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## The image of Eastern European women through the Western lens: a pop-cultural analysis

**Abstract.** *The main objective of the article is to consider the issue of pop cultural stereotyping, its background, and to apply post-colonial and feminist criticism as tools for the main analysis. It aims to describe the global hierarchy and post-colonial dynamics between the West and the East, while also attempting to explain the context behind the two ideas and their connotations. It uses both historical and theoretical academic resources to establish a clear understanding of the meaning behind the terms used. In the latter sub-chapter, the problems connected with the representation of Slavic women emerge. Certain mechanisms related to facile and improper imagery of Eastern Europe and women are explained, with an emphasis on objectification and the lack of agency of the fictional characters portrayed in Western media. Finally, the examples derived from mass culture are closely analysed, referring to the already existing discourse about stereotypes and unfair representation of Slavic women.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe, feminism, objectification, popular culture, post-colonialism, Slavic women

**Słowa kluczowe:** Europa Wschodnia, feminizm, uprzedmiotowienie, kultura popularna, postkolonializm, Słowianki



## Introduction

The subject of the article is the representation of Eastern European women based on Western sources of audio-visual cultural texts, such as broadly available films or TV series. Its main aim is to study the examples contextually and apply the post-colonial and feminist framework in search of harmful biases and discriminatory notions against women from this region of Europe. The analysis will focus on archetypes shaped by American or British media, considering the processes underlying stereotypical imagery of Eastern Europe. It will include the question of perspective on Eastern European women and focus on how they are perceived within Western Anglo-Saxon culture. What is more, it shall take a closer look at the historical contexts and delve deeper into the image of Eastern European women, using tools and concepts from both postcolonial and feminist criticism. At the same time, considering processes such as objectification, stereotyping, and the potential impact of these two.

To understand the processes more profoundly, post-colonial observations and ideas are highly valued tools. It is possible to look for common patterns of the Saidian “orientalisation” in Eastern Europe as well. Nonetheless, it has to be emphasised that the matter requires a particularly careful approach. It would be misleading to directly compare the experiences of the colonised nations of the ‘New World’ with those of post-communist countries. What it will try to do is challenge the omnipresent dominance of the Western perspective and search for colonial processes taking place in mass culture as well.

When it comes to the feminist lens and the perception of women, the concepts of Martha Nussbaum are exceptionally valuable here. Her idea of objectification will be used here to portray the multi-level aspects of objectifying women. She named seven elements characterising the objectification of a person:

1. **Instrumentality:** The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.

2. **Denial of autonomy:** The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.

3. **Inertness:** The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.

4. **Fungibility:** The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.

5. **Violability:** The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, or break into.

6. **Ownership:** The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.

7. **Denial of subjectivity:** The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.<sup>1</sup>

Many, if not all, of the features mentioned by Nussbaum can be applied to both the feminist and post-colonial perspectives. Treating a person as an object is not an exclusively patriarchal form of oppression. It is certainly a key element of white supremacy as well, or any other idea of racial, ethnic or national superiority above others. That is the reason why Nussbaum's work is also of great use for this particular topic and will help to analyse the topic through a "double lens."

## 1. The Construct of Eastern Europe

To merely begin describing the issue of Eastern Europe, or, less broadly, Slavic post-Soviet Europe, from a postcolonial perspective, it is crucial to understand the cultural and historical origins of the very concept. There are no clear natural borders between Western and Eastern Europe, and both terms have evolved throughout the centuries of European history. However, Alan Dingsdale described the elements building the cultural image of Eastern Europe as a geographical region. The most important factors, as Dingsdale notes, can be the economic backwardness relative to the biggest Western economies or the historical contexts of feudalism, nationalism, and then Soviet socialism. He proceeds to mention how in 1990, "the idea of Eastern Europe involved the nations controlled by communist governments German Democratic Republic, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria and Romania, except Yugoslavia, which followed an independent line and Albania, which looked to China as a model of socialism [...]."<sup>2</sup> Some of the countries named by Dingsdale do not identify as Eastern Europe – the more neutral idea of Central Europe carries no cultural burden of linkage to the Russian state and is often favoured politically. This might be partially the reason why the problem with the mentioned definitions has become ideologically burdened and evokes emotions to this day.

