

**"IF THERE'S WAR BETWEEN THE SEXES THEN THERE'LL BE NO PEOPLE LEFT" -
(POST)COLONIAL MEN AND MASCULINITY IN SERHIY ZHADAN'S FICTION**

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The study on men and masculinities is a marginal subject of academic interest in Ukraine. The lack of publications is abysmal, especially when we think about the identity problems of Ukrainians caused by the complicated history and political situation before and after regaining independence in 1991. Formally no longer allowed to be Soviets or subjugated Little Russians, millions of people were supposed to create a totally new post-Soviet national identity that would unite them and help them create an independent Ukrainian state. The current situation in Ukraine shows how difficult this process is and proves that it has not been fully successful, for both Ukrainian men and women.

The dominant model of Ukrainian masculinity is a result of several factors: the Soviet ideology (deeply rooted in the representatives of the older generations), Ukrainian history (marked by the stigma of colonialism, communism and totalitarianism), the collapse of communism and the political and cultural transformations, as well as the ensuing, and still ongoing, process of forming Ukrainian national identity.

The complex relationship between the First World and the Second World caused by the Cold War resulted in the emergence of the teenage bad boy image in American popular culture (Medovoi 1). This figure of a young *positive rebel*, whose attributes are awareness and a strong sense of identity, was introduced by Robert M. Lindner in the 1944 book *Rebel Without A Cause: The Hypnoanalysis Of A Criminal Psychopath*, where he contrasted it with the Soviet “Mass Man ideal”, which he called “antibiological and unprogressive in the widest sense” (Lindner 222). This concept of a teenage rebel became widespread in popular culture after the release of *Rebel Without A Cause*, the 1955 movie starring James Dean, and has appeared in American literature and cinema ever since.

Although the Soviet censorship tried to antagonize the products of Anglo-American popular culture, some Anglo-American models of masculinity appeared in the mass media and literature even before the collapse of communism. As a result of perestroika many previously banned films and books were finally released. Interestingly, teenage rebels like Jim Stark and Holden Caulfield, who were nothing like *homo sovieticus*, became models of new rebellious identities for the next generation of post-Soviet Eastern-Europeans. The fiction of Serhiy Zhadan, one of Ukraine’s most popular contemporary writers, provides numerous examples of boys rebelling against the generation of their Soviet fathers. While it is

impossible to treat Zhadan's fiction as a full compendium of knowledge on the state of Ukrainian manhood, it contains images of masculinity and relationships between men which are accurate literary representations of the changes taking place in Ukraine in the last thirty years.

In *Depeche Mode*, like in all of his subsequent novels, Zhadan goes back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. His male protagonists grow up in a period of transformation from communism/totalitarianism to democracy, in the age of spreading globalisation and growing consumerism. The plots and titles of his books and short stories often refer to Anglo-American popular culture, as is the case in *Big Mac*, *Anarchy in the UKR*, *Red Elvis*, *Ten Way of Killing John Lennon* and *Depeche Mode*, which in turn manifests in frequent references to such images of pop-cultural rebels as Elvis Presley, Iggy Pop, Mick Jagger and Chuck Berry. However, it is not only because of Zhadan's pop-cultural inspirations that his protagonists emerge as post-Soviet *positive rebels*.

The plot of *Depeche Mode*, one of the first post-Soviet Ukrainian coming-of-age novels, is located in the early 1990s. The young protagonists, who grow up in Kharkiv, face unexpected social changes caused by Ukraine's sudden regaining of independence. Even though the mass media are still full of remnants of the Soviet propaganda, they promote new globalizing models of behaviour. Young Ukrainians try to fit into the new reality by revolting against the adults and the state institutions: they overuse alcohol, drugs and tobacco; they steal and illegally sell Russian vodka; they also get into fights with hooligans and the police. However, the boys bond and form a strong sense of collective identity. Their behaviour is typical of resentment, because it is not associated with any desire for a real change in the system of values. Moreover, the protagonists, often unconsciously, duplicate the behaviour of their parents. Tamara Hundorova, a well-known Ukrainian scholar, argues that this resentment is related to the "absence of the father figure". Furthermore, Hundorova refers to Zhadan's writing as "talking about nothing" (Hundorova). Even though the absence of the father figure pointed by Hundorova turns out to be crucial in the protagonists' rebellion, the gradual evolution of the anarchic resentment into a mature rebellion in Zhadan's subsequent fiction shows a certain diagnosis about his generation: it is affected not only by the trauma of totalitarianism but also by the trauma of globalization. Thus, this growth seems to confirm that resentment is a ground on which a real rebellion that completely changes the system of values can grow (Fatyga 168).

