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## Post-Orientalist Discourse in Lesja Ukrajinka's Writing

Post-orientalism is prominently positioned among the numerous forms of contemporary cultural critique aimed at a variety of forms of colonial relations. Research in this area is inevitably associated with Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism* (1978) and mainly constitutes an attempt to rethink the geo-cultural categories of global design with its typical paradigm of hegemony and subordination.

When exploring the difference of the East as *a different* civilizational image, Said's ideas have been subjected to criticism because, by distancing himself from the earlier achievements of oriental studies, he strengthens them to some extent. He demonstratively avoids political analysis, focusing instead on the humanities, intellectually distancing himself by resorting to controversy. In fact, Said himself originates a critique of Orientalism, but he also brings about a stormy reaction from his opponents, who note the lack or an imitation of an equal dialog between the West and the East. Today one cannot but agree to a certain utopianism of the Orientalist theory, which claims the universality of the form of attitude to *the other*, simplifying the inevitable imagological conflict. Enrique Dussel rightly regards Said's Orientalism as a "defect" of the European interpretation of all cultures to the east of Europe, a consequence of a distortion of history originating from the works of French Encyclopédistes, English thinkers of the Enlightenment, and German philosophers Kant and Hegel, "for whom the 'Orient' was humanity's 'infancy' (*Kindheit*). It was the place of despotism and unfreedom from which the Spirit (*Volksgeist*) would later soar toward the West, as if on a path toward the full realization of liberty and civilization" (Dussel 2019: 222).

*Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* is a monograph by Hamid Dabashi, one of the most well-known researchers of post-colonialist thought, which stands out from other studies in this area from recent decades. The author emphasizes that ideas about the idiosyncrasies of the Eastern world were formed globally for too long by those who tried to rule it, so this is a matter of the dubious nobility of a kind of spiritual colonization (Dabashi 2015). According to Hamid Dabashi, we need to accept the fact that "the universe has no center, no periphery" (Dabashi 2015b: 59). At the same time, Dabashi proclaims "the end of post-colonialism", a claim that is deeply criticized by scholars who consider it to be just one more science of the West about itself (Jefiyu 1989: 107-118). Victoria Lysenko appropriately distinguishes two phases of postcolonial studies: dogmatic "anti-orientalism" and "post-orientalism" that "arrived at a new level of hermeneutical self-

reflection” (Lysenko 2017: 7). By adopting and rethinking the fundamental theses of both Orientalism and post-colonialism, post-Orientalism provides a new approach to reflecting on another culture’s way of life.

In modern literary criticism, as defined by Tamara Hundorova, “Post-Orientalism is seen as an opposition between post-colonialism as a form of othering by another popular culture and post-colonialism as a form of inversion of the Eurocentric narrative” (Hundorova 2014)<sup>1</sup>. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is the title of an essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that has become a capacious formulation of the problem directly related to the West-East axis. Notably, in her reflections on the global geo-poetic problem, Spivak touches on the woman writer’s role in the coverage of an enslaved consciousness and maintains that, in fact, “the postcolonial woman intellectual asks the question of simple semiosis – What does this mean?” (Spivak 1993: 93). Further significant contributions to the development of post-oriental studies in literary theory have been published by such scholars as Patricia Almarcegui, Maria Degabriele, Rory Finnin, and Alexander Kratochvil.

Lesja Ukrajinka’s writings belong to the artistic practice of deconstructing the discourse of Orientalism. They show clear signs of trends typical of the present interpretation of post-Orientalism as a phenomenon. The writer’s consistent return to Orientalist issues might be understood as a reaction to Ukraine’s perceived ‘inferiority’: divided between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, it had every reason to lose its own personality. As noted by Dariusz Skórczewski, a kind of “no man’s land,” without “its own voice,” finds itself under a discursive occupation even in the center of Europe, “just like in its books, travel diaries, political letters, and academic works, the West pursued the capture of the ‘Orient’” (Skurčevs’kyj 2013: 31). Unlike many Orientalist authors who were her contemporaries, Lesja Ukrajinka tries to expose the world view of the carriers of colonized culture and the difference of perceptions of certain phenomena and situations by representatives of the West and the East, a difference that causes perpetual geopolitical conflict. When presenting *the other*, the writer consistently endeavors to give a voice to subalterns and to challenge orientalist myths.

