

The Flight over Madatov Island

The events of the novel unfold in 1899. By then Georgia had been part of the Russian Empire for nearly a century and its capital Tbilisi was considered one of the most colourful cities with its unique character.

In those days an invisible line divided the city into a European and Asian parts. The river Mtkvari, running through the city, had several islets, one of which was named after Madatov, a Russian general. It was on this small island that the body of Khapo the Artist was found. He was a well-known figure of the Asian quarter, but his open homosexuality made him a target for the heads of different denominations.

In reality, Khapo wasn't an artist. He was quite a successful painter and decorator, appreciated for his talent of painting trendy wallpaper, hence 'an artist' in his name. Thanks to his acknowledged skill he mostly worked in the European part, which ensured him wide connections among the urban elite.

However, it transpired that Khapo was an artist indeed, but very few were aware of the fact. This side of his talent was accidentally discovered by the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, one of the characters of the novel, visiting Tbilisi at the time. On the other hand, homosexuality was rather common among the small traders of the Asian part. And so, it was Khapo the Artist who was found murdered on Madatov Island.

Surprisingly, it is the Gendarmerie that undertakes the murder investigation. Under the pretext that his leading detective is on sick leave, Count Segedy, the Head of the Caucasian Gendarmerie, assigns the task to Colonel Korganov, the Head of the Gendarmerie Archive, now practically forgotten by his colleagues. Victor Bayard, the Head of Political Surveillance Services, is designated as his deputy for the investigation.

By now, Korganov is fat and slovenly, living quietly with his wife in the suburb. After an extremely promising start, an unfortunate incident (he was ordered to liquidate someone he highly sympathised with) nearly ruined his entire career, leaving him to serve in a comparatively inconspicuous position until his retirement.

Bayard, by contrast, is emotional and dynamic, having at his disposal diverse information concerning the eminent citizens and, as a result, he is highly cynical of the integrity and the morals of the city inhabitants. He has a feeling, which he expresses out loud, that he has been assigned to the task with the aim of failing the investigation. Korganov, on his part, has practically forgotten how to properly deal with a murder case, finding it increasingly difficult even to move around.

The crime circumstances uncovered by these two detectives reveal that Khapo the Artist was a notorious money-lender and blackmailer, using compromising evidence of homosexual relations in order to get money.

Certain figures emerge in the course of investigation, such as an elusive Prince Bebuov, a Tbilisi-type professor Moriarty, or several participants of numerous homosexual orgies. But the murderer remains unknown, probably the way Count Segedy had planned it from the start: he seems to have done his duty by conducting the investigation, but decides not to frustrate anyone with its results, especially those in the top positions or belonging to the high circles. Numerous arrests lead nowhere as the eminent suspects are quickly released.

Colonel Korganov continues the investigation single-handedly. He comes across a student of the religious seminary, suspected of terrorism, but after meeting him in person,

the Colonel dismisses him as innocent in the murder. The unravelling of his theory, however ungrounded, strongly affects the Colonel: he roams the city in a state of complete dazzle, while his mind begins to search for the culprit elsewhere.

Khapo the Artist was often seen in the company of a 14-year-old deaf-and-dumb youth. Some believed he was his illegitimate son, others said he was just a servant, a poor homeless lad given a shelter and a job. Meanwhile, many vicious minds of the Asian quarter held on to the belief that the youth was the painter's lover.

Not having children of his own, Colonel Korganov decides to adopt the lad, who shows definite signs of talent in painting. On the last pages of the book, the colonel seems practically convinced that the lad killed Khapo. However, the readers might feel less conviction in this respect, being given the freedom to draw their own conclusions.

The methods chosen for the narration are diverse and unusual. In some parts one comes across the typical elements of a spy novel, while the descriptions of everyday situations prevail in others. The stories are mostly told from a detached point of view. Some aren't even remotely connected to the murder, but while reading through them, the readers find various investigation details as if deliberately scattered in the narration.

On the whole, the narrative style is somewhat eclectic and reminiscent of a carnival mood, especially that the author selects specific devices to render the desired effect. One episode of the novel can offer a parody of the 19th century realistic style, while another can present a semblance of a decadent miniature. The reader comes across the old newspaper style, the language of typical complaints of the Bolshevik period, as well as some extracts written in an approximation of the period drama, while the investigation-related story is offered through the boringly monotonous narrative from the seemingly incomplete memoirs written by Colonel Korganov years later. Each chapter is preceded by several epigraphs, some by famous and some by fictitious writers.

The novel alternately depicts the comical life of the Georgian aristocracy, the hardships of the religious seminary students, entertaining and unexpected stories of the city casinos and whore-houses.

