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Woman and Postcolonial Trauma

Abstract: *This article explores contemporary Georgian memoir literature as a powerful medium for representing postcolonial trauma through women's perspectives. Focusing on works from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it examines how personal and collective memory intertwine to narrate the legacy of Soviet rule and the challenges of navigating post-imperial transitions. Women's memoirs document experiences of marginalization, violence, loss, and survival, while simultaneously constructing spaces for agency, reflection, and cultural resistance.*

The analysis highlights how female authors position themselves as both witnesses and participants in historical transformation, often reclaiming silenced or distorted narratives. These memoirs shed light on the shifting policies of the Soviet regime toward women, including state control over reproduction and sexuality, and the ideological instrumentalization of the female body. They also reflect on the gendered aspects of national memory and identity in post-Soviet Georgia, where the return to tradition frequently intertwines with efforts to redefine womanhood.

Drawing on postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and gender criticism, the article emphasizes the hybrid nature of Georgian memoir writing, which blends documentary realism with subjective introspection. Through close readings of selected texts, including works by Gogi Gvakharia, Lana Gogoberidze, and Ketevan Javakhishvili, the study reveals how women's voices in memoir literature contribute to broader cultural processes of mourning, resistance, and redefinition. Ultimately, these narratives serve as crucial testimonies of historical rupture and continuity, positioning women not only as bearers of trauma but as active agents in the reshaping of memory and identity.

Keywords: *politics of memory; postcolonial trauma; gender and tradition; Soviet ideology; hybrid genres; Georgian women's memoir.*

Memoir literature, the wave of actualization of which in Georgian literature was intertwined with postcolonial processes, became the formative force of numerous symptoms and memoirs, is actively mastering modern history and offering us memoir literature, a completely artistic invention. Therefore, in very many cases, the plot and problems

of modern Georgian literature and cinema are based on the second half of the twentieth century. To analyze the above processes, it is necessary to rely on an appropriate theoretical framework that examines the socio-cultural functions of memoir texts in the context of post-totalitarian experience, from the perspective of trauma and memory. The methodological basis of the study, which allows to analyze the discussed texts not only as literary events, but also from the perspective of historical trauma and the expression of memory, is represented by the following: memoir texts are examined in the aspect of collective memory about the traumatic effects of the Soviet dictatorship; we rely on the viewpoint of the famous American sociologist and researcher of collective memory, Jeffrey K. Olick, quoted in the research paper of Mariam Miresashvili, that “collective memory is a unifying force that unites the national consciousness and mentality of the country” (Miresashvili, 1924, p. 70), and also that “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).

Our approach involves analyzing the main thematic elements of the text – repression, changing gender roles, national identity – through the practice of reading in detail. The study focuses on autobiographical discourse, as well as the ability of female authors to connect personal pain with the public one. We bring an understanding of historical context to the discourse of historical metafiction and fix the attempt to fill in the “blank spots” of memory representation through literary narrative.

In the study „Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History“ (1992) Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that witnesses are special subjects who bear the burden of “unspeakable” experiences – those that cannot be put into words – and, therefore, that testimony [...] exposes the paradox of trauma: it is both a saying and an unsaying, a witnessing and a silencing. Even trauma literature does not give us pure evidence. It gives us space to bear witness – and it is this space that shapes ethical responsibility (Felman, Laub, 1992).

The development of artistic and documentary (autobiographical) prose in certain eras and cultures is influenced by political, social and cultural factors. The history and political situation of Georgia (similar to the situation of other small nations) gave this genre of literature, in addition to the aesthetic function, social and political significance. This meant that in the absence of statehood, works in the memoir genre em-

phasized national interests and anti-colonialist protest. Besides the artistic and educational value, fiction and documentary texts have also become a tool of political struggle, participating in social-political processes. In this regard, such issues as national identity, anti-colonial protest and the politics of memory are relevant in Georgian memoir prose, which is represented by such works as “My Adventures” by Akaki Tsereteli, “Memories of a Shepherd” by Alexander Kazbegi and “On the Path of My Life” by David Kldiashvili. It is in these works that the colonial nature of the tsarist policy is revealed in the consciousness of the Georgian reader, acting as chronotopes of genuine historical figures and events, and the formation of collective memory is achieved. As Anthony D. Smith notes, “The rich ethno-history is a vital source of cultural identity and serves as a foundation for mobilizing collective political action” (Smith, 2008, p. 207).

