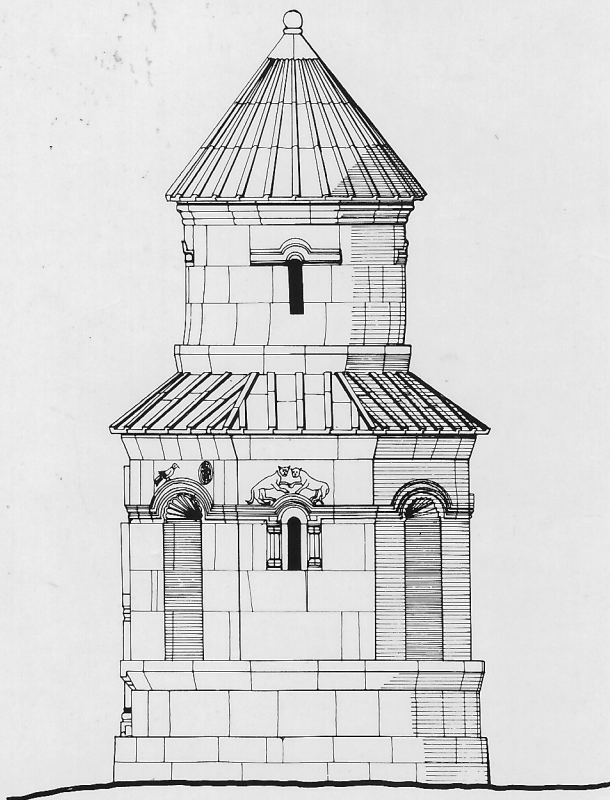


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THE TRANSFORMATION OF ARMENIANNESSE IN THE FORMATION OF ARMENIAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY

Rubina Peroomian

Ethnic literature and the study of ethnic or minority culture in contemporary America is no longer seen as a threat to Anglo-American culture or to the Western tradition. On the contrary, as multiculturalists in America suggest, it is only by exploring the components of the multicultural experience and understanding the complexity of our hyphenated American society that we will be able to visualize a truly vital American culture.

In the context of this theory, I will deal in this article with the problems of Armenian ethnic identity and the current crisis among Armenian-Americans in defining their Armenianness. The altering patterns and tendencies in dealing with this question will be examined in reference with selected works of Armenian-American literature which are illustrative of these changes.

The term "Armenian-American" literature in this paper refers to the literature written in Armenian and composed in America. Such literature is written by successive waves of immigrants, always the first generation in America, whether they have arrived in the 1920s, the 1930s, the 1960s, or even the 1980s. Second and subsequent generation Armenian-Americans may write on Armenian topics or have Armenian themes, but they write almost universally in English.

I have chosen to analyze Armenian-American creative literature in this paper as a guide to the cultural transformation of Armenians in America. Literary art, as a form of cultural representation, is the site where social and cultural transformations is reflected and the remaking of the relationship of the self and the social can be viewed. As described by Bernard De Voto:

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

¹ Bernard Cohen, *Sociocultural Changes in American Jewish Life as Reflected in Selected Jewish Literature* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1972), pp. 28-29.

The Early Period

I have written extensively elsewhere on Armenian-American literature in the 1920s and its consequent development.² Here space permits only a summary and a few examples to sketch the context for later comparisons. In general, Armenian-American writers of the early period felt like victimized exiles. They were almost universally refugees from the Ottoman Turkish genocide of the Armenians which began in the 1890s and reached its apogee from 1915 to 1922. This psychology of the exile was translated into a literature of nostalgia intertwined, of course, with dreadful accounts of the Turkish atrocities which had impelled the writer to flee from the homeland to a new world. This nostalgic temperament prevailed, especially in their early works, in writers like Hamastegh, Aram Haigaz, Vahé Haig, Beniamin Nourigian, and others. It led to the exaltation of Armenian "tradition" as a necessary element in the preservation of identity, of personhood. Love of homeland and adherence to Armenian tradition were touted as the only possible source of strength and inspiration for an Armenian.

Gradually, the American scene and topics began to creep into their writings, albeit almost always in association with relations to the Old World. For example, in Aram Haigaz's "Mijazgayin Entanik" (International Family [1942]), Jake is married to an *ōtar* (foreigner, outsider), a German-American woman who is doing her best to allay her husband's nostalgia for the Old World by cooking him ethnic dishes—bulgur pilaf, *chikufteh*, and shish kabob—once in a while. A trivial effort. Jake, torn by inner conflict, has a strong urge to transmit something of himself, his past, his origin, and what it meant to be an Armenian, to his entirely Americanized daughters. In this he fails. All he is able to pass on to his daughters is a vague memory of a tragic past and the plight of a nation of victims, weeping and lamenting over their formidable losses, begging for recognition by the world community.

Kar Amu, in Hamastegh's "Zohe Kar Amun Er" (The Victim Was Kar Amu [1921]), as so many of the first immigration, had lived in America for twenty years yet knew nothing about his new country. "He was thrown onto these shores by strange tides, . . . but he wasn't the man to

² Rubina Perroomian, "From the Psychology of an Exile to Mobilization Toward Nationhood," Paper presented at the Annual MESA Conference, Washington, D.C., 23-26 November 1991; "Hagop Oshagan: A Phenomenon in the Armenian Diasporan Literature," Paper presented at the Annual MESA Conference, Toronto, Ontario, 15-18 November 1989; and *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experiences* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993).

separate from his native village."³ He dreamed of his village every night. The dreams usually lingered on into the next day and governed his mood and his productivity at work in the factory. His absentmindedness, his daydreaming, eventually led to a lethal accident. On that fateful day at work, he was not focused. His thoughts drifted off to the past:

He was chatting with Sako, a fellow farmer; he was caressing his cow, when a heavy hand rested on his shoulder. 'Hurry up!' That was his boss. Kar Amu pulled himself together and began to work faster. . . . A few minutes later, he let himself go again. This time he was offering a bunch of grapes to a beggar passing by the fence. Another instant, and suddenly . . . *kurt, kurt, ch'rukhh, ch'rukhh*. . . . The machines stopped. The factory was in commotion. Bloody pieces of human body were scattered all around. . . . The victim was Kar Amu.⁴

Akob Aghbar, in Benjamin Nourigian's "Mashats Avel" (Worn Out Broom [1937]), never adapts to the New World and never even tries to. Yet, unwillingly, he is becoming an American,

a property of the U.S., that is, a [piece of] chewing gum in Uncle Sam's mouth, in which all the races, all the refugee sons of the Old World are chopped and mixed . . . to make the flesh and bone of the future American.⁵

Still Akob Aghbar remains, at heart, an Armenian villager who only lives in America. He works diligently in a factory, sweeping the floors and keeping the place spotless, but he is always under a cloud of impending tragedy. That tragedy comes one day when he is told, with no forewarning, that he is fired. His services are no longer needed. He is sent home with his last pay, nine dollars and eleven cents, the price of his life.

