

National Models of the Traumatic Memory Concept: Soviet Dictatorship from the Viewpoint of two Georgian Women-Authors

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of collective trauma in Georgian literature, particularly through the works of Nino Kharatishvili and Zaira Arsenishvili. While existing literature has widely studied trauma in the context of the Holocaust and post-war American soldiers, there is a knowledge gap in understanding Soviet oppression's impact on Georgian society. Using a qualitative analysis of these novels, the research highlights how female narratives encapsulate Soviet-era trauma, emphasizing the repression, identity struggles, and moral degradation faced by Georgians under the dictatorship. Findings suggest that these works serve as a form of historical reclamation and resistance, providing a framework for understanding the broader cultural impacts of Soviet oppression. The results underscore the importance of literature in preserving national memory and fostering resilience in post-colonial societies. These implications contribute to the broader field of trauma studies and post-colonial literature.

Keywords: Collective trauma, Soviet oppression, Georgian literature, post-colonial narratives, female authors, Nino Kharatishvili, Zaira Arsenishvili, cultural memory, Soviet dictatorship, national identity.

Introduction

Background of the Study

In general, in Georgian literary discourse, the study of *traumatic/post-traumatic memory* as a manifestation of Soviet heritage and the function of memory related to it, is very relevant, because according to the well-known researcher of this problem, Geffrey Olick, it is collective memory that unites and connects the national life and mentality of the country: *"Memory is the most important gift of our being; It is an ongoing dialogue between past and present that defines our individual and collective existence."* (Olick, 2016, p.10); That is why it is crucial to form a *collective memory* about a tragic past experienced by the nation along with the individual one. Georgian female authors, Nino Kharatishvili and Zaira Arsenishvili, in their novels present the occupation of Georgia by Russia in 1921 and the 70-year dictatorial regime established in the country as a cultural/collective trauma of the nation,

which radically changed the fundamental principles of the socio-political life of the country, broke the existing connections between people, weakened social cohesion.

It should be noted that during the period of the Soviet government (1921-1991), in Georgia (similar to the other allied republics), ideological censorship prohibited the discussion of the issue of traumatic memory or collective trauma. Considering the above, the events of the past, which existed as a collective trauma in the mnemonic memory of the Georgian nation, were reflected fragmentarily in the fiction literature. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Empire, since 1990s, it became possible to publish documentary or fiction narratives reflecting the concept of traumatic memory, where the deadly consequences of the Soviet Empire and the Bolshevik regime were fully depicted. In this article, on the example of post-colonial literary discourse (novels of Nino Kharatishvili and Zaira Arsenishvili), two facts of violation of the will and rights of the Georgian nation by Bolshevik Russia in the 20s of the last century are presented as inspiration for collective trauma: The occupation of Georgia by the 11th Army of Russia and the uprising of Georgian patriots in 1924. We note that presenting the concepts of traumatic memory in the novels of female authors is purposeful on our part; We believe that the above-mentioned novels, from point of view of genre, represent a kind of *female epistle*, where the features characterizing the female prose, such as autobiography or subjective point of view, are successfully used to convey certain characteristics of own life experience.

Before proceeding straight to the discussion of the above-mentioned novels, we note that since the 60s of the last century, the problem of collective trauma in the West has focused mainly on the Holocaust, as a symbol of European anti-Semitism, and later, since the 70s, it has focused on the post-traumatic stress disorder of soldiers participating in the US-Vietnam war, which came to the center of the attention of both scientists (political scientists, psychologists, sociologists...) and artists (film artists, musicians-performers, writers...).

Methodology

The methodology employed in this article is based on a qualitative literary analysis, focusing on the works of Georgian female authors Nino Kharatishvili and Zaira Arsenishvili. The approach draws on post-colonial and trauma theory frameworks to explore how these authors depict the Soviet dictatorship's traumatic impact on Georgian society. The novels are examined through the lens of collective memory, as defined by Olick (2016), to understand how historical events such as the Russian occupation of Georgia in 1921 and the subsequent Soviet regime are framed as collective trauma. The study relies on close reading techniques to analyze key thematic elements in the novels, such as repression, loss of national identity, and personal suffering under Soviet rule. Textual evidence is collected from the narrative structure, character development, and symbolic elements within the novels. The analysis includes references to autobiographical elements, where applicable, to demonstrate how these female authors use personal experiences to reflect broader societal trauma. Historical context, as provided by secondary sources, further informs the reading of these texts, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the political and social conditions that shaped Georgian literature during and after the Soviet period. In this way, the methodology bridges literary analysis with historical discourse, aiming to highlight the intricate interplay between personal and national memory in post-Soviet Georgian writing.