They raise questions of national identity and the politics of memory. The focus is also on the individual and his or her inner freedom. A woman, regardless of her historical role or social function, is undoubtedly the main theme of all genres of literature (fiction, documentary, fiction-documentary). Based on texts of different genres, it is interesting to consider the retrospective review of how a woman experienced transitional periods under the pressure of tradition and ideology, how social and cultural changes affected her psyche. Another interesting subject is the observation of women's issues, of a regime that was created through revolutionary processes with the aim of breaking traditions, and how it subsequently turned that same tradition into a tool for achieving the own goals.

Although modern Georgian society is noticeably different from the past depicted in analytical texts, however, reflection is not yet complete, and certain inertias still cause a sense of trauma. It is precisely because of the interests of modernity that some historical events find their way into memoir prose (i.e., into the functional area of collective memory), while others remain in historical archives and the works of historians. As E.H. Carr reminds us, “The past is unknown; history is a representation” (Carr, 1961, p. 22), which highlights the constructed nature of historical narratives and the selectivity involved in what enters public consciousness. Soviet women, state policy towards them, feminism, and later propaganda of the “return of femininity” are important themes of anti-colonial protest. In countries such as Georgia, anti-colonial resistance begins with the revival of national history. Memoir prose is often actively used to depict traumatic periods and episodes, which

often feature an active character – a female victim, mother, or teenage daughter. Writers who lived in colonial conditions used history and memories to create collective memory. National collective memory was supposed to resist colonial policy, which is why the politics of memory was actively used in colonial and postcolonial literature. In modern reality, the politics of memory serves a different purpose, contributing to the formation of an image of a woman that fits into the context of our era.

When we talk about the soviet regime, we mean its impact on the destruction of traditional values and the renewed role of women in the new social order. This and other similar events „have radically changed the fundamental principles of the sociopolitical life of the country, broke the existing connections between people, weakened social cohesion“, says another Georgian researcher, M. Miresashvili, who examines those examples of modern Georgian fiction that represent the era of Sovietization (Miresashvili, 2024, p. 69-70).

Epochal changes lead to unpredictable processes. Memoirs also prepare surprises for the modern reader. In the first decade after the creation of the Soviet Union, the inertia of the revolutionary spirit was focused on free love and the backwardness of traditional family roles. The party gradually replaced the pathos of women's emancipation with propaganda of the purity of the family and the definition of the function of the family as a healthy unit of the state, complicating the divorce procedure, and earlier banning legal abortions.

For illustration, let us take a chapter *Adam and Eve* from the memoirs by Gogi Gvakharia "Tearful Glasses" (Gvakharia, 2013, pp. 36-47)., which is devoted not to the relationship between a man and a woman in the classical sense, but to the problems of a man and a woman under socialism, as well as such topics as the teenage problems, the relationship between the authorities and the creative personality, the authorities and the citizen, moralists and their Procrustean bed, protectionism, censorship, the relationship between father and son, fashion, modernity and timelessness, aesthetics, authorities, as well as local problems.

The leitmotif of this chapter is the story of an ordinary Soviet citizen. He lives in the barracks on Plekhanov Street. The point of intersection between Ketino and the author is the toilet at the Nakaduli cinema, although the motives for going there are different. Gogi drags out his time, from session to session, trying to save money on tickets, while Ketino has a more forgivable reason - satisfying a physiological need.

For this purpose, she often goes not only to this particular place, but also to "skirmishes in the neighborhoods" (there are no toilets in the barracks). Ketino's early pregnancy does not escape the attention of the authorities, concerned about public morality, and this story will put on the agenda the need to check the virginity of schoolchildren. Ketino becomes a victim of the wrath of her father, who adequately "thinks" about Soviet ideology.

In the postcolonial context, trauma is often not a single event but the result of long-term systemic violence, argues Stef Craps in the research paper *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2013), that focuses on trauma theory, memory, and postcolonial theory. The author notes that trauma in the postcolonial context is an ongoing, everyday experience that impacts society as a whole (Craps, 2013).

The affirmation of tradition turned out to be a weapon of the regime. Too many stereotypes favored the strengthening of the regime. Therefore, after a certain period of time, the feminist wave in the Soviet Union changed direction and became a force advocating for the preservation of the state. Such a stereotype was the institution of virginity, the protection of which allowed the regime to control morality.

Communist propaganda, which treated propaganda posters as art, replaced the real female image with the type of a sexless working woman. In the Soviet Union, traditional symbols of femininity were hidden due to fear of the ancient tradition: Christianity in our country was spread by a woman educator, Saint Nino, and the most outstanding part of history belongs to a woman monarch, Queen Tamar. Women in Georgia received the right to vote in elections in 1918, even before the Soviet power. From history we know that many women played an important role in public and state affairs.