Nowadays young people not only in the First World, but also in the Second World remain much longer under the influence of adults and state institutions than even 30 years ago. Men, who constitute the majority of characters in Zhadan's novels, are trapped in a period

resembling *guyland*, described by Michael Kimmel as the time between the age of 16 and 25-9, a period of suspension between boyhood and manhood; the stage when boys spend time together proving their manhood by ignoring the obligations of adulthood and doing *manly things* like drinking alcohol, watching porn movies and sport games, telling homophobic jokes, taking part in vandalism (Kimmel 4). According to Kimmel, this is a common stage in a man's life but a prolonged stay in *guyland* involves a risk of suffering from the Peter Pan syndrome, which transforms a young man into a *puer aeternus* and prevents him from reaching full maturity (Kiley 20). Even though this American concept was not coined with young post-Soviet men in mind, the presence of a Ukrainian version of *guyland* in Zhadan's post-Soviet fiction is evident, since his protagonists try to escape from the responsibilities of adulthood. Yet, in this post-totalitarian situation *guyland* turns out to be a symbolic state of mind that helps young men to rebel against subjugation by the post-Soviet adults.

The protagonists of *Depeche Mode* try to fit into the post-totalitarian world, but they tend to see that dubious state institutions, as well as deceitful mass media promoting a distorted image of the world, are still creating the reality they are surrounded by. The novel is narrated by the protagonist named Zhadan, who goes back to the time when he got drunk for the first time at the age of fourteen, and then moves to 1993, when he was nineteen. Finding out from Robert, a strange man with a very non-Ukrainian name, about the suicide of his friend Sasha Carburetor's stepfather, Zhadan decides to find the boy with the help of his mates and tell him about this tragedy. However, the boys know that Sasha has had a complicated relationship with his one-legged stepfather. One of them immediately notes that, despite everything, "father and stepfather – are two completely different things", which emphasizes the usurper function of the latter (Zhadan 82).

As rightly pointed by Ania Loomba, the colonial world often operates like a family where the nation of the colonized country is like a mother and "the leaders and heroes assume the role of fathers" (Loomba 225). Although in the Ukrainian culture Taras Shevchenko is traditionally recognized as the symbolic father of the nation, the authorities of the Soviet Union put Stalin in the totalitarian usurper role of not only the father of the Soviet people, and thus Ukrainians, but also their God (Heller 47-8). The motif of the stepfather's suicide in *Depeche Mode* can refer to the almost simultaneous death of the Soviet empire and to throwing off the pedestal the symbols of Soviet propaganda. Looking for Sasha turns into an attempt to deal with the Soviet legacy in the progressively globalized world. The other boys who decide to look for Sasha include Zhadan's best friend Vasya the Communist (who is fascinated by communism and its *real fathers*: Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky), and a hooligan nicknamed Sobaka Pavlov. Still, Zhadan is the only one of the three boys to find

Sasha, who turns out to be staying at a very stereotypically masculine Young Pioneer camp. The main protagonist decides not to inform his friend about the death of his stepfather. When Sasha says that he renounced both his stepfather and his mother, and for him “they do not exist”, Zhadan understands the usurper role of the man in Sasha’s life and thinks that “he had so much shit in his life that this whole bullshit with his one-legged stepfather and his uncle Robert is not needed” (Zhadan 14-15, 239-41). When Zhadan finally gets to the pioneer camp, the suicide of Sasha’s stepfather turns out to be not a tragedy but ‘bullshit’ because the boy has already symbolically killed his stepfather and mother.

