

WAYS OF PRESERVING AND CONSTRUCTING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ZAIRA ARSENISHVILI'S PROSE¹

Bokuchava Nino

Doctoral student at Ilia State University (program of Linguistics and Literary Studies),
Invited Lecturer at Shota Meskhia State University of Zugdidi. Georgia.

Nino_bokuchava@iliauni.edu.ge

ABSTRACT: *The report discusses the Georgian writer, Zaira Arsenishvili's prose. The report was conducted with the assumption that Zaira Arsenishvili's novels: „Woe is Life: Kakhetian Chronicles“, „Requiem for Base, Soprano and Seven Instruments, or Portrait of a Young Storyteller“ and the story – „When Fear and Trembling are Raging“ are „media of memory“. Collective Memory Texts / „Memory Fictions“ are established terms in literary studies, they refer to such fictional texts, in which special attention is paid to „acts of memory“ (remembering) and reflections on the past. In turn, people, collectives, get to know themselves and their identity through memory.*

The purpose of the report is to study, in the conditions of the totalitarian regime, the Soviet Union, how it is possible to preserve the national identity and transfer it to the new generation.

The report is based on the theoretical approaches of recognized theorist in cultural memory studies – Aleida and Jan Assmann, Pierre Nora – „cultural memory“, „communicative memory“, and „sites of memory“.

As a result of the study of the research objects, it was established that the protest of „social memory“ against totalitarian „political memory“ is symbolic, verbal, clearly expressed or implicit. A totalitarian system, despite possessing all possible tools to influence society, fails, the indoctrination of the society cannot be fully implemented, because individuals are able to protect and preserve the memory even in conditions of violence.

Keywords: *Zaira Arsenishvili, Post-soviet Georgian Literature, Identity, Collective (Memory) Texts.*

During her lifetime, Georgian society knew Zaira Arsenishvili as a musician (she played for years in the orchestra of the Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Theater) and a screenwriter², less as a writer, whose conceptual framework of her work is a reflection on the violent Soviet past and

¹ The report was prepared with the support of Shota Rustaveli National Foundation: FR-22-793.

² From this point of view, his cooperation with the director Lana Ghogoberidze is worth mentioning. From 1972 (their first joint work is „When the Almond Bloomed“) until the writer's death, Zaira Arsenishvili was the script's co-author for each of Ghogoberidze's films.

repressions. Arsenishvili started working on revelatory writings directed against the system in the 1960s of the last century, which coincides with the period of existence and influence of Soviet censorship. In fact, she wrote works „for drawer“, which became possible to print her writings only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It should be noted that her novels (“Requiem for Base, Soprano and Seven Instruments, or Portrait of a Young Storyteller”, „Woe is Life: Kakhetian Chronicles“) published in the 1990s and early 2000s did not receive an active reception from the public, and the general reader discovered the work of Zaira Arsenishvili only after 2019 when one of the biggest publishing houses in Georgia (Bakur Sulakauri Publishing) became interested in her novel „Woe is Life“ (in the following years, they published a complete collection of Zaira Arsenishvili’s art). Thus, the literary study of his novels and short stories is still a prospect for the future. It is noteworthy that for understanding the writer’s work her (auto)biography is an important resource. Zaira Arsenishvili’s works often feature family members, and she keeps their real names. Zaira Arsenishvili is from a repressed family, her ancestors experienced being on the „black list“, confiscation of property, and living in constant fear at different times, however, a particularly traumatic episode of the writer’s life is the loss of her father, when she was only five — Ivane (Vano) Arsenishvili is a victim of the repression of 1937². The writer explains her intention to make Georgia’s bloody Soviet past the main focus of her work in the „oral history“ recorded in 2011 as follows:

Since childhood, I heard all the time: „repression, repression“, and I thought (..), if I write something, I will write about it. This was the main topic. (..) I am surprised that I was reading the literature of the 20th century, there must have been some extraction. I have never met anyone my age who was not affected by repression in some way. It was a network that the state put out, and this network affected everyone.³

In this report, Zaira Arsenishvili’s texts — the novels „Requiem“, „Woe is Life“ and the story „When Fear and Trembling are Raging“ — are considered as „collective texts“ / „media of collective memory“. The report aims to investigate in Zaira Arsenishvili’s prose, in the presence of the totalitarian regime, the Soviet Union, in what ways it is possible to preserve and construct the national identity and transmit it to the new generation. Memory studies were defined as the theoretical approach of the report.

