

Shota Iatashvili

MAIN ACTORS ON CONTEMPORARY GEORGIAN LITERARY SCENE

Georgian literature has a history that spans one thousand and five hundred years. This short article can hardly have an ambition to depict or even schematically outline major stages of its development. The origins of contemporary literary scene in Georgia trace back to the first years of Georgian independence in the early 1990s. This study thus offers an analysis focusing on this latter period. While discussing various contemporary tendencies, we shall also try to mention certain decisive literary events of previous centuries. When looking back at the 20th century Georgian literature from the perspective of the 21st century, it is obvious that it has gone through three stages of fundamental renewal. In the global context, these stages have resulted from international literary processes and yet they had unique views and perspectives of their own, mostly arising out of the national political context. First modernist or avant-garde renewal in the early 20th century was orchestrated by poetic activities of Symbolist, Futurist and Dadaist movements (the latter two movements were actually merged in Georgia), while the prose was largely dominated by authors who wrote in the expressionist style. Such diverse processes were brought to an abrupt end in the 1930s by the Soviet regime that established Social Realism as the only legal form of artistic expression, thus blocking all paths to further literary quest. Similarly to all countries of the Soviet Union, another wave of renewed quest began in Georgia by the late 1950s and 1960s, during the political meltdown of the Khrushchev administration. It has to be argued that several authors that pioneered the renewal and renovation of Georgian literary scene at that time are still actively involved in literary processes nowadays. These include key figures in contemporary literature, of whom Besik Kharanauli (1939) and Lia Sturua (1939) can be deemed as poets of major significance. Sturua and Khahranauli, along with other authors, were among the first blank verse poets, introducing and establishing this poetic form in Georgia.

Besik Kharanauli uses a language that is evocative of folklore style of the Fshavi dialect (one of the northern dialects of the Georgian language). His poetry is reflexive and often oscillates on the verge of wisdom and naiveté. His verse impresses with unique features and extensiveness, and it is always directed towards the quest of ever-new poetic forms. Kharanauli's aesthetics changed considerably since the break of the millennium. His new books don't fall within the categories of any particular genre. Reader will find it impossible to trace in the text influence of a specific style. In its essence, his poetry is one deep breath, as Kharanauli focuses particularly on the stream of consciousness – a single but extremely powerful and uninterrupted stream. The poetry of Lia Sturua is filled with unhackneyed, surrealist metaphors; her style is gentle and refined. Yet, the key to her metaphors is frequently intellectual. She has also written many sonnets throughout her life. Whilst composed with full respect for classical and formal rules, they sound unconventional and unique, and cannot stand out as fundamentally different pieces in her career. Instead, they present logical and natural continuation of her mainstream works *in verse libre*. The poetic tandem of Taniel Tschanturia (1933) and Vakhtang Javakhadze (1933) is notable among those poets of the 1960s who are still active writers. They introduced irony and parody to Georgian poetry, loading their verse with *calembours*, word play, and alliteration. They have remained faithful to that style. The latter generation of poets was followed by another in the 1970s and 1980s that absorbed and interpreted these renovations, successfully combining the tradition with their own individual voices. These include, inter alia, Tedo Bekishvili (1941–1993), Jarji Pkhoveli (1943), Givi Alkhazishvili (1944), Tamaz Badzaghua (1959–1987), Ella Gochiashvili (1959), Omar Turmanauli (1959), Nino Darbaiseli (1961).

The third renewal dates to the late 1980s and early 1990s, marked by the Soviet perestroika and the first years of Georgian independence. This period and the new generation of artists revived the experience of the avant-garde movement in the beginning of the 20th century, combined it with the aesthetics introduced by the generation of the 1960s, and integrated a number of texts within the creative process that were hitherto taboo. Subsequently, the image of Georgian poetry changed entirely. Renovations to the poetic forms led to the opening and expansion of problems and themes. Poetry of that period took great interest in American culture and literature of the second half of the 20th century. Davit Chikhladze (1962) played a major role in popularisation of American literature. He translated poems by Ginsberg and Kerouac, essays by Susan Sontag, etc., involving Georgian authors and translators in the process. His interests influenced not only his worldview, but also his poetry. Eastern religions found their way to Georgian poetry – a powerful means of cultural self-identification of beatniks and hippies. The phenomenon is interesting also because Georgian culture had been under the influence of Eastern aesthetics for centuries. Thus, once again, the East entered

Georgian poetry indirectly. This time, however, it was not the Arab or Persian East, as the influence came from India, China and Japan. Haiku and Tanka became particularly popular.

