

Representations of Traditions Against Infectious Diseases in the Texts of the Nineteenth-Century Georgian Writers and the Epoch Socio-Political Context

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Abstract:

Our interest in this issue has arisen from the main global problem – the Coronavirus pandemic. We wondered how the nineteenth century is represented in the texts of Georgian writers, how Georgian folk rituals and beliefs against infectious diseases are presented in the texts of the nineteenth-century Georgian writers: Nikoloz Natidze-Melania, Niko Lomouri, and Anastasia Eristavi-Khoshtaria. The research aims to find out whether the reflection of rituals and beliefs in the stories of the above-mentioned writers is their artistic means or the way to show the spirit of the epoch and the worldview of the time – serious socio-cultural changes taking place in the nineteenth century Georgia, the desire to show their position about these changes or innovations. The texts of the writers we have selected are important from the standpoint that Anastasia Eristavi-Khoshtaria is a woman writer standing at the forefront of Georgian gender writing, Nikoloz Natidze was a clergyman, and Niko Lomouri was a well-known teacher. Therefore, important are the events seen and appreciated through the eyes of a clergyman, woman writer, and teacher. All three stories, especially Lomouri's and Eristavi-Khoshtaria's, pose the issue of women's rights and are the best examples of Georgian children's writing. This interdisciplinary research, based on archival materials and scientific literature, showed that all three texts depict the customs related to infectious diseases as an artistic way of expressing current significant socio-cultural and, consequently, mental changes. By using the beliefs related to infectious diseases, the authors inform readers of their position on the most important, current epoch-making events. The Georgian experience of fighting epidemics, seen by the three mentioned authors, conveys socio-cultural processes that are generally characteristic of the European context.

Keywords: Nineteenth-century Georgian literature, Literature for Children, Women's Issue, Infectious Diseases

Introduction

The purpose of our research was to study the literary texts of three famous Georgian authors – Nikoloz Natidze (Melania), Niko Lomouri, and Anastasia Eristav-Khoshtaria. Their texts are devoted to Georgian folk rites, traditions, and beliefs in the fight against infectious diseases. We have compared these texts in an effort to show the similarities and differences between these traditions as an artistic way of showing the significant socio-political and corresponding mental changes taking place in those times.

Methods

The study is based on cultural-historical, hermeneutic, and comparative literary methodologies.

Results

The study showed that all three stories reflect the customs related to infectious diseases as an artistic way for the authors to express important socio-cultural and therefore mental changes and the outlook of society. These stories obviously show that the issues of those days' ongoing processes in Europe, especially education and women's rights were not only of special interest to Georgian writers and public figures but were the fields of their activity as well. Through literature, they tried to bring up society towards new challenges.

All these authors in their short stories display the customs specific to Eastern Georgia.

It should be noted that all three stories, especially A. Eristav-Khoshtaria's and N. Lomouri's contain important ethnographic material in terms of Georgian folk beliefs.

Discussion

For Georgia, the second half of the nineteenth century is a particularly intense period, distinguished by the diversity and depth of opinions. Despite Russia's imperial policy, for the country, this is the era of the struggle for the national idea, freedom of personality, and thinking. Georgian youth of

the time got familiarized with new socio-political, economic, and national theories and tried to disseminate these ideas in their homeland.

Populist writers appeared in the Georgian literary space from the 1870s, they were imbued with the search for novelty. Sincere sympathy for the centuries-old suffering of the peasantry in the village, the search for ways and means to share the fate of the oppressed and alleviate their hardships, and the idea of social equality led some Georgian writers to populism. According to the populists, society needed to be transformed, rejuvenated, and “healed”. The goal was to mobilize the peasantry, introduce education to the illiterate population, open schools, libraries, and outpatient clinics in rural areas, in a word, equal distribution of material wealth (Tsitsishvili, 2022, p. 25). In Georgian literature, populist writers introduced the moods and motifs that correspond to their characteristic aesthetic ideal. The texts of the new Pleiades writers mainly depict severe social conflict and deep social differentiation of the society. They aimed at raising the cultural level of the peasantry in rural areas and making the spiritual life of the people the main subject of literature. The plain, laconic style of populist writings and the simplicity of the narration manner influenced their contemporary literary process. The writers that we refer to – Niko Lomouri and Anastasia Eristav-Khoshtaria belong to the populist movement, while Nikoloz Natidze was greatly influenced by the populist movement in his time.

