

I N T E R V I E W

Peroomian Explores Literary Perspectives on Diasporan Identity

Interview by Adriana Chitilian

The advent of the Genocide followed by the formation of the Diaspora brought about a victimized psyche in Armenian literature. The writings at this time reflected a nostalgic nature. People were depicted as isolated, clinging to the remnants of their past. Even today, contemporary literature continues to reverberate the victimized tone of a people who are not yet ready to let go of their past. What do you foresee as the future theme of Armenian literature within the Diaspora and Armenia?

Diasporan literature, in the immediate aftermath of the Genocide, evolved mainly around such themes as nostalgia, survival in a foreign land, inability—sometimes even unwillingness—to adopt oneself to the new culture and environment, psychology of a victim. Today, decades later, we still see the reverberation of the same state of mind. But why should we expect otherwise when nothing has changed? The possibility of return to one's native land is null, and the diasporan Armenian is condemned to gradual loss of national identity. The passage of time can only dull the pain, not cure it; and with the Armenian predicament unchanged, the call against assimilation and the rage against the Turkish denial of the Genocide will continue to contaminate the creative imagination.

The situation today is different, however. A free and independent Armenia can and should play the role which Soviet Armenia refused to play. For 70 years, the communist government discriminated the diasporan communities, divided them into friendly and unfriendly factions, favored few and alienated the remaining masses sympathetic to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Armenia today can provide the spiritual tie, the essential foothold for all diasporan Armenians to stand firm and tall, proud of their roots. If and when the Armenian government shoulders the struggle to achieve the ultimate national goal and adopts the ideal United Armenia—as the Armenian government did on the eve of the first anniversary of Armenian independence, May 28, 1919—then Armenia today can become the synthesis of a homeland and revive that ailing sense of belonging, cure that crisis of identity which cripples the healthy mind and affects the diasporan art.

With the interrelations between the literati in Armenia and Diaspora, initiated recently, some type of rapprochement in the critical thinking as well as the influential factors inspiring artistic literature will occur. The formidable divergence of literary themes, style, and content between the diasporan and Soviet Armenian literatures in the '20s will hopefully never happen again. I didn't intend to prescribe the future themes. I do not believe in prescriptive criticism. After all an artist creates an artwork not to convey a message or to propagate an ideology (this type of approach to literature is no longer favored), but I can foresee a growing similarity, in theme and style, and maybe even uniformity someday. Is it unrealistic to envision Armenia and Diaspora as one single national unit?

Many contemporary writers are addressing the important topic of defining an Arme-

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My first encounter with Dr. Rubina Peroomian was at a lecture symposium on the topic of North American-Armenian literature. Along with her two other colleagues—professors Lorne Shirinian and Leonardo Alishan—Peroomian discussed the subject of contemporary Armenian identity within the Diaspora.

Along with a Bachelor of Science in civil engineering, Peroomian received her Master's in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, after which she began working on her dissertation for her doctorate, a milestone comparison of Armenian literary responses to Catastrophe and the parallel Jewish experience. Through such a study, Peroomian extends the confines of analysis in the realm of Armenian literature, placing it in the context of literature in general.

This thesis was accepted for publication by the Near Eastern Studies Center of the University of California at Los Angeles. The publication is due out by the end of the year. Presently Peroomian teaches Armenian studies at UCLA and La Verne University. She also writes periodically for numerous journals and publications, and is an active participant in literary circles.



Peroomian: "No mathematical formula" to define diasporan identity

nian identity in the Diaspora. What factors would you say characterize the modern Armenian identity within the realms of contemporary Armenian literature?

There is no mathematical formula to define the Armenian identity in the Diaspora. The concept is elastic, undergoing constant metamorphosis. What Armenianness meant for Hamastegh's characters is not the same as the Armenian identity Vahe Oshagan strives to forge. The definition of an Armenian identity in the Diaspora can entail factors that were beyond the imagination of a writer even of the past decades. Perhaps in a very near future the Armenian identity will simply mean an Armenian passport in your pocket.

Now considering the Armenian Diaspora, particularly North America, before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, I would say contemporary writers, such as Vrej Armen and Hakob Karapents portray the retreat of the national identity (as Shahan Shahnur did in the early '30s in France). As I presented in my paper, they textualize the struggle to cope with the crisis of identity. Armenian values are compromised; Armenia has become a memory; involvement in the church and cultural institutions is a facade, a tool to pacify the compunction of having lost that conscious sense of Armenianness. Vahe Oshagan's *Ahazang* is an untraditional conceptualization of a tormented soul in a futile search for identity. Oshagan's "Odzum" is another—according to some, unconventional—at-

tempt to re-establish the ever fading national identity by challenging the values that are taken for granted and pushed back to the unconscious by destroying the myth, by breaking the mysticism which envelops the sense of Armenianness. Oshagan challenges the unchanging Armenian collective identity built upon an unquestioned faith towards the Armenian church, language, and the forefathers. It is not easy; it may even be considered sacrilege by some, but the result will be a conscious decision, a reconciliation, and an equilibrium in the dual identity and sense of belonging.

How do you think the current political climate in Armenia will effect literature?

It is too soon to tell if the political course in Armenia will dictate intolerance for differing views and agendas and label them as unwanted and unnecessary oppositions. Hopefully, the mistake of the past will not be repeated.

Armenians worldwide are polarized not in terms of culture, but in terms of their perception. Many times, the term Armenian is used generically to mean one people, when in reality it connotes a very pluralistic existence. For example, an Armenian living in San Francisco will certainly have different views than one who lives in Lebanon. How do you see these many different factors translating themselves under the heading of one culture? How do you think contemporary Armenian writers will translate this experience?

After centuries of dispersion and foreign influence, it is only natural for Armenians with different backgrounds to think, to act, and to perceive the world differently. These differences can introduce variety in literature, which is healthy and

See IDENTITY, page 12...

IDENTITY...

desirable, provided that the core of the literature remains Armenian. In other words, the author can adapt, transform, but cannot copy blindly. The young writers of the '30s in Paris, under the influence of the surrealists and the French socio-political movements, produced lasting values which unquestionably belonged to the traditions of Armenian literature.

What is your opinion of contemporary Armenian writers who do not utilize the Armenian language? Do you believe it is important to write in Armenian in order to be perceived as an Armenian writer?

Who is to blame if an Armenian writer does not write in Armenian? Except for the Middle Eastern countries, where for generations, families and educational institutions transmitted the Armenian language as a mother tongue, other diasporan communities treated Armenian as a second language at best. An artist uses his or her best medium to create a work of art. It is only the rigidity and intolerance of some that has cast a shadow of mistrust over these artists' work. But try to eliminate the great output of Armenian literature, especially that of the recent years, composed in other languages, and you will see how impoverished the diasporan literature will become. Of course, this logic does not contest the importance of the Armenian language in art both as a medium of expression and as a cultural characteristic. Armenian literature composed in another language is a phenomenon stemming from the diasporan reality. Here, I stress upon the word Armenian because this category encompasses texts only if they entertain themes and topics of Armenian relevance not those signed by an "ian."

What do you see for the future of diasporan women writers? Why do you think more Armenian women have not written in the past?

The scarcity of Armenian women writers is a phenomenon in the multifaceted problem of women in diasporan Armenian communities in countries even as progressive as