DOI: https://doi.org/10.22601/PET.2023.09.06

LANGUAGE AS A BATTLEFIELD: UKRAINIAN POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY THROUGH HALYNA PAHUTIAK'S YOUNG ADULT NOVEL "THE WORLD'S EYE"

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Abstract. This article addresses the ethical implications of applying postcolonial theories to the Ukrainian context, arguing against the homogenization of global postcolonial histories. Positioned between Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, the Ukrainian culture has long faced oppression and is still fighting against Russian disinformation, perpetuating its colonial narrative. By engaging with the works of Eastern European scholars such as Mykola Riabchuk and Ewa Thompson, and frameworks of subalternity and hybridity, the article critically examines the distinctive features of Ukraine's postcolonial identity. A feminist literary analysis of Halyna Pahutiak's novel "The World's Eye" (2023) foregrounds the critical role of post-1990s Ukrainian women authors in decolonizing Eastern European culture.

Keywords: colonial, decolonial and postcolonial discourse, Eastern European studies, feminist literary analysis, Halyna Pahutiak, hybridity, subalternity, identity, imperialism, insurgents, marginalization, post-Soviet studies, Russian disinformation

Introduction

The struggle for independence and self-determination has been a central theme in the Ukrainian history since the autonomous Zaporozhzhian Cossack state in the late eighteenth century which was "a unique for its time democratic system, of high culture and

free Cossackhood" (Kuzio 2018). The Cossack era marks the start of organized resistance against violence pertaining to ever-changing colonial powers, the struggle which ended only with Ukraine's independence in 1991. Due to its geopolitical location at the crossroads of competing empires, the territory of modern Ukraine was divided between the powers and experienced the imposition of external systems in all areas. This includes the period under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), when significant parts of Ukraine were under Polish control, the Russian Empire's ownership of Ukraine (following the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, from 1793 until 1917), and the Austro-Hungarian Empire's control over Western Ukraine (1772–1918), followed by the interwar period when portions of Western Ukraine were ruled by the Second Polish Republic, the Kingdom of Romania and the First Czechoslovak Republic. These periods of foreign control have had profound effects on Ukraine's culture. The policies of Russification, Polonization, and Sovietization, and others, which aimed at suppressing the Ukrainian language and national consciousness while promoting the interests of the ruling powers, are similar to those endured by many post-colonial societies across the globe: the Anglicization efforts in Ireland, Francization in various African colonies such as Algeria and Senegal, and Spanish cultural imposition in Latin American countries like Mexico and Peru.

Ukraine is a nation with a thousand-year history, contrasting with the relatively newer Russian state that has often appropriated Ukrainian culture, partially through the historical continuity of the Rurik dynasty in Russia. Throughout a complex historical entanglement, Russian narrative reframes Ukrainians as "Little Russians," a term Ukrainians have resisted for centuries. By the 1870s–1890s, Ukrainian intellectuals initiated a deliberate reclamation of the name "Ukraine" – a name documented since the 12th century, transforming it into an ethnotoponym (Riabchuk *s.a.*; Plokhy 2015). Later, Mykhailo Hrushevsky's "History of Ukraine-Rus" (1903) re-established a historiographical foundation that resisted Russian

narratives and offered Ukrainians a more coherent vision of their pre-colonial past. Ukraine's autonomy is rooted in its early medieval state, Kyivan Rus', and its Cossack traditions, both of which relied on self-governance, distinct legal systems, language and an authentic culture which largely differed from neighboring powers (Hrushevsky 1997).

After achieving (re-)independence in 1991, Ukrainian identity is now gradually re-emerging from histories of trauma, a process made even more urgent by the current war. As Mykola Riabchuk contends in "Ambiguous 'Borderland'", his review of Tatiana Zhurzhenko's "Borderlands into Bordered Lands. Geopolitics of Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine", published in 2010, the national identity of the Ukrainian people appears to be a significant factor influencing the various "trends in Ukraine's current (under)development" (Riabchuk, *s.a.*). The entanglements of this identity will be my central focus throughout the literary analyses carried out in this research.

The linguistic identity of Ukraine has been a contested arena under Russian imperial and Soviet rule, where assimilation into Russian culture was systematically enforced upon Ukrainians to suppress distinct Ukrainian expression. Ukrainian literature, especially immediately after re-independence in the post-1990s, often centers language as a battlefield where characters use language as a form of insurgency against imperial erasure of the Ukrainian culture and language. The present research explores how language functions as a postcolonial tool for identity reclamation in Halyna Pahutiak's young adult novel "Око світу" ("The World's Eye", 2023). While the concept of "subalternity" is not my primary focus, it is used as an analytical lens for examining Ukrainian postcolonial identity in comparison with other postcolonial identities. Marginalized within the discourse, subaltern groups occupy spaces that demand alternative modes of expression to counter colonial silencing. In Pahutiak's novel, many characters – especially women – embody this subaltern position, using language and cultural traditions of faith (with prayer being an intimate act that takes place only in one's mother tongue)

to resist cultural assimilation. The chosen novel provides insights into the interrelation of language and spirituality as primary insurgent markers. Through textual analysis, this article aims to demonstrate how Ukraine's context differs from other postcolonial contexts.

