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Postcolonial Perspectives on the War in Ukraine: A Cross-Referential Study of General and Literary Approaches

Abstract. This essay critically examines both mainstream postcolonial scholarship, especially revised and reedited publications, and emerging Ukrainian-authored approaches to regionalized postcoloniality, in the context of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine (for a similar treatment of the Irish context, see Konecniak, 2009). It argues, first, that Ukrainian postcoloniality has already developed into a distinct discourse, and second, that recent literary and theoretical works should be included in the development of a broader postcolonial paradigm internationally. While its primary aim is to contest claims that Ukrainian postcoloniality remains underdeveloped, the essay also serves as a preliminary survey for researchers interested in approaching post-invasion Ukrainian literary and cultural works from a postcolonial perspective.

Keywords: postcoloniality; war in Ukraine; literary theory; literary criticism; meta-theory.

1. Introduction: Postcolonizing the War in Ukraine

To account for the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war, a group of Ukrainian researchers, led by Vasyl Krotiuk, have contributed the mono-graph *Світоглядний сенс сучасної війни: соціогуманітарні аспекти* (*The Worldview Sense of Modern War: Socio-Humanitarian Aspects*). Mykhailo Chuhuienko presents there details of the context of the war through the lens of postcolonial theory yet, at the same time, he notices its spatial limitations: “postcolonial criticism focuses exclusively on the imperialist ideologies and practices of Western states, essentially leaving non-Western forms of imperialism, in particular, Russian, Chinese, Iranian, and Turkish imperialism, without adequate critical examination” (Chuhuienko, 2024, pp. 51–52). He specifically identifies the omission in existing postcolonial approaches to the war in Ukraine and, referring also to the observations of Tamara Hundoro-va, he comments on the ambiguous status of Ukrainian postcoloniality:

On the one hand, for quite some time now, since roughly the mid-1990s, articles [...] devoted to postcolonialism have appeared in Ukrainian periodicals, academic conferences on this topic have been held, [...] and Ukrainian researchers have recognized the relevance and creative potential of postcolonial studies in the Ukrainian context, as well as the possibility and necessity of applying their insights to understanding Ukrainian-Russian relations. On the other hand, throughout the years of Ukraine’s independence, not a single in-depth monographic study on the history and philosophy of postcolonial critical theory has been published. (Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 52; all translations by the authors)

Chuhuienko’s comment shows the ambiguous condition of Ukrainian postcoloniality, the presence and absence of scholarly interest at the same time. He continues that “in terms of content, those few scholarly articles by Ukrainian authors do not demonstrate a deep grasp of the sophisticated conceptual apparatus of postcolonial studies” (Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 52). He discusses selected attempts made to situate Ukraine in a colonial and postcolonial context, namely those based on “internal colonialism” found in discourses about Ireland, Wales or Scotland, or rooted in Ewa Thompson’s thought (see Chuhuienko, 2024, pp. 54–55).

He also considers ways to apply Western versions of postcolonialism, namely the thought of Edward Said (Chuhuienko, 2024, pp. 61–64), and sim-

ilarly finds ambiguity there (Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 63). Chuhuienko points to both the spatial adaptability of Said's concept and the contextual threats that its adaptation may lead to. He raises questions about the postcolonial aspects of the "hybrid war" (p. 55) and about the future of Ukrainian-Russian postcolonial dichotomy from a global perspective: "Whether we can even speak in this context of the 'globalization of Ukraine' and the 'provincialization of Russia' will be determined by the course of events in eastern and southern Ukraine" (Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 65). He sees two crucial theoretical forces for basing postcolonial research, namely anthropology (pp. 66–67) and philosophy: "The need for postcolonial studies of war in its philosophical and anthropological dimensions has become notably relevant in light of attempts to revive the imperial idea, particularly in the context of Russia's large-scale military aggression against Ukraine and the Kremlin's genocidal practices aimed at the 'recolonization' of the neighboring state" (Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 71). He treats the development of Ukrainian postcolonial criticism as shaped by the impact of the 2022 invasion and the war itself.

The first aim of this essay is to analyze a selection of contemporary Ukrainian scholarship to demonstrate that the existing body of this research direction in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has helped Ukrainian postcoloniality develop into an already distinct and well-defined discourse (for a discussion moving from foundational postcolonial texts to Ireland-specific analyses, see Koneczniak, 2009), quite contrary to what Chuhuienko claims. We further aim to re-evaluate the presence of postcolonial studies in Ukraine-based literary research on the current situation following Russia's invasion by analyzing their cross-referential networks of postcolonial Ukrainian approaches (for a cross-referential study in a different context, cf. Koneczniak, Yağızyılmaz & Abu Hanieh, 2024), to reassess Chuhuienko's skeptical view that it is developing in divergent directions. Finally, we seek to find evidence against considering the 2022 invasion a defining point that impacted Ukrainian postcolonial critique, which is slightly against the argument that Chuhuienko put forward.

