

PORTRAYING ARMENIAN IN MODERN IRANIAN LITERATURE. NATIONAL AND CULTURAL PECULIARITIES

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Armenian-Iranian relations which originated still in the I millennium BC, include military-political, economic and cultural spheres. During the centuries Armenian intellectuals were greatly interested in Persian history, language and literature and their studies devoted to them enriched our historiography, philology and fiction. Later these studies provided a framework for Persian scholars for the evaluation of Armenian historiography and sources which contain numerous valuable information about the history and culture of Persia.

As mentions the prominent Persian literary critic S. Nafisi: «From my youth until now I am well acquainted with Armenian literary and scientific circles more than any other Persian of Teheran and do not think that they had as much converged and contacts with Armenian intellectuals and are familiar with old and new Armenian literature like me. I consider it as one of the pride of my life, since due to it I have noticed the linkage of Armenians to the history and literature of this country».¹

Centuries-long Armenian-Iranian literary relations contain innumerable realities testifying in favor of mutual understanding and evaluation, translations and influence, which are an important stimulus not only for the spiritual convergence of both peoples, but also for the development of the new literary thought. Deep respect towards the centuries-old cultural values and wisdom of Armenian people are reflected in the Iranian literature. Many valuable studies were carried out by Armenologists and Iranologists in regard to the Armenian topic in the classical Iranian literature, and to comparative analysis of Armenian and Iranian eposes.

Armenian topic and the image of an Armenian had found an original reflection in the works of the outstanding representatives of the early XX century «Persianist» nationalistic literary movement - Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, Sadegh Hedayat, Bozorg Alavi. It is noteworthy that during their exile in Europe all three novelists had close contacts with Armenian liberal intellectual circles. S. Hedayat and B. Alavi participated in the meetings of the philosophical group founded by the famous Iranian Armenian painter Andre-Darvish Sevrugian,² during which the latter was entitled as Darvish due to his Sufi behavior.

¹ Pahlevanyan 1989: 222.

² Andre Sevrugian is the son of Anton Khan Sevryugin, famous photographer of Late Qajar period, who in 1920s initiated the project of the series of pictures on «Shahname» of Firdowsi, about 10 years later organized an exhibition dedicated to the 1000 anniversary of the great poet. Worth to note also illustrations of O.Khayam's quatrains.

In 1915, during his journey from Berlin to Baghdad, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, the famous expert of modern Iranian new novel, living for a while in Istanbul and Aleppo, became an eyewitness to the terrible events of Armenian genocide, miseries and hardships of Armenians which they experienced on their way to Mesopotamia; he wrote about it in his essay in 1917: «My personal reflections during the years of World War 1».³

While studying Armenian topic and the image of the Armenian in modern Iranian literature is of special interest the Armenian woman. «Iranian Armenian women as members of a religious and ethnic minority had retained their cultural distinctiveness for more than Iranian Armenian men, who were much more likely to come into contact with the dominant group of Muslim Iranians».⁴

As fully faithful to the traditional moral values of Armenian family the Iranian Armenian woman has been the symbol of femininity, who keeps the national and religious identity of Armenian community. By the way, one of the masterpieces of modern Iranian «new poetry», the love poem «Aida before the mirror» of famous poet Ahmad Shamlu, is dedicated to Armenian Aida Sargsyan, his beloved wife:

*And Your bosom
Is a small place for living
A small place for dying
And flight from the fraudulent city
Which shamelessly accuses the sky
Of impurity.*⁵

The image of Armenian woman is represented in the story of B. Alavi named as «The story of room» which is included in his collection of stories «Suitcase» (1934).⁶ Madam Hakobyan who had lost his husband 17 years ago, raised by herself her two sons - Artashes and Ashavir. Years later this active and smart woman (who like all Armenians speak Persian with Armenian accent), with inseparable sadness tells about the tragic story of her lovely son Arshavir's room. Many years ago a tall blue-eyed Russian woman who rented this room, has brought her handicapped German husband Mr. Schulz to Teheran in order to cure him. This blond woman had destroyed the life of young Arshavir and her own due to a light love affair. Madam Hakobyan could not even imagine how similar might be the relations between the young Russian woman, her handicapped German husband and well-mannered Armenian young man to the relations of heroes of the story «The wife of a scholar» which was bought for Mr. Schulz. The doors of her son's room were closed forever for anybody. For the mother who lost her son the room had become a longing sanctuary where even two faded bouquets remind sad memories on the eve of 1932.