In his article about Central and Eastern Europe, Robin Okey draws attention to the variety of problems arising solely from these definitions. Okey notices that identification is a key factor in the discourse and emphasises the problem of rejecting Eastern identity. "Indeed, when Hungarians, Poles and Czechs writing in English claim a central European status for themselves and deny a European identity to Russia, the bizarre situation results of a continent with a west and a centre, but no east."<sup>3</sup> The dichotomy of (Western) Europe vs. Russia is still very much intact

<sup>1</sup> M. Nussbaum, *Objectification*, "Philosophy & Public Affairs" 1995, vol. 24, no. 4.

<sup>2</sup> A. Dingsdale, *Redefining "Eastern Europe": A New Regional Geography of Post-Socialist Europe?*, "Geography" 1999, vol. 84, no. 3.

<sup>3</sup> R. Okey, *Central Europe/Eastern Europe: Behind the Definitions*, "Past & Present" 1992, no. 137.

and disrupts the sense of belonging in the previously mentioned countries. In the article, the term “Eastern Europe” will mainly refer to the post-Soviet countries that Dingsdale has listed alongside, e.g., Ukraine and Belarus (excluding the Balkans, as countries with their own distinctive and complex issues). The contemporary identity and culture of Eastern Europe are undoubtedly impacted by the Soviet Union’s domination in the twentieth century.

The image of these countries in American mainstream media is hugely based on the sentiments connected with the Cold War, but also derives from the historically low position of, e.g. Polish emigrants in the United States. A Polish journalist, Przemysław Wielgosz, in his book *The Game of Races*, references the matter of certain forms of ‘white slavery’ in North America and the particularly subordinate positions of the poorest Europeans, including Poles or the Irish. He concludes that the predominant characteristic of any given form of oppression towards a certain group is man-made and developed as a supremacist ideology only to perpetuate economic dominance over the underprivileged groups that also tend to be non-white, Native, Hispanic or Slavic.<sup>4</sup> Wielgosz’s remarks appear quite valuable in the case of popular culture – such oppression could possibly have a noticeable impact on the creation of stereotypes. The historical background of this issue is discussed, for instance, in the article from 1982 *Hunkies: Stereotyping the Slavic Immigrants, 1890–1920* written by Karel D. Bicha.<sup>5</sup> However, it is a great challenge to find sources regarding the gendered perspective on these processes.

## 2. Slavic Women

To properly investigate the feminist issues arising from the portrayal of Eastern European women, additional ideas must first be introduced. Various factors shape the social and cultural discrimination of women; their nationality, sexual orientation or race make each oppressive practice unique and universal at the same time. It is not possible to fully grasp the problem from the female perspective without historical context, but also without feminist criticism. The issue of objectification is quite well described in academia and developed by feminist scholars as well as writers and activists. Michel Foucault analysed the processes of what he called “objectivization” in relation to his studies of power and one’s subjectivity. In his view, turning a subject into an object could occur in three modes: *Dividing Practices*, *Scientific Classification*, and *Subjectification*. In *The Subject and Power* Foucault writes that “I have studied the objectivizing the subject in what I shall call dividing

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<sup>4</sup> P. Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy. Jak kapitalizm dzieli, by rzqdzić*, Karakter, Kraków 2021, pp. 78–79.

<sup>5</sup> K.D. Bicha, *Hunkies: Stereotyping the Slavic Immigrants, 1890–1920*, “Journal of American Ethnic History” 1982, vol. 2, no. 1.

practices. The subject is divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him. Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the “good boys.”<sup>6</sup> Is division a powerful tool of subjection?

Dividing practices could be related to the notion of outsiders and insiders, the centre and the margin. But the most crucial matter regarding the female perspective and patriarchal forms of oppression is the one described by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who identified seven characteristics of treating a person like an object (already mentioned in the Introduction). The three of them: denial of subjectivity, inertness, and fungibility, seem to be particularly accurate. The presence of patriarchal, xenophobic, and racist patterns makes objectification a universal issue rooted in the patriarchal treatment of women as “sub-humans,” turning them into beings essentially lacking self-agency. All the named phenomena can be found echoing throughout modern popular culture, even though they rarely appear in their most evident form. But certain perspectives remain favoured in the media and shape how people form their vision of reality.