Concepts

It is vital to acknowledge the ongoing debate surrounding the ethical implications of applying the term "postcoloniality" in the Ukrainian context, particularly given the specific historical and cultural experiences that distinguish Ukraine from other postcolonial narratives. A number of Eastern European scholars, including Mykola Riabchuk and Ewa Thompson, have contributed to this discourse. Moore (2001) expresses his concern about the lack of research carried out in the field of postcolonial studies in Eastern Europe. He insists that the implementation of knowledge about the Global South in the post-Soviet postcolonial context might be helpful towards the ultimate goal of decolonization. Moore states that excellent tools have already been developed by postcolonial scholars: "In the hands of postcolonial and resistance theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Edward W. Saïd, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Aimé Césaire, postcolonial perspectives have generated powerful analyses of societies and texts" (Moore 2001). In his examination of postcolonial spaces, Moore cautions against the danger of conflating disparate postcolonial experiences into a monolithic narrative. He remains the first Western scholar, however, to point out the colonial nature of the Russian empire and include the Baltic States in the postcolonial context.

In this article, I argue against homogenizing all postcolonial histories and support the position of treating every case within its social, cultural and historical particularity. I do not disagree with the claim that post-Soviet is a different postcolonial space compared to those of West Africa. It is impossible to underestimate the

significance of examining the perspectives of marginalized and subaltern groups within the postcolonial context, however. While Ukraine may not conventionally be viewed as a post-colony from a Western perspective – given that it was not an "overseas" territory and that the victims shared the same skin color as their colonizers – I concur with Ştefănescu who compellingly argues that postcolonialism and post-communism can indeed be regarded as "siblings of subalternity" (Ştefănescu 2013).

The framework of subalternity, first conceptualized by Spivak, provides a critical background to understand the lived realities of marginalized communities under colonial rule (Spivak 1988). In the Ukrainian context, subalternity manifests through the experiences of those forced to the periphery by imperial and Soviet policies, where voices were stifled, and language was subject to erasure. Although Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" addresses groups in the Global South, I argue that Ukrainian resistance movements embody a form of subaltern identity, while they have been widely disregarded as peripheral or non-compliant. This article aims to situate Ukraine within a global postcolonial space while remaining the specificity of its Eastern European position.

Postcolonial identity is a self-concept that refers to ways in which people from formerly colonized nations or groups understand and express themselves in response to their histories. It is a painful, ongoing conversation between indigenous cultures and the cultural impositions of colonizers. This identity is not static; rather, it is continuously renegotiated. Bhabha was the first to emphasize the "hybridity" of postcolonial identities, referring to how these identities are continuously evolving, containing elements of both colonized and colonizing cultures. This article aims to discuss the transformative potential of those hybrid identities, acknowledging that "the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing" (Bhabha 1994: 7), thus bringing forth new meanings of cultural expressions. Bhabha recognized hybridity as a space for creativity and resistance "without an assumed or imposed hierarchy"

(Bhabha 1994: 5); therefore, one should hope that it is in writing that identities are reclaimed and transformed.

Mbembe demonstrates that a postcolonial framework transcends the confines of specific historical "realities". Rather, he articulates theories that encompass broader manifestations of power and domination in the global landscape. Central to his conception of postcolonialism is the notion of necropolitics, the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations (Mbembe 2003: 14). He critiques colonialism and imperialism for historically entailing the systematic destruction of life and the devaluation of certain populations deemed disposable or expendable. This logic of necropolitics persists in the postcolonial era, as in Ukraine nowadays, evidenced in practices of state and interstate violence, militarization, and biopolitical control. These practices have happened in Ukraine systemically and continue to exist; their descriptions can be found in literary works, both classical and contemporary: Taras Shevchenko in the 19th century, "The Enchanted Desna" (1956) by Oleksandr Dovzhenko, "Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex" (1996) and "The Museum of Abandoned Secrets" (2009) by Oksana Zabuzhko, among others.

Though fully recognizing that Ukraine may not conform to the conventional colonial archetype seen in nations of the Global South, it has nevertheless suffered various forms of external control and subjugation that are indicative of colonial power relations between the Russian Empire and Ukraine. The historical context of Ukraine, characterized by layers of domination by interchanging powers and resistance against them, demands analysis within the broader discourses of postcolonial studies to be accurately contextualized. Employing a feminist perspective in literary analysis will help examine more in depth the effects of colonialism on individual human lives and societal structures that affect them. As Powell (2021) notes, "body is the archive" in itself, "embodiment of transnational spaces […] and thus a multitude of geopolitical discourses" (Powell 2021: 580). Ukrainian literature has documented the colonial exercise of power and offers

insights into the lived experiences of those who have been directly affected by these dynamics. It is within the narratives of women, who have been oppressed both as colonial and gendered subjects, that we as researchers must find and uncover these "archives" in Powell's sense and give voices to those who suffered and who resisted.

Loomba, as she explores postcolonial identity, shows how colonial histories influence modern identities. She contends that postcolonial theory is essential to "to map the historical, cultural and political shifts between then and now" in order to comprehend how colonial histories continue to shape cultural and political dynamics today (Loomba 2005: 57). She argues that a comprehension of a postcolonial identity requires examining contemporary responses of individuals and communities to entangled histories. In this context, incorporating a feminist perspective in literary analysis can help address colonial histories that continue to produce discourse.

Employing a feminist perspective in literary analysis enables an evaluation of colonialism's effects on individual human lives and societal structures surrounding them. Ahmed (2014) posits that emotions present in the discourse are not solely personal; they are socially mediated, both shaped by and shaping power relations. Her concept of "affective economies" problematizes emotions that "circulate between bodies and objects, attaching values and significance to them", thereby influencing social cohesion and division (Ahmed 2014: 8). In the context of Ukrainian literature, these insights provide a framework for understanding how collective memories of oppression during World War II and responses to the ongoing war are interrelated. Emotions like national pride, fear, and resentment not only actively contribute to the production and reinforcement of unequal hierarchies but also impact the formation of collective identity. By integrating feminist theory, it is possible to see how various narratives participate in the production and reproduction of cultural discourse.

