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The Handbook of Georgian Literature
Irma Ratiani ed., (Brill, 2025)
ქართული ლიტერატურის სახელმძღვანელო
ირმა რატიანი (რედ.) (ბრილი, 2025)

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Abstract

The publication of *The Handbook of Georgian Literature*, edited by Irma Ratiani, is highly significant. Until now, the only English-language book devoted to the history of Georgian literature was Donald Rayfield's *The Literature of Georgia: A History*. Thirty years after the publication of Rayfield's book, this new volume proposes an updated history of Georgian literature to English-language readers and researchers.

One important difference between Rayfield's book and this volume is that Rayfield's book is a monograph, whereas this volume brings together articles by many Georgian scholars. It consists of studies researched by specialists in different fields and is useful not only for readers who want to gain a general understanding of the history of Georgian literature, but also for students and researchers who want to study a particular period, theme, poet, or writer in greater depth.

A second difference is that this volume covers topics that Rayfield did not address. These include, for example, women's literature and contemporary literature. Most of the writers discussed in these chapters have remained largely unknown to

English readers. It is therefore highly significant that this new volume introduces recent discusses on these topics to readers outside Georgia.

The editor of the volume, Professor Irma Ratiani, has played an important role in internationalizing Georgian literature and its studies. In 2022, she and her Georgian colleagues hosted the XXIII Congress of International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). It could be said that this volume itself is one of the most important outcomes of internationalization of the studies. Just as Rayfield's book served as the main guide to Georgian literature for the past thirty years, this new volume is likely to become an important reference for many years to come for those who wish to study Georgian literature.

Keywords: Georgian literature, history of Georgian literature

Handbook of Georgian Literature is a comprehensive scholarly volume published by Brill. It is edited by Irma Ratiani, a professor at Tbilisi State University and Director of the Institute of Georgian Literature. The volume comprises more than 472 pages and covers the major fields and periods in the history of Georgian literature. By reading this volume, readers can gain an overview of the major theme and developments in Georgian literature throughout its history.

Until now, the only English book dedicated to the history of Georgian literature has been *Literature of Georgia: A History* (1994), written by Donald Rayfield. There are, of course, other options available to readers who can read in Russian, but for those who cannot, the choice has been quite limited. In this respect, the publication of the *Handbook* marks a significant milestone, providing the first major update to Rayfield's work in three decades. Another notable point is that, in *Handbook*, Georgian texts including literary texts as well as previous studies are translated into readable and accessible English, making it easier for readers without knowledge of Georigan to understand thier literary significance. In this regard, the work of the editor, Irma Ratiani, should be commended.

One of the significant differences between Rayfield's book and the *Handbook* is that, whereas the former is the monologue of a single author, the latter consists of a wide range of Georgian scholars. Rayfield provides a conprehensive account of the history of Georgian literature, from fifth-century hagiography to twentieth-century

literature, and this in itself is an impressive and extraordinary achievement. However, his approach seems to provide a broad overview of each periods and poets and writers rather than exploring and discussing them in depth. By contrast, the Handbook brings toghether contributions from 17 Georgian scholars, each of whom writes on fields and periods they specialize. Given the breadth of the volumes, it is impossible to discuss all of its contributions in detail here. Therefore, I introduce the table of contents below:

1. Georgian Hagiographic Literature (Ivane Amirkhanashvili)
2. Georgian Hymnography (Gocha Kuchukhidze)
3. Emergence of Georgian Secular Literature (Maka Elbakidze)
4. On the Character of Georgian Verse (Tamar Lomidze)
5. Georgian Literature in the 16th (Irma Ratiani)
6. Georgian Romanticism: Texts and Contexts (Gaga Lomidze)
7. Realism in Georgian Literature (Irma Ratiani)
   7.1 Ilia Chavchavadze and His Reader (Irma Ratiani),
   7.2 A Few Words on Akaki Tsereteli's Lyrics (David Tserediani)
   7.3 Alexander Kazbegi: Georgian Tragedian (After the Novel Khevisberi Gocha) (Irma Ratiani)
   7.4. Vazha-Pshavela's Poems (Tamaz Vasadze),
   7.5 Vazha-Pshavela on Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism (Irma Ratiani),
8. Origins of Georgian Leftist Writing (Tamar Tsitsishvili)
9. Georgian Female Writers of the 19th Century (Tamar Tsitsishvili)
10. Georgian Modernism: Relocating Georgian Culture (Bela Tsipuria)
    10.1 The Blue Horns; the Group as 'a One Poet' (Bela Tsipuria)
    10.2 Galaktion Tabidze and Symbolism (Teimuraz Doiashvili)
11. Symbolism and the Avant-Garde in Georgia (Gaga Lomidze)
12. Soviet Totalianism and Georgian Literature (Irma Ratiani)
    12.1 Mikheil Javakhishvili; In the Distorted Mirro of Totalitarianism (Irma Ratini)
    12.2 Socialist Realism as a Discourse (Maia Jaliashvili)
    12.3 Georgian Women Writing in the Soviet Period (Nona Kupreishvili)
13. Formation of Modern Georgian Literature (Irma Ratiani)
    13.1 The Western Model of Neocrealism and Georgian Liberal Discourse (Manana Kvachantriradze)
    13.2. Ana Kalandadze (Zoya Tskhadaia)

14. Georgian Youth Literature in the 1980s (Tamar Tsitsishvili and Irine Modebadze)
15. Post-Soviet Georgian Literature on the Difficult Path of Transformation (Irma Ratian and Bela Tsipuria)

What a breadth of coverage! As the table of contets above demonstrates, the *Handbook* includes a wide range of specialized articles, each written form the perspectives of the contributers' particular area of expertise. This makes this book valuable not only to readers seeking an overview of the history of Georgian literature, but also to those who wish to investigate more specialized study of particular fields, periods, themes, poets, and writers. Thus, it will be of interest to a wide range of readers.

