

History of Armenian Literature

5. Beginnings of the Diaspora

1915 to 1945

1. Introduction.

- The first decades of the Diaspora literature present an extremely confused and confusing picture. Our attention will be focused on
 - a) The short interlude 1918 - 1922.
 - b) The Literature of the Orphans
 - c) The Great Survivors
 - d) The Angry Young Men of Paris.
 - e) Literature in the U.S.A.

2. The Legacy of the Past

- The entire nation was suffering a state of shock. The only bright spot was the creation of the tragic Independent Armenian Republic
- By 1918, almost all the intelligentsia of the Arm. community in the Ottoman Empire had been wiped out. Some were stranded in the Diaspora. Const. was empty of its lively, excited Armenians.
- But with the Allied occupation of Const. and Turkish capitulation, Arm. intellectuals and expatriate writers flocked back to Const. and social life started once again ! Incredible sight... Arms. behave as if nothing had happened. Is it a symbol of Arm. creative, unconscious realities? Or a sign of insensitivity ? It is atavistic behaviour, most likely. Freudian explanation. Cf. Tiflis
- Important new journals see the light of day - Shant, Bartzravank, Arakadz, Nor Haiasdan etc. All schools are opened. Meetings, celebrations in honor of Independent Armenian Republic, fund-raising, concerts, plays , lectures...
- In the short space, 21 books are published.
- But... as Kemal Atatürk emerges, the Arms. start to leave. Suddenly, it is silence.

3. The Literature of the Orphans - 1920 to 1930.

- Middle East, Europe, Eastern Mediterranean flooded with orphans. A generation of bitter, angry, frightened and lonely youngsters. The race has become ugly, unhealthy. But some pride and dignity is still left.
- By 1925, a first generation of poets has sprung all over the globe.

- Lower middle-class boys, with no intellectual baggage, no purpose no tradition start to write in the periodical press terrible, pathetic poetry -- A.Adjemian (Cyprus), Yergat (Cairo), Suni (Bulgaria), Kotchian (Vienna), Dikranian (Berlin), Melikian (U.S.A.), Surmelian (Paris), Georguisian (U.S.A.), Meghrouni (Lebanon), Sebouh (Cairo), Nairtzi (Finland), Lass (Paris), ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ V.Kevorkian (B. Aires)
- There is no idea of a Diaspora yet, neither has it a central city. A transition period.

- The best work is that of Nishan Beshigtashlian, Mannik Berberian, G. Sidal, Vahé Haig, Leon Esadjanian, Yervant Kolandjian, V. Totovents, Louder Gorgodian, Hagop Andonian, Afenatzi, K.Gulian etc Pale, sick and directionless literature.
- Important intellectuals are H. Avakian, A. Andonian. ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Leading journals are Arek, Haiasdani Kotchnak, Hairenik, Nor Sharjoun (Cairo), Navassart (Sirouni in Bucarest). These journals publish anything written by anyone...

- Nothing solid remains today from that period except the work of two poets - Mateos Zarifian and Zaven Surmelian.

-Mateos Zarifian.

- Sensitive, pathetic, self-centered poet, died young in 1924. Published his poems in 1921 and 1921. Lacks the true sense of what art is all about but manages to touch the heart of his reader.
- His tragic end and his bolsetzi origins has assured him a place in the hearts of critics.

- Zaven Surmelian.

- The only authentic poetic voice of the period. His volume Louis Zvart stands the test of time. An emotional and highly imaginative poet with a true poetic sensibility.

3. The Survivors

- Tekeyan, Oshagan, Tchobanian, Shant, Zarian, Y.Odian and Yessayan. Save for the last 2, the others gave their best work in the Diaspora

- V. Tekeyan.