³ Jamalzadeh Mohamad-Ali 20.10.2017. <http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/20.10.2017-Jamalzadeh.php>.

⁴ Berberian 2000: 74-75.

⁵ Nafisy 2007. <https://iranian.com/2007/03/13/love-in-persian-literature/>.

⁶ Alavi 1996: 36-44.

In the image of Armenian mother about the underlined positive peculiarities in the character, the behavior and honesty tells the famous post-revolutionary novelist Muniru Ravanipour in her story named «Hero» included in the collection «Satan's stones».⁷ It goes back to the tragedy of the mother experienced during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, trying to see in her painful fate, especially stressing the peculiarities of national mentality. Hasmik whose children had chosen the way of emigration, could no more sustain loneliness and sadness. The walls of an empty and cold house and the memories of her children's childhood embraced the soul of the grieved mother with sorrow. For Hasmik had become also familiar the cemetery where her children's close friend, a Persian Ali was buried. She mourned his death as if he was her son. After she heard about his death, it seems that all doors back to life were closed for her forever. Hasmik carries her sorrow and misery silently and with great patience. But for the Armenian woman it was a heavy burden to feel alien glimpses of neighboring women and hear their ironic speech. They could not understand the sorrow and fragile soul of this seemingly moderate and balanced Armenian woman. «Let goodness be with you, madam, you are different from us».⁸

Sympathizing Armenians and dedicating his story to Janet Lazaryan, the Iranian Armenian literary celebrity, the author had tried to create a personage of a true and wise Armenian woman who is faithful to her national identity. Muniru Ravanipour stresses in full severe ordeals and agonies of the Iran-Iraq war, the pain and grief of human losses which embraced everybody who lives in Iran, regardless of his ethnicity and religion.

Noteworthy is the study of the image of Armenian woman in the historical novel of the early XX century. In the novel of R.Jula'i («The longest night of the year and the tale of the tippler», 1990)⁹ is told about the tragic end of the prohibited love between an Armenian lady and a Persian guy during the Russian-Persian war of the XIX century. Besides the historical facts, the author had revealed the traditional and moral description of the ethnic and religious minority – the Armenians, stressing the behavior of Armenian woman as faithful to the community.¹⁰

The image of Armenian women in Iranian prose is touched upon by Z. Behrouzi who is well-known by satiric works in his historical novel «The Shah of Iran and Armenian lady» (1927), and M. Kazemi in his novel «Terrible Teheran» (1922) which is familiar to Armenian reader. In the modern Iranian historical novel the positive image of Armenian is represented in the «Throneless and crownless king» of F. Farrokhi and M. Moti's «The Cross of Opal».

The Armenians are the largest Christian minority and probably the largest non-Muslim community in Iran. For much of the twentieth century as indigenous Christians, Armenians had cultural autonomy and relative respect.¹¹ The national coloring of Iranian

⁷ Muniru Ravanipur 1996: 43-51.

⁸ Ghanoonparvar 1996: ix.

⁹ Jula'i 1990.

¹⁰ Abramson and Kilpatrick 2005: 170-172.

¹¹ Sanasarian 2002: 39.

