

IRINA MARCHESINI



# WEAVING MYTHS.

TWO WOMEN'S VOICES FROM  
THE CAUCASUS

Bologna 2023



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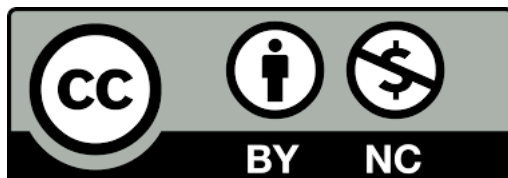
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*To Augusta Vasil'evna, Veteran Truda*



## Contents

NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION	9
INTRODUCTION	11
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	13
Introduction	13
Theoretical Issues and Methodological Framework	15
Societies and Identities in Transition. Regrouping and Rewriting	19
The Role of Nature in Myths' Rewriting	21
REFERENCES	24
THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE SACRED MOUNTAIN IN THE PROSE OF ALISA GANIEVA	27
A New Start	29
The Festive Mountain	33
REFERENCES	38
THE FUNCTION OF MYTHOLOGY IN ANA KORDZAIA- SAMADASHVILI'S SHORT STORY I GO HOME	41
At the Heart of a (Wo)men's World	43
Nature and Covert Mythology	46
REFERENCES	50
INTERVIEWS	53
Alisa Ganieva	55
Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili	61
Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili. Portrait of an Artist	71





### *NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION*

Unless otherwise stated, all the translations from French, Georgian, German, and Russian are mine. Square brackets represent my additions or changes.

Transliteration from the Russian Cyrillic script follows the American Library of Congress system (ALA-LC system), with the sole exception for the letter “й”, that is transliterated as “i” instead of “y”.

Transliteration from the Georgian script follows the 2002 system of transliteration of the Georgian alphabet into Latin developed by the Georgian Academy of Sciences.



## *Introduction*

Traditionally, the act of weaving has always been associated to the female's sphere. Not surprisingly, then, a large number of prose works written by women writers revolves around the myth of Arachne. While alluding to this tradition, the title of this book refers in particular to the weaving of myths in two prominent women writers in the context of the post-Soviet Caucasus: Alisa Ganieva and Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili. Through the comparison of these two case studies, this research wants to show how, especially at times of radical, paradigmatic cultural shifts – namely in the region of the post-Soviet Caucasus – the rewriting of old myths serves to establish new narratives around specific issues. In the case of Ganieva and Kordzaia-Samadashvili, these two authors succeed in creating original stories of women that laid the basis of what is becoming the new Canon in Russian and Georgian literature.

The first chapter of this book presents the methodological approach used to analyze the selected prose works by Alisa Ganieva and Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili. More specifically, it discusses the core principles of a new branch of narratology, called “hyletic narratology”, against the background of the more classic frameworks provided by Gender and Myth Studies. In this respect, the hyletic narratology toolbox proves to be particularly useful to highlight the function(s) of the (re)writing of myths in their *oeuvre*.

The second chapter is devoted to a close reading of two specific prose works by the Dagestani writer Alisa Ganieva: the novel *The Mountain and the Wall* (*Praxdnichnaia gora*, 2012) and *Thirteen* (*Trinadtsat'*, 2012). Colorful and vivid, these narratives display the deep ambivalence of the symbol of the mountain, here functioning as a sort of Noah's ark to save autochthonous traditions from oblivion. Amongst these, the mythical hyleme “*azhdakha*” undergoes an interesting process of rewriting, here discussed at length.

The third chapter is focused on the short story *I go home* by the Georgian writer Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili. Also in this case, the rewriting of the myth concerning T'q'ashmapa introduces a more positive depiction of this female forest entity from the Mingrelian tradition. Although written in Georgian, this short story proves to be relevant for Russian Studies, as it tells the story of a Doukhobor character in contemporary Georgia.

This research makes use of original, previously unpublished materials, which include two interviews with Alisa Ganieva and Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili respectively. Due to the current geopolitical situation, the first interview to Alisa Ganieva was conducted in remote mode (via e-mail) and dates to the months of November-December 2023. The second interview (and

photographic materials) to Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili was held in person, recorded in 2018 by the author [I.M.] and then transcribed. Both interviews were originally released in Russian language. The originals are enclosed in the section “Interviews” for comparison with the English translation.

This book condenses part of the research carried out for the National Research Project PRIN n. 2015KAZ284, entitled “Myth (De)construction in Contemporary Women’s Literature in Russia and Poland. A Comparative Study” (2015). Moreover, it already contains some relevant elements pertaining to another National Research Project PRIN the author is currently involved in, entitled “From Post-Trauma to Ecology: Contemporary Gender Narratives in Slavic Cultural Texts” (protocol n. 2022S3XZZ5, 2023).

My heart is filled with gratitude for the enormous support I received to write this book. My first thanks go, of course, to Alisa Ganieva and Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili for their exquisite kindness and unique availability. I am very thankful for the time they generously devoted to me and for allowing me to publish their interviews. I am deeply humbled by this experience and feel privileged to have been able to talk about literature with such outstanding artists. I am particularly grateful to Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili for posing for me and allowing me to publish here part of the little series of her “Portraits” I worked on while living in Tbilisi (2018). I am also indebted to Prof. Marina Ciccarini (University of Rome Tor Vergata) for the suggestion she gave me during the conference “La riscrittura al femminile del mito nel panorama letterario slavo dal Novecento ai giorni nostri” (May 16-17, University of Salento, Lecce, Italy). Last, but of course not least, my biggest *grazie* goes to my huge family scattered around the world. Without your encouragement, your strength, your patience, and your invaluable advice this book would have never seen the light. Alma, Anita, Bruno, Khefreun, Nina: you are my rock, you are my home.

## *Theoretical Framework*

*What are your wishes?  
You are fire, dressed in fire.  
Which fire can I withstand?  
I want to understand the heart  
beating inside you.  
But you have covered it over  
with Indian embroideries, tapestries of gold and of silver,  
my coquette, my flirt.  
— Sayat Nova.*

### *Introduction*

*In principio erat ardeola*<sup>1</sup>. Or better: *in principio et in aeternum est Benu*<sup>2</sup>. According to the ancient Egyptian myth of creation, in obscure, forgotten times a little mound arose from cosmic waters. An egg was laid on top of it, from which Benu was born clothed in the breath of life. This bird, traditionally depicted in the form of a heron, is known as the “soul of Re” or “heart of Re”. In spell 600 of the “Pyramid text” it appears as the creator of god Atum-Khepri at the very beginning of time. Hence, according to Foy Scalf, “[t]he *benu*-bird thus represented the power [...] of the sun god as creator and the avian imagery further reinforced the metaphor of the sun’s daily ‘flight’ across the sky” (Scalf, 2012: 134).

It is precisely because of its freedom of movement, enabling it to connect the earth to the sky<sup>3</sup>, that Benu was associated not only to cosmogonic myths, but also to those of rejuvenation and rebirth in the afterlife. An inscription found on a scarab-shaped amulet placed in the proximity of the heart of a mummy tells us about its paramount function: “I am the *benu*-bird, the soul of Re, who guides the gods to the netherworld from which they go forth” (Taylor, 2010: 227).

The myth of this heron-like bird has certainly played a central role in early Egyptian religious symbolism. Its relevance, however, was not limited to the culture where it was conceived, but became the main inspiration for the classical legend of the phoenix<sup>4</sup>. In fact, its story traveled throughout the ancient

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<sup>1</sup> My adaptation of the first verse opening the Gospel of John (1:1) in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Translated into English the verse reads: “In the beginning was the heron”.

<sup>2</sup> For further reference on the *benu*-bird, see Pinch (2002); Hart (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Ancient Egyptians located the afterlife amongst the imperishable stars of the northern sky.

<sup>4</sup> On the differences and common traits linking the *benu*-bird and the phoenix, see Van den Broek (1972); Tammisto (1986); Assmann (2005: 429). Notably, in no ancient Egyptian sources there is a mention of Benu’s death, nor there is any mention of its connection to fire. These, in turn, became prominent features of the classical myth.

Mediterranean world, figuratively landing in the account of Herodotus. The Greek historian, who visited Egypt in the fifth century BC, wrote that he learnt about this myth in Heliopolis:

[t]here is another sacred bird, too, whose name is phoenix. I myself have never seen it, only pictures of it; for the bird seldom comes into Egypt: once in five hundred years, as the people of Heliopolis say. It is said that the phoenix comes when his father dies. If the picture truly shows his size and appearance, his plumage is partly golden and partly red. He is most like an eagle in shape and size. What they say this bird manages to do is incredible to me. Flying from Arabia to the temple of the sun, they say, he conveys his father encased in myrrh and buries him at the temple of the Sun. This is how he conveys him: he first molds an egg of myrrh as heavy as he can carry, then tries lifting it, and when he has tried it, he then hollows out the egg and puts his father into it, and plasters over with more myrrh the hollow of the egg into which he has put his father, which is the same in weight with his father lying in it, and he conveys him encased to the temple of the Sun in Egypt. This is what they say this bird does. (Herodotus, 1982: 12, 2.73)

The ancient Egyptian myth of Benu, as well as its later merging into the figure of the phoenix, “one of the most evocative symbols ever devised by the human imagination” (Rundle Clark, 1949: 3), seem to be the ideal metaphors to introduce the subject of the present research, devoted to a comparison of the prose work of two prominent women writers in the context of the post-Soviet Caucasus: Alisa Ganieva and Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili. Within the methodological frameworks provided by narratology, Gender and Myth Studies, this investigation ultimately aims at determining the function(s) of the (re)writing of myths in their *oeuvre*. Arguably, through their use of myths from various cultures of the world, Ganieva and Kordzaia-Samadashvili succeed in creating original stories of women that lay the basis of what is becoming the new Canon in Russian and Georgian literature. Therefore, these two case studies appear to be particularly relevant to describe the paradigmatic cultural shift that occurred in a specific region – that of the Caucasus, – once entirely part of the Soviet Union, now divided between the Russian Federation and the Republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. From the ashes of the previous world order, Ganieva and Kordzaia-Samadashvili strive to construct new female narrative identities in dialogue both with the societies in transition they are living in, and with various versions of the past. In this respect, tapping into the suggestive, arcane power of myths, the oldest relics of the past, they operate a regrouping of values, further problematizing the role of women in times of radical change.

## *Theoretical Issues and Methodological Framework*

Standing as a symbol for the beginning of life and time, the *benu*-bird/phoenix calls for a renewal of the “old”. In their fictional worlds, Ganieva and Kordzaia-Samadashvili explore possible directions to revitalize their respective national literatures through the use of mythology. However, due to its intrinsic nature, the concept of “myth” can be approached from a multitude of points of view. In fact, as Larry D. Shinn explains, “[s]tudents of language and literature (e.g. F. Max Müller and J. Campbell), psychology (e.g. S. Freud and C. Jung), sociology (e.g. E. Durkheim and P. Berger), social anthropology (e.g. B. Malinowski, V. Turner and C. Levi-Strauss) as well as religion (e.g. M. Eliade and G. La Rue) have all offered interpretations of myth” (1981: 369). Notably, Charles Delattre underlines the almost indescribable nature of the concept<sup>5</sup>: “myth is elusive, fleeting, it constantly escapes investigation and is never more deceptive than when one believes that they have grasped it. The proof of this lies in the multiplication of possible definitions, of assertions concerning its condition and its status, and of attempts to circumscribe it” (2005: 6). Robert Fowler too notices this prominent feature pertaining myths: “where or what is the ‘myth’ that the mythographer seeks to reduce? The difficulty of locating this elusive entity lies behind the oft-repeated dictum that there is no myth, only myths: stories told in particular contexts” (2017: 24). Today scholarship tends to agree on the validity of the definition provided by Lauri Honko in 1971:

[m]yth, a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of the gods as a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together with all the parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains. A myth expresses and confirms society’s religious values and norms, it provides patterns of behaviour to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends and establishes the sanctity of cult. The true milieu of myth is to be found in religious rites and ceremonial. The ritual acting out of myth implies the defence of the world order; by imitating sacred exemplars the world is prevented from being brought to chaos. The reenactment of a creative event, for example, the healing wrought by a god in the beginning of time, is the common aim of myth and ritual. In this way the event is transferred to the present and its result, i.e. the healing of a sick person, can be achieved once more here and now. In this way, too, the world order, which was created in the primeval era and which is reflected in myths, preserves its value as an exemplar and model for the people of today. (Honko, 1972: 15-16)

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<sup>5</sup> For further reference, see also Honko (1972).

Decades after these remarks, the field of Myth Studies has further expanded, solidifying its status as an interdisciplinary area of research<sup>6</sup>. This interdisciplinary and comparative perspective proves to be particularly fruitful if applied to analyze Ganieva and Kordzaia-Samadashvili's work, because of the types of myths these two authors include in their prose. These encompass:

- i). classical myths (i.e. Roman and Greek);
- ii). autochthonous myths (i.e. those myths pertaining to the cultural and geographic area of the Caucasus);
- iii). Slavic myths;
- iv). religious beliefs (namely, Islam);
- v). by extension, Soviet myths.

Such multifaceted and mosaic-like common trait uniting these two writers clearly calls for an approach that foregrounds its richness and dynamism, instead of reducing it to some specific, isolated aspects. To this end, the ideal theoretical framework is provided by the material-analytical approach that characterizes a new branch of narratology, called hylistics, “the study of narrative materials or *Erzählstoff-Forschung*” (Zgoll, Cuperly, Cöster-Gilbert, 2023: 285). In fact, according to Annette Zgoll,

[t]he challenge for a scientific approach to art is to understand as precisely as possible the particular forms or features of the work in question, and to trace the relationship between its contents and form, in order to understand its meaning(s) and appreciate its design. If the aim is to understand and appreciate not just the rough outline but also the finer details of the work, one must compare the finished piece with the raw material from which it was made, as one would examine a precious new garment to appreciate the pattern of its weave and even the individual threads revealed by closer inspection. (Zgoll, Cuperly, Cöster-Gilbert, 2023: 286)

In extreme synthesis, hylistic narratology focuses on the “raw material”, that is “the narrative material or ‘*Erzählstoff*’, abbreviated ‘*Stoff* [s] [...] a type of content not exclusively associated with or bound to any one form or medium” (Zgoll, Cuperly, Cöster-Gilbert, 2023: 287). *Hylemes*, or “raw materials” (from the Greek *hyle*, ὕλη), are the “minimal action-bearing units of *Erzählstoff*-versions (narrative

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<sup>6</sup> Research centers specifically devoted to Myth Studies have recently appeared across the globe. This is the case, for example, of the “Collegium Mythologicum” (Göttingen) and the “Centre for Myth Studies” (part of the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex), founded in 2008. The results of the group's inquiries have appeared in two academic collections that tackle different aspects of the study of myth from a psychoanalytic perspective (see Burnett, Bahun, Main 2013; Pestell, Palazzolo, Burnett, 2016). Moreover, several Mythological Studies programs have opened at such institutes as Pacifica Graduate Institute (Santa Barbara, California). Of course, this list is by no means complete. Its aim is to give an idea of the dimension and entity of this field of research.



material)” (Zgoll, Cuperly, Cöster-Gilbert, 2023: 291). As Christian Zgoll clarifies, “[h]ylemes are the basic building blocks of any type of narrative *Stoff* [...]. Hylemes represent key pieces of content that are moreover not defined by or limited to any specific medial manifestation, such as a text or an image” (Zgoll, Zgoll, 2020: 29).