As a survey and preliminary discussion aimed at providing scholars with a comprehensive cross-referential tool to study contemporary literary works in the framework of Ukrainian postcoloniality, the essay builds on existing perspectives, including not only the already addressed contribution by Chuhuienko but also, notably, the essay "Explanatory Potential of the Postcolonial Approach for Understanding the Russian-Ukrainian War"

by Olena Khylo and Maksym Khylo (2024). In their attempt to theorize Ukraine's and Russia's current status in international relations, the authors trace the Ukrainian-Russian conflict through the colonizers-colonized dichotomy. They also treat the 2022 invasion as crucial in the context of the development of Ukrainian postcoloniality and view the present-day opposition as an example of a process of decolonization. They acknowledge that Ukraine escapes simple categorization as a colony, given the absence of racial hierarchies and geographical distance. At the same time, they focus, instead, on the colonial formation of power relations, the colonizer's assertion of cultural superiority, and Ukraine's pro-European orientation as a form of expressing counter-discourse.

Drawing on such crucial postcolonial theorists and philosophers as Edward Said (Orientalism), Jean-Paul Sartre (neocolonialism), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (subalternity), and Homi K. Bhabha (othering), they provide a metatheoretical basis for including the treatment of the war in Ukraine in the postcolonial paradigm (or at least for not excluding it). Khylo and Khylo published their text in English and engaged extensively with canonical theorists. As such, their work has achieved a broader international readership. Notwithstanding this, it does not relate to Chuhuienko's essay, which can be justified with their concurrent publication or belonging to different fields of knowledge, no matter how similar their approaches to the potentiality of postcolonialism for a discursive description of the war in Ukraine are.

When demonstrating lack of sufficient interest in appropriately postcolonizing the war in Ukraine, Chuhuienko refers to the thought of the historians Valerii Smolii and Oleksii Yas. He refers to them in the context of renewed attempts at postcolonizing the Ukrainian-Russian relations following the invasion of 2022: "The topic of postcolonial war has become even more relevant, and consequently, interest in postcolonial themes among Ukrainian scholars has grown in connection with the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022" (Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 56). He considers Smolii & Yas as the pioneering scholars who noted the possibility of applying a postcolonial framework in the context of the war in Ukraine (see 2024, p. 56) and who, in their article titled "Сучасна російсько-українська війна у світлі постколоніалізму" ("The Contemporary Russian-Ukrainian War in the Light of Postcolonialism"), characterize Russian aggression as a policy of "repeated colonization" (Smolii & Yas, 2022, p. 13; cited in Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 56). They contend that "the contemporary Russian-

Ukrainian war is not only a war with Putin's Russia, but it also stands as a war whose aftermath would be the final break with the Soviet and imperial legacy. It is the war that must ultimately offer a genuine postcolonial solution to the problems and contradictions of the post-Soviet space" (cited in Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 56).

Chuhuienko follows the thought of Smolii and Yas in considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine a defining period in the expected development of the regionalized postcolonial criticism. As a matter of fact, read first-hand, Smolii and Yas's article does stress the postcolonial nature of the war manifested in several interrelated factors and leading to the development of Ukrainian postcoloniality: "conceptual proposals and research strategies from the scope of postcolonial studies and imperial history" (Smolii & Yas, 2022, p. 6). As to the long-lasting causes of the invasion, these comprise the denial of Ukrainian statehood, driven by Russia's ambition to restore its colonial empire and reinforced across its information policy; the manipulation of historical and cultural narratives which aim at erasing Ukrainian identity and distorting perceptions of Ukrainians as a distinct people; and the Putin regime's military aggression serving to reclaim Russia's former imperial status (Smolii & Yas, 2022, pp. 3–6). They argue that "The nature of the modern Russian-Ukrainian war is hidden in the Soviet and old imperial past, since it is from there that the neo-imperial priorities of Putin's Russia originate, which determine the essence of its political, economic, social, cultural decisions, strategies, actions, and even the very justification for the current aggression" (Smolii & Yas, 2022, p. 12). The article does not offer a literary perspective on Ukrainian postcoloniality; however, it affirms the possibilities of postcolonial thinking. In this respect, it is similar to the orientation adopted by Khyenko and Khyenko (2024), even though the latter does not mention Smolii and Yas, which might indicate that their observations might have been formulated independently. Still, both articles confirm the relevance and validity of postcolonial paradigms in discussing the war in Ukraine and its broader context.

