GENDER ISSUES AND THE OLDEST GEORGIAN LITERARY MONUMENTS

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Abstract - In the modern Georgian cultural space, the growing interest in gender issues has made the special role of women in historical processes increasingly relevant. At the same time, it has brought gender-based stereotypes to the forefront—stereotypes that can be overcome through in-depth study of the issue, public awareness, increased levels of gender education and a proper understanding and highlighting of the most important events of the historical past. For centuries, Georgian identity has been defined by Orthodox Christianity, which preaches the spiritual equality of women and men. A prime example of this gender equality can be found in the oldest hagiographic monument of Georgian historiography — the Life of Saint Nino (4th century), the Christianizer of Georgians. The Saint's successful missionary work during the era of dominant pagan kingship completely dismantles the gender perceptions of that time. On the other hand, we are also presented with the martyrdom of a holy woman — Saint Shushanik (5th century) — and the gender-related hardships she faced on her path to Christ, in opposition to her husband. Through the example of the deeds of these Saints, our research highlights the general role of women in the Christianization of our country and in history overall. It examines the differing gendered language/terms used in the texts, the perspectives of the first female authors and other valuable gender-related issues, which are of great importance in the field of gender education.

Keywords - Hagiography, Gender, Language, Stereotypes

One effective strategy for combating the legitimization of gender stereotypes and sexism-related inequality in the modern world is to promote gender education. A wide range of disciplines contribute to this effort, including historiography and its subfields. Equally important is the consideration of traditions, customs, psychological traits of individual nations, and the historical-cultural contexts specific to each society—factors that have historically influenced, and continue to shape, gender roles for women and men.

In Georgia, recent instances of gender inequality and sexism have made the study of women's historical roles and their progression particularly relevant. Given that Orthodox Christianity is a central pillar of Georgian identity, it is essential to revisit the transformative role Christianity has played in women's lives. This is especially pertinent in a country where 83.4% of the population identifies as Orthodox Christian—one of the highest religiosity rates globally.

Christianity proclaims the spiritual equality of men and women, grounded in the doctrine that both were created in the image and likeness of God, and share in the potential for deification and salvation (soteriology). However, in practice, longstanding perceptions of women as inherently weaker beings persisted. The female sex was often viewed as sinful—rooted in the legacy of Eve, despite the redemptive figure of the "new Eve," the Virgin Mary. Such attitudes reinforced male dominance and laid a foundation for systemic gender inequality.
The situation of women was shaped, to a certain extent, by political interests; much depended on the rulers, the ideology of the conquering powers, and broader sociopolitical factors. This was especially evident during the early stages of Christianity. Pagan philosophers of the Greco-Roman world often portrayed women as inherently flawed, asserting that their nature predisposed them to serve any cult—including Christianity—without discernment. Women were labeled as "believers," naïve, and incapable of distinguishing between false cults and traditional values (Minicius 1974:8). Such gender-based arguments were commonly used to undermine the credibility of the emerging Christian faith.

It is important to note that many foundational theological ideas regarding the nature and purpose of women, developed by the Christian Church in its earliest period, as well as the obstacles it faced, found full expression in Georgian reality. All of this was reflected in examples of Georgian historical writing, among which we will focus on two hagiographic works — „The Life of Saint Nino“ and„The Martyrdom of Shushanik“ — which depict events from the 4th and 5th centuries.

Saint Nino is revered as the Enlightener of the Georgians. The country embraced the light of Christ between 326 and 337 CE, during the reign of the pagan King Mirian. While Christianity has had many female preachers, it has had no other female national enlighteners. As the French Kartvelologist Bernard Uthier notes: “Georgia is truly incomparable because your mother in faith, your enlightener, your apostle is a woman, Saint Nino; as far as I know, this has happened only once in the history of the world, and that too with you, the Georgians” [1].

