

The Mother of God's Perception of the Crucifixion. Sorrow and Joy

“...and you too will be pierced to the heart”
(Luke 2:35)

(Abstract)

The scene of Crucifixion and sufferings of the Mother of God is one of the most popular themes in Georgian writing of both the earlier and renaissance periods. The influence of the Byzantine literature on Georgian writing has been emphasized by the literary scholars more than once. The passion of the Savior on the cross added new trait to the formation of spiritual portrait of the Virgin. The purpose of this paper is to study this important issue on the example of Georgian hymnography and its relation to Byzantine hymnographer, Theophanus Graptos's hymn “The Lamentation of the Mother of God”.

Key words: Crucifix, The Virgin, Theophanus Graptos, Georgian hymnographers

In ecclesiastic poetry a complete perception of the image of the Virgin is impossible without taking into consideration the mystery of the crucifixion. Sin entered this world through Adam was defeated by the God who assumed human nature with Adam's icon itself that has been mentioned by hymnographers more than once: „as death reigned through one man, so the Son of God as man came to the world and trampled death by death” (Khachidze 1987:146).

It is quite natural that the passion of the Savior on the cross added new trait to the formation of spiritual portrait of the Virgin, it may be said bring to perfection because along with numerous other aspects the motherly nature of the Virgin as if invisible before manifested itself in full light just at the time of crucifixion. The theme of the lament of the Mother of God “caused by the reminiscence of son, expressed with motherly grief gave an opportunity for developing lyrical motifs” (Andrianova-Perets, 1947:159).

The purpose of this paper is to study this important issue on the example of Georgian hymnography and its relation to Byzantine hymnographer, Theophanus Graptos's hymn “The Lamentation of the Mother of God”. The translation of this hymn done by Ephrem the Mtsire was discovered by L.Khachidze at the Library of Paris who offers interesting conclusions in connection with this issue. The literary scholar also emphasizes Graptos's impact on the creativity of David Guramishvili and Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani. Below we speak more largely on this.

The episode of Crucifixion has been reflected in ecclesiastical poetry more than once. The hymnographers are well aware of its theological aspects: Christ, through his crucifixion defeats the death for all time. “Through his victory over the pain of body-soul opposition, i.e. inner contradiction, Christ is elevated to divinity” (Parulava 1983:15).

While speaking about the genre of lamentation academician Korneli Kekelidze names those sources which contributed to the development of this genre in Georgian writing. First, he refers to the Bible, King David's Psalm 136 which is devoted to the lament in Babylon. And from the Books of Prophets he names the lament of the prophet Jeremiah. In his view, Byzantine literature gives more samples rich in content in the genre of lamentation, namely, John of Damascus's “The lament of the Virgin at the foot of the cross” (Kekelidze 1956:200-201).

It is true the theme of lamentation is not alien for the Bible (“The Lamentation of the Prophet Jeremiah”, “The Lamentation in Babylon”), but in the Gospel nothing is said about the feelings of the mother of a dead child. Hence logically the question arises as to what source the hymnographers addressed to for rendering the grief of the Mother of God.

In the Gospel of Luke there is a description of the meeting of Simeon the Prophet the God-receiver with the Virgin when she brought Christ as a child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

There was at that time in Jerusalem devoted Simeon to whom it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the promised Savior that came true (Luke 2, 28-29). The righteous Simeon had foretold to the Virgin: “This child is destined to be a sign that will be rejected; and you too will be pierced to the heart” (Luke 2, 34-35).

The quotation “and you too will be pierced to the heart” said by the righteous Simeon is specially added at the beginning of the paper. He reports the Virgin about the pain she must have suffered on the passion of Jesus Christ.

The scene of Crucifixion and sufferings of the Mother of God is also one of the most popular themes in Georgian writing of both the earlier and renaissance periods. The influence of the Byzantine literature on Georgian writing has been emphasized by the literary scholars more than once. As Lela Khachidze puts it, similar influence is felt on Georgian original works reflecting the lament of the Mother of God too. The scholar gives an example of the ninth-century Byzantine writer, Theophanus Graptos’s hymn “The Lamentation of the Mother of God” and states that “the hymn creates rather rare image of the Virgin – this is a mother stricken with grief, who like an ordinary woman of the people is driven to despair. Emotion is reinforced by repeated refrains “Will die with you”, “Will follow you to the Underworld”, which like refrain accompanies the hymn. Great psychological truth seems to give us the experience of one of the most tragic episodes in the New Testament once again” (L.Khachidze 2000:152).

