

For Identity Awareness (through the examples of Vazha Pshavela and Amin Maalouf)

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the crucial problem of today's times – the problem of identity. Our aim is to demonstrate through the views of a Georgian writer, Vazha-Pshavela and a Lebanese-born journalist, Amin Maalouf, who was brought up as a Christian, what determines human identity, and how human sense of belonging – an important aspect of human socialization – evolved throughout XXth century. The research into this issue has demonstrated that both thinkers consider self-knowledge and definition and analysis of one's identity to be of the highest importance. It can be said that this problem has always been relevant. In the era of globalization, taking into consideration the new existing reality, a new concept of identity needs to be developed, the basis for which will be recognition of not just one, but multiple belongings.

Keywords: identity, human belongingness, language, religion, ethnicity, Vazha-Pshavela, Amin Maalouf.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of identity is the most crucial problem of our time. What determines the identity of a human and human belongingness? How precise and healthy is it to define the identity on the basis of one belonging only, such basic ones as religion, language, or ethnicity? Formation of personal skills in human beings, their development and perfection continues throughout one's life. The process of socialization is a continuous process than encompasses human life from birth to death. The outside world (social space), the inherent individual qualities and the cultural structures in which humans have to reside have a tremendous influence on the development of their personalities. The person is primarily born and then chooses his own path. This original principle of existentialism implies human activity to create from oneself whoever one wants to be. The essence of the problem lies in the tools that a person uses to create himself. One of these tools is represented by the question of understanding human belongingness, the identity of the human. Numerous thinkers are working on this issue today. The modern world, at first glance, offers creating a uniform, single, single-layered space. The pursuit of uniformity is disturbing, which, in our view, implies cultural uniformisation, while the civilized world is valued by its diversity. There is no such a thing as big and small cultures. Each culture is the product of the substantive forces of its creators. Who can identify, mobilize and direct these substantive forces towards development and perfection? This process is determined by a number of factors and, perhaps, one should seek the answer in the creative process of creators of the particular culture.

Cultural diversity will always remain as one of the greatest achievements of humankind, the sensitive attitude towards which has been of high importance in all epochs and among all people.

OBJECTIVE

Our objective is to illustrate the transformation of human belongingness – an important aspect for human socialization – throughout XXth century from Vazha Pshavela and Amin Maalouf's perspective. We chose the views formed in entirely different socio-cultural environments and discourses, and tried to show how the two scholars comprehended identity related issues in the beginning and the end of the century.

DISCUSSION

Vazha-Pshavela's letters ("Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism", "What is Liberty" and "Small Note") and Amin Maalouf's book "Deadly Identities" present interesting material for identifying similarities and differences in the views of the two scholars.

Vazha Pshavela is a pseudonym of the Georgian literary figure, Luka Razikashvili (14.07.1861-27.07.1915). He studied in various religious and secular schools, as well as at teaching seminary. He was an auditor at the faculty of law at St. Petersburg University. He worked as a teacher in school and led a life of a mere peasant. Vazha-Pshavela often wrote in the moonlight, but Vazha always remained self-respectful, never lost dignity of his own.

During the 35 years of his literary work, the Georgian writer produced more than 400 lyrical poems, several dozen poems, numerous stories, essays, a few plays, and publication letters.

Vazha-Pshavela's works of universal significance have gone beyond Georgia. His works are translated into many languages. The World Council of Peace announced the year 1961 as Vazha-Pshavela's year and celebrated the 100th anniversary of his birth.

Vazha-Pshavela appeared on the public arena in the second half of the 19th century. This is the time when Georgia with its centuries-old statehood was a part of the Russian Empire. Tsarism introduced the governorate in its colony and mentioning word "Georgia" was strictly prohibited. The conqueror acted in accordance with the famous words of the Russian Emperor Catherine II: "The Georgian body, the Russian soul". There was a severe struggle against the Georgian language, Georgian history, Georgian customs, Georgian lifestyle and traditions. The conqueror tried to colonize the mind and the consciousness of Georgian people, to achieve national assimilation of Georgians. Georgian intelligentsia turned against crude Russian colonial policy. The literary figures were at the forefront in this fight. Their widely recognized commander was Ilia Chavchavadze, an ideological leader, a writer and a public figure, who expressed the whole nation's action plan in three words – "Motherland, Language, Religion". And indeed, it was motherland, language, and religion that defined the distinctness of the Georgian nation, its identity and belongingness. Fighting for the motherland, language and religion meant fighting for being Georgian, since "... the nation has been guided by this trinity, has gone through numerous wars and bloodshed for a thousand and five hundred years, and saved Georgians a place to stay, as well as being Georgian" (Chavchavadze, 1888). Georgian writers were raising national consciousness and bringing in national optimism. Vazha Pshavela was one of these writers.

