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## YEAR BOOK

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# A CURSORY SURVEY OF SHAHAN SHAHNUR'S LITERARY CREATIONS

Shahan Shahnur, a prominent name in modern Armenian literature, belongs to the post World War I generation. This generation of young survivors of the Genocide, forcibly uprooted from their native land and cast in what is called the Armenian Diaspora, struggled all their lives to adjust to the new environment and new life style. They tried hard to overcome the forces of assimilation. Some succeeded to maintain their national identity; some others, weary and disappointed, wearing the mask of indifference towards everything Armenian, were carried off by the sweeping tide of assimilation.

Shahan Kerestechian was born in Uskudar, a suburb of Constantinople, on Aug. 3, 1903. His parents were humble, hard working tailors, but their modest home, frequented by such well known intellectuals as Theodik, V. Papazian and Indra (Tiran Chrakian), provided a cultural atmosphere which in turn influenced and directed young Shahan's interests towards Armenian literature.

Shahan had hardly graduated from Berberian High School when a new wave of repressions by the Kemalist regime, in 1923, forced him to leave the country and join the mass of young Armenians in France in their pursuit for a new and better life.

Shahan Kerestechian earned his living as a photographer. He adopted Shahan Shahnur as his pen name and became deeply involved in literary activities.

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Shahan Shanur opened his way into the Armenian literature by his first novel, «Նահանջը Առանց Երգի» (Retreat Without Song). This novel also carried a general title *Illustrated History of the Armenians*, thus, indicating the author's intention to produce a series of works pertaining to this topic. The novel first appeared as a feuilleton in *Haratch*, in 1929; since then, it has been published as a separate book several times. It has also been recently translated into English.

Shahnur's novel aroused strong controversy. It was received with a mixed feeling of admiration and rage. The ideas, the language and the realistic descriptions of some intimate scenes were shockingly outrageous; nevertheless, no one could deny the author's talent and his innovative touch. Even Archak Chobanian, a renowned literary critic of the time, despite his conservatism, proclaimed, "with his unique characteristics, his unique way of expression and his unique perception of life, Shahnur brought a new note to our literature".<sup>1</sup>

The novel begins with two Biblical quotations from St. Luke, pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The only logical assumption is that the author intends to draw a parallel between the Resurrection of the Lord and the survival, or rather the revival, of the Armenian nation after the Genocide. This analogy can also be an indication of the starting point for the "History of the Armenians": Shahnur intends to portray the life of the survivors of the Genocide in the Diaspora. This religious prelude, however, is immediately followed by a lustful scene of love and desire, a shocking contrast that repeats throughout the novel with the outpour of unexpected ideas and interpretations.

Petros, the leading character of this novel, is actually the embodiment of a restless and feverish young generation of Armenians in quest of new opportunities in a new world. Petros is young, healthy and handsome; he is out to live and enjoy life and all its ephemeral pleasures, and Paris seems like a big whorehouse to him, "but, on the other hand," he reasons, "there are no whores in Paris, since all the women are alike." Thus, he has "no explanation, no definition for a whore as well as one for God."

Juxtaposing these two concepts of God and whore is another shocking contrast not infrequent in this novel. Levon Pashalian, another well known critic of the time, in an article in *Le Foyer* (a French Magazine), praises Shahnur's talent, "but, nevertheless," he adds, "some of the ideas suggested in some passages, trying to be unique and profound, are plain nonsense. Treating the two concepts of God and whore together is one of them."<sup>2</sup>

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1. "Anahit" periodical, No. 6, 1930, Paris, p. 109.

2. *Ibid.*, No. 1, 2, 1939, p. 80.

