

Georgian Literature as Part of World Literary Heritage. A Brief Introduction.

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Georgia is a lot of things at the same time.

Fascinating landscapes and old churches, renowned wine and delicious cuisine, polyphonic song and magnificent dance, far-reaching traditions and customs, unique ornaments and inscriptions, archeological treasures and iconography, orthodox faith and religious tolerance...

All this together expresses the historical spirit of the Georgian nation and its significance in the history of World culture.

And yet, we Georgians say: Georgia is Rustaveli's country. It was He, Shota Rustaveli, Middle Ages author, who wrote the Great Georgian Book, in which he condensed the Georgian cultural genius, and which is called: *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*.

Literature in Georgia has always performed the function of an intellectual leader: due to its high – quality writing, the country has always represented a significant landscape of the world literary and cultural process.

The Georgian alphabet was created in the third century and is among worlds' 14 alphabets.

In 2016, UNESCO added Georgian alphabet to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Despite the fact, that Georgian history and cultural consciousness begin already within the pagan period, at the ancient pre-historical stage, the history of Georgian writing starts from the era of

Christianity, from 4th century. The first literary piece – *‘The Life of St. Nino’* – is dated back almost to the same period.

Due to the fast spreading of the Christianity, in the Early Medieval period Georgia was already included in the European net of Christian writing. All branches of Christian spiritual literature were presented. Starting from 6th–8th rivalry with the Byzantine culture was an evident tendency and became more obvious from 10th century. Exactly in this period, in Greece, on the Mount Athos, Georgian Monastery – *Ivioni* – was established (980-83). In 10th-11th centuries, Georgian monks transformed the Monastery into a theological center of Georgian bibliophiles. Moreover, their activities soon were spread to Antioquia and Bulgaria.

Despite the attempts of already increasing Eastern Empires, Georgia was politically and economically bond with Western European civilization and Georgian culture and literature naturally was developing in the frame of the Western European tradition.

In 11th–12th centuries, Georgia was politically very powerful. The country was ruled by strong monarchs. On the edge of 12th-13th centuries the King of Georgia becomes the Lady, Tamar (a). It was a Golden Era for Georgia, and the heyday of fame for Georgian culture and Literature as well. Exactly at this period “The Knight in the Panther's Skin” was created by Shota Rustaveli and was dedicated to Tamar.

Apart from its aesthetic, philosophical and worldview depth, it is a first text in Georgian literature as well as in European, that reflects the clashing of two huge universes in Georgian culture – The West and the East. The Western principles are revealed in the Christian worldview of the text, in the way of thinking of the author and in its genre of course: the text corresponds to the genre of the European chivalric romance. However, 12th century is already a period of strengthening of the influence of Eastern culture and literature in the European part of Caucasus, and Rustaveli regards with obvious favor the Oriental poetic motifs. However, the meeting of West and East is of “Dialogue-type” with a permanent condition of overcoming resistance, as Georgian literature, as well as the country itself, constantly exists on the border of inner necessity and external determination.

Unfortunately, Georgian literature, so well-shaped and prepared, was not fated to join the European Renaissance.

At this stage of the European literary history, Georgian literature was separated from the Western European literary process due to the tragic political events: inventions of Mongols, soon after of Iran and Ottoman armies. Since 1490 Georgia has been officially disassembled.

As for literature, it was a period of almost three-century silence. In 1453 the fall of Constantinople and strengthening of the Muslim world changed drastically the geo-political and geo-cultural panorama of the Near East. Georgia found itself in the different geo-cultural area, where the Eastern poetic themes and motifs prevailed. Georgian literature had to move closer to the Eastern area as an historically offered alternative. However, Georgia always was keeping West in her mind. From the 17th century, thanks to the efforts of Georgian kings and politicians, the process of returning of Georgian political and cultural life back within the European frame has been started. The crucial role in this process was played by an outstanding writer, diplomat, and the Priest, Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani.

