

1 Introduction

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In recent years, there has been a growing number of studies devoted to understanding the sociopolitical roles of women and gender regimes in Central-Eastern Europe from transnational and cross-border perspectives. These works variously enquire after the intersectional marginalisation of ‘Eastern European’ women, the role of socialist regimes and the Western gaze in shaping discourses on women and gender in Central-Eastern Europe, and also feminist movements and women reclaiming their rightful place in historical, cultural and political contexts.¹

Feminist Imagining in Polish and Ukrainian Theatres contributes to this field of research by not only moving between theatrical representations of women’s struggles in the two countries, but also by exploring theatre’s role in staging the interrelatedness of these struggles and forging transcultural alliances that facilitate mutual understandings between nations and people who often have conflicting relationships or do not ‘see’ each other. The women theatre makers who appear in the Element are those who variously propose cultural and social solutions or scenarios that redefine the past, present, and future, creating feminist imaginaries and epistemologies specific to and situated in Central-Eastern Europe.

1.1 Ukraine and Poland after 1990

Ukraine and Poland share a common historical past and geographical proximity: almost 300 years of territorial commonality and statehood, as well as dependence first on the Russian and then on the Soviet Empire, and, finally, after 1990, the building of state independence. The years 1989 and 1991 – key dates for transforming Poland and Ukraine into free states – could have seen new possibilities for a dialogue between the two countries, their people, and their theatres. However, this did not happen as the transformation processes in Ukraine and Poland had different prerogatives, and the countries experienced different, sometimes conflicting, realities. Poland opted for the closest and fastest possible rapprochement with the Western world, entering NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, despite the independence supported by 90 per cent of the Ukrainian population who voted in the referendum on the 1st of December 1991, there was no immediate radical break from Russian influence, as the previous Ukrainian political elite had not

¹ See for example: Glajar and Radulescu, 2005; Pascall and Kwak, 2005; Zychowicz, 2020; Fábíán, Johnson and Lazda, 2021; Kasińska-Metryka and Pałka-Suchojad, 2024; Slavova and Stoilova, 2024.

been replaced (Sribna 2011). And it was only around the early 2010s that the two countries, and especially women theatre artists, started to ‘see’ each other – an emergent state of mutual recognition that was arrived at through differing sociopolitical processes and events.

In Poland, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and conservative right-wing nationalist sentiments escalated around 2010. They were mainly expressed in the form of discriminatory policies towards women and ethnic and gender minorities. This escalation began after ninety-six people – predominantly Polish political and military leaders – died in a plane catastrophe in Smoleńsk (Russia). The event unsettled the sense of national security in Poland and was manipulated by the far-right into fearmongering narratives that Poland was, once again in its history, under threat, first from Russia and later from refugees, gender studies, and LGBTQ+ communities. Such discourses made Polish society’s profound social and political divisions visible. Building on and deepening these rifts, the ultra-right-wing Law and Justice party won the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections and governed the country until 2023. During this period, the government endorsed anti-women, patriarchal, and ultra-conservative Catholic ideology, which led to a decrease in protection against domestic violence and further restrictions on women’s reproductive rights. This was even though Poland, after 1993, already had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world, with abortion illegal except in three situations: severe foetal impairment, a threat to the mother’s life or health, and pregnancy resulting from a criminal act. In 2020, the far-right Constitutional Tribunal declared the foetal impairment unconstitutional.

Such restrictions ignited women-led mass protests. First, in 2016, in response to a public discussion about the further outlawing of abortion, women organised Czarne Protesty (Black Protests) using black to symbolise mourning for reproductive rights. In 2020, Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (Nationwide Women’s Strike, referencing the 1975 Icelandic women’s strike) also made the case for reproductive rights as human rights, writing them into an intersectional and transnational history of struggles for equality. The Polish slogan ‘Wypierdalać’ (Get the fuck out of here) appeared on a banner during a demonstration in Berlin as ‘Wipjerdalatsch’ (using ‘German’ spelling); ‘Liberté, égalité, wypierdalajté’ (connoting the French revolution’s motto) featured on many banners across Poland. The massive and militant dimension of the Women’s Strike finally led to the fall of ultra-right power in 2023.

