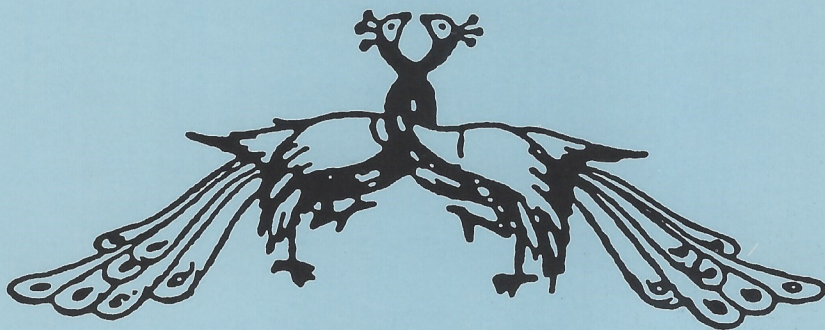


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WHEN DEATH IS A BLESSING AND LIFE A PROLONGED AGONY: ARMENIAN AND JEWISH WOMEN—VICTIMS OF GENOCIDE¹

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Can we learn from the past, colossal violations of human rights and genocidal acts, in order not to repeat them? Understanding and awareness about these acts is crucial, and the contribution of artistic literature in response to these acts, among other ways to reach that preparedness, is indispensable. With the purpose to uncover that inherent powerful energy and undeniable potency of artistic literature in transmitting that understanding, I have taken up the comparative study of the literary responses of the victims of the two most exorbitant genocidal acts of the twentieth century, the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust.

Perhaps, being a woman scholar, I could not help becoming more attentive to women's lot and the uniqueness of their suffering. I believe that gender analysis—not in its exclusivity but as a component of the genocidal process—contributes to a richer and more finely nuanced understanding of genocide, since in many instances, the victims' ordeal was shaped by their gender. My premise is that women were more vulnerable and less equipped physically and emotionally to endure the calamity. In many instances, they had to face tragic choices—Lawrence Langer calls it “choiceless choices”—along the way, decisions to live or die, with neither offering true salvation, yet both demanding heavy compromises or extraordinary courage.²

The ordeal of Armenian women was prolonged, as they had to endure the hardship of the concentration camps or the deportation routes. The lot of those women who were “rescued” (most of the time not with an altruistic motivation, but for egotistic reasons) or abducted and forcibly converted to Islam was not any better. Their experience as concubines in Moslem households and their lifelong compunction for the compromise they had made could not have been less painful than death itself. Unfortunately, their life stories are not recorded, and their image as a victim of genocide remains obscure. In contrast with Armenian women, the Jewish women were not given the chance to live, be it a disgraceful and humiliating life. If they were chosen and spared from the gas chambers, that was only

¹ This paper was presented at the 35th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association—Congress 2000, May 28-31, University of Alberta.

² In both Armenian and Jewish cases, men in the leadership were arrested and annihilated, and those younger and able-bodied were mostly rounded-up, either segregated in labor camps or murdered outright (obviously, in the case of men, too, their gender determined the method of extermination in the genocidal process). As a result of this strategic approach of the perpetrator, women were left unprotected to become an easy target.

a temporary arrangement, while being used as objects of the perpetrators' sexual pleasure—after sterilizing them and shaving their head—or as secretaries, translators, note-takers, and book keepers in service of German police, as in the case of the Political Bureau of Auschwitz I. They were better treated, better fed as long as their services were needed, and then they were cruelly discarded to meet their destiny like their fellow Jews.³

My objective in this paper is to pursue the image of Armenian and Jewish female victims as reflected in literature, with a prior knowledge of the dichotomy between the literary image coming through the authors' portrayal—which can be realistic, idealized, or prescribed—as opposed to the factual personage, the unembellished concept of woman and her behavior out there in the killing fields.⁴

The prototype

Nothing is more eloquent than the images of *Mayr Hayastan* (Mother Armenia) in Movsēs Khorenats'i's "Lamentation" and *Bat-tzion* (Fair Zion) in the Book of Lamentation (Lam. 1:10) as two archetypes of female victims. Embedded in the collective memory of the two peoples, they symbolize the defiled and victimized women, as personifications of the homeland ravaged and ruined under the yoke of foreign rulers. These images kindle the imagination of the artist responding to his contemporary national catastrophe. They acquire flesh and blood, become real, and heroically withstand torture and suffering. They set the example of martyrdom for a cause. Shushanik Vardeni's tale of martyrdom for Christianity (fifth century) is a fine example. Hripsimē and the forty virgins (late third century), martyred for their love of Christ, have inspired Komitas Catholicos Aghts'ets'i (a sixth to seventh century poet) to sing his beautiful ode: "For you, blessed martyrs, / The host of angels incorporeal / From heaven to earth descended, and men / celebrated with the Christ God's band of soldiers."⁵ The same bravery and willingness to become martyrs of God is witnessed in the Jewish literature. Miriam, modeled after the woman in the legend of the Mother and Her Seven Sons in 2 Maccabees 7, is a venerated and commemorated role model. Jewish mothers mourn their sons about to be murdered, but they simultaneously rejoice, because through their martyrdom God's name will be sanctified. Further along history Solomon Bar Simon writes about the Crusader massacres of 1096: "There women girded themselves with strength and slaughtered their sons and daughters, along with themselves. . . . Young women and the brides and the bridegrooms gazed through the windows and cried out loudly: 'Behold and see, our God, what we do for the

³ Lore Shelley describes the experience of these women in *Secretaries of Death: Accounts by Former Prisoners who Worked in the Gestapo of Auschwitz* (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1986).

