

Between Shadow and Rock: The Woman in Armenian American Literature

Margaret Bedrosian

Periodically bolting out of the Boston apartment that keeps her safe in a world unmoved by her existence, clad in the heavy sweaters and thick wool socks that shield her barren spinsterhood, the Auntie of Hapet Kharibian's "Home in Exile" also breaks out of the box that imprisons most portraits of Armenian American women.¹ As Auntie exerts her pittance of domestic authority by shopping for Ajax and picking green beans for an aged father's stew, nurturing insanity through her idle days, the reader briefly glimpses a refreshing truthfulness behind the types and stereotypes that populate much Armenian American literature. Auntie's life reflects a dual injustice: her silent reproaches to a dutiful nephew who visits weekly to shave his grandfather echo the equally inarticulate reproaches of numberless women unseen and unrecorded. Auntie reminds us that nowhere in Armenian American writing do we find a detailed and sustained portrait of a three-dimensional Armenian woman; indeed, in a literature that documents marginal experience—both in the Old Country and in America—the Armenian woman is exiled to its outer edges.

The causes for this artistic void are related to the challenges faced by smaller ethnic minorities in America as a whole. Though certain critics see a perverse philistinism in the lack of moral and financial support Armenian American artists receive from their own community, this view is probably unfair. In the swift flow of American life where smaller ethnic groups resist mobility and the disintegration of ethnic ties at the risk of calcification, they can seldom have their cake and eat it too. Addressing the particular obstacles that have tested Armenian writers in the past, Leon Surmelian notes they have "to contend with that branch of American big business called publishing, and cannot rely on their own group, as [other ethnic writers] might, to support them with sales figures publishers respect if they choose to write on an Armenian theme."² Currently, of course, the willingness of

smaller presses to publish the new and unknown gives writers alternative paths to an audience. Nevertheless, given the smaller size of the Armenian American population and proportionately, the fewer numbers of writers, one is grateful for the fine narratives that do exist. But the very fact that one can name several well developed works of fiction and non-fiction about Armenian fathers and sons—among the best known, Michael J. Arlen's *Exiles* and *A Passage to Ararat*—and not follow with an equivalent for an Armenian mother and daughter forces us to examine the cultural dynamics inhibiting this much needed testimony. This article charts a few views of Armenian women in Armenian myth and history, gives some sense of historical factors that have shaped their experience in America, and reviews the range of women portrayed in Armenian American literature.

Armenian culture was born out of a rocky, mountainous geography, a land that bred a durable people. The women have always maintained a tough outlook on life, and their composite story bursts with the passions of great epic. Persecuted along with the male half of the population by the whims of Ottoman rule, seldom asserting a voice in the destiny of their nation or sex, they—not surprisingly—bore much of the suffering as the massacres of 1915 turned Turkish Armenia into the century's first inferno. Yet, even as they were driven across the Syrian deserts, some remembered their descent from the proud pagan goddess, Anahid, a deity equal to any cosmic adversity, as the poet Siamanto reminded his readers on the eve of the massacres:

Take your revenge now, after twenty centuries,
oh my goddess, Anahid, now as I throw
into the fires of your altar, the two poisonous arms
of my cross. And I celebrate you, oh golden mother,
by burning the polluted bone from the rib,
of the Illuminator.

I beg of you, oh powerful, unequalled beauty,
give your body to the sun and be fertilized,
give birth to a formidable god for the Armenians.
For us, from your diamond-hard uterus bear an invincible god!¹³

Significantly, the poet cites Anahid's elemental, pre-Christian vitality as the only hope for a demoralized people. Like mother goddesses in other Indo-European traditions, Anahid is voraciously active, her womb the vortex of a tough divinity. But driven underground by the national embrace of Christianity in 301 A.D., Anahid's golden strength lay impotent and her diamond-hard uterus hosted millenia of carnage.

