

Representation of “Lost Orientation,” or, Lesbianism in Georgian Print Media¹

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Abstract

This paper examines how lesbianism is portrayed in Georgian media. Media representation of lesbianism is presented here as a constructive process. Using qualitative and quantitative analysis of articles from Georgian print media from 2008 to 2009, we highlight such issues as: the invisibility of women’s sexuality and homosexuality, and the social construction of lesbianism in Georgian print media as immoral and dangerous. We find that homophobia in patriarchal Georgia often links lesbians to social problems, including drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, and crime. Georgian homosexual women are doubly marginalized because of their gender (female) and sexual (lesbian) identity. Homosexual issues and relationships are viewed as threatening the interests of patriarchal society. Georgian media provides an example of a dominant discourse in society; because it constructs lesbianism as a social problem it thus supports marginalization of homosexuals in general and women homosexuals in particular.

In the article we will first explore Georgian research data on sexuality, including homosexuality. Then, we will discuss the theoretical framework within which we consider homosexuality and its media representation, namely the social constructionist approach to homosexuality, media representation and social problems. We conclude with our results of qualitative and quantitative content analysis of 9 Georgian newspapers and magazines³. The newspapers and magazines were selected based on their position in the popular press, their focus on social political issues and entertainment. Particular care was made to select publications with high circulation and availability to readers across Georgia. The newspapers and magazines have a reasonable price and publish articles for a broad audience. All the newspapers and magazines are spread all over the country. The number of copies issued for newspapers varies from 5,000 to 50,000; while the print run for magazines is larger: from

40,000 to 70,000. These are considered “true” information providers and the articles are perceived by the audience seriously.

Through this analysis we will show the ways in which Georgian print media marginalizes homosexuals, focusing on lesbians in particular.

In her report on LGBT people in Georgia, Sheila Quinn discusses the double gender morale in Georgia. According to her, for men, unlike women in Georgia engaging in sexual intercourse before or during marriage is unproblematic. According to the same report, for women, participating in a sexual act only for pleasure and not reproduction is regarded as prostitution (Quinn, 2007). In a recent study of dating ads (Javakhishvili, 2008), women frequently portrayed themselves as “honest,” [patiosani] while men did this very rarely. A focus group discussion on the term revealed that it has different meanings for men and women. For women, “honesty” refers to conduct in sexual relations, while for men, it refers to business relationships and practices. For focus group participants, an honest woman either did not have sex at all, or had it only with her husband. Furthermore, in the dating ads, men were more likely to describe themselves in sexual terms while women did not, so as to conform to the norms of the dating market. Different sexual norms thus exist in Georgian society for men and women and different sexual behavior is expected for them. Though men discussed their sexual characteristics more often than women did in dating ads, it was rare overall for either group to refer explicitly to sexuality. Sexuality is taboo in general in Georgia, but especially so for women (Javakhishvili, 2008).

Recent survey data yields similar results. For example, a 2004 survey in one of the southern regions of Georgia showed the following: 98% of respondents think that a woman should remain a virgin until marriage, and only 47% think that a man should not have sexual intercourse before marriage. Also, 87% of parents view women’s sexual relations before marriage negatively, while only 2% of respondents think that man should restrain from sexual relations before marriage (Sumbadze, Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2005). Another survey showed that 89% of young women and 87% of young men agree with the statement that “a woman should be a virgin when she marries” (Mataradze et al., 2002). Additionally, 2004 survey results from Quinn’s report show that 84% of respondents have negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Forty percent of respondents think that lesbianism is a disease [avadmyofoba], 34% regard it as ugly [simaxinje], 20% consider it a sin [codva], and 1% think it is only temporary and will stop in the future (Quinn, 2007).

Thus far, the only research on representation of homosexuality in the Georgian media was done by E. Aghdgomelashvili (Aghdgomelashvili, 2005 and 2007). In her 2005 study,

she shows that certain myths are proliferated through the media. Beginning in 1990, the Georgian media began linking homosexuality to AIDS and prostitution. Furthermore, homosexuality is represented as a western fashion, as well as the harbinger of demographic catastrophe.

