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## The Soviet Era in the Focus of 21st Century Georgian Literature (According to Beso Solomanashvili's Novel A Tale of the Old Executed and of those to be Executed)

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### Abstract

*The main object of our research is to illustrate the influence of the Soviet era on modern Georgian literature. Article is dedicated to the historical-literary analysis of Soviet epoch tragic events based on Beso Solomanashvili's novel A Tale of the Old Executed and those to be Executed, published in 2019. The following research methods are used to solve the scientific issue: methods of induction and deduction, methods of text observation and analysis, conceptual interpretation method, and comparative-historical method. The given literary work is one of the modern works that resonate with the Soviet era. The results of the research showed that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the mentioned topic is still relevant. This fact once again proves that the traces of the Soviet system are still very evident on the Georgian reality and their daily life, people's characters and lifestyle. Added to this is Russia's aggressive and conquering policy, which reminds us of itself every day (20% of the country's territory is occupied, creeping occupation, constant abduction and humiliation of people from the so-called administrative borderline villages) and makes the feeling of finally leaving the Soviet era behind, in the past even more difficult to achieve.*

**Keywords:** Literature, History, Soviet Union, Modern Georgian Novel, Russian Occupation

### Introduction

According to established classical definition, occupation, means the forceful occupation of the territory of another by one state, however, it is no less important that at the same time it is the occupation of the nation's mental and cultural identity. Major part of society views military aggression and occupation as the loss of state control over a certain geographical space and the accompanying negative process, which mainly involves casualties and mutilation of people in war, but less attention is paid to mental occupation, the deliberate expansion against the culture created by the nation, which results in much more people lose their face, value identity and is destroyed; people's consciousness is poisoned, a society is created for which dignity and similar sublime ideals are ridiculed and personal benefits, career aspirations and many other expressions of low spirit take the lead. This process is not only a manifestation of personal inferiority. It is deliberately supported by the occupier, because the development of healthy public values is not in its interests and, moreover, it is its main threat. If we refer to Z. Brzezinski, -, „...history has shown us that national independence, once gained, is contagious and can be denied to someone only by using excessive force.”<sup>3</sup>

The conquer of Georgia by Russia must be considered as an example of double, physical and mental

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<sup>3</sup> Brzezinski, Z. The Grand Chessboard. Tbilisi, 2014

occupation, which is why the richest national and cultural heritage of the ancient nation was being deliberately destroyed for decades. It was not difficult for the Georgian intelligentsia and the national mind to perfectly perceive this reality and the impending dangers that passed on to generations. The greatest Georgian writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one of the victims of the Soviet occupation, Mikheil Javakhishvili, wrote: "The end of my will: our children, forget that Russian language so that you will not remember even a single word." The attitude of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Georgian writer, named the Father of the Nation, Ilia Chavchavadze, is also essential: "God has neither put brains in the bold heads of Russians, nor any feelings in their dark souls." The opinion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Georgian philosopher and thinker, Merab Mamardashvili, is to be noted too: "I would be ashamed of myself if I considered Ossetians or Abkhazians as serious enemy and danger for Georgia. The enemy that Georgia has, is the Communist Soviet system." Numerous other prominent people felt that Georgia should get rid of Russia's claws as quickly as possible, however, history, chance or the will of the authorities decided otherwise and Georgia fell into the clutches of both mental and territorial occupation.

As a researcher of literature, Rostom Chkheidze writes, if the flow of literature was not guided by its internal laws and if the social and political formations determined its course, the two centuries of Russian oppression, in the barbed wire of which Georgia was captured, would undoubtedly be depressing and fatal for our literature. As Ilia Chavchavadze defined writer's function that, they are the ones keeping nation awake in the times of hardship and extreme oppression, this is the burden that many Georgian writers took upon themselves during the Soviet regime. However, it must be noted that this was equivalent to great courage, sometimes even heroism and cost some of them their lives. Writers of the so-called first stream of anti-Soviet sentiment were: Mikheil Javakhishvili, Grigol Robakidze, Nikolo Mitsishvili, Tsiferkantselebi (The Blue Horns) and others.

From the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after Stalin's death, the situation more or less changed and writers were no longer executed by shooting for exposing the bloody Soviet regime, however, openly expressing anti-Soviet sentiments was still risky. Chabua Amirejibi, Otar Chiladze, Guram Dochanashvili, Otar Chkheidze, Guram Rcheulishvili, Guram Gegeshidze, Shota Chantladze, Rezo Cheishvili and others should be named as "bold" representatives of Georgian literature of that period.<sup>4</sup>

Beso Solomanashvili tries to show the result of cultural and consciousness expansion in his novel, *A Tale of the Old Executed and those to be Executed*. The literary work became the best novel of 2020 at the Saba Literary Prize. The author turns the events of the Soviet era starting from 1921, into the period of development of the plot of his novel. Thanks to the outstanding, seemingly simple, but at the same time intriguing narration style and plot creation, the novel is even more interesting to read. The news, people and stories developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, which at first glance should have nothing in common, are connected to each other by an unexpected and strong chain; and all this is gradually revealed when familiarizing with the novel and arouses great interest in readers.

