

And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915
The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature

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Nearly three decades ago, when I chose Armenian Genocide literature as my specialized field of research and as the topic of my dissertation, I could never imagine 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 book that I am invited to introduce to the *GPN* readers is my second book in the field of genocide studies.¹

And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915, The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature is composed of an introduction, the preamble, the body of 7 chapters, conclusion, bibliography, index, and a short summary in Armenian, 277 pages in total.² As the long title suggests, the book traces the effects of that past traumatic experience on the formation and metamorphosis of Armenian ethnic identity—common history, language, race, religion, traditions, and a territorial belonging—of generations of Armenian survivors who did not leave Turkey during or after the Genocide. This work has only been 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.

This study would have been impossible not very long ago. There was no evidence to show how Armenian survivors in Turkey lived, and no research had been done about their experiences. The literary movement in quest of new directions to revive the erstwhile thriving Armenian cultural life by surviving Armenian intellectuals gathered in post-war Constantinople and the tremendous efforts to collect, shelter, and feed the wretched survivors, to establish orphanages and schools for the young ones, in other words, attempts to breathe life into the massacred nation were all cut short by Mustafa Kemal's threatening military campaign and eventual establishment of the Republic of Turkey.

As a result of the prevailing atmosphere of fear and political pressures in the ensuing Republican era, the cultural life of the minorities, Armenians for that matter, was dead. In order to block the transmission of historical memory, the government had banned the teaching of Armenian history and geography in Armenian schools. Likewise, the mention of Armenians and their past experience, the existence of Armenians all together, and the Armenian issue in Turkey was banned in Turkish media, in schools, in textbooks, in literature. A generation of Turkish citizens was growing up ignorant of their past, ignorant of the Armenian presence and cultural input in the pre-Republican era. In the words of Elif Shafak in *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), the average Turk was taught to draw

an impermeable boundary between the past and the present, distinguishing the Ottoman Empire from the modern Turkish Republic The new state in Turkey had been established in 1923 and that was as far as the genesis of this regime could extend. Whatever might or might not have happened preceding this commencement date was the issue of another era—and another people.”³

Ömer Türkes attests that among 5000 novels published in the Republican Turkey, only a dozen mentions the Armenians and their deportation, and almost all follow the official line of the interpretation of the events. The successive

Turkish governments pursued the goal of constructing one single national identity, the Turkish national identity that covered all ethnic and religious groups in Turkey, and this *modus operandi* catered the realization of that goal.

In light of the precariousness of minority rights and especially the unyielding Turkish political stance against Armenians and a tight censorship, Turkish-Armenian literati walked a tightrope, always cautious not to cross the line. And so, writers stayed away from the theme of their nation's collective suffering of the past. Instead, they espoused the cause of humanity. They sang the loves, hopes, dreams and yearnings, pains and suffering of mankind, and the struggle for equality and justice. They successfully overcame their own emotions and replaced the "I" with the "collective I." They replaced personal struggle with the collective one. Onnik Fchjian's poem, "Vacharorde" (The vendor) epitomizes this trait in Istanbul-Armenian poetry of the 1950s and 60s:

*I sell oil; I sell honey,
Forgiving spirit,
Sincerity
Loving hearts I sell...
My baskets are inundated with
Happiness, brotherhood
And I sell; I sell...
Vendor!
hatred,
lies and deceit I want from you.
Unfortunately, Madame, there are not.
They are all gone. (6-7)⁴*

As Hilda Kalfayan explains in *Bolsahay nor banasteghtsutiane* (The Istanbul Armenian new poetry, 1998), "Images, often surrealistic, and especially symbols come to help the Istanbul-Armenian poet to create multiple meanings lending 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" (11). Zahrad (Zareh Yaldejian) was a principal figure and a pace-setter followed by Zareh Khrakhuni whose one poem, for example, titled "Patmutiun" (History) about the birth of Rome by Romus and Romulus brothers, begin with the following four lines,

Their totem was wolf

*And ours was lamb
Here is the issue
The rest is history.(8-9)*

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

Haygazun Galustian's simple and unembellished portrayal of his family tree in a poem paradoxically titled "Khaghaghutiun" (Peace) is another subtle reference to the calamity that befell the nation before the poet was born and which continues in his life as well:

*My mother had two brothers
she had father
she had mother
they had sisters and brothers
they were all married
they all had children*

*From them neither this nor that remained
they all – they all
died before I was born*

