

## Representation of Death in Vazha-Pshavela's Artistic World

**Abstract:** Among the Georgian writers of the nineteenth century, the comparatively exceptional interest in the theme of death was revealed by Vazha-Pshavela, the classic of Georgian Realism. In creative works of Vazha-Pshavela the phenomenon of death is assessed from the ethical as well as aesthetical standpoint. According to the writer, the eternal alternation of death and life is the principle of the existence of the universe. Death indeed refutes, but at the same time, it even improves and “makes it beautiful”. According to Vazha-Pshavela, life is beautified by death from the aesthetic standpoint as far as it removes everything obsolete, faded, feeble from life and thus, it is death that promotes the renewal of life. From the ethical point of view, death adorns life, because it is death that gives sense, form and meaning to life.

**Keywords:** *Georgian Literature, Vazha-Pshavela, concept of Death, Representation of Death in literature.*

Death is one of the invariable themes of world literature and, generally, art. This mysterious phenomenon can excite the diverse thoughts in human beings, impelling them, first of all, to search for the insight of life. That is why, “the problem of death is the subject of not only metaphysics but that of the ontological ethics as well... only the fact of the death brings up the issue of understanding the life in the whole depth” (Berdyayev 2010: 405). In this paper we will try to show the specificity of the artistic embodiment of death in the creative works of the classic of Georgian literature, Vazha-Pshavela (1862-1915).

First of all, a few words should be said about the attitude which Georgian literature had historically adopted towards the theme of death. Deliberating the main tendencies of nineteenth-century Georgian poetry, the well-known Georgian literary critic Kita Abashidze remarked that Georgian literature revealed the completely indifferent attitude towards the subject of death: “Should not a man watching the everyday existence of a human being often remember death? I do not know the reasons accounting for the striking indifference of Georgian lyrical poetry to the theme of death, is it occasioned by the Georgian's carelessness and negligence or his superficial nature? Whereas the majority of European lyricists pays particular attention to this problem” (Abashidze 1962: 53).

This kind of evaluation of the critic is still radical and doesn't quite accurately reflect the factual situation. The old and new Georgian literature may lack the literary works, which are dedicated specially to the theme of death, but it doesn't mean that this most major philosophical problem has been left beyond the interest of Georgian writers in general. In the samples of the Georgian classic literature or folk poetry, the discussions on the essence of death are often presented even in the theoretical form. In Georgian folklore the subject of death is intertwined with the issue of vanity and temporality of earthly life. There can be seen as the mythological order of mentality, mythological imaginations as well as the Christian viewpoint and the deep human emotions connected with it. In Georgian folk poetry death is represented as a rustless and cruel enemy to the human being which is impossible to be oppressed:

“Death, I could not manage to hide from you,  
I tried to escape from you to the cave,  
I couldn't outride you by a horse either,  
I even tried to bribe you, but you refused”  
(Interlinear translation)  
(Georgian... 1979: 55).

On the other hand, in several folk poems death is even understood as God's will, that "Death is man's duty" and it assumes a kind of moral function as well – the function to restrain people's arrogance and achieve their equality. Yet, in Georgian pieces of folklore, the "transience of dusky life" arouses the painful and hard feelings more frequently than the religious calmness in the human being greedy for life. As a consequence, the majority of folk poetry is imbued with fierce and sad mood:

"What is our mortal life?  
it is a stone rolling up,  
the grave is just there ready  
at the very moment, we are born"  
(Interlinear translation).  
(Georgian... 1979: 32).

The understanding of the issue of death and life is obviously based on Christian theology in Georgian hagiographic literature. According to Christian divinity, death, on the one hand, is malice and punishment, but, on the other hand, it even appears to be the manifestation of God's grace to mankind: "God granted Adam "great kindness" through physical death since in this way the boundary was set to the human's sinful state, death is the guarantee that the human will not be "forever bound with his sins" (Vassiliadis 2009: 65). As stated by Basil the Great, "God did not hinder the separation of soul and body so that the disease itself could not be immortal in ourselves... being a philanthropist God does not punish the human nature fallen into sins through death but he cures him" (Vassiliadis 2009: 75). This standpoint is sequentially reflected in Georgian theological literature.

