

THE TRANSFORMATION OF EKATERINE GABASHVILI'S *MAGDANA'S DONKEY* FROM TEXT TO SCREEN

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Abstract. The present study examines the transformation of Ekaterine Gabashvili's well-known short story *Magdana's Donkey* from literary text to cinematic screen not only from a cinematographic perspective but also— and more significantly—from a gender-oriented standpoint. The aim of the research is to reveal how the female narrative voice is altered in the process of cinematic interpretation of the literary text.

The short story was written in 1890, whereas the film adaptation was directed by Tengiz Abuladze and Rezo Chkheidze in 1955, under a radically different socio-political context. The study pays particular attention to the issues of women's social and economic vulnerability, the phenomenon of motherhood, and the impact of a patriarchal environment on a woman's fate. Based on gender theory, the analysis demonstrates that in Gabashvili's text the female voice is presented as an individual experience, while in the film adaptation it is transformed into part of a collective social tragedy. The article argues that despite narrative and aesthetic differences, in both the literary text and the film *Magdana* remains a symbol of feminine resilience, dignity, and moral strength.

Keywords: Ekaterine Gabashvili; *Magdana's Donkey*; gender analysis; neorealism; social injustice.

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Introduction. Ekaterine Gabashvili's short story *Magdana's Donkey* is one of the most emotionally powerful works of Georgian realism. It portrays a woman's harsh living conditions, poverty, and the inner strength that enables her to struggle for the survival of her family and children. From a gender perspective, the fact that the author of the story is a woman acquires particular significance. Gabashvili directly observes, experiences, and represents a woman's position within a patriarchal society oppressed by poverty.

Sixty-five years after the story was written, in 1955, two young Georgian film directors decided to adapt it for the screen. The joint work of Tengiz Abuladze and Rezo Chkheidze proved to be highly successful, winning the main prize—the Palme d'Or—at the Cannes International Film Festival. This film marked the beginning of a new era in Georgian cinema. It represented a distinct Georgian manifestation of Italian neo-realism, characterized by location shooting and an unembellished depiction of reality, allowing audiences to see their own problems reflected truthfully on screen.

Naturally, the question arises: why did the two young Georgian directors choose *Magdana's Donkey* for adaptation? This choice was certainly not accidental. The later creative careers of both directors confirm that their artistic decisions were never random. In our view, the selection of *Magdana's Donkey* was determined by the story's undeniable artistic merits. The work offers an unadorned portrayal of ordinary people's lives and conveys not only the narrative itself but also the characters' psychological depth and portraits with remarkable artistic mastery—qualities that lend the story strong cinematic potential.

In this context, the phrase “In the beginning was the Word” may be invoked, not in its biblical sense, but in its literal meaning: without Gabashvili’s short story, such a cinematic masterpiece could not have been created.

The central thematic line of both the story and the film is a woman’s harsh existence and her struggle to save her children. As Gabashvili writes: “Magdana was still a very young woman when her husband died, leaving her with four helpless children and no bread to feed them.”

Research Methodology. The research methodology is based on comparative-structural and intermedial analysis combined with gender criticism and narratological approaches. These methods make it possible to identify narrative, aesthetic, and ideological differences between the literary text and its screen adaptation, particularly in the context of the transformation of female subjectivity.

Discussion. As noted above, the shared thematic axis of Ekaterine Gabashvili’s text and the Abuladze–Chkheidze film is a woman’s difficult life and her struggle to save her children. In both cases, Magdana is portrayed as a widowed single mother who fights to preserve her dignity under conditions of social injustice and poverty. The incessant cries of her children — “Mother, bread, mother, bread!” — torment her day and night and pierce her heart. In both works, Magdana stands alone, without social support, confronting hunger, poverty, and relentless labor, which function not merely as background elements but as driving forces of the narrative.

Despite differences in expressive means, the woman remains the central subject of the story in both media. In the literary text, her inner experiences are conveyed verbally, while in the film this function is assumed by the camera’s gaze, the actress’s facial expressions, bodily movements, and speech. Thus, despite the difference in media, both works place female experience at the center of the narrative.

