GENDER, NATION, AND MODERNITY: REIMAGINING MODERNISM IN UKRAINIAN LITERARY FEMINISM OF THE 1990s

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Abstract

My thesis reconstructs the development of feminist thought in Ukraine from 1985 to 1999. It tells the story of a group of female literary scholars—Solomiia Pavlychko, Tamara Hundorova, Vira Aheeva, Nila Zborovska, and Oksana Zabuzhko—who introduced feminism to the public sphere through analysis of Ukrainian modernist literature of *fin de siècle*. I argue that by exposing the patriarchal aspects of the Ukrainian literary canon, they tried to modernize the project of national self-determination. I also contrast their approach to the alternative feminist project presented by Irina Zherebkina and the Center for Gender Studies in Kharkiv. I try to understand how these scholars positioned themselves against the national project, and, in turn, how nationalist discourses influenced their feminist priorities and rhetoric and how it affected negotiations between feminism and nationalism in post-independence Ukraine more broadly.

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Introduction

"Feminism in Ukraine is inevitable as part of the democratization and modernization of society and its intellectual thought,"[1]—wrote Solomiia Pavlychko, an already established literary scholar, in the late 1990s. This was a direct intervention in the public debates about the national project that was structured around neo-traditionalism, patriarchal values, and a return to "authentic" pre-Soviet culture.

Almost thirty years later, Pavlychko's words are still relevant. The Russian war in Ukraine reactivated the same traditional representations of women that once were the object of her feminist critique: as symbols of the nation and bearers of cultural continuity. At the same time, women are more prominent than ever in the Ukrainian public sphere—as leaders, politicians, intellectuals, volunteers, and active participants of the war. The fact that feminist intellectuals already discussed the risks and possibilities of nationalizing women's agency brings the need to revisit their unfinished feminist project and its foundational conflicts—if not to resolve them, then to understand the political implications of their re-emergence.

This thesis returns to the moment in which Ukrainian literary scholars—Solomiia Pavlychko, Tamara Hundorova, Vira Ageyeva, Nila Zborovska, and Oksana Zabuzhko—tried to integrate feminist discourses into the project of national modernization and self-determination by re-reading early 20th-century modernist literature. I also contrast their project to the alternative feminist project in Ukraine which explicitly rejected the national framework. Presented by Irina Zherebkina and the Center for Gender Studies in Kharkiv, this project was more international in scope, post-Soviet in orientation, and poststructuralist in its philosophical approach.

[1] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Is Feminism in Ukraine Possible?" in *Feminism*, ed. by Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 176.

This thesis reconstructs how these feminist intellectuals articulated their place in the public sphere of the mid-1980s-1990s. I try to understand how they positioned themselves against the national project, and, in turn, how nationalist discourses influenced their feminist priorities and rhetoric and how it affected negotiations between feminism and nationalism in post-independence Ukraine more broadly. I also consider how feminist intellectuals approached the postcolonial condition of Ukraine and contributed to the discourse of decolonization.

The existing academic literature on feminist discourses in post-independence Ukraine is fragmented, as most studies that cover the Ukrainian history of the transition period overlook feminist projects. For instance, one of the most important books on post-independence intellectual debates about Ukrainian national identity, "Farewell to Empire: Ukrainian Debates on Identity"[2] by Olia Hnatiuk, does not engage with feminist discourses and their role in these debates. Tetiana Zhurzhenko analyzed the intersections of nationalism and feminism in post-independence Ukraine, but concentrated on feminism as a social movement.[3] Similarly, Vitaliy Chernetskiy also touched upon the ideological opposition between the two centers of feminist thought[4] but remained interested in broader geopolitical tensions. Oksana Kis,[5] Olena

[2] Ola Hnatiuk, *Proshchannia z imperieu: Ukrainski dyskusii pro identychnist* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2005).
[3] See: Tetyana Zhurzhenko, "Inscribing into the Discourse of the 'National': Ukrainian Feminism or Feminism in Ukraine?" *Pererekrestki* 2/4 (2008): 122–153; Tetyana Zhurzhenko, "Nebezpechni zviazky: Natsionalizm ta feminizm v Ukraini," in *Ukraina: Protsesy natsiietvorennia*, ed. Andreas Kappeler (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo K.I.S., 2011), 138-153.
[4] See: Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).
[5] See: Oksana Kis, "Feministski studii ta femaktyvizm u nezalezhnii Ukraini: kroky nazustrich sobi," *Naukovi zapysky UKU. Istoriia* 3 (2019): 207–231; Oksana Kis, "Feminizm v Ukraini: Kroky nazustrich sobi. Ch. 1. Akademichnyi feminizm," Gender in Detail; Oksana Kis, "Feminizm v Ukraini: Kroky nazustrich sobi. Ch. 2. Derzhava i zhinochi rukhy," Gender in Detail; Oksana Kis, "Feminizm v Ukraini: Kroky nazustrich sobi. Ch. 3. Zhinochyi aktyvizm," *Gender in Detail*.

Plahotnik,[6] Mariia Mayerchyk,[7] and Tamara Martseniuk[8] offered important overviews of the development of feminism and gender studies in Ukraine. However, their accounts concentrate on the post-2000s period, and in the few cases in which they discuss the 1990s, they are interested in the institutional aspects of establishing gender studies as an academic discipline, largely overlooking the contributions of female literary scholars.

Thus, much of the existing literature concentrates either on the literary and cultural critique produced by this group of female literary scholars or on their political interventions, but rarely establishes a connection between their feminist literary critique and Ukrainian nation-building. Instead, I would like to argue that by exposing the patriarchal aspects of the Ukrainian literary canon, they tried to modernize the national project. Analyzing their feminist contributions would add another layer to the discussion on Ukrainian national identity.

Chronologically, I focus on the period from 1985 to 1999. Anything outside this timeframe is included where there is a need to give context for the development of these feminist projects or to analyze their influence. I begin the story with perestroika, which created conditions for the liberalization of the Soviet public sphere: alternative political and cultural debates emerged, which also led to the interest in feminism in the younger generations of scholars. I end the story in 1999, a year of the sudden death of Solomiia Pavlychko, who was central to establishing feminist literary critique as a legitimate intellectual field. After her death, feminist literary discourse became increasingly fragmented and did not receive any institutional continuity.

[6] See: Olha Plakhotnik, "Neimovirni prykhody hendernoi teorii v Ukraini," Krytyka, no. 9–10 (September 2011): 17–22; Olha Plakhotnik, "Postsovietskyi feminizm: ukrainskyi variant," Hendernye issledovaniya, no. 17 (2008);

[7] See: Olha Plakhotnik and Mariia Maierchyk, "Ukrainian Feminism at the Crossroad of the National, Postcolonial, and (Post)Soviet: Theorizing the Maidan Events 2013–2014," Krytyka, November 2015; Olha Plakhotnik and Mariia Maierchyk, "Radikalni 'Femen' i novyi zhinochyi aktyvizm," Krytyka, no. 11 (December 2010): 7–10.

[8] See: Tamara Martseniuk, *Chomu ne varto boiatysia feminizmu* (Kyiv: Komora, 2018); Tamara Martseniuk, *Bezstrashni: Istoriia ukrainskoho feminizmu v interv'iu* (Kyiv: Creative Women Publishing, 2024).

My primary sources are academic texts, interviews, reviews, and essays—essentially, all the texts produced by these scholars in the specified period, mainly because I am not exclusively concentrated on their academic contributions but also their views on broader problems of Ukrainian culture and national identity. To this extent, I employ similar methodological approaches to those they used in their literary critique. In closely reading the primary texts, I concentrate on ways in which literary canon, cultural identity, nation, and gender were constructed and contested. I pay particular attention to the rhetorical strategies they developed and the ways they described tradition, modernity, patriarchy, decolonization, and other concepts. My secondary sources are theoretical works on nationalism, feminist theory, literary studies, and Ukrainian historiography, as they provide context for situating both feminist projects.

The thesis has three chapters. The first chapter introduces the theoretical approaches on the intersection of feminism and nationalism, and explores how they apply to Ukraine. It also describes the development of feminist discourses during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods and the academic discussion around these phenomena. The second chapter discusses the emergence and institutionalization of feminist thought in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Here, I present the intellectual trajectories of the female literary scholars central to this thesis. It also explores their attempt to re-read the traditional Ukrainian literary canon, particularly early female modernist writers Lesia Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska. Finally, the third chapter discusses the political implications of their literary critique, mainly their negotiations with nationalist discourse. It also contrasts their feminist project with the alternative stream developed by Irina Zherebkina and the Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies, which emphasized the incompatibility of feminism and nationalism and positioned itself in a larger post-Soviet intellectual context.

Chapter 1.

1.1. "A Woman's Place" in the National Project: The Intersections of Feminism and Nationalism

"The control of women becomes a logical project of nationalism."[9]

Almost every notion of the nation, whether based on citizenship or ethnicity, intersects with gender. Firstly, citizenship and political rights work differently for men and women.[10] Secondly, ethno-national symbols are not gender neutral[11]—in reinforcing a national norm, they implicitly or explicitly also construct a set of gendered norms that define the roles of men and women in the national framework.[12] Thus, specific conceptions of masculinity and femininity "shape female and male participation in nation-building."[13]

Representations of women as mothers are directly related to the construction of modern national ideologies and nation-states.[14] The classic national grand narrative, developed by and for male-dominated political ends, prioritizes women's roles within the domestic sphere as bearers of biological and cultural continuity, and represents men as rational "subjects of 'modernity'"[15] and protectors of the nation[16] which is metaphorically feminized.

In the symbolic construction of national boundaries, women's bodies are central sites of both protection and control—nationalist discourse appropriates them as symbols of territorial and

[9] Susan Gal та Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 26.
[10] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 3.
[11] George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and sexuality: Middle-class morality and sexual norms in modern Europe* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 17-18.
[12] Joanne P. Sharp, "Gendering Nationhood," у *BodySpace* (Routledge, 1996), 99.
[13] Vjollca Krasniqi, "Feminism and Nationalism," ProFemina, special issue (summer/autumn 2011): 54.
[14] Mirjana Ule and Tanja Rener, "Nationalism and Gender in Postsocialist Societies: Is Nationalism Female?," in *Ana's Land* (Routledge, 1997), 214.
[15] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 26.
[16] Nira Yuval-Davis, Floya Anthias, and Jo Campling, eds., Woman–Nation–State (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 85.

cultural integrity.[17] In considering women's autonomy secondary to the protection of national identity, nationalism mobilizes women's sexuality and makes it "the possession of the nation rather than the individual."[18] Thus, masculinity becomes synonymous with agency and femininity with passive symbolic functions—women are seen not as individuals but as symbols of the nation that mainly contribute to it through their responsibilities in the family.

Moreover, nationalism associates national independence with male dignity. In this sense, it metaphorically presents foreign subjugation of the nation as "emasculation," and the national project becomes a project of restoring a violated nation."[19] Usually, this discourse of national "victimization" is directed outside of the nation, but it can also be internalized and redirected at women if they do not accept prescribed gender roles and/or family structures.[20] In that case, they are constructed as internal enemies or betrayers of national interests, even though their participation is necessary for the success of the national project.

National projects need women to mobilize larger masses of people. In this regard, Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias suggest several types of women's participation in ethnic, national, and state-building processes: women as "biological producers" of ethnic community members, women as holders of "proper" female behavior, women as reproducers of national ideologies, women as expressors of national and cultural differences, and women as actors in national, economic, political, and military processes.[21]

At the same time, in these types of participation, women's agency is still extremely limited, even if they raise the status of women symbolically. Solomiia Pavlychko pointed out that society can canonize women on the symbolic level, but "this does not mean that this kind of

[17] Ranjoo Seodu Herr, "The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism," Hypatia 18, № 3 (2003): 137.
[18] Herr, "The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism," 137.
[19] Herr, "The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism," 137.
[20] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 26.
[21] Yuval-Davis, Anthias, and Campling, *Woman–Nation–State*, 8-10.

respect extends to all women as a gender and that society is ready to recognize existing exploitation and inequality."[22]

As Vjollca Krasniqi notes, even if women's participation in nation-building is seen as emancipatory in the short term, it does not change gender hierarchies in the long term.[23] Indeed, nationalism can temporarily expand women's agency beyond the domestic sphere—as leaders, co-organizers, or even soldiers—but expansion is temporary and conditioned on the needs of the national project. These expanded roles are justified by extraordinary circumstances and framed as exceptions to the rule, but they almost never turn into long-term political agency when the national project succeeds because by then, women's "exceptional" participation is no longer needed, and women are expected to go back to their "natural" roles in the domestic sphere.

In many cases, nationalist ideologies are resistant to include gender issues in their agenda and promise to deal with them in the indefinite future after independence is gained.[24] In this situation, even when women manage to articulate their agenda, "they do so in accepted male terms"[25] because "promised" emancipation is made part of gaining national independence and, hence, is conditional to the success of the national project. But once the national project is successful, more often than not, women are left behind, because their participation disturbs the patriarchal logic of the nationalist discourses.[26] Nationalist discourses dismiss feminists who call out the gendered foundations of nationalism by labeling them as "inauthentic" and "Western," and their concerns as incompatible with the priorities of the nation or even

[22] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Zhinochi prava—liudski prava. Ukrainska perspektyva," in *Feminism*, ed. by Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 120.
[23] Krasniqi, "Feminism and nationalism," 54.
[24] Krasniqi, "Feminism and nationalism," 55.
[25] Marta Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Political communities and gendered ideologies in contemporary Ukraine* (Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, 1994), 9.
[26] Herr, "The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism," 137.

dangerous for the national cause.[27] As a result, patriarchal values get institutionalized in the cultural and political structures of the new states and transform policies that limit women's rights.

Of course, such an account should not be generalized, as it appeared in the context of a particular tradition of feminist critique that was conditioned by post-colonial and post-imperial state-building. In other cases, post-World War II welfare states with relatively stable democracies, strong institutional continuity, and no experience of colonization made institutionalization of gender equality possible through social reforms, economic growth, and a general reorganization of the relationship between family and the state, thus, without the patriarchal implications typical for nationalist state-building.

In post-colonial and post-imperial contexts, women articulated the relationship between feminism and nationalism differently, as they considered feminism to be inseparable from the national struggle against colonial oppression. For instance, in the analysis of Northern Irish republican feminism, Theresa O'Keefe showed the ways in which feminist movements can emerge in the nationalist frameworks and argued that nationalist attempts to silence feminist discourses actually amplify them.[28] Thus, in certain contexts, feminism can dialectically emerge from nationalist politics of exclusion. Surely, if feminist growth depends on the exclusionary politics of nationalism, the long-term sustainability of such feminist mobilization is questionable. At the same time, an alternative conceptualization of the relationship between feminism and nationalism is an important theoretical change.

Similarly, the feminist and nationalist discourses in the Ukrainian context of the early twentieth century were in mutual dependence, and in many cases, Ukrainian women joined the nationalist

[27] Herr, "The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism," 137.
[28] Theresa O'Keefe, Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 186.

cause. Marta Bohachevsky-Chomiak, author of the first history of the Ukrainian women's movement, argued that reducing nationalism to a tool of patriarchy would be a mistake because in Ukrainian history, as in many colonial and post-colonial contexts, there were times when national and women's interests were similar.[29] Bohachevsky-Chomiak maintained that Ukrainian feminism adapted to a specific socio-political context by supporting the goals of the national project. She characterized Ukrainian feminism as "pragmatic," stating that nationalism appealed to Ukrainian women exactly because it emphasized motherhood, family, and romanticized women's self-sacrifice.[30]

According to Tetiana Zhurzhenko, both nationalism and feminism in Ukraine were suppressed during the Soviet times. Shared experiences of oppression determined the common goal in the post-independence period—to break with the communist legacies and colonial status of Ukraine.[31] Hence, "national feminism" in Ukraine emerged in the late 1980s because feminism and nationalism, being in marginal positions, needed each other. Ukrainian feminists tried to rehabilitate nationalism by rejecting its patriarchal tendencies and referring to its democratic potential, and nationalism justified the feminist agenda by its loyalty to the national project.[32] This integration was, however, not unproblematic. In the next part, I analyze how feminist and nationalist discourses were articulated in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, trying to show the ways they negotiated with and in some contexts also contradicted each other.