On the case of Ukraine in postcolonial research and the subaltern silence

> In view of these postcolonial-post-Soviet parallels, two silences are striking. The first is the silence of postcolonial studies today on the subject of the former Soviet sphere. And the second, mirrored silence is the failure of scholars specializing in the formerly Soviet-controlled lands to think of their regions in the useful if by no means perfect postcolonial terms developed by scholars of, say, Indonesia and Gabon. (Moore 2001)

The emergence of post-Soviet and post-Ottoman studies within the broader field of postcolonial and post-imperial scholarship has marked a significant evolution, particularly as scholars have begun to concentrate on the successor states of the Soviet Union around the turn of the millennium. This development, as highlighted by Moore (2001), has introduced a different perspective to postcolonial studies, despite the acknowledgment by researchers such as Kołodziejczyk and Şandru that their contributions remain somewhat marginalized within the discipline (Kołodziejczyk, Şandru 2018). The substantial body of work produced in this area attests to its growing significance and applicability.

Conrad believes that imperial and colonized societies "(1) have different socio-political orders, (2) have different pre-histories and (3) are differentiated, in the minds of the colonizers" (Conrad 2012: 13). More than a decade ago, Kelertas emphasized that the application of postcolonial frameworks to post-Soviet contexts was not a matter of fit but rather of how these frameworks are applied, indicating the relevance and necessity of postcolonial analysis for understanding the complexities of post-Soviet nations (Kelertas 2006). This sentiment is further elaborated by Kalnačs, who explores the concept of European internal colonialism, thereby extending the conversation beyond the more traditionally recognized forms of intra-continental colonialism, such as the German colonial ambitions in Eastern Europe, including the creation of settlement colonies in what is now

Poland and thus having painful relations both with the East and the West (Kalnačs 2016).

In a contrasting viewpoint, Thompson juxtaposes Western Europe with Russia as East and is convinced that "postcolonial studies conducted by English-speaking Asians or Africans are usually anti-European, but from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe, Europeanness is not the enemy" (Thomson 2014: 77). Thompson is steadfast in her belief that, despite countless connections, resemblances, and associations, Russian culture continues to rival European culture, and that Russian distinct identity, which has captivated the minds of Russians for centuries, stands in stark opposition to Europeanness with their values of nationhood (Thomson 2014: 77).

The reasons for the silence of the Eastern European scholars, according to Moore (2001), are "pride" and "unwillingness" to engage with the topic. Moore applies this trope repetitively in his analysis, building on the lack of research as a superior position and even lack of understanding. In this way, it seems that the American scholar makes a totalizing move of depriving his colleagues of agency, telling their stories in his own terms. By claiming "they are not speaking," he justifies imposing a Western perspective on the Eastern European context. As Trinh Minh-ha notes, referring to similar cases, the scholar "makes them said" (Minh-ha 1992: 12). This critique of patriarchal and colonial structures extends to language itself, where the act of "speaking about" is tied to the conservation of binary oppositions (subject-object) that sustain territorialized knowledge. This process creates a semantic distance between the speaker and the work, between the maker and the receiver, and between the self and the other. Through this dynamic, the speaker secures a position of mastery, claiming authority over the known while the "other" remains relegated to the unknown. Truth, in this context, serves as the instrument of mastery, used to dominate areas of knowledge as they are incorporated into the speaker's domain (Minh-ha 1992: 12).

As Young (2020) asserts, there is no singular "postcolonial theory"; instead, significant portions of it discuss the relationships between ideas and practices – both harmonious and conflicting – across cultures. Young posits that "postcolonialism deals with a changing world, a world that has already been transformed by struggle and will continue to change" (Young 2020: 7). He points out the issues faced by colonized and postcolonial peoples who have suffered defeats in all related paradigmatic wars, enduring tragedies and being deprived of their right to self-defense. This lens is particularly relevant to the Ukrainian experience, allowing us to view postcolonial theory as a "more or less freely woven network of approaches rather than a solid, unified field" (Висоцька 2022: 122).

Raja agrees on the difficulty to define postcolonial studies, stating, "the question 'What is postcolonial studies?' might have a simple answer at first, but as I reflect longer on it, the answer keeps getting complicated and becomes increasingly complex" (Raja 2019). He also emphasizes that one should aim to understand postcolonialism as a human experience that has traditionally been either silenced or marginalized, but the focus remains on experiences of the oppressed and the subaltern (Raja 2019).

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, research into Ukrainian-Russian relations was limited, hindered by the widespread myths of Ukrainian-Russian brotherhood. Such narratives, endorsed by Russian sympathizers, significantly delayed the decolonization process in Ukraine. Falsehoods surrounding the inseparable unity of the two nations acted as barriers to addressing the histories of violence of Russia against Ukraine. Kuzio has been vocal about the myths surrounding Russian-Ukrainian relations that persist in Western discourse since Ukraine's re-independence. In his work, he emphasizes that Russian violence stems from its colonial thinking, but the invasion has fundamentally altered the relationship between the two countries, debunking the myth of Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood with the emphasis on colonialism and discrimination against national minorities (Kuzio 2022: 37). He

discusses the troubled history of the politics of Russian imperialism and how Russia attempts to retain dominance over Ukraine with disinformation that extends to the West: "Praise for Western colonialism is no longer acceptable in Western scholarship. This is not the case in Russia where Russian state officials and nationalists continue to claim the Tsarist Empire and the USSR were beneficial to the non-Russian peoples" (Kuzio 2022: 37).

