SHOTA RUSTAVELI'S WORLDVIEW: COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENTS BY SOVIET AND EMIGRE GEORGIAN SCHOLARS

MAKA ELBAKIDZE

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
E-mail: Makael2004@yahoo.com

Abstract - In the first half of the twentieth century, debates on Rustaveli's worldview became central to Rustaveli Studies. Within Soviet scholarship, a number of pseudo-scholarly theories were advanced, including Mohammedanism, Manichaeism, and Solarism. In contrast, émigré Georgian scholars approached the subject free from Soviet ideological constraints. They grounded their interpretations in philosophical and theological perspectives. Notably, in his 1963 study Les problèmesphilosophiques et religieux dans le poèmeGéorgien du XIIe siècle de ChotaRoustaveli "Le Preux à la Peau de Tigre", Nozadze emphasized the necessity of theological knowledge and close hermeneutic analysis for understanding Rustaveli's text.Drawing on patristic authors Nozadze concluded that Rustaveli's conception is rooted in Christian philosophical traditions.

Keywords - Emigre Georgian scholars, ViktorNozadze, Rustaveli's worldview, "The Knight in the Panther's Skin"

*The Knight in the Panther's Skin (Vepkhistqaosani)*is a medieval chivalric romance, composed at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries at the court of Queen Tamar of Georgia (1189–1210). Regarded as the pinnacle of Georgian classical literature, the romance reflects the cultural, political, and intellectual vibrancy of Tamar's reign, combining universal humanistic ideals with the medieval code of knighthood, loyalty, and love.

In his romance, Rustaveli is notably reserved on religious matters, and the ritual aspects of Christianity are not emphasized. While the protagonists of the poem are clearly religious, the name of their deity is never explicitly identified (The Supreme Being in*The Knight in the Panther's Skin* is: Unknowable, Unutterable, Ruler of heart-utterances, Invisible Might, The Aid of every earthly being, The Creator the face of every form, Sunny Night, the Image of the Three-in-One, Timeless Time, etc.). Accordingly, there is hardly any known religious system from Asia Minor, of which the author of*The Knight in the Panther's Skin* has not been at some time or another declared an adherent or representative.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the question of Rustaveli's worldview gained particular significance within Rustaveli Studies. Numerous pseudo-scholarly theories emerged regarding the poet's religious beliefs and philosophical outlook including those of Mohammedanism[1], Manichaeism[2], and Solarism[3]as well as a pantheistic interpretationsIvane Javakhishvili[1876-1940], Shalva Khidasheli [1911-1994]).These theories had one purpose: to deny the traditional and fundamental thesis regarding the Christian faith of Rustaveli, the foundation for which was laid as early as in 1721, when Georgian King Vakhtang VI (1675–1737) published Vepkhistqaosani. In his commentaries Vakhtang VI offered a scholarly assessment of the poem's Christian context, asserting that while plot is secular, its meaning is ecclesiastical.

The tradition of reading Rustaveli's poem from a Christian perspective persisted even under Soviet ideological pressure. This is particularly evident in research identifying intertextual relations between Vepkhistqaosani and the Bible, advanced by scholars such asKorneliKekelidze (1879–1962), Kalistrate Tsintsadze, Solomon Iordanishvili (1898–1953), and Akaki Gatserelia (1910–1996). By 1936, the Christian worldview of Shota Rustaveli was well-established academically, though Soviet ideological policies suppressed discussion of it for decades. Georgian Literary criticism of that time was the strict directives of the regime and its Marxist–Leninist philosophy. In the introduction to Volume I: Old Literature of the six-volume edition of The History of Georgian Literature, one reads:

"The present volume one of The History of Georgian Literature is based on new literary materials discovered in recent years; whereas the approach must change toward texts that have been known for a long time, they must be analyzed once again on the basis of historical decrees of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party according to the new approaches stated in these decrees. At present, on the basis of the instructions of the Party, the need for critical development of the cultural and literary heritage of the past is noted categorically and definitely" (Leonidze, 1960, p. 6).

[1]See: Nikolas Marr, Georgian Poem Vepkhistqaosani by Shota Rustaveli and a New Cultural and Historical Problem (1917).
[2] See: PavleIngoroqva, Rustveliana (1926).
[3]See: PavleIngoroqva, Shota Rustaveli and his Poem. Preface of academic edition (1937).