Theoretical Background

People, collectives get to know themselves through memory. If we extend this statement in the socio-cultural context, we get the following formulation: identity is produced within the framework of „collective memory“^{4,5}. In turn, any form of memory (individual, collective) is based on retrospective narrative⁶. Literature is a medium of collective memory, a means of staging

1 Hereinafter, the short title of novels „Requiem“ and „Woe is Life“ will be used.

2 Arsenishvili, Z. 2000:8-9.

3 Arsenishvili Z. 2011.

4 The author of the term „collective memory“ (fr. La Mémoire Collective) is a French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs.

5 Pataridze and Tsagareli 2024: 47.

6 Müller-Funk 2012:207.

memory in which „acts of memory“ (e.g., remembering, forgetting, reflection on memory) occur¹. German theorist, Astrid Erll developed the idea of „collective text“ in the early 2000s. The latter, firstly, should be interpreted as a „remembering media“ framework in which collective memory is constructed. They refer to reality, real events, i.e. The common past, norms and values of the collective will appear. Collective texts traditionally belong to popular genres (i.e., detective, historical novels) and, while transmitting widely shared versions of the past to new generations, they become objects of remembrance. In other words, the concept of a collective text is more of a reading method, a reception, that is often unconscious by readers².

In collective memory texts, socially shared past versions can be conveyed in various „mnemonic modes“ (narrative forms of memory, schemes). Astrid Earle distinguishes five modes³ of „collective memory“ (narrative modes), within which (or in their combinations) the past, memory is reflected in literary texts, i.e. Literary text is considered as a media of memory. From the typology developed by Erll, the following are useful for analyzing Zaira Arsenishvili's writings: *experiential mode* and *antagonistic modes*. Stories told in *experiential mode* are conveyed as real, lived-through experience. Using this form of literary memory, the „living memory“ of modern history (e.g. generational, family memories) is staged in fiction, in other words, the form of memory that Aleida and Jan Assmanns call *communicative memory*⁴ is used. In an experiential mode, first-person narration, and the present tense are used. Furthermore, the latter is characterized by the detailed presentation of past everyday life. And, finally, from the linguistic point of view, the characters often speak using sociolect, and slang.

In the *antagonistic mode*, a concrete version of the past (as opposed to a different narrative version) is promoted and the other is rejected. i.e. only the memory of a certain group appears true. Such literary texts use negative stereotypes, and we-narrative, and the main issue is the representation of identity⁵.

Data of research texts

„Requiem“ - the event causing the main conflict of the novel, is the repressions of 1937, which is conveyed on the example of the tragic events that took place in the Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Orchestra. Until the final episode, one gets the impression that the novel's antagonist is Jeriko Kashibauri, an orchestra trumpeter, who grew up as an orphan in an orphanage. His father, „GPUshnik“ (Chekist) Khvtiso Kashibauri, was killed in 1924 by the Kakutsa⁶ squad in response to the members who shot him. Jeriko grows up with a thirst for revenge, though,

1 Erll 2004: 337; Neumann 2008: 334.

2 Erll 2004: 39-41.

3 This strategy has been called as the „rhetoric of collective memory“ by Erll. See: Erll 2011:157.

4 It is a form of oral, non-mediated memory whose time reaches approximately 80-100 years, which is more or less equal to three generations. As for cultural memory, the latter is a category of externalized memory, a kind of institution. It is found in material and symbolic forms, which means that *cultural memory* is a stable memory, i.e. It is passed down from generation to generation (Assmann 2008: 110-111).

5 Erll 2011:157-159.

6 Kaikhosro (Kakutsa) Cholokashvili is Georgia's national hero. He commanded an anti-Soviet guerrilla movement in Georgia in 1922-1924.

after years, he discovers that the only survivor of the family of his father's murderers is their very old mother, who „inscribes“ the mountains and valleys with her sons' names in honor of the memory of them.

„Woe is Life“ – The novel focuses on the repressions of 1937 in Kakheti. The narrator, whose father is a victim of repression, remembers the past, her childhood, when she was taught poems in praise of the leaders (Stalin, Lenin) in kindergarten, and at home, the nurturing grandmother made her refute this notion because, despite his young age, he should know „who is who“ from the beginning. At the same time, the totalitarian system is not satisfied with the shooting and deportation of people, they force society to condemn the „Enemies of the People“ publicly.

„When Fear and Trembling are Raging“ — The protagonist of the story, Tamar, experiences the repressions of 1937 on herself: her husband is shot, which means that Tamar is a member of the „enemy of the people“ family. Thankfully arranged in the library of Tbilisi State University, she does not obey the order to destroy the books of „harmful“ authors, the list of which was given to her. Tamar risks her life to hide these books at home, believing that the time of truth will come when the censored works of prose and poetry will be returned to the shelves where they belong.