Lesja Ukrajinka showed a consistent interest in the study of Eastern culture from an early age. This was facilitated by her numerous travels due to illness. Unsurprisingly, the writer called herself a “wandering Jew”. As noted by Dabashi, only an exiled intellectual can comprehend the uniqueness of the meeting of the West and the East, the intersection of ideas that result from a completely different socio-cultural experience. At nineteen, she began writing *Ancient History of Eastern Peoples*, a textbook in Ukrainian that was originally intended for her younger sister. Over time, her travel and personal experience with a number of artifacts and historical monuments of Eastern countries enabled her to add to and edit the text, which was only published after her death. Volodymyr Šajan describes the work as “the first introduction to Oriental studies in Ukraine’s history” (Šajan 1987: 648). Ahatanhel Kryms’kyj, a well-known scholar of the Orient who was the writer’s friend and

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine (SK)

'brother-in-arms,' becomes an authoritative consultant in this area of interest. However, this aspect of Lesja Ukrajinka's writing has been addressed only occasionally so far.

In recent years, Ukrainian literary studies have shown increasing interest in how the phenomenon of the Orient is presented in literature. *Orient in the Mirror of Romanticism* (2017) is a monograph by Iryna Purpurs that should be considered a vital step in this area. The author concludes that Ukrainian romantic orientalism "turns out to be not only typologically similar to the authoritative English and Russian models, but also completely authentic in terms of the romanticization of oriental material" (Purpurs 2017: 351). However, Lesja Ukrajinka's work was not explored in this monograph, even though the writer made her debut in romantic traditions and scholars have focused on the exoticism of the themes of her oriental works for a long time. A few studies attempt to present convincing interpretations of oriental themes and motifs in the author's writings, primarily the book by historian O. Ohnieva *Eastern Pathways of Lesja Ukrajinka* (2007), O. Kozlitina's dissertation *Egyptian Modus in the Writings of Lesja Ukrajinka: Genesis, Paradigm of Signs, Interpretation* (2011), and articles by T. Malenka (*Oriental Poetry of Lesja Ukrajinka: From Romanticism to Modernism*) and T. Lebedyn'ska (*Orientalism in the Life and Work of Lesja Ukrajinka*). Scholars' interest in the post-colonial reading of Lesja Ukrajinka's works (V. Donij, T. Hundorova, I. Rusnak, O. Jurčuk, O. Zabužko) is on the rise, but the orientalist discourse of the writer's work has not been analyzed yet in this segment of literary studies.

This article sets out to outline the post-orientalist paradigm in the oeuvre of Lesja Ukrajinka as illustrated by her writings whose world of imagery presents the clash of East and West, and to throw light on the author's inversion of the traditional Eurocentric narrative, which is achieved through an expressive representative position of subalterns. This perspective of the study is appropriate primarily for the analysis of texts by authors who have their own experience of "being between two cultures". Among them we rightly list the Ukrainian writer.

Oriental themes emerge in the works of Lesja Ukrajinka organically, along the lines of the European literary process, where the philo-orientalist trend became clear in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (let us just remember, among many others, the names of Montesquieu, Byron, Hugo, Goethe, Mickiewicz). Oriental motifs enhanced the effectiveness and credibility of Lesja Ukrajinka's literary debut and were primarily associated with her trips to Crimea. She was especially impressed by Bachčisaraj, the former capital of the Crimean Khanate, the center of Crimean Tatar culture, and a city that A. Mickiewicz called "the Orient in miniature". The poems *Tatar Girl* and *Oriental Melody* stand out in the poetic cycles *Crimean Memories* (1890-1891) and *Crimean Echoes* (1897-1898). The former makes obvious the distance between the lyrical heroine and a Crimean Tatar girl, whose ethnic clothes are perceived as exotic by the tourist. What is notable in the latter is the emphasis on the independent personality of the individual, although the self-presentation of the lyrical heroine, longing for her loved one, is consistent with the Western recipient's widespread perceptions of feminine types of the Muslim world. Interest in the inner world of Muslim women is also demonstrated by the mature work of Lesja Ukrajinka. She

never doubted the freedom-loving nature of followers of Eastern religions: “From under the black haze” she captured the looks eloquently described in her poetic lines: “Islam oppressed the woman, but her eyes remain free!..” (Ukrajinka 1975a: 366).

