

Patriotism for Cosmopolitanism: Postcolonial Reading of Vazha-Pshavela's Essay "Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism"

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Abstract:

Vazha-Pshavela is known as one of the most important poets in the history of modern Georgian literature. His epic poems, "Aluda Keterauli," "Guest and Host" are regarded as masterpieces until today and are adopted into a film, "Vedreba" ("The Plea"), by Tengiz Abuladze, which consist of his trilogy (the others are "Natvris Khe" ("The Wishing Tree") and "Monanieba" ("Repentance"). Beside poems, he wrote short tales as well as ethnographic or philosophical essays. Today I would like to make my presentation based on his one of the most important essays, "Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism" (1905).

This essay tends to be understood that the poet supports for patriotism *against* cosmopolitanism especially when considering the context of that time. Before starting our discussion, I would like to introduce this historical context. In the second half of 19th century, Georgian students started studying in university in Russia and they formed a new group with nationalistic ideology to find the way to save the country from Russian colonial rule. The leaders of the group were Ilia Ch'avch'avadze and Akaki Tsereteli (we can see their statue on Rustaveli Ave.). Later they are called as "Pirveli Dasi" (The first group) and are considered as canonical writers. If the first group consists of nationalists, the second, "Meore Dasi" is utopian socialists, and the third "Mesame Dasi" is Marxists. The last one got active since 1898 and harshly criticized the first group and its leader, Ilia Ch'avch'avadze, blaming their nationalistic thought and aristocracy while insisting international and cosmopolitan movement. Finally, this opposition ended up with Ch'avch'avadze's murder in 1907 while the essay we are now going to discuss is written in 1905–2 years before the murder. Therefore, from this context, it looks natural to understand that with the essay Vazha-Pshavela was supporting the nationalist movement, with which Ch'avch'avadze intended

to decolonize Georgia, and it is also natural to consider Vazha-Pshavela as a member of “The First Group.”

Nationalism, of course, is a strong ideology and narrative to fight and struggle against imperialism and colonialism. However, when once decolonization is successfully accomplished, nationalism itself sometimes turns into nothing but a mean to oppress other ethnic minorities, or to cause conflicts with other nations. From this postcolonial point of view, we should be careful when treating nationalism as the ideology for fighting against empires; we should recognize that nationalism has both sides. We can observe such political situations in African as well as Asian post-colonial countries, and, to some extent, the similar scene can be observed in the post-soviet nations including Georgia, which holds the nationalist ideology of “the First Group” as a core of national narrative as well as the Georgian literary canon until today.

Therefore, when reading the canonical works of Georgian nationalist literature, in our case Vazha-Pshavela, we should pay more attention to this postcolonial admonish in order that we should not be trapped in the nationalist dilemma (or, in other words, chauvinism). The aim of this paper is to inquire how we can read Vazha-Pshavela’s works without a simple and direct understanding as a part of “nationalist” discourse.

Keywords: Vazha-Pshavela, Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism, Sense of Place

Patriotism and “Sense of Place”

In “Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism,” Vazha-Pshavela, proposing an argument that supports patriotism, insists:

“I can not imagine a person with full reason and healthy feeling who does not love any single nation or a region more than other [nations or regions]. Why? –Because the same person is not born in thousands of places [at once], but must be born in a single place, in a single family, and must have a single mother!” (Vazha-Pshavela, 1964, 9, p. 254).

He declares that when a person is born in the world, he/she starts to have contact and communication with his/her mother as well as circumstances and therefore it is natural to love them and to acquire patriotic feeling.

Interestingly, Vazha's this thought is to some extent correspond to a main topic of ecocriticism, "Sense of Place". In its definition, the sense of place is formed by a human-environment relationship, which local inhabitants have created through local history, culture, memory, knowledge and so on. As Ryden (1991, p. 38) defines, "[a] sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing a history within its confines". If so, we can confidently say that what Vazha insists in the essay is truly Georgian version of the sense of place.

Grigol K'ik'nadze (1957), a Georgian scholar on Vazha-Pshavela studies, points out:

"If any feeling of love toward any single region of their homeland does not rush in Ilia's [Ch'avch'avadze] and Ak'ak'i's [Ts'ereteli] works; if the feeling of love toward any region is subordinated directly under the idea of homeland as such in these poets' writing, then, in Vazha-Pshavela's works, the homeland is represented not as a general idea, but as his own region with rivers, mountains, flowers, birds and animals..." (p. 44).

This point of view exactly shows the essence of Vazha-Pshavela's sense of place. After returning from St. Petersburg, where he studied in university, he had basically lived in his home village, Chargali, and collected folklores and ethnographies by walking from village to village. Then, he used these ethnographic or geographic details in his poems, as Vazha-Pshavela (1964, 9, p. 363) writes: "Almost all my poems are based on folklore or old tales [...]".

For instance, when creating the poem "The Snake Eater," he used a folklore "Mindi of Khogai," in which the main character eats snake meat and obtains an ability to hear voices of plants. While this plot itself is certain reflection of relationship between the local people and nature, he added some more local ethnographic details in the poem; in "The Snake Eater" as well as in his other poems, he often mentions about a local traditional religious festival ("Lashaloba").

