

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ARMENIAN IDENTITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: VULNERABILITY, RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION



HRANT DINK VAKFI
HRANT DINK FOUNDATION
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Critical Approaches to Armenian Identity in the 21st Century:
Vulnerability, Resilience and Transformation

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ARMENIAN-AMERICAN OR AMERICAN WITH ARMENIAN ROOTS? THE POST-GENOCIDE CONDITIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES IN AMERICA AND THE DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY

RUBINA PEROOMIAN*

We are a nation of survivors of Genocide whether or not our parents or grandparents went through massacres and deportation. We share the memory. Our common history, an important element of our national identity, has the Genocide at its core. We carry the burden of the traumatic experience endured by half of the Armenian nation who perished in the deserts of Syria or somehow survived the Catastrophe and vainly tried to return to normal life.

The post-1915 immigrant/refugees in America faced the tough and demanding struggle of adjusting to a totally new and unfamiliar situation. They formed ghettos and locked themselves in. For them, keeping to each other and finding solace in each other's company was a principal tool of survival and perpetuation. There, in the safety and security of their closed society, they could practice their culture, preserve their identity, and avoid confrontation with the suspicion and prejudice of the mainstream society.

THE DYNAMICS OF POST-GENOCIDE ARMENIAN ETHNIC/NATIONAL IDENTITY

To trace the dynamics of post-Genocide Armenian ethnic/national identity within the temporal and spatial conditions and circumstances in America, I draw upon the artistic expressions of the generation born to these survivor/refugees, that is, the literary responses of the second generation to their unique situation. These artistic expressions provide the place where the making and remaking of the relationship of the self and the social can be recognized. Or, as Bernard De Voto

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suggests, “[Literature is] affected by all social energies and is frequently the best and sometimes the only place where their actual working can be examined.”¹

At one end of the spectrum of these diverse responses, we see the reverberation of a psychology of victimized exile, planted by the survivor parent. Then comes the transformation, conditioned by the continuing tension between the polarities of inside and outside; the quest for identity; the struggle to reconcile the transmitted memories of parents’ traumatic past with the schemata of their cognitive-world models; confrontation with the exigencies of the acquired sense of belonging and citizenship which, as Dexter Fisher suggests, imposes constantly and forges the ethnic duality — American-Armenian or an American with Armenian roots. At the other end of the spectrum is acquiescence, or total assimilation.

OUT OF A STRICT ARMENIAN HOME

In the close atmosphere of the ghettoized Armenian communities, parents raised their children with the inflexible customs, outlooks, traditions, and set of values of the Old World, even with some repression. They instilled in them a large dosage of Armenianness with admonishments like “You are Armenian and don’t you forget,” or “My family perished in the desert and you have to compensate for their loss by staying close to your roots.” That was their way to fight assimilation.

They tended to name their children after family members they lost to Turkish atrocities. The name thus became a constant reminder of what was lost. It became a fragmented memory, a niche within identificatory modalities.

In their consuming efforts to get ahead in the mainstream society and get away from the Armenian ghettos, the second generation gradually drifted away from the rigid concept of Armenianness, a negation of the first generation’s response to assimilation. The duality of the strictly Armenian home and the vast societal opportunities outside prompted questions in the children of survivors: who were they? Where did they belong? The questions persisted and became a challenge in their perception of their identity when they were adults

¹ Bernard Cohen, *Sociological Changes in American Jewish Life as Reflected in Selected Jewish Literature* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck, Fairleigh: Dickinson University Press, 1972), p. 29.

and immersed in the culture and lifestyle of their birthplaces, a source of constant tension which in many cases resulted in fits of resentment and rebellion at home and alienation and marginality outside. For Helene Pilibosian “Home was very much Armenian, and school was very much American.”² Lorne Shirinian points to the difference of the two generations’ self-perception and the way they coped with it. His parents, and the Genocide survivor/refugee/immigrant generation in general, “lived their Armenian lives at home and with Armenian friends” in Toronto, Canada. They adapted to life away from their homeland with a consciousness of being the carriers of the memories of the Old World, memories that had to be kept alive and passed on to the next generation. On the other hand, being “the product of two heritages,” Shirinian feels “drifted into some nether zone that appeared to exist between two cultures, not belonging to one or the other.”³ Virginia Haroutunian’s strict mother did not let her go out with friends or date. She considered these things “improper and immoral.” “Only street girls sit in a car alone with a boy,” she prompted.⁴ Virginia was left with “a growing sense of isolation and depression.” She felt an intense desire to become a true American, to cast out everything foreign — beginning with Armenian values to the everyday rituals.

