

Zabel Yessayan: At the Intersection of Armenian Nationalism and the Women's Movement

Andrew Wickersham

Zabel Yessayan¹ née Hovhannessian's life demonstrates that intersectional identities complicate narratives of struggle and survival in the Middle East. Born an Armenian in the late-nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, Yessayan, a female writer and intellectual, devoted much of her life to improving the conditions of Armenian women at home and expanding their opportunities in the public sphere. Much of her life, however, was overshadowed by violence against the Armenian community (*millet*) in the Ottoman Empire. Zabel Yessayan lived her life at the intersection of Armenian nationalism and the burgeoning women's movement.

This intersection was not without its complications. James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* argues that within subordinate groups confronted by a dominant group, a rigid solidarity often develops in order to maximize the efficacy of resistance. Power relations within subordinate groups tend to prioritize the struggle against the primary oppressor over attempts to establish more democratic power structures within the group.² Yessayan's attempts to establish more egalitarian gender relations within the Armenian community often ran up against the Armenian nationalist movement's need for intercommunal solidarity. Yessayan believed in both Armenian national autonomy as well as women's advancement, but when confronted with the horrors of Armenian persecution, she frequently prioritized the nationalist movement's objectives over furthering the place of women in society.

Childhood and Adolescence (1878-1895)

Zabel Hovhannessian was born into a middle-class Armenian family in the neighborhood of Silihdar in the Scutari district of Istanbul.³ Her father's family was very well connected. Zabel writes that all of her male relatives on her father's side had attended school at the Galatasaray Lycée and could speak French in addition to Turkish and Armenian.⁴ Her grandfather had been a judge in an Armenian *millet* court in Rumelia, and

¹ Also transliterated as "Yesayan" or "Esayan."

² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 26-27.

³ Zabel Yessayan, *The Gardens of Silihdar: A Memoir*, eds. Joy Renjilian-Burgy and Judith Saryan, trans. Jennifer Manoukian (Boston: Armenian International Women's Association, 2014), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

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her grandmother's cousins had been palace servants of the *valide sultan* during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz.⁵ When Zabel's father completed secondary school, he contemplated studying medicine in Russia, but instead invested his money in opening a factory that produced ornate *yazmas*. This enterprise soon failed, leaving the family in a tenuous economic position surviving on loans.⁶ Her mother's family had slightly more eclectic origins. Her maternal grandmother had grown up as the daughter of an Ottoman civil servant, while her maternal grandfather traveled the empire as a merchant leading caravans to and from Persia.⁷

The Hovhannessians' attempt to maintain a façade of middle-class respectability stood out conspicuously within their neighborhood. Silihdar had originally been settled by members of the Armenian *amira* class and many of their neighbors were the descendants of *amiras*.⁸ The *amiras* were an elite group of Armenians whose economic interests were closely tied with the Ottoman state. They acted as intermediaries between the Armenian community and the Ottoman government and "effectively controlled the Patriarchate...the spiritual and civic leader of the entire Armenian population of the empire."⁹ The *amiras* acquired their position of prominence through their control over a vital segment of Ottoman finance, providing the capital needed by *paşas* to bid on Ottoman tax farms (*iqtas*). Such officials were known as *sarrafs*.¹⁰ Despite their prestige as elite *dhimmis*, non-Muslim "Peoples of the Book" living under Muslim protection, the *amiras* occupied precarious ground; the sultan could take their property, as well as their lives, at any time, as was the case with Sultan Ahmed III's chief palace purveyor (*bazirgan başı*) Hagop Hovhannessian and an *amira* named Kasbar who was hanged on the sultan's orders in 1821 in Istanbul.¹¹ However, because the *amiras* maintained their position by fulfilling a key role within the Ottoman tax system (*iltizam*), they remained committed to preserving the *millet* system, which integrated non-Muslims into Ottoman society through religious elites acting as intermediaries between the state and their respective communities. This put them at odds with the growing liberal

⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

⁶ Ibid., 13-15.

⁷ Ibid., 5-10.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Hagop Barsoumian, "The Dual Role of the Armenian Amira Class within the Ottoman Government and the Armenian Millet (1750-1850)," in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of Plural Society*, eds. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 172; 177.

¹⁰ Ibid., 175.