The author has supplied his own comments with additional information about every character of the novel. Also, he gives an insight into the story of writing each chapter, referring to the historic prototypes of the figures, as well as some episodes which failed to make their way into the novel. For instance, from Khapo the Artist's family tree we learn that the deaf-and-dumb lad is his illegitimate son.

The novel includes a police-style document formally closing the case. Although it states that Khapo the Artist was murdered by his son, it seems unnecessary to blindly trust the official conclusion.

The author's comments are an integral part of the novel, maintaining the cheerful tone of the entire narration.

To Disappear on Madatov Island

The shared years of studies in Europe, a nomadic lifestyle, shared room and shared lover – these were the common features of the life once led by two friends, Ilia Imerlishvili and Akaki Ioseliani.

On his return to Tbilisi, Akaki begins to work as a reporter for a cheap newspaper, struggling to earn a little and find a way to leave the poverty, debts and misery behind. On a late autumn night, quite unexpectedly, when looking at some pastry in a shop-window, he meets his old friend Ilia. The latter certainly seems better-off, visiting Tbilisi en route to some foreign country. The friends feast in a restaurant and go to Ilia's rented place after the merry-making. It is here that Ilia explains to his friend that he is the member of the secret World Evolutionists' Organisation, that revolutions are rubbish, while it is the evolution which counts. It is noteworthy that the action takes place in 1909, soon after the cruel suppression of the 1905-07 Russian Revolution.

Ilia offers Akaki a flat, money and comparatively peaceful existence, but in return he has to secretly translate *Kama Sutra* into Georgian, thus initiating certain changes in the Georgian mentality, eventually enhancing bigger changes in the nation's conscience.

Akaki accepts the proposition. Early in the morning Ilia disappears, leaving Akaki with the book in a wonderfully furnished flat. He immediately adapts to all the advantages of his new life: begins to wear expensive clothes, goes to costly cafes. And sets to the task of translating the book.

He was given a deadline for the translation and a secret code which would enable him to identify the person designated to take the manuscript on its completion. The rendezvous is the isle of Madatov, a tiny island in the middle of the river Mtkvari, dividing Tbilisi in two.

Such is one narrative plane of the novel, while the other is dedicated to the work of the Gendarmerie. Victor Bayard, the Head of Political Surveillance Services, is looking for Ilia from the beginning but fails to find him. Once he meets Akaki during the raid of Ilia's flat. Not only Bayard, but his old friend Colonel Korganov has travelled from the first book of the trilogy, *The Flight over Madatov Island*. Now, ten years later, the colonel is already retired, meeting his former colleague very seldom. However, Colonel Korganov is involved in the case, because, as the readers discover in the end, he is the mysterious man who should take the translation from Akaki at the rendezvous on the Madatov Island.

Akaki is in love with Marie Agabegova, a young pharmacist's assistant, but being a practically unemployed poor student, he cannot find the courage to see her father about the marriage.

There is a mysterious man living next door to Akaki, a retired Captain Saginov, who has an enormous sheep dog with bloodshot eyes. Saginov is a rough man, whose adventurous life occupies quite a section of the novel. The Captain is often visited by his ex-wife, known as Countess Aradel. In reality she is a blackmailer, and using the knowledge of her ex-husband's secrets, she constantly demands money from him, makes him take loans and even controls his last will.

One of the secrets that Captain Saginov hides is related to his young days. Once his name was associated with extremely popular adventure books in Russia, but the truth

is he had never written any of them. They belonged to his cousin who published the books under Captain Saginov's name. During his military career, he had been involved in several duels and had even killed a man under suspicious circumstances.

Following one of the visits from his ex-wife, Saginov sets fire to his house, but saves several old documents. One of them is a description of the place where a royal treasure is buried.

The fire is extinguished and it is due to the incident that Akaki and Captain Saginov get to know each other. Sensing that he is under a close scrutiny from the Gendarmerie, Akaki shares his secret with Saginov. Also, some time before the fire incident, Akaki meets Saginov's ex-wife in a cafe, but because she introduced herself under an assumed name, he is unaware that she has any connection with his new friend.

Then comes a time when Akaki panics and believes he has to hide. He turns to Marie for help, also telling her about his secret mission. Marie takes him to her sister's fiancé, Aram Nikolaevich, and hides him at his place. But Aram's house is already full of revolutionaries, his brother's friends, who not only plan a terrorist attack, but actually fulfil it. They treat Akaki with utter suspicion and decide to kill him, but Aram Nikolaevich settles the dispute before it gets too heated. He then takes Akaki to a restaurant in the Asian quarter of Tbilisi. After all the stress, they soon get really drunk and Akaki begins to read aloud the passages from *Kama Sutra* in his translation, which absolutely shock the common people dining around. Finally they both decide to visit Marie's father to ask him for his blessing for them to marry his daughters.

