

3-28-2006

## Postcolonial Herstory: The Novels of Assia Djebar (Algeria) and Oksana Zabuzhko (Ukraine): A Comparative Analysis

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Postcolonial Herstory: The Novels of Assia Djebar (Algeria) and Oksana  
Zabuzhko (Ukraine): A Comparative Analysis

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Women's Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
March 28, 2006

Keywords: postcoloniality, nationalism, the second world, decolonization, francophone

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Oksana Lutsyshyna

ABSTRACT

This work is a comparative analysis of the works of the Ukrainian author Oksana Zabuzhko (*Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*) and the Algerian writer Assia Djebar (*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*). Although the lives of Algerian and Ukrainian women were shaped by different historical and social forces, discourses and traditions, common themes exist in their writings because of their common postcolonial background. Both authors examine the relations of women to history in the postcolonial setting, the problem of inscribing women into history, and the double oppression women experienced during colonial times (as colonized subjects and as gendered subjects).

One of their main themes in the works of Djebar and Zabuzhko is that of the body. In their writings, Assia Djebar and Oksana Zabuzhko unite the discourses of female body, pain, and history. Woman's body, "unseen" by the Algerian and Ukrainian societies, is inscribed into the historic process through pain. The experience unacknowledged before is expressed through details of (sexual) violence and rape that the women of the colonized nation suffered from the colonizers (the French or the Soviets), because the discourse of postcolonial nationalism ascribed to women the roles of chaste patriotic icons.

In my research, I focus on the themes of the female body as a site of (colonial) violence done to a woman, as well as a site of resistance to patriarchal values. The methodology of my research consists in close reading of the texts of Assia Djebar and Oksana Zabuzhko. I analyze the texts providing historical context of women's condition in Algeria and Ukraine and concentrating on the impacts of French and Russian/Soviet colonialism and nationalism on the lives of women. One of the issues under analysis is that of decolonization, or disengagement from the colonial trauma. I argue that the language chosen by these authors for writing (French by Assia Djebar and Ukrainian by Oksana Zabuzhko) contains a liberating potential.

## Introduction

In my work, I analyze the writings of two authors, Ukrainian Oksana Zabuzhko and Algerian Assia Djebar. Oksana Zabuzhko is a famous feminist writer in Ukraine, and her novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* (1996) was a groundbreaking work that looked into the earlier unexplored themes of sexuality, sexual violence, and intimate relations between men and women. These topics were on the list of taboos during the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union. *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* is a complex work that not only revisits a personal drama, but also tackles such broad issues as gender oppression, Ukrainian colonial history, Russian/Ukrainian relations, and colonial and postcolonial traumas, both collective and individual. As Halyna Hryn', who translated the novel into English, puts it, it is a work in which "the personal is subsumed under the weight of history" (Zabuzhko, *A Conversation with Oksana Zabuzhko* 1).

Assia Djebar, an internationally known Algerian writer of French expression, "a woman novelist in the French language," as she called herself in her essay "Writing in the Language of the Other" (113), explores the topics of gender oppression and women's long-term silence in Algerian society. The French colonization of Algeria started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and ended in 1962, after much bloodshed in the war between the French and the Algerians. In her collection of short stories *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1980) Assia Djebar revisits the past and also focuses on the postcolonial context, in which women are still largely silenced and women's experience not acknowledged.

Within the nationalist ideology of the newly independent Algeria, the question of women's liberation was not addressed. In *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and her other works, Djébar attempts to "rewrite the history of Algeria from the feminine point of view" (Gafaiti 813).

I analyze the texts of Djébar and Zabuzhko by providing the historical contexts of women's condition in Algeria and Ukraine and focusing on the impacts of French and Russian/Soviet colonialism on the lives of women. The methodology I use consists in close reading and comparison of the texts of Assia Djébar and Oksana Zabuzhko. The postcolonial critique applied to the works of these authors will help explore a number of important issues. I draw on the works of such postcolonial feminist scholars as Ania Loomba, Anne McClintock, Cynthia Enloe, Fatima Mernissi, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. When discussing the problems of colonial identity, Ania Loomba points out the "gender blindness" of such researchers as Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha (162-163), who tended to concentrate on *male* identity – most likely, not because they deliberately chose to ignore women, but rather because they followed the long-standing ontological tradition to equate the male with the universally human. The works produced by feminist scholars in the realm of postcoloniality fill in this gap, offering a new, enriched perspective that focuses on female experience in the colonial and postcolonial times. This choice of a theoretical framework is especially justified in regard to the two authors whose writings I analyze (Assia Djébar and Oksana Zabuzhko), since both of them are particularly concerned with inscribing women into the historic discourses of their countries. Gender as a category of historic analysis, as Joan Scott contends, "seem[s] the best way to... bring women from the margins to the center of historical focus, and, in the

process, transform the way all history was written” (*Gender and the Politics of History* xi), and feminist postcolonial scholars use the category of gender as the central one in their critiques of colonialism.

In this work I strive to apply postcolonial theory to the context of post-Soviet Ukraine, a country from the so-called “Second World.” French colonial politics in Algeria has been theorized within the postcolonial framework on numerous occasions, since this case of colonization fits the category of a more or less “traditional” colonial enterprise, with the Western European power (France) controlling and conquering an overseas territory, the inhabitants of which differ from the French culturally and racially. However, Russian/Soviet colonial activity, where peoples of similar culture and the same race were often the targets of the colonial ambition of their neighbor (Russia),<sup>1</sup> has received much less attention from postcolonial scholars. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries that used to be part of it (e.g., Ukraine, Belarus’, Kazakhstan, Latvia, etc.) or within its sphere of influence (e.g., Slovakia, Hungary, Poland) were not immediately classified as postcolonial, because the term was mostly reserved for the Third World countries colonized by the powers of the West (e.g., France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, etc). However, as David Chioni Moore points out in his article “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?,” published in 2001, such a perspective succeeds only in “perpetuat[ing] the already superannuated centrality of the Western or Anglo-Franco World” (123), and does not allow for a truly global theoretical approach. The Western European countries were not the only ones involved in colonial activities,

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the similarity of culture and the sameness of race are the conditions relevant to the present analysis, but not to the general context of Russian/Soviet colonial politics. For example, in the case of Russia’s colonization of Central Asia, differences of culture, race and religion were major issues.



and the East/West binary does not reflect the complexity of the relations between different nations in different historic periods.

When talking about the Ukrainian colonial context, I use both the names “Russia” and “the Soviet Union” in regard to the colonizing force. I agree with David Chioni Moore’s viewpoint concerning these two states (Russia and the Soviet Union) and their profound differences:

By all accounts, the Soviet Union attempted something very different from the Russian imperium it succeeded: instead of declaring itself an empire, it proposed a multilayered “voluntary” union of republics. Though according to the strictest Marxist-Leninist approach, national identities would eventually dissolve into homo Sovieticus, Lenin and his Commissar of Nationalities, Joseph Stalin, developed an approach, “nationalist in form, socialist in content,” that offered an alternative to the then current imperial, colonial, caste-based, universalist, and melting-pot ideologies. (122)

Therefore, to state that the Soviet Union was the colonizer one has to “consider multiple dimensions” (*ibid.*). The Soviets, especially in the earlier stages of their rule, did promote certain values that differed greatly from those of the “traditional” (e.g., French or British) colonial regimes: they did away with some “ethnic-Russian privileges in ...[the] east and south.... Support[ed] ...many of Union languages...liberat[ed] ...women from the harem and the veil...support[ed] ...Third World anticolonial struggles” (Moore 122). However, the Soviets also relocated whole nations to Siberia; controlled and invaded the countries of the so-called ‘Soviet block’; re-conquered the Baltic states in 1941 (*ibid.*); imposed the rule of Soviet doctrine in places where the people did not welcome it; and proclaimed the Russian language to be the best and most efficient means of communication throughout the Soviet state, thus marginalizing the other languages and their literatures. The Soviet Union, therefore, is an empire and a colonial power with its

own peculiar characteristic features and of multidimensional character. I use both the terms “Russia” and “the Soviet Union” to label the colonizer of Ukraine, depending on the historic period I am referring to in my text: if the events under consideration took place before 1917, the year of the collapse of the imperial Russian order, the term “Russia” or “Russian Empire” is applied, and if the events took place after 1917, I call the colonizer “the Soviet Union.”

I wish to draw connections between the two distinctly different colonial and postcolonial situations: the Algerian and the Ukrainian. David Chioni Moore emphasizes that “when one chats with intellectuals in Vilnius or Bishkek or when one reads essays on any of the *current* literatures of the formerly Soviet-dominated sphere, it is difficult to find comparisons between Algeria and Ukraine, Hungary and the Philippines, or Kazakhstan and Cameroon” (116). My work therefore has a potential to begin filling in this gap. As was mentioned earlier, the postcolonial paradigm of analysis has long been used in relation to the countries of Asia and Africa, and thus the former “Second World” was not profoundly theorized from the point of view of postcolonial studies. However, eliciting the similarities and differences between these two modes of colonization and postcolonial contexts (the First/Third World and the Soviet “Second” World types of relationships) may help broaden the basic definitions of colonialism and postcoloniality. Gender as the category of analysis here is extremely useful, because it appears to be central to the colonial discourse.

In Chapter One, I discuss the application of postcolonial theory to the context of the Second World, and examine the mechanisms of the construction of “the Other” by the French and Russian imperial discourses in the Algerian and Ukrainian colonial settings.

These mechanisms are significantly different, as are their consequences and ramifications.

In Chapter Two I analyze the literary texts of Assia Djébar (*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*) and Oksana Zabuzhko (*Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*). I argue that there exist common themes in the works of Djébar and Zabuzhko, such as the theme of the postcolonial female body, tortured by the colonizer and unacknowledged by the ex-colonized in the postcolonial context. Both authors strive to inscribe women in the histories of their countries, to make women visible, and to show the complex relations between the colonizers, the men of the colonized nation and the women of the colonized nation.

Chapter Three is dedicated to the issue of the language choices made by Assia Djébar, who is Algerian and writes in French, and Oksana Zabuzhko, who is Ukrainian and writes in Ukrainian (though to be Ukrainian and to write in Russian is not, and never was, uncommon for Ukrainian writers). I explore the decolonizing potentials of French (for Djébar) and Ukrainian (for Zabuzhko). Both French and Ukrainian become the means of impacting the consciousness of the postcolonial nations and of disengaging from the colonial trauma. This is especially significant with regard to the women's voices encoded in French and Ukrainian by Djébar and Zabuzhko.

In Chapter Four, I conclude that despite the different modes of colonialism experienced by Algeria and Ukraine, there are certain similarities in the postcolonial settings, especially in relation to gender issues. A colonized woman bears the brunt of double oppression: as a colonized subject and as a gendered subject. Zabuzhko and Djébar reveal this in their texts, and make the postcolonial woman visible to the world.

## Chapter One: Contextualizing the Empires

### *Postcolonial Theory and the Second World*

A comparison of the postcolonial writings of Oksana Zabuzhko (Ukraine) and Assia Djebar (Algeria) offers important insights into the cultural experience of postcoloniality. The “three-world theory,” dominant in the tradition of postcolonial studies, holds Western Europe and North America to be the “First world,” “the villains,” the powers capable of colonial enterprises; and groups all the “economically weakest states” under the category of “Third World,” despite the great differences between these countries (Moore 116). The Second World, that is the (post) socialist states, long considered the “alternative” to the colonial powers of the West, is not usually analyzed with the help of the postcolonial paradigm. Madina Tlostanova argues that one of the reasons for such omission is the Eurocentrism of the very paradigm: “...Scholars... practically do not pay attention to the former socialist world... Most Eurocentric theories of the project of modernity... envision history as a victorious march from the Roman Empire to the United States, not acknowledging the histories of other countries” (Tlostanova 6). As yet another reason for the reluctance of academics to employ the postcolonial critique in relation to countries of the Second World, David Chioni Moore points out the Marxist and leftist opinions of Western academics:

[There]...has been the belief, not without reason, that the First World largely caused the Third World’s ills, and an allied belief that the Second’s socialism was the best alternative. ...In addition, many postcolonial scholars, in the United

States and elsewhere, have been Marxist or strongly left and therefore have been reluctant to make the Soviet Union a French- or British-style villain. (117)

However, though “postcolonial theory ... was initially a critique of Western power,” it is evident from the world’s historic processes that “the West has hardly monopolized colonial activity” (Moore 114). Madina Tlostanova emphasizes the necessity of analyzing the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman and the Russian empires with the tools offered by postcolonial theory (Tlostanova 6). Some of the empires, though, did not obtain colonies on other continents. David Chioni Moore points out the tendency of postcolonial studies to define colonial enterprises only by their overseas conquests: in other words, if a country did not subjugate the peoples of far overseas lands, it is often not regarded as the classic “colonizer” (Moore 118).