This angle<sup>7</sup> proves to be particularly useful to better understand the idea of “rewriting of a myth”, as well as to shed light on the mechanisms involved in this process. Ganieva’s and Kordzaia-Samadashvili’s prose works are undoubtedly myth-informed literature, as the prominent features of their poetics, as well as their own opinions (see, for instance, the interviews enclosed at the end of this book) demonstrate. Thus, to appreciate the use they make of this “raw” material, their writings will be analyzed in the following chapters through the lens of three of the ten hylistic approaches theorized by Annette Zgoll:

- i). identification, categorization, and standardization of narrative materials;
- ii). analysis of textual representation of hylemes;
- iii). analysis of textual omissions of the narrative material (*erzählstoff*-version).

Notably, hylistic narratology represents an evolution of a methodology originally applied to the area of mythological studies. This approach is at the core of two volumes that recently appeared in the “Mythological Studies (MythoS) Series” (De Gruyter): *Tractatus mythologicus* (Zgoll, 2019) and *Mythische Sphärenwechsel* (Zgoll, Zgoll, 2020). Here, myth is not understood simply as a text or genre. Instead, it is conceived as narrative material that can be concretized in a wide plethora of media forms, such as texts or images, but also dance, pantomimes, statues, films etc.. Thanks to their lively interconnectedness, different media contribute to creating original layers<sup>8</sup> of meaning that adapt the mythical material to new cultural contexts, both from a synchronic (different societies coexisting in the same epoch) and a diachronic perspective (i.e. different epochs, societies of the future). In doing so, such semantic stratification guarantees the continuous propagation of myths, virtually generating an infinite, open text. In fact, as Zgoll maintains, “if one starts explaining [what exactly makes myths different] at one end, [they] would inevitably have to include many other ‘ends’ as well, preferably at the same time” (2019: 1).

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Fowler too stresses the idea of multiplicity with regards to myths: “[t]he myth is the hypostasis of all the versions the mythographer has heard, and the color and the flavor of the contexts in which he has heard them. His unity, however arbitrarily derived, notionally underlies the inherited multiplicity. Like language, however, myth is a social phenomenon, existing both in the individual and the group. In some sense myth is indeed ‘out there’. Any individual telling responds to a social nexus, and that is where ‘the myth’ must be” (2017: 24).

<sup>8</sup> On the idea of “polymorphism” as a peculiar trait of myths, see (Zgoll, Zgoll, 2020), in particular pp. 9-82.

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The life of myths is essentially endless, insofar as the storytelling continues as long as there exist human beings able to pass them on. However, *who* is telling or re-telling these stories acquires a specific relevance in the field of Gender Studies, especially at a time when the role of myths in society came under renewed scrutiny. In keeping with Purkiss, “it is misleading to speak solely of women’s ‘rewriting’ of myth, since the term implies that man was its prime maker” (1992: 441). In several cases, as she demonstrates in her essay, women’s rewritings of myths give birth to narratives that can be considered as a sort of derivative product of the men’s gaze. Taking as an example the myth of the goddess, Purkiss argues<sup>9</sup> that “the feminist revival of the goddess does not come straight to us from prehistoric women, but was invented by men earlier this century [the 20<sup>th</sup> century] for reasons which had nothing to do with empowering women” (1992: 442). Therefore, she bitterly concludes, “no possible strategy of rewriting of myth (or anything else) can really constitute the kind of absolute, clean and revolutionary break with the discourse and order sought in the days of feminism and poststructuralism’s greatest confidence” (1992: 455).

On the one hand, it is impossible not to agree with the essence of Purkiss’ words, insofar as only a brand-new set of myths has the potential to entirely rewrite the grammar of mythology in a given cultural and social context. On the other hand, though, an investigation of myth-based products carried out through the prism of a hylistic approach could help reconstruct and measure the degree with which women’s rewritings of myths differ from the basic hyleme<sup>10</sup>. The diapason of discrepancy, as Purkiss herself demonstrates, varies greatly. In some cases (namely with Sylvia Plath), the alteration is so profound and structural, the functions and scopes so radically revised, that the final result seems to be something completely different from the supposed “original”. This evolution reminds that of the *benu*-bird and the phoenix: the former myth persisted for at least five, seemingly endless, millennia before undergoing the famous metamorphosis that ultimately transformed it into the latter. Nowadays, the myth of the phoenix is deeply rooted and widely rewritten in Western societies. We could even go as far as stating that this myth has been *overwritten*, to the detriment of the narrative it came from. However, this apparent intangible status does not necessarily forbid a further, alchemical transmutation.

A possible criticism against the use of the hylistic toolbox in this context might concern the shift of focus from the element of struggle to modify gender

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<sup>9</sup> Also: “radical feminist claims of utter separatism are invalid, since their theories are predicated not on the stories produced thousands of years ago by women, but on a masculine discourse of myth” (Purkiss, 1992: 444).

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, these two perspectives can coexist – along with establishing new myths, an innovative rewriting of old ones can prove to be functional too.

asymmetries in favor of a gender-neutral based approach. This shift of focus, however, is only apparent, because it is precisely in the analysis of *how* a myth is told (i.e. use of narrative techniques and their implications) that the innovative element emerges with strength. Instead, a hyslistic approach contributes to shaping the view of an equal participation in the rewriting of myths, a process carried out by individuals, regardless of the gender they identify with.

### *Societies and Identities in Transition. Regrouping and Rewriting*

In her 1992 article, Purkiss mentions some of the prominent techniques that women writers use to re-elaborate myths. These include:

- i). a change in the focus of the narrative (for instance, from a male to a female point of view, p. 441);
- ii). a shift of the terms of the myth (for instance, a “negative” female role-model becomes positive, p. 441);
- iii). a change in the spaces available for identification (p. 444);
- iv). substitution or inversion of certain elements, (for instance, the introduction of comic features in a tragic context, p. 446);
- v). translations and variations (p. 451);
- vi). use of indeterminacy to blur the genders’ hierarchy (p. 454).

It should be noticed, though, that all these strategies are generally exploited in any context characterized by the juxtaposition of two seemingly opposed elements. In this case the dichotomy is played between “male” *versus* “female”, but can be applied also to other opposing pairs, such as “old” *versus* “new”, “fathers” *versus* “sons” and “mothers” *versus* “daughters”, “nature” *versus* “city”, “paganism” *versus* “monotheism” etc.. In both Ganieva’s and Kordzaia-Samadashvili’s prose works all these antonymic pairs become functional, as they represent different aspects of a world that is crumbling.

Framed within this context, the rewriting of myths takes on at least two new interconnected levels of reading. First of all, the creation of new myths serves as a means to overcome the trauma caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991).

Secondly, this cataclysmic event, which disintegrated the ostensible Soviet unity into a constellation of multiple societies, created the need to regroup values to build a new identity<sup>11</sup>. Notably, the regrouping of values is a process that typically occurs in periods of political, economic, cultural change and cyclically repeats itself in different historical phases. At times of drastic paradigm shifts, the technique of rewriting becomes a crucial strategy to discard the elements that

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<sup>11</sup> On women’s condition in this period, see Goscilo (1996).

cease to be functional in the newly constituted order. As the American feminist poet Adrienne Rich maintains, “to rewrite” does not equal to “revise”; instead, it is first necessary to “re-vision”:

[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. [...] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (Rich, 1972: 18-19)

In both Ganieva’s and Kordzaia-Samadashvili’s literary production this renewed gaze takes the form of a fresh use of well-established hylemes. New myths thus seem to emerge from the primordial soup of chaos, which itself constitutes an unavoidable step to mold a new society, as well as to redefine the role of women in it. Consequently, the gender discourse here seems to be one, although essential, piece in the wider, vivid mosaic of the Caucasus in transition.

Of course, the degree of rupture with the past depends upon multiple variants. Moreover, this does not automatically prevent people from passing on what is perceived as a positive influence or model from the past. Such act is valid if it serves the purpose to construct a new “collective memory”, given that memory creates communities. It is Pierre Nora’s opinion that the concept of “memory” plays a vital role, especially during periods of major upheavals:

[o]ur interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory. (Nora, 1989: 7)

In keeping with Nora’s theory<sup>12</sup>, fictional narratives can arguably be regarded as places of memory, provided that they show a connection with the past or national identity. This seems to be particularly true in the case of texts that deal with mythology, as Burkert once contended:

[t]he specific character of myth seems to lie neither in the structure nor in the content of a tale, but in the use to which it is put; and this would be my final

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<sup>12</sup> Nora distinguishes between three dimensions of sites of memory: i). material (including physical objects and past events; ii). functional dimension (sites of memory that serve a purpose in society); iii). symbolic dimension (ritualized actions or spaces) (1989: 18-19).

thesis: *myth is a traditional story with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance*. Myth is traditional tale applied; and its relevance and seriousness stem largely from this application. (Burkert, 1979: 23)

In other words, as hylemes myths seem to have a very specific and recognizable nucleus, which usually consists of a story that serves as a model (*exemplum*). When adapted to other contexts, – these may include both the same geographic area but at a different time, or a completely different environment – this primary core adapts to respond to the needs of a new set of circumstances, or to the scopes of certain narratives. In the particular cases under scrutiny here, hylemes undergo a dramatic change in order to become functional in a drastically transformed cultural and even urban space. In this respect, Nora’s theory is particularly useful also to understand the role of Nature in women’s rewriting of myths.

### *The Role of Nature in Myths’ Rewriting*

Major historical, political and social upheavals bring unavoidable transformations in myriad aspects of life. Notably, in all post-Soviet areas, including Russia<sup>13</sup>, processes of de-Sovietization have taken place, to a lesser or greater degree. This tendency, which has been observed by scholarship since the early 1990s<sup>14</sup>, reached its peaks in conjunction with significant historical moments, such as the colored revolutions and the February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 events. Architecture in particular can be considered one of the markers of such alteration, being the very flesh of any city. Therefore, such shift invested the way cities look like: endless monuments have been effaced (see, for example, the phenomenon of “*Leninopad*”<sup>15</sup>), countless buildings are either still in need of urgent renovation or have completely changed their appearance. In a nutshell, it is possible to register an oscillation between the *architectural rewriting* of the space (i.e. the structure is kept, but the façade and the interior decor are deeply modified) and the *architectural overwriting* (i.e. the dismantling of buildings to use the space as sites for new constructions). As a consequence, the progression of de-Sovietization contributed to the creation of an unstable perception of post-

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<sup>13</sup> Such processes include the following actions: i). renaming of cities, streets and other object connected to the Soviet legacy; ii). revision of lexicon; iii). restructuring of the education system; iv). revision of linguistic policies; v). obliteration of cultural sites and art objects.

<sup>14</sup> For further reference, see Tunbridge, Ashworth (1996); Bernhard, Kubik (2014); Rodkin (2015); Lastouski, Ramanava (2021).

<sup>15</sup> According to Marco Scotini, “the most effective image that we still preserve of the so-called ‘fall of Communism’ is the iconoclastic, collective ritual that has showered down on the numerous statues scattered throughout the ex-Soviet territories (*Leninoclasm*) [...]” (Scotini, 2014: 19).

Soviet cities, an uneasy balance between (sometimes forced) modernization and the vacuum left by a traumatic memory that still needs processing.

Not surprisingly, in the prose works of both Ganieva and Kordzaia-Samadashvili, Nature counterbalances the fragile precariousness of the city, when not touched by urbanization. Indeed, countryside seems to undergo change at a much slower pace, almost becoming reassuring in its seeming immutability. Understandably, this dichotomic opposition between urban space and the space of Nature has a multitude of implications, both in terms of myth rewriting as well as in the economy itself of any given text. In fact, according to Lotman, the semantic field of a literary text is represented in the spatial architecture of the narrated world, given that spatial order is a central organizing element of its structure.

In Ganieva's and Kordzaia-Samadashvili's fictional worlds, personal stories and myths' rewriting intersect in a space that is simultaneously invented (because it is described solely with the help of words, i.e. conventional symbols on a physical support or device) and real, when the reference points at actual places the reader knows about or can visit. It is precisely thanks to this place-based knowledge, shared both by fictional characters and the physical readership, that these stories act as sites of memory. In fact, at a first, concrete level they provide a specific background for the story with a referent to the real world. At a second, more abstract level, they function as open texts, since they can be infinitely filled in with new meanings, in harmony with the cyclical nature of civilizations and their societies<sup>16</sup>.

This twofold characteristic is evident in the case of some specific sites of memory, remarkably the ones connected to myths<sup>17</sup>. In fact, as Miles-Watson and Asimos maintain, "[...] onomastic references are not simply fillers, residue from oral cultures that had to pass long winter nights, they are rather crucial parts of the myth's communicative story that anchor it in place [...]; to ignore the spatial element of mythology is to gain a diminished understanding of the material" (2019: 204). Arguably, their importance increases during transitional stages, when societies attempt to establish new connections with the past, with society and their environment.

The backgrounds described in Ganieva's and Kordzaia-Samadashvili's stories are real, thus giving a very specific connotation in terms of realism and of the knowledge entailed by this specific reference in the readership. Yet, extraordinary, exceptional events or characters are tightly interwoven in the dense fabric of their prose works. This is probably one of the reasons that lead critics and academics alike to label their *oeuvre* as "Magic Realism" or "New

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<sup>16</sup> On this point, see also Behravesch (2016).

<sup>17</sup> For further reference, see Malinowski (1922); Singh, Khan (2002); Warf, Arias (2008); Arias (2010); Lavrenova (2010); Hawes (2017). Amongst the first studies that focused on the importance of space in myths, see Klimkeit (1975).

