

FORMS OF GENDER FREEDOM IN GEORGIAN LITERATURE: CREATIVE AND SOCIAL EMANCIPATION

Lili Metreveli

*PhD Student at Caucasus International University;
Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature of
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*

Email: Lili.metreveli@tsu.ge

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3263-1593>

Tatia Oboladze

*PhD in Philology, Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian
Literature of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*

Email: tatia.oboladze@tsu.ge

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2326-5965>

Abstract. From the second half of the 19th century, Georgian literature joined the feminist discourse that had emerged in American and European literary spheres. This discourse aimed to reconsider traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes and to highlight issues connected to women's economic, social, political, sexual, and creative emancipation. Similar to the West, in Georgia, women's activism was linked to raising awareness through various educational activities and fight against gender myths that had been constructed over centuries. Artistic representations of feminist narratives can be found in the works of Georgian female writers active at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, including Ekaterine Gabashvili, Sappho Mgeladze, Barbare Jorjadze, Lidia Megrelishvili, Kato Mikeladze, and others.

From the 1920s onward, Soviet ideology declared feminist activism and artistic work to be mechanical copies of Western trends and incompatible with the new socialist reality. This position was based on the claim that the issue of women's "gender emancipation" had already been "resolved" in the Soviet Union. Unlike the West, women's education, employment, the legalization of abortion and divorce, sexual liberalization, and the decriminalization of homosexuality (until 1934) became part of the political and ideological agenda. Propaganda used these themes to demonstrate superiority over the West. Accordingly, in the socialist discourse, a new myth of the "emancipated Soviet woman" emerged, whose primary function was tireless labor for the public good.

The article examines the play *"Wingless"* by the Georgian feminist woman writer Ekaterine Gabashvili and the play *"The Collective Farmer's Wedding"* by Polikarp Kakabadze. Based on a comparative analysis of these two texts, created in different contexts, the study highlights how the feminist discourse that was active in Georgian literature of the 1910s was replaced by the myth of the Soviet woman, how diverse female characters and authors engaged in processes of self-determination disappeared from the Georgian literary field, and how a unified image of the Soviet woman was constructed.

Keywords: gender emancipation; feminist discourse; Soviet feminism.

From the second half of the 19th century, Georgian literature, along with European traditions, responded to the first wave of feminism that emerged in the West. This wave aimed at women's political, social,

and economic emancipation, as well as the rethinking of traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes.¹ Gradually, prominent Georgian women entered the cultural sphere: Barbare Jorjadze (1833 - 1895²), Ekaterine Gabashvili (1851 - 1938), Anastasia Eristavi-Khoshtaria (1868 - 1951), Kato Mikeladze (1878 - 1942), Mariam Gariquli (1883 - 1960), Lidia Megrelidze (1883 - 1968), Babilina Khositashvili (1884 - 1973), Ana Khakhutashvili (1886–1960), Safo Mgeledze (1894–1936), and others. Women writers advocated feminist concerns not only through their artistic works but also through public activity and activism.³ Their strategic goal was women's active inclusion in educational and cultural processes. They collaborated with the Society for the Spreading of Literacy, founded women's organizations and clubs ("Georgian Women's Society," "Women's Club," "Georgian Women's Charitable Society," "Women's Interparty Club"), supported the creation of children's literary journals (Jejili, Nobati, Nak'aduli), and took part in editorial boards of periodicals. They also contributed to significant anthologies and translations, such as *Translations of Pleasant Readings* (1870) and the *Almanac of Georgian Women Writers* (1925). Most importantly, they founded the first feminist weekly political, scientific, and literary newspaper, *Voice of the Georgian Woman* (1917 - 1918), which demanded full political and civil rights for women, called for solidarity, and promoted women's unity with slogans such as "Full political and civil rights for women," "Long live women's solidarity," and "Women of the whole country, unite!" Its pages featured articles such as "Women, Demand the Right to Vote" (*Voice of the Georgian Woman*, 1917, N2), "The Georgian Woman in Today's Family" (*Voice of the Georgian Woman*, 1917, N2), "Woman as a Free Citizen" (*Voice of the Georgian Woman*, 1917, N5), "Give Way to Women" (*Voice of the Georgian Woman*, 1917, N11) and "The Cause of Women's Enslavement and the Women's Movement" (*Voice of the Georgian Woman*, 1917, N23). Thus, feminist themes became an integral part of the literary discourse of Georgian women authors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

¹ Women authors also entered the world literary space with feminist themes: Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*; Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, *Shirley*; Anne Bronte, *Agnes Grey*; Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sanditon*; Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*; and others.

