

# A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian from A Feminist Perspective

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**Abstract.** Feminist literary criticism began in the 1960s, analyzing the characters in literary works from a feminist perspective, opening up the gender dimension for literary criticism. This theory enriched the methodological system of literary criticism and became an important theory of literary criticism. As the theory was introduced into China in the late 1980s, feminist literary criticism in China gradually developed. Researchers have analyzed and interpreted literary works from a feminist perspective, exploring the image of women, the gender issues embodied in them, and the topic of women's writing. This study focuses on the work *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* from a feminist perspective. By adopting the method of close reading of the text and analyzing the experience, status, and character of the female characters in the novel, it explores the current situation of their existence and the problems they face and provides new perspectives and understandings for the interpretation of *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*. This study takes the novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* as a material, analyzes the character construction in the novel based on feminist literary criticism theories, and explores the author Lewycka's thoughts on the current situation of Ukrainian immigrant women's survival under the male-dominated society in Britain from the perspective of trans-ethnicity, trans-bilingualism, and transculturality.

**Keywords:** Marina Lewycka; feminism; gender roles.

## 1. Introduction

A Brief History of Ukrainian Tractors tells the story of Nadezhda, who after learning that her father has remarried, drives away the outsider Valentina together with her sister Vera, while gradually learning about the buried past of this family of Ukrainian refugees who immigrated to Britain during the war. The novel presents several distinct and individualized women with different origins, experiences, and statuses, and from their different life tracks, it is possible to see how the situation of women has changed with the change of culture, region, and time. Lewycka, as a British female writer after Ukrainian immigration, has a natural sensitivity to the topic of gender and immigration. The novel was initially misclassified as an agricultural science and technology book but later gained attention through word-of-mouth among readers. Not enough attention has been paid to this novel in China, thus there is still much room for research on this novel.

This study uses the textual close reading method to analyze *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* from a feminist perspective. Textual close reading is a method of in-depth interpretation of a text that reveals hidden meanings and themes by carefully reading and analyzing the content of the text. The study will read *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* closely, focusing on its portrayal of female characters.

The purpose of this study is to analyze and interpret the portrayal of women and gender issues in *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* from a feminist literary criticism perspective. By exploring the portrayal and gender portrayal of female characters in the novel, it explores the expression of women's social status, power relations, and gender identities in the work, as well as the author's feminist ideology embodied in it.

Through the study of female immigrants in *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, the scope of feminist theory can be further expanded to provide new perspectives and theoretical frameworks for feminist studies. *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* shows the current situation of female migrants' survival after World War II. World War II led to a large number of war migrants, who faced great changes in language, culture, social structure, and other aspects [1]. And more migrants who

appeared afterward for the purpose of gold-digging also reflected the change of times. Research from a feminist perspective can reveal women's status and power relations in society, as well as their ways of self-identification and resistance in different environments. The significance of this study is to explore the opportunities and dilemmas faced by several generations of female migrants, as well as their survival strategies and the construction of self-identity in the new environment.

## 2. Literature Reviews

Limited attention has been paid to Lewycka's works in China. Tian Huiwen, author of *The Comedic Aesthetics of Suffering Narratives*, analyzes Lewycka's works in terms of the theme of suffering, the form of comedy, and the combination and transcendence of the two, and analyzes the historical imprints and realistic dilemmas in Lewycka's works; she also analyzes the comedic styles of the works from various angles and argues that Lewycka dissects and reconciles with the suffering in a humorous way [2]. In *On the Narrative Strategy of a Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, Guo Lidong analyzes the narrative strategy of *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* in terms of narrative mode, narrative voice, and narrative plot [3]. In *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian in Imageology Perspective*, Li Qi examines the images of two mothers, three husbands, a pair of sisters, and two countries in the novel, and analyzes the author's narrative stance and values [3].

Based on the current research status of the above scholars, this study will pay attention to the position, image, and behavior of women in the text, as well as the author's attitude toward gender and power relations. Attention will also be paid to the role and influence of women in the storyline and whether their behavior and decision-making are limited by gender roles and social expectations. Through a close reading of the text, the feminist themes in *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* will be explored in depth and their exploration of gender and power relations will be analyzed and interpreted. This approach will help readers to better understand and interpret the position and portrayal of women in the text, as well as the author's attitudes and perspectives on feminist topics.

## 3. Analysis of Characterization in *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*

### 3.1. Nadezhda

Nadezhda, the protagonist of *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, is a university lecturer who was born at the end of the war and grew up in the era of "Beatles, anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, the student riots of 1968, and the birth of feminism" [1]. However, a sudden change in her family caused her to "turn back into a four-year-old girl with a weird nose" [1]. when she was suddenly confronted by her sister and father again. In the process of repelling the outsiders together with her sister, she gradually understands the pain of her family in the war and gradually understands her sister, with whom she is finally reunited.

