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Revisioning Gendered Reality in Armenian Women's Life Writing of the Post-Genocidal Era: Zaruhi Kalemkarian's *From the Path of My Life*

Introduction

Even after more than a century, the Armenian Genocide in 1915 has still more to tell us not only about the numbers, conditions, and methods involved in the first systematic extermination of the twentieth century, but also through the “afterlives” of those who survived and yet remained in what can be called an “in-between life and death” situation. A group of “remnants,” that is, Armenian women intellectuals living in Istanbul, were mostly exempt from the arrests on the eve of the Catastrophe simply because they were women, while about 250 Armenian male notable figures from different professions, unlike them, were first arrested and deported and then executed (Ekmekcioglu 4).

Zaruhi Kalemkarian (1874-1971), poet, writer, feminist, activist and public worker, was an Armenian intellectual who left her country for New York in 1921 for fear that Kemalist forces¹ would enact further massacres (Ekmekcioglu 50). Presiding over various charitable institutions, including the Armenian Red Cross and Patriotic Armenian Women's Society, Kalemkarian was one of the figures in her community who gained political agency via her participation in the task of recovering a nation and her social and political visibility was not limited to the active role she played in her society. She had reason to

¹ Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) was the leading figure of the Turkish National Movement and the founder of the Republic of Turkey. The establishment of the Turkish nation-state is founded upon allegedly his secular national ideology (Kemalism), which was essentially dictated and self-proclaimed rather than accepted by the Turkish population at the end of historical and political conditions. Derived from his name, Kemalist forces designated the nationalist Turkish army which routed the occupation of the Allied powers and Greek army.

fear repercussions. With her autobiographical work, she also contributed to the emergence of a discursive terrain of Armenian women's life-writing (diaries, letters, memoirs and autobiographies).

Zaruhi Kalemkarian is one of the few Armenian intellectuals who not only acted as political agent within her community, but also was involved in the small group of women who produced a literary field of women's autobiographical practice. In addition to her feminist thought and activism, a kind of feminism appeared in her life-writing. The textual feminism she introduces reveals her own limitations within her active involvement in the politics of rescuing Armenian women. While marking this as her ethical stance, Kalemkarian tailors her self-representation and subjectivity on the basis of writing her self in connection to and solidarity with those female afterlives. It is thus that her life-writing makes itself to be a monumental-history which foregrounds the absent, ruined and fragmented contours of other lives rather than the information-ridden solid lines of documentation that have more often than not taxonomized such lives.

The articulation in *From the Path of My Life*, in particular of the gendered realities of the time, the common ground of these women's narratives, exposes two vital points. As much as these gendered microhistories invalidate the Turkish national historiographical discourse that denies the experience of the survivor as well as recognizing the event as a genocide, these microhistories also generate a "textual moment" in Armenian feminism via the writers' engagement with the postgenocidal Armenian female body, subjectivity, self and representation. In telling about the afterlives of raped and impregnated Armenian girls along with her own personal life story, Kalemkarian not only disturbs and subverts the documented Turkish historiography, but also renegotiates the limits of autobiography in favor of representing victimized Armenian women's lives and bodies as well as her own life and subjectivity. The lives of a number of women are not simply referred to within the main life storyline of the author, but in a conscious manner, introduced as politically objectified lives. Rather than reiterating a dominant rhetoric of history, Kalemkarian excavates personal stories, which have been buried in the long-forgotten past and

reshapes an alternative historical reality by privileging a marginalized line of fragmented narratives. Drawing on the stories of victims, by which she mirrors and reassembles her self in an attempt to reconfigure the politics of reality, which has primarily been a domain of history, on the basis of Armenian women's life-writing.

The monumental interpretation of history is in tune with, among many things, the gendered perspective of untold and unseen realities. If what had happened after the 1915 Genocide, was, along with the catastrophic extermination of a nation, also the rearrangement of the life of the survivors (orphans, widows and raped women), then, in what ways and through what textual possibilities (other than official historiographies) is it possible to *re-present* the gendered realities of and after this historical moment? I argue that the genre of women's autobiography, in this particular case Armenian women's autobiographical practices, is a case of monumental history, which aims to call back silenced and fragmented realities so as to put them together for a different narrative of the past. The present essay keeps away from the long history of the genre of autobiography, which has been entangled in the male-identified paradigm and has served "as one of those generic contracts that reproduces the patrilineage and its ideologies of gender" (Smith 44). Instead, following the feminist poetics of women's autobiography that recognizes the distinctive narrative technologies of women's life-writing (fragmentary, fluid, episodic and discontinuous

storytelling, with possibilities of sexual and textual imbrications) allows for the reconfiguration of a particular past within the Armenian context.²

