

An army of books

In her latest work, Rubina Peroomian offers a landmark study of Turkish-Armenian identity



by Armine Iknadossian

The woman on the cover of Rubina Peroomian's new book is tattooed on her forehead, on the left corner of her lip, and on her chin. She represents an Islamicized Armenian, branded like a prize cow. Many women, including Muslims, were tattooed to identify what tribe they belonged to, and this woman's pretty but doleful expression tells just one story of the many Armenians who gave up their identity in order to survive in Turkey during and after the Genocide.

Peroomian's latest study, titled *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915*, draws on post-Genocide Armenian literature to chronicle the survival of Turkish-Armenian identity in the decades following the catastrophe. The book also explores contemporary Turkish literature to shed light on the new phenomenon of Turkish writers and intellectuals revisiting their country's past and trying to uncover the truth about the Armenian Genocide.

Peroomian says she wrote the book in English because she sought to reach an audience that might be ignorant about Armenian history, the Genocide, and the subsequent loss of identity of many Armenians who were forced to assimilate.

Published by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915* has received much praise in Armenia. In May, Peroomian presented her book at the institute and gave a dozen or so television interviews during the time she was in the country. "The fiction, the novels, the poetry about those events are what get into you and help you get deep into the heart of [the Catastrophe], to understand it, and this book is doing that," she says.

Armenians at heart

Peroomian educates me about the categories of Armenians living in Turkey after the Genocide. First, there are those who converted to Islam to avoid deportation and hid their true identity. Then there are those who transmit their memories so their children have an awareness of their roots. This group, called "heathen Armenians," converted to Islam merely to avoid persecution, but secretly adheres to Christianity. Thirdly, there are the orphans who were brought up by Muslims but secretly knew they were Armenian. Next, there are Armenian women who were made to marry Muslims in order to

prove their conversion to Islam. Finally, those who chose to maintain their Armenian-Christian identity eventually moved to Istanbul in order to live among other Armenians. Currently there are about 50,000-60,000 Armenians living in Istanbul. "To understand these people, their ethnic identity, why they chose to maintain their identity while being persecuted, this is what I try to answer in my book," Peroomian says.

Her first book, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience*, is about first-generation responses to genocide. Her latest work is about second- and third-generation responses through literature, by Armenian and Turkish writers alike.

"They [the Turkish intellectuals] are not happy about the official line, the homogeneity of Turkish society," Peroomian explains. "So they go into those dark days, 1915. These people were not allowed to learn their history." In the 1970s and 1980s, Peroomian explains, when a number of Turkish diplomats were assassinated by Armenian groups seeking justice for the Genocide, the Turkish public took a renewed, albeit negative, interest in the Armenians.

"Armenians were seen as traitors, people to stay away from, bad people," Peroomian says of that period. "And then came the discovery period, when [Turks] encountered Armenian friends, families, they heard their stories [about the Genocide]. At first, they didn't believe what they were told, and then they learned to find out for themselves." This is when Turkish writers attempted to unearth the truth through novels – such as Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*, about two Armenian families and the struggle between forgetting and remembrance.

Peroomian also focuses on the writer Kemal Yalcin, who was inspired by his Armenian instructor in Germany to explore Armenian culture and why it and the Western Armenians were all but exterminated by the Ottoman Turks. Yalcin took a trip back to Turkey, under intense scrutiny, and interviewed people, even first-generation Armenians, who discussed their past, admitting that they *felt Armenian*. Through these interviews, Peroomian explains how the concept of Armenianness has evolved differently for Turkish-Armenians and the rest of the Diaspora. "We speak about our language, Christianity, traditions, Armenia as our homeland, Armenian history as our common history and the Genocide as a very important element in our identity," she explains. "These elements have changed for Turkish-Armenians. Many of them say, 'I am Armenian, my mother tongue is Kurdish or Turkish, my mother religion is Islam, but I am Armenian.' This is the challenge. With our own concept of what Armenian is, do we accept these people as Armenian? We have to accept these people, these people have been persecuted."

