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## Discourse of resistance in contemporary Ukrainian fiction: satire and anti-colonial motives in Maria Miniailo's *Stolen Spring*

Дискурс опору в сучасній українській прозі: сатира й антиколоніальні мотиви в повісті «Вкрадена весна» М. Міняйло

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### Abstract

The situation of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine after February 24, 2022 resulted in the emergence of literary works that reflect the forms of literary interpretation of war, its catastrophic consequences and tragic losses. 'Stolen Spring' (2022) by Ukrainian writer Maria Miniailo is one of the first novellas in Ukraine that is based on the real situations that reveal the confrontation between Ukrainian people and Russian invaders in 2022 as the result of the full-scale invasion. 'Stolen Spring' is an example of a narrative that reveals Berlant's ideas about the theory of 'cruel optimism'. It was discussed that the reality of the war became the factor of resistance generating new senses that became a factor in establishing an innovative historical reality in Ukraine. At the same time, it was emphasized that Miniailo's novella is a form of intensification of Ukrainian resistance to the ideology of new Russian 'fascism' (Rasshism) represented in the behaviour of the "katsap" community and portrayed in the concept of the "Russian soul". The writer resorts to the construction of the world that reinforces the satirical forms through transparent depictions of reality in all its forms in war and terror.

**Keywords:** contemporary Ukrainian literature, cruel optimism, Maria Miniailo, satire, war.

### Анотація

Ситуація повномасштабного вторгнення в Україну після 24 лютого 2022 року детермінувала появу літературних творів, які відображають форми літературного осмислення війни, її катастрофічних наслідків і трагічних втрат. «Вкрадена весна» (2022) української письменниці Марії Міняйло – одна з перших в Україні повістей, яка заснована на реальних подіях, що розкривають протистояння українського народу та російських загарбників у 2022 році внаслідок повномасштабного вторгнення. «Вкрадена весна» - приклад наративу, який розвиває концепцію Л. Берланта про «жорстокий оптимізм». З'ясовано, що реальність війни стала чинником спротиву, що породжує життєствердні сенси, які сприяли утвердженню нової історичної дійсності в Україні. Водночас наголошено, що повість М. Міняйло є чинником інтенсифікації в Україні опору ідеології нового російського «фашизму» (рашизму), яку оприявлено в поведінці «кацапської» спільноти та висвітлено в образі «російської душі». Письменниця вдається до конструювання світу, що підсилює сатиричні форми чітким зображенням дійсності в усіх її виявах під час війни й терору.

**Ключові слова:** сучасна українська література, жорстокий оптимізм, Марія Міняйло, сатира, війна.

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## Introduction

The recently published book *24.02* (2022) by Maria Miniailo (Марія Міняйло) consists of two novellas, 'Stolen Spring' (the main work in the book) and 'The Flower Garden of Mrs. Savenko' and four short stories on war topics ('The story about grandfather Dmytro, who scared five saboteurs', 'A story about Olexandra, who met love in the ruins of her former life', 'A story about Ihor, who met face to face with a real spy', 'A story about Mrs. Myroslava, who prepared a special moonshine'). In the beginning of 2022, Miniailo's book *The Children of Grad* was published in London by Glagoslav Publications (<https://waterloopress.co.uk/books/the-children-of-grad-2022>). This time the writer has created a narrative that in a special way portrays the situation in Ukraine after the full-scale invasion in 2022.

The war in Ukraine became a factor in the world crisis of ethics, as it caused mass emigration, the reign of fear, the death of ordinary people, etc.

Contemporary Ukrainian fiction (Drozdovskyi 2021) demonstrates the transformation of its literary landscape due to wartime. New motives and new concepts have been reinforced after the full-scale invasion. Contemporary novels, novellas and short stories portray the situation of the war and its influence on the social life of Ukrainian people. The Russian-Ukrainian war has generated texts in which the authors reflect on the tragedy that Ukraine experienced in 2022 and reveals the antihuman aggressive nature of Russian invaders who destroy people's homes and ruin human lives.

