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Imperial pipe dreams

A Georgian satire on the human will to conquer

By Maya Jaggi

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HUMAN SADNESS

Translated by Geoffrey Gosby, Clifford Marcus et al
160pp. Dedalus. Paperback, £9.99.
Goderdzi Chokheli

When Georgians of the remote Caucasus Mountains were not yet reconciled to Christianity, the local villagers threw a priest into a warrior's fresh grave before filling it with dirt. As the stubborn pagans told the *Catholikos*: "you said not to bury anyone without a priest". This joke, related in *Human Sadness*, is emblematic of Goderdzi Chokheli's novel as a whole, in its deadpan tragicomedy, its veneer of pastoral innocence overlaying a sophisticated irony.

Born in Soviet Georgia in 1954, Chokheli was internationally fêted as a film-maker when he died in Tbilisi at the age of fifty-three. Yet western awareness of Georgia's rich literature has lagged behind acclaim for its cinema. *Human Sadness*, his third prose work, was published in Georgian in 1984. Levan Berdzenishvili's preface to this first English translation posits Chokheli as a "modern-day mythographer" who deftly eluded the censor without compromising his art. Centred on the author's birthplace, Chokhi, a mountain village northeast of Tbilisi, the novel criss-crosses the "godforsaken" Gudamaqari Gorge. Folkloric tales conjure up hunters, shepherds, animal sacrifice, blood feuds and Death personified. Allusions to submarines, jets and nuclear war anchor the plot in the twentieth century.

Searching for a wick at dusk, a young novelist stumbles on five books documenting a bizarre military campaign in which his grandmother took part. The aim was to restore the customary right of Chokhian men to marry any woman from the gorge, after a father shockingly withheld his daughter's hand: "It's a different time now, wake up, eh! You're living in the Dark Ages … It used to be the law but it's not any more". The indignant Chokhian mother whose son was refused makes of it a *casus belli*.

On the war path to restore their privileges are mainly women and the elderly, since the men have taken the flocks to winter pastures. The pugilistic swordsman Galilei, beheading snowmen he names Napoleon, Alexander, Hitler, Achilles, Shah Abba and Tamerlane, enacts war games with chickens drunk on vodka. Bibighai is the village priest and flag-bearer, recycling old speeches. The medal-wearing commander-in chief, Vazhi Gogi, "lived 12 years underwater" as a submarine captain. With Homeric criers, this ragbag

army assaults sparsely populated villages with “total force”, ringing bells and making the vanquished swear “servile obedience”.

This “illustrious campaign”, mirroring the civilizing pretensions of expanding empires, is joined (like Alexander’s) by historians and philosophers. Belief systems are gleaned from the defeated, rather as Enlightenment explorers siphoned knowledge from the colonized, the better to subdue them. But the harrowing tale of Gamikhardai, “collector of worries”, whose beloved threw herself into the black Aragvi River after having been raped by bandits, overshadows all he collects. While the official chronicler Samkharauli trumpets heroic deeds, the sceptical writer Chaghi – whose lyrical notebook gives the novel its title – “tried hard to convince the women that they were doing something foolish”. These disparate registers are for the most part finely rendered by five translators from Lia Chokoshvili’s Oxford Georgian Translation Project. They range from the humorously idiomatic (“I’ll knock your blocks off!”) to the lyrical: “The soot-blackened towers stand like exclamation marks in the snow”.

It emerges that an underlying war aim is to commandeer resources to construct a grandiose 500-room house from walnut trees. “‘Why live separately?’ the priest intoned. ‘Wouldn’t it be better to be together all the time?’” Soviet collectivization, though roundly mocked, is not the only target. The campaign’s ultimate futility fuels a Swiftian satire on all imperial conquest and wars of occupation – from historic Greek, Persian or Russian expansionism to (by implication) the Red Army invasion of independent Georgia in 1921.

Yet the author’s genius is to hint, through myths and fables, that the will to conquer is inherent in us all – whether stoked by jealousy, revenge, pride, pique or lust. Women and children are often its victims. Ranged against these cruelties and follies are tales of natural justice. A silent thistle gives away a murderer. An eagle pecks out the eyes of a boy who would crush him.

Goderdzi Chokheli’s affirmation of the individual is flagrantly at odds with Soviet ideology. Every person “seems to me to be a story”, he writes. Each, however foolish, is viewed with clarity and compassion: “I don’t write about anything that I don’t love”. We can be grateful that this absurdist anti-war classic is at last available in English – with further short stories promised.

Maya Jaggi *is a writer, critic, founding director of the Oxford Literary Festival’s Georgian programme and the chair of judges of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Literature prize 2024-6*

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