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Some Notes About Armenian Émigré (Diasporic) Literature

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Abstract

The article focuses on Armenian émigré (diasporic) literature, which can be defined as a continuation of Western Armenian classical literature that emerged primarily as a consequence of the Armenian Genocide. Following this historical catastrophe, large numbers of Armenians settled in different countries, particularly in the United States and France.

Among American-Armenian writers such as Hamastegh (Hambardzum Gelenian), Vahe Haig (Vahe Dinjian), and Aram Haigaz (Aram Chekemian), one can observe the formation of a **Literary Movement of Nostalgia**, which may also be viewed as a part of Romanticism. These authors expressed a profound longing for their ancestral homeland, particularly Harput (Kharpert), renowned for its distinctive folkloric and cultural life. Representative works include Hamastegh's *The Village* (1924) and *The Rain* (1929), as well as Vahe Haig's five-volume *Fatherland's Hearth* (1935-1970). Their works demonstrate a strong sense of historical continuity and frequently function as literary chronicles intended to preserve the memory of the Armenian past.

In contrast, French-Armenian writers such as Shahan Shahnour (Shahnour Kerestejian) and Zareh Vorpuni (Zareh Oksyuzian) initiated a different literary tendency, which can be referred to as the **Literary Movement of Retreat**, characterized by elements of Realism and Surrealism. Their approach was more critical and analytical, seeking to examine Armenian identity within a rapidly changing European context. Shahnour's seminal novel *Retreat Without Song* (1929) may be regarded as a representative work of this movement.

A distinctive trajectory can be observed in post-World War II Istanbul Armenian literature, although this literary tradition is not usually classified as part of diasporic literature. Developing in the specific cultural environment of Istanbul, it increasingly adopted a symbolic mode of literary expression. The poet and theorist Zareh Khrakhouni (Arto Jumbushian) conceptualized this approach as **"Objective Symbolism."** Writers such as Zahrad (Zareh Yaldizchian), Zareh Khrakhouni, Igna (Ignatios) Saryaslan, Rober Haddeciyan, and Zaven Piperian sought to interweave national concerns with universal human issues. In doing so, their works transcended the boundaries of a specifically Armenian literary context and acquired a broader significance that could be accessible to international readers.

A further dimension of Armenian émigré literature is represented by **Armenian foreign-language writers**. The question of their literary and cultural belonging remains relevant today; nevertheless, their contribution to Armenian cultural history is undeniable. In some cases, the use of a non-Armenian language resulted from external circumstances, including the writers' social environment and education, as in the cases of William Saroyan, Michael Arlen, Peter Balakian, Antonia Arslan, and Carol Edgarian. In other cases, the choice of language was deliberate. Writers such as Shahan Shahnour, who wrote in French under the pseudonym Armen Lubin, and Leon Z. Surmelian, who wrote in English, used a foreign language to communicate Armenian experiences and themes to a broader international readership.

In conclusion, Armenian émigré literature constitutes a diverse and dynamic field. It is far from monolithic and opens numerous avenues for scholarly investigation, particularly with regard to questions of identity, language, memory, cultural continuity, and adaptation in exile.

Key words: Armenian Diaspora, literary movements, foreign-language writers, identity, memory

Introduction

Discussing Armenian diasporic or émigré literature, it should be noted that this is not a unique phenomenon. In many countries, emigration has occurred for various historical, political, economic, and other reasons, giving rise to different forms of émigré literature. In many cases, these factors are also reflected in the thematic content of the literature.

Armenian diasporic literature can be understood as a continuation of Western Armenian classical literature, emerging primarily as a consequence of the Armenian Genocide. Following this catastrophe, many Armenians settled in various countries, most notably the United States, France, and regions of the Near East. Although this migration was a profoundly difficult experience, the remnants of the nation – as Hakob Oshagan titled his novel *The Remnants* – sought to overcome trauma and integrate into the cultural and social life of their new homelands.

One of the characteristic features of diasporic literature is its origin, which remains connected to the literature of the homeland. For example, speaking about Russian diasporic literature, Mark Slonim notes: "The outcome of emigration is joyless. And the most frightening thing is that not only have no new writers been born in emigration, but even the old ones have withered. If Russian literature were truly limited only to emigration, there would be reason for despair and for doubt about the future. But fortunately, émigré literature is only a branch on the common trunk. It lives insofar as the trunk lives; it draws nourishment from its sap. It flourishes when this exchange is alive and full, and it withers as soon as that exchange ceases" (Slonim, 1920-1925, p. 385).

This approach also characterizes Armenian diasporic literature. Rober Haddeciyan, comparing diasporic literature to an "uprooted tree," emphasizes the tragic and uncertain condition of a literature separated from its roots: "This is our tragedy: we shall see how long an uprooted tree can preserve its leaves and branches" (Danielyan, Personal archive).