¹¹ Ibid., 175-176.

movement within the Armenian middle class as well as with nationalists who pressed for greater autonomy within the empire.¹²

Zabel Hovhannessian's childhood was not sheltered from talk of politics nor did her family keep her ignorant of the perceived dangers facing the Armenian community in the late nineteenth century. In her memoirs she recounts a particularly gruesome tale of what life was like for Armenians at the beginning of the nineteenth century according to her grandmother. "Janissaries would often test the sharpness of their swords by decapitating Christians in the street. To show deference, Greek and Armenian men used to shave their mustaches, pull their fezzes down over their ears and timidly walk through the streets to avoid catching the eye of a janissary."¹³ In all likelihood, this anecdote was embellished for the dramatic effect it would have on the young Zabel, but the fact that such tales were in circulation within the Armenian community attests to the collective memory of periods of persecution. The sad history of the Armenian past also comes across in a song her aunt Younghaper used to sing to Zabel as she went to sleep: "The city of Ani sits and cries/There is no one to say, don't cry, don't cry..."¹⁴ Ani had once been the capital of the Pakradouni Kingdom, whose ruling family had been Armenian, before the Seljuks destroyed Ani in 1118.¹⁵ Here we see that women play a critical role transmitting Armenian identity to the next generation through their songs and stories of the past.

Yessayan also recounts hearing her family talk about contemporary politics. Her uncle Dikran told her that Ottoman soldiers had massacred Bulgarian Christians. "Sultans are tyrants by trade," he told her. She incredulously asked whether Sultan Abdülaziz was really a tyrant, to which he replied that he was "the most despicable tyrant of them all."¹⁶ She concludes with satisfaction that "fortunately, in our house, no one felt the need to act like loyal subjects."¹⁷ From a very young age, she developed political views of her own lamenting that "if I had only been a boy, I would have been...a smuggler, or a thief who hides out in the woods. I would have fought for justice and would gladly have died for it."¹⁸ While perhaps this patriotic sentiment was later retrospectively read back into her life at the time of writing, the desire to be a bandit does have the authentic feel of childhood fantasy.

¹² Ibid., 180-181.

¹³ Yessayan, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 147.

¹⁶ Ibid., 54-56.

¹⁷ Ibid., 56.

¹⁸ Ibid., 58.

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Yessayan's passing allusion to her wish that she had been a boy raises some interesting questions about her views on gender and women. She writes that as a child she hated other girls because she "was disgusted when they would go crying to their mothers to complain after falling or getting hurt..."¹⁹ Likewise, she "despised weak boys."²⁰ She reserves some of her harshest criticism in her memoirs for women while she lavishes praise upon the men in her family. She describes her grandmother as "harbor[ing] unyielding contempt for everything and everyone, even for her own children."²¹ She calls her aunt Annig "a tyrannical woman" and her aunt Makring "impetuous" subject to anger "erupt[ing] in sudden rage and rebellion."²² The reason for Yessayan's disdain for the women in her family can probably be explained by her charge that they "were conservative and traditional, armed with an aggressive self-righteousness..."²³ In other words, she objected to women policing other women, keeping them in alignment with the patriarchal gender norms of the time. By contrast, she writes that her father had the greatest influence on her life. He was a man who "treated everyone's dignity with the same respect and consideration...He did not discriminate against people. Wealth, class, and nationality were not factors in determining his opinion of a person."²⁴ This glowing description of her father could not contrast more starkly with the disdain she held for women in her family.

Hovhannessian's first foray into the women's movement came in her late teens after she had completed primary school. The Armenian women's movement emerged within the broader context of the late-nineteenth-century Armenian literary movement known as "The Awakening" (*Zartonk*).²⁵ Female intellectuals of the Awakening hoped to improve women's education and expand their ability to participate in the public sphere through starting their own periodicals and newspapers, founding philanthropic organizations, and taking an active role in politics.²⁶ She was motivated to become involved after listening to the stories of some of her closest friends. "These young women," she says, "could not leave the house by themselves, and some were even forced to

¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

²⁰ Ibid., 54.

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ Ibid., 114.

²⁵Victoria Rowe, "Armenian Writers and Women's-Rights Discourse in Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Constantinople," *Asparia*, Vol. 2 (2008): 44.

