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Faces of Women Victims of Inequality in the Prose of Alexander Kazbegi

Abstract: *The article discusses how the faces of women victims of inequality and the process of their evolution are reflected in the works of Alexander Kazbegi. The issue of women's inequality has been introduced into Georgian literature since the 1860s. It is directly related to the establishment of realism. Initially, the faces of rightless, unequal women are obscure, because the female characters with other functions and destinations dominate next to them, but over time these faces become stronger and culminate in the works of Alexander Kazbegi. The main characters of the mountain cycle stories "Elguja" and "Priest" reviewed by us are women with tragic fate in an unequal position in the society and family. They fail to raise their voices against injustice and, therefore, obey their fate silently. There are several reasons for this: socio-political situation and the factor of external forces, public order and psychology, traditions and customs of the society, the predominant position of a man in the family and society. "The Condemned" is a work reflecting the life of a city, it is autobiographical. One of the main characters of the novel Mari is a different character. She is a representative of an aristocratic circle, an educated woman who at some point in her life raises her voice against inequality and fights for personal freedom. Mari is a morally perfect person. A lot of things are unacceptable for her in real life. Although Mari also tragically dies and becomes a victim of the society of which she herself is a member, she is a progressive figure compared to other female characters.*

Keywords: *Woman; inequality; social environment; tragic ending.*

For Georgian literature of the 19th century, the images of women are mainly typical, who were ideal mothers and spouses, and if necessary, they sacrifice themselves and their children for the happiness and freedom of their homeland. This type of character was heroized as a woman who must elevate national self-awareness.

Since the 60s of the 19th century, when the social order changes and women emerged in the society, writers have been describing in their writings the lives of rightless, unequal women, both in urban and rural areas. In this case, we consider the literary works of Kazbegi "as a certain complex of socio-class aspirations and feelings" (Kapanelli, 1928,

p. 14), and the unequal position of female characters depicted in this context in the family and society.

When discussing the works of Kazbegi, the following circumstances should be taken into account, “Despite the great spiritual kinship with Romanticism, the basis for works of Kazbegi is realistic” (Andronikashvili, 1984, p. 110). He tells about his heroes with a tragic sense of real reality. “He explained intimate feelings on social background, presented nature in connection with lives of human beings” (Vardoshvili, 2017, p. 671). They often talk about the presence of neoromantic tendencies in his creation. When creating works, Kazbegi relies on three sources: historical facts, ethnographic foundations and folk material. He is one of the prominent representatives of critical realism, who reflects objective reality and not desirable one.

It is also important that in one of the small records, called “Woman’s Freedom” (Kazbegi, 1950, 235), Kazbegi tells the story of a gathering in Switzerland attended by several Georgian men and women. They spoke about women’s freedom, however, Kazbegi does not convey the content of the conversation.

Many stories have a woman’s name as their title chosen by the writer, such as: “Eleonora”, “Tsitska”, “Fati”, “Eliso”, “Tsitsia”. Where the writer tells us about the tragic fate of a woman, her unequal position in the family and society. They fail to raise their voices against injustice and, therefore, obey their fate. However, deep down they feel their inconsolable situation. The writer seems to want to wake them up, to inflame a sense of protest, to break their silence.

The story “Elguja” has a political nature. It is based on historical facts depicting the 1804 Mtiuleti rebellion and clearly shows the struggle of the Caucasian people against Russia. The action takes place in presence of the love between Circassian Mzagho and the Mokheve Elguja. We should note that “the characters of Kazbegi are the children of different peoples living in the Caucasus. They differ both in their ethnicity and religion. Kazbegi specifies their different religious beliefs and ethnic origins in his writings, but when he talks about universal human values such as friendship, love, struggle for freedom, there is no limit to the relationship between his heroes, they become the carriers of one idea” (Vardoshvili, 2014, p. 76).

At the beginning of the work, it reads: “Makhamet admitted that that woman was a Circassian and that she had been taken by Kist person to the Ossetians for sale” (Kazbegi, 1976, 18). In this case, the work

does not show Mzagho's desire or necessity to protest. She silently obeys fate and waits for her own verdict.

Elguja and Mzagho fell in love with each other at the first sight. Elguja decided, "I will go, show my bravery, make a name for myself, serve the community, and when I return home safely, I will ask Gagi for that woman" (Kazbegi, 1976, p. 24), he gets refused by Gagi and kidnaps Mzagho. A woman who seemingly obeys her fate will run away with her true love. "In the heroes of Kazbegi, love appears quickly and easily, this love is pure and selfless, the ultimate goal of which is to start a family" (Vardoshvili, 2014, p. 65). Kazbegi portrays Mzagho's nature, his inner world in an interesting way: "A Circassian prayed, but it was surprising that her request did not express a desire for the death of one person and the salvation of another; she asked for everything to end peacefully, for no one to die, and she would wish joy, happiness, and peace to all with her heart" (Kazbegi, 1976, p. 43). It is the highest expression of humanism and human love that characterizes the heroes of Kazbegi.