In Graptos's hymn soul's suffering often transfer to physical pain. The most impressive is a “gut-wrenching pain” of a mother standing at the foot of the Cross who totally shares the excruciating pain of the Savior: „ Oh my Son, what a gut-wrenching pain” (L.Khachidze 2000:152).

Lela Khachidze draws interesting parallels between Graptos's hymns and Guramishvili’s “The Lament of the Mother of God” and concludes that David Guramishvili as a brilliant connoisseur of Georgian hymnography was familiar with Ephrem’s translation of “The Lament of the Mother of God” that has been performed in Georgian church in the course of centuries for Good Friday, the most important day. It is interesting to note the fact that in Guramishvili’s “Lament” the strongest passages are emphasized artistically and emotionally” (L.Khachidze 2000:156).

The scholar finds similarity with Ephrem’s translation in Sulkhan-Saba’s “The Lament of the Mother of God”. According to her observation Saba uses the images from Ephrem’s translation. For example, while describing the ineffable sorrow of the Mother of God who follows Christ to Calvary, Saba writes: „She experienced sharp pain in her heart, her guts burnt, her breasts moaned and stomach ached” (Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani 1963:133).

In Ephrem Mtsire’s translation the image coming from the Gospel „a sword has pierced my heart” is treated by Saba in the following way: „My heart is wounded with the spear pierced your side”, where the “sword” is changed by the “spear” that according to Lela Khachidze’s observation is a symbol introduced by Saba.

It is interesting to trace what relation Theophanus Graptos's hymn “The Lament of the Mother of God” establishes with the creativity of Georgian hymn writers. What common parallels can be found and from this viewpoint, what is the novelty in Georgian hymnography? We shall try to answer these questions directly based on the texts. Here we’d like to mention that Byzantine hymnographer mainly represents an image of the Virgin suffered from physical pain who bitterly bemoaned her Son. She felt consolation only when she saw her son arisen from the dead: „As a mother I will stay at your grave and bemoan you until you rise” (L.Khachidze 2000:151). Also: „Hey, I’ve heard your sweet voice, my Son Jesus, cried the Blessed Virgin - Move you beautiful lips and kind eyes and I will also be glad because of beholding your resurrection” (L.Khachidze 2000:150). It can be said that there are only these two passages in Theophanus’s hymn where the Virgin’s joy is seen, in other cases she is a sorrowful mother who physically suffers her son’s pain: „Here I bemoan my dead son together with his disciples” (L.Khachidze 2000:148).

The loss of a child is a real tragedy for every mother: “It is true, the death of Christ and the rise is quite different divine plane and it contains in itself the overall happiness but mother is still a mother and this is perceived just from mother’s part and thus easily imagined and toughly experienced by each man” (Baramidze 2005: 143); but through the deepest sorrow that pierced the Virgin’s heart she could see human and divine nature at the sight of crucified Son. The Mother of God beholds her son stretched out on the cross, covered in blood, suffering the pains that are beyond the words. Who can imagine this physical torture? Yet the physical pain was nothing compared to the spiritual. “Beholding physical pain of whom she gave birth, the Mother of God wept lamenting” (Ingorokva, 263).

Georgian hymnographers perceive the essence of the passion of Crucifixion in quite real way. When the Mother of God bemoans her son as a mortal, as transient, in this case a hymnographer tries to render mother’s sorrow with all depth. Her eyes naturally contemplate what is to be seen by everybody: the mother bemoans her son, as a mortal: „When your immaculate mother saw you, the Word of God, she started crying bitterly” (Ingorokva, 322). „ Beholding Thee, O Christ, stretched dead upon the Tree, nailed and pierced with spear on the side, Thy Virgin Mother cried aloud with bitter tears” (Ingorokva, 285).

While portraying the image of the mournful Virgin Georgian hymnographers show double nature of the sorrowful mother: on the one hand, the Mother of God grieves about the eternal prisoner of death as a man and a mother-son tragedy comes to the foreground and, on the other hand, the sufferings of the dead son's mother are accompanied by the religious optimism of the mourning and unhappy woman: „How one so righteous could fall into the hands of the wicked” (Gvakharia, 167).

In the Gospel of John the care about mother by crucified son is rendered briefly: “Seeing her mother, with the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, Jesus said to her, “Mother, there is your son; and to the disciple, “There is your mother! (John 19, 26-27).