The letters related to the here discussed topic were written by Vazha Pshavela in the beginning of the XX century. The writer's attitudes towards the issue of human belongingness are well visible in these letters.

Vazha Pshavela, as a writer and a Georgian, sees the love for his country as his main motherland. He pleads to God: “The soul – to you, the body – to the earth”, but “let my homeland live”.

According to him, true patriotism does not contradict cosmopolitanism. Each patriot is just as cosmopolitan, as a wise cosmopolitan is patriot, because if a man serves his nation’s development, he contributes to the development of all humanity. The writer defines cosmopolitanism as follows: love your nation, your country, and work for its prosperity. Do not hate other nations and do not envy their happiness. Try not to let others oppress your homeland and try to get it to the level of leading countries. Whoever denies his nationality and his country for the reason of being a cosmopolitan is the enemy of humanity. Cosmopolitanism does not imply everyone giving up their nationality. Then mankind must reject itself. The development of separate nations is essential for the development of mankind (Vazha-Pshavela, 1986, pp. 679-683).

Vazha argues that if anyone claims that he loves all the people in the same way, he is either lying, either making a pretence, or is feeble-minded, because “the one who does not love his mother, how can he love the other”. From this point of view, nationalism, in the writer’s opinion, is not a vituperative word, but a form of vital existence of a man and of a small nation, in particular. In his words: “The historical past and the nature of the Georgians give us hope that the “nationalism” will always remain healthy and will never turns into chauvinism or fanaticism” (Vazha-Pshavela, 1986, p. 710).

Throughout the history of Georgia, the Georgian language was considered to be the basis for national self-identity and state and cultural consolidation of the Georgian nation. In the 19th century, it was of vital importance to protect and revive the Georgian language in order to preserve national identity and unite them. Amid persecution and abuse of the Georgian language, Georgian writers and public figures spared no effort to protect and develop the language as the national treasure, since language was considered to be the mother of the nation, whereas language distortion was seen as the fall of the nation. “Language is divine, the property of the public; one should not touch it by sinful hand” (Chavchavadze, 1861).

Vazha Pshavela was deeply aware of the fact that the native language was one of the determiners of the viability of the nation, its mentality, worldview, and world perception. “The mother tongue is such a national distinctness that if the nation concedes it, then it will neglect everything and repudiate the territory”, he wrote, and with a pen in his hands he fought with those who prohibited him from speaking, praying, and studying in his mother tongue.

“To all of us Christianity, in addition to the doctrine of Christ, meant native land, meant being Georgian” (Chavchavadze, 1888).

Indeed, in the course of historic misfortune, in the course of invasion of enemies’ into the country and the political dissipation, Christianity and the Church represented the power that conditioned preservation of Georgian identity. Hence, the fight to save faith, to save Christianity was a fight for Georgia and preservation of being Georgian.

“I love Jesus very much”. This poetic phrase of Vazha – a pillar of his creative purpose – is an ideological credo of a Georgian and world citizen.

As we can see, the Georgian writers, public figures and the parties interested in the country's fate faced the task of preservation of the nation, saving the country while a part of the Russian

Empire. And, in their view, it could have been achieved by saving the motherland, the language and the faith. It was motherland, language and religion that determined Georgian belongingness and its identity in the beginning of XX century.

A well-known journalist, writer and essayist, Amin Maalouf was born in Lebanon in 1949 in a Greek-Catholic community called Melkit. As he says, his ancestors were always proud that their surname was Arabic and Christian at the same time, something that has greatly identified the vast majority of decisions made by Maalouf.

