THE SEMANTICS OF THE TITLE OF NODAR DUMBADZE'S NOVEL *"DO NOT BE AFRAID, MOTHER"*

Natalia Gulua
PhD in Philology, Associate Professor at
Akaki Tsereteli State University
Email: natalia.gulua@atsu.edu.ge
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4463-9995

Abstract. Nodar Dumbadze's novel *Do Not Be Afraid, Mother* is commonly situated within anti-Soviet discourse for its explicit anti-Soviet rhetoric and its resistance to cultural isolation. The work responds to the sociocultural conditions of its time and articulates the author's subjective position toward processes unfolding in the Soviet space during the 1960s. This study investigates the novel's artistic dimension and the expressive strategies the author employs to convey his central message. In particular, it analyzes the title as a manifestation of artistic convention, its role in realizing the author's creative intention, and its function in shaping the ideological content and figurative structure of the text. The aesthetic function of the title is assessed in relation to the work as a whole.

Decoding the title is a crucial component of this research because it illuminates the author's method of textual construction and helps determine the originality of his literary style. The analysis focuses on symbols and key lexical units and their meanings, including the number thirteen; the notion of a "new god"; satanic marks and signs; the cross as a solar symbol; the rooster as a zoomorphic transformation of heavenly fire—the sun—and as a symbol of dawn and spiritual renewal; and the "Paris Commune" as a prominent emblem of state propaganda. Biblical parables and expressions associated with the text are also examined.

The analysis leads to the conclusion that, owing to its strong positional status, the title functions as the organizing center of the artistic text and serves as its compositional dominant.

A close reading shows how the title acquires conceptual significance. At the novel's end, the words *Do Not Be Afraid, Mother* are addressed not only by the protagonist to the maternal image but also by the author to the reader, offering consolation and affirming that the era of darkness has ended and the age of light, the sun, and the Lord has begun. The phrase suggests the emergence of a worthy generation and the advent of a new dawn. In our view, this constitutes the principal message encoded in the title.

Keywords: anti-Soviet discourse; title; decoding; symbol.

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Introduction. Nodar Dumbadze occupies a prominent place in the history of twentieth-century Georgian literature. His novel *Do Not Be Afraid, Mother* is regarded as part of anti-Soviet discourse because of its clearly articulated anti-Soviet rhetoric and its resistance to cultural isolation. We contend that the novel responds to the sociocultural conditions of the author's era and expresses his subjective stance toward the processes unfolding in the Soviet space during the 1960s.

Despite considerable scholarly interest in Dumbadze's oeuvre, questions concerning his artistic mastery, examined from a deideologized perspective, have not yet been the focus of specialized analysis. Consequently, the distinctive features of his artistic system and his rich repertoire of expressive means remain insufficiently explored. The relevance of the present study lies in its modest contribution to addressing this gap in research on Dumbadze's creative work.

This article examines the artistic dimension of *Do Not Be Afraid, Mother*, focusing on the title as a manifestation of artistic convention, its role in realizing the author's creative intention, and its function in shaping the work's ideological content and figurative structure. The aesthetic function of the title is analyzed in conjunction with the text as a whole.

The title occupies a strong position in the work, marked by a fixed status and distinct semantic and semiotic properties. It performs two essential functions: first, it emphasizes the work as an independent entity; second, it serves as a compositional element—a key that enables entry into the labyrinth of the literary text. It signals the theme, the authorial stance, and the genre specificity while simultaneously attracting and engaging the audience (Taliashvili, 2012).

Research Methods. To derive well-founded conclusions from the analyzed material, the study employs contemporary approaches, specifically reception theory and structural–semiotic analysis of the literary text.

Discussion. The title of *Do Not Be Afraid, Mother* conveys a distinct conceptual message and establishes specific expectations for the reader. Semantically, it functions as the initial textual sign, revealing the author's explicit stance toward the reality depicted in the novel. Decoding the title therefore becomes essential for understanding the author's compositional method, the structural organization of the text, and the originality of his literary style. As a condensed textual unit preceding the main narrative, the title serves as a key to interpreting the author's intention and purpose.

Two central elements—the maternal figure and the motif of fear—are crucial for grasping the novel's message. Their clarification is indispensable to articulating the author's thematic vision. Within the narrative, fear is portrayed as an inherently human emotion, a necessary stage on the spiritual path toward God. This idea recurs throughout the novel and differentiates the human from the animal. The phrase "*Do not be afraid*" simultaneously echoes the biblical reassurance found in (Isaiah 41:10): "*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*", thus introducing themes of hope and consolation.