Armenian Women's Life Writing

The public visibility and new social roles that Armenian women had begun to gain in the late nineteenth century, mainly through charitable organizations (founded especially for the purpose of enhancing female education) and literary salons³, continued to grow in the early years of the following century with women's journals and literary productions. In general, women's active involvement in such organizations and institutions has been underestimated and disqualified as political activism.⁴ Yet, their intellectual and social presence did take a further different turn in the wake of the Genocide, which generated an unfamiliar but unique and even paradoxically climactic moment in the history of Armenian feminism (Ekmekcioglu 54).

² I must note a caveat about the poetics of women's autobiography and all its liberating interpretive force which rest on Anglo-American feminist critical thought. I'd like to extend this so as to elaborate the poetics of Armenian women's autobiography in distinction from its Western counterparts, Armenian women's autobiography as part of the Ottoman/Turkish context can at times follow other creative openings regarding ways and forms of (self)representation. One exemplary study of its distinctiveness is to be found in the work of Melissa Bilal who examines lullabies as one of the discursive terrains of gendered memory and trauma in her "Lullabies and the memory of pain: Armenian women's remembrance of the past in Turkey". That being said, the Ottoman/Turkish women's autobiography of the time was suppressed in Turkish women's self-negating modes of silencing themselves in a kind of "self-infantilization" for the justification of the patriarchal authority in both private and public realms (Hülya Adak, "Suffragettes of the Empire, Daughters of the Republic: Women Auto/biographers Narrate National History (1918–1935)").

³ Such as the Society of the Charitable Ladies, established in 1864, The Patriotic Armenian Women's Society founded by Zabel Asadur (Sibyl) in 1879, or the Armenian Women's Pro-Educational Society that began to operate in the same year (Lerna Ekmekcioglu, *Recovering Armenia: The Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey*. 180).

⁴ In her article, "This time women as well got involved in politics: Nineteenth Century Ottoman Women's Organizations and Political Agency", which maps out women's organizations of different non-Muslim ethnic communities (Greeks, Jews and Armenians of the Ottoman empire), Nazan Maksudyan emphasizes that women's active involvement in public life through social, philanthropic or educational purposes have always been underestimated as simply charity works, but in fact through their presence in the public sphere, they gained political agency and "acted as agents of social change" (127).

All forms of organizations and charity works, which had defined the principal feminist endeavor among Armenian women since the mid-nineteenth century, evolved into efforts to engender a resisting force that would help revive the ruins of the Armenian nation. In Istanbul, the capital city of the declining Ottoman Empire after 1915, institutions such as The Armenian Women's Association, the Armenian Red Cross, the Neutral House, orphanages, maternity wards, deportation centers constituted the new space where Armenian intellectuals such as Anais (Yevpime Avedisian), Zaruhi Bahri, Zaruhi Kalemkearian, and Arshagouhi Teotig engaged in the remaking and recovery of the remnants of their nation. Instead of marking the end of history, the post-genocidal era marked the beginning of a new phase of Armenian feminism, which primarily took shape through the activism and rescue and relief works of this group of elite Armenian feminists. Under the protection and aegis of the Allied forces and the Armenian Patriarchate, this small group of Armenian women worked in various institutions that were established largely for orphans and young women who were uprooted and Turkified or Islamized.

The active role of these women was evident not only in the recovery efforts toward the afterlife of a massacred nation but also in their acts of writing memoirs and autobiographies. In bringing into their own autobiographical practices bits and pieces of the facts and realities they witnessed during those times, these Armenian women writers⁵ generated a new literature that distinguished Armenian feminism, the genre of life-writing and resistance literature all of which, in their own terms, would work as 'monumental history' within the Post-genocidal context.