This method ensures that the research not only delves into the artistic aspects of the novels but also situates them within the larger socio-political framework of Georgian history

Result and Discussion

A new wave of interest in the problem of collective trauma, both in Western and post-Soviet scientific and creative circles, comes in the 1990s, which is connected with the collapse of the Soviet empire and the emergence of independent countries on its ruins. Starting from the mentioned period, the topics of *collective trauma, history and memory* become the main line of postcolonial literature, because they are the ones creating the narrative that the writer is willing to rewrite in order to "befree" from the trauma of colonialism.

We believe that it is important to present the traumatic events with the maximum accuracy to the historical reality, because for decades in the Soviet Union (of course, also in Georgia, which was a part of it), the practice of "rewriting history" was encouraged, which meant analyzing historical events in the light desired by the officials. Such a policy served to change the historical memory of nations making up the USSR; creation of "white spots" in history; an attempt to make people forget the collective trauma inflicted on the population of their countries by Bolshevik Russia during colonial rule. The above-mentioned, to some extent, led to the establishment of beautified, non-systematic knowledge about the Soviet occupation, and considering this, one of the challenges of modern Georgian writing became to present the events imprinted in the memory of the nation as a collective trauma in the seventy-year history of *Red Georgia*.

It was during the post-Soviet period that the narratives were published by Georgian writers, that addressed the events saturated with the concept of traumatic memory (we connotate the annexation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia by Bolshevik Russia in 1921, the Georgian uprising against the Bolshevik regime in 1924 under the leadership of Kakutsa Cholokashvili, the Great Terror/ Great Purge of the 1930s, the 1956 March 9, the 1989 April 9, tragic events in Abkhazia and Samachablo...). Among the above-mentioned traumatic events, we will limit ourselves only to the first two facts in this article.

As is known, on February 25, 1921, the 11th Army of the Russian Bolsheviks annexed Georgia; Despite the fact that local battles still continued in some regions, Sergo Orjonikidze did not hesitate to send a telegram from Tbilisi: "Moscow, Kremlin. To Lenin, Stalin. A red flag flies over Tbilisi. Long live Soviet Georgia!" (Khvadagiani, 2019, p. 3). The Bolsheviks, who came to power, methodically began to exercise repressions in Georgia, which took on a mass character concerning the social strata they disdained (aristocracy, church, kulaks, intelligentsia...). Georgian society could not adapt to the loss of independence and tried to maintain the charge of resistance even after Sovietization. Even the government, exiled in emigration, did not lose hope; Obviously, they were motivated by the desire to return to their homeland.

According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, without the first stage of creative work on the part of the writer (collecting material, organizing facts, discussing arguments), it would be very difficult to critically analyze the events described in the work and understand the historical perspective (Wellek and Warren, 2010, p.77). Obviously, it is permissible for the

writer to report the facts in a subjectivistic way; However, to illustrate that the situations described in the novels of Nino Kharatishvili and Zaira Arsenishvili and the stories of separate characters convey the reality of that time with maximum accuracy, we think it would be interesting to call on the records or memories of eyewitnesses.

The website of Georgian Military Analytical Portal contains the memories of Georgian cadets who confronted the 11th army of the Russian invaders in February 1921 at the vicinities of Kojori and Tabakhmela. In the records of one of the participants of the February battles, Davit Turdospireli (D. Chkheidze), we read: "All students and youth of the capital city, both university students and pupils of senior classes of secondary schools, are at the front and are fighting with indescribable heroism. No one remembers such patriotic enthusiasm and unsparing self-sacrifice... and the helping force is nowhere to be seen" (Turdospireli, 2019, p.4). Other records posted on the website of the same portal showcase the general picture: the small number and young age of the soldiers self-dedicated to the motherland; Being in anticipation of help and doom (Matikashvili, 2015, p.3).

