

Book Prizes

There are several book prizes in Azerbaijan, founded both by the government and individuals. The most successful competition in terms of public awareness was the National Book Award (NBA) founded last year by the Ali and Nino Publishing House. The organizing committee of the NBA visited six regions of Azerbaijan and all the main universities to promote this contest among the population. As a result, 265 works were collected from across the country. Overall, 69 percent of the writers competing for the NBA were male and only 31 percent female. The launch of the project and the announcement of the long list and short list provoked a lot of discussions and debates in society. The first reaction was not positive, but gradually the project gained considerable support and interest among the general public. Moreover, it has served as a bridge between the Russian-speak-

ing and Azerbaijani-speaking groups, the regions and the capital, and young authors and prominent writers who have been famous for many years. It was also the first public-private partnership project devoted to literature, with several businesses funding the book prize competition.

Authors who ended up on the long list came from different backgrounds: a young man who is serving in the Army, an obscure public school teacher living in a village, and famous writers well known to public. Even though the project is on-going and the results will not be announced until May 1st, it has already gained a reputation as the first independent and fair book prize competition initiated in modern Azerbaijan. As expected, this project has aroused interest for literature among the larger public and provoked a lot more discussions about books than ever before.

About the Author

Nigar Kocharli is the owner of the Ali and Nino chain of bookstores and cafes. She was inspired by the book of the same name written by the Azerbaijani author Kurban Said, which describes events when Azerbaijan was an independent country just after World War I. Even today the story presented in this book is relevant and people still relate to it even though nearly a century has passed. This book has remained a best-selling novel for over 7 years since it became available in Azerbaijan and is still in great demand by local and foreign customers.

Recommended Reading:

Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino*, Anchor reprint in English, 2000. The book is now available in 33 languages.

Conformism and Resistance: The Birth of the Modern Georgian Literature

By Malkhaz Kharbedia, Tbilisi

Abstract

This article investigates the state of the Georgian literature as it developed since the late 1980s. It argues that Georgia did not begin on a new path even with the collapse of the Soviet Union and that the country needs to conduct an evaluation of its history. There is little interest in contemporary poetry in Georgia, including even the “civic lyric” from street protests. Georgian literature today is infantile in the sense that it distracts one’s attention so that people will accept something against their will. Among Georgia’s recent literature you will hardly find powerful, rebellious, insightful, witty, or sarcastic texts. Another problem is the lack of effective criticism. Additionally, media discussions of literature are boring and do not attract attention to it.

Pseudo-Crossroads

There is an interesting book by Jean Starobinski called *1789: The Emblems of Reason*. The book is about shifts in artistic vision during the French revolution. It addresses the questions of whether the revolution prompted the changes, what the intersecting points

of the revolution and aesthetics were, and if the revolution was a watershed event in the history or art as well as in European political history. The book perfectly reflects the cultural dynamics of those times and the roots of the modern culture that evolved out of them.

Starobinski writes in the first paragraph: “Revolutions do not instantly create an artistic language pertinent to the new political order. Rather, the forms inherited from the past remain in use for a long time, despite the old world having been demolished.” Modern Georgia aptly exemplifies this train of thought. From April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops killed several people participating in a peaceful protest, Georgia has lingered at a crossroads that falsely resembles the beginning of a new road and a renewed life. In fact, the idea of such a new start is a delusion and nothing more. That is the reason why I call the period spanning from 1989 to today an epoch of pseudo-crossroads.

Georgian history contains no narratives and consistencies, but is rather frozen into paradigmatic columns devoid of any logic and reason. Our history is only a skeleton in which the powerful mechanisms of mythologems and constant recurrences are tugging at each other. In Georgia, the idea that one can start from the beginning is a mere illusion which does nothing more than force us to repeat history rather than analyze it. Perhaps that’s why we have broken from our history, and only its assessment and evaluation will help us to return.

Where is “Poetry” born?

There were a lot of changes in Georgia over the last twenty years, but very few poets remained on the scene to write about them. Some poets simply stopped writing, others lost their readers, and some left the country. At the same time, religious and patriotic sentiments remained intact beyond any poetry.

The venerable French poet Yves Bonnefoy in one of his interviews last year said: “Those who are enchanted by religion should start to think about poetry.” Georgia, by contrast, has experienced the opposite trend, as poets and poetry have sunk into near oblivion, while religious sentiment has grown to a degree that takes it beyond reality. By “reality” I mean being a real person with a unique voice, who has a true comprehension of his finitude and is searching for a shelter in self awareness. Undoubtedly, religion is often a shelter, but only for the masses, leaving no room for the individual, while “poetry never forgets the individual and perpetually returns to show him the peculiarity of his being”. (Yves Bonnefoy)

A different matter is whether modern Georgian poetry is addressing the most important questions of the day, and how desperate, insightful, sarcastic and committed it is. Articles are already being written about this problem.

