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THE ART OF CHARACTERIZATION IN GABRIEL SUNDUKYAN'S VAUDEVILLES

Abstract

The article examines the art of characterization in the vaudevilles of Gabriel Sundukyan and beyond. Gabriel Sundukyan is one of the greatest representatives of Armenian dramaturgy. His vaudevilles constitute an important and irreplaceable part of Armenian theatrical literature. Sundukyan's vaudevilles are distinguished not only by their comedic structure but also by their deep social subtext and the multilayered development of characters. The author creates typical yet individualized figures that reflect the social relations, moral values, and contradictions of the time. The analysis shows that Sundukyan skillfully combines humor with a critical perspective, revealing social inequality, false morality, and materialism. It is also noteworthy that his characters often bear the influence of cultural intersections, such as the character Yavangul, who represents a fusion of Armenian and Georgian cultures. Through his characters, Sundukyan frequently raises issues related to

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the moral and social decline of society. His characters often find themselves at the center of internal and external conflicts, facing the clash between old and new values, material interests, and ethical principles. Thus, Sundukyan's vaudevilles possess not only artistic value but also serve as an important source of socio-philosophical reflection.

Keywords: *Vaudeville, dramaturgy, European culture, Gabriel Sundukyan, characterization, Values, theatre.*

Introduction

The vaudeville genre flourished in the first half of the 19th century. At the Alexandrinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg, out of 1606 performances staged between 1826 and 1855, 850 were vaudevilles.¹ "Vaudeville is a play in which dialogue and dramatic action, built on an intriguing plot and an anecdotal storyline, are combined with music, quartet singing, and dance."²

Comedy in Sundukyan's vaudevilles is not considered merely for the purpose of entertainment, but rather as a form of moral critique. In his vaudevilles, Gabriel Sundukyan expresses the customs and psychology of society in his time, ranging from individual crises to social inequality. Sundukyan's vaudevilles combine serious social issues-such as family relations, romantic relationships, financial interests, and moral values-with comedic plots and humorous characters.

Human contradictions hidden behind laughter in the vaudevilles "Gishervan Sabry Kher e" and "Oskan Petrovichn En Kinkum"

Gabriel Sundukyan's art of characterization combines emotional intensity, humor, and profound social observation. Through comedy, Sundukyan presents not only entertaining situations but also the human flaws hidden beneath them, revealing the disorders and contradictions of different social classes and moral values within society. His characters often find themselves in situations that are both comical and tragic, where personal interests and individual desires come into conflict with one another. Nevertheless, Sundukyan's plays would not have achieved such impact and classical depth if he had not deeply understood the complex relationships and contradictions among various layers of society,

¹ Sakhnovsky-Pankeev 1964, 173.

² *Kratkaya Literaturnaya Entsiklopediya* 1962, 1003

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thereby creating monumental and memorable characters. For the first time, Sundukyan tested his literary strength in the play "Gishervan Sabre Kher e", one of whose characters was inspired by Artashes Sukiasyants, a prominent Armenian popular actor of that time.³ Although the play is a simple and light comedy, it simultaneously reflects the life of certain layers of society-in this case, the conflicts among petty traders and individuals involved in the struggle for income. The characters are mostly presented with surnames such as Irasatsov, Chartarov, and Tanakutoghints, which helps to highlight the social strata that were already "established" in society at that time through their names. Each character is portrayed as a unique symbol rather than a fully developed psychological or philosophical individual, as might be found in more complex dramas. Gabriel Sundukyan emphasizes, through his characters, the mentality and behavior of certain social groups-particularly petty traders-placing them in comedic situations. In the play "Gishervan Sabre Kher e," Sundukyan gives special importance to the depiction of human character traits. From the very first vaudeville, the social psychology of the petty trader is presented: Oskan Petrovich Irasatsov is entirely immersed in vulgar and pragmatic thinking, where everything is evaluated in terms of money and calculation. For him, every situation-whether family or social-revolves around financial gain. The power of money is also felt by Martha. Kekel's fate is dependent on her father's will and money. Through Kekel, Sundukyan raises questions related to the practical mentality of society, where everything is measured by material value. Oskan is simply obsessed with money and driven by its desire, while still preserving a patriarchal worldview. In Sundukyan's vaudevilles, typical characters are depicted in vivid colors: on one hand, their social flaws are ridiculed, and on the other, human weaknesses such as lying, greed, and malice are revealed. By presenting Oskan Petrovich's idea of "leasing" the theatre, Sundukyan does not merely portray "bandits" or "businessmen," but instead creates a clear perspective on how the interaction between high society and the world of art can lead to contradictions. The dramatist, who studied the phenomena of life, observed that the source of comedy can be the hero's real-life situation, his intellectual capacity, and the contradiction between that situation and the

³ **Sundukyan** 1951, vol. 1, 460.