Prominent apologists of Rustaveli's Christian world outlook, including Kekelidze and his close circle, faced significant obstacles. For example, Solomon Iordanishvili's *The Search for Traces of Christianity in the Vepkhistqaosani* (1916)was not published until 1990.KorneliKekelidze, in his book *The History of Ancient Georgian Literature (Vol. 2. 1924)* argued with confidence for the Christian worldview of the author of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, but, at the same time, he was forced to create an artificial term – "Biblical Christianism" and, in contrast to his view, to write:

"Speaking about Biblical Christianism, the following circumstance should be borne in mind. Rustaveli fully rests on the first source of Christianity, the Bible, the "Holy Scripture"; in this regard he is a representative of so-called Biblical Christianism. Dogmatic-ecclesiastical Christianity, which originated on the basis of the scholastic-mystical mental acrobatics of ecumenical councils and subsequent periods, is strange to him; all the ballast that merged with Christianity afterwards, over the centuries, against which the forerunners of the Reformation boldly raised their voice for the first time in the fifteenth century in western Europe, is also alien to him. In this we should look for the reason for the fact that if, in the subsequent centuries, a certain circle persecuted him on religious grounds, it persecuted him not because he was not generally Christian, but because he was not a follower and admirer of dogmatic Christianity" (Kekelidze, 1981, p. 204).

Kekelidze acknowledged the artificiality of the term, noting it as a product of a "relatively new period." As both a scholar and a clergyman, he could not dismiss the writings of early Christian theologians as "ballast," but he sought to frame Rustaveli as a Christian whose worldview was rooted exclusively in the Bible. With respect to the research issue, the approach of MoseGogiberidze[4] and ShalvaNutsubidze[5] differed from that of Kekelidze. Educated in Germany, both scholars were well-versed in contemporary European literary criticism, including evolutionary, psychological, and sociological methodologies. Drawing on these frameworks, they engaged critically with orthodox Marxist critics, a stance that led to political persecution in the 1940s (MoseGogiberidze was arrested on charges of being a Nazi agent and died in the Aktiubinsk Gulag).

Shalva Nutsubidze regarded The Knight in the Panther's Skin as a philosophical poem, emphasizing Rustaveli's worldview based on the Areopagitic teachings concerning God, divine light, good and evil, and the celestial hierarchy. Rustaveli's familiarity with Georgian classical philosophy further informed his literary imagery. Mose Gogiberidze argued that "The god of Rustaveli is the god of the Renaissance … For such revolutionary thinking regarding the idea of God, Rustaveli had sources comparable to Renaissance writers, drawing on Aristotelian-Neoplatonic interpretations of faith and high scholasticism, with direct acquaintance with Aristotle and Arabic philosophy" (Gogiberidze, 1961, p. 52).

Émigré scholars Viktor Nozadze (1893–1975), Aleksandr Manvelishvili (1904–1997) and others exhibited a similar approach, comparable to that of Gogiberidze and Nutsubidze. In his book Les problèmesphilosophiques et religieux dans le poèmeGéorgien du XIIe siècle de ChotaRoustaveli "Le Preux à la Peau de Tigre" (1963), Nozadzecontested Soviet ideological interpretations, emphasizing Rustaveli's Christian worldview from philosophical and theological perspectives. He criticized Soviet scholars' framing of Rustaveli as an atheist or pantheist, insisting that proper study of the poem requires in-depth knowledge of Christian theology and careful analysis of each phrase, symbol, and metaphor:

"Rustaveli is praised as an advocate of atheistic ideas. He is glorified as a pantheist and materialist. He is lauded as a standard-bearer of democracy . . .He is praised and glorified as a person expelled and persecuted by the Georgian church. Incense is burned to him especially because he, as it were, "is consonant with the contemporaneity," the Communist period. And this is obscenity, indecency, folly. (Nozadze,1966, p. 109)

As can be seen, Nozadze's role in Georgian literary criticism is not easy to determine, not only because he was an emigrant but mainly due to his opposition to the ideological context governing Georgian scholarship of the time. The main locus of his opposition, that of Rustaveli's world outlook and religious beliefs, is seen precisely in*The Theology of The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. In this work, Nozadze openly contests the ideological view of Soviet scholarship, and thus the change in the reception of his works in Soviet-Georgian literary criticism should mainly be attributed to this fact.

Nozadze approached Rustaveli through the lens of multiple philosophical and religious traditions but focused on central thematic motifs—good and evil, love and Providence, and the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds—as well as Rustaveli's terminology for the Supreme Being and the aesthetics of light. His analysis demonstrated that Rustaveli's worldview is rooted in Christian theology rather than in Platonism, Neoplatonism, Zoroastrianism,

[4] See: MoseGogiberidze, Origins of Rustaveli's Worldview (1937); Concept of the Supreme Being in Vepkhistqaosani (1941).

