

# Narrative Strategies of the Representation of Consciousness in the Modern Georgian Novel: Post-Soviet Experience (Based on *Obole* by Aka Morchiladze)

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## Abstract

*The paper presents the outcomes of the research on the following topic: the formation of the national identity in the Post-Soviet/Post-Communist Georgian literary discourse. The material is taken from Obole – a novel by a famous representative of post-modern Georgian literature Aka Morchiladze. The research methodology consists of cognitive narratology, namely, the narratological knowledge aimed at the study of the character's consciousness (Palmer 2004, Zunshine 2006). In order to identify the peculiarities of the act of remembering, the research uses various approaches to the research of memory (Neumann 2005, Birke 2008). The aim of the research is to define the role of values, aspirations and opinions (regarding the reality beyond "the iron curtain"), obligations, traumatic experience, action programs (stereotypes) (Antonio Damasio) formed in the Georgian society (on the individual and collective levels) during the Soviet regime in the functioning of the autobiographic self/identity of characters living in the Post-Soviet reality. The research attempts to study how the old model of identity meets human homeostatic and homeodynamic (Antonio Damasio) needs in the new reality of the Post-Communist period. The research also attempts to find out whether the act of remembering (Soviet experience) supports or hampers the formation of the new national identity. Based on the novel under analysis, the research identified the peculiarities of individual and social consciousness in the Post-Soviet reality. Implementation of the above-mentioned objectives clarified the cultural representation of Communism in the Post-Soviet States.*

**Key words:** *Soviet experience. National identity, cognitive narratology, Aka Morchiladze*

Contemporary Georgian literary discourse does not draw a uniform picture of the formation of the national identity; hence, we can talk about the identity of certain groups. Literary critics have assessed Aka Morchiladze's *Obole* as a representation of the dominant national discourse. The model of

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identity shown in the text creates a figure of identification for a major portion of the society: after gaining independence, the opening of borders yielded new possibilities for development. However, under the new social order, orientation towards the old model complicated decision-making and optimization of behavior. For many people, new possibilities formed grounds for an identity crisis. Such drama of functioning of consciousness is the main theme of *Obole*. The main challenge for the protagonist who lives in the post-Soviet reality is the controversy between his memories and the new reality. This creates the main homeostatic need (Antonio Damasio): "Your childhood habits cannot be overcome easily. It is hard to change what you have acquired in childhood..." (Morchiladze 2011: 22)

What forms narratological grounds for the study of the character's consciousness in the text under analysis? Consciousness is a complex phenomenon, the main function of which is to meet the evolutionary needs of a human being. All mental processes serve this function. The formation of *identity/autobiographic self* plays a key role in the correct functioning of consciousness (Damasio 2000). Identity is a dynamic construct that may be updated based on human needs. A human being optimizes his/her behavior, takes decisions and makes future plans based on the identity model (Damasio 2000).

In order to study the above-mentioned mental processes in a literary narrative, we should focus on several facts: above all, we should define whether recollection is one of the mental processes described or whether it forms the main part of the narration. In *Obole*, focus is laid on the description of the act of recollection. The novel is classified as a novel of Memory (Neumann 2005). From the narratological perspective, focus should be on such categories as focalization and reliability of narration. With this aim, we should observe how the narrator evaluates himself and other people (Zunshine 2006). When studying the act of recollection, we should bear in mind that recollection is a constructive process and not a reconstructive one (Schacter 1996). The character recalls facts based on the present needs of identity, i.e. homeostatic needs (Damasio 2000). When recalling one's past, if its effect is continued in the text, we should study the regulation of emotion (Palmer 2004). When observing the character's emotion, we should pay attention to such categories as the narrator's protocol (Palmer 2004) and the lexical units denoting the character's behavior. In order to study the identity crisis described in the novel, we should also take into account a category such as analepsis. Violation in the

sequence of narration, as a rule, points to the intensity of functioning of consciousness, i.e. tension. (Birke 2008)

The brief contents of the text under analysis are as follows: the main character, who lives in Tbilisi, receives a message from his brother, who lives in the USA. The brother has learnt from a relative that the roof of their village house has fallen. The main character decides to go to the village at once and repair the roof. But the main reason for this decision is that the village performs the function of the space of memory. Thus, his identity requires frequent visits to the village. As the main character notes, his brother's message was a pretext for satisfying his inner need. Otherwise, he could stay in Tbilisi and just send the money for the repair works. A visit to the village activates numerous memories, none of which are chaotic. Each of the memories is related to the narrator's identity crisis and homeostatic needs. Below, I will try to define the reasons for the character's identity crisis.

In the text under analysis, the main character shares the epistemological knowledge (Ryan 1991) widespread in the Georgian society: America is a country of great opportunities. This knowledge was acquired by the narrator back in his childhood: "Once, in my childhood, I went as a tourist to Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. A taxi driver told my mother and me: 'Yugoslavia is a small America' (Morchiladze 2011: 5). The narrator's childhood embraces the 90s, i.e. the period when the Soviet Union was disintegrated and the national societies strove for self-identification. The narrator's idea of the West is supported by the fact that his brother has made a fortune in the USA. According to the analyzed text, America is a model of the West.

Despite the above-mentioned, the reader sees that the main character is not actively involved in social life. Moreover, he is skeptical about the new perspectives (America). This is due to his memory, which is the basis for his identity.

