

# **And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915**

**The Metamorphosis  
of the Post-Genocide  
Armenian Identity  
as Reflected in  
Artistic Literature**

**Rubina Perroomian**

Yerevan, 2008

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Identity  
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by  
**Rubina Peroomian**

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# Introduction

Two decades and some years ago, when I chose Armenian Genocide literature as my specialized field of research and as the topic of my dissertation, I could never have foreseen how deeply this field of study would engulf my academic endeavors, my community activism, my life. Dealing with the enormity of material and the emotional impact of this field of epic grandeur is a daily struggle. The present book, and the trilogy it is a part of, sum up only a portion of my aspired undertakings in this field. I am still hoping to reach closure, if at all possible, in this bottomless sea of my people's struggle to cope with and eventually transcend the Genocide in her past.

In the first monograph<sup>1</sup> of my projected trilogy, itself a follow-up to *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of*

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming.

*the Armenian and the Jewish Experience*,<sup>2</sup> I focused on the literary responses of generations of Diasporan Armenian survivors to the traumatic past of their parents and grandparents. I traced the transmission, from the first generation to the next and the next, of the lingering pain and the memory of having survived a cataclysm that was later recognized as the first large-scale Genocide of the twentieth century.

In the present volume, the second in the trilogy, I shift my focus to trace the effects of that past traumatic experience on the formation and metamorphosis of the identity of generations of Armenian survivors who continued living in Turkey. I have therefore chosen “The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature” as the subtitle of this monograph to emphasize this shift.

I intend to complete the trilogy with a volume on the study of the reflections of the historical memory of the Armenian Genocide in Soviet Armenian literature, in which the Genocide was a forbidden subject. I will demonstrate that, despite the hostile atmosphere in which not only writing about the past and the Turkish atrocities but also speaking about them was a punishable crime, the memory of the Genocide was transmitted in the stories of grandparents in the confines of their homes. This memory resounded in literary works, subtly

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<sup>2</sup> *Literary Responses to Catastrophe* was an expanded version of my dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree at the University of California, Los Angeles, in June of 1989. The book was published in 1993, under the auspices of the Von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA, by Scholars Press in Atlanta, Georgia.

but unmistakably, and interestingly accumulated the memory of subsequent persecutions during the Soviet era. In this final volume of the trilogy, I will highlight the impositions of Soviet ideology and state policies upon the treatment of Armenian history and the collective memory of the traumatic past. To tie in with the thesis I develop in the present volume, I will draw a comparison between the prevailing atmosphere of fear in then-Soviet Armenia and the state of mind that governs contemporary Turkish society.

The basis of the focus in this second monograph—from literary responses to the transgenerational sense of Armenianness—is twofold. First, in my readings of genocide literature and my study of the effects of the Armenian Genocide on generations of survivors, I came to realize that the nation's past traumatic experience had a definite role in the formation of the Armenian sense of ethnicity and identity through time. This realization necessitated an approach with a different angle, with an emphasis on the construct of identity—ethnic identity in particular—again in artistic literature, as before. This shift, or this modified approach, is reflected in articles that I have published and presentations that I have made in recent years.

The second and more important reason is the fact that I could not rely on Turkish-Armenian literature to explore the Turkish-Armenian literary responses to the Catastrophe. There were none. Surviving Armenian intellectuals gathered in postwar Constantinople made superhuman attempts to overcome the devastating effects of the destruction of the Armenian people and to find the means, that is, literary directions, to transcend the Catastrophe. The short-lived



*Bardzravank* literary movement initiated in 1922 by Vahan Tekeyan, Hagop Oshagan, Kostan Zarian, Shahan Berberian, and others was an attempt toward that goal. That movement and the literary output it entailed promised a new revival in the history of Western Armenian literature.<sup>3</sup> The path to reach that revival necessitated facing the past, comprehending the Catastrophe, confronting and responding to it. Oshagan's *Kayserakan haghtergutiun* (Imperial song of triumph) best exemplifies the new direction.<sup>4</sup>