As the British feminist Rita Felski notes in her work *Feminist Literature and Social Change*, the first wave of feminism showed relatively little interest in fundamental theoretical justification. Felski associates the development of theoretical discourse and the establishment of women's studies as an academic field with the 1970s - 80s (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*). In the history of feminism, several influential authors and directions should be highlighted, as they initially played a crucial role in women's political, economic, and creative emancipation, and later in the recognition of women's fundamental rights (participation in political processes, the right to vote, access to full education, ownership of property, etc.), as well as in the deconstruction of gender myths and stereotypes. In this regard, we should note the following movements and authors: Enlightenment Feminism - Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1790s); Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845); Political Feminism - Feminism from the perspective of liberalism, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869); Women's Economic and Creative Emancipation - Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

² "Barbare Jorjadze was the 'first swallow,' after whom the journal *Tsiskari* widely opened its doors to other Georgian women writers—Salome Makashvili, Mariam and Ekaterine Eristavi, Nino Orbeliani, Nino Abashidze, Ekaterine Dandurov, and others," notes Georgian gender studies scholar Tamar Tsitsishvili in her extensive essay on Barbare Jorjadze (Tsitsishvili 2015: pp. 168–169).

³ For this purpose, Ekaterine Gabashvili opened a sewing school in her own home, which provided poor and orphaned girls with the opportunity to receive vocational education. At the same time, Ekaterine's house became a gathering place for Georgian feminist women writers and a space for sharing creative ideas.

In 1870, Ekaterine Gabashvili founded the *Georgian Women's Society*; in 1895, the *Women's Club*; in 1916, the *Georgian Women's Charitable Society*; and in 1918, Kato Mikeladze established the *Women's Interparty Club/League*.

"*Translations of Pleasant Readings*" was published in 1872 by the *Georgian Women's Society*, which had been founded in 1870 by Ekaterine Gabashvili, Ekaterine Melikishvili, and Elene Kipiani. The aim of the society was to translate and publish works by foreign authors. The collection included "*The Parisian Boy*" (an excerpt from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*), "*American Women of the 18th Century*", "*Jules Tarrot*", and "*The Last Days of Nathaniel Russell*." The publication had a serious resonance, which gave a powerful impetus to the increased activity of Georgian women in the public, cultural-educational, and literary spheres.

We aim to examine how the theme of women's creative emancipation - a central issue in feminist discourse - was represented in Georgian women's writing, using Ekaterine Gabashvili's autobiographical play *Wingless* as a case study.

Remarkably, in 1912 Gabashvili raised the same question that Virginia Woolf would later pose in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): Why is the woman's voice absent in literature?

Gabashvili's play presents two perspectives on gender roles and self-realization. On one side is Keto, a woman writer, and her editor, who represent marginalized voices. Keto sees herself as equal to men, intellectually and socially, and insists that family life must respect each other's profession and time. On the other side stand patriarchal figures - her husband Niko, mother-in-law Barbare, and the servant Melania - who reject Keto's professional choices, belittle her creative abilities, and confine her rights to a merely formal equality. Keto lacks both "a room of her own" and recognition in either the private or public sphere.

Society demands her conformity to the traditional female role, defined by service to men, domestic work, and motherhood. Her mother-in-law says: "Who ever heard of a married woman writing for newspapers?" (Gabashvili 2021:306). Her servant complains, "Women should sit on the couch and sew all day for their husbands and children, not scribble nonsense" (Gabashvili 2021:303).

It is important to recall that Virginia Woolf, in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, pointed out - alongside political and social factors - the necessity of women's financial independence for creative emancipation, since for centuries men had used economic dependence as a tool of manipulation and domination over women. Within this social and cultural framework operates Niko, who, by demonstrating his privileged position, on the one hand emphasizes his superiority, and on the other hand turns Keto's financial limitations into an instrument of her subordination:

Niko (the husband): "Niko (shouting): How dare you defy me! Are you and I the same? When I go to work, sit for five or six hours bent over and write, when I hand you one new banknote after another with a rustle, isn't that worthy of respect?" (Gabashvili 2021: 300).

In the text, Keto does not submit to the discriminatory discourse that society imposes on her. As Woolf observes, any rebellion by a woman against the norm is doomed to destruction: women's creative ability is usually regarded as a deviation, serving as grounds for their marginalization. They are labeled as witches, madwomen, feared, and ridiculed (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*).

What fate awaits Keto? Will she follow the archetypal path of the creative woman? At the climax, the author interrupts the narrative, leaving this question unanswered. Keto's future as a writer remains uncertain: will she manage to overcome resistance (including unfounded accusations of a romantic relationship with her editor) and achieve self-realization in the absence of societal support? In our view, the open ending leaves space for the possibility of Keto's creative emancipation.