The Social Constructionist Approach: Exploring How Groups Become Defined as Problems

Spector and Kitsuze define social problems as “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Best, 1987). The scope of our paper does not aim to find out whether these objective conditions exist. Instead, we take our cue from Stuart Hall (1999) who writes that objective reality exists as only a constructed product and gains its meaning through the process of representation.

Joan Ferrante in her book, *Sociology: A Global Perspective*, considers the social constructionist approach. She bases her work on the ideas of Spector and Kitsuze, who write that, “regarding deviance, the constructionist approach focuses on the way specific groups (such as illegal immigrants and homosexuals)...become defined as problems” (Ferrante, 2008: 184-185). Constructionists examine claims-makers and claims-making activities. Claims-makers are people who articulate and promote claims with the intent to convince the targeted audience to accept their claims as true. Claims-makers include government officials, advertisers, scientists, professors, and special interest groups. Ferrante cites the sociologist Joel Best to explain:

...when constructionists study a process through which a group or behavior is defined as a problem to society, they focus on who makes the claims, whose claims are heard. Is there evidence that the claims maker misrepresented or inaccurately characterized the situation? To answer the last question constructionists examine how claims makers characterize a condition. Specifically, constructionists pay attention to any labels that claims makers attach to a condition, the examples they use to illustrate the nature of the problem and their orientation toward the problem (describing it, for example as medical, moral, genetic or educational) (Ferrante, 2008: 184-185).

While making claims, a part of society addresses another part. This is a communicative process between claim makers and claimant clients, or those who receive the claims. For Spector and Kitsuze the content and constituting elements of the claim are the most salient. Our study focuses on the content of constituting elements made by Georgian media outlets and how these intersect discourses on homosexuality.

For Stuart Hall (1999), culture, of which mass media is a part, is a social construct where social dimensions such as gender, race, and sexuality are shaped. Each of these, in turn, is a social construct itself and is shaped by media and other forces. Media plays a leading role in the social construction of gender, sexuality, and social problems. Media frequently utilizes links with deviant behavior as a way to marginalize particular groups (Djakova, Trahtenberg, 2003). Because homosexuality is not seen as a part of traditional Georgian society - indeed it is considered a deviation from “traditional wisdom” (Hall, 1999: 72) - people have few sources of information other than the media. Therefore, it is particularly interesting to look at what meanings and definitions media texts offer to their readers.

Several Russian authors (Aristarkhova, 1999; Erebkina, 2003) have discussed the dynamics of change in the Russian media from the Soviet era to the end of the twentieth century based on Russian youth journals and TV shows. They find that constructions of gender, sexuality, and homosexuality change along with the officially recognized ideology. These studies bolster the idea that homosexuality as well as gender is socially constructed, and that one of the most potent means of social construction is the media, which is itself shaped by other discourses, ideologies, and power structures. The politics of media representation takes place within the frames of dominant ideologies. The media thus produces and establishes images of marginal identities as opposed to merely normative ones (Iasaveev, 2004; Briant and Thompson, 2004). While we understand that the social construction of various issues is a dialogic process and that different audiences react to and interpret media messages in various ways, for the purposes of this study, we restrict ourselves to only the media.

In our study, we will show that the ways in which the Georgian print media represents homosexuals, and especially lesbians, marginalizes them. As Kellner points out, many gay and lesbian theorists have stated that media representations often promote homophobia by presenting negative representations of homosexuality. Media culture defines and frames sexuality in ways that marginalize gays and lesbians, and “symbolically annihilate” their lives (Kellner, 2009: 6).

In Georgia, lesbians are doubly marginalized because, in addition to their sexual orientation, they are women. The media frequently marginalizes lesbians in Georgia by ignoring lesbians as a social group and linking them to social problems. The media constructs these negative images of lesbians chiefly by inviting experts, such as academics, to judge homosexuality. We base our work on the social constructionist approach, which states that both homosexuality and social problems are socially constructed (Holstein, 2009).