THE PROBLEM OF DUAL IDENTITY

The question of identity, finding a balance between the American present and the imposing Armenian past has been a central preoccupation of second generation from the outset. Under the spell of the past so alive in her family, Diana Der-Hovanessian finds herself constantly in search of reconciliation between the “Two Voices” constantly speaking to her, speaking to each other, each trying to find preference over the other. Sometimes, she tries to ignore the duality of her identity, the two voices in conflict, and think of herself as a woman brought up in New England with all the attributes of an educated American lady. And this is despite her grandparents’ stories of blood and tears always present, always a part of her subconscious even sometimes making her feel like an orphan girl in an Armenian village. Is she an Armenian, an American, or a hyphenated American — an American-Armenian?

² Helene Pilibosian, *My Literary Profile: A Memoir* (Watertown, MA: Ohan Press, 2010), p. 37.

³ Lorne Shirinian, *Writing Memory: The Search for Home in Armenian Diaspora Literature as Cultural Practice* (Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Blue Heron Press, 2000), p. i.

⁴ Virginia Haroutunian, *Orphan in the Sands* (Michigan: Jou-jou Productions, 1995), p. 74.

No, neither one. Responding to D. M. Thomas' question, she writes,

No. Most of the time, even as you,

I forget labels.

Unless you cut me.

Then I look at the blood.

It speaks in Armenian.⁵

The clash between the two voices is sometimes unbearable, a source of pain and guilt, a pressure of the past that would not let her live her present. Who is she? Whereto is her sense of belonging? She is profoundly conscious of this element in her identity and at the same time the influence of the present environment, no matter how much of the past is present:

*I found the bloodied arm on the ground
before me. "You didn't need it" said the voice.*

*I saw a sea of dismembered limbs tossed,
strewn on the horizon and beyond.*

"You didn't really need these bones."

They covered land that stretched, pressed past.

"You didn't need these provinces, did you?"

What would you do with all these stones?"

A mountain of broken bodies rose.

"You didn't need Mt. Ararat, did you?"

I tried to speak. No tongue. My breath froze.

"You didn't need that language, did you?"

I woke, washed, and looked in the glass.

Only another American there, dressed in fine clothes.⁶

Peter Najarian's *Voyages* (1971) is the site of the painful conflict and attempted reconciliation between the past and the present. There is little reference to the Genocide, but "the Armenian Genocide as a collective symbol permeates the entire novel."⁷ Najarian's *Daughters of Memory* (1986) is again a search for identity "The plot is simple,"

⁵ Diana Der-Hovanessian, "Two Voices," in *About Time* (New York: Ashod Press, 1987), pp. 50-51.

⁶ Der-Hovanessian, "In My Dream," in *RAFT* 3 (1989), p. 8.

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of Peter Najarian's *Voyages* and *Daughters of Memory*, see Lorne Shirinian, *Writing Memory, The Search for Home in Armenian Diaspora Literature as Cultural Practice* (Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Blue Heron Press, 2000), pp. 123-160. This citation from p. 141.

as the narrator/author maintains: “an old hairy-nosed and horny artist is reviewing his life’s work and he confronts the spirit of history, of our species who kill each other and of his grandmother who was slaughtered in the desert.”⁸

David Kherdian had a strictly Armenian childhood. But he felt discrimination coming from *odars*, the Americans, looking down on them, calling them dirty Armenians. He resented this feeling of inferiority, tried hard to distance himself from everything Armenian. His “resistance to Armenian food,” his “preference for everything American,” his arguments with his father were all symptoms of his alienated soul, caught between a past he despised and ignored and a world of the present around him he so enthusiastically embraced. It is only after his father’s death that Kherdian experienced a posthumous bonding, a feeling of guilt and regret.

*Why have I waited until your death
to know the earth you were turning
was Armenia, the color of the fence
your homage to Adana, and your other
complaints over my own complaints
were addressed to your homesickness
brought on by my English.*

Hakob Karapents has an array of characters caught in the struggle to adjust to their dual identity, like the one between the two personalities in Hrand’s identity the American Grant and the Armenian Hrand: “Two individualities … They wrestle with each other knock each other down, and try to crush each other. And often, when the American is the obvious winner, the Armenian shows up God knows from where and tries to prevail.