Armenian community is expressed in the works of the well-known post-revolutionary writer Zoya Pirzad who has Armenian origins. Z. Pirzad is among those female representatives of the Iranian novel who had won all honorary prizes in literature of Iran. In 2002 was published her novel «I will switch off lights», which immediately appeared on the radar of writers and literary critics. This is the first and most acclaimed novel by Zoya Pirzad and the second to be panned by an Armenian-Iranian writer, after Alice Arzumanian's «Hama az Yek» («All from one», Tehran, 1963).¹²

In the same year the novel was awarded with several honorary prizes in literature – the prize of the outstanding writer Hushang Golshiri, Yalda, Book of the year, Mehregan.

The events described in the novel «I will switch off lights»¹³ took place in 1960s in the refinery city of Abadan, in the south-west of Iran. In the description of everyday life of Iranian Armenian community and relationship between peoples the author pictures the permanent chain of human feelings - misery, nostalgia, dreams, love, separation. In the novel the central figure is Claris who devoted all her life to her husband and three children. The faded palette of this sensitive and dreamy Armenian woman was illuminated by the chilly and unrequited love which she kept deep in her soul.

Colorful pieces of Iranian Armenian community are represented in «On the Eve of Easter», the collection of stories by Z. Pirzad published in 2003.¹⁴ For the author the celebration of Easter is one of the most memorable events of her childhood, which is identified with the unfading feelings - the house of the grandmother, her light faced image, aromatic kitchen, carelessness, laughter, warmth of relatives.

«My childhood memories had always been rose-colored images of Muslim, Christian and Jewish children mingling together in an Armenian school, apparently free from constraints of ethnicity and religion, ... my return to a cycle of her short stories set in an Armenian school of our childhood, titled «A Day Before Easter», instigated for me an interrogation of these cultivated personal memories and questions about presumed ease with which the Armenian minority coexisted with the dominant Muslim Iranians of that time».¹⁵

Nor-Jugha is a prime example of the historical existence of the Iranian Armenian community.

It is one of the important centers of national culture, education, science, arts and book publishing outside the motherland. Armenians who were deported and settled down in an unfamiliar background, were not disintegrated under the influence of different religion, morals and customs, did not lose their national identity, but created an organized community, have got a collective life, kept unpolluted their mother language, national habits and religion¹⁶.

¹² Gheytonchi Elham 2012.

¹³ Pirzad 2002.

¹⁴ Pirzad 2003.

¹⁵ Rahimieh 2014: 121-122.

¹⁶ Bayburdyan 2007: 11.

The novel «He learned from the devil and burnt down» of Farhonde Aghaye, young writer of post-revolutionary period, is dedicated to Nor Jugha.¹⁷ The title of the novel is taken from the last two lines of the tragedy «History of Isfahan. Nor Jugha» (which is dedicated to the destruction of Nor Jugha). «He learned from the devil and burnt down, afterwards became mad and did not withstand».

The novel of Aghaye is the dramatic and tragic story of an Armenian woman from Nor Jugha based on her diaries.

The moral and honest characteristics of Armenian has been especially stressed in the post-revolutionary Iranian prose. In this regard is typical the story «The last loneliness» of E. Fasih.¹⁸ The old servant Armenak working in the pub-restaurant «Omar Khayyam» at Washington, enchants the clients by his noble stance. He works here already 27 years, and before that another 19 years in the caffee «Blue Moon» in New York. Now it was difficult for Armenak to perform his duties during the last hours of the day. Sixty-five years of life and forty-nine years of work. Like all Armenians he had passed the long and difficult ways from the Caucasus to Greece and from there to America on ship. Iranian Armenian emigrant Eric Bagajanyan, the owner of the restaurant, also was a nice man who behaved compassionately towards his compatriots. For the clients of the restaurant the presence of these two Armenians creates a specific background of warmth, respect and familiarity.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran the topic of the Iran-Iraq war obtained special importance, which was based on the concern of heroism and martyrdom. To such topic is devoted the story «The Mystery of Masih» of Ibrahim Hasanbeigi.¹⁹ Among the Iranian war-prisoners in the Iraqi camp at Mosul was an Armenian Masih, a green-eyed, blonde, bantamweight guy,¹⁰ who was highly esteemed by his friends due to his heroic, unbending and brave behavior. For his disobedient behavior the Armenian soldier was transferred to the colony of «Rashide» where he became subject to inhuman tortures after he refused to applaud in honor of Saddam Hussein. After their return from captivity the death of Masih remained a puzzle for most of his friends. Honoring his memory they visited Masih's old parents and Armenian church. But years later nobody remembers the name of Albert Minasyan, the Armenian soldier who was ready to be martyred for Iran. The name of «Albert Minasyan» the author reveals only at the end of the story. It is worth to mention also the exciting poem «The death of Nazli» or «Vartan» of A. Shamlu which is dedicated to the Armenian soldier Vardan Salakhanyan martyred in the struggle against the Iranian monarchy.²⁰