Although the text emphasizes only the opening words—"*Do not be afraid*"—a comprehensive reading suggests a subtextual reference to the full biblical passage. At the time of the novel's creation, explicit incorporation of biblical language was impossible due to ideological constraints. Nonetheless, under the Soviet dictatorship, the need for divine consolation and hope was particularly acute—not only for the oppressed and marginalized but also for morally misguided individuals such as Isidore, one of the novel's central characters.

The novel's ethos rests on the idea that a person must acknowledge their sins, repent, undergo spiritual purification, and pass on love—for God, for humanity, and for the homeland—from generation to generation. To understand the role of fear as a driving force behind the characters' actions, one must trace the narrative development in detail.

Another significant aspect is the chronotope of the novel. Its temporal span of fifty to sixty years encompasses the active lifetimes of three generations, a period marked by profound national transformation. These generations—represented by Isidore, Gabriel, and Avtandil Jakeli—occupy distinct historical moments and embody different values, worldviews, and personal characteristics. Despite familial ties, the contrasts between them outweigh the similarities, though certain shared traits remain. Examining their lives makes it possible to trace shifts in worldview over half a century and to evaluate whether their spiritual evolution reflects decline or progress. Each character therefore warrants individual analysis.

Isidore Jakeli

The narrative of the novel opens with the story of Isidore Jakeli. At this point in the text, it is the twentyfirst year of the twentieth century, and Isidore is himself twentyone—symbolically mirroring the age of the

century. He is portrayed as a victim of his historical moment: a former nobleman who joins the Komsomol, thereby severing ties with his family and with his former way of life. From this moment onward, his life is reckoned anew, beginning precisely at the age of twenty-one. By entering the Komsomol, Isidore aligns himself with the new era and places himself in opposition to his own family, ancestors, and origins; he effectively crosses into what the narrative presents as the "enemy camp." This marks the beginning of his personal tragedy, which mirrors the broader tragedy of the country.

Isidore emerges as a man uprooted from his origins, a modern embodiment of the "prodigal son." In the biblical parable, the younger son seeks independence, squanders his inheritance, and ultimately returns home in repentance, where he is received with forgiveness. A similar narrative pattern unfolds in the novel. Among the Komsomol members, Isidore is depicted as an exceptional figure—strong, decisive, and unwavering in his chosen ideological path. This remains true until the moment he removes the cross from the dome of the Church of the Archangel and casts it down. This transgressive act radically alters the course of his life. In the eyes of atheist communists, he becomes a hero; for the believing villagers, he becomes an accursed figure. The women who fall to the ground cry out a curse: "*Michael the Archangel, unleash your wrath upon the one who has defiled and disgraced you!*"

To cast down the cross, Isidore undergoes a severe physical and spiritual ordeal. He climbs to a height of eight sazhen and ascends thirteen chain links. Although the number thirteen is widely perceived as negative, in religious symbolism it also bears divine meaning, representing immortality and cosmic order. Christ was the thirteenth participant at the Last Supper, and in Christian tradition thirteen signifies the universe. Within the novel's symbolic framework, Isidore must climb thirteen links—thirteen steps—before approaching the cross, the emblem of God.

Comparable episodes appear elsewhere in Georgian literature. In Grigol Robakidze's *The Murdered Soul*, for example, Komsomol members storm a church and desecrate an icon: *"One of them knocked down the saint's icon and, blinded by rage, stepped on it with his foot. 'Let your almighty icon punish me, then!' he hurled at the silent peasants staring motionlessly. An old peasant finally broke the silence and quietly replied: 'What more could it do to you? You are already mad—that is enough'"* (Robakidze 1990: 11).

Isidore's movement toward the cross, though dramatically rendered, is tinged with irony and presented as a futile attempt to challenge God. His appeal to a "new god" lightens the narration stylistically while revealing the author's intention to unmask the brutality and spiritual emptiness of the godless communists. Isidore's disfigurement becomes a physical and spiritual mark—a stigma—symbolizing his renunciation of God. In traditional belief, Satan brands his followers, asserting dominion over them; thus, Isidore's "mark" signifies his spiritual fall.