The article is structured as follows: Introduction, main body (*Jvarnakravi* as a face of the Soviet regime; Type in a typical setting- Tedo's transformation; To be Executed) and conclusion.

### **Jvarnakravi as a Face of the Soviet Regime**

The novel begins with the story of an ordinary boy who tells us the story of his grandfather. The story is of my grandfather - the Executioner; he was my mother's father", he writes. Later,

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<sup>4</sup> Gogilashvili, A. Guram Gegeshidze's Fiction Prose. Tbilisi, 2019

we witness the story of a decent boy becoming an executioner. He is a type in a typical environment, cauterized by the Soviet era, with a destructed life; becoming an executioner and an oppressor himself - little Tedo. The boy's father was a former noble who raped and then married a beautiful peasant woman. The author shows us that even before being born Tedo is associated with violence. In his genes is the wormy seed that is waiting for fertile soil to germinate and to "flourish". Establishment of the Soviet system appeared to be such a "fertile soil" for the boy. Before that, the writer portrays Tedo as a decent kid, kind-hearted, obedient to his mother, with a perky nature; and then we gradually witness the changes in his soul. The young boy loses his father and witnesses the tragedy of his best friend and first love, little Malachi, the daughter of Menashe, a Jewish tailor. These two grave traumas, which changed the life of the main character of the novel, are the merit of Jvarnakravi (geo – "hit by a cross"), who appears as the most cruel, heartless, rude, soulless character and represents the face of the Soviet system.

The connection between Tedo and Jvarnakravi develops in a very interesting and contrast way, until the boy himself becomes like the Commissar called Jvarnakravi and even more brutal than him. If at the beginning of the novel there is a little, gentle boy who dreams a lot and imagines the future in bright colors, at the end of the novel we will find a completely different, completely changed character. On the other side, there is the nameless character who is cruel, perverted in his life, violent, traitorous to his friends, family and homeland, who fights for the Sovietization of Georgia in 1921 for the benefit of the Russian army. He stands out by provoking two groups of Armenians to kill each other and blaming it on those fighting for the independence of Georgia. He will succeed so much with his insidiousness and great determination so much that he will even befriend Stalin.

The paths of Tedo and Jvarnakravi are connected multiple times during their lives and in the end the one-eyed Commissar becomes a victim of Tedo, who is just starting his path as an Executioner.

As we have already mentioned, Jvarnakravi is the character that creates Tedo's life tragedy. And since we also said that the author presented him as the face of the Soviet regime, we can easily conclude that the Soviet era is the creator of the tragedy of Tedo and not only this one boy, but many other people in the novel, and unfortunately, not only in the novel.

"It was a time when Jvarnakravi was not yet being called Jvarnakravi ", the writer uses this phrase repeatedly in the work until the nameless character of the novel meets Tedo's father and gets this eternal name. The fact that the character nameless is certainly not accidental. The author does this on purpose to make us realize that he does not have a specific name for a clear and easily guessable reason, he is not one, but many. If we refer to the greatest Georgian poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Galaktion, "His name is the Legion" (taken from Galaktion's poem dedicated to Stalin and echoes the Gospel fable about the exorcism of a legion of demons from a possessed man). It was those like him who created the bloody and soul-crushing era, so such a character does not need a specific name. The reader should perceive it as a generalized name.

The episode of Jvarnakravi, executing Tedo's father, a young priest must be called the murder in the name of the Party and the Chief. That strange man goes abroad and brings a secret powder from there, he has a beautiful wife and a little boy, wears an anaphora and has a big cross on his chest, rumors spread. The latter was an unforgivable mistake in Soviet times and Tedo's father is caught by his fate in the form of Jvarnakravi, who was not yet being called Jvarnakravi and was only called the New Commissar. It was not an easy task to shoot this

unusual man. The Commissar missed three shots, as if some force was pushing his hand away and getting in his way. With a trembling hand he targeted the fourth bullet right at the priest's heart, but ironically, the bullet hit the cross and ricocheted back into the Commissar's left eye. He did kill the man in the anaphora after this, but he lost one eye and was half-blinded forever. On this very day, he acquired a nickname – Jvarnakravi (Hit by a Cross), which stuck to him forever and accurately characterized his personality. Completely immoral, arrogant, conscienceless and unintelligent, he lived as if God had really abandoned him and he had been cursed by the Cross and the Church. A common Georgian expression, Fallen out of God's Mouth, is probably best suited to a man like Jvarnakravi. As we have mentioned, we believe that he is a collective character, so when he executes Tedo's father and makes love to his mother, the association leads to the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union, Lavrenti Beria, who is obsessed with cruelty and animalistic lust for women. More specifically, with the constructor of Rioni Hydropower Station, Vladimir Jikia and his beautiful wife - Tinatin. As it is known, Vladimir was executed on the order of Beria, because the latter wanted to take over his wife.