Traditionally, in the reader’s memory, literary epochs are associated with the names of prominent writers. In the history of world literature, next to the classics there will always be “second-rate” – non-classic authors. Sometimes, justly, or due to conjuncture, or due to the “carelessness” of their contemporaries, they remained forgotten writers for the readers. Sadly, this can also be said about Nikoloz Natidze, even though he deserved the great favor of the reading audience of his time. As for Niko Lomouri and Anastasia Eristav-Khoshtaria, these authors still arouse great interest today. Neither of them ever involved their heroes in extraordinary adventures. Their texts always base on the truth of life and do not segue into falsity, they do not leave the reader indifferent and bored. Our attention to the aforementioned writers was caused by the main global problem – the Corona-virus pandemic. In Georgia, infectious diseases caused fear in people for centuries. Our ancestors had extensive experience in dealing with epidemics. We wondered how the Georgian folk rituals and beliefs on the fight against infectious diseases, surviving until recently, are presented, in the

texts of the nineteenth-century Georgian writers – Nikoloz Natidze-Melania (“Bnelo”), Niko Lomouri (“Little Friends”), Anastasia Eristav-Khoshtaria (“Batonebi were not Displeased”).

Melania (1853-1881) was born to the family of a clergyman. The future writer studied at Telavi Theological School and graduated from Tbilisi Theological Seminary. He worked as a teacher in the village Vejini for years, and was later ordained a priest. Interestingly, he created a scheme for an anti-hail device, which he could not implement due to a lack of funds. It is worth mentioning that Melania and Niko Lomouri lived in the same apartment for three years. Melania recalls in “Memories” that time as the period of their passion for literature: “We would read our writings to each other, discuss, criticize and process them, and only when we were both satisfied, then we dared to send the works to print.” Immediately after the publication of the story “Bnelo”, Melania acquired the name of a talented and famous writer, and literary criticism was equally positive towards the young author. The author’s stories did not go unnoticed by well-known Georgian critics Kita Abashidze and Romanoz Pantskhava (Khomleli). “From the story, the reader will extract the material that enriches mind and feelings, this is the dignity of the writer” –Khomleli says (Khomleli, 1963, p. 367).

In the story “Bnelo”, which is considered to be Melania’s best work, the action takes place in the countryside. The writer has selected the inconsolable, sad, monotonous, and dull existence of peasants as the theme of the story. The author does not hide the unreliability, filthiness, and violence widespread in the world, which destroys the youth and turns them into beasts. Melania was a clergyman, a priest, and he was well aware of the superstitions prevalent in the village. Therefore, we are especially interested in how he saw the Christian beliefs of the people, living in the villages of East Georgia, during the time of infectious diseases, common superstitions, customs, spells, and incantations among the peasants, which can be found in Georgian oral folklore and ethnography.

One episode of the story is especially interesting for us – the twelve-year-old hero is ill with smallpox, and neighbors are gathered in his house – an old woman surnamed Shamandukhashvili, shortly Shamandukha (we think the author inherited it from the word *shaman*), a woman who plays the *chonguri*, and girls singing Nana. Old woman Shamandukha spoke about the neighbors to whom the devils “gave life and took it away again”. When a sick child started screaming in his sleep and asked his mother for

help, the mother comforted the newly awakened boy, who told her what he had seen in a dream. In the dream, when he was for gathering a bundle of wood, a big-toothed woman from *Brma ghele* ran after him. The woman would have caught him if he hadn't wakened up. "May the Cross protect you son, the angel of *batonebi* wanted to scare you" – this is how Shamandukha explained the dream. The girls immediately started to sing a lullaby:

"Iav nana, vardo nana iav, naninao!
Batonebi have come here iav, naninao!
Batonebi's mother has a hearth decorated with roses;
Next to the hearth there is a golden cradle
Adorned with violets and roses;
There is a prince lying in the cradle – prince Levan
He has a mouth full of pearls;
There is ruby-color wine in the wine cellar;
A poplar tree has grown in it
It is young and is rustling in the wind;
A nightingale is sitting in it..."

The girls nicely sang "Iav nana" adding other verses from time to time. The patient's mother kept calling out – "Heal my Ilia!"

Old woman Shamandukha kept repeating his poem:

"I raised the orphans well; they are true men
My Mikha will plough,
Solomon will go to the mountain to bring cheese;
Zakro will go and bring salt."