⁴ With this brief study, I am scratching the surface of a rich and extraordinary domain. This is only a start in the hope of generating interest in further research to find characteristic responses of universal female victims to extreme moments in history.

⁵ Levon Mkrtich'yan, comp. and comm., *Hay dasakan knarergut'yun* (Armenian Classic Lyric Poems) (Erevan: "Sovetakan Grogh," 1986), pp. 150-154.

sanctification of your holy Name. . .'"⁶ The chronicler of the massacres clearly glorifies the willingness and eagerness of Jewish women and their bravery to embrace martyrdom for the glorification of the Name, martyrdom being the prevailing concept in response to national tragedy.

The impact of Renaissance thought

The emancipation movement of the nineteenth century among the Armenian and the Jewish intellectuals gradually made its way into the populace bringing about some degree of modernization, enlightenment, and secularization of thought and outlook. In the Jewish reality, especially in East European communities, the *Haskalah* (enlightenment) writers endeavored to institutionalize secular literature and disseminate ideas of enlightenment or *maskilim* thought. They advocated a balanced and peaceful coexistence between Jews and Christians. They even went so far as to promote integration with the Christian, or gentile, societies to the extent of compromising the Jewish tradition. Most of the *maskilim* (the enlightened and western-oriented intellectuals) were drawn toward international socialism as a reaction to the tsarist repression; thus, their responses to the Jewish pogroms lacked national aspirations. The fight was against anti-Semitism, but it more importantly entailed self-criticism and the laying bare of the corruption of Jewish traditional infrastructures; in other words, the trend was the internalization of the problem. It was not until the World War I pogroms that progressive Jewish intellectuals began to nurture the idea of Jewish national sovereignty and the vision of returning to the land of Zion.

The trend of modernization as an offshoot of the enlightenment movement among both Jews and Armenians had also resulted in assimilation and loss of ethnic identity, particularly with the younger generations. Many are examples of young female characters, who responded to the government's (Russian or East European) discrimination and prejudice against ethnic minorities (Jews and Armenians) by becoming one with the mainstream, by adopting wholeheartedly its culture and life style. Such women are brutally criticized and labeled as disgraces to the family and the community. The Armenian and the Jewish literature of the Enlightenment era promoted the true heroine in her chastity and her loyalty to her language, religion, and ethnic heritage.

My search to find a predominant female lyric figure to respond to the Jewish plight in the second half of the nineteenth century was not successful; however, what caught my attention was the mid-nineteenth century character of a grandmother (during the Cantonist era) cursing and complaining that not even the *Tokheha* listed among its curses the possibility of Jews being kidnapped by other, pious Jews.⁷ Cursing and complaining as well as lamentation on the loss seemed

⁶ David G. Roskies, ed., *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988), pp. 80-81.

⁷ For this citation and a description of Cantonism, the forced conscription of Jewish youth into the Tsarist army, and the brutalities of Jewish religious leaders to facilitate the draft, see David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 57-62.

to be the reaction of female victims of the 1881 and the later pogroms as well. In a parody entitled "Burned Out," Sholem Y. Abramovitch attests to this phenomenon. In this "lachrymose historiography," as Salo Baron terms it, he criticizes the traditional responses to catastrophe and the recourse to traditional explanations of sin and punishment. "While the men of Beggarsburg were talking to me, the womenfolk added their own spice, seasoning their husbands' talk with lamentations and groans, with oaths and curses, as their way."⁸ Lamentation is also the lyric heroine's response in Judah Leib Gordon's poem "My Sister Ruhamah." Or it may well be the author's idea of a fitting response by a female victim. The memory of Fair Zion, the personification of Israel reverberates throughout:

Why do you sob, my sister Ruhamah?
 Why are you downcast, why is your spirit agitated?
 Because plunderers have fallen upon your honor and profaned it?
 If the fist has triumphed, the hand of the enemy grown mighty,
 Can the blame be yours, my sister Ruhamah?⁹

This piece also reveals another example of Jewish recourse to traditional explanations as an attempt to cope with the present dilemma.

The Armenian responses to catastrophe, on the other hand, took a political turn in Armenian Renaissance literature. National emancipation as a goal and armed struggle as a means to achieve that goal were pursued. Patriotism, aspiration for freedom, and armed resistance were favorite themes of the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century. This literature inspired valiant acts of self-defense and retaliation, and in turn, was inspired by the real occurrences of such acts. In this literature the image of the Armenian woman emerged in her classic role of devoted mother and supporting wife, but her responses to the victimization of her son or husband took a different path.

Smbat, a young Armenian political activist, is murdered in the Turkish prison, and his mother laments his death: "My dearest Smbat, my beloved son." Her words of sorrow, however, do not echo the traditional elegy of a mourning mother. Her lamentations, as the author, Mihran Damadian, aims to portray, embody a rebellious spirit against the Turk and against the God of Armenians:

Hungering and thirsting for Armenian blood
 [Turks] threw thee into prison, O my dear,
 And chained thee cruelly; thy pleading prayers
 The God of Armenians did not hear. . .

