

CRITICS' FORUM **LITERATURE**

A DECONSTRUCTION OF CONNECTED HISTORIES IN ALINE OHANESIAN'S "ORHAN'S INHERITANCE"

by Talar Chahinian

I must admit, picking up a book with a narrative already too familiar is a tall order. The task is made even more difficult when the narrative is one that speaks to my ethnic and communal sense of belonging. The room for disappointment is wide since so much is at stake. This hesitation, informed by simultaneous feelings of possessiveness and intrigue, often frames my approach to memoirs and novels about the Armenian genocide, an event that marks my familial history of becoming. It was in this resistant vein that I picked up Aline Ohanesian's debut novel, "Orhan's Inheritance" (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill 2015). Yet it did not take long for the text to disarm my uneasiness, for what unfolded was a beautifully written narrative, which was wise, mature, and cognizant of its making.

"Orhan's Inheritance" develops along two intermittent temporal planes, 1915 and 1990. The first documents the story of Seda Melkonian's survival in 1915, and the second tells the story of its intersection with a young Turkish man, Orhan Turkoglu's family past. What drives the narrative forward is a perplexing inheritance occasioned by the sudden death of Orhan's grandfather, Kemal, in 1990. In a decision indecipherable to his children, Kemal leaves the family estate in Karod, Turkey, to an unknown woman named Seda. Eager to find the reason behind his grandfather's odd, final gesture and to correct it, Orhan travels to Los Angeles, where the 90-year old Seda resides in a retirement home. Although the unraveling of hidden truths is a familiar trope in genocide literature, in what follows, Ohanesian's novel challenges our expectations through a meticulously executed formula that simultaneously feeds and subverts paradigms of the genocide's cultural narrative.

The 1990 sections serve as a frame for the 1915 flashback tale, wherein a monolithic version of the genocide's narrative develops. A frame is a common literary device that allows for the embedding of multiple narrative threads and temporal planes within a single work. The 1990 frame in the novel, therefore, provides a platform to complicate the 1915 narrative and explore it through questions of loss and haunting, trans-generational memory, and connected history.

The 1915 sections reproduce the genocide's narrative that resides in the collective imagination of Armenians. Beginning immediately prior to the deportations and massacres, it follows the fate of Lucine, a 15-year-old independent-spirited daughter of a wealthy Armenian merchant in Sivas. As the deportations get under way, the narrative

seeks to be relentlessly sequential and comprehensive. It seamlessly weaves together familiar images that have become potent markers of group memory for surviving generations. These images of young boys clad in female garb as disguise, women and children starving under the desert sun, scenes of kidnapping and rape, fetuses being ripped out of their mothers' bellies by bayonets, and virgin suicides in the Euphrates are recounted from the perspective of a singular victim, Lucine, who becomes the witness par excellence. In other words, she becomes a substitute for the complete witness, who, in theoretical terms, is the dead victim. Subsequently, the text provides narrative closure for all its storylines. For instance, while the gendered mode of the genocide called for the rounding up and killing of men in the villages, their ill-fate often unfolded away from view of bystanders. In the novel, this narrative thread is not left open. Lucine coincidentally becomes privy to the killing of the men of her village, including her father, marking the genocide narrative within the novel as irrefutably complete in its representation of the collective, cultural narrative.

In its effort to be comprehensive, the novel's 1915 narrative also tries to serve an explanatory function and does so by reproducing the prominent historical models of the genocide. At various points in the storyline, Ohanesian weaves in arguments that historians have used to explain the causes for genocide: that Armenians posed a threat to the stability of the Ottoman state due to their insurgent behavior in some of the provinces, that Armenians were offensive to the majority culture due to their economic success, that the deportations were a necessary security measure during a time of war, and so on.