The casting down of the cross leaves two lasting marks on Isidore's life. One is visible—his disfigurement; the other is internal and spiritual. Although the narrative does not explicitly portray a radical ideological transformation, he nonetheless gives his only son the biblical name Gabriel—the name of the angel associated with the very church he desecrated. This gesture signals deep internal conflict, repentance, and fear of God. Through this symbolic naming, the author expresses his own critical stance toward the Bolsheviks who destroyed religious institutions.

Another moment of transformation occurs when Minago captures Isidore and his death seems inevitable. At this moment, Isidore no longer calls upon his "new god"; instead, he gazes at the rising sun:*"Isidore Jakeli gazed at the newly risen sun without squinting, as if he wished to take this vast, immense, golden, and warm presence with him into the grave… Then he thought he heard the crowing of a rooster, whether from someone else's yard or his own…"* The sun becomes his final mourner. Facing death, he prays to the sun:

"Isidore Jakeli felt the urge to fall to his knees, to pray to the sun, and to weep." In effect, he replaces one object of worship with another. One might say that he returns to his primordial faith.

In Christian tradition, the rooster embodies light and resurrection. It represents the antithesis of darkness and obscurity. As the herald of dawn, it simultaneously functions as a symbol of the sun and of spiritual renewal. From a mythological perspective, the rooster is not merely associated with the sun but also constitutes its embodiment; it is the zoomorphic transformation of the heavenly fire—the sun. The rooster is likewise connected with resurrection, the continuity of life, and perpetual renewal. The fact that Isidore, while in a critical situation, hears the crowing of the rooster—the herald of dawn—signals a profound transformation. Doubt arises in him toward the "new god," and he turns instead to the true one, just as the rooster calls forth the dawn. Through the appearance of the rooster, the author prepares the reader for a decisive turning point in the character's life and, simultaneously, in his consciousness—for his resurrection and spiritual rebirth.

Neither the sunrise, nor the crowing of the rooster, nor Isidore falling to his knees is able to alter Minago Jabua's decision: *"No, my Isidore, I will not shoot you beautifully, like a Paris Communard; I will not send you to the grave together with this beautiful nature. I will finish you off in filth and manure."*

As for the Paris Commune mentioned in the text, it is well known that it was a revolutionary government in Paris that lasted only seventy-two days. Marxists proclaimed it the first example of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is why it became an important symbol of state propaganda in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Minago's ironic reference to the Paris Commune—*"I will not kill you beautifully, like a Paris Communard"*—constitutes an authorial allusion to the short-lived and ultimately futile nature of the Commune's dictatorship.

It is significant that, despite his numerous crimes (*"for the plundering of estates and for many other crimes committed against the state, by the name of the Revolutionary Council's field court of the Gurian uprising, you are sentenced to be shot"*), Isidore, riddled with bullets by Minago, manages to stand on his feet. This moment marks his rebirth. It is no coincidence that Minago shoots Isidore in a cowshed, at the manger. The manger is the birthplace of Jesus Christ. No matter how filthy and manure-filled the author may present the manger, it must nevertheless be regarded as a sacred space. Both the text and the development of the plot confirm this interpretation: it is the place from which the sun (the Lord) can be seen, where the crowing of the rooster can be heard, and where Isidore—shot and virtually dead—comes back to life, resurrects, because he prays to the sun and no longer invokes the "new god." Instead, he asks the sun for help and forgiveness, and the rooster confirms this through its crowing.

Isidore's resurrection does not occur immediately. For five months he struggles against death. More precisely, the sun and the black sky, light and darkness, fight one another over Isidore, and this struggle ends in the victory of life: *"In the fifth month, the sun tore apart the black sky like a felt cloak."* This is a mythological passage in which the hero slays the dragon and returns to the world transformed. By lying in manure, through humiliation (analogous to covering one's head with dust and ashes), and by surrendering himself to the Lord—an act that also expresses repentance—the character undergoes transformation: *"Suddenly he felt a warm, salty tear fall upon the enormous stone pressing on his heart; the stone stirred, split in two, then split again, and again, until it melted and flowed somewhere into his inner depths; the heart found its nest, settled there, and resumed its ceaseless work."*

From this point onward, Isidore belongs to the Lord, who grants him a second chance, a second life, so that he may correct his mistakes, endure suffering (the premature deaths of his wife, son, and daughter-in-law), and raise his grandson to become a morally worthy.