These are only a few examples from a vast array of short stories written at the beginning stages of Armenian-language literature in America, in which scenes and incidents from the Old World are closely intertwined with a bleak life in the present in the consciousness of the protagonist.

³ Hamastegh, *Erker A, Giughe ev Andzrev* (Works, [volume] A, The Village and Rain) (Beirut: Hamazkayin Press, 1966), p. 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵ Gegham Sevan, ed., *Sp'iurk'ahay Patmvatske* (The Diasporan Armenian Short Story) (Erevan: Erevan University Press, 1984), p. 299.

Many of the writers of this early period are forgotten, and their works are no longer read. Yet they were witnesses to the gradual decline in America of what was perceived as Armenian identity. These writers embarked on an intense struggle to warn Armenians, any way they could, through newspaper articles, discourses, and fiery speeches, but most importantly through fiction, of the dangers of creeping assimilation. Though these writings are often devoid of artistic value, they occupy a special place not only in the history of diasporan-Armenian literature, but also in the history of the formation and transformation of the Armenian-American identity.

The dominant ideology in this early period and its perception of Armenianness, underwent radical transformation with the community's increasing associations with American society and with subsequent waves of immigrants. As Dexter Fisher suggests in *Minority Language and Literature*, the process of constructing a group identity is dynamic. The confrontation of the former national identity with the exigencies of the acquired sense of belonging in a new land imposes the constant need to confront ethnic duality and to come to terms with the new reality.⁶

Unlike the first Armenian immigrants to America, who came here as refugees from the Turkish massacres, Armenian immigrants since the 1950s have often consciously chosen to come to America in the search for new opportunities and a better life. Motivated by hope, and not despair, one would expect that the newcomers would not manifest the same victim psychology as the earlier immigrants. The newcomers, in reality, faced the challenge of coming to a new understanding of themselves not only in relation to the past but also in relation to the collective psyche of the established Armenian-Americans, an issue which should be strongly reflected in Armenian-American literature. Yet the Armenian-American literature of the second period still mirrors the old concerns: Armenian writers still see their people as victims of injustice, a people driven from their homeland, and a people with scant hope of help from an indifferent world. Thus, the victim psychology persists. The characters depicted in this literature are doomed. They are either condemned to perish because they lack the ability to cope with the new environment, or they are condemned to a life of futility trying to hold on to their "Armenianness" in a predominant culture which is ruthless in its propensity to assimilate newcomers, as well as totally cut off from the homeland, a territory now devoid of Armenians. Still, it is important to note a new element. For

⁶ Dexter Fisher, ed., *Minority Language and Literature* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1977), p. 13.

the first time, the concept of "Armenianness" is itself being reevaluated and reinterpreted.

The slow process of acculturation and assimilation, of course, continues. The larger question is, "has it been possible for Armenians in America to achieve a reconciliation, a synthesis, between being Armenian and being American, or have the Armenians in America merely surrendered to assimilation?" Four writers, from the past four decades, are discussed in this paper. They exemplify the attempt to depict in fiction, with various degrees of success, the multifaceted responses of the contemporary Armenian community to the predicament of diaspora living.

Hakob Karapents'

Hakob Karapents', as a young man, emigrated to America from Iran in pursuit of higher education. He developed a successful career in the field of American journalism, but he chose the Armenian language as the medium of his artistic expression. His short stories, his favorite genre, first appeared individually in Armenian periodicals and then, beginning in the 1950s, in volumes of collected works. He writes in the Eastern Armenian dialect, the native dialect of the Armenians in Iran, and regards himself as a Diasporan-Armenian writer, not merely an Armenian-American writer. As he puts it, a Diaspora writer is one who tries to create art out of "the commotion of the big cities, the fragmented Armenians of the Diaspora, the Armenian and the American, humanity, and the ever-present nightmare of a nuclear disaster."⁷ He writes extensively, almost compulsively, even though skeptics have long warned him of the futility of writing in Armenian in America and of the imminent extinction of his kind.⁸

Most of Karapents' characters share a common preoccupation, namely, dealing with the psychological crisis of an exile trying to come to terms with his life in a new and strange land and finding a way to assuage the painful yearning for a homeland. That homeland, of course, might be a tangible locus, as in the case of expatriates from former Soviet Armenia, or perhaps a spiritual or imaginary construct of a place lost in time yet dear and immediate. Karapents' characters certainly have a complex inner world which is revealed masterfully by the author.

⁷ Hakob Karapents', *Erku Ashkharh: Grakan P'ordzagrut'iunner* (Two Worlds: Literary Essays) (Watertown, MA: Blue Crane Books, 1992), p. 59.

⁸ At the time when the first draft of this article was being written, Karapents' was still alive. This explains the use of the present tense.

Karapents' sets the sites of his stories in Jefferson, a "Middletown"⁹ which could be anywhere in America or in any corner of the world. It is a microcosm of the Armenian diaspora. Here, in this town, he records the stories of succeeding generations of Armenians as they are born, live, struggle, and die. He calls the first wave of immigrants the "old sowers" (seed planters). Karapents' portrays their initial enthusiasm in building ethnic institutions, their internal quarrels, and the division of the community into opposing camps.

These wretched, half-educated refugees¹⁰ from the Old World are the first to arrive in Jefferson at the turn of the century. They attempt to isolate themselves and to build a spiritual homeland in place of their lost physical homeland, separate from the non-Armenians around them, in which they can live and safeguard their identity. "Give them a hundred documents proving their American citizenship, they will still say they are Armenian, and not only Armenian, but Kessabts'i, or Aintabts'i, or other."¹¹ They have inferiority complexes; they consider themselves victims and, consequently, not completely human. To make up for this feeling, to cure their wounded pride, they toil, they build, they make sacrifices, and they provide the best education for their children. The second generation is better-off financially, well-educated, well-adjusted, halfway between patriotic Armenians and full-fledged Americans, have good jobs, and participate in local politics. The third-generation Armenians grow up in Jefferson with no affinity with their ethnic roots. The gap between them and their parents and grandparents is alarming. The only institution that still has some weight in the life of this third generation is the Armenian church. However, without the input of other

⁹ "Middletown," of course, is the fictional name that Robert and Helen Lynd gave to Muncie, Indiana, in their groundbreaking 1929 sociological study, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*.

¹⁰ It should be noted here that the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire followed a systematic plan in attempting to eradicate the Armenians from their native soil and to destroy their intelligentsia. Nearly 600 Armenian political and intellectual leaders were arrested in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) on April 24, 1915, and subsequently killed. Most clerics, a large portion of the educated Armenian population, were also subsequently killed. Most educated adults from the cities died in the expulsion. Those who survived the expulsion and massacres were generally hardy villagers or small children, in both cases "uneducated." The educated population which survived was made up mostly of political activists who were able to flee and who generally settled in the Middle East.

¹¹ Hakob Karapents', *Nor Ashkharhi Hin Semnats'annere* (The Old Sowers of the New World) (Beirut: Atlas Press, 1975), p. 22. Here these former villagers identify themselves by their native towns, a strong type of native particularism.

ethnic organizations, such as cultural societies and political parties, the church alone cannot instill Armenian patriotism and ensure the preservation of ethnic identity. The Jefferson Armenian community shows signs of weariness. It is tired. New blood is needed if it is to survive.

