

MODERN CLASSICS FROM GEORGIA 2015



Modern Classics from Georgia

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Introduction

The 5th-century hagiographic text *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* is considered to be the first monument of Georgia's centuries-old literature. The poem *The Man in a Panther's Skin*, a masterpiece of lay literature, is a fine complement to the impressive hagiographic works and chronicles of the Middle Ages. Rustaveli produced as early as the 12th century a Renaissance ideal of humanity, thus anticipating, in fact, the European Renaissance's historico-cultural epoch of the 13th to 15th centuries.

In the Middle Ages Georgia's history was one of struggle with the great Eastern empires, submission to them and escaping from them, it is not surprising that Georgian literature borrowed a great deal from the east, particularly from Persia. In this tragic epoch for Georgia, the country had poets who were kings and chroniclers who were poets: they used Rustaveli's forms. Generally, Georgia was always more a country of poetry than of prose. This is shown by the variety and richness of its folk poetry.

Despite many attempts, Georgia, which had been isolated from Europe for centuries, found itself incorporated into the Russian empire by the beginning of the 19th century, and this brought a new wave, in the form of Romanticism, into Georgian literature. What is most impressive is the artistic realism which comes to the fore in Georgian literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, and this realism unites a whole generation of the greatest Georgian writers. Georgian literature, in fact, completely assimilated and adopted fully every tendency of western literature: symbolism, dadaism, futurism, and others.

Georgian culture and literature found itself, in a sort of vacuum, during the Soviet era. This is why many Georgian authors, given the severe censorship of the times, were translated into and published in foreign languages only in a fragmentary way.

In the Soviet period Georgia, like the other republics of the USSR, was subject to the restrictions and pressures of many ideological kinds. Nevertheless, Georgian writers and professionals working in various other spheres of the arts managed to create interesting works, thanks to the fluctuations in the time and place of their activity and through metaphorical reworking.

The thirteen Georgians who are represented in the 2015 catalogue produced by the Georgian National Book Centre's Supervisory Board are for a good reason called by us not just 'classics', but 'modern classics'. By this term we want yet again to emphasize the fact that the work of these writers is relevant to the 21st century reader. In their works, which have reflected in an idiosyncratic way both era and traditions, they have managed to make us think about humanity, about general human values, about a philosophy of life.

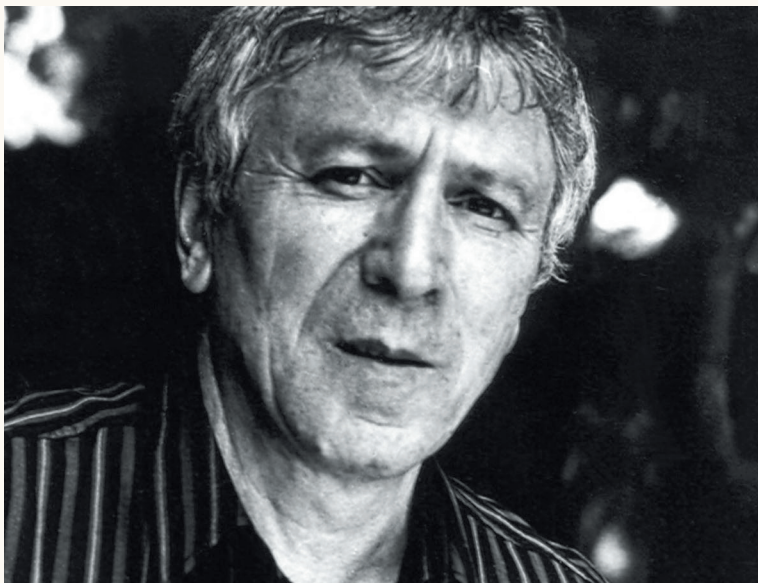
Naturally, the aim of this catalogue cannot be to give a complete picture of Georgian classic literature and of its most significant representatives. But we are even at this stage proud to offer the names and titles of modern classic authors and their works which cannot leave the reader unmoved.

