



A Postcolonial Reading of Nikolai Gogol's *Taras Bulba*

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Abstract

The sixteenth-century Cossacks became the favourite topic of Ukrainian authors of the nineteenth century who dealt with national and individual identity issues. Nikolai Gogol, the celebrated Russian author who had Ukrainian origin and was born in a Cossack village, wrote the epic romance of *Taras Bulba*, which narrated the story of Cossacks and their struggle for preserving their independence. While the work has been previously studied under the light of postcolonial theoretical framework, using the concepts developed by Homi Bhabha to scrutinize the situation and the destiny of the two main hybrid characters, Taras Bulba's sons, takes a step further and reveals the deeply ingrained anxiety and ambivalence in the Cossack mentality. The article focuses on the two main hybrid characters who choose divergent paths upon encountering the conflict brought to them by the imperial power.

Keywords: national identity, identity crisis, Littlerussianness, Nikolai Gogol

1. Introduction

Nikolai Gogol's historical magnum opus *Taras Bulba* (1842) has been known as "his only fiction that glorifies Russian nationalism" (Bojanowska 255) and there have been many debates over its context and interpretation especially because there exist two versions of it. The 1835 edition was a glorification of Ukraine, but then through a Russification process, the 1842 version "demonstrates the distance that Gogol travelled in his national allegiance as a writer" (Bojanowska 257). The novel was inspired by the Cossack tale of Taras Bulba, a leader who values Cossack's integrity above everything else. The narrative is the story of the Cossack individuals and their struggle to maintain their national identity against the cultural conflicts created by the powerful imperial countries surrounding them. While the characterization of Taras Bulba's sons is



exemplary, “serious critics of Gogol have never found *Taras Bulba* particularly interesting, perhaps because of its fame as an adventure yarn” (Grimstad 117).

This epic-romance was also inspired by Gogol’s self-initiated quest during his twenties when he started to search for his Cossack roots and Ukrainian national identity. On the journey to explore his origin, he started writing Ukrainian tales besides studying the *History of the Rus’*, from which he borrowed many parts of the plot and setting of *Taras Bulba*. (Plokyh 57) The work nevertheless played a significant role in “establishing a model of the Russian-Cossack hero.” (Yoon 431) Furthermore, the narrative has provided a rich background for further study of its hybrid characters stuck in the third space created by the cultural conflict brought to them by the imperialistic power. Scrutinizing the situation of the Cossack brothers, whose endings are both heartbreakingly tragic despite having chosen two divergent paths, is examining the situation of the subjugated subject and an attempt to see whether it is possible to escape the hybridity and identity crisis triumphantly.

2. Gogol in Search of Lost Identity

Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol (1809-1852), the Ukrainian-Russian genius whose Ukrainian origin crawled into his soul upon arriving St. Petersburg in 1828, started writing “Ukrainian tales based largely on folklore sources” (Plokyh 57) in 1829. Gogol, as a genius, had realised that it was necessary to make peace with his origin in order to create an individual identity that could continue writing marvellous fiction. The pattern seems to have been repeated by the twentieth-century genius author, James Joyce. His treatment of Dublin when he found it necessary to write about the city he had rejected was somehow similar to Gogol’s career path. Joyce produced *Dubliners* (1914) in order to move on and the alienated Gogol published the 1835 Ukrainian version of *Taras Bulba* only to Russify its narrative some years later. Gogol could never only reside in one literary tradition but his alienation was sublimated into productive, original masterpieces that earned the writer his reputation.

