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Inner Martyrdom: Deconstructing the Sacrificial Female Subject in Post-Soviet Georgia

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Abstract: This article analyzes the 2017 film, *My Happy Family*, and how it depicts the archetypical Georgian woman and the sacrifices she is required to make for the family and, by extension, the nation. In doing so, I explore the socio-historical construction of the ideal woman and the ways women resist gendered demands, often through unseen means. Scholars have explored the cultural politics of “postsocialism,” analyzing the “New Woman” archetype in relation to class, sexuality, and labor. Finding that many neglect issues of women’s own socio-psychic negotiation of the postsocialist terrain, I argue that we must investigate more closely the production of the sacrificial/sacred female subject in terms of “inner martyrdom.” By focusing on female martyrdom in Georgia, I shed insight into women in a postsocialist context.

Keywords: Georgia, postsocialism, post-Soviet women, inner martyrdom

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Introduction

This article examines the 2017 film, *My Happy Family*, directed by Nana Ekvimishvili and Simon Gross to analyze the hidden/public lives of Georgian women and examine their space of belonging (and exclusion) in the national/family space (or national family).¹ *My Happy Family* portrays the life of an archetypical Georgian woman named Manana and the sacrifices she is required to make for the family and, by extension, the nation. I explore the socio-historical construction of the ideal woman and the ways women resist gendered demands, often through unseen means.

This article uses a discussion of the film as a means to analyze and illustrate various aspects of gendered social codes and relations in post-Soviet Georgia. The choice of this specific film emerges from the fact that this is one of the most acclaimed Georgian films of recent years, one that has spurred discussions on women’s predicament and feminist agenda in present-day Georgia. The film has been screened at feminist festivals and forums in the country, garnering international awards. Popular with mainstream audiences, the text is also ripe for scholarly analysis on what it means to be a woman in postsocialist Georgia.

Scholars have explored the cultural politics of “postsocialism,” analyzing the “New Woman” archetype in relation to class, sexuality, and labor in countries once under communist rule (Ghodsee 2004; Tlostanova 2010; Todorova 2018). Finding that many scholars neglect issues of women’s own socio-psychic negotiation of the postsocialist terrain (focusing more on issues of rights), I argue that we must investigate more closely “inner martyrdom,” which is a gendered condition of being/becoming that speaks to struggles that bridge the public/private divide. I contend that inner martyrdom depicts the ways women and other gendered subjects are held up as sacred beings who must constantly sacrifice their private lives to maintain

and uphold a heteropatriarchal public order. This sense of martyrdom differs from between being a public martyr who sacrifices for a cause or being a personal martyr, someone who seems to always be suffering.

To define the heteropatriarchal family structure, I first explain how the heteronormative system works. The heteronormative system categorizes humans as exclusively men or women who exhibit masculine or feminine characteristics respectively. The heteronormative system deploys heterosexual mechanisms that impose a hierarchy of men and masculinity above that of women and femininity (Fraser 1997). The heteropatriarchal family as an extension of the hetero-national family assumes that the normal expression of heterosexuality in society is one of a married couple with children. Motherhood and wife-hood are the ultimate goals for a woman. The marriage should be only between a man and a woman. Such a normative view of sexual relations is conveyed through everyday discourse, media, the economic system, and the law. The system, which can be found in many cultures, opposes and oppresses those who do not subscribe to the trope and archetype of the good wife/mother (Castree, et al. 2013). In the Georgian case, I underline that besides institutional structural forces, kinship, and honor play a significant role in emphasizing heteronormative behaviors and help the system to reinforce and legitimize punishment of behaviors that do not follow the heteronormative ideal.

By focusing on inner martyrdom in Georgia, I shed insight into the profound ways that women bear a heavy existential burden within a confusing time that promises gender parity even if it is anchored in deep inequities. Women do suffer, but their suffering is not so apparent or one that puts them in the position of victim/hero. My aim here is twofold: to provide the larger context for understanding gender regimes as they have changed, such that they end up reproducing systems of oppression, which individuals negotiate and navigate on their own terms. A close reading of *My Happy Family* reveals the intergenerational dynamics and heteropatriarchal conditions under which Georgian women live. These social structures appear on the surface egalitarian or non-political but involve restrictive quotidian circumstances that force women like the main character in *My Happy Family* to make a radical break from convention. Methodologically, my analysis of the film *My Happy Family* focuses not so much on aesthetics as much as it employs this cultural text as a case study or microcosm for elucidating larger forces. This approach brings together text and context in an interdisciplinary manner that speaks to global studies, women's studies, cultural studies, and historical studies. In doing so, I explore the multi-scalar ontologies of women across human domains.

