

The Post-Soviet Era Through the Eyes of Georgian Authors of the 21st Century (According to Nino Kharatishvili's Novel "Lack of Light")

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Abstract

Nino Kharatishvili is a Georgian author working in Germany who is mostly interested in artistic analysis through remembering the past and analyzing the present of her motherland. The last novel of Nino Kharatishvili "Lack of Light" was published in 2021 and showcases Georgia of 90's by the example of inhabitants of common Tbilisi yard. Darkness, hunger, cold, bloodshed, drugs, criminal lords, murder, suicide – all these tragic realities and events force the characters to fight for survival. They become typical geezers, children of a typical environment, relevant to the dark era they live in, both literally and figuratively. Due to unstable criminal situation established in the country, their talents are buried. Their ambitions, childhood dreams and hopes remain unreachable and unthinkable. Crucial and noteworthy aspect is that Georgian literary figures of the 21st century display a keen interest in and produce works dedicated to Soviet and post-Soviet themes. This is a result of the fact that, as it was mentioned in the introduction, the Georgian thinking, way of life and humans' actions still unable to break free of Soviet and Russian influence, which is mainly perpetuated by occupied territories and the enduring mental impact handed down to current generations.

Keywords: Russian Occupation, Post-Soviet Georgia, Modern Georgian Literature

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Introduction

Tragic events of 1921 created another appalling page in the history of Georgia. The military units of Russian 11th Army invaded Georgia on 11th of February 1921. After several days of unequal battles near Kojori and Tabakhmela and grievous losses, the Georgian units surrendered and thereby a short-term history of Georgian Democratic Republic came to an end. Our country found itself in the grip of Russian occupation that gave rise to a seventy-year pressure of the rigorous Soviet ruling.

The subject of my study is Soviet and post-Soviet era in the eyes of Georgian literature of the 21st century. The matter under inquiry is chosen due to the fact that many modern authors even today try to expose the results of the Soviet cultural and ideological expansion, which unfortunately wasn't limited to 70 years and still remains and makes itself felt even after the Soviet order came to an end. Brutal events which took place during the Soviet ruling and the spineless life of post-Soviet Georgia was chosen by many Georgian writers of the 21st century as a period of development of narrative thread in their literary works. All of this is caused by the fact that on one hand, the literary-artistic analysis of already closed chapter of history can be much more objective (since it is free from censorship), and on the other hand, the circumstance that this matter is still relevant in the 21st century, is another confirmation that the imprint of the Soviet order is still quite evident in Georgian reality and has an impact on our everyday life, people's mindset and the way of life. Moreover, the aggressive and concurring policy of Russia, which constantly leaves its mark on Georgia (20% of the country is occupied in addition to creeping and mental occupation), makes it even more difficult to experience the feeling of finally leaving behind the Soviet era.

Soviet and Post-Soviet Influence on Georgian Culture and Literature

According to entrenched classic definition, occupation is a violent seizure of the territory of one country by another country, though one has to bear in mind that this process is also accompanied with the nation's mental and cultural identity occupation. The latter means purposeful expansion directed against the culture created by the nation due to which more people lose their own personality and values, which is followed by wrecking and poisoning of humans consciousness and establishment of a social medium, in which dignity and strive for lofty ideals becomes a laughing stock, while personal profit, career ambitions and many other expressions of a weak spirit comes to the fore. It should be noted that this process doesn't just mean society coming to its baseness. It is intentionally supported by the occupants, as the development of healthy social values is off their interests. Moreover, it is the major threat for the conquerors. Taking into consideration all above mentioned we have to consider the Soviet occupation as an example of both physical and mental occupation, due to which the national and cultural heritage of Georgian nation has had been intentionally destroyed for decades. Georgian intellectuals and thinkers didn't find it difficult to see this reality and potential threat outlasting the generations. Mikheil Javakhishvili wrote: "The last will: my children, let's clean forget this Russian language so that not even one word is remembered." Iliia Chavchavadze words are worth mentioning as well: "The God put no brain into Russians' bald heads and no feelings into their stinky hearts". In his turn, Merab Mamardashvili said: "Shame and disgrace to me, if I think of Ossetians or Abkhazians as serious enemies of Georgia. Georgia has one and only enemy – the Communist Soviet System". Many other intellectuals also felt that we have to break free from the clutches of Russia as soon as possible, however history, fortune or the will of people in power ordered otherwise and Georgia found itself in the grip of both mental and territorial occupation. As a

literature researcher Rostom Chkheidze writes, provided literature flow and its course was ruled not by its internal laws, but rather determined by social and political systems, two-century long Russian pressure, in thorny embrace of which Georgia found itself, could become really oppressive and fatal to our literature (Chkheidze, 2012, p. 48).