The ideas proposed by Khyenko and Khyenko, Chuhuienko, as well as Smolii and Yas, also echo "The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine" (2023) by Maria Mälksoo. Yet, this article is directly addressed only by Khyenko and Khyenko (and not by Chuhuienko), who take note of Mälksoo's observation that "Ukraine is also among the most flagrantly neglected cases of Soviet colonialism due to the allegedly insufficient applicability of the

label ‘postcolonial’ to the former Soviet/Russian imperial space” (as cited in Khylyk & Khylyk, 2024, p. 21) and who consider it as a representation of “a significant shift in academic discourse” (Khylyk & Khylyk, 2024, p. 21). Mälksoo’s essay problematizes the discussion by differentiating Ukraine’s case from global postcolonial studies, which typically emphasize racial categorization. The features found in the postcoloniality of former Russian imperial subjects, which include post-communist societies from former Soviet republics, remain contested and they involve the necessity for redefining the very concept of a postcolony (2023, p. 473).

Mälksoo attributes this omission to the epistemic differences found in Eastern and Western frameworks which have been developed for managing historical and cultural knowledge about imperial relationships. Again, postcolonial criticism, rooted in Western traditions, has not been inclusive enough to incorporate Eastern experiences. She argues that decolonizing international relations requires consideration of the memory politics behind their categories of subjectivity and agency. Russia’s war against Ukraine, as she believes, has exposed the principles as who has historically been, and who has not, able to speak for themselves in the discourse of international politics (2023, p. 479). Although “[t]he reactions to Russia’s current war against Ukraine, general support to Ukraine notwithstanding, have also revealed some long and deeply rooted legacies of Russian imperialism in the mindsets of many in Western thinkers when it comes to the difficulty of seeing and acknowledging a distinct Ukrainian subjectivity that is not defined by another power laying a historical claim to Ukrainians as ‘Little Russians’” (p. 474). This has not significantly impacted global postcolonial thought.

Khylyk and Khylyk (2024), who, in contrast to Chuhuienko, omit Smolii and Yas’s significant Ukrainian contribution, offering a similar approach, from their English-language essay, argue that Ukraine has been subject to postcolonizing attempts by Western scholars unfamiliar with its context. In contrast, as already mentioned, Mälksoo (2023) highlights Ukraine’s marginalization in postcolonial scholarship. Khylyk and Khylyk as well as Chuhuienko also advocate for the development of domestic Ukrainian approaches to postcolonial theory, while Mälksoo frames the invasion as “the postcolonial moment”, necessitating cultural decolonization: “The war is already proving to be a decolonizing moment of sorts: indeed, a game changer for the Central and East European (CEE) states more generally in their vocal countering of Russia’s attempted denial of Ukraine’s (and by extension Rus-

sia's former imperial subjugates') sovereign political agency" (2023, p. 472). A year before publication of the contributions of Khylyk and Khylyk, as well as Chuhuienko, Mälksöo makes it clear that the question is not whether or how postcolonial thought applies to Ukraine, but rather which aspects of Ukrainian postcoloniality already define this field of study.

Alongside this first aim, our second objective is to identify and critically assess emerging Ukrainian-authored postcolonial scholarship in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion. Rather than applying established postcolonial frameworks to Ukrainian literature, this essay investigates whether Ukrainian scholars themselves are already generating a distinct decolonizing discourse rather than focusing solely on its potential. The assumed "nuanced" discourse reflects local cultural, historical, and geopolitical realities. By analyzing recent academic publications, we seek to understand how postcolonial theory is being reimagined from within Ukraine, and how this domestic discourse challenges, complements, or sets itself in opposition to global postcolonial paradigms.

The following questions will be addressed (cf. Chuhuienko, 2024, pp. 56–57):

1. How has the war affected the circulation and recognition of Ukrainian postcolonial scholarship and Ukrainian postcoloniality in global postcolonial academic discourse (cf. Koneczniak, 2009)?
2. To what extent are Ukrainian scholars developing original postcolonial frameworks in response to Russia's invasion?
3. Which theoretical approaches are emerging from Ukrainian-authored studies, and how do they interact with established postcolonial paradigms?