In both the story and the film, the donkey, Lurja, is not merely an animal or a бытов detail; it carries symbolic meaning, embodying hope, dignity, and the possibility of survival. For Magdana, Lurja represents not only economic relief but also the tangible result of her labor and her right to its fruits. Her care for the wounded animal reveals maternal tenderness and compassion, transforming the donkey into a member of the family.

The charcoal burner character represents a system of injustice and violence in both works. He is not merely an individual villain but an embodiment of a social structure that oppresses the weak and legitimizes the strong. His greed and cruelty stand out sharply against the backdrop of Magdana’s vulnerability. Magdana’s defiant outcry—her refusal to surrender Lurja—serves as a manifesto of female perseverance and moral resistance.

Both works clearly exhibit features of social criticism. The courtroom scene, despite differing outcomes, demonstrates in both cases that justice does not stand on the woman’s side. Thus, both the text and the film expose a social system in which women are economically and legally unprotected.

Magdana is depicted in both the book and the film as a mother whose inner strength derives from love for her children. Motherhood here is not merely a biological fact but an ethical and spiritual value that determines the character’s actions. Her every decision is motivated by the desire to save her children.

Although the text belongs to the realist tradition of the nineteenth century and the film is imbued with the aesthetics of twentieth-century neorealism, both share a commitment to the unembellished portrayal of reality. Poverty, labor, and suffering are not softened either by words or by images.

Thus, the similarity between the text and the film extends beyond plot parallels. They converge thematically, symbolically, and ideologically, creating a unified narrative of female hardship, motherhood, and social injustice that remains essentially unchanged despite shifts in social context.

At the same time, significant differences exist between the text and the film. Gabashvili's story ends on a hopeful note: Lurja remains with Magdana, preserving her faith in life and the future. This ending emphasizes the productivity of female labor and moral victory. In contrast, the film's ending is tragic: Lurja is taken away following the court's decision, symbolizing not only Magdana's personal defeat but also systemic social injustice. By altering the ending, the directors intensify the scale of social tragedy and confront the audience with emotional shock.

In the literary text, Magdana's voice is distinctly individual. The reader is invited to directly experience her pain, fear, and inner struggle. The narrative is concentrated on a single woman and her personal experience. In the film, however, Magdana's voice becomes partially collectivized; her suffering turns into a shared pain of the impoverished community. Her individual tragedy is transformed into a social allegory, resonating with the ideological context of the Soviet era.

Children in the story primarily function as indicators of Magdana's burden and responsibility, whereas in the film they become more active agents, participating in the action and enhancing emotional dynamics—an adjustment dictated by the visual language of cinema.

Emotional intensity in the text is achieved through verbal description, inner monologues, and authorial commentary, while the film relies on visual techniques such as prolonged shots, facial expressions, movement, and silence. This contrast illustrates the process of transformation from text to screen.

In the story, the social environment is mainly seen through Magdana's perspective, with society depicted as an indifferent force. In the film, the social background is more pronounced: the village, its people, and the environment create an impression of collective existence, thus emphasizing social problems more sharply.

From a gender perspective, Gabashvili's text presents the problem in a personalized manner, focusing on the experience of a specific woman in a patriarchal environment. In the film, the gender issue is more indirectly represented and becomes part of broader social problematics, turning the woman into a symbol of social inequality.

Conclusion. *Magdana's Donkey* represents a unique example of how a female voice can be articulated in a literary text and how it is transformed into cinematic language. In Gabashvili's short story, the woman appears as an individual subject who defends her family and dignity, while in the film adaptation her voice becomes part of a broader social tragedy.

Gender analysis demonstrates that despite differences in endings and modes of expression, Magdana remains in both works a symbol of female resilience, motherhood, and moral strength. The transformation from text to screen does not erase the woman's voice; it merely alters its resonance.

References

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