Riabchuk (*s.a.*) points out that, on the postcommunist front, Moore (2001) highlighted two fundamental reasons for the hesitancy to embrace postcolonial perspectives, one of them being the perception of Soviet oppression which appeared to many more akin to occupation rather than colonization. He claims that "Eastern Europeans, understandably, feared that being labeled as colonial would diminish their European identity" (Riabchuk, *s.a.*). In 1993, Riabchuk had initiated a rather unexpected discussion of Ukraine's postcoloniality, claiming that the country was wrestling with the totalitarian legacies of Soviet communism and the colonial legacies of Russian imperialism (Riabchuk 1993). This revelation sparked immediate criticism from several African participants who questioned the participants' capacity to fully grasp the essence of colonialism due to their white identity. In defense, Riabchuk mentioned the symbolic role of the Ukrainian language as akin to 'black skin' – a marker of belonging to a perceived inferior class. He described the experience as, "the Ukrainian language, which was our black skin – a sign of belonging to a lesser world, to a subhuman race of rural bumpkins, a lower caste of kolkhoz slaves, ghettoized in their wretched villages, paid in kind if at all" (Riabchuk 1993: 48). This analogy aimed to illustrate the marginalization experienced by speakers of the Ukrainian language, likened to a subaltern group, relegated to the status of rural lower caste from a collective farm (kolkhoz) laborers, isolated in their deprived villages, and oftentimes bereft of basic rights such as identification documents or the liberty to relocate.

Riabchuk's analogy reveals a fundamental distinction of Ukraine as a postcolonial state. He notes that Ukrainians who managed to

transition from their "Third World" rural settings, that can and must be viewed as internal colonies, to the ostensibly "First World" urban environments, were forced, within a generation or two, to let go of their stigmatized linguistic identity and assimilate into the dominant culture, thereby "passing" as white. No matter how problematic this statement might be, the lived experience of speaking Ukrainian in the colonized regime was undeniably marked by systemic discrimination, various forms of violence and a pervasive experience of otherness, being something else than the system expected you to be. In the colonized regime, the Ukrainian language was a signifier of lower socio-economic status, intellectual inferiority, and cultural backwardness, effectively relegating its speakers to the peripheries of societal recognition. This relegation was further exacerbated by institutional policies and social practices that privileged Russian language and culture, thereby institutionalizing a form of linguistic imperialism.

The phenomenon of code-switching between Russian and Ukrainian, or the ability to transition between the colonial and native languages, represents a survival strategy against the ubiquitous violence. As Mbembe contends, building on Fanon's concept of violence, "violence insinuates itself into the economy, domestic life, language, consciousness. It does more than penetrate every space: it pursues the colonized even in sleep and dream" (Mbembe 2001:175). I particularly advocate for the importance of considering linguistic violence. Mbembe's analysis of language violence emphasizes the need to recognize linguistic domination as a form of violence that is as destructive as physical violence. He explains how a colonized subject participates in the verbal economy of a colonizer, who "irons out" the language, by removing all the local references and thus bringing disorder into the colonized space. Language, in Mbembe's terms, is not merely speech but acts that serve "essentially to translate orders, impose silences, prescribe, censure, and intimidate" (Mbembe 2001: 179). The practice of code-switching, in this context, can be seen as a form of negotiation with the pervasive

violence that Mbembe describes. In the context of Ukrainian and Russian languages, the act of "ironing out" the language manifests in the systematic suppression of Ukrainian language, and a cultural expectation to code-switching. This suppression attempts to erase local cultural markers, bringing disorder to the colonized space of Ukraine, aiming to transform the speakers into Soviet subjects. At the same time, the switching may be seen as a form of cultural preservation: the persisting of the native culture in the face of forceful homogenizing.

"The World's Eye" by Halyna Pahutiak

The problematics of language as a symbolic act becomes prominent while analyzing the historical legacy of Ukrainian insurgents, whose resistance against both Soviet and earlier imperialist dominations was both physical and linguistic. This association of the Ukrainian language also rendered Ukrainian speakers as potential subjects of suspicion and discrimination. As Havryshko mentions in her research on women in the military underground, in the Soviet Union, members of the underground Ukrainian organization of nationalists, one of the most massive and longest-lasting anti-Soviet resistance movements, were labeled as "Bandera people," and sent to the Gulag, where they were ordered to remain silent about their past. This enforced silence contrasted sharply with the Soviet Government's narrative, which was the only one allowed to proliferate (see Гавришко 2017). Until the country's independence in 1991, or even until the Maidan Revolution, insurgents were often vilified in official narratives, thereby contributing to a politicized landscape in which the act of speaking Ukrainian could be perceived as an act of defiance.

The publication of Halyna Pahutiak's young adult novel, "Око світу" ("The World's Eye"), in 2023, marks a societal shift towards acknowledgement of the history of insurgents, distinguishing itself from the era of their narratives' marginalization under

Soviet rule (see Пагутяк 2023). The plot unfolds in the post-World War II era (1946), with Ukraine being re-occupied by the Soviet Union after the withdrawal of the Germans. In this novel, the use of language is a strategic, meaningful act, and so is a deliberate use of double names. The narrative captures the period when the use of language was not merely about communication but served as a tool of resistance; however, only in places where it was safe to practice it. Language precariousness and the adoption of second names for the pre-Soviet identity preservation were a conscious strategy, but the tragedy of it lay in the fact that it led to a fractured, dual life. Du Bois introduces dual identity with his concept of double-consciousness, arguing that a postcolonial subject perceives oneself through the prism of others' perspectives, embodying "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 1903: 8). Throughout Pahutiak's novel, it can be observed how the postcolonial subject's life is a negotiation between personas, external and internal, pre-occupation and post-occupation ones.