The new waves of Armenian immigrants break upon Jefferson after World War II and revitalize the Armenianness of the community with their zeal. The immigrants also bring their Middle Eastern mind-set, a haughty disdain and intolerance for Armenian-Americans who have lost their ancestral language. The cleavage between the American-born and the newcomers grows wider and wider. Time passes, and the newcomers give birth to their own second generation. These new American-born Armenians look and think no differently from the earlier American-born generation and even the other Jefferson youth. They are elected to public office. They work for the betterment of humanity. They know they are Armenians but have no fanaticism about it. They have made peace with the world and with themselves. Yet,

because this new generation does not boast of its Armenian heritage, because it does not nurture an empty ethnic pride, the older generation distrusts its Armenianness and considers it assimilated and lost.¹²

Karapents' works to epitomize Armenian life in the present-day Diaspora. He sees the end result of the ethnic struggle as a synthesis between the old and the new, an accommodation of the new generation to objective reality.

Karapents' stories are populated with ordinary people, but there is always a particle of the author's own restless spirit in each one of them. They reflect his own psyche, branded with the pain of his exiled (*pan-dukht*) people. The characters, as perhaps he, are caught up in the struggle to put up with the dichotomy between a routine life and an abstract, but vexing, sense of belonging to another world—to the homeland left behind, to a people unknown, unfamiliar but amazingly near and dear.

In his stories, Karapents' is searching for an equilibrium to make that dichotomy less painful. But the crisis is always there with the author's characters, resurfacing periodically as the hidden cause of a tangled, unhappy life and, most often, a tragic ending. Karapents' admits that his characters lack wholeness, for they have neither roots nor proper footing. Only their homeland can provide that foundation, something that will nourish their souls and give them "confidence and wings to fly in the vast

¹² Ibid., p. 19.

universe of creative imagination,"¹³ and that homeland is nowhere to be found.

The predominantly male protagonists of Karapents' stories cannot relate easily to non-Armenian women. They always remain strangers with the local women, even in marriage. The protagonists are not able to enjoy the love and happiness of ordinary human beings, for their souls are injured. Catastrophes that have befallen the nation over the centuries have left their imprint, and it will perhaps take centuries for the wounds to heal. Only then will the fatherland cease groaning and calling to its exiled sons, only then will the inner voices cease to torment their souls.¹⁴ Perhaps universal ideas and human aspirations can then coexist peacefully with the concept of Armenianness. Perhaps then, Vahé Vahanian, the young Armenian student at Columbia University in the 1960s, in the story "Mi Mard u Erkou Shirim" (One Man and Two Graves [1966]), can reconcile his fascination with the dead John F. Kennedy and Kennedy's humanitarian ideals with his own worship of the dead Eghishē Ch'arents', the prominent Soviet Armenian poet of the 1930s, whose life and artistic creations he considers the embodiment of Armenian yearnings and aspirations. Perhaps then, Vahé can enjoy the undying love that Ingrid, the Swedish-German woman, offers him so unselfishly.¹⁵ Until then, Vahé and Karapents' other characters live a dual and fragmented existence.

In the story "P'ayte Ndzuikē" (The Wooden Horse [1965]), Hrand yearns for the land he has never seen, the sacred mountain he can only visualize in his imagination. He is entangled in the painful clashes between his two identities. He has suffered since childhood, when his playmates in the street did not understand his language, and when no one heard the word Armenian in the school. Hrand tries hard to forget his origins, adopt the culture and lifestyle of his American birthplace, and pursue happiness in his personal life and success in his career. He has even Americanized his name; "Grant" sounds better and is more fitting for an American than "Hrand." But the conflict does not go away, and every time that Grant, the American-born journalist, comes out the winner and a happy life is in sight, Hrand, that restless Armenian boy, crawls into the picture and ruins everything. At that painful moment, all the sad stories about the Armenians that Hrand's father once told him come alive,

¹³ Hakob Karapents', *Antsanot' Hoginer* (Stranger Souls) (Beirut: Atlas Press, 1970), p. 156.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 376.

¹⁵ Ibid., from the story entitled "Mi mard u Erkou Shirim" (A Man and Two Graves).

and the ominous questions hang in the air: Where do I belong? Which is my homeland? How can I have two?¹⁶

Similarly, in the story "Antsanot' Hoginer" (Stranger Souls [1955]), Sourenian, or "the sad Armenian" as others call him, is a lonely and reclusive man. He cannot relate to the people around him. He has no smile, no loving words for them. "His life was empty," writes Karapents'. "He was submerged in a swamp and could not get out. He had lost his will to struggle and was stranded helplessly in the dark webs of desperation."¹⁷

In "Voreve Teghit' Minch'ev Aystegh" (To Here From Any Place [1955]), Artavazd Srmakeshkanlian, called Artav for short, is a native of Soviet Armenia who left his family in Erevan and fled to America from his exile in Siberia. He is portrayed as a prototype doomed to a tragic end:

He was an Armenian like any other Armenian. He was young and old like any other Armenian, because he had suffered. . . . He lived his life passively, without will or effort, like the survivor of a catastrophe.¹⁸

Artav finds work in a small town in Kentucky yet constantly dreams of his native land as he walks up and down the streets. He hears the call of the homeland, the groaning of the land. The inner voices haunt him, torment his soul, and eventually destroy his life, pushing him to commit suicide.

Similar forces are at work in "Mer Nakhnineri Stvernere" (The Shadows of Our Forefathers [1986]) when Karapents' describes his own attendance at the annual conference of the Urban Renewal Federation of America (URFA), which translates in Karapents' imagination as Urfa, the Cilician town where the Armenians resisted deportation in 1915. He is transported into another world, where the heroic defense against the assaulting Turkish army took place in 1915. Karapents' confesses:

I never looked back in my life. I lived my today and planned my tomorrow, . . . but there and then in that hall I suddenly realized: the shadow of my forefathers has always been hanging over my

¹⁶ Ibid., from the story entitled "P'ayte Ndzuyke" (The Wooden Horse).

¹⁷ Ibid., from the story entitled "Antsanot' Hoginer" (Stranger Souls), p. 130.

¹⁸ Ibid., from the story entitled "Voreve Teghit' Minch'ev Aystegh" (To Here From Any Place), pp. 152-153.

path like an instinct for preservation, like the voice of blood (*arean dzayn*), like an anchor of existence.¹⁹

Sometimes it is possible to find peace and reconciliation with that "shadow" and lead the life of an ordinary American. However, the eventual clash of the old and the new, the Armenianness and the American outlook, is inevitable. Karapents' depicts the crisis, the rupture of the paradigm of peace and accord and the resulting psychological trauma in "Haykakan Shurjpar" (The Armenian Circle Dance). Karapents' makes a trip to Armenia. Among his brothers in Armenia, Karapents' feels like a foreigner, "a tourist dressed in the style of the Brooks Brothers." He tries to feel the music in his soul. With clumsy motions, he tries to imitate the authentic movements of Armenian men dancing an Armenian dance on Armenian soil. With a painful sensation he comes to realize that he has lost that rhythm in the streets of foreign cities; he is no longer authentic.²⁰ One might observe here that Karapents' is experiencing a type of cultural shock. In reality, several strains of Armenianism have their roots in pre-1915 Armenian life—Turkish-Armenianism, Russian-Armenianism, and Persian-Armenianism, each reflecting a major locus of Armenian life. Furthermore, each of these Armenian cultures has developed over time, and to be transported between them, in let us say 1980, is in reality to experience another, albeit related, culture.