Miniailo's novella is an example of the narrative of resistance that was created in Ukrainian fiction (Miniailo, 2022) and poetry (Korotko, 2022) in 2022. The literary text is an example of literature that demonstrates the terror of war and re-thinks the relations between Russians and Ukrainians in one little village. Though partly satirical, her novella realistically depicts the catastrophes that happened in Ukrainian cities that were occupied in February-March, 2022. Miniailo reinforces the motifs of inter-cultural clash between communities, collaborationism and inner human transformations, and the unreasonable cruelty that is a remarkable feature of Russian identity. The writer demonstrates the abyss that exists between two communities in the Ukrainian village: Ukrainians, and Russians whom the author calls "the katsaps".

'Stolen Spring' is a cultural text with anthropological implications that demonstrate the basic and fundamental differences between communities and explain the nature of the destructive desire of the Russians for war and confrontations. In the novella, Miniailo re-thinks and revises the issues that deal with identity phenomenon. The author concludes that there are some stable and unchangeable features of identities that result in specific forms of social behaviour.

Despite some grotesque episodes and situations, the novella portrays real experiences of war and the situations that happened in the occupied Ukrainian villages and towns in 2022. The author may have used real facts distributed in the media about the cruelties of Russian invaders. However, this real cruelty has become an inspiration for the author to create a literary work that demonstrates the power of Ukrainian people and demonstrates how they were able to liberate their villages and towns. 'Stolen Spring' demonstrates Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" and is an example of a text that was created in one of the most cruel times Ukraine has ever experienced. Tragedies of real life intensify literary experiment and demonstrate a system of new motives and socio-cultural issues that become important for literary representation in contemporary Ukrainian fiction.

In this paper, I will analyse the crash of two communities and cultural identities, Ukrainians and "katsaps", represented in 'Stolen Spring', and the forms of portraying the issues of occupations regarding the discourse of the Russian-Ukrainian war intensified after February 24, 2022.

## Theoretical Framework or Literature Review

In the study 'Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History' (1996), Kathy Caruth speaks about trauma as an event that carries not only destructive potential, but one which also harbours the possibilities of new meanings and life-affirming narratives. In the article, I will consider the new form of relationship between social reality and literature (fiction), literary practices, and social fears and disasters. The war context of "cruel reality" has become a form of immense productivity in order to establish the narrative that is opposite to the discourse of Russian military aggression, antihumanism, fascism, etc.

The specificity of the situation in Ukraine after the full-scale invasion in February 2022 determines the choice of methodology that reflects the correlation of literature (fiction) with the relevant socio-cultural and political context. I have reinforced theoretical works that demonstrate the connection between the forms of restrictions due to terror, war, etc. and the reflection on such restrictions in literary texts. In the work of L. Berlant, the cruelty of reality contains the potential impulse for transformations that draw inspiration from the cruelty of the surrounding reality. Kathleen Stewart's work *Ordinary Affects* (2007) demonstrates the correlations between the general social situation and the structure of sensibility, the forms of feelings that find realization in literature and the arts. Stewart in her research 'begins with the disparate, fragmented, and seemingly inconsequential experiences of everyday life to bring attention to the ordinary as an integral site of cultural politics. Ordinary affect, she insists, is registered in its particularities, yet it connects people and creates common experiences that shape public feeling' (*Ordinary Affects*). Moreover, Stewart has proved that social factors in many ways structure the narrative, reflecting certain images in it, determining literary practices, etc. The external reality and the general system of feelings that prevails in society determines the narratives in fiction, outlining a certain topic, image system, within it.

Fiction in post-postmodern conditions in Ukraine is postulated not as an autonomous phenomenon, but as one that is under the significant influence of social pressure, wartime consequences; and, therefore, the context determines artistic practices.

### Methodology

The research vector corresponds to contemporary cultural approaches, methodological guidelines that determine the understanding of contemporary literature (fiction), in particular in the aspect of representing the concept of *Cruel Optimism* (Berlant, 2011), *Ordinary Affects* (Stewart, 2007), *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed, 2010), etc. This methodology is innovative and has not yet been applied to Ukrainian material, in particular in the aspect of studying fiction.