An interesting experiment was proposed by contemporary Georgian director Lana Gogoberidze in the direction of using memoirs as a multi-genre text and creating non-textual material. Oral traditions are often considered as a source that allows filling in gaps in history, especially when the regime has taken care to destroy documents.

Lana Gogoberidze is the author of many feature films, and the main theme, the leitmotif of which is the story of a mother and her child, of course, autobiographical in nature. Later, at the age of 94, she created a documentary based on her memoirs, "What I Remember and How I Remember It" (2020) and "For Whom the Thrush Sings" (2021). An interesting technique is a kind of simulacrum, namely, in the documen-

tary she offers us fragments from her own feature films (the plot is created from personal memories of that time), which helps the viewer visualize the memories.

Lana Gogoberidze's mother was the first female director in the Soviet Union, who managed to shoot three documentaries, but was later exiled to Central Asia and returned to her family only ten years later. The trauma of totalitarianism affects women of different ages, mothers and children in different ways, subjugating their psyche and subsequently determining their life path.

The director chose the words of Paul Eluard as the title of the documentary: "The night is never completely dark." The film touches on many issues at once, and also reflects the complexity of modern life. The author understands the feeling of solidarity as a social and individual component. Compassion and support are considered the truest test of humanity. The ability to manage to feel deeply someone else's pain means to know that perhaps today this pain is much stronger than yours.

The perception of beauty is the leitmotif of the film; a human is not only a chain of losses, but also a chain of acquisitions. The experience and memories of a tragic existence through beautiful shots, aesthetics, cinematography, art give the right to exist.

The director called the film "Waltz on the Pechora" (1992), "Farewell to the Past". With his film, the author seemed to open up, spill up everything that was in his soul, and freed himself from the burden of memories. The main metaphor of the film is exiled women wandering through the endless icy expanses of the Russian north. The young hero is the only survivor of a failed family. According to the magazine "Liberation", this film is a legacy that arose from a painful and at the same time responsible childhood.

Memoir prose is certainly one of those types of literary texts in which the cultural context of the work is the main connecting element of the composition of the work. In our article, we examined exactly this kind of literary material in which, thanks to a documentary, realistic depiction, the cultural context turned out to be extremely clear and made it possible to talk about the essential aspects of the problem, and not just about an artistic rethinking of life. The women we presented, reflecting on the Soviet era and showing us the complex twists and turns of women's life and awareness, are simultaneously good storytellers, main characters and chronotopes for fiction. We believe that no literary genre has revealed postcolonial trauma, the analysis of which is the present material, as reliably and clearly as literary-documentary, polygenre

texts, in particular memoirs, have managed to do. Women and work, women and education, women and civic responsibility, women and their reproductive function, women and creativity – these are the issues that the female authors of Georgian memoirs gave us the opportunity to reflect on and judge.

In 2012, the *Laboratory for the Study of the Soviet Past* (SovLab)¹ implemented the project "Lost History" which narrates stories not only about famous people, but also about ordinary "victims" of repression. The collection contains memories of three "genres": memoirs by repressed women (Minadora Toroshelidze, Kristine Sharashidze, Keto Khutsishvili and Raisa Mikadze), oral histories and memories about repressed women.

In 2009, within the framework of an international conference organized by DVV international and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, there was formed an initiative group that set itself the goal of developing the topic of the topography of Stalinism, terror and repression and starting research to create a documentary, educational route about Soviet terror and repression in Tbilisi. Later, in March 2010, there was created the Laboratory for Research on the Soviet Past. The organization was founded by Lasha Bakradze, David Gogoshvili, Giorgi Kldiashvili, Nino Lezhava, Ana Margvelashvili, Giorgi Shaishmelashvili, and David Jishkariani. Since then, the board of Sovlab has changed several times².

Since 2010, SovLab has conducted numerous studies on key issues of recent history that were distorted or erased from the collective memory of Georgian society by Soviet propaganda. The issues covered by the organization include the legacy of the Democratic Republic of Georgia and its democratic institutions, the invasion and subsequent occupation of Soviet Russia, organized anti-Soviet resistance, totalitarian terror, the post-Stalin era, and the late Soviet period before the restoration of independence.

Historians began using oral histories in the 1940s, especially in cases where the available sources of "traditional" historiography are insufficient. Partially oral traditions formed the basis for Ketevan Javakhishvili's memoirs about her father, "*The Life of Mikheil Javakhishvili*" (1981, 1989). The stories and scenes described in these memoirs

¹ The Laboratory for the Study of the Soviet Past is a leading non-governmental organization that develops memory policy in Georgia and fights against the use of memory as a weapon of Russian disinformation.