*My father like my mother
what he had, father, mother, brother
cousins – a whole clan
died before I was born
when I opened my eyes, my mother was left alone
your father was drafted in the army they said. (115)*

Notice the calculated word choice. They all "died," not murdered or death-marched. Equally significant is Varteres Karagozian's sketching the life of his grandmother that can be the life of any Armenian woman raising a family in Turkey:

*She was a girl, still a blossom
they took his father away
she sat and wept with her mother*

*she became a bride, a young bride
they took her husband away
she sat and wept with her son*

*she was the guardian of her orphan son
they took her son too
she sat and wept with her daughter-in-law*

*now there is no fear
no massacres, and no war*

*but they took her grandson too
What was that – she sat and wept. (113)*

Later on, as the grip of the military regime tightened, many of these writers and poets, who entertained the themes of human justice, brotherhood, and equality among human beings were considered socialists (leftists) and were persecuted and imprisoned by the government.⁵

The government policy of silencing the memory of the atrocities against Armenians underwent changes in the 1970s commencing a period of emphatic and absolute denial of the past wrongdoings and the reversal of the blame. An outpour of denial literature occurred finding its way also in popular and formal education. As Osman Köker, Taner Akçam, and others attest, a generation of Turks grew up indoctrinated to hate Armenians as traitors, liars, rebels, and conspirators who allied with the enemies of Turkey to topple the Empire .

The atmosphere of fear and apprehension pressed more heavily upon the Armenian minority. Not only did the literati refrain from writing about the Armenian suffering, but even ordinary Armenians, generations of survivors of the massacres and deportations, kept silent about the inherited traumatic past and especially did not share them with even their closest Turkish friends. Kemal Yalçın confesses in the end of his book, *Seninle Güler Yüregim* (You Rejoice My Heart), that it was very difficult to win the trust of his Armenian interviewee to speak freely and without apprehension. There had always been a cautious reservation, a conscious or subconscious drive to hide their past even when talking to a Turkish friend (13).⁶

With the lack of sufficient Turkish-Armenian literature, I therefore had to rely mostly on recent Turkish literature—those few which 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 in Turkey.

Indeed, with the recent political developments in the world and interest in the Turkish-Armenian relationship, the wall of silence is breached. Significantly, the events of 1915 and the plight of the Armenian survivors in Turkey—whether Christians, converted Muslims, or those pretending Islam—are taken up by recent Turkish literati and fictionalized. Artistic expressions echo the continuing trauma in the life of these “rejects of the sword,” as Turks call Armenians referring to their undeserved escape from death. The stories which Turkish writers, such as Kemal Yalçın, Elif Shafak, Orhan Pamuk, Mehmet Uzun, and others unearth and the daring memoirs of Turkish citizens with an Armenian in their ancestry like Fethiye Çetin, Filiz Özdem, Ahmet Önal, and others shed light on the obscured references to these same stories and events in Turkish-Armenian literature. The experience of Istanbul Armenians and their perception of the past have also begun to burst into the open, principally through a new but cautious trend in the literature produced by Turkish-Armenian literati. Their venture to write in Turkish or to translate the Armenian original into Turkish the stories they have cautiously told about the Armenian past is particularly notable.

A close reading of this newly emerged Turkish and Turkish-Armenian literature reveals an enigmatic past for the Turks as well as a full picture of Armenian survival and the everlasting impact of a tormenting memory of not only that of the lost ones but also of forced conversion, of nurturing the “enemy” in the bosom, of suffering dehumanization, and of torture involving sex organs on women and men. In a chapter titled “**A Secret Rather Buried**”⁷ I speak of the persistence of these harrowing memories and the role they play in the shaping of the victim’s (male or female) outlook, character, personality, and identity. I try to fathom the inner world of Armenian survivors, how they live with their sense of Armenianness, how they perceive their identity. Did they try to assimilate in the Kurdish or Turkish society and took their secrets to the grave? Or they confided it to their offspring. I tried to delve into the world of young Armenian women, kidnapped, bought for a few coins, or “rescued” by a Turk, a Kurd or an Arab and taken as a wife or a concubine. How did they feel, bearing the children of their parents’ murderer? Why didn’t they escape, although many of them did and many more were caught and brought back? I tried to see the world of little boys and girls harassed, abused, raped, and sexually

violated. How were they able to live with that horrible experience tormenting their soul, constantly instilling the feeling of shame and humiliation in their psyche as long as they lived?

