

UDC 821.111(73)

**Marta Koval****FEMALE VOICES IN UKRAINIAN AMERICAN FICTION:  
MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND FORGETTING**

In contrast with Ukrainian American émigré fiction (fiction by writers of Ukrainian descent who live in the USA and write in Ukrainian) that is well known to both critics and reading audiences, Ukrainian American ethnic literature (fiction by American writers of Ukrainian descent who write in English) is understudied. With the exception of few articles, book chapters, and interviews about key representatives of ethnic Ukrainian literature in the USA by Tamara Denysova, Yulia Tkachuk, Tetiana Ostapchuk, Oksana Lutsyshyna, and Oksana Zabuzhko, little was published on this topic elsewhere Europe and the USA. Meanwhile, Ukrainian American fiction lends itself to multiple interpretations. While it shares many themes and motifs typical of all ethnic American literatures in the 20<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> centuries, it offers a specific cultural and historical perspectives. Fictional representation of mnemonic practices and their cultural implications is one of the most challenging and interesting aspects to research. This article aims to analyze female voices in Irene Zabytko and Askold Melnyczuk's fiction as a medium of cultural memory and describe ways of remembering and narrating traumatic experience of violence, uprooting, and immigration.

When we view literature as a medium of cultural memory (Astrid Erll's definition) simplification of its artistic value is unfortunately unavoidable but this approach also opens new perspectives and gives new insights into the role of fiction in shaping cultural remembrance.

Both Askold Melnyczuk and Irene Zabytko go beyond the thematic constraints of émigré fiction. The stories told by their female characters are those of uprooting and emigration but also of suppressed anger, helplessness, incurable loss, and remembering as a way to emotional resurrection.

For the purposes of this article, I will use the story “Obligation” from Zabytko’s short story cycle “When Luba Leaves Home” (2003) and Melnyczuk’s third novel “The House of Widows” (2008). Women’s voices are crucial for creating mnemonic landscape in fiction to be discussed although neither writer articulates a feminist perspective in a traditional meaning of the concept. Marianne Hirsch mentions the importance of a balanced approach in the interpretation of women’s memoirs and testimonies that will help to avoid an “unfortunate and all too common opposition” between erasing gender difference and “exaggerating it to the point of celebrating the skills and qualities of women over those of men” [5, p. 17]. Hirsch underscores numerous functions that gender as sexual difference can fulfill in the work of memory and emphasizes, what is particularly relevant for the theme of this paper, that feminist perspective can illuminate not just *what* stories are told or forgotten and *what* images are presented or suppressed, but also *how* those stories are told and *how* those images are created. According to Hirsch, gendered perspective can offer a lens through which to read memorial acts [5, p. 17]. Women in Zabytko and Melnyczuk’s fiction are not silenced emotional background figures. Even when they are not able to narrate their memories in a coherent way, their subdued, suppressed, or silenced voices are paradoxically very loud.

“Obligation” from “When Luba Leaves Home” is a narrative of trauma and subsequent craziness. It is a story of amnesia that leaves no hope of learning the truth or at least of hearing a true story about the past. After many years of absence, beautiful and smart Khrystia Leskiw returns to Wheat Street in the Ukrainian district in Chicago which was unusual by itself. It seems to her that one day she saw Anya – a woman who took care of her back in Europe after her mother’s death. Now Anya is a bag lady who eats from garbage cans at the train station. She is old, ugly, and stinky but she is the only person who can tell Khrystia about her mother. The young woman decides to approach Anya and talk to her no matter what. While Anya is very aggressive and tense at the beginning, she calms down a little when she hears Ukrainian and allows Khrystia to take her to her place. However, Anya is clearly mentally ill and Khrystia’s attempts at making her remember anything fail. Khrystia was seven when

her mother was killed in a German labor camp and Anya took care of her then and later in a DP camp. That camp was controlled by the Red Army and one day “some men in grey uniforms,” as Khrystia described them, proposed something to Anya. Khrystia who did not understand Russian, only remembers that Anya spit in their faces. The men pushed the little girl aside and dragged Anya away. She returned to the barracks only in the morning: “All I remember is how she had changed. She never again looked at me with any warmth. She treated me like a stranger” [9, p. 125].

