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**At the Intersection of Tale, Myth, and Modernism:
The Moral Allegory of *The First Garment***

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Abstract

Guram Dochanashvili's *The First Garment* presents a distinctive narrative structure in which folktale aesthetics intersect with modernist literary techniques. The novel's allegorical design departs from the traditional fable's didactic clarity and instead constructs an open-ended ethical space shaped by the protagonist's inner conflicts. The motif of the "first garment" exemplifies how a symbolic element inherited from myth and folktale acquires new significance within a modernist framework, revealing the fragility, ambiguity, and moral uncertainty of human nature. The rhythmic simplicity of myth and tale coexists with modernist disorientation, epistemological instability, and psychological fragmentation, producing a hybrid narrative form that both engages Georgian literary tradition and reinterprets it thro-

ugh a contemporary lens. Rather than offering fixed moral conclusions, the novel foregrounds interpretive multiplicity and reflective openness, contributing a nuanced perspective to discussions on modern fable and moral allegory. There is a lack of a comprehensive analysis of Dochanashvili's allegorical structure in modern fable studies. This article fills this gap and repositions the text within the context of both mythopoetic and ethical modernism. This study aims to fill the theoretical gap in modern fable studies by repositioning the novel on the axis of tale-myth-modernist ethics.

Keywords: Guram Dochanashvili, modern fable, moral allegory, mythopoetics, Georgian literature, modernism.

Introduction

Guram Dochanashvili's novel *The First Garment* (*Pirveli Sartskhi*, 1975) is regarded as a decisive milestone in the modernist transformation of the Georgian narrative tradition. Combining folkloric and fairy-tale elements with a modernist consciousness, the work presents an original narrative form that both preserves historical continuity and expands the aesthetic boundaries of Georgian literature. This distinctive quality makes the novel worthy of critical attention not only within the national context but also in the broader landscape of modern world literature. However, the limited number of studies—both local and international - that explore the novel's allegorical structure through the lens of the modern fable highlights the need for a more comprehensive reading of the text.

At the center of the work stands the image of the “first garment,” which not only constitutes the symbolic core of the narrative, but also functions as a multilayered metaphor marking the transition from nature to culture, from innocence to ethical consciousness. This

establishes the fundamental question of the novel: How does Dochanashvili transform the structural and thematic components of the modern fable, and how does he employ this transformation within the framework of a moral allegory? Such an inquiry offers a productive lens through which to understand both the fairy-tale aesthetics and the modernist fragmentation that shape the novel.

In discussions of the modern fable, *The First Garment* has generally been approached at a thematic level; yet a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining how the genre is reshaped under modernist conditions has not been fully developed. Although existing scholarship focuses on the novel's fairy-tale atmosphere and allegorical symbols, the relationship between these elements and the modernist dynamics of ethical ambiguity and epistemological rupture has not been examined in sufficient detail. Consequently, how the novel creates an original narrative form through the interplay of mythopoetic references, modernist narrative strategies, and moral inquiry remains an open field of research.

This article aims to fill this gap by analysing Dochanashvili's novel within the intersecting frameworks of the modern fable, moral allegory, and the tale–myth–modern narrative continuum. The analysis re-evaluates the novel's position in modern Georgian literature by examining its formal structure and thematic layers together. Employing a hermeneutic approach grounded in qualitative textual analysis, the study focuses on the functioning of allegorical signs, the transformation of symbolic structures, and the indeterminacy surrounding ethical decision-making. This methodological framework makes it possible to reposition the novel not only in terms of its content but also within contemporary debates on the modern fable.

Through this approach, the article seeks to demonstrate how *The First Garment* reshapes the didactic quality of the fable through

modernist ruptures, how it constructs a tension between fairy-tale continuity and ethical uncertainty, and how Dochanashvili develops an allegorical poetics that constitutes a unique contribution to modern Georgian literature.