[29] Marta Bohachevska-Komiak, "Natsionalizm i feminizm: providni ideolohii chy instrumenty dlia z'iasuvannia problem?" in *Hendernyi pidkhid: istoriia, kultura, suspilstvo*, ed. Liliana Hentosh and Oksana Kis (Lviv: VNTL-Klasyka, 2003), 173.

[30] Bohachevska-Komiak, "Natsionalizm i feminizm: providni ideolohii chy instrumenty dlia z'iasuvannia problem?," 173.

[31] Tetiana Zhurzhenko, "Nebezpechni zviazky: natsionalizm i feminizm v Ukraini," in *Ukraina. Protsesy natsiotvorennia*, ed. Andreas Kappeler (Kyiv: K.I.S., 2011), 140.

[32] Tetiana Zhurzhenko, "Vpysyvaiuchysia v dyskurs natsionalnoho: ukrainskyi feminizm chy feminizm v Ukraini," in *Henderni rynky Ukrainy: politychna ekonomiia natsionalnoho budivnytstva* (Vilnius: EHU, 2008), 43.

1.2. Things Fall Apart, Tradition Remains: Feminist Discourses in Soviet and Post-Soviet Contexts

"Communism never had a 'State Feminist,' but it definitely had a strong, overwhelming 'State Patriarchy.'"[33]

"Today, there is no mature feminist movement in Ukraine. We have a women's movement—even many different 'movements,' however, all of them are mostly anti-feminist…."[34]

The extent of women's emancipation under socialism remains a hotly contested issue. Soviet ideologies presented the USSR as a state that liberated women from traditional forms of oppression.[35] Indeed, in the early days of the Soviet regime, feminist goals and revolutionary objectives were similar, but by the time Stalin consolidated power, the "woman question" was practically erased from the political agenda. The struggle for gender equality was absorbed by state discourses of class struggle[36] and consequently, abolishing class meant solving gender problems. However, the theoretical solution of the Soviet state did not account for practical realities and, thus, failed to address gender oppression.[37] What is more, family-centered conservative values and also natalist policies were restored.

Legislatively, gender equality was established in Soviet law, but de facto, it was never the case. Although women were integrated into professional, public, and political spheres, they remained

[33] Mihaela Miroiu, "Communism Was a State Patriarchy, Not State Feminism," *Aspasia* 1, no. 1 (March 2007): 200.
[34] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Suchasna zhinka—obraz zovnishnii i obraz vnutrishnii," in *Feminism*, ed. by Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 233.
[35] Marian J. Rubchak, "In Search of a Model: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness in Ukraine and Russia," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 8, no. 2 (May 2001), 151.
[36] Nora Jung, "Importing Feminism to Eastern Europe," *History of European Ideas* 19, no. 4–6 (1994): 845.
[37] Rubchak, "In Search of a Model: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness in Ukraine and Russia," 151.

"in the lower ranks of state-owned paid work and state-run political activity,"[38] and even that happened because of the state's needs rather than a commitment to gender equality.

Forced industrialization and collectivization required extensive human resources to meet the targets of the communist construction plans. However, both World Wars resulted in a large percentage of the male population being unable to join the labor market. As a result, the Soviet state mobilized women for jobs traditionally occupied by men.[39]

At the same time, the division of labor in the private sphere remained unequal[40]—domestic responsibilities were still seen as a natural extension of women's roles, and their value was defined by their contribution to the family.[41] Regardless of a woman's professional activities, she had to perform domestic work that was not only unpaid but also not recognized work as such. Mariia Mayerchuk and Olha Plakhotnik explain that these policies resulted in a "triple burden"—industrial labor, domestic responsibilities, and social work.[42] As Susan Gal and Gail Kligman rightly put it, "the considerable gender inequalities in Soviet life increased [compared to the pre-Soviet period] but became 'unsayable.'"[43] Thus, the fact that in the Soviet Union, women were able to get out of the domestic sphere and enter the workplace did not mean the same "liberation" it did for liberal feminists in the West—full-time employment was not their choice or a right, but a state requirement.[44] As Larissa Lissyutkina noted, "On the contrary, liberation is perceived by many [socialist women] as the right not to work."[45]

[38] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 48.
[39] Oksana Kis, *Ukrainski zhinky u hornili modernizatsii* (Kharkiv: Klyub Simeinoho Dozvillia, 2004), 207.
[40] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 48.
[41] Rubchak, "In Search of a Model: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness in Ukraine and Russia," 151.
[42] Mariia Maierchyk and Olha Plakhotnik, "Chy(m) radykalni 'Femen' abo deshcho pro novyi zhinochyi aktyvizm v Ukraini," *Hendernyi zhurnal 'Ya'*, no. 26 (Feminizm ta zhinochyi rukh) (2010): 19.
[43] Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 47.
[44] Sharp, "Gendering Nationhood," 102.
[45] Larissa Lissyutkina, "Soviet Women at the Crossroads of Perestroika," in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller (London: Routledge, 1993), 366.

Similarly, quotas that increased female representation in the public sphere did not translate into real influence for women.[46] Although women were numerically represented in the party organizations and structures, they were able to exercise very little power—their presence meant to reproduce state ideology, not to reform it. As Mihaela Miroiu noted, women were meant to be present in the public sphere "as obedient soldiers under the party's command. It barely had to do with the political representation of women's interests."[47]

All non-communist women's organizations that were active before World War I were "shut down, repressed, or absorbed into communist-dominated women's organizations."[48] These communist women's organizations were created as top-down party initiatives strictly controlled by the state— "though active, [these organizations] were not necessarily agents for women."[49] Mirjana Ule and Tanja Rener noted that as a result, "women did not have any special reason to participate in such empty and ritualized political activities, which only ate up the already tight spare time."[50] And those who joined them, mostly did it "to fulfill the political obligation to be active in an organization," "solely out of careerist interests," or "only to follow instructions to do so."[51]

Furthermore, feminist scholars largely criticized the top-down nature of socialist reforms. However, there is still no consensus on the issues of women's rights and agency under socialism. The exchange between Funk, on the one hand, and Ghodsee and the so-called

[46] Martha Bohachevska-Khomyak and O. M. Veselova, "Zhinichyi rukh v Ukraini," in *Entsyklopediia istorii Ukrainy: u 10 t.*, ed. V. A. Smolii et al., vol. 3: *E–Y* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2005), 672.
[47] Miroiu, "Communism Was a State Patriarchy, Not State Feminism," 199.
[48] Nanette Funk, "A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (2014): 346-347.
[49] Funk, "A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism," 349.
[50] Ule and Rener, "Nationalism and Gender in Postsocialist Societies: Is Nationalism Female?," 217.
[51] Nanette Funk, "(K)not So: A Response to Kristen Ghodsee," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 3 (2015): 351.

"revisionist feminist scholars," as Funk herself defined them, is one of the most notable examples of such disagreement.

Nanette Funk was among those who questioned whether women's organizations under state socialism represented women's agency or simply extended party ideology. According to her, "many women in state socialist women's organizations could not be proactive, that it was most often difficult to be proactive, and usually in a very limited way."[52]

In contrast, Kristen Ghodsee argued that socialist states not just granted formal equality, but actively integrated women into the labor force and mitigated the disadvantages posed by women's reproductive functions.[53] She maintained that state socialism brought benefits for women in the form of legal rights, state-provided support for motherhood, and secured work-life balance. Ghodsee insisted that women under socialism exercised agency within and sometimes against state structures, and that their experiences should not be dismissed "because they were imposed from the top down and within a context of political autocracy."[54] For her, "women (and men) can still be meaningful agents even if they are acting to promote communist ideas they believe in."[55]

Ghodsee also emphasized that for socialist women, liberation was not possible without addressing class oppression—they saw the struggle for women's rights as a part of the struggle against capitalism.[56] As she stated, socialist women believed that "the abolition of private property and state ownership of the means of production would produce societies more

[52] Funk, "(K)not So: A Response to Kristen Ghodsee," 352.
[53] Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead, "What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?" Catalyst 2, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 117–19.
[54] Ghodsee and Mead, "What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?", 102.
[55] Kristen Ghodsee, "Untangling the Knot: A Response to Nanette Funk," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 3 (2015): 4.
[56] Ghodsee, "Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism, and Women's Nongovernmental Organizations in Postsocialist Eastern Europe," 732.

conducive to sexual equality than capitalist free markets."[57] Thus, she insisted that there was a distinct socialist feminism—one that prioritized class oppression over gender.

However, as Funk rightly noted in response to Ghodsee,

> "showing that women members of official women's organizations at times took action that benefited women does not prove that they were feminists, though those instances can be *compatible* with feminism."[58] Moreover, even if some policies lead to the improvement of social and economic conditions of women and allow them to be present in the public sphere, it does not mean that they were feminist."[59]

In the late Soviet period, socialist women were still in a structurally entirely different position from middle-class women in the West.[60] Western feminism, based on gender equality and personal autonomy, was in conflict with what socialist women were going through.[61] Because of their relatively better material conditions, Western women were perceived by socialist women as problem-free: they were feminists only because they did not have the same "real" problems. In contrast, considering the number of problems socialist women faced, Western women did not understand how there was no women's movement (or what they considered to be a "women's movement") to address them. As Larissa Lissyutkina put it,

> "Soviet women are convinced that Western women have no problems and therefore they participate in the women's movement, while Western women are bewildered that Soviet women have so many problems, but no movement."[62]

After the fall of the Soviet Union, no mass feminist movement emerged in Ukraine. Western middle-class feminists expected that women's issues in post-socialist contexts would be identical to their own, for instance, reproductive rights, equality in the workplace, or gender

[57] Ghodsee Untangling the Knot 3
[58] Funk, "(K)not So: A Response to Kristen Ghodsee," 355.
[59] Miroiu, "Communism Was a State Patriarchy, Not State Feminism," 198.
[60] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 100.
[61] Nanette Funk, "Feminism and Post-Communism," *Hypatia* 8 (December 16, 2008): 86.
[62] Lissyutkina, "Soviet Women at the Crossroads of Perestroika," 366.

roles. When it did not happen, they oversimplified and reduced East Central European women's lives to deviations from Western feminist standards—as lagging behind or underpoliticized.[63] Indeed, there was no "second wave" of feminism and public discussions around women's rights in the Soviet Union, which left many women unprepared to articulate their rights.[64] However, women in post-communist states in general rejected the Western idea of feminism: partly because it was still seen as a part of socialist policies, which many wanted to get away from, partly because it was considered to be a forcefully imposed Western ideology,[65] and partly because it was connected to postructuralist theories which did not make it easy to process. On top of that, for women in the post-socialist context, establishing democracy and political stability was a necessary condition for gender equality, and thus, was seen as more important.[66]

With the intensification of national mobilization in the mid-1980s, neo-traditionalism started to dominate the public sphere. It supported the superiority of traditional family values, economic autonomy of families from the state, and return to "natural" gender roles.[67] Neo-traditionalism introduced the "national idea" as the basis of Ukraine's new ideological framework. A similar neo-traditional shift happened in other post-socialist countries. As Agnieszka Graff stated: "The rise of the liberation struggle [in Poland] […] symbolized a restoration of the patriarchal order disrupted by the totalitarian regime."[68]

Under the "revival" of the ethnic national identity and traditional cultural values, neo-traditionalism reactivated a lot of myths, including the matriarchal myth of women as

[63] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 99.
[64] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Feminism in Post-Communist Ukrainian Society," in *Feminism*, ed. Vira Aheieva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 68.
[65] Tanya Renne, "Disparaging Digressions: Sisterhood in East-Central Europe," in *Ana's Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*, ed. Tanya Renne (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 10.
[66] Funk, "Feminism and Post-Communism," 86.
[67] Tetyana Zhurzhenko, *Ukrainian Feminism(s): Between Nationalist Myth and Anti-Nationalist Critique*, IWM Working Paper 4 (Vienna: Institute for Human Sciences, 2001), 44.
[68] Agnieszka Graff, *Svit bez zhinok: stat v polskomu hromadskomu zhytti* (Lviv: Akhill, 2005), 24.

reproducers of the nation.[69] As Mirjana Ule and Tanja Rene noted, "[Women] became the targets of redelegation into 'mothers who should ensure the biological survival and moral progress of the nation,' 'the guardians of the home,' and the 'guardians of privacy.'"[70] Neo-traditionalist discourse presented reproduction and protection of the home as natural functions of women in Ukrainian society. To legitimize these views, it also brought back the image of Berehynia, a pagan goddess and protector of the home, who was meant to be a female symbol of the Ukrainian nation.

Neo-traditionalism sought to impose gendered categories of "public men" and "private women," such as men belonging to the public sphere—economic, political, and social,—and women belonging to the private sphere—family and home.[71] Yet, at that time, women were already participating in different social and political movements, including those connected to Ukraine's independence. When oppositional movements transitioned to parliamentary and party structures, civil society lost its value. As it was perceived as less politically central, civil society became a place for many women in the public sphere—they became prominent in NGOs, activism, and community initiatives.[72]

In 1989, the women's branch of the People's Movement of Ukraine (RUKH) was created, and in 1993, it became the international organization "Women's Community." It was referencing the women's organization "Women's Community" that was created in 1900.[73] Maria Drach, the leader of the organization, among other things, was married to Ivan Drach, the first chairman of RUKH.

[69] Mariaan Rubchak, "Peredmova," in *Hendernyi pidkhid: istoriia, kultura, suspilstvo*, ed. Liliiana Hentosh and Oksana Kis (Lviv, 2003), 13.
[70] Ule and Rener, "Nationalism and Gender in Postsocialist Societies: Is Nationalism Female?," 215.
[71] Ule and Rener, "Nationalism and Gender in Postsocialist Societies: Is Nationalism Female?," 215.
[72] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 95.
[73] Marta Bohachevska-Khomyak, *Bilym po bilomu: Zhinky v hromadskomu zhytti Ukrainy, 1884–1939* (Kyiv: Lybid, 1995), 70.

In 1991, the international organization "Ukrainian Women's Union" was created. Similarly, it was also referring to the women's organization with the same name which was founded in 1917. The connection to pre-Soviet women's organizations was important to "return" to the history of the Ukrainian women's movement. However, it also meant "return" to national conservative values that were not progressive. In the statute of the "Ukrainian Women's Union," we can read about its main aims:

> "The main goal of the activities of the Ukrainian Women's Association is to unite Ukrainian women in the democratic women's movement, protect their rights, achieve gender equality, direct creative forces to the establishment of historical shrines, national ideals, and spiritual culture in society, and educate a new generation of Ukrainian youth capable of building a legal and democratic Ukrainian the state."[74]

The statute mentioned gender equality and women's rights but put them in the context of the national project. For example, the phrase "educate a new generation of Ukrainian youth capable of building a legal and democratic Ukrainian state" shows the nationalist orientation of their activities—women's rights and gender equality were necessary for protecting the nation and educating future generations. Ironically, women were able to participate in the public sphere, but they still presented themself as responsible for the nation's cultural identity. Many of them were still hostile to feminism. As Solomiia Pavlychko explained:

> "Today, there is no mature feminist movement in Ukraine. We have a women's movement—even many different 'movements,' however, all of them are mostly anti-feminist, that is, they do not raise issues of social, political, economic equality in society."[75]

Indeed, in post-independent Ukraine, there was no unified women's movement. With so many regional divisions—based on language, culture, and history, mobilizing a large number of

[74] "Soiuz Ukrainok: Statut," *Ofitsiinyi sait Vseukraons'koi hromads'koi orhanizatsii «Soiuz Ukrainok»*, accessed March 5, 2024, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20150105134426/http://su.org.ua/sample-page/.
[75] Pavlychko, "Suchasna zhinka —obraz zovnishnii i obraz vnutrishnii," 233.

women across the country was almost impossible. The national project, which was so important for many women's organizations at that time, simply did not appeal in the same way in all regions, which did not allow them to reach a wider audience. For the same reasons, there was also no chance of building a unified feminist movement.