The reader can only guess what happened to the young woman during that terrible night. Anya’s inability to speak about it back then and now, i.e. at the moment of narration, underscores the possibilities and limits of literary representation of violent history (war, terror, genocide, and rape) [4, p. 79]. A traumatic experience of the character resists reconstruction and transmission. “Obligation” exemplifies a small-scale “crisis of representation” (Cathy Caruth’s term used in *Unclaimed Experience* in relation to traumatic experience) and a “constitutive failure of linguistic representation“ of traumatic experience [4, p. 80] that stretches beyond the limits of signification and, in consequence, language.

Anya is the only link to the past Khrystia has. Her memories might be very important. However, Anya will not speak. In her greasy bags she keeps a piece of embroidery which is very precious to her and has its story: “‘I started this in Germany,’ she said in Ukrainian, and smiled openly. Her gold teeth glowed softly in the fluorescent lights that gave her withered face a ghostly cast. ‘Look at the fine cross-stitches. I chose the best threads I could find on the black market. It’s supposed to be a towel to decorate the Virgin’s icon.’ She abruptly shoved the still brightly colored towel back into her bag. ‘But you know what happened, don’t you? Don’t you?’ Anya looked around theatrically and whispered, ‘The Virgin Mary died in the camps. I saw it happen with my own eyes. The guards kicked her to death’” [9, p. 122-123].

This little memorabilia from the past serves as the “punctum,” i.e. a point of memory that “highlights the intersection of spatiality and temporality in the workings of personal and cultural memory” [5, p. 61]. Roland Barthes and later Hirsch identify the punctum as a detail of personal

connection to the narrator, viewer or listener [5, p. 62]. The embroidery that Anya shows first at the train station and later in Khrystia's home functions as a point of memory and produces "touching, piercing insights that traverse temporal, spatial, and experiential divides" [5, p. 62]. It is an expression of subjectivity and vulnerability. But for Anya's disease, her poor mental health and loss of the sense of reality, the little embroidery fails to bridge an experiential divide, thus her story remains untold. The little embroidery only hints at the incongruity and incommensurability between the meaning of a given object *then* and *now*, at the moment of narration [5, p. 63].

Anya's memories are very important for Khrystia who desperately tries to reconstruct the past. She gives Anya hints, as if pushing her to say more, shows her childhood photographs and tells her what she knows about the past: "You took care of me when I was a child. We were in a German labor camp, and then the Russians came to liberate us, and then the Americans, I think, and then you left me with a refugee group that was going to America. I lost track of you because I was adopted" [9, p. 130]. They are speaking Ukrainian and the language seems to be an important tool for the reconstruction of the past and telling a story that, in all probability, had never been told earlier. Anya hugs Khrystia and even sings to her a lullaby in Ukrainian but as soon as Khrystia presses her into saying something about the past, Anya turns into an aggressive and uncomprehending monster: "Khrystia approached her as she would an injured animal. 'Anya,' she said in her low, controlled voice, 'do you remember Maria Leskiw?' When Anya didn't answer, Khrystia repeated the name with some hostility, almost cruelly, I thought as I stared into Anya's incomprehensible eyes. 'Maria Leskiw. My mother, Maria! Tell me about Maria!' 'No. Not for million dollar,' Anya sobbed. 'I tell you nothing.' Anya sank to her knees and pleaded, '*Nein, nein! Ich nicht verstehen! Ich Untermensch! Ich Ukraine Oster! Gott helfen mir!*'" [9, p. 132]. Thus, the traumatic memories of the German camp and sexual assault she must have experienced from the Red Army soldiers entwined and merged in Anya's mind. She carries in her memories disparate fragments of the past that do not fit together. She failed to cope with the trauma of the past