The study employs a hermeneutic method based on qualitative textual analysis. The novel is examined through close reading, and its allegorical elements are interpreted within the frameworks of modern fable theory and modernist ethics. Throughout the analysis, theoretical texts and the primary work are brought into dialogue, and the functioning of symbolic structures as well as the domain of ethical ambiguity are articulated through content analysis.

Within the context of Georgian modernism in the 1970s, Dochanashvili is regarded as one of the writers who bridge folkloric consciousness with modernist ethical inquiry. *The First Garment* exemplifies a mythopoetic modernism in which the cultural pressures of the Soviet era are subtly present in the background, even though the novel is not explicitly political. This position situates the work firmly within the contemporary Georgian narrative tradition while also marking it as a localized adaptation of modernist aesthetics. By addressing these gaps, the present study situates *The First Garment* within the theoretical framework of modern fable studies and proposes a holistic reading that reinterprets the novel's allegorical structure in the context of ethical modernism. Within this framework, evaluating the novel's allegorical structure first requires outlining the conceptual foundations offered by modern fable theory, the tale–myth relationship, and modernist narrative theory.

Theoretical Framework

The transformation of the modern fable as a literary genre marks a striking rupture within the narrative aesthetics of the twentieth century. While the traditional fable is defined by a concise structure

grounded in a clear moral lesson, this structure becomes fragmented in modernist literature at both the thematic and formal levels; didacticism gives way to ethical ambiguity, and certainty is replaced by multi-layered interpretability. This transformation fundamentally alters the function of allegory as well. Walter Benjamin's approach – linking allegory to the fragility of historicity and the discontinuity of meaning – demonstrates that in modern narratives, allegory functions not merely as a moral indicator but as a mode of expression that reveals the instability of meaning within a fractured world (Benjamin, 1998: 156-164). Angus Fletcher's conception of allegory as a mode of multivalent thinking rather than a fixed regime of representation provides an essential theoretical foundation for understanding why the modern fable diverges from the traditional one (Fletcher, 2012: 45-52).

The relationship between tale and myth and their connection to modern narrative also plays a crucial role in explaining the transformation of the modern fable. Northrop Frye's classification, which illustrates the enduring influence of mythic patterns in modern literature, shows that archaic structures are not merely historical residues but active components in the production of meaning within modern narrative (Frye, 2000: 137-154). When the cyclical temporality, archetypal characters, and simplified plotlines of the fairy tale meet the fractured timelines, fragmented consciousness, and strategies of uncertainty characteristic of modernist narrative, they give rise to a hybrid form that is at once grounded in tradition and operating beyond it. This hybridity makes visible the tension between the familiar structures of the tale and the epistemological insecurity of modernism in texts such as *The First Garment*.

In the context of moral allegory, the defining feature of modernist sensibility is the treatment of morality not as a matter of fixed

truths, but as something examined through the internal conflicts experienced by the subject. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach, which emphasizes the interpretive openness of the symbol, offers a productive framework for explaining the resistance of modern allegory to univocal meaning (Ricoeur, 1976:47-53). In the modern fable, the moral conclusion is neither explicit nor definitive; meaning is shaped through a continuous interaction between the reader and the text. Thus, allegory becomes a narrative strategy that invites the reader not toward a predetermined ethical answer, but toward reflection, interpretation, and the construction of one's own ethical position.

Modernist narrative theories provide another essential component for analysing the formal structure of the novel. Brian McHale's approach, which defines modernist narrative through epistemological uncertainty, internal division, and cognitive dissonance, helps explain the slipperiness of meaning in works like *The First Garment* (McHale, 2004: 23-34). In the modernist text, the central question is not "What is the world like?" but "How can the world be known?", and this question undermines the traditional didacticism of the fable. Consequently, the modern fable becomes a narrative form in which epistemological inquiry and ethical indecision are intertwined.

When these theoretical approaches are brought together, three fundamental conceptual axes emerge for analysing *The First Garment*: the modernist refunctionalization of allegory; the fusion of tale and mythic structures with modern narrative strategies; and a fable form grounded in ethical uncertainty and subjective experience. This framework makes it possible to read the novel in terms of both mythic continuity and modernist fragility.