The hymnographers with the purpose of dramatization lyrical flow put the Savior in the conversation too. His comforting words in relation to his sorrowful mother have strong emotional effect: „ **Do not lament me, O Mother, seeing me in the tomb. I am your son whom you conceived in your womb without seed. I shall arise and be glorified with eternal glory as God, for as God I have struck down the enemies with the cross, and I will rise again, and magnify you**” (Nevmirebuli 1982: 595).

The hymnographers due to the diversity of their literary word render the dialogue between the Savior and the Virgin in which the Mother of God is presented as if she sees only the transient nature of her son and like all mothers she is desperate and the Savior consoles her, reminds her about his divine nature and promised resurrection. This episode is familiar both to Theophanus Graptos's creativity and Georgian hymnographers. In Graptos's hymn the Savior appeals to his Mother not to lament as “other mortals who are in graves” (Khachidze, 2000:151) because he is God and she will be the first to see him rising. The treatment of the lament of the Mother of God by Georgian hymnographers is approximately the same: „The crucified Christ, as you beholding your blessed mother standing at your cross and weeping together with your disciples, you tell her not to lament, I am infinite, God who will destructs the Underworld, kill the death and you will see your son arise on the third day” (Ingorokva, 270). In rather original way hymnographers render the lament of the Mother of God who is sorry for people who rejected the acceptance of Jesus as God and Savior: „As your mother sees you stretched dead on the cross, she weeps lamenting as a man and wonders aloud how one so righteous could fall into the hands of the wicked, a judge of the living and dead, how the death defeated you, the immortal” (Ingorokva, 317).

In other hymns the Virgin is aware that she is the Mother of God-man but every pain he felt, she felt as well and appeals to her son to manifest divine nature and defeat the death: „The Mother of God lamented over her Son nailed on the cross, every pain he felt, she felt as well and say: through your resurrection show them that you are God” (Ingorokva, 278).

The hymnographers establish direct closeness with the Savior by means of their own literary word and talk with him about the sufferings of the Virgin: „O Savior, your mother made a pool of tears at seeing you stretched on the cross and she questioned: How dost Thou who givest life eternal unto all, suffer?” and similar to the Mother of God they also appeal to Christ to display his own power and suppress the death by rising: „we believe that you will show your power, defeat the death by rising and give us divine joy” (Ingorokva, 261).

It should be noted that Georgian hymnographers manage to push the emotion to the background when we see in death not destruction but birth of new life. The reminiscence of the divine nature of the crucified Son somehow suppresses the Virgin's emotion: „O my Son, the God of all, show your power and arise from the dead as you are the God” (Ingorokva, 1913: 272). The words of the Virgin show well the essence of the crucifixion that implies the joy of rising which is treated by hymnographer as one of the expressions of religious optimism: “...thus today he raised from the dead, as God. See these unworthy creatures and rejoice” (Minchkhi 1987:21).

The rendering of the feelings of lamentation and joy in the hymn serves to the perception of spiritual and corporal sides of the Crucifixion where, naturally, spiritual aspect wins that is why the sorrow is perceived by the hymnographer as “elevated burden”. That is why the grief of the Mother of God is so short in Georgian hymnographers.

It can be said that in the hymns of Georgian hymnographers the boundary between the sorrow and joy is almost absent because the lamenting mother after short period of time turns to be a mother full of joy: „The Virgin Mary standing at the cross suffered her son's pains as a mother and lamented and then this pain was changed by the joy of the rising of the Savior” (Gvakharia 1978: 386). This joy is caused by suppression of death and faith of entering into the eternal Kingdom: „Today blessed Virgin is filled with joy when she came to the tomb and saw her Son arisen” (Ingorokva, 1913: 272).

As is seen the mystery of the crucifixion caused the creation of rather original image of the Virgin in which the hymnographers have their say.

We have also emphasized the fact that in the Gospel nothing is said about a mother of a dead son. In our view this happens because the spiritual nature of Christ whose uniqueness is manifested against the background of his physical torments is put to the foreground and Christ's resurrection changes everything.

In Georgian hymnography the image of the mother suffering of her Son's passion as well as an eyewitness of the grandeur of God has been shaped. The moderation manifested by hymnographers while describing the event of such scale is evident. They manage not to go beyond the scope of the Christian canonic. Therefore, their Virgin is not extremely lamenting, with "burnt guts". Here the boundary between the sorrow and joy seems to be almost absent on purpose and their perception happens in wholeness by the reader. It is this fact precisely that distinguishes the Virgin described by Georgian hymnographers as of Graptos's from the lamenting image of the Virgin created by the representatives of the Renaissance.

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