²⁶ Ibid., 46.

marry men they despised.”²⁷ They came to her for advice, and she gave them tips for how to rebel against their families. One of her friends even “cut her hair short...dressed simply and wore a man’s tie.”²⁸ One day Zabel took one of her friends to meet Madame Dussap, one of the preeminent figures in the Armenian women’s movement.²⁹ Madame Dussap was the *nom de plume* of Srphuhi Dussap (1841-1901), the daughter of Nazli Vahan who founded St. Hripsimants girl’s school in 1859 and the Charitable Women’s Association in 1864.³⁰ During the 1880s, Dussap published three ground-breaking articles: “Women’s Education,” “The Principle of Women’s Employment,” and “A Few Words about Women’s Unemployment” that established the main advocacy issues that succeeding women would take up in decades to come.³¹

Education and Life in Paris (1895-1902)

In 1885 Zabel Hovhannessian became the first known woman from the Ottoman Empire to study abroad. She was admitted into the Sorbonne in Paris where she studied literature and philosophy.³² In addition to her natural talent, her family’s attitude toward education and the expansion of educational opportunities for women within the Armenian *millet* enabled Hovhannessian to obtain a level of education far exceeding that of most women in the Ottoman Empire.

Hovhannessian learned to read when she was four years old under the tutelage of her father.³³ At that point, her aunts thought it would be appropriate for her to take private religious education lessons in order to gain a proper appreciation of Armenian culture as well as learn classical Armenian. Her father objected, favoring the Sourp Khatch school, but her aunts thought she was still too young to be allowed out in public alone.³⁴ She reports being utterly bored with Garabed Ağa’s Bible recitations and she deliberately misbehaved, hoping that he would refuse to have her again as a student.³⁵ This strategy proved unsuccessful, but once she told her father that her teacher had instructed him to read to her

²⁷ Yessayan, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, 131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.136

³⁰ Victoria. “Armenian Writers and Women’s-Rights Discourse,” 48.

³¹ *Ibid.* 49.

³² Joy Renjilian-Burgy and Judith Saryan, “Brief Biography of Zabel Yessayan,” in *The Gardens of Silihdar*, trans. Jennifer Manoukian (Boston: Armenian Women’s Association, 2014), vii.

³³ Yessayan, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93-97.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

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from the New Testament every night, he decided not to send her back again.³⁶

Next, her father enrolled her in Sourp Khatch school. According to Yessayan, "Everyone agreed that the school had all the necessary requirements to become a secondary school and to successfully prepare a new generation to meet the new demands of modern life."³⁷ This was because, "The nouveaux-riches merchants along with the middle-class workers and shop owners...managed to force the resignation of the powerful, conservative and religious-minded men of the parish council and elect new trustees from a group of enlightened and educated young men."³⁸ By enrolling her in Sourp Khatch, her father no doubt hoped that his daughter Zabel would not only receive a quality education but that she would also embrace the values of modernity and progress that were so important to him.

Apart from the schools operated by the Armenian Apostolic Church, Armenian girls in the Ottoman Empire had two other options for education at that time. In 1869 American missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions founded the first Protestant girl's primary school in Kharpert. By teaching girls to read and write in colloquial Armenian, as opposed to the classical language, the Americans hoped that the girls would be better able to read and understand the Bible for themselves—a condition the missionaries felt assured would bring about a conversion to Protestantism. Though some Armenians did become Protestants, the mass conversion anticipated by the missionaries never happened.³⁹ Protestant girls' and boys' schools, nevertheless, proved highly successful owing to their curriculum, which taught Armenian language and grammar, mathematics, geography, astronomy, chemistry, ecclesiastical history, and philosophy.⁴⁰ Still, the curriculum was not as comprehensive as it could have been. Crosby H. Wheeler, the founder of the Kharpert mission school, cautioned that "...our greatest care has been not to educate them *too much*, so as to raise them too far above their own people and destroy their sympathy with them."⁴¹ The second alternative was secular education, which was rarer, but had

³⁶ Ibid. 97.

³⁷ Ibid., 105.

³⁸ Ibid., 105.

³⁹ Barbara J. Merguerian, "Missions in Eden': Shaping an Educational and Social Program for the Armenians in Eastern Turkey (1855-1895)," in *New Faith in Ancient Lands: Western Missionaries in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Heleen Murren-van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 241.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 249.

