

## Suicide – Protest or Escape from Reality

(Leo Kiacheli's *Princess Maya*)

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**Abstract:** The paradoxical nature of the social effect of suicide has been noted many times not only in scholarly works but also in literary texts. Common sense considers suicide to be a completely meaningless act; however, it may be caused by many different factors, and it is impossible to unite this diversity under a single phenomenon.

In a literary text, suicide as an act can be seen either as a form of protest — resulting from the incompatibility of the individual with the surrounding world — or as a fact, a reaction to a particular (sometimes personal) life reality, though it is also, to some extent, intensified or conditioned by more general circumstances. Thus, there is no fixed narrative definition of suicide, since it is multi-causal in nature.

Nevertheless, every act of self-destruction, despite its individual (sometimes egoistic) character, is grounded in one cognitive foundation: hopelessness. At the same time, it is predominantly linked to religion and patriotism and is generally regarded as an anti-religious and antisocial phenomenon. It is accompanied by the suffering of the actor/suicide and by his or her paradoxical perception of time.

Throughout world literary history, accounts of suicide have accompanied narratives from the beginning to the end. However, it is also recognized that since the last century - under the influence of the technocratic and modernist era, within the framework of wars, the collapse and reinterpretation of values, together with personal alienation - the human desire to voluntarily withdraw from the world has increased and, accordingly, has been reflected in literature as well.

This tendency has become equally evident in Georgian literature, appearing in the works of Egnate Ninoshvili, Shio Aragvispireli, Chola Lomtadze, Grigol Robakidze, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, Niko Lortkipanidze, Leo Kiacheli, and other writers.

In this paper, the phenomenon is examined through Leo Kiacheli's short story *Princess Maya*, with particular attention to how the protagonist's life, inner world, and psychological portrait are interpreted in the context of her self-inflicted suicide.

**Key words:** suicide, Georgian literature, Leo Kiacheli, alienation, value crisis, anti-social phenomenon

The paradoxical nature of the social effect of suicide has been noted repeatedly not only in scholarly works but also in literary texts. The so-called common sense regards suicide as a completely meaningless act; however, it may be caused by a variety of factors, and it is impossible to unite this diversity under a single phenomenon.

In literary texts, suicide as an act can be interpreted either as a form of protest - arising from the incompatibility of the individual with the external world - or as a fact, a reaction to a particular (sometimes personal) life reality, though it is also, to some extent, intensified or conditioned by broader circumstances. Therefore, no definitive narrative definition of suicide exists, since it is multi-causal in nature.

Yet, every act of self-destruction, despite its individual (sometimes egotistical) character, has one cognitive foundation: hopelessness (Berdyayev 1922, 17). At the same time, it is predominantly associated with religion and patriotism and is generally viewed as an anti-religious and antisocial phenomenon. It is accompanied by the suffering of the actor/suicide and by his or her paradoxical perception of time (Berdyayev 1922, 17).

Suicide is the negation of the three principal Christian virtues, among which hope holds the foremost place. Hope is the minimum of Christianity; suicide is the ultimate expression of the absence of hope. Hell is the ontologization of hopelessness. Dante Alighieri's words, "*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,*" refer to the death of hope. Hopelessness, in eternity, is the fundamental cause of the torment of the damned in Hell (Western... 1996, 56).

According to Albert Camus, "*Suicide is the fundamental philosophical problem*". Hamlet is the first character in world literature to pose the problem of suicide. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's creative explorations, one can discern attempts at the idealization of suicide (Camus 1990, 28-34).

Throughout the history of world literature, depictions of suicide can be traced continuously. Yet it is widely recognized that since the last century - within the technocratic and modernist era, amid wars, the collapse and reevaluation of values, and under conditions of personal alienation - the human desire to voluntarily withdraw from life has intensified and, consequently, found greater reflection in literature (Schopenhauer 2000, 63). This tendency has become equally evident in Georgian literature, where it is reflected in the artistic texts of Egnate Ninoshvili, Shio Aragvispireli, Chola Lomtadze, Grigol Robakidze, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, Niko Lortkipanidze, Leo Kiacheli, and others.