Considering the public activity of Georgian women authors in the late 19th - early 20th century and Gabashvili's *Wingless*, we can conclude that Georgian women employed every available platform to make their voices heard. While many issues remained unresolved - such as the desacralization of women, misinterpretation of women's intellectual and emotional capacities, and the unfair division of gender roles - the struggle reached concrete results: in the 1919 elections for the Constituent Assembly, 17 women stood as candidates, and 5 were elected deputies.

The fact that Georgian women raised feminist questions simultaneously with, or even earlier than, their European counterparts must be seen as a milestone in the history of Georgian feminism. This history also necessarily includes the Soviet Union's gender policies and their literary reflections.

The ideologue of socialist feminism, Alexandra Kollontai (1872 - 1952), in discussing the differing legal status of women in the West and in the Soviet Union, noted: "All over the world, women continue to struggle

for their rights, yet on this path they encounter strong resistance and rejection from their bourgeois governments. Women in the West have been unable to obtain the rights that every woman possesses in the Soviet Union.” (Kollontai, 1919)

In the framework of our paper, we will attempt to highlight the Soviet Union’s gender strategy through the analysis of Polikarpe Kakabadze’s comedy *The Collective Farmer’s Wedding*. The choice of this play is determined, on the one hand, by the fact that its main character is a woman of the “new era,” and on the other hand, by the figure of the author himself. Kakabadze belongs to that small group of writers who were, at the same time, both recipients of the Soviet Union’s Order of the Red Banner of Labour and outspoken critics of the system (as the author of *Qvarkvare Tutaberi*).

In *The Collective Farmer’s Wedding*, the action takes place in a socialist village. Against the backdrop of remnants of the old times (Khakhuli, Manuchari) and rootless tricksters (Vata, Kakala, Lomkatsa), the play presents especially striking figures of Soviet heroes - people inspired by socialist ideals (Guiristine, Miriane, Irine, Jamlet).

The main character of the text, Gviristine, is a confident, independent, and respected woman who firmly asserts her position everywhere and with everyone, including in Moscow, at a Stakhanovite event, where delivering a speech was considered a great achievement in Soviet reality. Guiristine’s speech impressed the Soviet elite and even won Stalin’s approval: “One great comrade, sitting next to Stalin, asked me: ‘Don’t you get tired from working so much?’ I replied: ‘I only regret that I spared myself.’” (Kakabadze 1946: 162).

When defining the Soviet model of gender emancipation, it is important to pay attention to the degree of freedom of choice enjoyed by the main character, since freedom is a fundamental principle of feminism. An interesting question arises: for Gviristine, is labor truly a matter of choice, or is it the only path to establishing herself in society? In our view, Gviristine’s obsessive devotion to work is shaped by the Soviet standard, which demanded that every citizen, including women, embrace collective labor as both the means of self-realization and the determinant of personal identity in order to gain recognition as a full member of society. Accordingly, she becomes the “successful product” of Soviet ideology, for whom human social function – labor - has turned into the only way to avoid social isolation. Moreover, her exalted attitude toward work completely erases her “femininity”:

Guiristine: “In the end, Jamlet told me that in Moscow he wanted to buy me a dress worthy of my Order. I replied: it is not the dress that will be worthy of this Order, but my right hand must remain worthy of it.” (Kakabadze 1946: 87).

It is also important to note that alongside her status as a working woman, society simultaneously demands that Guiristine fulfill traditional gender roles:

Khakhuli: “Day and night you are running around with the affairs of the collective. You don’t behave like a woman, but you’re not a man either.”

Guiristine: “What can I do?”

Khakhuli: “If you had any conscience, you would take care of your father.” (Kakabadze 1946: 74).

Khakhuli: “Better to tend to an old man than wander around the collective. Don’t leave the elder without care.” (Kakabadze 1946: 75).

In her article *Women in the Soviet Union*, Mary Buckley explains the aim of so-called “gender emancipation” under conditions of totalitarianism. In her assessment, the integration of women into the Soviet labor market was motivated primarily by the desire for economic gain and the drive to claim superiority over the West. Indeed, after Sovietization, the logical development of Georgian feminism was transformed by the Soviet pseudo - gender policy. In the new reality, not only did genuine emancipation fail to occur, and the achievements of the feminist movement that had begun in the 19th century fail to evolve naturally as in the

West, but instead the process became subordinated to the demands of the regime. Women thus found themselves in a condition of dual subordination - both to men and to ideology.

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