(Melania, 1891, pp. 29-31, 41-42, 48)

Batonebi were the divine attendants and children of Great Mother Nana. They spread infectious diseases and obeyed Nana the Deity, goddess of fertility and revival. *Batonebi* are the children of her, the seven brothers and seven sisters are the children of Nana, the Sun goddess. They were seven brothers dressed in red *chokhas* (national Georgian costume) and seven sisters, seven suns bringing infectious diseases to families sent by great mother Nana. According to mythological beliefs, the land of *batonebi* is the country of violets and roses, decorated with ivory, with eternal light, a ruby wine cellar, and a poplar growing nearby, with a nightingale and falcon

sitting in it. Some variants of the sacral text tell us that there is a tall vine-plant, growing upwards along that climbs the tree, the fruit of which grants immortality, and a woman and a man who does not eat it, die untimely. The recovery of an infected person was up to the will of Nana and batonebi. According to folk belief, if they generously were treated and entertained by the family, a patient would recover safely. If not, batonebi might become angry at a family and the results of infectious disease could be fatal. Thus, they were honorary guests who should have been received with joy. They throw seven plates of pearl or infectious disease over seven villages, then pick them up and take them away in the form of pearls. They put up tents in seven villages and had fun. It should be noted that mythological narratives related to the great mother Nana are reflected in the ritual performed for the diseased (Bardavelidze, 2007, pp. 86, 96; Ghambashidze, 2021, pp. 266-267).

“Iavnana” is performed with *chonguri* accompaniment and dancing by all the present. Melania also describes the room of the sick child. A large *bazma* candle is lit in the corner. The author also provides the definition of the *bazma* candle; it was made of squashed walnuts and was lit in families with a person sick with infectious disease because *batonebi* liked the fragrance of *bazma*. On a small board near the *Bazma* candle, there were some scraps of fabric with dried raisins, apples, churchkhela (traditional Georgian sweet made from walnuts, nuts, almonds or raisins and grape juice), and red-dyed eggs for the *batonebi*. The mother of the sick boy does not cook at home, because *batonebi* will not like fire in the fireplace or the odor of cooking (Melania, 1891, pp. 27, 29).

Niko Lomouri (1852-1915) also had theological education. He graduated from Gori Theological College, and later from Kyiv Theological Academy. All his life he was engaged in teaching activities and was considered an excellent teacher. Lomouri knew children’s nature very well and was their favorite writer. The writer is known to consider education and cultural activities as the main transforming factor in people’s hard life. As the press of the time wrote, the education system had turned into a kind of battle arena and Lomouri’s main focus was to increase the number of literate and educated people in the village. Precisely due to illiteracy, the roots of superstition were deeply rooted among the people in a Georgian village, which left an indelible mark on the psyche of peasants since childhood. Superstition with its unnatural powers – als, kajs (evil spirits in Georgian mythology

and folklore) witches, evil spirits was a great illness in people's lives and even official religion often seemed powerless to fight it (Zandukeli, 1978, p. 105).

In the story "Little Friends" (Lomouri) little Maro falls ill with measles. The girl is suffering from the severe disease, complicated by the loss of vision. The parents resorted to all means against *batonebi*, common among the people, so that the child would recover. They even went to a fortune-teller, diagnosed the illness with wool on spindle, made a promise to St. Marine and Barbare for the overnight prayer and sacrifice. St. Marine and Barbara were known among people as eye healers and patrons against infectious diseases. Then the parents made two hazelnut-sized balls from the holy candle, strung them on a red silk thread, and hung it on the girl's neck. When little Maro would recover, the balls were to be sacrificed to St. Marine, like two eyeballs. As advised by the fortune-teller, they put a red dress on Maro, a red scarf on her head, and took her out to walk for half a day (Lomouri, <https://poetry.ge/poets/niko-lomouri/prose/xxar-pawia-megobrebi.>).

Anastasia Eristav-Khoshtaria is one of the first female writers. She studied at the women's Gymnasium in Gori, where Niko Lomouri was her teacher. Eristav-Khoshtaria says: "These two people (meaning Misho Kipiani) inspired my decision to sacrifice myself for the service of the country".¹³ The author's characters are mostly women. The writer was referred to as the artist of the Georgian village.

"Batonebi were not Displeased" is one of Eristav-Khoshtaria's first stories, very much liked by Akaki Tsereteli, who encouraged the young author and advised her to "write prose". Tsereteli published the story in "Kvali" magazine in 1893.