Chapter 2.

2.1. New Methods in Old Academia: The Emergence of Feminist Scholarship in Post-Independence Ukraine

"The female turn in science, culture, and politics in the 1990s was obvious, and it was particularly productive."[76]

"If the prerequisite for feminism is the existence of oppression, then in modern Ukraine, feminism has numerous reasons to exist."[77]

In the mid-1980s, the policies of perestroika and glasnost loosened the state control of the public sphere. After decades of surveillance and suppression, intellectuals were finally able to articulate their thoughts without constant self-censorship. Describing the changes, Mykola Riabchuk wrote that intellectuals "could now say what they think and think what they want. They are not expelled from universities for samizdat, not imprisoned for political statements, not punished for inappropriate connections and the wrong books."[78] Indeed, more and more alternative ideas were introduced into the public discourse—they subtly encouraged more radical transformations, not least moving away from the socialist system.[79]

During these changes, some intellectuals started to express interest in feminism. At first, feminist initiatives emerged at the peripheries of universities and research institutions without

[76] Tamara Hundorova, "It Was from Feminist Theory That the Turn in Ukrainian Society and Humanities Began," interview by Iryna Slavinska, *Povaha Longread*, October 13, 2016, accessed March 5, 2024, https://longread.povaha.org.ua/tamara-gundorova-same-z-feministychnoyi-teoriyi-pochavsya-povorot-v-ukrayinskomu-suspilstvi-ta-gumanitarystytsi/.
[77] Pavlychko, "Is Feminism in Ukraine Possible?", 171.
[78] Mykola Riabchuk, *Leksykon natsionalista ta inshi esei* (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Staroho Leva, 2021), 170.
[79] Olga Baysha, *Democracy, Populism, and Neoliberalism in Ukraine: On the Fringes of the Virtual and the Real* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 9-10.

any formal institutional support.[80] Alexandra Hrycak and Maria G. Rewakowicz refer to these informal groups of scholars with a shared interest in feminist theory as intellectual micro-publics. Coming from so-called "tysovky," meetings of underground artists, poets, and scholars searching for spaces free from the repressive Soviet ideology,[81] these alternative intellectual spaces were established in private and unofficial environments in which they could openly exchange ideas. It was in these small groups that scholars formulated their feminist ideas, and did so rather independently from their academic institutions.

Tamara Hundorova described that at the beginning of the 1990s, the Institute of Literature had two different spaces—"official and alternative literary studies":

> "The Academic Council met in the meeting room, and official views prevailed there. Instead, outside of the meeting room, in the corridor [...] groups of young people were gathering, discussing completely different issues. We shared new knowledge, talked about taboo topics, and made fun of many things."[82]

After the independence, Ukraine transformed not only politically and economically but also within academia. Scholars got access to new literature and methodologies from the West, including classic works of post-modernist, post-structuralist, and postcolonial studies. Political turmoil also influenced centralized academic institutions which allowed scholars to institutionalize their informal discussions and transfer them to their academic work.

Dividing the development of Ukrainian women's studies in two periods, Ukrainian historian Ludmyla Smoliar stated that during 1990-1995 they were recognized as a separate field of research and formalized in the academic spaces; and from 1995 to 2002, women's studies were

[80] Irina Zherebkina, "On the Performativity of Gender: Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Higher Education," *Studies in East European Thought* 55, no. 1 (2003): 64.
[81] Alexandra Hrycak and Maria Rewakowicz, "Feminism, Intellectuals and the Formation of Micro-Publics in Postcommunist Ukraine," *Studies in East European Thought* 61 (November 1, 2009): 310.
[82] Hundorova, "It Was from Feminist Theory that the Turn in Ukrainian Society and Humanities Began."

incorporated in the system of higher education and university courses, which was extremely important for the overall development of women's studies in Ukraine.[83]

Characterizing the emergence of women's studies in Ukraine, Oksana Kis, a Ukrainian historian and anthropologist, used the term "catching up with the West" to explain that most scholarly efforts were directed towards integrating Western theories to the Ukrainian academic realities. Yet, Kis states that, for the most part, overcoming the gap between the newly emerged women's studies in Ukraine and long-established women's studies in Western academia was "mission impossible."[84]

Indeed, in the early 1990s, most of the feminist literature was not (easily) accessible. Partly because of a language barrier, as it was available in English, French, and German languages which most of the Ukrainian scholars did not know, and partly because scholars were limited in their access to academic resources. On top of this, there were not many financial resources for scholars to attend international conferences or academic exchange programs.

In the mid-1990s, the situation changed: Western governments, private foundations (such as the Soros "Renaissance" Foundation), and international organizations (such as the United Nations Development Program) started bringing money and institutional assistance to Ukraine.[85] They supported several gender studies centers that were established in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and Lviv. Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies and Odesa Scientific Center for Women's Studies were established in 1994, and the Kyiv Institute of Gender Studies and Scientific Research Center "Woman and Society" in Lviv were founded in 1999. Although

[83] Ludmyla Smoliar, "Stanovlennia hendernoi osvity v Ukraini", In *Osnovy teorii henderu: Navchalnyi posibnyk*, ed. L. O. Smoliar, (Kyiv: K.I.S., 2004), 504-505.
[84] Oksana Kis, "Feminism in Contemporary Ukraine: From 'Allergy' to Last Hope," *Kultura Enter*, no. 3 (2013): 265.
[85] Hrycak and Rewakowicz, "Feminism, Intellectuals and the Formation of Micro-Publics in Postcommunist Ukraine," 313.

geographically, they left peripheries behind, these centers still offered feminist scholars much needed infrastructure, resources, and intellectual networks.

Kyiv, as the capital, became the main center of gender studies. Among its leading feminist figures were Solomiia Pavlychko, Vira Ageyeva, Tamara Hundorova, and Nila Zborovska—all employed full-time at the Institute of Literature at the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv—and Oksana Zabuzhko, who worked full-time at the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv.

As the daughter of Dmytro Pavlychko, a well-known Ukrainian poet, translator, and political figure, Solomiia Pavlychko grew up around the Ukrainian intellectual circles and networks her father was a part of. He was involved in the creation of the People's Movement of Ukraine in the late 1980s and worked on the Act of Independence of Ukraine, but he was also a part of the National Union of Writers of Ukraine and an editor of several literary journals, including "Dzvin" and "Vsesvit." Being the daughter of a prominent figure also meant that Solomiia's life was comparatively privileged and free from the economic difficulties that others faced at the time. She started her academic career at the philology department of the Taras Shevchenko University. In 1984, she defended a dissertation on American Romanticism, particularly on the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson, and published it in 1988. After that, Pavlychko started working in the Institute of Literature in the Faculty of Foreign Literature, concentrating mostly on American and British literature. During that time, she was also working on literary translations from English to Ukrainian, for example, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.[86]

[86] Vira Ageyeva, "Intelektual′na biohrafiia Solomii Pavlychko," *Dukh i litera*, no. 7–8 (2001): 249.

At first, Ukrainian literature was not a part of her academic research, and it was not until 1985-1986 that she developed an interest in it.[87] Pavlychko wrote her second doctoral dissertation on the discourse of Ukrainian modernism and defended it in 1995. She received a scholarship from Central European University to edit it into a book, which was later published with the support of the Renaissance Foundation. This fact shows not only the lack of support from the national institutions but also the influence that international academic, charitable, and non-governmental institutions had on the development of research in Ukrainian academia in the 1990s.

Another scholar from the group, Tamara Hundorova, came to Kyiv from Poltava region to study Ukrainian language and literature at the philology department of the Taras Shevchenko University. After graduating in 1977, she came to the Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences as a PhD student. In 1981, Hundorova defended her dissertation, "The Problem of the Intelligentsia and the People in Ivan Franko's Socio-Psychological Novels of the 1880s and 1890s," which was later published in 1985 as a monograph. Although Hundorova was very active academically in the 1980s, it was the intellectual changes of the 1990s that transformed her approaches. In 1996, she defended her second dissertation, published in 1997 as a book, "Manifestation of the Word: Discourse of Early Ukrainian Modernism. Postmodern Interpretation." Unlike Pavlychko and Zabuzhko, who were more engaged with public discourse, Hundorova concentrated more on academic research.

Raised in a family of school teachers, Vira Ageyeva moved to Kyiv from the Chernihiv oblast. Like Hundorova and Pavlychko, she studied Ukrainian language and literature at the philology department of the Taras Shevchenko University. She wrote her dissertation about war prose, publishing it as a monograph, "Memory of the Feat: Ukrainian War Prose of the 60s and 80s"

[87] Hundorova, "It Was from Feminist Theory that the Turn in Ukrainian Society and Humanities Began."

in 1989. Ageyeva rarely mentions this monograph among her publications, as the topic was imposed on her by the Institute of Literature of the Academy of Sciences. She gained more freedom in choosing a topic for her second doctoral dissertation, "Stylistic Models of Impressionism in Ukrainian Prose of the First Half of the 20th Century," and defended it in 1995, just a few months before Pavlychko's defense.

Oksana Zabuzhko was born in Lutsk and moved to Kyiv with her family when she was a child. Her father, Stefan Zabuzhko, a literary critic and translator, was repressed by the Soviets during the Stalinist era. Zabuzhko graduated from the philosophy faculty of the Taras Shevchenko University, defending her doctoral dissertation, "The Aesthetic Nature of Lyric Poetry as Art," in 1987. After graduation, she taught aesthetics and the history of culture at the Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music till 1989, when she became a senior researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. By then, Zabuzhko was already famous among a young generation of intellectuals. Even though she started as a poet, publishing a couple of poetry books, such as *May Frost* (1985) and *The Kapellmeister of the Last Candle* (1990), she later turned to writing prose and critical essays.

Similarly, Nila Zborovska moved to Kyiv to study at the philology department of the Taras Shevchenko University. Graduating in 1986, she was younger than the other scholars in this group—when Pavlychko, Ageyeva, and Zabuzhko were defending their doctoral dissertations, Zborovska was just starting her graduate degree. There were not many PhD positions at the Institute of Literature in Kyiv, so she had to write her dissertation at the Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan in Almaty. After defending her dissertation in 1991, Zborovska returned to Kyiv to work at the Institute of Literature. Being mainly interested in psychoanalysis, she applied Freudian and Lacanian concepts to Ukrainian literature in her second doctoral dissertation, "Psychohistory of Modern Ukrainian Literature: Problems of Psychosemantics and Psychopoetics," which she defended in 2008.

Certainly, Pavlychko, Hundorova, Ageyeva, Zborovska, and Zabuzhko met in the same academic institution, were a part of the same intellectual circles, or had similar intellectual trajectories, but these were not the only factors that united them. They represented a younger generation of scholars who tried to distance themselves from the "old" academia by looking for new approaches to Ukrainian literature and culture. As Tamara Hundorova described,

> "In the early 1990s, as a researcher, I felt at a dead end, in a vacuum, because I really lacked any new approaches and methodologies. What had been developed until then did not suit me. I wanted to understand what the situation is in the West, what is developing there, what directions and methodologies."[88]

The intellectual frameworks at the Institute of Literature were too rigid, and their attempts to criticize them, to put it mildly, did not help their careers. The problem was partly generational, as they were younger than most of their colleagues. The older generation had more power, influence, and authority to pressure younger colleagues and dismiss their work.

On top of that, there was the issue of gender inequality in academia, as in the late 1980s-early 1990s, it was a male-dominated space. Describing one of the photos from that time, Hundorova said:

> "If you look at the photo of the department where I was a graduate student, you will see fifteen men—with candidate's and doctoral degrees, two women—with candidate's degrees, and one young woman—an assistant or a methodologist."[89]

One might guess that as young women, they did not have a very privileged position in academia—it was difficult for them to build a career, as they had to work harder than their male

[88] Tamara Hundorova. "Interview with Tamara Hundorova about Feminist Themes in Ukrainian Literature," interview by Tamara Martsenyuk, *Gender in Detail*, May 7, 2018, accessed March 5, 2024, https://genderindetail.org.ua/spetsialni-rubriki/bezstrashni/interv-yu-z-tamaroyu-gundorovoyu-pro-feministichnu-tematiku-v-ukrainskiy-literaturi-134482.html.

[89] Vira Ageyeva, "Feminism Was Risky for Reputation, Career, and Authority but Interested Everyone: An Interview with Vira Ageyeva," interview by Iryna Slavinska, *Povaha Longread*, November 25, 2021, accessed March 5, 2024, https://longread.povaha.org.ua/vira-ageyeva-feminizm-buv-ryzykovanym-dlya-renome-kar-yery-j-avtorytetu-ale-tsikavyv-usih/.

colleagues to get recognition in their field. Hundorova shared a memory from those times that illustrates the situation in the institutions they worked in:

> "I remember very well one meeting at the Institute where I, then a young researcher, dared to criticize our head of the department. [...] I expressed some critical remarks [...]. At the time, this was quite unexpected because junior researchers usually did not intervene in the discussion or agreed with everything. Our supervisor said the following phrase: 'Well, what Tamara Ivanivna said here... What you can expect from a woman.' For me, the sky and the earth turned upside down because I felt that did not just apply to me personally, but determined the attitude towards female researchers in general. [...] I did not have the strength to protest then, but I understood how a woman is interpreted in science, in particular, in the environment in which I was. It was a lesson for me."[90]

In introducing new theoretical frameworks, they relied on feminist theory partly because it allowed them to deconstruct the patriarchal frameworks they were operating in. This, however, brought only more difficulties. Irina Zherebkina, director of the Kharkiv Center of Gender Studies, recalled her personal experience of the institutionalization of gender studies as "not one of 'academic respectability' but rather the traumatic experience of distinct power relations at the macro- and micro-levels (a form of experience, incidentally, well-known to every Soviet 'totalitarian' individual)."[91]

Indeed, as feminist studies faced a lot of opposition in Ukrainian academia, feminist scholars found themselves on the periphery of their departments. Their colleagues were used to a hierarchical academic system and well-established methods—gender studies were a threat to their intellectual status quo. When asked if she faced negative attitudes to gender studies in academia, Vera Ageyeva said:

> "It would be more accurate to ask: was there anyone who did not make fun of us? [...] At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the academic establishment consisted mainly of

[90] Hundorova, "Interview with Tamara Hundorova about Feminist Themes in Ukrainian Literature."
[91] Zherebkina, "On the Performativity of Gender: Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Higher Education," 64.

> men. And they all shook their heads with laughter: what did these girls invent? What is feminism?"[92]

The construction of the stereotype of the feminist as unreasonable, irrational, and aggressive was not just a result of ignorance—it was used to undermine women's participation in public discourse that was previously dominated by men. As Hundorova noted,

> "In fact, it turned out that in the post-Soviet situation, when it was necessary to think in a new way and radically reevaluate something, it was women who were ready for this change. Perhaps because they were usually assigned marginal roles, they accumulated a lot of revolutionary energy and were ready for change."[93]

At that time, there was general distrust towards feminism as if it was some kind of speculation.[94] Feminism was accused of being a tool of capitalism[95] and feminist scholars were accused of betraying national interests.[96] This damaged the personal reputation of feminist scholars as much as it undermined trust in feminist ideas. As Ageyeva noted, "Feminism was risky for reputation, career, and credibility, but everyone [of us] was interested in it."[97]

In the late 1980s, international support allowed this group of female scholars to participate in academic exchange in the West. Ukrainian-American symposia, initiated by Professor Grabowicz, was one of the first important international events that connected Ukrainian and international scholars.[98]

[92] Vira Ageyeva. "1990-ti dlia mene—tse neimovirnyi dosvid chytannia," interview by Anastasiia Levkova and Danylo Pavlov, *The Ukrainians*, May 24, 2021, accessed March 5, 2024, https://theukrainians.org/vira-aheieva/.
[93] Hundorova, "Interview with Tamara Hundorova about Feminist Themes in Ukrainian Literature."
[94] Hundorova, "It Was from Feminist Theory that the Turn in Ukrainian Society and Humanities Began."
[95] Ghodsee, "Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism, and Women's Nongovernmental Organizations in Postsocialist Eastern Europe," 733.
[96] Hrycak and Rewakowicz, "Feminism, Intellectuals and the Formation of Micro-Publics in Postcommunist Ukraine," 314.
[97] Ageyeva, "Feminism Was Risky for Reputation, Career, and Authority but Interested Everyone: An Interview with Vira Ageyeva."
[98] Tamara Hundorova, "Intellektual–ne toi, hto mozhe hovoryty pro vse, tse toi, hto hovoryt pro holovni rechi," interview by Danylo Ilnytskyi, *Ukraina Moderna*, June 13, 2020, accessed March 5, 2024, https://uamoderna.com/jittepis-istory/tamara-hundorova/.

