



Rewakowicz, Maria G.

*Ukraine's Quest for Identity:  
Embracing Cultural  
Hybridity in Literary  
Imagination, 1991–2011*

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*Reviewed by Olha Maksymchuk*

Maria G. Rewakowicz's monograph *Ukraine's Quest for Identity: Embracing Cultural Hybridity in Literary Imagination, 1991–2011* is an attempt to give an overview of contemporary Ukrainian literature of the first twenty post-independence years. The book elaborates a vast field of textual material and a considerable number of authors who live and create in Ukraine. Rewakowicz does not set herself the goal of mentioning all of the new names appearing on the horizon of Ukrainian literature but concentrates her attention on the most prominent writers. The book is not just a compendium of critical remarks on the author's selected works: its structure is quite well-thought-out and reveals the researcher's intention to interpret texts through the lenses of an ideological approach (post-colonial and feministic methods). In her preface Rewakowicz explains the logic of the division of the book into chapters, each of which except for the first, deal with a particular reading strategy used by the interpreter. To be precise, Rewakowicz considers the geographical dimension and territorial identities in the authors' oeuvres, gender aspects of writing, language diversification, presenting marginal strata of society, and exploiting pop culture genres.

The first chapter is dedicated to a review of theoretical studies containing certain important concepts applied in the book. Multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, and constructing identity are the main underscored issues. Rewakowicz proposes to apperceive Ukrainians as a post-colonial nation whose social and cultural life has assumed somewhat hybrid forms because of the inheritance of the Soviet past and the metropolitan influence of Russia. For example, hybridity manifests itself in the coexistence of the Ukrainian and Russian languages on the territory of Ukraine as well as in the cultural space of the country.

According to Rewakowicz, linguistic hybridity and the formation of modern national identity are connected with the decentralization of the literary process and

revision of the Ukrainian literary canon. Its borders were expanded by including authors who represent “the margins” of literature—e. g., female writers or authors who prefer to create using local or regional perspectives (the Stanislaviv or Zhytomyr Schools) and so on. At the same time, Rewakowicz indirectly leads her readers to an as yet controversial thought—especially in the period of the Russian aggression in the Donbas and the occupation of the Crimea—that Russian-language authors (e. g., Andrey Kurkov or Lada Luzina) should be treated as Ukrainian writers. It seems a little premature to close the discussion on this subject, and Rewakowicz is aware of this, trying to define criteria of the national affiliation of authors, such as their level of integrity into the social and cultural spheres of Ukraine and the choice of the country where they publish their works.

Speaking about the multicultural and multiethnic character of Ukrainian society, Rewakowicz consciously or not, limits herself only to the Russian minority. However, the Crimean Tatar, Bulgarian, Magyar, Polish, Jewish, and other historical diasporas who also form the polyethnic map of present-day Ukraine are not mentioned. Meanwhile, in the light of the tragic events of the last years, social attention to the problems and needs of different minorities and indigenous peoples in Ukraine has noticeably increased. The example of the singer Jamala, whose participation and victory in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2016 made her world-famous, illustrates the splash of interest in the place of Crimean Tatars in today's Ukraine. That is why Rewakowicz should have outlined the existence of various non-Ukrainian ethnic groups and their role in the construction of modern Ukrainian—national or regional—identity.

The researcher quite often connects a pro-Ukrainian position of authors with political sympathies to Europe, which becomes more understandable in the context of events in the history of Ukraine in the 2010s. The book does not focus on the Euromaidan period and the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, but Rewakowicz occasionally runs ahead and appeals to the years after the collapse of the Yanukovych regime. So it is not surprising that in the book next to the conclusion, which summarizes the key points of the monograph, there is also an epilogue entitled “Literature in a Time of War.” Whereas the epilogue does not correspond to the time frame declared in the title of the book, it serves as a logical sequel of the study, introducing to the reader new personalities in the literary process (for example, the poets Liubov Yakymchuk and Yuliia Musakovska), who give their poetical answers to the turbulences of the epoch.

To justify applying a political background to explain peculiarities of the analyzed texts, Rewakowicz refers to the sociological method of Pierre Bourdieu. Although the use of this interpretation strategy seems reasonable, at times the critic makes inaccurate remarks, for instance, claiming that “the government's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union led to the Revolution of Dignity and war with Russia” (p. vii). Surely, these events are connected to one another as links in a chain, but the refusal of the Yanukovych government to continue the European integration of Ukraine is not a direct reason for the breaking out of the war.

It is worth noting that along with national and language identities, women's self-representation is one of the core issues of the study. Women's writing is reviewed not

only in the chapter specially entitled “Gender matters,” but also in the section dedicated to popular literature in modern Ukraine. As a result, the monograph embraces a bunch of very unlike, in thematic inclination and measure of talent, writers ranging from Oksana Zabuzhko to Tania Maliarchuk, Mariia Matios to Irena Karpa. But, at times, their proximity in the frame of one and the same chapter looks slightly artificial. For example, discussing the phenomenon of non-feminist women’s literature, Rewakowicz combines quite diverse writers, namely Halyna Pahutiak, Dzvinka and Bohdana Matiash, and Svitlana Povaliaieva. Their common feature is being “beyond feminism and postfeminism” by creating texts without the typical controversion of men and women. Rewakowicz points out that these authors go beyond the territory of reality to the realm of mysticism and fantasy (Pahutiak), metaphysics (the Matiash sisters), and the transformation of consciousness (Povaliaieva). Obviously, such similarities do exist, but nevertheless bringing such distinctive female writers together appears insufficiently substantiated.

Overall, *Ukraine's Quest for Identity* is intended to acquaint a foreign, non-Ukrainian audience with the main tendencies in the development of Ukrainian literature of the first two decades after independence. It may be less informative for a well-read Ukrainian critic, but for readers abroad who are interested in today’s Ukraine Maria Rewakowicz offers a good “guide book” for a trip to the home of contemporary Ukrainian literature.