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demands that are incompatible with his abilities.⁴ Gabriel Sundukyan compels the audience to reflect on the idea that art-especially theatre-can become unprepared and "mercenary," and that, despite its comedic and extraordinary elements, the author also incorporates the fact that a crisis in art cannot fail to be reflected in a crisis within society. In this sense, Oskan Petrovich, through his actions, demonstrates the emptiness of life and the tendency in which art turns into a form of "commerce," while theatre, as a sacred institution, becomes merely a source of financial profit. The difficulties of livelihood and the decline in commercial profitability are explained by Irasatsov as a result of changing urban morals: everyone has become preoccupied with accumulating money, and he himself is forced to do the same-thinking about the means by which large merchants become wealthy.⁵ And thus, already in the play "Oskan Petrovichn En Kinkum", Irasatsov enters the kingdom of hell and tries to gain freedom, attempting to seduce Satan with lavish gifts, but he is unable to escape. Through this character, Gabriel Sundukyan seeks to show that people cannot escape their sins by means of extravagance or personal gain, since they do not yet fully understand the depth of their guilt. Oskan Petrovich, upon hearing the confessions of the tormented souls in hell, begins to act as an accuser, as if trying to free himself from his own sins by separating himself from others. This character development demonstrates how he, upon entering the world of hell, attempts to judge others, thereby trying to deny his own guilt. An interesting character in the vaudeville is the servant Kidesi, who represents one of the members of "lower" society-a lively, perceptive young man who creates a distinctive presence on stage. The author introduces his character not through special narrative devices, but directly from real life, preserving his manner of speech, the color of his environment, and his linguistic features. The character of Kidesi represents a part of the "voluntarily integrated" lower social stratum-active, sharp, and at the same time faithful to the new ideas of his time. In his movements and speech there is a subtle witty irony hidden between social classes, showing that he appears not only as a servant but also as someone with his own social position. Through this character, Sundukyan emphasizes that representatives of the lower classes possess their own original way of thinking and sense of dignity. It should be noted that one of the key aspects of

⁴ Harutyunyan 1934, 6.

⁵ Abov 1953, 79.

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Sundukyan's art of characterization is his use of a large number of typical characters-housewives, liars, greedy individuals, and farcical figures-often contrasted with honest or virtuous characters. These characters possess clearly observable and realistic traits drawn from various layers of society. Through his art and characters, the playwright subtly reveals human inner turmoil, the inability to overcome mistakes, and the contradictions that consume the essence of human existence.

Social and moral portraits of characters in the vaudevilles "Evayln or New Diogenes" and "Baghnsi Bokhcha".

It must be noted that Gabriel Sundukyan appears not only as a critic of social phenomena, but also as an author attempting to deeply understand the real condition of society. A vivid example is the vaudeville "Evayln or New Diogenes", where Sundukyan, through each character with its specific traits, presents a segment of society. The author builds the work on contrast, creating a unique protagonist Evayln who is the main character of the play and represents a "false bearer" of European culture, while being completely detached from the corresponding values and moral principles. He is young, well-dressed, seemingly refined in European fashion, and stylistically "decorated" in language, using literary Armenian and imitating European civilization. At the same time, however, he preserves the manners of his native environment, acting in a cunning and manipulative way. Through this character, Sundukyan demonstrates that the "new" does not always mean something better or more moral. Thus, Evayln is a kind of fashionable young man who outwardly represents European civilization but does not internally adhere to its ideals and values. The character is even given no proper personal name; instead, he is called "Evayln" ("and so on"), because he frequently uses this expression in speech. The author deliberately does not assign him a conventional name, as Evayln is not a specific individual but rather a type, an attribute of a certain social phenomenon. He remains a "phrase" rather than a fully defined identity, and his essence lies in linguistic play, where "and so on" reflects speech and thoughtlessness. This expression, often repeated in his speech, conveys something unstructured, uncontrolled, and at the same time vague and ambiguous. "And so on" thus symbolizes something that seems to contain everything but in reality contains nothing. Sundukyan's attitude toward