The following morning, when Akaki wakes up on the river bank, he is completely oblivious of the night's events. He heads for Marie's pharmacy and hears from her about the scandal he caused. Apparently, he lectured his sweetheart's father on sex and no wonder was kicked out of the house by the infuriated prospective father-in-law. In utter distress, Marie refuses to see him in future.

Captain Saginov's ex-wife comes across Akaki, who is by then aimlessly walking the streets. Soon she becomes his lover and manages to get hold of his manuscript, which she considers valuable as a future bargain. Meanwhile, the rendezvous zero-hour closes in, which means Akaki has to meet a mysterious stranger. Quite unexpectedly, Captain Saginov visits his ex-wife with the aim of killing her and actually fulfils his plan. After the murder, he takes Akaki with him and hides him at his old Azeri friend Chikila's place.

That fatal night *Fidelio* is on at the Opera House. During the interval Colonel Korganov tells his wife he needs a breath of fresh air and leaves. Incidentally, the novel begins with a similar episode when Korganov meets a mysterious stranger in the Opera buffet, receiving from him the rendezvous code and location. Korganov heads for the Madatov Island and meets Akaki, having identified himself with the help of the code word. However, not everything goes smoothly as Victor Bayard is waiting for them. He takes the manuscript, but lets Akaki go unharmed.

The stirring conversation between Korganov and Bayard ends with the latter throwing the *Kama Sutra* manuscript into the river. Then they walk away into the city night together. Korganov returns to the Opera, apologising to his wife for forgetting about the second act.

The novel ends with the episode in which Captain Saginov goes out of the city, to a legendary lake which might have featured on his secret map as the treasure trove

location. He leaves his loyal sheep dog on the shore, while he himself ties a largish boulder to his waist and steps into the lake brandishing a sword. The entire suicide scene leaves an eerie impression of a sacrificial rite. On the very last page of the novel, the reader finds Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee*, translated by Akaki and presented to Marie.

The novel is written in the language and style of the turn of the 20th century. The reader will undoubtedly notice the allusions from Dickens, Chekhov, Arabian fairy tales. The narration is far from straightforward as the novel abounds in inserted passages, novellas and anecdotes, which complete each other. For instance, the chapter epigraphs are quotations from Captain Saginov's novels. The entire story becomes clear only towards the final pages of the novel as the seemingly independent plot lines come together. On the whole, the novel is written in an ironic tone.

The Whale on Madatov Island

The novel consists of two parts and presents the third, slightly more ideological continuation of the 'Madatov' trilogy.

In the first part, which finishes abruptly, the action takes place in 1929 in Tbilisi. By this time Georgia had been under the Communist rule for eight years already. After a short period of independence, Georgia was annexed once again in 1921, this time by the Russian Bolshevik army.

The Communist government of Georgia and its KGB (then called Che-Ka) have plenty to worry about as the Communist Party functionary of one of the provinces sent two extremely strange letters to Comrade Stalin. Strange as it may sound, Stalin read them and ordered the KGB in Georgia to investigate the matter.

The KGB authorities thought it best to announce Prokopy Dogonidze, the author of the troublesome letters, insane and lock him in a psychiatric clinic. However, the head of the clinic, Professor Alexander Samanishvili, who spent the best part of his life in Germany, where his children and grandchildren still live, claims that Dogonidze is in sound mind. For his opinion he is persecuted by the KGB, which sends a special investigator from Moscow, someone Evgeny Sheradze, a Georgian by birth. The latter establishes a friendly relationship with Professor Samanishvili, even lets him read the letters.

Soon it transpires that Sheradze is an impostor, not an agent at all, more so, not even the Party member. He actually is the son of a judge who used to work in Tbilisi of the Tsarist times. Sheradze walks the city streets, recalling the times of his childhood, but what he finds is very far from his happy memories. Gone are the days when Tbilisi was cozily welcoming, embracing everyone with its magic charm. Instead he sees only destruction, poverty and dejection. Once he even comes across his old flame begging in the street, but she refuses to recognise him, claiming he mistook her for someone else.

In fact, Dogonidze's letters informed the authorities that highly mysterious things were happening in his province. Among them he mentioned the appearance of an old man walking around in a cassock, which was banned in the Soviet times, when even the

priests were forbidden to wear them and churches were turned into warehouses, if not demolished. In Dogonidze's province there was an old monastery, now standing idle. As it was trendy in those times to stage anti-religious plays, he gladly permitted a travelling troupe to use the monastery yard for their propaganda performances.