Usually these personal narratives seem to follow a traditional line in covering their writers' childhood years, education and personal memories on various subjects such as their old neighborhoods, surroundings and daily life in general. However, on closer inspection the seemingly conventional narrative frameworks point to an irretrievable moment of non-belonging resulting from the Genocide and its

⁵ Along with Kalemkearian, it is here apt to remember some of the most prominent women writers and their autobiographical writings: Zabel Yesayan's *The Gardens of Silihdar* (1935), Anayis' *My Recollections* (1949), and Hayganush Mark's *Her Life and Works* (1954) and Zaruhi Bahri's *The Story of My Life* (1995).

aftermath. Almost all of the women writers this essay considers had to flee the country right before the establishment of the Turkish republic and settled down in Europe or the US. In allotting pages to the social and political activities they accomplished within their communities, these feminist autobiographers brought an unconventional new turn to the task of re-membering those facts. Through vignettes, portrayals and confessional narrative moments, their re-collections bring back the pieces of the ruined bodies of their nation in an effort to reclaim personal, collective or national modes of representation.

Among these Armenian women, Zaruhi Kalemkearian stands out with her autobiographical work, *From the Path of My Life*, a collection of writings in which she *re-collects* those fragments from her past dating back to the 1890s in a post-war era Istanbul. The influx of rare, vivid and insightful depictions flowing out of her memories continued after she eventually moved to New York. Published in 1952, her autobiography includes six disparate sections⁶ covering a wide range of topics from the times of her early childhood to the portrayals of prominent figures, who were influential in her life and career as a writer; from the cultural rebirth of her community, of modern Armenian language, and of the foundation of the short-lived republic of Armenia, to the times when she worked as a community worker and social activist in order to help Armenian orphans, mothers and other victims of the genocide whose survival was even more problematic. Covering a wide span of time from the early 1910s to the end of 1940s, *From the Path of My Life* reflects the politics dominating the lives of Armenians. Some major political events (the violent policies of the Sultan Abdul Hamid and the massacres in the 1890s, the before and aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, the Genocide in 1915 and its afterlife) are placed in the background, such that Kalemkearian's life narrative takes on a semi-personal quality.

The Reality as Document and Monument

⁶ To be more precise, these sections are entitled: "From the pages of my life", "Stories from real life", "Figures", "Orphans", "Family and Mother", "Armenian Language", "My Nation on the Rise".

Adopting Foucault's notion of "monumental history" in the service of reading Armenian women's life-writings belies the official Turkish historiography regarding the Armenian Genocide in 1915. The reality of denial produced by the official history is deeply embedded in archives, numbers,⁷ and facts, all of which have been used to prove the non-reality of the event. The main focus of the works on the Armenian Question published in Turkey, as Turkish historian Taner Akçam notes, is always on "Armenians themselves as the culpable party and their 'lies' or their 'ingratitude'" (Empire 59). As Akçam further highlights, the official history goes as far as to claim that "it was not the Armenians who were slaughtered but rather the Turks" (60). Yet the reality of survival on the part of Armenians comes in countless ways and through myriad experiences. How to represent those untold realities without falling into the same fever of proving, archiving and piling up the documental historiography? While the term *genocide* is still taboo, and the national Turkish historiography has not moved from regarding the period as anything other than a "dark chapter" as the founder of the republic called it (Akçam 31), the post-genocidal era, far from marking the end of violence, continued furthermore to produce "mechanisms that legitimized oppressive social practices" (Suciyan 73). One of those numerous acts of violence was the rape and kidnapping of Armenian women during 1915, which embodies a monumental history in itself; by recalling Foucault's demarcation of monumental history, their bodies/life stories can be seen as torn apart and left as traces which history has already forgotten about. These have been reclaimed within the borders of Kalemkearian's autobiographical narrative.

Testimonials might, at first sight, be regarded as one of those discursive terrains which can enable us to excavate a ground for monumental history. However, the nature of responses to catastrophes such as the Genocide in 1915 presented in testimonials bears further problematic consequences for the Armenian

⁷ In his analysis of the Turkish national identity and the denialist approach as its indispensable discourse, the official claim that Taner Akçam brings in repeats the urge of proving in numbers: "The number of Turks killed by the Armenians during the First World War is greater than the number of Armenians who were allegedly killed." (60).