In this paper, this phenomenon is considered through the example of Leo Kiacheli's short story *Princess Maya*, examining how the life, inner world, and psychological portrait of the main character are interpreted against the background of her self-inflicted suicide.

In general, Leo Kiacheli's novellas can be divided into several arcs, each distinguished by specific features of artistic perception: the variety of character portrayals, the diversity of motifs, and the particularity of artistic and ideological positions.

Accordingly, one must not overlook what unifies the thematic arcs of his short stories - namely, the writer's pronounced interest in the inner world of the individual, in the spiritual metamorphoses taking place within it, and in the problem of the individual's unequivocal estrangement from the external world.

Kiacheli's primary focus is on the psychological experiences of his characters. If we also take into account that he was a creator of modernist/ impressionist worldviews - who therefore trusted empirical reality less and preferred "the mysterious and rare" over "the ordinary and simple" — it becomes clear why the novella form proved especially favorable and fruitful for expressing such artistic tendencies (Yumi 1965, 38).

In a short story "*Unattainable Strings*", which in itself emphasizes the writer's distinct attitude toward the "mysterious and the unattainable," the author writes: "There is a certain mysterious voice,

inaccessible and incomprehensible to us, yet one that we feel with our whole being. Secret and unattainable strings are stretched across the entire universe, and their enchanting sounds can be heard in nature, in the human soul, and in the human heart. We always sense their existence, though we do not know whence they come. Many mysteries lie hidden in the enigma of man, and there arises a desire to lift the veil from this mystery.” (Khiacheli, 1964, p. 78)

It is also a well-known fact that Georgian literature of the 1920s sharply reflected the ideological agenda of the period. Among the themes that became the “profile” of the socialist-realist narrative was the depiction of “transient,” “obsolete,” and “historically doomed” social strata, the uselessness of this “hostile class,” and its moral and spiritual degeneration - issues that came to form one of the central problematics within the creative discourses of Georgian classics. Demna Shengelaia’s *Sanavardo*, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia’s *The Smile of Dionysus* and *The Abduction of the Moon*, and Mikheil Javakhishvili’s *Jaqo’s Refugees* provide direct confirmation of these views. From the early stages of his creative life, Leo Kiacheli, too, did not shy away from portraying sharp socio-political conflicts in his works (the foremost evidence of which is the novel *Tariel Golua*, dated 1915).

A distinctive stage in Leo Kiacheli’s creative success begins with the creation of *Princess Maya*. This story is a psychological drama about the life of an individual woman, her emotions, and her death. Soviet literary criticism for many years echoed the story with propagandistic and informational motives; it deliberately argued that the princess was a typical example of an outdated, stagnant figure, unnecessary in the modern age. By her character, moral stance, and worldview, she embodied the face of the bourgeois class - the arrogant landowner who believes she can manipulate people, only to realize too late that she belongs to a dead society and has no place in socialist reality. Such an interpretation became a stereotype in the analysis of this story until quite recently.

“Princess Maya” is dated to 1927. This marks a special stage in Leo Kiacheli’s creative work, when, after a pause of several years, in the era of the modernist post-period, the writer abandoned active public engagement and devoted himself entirely, body and soul, to literary life. To this period belong several short stories written in the classical genre, which, alongside reflecting the epoch, should be regarded as milestone and highly artistic examples of depicting the inner world of the individual character and analyzing their moral values. Among them, particularly important are “Almasgir Kibulan”, “Haki Adzba”, and “Princess Maya”.

“Princess Maya” is a novella of pronounced artistic and problematic value, which at the same time retains its social significance. Maya is an atypical character, elevated above social determinism, and represents, in a sense, a development of what had been embryonically present in the female figures of the writer’s other novellas. Maya bears turbulent passions openly in her heart; she is “faithful to the voice of her heart, to her character and destiny, and she will never unfasten the iron ring forged by fate’s hand. Therefore, she is not only tragic but also beautiful,” notes critic Tamaz Vasadze (Vasadze, 2016, p. 46).