Women's Reality in Georgia

On July 18, 2021, a special session of parliament was held in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. The opposition demanded the ruling party, "Georgian Dream," to explain why they refused to provide any safety measures for LGBTQ supporters to hold an annual Pride Parade. The annual Pride Parade was supposed to happen on July 5, however, due to violent attacks by far-right groups against LGBTQ activists and journalists, the organizers had to cancel it. The opposition asked the ruling party to explain why police did not stop far-right groups from assaulting queer rights supporters and vandalizing the Tbilisi Pride office² The speech of Vakhtang Gomelauri, the Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia, caused turbulence in parliament and ended in a verbal confrontation between the majority and the members of the opposition. During the verbal altercation, Tina Bokuchava, one of the female leaders of the opposition party, United National Movement, tried to approach the seat of the speaker. However, she and her colleague, Nona Mamulashvili, were forcibly removed from the space by their male colleagues from the ruling party. Besides physical aggression, the female members of the Georgian parliament were also targets of verbal abuse (Radiotavisupleba, July 22, 2021). This example demonstrates how gender non-majority subjects and sexual minorities are disavowed from civil society.

If male politicians do not hesitate to use force against their female counterparts in front of the cameras, then one can only imagine what happens within Georgian homes. If women are stopped from speaking and physically removed from the speaker's seat, who is voicing their needs and protecting their rights? What message does this action send to young women who imagine themselves as future politicians? Those would be the questions of an audience that are not familiar with how distressingly common violence against women is in Georgia. Once a promising leader of democratic change in the post-Soviet territories, the Republic of Georgia now hides behind the "progressive laws" that are never fully enforced or implemented. On a wider level, many women do not feel secure and sovereign, even within the comforts of their family and other institutions.

Soon after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia expressed its willingness to fight discrimination against women and supported the establishment of gender equality by joining the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1994. In 1995, Georgia adopted the Beijing Platform of Action, which aimed to achieve greater equality for all women. In 1998, the Georgian government decided to address women's issues locally and established the first state institution for the advancement of women. Yet, these attempts had only a legal character and rarely involved any enforcement that was necessary for real change of status and rights of women in Georgia (Chkheidze 2011). Several governments changed throughout last two decades in Georgia, and each of them brought new laws and hopes for improvement of women's conditions.³ However, as the Manifesto of Georgian Women's Movement shows, progress has been slow and, in some cases, even nonexistent. The manifesto is drawn by Georgian women's movement and argues that,

Today in Georgia:

- Every fifth woman stays in the family as a housewife at the request of her husband.
- Women work at home for an average of 45 hours without pay.
- Women victims of violence have nowhere to go, they often return to the abuser due to lack of money and homelessness.
- Women make up only 20% of the governing body of organizations.

And the list goes on! International organizations share a similar concern and point out that Georgian women account for a significant proportion of the poor in the country and remain amongst the impoverished of Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions (Brody 2018). Georgian women have to work more than one job to make as much as men, which might still not be enough for a substantial living. Georgian women receive less than two-thirds of the average monthly salary of men and that dynamic has remained stable for last ten years (Georgian National Statistics Office, 2020). Women are therefore often reliant on men for survival and success. Their happiness is deemed irrelevant, much less the whole of their thoughts or feelings.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was hope for great changes, which were not always forthcoming. Georgian women, who actively fought for independence, thought that the independent Republic of Georgia would guarantee their freedom and equality. However, the transition process from state socialism to liberal democracy turned out to be more challenging than expected (Ghodsee 2011), especially for women who lost any social safety nets that they had during the Soviet times (Ghodsee and Mead 2018). The hope that regime change would emancipate or liberate women never came to full fruition. Promises of gender parity started to slowly disappear in post-independence Georgia. The belief that liberal democracy will bring progress and equality for women is based on a false assumption that ongoing oppression is a thing of the past and the future holds progressive, equal societies. Thus, the challenging process of transitioning from state socialism to market economy was presumed as a natural process of modernization, one that

would eventually lead to Europeanization and Westernization as well as gender mainstreaming (Suchland 2011).

Georgian cinema has a long and rich history. However, it is quite telling that the very first feature film in the independent Republic of Georgia (1918-1921),⁴ *Qristine* (1919)⁵ depicts a cautionary tale for young women. The film shows how the female protagonist Qristine is excluded from society because she dared to disobey pre-designed script written for women in her social class. After Georgia gained independence for the second time in the twentieth century, in 1991, it took quite some time for women to appear as lead characters in Georgian cinema.⁶ However, some of the most important recent Georgian films have been dedicated to the evocation of women's lives with intense seriousness. In 2012, Rusudan Chkonia's *Keep Smiling* successfully premiered at the Venice film festival and won many international awards. *Keep Smiling* depicts ten different Georgian mothers and represents the brutal reality of Georgian women who, despite their sufferings, have to keep a smile on their faces in order to get the approval and support of their families as well as that of the public (Gvakharia 2016). Another prominent example is *In Bloom* (2013) directed by Nana Ekvimishvili and Simon Gross. *In Bloom* tells the story of young Georgian women in the 1990s, whose childhood and happiness are taken away by forced marriages. Ekvimishvili and Gross's more recent works, *My Happy Family* (2017) and *Scary Mother* (2017), depict the reality of older Georgian women and the sacrifices they have to make for their families and nation (White 2018). Sacrificing their personal space, desires, and happiness, they are put into the constant mode of inner martyrdom. *Scary Mother* demonstrates how the experiences of inner martyrdom can cause a rupture between desires and reality and lead to further alienation of women from their families and communities. Modern Georgian cinema thus shows the impossibility of being a happy woman in a heteropatriarchal society.