scholar Marc Nichanian, who explains that “[T]estimony is from the start, from the moment it is uttered, destined to become archive, to be thrown back into the limitless domain of the archive, the latter also being secondarily at the service of historical truth, that of facts or an experience” (93). Following the philosophical line of thought from Lyotard to Agamben⁸, Nichanian investigates the possibility of turning testimony into something other than an archive or an archival document. Criticizing the idea that the testimonies of the Armenian Genocide suffer from the same “archival fever” that Derrida had argued, Nichanian looks for the ways in which it would be possible to “save the testimony from the archive” (93). The seemingly “infinitesimal” difference, as he calls it, between document and monument marks a radical change in our understanding of all past and present reality:

Everything leads us to believe that testimony—which used to be document—is now demanding to be read as monument. As long as testimonies were merely documents, they were read (if they were read) as the silent vestiges of memory that would help us to reconstruct the facts or that would bear each time the traces of a tragic experience, as the instruments of a universal memory, current or to come. A document is always instrumentalized, it serves something else than itself. A monument, on the other hand, exists only for itself.

This difference between document and monument in Nichanian’s formulation about the impasse of testimonial survival alters not only the way we approach and preserve history and facts; that very difference also disrupts the universal homogeneity of archival memories within the field of history.

If testimonials, every time, reveal a complicity in producing documental and archival history, then how are we to approach victimized Armenian women without damaging more the absent and mutilated realities of their afterlives? Perhaps the etymology of these two terms, *document* and *monument* might help us to reconfigure reality or history aside from the formulated totalities privileged by concepts like

⁸ In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben questions the impossibility of testimony, asserting that the ‘remnants’ of the Holocaust, as witnesses who are “neither the dead nor the survivors”, are unable to bear witness (164).

“document,” “documental history,” “testimonial history,” or “history as archive.” “To document,” by definition, is “to instruct” while “monument” is “a reminder”⁹ (Hedrick 18). The premise of the term “document” is that knowledge and its object are detached, while monuments are the space for the integration of knowledge and its object (18). Led by this etymological sign, *monument* helps us to remember “a trace of the past that is integrated in the present life and traditions of the community” (18). In contrast to the institutionalized sources providing the mediums of documents, monuments mark and carry a trace from the past to the present, very much like the concept of ruins. Here an apt reference should also be made to Walter Benjamin’s recurring references to ruins in several of his works¹⁰, where he develops an understanding of modernity through ruins. In his fragmented and incomplete *The Arcades Project*, he reads experience in the urban space of Paris paradigmatically, the image of the ruin enables him to offer an alternative site for the dialectical and interpenetrative site of nature and history, which only occurs at the absence of the “sovereign observer” (Pensky 70). More than simply signaling an absence or loss, his notion of ruins serves to transform the relationship between the past and present without reconstructing them in ideological frames.

What the autobiographical persona of Zaruhi Kalemkarian accomplishes goes beyond the simple act of remembering her lived experience through various traumatic cases. The act of remembering and keeping alive the memory of an Armenian woman’s past in its own silenced and yet self-evident terms would already be enough to be regarded as an exercise in monumental history. Yet, Kalemkarian also takes an ethical/political turn in weaving her personal story into and through the politics that otherized,

⁹ For further investigation of the present and forgotten meanings of both terms, see *moneo* vs *doceo*; *moneo* admonition, to admonish, reprimand, and also to advert, and remind; *memini*: I remember. As for *doceo*, it signifies the verb of demonstration; other examples from the same root: *doctum*, *doctor*, *docent*.] See *Documento/monumento* [document/monument] in *L'Enciclopedia Einaudi*, (volume quinto, 38-48).

¹⁰ *The Arcades Project* (1999), “On the Concept of History” (In *Selected Writings*, 4); “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (In *Selected Writings*, 2), *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (In *Selected Writings*, 3), “Berlin Chronicle” (In *Selected Writings*, 2).

victimized and traumatized women survivors. As she revisits her encounter with those women, she reveals her inability to take care of those women's bodies and lives, and at times her passivity in the face of them. It is this sort of self-acknowledgement of her own failure in saving these women that brings to the fore the 'monumental' picture (or history) of an Armenian woman's fight for survival as a subject. The fragmented, discontinuous, independent personal stories collected within the so-called integrity of Kalemkearian's life story in fact evidences the irony of mutual victimization, which is replaced by the mutual chance for self-representation.