Sample translations of each title included in the Catalogue are available in English or German



Chabua Amirejibi's (1921-2013) parents and close relatives became victims of Stalin's terror in 1937. As a student he himself narrowly escaped being shot in connection with allegations of a planned coup that was intended to achieve Georgia's secession from the Soviet Union. Instead he was sentenced to 25 years in the Gulag—a term that was increased to 85 years as a result of his repeated attempts to escape from the camps. In fact he returned to Georgia in 1960 after 16 years in detention and attracted attention with his first volumes of stories. He achieved lasting popularity with his novel *Data Tutashkhia* (დათა თუთაშხია), which made him famous throughout the Soviet Union and was turned into a film. The book was published in 1972 thanks to the then First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, Eduard Shevardnadze, who championed it in dealings with the censors. *Data Tutashkhia* has appeared in English, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Bulgarian, Romanian, Czech, many of the languages of the former Soviet Union, and, most recently, in French (*L'Âge d'Homme* 2012). Amirejibi supported Georgia's declaration of independence in 1991 and was elected to parliament in 1992. The death of one of his sons in the Abkhazian War precipitated a major personal crisis. It came as a surprise when his novel *Gora Mborgali* was published in 1995. The book is based on the author's experiences in the Gulag. His most recent work, *Giorgi Brqinvale* (George the Brilliant), a historical novel about this 14th-century Georgian king, appeared in 2005. Amirejibi has won many prizes; In 2009 he won the Literary Award SABA for his contribution to Georgian literature.

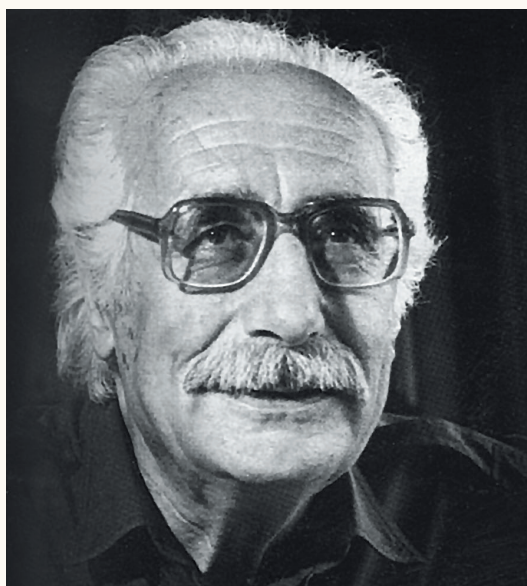
Amirejibi's magnum opus and an undisputed classic of Georgian literature, constantly being republished in Georgia 40 years after it first appeared is *Data Tutashkhia* – a Georgian Robin Hood—embodies the soul of the Georgian people. The novel tells the story of a Georgian outlaw at the time of the tsars (1854 onwards). It combines thriller elements with Dostoyevskian themes of personal fate and national identity. Above all, though, it defends the right to personal freedom and critical expression in the face of a repressive political system.



Otar Chiladze (1933-2009) was a Georgian writer who played a prominent role in the resurrection of the Georgian prose in the post-Stalin era. His novels characteristically fuse Sumerian and Hellenic mythology with the predicaments of a modern Georgian intellectual. He gained popularity with his series of lengthy, atmospheric novels, such as *A Man Was Going Down the Road* (1972-3), *Everyone That Findeth Me* (1976), *Avelum* (1995), and others.

The Basket (გოგონი) was published in 2003. The story begins at the end of the 19th century when a Russian officer seduces a Georgian shepherd's wife: the resulting bastard, the ancestor of the novels anti-heroes, is kept in a basket where he cannot interfere with his mother's adultery. The shepherd avenges himself by murdering his wife and disembowelling himself, but fails to kill the boy in the basket. The boy, Razhden Kasheli, later rapes his foster-mother, before disappearing to become a robber and murderer, returning to Georgia with the Red Army and a female tramp he has married: he becomes a killer for the Soviet authorities. After he is murdered by a drunken Assyrian, his son Anton acts as a GPU and NKVD killer in the Great Terror of 1937-8, shooting countless victims: Anton's great achievement is to marry Princess Ketusi, whose father and husband he has murdered, thus initiating the process, fatal for Georgian society, of intermarrying and interbreeding Soviet killers with Georgian aristocrats and intellectuals. Anton is killed by a runaway truck in 1949, but his son Razhden 2nd takes over as an important Soviet official. Razhden's son Anton 2nd may not, however, be a real Kasheli, since his mother Pepe was pregnant before the parents married. Anton is a childish dreamer and, manipulated by Razhden 2nd, marries Liziko, the daughter of an unworldly writer, Elizbar. Razhden seduces Liziko: both Anton and Elizbar find out after Liziko confesses to her stepmother.