² <https://sovlab.ge/about>

were later used in cinematography to depict that era (we are talking about Tengiz Abuladze's film "Repentance" (1984).

Cathy Caruth, one of the leading authors of trauma theory, believes that trauma is not just a painful event, but something that a person cannot fully comprehend at the time of its occurrence. According to her, "The traumatized, one might say, carry within themselves an impossible history, or they themselves become a symptom of a history that they cannot fully own (and which thus owns them)" – Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). It is this kind of impulse that shapes the personality, the creator, like Lana Gogoberidze, who carries the traumatic experience of her ancestors into postmemory and returns to it again and again, regardless of age. In her work, the same story first becomes the inspiration for the creation of feature films, and then memoirs or autobiographical documentaries.

At the end of the 20th century, the genre of memoirs found a new life in Georgian literature. Under Soviet ideological censorship, it was seemingly forgotten, and this can be explained by the fact that the "sincerity" and "self-reflection" that create the emotional charge of a memoir, and therefore its literary value, contradicted the principles of socialist realism. In the so-called "Otepel Era" (era of warming), literature of this genre first appeared in dissident literature, and then in the public sphere, and became relevant as a way to fill in the "blank spots" of history. The artistic invariance of memories harmoniously intertwined with the new order of memory politics and played an important role in the representation of history. As an example, there can be examined the memoirs "My Father Mikheil Javakhishvili" by writer Ketevan Javakhishvili, published in Tbilisi in 1984. The author is the m of a Georgian classic writer and public figure who suffered from Stalin's repressions; she witnessed her father's arrest in 1937. The work is an interesting text from different points of view: as a historical source, as a chronicle of the writer's life and work, and from the point of view of the gender issue. The author tells how the wife and two daughters of a "people's enemy" continue to struggle for survival, first during the era of repressions and then during World War II. This is interesting both for its clarification of the gender restrictions of labor under socialism and Asian society, and in connection with the issue of access to education. "When my comrade Medea Abasheli heard our story, she hurried to us; not daring to enter the house, she stood by the fence and consoled us there. No one else came to us except Medea. Everyone was afraid to

talk to us, and therefore to express sympathy to the family of a people's enemy," (Javakhishvili, 1991, pp. 5-6) writes Ketevan Javakhishvili, and this passage clearly shows the influence of fear sown by totalitarianism on the moral stability of society.

One of the key terms in the literary discourse of trauma theory is "postmemory", introduced by Marianne Hirsch. She describes how traumatic experiences are transmitted from generation to generation, how they are reflected in memory, and how storytelling becomes a way of overcoming them, – in the form of confession and testimony (Hirsch, 2012). Obviously, Ketevan Javakhishvili's memoirs can be read from this perspective as well: although the text evokes memorable scenes from the author's childhood and, thus, also reflects her personal traumas, the narrative mainly aims to convey the life of her father and his traumatic experience. Here, trauma is presented not as an individual experience, but as an intergenerational response and a link between them. Adapting trauma theories to a postcolonial context requires a different analytical framework.

As Jennifer Yusin notes, the Western model of postcolonial trauma research, built around a single traumatic experience, fails to capture the systemic and long-term violence associated with postcolonial experience (Yusin, 2018). The effects of this violence are often passed down from generation to generation, and traumatic memory is imprinted not only on personal but also on collective identity, which is especially important when understanding cases such as Ketevan Javakhishvili's memoir, where a father's traumatic experience is revived in the daughter's narrative, or Lana Gogoberidze's films, where a mother's traumatic past is a constant companion to her present.

As Sylvia Pellicer-Ortín notes in her analysis of Holocaust narratives, the intergenerational transmission of trauma is not only a transmission of memory, but also the activation of an ethical impulse – the desire of descendants to continue to bear witness, regardless of whether they have had direct experience of it (Pellicer-Ortín, 2014). In her view, members of the second generation, growing up in the shadow of their parents' traumatic histories, simultaneously experience both a close connection and an alienation from this memory. Such a dualism – alienation and connection – is characteristic of the very same internal conflict that often manifests itself in narratives built on a traumatic legacy. Ketevan Javakhishvili's text also conveys such ethical tension: the author seems to be trying to rework the legacy of her father's trauma

through her narrative, which is not only a political and ethical gesture of personal survival, but also of preserving memory.