Diasporic literature is generally regarded as part of the "Newest Period" of Armenian literature, which in Armenia begins in the 1920s and coincides with the establishment of the Soviet Union. However, the two branches of Armenian literature developed under markedly different historical circumstances. One branch evolved in Soviet Armenia under the political and cultural influence of the USSR, maintaining a strong orientation toward the homeland. The other branch spread across the world, developing an independent identity shaped by exile and cultural transplantation. For this reason, diasporic literature is often taught as a separate subject in Armenian universities.

Memory and Hope for a Return to the Homeland

The first major center of Armenian diasporic literature emerged in the United States, where the so-called Literary Movement of Nostalgia developed. Prominent Armenian-American writers, such as Hamastegh, Vahe Haig, and Aram Haigaz, frequently expressed a longing for a return to the ancestral homeland. As Khachig Tölölyan observes, "The classical paradigm also stipulated a desire by diasporans to return eventually to the homeland, but this was a desire ritually and rhetorically proclaimed" (Tölölyan, 2007, p. 647). As Aram Ghoogasian mentions, accounting with William Saroyan's *Bitlis*, this return is not possible even if the author physically has an opportunity to visit the land of his ancestors: "This problem is only exacerbated by the face-to-face encounter with the homeland by an Armenian born in the United States to an immigrant family. In Bitlis the protagonist Bill, Saroyan's literary stand-in, is forced to acknowledge that return in the fullest sense is not possible, even if visiting the homeland is" (Ghoogasian, 2021, p. 19).

Reflecting this deep spiritual connection with the birthplace, authors often entitle their works with names or the nature of their homeland. For instance, Hamastegh, originally from Kharpert, titled his first collections *The Village* (1924) and *The Rain* (1929). Similarly, Vahe Haig devoted much of his literary energy to the memory of the homeland; his multivolume work *Fatherland's Hearth* (5 vols., 1935-1970) and a national-historical-cultural and ethnographic memory book *Kharpert and Its Golden Plain* (1959) embody this nostalgic orientation. In contrast, Aram Haigaz turned to personal testimony in his memoir-novel *Four Years in the Mountains of Kurdistan* (1972), recounting the survival of an Armenian boy during the Armenian Genocide.

Collectively, these works demonstrate a strong sense of historical continuity and function as literary chronicles, preserving the memory of the Armenian past.

To define this movement within the classical framework of literary directions, we can characterize it as a form of Romanticism. It is no secret that by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Armenian village was in a state of decline and hardship. This reality is vividly reflected in the works of earlier realist writers such as Tlkatintsi and Ruben Zardaryan, whose short stories portrayed the poverty and hardships of rural life. In contrast, however, Hamastegh maintained that the village completed his world during childhood and adolescence – with its mountains, its church, and especially its sacred sphere, which "remained within the village" (Hamastegh ԺՉ, 1966, p. 13). He perceived an extraordinary unity among the sacred, the stars, and the peasants, which reveals his aesthetic aim to present an idealized and purified vision of the past.

Notably, this movement did not develop solely in the United States; it also spread to the Near East (Mushegh Ishkhan, Andranik Tsarukyan) and even to Istanbul (Hakob Mndzuri).

The latter, Mndzuri, defines his literary preference somehow as a pressure of history. Once he declared that it was Gustave Flaubert who shaped him – not through *Madame Bovary*, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, or *Salammbô*, but through his *Correspondence*, his final volumes, in which he articulates his thoughts on art and literature (Mndzuri, 1974, p. 12). Yet he turned to the homeland as his central subject precisely because of its loss (Demirjian, 1994, p. 514). In this case, the most suitable subgenre is the chronicle. "I created a form of regionalist literature, blending narrative with ethnographic elements. This approach was necessary to construct an authentic atmosphere" (Mndzuri, 1984, p. 209). This approach is even evident in the titles of the author's books. For example, *Blue Light* (*Kapuyt Luys*, 1958) refers to the mountains of Kharpert, while *Armtan* (1966) evokes his birthplace.

Retreat without Song

In contrast to the Movement of Nostalgia, French-Armenian writers such as Shahan Shahnour and Zareh Vorpuni inaugurated what has been characterized as the Literary Movement of Retreat. Unlike the romanticized or nostalgic perspectives of earlier émigré authors, this movement adopted a more critical and analytical orientation, interrogating the dilemmas of Armenian identity within the shifting cultural and intellectual landscape of interwar Europe.