Nadezhda belongs to the generation that grew up in the aftermath of World War II; her sister, Vera, thinks she can't see the darkness of life and that she is a delusional idealist who wants to pull the world into the right path on her own, and her father, Nikolai, at one point cold-shouldered her for being a girl with no aptitude for engineering, and even at one point left the family because she participated in the student movement and her arrest [1]. Nadezhda is the dividing line between war and peace in her family, with those older than her experiencing war and centralization, and those born after her living in peace, while Nadezhda herself, born at the end of the war, did not experience war at the one hand, but always felt its shadow: whether it was her mother's lifelong thriftiness, her father's dedication to ideology, or her sister's shrewdness in calculating, they all reflected the impact that totalitarianism and war had on the family. At the same time, Nadezhda, who grew up in England and has never set foot in Ukraine since she was a baby, has a strong immigrant imprint: as a child, the family spoke a different language and ate a different kind of food than their neighbors, and their parents and sister were always "talking about something that happened between their childhood and

mine" - something so terrible that it had to be unattainable! -something so terrible that I must not know about it." [2].

Nadezhda's feelings toward Valentina are complex. While she hated the "hairy pink grenade" who had made a mess of her family, she was also sympathetic to her on several occasions: she was both envious and repulsed by the sultry blonde's unbridled sexual charisma, she was attracted to and frustrated by Valentina's seductive energy and vitality, at the same time, Nadezhda is also hostile to Valentina, the aggressor of her family, whose pursuit of materialism and industrial convenience is, in her eyes, a betrayal and trampling on her mother, who has spent her life cultivating the land with hard work and frugality; yet she always seems to understand Valentina's plight and even wants to be reconciled to it when she realizes that Valentina's immigrant status is similar to her own, as is the state of her life; but she also seems to resent Valentina when she sees how much she has abused and plundered her father's family, and how much she has taken pity on him [3]. depredations against her father, and then would be ruthless and determined to deport her.

### 3.2. Vera

The protagonist's sister, Vera, was born during the war years and survived massacres and concentration camps, an experience that has made her shrewd and pragmatic, always "able to dig out the hidden, the dirty, the false." [4]. Her sister believes that she is robbing her mother's inheritance and calculating her ex-husband's income for herself and her two daughters. She also breaks with her sister over the inheritance until Valentina, an outsider, breaks in.

After her mother's death, Vera becomes the "keeper of the family legacy," and Nadezhda is always trying to dig out the family's buried secrets from Vera. Unlike Nadezhda, Vera's childhood was characterized by hunger and oppression by the powerful, as well as by the turbulence of the situation, which left her without a place to live, followed by oppression and bullying in concentration camps [5]. As a result of these experiences, Vera became paranoid and suspicious, addicted to money, and always assumed the worst in others. When she came to England she married Dick, an Englishman, and had two daughters, whom she firmly divorced after Dick cheated on her. Vera, who has "never worked a day in her life", exploits her ex-husband's fortune to make ends meet, and Nadezhda's break with her stems from a fight over her mother's inheritance [6]. Both sisters believe they deserve to inherit their mother's estate, with Vera accusing her sister of neglecting her mother by indulging in social work and Nadezhda accusing her sister of amending her will and getting something for nothing. And on the matter of Valentina, the sisters agree to battle lines.

Vera is quite adamant about Valentina - she must get her to divorce her father and leave England. Throughout the whole process, she is decisive and sophisticated, always showing the professionalism and determination of a "Mrs. Divorce expert". Nadezhda's dislike of Valentina is seldom expressed directly, as opposed to Vera, who can be described as verbally abusive. However, she also "admired Valentina's overt sexual energy and her ruthlessness", and does not even hide her dislike and distrust of her father.

### 3.3. Valentina

Valentina is an intruder into the protagonist's family in the novel, having "fallen in love" with the protagonist's father, Nikolai, two years after the death of the protagonist's mother, and then remarried him. Valentina comes to England to pursue her dream of living in England and to give her son Stanislav a better education. She is tall, good-looking, vulgarly made-up, and can't live without convenience foods, refrigerators, luxury cars, and catalogs. What happens to her in the UK can be described as a tragedy: she tries to trade in her body for the British life of her dreams, but it doesn't work out that way; she still has to get up early and work late, but that doesn't allow her to live a life of material abundance. In the end, she returns to Ukraine with her ex-husband Dubov.