Now let us go back to Tedo and his second greatest pain, which, as we mentioned earlier, is also related to Jvarnakravi. After he began an affair with Tedo's mother, the boy enclosed himself and fell into depression. Nothing made him happy anymore, he stopped contacts with his mother. Unexpressed desires, protests and pain rooted in his soul. At that time, the only bright spot in his life was Malachi, a Jew living in the neighborhood. He liked visiting the girl at her home, they used to drink milk together and this ritual gave the boy a rush of warmth and pleasure. Malachi would put violets in the milk. Her mother was upset because of this, but the girl did obey her and Tedo was happy, because he just loved this scent immensely. Violets in the milk remained in his mind as the only beautiful and tender memory. And then Jvarnakravi appeared again. One day, the girl naively told the boy that mom and dad are together like your mom and Uncle Jvarnakravi, and the next day, Tedo saw Malachi's house engulfed in flames. Although he did not know for sure that Jvarnakravi was responsible for the fire, he felt it was so and since then recalled more and more often with disgust the image of the topless, hairy body Commissar going into Tedo's mother's room. We think that this detail is not accidental as the author gives us two hints: the first is that this creature has a lot in common with a beast, both visually and internally and the second is also essential: in our opinion, Jvarnakravi embodiment in the postmodernist epoch novel through allusion, of Jako Jivashvili, the main character of Jako's Sheltered by Mikheil Javakhishvili, one of the greatest Georgian writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sacrificed to Soviet censorship. The appearance and ideological similarity of these two characters, aspirations, attitude towards women, greediness, unappealing and savage brutality and treacherous spirit make their emergence from one "seed" obvious and apparent.

Beso Solomanashvili presents Jvarnakravi with the full "magnificence" during the events of February 1921 (invasion of Georgia by the 11<sup>th</sup> Army of Russian). Along with the mentioned character and other Georgians obeying Moscow's directives, the Bolshevik revolutionary and one of the creators of the occupation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Filipe Makharadze, also appears in the novel. The writer conveys the thoughts of the traitors as follows: "The men of the Shulaveri Committee were worried. They couldn't fulfill their dreams so easily... and everyone thought to themselves: - Was it worth it? – What if the war is lost? They will not be able to stay in their homeland, nor will they be accepted by those to whom they sold their souls to. They tried to convince themselves of being right and once they failed to prove it, then they sought to justify their actions; why they did it. The only thing they could do, as long as they were drowning their own people in blood, was to go all the way to the end."

<sup>5</sup> Jvarnakravi was the most active in these processes. He wanted to dedicate the victory to his son's birthday. On February 25, they had to take over Tbilisi and he would make his Joseph happy. Of course, he named his boy in honor of Joseph Dzhugashvili (Stalin). The boy was born to one of the former Nobles daughters, who he raped when they attacked their house, during the operation - "raiding the enemies of the motherland". The facts of attacks on the intelligentsia, their beatings, humiliation and raping are numerous in the novel, which once again clearly and openly shows face of the regime. "All the Commissars and Commanders would sniff around the country like jackals, in search of the enemies of the people. From time to time, they used it for their own benefit; stealing property or just killing those who they just hated personally; or they would get in the bed with someone's wife. However, they did not remember and did not even know that the world is insidious. They thought that God really did not exist anymore and they would not be held responsible; but how could it be known to laborer-peasant bandits, taken away from their lands, kicked out of rotting factories and awful prisons, because of their immorality and laziness." (Solomanashvili, 2019)

Jvarnakravi either was not aware of the "boomerang principle", but life gave him the most bitter sentence. Stalin's namesake, Joseph, his son, he was so proud of, turned out to be bisexual and would mainly have sex with men. When Jvarnakravi got to know about it, he remembered how many such boys he has executed for being suspected of being attracted to the same sex. And now God brought the worst ordeal on him, in the form of his own son. As he could not kill his son, he started executing all of his lovers; and kept on shooting them all, until that, once little, already grown up Tedo appeared to him in the same status.

We think that the fact that the boy named after Stalin is in love with people of his own gender was used in the novel by the author once again to show the barrenness and futility of the Stalinist regime.