Gogol characterised himself as an alien. As far back as his school days he had been isolated and enigmatic...He made his professional *début* in Russian literature as an ‘alien’, and turned a drawback, his rather inadequate knowledge of Russian, to good account by writing the early Ukrainian tales in a language that shifts constantly back and forth between Russian and Ukrainian. (Čiževsky 480)



Gogol, like every other Ukrainian, had to face anxiety in resisting what Yevhen Malaniuk calls “*malorosianstvo* or Littlerussianness” (Shkandrij 246), which assumed that Ukrainians were little Russians. This Russian imperial assumption destroyed Ukrainian national identity by denying the diversity and the distinguishing characteristics of Ukrainian native culture. Malaniuk’s explanation about this “unwelcome, forced hybridity” mainly refers to Gogol’s case as a Ukrainian author to point out to the “cultural-national suicide” (qtd in Shkandrij 246) that was caused by Little Russian mentality - a term applied to the inferiority complex experienced by Ukrainians who admire Russians and prefer to leave their Ukrainian distinctiveness for imperial tradition and culture (*Encyclopedia of Ukraine*). The anxiety and ambivalence that Gogol was experiencing, the quest for finding a stable identity, and the haze of confusion that followed every intellectual Ukrainian at that time, sent him to search deeper in the past. Donal Fanger in *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (1979), points to Gogol’s burden as a hybrid character who was highly influenced by the romantic notion of individualism and writes:

modernity, variety, and pluralism were a personal burden and a personal threat from which he dreamed of escape into an ideal society where membership already conferred dignity, morality became a simple matter of loyalty, individualism was punished as treason, the earth gave abundant nourishment without labor, and divine order manifested itself through the colossal harmonies of a public art that sustained man even as it dwarfed him. Indeed, these themes-all but the last, which had as yet no embodiment in Russia-can be found in Gogol’s literary work of the period...Escape from solitary selfhood, as George Ivask has claimed, may well be the fundamental pathos and impulse of Gogol’s imaginative life. (65-66)

Gogol’s name in Ukrainian was “Mykola Hohol” (Shkandrij 105) and while he has been discussed as a subject who has tried to “part from his attachment to Ukraine” (105), no success in fully reaching that goal can be pointed out. Yuliya Ilchuk, in an article titled “Nikolai Gogol’s Self-Fashioning in the 1830s” (2016) scrutinises Gogol in a postcolonial perspective where she uses Bhabha’s theoretization of mimicry to draw out “Gogol’s complex self-fashioning during and immediately after the publication of his Ukrainian tales.” (204) According to her, Gogol adopts the Russian language and cultural behaviour to “gain inclusion into the diverse imperial and national spaces of Russia.” (204) Gogol overcame his confusions masterfully, and by writing *Taras*



Bulba he produced one of the most idiosyncratic narratives which “appealed most to those readers who were most baffled by Gogol’s originality.” (Fanger 99) His hybridity was sublimated into idiosyncrasy by “shifting peculiarly personal connections...and the frequent ambivalence those connections reveal.” (Fanger 109) *Taras Bulba* distances itself from Ukrainian tales that Gogol was writing which delineated peaceful rural places, their residents and customs. The historical novel, which aligned itself with romance epics by using devices of hyperbole and exaggeration, became a masterpiece that authors and critics could not resist responding to.

Gogol had started reading the *History of the Rus’* since 1829, and in 1830 he started working on a “historical novel titled *Get’ man*” (Plokhly 57), which he never completed. His *Dikanka Tales* or *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1829-32) show how he started collecting and reconstructing Ukrainian culture, customs and holiday traditions. He started exploring his identity consciously and as a person whose “ancestors were partly Polish but chiefly Cossack” (Rozdestvensky 81) his adventurous soul did not dwell in one place. “Gogol’s interest in Ukrainian history dates back to his Nizhyn years...but he worked on it most intensively in his capacity as a scholar between 1833 and 1835” (Bojanowska 122). *Taras Bulba* owes a lot to Gogol’s new studies in history and “in this story Gogol’s historianism is at its height” (Strakhovsky, 367).

He visited many places in his lifetime and became a cosmopolitan whose universal knowledge had quite a significant impact on his literary perspective and writing. Gogol’s “On Teaching World History” shows his erudition and knowledge of world history. He depicts the outline of his teaching and expresses that after treating the history of the world as a whole, it would be necessary to “take to pieces separately the history of all the countries and nations which comprise the huge mechanism of universal history” (qtd in Rozdestvensky 87). According to Gogol’s correspondence to M. Pogodin, he had started writing the History of Ukraine, and it was “progressing” (Rozdestvensky 82). However, in a letter to Sreznevskij in 1834, he expressed “his disappointment with the available chronicles” (Grabowics 175), which led him to leave the project unfinished.