Yet even within the Christian timeframe, in epics such as *David of Sassoon*, women matched beauty with heroism. In David's

saga, Khandout Khatoun, the matriarch of the clan, is thus said to have “killed five thousand men” and saved her husband’s life in one battle. And, of course, during the deportations and massacres, as women were denied the quick death that blessed their husbands, many held on to human dignity.⁴ Through successive invasions and conquests that battered Armenia, a culture rich with artistic and intellectual vitality had managed to sustain national identity. But the psychological costs of survival ran high. By necessity, the family turned itself into a fortress, guarding its boundaries with vigilance and absolute adherence to the father’s word:

In times of social unrest, when the frightful and deadly fear of massacre was rampant, the necessity for self-preservation made every Armenian the potential and suspected enemy of every other. Trickery and treachery between Armenians under stress of great necessity has not been at all uncommon in the history of this persecuted people. Thus it is that family loyalty becomes a prerequisite for social welfare and filial loyalty becomes, or remains, an essential part of Armenian family tradition.⁵

The woman’s position in the traditional Armenian household varied according to age. As in other patriarchal cultures, the female child was less prized because her future lay in another man’s home. As a bride, she would hold the lowliest status in the extended family; unable to address her elders directly, forced to use children as intermediaries, her married life was circumscribed by obligations to other family members: she washed the feet of her father-in-law, kept her eyes averted when addressing her superiors, was the first to rise and last to bed. If she didn’t die in childbirth (commonly, Old Country men went through more than one wife because the bodies of the women met such tortuous demands), a daughter-in-law might look forward to a position as a matriarch at the close of her life. At this time she would exercise the same sanctions that had contracted her life earlier as a bride. This pattern of female subservience is common to other Mediterranean cultures, especially those nearby, and the Turkish household was essentially no different in the dynamics of male and female power. Indeed, careful comparison of these antagonistic cultures suggests that—outside of religion—they shared many similarities sociologically. It can also be argued that given the tireless work of harvesting, cooking, sewing, and rearing children, their position was central to the welfare of the family fortress, and that the father’s authority was not so much imposed as assented to.

But having conceded this much, it would be naive to assign the peculiar poignance of many Armenian women’s lives solely to the injustices that mark cultural patterns of Asia Minor. To forget that they were constantly vulnerable to the whims of a brutal social sys-

tem, that they were members of a race without authority within the Ottoman Empire, that for all the care their families took of their honor, one misstep with a Turk or Kurd could lead to rape and murder, betrays the same indifference that has kept the general history of the Armenians in the shadows.

The combined impact of a father-dominated home life and the unremitting threat of abduction kept women, especially young women, under the scrutiny of all. In Emmanuel Varandyan's 1938 novel, *The Well of Ararat*, we find a painstakingly vivid recreation of the tragic effects such family mores have on a young woman's fate in an Armenian village in Persia.⁶ The story of Marina's betrothal aptly demonstrates by what twisted means destiny—encoded in cultural sanctions—subverts desire. Raised in a rural family besieged by poverty and Moslem foes, Marina has been espied by the Tartar Son of Bey, who naturally wants to add her to his harem. Though she manages to escape, he vows "to finish off" her parents and abduct her. In response, her parents arrange for her marriage to a man she neither loves nor trusts. Up to this point, the parents' motives seem understandable and Marina's need for obedience and loyalty, a cultural imperative. But in a work tense with irony and criticism of modern urban values, we also learn that the husband Marina would have preferred has been overlooked because the chosen groom has more money. Marina, sacrificed to the dual gods of family safety and material welfare, commits suicide at the end. Winner of the 1983 Avery Hopwood Award, *The Well of Ararat* continues to be one of the most layered and sharply focussed works in Armenian American literature. The stylized cadences of ritual appropriately veil the characters, especially the women, yet their human predicaments permeate the narrative and we are made to see that Marina's life is taut with sexual and cultural givens.

