and responsibilities of a woman as a wife and mother determine her final choice. The readers perceive Valia as a keeper of the family hearth, who, to quote the feminist author Solomiia Pavlychko can be called "disenfranchised but nationally conscious" (2002, 61).

NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPING NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Language is a matter of principle for the protagonist of the story "Hoida-Hoida-hoi" after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The mentality of this native of Odesa undergoes radical changes under the influence of the war. As the mother of two young twins, she becomes conscious of her Ukrainian identity when discussing the war with her children: "Russians came to peaceful Ukraine and want to destroy us all. That is why we fled to Romania. And that is why we cannot speak Russian" (Feofanova 2023, 76). She is ashamed that before the war, while holding a Ukrainian passport, wearing an embroidered shirt, and singing the Ukrainian lullaby "Hoida, Hoida-hoi" that she remembers from her grandmother, she spoke Russian, listened to Russian pop, and read Russian books to her children at night. The war became the reason to "evaluate not only the mistakes of the present but also the misjudgement of the past" (Polishchuk 2018, 14). The character's national identification is strengthened abroad, where she begins to appreciate things she previously overlooked.

The women in the story "Viina, kukhnia i 8 vypadkovykh liudei" are complex and realistic. They occasionally quarrel over a "cup with sunflowers on it", "pots", "tea mushroom", or "just hide in silence", but they also exemplify a strong sense of national consciousness. However, it takes them time to fully comprehend and "work through" (LaCapra 1999) their traumatic experience. Only after reliving the experience do the characters realize that they were mistakenly becoming irritated and angry with each other, rather than understanding that it was the Russians whom they should hate, since it was the Russian soldiers who destroyed their homes and cities, tore them out of their lives, and erased everything they had achieved and dreamed of. Thus, developing national consciousness helps the characters become a close-knit group of internally displaced persons, despite some misunderstanding in the past, which in turn helps them to cope with their trauma together.

In her feminist reflections on the portrayal of women in artistic discourse at the beginning of the millennium, Pavlychko argues that representations of men have usually outnumbered representations of women, largely because of the unwillingness to portray a woman as "a self-sufficient person filled with her independent ideas" (2002, 174). Nevertheless, Feofanova confidently works as a feminist author whose short stories reimagine the image of women and their traditional role in Ukrainian society during the war. The reader encounters the images of traumatized, sometimes uncertain, but courageous internally displaced and refugee women who, despite all the difficulties associated with their status, do their best to save their born and unborn children, protect their families, and support the victorious defense of their homeland. They also inform the world about the tragedies caused by the war, and find, if not *kinship*, then at least *belonging* in the places where they have found temporary refuge.

CONCLUSION

Feofanova, drawing on her own experience and the experiences of other Ukrainian women, offers realistic perspectives on the challenges that the Russian-Ukrainian War poses to modern humans. All of her short stories attempt to analyze the condition and fate of internally displaced persons and refugees, which is also described in numerous studies by psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and literary critics (Kristeva 2002; Papadopoulos 2021; Polishchuk 2016, 2018; Said 1994, and others). The characters' condition is especially acute abroad, in the world outside the war, in the new "organized spatial sphere" (Lotman 2000), where the surrounding space and environment seem devoid of any signs of violence, fear, and restrictions. Despite their new geographical reality, all of the characters in Feofanova's short stories have traumatic memories. Three factors underlie their traumas: the shock of the war experience, which produces actual physiological changes and diseases; the loss of home, which has impacts beyond the loss of a physical space; and the devaluation of their lives in the war and a collapse of their worldview, which manifests itself as uncertainty and confusion about the present and the future. However, the characters dismantle stereotypes and transform their experiences.

Like other war narratives written by women, Feofanova's fiction demonstrates a different perspective on the portrayal of war from the mainstream masculine discourse because "when women's experience becomes central, the traumatic nature of war, rather than the heroic one, comes to the forefront of the story" (Krupka 2022, 490). All of the stories in her collection are structurally heterogeneous but interconnected in three dimensions: 1) the common theme of war, which the writer always presents as a reason for her characters' traumas; 2) the perception of war not only as a tragic problem of Ukrainian society as a whole, but also as a tragedy of a particular Ukrainian family or individual; 3) the focus on a refugee or internally displaced woman protagonist who draws on her inner strength to cope with pain, despair, and anxiety, not only to survive but to live fully, regardless of the circumstances or location.

The writer presents images of modern Ukrainian women as: a tender and caring mother, a faithful and devoted wife, an intelligent, purposeful, and reliable worker, and most importantly, a patriot of her country, committed to Ukrainian beliefs and traditions. By narrating the fate of contemporary Ukrainian internally displaced and refugee women in a sincere, compassionate, and individualized tone, Iryna Feofanova's short stories contribute to the war narrative and migration discourse from a Ukrainian perspective.

NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise noted all translations from Ukrainian are by the present author.
[2] Borodianka was bombed extensively and devasted on 7 April 2022.

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