In that case, the consequences of the monopolisation of the male perspective need to be taken into consideration. The term *male gaze* was more broadly introduced to academic criticism thanks to the contribution of Laura Mulvey, who analysed its mechanisms in the context of filmmaking in the 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.<sup>7</sup> In modern feminist discourse, the process of sexualising women and the influence of a strictly masculinised perspective gained acclaim and publicity not only within the narrow community of academics or feminist activists but also started to appear as a more mainstream and widely used term in the most successful contemporary media. Online magazines and social media posts have become suitable platforms for women to name multiple examples of male-influenced perspectives and to search for the male gaze in popular culture. Mulvey inspired scholars to develop her notion, and that is why we could also use the term of *Western gaze* – another angle of observing the world from the dominant position. The analysis assumes the existence and co-dependence of Western and masculine perspectives. Both are visibly emerging in audiovisual media. Earlier, Ann E. Kaplan popularised the idea by introducing the *Imperial gaze* – a colonial perspective in visual art – to portray a parallel phenomenon to Mulvey’s.<sup>8</sup> However, many decide to use a broader concept of the West. It appears to be more accurate in this article as well.

To understand those *Western* stereotypes and their presence, one could type the term “Eastern European Woman” into Google. A significant number of results (in

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<sup>6</sup> M. Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, “Critical Inquiry” 1982, vol. 8, no. 4.

<sup>7</sup> L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in: *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. C. Penley, Routledge, New York 1988.

<sup>8</sup> E.A. Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, Routledge, New York–London 1997, pp. 56–76.

English) will offer dating “tips,” as women in the region are supposedly proper “wife materials.” This involuntarily creates a sense of dichotomy where “Western” women have the less desired traits and represent what potentially resents single men who seek the vision of femininity that coincides with the strictly patriarchal gender roles. The situation often concerns young American men who might have trouble adjusting to circumstances where traditional male dominance starts to be questioned. Most “Western” stereotypes of Eastern women are based on a sense of false nostalgia, seeking the image of 1950s American middle-class housewives. Nevertheless, the whole fallacy of the belief that “the traditional wife fantasy” can be achieved through searching for a Slavic partner is based on the xenophobic assumption of Eastern backwardness. Women in Eastern Europe are not perceived through the historical and social context of the region; American patterns are being applied, and the core of the fantasy is inspired by the vision of American society from the past. To properly analyse why the housewife archetype is quite improper in the context of, e.g., Eastern European working-class women, one must consider the fact that many of them have traditionally worked in often physically demanding professions. The Westernised image of Slavic or Eastern European women usually combines elements of sexism, classism, and xenophobia.

There is also a common idea that Slavic women are more elegant and more feminine, while Western women have stopped cherishing their womanhood as a result of emancipation. It leads to the conclusion that, even though women’s rights movements discouraged women from existing purely for the male gaze and satisfaction, there is still a chance that, somewhere, it remains women’s priority. Why would anyone, including conservative American men, assume that feminism and women’s rights are non-influential in Eastern Europe and that the process of emancipation stopped there a few decades ago? Hypothetically, it could mean that, from this Western, especially American, perspective, the notion of feminism is exclusive to their part of the world, and it is possible for it to either spread to Eastern Europe or not exist there at all. The concept of separate women’s rights movements developing there cannot occur. Peripheries do not develop ideas for themselves; their ideas exist in relation to the dominant ones. Edward Said discussed what he called Western hegemony over the Orient<sup>9</sup> – in this case, the hegemony of perspective has a cultural impact on everyone outside of the centre.

### 3. A Study of a Few Fictional Slavic Women

Given the ongoing globalisation, it is reasonable to consider American popular culture omnipresent. As a consequence, we observed the rapid popularisation of exclusively American streaming platforms. A catalogue of past and present (pre-

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<sup>9</sup> E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, “The Georgia Review” 1977, vol. 31, no. 1.

dominantly) American productions: films, TV series, reality shows, etc., is within reach all the time. And it is continuously extending. Certainly, that does not mean there is no, e.g., British/European, Australian or Asian media content available and being produced solely for these platforms. Netflix, Max, Disney+ and Amazon Prime want to appeal to audiences everywhere; they prioritise inclusivity and diversity. The question is whether these are actual efforts or elements of a marketing campaign. While examining widely promoted and most popular Netflix original series, we noticed that almost all of them are American productions starring English-speaking actors, set in the U.S., sometimes in the U.K. A visible exception is the phenomenon of *Squid Game*, a South Korean Netflix original. Nonetheless, it is fair to emphasise how well it targets American audiences, revolving around impoverished Asian people fighting to survive in awful conditions. Could it be considered as appealing to the “Western gaze”? And what about the portrayals of other ethnicities and nations?