which thus became ultimately inaccessible. Luba, the narrator, who stays emotionally uninvolved and does not understand Khrystia's persistence, recognizes those German words as they express deeply rooted fears that the postwar émigré community shares: "It was hearing the German that frightened me the most. After all these years, those lashing, wounding words *Untermensch* and *Oster* in particular - still held the same paralyzing power no DP ever forgets" [9, p. 132]. Although this is the only episode in the story related to collective memory of a community, it is very important as an element of shaping collective remembrance. Anya's memories are episodic and from a neuroscientific perspective can be described as notoriously unreliable. However, when integrated in a narrative with a clear cultural and historical context, they can acquire significance and meaning [1, p. 41]. Because of Anya's disease and lack of any other sources that might help reconstruct the past, it never happens in the story. Khrystia is painfully aware of her failure to learn anything about her mother and walking along the street starts singing a traditional Ukrainian mourning chant "Vichnaya pamyat" (Forever in memory) that is typically sang during funerals: "Its (the chant's - M.K.) melancholy Slavic rhythms were made sadder by her deep voice. She sang it three times: the first for the mother, the second for Anya, and the last, I hoped, for the past of her soul that Khrystia would never find" [9, p. 135]. Thus, metaphorically, Khrystia buries the past that leaves her only fragmented memories she will never be able to integrate into a whole.

"The House of Widows" lends itself to being read in manifold ways: as a generational novel, a novel about history and an émigré novel, to mention just some of its possible definitions. It combines historical and ethnic elements with features of crime fiction and romance. The multivocality of the novel creates a range of memorial patterns and makes it an important document of cultural memory. A mnemonic landscape of "The House of Widows" is complex and multilayered. There are three major female voices: the Ukrainian voice of Vera, the English voice of Marian, and the Palestinian voice of Selena. Ethnicity of the female characters only to underscore a diversity of memorial accounts that were equally marked by a malicious role of history. Women's stories are complementary and

represent what Jeffrey Olick identified as collected memories (1) – fragmentary by themselves but at the same time set within a historical and cultural frame of Europe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus having a common frame of reference but preserving their individual value. Memories of the three female characters of different ethnic background are shaped by painful experience of their home countries. They share a sense of the irreparable loss and a painful awareness of the necessity to live with it. Thus, the novel creates a connective fictional history that embraces different nations, pasts and experiences and takes characters' memories beyond the normative frames of respective national memories.

Marian Gordon is one of the main narrators in the novel. Her story is crucial for James Pak who came from the US to Oxford to study but also to learn something about his Ukrainian father who had recently committed suicide. James is probably the first and the only person to hear Marian's story from the beginning to the end. She must have rehearsed it in her mind many times as the narration is very smooth, logical and coherent: "She had stepped outside herself. I watched her pushing open rusty black gates, walking through them into a world that lived only in memory. History is a long corridor in a house of infinite extension. The house, of course is time, a maze of stairways and horizonless halls lined with mirrored doors from behind which drift moans, laughter, and occasionally shots" [7, p. 28].

Marian's story is an excellent example of cultural memory. The woman survived the bombings and deprivations of WWII and in many aspects her story reflects the collective experience and mnemonic challenge of her folks: "The bombs hurt but they also kept us awake. They droned like dragonflies. Thousands fell in ten months at the start of the war, and thousands more at the end – and ultimately those who survived were determined to live, forget and remember. All at once" [7, p. 106]. The experience of a Londoner and that of a young woman who had to go through a personal tragedy – a breakup with Andrew, James's father, the birth of their daughter out of wedlock and subsequent conflict with her family – entwined.

A story of the Gordon family that at different times accepted and raised Andrew, a child from Eastern Europe in the 1930s, and then, some forty

years later, Selena from Palestine shows the other side of British immigration history. Although Marian did not connect the two stories in which she performed different roles (that of a step sister and an adopted mother), the Gordon family history mirrors rather an unusual personal experiences of the war generation of the British.