The key caesura for the awakening of a social and feminist consciousness in Ukraine occurred in the years 2013–2014. This was the period when revolution broke out on Kyiv’s Maidan (square), now known as the Revolution of Dignity. This was in response to Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich’s decision to cancel the Association Agreement with the European Union, which Ukraine had been

working on since 2005, and to sign an Association Agreement with Russia instead. Young people first lead a sit-in strike in Kyiv, which subsequently was quelled by police; it went down in history as the ‘Heavenly Sotnia’ murders. But similar ‘maidans’ took place across the country, even in Russian-speaking cities like Donetsk and Kharkiv, where they were brutally repressed. Although Yanukovych eventually stepped down and Ukraine signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, this triggered a ferocious Russian response, culminating in the annexation of Crimea, the secession of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, and, finally, the full-scale invasion in 2022.

Hence, by 2022, a pessimistic mood prevailed in Ukraine, calling into question the sense of patriotic struggle. At the same time, there were alarming reports from the Donbas Region of the torture and rape of Ukrainian citizens in Russian-backed separatist republics, and the forced Russification of children and kidnappings for ransom. This violence against women and children was thus a harbinger of the rape culture that was fully manifested in Russia’s full-scale attack. Many Ukrainians, mainly women and children, were forced to leave the country as early as 2014, often choosing Poland as their place of residence. For women, crossing the border from Ukraine – a country with legal abortion – to Poland meant a restriction of their reproductive rights. Thus, over the last ten years, the issues of patriarchy, violence against women and family breakdown have increased ties between women in Poland and Ukraine. Such bonds were also strengthened by the global #metoo movement that impacted both countries (Kwaśniewska, 2021; Chuzhynova, 2025).²

1.2 The Element and Its Premise

Feminist Imagining in Polish and Ukrainian Theatres observes how this process of cross-border solidarity between women is reflected in theatre. We explore the ‘feminist imaginings’ of women theatre makers from Poland and Ukraine and assess their political potential to assist in the socially progressive transformation of Poland and Ukraine. Doing so, enables us to highlight artists’ practices related to intersectional feminism and allyship, areas deeply connected to themes of diversity and intersections between power relations and inequalities (Ahmed, 2012, p. 14).

The term ‘intersectionality’ – first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in relation to combined inequalities against Black women in the United States (1989, pp. 139–140) – is used in the Element to address and reflect on the compounding marginalisation of women from Poland and Ukraine. These relate to their

² For more, see #НеМовчи (Don’t Be Silent) and #46th #MeToo Movement in Ukrainian Theatre at www.cambridge.org/Ewa.

identities as women, as mothers, as young women, as transgender women, as ‘Eastern Europeans,’ as ‘Eastern European’ women, and as children. Overall, the Element shows how women artists, by exploring their respective states of intersectional marginalisation, begin to form intersectional alliances with other women and marginalised people.

Such alliances grew out of struggles for justice (Butler, 2015) which involve (1) recognising each other’s differences, (2) understanding these differences are rooted in multi-situated experiences of marginalisation, and (3) redressing a mutual lack of knowledge and understanding of each other’s differences and positionalities (McIntosh and Hobson, 2013, pp. 2, 14–15; Ghabra and Calafell, 2018, pp. 39–41). In short, these alliances are formed by recognising critical and different non-knowings.

The concept of situated knowing and non-knowings relates to Donna Haraway’s ‘situated knowledge’ and Ewa Bal and Mateusz Chaberski’s ‘situated knowings’ (2021). Haraway discusses knowledge embedded in specific social and cultural positioning and experience (1988, pp. 587–590). Bal and Chaberski focus on knowledge creation processes as inherently situational, contextual, contingent, and emergent (2021, pp. 5–6). Through differently situated knowledge and knowings and difference-underpinned alliances, the women artists discussed in this Element attempt to transform their respective countries past, present, and futures, shifting the existing local, national, and international political imaginaries and geopolitics, including those related to epistemology and knowledge-making. However, to appreciate the radical potential of the works the Element discusses, it is vital to understand the patriarchal structures intrinsic to the national cultural imaginary in both countries and their relationship to the discourses of independence on the one hand and, on the other, the situatedness of the feminist processes, which counterbalance those imaginaries.