Invisible Lesbians

One of the main ways in which lesbians are marginalized in the Georgian media is by ignoring them. Lesbians are thus rendered “invisible” to the public. Our quantitative content analysis of publications from 2008 and 2009 showed that out of 272 articles about homosexuality, lesbianism was mentioned in only 55, or 20% of the articles. The remaining 80%, explicitly or implicitly addressed only male homosexuality. In the articles that explicitly discussed male homosexuality, gay men were described in humiliating terms such as “blue,” “gay,” and “pederast.”⁴ Although the term “homosexual” encompasses both gays and lesbians, in the Georgian media, as in everyday Georgian speech, it is used almost exclusively to denote male homosexuality. When asked about the word, most of the Georgians immediately think about men, not women. One article, for example, was entitled, “Homosexualebi spermas ver chaabareben” [Homosexuals can not give their sperm] (Koberidze, 2008) thus reinforcing the connotation of homosexuality as male.

Our analysis showed that, while homosexuality is largely neglected in the Georgian press, lesbianism is almost completely ignored. In one of the articles, entitled “Gagijebuli qartvelebi da orientaciadakarguli adamianebi” [Georgians gone mad and people lost orientation] (Kajaia, 2008), one random respondent says: “How can you speak about such themes? On the contrary, we should ignore such people and the less information that leaks about them, the better for our children.” He goes on to say that homosexuality should not concern us “normal” people, reinforcing the idea that ignoring homosexuality is the most effective way to marginalize it. In Georgia, the absence of lesbianism from the popular media is complicated by the fact that Georgia is traditionally considered a masculine culture (see Gadua, 1999; Javakhishvili and Bregvadze, 2000; Javakhishvili and Khomeriki, 2003; Kutchukhidze, 1999; Mataradze et al., 2002). Women’s sexuality in Georgia is understood only in terms of reproduction and within a traditional, heterosexual family context (Javakhishvili, 2008; Pkhakadze, 2002). Because lesbian relationships cannot reproduce

biologically and by definition do not involve men, both traditional components of female sexuality are lacking in lesbianism.

At the same time, lesbianism is perceived as a less dangerous social problem than that of male homosexuality. As one popular Georgian newspaper puts it, “Lesbianism does not end with serious results in most cases, because most lesbians remain women. They can have children and a [traditional, heterosexual] family. It is a shame and should be banned, but it is not as dangerous” (Goziashvili, 2008). The author of these words, a sociologist, denies lesbians as a social group because, according to him, sooner or later all of them enter hetero-normative space and “remain women.” Dioli (2006) also thinks that lesbianism is rarely perceived as potential threat by patriarchal society: “In patriarchal terms the world is conceived as phallogocentric; a relationship between two women, excluding men, is hardly conceivable or likely to be considered as a serious issue” (Dioli, 2006: 145). In her more recent article on the former Yugoslavia, Dioli writes,

Yugoslavia was no exception to the repression and domestication of sexuality common to Communist systems. A rhetorical emphasis on masculinity stigmatised male homosexuality as an expression of weakness, while a general erasure of female sexuality and pleasure virtually cancelled female homosexuality from the picture. Fittingly, the penal code (revised on June 30th 1959) deemed male homosexuality illegal in the whole Yugoslavia, but made no reference to female homosexuality” (Dioli, 2009: 5).

While lesbianism is considered a less serious social problem, it is still largely omitted from popular discourse.

Constructing Lesbianism in the Georgian Print Media

Now we turn to how lesbianism is constructed in Georgian print media and by whom. As we show, lesbianism is linked to social problems such as criminal behavior, drug addiction, and alcoholism – in other words, to deviant behavior. Lesbians are also considered threats to national traditions, values, religion, and fecundity. Our analysis shows that 80% of the articles that deal with lesbianism consider it in relation to social problems. The remaining 20% are fairly neutral, discussing the lives of famous lesbians and bisexual women, such as Frida Kahlo.