Despite this exaggerated attitude, however, Shahnur was one of the few writers of that time who ruptured the veil of moralism in Armenian literature. He dared to take up forbidden subjects such as the questionning of the concept of God or the description of a sexual relationship in every detail. In fact, once a woman told him, "I read your novel, and I truly admired it, but some of the love scenes are so obscene that I can not let my daughter read it. Can't you write something more conservative?" Shahnur had replied sarcastically, "Oh yes, I am working on it. Next year I am going to publish a wall calendar."<sup>3</sup>

The realistic description of Petros's love affairs and his antagonism towards moral and spiritual values do not lower Shahnur's novel to the level of pedestrian literature – as Chobanian claims. On the contrary, they are the evidence of the author's modern approach in portraying psychological conflicts and the inner world of a young man in his painful struggle to adjust himself to the new and totally different environment. Yes, Petros tries to forget the past, to cut his bonds with the old world. He even changes his name to Pierre. But Petros, "the Armenian", manifests himself in the most unexpected moments, to destroy Pierre's peace of mind. The alternate use of these two names throughout the novel characteristically becomes a yardstick for the youth's fluctuating national consciousness and his moral bonds to the old customs and traditions. And again, every now and then, throughout his inevitable "retreat", in the most crucial moments of despair and agony, his mother's soft and tender voice calls him from that far away land. It comes to mend the ruptured ties and caress his tormented soul, «...անուշիկ չունուխս իմին...»:

*Retreat Without Song* is the story of a confused and displaced generation. They criticize, analize the past, protest against the fate of the nation doomed to perish in the Diaspora. In their pessimism they give way to a passionate outpour of hate and disdain towards Armenian traditionalism and moral concepts. They condemn our forefathers for teaching us nothing but obedience and patience, for teaching us to take the blame of all the calamities that fell upon our nation. Suren, the "intellect" of the whole gang, overwhelmed with this venomous emotions, curses our forefathers and labels the Armenians as the lowest creatures of God:

«Հայր ամուլ է, անծին, անպառլ: Հայր դատարկ է, փուն, ունայն, սնոտի: Ապրելու իրաւունք չունի ան ժանի որ չէ ծնած: Ներքինիներ են մեր բոլոր պապերը, որքան որ մտածումս ետեւ տանիմ, հայերը կը տեսնեմ միշտ այնպէս ինչպէս այսօր, պզսիկ, գանձն, սխեղծ:»<sup>4</sup>

He launches bitter attacks against Armenian spiritual monuments; he

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3. Shahan Shahnur, "Tertis Giragnoria Tive", Beirut, 1959, p. 20.

4. "Nahanche Arants Ergi", p. 138.

accuses Narekatsi for preaching piety, patience, and obedience even at the cost of losing the national pride and aspiration. This “irresponsible approach to the Armenian traditions”, as Arshak Chobanian puts it,<sup>5</sup> aroused strong negative reactions, and Shahnur was accused of being sacrilegious. But curiously, we encounter the reverberation of this same thought in Eghishe Charents’s «Գիրք Ճանապարհի»: This gifted poet, who sang the glory of saintly titans of the ancient Armenian literature, in the apex of talent and creation, weary and disappointed, protests against them, denouncing their creations that enchanted our souls and made serfs out of our nation. These profane expressions, this irreverence towards our spiritual treasures are nothing but the desperate reaction of a healthy and energetic generation in view of their incapability to change the deplorable fate of our nation. In their abortive struggle very few manage to carry through; others are crumbled and crushed under the pounding waves of frustration and, in their agony, turn to opium to find a delusive relief in the dark and smoke filled dungeons of Paris.

Shahnur’s pessimism culminates in a vision of a total assimilation. He sees the painful retreat of the nation in the Diaspora:

«Նահանջը, նահանջը հայերուն: Կոիւր սրբազն բան է, նակատամարտը երբեմն նոյնիսկ օգտակար. անոնցմէ ազգ մը դուրս կուգայ պարտուած կամ յաղթական, սակայն երկու պարագային ալ դուրս կուգայ: Բայց նահանջը կը չնշէ, կը առւլէ, կ'անհետացնէ ամէն բան»<sup>6</sup>: Shahnur’s extremism seems to have mellowed down in «Յարակեզներու Դաւանանութիւնը» (The Treason of the Vampires), the second volume of “Illustrated History of Armenians”. In this collection of short stories, published in 1933, Shahnur’s pen is more mature; he is able to avoid exaggerations and tame his feelings, but his criticism remains sharp and unsparing. He portrays the ugly aspects of the life of Armenians in Constantinople. Angel, the plump, unsightly and uneducated woman or “the Armenian woman”, as Shahnur likes to generalize, betrays her husband for money and for expensive clothes and jewelery. After all, that is the only way to compete with her rich neighbors that is the way to procure a “decent” life. He ridicules the superstition and naivete of the older generation. He builds a heartwarming story around a very ordinary human relationship and, in the midst of this story, he meditates and ponders upon the philosophy of life, and he concludes: “Life is like waiting behind a closed door with an unusually large sunflower and a stinking dead cat. Sometimes the smell of the rotten corpse becomes so overwhelming that it spoils the beauty of the sunflower.” This is a realistically depicted Shahnurian concept of good