The question is: why should individuals like Mzagho not have the desire to express their protest? There are several reasons for this: 1. Socio-political situation and factor of external power. 2. Public order and the social psychology of the society of which they are members. 3. Traditions and customs in which they were raised. 4. The predominant condition of a man in the family and society.

In the letter of an ethnographic nature "Mokheves and their lives", Kazbegi describes the condition of a woman in Khevi¹: "Among Mokheves, the woman is in a different situation than the neighboring peoples around them. Here the woman is not so hidden, and participation in work remains unacceptable as in Ossetians and Circassians. Nor do they have the same privileged status as in Kartli. A Mokheve woman plows, sows and harvests together with men, and her duty is also to do housework, such as baking bread, making food, and sewing for men" (Kazbegi, 1950, p. 36). As we can see, women had to work hard, but they considered it natural and fair.

¹ Khevi is a historical-geographic area in north-eastern Georgia. It is included in the modern-day Kazbegi district, Mtskheta-Mtianeti region (mkhare). Located on the northern slopes of the Greater Caucasus mountains, it comprises three gorges of the rivers Truso, Tergi (Terek) and Snostsq'ali. People of Khevi were called Mokheves (Mokhevians). History, traditions and lifestyle of the Mokheves are very similar to those of other mountaineers of northeastern Georgia.

It is noteworthy that the stories of Kazbegi are often compared to the narratives of Prosper Merimee, the works of Exotic Cycle are meant, and to Shakespeare's work – with the intensity of the expression of love. The issue of women's inequality is clearly seen in "Priest" by Kazbegi. The scientific literature notes that the image of the active Priest in this work derives from V. Hugo "Misérables". The image of Myriel became a paradigm in Georgian prose of the 19th century.

It should be noted that historically in Georgia there was no distinction between men and women in terms of rights. Rustaveli magnificently expressed the equality of men and women in the 12th century in his "The Knight in the Panther's Skin"².

The work of Kazbegi shows how the attitude towards a woman has changed with the breakdown of the community, the change of social order and the establishment of Russian domination. "The high notion of a woman degraded by the laws of external force and reduced to the concept of a woman born for entertainment, to quench the lust of men" (Benashvili, 1948, 23), which is clearly seen in "The Priest".

"The Priest" was published in 1885 in the journal "Iveria" and immediately attracted public attention. The plot of the work is as follows: one of the main characters of the story, a fifteen-year-old Makvala, is lovelessly betrothed to Gela Goderdzishvili, who is in the service of Russian reign. Onise, who is madly in love with Makvala, she loves Onise, too, although she withholds herself. In the end, they will try to escape, but fail and the community will cut them off. She will take refuge in the forest, and one day, while frozen and on the verge of death, the priest Onofre finds and shelters her. Onise kills her in the Priest's hut. Onofre does not reveal the secret of Onise's communion, and dies in prison as the culprit. Gela Goderdzishvili also dies having been stoned by the community.

Kazbegi sympathizes with Makvala, who is in rightless and unequal position and characterizes her situation in the beginning of the story: "A woman who was wretched by fate did not love her husband, but since the wheel of fate turned in this way, she obeyed her fate, and became a faithful wife, cared for the family and defended the honor" (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 631). Makvala endures her situation in silence. The basis of their family life is inequality, because the spouse demanded complete obedience from her, often scolding and making the woman cry, so that Makvala did not fall out of habit of obedience.

² *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is a Georgian medieval epic poem, written in the 12th or 13th century by Shota Rustaveli (Rayfield 2013).

The dire situation in Makvala has led to a sense of protest, she flees from the house. They convene a community assembly to discuss her issue at the Holy Trinity Cathedral. The community assembly takes into account that the woman was forcefully married and decided to divorce them. However, this decision was not subject to the law introduced by Russia and Makvala was brought back to the family. In this case, it appears that the decision made by the community assembly is more humane, it protects to the interest of the woman and democratic principles than the existing law, according to which it was impossible to separate husband and wife.

It is interesting to see what kind of psychology Makvala develops. After some time, Makvala and Onise meet again. Her entire life passes in the woman's minds. Kazbegi writes: "The woman remembered the bitter and unbearable moments of being forcibly married, remembered the nights spent in tears, remembered tramping on the decision of the community and forcibly settling down with her husband; bitter and sad days, when he had to humbly carry out the command of a willful man and to bow her head before his demand; she remembered and her heart sank, when these memories did not promise anything for the future either" (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 645). Despite the experience, the woman decides to forget about Onise, subconsciously feeling that this could bring misfortune to them. She tries to convince herself that she doesn't love Onise anymore. She is as if psychologically ready to remain a victim of inequality, but the struggle of Makvala with herself ends in vain. After each sight of Onise, the feeling of love in her being intensifies. Kazbegi tells us: "The first days of their love passed with the incredible pleasure. This is the spring of man's life! It comes is so hard, so rare that when it comes to somebody, they forget everyone and everything" (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 679).

It seems to be a turning point in Makvala's personality. The lovers decide to flee the village, start a happy life, forget about the past. Onise sells his house and the flock of sheep, however, his heart is broken that he should leave his village and relatives, but he gives up everything for the sake of his loved one.