Lesbianism as Deviant Behavior

Lesbians are often linked to maniacs, murderers, and sexual predators. In the journal *Tbiliselebi*, an expert sociologist links lesbians to criminality. In the article, “Maniaki mokluli qalis tmisgan tilismebs aketebda” [Maniac made talismans/charms from murdered women’s hair](Giorgadze, 2008) the author discusses the criminal, who was a lesbian. He claims, “She first sexually violated her victims, then cut them with an axe and threw parts of their bodies into the sewage system.” Another article from the same journal, “Lesbosel qalTa ordeni” [Order of Lesbian women] describes an orgy of 12 Satanist lesbians, including sisters who engage in incest and use axes to chop up their victims (Lashauri, 2008). The text is not based on a true story, rather, it is constructed as a fairytale. However, it is not explicitly stated whether the story is true or the author’s fantasy. An article in a different newspaper, “Chronika,” reports on a student who was sexually assault by her teacher. The focus of the article is on the sexual orientation of the professor (a lesbian) and does not discuss issues of violence or assault. The journalist focuses on homosexual orientation as a main theme and provides his own commentary on the “problem,” writing, “There would be nothing to worry about if the professor were a young man, but she was a lesbian” (Goziashvili, 2008). (The article does not see a problem in the violent attack, but rather in lesbianism. Violence by a male perpetrator is regarded as normal because it takes place in the frame of heterosexual behavior, whereas the assault by a lesbian represents deviant behavior.

In the article “Siontan satanisturi rituali chatarda?” “[Did a Satanist ritual take place at the Sioni Cathedral?] (Chubinidze, 2008), the respondent relates how naked women⁵ dance, have sex, openly proclaim their sexual orientation, and “qadageben” [preach] suicide. Each of these components is considered immoral and deviant. First, the women dance naked on the streets, in full view of everybody, and in the tourist center of Tbilisi. Secondly, the women’s behavior is deviant because it involves an overt, homosexual act. These deviant behaviors are even more dangerous because they occur near the cathedral. Thirdly, suicide is linked with lesbianism and Satanism. As one newspaper reported, “Usually Satanists preach suicide; they cut their own veins and then transfuse blood to each other” (Chubinidze, 2008). Orthodox Christianity, the most prevalent religion in Georgia, regards suicide as a serious sin.⁶ Furthermore, Satanism is regarded as enemy to the Orthodox church, so labeling lesbians as suicidal Satanists has an especially dangerous connotation. Because of all of these deviant behaviors, social problems are linked to lesbians.

Lesbianism as a Threat to the Nation

Lesbianism is often conceptualized as a threat to the Georgian nation, and it is particularly connected to concerns over demography, religion, national traditions, and corrupting western influences. For example, quite a number of articles concern Lindsey Lohan. She is portrayed as a lesbian drug addict who has tried to commit suicide,”*Lesboselma lindsi lohanma TviTmkvleloba scada*” [Lesbian Lindsey Lohan tried to commit suicide] (Sakhvadze, 2008). The tone of these articles is cynical, and the journalists often refer to not only Lohan but to the whole “corrupted west” where homosexuality “became fashionable.” One of the articles about Lohan begins, “Homosexuality in the USA has become a fashion and has taken root, so that even the most harmless person openly and shamelessly declares her lost orientation” (Sakhvadze, 2008).

The article above about the Satanist ritual in front of the cathedral, which occurred on Halloween, also evaluates the lesbians as an anti-state, anti-nation group backed by the “West, and America, more than other countries,” which is seen as opposing the church. The article says: “The statehood of present-day Georgia is based on the constitution and an agreement between state and church. Therefore, whoever fights against church also fights the state, and his/her place is in prison” (Chubinidze, 2008). Traditionally, the role of women in maintaining the nation by raising future generations is highly valued in Georgia and any deviation from this traditional role by women is a threat to the nation. As Dioli puts it:

a relational model between same-sex people comprising sexual activity as well as the forming of stable couple and/or family relationships and social networks ...becomes highly problematic, because of the crucial role played by women in the building and maintenance of national communities. In this context, the female body does not belong to the woman herself or to an individual man only; on the symbolic level, it is the collective property of the male-led community” (Dioli, 2006, p 147).