Saint Nino entered Georgia at a time when pagan deities still dominated the spiritual landscape, and Mazdeanism, alongside various local and Iranian cults, held significant influence. Yet, in such a context, a 16-year-old virgin unfamiliar with the Georgian language traveled alone through southern and eastern Georgia to Mtskheta without facing major resistance from the local population or rulers. This stands in contrast to her companions, virgins who traveled toward Armenia and Rome, where they faced persecution and martyrdom. Through divine guidance, Saint Nino continued her peaceful missionary journey into Georgian lands.

What made Saint Nino's mission so remarkably peaceful? And why was the Christianization of Kartli (Georgia) accomplished specifically through a woman?

According to early versions of Saint Nino's hagiography, prior to her mission, a mysterious figure appeared to her and handed her a message known as the "Ten Words" (like Decalouge)—a letter containing selected passages from the New Testament. Four of these scriptural verses (Luke 10:39, Galatians 3:28, John 20:17, and Matthew 26:13) emphasize the spiritual equality of men and women and affirm the apostolic and missionary roles of women. These words signaled divine providence, Saint Nino's calling, and the extraordinary nature of her mission.

The life and missionary work of Saint Nino are closely tied to the chosenness of the Georgian nation and its appointment as the inheritance of the Most Holy Mother of God. According to one version of The Life of Saint Nino, authored by the prominent Georgian church figure Arsen Ikaltoeli (11th–12th centuries), the Most Holy Mother of God, who had been assigned to preach in Georgia by the casting of lots with the apostles, could not fulfill this mission because her Son took her into heaven. She then appeared to Saint Nino and entrusted her with the task, thereby not abandoning her inheritance but sending a female preacher in her place. This episode in Saint Nino's life clearly develops what has been called the "political-theological paradigm of the chosenness of the Georgian nation", in addition to the idea of Georgia's allocation to the Virgin Mary [2].

A similar idea is expressed by the 12th-century author Nikoloz Gulaberisdze in his work The Question of Svetitskhoveli, the Lord's Robe, and the Catholic Church (where "Catholic" refers to the universal church, not Roman Catholicism), asserting that the Lord Himself called Saint Nino to preach in Georgia as an enlightener of the chosen people of the Mother of God.

Thus, Saint Nino's mission is made even more important by the fact that "she preached in Georgia instead of the Mother of God, and here the worthy mother who came to enlighten was soon chosen as the 'life-giver of Kartli' and 'the mother of the Georgian community'" [3].

Saint Nino, together with like-minded women of her era, strives for the Christianization of the country. Their number is about two dozen. These are women of high social class, queens and, above all, Queen Nana, the wife of King Mirian, also pious virgins. It is possible to assume that there were deaconesses (Saint Nino herself), pilgrims to holy places, followers of Euergetism, etc. The Life of Saint Nino can also be considered one of the first Christian works, which gives us important examples of the active ascetic labor of female saints and ascetics, service to the church in the Christian world. Most importantly, they fight to spread Christianity alongside men, with a calm and reasonable approach. It should be noted that even King Mirian's resistance is not as fierce as would befit a pagan king.

Separately worthy of mention are the female authors who described the life of Saint Nino, who were contemporaries and helpers of Saint Nino. There are four of them, and they describe important episodes of the saint's life and deeds one by one. This work can also be considered as one of the oldest examples of women's literature not only in Georgian but also in world literature.

This raises the question: why was it a woman who Christianized Kartli (Georgia)? As noted above, the first reason lies in divine will—according to tradition, since the Virgin Mary had been destined to enlighten the country but could not fulfill the mission, a woman was chosen to take her place. The second, and perhaps more striking, reason is offered by the 12th-century Georgian author Nikoloz Gulaberisdze, who writes: "These people [the inhabitants of Kartli] were fearless and untamable, therefore [the Lord] sent a woman to make his divine power more visible" (Gulaberisdze 2007: 8).

This suggests that, despite the strong influence of paganism, Kartli accepted Christianity peacefully—a process also influenced by the political context. Following the Treaty of Nisibis in 298 AD, Georgia became a client state of the Roman Empire, and soon thereafter embraced Christianity [4]. While this pivotal event encouraged the spread of Christian practices across various spheres of life in Kartli, the active role of women—such as that seen in The life of Saint Nino—was highly unusual for the era.