1.3 Nationalism and Patriarchy in Ukraine and Poland

The last three years of full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, and the eight years of the border and hybrid war that preceded it, have updated several national imaginaries and mythologies in the Ukrainian collective imaginary and led to their redefinition in art, literature, and theatre. It is important to remember, however, that Ukraine, as a country struggling with its colonial past, has, for most of its history, and especially during the Romantic period of the nineteenth century, internalised imaginaries of itself created as a result of the dominant gaze of neighbouring countries, including Western Europe, as well as Russia and Poland.³ As Tamara

³ In the Element, we discuss Ukraine and Poland as having a colonial past. While discourses from the Western and Global South paradigms have traditionally overlooked the colonial histories

Hundorova writes, it was Johan Gottfried Herder who gave Ukraine its proper place in European civilisation by including it in the discourse of Euro-Orientalism. The latter became a practice of Western domination and envisaged the discovery, exploitation, colonisation, and ‘civilisation’ of the East (Hundorova, 2014, p. 93). The discourse of (Euro)Orientalism thus laid the foundations for the Ukrainian ethno-national identity along with the desire for Europeanisation, to become a modern, civilised nation. An important feature of this discourse was its gendering: the West was perceived as civilised, active, rational, and masculine, while the East appeared nostalgic, mystical, passive, and feminine (ibid.).

In the Ukrainian situation, however, a double feminisation was taking place – simultaneously on the part of the West and on the part of the Russian imperial centre, the latter attributing ‘otherness’ to Ukraine as the provincial and exotic Malorossia (‘Little Russia’) (Hundorova, 2014, p. 94). Colonisation by the Russian Empire perpetuated the identification of the Ukrainian periphery with the chaotic and unstable feminised borderlands of the Empire. In Ukrainian Romanticism, most clearly represented by Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine is also clearly feminised and associated with the mother, the woman, or the virgin with the child. The source of masculine strength was located in Kozaccchina (pp. 94–95), a semi-mythologised land, a republic of free people living in the steppes.

Like Hundorova, Katarzyna Glinianowicz also draws attention to the typically Polish colonial view of Ukraine, expressed in the gendered discourse of literature. In nineteenth-century literature, the Polish nobleman is often the ‘subject of desire’, and the erotically exoticized, wild, and passionate Ukrainian woman is the ‘object of seduction’. In the Polish literary imaginary, Ukraine was described as a virgin and a lush nature, a fertile black soil, to be seeded by Polish civilisation processes (Glinianowicz, 2014, p. 164). The male coloniser was to be spurred into action by the passionate Ukrainian woman, depicted as ‘black-browed beauty’ and ‘faithful lover’ (p. 165). The civilising mission of Western and Russian imperialism and the libidinous Polish rhetoric on Ukraine form the core of colonial imaginaries that persisted throughout the twentieth century.

For instance, the Soviet propaganda painting from the time of the October Revolution, which encouraged Ukrainians to create an independent republic within the USSR, represented an allegory of Ukraine as a pregnant woman crucified by a Polish Lord. A more recent painting by the contemporary artist Yuri Solomko, entitled *Okhliadova karta Ukrainy* (*A View Map of Ukraine*,

in Central-Eastern Europe, numerous studies have shown otherwise. See Thompson (2000), Korek (2007), Cervinkova (2012), and Huigen and Kołodziejczyk (2023).

2008), depicted a naked woman, trying to cover herself by a sheet that was also a map of Ukraine (*Ukraine*, 2021, p. 176). These victimized and eroticized allegories of Ukraine were also alluded to in the work of Vlada Ralko, *Kyivskii Shchodennyk* (*Kyiv Diaries*, 2013–15) (*Ukraine*, 2021, pp.100–103), depicting a naked, kneeling woman wearing garlands on her head, and facing soldiers of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, who quelled demonstrations in Kyiv during the Independence Maidan in 2013 and 2014.