Berlant's methodology has been exploited in the research as in the most successful way it gives grounds to explain the connections between the 'cruel' reality of war in Ukraine and Miniailo's

novella written in the war period as the result of this clash with the cruelty of the war. The originality and innovativeness of the project is connected with the necessity to comprehend changes in approaches, principles and techniques that take place in Ukrainian poetry during war time.

William Watkins in his *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (2004) defines the crises of the contemporary world, in which there is a discrepancy between political, moral and ethical ideals and the existing state of affairs in society, which makes it impossible to build a society of ethics. The unattainability of these ideals forms a society of melancholy, which is reflected in culture and art, which appears as a narrative of grief, mourning, and pain. Literature these days reinforces the motif of death, because society cannot create a space of happiness and ethics for all individuals. If society cannot take responsibility for the ethical dimension, then arts and literature in particular, as Watkins stresses, take responsibility for death, which is the result of the gap that arises from the unattainability of the ideal. Literary practices and fiction forms reinforce the motives of melancholy and despair, which generally speak of the pessimistic images represented in their paradigm.

In their theoretical works, Berlant, Stewart, and Watkins define the methodology of this research, which explores the conceptual sphere of contemporary Ukrainian fiction. Such a sphere of new concepts is formed under the influence of generally threatening messages through the intensification of the discourse of melancholy, death, etc. The discourse of death is determined by the topic of war in Ukraine, which is relayed by media and which affects the worldview of Ukrainian writers like Miniailo. At the same time, the war increases the need for self-expression, intensifying practices that appear as a form of response to the brutality of reality, or melancholy, crying and despair arising from the global violation of ethical principles. The represented methodology is determined by the real socio-cultural situation in Ukraine and reflects the key forms of interaction of literary and socio-cultural reality in the conditions of war.

### Results and Discussion

T. Snyder (2022) explains the Russian-Ukrainian war as an example of the 'last postcolonial war'. The novella 'Stolen Spring' ('Вкрадена весна') draws readers' attention primarily due to the ability of the author to portray contemporary

characters in war torn Ukraine. The novella is genetically and typologically close to classic Ukrainian author Ivan Nechui-Levytskyi's famous novella *Kaidash's Family* ("Кайдашева сім'я", 1878). 'Stolen Spring' reinforces the questions raised in Nechui-Levytskyi's text, but in the new wartime context.

Miniailo wrote a story in which we have the concept of 'laughter through tears' (Ivan Franko used these words to define the essence of *Kaidash's Family*). It is an example of the imagological novella with an Us and Them emphasis for Ukrainian and Russian/ 'katsap' characters respectively: the Ukrainians (the Doroshko family, Andrii Shtanko) are depicted as familiar to the reader, while the Russians are ascribed the derogatory colloquial lexeme "katsaps" ("billy goats") to emphasize their foreignness (Vera Vasylivna, Styopa, Tan'ka).

Miniailo admitted in her January post on Facebook (with information about the publication of the book) that the basis for her novella 'Stolen Spring' was an uncompleted play, *How The Katsaps In Our Village Had A Wedding Party*, on which the writer had previously worked. Moreover, the dramatic element in the story is clear and strong enough to compare this novella with *The Kaidash's Family*. The novella was written on the basis of a grotesque and satirical depiction of the souls of the 'katsaps' and tragic events related to the occupation of Ukrainian villages, towns and cities in 2022.

Satire in Miniailo's novella becomes a powerful instrument instead of irony. Irony has become useless in the paradigm of war and for a culture staring death in the face. New (post-postmodern) Sincerity in Ukrainian novellas demonstrates the break with postmodernism in the aspect of irony and rejection of true emotions. Miniailo's novella underlines satire and the *return to the human* as core elements of the post-postmodern wartime discourse. 'The ideas of sincerity and authenticity are not unchanging but differ from culture to culture' (O'Gorman & Eaglestone, 2019: 38). Martin Paul Eve provides a few examples: 'Firstly, assuming that authenticity really exists, it is possible to behave authentically, but insincerely. If <...> you make a promise on which you subsequently renege, you were insincere but authentic.' (O'Gorman & Eaglestone, 2019, 38).