These axes demonstrate that the novel offers a space in which the modern fable is reconstructed not only in terms of content but also in relation to narrative aesthetics. Thus, the theoretical frame-

work provides a holistic perspective that enables the analysis of the novel's allegorical signs, fairy-tale structures, and modernist ethical tensions. This framework lays the conceptual foundation for the next section, which examines the novel's allegorical fabric and the ways in which the fairy-tale structure is transformed through modernist ruptures.

Analysis of the Novel's Allegorical Structure

Although *The First Garment* presents a simple, fairy tale-like atmosphere at the level of narrative surface, it is structurally built upon a multi-layered allegorical fabric. The symbolic organization at the center of the novel disrupts any linear progression of the plot, transforming each narrative unit into an independent space of intellectual inquiry. Dochanashvili's text continually invites the reader to perceive both the overtly fairy-tale structure of the narrative and the deeper moral and ontological tensions operating beneath it. The novel's allegorical force derives precisely from its ability to sustain these two levels simultaneously in a delicate yet mature balance.

The novel's central symbol, the "first garment," functions not merely as an object but as a sign that shapes the meaning of the individual's relationship with the self and the world throughout the narrative. The multiplicity of meanings attached to the garment clarifies the novel's approach to allegory. The garment appears both as a protective shell and as a marker of the individual's departure from innocence; it is at once a metaphor for humanity's entry into cultural and social structures and a reminder of the impossibility of returning to pure naturalness. This tension becomes a recurring moral motif throughout the novel, directing the reader toward an inquiry into the individual's inner transformation. Here, allegory does not produce classical meaning-fixity; rather, it becomes a symbolic form whose meaning constantly shifts, expands, and opens space for thought.

The novel's characters must also be considered within this allegorical framework. Most characters are not drawn in detailed psychological depth; instead, they appear as figures embodying particular aspects of human nature. While this figurative structure echoes the typological characters of the fairy-tale tradition, the internal conflict characteristic of modernist narrative remains consistently visible. The protagonist, with his passive and receptive disposition, evokes the journey of the traditional fairy-tale hero; yet the trials he encounters do not lead to the clear resolutions expected in the fairy-tale mode. Each encounter constitutes a moment of learning, but this learning process does not yield definitive conclusions—on the contrary, it exposes the expanding emptiness within the individual. In this sense, Dochanashvili reconstructs the patterns of the tale through modernist ambiguity: the characters are not heroes fulfilling their destinies, but representations of the modern individual who loses direction in the search for meaning.

Dochanashvili's narrative strategy is also reinforced by the ambiguity of spatial configuration. Throughout the novel, no precise geographic or historical setting is explicitly identified. This choice strengthens the universality of the allegorical structure; the setting carries traces of Georgian cultural memory while simultaneously maintaining a level of indeterminacy that enables resonance with the mythic textures of many societies. This spatial ambiguity recalls Benjamin's association of allegory with historical discontinuity: the emptiness of place prevents meaning from settling into fixed stability, offering the reader the possibility of reinterpreting the symbolic structure from multiple perspectives (Benjamin, 1998: 172-175).

One of the narrative domains in which allegory becomes most concentrated is the novel's language. Although Dochanashvili's language exhibits a fairy-tale simplicity, an ironic consciousness lies ben-

eath this simplicity. Sentences often begin with the reassuring tone of a traditional storyteller, yet proceed with unexpected shifts that signal modernist ruptures. This language exposes the reader simultaneously to the familiarity of the tale and the unsettling questions of modernist narrative. Ricoeur's approach to symbolic discourse - emphasizing the multi-layered interpretability of the symbol - offers an apt framework for explaining the novel's linguistic strategy; the language does not allow the reader to reduce meaning to a single conclusion, but instead generates an excess that stimulates thought (Ricoeur, 1976: 61-65).