In the story "Little Friends" measles is spread in the village. Children are ill in the family of peasant Zuraba. At the head of the children's bed there is a chair with a red tablecloth. On it there are – tiny loaves of bread, lumps of sugar, various fabric strips, dolls, kerchiefs, and red-dyed eggs. This is a table set for *batonebi*. The hostess of the family is singing "Iav, nana":

¹³ In 1915, Anastasia Eristav-Khoshtaria founded the Georgian women's society "Mandilosani". Its membership was open to everyone, regardless of rank and property status. The society aimed at providing material and "moral" assistance to needy women. "Mandilosani" had its charter published in the form of a brochure.

“Iav-nana, vardo nana, iav-naniao!
Batonebi, have mercy, iav-naniao!
I am picking violets, spreading roses, iav-naniao!
Give relief to my children, iav-naniao!”

After that, the woman stands up and dances elegantly moving her hands and saying:

“In batonebi’s garden, iav-naniao!
White mulberry is growing, iav-naniao!
I was in a grove, I saw the grove, iav-naniao!
Aspen trees intertwined, iav-naniao!
We have come from the White Sea, iav-naniao!
We – seven brothers, and seven sisters, iav-naniao!
We will go to seven villages, iav-naniao!
And settle in seven villages, iav-naniao!
Make us happy with your depart, like you did with your
coming, iav-naniao!
Nana to *batonebi*, iav-naniao!

(Eristav-Khoshtaria, 1934, p. 6)

Then, Zuraba’s wife asks *batonebi*: “May your path be blessed, please give relief to my little ones (and lists the names of her children), we will duly respect you”. It was forbidden to talk loudly or fight in the house, because *batonebi* may have got angry. Zuraba's eldest daughter, Nusho, oppressed by her stepmother, who thinks that her fiancé has left her, wishes to fall ill. She wishes that *batonebi* were not displeased with her. The writer used these words in the title. Nusho dies of measles, *batonebi* were not displeased with the poor girl. Khoshtaria also tells about the tradition common in the village. Namely, if there were other people with infectious disease in the house, it was not allowed to mourn over the deceased, because *batonebi* liked attention and singing. Only in this case they would leave the place peacefully (Eristav-Khoshtaria, 1934, pp. 6, 33-34).

The texts of the writers selected by us are also important with regard to the fact that Anastasia Eristav-Khoshtaria is a female writer who stands at the origins of Georgian gender writing, Nikoloz Natidze (Melania) is a clergyman – priest, and Niko Lomouri is a well-known teacher. Therefore,

important are the events seen and evaluated through the eyes of a clergyman, woman writer and teacher.

In all three stories, especially, with N. Lomouri and A. Eristav-Khoshtaria, the issue of women's rights has been brought forward; and the stories of Lomouri and Eristav-Khoshtaria are the best examples of Georgian children's literature. All three works reflect the customs related to infectious diseases as an artistic way of expressing important socio-cultural and therefore mental changes. In this way, the authors inform the readers of their own position on the current most important, epochal events. Melania, as far as possible, describes the rituals and beliefs associated with infectious diseases in detail and in a negative context, for him, they are empty superstitions, which the author needs to show people's ignorance and illiteracy. A. Eristav-Khoshtaria gives us a small but important material from a neutral standpoint. N. Lomouri, unlike the other two, – through a tactful juxtaposition of old customs and modern scientific achievements gives priority to knowledge. All three authors display the customs specific to Eastern Georgia. The Georgian experience of combating epidemics, seen by the three aforementioned authors, conveys the socio-cultural processes which are generally characteristic of the European context. It should be noted that all three stories, especially A. Eristav-Khoshtaria's and N. Lomouri's contain important ethnographic material in terms of Georgian folk beliefs. N. Lomouri's material is extremely valuable in this regard. As for giving priority to knowledge and integration with the European context, it is a special theme in the works of Georgian writers and fathers of the nation of the period. Russian expansion (abolition of the autocephaly of the ancient Christian country, Russification of religious and secular life) towards Georgia typical of this period imbued the activity of Georgian writers and public figures with the idea of independence. However, they were well-aware that the struggle of a small nation against a large, aggressive empire should have a certain, specific character; that this small, war-torn country, in difficult economic conditions, could not oppose the expansion by military means. So Ilia Chavchavadze, father of the nation, noted: today our weapons are pen and knowledge. In Ilia's understanding, the only "effort" for a man to become accomplished was knowledge and education. Because education, knowledge, and science – "is the power that nothing can defeat – neither a fist, nor a sword, or numerous army" (Chavchavadze, 1879, p. 104).

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