Shahnour's seminal novel *Retreat without Song* stands as the emblem of this current. The text undertakes a dual task: first, it establishes an "intertextual dialogue" with the French literary canon, particularly with traditions centered on the figure of the "fallen woman" (from Abbé Prévost and Gustave Flaubert to Alexandre Dumas fils). Second, it dramatizes the processes of "cultural assimilation", portraying how the Armenian younger generation gradually loses its native language, communal traditions, and moral frameworks within the French milieu. The author articulates this idea through his tribune-like double, Souren, who declares that: "'Parents, sons, uncles, and sons-in-law, retreat: customs, conceptions, morals, and love, retreat: the language retreats, the language retreats, the language retreats. And we are still retreating in words and in deed, willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly: forgive them, forgive them, Ararat!" (Shahnour, 1982, p. 104). Shahnour simultaneously critiques the historical and cultural referents that, in his view, obscured or distorted the reception of his literature.

His short stories further develop this inquiry by presenting characters who attempt to resist assimilation and preserve their "national consciousness". Yet, these figures often emerge as "existentially defeated", reflecting the paradox of struggling to maintain national identity in a setting where the forces of integration are overpowering. Similarly, Vazgen Shushanyan's novel *Summer Nights*, written in a "stream-of-consciousness mode", explores the subtle cultural stimuli that accelerate assimilation – Chopin's polonaises, Heine's poetry, Chinese porcelain (Shushanyan, 1930, pp. 5-21), and even the attraction of a Jewish love interest – thereby mapping the psychic terrain of displacement.

Behind Symbols

Moreover, the Retreat movement sought to inscribe the Armenian experience into broader historical and philosophical frameworks. For instance, Nikoghos Sarafian's poetry collection *14* invokes the French Revolution as an archetype of liberty's bloody recurrence. The haunting refrain – "It is not possible not to remember you, O blood" (Sarafian 3), functions as both a meditation on universal historical cycles and a coded allusion to the Armenian catastrophe.

In the most recent period of Istanbul Armenian literature (though it is not usually regarded as part of diasporic literature), writers increasingly turned to symbolic expression. This movement, which Arto Jumbushian–Zareh Khrakhouni defined as *objective symbolism (symbolisme objectif)* (Jumbushian, 1959, p. 21), sought, on the one hand, freedom in the combination of non-poetical objects, and on the other, the capacity to address history under comprehensible conditions. It is exemplified in the poetry of Zahrad (poem called *Evil Things*) and Zareh Khrakhouni (*Song of Liberty*, 1993), as well as in the novels of Rober Haddeciyan – *Ceiling* (1983; 2000, two volumes) and Zaven Piperian *The Dusk of the Ants* (1984).

When Zahrad writes, "Go and greet the evil things" or "Tell them not to happen," (Zahrad, 2006, p. 193) he implicitly refers to the life of oppressed people – among them, the Armenians. Likewise, when Zareh Khrakhouni composes his well-known *Requiem* and dedicates it "To all those who did not have a grave," (Khrakhouni, 1973, p. 30) the reader understands that he is alluding to the Genocide, even though no specific historical event is explicitly mentioned. In his novel, Rober Haddeciyan also symbolically evokes history when he writes that: "In reality, neither the province remained nor the graves, because the tornado of war completely destroyed life in a single day: suddenly all lights were extinguished" (Haddeciyan, 2006, p. 38).

Seeking the Identity

Another dimension of Armenian émigré literature involves foreign-language writers. In some cases, the use of a non-Armenian language resulted from external circumstances such as environment or education (William Saroyan, Michael Arlen, Peter Balakian). In other cases, the choice was deliberate: writers such as Shahan Shahnour (under the pseudonym Armen Lubin) and Leon Z. Surmelian wrote in French or English to present Armenian themes to a broader international audience. Leon Z. Surmelian, for instance, conceptualized this linguistic choice as a necessary literary task. In 1964, during a visit to Armenia, he explained in response to a fellow writer's question: "It is simply a division of labor. You write in Armenian, I write in English, and we both serve the same purpose. I came here with the manuscript of the Armenian national epic *Daredevils of Sasoun*, and I ask all the participating writers to acknowledge that he is more Armenian than I am" (Surmelian, 1980, p. 12).

This phenomenon has sparked considerable debate among Armenian literary critics. The central question is whether such authors should be regarded as part of Armenian literature. Some argue that since their works address distinctly Armenian subjects – such as the experience of the Genocide or the life of the diaspora (Muchoyan, 2015, pp. 429-90) – they rightly belong within Armenian literary tradition. Others maintain that language is the decisive criterion in determining literary identity (Danielyan, 2011, pp. 206-16).

The debate has often been revisited by the writers themselves. William Saroyan, for example, once (1976) declared: "Although I write in English, and despite the fact that I am from America, I consider myself an Armenian writer. The words I use are in English, the surroundings I write about are American, but the soul, which makes me write, is Armenian. This means I am an Armenian writer and deeply love the honor of being a part of the family of Armenian writers" (Saroyan, 1986, p. 6). His words highlight the emotional and cultural ties that bind him to Armenian heritage. Nevertheless, from a literary-historical perspective, his oeuvre belongs primarily to American literature. The same applies to Leon Z. Surmelian, Peter Sourian, Sevda Sevan, Peter Balakian, Carol Edgarian, Varuzhan Voskanian, Antonia Arslan, Hakob Hacikian, and others who, while profoundly Armenian in spirit, expressed that spirit outside the linguistic framework of Armenian literature. It allows us to say that Armenian foreign-language literature, without any doubt, enriches Armenian literary and cultural history.