After years of studying and searching, Gogol rejected all chauvinistic feelings in a letter to A.O. Smirnova in 1844 and stated:

I do not know whether my soul is Ukrainian or Russian. But I do know that I will not concede preference to a Ukrainian before a Russian, nor to a Russian before a Ukrainian.



Both natures are so generously endowed by God and, as if by design, each of them separately contains what is lacking in the other; this is an obvious indication that they should complement each other. For this the very histories of their past are unlike each other in order that they should develop different forces of character so as to compose later, when merging together, something most unique and perfect in all mankind (qtd in Strakhovsky 369)

3. The Cossacks and Their Codes

The strictness of the Cossacks of *Taras Bulba* could be regarded as a way to guard their national identity against imperial Poland. Ukrainian national consciousness consisted of “loyalty to native language, affirmation of historical traditions, and defense of the Rus’ religious inheritance.” (Chynczewska-Hennel 379) The masculinity found in Cossack culture and their codes of brotherhood are not values to be dismissed, and “the failure to embody the laws of masculinity, to affirm the power of these laws and one’s achievement of them is a source for the characters of confusion and pain.”(Grimstad, 118) It is a matter of importance to remember that the nationality discussed in this context is not the same as the nationality in its English sense and Hennel defines the “national consciousness” of Cossacks in her own words:

National consciousness is a phenomenon belonging to the sphere of social psychology, manifested by individuals or by groups of people. It is an expression of the existence of a nation in a certain phase of its development, and it constitutes a necessary condition of its existence. National consciousness is formed under the influence of determinants such as the sense of community of language, of historical tradition (including a community of laws and customs), and of religion; the need to create a popular hero (a moral ideal); a community of territory; a desire for independent statehood. Not all of these determinants are absolutely necessary, nor is the presence of one or two sufficient. All of them change through time. (379)

The binary opposition created by the dominant imperial countries started showing symptoms in the literature. “Polish literature “orientalised” Ukraine, just as Russian literature orientalised the Caucasus and, to a degree, Ukraine” (Shkandrij 30).

The political situation of Poland and Russia through centuries formed the Ukrainian’s attitude toward the imperial powers and the anti-Polish attitudes of nineteenth-century Russian literature were the result of “two Polish insurrections of 1830-31 and 1863” (Shkandrij 30). The



ambivalence found in Gogol's nationalistic perspectives is nevertheless a symptom of hybridity that is innate in Ukrainian individuals. He was fully aware of the dichotomy that existed among different nations and in the heart of a group. However, according to Ilchuk, the ambivalence found in Gogol's different attitudes toward the imperial power is a sly way through which the genius author "escaped identification in terms of "either"/"or" and creatively played out this ambiguity in his self-fashioning" (205). Grambowicz points out to the consul of decision making in *Taras Bulba* and their decision to fight the Turkish or the Polish which shows the lack of a consensus and further division among the Cossacks. "The distinction between the Cossack world and that of the settled toilers is only the first of the dichotomies" (Grambowicz 177).

4. The Defeated Cossack Brothers

Bojanowska's comprehensive study on Gogol's nationalism which is compiled in the prize-winning *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism* (2007), acknowledges the Ukrainians' critique of his "self-Russification" (6) and also the other hypothesis which regards Gogol as a purely Russified Ukrainian who only wrote in Russian. She then finds *Taras Bulba* to "mark a crucial turn for Gogol, as he sacrifices his Ukrainian nationalism on the altar of the Russian one" (256). However, Bojanowska points to Gogol's unpublished fragments which carry an utterly opposite view expressed in *Taras Bulba* that "affirm the exact opposite view of Ukrainian history, making the Russians into Ukraine's enemies and the Poles into its kinsmen and allies" (258). The ambivalence found in Gogol's views is not very far from Andrii's and can be explained in postcolonial terms developed by Homi Bhabha. The ambivalence was first developed in psychoanalysis and Bhabha translated it into colonial discourse to express "the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterises the relationship between coloniser and colonised" (Ashcroft 10). This ambivalence is internalised in each individual and has created a love-hate attitude toward the other side. Thus, ambivalence threatens the colonial domination in the fluctuation it brings to the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

