

Cupid at the Kremlin Wall

Every new book by Aka Morchiladze instantly becomes a bestseller, favoured by readers of different generations and interests. By opening up a new world for them, involving them in thrilling adventures and blending the real with the imaginary, the author firmly holds the leading position among the contemporary Georgian writers. Recently Aka Morchiladze has published many novels of significant importance but his latest, *Cupid at the Kremlin Wall*, is probably the one that will touch the hearts and minds of readers, impelling them to empathize with the main characters. Although the novel is a page-turner, one will surely wish to return to certain passages if not be driven to re-read it. The author is a historian by education, which helps him to masterly depict one of the hardest periods in the Georgian history, offering a memorable socio-cultural background for the entire narrative. Along with historical figures, his characters gradually lead the readers to better understanding of the tragic events of the 1920-1930s that ultimately defined the tyrannical Soviet Empire.

The Latvian husband of Musia (Mariam) Eristavi, the protagonist, suddenly disappears in 1938 and the courageous Georgian woman embarks on a search mission. Looking for someone in the Soviet Empire is next to impossible even if the missing person is a former revolutionary and a KGB officer. The 1937 purges have passed, leaving the vast country in a constant fear of more terror to come. At the time Georgia is ruled by Lavrenti Beria, a spiteful, vindictive man with an amazing memory enabling him to mercilessly punish anyone who had ever crossed him. His reign affected the society to the extent that neighbours and co-workers stopped trusting each other, everyone is capable of denouncing everyone else and anyone can be branded as a “public enemy” and executed. If someone travels abroad, they are blamed for spying for a foreign country and likewise executed.

Musia is perfectly aware of where her husband might be kept, so instead of appealing to a petty functionary, she decides to travel to the Red Tsar’s court to see Stalin himself. The logical question arises: Why would Stalin help her and, more importantly, how can a woman, even an exceptionally determined one, get through the bureaucracy and security of such a male dominated system? Little by little the author reveals the details of the relationship between Musia and the despot to the inquisitive readers, who become hopeful that her odyssey will be successful.

Musia is far from being an ordinary woman and by telling the story of her childhood and young days, the author also describes Georgia at the start of the 20th century. She is the daughter of an

eminent lawyer, regularly reads periodicals the family receives from the US. She is known for her rebellious character and fights for women's rights from her early years and despite her aristocratic background supports equality. We are assured that being raised as a leftist, she welcomes the Russian Red Army believing it will turn her homeland into a modern country. As the writer tells us, the leftists extend the concept of home beyond the actual borders, regarding their homeland in the global context. Before realizing the Red Army has in fact deprived Georgia of its short-lived independence, Musia seems quite content because she can put her radical ideas, especially the suffragist ones, to life. She organizes cycling races, turns uninvited at homes, telling women they are no servants to their husbands and that they should live as they wish. Not surprisingly, she isn't particularly popular in a rather patriarchal country. Under the new reality of living in an occupied country, the women of the time were afraid of the new ideas sprung unexpectedly urging them to fight for their rights and seemingly designed to violate the traditional family as such. If under the Tsarist Russian Empire they feared to lose their national identity by their men being forced to marry Russian women, now they see the threat in Musia and the likes of her. They believe the new ideas will confuse people further and by propagating free sexual relations whole villages will eventually sleep under one single blanket, metaphorically speaking.

Aka Morchiladze's involving narrative describes the conditions of the 1920s Georgia, alternating humorous passages with hard to digest realistic portrayals of the newly established Soviet regime. Musia is no ordinary woman and soon she realizes that her socialist ideas have vanished, giving way to Stalin's totalitarian rule. The final stage of her disillusionment is disappearance of her husband, which in the 1930s meant execution, or at best exile to a Siberian camp.

Looking for justice in Moscow is next to useless because it's not the place where law and fairness can be sought. First of all, Musia has to get a railway ticket, which isn't as easy as it sounds. Besides, she tries to keep her mission a secret and decides to travel under an alias. For the purpose she uses the passport of an executed film actress Raissa Vasilyeva, substitutes her photo with her own and manages to get the ticket. Before setting out, she sends a coded letter to Stalin, reminding him of herself, the aim of her trip and the approximate date of her arrival in Kremlin.

The letter tells us a lot about the romantic past those two shared. Musia's father was a staunch supporter of the revolution despite belonging to the nobility, as well as her brother. The Eristavi family home often hid the enemies of the Russian Empire, the future dictator among many others. In

those days he was just another revolutionary, known as Ioseb Jugashvili. Soon an avid reader and reticent young man and an idealistic young suffragist became friends. They talked about poetry, novels, and thanks to her knowledge of English, Musia even translated to young Stalin Jack London's stories which were published in American magazines. Those are the prerequisites that keep Musia hopeful, believing the romantic memories will soften Stalin's heart. Surely, time has passed, she is in her forties but still quite attractive. Here again, the author throws in an intrigue: Will the tyrant even condescend to meeting Musia? And if he does, how will the man responsible for killing thousands of innocent people take her Quixotic mission?

