

Critique

Female characters, drawn from a sampling of Armenian American writing, are examined for clues to the breadth of their individual and group experience in this brief literature review. The author early concludes that the range of experience and personality available for examination in such an overview is extremely limited. The bulk of the review is then given to a presentation of possible historical and cultural explanations for the typical flat, narrow, and slightly negative portrayal.

People of a harsh, mountainous land, the Armenians have borne not only the challenge of geography, but also the rigors of repeated invasion, war, and conquest. Out of this matrix the heroic vision of the mythical goddess Anahid rises to challenge the tepid portraits of her 20th-century daughters. To explain away this contemporary quietude, the author argues the survival value of filial obedience and adherence to a strictly patriarchal cultural code. The instinctively obedient behavior characteristic of many of the women described in the quoted passages has adaptive significance in the family fortress of an embattled people.

As the author points out, this pattern of female subservience has been common to other neighboring Mediterranean cultures as well. One might argue, indeed, that it is normative for the vast majority of world cultures, and that only the exceptions to this situation are remarkable. In the Armenian instance, it is the intensity of domination that is worthy of note, not the pattern of subjugation itself. Ruled by a brutal Ottoman Empire, reflected in a harsh patriarchy at home, the individual woman was deemed worthless save as a breeder of sons and bearer of services. Ironically, the passage selected to illustrate the ideal, other-worldly, superhuman qualities of the goddess is cast in just these traditional terms. The goddess is urged to bear a son who will be an invincible leader for his people. Rather than save her people through her own power, the goddess is assigned a secondary role—to become the mother of hope, not hope itself.

One obvious reason for the secondary role assigned to women in Armenian American literature is that it is a male genre. Armenian men, writing from a position of painful struggle with issues of domination and justification, have simply not noticed the struggle of the women at their sides. Saroyan, probably the best known of the recent writers, is engulfed with identity issues, and, relating *to* women in a variety of superficial ways, fails to relate *from* them any sense of their story, or of the essence of their struggle.

When we move from literature to the other artistic streams flowing from Armenian life, the depiction of women becomes more human, more whole. Gorky, in the author's illustration, perhaps best exemplifies this desirable balance, but scenes from music or dance could have been sketched to make the same point. The women are neither missing or mute, as the literature would have us believe.

While Armenian American literature is strangely silent as to the strengths of the traditional woman, it would be unwise to pass too lightly over the accuracy of the depiction of subordination, or of its cultural utility. As immigrants rooted in Old World customs, the women played a pivotal role in enabling their fathers and husbands to rapidly acquire financial standing through thrift. Their subordinate orientation reinforced the male's ability to sacrifice present comfort for future gain.

A hint of the power of the women's untold story is found in Najarian's *Voyages* (1971). An immigrant, constrained by an arranged marriage, the mother of the protagonist nevertheless is sensitive to her needs and her identity. She allows herself to become angry enough at her restrictions to break free, to find herself and to establish a new relationship based on choice.

Personal exploration does indeed pose a significant danger to the old order. Rifts such as those experienced by this woman are not inevitable, however. For some couples and families mutual exploration and establishment of identity can be a highly adaptive mechanism, empowering their growth in new contexts. For all immigrant groups, the question of what to leave behind and what to hold fast to of the old culture must be addressed. For the Armenian man's immigrant experience, that process has been eloquently witnessed to by Saroyan, Sourian, and others. The chorus has been moving, powerful, and instructive, but comprised of only male voices. What we must hear now, if the record is to be truthful, is the woman's story as well, spoken in her own words.

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