

Critics' Forum

Literature

Perennially Transnational: Armenian Literature after the Genocide

By Myrna Douzjian

As a graduate student in Comparative Literature, I recently had the opportunity to present a talk entitled “Post-Genocide Armenian Literature of the Homeland and Diaspora” to students in an Armenian Studies undergraduate seminar at USC.

I was initially confounded by the notion of having to unify a vast period of literary production in two complex and fluid locales – the homeland and the Diaspora. The term homeland lacked geographical and historical fixity – Western Armenia, Karabagh, Javakhk, the Armenian SSR, and the two periods of the Republic of Armenia (pre-Soviet and the contemporary, post-Soviet) had to be taken into account.

Defining the Diaspora presented a separate slew of considerations: the generation of Genocide survivors; the distinctions in perspective that their successors would come to offer; different waves of voluntary dispersion throughout the 20th century; and an abundance of locales and shifting centers of literary output (Argentina, Canada, France, Lebanon, Russia, Syria, US, etc.) were factors contributing to the heterogeneous nature of the Diaspora. I would have to convey that Armenian Diaspora literature represents various networks of ever-changing communities and a diverse range of diasporic experiences.

But even these issues were not the most important of my worries. There remained the rather conspicuous fact that, for the most part, I had studied and read about literature in the homeland and Diaspora separately. Subcategories in Armenian literary studies abound: Eastern, Western, Soviet, Armenian Republic, French-Armenian, Armenian-American, second generation Armenian-American, *ad infinitum*. Academic scholarship perpetuates the specialization of Armenian literature into narrower, separate subfields, thereby limiting the amount of dialogue that acknowledges the connections between the parts of the whole. What thread would tie it all together in order to produce a coherent lecture?

Certainly, the conscientious critic strives to bring out the particularities in the work of individual authors. Thus, an attempt at effectively homogenizing nearly a century of Armenian literary production would seem like a counter-intuitive move, positioned directly against the norm. But I've come to understand that the attempt to find a unifying thread in the Armenian literature of the last century proves, nevertheless, to be a worthwhile endeavor. When viewed as a whole, Armenian literature after the Genocide exhibits a striking constant: its *transnational* character.

In academic terms, the concept of “transnationalism” involves a constant negotiation of cultural identity with the identity of others – neighbors, colonizers, and empires – and a grappling with the power dynamics involved between various positions, including

dominant and dominated, and central and peripheral. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (and certainly well before that) Armenians have been living in the interstices, between cultures and identities, thereby problematizing the traditional definition of the nation-state. As a result, Armenia, or the homeland, has existed as a place; but its presence as a state of mind in the cultural imagination has arguably had equal weight. The significance of geographical specificity becomes lessened in this regard: Armenian literature, no matter where or when, has a transnational character, because it has always existed at the intersection of cultures as well as power politics.

To take a simple example, Soviet Armenian literature, if considered part of literature of the homeland, was always based on an interaction between Soviet policies and Armenian interests. Throughout this period, authors in the Armenian SSR had to manipulate their actual priorities according to the Soviet party line and the dictates of Socialist Realism. Although the amount of pressure placed on writers varied depending on the political climate in Moscow, punishment through exile and limitations placed on the articulation of national and ethnic concerns remained unchanging issues for Armenian writers. Similarly, though in the era of post-Soviet independence, the work of contemporary writers like Berj Zeytountsyan, Aghassi Ayyvazyan, and Kourken Khanjyan has addressed the lasting effects of the Soviet regime on the new nation-state as well as the rise of the influence of neocolonial powers, most notably Russia and the US.

As a result of the transnational character of the Armenian experience, a fixation in the literary criticism of the last two decades has been the question of where to place Armenian literature in the context of global literary trends. Authors and critics have constantly evaluated the literature of the Republic in comparison with “European standards.” Just as Armenia continues to be subjected to the Great Game – the world powers’ quest for leverage over the Transcaucasus region – the literature of the homeland struggles to affirm its cultural viability. By the same token, Diaspora literature has defined itself based on an awareness of itself in relation to external socio-political and cultural forces. Its struggle for cultural viability therefore represents the difficult tug of war between Armenians’ resistance against and assimilation into dominant cultures; and, its transnational themes include dual or hybrid identities, language, cultural transference (such as the use of memory and history in the grand narrative that unities Armenians), cultural survival, and the Genocide.

To take a specific example from the literature, Simon Vratzian’s semi-autobiographical work *Kianki Ughinerov* begins with a description that highlights the age-old relevance of transnationalism to Armenians:

In the beginning was the land of Armenia and the Kingdom of Bagratuni – Ani. And Ani became the Volga. And the Volga became the Crimea. And Crimea became the Don. And the Don became the Republic of Armenia. And the Republic became the entire world. And the Armenian became a citizen of the world. This is my story, and, changing names, the story of all Armenians, past and present. (Qtd. In Richard G. Hvannisian, “Simon Vratzian and Armenian Nationalism.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 5. No. 3. Oct. 1969. P. 192.)

Being located between various flows of cultural capital or on the periphery of hegemonic cultural activity – in other words, struggling with and against the cultural and political forces around it – binds together the multiple locales that the terms homeland and Diaspora encompass. And since the historical definition of the homeland as a place has itself changed, Armenian cultural identity, and by implication, the obsessions of so much of its literature, is defined by both the status and the struggles of a complex, transnational identity.

Literary and cultural critic Gayatri Spivak sees Armenia and the Diaspora as a model that can be applied to a great deal of contemporary global realities. She writes, “Any theory of postcolonial hybridity pales into insignificance when we consider the millennial ipseity of the Armenian, existing in uneasy double bind with the hybridity imposed by the locale” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Other Asias*. Blackwell Publishing: Malden, 2008). In simpler terms, the identity (the “ipseity”) of Armenian literature and the Armenian experience lies somewhere between the global and the local; it is defined by the “uneasy” combination of the two. And rather than representing an anomaly, the transnational character of the Armenian experience is fast becoming the norm. Likewise, irrespective of the geographical divisions intrinsic to the categories of Armenian homeland and Diaspora, the literature of the two shares a strong common ground – the constant necessity of negotiating the politics and identities of various others.

Homeland and Diaspora are widely accepted, nearly undeniable categories for things Armenian – in the arts, academia, politics, news media, and, above all, daily life. Having found at least one framework by which to represent Armenian literature in its variety, I was able to let go of these occasionally divisive designations, however unintentional they might be. At a time when politics has driven a wide rift between the Diaspora and the homeland (now defined in the traditional sense of the nation-state), I found that literature and literary criticism offered us a reminder of the inextricable link between the two.

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Myrna Douzjian is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA, where she teaches literature and composition courses.

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