For a “Lebanese-born” and brought up as a Christian, emigrated to France, Arabian writer, Amin Maalouf both identities represented the reality in which he was to live. “The fact of being Christian and having Arabic as a native language, which is a sacred language of Islam, is one of those essential paradoxes which have carved my identity”, he writes. He adds: “My affiliation is what causes me to be not identical to any other person” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 22).

A person, as a member of the social community, exists and is socialized only in society. Personal growth and personal development depend on numerous factors. In the process of socialization person acquires moods, emotions, skills, ideas, which determine his autonomy, inheritance, uniqueness, i.e., and his identity by the influence of these very factors. These belongings are not religious, ethnic, linguistic, or social only. The list is more extensive, almost infinite: people may have more or less strong belonging to a city, countryside, neighborhood, sports team, or some profession, political party, association, community, and other aspects of everyday life. All these belongings are not “absolutely insignificant, they are a part of one’s personality” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 23). That is why we can not accept the absolute dominance of one of the belongings over another. According to the author, the fact that he himself represented the part of the Arabian, Christian, Francophone literary worlds predetermined his uniqueness.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, from all the belongings that we see as “ours” the author draws special attention to religious identity and language. Let us consider each of the belongings separately.

Right from the beginning we should note that Maalouf’s vision of religious identity is not consistent. On the one hand, he argues that “society creates a religion which, in turn, shapes society” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 75) and modernization of society implies modernization of religion. In the XV-XIX centuries, whilst the Western society was modernizing itself (and it touched upon all social institutions, religion among them), the Arab world went around in circles: its modernization was put on hold. “Social revolution – scientific, technological, industrial, intellectual, and moral” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 76) – these are the events that have led to continuous and strong changes. And it happened in the West and in the West only. Why in the West? Was it the merit of Christianity alone? Of course not. The author writes: “For a long time, it [the Christianity] opposed social change, often with rage, and, hence, a deep, powerful and continuous stimulus was created for the benefit of these changes, so that the resistance would be weakened and the religion would gradually be adjusted to it” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 76). And there is no one particular answer why in the West. The only thing that is obvious is the West has created a civilization that “has become a gold standard of the material, as well as intellectual fields for the whole world” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 77).

If modernity holds so much goodness, why does the non-Western world not accept it? Why does it [non-West] perceive it [the West] as some kind of a “Trojan horse”? Why does it keenly feel humiliation, assimilation, loss of its own identity, “rejection of something dear” (Maalouf,

2007, p. 79)? The answer is as follows: modernity, as a symbol, should not be perceived by the non-Western world as the aspiration of the epoch only. Rather “at the level of symbols, it is also necessary for this change not to contradict, not to arise the feeling of rejection of the opinions among those, who are induced to changes” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 80). They should not have the feeling that the only thing the West desires is “obedience” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 84). “Modernity which is foisted upon is imperfect” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 97).

On the other hand, the modernized European model failed to become fully perfect, as the attractive model does not have the capability to solve numerous social problems – unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime, etc. And “those who are inspired by the “western paradise” often are given an opportunity to immigrate only” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 95). The possibility of immigration alone does not seem to be a fascinating perspective. This crisis of the Western model, in its turn, is reflected in different societies of the Third World, who offer “hungry” youth to get out of a deadlock by engaging in religious movements. Often these are radical religious movements that exclude the possibility of self-reflection on the fundamental value by their doctrine – the freedom of faith – the possibility which shows that the freedom of each of us lies in “leading one’s life as one understands it” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 96).

The western model crisis, the Third World's dead state and the evolution in the field of communication have had a decisive impact on the rise of religion. Religious affiliation is a traditional value and symbol, which is perceived as a shelter by the groups of people frightened by modernization. Communities of believers represent “planetary tribes” insofar as a union of people with one faith, which can overcome the boundaries of national, social and racial origin, is “considered by some as a desire to portray believers as universal” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 99). The existence of such religious societies is of primary significance today. And this fact is a cause for the author’s concern, for the division of societies into “planetary tribes” makes the universe even more flammable that it already is. And uniting people of one faith – the faith which is proclaimed to be the only belonging – contributes to this fact in particular. It is especially noticeable in the Eastern world. In Maalouf’s view, what is the way out of this situation?