In my analysis of *My Happy Family*, I show that gender inequalities in Georgia are rooted in the notion that women must turn into martyrs for their families, an orthodoxy wedded to past and current conditions of power. Ekvimishvili and Gross depict this internal/external struggle in *My Happy Family* by showing three different generations of women in Georgia that are stuck in the same space of confinement and are destined to similar futures. Unless they break the cycle and embrace the consequences that the hegemonic sexist system has in place to punish those who go against it. And some do, as I later demonstrate, charting a path of independence that rails against societal norms and expectations. Such actions are not always explainable or rooted in a need to outwardly rebel. The next sections will use the movie as a cultural text that depicts the larger context of heteropatriarchal structure in Georgia which seeks to render women disposable. This structure, as will be revealed, precedes the present moment to draw on decades of women inhabiting both Soviet and non-Soviet political regimes. Later in the article, I will discuss how *My Happy Family* opens up a conversation about how the heteropatriarchal system fails to exist without women's mental and physical work as, eventually, the women get sick and tired and refuse this forced labor.

Contemporary Representations of “Modern” Georgian Women

My Happy Family follows the story of a 52-year-old literature teacher, Manana, who is played by Georgian actress, Ia Shugliashvili. Manana lives in a three-bedroom apartment with her family. The apartment belongs to her parents and accommodates three generations: Manana and her husband; Manana's parents; and Manana's kids, one of whom is married and lives there with her spouse. The smallness of the home space is depicted in different ways throughout the movie; the most obvious one is a huge, shared family closet. The protagonist has to go into her married daughter's bedroom every morning to get dressed. She has no privacy.

The main conflict of the movie arises when Manana decides to leave the house without any specific explanation and moves to an apartment that she just rented on the outskirts of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Her whole family is shocked by the decision and cannot grasp why she wants to leave her “happy household.” Yet, Manana has contemplated the idea of moving out for quite some time, given that she had chosen a location and packed her things in such an organized fashion. In the first scene, we see her checking out the apartment where she eventually moves; however, she makes her final decision after interacting with one of her students at school.

It is quite telling that the teacher gets a life lesson from her student in one poignant scene. Tatia, a student, who had missed school for some time, explains to Manana, her teacher, that her absence was due to her recent divorce. She clarifies that her divorce was not a result of abuse, but simply the fact that she and her husband wanted “different things” in life. Divorcing for such a “simple” reason was not common in Manana’s generation. Prevailing gender ideologies did not favor divorced and/or single women in Georgia. The directors chose this scene to be one of two scenes where Manana is shown at her work. In the other scene, Manana teaches her class about *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik* (Gambashidze and Tsurtaveli 2012). The choice of this particular piece of literature is not accidental. *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik* is considered to be the earliest surviving piece of classical Georgian literature dating back to the fifth century. The hagiographical novel tells the story of an Armenian noblewoman, Shushanik, who was tortured to death by her husband because she refused to accept Zoroastrian religion and defended her right to profess Christianity. The author, Iakob Tsurtaveli, who was also a witness to the torments of Queen Shushanik describes in vivid detail what she went through and expresses his fascination with her courage and devotion to her religion. *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik* is a core text that comprises Georgian high school curriculum. Manana comments on the texts and says, “Is *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* a family drama? From a present-day perspective, it is. However, it can be said that in this work, the conflict is based on religion, exceeding the bounds of family drama” (Ekvtimishvili and Gross 2017).