The author contrasts the scene in Armenia with a celebration taking place at Camp Hayastan in Franklin, Massachusetts, "a piece of Armenia in the U.S." Armenians gather there to renew promises of perseverance and perpetuation, to reaffirm faithfulness to their ethnic heritage. They dance, he writes,

tapping on the American soil with an unspeakable enthusiasm, the dances of Van, Sasun, Tarōn, the dance of the masses of exiles, as an outcry for survival, as an aspiration for perpetuation (*azgapahpanum*) so that they will live, so that we will live, so that there will be life and a future. . . . These old-time refugees, who somehow reached the New York harbor, these young boys and girls who were born in America, these exiles who built Armenia and then left the country, always dreaming about it, all dance, so

¹⁹ Hakob Karapents', *Ankatar* (Incomplete) (Beirut: Atlas Press, 1970), from a story entitled "Mer Nakhnineri Stvernere" (The Shadows of our Forefathers), p. 41. The "voice of blood," of course, refers to a primeval ethnic impulse.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, from a story entitled "Haykakan Shurjpar" (The Armenian Circle Dance), p. 11.

that the blood boils in their veins, so that this Armenian independence day celebration becomes a celebration of the endurance of the nation throughout centuries. . . . But America is constantly present in the way they dress, in their softened looks, in the rounded pronunciation of Armenian words.²¹

Karapents' is in constant search for a balance between two identities, two senses of belonging, whose continuing conflict becomes a major source of tension in his narrative and a source of suffering for his characters. Within Karapents' artistic prose, the interrelation between his characters' Armenianness and their American social identities are laid out. They struggle for reconciliation. And even though in many instances their concept of Armenianness is compromised, and the constituting elements of "tradition" seem to have become acculturated to the new world, more often than not they do not achieve the balance they seek.

Noubar Akishian

Noubar Akishian's literature encompasses Armenian-American life in the 1960s and portrays the psychological turmoil of generations of immigrants in the New World. He himself was an immigrant who experienced that same turmoil, coming to the U.S. in 1957 as a student from Egypt.

Akishian's first short story, "Badzanvats Tune" (The Broken Home), was written in Boston in 1964. In it Akishian depicts two young Armenian boys from Beirut, Lebanon, Gevorg (Gregory) and Hakob (James). At the beginning of the story, the boys relish the physical, moral, and sexual liberties of this new world: physical comforts, wine, women, and cheap love affairs. Gevorg finds himself married to an American, and his life is hell. To her, he will always be a foreigner, a crude, unpolished product of the Middle East unworthy of fathering their little son. She divorces him, takes the child, and disappears without a trace. Gevorg searches for them frantically, but to no avail. He tries to cope with the vacuum his son's absence leaves in his life, but it is all in vain. One day Gevorg commits suicide. What else is there to do? The road to the past had long been cut off, and he has no future. He had once said to his friend,

If you want to know the truth, we are exiles, expelled from earth and heaven, expelled even from life. There is something alien in our existence, something temporary. We wander from one coun-

²¹ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

try to another, but we cannot put down roots, strong, deep, and permanent. . . . I even see something illegitimate in our lives. We simply drag out our existence and run, run from one place to another, carrying the fear on our backs of not being able to belong to a place.²²

Hakob in the same story is more fortunate. He is given a second chance. He repudiates his prodigal life of strong drink and raucous parties, and, returning to the bosom of the local Armenian community, he marries a second-generation Armenian girl. Gevorg admires Hakob's courage and firmly contends that

the voice of blood (*ariuni dzayne*) has a particular significance for us. We are different from them in every way. We cannot change our inner-selves even if we change our clothing and our taste. One day we would cry out our disillusionment; we would protest against everything that is forced upon us.²³

Hakob's marriage, unfortunately, does not work out. Sirvart, his wife, is an Americanized, highly educated woman, who gradually grows contemptuous of her husband and all the Armenian issues and problems he and her father constantly rehash. She criticizes her father's generation, those "who struggled without purpose and could not change anything in the life of the new generation." She calls them "dreamers, simplistic people, unable to adapt, going from one failure to another. . . ." ²⁴

Akishian argues that an immigrant will always remains an immigrant, foreign to the new environment as well as foreign to his fellow Armenian-Americans. The "voice of blood" does not suffice. It is the mentality that a person carries with him that becomes the decisive factor—the way they see their ethnicity, the way they judge the importance of traditional values and their preservation, the unconscious way in which they lead their lives.²⁵ Hakob has no hope for the future; his life is enveloped in frustration and despair. The story ends on a sad note and with a pessimistic question: "What are we doing here?"

²² Noubar Akishian, *Marde Hoghin Vra* (The Man on the Soil), a collection of eight short stories and one novel (Erevan: Sovetakan Grogh Press, 1987), from a story entitled "Badzanvats Tune" (The Broken Home), p. 46.

²³ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

Most of Akishian's later works reflect this same pessimism. In the story "Ötarakane" (The Foreigner [1977]), Tigran, a successful heart surgeon in Sacramento, leads a lonely life. Twenty-five years earlier he fell in love with Louise Smith, the one and only true love in his life. Yet marriage to Louise was denied him. Louise's mother scorned Tigran as a "foreigner." To her, Tigran was only a vulgar foreigner, like all the vulgar foreigners in America:

Blacks, Mexicans, and all the others, all ungrateful toward this land of opportunities. . . . They cannot understand how much our forefathers sacrificed to make this land what it is today. They can never be part of our proud history.²⁶

In the story "Avervats P'oghotz'ner" (Ruined Streets [1980]), the protagonist, Hakob, drops out of college and marries an American girl. Soon, however, they are divorced. The wife, of course, receives custody of their newborn child and takes revenge on Hakob by denying him permission to see the child. Hakob drowns his sorrows in alcohol and sinks into a life of cheap dissipation among the street crowd. Eventually, he loses his life in that netherworld.²⁷

In the same story, through the words of the sixty-year-old Kesarats'i, Mikael, in Fresno, Akishian preaches against the danger of assimilation which threatens Armenians in America:

We'll be lost. We'll be lost, all of us, if we don't deal with our situation seriously. Look around you. Instead of building bulwarks, thinking about the future generation in a united way, we waste our insufficient energy in quarrels among ourselves. Our generation will not lose its ethnic identity. . . . But after our generation is gone, the Armenian language will be forgotten; the Armenian newspapers will be abandoned. The generation born and raised in this country will not care about the fate of our nation. . . . It is time to act. If we can build churches and halls one after another, we can also think of ways to preserve our language.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., from the story entitled "Ötarakane" (The Foreigner), p. 86.