From the viewpoint of theological writers, leaving this mortal life is a pledge for a righteous soul to connect with God, hence, it is, somewhat, even desirable. Exactly due to this fact, martyrs happily meet the death sentence, they consider it as the ground for fellowship with God and "suppress death through death" with their spiritual boldness. The aforesaid is revealed, for instance, in one of the outstanding literary writings of medieval Georgian literature *The Martyrdom of Abo Tbileli*. The martyr walking along his last road encourages mourning Christians in this way: "Don't cry for me, be happy instead, as I am hurrying to my God" (A Collection... 1963: 70). In the same literary work, an amazing passage can be encountered. Abo Tbileli, condemned to death, has been so robbed of the fear of death and so much spiritualized over natural instinct, that he accompanies himself as the deceased singing the 118<sup>th</sup> psalm: "but he was walking as if he was accompanying the deceased along the last road. He saw himself in this way" (A Collection... 1963: 70). Such perception of death is typical in Georgian hagiography.

In terms of comprehending the issue of death and life, its Christian understanding is followed by the masterpiece of later medieval Georgian literature, Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* as well. According to the poem, a human is the unity of soul and body, the body is transient, vanishing, and the soul is – immortal. Rustaveli's heroes strongly believe that the soul maintains its personality in the afterworld. Based on Rustaveli, death is a "matter ...inevitable for everyone", it "cannot be stopped... neither by a narrow nor cliffy road", nobody can defeat death, it is an unbiased judge making the old and young equal. The ghost of death is constantly chasing everybody ever born: "those who do not expect death at every minute are bitterly mistaken".

Even though the heroes of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* struggle for worldly happiness, this aim cannot exhaust the content of their aspirations. Based on Rustaveli's poem, the main concept of earthly life and moral teaching is the communion with eternity: „we are taught in order to join the heavenly hosts.“ In a word, the earthly life is not of absolute value if it is not connected with the transcendental world. Life is worthless for Rustaveli's heroes if it is emptied of moral content. But sacrificing their life for the highest goal was deemed to be happy to them:

"I am the one for who mortal life is not worth even a straw  
and who considers the death for a friend to be a game"  
(Interlinear translation)  
(Rustaveli 2006: 36).

– says Avtandil, the knight. These words represent a kind of paraphrase of the main Christian commandment: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Out of the writers of Georgian literature of Renaissance (XVI-XVIII), Davit Guramishvili stands out by the interesting consideration of the problem. His vast poem *Dispute and Discussion between Death and Man* is very impressive in terms of artistic embodiment of the issue, as it is created applying the satire-humoristic approach. Here death is represented as an impersonated creature verbally arguing with the human. The opponents do not grudge the heavy irony and attack each other with provoking epithets, comparisons, rough sayings and witty quotes. The deep theological teachings are expressed in the form of dialogue and plain language; Satiric shade makes the poem amusing to read and, to some extent, relieves the mental heaviness which a man feels while thinking of death. A kind of lightness, which the human is overwhelmed with after having read the poem, is conditioned by the belief in the final defeat of death. Before the death kills an old man, the latter addresses him in such words:

“Death, eating me you won’t be able to put on weight.  
God will throw you into the lake of fire to be burnt,  
and my soul will hurry to the heaven  
and laugh at you from above”  
(Interlinear translation)  
(Guramishvili 1998: 172).

These words highlight the febleness of death compared to the immortality of the soul. It is worth noting that the profoundly erudite poet relies on *The Revelation of Apostle John* which depicts the second coming of Jesus, the universal resurrection and the final defeat of death after the Last judgment.

The theme of death is not so widely considered in the poetic legacy of Georgian romanticists. The mercilessness and ruthlessness of death are talked about in the original as well as adapted poems of Aleksandre Chavchavadze: *What is Death, The Different Stages of Human Life, The Inscription on the Lad’s Grave*. In this respect, Grigol Orbeliani’s literary writings are not singled out by a particular peculiarity. While considering the issue the poet bases on the traditional Christian view, according to which the soul continues its eternal life after death in quite a different world. The greatest representative of Georgian romanticism Nikoloz Baratashvili does not remarkably highlight the theme of death in his poetry, however, the interest is evinced for one of his private letters where the poet expresses the impression having been gained when being at the cemetery and points out, that “the cemetery is a wonderful invention, it is necessary for the mortal, to see his own life in it from time to time!” (Baratashvili 1972: 110). In his letter, Nikoloz Baratashvili focuses on the ethical significance of death from the perspective of making the human speculate about the sense of life.