Ways of preserving and constructing national identity in Zaira Arsenishvili's prose

The works selected for this report are „collective (memory) texts“ as in them, through „acts of memory“ (remembering processes), traumatic memories of the past are staged, and memory is not only represented but also reflected. Zaira Arsenishvili's texts are a kind of memory framework in which national identity is produced, as they answer the question of who we are as a society.

From my observation, the narrative in „Requiem“, which is aimed at preserving and constructing identity, is conveyed in the antagonistic mode of memory: It rejects the official version of the past (The brothers supporting Kakutsa, who was shot by „GPUshnik“ Kashibauri, are „enemies of the people“) in favors of the „we-narrative“ (in fact, these people are victims of the totalitarian regime). In „Woe is Life“, a combination of antagonistic and reflexive modes is found: In addition to the fact that the voice of the oppressed, the repressed can be heard in the novel by speaking the hitherto forbidden truth (Shot wedding guests as victims of the system, public condemnation of „enemies of the people“ as a farce), the elements of the communicative mode are also evident. The grandmother manages to form the identity of her granddaughter precisely as a result of face-to-face, direct communication: Even at a young age, she openly talks to Rusiko about who the „father of the people“ Stalin (the source of all evil) is and teaches that the role models for the girl should be the heroes of „The Knight in the Panther's Skin“ instead of the leader. And, finally, in the story „When Fear and Trembling are Raging“ the dominant mode is the reflexive mode. In it, priority is given to the present tense: Tamari is a direct witness of the tragic events of 1937, while at the risk of her life, she tries to save the

¹ It is a Georgian medieval epic poem, written in the 12th century by Shota Rustaveli.

national treasure (Tamari did not burn novels and short stories of Mikheil Javakhishvili¹). In the research texts, the protest of social memory² (as a guardian of identity) against totalitarian political memory³ appears in various forms: symbolic, verbal and explicit.

The symbolic representation of resistance: In „Requiem“, the mother of the shot Jordanashvili brothers „inscribes“ the names of her sons - Bidzo, Ando, Misho - in the fields and thus preserved their memory, in her words: „I live for their remembrance, should not there be a proof of their life?⁴ ⁵“. With this symbolic act, Mother turns the fields of Kakheti into „places of memory“, symbolic places that should preserve the names of people who fought before the Soviet occupation. In 1924, being a member of the Kakutsa squad meant life at risk, which is what happened in the case of the Jordanashvili brothers. To strengthen the national identity, it is necessary to remember their names: the collective memory must remain the narrative that the Georgian nation did not obediently accept the occupation in the name of the peasantry and the proletariat.

„Gigo’s Hill“ becomes a place of memory in „Woe of Life“ which after the tragedy of the „bloody wedding“, after this hill became the grave of an innocent victim, became the „Golgotha of Telavi“ in the memory of the locals. In this case, too, the targets of the regime are Khakutsa and his supporters. The guests of the wedding held in Telavi were accused of being allies with Kakutsa, and the „Troika“ sentenced them to be shot, even though the majority of those who were shot had never even met him. The present episode reveals the goal of the occupation regime: to wipe out the Georgian noble family as an opposing, antagonistic class and thus erase the social memory. However, in the novel, the counter-reaction is expressed: in the collective memory, „Golgotha of Telavi“ remained a symbolic and material place of the victims killed in the name of the Soviet revolution, which in turn is a prerequisite for preserving the national identity.

Verbal representation of resistance: In the novel „Woe is Life“, communicative memory is used to construct the identity of the new generation, which is staged in the relationship between a grandmother and a granddaughter. While the regime starts the ideological indoctrination of the occupied society, its political „upbringing“ from the kindergarten age, the grandmother confronts this mental violence with the „canonical text“, the symbol of the identity of the Georgian nation, the „The Knight in the Panther’s Skin“, to protect her granddaughter from Soviet propaganda. The „tool“ of the grandmother is a sincere word, with which she instructs

-
- 1 Mikheil Javakhishvili was a Georgian novelist who is regarded as one of the top twentieth-century Georgian writers. In 1937 he was sentenced to death.
 - 2 Social memory is a category of „bottom-up“ implicit memory (Pataridze and Tsagareli 2024:25).
 - 3 Political memory is a form of „top-down“, externalized memory (it is manifest in a symbol, medium, or place). The latter belongs to the category of long-term memory, which achieves stability through a cohesive narrative, strong symbolism, and involvement in collective rituals. According to the meaning of political memory, educational and mass communication systems are used for societal indoctrination (Pataridze and Tsagareli 2024:25).
 - 4 Unless otherwise indicated translations are mine.
 - 5 Arsenishvili 2021:233.
 - 6 The concept developed by the French historian Pierre Nora - „places of memory“ (fr. Lieux de Mémoire) refers to the places of the nation’s identity and collective memory, the places where the memory crystallizes. In his concept, „place“ is symbolic, i.e. the latter can be expressed in both material and immaterial form (Nora 1989:7; Nora 1998: IX-X, 632).