The Russian Empire began absorbing Ukraine in the late seventeenth century, and later the Soviet Union transformed this legacy into a different form of colonialism. Edward Said states that “Russia... acquired its imperial territories almost exclusively by adjacence. Unlike Britain or France, which jumped thousands of miles beyond their own borders to other countries, Russia moved to swallow whatever land or peoples stood next to its borders, which in the process kept moving farther and farther east and south” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 10). George Grabowicz discusses the term “colonialism” and its relation to Ukraine’s experience:

Colonialism is a term normally used in discussing the overseas empires and the so-called Third World. To see it applied in the context of the Soviet Union flies in the face of verities, both until recently generally accepted. One was the perception of the Soviet Union as a unitary force, a country more or less like any other country, only larger... The second stereotype blocking such a perception of the Soviet Union ...is...Western understanding of Russia and a certain readiness...to see it ...implicitly as natural... Beyond that, the issue of race, central to many familiar examples of colonialism, was also blurred in the case of Russia’s empire:

for while Russia's expansion into Central Asia... clearly involved subjugation of racially different peoples...., its expansion westward... did not readily trigger this racial and civilizational criterion. But [all this] does not invalidate the paradigm of colonial rule. On the contrary, it broadens our understanding of its nature. (Grabowicz 28-29)

One should also consider historic parallels between Ireland and Ukraine as countries whose colonial experience included geographical proximity to the colonizer as well as the absence of racial distinction (Antonuik 21). David Chioni Moore, who proposed a taxonomy of the types of colonization, calls this kind of colonization "dynastic, in which a power conquers neighbor peoples," in contrast with the "classic": that of, for example, the British in Kenya and India or the French in Senegal and Vietnam, in which a long-distance but nonetheless strong political, economic, military, and cultural control is exercised over the people who, in Said's terms, are "Orientalized" due to their distinct racial and cultural differences with the colonizer (qtd. in Moore 115).

Marko Pavlyshyn, a "primary scholar of postcolonialism and Ukrainian culture," (Antonuik 19) introduces the term "cultural colonialism" to label the relationship between Russia/the Soviet Union and Ukraine. He distinguishes four main features of cultural colonialism in the context of Russia/the Soviet Union and its colonies:

Firstly: cultural colonialism generates hierarchies of value which impute supreme value to the goods of the dominant culture.... Second: as Homi Bhabha has perceived, cultural colonialism promotes the myth of the transcendent, universal quality of the colonizer versus the merely local, political and ideological particularity of the colonized. The dominant nation transcends nationhood and nationalism. It eschews the symbols of mere nationality. ... Third: the cultural institutions of the empire function to render the center visible and valid to the outside observer, the colonies scarcely visible at all. If, under controlled conditions, they acquire a measure of visibility, then they do so as local color...[and]... are mired with ethnographism. Fourth: cultural colonialism fosters historiographical myths, and of particular importance in the Soviet case are the twin myths, inherited from tsarist historiography, of the direct continuity of the dominant nation with the oldest state formation of East Slavdom, Kievan Rus,

and of the benevolent and historically productive absorption into the empire of all its constituent parts. One of the commonplaces characteristic of both myths in their more vulgar form is the personification of the colonizer as the “elder brother”. (Pavlyshyn, qtd. in Antonuik 24)

Colonialism has influenced Ukrainian culture as well as its social and economic life. Modern Ukraine, which obtained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, fits the definition of postcoloniality offered by Moore just as easily as does Algeria: “...The cultures of postcolonial lands are characterized by tensions between the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence, between the desire for autochthony and the fact of hybrid, part-colonial origin, between resistance and complicity, and between imitation (or mimicry) and originality” (Moore 112). By using the postcolonial approach when looking at these experiences, one can look deeper into the nature of the changes that have happened in a particular country and examine them more fully.

Moreover, the use of the postcolonial critique in regard to the countries of the former Soviet bloc may help refine our understanding of the very term “postcolonial,” which was long used only for relations between the “West” (Western Europe, North America) and the too broadly defined “Third World” (Africa, Asia, the Caribbean). Catherine Hall points out that not “all societies ...were colonized in the same ways, nor ... [are] all postcolonial societies ... postcolonial in the same ways, but that the term draws attention to the systems of colonialism and the relations between colonizer and colonized which operated” (Hall, “Introduction” 3). This comparative analysis of writings coming from two postcolonial situations, the Algerian and the Ukrainian, may help elicit the commonalities and differences existing in these societies, as well as the influences of the colonial power (France or Russia) and their specific ramifications.

### *The Civilizing Mission as the White Man's Burden*

Western European (e.g., British, French, and Dutch) colonialism was characterized by the subjugation of nations that differed significantly from the Europeans culturally and racially. Western European colonialism relied on the discourse of Orientalism, defined by Edward Said as “a political vision of reality whose structure promoted a binary opposition between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”)” (Said, qtd. in Loomba 47). The colonial discourse often made the connections between the “bestial” state of the colonized and their need for the Europeans to civilize them, to give order to their irresponsible, “childish,” primal world. For example, Rudyard Kipling, a prominent poet of colonial times, wrote that to civilize is “the White Man’s Burden.” Europeans should take care of the “sullen peoples,/ Half-devil and half-child,” and invest in “educating” them (Kipling 58). This discourse of “civilizing” was especially characteristic of the French colonial enterprise. “Mission civilisatrice française,” “a special mission to civilize the indigenous peoples,” stemmed from the “fundamental assumptions about the superiority of French culture and the perfectibility of humankind” (Conklin 60). The French, the racially and culturally “superior” people, constructed the inhabitants of the colonized lands as inferior, beastly, childish and barbaric. Around 1870, during the times of the Third Republic, “mission civilisatrice” obtained the status of official ideology of the French state (*ibid.*).

In 1830 the French invaded Algeria and began the process of its colonization, performing the “civilizing mission,” trying to “assimilate” the Algerians, making them more “French,” and supplanting their Arabic and Islamic traditions with French ones (Hause 141). Algeria had to become part of France, its “natural complement” (Fletcher



199), with a separate Algeria “impossible to imagine” (Fletcher 198). Yaël Simpson Fletcher stresses that “as the largest settler colony in the French Empire and the closest to France, Algeria was particularly significant” (Fletcher 194).

Another reason for this significance was the fact that Algeria became “the Other” against which the French constructed their own identity as the “civilized” nation. In fact, race played an important role in “Othering” the Algerians. Patricia Lorkin analyzes the so-called “Kabyle myth” which consisted in discriminating against the people with darker skin – the Arabs -- while claiming that the Kabyles, another part of Algerian population, people with lighter skin, were less “barbaric.” The Arab people were darker-skinned and nomadic, and their culture was farther from the European one. The Kabyles were considered more susceptible to being “civilized” because they were not nomads, their skin was of lighter color and they were not as “fanatical” about Islam as the Arabs, presumably, were. The author points out that the Kabyle myth was “sanctioned by the European scientific societies” (163).

Though the French claimed that they were attempting to bring the Algerians to a higher level of development, socially and economically, in reality the Algerians were always discriminated against. As Yaël Simpson Fletcher argues,

...The colony and the metropole were presented as “almost the same but not quite,” one a slightly distorted reflection (rather than imitation) of the other. Since colonial domination required the clearly demarcated difference between “them” and “us,” any merger of identities threatened the status quo”. (199)

“The Other” had to remain “the Other”: savagery was constructed by the racial theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a biological condition that could not be socially improved, and “the imperial claim of civilizing the natives” (Loomba 117) was but an example of

colonial discourse and its striving for power and domination.

*The Russian Empire and its “Other”*

In the case of the Russian Empire, however, “the Other” was constructed in a somewhat different way. As Jacques Bacic points out in his book *Red Sea – Black Russia*, from early times the Russians saw themselves as different from the Western European nations on the basis of religion. The West, in the opinion of the Russians, followed the “untrue” religion (Western Christianity), unlike Russians themselves (representing Eastern Christianity). The West was “them,” not “us,” for the Russians, and so were the Russians to the West (Bacic 104). The “Otherness” of Russia was seen by the capitalist imperialist West, symbolically, in almost racial terms, as Madina Tlostanova argues in her book: “It is interesting to note that Russia with its “incorrect,” from the Western point of view, Christianity... became more and more “non-white” for the rest of the world... since...in the Western-European consciousness protestant capitalist modern empires were equated with the white race (55).

To be white meant to be “civilized”; and to perform a colonial mission (“civilizing mission”), respectively, meant to be white. Historically, colonial regimes (e.g., French, Dutch) put great emphasis on race and on the “Europeanness” of the Western European citizens who served the colonial power. The assumption of race is supposedly based on the premise of division of peoples into lighter- and darker-skinned, but it does not follow this criterion consistently. For instance, in the context of French imperial discourse, the issues of race were closely connected with the issues of citizenship and “fitness” for citizenship. “Whiteness,” of course, was an ideal condition for French citizenship, but, as Alice Conklin argues in her article “Redefining

'Frenchness': France and West Africa," skin color was not the only "marker of Frenchness," since religion and culture were also important variables. "Muslim status... was incompatible with their [the French] Civil Code" (Conklin 69). The people of the different culture/religion were treated as differently "raced" and therefore undesirable.

The individuals who had "mixed blood," or who "legally classified Europeans" but "fell short of ...economic and cultural standards" of an ideal servant of the regime, were often "barred from posts in civil service" due to their assumed inability to promote colonial ideology (Stoler 129-130). On the global scale of the colonial project, as Madina Tlostanova remarks, "the Russians... could not be considered "blond beasts," and Kipling's "white man's burden" could hardly be entrusted to them," because they were not "Western enough" (55). Tlostanova illustrates her point by the words of Lord Curzon who reacted to the news on the colonization of Central Asia by Russia by saying that this was "the annexation of the Asiatics by the Asiatics" (Tlostanova 56).

In Russia, Western values were traditionally well accepted: for example, the Russian nobility of the 19<sup>th</sup> century spoke French among themselves. Madina Tlostanova refers to a famous Russian literary scholar Yuri Lotman who states that "there emerged a paradoxical situation, when the foreign obtained the significance of the cultural norm, and the domestic existed [on the margins]... and was held in low esteem. However, the realization of the foreign as valuable did not erase the psychological mistrust" (qtd. in Tlostanova 61).

The "savage" as "the Other" of Western European culture did not exist for the Russians. "Russia...used its own peasants as the "remote savage"... and the transfer to this peasant of the functions of the "Other," which the Western-European culture

attributed to the savage, was natural” (Tlostanova 62). The peasants were not “cultured” in the style of the Russian nobility – they did not speak French and did not glorify foreign values, but were “uncivilized” and therefore “barbaric” and “inferior.”

The Russian elite (the Tsars, the nobility) enjoyed the status of “us,” who, however, felt “culturally inferior” (Moore 121) to the West, whereas the rest of the population, the Russian peasants as well as the colonized nations, were “them,” or “the Other.” Therefore, the mechanism of “Othering” was more class-based than race-based.

As David Chioni Moore contends,

...the standard Western story about colonization is that it is always accompanied by orientalization, in which the colonized are seen as passive, ahistorical, feminine, or barbaric. However, in Russian-Central European colonization this relation is reversed, because for several centuries at least Russia has, again, been saddled with the fear or at times belief that it was culturally inferior to the West (121).

Colonizing lands, then, had special significance for the Russian Empire: Russia wanted to be seen as an important European power. “Whereas the British mimicked no one but themselves, the Russians were mimicking the French and British, to whom, again, they had long felt inferior. In the later nineteenth century, colonial expansion was the price of admission into Europe’s club, and this was Russia’s ticket” (Moore 120).

Yaël Simpson Fletcher refers to David Spurr who identifies “a paradox of colonial discourse: the desire to emphasize racial and cultural difference as a means of establishing superiority takes place alongside the desire to efface difference and gather the colonized into the fold of an all-embracing civilization” (Spurr, qtd. in Fletcher 207). Algeria, though proclaimed “French,” differed from France too significantly to ever merge with France culturally and racially. Yaël Simpson Fletcher illustrates this situation

with a very telling historic anecdote. When the French President Doumergue made an official visit to Algeria in 1930, several Algerian leaders met him to declare their loyalty. There was a photograph made on this occasion. Chiefs Boussif-Caïd and Ben Chika appeared in their traditional white Arab robes, and their mere presence, especially that of chief Ben Chika who remained silent and left no verbal message, was in sharp contrast with Boussif-Caïd's words placed as a caption to this photo: "There is no longer present, on this African earth, an Algeria and a France; there is nothing but France" (Fletcher 207-208).

Ukraine, on the other hand, was always seen (by Russia) as a part of Russia, referred to as "Small Russia" ("Malorossiya"), with the Ukrainian language appearing as the "Small Russian tongue" in the works of the respected linguists. The Ukrainians were seen as the "brothers" of the Russians, people who shared such important markers as religion and a number of cultural practices with the colonizer. Instead of a scenario of "civilizing" which consisted in setting up an unattainable goal of "civilization" for a subject whom the colonizer, in reality, wished to keep degraded and "Othered," as was the case in French/Algerian relations, the Russian/Ukrainian case demonstrates a scenario of a "total merging" with the colonized subject, of complete erasure of this subject's difference from the colonizer, of annihilating domination.

Oksana Zabuzhko compares this form of colonial consciousness with "destructive...vampire-like love... its main characteristic feature is the in-built absence of interest in the "difference" of its object, a hungry and burning desire to appropriate [this object]... to make it a part of oneself" (Zabuzhko, "Farewell to the Empire" 306). Oksana Zabuzhko argues with Edward Said who claims that Russian colonialism differs

from the Western only by its geographic factors (proximity of the colonies) and close cultural ties with the colonized (sameness of religion; similarity of languages). Zabuzhko asserts that there is another important dimension of Russian colonialism usually overlooked by the researchers: “assimilation as the imposed categorical imperative of coexistence” (Zabuzhko, “Farewell to the Empire” 306). “Russia without Ukraine” becomes a totally new phenomenon, radically different from “Russia with Ukraine,” and by absorbing “the Other,” Russia, the colonizer, symbolically rejuvenates itself (Zabuzhko, “Farewell to the Empire” 306).