Realism”<sup>18</sup>. Notably, Kulakovskaia underlines the prominent role played by the use of mythology in the “New Russian Realism”, a literary current that sees Ganieva as one of its most important representative and critic. Prior to this, Lotman and Mints already introduced the term “neomythologism” as one of the main dominants of the Twentieth century (1981: 50). Moreover, commenting the Russian case, Leiderman and Lipovetskii argued that the creation of a new mythology and, in general, the use of myth is a pivotal feature of contemporary Russian literature, with specific reference to the Silver Age (2003: 537-538).

The following two chapters are devoted to a close reading of both Ganieva’s and Kordzaia-Samadashvili’s prose work, with particular attention to the role of Nature and myth rewriting in the creation of a new role for women in post-Soviet societies.

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<sup>18</sup> To reconstruct the debate around this term, see Abisheva (2006); Bol’shakova (2008); Cherniak (2010), (2016); Chuprinin (2007); Kaznacheev (2008); Pustovaia (2004), (2005); Rotai (2011); Senchin (2005).

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## *The Ambivalence of the Sacred Mountain in the Prose of Alisa Ganieva*

The vibrant landscape of contemporary Russian literature has recently seen the birth of a new genre that entered the scholarly debate under the name of “New Realism” (Cherniak, 2016: 320). The common trait uniting the novels belonging to this genre is a focus on the representation of ordinary people and their everyday life. As Alisa Ganieva (b. 1985) puts it,

[n]ew realism is a literary movement that marks the crisis of the parodic attitude towards reality and combines the features of postmodernism (“the world as chaos”, “crisis of authorities”, emphasis on corporeality), realism (typical hero, typical circumstances), and romanticism (the discord between the ideal and reality, the opposition between “I” and society) with an orientation towards an existential dead end, alienation, search, dissatisfaction, and tragic gesture. This is not so much a movement in terms of unity of the writers’ individualities, but a universal perception of the world reflected in literary works, which are diverse in their artistic and stylistic choices. (Ganieva, 2010: online)

Despite the fierce criticism provoked by this concept (Kotvun, Klimovich, 2018: 319), the enormous success in terms of readership made it possible for these novels to enter the Canon of Russian literature. “Diversity” is certainly a key feature of the phenomenon, as Ganieva herself clarified. In fact, under this “umbrella term” it is possible to find such names as Andrei Astvatsaturov (b. 1969, who writes autobiographical fiction focused on the past and the city of Leningrad – St. Petersburg), Roman Senchin (b. 1971, author of *The Eltyshyevs*, a family saga), and Zakhar Prilepin (b. 1975, military prose), amongst others. This picture would not be complete without the mention of those New realist writers who chose to set their stories in the North and South Caucasus, such as Denis Gutsko (b. 1969). As this very brief list shows, despite their common focus on the individual perception of reality, these authors vary greatly not only with regards to their style, but also in terms of the privileged setting of their stories. Not surprisingly, within this frame of reference, the Caucasus emerges as a very prolific area, both in terms of writers’ origin and from a thematic point of view.

In fact, as it is widely known, since the early Eighteenth century the contacts with the inhabitants of this region made a profound and durable impact

on numerous generations of Russian authors and artists alike. In keeping with Edith Clowes, for many Russian writers the Caucasus and its populations were used in fiction as an “alien” setting, thanks to which their characters could find themselves and define their identity (Clowes, 2011: 141). This cultural influence gave birth to the idea of the “Russian Orient”, a concept which up to this day is an object of heated scholarly debate<sup>19</sup>. Already central during the period of the golden age of Russian literature, the Caucasus also played a pivotal role in the Russian literature of the Twentieth century. Suffice it to mention the name of Fazil’ Abdulovich Iskander, who became famous in the Soviet Union for his colorful Russian-language descriptions of life in Abkhazia. However, the dissolution of the USSR created a void, a substantial absence of this region in early post-Soviet literature, as Liudmila Ulitskaia (Ulitskaia, 2015: 5) also noticed in her preface to the novel of the Tatar author Guzel’ Iakhina *Zuleikha opens her eyes* (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*, 2015).

Issues related to everyday life in the geographical space occupied by the North Caucasus – namely the republic of Dagestan – are the main ingredients of the first prose works written by Alisa Arkad’evna Ganieva. These salient traits undoubtedly place her narratives in the genre of “New Realism” in its specific “branch” of the Caucasian setting. Not surprisingly, as Ganieva herself explains, her main intent is to show “the isolated microcosms of the Caucasus, at the same time narrating about ordinary people and universal human collisions understandable to each and everyone on this earth” (Murdaca, 2012: online). The reception of her work confirms the collective, shared nature of the themes Ganieva deals with. In fact, after her literary debut with the long story (*povest’*) *Salaam Dalgat!* (*Salam tebe, Dalgat!*, 2009), published under the male pseudonym Gulla Khirachev, a Russian reader wrote: “now we know that in the Caucasus people are very different and very similar to us. We have more or less the same problems” (Murdaca, 2012: online). Yet, in Ganieva’s prose there seems to be something more, a sort of “mystical aftertaste” that diverts the narration of simple facts of daily life from the purely documentary intent pursued, for example, by other Caucasian authors. The presence of mythical elements in Ganieva’s writings is evident and has been commented by scholarship<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, Kotvun and Klimovich identify the construction of myths as one of the main reasons why New Russian realist authors gained so much attention from the public:

[t]he success of the “new realists” is built on the youthful enthusiasm of the authors, their vital energy, the pathos of fighting with a disappearing

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<sup>19</sup> For further reference on the topic and on the appropriateness of the application of the term “Orientalism” to the case of South Caucasus – Near East of the Russian Empire, see: Layton (1995); Sahni (1997); Ram (2003); Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (2010); Tolz (2011); Ferrari (2015); Weber (2016); Taroutina, Leigh (2023).

<sup>20</sup> See Marchesini (2020).

postmodernism, the ability to address the mass readership's tastes, to construct myths, movements and heroics, to anticipate the commercial effect of literary works, and to be able to orient themselves in an ideological conjuncture. (2018: 319-320)

Ganieva's interest in mythologies from various countries and cultures is testified by her efforts in recovering through her creative writing not only classical Greek and Slavic myths but, most importantly, local Dagestani myths. The polyhedric nature of her thematic choice is also a prominent feature of the so-called "*neomifologizm*" ("neomythologism"<sup>21</sup>, XX-XXI centuries), a genre whose distinctive characteristics include a plurality of sources from which myths are drawn and heightened intertextuality (Rudnev, 1999: 184-187). Some scenes from the novel *The Mountain and the Wall*<sup>22</sup> (*Prazdnichnaia gora*, 2012) reveal particularly telling details about the use and the function of myths in Ganieva's poetics.

### *A New Start*

Narrative beginnings<sup>23</sup> are undoubtedly an integral, as well as a very powerful structuring (or de-structuring, in some cases) force of any kind of text. Edward W. Said highlighted the foundational value of this textual portion when claiming that it represents "the first step in the intentional production of meaning" (1975: 5). Hence, it is a very telling fact that the prologue of *The Mountain and the Wall* is filled with a large number of mythological and folklore references. A very simple search opens the story: Yusup<sup>24</sup> sends Anvar to look for a corkscrew. Therefore, Anvar enters kitchen, where a group of women is kneading the dough. This everyday activity is paired with ordinary conversations about marriage, divorce, religion Anvar overhears. While waiting for the dinner to be served, Anvar starts talking with his friend Maga:

"[h]e took me to this rock, once. Said it's an *azhdakba*."

"Which *azhdakba*?"

"I'll tell you: so there's this *ustaz* who tells folktales. In our village, he says, there once lived a *chaban*, a shepherd who took care of people's sheep, and this *azhdakba* started stealing rams from him. Stole one after another. But the

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<sup>21</sup> For further reference, see also Voivodich, Ioffe (2019) and Voivodich (2021).

<sup>22</sup> This is the name of the official English translation by Carol Apollonio. The title literally translates as *The Festive Mountain*.

<sup>23</sup> For further reference, see Richardson (2008).

<sup>24</sup> When referring to the characters of this novel I follow the transliteration used in the official English translation. The present analysis of Ganieva's novel is based on the Russian original (Ganieva 2018). For the sake of greater clarity in this study, all textual references are taken from the English translation (Ganieva 2015). For a deeper comprehension of the text, the Italian translation too has been taken into account.

shepherd wasn't about to run and hide. Hey, he says, give me back the rams, or people will think I'm falling down on the job or stealing them myself. The *azhdakha* wouldn't budge, no way was he going to give them back. So then the *chaban* took an arrow and shot the *azhdakha*, and the arrow hit him in the torso and came out the other side. The *chaban* went and took back the arrow and asked Allah to turn the *azhdakha* to stone."

"So? It worked? Does the stone look like an *azhdakha*, or something?" asked Anvar, springing back up onto the bar and dangling from it head down.

"There's a hole that runs straight through it. Other than that, no. Bashir believes it, though, he says that the hole is just like an arrow hole... plus, he says, the head fell off afterward anyhow".

"What, hasn't he ever seen any stones in the mountains?" laughed Anvar, still hanging upside down. "There aren't that many in that area. I told Bashir it's *bida*, *bida*. So then he started calling me *vakh*. With those Sufis everyone who doesn't believe them is *vakh*". (Ganieva, 2015: 14-15)

Strategically placed in the *incipit* of the novel, this episode already foregrounds the relevance of mythological and folklore elements within the economy of the narrative. As the reader learns from the glossary, the *azhdakha* is a Turkic word that indicates an evil monster (Ganieva, 2015: 243). Nothing more is said of this creature, apart from the fact that it steals rams from a shepherd and is killed by an arrow because of this crime. It is then turned into stone as a form of punishment by Allah, the supreme Islamic god. A more thorough search on this figure shows not only its importance across the pre-monotheistic cultures of the Caucasus and Iran (and, by enlarge, Persia), but also its very multifaceted description in different myths. The *azhdakha* is a gigantic snake-like creature of Iranian mythology, roughly equivalent to the dragon<sup>25</sup>. In Persian literature, it is described as a sort of dragon, that is a giant snake or lizard with wings. It can live in the air, on the earth or in the sea, where it is finally confined before being killed, because it harasses living creatures. If an *azhdakha*'s head is buried in the soil, that soil will become good. According to Robert Chenciner and Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov, it also lives behind high mountains and in forests. In Dagestani traditions, Chenciner and Magomedkhanov claim, it could take the form of

a huge male and female monster, with one to 12 heads, two eyes and two ears on each head, noses and lips; two or four legs; or single-headed and one-eyed with snakes and lizards in its hair. Flames erupt from its eyes, the sky darkens in the smoke from its nostrils. [...] [I]t negotiates in human language and knows sayings [...]. It gets married, [...] cooks and eats flour and meat dishes including pilaf, bread and people, and it drinks milk and girls' blood; [...] it has herds of cattle and horses; it protects rivers and lakes from people; it keeps treasures, captures people, and abducts girls. [...] Special weapons are required to kill them. Birds

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<sup>25</sup> For further reference, see Röhrich (1981); Blust (2000).

tear off their feathers and throw them down in token of worship. [...] It [...] can turn people into stone and revive them. It overcomes difficulties. (Chenciner, Magomedkhanov, 2023: 4)

Moreover, according to Viacheslav A. Chirikba, this creature “is believed to have one, three or seven-heads, projecting fire from its maw; it sits near water springs, protecting them from intruders and demanding in exchange for access to the water human sacrifices, mostly young women, on whom it feeds” (Chirikba, 2015: 167). Thus, read through the prism of hylistic narratology, the representation of the hyleme *azhdakha* can be summarized as follows (table 1):

<i>Azhdakha</i>			
<i>Features, traits</i>	<i>Hyleme</i>	<i>Dagestani version</i> <sup>26</sup>	<i>Textual Representation (MW)</i>
Physical description	Giant snake or lizard with wings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Huge male or female monster;</li> <li>- one to twelve heads;</li> <li>- two eyes and two ears on each head, noses and lips;</li> <li>- two or four legs;</li> <li>- if single-headed, one-eyed with snakes and lizards in its hair;</li> <li>- Flames from its eyes.</li> </ul>	--- <b>Textual omission.</b>
Actions	Harasses other creatures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Speaks human language;</li> <li>- gets married;</li> <li>- <b>eats flour, bread</b> and meat;</li> <li>- eats humans (<b>especially women</b>) and drinks their blood;</li> <li>- <b>possesses herds of cattle and horses;</b></li> <li>- <b>abducts girls;</b></li> <li>- lives close by water.</li> </ul>	<b>Steals rams</b> from a shepherd.
Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thrown by God in the sea, where it continues to grow.</li> <li>- Eventually killed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It is very difficult to kill;</li> <li>- birds throw <b>feathers</b> at it;</li> <li>- special weapons are required.</li> </ul>	Killed by an <b>arrow</b> .
Metamorphosis	Absent.	Can turn people into <b>stone</b> .	Allah turns the a. into <b>stone</b> .

**Table 1.** Comparison between the hyleme “*azhdakha*” and its textual representation in *The Mountain and the Wall* (MW).

<sup>26</sup> These elements are drawn from the sources indicated in the list of references. It goes beyond the scope of this study to meticulously reconstruct all the regional versions of the basic hyleme of this story.

The comparison between the hyleme associated to the *azhdakba*, its representations in Dagestani culture, and Ganieva's version discloses a series of significant elements with respect to her rewriting of the mythical material. In the framework of the present discussion, the most important detail that changes in *The Mountain and the Wall* involves the representation of women in this mythical story. In fact, in the Dagestani version women are abducted or killed to be eaten. In the book, however, instead of women the *azhdakba* steals rams, which are similar to those it owns in the folklore variant of the myth. The monstrous trait is softened too, since no physical description is provided. Yet, despite this textual omission, the creature is nonetheless harmful to the point that it is killed by an arrow, a weapon reminiscent of the birds' feathers in the Dagestani account. Another element that connects this story to the corresponding myth is the reference to flour and bread, traditionally associated to this creature and repeatedly foregrounded in key parts of the novel, such as the beginning and the end<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, these two versions (Dagestani and Ganieva's) present the trait of metamorphosis, which is absent from the basic hyleme. This characteristic is pivotal, both in the economy of the narrative and on the hermeneutic plane. Indeed, in *The Mountain and the Wall*, after the shepherd slayed it, Allah turns the *azhdakba* into stone. Given that this story was indirectly told to Maga by a *sufi*<sup>28</sup>, it is possible to infer that it is a monotheistic religion that symbolically transforms the autochthonous myth by turning it into something that has little to no reference to the original, thus condemning it to a sort of oblivion. Such a reading of the scene alludes to the problematization of the role of Islam within the context of Dagestani society, a theme that spans the entire novel. The fact that this rewritten version of the *azhdakba* myth is narrated by a chain of male characters (*sufi* → Bashir → Maga → Anvar) is meaningful too. Arguably, this choice implies that the shift from tradition has been performed by men. This action, however, seems to have an ambiguous nature: on one hand, it is a representative of a monotheistic religion that metaphorically kills the "pagan" past of this group of people. Still, on the other, it is a male character that rewrites the myth in a more favorable fashion with respect to female figures. Possibly, it is in this fundamental ambivalence that reside the different reactions of male characters to this rewritten myth.