Eager to solve the mystery of his father's suicide, James's goes to Vienna to meet his ancient Ukrainian grandmother Vera who, according to her family doctor, should have been dead for many years already. He is almost forced to accompany her and his semi-criminal and homosexual uncle to Ukraine. Vera is going to the city of Prypiat to die. Although her transportation to the ancestral place in the "old country" is almost theatrical, it is also marked with sadness. After the Chernobyl disaster, Prypiat became a ghost town, part of the Exclusion Zone. Even though it was not allowed to live there, several hundred old locals returned to Prypiat and the neighboring villages. Vera is going to die in the town which is already dead. Her memories will die with her and she does not wish to share them with anybody.

Vera's memories, though very scarce, are so emotional that listening to her James feels "getting caught up in someone else's games, swept into a different world" [7, p. 81]. At the moment of their encounter in Vienna and later on their way to Ukraine old, sick, and morphined Vera is more inclined to speak about eternity, contemporary politics and distant family history than about James's father. She carries some pictures but is clearly unwilling to share what she knows and remembers. Thus, a significant part of Vera's past remains untold. For the same reason, James's story remains untold as well: Vera will die not knowing what happened to her son Andrew. She will not read the last letter from him that was written in Ukrainian and actually revealed the mystery of his life and suicide.

In Vera's case, the limits of memorial representation are not only physical, but also emotional. Unfinished thoughts and random comments that she drops show her doubts of James's ability to understand her story: he is American and belongs to a nation without history and memory. However, she manages to make her grandson understand that "I" is not merely

a name and circumstances. Each “I” is a history by itself and an identity to be shaped by the awareness of its history or conscious forgetting of it.

Louisa Passerini noted that the twentieth century in Europe was the time of cancellation of memory and removing the past. She emphasizes that although this cancellation is associated with totalitarian regimes, it can easily happen in democratic or transitional regimes as well [8, p. 241]. In this context, Marian and Vera’s memories, although subjective and incomplete, are also important as a medium of resistance against the policy of erasing memories or modifying them for the purpose of political correctness.

Paradoxically, James’s family history and his difficulty to deal with it, helped Selena, Marian’s adopted daughter, to come to terms with her memories and her past and get the freedom of thought: “We were locked into something here, and we needed an outsider to kick it loose. If you hadn’t come, who knows what I’d have done? ... You reminded me of something I’d known and forgotten. You made me feel I had choices. I wasn’t locked in or defined by what had already happened – never mind by what happened before I was born” [7, p. 234].

James Pak became the owner not only of the Gordon family history, but also of Selena’s story which was equally overwhelming. All her family died in an accident in Palestine in 1979 when her older brother who was connected with the Palestinian resistance movement by accident blew up their entire house. Everybody was killed except Selena who was away at her friend’s. Although the girl was little then, she still clearly remembers parts of bodies scattered around the garden and house. Selena never speaks about it in Marian’s presence, but it does not mean she forgot. Her suppressed memories surface when she is talking with James. She is the only of the three women for whom the “geography of belonging” is of importance, determined by the topography of national memory of the Palestinian people [2, p. 3]. Selena preserved her ethnic and familial identity despite dislocation and alien environment. Although Marian, her late husband, and the rest of the Gordon family treated Selena with warmth and understanding, her British experience, which in the formal sense is a migrant one, echoes that of James’s father: she never felt at home with her



new family, she hates the British and is thinking about reconnecting with her people. The British period of her life gave Selena a chance to forget what had happened to her family. In Paul Connerton's classification, this type of forgetting is described as constitutive in the formation a new identity [3, p. 63]. However, Selena's silence does not mean forgetting. On the contrary, it makes her alienation from the Gordons and her willingness to share her people's memory even more explicit. Occasional verbal outbursts testify not only to her unwillingness to discard memories of the past, but also to an intentional preservation of pain and inner cultivation of anger that eventually help Selena shape her future and her identity.

