

GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY GEORGIAN THEATER

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Gender studies are becoming increasingly important in social sciences. With time, the meaning of the term *gender* has changed. If previously it was only a grammatical category of sex, since 1955 sexologist John Money used it to distinguish between biological sex and social roles. The Dictionary of Social Sciences gives us the following definition: "Gender is a combination of physical, biological, psychological and behavioral characteristics that determine the difference between men and women in society." The idea that the social construct of women and men should not be reduced to biological sex is much older than the use of *gender* in this sense.

In the modern world, the *social sex* or gender of a person—the difference between a man and a woman not in a biological, but in a social way—is becoming increasingly relevant. The Dictionary of Social Sciences reads that since the 1970s, the notion of gender has been firmly established as matching the socially constructed differences between the sexes, which are historically and geographically variable and which people acquire in the process of socialization. Consequently, it has become increasingly clear that gender is not necessarily binary (female or male), that there are (or may be) more than two genders in different societies.¹

In Georgia, the *social sex* or gender of a person is becoming more and more relevant as well. At the same time, the term *third sex* appears in Georgians' everyday life. In the anthropological literature, this term refers to transgender people, still a marginalized group in Georgia. The modern understanding of the term *gender*, which is already beyond the two sexes and offers the concept of the third sex, has somehow changed the approach to the issue and has become the subject of much discussion. All

this is reflected in art in different ways.

It is not debatable that art is not limited to gender, and any of its fields in its forms explores a human being as a person. The same is true the oldest form of art, theater which, as a society-related institution dictated by existing reality in terms of forms and content, is interesting to consider from a gender perspective, even as one of its aspects.

As we know, cultural changes do not happen overnight and are preceded by several sociopolitical processes. In Georgia, gender has been perceived more or less as social science and a subject of analysis since the 1990s when significant political shifts in society begin.

At the legislative level, the state started thinking about gender equality when the Parliament of Georgia adopted the Law on Gender Equality in 2010, followed by the adoption of a multilateral anti-discrimination law in 2014 which bans all forms of discrimination, including based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Today, both the state and Georgian society still have a long way to go before the laws are properly applied, as problems related to gender equality, domestic violence, sexual harassment, women's rights, LGBT+ rights, and many other similar issues are growing and require finding solutions and talking out loud about them.

When and how was the socio-cultural phenomenon of sex reflected in the Georgian theater? And how does it respond today to the problems associated with the recognition of gender equality and gender identity? In this article, I will try to answer these questions.

In the second half of the 19th century, the theme of gender was reflected in world dramaturgy to a certain extent. This is the period when Sigmund Freud appears in

¹ გუნია ა., გენდერი. 2016.

Western consciousness with his *Psychoanalysis*, which to some extent impacts dramaturgy. A good example of this is the play *Miss Julie* by Swedish playwright August Strindberg, one inspired by Freud's theories of sex and the eternal struggle between the sexes. Hans-Martin Lohmann, in his review of Freud's biography, says: "Freud creates the image of a woman as a sign of absolute exclusion and inadequacy. The form of femininity does not possess anything essential, that is, what shapes the subject: the penis, the super-ego (conscience), the intellect, the ability to sublimate and act culturally. In this regard, Freud, according to public opinion, is unanimous with most of the men of his era: Karl Kraus, August Strindberg, Frank Wedekind and Otto Weininger. A woman is nothing but an imperfect man."² Freud, because of such views, faced great resistance from feminists throughout his life.

Despite sharing Freud's phallogocentric ideas, Strindberg's dramaturgy makes a significant contribution to the development of gender drama. In contrast, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen directly supports the recognition of women's rights and because of this is under great pressure and persecution from society. Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* that talks about a woman as an individual and a person have been staged in Norway for more than 30 years before a woman gained the right to vote. The work of Henrik Ibsen was also a source of inspiration for Sarah Kane, an important representative of gender drama.

I believe that the topic of gender in Georgian theater starts with these authors.

The Royal District Theater is distinguished among Georgian theaters in many ways. This theater company always tries to be contemporary and respond to the current events in world theater. The Royal District Theater is the only one in Georgia so far to openly support gender equality and the recognition of gender identity. Georgian viewers enjoyed August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (staged by Data Tavadze, translated by David Gabunia) here for the first time. Initially, this play was met with great opposition in Europe because of the topics that the author talks about: sexuality, the constant struggle between the sexes, women who want to finally be equal to men. Strindberg's work was introduced to Georgian readers at