When it comes to the Russian presence in American popular culture, it is usually based on antagonisms created by Cold War hostility. Interestingly, other Eastern European countries receive less attention in the American media. It requires looking a bit more closely to detect all the housekeepers, cleaning ladies or babysitters, standing usually behind the main characters – white Anglo-Saxon Americans. However, the situation seems to be changing, and nowadays such portrayals could be interpreted as looking down on immigrants (not only Europeans). Understandably, portraying Black women solely as housekeepers, babysitters, etc., is no longer as acceptable as it used to be unless the historical context validates it. The role has been taken over mainly by white immigrant women because the class division between them and Anglo-Saxon American families does not evoke strong objections.

An accurate example of this problem in the media is the character Dorota from the American teen TV drama *Gossip Girl*. The series was particularly popular in the early 2010s, and Dorota fits the tropes of the time. Dorota, played by Zuzanna Szadkowski, was Polish and worked as a maid for one of the main characters, Blair Waldorf. In fact, Dorota is not making negative assumptions about the personalities of Eastern Europeans. or, specifically, Polish women. She is supposed to be a likeable person – unfortunately, not as a part of the plot, but rather as a nice recurring element. Dorota is helpful, loyal, and eager to give Blair her advice. She could even be viewed, to some extent, as a motherly figure, and it would not be right to simply consider her a “dumb” archetype. That being said, she serves a very stereotypical role of a helpful and good-natured maid who builds a close interpersonal relationship and attachment to her employers in an unjust power dynamic. The symptomatic culmination of her plot is when Dorota becomes a “countess” in Poland—a small, yet excellent example of further ignorance regarding the history of Eastern European nations.

Inaccurate examples of media representation still spark discussions about conscious and respectful portrayals. Currently in the United States, Latino, Asian, and Indian immigrant communities are beginning to regain their voices and speak up about their unique perspectives. Due to increasing diversity among creators, scriptwriters and directors, it becomes possible to develop original ideas outside the Western gaze. However, Bicha noticed that the situation of Eastern European immigrants in the U.S. is slightly different because they never came together to form a separate immigrant community. Slavic communities revolved around a certain nation or, even more so, around the individual. They did not share a colonial history with the U.S., and individual nations were not numerous enough to form distinctive groups capable of shaping their own independent narratives.<sup>10</sup> To this day, women from, e.g., Ukraine, Poland, or Belarus are being frequently depicted in a fixed way. Western popular culture keeps reproducing distorted portrayals of Eastern European immigrants, perpetuating the idea of them being less educated, poor or looking to improve their status through marriage with an Insider.

There is a particular media incident worth recalling, and it concerns the character in a Netflix original production called *Emily in Paris*. The TV series premiered in 2020 and has four seasons so far, following the story of a young American woman, Emily Cooper (played by Lily Collins), who moves from Chicago to Paris. The story is openly marketed as a light-hearted one and revolves around Emily's life and her struggles to fit into the European metropolis. The series has been criticised for its stereotypical portrayal of Parisians and France due to the story's highly "Americanised" perspective and has been accused of some sort of mockery towards the citizens of the city.<sup>11</sup> The issue that raised even more questions was the portrayal of a Ukrainian woman in season 2 of *Emily in Paris*, which premiered in 2022. The character of Petra (a name that is also uncommon in Ukraine) represented several biases associated with Eastern Europe, Ukrainian women, and immigrants, viewed strictly through the American lens.