I

The need to achieve a socially constructed hegemonic masculinity and continuously proving it is rooted in the culture of colonialism and patriarchy (Connell 452-478). In *Depeche Mode* it collides with the fear of being suspected of homosexuality. The collapse of the USSR led to the re-emergence of themes previously eliminated in the Soviet mass media, such as gender and sexuality. Homophobic discourse in Zhadan’s fiction seems to represent a defensive response to the feminization of the colonized lands and the conquered men (Loomba 165). The protagonists of the novel show homophobia, a fear of being accused of homosexuality (Zhadan 50). Thus, they repeatedly accuse other men of their alleged homosexuality, referring to them as “faggots” and “queers”. Despite the sarcastic statement that “homosexuality is not among our interests”, which appears in the novel, as well as similar conclusions in Zhadan’s other works, his prose abounds numerous non-heteronormative themes and characters (Zhadan 50).

The fear of being accused of homosexuality forces the protagonists to limit interactions with their neighbour nick-named Cocoa, who desperately wants to belong to their clique:

Cocoa is fat and we don't like him but he clings to us [...] in his suit he looks terrible, but he likes it, I have no idea who sells these suits, but Cocoa somehow managed to find one, he also thinks it's chic, he is the only one I know who's into stuff like that, Cocoa is probably the only one of my friends who visits a hair salon, and uses some queer gel, he even shaves from time to time. (Zhadan 29-30, 47)

When it turns out that Cocoa is the only person who knows where Sasha is, the protagonists decide to find their missing friend on their own rather than having to deal with him. Still, they fail to find Sasha without Cacao, whom they have to meet in the apartment of his older lover, a pro-European journalist named Gosha, referred to as the “faggot number one”, who turns out to be a “fat bald guy in a blue silk robe”. Zhadan shows disgust for the man and calls his apartment “queer” (Zhadan 155-8).

The boys demonstrate a different attitude towards their stereotypically masculine friend Chapai, with whom they drink vodka and smoke marijuana. When Chapai says he has gonorrhoea, they automatically ask if he is gay: “Who did it to you? – I ask. – Sorry, I mean who did you do? – Who? – Chapai doesn’t get it– Well – I say – who you got it from? - Oh – says Chapai – Nobody. It’s an everyday clap” (Zhadan 99). Even though they do not believe their older friend when he denies the accusation, they keep on drinking with him: “Sure – I say. – You, Marxists, are just like angels: you don’t fuck and you don’t drink”. The protagonists do not negate Chapai’s sexual orientation because he represents the Soviet lack of sexuality. Moreover, he does not fit into the boys’ stereotypical image of homosexuality. Gays (or rather individuals accused of homosexuality) in *Depeche Mode* are either effeminate foreigners (like Wakha – a rich man who sells vodka and American candies), or Ukrainians fascinated with the foreign culture of consumerism like Cocoa, who is infatuated with Reverend Johnson-and-Johnson and a boy nick-named Little Chuck Berry) and Vasya’s schoolmate, who masturbates while looking at a poster of Dave Gahan. Interestingly, the boys also refer to the majority of older men associated with the post-Soviet state institutions such as the police, the army and the railroad as “faggots”. Using this word in this context renounces the generation of their fathers and shows them no respect. Accusing older men of homosexuality is supposed to prove the boys’ own manhood and show their superiority over the subjugated and inferior men (Bourdieu 32).

II

Chapai, who lives in a closed factory, suggests to the teenagers that they should steal a copper bust of Molotov, who does not symbolize a father figure, as argued by Tamara Hundorova, but rather the Soviet power and yet another “national stepfather”. It is worth noting that as the “fathers of the nation”, Stalin and Molotov went down in Ukrainian history as being jointly responsible for Holodomor, an act of genocide of 1932-3, which caused deaths of about 4-6 million people.

While visiting Chapai, the boys are talking about communism and the future of their country. Chapai posits a theory of “permanent fuck-it-all-ism”, which shows that he is disappointed with the post-Soviet reality and has no clear vision of the future. Older than the protagonists and raised in the Soviet times, Chapai calls the present-day reality “fucked up”. Boys do not now how to change this “fuck-it-all-ism”, but what distinguishes them from Chapai is their faith in the very possibility of change, as well as the anarchic sense that one has to “do something”. Therefore, when Chapai passes out drunk, without a second of thought they steal the bust of Molotov and quickly decide to sell it to a girl named Marusia.