### *The Gendered Nature of Colonialism*

It is impossible to fully theorize the issue of “the Other” in the colonial setting without turning to one of the most crucial aspects of the problem: the gendered nature of colonialism. Ania Loomba contends that in the context of colonialism “sexual and colonial relationships become analogous to each other” (151). Both Assia Djébar and Oksana Zabuzhko are aware of colonial gendered discourse. In *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* Assia Djébar revisits the drama of the colonization of Algeria. She evokes the written accounts of the French officers who participated in the attacks of 1830, the documents she found in the archives and libraries: “...[B]etween the lines these letters speak of Algeria as a woman whom it is impossible to tame” (57). These letters contain many an image of penetration of the (potentially) colonized land, of “eating one’s way” into it, of getting hold of its treasures. The process of conquest is described in the eroticized metaphors which point out the situation that can be described as “colonial rape,” equating the colonized land with a subdued, passive female, an object of somebody’s desires, and the colonizer – with a predatory male power, a “rapist” who

exercises his right to act upon his victim's body.

The equating of a colonized land with a woman is very characteristic for European colonial discourse. This discourse shows itself in many domains, from art to science: for instance, the long tradition of European painting depicted the continents of Asia, Africa and America as women "available for plunder, possession, discovery and conquest" (Loomba 151). America, discovered by Vespucci, was presented as a beautiful naked woman (*ibid.*). Female bodies "symbolize[d] conquered land" (Loomba 152), full of treasures and rich splendor. According to the gendered vision of colonial projects, the colonizer was bestowed with maleness, and the colonized - with femaleness. In 1899 a Dutch journalist Charles Boissevain even "proclaimed ...[that]...the Occident and the Orient belong...together as man and woman" (Gouda and Clancy-Smith, "Introduction" 7). Yaël Simpson Fletcher mentions that "France was often portrayed as a powerful masculine figure, despite its traditionally female representations" (194), - and Algeria, of course, was its female counterpart, as well as its "Other." The Algerian woman was exoticized, as was the whole "Orient" constructed by the Europeans as a place of "dirt, smell, and disease" as well as the tantalizing "obscure mystery" (Fletcher 201). For example, the Casbah, the Arab quarter of Algiers, was often depicted by European travelers as a dangerous, though attractive place, a "fantastic network of tortuous streets" full of available prostitutes and a certain "Oriental" mystique (Fletcher 201-202).

The "women question" was always at the center of European colonial discourse. Both societies, the colonizers and the colonized, "came to evaluate each other's cultural worth in terms of the female question" (Clancy Smith, "Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria" 156). The fact that Islamic law regulated marriage and

allowed men to have more than one wife was perceived by the French as characteristic of a “barbaric,” uncivilized society, and as a justification of the colonial “mission civilisatrice.” Those Algerians who practiced polygamy, for example, were discouraged from obtaining French citizenship, which was reserved for the more dignified, less “savage” individuals (Bowlan 110). A Muslim practice, polygamy was viewed as incompatible with French customs and French “civilization” (Lorcin 63). However, the “liberation” of women was done only in talk, and not in reality. As Patricia Lorcin contends, “though a lot of indignation was expressed by the French officials over the condition of women and polygamy in particular, no action was ever taken to prevent such practices. This “indignation was used as a moral stick with which to beat Islam and the Arabs” (66).

Algerian women were regarded by the colonial discourse as oppressed by Islamic law. However, the condition of women in France was also far from ideal. According to the Napoleonic Code, the French civil law code, women were “destined to be men’s property, to obey them, and to procreate on their behalf” (Bell and Offen 37). Women had no property of their own: “A wife...cannot give, convey, mortgage, or acquire property...without her husband joining in the instrument or giving his written consent” (“The Napoleonic Code” 39). Thus, the calls to liberate Algerian women and to reform the imperfect system of civil laws and domestic customs came in the context of a situation in which French women were also lacking many basic rights, such as divorce, the right to possess property and to file paternity suits. Obviously, the issue of freeing women was but a pretext for justifying the colonial enterprise, but not at all its goal.

While Algerian men were constructed as “aggressive,” but also “weak, lazy, and



insincere” (Fletcher 207) and overall inferior to French men and their masculinity, the Algerian women were seen as exotic, passive, and helpless, in need of the Europeans to “liberate” them. In a broader context, they represented Algeria itself, a land that the French intended to “civilize.” As Helen Carr states,

In the language of colonialism, non-Europeans occupy the same symbolic space as women. Both are seen as part of nature, not culture, and with the same ambivalence: either they are ripe for government, passive, child-like, unsophisticated, needing leadership and guidance...or... they are outside society, dangerous, treacherous, emotional, inconstant, wild,...sexually aberrant,...disruptive,...evil. (Carr, qtd. in Loomba 159-160)

A woman and a country (Algeria) thus became one – a sexual object to be, paradoxically, “tamed,” penetrated, “civilized” and liberated at the same time.

Ukraine and its colonial status were symbolically embodied in literary images of girls seduced by the colonizers. This topic was extensively covered by the greatest Ukrainian poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Taras Shevchenko. Taras Shevchenko is considered by many to be one of the “founding fathers” of the Ukrainian nation. As his contemporary Borys Hrinchenko contends, “We are sure that Ukrainian literature will have many more writers whose talent will equal that of Shevchenko’s, but nobody will equal him in terms of his dedication to the cause of national renaissance” (qtd. in Zabuzhko, *Shevchenko’s Myth of Ukraine: an Attempt of Philosophical Analysis* 11). Shevchenko, born a serf, was bought out of serfdom by several influential Russian painters in 1838. He was imprisoned and then exiled in 1847 for his patriotic poems about Ukraine and satirical ones about the Russian Tsars. Shevchenko, whom critics have called “an ethical genius” capable of understanding tragedies of national scale (Zabuzhko, “A Woman-Author in a Colonial Culture” 167), wrote a poem “Kateryna,”

the heroine of which fell in love with a Russian who got her pregnant and ran off without marrying her, leaving the girl at the mercy of a very patriarchal Ukrainian village community. Kateryna became a widely used metaphor for all Ukraine, seduced and deceived by Russia. Oksana Zabuzhko states that it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the phenomenon described by Taras Shevchenko (Ukrainian girls' being "picked up" and then left behind) became especially widespread. Ukraine's colonial status meant that the women of the colonized country were available and submissive, and this state of affairs resembles the situation of French colonial politics in Algeria.

During the Soviet period, the "gendering" of Ukraine, though still present, took a different form. Oksana Zabuzhko, when analyzing the gender structure of the former Soviet Union, suggests that "gender," under the totalitarian regime, "stopped being an individual characteristic: ...it was the whole country that became a Woman -- a classical sexual object, prone to passive eroticism, lying readily under the ... Supreme Power, which kept the country subjugated thanks to the constant erection of its military organs" ("Woman Author in Colonial Culture" 159). The citizens of the country, men or women, were "stripped" of any sexual characteristics in the puritanical atmosphere of the Soviet state, and became no more than "bacterial flora in the ...open uterus of the country" ("Woman Author in Colonial Culture" 160). Women (whether Russian, Ukrainian, or of any other Soviet nation), with rare exceptions<sup>2</sup>, were no longer "sexual" objects, but "muscle strength," as were men (159). When analyzing Zabuzhko's novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, in which she depicts relations between the sexes in the (post)totalitarian environment, Madina Tlostanova states: "Zabuzhko emphasizes the ...castrating role [of

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<sup>2</sup> Secret call-girls (Zabuzhko refers to them as "the Soviet hetairas") for the Party bosses were carefully selected from among the most beautiful women (Zabuzhko, "A Woman-Author in the Colonial Culture").

the empire], the fact that the empire strips the individuals of their femaleness and maleness, producing a kind of “subhumans”, like Oksana’s father; sadists, like her lover; and frigid women, “black window pane[s] deflecting all light”, like Oksana’s mother, women without any erotic drive” (Tlostanova 181).

These two situations (the French colonial regime in Algeria and the Russian/Soviet colonial regime in Ukraine) no doubt differ greatly in origins, political ramifications and modes of oppression. The French had overseas colonies, and their subjugation of peoples included the politics of the “Orientalization,” or “Othering” of the colonized. Russian colonialism, on the other hand, operated according to different premises. First of all, the colonies were often geographically close to the metropole; secondly, there was no “Orientalization” involved due to relative closeness of culture and (in the Ukrainian case) the absence of racial difference; thirdly, the “civilizing” pretext used by the French to obtain colonies was also absent, because the very mechanism of the construction of “the Other” in the discourse of Russian imperialism did not coincide with the Western patterns. Instead of believing in one’s cultural superiority, the ability to spread “civilization” and carry the “white man’s burden,” as the countries of the West did, Russia, where foreign values were glorified and the domestic ones shunned, struggled to be accepted “into Europe’s club” (Moore 120) by getting colonies and thus more power, in order to become more “European.” However, despite the differences, these two situations do share a significant feature: the gendered nature of colonialism. These two descriptions of the specifically gendered colonial situations (Algerian - with Algeria portrayed as “a woman to be tamed” (Djebar, *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* 57), and Ukrainian – with the totalitarian vision of the whole country as a subjugated

female body) are important for my analysis of Djébar's and Zabuzhko's writings, because they provide a historic context by evoking the images of two strikingly different, and yet similar kinds of colonial consciousness.

## Chapter Two: Writing the Postcolonial Female Body

### *Women and the Discourse of History*

In his essay “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” Dipesh Chakrabarty states that the notion of “Europe” occupies the central place in the discourse of history as a discipline: ““Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “history of Europe”” (Chakrabarty 27). The process of colonization and its ramifications are either ignored by this discourse of master narratives, with the European ‘Renaissance’ or ‘Enlightenment’ taught “without reference to colonial history,” as Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong’o points out (qtd. in Loomba 64), or distorted and misrepresented through the vision of Orientalism. According to the master narratives, the Europeans came to the “New World,” Asia and Africa to bring knowledge, technology, and overall progress, performing the civilizing mission. European history is always treated as “center,” and the history of other nations or parts of the world – as “margins.” This is the angle from which the official sources tend to regard the history of the colonized nation – this history cannot and could not be the “center” because the position of centrality has already been appropriated by the colonizer.

The marginalization of women’s history is achieved by similar means. From the official history textbooks we learn little about the lives of women. Instead, these

textbooks contain a lot of information on wars and violence. The very periodization of history is based on such events that are considered to be “the center” of the historic discourse. Women’s history remains outside of this discourse. Women, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out, “exist outside of history” (31).

Women, mostly excluded from political life and confined to the private sphere of the home, remained largely invisible throughout the written accounts produced by male scholars and analysts, but this does not mean that women did not have a “history” – rather, we see that traditional approaches to history which focused on “describing,” and not on “theorizing,” and which presented only one point of view – that of the “mainstream,” fail to do justice to the marginalized groups, of which women were (if not are) certainly one.

Women’s history of a colonized nation is doubly marginalized as the history of women and the history of the colonized. Even in the postcolonial period, when the nation that experienced colonization has produced its own historic discourse and claimed its place separate from that of the colonizers’, women’s history tends to remain invisible. In this context, the works of women authors from postcolonial countries constitute an important source of information: they contain “women’s” history. In their works, postcolonial women writers express that which was not said before, and, in particular, verbalize the experience of double oppression – as gendered subjects and as colonized subjects.

An analysis of the works of Assia Djebar (Algeria) and Oksana Zabuzhko (Ukraine) demonstrates that, despite the differences in the postcolonial situations that these writings come from, one can still identify common themes, such as inscribing

women into history and double oppression women experience during colonial times (as colonized subjects and as gendered subjects). One of the most important themes is the relationship of women and history and the depiction of women as agents of history, where women are put in the center, and not marginalized.

The theme of the body is one of the central ones in the works of both Assia Djebar and Oksana Zabuzhko. Traditionally, women have been discouraged from discovering their bodies and writing about them. The Cartesian philosophical discourse separated the body from the mind, equating the former with femininity and the latter with masculinity (Grosz 4). This “coupling of mind with maleness and the body with femaleness” problematized femininity and women “as knowing philosophical subjects and as knowable epistemic objects,” and philosophy has been “established...as a form of knowing...through the disavowal of the body” (*ibid.*). The role of the body in “the production of philosophical values – truth, knowledge, justice... [was] minimize[d] or ignore[d]” (Grosz 4). Thus, accepting a woman’s body as a “knowable subject” and theorizing it becomes a way of reclaiming it as an epistemic field.

In her influential essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous points out the pervasiveness of the phallogentric discourse in the “history of writing” (Cixous 1456), which has been producing the universal truths of master narratives that exclude femininity as a “dark continent,” an “Africa” that is to be kept silent and unknown (Cixous 1455). Hélène Cixous encourages women to “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from [them], which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (1457). Cixous states that women must write the body in order to reclaim it (*ibid.*). “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to

writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ...  
Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own  
movement” (Cixous 1454).

Hélène Cixous’ ideas become especially significant in regard to postcolonial women’s writings. The women of the colonized nation are alienated from their own bodies which are appropriated by colonial discourses. These women are “Other” to themselves. In the gendered discourse of colonialism the colonized country is viewed as a woman, an available female body, and women of the colonized land symbolically represent the country. A female body exists as a “battlefield” of the colonial enterprise, and as a site of colonial violence. Both of the colonial situations under analysis (Algerian and Ukrainian) featured a model of gendering the colonial discourse. In the Algerian case, the country was seen as a “woman,” and Algerian women were exoticized as available sexual objects. In the Ukrainian case, a woman was only regarded as a part of the Soviet community of the builders of communism, a muscular worker devoid of sexuality and sex characteristics.

For Assia Djebar and Oksana Zabuzhko, “writing the body” (Cixous 1457) becomes a way of conceptualizing a history (“herstory”) of a postcolonial woman whose memory is plagued by the colonial trauma.

Assia Djebar, *Women in Algiers in Their Apartment*

*A Colonial Gaze: Assia Djebar versus Eugène Delacroix*

*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* consists of seven short stories, some of which are accounts of the postcolonial “present” (“Women of Algiers in Their Apartment”), while others evoke the past -- the times of the War of Independence (“The



Dead Speak”) or even earlier, the colonization of Algeria (“Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound”). “For Arabic women,” states Assia Djébar, “I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women’s quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects” (Djébar, “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment” 50).