Through the figure of Maya, the author depicts the life of a woman who once lived in luxury and pleasure, but whom the new times have stripped of everything. Instead of her privileged, pampered existence, all that remained are a rather withered face and the jewels adorning her fingers. The past only sharpens the sense of present reality, and in the work the writer opposes two realities - the old and the new. The old is embodied in Maya and Bondo, while on the side of the new stand Dafino and Ambako.

By portraying Maya's character, Leo Kiacheli represents the social stratum that gave rise to her - that same social unit which once served as her support, but which is now doomed itself to perish. The work reveals the tragedy of an individual who, in effect, assumes responsibility for the sins committed by her entire social circle, sins she ultimately atones for through her own death.

What led Maya to suicide? From the very beginning of the story, there is a sense of preparation for such an ending, an anticipation of the approaching finale. Yet Maya herself has not fully realized this moment, for within her the hope of the possibility of a future has not been completely extinguished. This possibility is bound to Bondo's love: *"the famous seducer, Prince Bondo - the last love and the purpose of Maya's life."*

And yet, the issue is more complex and profound than the superficial social or ideological parameters might suggest. Maya's life and death constitute a deeply psychological drama, based not on the decline of the noble class, but on the collapse of feminine pride, the tragedy of loneliness, and the fate of an estranged human being. These become the causes of her demonstrative, and in a sense ritualistic and confessional, suicide.

It is also symbolic that, while at first the princess awaits the sight of the sea as if it were a liberator from heavy thoughts and pains, in the end it is to the sea itself that she entrusts her fate, surrendering both her soul and body to it. The gaze toward the sea is directed into its depth, and it is entirely calm. From this perspective, Maya's calmly spoken words seem natural: *"I seek the depth, Dafino, the depth of the sea, which can conceal me, cover me in such a way that my body will turn invisible. ..."* (Kiacheli, 1964, p. 86).

While contemplating the paradoxes of human inner life, the author offers an intriguing philosophical interpretation of the story. Within the plot he embodies a universalizing idea: Maya, though submissive to fate, is at the same time merciless toward the betrayer - in this case, Bondo. Once Maya, humiliated by Bondo, realizes the degradation of her feminine dignity, it is as though the final thread binding her to hope and to life itself is severed. It seems as if her personified inner voices engage in outward polemics, and one of them - embodying an aggressive instinct - destroys the rest. From this arises an overwhelming sense of vengeance: *"You have insulted Princess Maya, who does not know forgiveness - you have offended her love,"* says Maya (Kiacheli, 1964, p. 85).

The intensity of the story is created not so much by external events but by the spiritual conflict born of the betrayal of a beloved; Maya is incapable of forgiveness. Moreover, in order to prevent anyone from trampling on her pride, Maya herself becomes the initiator, offering Bondo a kind of "free choice in love" — a sacrifice of great magnitude on her part. An inner struggle unfolds between the woman and the man: *"Maya was calm like a queen, the noble smile of courtesy secretly resting upon her lips"* (Kiacheli, 1964, p. 88). It is as though fate itself had sent her the weapon of revenge; suddenly, in her mind, a plan for vengeance takes shape.

At the first glance, the feelings of a woman offended by her lover's betrayal may seem banal, but through the eye of reason we perceive a deeper social meaning, alongside her personal glory and shattered human passions. Maia's happiness is bound to her beloved man, Bondo, and with his death, the noblewoman's happiness also vanishes; if at first, because of betrayal, Bondo's death is felt as a sharp yet still unconscious and uncomprehended desire - that is, Maia thought she would find relief in Bondo's death - quite the opposite occurred: she "felt her own nothingness, passions tightening around her neck like a vise."