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<sup>27</sup> References to flour in Ganieva (2015): 10; 16; 38; 44; 76; 79; 209; 228; 243. References to bread in Ganieva (2015): 7; 43; 116; 208; 209; 217; 224; 225; 228; 230; 232; 233.

<sup>28</sup> *Sufis* adhere to Sufism, a religious practice within Islam that focuses on purification, spirituality, ritualism, asceticism, and esotericism.



## *The Festive Mountain*

As a matter of fact, this little stone with which Anvar and Maga play is a metonymy for “Rokhel-Meer”, the Mountain of Celebrations mentioned in the novel’s title. Once again, this episode sees as protagonists two friends, Shamil’ (the central character in the plot) and Arip. In part I of the book Shamil’ recalls a mysterious event that happened to them in an undefined past moment. During a mountain hike, they arrive at the village of “Rokhel-meer”, or The Festive Mountain. Meaningfully, the only other character that calls this place using the same expression is an elderly man, who happens to be the mysterious figure Arip and Shamil’ meet during their hike. Upon arrival at the old gray-haired’s house, the traveling companions inexplicably fall asleep, waking up only the morning after and finding themselves at the starting point, as if they had never climbed the mountain. In other parts of the novel, the protagonist claims that what happened must have been just a dream, thus confusing the plane of reality with that of magic and the imagination (Ganieva, 2015: 100). The explanation of this unusual event will be given only at the end the novel, when Shamil’ reads about this magical place in a novel written by a fictional character, Makhmud Tagirov:

I was taught from childhood that there is no God on earth. But now that I, Makhmud, have lived my life, I can state absolutely that He exists. And I can even tell you, dear readers, where souls end up after death. Our souls end up at the top of Rokhel-Meer, the Mountain of Celebrations. And there, on Meer, will be a place of purity, where there is no poverty, no scarcity, no want. There will be a great village there with tanneries, armories, and stone workshops. Its dwellings are part of the very cliffs; there, benign white spirits will feast together with the people, and the celebration will never end. There too, I hope, will dwell your Makhmud, he will drink fresh *buz̄a* and watch as the dove-gray steam rises above the green-white-blue peaks...

“Break it up, go on home! There’s no more bread!” howled someone in a crude bass. The line fidgeted and dispersed. (Ganieva, 2015: 224)

Through the use of a *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach, 1977), this excerpt from a fictional book nested inside *The Mountain and the Wall* seems to provide a possible explanation of what happened to the two travelers. Arguably, Shamil’ and his friend might have had a sort of premonition, a near-death experience in which he had a clear vision of existence after life in Rokhel-Meer, a symbolic place located in Paradise. Such reading of the scene finds confirmation if taking into account other elements of the novel, namely the characterization of the above-mentioned elderly man. Due to the traits associated to him, and especially the frequent references to white hues, this figure can be paralleled to the

mythological mountain spirit *Budulaal*, a mediator between gods and man. As Seferbekov, Razakhanov and Galbatsov maintain<sup>29</sup>,

[w]ith the adoption of Islam, they began to be perceived as Muslim saints, intermediaries between man and the God. In appearance, they seem to resemble people dressed in white clothes. They dwell on the tops of inaccessible mountains, in rocks and caves. [...] Mountain spirits allegedly help people who get lost in the mountains to find their way if they turn to them for help. [...] It is noteworthy that *Budulaal* is still being asked for help even today. (2022: 812)

Metaphorically dressed as a *Budulaal*, this figure directs the characters in their wanderings of the mountain, uniting the space of life and death. This image Ganieva built is particularly captivating insofar as it can be read at least on three levels. The first level is, of course, connected to the plot: the two characters follow the elderly man at a point where they seem to be lost. Hence, this character stands in continuity with the Avar myth. On a second level, pertaining the architecture of the narrative, the meeting with this figure functions as a pivotal junction for the course of the following events involving the protagonist, who seems to be lost as much as Dedalus is in the labyrinth. On the third, and last level, this scene mirrors the experience of the reader as they make their own way through the text.

Most importantly, though, the character of the elderly man serves as one of the many indicators of Caucasian mythology, a reminder in the text of a tradition that seems to be almost lost. By extension, not only it is the elderly man that performs this function, but also the “Festive Mountain” itself symbolizes a remnant of Caucasian culture that is now disappearing, and that has started disappearing since the conversion to Islam (Murdaca 2012: online).

In this respect, it is possible to infer that Nature, in the form of a mountain, plays a mythical role in Ganieva’s narrative<sup>30</sup>, especially considering the way this author masterfully incorporates both Avar primordial myths and the universal symbolism (and mysticism) traditionally associated to it. As Ganieva herself revealed in the interview enclosed in this study, “[n]ature for me is rather a sacred zone, a little mystical or magical. It is a space not yet fully possessed, not yet fully poisoned by human passions, in which the forces of mercy or, on the contrary, vengeance, can awaken” (p. 56).

Commenting on Caucasian autochthonous myths, Ketevan Sikharulidze notes that “the mountain was perceived as a model of the universe in which all the elements of the cosmic order were reflected. The tip corresponds to the celestial sphere, while the base of the mountain is located near the abyss. [...] The ancients

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<sup>29</sup> For further reference, see Seferbekov (2005); Osmanov, Seferbekov, Seferbekov (2018).

<sup>30</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Marina Ciccarini (University of Rome Tor Vergata) for the suggestion she gave me on this point during the conference “La riscrittura al femminile del mito nel panorama letterario slavo dal Novecento ai giorni nostri” (May 16-17, University of Salento, Lecce, Italy).

thought that the cosmic mountain was at the center of the universe, at the point where the axis of the world passes” (Sikharulidze, 2015: 35).

It is probably because of this inherent vertical opposition between the value of “high” and “low” – namely, the sky and the abyss – that among many Caucasian populations, as well as for ancient Greeks, the mountain was depicted as a place characterized by a profound ambivalence. In fact, on the one hand it could symbolize paradise, or the place where the divinities resided; yet, on the other hand, it could also be considered a place of punishment.

Nevertheless, for the characters in Ganieva’s novel the mountain is a direct connection to the cultural heritage of the past. This lead scholars like Anni Lappela to contend that the mountain is described as a space “in between”, both in spatial and temporal terms. It is a sort of “third space”, to use the notion proposed by Edward Soja (Soja 1996: 6). In Lappela’s words,

[p]ortrayed in this way, the mountain’s location is depicted as being somewhere ‘in-between’, both in temporal and in spatial terms. It is simultaneously located in the actual reality of the textual world and in the (utopian) dream world. The Festive Mountain is located in the past, in the present and in the future. It seems to be real-and-imagined, referential and non-referential at the same time, a very concrete ‘Thirdspace’. (2017: 110)

Certainly, in *The Mountain and the Wall* the referential aspect is particularly evident because of the wealth of details used to describe the mountain. This element acquires even more relevance if considering the sharp contrast in which the mountain is placed with respect to the city, and in particular to the capital Makhachkala. They look like two opposite poles. Nonetheless, to interpret this relationship as purely dichotomic seems a rather simplistic understanding of a much more layered symbolic depiction. In fact, not only the mountain can be considered as a “third space”, as Lappela contends, but it is a very specific type of real yet imagined space. In this respect, it seems to be congruent to read Ganieva’s construction of the fictional mountain as a proper site of memory. Indeed, as Nora points out,

[L]ieux de mémoire are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial [...]. [T]hey are lieux in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional. Even an apparently purely material site, like an archive, becomes a lieu de mémoire only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura. A purely functional site, like a classroom manual, a testament, or a veterans’ reunion belongs to the category only inasmuch as it is also the object of a ritual. And the observance of a commemorative minute of silence, an extreme example of a strictly symbolic action, serves as a concentrated appeal to memory by literally breaking a temporal continuity. Moreover, the three aspects always coexist”. (1989: 18-19)

The episode of Rokhel-Meer, in which the mountain is the absolute protagonist, undoubtedly displays the features of a site of memory: it is both natural and ambiguous, and it performs all the three functions described – material, symbolic, and functional. Although being physically made of words, this fictional mountain is so richly described that it potently evokes its correspondent referent in the real world. It is also functional, because it serves a purpose both at the plot level (thus, in the fictional world) and in the readers' experience. Lastly, it is a densely symbolic space, insofar as like a Noah's ark it preserves the myths and the belief system of the Avars. Moreover, the fact that characters fall asleep in its proximity emphasize its symbolic aura, given that sleep implies silence. This event, in turn, cracks the temporal unity of the plot, thus forcing the reader to stop and ponder, at least for a while. The author herself underlines the sacral, symbolic nature of the mountain in her work, as the enclosed interview confirms:

[i]ts role is most prominently played, obviously, in *The Mountain and the Wall*, where the mountain (as in many world myths) is a sacred place, a peak inhabited by spirits who can mock a man, turn him around or on the contrary help him. It is a timeless window into another, lost Dagestan, where people live in their traditional mountain beehives or towers, farming, and strictly observing the laws of free societies, which look almost like proto-democracy against the background of the corrupt and autocratic Russian life. This is a kind of heaven, a kind of dream, a kind of light, a kind of paradise where the souls of my heroes end up. (p. 56)

In other Ganieva's prose works the mountain is portrayed in the same fashion, thus as an ancestral place, a sort of Edenic, primordial, mythical space. This is particularly evident, for instance, in a short story written in 2011 for the project "Snob", *Thirteen (Trinadtsat)*. Once again, the facts narrated here have to do with the common life of many people who live or who regularly visit southern Russia and the Caucasus: a trip on the *marshrutka*, a small bus used for short connections. The narration enters *in medias res* describing the journey of passengers that move from the city to other villages across the mountain. The reported conversations and dialogues are those of every day; the landscapes that open outside the windows are the green, or sometimes less luxuriant, slopes of the Caucasus. As the bus climbs up the mountain, the passengers continue with their activities, especially with conversations. At some point a female character realizes that something strange is happening: the *marshrutka* does nothing but going up, and up, and up; the descent never comes. The driver, however, does not pay any attention to her words and keeps pressing on the accelerator. He would just go on and on, without caring for his passengers or for the destination. As the narration proceeds, it seems impossible to approach the summit; the journey seems to have no end and as it stretches, also the physical features of the passengers appear to be deforming, becoming unrecognizable. As the vehicle

gets closer to the last turn, the narration abruptly changes the subject. It is precisely in this moment that the focus shifts to a small group of people gathering. Passing cars stop and offer help. Volunteer rescuers are busy down below, in the rocky crevice behind which a bus crashed. They were waiting for the police.

- How many dead? – someone asked, staring anxiously into the abyss.
- Everyone, - someone replied from below. – Thirteen people, as always in minibuses.

(Ganieva, 2012: 238)

As the completely unexpected ending of the story reveals, the passengers really reached the top of the mountain, not only in a literal sense, but also metaphorically, going on with their own path into the afterlife. In this specific excerpt, Ganieva's ability to twist the narrative until its last "curve" is admirable: revelation awaits behind the corner and consists of a single expression semantically linked to the concept of metamorphosis and change, "to deform" ("raspolzalis' do neuznavamosti", Ganieva, 2012: 237). Symbolically, this expression serves as a transition, a threshold, thanks to which a bitter epilogue is disclosed. Once again, this climax is achieved after the characters, together with the reader, like modern Daedaluses, venture themselves in the labyrinthine mountain.

Here, too, the depiction of the mountain displays the specific trait of ambivalence, where life and death meet and coexist: this place is like home, a native land that gave birth to almost all Ganieva's characters. Yet, this very familiar space turns out to be extremely dangerous. As it happens in *The Mountain and the Wall*, the protagonists of the story traverse the mountain, but this road leads them, in a metaphorical sense, to heaven. At the same time, though, the mountain represents a sort of punishment for the characters left alive, condemned to spend the rest of their existence without the physical presence of their beloved ones. Thus, the mountainous ridge acquires the value of a boundary line.

After all, as the legend goes, Dagestan, and namely the city of Derbent, is where Alexander the Great<sup>31</sup> supposedly built that boundary line that took the name of "Gates of Alexander".

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<sup>31</sup> See Anderson (1928).

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## *The Function of Mythology in Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili's Short Story I go home*

*A man is alive until his name is pronounced.*  
— Ancient Egyptian saying.

Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili (b. 1968) is a very eclectic and dynamic figure in the vast panorama of post-Soviet Georgian literature. Active for decades in the field of cultural journalism, literary translation<sup>32</sup> and the academia, she gained immediate attention in the early 2000s as a writer, thanks to the circulation of her first stories. After winning the prestigious national Georgian prize “Saba” twice, in 2003 for best debut with *Berikaoba* (2002) and in 2005 respectively, she was also awarded the “2013 Ilya State University prize” in the category “best novel” for *Who Killed Chaika? (Vin mok'la Chaik'a*, 2013). In 2017, the New York Public Library nominated her collection of short stories *Me, Margarita* (2005)<sup>33</sup> in the list of best 365 books written by women across the globe (Glazer 2017: online).

The red thread connecting all her prose works can undoubtedly be found in the constant presence of coarse, forthright, female characters populating the fictional worlds of her invention. Stories of women, of their relationships with men, and the harsh reality surrounding them, unravel following the counterpoint of a cynical, yet sarcastic tone. Collectively and individually, various generations of women reflect upon their personal and national history while raising children, dealing with men and their dependence on them, if they have not been taken away by war yet.

Another prominent feature of Kordzaia-Samadashvili's prose works is the focus on the urban setting, which lead critics like Salome Pataridze to consider, for example, *Zinka Adamiani* an “urban novel” (2023: 205). Interestingly, though, the metropolitan space of the city is animated by supernatural, magic elements drawn from the Georgian and Caucasian folklore. Moreover, the city is often put in a dichotomic relationship with Nature and life on the mountains. This interplay between the city and magic elements is present in many of her works, such as *The Children of Nightfall*, where every day's prosaic

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<sup>32</sup> In 1999 she was awarded the Goethe Institute Prize in the category “best translation” for *Die Liebhaberinnen (Women as Lovers)* by Elfride Jelinek, which she translated into Georgian.