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European culture is complex and multilayered. He does not fully cling to patriarchal customs and traditions, as can be seen, for example, in Kh. Galfayan's comedy "Alafranga".⁶ Gabriel Sundukyan did not aim to create a completely negative type for the protagonist of his comedy. On the contrary, he endowed him with certain attractive traits: a fine voice, beautiful singing ability, and the capacity to perform both national and European music. Sundukyan did not seek to discredit his character; rather, he shows that although he is Europeanized, he is not, in essence, a degenerate cosmopolitan. The character does not renounce his nationality. When Eastern songs are performed during a feast, Evayln says: "Please leave those Asian songs... take, for example, the sweet and tender songs of Europeans..." And in response to the question of where he is from, in one of the manuscripts Evayln answers: "First of all, I am Armenian, the rest... and so on." Later, the author crossed out the words "first of all".⁷ The question "Where is he from?" and Evayln's answer-"First of all, I am Armenian, the rest... and so on"-carry a deeper meaning. Gabriel Sundukyan may be expressing the character's inner struggle between preserving his identity and adapting to the flows of global culture. The phrase "First of all, I am Armenian," which the author later removed in the final version, can also be seen as an element revealing his own complexity and hesitation. First, he states that his primary and essential identity is Armenian, and then comes the "rest" part, which may refer to his European aspirations and his connection to the wider civilized world. Thus, the character reflects not only a social type but also an individual experiencing an identity crisis, positioned between the traditional and the modern, the national and the global.

It is also necessary to single out the character of Yavangul, who in Sundukyan's drama can be viewed as an example of the artistic transformation of a real historical figure, reflecting the distinctive features of Gabriel Sundukyan's theatrical thinking and aesthetic approach. Yavangul, as a historical personality, is presented as a singer and tar player who lived in Tiflis. Through his character, the play highlights the social and cultural dynamics of the period, showing how artistic figures were embedded in and shaped by the cultural environment of their time.⁸ However, Gabriel Sundukyan presents him not only

⁶ Terzibashyan 1964, 289-290.

⁷ Terzibashyan 1964, 291-292.

⁸ Terzibashyan 1964, 295.

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as a tar player or singer, but also as a character who carries a broader contextual role as a representative of an entire era and society. This allows Sundukyan to deepen the character's function, emphasizing his theatrical thinking, which is realized across different times and realities. In his works, Sundukyan often avoids generalization into purely romantic or epic figures. Instead, he presents characters as individuals acting within specific situations, performing concrete actions determined by the conditions of their time. Yavangul makes this concreteness even more tangible. Yavangul is not only a character but also a form of autonomous musical synthesis, intertwining Armenian and Georgian cultural and musical traditions. He operates aesthetically within the cultural frameworks of both peoples, adding diversity to his character and demonstrating his unique place within the boundaries of world art. Unlike other characters, Yavangul is distinguished not only by his art but also by the broader traditions surrounding him. He does not create only moral conflicts but rather serves as an example of Armenian–Georgian cultural unity. His character develops smoothly according to the environment of his time, simultaneously embodying both enslavement and freedom, existing between past and present cultural conditions. Through Yavangul, Sundukyan conveys values related to social compromise and cultural reconciliation. Thus, Yavangul is not only a historical figure but also an artistic character who combines real life and episodic representation, creating an artistic environment rich in universal human values.

In the vaudeville "Baghnsis Bokhcha", the characters form a unified whole—a model of society in which human morality, or its absence, becomes tangible and visible. Gabriel Sundukyan gave the well-known plot of marital infidelity in world literature a local, distinctive, and contemporary coloring, which can be interpreted not only as a reflection of reality but also as a deep representation of human relationships. His work stands out for its vividness and realism, where each character expresses the specific psychology of that society. In Sundukyan's interpretation, this becomes a new level of artistic expression, where the boundaries between past and present are merged into a unique environment, and the reader encounters situations that speak not only of past times but also of complex human relations in the present. Sundukyan skillfully constructs contrasting psychologies in the play, presenting different characters that reveal the complex and multilayered nature of human temperament. Katarine and

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Samvel serve as standards of morality and humanity, while Talal, Yeghisabet, and Aghalo symbolize the darker sides of inhumanity and hypocrisy.⁹ This contrast is not merely episodic between individual characters, but rises to a theoretical level, where Gabriel Sundukyan attempts to construct an entire world in which the boundaries between the human and the inhuman become slightly blurred. Katarine and Samvel embody the values that enable the affirmation of truth, love, and morality, whereas Talal, Yeghisabet, and Aghalo, in a state of moral crisis, reveal those aspects where greed, hypocrisy, and soullessness prevail. The prototype of Zimzimov's character is Aghalo a wealthy merchant who has accumulated significant wealth. Through the money he has gained, he has acquired considerable influence, at times using it to impose his will on others and secure his material success, thereby strengthening his position in society.¹⁰ In the comedy "Baghnsis Bokhcha", Gabriel Sundukyan artistically and remarkably presents the character of Samvel. Through Samvel's character, Sundukyan effectively reveals the social injustices and disorder that threaten every member of society. Particularly interesting are the characters Maton-the "motsikul"- and Yeghisabet, Talal's mother. Maton considers her shameful profession to be completely lawful. Her words are as follows: "Why shouldn't I be bold? You just say money, and I can manage everything... Haven't I given away a few girls? Half the city are my matches. It all depends on mutual liking. No, by God, who asks about the girl? It's just that they like each other...".¹¹ Gabriel Sundukyan fully reveals the character of the "motsikul" in the comedy "Baghnsis Bokhcha". He uses this character to create a contrast between old and new morals, or more precisely, to criticize false Europeanization and the degradation of moral norms. Maton has her own understanding of honor, and her profession is her means of survival. In her view, she does not earn her living through dishonest means; yes, she deceives naive people, but she does not use force, does not oppress others, and does not exploit the poor and needy-rather, she takes "payment" from the wealthy. Maton speaks about rich people who, instead of moral principles and values, prioritize material gain. She criticizes those who "sell" their honor and dignity for greed or for imitating Europeanized stereotypes. Going further, Maton believes that society has lost its essential