"Rescuers" as they may be in their society, the group of women, which included Kalemkearian, were victims in their submissive complicity to work in the service of the recovery mission and re-Armenianization of ravished Armenian women under the aegis of Armenian national (which was inextricably gendered) politics in the early years of postgenocidal period. Against the bilateral politics of control imposed on women's bodies both by Turks and Armenians, Kalemkearian's political body and visibility are both fulfilled only when she brings forth her autobiographical work in the form of a monument, which reconciles knowledge (in this case, of the crime of rape) and its object (impregnated bodies induced by rape) through the fragmented but self-fulfilled existence of these micro-her-stories. It is only years after those encounters with those "sister souls," as she calls them in one of those confessional moments, that she "apprehends so well the irremediable sufferings [they] had" (292). Despite the necessary complicity she demonstrated in the work of rescuing many victimized women, Kalemkearian's life story grants her a full mode of self-representation as she re-writes herself into the ruined lives and bodies of her fellow women.

Gendered Realities

A limited number of these stories discussed in this essay include different (yet at the core the same) impasses that raped and impregnated Armenian women faced. Some explicitly refused to live with the

offspring of the perpetrator, some wanted to have them back so as to raise them as Armenians, while some were denied the right to abortion despite their insistence. However, in reassembling these stories of enforced motherhood, Kalemkarian has more vital intentions than the simple act of pinpointing the dual Turkish and Armenian forces of politics and control mechanisms contesting over the reproductivity of female bodies. First and foremost, as her narrative treatment with each case she witnessed in the past reveals clearly, she dismantles the concept of motherhood from conventional homogenous connotations. Kalemkarian had witnessed the new and uncanny state of motherhood, which further caused the women she is concerned with a state of alienation and self-negation; out of demographic concerns and under the temporary law of re-Armenianization, the protection and control of the Patriarchate dictated that raped and impregnated Armenian female survivors to give birth no matter how deep the traumas they had to live through.¹¹

In the process of recounting the silenced histories of these women, Kalemkarian strives to bring a sense of individuality and self-hood to them by fully portraying their refusals, voicing their emotional and existential dilemmas and describing them as resistant decision makers. Secondly, by her narrative treatment of these women not just as politicized bodies but also speaking subjects, Kalemkarian puts herself in dialogue with them, which marks a mode of mourning or an apologetic gesture. “I find myself so guilty for all my comforting remarks with which I had the foolish belief to save you from your painful experiences” (292). In her reassembling, albeit in narrative or fictional terms, of a conversational scheme with victimized women, she seizes a moment of admitting her passivity towards their lives and the silent complicity with the Armenian patriarchy she showed in prioritizing the future of her nation over its women’s needs. It is this moment in her narrative that gives Kalemkarian her own distinctive ethical voice and elevates her work of ‘self’-writing to the level of monumental history, a history that is interested in

¹¹ For the historical background of the kind of politics practiced on Armenian female bodies, see Lerna Ekmekcioglu’s essay “Biopolitics of “Rescue”: Women and the Politics of Inclusion after the Armenian Genocide” 215-235.

unearthing hidden and absent parts, rather than in building a past in the proximity with and through the definitions of authority.

Here, one might ask that whether not all gendered auto-bio-graphics (or self-life-writings) are unexceptionally monumental in their efforts to re-write the stories of self-fulfillment through the faultlines of resistances, interruptions and impositions. Probably yes. In the case of Kalemkarian's life-writing, the monumental-history shows itself in her decision to retell Armenian women's collective and gendered self-representation in its complexity. Within Western parameters of women's autobiographical practices, her narrative manifests itself as an Armenian case of "autobiographics," a term coined by Leigh Gilmore to describe "elements of self-representation ... that mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography (namely legalistic, literary, social and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced) (184). Now with the examination of Armenian autobiographics, not only do we follow the way in which the Armenian female subject of autobiography (here namely Zaruhi Kalemkarian) is produced but also how the historical discourse of truth and identity is restructured within the technologies of autobiography.

In the section entitled "Orphans," Kalemkarian brings forth several vignettes about survivor women who were radically troubled with the fate of giving birth to the child of the perpetrator. In the story called "The Child," she depicts an Armenian woman who had to give birth to the son of her Turkish rapist. The woman insists on giving away the child, who carries all the violent and barbaric features of the perpetrator, evidenced when the mother catches his child in the act of hollowing out the eyes of a cat. Instead of intervening in this violent act as a legacy of the enemy, Kalemkarian opens up space for the woman's remarks on her hatred for and denial of this monstrous offspring (271-273).

