

## **The Woman in Western and Georgian Literature of the Middle Ages**

### *Introduction - Rustaveli*

Shota Rustaveli's poem, "The Knight in the Panther Skin", was written around the end of the 12th century and the start of the 13th century. The poem poses topical intellectual problems of 12th century Georgia and of world society in general at that time. For this reason, the study of any of the problems portrayed in the poem must take into account not only Georgian history and culture, but also world thought more generally. The questions posed in the poem have a direct link what later became Renaissance thought in the West. His questions also show a familiarity with both Eastern and Western thought, although on balance it is clear that Rustaveli was more familiar with the latter.

Accordingly, my research looks at those questions and problems, which are characteristic not only of Georgian but also of Western Literature written in the same period and, in particular, discusses certain characteristics of Western romances of the Middle Ages and of "The Knight in the Panther Skin": ideal-thematic motifs and structural elements, typological parallels and the individualisation of characters.

In this article I will briefly look at one question, which is the point of view of the woman in Western and Georgian literature of the Middle Ages. My research was helped by material held in the British Library.

### *Woman in the Middle Ages*

The culture of the Middle Ages was of great importance in the formation of thinking about the nature and role of the woman. It was in the Middle Ages that one started to see the woman in quite a different perspective. It seemed as if the Middle Ages discovered entirely new qualities in the woman, who was seen as a source of good and not of evil. It is well-known that Christian culture gave rise to two radically different opinions about the woman, two opposites – wicked Eve and the Virgin. However, these views were more common in the West than in Georgia, where the woman had never been much detested.

### *Celtic literature and Georgian literature*

The woman's role and status in mythology and tales is important. Western mythology is full of surreal, magical women who are unearthly creatures, though their chosen partners are earthly men. In early Celtic literature women choose their husbands themselves and are very much respected. The fact is that the woman plays a rather important role. Scientists have already come to the conclusion that the chivalry novels of the Middle Ages were based on the love stories of Celtic Mythology.

The same is the case in Georgian mythology. We learn from the "Tale about Amiran" that his father is a usual mortal, but his mother is the goddess of hunting, called Dali. The characters of Georgian fairy-tales are usually beautiful women and the plot and denouement of the story is closely connected with them.

### *Early positive views of woman*

As the synthesis of antique and Christian cultures, the Middle Ages inherited lots of things from both of them and among them were the views about the woman.

Isidore of Seville, in one of his works, gives an etymological explanation for everything that exists in nature. "According to him the Latin word *vir* (man) comes from the word *vis* (strength) and is connected with the word *virtus* (doing kind things). As for the word *mulier*

(woman), it is derived from the adjective *mollis* meaning (weak, soft, fragile)". (Tvard, 1973: 167)

The woman is highly estimated by Peter of Lombardi (XII c). He maintains that the woman is made of the man's rib and of no other part of him. If she had been made of the other part of the man, of the head, for instance, she would have had to rule over him; if she had been made of the man's leg, she would have had to serve him; but she is neither a ruler nor a slave. So the man should know that he must consider the woman his equal in rights and their relations must be based on love.

The woman is even more highly estimated by other authors. For instance, Umberto of Romania (XIII c.) thinks that the woman has some qualities given to her by God that the man has not. "For instance, the man is made of clay, while the woman is made of the rib of the perfect man. That's why she is more refined and perfect. Pilate's wife and Mary Magdalene tried to avoid crucifixion, while men did not do anything for that." (Sharer, 1983: 76).

### *Positive views of the woman in Georgia*

It should be noted that in Georgia the woman had never been considered the source of evil. Georgians had never had debates as to whether Eve was the source of evil. On the contrary, in Georgia, the country which is under the Virgin's protection, the woman had traditionally been respected.

In the reign of Queen Tamar she was idolized. Queen Tamar's contemporary writer Nicolas Gulaberidze in his work "sakiTxavi suetisa cxovelisai" underlines the role of the woman. According to some authors Ioane Shavteli in his "galobani varZiisa RmrTismSoblisani" praises Queen Tamar.