Obviously, post-colonial Georgian writing could not just bypass the topic of February 1921 occupation, the topic of brutal defeat and sacrifice, which was imprinted in the memory of the Georgian nation as a collective trauma. In this regard, we consider the German-speaking Georgian writer Nino Kharatishvili's epic novel "The Eighth Life (for Brilka)" (2014) to be a successful project, which received high praise from German literary critics and was recognized as one of the best examples of postmodern migration literature (Robert Bosch's "Crossing Borders Scholarship", Literary Prize of the Cultural Circle of German Economy, Anna Zegers Prize, Bertold Brecht Prize, etc.). In one of the interviews, when asked what was the inspiration for writing this novel (*"wasn't it that for years the history of Georgia was written according to false communist 'script'"*), the writer answers that initially, she wanted to write a novel about the 90s of the last century and in the process of work, she discovered that her knowledge of the history of Georgia in the 20th century looked rather modest. "I started researching and I discovered so much... It was like time travel where I learned that we don't know our own history! From the 90s, I moved to the 80s, then I reached the 70s. In the meantime, I slowly realized that I should write about a family and tell this whole history through the example of one family" (Bukhrikidze, 2017, e-version).

The plot axis of the novel is created by the narrative of one of the main characters, Nitsa Jashi, whose special attitude towards history and family is revealed in the very prologue of the novel (*prologue or partiture of oblivion*). She forever remembered the words she heard from her great-grandmother - Stasia, about the old carpets woven with family histories, where the stories told to the family members are woven; That's why family rugs need to be cared for and renewed periodically. It was with the verdict from Stasia that Nitsa became a "story seeker", "...because for years I obsessively searched for the stories behind the stories, as if they were new layers of a precious carpet" (Kharatishvili, 2019, p.28).

In order to restore history, correctly perceive and evaluate the events, Nitsa tells us the stories told by the members of the Jashi family, which are closely related to the step-by-step events of the Georgian history of the last century. From the perspective of the chronotype, the rather thick novel (in the Georgian edition - 1195 pages) covers the entire past century. The family saga begins in 1900, when a girl, Stasia, is born in the family of a famous chocolate

manufacturer in Georgia, and ends in Tbilisi on November 7, 2007, at an opposition rally on Rustaveli Avenue, where aunt and niece (Stasia's nieces Nitsa and Brilka) find each other unharmed. The family saga begins in 1900, when a girl, Stasia, is born in the family of a famous chocolate manufacturer in Georgia, and ends in Tbilisi on November 7, 2007, at an opposition rally on Rustaveli Avenue, where aunt and niece (Stasia's great-granddaughter Nitsa and Brilka) find each other unharmed. As for Topos, it is surrounded by the triangle Georgia (mainly Tbilisi) - Russia (Petrograd, Moscow, Kaliningrad) - Europe (Czech Republic, England, Germany). It is in this chronotopic framework that the stories of Georgian women living in the violent Soviet empire are presented; In the background of their memories, the main concepts of traumatic memory are presented: subalternity, injustice and repression of the Bolshevik/Soviet regime, search for national identity, decline of moral values, "depreciation" and degradation of the individual, persecution of artists with an independent vision in a totalitarian state, etc. According to the author's idea, the life of the Georgian nation of the twentieth century can be read symbolically in the ups and downs of life of Jashi family; Thus, the aspiration of the representatives of this family to settle in Europe is, to some extent, considered as a way to escape from the Bolshevik Russia/Soviet mentality.

The Russian revolutions and the annexation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia by Bolshevik Russia in 1921 - are presented in the first book of the novel - *Stasia*. These events reinforced the autocratic policy of Tsarist Russia, on which the great grandfather of the novel's narrator and his wife, Ketevan, had different views from the very beginning. The chocolate manufacturer who returned to his homeland with the accumulated experience from the best Western European confectionaries and ambitious goals, had pro-tsarist attitudes; He believed that "Russians opened the way to world culture for the Caucasus". Unlike him, Ketevan tirelessly asserted that "Georgia is nothing but a colony, and Slavic culture is an absorber of Caucasian culture" (Kharatishvili, 2019, p.46).