Assia Djébar called her collection of stories after the painting of a famous French artist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Eugène Delacroix, who depicted three women, looking like the inhabitants of a harem, in “their apartment,” - or, rather, in the women’s quarters of a house. After visiting Algeria, where he was allowed to paint the women in their quarters, Delacroix wrote in his diary: “It is beautiful! It is straight out of Homer! The woman in her women’s quarters busy with her children, spinning wool or embroidering splendid fabrics. That is woman as I think she should be!” (qtd. in Djébar, “Notes to *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*” 153).

Delacroix was able to enter the women’s quarters, and thus to show the women to the viewers, to make them the object of public gaze. These women are passive figures, open to (the painter’s and the viewers’) scrutiny. Assia Djébar points out that the painting of Delacroix presents the Algerian women in a stereotypical Orientalist manner (Al-Ghadeer 140). The Europeans often portrayed Algerian women as obedient harem inmates, inhabitants of an Orient which itself was a product of the European colonial imagination (Said, *Orientalism* 26). The interest of Europeans in Algerian women was spurred by a certain kind of Orientalist voyeurism, and the ideas and representations that the Europeans had about the Algerian women constituted “the colonial gaze” (Clancy-Smith, “La Femme Arabe: Women and Sexuality in France’s North African Empire” 53).

According to Malek Alloula, the harem was “a central figure [among the phantasms produced by Orientalism], ... the very embodiment of the obsession” (3). The images of the colonized women were often erotic, as on the French postcards made in Algeria depicting half-naked girls.

In her article “Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria, 1830-1962,” Julia Clancy-Smith points out that “the construction of French Algeria was as much the forging of a gaze – or spectrum of gazes fixed upon Muslim women – as it was the assembling of mechanisms for political and economic control” (155). Algeria, just like the odalisques that (mis)represent it on the postcards and Delacroix’s painting, did not exist for herself, but only for the gaze of the colonizers. The French always stressed that Algeria was an integral part of France, calling it “our francized African land” (Auclert, *Les Femmes Arabes en Algérie* 63), thus denying agency to Algeria as a separate entity. “French colonialism was glorified as the progenitor and benefactor of Algeria” (Fletcher 194). The history of Algeria, thus, became a true “variation” of the French imperial history (Chakrabarty 27).

Therefore, one can say that in *Women in Algiers in Their Apartment* Assia Djebar reclaims women’s stories, but also, more broadly, the history of Algeria. Letting her heroines speak, Assia Djebar shows that the “harem inhabitants” are not passive, that they can tell their own story. They are “in their apartment,” in their home, and they regard the viewers just as the viewers regard them. In colonial ontology, the women of Algeria stand for Algeria itself, and therefore, in Djebar’s work, if a woman can talk and have her own history, so can the country.

## *Women and Nationalism*

*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* touches upon the topic of women and the nationalist struggle. As has been observed, the significance of the nation and nationalism becomes especially strong in the colonial situation, with nationalism viewed as an anti-colonial force, “a struggle to represent, create or recover a culture and a selfhood that has been systematically repressed and eroded during colonial rule” (Loomba 217). But nationalism (Enloe 44) has “sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and hope,” therefore it operates with numerous fantasies which also “play upon and with the connections between women, land or nations” (Loomba 215).

In *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* Partha Chatterjee analyzes the paradox of the “women’s question” in a nationalist struggle. On the one hand, nationalism bestowed women with agency and let them participate in the cause of liberation from colonial rule. On the other hand, this “new” woman who was more active in the public sphere than in the past “was subjected to a new patriarchy” (127).

Discussing the division of the public and the private spheres in the epistemology of the nationalist movements of the colonized countries, Partha Chatterjee contends that

The *world* is the external, the domain of the material; the *home* represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. (120)

The woman therefore was to preserve the “spiritual,” “essential” values, the “tradition”:  
“women cultivate and cherish ... godlike qualities [e.g., modesty] far more than men”

(Chatterjee 125). Women, protected by men, can devote themselves more fully to keeping the “spiritual qualities that are characteristic of civilized and refined human society” (*ibid.*). Thus, women are the guardians of the core identity of a colonized nation.

As Partha Chatterjee points out,

The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the terms world and home corresponded, had acquired, as noted before, a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But, the nationalists asserted, it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture... For the colonized peoples, the world was a distressing constraint, forced upon it by the fact of its material weakness. It was a place of oppression and daily humiliation ...[a place] where the battle would be waged for national independence. ...But in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve, and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence. (121)

In order to perform this function of the guardians of the spiritual core of a nation, women “must not... become essentially Westernized,” and the distinction between material/spiritual (equated with male/female) must be always present (Chatterjee 126).

The histories of nationalist struggles give numerous examples of women being allowed to participate in these campaigns, but mostly “through the accepted feminine roles of bearer of the community’s memory and children” (Enloe 55). The women of the colonized nation are included in the nationalist cause, but within the institution of nationalism they are not fully liberated, because the domestic patriarchy holds them as the keepers of the “true spiritual essence” and the core identity of the nation (Chatterjee 121) that cannot be challenged. As Cynthia Enloe (55) mentions, women in nationalist struggles often do take on the traditional roles of “bearers of the community’s memory,” and “being praised by men in the nationalist movement for bearing more children and

raising them well doesn't always feel like being patronized or marginalized." The colonizer is identified as the common enemy, and all the efforts are being applied towards eliminating the traces of his rule and recovering the national identity previously destroyed or distorted by the colonial regime.

However, though women are allowed to enter the public sphere, they are discouraged from raising the issues of female emancipation. Women who wish to address feminist issues along with nationalist ones have often been told "to be patient," since the nation "is too fragile yet" (Enloe 62), and the nationalist goals are to be taken care of first. "Nationalism ... located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the West ..." (Chatterjee 132), and therefore "in the ... case of reforming the lives of women ... the nationalist position was ... based on the premise that this was an area where the nation was acting on its own, outside the purview of the guidelines and intervention of the colonial state" (*ibid.*).

One of the first nationalist organization of Algeria, the *ulama* (doctors of law), produced a famous motto "Arabic is my language, Algeria is my country, Islam is my religion" (Stora 16). "The basis of their political doctrine can be summed up by the following categories: *umma* (nation), *cha'ab* (people), *watan* (homeland), and *quawmiyya* (nationality)" (*ibid.*). It is obvious that the values espoused by the discourse of nationalism were rather traditional, emphasizing the ideas of "nation" and "home," and that women's liberation as a separate issue was not considered. This becomes especially evident when regarding the issue of the veil.

### *The Veil and the Colonial Context*

In the story "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment" Assia Djebar writes about

the lives of Algerian women in postcolonial times, after Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). As Hafid Gaifati contends, in this and other stories Djébar emphasizes that “despite the loosening of restrictions against women during the anti-French Resistance and the promise of the first few years of independence, women ... are again subject to the repressiveness that has plagued women for centuries past” (Gaifati 815). *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* was written in 1980, after the War. Assia Djébar shows the disappointment women felt due to the fact that their condition was not profoundly changed and that they did not obtain more rights.

In her article, Winifred Woodhull talks about the state’s Family Code based on Islamic law. This document was formalized in 1984, and according to it women “remain legal minors...until they marry; women’s...decision to marry must be authorized by a guardian;...married women must obey their husbands and must have their husbands’ permission to gain employment; ... men retain the right of polygamy and repudiation of their wives; ... one man is considered equal to two women in matters of inheritance” (Woodhull 570). When Algerian feminists objected to this code, President Chadli responded that “no place whatever exists for anarchy [that is, feminist opposition to government policy] in a society that is building itself and constructing the foundations for its future” (*ibid.*).

The protagonists of the story, Sarah, Leila and Anne, relive their experiences of the war. It is not only the disappointment of postcolonial times that they have to deal with, but also the wounds of war, and the scars its violence has left on them. *Women in Algiers in Their Apartment* (1979) begins with the scene of torture (by the French) of an Algerian woman in the dream of one of the male characters: “a young women’s head,

blindfolded, neck thrown backward, hair pulled back” (Djebar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* 5). It is significant that the first image of the book is that of a woman’s face, half-covered by a blindfold and distorted by pain. On the one hand, Djebar evokes women’s experience during the war, when many women who took part in the struggle for independence were captured and tortured by the French; on the other hand, the blindfold can be understood as a reference to the veil.

As Fatima Mernissi contends in her article on spatial boundaries in Muslim culture, “the eye is undoubtedly an erogenous zone in the Muslim structure of reality” (Mernissi 492). The veiling of women thus performs the double function of protecting a woman from the gaze of strange men, as well as protecting the men from temptation. Even the Prophet asked God to help him by letting him have more control over his eyes and sexual organs to prevent the “danger of fornication” (Mernissi 492). “The female body as object of the male gaze must be covered” (Faulkner 852), otherwise women are “naked” (*ibid.*).

In a colonial setting, the issue of the veil becomes more complex, because now the veil functions not only as a barrier between the female body and the male gaze, but also as barrier between the female body and the gaze of the Westerners, the colonizers. For Frantz Fanon, a supporter of Algerian War of Independence, the “wearing of a veil [was] ... symbolic in the colonial struggle” (Faulkner 848). The French colonial administration issued a political doctrine stating that to destroy “the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, ... [it is necessary to] ... conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil” (*ibid.*). An Algerian woman was thus equated to the Algerian land, and vice versa. To “have” a woman meant to “have” the land. The

intention of the colonizers (the French) to unveil the women was perceived as “rape” (Fanon, qtd. in Faulkner 849), and to wear the veil was seen as a patriotic act.

Rita Faulkner points out Fanon’s “dialectic thinking,” according to which “the wearing of the veil [was] ... a resistance to French cultural hegemony” (Faulkner 849). In her *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, Assia Djébar contests Fanon’s point of view. She shows that the French colonial regime was not the only oppressor of women, and that the veil is not perceived by women merely as a symbol of patriotism, but also of isolation, exclusion and the “muffling of the woman’s voice inside” (Djébar, qtd. in Faulkner 852).

The story of Fatma in “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment,” a woman who was a prostitute when she was younger, and who had to take up work in the baths when she grew old (she is a water carrier), reveals that the veil for this woman does not have the same significance as postcolonial nationalism ascribes to it. Fatma hurts her arm, and is taken to the hospital. On the way there she is delirious, and it seems to her that she is being wrapped up in her veil to be buried. She rejects the veil:

“I am – am I – I am the unveiled one...”  
“I am – am I – I am the Excluded One”  
“it is me – me? – It is me they have excluded, me whom they have barred  
it is me – me? – me they have humiliated  
Me whom they have caged in  
Me whom they’ve sought to subdue, their fists on my head, to make me drown  
while standing straight, all the way down to the monkey-faced layer of evil, me  
within the marble halls of mute distress, me inside the rocks of silence of the  
white veil...” (Djébar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* 38-39)

For this woman, the revolution did not bring liberation from her condition. The discourse of the veil is connected with that of violence.

Women revolutionaries who were caught and tortured during the war feel



excluded from the “brotherhood,” because certain aspects of women’s experience (as, for example, rape) were perceived as “dirty.” Leila, one of the protagonists of “Women in Algiers in Their Apartment,” speaks as Sarah listens:

Where are you, you women who carry the bombs? They form a procession, in the palms of their hands grenades that blossom out in explosions of flames, faces illuminated by flashes of green ... Where are you, you fire carriers, you my sisters, who should have liberated the city ... In the streets they were taking pictures of your unclothed bodies, of your avenging arms in front of the tanks” (Djebar, *Women if Algiers in Their Apartment* 44)

On the one hand, these women are abused by the French soldiers. On the other, though, they are hurt by domestic patriarchy. Leila says that “the brothers” are ashamed of her, because she “entered the public frenzy too often” (Djebar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* 45).

As Clarisse Zimra notes in her afterword to the novel, “the women fighters are also an embarrassment because their female flesh simply won’t go away, making a public spectacle out of the breaking of the most powerful taboo in Islam: the denuding or unveiling of woman.” (205). The female combatants, whose true experiences were unacknowledged by official histories of the war, speak in Djebar’s text.

The heroines of Djebar’s story are not the powerless victims or harem inhabitants (as the title, taken from the picture of Delacroix, may suggest). They are “open onto the light, heavily and unashamedly taking their space, revealing breasts, buttocks, and navel, speaking boldly, gazing out at the spectator proudly” (Faulkner 855). These women show their scars and wounds, they are not afraid to speak out the violence done to their bodies. For them the veil is not only a patriotic symbol that the colonizers tried to take away, it also signifies oppression by the domestic patriarchy. The pain these women experienced

during the war (Sarah, who was tortured) and after (Leila, who was locked in a mental hospital; Fatma who imagines herself buried alive wrapped in the veil) was not caused only by colonization. They wish to state it, and their bodies become the site of resistance and of reclaiming their own history. They unveil, “denude” themselves to be seen and inscribed in the history of their country. As Katherine Gracki underscores in her article “Writing Violence and the Violence of Writing in Assia Djébar’s Algerian Quartet,” “the wounded female body comes to represent Algeria...Far from collaborating with ... [the] discourse of exoticism when recuperating the image of Algeria as a woman, Djébar subverts this discourse by ripping the veil which masks the overt violence of colonial invasion” (836).