Vartan was a violet,

¹⁷ Aghayei 2007.

¹⁸ Silk road 1996.

¹⁹ Hasanbeigi 2006: 12-22.

²⁰ Vartan Salakhanyan an Armenian-Iranian born in Tabriz. He was arrested during the coup in 1953 and cruelly assassinated; he did not betray his friends. In order to get rid of the tortured body he was thrown into the Jajrood river.

*He came into blossom
and gave us a good news
«Winter has fallen apart.»
and then went away.....²¹*

In 1989 was published «The Symphony of the Dead Man» of A. Maroufi, one of the masterpieces of modern Iranian novel.²² The composition of the novel is in accordance with the rules of the complex musical structure of a symphony. It is a saga about the family of Urkhani which is built around the tragic and sad fate of the father and his children, the topic of fratricide has close parallels with the Biblical story of «Cain and Abel». The author with extreme delicacy stresses the image of Surmelina, an untimely deceased Armenian wife of Aydin, one of the sons, whose tenderness and solicitude heals the wounds of Aydin's adolescence.

While studying the image of the Armenian undoubtedly is of special importance the novel «Asieh between two worlds» of Shahrnush Parsipur, the outstanding representative of the innovatory Iranian prose, which was published in 2008. This prosaic is known to international literary community through his novels «Tuba and the meaning of night» and «Women without men» published in 1990s, which became his literary visit card.²³ The novel «Asieh between the two worlds»²⁴ embraces wide chronological frames including the rule Pahlavi's until the Islamic revolution (1926-1979). The main character is Asieh – a maid-servant in rich families whose dream was to have her own house and feel the pleasure of the family. Being a *sighe*²⁵ during her all life this beautiful young woman only once had met with Artashes, an honest, kind and virtuous Armenian who was ready to marry her and take care of Asieh. Asieh who was not even educated, thinks that the Muslim woman could not marry a Christian man and thus she refused Artashes. Realizing her mistake years later Asieh tries to find him, but all in vain. Asieh mourns the untimely death of Artashes and weeps on his grave recalling those two days when the lonely woman with the newborn baby, disappointed by the indifference of the world, had find a shelter in the small hotel of Artashes where the Armenian man virtuously and kindly took care of this poor woman and surrounded her with love and warmth for the first time in her life.

The novel «Asieh between two world» is the expression of deep sympathy in regard to Armenians. The novelist creates the person of Artashes with great skill, stressing livelihood, honesty, kindness, love of the light and sciences which distinguish Armenians.

²¹ Rajabpour 2017.

²² Maroufi 2007.

²³ Women without men is a 2009 film adaptation of a Shahrnush Parsipur novel directed by Shirin Neshat. The director of the film won the 2009 Venice film festival Silver Lion for best directing.

²⁴ Parsipur 2009.

²⁵ A woman who is engaged in the temporary marriage (in Persian).

Summarizing our study it should be concluded that in the works of modern progressive Iranian writers the images of Armenians are distinguished by high moral characteristics.

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