the end of the 19th century, though his dramaturgy was staged in the Georgian theater quite late, and Georgian theater-makers do not favor this author much even today. Strindberg's adventure in Georgian theater ends with the recollection of two more plays: Temur Chkheidze's performance *The Father* staged at Marjanishvili Theater, and Avtandil Varsimashvili's *Dance of Death*. Unlike Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen's dramaturgy has a much longer history in Georgian theater. His plays have been and continue to be staged with great success. In this article, I would like to mention two performances that were staged based on a play. *A Doll House*, in my opinion, is the author's *Magnum Opus*. This is the story of a woman who was able to deviate from the norms established in society and reject the taboos proposed by the patriarchal establishment. An act of such courage: neglecting family, husband, even your children, until you get to know to yourself and become a person, still deserves admiration. The importance of the play is also confirmed by the fact that *A Doll House* is one of the most frequently staged plays in the world. Domestic violence against women in Georgia is slowly coming to light. If half a century ago it was considered a shame to talk about it, today the situation has changed significantly, though generally it is still not so favorable. Domestic violence against women is not only physical, it can be psychological, economic, sexual, social. In Ibsen's play, this is how the problems of women are portrayed: they are economically dependent and experience psychological pressure from family members. Ibsen wanted to show women to the public as a person, a subject, an individual.

Georgian viewers got to know to director Ioane (Vano) Khutsishvili through Ibsen's play *A Doll House* and, as we read in the professional press of that period, it was quite a successful debut. The performance staged at the Liberty Theater was on the repertoire for more than 10 years. Among the recent performances of the play *A Doll House* is one staged at the Konstantine Gamsakhurdia Sokhumi State Drama Theater (staged by David Sakvarelidze). It was staged in 2019 as part of the EU project "EU—In Support of the Intergovernmental Commission on Gender Equality," is in the repertoire of the Sukhumi Theater and is awaiting the audience's applause.

Director David Sakvarelidze did not touch upon the

² Lohmann H.-M., Sigmund Freud, 2008. p. 167

topic of gender in *A Doll House* for the first time. The production *Lysistrata* (playwright Lasha Bugadze) directed by Sakvarelidze was staged on the main stage of Rustaveli National Theater. We already know the story of Lysistrata, an Athenian woman, from ancient dramaturgy. Aristophanes wrote the comedy *Lysistrata* in 411 BC. In Aristophanes' comedy, Lysistrata cleverly completes the war between the Athenians and the Spartans. Women change dominant masculine discourse and manage to intimidate men by refusing them sex. Perhaps portraying women as *war destroyers* with masculine consciousness was only possible in comedy. However, we see examples of such productive *sexual strikes* in real life: for example, in 2006 in Colombia, the wives of members of a criminal gang announced a *cross-legged strike* to prevent blood feuds between gangs. As a result, in 2010, the number of homicides in the city of Pereira decreased by 26.5%.

Aristophanes' comedies were sociopolitical and dealt with war and social issues. Very often the comedian portrayed the citizens and politicians of Athens as grotesque characters in the plays, thus trying to change reality and the attitude of society towards them. Probably, this was the goal of director Sakvarelidze and playwright Bugadze as they offered a continuation the story of Lysistrata at Rustaveli National Theater, overwhelmed by the problems that exist in our daily lives. The play was staged for a specific purpose of showing the insurmountable contradictions in Georgian society in terms of gender inequality and violence, and I think the whole creative team has successfully achieved this goal, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of creativity. The production *Lysistrata* won three of the four main nominations of the annual "Duruji Theater Award" in Georgia. This production is a successful example of how art can be used as a medium to speak about the most acute problems in society, to speak in a way that changes people's attitudes towards the problem, as it

was done in ancient Greece.

If private and independent theater companies in Georgia can speak through plays and performances about the sensitive topics and problems we have discussed above, for the most of the state theaters there is an *invisible hand* in the form of state policy, religious institutions, public opinion, which poses some obstacles to them, though there are exceptions here as well. For example, the play *Spineless* by the successful young Georgian playwright Alex Chighvinadze that won the nomination "New Georgian Play 2017" has been staged several times. In 2017, at the regional festival Theatrical Imereti, Tkibuli Theater presented the play *Spineless* (staged by Lali Kublashvili), which was awarded a special prize by the jury. In 2020, the play was staged at the Zugdidi State Drama Theater by a young director, Davit Turkiashvili. Professional feedback on the production was also positive. The play tells the story of a transgender woman. The protagonist Ella, around whom the action unfolds, is already dead. The author tries and successfully evokes empathy in the reader and viewer with this text, which comes out. However, it is unfortunate that even in the play we have to talk about a dead transgender woman because in reality neither talking about them nor writing plays about them is allowed. Here, too, we have to fight with the same *invisible hand*. I do not remember any other examples about transgender people in Georgian drama.

The examples presented in this article on gender in Georgian theater are not a comprehensive and thorough study of this issue is in order.

Georgian theater today is in search of its identity and in this process it will find a language to speak to the audience about all the problems that will contribute to the development of theater itself and society. I will continue talking about this topic. Today, let's end here.

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