The story about a 14-year-old protagonist, Ілько́ (Ilko) with a pseudonym Pidstrelenyi ("The Shot One") takes place in the author's native village as a metahistorical narrative. The protagonist secretly serves as a contact point for the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (УПА) and aspires to join the insurgent group, who are fighting against the Soviet regime. The young narrator witnesses deportations to Siberia in the village where people live in a pervasive atmosphere of fear and who thus develop various protective mechanisms either leaning into the power, complying with it or standing against it. It is a reality in which it is hard to trust even the closest ones. Mbembe explains how the omnipresent discourse of power, the danger imposed by a colonizer, distorts reality and manipulates perception: "The post-colonial polity can only produce 'fables' and stupefy its 'subjects', bringing on delirium when the discourse of power penetrates its targets and drives them into the realms of fantasy and hallucination" (Mbembe 2001: 118).

The village has belonged to several different states within the protagonist's life: he remembers the rule of Poland, then Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and the Stalinist regime's reoccupation. Many villagers serve in the Red Army, some stay to fight against the Soviets, but they are not many; their divergent choices to either serve in the Red Army or resist the Soviets are illustrative of how identity is unstable under oppressive regimes. Some villagers appear to be persuaded by the official narrative enforced by the occupiers, essentially becoming "zombified" by it. It is not clear, however, whether they choose to comply with the regime out of fear or because of sympathy. This phenomenon can be observed throughout many postcolonial contexts, and Mbembe points out how "the rhetorical devices of officialese in the postcolony can be compared to those of communist regimes; that is, to the extent that they are, in both instances, actual regimes given to the production of lies and double-speak" (Mbembe 2001: 118). In both contexts, these regimes engage in the propagation of falsehoods; consequently, any form of verbal dissent becomes a target for stringent monitoring and suppression.

The role of women in this crucible is inherently tied to the preservation of life. In this novel, written by a woman, the female characters, almost exclusively mothers, remain silent and all their stories are told by Ilko, the protagonist, which is emblematic of the concept that only those higher in the hierarchy can tell the subaltern's story (Spivak 1988). Ilko recounts the story of a woman who, after identifying her rebel son among the deceased, brought to the church by the secret police, chooses silence to protect her living children from the danger of being arrested and tortured. This woman, looking at the body of her dead son, turns around with a great effort and goes home, pretending that her son is not there.

In this narrative, time appears to hold a unique significance, echoing Mbembes's argument on temporalities that the perception of time is subjective, thus temporality is a subjectivity (Mbembe 2001: 15). An insurgent identity defies the constraints of time in the popular saying "Heroes do not die" which encapsulates a popular

belief that a rebel's identity transcends the physical existence of the person who has passed away. However, in the context of the aforementioned illustration, "heroes do not die" because recognizing them as dead and burying them can endanger the living.

The condition of the insurgent group is critical at the moment of narration after the re-occupation by the Soviet Union. The other insurgent groups have retreated into the mountains and are on the way to emigrate to the Czechia and further. They say: "You cannot even go to Poland, because Poland is now Communist too" (Пагутяк 2023: 123).[1] Following Fanon's exploration of the colonized masses and rebels, the insurgent struggle is specific to colonized societies. These societies always struggle with the same question: how can the oppressed, lacking in material and organizational resources, believe that violence is their only path to liberation against the occupier's military and economic might?

> What is the real nature of this violence? We have seen that it is the intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force. By what spiritual aberration do these men, without technique, starving and enfeebled, confronted with the military and economic might of the occupation, come to believe that violence alone will free them? How can they hope to triumph? (Fanon 1963: 73)

The essence of this violence, as Fanon problematizes it, is therefore not rooted in a mere aberration of the mind or a base instinct towards destructiveness. Instead, it emerges as a rational, albeit desperate, response to systemic dehumanization and exploitation.

The insurgents' complex identities, who switch between their pre-war identities (as they are known to their families) and their resistance personas (as they are known to their comrades) as in "double-consciousness" (proposed by Du Bois 1903), reflect a broader

[1] All citations from the novel are translated from Ukrainian to English by the author of the article.

societal conflict between the oppressive forces attempting to maintain control and the individuals seeking to assert their autonomy and resist dehumanization. Their deliberate use of double names is a strategic, meaningful act within a postcolonial culture. Like Du Bois's subjects, insurgents exist in a world that denies them a singular, cohesive identity, enforcing the tension between their colonized personas and the personas that emerged within their struggle.

When Hrom (Thunder) sustains a fatal wound in battle and decides to end his own life, Ilko ponders over the motives behind his comrade's suicide, wondering whether it stemmed solely from the physical pain, mutilation, and leg amputation, or if Hrom recognized that he could no longer be Vasyl (his pre-war self) but only Hrom (Пагутяк 2023: 142). According to Ilko, Hrom had metaphorically ceased to be Vasyl long before his suicide. As such, returning to the village mutilated and living as a disabled man with his mother was deemed impossible. Ilko believes that Hrom had consciously distanced himself from his mother after adopting this second identity. He recalls an incident during Easter, a time when insurgents received special treats from their mothers, including the traditional pastries, sweet breads "pasochkas". Despite the festivities and the chance to at least play the ordinary life, Hrom refused to act like Vasyl by displaying indifference to his mother's cooking and refraining from expressing gratitude. Although he placed the dish on the table, he physically distanced himself from the one his mother had baked. This observation profoundly impacted Ilko, who remains deeply attached to his own mother. Moreover, after Hrom's death Ilko thinks that he wants to dig up his other comrade's, Nechuy's, body and rebury it near his family because he was "like a brother" to him. He does not want Nechuy to lie alone in the forest.