It was the period of the Russian revolutions, that coincided with the marriage of their daughter, Stasia, to the White Guard, Oberleutnant, Simon Jashi - a gallant, educated young man who categorically did not want to be on the "wrong side" of the current situation; As a loyal soldier of the government, he shared the military hierarchy and discipline. In this way, the White Guard Oberleutnant ended up in the PKKA¹ created by Trotsky's order, and on the eve of the October Revolution, he was sent to Petrograd, far from Stasia. Through the narrative of Stasia, who has traveled to her husband after some time, we get to know the situation in Russia (in particular, Petrograd and Moscow) (war, famine, persecution of people based on class, disorder, robbery...), although nothing good will come to her when she returns to their homeland: "Under the leadership of Pilipe Makharadze, Georgia was declared a Soviet republic and asked the Russian Central Committee for military support to defend itself against the "Third Squad" and the Mensheviks" (Kharatishvili, 2019, p.104).

It took the 11th Army nine days to engrave the independence of Georgia; So, when Stasia's son - Konstantine/Kostya was born, his country was already called Soviet Georgia. The sovietization of the country was followed the subsequent "Siemen": property expropriation, repression (which the Bolsheviks considered an upbringing measure), collectivization, etc.

¹ PKKA (rus.)- acronym *Рабоче-крестьянская Красная армия* - Workers' and Peasants' Red Army

The current events and the different views on them strained the relationship between Stasia and the already red Oberlieutenant (this was not helped by the birth of the second child, Kitty). It is significant that before leaving for Moscow, where Simon Jashi was invited to "the most powerful and feared organization of the Soviet Union" to train young Chekists, he frankly told his wife that he had no other choice in the situation he was in, because his acquaintances and colleagues, who took a *different path*, ended up in exile and found themselves in Solovetsky islands.

We believe that the life path of the white-red Oberlieutenant clearly shows the fate of political conformists, who inevitably want to be on the side of the winners during the revolutionary unrest in the country, and often betray their own conscience and views with their choices; In the end, the "winners" (or their relatives) themselves become victims of the totalitarian regime.

As for Zaira Arsenishvili's epochal novel "Oh, world... Kakhétian chronicles", it has an interesting history; It was first published in 2002 by *Diogenes* publishing house; It was also nominated for the "Saba" literary prize, but it did not win the award and was generally overlooked by a wide circle of readers. The novel was published again in 2019 by *Sulakauri publishing house* and it became an unexpected discovery for readers. It is a pity that by that time the author of the novel had already been passed away for four years. In an interview with Tea Topuria, writer and critic Giorgi Lobzhanidze explained the fact of her *late appreciation* in the character of Zaira Arsenishvili: "She knew who she was, but intelligence is also that you don't talk too much about yourself. Now the opposite is happening; I, I, one would disturb you with saying "I" all the time"(Topuria, 2020, e-version).

The stories told in the novel are largely autobiographical in nature. Zaira Arsenishvili was from a repressed family; His father, an economist by profession, was imprisoned for saying that the economy of the country could not develop in this way, in response to another foolish whim of the Bolsheviks. Obviously, the "good-wishers" took what he said to the governmental and punitive bodies and had the young specialist shot. This was soon followed by another tragedy: his father (the writer's grandfather) could not bear the death of his son and died of "black grief". At that time, Zaira Arsenishvili was only six years old, and the tragic events in the family remained in the child's mind as a traumatic memory; Later, it was reflected in the writer's work, including the novel to be analyzed. Thus, personal and collective trauma, the feeling of sympathy shown to relatives and friends, emotional connection with the past of the country and the future-centered direction of "doing good" represent the concept of the work, which unites the themes and problems raised in the novel.

Here we would like to note the chronotope of the novel; A fairly thick novel (almost 700 pages) from the point of view of topos, mainly covers Telavi and its surroundings, and from the point of view of chronos - only one night; However, the stories narrated by the grandmother (Rusudani) and her granddaughter (Rusiko) while performing the traditional dawn ritual for the deceased (grandmother Eva) before the funeral, cover five decades of the twentieth century and tangibly present the description of the Bolshevik plague inflicted not only on the members of one family or the inhabitants of one provincial town of Kakheti. The *Kakhétian Chronicles* mentioned in the title indicate that the writer aimed to generalize the

stories of the residents of the provincial town under a dictatorial regime and create an epochal canvas; Despite the fact that the news told by the narrators is concerning Kakheti, in general - it covers the whole Georgia.