The author was also consistently drawn to the unknown mentality of the Asian ethnic groups of the indigenous populations of lands that became part of the Russian Empire. The East as a locus of exotic (non-European) experience is represented by two epic poems of Lesja Ukrajinka, *One Word* and *This is What You're Asking about Those....* Despite being written in different years and ideologically biased, these works form a binary unity, and their plot lines merit attention as a mirror image of situations. In its treatment of Northeast Asian peoples, the diptych merits a post-orientalist analysis, which, according to Almarcegui, attaches great importance to the skill “of imagining and examining situations that go beyond the binary logic of dichotomies and oppositions,” revealing “the relation between two entities that do not form a duality but a pair/couple (Almarcegui 2014: 141). The *other* in both texts are the representatives of Northeast Asia, who are labeled as “natives of the North” in the former poem and “Yakut savages” in the latter. Lesja Ukrajinka’s interest in the population of a distant land was most likely enhanced by numerous exiled activists of the civic movement of disobedience and dissidents. Aged 9, Lesja Ukrajinka herself reacted emotionally to her aunt Olena Kosač’s exile<sup>2</sup>, as confirmed by her first poem *Hope*.

*One Word* (1903) had a subtitle *The Story of an Old Yakut* in the first printed book. In the poem, the Yakut is a narrator who expresses the attitude of indigenous people to the exiled intellectual, finding him to be a strange recluse lost in his books. The situation accords with typical plots that Said noted when emphasizing the dominance of the West over the East. Lesja Ukrajinka’s protagonist is imprisoned by a system that brings him closer to the locals, who do not, however, fully understand the enslavement of their people. Quite ‘democratic’ in his behavior and open to communication, in the eyes of his new acquaintances the stranger still embodies the government that they associate with any member of a strong civilization. Education, competence, knowledge, as intuition tells them, can be generated by government only to take advantage of the conquered and subordinate people. The first title of the work, *Strange People*, highlights the insurmountable barrier between the exile and aborigines (*strangers*), but at the same time appeals to humanistic values (*people*), which dominate their complex relationship. The Yakuts come to the conclusion that the “kind” stranger is different from a typical “toyon”<sup>3</sup> (Ukrajinka 1975b: 79). However, they cannot quite empathize with the exile’s longing, and his obsession with something mysterious causes alienation. Emphasizing the Yakuts’ naivety, Lesja Ukrajinka does not conceal her sympathy for the prisoner character, achieving compassion for him in part by not quite

<sup>2</sup> O. Kosač (Teslenko-Prychodko in marriage) was exiled in 1876 for supporting the *narodnyk* (‘populist’) movement to Pudož, Olonec Governorate, and for another 5 years to Yalutorovsk, Tobolsk Governorate, afterwards.

<sup>3</sup> Toyon is the word that denotes any chief in the *ulus*, the exploiter, including a member of the ruling elite in Yakutia, which became part of imperial Russia in the seventeenth century.

consciously humiliating the culture and intellectual potential of the natives, which is typical of the colonial consciousness. The entire concept of the poem pivots on the problem that the representatives of the two worlds cannot understand each other. To maximize the concept, the author reduces it to an unambiguous metaphor: the aborigines do not have the word that would describe the stranger's aspiration. The word that the protagonist's system of values is built on is never used, but the attempts to describe the concept clearly show that it is freedom, which "is an extremely problematic, multifaceted phenomenon in the creative interpretation of Lesja Ukrajinka" (Dems'ka-Budzuljak 2009: 9).

As shown throughout the history of how the Western world depicts the East, many representations which may seem authentic are approximate or even erroneous, since the unknown is a priori interpreted simplistically. The same mistake is made by Lesja Ukrajinka and criticized by Kryms'kyj, who acknowledges the "fly in the ointment", noting the Yakut language has not only the word "freedom," but also at least three known synonyms. In his memoirs about the author, he writes: "Lesja Ukrajinka took my criticism in stride and felt very sorry that she made such a mistake in her work" (Kryms'kyj 1971: 170). Seeking an assertion of artistic truth, the author would later return to the topic, resorting to role inversion: the Yakuts become the exiles.