<sup>33</sup> This collection was first translated into German in 2014 with the title *Ich, Margarita*. A year later appeared its English translation *Me, Margarita: Stories* (2015). Her works are currently translated into German, English, Italian, Russian and Sweden languages.

scenes are juxtaposed to a poetic narrative. Talking about this book, in a recent interview released for the present study, the author explains her interest in myths as follows:

[g]iven the fact that I love this layer of human culture very much, of course I cannot do without it. And probably also the fact that I was born in Tbilisi, I live in Tbilisi, I grew up here, and although I travel a lot, whether I want to or not, I am a Tbilisian and I hope that I will die in this city. And I like it very much that this city is inhabited by some creatures that I was told about in the courtyards on both sides of the river. The creatures we were telling stories about, the ones we thought were doing stupid things. For example, at the Crying Rock we knew that if you washed your face with this water – because one girl had washed her face there, – we knew that you would become beautiful, so we rubbed our faces until we lost our pulse. It was horrible. This city itself, it was founded because there are hot waters. This too is a kind of myth because Tbilisi is warm because of its hot waters and so on. [...] I think that without everything that surrounds me, everything that is invisible in Tbilisi, it is not that I could not write, but I would probably be – again, – very bored. (p. 61)

Nevertheless, in other narratives the almost absolute lack of specific temporal, spatial, or other kinds of indicators becomes a powerful generator of meaning. This is the case of the short story *I go home* (*Mivdivar sakeblshi*, 2014).

*I go home* is a story of lack. The first perception the reader gets is that the author tried to strip the narrative, as well as the characters, of all possible, seemingly futile details, almost reducing them to the bare minimum units of meaning. The reader will never know the name of the female protagonist, as well as that of her husband. Likewise, the reader will never know exactly where the action is taking place, although they can assume the setting is somewhere in Georgia, between the city and the mountainous countryside<sup>34</sup>.

Yet, *I go home* is also a story of freedom. A freedom that is conquered specifically through this necessary operation of denudation. It is precisely in this sort of “zero” point provided by the absence of definite, contextual information that the universal sense of the story emerges with clarity. Any reader could empathize with the protagonist, or with one of the other characters mentioned. Any reader could recognize themselves within the bitterness of the events that left a deep mark in the protagonist’s fictional life. Moreover, the choice of a terse, laconic narrative inevitably foregrounds any object, detail, or situation that is mentioned in the unfolding of the story. Evidently, the balance between very precise textual indicators and rather generic information has been carefully pondered by the author.

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<sup>34</sup> This information can be inferred from the general context in which Kordzaia-Samadashvili sets her prose works. However, another very telling element in this respect is the quotation inserted in the paratext.

The dynamics of the plot too deserves a particular attention: Kordzaia-Samadashvili masterfully weaves the information in a way that the reader feels compelled to go on with the following paragraph if they want to understand what was previously just hinted at. In other words, the relevant information to fully comprehend a paragraph is nested in the following one. This technique reminds of a chain of different sequences, where an element of the first chain is explained and expanded in the following one. In this apparently inelastic architecture of words, though, real memories, thoughts and imaginary scenarios blur in a collage that, ultimately, refers only to the mind of the main character.

### *At the Heart of a (Wo)men's World*

The hero is presented already at the beginning of the narrative, also because she is the voice narrating the events. Interestingly, this textual portion seems doubled, twofold, as to mirror the separation she experiences. The story opens with a very simple, everyday life scene: a couple is sitting in front of a river, looking at passing boats and enjoying the last warm days of the year. The protagonist looks at a big river, hoping for the autumn to last eternally, as to perpetrate the endless flow of the waters she is staring at. There is no specific indication of the name of the river, as it happens with the name of the main character<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, throughout the entire story, she is only called “woman”: “[m]y man called me ‘Woman’. ‘Woman said, It seems to Woman that...’. Of course, he perfectly knew my name, but I was – WOMAN!!!”<sup>36</sup> (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online). Moreover, when referring to herself, she constantly uses expressions which involve her partner too, as if she sees the world filtered through his gaze. Such constructions include, for example, “as my husband would say” (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online), “[m]y husband and I” (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online), or “[t]his is what he, my husband, taught me” (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online). As these quotations show, also the name of the male character is not mentioned. This double omission triggers a generalization of the experience, which ultimately binds the reader to the narrator, thus minimizing their distance. Furthermore, this obsessive, redundant presence of the expression “my man” seems to give a peculiar rhythm to the story, as well as underlining the overbearing presence of men even in the simplest activities and tasks any woman could perform. Ultimately, she is like an empty vessel, filled with the domineering, pressing presence of others. As a consequence, her identity seems to be filtered, distilled through a multitude of

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, the two animals that appear in the story, the dogs Lada and Druzhok, have a name.

<sup>36</sup> My translations into English contained in this chapter are based on: the Georgian original, kindly provided in manuscript form by the author, and the Russian translation by Anna Grig.

points of view, except her own: “in that moment I truly thought I was beautiful, since a man like him fell in love with me” (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online).

This quiet, almost bucolic scene is abruptly interrupted by a sudden change of scenario: “It was good. Then someone grabbed me by the knee” (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online). Technically speaking, the reading flow seems to be moving fluidly, insofar as anybody could have grasped the protagonist as she was sitting by the river with her partner. Only the following lines, though, reveal the true nature of that unexpected, uncanny event: there seems to be someone under her bedsheets, and her mother-in-law Tina, who lives with her, noticed the strange movement. The reader then realizes that the setting has shifted: now the action is taking place in a city house. That lucid vision nested in the *incipit* of the story was probably a just a dream, or a memory, the unnamed protagonist had while in a state akin to sleep. As she is going back to her senses, the serene, mellow taste of the river scene drips away, to leave room to her ghastly present.

Now, she shares her life with the suspicious mother of her husband, who calls her just “woman” too. The introduction of this character in the plot starts a discussion in the mind of the protagonist about the idea of “womanhood”:

Tina too says I am a woman. But to her I am a woman in the more ordinary sense of the word, just a woman. Tina, though, is not just a woman to me, but the mother of my man. After all, if she were just a woman, she would not be able to call me in any way, and she would not be able to talk to me or see me at all and would never even know I existed. But this was what was meant to be, it could not have been otherwise: I inherited Tina, and she is Tina, and I am a woman. (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online)

This paragraph shows with disarming simplicity the complex structure and perception of the idea of “womanhood” in this fictional world. Both Tina and the protagonist belong to the same gender, yet there is a difference in the role assigned to them, as well as in their perception of themselves individually and within the family. For her husband, the hero is a woman in a full sense, built within the perimeter of their emotional and physical relationship, as prescribed by the contract of marriage. Tina too is depicted as a special woman, because she is a mother, namely the mother of the narrator’s beloved. Yet, to Tina she is a woman in the purely superficial sense of the word, her female gender being determined by her physical traits only. This, on the one hand, suggests a strong hierarchy within the family, where the role of the mother-in-law is comparable to that of the man. On the other, though, Tina has objective difficulties in remembering her name, since she suffers from the Alzheimer’s disease. Therefore, the use of the generic term “woman” is somehow determined by that tragic circumstance.

Unlike the placid river, the protagonist is essentially stuck in her existence: at first, she was a sort of silent slave of her husband, a full representative of patriarchy. After his death caused by war, she is not freed from the previous cage but enters another one, namely the cohabitation with her mother-in-law. As disclosed later on, another reason that probably determines this immobility can be found in the zealous respect the protagonist has for what is called “our book”. Of course, the reference here is to volume hinted at in the paratext, that is the *Book of Life (Zhivotnaia kniga dukhobortsev, 1909)*<sup>37</sup>, a collection of teachings that in Doukhobor’s culture has *de facto* replaced the written Bible. This paratextual element, which is also indirectly mentioned in the plot, carries a very important information: she – and, probably, all her family, – belong to the Doukhobors (literally: “Spirit-Warriors”), a Christian ethno-religious group of Russian origin that resettled in the Transcaucasian region under the reign of Nicholas I (1841-1845)<sup>38</sup>. Hence, together with the orders imposed by her husband first, and then by her mother-in-law, the protagonist has always obediently followed the religious precepts contained in that book, as this excerpt shows:

I remember well the words of our book: “What does God require from you? First the accomplishment of good deeds: as you begin, so you do”. This heavy burden has been placed on my shoulders, and I go everywhere with it. I did not decide to do it, I did not put it on me. It just happened. At first, I thought it was because of my man, because for his happiness I would bear any weight, but he has nothing to do with it. My man is not here anymore. And Tina is still hanging around my neck. I will resist then.

I will not let my family down, I am their girl, hard-working and very resilient. I am still carrying a hellish burden on me: Tina.

“You are doing good”, my man used to say.

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<sup>37</sup> This book, which is considered the basis of the Doukhobor’s religious tradition, includes holy hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs. First printed in 1909, this document can be considered a written testimony of the oral tradition of this group. From the linguistic point of view, this text is particularly interesting because of its use of the Southern Russian dialect. For further reference, see Palmieri (1915); Abramova (2000); Zernina (2015).

<sup>38</sup> For further, general information on the Doukhobors and their traditions, please refer to the most relevant study in the field entitled *The Doukhobors: their history in Russia; their migration to Canada* (1903) by Joseph Elkinton. Valuable insights can also be found also in Wright (1940); Holt (1964); Woodcock (1968); Bonch-Bruevich (ed., 1978); Tarasoff (1977; 1982); Friesen (1989); Abramova (2005). For a reconstruction of the prosecutions perpetrated against the Doukhobors, see Tchertkoff (1900); Stupnikoff (1992). On the history of the Doukhobors’ migrations, see Buyniak (1985); Sulerzhitsky (1982). On the history of the Doukhobors in Canada, see Hawthorn (1955); Horvath (comp., 1970-1973); Yerbury (1984). In recent years a unique photographic project by Natela Grigalashvili (2021) captured the everyday life in the Doukhobor community still residing in Georgia. Pictures from this project can be viewed on the official website “The Doukhobors’ Land” (online). For further iconographic reference, see the classic Tarasoff (1969).

Of course, my love. I live of you and for you only.  
I tolerate Tina, Tina hates me, and I want my man.  
(Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online)

It seems relevant in the context of the present discussion that the only character that is explicitly named in the story is Tina. Her characterization, though, proceeds in the opposite way, if compared to the protagonist: on the one hand, the reader knows a wealth of details about the hero's life, but not her name. On the other, the mother-in-law's name is immediately given, but little is told about her, apart from the serious condition that heavily affects their lives. This inversion in the order with which the information is delivered suggests the evil, "contrary" nature of this character, as opposed to the one of the narrator. The same association is repeated in another part of the story, where the protagonist recalls the past and that pivotal moment of change:

In general, Tina never worries about anything. She is not happy about anything, and she is not offended by anything. I remember exactly what our book says: "Hell is people who do not know the light; evil spirits live in them".

Tina is hell.

She used to be different. I have had enough time to talk to the other Tina. Once Tina was beautiful, young, cheerful and a little frivolous. A very different woman. Then her soul sank into darkness, and when in the end my man left, he left me with Tina and the whole hell with her. (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online)

This reference to evil spirits, though presented through the prism of religion, seem to hint at a different belief system. This connection becomes particularly evident when the narrative focus shifts to the protagonist's grandmother who, on the contrary, represents a positive influence in her life.

### *Nature and Covert Mythology*

Although not explicitly mentioned in the text, some pre-Christian Georgian gods seem to be indirectly present in Kordzaia-Samadashvili's story. The connection of the characters to some specific deity can be inferred on the basis of their characterization. Thus, in terms of hylistic narratology, both the textual representation of hylemes and textual omissions of the narrative material (*erzählstoff*-version) become relevant. The protagonist's grandmother, for instance, is constantly associated to white hues. From this detail it is possible to deduce that she is dead<sup>39</sup>, since white is the color typically attributed to the

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<sup>39</sup> Although not explicitly revealed, it is possible to understand this detail from other elements of the story. Particularly telling in this respect is the moment when the protagonist says that she saw the white dog Lada only in photographs, but never in real life.

highest world, and the home of the gods (Zeskneli). Moreover, this character's traits allow us to build a parallel between her figure and T'q'ashmapa, a forest entity according to Georgian (namely, Mingrelian) mythological tradition. The table below (table 2) summarizes the main similarities they have in common:

<i>T'q'ashmapa</i>		
<i>Features, traits</i>	<i>Hyleme</i> <sup>40</sup>	<i>Textual Representation</i>
Physical description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pale young woman with long white hair;</li> <li>- wears <b>white</b> dresses and/or accessories;</li> <li>- when she smiles, her pearl white teeth become visible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Old lady (grandmother)</li> <li>- <b>White</b>-haired;</li> <li>- wears a <b>white</b> hat;</li> <li>- the border of her dress is associated to <b>white</b>.</li> </ul>
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very strong;</li> <li>- protector of wild animals;</li> <li>- can also be vicious and violent;</li> <li>- looks for young, virgin men lovers;</li> <li>- if refused, she physically abuses them;</li> <li>- lives in forests on remote stones.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Possesses two dogs, Lada (<b>white</b>) and Druzhok;</li> <li>- presence of storks in her space.</li> </ul>
Metamorphosis	Can turn her lovers into stone if they reveal her secrets.	<b>Absent.</b>

**Table 2.** Comparison between the hyleme “*T'q'ashmapa*” and its textual representation in *I go home*.

This comparison between the basic features of the hyleme pertaining to Georgian mythology with the textual representation of the character in *I go home* clearly shows the removal of negative elements attributed to the mythological source. No violence, no vengeance, no physical threats can be found in Kordzaia-Samadashvili's character. Instead, the protagonist's grandmother is consistently depicted as a positive influence in her life. Moreover, the power of their bond is still so strong that it affects the life of the narrator. As a matter of fact, often times her digressions, which include happy memories, playful thoughts and imaginary conversations, involve this almost maternal figure. Perhaps paradoxically, it is this dead character that becomes the main source for the vivid scenes to which the protagonist clings in order to survive (and escape, from time to time) her grim life. Furthermore, these scenes stand in stark contrast to those where Tina is present, as candid white opposes pitch black tones.

<sup>40</sup> These elements are drawn from Tsanova (1992) and Kiknadze (2007). It goes beyond the scope of this study to meticulously reconstruct all the regional versions of the basic hyleme of this story.