Oksana Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*

*The Ascetic Culture of Totalitarianism*

The novel of Oksana Zabuzhko *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* is written in the form of an academic paper presented by the protagonist at an imaginary Slavic Studies conference. One can see this as an ironic device, but it is probably more than that: if an academic audience listens to a woman’s story, then this story is worth regarding. Women are part of history, they are active participants in it, and not only the objects acted upon by colonialism and domestic patriarchy. Zabuzhko thus inscribes women’s history into history-as-discipline. Women’s history stops being marginalized, since even such a respected academic body as the conference of Slavic Studies takes it seriously.

Oksana Zabuzhko examines the relationship of a Ukrainian man (the painter Mykola) and a Ukrainian woman (the poet Oksana). The relationship begins in Ukraine and continues in Pennsylvania, where the two go as recipients of grants and fellowships.

In her novel *Zabuzhko* claims that the violent attitude of Mykola towards his girlfriend is not only a personal stand, but a direct result of the colonial status of Ukraine. The men of the colonized country (Ukraine) were “copying the practices of the colonizer” towards their women, subjugating and oppressing them (Romanets’ 112).

The very notion of the body was for a long time absent from the works of Ukrainian writers. As Solomia Pavlychko contended in her monograph *Discourse of Ukrainian Modernism*, the sphere of sexuality did not exist for “the patriarchal culture” of Ukrainian pre-Soviet literature, and any reference to physical love was coded as “sin” (78-79). The “demon of flesh” was considered to be one of the most dangerous (Ageeva 111). A woman’s body was always described in an idealized way, her beauty compared to a flower, and her sexuality unacknowledged (Ageeva 113-114). Early Soviet literature and Soviet Ukrainian literature in its asceticism also did not focus on such themes as the body and sexuality. In one of her essays Oksana Zabuzhko analyzes several modern Ukrainian and Russian translations of Shakespeare’s sonnet 130, - in particular, the way the lines “And in some perfumes is there more delight/Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks” were rendered from English. They were translated by euphemisms, and the very idea of “reeking” disappeared, since the corporeal image of the original turned out to be not ascetic enough and therefore too threatening to the “Slavic infantile mentality” (Zabuzhko, “Notes from the City of Poets” 252).

As for Soviet times, a woman was first and foremost a builder of communism, and as such she was portrayed in the literature. Kate Millet mentions the “distaste for sexuality” (172) in the Soviet culture. In the early 1920s it was quite possible to be excluded from the Komsomol (young Communist league) for having a silk dress on or

wearing make-up, since such things were considered too bourgeois. The Russian writer Maria Arbatova addressed the issues of abortion and birth in her works, and those were thought to be extremely controversial and at times were banned. Perhaps nothing illustrates the attitude of the society towards the body and sexuality better than the famous response of one of the Soviet women participating in a Soviet-American “telebridge” during *perestroika* times (the period of cultural openness in the 1980s under Gorbachev): when asked about sex in the USSR, she answered indignantly: “We have no sex” – a statement that serves as “a spontaneous and absolutely honest snapshot of the public consciousness in 1987” (Stishova 188).

However, “sex” and “sexuality” in *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* do not appear as signifiers of pleasure and satisfaction. The language and stylistic devices (e.g., metaphors, allusions) chosen by Zabuzhko to describe the feelings of her heroes in the sphere of sexuality are those evoking pain, trauma, and dramatic historic events that affected Ukrainian people and from the influence of which nobody is free, because they are stored in the collective memory. As Zabuzhko said in her interview with Halyna Hryn’, “I have always been interested in how history reveals itself ... through personal lives and destinies – In Eastern Europe it is ... far more visible than in America: stop anyone in the street, ask them to tell their family story for, say, the past three generations – and ... you won’t need any textbooks in 20<sup>th</sup> century history” (Zabuzhko, “A Conversation with Oksana Zabuzhko” 2).

### *Women and the Gulag Experience*

Many Ukrainians, especially those from Western Ukraine, were sent to the Gulag during the times of Stalinism (from 1930s to 1950s), since Ukrainian nationalism was

perceived as a threat to the Soviet totalitarian regime. Gulag (the acronym for “Main Camp Administration”) was a system of concentration camps, usually situated in the Russian far north and east. As Anne Applebaum contends, ““Gulag” has come to mean the Soviet repressive system itself” (xvi). Gulag, along with being a punitive institution, “use[d] forced labor both to speed up the Soviet Union’s industrialization, and to excavate the natural resources in the Soviet Union’s barely habitable far north” (Applebaum xvi).

A woman in the Gulag often became the sexual victim of the administration or the “criminals.”<sup>3</sup> The world renowned historian of Gulag, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, writes: “In the camp, for a woman it is harder than for a man... they [administration] scrutinize naked women in the bath... then they decide who takes which one...” (*Gulag Archipelago*, p. 2, ch. 8). Sometimes, a woman could “ameliorate” her condition if she agreed to be the lover of somebody “important,” although, of course, she would then be considered a “slut.” A man in the same situation would be thought of as a resourceful person. As Zabuzhko contends, analyzing the memoirs of Herling-Grudzinski, an ex-prisoner, “pre-totalitarian,” patriarchal moral values were... an additional burden for the women prisoners” (“Woman-Author in a Colonial Culture”157). The doctrine of socialism had presumably freed women from a double bind of patriarchal stereotypes (e.g., being labeled a “slut” in a situation of sexual exploitation), but in reality the equality of sexes was never achieved, and the moral values of pre-Soviet (pre-totalitarian)

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<sup>3</sup> The “criminals” were dispersed on purpose among the “political” prisoners. The “political” prisoners, technically, did not consist of people who had political beliefs – rather, they were the ones caught in the net because, for example, they verbally complained about the shortage of goods in the stores or wrapped a piece of meat in the newspaper that had a picture of Stalin in it. The true criminals, murders and thieves, on the contrary, were much favored by the Soviet regime, considered a “social element closest to the proletariat” and used against the “political” prisoners who were also called “the enemies of the people.” The “criminals” made the life of the “politicals” very difficult.

times never went away.

A big part of the female Gulag experience was sexual violence. Rape was just as widespread in the camps as was the sexual exploitation of women. In *Gulag: a History* Anne Applebaum writes about the gang rapes on the ships that transported the prisoners from Magadan to Kolyma. She evokes the memoirs of the survivors, one of whom, Elena Glink, describes scenes of rape during which women would often die because of the great number of rapist men involved: “Dead women were pulled by their legs to the door, and stacked over the threshold. Those who remained were brought back to consciousness – water was thrown at them – and the line began again” (Applebaum 171). In the camps rape was all too common, and the scenes of “eight men pull[ing] the girl behind the latrines,” to rape her, happened very often. The administration never tried to intervene and punish the rapists or protect the women. At best, “a sleepy voice [would call] from the watch-tower: “Come, come, boys, what are you doing? Have you no shame?” (Applebaum 190), but no official statement would be made.

The female experience in the camps has not yet been profoundly analyzed – because, as Zabuzhko strives to explain in one of her essays, “in all the memoirs of the former women prisoners... whenever it comes to the questions of sexual harassment... the story becomes ... elliptical” (“Women-Author in a Colonial Culture” 157). The specificity of the female camp experience is often not acknowledged in publications, with rare exceptions. For instance, Nadiya Surovtseva in her memoirs addresses the kind of suffering that women who were “constantly followed by male touch and gaze,” had to endure (Ageeva 121). In most historic accounts of Gulag, though, such dramatic elements of the female experience as the sexual vulnerability of women in the camps and the

existence of a double standard are not considered.

*Body as Map: "Between Victim and Executioner"*

Oksana, the protagonist of Zabuzhko's *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, feels the weight of unspoken history all the time during her relationship with Mykola, her lover. The author theorizes in her novel about the gender roles and relationships in post-Soviet and Soviet Ukraine. She claims that gender relations in Ukraine were produced, to a great extent, by the colonial situation (the domination of Russia and then the Soviet Union). These forms of social and political life harmed men and women, enforcing a very patriarchal and heterosexist view, according to which women have to submit and men to dominate. Since the men of the colonized nation are "abused" by the colonizers, they feel that they have to recreate this scenario of domination and submission with their (colonized) women, and thus to alleviate their own pain of being subjugated.

A woman in this situation is doomed to be conflicted and pained:

We were raised by men fucked from all ends every which way ... later we ourselves screwed the same kind of guys, and ... in both cases they were doing to us what others, the others, had done to them ... and ... we accepted them and loved them as they were, because not to accept them was to go over to the others, the other side... our only choice, therefore, was and still remains between victim and executioner: between nonexistence and an existence that slowly kills you. (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 57, transl. by Halyna Hryn')

The relations between sexes are not harmonious, since they include struggle, discomfort, and imbalance of power. The notions evoked in this passage ("executioner," "victim," "kill") reinforce the idea of pain (physical and emotional). Close reading of the text reveals that one of the first themes introduced early in the novel to set the tone for the story of the amorous relationship between Oksana and Mykola is that of torture. Oksana, before even meeting Mykola, as if anticipating the relationship full of pain, writes a poem

“Somebody was screaming/my name through the night/ As if being tortured.” It is interesting to note that in Assia Djebar’s story the motif of torture is also a central one, and appears on the first pages of *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*.

At the beginning of the novel, Zabuzhko equates Oksana’s (the heroine’s) body to a “map” on which one can see “the archipelagos of ... reddish and brownish ... spots – scars, cuts, burns, the graphically presented story of the nine-month-long ... *mad love*, from which true *madness* arose ...” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 5). The word “archipelago” can be read as an allusion to the well-known history of Gulag, *Gulag Archipelago* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. It would not be surprising if this word choice is, in fact, intentional – both Zabuzhko and her protagonist come from the milieu of the dissidents – the underground movement that opposed the regime.

The violence “writes” itself on the map of the female body, and the latter becomes symbolically trapped between the two “fighting parties” – the colonizers and the colonized. When Mykola, the painter, a man of the “colonized” nation, acts brutally towards Oksana (makes the intercourse painful, tries to burn her leg with a lighter, forces her to perform oral sex on him), one of her reactions is to associate the pain with Gulag, this symbol of totalitarian power, “the colonizer,” a place where sex becomes a kind of torture inflicted upon a woman: “this pity towards one’s own body – a body wasting away, this feeling is well familiar to the prisoners of Gulag...” (*Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 15).

Moreover, though Gulag is in the past, its ways and customs have penetrated the whole territory of the now former Soviet Union, and marked profoundly the population of all its countries. It did not matter who went to Gulag and who did not. The unmerciful,



unsympathetic attitude towards each other and the treatment of women as available “sluts” –these markers of criminal mentality affected the minds of all citizens and became a “norm” most are hardly aware of – and this situation did not come to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This process was labeled by some critics as “stripping down the individuality and dignity of every citizen to create *homo sovieticus*,” (Wanner 49), “a Soviet person,” a robot-like insensitive creature full of hatred towards whomever he or she perceived as an enemy. Such thinking remains in the consciousness of the post-Soviet nations. In one of the protagonist’s poems included in the text of the novel, Oksana summarizes the experience of a woman in a country where the camp mentality rules, in a very condensed and incisive manner:

“Gulag– it is when they shove an empty bottle  
Between your legs; after that they become very polite to you.  
We are all from the Zone. A hundred years this heritage will last.  
We are looking for love, but finding convulsions of pain.  
Gulag – it is when you are lamenting “oh my sorrow, my sorrow”  
And nobody understands the language you are crying it in.” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 23)

A special significance of this poetic excerpt consists in uniting the discourses of the female body, pain, and history. Woman’s body, “unseen” by the Ukrainian and Soviet societies, is inscribed into the historic process through pain. The experience unacknowledged by official historians of Ukraine, the Soviet Union and Gulag is expressed through terrible details of sexual violence which are no metaphor, but a detail from the real world (“Gulag– it is when they shove an empty bottle /Between your legs”). Official history chose not to include such episodes, because rape was traditionally viewed by the patriarchal Ukrainian and Soviet societies as a shameful event for which a woman herself was to blame.

In their writings, Assia Djébar and Oksana Zabuzhko show the world of a postcolonial woman, who is doubly oppressed by the discourse of official history – as a woman and as a colonized subject. It is evident that *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* differ greatly in terms of the artistic techniques chosen by their authors as well as the social and political contexts by which these writings were informed. However, one can note that both Djébar's collection of stories and Zabuzhko's novel illustrate the complexity of the condition of postcolonial women. The lives of Ukrainian women were shaped by the discourses of totalitarianism, Soviet and Russian colonial politics, as well as the attitudes of Ukrainian men who felt oppressed by the colonizers and recreated the scenarios of this oppression with their women. Oksana Zabuzhko's heroine refuses to muffle her traumatic experience, voicing the unspoken and unacknowledged women's history under the totalitarian regime and colonial rule. A woman in this situation is not even a sexual object, because the notions of sexuality and desire are too marginalized in the ascetic culture of the Soviet Union, but an object of rape and violence which function as manifestations of colonial and totalitarian power.

The Algerian women find themselves supporting the nationalist doctrine, fighting the French colonial regime, but also contesting the discourse of nationalism which ascribes to women the roles of chaste patriotic icons. The issue of the veil reveals itself as an especially dramatic one. On the one hand, it symbolizes patriotism, since it protects the colonized women from the Westerners (the French) who equate Algeria with its women, and reinforces the nationalist vision of women as the carriers of the tradition and spiritual values of the nation (Chatterjee 125). On the other, the veil subjugates women, takes away their voices, and makes them invisible.

Both Djébar and Zabuzhko address the issue of the violence done to the body of a postcolonial woman in the colonial and postcolonial times. They reclaim women's history, unseen by the official discourses, through the technique of "writing the body" (Cixous 1457). "Seeing" the body of a postcolonial woman means acknowledging her experience and recording her history, as well as validating her epistemological position.