Developed from the presentation of Ukrainian approaches towards the potentiality and applicability of postcolonial studies to the description of the Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine, the discussion will consist of three further sections. The next examines the current state of "mainstream" postcolonial research, focusing on recent developments (2025). It includes a discussion of new publications and revisions of established works (cf. Koneczniak, 2009). Limiting the temporal scope to the post-invasion period, we examine revisions and re-editions of key postcolonial studies to identify Ukrainian-Russian issues within them. Then, the following section discusses Ukrainian scholarly approaches to postcolonialism prior to the 2022 invasion, particularly since the Euromaidan events of 2013. It highlights the presence of postcolonial research at Ukrainian universities, both in teaching and scholarship,

and assesses their presence in or omission from the discussion of the potentiality of postcolonial approaches discussed in the introductory section. Finally, the essay offers an analysis of selected research publications that draw on postcolonial theory to the post-2022 Ukrainian context. In this respect, it reassesses their theoretical underpinnings and potential application.

2. Ukraine and Mainstream Postcolonialism at Present (2025)

Postcolonial criticism remains one of the most adaptable theoretical frameworks of the twentieth and twenty-first century. It continues to shape descriptions of contemporary literary and cultural discourses globally. Its adaptability is both its strength and weakness. As postcolonial literary and cultural theorists and practitioners representing minority communities commonly agree, it enables analysis of increasingly complex social relations rooted in inequality, but it can also lead to superficial interpretations when inequality is not easily defined. Such key-foundation publications as *The Empire Writes Back* and *Orientalism* are still widely referred to because of their relevance; however, the third decade of the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of new original approaches and revised perspectives (cf. Koneczniak, 2009, p. 97). For example, in 2025 alone, Routledge released a revised edition of *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, alongside several new postcolonial companions and comprehensive studies that reflect the field's development. As shown in the previous section, Ukrainian scholars often adopt and adapt mainstream postcolonial theories. This raises the reverse question: to what extent do mainstream postcolonial studies engage with Ukraine (cf. Koneczniak, 2009)?

Despite this proliferation of scholarship, the Ukrainian context remains conspicuously absent from revised foundational texts. This contrasts, for example, with Irish studies, which have been well integrated into mainstream postcolonial criticism (see Koneczniak, 2009). Maria Mäklsoo noted this omission in 2023, and it persists in the 2025 publications. For instance, the fourth edition of *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2025) by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin makes no reference to Ukraine, although it does mention Russia in discussions of contemporary imperialism. Similarly, recent works such as *Navigating Boundaries: A Comprehensive Study of Postcolonial Theory and Literature* by Shuchi Agrawal, which offers a broad and versatile scope of societies subject to postcolonial analysis, fail to address Ukraine's war-inflicted situa-

tion. Neither Soviet nor Russian imperial histories, nor their present-day aftermaths, are included. In *Reading Postcolonial Literature: From Professional to Non-Professional Practices* by Hayley G. Toth, one can speak of a similar omission, as the war in Ukraine does not feature there (cf. Koneczniak, 2009).

These examples suggest that, despite postcolonialism's theoretical apparent inclusivity, its geographical scope still remains narrowly defined, confirming earlier observations by the Ukrainian scholars. Mainstream postcolonial scholars appear largely uninterested in contemporary societal and political relationships, such as those in Ukraine, that could be meaningfully interpreted through the colonizer–colonized dichotomy. Even in publications on postcolonialism whose thematic scope reaches beyond literature and culture and concerns legal and political issues, the Ukrainian context is not explored. For example, Shuk Ying Chan's *Postcolonial Global Justice* (2025) does not refer to Ukraine at all. This and similar gaps suggest that mainstream postcolonial scholarship continues to overlook the Ukrainian context, even though it is highly relevant. They also indicate the necessity for developing postcolonial frameworks that could take into account the postcolonial specificity of Ukraine. Chuhuienko argues that Ukrainian scholars are yet to draw on postcolonial critics to describe their spatial and geopolitical specificity of postcoloniality: "Contemporary postcolonialism, as a branch of social philosophy, has achieved significant scholarly accomplishments thanks to long-term interdisciplinary research into historically diverse colonial conditions and situations, as well as the theories and practices of both imperialism and anti-imperial resistance" (Chuhuienko, 2024, p. 71). However, we would contend that Western postcolonialism itself can lend itself to revisioning and reevaluating in the context of the complexity of the Ukrainian postcolonial status. By way of illustration, it could refer to the cultural and historical theories of Russian-Ukrainian imperial contexts addressed by Smolii & Yas (2022, pp. 8–9).