The problem of disagreement between generations usually deepens during periods of social transformations, when the trauma leads to the emergence of a new generation that tears down the hierarchy of values of the older one (Pilkington 12). Moreover, as rightly pointed out by Leszek Kolakowski, in the post-totalitarian situation:

children would like to be adults, because they imagine that adults are completely free, and no one tells them anything. Adults, on the other hand, would rather be children because they think that children are provided with safety. So both are human feelings. We need freedom and security, but we cannot be fully provided with both (Kolakowski).

In the novel the issue of generational conflict appears quite frequently. All parents in *Depeche Mode* are absent in the lives of their children and the fathers do not provide them with any authority or models of masculinity. What is more, they cannot change it, because they grew up in a totalitarian reality, where everyone had to be like “brothers and sisters” raised by only one “father of the nation”, who held the absolute power (Loomba 225). The majority of these men work in state institutions despised by their sons. Boys rebel against them, believing that establishments subjugate and limit individual freedom. The novel confronts the patriarchal myth of the father as the head of the family. As rightly pointed out by Agnieszka Matusiak, these men were destroyed by the enslaving system and the totalitarian trauma that they have not overcome, which consequently prevents them from building healthy relationships with their children, especially sons (Matusiak 254-267).

Even though Zhadan says he has a “normal family, normal parents”, they do not appear in the novel. Just like the other boys, he wishes to have a father figure that would represent law, order and authority—values that do not exist in the chaotic post-Soviet reality. Despite saying that he has a normal family, the protagonist knows “fatherly attention” only from the globalized TV. Zhadan thus expresses this desire after visiting Gosha:

[...] so why can't somebody adopt me? why can't this fag be my father? I would be the son of a faggy regiment, I am 19, I am now self-sufficient, I do not need constant attention, nobody needs to change my diapers and feed me with oatmeal – yes, some minimal food, hot water, toilet paper, porn videos, chicks in the kitchen, weed on the balcony, but it's not even the most important, the main thing is the fatherly attention, regular and continuous fatherly attention, the real fatherly attention, as on TV (Zhadan 167).

Soviet fathers in *Depeche Mode* appear to be men “castrated” by totalitarianism (Zabuzhko 171). They struggle with building healthy relationships with their children as Soviet propaganda has taught them that Stalin should be the only father of Soviet men. Marusia's

father, who is a rich and influential ‘real general with a supply of cannon fodder in the barracks’, is a good example as he tries to use his power and money to fulfil the responsibilities of a father by buying his teenage daughter an apartment (Zhadan 137). When she becomes pregnant at the age of 15, he encourages her to have an abortion and buys her an expensive car.

The girl rebels against her father, who represents patriarchy and totalitarianism. This rebellion is not open because the fear of losing him makes Marusia rebel only on the most intimate level of sexuality. She breaks with the patriarchal image of a good and asexual girl by sleeping with various men, including many characters in the novel, even the homosexual Gosha. Zhadan mentions that “she didn’t remember some of us, but she’s slept with all of us, for her sex was something much more stimulating” (Zhadan 138). Sex seems to be the girl’s only way to overcome her own trauma. She tries to find intimacy in her lovers because she has not found it in her parents. When the boys suggest buying the copper bust of Molotov, without hesitation Marusia says: “I like it – he’s similar to my father” (Zhadan 156). In this bust she finds her symbolical stepfather, who, like her own father, is passive and cold.

At the end of the novel Zhadan recalls Marusia hugging Molotov and reflects on her relationship with her father:

Then I think of Marusia, how is she, I think that she sits on the balcony hugging her Molotov, which is somehow similar to her father – the General. Why she can’t just sit there with her dad? What does it bother her? I don’t know, maybe when you have an apartment with a view of the city council and a garage with a car, a crashed Lada, but who cares it’s still a Lada, you fail to understand, for you it’s much more natural to embrace a copper bust of Molotov, a member of the Central Committee, than your own father, how tacky (Zhadan 240).