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5. “The Healthy and the Unhealthy in Shahnur’s Literature”, “Anahit”. Paris, No, 1, 2, 1939, page 79.  
 6. “Nahanče Arants Ergi”, p. 172.  
 7. Shahan Shahnur. “Haralezneru Davachanutiune”, Paris, 1971, p. 47.

and evil. Shahnur is truly successful in presenting the ugliest, and only the ugliest, aspects of life. Is this his criterion for criticism or is it his pessimism that makes him see only the ugly? In any event, I am convinced that Hagop Baronian and Ervand Odian's criticism of the social ills of the Armenian community in Constantinople were far more constructive than Shahnur's extremely negative approach.

Among these short stories, the ones dealing with the lives of the Armenian immigrants in Paris are each a valuable artistic creation. Each one of them in its limited framework of a short story has the merits of a novel. The subject matter of these stories, like Shahnur's first novel, is again the process of adaptation. Tages Balabanian, an old and respected tailor from Constantinople finds himself stripped of his honor and reputation in this new society. He lives the trauma of coping with the new world where old values and traditions are nothing but sweet memories. Eprakse hanem embodies Shahnur's realistic concept of the Armenian mother: kind, sincere, a little naive, a little selfish, a little helpless and lost in this new environment, but never sanctified.

Shahnur's skill and talent find full expression in a symbolistic short story «Յարակեզներու Դաւանանութիւնը» (The Treason of the Vampires), which, very appropriately, is also the title of the entire second volume of "History of Armenians". Through a vertiginous turn of psychic tribulations, visions and meditations, Shahnur expresses his fears and frustrations, presents the most interesting interpretations for love, hope, and faith. Hambartsum, the confused and helpless protagonist, represents a generation of orphans whose families have been slaughtered by the Turks. He is not capable of thinking clearly, making decisions, living and enjoying life as it is. His thoughts are poisoned with the horrible memories of the massacres. His outlook and his perception of life are affected by pessimism. In his painful delirium, he sees the escape of the vampires<sup>8</sup>, who refuse to lick and revive the massacred nation. He protests against God; he curses him and then turns to Anahit, the Armenian goddess, the symbol of the nation's glory. He seeks consolation in the pagan past.

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The second volume of Shahnur's creation already speaks of an untold suffering, an incurable illness that tortured him for more than 30 years and finally took his life. Throughout the lines of some of the short stories, a careful reader can detect some autobiographical remarks and trace aspects

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8. In the Armenian mythology vampires were spirits who had the power to revive the dead by licking their wounds.

of Shahnur's own life. Otherwise it is very difficult to sketch his life story, since he always remained reluctant to share his sad life story with his readers. Zanoste, one of these short stories, in fact depicts Shahnur's life in a sanatorium. Michel, the protagonist, drags an agonizingly monotonous life. Shahnur comes up with interesting psychological analysis of the concepts of life and death, naturally from the standpoint of a fatally ill person. In a state of wake and delirium, Michel, or the author himself, reveals his political views. He envisages his neighbor, a wretched Armenian patient woman, who is cast out of her home because of her illness, as the personification of the Armenian Diaspora. And he pours out his hatred and his deep contempt against her, "If you were healthy, you, Armenians of Diaspora, we would open the doors of Armenia for you, we would accept you back to your homeland. But you are ill, you are contaminated with the poison of Dashnaktsutiun. And... we let you live in exile until the day...". This is not the only outburst of Shahnur's dislike towards the Dashnaktsutiun. We encounter similar remarks in an article called «Գրական էջ մը» (Grakan ej me).<sup>10</sup> This attitude is a contradiction to Shahnur's claim (as stated in an article in "Bats Domar") that he has always avoided giving political coloring to his artistic creations.