The group kept connections with the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University, and in 1989, Pavlychko came there with a lecture, "The Theme of Beatrice Cenci in European Romantic Literature."[99] Later on, many of Pavlychko's publications were linked to her participation in international conferences, such as "Feminism and Nationalism" at the University of Toronto and "Feminism as a Possible Approach to the Analysis of Ukrainian Culture" at the University of Illinois.[100] In 1990, Pavlychko was a Visiting Professor at the University of Alberta. From 1993 to 1994, she spent ten months at Harvard University with support from the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). In 1996–1997, she returned to Harvard as a Fulbright scholar to teach Ukrainian literature at the Harvard Ukrainian Summer Institute.

Hundorova's first international experience was a one-month research trip to Poland in 1974, which, as she described it, "opened up a completely different world—not just Poland, but the West as such."[101] In 1989, Hundorova also came to Harvard, where she presented on "Aesthetic Consciousness of Early Ukrainian Modernism."[102] In 1991, she spent a year at Monash University in Australia, invited by Marko Pavlyshyn, an Australian literary scholar of Ukrainian dissent and professor in the Mykola Zerov Centre for Ukrainian Studies in Monash University's School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics. From 1997, Hundorova taught at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University as a Fulbright scholar, and in 1999–2000, she was a visiting professor of Slavic Literature at the University of Toronto.

In 1992, Oksana Zabuzhko spent a year teaching Ukrainian literature at Penn State University, and in 1994, as a Fulbright scholar, she taught at the University of Pittsburgh and Harvard

[99] Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, "Seminar in Ukrainian Studies," November 9, 1989, accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.huri.harvard.edu/event/seminar-ukrainian-studies-670.
[100] Ageyeva, "Intelektual′na biohrafiia Solomii Pavlychko," 256.
[101] Hundorova, "Intellektual–ne toi, hto mozhe hovoryty pro vse, tse toi, hto hovoryt pro holovni rechi."
[102] Hundorova, "Intellektual–ne toi, hto mozhe hovoryty pro vse, tse toi, hto hovoryt pro holovni rechi."

University. Similarly, Ageyeva taught Ukrainian literature in Canada in 1992,[103] and it was only Zborovska who did not participate in international exchanges as extensively at that time.

These international engagements allowed them to access academic networks and institutions and, even more importantly, build connections with Western scholars. As Hundorova recalled,

> "A window to the West opened for me—I saw a different world and a different way of thinking, and I realized that it is not foreign to me, that I understand it, and that I almost think the same way. I realized that there is no clear boundary between us, even though we speak different languages. I realized that there is a whole layer of new methodologies and theories with which I am not yet familiar."[104]

Meanwhile, foreign researchers were coming to Ukraine as well. The Ukrainian diaspora in the US and Canada supported these connections. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, author of the book "Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life"[105] and one of the first researchers of the women's movement in Ukraine, came to Kyiv on a research trip in 1979. Describing this experience, she stated,

> "For my generation, it was very important that the USSR began to open. Sure, this process was controlled and very slow, but we got a chance to get to know living Ukraine a little better and to realize that it was not an isolated museum site."[106]

Bohachevsky-Chomiak had close contacts with intellectual circles in Kyiv and met many young researchers, among them the group of young female literary scholars. Describing

[103] Ageyeva, "1990-ti dlia mene—tse neimovirnyi dosvid chytannia."
[104] Hundorova, "Intellektual–ne toi, hto mozhe hovoryty pro vse, tse toi, hto hovoryt pro holovni rechi."
[105] The book focused on Ukrainian women's movements from 1884–1939. The original English version was published in 1988. The Ukrainian translation was published in 2018 under the title "White on White. Women in Ukrainian Community Life."
[106] Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, "I Had to Explain From an Early Age What Ukraine Was: The Portrait of a Researcher of the Ukrainian Women's Movement," interview by Grytsia Erde and Iryna Slavinska, *The Ukrainians*, February 8, 2023, accessed March 5, 2024, https://theukrainians.org/en/martha-bohachevska-chomiak/.

Bohachevsky-Chomiak's influence, Vira Ageyeva said, "Martha Bohachevsky [Chomiak] came to Ukraine and told us all about feminism."[107]

Later, Bohachevsky-Chomiak became the head of the Fulbright program, which, to this day, is one of the most important initiatives that support academic stays abroad. Bohachevsky-Chomiak emphasized its influence by saying: "The Fulbright program was important for the development of research in Ukraine, especially in the humanities. It was beneficial not only for Ukraine but also for the United States."[108] After all, Pavlychko, Hundorova, and Zabuzhko were all Fulbright scholars.

This group of feminist scholars stayed connected not only to the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute but also kept in touch with its director, George G. Grabowicz, an American literary critic of Ukrainian origin, and Dmytro Chyzhevskyi Professor of Ukrainian Literature at Harvard University. In 1991, Solomiia Pavlychko translated Grabowicz's monograph "The Poet as Mythmaker,"[109] which was published in Ukrainian nine years after the English original.[110]

In 1997, Grabowicz founded *Krytyka* magazine and has since been its editor-in-chief, while Solomiia Pavlychko and Mykola Riabchuk, among others, became a part of its first editorial board. The magazine became an important platform for Ukrainian intellectuals who wanted to balance the authoritarian and provincial tendencies in Ukrainian academia. Grabowicz himself was very critical of the old academic establishment, especially the Institute of Literature, and

[107] Ageyeva, "Feminism Was Risky for Reputation, Career, and Authority but Interested Everyone: An Interview with Vira Ageyeva."
[108] Bohachevsky-Chomiak, "I Had to Explain From an Early Age What Ukraine Was: The Portrait of a Researcher of the Ukrainian Women's Movement."
[109] George G. Grabowicz, *The Poet as Mythmaker: A Study of Symbolic Meaning in Taras Shevchenko* (Cambridge: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1982).
[110] Hryhorii Hrabovych, *Poet yak mifotvorets'*, trans. from English by Solomiia Pavlychko (Kyiv: Krytyka, 1998).

often bluntly expressed his opinions about the state of Ukrainian academia. For example, in one of the interviews, he said:

> "All those who worked till now should be fired. I would start with the Academy of Sciences. Dissolve it completely, starting with Paton and those people who, for 23 years of independence, compromised it and brought Ukrainian science to the state it is now."[111]

As could be expected, Grabowicz's views were not well received by the Ukrainian academic community, particularly by the older generation of scholars, who resisted new approaches to Ukrainian literary studies. As a student of Harold Bloom,[112] in his book about Shevchenko, Grabowicz used structuralist methodology, causing a huge controversy among Ukrainian intellectuals who blamed him for discrediting Shevchenko's canonical status as a Ukrainian national symbol. Taras Salyha, Head of the Department of Ukrainian Literature at the Ivan Franko Lviv National University, expressed his opinion on Grabowicz's work at a conference marking the 200th anniversary of Shevchenko's birth:

> "Grabowicz will never be able to remove Shevchenko's image from the iconostasis wall of the Ukrainian home, where it hangs and will hang between the images of the Mother of Jesus and the Crucifixion of Christ. This is a spiritual need to pray to one's savior. This is the noble conservatism to which the so-called postmodern 'in short pants' capitulates."[113]

If the older generation of Ukrainian scholars remained hostile to Grabowicz's approach, for the young female literary scholars, his works were a reference point for approaching Ukrainian literature in a new way.

[111] Hryhorii Hrabovych, "Natsional'nu akademiiu nauk Ukrainy pora rozpuskaty," *Radio Svoboda*, June 19, 2014, accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/25421454.html.
[112] George G. Grabowicz and Halyna Hryn, "George G. Grabowicz: A Biographical Sketch," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 32/33, pt. 1 (2011–2014): 26.
[113] Taras Salyha, "Shevchenko Sohodni Likuie Rak Mental'nosti, Urazhenoi Putins'kym Virusom," *Galinfo*, March 7, 2014, accessed March 5, 2024, https://galinfo.com.ua/news/shevchenko_sogodni_likuie_rak_mentalnosti_urazhenoi_putinskym_virusom__professor_salyga_162538.html.

From their research stays abroad, these scholars brought new methodologies that connected Ukrainian academic tradition closer to the Western one.[114] They would also bring back books or xeroxed copies of articles that were not available in Ukraine. [115] As Tamara Hundorova recalled,

> "...at that time in Ukraine, it was difficult to find new materials, books, articles, in particular those that had long become familiar in the West and were studied even in schools. All this was just beginning to come to us. Each new publication from the West was valued almost at its weight in gold."[116]

At the same time, they tried to balance new theories with local realities. The fact that they did not simply translate Western theories into the Ukrainian context but actively negotiated them is evident from their work. As Pavlychko stated,

> "Feminism already exists in Ukraine as an intellectual theory—not only as a system of postulates brought from the West but as the efforts of a few scholars: sociologists, literary critics, philosophers, who are trying to introduce a feminist discourse into the Ukrainian scientific and artistic circulation."[117]

The year 1990 was a turning point in the institutionalization of feminist literary criticism—Pavlychko initiated the creation of the "Feminist Seminar" at the Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and Ageyeva, Hundorova, and Natalka Shumylo became its members, while Zabuzhko was named as its "closest supporter" and Roman Veretelnyk, Marta Bohachevsky-Chomiak, George Grabowicz, and Bohdan Kravchenko were

[114] Maria G. Rewakowicz, *Ukraine's Quest for Identity: Embracing Cultural Hybridity in Literary Imagination, 1991–2011* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 22.
[115] Ageyeva, "1990-ti dlia mene—tse neimovirnyi dosvid chytannia."
[116] Hundorova, "Interview with Tamara Hundorova about Feminist Themes in Ukrainian Literature."
[117] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Chy mozhlyvyi v Ukraini feminizm?" in *Feminism*, ed. Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 175.

mentioned as "Western colleagues" interested in supporting the seminar's work and its publications.[118]

In 1991, they published a feminist section in the monthly magazine Institute of Literature—Word and Time (*Слово і час*). The section included the articles "Does Ukrainian Literary Studies Need a Feminist School?" by Pavlychko, "A View of 'Marusya'" by Hundorova, and "Woman in Post-October Prose: A Parade of Stereotypes" by Ageyeva.[119]

Pavlychko's article was recognized as foundational to the development of feminist literary criticism in Ukraine. In the article, she stated that feminist critique was missing from Ukrainian literary studies, as compared to the long history of feminism in the West. Through analyzing American, French, and British feminist critics, including Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Judith Fetterley, Elaine Showalter, Barbara Heldt, Sandra Gilbert, and Mary Ellmann, who have proposed new methods of reading based on women's experiences, Pavlychko tried to show the urgent need for such analysis of Ukrainian literature that was still holding to patriarchal models. However, her main argument extended to saying that Ukrainian literary studies need a feminist school because a culture that ignores women will never become "complete."

Hundorova, Ageyeva, and Zborovska recognized Pavlychko as the leading figure of the circle. Describing Pavlychko's impact on Ukrainian literary studies, Hundorova stated:

> "When she [Pavlychko] translated Lady Chatterley's Lover—it was a revolution. After that, you could talk about everything. I remember how she admitted that she asked different people for the correct names of some intimate parts of the body because it was not customary to use such words in Ukrainian literature. That is, Solomiya created a new language for narration."[120]

[118] "Dyskusii. Feminis-tychnyi seminar," *Slovo i chas*, no. 6 (1991): 10.
[119] "Dyskusii, Feminis-tychnyi seminar," 10–29.
[120] Hundorova, "It Was from Feminist Theory that the Turn in Ukrainian Society and Humanities Began."

Background in British and American studies influenced how Pavlychko approached Ukrainian literature and informed her editorial work, including anthologies of Ukrainian prose translated into English, such as *From Three Worlds: New Writing from Ukraine*, for which she wrote the introduction.[121]

In 1992, Solomiia Pavlychko and Bohdan Kravchenko, a Canadian scholar of Ukrainian descent and former director of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, co-founded the publishing house "Osnovy." With the support of the Soros "Renaissance" Foundation, they started to publish translations of classical works, including important texts of Western feminism, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. Sometimes poorly translated, these books were important in contextualizing Western feminist theories, and what is even more important, made them available to Ukrainian scholars and students.

However, their approaches to feminism were different: Pavlychko wanted to bring feminism to the public sphere, while Hundorova and Ageeeva had very little public activity and were mostly interested in academic careers. Zborovska could be seen as a feminist "by accident"—feminism was one of but not the main method she used in her work, as she was more interested in psychoanalysis and eventually even distanced herself from feminism. Zabuzhko, on the other hand, has always been interested in public discussions, so she quite naturally started writing more prose and critical essays than producing academic research.

[121] *From Three Worlds: New Writing from Ukraine*, edited by Ed Hogan (Boston: Zephyr Press, 1996).

Differences also existed in their approaches to Ukrainian literary studies, as will be explained in the following chapter, which concentrates on how these scholars re-read the Ukrainian literary canon, particularly female modernist writers, through a feminist perspective.

2.2. Against the Populist Canon: Feminist Re-Reading of Ukrainian Modernist Literature

"Modernism is not just a literary movement or cultural phenomenon, it is a metaphor of our time, the entire 20th century."[122]

"Gender studies could not but have a place in Ukrainian literature because our literature is such that it cannot be read without them."[123]

In the article "Literary Canons and National Identities in Contemporary Ukraine," Marko Pavlyshyn described the Ukrainian literary canon as hierarchical and homogeneous, referring to it with the metaphor of "iconostasis."[124] The canon was attached to the political function of literature that defined and defended Ukrainian national identity in the absence of political sovereignty.

In the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, an alternative to the iconostasis appeared—Pavlyshyn called it "new canon." It re-evaluated the classics as well as authors, themes, and styles that were marginalized in or excluded from the "iconostasis." As Pavlyshyn said,

[122] Solomiia Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2024), 52-53.
[123] Ageyeva. "1990-ti dlia mene—tse neimovirnyi dosvid chytannia."
[124] Marko Pavlyshyn, "Literary Canons and National Identities in Contemporary Ukraine," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 5.

> "At stake, more than the images of the respected figures in the iconostasis were two issues: whether the system of cultural judgments was to remain forever monolithic, and who had the right to participate in crafting such monolithic judgments."[125]

The generation of writers and critics who promoted the new canon included many female scholars who saw an opportunity to rightfully position women writers in the new canon. Their feminist literary criticism did not just introduce new subjects but also reconsidered interpretive priorities—the very criteria by which literary value was previously allocated.

Solomiia Pavlychko's article, "Does Ukrainian Literary Scholarship Need a Feminist School?" published in 1991, was one of the first calls to integrate feminist theory into Ukrainian literary criticism. Pavlychko stated,

> "I am interested in feminism as a key to analyzing literary phenomena. The formulation of the problem is not new. After de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex,' these approaches have been tested for forty years, and I simply apply some of its methods to Ukrainian literature."[126]

The *fin de siècle* era was the main reference point for their feminist literary group. Modernism in Ukrainian literature is generally viewed as starting in the 1890s, but they argued that it manifested through the 20th century—from the 1910s to the 1960s.[127] The group defined it not only as a literary style, a chronological category, or a cultural phenomenon, but as a metaphor of the era in its intellectual, aesthetic, and historical dimensions.[128] Their primary interest, however, was in "early modernism."[129]

[125] Pavlyshyn, "Literary Canons and National Identities in Contemporary Ukraine," 13.
[126] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Feminizm—Nepohanyi Instrument, Shchob Nazvaty Rechi Svoimy Imenamy: An Interview with Solomiia Pavlychko," interview by Lyudmila Tarnashynska, *Den*, June 13, 1998, accessed March 5, 2024, https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/node/318065.
[127] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 38.
[128] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 52-53.
[129] Solomiia Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (Kyiv: Lybid, 1997), 19.