### Chapter Three: Language as a Tool of Decolonization

#### Oksana Zabuzhko's Language Choice

##### *The National Language and Postcolonial Critique*

Reflecting upon languages and their food-like “tastes” and “colors,” the protagonist of *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, the poet (hence the synesthetic, “poetic” comparisons of sounds with hues and tactile feelings) Oksana says: “...of course, her native [language]... was the most nutritious of all, the best for containing meanings” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 22), and “she was so famished without it, physically hungry and thirsty: as if in a dry desert, longing for water; if I could only hear the intonations of my native language, at least once, oh, they sound like a fresh creek... - I swear, I would right away feel stronger...” (*ibid.*). She states that “[she has] only one home in this world – [her] language.” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 6).

The author thus emphasizes the deep significance of the Ukrainian language both for her and for her protagonist. It is important to note that, as far as the theme of language in *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* is concerned, there are two dimensions of the author's (and her protagonist's) relationship with the Ukrainian tongue: firstly, the “intimate” one, with the Ukrainian language being her “home,” her “food,” her means of producing and storing meanings. The second dimension is “political,” or anti-imperial. Oksana Zabuzhko's novel is written in Ukrainian, and throughout the text the author defends this language choice. Historically, it was not uncommon for the Ukrainian writers to switch to

Russian, the dominant tongue of the Russian empire and, later, of the Soviet Union. For Oksana, the protagonist of *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, to speak and to write in Ukrainian means to be Ukrainian, to not disappear from the world map, to withstand assimilation, and to fight against the imperial discourse of the Russian, and later Soviet, state. Both dimensions (“the intimate” and “the political”) are inextricably intertwined, and it is necessary as a corollary to keep them both under consideration when analyzing the theme of language in Zabuzhko’s novel.

In her book *Postsoviet Literature and the Esthetics of Transculturation* Madina Tlostanova offers a critique of Zabuzhko’s novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, and in particular of the ideas on language and nation present in the book. Tlostanova claims that Zabuzhko is framing her discourse outside of the postcolonial paradigm that presupposes a more open-minded, less conservative stand than the one demonstrated by Zabuzhko.

Marko Pavlyshyn defines the terms “colonial,” “anti-colonial” and “postcolonial” in the following way:

As “colonial” I have understood those cultural phenomenon which may be interpreted as promoting and maintaining the structures and myths of colonial power relations, and as “anticolonial” – those which directly challenge (or seek to invert) such relations. The attribute “postcolonial” I have regarded as applicable to those entities in culture which signal an awareness of the relativity both of the term “colonialism” and of its negation, and which benefit from this relativity – in the work of art through exploring the consequences of the simultaneous historical availability of the heritage of the colonial and anticolonial, without any obligation to conform or deny either, and with every right to play with both. (qtd. in Antoniuk 25)

The postcolonial paradigm, as it follows from this analysis, is more complex and “sophisticated” than the anticolonial: it does not operate with simple binary oppositions. Anticolonial discourse is known for reversals of “I” (the colonizer) and “the Other” (the

colonized). The postcolonial discourse, on the contrary, seeks to “to take apart...the cultural structures of colonialism,” “to deconstruct” them (Pavlyshyn, qtd. in Antoniuk 26).

In her article ““Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism,” Joan Scott refers to the ideas of Jacques Derrida: “The Western philosophical tradition... rests on binary oppositions: unity/diversity, identity/difference, presence/absence, and universality/specificity. The leading terms are accorded primacy; their partners are represented as weaker or derivative” (Scott 37). In fact, the terms become extremely interdependent, because “they derive their meaning from a particularly established contrast rather than from some inherent or pure antithesis” (*ibid.*). To bring this interdependency to light, Derrida introduced the idea of deconstruction which consists in “analyzing the operations of difference in texts, the ways in which meanings are made to work,” and can be characterized as “the reversal and displacement of binary oppositions” (*ibid.*).

In anticolonial discourse, “I” and “the Other” are reversed, but the structure of the binary remains intact. In her critique of Zabuzhko’s novel, Madina Tlostanova points out certain elements of Zabuzhko’s text that do not fit the postcolonial modality exactly due to their overt binarism of “I” – “the Other.” Tlostanova claims that Zabuzhko’s novel contains racist comments: for instance, the protagonist

unmistakably classifies herself as white, and “the ocean of yellow faces” in some unnamed Asian country, as well as a Puerto-Rican immigrant in the New York subway, whom she immediately calls “a dirty Latino,” are considered subhuman, underdeveloped, not dignified enough to value her creative work (Tlostanova 176)

Tlostanova also points out the binary of Asia (Russia)/Europe (Ukraine) in *Field*

*Work in Ukrainian Sex*: “Ukrainian Eurocentrism ... is expressed... through juxtaposing “Asiatic” Russia and “European” Ukraine, and translates into overt racism towards everything non-Western, which is right away rejected as “bad.” This racist and essentially servile attitude towards Europe is, probably, the most characteristic feature of Ukrainian novels which attempt to present themselves as anticolonial” (175). Tlostanova argues that in Zabuzhko’s novel “[we see] the distinct division of values into eastern as bad and western as [good]” (177). “[The author claims] that the Ukrainian consciousness is more Western, more individualistic, and, unlike the Russian one, which is marked only by Eastern fatalism, more prone to believe in its own agency...” (*ibid.*).

However, the fact that the discourse of Zabuzhko’s novel does operate with binaries and contains the elements of “anticolonial” thinking (as defined by Marko Pavlyshyn) does not mean that the novel is devoid of “postcolonial” consciousness. This becomes evident when analyzing the theme of language (Ukrainian) in *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*: while one may agree with Tlostanova that Zabuzhko’s novel is marked by the Eurocentric epistemology and therefore is not entirely free from binary thinking, viewing Europe and the West as “positive,” and “Asiatic” Russia as “negative,” Tlostanova’s critique of Zabuzhko’s “nationalistic” discourse appears to be more problematic.

To Tlostanova, the “nationalist discourse” of Zabuzhko’s protagonist constitutes the most intriguing part of the overall “mediocre” novel (Tlostanova 175). In her critique, Tlostanova reacts rather sharply to Zabuzhko’s nationalism and to Ukrainian nationalism in general. Actually, she does not differentiate between the two, equating them in all their meanings and manifestations. However, Zabuzhko’s “nationalism” is more than just

unquestioning adherence to a social and political doctrine. Instead, it is an expression of feminist consciousness and an attempt to decolonize one's history.

*Colonization of Ukraine and the Politics of Russification*

The relations between Russia and Ukraine (and, respectively, their languages) reach far back into the past. The gradual engulfment of Ukraine by neighboring Russia began shortly after 1654, the year in which the Pereyaslav Treaty was concluded. This treaty originally stipulated a temporary military union of Russia and Ukraine. The agreement with Russia did not presuppose any merging of the two states, but concluded that they would fight the common enemy together. However, the Russian side did not stick to the agreement, and undertook a number of smaller and bigger military interventions into Ukraine's territory in order to establish the rule of the Tsars over it. Altogether, the Tsars used a wide range of means to subjugate the Ukrainians, from the use of armed forces and the destruction of the Ukrainian army (the Cossacks) to prohibitions of the Ukrainian language and culture.

One of the most obvious results of Russian colonial politics in Ukraine was Russification. The Russian Tsars issued a number of bans on Ukrainian publications and Ukrainian schools (the "Valuev Tsyrkuliar" in 1863, the "Ems Ukaz" in 1876). The Ukrainians were not recognized as a separate nation, but instead referred to as "Little Russians," a branch of the "Big Russian" nation, and were expected to merge with their "Big Brother" completely. "A separate Ukrainian language never existed, does not exist, and will not exist, and what they call "the Ukrainian language," a dialect, used by common people, is really the Russian language spoiled by the influence of the Polish tongue," stated the Valuev Tsyrkuliar that banned Ukrainian publications and theatrical



performances in the Ukrainian language (qtd. in Zabuzhko, “A Woman Author in a Colonial Culture” 154). As Bohdan Krawchenko emphasizes, the Tsarist policy of Russification had two major consequences: first, the Ukrainians who did submit to it and “[renounced] their identity and merge[d] into an “all-Russian” one, were not discriminated against” (31). Second, the ones who resisted Russification were “systematically repressed” (*ibid.*).

The Soviet state was a continuation of the Russian legacy in this respect. Overall, the government tried to establish the “Soviet people,” “a supranational “new historic community” that had emerged as a result of socialism” (Wanner 11), and this meant that the interests of particular nations (e.g., Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Georgian) were considered secondary to those of the “Soviet people.” In his book *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine* Bohdan Krawchenko consistently exposes the policies and measures of the Soviet government aimed at ensuring that the Ukrainian language did not have a chance to develop, but was instead simplified, cut off and “Russified.” In a work highly influential in underground dissident circles, “Internationalism or Russification,” Ivan Dziuba, a Ukrainian intellectual, expressed the anxiety and protest of his generation against the encouragement to use only Russian, which, as a language, was proclaimed to be “the greatest achievement of all human communication” (Krawchenko 212-213).

### *Language and Decolonizing the Culture*

In the novel, Zabuzhko’s protagonist reflects upon the Ukrainian nation battered by the Soviet totalitarian regime, decimated by camps, wars and famines, dispirited and Russified. To restore the nation, she wants to have children with her lover, the painter

Mykola, but he claims that “the slaves should not have children” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 28). Tlostanova compares this kind of discourse to the eugenic ideas of the Nazis (176), but Mykola is not talking about selective breeding. For him, it is not just a certain class or a part of the Ukrainian population that is “a slave,” but everybody. He refers to himself as well as to every representative of the Ukrainian nation, the nation that does not know how to be free. He thinks that this “inability to be free is hereditary” (*ibid.*), and therefore reacts bitterly to Oksana’s proposition to have a child. For Oksana, however, to have a child with Mykola would be to re-create the nation anew, to re-establish it.

As I have stated earlier, Zabuzhko’s (and her protagonist’s) relationship to the Ukrainian language is twofold: the native tongue is an “intimate,” nourishing, nurturing force, a meaning-making system, as well as a tool to fight colonialism and to oppose cultural assimilation, and to shape her national identity. The protagonist, Oksana, when living in Pittsburg (where the action of the novel takes place), calls her language her “house,” alluding, perhaps, to Heidegger, who called language “the only house of being” (Tlostanova 177): “... your home is your language – the language, which only another hundred more people in the whole world know well – your language is always with you, you are like a snail that way, you carry your house with you” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 6).

In the context of “language as a house” Oksana’s relationship with Mykola obtains a new meaning. For her, he is not just a lover, he is a “brother,” a comrade, her first “truly Ukrainian man” whom she did not have to “teach Ukrainian, bring him books from her own collection – in order to expand the common inner space of understanding”

(Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 13). With Mykola, they were able to exchange “not words, but ...secret... [meanings]” of the shared cultural background (*ibid.*). Mykola and Oksana are alike, they match: “You are my brother, my motherland and my home,” as Oksana claims (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 19). In one of her poems she calls Mykola, whose paintings are often based on the elements of Ukrainian folklore and demonology, a “warlock.” Throughout the novel Oksana often calls herself “a witch,” both in the positive sense, evoking her “supernatural” – poetic – power, ability to see and to foresee (she claims that her poems “are all about the future”), and in the negative one, referring to her aggression “unlocked” by Mykola and his abusive actions towards her, his violence.

After their relationship falls apart, Oksana bitterly states that “in the language there was much more than there was in bed” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 13) – talking to Mykola and exchanging all the “secret meanings” (*ibid.*) coded by their native tongue was the most rewarding part of the relationship, but the actual intimacy did not bring the protagonist any fulfillment. Oksana bemoans the collapse of her dream of Mykola, the ideal man to live with her (and their potential children) in the “house” of their common language. Together, they were to create an archetypal family consisting of free, uninhibited people in a new world without colonial violence, but this does not happen. Oksana bitterly states at the end of the novel: “maybe this is true, and the slaves should not have children ... Slavery [means] ... being infected with fear. And fear kills love. Without love children and poems and paintings become pregnant with death” (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 56).

Oksana’s role as a woman in this utopia was that of an equal partner, a “sister,” a

comrade, rather than any of the roles prescribed to women by the discourse of nationalism. Though she still was, in a way, a part of the family, which in the discourse of nationalism “becomes both the domain and the symbol of ... anti-colonial activity” (Loomba 217), she never considered herself an “ideal woman” of the nationalist vision, “a meek mother - nurturer dressed in traditional fashion” (Pavlychko 64). Oksana constantly emphasizes her equal status with Mykola, and is in fact badly hurt by his domineering behavior, his inconsideration for her. When they part, he sarcastically asks her: “So, do you feel like you are a winner?” Oksana is surprised, because in her mind she was not trying to win anything (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 12). The binary “winner/loser” (“top/bottom,” “superior (man)/inferior (woman)”) does not even exist for her before Mykola “teaches” her this bitter lesson. Oksana’s feminist perspective and striving for equality challenge the assumptions of the old-fashioned model of nationalism (to which Mykola, obviously, is much more prone), with its rigid gender roles (men as “warriors” and women as “producers of children”). This vision seems to be utopian, because the discourse of nationalism, which is a masculinized institution, emerges here as the well-known “master’s house” that cannot be dismantled by “master’s tools” (Lorde, qtd. in Watson 140).