her grandson to look for role models not in the leaders (Lenin, Stalin), but in the heroes of the poem. As a result, the propaganda calculation of the false state turns out to be in vain, the grandmother not only protects the national identity but also manages to pass it on to the new generation.

The explicit resistance: A grown-up episode of „Woe is Life“ is devoted to the public condemnation of „enemies of the people“ in the Telavi theatre. The attendees of the „performance“, as well as, the participants are aware of the fictitious, formal character of these scenes, they are only doing what they have been told to. Among the total condemnation, only one character, 14-year-old Iatamze Shamanauri, dares and openly challenges the regime. She is forced to condemn her father as an enemy of the people, and the girl defends her father with the following argument: „Our genius poet was a friend of my father (..). Father also wrote memoirs about Vazha-Pshavela. The way Vazha Pshavela was worried about the fate of his homeland, who else would be concerned?!”¹. Thus, an outstanding character was found in the society, who rejected the rules of the game of the regime and explicitly opposed it. The girl protects her national identity because she refuses to cooperate with the regime. she opposes a totalitarian state with the social memory of the, in which Vazha-Pshavela occupies a proud, symbolic place.

The implicit resistance: In the story, the indirect protest against the system is expressed through cultural memory. Since the regime daily exposes „enemies“, including writers, the works of Mikheil Javakhishvili, who was shot in 1937, are on the list of books to be destroyed. Tamar’s implicit protest is as follows: she refuses to burn the treasures of Georgian literature, thereby becoming a defender of national identity. At the cost of risk, she dares to save the novels and stories and hide them in the house, between the bed and the slats. Although her protest is secret (representatives of the system do not know about it), the national treasure, since it has already been mediatized (literature turned into a book), is protected. Thus, Tamari is waiting for the right time to return Mikheil Javakhishvili’s books to society, the time when a new generation will read them again.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that in the work of Zaira Arsenishvili, different ways of constructing and maintaining identity are used: symbolic, verbal, explicit, and implicit. In these research texts, the actions aimed at protecting identities are staged by contrasting national and repressive political memories. In the end, the totalitarian system, which possesses all the possible tools of influence on people (physical and mental), fails because the ideological indoctrination of the society cannot be fully implemented - individuals still manage to protect and preserve their identity even in a violent environment.

REFERENCES

Arsenishvili, Z. 2021. *Requiem for Base, Soprano and Seven Instruments, or Portrait of a Young Storyteller*. Tbilisi.

Arsenishvili, Z. 2020. *When Fear and Trembling are Raging*. Pebbles. Tbilisi.

Arsenishvili, Z. 2019. *Woe is Life*. Tbilisi.

Arsenishvili, Z. 2011. Interviewed by Nino Bekishvili, Virtual Platform, *Rethinking the Soviet Union*. Tbilisi, March 12.

Arsenishvili, Z. 2000. Interviewer by Kakabadze Lia, „I Gave my Violin“ *Woman of Georgia* No: 3-4, Tbilisi.

Assmann, J. 2008. Communicative and Cultural Memory. In *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin.

Erll, A. 2011. *Memory in Culture*. Houndmills.

Erll, A. 2004. Reading Literature as Collective Texts: German and English War Novels of the 1920s as Media of Cultural and Communicate Memory. *Proceedings of Conference of the German Association of University Teachers of English: Volume XXV*. Trier.

Müller-Funk, W. 2012. On the Narratology of Cultural and Collective Memory. *The Architecture of Modern Culture: Towards a Narrative Cultural Theory*. Berlin.

Neumann, B. 2008. The Literary Representation of Memory. *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin.

Nora, P. 1989. Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, Special Issue: *Memory and Counter-Memory*, N26.

Nora, P. 1998. *Realms of Memory: the Construction of the French Past*. New York.

Pataridze S., Tsagareli L., Bokuchava N. 2024. *Literary Fiction and Memory*. Tbilisi.

პატარიძე ს., ცაგარელი ლ., ბოკუჩავა ნ. 2024. *ლიტერატურა და კოლექტიური მემორია*. თბილისი.