In other works of fiction such as Peter Sourian's *The Gate* (1965), the very insignificance of the Armenian American women characters suggests their minimal impact on the historical irrationalities that shredded Armenia. Dominated by Armenian men who neither understand nor control the ambiguities that stalked them from Turkey to America, the novel's few women are either flaky non-Armenians or devitalized ethnics. The males, on the other hand, are crazed by a peculiarly Armenian obsession, the drive for a self-justification that rests on recapturing their lost Eden. Unable to interact naturally and compassionately with women, they are fueled by the stereotypical "masculine" excess of rigid thought cut off from intuitive insight. At their most extreme, they exemplify the revolutionary mania that

helped drop Armenia into the Turkish maw in 1915. From the perspective of this discussion, the novel's lack of strong female characters is linked to its vision of Armenia as a mirage whose color and shape reflect individual passions. For as the actual Armenia recedes in memory, it becomes either an abstraction ("Armenia, what was Armenia? How could one grasp it? It was everything, yet it was not in the air, not in a room, like a chair or a table,"⁷) or a fossil set in the amber of imagination, the only unifying ideal in a post-Holocaust fragmentation. Ultimately, *The Gate* hinges on a—perhaps unintended—irony: the future of the land, that diamond-hard archetype of the Armenian woman, only underlines the plight of these diminished women.

Life in America only accentuated the paradoxical position of Armenian women, ironies that surface in the literature. Generally perceived by the men in Old Country idioms, the women were expected to follow through according to norms of the past. But there is increasing documentation of a deeper truth: these women were often more suited to the rigors of American life than their husbands.⁸ The ethos of American independence sanctioned an increasingly assertive attitude among the women, stimulated impulses that had been forced into dormancy under the combination of patriarchy and Ottoman rule. This new strength begins to surface in Richard Hagopian's 1952 novel, *Faraway the Spring*. Hagopian, who along with Varandyan and Saroyan, belongs to the earlier generation of Armenian American writers, typically plays with the tensions that pull at immigrant life; his characters fight to escape the culturally inherited sadness that traps them. In *Faraway the Spring*, the mother of the Dinjyan family secretly thwarts her husband's traditional authority by getting a part-time job washing dishes for Protestant church socials. But her innocent intention to supplement a subsistence income her husband keeps squandering backfires when one of the Protestant men makes a pass and frightens her into quitting. Though the novel relies too heavily on miracles to decide plot, its depiction of Maryan's circumscribed life draws upon a well-defined pattern in Armenian women's lives in America. As described by Richard La Piere in his seminal study, "The Armenians of Fresno County," the Old Country traits bred into the women persisted into the first generation, as this young Armenian's testimony indicates:

I have come to the conclusion that the Armenian girl will stick with you longer and put up with more than American girls. The Armenian girls have been brought up to believe that the man is the boss of the household and that marriage is a sacred thing not to be revoked, and, for better or worse, a woman must stick with her husband. And stick they do. Likewise from their earliest years they are

taught cooking, sewing, and all the other essentials which one would like to have in a wife and which one so seldom finds in one now. They are taught the value, indeed the virtue, of economy and will save with a man. Economy is something which is apparently looked down upon in this country.⁹

As a summation of Armenian American expectations in 1930, when immigrants and their offspring were still sorting out Old and New World mores, these remarks strike us with their forthright self-satisfaction. They indicate how pivotal the wife's prescribed role was to the affluence Armenians achieved within a generation in this country. On the other hand, not all young Armenian men wanted such pliancy, and unless the woman was daring enough to marry an *odar* ("non-Armenian"), she risked the contracted life of a *doun-mena* (lit., "stay-at-home").