Queen Shushanik is seen as an example of a true Christian woman who turns the other cheek, who forgives her torturer, and who has been spat upon and insulted and still stands strong and faithful. Having Queen Shushanik as a role model is a heavy burden since sacrifices that are asked from modern Georgian women seem so small compared to what the queen had to go through. Even if one skips the class on Georgian literature, other institutions are there to remind Georgian women about the sacrifices that are expected from them, making them martyrs like Shushanik. Georgian Orthodox Church consistently “advises” women on their role and “place” in the world. Ekvtimishvili and Gross subtly depict this pressure to conform and obey in the scene where Manana is busy doing her housework; in the background, the speech of the Patriarch of Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II, airs on television. According to the Patriarch, “Happy is the family with a peaceful mother who sacrifices herself to her family and raises children” (Ekvtimishvili & Gross 2017). His voice serves as a reminder to Manana of her role as a woman and a mother in Georgian society. To understand the influence of Patriarch’s message, one should keep in mind that Ilia II is one of the most loved figures in Georgia (Minesashvili 2017). This scene sets the tone that Manana is expected to sacrifice her own happiness and endure life as it is. The sacrifice or martyrdom that is expected from Manana is not individualized; it is a process that every woman is supposed to go through, now and forever.

However, after a quick encounter with Tatia, who is depicted as an example of a woman who managed to put herself first and got divorced despite knowing that Georgian society would judge her, Manana decided to leave her parents’ house. Manana finally decides to stop following the path that was predesigned for her and leaves her family to start her own journey of autonomy. However, her choice to leave confuses her family, and Manana’s decision to keep her reasoning to herself deepens her relatives’

frustration. Manana's family expects her to fulfill her traditional roles as a mother and as a woman and, since her husband is not abusive, they cannot comprehend why she would want to leave. Unlike Queen Shushanik's husband, Vardan, Manana's husband, Soso (Merab Ninidze) is not abusive or even aggressive. He is a "good" husband by Georgian standards, though we later discover his infidelity. Thus, he and her family cannot imagine why Manana is unhappy and why she wants to leave a "happy" household. Her desires are viewed as selfish, unacceptable, and offensive. Her relatives refuse to acknowledge the sacrificial aspects of Manana's life or what I call her inner martyrdom.

Martyr for the Nation-family

The theme of sacrifice and the ideal woman is not new to post-Soviet space. Self-sacrificing for others as a heroic act was commonly promoted by the Soviet culture. Yuliya Minkova (2018) points out that official Soviet culture did not only introduce different heroic figures but also created a space that was endlessly filled with new exemplars of martyrdom. In her book, *Making Martyrs: The Language of Sacrifice in Russian Culture from Stalin to Putin*, Minkova shows how Soviet narratives intentionally created sacrificial imagery and used it to assert Soviet ideology and justify the brutal methods that were used to change Soviet society and fashion an ideal Soviet person. This already added to the given social conditioning that women need to sacrifice to men in authority. Minkova underlines that the metaphor of the sacred victim or martyr was essential to the discourse and its influences did not vanish with the collapse of the Soviet Union. She argues that the same system of creating homo sacers⁷—that legal subject of exception who can be sacrificed but not killed—is still intact in post-Soviet spaces. However, she does not analyze how post-Soviet women understood or crafted their sacrificial roles, which this article aims to do.

Famed Georgian director, Lana Ghogoberidze, brought up the issue of female sacrifice in her phenomenal movie, *Some Interviews on Personal Questions* (1978). Ghogoberidze bravely put women's issues on screen from a female perspective and depicted how the fate of one woman is intimately connected with the fate of others (Galichenko 1991; Lagarias 2018). Ghogoberidze also dramatized the conflict between a woman's professional life and the needs of her family. The main character Sopiko (Sofiko Chiaureli) is, directly and indirectly, asked to sacrifice her career for the sake of her husband, her sick mother, and her children. Her husband fails to see Sopiko's passion for her work and how much difference she makes in other people's lives (Attwood 1993). *Some Interviews on Personal Questions* shows that Sopiko is not alone in her troubles and that lots of women in Georgia are required to sacrifice their careers and passions for the sake of men, children, and their family. The continuity and cyclicity of Georgian women's struggle is depicted in this key Soviet-era text by an interesting use of flashbacks. While flashbacks typically uncover fragments of the past, Sofiko's flashbacks are of a distinct nature. They seem to be events, parts of her interviews or her personal life, which co-exist permanently within her and are hidden in an alternative mental reality. In that sense, she is a carrier of those people who shared their stories with her. In a way, she is an embodiment of these questions around loneliness, womanhood and family (Lagarias 2019).

Insofar as this film continues to hold a popular status within the cultural sensibilities of Georgia today, I contend that flashbacks in *Some Interviews on Personal Questions* represent the times of gender oppression are cyclical, crossing historical eras, and overlapping. Sopiko represents not only herself, but all the women throughout time and space who have suffered and continue to suffer within the heteropatriarchal family system that demands sacrifices from them. In *My Happy Family*, Ekvtimishvili and Gross bring to light a similar question and evidence that the heteropatriarchal structure of the Georgian family has not changed. The discourse of the model family in Georgia continues to promote gender binary, where cisgender men are perceived as the most powerful creatures, while the rest are depicted as powerless

“other” (Sargsyan 2017). This approach requires societies to have a clearly pronounced vision of what it means to be a man and a woman. Later in the article, I will make obvious how Manana’s family revolves around these structures. However, here I want to point out how the reasons for conflict in Georgian families have widened and now include the quest for personal space and freedom. Manana did not need to sacrifice her career for her family, however, she was required to diminish her personal needs. Having no private space leads Manana to have no personal life outside her family. She could not even enjoy her own music. The movie shows how much Manana loved playing the guitar, however, she was only able to find time to play once she moved to her own apartment.