The boy does not see that Marusia’s father is just like the copper bust of Molotov. They are both incapable of showing their feelings. Zhadan seems to envy Marusia her expensive belongings, but he does not understand that the girl is a lost victim of not only the post-totalitarian trauma, but also of the trauma of globalization. Trying to find intimacy in various sexual partners, she treats sexuality as a product and loses herself in promiscuity, which does not help as it only deepens the trauma.

A generational conflict is also reflected in the relationship of a police officer named Mykola Ivanovich and his drug addict son. The policeman works and fails to find time to truly bond with his rebellious teenager. He accuses the boy of using his belongings, which may indicate the boy’s need of attention. The man is passively present in the upbringing of his child and seems to be a typical representative of the police, a state institution symbolizing the

subjugating post-Soviet power. Repeatedly emphasizing that everything belongs to him – “MY stuff [...] MY cigarettes [...] MY keys” – the police officer uses symbolic violence caused by the fear of losing power (Zhadan 72). His son becomes addicted to drugs: he starts from sniffing his father’s glue and later ends up on resuscitation after trying to rob a chemist’s shop. Still, Ivanovich does not blame his son or himself for these events. For him, it is the fault of the system:

What a fucked up country! – Suddenly Mykola Ivanovich says. – The people are dying like flies. My son had to be resuscitated [...] at night three days ago he burgled to a chemist’s shop. He says that he wanted to get some vitamins. Well, I already know, what kind of vitamins, you won’t fool me, with MY experience. [...] There he took some pills, ravened the whole package, and when he was on his way out – he fainted and so he got stuck in the skylight. [...] He was just dehydrated you know? He sat there for nearly two days only on pills (Zhadan 201-3).

Moreover, he rejects the idea of his son’s progressive addiction by downplaying the incident. Simultaneously, he seems to find a symbolic son in Zhadan. Instead of dealing with his own child, he helps the protagonist and shows him compassion:

You have tonsils [...] they should be cut out. [...] Oh, my son, my son... What am I gonna do with you? [...] In this state you will be caught again by the police within five minutes . You will be caught by the same fags that brought you here. They are young, for them it’s like knocking down the enemy’s aircraft [...] Yes, you’d better just sit here [...] Here you are the safest (Zhadan 73).

Mykola Ivanovich is not a good role model, but he does not resemble his colleagues, who, as he says, instead of helping the citizens, repeatedly attack them because they treat violence as entertainment. This difference rather seems to be a consequence of his occupational burnout caused by the collapse of the Soviet ideals than a genuine concern for the residents.

The protagonists know that state institutions such as the police, the army, and the health care system are like simulacra – they do not meet their basic functions and do not resemble those present in the Western and Anglo-American mass media. The policemen described in the novel use violence against the weak because it reinforces their sense of control, power and masculinity. Thus, they show their own postcolonial weakness: being ‘castrated’ by the totalitarian Soviet power, they attack defenceless people. As Chapai says:

All law enforcement agencies operate solely in order to maintain their existence, they do not produce anything, and they do not provide any benefits. If tomorrow we closed the KGB, nothing would change (Zhadan 117).

Nevertheless, their existence is inevitable for it is based on symbolic violence, which constructs people's knowledge about the world.

Sobaka Pavlov has a particularly bad experience with both the police and the health care system. During a soccer game that he attends even though he does not support any particular team but only wants to get into a "masculine" fight, he loses consciousness, which "saves him" because officials "don't kill him on the spot, as required by the instructions of a sergeant's behaviour" (Zhadan 227). Sobaka is taken to hospital, from where he is removed by a nervous nurse and then thrown on a sidewalk. At the end of the novel, having witnessed a policeman's unjust attack on a disabled person at the train station, Sobaka decides to physically rebel against the system:

[...] he walks up to one of the cops, the older one [...] and hits his face so hard that his cap falls to the ground, and the sergeant himself falls, but then [...] another officer comes for him, the younger one, and then two or maybe even three motherfuckers in uniforms run from the train station (Zhadan 227).