Oh let it reach the highest heaven, the voice
 Of my lament, a mother's sighing breath!

⁸ *The Literature of Destruction*, pp. 136-144. The quotation is from p. 141.

⁹ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 115.

And let Armenia's valiant-hearted men
Take vengeance for my son's untimely death!¹⁰

There are two characteristics in this poem that are significantly different from traditional responses: first, the enemy is identified. The mournful mother points to the enemy and calls for revenge against him. This is contrary to the trend in the past, where the identity of the enemy was not important and the enemy was regarded as a tool in the hands of God to execute His wrath against a sinful nation. The second diversion from tradition lies in the fact that the mother does not expect God to avenge her son's murder, but she entrusts it to the "valiant men of Armenia."

In another poem, Mkrtich' Pēshikt'ashlian, a contemporary of Damadian, depicts the death of a wounded freedom fighter during the Zeyt'un uprising. The dying youth regards his death as a sacrifice to the altar of the freedom of the Armenian people, and calls his mother not to weep but to be proud. Here, female response is prescribed, as the author deems desirable and fitting:

Come, tremble not, draw near.
Gaze on thy son's blood streaming wounds
Without a sigh or tear.
Let Turkish mothers rend their hair
Do thou glad news to Zeyt'un bear!¹¹

The ancient Armenian martyrological literature is replete with the accounts of mourning mothers who find solace in the glorious vision of their dead sons soaring to heaven on the wings of angels. Their strong Christian faith led them to believe that their sons would join the ranks of the heavenly hosts for having accepted martyrdom for the sake of Christianity. Here the context is secular. The catharsis offered to the mournful mother is vengeance, the sight of the enemy scattered dead in the battlefield. Instead of the soothing vision of immortality for her son, she is shown to expect the emancipation of Zeyt'un as a reward.

Another significant turn in Armenian responses occurs in the genre of lullabies. These ordinarily soothing and sentimental songs have taken a new twist in Ēap'aēl Patkanian's poetry: "Awake my darling! Open your bright eyes, dark and deep." The mother visualizes her grown up son as brave as Vartan, a hero to liberate Armenia. She has made a golden belt from which hangs a sword; a steed stands in wait outside the door:

¹⁰ Mihran Damadian, *The Lament of Martyred Smbat's Mother*, in *Armenian Poems*, trans. Alice Stone Blackwell, reprint of the 1917 edition (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1978), pp. 277-278.

¹¹ The Zeyt'un uprising in 1860 was the first outburst of collective protest against the Ottoman government's oppressions and discriminatory taxes extracted from minorities. For the English rendering of this poem, see Aram Tolegian, comp. and trans., *Armenian Poetry Old and New* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 117

The heroes of Mount Ararat, their ghosts shall strengthen thee
 With power and might, that thou as brave as Vartan's self mayst be.

.....
 Awake, and take thy sword! . . .
 Thy nation is in misery; in fetters, lo! They weep;
 Thy brethren are in slavery, my loved one; wilt thou sleep?

No, soon my son will waken, will mount his champing steed,
 Will wipe away Armenia's tears, and stanch the hearts that bleed;¹²

The image of the Armenian woman emerging from the Armenian Renaissance literature is rarely a source of corporeal pleasures; rather, she comes forth as an understanding and devoted mother and wife supporting the nation's struggle for freedom and justice. The image, although to some extent compatible with the reality, is still rather a prescribed one, a result of the Renaissance writers' and ideologists' idealization of female responses to persecution.

Challenging the elevated image

There are historical extremities, however, in which human behavior, moral order, and traditional concepts shaping outlooks and responses to trauma are put to test. The massacres of Ottoman Armenians in 1894-1896 were such a catastrophe. The image of the Armenian woman, more realistic than its precedents, did not come out of it absolutely indomitable and clean. More often than not it emerged shaken and tainted. The traditional responses no longer held true. The outbursts of protest and nationalistic pride propagated by the nineteenth century Renaissance literati fell short of explaining the unprecedented and unexpected disaster. However, the Renaissance ideology of national emancipation by means of armed struggle still lingered in Armenian responses to these massacres. The new twist was an unleashed expression of anger and protest.

In the lyric poem *Hayhoyank'* (Curse), written in response to the massacres of 1894-1896, Daniël Varuzhan denies the failure of Renaissance ideologies and nurtures the idea that the catastrophe was the outcome of a failing Divine Promise. Curiously, the religious atmosphere in the poem, a setting more suitable for traditional responses, is self-negating; it has been put to subversive use. The lyric hero, an unnamed old woman, stands above the crowd of wretched survivors of a mass slaughter, and raising her clenching fists toward the sky, curses God for what befell the Armenian nation. She challenges the covenant between man and God; she questions God's judgment, protests His indifference toward the persecution of a people who faithfully worshipped Him and sacrificed their lives for Him. But the old woman is alone in her outburst. The frightened youngsters in the crowd

¹² Raphael Patkanian, *Lullaby*, in *Armenian Poems*, trans. Alice Stone Blackwell, pp. 75-76.

begin to cry; women pray. The old woman as a lone heroine of this strange uprising walks to the edge of the abyss and hurls herself down. With her death, the angry voice of protest is stifled in embryo.