²⁷ Ibid., from the story entitled "Avervats P'oghots'ner" (Ruined Streets), p. 145.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

For Akishian, preserving the language is the key to the perpetuation of Armenian identity in America. Despite the efforts of Akishian and his peers, however, the process of language loss and assimilation appears inevitable. The plight of the immigrant reverberates throughout Akishian's writings over the next twenty-five years with only one subtle change: the Americans grow more tolerant toward foreigners and have some feeling for their predicament: Marriages to Armenians are no longer denied by the Americans; Americans even forgive the anger and resentment of the old Armenians when their children or grandchildren marry "Americans." Mark, the *ōtar pessa* (foreign son-in-law) in this same story, receives words of encouragement from his Armenian friend,

Don't worry, Mark. They [the older Armenians] will probably get used to it. You're not the first *ōtar* in the Armenian families. . . . Don't forget that you're dealing with first-generation Armenian immigrants; for them their Armenianness still comes first. After all, they've shed blood to hold on to their ethnicity.

"I understand," Mark replies,

We would have probably done the same. A few decades ago, the conservative and uneducated American felt the same way against mixed marriages. But that was more out of ignorance than for reasons of history or ethnic pride. . . America is a melting pot. You can't stop the wheels of history.²⁹

Akishian's preoccupation with ethnic identity, assimilation, and the future of Armenians in America persists in a novel called *Gaght'akannere* (The Refugees). The novel, written in 1982, is set on the streets of Hollywood, in Armenian restaurants and grocery stores. Here new and old immigrants from Soviet Armenia, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and other places come together to share their often sad experiences and vent their grievances. Akishian paints them with gloomy colors and interjects his repetitive conclusion every now and then: "Ours is an unfortunate nation" (*d'zhabakht dzoghovurd men e mere*). The entire novel becomes a vehicle, and sometimes a clumsy one, for these ideas. The story is so heavily crammed with statements and rhetorical discourses that there remains very little room for the plot to evolve and the characters to develop in any natural way.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

Akishian rationalizes his obvious shortcomings as a writer. "True culture and fine literature," he states, "cannot flourish in the Diaspora since the struggle to survive as an ethnic entity consumes energy and drains the community of its livelihood and intellectual manpower."³⁰ In search of a solution, Akishian turns to Soviet Armenia. He praises it as the homeland of all Armenians in the world but curiously advocates only the return of the expatriates. Apparently, he does not envisage the repatriation of all Diasporan-Armenians as a viable solution to the dilemma of ethnicity. In any case, Akishian considers Soviet Armenia the haven where Armenian culture and literature can flourish. He even expects Soviet Armenian writers to create THE NOVEL, the masterpiece of the Armenian survival after the genocide. This point of view, apparently, arises from Akishian's political conviction that Soviet Armenia is "the realization of the dreams of the Armenian nation."³¹ He eulogizes Soviet Armenians for their relentless struggle to progress and to turn their land from a backward country into a modern republic.³²

Akishian's stand towards Soviet Armenia is shared by a few other Armenian-American writers, followers of the same political ideology. Vahé Haig, for example, idealizes Soviet Armenia as *Erkir Drakhtavair* (The Land of Paradise). In a short story by the same name, Arsen, a survivor of the genocide, an orphan found in the desert, is one of the first Armenians to repatriate and find happiness in that "land of paradise," Soviet Armenia. Haig promotes the idea of repatriation, believing that "the homeland called her wandering sons back home again."³³ Aram, another one of Haig's characters, declares with a more intensified conviction:

Armenia is liberated; the dawn of revival has come. Give us twenty years, and you will see how our land will flourish. Together with the great people of Russia and alongside their ideological path, we will enter an era of prosperity.³⁴

It is obvious that for Vahé Haig or Noubar Akishian Armenian life can only continue in Soviet Armenia. Sooner or later Armenian identity will be lost in the diaspora. In spite of this conviction, Akishian does not cease in his quest for solutions to the plight of the Armenian-American

³⁰ Ibid., from the novel *Gaght'akannere* (The Refugees), p. 304.

³¹ Ibid., p. 315.

³² Ibid., p. 295.

³³ Sevan, *Sp'iurk'ahay Patmvatske*, p. 279.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

communities. He constantly searches for answers, even easy solutions. At the cost of reiterating the same tired ideas that resound in newspaper propaganda and burning community speeches, Akishian enthusiastically advocates unity among the Armenian-American communities. If different organizations and political parties could only cast aside their ceaseless conflicts and unite, he believes, their struggle will become more effective, and can attract the sympathy and cooperation of the new generation.³⁵ Akishian believes that from this new direction a new Diasporan-Armenian can be born.³⁶

Vredz-Armen

Vredz-Armen is another immigrant from Cairo, Egypt, who writes in Armenian. His entire literary corpus revolves around a struggle against the assimilation of the younger generation, most of whom have not had the opportunity to receive a formal education in Armenian or even the chance to learn the language. In an imaginary dialog with Khachatur Abovian in "Aboviani Het" (With Abovian [1979]), Vredz-Armen discusses the problems of the Armenian Diaspora, issues like the impact of the dominant culture, the lack of a network of Armenian schools for the generation growing up in America, and the imminent danger of losing the Armenian language and culture.

The choice of Khachatur Abovian (1805-1848) as an interlocutor is a powerful literary device. Abovian was one of the first writers to address the plight of the Armenian people, and he was one of the first to write in the vernacular in order to reach the common people. During this imaginary conversation, a comparison is drawn between the deplorable conditions of diasporan Armenians today with the dire situation in Armenia in the early nineteenth century when Abovian wrote. It was Abovian who spearheaded, almost singlehandedly, a campaign against ignorance, social and political injustice, and foreign repression. Vredz-Armen suggests that Armenians were better off in Abovian's day because they were still rooted in their own soil. By contrast, contemporary Armenians are dispersed throughout the world, where many have already found peace and satisfaction in their personal lives. They do not offer a fertile ground for reformation. Echoing the same line of thought as in Vahé Oshagan's

³⁵ Akishian, *Marde Hoghin Vra*, p. 305.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

"Otsum," Vredz-Armen states in "Aboviani Het," "An Armenian living in such comfort will never think of our Cause."³⁷

An Armenian living in America owns the soil, the river, the mountain, the street, the city . . . as much as another person with another origin. We declare that we are good citizens of this country, and the locals reassure us that we have no fewer rights than others, that there is no discrimination and no differences. Now, wasn't this what we wanted? Why would Armenians then go to the trouble of pursuing a cause? Whose cause? They do not have a cause. They are comfortable and happy. . . . In spite of all this, the conditions of how we came to settle here hang over the future and shape the outlook of all of us. The truth is that very few chose to come here by their own free will. We fled persecution. We are exiles.³⁸

On the problem of language, the question remains the same as in Abovian's days. What language should we choose to communicate with the common people, to transmit the Armenian spirit and elevate ethnic consciousness? As Vredz-Armen puts it in "Haghordut'ian Pēs" (Like Communion [1979]), "teaching Armenian to the kids today is like [fighting] the battle of Sardarabad."³⁹

The two volumes of *Vostayn* (Web), 1987 and 1988, are punctuated with sad stories of the doom facing Armenian communities like those of North Andover and Hayverhill, where the old generation of Armenians is dying and the new generation pays its paltry dues to its ethnic heritage by gathering once or twice a year around a shish kebab dinner in the church hall.

Despite all this, Vredz-Armen is convinced that, "Armenia lives," as proclaimed by the graffiti-art banner that some Armenian boys had posted against the wall of an American highway in the essay "Armenia Lives!" (1983). Armenia lives even within those who carry only a hazy memory

³⁷ Vredz-Armen, *Vostayn 1* (Web 1), (Montreal: Mesrop Mashtots Foundation Press, 1987), from an essay entitled "Aboviani Het" (With Abovian), p. 40. Our "Cause" here refers to the establishment of a united, free, and independent Armenia.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

³⁹ Vredz-Armen, *Vostayn 2* (Web 2) (Toronto: Hamaskaine, 1988), from an essay entitled "Haghordut'ian Pēs" (Like Communion), p. 50. The battle of Sardarabad was fought by the remnant of the Armenian people on the soil of former Russian Armenia against the invading Turks who wanted to complete the genocide of the Armenians.

of their roots, and every time they hear Armenian spoken, they rush to introduce themselves, “*Yes hay, yes hay*” (I Armenian, I Armenian [sic]).⁴⁰

Vahé Oshagan

Vahé Oshagan entered the arena of Armenian-American literature in the late 1970s. After living the life of a Diasporan-Armenian in Cairo, Beirut, and Paris, he came to America. In America he confronted the overwhelming experience of the American life-style, worldview, and culture. He witnessed the struggle of the Armenian-American communities to preserve their ethnic heritage against all odds. Oshagan's short stories, in particular, depict men and women caught up in this battle. His masterful brush paints a picture of ordinary people, pitiful creatures uprooted from their birthplaces and thrown into an unfamiliar land, fighting the everyday battle of survival, survival as an American and survival as an Armenian. The battle is sometimes against the engulfing waves of assimilation, sometimes against their own sense of Armenianness. They struggle to live a comfortable life and conform to the new society. To be accepted, to be a part of America, some are ready to give up their Armenianness. In the process, they lose their sense of morality, their beliefs, and the principles deep-rooted in the tradition, religion, and culture of their people. They become “nowhere” men.

Most of Oshagan's characters are unusual, controversial, almost scandalous. Conventional ideas of familiar relations are trampled by greed in “Sirahare” (The Lover). Avetis Soukiasian, the father, sacrifices his beautiful daughter, Shushan, to the “blindness of the narrow and dark streets of the city” and pushes her “to commit inevitable sins and unspeakable acts.” After all, Shushan is the only one capable of earning money for the family, and the father accepts the inevitable consequences as the price of his physical comfort.⁴¹ In the story, significantly subtitled “Dzamanakakits‘ Hek‘iat” (A Contemporary Tale), the sacredness of family ties, parental obligations, and the honor of the daughter are trampled. One can only wonder what metaphor, what vision of the Armenian community, lies behind this tawdry tale.

Traditional moral obligations toward parents fade away in “Vipayin Herosin Tsnunde ev Mahe” (The Birth and Death of the Protagonist), another short story in *T‘akardin Shurj*. Zapēl, who had led a rich and

⁴⁰ Ibid., from an essay entitled “Armenia Lives!,” p. 66.

⁴¹ Vahé Oshagan, *T‘akardin Shurj, Artsak Grut‘unner* (Around the Snare, Prose Writings) (New York: Vosketar Press, 1988), from the story entitled “Sirahare” (The Lover), p. 6.

comfortable life in Istanbul, is a nuisance for her two sons in America. What can Jirair, now Jerry, do? He can follow the tradition, keep his mother at home, and arouse his American wife's displeasure, or he can deceive his mother, take her to an old age home, leave her there, and never look back. "What can you do? . . . This is America . . .," his brother tells him. "Put her in the car and take her, Jerry. Sorry, but I'm too busy right now. . . . Do whatever you want to do. We'll look at the cost later. Send me the bill."⁴² Here again, Oshagan makes a powerful metaphor for a community which betrays its ancestry for the comforts of the day.

A similar theme is taken up by writer Vahé Haig in "Kat'id P'aran Ch'mornas, Mama!" (Don't Forget the Money of Your Milk, Mama!) and in "Vere Astvats Ka Karapet" (There Is God Up There, Karapet).⁴³ In the latter story the occupants of an old age home sit around telling their stories. They feel as if they have been abandoned in the home to await their death. Their children hardly ever come to visit, and their lives have no meaning. The Armenian old folks reflect on their condition:

What kind of a country is this? Sons betray fathers; married couples ruin their homes and separate from each other for money. Sons walk out on their parents, and people sell their God for a dollar.⁴⁴

Markar Aghbar, in the same story, remembers with a sigh of grief and nostalgia how in the Old Country children loved their parents: "The older our parents got, the more respectful we grew toward them. Here, they call you old man and lock you up in a stable."⁴⁵

Oshagan also brings to life the sallow and pathetic lives of Armenians who have long separated from their roots, married an *ōtar*, and severed ties with the Armenian community. Somewhere, deep in their souls perhaps, persists the memory of an Armenian childhood. In "T'elefone" (The Telephone), in the dim recesses of the mind of Harry, the businessman, there glimmers nothing from the "*Ts'eghakron*"⁴⁶ enthusiasm of his

⁴² Ibid., from the story entitled "Vipayin Herosin Tsnunde ev Mahe" (The Birth and Death of the Protagonist), p. 17.

⁴³ See *Sp'iurk'ahay Patmvatske*.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 289.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 290.

⁴⁶ A zealous Armenian youth organization founded in 1933 in the United States. From *ts'egh* (race) and the suffix *kron* (devotee of), that is someone devoted to his race or, in more modern terms, his *ethnos*.

youth . . . but a uniform and a zealous belief in the ideals of those fiery days."⁴⁷ That is all in the past; Harry has nothing today to arouse his spirits. He is a hollow man. Arthur, another Armenian in the same story, has fought for America in the armed forces, is married to an American, and has given two sons to serve his adopted homeland. One of them fought in Vietnam, the other was an air force officer in Germany. Arthur thought he had served his country well and deserved a comfortable life. Then, one day out of the blue, a telephone call comes from Harry, an Armenian whom Arthur does not know personally. Harry has come to town on business. While there, he learns of the suicide mission carried out by young Armenian avengers against the Turkish Embassy in Lisbon. Harry just has to talk with a fellow Armenian, so he opens the phone book and finds Arthur's name, the only Armenian last name in the phone book. Harry's rantings stir the ashes of Arthur's smoldering Armenianness. They talk about the past, the present condition, and what the future might hold. The strange conversation ends. Arthur is momentarily exhilarated. Soon the exhilaration fades. The conversation was like a dream. The telephone is silent, the memories fade, the living room envelopes him like a cocoon. It is business as usual; life returns to its old rut.