Madina Tlostanova, however, does not see the model of the “national language as the house of being” convincing as far as postcolonial consciousness is concerned. Instead, she adheres to the epistemological findings of Homi Bhabha who emphasized the interculturality, the “unhomeliness,” which he defines as “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Bhabha 1337). However, perhaps historically Ukraine has not yet reached the point at which such epistemology would be accepted by

everyone. Instead, the country seems to be in the process of slow and painful disengagement from the colonial trauma, of decolonization, and Zabuzhko's novel illustrates this process well. One of the most important dimensions of Oksana Zabuzhko's novel is the search for the "lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted..." (Minh-ha 415). The Ukrainian language symbolically represents the pure and the authentic self: by virtue of speaking Ukrainian, the Ukrainians are not the Russians, and the Ukrainian identity is thus "not corrupted" and "pure" (*ibid.*) This national identity excludes the "Russian" past, though the Russian language was and is used by a large number of the Ukrainian population, and historically played a big role in the life of the Ukrainian people (Grewal, *Discussion*). Perhaps, in the future one will be able to talk about the "bilingual house of being," and the traumatic experience of colonialism will be processed and integrated into the nation's mentality, but Zabuzhko's novel was written in 1996, and this was only five years after Ukraine's independence (1991).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty states that

decolonization involves profound transformations of self, community, and governance structures. It can only be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination. It is a historical and collective process, and as such can only be understood within those contexts. The end result of decolonization is not only the creation of new kinds of self-governance but also "the creation of new men" (and women)." (Mohanty 7-8)

Mohanty especially emphasizes

the centrality of self-reflective collective practice in the transformation of self, reconceptualization of identity, and political mobilization as necessary elements of the practice of decolonization ... History, memory, emotion, and affectional ties are significant cognitive elements of the construction of critical, self-

reflective, feminist selves ... decolonization coupled with emancipatory collective practice leads to a rethinking of patriarchal, heterosexual, colonial, racial, and capitalist legacies ... (Mohanty 8)

It is interesting to note that Zabuzhko in her novel does refer to “literature as a form of national psychotherapy,” a self-reflective “collective practice” (Mohanty 8) that will be able to restore, renovate and remedy the national psyche wounded by colonialism and its brutality. In this respect, the use of the national (Ukrainian) language appears as a tool of decolonization, a way to conceptualize history.

Zabuzhko’s views parallel those of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who in his book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* discusses the choice of language for African writers. The European languages (French, English, Portuguese) were imposed on the African countries, colonized by the European powers. As Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o puts it, “the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom” (9), in which the children of the colonized nations were educated in the European languages. The African languages were proclaimed inferior, as was the local culture. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o recalls how the Kenyan children were punished for using their native languages at school, where they were supposed to speak only English, and how English was considered the only truly important subject to master, because without good grades in it one could not pursue further education (Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o 11-12).

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o points out that “...any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (13). According to Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, “culture is a product and a reflection of the history which it in turn reflects. Culture ... is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one

another” (15). Moreover, language as culture “is ... an image-forming agent in the mind of a child” (*ibid.*): in other words, people conceptualize themselves through their native tongues. “Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature”( Ngugi Wa Thiong’o 15). Ngugi Wa Thiong’o emphasizes that a particular language as culture is both universal and particular:

Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries. (Ngugi Wa Thiong’o 15)

For Thiong’o, the significance of a literature written in a native tongue therefore lies in the capacity of this tongue to capture all the meanings of a culture and of a history, and to preserve the values of a particular people (16). There is no other language in the world that can transmit these unique meanings and codes, give them to the world and enrich humankind. The colonial language replacing the native one is seen by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o as a destructive force and an attempt to “control, through culture,” the way “people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world” (16). Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s choice to abandon English as the language of his creative writing and to write in his native Gikuyu was inspired by his desire to “return to the roots, return to the sources of [Kenyan] being in the rhythms of life and speech” and thus to recreate “the epic grandeur of that history” (72-3). The literature in the colonial language “[took] us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds” (Ngugi Wa Thiong’o 12), and therefore to write in a native tongue means to come back to one’s own values and one’s own culture. It is significant that Ngugi Wa Thiong’o was

imprisoned for using his native tongue to write plays and promote the Gikuyu language in general. In prison, he began writing a novel in Gikuyu, continuing to oppose the authorities and reclaim his cultural heritage. As he contends, “I would attempt a novel in the very language which had been the basis of incarceration. I would reconnect myself not to the Afro-European novel of my previous practice but to the African novel of my new commitment” (71).

### *Ukrainian Poets in the Soviet Empire*

The colonial persecution of poets and writers was a widespread phenomenon in the Soviet Union as well. Though formally the languages of the republics that constituted the Soviet Union were not prohibited, and literature in these languages did exist, writers were not encouraged to “return to the roots” (Ngugi Wa Thiong’o 72) or to integrate the true history of their peoples in their writings. It was only topics “loyal” to the regime, such as the “friendship” of the nations of the U.S.S.R., love towards the Communist Party and eulogies to the new Soviet socialist lifestyle, which one could dare to cover. A deep inquiry into Ukrainian culture and history was potentially seen as a threat to the Soviet system, deemed separatist in nature. In her article “Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture” Oksana Zabuzhko points out the difficulties faced by Ukrainian writers during the Soviet period:

Ukrainian poetry...expressed the sensibility and emotional inner life of a people condemned by Party doctrine to disappear very shortly as a separate national and cultural entity, to become more and more like Russians, to be merged with them into a new prospective community, the so-called “Soviet” people, held together by the Russian language and the Russian political tradition. (Zabuzhko, “Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture” 272).

Ukrainian poets were forced to turn down their nominations for the Nobel Prize



(Pavlo Tychyna and Mykola Bazhan). The last Nobel Prize candidate, Vasyl Stus, died in a prison camp in 1985, the year of his nomination (Zabuzhko, "Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture" 271). This prompted some historians to raise the question of Stus' murder by the regime. Overall, as a well-known critic Vitaly Chernetsky emphasizes, "[Ukrainian literature] ...remained a literature in an endangered language, brutally suppressed by the ruling colonial powers," and thus "...the very fact of writing in Ukrainian was seen as a gesture of defiance" (674).

To write in Ukrainian on the topics of the Ukrainian culture and history was often condemned as a manifestation of "bourgeois nationalism," which was a dangerous political label that meant exile or imprisonment. In the vocabulary of Soviet totalitarianism the term "nationalism" did not signify a social movement, but a crime, a rebellion against the communist ("internationalist") doctrine. Oksana Zabuzhko revisits the case of the Ukrainian poet Volodymyr Sosiura, who in 1950s wrote a poem "Love Ukraine," for which he was harassed by the government structures. Sosiura was even forced to write "a letter of recantation" (Zabuzhko, "Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture" 272). As Zabuzhko poignantly states, "here lies the crucial difference between the status of Ukrainian and Russian poets. Contrary to our Russian counterparts, we were not allowed to love our country" (*ibid.*).

In her article "Reinventing the Poet," Oksana Zabuzhko cites T. S. Eliot who said that "of all arts, poetry is the most stubbornly national" (Zabuzhko, "Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture" 272). As he puts it, "A people may have its language taken away from it, suppressed, and another language compelled upon the schools; but unless you teach that people to *feel* in a new language, you have not eradicated the old one, and

it will reappear in poetry, which is the vehicle of feeling” (qtd. in Zabuzhko, “Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture” 272). The task of the Ukrainian poet was, then, complex – first, he or she had to preserve the national spirit, to be a “nationalist,” and second, by virtue of doing so, oppose the regime politically.

The protagonist of Zabuzhko’s *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, Oksana, is a poet very faithful to her language choice. This is how she describes her encounters with American publishers (some of the events of the novel take place in Pennsylvania):

You are a superb poet– local publishers tell her ... thank you, I know, too bad for me, -- but you, my darling, have no choice, not because you could not change language – very well you could, if you gave yourself the trouble, but because you have had a spell cast over you, a spell to be faithful to all those dead who, not worse than you, could have written -- in Russian, in Polish, some even in German, and lived a totally different life, but instead they threw themselves into the dying fire of Ukrainian [culture], and not a damn thing came out of this effort except for broken lives and unread books, and yet today you cannot step over all these people, - you cannot, you cannot and that’s it, the sparkles of their presence do wake sometimes from the ashes of the everyday mundane existence, and they are your family, your family tree... (Zabuzhko, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* 15)

Later on, Oksana (the protagonist) evokes Nikolai Gogol, a Russian writer who was Ukrainian by birth. Gogol moved to St Petersburg, Russia, to launch a successful literary career that he surely would not have been able to have if he wrote in Ukrainian and lived in his native Ukraine. Though it is an obvious fact that his writings reflect his heritage (the characters, the mythology, the demonology, the folklore he uses in his works), Russian imperial historiography was never willing to admit this. When Yuri Barabash, a Ukrainian critic writing for a Russian literary magazine, in his article ““Ours” or Not “Ours?” – Gogol in the Literary Thought of the Ukrainian Diaspora,” introduces the topic of “Ukrainian Gogol studies,” or the history of interpretation of Gogol by the Ukrainian critics and the “Ukrainian consciousness,” he feels compelled to

state in the introduction that “the Russian reader ... will be surprised and even shocked to discover certain ideas ... [on] the life and work of this great Russian writer... certain elements of ideology and terminology may prove to be unacceptable for the Russian reader at all” (Barabash 144-145). The author uses an almost apologetic tone, preparing the Russian reader, expressing fear of shocking him or her. This is as if the Irish were having scruples over considering James Joyce an Irish writer just because he happened to be writing in English. Gogol, no doubt, belongs to both cultures – Russian and Ukrainian, but the Russian imperial discourse did not leave any room for such acknowledgments.

### *The Liberating Potential of the Ukrainian Language*

For Zabuzhko’s protagonist (and for the author herself) language thus becomes the tool of conceptualizing her identity and of withstanding assimilation. There is, however, one more important dimension relating to the language choice. *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* was published in 1996, after Ukraine had already gained independence. Russian, though, continued to be widely used in official settings, despite the laws adopted to promote Ukrainian. According to Zabuzhko, the Ukrainian language has a potential to function as a space without the violence of the colonial (totalitarian) times. Russian, the official language of the Soviet Union, was used during the unfair “trials” that led to the imprisonment of millions in the Gulag. Moreover, the Russian spoken by Soviet officials did not differ much from the “Russian” utilized by the criminal world. The “power” and the “thieves,” in other words, shared the language – perhaps because the people who later became the Soviet leaders themselves came out of the criminal milieu in the beginning of the century (Zabuzhko, “Language and Law” 128) As Oksana Zabuzhko contends, the researchers of the language of the totalitarian state have lately discovered that the

sociolinguistics of the criminal world is essential for understanding the language of Soviet power structures, since the two share many characteristics – such as a disrespectful attitude towards subordinates, the use of informal “you” when speaking with the latter, the use of oaths (Russian “mat,” a set of extremely strong curse words), and the style of the so-called “counter-propaganda” putting down a political (or any other) opponent (Zabuzhko, “Language and Law” 127-128).

On the other hand, the Ukrainian language is free from this tradition of disrespect and legal arbitrariness; it does not “drag behind itself... a long train of dirty historic memory” (*ibid.*). The Ukrainian language gives Ukraine a chance to avoid all the unpleasant associations that the Russian language triggers when used in legal and other official settings on Ukrainian territory.

The Ukrainian language is thus understood in Zabuzhko’s text as a tool to break through the colonial discourse of history, to decolonize Ukraine, to write history in a different voice, literally “in a different language,” from a different point of view.

Assia Djébar, “a Woman Novelist in the French Language”

*Postcoloniality of a Francophone Author*

An Algerian writer of French expression, Assia Djébar calls herself “a woman novelist in the French language” (Djébar, “Writing in the Language of the Other” 113). In her book *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* Assia Djébar explains her language choice. Writing in French, she captures all the other “multiple voices” of her culture, her upbringing and her country: “the women’s Berber, the dialectal Arabic, the literary Arabic, and the French of her schooling” (Michel 81). “I am an Algerian woman,” says Djébar, “but also... I am an “Arab-Berber woman”... [who

writes] in French” (Djebar, *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* 42). Assia Djebar stresses that “identity ... is [a product of ] paper, blood, and language” (*ibid.*). She does not see herself as belonging to just one culture, instead striving to exist in several, and to represent them in her writing.

What does it mean to be a “writer of French expression”? The umbrella term “francophone” is applied to a number of authors in many a former French colony, from the Maghreb to the Antilles. Assia Djebar points out that by writing, she seeks to “go beyond the geographical limits of the French language in order to analyze, discuss, and question the ambiguous notion of francophonie – a notion that is not always a literary or a cultural one, but [is linked] to politics... In the linguistic territory of ...“francophonie,” I place myself on its margins” (Djebar, *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* 27).

In their article “The Francophone Postcolonial Studies” Jacques Coursil and Delphine Perret point out the “francophone paradox”:

In the French language, the expression “francophone literature” is not only restricted to (non)-French but, in a greater sense, to (non)-European; “traditionally” the literatures from French-speaking Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, etc., are not termed “francophone” in France; this is also true for philosophy, songs, and cinema (Rousseau, Verhaeren, Michaux, Brel, Godard). On the other hand, Césaire, Fanon, Glissant, and Condé, who are French citizens, are classified as “francophone” writers. What is termed “francophone” has to be related one way or another to colonial history, that of Canada, the Cajuns, the Antilles, sub-Saharan Africa, Madagascar, the Maghreb, or Lebanon, but does not apply to neighboring European nations that have never been colonized by France. (Coursil and Perret 200)

To be “francophone,” thus, means to be “postcolonial,” because a European national, even if he or she was born in Russia (Andrei Makine) or in Ireland (Samuel Beckett) and writes or wrote in French, is automatically classified as “French” (Coursil

and Perret 201). The term “francophone” may also indicate that the relationship of a particular author with the French language is complex, because French is the language of the colonizer, “the Other.” If a European whose native tongue is not French decides to write in French, the choice of the language here is situated outside of the colonial context, and does not espouse the colonial trauma. An author from a former colony or a minority milieu, however, has to come to terms with the burden of colonial history, and to move beyond the attitude that Marko Pavlyshyn calls “anticolonial,” that is defining oneself in direct opposition to the colonizer and his language, to stand in the position of postcoloniality and “to use the colonial experience... for forming one’s own consciousness” (Pavlyshyn 227). Such consciousness is “the fruit of a deconstruction of colonialism: as the unmasking and taking apart, and simultaneously the productive re-use, of the cultural structures of colonialism” (Pavlyshyn, qtd. in Antonuik 26).