Petra is certainly not a villain of the story, and she even seems to lack the agency and intellectual capability to be one. She fits into the stereotype of an immigrant woman who is not as classy, wealthy, and attractive as Emily, who is portrayed as exceptionally fashionable. Petra is a minor episodic character who steals while shopping with Emily and recalls some of the most common patterns of "fake" Westerners: ignorant, poor immigrant women with questionable taste (which provides an additional contrast between her and the American woman). The character of Petra sparked outrage among Ukrainian people who interpreted it as a "cheap" caricature. Ukraine's Culture Minister, Oleksandr Tkachenko, has

<sup>10</sup> K.D. Bicha, *Hunkies: Stereotyping the Slavic Immigrants...*

<sup>11</sup> A. De Oliveira, S. Smith, *Cheating, Croissants, Couture: Young Parisians Revile Cliché-Packed 'Emily in Paris'*, NBC News, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/emily-paris-angers-real-life-parisians-rcna11889> [accessed: 27.05.2025].

issued a complaint to the streaming platform, accusing Netflix of creating “a caricature image of a Ukrainian woman that is unacceptable. [...] also insulting”<sup>12</sup>, later asking whether this is how Ukrainians are perceived abroad. But that was not the end of the backlash connected with the series.

According to the portal The Kyiv Independent, which was reporting the whole controversy around the Netflix character, “Eugenia Havrylko, an actual Ukrainian influencer living in Paris, was among the first to criticise the depiction as ‘a cheap trick, absolute scandal and a shame.’ [...] Ukrainian film critic Inna Gordeeva agreed and said that Netflix should delete the scenes with Petra, especially since they don’t drive the story. Many have pointed out that Petra is an unusual name to give a Ukrainian character since it’s rare in the country and more common elsewhere in Eastern Europe.”<sup>13</sup> It is also important to mention that the situation evoked a broad discussion among Ukrainians and some people were defending Netflix, arguing that the outrage might have been caused by the Ukrainian “inferiority complex.”<sup>14</sup> The series evoked many emotions and sparked controversy around the character. Still, it was not the first time a Netflix production drew on stereotypical imagery of Eastern European women to define its characters’ traits. In the article *Colonization of minds: Ukraine between Russian colonialism and Western Orientalism*, Galyna Kotliuk states:

Petra is a hyperbolic caricature of a Ukrainian savage that has entered civilized European space and is menacing to destroy it if not controlled by Emily, who functions as an agent of Western (specifically American) values and norms. Petra’s personality is diminished in two aspects: she is Ukrainian and enjoys shoplifting. The fact that Petra is not even a Ukrainian name only reconfirms my claim that the West has (re)created a distorted image of Ukrainian women based on the double colonial perspective and the lack of knowledge it has engendered.<sup>15</sup>

Kotliuk evokes the colonial character of such portrayals and firmly criticises the American popular culture for situating Western norms as inherently higher in the global hierarchy. Petra is an example of a deeply problematic and wrong idea of who Ukrainian women are and represents what is an improper media portrayal. Even though *Emily in Paris* is often described through its satirical tone and exaggerated characters, it does not challenge any of the present stereotypes. More so,

<sup>12</sup> K. Abbott, *Ukraine’s Culture Minister Blasts Emily in Paris over ‘Unacceptable’ Stereotype*, “The Guardian” 3.01.2022, <https://tiny.pl/29vr2z4rt> [accessed: 27.05.2025].

<sup>13</sup> A. Korniienko, *Netflix Responds to Criticism over ‘Offensive’ Ukrainian Character in ‘Emily in Paris’*, “The Kyiv Independent” January 4, 2022, <https://tiny.pl/5qf1334wc> [accessed: 27.05.2025].

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> G. Kotliuk, *Colonization of Minds: Ukraine between Russian Colonialism and Western Orientalism*, “Frontiers in Sociology” 2023, vol. 8, p. 6.

it benefits from them by targeting Americans and creating further simplifications that only embrace the colonial perspective and lack of knowledge.

Despite that, a better representation of complex women who play a bigger role in the plot certainly exists. It is not the point to deny the presence of well-written, complex Eastern European female characters. Still, reproducing stereotypes and questionable patterns remains an issue even when a character is both likeable and vital to the plot. There is a general notion of “corruption” and “misbehaviour” when it comes to Eastern European female characters, often rooted in associations with the Soviets. Specifically, Russian women are characterised by their ruthlessness and surface-level cold-heartedness.

The Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* was one of the platform’s first and biggest hits, featuring a cast of characters from very diverse backgrounds. In the multicultural environment of Litchfield’s female prison, where the action takes place, the Eastern European archetype is embodied in Red, whose birth name is Galina Reznikov (not Reznikova). She is a vivid character and instantly draws the viewer’s attention. She is a strong and intimidating figure of a middle-aged woman who had to fight to reach prominence in the prison hierarchy. She speaks with a strong Russian accent and presents herself as dangerous, a person who has no remorse for her enemies. The main character of the series, Piper Chapman, ends up in prison unexpectedly, and Red intimidates her as a kind of prison “veteran” who enjoys a lot of authority and respect but also competes to maintain her position. Later on, the series reveals more context about her life and attempts to create a “fuller picture” of who she is as a person and what her life was like before being sentenced to prison. As a Russian inmate, Red does not have a surprising background, yet it allows us to understand the circumstances that made her what she is and what factors impacted her becoming such a “tough” woman. Through flashbacks, the story reveals that Galina had a husband, Dmitri, who was involved in a sort of mafia organisation in Queens. Through her husband, Red learned the ways of the Russian mafia.

In the article *Seeing ‘Red’ (Orange Is the New Black) – Russian Women, US Homonationalism and New Cold War Cultures*, Katharina Wiedlack discusses the cultural representation of Russian women in media based on the example of that particular Netflix TV series and, again, takes a closer look at how the processes of racialisation and *othering* happen towards women from the post-Soviet countries. Moreover, Wiedlack analyses the way heterosexuality or heteronormativity is linked to the portrayals of Eastern Europe, and how “Eastern European binarism” is contrasted with the diverse prison community in Litchfield. It is important to note that when the show begins, the main plot line revolves around the main character meeting her ex-girlfriend in prison, drawing attention to the sexual tension between the two. Unlike the young American women, middle-aged Red impersonates a kind of conservative and exclusively heterosexual toughness. As Wiedlack describes

the issue in her text, “US imaginaries of Russian women, although they are understood ethnically as Slavic and therefore as white Europeans, are structured through a ‘complex cold-war-era version of orientalism’ (Williams 2012: 4) that signifies them as feminine and heterosexual.”<sup>16</sup> It is clear that there is a difference between the portrayals of Russian women and other Slavic women from Eastern Europe.

In Western media, the evil component of Russian women is strongly linked with Cold War imagery and heterosexualisation as well. In the 1995 Bond film *Goldeneye* (script co-written by a British and American man), there are two archetypes of “Soviet” women – Natalya Simonova, a positive figure and a helpful “Bond girl” that needs saving and on the other end of the spectrum – Xenia Onatopp, a hypersexualised vision of Russian women, an assassin who crushes men with her thighs to reach a sexual climax (sic!). Onatopp is villainous, attractive and threatening. As a character, she could be considered a visual representation of both the male gaze and the Western gaze; an orientalist, unrestrained, evil female force. Nonetheless, the portrayal of Xenia Onatopp from *Goldeneye* would currently be considered objectifying or even ridiculous, and it is not easy to find similar examples in today’s films and TV series.

*Orange is the New Black* does not objectify its female characters; it presents a wide range of diverse, complex women throughout the series. But the pattern regarding Russians and Eastern European immigrants is blatant. Wiedlack mentioned how OITNB features female characters of difficult backgrounds, women of colour, white underprivileged women from lower classes, and many non-heteronormative women. The series premiered over 10 years ago, and the way it portrayed women from such diverse backgrounds could have been a major part of its undeniable success at the time. But on the other hand, it is necessary to note that Red is played by an American actress, Kate Mulgrew, with no experience playing Russians.