3. Postcolonial Theories in Ukraine Prior to the War

Ukrainian literary criticism has evolved significantly since the political, cultural, and social transformations that marked the beginning of the twenty-first century. In common cultural (postcolonial) perspectives, these changes signaled Ukraine's growing affinity with Western Europe and its gradual distancing from Soviet heritage. Such a process, as a matter of fact, has been

contested by Russian policy aimed at reintegrating former Soviet states. In response, as one counter-discursive strategy, Ukrainian scholars at major universities began actively engaging with literary texts and cultural artefacts through the lens of postcolonial studies, particularly in relation to post-socialist and post-totalitarian realities. Such works have since been considered in the context of the escalating Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Tamara Hundorova is widely recognized as a leading scholar of Ukrainian postcoloniality. She is referred to by Chuhuienko (who quotes two of the many publications she has contributed), but her approaches are included in neither Khyenko and Khyenko's nor Mälksoo's texts, even though she has been the major advocate for the establishment of Ukrainian postcolonial frameworks of thought. In one of her texts, an introduction to the volume she co-edited with Agnieszka Matusiak, not referred to by Chuhuienko, Hundorova argues that the development of postcolonial studies, and its impact on Ukrainian scholarship, at some point coincided with the fall of the Soviet world, the process that entered postcolonial discourse: "after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which functioned as an imperial structure, postcolonial studies migrated to the post-Soviet space. In this regard, the experience of Ukraine, which has been in a situation of semi-colonial dependence since the 17th century and which has experienced the difficult experience of totalitarian colonization in the 20th century, is particularly conducive to the application of postcolonial methodology" (Hundorova, 2014a, pp. 8–9). The development of postcolonial criticism in Ukraine can be divided into two phases: the first involved familiarization with the principles and methods of postcolonial criticism in the 1990s; the second, emerging in the early twenty-first century, concerned the availability of important texts in the Ukrainian language, for example the translation of Said's *Orientalism*, which caused Ukraine-specific theoretical and critical adaptations to emerge (Hundorova, 2014a, pp. 8–9). Hundorova has already established a body of postcolonial criticism to account for the specificity of the Ukrainian context and thus deserves a comprehensive treatment, not just essential single mentions (as commonly happens), in scholarship specializing in Ukrainian postcoloniality.

As Serhiy Trojan discusses, and as can be confirmed in an analysis of almost all of the texts addressed here so far, Ukrainian postcolonial scholarship is deeply rooted in Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which remains a foundational theoretical text in the field. Said's ideas entered cultural discourses in Ukraine in the 1990s, particularly as a critical tool for examining the after-

math of imperial domination. Trojan refers to Vitalii Chernetskyi's description of Ukrainian postcolonialism as a 'postmodernism of resistance'. Yet his scholarly contributions are not included in recent discussions by Mälksoo, Chuhuienko, and Khyenko and Khyenko. As he notes, the development he describes is visible in Ukrainian literature in such features as carnivalism, polyphony, and a conscious break with the colonial past (Trojan, 2014, p. 63). Trojan also draws on Marko Pavlyshyn, who supports a postcolonial reading of Ukrainian culture. Pavlyshyn emphasizes that postcolonialism can offer a less reactionary and more generative approach, and that the colonial experience can be used not only to reject it but also to construct a unique cultural identity in Ukraine (in Trojan, 2014, p. 69).

Trojan identifies the BU-BA-BU literary group, consisting of Yuriy Andrukhovych, Oleksandr Irvanets, and Viktor Neborak, as embodying a "carnival-like destruction of worn-out totalitarian rituals" (2014, p. 70). Citing Chernetskyi, Trojan highlights that Andrukhovych's essays reflect "the trajectories of self-identification of the postcolonial Ukrainian intellectual in today's multipolar world" (in Trojan, 2014, p. 70). Trojan argues that in his work *Postcolonial Syndrome*, Mykola Riabchuk addresses Ukraine's sociopolitical evolution as a gradual process of emerging from imperial influence. He stresses the difficulty not only of breaking from external domination but also of overcoming internalized complexes, and this process resonates with Said's notion of lasting cultural hegemony beyond 'official' colonial rule (Trojan, 2014, p. 70). Trojan concludes that Ukrainian postcolonial discourses vary. Even though they are generally based on Said's theoretical framework, they are also appropriated to account for the specific conditions of the post-Soviet context (Trojan, 2014, p. 71). Given Trojan's engagement with a range of Ukrainian postcolonial theorists, his exclusion from recent efforts to apply postcolonial approaches to the war in Ukraine is indeed pronounced.

