

# Oleksandra Wallo. Ukrainian Women Writers and the National Imaginary: From the Collapse of the USSR to the Euromaidan

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**Oleksandra Wallo. *Ukrainian Women Writers and the National Imaginary: From the Collapse of the USSR to the Euromaidan*. U of Toronto P, 2020. x, 201 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$54.00, cloth.**

**A**ppearing six years after the publication of the English-language anthology of contemporary Ukrainian women's prose *Herstories: An Anthology of New Ukrainian Women Prose Writers* (compiled and edited by Michael M. Naydan), Oleksandra Wallo's monograph *Ukrainian Women Writers and the National Imaginary: From the Collapse of the USSR to the Euromaidan* is a timely contribution to the development of the critical discourse on gender and women writers in Ukrainian literature. Wallo not only analyzes influential works by the first post-Soviet cohort of Ukrainian women writers but also paves a path toward the understanding of a unique, Ukrainian version of feminism that is closely interlinked with the ideas of nation. Wallo addresses the prose of three major female authors—Oksana Zabuzhko, Ievheniia Kononenko, and Mariia Matios—who started writing just before the collapse of the Soviet Union; afterward, they were known as *visimdesiatnyky* (writers of the 1980s). The literary voice of Zabuzhko is at the core of Wallo's study, occupying five of the six chapters, with two chapters dedicated (almost exclusively) to her writing. This is not surprising, as Zabuzhko's pioneering novel *Pol'ovi doslidzhennia z ukrains'koho seksu: Roman (Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex: A Novel, 1996)* tends to the same subject that Wallo's monograph ponders—"how a Ukrainian woman could write at all" (5). Wallo is meticulous in depicting the challenges grounded in both politics and patriarchy that were faced by women writers in Soviet Ukraine despite the presumed liberation promised by the Soviet regime and experienced by female literati in the metropolitan core (that is, Moscow). Wallo explains such challenges by engaging an array of scholarship on gender and race, first and foremost Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay on the double silencing of subaltern women in the (post-)colonial world ("Can the Subaltern Speak?").

*Ukrainian Women Writers and the National Imaginary* opens with an insightful chapter (25-42) on Ukrainian women writers during the 1950s-70s. It is based on western Ukrainian author Nina Bichuia's prose—in particular, on her last short story "Kaminnyi hospodar" ("The Stone Master," 1990). Wallo compares this piece with the works of two modernist female writers of the preceding *fin de siècle* period, Lesia Ukrainka and Ol'ha Kobylians'ka, noting the intertextual borrowing in Bichuia's title from Ukrainka's eponymous drama from 1912. Bichuia's female protagonist—her autobiographic projection—is unable to speak. A silenced female character is later seen in the early works of Bichuia's literary successors Kononenko and Zabuzhko (the topic of Wallo's chapter 2 [43-63]), who attempt to breach

the imposed gendered and political silence and who explore what it means to be a Ukrainian woman writer in post-Soviet Ukraine.

While all of the chapters in Wallo's study contain meticulous textual analyses of their chosen literary works, chapter 3 (65-88), on Zabuzhko's *Pol'ovi doslidzhennia z ukrains'koho seksu*, presents the most developed and refined reading of a single literary work. Wallo's analysis is further enhanced by her comparison of Zabuzhko's influential novel to a Gotho-carnavalesque bestseller written by a key male author of post-Soviet Ukrainian literature—Iurii Andrukhovych. Wallo's comparison helps to crystallize a new type of female literary character that we see emerging in Zabuzhko's novel—a character who is more than just a symbolic patriarchal mother-martyr figure or a newly liberated, sexualized femme fatale. Wallo goes on to examine “the nexus of gender and Ukrainian national identity” (65), placing the discussion of the main heroine in Zabuzhko's novel, a poetess, within the discourses of “Soviet colonialism and Western cultural dominance” and “Ukrainian populism and anticolonial nationalism” (69).

These discourses are important points of contention and exchange for Zabuzhko and the two other female authors featured in the book, Kononenko and Matios—their works are explored in chapters 4 and 5 (89-116, 117-30). These chapters, with the fitting main titles “Rewriting the Nation” and “Excavating the (Gendered) Nation,” consider Zabuzhko's, Kononenko's, and Matios's attempts to contribute to the creation of Ukrainian “foundational national narratives” and to Ukraine's sense of political self. Their writings deliberately disrupt the prevalent ethnocentric and patriarchal discourses, as they centre on the development of multi-faceted Ukrainian female protagonists who demand space for the gender paradigm within discussions of national visions for Ukraine. Of particular interest here is Wallo's analysis of the novels *Imitatsiia: Roman (Imitation: A Novel, 2001)*, by Kononenko, and *Solodka Darusia: Drama na try zhyttia (Sweet Darusia: A Drama for Three Lifetimes, 2004)*, by Matios. These works are informed by the questions of national belonging, geographical and symbolic boundaries, mapping and internal Othering, and the ideological biases behind coherent historical narratives. Kononenko, Matios, and Zabuzhko (the latter in her later novel *Muzei pokynutykh sekretiv: Roman [The Museum of Abandoned Secrets: A Novel, 2009]*, which is discussed in chapter 5) consciously show gaps in national history rather than montaging a totalizing knowledge of the past. In the works of these authors (especially in Zabuzhko's *Muzei pokynutykh sekretiv*), there is an attempt to understand and bridge the divisions within Ukraine and to challenge the androcentric narrative of history.

The androcentric theme has particular significance in the final chapter of Wallo's monograph—chapter 6 (131-47)—which concentrates on the eyewitness narratives in two collections exploring the Euromaidan (the

Revolution of Dignity of 2013-14). One compilation was produced by Zabuzhko in co-operation with Tetiana Teren (*Litopys samovydtsiv: Dev"iat' misiatsiv ukrains'koho sprotyvu* [*Chronicle of Eyewitnesses: Nine Months of Ukrainian Resistance*]), and the other was put out by Matios (*Pryvatnyi shchodennyk: Maidan; Viina . . .* [*Private Diary: Maidan; War . . .*]). Wallo shows how these two distinct collections challenge the presentation of the Euromaidan “as a conventional national narrative focused entirely on male heroism” (135), and she addresses their investigation of the developing awareness of a Ukrainian citizenship that can help women claim the public sphere for themselves.

Wallo's monograph will be of especial importance to scholars interested in an in-depth reading of primary texts. Her insightful close textual analysis informs as much as it is influenced by post-colonial gender discourse. Wallo's treatment, though, would be further solidified by a more detailed contextualization of the diverse literary activity that conditioned the writing of the three main authors covered. The monograph does not discuss poetic developments. However, a brief examination of Lina Kostenko's poetic contributions along with the poems of other female writers of the 1980s (for instance, Natalka Bilotserkivets') could establish a broader cultural backdrop for Zabuzhko, Kononenko, and Matios, given that all three women began their literary careers as poets (43-44). The addition of more-popular and genre-oriented works of Ukrainian female prose (by Liuko Dashvar or Iren Rozdobud'ko, who are from the same generation as the authors dealt with here) would help widen the exploratory lens on the writing styles and literary characters that both contest and promote the niche of “women's prose,” a concept from which Zabuzhko, Kononenko, and Matios consciously distance themselves, as Wallo points out. Wallo's monograph serves as a solid foundation for such future analyses, and hopefully its various chapters will inspire a greater dedication of space for Ukrainian literature in courses devoted to Slavic and comparative women's prose and in gender studies curricula.

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