⁴¹ Ibid., 249.

existed for about a century by the time Zabel Hovhannessian was of school-age. In 1790 Mkrdich Mirjanian, an *amira*, established the first Armenian secular school in the Kum Kapı neighborhood of Istanbul.⁴² It would not be until the opening of a new school in the Samatia neighborhood in 1831, however, that girls were able to receive a secular education.⁴³

Hovhannessian entered the sixth grade at Sourp Khatch school, as she already could read classical Armenian.⁴⁴ After graduating, however, she faced a problem nearly all women at the time would have encountered. Her father wanted her to attend the Getronagan School for secondary education, but at the time it was only admitting boys.⁴⁵ As violence against Armenians came to a climax during the Hamidian Massacres (1894-1896) in the Eastern Provinces, her father concluded that it would be best for her to go to Europe, not only to further her education, but for her own physical safety.⁴⁶

Paris had traditionally attracted Armenians hoping to obtain the highest levels of education. Armenian men had been admitted into Parisian lycées and universities since at least the 1830s.⁴⁷ However, Hovhannessian is among the earliest – if not the first – Armenian woman admitted into the Sorbonne. She studied medieval and modern French literature and history as well as classics, such as Greek philosophy and Latin literature.⁴⁸ It was during these years that an Armenian language periodical, *Flower*, published her first poetry. Later a series of her articles on the women's movement appeared in the same publication. These were titled "The Woman Question," "The New Women," and "The Parisian Woman."⁴⁹ Still, in spite of these successes, Hovhannessian's life in Paris was not altogether idyllic.

Hovhannessian based her first novel, *In the Waiting Room* (1903), on her experiences as a student in Paris. "It was the beginning of my second year in Paris," she wrote. "At that time I was living in the Boulevard Arago in a small room on the sixth floor which overlooked a courtyard...Above me I saw only a square patch of sky, which was often covered with the black, polluting smoke and hopeless, damp fog from the

⁴² Barsoumian "The Dual Role of the Armenian Amira Class," 177.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴⁴ Yessayan, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, 101.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁶ Victoria Rowe, "The 'New Armenian Woman': Armenian Women's Writing in the Ottoman Empire, 1880-1915," (PhD, diss., University of Toronto, 2000), 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10; 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

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nearby factories.⁵⁰ Boulevard Arago was one of the many thoroughfares built during the Second Empire (1852-1870) as part of Georges Haussmann's renovation of Paris.⁵¹ During the 1870s, this part of Paris was decidedly working class and industrial. The nearby Bievre River "had attracted a variety of industrial plants that required water..." and "was bordered by a succession of tanneries, laundries, and chemical works."⁵² Contemporaries criticized Haussmann's construction of new avenues through the slums on the south bank of the Seine as "anti-riot streets" meant to control the poor rather than improving their living conditions.⁵³

Hovhannessian's narrative describes the life of Armenian woman studying abroad as being filled with both "anxiety and the sense of freedom."⁵⁴ While her novel stresses the isolation that Armenian women must have felt, she could not have been completely removed from the Armenian diaspora community in Paris, as she met and married an Armenian painter, Dikran Yessayan, in 1900. The couple had two children, Sophie and Hrant.⁵⁵ Yessayan was a little-known artist, and of the two Zabel received far more acclaim in Armenian artistic circles.⁵⁶

Nationalist and Feminist (1902-1915)

Yessayan returned to Istanbul with her husband in 1902.⁵⁷ The years immediately following her homecoming were tumultuous years for the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian community. In July 1908, the bloodless Young Turk Revolution restored the Ottoman constitution of 1876, restricting the autocratic rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II. While most Armenians in Istanbul looked favorably on these developments, their enthusiasm for the revolution was tempered with a note of caution as can be seen in two editorials from the period. Mihrdat Noradoungian warned in his August 1908 article "The Price of Freedom" that bloodless revolutions are rare in history: "Whatever the revolution did not do, the counterrevolution will do. There is only one way in order to prevent the occurrence of this contingency (bloodshed) and that is *discretion, modesty,*

⁵⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁵¹ David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 73.

⁵² Ibid., 12.

