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Women against Death: Georgian Folktales in Context of Oriental and Occidental Paradigms*

The study of the geographic spread of the folktales is closely connected with the interaction between literary and oral narratives. The large numbers of the folktales has a rich literary tradition and some motifs of the folktales come from the literature, spread and interpreted by folk narrators. In the research of the literary and oral narratives is very important to consider not only particular sources but also their social and cultural milieu.

This paper gives an account of the Georgian folkloric versions of the international tale type ATU 899 *Alcestis*: A young man is doomed to an early death: He is predestined to die on his wedding day. Norns (or Angels) predict his death for the third day after his birth. God intercedes with the Norns, and they agree that the young man may live if another person is willing to die for him or to give him half of his own remaining lifetime. His parents refuse, but his bride is ready to die for him. God saves both the young man and the woman who is willing to sacrifice herself.[1]

The plot of the Georgian folktale *Death and a Young Man*, matching to the tale type ATU 899 *Alcestis*, is as follows:

A rich young man decided to marry. He dressed red, settled on a red horse with a red saddle and went to search someone who could help him to find

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[1] Uther, Hans-Jörg. The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. Part 1. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004, pp. 522.

a bride. He met a man with a red horse and red clothes. The red horseman did not speak and went away. The young man followed him and asked him for help. The red horseman said: 'I am Death and I will kill you on your wedding night.' The young man returned home and told his parents that he was ready to marry any woman regardless which. The parent found a bride for him. On the wedding night the Death came and told the young man: 'Ask your mother to give you some years of her 110 years lifetime.' The young man went to his mother. Unfortunately she refused to give him anything. His father, his brother and his sister refused to help him. The Death suggested him to ask his wife who had 80 years lifetime. The young man was ashamed to ask his wife if she was willing to give him half of her own remaining lifetime. He did not know his wife well. However, finally he explained his extreme situation. The wife immediately agreed to gave him half of her lifetime and the Death went away. The couple lived happily, raised their children and after 40 years came the Death and toke the both spouses. (My summary and translation).[2]

Georgian folktale evidently shows the parallels with Ancient Greek and Hindu narratives. The female character of the Georgian folktale could be regarded as a duplicate of Alcestis from Euripides' drama (fifth century BC), and Savitri from *Mahabharata* (fourth century BC). All of these women used their power of dedication to their husbands to prevent the death.

In the drama *Alcestis* by Euripides, Admetus is granted the privilege of being able to offer a substitute for his death, thanks to his previous kindness to Apollo. His parents decline the proposition that they should volunteer to deputize for him, and Death is about to take him when his wife Alcestis volunteers. She is already being lamented on her deathbed when Heracles, a former associate of Admetus, appears and wrestles with Death, who is forced to give up his victim.[3]

The story of the princess Savitri is one of the best-known and best-loved tales of India. It appears within *The Mahabharata.*

Savitri is a daughter of the king Asvapati in the land Madra. She is so beautiful and has such radiance that prospective suitors are put off by the very

[2] Georgian Folklore Database. Fundamentals of an Electronic Documentation of Caucasian Languages and Cultures 'Armazi'. Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature Folklore Archive. 2006. http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/database/folkarch/query.htm#inpform

[3] Euripides. Alcestis. Edited and translated by David Kovacs. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1994. http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0006.tlg002.perseus-eng1:1-27. Euripides' version is one of only two complete extended treatments from antiquity, though we can trace a considerable tradition in previous allusion or early fragments. The other is the so-called *Alcestis Barcinonensis* (Barcelona Alcestis), a late Latin poetic narrative of considerable sophistication, but clearly looking back to the already classic version of Euripides itself.

splendor of her eyes. Nobody simply has the courage to marry her. Savitri finds Satyavan, the son of a blind king named Dyumatsena. Savitri returns to find her father speaking with sage Narada who announces that Savitri has made a bad choice: although perfect in every way, Satyavan is destined to die one year from that day. In response to her father's pleas to choose a more suitable husband, Savitri insists that she will choose her husband but once. Savitri and Satyavan married. Three days before the foreseen death of Satyavan, Savitri asks for her father-in-law's permission to accompany her husband into the forest. They go and while Satyavan is splitting wood, he suddenly becomes weak and lays his head in Savitri's lap. Yama himself, the god of Death, comes to claim the soul of Satyavan. Savitri follows Yama as he carries the soul away. When he tries to convince her to turn back, she offers successive formulas of wisdom. Impressed by Savitri's dedication and purity, Yama grants life to Satyavan and blesses Savitri's life with eternal happiness. Satyavan awakens as though he has been in a deep sleep and returns to his parents along with his wife.[4]

In the scholarly literature has been already noticed the similarity of the stories of Alcestis and Savitri.[5] Moreover, there is no difficulty in accepting that Alcestis represents a literary treatment of a folkloric original. Georgios A. Megas examined in detail numerous oral versions of Modern Greek and South Slavic folk narratives. Megas treated many questions of the folktale type ATU 899 *Alcestis* through an examination of their affinity to existing environmental conditions and folk beliefs.[6]

The geographical position of Georgia, a region lying between East and West, formed a natural melting pot of cultures. In Georgian folklore, the motif of self-sacrifice is wide-spread as well as in the folklore of European and Near Eastern peoples.