Another article plays on fears of conflict between homosexuality and national traditions and values. In the article,”*Sanam tbilisis tavze cisferi drosha afrialebula*” [Until a Blue Flag Waves above Tbilisi] the author writes, “Georgian values, traditions, orthodox Christianity, nationhood are threatened not only by Saakashvili’s⁷ government and his foreign masters, but a whole army of pederasts, lesbians and bisexuals with their foreign

patrons and donors” (Khubua, 2009). Here, lesbians are explicitly linked with the west and western values that approve of homosexuality; thus, lesbians and the west threaten Georgian nationality, traditions, and religion. It has to be noted also, that this article is placed under the newspaper section, titled “devil,⁸” which is one more link of homosexuality with Satanism.

This same conflict between the west and traditional Georgian national values is expressed in the article, “Cekvas gvaswavlian” [They teach us how to dance]. After reading the text of the article, the title sounds somewhat cynical, meaning that Georgians are taught by foreigners how to dance traditional Georgian dances. The journalist describes the religious wedding ceremony of a shavkaniani [blackskin] couple who dared to perform a Georgian dance at their wedding ceremony. Xenophobic and racist phrases in the text are followed with fear-mongering homophobic comments, like “the tourist industry will not refuse church weddings for pederasts.” The author continues in a cynical tone, “Pederasts and lesbians are so romantic, and love exotic, untouched natural settings” and, “There is no lack of pederasts, lesbians, masochists, and other degenerates!” The author concludes, “We need timeless Georgian traditions to save our selfhood and not to adorn silly, fake shows [for tourists]!” (Gigauri, 2008). Lesbians here are portrayed as emotional degenerates and linked with masochists, another group of sexual deviants. The journalist is indignant with the Georgian tourist industry, which, in order to attract money, allows its history and ancient traditions to serve foreigners.

Another article, “How naïve and inexperienced boys are caught in the net by homosexuals,” similarly portrays the West as the source of homosexuality. The author writes,

Since Georgian politicians have turned towards the west, the number of homosexuals in our country has seriously increased....Fortunately, Georgian society is healthy and the growth of homosexuality has not changed people’s mindset. Attitude to this vicious behavior is strictly negative. Why let others set a bad example? Trying to be like others always yields bad deplorable results for such small, traditional countries like us.... Georgians should take care to increase the population (Goziashvili, 2008).

The article thus links corrupted behavior with Western values and opposes these to traditional, incorruptible Georgian values.

Another problem linked to lesbianism is demographic, namely, that lesbians do not reproduce biologically, and therefore, population growth decreases. Based on census data, the population has been decreasing in Georgia; it decreased from 4,794,000 in 1995 to 4,385,000 in 2009 (Chelidze, 2010). At the same time, the authors of the articles linking lesbians with demographic problems worry not only about Georgia, but about the whole world. One writes that, “the pandemic of homosexuality threatens us with mutation and death....If we, heterosexuals, do not think about the future of human beings, homosexuals will do the same harm as atomic weapons” (Lejava, 2009). The author is particularly concerned about the West because it has more gays and lesbians, concluding that “like terrorism, homosexuality now can be considered ‘sexual terrorism’ or a ‘blue plague’⁹ in its scale and results” (Lejava, 2009).

According to Dioli, emphasizing reproduction restricts women’s sexuality. A woman’s body does not belong only to her, but is social property. In a patriarchal society, women can find their place in society only through men, because women are the “territory of men” (Dioli, 2006: 148). Unmarried or lesbian women do not belong in a patriarchal society. Women “can enter society only by signing the marriage contract” (Dioli, 2006: 149). Dioli elaborates on Monique Wittig’s ideas on lesbianism. When Wittig asks the question “Are lesbians women?” by women, she means the subordinate social group as defined by a patriarchal structure. There is a certain feminine model of women in such a society and a woman is a woman only if she fulfills society’s expectations of her. Women are subordinated to men, and work in a private sphere where their function is reproduction. Lesbians do not fit in such societies (Dioli, 2006).