Finally bursting through these limitations is the mother of Peter Najarian's *Voyages* (1971). Although the father-son relationship controls the thematic weave, we find here a portrait of an Armenian American woman sensitively attuned to her identity and needs. Her awareness of her historic condition suggests that here we finally have a more truthful portrait of a real woman. Like other young women who survived the massacres, the protagonist's mother has been raised in an orphanage and is eventually brought to America to marry a man she's never seen before. Once married, though, she doesn't fall into the expected pattern, sublimating her independence to duty. Listening to an *oud* solo by another woman survivor, she admits the emptiness of her situation:

... a *taxim* bubbling, flowing from her nimble fingers as if to form that long embroidery she had been weaving in her heart since her father and brother were murdered. And the tears down my face were not for her alone but my own loss and the nine years I never knew joy, never waved a tambourine about my head without shame as if there were something sinful in being happy, I had not learned how to be happy: where was *kef* for the orphan without a home, that dumb donkey who never learned how to love her husband because he was forced upon her?¹⁰

Out of this fierce honesty, she enables herself to break one of the strictest of Armenian taboos: she leaves her husband, divorces him, and with her son sets up a home alone in the middle of an alien country, giving herself time to reclaim her personhood before marrying Petrus, the man she actually loves. Though Melina is in many ways a typical Armenian mother (symbolically sending food in bottles and plastic bags with her son wherever he goes), in a deeper sense she has not acted normally:

"I was different. You think I don't understand when you say 'I'm different., Ma, I'm not like other Americans'? Why do you think I don't tremble like other

mothers when their sons go out with Italian or Irish girls? Petrus remembered his father's house and it meant everything to him, but what did it mean to me, *Armenian*, except that it made me an orphan?"¹¹

Though Melina's question—"What does it mean, *Armenian*?"—is critical for all members of this ethnic group, the women have had to formulate a distinctive answer.

Turning to William Saroyan's work, we still don't discover a sustained commitment to depicting believable Armenian American women despite glimmers of sensitivity to the lives around him. In general, Saroyan's fiction often sacrifices characterization to the demands of his worldview or his embittered alienation. But the plainest expression of his attitude toward Armenian women outside his own family is that he just didn't care much about them. His ethnic alter-egos mirror his own predilections for unhappy liaisons with non-Armenians, women who inevitably betray his naive faith in them. When he does focus on his family members, he assigns his mother and grandmother roles in a Saroyan myth where their earthiness, pragmatism, and hard work assuage his insecure psyche. Thus, his grandmother inevitably appears as the Old Country *barav*, the old woman whose rugged voice and contours match the rocky Armenian terrain. His widowed mother, conversely, incarnates the same dutifulness toward family and work values that we find in Hagopian, steadily feeding her children a diet of wholesome Armenian food and anchoring their lives in that microcosmic melting pot of Fresno, California. But bound by his own need for self-justification, Saroyan never frees these women to tell their complete stories. As a result, he obscures the sources of his mythic self-image as a defiant son of an ancient race.

By contrast, Michael J. Arlen in *Exiles* and *A Passage to Ararat* does pursue his heritage to its legendary sources in Armenia. The first volume of this pair poignantly sets the scene for the revelation of the second. As Arlen peels away the sophisticated masks his Armenian father and Greek mother wear, we see how their lack of commitment to a *place* has bedeviled their lives and how their rejection of tradition leaves them dessicated expatriates. Particularly in the case of the father, anger and impotence burn under the suave exterior, he has rejected his given name and his ethnic identity at the cost of cheapening his talent. In *A Passage to Ararat*, Arlen solves the riddle of his father's anguish, placing it in its final context; as his guide through Soviet Armenia vehemently insists: "Fatherland, father, It is the same thing. . . . Your father was an Armenian. . . . You must respect him."¹² The value of Arlen's record lies in his skillful proof of that

equation, fatherland equals father, and of his discovery that ethnicity can mold human identity itself. But here too, Melina's question dogs us: what relevance does Arlen's insight have for the Armenian woman? Does fatherland equal mother? Is there room to push this question even further: does motherland equal father?