⁵³ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁴ Rowe, "The New Armenian Woman," 87.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁷ Renjilian-Burgy and Saryan, "Brief Biography of Zabel Yessayan," vii.

wisdom, and patience. New freedom is always fragile. Let us be careful."⁵⁸ A similar article was even more explicit: "We repeat that we need to be careful from shouting 'Armenian,' or to talk about an independent Armenia. The majority of the nation is in agreement that reforming the condition of the Armenians of Turkey is dependent on the reform of Turkey."⁵⁹

As Bedross Der Matossian has argued, the April 14-17 and April 25-27, 1909 massacres of Armenians in Adana were part of a larger conservative counterrevolution. On April 12, the First Army Corps in Istanbul mutinied and forced the constitutionally appointed cabinet to resign. Tevfik Paşa became the new grand vizier, ushering in an anti-Young Turk administration the same day that the first victims fell in Adana.⁶⁰ Prior to the massacres, Adana had been home to 30,000 Armenians or about thirty percent of its population.⁶¹ Tensions in Adana had been building since March after the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in Istanbul replaced the current *vali* with a pro-CUP governor. Fearing the opposition in Adana would turn violent, the Armenian bishop called upon his community to begin stockpiling weapons.⁶² At the end of the month, a group of Muslims attacked an Armenian man in the countryside. The man defended himself, killing one of his attackers and wounding several others. This incident triggered pervasive anti-Armenian sentiments in Adana.⁶³

On the morning of April 19, Armenian shopkeepers closed their stores after seeing crowds of migrant workers roaming the streets armed with hatchets and clubs. Rumors spread throughout the Muslim quarter that the Armenians were planning a separatist uprising, and by nightfall, they had burned most Armenian shops to the ground.⁶⁴ This continued for three days before the Ottoman army arrived. On the evening of April 25, the military commander believed that Armenians had attacked his garrison as they camped outside Adana. The army mobilized and set about burning the Armenian quarter for the next two days. Those who resisted were put on trial afterward and many were sentenced to death.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Bedross Der Matossian, "From Bloodless Revolution to Bloody Counterrevolution: The Adana Massacres of 1909," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 6 (2011): 152.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

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Similar violence against Armenians spread throughout Cilicia, killing around 30,000 people.⁶⁶

Yessayan was among a group of Armenian leaders who organized a relief mission for the orphans of the Adana Massacres.⁶⁷ She traveled to Adana with the second delegation dispatched by the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople.⁶⁸ The primary task of the mission was to register all of the orphans and provide immediate aid to those who had lost both parents.⁶⁹ They worked with the Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church to tour all the provisional locations where the orphans were sheltered in the immediate aftermath of the massacre.⁷⁰

That a woman should play a leading role in such humanitarian work was in no sense unusual for the time. Charities and relief organizations proliferated after the adoption of the Armenian National Constitution in 1863.⁷¹ Founding philanthropic organizations for the advancement of the Armenian community became fundamental to the emerging Armenian women's movement as it taught women "practical skills such as public speaking, committee chairing, and report writing."⁷² Moreover, "by taking over social programs, the traditional domain of religious authorities, welfare or charitable societies emerged as a way for secular leaders to challenge clerical authority."⁷³ However, in this particular case, Yessayan's close cooperation with the Armenian Apostolic Church did not afford her the ability to assert her normally anti-clerical views.

In her memoirs Yessayan makes no attempt to hide her contempt for the Church as an agent of social control. She criticizes the Patriarchate for being on good terms with the Ottoman elite, particularly the Janissaries prior to the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ She writes that during Lent, *yasakcis* (literally "those who prohibit") from the Church would ensure that people were observing the fast by "[wandering] through the neighborhoods. If the smell of meat rose from a house, they would arrest and occasionally beat, the head of the household."⁷⁵ She also disapproved

⁶⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁶⁷ Renjilian-Burgy and Saryan, "Brief Biography of Zabel Yessayan, viii.

⁶⁸ Zabel Yessayan, *In the Ruins: The 1909 Massacres of Armenians in Adana, Turkey*, ed Jurdith Saryan, Danila Jebajian Terpanjian, and Joy Renjilian-Burgy, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Watertown, MA: Armenian International Women's Association, 2016), 7.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁷¹ Rowe, "Armenian Writers and Women's-Rights Discourse," 54.

⁷² Ibid., 54.