Logically, the birthplace of the modern Georgian poetry should have been a city square. But despite the

fact that today everybody is deeply and actively involved in politics, this loud, so called “civic lyric” (from such “loud poets” as Zurab Rtveliashvili and Kote Kubaneishvili) did not gain prominence.

Even though many poets have been active during the last twenty years, (including Otar Chiladze [died in 2009], Besik Kharanauli, Zviad Ratiani, Andro Buachidze, Dato Barbakadze, Dato Chikhladze, Shota Iatashvili, Rusudan Kaishauri, Ela Gochiashvili, Zaza Tvaradze [died in 2007], Zviad Ratiani, Maia Sarishvili, Rati Amaghlobeli, Nika Jorjaneli, Lela Samniashvili and Rezo Getiashvili, Lia Sturua, Givi Alkhazishvili, Batu Danelia), it is still uncertain what place poetry can occupy in a society that is less and less interested in literature, where there is not much time for a serious culture, and where nobody cares about the past (or the past is used only to evoke apparitions). Even the so-called “intellectuals” are not interested in poetry. Instead it’s used as a shield by groups in whose hands the past turns into a lofty monolith, and poetry becomes a toast.

Literature and Reader

The major problem of modern Georgian literature is that it was not able to gain an active readership in the 1980s and 1990s. My peers, who were only 18–20 at that time, did not turn out to be good readers. Those who were reading the “modern literature” of that time soon became authors themselves and split the Georgian literature scene into odd camps where everybody who was a reader was a writer at the same time, while real, potential readers sat in front of their TV sets.

Once I shared my opinion with my friend and he told me that the main cause of the problem was the disappearance of the Soviet reader, which left a large void as a consequence. The void was filled by only a handful of books. In the first place, we should mention Otar Chiladze’s “Avelumi” and “Godori” (2002), Chabua Amirejibi’s “Gora Mborgali”, Jemal Karchkhadze’s “Dimension”, and the novels of Otar Chkheidze. But nevertheless the new era is unavoidably associated with the first novels of Aka Morchiladze. “A Trip to *Karabakh*”, “Dogs of Paliashvili Street” and “Flight over Madatov Island and back” were novels that bred a Georgian reader during the years of 1992–1998. Each of his new novels tried to address cultural shortcomings. His novels took a responsibility for a reader and were solely focused on breeding her.

Other writers were either replicating Aka’s style or trying vehemently to escape from his influence. Zaza Burchuladze possessed an ardent desire to create something genuinely new, since 2002 (when his “A Letter to

Mother” was first published), but unfortunately, it was not realized for the last seven years. Only recently, his efforts paid off in the novel “Adibas”. It gives an abstract of a new decade, with its precise, artful and completed form that is lighter unlike his other novels and the writer is reflected in it to a much greater extent.

Modern Georgian novelists of note are Kote Jandieri, Zaza Tvaradze, Zurab Karumidze, Irakli Samsonadze, Zura Meskhi, Gigi Sulakauri, Beso Khvedelidze, Zurab Lejava, Gela Chkvanava, Lasha Bughadze, and Davit Kartvelishvili. Some of these writers are creating elegant prose with ironic linguistic twists that is described by some critics as “postmodern.” Still, among them one can find those who poignantly deal with recent events. In the last few years, the Georgian modern classic Guram Dochanashvili is paving new ground in literature. Often published authors are Rezo Cheishvili, Guram Gegeshidze, Vaja Gigashvili, and Nugzar Shatidze, who died in the last year. His prose, on the one hand, embraced Georgian traditional culture and, on the other, thoroughly described the modern urban world.

Of particular interest are the women writers of Georgia, such as Naira Gelashvili, Maka Mikeladze, Ana Korzaia-Samadashvili and Tamri Pkhakadze. Naira Gelashvili’s new novel published at the end of 2009 “The First Two Circles...” can be easily regarded as one of the most ambitious projects of the last 20 years. It’s an 800 page book written in a bizarre manner describing the fate of “the Translators’ Guild”, capturing the crossroads period we mentioned above.

The books of the above mentioned authors are circulated in the Georgian market in very small numbers. The best-selling author among them is Aka Morchiladze (he’s the only Georgian writer who publishes a book or sometimes several books a year). Dato Turashvili’s “Flight from the USSR” beat all the latest records in book sales. It’s about the case of the Georgian young airplane hijackers of 1983.