An equally striking vignette ("Dark Days") presents the fate of an Armenian woman called Verjine, who became the wife of the son of the governor of Adana province. Despite "the luxuries of harem life,

the lavishness of muslin divans and clothing embellished with gold, her diamonds and servants, her day trips by carriage, the love of her husband and especially the love of her child,”¹² she leaves everything behind and arrives in Istanbul, like thousands of survivors, to take refuge in one of the relief organizations (277). In one of her encounters with Kalemkarian, the victimized woman’s confessions clear up the painful paradox she has to live through:

Oh, *Mayrig* [Arm. mother], I am a married woman. I have a child and my husband is the son of the governor of Adana. All of my friends here, like you, think that I am just a young girl. Oh, *Mayrig*, I love my child so much. It doesn’t matter that he is from a Turk. My husband was a young man with a gentle, noble and chivalrous soul. He really loved me. He was the one who saved me, after savage Arabs cracked my father’s and later my mother’s skulls on a rock after they pillaged their gold. ... My husband and I loved each other... Two opposite currents are flowing side by side in my soul... I have no peace, *Mayrig*. My child... My husband got down on his knees and begged me not to leave him... But on the other side, the cracked skulls of my father and mother are still so fresh and vivid before my eyes. Both hatred and love stand in stark contrast before me. The pain of my people makes me revolt and roars within me. What happened to my child?... Oh, my child... (275-76)

Verjine shares the truth with Kalemkarian only to have her child be saved and “raised in [her] church and in the bosom of [her] nation.” As a response to the painful confessions of Verjine, Kalemkarian makes her own confession by writing that her consolatory promises as to take care of everything (“‘Verjine, my sweet girl,’ I said, ‘I will take care of everything. I’ll take care of it. You rest. Your child will be on your lap again in just a few days’”) were only a lie to comfort her compatriot during the final moments of her deteriorating health (275). With her belated confessional response to the already dead woman, Kalemkarian attempts to preserve a moment of mourning in her textual remaking of the women’s

¹² The translations belong to the author of the article.

realities and thus closes that painful chapter of her life with the following lines: “Seas and oceans separate me from your grave, poor Verjine, but now that I have put into words the most touching moments of your life, accept a warm teardrop as an homage to your memory” (277).

In the above-mentioned two cases, the concept of motherhood ultimately presents a reality distorted not only by the Turkish politics of violence but also by the Armenian patriarchal (both in the sense of religious and gendered superiority) politics of life. Every vignette through which Kalemkearian attempts to revisit this double bind of distortion seems to underline a different dimension of those ruinous lives. In the story entitled “The Picture of the Child” the author recounts the story of a young Armenian orphaned girl from Adana, whom she meets on a ship. As part of a group of orphan girls just like her, who were taken to be submitted to the care of the Armenian Catholic organization in Italy, this particular girl attracts the author’s attention with her reserved, bad-tempered and morose appearance (283). She dares to ask her name to open up a conversation with her after another girl whom Kalemkearian took care of in the past, mentions her exquisite skills with needlework. While the girl barely talks and gives curt answers, Kalemkearian witnesses a little scene happening in front of her. A younger child, who turns out to be her younger sister, approaches the girl and demands from her money in order to buy some fruit while the ship is anchored in Izmir. Serpouhi, the girl under Kalemkearian’s focus since the beginning, takes out a small parcel from her chest and hands out a silver coin to her younger sister. Having seen in this momentary small event the girl’s meticulous attention in putting back the parcel as if it was a relic or a sacred object, Kalemkearian immediately notices the fact or reality that others could not understand. In the closing she discloses the painful truth behind the reality of a rape the girl underwent during the Genocide.

For me who observed the psychology of orphan girls who survived the massacres and saw life in the deserts, it was not hard to see that Serpouhi, just like other girls her age, was one of those who became a mother during the deportations. And I realized what was inside that small parcel, like a sacred object; that must have been related to her heart’s fetters and it must have represented a

heart-felt request from her own life. How is it not possible to comprehend those profound pains, which surrounded the souls of the wretched like her. ... those girls who involuntarily became mothers, upon a general decree, left the fruit of their wombs in the Turk's home and returned, heartbroken and dejected, under the roof of the orphanages, while they kept the pictures on their chests, their love in their hearts (286-87).