In our study, we find the connection between women and post-colonial trauma pertinent precisely because C. Caruth emphasizes the role of literature and narrative forms in overcoming trauma. In her view, both psychoanalysis and literature serve to reveal the boundaries that exist between knowledge and ignorance, memory and non-memory:

Literature and art provide the opportunity for traumatic experience to become a story, a narrative, which somewhat reduces its impact (power) on a person's life. Because of the falsification of history, memoirs from the Soviet period, especially those that were published only after the collapse of the Red Empire, are unique material for reconstructing history; in many cases, they are the only surviving testimonies: "I have presented the facts with all the truth, thanks to which my father's spiritual state, his pain, the oppressive environment that was created around him, and the unfair life in which he had to exist and work creatively became clearer to us. Finally, I described the tragedy that befell our family on August 14, 1937. I hope that this work will truthfully introduce future generations to the difficult and hard life of the writer, which, due to his tragic fate, he went through with suffering and ended with torture" (Javakhishvili, 1991, pp. 5-6).

Transitional periods, times of state and social changes are very impressive and sensitive for history, and therefore for collective memory. The so-called "icon of the world" is modified, the mentality of a person, the norms of his behavior, the worldview are changed as well. That is why it is unsatisfactory for him to view the history only with the help of facts, which are stubborn in themselves, but at the same time very dry, conveying the national tragedy. Therefore, the forms of expression are changed, the line between documentary and fiction is erased. Memoirs become poly- or meta-genre; they are overly carried away by the artistic flow and move from documentary prose to fiction. Fictional and documentary memoirs open the door to the theme of love, reflect everyday life and relationships between a man and a woman. Many of the topics raised in memoirs are unique to literature, especially in the context of socialist realism. Memoirs showed us the "kitchen" of Soviet families, for example, in "My Father Mikheil Javakhishvili" instead of the official stereotype of a Soviet woman, Ketevan Javakhishvili depicted the portraits of weak, intimidated and internally broken people, while art was supposed to depict a young, healthy, athletic person, a kind of symbol of the ideal of a Soviet citizen, not afraid of the

future, able to work and fight. The Soviet woman was supposed to be a multifunctional woman who had to raise people of the future, her main mission was motherhood and the construction of a socialist state.

If we look at the art of socialist realism with a critical-analytical eye and also consider documentary prose, we will see that the female image in any genre of fiction or non-fiction literature - painting or sculpture, theater or cinema, is loaded with symbolic functions designed to express official messages. It is worth noting that such art is belittled and less reflective of reality. The purpose of the image of a tough, artificial woman is to demonstrate the idea of gender equality, to emphasize the role that Soviet society assigned to women in the large Soviet family.

The weakening of the erotic content of a woman's femininity contributed to the strengthening of its social and economic function. In the Stalin era, a taboo was imposed on the manifestation of natural female passions, instead, there was created the image of a strong and sexless woman, which became the chronotope of socialist realism.

Memoirs written not only in the Soviet era, but also in the post-Soviet era, reviving this period through recollections, do not differ much from each other in their approaches. Comparing these two different time samples, we can conclude that the change is minimal. Although female authors of memoirs created in the post-Soviet period reflect on and discuss the pernicious tendency of women to submit to ideological dictates, their works do not have the level of sincerity that would be characteristic of their intimate, sexual images. This would be overcoming a taboo, and we would no longer be talking about the inertia of socialist realism.

Thus, as a result of our study, we can conclude that a woman was not only the victim of the regime in the Soviet period, but also that the postcolonial trauma limits them even in the modern era, forcing them to create under conditions of self-correction and an internal filter. All this reveals numerous markers of postcolonial thinking not only in literature, but also helps us better understand the role of a woman, one of the main components in the formation of modern society. Thus, memoir prose is the best tool for representing collective memory.

Our study emphasizes the following circumstance: communist ideology, which considered propaganda posters to be art, replaced the real female image with the type of a sexless working woman. In the Soviet Union, traditional symbols of femininity were carefully disguised. It is precisely because of the interests of the present that some

historical events fall into memoir prose (i.e., into the functional area of collective memory). The memoirs reliably, clearly and vividly revealed the problem of gender, in particular, the female gender; they covered such topics as a woman and work, a woman and education, a woman and civic responsibility, a woman and her reproductive function, a woman and creativity - these are the issues that the female authors of Georgian memoirs gave us the opportunity to reflect on and judge. Thus, as a result of our research, we can conclude that women were not only victims of the Soviet regime, but they are a consequence of post-colonial trauma, which limited them in the modern era, forcing them to create in conditions of self-correction and an internal filter. All this reveals numerous markers of postcolonial thinking not only in literature, but also helps us better understand the role of a woman, one of the main components of the formation of modern society.

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