Gabriel Jakeli

Gabriel represents the next generation. Although he differs markedly from his father—being educated, a dedicated physician committed to serving others, and ultimately losing his life in the line of duty—these traits do not fully define him. He lacks several essential human virtues, including kindness, compassion, empathy for others' suffering, and the emotional capacity to internalize and process death. The author does not explicitly enumerate these shortcomings; rather, Gabriel's rigid character is subtly revealed through ironic and humorous narrative elements. His approach to child-rearing is similarly strict and uncompromising. Gabriel does not want his son to grow up sensitive, gentle, or tender-hearted; he forbids him from attending funerals, memorial feasts, cemeteries, or participating in others' sorrow. Like his father, Gabriel is a man of duty—resolute, courageous, and unwaveringly devoted to his work.

Although his wartime experiences partially reshape his worldview, Gabriel remains fundamentally a product of the wartime era and struggles to adapt to peaceful life. This stands in contrast to his wife Manana, whose warmth, kindness, and humanity nurture the main character, Avto, throughout his childhood and adolescence, shaping him into a morally grounded individual. Manana frequently challenges Gabriel's emotional austerity, refusing to allow their son to be raised as a "beast":

The wartime episodes involving Gabriel are particularly significant. A woman dressed in white appears at a crucial moment, offering him spiritual strength and saving his life. Through this encounter, Gabriel comes to understand that fear is not a sign of weakness but a natural human condition; true courage lies in fulfilling one's duty despite fear. To feel nothing at all, she explains, is not bravery but brutality. She teaches him that every person is created in the image of God and bears within them a seed of goodness.

Despite the many hardships he experiences during the war, true nobility and spiritual transcendence never fully awaken within Gabriel. He remains largely indifferent to the Kurdish neighbors' family tragedy, to Sara's death, to Abo's orphanhood, and even to the sincere grief expressed by his own wife and child.

Avtandil Jakeli

Avtandil's (Jaqo's) life takes a markedly different trajectory. The tragedy and orphanhood he endured in childhood left a profound imprint on his personality, giving rise to an enduring sense of inferiority. He becomes a perpetual seeker. In order to gain stability, to feel grounded, and to make independent choices, he must return to his past and liberate himself from painful memories; otherwise, progress is impossible. Past, present, and future form an unbroken continuum, and a person who does not understand his origins is unable to function meaningfully in the present or to plan for the future.

Through a thorough reengagement with the past, Jaqo is able to restore his faith—something that his grandfather Isidore, despite his dedication, is unable to instill in him. What he truly requires is the recovery and re-experiencing of his mother's firm and enduring principles: goodness, love, compassion, empathy, and forgiveness. These are precisely the virtues that Isidore lacked and that were not abundant in Gabriel's character, yet they were richly embodied by Manana and Uncle Vanichka. For this reason, Jaqo persistently searches for his childhood friend Abo—and Abo, for the same reasons, searches for him. Their destinies are parallel: both lost their mothers early in life, both experienced disorientation and moral displacement, and both struggled—Avto especially—to rediscover the correct direction. Indeed, the search for moral and existential orientation constitutes one of the central themes of the entire novel.

As Isidore's grandson and Gabriel's son, Avto struggles to distinguish between good and evil, to maintain moderation, and to preserve inner balance. The moral examples of his ancestors prove inadequate for navigating the complexities of his contemporary world. Society has undergone radical transformation over several decades; ideals, aspirations, and modes of thought have all shifted. Avto gradually realizes that only certain traits inherited from his father and grandfather can serve as the basis of his own identity. It is his mother's teachings and her brief yet meaningful life that he finds most exemplary.

Over time, however, Avto understands that contemplating the lives of others—even those closest to him—is insufficient. One must construct one's own life, learn from one's mistakes, and determine one's personal goals. To enable him to see reality firsthand, to experience joy and suffering directly, and to learn to make decisions independently, the author sends Avto into military service. This becomes a significant trial that catalyzes his maturation into a fully formed individual.

The older generation experienced a great war—Gabriel's generation—during which young people, shaped by Soviet ideology, volunteered to fight under the belief that they were defending their homeland. Their understanding of patriotism and sacrifice differed fundamentally from that of Avto's generation. As Uncle Vanichka notes, the army, prison, and the mountains are divine testing grounds:

"If you are corrupted in the army—it is death; if you betray a comrade—it is death; if a comrade betrays you—it is death."Those who fell during such trials are, in his view, akin to saints.