Olena Yurchuk, like Hundorova, is a major critical and scholarly voice supporting the development of Ukrainian postcolonialism. However, she is mentioned in only one of the articles from the first section of this article. Namely Khyenko & Khyenko refer to her article "Some comments concerning Ukrainian postcolonial studies", when juxtaposing the colonial policy of the tsarist and the Soviet periods, both aiming at annihilation of Ukrainian culture: "While in the Tsarist Russia the prohibition model of identity moulding prevailed, in the Soviet era it was a substitution model under which Ukrainian national symbols were gradually replaced by imperial ones

through renaming and infusing them with imperial fundamentals or markers (Khylo & Khylo, 2024, p. 27). Yurchuk argues that the development of Ukrainian postcolonial studies should account for a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial theory itself. This might be achieved by means of a detailed and thorough exploration of imperial and colonial discourses as well as their mutual influences. She suggests that such an approach can question the still present marginality of colonized cultures and reformulate the relationship between center and periphery in the Russian-Ukrainian context. She questions the interpretation of Ukrainian history as an “eternal colony”, the status stemming from successive imperial centers it was positioned against (Mongol-Tatar, Polish, Russian). This status is responsible for the misconception that Ukrainian culture cannot exist outside its imperial framework (Yurchuk, 2015, p. 257).

Yurchuk explores how Russian cultural expansion sought to absorb Ukrainian cultural space to reinforce Russia’s self-presentation as part of the European tradition. In this account, Russia did not frame Ukraine as inferior. Instead, it appropriated Ukrainian culture to reinforce its own imperial prestige. According to Yurchuk, this appropriation helped Russia shed its Orientalist image and reestablish itself as a European power. The cultural paradigm rests here on two key myths. First, it is based on the idea of Kyivan Rus seen as the cradle of three fraternal peoples, granting Russia historical continuity with Europe, despite the fact that during Kyivan Rus’s zenith, the territory of modern Russia lacked developed centers and remained peripheral. Second, it consists in the myth of Russia as the “older brother” of all Slavs, asserting cultural superiority over the region (Yurchuk, 2015, p. 258). In applying postcolonial theory to the Ukrainian context, it is essential to analyze texts through the prism of the author’s ideological position: colonial, anti-colonial, or postcolonial. Such an approach would open the way for dismantling imperial narratives, re-examining colonial trauma, and re-engaging with pre-colonial experience. These could serve as the foundation for national identity in postcolonial Ukraine (Yurchuk, 2015, p. 261).

Vira Burko, whose contributions do not feature as part of the cross-referential network in the three articles discussed in the first section, adds a crucial point to the Ukrainian postcolonial discourse. She emphasizes the role of trauma and its expression in postcolonial literature. Writers use postcolonial strategies to expose mechanisms of subjugation, such as the construc-

tion of the “Other” and the legitimization of colonial violence, thus assuming a dual role: “the destroyer of the dominant tradition and the creator of a new one” (Burko, 2012, p. 38). Verbalization becomes an act of resistance and recovery, a means of entering cultural dialogue: “only if there is a powerful and effective postcolonial voice it is possible to destroy the imperial system as such” (Burko, 2012, p. 38).

Olha Nikolaienko, similarly blatantly omitted in the texts discussed in the first section, in her article “Постколоніальний процес і Україна: у пошуках ідентичності” (“The Postcolonial Process and Ukraine: In Search of Identity”), builds on Hundorova’s ideas and also contributes to what appears to be a developing Ukrainian school of domestic postcolonial criticism. She highlights that, for the colonized, the struggle for the right to exist and speak is historically and geographically embedded (Nikolaienko, 2015, pp. 130, 132–133). Her thought also borrows a lot from mainstream postcolonial theorists, such as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak. Nikolaienko stresses the importance of regaining one’s agency and voice in Ukrainian postcolonial culture. Postcolonial texts often reject Western ideas of universal truth and logic. Instead, they support a multiplicity of experiences and (their) interpretations. Language plays a central role in this process: its decolonization involves both a return to the “language of the colonies” and a revision of the privileged status of the “language of the center”. She identifies two key strategies in postcolonial writing: the denial of the center’s linguistic dominance and the appropriation or reconstruction of its language (Nikolaienko, 2015, p. 128).

The motif of silence in Ukrainian postcolonial fiction is explored by Tetiana Ostapchuk through Mariia Matios’s novel *Солодка Даруся* (*Sweet Darusia*). The novel depicts the tension between personal memory and imposed historical discourse. It highlights the consequences of trauma, loss, inferiority, and fractured cultural identity (Ostapchuk, 2014, pp. 79–80). Ostapchuk’s analysis takes into account the specificity of Ukrainian postcoloniality in literary criticism. However, her voice is largely absent from recent attempts aiming to postcolonize the war in Ukraine in philosophy and international relations, which reveals the broader marginalization of literary research in Ukrainian postcolonial studies.