### *The attitude of the knight towards women*

Since the eleventh century, Mary's cult increases alongside the cult of knighthood. In the Knights' circles a peculiar form of worship towards a beautiful woman is observed. Such a kind of love was based on the following principles:

1. There is no happiness in marriage.
2. A knight must serve his woman and satisfy her whims.
3. The ideal of a knight and that of the knight serving his woman was almost identical. One could become a real knight only by being courteous to one's woman and the indispensable attributes were keeping silence, patience and devotion.

### *Women and the divine*

The troubadour's poetry is more mystical and inspired with Platonic love. Hence the woman who is worshiped by a troubadour is more ephemeral and elevated. In the Middle Ages the ground had already been prepared for seeing in earthly beauty the reflection of divine beauty.

There is an inscription belonging to an abbot on the door of a church saying – by means of earthly beauty, the soul reaches true beauty, that is, it speeds from the earth to heaven.

So it is not surprising that the poets praising women's earthly beauty mentioned angels together with them and sometimes they saw even God in their beloved. In the poetry of the Middle Ages the virtue and, in the first place, the beauty of the woman was considered immortal. It really deserved "elevated love" and such love was worth of a poegee.

That is why Pierre Vidal, while looking at his beloved, sees God in her. And one poet says that four hundred angels' smiles cannot be compared with the smile of one's beloved.

## *The concept of love*

It is interesting that Rustaveli, who praises his characters with exquisite and elevated metaphors, never compares them either to angels or deities. Rustaveli's characters are lit up by the Sun, their beauty rivals the beauty of the sun.

Rustaveli's earthly love is value in itself. In the thirteenth century Guido Guincheli (1240-1276) wrote: "loving a woman makes a man as noble as loving God".

In this respect, Byzantine culture, with which Georgia had close relationships, deserves attention. Here in the Middle Ages the religious concept of love was important but not uniquely so. In Byzantine novels of the twelfth century, authors advanced the aesthetic side of love. Earthly love, which had been anesthetized, acquired different colouring. It became more important to describe characters' beauty, to tell their lyric stories. Love between a man and a woman was worthy of all kinds of praise and love should end in marriage. This satisfied the ethical norms of the Middle Ages.

We have briefly surveyed the woman's role and status in some of the early literary works of the Middle Ages. We may conclude that the woman described in Rustaveli's poem is sublime, with noble manners. In Rustaveli's time there were some etiquettes of behaviour. Women in Rustaveli's poem, like those described in Greek novels, never betray. Characteristic of their love is complete emancipation. Women are equal to men and have the same rights. These ideas are discussed by the Georgian Scholar Alexandre Alexidze in his work on Greek courtly romances. The same is the case in "Songs about Nibelungs" where Bremhilda commits suicide after Siegfried's death, though, it must be noted that, unlike French literature, in German literature conjugal infidelity is seldom found.

The Greek novel with its ideals has more in common with Rustaveli's poem than with the Western novel, where men patiently fulfill the women's humiliating caprices.

The ideal of Rustaveli's poem is settling down to married life, while according to Western literary works there is neither happiness nor love in married life. Ulrich Liechtenstein (XIII) states such a view: A knight falls in love with a woman who already has a beloved. The woman pities the knight and promises him that if she ever loses her beloved she will love the knight. The woman marries her beloved and at that very moment the knight asks her to keep her promise and then brings an action against her. The verdict is: the woman must keep her promise as there is no love in married life.

In spite of the above, works describing conjugal love can be found in the West too (Flamenco, Erik and Enid, Perceval...), but it should be noted that Rustaveli, with his ideals, left Europe behind by preaching conjugal love, equality of rights among men and women and general equality which is relevant even in our time.

Tavard J.H., *Women in Christian Tradition*, Notre Dame, 1973

Sharer, *A History of Woman in the Middle Ages*, N.Y., 1983

Badel P. Y., *Introduction a la literature francais du Moyen Age.*, Paris., 1969

Marie de France, *Lai de lanval*, p. 1973

Georges Duby, *Le mariage au debut du Moyen Age* 1988

1. portrait of Rustaveli from the fresco of the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (conjecturally first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century)
2. Mianiature of *The Man in the Panther's Skin* from the 1664MS, done by Mamuka Tavakarashvili. (second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century). National Centre of Manuscripts, Tbilisi.