Notably, the poem *One Word* was for some time banned by censors for a "harmful tendency", which in fact is even more pronounced in the epic poem *This is What You're Asking about Those...* (1904)<sup>4</sup>. Like *One Word*, the story is related by a narrator and has the signs of a monodrama, which the writer naturally gravitates to at this stage of her creative self-realization. The plot line involves Yakut youths recruited for military service who cannot adapt to their new environment. They experience no compassion from those around them and their foreign ways lead to contempt and ridicule by their Russian counterparts. The expression of the unfortunate is presented by the narrator as a result of their primitive childish mentality devoid of adaptability. The dominant people unambiguously believe that 'strangers' are inferior and do not appreciate the benefits of the Occidental community. The narrator describes physical violence and other forms of bullying against the Yakuts as acceptable because he equates them to animals. The newcomers' commitment to the traditional rites, the cult of spirits, and ancient ethnic culture breeds sarcasm in the unified majority of Christian soldiers. The officers' prohibition to speak their mother tongue, which is described as frogs' croaking, is the last straw that drives the Yakuts to suicide.

Three times the work contemptuously labels the natives of the colonized lands as "savages" whose world arouses no interest in the members of the intolerant dominant culture. In addition, the text presents the Yakuts' hetero-image exclusively through negative characteristics: they are weak with "womanish" faces, lazy, cowards, crybabies, and so on. The military unit reacts to the fellow soldiers' suicide almost unemotionally, describing it as a choice of "fools". People around them have not the slightest remorse, the lack of knowledge and humanistic education rules out any manifestations of historical guilt before the

<sup>4</sup> The poem was first published as late as in 1945 under the editorial title *The Yakut Poem*.

enslaved peoples of Asia due to the expansion of the Muscovite Empire. The key word in this poem is “home”; nostalgia was unbearable for the Yakuts, who were accustomed to a different climate, nature, and lifestyle. Lesja Ukrajinka’s writing is special in that, while offering a contemptuous depiction of foreign characters in her poem, she still foregrounds the recipient’s culture of shame. There is no doubt that the poem reflects the worldview of the author herself. Without commenting on the narrator’s monologue, she still expresses the post-orientalist rejection of ostracism as a policy towards indigenous peoples and denies the thesis of inferiority of people from the East widely maintained by the public.

Unlike *The Yakut Poem*, where disenfranchised foreign characters humbly accept their own doom in the circumstances of historical vicissitudes, Lesja Ukrajinka’s dramatic poem *Rufin and Priscilla* (1908) presents a model of resistance to the dominant assimilative system by the character representative of the conquered East. This piece was surprisingly dear to the writer, and its testamentary status is highlighted by lines from a letter to her sister Ol’ha dated October 18, 1912: “It seemed I did not dare to die without finishing *Rufin and Priscilla...*” (Ukrajinka 2018: 613). This is the largest work in Lesja Ukrajinka’s oeuvre, who jokingly described its genre with her newly coined term “super-drama” with good reason. Contemporary scholars find in it not only a vision of history but, above all, a powerful prophetic discourse with elements of one of the first anti-utopias in European literature because the tragic element of the early Christian era it depicts is a clear allusion to the popularization of socialism in the early twentieth century (Pančenko 2011: 50). O. Zabužko rightly notes that Lesja Ukrajinka’s historiosophical views in the dramatic poem *Rufin and Priscilla* are systematized into a holistic prognostic concept, which “awaits a truly solid study, where her ideas, to be later given a more developed, now purely theoretical articulation in the history of European thought (...), would be analyzed in an adequate intellectual context” (Zabužko 2007: 170). It should be emphasized that Lesja Ukrajinka avoids unambiguous statements or didactics and thinks about progress as a dramatic junction of clashes, as the vulnerability of passionarians’ convictions. As a result, she does not try to offer definitive answers to complex questions that go along with the historical man. The part of Narthal, whose presence in the implementation of a large-scale plan is logical, appears to stand out among the characters of the drama *Rufin and Priscilla*, built on the principles of symphonic counterpoint. In the draft autograph, he was originally designated as a slave named Ben-Nergal; his character was even more often described by the ethnic origin as “Numidian”, i.e. a native of North Africa colonized by imperial Rome (presently, eastern Algeria). It is only later that his name is finalized as Narthal. In the text of her dramatic poem, the author twice emphasizes the self-identification of the hero, who primarily considers himself a nomad. Narthal is aware that the representatives of a strong empire, who lead a sedentary lifestyle, associate any nomad with “savagery”, backwardness, and marginality. A note stressing that the hero’s wailing “is reminiscent of *oriental* [emphasis mine, SK] lamentation on the tomb” is probably the most accurate characterization of the composite nature of Narthal’s character (Ukrajinka 1976: 206).