The private joy of playing guitar is taken away from Manana when she is forced to perform at the gathering with her old classmates right after she learns about her husband’s infidelity. Her classmates fail to see her personal devastation and continue to demand from her to sing for the audience until she agrees. The song Manana chooses is a true depiction of the love she has for her husband and sadness she experiences from his betrayal. Manana’s performance in this scene is particularly exceptional since she is performing her late mother’s song. The song *How good you are, how good* (რა კარგო ხარ რა კარგო) tells a story of a woman who is in love and praises her lover but at the same time expects betrayal from him. The woman eventually lets her lover go but blames him for not knowing how to love (Gabisonia and Makharadze 2019).

The lyrics are somewhat similar to Manana’s story; thus, with this song, the anti-hero channels all her sorrows and disappointment. The fact that Manana felt that she did not have a choice not to perform despite the emotional trauma she was enduring speaks volumes about women’s perceived obligations both in the family and society, to the detriment of their own privations. This scene is a true depiction of her inner martyrdom; it obviates how Georgian women have to follow social demands and perform their supposed roles (even for the public) even when they are going through mental and physical challenges. They are compelled into a state of martyrdom that is not visible.

Manana decides to keep quiet about her husband’s betrayal, however, she manages to meet the woman with whom her husband cheated and even gets to meet their kid. In a society where men’s disloyalty is not as harshly judged as women’s, Manana’s silence is not unexpected or even rewarded.⁸ Time circles around once more when Manana’s son-in-law cheats on her daughter, Nino. Manana, who knows that Nino’s husband is having an affair, tells her daughter that not being able to get pregnant is not the worst thing in the world and that she is young enough and can use this time to study and explore the world. However, Nino believes that having a kid will save her marriage and family. The heteropatriarchal system makes the daughter believe that if she fulfills her role as a mother, her husband will stay with her. There is not much to persuade Nino that she can be happy on her own.

Another person who seemed to have kept quiet about the challenges in her life is Manana’s mother, Lamara (played by actress Berta Khapava). Thus, when Manana is packing her stuff to leave her house, Lamara screams in agony that she had to endure much more from her husband than Manana and that Manana’s life was easy since Lamara sacrificed everything for her. Portrayed as an overbearing matriarch, Lamara is the loudest in expressing her dissatisfaction with her daughter’s actions, which do not accord with social convention. Manana was born in a place dubbed as “the country of the happiest women,” where the ideas of feminism, particularly the idea of equality of men and women, were embraced (Barkaia 2018). Lamara lived most of her life under the Iron Curtain, and her definition of social responsibility derives from that. To mark off Manana as a feminist figure, and not her mother, discounts the manner in which Soviet-controlled women existed.

As Rosalind Marsh (2013) indicates, “Pervasive practices of patriarchal models did not permit feminist ideas to fully penetrate Soviet society. With generations of women living under the masculine rule of the Soviets, it becomes difficult to unshackle women from the hand of history. The coexistence of those

antagonistic concepts of feminism/womanhood had a controversial effect and mostly led to durable oppressive systems where women were the bearers of “double” or even “triple burden.” Women were and are constantly under pressure to make sacrifices for the ideal picture of the Soviet woman, the mythical Soviet woman that embraced the roles of worker, mother, and revolutionary (Attwood 1990; Goldman 1993; Goldman 2002). Soviet women like Manana’s mother had to make different moral and personal sacrifices, the character of which was defined by a woman’s class location and the social spaces she occupied. This public role-playing was matched by a circumscribed private world that, once revolutionized from within, can be described as inner martyrdom (since outer martyrdom requires a publicly recognized form of sacrifice acknowledged by others). Thus, Lamara’s inner martyrdom is never acknowledged and her pent-up emotions come out when her daughter decides to leave. Initially, Lamara fails to see why her daughter decides to stop sacrificing herself for the family and embarks on a path to find her own space. However, after a family drama evolves and all relatives get involved to stop Manana from leaving, Lamara does show her support to her daughter by giving her a hug before she leaves. In a way, the mother is also an inner martyr, one who suffers internally but sacrifices for others, if only as a matter of self-preservation and ethics.