Vartges, in "Dek'tember 31" (December the 31st) is another man who has forgotten his roots. Ironically, he is the son of Barsegh Ch'elebian, the renowned editor of the newspaper, *Hai Khosnak*, meaning the Armenian Speaker. Vartges "spoke Armenian beautifully until one day he came home from school and declared that he had forgotten the language altogether." Vartges then marries an *ōtar*, goes away, and never looks back. He abandons his old and lonely father and all that his father stood for.⁴⁸ Again, we can see a powerful metaphor of a community abandoning its heritage.

The Shohlemian brothers in "Otsum" (Consecration) are both rich and successful men married to Americans; their children have nothing Armenian but their last names. The brothers go to the Armenian church in Philadelphia every Sunday, seemingly from habit, or to be seen by their friends:

Carrying their rich men's bellies, they stand there in the middle of the church, feeling nothing, hearing nothing. They throw in

⁴⁷ Oshagan, *T'akardin Shurj*, from the story entitled "T'elefone" (The Telephone), p. 147.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, from the story entitled "Dektember 31" (December the 31st), p. 285.

some small change when the donation plates go around the room.⁴⁹

Then, with the satisfaction of having performed their national duty, they return home to their real life as Americans. The Shohlemians are no different from the other few dozen churchgoers, "who went there to fill up idle time, not because of religious fervor." As Ter Avetis, their pastor says, "What is faith for this wretched people? It is the instinct of the old times, the voice of the homeland" attracting them to the church.⁵⁰

Oshagan raises an significant question in this finely wrought story: Can the church, as an institution, become the anchor of the Armenian spirit, preventing assimilation and securing the perpetuation of Armenian national life? Oshagan sees this as unlikely:

It was a very plain and ordinary church, built out of deceit and boredom. The same people gathered there every Sunday and sat in the same places. The pain of having betrayed their homeland, their fathers, their children, and their God rips their heart, but they always think of something else.⁵¹

Can such a church can be the home of a god related to the Armenian spirit?

—an imaginary god who is detached from the everyday sorrows, pains and hopes of this world, who is a sort of a concept and an ideal, as abstract as the love and yearning one feels for the homeland, a god who has nothing to do with these masses and prayers?⁵²

It seems that such people are ethnically schizophrenic: They are "Americans" six days of the week, and Armenians for a few hours on Sunday. They talk Armenian patriotism on Sunday and live marginal lives in the predominate culture the rest of the week.

"I have no faith in Armenians in America," Jacques, the diehard member of ASALA (the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia), announced: "These people have no dilemma; they are self-

⁴⁹ Ibid., from the story entitled "Otsum" (Consecration), p. 45.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 53.

⁵² Ibid., p. 48.

content, satisfied people. The entire country has no crisis, let alone the Armenians here."⁵³

Oshagan continues his analysis of the struggle against assimilation in "Consecration." It is Jacques, again, who thinks out loud and plans provocative action. He believes that traditional diaspora institutions, like the church, no longer function as genuine bearers, or even manifestations, of Armenianness. Jacques wants to rupture the legend, the myth, the illusion. The sense of real Armenianness, which had retreated to the unconscious of diasporan Armenians, must be brought back to the surface through shock treatment.

If Armenians really love their church and religion, if they believe the priest's words . . . they should fight, they should at least get mad and defend the holiness of the church. They should do something, this god damned people.⁵⁴

A terrible sacrilege is planned. Jacques and his friends will storm into the church during the Divine Liturgy on Sunday with their "ghetto blasters" blaring hard rock music and do their mischief. The goal, obviously, is to shock the apathetic churchgoers and get their attention. "The coward would run away; there will remain those who can endure, those who are truly useful to the nation. The hell with the rest,"⁵⁵ Jacques reasons. "The church should burn down, and that should be the celebration of the 'birth' of the Diaspora," Jacques believes:

Armenians are frozen; they have turned into stones and fossils living in the false paradise of their religion. First, let us destroy the church and the mystique of the religion with it; after that, we can liberate Armenians from their immobile, passive state and bring them to life, something that can be transmitted from generation to generation.⁵⁶

Jacques plans to destroy perhaps the most sacred symbol of Armenian faith, the priest. He plans to strip the priest of his dignity—his sacerdotal robes, his pectoral cross, even his beard. He believes that by destroying

⁵³ Ibid., p. 62. ASALA was active during the decade from ca. 1975-1985. Its chief mission was a war on the Turkish state, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire which carried out the genocide of the Armenian people.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

the symbols, he will destroy the myth, and by destroying the myth, he will free his people from the age-old servile mentality acquired under the Turkish yoke.

Jacques and his ASALA confederates put their theory to the test. They storm into the church on Sunday in the middle of the mass, their "boom-boxes" blasting out "heavy metal." The radical Sona, dressed in tight jeans and leather jacket, and Bruce, the blond half-Armenian boy, prance to the front row and begin kissing lasciviously. Jacques marches up to the *berm* [Arm. *bema*], ascends the holy altar, and lunges at the priest. With the tip of his knife, Jacques begins to strip the priest of his holy vestments, slowly and contemptuously, as if conducting a striptease. The priest, however, is made of sterner stuff. Inspired by the divine spirit, he continues his prayers, upholding the dignity of the church. The congregation goes into a state of shock and remains motionless, as if hypnotized.

It is Bruce, the half-Armenian lad, who breaks the spell. His sensibilities are offended by the grotesque pantomime which is taking place in front of his eyes. He climbs up on the altar to restrain Jacques. They tussle, and Bruce is injured. The revolutionary troop beats a retreat.

The pious churchgoers have seen their smug and comfortable world unravel before their very eyes. They are confused. Something deep in their souls has been desecrated:

the tradition, the ritual, the inspiration, and the zealous faith toward their God, their forefathers, especially their language and their unconscious Armenian collective identity built over the centuries.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, Ter Avetis, the priest, the direct target, had been able to withstand the ordeal of attempted humiliation.

At that moment of torture, he had gained a mystic power; perhaps it was the truth of his nation, the meaning of Armenianness. He would always cherish that torturous moment.

Ter Avetis would proudly transmit that sensation of divine power in the face of adversity to his half-Armenian grandson, Mher, who, significantly, is named after the last of the Armenian epic heroes. The episode

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

becomes a symbol of the nation's strength to withstand persecution.⁵⁸ Yes, Ter Avetis would always remember Bruce, the blond half-Armenian terrorist, who had perhaps saved his life. Who knows what rage pounded in Jacques' heart at the moment, who knows what the young man might have done? It was Bruce, the half-Armenian, the fruit of Armenia and America, the blond boy, who defended the dignity of the Armenian church. It was Bruce who now could be depended upon to carry on "the Armenian heritage without speaking a word, like a mute prophet, whose coming poor Ter Avetis alone had been able to understand and to accept."⁵⁹

Here, Oshagan is playing with dangerous ideas. The full-Armenian patriot, frustrated by his lack of political power, attacks his own people at their most vulnerable point, their age-old faith. The half-Armenian comes to its defence. The priest sees this as prophetic. The fate of the nation in the diaspora may indeed depend on the Bruces of this world and the half-Armenian grandsons of Ter Avetis. Furthermore, the very name Jacques, not a traditional Armenian name, implies that the "full-blooded" Armenian youth is somehow not truly "Armenian," but rather the product of a more current, more secular, more quasi-European culture.