Narthal is part of a binary unity. As “an African released by Lucius”, his counterpart is the elite Roman, Kneus Lucius. Representing the Western world, Lucius is an authoritative, thinking, humane man. As a former high-ranking military man, he is proud of his wounds that he suffered “while fighting for Rome”. Lucius is positively characterized by soldiers (“a good chief”), but his views differ greatly from those of the general public. As a member of the elite, he seeks to help Rome establish itself on a spiritual level and finds the spread of Christianity, whose supporters were oppressed and persecuted at that time, instrumental to the glorification of his motherland. Rather than support violence against colonized peoples, noble Lucius prefers assimilating indigenous ethnic groups in the metropolis's community. The Roman sincerely believes that this strategy is effective, and his relationship with the slave he releases of his own free will seems idyllic at first. Lesja Ukrajinka describes Lucius and Narthal as being together all the time, seemingly demonstrating a model of unity of West and East, but their relationship changes dramatically as the plot evolves.

The cohabitation of Lucius and Narthal seems at first to confirm the idea that differences in the values of people from different backgrounds can be evened out in a civilized manner in the context of cross-cultural communication. The relationship that arises between the colonizer and his former slave gives an impression of love in the broad sense of the word. The nomad treats his older friend as a teacher and guardian; under the guidance of Lucius, he explores the peak of global culture, develops aesthetically, and his world view comes to be based on Christianity as well. There is reason to believe that the two friends are sexual partners. The homosexual contact of free Romans and slaves is recorded in historical documents; moreover, Lesja Ukrajinka's drama has no trace of a woman around the Lucius–Rufin couple. The nomad's words addressed to his friend at the final loss of harmony and understanding are indicative of their genuine relationship: “I loved no one but you...” (Ukrajinka 1976: 204). This case is not about cynically using love as leverage, which inevitably causes the rejection of self-identification. For example, one of the characters of Lesja Ukrajinka's drama *Orgy* (Maecenas) presents his concept of conquered peoples as follows: “He who loves can become like / anyone in body and soul” (Ukrajinka 1976: 412). However, the policy of teaching to love Rome, according to Maecenas, is reasonable and effective only if applied to foreigners of noble origins. In *Rufin and Priscilla*, instead, the attachment of people from different worlds appears genuine, cordial, and mutual, which is typical of ideal communication. However, Narthal gradually realizes that he has fallen victim to complete personal subordination, which was in fact the goal of Lucius' ‘humane’ scenario. After this insight, the former idealization of authority is forced out by the destructive hatred on the part of the subaltern.

Narthal's character focuses Lesja Ukrajinka's deliberations on the problem of expanding the cultural space, which, according to Said, becomes “the overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies” (Said 1994: 18). However, the author avoids answering such tough questions. Narthal has the ability to stand up for moral maxims. It is increasingly difficult for him to adapt to Christian obedience. He undergoes the ultimate reincarnation of convictions after Christians are arrested by the Vigils, and he

finally splits in prison with his former “brethren”, who still think he is the “black sheep”. Narthal realizes that, having bought the “poor and wild nomad”, Lucius did not formally take him into slavery but gained “power over his soul”, which is no less disgraceful for an individual and his entire family. It is worth emphasizing that nomads lived by cattle breeding and hunting, and Lesja Ukrajinka stresses Narthal’s closeness to nature, which fully manifests itself in his speech. Thus, the binary opposition of Lucius vs. Narthal reveals the eternal conflict of culture vs. nature. Swayed by passion, the erstwhile slave recognizes as his enemy the whole culture, which with its luster magnetizes, subdues the will and, ultimately, prevails over nature (if the latter is to be understood as responsibility for motherland and customs of the kin). He blames the aristocrat Lucius for a virtuoso popularization of the cultural landscape of Rome, which “takes away the will to want”, destroys self-identification, and modifies benchmark values.