While discussing smaller poetic forms, Kote Kubaneishvili (1952) deserves particular mention. In the early 1990s Kubaneishvili and Irakli Charkviani (1960–2006) founded a poetic group, The Reactive Club. They wrote on political issues and endeavoured to alter and influence the thoughts and views of Georgian public, sometimes using provocative or scandalous statements. Later the two broke up. Charkviani focused increasingly on music, gradually growing into one of the most significant figures in Georgian alternative rock in so much so that he received a posthumous degree. Although his rock poetry retains its social and political currency, Charkviani also addressed in his works perpetual themes of life and death, love and passion. Kote Kubaneishvili has remained faithful to social art, as he deems poetry to be a means of communication, quick reaction and protest. Hence, his texts are often reduced to just two lines. Kubaneishvili's poetic slogans and mono-rhymes become winged phrases widely known all over Tbilisi: élites, ordinary workers and police officers – they all know them by heart. Zurab Rtveliashvili (1967) is an acclaimed experimenter, multimedia artist and performer. He endeavours to free his poems from excessive verbal material, thus enhancing clarity of message. His texts vibrate, and his declamations are best examples of sound poetry. The most recent collections by Zurab Rtveliashvili, *Anarchy* and *Dictatorship of Poetry* best illustrate the main features of his poetic ideology. Dato Barbakadze (1966) is the key figure in this generation. His philosophical and conceptual poetry had major influence on the development of new poetics. He studies the structure of language: odd syntax and somewhat artificial grammar are what catches the eye in his works. The flow of his thought and his word constructions do not comply with natural or conventional syntax, thus making him subject his language with hitherto unknown rules. Zviad Ratiani (1971) is an expressive poet. Themes and images in his poetry are emotionally loaded. Mood controls the poet, gives him the impulse, and energy that may seem excessive at times; yet it is at that crucial moment when a kind of controlling force, which is born within the poet, subdues the creative process, and having returned it to the usual course, tries to find some optimum means of expression. Therefore, his poetic ideas can be conveyed with equal success in both blank and conventional verse forms. His poems include “interpreted material”, borrowed from the works of various poets. Not that they are allusions – he quotes directly from various types of poetic writing, and avoiding trite subtexts and plotlines, he creates impressive imagery. Giorgi Lobzhanidze (1974) is one of the best orientalist in Georgia. He made powerful impression on readers with his translations of classical and contemporary poetry of Iran and Arabic-speaking countries. His translations broke all stereotypes of contemporary Eastern poetry.

The phenomenon of Westernisation in new Iranian poetry can aid the perception of the issues Lobzhanidze addresses to in his poems. Beyond the oriental decorative style, there are always existential issues and taboos that cut through his poetry. Lobzhanidze depicts them with a degree of provocativeness.

