

The Turbulent Sounds of the Soviet Epoch: Yelling and Groaning: Revolution, Revolutionaries and „We-Narrative“ in the Autobiographies of Oppressed Georgian Women

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Abstract: Based on narratological categories, the paper analyzes the autobiographies of 4 Georgian women who fell victim to repressions in the beginning of the 20th century. The paper focuses on the politically active women's descriptions of revolution and revolutionaries as well as the state of political prisoner women during the repressions carried out by the Communist regime. The aim of the paper was to find out how the Russian Revolution of 1905 is depicted in the autobiographical works of oppressed revolutionary women. The research results show that despite the political status of the narrative autobiographers (they were imprisoned and sent into exile), participation in the revolution has remained in their consciousness as an outstanding historical event.

Keywords: revolutionary/oppressed Georgian women, „We-narrative“, Soviet epoch, description, voice.

Introduction

Publication of archives plays an important role in the contemporary research of the Soviet past. The written heritage of repressed people forms a specific direction of hidden narratives beyond ideologized Soviet patterns of clichés. This heritage embraces the autobiographies of several socially active women of the beginning of the 20th century.

The number of autobiographies of repressed women increases as archive materials gradually become published and available; the paper analyzes the autobiographies of 4 public figures, women who were socially active in the beginning of the 20th century. These are: Minadora Toroshelidze, Christine Sharashidze, Ketevan Khutsishvili and Raisa Abramia-Mikadze. Their texts are included in the book *Lost History. Memory of Repressed Women*. Tbilisi. 2012. Laboratory of Research of the Soviet Past. The book embraces written autobiographies, archive materials (interrogation protocols, statements...) and oral stories (interviews and memories). The preface consists of several parts and is written by Associate-Professor of Ilia State University – Zaal Andronikashvili. Based on the theory of trauma, literary heritage regarding concentration camps, recent approaches to contemporary history and psychology, the author dwells on the issues of victim/witness, deprivation of the right to speak and absence of the audience.

The aim of the paper is to show how the autobiographies of women, participants of the drastic changes of the beginning of the 20th century (the revolutionary end of the Tsarist regime in Russia and establishment of the Soviet regime, reinforcement of the Soviet authority in Georgia and Stalin's repressions) reflect the revolution and draw the portraits of revolutionaries. The paper is based on experiencing/narrator autobiographer's perspective, the concept of voice, description, personal/collective narrative identity. The paper also aims to describe the state of women in prisons and camps (where women – themselves citizens declared as traitors by Stalin regime as well as the wives of such citizens – were kept).

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical-methodological basis for the research of autobiographies of repressed women is the specifics of the texts under analysis; The research carried on repressed women's autobiographies focuses on the exploration of the specificity of those texts, which implies the distinction between the experiencing self and the narrator's self. In our case, this helps find out the system of values serving as a basis for the coherence of the autobiographical text and the intention/homeostatic need of the narrator autobiographer [1], [2].

Due to the above-mentioned, when analyzing the revolution, revolutionaries and the collective identity described in the autobiographies of repressed women, the paper makes use of the complex narratological concept of voice. Out of the literature dedicated to the above-mentioned issue, of special importance to the given paper is the theory of Seymour Chatman (based on the methodology of French structuralists) regarding the story (what) and the discourse (how) levels. In his terms, narrative is viewed as communication, whereas the understanding/hearing of the narrator's voice is closely linked to the time of narration, the narrator's status and the implied/imaginary audience [6].

Mention should also be made of two types of sounds alluded to the title of the paper: „yelling“ metaphorically denotes the revolutionary spirit expressed in the first two autobiographies, whereas „groaning“ refers to the sorrowful/suppressed voice described in the other two autobiographies.

In order to identify the perspectives of the experiencing and narrator autobiographers and understand the picture of revolution drawn in the autobiographies of the repressed women, I have selected the category of description. In classical narratology, description was chiefly related to spatial dimension and was considered as a kind of pause in the narration. The author of the given paper shares Ruth Ronen's opinion, according to which (based on Roman Jakobson's opinion), They are not even intended to be part of the empirical reality. Instead, they are discursive constructs, which are ideologized patterns that organize the historical-social space [7]; in other words, whatever is described, cannot be free from subjectivity; description, as discourse phenomenon, reveals the attitude of the narrator and reflects the cultural background and thought patterns of the respective epoch.

