



WOE IS LIFE

Setting: Georgia over the course of the 20th century; town of Telavi; shepherd community in the mountains.

Themes: freedom; love; resistance; communism; history of Soviet Occupation; repression; life and death.

Genre: drama; historical saga.

Adaptation: limited series; feature film.

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

The events described in the novel unfold in Telavi, a small Georgian town in the 1920-50s. Following the lives of three women, a reader can observe the developments in the history of the country: the lifestyles of the locals, as well as the Georgians of the period in general, their culture and aspirations, global political events and the Soviet terror of the 1930s.

MOVIE REFERENCES:

1900 (1976) a film by Bernardo Bertolucci

In the Time of the Butterflies (2001) a film by Mariano Barroso



CHARACTERS:

Rusudan – pious woman, one of the three heroines

Maka – kind and generous woman, one of the three heroines

Eva – the main heroine of the story, beautiful and free-spirited girl

The narrator – the initial narrator of the story, Rusudan's young granddaughter

Gigla – Eva's son

Maro – Eva's daughter in law

Matsia – Eva's widowed father, caring dearly for his only daughter

Gio – Eva's husband, humble and hardworking man

Father Luka – the village priest

Spiridona – Eva's second husband, forcing himself into the marriage; communist collaborator

Chiko – an orphan adopted by Grandma Maka

Archil – Maka's old sweetheart, later turned into a communist functionary



BOOK SAMPLE

SUMMARY:

The novel is a compelling saga that revolves around three women and their journey through uneasy and turbulent times of Georgian history.

The story takes place in the 20s and 50s. The narrator opens up with the scene of a wake for one of the main heroines of the novel - Eva. A beautiful and courageous woman, she had become her most bitter self by the end of her life. The family is alienated from her, her daughter-in-law Maro won't even forgive a dead woman. The only people staying awake by her body at night are her lifetime friend Rusudan (now Grandma Rusudan) and her granddaughter, who begins narrating the story, shifting to other timelines and narrators later on. Their wake is joined by the carpenter Yoseba, who made and delivered a coffin for Eva. He starts reminiscing about Eva and segways the reader into what turns out to be a story of much larger scale and importance.

Eva was a daughter of a widow named Matsia, a lead shepherd in a mountainous eastern part of Georgia. After losing his wife, Matsia started cherishing Eva as a reflection of his dear wife, giving her an extraordinary life that young girls didn't usually experience back in those times and in that community. Eva barely ever left his side, rode a horse from a very young age, accompanied his father during winter sheep keep, and grew up to be a free spirit. Alas, the life and havoc of the revolutions and Soviet occupation would later deprive her of chances for freedom and happiness.

In a parallel story we meet two other cornerstone women of the novel, - Eva's friends Rusudan and Maka. Their friendship, paths, and life stories are the cornerstone of the novel, intertwined with 'woes' of extremely hard times.

As for all young women, romantic love and marriage occupy a big part of the thoughts and plans of these three. Eva falls in love with Gio, a young man she and her father saved during a vicious blizzard after he had lost his entire flock of sheep. For a shepherd, a loss like that is a devastating incident. Eva and Matsia nurse him into getting back to his feet physically and emotionally, and Matsia keeps Gio in his team of shepherds to help him recover. Eva, being an ultimate free spirit, falls in love with Gio and asks his father for permission for the marriage. She doesn't behave like a damsel in the wait for love, she recognizes true love when she sees it and is ready to fight for it. They get married and are promised to live a simple but extraordinarily loving life, if not the tragic and early death of Gio. Falling into despair, Eva doesn't stay single for long, because the man with a newfound power is after her. The ultimate villain of the story, her second husband Spiridona approaches Matsia and implicitly threatens him in case he won't agree to let him marry Eva. The socialist revolution has reached the country and Spiridona is one of the ardent followers, rewarded by the party. The novel speaks

about the dark side of the revolution and Sovietization. Matsia realizes that in this new order of state and community, the best chance for Eva is to marry the villain, rather than be targeted by him for the rest of her life. Convincing her is not easy, but depressed and desperate after Gio's death, she does not care much about what comes next, so Eva agrees and starts living a miserable, loveless life, just to find out later that the death of her husband was no mistake, but part of the plan. This event dooms her into living a bitter life, into being an absent mother, wife and a member of society. The narrator, Rusudan's granddaughter, remembers stories of their walks in the forest, how Grandma Eva knew everything about the local flora, and how she found an escape in nature, away from a spoiled society of depraved people. Later in life, the only activity that Eva enjoys is spending time with her friend Maka, playing cards, and contemplating life.

Eva's story is the heart of the novel, creating different pathways for flashbacks and other storylines. Although her friends also have an uneasy life. Maka had one big love in her life, Archil, who later became one of the three bloodiest executioners of the Soviet order in the part of the country where they all lived. The narrator doesn't fully give up on any of the characters, even Archi, who shows that he still has a humane side deep inside when he tries to help out Maka and save the life of a young man repressed by the Soviet State. Rusudan, who was a smart, pious girl, is married off against her will at a very young age, having to leave her young friend Eva behind in the village.

Despite every tragedy and bitterness, the three women stay true to each other, true to humanitarianism and kindness. The novel is an engaging, captivating saga of three generations over 30-40 years, telling an incredibly humane story of their lives and struggles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Zaira Arsenishvili (1933 – 2015), a writer and screenplay writer, was educated as a philologist, and also graduated from the violin class of a Music College. For some time, she worked as a music teacher and was a violinist in the Opera House orchestra. Later, her talent flourished in a collaboration with Lana Gogoberidze and they produced screenplays for the latter's films: *When Almonds Blossom*, *Turmoil in Salkhineti*, *Several Interviews on Personal Matters* and others.

Zaira Arsenishvili received numerous state prizes in Soviet times, as well as in independent Georgia.

She is the author of several novels and short stories.

Her novel *Woe is Life* is a bestselling favorite of Georgian readers as is the novel *Requiem*, and two short story collections.