

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* as an Intertext to the *Smile of Dyonisus* by K. Gamsakhurdia

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Professional Biography

In 2011 Ana Dolidze graduated with honours the BA in Georgian Literature at the Faculty of Humanities of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. She enrolled as an MA student in the Faculty of Humanities after her graduation. The topic of her MA research was “Vazha Pshavela as a translator” – much less studied in Georgian literary scholarship. Ana Dolidze was awarded with diplomas and certificates for participating in four major academic conferences. After completing her MA in 2013 Anna Dolidze's project *The Lingvo-Personal Coexistence of a Writer and a Translator in the Legacy of Vazha-Pshavela* (#52/68) won the Presidential Grants' Contest for Young Scholars. In 2014 Ana Dolidze became a doctoral student and committed herself to studying contemporary Georgian literature. At the same time her grant project *The Psycho-Semiotics of Dream in Georgian Literary Discourse* (DO/277/1-20/14) won a doctoral research grant.

Abstract

The article aims to explore literary parallels between the writings of the two authors of two different nationalities and epochs. These works are: *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri from the 16th c. and the novel by the 20th c. Georgian modernist author Konstantine Gamsakhurdia *The Smile of Dyonisus*. The literally parallel is based upon their thematic similarity. Both authors use the theme of descending into hell as the main pattern. Considering the fact that Gamsakhurdia was well acquainted with the Alighieri's work and analyzed it critically, we are obviously dealing with the use of text as a model.

Keywords: *Alighieri, Gamsakhurdia, Hell, Archetype, Paralel.*

It is hard to make a comparative analysis between the two novels that are a few centuries apart and their unity solely relies on the common theme shared. Yet, since the common theme is “descent into hell” we are dealing not with simply a comparative study but with a classical intertext, especially since the megatext here is the famous novel such as Dante Alighieri's *divine Comedy*.

The classical 20th century Georgian writer Konstantine Gamsakhurdia was always concerned with the masterpieces of the arts and he considered Dante Alighieri's *Divine*

Comedy among those masterpieces. He even translated this comedy and dedicated a special research to the life and work of Dante Alighieri. He admired the literary-philosophical thought of the great master as much as his single phrases (*immortal sententia*) from his literary legacy loaded with historicism; he also appreciated the fact that “the history of Georgia reminds us of the history of Italy in many ways”.

Italy – the prettiest part of Europe was the most unfortunate on the European land”. [Gamsakhurdia, 1963 : 59]. He applies the same sentiment to his own homeland that makes his interest for Dante ten times greater.

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia in his quite a lengthy research paper “Dante Alighieri” argues about how the history of Italy was reflected in the literary work of Dante Alighieri, he considers the accounts of Dante’s biographers and draws his own conclusions of their truthfulness. He dedicates a separate chapter to the person and character of Beatrice, discusses the origin of the term *Renaissance* and asks questions about what is meant by the Italian Renaissance; he compares Rustaveli with Dante, distinguishes the key motif in *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* as well as in *The Divine Comedy* – the journey through the hell. He discusses the whole of the Dante’s literary legacy and considers in great detail all three parts of the *Divine Comedy*.

We find particularly interesting those approaches demonstrated by Konstantine Gamsakhurdia to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, which may also emerge in *The Smile of Dionysus* since the main theme in this work is also the descent into hell. Konstantine Gamsakhurdia writes: “in the comedy by Dante not only the history of modern Italy is represented but the whole of the antiquity, Christian Rome and the Early Renaissance Philosophy and eschatology”. *Divine Comedy* by Dante is the focus gathering the aryl of rays where the fluids of the ancient philosophy, Christian mysticism and Arab culture and the great ideas of the Early Renaissance Humanism meet. [Gamsakhudia, 1863: 59]. Neither is in the novel by Konstantine Gamsakhurdia reflected only the Georgian history, yet, the fate of the homeland is inseparably linked with the personal tragedy of the main character. The novel represents the spiritual crisis of the West, The synthesis of Georgian and ancient mythologies, struggle between Western and Eastern philosophical doctrines and in the end the struggle between Christianity and paganism shown in the psyche of the character.

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia considers the circumstances, in which conquering Italy and Spain by the Arabs played a crucial part in acceleration of the early Renaissance, since the Roman Catholic monks fought against paganism so keenly that they destroyed mercilessly the culture of antiquity that was brought back to Europe precisely by the Arabs. Therefore,

in Gamsakhurdia's opinion it is not a coincidence that Dante locates next to Plato, Aristotle and other scholars in his second cycle an Arab scribe, the commentator of Aristotle – Averroes.