Infantilism and Conformism

In Georgia the best-selling books are, generally, children’s books and some even consider them as a means of saving the other genres. If we listen to publishers, the profitable business of selling children’s books can offset the losses incurred by unprofitable products. But is that always the case? No. If you leaf through the pages of an unprofitable Austrian author’s low-quality Georgian translation, or perhaps a good work of linguistic research, you will find out that it was funded either by a foreign donor or the author’s friend, who lives abroad and remains devoted to his buddy’s talent.

Children’s literature is a profitable business; it creates an opportunity to sell books in large numbers. Moreover, those books are often published in Turkey or Hungary, where high-quality publishing costs half as much as it does in Georgia.

Children’s literature makes me think about the infantile nature of Georgian literature in general. Here I am not talking about the banal and infantile compromises that writers make. What is interesting is how the authorities use literature to prop up their power. They hide behind various guises and one of the guises, unfortunately, is children’s literature. Nowadays, all of Georgian literature is essentially plunged into infantilism. It is infantile in the sense that it distracts one’s attention so that people will accept something against their will (one of the functions of children’s literature is to make a child swallow the necessary dose of food, help her sleep or play quietly and not bother adults). This kind of literature only causes dilution, often engulfs us with apathy and rarely can be used for entertaining purposes. Among Georgia’s recent literature you will hardly find powerful, rebellious, insightful, witty, or sarcastic texts. Unfortunately, the pseudo-beatniks of the old and new generations cannot fix the predicament.

Writers about Writers

An equally painful problem is the dearth of literary criticism. Here, the problem lies not only in the deficit of professional journalists, essayists and reviewers, but in the laziness of the authors themselves. Among today’s Georgian writers, I can name only three or four who are extensively writing or speaking about their colleagues. If you read interviews with contemporary writers, you will find that they seldom mention the last names of the other authors. First, they do not read their colleagues’ texts, and second, if they do read them, they are reluctant to evaluate them. Others will promote and flatter only their friends.

I vividly remember that several years ago, one literary magazine that regularly published interviews asked several writers to name their most distinguished colleagues, and most of the respondents named the same authors every time. A correspondent tried to coax out at least one name of a younger colleague with three differently formulated questions, but in vain. The writer had certainly read several of the younger novelists’ works, but he would not admit to it.

I was always dreaming about the emergence of new methods for literary reviews and criticism in Georgia, which means that nobody would be able to determine beforehand what one author would write about the

other. Of course, nothing like this has happened so far, because no author is willing to write about her/his colleagues. On the other hand, if writers would review honestly, they could help their colleagues sell books as well as help readers to find books that interest them. Only in this way will literature not fall behind history, society, protest, or even anecdotes and jokes.

We should not forget that literature is a business for some people, and at the same time, it always rejects “rational discourse”, moderation and conformist comfort.

Process as Reaction

In Georgia, the “Saba” Literature Prize produces more or less adequate assessments of literature. Even here the shortcomings are apparent. In the first place, there should be more extensive media coverage of the prize. It’s equally important to promote not only the winners, but also the list of nominees, along with published interviews with them in various literary outlets. It would be a good idea to include insiders’ reviews and press reviews as well, thus, making them accessible to the wider public. Moreover, the process could involve roundtable discussions and questionnaires that could be sent to literary critics.

In contemporary Georgia, literary periodicals which publish the latest works play an important role. However, it would be beneficial to include more analysis, critical

assessments, reviews and information in them. Today there is an increased number of blogs, literary portals and internet forums which by all means deserve our attention. It’s very important to take into consideration those remarks they make about printed works.

Furthermore, more attention should be paid to the quality of translations which have an enormous influence on the creation of modern literature. We must take into account that nowadays, in Georgia, many more translated books are published than original ones, which makes this issue particularly compelling.

A whole different matter is print and broadcast media, which is the most powerful source for attracting readers to literature and which is so weak in Georgia that literature is associated with boring conversations about it. In order to change these patterns, it is necessary for the media and critics to assume an active role themselves and establish some order and classification in the contemporary literary chaos. The attempt to create order will probably be resisted and cause even greater chaos. But that is inherently good, because the one thing that literature cannot tolerate is classification. Literature always bears in itself the resistance to classification. A good literary process engenders such a response or reaction.

About the Author

Malkhaz Kharbedia is Editor-in-Chief of the Monthly magazine “Literature – Tskheli Shokoladi” and a Research Fellow of the Literature Institute’s Theory Department.