Although Pavlychko defended the plurality of modernism, she also defined its recurring discourses: Europeanization, anti-populism, experimentation, individualism, and criticism of the gender norms and cultural taboos.[130] On the one hand, these discourses placed Ukrainian modernism in dialogue with Western cultural models, on the other, they were not just an imitation of it but a locally situated negotiation with modernity itself.

At the same time, they believed that modernism would not come to an end naturally—its end is possible only through a disclosure of its internal logic and overcoming the conflicts that it has shaped or reproduced. That is one of the main reasons why modernism was so central to their feminist critique. In their view, this period showed the primary conflicts and tensions within Ukrainian culture. They saw parallels between the early modernist era and the present, addressing, as noted by Pavlychko, the common problem of "modernity of the nation and modernity of culture."[131] As Ola Hnatiuk noted,

> "This was caused, firstly, by the typological similarity of positions in relation to modernization challenges, and secondly, by the project of transformation of the existing cultural identity, based on the concepts that arose during the creation of the modern Ukrainian nation."[132]

Indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century, the modernist tradition came into conflict with the dominant cultural mode, which was male-dominated, patriotic, and populist—feminist critics saw these issues reemerging in the 1990s.[133] As Viha Ageyeva stated,

> "The interest in the previous fin de siècle—in the slogans, issues, and fascinations—that the new 20th century brought with it, is related, in part, to the desire to outline the perspective of the entire century, to see the connection, the inevitable similarity, but also the differences between two historical milestones—our present and the discourse of early Ukrainian modernism."[134]

[130] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 52-53.
[131] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 35.
[132] Ola Hnatiuk, *Proshchannia z imperiieiu: Ukrainski dyskusii* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2005), 24.
[133] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Feminism and Nationalism," in *Feminism*, ed. Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 54.
[134] Ageyeva, "Intelektual′na biohrafiia Solomii Pavlychko," 252.

In "Discourse of Modernism in Ukrainian Literature," Pavlychko was one of the first to analyze the period through the opposition of populist and modernist paradigms. Defining populism (narodnytstvo), Pavlychko stated that firstly, it is a political ideology, secondly—a system of literary styles, and thirdly—a cultural discourse that tries to theoretically comprehend it.[135] Pavlychko distinguished between political and literary discourses of populism. Politically, it spanned over 1840—1880 and had two main phases—romantic (1840s–1850s) and positivist (1860s–1870s).[136] She associated the romantic phase (1840s–1850s) with the Kyrill and Methodius Brotherhood, the positivist phase, with the generation of Old Hromada.[137]

Pavlychko was convinced that populism was a fundamentally patriarchal ideology.[138] It idealized the community in the form of a patriarchal family and the authenticity of rural life. The male was a breadwinner and, as such, the main authority. Female individuality was largely irrelevant to the populist discourse, as a woman was defined in relation to her family: her experiences remained peripheral and in many ways instrumentalized.

When it comes to literary populism, Pavlychko claimed that it preceded political one.[139] This means that literature was formative in articulating national identity in the absence of statehood. As Pavlychko ironically noted, "Literary revival is identical to cultural and national. Ukrainian literature is identical to Ukraine."[140] Thus, literature was not just mirroring society but substituting it. As such, it was not just a form of expression but the symbolic construction of the Ukrainian nation itself.[141] This placed enormous symbolic weight on literary forms and

[135] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 58.
[136] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 59.
[137] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 59.
[138] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (1997), 69.
[139] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 59.
[140] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 64.
[141] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 64.

styles—to write in the "correct" populist tradition was not just an aesthetic choice but an act of loyalty to a populist ideology.[142]

The populist literary canon was a patriarchal space represented by such figures as Kotliarevsky, Shevchenko, Kulish, Nechui-Levytsky, Franko, and Stefanyk.[143] It was also seen as a patriarchal family, with Shevchenko as Kobzar, the "father-founder" of Ukrainian literature and even the "father of the nation."[144] Shevchenko was not a writer open to reinterpretation, but a symbolic figure into which the populist canon selectively prescribed its values: moral clarity, self-sacrifice, and loyalty to the nation. Shevchenko's ambivalence, radicalism, and eroticism were ignored.[145]

The view of the literary field as an idealized "family" created a hierarchy in which canonical authors exercised authority and younger generations were expected to demonstrate continuity. As a consequence, it pushed to the margins those who did not fit populist ideals and threatened to destabilize the symbolic order of the "national family." Naturally, women were not part of the populist literary canon, although several of them wrote under male pseudonyms, as it was the only way to be part of literature at that time.

Similarly, in the structural hierarchy of genres in 19th-century and early 20th-century Ukrainian literature, poetry, especially lyric poetry modeled on folk traditions, was placed at the center. The poet was mythologized as a national figure.[146] In contrast, prose remained marginal both in status and scope as "it lacked a real linguistic basis, broad (non-people) themes, aesthetic and linguistic refinement."[147]

[142] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 64.
[143] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 59.
[144] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 70.
[145] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 70.
[146] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 67.
[147] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 67.

Although by the end of the 19th century, romantic nationalism became outdated, the general historical overdetermination of Ukrainian literature as a carrier of national identity made it normal for literary discourse to marginalize, if not forbid, the experimental: literature was too important to be left to modernist writers. It continued to function as a normative standard against which modernist "deviation" was judged as apolitical and decadent. Later on, experimentation was similarly proscribed in Soviet literary practice, and modernism was officially replaced by socialist realism.[148]

Pavlychko considered modernism to be a counter-discourse that arose "from conflict, denial, and destruction of the old."[149] It rejected populism and turned to the Ukrainian elite to create its own high culture.[150] As Nila Zborovska put it, Ukrainian literary modernism "appeared as a denial of hermetic populism, [it] identified itself as a literary nationalism directed at the creation of a modern European nation."[151]

They concentrated predominantly on female modernist writers. Zborovska pointed out that it was female modernist writers who reacted against populist ideology and resisted its ideological imperative to serve the nation. She stated:

> "Olga Kobylyanska sets before her generation a completely conscious problem: to bring the concept of nation beyond the borders of the peasantry, which would also mean beyond the borders of the non-authoritative patriarchy with the only style of women's life as humiliation."[152]

[148] George G. Grabowicz, "Rethinking Ukrainian Modernism," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 36, no. 3/4 (2019): 267.
[149] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 47.
[150] Tamara Hundorova, *Femia melancholica: Stat i kultura v hendernii utopii Olhy Kobylianskoi* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2002), 132.
[151] Nila Zborovska, "The Ukrainian Cultural Canon: A Feminist Interpretation," *Ji*, no. 13 (1998), accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.ji.lviv.ua/n13texts/zborovs.htm.
[152] Zborovska, "The Ukrainian Cultural Canon: A Feminist Interpretation."

Similarly, Pavlychko considered that modernism in Ukraine was represented better by women than by men, as it was women who brought the progressive ideas that could modernize Ukrainian culture. Moreover, they not only represented an alternative to the patriarchal literary tradition but "destroyed the patriarchal images of impersonal women that dominated the national culture of the 19th century, as well as the myth of female passivity, weakness, and principal male activity."[153]

Among modernist authors, Lesia Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska interested the feminist literary group the most. Hundorova characterized Lesia Ukrainka's poem *Oderzhyma (Obsessed)* as a turning point in Ukrainian literature. In her opinion, it articulated a new way of modernist thinking[154]—one that is subjective, psychological, and anti-populist.

By writing about the "male" themes, Ukrainka and Kobylianska did not simply place women into literary discourse, but transformed the very terms of that discourse—their works, in Hundorova's formulation, "created 'women's culture' that goes beyond the biological [...] capabilities of the sexes and becomes a cultural phenomenon."[155]

At the same time, Hundorova also argued that within patriarchal Ukrainian cultural tradition, women have historically occupied the position of the "Other." She traced the marginalization of women to the second half of the 19th century when literature written by women was separated from the mainstream male literature.[156] In the article "A View of 'Marusya,'"[157] published in 1991 in a feminist section of Word and Time (Slovo i Chas), Hundorova argued that because Ukrainian literary tradition was formed under the influence of romanticism and

[153] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (1997), 86.
[154] Tamara Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly* (Kharkiv: Vivat, 2023), 234.
[155] Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly*, 186.
[156] Tamara Hundorova, *Proiavlennia slova: Dyskursiia rann'oho ukrains'koho modernizmu* (Kyiv, 2009), 148.
[157] Tamara Hundorova, "Pohland na 'Marusiu'," Slovo i Chas, no. 6 (1991): 15-22.

populist ideology and mirrored the patriarchal image of a "complete" culture through the female archetype as a "sacralized" entity.

Hundorova showed that in populist tradition, a woman is represented as a symbol of the nation rather than an individual. She illustrated this through figures of Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko's Marusia or Taras Shevchenko's Kateryna. According to Hundorova, this idealization of women became the basis of a "closed" cultural model opposed to the "openness" of modernity. Modernist writers—including Ukrainka and Kobylyanska but also Franko and Vynnychenko—tried to go beyond the symbolic function of women and their individuality.

Hundorova connected the representation of women in literature to national identity building and cultural modernization. She argued for the need to reconstruct patriarchal models of thinking, as this is the only way to the construction of an "open" culture. Describing her work, Hundorova mentioned:

> "I was particularly interested in the idealization of patriarchal femininity in Ukrainian literature, to which Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko contributed greatly with his image of Marusia in the novel of the same name. Marusia became the model, so to speak, of the entire Ukrainian patriarchal literary tradition. It was Marusia who was especially valued and idealized as a type of Ukrainian woman by Panteleimon Kulish. Kulish created a populist (rural) cultural myth, and in this myth, he assigned a special place to Marusia: she was supposed to symbolize the modesty, decency, virginity of a Ukrainian woman, her ideality. Marusia had to be modest, the female body had to be carried beyond the lines of the work— Kulish specially emphasized that all her buttons were fastened to the very neck..."[158]

Thus, they saw the literary strategies of Ukrainka and Kobylianska as a response to the need for cultural emancipation: female modernists rejected romanticism and populism, and chose modern "Europeanness" instead. According to Hundorova, Ukrainka and Kobylianska adopted

[158] Hundorova, "Interview with Tamara Hundorova about Feminist Themes in Ukrainian Literature."

European modernism not just because of foreign influences—it emerged in a dialectical relationship with Ukrainian literary tradition.[159] As Pavlychko noted,

> "On the one hand, none of them [Ukrainka and Kobylianska] put forward a theoretical concept of rebellion against the national tradition, on the other hand, none of them found authorities for themselves within its framework."[160]

For Zborovska, women's literature undermined the ideal of patriarchal femininity that associated women with vulnerability, sensuality, and modesty by introducing "the image of strong-willed and courageous femininity."[161] Zborovska called male modernists, like Mykola Voroniy, Hnat Khotkevich, Petro Karmanskyi, and Mykhailo Kotsyubynskyi, "distinctly infantile" and considered them unable to articulate a developed modernist program because their writings were immature compared to the radicalism of female modernists.[162]

Nila Zborovska pointed out that Ivan Franko called Lesia Ukrainka "the only man" in Ukrainian literature,[163] and Pavlychko stated that Franko canonized Ukrainka by masculinizing her[164]—he acknowledged her writings not despite her gender but as far as she could be defined as transcending it. Essentially, Franko reaffirmed the idea that cultural authority could only be claimed by denying feminine identity. He associated subjectivity, emotion, and introspection with femininity, which he pathologized and excluded from "healthy" literature that was supposed to be objective, rational, and ideological.[165] Nevertheless, Ageyeva noted that by

[159] Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly*, 122.
[160] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 91.
[161] Zborovska, "The Ukrainian Cultural Canon: A Feminist Interpretation."
[162] Zborovska, "The Ukrainian Cultural Canon: A Feminist Interpretation."
[163] Zborovska, "The Ukrainian Cultural Canon: A Feminist Interpretation."
[164] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 71.
[165] Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly*, 9.

labeling Ukrainka as "the only man" in the literature, Franko also confirmed the "feminine" nature of the literature of that time.[166]

At the same time, Franko was talking mostly about Ukrainka's poetry, while "it was Ukrainka's dramatic works that proved to be most consonant with her creative talent and the most adequate form of her self-expression."[167] He dismissed Ukrainka's dramas that were intensely psychological and formally innovative. In them, she wrote about pain, suffering, illness, exile—themes that went against the objectivity that Franko idealized so much. Similarly, Ageyeva demonstrated how in the Soviet period, Ukrainka's dramas that contained most of her modernist ideas were ignored, while she was canonized only for her "revolutionary" poetry.[168]

Describing how Ukrainka was presented by the Soviet literary critics, Ageyeva ironically noted:

> "Lesya Ukrainka is a friend of the workers, close to Marxism, almost a Soviet person. Instead, she is surrounded by enemies: her mother, her husband, her closest friends, not to mention her uncle Mykhailo Drahomanov—all of them were bourgeois nationalists, enemies of the working people. The question arises: how did she keep her innocence in such an environment?"[169]

In the article "Woman in Post-October Prose: A Parade of Stereotypes," published in a feminist section of Word and Time (Slovo i Chas) together with the mentioned articles by Pavlychko and Hundorova, Ageyeva insisted that in the works of Ukrainka and Kobylyanska, women appear as active and independent subjects with a complex psychological life. This tradition disappeared from Soviet literary discourse that produced a very simplified ideological image

[166] Vira Ageyeva, *Poetesa zlamiu stolit: tvorchist Lesi Ukrainky v postmodernii interpretatsii* (Kyiv: Lybid, 1999), 254.
[167] Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly*, 234.
[168] Vira Ageyeva, "Zhinka v pozhovtnevii prozi," *Slovo i Chas*, no. 6 (1991): 23.
[169] Ageyeva, "1990-ti dlia mene—tse neimovirnyi dosvid chytannia."

of a woman who either unconditionally served her family or equally sacrificially to the state. Thus, Soviet literature interrupted the modernist tradition of female subjectivity. [170]

Finally, Pavlychko's monograph, "The Discourse of Modernism in Ukrainian Literature," brought attention to the letters between Lesia Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska. Their correspondence, which lasted 14 years (1899–1913), includes 59 surviving letters: 55 from Lesia to Olha and only 4 from Olha to Lesia. In the letters, which were extremely intimate and sincere, writers invented their own language to express closeness, using impersonal addresses: "htos" (someone), "htosichok" ("little" someone), or "htos bilenkiy" (someone white)—referring to Ukrainka, and "htos chornenkyi" (someone black)—referring to Kobylyanska. This way, they tried to express the depth of feelings for which there were no words in the language of that time.

To this day, literary critics have not given a clear answer to the question of whether these relationships were exclusively platonic or had erotic overtones. Pavlychko's monograph, in which she insisted on the latter, predictably, was met with controversy, as both academic and general audiences were not ready for such a perspective on the relationship between two canonized female writers. Some statements outraged conservative parts of Ukrainian society. For example, Pavlychko wrote:

> "Their letters were the embodiment of a dream about love that was not realized in their lives. A lesbian fantasy, for which Kobylianska's diaries and her previous works provide grounds."[171]

[170] Ageyeva, "Zhinka v pozhovtnevii prozi," 23-29.
[171] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (1997), 86.