⁷³ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁴ Yessayan, *Gardens of Silihdar*, 6.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 7.

of the asylum housed in the basement of Sourp Hovhannes Church. The cries of the inmates would frequently disrupt worship, prompting “the wardens to sometimes ruthlessly beat them to the brink of death.”⁷⁶ She shared many of her views about the Church with her father, whose “harsh critique of our black-hooded priests inspired in me a kind of pride in his sense of integrity.”⁷⁷

However, in the wake of the Adana Massacres, Yessayan saw the Armenian Apostolic Church as an institution that could rejuvenate the Armenian people and looked to Christianity as a cultural force that could promote national unity. At a mass held in Adana the first Sunday after her arrival, she writes that “[t]he scene recalled the first centuries of Christianity. The traces of the blood shed by martyrs and men who had taken an oath to fight to the death were still moist, and it seemed as if it were their souls that were wafting upward in the undulating waves of smoky incense.”⁷⁸ Upon visiting the survivors at Sis, she praises their “spirit of Christianity” for having been able to defend themselves without killing any of their attackers: “The women and children had found refuge in the monastery in the days when the monks had smelled of gunpowder rather than incense; when, instead, of prayers and exhortations to resignation, encouragement and incitements to bravery had come from their lips.”⁷⁹ Attending mass again in Sis, she aptly concludes that religion can be a form of resistance:

All these ceremoniously observed formalities might well have struck us as ludicrous, yet quite the contrary was true: we were filled with feelings of tenderness and deeply touched. In the ruined Cilicia, ravaged by fire and massacre, we felt, in one corner of a village far from the beaten track, the instinctive will that made a handful of Armenians want to preserve their ancestral traditions. Was that, too, not a form of self-defense?⁸⁰

Yessayan published her account of the Adana survivors’ experiences in her 1911 book *In the Ruins*. Her narrative style mixes raw emotion with waxing sentimentality and highly charged nationalistic rhetoric. Upon seeing the victims, she laments:

How, by what means, could we shake them out of the torpor induced by centuries of suffering? How could we rekindle the flame of humanity in them, bring a gleam to their eyes, lighten

⁷⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁸ Yessayan, *In the Ruins*, 16.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 121-122.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 133.

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their dark destiny, put hope and a smile on their lifeless lips, withered with cursing?...Fatherland, your soil means more to me than life itself! Let me shed my blood, not here, but on your breast!⁸¹

In the Ruins is also a very gendered account of suffering in which motherhood features prominently.

I had seen all sorts of unfortunate mothers. I had seen mothers with bodies wasted by debilitating manual work who had repeatedly had miscarriages or given birth to monsters. I had seen mothers with breasts drained by poverty who were unable to nurse their anemic infants. I had seen mothers with incurable diseases who produced, not milk, but only pus and contagion; and I had seen mothers who, had become criminals and killed their newborn babies. But there was no ranging those mothers under the rubric of any merely human misfortune. They were mothers from Armenia...⁸²

These two themes, nationalism and gender, would feature prominently in all of Yessayan's writings published between 1902 and 1911. The earliest, titled "Our Women Teachers," dates from August 1903 published in *Masis*. The other three that have been translated, "The Newest Manifestation of the Women's Cause," "The Armenian Woman after the Constitution," and "The Armenian Women's Role in the Current Movement towards the Homeland," were all published later between 1911 and 1912 in *Arakadz*.⁸³

Her prolific writings during this period testify to a broader phenomenon, the expansion of public spheres in the Ottoman Empire following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.⁸⁴ This revolution had repercussions within the Armenian *millet* forcing the resignation of conservative Patriarch Ormanian, the institution of a new Armenian National Assembly rooted in constitutionalism, and the return from exile of the leaders of the two main Armenian political organizations, the

⁸¹ Ibid., 86-87.

⁸² Ibid., 65-66.

⁸³ Zabel Yessayan, *My Soul in Exile and Other Writings*, ed. Barbara Merguerian, et, al., trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Jennifer Manoukian, and Nanore Barsoumian (Boston: Armenian Women's Association, 2014), 81; 85; 88; 92.

⁸⁴ Bedros Der Matossian, "Formation of Public Sphere(s) in the Aftermath of the 1908 among Armenians, Arabs, and Jews." in Francois Georgeon, ed. "L'ivresse de Liberte" *La Revolution de 1908 dans l'Empire Ottoman* (Paris: Peeters, 2012), 189-192.