Maalouf dreams of a world where “the desire for spirituality will be separated from the desire for belongingness” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 101); where a person of some faith will not be asked to join the unions of fellow believers; where religion will not rally ethnicities; where religion will be separated from identity. However, this does not mean that Maalouf denies religion as a significant human belonging. Of course not. To him religion is the belonging “which is able to fill in a substantial human need” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 102). Amin Maalouf rejects any kind of religious affiliation that can cause a conflict.

The second important belonging Maalouf focuses on is language.

In his opinion, the basis for a diversified culture is language, numerous languages that exist today in the modern world. Language “is almost always one of the most defining belongings; it is at least as much defining, as religion is” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 134). The two main elements of identity – religion and language – have been allies and rivals alike throughout history. However, the main thing is that religion has a higher calling to be the only one, whereas language does not. One can speak Hebrew, Arabic, Italian or Swedish languages, but it is impossible to be a Jew, Muslim, Catholic or Lutheran at the same time. “By the way, if someone considers himself to be the adept of two religions at the same time, such a position is not acceptable to others” (Maalouf, 2007, p. 135).

Maalouf believes that language is a pillar to cultural identity. It is a guarantee of person's integrity and, therefore, "there is nothing more dangerous than an attempt to break this native thread that connects people to their own language" (Maalouf, 2007, p. 136). This thread of belonging is so strong that if it is broken or seriously damaged, the integrity of the human being is damaged as well. When we talk about the universal values of the modern global world, one of the most important rights is the right "to maintain one's own identity and use it freely" (Maalouf, 2007, p. 137). And this right is equal to the right of freedom of religion. A person has the right of freedom of belief, as well as the right to retain its belongingness to the language of his identity and use it freely.

However, in the author's view, the languages of the modern world are not on equal level. No one can dispute the fact that knowledge of the English language is important today. It is unnecessary to speak about the need for knowledge of this language, as it fits many needs, but does not fit the need for identity. No person (regardless of the nation) should have a feeling of being forced to mentally leave his homeland. On the contrary, one should have a feeling that the modernity is one's own choice. One should have a feeling that he is treated as a "full citizen irrespective of his belongingness" (Maalouf, 2007, p. 152). The author comes forward with initiative and argues that it is desirable for people to speak some other languages except for their native languages and English, be it any European, Arabic, Chinese, or Japanese language. And the more one realizes this, the more valuable it is for the person and for the whole community.

CONCLUSION

We presented the views of the two minds standing at the different (be it socio-culturally, linguistically, religiously, ethnically, etc.) pole of the same century. It is clear that the most important for both of the thinkers is to study and analyze their own selves and their own identities. We can say that it is an eternal problem, especially in terms of globalization. How can one defend one's identity so that it does not become a source of conflict?

We believe (and we will not be original here) the key to solving the problem should be sought again in education. The more we realize that reduction of the identity to just one belonging (no matter how fundamental it is) dilapidates and degrades the human essence, the more we come to realize that a person is a multilayered creature and reducing him to "singular identity" is categorically unacceptable. By recognizing "multiple affiliations", humans have the opportunity to live with dignity, to work and to create as free creatures.

We are living in the epoch of globalization and we must create a new concept of identity based on this new reality, the basis of which will be the recognition of not just one, but multiple affiliations. The latter [the acknowledgment], in words of Maalouf, is a "somewhat enriched and fruitful experience" for people (Maalouf, 2007, p. 15), a frank and uncompromising openness towards other cultures; it is a burden and a choice that one must definitely make. If not, we will find ourselves in the captivity of "bloodbaths and lost legions" (Maalouf, 2007, p. 45) and "the future of our planet will gain a deplorable face" (Maalouf, 2007, p. 76).

All of the above guides us to conclude that in the contemporary world "the problems associated with religious affiliation, ethnic origin or identity ... can only be placed in the framework of democracy" (Maalouf, 2007, p. 150), and that is because "what is sacral in democracy are values, not mechanisms" (Maalouf, 2007, p. 155); it is human's dignity, regardless of religion, ethnicity, skin color, or any other affiliation.

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