We do not encounter real historical people in Konstantine Gamsakhurdia's "hell". Its inhabitants are sorted according to their sins, also there are characters which have met the main character Konstantine Savarsamidze and attracted his attention. Yet, one circumstance is worth noting: the two of the Konstantine's friends are guiding him through the hell" one is a Circassian Muslim – Khalil Bey, the other one is a German Christian – Herbert Shtuders. It is precisely communion with them that presents the double origin of the Georgian character as both Eastern and Western.

In Dante's "Hell", we meet the Popes, Emperors, Bishops and perverted aristocrats, also, alchemists, astrologists, magicians and the masters of "black magic". The idea of placing the latter ones in hell was characteristic to the epoch, since the Roman Catholic church of the middle ages fought against them cruelly and saw the "demoniacs" everywhere. The main inhabitant of the Gamsakhurdia's "Hell" is Slansky, a Mongol with yellow epaulettes nicknamed as "Bloodthirsty Bear", who stole from Savarsamidze the most precious thing he had – an "Emerald ring" of his mother. The epithets for Slansky are ironical and refer to Russia (according to the writer the Mongol blood prevails among the Russians; the yellow epaulettes are also the accessories of a Russian cavalryman; bear is also a Russian totem and a symbol of Russian culture). The character fought the main battle against them in hell.

Konstantine Savarsamidze meets his old acquaintances in hell "moneylenders, thieves, murderers, the dishonest rich, prostitutes and pimps, the collaborator journalists and writers who sold their pens and word for gold" [Gamsakhurdia, 1961: 944]. There are lots of morally degraded people in *The Divine Comedy* by Dante, but *The Smile of Dionysus* bears the trace of its own epoch that is presented by its contemporary "professions" (such as pimps, journalists etc...).

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia refers to the archetype that might have become a foundation for *The Divine Comedy* by Dante and mentions that the idea of descending into hell is underlying "the eastern epic poem of Gilgamesh decoded from the cuneiform inscriptions. Much later we have the famous biblical myth of Christ's descent into hell following the descent of Odiseus into Hades. In the end Eneas goes down into the world of shadows [Gamsakhurdia, 1963: 103]. After this note Gamsakhurdia emphasizes the goal of descending into hell: Gilgamesh goes to look for his friend Enkidu, Dante is searching for the soul of Beatrice. We face the question: what is the aim of Constantine Savarsamidze? The aim of Constantine is to meet his father and ask for forgiveness. The character has been

tortured all his life by knowing that he neglected the father's dream of running a vineyard, instead he sold the lands left to him and wasted all the money on the "aimless wondering" across the Europe.

„Your curse has become true, father, I have become barren like our alder tree in Etsera” - tells Konstantine Savarsadmidze to his parent who he met in hell, - „... My old vineyard wasted and I could not start a new one, bless me, give me back your frozen land, give me back your vineyard, father“ [Gamsakhurdia, 1961: 944]. The father put the son on his knees the same way as he used to put a child on his knees, stroke him but failed to bless him because he had lost his voice. This symbolic episode indicates that the character is not going to acquire happiness in either real life, since he is left without a fraternal blessing. The theme of vineyard, which is crucial in Georgian literature, is alien for the Dante's comedy.

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia while making a comparative analysis between *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* and *The Divine Comedy* pays attention to who the characters travel with through the hell. "Dante is guided by his craftsman Virgil, Odysseus is guided by sailors", while Tariel, the character of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* follows his adopted brothers Avtandil and Phridon. Gamsakhurdia himself does not betray a Georgian tradition and accompanies his character by his friends.

The Georgian scholar and the writer also pays attention to another meaningful aspect: "Gilgamesh runs down into the underworld, Dante goes there in a state of being half awake ("came to myself, like someone woken by force, and standing up, I moved my eyes, now refreshed," *Inferno* IV:1-63 The First Circle), Odysseus goes in there on a ship, and the Patman's messenger flies down there [Gamsakhurdia 1963 : 106]. Gamsakhurdia describes the Dante's transition from the state of sleep to the state of sobriety as "the moment of mystical silence" and explains it by the Christian worldview of the writer. Contrary to this he attributes the conquering of Kajeti fortress with the sword by the Rustaveli's characters to the cult of knightly chivalry and paganism. Konstantine Gamsakhurdia himself offers the way of Dante to his own character and transfers him to hell in a state, of lethargy yet the writer preserves individualism and expresses the crossing of the boundary between the two worlds by slipping down into the abyss. His choice is conditioned by the image of the character, which even though has the blood and nature of the knights – the dukes of Argveti, but has not inherited their spiritual strength.