Heteropaternalism and the (Im)Possibility of Gender Equality

Before getting to know Manana as she is in the present (in 2017), we need imagine her past since it is not depicted in the movie. Manana’s generation struggled to find a sense of self and freedom in the post-Soviet era where the interplay of sexuality, tradition, religion, and capitalism were collectively shaping a new reality. In 1991, a 26-year-old Manana would have woken up in an independent Georgia—a new country that demanded a new sacrifice from her citizens to rebuild and maintain the nation. One thing that was obvious was that it was supposed to be the end of authoritarianism and the beginning of democracy and freedom for all. Sadly, the path of independent Georgia started out with two ethnic conflicts that merged into an internecine civil war. The 1990s were challenging times not only for Georgia but for the whole of South Caucasus, where independence was not a result of peaceful protest but achieved via violence and turmoil, which continues today in smaller form.⁹ As in many other places, the wars overshadowed the worldviews of women and emphasized male power, thus supporting the existing traditional views of gender and family structure. The geopolitical situation of Georgia does not entirely capture the inner world or turmoil of women.

The new “post-Cold War” reality was infused with anti-Soviet nationalist sentiments coupled with antifeminist approaches; women remained entrapped by domesticity. Women of Manana’s generation endured a period when the ideas of social solidarity, unions, emancipation, equality were deemed taboo due to their associations with the Soviet period. To be an independent woman or one seeking equality with men revived the ghosts of communism. As Tamar Jakeli (2018) argues, the newly established government of the independent Georgia promoted the revival of a pre-Soviet culture “untainted-by-communism,” a national identity which had a regressive effect on the role of women in Georgian society because it individualized (and privatized) all struggles. Politics were democratized but held the status quo as a male province. These “post-feminist” anti-Soviet challenges did not stop Georgian women from fighting for their rights; the new context forced them to shift tactics and utilize methods that would give them agency in a unique challenging environment or what Jakeli calls, “maneuvering without compromising” (86). A new generation emerged to take hold of these emerging political stakes.

The war-torn economy was and remains one of the most challenges for Georgian women. *My Happy Family* depicts how these economic challenges affect Georgian women. Manana is a good example

of a typical Georgian woman. Her typicality is shown in many ways, one of which is her profession. Women represent 84% of schoolteachers in Georgia (World Bank 2016, XIII). Segregation of occupations by gender and the notion of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” work for women is underlined in *My Happy Family*. First, we can glimpse it when Manana encounters her old classmate at a local market. They seem incredibly happy to see each other, however, one can see a slight embarrassment in her classmate’s actions as she tries to explain why she had to accept her job as a street vendor. Despite her contentment with the position, she describes it as a burden she accepted since her husband lost most of their family’s money in gambling. Her unease with her current occupation becomes more obvious when she asks Manana not to mention her job during their class reunion gathering. The actual income of these women happens to be inconsequential when measuring their success. As a literature teacher, Manana barely makes enough to move out of her family’s apartment and live on her own. Yet since being a teacher is considered more respectable than being a street vendor, despite the latter’s capacity to provide for a full family, Manana’s classmate is perceived as an unsuccessful woman in an unacceptable work position. Another reason why Manana’s classmate might appear as an underachiever is that girls and women enjoy substantial access to education in Georgia, even tertiary education. Their educational foundation does not necessarily translate into improved skills and job opportunities. The limited access to economic opportunities leads to a significant gender gap in labor force participation.¹⁰

Manana’s husband Soso is employed but he and Manana have not earned enough to move out from Manana’s parents’ house. Since the house does not belong to Soso, his role as a patriarch of the family is undermined. Thus, at first glance, it is hard to figure out who is in charge of the household. Manana’s father, Otari, is too old to have a say in his daughter’s life. Soso does not fit the category of the family patriarch either. He tries to understand his wife’s decision and looks for the ways to control the people and space around her. However, Manana’s household does have a patriarch and that is her brother, Rezo. Rezo’s importance becomes clear when, in response to Manana’s actions to leave the house, her mother asks her grandson to call Rezo. Up until that moment, Manana was relatively calm and not responding to any of the questions or accusations coming from her family members. But as soon as she hears that Lamara wants to involve Rezo, Manana becomes very angry and defensive. She keeps repeating that Rezo is not her judge even though their mother is trying to make him her judge and superior. She argues that nobody can tell her what to do, given her age. Despite Manana’s refusal, her brother still gets involved and pays her an uncomfortable visit at her workplace.