However, the movement and the thriving literary activities in Constantinople were cut short by Mustafa Kemal's threatening advance toward Constantinople. Armenian intellectuals fled the country in fear of renewed persecution. In fact, the turbulent period between September 1922, with the Kemalist army's occupation and burning of Smyrna (Izmir), and October 1923, with the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey, was the only opportunity to escape the country. After the establishment of the Republic and until 1946, no exit visas were issued. "The doors were closed," and those intellectuals who remained in Constantinople/Istanbul were mostly persecuted. As a result of the prevailing atmosphere of fear

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<sup>3</sup> The movement is named after its organ, *Bardsravank*, which was published for a year in 1922 and ceased to exist after the Kemalist advances on Constantinople.

<sup>4</sup> Oshagan, *Kayserakan haghtergutiun* (1983). In his preface to this collection of five stories from this period, Oshagan gives his interpretation of the events of 1915 and the role of Kaiser Wilhelm as an indifferent bystander to the events. He discusses the German conspiracy in a later work, *Mnatsordats* (1932-33). For a discussion of these works, see the chapter on Oshagan in Perroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe* (1993), pp. 173-215.

and political pressure, the cultural life of the minorities was dead. The established Armenian writers of the pre-1915 era, unable to freely express the suffering of their people, refrained from writing at all, or resorted to occasional outbursts of abstract melancholy.

Despite the unfavorable milieu, the post-World War II Turkish-Armenian, or rather Istanbul Armenian literature—since after Mustafa Kemal's coming to power in 1923 and the inauguration of the Republican era in Turkey, Constantinople/Istanbul has been and is the only center in Turkey where Armenian literature is produced—has made significant strides in artistic expression. In fact, the Istanbul Armenian literature of the past few decades is a great leap forward after decades of searching for a new direction to rise above the stagnation caused by the unyielding Turkish political stance against Armenians and especially the Turkish denial of the historical truth that preceded the Republican era. In light of the precariousness of the right and the ability of minority peoples to practice their religion and establish schools, media outlets, and other cultural institutions,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Little is left today of the thriving Armenian cultural, religious, and educational life of pre-1915 Constantinople. The periodical press that mirrors the life of the community is comprised of *Zhamanak*, founded in 1908, *Marmara*, founded in 1940, the theatrical journal *Kulis*, founded in 1946, *Lraber*, the newsletter of the Patriarchate, *Sourb Prkich*, the organ of the Sourb Prkich Hospital, and *Agos*, the newest periodical in Armenian and Turkish. These have continued uninterrupted. In addition, other periodicals such as *Shoghakat*, *Nor San*, and *Handes Mshakuiti* have resumed publication after decades of silence. The Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul oversees the religious and cultural life of the Armenian community as before (since the fifteenth century). There are more than 35 churches, of which only

Turkish-Armenian intellectuals walked a tightrope, always cautious not to cross the line. And so, writers stayed away from the theme of the nation's collective suffering of the past. For decades, Istanbul Armenian literature, and poetry in particular, developed by following the path of modern international literature,<sup>6</sup> with no limits or constraints in form and content and with humanism and abstract contemplations of human traits and attributes as favorite themes. With a unique perception of the world and humankind, Turkish-Armenian writers and poets sang the loves, hopes, dreams and yearnings, pain and suffering of mankind, and the struggle for equality and justice.<sup>7</sup> They successfully overcame their own

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about ten are in operation, compared to 47 functioning churches in 1915. Some of these churches have been turned into mosques. There are also two Protestant and six Catholic Armenian churches functioning. There are 18 Armenian schools, orphanages, and a hospital in operation, and seven Armenian cemeteries, Shishli being the most famous among them.

<sup>6</sup> Being cut off from the outside world, it was mainly through modern Turkish literature and Turkish literary journals that Armenian intellectuals were introduced to international literary movements—surrealism in the West and social-realism in the Soviet Union—and trends in poetry. This does not necessarily mean that the Istanbul Armenian literature fell under the influence of contemporary Turkish literature.