A rich and paradoxical memorial landscape created by Zabytko and Melnychuk not only gives an insight into a specific ethnic community but also integrates its story into a global cultural context. The article discussed only one aspect of remembering, while representation of mnemonic practices and their cultural and social background in Ukrainian American fiction deserves further in-depth study.

#### Footnote

(1). As Olick suggests, collected memories, as opposed to collective memories, are based on the individual, "the aggregated individual memories of members of a group" (qtd. in Andrew Hoskins "Memory Ecologies," p. 351).

#### References

1. Assmann, Aleida. "Re-framing Memory. Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past." *Performing the Past. Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*. Ed. Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winters. Amsterdam UP, 2010. 35—50.
2. Bond, Lucy, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen, eds. *Memory Unbound. Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018.
3. Connerton, Paul. "Seven Types of Forgetting." *Memory Studies*, vol. 1(1), 2008, pp. 59—71. Sage Publications, doi: 10.1177/1750698007083889. Accessed 13 February 2019.
4. Erll, Astrid. *Memory in Culture*. Trans. Sara B. Young. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
5. Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

6. Hoskins, Andrew. “Memory Ecologies.” *Memory Studies*, 9(3), 2016, pp. 348—357. Sage Publications, doi: 10.1177/1750698016645274. Accessed 12 April 2019.
7. Melnyczuk, Askold. *The House of Widows*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Greywolf Press, 2008.
8. Passerini, Luisa. “Memories Between Silence and Oblivion.” *Memory, History, Nation. Contested Pasts*. Ed. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone. Transaction Publishers, 2006. 238—252.
9. Zabytko, Irene. *When Luba Leaves Home*. Algenquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2003.

### Анотація

#### **Марта Коваль. Жіночі голоси в українсько-американській прозі: пам'ять, травма і забуття**

Стаття присвячена проблемі пам'яті та створення мнемонічного ландшафту в українсько-американській етнічній літературі. На прикладі оповідання «Зобов'язання» Ірен Забитко зі збірки «Коли Люба йде з дому» (2003) й роману Аскольда Мельчука «Будинок вдів» (2008) проаналізовано способи художнього відтворення пам'яті та її зв'язок з травматичним досвідом насильства, втрати й еміграції. Ключовою у згаданих творах стає жіноча перспектива переживання минулого. Художня модель пам'яті твориться за допомогою мотивів вразливості жіночого тіла (оповідання І. Забитко) і материнства та помсти (роман А. Мельничука). Теоретичну основу аналізу художніх творів складають концепції постпам'яті М. Гірш, забування П. Коннертона та культурної пам'яті А. Ерл. У статті наголошується на важливості матеріального й лінгвістичного маркування досвіду, а також мовних обмеженнях передавання травматичних переживань. Можливість і способи передавання пам'яті є головною проблемою у згаданих творах. Насильство й породжена ним травма унеможливають нарацію пам'яті, як у випадку з головною героїнею оповідання І. Забитко. Забування як форма пам'яті стає захисним емоційним бар'єром, що дозволяє вижити. З іншого боку, в романі А. Мельничука індивідуальна пам'ять персонажів показана не лише як елемент колективної пам'яті мікросоціуму (етнічної громади), а й як складова культурної пам'яті народу. Нарації пам'яті трьох головних героїнь роману віддзеркалюють різне ставлення до досвіду минулого, яке, проте, має одну спільну рису – історичну зумовленість. Саме така мнемонічна модель є характерною для українсько-американської етнічної літератури загалом. Пам'ять героїнь переплітається з колективним історичним досвідом ХХ століття та інтегрується в простір еміграційної пам'яті, створюючи складну культурно-історичну амальгаму.

**Ключові слова:** Аскольд Мельничук, Ірен Забитко, пам'ять, травматична пам'ять, забування, пунктум, українсько-американська література.