Soon after returning from his diplomatic mission to Europe, Orbeliani published the book – ‘*A Journey to Europe*’, which became the best reminder for Georgians of their roots and history. This work was soon followed by some other texts, written in a style of European Enlightenment.

In the same period, an outstanding Georgian Poet David Guramishvili wrote ‘Davitiani’, philosophical text with didactical accents, which overcame the influence of the Oriental epos. Guramishvili brought back into Georgian literature Christian symbolic. He imbued his verse with the aesthetics of the *Beautiful, Sublime, Great*. He widely opened the gates for Romanticism in Georgian literature and culture.

19th century started with an increasing political influence of Russian Empire in the region and particularly, in Georgia. The main condition of the Treaty of Georgievsk signed by Georgian and Russian Kings – keeping the Georgian throne and the Georgian Church unchanged – was not protected, and from 1801 Russian Empire occupied the whole territory of Georgia.

On the one hand, Russia enjoyed the privilege of an orthodox country, and on the other, she set Georgia against the non-Christian people of Caucasus, depriving her of the needed political distinctiveness. Political and social

reality of Georgia fully reflected the controversial character of the 'New Colonialism'. The literary process, also, was controversial, however, the odor of European Romanticism, introduced by Georgian writers of the previous period overlapped the country.

The era of Romanticism was marked by at least two major events in Georgia, and both were associated with the name of Nikoloz Baratashvili. Firstly, and foremost, Baratashvili merged Georgian romanticism with European Romanticism. His poetry was germinated in the depth of the best traditions of European Romanticism. He managed to establish the essential aesthetic principles of European Romanticism such as prevalence of individualism, mythological and religious depth, activation of folklore archetypes, communion with nature, and anticipation of eschatological end, however, he combined these principles with the idea of national self-awareness, which not only reflected one of the major cultural tendencies of European Romanticism, but it also contributed to the awakening of Georgian national dignity.

"The unity of faith will bring no good for the state, if the character of nations differs", declared 26 years old poet to make Georgians understand, that the political future of Georgia was related not only with religious consent, as it was before, but with national self-cognition, which must save the Georgian identity and statehood.

Baratashvili tragically died at 27. He was young, popular and in love! He adorned with his existence Tiflis, the city, which, for that time already was a city of multiple faces, inhabited by people of different religious belief and social groups, becoming the part of Tiflis bohemian life.

Baratashvili's immediate successor was Ilia Chavchavadze, the leader of a new political and public movement, started from 1860s in Georgia.

Besides, his crucial role in the political and social life of Georgia, he established the principles of Critical Realism in Georgian literature. Ilia contributed to the Europeanization of Georgian political thought and social order, spearheaded a new banking and educational reform, however, he also was a man who led the principles of Critical Realism in Georgian literature. Georgian critical Realism, from its very beginning, was well acquainted with the main themes of European Critical Realism, as well as of the Russian, bringing up issues such as: the impossibility to achieve human happiness and independence in the society based on the primacy of money, on the one hand, and – the problem of the global incompatibility between a person and

the world, on the other. However, again and again, the idea of national dignity and political independence remains the main idea of Georgian critical realism.

"Ourselves must belong to us" – declared Ilia Chavchavadze, as a formula of future political goal for Georgia and whole Caucasus. He was joined by Akaki Tsereteli, Iakob Gogebashvili, and of course, Vazha Pshavela, one of the most significant writers and thinkers in the history of Georgian literature, whose ethical and social values of his characters go beyond the standard of narrow separatism, reaching the deepest layers of humanism. His attention was focused on human being, regardless of his religious belief and social position, seeking for his personal freedom.

It was Vazha-Pshavela who gave rise to Modernist tendencies in Georgian literature.

The beginning of 20th century was marked by the fatal clash of Modernistic tendencies, already established in Georgian literature, with newly born Soviet ideology. The Bolshevik Revolution, which reached Georgia in 1921, put the end to the three-year independence of Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). The biggest achievement of independent Georgia was the opening of the first university – Tbilisi State University.