To explain the notion of New Sincerity, Martin Paul Eve states that 'one of the core components that needs to be analyzed is the supposition that

the irony of postmodern literature 'is parasitic on sincerity' <...>. Indeed, those contemporary authors seeking new ways of engaging with sincerity in their fiction are not rejecting all aspects of postmodern literature; the complexity, fragmentation and even the historical subject often remains <...>. Instead, the core facet that these authors of the (New) Sincerity reject to their aesthetic is postmodern irony while in philosophy they retain a postmodern incredulity at the idea of an authentic self' (Eve, 2019: 39). Irony does not play the key role in the post-postmodern narrative of the contemporary Ukrainian novel. The narrative describes the situation in which irony is connected with sincerity, moreover, irony is connected with authenticity and, finally, irony is connected with the discourse of tragedy and pain the Ukraine wartime.

In the novella, the 'katsaps' live in the world of alcohol abasement and do not want to make any effort to make their own lives better. Unlike Ukrainian families, which are able to organize themselves in the most difficult moment in order to survive, the 'katsaps' can win only when they have a physical advantage. They are not capable of collectivism, of mutual assistance. The 'katsaps' world in the novella is depicted as internally disjointed and aggressive, where the animal instinct reigns. The image of the 'katsap' woman Vira Vasylivna and her son Styopa reflects ideas about the laziness and aggressiveness of the "Russian soul"; the 'katsaps' in the story are dirty and cruel to each other, e.g.: the mother abuses her son in the same way that her husband abused her until his death. In the novella, Miniailo recreated the peculiarities of the interaction of two families in the Ukrainian countryside, one of which is typical Ukrainian, and the other typical 'katsap'. The writer manages to construct characters belonging to different cultural and historical paradigms. In general, the story is satirical; it resembles 'The Kaidash's Family' world with a huge number of dialogues between the characters. In addition, the novella could be easily transferred to a theatre stage: the dialogues between the characters are full of laughter and represent a special wit, they reflect the flow of real life.

Moreover, it is worth saying about the third-person narrative at the very beginning of the story that the writer resorts to a narrative technique which occurs in Ukrainian classical literature. This is the view of the *omnipotent narrator* who talks about the world in an epic, detached way; and such a story contrasts with

what will be discussed further in the dialogues. In the finale episode, the reader finds out who recorded for posterity what happened in the village during the occupation, who told of the victories of the Ukrainians over the 'katsapy', who recorded all the crimes of the occupying marauders.

*'And it so happened that many years ago (no one can say exactly how many years ago) several dozen katsap families moved (or were relocated) to our village. During this time, they multiplied so much that they now made up a significant percentage of our rural community. Most of them drank incessantly and lived in poverty on the edge of the village. As my grandmother used to say: "They are born naked and barefoot, they grow up naked and barefoot, they die naked and barefoot." They started drinking when they were young, but that's why they didn't live to old age. They gave life to the same miserable creatures who repeated the fate of their parents'* (Miniailo, 2022, p. 7).

In 'Stolen Spring', the author uses words that are rarely used by writers today. These are forgotten, outdated lexemes. The author sometimes explains them in her notes for readers. These words help to create the mode that helps to de-automatize readers' perceptions. Old Ukrainian lexemes only confirm the specific authenticity of the Ukrainian world and intensify the grotesqueness of the reality, which in the reader's perception is still very strongly connected with the events of February 24, 2022.

Moreover, the novella is characterized by the discourse of Ukrainian authenticity. From the dialogues, the readers can clearly imagine contemporary characters. In the traditions of Ukrainian classic literature, the writer often resorts to the construction of a stock rustic world. But in 'Stolen Spring' the rustic space seems to be written in a modern form. The Ukrainian space of the modern village is depicted without artificial pastoralism, idealization or excessive images of village degradation. Psychological authenticity in the relationship between the characters is what attracts Miniailo's story.