Similarly to T'q'ashmapa, the grandmother also displays a tight connection to the realm of Nature. First of all, in the story she is consistently accompanied by two dogs, Druzhok and Lada; interestingly, the latter is white as her owner. This detail foregrounds once again the mythological matrix from which the character is derived. Nonetheless, there is another element that is often linked to her: storks. For example, when the narrator visits her grandmother to introduce her partner for the first time, two storks build a nest on her roof. In Doukhobor culture, as the grandmother affirms, this is regarded as a very positive sign. Every time she sees them, she would start praying for the family to live in good health and prosperity. This is indeed the action the protagonist describes in another scene, where she imagines her grandmother noticing a stork flying over a field. On another textual occurrence, this animal appears in a picture placed in the grandmother's living room.

Not only animals, but also Nature plays a dominant role in the depiction of this character. In fact, although no precise geographical reference is given in the text, the narrator mentions the presence of a sacred mountain, shiny like an enormous diamond, located in the area where the grandmother lived. Moreover, on multiple occasions, the protagonist states that she lives far away from her, and that she always waits for her at the stop of the *marshrutka* (lit. "small minivan"), together with her two faithful dogs. The hero of the story, though, never manages to free herself from her chores in the city. This distance between the protagonist and her grandmother could be interpreted as a metaphor for the distance between contemporary society and the autochthonous myths, viewed as forgotten memories relegated in a remote, almost inaccessible space. The impossibility of communication with that figure, paired to the lack of exchange with her mother-in-law in the micro-space of her city apartment, probably determines the tragic conclusion of the story. In fact, as Salome Pataridze observed, "[u]nlike the countryside, individuals confined to the city have no opportunity to integrate socially, which in turn complicates communication across generations" (2023: 212). The asphyxia of the flat where the protagonist lives with Tina is put in striking contrast to the almost boundless space of nature. This idea of limitlessness of the countryside's space, primarily suggested by the absence of a precise description, seems to imply its infinity. This perception is further reinforced in the text by at least two factors. First, the protagonist's memories of that place tend to expand and travel freely. In the pitch dark of the last hours preceding the sunrise, she wanders in her delusions to alleviate the gloom and the solitude of her life in the daylight. Second, the consistent recurrence of the same image of her grandmother, always pictured as an old lady dressed in white with a white dog, constantly waiting at the bus stop in the countryside.

The steadiness of this picture distinctly reminds the opening scene, where the river peacefully flows, bringing happiness and joy to the protagonist. Alike the river, that transmits her a sense of stability and permanence, her



grandmother too is always present, whether dead or alive. Figuratively, she represents a loving haven for the nameless “Woman”, who is trapped in the everchanging, chaotic, mosaic-like lifestyle of the city. Furthermore, this connection between Nature and the grandmother is strengthened by the reference to the milky – thus white – smoke coming from a ship that traverses the river. The absence of specific spatial markers suggests the idea of a sacred suspension that foregrounds the mythical elements presented in the text. Both the space of the river and that of the countryside are soothing thoughts for the protagonist, who is trapped in her stagnant city life.

Eventually, in the epilogue, the protagonist tries to free herself from the prison she has been confined to: “[s]ooner or later people get out of prison, but there is no way out of here. Has anyone ever gotten out of hell? Hell is meant to be eternal” (Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online). Her plan is drastic: first, she decides to suffocate Tina in her sleep. Unable to keep living after committing this crime, she takes her life too. The final image is one of a long-awaited reunion both with her partner and her beloved grandmother:

I opened the window. It was a cold, gray morning. I kissed my thumb and stretched it toward the sky. Praise this new day!

Grandma!

Grandma, our Lada is really white as snow! Hey, Druzhok, do not hit my legs with your tail and put your face away! Grandma, my grandma, how beautiful you are, my dear grandma!

Grandma’s headscarf is around her shoulders. She stands spreading her arms, and recites a prayer of gratitude, and my man – my, my man! As he laughs, he claps his hands:

– She has come! Woman! My Woman has come!

(Kordzaia-Samadashvili, 2014: online)

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## *Interviews*



I.M.: Irina Marchesini

A.G.: Alisa Ganieva

1. I.M.: *Myth, women, identity. In your view, what is the relationship between these terms?*

A.G.: Unexpected question. Well, probably, myths of any peoples usually involve cosmogenesis and fertility cycles, which inevitably leads to the mention of generative beginnings, the goddess-mother or some female beginning, even if negative, chthonic. In general, it is curious that with the transition of societies to patriarchy female characters of many mythologies underwent transformation and from good became evil or changed sex from female to male. At least, this happened with deities and entities from the belief system of Caucasian peoples. About identity... For most of us, it is multicomponent, heterogeneous and in one way or another connected with the figure of a woman (maternal roots, maternal language) and myths associated to it.

2. I.M.: *What role does myth play in your prose works?*

A.G.: In my prose, myths are rarely plot-driven, but they are present as a kind of cloud of allusions, echoes, grandmother's stories, vague semi-conscious fears. I write a lot about Dagestan, where Islam has unified and globalized a lot in recent years, erasing the more archaic layers of the collective popular unconscious. And it is important for me to record them and somehow mark them as largely transient in nature, without which neither this region nor the peoples inhabiting it will be preserved in their authenticity, and autochthony. Instead, they will be assimilated and impoverished culturally.

3. I.M.: *What myths do you use in your prose? Are they, for example, Greek, folklore, Georgian, foreign?*

A.G.: I don't reflect upon this consciously. I am not an ethnographer or a folklorist and I would rather be interested in reading an external, professional reader's analysis. I do not remember using Greek or Georgian myths. Most likely I have used some local beliefs of the mountaineers of Dagestan.

4. I.M.: *For what purpose did you choose various myths (Dagestani, Slavic, Classical myths etc.) in your novel 'The Mountain and the Wall'?*

A.G.: Again, here one must understand what we mean exactly. In *The Mountain and the Wall* I mainly work with the lower mythology and, perhaps, demonology of the Dagestani people. Notably, one of my characters writes a novel about pre-Islamic, pagan Dagestan. It is a novel within a novel, its excerpts are scattered throughout the text, and it mentions, for example, the Mother of Diseases and

rituals to help women in labor. This serves as a utopian contrast to the “contemporary” parts of the novel, in which this autochthonous world is crushed by the clashes of Muslim fundamentalism and political crises.

5. *I.M.: What meaning does the contrast between city and landscape carry in your novel 'The Mountain and the Wall and, in general, in your prose works?*

*A.G.:* In my prose work there is usually much more of the city and in general of the noisy, shouting, colorful, clattering, and crowded urban spaces, towns, villages than of nature. Nature for me is rather a sacred zone, a little mystical or magical. It is a space not yet fully possessed, not yet fully poisoned by human passions, in which the forces of mercy or, on the contrary, vengeance, can awaken.

6. *I.M.: What role does the symbol of the mountain play in your prose works?*

*A.G.:* Its role is most prominently played, obviously, in *The Mountain and the Wall*, where the mountain (as in many world myths) is a sacred place, a peak inhabited by spirits who can mock a man, turn him around or on the contrary help him. It is a timeless window into another, lost Dagestan, where people live in their traditional mountain beehives or towers, farming, and strictly observing the laws of free societies, which look almost like proto-democracy against the background of the corrupt and autocratic Russian life. This is a kind of heaven, a kind of dream, a kind of light, a kind of paradise where the souls of my heroes end up.

7. *I.M.: Why are you interested specifically in women's prose?*

*A.G.:* I would not say I am interested in women's prose, and, most importantly, I would not be able to define it. What it is. In Russia, this is what it is usually condescendingly called second-rate reading for housewives. Another meaning appeared now is “*fem-prose*”, which is prose written by female authors and writers, emphasizing the problems of women's rights and so on. I do not see myself in this sense, neither here, nor there. I write prose without labels, in which, since it reflects the very masculine, patriarchal, aggressive world of the modern Russian Caucasus, there is room for a woman's corner of view, a woman's perspective. In general, in one text I combine different perspectives, different linguistic registers, and completely different styles. This is a way of showing the variety and the diversity of Dagestan, as well as the fragmentary, schizophrenic nature of its values, where on the one hand there are local customs, and on the other hand there is religion. Besides, these two different currents, struggling with each other, also clash with a third one, the reality of Russia, of which Dagestan is part.



8. *I.M.: What is, in your opinion, the role played by myths in contemporary literature and, more specifically, in the context of post-Soviet Russia?*

*A.G.:* It depends on the writer. In some authors they play a big role (in the case of Rushdie, for example), in some others almost none. As for post-Soviet Russia, in the last twenty years literature seems to be returning to old Soviet myths – the cult of victory over Fascism, the myth of the friendship of peoples under the leadership of Russians, and so on. Here is an entire field for cultural and political science research.

9. *I.M.: What is your overall view on contemporary literature in general?*

*A.G.:* Russian or in general? It is difficult to answer briefly, but on the one hand, it is a joy that it has not been pushed aside, that reading and readers exist, despite the onslaught of movies, the Internet, etc.. On the other hand, book entropy is alarming. Far more texts (and more often of poor quality than vice versa) are being produced than those that can be digested. As for Russian literature, unfortunately, this is now not so much literature but a set of individual books. Sometimes they display great talent, but on the whole they do not form a coherent picture. Moreover, the institution of criticism, of a hot and unbiased literary discussion, has completely disappeared in recent years. But what kind of discussion can there be in a country at war, with tightening censorship and a growing number of political prisoners?

И.М.: Ирина Маркезини

А.Г.: Алиса Ганиева

1. И.М.: *Миф, женщина, идентичность. Какая связь между этими понятиями по-вашему?*

А.Г.: Неожиданный вопрос. Ну, наверное, мифы любых народов обычно затрагивают космогенез и циклы плодородия, что неизбежно ведет к упоминанию порождающего начала, богини-матери или какого-либо женского начала, пусть даже негативного, хтонического. Вообще, любопытно, что женские персонажи многих мифологий с переходом обществ к патриархату подверглись трансформации и из добрых превратились в злых, ну или сменили пол с женского на мужской. По крайней мере, это произошло с божествами и сущностями из верований народов Кавказа. А идентичность... У большинства из нас она многосоставна, неоднородна и так или иначе связана с фигурой женщины (материнскими корнями, материнским языком) и мифами с нею связанными.

2. И.М.: *Какую роль играет миф в вашей прозе?*

А.Г.: В моей прозе мифы редко сюжетообразующие, но они присутствуют, как некое облако аллюзий, отголосков, бабушкиных рассказов, неясных полуподсознательных страхов. Я много пишу о Дагестане, в котором ислам за последние годы многое унифицирует, глобализует, стирая более архаичные слои коллективного народного бессознательного, и мне важно их зафиксировать и как-то их обозначить как во многом уходящую натуру, без которой ни этот регион, ни народы, на нем проживающие, не сохранятся в своей подлинности, автохтонности, ассимилируются и обеднеют культурно.

3. И.М.: *Какие мифы вы предпочитаете использовать в вашей прозе? Например, греческие, фольклор, грузинские, иностранные?*

А.Г.: Я не рефлексирую это сознательно. Я не этнограф и не фольклорист и мне тут скорее было бы интересно прочесть анализ профессионального читателя со стороны. Не помню, чтобы я использовала греческие или грузинские мифы. Скорее какие-то местные поверья горцев Дагестана.

4. И.М.: *Для какой цели вы выбрали различные мифы (дагестанские, славянские, классические, и т.д.) в вашем произведении «Праздничная гора»?*

А.Г.: Оять же, тут нужно понять, что конкретно имеется в виду. В «Праздничной горе» я работаю в основном с низшей мифологией и, возможно, демонологией дагестанцев, в частности, один из моих героев пишет роман о доисламском, языческом Дагестане, это такой роман в романе, отрывки его рассыпаны по тексту, и в нем упоминаются, например, и Мать болезней, и ритуалы для помощи роженицам. Это служит таким утопическим контрастам «современным» частям романа, в котором этот автохтонный мир перемалывается клещами мусульманского фундаментализма и политических кризисов.

5. И.М.: *Какую значимость несет противопоставление между городом и природой в вашем произведении «Праздничная гора» и вообще в вашей прозе?*

А.Г.: В моей прозе обычно гораздо больше города и в целом шумного, крикливого, красочного, клокочущего и заполненного людьми города, поселка, села, чем природы. Природа у меня это скорее зона сакрального, немного мистического или волшебного. Это еще не до конца освоенное, не до конца отравленное человеческими страстями пространство, в котором могут проснуться силы благодати или наоборот возмездия.

6. И.М.: *Какое значение имеет символ горы в вашей прозе?*

А.Г.: Выпуклее всего он играет, очевидно, в «Праздничной горе», где гора (как и во многих мировых мифах) – это священное место, вершина, населенная духами, которые могут надсмеяться над человеком, обвести его вокруг носе или наоборот помочь. Это вневременное окно в другой, утерянный Дагестан, где люди живут в своих традиционных горских ульях или башнях, занимаются земледелием, строго соблюдают законы вольных обществ, которые на фоне коррупционно-автократической российской жизни выглядят почти что прото-демократией. Это не то явь, не то сон, не то иной свет, своеобразный рай, куда попадают души моих героев.

7. И.М.: *Почему вы интересуетесь женской прозой?*

А.Г.: Я бы не сказала, что я интересуюсь женской прозой, а самое главное – я не смогу дать ей определение. Что это такое. В России так обычно снисходительно называют второсортное чтение для домохозяек. Сейчас появилось другое значение – фем-проза, которою пишут авторки и прозаики, акцентируя внимание на проблемах соблюдения прав женщин и т. д.. Я себя в этом смысле не вижу, ни там, ни там, я пишу прозу без лейблов, в которой, поскольку там отражается очень маскулинный, патриархальный, агрессивный мир современного российского Кавказа,

есть место и для женского угла зрения, женской перспективы. Я вообще в одном тексте сочетаю разные перспективы, разные регистры языка, совершенно разные стили – это и способ показать разнообразие, неоднотипность Дагестана, и фрагментарность, психотропность тамошних ценностей, где с одной стороны местные обычаи, с другой – религия, причем разных, борющихся друг с другом течений, с третьей реалии России, частью которой Дагестан является.

8. И.М.: *Как вы думаете, какую роль играет миф в мире современной литературы и, в основном, в контексте постсоветской России?*

А.Г.: Зависит от писателя. У кого-то большую (у Рущди, например), у кого-то почти никакой. А что касается постсоветской России, то в последние лет двадцать она как будто возвращается к старым советским мифам – к культуре победы над фашизмом, к мифу о дружбе народов под предводительством русского народа и т. д. Тут целое поле для культурологических и политологических исследований.

9. И.М.: *Каков ваш взгляд на современную литературу в целом?*

А.Г.: Российскую или вообще? Трудно ответить коротко, но во-первых, радостно, что она не вытеснена, что чтение и читатели существуют, несмотря на наступление кино, Интернета и т.д. С другой стороны, тревожит книжная энтропия – текстов (и чаще некачественных, чем наоборот) производится гораздо больше, чем можно переварить. Что до российской литературы, то, к сожалению, это сейчас не столько литература, сколько набор отдельных книг, иногда очень талантливых, но в целом они не выстраиваются ни в какую целостную картину, да и институт критики, горячей и неангажированной литературной дискуссии, за последние годы там совсем сошел на нет. Впрочем, какая может быть дискуссия в воюющей стране с ужесточающейся цензурой и растущим числом политузников?

I.M.: Irina Marchesini

A.K-S.: Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili

1. I.M.: *Myth, women, identity. In your view, what is the relationship between these terms?*

A.K-S.: To be honest, I would leave the term “woman” out, because I think the myths everyone grew up with are part of their identity, no matter if it is a woman or a man. In this case I would definitely leave out the word “woman”. If a person does not have their own myths, tales, legends, something amazing, then, they are probably very bored in this world. And for this reason, they themselves become boring and uninteresting. This is why I think that in this case to distinguish between women and men somehow will not work. I have this suspicion. For the rest, of course, you have probably noticed that every nation has its own myth, about how it came to the world. Myths are usually a little bit funny, jolly, sad, but there always is something about them, that makes them chosen and magnificent. Every person tries to discover at least one exceptional grandfather or an outstanding grandmother that once were. That is also myth making. How do I know if Evdokiia Kordzaia, my great-great-great-grandmother, was as beautiful as they say. I do not know, but I know that my grandmother was a beauty and that she, and that she ... and so on and so forth and so on.... Maybe one really wants to be a part of something big and magical. In this respect, myths are very cool, I like them. They are a part of something that I may not realize myself, but it means that I also have some value in the world.

2. I.M.: *What role does myth play in your prose works?*

A.K-S.: Given the fact that I love this layer of human culture very much, of course I cannot do without it. And probably also the fact that I was born in Tbilisi, I live in Tbilisi, I grew up here, and although I travel a lot, whether I want to or not, I am a Tbilisian and I hope that I will die in this city. And I like it very much that this city is inhabited by some creatures that I was told about in the courtyards on both sides of the river. The creatures we were telling stories about, the ones we thought were doing stupid things. For example, at the Crying Rock we knew that if you washed your face with this water – because one girl had washed her face there, – we knew that you would become beautiful, so we rubbed our faces until we lost our pulse. It was horrible. This city itself, it was founded because there are hot waters. This too is a kind of myth because Tbilisi is warm because of its hot waters and so on. It is very cool. I do not know, I think that without everything that surrounds me, everything that is invisible in Tbilisi, it is not that I could not write, but I would probably be – again, – very bored. And, consequently, this is very easy. To throw something down on them

they might not know, but I do... So, my Shushanik is like this. For example also Tashi is like this. Tashi [ტაში - t'ashi, I.M.] means clap, applause. He was such a beautiful young Iranian, Persian, he was very tall, very handsome, and he always used to say that the Lord God is terribly envious. So, he does not like it when someone does something better than him. This is why Homer was blind, Beethoven was deaf, and he, Tashi, a great painter, was born into the world without hands. Applause had no hands. And, of course, they called him Tashi, "applause". And he painted. I mean, the interesting thing is that he really existed, he was a poster painter. He drew with his feet. When there was already silent cinema he loved Lillian Gish, and he drew Lillian Gish all the time. Tashi had a great love. In short, he again is a story. It is because of this great love, for example, that in the city of Tbilisi you can – if you know the secret – find your great love, and yet things are not so simple. I like it when I think that sometime at night, when it is very dark and there is no one in the streets – now it is very difficult to achieve this, but still they say that there are such nights, – maybe you will meet Tashi in the streets, maybe. If you meet him, he will tell you something important, very important. What it is, I do not know. And I like it. I still think that someday you may see the tall silhouette of a beautiful, young Persian, but without hands.

3. I.M.: *What myths do you use in your prose? Are they, for example, Greek, folklore, Georgian, foreign?*

A.K-S.: Tbilisian ones, specifically Tbilisian ones, because this is what I know better. It is better to write about what I know rather than what I do not know. Of course, different Tbilisian characters can appear there [in A.K-S. prose, I.M.]. For example, over there is a bridge, it is a very strange bridge, it is dry. In fact, beneath it there was a river, and the name of this river was Varas. Surprising things happen on this bridge, literally anything. This bridge connects two Tbilisi neighborhoods. And to this day they cannot figure out whether this bridge is Vera or Vake<sup>41</sup>, it is very hard to say. This makes me very happy, it is a lot of fun. Sometimes, for example – here is a neighborhood version of a Tbilisian [myth], – sometimes a very cute harpy will fly in. Of course, the harpy is not from a Tbilisian myth, but she is very nice; somehow I cannot do without her. She is confident that she is very beautiful. If someone told her that people think she is horrible and that she stinks, she would be very surprised, because she knows that she has such shiny feathers, very big eyes, beautiful breasts, long hair, and terrible claws. She is a real harpy, of course you cannot do without her. She must be a woman in love with herself. Not a common bird, but a harpy.

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<sup>41</sup> These are the names of the neighborhoods the author previously referred to.

4. *I.M.:* For what purpose did you choose the myth of Shushanik in your work *The Children of Nightfall*?

*A.K.S.:* It started out in a very funny way. With Ursula Le Guin. She wrote a novel called *The Left Hand of Darkness*. When I read that novel, I was bewildered. Because, honestly, I have always wanted to write about the love of people who just love each other, not because they are husband and wife or brother and sister, etc.; just a big love. For no reason, for no other reason at all. Without any sex, without any marriage stuff. I have wondered for a very long time what that could be, but I actually know. This certainly is the very big love of a young, handsome homosexual man and an old one, a little bit with the past too, yes. And these are probably people who have been looking for love, big love, all along. But they are not going to find it. I thought about who they could be. Of course, they are Shushanik's children from the Tbilisian legend, who wander, wander, and wander in search of a love that will not happen. They are fun, they are nice, but they are not loved, it is impossible to love them. They are intangible, they are some kind of spirits. Likewise, I wanted to write about two people who love each other very much, but it is not ordinary human love. Instead, it is something a little blue, a little cheerful misanthropy, if I can say that. And therefore, of course, the best thing to do was to rely on the fact that their mother is Shushanik, of course you cannot take anything from her.

5. *I.M.:* Can you please explain the myth of Shushanik (*The Tbilisian one*)?

*A.K.S.:* According to the Tbilisian myth of Shushanik, there was a beautiful woman in the world, she had very long hair. Once she was badly offended, as she was considered crazy because she gave birth to a child that others did not see. She still lives in Tbilisi, I can even show you the place, although you cannot see it. But it is there, and she combs her hair at night, I love it very much. She combs her hair, which then creep, it creeps at night on the streets, it comes into your house while you sleep. If you sleep alone and you dream of love, know that Shushanik did it for you. This hair wraps you and tells you "I love you very much", is a very good thing. And aside from this, she gives birth to babies all the time. These are not ordinary babies; they do not die. She gives birth to them and lets them wander around the crooked streets of Tbilisi. You have met them for sure. If you meet someone and you just have fun and feel good – it is Shushanik's child, you just do not notice that. You leave these children very easily, but then it is very difficult to forget them, because it was amusing and you had a good time, they did not oblige you to anything. These are Shushanik's children. They are very cute actually. Once a lovely lady, who had only two teeth in her mouth for the last forty years, she told me that these children have a chance to die. If they make two people fall in love with each other, then they will be favored by Mother Shushanik, so to speak, and they will be able to leave. This is really great. I love them.

6. *I.M.: Do you think it is possible to find love, real love, the love of a life time and where? In Tbilisi?*

*A.K-S.:* You can absolutely find it in Tbilisi. And as soon as you... You know, there is a great sign to understand that this is the one: you will hear applauses. That is Tashi applauding you. "Bravo!" – he will say.

7. *I.M.: Why are you interested specifically in women's prose?*

*A.K-S.:* Maybe because I myself am a woman. It can't be otherwise. It is very difficult for me to even write a monologue if I do not remember it word by word or if the person is not so close to me that I already recognize exactly his face. Let's say, I find it very difficult to write men's words, I fail. And, of course, women are again what I know. You know, there are those lucky authors who have a good fantasy. I have no imagination. But I have a very good memory. I am very good at remembering who, where, when, why they told me something or showed me something or did something and so on and so forth. But given the fact that I probably have a brain like every woman's, what I remember best is that I know women's stories, a lot of them. I know little men's stories. Because I know stories about men, but they were told by women. And so, if I write, my protagonist will never be a man. I mean, I am the storyteller, I will never be a man. I am not Flaubert, who could be Madame Bovary. I cannot do it.

8. *I.M.: What is, in your opinion, the role played by myths in contemporary literature and, more specifically, in the context of post-Soviet Georgia?*

*A.K-S.:* Given that I am a great lover of fantasy, and, of course, I try this fantasy genre everywhere, I am not getting into statistics, but frankly, in the world of contemporary literature, I have no idea. It seems to me that people is very bored with the world they have and they want something more. But you cannot invent Prometheus anymore, we have him, why invent a new bicycle? You know, I think that the world we have today is a little bit drier and a little bit sadder than the one we can see somewhere. As far as Georgian literature is concerned, so far – no... The thing is that we still have to process the collapse of the Soviet Union and the four wars that were fought. This is all too real and all too tangible, and it is hard to escape from it. Hence, it will probably take at least a quarter of a century of peace for Georgian literature to turn to those beautiful deeds, to those beautiful heroes that are in Georgian, not in Tbilisian mythology. You will not find great knights in Tbilisian mythology, they are craftsmen, ordinary fools by experience, but that is another story. But in that big mythology, where a very beautiful woman and a knight, he is so strong in everything, this is, of course, this layer, it is still... early for us. It is not going to work yet.



9. *I.M.: It may be early, but you anyway use these myths in your writings...*

*A.K.S.:* Again, same thing, I am a woman after all. And, I do not know, I feel like, you know, I want to find some shelter, burrow in there. I did not go to the war. During the war I was in Tbilisi and, of course, when there are wars going on somewhere, stray dogs and some armed formations run around, there is no gas, light, and water. Of course, well, you really want to meet Tashi at least.

10. *I.M.: What is your overall view on contemporary literature in general?*

*A.K.S.:* I have a very soft spot for literature. I think it is fantastic. It is even a little annoying that there are only twenty-four hours in a day, and it is completely impossible to read everything. It is wonderful. It is so beautiful. I am lucky enough to go to big book fairs every year. I kept thinking how great it is that the Soviet Union has collapsed, and I can go to Frankfurt for the fair, and how nice it is that I became part of something very big that can be called world literature. How great it is that somewhere in a country I only know about from a geography textbook, someone wrote something I thought of. Gosh! I wish I had written it. This is so great. I love it.

Tbilisi, January 28<sup>th</sup> 2018

## *Ана Кордзая-Самадашвили*

И.М.: Ирина Маркезини

А.К-С.: Ана Кордзая-Самадашвили

1. И.М.: *Миф, женщина, идентичность. Какая связь между этими понятиями по-вашему?*

А.К-С.: Если честно, я бы пропустила женщину, потому что, по-моему, для каждого часть его идентичности мифы с которыми он вырос, неважно это женщина или мужчина, в этом случае я бы точно опустила женщину. Если у человека нет своих мифов, сказаний, легенд, чего-то удивительного, то, наверно, ему очень скучно на белом свете и поэтому он сам становится скучным и неинтересным. Поэтому я думаю, что в этом случае различать женщин и мужчин как-то не получится, у меня такое подозрение, а в остальном, конечно, вы, наверно, замечали, что у каждого народа есть свой миф, как он явился на белый свет. Мифы, как правило, немножко смешные, веселые, печальные, но всегда есть что-то такое, что они избранные и великолепные, каждый человек старается обнаружить хотя бы одного великолепного дедушку или потрясающую бабушку, которые были, это же тоже мифотворчество, откуда мне знать была ли Евдокия Кордзая, моя прапрапрабабушка, такой красавицей, как рассказывают, я не знаю, но я знаю, что моя бабушка была красоткой и что она, и что она ... и так далее, и тому подобное.... Наверно, очень хочется быть частью чего-то большого и волшебного. В этом случае, мифы –это очень здорово, мне это очень нравится, часть чего-то, чего я, может, сама не осознаю, но значит я тоже имею какую-то ценность на белом свете.

2. И.М.: *Какую роль играет миф в вашей прозе?*

А.К-С.: Учитывая тот факт, что я очень люблю этот пласт человеческой культуры, конечно без него мне не обойтись. Еще то, что, наверно, я родилась в Тбилиси, я живу в Тбилиси, я здесь выросла, и хотя я много разъезжаю, всё-таки хочу я того или нет, тбилиска я и надеюсь, что умру в этом городе и мне очень нравится, что этот город населен какими-то существами о которых мне рассказывали во дворах по обе стороны реки, о которых мы рассказывали, те, о которых мы думали, делали всякие глупости, например, у плачущей скалы мы знали, что если умыться этой водой, потому что одна девочка умылась, это мы знали, то станешь красавицей, мы себе терли лица до потери пульса, это было ужасно. Сам этот город, он же основан из-за того, что есть горячие воды, это тоже некий миф, потому что он, Тбилиси, теплый, что это горячие воды и так далее. Это

очень здорово. Не знаю, мне кажется, что без всего того, что окружает меня, невидимое, в Тбилиси, я бы не то чтобы писать не могла, наверно, мне было бы, опять-таки, очень скучно. И, соответственно, это очень легко. Сбрасывать что-то на кого-то, кого, может, не все знают, но я-то знаю.... Такова моя Шушаник, такой, например Таши. Таши [ჭაში - t'ashi, П.М.] значит хлопок, аплодисмент. Это был такой прекрасный молодой иранец, перс, он был очень высокий, очень красивый, и он говорил всегда, что Господь Бог страшно завистливый. Поэтому он не любит, когда кто-то делает что-то лучше, чем он. Поэтому Гомер был слепой, Бетховен был глухой, а он, Таши, великий художник, родился на свет без рук, у аплодисмента не было рук. И его, конечно, назвали «аплодисмент». И он рисовал, то есть самое интересное, что он реально существовал, он был художником афиш. Он рисовал ногами и когда уже было немое кино он любил Лилиан Гиш, и все время рисовал Лилиан Гиш. У Таши была великая любовь. Он, короче, опять-таки история. Из-за этой великой любви, например, в городе Тбилиси можно, если знать секрет, можно найти свою великую любовь, не так уж просто обстоят дела. Это мне нравится, что я думаю, что когда-нибудь ночью, когда очень темно и на улицах никого нет, сейчас этого очень трудно достичь, но всё-таки говорят, что бывают такие ночи, может быть встретите Таши на улице, может быть. Если вы его встретите он Вам скажет что-то важное, очень важное. Что это, я не знаю. И мне это нравится. Я все-таки думаю, что когда-нибудь, может быть, вот увидите высокий силуэт красивого молодого перса, правда без рук.