In Ukraine, the critique of these victimised imaginings of Ukrainian women and Ukraine as a country was initially expressed at the intersection of visual arts and performance (Zychowicz, 2020) as exemplified by the feminist collective Femen. Like Pussy Riot in Russia, Femen drew public attention to the objectification and sexualisation of Ukrainian women by intervening in public places and exposing their naked breasts. They wanted to draw public attention to the message written on their bodies: ‘Ukraine is not a brothel.’ It was a blatant indictment of the behaviour of Western football fans visiting the country during the 2012 European Football Championship, hosted by Poland and Ukraine.

In theatre, a feminist critique of women’s situation was slower to take effect: emerged in the aftermath of the EuroMaidan (2014) and accelerated in 2022 given the war with Russia. A young generation of female directors and playwrights began to speak openly and critically about the widespread patriarchal power relations in Ukraine at all levels of cultural management, and about Russia’s rape culture as a war tactic and the family crisis of producing war-orphaned children.

To elaborate: women theatre makers have addressed issues ranging from sexual harassment in drama education and theatre, exemplified by Kateryna Peknkova’s *Buty maystrom* (*Being a Master*, 2021), to the debilitating conditions of female depression caused by emigration from war zones and having to raise children alone like in the Natalka Blok’s *Kriz shkiru* (*Through the Skin*, 2018) and in the Natalka Vorozhbyt’s *Zeleni koridory* (*Green Corridors*, 2023). Several plays and performances deal with the rape culture in the eastern Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine (see Section 3), as well as with the realities of eastern Ukraine, which is riddled with corruption and materially underfunded like in the Lena Lagushonkova’s *Mij prapor zapisal kotykh* (*Kitten Peed on my Banner*, 2022) and *Shchodennyk Donbasu* (*Donbas Diaries*, 2020). Finally, after the outbreak of full-scale war, the theatre responded to the initial shock of what was happening (Nina Zakhozhenko, *Ja norm/I’m ok*. 2022).⁴ Although many plays responding to the onset of war were not performed in the repertoires of leading theatres, they did find a place in studio and fringe stages

⁴ For further examples see: <https://ukrdrama.ui.org.ua/> (30.01.2025); <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/collection/bez-nykh> (30.01.2025); <https://kurbas.org.ua/news/nenazvana-viuna/nenazvana-viuna.html> (30.01.2025).

like Teatr Dramaturkhiv (The Playwriters Theatre) in Kyiv, Jam Factory Art Center and Lesia Ukrainka Academic Theatre in Lviv. Most importantly, these works were translated into many foreign languages and staged abroad, thus increasing the resonance and international profile of Ukrainian women playwrights.

Furthermore, the generation of female directors to emerge post 2014 frequently practised their craft in dialogue with Polish theatre makers. Some of the most remarkable collaborations were the Polish workshops ‘Director – Playwright – Dramaturge: Formation of an Idea’ organized in partnership with the Ukrainian NGO ‘Theatre Platform’ (2014); and ‘Theatre Desant’ in partnership with the NGO ‘Drabyna’ (2015–2016). Other initiatives were oriented towards the realisation of productions, such as *Mapy strachu mapy indentycznosci* (*Maps of Fear – Maps of Identity*, 2016) and *Mij did’ kopal, mij bat’ko kopal, a ja ne bydu* (*My dad used to dig, my father used to dig, and I won’t*, 2018), both about the biographies of young people from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and produced by Joanna Wichowska together with the Ukrainian director Roza Sarkisian. Another Ukrainian female director Olena Apchel (now an enrolled soldier in the Ukrainian Army) created at least two productions in Polish theatres: *Więzi* (*The Ties*, 2019) at the Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk (about the fate of a woman subjected to internal and external emigration) and *Kreszany* (*The Trees’ Spirits*, 2021) in Zagłębie Theatre in Poland (a feminist war manifesto and expression of nostalgia for the lost homeland in Donbas). There were also Katarzyna Szyngiera’s and Przemysław Wlekły’s two projects: *Swarka* (*A Fight*, Bydgoszcz, 2015), *Lwów nie oddamy* (*Lviv, we won’t give it up!*, Rzeszów, 2018), which explored mutual Polish-Ukrainian relations of the borderland.