Gamsakhurdia points out that "the similarity between Dante and Rustaveli is to be found even in their bold expressions"; he brings relevant examples from *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* and *The Divine Comedy* and adds that Dante "mentions many times embarrassing male organ and „fart-hole“ without any hesitation [Gamsakhurdia, 1963: 107].

Gamsakhurdia does not hesitate using these words himself and he describes the man-scorpions in hell, who have double faces, four legs and four arms and two male organs in the front and in the back.

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia reveals a bias or maybe an influence by the Dante's *Divine Comedy* at one place. The main character of the work by Dante Alighieri is the author himself while the main character of the novel *The Smile of Dionysus* by Konstantine Gamsakhurdia is Konstantine Savarsamidze. A reader may find so much similarity between the author and the main character (not only due to the name), that the writer is asking in the afterword not to attribute to him the sins of the character.

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia sees the main difference between Dante and Rustaveli in the excessive religiosity of Dante, which is not so strong in the case of Rustaveli. The similarity between the two is found in the original stimulus of both poetic expressions towards the eternally feminine element (*L'eternal Feminin*). „It is only that Rustaveli is more sober“ – adds Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, –„Dante's admiration for this “eternal feminine” crosses the line of religious ecstasy. Obviously a great courage was required of Dante and Rustaveli in the middle ages in order to reveal such an explicit eroticism“ [Gamsakhurdia, 1963 : 10]. Gamsakhurdia himself parts with both writers, Rustaveli and Dante and chooses the sexless Dionysus as his sweetheart instead of an eternal virgin, while he exceeds both writers in terms of eroticism. He reveals exceptional courage in the 20th century by describing a male attraction to another man.

We also refer to that fundamental difference, which is noticeable in the model of “that world” described by Dante Alighieri and Konstantine Gamsakhurdia. Dante distinguishes between hell, purgatory and paradise. Whereas, considering the traditional faith of Gamsakhurdia, the otherworld is understood only in terms of heaven and hell. It is noteworthy that Savarsamidze meets his acquaintances only in hell. Only one character of the novel is found in heaven – Parviz – the (male) beloved of Savarsamidze.

Dante Alighieri, even though half-asleep goes to the otherworld alive. However, Konstantine Savarsamidze dies in the state of being half-asleep – he is torn apart by a double-edged sword. Dante knows that after his death he will definitely go to heaven because he is already purified. Savarsamidze, on the other hand, is predestined to hell. God tells Helios who reaches heaven that his hands are covered in blood; the character is asking forgiveness but God disappears. While Dante is granted to see Beatrice in the last circle of the purgatory, Konstantine savarsamidze sees God – Helios first, who disappears and in the end he sees his beloved. This should not have been a coincidence. Konstantine

Gamsakhurdia escapes religiousness, to be more precise – religious dogmatism. However, both writers give to the descent into hell a meaning of purgation.

It is noteworthy, that neither Dante, not Gamsakhurdia address the Christian god. In the beginning of the third part – *Paradiso*, Dante calls upon Apollo, the muse of ancient poetry, Gamsakhurdia calls upon Helios (who was identified as Apollo in the 5th c BC). The calling upon Helios must have a different meaning in the novel by Gamsakhurdia. Helios is the father of the mythical king Ayet of ancient Colchis. Therefore naming Helios as god was related to the idea of the divine origin for the Georgians and encouraged the national pride in Gamsakhurdia, who was an extremely nationalist writer.

For both Dante and Gamsakhurdia hell is presented as the world of evil, as the death of the soul, defilement of flesh, aesthetic ugliness, while paradise is the source of light, absolute truth and aesthetic beauty. Both writers consider heaven and hell in earthly terms presenting them as complete allegories. Both works present a deeply individual person as the central figure of the journey, who suffers the pain, sin and troubles of his homeland as well as the whole universe.

It is worth noting that each part of Dante's poem consists of 33 praises, which might be referring symbolically to the time of the Christ's earthly ministry. Gamsakhurdia's novel contains 13 praises. It is rather unusual to divide a novel in such a way that refers to the Dante's influence, yet, the individualism of the writer emerges again in the number 13, which is a reference to the allusion of the 13th disciple of Christ and therefore is considered as accursed. We reckon that the number 13 not only defines the fate of Savarsamidze's but also the whole epoch emptied of spirituality.

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