But quite soon it became obvious that there was nothing anti-religious in them. Moreover, they were actually mystic, having unimaginable consequences: there were destructive blasts, then medieval knights appeared on their charges; the Communists scattered in panic and soon vanished completely; in his study Dogonidze found an exquisite sword, old and precious, and above all, a note saying he had to fight the enemy with it. All this was reflected in Dogonidze's letters to Stalin.

The matter is aggravated by a simple fact that Dogonidze is the head of the province where Stalin began his revolutionary career, thus he should be familiar with all the places described. Knowing all too well the unpredictable nature of a Georgian character, Stalin must have found the events extremely upsetting.

Meanwhile, Evgeny Sheradze investigates the origin of the sword, which makes the matter worse as he discovers it is absolutely unique.

By now Professor Samanishvili is seriously involved in the story and decides to confide in Nurse Madeleine, his only friend. They are closely watched by the KGB agents. It is at this point that Professor and Madeleine are contacted by a stranger and only now Professor fully realises the enormity of the problem he got himself into. And this problem can be called Ilia Imerlishvili's Theatre. The character of Ilia has travelled from the novel *To Disappear on Madatov Island*, as the one who was commissioned to translate *Kama Sutra*, spread it across the Russian Empire, thus assist the evolution.

Ilia Imerlishvili received the sword under extremely suspicious circumstances: he was approached by a total stranger on a crowded market place. The man introduced himself as Jabrail Visramiani. But Ilia has already constructed huge plans for the future.

His conviction is that in order to free his home country from the Communists it is useless to start a revolt or a war as these were tried by the Georgians, but unsuccessfully. He believes that the root of all evil must be affected directly, and he aims at Stalin himself. He plans to stage a grand performance, permeated by mystic meanings, which should be first shown exactly in the province where Stalin's revolutionary activities began.

The performance is envisaged as a reference to allusions, images, symbols and episodes brought to life from the great Georgian history and literature, which are familiar to Stalin, thus must affect him in the most unnerving way. In order to fulfil his plan, Ilia Imerlishvili gathers around him trustworthy people, who form an extensive gallery of portraits - the characters of the novel. His plan is so grand in scale that he is determined to embrace the whole country and include everyone in his performance.

Ilia Imerlishvili's confidant visits Professor Samanishvili, who secretly goes to join Ilia's group in their hiding place, deep in a dense forest. At this point the narration of the first part of the novel ends abruptly.

The time in the second part of the novel is 1999, the place – post-Soviet Tbilisi. It is the story about a 37-year-old writer of cheap novels, who publishes them under the pseudonym Ishmael Peran. Certain allusions are obvious in this part, for instance it begins with 'Call me Ishmael', a clear indication of *Moby Dick*.

We get acquainted with Peran when, following a family quarrel, his wife moved to her mother's place. But Peran is unruffled knowing all too well that it's not their first or last disagreement.

The writer is visited by his school friend Kwikwi, recently released from prison. He asks for a temporary shelter and brings along his girl-friend Zoya. Peran invites them to stay.

Meantime, Peran's publisher Toushi hides the books he has printed in the writer's house, because some obscure radical sect is protesting against his publishing company. He is blamed for printing and distributing satanic books, such as Darren Shan's series about vampires. Peran has two other friends: computer game expert nicknamed Corbin Dallas and his fiancée.

From his computer expert friend Peran borrows a strategy game The Magic Polis, the idea of which is to build a city and work towards its prosperity. The writer is a crazy fan of the game, playing the nights through.

Alongside everyday life, the plot tells of the game story as well. As the Head of the city, Peran tells the history of his creation, which goes back over thousands of years. The entire game is presented as a metaphor of the ruler-people relation.

In the real life Peran's house is raided by twin policemen brothers, obsessed with arresting Kwikwi. The latter escapes by jumping from the balcony, while in their frustration the policemen now turn against Peran.

His friend Dallas is wounded by street muggers, his wife does not seem to be willing to return to him, so Peran lives in his flat with Zoya. But there is nothing like romance between them as he is entirely engrossed in the computer game. Finally, Zoya steals his money and leaves. During their chance meeting, one of the twin policemen tells him that Kwikwi killed his brother.

Peran turned the city he created into a prosperous, flourishing metropolis, where he is a happy ruler. However, a misfortune befalls him when a treacherous enemy takes over his game city, as the computer game rules prescribe. Peran's hero-character returns for retribution and leads a rebellion. At the same time, Mobus, the deep-water monster of the game, emerges to swallow the island of Pegot, Peran's favourite place in his cherished city.

The allegory is designed to make us think that Stalin managed to beat Ilia Imerlishvili. At this point in the novel Peran switches the computer off, stops the game in the hope of saving his poor city from complete destruction, in his miserable attempt to desist the monster from eating his tiny island. And then immediately we find ourselves back in the first part of the novel - Tbilisi of the Communist 1920s.