Research Article

Facing Familiar Violence

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Dehumanization Practices: Effects of Violence on Self-Identity in Diana Balyko's Plays

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Abstract: Diana Balyko (1979) is one of the most prominent Belarusian contemporary playwrights writing in Russian and Belarusian. Despite not adhering completely to the so-called post-Soviet New Drama, Balyko's production is heavily influenced by the theatrical movement, as is evident by the use of verbatim and the brutal portrayal of violence. In the author's work, violence manifests itself especially through medical and sexual discourse. They become part of a power dynamics between individuals, behind which in fact lies a desperate longing for recognition and acceptance. In this way, Balyko points the finger at the absence of high values in post-Soviet society and in post-Soviet Belarus at the beginning of 2000's which appears especially in a disregard of human life. This research aims at exploring the theme of identity in Balyko's work through the body, considered by many feminist studies one of the main sites for the construction of the self as well as the subject and object of violence. For this purpose, the plays Belyj angel s čërnymi kril'jami (Balyko. 2005. *Belyj angel Ss černymi kryl'jami [A White Angel with Black Wings]*), about the social stigma of AIDS, and Gorjačaja točka (Balyko. 2006. *Gorjačaja ttočka* [Hotspot]). Foucaultian concept of biopower and biopolitics will be especially useful in the analysis.

Keywords: Diana Balyko; Novaja drama; Belarusian theatre; communicative violence

1 Body and Identity: Theoretical Remarks

Diana Vladimirovna Balyko (1979) is one of the most prominent Belarusian contemporary playwrights writing in Russian and Belarusian language, as well as a writer and a poetess.

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After attending the 'Maxim Gorky Literature Institute' in Moscow, in 2005 she achieved success with her play *Belyj angel s čërnymi kryl'jami* (*A White Angel with Black Wings*), which became even part of school curricula in Belarus (Gončarova-Grabovskaja 2015, pp. 117–132). As well as being the author of many award-winning plays, Balyko has written several poetry collections, screenplays and song lyrics, even collaborating with important artists such as Alla Pugačëva (Malinovskij 2019). Because of her political views against Lukašenka's regime, her status as an intellectual has progressively worsened throughout the years (Smejkalová 2022). After participating in 2020 electoral protests, she was forced to emigrate to Kyiv, which she left in 2021 due to the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. She was welcomed for a short period of time at the 'National Theatre of Prague' as part of a residential programme for artists at risk. However, because of her Belarusian passport, Balyko was denied refugee status in Czech Republic and emigrated to Poland (Smejkalová 2022). She is currently living between Warsaw and Vilnius, where she continues to denounce through her works the horrors of the Belarusian dictatorship and of the Russo-Ukrainian war. As Balyko herself claimed: "I am a literary soldier. A soldier of literature. My task is to record time, to make sense out of it, to collect stories of pain" (Balyko n.d., transl. mine).[1]

I had the privilege to interview Diana Balyko at the beginning of October 2023. During the conversation a number of different topics about her work and intellectual persona were discussed, including a small scandal at the beginning of her career. In 2010 she took part with several other women writers in a project called 'Contemporary Belarusian Calendar', which was an erotic calendar for the year 2011. Balyko revealed that, despite all allegations, her participation was dictated not so much by a desire for publicity, as by a sincere interest in exploring and celebrating her own body: "every woman has breasts, but not every woman writes poems, novels […], plays. I always write about what interests me and breasts were never a way to promote my work" (Parotti 2024, p. 197).[2] Balyko's early production is as well characterised by a large presence of the corporeal theme, which is often used as an expedient to unravel characters' psychology and inner conflicts. As will be seen in the following paragraphs, characters in the author's plays are indeed frequently portrayed as tormented souls looking for their own identity in a society ruled by norms and standards to which they fail to conform. Their sense of self usually starts to be built through bodily exploration and expression, even at the expense of the body itself. In order to understand how body and identity are strictly related, a theoretical premise seems necessary.

1 "Я литературный солдат. Солдат литературы. Моя задача – фиксировать время, осмысливать его, собирать истории боли".

2 "грудь есть у каждых женщин, но не у каждой женщины есть стихи, романы, не у каждой женщины есть пьесы. Я всегда писала о том, что меня интересует, и точно грудь не была способом продвинуть мои произведения".