There is also a difference from Rayfield's book in terms of its structure and scope. It consists of five parts and covers from fifth century to the first half of 20th century:

I. The Making of the Classical Age. The Fifth to the Eleventh Centuries: Asceticism & Byzantium
II. The Golden Age, The Fall & The Resurrection: The Twelfth to the Eighteenth Centuries: Court & Courtly Love
III. Romantic & Civic Literature, The Ninteenth Century: Russian Tutelage
IV. The Rediscovery of Roots, 1880-1914: Vazha-Pshavela & Hiroic Folk Poetry
V. The Age of Internationalism: The Twentieth Century: The Dashing of Hope.

It is significant that the scholar devotes a separate chapter to Vazha-Pshavela. Catergorizing the phenomenon of Vazha-Pshavela, as Georgians say, is a complex question: Is he a Romanticist or a Realist? Rayfield's strategy to devote the separate chapter to Vazha-Pshavela may reflect the difficulty of situating this unique literary figure within a particular literary movement.

The *Handbook* also covers from fitth-century hagiography to contemporary literature, incorporating periods and topics that Rayfield didn't discuss. In this respect, it offers a more complehensive and up-to-date understanding of the history of Georgian literature. For instance, in Chapter 4, Tamar Lomidze provides a detailed discussion of Georgian versification, reviewing previous scholarship, much of which is relatively unknown outside Georgia. It also devotes greater attention to women's literature and can be said to offer a more gender-balanced account of Georgian literature. This proposes an important development in comparison with Rayfield's book, although it should be noted that Rayfield himself didn't ignore women's literature. In Chapter 9, entitled "Georgian Female Writers of the 19th Century," Tamar Tsitsish-

vili emphasizes the importance of women's literature: "Georgian women tried to destroy the role and stereotype of a woman that had developed over the years" (222). Her discussion underlines the need for futher research of women's literature in Georgian literature and culture.

In Chapter 12.3, Nona Kupreishvili reports on women literature during the Soviet period. The chapter discusses wide range of writers, including the renowned poet Ana Kalandadze, whom Rayfiled also mentions in his book; Sofo Mgeladze and Despine Gelovani, whose poems were published in the newspaprer *Voice of the Georgian Woman* (*Khma Kartveli Qalisa*), edited by Kato Mikeladze; the children's writer Lidiya Megrelidze; the left-wing activist Babilina Khositashvili; the modernist poet Nino Tarishvili; and contemporary writers such as Naira Gelashvili, who is both a writer and a prominent intellectual, as well as Zaira Arsenishvili and Leila Beroshvili, both well known as screenwriters for Georgian films. The works of these women writers have recently been republished in Georgia and are received increasing attention. This chapter shows an important achivement of recent scholarship on women's literature in Georgia. Presumably, almost all of these names are being introduced for English readers for the first time. From this point as well, the contribution of the *Handbook* is substantial. This chapter and the book itself will encourage further comparative studies of women literatures across the Soviet, European, American, Asian and other regions.

Another new theme adressed in the *Handbook* is contemporary literature. In Chapter 14, Tamar Tshitshishvili and Irine Modebadze examine it from the new perspective of "1980s literature." The 1980s was, in Merab Kostava's word, a period of "expectation of transfiguration." During this period, numerous works reflecting the spirit of age were created not only in literature (so many writers are mentioned in this chapter that it is impossible to discuss them here), but also in play (Robert Sturua's Shekespere interpretation), films (Eldar Shengelaia's *Blue Mountains or Unbelieavable Story*), and documentalies (Revaz Tabukashvili). In Chapter 15, the editor Irma Ratiani and BelaTsipuria discuss post-Soviet literature. Following the Perestoroika period, the young generation writers including Irakli Chaarkviani, Aka Morchiladze, Zaza Burchladze, Zurab Karumidze, Dato Barbakadze, and Lasha Bughadze, created what should be described as postmodern situation in Georgia. At the same time, post-Soviet Georgia was an epoch of war. The counry experienced the civil war and Abkhazia conflict in 1990s, and the Russo-Georgia war in 2008. Consequently, "War Discourse" emerged as a major theme alongside postmodernism. Representative writers associated with the theme include Guram Odisharia, Zaza Burchuladze, Basa Janikashvili, Tamta Melashvili and more. Both postmodernism and post-Soviet litera-

ture reflect the global tendencies in the post-World War II period and therefore imply, again, the need of comparative way of studies across difference regions and cultures. From this perspective, once again, the *Handbook* makes a significant contribution by providing a starting point for further discussion.

The editor of the *Handnook*, Irma Ratiani, has made a notable contributes to the internationalization of Georgian literature and its scholarship. Its eloquent example is the fact that she and her colleagues successfully hosted the international conference of ICLA, International Comparative Literary Association, held in Tbilisi in 2021, marking the first time the congress was held in a former Soviet country. Viewed in this broader context, the *Handbook* has a huge impact on the study of Georgian literature and culture. As Rayfield's book served as an important reference for more than three decades, the *Handbook* is likely to become an influencial vollume for students and scholars, particularly those outside in Georgia, who are beginning to study in the studies of Georgian literature.