According to the conclusion of the outstanding researcher of Georgian romanticism Grigol Kiknadze, “it is true that Gr. Orbeliani, A. Chavchavadze and sometimes N. Baratashvili cast doubt on the sense of life, but none of them saw the salvation in death. It means that death does not represent the motif for Georgian romanticism” (Kiknadze 2009: 265).

The same can be said about the main representatives of Georgian classical realism Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli. In terms of comprehension of the issue, no qualitative novelty is encountered in their literary works, either.

Among the Georgian classics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the comparatively exceptional interest in the theme of death was revealed by Vazha-Pshavela, in whose creative works the phenomenon of death is assessed from the ethical as well as aesthetical standpoint. According to the writer, the eternal alternation of death and life is the principle of the existence of the universe. The rule of thinking which considers death and the world of stagnation to be the primary and initial, and life – the secondary state is unfamiliar to Vazha-Pshavela. From the poet’s standpoint, life is eternal and

endless, and death represents only its additional part. In this respect, it can be said that Vazha-Pshavela's creative works best express the worldview of Georgian people:

“According to the rule of mortal life,  
some people'll go and others will remain;  
people are born in place of the dead.  
death is the child of life as well, its assistant,  
which destroys everything feeble  
and faded like old clothes.  
Life loves everything youthful, fresh,  
to beautify its body”  
(Interlinear translation)  
(Vazha-Pshavela 2006: 276).

From Vazha-Pshavela's point of view, the death of the elderly is a necessary and natural phenomenon, but the untimely death contravenes the rule of nature. That's why the poet entreats God:

“My Lord, don't kill the little,  
don't make his parents cry,  
let him be sated with the life,-  
with the experience the cruelty and goodness.  
Let a child be fed up with life,  
and watch wickedness and goodness,  
let him be able to defend his homeland  
with his strengthened arms”  
(Interlinear translation).  
(Vazha-Pshavela 2006: 433).

In Vazha's poetical world death and life are represented as phenomena, on the one hand, struggling and eternally opposing, but at the same time, filling and improving each other. Death chases life, however, it somehow even “helps”, serves and beautifies it. This viewpoint is impressively expressed in the poet's words:

“let God bless you, death,  
you beautify life,  
it is exactly your struggle  
against it that rises your price”  
(Interlinear translation)  
(Vazha-Pshavela 2006: 136).

According to Vazha-Pshavela, life is beautified by death from the aesthetic standpoint as far as it removes everything obsolete, faded, feeble from life and thus, it is death that promotes the renewal of life. From the ethical point of view, death adorns life, because it is death that gives form and meaning to life. Exactly the inevitable end of the earthly life instills the desire of cognition of the universe and finding his place in it and the moral sense of humility and sympathy into the human being.

In Vazha Pshavela's literary writings the death is differently perceived by human beings and the spiritualized creations of nature. The latter are terrified at the thought of being dead because they can't be sated of life: “death can't be good” (*Kuchi*), “if you have given me birth, God, why don't you let me live a long life” – dares to reproach the Violate to The Lord (*The Violate*). Only the human can rise higher than the fact of the death and see the peculiar beauty even in it, because according to the poet, “the death is the grace along with the life and one of the glories raising my manhood” (Vazha-Pshavela 1964: 115).

As stated by Vazha-Pshavela, the secrecy of death is universal to such an extent, that sometimes it even becomes the cause of sinful interest of the human. This psychological view is particularly highlighted in his epic poem *Host and Guest*. Upon the public execution of Zviadauri, one of the characters of the poem, the attendance of a vast quantity of people is occasioned not only by the desire for revenge on the sworn enemy but by the deep humane emotion - the interest in the phenomenon of death. However, the unrestrained revelation of this emotion, which is expressed by the desire to attend the process of execution, is evaluated as a vicious, sinful intention by the poet:

“Death scares all of us,  
if somebody else is killed, we wish to watch.  
Men sometimes cannot feel,  
what a great sin they commit”  
(Interlinear translation)  
(Vazha-Pshavela 2009: 285).