The idea of the body as a primary agent in the identity-building process, despite not being a brand-new concept, particularly sparked the academic discussion in the late 1980s (McDowell 1999, p. 36). In the feminist debate of those years, corporeality began indeed to generate burning questions about the foundations of sex and gender differences. The post-modernist re-theorisation of the sexed body started in the first place with an attempt to overcome the fundamental opposition between body and mind. Through the concept of gender, biological binarism was questioned and consequently the ontology of self reshaped. Authors such as Butler and Grosz reread in a new key the studies of the French structuralists, in particular Merleau-Ponty (Butler 2017; Grosz 1994), who in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) attempted to change the perceptual paradigm, placing the body as the foundation of experience and eliminating the distinction between subject and object. A substantial spatial continuity is thus postulated. Bodily space has no sense of its own nor can be distinct from the space of the object: "far from my body's being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 117). The body inhabits space, it perceives and is perceived, it is both subject and object, but never one or the other in isolation. The concept of individual identity is thus reshaped. Identity is irreducible to a biological essentialism, but neither can it be limited to an exclusive socio-cultural construction, since experience is unique to each person (Butler 2017).

Considering the multiplicity of factors that cooperate in the identity-building process, the importance of body in Balyko's work can therefore be considered not only as the result of a sincere and personal interest in the subject from the author, but also as a consequence of the important changes in the common perception of corporeality during the so called 'sexual revolution' of the 1990s. At the end of the century, with the introduction of the free market in the former Soviet Republics, a new unprecedented commodification of the body took place. Body representations multiplied, invading advertisements, commercial products and services, while pornography experienced an unprecedented popularity in the post-Soviet space (Borenstein 2008, p. 88). If in the Soviet Union 'there was no sex',[3] the weakening of the Iron Curtain finally enabled the creation of a discourse around sexuality and, consequently, also around corporeality. As Borenstein points out in *Overkill* (2008, 28–29): "The sexual question was, after all,

3 "Here we don't have sex!" ("У нас секса нет") was a famous sentence pronounced during one of the space bridges between the US and the Soviet Union in 1987. Space bridges were broadcasts structured as videoconferences: a group of US citizens and a group of Soviet citizens, each live from a TV studio in their own country, asked each other questions about current affairs. In the Leningrad-Boston space bridge, Mrs Ljudmila Ivanovna, addressing the problem of the sexualisation in American advertising, uttered the well-known phrase. It became so emblematic that it is considered by various journalists and scholars as a symbolic starting point of the Soviet and post-Soviet sexual revolution at the end of the millennium (Borenstein 2008, pp. 28–29).

raised by an American; *seks*, like AIDS, penetrated the Soviet borders once vigilance became lax".

The interest in the body permeated the artistic-literary scene as well, which was equally impacted by Western influences. Theatre makes no exception, and the beginning of so called *novaja drama* (new drama) in the first years of 2000s can be considered a perfect product of that time. The starting point of the dramaturgical movement is formally considered the cycle of seminars conducted by the Royal Court Theatre of London in 1999 in Russia under the auspices of the British Council (Lipovecki 2016). The aim was to disseminate the then popular New British Writing or In-Yer-Face Theatre, a type of dramaturgy characterised by a gritty documentary realism and by a predominant use of verbatim (as evidenced by the plays of its leading exponents, such as Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, Martin McDonagh and Patrick Marber). The movement soon developed beyond the British influence and acquired some local features inherited from the so-called *černucha*, i.e. that tendency towards the brutal representation of violence and the human body widespread in certain literature and filmography of *perestroika* (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, pp. 13–35). *Novaja drama* became equally popular in different post-Soviet countries, especially in Russia, Ukraine and, of course, Belarus. Paradoxically, the so-called 'new drama' made it possible to re-establish a common theatre scene among the former Soviet countries, where actors, authors and directors from the newly independent states could actively elaborate on the recent USSR experience (Curtis 2021a, p. 3). After the first decade of the 2000s, parallel to the end of the liberal climate in Belarus and Russia, the *novaja drama* took on a more eminently political tinge, with an increased focus on national issues (Curtis 2021b, pp. 259–266). In the Belarusian case, this has resulted in less tolerance on the public scene towards works considered problematic and controversial, which explains the greater difficulty of Balyko's plays in being staged.