Another Turkish writer Peroomian studies in her book is Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, who was put on trial in Turkey for admitting that the Armenians were massacred. Like Pamuk,



Dr. Peroomian presenting her book in Yerevan on May 29.

Fethiye Chetin is an outspoken Turkish writer (mentioned in Peroomian's book), who wrote a memoir of her Armenian grandmother. Chetin, the attorney of the late Hrant Dink, would get threatening phone calls from fellow Turks for what they viewed as her denigration of Turkishness. But she would also receive sympathetic calls from people who would admit that they have Armenians in their ancestry as well, and they would come and tell her their stories. "This one old man said to her, 'Tonight is the only night I can get a good night's sleep because [I can tell] this story that has been imprisoned in my heart,'" Peroomian says.

She is excited about the next writer, Kurdish novelist Mehmet Uzun, who, in his memoir, *The Color of Pomegranates*, relates a story about a man who would sit by the Euphrates drinking raki, singing and crying. Uzun would not understand what this was about until years later, during his exile years in Sweden. That's when he heard about the Parajanov movie with the same title as his memoir and discovered what a pomegranate meant to Armenians. He learned the man was singing Sayat Nova.

Among the Armenian writers living in Turkey, Peroomian mentions Haygazun Galustian of Istanbul. In a poem titled "Khaghaghutun" (Peace), Galustian lists all the family members he has lost during the Genocide but never mentions the words "murder" or "massacre." Also mentioned in Peroomian's book are the memoirs of Hagop Menzuri, who talks about the massacre and deportation of his family, although he doesn't use the words "deported" or "exiled," instead describing his family's plight as "driven out of their house." Another discovery for Peroomian was Arpiar Der-Markarian's daughter, who, in an essay on her father, relates that every time there were festivities, he would start singing sad songs and cry after drinking.

Evolving responses to genocide

To delineate the various approaches through which different generations perceive and deal with the Genocide, Peroomian expounds on the particularities of the three post-catastrophe generations thus far.

The first generation in the diaspora narrates the events, and through this

narration "[members of that generation] seek catharsis, to free their souls of this catastrophic trauma they were trying to comprehend in order to survive."

The second generation, which was one step removed from the experience of genocide, had mixed reactions. "Some are sick and tired of their parents," Peroomian says. "They don't want to hear it anymore and the literature is scant. Few wrote about their past and the experience of their parents."

The third generation "is free, very well-versed in the language and culture of the diaspora, and has mastered the poetics of genocide. With a detached position, [members of this generation] try to discover the past of their grandparents, and they are comfortable with their dual identity. The only thing that aggravates this generation is the denial, which does not allow closure."

Although Peroomian's passion is writing, her career has always been civil engineering. A graduate of Tehran University, she worked as a civil engineer until moving to Los Angeles in 1978 with her husband and two sons. "My dream was always Armenian literature," she says. In 1985, Peroomian achieved doctoral candidacy and chose genocide literature as the topic of her dissertation. "I guess it is in my genes," she says. "I wanted to analyze the feelings and responses of poets and writers to genocide, so I studied the Armenian and Jewish responses."

Peroomian has also published in scholarly journals articles about the perceptions of second- and third-generation Armenians in the diaspora. "There was always a shortage, a lack of information on Turkish-Armenian literature," she says. "Then I discovered Kemal Yalcin."

Her third book, which is about a year away from completion, will round off the trilogy, focusing this time on Soviet-Armenian perceptions of the Genocide. This daunting task, which entails extensive research and interviews, is a labor of love for Peroomian, and her enthusiasm is palpable. "This is the way I'm fighting the denial, I'm fighting for our cause," she says. "When my first book was published, I considered it as the first soldier fighting. Every book that I publish is a soldier in that army."

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