From within Oshagan's stories, as we can see, rises the figure of the new Diasporan-Armenian with a new and perhaps different sense of Armenianness. No longer are the young, the members of the second and third generations, expected to have zealous and unquestioning adherence to all the elements of Armenian tradition—the Armenian church, the Armenian language, the cultural legacy, and the old lifestyle—that might even prove to be counterproductive in the modern world. Instead, Oshagan seeks a new synthesis which would include a love of the past, reasoned dedication in the present, and a reinterpretation of Armenianness for the future. It is even through half-Armenians like Bruce and Mher, who cannot speak Armenian but who may hold Armenia safely in their hearts, that the Armenian community in America may journey into an uncertain, yet meaningful, future.

Conclusion

This brief analysis of a small sampling of Armenian-American literature written in Armenian intended to show that the Armenian-American identity as reflected in these stories had not been fully defined and is not immune to change. It is clear that a culture suitable for 1915 must some-

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

how be modernized if it is to serve a living people in a changing world. This theory, the need for change to survive, is true for life in general and certainly for all ethnic groups, not excluding those in America. Ethnic identity is not a fixed, unchangeable concept but rather a dynamic element. America has currently become hospitable to multiculturalism. Differences are not despised but celebrated.

Using Henry Louis Gates' terminology, one can clearly see the Armenian "identity politics" changing over time: In the first stages of the Armenian immigration in America, identity politics in the Armenian communities was that of the old country, the native land. And that standard was postulated as its purest form. It entailed the pursuit of the survival of Armenian identity by being faithful to the past; it was based on adherence to a "traditional" concept of the Armenian identity. The early artistic literature reflects a call to the community to preserve that concept. Inevitably, since the early Armenians came to America not as free-will immigrants but as refugees from Turkish oppression, the literature bears the imprint of its authors' psychology of exile. Indeed, the Armenians have for centuries been a diaspora people and the theme of exile goes back even farther in the literary tradition, thus explaining in some degree the persistence of that theme in current literature. Furthermore, since Armenian-American literature in Armenian is almost solely produced by first-generation Armenian immigrants, either from the homeland or from the world-wide diaspora, this psychology lingers in their writings over time although with a fluctuating intensity.

The native language, of course, may be lost over time. Only a small intellectual elite might hold on to it, not so much as an everyday language, but as a means of inter-diaspora communication. Second-generation Armenian-American writers do not write in Armenian. They express themselves in the language of their birthplace. But is the traditional language the main bulwark against assimilation? Is Noubar Akishian right in predicting the assimilation of Armenians in America, particularly those who no longer speak Armenian? Perhaps. Yet, it seems more likely that, as in Karapent's story of the town of Jefferson, new waves of immigrants will keep coming and will successively revitalize Armenian community life.

Acculturation and assimilation are an ongoing process due to the overwhelming strength of the predominant culture, a culture which in the case of America is becoming dominant throughout most of the industrialized world. Armenian-American literature produced in English is more apt to reflect these changes and be more reflective of them. The medium of expression itself naturally and unconsciously imposes its own constraints which reflect a particular outlook or worldview. It is also the case

that Armenian-American writers who use English see that "tradition," an important component of ethnic identity, is never fixed or closed. "Traditions" continue to develop over time and are not fixed at any one point in history. Writers who accept this view of the continuous development of tradition desire to direct and control the process of acculturation in order to help determine the eventual synthesis of the "old tradition" and the "developing tradition."

Of the writers discussed here, only Vahé Oshagan attempts to deal with these issues in a constructive way. His characters, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to reconcile their past with their present condition, not allowing themselves to be cast adrift with no tradition, to become as Shushan, a person of the dark street, but as persons conscious and proud of their heritage, a heritage which guides them into new lives. Oshagan clearly illustrates in his characterizations that when Armenianness becomes an unchanging concept shrouded in old myth, it no longer carries meaning for the Diasporan-Armenian. Oshagan tries to deconstruct the Armenian tradition to find its essential elements. Once the subconscious is made explicit, people will be able to choose what they want to be and how they will be it. The Armenian-American could become a clear and identifiable element in the mosaic of America, and the Armenian community could maintain its distinctiveness far into the distant future.

Some scholars have observed that the Armenians, Jews, and Greeks—traditional diaspora ethnoses—are more concerned with ethnic perpetuation than most other peoples. It is also true that the Armenians and Jews, both victims of a genocide in the twentieth century, have a particular interest in seeing their people survive. These are themes which need to be explored and developed.

Finally, what does the future hold for Armenian-American writers writing in Armenian in America? In the first place, obviously, there is a need for a readership. Who reads this material and why? The first wave of immigration was made up essentially of refugees from the Ottoman Empire. They had experienced genocide in the homeland and fought desperately to prevent the "white genocide," cultural assimilation, from taking place. Clearly the literature which captured their interest was a literature of the exiled. The second generation of immigrants arrived from other diaspora communities and came to America seeking improvement in their economic condition. They had, for the most part, come from truly plural societies where they had preserved the Armenian language as a language of everyday communication, business, education, and to some extent, scholarship. They also had hope of freeing the homeland, although that would be in the future and there was no present expectation of it. These readers, of course, were interested in preserving their tradi-

tion, both preserved and acquired, in America, not a plural but only a pluralistic society.⁶⁰ Part of being Armenian for them was a desire to rescue a homeland under foreign domination. Faithfulness to Hai Tad, the "Armenian Case," was a touchstone of Armenianism for them. The present immigration is chiefly from the former Soviet Union, and it reflects a character quite different from the earlier immigrations. Those from the former Soviet Armenia obviously read, write, and speak Armenian. Yet it remains to be seen what kind of Armenian literature they will produce, what issues will interest them, and what kind of readership they will attract. Finally, there are those Armenian immigrants from the diaspora of the former Soviet Union, a people whose "native language" is neither Armenian nor English. Will these people learn Armenian? Will they produce writers of their own or will they read the works of Armenian writers from other milieus?

Thus we can see that the question of Armenian-American literature written in Armenian is a complex one. It is deserving of study if for no other reason than to trace the heroic struggle of a people who call themselves Armenians as they attempt to find their rightful place in a complex and ever changing world.

⁶⁰ A plural society is a society in which different ethnoses live side by side but do not intermix except for business or issues of common concern. Such was the case of Armenians in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iran. A pluralistic society is a society in which different ethnoses are intermixed and, while preserving differences, tend to amalgamate into one or more classes of the predominate culture. It, of course, is typified by America.