As Ageyeva noted, during the defense of Pavlychko's doctoral dissertation, one of the people in the audience spoke out and started to "defend Lesia Ukrainka from Solomiia Pavlychko," calling Pavlychko's writing her own "lesbian fantasies."[172]

Recalling the perception of Pavlychko's work, Hundorova stated:

> "Our people, in general, did not really understand what 'discourse' is, and translated everything into biology. I remember that it [Pavlychko's monograph] was a bomb. Who did not talk about this 'lesbianism'? An insult to honor, an insult to literature... How can such a thing be said about innocent Ukrainian literature? We can say that in the gender sense, Solomiia broke through the wall of silence."[173]

Pavlychko did not mean that Ukrainka and Kobylianska were in an erotic relationship. Her use of "lesbianism" was metaphorical—it meant to describe an alternative type of intimacy between two writers that functioned within the male-dominated literary sphere[174] and the patriarchal structure of society more broadly. The suppression or sublimation of desire in their literary texts reflected the limitations of the literary and social norms. In their correspondence, they produced an aesthetic in which female desire could be at least imagined, if not always fully articulated as a legitimate literary subject. Pavlychko considered their intellectual and emotional connection as "a radical rethinking of female subjectivity in a form of protest against the patriarchal culture."[175]

Commenting on Pavlychko's book, Zborovska noted:

> "The mechanism of this provocation was obvious: if in a totalitarian society sexuality was suppressed and doomed to be silenced, the conversation about it becomes a sign of a radical shift—it strikes academic literary studies."[176]

[172] Ageyeva, "Feminism Was Risky for Reputation, Career, and Authority but Interested Everyone: An Interview with Vira Ageyeva."
[173] Hundorova, "Interview with Tamara Hundorova about Feminist Themes in Ukrainian Literature."
[174] Hundorova, "It Was from Feminist Theory that the Turn in Ukrainian Society and Humanities Began."
[175] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (1997), 86.
[176] Nila Zborovska, *Moia Lesia Ukrainka: Esei* (Ternopil: Dzura, 2002), 66.

Indeed, in Pavlychko's opinion, most of the literary critics who ignored feminist aspects of Ukrainka's and Kobylianska's works were intellectually and culturally behind both writers:

> "Our writers are genderless, they devoted their lives only to folk or pure aesthetics. The level of such public discourse is a hundred years behind. [...] Modern Ukrainian literature is only slowly discovering the erotic language."[177]

In the book "Femina Melancholica: Gender and Culture in Olga Kobylianska's Gender Utopia," Hundorova also analyzed the letters of Ukrainka and Kobylianska using a psychoanalytical approach. Although it received much less attention than Pavlychko's monograph, some of the chapter titles—"Anatomy of Female Sexuality (Narcissism-Hysteria-Masochism)" or "The 'Castrated' Woman: Gender Violence"—were no less provocative.

As Pavlychko, Hundorova described the relationship between Ukrainka and Kobylianska as an idealized intellectual and emotional connection, or "female platonic novel," and by no means a romantic or an erotic relationship.[178] In her view, the foundation of their friendship was built on the similarity of personal stories:

> "This union was a form of self-defense for women in a patriarchal world dominated by structures of male culture and male consciousness. Female love appears to be the construction of a special intimate field of culture, where feelings, play, and language are connected."[179]

Thus, the intimacy between Ukrainka and Kobylyanska developed in a space that had no language to describe and legitimize their relationship. The letters, then, also show the limitations of literary discourse that was not able to accommodate non-patriarchal modes of

[177] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Ia vvazhaiu Lviv ridnym, svoim idealnym mistom," in *Feminism*, ed. Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 253.
[178] Hundorova, *Femia melancholica: Stat i kultura v hendernii utopii Olhy Kobylianskoi*, 271.
[179] Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly*, 202.

connection. In their correspondence, "a new language is created and a new—feminine—writing is born."[180]

Moreover, Zabuzhko considered their friendship to be a prerequisite to the development of their femininity,[181] and, thus, a part of personal growth and not only a defensive response to patriarchy. In their exchange, they constructed an intersubjective way of thinking and feeling through performative and extremely saturated language. This was not just "confessional" writing but the mutual development of shared semantic register—a form of what Hélène Cixous called *écriture féminine*. To call this relationship "lesbian fantacy" is not necessarily to invoke sexuality but to designate the intensity of their relationship that existed outside partriarchal frameworks, because "after all, their love remained a literary act, it began literary and sublimated textually, without coming out into public life and becoming a hidden story."[182]

Interpreting the relationship between two modernist writers, Zborovska argued:

> "...in the relationship between Lesya Ukrainka and Olga Kobylyanska, love is lived and experienced as a poetic passion, in other words, the desire itself is important, and not its embodiment, the dream itself (fantasy), and not reality…"[183]

The misrepresentation of Ukrainka and Kobylianska in the literary canon meant that they were too important to be excluded from it but too "radical" to be included unless they were depoliticized. Their works did not fit the gender norms promoted in the canon, so they were deprived of their feminist substance, which shows that the canon was unable to accommodate the new women's identities.

[180] Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly*, 185.
[181] Oksana Zabuzhko, *Notre Dame d'Ukraine: Ukrainka v konflikti mifologii* (Kyiv: Fakt, 2007), 121.
[182] Hundorova, *Lesia Ukrainka. Knyhy Syvilly*, 203.
[183] Zborovska, *Moia Lesia Ukrainka: Esei*, 74.

At the same time, feminist re-reading of their works was not just an attempt to establish an alternative literary canon but also meant establishing continuity with the interrupted feminist tradition in Ukrainian literature. A return to the origins of feminism allowed these literary scholars to demonstrate that feminism was not just a modern Western "import" but an important part of Ukrainian literature. Showing this continuity with female modernist writers allowed them to claim their own place in academia.

Pavlychko noted that the modernist project of that time was not able to modernize the culture fully:

> "None of them [modernist attempts] changed the relationship between modernism and the main tradition (populism and realism), as well as between the marginal and the central in literary history."[184]

Indeed, female modernist writers still had to negotiate with the populist tradition. The irony is in the fact that the cautious approaches of Ukrainka and Kobylianska had a parallel in the work of female literary scholars—they had to negotiate with the nationalist discourses to get legitimacy and acceptance in the public sphere.

Although modernism was a counter-discourse, it remained peripheral compared to the populist ideology and later socialist modernism. Similarly, feminist literary discourse generated an alternative literary project, but it remained a discursive intervention rather than a fully institutionalized methodology. Of course, the marginal often defines the center. However, it does not change the dispositions that marginalize it in the first place. In each case, the periphery became the space of innovation, but it was not able to reconfigure the center. Feminist literary discourse, like modernism at the turn of the century, was not excluded from the dominant cultural mode but was legitimized only insofar as it was compatible with it. At the same time,

[184] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi* (2024), 48-49.

they were quite successful in raising their cultural capital and managed to position themselves as authorities in the Ukrainian public sphere. This intellectual legitimacy, in turn, allowed them to influence not only academic discussions but also broader debates on national identity.

Chapter 3.

3.1. A Nation of Her Own: Construction of the Feminist National Mythology

"In my opinion, Ukraine has a chance to survive as a cultural European nation only if it modernizes [...] and here feminism is a very good tool."[185]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, interest in re-evaluating the Ukrainian cultural heritage emerged. The so-called "revival" of the national idea—previously repressed national literature, history, and art—was seen as a return to the authentic Ukrainian culture. At the same time, it also led to the restoration of traditional cultural norms that were patriarchal in their nature.

In 1991, Pavlychko warned about the danger of neo-traditionalism. She saw the roots of patriarchy not only in the seventy-two years of communist rule but in "a strong peasant ethos, Christian traditions, and certain aspects of Ukrainian history and culture specific to a non-sovereign country."[186] She argued that patriarchal limitations narrow down the culture and make it small, provincial, irrelevant, and even went so far as to say that a society without gender equality is "sick or underdeveloped."[187] Describing this situation, she stated:

> "The populist ideal born of romanticism, namely the ideal of literature, which would serve the liberation and enlightenment of the people, [is] the idea that conserves old or develops new patriarchal ideals, subordination, sexism, inequality."[188]

[185] Pavlychko, "Feminizm—Nepohanyi Instrument, Shchob Nazvaty Rechi Svoimy Imenamy: An Interview with Solomiia Pavlychko."
[186] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Between Feminism and Nationalism: New Women's Groups in the Ukraine," in *Feminism*, ed. Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 39.
[187] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Chy potribna ukrains′komu literaturoznavstvu feministychna shkola?" in *Feminism*, ed. Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 25.
[188] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Feminizm yak mozhlyvyi pidkhid do analizu ukrains′koi kul′tury," in *Feminism*, ed. Vira Ageyeva (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 29.

Pavlychko raised a reasonable question—to what extent neo-traditionalist ideas were positive, or in her own words, how "universal, humane, and egalitarian" they were?[189] In her opinion, most of them were based on patriarchal norms that oppressed women, not always directly, but also by praising women as mothers, responsible not only for their family but also the national culture.

While not rejecting the return to "traditional" Ukrainian culture, Pavlychko called for its intellectual reorientation, as "it is impossible to think and live in the categories of the beginning of the 19th century."[190] She was convinced that only a feminist approach can "destroy and deconserve patriarchal structures of society and populist ideals"[191] and modernize Ukrainian culture.

Similarly, Tamara Hundorova saw modernity through gender. She stated that "feminist ideology, fundamentally modern in its nature, should help Ukraine develop as a modern nation and modernize Ukrainian culture."[192]

Yet, nationalist discourses presented feminism as a threat to the foundations of traditional culture and, thus, the "revival" of the Ukrainian national idea. Pavlychko saw the rejection of feminism as a matter of priority—"first we get sovereignty for Ukraine, and then everything else, including equality for women,"[193] as Ukrainians always placed special importance on preserving the nation, and accordingly, national culture.

[189] Pavlychko, "Feminizm yak mozhlyvyi pidkhid do analizu ukrains′koi kul′tury," 30.
[190] Pavlychko, "Feminizm yak mozhlyvyi pidkhid do analizu ukrains′koi kul′tury," 31.
[191] Pavlychko, "Feminizm yak mozhlyvyi pidkhid do analizu ukrains′koi kul′tury," 29.
[192] Hundorova, "Pohland na 'Marusiu'," 22.
[193] Pavlychko, "Feminizm yak mozhlyvyi pidkhid do analizu ukrains′koi kul′tury," 30.

At the same time, the feminist methodology, adopted by this group of literary scholars, was meant to transcend not only the patriarchal ideology but also the provincial and post-colonial status of Ukrainian culture.[194]

In the article "Empire as Discourse," Mykola Riabchuk argued that independent Ukraine did not have a clear epistemological break with the Soviet Union. As such, he thought that imperial structures continue to exist in Ukrainian cultural production because the "imperial discourse" was unconsciously internalized by Ukrainian intellectuals, that, as a result, continued to function within the opposition between an imperial discourse and an anti-colonial counter-discourse.[195]

Female literary scholars similarly considered Ukrainian culture to be influenced by the colonial past.[196] Pavlychko considered the early 20th-century modernism as an attempt to get rid of the inferiority complex and coloniality of Ukrainian culture. As she stated,

> "Ukraine is a typical postcolonial society. Its cultural discourses repeat Soviet formulas and do not want to distance themselves from "classical" writers and ideas inherited from the past. At the same time, it is precisely today that the rethinking of cultural values and the modernization of cultural discourses are an urgent task."[197]

This was especially relevant for Ukrainian literature that, in the context of a stateless nation, became strongly linked to politics. Early modernist writings implicitly contained political views because other ways of their expression, especially for women, were limited. Later on, literature also became a form of resistance, as it had to preserve Ukrainian culture from the

[194] Scholars paid a lot of attention to the idea of viewing the post-Soviet space through a postcolonial lens, and notably David Chioni Moore in his essay "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique" suggested that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of its republics can be understood as a form of decolonization, similar to the experiences of former European colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

[195] Mykola Riabchuk, "Imperiia yak dyskurs," *Krytyka* 6, no. 9 (59) (August 2002): 2–6, accessed March 5, 2024, https://krytyka.com/ua/articles/imperiya-yak-dyskurs/.

[196] Zhurzhenko, "'Nebezpechni zviazky': natsionalizm i feminizm v Ukraini," 145.

[197] Solomiia Pavlychko, "Nasyl′stvo yak metafora (Dyskurs nasyl′stva v ukrains′kii literaturi)," in *Teoriia literatury* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 594.

Soviet impositions. After independence, literature continued to perform this political function with writings about national identity, memory, and language.

Female literary scholars did not agree with this instrumentalization of literature. In their view, an obsession with the national idea and subordination of literature to national goals meant that Ukrainian literature and culture more broadly were still reproducing the colonial complex. Oksana Zabuzhko argued for the need to free literature from this "national mission," stating that her generation could be the first after the last six decades to be free from the obligation "to save the nation."[198]

Moreover, Zabuzhko emphasized that Ukrainian female modernists were limited in their expression not only by the hierarchy of gender roles but also by the coloniality of Ukrainian culture. The expectation to fit the national ideal pressured them to accept populist literary norms or be marginalized in the literary discourse. Surely, Zabuzhko saw the parallel between female modernists and female writers of her time who faced similar pressure that kept them from being recognized.[199]

Zabuzhko's "Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex" became a defining feminist intervention of independent Ukraine—as Hundorova defined it, "an apology for women's literature of the 90s."[200] The central narrative was not just personal but symbolic of a colonial national trauma. It explored the consequences of Ukrainian national subjugation—the social and national marginalization of women and the "weakness" of Ukrainian men.[201] Writing about an intellectually self-aware woman who was nothing like a national symbol, Zabuzhko

[198] Oksana Zabuzhko, "Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 39, no. 2 (1995), 275.
[199] Oksana Zabuzhko, "Zhinka-avtor u kolonialnii kulturi, abo Znadoby do ukrains'koi hendernoi mifolohii," *ExLibris*, accessed March 5, 2024, https://exlibris.org.ua/zabuzko/r05.html.
[200] Tamara Hundorova, *Pisliachornobyl's'ka biblioteka: Ukrains'kyi literaturnyi postmodern* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2005), 209.
[201] Hundorova, *Pisliachornobyl's'ka biblioteka: Ukrains'kyi literaturnyi postmodern*, 209.

constructed a "new heroine," and through her emotional and bodily experiences, she exposed the failures of post-Soviet transition.[202]

The way in which Zabuzhko described male "weakness" was similar to how Zborovska described male modernists as lacking the intellectual radicalism compared to female modernists like Ukrainka and Kobylianska. In this sense, too, Zabuzhko's feminist writing connected to and extended the early 20th-century female modernist project through a late 20th-century postcolonial lens. Her description of male "weakness" was a structural diagnosis of failure of male Ukrainian intellectuals to provide a coherent cultural response to post-Soviet crises. Just as these scholars considered literary modernism in Ukraine as a project led by women, they projected the same situation on their own time. The implication is that, in times of national or cultural crises, women are those who are capable of articulating alternative thoughts. This also meant that the task of cultural critique and national recovery is disproportionately assigned to women.

At the same time, Zabuzhko's feminist writing was a form of postcolonial critique: it not only destabilized the oppositions between public/private discourse and political/emotional life, but also showed how gendered oppression was built into the very processes of constructing national identity. Thus, feminist re-reading of Ukrainian modernist literature was also an attempt to deconstruct a postcolonial Ukrainian national identity.

Moreover, to deconstruct the colonial aspects of Ukrainian culture and connect it to the European intellectual tradition, the group tried to show the European origins of Ukrainian modernism. After the independence, such a stress on the European roots of Ukrainian identity was particularly important since many of the Ukrainian intellectuals tried to distance themselves from the Soviet legacies. Thus, they saw Europe as a way out not only of patriarchal

[202] Hundorova, *Pisliachornobyl's'ka biblioteka: Ukrains'kyi literaturnyi postmodern*, 209.

structures but also of Russian cultural hegemony and provincialism that defined Ukrainian identity.