Shahnur's contemptuous remarks about Eastern Armenian also come as a shocking lapse of intellectualism. In the aforementioned story, he writes, "My toes are sticking out of my blanket, and I am speaking to them in Russian-Armenian... I am a foolish person, who, instead of thinking about serious matters, speaks to his toes in Russian-Armenian."<sup>11</sup> I wasn't able to explain this disdainful attitude until I came across one of his articles called "Voski Gshir". There he proclaims «Ռուսահայերէնի տակաւ կ'ըլլայ գնչուի լեզու»<sup>12</sup>. (Russian-Armenian is still a gypsy language). Still in another article he talks about A. Aharonian's creations and says «Դժբախտաբար լեզուն գաւառաբարբառ է, այսինքն ռուսահայերէն»<sup>13</sup>. (Unfortunately, the language is a provincial dialect, that is, Russian-Armenian).

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Shahnur's literary activities were interrupted by the deterioration of his health and an unsuccessful surgery in 1939, as a result of which he was dragged from one sanatorium to another for the next twenty years. It was

9. "Haralezneru Davachanutiune", p. 211.

10. "Tertis Giragnoria Tive", Paris, 1959, p. 99.

11. "Haralezneru Davachanutiune", p. 182.

12. Shahan Shahnur, "Bats Domar", Paris, 1971, p. 62.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

during this period that Shahnur ventured into the arena of French literature. His poetry and memoirs were published under his French pen name, Armen Lubin. These creations and particularly "Transfaire Nocturne" (a collection of his writings in prose) won him the *Revareau* Award in 1956.

In 1958 Shahnur is back in Armenian literature with a peculiar collection of his revised critical articles. "Tertis Giragnoria Tive" (*The Sunday Edition of my Paper*) has a peculiar structure. With all sections and headings of a regular newspaper, with an allegorical approach, and with a deep understanding of the situation, he analyzes the life of the Armenian community in Paris. "Two sisters were reunited with each other after long years of separation. One of them raised her family in France, the other in Germany. While the sisters were chatting with each other and recalling old memories, their two children were playing in a corner reluctantly, without trying to make friends with one another. The one born in France tried to snatch a toy from the other, but he didn't succeed; angrily, he turned away and yelled in French, 'You dirty German, go back to your country.'<sup>14</sup>". And this passage is titled "Obituary Notice".

In this collection of articles, we are encountered with Shahnur's sharp criticism of even the most popular authors of modern Armenian literature. He calls Raffi, Aharonian and Zardarian sentimentalists in destitude of an intellectual drive. He considers the Armenian literature devoid of unique directions imitating foreign schools of thoughts, trends, and directions. This kind of sharp criticism, however exaggerated, was highly instrumental in creating an atmosphere of productive debates and literary activities in which a talented generation of writers like Vazgen Shushanian, Nshan Beshiktashlian, Vorpouni and others along with Shahan Shahnur himself were striving to conquer new horizons toward the modernization of Armenian literature.

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After his two volumes of "The Illustrated History of the Armenians", Shahnur published three more books but added nothing to the legacy of his artistic creations. The few stories in those volumes were not masterpieces. Apparently his deplorable health had dried-up the source of his artistic inspirations. Indeed, his life had been full of pain and sufferings. "I prefer literature to my life", he had said, "because sufferings have an end in my literature."<sup>15</sup>.

Shahnur died lonely and forgotten in 1974 in a sanatorium near Paris. His fatal disease had finally taken its prey.

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14. Shahan Shahnur, "Tertis Giragnoria Tive", Paris, 1958, p. 22.

15. "Tertis Giragnoria Tive", p. 20.

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Shahnur's contribution to Armenian literature is not limited to his artistic creations. His critical articles, which constitute the main body of his last three volumes, establish Shahnur's career not only as an accomplished novelist but also a strong literary critic. These articles describe the author's realistic views which find their most beautiful and yet most controversial expressions in his artistic creations. They also reveal his concepts of and his strive for modernism: realistic self-criticism for the sake of improvement and progress. Shahnur, the avant-garde of our post-Genocide literature of the Diaspora, was convinced, and I like to emphasize that "we have a lot of reasons to be proud of as Armenians; therefore there is no reason for us to try to hide the shortcomings."<sup>16</sup>

RUBINA PEROOMIAN



16. "Krage Koghkis", p. 74.