History of Georgian literature of the second half of the 20th century has a long list of successful and talented women poets. Along the same line, 1990s and the millennium have seen a number of brilliant works. Their authors can be regarded as pioneers of Georgian feminist poetry. The main theme of Rusudan Kaishauri's (1957) poetry is the routine in woman's life. The lyrical person describes women's everyday life, and activities traditionally ascribed to them, including doing laundry, cleaning and cooking. Although her depictions may be aggressive at times, general attitude is far from single-sided. Sometimes the routine begins to transform itself, and the usual world suddenly gives way to the magical. Compared to Kaishauri, texts by Maia Sarishvili (1968) are more complex and associative, more hermetic. Abundant metaphors and originality of imagery in her poetry may be evocative of Lia Sturua's texts. However, while Sturua's works are known for their aristocratic refinement, Sarishvili takes her verse to a different level of tension and frankness, which opens the vast tragic world of depression. Lela Samniashvili (1977) is a philosophical author and keen researcher of cultural phenomena. Her all-encompassing poetry addresses wide range of issues. Her observations and metaphors are always precise, as if she has the entire creative process planned and designed from the very beginning. She constructs the body of poem with filigreed accuracy and emotional balance whether it be the theme of love or some global issue, blank or conventional verse. Tea Topuria (1977) is distinguished with her concealed humour and self-mockery that are inherent features of her poetry. Contrastingly, however, her themes are usually solemn and dire: Topuria's poetry and prose mainly focus on death – she manages to remain equally successful in both genres. Diana Anfimiadi (1982) is a professional linguist, which is also reflected in her poetry. In addition to linguistic games in her works, what also epitomises her works is poetic reinterpretation of characters and themes from Greek mythology. The leitmotif in the poetry by Eka Kevnishvili (1979) is social injustice and the fate of insecure people in contemporary alienated and indifferent world. She is a professional journalist, and her poetry illustrates the false environment smeared with global wars and ethnic conflicts, mass media, and political speeches. Last but not least, Lia Likokeli (1986) is among the finest Georgian authors. The distinctive features of her works are the world of fairy tales, myths, and creatures evoked from the past. When composing a particular plot (hers are long, narrative poems), she discusses painful issues and analyses the fate of women in general through the world of folklore and fairy tales.

A number of authors stand out in the list of poets of the millennium. Poetry by Rati Amaghlobeli (1977) is inimitable for its exquisite musicality, ornaments

and abundant alliteration. He often employs archaisms and dis-quotations from old Georgian poetry. His more recent collected poems *Angelarium* is an attempt to perceive angelic world through poetry. Nika Jorjaneli (1978) is an intellectual poet. In his poetry (blank or conventional verse), emotion is always subdued to the leitmotif. The texture of his poems is always weaved with great accuracy and profound knowledge of various canons and rules of poetry. Paata Shamugia (1983) is ironic and sarcastic. His poetry is the study and portrayal of social or political injustice and perversions, and interpretation of religious themes or taboos.

Prose, similarly to poetry, also underwent some renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. Its development proved quite impressive and successful. There are authors who are now already considered classics, such as Chabua Amirejibi (1921–2013), Otar Chkheidze (2020–2007), Otar Chiladze (1933–2009), Tamaz Chiladze (1931–2018), Nodar Dumbadze (1928–1984), Archil Sulakauri (1927–1997), Otia Ioseliani (1930–2011), Rezo Inanishvili (1926–1991), Jemal Karchkhadze (1936–1998), Rezo Cheishvili (1933–2015), Erlom Akhvlediani (1933–2012), and Nugzar Shataidze (1944–2009). They managed to avoid and contradict the ideological dogmas of Socialist Realism imposed by Stalin. Instead they introduced unique style, “Aesop’s language”, unrestrained and free humour, irony and a number of other literary forms. Guram Dochanashvili (1939) is the only author from that generation who remains active in contemporary literature. His name is associated with *The First Garment*, published in 1976, which has already become a major classic in Georgian literature. The style of this novel shows some stylistic resemblance with Latin American magic realism. Indeed, the book contains the story of an actual rebellion in the 19th century in Canudos, a settlement in Brazil. Mario Vargas Llosa also discusses similar issues in his novel *La guerra del fin del mundo*, which was, however, written in 1981. Thus, it can be argued that Dochanashvili’s interests and literary quest developed in an independent, and yet parallel manner to that of Llosa. *The Last Garment* is an original piece of a significant literary movement of the period. Guram Dochanashvili has published several dozens of volumes of novels and short stories. He is one of the most revered authors in Georgia. Naira Gelashvili emerged in the early 1980s. Arguably, she is the first Georgian female prose writer, who, with her multi-level, complex narrative and highly refined style, established herself among many notable authors right with her literary debut. Her novels and stories always stood out with their psychological depth. Later, however, social and political contexts began to prevail in her works. Hence, she employed various methods of the interpretation of documentary material. Gelashvili also began to write works in the genre of autobiography, which acquires parabolic forms in her *The Splinters of Mirror*.