### **Аннотация**

#### **Марта Коваль. Женские голоса в украинско-американской литературе:**

#### **память, травма, забывание**

Статья посвящена проблеме памяти и создания мнемонического ландшафта в украинско-американской этнической литературе. На примере рассказа «Обязательство» Ирэн Забитко из сборника «Когда Люба уходит из дома» (2003) и романа Аскольда Мельничука «Дом вдов» (2008) в статье анализируются способы художественного представления памяти и ее связь с травматическим опытом насилия, потери и эмиграции. Ключевой в данных произведениях является женская перспектива переживания прошлого. Модель памяти опирается на мотив физической уязвимости женского тела (рассказ Забитко) и мотив материнства и мести (роман Мельничука). Теоретическую основу анализа составляют концепции постпамяти М. Хирш, забывания П. Коннертона и культурной памяти А. Эрл. Подчеркивается важность материальной и лингвистической маркировки опыта, а также ограниченность языковых средств, используемых для представления травматического опыта. Главная проблема в анализируемых произведениях – это возможность и способы передачи памяти. В истории главной героини рассказа Забитко насилие и возникшая в его последствии травма блокируют наррацию памяти. Забывание как одна из форм памяти становится защитным барьером, позволяющим выжить. В романе Мельничука индивидуальная память персонажей показана не только как элемент коллективной памяти микросоциума (этнической группы), но и как составляющая культурной памяти народа. Наррации памяти трех главных героинь отражают разные подходы к пережитому, имеющие при всем различии одну общую черту – историческую обусловленность и выход за рамки индивидуально-го сознания. Подобная мнемоническая модель характерна для украинско-американской литературы. Травматическая память героинь тесно переплетается с коллективным историческим опытом XX века, создавая при этом сложную культурно-историческую амальгаму.

**Ключевые слова:** Аскольд Мельничук, Ирэн Забитко, память, травматическая память, забывание, пунктум, украинско-американская литература.

### Summary

#### **Marta Koval. Female Voices in Ukrainian American Fiction: Memory, Trauma, and Forgetting**

The article analyses memory patterns and mnemonic landscape in Ukrainian American ethnic fiction. Fictional representation of memory and ways of reflecting traumatic experience of violence, loss, and emigration is explored on the basis of Irene Zabytko's story "Obligation" from "When Luba Leaves Home" (2003) and Askold Melnyczuk's novel "The House of Widows" (2008). Female perspective is crucial for the representation of mnemonic experience that is linked to the motifs of female body vulnerability (Zabytko's story) and motherhood and revenge (Melnyczuk's novel). The analysis is based on concepts of postmemory (M. Hirsch), forgetting (P. Connerton), and cultural memory (A. Erll). The article underscores the importance of material and linguistic experiential frameworks and limits of linguistic representation of traumatic experience. Accessibility of memory as well as ways of its transmission is the major concern of female characters in Zabytko's story and Melnyczuk's novel. In "Obligation," violence and subsequent trauma make the transmission of memory impossible. Forgetting as the other side of memory is presented as a survival tool. In Melnyczuk's novel, mnemonic experience of the three female characters is integrated into collective memory of their respective ethnic and social communities and becomes part of cultural memory of the nation. Representation of historically determined individual memory is a characteristic feature of Ukrainian-American ethnic literature. Traumatic memory of female characters in Zabytko and Melnyczuk's fiction entwines with collective historical experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and memory of immigration. Together, they create a complex cultural and historical amalgam that helps to inscribe Ukrainian ethnic fiction into a global cultural context.

**Key words:** Askold Melnyczuk, Irene Zabytko, memory, traumatic memory, forgetting, punctum, Ukrainian-American literature.

---

### *Інформація про автора*

**Коваль Марта Романівна** – доктор габілітована, професор Іданського університету (Польща); вул. Віта Ствоша, 516, м. Іданськ, 80-316, Польща; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0935-4679>.