Or, more simply, he puts concrete names of places in the poems so that readers can recognize where the events are happening in their plots. As an example for this point, I could propose his epic poem, “Bakhtrion.” This poem depicts the battle of Bakhtrion (1659) and show us how legendary the mountainous people fought against enemies, which occupied the lower Georgia. We can notice that many concrete places are mentioned in the poem: *Khoshara, Apkusho, Roshka, Agma, Gudani, Ch’ormeshali, Ch’ie, Ghuli, Khakhmati, Bachali, Akhadi, Gogolaurta, Maturi, and the headstream of Alazani river...* With this concreteness, we read the poem as if we are experiencing the history and the memory of the region.

In short, Vazha’s sense of place is strongly connected with the history of the Pshav-Khevsureti region, where he was born therefore he love. Once Vazha-Pshavela (1964, 9, p. 291) writes: “The historical past and the nature of Georgianness give us hope that this [The first group’s] ‘nationalism’ would be healthy and would never change into chauvinism and fanaticism”. If the sense of place emerged with slightly criticising the idea of nation-state and the subtle national identity, in this sense unlike Ilia Ch’avch’avadze and Ak’ak’I Ts’ereteli, who supposed a single “imagined community” and a national identity, Vazha-Pshavela explained the sense of place as the love of local history, nature, and culture, and therefore his “nationalism” could be “healthy” forever.

Patriotism and/for Cosmopolitanism

Despite the general understanding, Vazha-Pshavela actually does not deny cosmopolitanism in the essay, “Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism.” Vazha-Pshavela (1964) starts the essay as follow:

Each true patriot is a cosmopolitan as each clever (and not our [Georgian]) cosmopolitan is a patriot. How? – In following way: Such a person sensibly serves his/her own nation and tries to improve his/her own homeland mentally, physically, and ethically. By this [behavior], he/she prepares the best members and the best friends for the whole humanity and contributes the development and well-being of the humanity (p. 252).

He thinks that, since the development of each nation through nationalists' contribution finally reaches the development of the whole humanity, patriotism and nationalism are not opposed to cosmopolitanism.

Considering the above-mentioned concept, here are two viewpoints from which we can construe Vazha-Pshavela's poems:

(1) Vazha-Pshavela thought that we can not become global or cosmopolitan without any local origin (especially, in cultural and literary turn). Therefore, he was particular about the sense of place as I mentioned above. He firmly believed that Georgians were able to love their own region(s). This love encourages them to enrich their region and homeland, and through this way they will contribute for all of humanity. Therefore, "the nature of Georgianness" to love – he insists – guarantees that "nationalism would be healthy."

(2) At the same time, he criticized conservatism and intolerance of local communities and depicted those who are exiled from the communities in his poems. Certainly, one of the main themes of his poems is conflict between individual and community. In "Aluda Keterauli," Aluda with his family were exiled from his village because he made a sacrifice for an enemy he killed on the local festival; in "Guest and Host," three main characters, Zviadauri, Jokola and Aghaza were all died because Zviadauri is the enemy for Jokola's village and killed by the villagers: because Jokola was forsaken because of inviting Zviadauri and was killed in the battle: and Aghaza, after his husband's, Jokola's death, committed a suicide; In "The Snake Eater," Mindia's ability to hear the voice of nature was once criticized by villagers. All of these examples show us that Vazha intendedly repeated the theme of conflict between individual and community.

Moreover, it is also interesting for us that destinations these characters go in exile is imagined as deterritorialized spaces. In the final chapter of "Guest and Host," Jokola, Aghaza, and Zviadauri get up from their graves as ghosts and gather on a rock and talk friendly after their tragic death. Therefore, this scene represents a world after death, i.e., deterritorialized world. In "The Snake Eater," it is possible to regard that the time-space where Mindia hears the voice of nature is a pre-historical, Edenic space. These deterritorialized spaces are not in the original text of the folklore he used to create the poems; rather, it is his original imagination, as he himself testified (Vazha-Pshavela, 1964, 9, p. 363-365). If so, Vazha-Pshavela specially prepared these deterritorialized spaces contrasting it with the local space in order to deconstruct the local identities, rather than depicted a cosmopolitan space which has no connection to any local identity.

Conclusion

In the essay, Vazha-Pshavela (1964) writes:

Patriotism is more a matter of feelings than of reason while the reason was and is always adored and respected. Cosmopolitanism is just a fruit of the reason, of the reason of human being. It is not related to human's heart. It is a mean to avoid from the tragedy, which is suffering whole humanity until today (9, p. 254).

Vazha-Pshavela's this consideration echoes today's ecocritical discussion about the reconciliation of regionalism/localism and cosmopolitanism to overcome global scale environmental crisis like global warming, some ecocritics think that knowledge and technology help widening a local identity to global level (Heise, 2008, p. 17-67; Thomashow, 1999). Of course, this ecological point of view goes far beyond our discussion, but we can say that what Vazha-Pshavela insists in the essay doesn't lose its significance even today.

In short, Vazha-Pshavela, while describing the local tradition as the base of his creation, at the same time depicted the figures exiled from the local and tried to show a way to develop the local communities ethically. In other words, the poet imagines the deterritorialized space while drawing the very local sense of place. By being aware of this deterritorialization, local identity and nationalism keep "healthy" and contribute to the world.

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