Despite having earned a reputation as a postcolonial theoretician, Homi Bhabha's developed notions in the colonial discourse have plied so many other approaches that have become universally inclusive. The subjugated subject in this article is stereotyped, disarmed, and considered inferior while the dominancy attempts to devour it. Gogol's depiction of Cossacks and their rebellion against imperial Poland is emblematic. As an independent group whose values of



honour and brotherhood had been treated with ambivalence through centuries, the Zaporozhian Cossacks represented the liminality. As stated by Shkandrij, “On the one hand, their services to the empire were lauded...On the other hand, they were treated with suspicion and situated where their escape abroad would be difficult.” (5) The group which was once treated as a partner in fights, were seen as a threat as soon as the great fights were over and new lands were established; and “hundreds of thousands of free peasants and Cossacks were thrown into another form of slavery – serfdom – or suffered from the imposed system of tsarist military colonies.”(28) This slavery created a binary opposition of “civilised imperial countries/inferior Cossacks (Ukrainians)”. Once a nation is put into the dichotomy of imperial/other, the inferiority complex crawls into every corner of their culture and psyche.

To defeat the inferiority complex, one cannot simply deny their subjugation and stick to their stance. According to Bhabha’s own words, the hybridity, which is the outcome of the interaction of different cultures, is a “historical necessity” (1994 28). He does not regard hybridity as an impurity but a productive characteristic, and although Andrii’s acceptance of his hybridity leads to his death, it is still regarded as the only means through which he finds access to free will. Clarence Manning, in his “Nicolai Gogol” (1926) criticises the author for depicting the love affair between the Cossack Andrii and the Polish lady since “*Taras Bulba* is a man’s book” (577). Yet, he fails to see the significance of Andrii’s situation as a hybrid character who is trapped in a cultural conflict and deprived of his own individuality. Yoon finds the root of this conflict in Gogol’s adapting of “Western individualism” (437) that allows the character of Andrii to be mobile in his liminal space. Strong asserts the same thing in his article and states that “though certainly a very original writer, Gogol was, after all, a professional literary man and could not help being aware of contemporary European trends in literature” (538). He goes on to write that “despite the fact that Gogol personally seemed to prefer the classics...definite elements of later writers, particularly the Romantics, are to be found in his works” (538). Gogol’s knowledge of the Romantic works draws our attention to one of the most celebrated concepts about the Romantic Movement: individualism. Andrii, who can be compared to Gogol himself in terms of hybridity, has studied in the seminary and adapted the Western individualism and freedom. In contrast to Ostap, his brother, Andrii cannot make peace with his Cossack heritage and his love for the Polish noble lady, detaches him from the imposed duty of fighting for his fatherland.



Andrii's fighting with the Polish instead of standing opposed to them is not an act of submission but a way to show his bravery and also individualism. The hybridity, which might be regarded as the dominance of a culture considered superior, is actually a dialogic space for the individual to find himself away from the imposed cultural hegemonies of either side. Hybridisation is a dialogic process through which a variety of cultures interact. It could be concluded in Michael Syrotinski's words in *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial* (2007) that finds hybridity as "a fluid, catch-all counter-hegemonic means of reaffirming identity over and against essentialising discourses of ethnicity or nationalism." (25) The hybridity found in *Taras Bulba* is not only limited to the characterisation of Andrii but the work itself which is an amalgam of Western Romanticism and Cossack myth in style and context. In "Gogol's *Taras Bulba* and the *Illiad*" (1965), Carl Proffer finds the elements of ancient epic in the 1842 edition, the final version of the work. He situates the Polish lady as a parallel to Helen in *Illiad*. Furthermore the article finds Andrii akin to Paris who has "shown his treachery by taking Helen into Troy" (149).