A Georgian folk poem, similar to the international tale type ATU 899 *Alcestis*, describes how a young man begs his parents, brothers, wife and lover

[4] Sarma, Bharadvaja. Vyasa's Mahabharatam in Eighteen Parvas. The Great Epic of India in Summary Translation. Kolkata: Academic Publishers, 2008, pp. 329-336.

[5] Griffith, Ralph T.H. Idylls from the Sanskrit. The Calcutta Review, Vol. XLVI (1868), 137-157; Gubernatis, Angelo De and Joseph Gerson Da Cunha (translators). Savitri: An Indian Dramatic Idyl in Two Acts. Harvard: Ránimá's Union Press, 1882; Kerbaker, Michel. Savitri: episodio del Mahabharata recato in versi italiani: premessovi uno studio storico-comparativo sul mito di Savitri-Alcesti. Perrotti 1875; Eliot, Valeric (ed.). The Letters of T.S.Eliot. Vol. 2. 1923-1925. Faber&Faber, 2011; Škof, Lenart. On Sacred Genealogies: Antigone and Savitri. O svetih genealogijah pri Antigoni in Savitri. Primerjalna Književnost. PKn (Ljubljana) 38.1(2015): 175-186.

[6] Megas, Georgios A. Akestis, in: Enzykopädie des Märchens. B. 1. Berlin/NewYork: Walter de Gruyter, 1977, 315-319.

that may be they can take his place when the deity of death comes for him. Everyone refuses to do so, except the lover of the young man – she is ready to sacrifice herself to save her beloved. This poem is antiphonic. In the end of each verse comes a refrain word *menatsvale* [Georg. 'please take my place'], meaning 'can you die instead of me?'

The poem in my translation is as follows:

'My Mother, Death is coming to take me, please take my place!'

'I cannot, ask your father!'

'My Father, Death is coming to take me, please take my place!'

'I cannot, ask your brother!'

'My Brother, Death is coming to take me, please replace me!'

'I cannot, ask your sister!'

'My sister, Death is coming to take me, please take my place!'

'I cannot, ask your wife!'

'My wife, Death is coming to take me, please take my place!'

'I cannot, ask your lover!'

'My love, Death is coming to take me, please take my place!'

'I will die instead of you, please show me which way I have to go!'[7]

In Georgian language there are some figures of speech which have the meaning of self-sacrifice. Such words are *genatsvale*, *sheni chiri me* and *shemogevle*. They are terms of endearment and their linguistic status is defined as the semantic zone of "Self-sacrifice".[8]

The word *genatsvale* ("I wish to be in your place") in Georgian language is unique as it is difficult to find its equivalent in other languages, expressed in one word. The word *genatsvale* widely used in Georgia means taking on oneself the misfortune of the other. Its synonyms *sheni chiri me* ("I will take your sorrow instead of you", "let me take your place in trouble") and *shemogevle* ("Let me take care of you") express the desire to suffer the other's plague. The word *shemogevle* literally means movement of a person around the other person. In Georgian traditional folk medicine, in some cases of illness, the family members complete a ritual: they go in the circle around a sick person to beg the health-deities for her/his wellness.[9] Georgian Ethnologist Irakli Surguladze con-

[7] Kotetishvili, Vakhtang 1961. Khalkhuri poesia [Folk poetry]. Tbilisi, 1961, p. 80

[8] Levidze, Marine. Komunikatsiis ethnostili da mimartvis saalerso formebi kartulsa da inglisur enebshi. [The ethno-style of communication and endearment terms in Georgian and English languages]. Thesis. Tbilisi 2017, p. 99.

[9] Surguladze, Irakli. Mitosi, kulti, rituali sakartveloshi. [Myth, Cult and Ritual in Georgia]. Tbilisi: Mematiane, 2002, pp. 192-202; Tuite, Kevin. The Violet and the Rose. A Georgian Lullaby as

sidered this archaic ritual in connecting with the mythological concept of self-sacrifice, widely spread in Mediterranean, Near East and Caucasus: to replace someone when the deity of health or the death comes for him.