The contrast between Ilko, who had not yet joined the army and lives in both worlds, and the more mature insurgents becomes apparent through episodes where dual identities are present. Ilko himself asserts that he is not prepared to die as Ilko; he identifies more with

his original self than with the insurgent persona of Pidstrilenyi: "I am not yet ready to give up what I have. I'm still more Ilko than the Shot One" (Пагутяк 2023: 142). On the contrary, the novel foreshadows that Ilko will inevitably have to depart from home; this leaves him anxious, contemplating whether, once he leaves the safety of his home for the concealed refuge in the ground, he will also be reduced to the identity of Pidstrilenyi.

Both the insurgents in the Ukrainian context and the African Americans described by Du Bois are being forced upon a fragmentation, challenged to reconcile their multiple identities within a society that views them through a lens of otherness. The use of language in the novel marks visceral expression of ideological positioning. It also illustrates well the political divide within the community and the characters' relationships. The details in the way characters talk about one another, in how they refer to insurgents, serve as additional indicators of their allegiances: the shepherd boy Slavko demonstrates a lack of hesitation when speaking about the insurgents. He calls them simply "повстанці" without any use of derogatory language. His word choice provides a clear signal to Ilko that he can be trusted. In contrast, Ilko's childhood friend Yurko employs the term "banderas" when referencing insurgents, a pejorative label applied by those aligned with the Soviet power.

Contrasting to insurgents, there is a group of people with no identity, referred to by the narrator as THOSE (original capitalization): "Then there were THOSE about which the insurgents were talking about: deserters who did not want to fight either for the Soviets or for Ukraine. They tried to make their way west and got lost. The rebels bypassed them and the NKVD shot them on the spot. I know that village people helped them a little at first, but when the calves and sheep began to disappear, they started to chase them away" (Пагутяк 2023: 123). Described as deserters attempting to escape the war by avoiding allegiance to either the Soviets or Ukraine, THOSE are rendered nameless and voiceless. They appear lost in the vastness of the landscape but instead of sympathy, they

evoke irrational fear in the narrator's mind. His attitude towards these people is quite peculiar: as an insurgent, he always acts bravely in the face of danger, he fights as an adult soldier without displaying fear facing life-threatening danger. However, when he encounters deserters, he is panic-stricken and runs away: "I myself came across them once and they seemed so terrible to me that I ran away" (Пагутяк 2023: 123). His decision to run away implies that the presence of an unidentifiable group evokes a feeling of uncanniness that stands beyond the immediate dangers of war or the foreseeable enemy identity of the secret police. The presence of THOSE seems to evoke a terror that surpasses the known threats, emphasizing an existential affect of encountering the unknown.

The lack of specific identities, apart from the mention of women and children, creates another uncanny accentuation on these individuals' marginalization and isolation: "Sometimes there were women and children there. These unfortunate people didn't even have names and they were so different that they were simply called THOSE (Пагутяк 2023: 123). The emphasis on namelessness is similar to the denial of full humanity of others during war times. During unsettling realities with physical danger, individuals seek especially to belong to groups driven by ideological allegiance. Without a group, it is as if people lose their identity and are reduced to an amorphous mass of refugees. The absence of names also points to extreme vulnerability and at the same time difficulty in establishing a connection or empathy with them. The fact that these people do not speak is also remarkable in the Ukrainian linguistic context, where one is always forced to take sides by choosing a language.

At the end of the novel, the narrator mentions them briefly once again by referring to them as "the living dead", which suggests a profound level of disconnection, portraying THEM as individuals caught in a liminal space between existence and non-existence. Situated on the fringes of recognition and categorization, these characters work as non-characters exemplifying the dehumanizing impact of war. Their lack of identities brings a fuller representation to the

war, in which most people take sides. The idea that someone may attempt to merely save their lives, be devoid of ideological attachments, challenges the narrator's worldview, built on ideals and principles; it feels foreign to him that not everyone in this war adheres to clear-cut categories.

The Ukrainian church plays another crucial role in the novel, and being a member of this church is inseparable from speaking the Ukrainian language. Yatsun maintains that nationalism and Christianity as ideologies and social movements exerted a decisive influence on the socio-political development of Western Ukrainians in the interwar period and that the relations between the church and the national movement developed in the spirit of cooperation (Яцун 2003). It's no coincidence that Monk, a secondary character and the protagonist's friend, who was educated at a seminary (school of theology) and is the son of a priest, helps the insurgent army.

In the interpretation of Soviet historians, "the criminal activities of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists have always found the support of the Uniate Church," and the spiritual father of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism was the "Trojan horse of the Vatican", Count Andrey Sheptytskyi (Чередниченко 1969: 38–39). The characters note: "Our church is the church where a mass is served in Ukrainian" (Пагутяк 2023: 210), accentuating how language for them is a primary marker of identity. The insurgents have conviction that preserving their native language is integral to maintaining their national character, akin to the statement of Mbembe, that "all verbal dissidence, whether written or sung, is the object of close surveillance and repression" (Mbembe 2001: 118). Mbembe maintains that power is not only exercised through violence but is also embedded in everyday practices one of which is using one's language or forcing a person to use another language, which can be seen as a banality, however, this banality masks the underlying violence and arbitrariness of power.