Miniailo portrays typical characters of contemporary Ukraine. Tan'ka is perhaps the most expressive representative of the 'katsap' world: ugly, dirty, cruel, constantly drunk. Styopa's mother seems to have faith in God, but this faith appears to be flat, it is faith from spiritual poverty. Reverend (Father) Pavlo is depicted through the internal dynamics of confusion, and the struggle with his own efforts

to avoid participation in the wedding of Tan'ka and Styopa. The wedding is the apotheosis of the representation of the "Russian spirit", which ends with a senseless drunken fight.

Miniailo's satire on the Russian spirit is successful in the novella. The readers see in the story that all tortures the Ukrainians have gone through are not a figment of the author's imagination. Looting, rape, etc., everything is part of a real horror that continues to this day in Ukraine. Tan'ka happily has sex with the 'katsap' soldiers. But in the novel, both the geography teacher and the girl are raped. Styopa becomes a typical collaborator: he is a person without moral principles, although he still paid one of his debts. He rejoices in his widowhood and is ready to imprison the priest who sanctified his marriage.

Reverend Pavlo's role during the occupation of the village is important. At the same time, the victory over the 'katsaps' is attributed to the woman Marusia, who is considered a village witch. The "potions" she prepares help to deal with violent rapists who abuse Ukrainians.

The world of the 'katsaps' in 'Stolen Spring' is cruel, aggressive, mean and miserable. The author satirically ridicules the inability of the 'katsaps' to build a comfortable space. Instead, they show a bilious envy of the Ukrainians, who were able to create something amazing in their gardens. 'Styopa's house, where he lived with his mother, Vira Vasylivna, was on the edge of the village. There used to be barracks here, but over time, thanks to the efforts of the head of the village council, they disappeared, and in their place, a dozen one-story brick houses were built, to which the heirs of the katsap barracks moved. The locals jokingly called this place 'parebrik', because the katsap culture and attitudes prevailed here' (Miniailo, 2022, p. 19).

Styopa, by the way, also does not understand why his mother is unable to even plant carrots in her garden. However, he himself is childish, and cannot work out how to deal with the situation of marriage with Tan'ka. He chooses his wife only at the will of his mother, who sees Tan'ka as a good wife (from the financial point of view). The world of the 'katsap' soul is creepy, empty, haunted, but still capable of bringing death to Ukrainian lands. The marriage of Styopa and Tan'ka is unsustainable, so the death of Tan'ka seems natural in the story. For Styopa, the death of his wife is by no means a tragedy. He is down-to-earth and humble, living a primitive life; after Tan'ka's death he does not fall into grief, but

continues to seek to satisfy his physiological needs.

Ukrainian characters in the story have moral values. Their lives are not simple, there are misunderstandings, insults, internal struggles, but the characters live in a world built according to moral standards. However, the world of the 'katsaps' is fundamentally different. Almost entirely animal instincts reign there, some inexplicable cruelty that manifests itself in the relationship between husband and wife, mother and son. The characters of the story do not imagine any other life. Styopa thanks Bohdan for the fact that once he protected him from the boys who had fun beating a 'katsap'. Vira Vasylivna does not invite a priest of a Moscow church from a neighboring village to the wedding, because she believes that if Reverend Pavlo consecrates the marriage, somehow the family will already *be tolerated and fall in love*: "I believe that you are anointed by God...", said Vira Vasylivna unexpectedly. - You have sanctity. Let the son's marriage be a hundred times unhappy, but let him be blessed by God. Then there will be no grief in marriage. There will be no happiness, but the son will not fall into the noose, the wife will not be beaten either. Their life will be normal" (Miniailo, 2022, p. 44). Vira Vasylivna's behaviour is irrational, mostly predatory (both towards her own and towards others) in the novella.