<sup>7</sup> Onnik Fchjian's poem, "Vacharorde" (The vendor) best epitomizes this trait in Istanbul Armenian poetry:

I sell oil; I sell honey,  
 Forgiving spirit,  
 Sincerity  
 Loving hearts I sell...  
 My baskets are inundated with  
 Happiness, brotherhood

emotions and replaced the “I” with the “collective I.” They replaced personal struggle with the collective one. Zahrad (Zareh Yaldejian)<sup>8</sup> was one principal figure and a pace-setter in post-World War II Istanbul Armenian poetry, followed by Zareh Khrakhuni (Arto Jumbushian).<sup>9</sup> In this strong inclination toward internationalism, Turkish-Armenian writers initiated attempts of rapprochement with Turkish writers and poets. They organized literary events dedicated to Turkish literature and invited Turkish intellectuals to

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And I sell; I sell...  
Vendor!  
hatred,  
lies and deceit I want from you.  
Unfortunately, Madame, there are none.  
They are all gone.

The poem is quoted in Haddejian, *Hushatetr* – 15 (1999), p. 188. Haddejian cites this poem as the author’s important and impressive first step by which he became known in Istanbul literary circles. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in the present work are my own.

<sup>8</sup> Born in 1924 in Istanbul, Zahrad is a product of the post-WWII Turkish-Armenian cultural and especially literary revival. His poetry encapsulates the postwar period’s invigorated cultural and religious activities, the booming of Armenian schools, churches, print press, art exhibitions, and cultural events in the atmosphere of socioeconomic recovery and relative political respite which ended with the revolution and military coup of May 27, 1960, the assassination of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, the demise of his democratic government, the liquidation of the parliament, and the arrest and incarceration of political leaders.

<sup>9</sup> Zareh Khrakhuni was born in Istanbul in 1926. Aside from his volumes of poetry, he is known as a critic, analyst, and staunch supporter of Istanbul Armenian modern poetry.

participate. The frequency and popularity of these events gave rise to resentment in some. Rober Haddejian quotes Hagop Martayan expressing his concern in this regard in one of the meetings of the organizing committee: "We need to think of our own bread." "Our bread, that is, our culture," Haddejian comments, "is in the lion's mouth. We had to take control of it."<sup>10</sup> With all this being said, it would be a fallacy to suggest that post-World War II Istanbul Armenian poetry entirely shunned themes of Armenian national interest and did not reflect the Turkish-Armenian experience. In an analysis of Istanbul Armenian modern poetry, Hilda Kalfayan explains,

Images, often surrealistic, and especially symbols come to the aid of the Istanbul Armenian poet to create multiple meanings that lend themselves to multiple interpretations.... The national remains obscure, barely noticeable; the poetry sounds harmless but reaches the reader's intelligence. It reaches through art, through images, never expressed directly.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, both Zahrad's and Khrakhuni's poetry best elucidate this phenomenon. They sing the pain of human beings in their struggle for justice and to attain and preserve their identity as human beings, but with a nationalistic approach and interpretation, that struggle can epitomize the Armenian Cause.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Haddejian, *Hushatetr* – 15 (1999), p. 201.

<sup>11</sup> Kalfayan, *Bolsahay nor banasteghtsutiune* (1998), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Khrakhuni's poem titled "Patmutiun" (History), about the brothers Remus and Romulus and the birth of Rome, begins with the following four lines:

Their totem was wolf

Unable to pursue the cause of the dispersed Armenian nation, and sometimes even unaware of that cause,<sup>13</sup> Istanbul Armenian poets of the 1950s espoused the cause of humanity, especially in their own country where injustice prevailed. An important work by a group of Turkish-Armenian writers and poets, titled *A Panorama of the Istanbul Armenian Literature of the Republican Era* (1957), encapsulated the spirit and the direction of Istanbul Armenian poetry of the time and attempted to reach Armenians outside Turkey.<sup>14</sup> In the epilogue to this publication, co-editor Vardan Komikian wrote,

As it can be clearly seen, the Istanbul Armenian literary-artistic movement continues its evolution in parallel with Diasporan Armenian and international progress in this domain, within the limits of circumstances and influencing factors. Nevertheless, this movement has been able to free itself from the inferiority complexes imposed by today's

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And ours was lamb  
Here is the issue  
The rest is history.