The train is about to leave but before the conductor closes the door, more passengers get into the carriage, some of them real, others imaginary. At a glance, one of them, Kikava, is an ordinary jovial man who was seen to the station by a merry company of buddies. He gets in holding an enormous jar of wine and soon lays out a generous table in one of the compartments. He looks like a typical cheerful, feast-loving chap, but soon it transpires he is Shalva Tsereteli, an agent appointed by Stalin and destined to play a decisive role in Musia's fatal journey. Actually, Tsereteli is a real figure, the head of Stalin's security at the 1943 Yalta summit. We still don't know how he is linked to Musia but one thing is clear: her letter reached the addressee and a certain plan has been put to action but whether it presupposes her safe passage to Moscow or to finish her remains a mystery.

Another chance passenger is Anteladze, a member of the Party Committee, who is smitten by Musia, her manners and stylish clothes so different from everyone else. His only dream is to get her into an empty compartment to spend some time with her away from prying eyes. By the twist of fate, yet another passenger is Otar Machavariani, Musia's sweetheart of their young days. He is a former aristocrat, a talented doctor completely crushed by the Soviet Empire and turned into an alcoholic. Instinctively, he feels that her decision is fatal and tries to talk her out of her plan. His chivalrous spirit impels him to save the beloved woman from the Soviet monster. However, Musia's only concern is to stay anonymous. It is against her intention to be recognized, to be addressed in Georgian, her true identity to be revealed because now she is Raissa Vasilyeva.

On the whole, the book abounds in amazing histories and characters, all of which are skillfully interconnected while the author gradually moves to the dramatic end. Among the colourful gallery of characters Fralov stands out: he is a former Red Army officer, hopelessly in love with Musia. Many years before he came to Georgia with the conquering army but was so impressed with

the country that he decided to stay. Whenever he hears Georgian spoken, he listens without actually understanding a single word. Another, even more interesting character is Sergei Eisenstein, the prominent figure of the world film industry. At a glance, he has nothing in common with Musia, but Aka Morchiladze is a master of blending the real with the imaginary, real figures with fictitious ones. What's more, he does it so naturally that it makes readers readily believe in the possibility of their encounter. The famous film director lives under constant fear, sees security agents everywhere and in everyone, is restless and edgy. It's not long since his latest film *Bezhin Meadow* was banned by the Soviet censorship, destroying the copies even before they reached cinemas, while the whole thing nearly cost him his life. Although the next one, *Alexander Nevsky*, somewhat restored his authority because the Red Tsar approved of it, even received several prizes, Eisenstein is still depressed and terrified. He tries not to be too conspicuous, not to do anything to put his life in danger. Basically, he acts like a law-abiding Soviet citizen and when he discovers an unknown woman travelling under the name of an executed actress Raissa Vasilyeva, and fearing it might be a ploy to test his loyalty, he informs the security.

Ultimately, Musia finds herself in a vicious circle, complete with heroes and anti-heroes. But the author has another twist in store for his readers: when the whole train is about to find out her true identity, Shalva Tsereteli, the future head of Stalin's personal security, steps in. It turns out that his task is to provide Musia's safe passage to Moscow, so he gives Eisenstein a hard time. However, once things get out of hand, it is practically impossible to control the situation, especially when the train stops in Rostov, the city infamous for criminal gangs, thieves and petty felons. It is here that blood is shed: Anteladze is waiting for Musia in an empty compartment but is stabbed by a criminal authority; Fralov, the former Red Army officer who was given the wine jar by Stalin's agent, is attacked and wounded in his head; Musia's admirer Otia Machavariani, who is also trying to safeguard her, is stabbed in the leg. The narrative reaches the stage when the entire Soviet machine of evil operates at its full capacity, manipulating human lives like an expert swindler dealing cards in his favour.

Nobody dies after the ordeal, but Musia is given an injection that renders her unconscious. She comes to her senses in Moscow, alone, dizzy and with a splitting headache. She has difficulty realizing where exactly she is and her vision is blurred, but she is picked up at the railway station, taken for a quick meal and then directly to the Opera House. She is told she is going to meet Stalin,

which can mean the end of her odyssey. Musia is shown into a dark box where the Red Tsar's shadow talks to her. He rebukes her for her idealism, saying she should have discarded the ideals of her younger days, and informs her that her husband is already executed. He also warns her that she won't be able to return to Georgia, but promises to do everything to save her from death. Soon Musia leaves the Opera but before the black governmental car drives her away, she hears: "Citizen, put your hands on your back!"

We are unaware of the protagonist's fate after the episode, neither is Valerian Samkharadze, the lecturer in Soviet Party History who is the narrator of the novel. The fact is that Musia never returned to Georgia, but we are told that her house, which once belonged to Raissa Vasilyeva and before that to another Georgian noblewoman also executed in the purges, was given to someone else. The new owner might have occupied it for not that long because in those days the party policy changed far too fast, leading to houses being handed to yet another occupant.

In order to better understand Musia's fate, one needs to return to the beginning of the book, to the passages one might have overlooked. There the narrator talks about at least one good feature Stalin possessed: apparently, he refrained from executing those people he was attached to in his young days. So, one can only wonder whether the Red Tsar spared the idealistic woman who had the courage to oppose the huge empire. She might have spent a quiet life in some remote Russian village, away from prying eyes. It wouldn't be absolutely unmanageable because the Soviet Empire was full of similar myths.