However, the temptation of the high metropolitan culture only has temporary power over Narthal; the muffled cry of “parental tents” proves stronger. On the verge of life and death, Narthal reconsiders Christianity as his existential choice, severely reprimanding himself for lack of caution: “The corrupt soul thirsts for heaven, / eternal luxuries, earthly treasures, / and I have traded my honor and pride for them” (Ukrajinka 1976: 204). But above all, the freed slave blames his former liberator, whom he regards as a real criminal, for his mental breakdown and his loss of self. Lucius, a refined patrician, a philosopher who professes humanistic values and has no evil intentions, suddenly becomes the target of criticism of the ‘ferocious barbarian’. This situation triggers a fatal crisis of intimacy. Notably, while showing sympathy for the “poor child” to the end, Lucius still does not try to understand Narthal’s logic, which is the cause of his aggression. The vulnerability of Lucius the intellectual is obvious to the reader as he positions himself as an innocent victim of ingratitude having grown used to his role as teacher and leader. He never recognizes that Narthal speaks for the entire enslaved East that was subdued not only with the help of the army; it was forced to imitate other people’s values, faith, and way of life. Narthal finds that the growth of empires threatens the diversity of the world and foregrounds the apologetics of “all Carthages”, radically putting this label on that part of the world that dominant civilizations treat as a symbol of barbarism, backwardness, and primitiveness. In Narthal’s concept, the Carthage nomination is an alternative to Rome, a sign of tribes and peoples doomed to destruction, castration, and loss of voice. In his monologue, Carthage means the right to be different, to preserve the ethnos with its culture, customs, values, and a different way of life. Narthal’s voice remains unheard, intensifying his uncontrollable destructive intentions.

The text suggests that the resistance of the subdued East is not only inevitable, but also legitimate. Although Narthal’s thirst for revenge is horrifying, and his image of savage cruelty is repelling, the nomad’s choice has “the beauty of struggle, albeit hopeless” (Ukrajinka 1977: 191), which always fascinated the writer. He is the only one who does not humbly accept the verdict of the Roman court: in “*damnatio ad bestias*”, he bravely fights a predatory panther in the circus arena until the carnifex kills the death row prisoner, who says goodbye to his life to the applause of the public. The scene of the Christians’ farewell



after the sentence is poignant. The solitary Narthal rejects Lucius's gesture of reconciliation, pushing away the liberator-master. The scene culminates in the monumental farewell kiss of the female protagonist, the Christian Priscilla, who stands out from the community that declares "love thy neighbor" but still ostracizes the stranger.

The post-orientalist layer of Lesja Ukrajinka's works is also manifested in her understanding of Eastern culture's penetration into the Western world, which is present in her Egyptian text. The topos of Egypt was foregrounded in the works of Lesja Ukrajinka's last years as a result of her climatotherapy trips to Geluan, a resort near Cairo. Egyptian motifs appeared in the author's earlier works as well, and their emergence could have been catalyzed by her impressions of ancient Egyptian museum collections. For example, Lesja Ukrajinka had the opportunity in 1899 to visit a Berlin museum, most likely the so-called New Museum, where she first saw authentic artifacts brought from Egypt that she wrote about in a letter to her mother. According to O. Ohnjeva, the first texts of the poet with Egyptian themes, written in 1900, are close in terms of content, attributes, and symbols to "the traditional perception of Egypt, typical of the nineteenth century. It was an Egypt of ancient sanctuaries, destroyed and sanded, where enterprising Europeans hired Egyptians directed by experts, muftis, hoping to find samples of exotic antiquity" (Ohnjeva 2008: 134). The art and traditions of the East primarily drew artists who gravitated towards exoticism, the mythologization of space, and travel became for Europeans a form of cultural intervention. Trips to distant lands (existing or imaginary) whose culture appeared to be beyond comprehension became a source of controversial impressions for Lesja Ukrajinka, too, provoking her creative ideas. In her poem *Sphinx*, the author focuses on the work of an Egyptian sculptor, who creates a cult structure of a mythical creature that is highly mysterious to humans. Reproduction of another people's cultural heritage as a mystery that cannot be decoded is characteristic of the author's writings. The cautionary lines from Lesja Ukrajinka's dramatic poem *Aisha and Muhammad* eloquently describe such unknowability: "God has secrets, but grasp them / we dare not" (Ukrajinka 1976: 105).