More important even than these violent sexual and homicidal events are the author's and character's reflections on the irrecoverable degradation of the country.



Otar Chkheidze (1920-2007) was a Georgian writer, whose father and uncles fell a victim to the tragic events of 1924 in Georgia caused by communist regime. The family was raided and evicted from homeland. He published his first short story in 1940 in the magazin *Our Generation*. His novel of 1974, *Sog*, was the basis for Giorgi Shengelaia's film *Travels of Young Musician* (1985). He was awarded the Literary Award SABA in 2005 and the Ilia Chavchavadze Award in 2006.

'*Sog* (ბორბაგი) has a narrative power and the powerful imagery comparable with Mikheil Javakhishvili's *Jaqos Khiznebi* (ჯაყოს ხიზნები), which it virtually continues. The years that follow were portrayed in Grigol Robakidze's *Murdered Soul* (ჩაკლული სული). The novel's plot is built on a journey (in this respect it echoes such classic texts as *Alms-Gathering*, *Don Quixote*, *A Traveller's Letters* etc). Nikusha Chachanidze, a young composer, comes to Kartli to collect folk songs; He comes prepared with a plan of the villages and families he has to stay with. The teacher Qanchaveli has given him letters to take to prominent families who might help him, but has also warned him that the times are dangerous. Leko Tatasheli offers him unexpected, unforeseen guidance. This man is an extraordinary, impressive image of an undeterred patriot who recognizes Nikusha as a mysterious hero and tries to convince others of this.

In this novel the Bolsheviks are seen as bringers of a new order, a constant danger to the country when, in the grip of an unjust idea, they get their hands on power and violence reigns. This applies to the times that have come and is prophetic of the future, too. The novel gives an impressive portrayal of people waiting for a hero. Everyone is waiting and this interrupted motif of the search for a hero is taken up again.' (M. Jaliashvili, literary critic)



Goderdzi Chokheli (1954-2007) was a Georgian writer and film-director. His first Book – *A Letter to the Spruce Trees* – was published in 1980 by the Merani publishing house. He is also the author of several collections of prose and poetry: *The Dusk-Coloured Valley*, *Wolf*, *The Priest's Sin*, *A Fish's Letters*, *Save It for Me*, *O Mother Earth*, *Fate the Pursuer*, *The Life of Grass*, *Four Novels*. His works have been translated into Russian, Ukrainian, Italian, English and German and have been at various times printed in both collections and in special issues of magazines in the former USSR, the USA, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Italy and other countries.

Goderdzi Chokheli's literary world as an unveiled secret grew in between the visible and invisible, actual and dreamy, real and mythical. The world has opened for him. And now the writer tries to share this secret with others. With incredible mercy and simplicity he sets up in the reader an inner readiness to make us believe in the greater; In the smaller, in the eternal and in the impermanent – the divine in a human.