Pavlychko clearly articulated the main stakes by saying:

> "The problem of orientation towards European cultural models was part of the literary debate between modernists and populists. Today, the question of the European choice is no longer only a literary one. For the first time in modern history, it affects politics, economy, nation, and the entire country. However, the broader political and economic European choice cannot take place without corresponding cultural shifts, without building a new cultural identity, and without a European orientation of literature, which in the process of modernization will not only maintain its originality but also get rid of historical isolation and the fears and complexes it caused."[203]

Zabuzhko drew a distinction between structural logic and historical evolution of Russian and European national ideas. She viewed the Russian national idea as following a cyclical pattern—intrinsically linked to and reproduced by forms of statehood.[204] It implied that the Russian concept of the nation is inseparable from state institutions and is defined by cycles of colonial or ideological expansion and retraction. As opposed to this, Zabuzhko saw the European national idea as created by separating from the state and dialectically reconnecting with it at a higher level so that, at first, culture stands distinct from the state, only to influence it later on. Zabuzhko considered the Ukrainian national ideal to be much closer to the European one. As she explained,

> "Ukraine represents the far east of European culture, albeit somewhat blurred by the marginal features that are natural for a spiritual borderland."[205]

Zabuzhko acknowledged that the Ukrainian national identity is defined by opposition to the Russian one.[206] The differentiation between "us" (Ukrainians) and "not us" (Russians)

[203] Solomiia Pavlychko, *Teoriia literatury* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2002), 22.
[204] Oksana Zabuzhko, *Filosofiia ukrains'koi idei ta yevropeiskyi kontekst: Frankivs'kyi period*, 5th ed. (Kyiv: Komora, 2020), 70.
[205] Zabuzhko, *Filosofiia ukrains'koi idei ta yevropeiskyi kontekst: Frankivs'kyi period*, 70.
[206] Zabuzhko, *Filosofiia ukrains'koi idei ta yevropeiskyi kontekst: Frankivs'kyi period*, 75-76.

presented the Russian cultural tradition as the main counterpoint to which Ukrainian identity reacted and defined itself.[207]

As Tetiana Zhurzhenko noted, this group of scholars considered their critique to be post-colonial, but its target was "not a 'Western-centered discourse' as is usual in post-colonial studies, but first of all, Russian (Soviet) cultural influence and dominance—past and present."[208]

Yet, although they saw placing Ukraine within the European intellectual tradition as anti-colonial, they implicitly positioned Europe as the normative center of legitimacy. In a sense, they replicated a similar contradiction in trying to adopt Western feminist theories that could also reproduce a hierarchy Europe/West vs. provincialism. They were still limited by the opposition between an imperial discourse and an anti-colonial counter-discourse.

Zborovska was the loudest among the group in insisting that the "Western model" of gender equality did not represent the complexity of Ukrainian society and was incompatible with Ukrainian historical experience and national priorities. As she noted,

> "In the context of global [Western] feminism, Ukrainian feminism will always have its own specifics. It is not about its inferiority to global feminism, but about its different quality determined by mentality."[209]

Indeed, one of the main specifics in their feminist approach was that they considered Russian political and cultural influence to be no less dangerous than patriarchy. This was also one of the main reasons behind their decision to negotiate with the nationalist project. It was a rather

[207] Zabuzhko, *Filosofiia ukrains'koi idei ta yevropeiskyi kontekst: Frankivs'kyi period*, 75-76.
[208] Zhurzhenko, *Ukrainian Feminism(s): Between Nationalist Myth and Anti-Nationalist Critique*, 11.
[209] Nila Zborovska, *Feministychni rozdumy: Na karnavali mertvykh potsilunkiv* (Lviv: Lytopys, 1999), 106.

pragmatic approach that allowed them to access the public sphere, as they otherwise were not likely to get into the cultural mainstream.

Female literary scholars argued that to fully modernize Ukraine national and feminist goals could and should be pursued together. Basically, they offered the idea of Ukrainian national feminism. Zabuzhko's "Field Research on Ukrainian Sex" was one of the first attempts to articulate this idea of national feminism by showing women's strengths.

Similarly, Zborovska was convinced that feminism and nationalism share the same idealized goal, which they are not able to reach in real life. She saw nationalism "as the destruction of cosmopolitan (imperial) thinking, as a return to another, national marginal existence"[210] and feminism "as the destruction of the patriarchal discourse of power and an appeal to marginal female existence."[211] Both discourses are "a myth-making (mythopoetic) process aimed at ideal (spiritual) self-affirmation."[212]

At the same time, Zborovska drew a distinction between "nationalism as state ideology or political system" and nationalism as "private and intimate sentiment of a particular individual" that exists "poetically."[213] Nationalism as a state ideology functions through formalized rituals and hierarchical exclusions—it is performative and rhetorical. In contrast, "poetic nationalism" is not instrumental and can not be reduced to state interests—it is an individual attachment to land, language, memory, and culture that is experienced and expressed in art, literature, and personal history. Zborovska was not convinced by nationalism as a state ideology but believed that feminism could negotiate with "poetic nationalism." As she stated,

[210] Zborovska, *Feministychni rozdumy: Na karnavali mertvykh potsilunkiv*, 46.
[211] Zborovska, *Feministychni rozdumy: Na karnavali mertvykh potsilunkiv*, 46.
[212] Zborovska, *Feministychni rozdumy: Na karnavali mertvykh potsilunkiv*, 46.
[213] Nila Zborovska, "Shevchenko in Women's Studies," *Krytyka*, March 1, 1999, accessed March 5, 2024, https://krytyka.com/ua/articles/shevchenko-v-zhinochykh-studiyakh.

> "The ideal perspective of feminism also includes the idea of 'fraternity' between man and woman based on the spiritual freedoms of each sex."[214]

This is where she distinguished two tendencies in the feminist discourse—one that operates with skepticism, or even hostility, toward nationalism, and one that does not reject the nation as such but attempts to feminize and pluralize it—so-called "soft national feminism."[215] However, even if nationalism is articulated through personal sentiments, it is never fully separated from political violence. Zborovska underestimated how quickly it can be mobilized for exclusionary political means, especially in postcolonial or post-conflict societies. For example, in the Yugoslav wars the intimate attachment to national identity was weaponized to justify the protection of "our women" and "our culture" at the cost of patriarchal control and ethnic essentialism which led the radical critique of any attempts to rehabilitate nationalism, even in its "soft" or "poetic" form, by the Yugoslav feminists.

In an attempt to overcome the patriarchal idea of woman as passive, dependent, and self-sacrificing, these feminist scholars constructed a counter-narrative that was centered around a "strong" woman—intellectual, independent, and political. However, their "strong" woman was emancipated not for her own sake but functioned as a cultural metaphor of European modernity and continued to be defined by the national interests.

Ironically, instead of deconstructing the patriarchal logic of national mythology, they transformed it into a "progressive" feminist-national myth—this time, created by women themselves. It did not resolve any structural problems but simply replaced one set of prescriptive roles for another and continued to prioritize national over individual.

[214] Zborovska, *Feministychni rozdumy: Na karnavali mertvykh potsilunkiv*, 45.
[215] Zborovska, *Feministychni rozdumy: Na karnavali mertvykh potsilunkiv*, 42.

This situation repeated a structural dilemma of the early 20th century and reflected the epistemological frameworks of modernism and second-wave feminism that these female scholars were working with. Just as female modernists, they tried to develop their literary agency in a space where literature had to perform a nation-building function, and their feminist discourse was similarly appropriated into the nationalist frameworks. Such an open negotiation with nationalist discourses became a source of major disagreement with other feminist groups and the next generations of feminist scholars in Ukraine.

3.2. Sisterhood is Not a Given: Limits of Solidarity Between Kyiv and Kharkiv Feminisms

"Political solidarity cannot be assumed on the basis of shared 'womanhood.'"[216]

The fact that the feminist groups in Ukraine had similar goals or shared the same enemies might have made their unity more desirable, but not more likely—it was only a matter of time before disagreements emerged. Most of them became fragmented by different interests, methodologies, and ideological positions, having almost no interest in collaboration. However, Kyiv and Kharkiv feminist groups positioned themself in a direct opposition to each other. One of the main reasons for this was their positions towards nationalism.

Indeed, Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies (KhCGS) was set apart from other feminist groups. Its leading figure, Irina Zherebkina, has been the director of the KhCGS since its establishment in 1994. In 1998, the KhCGS started a magazine, Gender Studies ("Gendernye issledovaniya"),

[216] Gal та Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 106.

with Zherebkina as its editor-in-chief, and in 2001, the series of books "Gender Studies" and "Feminist Collection."

Zherebkina's intellectual trajectory is very different from the female literary scholars in Kyiv. She received her degree in Philosophy at Rostov University in 1983, and from 1991 to 1996 worked at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. In 1989, she defended her first dissertation, "Multidimensionality of the Self as a Phenomenon of Nonclassical Rationality," and her second dissertation, "Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis and Gender Theory: Development of the Concept of the Subject," in 2002. Since 2003, she has been a professor at the Department of Theory of Culture and Philosophy of Science at Kharkiv National University. However, the influence of the Russian intellectual and academic contexts is clearly visible from her style of writing in the language she uses and concepts she refers to.

The Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies represented Russian-speaking feminism in Ukraine. The use of the Russian language was both practical and ideological. Practically, it acknowledged the linguistic realities of Ukrainian academia in the 1990s, where using the Russian language was not unusual but widespread, as well as many Ukrainians in general, especially in the eastern regions. Ideologically, it situated the center within a broader context of feminist scholarship in Russia and other post-Soviet states.[217]

During the 1990s, the Kharkiv academic community had to face the disintegration of the Soviet educational and research infrastructure. Kharkiv's status as a Soviet-era scientific and educational center[218] did not translate into post-independence Ukraine. While Kharkiv faced a visible decline in scientific status, Kyiv became a new national intellectual center. The

[217] Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Feminist (De)Constructions of Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space," in *Mapping Difference: The Many Faces of Women in Contemporary Ukraine*, ed. Marian J. Rubchak (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 189.

[218] Catherine Wanner, *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 21.

marginalization of Kharkiv's academia was exacerbated by the disruption of Soviet scientific networks and the loss of direct access to cooperative research and funding available to Soviet republics.

The context of institutional instability and limited resources also determined the development of feminist scholarship in Kharkiv. Under these conditions, the KhCGS recognized that their activities are conditional on external financial support and pursued international funding. In 1996, it started to receive substantial support for the institutionalization of gender studies in Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries from the MacArthur Foundation—the total amount the KhCGS had been receiving up to 2007 is more than $1,300,000.[219] Indeed, with this support, the KhCGS created "University Network for the Countries of the Former USSR" with the aim of introducing gender studies to other post-Soviet countries and collaborated with universities in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Latvia, and Lithuania.[220] As Zherebkina stated,

> "This [collaboration] seemed to us absolutely natural: after all, we still quite recently were citizens of one common state and we faced very similar and overlapping tasks and problems."[221]

The KhCGS's activities demonstrated its regional influence. Using Russian as the main language for its Gender Studies journal and translations of Western feminist theorists allowed the KhCGS to position itself in a linguistic and cultural space of the former Soviet Union. Publishing Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, Helene Cixous, Andrea Dworkin, Nancy Fraser, bell hooks, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and others[222] in Russian also helped the KhCGS to reach

[219] MacArthur Foundation, "Kharkov Center for Gender Studies," accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.macfound.org/grantee/kharkov-center-for-gender-studies-24628/.
[220] Irina Zherebkina, "Dispatch from Kharkiv National University," *Boston Review*, accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/dispatch-from-kharkiv-national-university/.
[221] Zherebkina, "Dispatch from Kharkiv National University."
[222] Zherebkina, "Dispatch from Kharkiv National University."

feminist scholars, activists, and students in the region, many of whom lacked access to Western feminist thought in their native languages.

Zherebkina highlighted the influence of KhCGS's work, noting:

> "These publications are still in demand, sought out by a new generation of feminists and gender researchers in the countries of the former USSR: they are read, republished, and remain the basis for the formation of feminist consciousness in our countries."[223]

At the same time, it also opened the KhCGS to criticism from Ukrainian intellectuals who associated Russian-language with cultural dependency or postcolonial inertia.

Zherebkina's assumption that cooperation between the former Soviet republics was "absolutely natural" does not to explain that in all fifteen post-Soviet states, there were many cultural, economic, and political differences, and that the collapse of the Soviet Union did not produce the same conditions for women across these countries. Since there was no common post-Soviet feminist agenda, believing that "Western-style" gender studies could be "universal" ignored the ambivalence of Soviet gender policies in different republics and also local feminist traditions.

However, Zherebkina distanced herself from "local" Ukrainian feminism, as she was skeptical about its possibility not only in Ukraine but in other post-Soviet states.[224] For her, any attempts to create "local" Ukrainian feminism would only help nationalist discourses. She theorized the possibility of women's transnational institutions and movements that would "contain the new universal order of globalization and expose local national regimes."[225] In such an approach, feminism should not articulate national differences but construct transnational solidarities that could end global systems of inequality. Basically, she denied the agency of Ukrainian feminists

[223] Zherebkina, "Dispatch from Kharkiv National University."
[224] Zhurzhenko, "Feminist (De)Constructions of Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space," 189.
[225] Irina Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye* (St. Petersburg: Aleteya, 2002), 70.

to create a form of feminism that makes sense not only locally but also globally. At the same time, Zherebkina's notion of a "new universal order" is contradictory in the sense that any attempt to create a "universal" framework favors some individuals and excludes others.

One of Zherebkina's central books, "Women's Political Unconscious," was published in 1996 and later reprinted in 2002. In the book, Zherebkina analyzed the Ukrainian feminist and nationalist discourses from a standpoint of postmodern feminist criticism. She argued that the ideology of the Ukrainian women's movement was always defined by nationalism. This was not her original idea, as this aspect of the Ukrainian women's movement was described by Marta Bohachevska-Chomiak in her monograph "Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life." However, contrary to Bohachevska-Chomiak, Zherebkina interpreted the historical connection of feminism and nationalism as negative to the women's interests and saw feminism in radical opposition to nationalism—a position that is very typical for Western feminist discourses.

Zherebkina claimed that similar problems in post-independence Ukraine prevented the development of a feminist movement. She saw neo-traditional ideology as subordinating all the economic, social, and political issues to the national identity. The new national space offered a system of identification that was supposed to help people go through the crisis—in other words, "national fantasies" filled the gaps left by the real problems.[226]

Zherebkina was convinced that the living conditions of many Ukrainians, including women, were not improved. She insisted that a new national discourse offered women symbolic models of identification that were based on the reinterpretation of the national past, including the symbol of Berehynia. It tried to modernize the traditional image of the Ukrainian woman that

[226] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 19.

would fit the demands of the nation, which she saw as an example of Hobsbawm's "invention of tradition."[227]

Zherebkina showed how the national discourse exploited resentment of the Soviet regime in claiming that under the Soviets, Ukrainian womanhood was suppressed and women were unable to fulfil their traditional roles. A patriarchal family became the foundation of cultural norms on which Ukrainian identity was constructed.[228] In this situation, a woman's body became instrumentalized both biologically and culturally,[229] and this gender symbolism was used as an object of violence against women.[230]

In her analysis, Zherebkina referred to Shevchenko's poetry,[231] stating that it is in Ukrainian romantic literature that the symbolism of a woman became an important factor in the construction of the Ukrainian national identity as female.[232] She noted that a woman in Shevchenko's works usually did not have individuality or agency—her fate was tragic, as she was almost always a victim of the unfair social order. The woman figure was always secondary compared to the man and was never idealized in the same way as in European romanticism—it was the man figure that was idealized as a symbol of freedom.[233]

Zherebkina concluded that in Ukraine, women's concerns were always used to implement discursive projects that were developed within male identity politics, but never had their own ground.[234] She believed that new national regimes substituted the tasks of women's concerns with the political task of formulating the nation state.[235]

[227] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 37.
[228] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 39.
[229] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 69-70.
[230] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 67.
[231] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 50-51.
[232] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 108.
[233] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 87-89.
[234] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 154.
[235] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 9.