Claims-Makers

The popular media sources quoted in our study are both journalists and experts, including sociologists, psychologists, sexologists, representatives of religious institutions, celebrities, and everyday people. In 63% of the cases where homosexuality were linked to social problems, journalists were the claims-makers. In other words, they constructed lesbianism as a social problem, either through direct claims of their own, by adding homophobic phrases to other claims-makers’ judgments, or by agreeing with the experts. For example, in the article, “Did Satanist ritual take place at the Sioni Cathedral?” (Chubinidze, 2008) the journalist uses evaluative phrases such as “it is terrible” and “harmless people at first glance.” In other articles, the negative and cynical attitude of the journalists is reflected

in titles such as “planetis erT-erTi kvelaze seqsualuri qalbatoni orientaciashi aiblanda” [One of the most sexual ladies of the planet became lost in her own orientation] and “Mteli amerikuli feradi banda ablanduli seqsualuri orientaciit xasaitdeba” [the whole American color gang¹⁰ is characterized by lost sexual orientation] (Sakhvadze, 2008).

None of the articles in the newspapers and journals studied presented homosexuality in a positive light. It is also interesting that journalists’ negative attitudes towards lesbians are always echoed by others in the articles – experts, researchers, and even passersby are of the same opinion on lesbians and homosexuals. It is incredibly unlikely that everyone in Georgia shares this negative view of homosexuality, so we can only assume that all experts and the “random” respondents were selected on purpose and the journalists excluded dissenting opinions.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that the social construction of lesbianism in the Georgian media conforms to the principles of patriarchy and its situational logic. Patriarchal gender and sexual norms are taken for granted and, therefore, homosexuality is “illogical,” deviant, and a social problem. Lesbians are ignored because they do not fit into the patriarchal paradigm of a woman. This paradigm constructs a woman as one whose function is not only biological, but the ideological and symbolic reproduction of a nation. A woman who does not engage in these reproductions becomes marginalized as a danger to society and is linked with social problems. In patriarchal society, lesbians become doubly marginalized because of their gender and their sexual identity.

Sara Balder’s (2005) research about sexual identities in Chile reveals the role of language in marginalization of women and homosexuals. She explains that, “By derogating individuals who do not fall within the inventory of socially acceptable identities in Chilean society, this type of language assigns legitimacy only to gender-normative heterosexuals, thereby denying gender and sexual minorities of social power” (Balder, 2005: 10). She agrees with Scott Kiesling, stating that, “heterosexual identities are...displays of power and dominance over women, gay men, and other straight men” (Balder, 2005: 10). Balder thinks that using such hetero-normative language “reinforces the social structure in which gender- and sexually-normative men maintain their dominant role, causing gender and sexual minorities to be marginalized” (Balder, 2005:10). Balder’s research dovetails nicely with our

own, showing how the media and language can work to marginalize homosexuality, and also points to topics for future research.

Notes

¹ Many thanks to Laura Linderman and Katherine Pruess for their editorial assistance with this article.

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³ Newspapers:

“Rezonansi” (5 times a week)

“24 Saati” (daily)

“Akhali Taoba” (daily)

“Alia” (three times a week)

“Asaval-dasavali” (weekly)

“Chronika”(weekly)

Magazines:

“Sarke” (daily)

“Reitingi” (weekly)

“Gza” (weekly)

“Tbiliselebi” (weekly)

⁴ The term “blue” denotes both color and refers to Russian slang that means “homosexual.” “Gay” entered the Georgian lexicon from English. The term “pederast” comes from Russian and technically refers to a specific type of homosexual relations between a young man and an adult man. However in Georgian, the term refers to all types of male homosexuality.

⁵ The article talks about the group of Satanists, which consists of both men and women.

⁶ Heavy sin is worse than just sin, for example, cheating might be sin, but suicide is heavy sin, so the believers know that they will be correspondingly differently punished for sin and heavy sin.

⁷ Saakashvili, the current president of Georgia, has been president since 2004 and was recently elected for a second term. He is clearly considered a pro-American candidate and supported by the Western European countries as well. He aspires to model his presidency after Western values.

⁸ The word-to-word translation means: spit to the Devil. The phrase shows negative attitude to all evil forces and is used in colloquial speech.

⁹ Blue meaning “gay” here.

¹⁰ The term color is a substitute here for blue, which denotes gays.

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