Michael J. Arlen’s case is quite atypical, as he grew up in a non-Armenian or pretended non-Armenian family. However, he writes “I became conscious of being accompanied by a kind of a shadow of ‘being Armenian’,” that being Armenian, something inferior and even dangerous; otherwise his father would not have moved out of it, beyond it.⁹ That shadow finally caught up with him, and the past his father had tried to efface in his life extended its influence upon the son. He travelled to Armenia to face his mixed feelings. On the last day of

⁸ Peter Najarian, *Daughters of Memory* (Berkeley, CA: City Miner Books, 1986), p. 3.

⁹ Michael J. Arlen, *Passage to Ararat* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), p. 7.

his visit, he stood at the brink of the eternal flame, shedding tears of self-realization, feeling the hand of his dead father in his. Michael J. Arlen had found his Armenian identity.

Herant Katchadourian, set out to reveal for himself and for the whole world who he was, a son of survivors of a great calamity in pursuit of truth about himself with a promise to himself to be truthful all along.¹⁰ This immigrant in America was a foreigner everywhere, not alienated or oppressed but different?¹¹ In his memoirs, he likens his predicament to those “Americans whose ethnic identity is less diluted and crucial part of their historical experience by way of discrimination and persecution,”¹² The difference is that in 1915 being Armenian “would amount to death sentence.” The call of his roots took him to Turkey to see the killing fields, to see the change thereafter. A visit or a pilgrimage?

A PILGRIMAGE TO TURKEY

It may sound implausible, but visits to Turkey (I use the term Turkey and not Western Armenia because in many cases the pilgrims’ ancestral home is outside historic Armenian lands) have generated a materialization or concretization of the inherited but imaginary sense of belonging, a face to face encounter with the Armenian component of their identity. Carel Bertram was one of the first scholar/researchers to characterize this Armenian group and individual visits to Turkey, in search for maternal or paternal towns, villages, even homes, as pilgrimage. The trip usually begins with apprehension, even reluctance, but the outcome one way or another is always tangible and effective. It generates a concretization of the inherited but imaginary sense of belonging, a face to face encounter with the Armenian component of their identity.

Herand Markarian traveled to Western Armenia in 1997, to his father’s birthplace Shoushants (Shoushanus, today’s Kevenly), a village near Van, to follow the path of his father and thousands of others who left their homes and belongings on the spur of the moment and marched toward the unknown which was death for the majority. All along this journey the group met with the ignorance or pretended ignorance of the local Kurds and Turks about Armenians having lived on these lands, about previous owners of the houses, churches, and

¹⁰ Herant Katchadourian, *The Way it Turned out: A Memoir* (Singapore: Pan Stanford Publishing Pte. Ltd., 2012), p. xi.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹² Ibid., p. 53.

institutions. Markarian's was a close encounter with the denial of the Armenian Genocide every step of the way.¹³

Arpiné Konyalian Grenier took such a trip in 2009 to her father's Konya. "I will be experiencing the culture of my ancestry, as well as the culture I had run away from." She wanted to experience them freely: Even the Istanbul hotel room accessories reminded her of her grandmother's embroideries. She was gradually exposed to see the likeness and the differences. She was ready "to learn to love that," even to obliterate the category of nationalities and make humanity her nation. She felt the need to connect for the sake of "reflection," and "harmony," and was baffled over the question "is what one does with the past the future?" At the end of this encounter, still searching for an answer, she comes up with an added question, "What do I do with remains?"¹⁴ Her sojourn in Konya is pleasant. She navigates within the Turkish language like an inherited but temporarily forgotten treasure. She returns transformed. Another cultural connectivity, another component added to her cultural identity resulting in a conclusion, "I am culturally un-locatable. . . . I developed, moving from unknowingly being Armenian Turkishly to knowingly becoming American, Armenianly."

Alicia Ghiragossian seeks to find herself and her identity in the land of her forefathers. In a poem, titled "Fatherland," she writes,

*I would like to touch
that land
to feel my past
in its fragrance
and reclaim my essence.*

Or, in "To be an Armenian," she confessed to her splintered spatiotemporal sense of belonging:

*We exist here and now
but just in halves
as we also belong there
where old voices are
still haunting us.¹⁵*

¹³ See, Herand Markarian, *K'aradzayn patarak'/Liturgy – Sound of Stones* (New York: Hamazkayin New York Chapter, 1998).