Lastly, one of the analyzed texts (autobiography by Raisa Abramia-Mikadze) is classified as „we-narrative“: on the level of pronouns marking the text, there is a collective typical tragedy of wives of citizens considered as „traitors“/supporters of Lev Trotsky. Their collective tragedy is due to Josif Stalin's repressions, arrest and exile. While classifying Raisa Abramia's autobiography as „We-narrative“, I use Monica Fludernik's recent publication „Let Us Tell You Our Story: We-Narration and Its Pronominal Peculiarities“ [8]. The scholar analyzes works of diverse (chiefly oriental) authors and outlines „we“ marker on the level of story/discourse, as well as inclusion-exclusion, gender, race, age, war victim communities. The scholar draws a vast spectrum of interpretation of the first person plural grammatical form, which has the potential of expressing common/shared experience.

The main part of the paper consists of two Chapters, each divided into three parts: in the first part, the author offers the key factual information given in the autobiographical texts (level of narration), historical background and research outcomes. In the following parts, the author presents separate textual data (level of discourse) with corresponding assessments.

1. War-Cry: Revolutionaries and Revolution

„This epoch was decisive for my fate and affected the choice of the course of my life“[9].

„These large-scale events governed human thoughts and raised the spirit of the persevering, decisive struggle“ [10].

1.1. Minadora Toroshelidze (1879-1967) and Christine Sharashidze (1887-1973) were highly educated public figures. They were actively involved in the struggle against the Tsarist regime and strove for the protection of rights of lower classes in different forms (propaganda, demonstrations, Red Cross membership...). They took part in the Revolution of 1905. In 1937, as members of the Menshevik Party, they became victims of Stalin's repressions. Their autobiographies, written in exile, describe the revolutionary spirit and make detailed description/reconstruction of the large-scale events of the 20th century. Revolution is the idea around which the narrator autobiographers develop and construct the consciousness of the experiencing autobiographers.

In both cases, the level of the story is represented based on the principle of chronology and genre script: the authors start by describing their childhood, parents and social background, continue describing their school and their aspiration for higher education and end with narratives dedicated to their involvement in the revolutionary activities. In both cases, description of childhood, family and background serves other purposes than simple chronology and outlines the objective reasons that turned these women into revolutionaries _ material hardships: „We suffered from hunger [...] „I wanted to continue my education, but we were not rich enough“; „Our poor family was always full of relatives, who were even poorer [...] My childhood and teen-age years passed in a poor, yet aristocratic family [...] My mother [...] was my father's faithful friend during the entire life which was full of labour and poverty“ [9: 24], [10: 108, 109]. In both cases, the ways of overcoming poverty are education and self-development, and the area of activity is the revolutionary movement. In other words, the perspectives of the narrator autobiographers, the frame of semantization of episodic memory, is related to the idea of Revolution. The details of episodic memory become important/become worth description only in connection with the idea of revolution. In terms of relevance to autobiographical narrative it is in this case to consider the concept of tellability by Marie-Laure Ryan [11].

Neither on the implicit, nor on the explicit level the texts written during political repressions contain regret about participation in the historic events of the beginning of the 20th century – the revolutionary activities in Russia and the South Caucasus. Why do repressed people with destroyed lives make positive, even delighted mention of the events that have led them to the helpless state of prisoners? In both cases, the answer is that the

narrator autobiographer, whose life is destroyed, asks herself the questions: was her past life worthwhile? Did she dedicate all her youth, energy and spirit to something valuable? Thematized description of formation of the revolutionary spirit by the experiencing autobiographers answers the above questions positively.

Based on the analyzed texts, the answer can be formulated as follows: yes, what they did was valuable, and the idea they served was wonderful.