The act of serving a mass in Ukrainian becomes a form of defiance against the atheist Soviet ideology. In the face of political and cultural pressures, the insurgents use Ukrainian language

as a deliberate, impactful act of doing; the fight against linguistic occupation meets the imposition of atheism. This act of doing is dynamic; it transcends mere communication and becomes a revolutionary gesture of commitment to the Ukrainian identity. This pattern is not unique to Ukraine but can be seen across Eastern European regions that have faced similar pressures, including the Baltic states and Poland. During the Soviet era, the promotion of Polish language and culture was a way to resist the imposition of Russian as the dominant language and the superior Soviet ideology (Thompson 2014: 79).

The Ukrainian church, apart from language used in it, is seen as very material: "When we regain our land, we will reclaim our church" (Пагутяк 2023: 226), and therefore holds a significance akin to "kryivka", the hideout that insurgents intentionally destroyed by throwing grenades when the enemy approached. This parallels the villagers' actions of burning their own churches to prevent them from falling into enemy hands.

Beyond the church, the novel introduces additional ritualistic elements, such as a philosophical stone that lends its name to the novel. The philosopher's stone is an important cosmogonic symbol in most Indo-European cultures. Berdnyk draws a comparison with the philosopher's stone and the European legends about the Holy Grail, which, as she states, was also not only the cup from which Christ gave communion to his disciples, "but also a shining stone, the quintessence of life force" (Бердник 2022: 61). Voytovych notes that the "Latyr-stone" is an ancient symbol of the presence of God, symbolizing unity with the deity through sacrifice (Войтович 2002). The philosopher's stone is also a symbol of fire, one of the world-building elements; the "living" fire was also imagined as a light-bearing stone (Бердник 2022: 61). In folk discourse of the Carpathians, springs that flowed under a stone or rock were especially revered. In his turn, Halaychuk notes that the "Tree of Life" as such does not appear in any of the authentic ancient texts, and it can only be identified by toponymy (Галайчук 1999).

Ilko's personal connection to the stone, stuck in his mind as a secret, becomes empowering in a world where no one else believes the fantastical tale:

> Since then, that stone has stuck in my head and has become my secret. I was glad that it was so close to me, that I could see Mount Berda, sharp, overgrown with forest, where even mushrooms did not grow, and the trees on it were weak from the shadow that Mount Chornohora cast on them. No one was interested in that mountain, and there were not even trails on it. No one would believe me if I told them. (Пагутяк 2023: 19)

According to the legend, whoever found this diamond would not only become immensely wealthy but would also gain superior courage. Yet, it was believed that the diamond, known as the Eye of the World, could not truly belong to any individual, for its purpose was greater. Only those pure of heart could liberate it from the darkness, and share it with humanity, which reads as a deeper quest for knowledge. Fanon, in his exploration of the psychological impact of colonial rule, notes that the colonist's power is often magnified through mythical structures, creating a phantasmagoric realm of terrifying adversaries: "The supernatural, magical powers reveal themselves as essentially personal; the settler's powers are infinitely shrunken, stamped with their alien origin. We no longer really need to fight against them since what counts is the frightening enemy created by myths" (Fanon 1963: 56). In Fanon's understanding, magic elements are distortions that serve to diminish the colonized people's resistance, relegating them to the realm of imagination. However, as he further suggests, in the liberation struggle these people who once believed in magic are suddenly thrust into the tangible reality of their fight for freedom.

At first, Ilko's admiration for the stone is reflective of childhood (pre-colonization) innocence, or a romanticized belief in a world beyond the tangible. Yet, the culmination of the novel, when captured by the secret police, the protagonist is subjected to a brutal

beating, he finds himself drawing a harrowing comparison between his own state in which he remained silent, refraining from telling the insurgent army secrets, and the metaphorical World's Eye:

> I liked being silent so much that I seemed to have really become dumb. And I even began to hear worse, because I received a kick first in one ear, then in the other. I didn't even know what they wanted from me, what I was arrested for. Not sure if anyone did that before, but it was cool. I was turning into a stone — into the Eye of the World — and gradually sank into darkness, until I stopped hearing, seeing and feeling anything. (Пагутяк 2023: 217)

This way, the character's evolution into the World's Eye works as a statement, where his body marks a transcendence from a childlike way of thinking into sole withstanding the oppression, in Powell's terms "a body that endured what will mark his personal archive" (Powell 2021: 589). This shift from one state to another is rooted in Ukrainian ideas of statehood by Plokhy (2015) and the collective struggles for self-determination: just as rebels collectively challenge oppressive regimes, the protagonist confronts the force that seeks to subjugate him, and in his silence asserts his agency as a Ukrainian nationalist. Plokhy emphasizes that the historical resilience of the Ukrainian people against various foreign dominations: the Mongols, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, the Soviet Union gave rise to a collective identity with a vision of Ukraine as a sovereign, independent entity within the European family of nations, that is worth fighting for. Regardless of the outcome of the current war, Plokhy asserts, "on its resolution depends not only the future of Ukraine, but also that of relations between Europe's east and west" (Plokhy 2015, 354). Just as the collective efforts of Ukrainians throughout history have challenged the attempts at erasure and subjugation, the protagonist's development in Pahutiak's metahistorical narrative embodies the very struggle for autonomy that Plokhy articulates.