Despite not adhering completely to the movement, Balyko shows in her work a hypernaturalistic tendency in the representation of the body, which comes to the foreground especially through violence. In the *novaja drama*, violence manifests itself both as an inescapable condition of human existence and as its intrinsic vital energy. Not surprisingly, it is often marked by an erotic connotation: "In the plays and productions of New Drama violence is inextricably linked to sexuality, in other words – with displays of a life-enhancing vitality and energy, a thirst for life and love" (Beumer and Lipovetsky 2009, p. 38). This thus restores centrality to the body, depicted in its 'basest appetites'.

Having thus established the main theoretical references, identified the artistic and cultural context of Balyko's work, and clarified the author's positioning, in the following paragraphs it will be analysed how violence affects characters' self-identity in the plays *Belyj angel s čërnymi kril'jami* (*White Angel with Black Wings* 2005) and *Gorjačaja točka* (*Hotspot* 2006). The first is focused on the social stigma of AIDS, while

the second play consists of seven stories, each of which is devoted to a different social issue (such as the demythologization of the Second Chechen, Chernobyl's consequences, gender inequality etc.). These works are representative of Balyko's early brutal style, as well as offering characters with a complex relationship with their own body.

2 A Special Kind of Violence: Communicative Violence

In order to understand how violence affects characters' identity, the special nature of violence portrayed by Balyko must be understood. The concept of 'communicative (or communal) violence' is well explained by Beumers and Lipovetsky in their monography *Performing violence* (2009), devoted to the *novaja drama* movement. It is defined as "'causeless violence'[…] a non-ideological "war of everyone against everyone" (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, p. 59) which, in absence of institutions that can protect and represent the individual, takes over as the only form of communication. Communicative violence is able to move everyday relationships into a dynamics of domination and submission, within which the Other – that is, the object of violence – is arbitrarily made an enemy. Since anyone can therefore assume an antagonistic role, it follows that communal violence is a destructive and self-destructive form of communication (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, p. 59). Although the results of such communication are often detrimental to the survival of society, it cannot be said that the communicative act itself results in a total failure: standing at the level of 'biological aggression' (perpetrator-victim relationship), communicative violence implies the forced acceptance of information by the recipient.[4] Although it does not manifest exclusively on a corporeal level, since it is comparable to an internalized disposition, an automatism, or, to borrow a term from Bourdieu, to a *habitus*, communicative violence often appears through physicality. Habitus can be defined as:

> A system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems, and thanks to the unceasing corrections of the results obtained. (Bourdieu 2013, pp. 82–83)

4 Luhmann argues that communication can only be called successful when the receiver accepts the information as a premise their behaviour. This is inevitable the use of force is involved (Luhmann 1990, p. 88).

The acquired dispositions are thus subjective, but not necessarily individual, since they derive from belonging to a certain group, social class and/or exposure to a certain environment. It goes without saying, that a habitus also includes a practice of 'cultivating' the body, which is influenced and reinforced by relationships and interactions with other subjects and objects. This implies that the body will react to certain situations according to previously acquired schemes.

It is indeed through corporeality and, in particular, through physical violence that communicative violence emerges in Balyko's work. The play *Gorjačaja točka* – which bears the subtitle 'Chronology of an Invisible War'[5] – well represents that state of 'indiscriminate antagonism' that Beumers and Lipovetsky define as typical of communal violence. A good example of this kind of violence can be observed in the following discourse pronounced by Marta, a lifelong teacher in a juvenile hall and the main character of the second story in *Gorjačaja točka*. The woman is recounting to Pavel, her masseur, how that day, in order to stop a ten-year-old boy from teasing the passengers on the bus, she threatened him 'spontaneously, instinctively' with the taser included in her work-equipment.