While the novel merely glosses over many of these explicatory models, it dwells more heavily on the justification of genocide as a consequence of hate, which is a characteristic feature of 1915's cultural narrative. The novel emphasizes religious difference as an organizing feature of Ottoman society, particularly in Sivas. In describing the town's layout, the narrator claims, "There is an invisible border that separates the Muslims from the Christians, the Turks and Kurds from the Armenians and Greeks" (72). Beyond serving as a spatial boundary, the invisible border also constructs social order. Lucine's father, upon noticing Lucine's attraction toward his employee's son, Kemal, warns her to stay away, saying, "Just because we live side by side, does not make us the same" (82). Her father's words resonate with Lucine, who, ultimately, rejects Kemal's professed love and protection on the eve of their deportation. A heartbroken Kemal, who until that point had refused to accept the invisible divide between Turks and Armenians, resigns himself to feelings of hate. The narrator traces the abrupt change in his affinity for Armenians, saying, "He suddenly understands why everyone hates the Armenians. What gives them the right to judge us? They are living in our country, living off our land. What made them think they were superior? Their god?" (128). Therefore, hate, articulated as such, forms the logical basis for genocide within the novel's 1915 narrative.

We meet Kemal once again when the narrative reaches the moment of the death marches. He is now a soldier in the Ottoman army and although he does not actively take part in killings or forced deportations, his complacency as a witness positions him within the mechanism of genocide. In the face of atrocities, he adopts a framework offered by

his fellow soldiers — that what is unfolding is a holy war. Speaking of his discomfort at watching the suffering of Armenians, the narrator claims, “His heart aches for them and for himself, and there is a part of him that hopes this war is truly holy and sanctioned by Allah, because how else can they bear it, really?” (216) Here, the genocide is made bearable, for it is warranted by Allah and feelings of hatred toward infidels. In summary, acts of violence are neatly justified and find closure in Ohanesian’s reproduction of the 1915 narrative. The category of perpetrator remains intact. His “evil” is never presented as banal, rather, it is always explained.

The 1915 narrative’s deliberate insistence on providing a comprehensive account is at the cost of complexity and nuance, which is cleverly redeemed by the 1990 narrative that destabilizes the former. The 1990 sections are comprised of Orhan’s interaction with Seda in an Armenian retirement home in Los Angeles, and the conversations that it enables bring the past into the present. Early on, we learn that Seda is a genocide survivor unwilling to probe her past. Her story remains untold, much to the chagrin of her niece, a woman in her 50s obsessed with the Armenian past and efforts of genocide recognition. Surrounded by other genocide survivors eager to tell their stories, Seda refuses to partake in any activity that demands testimony of the past. Hinting to Seda’s cynicism toward her fellow survivors, the narrator says, “Everyone is an amateur historian. They use words like *witness* and *genocide*, trying to bridge the gap between her past and their own present with words” (33). In contrast, Seda cannot perform the role of the witness, for she deems it an impossible task. Furthermore, she displays a complete distrust in words and in language’s capability to describe the past trauma.

Her defiance in offering testimony is only heightened by the presence of Orhan, who’s there on a time constraint and looking for answers. Upon meeting him and understanding that he’s the grandson of Kemal, she first launches into silence as a form of protest. Yet Orhan’s presence forces the past onto the present in a manner that cannot be constrained. She eventually delivers her story to him. In other words, Orhan, the Turk, is the receiver of her testimony. When he asks her why she never told the story to her niece, she responds, “She has too much past in her veins and you have none” (293).

We learn that Seda is the same person as Lucine of the 1915 narrative and that Orhan’s grandfather Kemal is her past love interest from Sivas. In other words, central to her testimony of genocide is a story of love between an Armenian and a Turk. The proclamation of this love punctures the 1915 cultural narrative’s reliance on hatred. Seda cites this as the interdiction to her testimony. She says, “There was only one story. A story of hate. So I stayed quiet” (297).

Ultimately, what gives narrative closure to the 1990 sequence, and the novel, is not the revelation of a truth for Seda. The truth was hers all along. Rather, the testimony enables the unraveling of a lie for Orhan, who must now come to terms with and reconstruct his familial history. The oscillating 1915 and 1990 narratives require us to take simultaneous journeys along opposing paths. In this sense, “Orhan’s Inheritance” is a brave novel that offers a unique literary rendering of the genocide and its aftermath.

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