Varuzhan's *Jardē* (The Carnage), another poem in response to the massacres of 1894-1896, stays closer to ancient archetypes and reminds of Judah Leib Gordon's recourse to Fair Zion. However, there is a significant new twist. The mourning Mother Armenia weeps not over the ruined land but because her friends, meaning the European Powers, deserted her and abandoned their promise to intervene with the Sultan. Moreover, Mother Armenia laments not over the loss of her sons but over their servitude—still unarmed, still unprepared to defend themselves. Varuzhan expresses his disenchantment and frustration in a poetic metaphor: "Instead of blood on their boots, they carry the yellow mud of the wheat fields."¹³ In this long poem, female survivors are gathered to mourn over the dead, but their lamentation is an outcry, a protest against Islam, against Turkish mothers, and the Sultan himself.

Surēn Part'ewian, whose entire literary legacy permeates the horrors of genocide, devoted a collection of short stories entitled *Hayuhin* (The Armenian Woman) to Armenian women, victims of the massacres of 1894-1896. The dedication note reads,

To you,
Armenian woman,
I dedicate these stories
Inspired by your tragic fate.¹⁴

Part'ewian depicts the traumatic experience of the Armenian woman, who possesses, as he puts it, "an unbelievable interfusing of patience, endurance, docility, and superhuman tolerance for pain and suffering."

Part'ewian's stories are populated with women who react to the victimization differently but in many ways symptomatic to the collapse of moral order. Saiko kills her newborn because she had conceived it during a two-month forced conjugal relationship with her Kurdish abductor. The innocent child becomes the substitute effigy upon which her suppressed hatred and frustration of an unfulfilled revenge against the real criminal is released. To be sure, Saiko emerges tainted as a symbol of violated morality. Her outrageous response not only fails to help restore moral order but, more emphatically, demonstrates its fatal collapse and the irreversible impact of the catastrophe on human psyche.

Siranush becomes melancholic, and under the pressure of her unforgettable traumatic experience, she gradually loses her sanity. She lives with the haunting

¹³ Daniël Varuzhan, *Jardē* (The Carnage), in *Banasteghtsakan Erker* (Poetic Works) (Antelias, Lebanon: Tparan Kilikioy Kat'oghikosut'ean, 1986), pp. 141-149.

¹⁴ See Surēn Part'ewian, *Hayuhin* (The Armenian Woman) (Constantinople: Hratarakut'iwn P. Palents' Gratan, 1911).

memory of the day when her parents were slaughtered. From her hiding place she had heard their helpless screams and the roaring laughter of the Turkish mob enjoying the killing and plunder. That day she had escaped physical death, yet she paid dearly for her survival. The undying enormous pain drove her mad and finally caused her death.

Zapel, too, goes insane. She had witnessed the killing of her younger brother who had tried to obstruct her abduction. The murderers took her to a bordello where she was forced to dance and serve the Turkish clients. One night she spots her older brother sitting in the crowd as a guest of a Turkish officer. She cries out for help, hoping that her brother would rescue her from that dungeon. But the brother, disguised as a Turk, denies knowing her at all and walks away indifferently.

Sarah sells her body to a Kurd for a piece of bread to feed her starving younger brother and sister, sole survivors of the large family. After eating her share of the bread, she regains her strength and comes to realize what she has done, and the sacrifice she has made. In a moment of rage, she kills the Kurd to avenge her shame and disgrace, but again, the killing does nothing but demonstrate the total collapse of moral order.

The collapse of the traditional morality was also the case with the East European Jewish communities facing increased persecutions escalating into pogroms during World War I. And once again, the response of the literati, to a large extent, amounted to introspective criticism, laying bare the collapse of morality and depicting the lowest human traits in the struggle to survive. The difference is that the writer criticizes the phenomenon without sympathy for the victim. Leyb Olitzky ridicules a rabbi who preaches an exaggerated practice of religious piety and laments the collapse of Jewish morality, while his own daughters have become whores serving Russian and German officers. David Roskies discusses the war-time literature:

There is scarcely a Jewish prose account, fictional or autobiographical, that does not dwell on the pornography of the war. At best, wives and especially daughters were sent to the local commandant to finagle a permit for flour, salt, lumber, or what have you, invoking nothing more than their feminine charms.¹⁵

To blame in these cases are, of course, not the men, who profited from the favors brought home but the women who actually performed acts of prostitution in return for these favors. They are both culprits and the victims of these transgressions. Their responses to their predicament, however, are not as outrageous as that of Saiko, Zapel, or Sarah. There is no testimony of their regret and sense of indignity. However, they will most likely come out of their forced predicament

¹⁵ For wartime testimonies, see Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, pp. 116-117. The quotation is from p. 116.

demoralized and tainted, incapable of building a new, healthy and normal life as survivors.