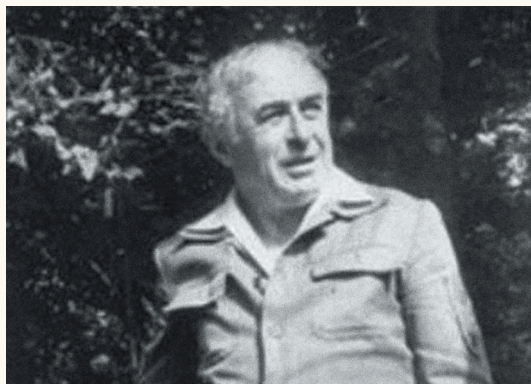
Characters of the novel – *Human Sadness* (ადამიანთა სევდა), the Chokheli's from Gudamakari, are strange people who dream of building a common family house. They have a gatherer of sorrows-Gamikhardai. One day, they carry all the sorrows gathered by Gamikhardai to an old man in a white nabadi on the top of the hill, in the hope of making them disappear. The old man chooses one of them – the universal sorrow of the approaching End of the World...

‘– ...What is life?

– Life is sadness, sweet sadness of being a human

– And death?

– Death is also sadness, sadness of unbeing a human.’



Revaz Inanishvili (1926-1991) graduated from the Philology faculty of Tbilisi State University. He wrote the scripts for a number of famous films. In 1977 he won the Shota Rustaveli State Award for his collected stories *The Distant White Peak*. His work has been translated into Russian, Ukrainian, German, Bulgarian, Armenian and other languages. The writer and critic Akaki Bakradze said of Inanishvili's story *Bread for the Soul*: 'His world is pure, crystalline, bathed in sunshine, populated by kind, decent, hard-working and neighbourly human beings.'

Recognized as a master of short prose, Revaz Inanishvili achieved fame with his novella *The Wandering Musician* (მოხეტიალე მუსიკოსი), an echo of an American story which the writer had read in the distant past. The main character is an elderly musician who wanders from village to village on the Swedish coast: nobody know if he wanders from village to village because he couldn't make it as a great musician, or whether he couldn't make it as a great musician because he preferred wandering from village to village. The climax of the novel involves a chance meeting between a lighthouse keeper and the musician. The lighthouse keeper asks the musician to tell his story. The musician says that he is a violinist, but the lighthouse keeper did not seem to understand what it meant. So the musician took the violin out of the case and started to play and after some time the musician noticed interest in the lighthouse keeper's eyes. He played several melodies and at last put the violin on the table. The lighthouse keeper was smiling. He said: 'But you too must know something good, to ensure that human souls don't go astray,' he tells him. For a few minutes both men are very happy.



Mikheil Javakhishvili (1880-1937) was a Georgian novelist who is regarded as one of the top twentieth-century Georgian writers. His recalcitrance to the Soviet ideological pressure cost him life: he was executed during Joseph Stalin's Great Purge and his writings were banned for nearly twenty years.

Mikheil Javakhishvili's novel *Jaqos Khiznebi* (ჯაყოს ხიზნები) was published in 1924, shortly after he had been reprieved from a Soviet secret-police execution squad. It reflects the chaos that ensued as the Georgian independent republic came to an end in 1920-1 and the Red Army turned Georgia into a Soviet republic. It is about the reversal in fortunes of the former landed gentry and the landless peasantry (The word khizani technically means a landless refugee peasant who is allowed land by a landowner in exchange for labour or a share of the crop, but it has come to mean a dependant, a refugee, a displaced person, or a poor peasant in general).

Jaqos Khiznebi is Javakhishvili's most prominent work. The plot describes Prince Teimuraz Khevistavi's tragic life, who has inherited a large estate and village, Nashidari. But he is a bookish pedant, absorbed by questions of history and politics, and prefers to live in Tbilisi on the income of his estate, whose fate he takes no interest in. The estate is managed by Jaqo, an illiterate but cunning Osetian brute, who himself came to Nashidari as a refugee from the Osetian forests, and was promoted to run the family estate. Jaqo, one of the great monsters of literature, terrorises and fleeces the peasants, robs his master's possessions and delivers only a portion of the tithes and other income on which Prince Teimuraz depends. Teimuraz sells all his possessions in Tbilisi for food, but is finally destitute and have to accept Jaqo's suggestion that he return to the estate with his wife.

Jaqo immediately enslaves his former masters. Despite all the evidence and the hints of friends, Teimuraz refuses to believe that Jaqo has stolen not just his house and estate, but his wife.