Another element that renders the novel's allegorical structure distinct is the emergence of ethical impasses throughout the narrative. The situations encountered by the characters do not lead to moral resolutions, as in the classical fable; instead, the moral problem often deepens rather than resolves. The underlying tension here is the inconsistency inherent in the modern individual's world of meaning and values. McHale's characterization of modernist narrative through epistemological uncertainty is important for explaining this aspect of the novel (McHale, 2004:39-42). Dochanashvili's characters experience the world not within the orderly moral framework suggested by the fable but within a moral geography whose boundaries are constantly shifting. It is precisely here that the modern form of allegory becomes visible: in place of didactic certainty, an open-ended structure of ethical questioning emerges.

This multi-layered construction transforms the novel's allegory from a mere narrative technique into an instrument of philosophical reflection on human nature. In *The First Garment*, allegory becomes a mode of thought that makes visible the individual's inner transformation, bringing together the archetypal elements of the fairy tale with the fragile subjectivity of modernism. For this reason, the novel possesses a structure that pushes allegory beyond its classical definit-

ions and offers a new theoretical and aesthetic direction for the modern fable.

The Relationship Between Tale, Myth, and Modern Narrative

The First Garment, with its narrative structure that blends the aesthetics of the fairy tale with a modernist consciousness, continually redefines the boundaries between the traditional and the contemporary. The novel's mythopoetic texture is constructed not only through imagery reminiscent of folkloric motifs, but also through the reworking of archetypes embedded in cultural memory within the framework of modern ethical inquiry. Thus, the narrative establishes a tense balance between the orderly, predictable structure of the fairy tale and the fragmented, fragile, and often ambiguous narrative strategies of modernism. The conflict between the security of the fairy-tale mode and the uncertainty of modernist form constitutes a central axis of the novel's poetic foundation.

One of the scenes in which this tension becomes most visible is the brief yet intense moment when the protagonist becomes aware of his inner transformation: "*In silence, he saw himself more clearly*" (Dochanashvili, 2015:103). In fairy tales, similar scenes typically lead the hero toward resolution or ultimate wisdom; in Dochanashvili's narrative, however, this recognition does not produce new stability. On the contrary, it marks a modernist point of transformation in which meaning becomes further fractured and the subject confronts his own inner fragmentation. Thus, the fairy-tale model of enlightenment is replaced by modernist existential questioning.

The journey motif at the center of the novel's mythic structure is similarly transformed. In the traditional fairy tale, the journey offers a developmental trajectory leading the hero toward a goal; in the novel, however, the road becomes a symbol of uncertainty and directionlessness: "*The road stretched without promise*" (Dochanashvili,

2015:56). This expression demonstrates the deliberate disruption of the teleological structure of the tale. The road's lack of promise or guidance reflects the modern individual's position within existential uncertainty. Thus, the journey ceases to be a narrative of progress and instead becomes a modernist metaphor for "the futility of seeking."

The fairy-tale atmosphere is also felt in the novel's figurative expression; yet the archetypal stability of fairy-tale characters dissolves significantly within the modern narrative. The symbolic nature of the burden carried by the protagonist becomes evident in the following sentence: "*He feared the garment's weight*" (Dochanashvili, 2015:42). In the fairy tale, such an object would traditionally serve a magical or supportive function; here, it becomes a symbol of guilt, responsibility, and alienation. In Dochanashvili's allegorical language, the garment signifies both cultural heritage and ethical burden. Thus, the fairy-tale notion of the supportive object is displaced by a modernist object of hindrance and reflection.

Another domain in which tale and myth intersect with modern narrative is the novel's temporal structure. Whereas time in fairy tales is often cyclical, ordered, and static, time in the novel becomes fragile, shaped by the psychological state of the subject: "*Time moved like a shadow*" (Dochanashvili, 2015:88). This shadow-like flow expresses both the indeterminacy of the historical setting and the fragmented nature of modernist temporal perception. The narrative thereby forms a dual temporal construction that preserves the timelessness of the fairy tale while incorporating the temporal ambiguity of modernism.