A markedly different portrayal of women's status emerges a century later in already Christianized Kartli, as depicted in the Georgian hagiographic text The Martyrdom of Shushanik (476–483). By this time, Iranian influence in the region had grown significantly

compared to the era of Saint Nino. The text vividly illustrates the tensions between the two dominant religions of the time—Christianity and Mazdeanism—and centers on the conflict between Varsken, the Mazdean satrap of Lower Kartli, and his Christian wife, Queen Shushanik. Varsken's conversion, likely politically motivated (though other interpretations exist), prompted Shushanik to leave his household and ultimately embrace martyrdom.

Shushanik's departure enrages Varsken, who views her act as a personal betrayal—she had "thrown ashes on his marital bed" and withdrawn from his authority. This reaction reveals that Varsken is less concerned with the spiritual implications of his apostasy than with his damaged pride. He had renounced Christianity without informing his wife, pledged to convert her and their children to Mazdeanism without their consent, and even planned to take another wife (as permitted by Mazdean law) to demonstrate loyalty to the Shah of Iran. These actions, and his continued disregard for Shushanik's autonomy over a span of seven years, expose a broader pattern of gendered oppression. Varsken's diminished moral and spiritual authority—as a husband, man, and ruler—manifests in the cruelty with which he treats his wife.

It is also significant that neither the secular authorities nor the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy were, in most cases, able to openly support Shushanik. Aware of this, Shushanik comes to believe that she will not find justice in this world. Instead, she looks to a higher court—where there is "no distinction between woman and man," and where she and Satrap Varsken "will speak as equals." This justice, she is convinced, awaits at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.

Despite enduring severe trials, Shushanik—queen, mother, woman, and Christian—offers a powerful example of unwavering faith. She does not deviate from her chosen path and ultimately joins the ranks of holy women who, with steadfast resolve, chose martyrdom over complicity with injustice.

The language of the author and the epithets attributed to Shushanik, reflecting the virtues she acquired on her path to Christ, are particularly noteworthy. Shushanik is described as a sacrificial lamb, bride of Christ, unblemished virgin, servant of God, among others. In contrast, Varsken is portrayed as the enemy of God, unfortunate, wolf, beast, and so forth. These characterizations, when viewed through a gender lens, reveal a symbolic opposition: Shushanik's titles emphasize virtue, spiritual purity, and humility, while Varsken's highlight aggression, dominance, and destructive masculinity. The lamb is set against the wolf, the bride of Christ against the beast—each pair illustrating a deeper contrast between Christian femininity and oppressive masculinity.

This gendered perspective is reinforced by a Persian character in the text, who advises Satrap Varsken not to speak harshly to Shushanik, because "the nature of mothers is narrow." Scholars are divided on the interpretation of this phrase: some view it as reflecting a stereotype of women's fragility, tenderness, and emotional sensitivity, while others argue that it implies a perceived limitation or weakness in the female nature.

Saint Nino, too, is adorned with numerous epithets in her Life, underscoring her apostolic status and feminine distinction. In one vivid comparison, she is likened to a lioness in strength and to a female vulture, who soars higher than the male. The text reads: "From the sky, in the eyes of this bird, the whole land appears like the eye of a small pearl, and as soon as she spots food, she folds her wings and descends upon it." This metaphor illustrates the precision and power of Saint Nino's missionary work, guided by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and once again emphasizes the importance of women in the Christian Church and the exceptional nature of Saint Nino's role.

Naturally, the perception of women in the Georgian cultural context was shaped by pre-Christian religions and pagan cults, which left their imprint on traditions and attitudes, as well as by the broader political landscape. These influences are reflected in the Georgian hagiographic texts of the 4th–5th centuries discussed above.

Despite the obstacles noted, Christian women have played a distinctive and inspiring role in Georgian history—particularly during the reign of Queen Tamar in the 12th century. Recalling and sharing this legacy, and honoring the luminous figures of the past, can significantly contribute to dismantling the gender stereotypes that persist today.

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