Dashnak and Hunchak Parties.⁸⁵ The Dashnaks were the more liberal-leaning of the two, pledging to work with the Committee of Union and Progress to achieve greater Armenian representation within parliament, while the Hunchak Party was more expressly social democratic and revolutionary.⁸⁶

Yessayan was well known within the Armenian social circles of Istanbul at this time for frequenting salons associated with prominent members of the leftist Hunchak Party.⁸⁷ Her own socialist views are quite apparent in her writings from those times. She claims that as a child she was particularly troubled by seeing children from well-off families eat their lunches at school while others went hungry, "I was still too young to articulate the injustice inherent in this inequality, but my conscience nevertheless tormented me." One day she remedied the injustice of a rich girl who was taunting a hungry girl with her food by "ripping the cherries out of her hand and throwing them over the garden wall."⁸⁸ Following the tragedy of the Adana massacres, she was enraged by the persistence of economic injustice among the Armenians given that "the uncompromising, stubborn hatred of the enemy should have kept our people free from class inequalities."⁸⁹ Yessayan also introduced Armenian women to the term "feminism" for the first time in an article published in *Dzaghigh* in 1903, shortly after her return from Paris.⁹⁰ Victoria Rowe argues that Yessayan's feminism should be characterized as relational feminism, which "[features] the primacy of a companionate, non-hierarchical, male-female couple as the basic unity of society," as opposed to individualist feminism that views "the individual, irrespective of sex or gender as the basic unit."⁹¹

Yessayan clearly articulates her rejection of a rights-based, individualist feminism in "The Newest Manifestation of the Women's Cause." Here she writes that the success of the women's movement can be attributed to casting off earlier ideas "reproachable and irreconcilable with human nature."⁹² No serious feminist today, she asserts, "will base

⁸⁵ Ibid., 192-195; 201.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 199-202.

⁸⁷ Rowe, "Armenian Writers and Women's-Rights Discourse," 51.

⁸⁸ Yessayan, *Gardens of Silihdar*, 109.

⁸⁹ Zabel Yessayan, "The Armenian Woman after the Constitution," *Arakadz*, 7 (July 6, 1911), in *My Soul in Exile and Other Writings*, eds. Barabara J. Merguerian, et al., trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Jennifer Manoukian, and Nanore Barsoumian (Boston: Armenian International Women's Association, 2014), 87.

⁹⁰ Rowe, "Armenian Writers and Women's-Rights," 56.

⁹¹ Ibid. 57.

⁹² Zabel Yessayan, "The Newest Manifestation of the Women's Cause," *Arakadz*, 1 (May 25, 1911) in *My Soul in Exile and Other Writings*, eds. Barabara J. Merguerian, et al., trans.

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the issue on principles of equality.” The “moral and spiritual differences” between men and women preclude that.⁹³ Instead, the modern feminist strives “to come out of the boundaries of family life; to assume her role as educator and caregiver—freely and without limitations—side by side with her male counterpart, by complementing and completing his work.”⁹⁴ In Yessayan’s view, jobs suitable for women included healthcare, education, art, journalism, and politics, but not manual labor.⁹⁵

Given the political environment, however, one must question how much of this latent conservatism owed itself to Yessayan’s genuine beliefs and how much can be attributed to a pragmatic desire not to undermine Armenian national unity at that perilous time. Armenian women during this post-Adana period, when confronted with “the physical insecurity of Ottoman Armenian life,” often chose to “cooperate with men for the amelioration of conditions for both women and Armenians.”⁹⁶ When nationalism met feminism, a new discourse emerged that stressed women’s advancement as a sign of national progress and modernity. Nationalists expected women to become literate, wear European clothing, and participate in the public sphere “in order to ‘prove’ that they were the negation of everything that was considered ‘backward.’”⁹⁷

In Yessayan’s writing, we see her desire that women assume the role of nurturing mothers to the Armenian nation, educating and raising its sons to be patriots, consoling the victims of massacre, and helping to lift up the impoverished. She urges girls and women to set aside vanity, comfort, and materialism to “devote themselves to exciting, dynamic work for the benefit of the people.”⁹⁸ Looking at the state of Armenians in the Eastern Provinces, she writes, “There are ailing people in need of care; grieving people waiting to be consoled, and demoralized people in need of a little hope in order to be reborn. There is an entire nation, with multifaceted and complicated problems, in need of hands to reconstruct it.”⁹⁹ Only the “Armenian women, with their pure and unadulterated instincts...the simplicity and tenderness of a grieving mother and

G.M. Goshgarian, Jennifer Manoukian, and Nanore Barsoumian, (Boston: Armenian International Women’s Association, 2014), 82.