In the story, Red was convicted of organised crime, and in the first season of the series, she had already spent 12 years in prison. She is influential and, as Wiedlack notes, embodies the “old” Russian stereotype, in contrast to the one based on fake appearance and attempts to fit in. Red is from a different generation and appears to be defined through her Soviet toughness, with some motherly protective traits of a traditional matron. This is how Wiedlack describes the contrast presented in the show as well:

In ‘Tit Punch’ the viewer is introduced to the reason why Red, a former restaurant owner, became a part of the Russian mob: She punching the mean-spirited, arrogant, and fake-blond Russian wife of a mafia boss in the chest, bursting the woman’s breast implant, which put her \$60,000 in debt to the mafia boss. The juxtaposition of the mafia boss’s wife and Red is interesting. While the first represents the stereotypical, newly rich, fake-blond ‘Slavic femme’ – a woman who cares about her feminine appearance,

<sup>16</sup> K. Wiedlack, *Seeing ‘Red’ (Orange Is the New Black) – Russian Women, US Homonationalism and New Cold War Cultures*, “Gender” 2016, vol. 17, no. 1.

likes to show of her wealth through expensive clothes and jewellery, looks down on people with less or no money, but has a simple mind – Red represents the good-hearted, old-fashioned, motherly, and modest working-class woman, who rises to the occasion in moments of need. Red is a real worker, practical and smart, authentic and principled – factors that mark her as ethnic, which means Russian – while the blond wife of the mafia boss represents the new Russia, rife with corruption and lacking ethics. Both women, however, are emotional and temperamental – a frequent attribute of Slavic women in TV shows – and it is Red’s Russian temperament that seals her fate.<sup>17</sup>

The flashbacks play a significant role in character-building when it comes to OITNB. In the fragment from Wiedlack’s article, there is one of those flashbacks described, probably one of the most important to the overall representation of Red. It is possible to differentiate two archetypes here: one (Red) that is more closely linked to this old Soviet imagery or traditional femininity, probably associating Red with growing up poor, fighting to survive in Soviet Russia, and learning to be humble. The other one (The blonde wife) is “new” and does not evoke Soviet imagery. It is more about anti-immigrant rhetoric and not treating Eastern Europeans as classy and sophisticated enough even to resemble “true” American white femininity.

These assumptions were present in *Emily in Paris*, as Petra was inferior in both attractiveness and intellectual capacity. Besides, class distinctions played an important role in stereotyping here. The wife of the mafia boss will also be stereotyped for her wealth and materialistic attitude, making her a better fit for the gold-digger trope than a poor Eastern European shoplifter. However, the mafia boss’s wife is less threatening as she is not looking for the wealth of American men; she is pathetic and fake, intertwined with her criminal husband (a common Russian stereotype regarding men). Red, as a person who actually experienced the hardships of Soviet citizens, values working hard and being honourable. Despite that, OITNB and the character of Red are not the only examples of Soviet/Russian hardships shaping the ruthlessness and determination of a woman in Western TV series.

*Killing Eve*, a 2018 TV series based on the British novel Villanelle, is a spy thriller with strong homoerotic undertones between the two main female characters – Eve Polastri and Villanelle. In this context, it is necessary to discuss Villanelle, as she is a particularly interesting figure and, at times, seems to be an indirect commentary on Western images of Russian women. Unlike Xenia Onatopp, Villanelle is a Russian assassin with a complex story and a multi-dimensional personality. Though ethically she is extremely questionable, it is possible to empathise with her because the character is created to have faulty yet humane qualities and weaknesses. Villanelle is hiding her identity and has many implied traumas linked to Russia and her family. Here, again, flashbacks are important; Villanelle’s backstory and identity are gradually revealed throughout the seasons. The story challenges previously discussed hetero-sexualisation and the male gaze in regard to shaping

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

Russian or Eastern European characters. Villanelle is not meant to appeal to male fantasy; she is psychopathic and lacks most of the stereotypical traits mentioned earlier. Her character keeps challenging the standards of femininity. The real name of Villanelle is Oksana, and she gives it up altogether with her whole Russian identity. Unlike most Russian characters in Western fiction, Villanelle's character is not defined through her country of origin, and there is no obvious way to exactly assume her nationality (except for her non-native accent, which might be considered as "Slavic"). She is the antithesis of "fake" immigrants awkwardly attempting to be stylish, classy and sophisticated. Villanelle is remarkably fashionable, wearing flamboyant designer outfits, and she is disturbingly intelligent, with a lack of empathy and perceptive sight.