¹⁴ Arpine Konyalian Grenier, "A Place in the Sun, in Turkey, Malgré Sangre," *Ottoliths, A Magazine of Many E-Things* 15 (2009) (<http://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2009/08/arpine-konyalian-grenier-place-in-sun.html>, accessed: 16 April 2017).

¹⁵ Alicia Ghiragossian, "To Be an Armenian," in *Stormy Seas We Brave, Creative Expressions by Uprooted People*, compiled by Helene Moussa (Geneva: WCC Publication, 1998), p. 17.

What is evident though is that this pilgrimages do not always bring closure. The sight of ruined Armenian towns and villages and vestiges of Armenian culture, churches deliberately destroyed or turned into mosques, stables, or museums at best, the ignorance/denial of the locals about the Armenian presence there cannot attenuate the pain of the memories and work toward reconciliation as some believe it would.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The Armenian language occupies a primary place in the conceptualization of identificatory modalities by many, especially writers who themselves write in Armenian. Vrej-Armen suggests learning the Armenian language as a condition to be able to live as an Armenian. He regards the Armenian language as an indispensable component of Armenianness. Language is key to the perpetuation of the nation for Nubar Akishian. His preoccupation about identity struggle, assimilation, and the future of Armenians in America reverberate throughout his works and especially the novel *Gagh'akannerē* (The refugees).¹⁶

Malgré tout, the evanescence of the Armenian language in the rapid decline of its use is a fact in America. Diana Der-Hovanessian, like many others in her generation, has lost that component. The Armenian language has become compartmentalized for her, limited to the subjects pertaining home, sweet memories of childhood, gradually becoming her “lost treasure,” “a gift/we are letting drift away.”¹⁷ Arpine Konyalian Grenier asserts, “My mother tongue lost me,” using a formulation that puts the blame on the Armenian language for having lost her.

The problem of losing the language and the difficulty of producing literature in the Armenian language was recognized in America where the pace of assimilation was faster. Minas Tölöyan pointed out the dilemma in a *Hairenik* editorial in 1970,¹⁸ also announcing the termination of the periodical. There was not enough interest around it, not enough financial support, not enough readers in Armenian, in other words, not a need for it. Tölöyan suggested that any human community, like that of the Armenians, which depends on atavism

¹⁶ Nubar Akishian, *Gagh'akannerē* (The refugees, written in 1982), pp. 185-388, in *Mardē hoghin vra*.

¹⁷ Der-Hovanessian, “Translating,” in *RAFT 7* (1993), pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ See Minas Tölöyan, *Tagnapē vor Sp'urk'inn ē* (The crisis that is of the diaspora), *Hairenik Quarterly 3/9*, (1970), p. 3.

for perseverance, definitely need the ancestral land. Two decades later, Vahé Oshagan calls the struggle for the preservation of the Armenian identity in the Western World an uphill battle, a battle against assimilation: “This time the threat of extinction looms very close, more menacing than before. There is fear. . . . that the culture is being eroded, and that national identity is being blurred. Yet, the endless struggle for survival goes on . . .”¹⁹

An important contribution to the understanding of the role of language in ethnic identity is Joshua Fishman’s *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*²⁰ where he regards language to be one of the most important symbols of ethnicity and maintains that all “distinguishing features of ethnicity are signified with it and within it.”²¹

Steven Jacobs, a second generation Holocaust survivor, like many second generation Armenian thinkers, considers language to be central to the affirmation and transmission of the collective identity of a group or a nation. He considers language to be the vehicle to “provide a multi-generational foundation for their continuing survival.”²²

Looking at the other side of the coin, we ask ourselves, is speaking Armenian such an important component to ensure the stability of the Armenian identity? I do not believe in such heavy accentuation. The concept of postmodern ethnicity defines the place of mother tongue differently in a setting where the subject is exposed to multiple languages. Livia Käthe Wittmann’s study, “Language and Postmodern Ethnic Identities,” reveals a parallel situation with the Armenian case. Her research is in the domain of individuals whose mother tongue is lost while acquiring other language[s] that have become their main language of communication, like the Jews in Eastern Europe with no knowledge of Hebrew or Yiddish.²³ She turns to Joshua Fishman for an answer, his definition of the concept of postmodern ethnicity as a “stance of simultaneously transcending ethnicity as a complete, self-contained system, but retaining it as a selectively preferred,

¹⁹ Vahé Oshagan, “Background to Modern Armenian Diaspora Poetry,” *RAFT* 1 (1987), p. 43.