Finally, the relationship between the fairy tale and modern ethical inquiry is sharpened through the novel's language. The narrator's simple and reassuring voice is frequently disrupted by modernist irony. One example of this disruption appears in the sentence expressing the protagonist's desire to return: "*He wished to return, yet the*

road no longer belonged to him” (Dochanashvili, 2015:67). In the fairy tale, return typically functions as a cyclical closure; here, return is impossible. The road no longer belongs to him, just as the sense of belonging to the past is irretrievable for the modern individual.

When all these elements are brought together, *The First Garment* presents a hybrid narrative form that fuses the archetypal continuity of the fairy tale with the fragile structure of the modernist narrative. This hybridity situates the novel both within the traditional structures of Georgian literature and within the deep framework of modernist ethical and epistemological inquiry. Dochanashvili’s novel thus becomes a powerful example for understanding the transformation of the modern fable—an original narrative model showing how the simple forms of the tale can merge with the aesthetics of modernist uncertainty.

Moral Inquiry and Human Nature

Dochanashvili’s *The First Garment* departs from the classical fable tradition, which defines morality through fixed principles, and instead constructs an ethical realm shaped by the individual’s subjective experience and internal tensions. Throughout the novel, moral inquiry emerges not as the command of an external authority but as the outcome of conflicts encountered within one’s inner world. For this reason, the ethical structure of the text is not linear; it is fragile, shifting, and often unresolved. This is precisely the point at which allegory becomes modernized: morality transforms from an instructive narrative element into a mode of thought woven with the uncertainties of human nature.

This fragile ethical space becomes concrete through the protagonist’s relationship with the garment. The garment functions in the novel not merely as a cultural symbol but as a metaphor for the moral burden carried by the individual. The duality the protagonist feels

toward the garment reveals the moral indecision of the modern person: *“He feared the garment’s weight”* (Dochanashvili, 2015:42). The “weight” here expresses not external punishment but the anxiety of taking responsibility for one’s own choices. Moral action is no longer a matter of obeying a law; it becomes a confrontation with one’s own conscience.

Throughout the novel, there are moments in which moral choices become directionless or even ambiguous. One of the clearest examples of ethical tension is the contradiction between the protagonist’s desire to return and the road’s rejection of him: *“He wished to return, yet the road no longer belonged to him”* (Dochanashvili, 2015:67). Here, the road functions not merely as a physical space but as a metaphor for a moral trajectory. In the modern narrative, the freedom to choose one’s own path simultaneously brings directionlessness and lack of belonging. Thus, the novel is less concerned with determining what constitutes moral error and more with exploring the individual’s attempt to make sense of their actions.

Another dimension of the novel’s discussion of human nature appears in moments of silence and introspection. In traditional fairy tales, such moments serve as calm intervals in which the hero attains knowledge or enlightenment. In Dochanashvili’s text, however, silence becomes a space in which inner turmoil surfaces rather than certainty: *“In silence, he saw himself more clearly”* (Dochanashvili, 2015: 103). This clarity does not lead to resolution but to a sharper awareness of one’s own fragility. Ethical enlightenment gives way to ethical doubt; the fragmented subject at the heart of modernist narrative shapes the novel’s moral structure.

One of the elements that most clearly defines the text’s moral inquiry is the uncertainty surrounding the consequences of the character’s actions. There is no definitive measure of whether the prota-

gonist's choices are right. The determination of right or wrong does not emerge from a fixed framework provided by the narrator but from the interpretive position of the reader. This suspends the didactic conclusion of the traditional fable and transforms the moral function of the narrative into a process of thinking co-constructed by reader and text. In this respect, the work aligns with modern ethical theories that emphasize subjectivity and interpretive openness.