Andrii and his brother, Ostap, are both hybrid characters who choose different paths regarding nationalism. Despite sharing some affinities in their personalities, the Bulba brothers are rather different, as depicted by Gogol at the beginning of the novel. In chapter two, *Taras Bulba* and his sons are riding in silence, it is revealed how his sons spent twelve years in Kiev and received the education they deserved as sons of a leader. While Ostap's mere issue had been studying logic and theology to "harden his character, and give him that firmness which distinguished the Cossacks" (Gogol ch.2), Andrii's wild soul and his need for love had always distinguished him from other Cossacks.

He (Andrii) carefully concealed this impulse of his passionate young soul from his comrades, because in that age it was held shameful and dishonourable for a Cossack to think of love and a wife before he had tasted battle. (Gogol ch.2)

Ostap is also condemned to conceal his liberal thoughts since he seeks to construct his identity upon Cossack's values. His ultimate goal is to satisfy his father and comrades and be a good Cossack; however, his education in Kiev has impacted him. When Ostap finds Andrii's corpse he feels sorry for his brother and tends to honour him by giving him the proper burial prohibited by their father (Gogol ch.11). Ostap and Andrii are both brave souls in search of their identities.



Ostap aligns himself with his father and other Cossacks to defend their national identity, but Andrii's love for the Polish lady creates a necessity to choose between love and duty and precisely between his free will and social hegemonies. Bhabha's hybridity notion states that the subject caught in the liminal space cannot escape his situation without facing an identity crisis. According to Syrotinski, Bhabha suggests "two concepts of hybridity, not one" (28), which makes hybridity have another signified besides "cultural diversity" and that is "cultural difference" and owes its meaning to Derrida's "différance". Applying deconstruction to the postcolonial discourse, Bhabha finds the relations between the colonised and the coloniser not "reducible to variations of traditional binary oppositions of power" (Syrotinski 28). While cultural diversity suggests culture's being static and homogenous entities, the cultural difference becomes "the process of the enunciation of culture as 'knowledgeable', authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification" (Bhabha 34). Ostap can be categorised as one of the "numerous Gogolian characters" who "attempt to signify their lives through the acquisition of rank, position, articles of clothing, epaulettes, carriages, acquaintance with persons of higher status, and other symbols that separate them from others" (Kelly 306). Andrii on the other hand, "embraces Western values of his own free will" (Yoon 438). Andrii's rebellious nature leads him to leave his Cossack comrades and enter the beautiful Polish city for the love of the Polish lady. As stated by Yoon, his "sensitivity eagerly responds to the sensual effects, but he is unable to grasp the presence of death that lurks beneath the beauty" (435).

The Cossacks of *Taras Bulba* regard the Polish as the "other" to deny how they are themselves viewed as the "other" by the imperial power. As it has been discussed, "In *Taras Bulha*, a Cossack's first duty and first honour is to be true to comradeship (*tovarishchestvo*); moreover, to let down another member of the all-male brotherhood is equated with the betrayal of the 'nationalist' cause (Grimstad 120). The rigid value of brotherhood acts as a defence mechanism against the anxiety brought to the subjugated subject upon showing resistance toward the coloniser. The novel examines the lives of hybrid characters who reside within the borders and deal with their identity in the third space. The Cossack myth holds within itself the characteristics of Ukrainian national identity that Gogol was seeking to examine at the time he was writing the narrative. Despite having strict rules and rigid values of brotherhood and moral duty, Cossacks are depicted as an independent group of men who guard their tradition and culture against the imperial



dominancy in the area. At first, Ostap and Andrii are both absorbed by the exotic ways their people live as they “embraced their new life, forgetting their home, the Seminary, and everything that had troubled their souls. They were fascinated by the wild ways of the Sech and the rough code of justice, which at times struck them as too harsh in such a willful republic” (Gogol ch.3).