Many Ukrainian postcolonial texts engage with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s theoretical work, particularly her concept of the subaltern. Spivak writes: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shad-

ows" (Spivak, 1994, pp. 82–83; also cited in Nikolaienko, 2015, p. 133). According to Nikolaienko, Ukraine has often been feminized in Eastern European contexts and cast as passive, nostalgic, or mystical (Nikolaienko, 2015, p. 133). Such gendered representations contribute another dimension to the Ukrainian postcolonial condition. It reinforces the need for developing a multidimensional approach to identity, agency, and resistance. This can serve as the argument for including Nikolaienko's literary perspective on Ukrainian postcoloniality in broader multidisciplinary contexts.

Shortly before the full-scale invasion by Russians and the war in Ukraine, Oksana Pukhonska (2021) noted that contemporary literary works had already begun to document the traumatic experiences of victims and depict the deep wounds inflicted by the war in Donbas. Those events led to a re-birth of scholarly interest in applying postcolonial frameworks to Ukrainian literature and culture. They resulted in efforts to develop new theoretical approaches and methodological tools. In Pukhonska's words, "War always causes the deconstruction of the world that humans have built on the foundations of security and certainty about the future. It is not even death that causes military trauma, but rather the constant fear of the destruction of one's familiar environment, and consequently the fear of death, which takes center stage in the physical space of combat operations" (Pukhonska, 2021, p. 168). She concludes that "contemporary literary texts bear witness to the depth of the trauma experienced as a result of the war, which has a destructive impact on both the individual and society seen as a whole". She adds that "in this case, literature takes on functions that have not been previously characteristic of it: those of cultural psychotherapy through the identification and detailed articulation of the injustices endured" (Pukhonska, 2021, p. 174). Hence, one may argue that Ukrainian war literature provides a specific and unique source of Ukrainian postcoloniality.

4. War in Ukraine Through Postcolonialism in Literature

At the outset of this section, it can be argued that, paradoxically, and somehow questioning what most of the scholars previously referred to have argued for, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was not viewed as a paradigm shift within postcolonial thought but rather as a continuation of existing theoretical and critical approaches, a representation of the gradu-

al evolution of national memory. According to Serhii Tsypanov, memory in postcolonial society does not change instantly: old and new paradigms coexist in their hybrid form. Colonial narratives remain present but are gradually being replaced by postcolonial ones: “Hybridization often occurs as a response to trauma, so revisiting hybrid identity and memory can be no less traumatic” (Tsypanov, 2024, p. 140). Tsypanov draws primarily on mainstream postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha (as Chuhuienko also does; see 2024. P. 51) but largely neglects the Ukrainian approaches to postcoloniality that had already been developed. As regards cross-referentiality, one should be aware that due to their temporal simultaneity, the texts to be discussed here cannot have featured in those discussed in the first section.

In her discussion of the Ukrainian postcolonial condition amid the full-scale war, Valentyna Kulenko emphasises the intensification of historical trauma and the pressing need to confront colonial legacies. The author describes Russia’s colonial ambitions and observes that colonial oppression and the threat of continuing colonial influences may lead to historical misrepresentation, cultural assimilation, and the rise of Ukrainian inferiority. Kulenko argues for the restoration of suppressed Ukrainian cultural activity and for the reintroduction of works by minority Ukrainian authors into the country’s cultural and educational spheres (Kulenko, 2023, p. 185).

Analyzed by Roksalana Mohylna, Haska Shiyan’s novel *Behind the Back* (*За спиною*), written in the context of Russia’s aggression in Crimea and Donbas, offers a notable case study. Published in 2019, the novel received several major prizes and quickly attracted a scholarly and critical interest. Mohylna (2025) interprets the work from a postcolonial perspective. She highlights themes of center and periphery. She treats the protagonist, Marta, as emotionally distant and unwilling to become involved in the war. For Mohylna, as also argued by other scholars, the war itself represents a kind of colonial return: Russia’s attempt to reclaim a former colony. The opposition between center and periphery, West and East, becomes central to the novel’s postcolonial framing (Mohylna, 2025, pp. 278–281).