Nikolai, the father of the protagonist, fantasizes about saving his fellow Ukrainians from totalitarianism and expects Valentina's arrival to bring his homeland to him, but the blonde that Nikolai fantasizes about, like Botticelli's Venus out of the water, and with whom he shares a lot of

common language arrives, but instead becomes his nightmare - Valentina! Valentina's pursuit of material things is far beyond the affordability of Nicola's pension, and after Nicola lets her down again and again, she is verbally and even physically violent towards him. Valentina is not the only male companion of Nicola's, and her sexual charms have led her to take refuge with several men, but this does not allow her to live the life she desires. Not only does she have to work two jobs, but she also has to satisfy Nikolai's sexual needs, and Nikolai's eccentricities gradually make her lose patience. After leaving Nicola's house, she even has to work in a bar to survive, and her expectations and fantasies of life in England are ruthlessly shattered by reality. However, her ex-husband Dubov is willing to come to England for her and her child, and after several days of persuasion by her ex-husband, Valentina returns to Ukraine with her son and newborn daughter.

Valentina is in a strong position in her marriage to Nikolai, asking for luxury goods at will, bad-mouthing Nikolai, kicking and punching him, but amazingly, even when she does something wrong, the men say, "One can forgive a beautiful woman for a little exaggeration." [7]. She seems to be loved by the men, but compared to the mutual admiration between the men, the so-called tolerance for her is not based on respect for equal individuals, but on the satisfaction of male desires as an object of objectification, and her situation is not improved by the men's love and admiration, and the male-dominated society consumes her sexual value while oppressing her labor force.

#### 4. Analysis

*A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* depicts the lives of several generations of immigrants; their mother, Lyudmila, who has lived through famine and totalitarianism and has had a tumultuous life, contrasts her love of animals and agriculture [8]. On the contrary, their father Nikolai's passion for scientific and technological engineering. Lyudmila represents an attachment to the land, a warm and unconditionally accepting, as she diligently labors to hold together the family, which is torn apart by her death; Vera is not happy with her younger sister's idealistic social worker posturing; Nadezhda perceives her sister's shrewdness as somewhat despicable; and the father never hides his disappointment at having only two unintelligent and unfeminine daughters at his knee; the father, too, never conceals his disappointment at having only two unintelligent and unfeminine daughters at his knee; Lyudmila is the quintessential mother figure, representing life, land, and the warmth of family. Because of the turbulent times and her attachment to her family, she has to give up her dream of becoming a veterinarian and dedicate the rest of her life to her family [9]. Nadezhda, as a university lecturer, makes a decent living, and her family life is calm and peaceful; Vera is a shrewd and pragmatic person who fights for her interests by her means [10]. The sisters split over the division of their inheritance but understand each other as they work together to expel the outsiders, and eventually reconcile through the efforts of their daughters. The sisters, Vera and Nadezhda, lead two different lives: Vera, who is shackled to a life of hardship, fighting for herself and her daughters, and Nadezhda, who is dedicated to transforming the world for the good of all through sociological research. Because she was born in a time of war and turmoil, Vera did not receive a perfect education, and the language barrier caused by immigration also led to the loss of job opportunities, resulting in her having to continue to endure for the sake of her possessions as her marriage with her husband was in ruins; Nadezhda is an independent woman of the new era, a moderate feminist, but the awakening of a part of the population is not enough to change the status quo of women completely, just as she sympathizes with Valentina's situation and understands Valentina's situation, but she also sympathizes with Vera and her daughter's situation. While sympathizing with Valentina's situation and understanding Valentina's plight, she fails to change her life. The image of Valentina fulfills the male gaze on women and represents the oppression of women in a patriarchal society: her sexual attraction is her ticket to the Western life she aspires to, yet her arrival in England only leads to further exploitation. Valentina's situation is related to her highly dependent lifestyle on men; she wants to trade her sexual attractiveness for a life of material abundance, but the men she is dependent on are unable to satisfy her needs, so she has to trade her cheap labor resources for food and clothing. She is a concentrated

manifestation of the male-dominated society's insatiable desire for women, and her pride in her sexual attractiveness, as well as the protagonist's sisters' shame and inferiority as a result, is also a manifestation of the male-dominated society's ubiquitous precepts on women.

## 5. Conclusion

In *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, Marina Lewycka paints a picture of the lives of several generations of immigrants. The first generation of immigrants, Lyudmila, who is rooted in the land, loves life, and works hard to maintain her family; the sisters Vera and Nadezhda, who went to very different lives after a ten-year difference and finally reconciled; and Valentina, who immigrated to England to dig for gold but was exploited for her sexual and labor resources. It can be seen that along with the development of feminism, women gained the right to education and the freedom to work, but in the patriarchal society, women still receive regulations in appearance and behavior, and many men enjoy the privilege of possession as a matter of course.

This study provides some references for future research in this direction. Future research can further study the image of women in modern literature and analyze women's living conditions and challenges in different social environments to better understand women's rights and needs, explore how to eliminate gender inequality and exploitation, and build a more inclusive and equal society.

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