⁹ **Asmaryan** 1980, 96-97.

¹⁰ **History of Modern Armenian Literature** 1964, 179.

¹¹ **Sundukyan** 1951, vol. 2, 367.

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human values, and in her opinion, those who live by honest labor are not considered as “worthy” as those who sell their morality. Maton thus presents a kind of “justification” for her profession, arguing that she does not exploit people but simply earns her living, even if society judges her actions negatively. It is as if she suggests that if she deceives, it is not a crime but a consequence of the social system in which she lives. Thus, Sundukyan’s artistic evaluation is achieved through contrast: the human element is preserved through colorful characters that reveal deep psychological nuances, while inhumanity appears as a destructive force that undermines all moral foundations. This opposition allows each character’s complexity and ambiguity to be observed without condemnation but also without compromise, creating a strong artistic value that reflects the human struggle within oneself. The dramatist’s rejection of evil and longing for good form the essence of his entire creative vision.¹² Among the great masters of our literature, only very few have succeeded in creating typical characters through precise and clear depiction of the diverse characteristics of human nature, as Gabriel Sundukyan did.¹³

Conclusion

Thus, it should be emphasized that Gabriel Sundukyan created characters who become not only individual personalities but also symbols of social groups and broader societal phenomena. These characters are often simple in appearance, yet simultaneously profound, conveying the problems, conflicts, and contradictions present in society during a given historical period. It should also be noted that the characters frequently find themselves in dynamic and contradictory situations, revealing what it meant to live in the society of that time. The figures created by Sundukyan essentially reflect the social complexity and conflicting ways of thinking of that era, attempting to summarize an inner struggle that also touches upon the uncertainty of the individual living within that period. It should be emphasized that Sundukyan revealed the true nature of his characters, particularly through their monologues, which become expressions of their psychological world and inner impulses. The monologue serves as a powerful literary device for the author, enabling him to reveal the inner world of the characters—their contradictions, illusions, or struggles born

¹² **Mkryan** 1982, 215.

¹³ **Gyuli-Kevkhyan** 1944, 21–22.

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from the hardships of life. Monologues expose not only the internal complexity of the characters but also provide a deeper depiction of the surrounding world.

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ԳԱՐՐԻԵԼ ՍՈՒՆԴՈՒԿՅԱՆԻ ՎՈԴԵՎԻԼՆԵՐԻ ԿԵՐՊԱՐԱԿԵՐՏՄԱՆ ԱՐՎԵՍՏԸ

Ամփոփում

Սունդուկյանի վոդևիլները առանձնանում են ոչ միայն իրենց կատակերգական կառուցվածքով, այլև խորը սոցիալական ենթատեքստով և կերպարների բազմաշերտ զարգացմամբ: Հեղինակը ստեղծում է տիպական, սակայն միևնույն ժամանակ անհատականացված կերպարներ, որոնք արտացոլում են ժամանակի սոցիալական հարաբերությունները, բարոյական արժեքները և հակասությունները: Վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ Սունդուկյանը հմտորեն համադրում է հումորը քննադատական մոտեցման հետ՝ բացահայտելով սոցիալական անհավասարությունը, կեղծ բարոյականությունը և նյութապաշտությունը: Հատկանշական է նաև, որ նրա կերպարները հաճախ կրում են մշակութային խաչաձևումներ, օրինակ՝ Յավանգուլի կերպարը, որը ներկայացնում է հայկական և վրացական մշակույթների միաձուլու-

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մը: Իր կերպարների միջոցով Սունդուկյանը հաճախ բարձրացնում է հասարակության բարոյական և սոցիալական անկման խնդիրները: Նրա հերոսները հաճախ հայտնվում են ներքին և արտաքին հակասությունների կենտրոնում՝ կանգնելով հին և նոր արժեքների, նյութական շահերի և բարոյական սկզբունքների բախման առջև:

Բանալի բառեր՝ վոդևիլ, դրամատուրգիա, եվրոպական մշակույթ, Գաբրիել Սունդուկյան, կերպարակերպում, արժեքներ, թատրոն: