

# Feminism, Modernism, and Ukrainian Women

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The interrelations of the three elements delineated in the title of this essay are problematical. I shall begin with four paradoxes.

1. The contents page of the 1984 American reprint of *Перший вінок*, the 1887 anthology of women's writing, lists an essay by Natalia Kobrynska, "Українське жіноцтво в Галичині в наших часах." The original title of this important essay is "Руське жіноцтво в Галичині в наших часах." The reasons for this editorial change are obvious, and the decision to make it is understandable. But the change is symptomatic of a general problem in Ukrainian feminism and particularly with the Ukrainian women's movement at the turn of the century.

2. One of the principal goals of Ukrainian feminists at the turn of the century was, quite logically, to reveal the conditions that women endured in Ukrainian society. To advocate change it is necessary first to show a need for it. Naturally literature, particularly short prose, was a useful tool for describing existing social conditions. The use of literature as a tool in a social-reform action was particularly appropriate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because the prevailing literary style at that time, particularly in Ukrainian literature, was realism. What better tool for the feminist crusader could there be than a socially oriented literary style that put primary emphasis on the depiction of social conditions, especially the oppressed lower classes? But this fortuitous confluence of prevailing literary style with the need for feminist agitation put the movement at odds with the new literary trend, Modernism, that was developing at this time. Ironically, a social reform movement found itself tied to an outdated literary style.

3. Two of the most important leaders and spokespersons for the Ukrainian women's movement at the beginning of the twentieth century were Lesia Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska. Their works offer a portrayal

of the various social, domestic, and personal difficulties Ukrainian women faced, as well as a reasoned, logical appeal for concrete steps to improve these conditions. But both authors are also heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, who is notorious as a misogynist and rarely considered a bulwark of feminist thinking.

4. The fourth paradox is really just a curiosity rather than logical contradiction. Feminism in Ukrainian literature at the turn of the century found its strongest advocates in men. Women writing at this time either do not take up the cause, took it up half-heartedly, diluted it with other issues, or were insufficiently skilled to do it effectively.

These four paradoxes capture many of the central characteristics of the women's question in turn-of-the-century Ukrainian culture. This is not to say that there is something unusual or peculiar about the development of feminism in Ukraine, but rather that this movement, like all cultural phenomena, can only be examined in its particular context.

The tension between the national question and all other social and cultural issues is a basic feature of Ukrainian history. The emendation of the title of Kobrynska's essay in the reprint of the *Перший вінок* anthology was the result of the nationalist sentiments of the editors in 1984. But the same sentiment is evident in the essay itself. First of all, as the title makes plain, the essay is about women of one nationality. There is no pretence of international women's solidarity. Kobrynska does not allow for one moment the possibility that Polish, Jewish, or even Polonized Ukrainian women living in Western Ukraine endure some of the same difficulties that Ukrainian women experience. This is not particularly surprising given the circumstances, but that is precisely my point. For a certain group of people the national question so fully dominated all spheres of thought and activity that the suggestion that things might have been otherwise is almost untenable. The term "Ukrainian women" is generally assumed to designate ethnic rather than geographic self-identification or even hereditary selection. This approach is underscored in Kobrynska's essay by her inclusion of both peasant and intellectual ethnic Ukrainian women. National solidarity overcomes class distinction, but not women's solidarity. The closest Kobrynska comes to women's solidarity occurs in her discussion of "Wandas," Ukrainian women who adopt Polish fashions and enter ethnic Polish society. This behaviour, she argues, is, at least in part, a misdirected but understandable attempt by Ukrainian women to escape Ukrainian patriarchal society. In a similar vein, a few paragraphs later, Kobrynska laments the additional burden placed on Ukrainian women by the growing popularity of higher education for Ukrainian men.

In recent times the national campaign for the development of a secular intelligentsia has raised the intellectual level, but it has had a negative impact on women's and family interests. A graduate of a [theological] seminary who has been ordained into the clergy often consumes his wife's entire fortune for the repayment of his debts. But at least he offers her support, and the demands on the resources of his own family are thereby reduced. But a student at a secular faculty often drains his family's resources to the last drop to pay for his own education and then goes off and marries a Pole or a German, leaving his sisters to the will of God and fortune, without any resources and without any preparation for gainful employment.<sup>1</sup>

It is not my purpose here to enforce any particular definition of feminism or to suggest that something is wrong or hypocritical in one stance or another. It is, however, a point worth noting that Kobrynska's ideas about seminarians and college students puts a lower value on Polish women than on Ukrainian women. Inasmuch as it appears as part of a political essay whose major function is to call attention to existing social conditions, it is merely a reflection of mundane reality. But to the extent that it reflects underlying intellectual principles, it is a marker of the cultural ambiguity of the women's movement in Ukraine. Can feminism and Ukrainian patriotism be reconciled?

The same ambiguity reflected in Kobrynska's political essay can be found in literary works, particularly in prose. In 1884, when her essay appeared, Modernism was not yet a movement to be reckoned with. The relationship between Modernism and feminism developed over time. The earliest works with a feminist undercurrent were realistic depictions of social circumstances. Modernist features slowly penetrated Ukrainian literature, and the women's question gradually entered a new stylistic environment. Good examples of this kind of work can be seen in Liubov Ianovska's novel from 1900 entitled *Horodianska*, or in Ievheniia Iaroshynska's 1903 novel *Perekynchyky*. Both works are still largely realist novels, although Iaroshynska's *Perekynchyky* has elements of psychological portraiture that stretch realism and anticipate Les Martovych's *Zabobon*. The authors of both works pay particular attention to the position of women in the society they depict.

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1. Natalia Kobrynska, "Ukrainske zhynotstvo v Halychyni v nashykh chasakh," in *Pershyi vinok: Zhynochyi almanakh*, ed. Natalia Kobrynska and Olena Pchilka, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Ukrainian Women's League of America, 1984), 92. (A review of this edition, by Marta Horban-Carynyk, appeared on pp. 98–101 of the winter 1985 issue of this journal—Ed.)

Ianovska's heroine is Priska Husak, who was sent by her parents to work in the city during financially difficult times for the family. When she returns home eight years later, she is unfit for village life. Her arranged marriage with the village nincompoop is a predictable disaster. And here Ianovska shows her feminist stuff and allows her heroine, without the author's approval but with considerable sympathy, to leave her husband and take off on her own back to the city. The ensuing story is a tale of woe and misery reminiscent of the works of the English eighteenth-century moralist Samuel Richardson, whose notorious *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, despite the attention they gave to a variety of women's problems, are hardly feminist works. Priska endures one outrage after another. She is taken advantage of, punished, humiliated, and otherwise suffers all the troubles that an urban environment can throw at a single, poor, and defenceless woman. Combined with the additional difficulties arising from single parenting and disease, these troubles spell out an inescapable doomed circle of biblically melodramatic proportions.

The position of women in society is not the primary focus in this novel, but it is certainly a factor. Priska's arranged marriage, the discussions of wife beating, and the depiction of her life in the city all indicate that Ianovska is aware of the women's question as a distinct topic. But the central issue in this novel, as the title indicates, is the role of the city, the source and locus of all evil. Priska's fatal flaw was her early exposure to and infatuation with the city. Ianovska points out that this is part of a common pattern of sending girls out of the family to earn wages, but no particular emphasis is placed here. On the contrary, the village—its community and the family values it fosters—are presented as the epitome of virtue. The contrast of city and village in this work follows traditional patterns familiar in many cultures, not only the Ukrainian. The village is the source of family values and community support. The city is a den of iniquity and corruption where sinful temptations abound and neighbours cannot be expected to help in times of need. As Ianovska makes evident in her novel and as we all know from history, the Ukrainian city had the further quality of being foreign. Horpyna, Melashka, Hanna, Maksym, Danylo, and Trokhym live in the village. The city is inhabited by transplanted villagers, and its wealthier natives, such as the Bogoliubovs, the Steinmilchs, the Rybalkins, and the ever-present Leiba, are not ethnic Ukrainians. So, in the personal and ideological struggle that characterizes Priska's existence, the choice of freedom and personal growth is associated with sinfulness and denationalization. The polarity is pointedly repeated in the final pages of the story. Uncle Maksym has brought the dying Priska and her daughter, Halia, back to

the village. In answer to his accolade for the village, Priska still sings the praises of the city:

"Багацько ... багацько там добра!" мовила вдруге молодиця. "Книгарні, театри, музика, вволю світа, тепла, щастя, життя, достатків ... усе, чого душа забажає, все є в городі. Ні, не з дурного то розуму, дядечку, тікають люди з села."

Максим скипів.

"Ти таки своєї співаєш! Не покинула й досі норівів! Сама душа у тілі, а ще не каєшся...."

"Чого ж мені каятися? Чи людині не вільно шукати собі кращого життя?"<sup>2</sup>

Of course, when the choice is between freedom and Ukrainian patriarchal society, even near-feminists choose the Ukrainian village. Priska's dying wish is that her family never allow her daughter, Halia, into the city. In the space of a single page, Ianovska manages to subdue her protagonist's devotion to urban liberties.

Iaroshynska's *Perekynchyky* is another work that shows a similar opposition between feminist and ethno-national values. Once again, as in the case of Ianovska, the author is aware of the feminist dimensions of the issues she depicts; indeed, she explicitly targets some of them, but in the final analysis chooses to subordinate the feminist perspective to the national one. The complex Victorian plot line revolves around three young women and their boyfriends, husbands, and lovers. Two of the women are sisters. Ahlaia and Sofiia are the daughters of a dim-witted priest and his free-spirited wife. Ahlaia agrees to a loveless marriage with the blockhead Erakles to avoid the horrors of spinsterhood. Erakles eventually brings her home to her mother when he discovers she's pregnant with another man's child. The child later dies of diphtheria, and the couple are partially reconciled. Sofiia, the younger sister, avoids the dangers of imposed, loveless marriages and runs off with a handsome young precentor. But he has no money, and her proud mother must swallow hard and do what she can to rescue her daughter. The sins of the mother, *protopopykha* Stefaniia, end up haunting her son as well when he falls in love with the diligent, intelligent, and virtuous daughter of a neighbouring landowner, only to discover that she is actually his sister. The sisters and their mother are contrasted with the third young woman,

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2. Liubov Ianovska, *Horodianka*, in her *Tvory v dvokh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1991), 560. It is a little-known fact of Ukrainian literature that anyone with the name Maksym should always be trusted.

Anna, who is actually the orphaned granddaughter of Stefaniia's older sister.

Anna and her relation to Kost Antoniuk are the central focus of the story. Both of these young people are idealists who want to better themselves. Kost is a peasant's son who is studying medicine at the university in Vienna. Anna loses her chance to continue her education when her aunt, *protopykha* Stefaniia, "borrows" her inheritance to help pay for Ahlaia's wedding. During Kost's visits back to his native village, he and Anna read Shevchenko and Fedkovych together. But Kost's own family treats him as a stranger and a "lost son." In their eyes he has become a пан, a member of the wealthy, privileged, and foreign classes. In Vienna Kost has, indeed, succumbed to the pernicious influences of the city. He falls in love with the daughter of a wealthy Romanian magnate and joins a Romanian student club and denies his Ukrainian background. Meanwhile Anna is left to suffer the indignities of the patriarchal village. But she befriends Oktaviia, her aunt's extramarital daughter, and together they lay idealistic plans for work among the benighted Ukrainian villagers. When Kost finally sinks to the bottom of urban depravity and eventually returns home to die, Anna inherits the role of a never elaborate married widow and selflessly dedicates her now loveless life to serving the *narod*. Her graveside oration makes clear the connection between the national and women's questions. Kost, she explains, fell victim to the consequences of a foreign education:

А чому в нас жінки та дівчата інакші—се має свій корінь у тім, що їх не вчать, які обов'язки мають вони зглядом суспільності, лиш яких прав вони мають домагатися від неї. Цілю пересічного жіночого життя є забава. З ким і як вона бавиться, се їй байдуже, аби лиш заповнити ненависний час, аби забити нудьгу і порожнечу. Чи стратить при тім свою честь, свою гідність, се байдуже, аби могла лиш затримати своє добре ім'я, аби перед людьми уходила за чесну. А се походить іще й з того, що в наших жінок замало патріотичного почуття; доки так буде, доти буде падати ще багато жертв на полі космополітизму, буде ще багато таких, що будуть чути нещасливими.<sup>3</sup>

Iaroshynska plainly sees that the problem facing women is a result of social norms that restrict their role in life. Indeed, the boredom and emptiness she describes in women's lives goes a long way toward explaining the frivolity she chastises them for. But she does not see what Kobrynska saw in the case of "Wandas"—that entrapped women seek

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3. Ievheniia Iaroshynska, *Perekynchyky*, in her *Tvory* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1968), 350–1.

any means, sometimes foolish ones, of escape. Escaping, searching for liberty, is not something Iaroshynska allows. A woman must serve, and her role is doubly rewarding when her servitude is adopted as a model by men, as it is at the end of this novel by the *protopopykha's* son.

The relation between feminism and nationalism evident in Iaroshynska's and Ianovska's novels is characteristic of works by women written early in the Modernist period and largely in a realist style. Later works by younger women reveal a different perception of these issues. But even contemporaries such as Olha Kobylianska have a different sense of the issues involved. The key difference here is not in the view of the national question, but in the relative value of self-fulfilment. Kobylianska is an exceptional figure in Ukrainian literature, and not just there, precisely because she is a passionate advocate of personal liberation for women. Her novel *Tsarivna*, which was completed in 1895 before either of the two works examined above, is the most direct and most sensitive treatment of the women's issue in Ukraine at that time.

In *Tsarivna*, unlike other works, the notion that women suffer discrimination because of their gender is addressed directly. In the very first chapter, Kobylianska has the insufferable Muno, the male student who will bankrupt the family to get an education, announce to his sisters and cousin: "Мужчина то 'всьо', а жінка то 'нічо'. Ви дівчата від нас залежні, як ті рослини від сонця, від воздуха.... Ми надаєм вам змислу, поваги, значіння, одним словом, все."<sup>4</sup> This provocation establishes the framework in which the female protagonist of the novel exists. Kobylianska stages this scene in the presence of a number of women in order to contrast their varying reactions. Muno's mother laughs, his sister smiles. But Nataalka Verkovichivna can neither ignore nor endure this injustice. Her entire life is a struggle to escape the constraints imposed on her by society, particularly those that arise by virtue of her sex. But Nataalka does not battle on behalf of her gender. She does not fight for women's rights—she struggles for personal freedom. Where Iaroshynska presented a number of women and compared their various responses to discrimination, Kobylianska presents other women merely to dismiss them. Nataalka is not a member of a group of oppressed individuals. She is an extraordinary individual with particular needs and difficulties. Her personal challenge is to discover a mode of existence that will not hinder her personal development but yet society will tolerate.

This approach to social ills is, of course, essentially Nietzschean. Kobylianska is more than casually indebted to the creator of the

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4. Olha Kobylianska, *Tsarivna* (New York: Surma, 1954), 27–8.

Superman. His name appears with some regularity in her works, including *Tsarivna*. This is not the place to discuss how accurately or how completely Kobylanska or any other east European writer in the early twentieth century understood the ideas of the German philosopher. But Kobylanska's notions of a general human malaise and of individuals who escape this malaise by rising above the social norm are clearly indebted to Nietzsche and are significantly out of step with basic feminist principles. Nataalka Verkovichna is not fighting for the equalization of women with men. She is trying to achieve her own full potential. Her ability to achieve this goal is blocked by many factors, only one of which is discrimination against women. Two other important factors hinder her development. One is nationality and the other is pride. The question of nationality is not given major attention in this work. Verkovichna, like many of her literary predecessors, is drawn to the idea of service to her oppressed nation. But she must escape her ethnic milieu to win her freedom. She leaves the home of her uncle, takes a position in the home of an elderly Croatian woman named Marko, and eventually marries her son. Although Mrs. Marko and her son have a very positive attitude toward Nataalka's devotion to her nation, in the novel this relation is seen as a necessary compromise between personal and national interests.

The most important compromise in the novel, the one that forms its central theme, is the one between personal ambitions and the limits and demands imposed by interaction with other individuals. In philosophical terms it is the gap between the self and the other. In social terms it is the conflict between the individual and society. In sexual terms it is the difference between instinct and accepted norms. In feminist terms it is the divergence between the struggle for liberation and the need for harmonious coexistence. All of these elements are subsumed in Nataalka Verkovichna's battle with pride. Throughout the novel Kobylanska shows her protagonist in circumstances where she must decide whether to compromise her ideals, whether to accept partial success rather than risk total failure. This is best illustrated in Nataalka's relations with Oriadyn and Ivan Marko. In many ways Oriadyn is an incarnation of Nataalka's sexual fantasy. On an instinctive level, he is everything she could wish for. But he is not an idealist. He does not embody all of the social refinements she prizes. In the final analysis, Nataalka is frightened by her own sexuality and jumps to the other extreme. Her relation to Ivan Marko is characterized by his near-total physical absence. Like his mother, he treats Nataalka with deep intellectual respect. Her idealism grows to extraordinary heights during her stay with Mrs. Marko. But Mrs. Marko dies, and her son turns out to be a man like all others. Nataalka denies the physical attraction between them as long as she can, but eventually she chooses



"life" and accepts him as a husband. Intellectual idealism and sexual liberation are both rejected as extremes. Nietzsche and Darwin (or is it Freud?) are forced to compromise, as are nationalism and feminism and any other ism Kobylanska perceives as a unitary system. The aeolian harp Ivan Marko hangs for his bride in the orchard of their home is typical of Kobylanska's romantic symbols and her vision of balance and harmony. The proud and lofty image of a princess often repeated in the novel, and with which the novel ends, is balanced by the image of Natalka as a flower at her lover's feet. How could Kobylanska the feminist write: "'Марко!' кликнула вона півголосом і кинулась, як стріла по сходах до його—ні, не як стріла, але як рожа, кинена кимсь йому на зустріч?"<sup>5</sup>

Of all the women who addressed the women's question in Ukrainian literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lesia Ukrainka certainly had the clearest sense of the complexities and interrelations of this issue. This is hardly surprising. Whatever her skills as a writer, Lesia Ukrainka was one of the finest analytical minds in Ukraine at that time. But it is not intelligence alone that distinguishes her work. Her single-minded devotion to the intellectualization of all problems, coupled with her choice of a peculiar dramatic genre, distinguishes her works from those we have examined above. With Lesia Ukrainka, there is no risk that a theoretical issue will dissolve into mundane descriptions of social ills. The women's question is a real issue for her, and she addresses it head-on and explicitly analyzes its relation to other issues, such as the national question or the problem of personal happiness.

Lesia Ukrainka touches on the women's question in practically all of her dramatic works. In many of her plays, including *Kassandra*, *Lisova pisnia*, *Boiarynia*, *Rufin i Pristsilla*, and even *Kaminnyi hospodar*, feminism is explicitly contrasted with other ideological formulations in order to examine the problems and contradictions that arise between them. In *Kassandra*, for example, there are serious issues of state behind the betrothal of Kassandra to Onomai. Troy desperately needs fresh troops or it will fall. Onomai offers his army in exchange for Kassandra's hand in marriage. Kassandra is certainly a patriot, but she doesn't appreciate being sold as a commodity. Of course, Lesia Ukrainka complicates the issue with other considerations, but clearly feminist and patriotic impulses are at odds here.

Among the other issues involved here it is important to note two in particular. They form the basic thematic substance of this play and are

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5. Kobylanska, *Tsarivna*, 432.

usually the primary subject of Lesia Ukrainka's philosophical deliberations. Cassandra is torn between her allegiance to Truth and the variety of personal, familial, national, and social threads that tie her to her fellow humans. The higher value, which in Cassandra's case is defined as Truth, in other plays becomes either natural law (in *Lisova pisnia*), absolute love (in *Rufin i Pristsilla*), personal self-fulfilment (in *Kaminnyi hospodar*), or some other challenge to the simple value system her characters want to adopt. Lesia Ukrainka does not actually believe in any unequivocal values, but her intellectual universe is always populated with absolutes of one kind or another. The distance between these absolutes and real life, with its social interaction, is the basic subtext of all of her plays. In such an environment no choice can be made without compromise. Feminist values do not define social reality; they complicate it. In *Kaminnyi hospodar* feminist liberation becomes social entrapment. Every system of values restricts its adherents. The personal freedom associated with Nietzschean superiority cannot be reconciled with the limits that are placed on individual behaviour to achieve social equality.

The connection between feminism and Modernism in Lesia Ukrainka's plays is even more problematical. By traditional yardsticks she is not a Modernist at all. But her formulation of the women's question is certainly clearer and more central to her works than it was in the works of the writers examined above. Perhaps the fact that she is not writing prose helps her to escape the lure of description and concentrate on the ideological question. But the genre of intellectual drama she adopts is not associated with Modernist theatre.

Another unconventional dramatist, but one whose Modernist credentials are not in dispute, is Volodymyr Vynnychenko. Although Vynnychenko is not a champion of feminism, the women's question appears in his works with a clarity and focus that it does not receive from any of the women writers examined above. Whether because he was writing drama or because he was a man and a non-feminist, Vynnychenko allowed feminist issues to appear in his plays without ambivalence or qualification. Like Lesia Ukrainka, Vynnychenko often creates situations that will produce the intellectual conflict he is looking for. Since he frequently tackles the problem of sexual ethics, feminism is one side of the conflict he is trying to present. In plays such as *Zakon* or *Chorna pantera i bilyi medvid* the idea of women's equality is presented very forcefully. It is true that Vynnychenko then goes on to undermine this position and challenge it with a variety of weapons; nevertheless, feminist ideas have been given an explicit (if not exactly fair) hearing. When Ryta (the "black panther") runs away from Kornii Kanevych (the "white bear") in act two and spends an evening in a bar with her

husband's artist friends, feminist issues have been stated with considerable candour. But the cards are stacked against her despite the outcome in the café, where Kornii wins back Ryta in a game of cards. Vynnychenko will not give her freedom. But he has let her make her case for it without real interference.

Thus I conclude where I began. The relations among feminism, Modernism, and Ukrainian women are problematical and paradoxical. There is nothing actually very new in this. In her ground-breaking study of the Western Ukrainian women's movement, Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak says about as much just in her title, *Feminists despite Themselves*, which emphasizes the provisional, contingent nature of Ukrainian feminism.<sup>6</sup> My point has been to offer an illustration of how this worked in literature (rather than in social organizations) and to point to some of the complex ideological problems against which the Ukrainian women's movement struggled and still struggles.

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6. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1988).