The police officers "beat Sobaka directly on the platform" and "handcuff him to a bench, pour water from a bucket and start to fight again". The boy loses consciousness and after a few hours the sergeants allow him to return home with a broken collarbone and a concussion. The injuries are so severe that Sobaka is rushed to hospital. After a few days in a coma the teenager recovers and once again rebels by trying to commit suicide:

Sobaka walks into the office of the Head of the Department, where he finds aspirin, ascorbic acid and some other pills and takes it all right there. [...] The next morning Sobaka is found lying on the floor, with saliva dripping from his mouth (Zhadan 229).

Once again Sobaka is resuscitated only to end up in a mental facility where he 'quickly gains weight and becomes wild'. In this prison-like hospital he meets his older friend Chapai, who does not recognize him. Chapai's madness symbolically caused by the boys who took the bust of Molotov, the last symbol of the old system, seems as the only way he can rebel against the incomprehensible reality that is devoid of order. Sobaka, on the other hand, faces an ultimatum: the doctor tells him that he has to either go to jail or join the army. The boy chooses the latter and he involuntarily changes from a hooligan and a young rebel into a participant of an institution he had previously despised. Finally, Sobaka disappears. His spontaneous rebellion shows not only the difficulty of making a real change, but also the possibility of a rebel becoming an enslaved representative of one of the hated state institutions.

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Eastern Bloc between 1989 and 1991 forced the citizens of the newly formed countries into performing a fundamental work for their sovereignty: the rethinking of the totalitarian legacy. Nowadays, from the perspective of the last twenty years, it is obvious that the strategy of clearing the post-communist countries of totalitarianism remains unsatisfactory. This is largely a consequence of the overly liberal approach of the new governments, which from the outset, albeit in varying degrees, adopted the strategy of their predecessors to 'forgive and forget,' concluding that the construction of a democratic society requires making a number of difficult choices that often incur diverse costs.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent political transformations almost overnight changed the process of growing-up of Ukrainians born in the seventies. This generation faced a challenge of creating a new post-Soviet identity that would be different from the generation of their parents, who were brought up in totalitarianism imposing the *homo sovieticus* identity on everyone. Teenage protagonists of *Depeche Mode* rebel because they find it difficult to fit into the post-Soviet reality, with its clash of totalitarian models of behaviour and globalizing consumerism. Teenagers do not understand and respect their parents' generation; the latter are unable to provide role models to young people.

The adults in the novel, who were raised in a totalitarian world, consider youth rebellion abnormal. They do not believe in the possibility of real change of reality and continue to live according to the Soviet standards. Hence, they treat their children as disturbers of the social order. Boys in *Depeche Mode* are constantly trying to prove that they are not like their fathers, whom they treat as 'the others' just like the Soviet system. Yet, they do not quite understand promises of a real rebellion characterized by the rejection of the system of values existing in a given culture in order to replace them with new ones, as well as by the rejection of the institutionalized means and replacing them with new ones (Fatyga 168). Because they cannot enjoy freedom, they simply act according to the anarchist principle of 'better to do something than to do nothing'. That is why they get into fights, drink lots of illegally acquired alcohol, and smoke soft drugs. Hence, they find it difficult to transform resentment into a thoughtful rebellion, something that could tangibly make a change. Because of the lack of positive role models, teenagers in *Depeche Mode* are stuck in *guyland*, the period of transition that helps them avoid the repetition of the fate of their parents. In his subsequent novels, Zhadan shows that his writing is not 'talking about nothing' but constitutes a project presenting new Ukrainian values. Resentment serves as the foundation of a true rebellion, and when teenage protagonists leave *guyland*, they evolve into grown men slowly learning how to face the post-Soviet reality.

Ukrainians have tried to build a civil society and rebel against the post-totalitarian influences, most notably during the Orange Revolution, but until now they have faced economic, linguistic, social and cultural problems, as if confirming the words of George Lamming that “the colonial experience [...] is a continuing psychic experience that has to be dealt with long after the actual situation formally ends” (Loomba 195). With no doubt, Ukraine’s current situation proves that two decades after the collapse of communism, the social trauma caused by totalitarianism has not been overcome. Nonetheless, the Euromaidan revolution and the sudden appearance of a civil society prove that young Ukrainians have never been closer to democracy.

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