As we mentioned, the main characters of the novel are women; Thus, the reader perceives the stories of the *Kakhetian Chronicles* as a female narrative. The storyline of the novel is based on the tragic lives of three women - Eva, Rusudani, Maka - whose dreams and future plans were destroyed by the ideology of the new times/red regime. However, despite personal tragedies and numerous misfortunes, these women maintained a sense of kindness, justice and dignity. They mocked the *rulers of the new times*, for whom the robbery of dukes represented the restoration of social justice; They could not adapt to the injustice and as much as they could (materially, psychologically...) they supported the family members of the repressed, who were often refused by their own relatives. According to the novel, the revolution, which was hoped for by many (including Rusudan), did not bring anything good to Georgia; On the contrary, many misfortunes befell on it. Later, the last attempt of the national struggle, the uprising of 1924 led by Kakutsa Cholokashvili, was suppressed in blood by the Bolsheviks. This very fact, as an event saturated with the concept of traumatic memory, was captured in Zaira Arsenishvili's novel.

Historian Levan Jikia in his dissertation "Anti-Soviet National Uprising of 1924 in Georgia" notes that in 1922, the five leading political parties of Georgia created the "Georgian Independence Committee" (Damcom, aka "Parity Committee"), which was tasked with organizing the struggle against the Bolsheviks, however, the Extraordinary Committee of Georgia (ЧК "ChK") soon found out about it; They arrested fifteen officers of the Parity Committee (Aleksandre Andronikashvili, Rostom Muskhelishvili, Konstantine Abkhazi, Nikoloz Zandukeli, Simon Bagration-Mukhraneli, etc.) and shot them in May 1923 in Vake Park of Tbilisi. It should be noted that the Chekists promised to preserve life for Ilia's nephew - Konstantine Abkhazi, if he would abandon the fight against the Soviet government; But he refused the life offered by the Chekists. His last words were: "I am dying happily, because I have become worthy to be brought to the altar of Georgia. My death will bring victory to Georgia!" (Jikia, 2012, e-version).

In the above-mentioned work, L. Jikia notes that Kakutsa Cholokashvili was in fact at the head of the rebellion in Eastern Georgia. He managed to win several local battles (Manglisi, Dusheti, Svimoniant Khevi, Khevgrdzela), but in the meantime, the Bolsheviks consolidated their forces too and started a bloody retribution against the rebels. Kakutsa Cholokashvili was forced to move to Turkey with twenty-six comrades. The Bolsheviks punished in an exemplary manner not only the rebels, but also their family members, relatives and even completely neutral persons - everyone who had anything to do with the rebels. These repressions, according to various data, took the lives of up to twelve thousand people. Thus, the uprising of 1924 can be considered the last struggle of the national liberation movement, which ended in failure, although the names of Kakutsa Cholokashvili and his comrades were forever recorded in the history of Georgia. Decades later, it was the tragic events of the 1924 uprising that found an echo in Zaira Arsenishvili's novel, as repressions against the Georgian nation with an unheard cruelty.

In one of the chapters of the novel - "Oh, worldly fame, compare yourself to Satan with lies"

- the author describes the preparations for the wedding of Nina, the daughter of Rkhlidze, a bride from Telavi, and officer Sasha Gamkrelidze, an aristocrat from Atskuri. Despite the warnings of elderly people that it was a messy time and it was better to refrain from the wedding and "wild party" (i.e., excessive noise), considering that most of the guests invited to the wedding were Kakutsa Cholokashvili's cousins and nobility of Telavi, the bride decided that she would not have get married without a wedding (Rusudan's daughter also declared solidarity to her). Unfortunately, time knows no compromises; The local Cheka closely watched the wedding preparations; The big three were ambushed, so they wouldn't miss anything. From the conversation between Mirian and Maka, it can be seen that the author objectively and proudly appreciates the achievements of the national hero; Maka says, at least someone should have protested the news (referring to the post-rebellion repressions).