Other than these abnormal situations, Jewish women of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were "exemplary" wives, kind, devoted, docile, observing piety in religion, and all together recognizing their limits and not mixing with their husbands' affairs. Thus, they were also unable to express their thoughts or interpretations of collective traumatic experiences. I.M. Weissenberg describes in "A Shtetl" the anti-Semitic mob violence and mass killings that occurred in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution in Tsarist Russia as a result of the tsar's reaction to punish the revolutionaries for their liberalistic demands. Weissenberg demonstrates the fragility of the Jewish solidarity vis-à-vis any anti-Semitic action. Here the heroes of the Jewish Bundists in that unnamed shtetl (the Yiddish word for small town) are men, of course. So are the victims of the brutal execution of the Jewish members of the organization by their own fellow members. Women are in their role of mourning the dead. "'What is there left to live for? The organization has killed!' Ephraim screamed. . . 'The organization . . . the organization. . . ' sobbed the women, choking on their tears, 'a father of eight children.'"¹⁶

In Sholem Aleichem's *Tales of 1001 Nights* on the Jewish pogroms of 1915, Yankel, a Jewish fellow in Krushnik, Poland, talks about his imprisonment. A brief reference to his wife's wailing about his lot reveals his view on women: "As you'd expect, a wife. What does a woman know anyway? . . ."¹⁷

Women characters and testimonies of women survivors are abundant in *Aweraknerun mēj* (Amid the Ruins), Zapel Esayan's accounts of the Armenian massacres in Cilicia in 1909. Portrayed through the eyes of a woman writer, with the least degree of fictionalization, the Armenian woman appears at times as an embodiment of cowardice and self-centered drives, ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of mere survival. At other times, she appears like an ancient goddess of courage and endurance. A young woman from Aken asks, "We survived, but we will soon die. That is all right. Tell me! Will our sufferings serve a purpose? Is there hope of deliverance for our nation?" Esayan praises the woman's courage and her determination to endure physical pain. She suffers, but only her doleful eyes and occasional shivering betray the consuming pain in her mutilated body.¹⁸ This woman's response to the Armenian plight lacks the traditional catharsis. The only solace is the hope for a better future for Armenians.

A woman of Dort Yol whose son was killed defending the city, tearfully vows, "If the Turks attack us again, the sons that were born to us, the sons that we nursed and raised will be on the ramparts again to defend the city, to fight and die on the ramparts."¹⁹

¹⁶ *The Literature of Destruction*, p. 179.

¹⁷ Sholem Aleichem, "Tales of 1001 Nights," in *The Literature of Destruction*, p. 227.

¹⁸ Zapel Esayan, *Aweraknerun mēj* (Amid the Ruins) (Beirut: Tparan Etvan, 1957), p. 57.

¹⁹ *Aweraknerun mēj*, p. 20.

Esayan also speaks of women who can sell out their neighbors to save their own neck. They snatch the relief food and clothing and will not share them with those in need. Esayan's treatment of female victims is realistic. Unlike Part'ewian, she does not fetishize Armenian women and justify their reactions to trauma. But she clearly sides with the brave ones, those who "have descended from a very noble vein of the race," those who took arms to defend themselves.²⁰

The pre-Holocaust Jewish writers witnessed the moral decline of the Jewish communities and their inability to defend themselves. In the words of Alan Mintz:

The entire enterprise of European Jewry had to be viewed as no longer viable and as already under the aspect of destruction. During World War I and the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the violence against Jews, on a much vaster scale than in preceding decades, strengthened the power of this analysis, and, practically caused the removal of almost all Hebrew writers and the institutions of Hebrew literary productions to Palestine. In Hebrew literature between the wars, the works of Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yitshak Lamdan, Hayim Hazaz, and S. Y. Agnon . . . established an apocalyptic mode replete with visions of destruction.²¹

And the genocide

There are many examples within the Jewish and Armenian literature where the enemy is addressed as an entity and targeted as the murderer, the perpetrator of the calamity. It is also true, however, that in many cases there is a deliberate or subconscious abstinence of reference to the source of the evil. Nelly Sachs, a Jewish poetess-survivor, offers the most explicit example of victim's behavior revealing this phenomenon. She is one of the most noted poets who symbolize the Jewish suffering. As Edward Alexander puts it, she "assimilate[s] the Holocaust into the poetic imagination and into Jewish history." But her critics maintain that "the themes and symbols of her poems so thoroughly integrate the Holocaust into the long history of the Jewish people that 'they diminish the uniqueness of the horror and . . . turn the murderers into impersonal and abstract forces.'" Alexander offers an interesting explanation: "If in her work, the German murderers are disembodied and without personal identity, it is because that is, in metaphysical (but not legal) justice, their due for turning millions of Jewish victims into smoke."²² Although the perpetrator is also absent in Armenian women's responses, however, Edward Alexander's reasoning does not hold true. The source of their responses is deep rooted in the tradition, which dictated them to turn to God and ask "for which sins of ours are we being punished." Or, perhaps, they

²⁰ Ibid., p. 203.

²¹ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 9.

²² Edward Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), p. 43.

were so deeply engulfed in their misery, that their only preoccupation was finding the means to survive without even thinking about an explanation.²³

Nelly Sachs' poetry is replete with visions of rebirth, lines such as "The sinking occurs for the sake of rising," or "How to listen . . . [so that] on the day of destruction . . . [they will be able to hear] how in death life begins." As a survivor herself, she juxtaposes her doleful experience with the hope of resurrection, the rebirth of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland. Such optimism is utterly absent in Armenian responses. In the state of total devastation of Armenian life in the Ottoman Empire and the sweeping away of the entire Armenian population of historic Armenia, there could not exist a flicker of hope for rebirth on ancient Armenian homeland. The case was different with Zapel Esayan responding to the 1909 massacres of Cilician Armenians. There, total destruction did not occur, and the survivors continued their life in their ravaged homes and ransacked towns and villages. Rebirth was possible. And Esayan foresaw the future:

In a few years the orchards will bear fruit again, the fields will be covered with the golden grain of copious crops, and the children's cries will once again fill the empty houses. . . . The tortured but invincible race will persevere despite all murderous intentions.²⁴

Once again, in another episode, with a similar optimism and oratorical style, she romanticizes the revival of the survivors and proudly attests:

The plans of the enemy once again had proven futile, and in spite of our hopelessly sad impressions, the immortality and ingenuity of the nation had escaped the hatchets, swords, guns, and fire. . . . The enemy was condemned to impotence; and this feeling hovered over the ruins, rose from the ashes of the martyrs, reflected in the ghostly appearance of widows, and glittered in the eyes of the orphans. . . .²⁵

Part'ewian's particular sympathy and reverence toward Armenian women victims continued to reflect in his fictional narratives on the massacres and deportations of 1915.