Conclusion

The article presents an analysis of Halyna Pahutiak's novel "The World's Eye" as a metahistorical text that narrates the post-colonial reality prevalent in the late 1940s within the territory of modern Western Ukraine where linguistic preservation becomes essential for cultural survival amid colonial violence. The emergence of this novel in 2023 signifies a societal shift towards decolonization. Following the full-scale war, Ukrainians are now openly discussing the previously marginalized topic of insurgents and uniting in re-interpreting the narrative surrounding these figures. This conversation is now taking place in broader circles, including discussions with children.

The novel is distinguished by its focus on postcolonial identities of the Ukrainian nationalist rebels as well as the significance of linguistic preservation. During the Soviet era, participants of the underground Ukrainian nationalist movement, who opposed the Soviet rule, were derogatorily termed "Bandera people" alongside accusations of being bandits. The official narrative about them "mercilessly exposed the criminal essence of Ukrainian nationalism," as Havryshko (Гавришко 2017: 204) maintains. The concept of subalternity, relevant across postcolonial studies, here finds a different expression: Ukrainian insurgents not only engaged in armed struggle, but employed language as a form of undoing the cultural erasure and worked to preserve the spiritual markers of identity. Although their lived experiences during the Soviet rule remain largely unspoken, they provide an exceptional case study of decoloniality.

The acknowledgment of Ukraine's position within the postcolonial discourse challenges the narratives that have traditionally dominated postcolonial studies. Ukraine's postcolonial discourse introduces a challenge to these narratives since the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union are still not broadly recognized as colonial powers. Eastern European scholars, e.g. Thompson, emphasize that Russian cultural and political dominance has overshadowed

both Eastern European narratives and the discourse in the West with Russian-centric perspectives (Thomson 2014: 75). Ukrainian scholars such as Riabchuk (*s.a.*) and Kuzio (2022) were among the first to contribute to the understanding of the post-Soviet context and Ukraine within it as postcolonial. They were also the first to explain the consequences of linguistic colonialism by the Russian empire onto present-day Ukraine.

The inclusion of Ukraine in postcolonial discourse invites scholars to re-evaluate established theories on power and ultimately recognize the intersectionality of postcolonial experiences across different cultures. There is a collective sense among Ukrainians of the need for a narrative shift toward a future where their perspectives are central to understanding their history. With the ongoing war waged by Russia against Ukraine, this re-evaluation is particularly urgent. Mstyslav Chernov, the author of the Oscar-winning documentary "20 Days in Mariupol", also emphasizes the critical importance of Ukrainians telling their own history. This article aligns with Chernov's hope, that "sooner or later, it will happen that it is Ukrainians and only Ukrainians who tell and write the history of their country" (see Кошеленко 2024).

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RESÜMEE

KEEL KUI LAHINGUVÄLI. UKRAINA POST-KOLONIAALNE IDENTITEET HALÕNA PAHUTJAKI NOORTEROMAANIS „MAAILMA SILM"

Artikkel uurib Ukraina näitel postkoloniaalsete teooriate rakendamise eetilisi küsimusi ja hoiatab üleilmse postkoloniaalse ajaloo ühtlustamise eest. Ukraina kultuur on sajanditepikkuse võitluse käigus oma identiteedi ja iseseisvuse säilitamise nimel pidanud taluma nii Venemaa kui ka Austria-Ungari impeeriumi survet. Tänapäeval seisab Ukraina silmitsi Venemaa desinformatsioonisõjaga, mis püüab säilitada ja taaselustada koloniaalnarratiive. Siinne uurimus lähtub sellest, et keel toimib postkoloniaalse vahendina identiteedi taastamisel. Ukraina keeleline identiteet on olnud Venemaa keisririigi ja nõukogude võimu all vaidlusküsimus, kui venestamispoliitika kaudu püüti ukrainlasi süstemaatiliselt allutada ja nende eneseväljendust pärssida. Artikkel toetub Ida-Euroopa teadlaste Mykola Riabchuki ja Ewa Thompsoni töödele ning lähtub mõistetest *subaltern* ja *hübriidsus*, analüüsides kriitiliselt Ukraina postkoloniaalset identiteeti ja selle kujunemist. Riabchuk tõstab esile ukraina keele sümboolset rolli, kirjeldades seda kui märki, mis näitab, et selle keele kõneleja kuulub madalamasse ühiskonnaklassi. Artikkel analüüsib ukraina keele marginaliseerimise ajaloolisi põhjusi ja vaatleb, kuidas keele kasutamine muutus vastupanu vahendiks. Feministliku kirjandusanalüüsi kaudu uurib artikkel Halõna Pahutjaki 2023. aastal ilmunud romaani „Maailma silm", rõhutades 1990. aastate ukraina naiskirjanike panust Ida-Euroopa kultuuri dekoloniseerimisse. Feministliku lähenemise rakendamine kirjandusanalüüsis võimaldab hinnata kolonialismi mõju üksikutele inimestele ja neid ümbritsevatele ühiskondlikele struktuuridele. Ukraina kirjanduses on kollektiivsed mälestused rõhumisest ja reaktsioonid käimasolevale sõjale omavahel seotud. Just ukraina naiskirjanike teostes on näha, kuidas keel toimib vastuhaku vahendina, et oma kultuuri imperiaalsete mõjude eest kaitsta.

Võtmesõnad: kolonialistlik, dekolonialistlik ja postkolonialistlik diskursus, Ida-Euroopa uuringud, feministlik kirjandusanalüüs, Halõna Pahutjak, hübriidsus, subaltern, identiteet, imperialism, Ukraina vastupanuvõitlejad, marginaliseerimine, post-sovetoloogia, Vene desinformatsioon