3. П.М.: *Какие мифы вы предпочитаете использовать в вашей прозе? Например, греческие, фольклор, грузинские, иностранные?*

А.К-С.: Тбилисские, конкретно тбилисские. Потому что, то что я знаю лучше. Лучше писать о том, что я знаю, а не о том, чего не знаю. Тбилисские, конечно, персонажи там могут возникнуть разные. Например, вот там есть мост, это очень странный мост, он сухой, на самом деле внизу была речка и звалась эта речка Варас и на этом мосту происходят удивительные дела, все, что угодно. Этот мост связывает два тбилисских квартала. И по сей день не могут разобраться, этот мост сам Вера или Ваке, очень трудно сказать. Это меня вообще радует, это очень весело. Иногда, например, вот тбилисский, такой квартальный вариант, иногда прилетает очень симпатичная гарпия. Она, конечно, не из тбилисского мифа, она очень симпатичная, как-то без неё не обходится. Она уверена, что она очень красивая, если бы ей кто-то сказал, что люди тебя считают ужасом и что думают, что ты вонючая такая, она бы очень удивилась, потому что она знает, что у неё такие блестящие перышки, у нее такие большие глаза, прекрасная грудь, длинные волосы и страшные когти. Она настоящая

гарпия, конечно, без неё не обойтись. Она должна быть самовлюблённая дама. Не обыкновенная птичка, а гарпия.

4. П.М.: *Для какой цели Вы выбрали миф о Шушаник в вашем произведении «Дети сумерек»?*

А.К-С.: Всё началось очень смешно. С Урсулы Ле Гуин. Она написала роман, который называется «Левая рука тьмы». Когда я прочла этот роман, я была ошарашена. Потому что, честно говоря, мне всегда хотелось написать о любви людей, которые просто любят друг друга, не потому что, они муж и жена или брат и сестра, или или-или, просто, большая любовь. Ни за что, ни про что. Без всякого секса, без всяких матримониальных дел, я очень долго думала, что это может быть, но я, на самом деле, знаю. Это, конечно, очень большая любовь, молодого, красивого мужчину гомосексуального поведения и старой такой, немножко с прошлым, да. И это, наверно, люди, которые все время искали любовь, большую любовь. Но не будет её. Я подумала, кем они могут быть. Конечно, детьми Шушаник из тбилисской легенды, которые бродят, бродят в поисках любви, которой не будет, с ними весело, с ними хорошо, но их не любят, их невозможно любить. Они же неконкретные, духи какие-то. Соответственно, я хотела написать о двоих, которые очень сильно любят друг друга, но это не нормальная человеческая любовь, а что-то такое, немножко голубая, такая немножко веселая мизантропия, если можно так сказать. И соответственно, лучше всего, конечно, было опираться на то, что мама-то у них Шушаник, конечно с неё ничего не возьмешь.

5. П.М.: *А Вы можете пожалуйста объяснить миф о Шушаник, тбилисский миф.*

А.К-С.: Согласно тбилисскому мифу о Шушаник, есть на белом свете прекрасная женщина, у нее очень длинные волосы, когда-то её сильно обидели, её сочли сумасшедшей, потому что она родила ребенка, которого другие не видели. Она и сейчас живет в Тбилиси, я даже могу показать место, правда, его не видно, но оно есть, и она расчесывает волосы по ночам, я это очень люблю. Она расчесывает волосы, которые потом ползут, они ползут ночью по улицам, они заходят к вам дом, когда вы спите, если вы спите один и вам снится любовь, знайте, что это Шушаник для вас сделала. Эти волосы обволакивают и рассказывают, что «я очень люблю тебя», это очень хорошо. И кроме того, она все время рождает детей, которые не обычные дети, они не умирают. Она их рождает и пускает по кривым улочкам Тбилиси, и они там бродят. Вы их встречали обязательно. Если вы кого-то встречаете и вам просто весело и хорошо – это ребенок Шушаник, просто вы его не замечаете. Вы очень легко бросаете этих детей, потом очень трудно забываете, потому что было весело, и смешно, и хорошо, и ни к чему не обязывало. Это дети Шушаник. Они очень милые на самом деле. Еще мне как-то рассказала одна прекрасная дама, у которой

во рту было всего два зуба последние сорок лет, она мне рассказала, что эти дети имеют шанс умереть, есть такой шанс, если они сделают так, что двое полюбят друг друга, то к ним будет, так сказать, благосклонна матушка Шушаник и они смогут уйти. Это очень здорово. Я их люблю.

6. П.М.: *А, по-вашему, можно найти любовь, вообще большую любовь, любовь жизни и где? В Тбилиси?*

А.К-С.: В Тбилиси её можно найти обязательно. И как только вы... Знаете есть прекрасный признак как понять, что это то самое, вы услышите аплодисменты. Это Таши вам будет аплодировать. «Браво!» - скажет.

7. П.М.: *Почему вы интересуетесь именно женской прозой?*

А.К-С.: Наверное, потому что я сама баба. По-другому не получается. Мне очень трудно даже писать монолог, если я не помню дословно или этот человек не настолько близок мне, что я уже точно знаю его «мурдык», скажем так, я очень трудно пишу мужские слова, у меня не получается. И, соответственно, конечно, женщины, то, что я знаю, опять-таки. Знаете, есть такие счастливые авторы, у которых хорошая фантазия. У меня фантазии нет. Но у меня очень хорошая память. Я очень хорошо помню кто, где, когда, почему мне что-то рассказал или показал или сделал и так далее и тому подобное. Но учитывая то, что, наверное, у меня мозги набекрень, как у каждой из женщин, я лучше помню что, я знаю женские истории, очень много. Я знаю мало мужских историй. Потому что я знаю истории о мужчинах, но их-то рассказывали женщины. И поэтому, если писать, то мой протагонист никогда не будет мужчиной. То есть рассказчик я, у меня никогда не будет мужчин. Я не Флобер, который мог быть Мадам Бовари. Я не потяну.

8. П.М.: *Как Вы думаете какую роль играет миф в мире современной литературы и, в основном, в контексте постсоветской Грузии?*

А.К-С.: В мире современной литературы, честно говоря, учитывая то, что я страшно люблю фэнтэзи, и, конечно, повсюду стараюсь на этой фэнтэзи, может мне даже кажется, честно говоря, я не лезу в статистику, я без понятия, мне кажется, что людям очень надоел мир, который у них есть и им хочется чего-то большего. А, выдумать Прометея уже не получится, у нас он есть, зачем выдумывать новый велосипед. Знаете, я думаю, что мир, который есть сегодня, он немножко более сухой и немножко более грустный, чем тот, который мы можем увидеть где-то. Что касается грузинской литературы, то здесь пока – нет... Дело в том, что нам надо еще переработать распад Советского Союза и четыре войны, которые были. Это уж слишком реально и уж слишком осязаемо и трудно от этого убежать. И, соответственно, наверное, нужно, как минимум, четверть века мира, чтобы грузинская литература повернулась к тем прекрасным делам,

к тем прекрасным героям, которые есть в грузинской, в грузинской, а не в тбилисской, мифологии. В тбилисской мифологии великих рыцарей вы не найдете, это ремесленники, обычные дураки на опыте, но это другой вопрос. А вот к тому большому, где красная, очень красная и красивая женщина, очень красивая женщина и рыцарь, он такой сильный во всем, это, конечно, вот этот пласт, он пока для нас ...рано. Не получится пока.

9. П.М.: *Рано, но все-таки вы пишете, используя эти мифы...*

А.К-С.: Опять-таки тоже самое, я все-таки женщина. И, я не знаю, мне хочется, знаете, где-то что-то, какое-то укрытие, зарыться туда. Я не была на войне. Я сидела в войну в Тбилиси, и, конечно, когда где-то война, идут, бегают бездомные собаки и какие-то вооруженные формирования, нету газа, света и воды, конечно, очень хочется, ну, хотя бы встретить Таши.

10. П.М.: *Каков ваш взгляд на современную литературу (вообще) в целом?*

А.К-С.: Я очень нежно к ней отношусь. Я считаю, что это прекрасно. Даже немножко обидно, что в сутках всего 24 часа и совершенно невозможно прочесть всё. Это великолепно. Это так прекрасно. Мне везёт, я ежегодно попадаю на большие книжные ярмарки. Я все время думала, как это здорово, что развалился Советский Союз, и я могу поехать во Франкфурт на ярмарку и как это приятно, что я стала частью чего-то очень большого, которое можно назвать мировой литературой. Как это здорово, что оказывается где-то в стране, о которой я знаю только из учебника географии, кто-то написал что-то, о чём я подумала. Мама! Так жалко, что не я это писала. Как это здорово. Мне это очень нравится.

Тбилиси, 28 января 2018.

*Ana Kordzaia-Samadasvili. Portrait of an Artist*

By Irina Marchesini







*Ana. No.1.*

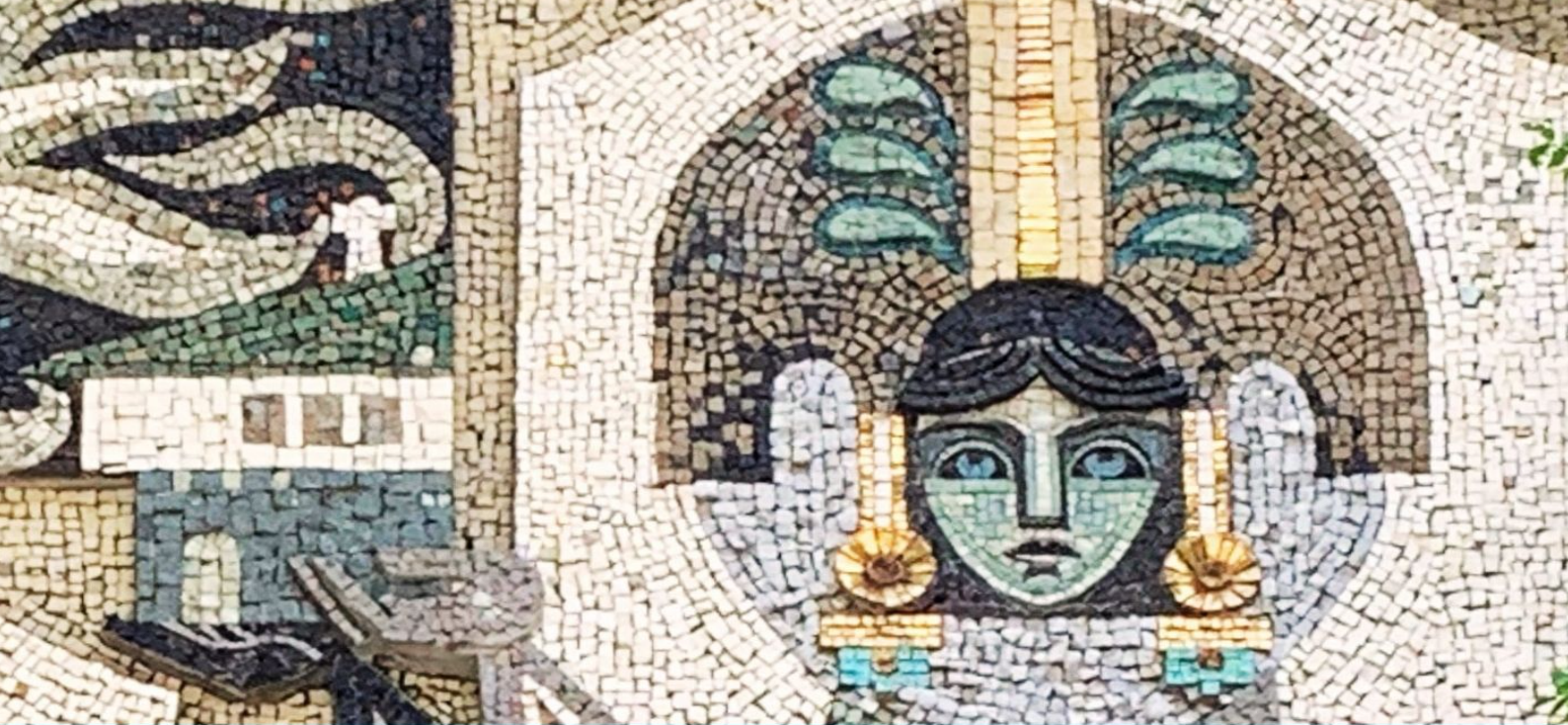


*Ana. No.2.*



*Ana. No. 3.*





This research is devoted to a comparison of the prose work of two prominent women writers in the context of the post-Soviet Caucasus: Alisa Ganieva and Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili. Through their use of myths from various cultures of the world, Ganieva and Kordzaia-Samadashvili succeed in creating original stories of women that lay the basis of what is becoming the new Canon in Russian and Georgian literature. Tapping into the suggestive, arcane power of myths, the oldest relics of the past, they operate a regrouping of values, further problematizing the role of women in times of radical change. Therefore, these two case studies appear to be particularly relevant to describe the paradigmatic cultural shift that occurred in a specific region – that of the Caucasus, – once entirely part of the Soviet Union.

**Irina Marchesini** is associate professor of Russian Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy. The study of extreme, experimental narratives belonging to contemporary Russian literature, such as Nabokov's, Kharms', Sokolov's, and Vaginov's works, are among her primary academic interests. She has published a monograph devoted to the concept of "absence" in contemporary Russian literature (*Levigati dall'assenza*, 2018), a monograph on Old Slavonic heritage in Soviet and Post-Soviet novels (*Lo specchio del tempo*, 2018) and an edited collection of essays on the centenary of the Russian Revolution (*I volti della Rivoluzione d'Ottobre*, 2022).

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