Shortly before this essay was completed, Tamara Hundorova reiterated in a 15 June interview that Ukrainian postcolonial studies do exist. She argued that the 2022 invasion should not be seen as a pivotal moment that reopens questions about whether postcolonial approaches can contextualize the war. Instead, she focuses on continuity and earlier beginnings, recollecting the dawn of the Soviet empire: “[.] at Harvard at that time Ukrainian studies

were flourishing: I first met [Mark] Pavlyshyn, [Omelyan] Pritsak, Maksym Tarnavskyi, and Viktor Ostapchuk. They founded a scholarship for Ukrainian scholars in Australia. That's how I ended up in Australia in 1991, where I encountered Ukrainian independence" (Hundorova, 2025). The scholars she enumerated would become Ukrainian postcolonial thinkers, whose contributions have also been discussed here. The first mentioned gave rise to postcolonial thoughts in and on Ukraine: "Pavlyshyn and his graduate student Petro Savchak wrote about [Mykola] Gogol, which sparked an interest in postcolonial studies. This was important for Ukraine with its relations with Russia. Pavlyshyn's idea was that postcolonialism and postmodernism are interconnected, they come out of poststructuralism and feed each other" (Hundorova, 2025).

For Hundorova, Ukrainian postcolonial criticism is a fact, and there is no need to return to Said's ideas frequently. Instead, developing its specificity and avoiding utilitarian perspectives is required, particularly when the latter may appear in the context of the current war: "We need to understand how certain ideas are used for political purposes. I am concerned that in Ukraine decolonization is reduced to topography. This is important, but we need to do it in moderation and be aware that there are other resources, such as language. We need to offer our own concepts" (Hundorova, 2025). She stresses that equally important is the need for ensuring specificity in postcolonialism as it develops in the former Soviet-dependent states. Even theories such as those advanced by Ewa Thompson should be approached cautiously, as "[h]ers is clearly decolonial, aggressive. Among other things, it is Polish optics. And Poland has complicated relations with Russia, history is the same" (Hundorova, 2025). Hundorova's stance might be a crucial warning against appropriating theories within Ukrainian postcoloniality: apparently similar and corresponding, they may turn out to be misleading. And in fact they were for some of the Ukrainian scholars whose texts were described specifically in the first section and contained plenty of references to contextually different postcolonial theorists.

5. Conclusion

Ukraine today faces not only political and economic challenges but also a pivotal stage in shaping its cultural identity. This identity should serve as a reason to continue developing Ukrainian postcolonial research, rather

than as a justification for its relevance after February 2022. Russia's ongoing aggression, rooted in imperial and totalitarian narratives, presents unprecedented challenges that demand responses shaped by Ukraine's own historical and cultural context. Postcolonial criticism has been present in Ukrainian scholarly discourse since the restoration of independence in 1991, and it remains heterogeneous as a theoretical and methodological framework, which can benefit specifically from Ukrainian postcolonial literary practice and theory. Much existing research remains at the level of thematic analysis. There is a need for conceptual and interdisciplinary integration of scholarship capable of confirming a stable paradigm for postcolonial discussion in the Ukrainian context.

This essay has examined three key dimensions of Ukraine's postcolonial discourse. It discussed Ukraine's absence from mainstream postcolonial criticism, notably in recent reeditions of major postcolonial studies. It thus reaffirms Mäklsoo's observation that Ukraine remains omitted in Western-led postcolonial thought. The essay also traced the development of Ukrainian postcolonial theory prior to the war and stressed the contributions of such scholars as Hundorova, Trojan, Yurchuk, and Nikolaienko. They have adapted canonical theories to Ukraine's post-Soviet and post-socialist realities. The three texts discussed in Section 1 argue for the applicability of postcolonial studies to the discursive context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While their arguments are valid, it is important to note that this question of applicability was already examined a decade earlier, as shown in Section 3. Both critical approaches conclude with the necessity of establishing a nuanced version of Ukrainian postcoloniality, and we have sought to demonstrate that such a version is already present in the most recent literary criticism and will continue to emerge in contemporary literary activity, which has definitely been hindered since 2022.

We acknowledge that this essay relies heavily on other scholars' approaches, which have already demonstrated the potential of Ukrainian postcoloniality for analyzing the war-inflicted realities of Ukrainian society, culture, and literature. For example, back in 2024, Chuhuienko's chapter also addressed the problems concerning postcolonial approaches to the war in Ukraine. A recent lecture by D. Uffermann (2026) has likewise addressed decolonization and strategic essentialism in the Ukrainian context. Nevertheless, our intention was to provide scholars seeking to interpret Ukrainian works within postcolonial frameworks with comprehensive referential

foundations to anchor their studies in the theoretical and critical descriptions and assessments of the uniqueness of Ukrainian postcolonial thought and history.

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