The fear of death is a natural emotion for all people, but the characteristic feature of a true knight is the inflexibility to this feeling. Vazha-Pshavela’s literary characters have if it can be said, a kind of contemptuous attitude towards death: “All will be defeated by that man, who pays no regard to the life” (*The Old Song of Warriors*). In the being of human the instinct of saving life and self-preservation is inhibited by the sense of moral obligations. The main characters of Vazha’s epic poems - Jokola, Giglia, Bakuri, Kichiri, Kviria, or Lela sacrifice their life without hesitation due to the moral beliefs. Life doesn’t have the highest values for them if it is emptied of the moral contents.

Vazha-Pshavela shows the essence of death from a different perspective. Although in the poet’s artistic world death is the precondition for spiritual ascension, sometimes it lays the foundation for the great misfortune. The story *Highlander’s Misfortune* demonstrates the consequences, to which the people living in permanent poverty are led by the death of their breadwinner. At the beginning of the story the author creates a heavy spiritual atmosphere by depicting the scene of the funeral: “The highlander died, death is awful. Imagine a grave, - a cold grave; the earth heaped up at the edge of the grave and the gravediggers with the spades in their hands, who are ready to throw earth to my poor friend ... his sensitive heart will be decomposed in the ground and his body will be filled with worms” (Vazha-Pshavela 2010: 27-28). While reading the novel it becomes clear, that death is a misfortune for the deceased, but it brings more hardship to the family left orphaned, when only the yoke of destitution and humiliation is awaiting family members: “being an orphan is more terrible. The deceased does not feel anything any longer, even if wolves and vultures or worms ate it – it is all the same, it is the family left orphaned that is miserable” (Vazha-Pshavela 2010: 28).

The mother and children have fallen asleep dream dead Bero (the main character), who cannot tell the orphaned family anything consoling, he only reminds them about the regularity of human tragedy and urges them to have patience: “how can I help you... I cannot do anything. Look at my body, hardly has any space been left without signs of worldly sufferings. I have shouldered my duty, now you should take care of yourselves” (Vazha-Pshavela 2010: 28).

Even though all human beings are helpless against the fact of death, the poet takes interest in the issue of the ways and possibilities of defeating and beating death. According to Vazha-Pshavela, death is indeed invincible in physiological aspects, but it can be defeated in terms of morality: “I love the one who has killed the death, and made his name by doing the grace” (*From Youth to the Other World*). In Vazha-Pshavela’s view, gaining the upper hand over death can be achieved by living the life of high morality and beneficence:

“I love who killed the death,  
made the name for himself  
by doing good deeds,  
is memory will never vanish in this life”  
(Vazha-Pshavela 2006: 191).

In Vazha-Pshavela's poetic world the thought about death doesn't cause the dullness, inactivity and pessimism of spiritual forces of the lyrical persona. The inevitability of death doesn't suppress the natural emotion of the joy of life, just on the contrary, the time limitation of the earthly life encourages him in the tireless action and activity. In the form of Vazha-Pshavela, we see the thinker having been philosophically reconciled with the death. The poet sees the basis of truly valuable optimism in the eternity of the spirit: "When flash dies, will it become the reason for the death of the soul?" (*The Last Salute*) Death is not the end of human existence, "the heart and feeling will be mixed with the sand of a black grave", but the spirit keeps living, It "has its domain, it knows its way well" (*The Fortunate Unlucky Man*).

According to the poet, an individual, to some extent, may "a little bit defeat" death, in case he leaves the kindness to be remembered in this mortal life. Thus, the viewpoint having been expressed in Georgian criticism, that Vazha-Pshavela "pays more attention to the external sides of death rather than the variety of emotions and thoughts, which the accursed issue about the transience of life excites in people" (Abashidze 1962: 343), should not be deemed to be acceptable. One of the peculiarities of Vazha-Pshavela as the writer and thinker is the fact that in the Georgian reality among the artists of the modern era it was he, who specially reminded us and underlined a certain positive significance of death as the great and exalted phenomenon based on the ethical-aesthetic grounds.

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