The novel is remarkably free from Soviet ideology: only the former priest declares that he has transferred his faith in God to the working people. The conversations between the priest and Teimuraz are fascinating explorations of the failings of the Georgian character that have prevented them from becoming European or from establishing a democracy, and the Christian philosophy of Matthew Chapter 7 that permeates Teimuraz's thoughts, however vainly, on the triumph of the meek and the ruin of the powerful give the novel profundity without didacticism.

English edition of Javakhishvili's novel *Kvachi Kvachantiradze*, was listed among the Best holiday reads 2015 by the Guardian.



Leo Kiacheli (1884-1963) was born in West Georgia. He studied law at Kharkov University. But the university was closed because of student protests, and Kiacheli returned to Georgia, where he was soon put in Kutaisi Provincial prison on charges of associating with revolutionary elements among the peasantry. In 1907 members of the Social-Democratic Party dug a tunnel under the prison and Kiacheli, together with 36 other prisoners, escaped. At one point he was living covertly in Moscow; Later he moved to live in Geneva. While abroad he made a thorough study of foreign literature and wrote his first novel, *Tariel Golua*. In 1917, after the revolution, Kiacheli returned to Georgia and continued his extensive and fruitful literary career. His novels – *Blood*, *Gvadi Bigva*, *A Man of the Mountains* – show the author to be a remarkable novelist, although it must be noted that his short stories are of equal merit: *Maya*, *the Prince's Daughter*, *Haki Adzba*, *Almasgir Kibulan* stay in the reader's mind because of their characters' complex psychology, the tense dialogues and the enthralling plots.

'As far as impressions are concerned, *Almasgir Kibulan* (ალმასგირ კიბულან) stands out among Kiacheli's stories: this is a human tragedy in which everyday images intersect with mythological ones, spiritual impulses with material ones. It is a tragedy whose character, together with ordinary people, is a river. The river Enguri is not just the scene of the destruction of one family, but the cause and the means by which father and son, cut off in this world, meet in the next.' (Z. Kvaratskhelia, writer, literary critic)



Davit Kldiashvili (1862-1931) chose as his main theme a portrayal of the decline of the impoverished so-called 'autumnal gentry' of Imeretia. He describes the inner tragic nature of the destitute country gentry in a comic way, which is something achievable only through his unique style of writing and characteristic individuality, unlike anyone else's. Humour is the mainstay of Davit Kldiashvili's writing.

'This story would be extremely tragic, were it not so laughable,' Davit Kldiashvili wrote in his story *Samanishvili's Stepmother* (სამანიშვილის ღვინაყვანი) which is devoted to the inauspicious subject of an inheritance. Obviously, this is not a new subject for Georgian literary narrative, but this Georgian writer finds a very different purpose for his treatment: he tries to bring out the comedy in the drama and to transform it as a form of self-defence: were it not for the comic minor characters, who are the core of the story, the story would be just another dreary description of the tragic social cataclysm which took place in Georgia towards the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries.

'Surely Bekina Samanishvili was a poor aznauri, and quite poor at that... Bekina, however, considered him among the well-off households and would never admit his poverty. He was, as they say in Imereti, rather big-headed. Whenever he used to proudly describe his unlimited resources, Platon, his only married son, took the old man's banter for wishful thinking. He would never contradict his father, only cross himself and say: "Thank you, Lord, for all you've given us! Thank you, Lord!"

With these words Platon expressed his genuine gratitude to the heavenly Father for not having any siblings to share the meagre bite... The loss of his mother was a bitter experience for the son, but Platon was also extremely worried for an additional reason. Bekina was a rather sturdy old man, so the fear that he would want to marry again was looming over his son. The prospect of a possible stepmother having her own children turned Platon's blood cold. That would certainly be a complete disaster...

With these thoughts in his head, one fine day Bekina sent a middleman to his son informing him of his wish to re-marry...' (Translated by M. Kiasashvili)



Giorgi Leonidze (1899-1966) was a Georgian poet, prose writer, and literary scholar. Throughout the Soviet period, he tried to follow the 'correct' political line; He published evocative prose based on his childhood memories and experiences, notably *The Tree of Life* (ნაგვერის ხე) which was filmed in 1976 by Tengiz Abuladze as the first part of his well-known trilogy. In his later years Leonidze spent his wealth to benefit his native village, and he was president of the Institute of Georgian Literature at the Georgian Academy of Sciences from 1958 until his death.