### **Type in a Typical Setting- Tedo's Transformation**

The last meeting between Tedo and Jvarnakravi is one of the most emotional scenes in the novel. The episode is loaded with internal monologue, with the contradictory emotions about Jvarnakravi flowing chaotically through Tedo's character's mind. He remembers the time when he and his mother had a carefree life and plenty of food thanks to the one-eyed Commissar, but at the same time he is filled with anger and humiliation accumulated over the years because Jvarnakravi has executed his father, he used to sleep with his mother and everyone around him gossiped about it. But he has also paid back and has started his love relationship with Jvarnakravi's son. All this was bursting through Tedo's mind, when Jvarnakravi's enemies, also from Bolshevik world, put the gun in his hand and gave him the opportunity to kill his hated rival. "I'll just shoot him. First, he was sleeping with my mother and because of that, everyone laughed at me and no one wanted to be close to me, everyone was afraid of me. Also, it was not his business who I would love and who... He stopped and almost choked. - Or who... - He felt Joseph Girl's touch again. - He was supposed to kill me and he did not. No, I won't shoot... No, I have to shoot. And him helping me to start with the army and to get salary? I won't shoot him, no."

- Fire! - He suddenly heard a scream. He startled. He was afraid of his thoughts and he pulled the trigger unconsciously. All five bullets hit the chest of Comrade Commander Jvarnakravi (almost no one remembered his real name).

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<sup>5</sup> Solomanashvili, B. *A Tale of the Old Executed and of those to be Executed*. Tbilisi, 2019

“Oh, I shot him... I didn't mean to. I'm sorry!” - He burst into tears. He was petrified and frozen. Jvarnakravi, glanced one last time with his one blind and one healthy eye at Tedo and died.<sup>6</sup>

Jvarnakravi was killed right by the boy whose father he executed, damaged his psyche and turned him into an executioner too. It was the first murder for Tedo, but the expectation that he would exceed the Commissar in the number of collected corpses is confirmed by the fact that Jvarnakravi broke his established rule about killing his son's boyfriends, took pity on the boy and did not execute him, instead, the boy killed him.

Exactly three years, two months and three weeks later, the general who gave this order was also killed by Tedo and became so skilled in this that when he received the order to kill his own mother and Joseph Girl, he took the gun and left without saying a word. After that, no one saw his mother and Joseph again.

As it is known, according to Christian teaching, the sin of Adam and Eve follows us from the beginning. It is also considered in psychology that the action committed by an ancestor, or his or her trauma, is genetically transmitted to us and nestles in our subconscious. It manifests itself through unconscious desires or unexplained fears, as well as an illogically strong emotion and reaction to something and it is often difficult to define and rationally explain it. In fact, it is an echo of the deeds or sins committed by our ancestors. It is this theory of trauma that the author uses when, at the end of the novel, the serious diagnosis of the boy telling the story of the executioner grandfather is told to the reader. No matter how unfair it may sound, it is clear that Beso Solomanashvili believes that the sin of the grandfather should be inflicted on his grandson and his gene should be rooted out forever, because the branch of executioners and traitors to the motherland does not deserve to continue growing.

### **To be Executed**

And the last chapter of the novel reminds us that the work is called not only the Old Executed, but also Those to be Executed and offers us a scene from one of the TV programs, where a young man and elderly guests confront each other during a discussion about the Stalinist regime.

You are younger than me, my dear, and you don't know this... No, this is not violence, it's order, order

I understand, I'm young and I don't understand anything, but imagine your Chief killing everyone thoughtful and freedom-loving. Who would have survived? Plebeians, people used serve, slaves and lackeys; or criminals like he was in his youth. We are all basically the descendants of these survivors, the descendants of the plebeians... It is very difficult for the plebeians to create something, because of the lack of dignity, because of their slavish nature"...

<sup>7</sup> The discussion continues with swearing, the young man is punished for not loving God, the LGBT community is mentioned, liberals are being cursed, the boy is splashed with water and the young guest leaves the studio as a physical confrontation ensues. This is a modern Georgian reality. One picture of today's reality, when the Soviet ghost is very firmly, still looking alive, continues haunting our country and unfortunately, not only the elderly are trying to empower it, as it is shown at the end of the novel.

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<sup>6</sup> same

<sup>7</sup> same

## Conclusion

Beso Solomanashvili's novel *A Tale of the Old Executed and of those to be Executed* reminds us once again of the decaying and destructive reality of the Soviet period and also shows that we need to be vigilant, as the post-Soviet era is still characterized by the fluctuation of national values and Russian propaganda attacks us in a thousand ways, not to mention the creeping occupation. The prototypes of Jvarnakravi and Tedo are still here, otherwise, works on similar topics would not have been written and even if they had been created, they would not have become so relevant, like the novel by Beso Solomanashvil and many others.

Research on the mentioned issue has also shown that the influence of the Soviet era on modern Georgian literature is an almost unexplored issue. The abundance of fiction on this topic indicates the urgency of the problem. However, there is almost no scientific research on this issue, which unequivocally confirms that this topic requires special interest and involvement of scientists.

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