Makvala suffers from double personality and at the crucial moment when they have to run away, she holds back as if some internal force is holding her back. We think she finds it difficult to overcome the psychological barrier, the reason of which is the unequal environment in which she lives. Makvala does not have the strength to fight for her own happiness to the end, she cannot give up her family, cannot

start a new life. Gela shoots Onise with a rifle, and the pious woman disappears somewhere.

The community cut off Makvala, Gela and Onise from their community. “Makvala, as a reason for all these misfortunes, a traitor to her husband and duty, a disgrace to the community and her home. Onise as a desecrator of the woman to the family and insult to the neighbor’s family and a transgressor of the community rule. Gela, as the person, who sheds the blood of his neighbor and fellowman, the cause of his wife’s behavior, who breaks the community rules” (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 700). Such is the judgment of the community, which takes into account all the circumstances when passing a verdict, but no one forgives the crime.

Even after meeting the Priest, Makvala again obeys her fate silently, she lacks the inner strength to give the Priest a confession and alleviate her spiritual condition. She thinks that by remaining silent she is protecting herself and her beloved, who will eventually take her life. The Priest “prayed for the soul of that woman, for her murderer, and for those people whose harsh decision had put the weak creature in this position. At that moment, the priest did not see any enemies” (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 718). The Priest is the ideal embodiment of Christian humanity.

In the works we have discussed, women are representatives of the lower social strata. The period of breakdown of the community is depicted. Generally, Kazbegi is considered to be the introducer of the mountain topic in Georgian literature, in his writings he clearly reflects political, economic situation in Khevi in the 19th century and the problems of the social order.

“The Condemned” is a work depicting the life of city, it has autobiographical nature and, unlike the stories of the mountain cycle, stands much closer to the traditions of critical realism.

The novel tells the story of the love of Mari and Levan. The uncle of Levan, Mari’s husband, is a person devoid of feelings and human dignity who is obsessed with ambition. The sense of ambition makes him especially associated with the characters of the French classic novel of the 19th century.

Kazbegi portrays vices of the high society living in the city. At the same time, he tries to draw an internal, intimate world of characters. The narrator in the novel is the main character Levan and everything that happens in the novel is seen through his eyes.

Levan often asked himself a question that made such a beautiful, young and educated woman to marry Porphyry Gelasiani. Mari's reply to Levan's question is as follows: "Well, have you ask the married ones? Have many of them chosen their husbands according to their own will? Have many married of their own free will? No Levan, you don't know yet in what state our women are... Many times they tell the grooms to their face, that they don't want them, not to marry them, but they still do not give up. Mom and Dad make them marry anyway" (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 455).

Levan thinks that marrying a woman by force is a crime, and if they defend themselves, the priest will not marry them. However, Mari is well aware of her own example that things are different in real life. After graduating from the institute, he was forced to marry Porphyry. At the first sight, she hated her fiancé and rejected him, but she found himself powerless against her stepmother and family. The woman feels that she is in an unequal position, but she is not able to fight, like many people around her. Here is what she says to Levan, who encourages a woman to fight for her own happiness: "I wish I knew by what right are you asking from women to fight for this? What education have you given them, how did you prepare them, so that they can fight in life... They grow up under slavery, get used to the execution of someone else's command, and marry by order" (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 455).

We think Mari's words fully reflect the unequal position of a woman and the social psychology of the society. This is a confession of a young woman who has no right to love, and when she and Levan swear love to each other, Mari breaks the silence and tells Porphyry the truth.

She wants to divorce her husband. Porphyry is ready to endure any humiliation from his wife, as long as the public does not find out about it.

The question is what is Mari's position, who, unlike her husband, has a sense of dignity: "So how can I live, what should I do? Should I have loves and deceive you and the whole world? Should I lie, be a hypocrite? I would not be able to live like this, I know you would forgive me for everything, you would not have noticed any depravity if it were hidden from the world and the people, if they did not have a reason to talk about it. But I don't want to, I'm not asking it from you... I demand human life, the kind of life I am entitled to and should be given to me" (Kazbegi, 1974, p. 477). With these words, Mari characterizes the society of which she herself is a member. In contrast to Mzagho and

Makvala, Mari protects her own rights. She is a morally perfect person, and many things are unacceptable for her in real life. Although her words will not bring results, but this move elevates her far above other female characters.

Mari's life ends tragically, she escapes from home and is declared insane as a husband and family denier and is placed in a psychiatric hospital. Levan is unable to help her.

Ten years pass, Levan goes from village to village, treats people, helps them compile complaints and search for the truth, and makes a living from this. In one of the villages, he meets Mari, completely robbed of her life, they barely recognize each other, the woman feels happiness for a moment that her dear has found her and ultimately did not abandon her. Desperate and condemned by life, Mari ends her life by committing suicide, she falls into a whirlpool. Although Mari also tragically dies, she is a progressive face compared to Mzagho and Makvala.

The artistically conveyed historical reality is reflected with great depth and completeness in the works of Alexander Kazbegi. Kazbegi portrays female characters who seem ideal at first glance but with complex psychology, whose fate tragically ends and the reason for this is the unequal social environment of which they themselves are members.

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