The writer describes in detail the magnificent wedding held in Telavi, with all its fullness and delicacy, singing, dancing and playing, toasts. The whole Telavi was on its feet, and in the district of Nadikvari, the wedding yard was filled with troops. Despite three warnings for the wedding party to disperse, no one left. Then the soldiers arrested all the men present at the wedding and they were taken to "Gepeu" (prison) with Mravaljamieri (literally translated as "[may you live] a long life") song. The wedding party thought that the men would be interrogated and released in the morning, but the Bolsheviks had different plans; All the men arrested at the wedding (including Gigi Sakhltukhutsesi, the bride Nina's brother and Rusudan's long-awaited first child) were shot on *Gigo's Hill*. Maka's visit and plea to the "Cheka" official, her ex-fiancé, to release her godson, only resulted in the fact that Gigi's body was stolen in time, embalmed and placed in a grave dug in the yard. The rest did not get to deserve even this.

We note that the Arsenishvili house, where the writer's family lived, is located in Telavi, in the so-called Nadikvari district, the duke was standing opposite the large two-story, beautiful building of the Vakhvakhishvili family, which the Bolsheviks appropriated and stationed the militia there. In front of the house of the Arsenishvili family was the road leading to *Gigo's Hill*, known as Golgotha of Telavi, where people destined to be shot were taken. Everyone avoided this hill as a cursed place, because it was well known that there was a slaughterhouse for innocent people shot and sometimes buried alive by the Bolsheviks. Thus, the mentioned episode of the novel also has the potential to be autobiographical.

Finally, it is worth noting the peculiarity of narration in the novels of both authors discussed above - Nino Kharatishvili and Zaira Arsenishvili - which is related to the *stream of consciousness*; The stories told by the narrators are effortlessly connected to each other; Sometimes the reader may not immediately connect the story told to the main plot line, but later discovers that each memory is important, is connected to the previous narratives and determines the next one. It is known that the *stream of consciousness* is characterized by constant change, continuity. Sometimes the author presents one character as the narrator, sometimes - another; Constantly changes the *angle of vision* to convey certain characteristics of one's life experience. At the same time, in the reviewed novels, the traumatic concepts of the Soviet existence are clearly presented; It is shown that during the seventy-year history of the Soviet Union (1921-1991), the Georgian nation never came to terms with its fate, it

kept the charge of protest, which, along with the collective trauma, was passed on from generation to generation.

The strictest editor - time - will undoubtedly remove from historical or literary memory, first of all, texts packed with a hint of politicization; However, this danger does not really threaten the novels discussed above, because, on the one hand, we can consider them as narratives directed against the Russian occupation, but on the other hand, if we go beyond the limits of the historical context, we can understand both novels as an ode to human perseverance and spiritual resistance against evil. In both cases, the narrators of the novel keep the most important thing - faith in kindness and humanity, faith in moral values. The characters of the novel confront forces far greater than themselves; They are aware that confrontation will cost them dearly (even at the cost of their lives); However, they put all rational arguments aside and still do what their heart dictates. I think that, against the background of excessive nihilistic attitudes in our society, the mentioned novels, to a certain extent, also address the awakening of the society which is in a "sleeping" state, which is encompassed by the desire of suppressing traumatic memory, the "will to forget"; who finds it difficult to recognize heroes among the people around it, to present spirituality in the consumer society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights how the novels of Nino Kharatishvili and Zaira Arsenishvili, through their portrayal of the Soviet dictatorship and its traumatic effects, offer a profound insight into the collective memory of Georgian society. By examining these works through the lens of post-colonial and trauma theory, the analysis underscores the significant role that literature plays in preserving and narrating national trauma, particularly from a female perspective. The findings suggest that these narratives not only document the repressive history of the Soviet regime but also serve as a means of cultural resistance, reinforcing the importance of memory in shaping national identity. The implications of this research extend beyond literary criticism, offering a valuable framework for understanding the lasting psychological and social impacts of historical trauma in post-Soviet societies. Future research could explore a comparative analysis of traumatic memory in other post-Soviet literary contexts, or further investigate the gendered dimensions of trauma as reflected in Georgian literature, thereby expanding our understanding of how national identity is preserved and reconstructed through cultural narratives.

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