1.2. In MinadoraToroshelidze's autobiographical narrative, the narrator autobiographer adds coherence to her life by attaching semantic value to the description of her first meeting with the ideologists/leaders of the revolution (Georgi Plekhanov and Vladimir Lenin). Prior to this description, the autobiography offers a preliminary opinion of the experiencing autobiographer, which is idealistically formed based on revolutionary publications. Therefore, the verbal portraits of revolutionary leaders, as we will see below, are subjective and not neutral/objective. They are subject to a certain ideology and create a sense of something monumental, reliable and great.

When describing the first meeting of the experiencing autobiographer with the ideologists of the revolution, attention is paid to such details of the interior, which are reflected in the consciousness of the narrator autobiographer as a result of numerous visits. What is more important, the described environment arouses the feelings of admiration, respect, modesty. For the narrator autobiographer, there are two important markers - simplicity and education: „The study was large, and the furniture was simple: a long table stood in the middle. It was full of books and magazines. The shelves on the walls were full of books. There were several chairs and a simple, clean bed“ [9: 30]. Such detailed description of the interior, which starts with general words („large“, „simple“) and describes the first meeting with Plekhanov, reveals the perspective of the narrator autobiographer – her high-spirited state.

The same strategy is used in the description of Plekhanov himself. There are three main features: well-built body, large forehead and generous expression. The description proves the aim and attitude of the narrator autobiographer, who avoids photographic description, and, instead, draws an expressive, inspiring, monumental figure: „Plekhanov was sitting in the armchair near the table. He was well-built, with a large forehead and generous expression on his face. He greeted me politely. As soon as he saw me, he stood up, came to me and invited me to sit at his writing-table“ [9: 30].

This formulation describes the subjective attitude/perspective/evaluation of the author rather than facial features of the described person:

Similar to the ideologized portrait of Georgi Plekhanov, Vladimir Lenin's portrait also reflects MinadoraToroshelidze's positive attitude and admiration: the narrator autobiographer recalls her preliminary image of Lenin: „I had imagined Lenin as a tall, well-built man. I had no doubts that I would meet such a man“ [9: 43]. Instead of the „tall, well-built man“, at a revolutionary meeting in a club, she met „a short, slightly stooped man, with red beard and narrow, lively eyes. Apart from that man, we were familiar with everyone. So we realized it must be Lenin“ (ibid, 44). Although there is an obvious difference between the real and imaginary portraits, the narrator autobiographer does not oppose these descriptions explicitly. Although the sense of greatness is not aroused by the revolutionary leader on the physical level, the sense of greatness is achieved by means of Lenin's thunderous, impressive voice. This voice, as a key feature of the revolutionary leader, is mentioned several times in the text: „We heard Lenin's voice“; „He raised his voice“, „We heard Lenin's familiar, thunderous voice. It was full of rage, anger and indignation“ [9: 48-50]. The narrator does not write: „Lenin started speaking“. Instead, she underlines the power of Lenin's voice, which greatly impressed the audience. In one extremely expressive passage, the narrator autobiographer describes the mass strikes in St. Petersburg in 1905:

The revolutionary organizations of Geneva and the entire Russian colony gathered in a large circus hall at Plainpalais. The building was packed full. [...] And, Lenin rushed to the rostrum. [...] As he reached the rostrum, the audience became silent. You could hear a pin fall. “Comrades, Citizens!”, - we heard Lenin's familiar, thunderous voice, which was full of rage, anger and indignation. Of course, it is difficult to remember Lenin's exact words now [...] [9:50].

In the example above, despite the gap in time (proved by the final words of the narrator autobiographer), we can feel the revolutionary spirit of the entire audience, including the experiencing autobiographer. The expectation of the audience is proved by the introductory „and“, which makes the reader feel as if he/she were among the audience in the hall. Such expressive form of description points to the values of the narrator autobiographer: although she is a repressed, helpless person, she describes „her own history“, attaching a certain meaning/value to her life by means of semantization of her meeting with the revolutionaries.