One of the main themes that keeps showing up in Manana’s conversation with her family members and, in particular, with her brother is their perception of Manana as a “child” who does not understand what she is doing. In her multi-generational home, Manana does not exist as an individual or adult. By attempting to assert her individualism, she is portrayed as a privileged, selfish, and unaware of her decent familial life. All the sacrifices she has made for the family are “thrown” out of the window. She is rendered weak, incompetent, naïve and confused, while Rezo is shown as strong, capable, and wise. He assumes the position of an all-knowing arbiter who knows what is best for Manana. Manana’s perception as an incapable mentally deranged or unstable woman is also on display when her brother questions her capacity to afford living on her own and alludes that she might be getting help from friends or a secret male partner. Seeing Manana as a helpless and stubborn child allows her family to ignore the sacrifices she makes for them. Her inner martyrdom goes unnoticed until the moment she decides to leave her parents’ house and even then, not all members of her family are ready to accept her decisions. A public showdown ensues.

This family relationship provides a window into gender dynamics in Georgia, where expressions of paternalism depend on distorted understandings of gender as a binary where men are construed as naturally stronger and in charge of managing female gender and her activities. The paternalism masquerades under the notion of love and care for one’s family and for women as wards of men. Rezo’s

interaction with Manana at her workplace reveals that his real concerns are not about Manana's wellbeing but concern about his own reputation. He tells Manana that he does not want the whole city to talk about his sister, meaning that by wanting to secure her own space, his sister is doing something that will harm his stature. He also quickly shifts the blame to her by asking "do you want me to kill someone?" making Manana feel guilty for putting her brother in the position where he would need to murder someone who speaks ill of her in order to protect her honor.

Her brother also takes action to get the relatives involved and use them as a pressure point to make her reconsider her actions. Rezo goes as far as bringing in random men, with whom he has some connections, who live near Manana's new home to monitor her actions. The situation becomes quite tense yet comical when these men come knocking to Manana's door after seeing her go to her apartment with a man. They are caught by a surprise when they learn through heated discussion that the man is actually Manana's husband. Soso, who is at first angry with the actions of the neighbors, soon calms down and even tries to find some logical explanation as to why Rezo would ask these people to watch over Manana. Soso is stuck between the expectations of what it means to be a Georgian man and his desire to be with his wife. He makes an effort to establish a new relationship with Manana, in her new home and on her terms, installing furniture and bookcases even though she did not ask him to. Soso is actively trying to renegotiate his role as a separated spouse in a woman-controlled space; they are not neither together nor fully separated, but they occupy a mutual space in which the institutional family and marriage do not have a bearing influence. However, his caring actions for her are challenged by traditional values and masculinities as evidenced by his attempt to rationalize Rezo's heteropaternalist behavior. The movie concludes with no clear climax or conclusion. This filmic decision leaves Manana's future open, allowing viewers to take stock of the quiet or unspoken means by which women like her deal with matters of life. These types of mundane negotiations are rarely broached, when we reduce females' liberation to outward displays of resistance. In Soviet and post-Soviet times, the call for females to serve family and society adopts a complex dimensionality and indeterminacy.

Conclusion

With *My Happy Family* and its probing depiction of Georgian women, I examined the gendered mechanism and social promises of happiness used to pressure Georgian women to continue self-sacrificing in terms of what I call "inner martyrdom." I analyzed how the film depicted female oppression within the family structure but also spotlighted that emancipation for Georgian women does not necessarily mean an outright rejection of the traditional home; it invites a renewal of terms. In one of her interviews, Ekvimishvili argues that Manana could not achieve this goal of independence until she was fifty-two years old (Ekvimishvili and Gross 2017). Ekvimishvili hints that there is a parallel between Manana's quest for space and Virginia Woolf's famous essay *A Room of One's Own*. I argue that Manana's story is more complicated than it seems. It is not a proto-feminist story of a woman simply looking for a private dwelling space. Manana's character knows who she is; and since her family is a big part of who she is, she does not abandon them. Manana's story rather is a story of inner martyrdom, about a woman negotiating her own world as an individual through and away from her multi-generational family.

Even though Manana leaves her family's home, she does not abandon them. She is always there when they need her; she just lives alone in her own peaceful domicile. Her decision to not explain her reasons for leaving also indicates that Manana has no desire to change her family or persuade them that her actions are rightful. Open conflict is avoided, even when they attack her. She remains a quiet enigma of reserved fortitude. Manana's actions showed how simple measures can at the same time be revolutionary

in the fight against heteropaternalist structures that govern all social relations. Manana, like so many women, is not an impoverished victim of sexism who cannot find her proper footing or an outright outcast/victim. Rather, she is a woman who is still in process of figuring out how to create her space without compromising her family and her values. She is, in short, the embodiment and epitome of inner martyrdom.

The movie also depicts the uncertainty of the contemporary moment and its implications. At the end of *My Happy Family*, one is still left with the big question of whether or not her story is one of success and progress or even contentment. The movie gives no conclusive ending. One message that is clear is that Georgian households crumble without women. The heteropatriarchal system that does not value women is incapable of functioning without them. As soon as Manana leaves, total chaos and confusion ensues in her home and family. Thus, her family, who did not seem to value her while she was there, now begs her to come back.