Similar questions were addressed by the group of female literary scholars from Kyiv. However, their critique of nationalism was more cultural than political. Contrary to Zherebkina, they did not reject nationalism as a framework for collective identity and tried to "feminize" it.

In contrast, Zherebkina rejected their strategy as inherently compromised. She declared feminism and nationalism ontologically incompatible, and any attempts to feminize nationalism as unable to produce a space for feminist critique because they have to accept the primacy of the national project as a precondition for any articulation of feminist concerns. For her, the task was not in feminizing nationalism but eliminating its gendered structures.

Zherebkina compared nationalism to communism in that it was similarly sexist, homophobic, and oppressive.[236] She considered it to be unable to integrate feminism in any meaningful way because it relies on exclusive definitions of national identity.[237] In her opinion, whn women engage in the national discourse, their language becomes no different from male language.[238]

In this sense, Zherebkina's insistence on the incompatibility of feminism and nationalism directly opposed the integrative project of female literary scholars in Kyiv. Moreover, Zherebkina's position also raised the question about the limits of modernism as an interpretative framework. Female literary scholars from Kyiv tried to integrate feminist aspects of female modernist writing that they considered as an underrecognized into the modernization project of Ukrainian national identity. However, they mostly ignored the Soviet period as a rupture in the national tradition rather than an object of feminist analysis. Zherebkina, by contrast, saw modernism as linked to the nationalist discourse and tried to understand it as a structure that made it possible for nationalism to suppress feminism in the first place.

[236] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 35.
[237] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 63.
[238] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 145.

Zherebkina's critique of Ukrainian nationalism alienated her and placed in ideological opposition to the Ukrainian intellectual community. For example, in one of her books Zborovska stated:

> "Among the patriotic intelligentsia, the negative perception of women's studies is also stimulated by the so-called 'Zherebkin's' feminism of the Kharkiv school with its clearly expressed chauvinistic orientation and pathological hatred of everything Ukrainian."[239]

Indeed, they did not fully understand KhCGS's project as building transnational solidarity and establishing a unified feminist network in the post-Soviet space. They oversimplified Zherebkina's position as simply "pro-Russian." Even years later they stayed committed to this view, which is clearly visible from Hundorova's comment in the interview from 2018:

> "...Center for Gender Studies was established in Kharkiv—we were not particularly connected with it, because it focused more on Russia, and our Kyiv [center]—on Ukraine."[240]

For this reason, it was also hard for KhCGS to connect with the Ukrainian diaspora, which directly affected the opportunities that were open to them: it could not use diaspora networks to get international visibility, institutional support, or publication opportunities.

On top of that, Zherebkina wrote in a very provocative style. For instance, in "Women's Political Unconscious" she insisted:

> "Ukrainian nation, as any other post-Soviet nation, is an example of political fantasmagory, a project that is in a state of permanent construction."[241]

[239] Zborovska, *Feministychni rozdumy: Na karnavali mertvykh potsilunkiv*, 155.
[240] Hundorova, "Interview with Tamara Hundorova about Feminist Themes in Ukrainian Literature."
[241] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 22.

This sentence could be interpreted as a critique of the instability of post-Soviet national projects. At the same time, it could be easily read as a dismissal of Ukrainian national identity, implying that Ukraine's national aspirations were just illusions. As a result, she was seen as "anti-Ukrainian" and had almost no credibility in the Ukrainian intellectual circles.

But again, even though Zherebkina's critique of Ukrainian nationalism was interpreted as pro-Russian, this oversimplifies her intellectual position. Moreover, one should also consider practical reasons, as her position was also connected to the structural limitations that prevented her from directly accessing broader academic circles. In her work, Zherebkina clearly engaged with Western methodologies and theoretical frameworks, but establishing contact with Western institutions and making herself seen by Western audiences was not that easy.

A big share of her intellectual network and institutional connections were built in Russia. During the 1990s, many Ukrainian intellectuals still saw Moscow as a necessary intermediary to reach Western networks, so working through Russia might have seemed to her as a practical solution. Of course, the reliance on Russian and, more broadly, post-Soviet academic networks meant that Zherebkina's intellectual background, way of thinking, and writing style were partly shaped by them. However, it did not necessarily mean that she was politically "pro-Russian."

Ironically, in identifying the most problematic aspects of their time, they also pointed out each other's limitations. Yet, in actively and even aggressively opposing each other, they replicated the exclusionary practices of nationalism they tried to resist in the first place. The lack of solidarity between them also showed the overall fragmentation of Ukrainian feminism at that time.

Their conflict was not just an academic or theoretical one, it was also an articulation of pre-existing cultural and geopolitical divisions in Ukraine. According to Zherebkina, Ukrainian identity politics were constructed through confrontation with "the Other." The exclusion of

those who were seen as different—ethnically, linguistically, or politically—created the feelings of unity and uniqueness.[242] In this sense, the national project excluded as "the Other" those who did not fit in the exclusive definition of the national identity: women, ethnical and sexual minorities, immigrants, people with disabilities, etc.[243] For Zherebkina, such logic was totalitarian.[244]

Surely, Russian has always been the constitutive "Other" for Ukraine. Even if its othering was constructed and used for political purposes, it also constituted a real threat to Ukrainian sovereignty. And although Zherebkina rightly identified the problem, she failed to see this threat.

After the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 that became a turning point for many other Russian-speaking Ukrainian intellectuals, Zherebkina did not change her intellectual position. Even following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, she continued to refer back to her earlier work and criticize nationalist discourses for instrumentalizing culture and identity to build performative unity. Zherebkina claimed that its predominantly Russian-speaking southeast of Ukraine—Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, or Zaporizhzhia—is where the heaviest burden of the war is felt.[245] Zherebkina wrote:

> "The war showed that the border between the 'Ukrainian world' and the 'Russian world' has nothing to do with language or literature."[246]

[242] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 46.
[243] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 13-14.
[244] Zherebkina, *Zhenskoye politicheskoye bessoznatel'noye*, 15.
[245] Irina Zherebkina, "Grieving for Others, Not for Ourselves: An Interview with Irina Zherebkina," interview by Oleksiy Radynski, *e-flux Notes*, April 2022, accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/473291/grieving-for-others-not-for-ourselves-an-interview-with-irina-zherebkina.
[246] Zherebkina, "Grieving for Others, Not for Ourselves: An Interview with Irina Zherebkina."

Indeed, the frontline is not the predominantly Ukrainian-speaking west, but regions that historically were always designated by nationalist discourses as being culturally "ambiguous" or even "pro-Russian."

Here, Zherebkina criticized Ukrainian nationalism for moralizing with authenticity. The war, she argued that the identity that is based on language or ethnicity is not sufficient.[247] In this, Zherebkina is not merely defending Russian-speaking Ukrainians that she also belongs to but tries to rethink what we mean by decolonization: if it is reduced to symbolically to imposing language quotas, erasing Russian literature, or renaming streets, it will just replicate colonial logic. For her, this is not just a moral failure: it does not allow the pluralistic solidarity that would actually strengthen Ukrainian democracy and its ability to resist Russian aggression.

Zherebkina saw the increase in the nationalist rhetoric in public discourse after the full-scale invasion as caused by the need for unprecedented mobilization. Yes, rather than actual mobilization, it offered only an illusion of collective sacrifice, as large parts of the population still remain materially and existentially detached from the frontline reality and avoid increasing inequalities and exclusions.[248]As she stated:

> "...during the state of war, the ideology of nationalism and monoculturalism became especially dangerous and harmful for Ukraine since it could not provide for the nationwide total mobilization necessary to win the war, which passed into the stage of a war of extermination."[249]

Thus, the implication is clear: democratic Ukraine cannot be built on the foundations of symbolic unity that mirrors the homogenizing logics of its former colonizer. However, Zherebkina knowingly or unknowingly overlooked that so-called cultural and linguistic

[247] Zherebkina, "Grieving for Others, Not for Ourselves: An Interview with Irina Zherebkina."
[248] Irina Zherebkina, "What Kind of Victory Do We Need?" *Syg.ma*, February 24, 2024, accessed March 5, 2024, https://syg.ma/@sygma/what-kind-of-victory-do-we-need.
[249] Zherebkina, "What Kind of Victory Do We Need?"

"ambiguity" of eastern and southern parts of Ukraine was instrumentalized in the rationalization of the Russian military aggression. The representation of these regions of Ukraine as culturally indistinct from Russia—a result of centuries of imperial and then Soviet policies of rusification—was used by Russia to justify its territorial claims and frame its aggression as "protection" of a supposedly oppressed "Russian-speaking population." Moreover, it created the perception of internal division rather than external aggression, which undermined international support for Ukraine. As legitimate as her critique of nationalist discourses is, it does take into account how language was instrumentalized by Russia as a weapon of war and used to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state.

Zabuzhko, in one of her recent essays, indirectly criticized Zherebkina's position by arguing that "performative unity" is necessary for existential survival. Zherebkina rightly argued for decolonization not to be reduced to "symbolic" acts, but Zabuzhko's argument is that these acts are not just symbolic but an integral part of destroying the discursive and institutional structures of empire.[250] In this sense, Zabuzhko was insisting that Russian culture formed the mindset that made Russia's war against Ukraine not only possible but justifiable, as "the road for bombs and tanks has always been paved by books."[251] Thus, Zabuzhko presents a decolonial project that is not against "pluralistic solidarity" but about identifying epistemic and cultural legacies of empire that made colonial violence possible.[252]

Vitaliy Chernetskyi rightly argued that the opposition of the two centers of feminist thought was based on post-colonial syndrome, as their differences showed opposing approaches to the

[250] Oksana Zabuzhko, "The Problem With Russia Is Russia," New York Times, February 20, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/20/opinion/russia-ukraine-war.html.
[251] Oksana Zabuzhko, "No Guilty People in the World? Reading Russian Literature after the Bucha Massacre," The Times Literary Supplement, April 22, 2022, https://www.the-tls.co.uk/literature-by-region/european-literature/russian-literature-bucha-massacre-essay-oksana-zabuzhko.
[252] Zabuzhko, "No Guilty People in the World? Reading Russian Literature after the Bucha Massacre."

national question.[253] Female literary scholars from Kyiv consciously negotiated with nationalist discourse and selectively adopted some of its rhetoric to access a limited discursive field that could otherwise exclude them. Nevertheless, it came at a cost of compromising the primacy of gender to national belonging. At the same time, in the process of active nation-building, it was not possible for feminism not to take into account the nationalist discourses. Zherebkina identified the ideological problem but did not propose any alternatives for how feminism could practically operate in the highly nationalized public sphere. As a result, both centers of feminist thought constructed one another as enemies and failed to build feminist solidarity.

[253] Vitaly Chernetsky, "Protystoiuchy travmam: henderno ta natsionalno markovana tilesnist yak naratyv ta vydovyshche u suchasnomu ukrainskomu pysmenstvi," in *Henderna perspektyva* (Kyiv, 2004), 233.

Conclusion

More than anything, this story is the story of the compromises—ideological, institutional, and symbolic compromises these scholars had to make in order to be published and recognized. These compromises were a result of structural transformations of the period in which legitimacy and authority were negotiated through nationalism.

In their attempt to modernize the Ukrainian cultural canon, Solomiia Pavlychko, Tamara Hundorova, Vira Ageyeva, Nila Zborovska, and Oksana Zabuzhko adopted a strategy of feminist integration in the nationalist project. They referred to the early modernist tradition, referencing Lesia Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska, for a couple of reasons: it helped them to show the European intellectual roots of Ukrainian culture and the continuity of feminist discourse in Ukraine—both aspects allowed them legitimize their feminist approach.

Although separated by almost a century, both modernist / feminist projects were performing similar acts of negotiation: early female modernists with the populism and realist aesthetic, and female literary scholars with neo-romantic nationalism and its patriarchal foundations. For both projects, writing became an act of resistance: they opposed nationalist discourses through literature and literary critique. However, their main object of critique was not nationalism as such but its specific populist form that idealized a gendered vision of national identity grounded in "authentic" folk culture. Instead of rejecting nationalism altogether, they tried to reconfigure it: in one case, through modernism, and in the other case through feminist epistemologies.

However, these similarities also point out a recurring problem of Ukrainian culture: for any feminist attempts, compromise becomes a condition of survival. Feminist critique within the nationalist framework that prioritized ethno-linguistic unity, continuity with the pre-Soviet period, and both symbolic and political autonomy from Russia could never be radical.

Eventually, female literary scholars constructed a feminist national myth that connected feminist subjectivity to national interests too closely, and, as a result, ended up instrumentalizing women in the same way nationalist discourses did.

In the context of the 1990s, this compromise also became a reason for fragmentation. The feminist project developed by Irina Zherebkina at the Center for Gender Studies in Kharkiv explicitly rejected nationalism and insisted that any form of feminist critique loyal to nationalist ideologies would ultimately fail. In considering the pre-Soviet cultural tradition as compromised by nationalist discourses and orienting her feminist project toward the entire post-Soviet space, Zherebkina refused to accept the pragmatic limits of reality in which national identity was seen as an existential issue.

At the same time, ideological differences between both feminist projects cannot be simplified to "pro-nationalist" and "anti-nationalist," or even more radically to "pro-Ukrainian"/"pro-Russian" and "anti-Russian,"/"anti-Ukrainian" positions, although it seems like this is exactly how they perceived each other. This resulted in mutual exclusion, as neither side was able or willing, for that matter, to understand each other's positionality and refused to accommodate different feminist strategies. Instead of supporting common feminist interests, they built legitimacy in opposition to each other's positions. Therefore, this is also a story of a failure—a failure to construct feminist solidarity.

Irina Zherebkina and the Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies remained closely connected to academic institutions and feminist networks in post-Soviet space. Their feminist project remained politically and institutionally marginal in the Ukrainian academia and public sphere, especially as the political and cultural discourse reoriented towards de-communization and eventually de-Russification after the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity.

On January 31, 1999, Solomiia Pavlychko died at the age of 41. Without Pavlychko, Ageyeva, Hundorova, and Zborovska followed individual intellectual directions and their group gradually disintegrated as a collective project. Vira Ageyeva went on teaching at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Tamara Hundorova continued as a research fellow at the Institute of Literature, and Nila Zborovska got a position at the Taras Shevchenko University. The lack of a common institutional space also contributed to the fragmentation of the group. They no longer collaborated and eventually developed different approaches to literary critique, integrating feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial theories in their own way.

Nila Zborovska passed away in 2011 at the age of 48. Her intellectual contributions were gradually pushed to the periphery of the Ukrainian literary discourse—not because they were not relevant but because there was no one who would circulate her ideas and build upon them. Oksana Zabuzhko gained recognition within and outside Ukraine for her fiction and essays rather than for her academic work. Nevertheless, to remain accessible to broader audiences, she had to become more polemical in style and simplify her theoretical arguments. Vira Ageyeva invested in articulating a feminist cultural canon within Ukrainian literature by re-reading 20th-century texts and defining Soviet cultural production as a colonizing structure that repressed alternative, particularly feminist, modes of subjectivity. Tamara Hundorova concentrated on postcolonial trauma and symbolic dimensions of memory, and continued to work with literary and cultural forms rather than social or material structures.

With the increasing institutional legitimacy of gender studies, feminist scholarship became more theoretically centered on intersectionality, queer theory, and decolonial feminism. The literary focus of feminist intellectuals became increasingly criticized by a younger generation of feminist scholars who conceptualized feminism primarily as a form of social critique and activism. For many of them, early literary feminist scholars were “not feminist enough” because they compromised their feminist positions by negotiations with nationalism.

Moreover, they considered the literary scholars of the 1990s to be engaged in an elite cultural project insufficiently grounded in the social and political realities of lived gendered experience, for example, labor precarity, reproductive justice, or militarized nationalism.

Ironically, the questions these feminist intellectuals debated—the gendered structure of the literary canon, the place of women in national culture, feminism's relation to the nationalism, or the problem of modernization—are still relevant. In this sense, this thesis is an attempt to recontextualize their feminist project under conditions of renewed crisis.

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