The Tree of Life is Giorgi Leonidze's collection of prose fiction and sketches; it was written in his last years (1962). The characters in this book are actual persons who stayed in the poet's memory of his distant childhood.

One of the main female characters is Marita, which appears in *The Tree of Life*:
'Marita was the similar gift from the nature, just like the pomegranate blossom entwining my dream – Marita! Full of light, sky-smiling flower of my youth!...
...Leading a shirt-clad woman on a donkey seated back to front.
I can still remember the tremble of her muscles. She must have been cold and in pain, hot and courageous, she must have craved for death, but Death was nowhere to be seen while her suffering was as merciless as death!
At that moment she died at least a dozen times and at least a dozen times she was forcibly revived!
She was escorted like a village saint, led like a queen followed by her courtiers. The young woman's fragile shoulders shuddered as the crowd threw mud and dung at her white night-gown, which was rapidly losing its whiteness. Not a single sound...
Not a single cry... and that was weird...
But the silence roared unbearably, bawled like a waterfall, dragging everything and everyone into its eddy...
Since that terrible day nobody ever saw the alienated, viciously humiliated Marita. Marita had died for the village!...
Everyone seemed to have realized their mistake, everyone contemplated their own share of the evil done...' (Translated by M. Kiasashvili)

Against the background of a difficult historical period, the stories of life as it unfolds are closely linked to each other, although each separate story is a completely autonomous text with its own characters, its sense of tragedy and its sincerity, and leaves an indelible impression on the reader. The prose narrative is imbued with a powerful poetic torrent.



Niko Lortkipanidze (1880-1944) has left a literary heritage with a wide range of very different themes and genres (he published about 200 miniatures, novellas and short stories, as well as a novel and two plays). His work was significant in determining the development of Georgian prose of the twentieth century. He can be considered an impressionistic writer. Russian imperialist system was not fond of Lortkipanidze. He even spent some time in a prison because of his disapproval towards the unnatural confrontation of Georgian and Jewish people. In 1902 Niko Lortkipanidze went to Austria to study and got familiar with the German Literature. After returning he worked as a teacher of German language at the gymnasium of aristocrats and at the same time he worked as a publicist and was involved in the publishing.

Lortkipanidze's story *Casting Spells by Radio* (შელოცვა რადიოთი) was first published in 1928. There was a real basis for what he describes in the story: after World War One, the catastrophes of the following years and the establishment of Soviet power in Georgia, a great wave of emigration flowed from Georgia. The main character is Elli Gordeliani, a prince's daughter, brought up with a tragic morality and who is consequentially too feeble to stand up to the new challenges of life. This last offspring of an ancient Georgian family dies, drunk on brandy, tired after dancing with snakes, which have poisoned her. The dream of returning to Georgia constantly pursues her, and the reason for her death is her attempt to realise that dream: she was trying to buy the means to return to her homeland by performing a dance with snakes. Her last wish is to hear her wet-nurse's magic healing spell on the radio, for this reflects her conviction that a Georgian word, a voice coming from Georgia, might cure her and give her the strength to come back to life.



Guram Rcheulishvili (1934-1960) spent only three years as a writer. During his life only seven short stories by him were published: *Granddad Kote's Autumn*, *The Mousetrap*, *Love in the Month of March*, *Slow Tango*, *A Horse Called Tvirtvila*, *The Nameless Man from Uplis Tsikhe* and *Death in the Mountains*. His first collection of stories, *Shepherd's Pipes*, was published after his death. His limited literary heritage (short stories, novellas, miniatures, and a play) has left a big mark on the development of Georgian prose. His works have been translated into German, English, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Czech and Russian.

Guram Rcheulishvili was 26 when he drowned at Gagra, after diving into a raging sea trying to save an unknown woman.