Even if one assumes that Manana's story is a success story how many Georgian women can recreate it considering that Georgia still ranks amongst the five lowest countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia for gender equality?¹¹ I believe that Manana's story is inspirational but the audience should keep in mind that her story is not a true depiction of all Georgian women's realities. Manana lives in the capital and has a stable professional job, which is not the case for many Georgian women. As a teacher, Manana also holds the ability to have a side job as a private tutor and supplement her salary. Many women in Georgia cannot afford to have even part-time jobs when they have to care of their families. Besides familial economic burdens, Georgian women are at high risk to face physical, sexual, and psychological violence. According to a brief that was developed by the UN Women project "Good Governance for Gender Equality in Georgia" (2020), one in every seven women in Georgia aged 15-54 have reported some sort of abuse. Domestic violence is still prevalent, which is not surprising considering the high degree of tolerance and acceptance of violence against women in the country. UN Women project shows that ideas such as "a woman should tolerate violence to keep her family together" or "violence between husband and wife is private and others should not intervene" are still prevalent in contemporary Georgia. As someone that was abused (as far as we can tell from the story's dramatization and plot), Manana's story only depicts aspects of psychological violence for women habituated into living for others and not themselves. The psychological distress we can glean from the movie plays out in convoluted fashion, and we can only infer what types of violence Manana has encountered.

Overall, Ekvimishvili and Gross's film aimed to tell a hopeful story of a Georgian woman who fights to reclaim her personal space and chase her happiness. However, she also suggests how, even then, gender progress is not guaranteed as Manana's daughter, Nino, still continues to believe in heteronormative roles, desperately wanting to get pregnant to stay married. Manana's son's girlfriend chooses to get married as soon as she becomes pregnant, indicating that being a single mother is not a viable option. However, there is still hope for a life outside marriage and motherhood, and Manana is the face of that hope.

Notes

1. *My Happy Family* is one of the very few Georgian movies that are shown on Netflix, the international streaming corporation; it is also one of the two movies that are about Georgian women. Surprisingly, the other movie, *In Bloom* (2013), is also directed by Nana Ekvimishvili and Simon Gross and tells a story of the friendship of two young women living their teenage years in a newly independent Georgia.

2. Tbilisi Pride is a civic movement that opposes homo/transphobia and fights to overcome it through exercising the constitutional right of assembly and manifestation. <https://tbilisipride.ge/en-US>.

3. The United National Movement (UNM) with the leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili stayed in power until 2012.

His government created Gender Equality Council in 2004. However, their biggest achievement was the creation of so-called GE Law (the Georgia Law on Gender Equality) in 2010. GE Law guarantees the prohibition of all sorts of discrimination based on sex. GE Law includes the principles that ensure gender equality in labor relations, education, health care, social protection, family relations, property rights and ownership, and voting rights (Chkheidze, 2017).

4. Georgia gained independence from the Russian empire in 1918. However, three years later, in 1921, the country was annexed by the Soviet army.

5. *Qristine* (1919) 'ქროსტონჯ' is the first feature film directed in the independent republic of Georgia (1918-1921). Directors Aleksandre Tsutsunava and Germane Gogitidze brought to the screens Egnate Ninoshvili's popular novel *Qristine*.

6. Unlike Soviet times when women issues had more prominent attention with directors such as Nutsa (Nino) Gogoberidze and her daughter, Lana Ghoghoberidze.

7. In *Making Martyrs: The Language of Sacrifice in Russian Culture from Stalin to Putin*, Yuliya Minkova (2018) uses Giorgio Agamben's (1998) argument from, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, arguing that homo sacer epitomizes the relationship between the individual and the modern state, a relationship in which power counters the bare life of its subjects while constituting the authority over life and death. Minkova argues that this model is applicable to the Soviet Union as well since Soviet culture created a culture of war which established a state of exception and gave the state ability to use drastic measures. However, Minkova points out that the Soviet system created two types of homo sacer: the self-sacrificing hero and the defendant at the show trials.

8. Sopiko, from Lana Ghoghoberidze's (1978) *Some Interviews*, chooses to take a similar course of action once she learns about her husband's infidelity.

9. 20% of Georgian territory is occupied by Russia. The occupation process is ongoing. Russian "peacekeepers" keep moving borders challenging the lives of people who live on both sides of the dividing lines (Modebadze 2021).

10. According to World Bank's *Country's Gender Assessment* (2021), Georgia has a large gender gap in labor force participation in 2019 with only 43% of working-age females participating in labor markets. Moreover, the female labor force participation rate in 2019 was comparable to the 2010 level, showing the lack of any substantial improvements.

11. In 2017, Georgia ranked 94th out of 144 countries, compared to 90th in 2016, 88th in 2010, and 54th in 2006.

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