Being a true Cossack at heart, Andrii’s desire to guard his free will is paradoxically more akin to the free spirit of Cossacks rather than his brother’s obedience. Bojanowska points to the fact that “first and foremost, a Cossack cherishes the freedom of his will and hates any external constraints, either political or social. Unlike the Catholic knights, Gogol writes, the Cossacks did not bother with vows, fasts, or the mortification of the flesh” (141). The Cossacks are distinguished from other warriors by their desire to stay free of commitment and this reveals Taras’s unforgiving manner to be caused by the anxiety of resisting the imperial power at the moment. Andrii’s ironic execution by the hand of his own father is the climax of their story as a nation in the midst of anxiety when they are trying to resist the imperial power and deny the dialogic nature of culture as stated by Bhaba. Gogol masterfully “subverts the nationalism of his novel by injecting it with irony, a mode that is radically incompatible with nationalistic discourse.” (Bojanowska 243) The irony situates in the fact that despite the idea of fighting for preserving national values, Cossacks have manipulated their autonomy with drawing a line between themselves and the “other” which prevents them from acting as freely as true Cossacks. Ostap and Andrii both bravely make their best efforts to remain real Cossacks but since there is no liberty in the face of hegemony, they are both defeated in the end.

Although the love of the Polish lady catalyses Andrii’s rebellion, the signs are foreshadowed. When Taras watches Andrii’s style of fighting, he witnesses how he “driven by a burning passion, faced situations that a levelheaded, rational man never could, his crazed onslaught bringing about miracles that bewildered even the most battle-trying warriors.” (Gogol ch.5) Andrei gets easily bored and cannot follow the rules as expected, especially when he is required to show patience and “endure everything”. (Gogol ch.5) While Ostap makes his best effort to stay on the safe side, Andrii’s adventurous temperament gets him killed for ignoring Cossack codes of moral duty and brotherhood. Andrii does not run away from his murder, who happens to be his father and “obedient as a child, he dismounted, and stood before Taras more dead than alive.” (Gogol



ch.9) Although death is at hand, Andrii cannot ask for forgiveness since he has totally melted in the culture of the enemy.

“Andrii was white as a sheet; his lips moved gently, and he uttered a name; but it was not the name of his native land, nor of his mother, nor his brother; it was the name of the beautiful Pole.” (Gogol ch.9)

Ostap’s ending is no more glorious than his rebellious brother. His last words also show no contentment with the Cossack codes but express his ultimate goal to be recognised by his own people so that he could escape the identity crisis without paying the price. At the beginning, he bears the tortures but he is finally broken and in his last moments he does not cry out nationalistic phrases but only wishes that he could be witnessed by his father so that he could be acknowledged for his sacrifice

O God! all strangers, all unknown faces! If only some of his relatives had been present at his death! He would not have cared to hear the sobs and anguish of his poor, weak mother, nor the unreasoning cries of a wife, tearing her hair and beating her white breast; but he would have liked to see a strong man who might refresh him with a word of wisdom, and cheer his end. And his strength failed him, and he cried in the weakness of his soul, “Father! where are you? do you hear?” (Gogol ch.11)

5. Conclusion

Hegemonies of an imperial power establish binary oppositions by which a group of people are considered the “other” and situated in the inferior position. In the liminality created out of the space shared by both sides, hybrid characters come into existence who feel alienated as they cannot reside in only one of these cultures because they belong to both sides. Bulba brothers come from the same background and have received the same education, making them native Cossacks who have tasted the enemy's culture. While due to their different attitudes in life, they might seem far apart, both brothers are Cossacks at heart who view the situation more realistically than their father but are finally forced to take sides. The need for validation and belonging to a group can be traced to both of these characters. Although Ostap’s real thoughts are concealed in between the lines of Gogol’s ironic pen, he seems to be the only one who understands Andrii’s struggle and choice. The hybrid characters of *Taras Bulba*, therefore, cannot escape their tragic fate. However, Taras and his men are the ones who have to bear the ignominious defeat by getting unconsciously



manipulated because their prejudice does not let them be wise enough to vanquish their anxiety upon facing the imperial power.

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