⁹³ Ibid., 83.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 84.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁹⁶ Rowe, “Armenian Writers and Women’s-Rights Discourse,” 62.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁹⁸ Zabel Yessayan, “The Armenian Women’s Role in the Current Movement towards the Homeland,” *Arakadz*, 1, (August 3, 1912), in *My Soul in Exile and Other Writings*, eds. Barabara J. Merguerian, et al., trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Jennifer Manoukian, and Nanore Barsoumian (Boston: Armenian International Women’s Association, 2014), 92.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 92.

weeping sister” have the ability to address these national problems.¹⁰⁰ The need to articulate their feminism within a nationalist framework was both “restrictive and liberating,” according to Rowe. On one hand, “it was almost impossible for women to present their roles independent of their perceived responsibility to the nation.” However, it was “a liberating concept for many women because it legitimated their right to speak publicly on matters relating to women, the family, and the nation.”¹⁰¹

Into Exile (1915-1942)

While Zabel Yessayan acquired fame as both a feminist and Armenian nationalist, ultimately it would be her nationalistic beliefs that would force her into exile. After the outbreak of World War I, the Committee of Union and Progress, which still held power in the Ottoman Empire, began compiling lists of political dissidents and arresting them. Yessayan was the only woman to appear on the list. When news reached her of her impending arrest, both she and her husband fled to Bulgaria in 1915. They would spend the rest of the war together in Paris.¹⁰² After almost two decades in Paris, Yerevan State University in Soviet Armenia invited Yessayan to join the faculty as a lecturer on French literature. During her years in Yerevan, she published her memoir *The Gardens of Silihdar* in 1935. At the height of the Stalinist purges, this work was deemed an overly nostalgic account of bourgeois life by the Soviet state, leading to her arrest in 1937.¹⁰³ Her death is shrouded in mystery. She is thought to have died in prison in Baku in 1942.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

While Zabel Yessayan was privileged in many aspects, including her socio-economic background and metropolitan social *milieu*, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were perilous times to be an Armenian in the Ottoman Empire. Confronting such socio-economic and physical perils, the Armenian nationalist movement pushed for community solidarity, shunting aside women’s demands for greater autonomy. We can see in particular that in the period following the traumatic Adana Massacres, that the Armenian Apostolic Church

¹⁰⁰ Yessayan, “The Armenian Woman after the Constitution,” 88.

¹⁰¹ Rowe, “Armenian Writers and Women’s-Rights Discourse,” 47.

¹⁰² Renjilian-Burgy and Saryan, “Brief Biography of Zabel Yessayan,” vii.

¹⁰³ Talar Chahinian, “The Paris Attempt: Rearticulation of (National) Belonging and the Inscription of Aftermath Experience in French Armenian Literature Between the Wars,” (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2008), 56n15.

¹⁰⁴ Rowe, “Armenian Writers and Women’s-Rights Discourse,” 52.

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assumed an even more prominent role in the lives of the survivors as a source not only of material aid and social assistance but cultural identity. The Church and other agents of Armenian solidarity remained highly patriarchal. Even the more liberal and leftist nationalist movements that placed women's education at the center of their modernization agenda did so not for the purpose of advancing women's rights but to mirror European society, which they sought to emulate.

In this context, Yessayan, as one of the first self-identifying Armenian feminists, struggled to reconcile these two identities as she advocated for broader women's participation in civil society. The vision of gender and feminism that she articulated is highly complementarian in its outlook, reflecting the need to emphasize Armenian solidarity amid her advocacy for Armenian women in particular. Yessayan believed that the physical dangers that confronted Armenian women necessitated women's involvement in national discussions, and this included questions regarding an Armenian homeland in the Eastern Provinces. Articulating such views ultimately cost her a place in the emerging Turkish Republic that succeeded the Ottoman Empire in its Anatolian and Rumelian heartland.

Andrew Wickersham is a second-year PhD student in the Department of History at the University of Arizona studying Turkish and late Ottoman history. His interests include the formation of Turkish identity through demographic engineering and the relationship between nationalism, secularism, and Islam. He earned his master's degree in Middle East Studies from the University of Chicago in 2017 and also holds Bachelor of Arts degrees in history and political science from Huntington University.

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