In *Anmah bots'ē* (The Undying Flame) Siranush is an educated woman, more alert than her husband. She can realistically judge the Turkish-Armenian relationship and see the imminent catastrophe. A woman of action, she decides to join the forces of resistance and fight, but she is entrapped in the cunning intrigues of her

²³ It would be a rewarding experience to undertake the comparison of the themes of Nelly Sachs' poetry and Zapel Esayan's response to the massacres of Cilicia. They were both eyewitnesses to the calamity. They both had the chance to write about their experience looking back on the carnage away in time and distance.

²⁴ *Aweraknerun mēj*, pp. 165-166.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

Turkish admirer. The Turk, a close friend of the family, arranges the arrest of Siranush's husband to abduct her. Under his threats, she finally surrenders herself to him to save the life of her young and only son. But soon after she arranges her son's escape, she commits suicide to put an end to her defiled existence.²⁶

In *Dzaynē hnch'ets'* (The Sound Echoed) princess Sonia Asaturof, a Russified Armenian woman, lives a lavish life in Tbilisi, but is suddenly sensitized to the Armenian plight and the massacre and deportation of her fellow Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. She joins the Armenian volunteers fighting the Turks alongside the Russian army and works as a nurse in the battlefield. She is eventually killed while gathering information on the enemy's movements. Zaruhi, another female protagonist of the same story, also joins the volunteers and fights the Turks disguised as a man. Her secret is revealed when she is wounded. Their characterization symbolizes Part'ewian's overly romantic perception of women's role in the Armenian armed struggle. Part'ewian's heroines each have a particular way to resist against the enemy's genocidal attempt. And resistance does not necessarily connote taking arms and fighting the assailant. Siranush's reaction to her predicament is a type of resistance. Resistance is the strong determination to survive against all odds to tell the world about Turkish inhumanity and unparalleled atrocities. Resistance is the valorous deeds of the Jewish women working in the Political section of Auschwitz, endangering their lives to help each other to cheat on deathbooks and omit names, to smuggle documents out, and later, writing their memoirs for posterity. Resistance is Rachel Auerbach's extraordinary effort to remember and eternalize in prayers the names of every Jew she knew was killed, to jot down every detail she witnessed hiding outside the Warsaw ghetto:

The beggars were rounded up, and there was no further singing in the ghetto. I heard singing only once more after the deportations began. A monotonous melody from the steppes sung by a thirteen-year-old beggar girl. Over a period of two weeks she used to creep out of her hiding place in the evening, when the day's roundups were over. Each day looking thinner and paler and with an increasingly brighter aureole of grief about her head, she took her place at her usual spot behind a house on Leszno Street and began the warbling by whose means she earned her bit of bread.

...

Enough, enough . . . I have to stop writing.

No. No. I can't stop. I remember another girl of fourteen. My own brother's orphan daughter in Lemberg whom I carried about in my arms, as if she were my own child. . . .²⁷

²⁶ Part'ewian's *Anmah bots'ē* (The Undying Flame, 1917) and *Dzaynē hnch'ets'* (The Sound Echoed, 1916) were published jointly in a single volume (Alexandria: Tpagrut'iwn Aram Step'anean, 1917).

²⁷ Rachel Auerbach, "Yizkor, 1943," in *The Literature of Destruction*, pp. 459-469. Quotation from p. 463.

Images not so bright

Religious, cultural, and traditional determinants give in and moral order loses its meaning when, after months of dehumanizing, incapacitating suffering, the wretched deportees come face to face with a choice between death and survival. They must either starve to death or eat their own children's corpses, dead by starvation. Aram Antonian reports instances of cannibalism in the desert of Der-El-Zor. In *Mets ochirě* (The Great Crime) a famine stricken girl is lying on the desert sand with her helpless mother on her side. The girl smells meat cooking nearby. "Mother, go ask some for me. I cannot go on anymore." The mother returns empty-handed. "They didn't give you a piece?" the girl asks. "When I die, mother, you eat my flesh alone; share it with no one."²⁸ The Turkish atrocities did not end with murder and plunder; in some instances they squeezed out of their victims the last traces of humanity, reducing them to the status of lowly animals, putting the burden of guilt on poor survivors to go on living a torturous life of lingering shame and remorse.