The past is buried, the present ruined, the future veiled in darkness. The collapse of the noblewoman's groundless dreams, the fulfillment of the harshest sentence of inevitability, unfolds against the background of her heaviest emotions. Revenge and treachery remain her last refuge, so that Maia does not surrender her existence too easily. Here we see a reflection of her inner disintegration, the most intense psychological moods, through which the author's own attitude is also revealed: a human being is a microcosm containing many different instincts, emotions, and spiritual forces; within it lies much that is inaccessible to reason, the soul loses its wholeness and becomes fragmented.

The concept of the novella is ultimately shaped by the fact that the protagonist discovers within herself the strength she did not even know she possessed; the murder, which is in fact committed by Maia herself, with her own hand, seems as though it has no connection to her at all.

Hence, the incompatibility and conflict between subjective perceptions and objective reality form the central problem of the text. Another noteworthy point is this: Leo Kiacheli explains epochal events through the fate of a single person, against the backdrop of the drama unfolding in her soul - through the depiction of Maia's life. In doing so, he essentially reveals a class doomed to destruction, which is hinted at from the very beginning of the story. However, as we have noted, the sharp sense of violated feminine dignity and pride becomes the explicit motive both for Maia's vengeance and for her suicide, and all of this is reinforced by the historical context of social upheaval.

The power of fate and inevitability is revealed with full intensity at the end of the work, where the noblewoman herself appears as the executor of the sentence handed down by life. It is likely that the motif of fate is employed by the author to heighten the dramatic tension of the plot. Here we must once again emphasize the fact that the force of destiny and the human sense of foreboding are among the stylistic features characteristic of many of Leo Kiacheli's works. Passion, meanwhile, becomes a kind of symbolic manifestation of these events.

Maia calmly accepts her end; regret and sorrow impart a certain romantic-poetic hue to the actions of the character. At the conclusion of the story, the author's narrative is accompanied like a refrain by the phrase rising from the blue waves of the sea: *"Who is here who should not be?"* And the noblewoman knows the answer: *"The unfortunate noblewoman Maia."*

What we see here is a pre-death mystery: Maia's narration of her own life sounds like a confession, and this confession is grounded in memory. Memory implies the objectivization of experience; an objective event that occurred in the past continues to exist - it is not merely an accomplished act.

Thus, the past also operates in the present, and this gives rise to the sense of loss and of the self, a feeling whose very essence is rooted in the past.

A hopeless, joyless future, and the fear of loneliness, determine Maia's attitude toward both past and future. And when the last bridge connecting her to the world collapses through betrayal, Maia becomes fully aware of the moment of complete incomprehensibility of her surroundings, the moment of estrangement from the world. Every object she possesses, each piece of jewelry, seems almost spiritualized, so deeply is it associated with a specific person. To Maia, these objects evoke the cemetery of self-sacrificing young men, who dwell upon her body; and with each recollection of a suitor, Maia casts into the sea the jewel he once gave her.

The sea is slowly calming, warming; it all resembles a ritual of sacrifice. Along with the sea, the noblewoman, subdued by fate, also grows calm - once a lover of life, swayed by feelings, now herself

subdued by them and doomed as a victim of life. Spiritual torment and tragic death restore the noblewoman's lost dignity, as though even her shortcomings are forgiven; she is wholly freed from real space, from time, and from the boundaries of the body: "There was no longer the noblewoman Maia."

She merged with the power and infinity of the sea. This act of suicide is deeply romantic, yet it remains a result and a manifestation of the most complex psychological and emotional metamorphosis - one among the many instances revealed in literary texts.

Accordingly, any suicide may be perceived as a metaphysical act, as nihilism carried to its ultimate conclusion. For a human being, to whom metaphysical challenges exist, there also arises the challenge - or the need - for merging with the environment and achieving harmony. Yet the disruption of this harmony often ends fatally and becomes, for the individual, a kind of destiny: suicide as the unattainable and failed attempt at unity.

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