A distinct and meaningful pattern can be observed in the relationship between the second and third generations of exiles in connection with questions of national

identity. The second generation frequently demonstrates a tendency to distance itself from national issues. The reasons for this distancing are complex and multifaceted: in some cases, it reflects a conscious effort to avoid the inherited trauma of collective national suffering: The typical example is Michael Arlen's approach: "O Armenia, O unlovely courtesan, abasing yourself first before one conqueror and then before another, why could you not die with dignity, why did you not die with Nineveh, Carchemish, Babylon? Then Genghis Khan offered you oblivion. And you got out of that, too. Dead, you might perhaps have interested historians of antiquity... Yes, you would have made a fairly interesting corpse. But alive, you are a bore to everyone and a burden to your children" (Arlen, 1929, pp. 59-60).

However, a paradoxical reversal emerges in the third generation. His son, Michael J. Arlen, returns to his ancestral roots and engages directly with questions of heritage and identity. About this "voyage" he confessed: "At a particular time in my life, I set out on a voyage to discover myself what it is to be Armenian" (Arlen, J. 1982, p. 3). His book *Passage to Ararat* may be interpreted as a symbolic and intellectual confrontation with his father's detachment, representing an effort to reclaim a suppressed historical and cultural legacy. At the end of the book, J. Arlen tells a soul-touching story about his father's dreams: "You know, he was just as I remembered him as a boy," my father said that morning. "Except his hair was white - but very thick. He wore a frock coat and steel-rimmed spectacles. He stood at the end of our road speaking to me, calling. But he was speaking in Armenian, and I couldn't understand a word."

Sometimes I think it is as if a circle, once broken, had been completed or recompleted. What circle? We were kin to begin with" (Arlen, J. 1982, pp. 292-93). At the same time, this return somehow unites the generations, in a way resolving this conflict.

This kind of dualism can be traced even within the creative trajectory of a single author, as illustrated by the case of Peter Sourian. In his first novel, *Miri*, he examines questions of identity through the story of a Greek family. This escape from identity is framed by the author as an embarrassment, as when one of the characters says: "I even went and listened in on some of the Greek courses, and once in a while I would go into the library and sneak around where all the Greek history books were kept, picking them off the shelves and reading furtively about Alexander the Great and Pericles and Athens and Sparta and all that. Every time I heard someone moving around near me, I would put the book up on the shelves as if it were pornography or something like that, and act as if I were just passing through" (Sourian, 1957, pp. 176-

77)[1]. Yet, within the broader thematic and symbolic framework of the work, the reader can readily discern an underlying Armenian leitmotif. In his later writings, particularly in *The Gate*, Sourian turns explicitly to Armenian subjects, directly engaging with issues of Armenian identity, memory, and heritage.

Conclusion

Armenian diasporic literature emerged in 20s of the 20th century and developed in different countries. It developed with some directions that define writers' attitude to the history or future of the nation. The belief of returning to the homeland and the loss of the past shape the Movement of Nostalgia which has developed mainly in the United States (Hamastegh, Vahe Haig, Aram Haigaz, and others). As an argument of this treatment in the same decade in France appeared the Movement of Retreat to show the realistic approach to history, to show how Armenians in émigré slowly retreat from their national ornaments: from language, from identity, from heritage (Shahan Shanour, Vazgen Shushanian, Nikoghos Sarafian, and others).

In some cases, especially in Istanbul, the fate of the nation and historical questions are discussed with symbols. It is on one side due to environmental factors, on the other side – due to authors' preferences (Zahrad, Zareh Khrakhouni, Rober Haddeciyan, Zaven Piperian, and others).

The other line of Armenian émigré literature completes due to foreign language writers. In this case, the marginal issue concerns the memory of survivors and a bold sense of identity: through refusing or seeking for it (Michael Arlen, Michael J. Arlen, Peter Sourian, Peter Balakian, Antonia Arslan, and others).

Armenian émigré literature is a diverse and dynamic field. It is far from monolithic and opens numerous avenues for scholarly investigation, particularly regarding questions of identity, language, memory, and cultural adaptation in exile.

[1] This narrative leads us to an image in Shahnour's book, where Mother Armenia, in the eyes of the Armenian émigré characters in France, appears as a naked woman: "It was quite a big enlargement, showing a young girl standing in an affected classical pose, her arms slightly open, a smile on her face, and completely naked" (Shahnour, 1982, p. 92).

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