One cannot help thinking that the poet was alluding to the history of the Turkish-Armenian relationship.

<sup>13</sup> Rober Haddejian (Rober Haddeler) attests that Armenian intellectuals of the 1950s had no contact with Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora outside Turkey and did not know much about the life, the literature, and the overall the cause of the Armenians outside Turkey. He also maintains that the Diaspora was unaware of Turkish-Armenian literature and believed that it was basically dead. The weekly literary insert first published in *Marmara* in 1955 was to fill that gap and become the pulse of Istanbul Armenian literary life. See Haddejian, *Hushatetr* – 15 (1999), pp. 20–1.

<sup>14</sup> Tsovak, Komikian, and Haddejian, *Hamaynapatker hanrapetakan shirjani Istanbulahay grakanutian*.

egocentric and unyielding critics as well as by the unaware and thus indifferent observers outside Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

This was not only a justification of the state of Istanbul Armenian art and literature of the time, but even more, it was a manifesto bridging the gap of 35 years since the *Bardzravank* movement, proudly announcing the birth of new literary figures who shared their predecessors' talent and drive.

Later on, as the grip of the military regime tightened, many of these writers and poets, who entertained themes of human justice, brotherhood, and equality among human beings, came to be considered socialists (leftists), and were persecuted and imprisoned by the government.<sup>16</sup>

The experience of Istanbul Armenians and their perception of the past have only recently burst into the open, principally through a new but cautious trend in the literature produced by Turkish-Armenian literati. Their venture to write their stories about the Armenian past in Turkish, or to translate original Armenian works into Turkish, is particularly notable. In an article on the question of silence in the Turkish Republican past, Fatma Müge Göçek touches upon this new trend in Turkish-Armenian literature and discusses the hesitance of

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<sup>15</sup> Cited in Haddejian, *Hushatetr* - 15 (1999), p. 219. For a comprehensive description of this important work and its role and place in Istanbul Armenian literature, see pp. 222-4.

<sup>16</sup> This was especially true after the military coups of March 12, 1971, and September 12, 1980, when a widespread hunt for socialists (communists) took place. The military would break into the homes of Turkish and Armenian intellectuals and arrest them if books by Nazim Hikmet, Karl Marx, and others were found.

Turkish-Armenian literati to break the silence and write about their traumatic experience. She attributes this hesitance to

self-censorship because of the precariousness of their societal location, leading them to mention, in the narrative that took them 75 years to present to the Turkish-Muslim national audience, the Armenian massacres that formed an indelible component of the memory of their parents and grandparents....<sup>17</sup>

Was it self-censorship or plain fear of persecution? In a situation where even speaking the Armenian language in public was forbidden and the accused would immediately be charged with breaking the laws of proper public behavior, how could Armenians speak about such a sensitive subject? Characteristically, Toros Toranian, a Syrian-Armenian writer visiting Istanbul in 1963, attests to his encounter with a group of Armenian intellectuals in the street. In his excitement at having met them, he greeted them in a loud voice and asked about an Armenian writer he very much wanted to meet. Coincidentally, the writer he was seeking was among this group. Very perplexed about this audacious and loud pronouncement of his name in the streets of Istanbul, he muttered words that no one could hear, and a lady in the group, a contributor to the Armenian newspaper *Marmara*, jumped in with a scolding tone: "Sir, if you will speak loud, speak Turkish. If you have to speak Armenian, then speak in a