The line separating Eastern and Western cultures underlies the artistic paradigm of the writer's original legend *Ra-Meneis*. This work centers around a historical figure "with the smile of a sphinx", a real ruler of Egypt whose cruelty knew no bounds. The Egyptians, in accordance with their traditions, consider her a deity and embody her likeness in art so that she will live forever. In addition to songs and statues, an incomparable cult building is to be the last home of Ra-Meneis — a unique pyramid built at the cost of numerous lives. However, the planned process of her perpetuation is disrupted by the intervention of higher forces. A powerful tornado (equally symbolizing the revolt of slaves driven to despair by the tyrannical rule built on the model of many dynasties of Egyptian kings) takes the body of the deceased; she is doomed to obscurity in her "moving grave" in the sands of Egypt. Many centuries later, a sarcophagus with Ra-Meneis is found by accident. Instead of preserving the body in its rightful place, an "orthodox sheikh" decides to collaborate with the Europeans looting the ruins of pharaohs' tombs, making an unheard-of profit. The uniquely preserved mummified body of the Egyptian queen and all her jewels are given to infidels ("insane javrs").

Ra-Meneis is depicted by Lesja Ukrajinka through a rich palette of colors, such as purple (royal bed), yellow (Nile waters, sand), and blue (lotus) in line with the Orientalist visions of cult figures. The emblem of the snake (“beautiful and terrifying, like Urea, the golden serpent”) is used to symbolize Ra-Meneis’s longevity. As interpreted by the archaic mythology of the East, the serpent divides the heaven and the earth by twisting into a cyclical ring of life. It is designed to protect the ruling pharaoh on earth and in heaven with its venom and flames. Apparently, this protection enables Ra-Meneis to remain rooted in the Egyptians’ historical memory, as symbolized by her unchanged appearance in the abandoned sarcophagus. While the Egyptians clearly associate the ancient ruler’s body and the almost miraculous preservation of it with the sacred, for the Europeans, the phenomenon of a find purchased in Egypt is completely devoid of religious or spiritual meaning; it turns into a secularized artifact.

After Ra-Meneis’ death, the sarcophagus with her body is solemnly sent on her last journey on a “red barge” along her dear Nile. A trip on a foreign ship becomes the second stage of her route outside earth time to an unknown land that “was ruled by a hostile cold and the indifferent humidity of the fog” (Ukrajinka 1975a: 209), where Ra, the center of the ancient Egyptian perception of the world, lost his power. In Europe, the mummy of Ra-Meneis was to become a highlight of the museum collection of oriental antiquities. However, the ostentatious curiosity of Europeans about the exotic ancient culture in the text is only a form of indifference, a naive interest in marauders’ caravans. In the denouement, Ra-Meneis’ sudden transformation with her jewels and symbols into dust in a foreign capital can be regarded as a natural (though unconscious) destruction or, at least, falsification of the East by the West. Though the queen did not end up in the sacred temple space of the Pyramid, she has weight in the Egyptian macrocosm and genesis, and persists in historical experience, albeit invisible and covered with sands. The museum in a northern city that claims to become a “temple for the gods of the world” actually turns into a tomb of dead gods. It is rather a pseudo-temple that, in the end, has no place for a stranger: the sarcophagus gets disastrously broken. On crossing a conventional border of two civilizations, Ra-Meneis becomes Nothing. As J.-P. Sartre notes in Hegel’s vein, “Being cut from Essence which is its ground becomes ‘mere empty immediacy’” (Sartre 1993: 13). Outside her ethnic continuum, Ra-Meneis is an abstraction devoid of productive functions. Lesja Ukrajinka’s work is not so much about the fundamentally disconnected communication between the West and the East, but rather about the illusory appropriation of other people’s values, especially when this process is driven by commercial gain. In addition to the axiological code of the work, we should isolate the gender code, because it is a *man* (sheikh) that decides on the lack of value in a *woman* (Ra-Meneis) and carries her to the West, which correlates with the East-West dichotomy by analogy with the female-male opposition. At the same time, Lesja Ukrajinka makes it clear with some literary devices that the world has failed for centuries to remove social inequality because both “black slaves” and “white slaves” follow the will of the rulers. They are excluded from the confrontation of Occidental-Oriental