If we bear in mind the inherent aspiration of literature to intellectual and representative freedom, we may form a clear idea of the contradiction that arises in conditions of a totalitarian regime between the artistic text and the actual context.

The idea of the integrity of culture suffered degradation: subordination of culture to the taste and necessity of masses caused the decline of general cultural process. The young Soviet government was glorifying the obedient and punishing the disobedient. *Who is not with us, He is against us!* That was a slogan.

It is my duty to recall those prominent Georgian authors who went through the hell of threats, fear, exile, arrest, torture, murder, suicide, – sacrificing themselves in the name of their dignity and art. Poets and writers, who established and flourished Georgian Modernism and Symbolism: Titsian Tabidze – executed, Paolo Iashvili – committed suicide, Valerian Gaprindashvili – executed, Grigol Robakhidze – sent to the exile... This wing of literature, which rejected Socialist Realism, was based upon the progressive Western spirit and modernist philosophy, however, the synthesis of the

traditional national values with the Western tendencies was observable almost in every direction. It was associated with the awareness of the national cultural image against the background of the inevitable process of Europeanization – in order to acquire a strong position before the European culture.

In 1937 Mikheil Javakhishvili was executed, author of a greatest Georgian book written in 20th century – *Jakho's Dispossession*. Javakhishvili, who worked on the edge of Realism and High Modernism, was considering not only the markedly totalitarian essence of the Georgian reality, but also its tragic outcome – estrangement of personality with the universe.

And one more: in 1957 Galaktion Tabidze – committed suicide – reformer and founder of 'New Georgian Poetry', author of *Artistic Flowers* (1919), which to the present day remains the peak of national lyrics ...

It must be said that Georgian modernist writing overcame in favor of art the utilitarian approach to literature and harmonized the level of Georgian literature with the Western standards. It rebelled against the artificial Soviet literary canon and Soviet ideology, to rescue the historical values of Georgian writing.

After Stalin's death contemporary Georgian literature was born: all trends of western writing were practiced, especially, Neo-realism and Magical realism, Women's writing also gained its strength. In 1960s and 1970s a very impressive group of the so-called "differently minded" writers occurred, reusing the principles of socialist realism. In their work themes that were topical for their contemporary world and European literature came to the foreground: depreciation of spiritual values; moral crisis of the society caused by false aims and ideas; severe deficit of intellect; loneliness, estrangement and searching for oneself. These worldwide themes intersect, on the one hand, with the anti-Soviet model of thinking, and, on the other one, with the local Georgian problems and issues, such as: aspiration towards self-representational freedom, searching for intellectual mechanisms against ideological clichés, and struggle for national independence.

The powerful art of these writers kept alive the strength of Georgian literature through politically and economically chaotic 1980s when the country faced the end of Soviet Union, civil war, war in Abkhazia, and other casualties, and disorder.

The fall of the political authorities was followed by the total devaluation of authorities, the method of irony and self-irony is used increasingly, high ideals are replaced by pseudo-ideals. Hence, Post-modernism, appears as an excellent means not only for reconstruction of the cultural consciousness being in a phase of crisis, but also for overcoming the Soviet canon.

Post-modernist discourse, as a specific model of representation, was fully realized in post-Soviet Georgian literature. Women's writing also became more mature.

However, in 2008, war in historical Samachablo – South Ossetia – once again raises the problem of necessity to protect the national identity and national values, as for literature, the War discourse, full of pain for occupied by Russia territories and the disrupted historical integrity becomes a significant part of a contemporary Georgian literature.

Anyway, Georgian literature of the post-Soviet period managed to adapt to the new aesthetic principles and take a completely new start. I'm more than sure, that Modern Georgian literature with its topics and stylistic models, discourse layers and objectives – diverse, multifaceted, and at the same time highly oriented on its own values – is a full-fledged member to the global literary world.

Georgian literature is a literature of a small country, but not a minority literature; it cannot dictate rules or cannot control the world literary space, but throughout its fifteen-centuries-old history it was eager to be at the center of the global, important, influential literary processes and reflected these processes with the constant awareness of its inner dignity.