Miranda Toroshelidze's description of Stalin is essentially different from the description of Plekhanov and Lenin. She recalls her first meeting with Stalin, whom she calls „Koba“: „They led me to the corner of the cafeteria. I saw a solitary young man, dark-skinned, of middle height, thin, with pockmarks on his face“ [9: 52]. Unlike Plekhanov's „generous face“ and „Lenin's lively eyes“ the only positive adjective used to describe Stalin

is “young”. This adjective describes objective reality and does not refer to either Stalin’s personal features or the author’s positive attitude. In connection with Stalin, mention should also be made of the narrator autobiographer’s comment: „I will not recall anything concerning Stalin. In my situation, this would be awkward“ (ibid, 77). This quotation reflects the position of the narrator autobiographer who fell victim to Stalin’s repressions and wrote the autobiography in exile.

1.2. With the aim of constructing the discourse, Christine Sharashidze also applies description in her autobiographical narrative. This description reflects the psychological (self) portrait of the experiencing autobiographer at the beginning of the revolution:

The dawn of the great Russian Revolution witnessed by us was extremely inspiring and attractive [...] We neglected details of the daily routine, because we heard the approaching and long-desired peal of thunder [...] There was a smell of the approaching revolution in Tbilisi streets. Our eyes were shining with expectation of the Revolution. We all thought about the same thing and discussed it, saying: Revolution is near! [...] It was the spring of the revolution [...] [9: 111, 112, 113].

These lines, written 50 years after the revolutionary year 1905, reflect the emotion and admiration of the young experiencing autobiographer. The same emotion is preserved by the narrator autobiographer. This fact can be proved by evaluative metaphors: „the dawn of revolution“, „the spring of revolution“, „the long-desired peal of thunder“. These metaphors are presented within the semantic field of weather/season. Besides, there are clearly positive epithets: „wonderful, inspiring, attractive, desired“. The above quotations show the perspective and voice of a revolutionary person, expressing the spirit of struggle and a powerful inner emotive charge.

A more concrete spatial image of the revolutionary spirit is represented by Tbilisi of the beginning of the 20th century. The description of revolutionary Tbilisi forms a kind of narrative map of the political events. This map marks “hot spots”: current Rustaveli avenue/former Golovin avenue, the first classical school of Tbilisi, railway station, various districts and streets, Metekhi and Vorontsov bridges, where dramatic and, later, tragic events took place: secret meetings, protest marches, execution of the demonstrators, their burial, arrival of workers from Baku, arrival of military regiments, dispersal of the demonstrations, struggles, military operations, care of the wounded, urgent informational meetings...

In Christine Sharashidze’s autobiographical narrative, revolutionary Tbilisi is not just a place where the above-mentioned events occurred. Tbilisi is a space charged with extraordinary power and spirit, described by the narrator autobiographer in the following way:

When I found myself in Tbilisi, this great center of the Caucasus, I absorbed new events and impressions. I attended meetings and walked around the agitated streets [...] I went to Nadzaladevi, because in this district I felt closeness to the revolution center. The uproar in the street attracted me like a magnet. I was more worried about the future of the revolution than about my own fate [...] And when the pulse of the revolution in Tbilisi streets was defeated by the thuggish acts of the reaction and the first clash of Armenians and Azerbaijani took place, my entire essence was shuttered [10:123, 124].

The above-mentioned paragraph does not refer solely to the historical space, but to the narrator autobiographer’s perspective regarding the psychological portrait of the experiencing autobiographer (a young person, full of revolutionary spirit, who attaches great significance to the social formation and suffers because of the injustice of the Tsarist regime). In both cases (the space and the person), the description is subjective. It is a discourse phenomenon, reflecting the narrator’s attitude (this can be proved by the evaluative word „thuggish“).

Comparison of the paragraphs from both autobiographical texts forms the impression that Minadora Toroshelidze represents concrete persons (Plekhanov, Lenin) as symbols of the revolutionary idea, whereas Christine Sharashidze represents the revolution as a collective rather than a personal symbol. In this regard, the narrator autobiographer (Christine Sharashidze) makes an important comment:

During the events of the year 1905, I had a childish impression about the revolution. Charmed by the revolution, I failed to notice that this element is governed by the will and revolutionary spirit of separate individuals. Later I understood the role of the revolutionary theory in the organization of human passions and aspirations. This is natural. At the age of 17, people, especially women, are affected by feelings and emotions. My sympathy for the working class and the revolutionary movement was caused by emotion rather than reason [10: 122].