It is well known that recollection forms grounds for the normal functioning of human identity. However, the same mental process may turn into an obstacle (Birke 2008). This is exactly the case in the given text. The narrator semanticizes his past. The childhood events that he recalls are characterized by narrative coherence. However, in the same narrative, part of identity is formed by a mysterious value/obligation that used to mobilize his attention back in his childhood (human relationships and stories related to ancestors). Mobilization of attention, in its turn, formed a longstanding memory of the experiencing autobiographer (Löschnigg 2006), an inalienable part of his autobiographic narrative. The identity formed on the basis of the

above-mentioned mysterious values is incompatible with the new model of the society. What are these values based on and how does the character see current reality and Western values?

These questions can be briefly answered as follows: the mysterious values which formed part of the main character's personal development are based on tenderness, subtlety and depth of human relationships. For the main character, the past is important because it consists of stories about such relationships. In the present, he attaches significance only to the facts related to his past. Sadness and melancholy are parts of the above-mentioned values, and the narrator often refers to them as romanticism. The symbol of this mysterious component of consciousness is a gun called *Obole*. This old gun is preserved at the main character's home. It was once gifted to his ancestor. As the narrator notes, the gun has never shot, but it has saved people from death. For these reasons, the gun is associated with tenderness and dignity:

A long, thin, flint gun, ornamented with nacre... It resembled Princess Diana... Once I watched Diana on TV. She was walking in the street, blushing with modesty. She reminded me of our gun. She was exactly like it, if a gun can be compared to a woman... In the past, guns were like women... These were the times when dignity mattered. (Morchiladze 2011: 45)

It should be noted that tenderness is not a passive state for the narrator. It is active. The word *Obole* means 'orphan'. The narrator's uncle gave this name to the gun. Although the narrator cannot explain the reasons, he thinks that the name denotes the values which are no longer important in the contemporary Western-oriented reality.

The narrator thinks that the Western lifestyle is superficial and restricted to the present. A symbol of this lifestyle is Burger King (Morchiladze 2011: 48). Thus, this lifestyle is more carefree and joyful: "I think people abroad do not understand Georgians because we start talking from a distant past... They are confused and scared by such talks. Who cares about the past? It is always now and today, like a menu" (Morchiladze 2011: 48). There is an unsurmountable gap between the Western values/lifestyle and the narrator's identity. Therefore, the narrator does not try to update the model of his identity. Instead, he prefers to replace actual reality with his past memories. When tired of his daily routine, he finds shelter in these memories ("the village is the place where you belong. You can breathe freely now", - says the narrator's wife when talking to him on the phone (Morchiladze 2011: 120). Special attention

should be paid to the fact that this attitude to current reality is expressed by a person (narrator) with high social competence who is internally active: "I would not lie still. I managed to do my secret things and spend happy lonely hours wondering in the distant corners of the yard" (Morchiladze 2011: 45). The narrator is not depressed. His identity crisis is revealed only in his attitude to the contemporary social context. Yet, the identity is not broken and the narrator is not disorientated. His pain is his conscious choice. However, at times, the narrator finds it difficult to stick to his choice, because this choice is periodically affected by his daily life, his brother's success in the USA, the fallen roof and the new cottage built with his brother's American money, his wife's viewpoints etc.: "I cannot arrive frequently. If I do arrive, I want to leave soon. Yet, there is nothing I enjoy so much." (Morchiladze 2011: 41)

The above-given peculiarity of functioning of the narrator's consciousness forms the present perspective of the narrator autobiographer, which semantically unifies the stories he recalls. His identity was entirely formed in the Soviet reality, namely, in the 90s. Therefore, we should find out the role of communism in the consciousness of the narrator autobiographer and the autobiographic narrative. Communism as a period is often mentioned and marked. It seems that the narrator autobiographer has frequently heard stories about the Soviet reality. These stories form the empirical time markers in his consciousness. However, in the psychological time (personal development of the narrator) (Perry 1979), they did not turn into benchmarks. The narrator's idea of the Soviet period is as follows: it was a time of violence, repressions and oppression, although the repressions did not affect the narrator's identity because he was not born at the time. The reason for recalling the Soviet period is as follows: the narrator's disposition and values are greatly influenced by his grandfather Timothy. The narrator recalls the Soviet period in order to draw grandfather's portrait. As the narrator notes, his ancestors were tortured (by Bolsheviks), but Timothy endured the Bolshevik pressure with great dignity.

According to the text under analysis, the identity of the 90s generation is not affected by communism as social order, since communism no longer creates homeostatic needs. However, communism is indirectly related to the identity crisis of the new generation. Due to the years passed behind closed borders (in the text, this phenomenon is marked by the word "abroad"), people find it difficult to adjust traditional cultural values to the new lifestyle, and this leads to an identity crisis. One more detail should be underlined: the stories heard by the narrator in his childhood (the violence

of Bolsheviks, the victim of which was his grandfather), have caused his strong suspicion, which is subconsciously involved in the perception of the present reality and defines the daily rhythm of functioning of the character's consciousness: "I have realized that the past is still here, and those joyful days and peaceful nights are just a speck in the pool of blood which overwhelms you" (Morchiladze 2011: 181-182). The main character does not trust the peace and welfare that are based on the superficial lifestyle of the West (America). In the main character's opinion, this reality is not based on deep human values, and this is a road that leads to a humanitarian catastrophe.

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