

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF GEORGIAN AND ARMENIAN WOMEN IN THE CAUCASUS IN 17TH–19TH CENTURY EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN TRAVEL LITERATURE*

This paper examines the notes of European travelers of the 17th–19th centuries during their visits to the Caucasus, during which they personally saw and described the local customs, external adornments and historical costumes of Armenian and Georgian women, as well as political events which were often conditioned by historical and political realities. The article refers to the notes by Sir John Macdonald Kinneir, Robert Lyall, John Buchan Telfer, Robert Ker Porter, and Thomas Lumsden, which serve as valuable sources for reconstructing the image of Georgian and Armenian women during the mentioned period.

Sir John Macdonald Kinneir (1782–1830), the distinguished Scottish officer of the East India Company, diplomat and perceptive traveller, left a valuable ethnographic legacy through his detailed observations on the peoples and cultures of Persia and the broader Near East. In his travel notes, he often refers to the ethnic diversity of the region, its social structure, and his notes contain valuable information about the women of the above-mentioned regions. According to the author, women of different nationalities and origins could be found in the Persian harem, but preference was given to Georgian women, taking into account the beauty and stately posture of the latter, yet they were more distinguished by their refined features, elegance and grace. Georgian women were brought from their homeland to Persia for sale by Armenian merchants. Young, beautiful Georgian women were sold for 80 sterling¹. In his work, Sir John Macdonald Kinneir also describes Georgian men as tall and well-built, and the elegance and beauty of Georgian women was proverbial throughout the East².

The author mentions another key fact about Georgians. Among Georgians, intermarriage with Armenians and Persians was prohibited in the small district of Fereydun, located deep in the southwestern ridge of the Khansar Mountains, which was inhabited by Georgians and Armenians were forcibly settled here by Abbas the Great³.

It should be noted that as a result of historical events, Armenians and Georgians lived side by side. Let us give another factual example. *The Journal Royal Geographical Society of London* mentions that in 1829, 13,041 Armenian

¹ Kinneir M. J., *A Geographical memoir of the Persian Empire, Accompanied by a Map*, London, John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1813, pp. 26–27.

² *Ibid*, p. 340.

³ *Ibid*, p. 128.

families lived in the Kingdom of Georgia and adjacent dependent regions: 39,274 men, and 34,027 women⁴.

Kinneir's work also includes descriptions of the Lezgins. The Lezgins were considered the bravest among the Caucasian peoples, but at the same time they had a quarrelsome and impetuous character. Attacks on neighboring villages were frequent, and the local population was taken captive. The author notes that Lezgin women surpassed all Caucasian women in their charm and beauty and were sold at the highest prices in the markets of Constantinople⁵.

Another author, Thomas Lumsden (1819), presented the social life and customs of the population, and his travel experiences during his stay in the Caucasus in his book. And it was he who once again wrote about the charm of Georgian women with beautiful features and eyes⁶.

Over the centuries, European perceptions of the Caucasus region have been shaped by various historical and cultural influences. In German-language literature from the 17th to the 19th centuries, perceptions of the Caucasus were largely negative. Stateless mountain peoples were portrayed as uncivilized, while kingdoms such as Georgia were described as highly respected. German literature spoke of Georgian women with admiration, describing them as "the most beautiful creatures in all of Asia", but they were seen as more indifferent than European women⁷.

The next author, Sir Robert Ker Porter (1777–1842), was a British diplomat and traveler, whose notes were of great importance for the scientific study of the geographical, cultural and political environment of the Caucasus in the early 19th century. In his notes, he presents Georgian women as follows: their beauty was indisputable, they had beautiful dark large eyes, regular features and a pleasant gentle expression on their faces, and their character was kind⁸. The author's attention was also drawn to women's clothing: the jacket was usually made of velvet or silk; it had rich embroidery, and covered the chest and the back⁹.

Another author, John Buchan Telfer (1830–1907), in his two-volume work *The Crimea And Transcaucasia: Being the Narrative of a Journey in the Kouban, in Gouria, Georgia, Armenia, Ossety, Imeritia, Swannety, and Mingrelia, and in the Tauric Range*, includes his travel observations about the Crimea and the Caucasus, providing valuable information about the political, ethnic, domestic and cultural

⁴ The Journal Royal Geographical Society of London, vol. III, London, John Murray, MDCCCXXXIV, 1833, p.32.

⁵ Kinneir M. J., A Geographical memoir of the Persian Empire, Accompanied by a Map, London, John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1813, pp. 354-355.

⁶ Lumsden T, A Journey from Merut in India to London, Through Arabia, Persia, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Austria, Switzerland, and France, During the Years 1819 and 1820: With a Map and Itinerary of the Route. London & Edinburgh: Black, Kingsbury, Parbury & Allen; Oliver & Boyd; Macredie, Skelly & Co., 1822, p.166.

⁷ Gogiashvili E., The stereotype of the Georgian lady in the travel literature of the 17-19 Century, Saeculum 59 (2), 2008, p. 265.

⁸ Porter R. K., Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia: during the years 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820, vol. I., London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown 1821, p.123.

⁹ Ibid, p.135.

realities of the late 19th century. John Buchan Telfer was a British naval captain (Royal Navy), he served in the Crimean War (1853–56) and later spent about three years in the Russian Empire during the 1870s. During this period he made two journeys to the Crimea and the Caucasus, which formed the basis for this book. The author describes the Gouria women's costume, noting that the cotton shirt, which, drawn in at the waist, is worn in such a manner, thus further emphasizing their beauty and body contours¹⁰.