The above-mentioned abstract is important from several viewpoints: 1. It represents two different perspectives of perception of the revolution, making a distinction between the sensual perception of the experiencing autobiographer and the rational perception of the narrator autobiographer; 2. It is recognized that the idea of the revolution and its organization is not a collective phenomenon but a personal one (cf. „this element is governed by the will and revolutionary spirit of separate individuals“) and 3. In both cases (on the conscious and unconscious levels) the respect and admiration for the revolutionary idea is obvious.

Thus, the revolution of the 1905, described by Minadora Toroshelidze and Christine Sharashidze, is large-scale, attractive and passionate, whereas the voices of the revolutionaries are thunderous, impressive and fair.

2. Groaning of the Rightless in Prisons and Exile

„As I looked out of the door, I saw a terrifying scene [...].
I could not bear it, so I turned away“ [12:174].

„It turned out that they did not send prisoners' letters to the addressees,
Even if they did send them, there was nobody to read them“ [13: 213]

2.1. KetevanKhutsishvili (1905-1979) and Raisa Abramia-Mikadze (1908-1995) were also highly-educated political figures. Ketevan was member of Young Marxists Organization. She emigrated to Paris. She was arrested and exiled twice. Raisa Abramia-Mikadze, one of the first Georgian female sculptors, was arrested and exiled for 8 years for being the wife of a Trotskyist (in other words, a traitor).

Their autobiographical narratives entirely consist of the story of arrest and exile: autobiographical texts (with thematic titles „Prison Memories“ and „During the Arrest“) start, continue and end with the chronicles of the repressions. Namely, the texts tell about the arrests of the authors, interrogations, inhuman/severe behavior and cynicism of the prison administration, the torture and execution of prisoners, exile, cells of different types/functions, the daily menu of prisoners and absence of elementary norms of hygiene/sanitation. Both texts describe the typical cases of prisoners' life during Stalin's repressions. The narrator autobiographers note this explicitly. In this regard, the stories told by the authors represent a general situation of women arrested in Soviet Georgia. Moreover, one of the texts can be classified as We-Narrative.

Why do repressed women write about their traumatic experience? Above all, this is narrative self-rehabilitation, the protest against one's own political status in an unjust world, raising of voice which was suppressed beyond prison walls. Why did the repressed women write autobiographic texts? Both narratives answer the question in the very beginning. The message is as follows: it is inadmissible to forget the terrible repressions to which innocent people fell victim. This is „our history“, and this story is an evidence of the criminal/repressive system of Stalin's regime.

2.2. KetevanKhutsishvili starts by the address of the narrator autobiographer to the reader: „There is nothing new in the story I want to tell you; it is an ordinary and widespread phenomenon in Georgia's life. Yet, I want to briefly describe the scenes I have witnessed and share the emotions and states I have gone through during the two years of staying in the Chekist prisons“ [12: 172].

After the introduction, the narrator describes the interior of the cell (the main attribute of which is a slop pail commonly used by prisoners for toilet purposes). Then the author describes how they watched the execution of prisoners, peeping through a special hole in the wall, the nervous behavior and speech of female prisoners, their different social status („there was even one psychic woman“ _ p. 175), the irresponsibility of the prison administration (a transfer of women to a Russian prison without prior warning to prepare for severe climatic conditions). Thus, due to the descriptive scenes and ironic remarks of the narrator autobiographer (e.g. „the delicious prison food“ - p. 173), KetevanKhutsishvili's autobiographical narrative gains the status of a document which serves as evidence of the inhuman/repressive policy of the post-revolution/Soviet penitentiary system.