- First major poet to echo the tragedy of the Massacres. At first, his volume "Ges Gisheran mintchev Arshalouis (From Midnight to Dawn). Strikes the chord of rebirth and hope of better days.
- Developed a patriotic theme of poetry - his weakest. Rhetorical, sentimental versification. The volume Ser (Love) is the best, published in 1933.
- Has created a school of poetry identified by its refusal to

express feelings and indulge in the artistic pleasures of sense experience. An anti-Armenian temperament. It is hard to see how such a reserved, private man could have political convictions late in life and yet he was a confirmed Ramgavar !

--Had a large following among Diaspora poets who mistook his sober, subdued simplicity and ease, his reserve for art...

4. Oshagan

- The leading novelist, critic and literary historian of modern Armenian literature. His prolific nature (40 vols. of published and unpublished work, 10 novels, 12 vols. of History of West Armenian Lit.), the power and depth of his psychological insights, his dense style and philosophy of life set him apart from the rest.
- As novelist, draws close to Balzac and Dostoievski. His novels are realist works of art yet they are built around the great myths of mankind (sex and murder, heredity and honor, paternity, atavistic drives and tragedy etc) they enact the old behaviours that lead to creation ~~and death~~ birth and death.
- His dramas are anchored in the West Armenian countryside and give us the best image of the old country and its life-style.
- Has written in all the genres -- short-story, tale, poetry, criticism, novel, plays, essays, scholarly creations, literary history etc.
- His sharp and erudite literary criticism has kept alive a rare tradition in Arm. letters. With his prose, our literature accedes to international status. Has no party affiliation.

5. Tchobanian.

- Represents the all-round, super-amateur, patriotic intellectual class of the Constantinople intelligentsia. Critic, translator, scholar, activist, essayist, poet, story writer and party man, he maintains alive through those dreary years a tradition of lyrical, national literary taste so loved by the old generation.

6. Levon Shant.

- He is a man with no problems, no social or national conflicts. Is the leading playwright of both East and West Armenians. A romantic of the worst kind, Shant takes his themes, his inspiration and philosophy from the 19th century German Romantics. He is detached from the world of everyday reality and Armenian life, and his own literary world is made up of allegorical personages, abstractions and stereotyped characters -- the woman, the great man, the leader, the hermit, etc. Has a certain scorn towards the

Diaspora. He is one of the founders of the Jemaran in Beirut and has written several textbooks on philosophy, pedagogy, etc. He has short stories, novels and poems of the same texture and his plays are still performed in the Middle East. A party man, he played a certain role in the political life of the Independent Armenian Republic.

7. Constant Zarian.

- Zarian is even more detached from Armenian life than Shant. A European cosmopolitan man, he too scorns Armenian letters but his long novels, travel essays and descriptions of Armenian reality in the days of the Republic are the most interesting, original materials for the average Diaspora reader.
- His fame rests on a novel Nave leran Vra (The Boat on the Mountain), published in 1943, ^{which} captures some of the tragedy and glory of the fight for independence of the Armenian Republic in 1918.
- With an avant-gardist artistic temperament, he is out of touch with both the older and the younger generations; but his glamor as a writer, his powerful imagination, his idiosyncratic style make him an outstanding figure in the Diaspora.

8. Zabel Yessayan.

- Her work and talent are also of European formation but they are anchored mainly in the Armenian experience. She has a great talent for the novel, the short story, as well as for political activism which appears in her novels written in Soviet Armenia.
- Yessayan's fame rests on pre-Diaspora literature; she left Europe very soon to return to Armenia, falling a victim to the 1937 purges in the U.S.S.R.
- Her short stories and novels keep alive an art that is a mixture of French psychoanalysis and the emotional attitudes of life typical of Constantinople Armenians. She has had no effect on Diaspora writing except for the example that her style and her mastery of the language set for the young budding writers.

9. The Literary Scene.

- Such are the men who represent the old, traditional literature in the Diaspora. In poetry, in fiction and in the theater, they serve as a bridge between a dead past and a dim future for the coming generations.
- They have no cohesion among themselves and no friends around them, only critics or, in rare cases, adulators.
- But in fact it is their literary views and their production that set