Without belaboring any of this in the abstract, we can address the issue of women's roles in Armenian American literature from the alternate perspective of Arshile Gorky's visual art. Though his creative medium was not literary, Gorky's copious letters articulated the challenges facing the ethnic artist in America. In one such letter, written in 1943 to his sister, he complains:

Mother's Armenian eyes they call Picasso's, Armenian melancholy they term Byzantine and Russian. And if I correct them and say, "No, dear sirs, you are in error for these are Armenian eyes," then they look at you strangely and say that such corrections are merely exaggerations of "small-nation chauvinism."¹³

Indeed, Gorky's burden as an artist was his faultless eye: he knew the cost of bearing a refined yet little-known aesthetic tradition from Asia Minor into the amorphous milieu of American art. As letter after letter insists, to the end of his life he cherished the integrity of his ethnic and artistic descent: "Every artist has to have tradition. Without tradition art is no good. Having a tradition enables you to tackle new problems with authority, with solid footing."¹⁴ Accordingly, he used his native traditions as a searchlight for personal exploration, and the elegant line and stripped down forms that became his signature symbolized his commitment to an evolving aesthetic: "For me great art derives from complexity, from the clash of many new and opposing ideas."¹⁵ Alchemizing his Armenian heritage, his bitter experience as an immigrant, and his experiments with contemporary art by his voracious creative will, Gorky pioneered abstract expressionism. As the artist Robert Jonas states in an interview with Gorky's nephew, Gorky broke through cubism and surrealism independently of European influences: Inspired by the fantasies and dream images of his native land, he opposed "the utilitarian, logical, rectilinear way of life in the United States. His Armenia is free-flowing."¹⁶

Jonas' comments are noteworthy for at least two related reasons. First, by indulging his love of the fantastic and thereby projecting a fully realized interior cosmos onto the canvas, Gorky fulfilled what Joseph Frank identifies as a central task of modern literature, "transmuting the time world of history into the timeless world of myth."¹⁷ This iconography also encoded and enshrouded the emotional nuances of Gorky's personal life, enabling him to transcend subjective and objective time. This achievement is largely due to

Gorky's sensitivity toward the feminine dynamics of his native culture, as Jonas' diction makes clear. Thye "free-flowing" and vibrant shapes and colors that squirm and burst through Gorky's paintings convey unabashed sexual sophistication, a direct legacy of a childhood spent in Eden before the Fall.

Not surprisingly then, this foremost Armenian American artist has depicted one of the most indelible images of an Armenian woman in this century. The portrait of "*The Artist and His Mother*," which Gorky completed only after a decade of preliminary studies, offers a haunting view of a mother and son on the verge of separation, restating the artist's bond to Mother Armenia herself. In its stripped-down focus, the painting is also an icon of modern art, where "the dimension of historical depth has vanished from the content of the major works," leaving the work free to exert archetypal power.¹⁸ As art critic Harry Rand describes the painting, the mother and son present themselves as objects of meditation, isolated "from the flow of any circumstance."¹⁹ This notion of "presentness" leads the viewer to considerations beyond Rand's intent. For not only does the picture's content express a son's love for his mother, but its stylistic innovation enacts an artist's gratitude toward his first teacher. Whatever he knew of Armenian art and history, Gorky had initially learned from his mother, a woman whose direct gaze, open features, and composed figure embody a secure, culturally grounded self-image. As an example of Gorky's love of essence, responsive to yet now bound by historical and aesthetic traditions, the portrait is an emblem of organic art: using the past as the backdrop for the "clash of new and opposing ideas," it honors its sources as it extends them.