The language of the colonizer (French) is therefore not altogether rejected by a postcolonial francophone author, but appropriated and used. These views were very well expressed by a group of Antillean writers, Jean Barnabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, in their famous “Eulogy to Creolity,” in which they explain the notion of Creolity as a new mentality, a way of conceptualizing their postcolonial reality, “a diffracted but recomposed world” (Barnabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 27) that consists of the elements of many cultures – Antillean, European, Asian and African. When describing their relationship with the French language, Barnabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant use the metaphors of conquest, emphasizing that they “conquered” the language of the colonizer, and tailored it to suit their expressive needs:

But our histories, for one time generous, gave us a gift of a second language. It

was not there at the beginning. It belonged to our oppressors. *We have conquered it*, this French language.... we appropriated [it]. We expanded the meanings of some words.... We enriched its vocabulary and its syntax. ...*In short, we inhabited it*. ... Our literature should witness this conquest... it is not creolized or reinvented French or francized or reinvented Creole, but the language we found and decided upon... An antidote to ancestral domination that oppressed us. (Barnabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant 46-48)

The French language becomes a living space to a francophone writer, a “home” that was re-conquered from the colonizer. It is both the space of opportunities and of violence.

### *French as “a Poisoned Gift”*

These viewpoints are close to those of Assia Djébar’s. In *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* Assia Djébar brings in a terrible episode of the French conquest of Algeria in 1830: the French commander Fromentin throws away the mutilated hand of an unknown Algerian woman. He described this occurrence in his notes, which Djébar, a historian, found in the archives. Djébar imagines picking up the chopped hand and writing the story of that woman and the others. As Catherine Gracki points out, “Djébar redefines her problematic relationship to the French language ... not by reconciling herself harmoniously with French but by taking it as one would take ‘war booty’” (836). Thus, the ambiguity of Djébar’s relationship with the French language is emphasized. Djébar herself calls the French language “a Nessus tunic,” referring to the Greek myth about a centaur Nessus who gave to Dejanire, the wife of Hercules, a beautiful tunic for her husband. The tunic turned out to be poisoned, and Hercules died (Gale 526).

The French language is undoubtedly a gift, because Assia Djébar was able to receive an education, and avoid being trapped in the gynaeceum with other women thanks to having mastered French. On the other hand, it is “the enemy’s language”

(Djebar, *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* 215), the language “indissociable from the official conquerors who killed as they wrote” (Gracki 836), “imported in the murky, obscure past... taken from the enemy with whom no fond word was ever exchanged ... This language was formerly used to entomb my people” (Djebar, *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* 215). To write in it “involves placing your elbow some distance in front of you to form a bulwark – however, in this twisted position, the writing is washed back to you” (*ibid.*).

*Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*, an autobiographical account, creates an especially dramatic situation, in which the produced text is “rich in ambiguities and paradoxes” (Gale 525). When analyzing these paradoxes, Beth Gale draws on the works of Jacques Derrida who stated that writing signifies the “desire to kill the father,” or parental authority, and to create oneself anew. In *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* Djebar recalls that it was through the legacy of her father that she was able to attend French school and avoid the fate of many other women of her land - to be disempowered and possibly trapped in someone’s harem. This set her on a “bilingual, bicultural, indeed an ambiguous journey that freed her from the female enclosure but sent her into a form of exile away from the majority of her sisters” (Mortimer, qtd. in Gale, 527). “The language of the Other [French] [was] at once a gift and a burden ... It is both a source of liberation ... and alienation” (Abdel-Jaouad, qtd. in Gale, 528). The narrator in Djebar’s novel, thus, cannot decide whether the “gift” her father “gave” her (the French language) is a sign of “love or condemnation” (Gale 528). In a way, she feels that she herself is a “gift” given by her father to the enemy, because her father, extracting her from the women’s quarter, “deliver[ed] [her] ... to the enemy camp” (Djebar, *Fantasia, an Algerian*



*Cavalcade* 213). "... Marriageable royal princesses also cross the border, often against their will, in terms of treaties which end wars" (Djebar, *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* 214). This evokes the issue of "exchange of women as gifts" in the patriarchal societies between the tribes (Rubin 278).

The ambiguity of feeling stays with the author throughout the writing process, confirming the thought of Derrida's that the "act of writing is always of double nature, both liberating and dangerous" (Gale 529). Assia Djebar exists in a space "between discourses," finding a freedom of expression that none of them can give her separately. "Postcolonial autobiography can accept the tension between the two cultures, and this is the only way not to lose any of them" (Gale 533). In a way, her use of the French language is one of Djebar's attempts to "speak the unspeakable," to articulate women's voices and experiences.

#### *Finding the Voices of Women*

*Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* consists of many women's voices intertwined with that of the narrator. Djebar emphasizes that this plurality of voices "allowed ... [her] to speak about ... [herself], intimately" (qtd. in Gale 533). She has further stated that her literary text could only be in French (Djebar, "Writing in the Language of the Other" 113) because this "language of the Other," the colonizer, is the only territory where she could express intimacy and yet remain on the "outside" (Djebar, "Writing in the Language of the Other" 114). In her book *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* Djebar points out that the "multiple voices" contributing to her writing are "the women's Berber, the dialectal Arabic, the literary Arabic, and the French of her schooling" (Michel 81). Assia Djebar states that "the women in her land have four

languages. The first of them, the most ancient... is the Berber language” (Michel 99). The second is the “one of the Book and of the five prayers of the day, the language of the Prophet” (Djebar, *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* 14). The third one is the “language of yesterday’s masters” (*ibid.*), that is French, and the fourth is the “language of the body with its dances and its trances, its suffocations, sometimes its asphyxia...” (*ibid.*).

Assia Djebar exists in a space that allows her to access all these languages, and capture all these voices. She says:

I started by writing one day, on the first page of a notebook, a rule of behavior to myself: “To recover the Arab tradition of love in the language of Giraudoux.” Then, after a few trials, I chose, as a defiance to myself a kind of: “Even though I write in French, can I be as Arab as possible? “... Each time I find different justifications, the least of evils being to re-create in French a life lived or felt in Arabic. This movement from one language to another has probably helped some North African writers of French expression achieve a certain lyricism, others a tone of aggressiveness or, on the contrary, of nostalgia. As for me, my desire is to find, in spite of this movement, a profound fluidity and intimacy – which seems difficult. (qtd. in Accad 809)

As Katherine Gracki contends in her article “Writing Violence and the Violence of Writing in Assia Djebar’s Algerian Quartet,” in her *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* Djebar is “rewriting history from a feminist stance... so that collective oral history transmitted by women may also be inscribed into the fabric of Algeria’s past” (836). The French language suits her best, because it is capable of comprising all the “screams” and “voices” (*ibid.*) of different women inhabiting Algeria – the Berber and the Arab women from the villages, and educated women like Djebar herself. Assia Djebar does not want to omit any of these voices. In the years following Algerian independence, Djebar was pressured to abandon French and to start writing in Arabic, for the sake of patriotism. She

refused, and did not publish anything for ten years (Burrell 112). As Hafid Gafaiti underscores, Djébar

challenges [the nationalist discourse]...[by] presenting a more subtle and complex analysis of the relationship between Algeria and France. At the same time, she constructs the modern history of Algeria from the perspective of those whom the official ideology excluded by reducing them, against all evidence, to a secondary role: women. (814)

For her, the colonial history has to be incorporated into people's consciousness, and the French language, the language of the colonizer, has a potential to capture and to preserve it.

In her afterword to Djébar's collection of stories *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* Clarisse Zimra, who translated the collection into English, tells how Assia Djébar chose her pen-name (Djébar was born Fatima Zohra Imalyène). The writer, who was to publish her first novel in French, needed a nom de plume, decided to call herself Djébar, "the phrase that praises "Allah the intransigent," but in her haste spelled it "djébar," unwittingly transforming the classical Arabic into vernacular term for "healer"" (Zimra 160). Clarisse Zimra contends that this "healer" appears later in the text of *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* "as ...a *sourcière*, a magic dowser who taps into the subterranean reality of woman's silence to exorcize the death-in-life of the harem and to bring her forgotten sisters a kind of immortality" (*ibid.*).

One can say that the language strategy chosen by Assia Djébar, a woman novelist of Berber origin, whose Arabic name signifies healing and who writes in French, contributes to the practice of decolonizing the consciousness of both the former colonized and colonizers. Decolonization, this "profound transformations of self...[and] community" (Mohanty 7), defines the "centrality of self-reflective collective practice in

the transformation of self, reconceptualization of identity, and political mobilization as necessary elements of [its] practice ...History, memory, emotion, and affectional ties are significant cognitive elements of the construction of critical, self-reflective, feminist selves..." (Mohanty 8). In her novels and essays Djebbar adheres to these practices. Unlike Oksana Zabuzhko, who reaches out for her native language of Ukrainian to achieve the goals of decolonization and to rediscover the cultural values damaged or forgotten during the period of colonization, Assia Djebbar seeks to exist in the space of "extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha 1337), and thus to come to terms with the colonial past and to incorporate the colonial trauma into consciousness. If for Zabuzhko the Ukrainian ("the native") language is the repository of authentic meanings and an important system of meaning-making that is capable of telling the true history - and "herstory" - of the Ukrainians, the French language for Djebbar is the means to collect all the unacknowledged voices of the marginalized groups – women, ethnic minorities (the Berbers), and to present these voices, that were excluded from the official historic discourse, to the world. It appears that either language choice (of the Ukrainian language in the context of the post-Soviet reality and of the French language after Algerian independence) is justified, as it carries a significant liberating potential.

## Chapter Four: Conclusion

In their writings Assia Djébar (Algeria) and Oksana Zabuzhko (Ukraine) emphasize that the women of postcolonial nations often find themselves marginalized both as gendered and as colonized subjects, with their history invisible and their voices unheard. The cultural experiences of postcoloniality in Algeria and Ukraine are significantly different, as are the forces that affected these countries in colonial times, during the French (Algeria) and Russian/Soviet (Ukraine) colonizations. However, both colonial regimes had a common feature: the gendered nature of the colonial discourse. The colonized country was often equated with the women of the colonized land, and vice versa. This meant that the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized were very complex, with the category of gender emerging as a central one. The colonizers tried to appropriate the women of the colonized nation (“the land”), thus taking these women (“the land,” the “territory”) away from the colonized men.

In the context of colonial Algeria, the discourse of nationalism and the issue of the veil well illustrate this situation. Wearing of the veil was viewed as a patriotic act by the nationalist movement of the Algerian War of Independence. Women, the keepers of the spiritual values of the nation (Chatterjee 121), preserved the very spirit of the country by adhering to the traditional practices, and thus helped defeat the colonizers (the French). However, the veil is also a symbol of the subjugation of women and of the “muffling of the woman’s voice inside” (Djébar, qtd. in Faulkner 852). Women are still

subjected to domestic patriarchy after liberation from the colonial yoke.

The Ukrainian scenario of gendered colonialism differs from the Algerian one. The totalitarian vision of gender was not to equate men with masculinity (“power”) and women with femininity (“powerlessness”), but to see all citizens of the Soviet Union as a powerless crowd, and the government and the domestic police as the powerful – and, symbolically, “masculine” – establishment. The Soviet Union, the country, thus was seen as a “female body” ready to be raped and available for trampling (Zabuzhko, “Woman-Author in Colonial Culture” 159-160). Women, just as men, were seen as persons with no sex characteristics, devoid of sexuality and desire, disembodied.

A woman has traditionally been constructed as a subject that “exist[s] outside of history” (Mohanty 31). Just as colonial history was written by the colonizers and never acknowledged the colonized, ignoring and marginalizing their experience, women’s history remains invisible due to the ways in which history as a discipline is conceptualized. The events put in the center of historic discourse are wars and revolutions, but not the experience of women. The history of colonized women thus appears to be doubly marginalized, because they are silenced as the colonized subjects and as women. In both colonial situations (the Algerian and the Ukrainian) women live through violence and sexual violence from both the colonizers and the colonized, but neither the colonial nor the postcolonial history recognizes this. Assia Djebar and Oksana Zabuzhko “write the body” (Cixous 1457) of a postcolonial woman, revealing this trauma and showing that the body functions as a site of intersection of the oppressive forces, and that it is not only the discourse of the colonizers, but also the attitudes of the colonized men and the postcolonial nationalist establishment that silences and subjugates women.

The issue of decolonization is also reflected in the works of Assia Djébar and Oksana Zabuzhko. Decolonization, this disengagement from the colonial trauma, involves a deep transformation of self and coming to terms with individual and collective pain. Literature, as Oksana Zabuzhko suggests in her novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, is a form of “therapy” needed by the nation. Zabuzhko writes in her native Ukrainian tongue, claiming that this is the only meaning-making system that allows for withstanding the annihilating influence of the colonial regime and its oppression. Assia Djébar, however, takes a very different path, appropriating the language of the colonizer, of “the Other,” and appropriating it to render the voices of different groups of women: the Arab women, the Berber women, the Arab women educated in French. For Djébar, writing in French becomes the best way to make the history of her country and the women of her country visible to the world.

Overall, the two authors whose works I have analyzed come from strikingly different colonial and postcolonial situations, and display different artistic techniques. Their works do have common themes, though. Both authors strive to inscribe women into the historic discourses of their countries.

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