As Ilia Chavchavadze determined, a writer's purpose is to awake the nation at the time of hardship and strongest oppression, and many Georgian writers shouldered this burden during the Soviet regime. However, it should be noted that this needed great courage and determination, sometimes heroism, and cost some of them their lives. Among the first wave of writers of anti-Soviet attitude one can name Mikheil Javakhishvili, Grigol Robakidze, Nikolo Mitsishvili, "the Blue horn" poets etc. Situation relatively changed from the second part of the 20th century, after the death of Stalin. Writers were no longer sentenced to death for the disclosure of the Soviet bloodthirsty policy, though it was still very risky to openly express anti-Soviet attitude. Among the "fearless" Georgian literary figures one has to name Chabua Amirejibi, Otar Chelidze, Guram Dochanashvili, Otar Chkheidze, Guram Gegeshidze, and Shota Chantladze, Rezo Tcheishvili, among others.

Darkness and Struggle in "Lack of Light"

Nino Kharatishvili is a Georgian author working in Germany who is mostly interested in artistic analysis through remembering the past and analyzing the present of her motherland. This fact is clearly confirmed by an especially popular and award-winning novel "The Eighth Life (for Brilka)," which tells us about several generations of a family whose life goes sideways owing to the Soviet System.

The last novel of Nino Kharatishvili "Lack of Light" was published in 2021 and was translated into Georgian in 2022 by Maia Panjikidze. This work is interesting in many ways: first of all, in regards to the epoch study, and secondly, perfected description manner peculiar for the writer, and the diversity of the development of the plot brilliantly thought out.

The novel showcases Georgia of 90's by the example of inhabitants of common Tbilisi yard. Darkness, hunger, cold, bloodshed, drugs, criminal lords, murder, suicide—all these tragic realities and events force the characters to fight for survival. They become typical geezers, children of a typical environment, relevant to the dark era they live in, both literally and figuratively. Due to unstable criminal situation established in the country, their talents are buried. Their ambitions, childhood dreams, and hopes remain unreachable and unthinkable.

The epigraph of the novel is also very symbolic. The author decided to start her narration with the following verse of Terenti Graneli:

I've got so used to death,
How I'm still living I can't guess!

I've got so used to ghosts,
I want to see their tracks in the snow and frost!

I've got so used to sadness,
All my poems are whining and helpless.

I've got so used to night,
This light will torture my sight.

I've got so used to death,
How I'm still living, I can't guess! (Graneli, 2021)

This piece of poetry by Terenti Graneli is very appropriate as it conveys the inner screams and the voice of heart of the lead characters. The main figure and narrator of the novel is Keto Kipiani—one of the inhabitants of Tbilisi yard. It is worth to mention that the writer uses unique and interesting way of storytelling as the action takes place exclusively in one of the exhibition spaces of Brussel, from beginning till the end. There three friends who haven't seen each other for ages finally meet at the retrospective photo-exhibition of Dina, their deceased friend. The entire work is a story of daily life and relationships of that period, a story of remembering the endured pain and happiness.

The Characters in "Lack of Light"—Forced to Confront the Collapse of Their Dreams and Ambitions

Very powerful is the imaginative side of the work. Pain and joy found deep in each character's heart, the writer's amazing ability to deeply understand the psychology of all heroes, a narration saturated with lots of very interesting inner monologues, struggle of characters lost in the world for return to their own and innovatory self-actualization, for ones—despair, for others—stubborn attempts to find a better world – there are the themes and imaginative ways by the unity of which Nino Kharatishvili crafts her works.

Keto's brother, honorable and talented Rati Kipiani, appears in the novel as the first victim of the wicked environment of the post-Soviet Georgia. The most caring person, a prominent student and an exemplary citizen was turned into a criminal by bloody and ruthless times. With the loss of an innocent friend killed by a so-called messenger of the dark world, the betrayal of his beloved girlfriend and lots of unjustness surrounding him, he became a villain himself. Eventually due to drug use his life completely fell apart.