Returning to the central concerns of this paper after this brief exploration of Gorky's art enhances our sense of the possibilities open to Armenian American writers. The fact is that Armenian American life pulses with all the urgency and drama of a Gorky abstract. Yet much of the literature is stalled at standard departure points—massacres, deportations, orphanages, immigration woes, and the filtering into American life—or picking over typical ethnic motifs such as grape harvests in the San Joaquin Valley, Turkish coffee breaks in Boston, or aging in the factories of the Midwest. Seldom do writers take advantage of the exciting and painful oppositions that make this country a vortex of relentless social evolution; seldom do we see how Armenian men and women actually interacted, changed, and grew under the heat of the Fresno summer during the Depression, working with or grating against other ethnic groups such as the Mexicans, Japanese, and Finns; never do we find a psychologically satisfying account of a

mother carrying the group memory of rape, abduction, and slaughter into life in the “free” society and then casting shadows of her fear or her triumph onto the second and third generations.

To sum up then, echoing earlier generations of observers, we note the materials of an absorbing literature scattered about the Armenian American landscape. But as they continue to gather and shape these materials, Armenian American writers could learn from the daring of Gorky’s art, innovation nurtured by the masculine *and* feminine energies of his native land. For this survey suggests, one of the telltale weaknesses of Armenian American literature, the undistinguished character of the women, is subtly yet unmistakably linked to the unleavened state of the literature in general. There is more to tell of how these women have lived, stories that will suggest the complex interweaving of culture and gender.

Notes

¹Hapet Kharibian, “Home in Exile,” *Ararat*, No. 52 (1972), pp. 3-8.

²Leon Surmelian, “The American Writer of Armenian Birth,” *Ararat*, No. 19 (1964), p. 53.

³Siamanto, “Prayer to Anahid on the Feast of Navasart,” in *Anthology of Armenian Poetry*, trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 138-40.

⁴Armenian men were shot first because they posed a greater potential threat to the Turks, whereas women, children, and the aged were—ironically—denied a quick death.

⁵Richard Tracy La Piere, “The Armenian Colony in Fresno County, California,” diss. Stanford 1930, p. 167.

⁶Emmanuel Varandyan, *The Well of Ararat* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., 1938).

⁷Peter Sourian, *The Gate* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 204.

⁸Recent informal surveys of Armenian American women in the Boston area substantiate what many within the community have suspected all along: a stronger tradition of female authority within the home than has been overtly acknowledged. Although this tradition doesn’t overturn the bulk of power held by the father, it balances our views of women’s roles both in the Old Country and in America. See Arlene Voski Avakian, “Armenian-American Women: The First Word . . .” (Working Paper for the Women and Ethnicity Project, Brown University, March 1983).

⁹La Piere, p. 254.

¹⁰Peter Najarian, *Voyages* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 62.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹²Michael J. Arlen, *A Passage to Ararat* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), p. 135.

¹³“The Letters of Arshile Gorky,” ed. Karlen Mooradian, *Ararat*, No. 48 (1971), p. 29.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1963), p. 60.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁹Harry Rand, *Arshile Gorky: The Implications of Symbols* (Montclair, New Jersey: Allanheid, Osmun and Co., 1980), p. 29.

Critique

"Between Shadow and Rock . . ." discusses how this ethnic literature reflects the place of women in Armenian American society. Few works are published by Armenian women. When women appear in Armenian novels of fathers and sons, they are often foils or narrowly portrayed in terms of stereotypes (e.g. loving mother, dutiful wife). Various themes recur in this ethnic genre: political upheaval and violence, the loss of homeland and the stress of immigration to the United States. Such themes call attention to the subordinate position of Armenian American women and their limited scope in society. Male characters expect women to offer psychological support and to suffer silently, to demonstrate qualities which represent a lost homeland such as endurance and fertility and to reject pressure in the U.S. to modify traditional behavior.

What is the relationship between ethnic identity and a woman's sense of who she is? Bedrosian shows that the two types of group awareness, attention to culture and homeland and a woman's sense of gender, do not necessarily complement each other. Male figures in Armenian American literature often think about being oppressed and alienated because they are members of a unique cultural group. However, the treatment they receive does not appear to make them more conscious of the subordinate position of women. Not surprisingly, the essay suggests that some female characters consider their ethnic legacy a burden which prevents them from being who they choose.