One of the points at which moral inquiry intensifies is the conflict between the individual's inner inclinations and the expectations of the external world. In many scenes, the protagonist acts with good intentions yet becomes trapped in an ethical dilemma because he cannot foresee the consequences of his actions. This becomes a defining feature of the modern individual's moral condition: the inconsistency between intention and outcome. The following short sentence expresses this tension with subtlety: "*He walked with doubt beside him*" (Dochanashvili, 2015:74). Here, doubt is not a force that paralyzes action but an inevitable dimension of ethical awareness.

In conclusion, the novel constructs a framework in which morality is assessed not through fixed rules but within the fragile nature of human experience. The clear truths of the fairy tale are replaced by modern ethical uncertainty, while the character's internal conflicts invite the reader to question the complex ground upon which moral thinking is built. For this reason, Dochanashvili's narrative transcends the instructive structure of the fable and renders the ethical, psychological, and existential reality of the modern individual in a richly multi-layered form.

Conclusion

Guram Dochanashvili's *The First Garment* should be regarded as one of the most original examples in modern Georgian literature that brings together the tale-myth tradition with modernist aesth-

etics. Although the novel constructs a simple and fairy tale–like narrative on the surface, beneath this simplicity lies a profound allegorical structure that interrogates the ethical, psychological, and ontological dimensions of human nature. As demonstrated throughout this study, Dochanashvili transforms the didactic function of the classical fable by merging the archetypal power of the tale with the epistemological uncertainty of modernist narrative, thereby relocating moral inquiry into an open-ended field of thought.

The allegorical operation of the novel presents a structure that expands the boundaries of the modern fable. The metaphor of the “first garment” functions not merely as a cultural symbol but as a multi-layered sign bearing the moral weight of the individual’s relationship with the self and with the world. Its meaning goes beyond the magical function attributed to objects in the fairy tale; it becomes intertwined with the individual’s choices, fears, and responsibilities, revealing the ethical fragility of the modern subject. As seen in the cited passages, the protagonist’s relationship with the garment is shaped by uncertainty and inner conflict: “*He feared the garment’s weight.*” This fear is a modernist reflection of the deep ethical anxiety one feels regarding the consequences of their own actions.

The analysis conducted along the axis of tale–myth–modern narrative demonstrates that the novel occupies an exceptional position both within the context of national literature and within the broader framework of world literary modernism. Dochanashvili brings together the rhythmic simplicity of folkloric consciousness with the stream-of-consciousness effects and uncertainty of modernism to develop a hybrid narrative form. This form can neither be reduced entirely to the linear structure of the traditional tale nor be fully absorbed into the rupture of modernist aesthetics. On the contrary, the novel positions itself between these two spheres and creates a unique

aesthetic space—one that serves as a creative point of intersection where archetypal motifs meet modern ethical dilemmas.

From the perspective of moral inquiry, the work offers an ethical framework cantered on the internal tensions of the modern subject. Here, moral truths are not fixed; the individual's subjective experience, the complexity of their choices, and their inability to foresee the consequences of their actions constitute the foundation of ethical reflection. As expressed in the line "*He walked with doubt beside him,*" doubt is not portrayed as a moral deficiency but as an inevitable component of existential awareness. For this reason, the novel consciously suspends the didactic clarity of the fable, urging the reader to reconsider their own ethical position.

In conclusion, *The First Garment* makes a significant contribution to discussions of the modern fable and moral allegory. By combining the cultural continuity of the tale with the critical consciousness of modernism, Dochanashvili's text secures a distinctive place both in Georgian literature and within the theoretical landscape of modernist narrative studies. The novel's multi-layered structure reveals the fragility of human nature, the openness of moral thought, and the continued resonance of mythopoetic symbols in contemporary literature. In this respect, *The First Garment* is not only a literary achievement but also a text that offers a rich field of inquiry for modern ethics and narrative theory. This study expands the scope of modern fable research in Georgian literature and provides a framework for future analyses that explore the relationship between allegory and ethical modernism in other works. In doing so, it contributes to rethinking the theoretical boundaries of the modern fable not only through Western literary traditions but also through the Georgian narrative heritage.

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