Just as generations of Diasporan Armenians have struggled to find a meaningful and livable identity and an understanding of the collective trauma of the past—the Diasporan Armenian literature is a reflection of that unending quest—it is time for Armenians in Turkey, and other ethnic and religious minorities as well, to overcome the sociopolitical and religious impositions and challenge the hegemony of the prescribed Turkish national identity, to bring back, as Orhan Pamuk aspired to see, the multiethnic, multireligion, and multicultural society, what used to be the richness of the country's kaleidoscope. Would today's Turkish sociopolitical atmosphere allow that to happen? Hrant Dink was assassinated for his campaign against this hegemony. He dared to say, "I am from Turkey, but I am not a Turk; I am Armenian." This statement shook the foundation of the concept of Turkishness. He had to pay for it.

Outside pressures may influence the metamorphosis of Turkish state of mind, but the change should come from within the Turkish society. Within such an atmosphere, will the modern day Turkish literature and literary criticism and analysis be able to bring to light what was not said? Will it unravel the knot of an unsettled account between the personal experience of the Turkish writer with the collective experience that was not only Armenian but also Turkish? I hope that it will. I hope that there will be an increasing amount of sources, narratives and literary analyses, available to a future scholar interested in this subject. In the meantime, I hope my scholarship to serve as a beginning, a genuine attempt to loosen the knot of a forbidden past.

Excerpt from "A Secret Rather Buried"

A military policeman accompanying a caravan of Armenian deportees from Aleppo to Mosul relates how he had proposed to a pretty girl to marry him and free herself from torture and death. The girl responded to him: "If it is your prophet who ordered you to treat us so inhumanely, I

cannot be the wife of a man who worships such a prophet. And if he did not order you to do this and still you are doing it, then I cannot be the wife of such a godless unbeliever, even if I were to die..”⁸

In Agop Hacıyan’s novel, *A Summer Without Dawn* (2000), Vartan Balian’s beautiful wife, Maro, decided to go with Riza Bey, a high ranking officer and later the mayor of Aintab, who promised to send her to Constantinople to join her relatives.

Her mistake was that she knew all along about the not so innocent intentions of her savior, but she went with him anyway, only for the sake of her son Tomas. In this novel, we witness the psychological hardship Maro endured during her four-year forced conjugal life with her “savior.” Meanwhile, the novel’s protagonist, Vartan Balian, is portrayed in his unspeakable ordeal, his arrest and imprisonment, his escape from a Turkish prison, his torturous four-year trek to eventual freedom, and his miraculous reunion with his family.

Riza Bey was kind enough to save Maro and her son from certain death on the deportation road, but instead of sending them to Constantinople, he took her to his mansion as his fourth wife. “Riza Bey forced me to love him and at moments I thought perhaps I did. I am indebted to him. I owe him Tomas’s life and mine too but that isn’t it!. I always felt like a prisoner. Then....” (Hacıyan, p. 519). Vartan had become suspicious of her grieving, her aloofness, and her abstinence in their marital relationship. He saw Riza Bey standing between them. Did she love Riza Bey and would she rather spend her life with him? Was that the secret she kept in her heart? She owed it to her husband, who did the impossible, searching all

over Anatolia to finally find her, to be frank and truthful and make her painful confession to him. .“If only you knew how I suffer! If only you knew how it hurts.” (p. 520). And she revealed her secret: she had a child by her Turkish abductor. Her compunction over leaving a child behind was killing the poor, frail woman. Vartan was mistaken. .“Her wound was the loss of Nourhan and she did not see how it would ever heal.” (p. 505). Would she be able to forget him in her new life with her husband and son? Would she ever confess to her husband that during that “captivity,” she had really grown to love the Turk? It comes across clearly in the novel that after a while her life with Riza Bey ceased to be that of a captive and her abductor. And what about the child she left behind? Would her half-Turkish son, Nourhan, grow up knowing that his mother was Armenian? Would he search for his hyphenated identity?