cultures, but sometimes find themselves on the transgressive line of the mental border between them, falling victim to conflicts, wars, and acts of terror.

Therefore, the legend *Ra-Meneis* explores the problem of intercultural communication, asserts the powerlessness of intersemiotic translation in conditions of vulgar interference in the ethnic-religious usage of another community, and the need to seek new forms of dialog between Western and Eastern worlds.

Inclined to find sense in the progress of civilization in her works, Lesja Ukrajinka always raised the issue of the confrontation between East and West and was vocal about various forms of subjugation, violence, destruction, and alienation from one's own, which accompanied the spread of European powers in the conquered lands of Asia and Africa. In her artistic texts, the life trajectories of characters who find themselves in foreign territory against their will recur at the center of the plot. Subdued or open conflicts full of tragic misunderstandings drive the establishment of contact between the members of Eastern and Western culture.

The tandem of characters that expresses the hierarchy of the dominant and conquered culture is personified by Lucius and Narthal (the drama *Rufn and Priscilla*). It is not about a dialogic parity of relationships because the nomad is fundamentally assigned the role of a subordinate, and dependence on an influential stranger is essentially considered destructive to the self-identification of the individual and the ethnic community as a whole. The Roman patrician gives the impression of a noble *Kulturtrager* who has the capacity to rise above the rebel's hostility, but this virtue coexists with intellectual deafness to the position of the subaltern, lack of self-criticism, and predictive foresight.

Lesja Ukrajinka's texts suggest the occidental interest in Eastern culture is often a tool for appropriating what is *other*, its conscious or unconscious devaluation through extreme othering. In the legend of *Ra-Meneis*, the sarcophagus from Egypt becomes a commodity, not without a contribution of the selfish national elite, only to crumble to pieces overseas. Thus, the coffin (memory of culture) without a home is doomed to failure.

The pervasive gender vector in Lesja Ukrajinka's oriental works can also be seen in *Ekbal-Ghanem*, a story that illustrates retransmission and popularization of European culture among ordinary Egyptian women. However, it would be reckless to consider it an example of established Orientalist discourse because this work was not finished. In general, the East in Lesja Ukrajinka's writings is far from romantic pathos, it resonates with the contemporary concept of post-orientalism that prioritizes a balanced interest in the indigenous peoples of Asia and Africa, avoiding exotic effects and happy endings. The post-Orientalist perspective is usually achieved by the writer through a centripetal shift of the position of *the other* from the periphery, and the assertion of *the other's* right to be heard.

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### Abstract

Svitlana Kocherga

*Post-Orientalist Discourse in Lesja Ukrajinka's Writing*

The article interprets Lesja Ukrajinka's creative work through the lens of post-colonialism and post-orientalism. The conceptions of H. Dabashi, G. Spivak, T. Hundorova are involved for analyzing the vision of the East by Lesja Ukrajinka. The article focuses on phenomena of communication with *the other*; on a global dialogue of cultures; and on the writer's critical response to historical conflict between East and West. The author's pathetic apology for the East is likely a result of belonging to a colonized people that is doomed to marginalization under the pressure of the Russian Empire. This leads to the identification of Ukrainian national issues in the writer's oriental motifs. The interpretation is based on the texts *Rufin and Priscilla*, *Only One Word*, *Yakut Poem*, and *Ra-Meneis*.

The article asserts that Lesja Ukrajinka does not put romantic pathos into the image of the East, which fully resonates with the contemporary concept of post-orientalism. She avoids exotic poetics and concentrates on the controversial position of other-image.

### Keywords

Lesja Ukrajinka; Orientalism; Post-Orientalism; Post-Colonial; Subaltern; Communication; Imagological Conflict.