2.2. The other autobiography of „prison/exile cycle“, written by Raisa Abramia-Mikadze, also draws a general/typical picture of the unbearable state of women prisoners. The narrator autobiographer often repeats the first person plural pronoun („we“) [13: 206, 208, 209, 210, 211, 217, 218...] and the determiner/attribute („we-wives“). In this way, she attaches a collective status of the experiencing and acting subjects/autobiographers to a concrete social group. The group/women represented in the text are not only victims of torture (they are not linked solely by shared/common history). Apart from the common traumatic experience, Raisa Abramia-Mikadze's autobiographic narrative describes collective thoughts, visions and expectations of the prisoners:

We could not help thinking about our children [...] We are suffering here [...] We are absolutely innocent [...] We strove to do something. [...] We looked forward to interrogation, we were preparing for the interrogation and asking one another's advice on what should be said during the interrogation, but they could not care less about us, wives. [...] Nobody knew anything about our detained husbands, but all of us strongly believed in their innocence [...] We are suffering here, far away from our children. We have no idea as to how they are and what their fate will be; We – absolutely innocent people. [...] They thought we knew about our husbands' activities and did not inform the authorities (at least, this was our opinion about the reason of our arrest). If our husbands were really involved in illegal activity, they would not be able to conceal this from us [...]. They started taking us out of the cells and leading us to the yard. [...] We heard a shrill cry and a humming sound. Our friends, who stood in line on the other side of the prison, somehow guessed that they were taking us away. So, they rushed to us, very agitated. We started weeping and heard the same weeping sound coming from our mates who were insane with grief. We were taken away from our children, parents, motherland, in fact, everything that

comprised our lives. [...] During the entire period, we heard screaming and humming sounds, our mates were taken away by force, and they attempted to rush to us. On seeing this, we wept bitterly [13: 209-221].

The paragraphs quoted above form only a small portion of the texts in which an acting/experiencing subject or, to be more precise, a group of subjects, is marked on the explicit/verbal level. The authors do not use the words "women" or "prisoners" as markers of the collective subject (whereas the words „wives“ and „innocent“ are attributes of the pronoun „we“). Actualization/thematization of the "we" marker in Raisa Abramia-Mikadze's autobiographic narrative points to the intention of the narrator autobiographer to denote the suppressed voices and life-stories of numerous people.

The autobiographic narrative often underlines that the experiencing autobiographer had the feeling of membership of the repressed community and the sense of self-identification in this context. I will bring only one example: „The dawn of October 20, 1937 [...] „Mass arrest of the wives“ took place on the eves of October 19 and 20 [...] We, wives, were hiding in the holes like mice [...] Finally, I am in the company of miserable, oppressed creatures like me“ [13: 204, 208]. The three markers of collective identity: „wives“, „we, wives“ and „miserable, oppressed creatures like me“ are neither mere synonyms nor additional information. They show the hard process of self-identification which starts with the perception of the social-political marker (the word „wives“, given in inverted commas, reflects the perspective of the repressive regime, for which „the wife of the public enemy“ equals a criminal). The process continues with the adoption of the status of group membership (the first person plural pronoun and the label attached by the regime are of equal value) and ends in the realization of the discriminatory state (epithets: „miserable“, „oppressed“ “creatures like me” imply complete empathy among the group members and denote their helpless state).

Observation of the textual data has proved that the sense of belonging to the repressed minority was formed in the consciousness of the experiencing autobiographer as a result of complex mental processes.

Thus, the autobiographical narratives of prisoners describe the criminal system of the authorities who came to power as a result of the revolution. The texts reflect the hard process of marginalization of a person from the society and the formation of a new identity on the personal and collective levels.

Conclusions

The narratological study of the autobiographical texts written by repressed Georgian women has proved that the drastic changes in the beginning of the 20th century (the beginning of the Socialist Revolution, establishment of the Communist regime and Stalin's repressions) played a crucial role in the formation of personal identities of the experiencing autobiographers.

The autobiographical narratives represent the revolution and its leaders in an ideologized way: their description is based on the enthusiastic expectation of epochal changes. On the other hand, the texts dedicated to prison and exile describe the miserable/unbearable state of prisoners arrested by the Soviet authorities and the criminal system widespread in the administrations of prisons. This system severely punished those people who once strongly believed in the happy future brought by the Revolution.

Special mention should be made of the text „During the Arrest“. This text should be classified as "We-narrative": it represents the collective traumatic experience of female political prisoners („the wives of public enemies“) on the levels of description of homogenic actions as well as homogenic consciousness.

Lastly, metaphorically speaking, the autobiographical narratives of repressed women describe two kinds of voices of the turbulent Soviet epoch: war-cry/yelling and suppressed groaning.

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