The novella 'Stolen Spring' demonstrates the chasm of worldviews, it satirically reveals the opinion that the Russian world is not viable. Vitality, which creates new lives, is not presented in the Russian world, the Russians have an animal desire to survive, there is a desire to "coop up", as the author writes, theirs is a desire to kill, to get pleasure from revenge and self-aggrandizement by diminishing one's neighbour. There are no values in the Russian world represented in the novella. That is why the marriage between Tan'ka and Styopa ends in an "abyss": she dies and Styopa becomes a collaborator. Styopa does not physically desire his wife, he does not have feelings for her, and even his attempts to "drink a cup of tea", (to have sex) with Tan'ka are simulated. "Tanya dragged Styopa up to the second floor to their bedroom. No matter how he tried to delay this moment, explaining that it is not comfortable in front of people, Tanya did not listen to that. Vodka and the recent fight ignited such a thirst in her that she couldn't stand it. She dragged Styopa into the bedroom and, grabbing the skirt of the dress, growled: "Take me as a wife." Styopa did not really understand how exactly one should take a

wife and whether it is worth it at all?" (Miniailo, 2022, p. 65-66).

## Conclusions

Miniailo's 'Stolen Spring' is a novella that reinforces the issues of war confrontation intensified after the full-scale invasion by Russia in February, 2022. The text demonstrates the author's attention to the identity representations that give a clue to understanding the nature of Russian aggression in Ukraine. 'Stolen Spring' is an example of the text that is a part of the narrative of resistance crated in Ukraine after 2022: the author has prepared a narrative that provokes emotional response to the cruelty of Russians perpetrated against the occupied Ukrainian territories. Miniailo unites in her story true facts and imagined situations providing a grotesque narrative in which satire plays a key role.

The novella demonstrates the importance of Berlant's theory that cruel reality could be a source for transformations in the sphere of arts and literature. Miniailo has used the discourse of war as a material for rethinking Russian identity and representing its key anthropological features. The writer uses irony to intensify the grotesque forms of representation of Russians as cruel, ugly, and without any desire to build a comfortable world. Miniailo stresses that Russians had a long history of coexistence with Ukrainians and in different times this coexistence was peaceful but with a lot of hidden problems that were not articulated in a public sphere. The author demonstrates inner Russian desire to destroy the order of the Ukrainian world, and to reshape their community in accordance with the norms of Russian the world. Miniailo explains in her novella the concept of the "Russian spirit" as a phenomenon that contains aggression and destructive intentions. Russian characters in the novella reveal the motif of unconscious behaviour, they are reckless and irrational, they do not have a desire to build a socially comfortable sphere and in their lives the characters share purely pragmatic views. The community of the 'katsaps' does not have values based on moral principles and ethics. They fight with each other and reveal the forms of cruel behaviour between mother and son, husband and wife.

'Stolen Spring' is an example of imagological texts in which the plot and narrative in general play with stereotypes and ruined expectations connected with identity representations and social interactions of the characters. The text

proves Stewart's theory about the influences of social background on the cultural situation that is determined by the tendentious society, and reveals the key socio-political issues that are important for people in a particular moment of time. Miniailo has created a story that is a new attempt to portray a typical Ukrainian family as in the times of Nechui-Levytskyi's outstanding Ukrainian novella *'Kaidash's Family'*. Miniailo also builds her story on many dialogues that intensify the plot dynamics and reinforce the issue of social relations between two different cultural groups. The level of dramatization in the novella is high and the conversations between characters give a possibility to understand their psychology and deep subconscious motivations. Ukrainians in the story are connected with the concept of a peaceful world order and the Russians (the 'katsaps') are portrayed as a community that has no values and that is oriented to bring destruction to the world and get satiation from social cruelty, war and violence as realized in murders, rapes, blackmailing, etc. that happen in the village in the occupation period.

The novella stresses the idea of the fundamental cultural and mental abyss between Russian and Ukrainian communities, and the author does not see any possibility of how to build communication and peaceful co-existence between them. The mental differences are so marked between the two nationalities. The only desire of 'katsaps' is to invade, to occupy and to destroy the world in which they live. With the help of grotesquery and satire, Miniailo portrays the tragedy of war in Ukraine and puts emphasis on the human catastrophe that happens in the result of such wars. The novella exploits real situations from the recent war torn history of Ukraine in 2022 and combines them with the author's imagination in order to create a cultural

literary text that is part of the narrative of resistance.

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