Avto's generation, by contrast, grows up in peacetime. Nevertheless, the political climate continually evokes the threat of war, fostering a pervasive sense of fear and anticipation of disaster. Many young people therefore attempt to avoid military service—a sentiment shaped not only by present anxieties but also by the bitter experiences of those who survived war and concentration camps only to be exiled to Siberia. This generation no longer shares the fervent devotion to the Soviet homeland or the sense of duty once characteristic of their predecessors. Avto, however, chooses to serve in order to gain authentic life experience.

The author places Avto in diverse environments and social contexts. His interactions with urban acquaintances, peers, Daduna's social circle, the military cohort, the writer, Uncle Vanichka, and the inhabitants of the border region each leave an imprint on his character. These encounters enrich his understanding but also intensify his inner conflict. His worldview is marked by radical dualism: people are categorized as either "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong," with no space for nuance. This rigidity often leads to conflict and is reinforced by Avto's youthful conviction in his own righteousness.

His character traits, set against the novel's conflict-laden backdrop, vividly depict the diversity of contemporary society—a diversity at odds with Soviet ideology. Avto, influenced by ideological inertia, initially seeks uniformity of thought and behavior—an impossibility within a transforming society. Life progresses, society evolves, and no universal standard can encompass everyone.

Uncle Vanichka serves as a moral catalyst. Through Vanichka's daily conduct and philosophical outlook, Avto learns to listen, to understand, to forgive, to show mercy, and to accept the legitimacy of differing perspectives.

By the end of the novel, Avto recognizes the truth of Vanichka's words: he is not yet a fully formed individual and therefore has no right to judge others. He remains "dough prepared for shaping," with many trials still ahead.

This recognition is further developed through Avto's dialogue with the woman who appears as his mother in a vision. In this exchange, he articulates his aspirations and future orientation. It becomes clear that he has drawn appropriate conclusions, gained valuable experience, and begun forming into a dignified human being. The danger has passed; the misguided society to which he belongs begins to rediscover its true identity. Just as the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years before a purified generation entered the Promised Land, so too did Soviet society, poisoned by ideology, wander aimlessly. Only in the third generation do genuine moral transformations emerge. The generations of Isidore and Gabriel wandered without purpose; the moral virtues required for renewal reside in Avto's generation.

Although Avto resembles his grandfather in some ways, he cannot continue Isidore's path. Rather, he is obliged to correct the sacrilegious mistakes Isidore committed.

In the final vision, the mother addresses her returning son with words of both caution and affirmation. Her dialogue outlines the system of human principles that will guide Avto as he begins his mature life. With the climactic phrase "Do not be afraid, Mother", Avto not only reassures his mother's apparition but, symbolically, the author reassures God—the creator of the nation—that the era of darkness has ended. The age of light, of the sun, of divine presence, has begun. A worthy generation is emerging. Dawn is approaching, foreshadowed decades earlier by the crowing rooster. This, ultimately, is the core message encoded within the title of the novel.

Conclusion. By recounting the history of the Jaqeli family, Nodar Dumbadze traces the trajectory of societal development following the establishment of the Soviet system. The recurrence of the phrase "*Do Not Be Afraid, Mother*"—both as the novel's title and as its epilogue—underscores the author's central assertion that the third generation, represented by Avtandil Jaqeli, embodies spiritual and moral progress. This generation, in the author's view, signifies the nation's gradual renewal.

In conclusion, the title occupies a central and structurally dominant position within the literary work. The relationship between the title and the main text reveals the depth of the narrative, as the semantic axis of the novel is shaped through the title's influence. The act of titling is therefore not incidental but decisive for orienting the work's semantic structure. Through the symbolic and metaphorical layers embedded in the title, the author conveys the core message of the novel, delineates its conceptual framework, and establishes its emotional tone, all within a succinct expressive form.

Decoding the title illuminates the author's method of textual construction and reveals the originality of his literary style. A close reading shows how the title acquires conceptual significance. At the novel's conclusion, the words "*Do Not Be Afraid, Mother*" are spoken not only by Avtandil Jaqeli to the image of his mother but also, symbolically, by the author to the reader. The phrase reassures us that the era of darkness has ended and that a new age—characterized by light, the sun, and divine presence—has begun. A worthy generation is emerging, and a new dawn is rising. In our view, this is the principal message encoded in the novel's title.

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