It is easy to see similarities between the stories of Alcestis and Savitri with the Georgian folk lyrics *Can You Die Instead of Me?* and the folktale *Death and a Young Man*. Both of them – lyrics and folktale remain the main theme of the self-sacrifice of the woman for her beloved man. In Georgian folklore there are some folktales presenting another female character as a self-sacrificed figure – a sister.

The Georgian folktale *The Stone Girl* tells about a little girl who overheard a prophecy of the 'Fate Writers' about her newborn brother. The Fate Writers are very popular figures in Georgian folktales, legends and folk beliefs, called *bedis mtserali* (Georgian: *bedi* – fate, *mtserali* – writer, *bedistsera* – destiny). They are represented as engels or wise old men. They come from the heaven and take a seat on a roof of a house where a baby is born.

The plot of the folktale is as follows:

A little girl heard the prophecy of the Fate Writers, when her youngest brother was born. One of the Fate Writers said: 'On the forehead of the boy there is written that he will fall down from a fir tree when he reaches his 12 age. If someone hears my prophecy and tells this, he/she will turn into a stone.' The second Fate Writer said: 'When the boy reaches his 16 age, he will fall down from a horse. If someone hears my prophecy and tells this, he/she will turn into a stone.' The third Fate Writer said: 'The youth will die on his wedding day by a snake's poison. If someone hears my prophecy and tells this, he/she will turn into a stone and nothing but only the water of the sun's surface can alive him again.' The sister feared for her brother greatly and she did not let him go out alone. She tried to avoid the predestined death of her brother. First she let the fir tree cut. Then she asked her father to kill the horse. The father fulfilled her strange wish. On the wedding day of her brother she threw the clothes in a fire and everyone saw the snakes in the clothes. The brother forced her to explain why she knew everything. The sister told him about the Fate Writers and when she finished telling, she turned into a stone. To rescue her, the brother went to search the kingdom of the sun. On the way he met a deer in a field. The deer's horns were raised up to the heaven. The brother climbed on the horns and reached the

song of Healing and Socio-Political Commentary. Cultural Archetypes and Political Change in the Caucasus, Nino Tsitsishvili & Sergey Arutiunov, eds. Nova Science Publishers, 2009, p. 3. http://www.mapageweb.umontreal.ca/tuitekj/publications/IavnanaTUITE.pdf.

kingdom of the sun where he was welcomed by the sun's mother. She was impressed by the story that the young man told her. When the sun returned home, his mother asked him to help the young man. The sun gave him the water of rejuvenation for the self-sacrificed sister. (My summary and translation.)[10]

The folktale begins with a prediction as a type ATU 934 *Tales of the Predestined Death*, and is contaminated with the type ATU 516 *Faithful John*. The tale contains the following motifs according to the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*[11] by Stith Thompson: death by natural forces [M341.2.2], death by an animal [M341.2.21], death by poisoning on the wedding day [M341.1.1]. These motifs are found in the tale types ATU 930, ATU 934 and ATU 516. The Fate Writers write their prophecy on a child's forehead or they have a book where fate is written. The Fate Writers live in a certain space which is chiefly described in the Georgian folktale *The Fate* (ATU 930A). Cited is an English translation of this text by Marjory Wardrop:

"He travelled on until he met a stranger; this stranger was an angel, clad in the form of a man. He inquired of the prince: 'Whither art thou going? what seekest thou?' The prince told him all, and that he wished to learn what was written in the book of fate for him. Then this stranger showed him a beautiful palace, and said: 'There thou wilt learn thy fate.' Then this stranger showed him a beautiful palace, and said: 'There thou wilt learn thy fate.' The prince thanked him, and set out for the palace. When he arrived in the courtyard, he looked round, and saw notes lying about. He began to examine them, but, for a long time, he searched in vain. Then there came from the palace another man, who said to the prince: 'What dost thou want, brother? what seekest thou?' The prince answered: 'I am seeking for the letter in which my fate is written.' 'Why seekest thou there? those are only poor folks' fates, kings' fortunes are written inside. Come with me and I shall show thee thine,' said the unknown. The prince entered the house. The unknown searched for his fate, and called him. Inside was written: 'Such-and-such a prince will marry a weaver's daughter who has been ill for nine years.' He read this out, and the prince was struck with horror. 'I shall change my fate,' said the prince to himself. He took his letter of fate, and went to seek the weaver's daughter."[12]

[10] Ketelauri, Sulkhan (ed.), Iko da ara iko ra. Tbilisi: Nakaduli, 1977, pp. 460-467.
[11] Thompson, Stith. Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends. Reprint ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975.
[12] Wardrop, Marjory (trans.). Georgian Folk Tales. London: in the Strand, 1894, p. 23.