In one of the episodes, Villanelle is having coffee in Amsterdam, looking flawless and straight out of a fashion magazine, when a tourist asks to take a photo of her. Villanelle instantly declines. She does not crave attention or admiration, but in her Western identity, she finds the freedom to be who she is. The scene was evoked in the article *Agents of Chaos: The Monstrous Feminine in Killing Eve* as well. Authors describe Villanelle's relation with style:

The gaze in *Killing Eve* is, further, both queered and female; Villanelle is constructed not through male spectatorship, but as suggested by the enchanted Instagrammer and the obsessive attentions of Eve, largely via the viewpoints or examinations of other women. [...] Villanelle's enjoyment for fashion and beauty is empowering because when she is not working, she is dressing up for herself. As Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Alison Mackiewicz (2016) argue, "Postfeminist beauty work is not an objectification evaluated by the 'male in the head'; instead it is a process of subjectification because the transformation is understood as a practice of consuming oneself into being through the rhetoric of agentic individualism, choice, and empowerment" (98). Villanelle sends the young Instagrammer away because she does not require an audience to "like" her look to feel attractive or empowered.<sup>18</sup>

One could even argue that even though *Killing Eve* exhibits some stereotypes regarding Russia and Eastern Europe in general (the Polish husband of Eve), Villanelle is an attempt to subjectify Russian women and women's role in mainstream media in general. It does not happen without the involvement of the Western gaze (the Western idea of being sophisticated and fashionable as a personal goal), but it is challenged by Villanelle's psychopathic behaviour, which does not fit into any social expectations that people have of her. Villanelle's sexuality is also a large part of her empowerment, agency and independence. Her relationship with Eve is complex and at times ambiguous, but the romantic and sexual tension between the two emerges early in the series and is not defined by stereotypes or oversimplifications. *Killing Eve*'s story challenges the portrayal of Russian women as dangerous

<sup>18</sup> A. Miller, C. Atherton, P. Hetherington, *Agents of Chaos: The Monstrous Feminine in Killing Eve*, "Feminist Media Studies" 2021, vol. 23, no. 4, p. 1812.

sexual objects and portrays Villanelle as a seriously threatening but complicated and nuanced human being.

Possibly, there is no point in comparing the portrayal of Eastern European women in *Killing Eve* to *Emily in Paris*, for instance, as the two have completely different target audiences. The question is whether a comedic series of a significantly less serious tone should be held to a lower standard. It does seem that preserving a distorted vision of reality, based on stereotypes and a sense of Western superiority, is problematic and wrong in any case. The social awareness among viewers around the world appears to be increasing, as characters such as Petra evoke strong emotions and receive significant negative media coverage. Mocking certain nationalities or using stereotypes to define a character has become increasingly unacceptable. Nevertheless, stereotypes connected with poverty, crassness or simply foolishness are still being associated with Eastern European women who quite often play the role of a comic relief rather than the main character.

## Conclusion

The feminist and post-colonial theorists described mechanisms that ought to be discussed in various contexts, creating a valuable foundation of analysis. Anti-immigrant biases or hostile political discourse tend to be reflected in mass culture as well. Despite many efforts to ensure diversity in the media, discriminatory patterns persist in more or less apparent ways. Eastern European women, contrary to e.g., Black women, are not a fixed group, and the matter of definition itself causes trouble. Therefore, it does not come easily to identify the background of a given stereotype. Orientalism might not have included Eastern Europe as a target of Western myth-making and cultural subjugation; however, it turns out to be one. Women of the region visibly experience postcolonial othering alongside Nussbaum's ideas of inertness and denial of subjectivity. Luckily, it does not happen unnoticed anymore.

Each of the mentioned examples from popular culture established an image of Eastern Europe as the middle-ground between the sophistication of the West and imperial notions of the East's primitiveness. Slavic women who were the main subjects of the text exist within the narrative of their irrelevance; as white women, they face a form of orientalisation that is more challenging to capture. It situates Eastern European women in a sort of liminal space where they exist between the oppression of a "Soviet Easterner" and the privilege of white Europeans. Nevertheless, throughout the years, the audiences have been observing a positive change in media representation of Eastern European women, and the attempts to somehow reconstruct certain biases are occurring more frequently (*Killing Eve*). These steps, although not perfect, are heading towards the right direction: a representation more mindful and inclusive of all perspectives. The issue demands further attention and vigilance, although the conscious reactions of the audiences make the future look bright.

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