When it comes to the breakthrough in prose in the 1990s, Aka Morchiladze (1966) is one of the main ground-breaking authors. A professional historian,

Morchiladze as a writer is like a magician: he breathes life into everything that he touches, transforming it into uniquely accomplished and mysterious images. He can revive the environment and life of the period between the late 19th and early 20th century and carve characters and people of the period. He is capable of studying and telling stories characteristic of the Soviet era. Furthermore, he can depict contemporary reality and fantasy worlds with equal splendour. Morchiladze masterfully matches it all with stylized language according to situations, as he is a perfect narrator, filled with humour and fantasy. The works of Zurab Karumidze (1957) draw from the age of modernism, and his works always “burn with the fire” of experiments and quests characteristic of that era. He is a passionate intellectual. He plays with epochs and cultures, mixing them together and contrasting, staging carnivals. His use of Georgian language, in which multiple layers coexist, is utterly captivating. Furthermore, Karumidze has profound knowledge of English language and culture, and writes in English effortlessly. One of his novels in English tells the mysterious story of the murder of Dagny Juel – Norwegian writer and the muse of Edward Munch. The event happened in Tbilisi in the early 20th century. Kote Jandieri (1958) is not a prolific writer; he does not write novels and prefers *novella*. Faithful readers usually have to wait for a long time for the arrival of his new works. However, since the 1980s, each of his works have never failed to attract great attention. He writes psychological prose with eccentric and unusual characters and good humour. Jandieri’s latest story, *Globalization*, is an irony towards those who have either entirely negative or entirely positive attitude towards these processes.

Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili (1968) stands out with her incisive and picturesque depiction of literary settings and characters. She has an exceptional talent to paint psychological portraits, relationships, or personal problems of her characters. She has a great army of eccentric and dramatic characters scattered across a number of her novels and short stories. Her texts frequently cause convulsive or neurotic laughter, because neurosis, in general, is one of the major characteristics of her texts. Even the issues or activities that should be a source of pleasure to her characters (sex, for example) ultimately cause utmost trouble. To prevent “ordinary minds” from being crushed and destroyed by great emotions, Kordzaia-Samadashvili ridicules their passions. Lasha Bugadze (1977) has a wonderfully keen eye and inherent talent of humour, sarcasm, irony, and grotesque, which he employs in his writing to intensify and sharpen the faults, mistakes and general ignorance that are commonplace in public and political life. He attempts to combine all these vices in a feuilleton, composing a set of paradoxical and absurd images. Interpretation of historical events, mythological and biblical themes is characteristic of him, in the context of which he shows profound understanding of real problems and current issues. Hence, since the publication of his first work, he has always been attacked by faith, political or social institutions and groups. All this is

brilliantly reflected in his semi-autobiographical novel *A Small Country*, 2017. Zaza Burchuladze (1973) is one of the most scandalous authors in contemporary Georgian literature. His texts are mostly written in the style of stream of consciousness, and they belong to the genre of satire. For example, his novel *Adibas* (2009) concerns Russian-Georgian war of 2008, and, more precisely, its hidden side. Burchuladze grotesquely describes how élites continue in their usual consumption of goods while people are being killed as closely as within half an hour's drive. Aleko Shughladze's (1965) works appeared in the 1990s. He instantly won the readers with his style that naturally merges free humour, paradoxical worldview and existential problems. Shortly afterwards, he disappeared from the literary scene for the next fifteen years. His recent novel *Hiding* (2016) combines the entire experience of this period: all that he thought, went through, and saw. It is a book of contrasts. Shughladze maintains his usual style, while adding new shades. Characters of this novel fight against death and illness, they learn to support and stand by one another in the fight to free themselves from stereotypes and complexes. Archil Kikodze (1972) first stood out as author of short stories. In 2016, he wrote his first novel that became lauded since the day of publication. The main character of his *Southern Elephant* wanders through the streets of Tbilisi in the course of a single day, while the author paints the portrait of the entire city, with stories of particular places and extensive gallery of characters along the route.

This is a short outline of contemporary Georgian literary scene. In addition to the above mentioned authors, there are many other noteworthy authors with unique and distinguished styles and ideas. The presented overview should, however, provide a more or less complete picture of multiple voices and layers of Georgia's small, yet very old literary scene.