In an episode entitled *Mayrerě* (The Mothers) in *Ayn sew ōrerun* (In Those Dark Days), another collection of stories by Antonian, Lusik lives agonizing moments when rescuers are trying to pull her son out of the raging waters of Euphrates. Is he still alive, or she has lost her last son, too? The scene of her gradual loss of senses and reason surpasses any description of motherly love. She throws herself on her son's dead body, caresses him and utters words of endearment. Then she starts screaming and cursing. She showers the body with warm kisses as though to find a meager spark of life in it. Suddenly, in a violent fit of madness, she lets out a piercing, deafening scream. She tears open her shirt, and her bony chest opens wide with two unsightly, dried-up and skinny breasts hanging. She sinks her teeth deep into her son's neck and the dark blood gushes out painting the woman's face with the deadly color. That is the last sign of life coming from her paralyzed brain. She collapsed unconscious, her teeth still clenched on the boy's neck, the blood oozing from the wound drop by drop, running into the desert sand, and tracing sinister configurations as though to record the story of this horrifying episode.²⁹ This is the story of the crucifixion of a nation. It is human tragedy in the extreme, a woman victim of genocide seized in an extreme fit of hopeless love, hatred, and revenge encapsulated into a prolonged agony and death.

In the same collection of episodes, Antonian depicts a caravan of women arriving at a concentration camp near Meskeneh, after a long arduous trek on foot, without food and water. The appearance of these moving skeletons, he writes, is painful proof of the transformation of human beings, born with the right to enjoy life, to love and to be loved, into filthy and faceless creatures. Antonian's juxta-

²⁸ Aram Antonian, *Mets ochirě* (The Great Crime) (1921; 2nd ed., Beirut: Ghukas Karapetian Publishing, 1977), pp. 116-117.

²⁹ Aram Antonian, *Ayn sew ōrerun* (In Those Dark Days) (Boston: Hratarakut'iwn "Hayrenik"i, 1919), p. 66.

position of the present with the imagined normal life these women lived before the catastrophe is shuddering. It is hard "to imagine that these breasts have had their graceful period of virginity; to imagine that these breasts round and firm, shining with snow-white brightness, with pink nipples, caressed by desirous hands, have experienced sensuous pleasures."³⁰ What human virtue can one expect from these creatures robbed of all traces of humanity and womanhood? Skin and bone, barefoot, half-naked, their skin encrusted with dirt and filth, they are ready to bear any dehumanizing humiliation only to get to the water in sight in the camp. But the night watchmen have no mercy. These Armenian fellow deportees, appointed by the gendarmes to guard the camp are worse than the gendarmes. They can be the most ruthless executioners only to please their Turkish masters and receive small favors from them. They beat the women, poor creatures, who do not look like women anymore, who have long lost their physical appeal to the hardship of deportation routes. "Luckier" are women, young and pretty of course, whom the night watchmen select to offer to satisfy the sadistic sexual appetites of the Turks in charge of the concentration camp. The inmates are aware of this. But "for them that is a natural precondition for living, a sort of a tax to pay. When their innocent daughters were snatched away to be raped and then passed around among the lower ranking officers, they made no protest. They sometimes even handed over their daughters as ransom to alleviate their own suffering."³¹ But when it comes to the question of whom to blame, Antonian points to the victims. Why should Armenian women lose their pride and dignity and turn into such lowly creatures? Why should men treat their wives and daughters as commodities to trade in return for a little bit of comfort? The response is internalized. The problem lies with the enemy within, just the way the Jewish literati responded to the World War I pogroms.

This type of realistic chronicling continued in the ghettos at the beginning months of German occupation. Peretz Opczynski's narrative of Warsaw ghetto is an account of survival at any price. "House No. 21" is a showdown of female characters in charge of the survival of their families who resort to every cunning, bribing, stealing, blaspheming, turning others in to the police, anything to get food for the family, to avoid the much dreaded bathhouses, they called "slaughter-house," and the fumigation and disinfections of their apartments.³² Opczynski gives a perfect example of internalization of the catastrophe. The German soldiers and Polish policemen are not to blame for the Jewish suffering but the Jews themselves: "The Jews who stand here pushing and shoving in order to enter the baths more quickly, are very much aware of this [the fact that there is no typhus spotted here, and these measures, fumigation, hot baths, and disinfections, are only to hold the ghetto in constant fear] and bear their humiliation patiently: What does it matter how one suffers, from blows or from . . . baths? They save their bitterness

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 80-81, from the story entitled *Jur . . . Jur* (Water . . . Water).

³¹ Ibid., p. 94.

³² Peretz Opczynski, "House No. 21" in *The Literature of Destruction*, pp. 408-424.

and impatience only for each other; they argue and curse and do not spare their fists: ". . . May your brains rot to hell, you trash! . . ." ³³ It is a dehumanizing torture to have to wait in the freezing weather outside the bathhouse naked for hours, and then comes the "barber" with a dull shearing machine to shave their heads. This is the last blow to their dignity. And when they return home stripped of their humanity, they have nothing to sleep on. They have to wait for days to get their bedding back from the disinfections process. The only way to survive in this hell is to "rob, steal, and fill your own belly." The real life of the war is only your own life.