The gendered imaginaries and their contemporary rethinking in Ukraine resonate with dominant discourses in Poland. As Maria Janion pinpoints, ‘Polish national culture is remarkably masculine’ (2006, p. 266). She refers here to the national imagining of Poland and its community, which culture in general – and theatre in particular – has facilitated since Poland first lost its independence in 1795 to Russia, Prussia (later Germany), and Austria. In the Romantic period, Polish male playwriting gained enormous power to shape discourses related to Poland. This Romantic paradigm – as we will refer to it throughout the Element – dominated the national liberation narratives and identity projects throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were absorbed into the patriarchal discourse of Poland’s transformation, legitimising the exclusion of women as a pernicious feature of Polish early democracy (Graff, 1999; Kościelniak, 2018, 2024). The artists in this Element are in direct

dialogue with the Romantic paradigm, particularly challenging how it imagined Polish women, the Polish community, and its relationship with the ‘Other.’

For a start, Romantics tied Polish identity to Catholicism and to the core ideas, which defined Polish male martyrology: messianism, and Prometheism. The former was based on the conviction that the Polish nation had been chosen by God to be sacrificed for the freedom of the world, similar to how Jesus Christ was sacrificed to redeem humanity. Prometheism, based on the Prometheus myth, expressed the necessity of individual sacrifice for the freedom of all humankind – or, in the Polish case, the nation – and the ability of the individual to rebel against God, who abandoned Poland. The artistic interpretation of Polish male martyrology is evinced in the Romantic play *Dziady* (*Forefathers’ Eve*) by Adam Mickiewicz, the text which many artists in this Element are in a critical dialogue with. This is because *Dziady*, in many ways, defined Polish theatre, its relationship to society, and the Polish community, mobilising its ‘performative creation’ (Kosiński, 2010, pp. 117, 122) that was deeply gendered.

Dziady, through its main character – the poet-lover Gustaw transformed into the national hero Konrad – dramatised and affirmed the sense of national solidarity based on homosocial brotherhood enabled by idealised (and desexualised, apart from the reproductive function) motherhood (Ostrowska, 2004, pp. 216–219; Janoszka, 2014). Romantics saw enslaved Poland as the mother of all Poles, sanctified by the status of Holy Mary as the Queen of Poland and mother of Poles, rooted in the Middle Ages. This conception of motherhood embodied by the figure of Matka Polka (Polish Mother) is glorified in *Dziady* and Mickiewicz’s poem *Do Matki Polki* (*To the Polish Mother*) that accompanied the play.

Polish Mother was at the heart of national liberation ideas: she passed on Polish spiritual and physical heritage to new generations of Poles. Her sacred duty was to give birth, feed with breastmilk made of her blood and raise sons so that they might die for Poland’s freedom, just as Mary raised Jesus to die for humanity. In doing so, she was sanctifying the ‘blood and milk’ oath that created the nation as a homosocial brotherhood (Janoszka, 2014). In *Dziady*, this was dramatised in the so-called ‘Vengeance Song’, which Konrad sang with a brotherhood of (male) prisoners, announcing the necessity of drinking the enemy’s blood to free Poland.⁵

⁵ Our historization contextualises the dominant socio-political-cultural models relevant to the artists featured in this Element. We thus do not explain the complex and ambiguous discussions surrounding women’s emancipation and patriarchy in the Interwar and post-WWII periods. For those interested in the topic, English-language resources include Strokata, 1980; Hrycak, 2001; Żarnowska, 2004; Fidelis, 2010; Fidelis et al., 2014.