

The Armenian Genocide

History, Politics, Ethics

Edited by

Richard G. Hovannisian

Professor of Armenian and Near Eastern History
University of California, Los Angeles

Foreword

Governor George Deukmejian

173	Robert Metcher
152	Robert Metcher
129	Robert Metcher
103	Robert Metcher
80	Robert Metcher
55	Robert Metcher

St. Martin's Press

New York

10 Armenian Literary Responses to Genocide: The Artistic Struggle to Comprehend and Survive

Rubina Perroomian

The event came to be known as the Armenian Genocide and the literary responses to this calamity as the Armenian Genocide literature. The category encompasses a wide spectrum of responses by the Armenian literati and, through their work, the reactions of victims to an unprecedented traumatic collective experience. The topics of the genocide literature consist of not only literary works with the 'Catastrophe' or *Aghed* as their theme but also those in which the event is a hidden motive, a source of an unknown pain, and the cause of a gloom that engulfs the author's creative powers.

As the event drops back in time, the class of literary works in which the genocide is not directly narrated becomes richer and more complex. The catastrophe becomes a covert psychological affliction symptomized by the dilemma of adjusting to the new environment, by the fear of assimilation and loss of national identity, by nostalgia and homesickness, by escape from painful reality into the world of dreams and memories of the past, and by scathing criticism of cultural, religious, and traditional values transmitted as sacred fetishes from generation to generation. In these literary representations of inner tumult, the catastrophe, though not addressed directly as a literary theme, is tacitly acknowledged as the end of an era and a collective life, a terminus that has to be comprehended in order to make a new beginning possible.

The genocide literature makes no attempt to document the event; the event is a point of departure, a source of psychological and ethical impact that reverberates in artistic creation. With

the imaginative realization of the catastrophe in literature, the author-survivor, and generations of survivors, strive to comprehend what is beyond comprehension, to come to terms with what is irreconcilable, so that life can continue.

The Armenian Genocide was not only a historical event stamped on the memory of mankind but a challenge to the ethical and moral standards of the Armenian people, to the traditional concepts and ideas that shape their world-perception and dictate their collective behavior. Finally, it was an enduring wound affecting the state of mind and creative imagination of the generations of survivors scattered in the diaspora. A thematic study of the Armenian post-genocide literature underscores the complex network of meanings of the literary responses.

The history of the Armenian people is filled with persecution, forced deportation, and massacre. And Armenian literature is replete with the responses of survivor-writers to those catastrophes. By the same token, traditional responses rooted in the ethical, religious, and cultural traits and peculiarities of the Armenian people have been transmitted in their paradigmatical form from generation to generation. Accordingly, it is an *a priori* assumption that no creative imagination is innocent and free of the influences of memories of past catastrophes and the responses to them. The core concepts of explanations and interpretations are transmitted into the conscience of the victim reacting to the catastrophe. Some prove adequate or acquire new connotations to provide explanation – the paradigm of responses continues intact. Others, impotent and inadequate *vis-à-vis* the catastrophe, are fiercely rejected – the paradigm is disrupted.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE ARMENIAN LITERARY RESPONSES TO GENOCIDE

Whether the actual atrocities are narrated or only their impact is portrayed in a literary work, a *leitmotiv* embodying the author's perception of the atrocities dominates the piece. Responses to genocide emerge through the varied treatments of these leitmotifs. In some literary works the Armenian Genocide unfolds as an internal tragedy. The dominating theme is the self-criticism of the victim. Others focus on the victimizer. The author attempts