Armenians who somehow survived the Genocide and continued living in Turkey had to overcome a second traumatic phase in their life subsequent to their unspeakable experience during the massacres and deportations. The process of adjusting to a new life was accompanied by psychological impositions such as those, for example, experienced by young women who were forced to marry the perpetrator and bear his children, a strange coupling of victim and victimizer. Sultan remembers her aunt’s words uttered in tears: “In front of my eyes the Kurd killed my husband and forced me to marry him. I married my husband’s murderer to save my soul. I can never forgive that man, the father of my two sons.” She cried and cried; then she consoled herself by

hoping that .“God will punish him.”⁹

Source: Peroomian, Rubina (2008). In *A Secret Rather Buried*, Chapter 4, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915 The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenia Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature*, pp. 86-88. Yerevan, Armenia: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute.



Rubina Peroomian, born in Tabriz, Iran, holds a BS in Civil Engineering from Tehran University, MA and PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures from UCLA. Her dissertation (1989) which was later published as a book, titled *Literary Responses to Catastrophe, A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (Atlanta Georgia: Scholars Press, 1993), marks her debut in the field of genocide studies. Her contributions to the field include:

Papers on literature and genocide presented in international forums, such as the conferences of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA); the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association; UCLA; the Scholars Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches; the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS); the Association internationale des etudes armeniennes (AIEA); the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, and various universities.

Research articles in scholarly journals such as the Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies, International Network on Holocaust and Genocide, Pakin, Armenian literary journal, Journal of Genocide Research, and Genocide Studies and Prevention.

Chapters in scholarly collections such as The Armenian Genocide; Remembrance and Denial, The Case of the Armenian Genocide; Remembering for the Future - 2000; The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide; Anatomy of Genocide, State-Sponsored Mass-Killings in the Twentieth Century; Looking Backward, Moving Forward, Confronting the Armenian Genocide; Genocide Perspectives II, Essays on Holocaust and Genocide.

Her major publications in the field of Armenian Genocide studies include Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish

Experience (1993); And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915 (2008, 2012); The Armenian Genocide in Literature, Perceptions of Those who Lived through the Years of Calamity (2012).

In the area of genocide education, she has conducted several workshops for U.S. public school teachers of history and social science, as well as Armenian teachers in Armenian schools in the U.S. and Armenia on how to teach the Armenian Genocide. The textbooks she has authored on the history of the Armenian Question (series of three for grades 10, 11, 12 in Diaspora Armenian high schools and one for grades 9-10 for schools in Armenia) contain chapters discussing different aspects of the Armenian Genocide offered with modern tools and methodology.

As a pioneering work in the field of genocide education, she has initiated and compiled a package of over 300 pages of age-proper material, worksheets, lesson plans and teaching strategies to teach the Armenian Genocide to Armenian students K-12 grades and has conducted workshops to introduce the material. The package is posted in the Republic of Armenia Ministry of Education website.

She has received Lifetime Achievement Award by the Armenian Educational Foundation, the Mesrob Mashtots Medal with an encyclical from His Holiness Aram I Catholicos of Cilicia, the Gold Medal of honor from the Ministry of Education, Republic of Armenia, the Clara Barton Gold Medal from the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute.

¹ My first publication in this field, *The Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience*, was actually an expanded version of my dissertation submitted to fulfill partially the requirements for a doctoral degree at UCLA in June of 1989. It was published in 1993 under the auspices of the UCLA Von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA, by the Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia (248 pages). My third and most recent book in the field of genocide studies is *The Armenian Genocide in Literature, Perceptions of those who Lived Through the Years of Calamity* (Yerevan Armenia: The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2012), 484 pages. The travail continues.

² The book was published in 2008 in Yerevan, Armenia, under the auspices of the Armenian Genocide Museum–Institute. The second edition, with a foreword by Richard G. Hovannisian, was released summer of 2012.

³ See, Rubina Perroomian, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915, The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature*, p. 205, (the quotations hereafter are marked with page numbers in parenthesis referring to this publication).

⁴ All quotations from Turkish-Armenian Literature are my translations.

⁵ This was especially true after the military coup of March 12, 1971 and the one on September 12, 1980, when a widespread hunt for socialists (communists) took place. The military would break into the houses of Turkish and Armenian intellectuals and arrest them if books by Nazim Hikmet, Karl Marx, and others were found.

⁶ My reference is to the Armenian translation of this book: *Hogis kezmov ke khayta*, Archbishop Karekin Bekjian, Primate of Armenians in Germany, tr. (Yerevan: Zangak 97 Press, 2003).

⁷ The chapter is in attachment.

⁸ Der Yeghiayan's, *My Patriarchal Memoirs* (2002).

⁹ Yalçın (2003), *Hogis kezmov ke khayta*, p. 358.