The narratives of Alcestis and Savitri in connecting with mythological figures such are Dumrul and Inanna, are analyzed by the Turkish scholar Günil Özlem Ayaydin within the context of Initiation Theory. By examining fairy tales comparatively, it is possible to find out common intercultural motives and to interpret other shared cultural features. By looking at how differently those motives work, the peculiarity of cultural structures are analysed. As a result, Günil Özlem Ayaydin suggest that fairy tales make use initiative patterns and present them camouflaged under symbols and transformed signs to both the human unconscious and the modern age.[13]

There are a number of modern folktale treatments, and at least one important medieval one, which serves to stress the difference in perspective between a classical literary and a non-classical sub-literary version. The very elaborate, quasi-heroic version in the late Medieval Turkish *Book of Dede Korkut* is told in an Islamic context:

Dumrul sees a dead warrior for the first time and proclaims himself mightier than death. Allah is furious, and sends the Archangel Azrael to take his soul. The Archangel comes as a bird, and is dismissed and mocked. He then causes the hero's horse to rear while in the form of an invisible spirit. Dumrul sees his folly and pleads for his life, but Allah will only spare it if a substitute is offered. His parents, too, refuse. Only Dumrul' wife does not resist the onset of death, but encourages him; impressed, Allah orders the death of the refusing parents and transfers their remaining span of years to Dumrul and his wife.[14]

According to Graham Anderson, there is no reason to suppose that the *Book of Dede Korkut*, the supposedly illiterate Bard of the Oghuz, had any knowledge of Euripides as such; and we can certainly point to the very early insistence in Sumerian mythological tales of producing a substitute for any of the already dead. We should note, too, the warrior aspect of wild Dumrul. This is hardly prominent in Euripides, where Admetus is an out-and-out coward throughout; through he had in the previous part of the story been able to pose as an outstanding heroic champion at least but only with Apollo's help.

Graham Anderson points that the tale *Alcestis* is found as a folktale in the Near East still, both in Greece itself, in the early twentieth-century Armenian variant *A Tale of Love*, and a fourteenth-century Yemeni Jewish text.[15]

[13] Ayaydin, Günil Özlem. Masalla ölüme meydan okuyan insan: Alkestis, Dumrul, Inanna ve Savitri anlatilarinin karşilaştirmali incelemesi (Challenging Death through Fairy Tales: A Comparative Study of the Narratives of Alcestis, Dumrul, Inanna, and Savitri). Millî Folklor, 55 (2014), pp. 15-24.

[14] The Book of Dede Korkut. Translated by Geoffrey Lewis. Pinguin Classics, 2011.

[15] Anderson, Graham: Fairytale in the Ancient World. London/NewYort: Routledge, 2000, p. 117.

The comparison Oriental and Occidental literary plots in Georgian folktales can derive some more general conclusions. If we take the old written documents as a testimony, not a source, then the interactions between cultural zones and the consequent discerning of cultural regions may be investigated. Here I would like to cite the concept by Nemanja Radulović, when he writes about Balkan folktales and folk beliefs in connecting with the fate and prophecy: "It is necessary to emphasise the link between motif and belief, because, although it has migrated, the motif was accepted in some areas and it has continued to live for centuries, obviously because it is connected with belief and fulfils a more significant function than purely narrative. A comparison of the different simple forms, such as sayings and tales, in this case fully reveals the phenomenology of both only in terms of its philological and ethnological cultural background".[16]

The dominant approach in folklore study the historic-geographic method focused on establishing the hypothetical archetype of a given folk narrative, its geographical starting point, and its historical routes of travel. Nowadays deepening understanding of traditional material culture and folk life is influenced by new approaches of historic-geographic method that placed the folk item in cultural context. On the other hand, one has to take into consideration here that the distribution of motifs within the theme is structurally and this formula itself represents a specific mechanism for the synthesis of folktales, then the motif is the most essential element of that analysis. An exact synchronic description has to precede historical-genetic analysis of folktales, i.e. to examine the constant elements of the folktale, of which the researcher would not lose sight when passing from one tale to another. It is precisely these invariants and their correlations within the composition of the folktale.

The Georgian folktale, folk lyrics and figures of speeches – discussed here, show certain features of ancient thoughts in Georgian folklore that are apparently universal and have wide distribution in the world that their generality may be presumed to result from recurrent reactions of the human psyche to situations of the general order. There is an astonishing similarity between myths collected in widely different regions. The differences are there too, of course, between cultures and culture areas but the basic idea of these myths are equal.

[16] Radulović, Nemanja. Fate Written on the Forehead in Serbian Oral Narratives. Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore 59(2014), pp. 29-44