That was then, when the Jews looked at the phenomenon as their internal drama. This kind of response is almost non-existent in later responses to the Holocaust. The Holocaust literature focuses on the external enemy. There is no criticism or chastisement of the victims committing lowly acts to survive the death camps. On the contrary, they are purged of any blame; they are mythified. Ka-Tzetnik's *House of Dolls* sets the example. Young, attractive Jewish women are sterilized and sent to the "House" to entertain German officers. Ka-Tzetnik's principal focus is not on these women's cunning intrigues, internal skirmishes, and immoral behavior for the sake of survival but on their suffering. With profound sympathy, he describes their pain and the degradation and humiliation they go through in that hellish environment. His protagonist is an innocent girl, named Daniella, who struggles to sustain her moral integrity. She dreams about her past, her family. She imagines herself in a life beyond that Hell where moral values prevailed. Her spiritual survival is realized by her living two lives. "Two existences. Severed and sundered. No connection or bridge between them. Which is reality and which is nightmare? . . . Can she be living these two lives simultaneously?" ³⁴ Daniella's attempted escape and death cleanses her of all stains the life of a prostitute had left on her soul. Her character remains in literature as the symbolization of the innocent victims of man's inhumanity to man.

Life was a prolonged agony in the Armenian concentration camp in Meskeneh, and Antonian, an inmate of that same camp, tried to record this agony as close to the incommunicable reality as he could. An old woman is fighting with a man, another deportee like her. They grapple with each other in the mud, shout and curse. The man grabs the old woman's hair and knocks her down rubbing her face in the mud. For a while the skirmish continues. Then the man stands up. But why did the old woman start the ridiculous fight. The man was able to bribe the undertakers to remove the body of his daughter from his tent. The old woman had no money, and the undertakers refused to take her grandson's body away. "Leave your dead outside, like others do," they told her. She begged them to carry the corpse away to make room for her last grandchild burning in fever. He, too, the

³³ Ibid., p. 421.

³⁴ For this quotation and a discussion of *The House of Dolls*, see Alan J. Yuter, *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature: From Genocide to Rebirth* (Port Washington, New York: National University Publications, Associated Faculty Press, 1983), pp. 5-17. The quotation from p. 10.

last survivor of the family, had come down with typhus. The old woman, left with a rotting corpse and a dying child, in a nearly maddened state attacks the man to empty her anger, her grudge, and the agony of the entire nation on another victim of that same tragedy.³⁵ Antonian's fiction is crowded with these characters, faceless, nameless women for whom femininity, moral standards, human dignity, and normal patterns of behavior had long lost their meaning. The only question was survival at any expense. Other inmates kept watching the bizarre fight with cold and indifferent gaze. When death was everywhere and ever-present, when it was a blessing for those still living, mourning over the dead had no place at all.

Charlotte Delbo, herself a survivor of Auschwitz, formulates the feeling in a poetic interjection in *None of Us Will Return*:

O you who know
did you know that one can see one's mother dead
and not cry

O you who know
did you know that in the morning one wants to die
that in the evening one is afraid

O you who know
did you know that one day is more than a year
one minute more than a lifetime. . . .³⁶

In this same collection of stories the “dancing skeleton of a woman freezing to death” is a shocking evidence of the meaninglessness of life and death when the boundary between the two is obliterated. In the same context of a marginal existence between life and death, Delbo describes a dying woman, another faceless moving skeleton, and her fellow inmates turned into aloof spectators. Lawrence Langer explains:

From the window of their barracks, the narrator and her friends see a pile of corpses dumped naked in the nearby snow. Suddenly, one of the living sees the hand of one of the “corpses” move—she is still alive. . . . But atrocity desensitizes compassion, eliminates the once clear border between life and death, makes longing to die more of a virtue at times than the will to live. The narrator looks numbly at the spreading fingers and feels void of response.³⁷

Delbo's reimagined Auschwitz trilogy, *A Useless Knowledge*, *None of Us Will Return*, and *Measure of Our Days*, is a repository of images of women, victims of

³⁵ *Ayn sew örerun*, p. 134., from a story entitled *Keank'en hognut'iwne* [The Weariness of Life].

³⁶ Cited in Lawrence L. Langer, *The Age of Atrocity* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 204. Langer discusses Delbo's work at length in pp. 201-244.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 204-205

the unthinkable atrocity and survivors, who try with no avail to adjust to life after death. For these victims and survivors "living is a merely physical exertion, while dying is the literal defeat of the body."³⁸

Armenians did not have a Nelly Sachs or a Charlotte Delbo to eternalize in art the pathetic struggle, the heroism, the determination and faltering of Armenian women, that have come to us through the unembellished accounts of survivors of Armenian Genocide. The story of each one of them deserves an elaborate work of art. And yet, in spite of the abundance of genocide fiction, the true art of genocide is yet to be born. Will the young generation of today succeed?

The women portrayed in Armenian and Jewish literatures may not have the immaculate holiness of Virgin Mary or the glory of Bat-tzion to deserve the commemorative rituals of their own. Nor do they have the nobility of Shushanik or Miriam to symbolize the glory of martyrdom. These women are not poetic figures, but they are the collective embodiment of all these literary heroines in a realistic life of the modern times and modern civilization, subjected to the most unthinkable human suffering. They are not always the typical heroines who transcend torture and pain with a halo above their head. These ordinary human beings meet their torturous death without the consolation of being rewarded with immortality for their martyrdom, as their predecessors had aspired. They pass on with no expectation of being remembered, commemorated, and glorified. At times, in their prolonged agony, they suffer physical and moral exhaustion and give in. At other times, they fall, like unknown soldiers, holding up the dignity of their gender and the pride of their nation. They are nameless victims of atrocity, the innocent, defenseless creatures deserving a sympathetic pen to create the monument of victimization to be dedicated to all women who suffered the most heinous crime in the history of mankind called genocide.

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³⁸ Ibid., p. 206.