The politics behind the genocidal will during the formation of the Turkish republic as a nation state had its repercussions in such life-events which manifested the forces that played out relentlessly on the Armenian woman's body. The catastrophe was not simply based on the event of racial cleansing via the systematic killings of an ethnic group of people, but also upon the revelation of gendered dimension of the political control over the remaining female bodies of that group.

Kalemkarian's attempt to revisit yet another heart-wrenching story of the after-lives of Armenian women ends up with the suicide of the Armenian mother who gives birth to the son of the perpetrator Turk. This particular story, which is curiously entitled "A Story for My Grandson When He is Older" brings forward another tragic layer of reality—of those ravished Armenian women who were denied the right to abortion even under the care of their own national/communal institutions. As the politics of inclusion behind the rescue efforts led by the Armenian patriarchate and its various organizations have shown, the patrilineal Armenian descent rule was temporarily ceased in order to reclaim the Armenianness of the infants to be born from ravished Armenian women survivors. In her article which lays out the historical and political workings of such bilateral politics practiced by both the Turkish and Armenian camps, Lerna Ekmekcioglu attends to the gendered realities at the core of both Turkish and Armenian politics by which national and political presence was reclaimed.¹³ Whether it be rescue efforts in the Armenians' camp or the abduction of Armenian orphans and women by Turks, the "fierce fights about

¹³ Lerna Ekmekcioglu, "The Biopolitics of "Rescue": Women and the Politics of Inclusion after the Armenian Genocide" 215-237.

who belonged where” shaped the politics waged over the contested field of the Armenian woman’s body. And this reality has so far been disregarded and neglected.

Despite her conscious decision to retell the story of the mother who was deprived of the right to abortion, Kalemkearian does not comment any further on her failure to rescue the woman, and indeed, with a little note through the end of the story, she suspends the reality of her guilty stance. Remembering her brief conversation with the doctor of the maternity ward, which was established specifically for expectant Armenian women survivors, she writes, “Once we were alone with the doctor for a moment, he told me that we could have saved the patient’s life if we had, in accordance with her wish, removed the child from her womb while it was still in the stage of fetus” (297). This makes clear that it was in the power of authorities including those feminists like Kalemkearian herself to choose saving the life of the mother at an early stage. Kalemkearian’s curious preference to entitle the story “A Story for My Grandson When He is Older” might perhaps lead us to her intentions to rewrite history through those silenced, disregarded, overlooked and long-forgotten gendered details of the national as well as her own personal past.¹⁴ This urge to rebuild a history through individual tragedies of women survivors might partly be accepted as Kalemkearian’s answer to the lack of resistance that she could not show against the politics deployed over the female body in real life. The belated compensation, just like the resistance itself, only comes in Kalemkearian’s textual representation of her past.

Conclusions

It is true that the reappropriation of historical moments, such as the afterlife of Armenian women in the post-genocidal period, can generate new narrative regimes, limitations and boundaries. However, women’s autobiographies such as Kalemkearian’s open up a site for the narratives invested in monumental histories

¹⁴ Zaruhi Bahri, a colleague and friend of Kalemkearian, recounts a similar story, in which she tacitly displays her failure to dissuade the Patriarchate from further punishing a woman for her insistence on returning to her ‘new’, Turkified life. (*The Story of My Life*, 186-192)

(or in this case Armenian “her-stories”) which have so far been rendered invisible from every form (literary, social, political, historical) of recognition and instead been hidden under the archival or documental history of hegemonic narratives. As opposed to the various forms of nonrecognition and denialism ongoing in the Turkish camp, the retold stories of Armenian women’s lives provides us with muted, mutilated and fragmented monuments which begin to speak others’ realities and histories. Against the understanding of history which is conditioned to teach, instruct and manage our perception of the reality through the reductive axes of archives and documents, Kalemkearian’s work embodies a specific moment of ‘monumentalism’ by dwelling on the task of remembering and recalling gendered microhistories, which have been relegated to the margins. In unearthing voices and visibilities, but more crucially in introducing a mode of self-representation which does not marginalize others but prioritizes the condition of textual confrontation with them, she reproduces history-as-monument as a counter-knowledge of afterlives and bodies. Kalemkearian’s life-writing in this sense is transformative in creating an engaging dialogue with the past, in revisiting her own failures, and finally in molding an ethically and politically valid form of selfhood.

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