> Marta. I ask him quietly: do you want to go to juvie? He shakes his head negatively. You know, you'll never end up in juvie, because right now, on this bus, I will paralyze your hands with the taser and you'll never bother anyone again, understand? […] When I was about to get off the bus, the kid pulled my fur coat twice and whispered: goodbye, auntie. And only at that moment I suddenly and clearly saw his ever-drunk mother and her drunken roommates, and that tormented child who *recognizes and understands only the authority of power*. And so, once again, I reviewed with him *a well-known and long-familiar lesson*. (Balyko 2006, story 2, transl. mine)[6]

Firstly, it can be noticed that violence portrayed is senseless and unnecessary, since Marta's opponent is an unarmed ten-year-old boy. Secondly, as confirmed by Marta's words ("*a well-known and long-familiar lesson*"), communal violence clearly appears as a habitus, a long-acquired corporeal scheme. Finally, communication becomes possible only when Marta – who is a teacher, so not accustomed to physical violence – adopts a *habitus* familiar to the boy. It is also interesting to notice that, in conformity with the functioning of the *habitus* – which is continually subjected to modifications and processes of adaptation in relation to new contextual conditions –, Marta's reaction is not

5 "Хронология невидимой войны".

6 "Марта. Я тихонько спрашиваю: ты хочешь в детскую комнату милиции? Отрицательно мотает головой. Знаешь, ты никогда не окажешься в детской комнате милиции, потому что сейчас в этом автобусе я парализую тебе руки электрошокером, и ты больше никогда не будешь никого доставать, ты мне веришь? […] Когда я выходила, пацан дважды дернул меня за шубу и прошептал: до свидания, тетенька. И только в этот момент я вдруг отчетливо увидела его вечно пьяную мать и ее бухих сожителей, и этого затравленного ребенка, признающего и понимающего только авторитет силы. И вот я в очередной раз провела с ним этот хорошо заученный и давно знакомый урок".

premeditated, but it results from a spontaneous interaction with the situation. It is through a new bodily experience that the woman modifies her standard corporeal disposition. As proof of this, in a later paragraph Marta confesses to Pavel how only recently the body has acquired a new meaning for her:

> Marta. You know, nerves used to be just abstract words to me. Well, like, I'm nervous… There's something going on in my head. Incomprehensible. *And lately it's been a physical pain.* It pierces, something clicks at the spine, closes it, ties it into a knot and with a painful arrow it passes through the arms, legs, and head. (Balyko 2006, story 2, transl. mine)[7]

The rediscovery of the body thus passes through an act of physical violence, which allows Marta to reach new possibilities of the self and to self-assert.

In this regard, it is now possible to specify another fundamental characteristic or, rather, purpose of communicative violence: communicative violence often acts as a means of identity construction. It can be considered as an obvious response to that need for an individual and collective need of belonging which characterises the post-Soviet era (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, pp. 64–65). Unlike any other process of identity construction, in the case of communicative violence, the substantiation of the self is not limited to a confrontation with the Other, but it implies its destruction. In order to explain this, Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009, pp. 64–65) resort to the concept of *negativnaja identičnost'* (negative identity) formulated by the sociologist Lev Gudkov, who in several works has investigated the identity building processes in the post-Soviet space. Negative identity can be understood.

> as a self-constitution from the opposite, from another significant object or representation, but expressed through the denial of any qualities or values belonging to their bearer – who is conceived as alien, disgusting, frightening, threatening, a personification of everything that is unacceptable to members of a group or community, in short, as an antipode. (Gudkov 2004, p. 271)

Unlike the Soviet model, the enemy in the post-Soviet landscape cannot be 'created' in a unified manner through power and ideological structures. It follows that the creation of the antagonist becomes a private matter. Without other structures that can provide tools to identify and categorize the enemy, the most immediate method of self-assertion for the individual becomes, as seen before, an act of communicative violence (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, p. 65).

In Balyko, once again, this process is expressed through bodily annihilation, which often takes the form of self-destruction. Her characters, unable to achieve that

7 "Марта. Знаешь, раньше нервы были для меня просто абстрактными словами. Ну, типа, я нервничаю… Что-то такое в голове происходит. Непонятное. А последнее время – это физическая боль. Пронзает так, что-то щелкает у позвоночника, замыкает, завязывает на узелок и болезненной такой стрелой пробивает руки, ноги, голову".

model for living imposed by society or that they would like for themselves, instead of directing violence outwards, they use it towards their own person. The numerous suicides or cases of self-harm in Balyko's plays testify characters' desire for self-elimination in a paradoxical attempt to achieve another form of self. This is the case of Nina in *Gorjačaja točka*, who, after being diagnosed with HIV, fears she has lost not only any possibility of becoming a mother, but also a sort of spiritual essence, deeply linked to a sort of 'morality of the body'. The perception of incompleteness leads the girl to take her own life in an attempt to regain possession of that part of herself, now perceived as corrupted by an equally 'corrupted' body. Another clear example is Pavel, Marta's masseur, whose disfigured face and blindness is the result of his numerous suicide attempts, an extreme resolution to his sense of profound inadequacy.

Chomjakov, the protagonist of the sixth story of *Gorjačaja točka* (*Smert' Chomjaka / The Hamster's Death*)[8] is another character who decides to end his life. His suicide is anticipated by a long conversation about the state of contemporary theatre between Chomjakov himself, Pronin, an artistic director, and the critic Kopytin. The violent critiques levelled at Chomjakov's work and person, imbued with elements of homophobia and misogyny, culminate in the playwright's suicide: convinced of his own mediocrity, the man decides that killing himself is the only way to give prestige to his work:

> Chomjakov silently and seriously prints out the title pages of his plays with the surname Karenin, replaces them on all manuscripts, puts them in an even pile on the floor, removes the chandelier from the ceiling hook, makes a loop, hangs himself… (Balyko 2006, story 6, transl. mine)[9]

The character's desire to define a new identity for himself, one that would set him apart from the sense of insignificance instilled in him by his interlocutors, is underlined by the choice of a new famous surname (Karenin, Anna Karenina's husband) for his plays.

Although, as a consequence of *communicative violence*, conflict in Balyko's plays is always placed at a private and individual level, this does not mean that Balyko's work lacks social criticism. It is indeed through intimate conflict that the author points out social shortcomings. In order to achieve this aim, Balyko still relies on the body, which she explores through, sexuality and health, two life spheres which fall between intimate experience and the largest processes of social control established by biopolitics.

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8 The title of the story is a pun with the playwright's surname Chomjakov and the word *chomjak*, 'hamster' in Russian.

9 "Хомяков молча и деловито распечатывает титульные листы своих пьес с фамилией Каренин, заменяет их на всех рукописях, складывает ровной стопочкой на полу, снимает люстру с потолочного крюка, делает петлю, вешается…".

3 Violence, Biopower and Identity

The fifth story in *Gorjačaja točka*, *Demografičeskij krisis* (Demographic Crisis), consists exclusively of a long soliloquy. Ženja, a journalist, reflects on how in the past year her small universe has been shattered by a series of unexpected deaths among her acquaintances (hence the title). The long list, which also includes her TV producer, Ženja's personal stylist and some of her neighbours, ends with a laconic reflection on the transience of life:

> In short, it's not life, but a continuous demographic crisis. Once your mother-in-law dies, once your husband is run over by a tram, once the cat has dysentery with a fatal outcome… These are the consequences of Chernobyl. (Balyko 2006, story 5, transl. mine)[10]

The sentence hides a sociopolitical meaning, since it refers to the broader demographic problem of Belarus, whose population has drastically declined since the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent deep economic recession. The Černobyl' disaster undoubtedly contributed to the decline of the population, although its role was amplified by political propaganda that made national security strictly dependent on demographic one. In this way government could easily justify a "highly technical and centralised perspective of public health and demographic problems, where people's lives, rather than being appreciated for themselves, are primarily seen as a resource for the authorities" (Kasperski 2013, p. 129). The same sense of dehumanisation is conveyed by Ženja's aseptic list, where people are remembered almost exclusively through their medical diagnoses: heart attack, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The choice of using medical discourse as a means to talk critically about corporeality and to address broader social phenomena is not casual, since sexuality and health are strongly subjected to the mechanism of biopolitics.

According to Foucault, biopolitics should be understood as the specific political practices through which biopower is exerted. This particular form of power can be defined as "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species" (Foucault 2009, p. 1). The French philosopher theorised that the transition to the modern age has also determined the transformation of power. It has changed from a deadly power – symbolised by the sovereign, who exercised full rights of life and death over his subjects – into a "calculated management of life" (Foucault 1978, p. 140). Indeed, biopower is exerted through positive mechanisms of population control, aimed at preserving and prolonging life and known as biopolitics. They include all techniques and instruments of classification

10 "Короче не жизнь, а сплошной демографический кризис. То свекровь скончается, то мужа трамвай переедет, то у кота дизентерия с летальным исходом… Вот они последствия Чернобыля".

and measurement useful to the State. In this sense, statistics, demographics, political economy and, of course, medicine developed both as social sciences and tools of governance. Medical-scientific discourse, in particular, produces positive knowledge by creating ontological categories. Medicine, putting itself at the service of the State, establishes – like the rest of the strategies of biopolitics – the difference between normal and abnormal, between harmless and dangerous (Foucault 2003). Sexuality is undoubtedly one of the areas of human life most subject to medicalisation and, consequently, also to pathologisation. The proliferation of discourses on sexuality, on which medical science exerts a strong influence, and not the repression of information, is what really, according to the Foucault, asserts control over the sexual sphere (Foucault 1978, p. 49).

However, in order for such control to be effective, its exercise cannot be limited to state institutions (schools, hospitals, police etc.) but must also rely on self-surveillance mechanisms that ensure the automatic functioning of power.[11] It follows that the body is disciplined through a series of assimilated practices and norms. Biopolitics establishes indeed a new kind of collective body (body-politic), which represent the reference standard for the individual one. The result is a never-ending self-surveillance mechanism, applied by individuals on their own body (Foucault 1978, pp. 145–147).

In Balyko, it manifests itself through the deep inner conflict that many characters experience due to their placing themselves outside of normativity in terms of both social status, gender, and sexuality. Returning to Pavel's case, his story can be considered the tragic consequence of not conforming to a precise model of masculinity, as can be understood from the following confession to Marta:

> Marta. Why did you do that?
> Pavel. What?
> Marta. Well…you know. A youthful mistake?
> Pavel. A stupid mistake, you mean. Well no… Just I have never had a libido. Not that idiotic desire to fuck… I somehow had it. But that universal libido, like planting a tree, building a house, making a child… *I didn't seek fame, success, money. I didn't want to prove anything to anyone. I was not a conqueror*.
> Marta. So you weren't a man in the philosophical conventional sense?
> Pavel. You could say that. *I wasn't a successful male*.[12] (Balyko 2006, transl. mine)

11 The best-known metaphor to illustrate the widespread mechanism of surveillance – and self-surveillance – is that of the Benthic panopticon explained in *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

12 "Марта. Зачем ты это сделал?
Павел. Что?
Марта. Ну… ты же понимаешь… По молодости?
Павел. По глупости… ты хотела сказать. Да нет… Просто во мне никогда не было либидо. Не этого тупого стремления трахаться… Оно-то как раз и было. А глобального либидо – посадить дерево, построить дом, родить ребенка… Я не стремился к славе, успеху, деньгам. Я никому ничего не хотел доказывать. Я не был завоевателем.

Pavel's condition reflects the general crisis of masculinity, which effected many post-Soviet countries (such as Belarus and Russia) especially in the 90s–2000's.[13] With the introduction of the new market, as Gapova (2002, p. 658) notices, a new model of manhood starts emerging, namely the so-called 'new rich'. The term is used to refer to all those entrepreneurs, bankers, real estate agents, mostly (if not exclusively) men, who more or less legally, accumulated enormous wealth in the early post-Soviet period. The new masculine prototype, as Gapova further states, is typically associated to possession and consumption (in other words, 'conquest', as signalled in the text) of resources:

> Possession and consumption of women, as a class marker, has become an important way to reclaim masculinity as part of a Western-type, middle-class formation, defined through possession of resources, opportunities of income, and mode of consumption. (Gapova 2002, p. 658)

Pavel, who before becoming a masseur was a simple provincial teacher, experiences his failure to conform to expected norms with profound anguish. The desperate "search for a meaning of life"[14] (Balyko 2006, story 2, transl. mine) ends with a series of suicide attempts that progressively disfigure his body, to the point of leaving him faceless. Since face is the most important physical site of our individual identity (Finol 2012, p. 12), Pavel's tragic gesture can be considered another act of communicative violence.

Nina, the protagonist of *Belyj angel s čërnymi kryl'jami*, is another character struggling with self-identity because of internalised norms on femininity. Although she never desired a traditional life, after being raped and being diagnosed with HIV, she starts longing for maternity. Nina even doubts her decision of aborting years before. Her condition clashes with the idea of motherhood as the primary purpose of women, which is largely spread in Belarus. Referring to Belarusian healthcare, Ščurko (2012, pp. 68–90) talks about 'compulsory motherhood'. Especially since the 2000s, motherhood has been the object of a strong political instrumentalization. The long demographic crisis of the country caused the decision of becoming mother to be no longer a personal choice, but a social duty.

Марта. То есть ты не был мужчиной в философском общепринятом смысле?
Павел. Можно и так сказать. Я не был успешным самцом".

13 The crisis of masculinity actually, as Gapova notes (2003, p. 653), is a phenomenon that dates back well before the collapse of the USSR. Towards the end of the 1960s – when improving the standard of living of citizens became one of the new goals of the PCUS – men discovered themselves not up to the masculine model imposed and propagandized for years by the government. Male population was considered weak in body and soul, particularly prone to self-destructive practices (such as alcohol abuse and smoking), irresponsible, unable to support their families and strictly dependent on their wives and mothers for their own survival.

14 "Поиски смысла жизни".

> The woman appears as the executor of the state order. Such a position blurs the boundaries of private space. A system of "institutionalization" of motherhood is being formed, within which various state institutions (state bodies for the protection of motherhood and childhood, medical and educational institutions, etc.) are called upon to "take care" of a woman's reproductive body, and a system of state benefits for women is being developed.[15] (Ščurko 2012, p. 75, transl. mine)

Having children means procreating new citizens and, consequently, the possibility to ensure the security of the nation (Shchurko 2017). According to this idea, on one hand women are responsible for the survival of Belarus. On the other, in order to guarantee a correct performance of female reproductive duty, a particular focus is placed on women's health. With the support of medical science, normative motherhood is thus established (Shchurko 2017). As a consequence, normal bodies and abnormal bodies emerge: an ideal maternity takes place within certain age limits (thirty-five years) and requires a perfectly healthy body, a condition that therefore excludes women who struggle with alcoholism, drug addiction and sexually transmitted diseases (Ščurko 2012, pp. 84–85). Moreover, typical of the Belarusian context is the use of medical discourse to promote or condemn behaviour and habits that actually fall under a moral label. Creating a healthy offspring often entails, therefore, the stigmatisation of a promiscuous sex life and non-heteronormative sexuality, as well as the problematisation of practices such as abortion (Sasunkevič 2009). In Belarusian propaganda, national salvation becomes thus also dependent on the maintenance of a 'traditional family' model with well-defined gender roles.

Because of the sexual violence Nina was subjected to and her suspected illness, she is placed outside the established norms. The protagonist's inner conflict indeed arises when she realises the impossibility of returning to a 'traditional' life, despite never desiring one before. For Nina, the diagnosis is tantamount to the end of her existence, as evidenced by the recurrent references to death in the following dialogue with her family:

> Nina suddenly. Should I have my life insured? For a hundred thousand dollars. […] I will die and at least I'll do something good for you.
> Olga. You're silly. You should get married.
> Nina. Oh, I should, ma. But no one will ever want me.[16] (Balyko 2005, scene 4, transl. mine)

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15 "Женщина предстает как исполнитель государственного заказа. Подобная позиция размывает границы частного пространства. Формируется система «институционализации» материнства, в рамках которой различные государственные институции (государственные органы охраны материнства и детства, медицинские и образовательные учреждения и др.), призваны осуществлять «заботу» о репродуктивном теле женщины, развивается система государственных льгот для женщин".

16 "Нина неожиданно. Может, мне застраховать свою жизнь? На сто тысяч долларов. […] Умру и хоть что-то хорошее для вас сделаю.

Before attempting suicide, Nina kills her pet hamster, in a desperate attempt to regain a sense of self:

> Nina. The next morning, I wept inconsolably over his little body, wrapped it in a handkerchief and carried it to that Jewish healer, we made so much fun of.
> Paška. The one who lives in a breeding and treats hamsters for ten thousand rubles?
> Nina. Yeah. She treats them for ten, while at a shop they cost five.
> Paška. And then?
> Nina. I took the dead hamster to her, paid a tenner, left it for a day, and the next morning she returned me a cheerful and healthy animal.
> Paška. She took him from the shop! For a fiver!
> Nina. Right. […] After all, I did not want a new hamster, but the old to revive.
> Paška. Are you a child?
> Nina. No, of course, it's just that sometimes you want a miracle so much. I understood everything, but I wanted to deceive myself.[17] (Balyko 2005, scene 20, transl. mine)

This act of senseless violence (or communicative violence) possesses a performative value. Sacrifice, which always contains in itself a potential resurrection (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, p. 298), hence of new life, is conducted on the animal with a purifying value for its offeror. For Nina, rape and illness represent the symbolic death of a part of herself and, consequently, the need for rebirth.

4 Conclusions

At this point, it would be legitimate to ask whether Balyko offers a solution to this destructive and self-destructive violence. Despite the tragic endings of many of her

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Ольга. Вот дура-то. Тебе замуж надо.

Нина. Ой, надо, ма. Только никто не берет".

17 "Нина. Наутро я безутешно рыдала над его тельцем, завернула в платок и понесла к той еврейской целительнице, над которой мы так потешались.

Пашка. Той, что живет у питомника и лечит хомяков за десять тыщ рублей?

Нина. Ага. Она лечит за десять, а в питомнике один хомяк пять стоит.

Пашка. И что?

Нина. Я отнесла ей мертвого хомяка, заплатила десятку, оставила на сутки, и на следующий день она вернула мне бодрого и здорового зверька.

Пашка. Она же его в питомнике взяла! За пятерку!

Нина. Правильно. […] Ведь я хотела ни нового, а старого оживить.

Пашка. Ребенок что ли?

Нина. Нет, конечно, просто иногда так хочется чуда. Я все понимала, но хотела себя обмануть.

Пашка. А бога-то не обманешь.

Нина. Вот за это он и наказывает меня сейчас".

plays, a sense of hope seems to be hinted through a return to the values of empathy and compassion. Emblematic then is the role played by certain medical figures in the works analysed who break the dictates imposed by protocol and the more generic 'norm' in favour of a less professional contact with their patients. An example is Dr. Samojlov, the only one who, despite the results of Nina's first test, is instinctively convinced of the girl's erroneous diagnosis, and who shows her support and understanding, going beyond his own professional duties. Not surprisingly, Samojlov places himself outside the norms, being a homosexual. Another case is the nurse who makes love to Pavel while he is in the hospital with his face severely deformed because of his suicide attempt. In the episode in question, sexuality and the body thus return to being means of human connection and not dangerous devices, that must be controlled and regulated by biopolitics. In a world portrayed as violent and selfish, Balyko thus allows readers to glimpse the possibility to build a sense of self through a positive and helping relationship with the Other. In this regard, it must be quoted the author's epilogue in *Gorjačaja točka*:

> This is not a fairy tale or a fable, in which there must be a moral. It's just a story. The story of everybody's war with everybody and against everybody. A war in which there are no winners, because everyone is defeated… The only thing I want to say at the end is: go to your loved ones now and hug them… for the past, for the present, for the sake of the future.[18] (Balyko 2006, transl. mine)

The author, for her part, stays committed to this mission of solidarity, even from abroad. After writing *S dnëm roždenija, ljubimaja*! (*Happy Birthday, darling!*, 2022), a play about the Russo-Ukrainian war, in Prague, she was shortlisted for the 'Dramaturgija protiv bojny' (Dramaturgy against war) contest with *Imeju naglost' Byt'* (*I have the audacity to be*, 2023), a work devoted to Belarusian political prisoners. This competition, organized by the renowned independent playwriting festival Ljubimovka, was able not only to bring together authors from different countries for a shared cause, but also to draw international attention to contemporary Russian-language drama. Indeed, thanks to 'Ėcho Ljubimovki' – the festival's out-of-competition reading programme – Balyko's latest play, was performed in Munich and, in its Polish translation, in Warsaw alongside other works addressing pressing political issues (Ermolova 2024). Given Belarus's current challenging socio-political climate, it seems likely that the immediate future of Balyko's plays (and of *novaja drama* as a whole) will unfold on the international stage,

18 "Это не сказка и не басня, в которой обязательно должна быть мораль. Это просто одна история. История невидимой войны всех со всеми и против всех. Войны, в которой нет победителей, потому что все побежденные… Единственное, что мне хочется сказать в конце: просто подойдите сейчас к близкому человеку и обнимите его… за прошлое, в настоящем, ради будущего".

where, fortunately, a resilient community of Belarusian artists has steadily taken shape in recent years.[19]

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