Another victim of the era, fated to see hardships from the very start, is Dina, a girl, talented photographer who desperately fell in love with Rati. She lives in the Tbilisi yard's basement with her mom and sister dealing with significant financial struggles, though these daily concerns have no influence on her joyfulness and avant-garde spontaneous spirit. This is a girl who brings light and beauty everywhere. Dina is a symbol of freedom in the novel. In contrast with disastrous life of a character and her contrastive mood the author shows us that freedom is an inner state and in no way depends on material possessions.

The tragedy of Dina and Keto, two inseparable friends, begins when with great difficulty they manage to collect some money to free Rati from jail and on their way to prison come across a horrific scene: due to untimely payment of so-called "tavani (debt)" the thieves' world members have had already killed a man and were going to kill the other one. Girls are caught up a dilemma deciding between humanity and private comfort. Keto and Dina choose the worthwhile way of rescue the nearest and dearest and thereby unconsciously sacrifice their own future in return of human life saving. They pay the hard-earned pounds to the abuser, while Rati remains in jail. In order to release him, Dina reluctantly agrees to an unwanted intimate relationship with Rati's deadly enemy. The boy finally gets released from prison, but Dina's actions can't be forgiven and forgotten, both of their hearts get shattered. Eventually, the boy

follows a path of “criminality” and “drugs”, while Dina puts her neck into a noose and therefore frees herself from the vicious world. Dina is as a symbol of freedom so her last step can be perceived as self-murder of freedom in that dark and ruthless world.

All characters of the novel carry on their shoulders the devastating burden of Soviet-era or its remnants. Rati and Keto’s grandmother, Eteri, who comes from noble family, in her early years witnesses her father’s resettlement. “I see somber, grim men, who arrive at 3AM, when a city is in deep sleep. I hear mom crying, ... see how [father] stands tall with pride and politely asks Bolsheviks not to touch him so that he can get into the waiting car himself, preserving his dignity” (Kharatishvili, 2022, p. 61).

Another friend of Keto and Dina, Nene, also fell victim to post-Soviet disorder. The girl was separated from her beloved and compelled to marry another man due to needs of her uncle, who had ties with “black” criminal underworld. All this led to yet another tragedy, when Nene’s former boyfriend was killed by the hands of her husband. Nene decided to divorce with her husband, but later found herself involuntarily marrying an older man in Moscow.

The fourth friend of the girls, very clever and talented Ira, affected by never-ending violence and tragic adventures of her friends, came to hate the mankind. This had an impact on her sexual orientation. The girl decided to move to America and built her career as a lawyer.

Keto, the narrator of the novel, also lives abroad, in Germany, all alone. She failed at living a happy private life since desperately falling in love with her brother’s friend Levan, but to have a crush on best friend’s sister was considered a sin in 90’s in Georgia. This misperception sacrificed their love. It took plenty of time fooled away and emotional energy for Keto to realize the hopelessness of their relationship and the couple separated for good.

Conclusion

Based on the novel we can analyze the impact of that period on humans’ life and assume once more that the post-Soviet era brought to light many taints and faults collected during the Soviet era. Between 1921 and 1991 a harsh crackdown of free-thinking often resulting in bloodshed or resettlement, severity, deception and betrayal, culminated all at once and turned the country into an insane asylum. It is worth noting that the darkest times described in the book destroyed numerous people full of hope and faith to have a brighter future, while within the so-called "lost generation," only those were saved who ventured abroad and sought refuge in other countries.

Another crucial and noteworthy aspect is that Georgian literary figures of the 21st century display a keen interest in and produce works dedicated to Soviet and post-Soviet themes. This is a result of the fact that, as it was mentioned in the introduction, the Georgian thinking, way of life and humans’ actions still unable to break free of Soviet and Russian influence, which is mainly perpetuated by occupied territories and the enduring mental impact handed down to current generations. Authors like Nino Kharatishvili and others mentioned above certainly deserve praise, since they don’t spare their creative skills and abilities to shed light on these nationally significant issues and to serve as a continuous reminder to the readers. Exposing and understanding problems is the first step taken towards their resolution.

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