²⁰ Joshua Fishman’s *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Clevedon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, Ltd., 1989).

²¹ This statement is cited in Livia Käthe Wittmann, “Language and Postmodern Ethnic Identities,” *Ethnic Studies Review*, NAES 23/1, 2, 3 (2000), p. 36.

²² Steven Leonard Jacobs, “Language death and revival after cultural destruction: reflections on a little discussed aspect of genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 7/3 (2005), pp. 423-30, quotation from pp. 423-424.

²³ See Wittmann, pp. 33-61.

evolving, participatory system.”²⁴ And she concludes, “This leads to a kind of self-correction from within and without, which extreme nationalism and racism do not permit.”²⁵

The battle is not lost, though. The Armenian language and culture are a part of the Armenian national identity. The relentless efforts of the crusaders of the preservation of the Armenian language stem from their firm conviction that the vitalization of the oral and written use of Armenian language is essential to the sustainability of Armenian culture and identity in the diaspora.

And now a new phenomenon: The factor of independent Armenia today.

THE FACTOR OF ARMENIA

Soviet Armenia was practically cut off from the Diaspora especially at the time when the second generation was growing up in America. Visitation was rare and exclusive. Only pro-Soviet intellectuals were being invited, even decorated for their literary productions or activities. The tension between Diaspora and Soviet Armenia relaxed in the 1980s and mutual visits became more frequent. However, the outcome was not always rewarding. The Soviet Armenian and American Armenian mindsets clashed against each other. There was no understanding of each other’s predicaments, views, and ideals.

In quest of self-identity, Diana Der-Hovanessian travelled to Soviet Armenia, but she found herself like a stranger: “I am the stranger/in my father’s land,/ . . . /a foreigner in the place,/ where millennium ago/my kind was bred.”²⁶ Hakob Karapents expressed the same feeling, “I had lost the harmony with the blood and the soil . . . I was trying to regain the rhythm worn out on foreign streets.”²⁷ It was excruciating for the second generation survivors born in the Western World, those who lived their lives yearning for the homeland, to come to the realization that what they had spiritually embraced is not theirs, has never been theirs.

The reality of the existence and accessibility of Armenia today, albeit only in the eastern corner of Armenian historic homeland, and

²⁴ Ibid., p.39.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁶ Der-Hovanessian, *About Time*, from the poem “Diaspora II,” p. 70.

²⁷ Hakob Karapents, *Haykakan shurjpar* (Armenian rondo, 11-30) in *Ankatar* (Incomplete), a collection of short stories (New York: Vosketar Publishing, 1987), p. 12. The story is written in 1986 in Connecticut.

therefore, not including the land to which a great majority of American Armenians attached some sort of sense of belonging, has introduced a significant shift in the understanding of identity and sense of belonging. The second generation basically lost the opportunity of imbibing from that genuine source of strength and inspiration. But for the younger generation, Armenia is that source to inspire national pride, a pleasant and not annoying sense of belonging. It is a positive factor in the shaping and reshaping of the Armenian ethnocultural identity.

To CONCLUDE

Ethnic identity is not a fixed, unchangeable concept. One has to look at it in its dynamics. Or, as Louis Henry Gate puts it, one should look at the “identity politics” changing through time. The identity politics in Armenian communities in America in the first stages of its formation after the Armenian Genocide was in its purest, and it entailed the perpetuation of that identity in its rigidity, in the form of persistence and accentuation of differences. This concept, however, is acclimatized or acculturated and finally compromised by the reality outside the ghettos.

In the process of this acculturation, the influence of the dominant culture plays an essential role. Armenian-American literature produced in English is, of course, more apt to undergo all these influences. The medium, the language of expression automatically and unconsciously imposes its own structure, which translates into a particular outlook that Armenians call *լեզվամանրածողութիւն* ['ležvam-dadzoghutyun']. It is also clear, that ethnic tradition, another important component of ethnic identity, is never fixed or closed.

My argument is that the Armenian nationalism is not rigid to the point of racism. Change is welcome, even desirable since, as Fishman maintains, ethnicity is permeable. Important is to retain, as Fishman puts it, “the recognition of putative biological origins.” We can call them Armenian heritage or historical roots.