His characters are distinguished by their strong natures; His novellas have an inner rhythm, and as a writer he had a very fine talent for looking deeper into things. In his very first story he set out his ideal of a human being: a strong and sane man tempered by the inexorable element of the sea, a man who will sacrifice his own life in order to save others' lives. In his story *Slow Tango* (ნელი ტანგო) we can sense a hidden dread of the sea, a feeling that there is some hostile, treacherous force in it.

'Guram Rcheulishvili brought a breath of modernity into our literature. He had a deeply developed feeling for formal innovation. This is why he found it so natural to assume the highly-strung, tense manner so typical of the great masters of prose fiction in our times. But at the same time there was something unearthly, mediaeval in his aura as a human being and in his nature as a writer.' (G. Asatiani, Literary critic)



Grigol Robakidze (1880-1962) took courses at the universities of Tartu and Leipzig. He returned from Germany in 1908, and eventually came to lead the young Georgian symbolists. In 1915, he founded and led the Blue Horns, a new group of symbolist poets and writers which would play an important role, particularly in the next two decades. Heavily influenced by Nietzsche, Robakidze's prose centered on the search for mythological archetypes and their realisation in the life of a nation and although its plotting is always artificial and displays much posturing, he was highly respected both by his compatriots and a number of major European literary figures, such as Stefan Zweig and Nikos Kazantzakis.

‘The novel *A Murdered Soul* (ჩაკლული სული), Robakidze himself admitted, was prophetic. In his afterword of 1937 he wrote, ‘This book which should not really be called *A Murdered Soul*, tries to give an artistic portrayal of the underground foul force of Bolshevism when it affects the atmosphere. The book was written at the end of 1932. What has happened in the interval since confirms the views which underly my work.

The novel portrays the period that followed the violent Sovietisation of Georgia. Its main character is a Georgia whose soul has been destroyed, which is humiliated and disgraced. The novel shows how a human being's soul is murdered and how the human being is turned into a zombie. The danger to be feared is that the writer has seen that there is no force capable of standing up to this demonic ideology: the people seem to have caught it like an infectious disease, which means that free, unbowed creators have been infected with something they either have to survive in order to be reborn, or else be spiritually wiped out. The novel shows how a creative spirit falls victim, but rises again through the power of faith and gathers the strength to struggle against evil. (M. Jaliashvili, literature critic)



Vazha-Pshavela (1861-1915) 'is the greatest genius of modern Georgia. At the peak of his works are the poems and stories of tragic narrative and humanistic pathos that amalgamate his individual philosophy, Caucasian myth and general human tragedy.' (L. Berdzenishvili, literary critic, translator).

'With his narrative poems Vazha put before us such a mirror of humanity that it would be right not to look into it lest we see dragons, dwarfs, boors, and those who revile humanity. But to save us there is placed before us the mirror of our own faces, our own bellied and sick brains.' (B. Kharanauli, writer).

The Snake-Eater (გველის მჭამელი), published in 1901 is Vazha-Pshavela's last epic poem. This poem is arguably the most outstanding works by Vazha-Pshavela.

The Snake-Eater tells the story of the highlander with the extraordinary ability to understand the nature. Mindia has been captured by mythological creatures, demons. Mindia is tormented by his isolation. Born free, he cannot accept a life of slavery or endure exile from his homeland; he decides to kill himself. He eats a piece of snake flesh in order to kill himself, but is surprised by undergoing a transformation. Mindia becomes a wizard, a soothsayer. He escapes captivity and gets back to his homeland. Now his tragedy begins. He has learnt the language of nature. Mindia can understand every living being, he has come to love nature, and nature loves him. Mindia marries and has a family. His family needs food and Mindia has to kill game. But how can he take an axe to a tree, when the tree speak so lovingly to him; How can he raise his hand to kill a deer, when it greets him affectionately? Mindia is in torment. He has to choose one or the other: life wins.

'Mindia's tragedy began not when he lost his knowledge, but when he got it, for his knowledge was of an unnatural kind.' (A. Bakradze, literary critic)

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