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<sup>17</sup> Göçek, "Silences in the Turkish Republican Past" (n.d.). In this article, Göçek provides a contextualization of the Armenian experience in the Turkish narrative and in particular discusses the works of two Turkish-Armenian writers, Hagop Mintzuri and Migirdic Margosyan.



low voice. *Burası Türkiye, anladın mı?*" (This is Turkey, do you understand?)<sup>18</sup>

The trend to write about the Armenian past in the Ottoman Empire in Turkish-Armenian literature is still taking its first shaky and cautious steps. Newspaper articles in *Marmara* and *Zhamanak* are trying to shed some light on the present affairs of the Armenian community without much reference to the past. The contribution of *Agos*, a weekly paper in Turkish and Armenian, is tremendous. This paper, which still continues to be published after the assassination of its longtime editor Hrant Dink, reached the Armenians in Turkey, especially those who came to Istanbul from the interior of the country and did not have an Armenian education—Istanbul being the only place where the existence of Armenian schools was tolerated. But more importantly, *Agos* aimed to spread accurate information about Armenians and Armenian affairs in the wider Turkish society.<sup>19</sup> Aside from the press, a scant few authors, such as Hagop Mintzuri and Migirdic Margosyan, have also ventured into the realm of memoir-

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<sup>18</sup> Toranian, *Istanbulahayere ke kanchen* (1997), p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> The birth of *Agos*, or rather the emergence of the need for a bilingual paper, is a phenomenon. Reports have it that Archbishop Mesrob II Mutafyan called on a few Turkish-Armenian intellectuals active in the Turkish press and formed a press council to respond to inquiries from the Turkish media, or to provide accurate information about Armenians to Turkish media where news about Armenians was usually distorted and falsified. This endeavor generated the need to publish a Turkish-Armenian paper, and gradually *Agos* was born. Hrant Dink served as editor-in-chief from the outset until his assassination, after which Etyen Mahçupyan succeeded him as editor-in-chief.

writing. However, the prevailing norm is still to stay within the accepted limits. In fact, in describing in simple images the nostalgic memories of their birthplaces in the interior of Turkey, these memoir writers did not speak of the memory of the massacres and deportations, "the exile," which could not have died in the minds of the elders and would have most probably lived in the stories they told their children.

Not only did the literati refrain from writing about the Armenian suffering, but even ordinary Armenians, themselves survivors of the massacres and deportations, kept silent about their traumatic experiences and especially did not share them with even their closest Turkish friends. Kemal Yalçın confesses at the end of his book, *Seninle Güler Yüreğim* (You rejoice my heart),<sup>20</sup> that it was very difficult to win the trust of his Armenian interviewees to speak freely and without apprehension. There had always been a cautious reservation, a conscious or subconscious drive to hide their past when talking to a Turkish friend.

Given the lack of sufficient Turkish-Armenian literature, I therefore had to rely mostly on recent Turkish literature—those few works that audaciously treat the subject of the Armenian massacres and deportations in Turkey. I read all that was available to me and tried to trace in them the sense of Armenianness and the perception of the past, or the persistence of the memory of the past in generations of Armenian survivors who continued living in Turkey. Of course, because of my lack of knowledge of the Turkish

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<sup>20</sup> My reference is to the Armenian translation of this book, *Hogis kezmov ke khayta*, by Archbishop Karekin Bekjian (2003).

language, I have relied on translations into Armenian, English, or French (and in some cases the English original), or on studies and analyses of Turkish literature in those languages.

Will modern-day literary criticism and analyses of Turkish literature be able to bring to light what was not said? Will this unravel the knot of an unsettled account between the personal experience of the Turkish writer and the collective experience that was not only Armenian but also Turkish? I hope that it will. I hope that there will be an increasing number of sources, narratives, and literary analyses available to future scholars interested in this subject. In the meantime, let this volume serve as a beginning, a genuine attempt to loosen the knot of a forbidden past.