[5] See: ShalvaNutsubidze, Rustaveli and the Oriental Renaissance (1947); Work of Rustaveli (1958).

Mithraism, Gnosticism, Sufism, Pantheism, or Manicheism. Unlike Soviet colleagues, Nozadze employed comparative and hermeneutical methods, grounding his interpretations in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Augustine, Athanasius the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Dionysius the Areopagite.

Through this perspective, Nozadze concluded that in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, God is the "Creator of the Universe" and "Providence," affirming Rustaveli's alignment with Christian theology rather than atheism, pantheism, or other philosophical "isms" (Nozadze, 1963, pp. 624–626). He maintained that alternative interpretations of the poem arose from misunderstandings of its theological basis or deliberate distortions (Nozadze, 1963, p. 596).

Nozadze's works, often published in émigré periodicals, remained largely inaccessible in Soviet Georgia. The Ideological Department of the Central Committee censored references deemed politically harmful, and emigrant literature was particularly scrutinized. Gaioz Imedashvili (1906-1995), author of the multi-volume bibliographic compendium *Rustavelological Literature* was criticized for "reviving the names of forgotten Rustaveli researchers (N. Zhordania, V. Nozadze, S. Dolakidze)" and for allegedly neglecting native scholars (Baramidze, 1969, p. 122). Soviet authorities routinely ignored dissenting views or responded with aggressive remarks. Innewspaper article *Glorious Path of Georgian Soviet Scholarship*(signed bythe Chairman of the Presidium of the Georgian Academy of Sciences Niko Muskhelishvili), Nozadze was described as a "maliciously breathing scholar" (Kharazishvili, 2009, p. 147).

In 1966, the eight-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Rustaveli was celebrated in Georgia. It was held under the aegis of UNESCO, and therefore preparations for the event began not only in Georgia, but also throughout the entire Soviet Union. The All-Union Governmental Anniversary Committee was approved, which was responsible for organizing and holding the anniversary events.

The Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party and the Government of the Republic passed a resolution that was entered by the World Peace Council in the work of its congress. The chairman of the Georgian Writers' Union, Irakli Abashidze, noted:"These are the days when we are standing face to face with the high thought of the entire civilized world and before the eyes of this world summarize the entire eight-hundred-year-old history of Georgian culture. During these days, Georgian literature and art will be a new discovery for many visitors, having arrived from distant corners of the world". (Abashidze, 1969). Elsewhere he wrote: "During the anniversary of Rustaveli, the Georgian people will face the high culture of the civilized world and will make a report on how they have lived from the times of Rustaveli until the present day" (Abashidze, 1966, p. 9). It should be noted that by this period (after appointment of Leonid Brezhnev as general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1966), the "Thaw" of Khrushchev's times was in fact over, but it was impossible for Soviet officials to limit at one stroke the freedom obtained to a certain extent from 1953 to 1965 (Šubin, 2008, 143).

This explains the "thawing" of Georgian officials towards Viktor Nozadze, who was officially invited to attend the jubilee celebrations in Tbilisi. The wish of Georgian officials to enable "Georgia to appear before the civilized world in a worthy manner" would to a certain extent be realized by an emigrant scholar attending the anniversary, one whose name had passed beyond the boundaries of the narrow circle of Georgian emigration by that time and attracted the attention of foreign Kartvelian scholars. However, Nozadze refused to go to Georgia. Apart from the more banal reasons, such as the telegram invitation being written in Russian, his categorical refusal to arrive in Georgia should be explained by his ideological and worldview conflict with the Soviet regime.

It was only after Nozadze's death, during Perestroika and post-Soviet Georgia, that his contributions received broader scholarly recognition. The opening of the National Library of Georgia's "special collections" provided access to previously prohibited literature, including Nozadze's works and correspondence, preserved in his Paris archive, bequeathed to his brother Giorgi Nozadze.

As early as 1989, Georgian philologist and historian Guram Sharadze (1940-2007) took an interest in the fate of this archive, and with the assistance of the Georgian emigrants MamiaBerishvili and KarloInasaridze he succeeded in fully transferring the archive to Georgia in December 1996. Sharadze also founded the Emigration Museum (Viktor Nozadze's archive is currently kept at this museum) and the Department of Georgian Emigrant Literature (Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature), which laid the foundation for research and publication of Viktor Nozadze's scholarly legacy. In 2004, at the initiative of the Viktor Nozadze Society (established in 2004) and Sharadze, the publication of Viktor Nozadze's works in ten volumes began. The publication will include six books devoted to *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, as well as hitherto unknown historical-philological and journalistic works on Rustaveli; essays, studies, and reviews, scattered throughout emigrant journals and newspapers; and epistolary heritage.

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