Telfer describes his attendance at a ball at the Kroujok, a club. The house, which later became a club, was built by a wealthy Armenian as his own residence. “We noticed that the men wore either uniforms or formal evening dress, while most of the women appeared in morning attire—some with long trailing skirts, others in shorter walking skirts. Only a few chose fashionable evening gowns. Many Georgian women wore their traditional costume, still widely used. The *kaba*, usually bright green or blue silk, combines skirt and bodice, open at the front to reveal a fine *goulisse pyrj*. The waist is wrapped with the *sartquely*, a wide, colorful ribbon that hangs almost to the feet. Their headdress, the *thiav-savavy*, is a narrow black velvet band embroidered with gold or silk and sometimes set with jewels; from it falls the *letchaky*, a soft white veil. Married women are distinguished by curls and braids brought forward. This attire serves as both morning and evening dress, differing mainly in fabric quality. In summer they wear a lace shawl, replaced in winter by the heavier *katyba*, a fur-lined, gold-trimmed coat. Indoors they use the *koshchy*, a half-slipper with upturned toes designed to show the small, fitted foot”¹¹.

The same author also offers some interesting descriptions of Armenians.

Armenian women were rarely seen in public spaces. During the Muslim rule, when women were often forcibly taken to the harems of the conquerors, the locals had to adopt the Muslim custom of hiding their wives. It was initially protective in nature, but over time it developed into a custom. Telfer gives a vivid example of this: for several years after marriage women remained confined in an inner chamber, and rarely met men, even their own fathers or brothers¹².

The same author provides a remarkably detailed description of the mourning ceremony in the rural settlements near Yerevan. The traveler describes that the Armenians continued to observe traditional mourning ceremonies: women allow their hair to fall loosely about the shoulders, covering the head with a black kerchief, and men bare and beat their breasts. In this ethnographic description, the author also presents one of the local beliefs about the dead: the deceased can appear to the living, but in a transformed way: it is noted that they appear with their feet turned upside down, so that the tarsi were visible from the front, and the toes could be seen from the back¹³.

¹⁰ Telfer J. B., *The Crimea And Transcaucasia: Being the Narrative of a Journey in the Kouban, in Gouria, Georgia, Armenia, Ossety, Imeritia, Swannety, and Mingrelia, and in the Tauric Range*. Vol. 1. London: H. S. King & Co., 1876, pp.139-140.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 153-154.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 246.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp.238-239.

Thomas Gaskell Allen, Jr. and William Lewis Sachtleben were American travelers and researchers who conducted an extensive study from Constantinople to Beijing in the late 19th century. The travelers collected a wealth of documentary material on geographical, ethnographic, and socio-cultural aspects of life. Their work contains a rather interesting ethnographic description of the image of the Armenian woman. The costume of Armenian women was mainly made of brightly colored cloth and beautifully decorated. The hairstyle, always neat, sometimes included a string of gold coins around the head or going down to the braid. A silver belt covered the waist, and a necklace made of coins drew attention to her beautiful neck. Turkish women were very different from Armenian women in the simplicity of their costume, as well as in the prohibition of exposing their faces¹⁴.

The issue of women's education was quite difficult, according to the authors. The specificity of missionary work in Kaisarieh lied in the education of Armenian women who had a socially lower status than Turkish women. The community experienced surprise and contempt for female missionaries. When the latter walked down the street, one could hear the following remark about them: "There walks a woman who knows about all of her husband's affairs and can manage them as well as her husband" or they were called "Madana satana", which meant "Female Satan". Initially, it was quite difficult to overcome the existing prejudices and force girls to receive free education; later, when education became paid, it became difficult to even find a room where they could study¹⁵.

Below are the memoirs by the English officer John Johnson (1817) about Armenian women; the officer was invited for dinner at the house of Prince Bebutov. The officer was critical of the women's clothing and looks, and noted that the women displayed unnatural coldness towards him¹⁶.

In his book *Travels In Russia, The Krimea, The Caucasus, And Georgia Performed During the Years 1814–1816*, the author Robert Lyall (1789–1831), a Scottish physician, naturalist, and traveler, also touched upon the Caucasus. The author reports that he met many Armenian women in Mozdok, noting that they were shy like Tatars or Circassians. They married at an early age, no older than thirteen¹⁷.

The same work also contains a number of observations regarding the socio-cultural status of Georgian women. One of them states that Russian soldiers were accused of degrading treatment of Georgian women, especially those from the lower classes. According to the testimony of the Russian army officer Maurice de Kotzebue (1789–1861), when meeting Russian soldiers, Georgian women were forced to face the wall in the streets and wait until the Russians would leave¹⁸.

¹⁴ Allen, T. G., Jr., and Sachtleben W. L., *Across Asia on a Bicycle: The Journey of Two American Students from Constantinople to Peking*. New York: The Century Co., Devinne Press, 1894, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.26.

¹⁶ Natchkebia I., *The Population Of Tbilisi Through The Eyes Of Foreign Travelers (First Half Of The XIX Century)*, *The Near East and Georgia*, 15, Tbilisi, 2023, p.227.

¹⁷ Lyall R., M.D. F.L.S., *Travels In Russia, The Krimea, The Caucasus, And Georgia*, vol.I, London, T. Cadell, 1825, p.455.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.526.

Summarizing the notes left by the European and American authors mentioned in the paper, we can comprehensively study and analyze the image and role of Caucasian women, Georgians and Armenians, and most importantly, their national characteristics. Thus, Georgians were described as charming, graceful and elegant, yet their behavior sometimes seemed cold to European travelers; it should be noted that this image was formed by the latter according to European standards and mentality. Armenians were described as modest and shy, and one could rarely meet them in public places. This was determined by the historical context: living under Muslim rule, they had to choose to avoid public places as a means of protection.

In conclusion, we can state that the position and behavioral norms of women in the Caucasus were formed under the influence of local traditions, cultural and national characteristics, and political, historical, and social influences.

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