

Cultural Translation and the Rediscovery of Identity

Case Study from the Armenian Diaspora

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Abstract This paper aims to underline how hidden selves rediscover their identity when they are translating or are being translated into the language of their ethnic origin. It compares two specific instances in which translations have been the primary means through which two famous Italian women writers, both of whom received thoroughly Italian formal educations and considered themselves thoroughly Italian, or “thoroughly translated women into Italian” to recall Rushdie, rediscovered their Armenian identity. The authors are the late 19th and early 20th century Italian-Armenian poetess Vittoria Aganoor and the late 20th and early 21st century novelist Antonia Arslan.

Keywords Antonia Arslan. Vittoria Aganoor. Cultural Translation. Identity. Diaspora.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Part I. Vittoria Aganoor. – 3 Part II Antonia Arslan. – 4 Concluding Remarks.

1 Introduction

Migration flows, besides being the prime reason of language contact, which causes the development of hybrid patterns of language use and of dialectal microvariations,¹ change also the socio-linguistic landscape of the world's global cities (cf. Sabagh, Bozorgmehr, Der-Martirosian 1990) and are the primary cause of the cultural translation (cf. Pym 2010; Spivak 2007; Bhabha 1994; Derrida 1979). The narrow sense of translation has recently been transformed into a broad metaphorical concept, which crosses the border that divides migrant's native and host cultures. Once the migrant surpasses this border and aims at integration, undergoes a process of personal translation and becomes a "translated (wo)man" (Rushdie 1992, 17). In today's social and cultural context and in the light of migration flows this is discussed to be "a new paradigm for the new century" (Pym 2010, 143), however the phenomenon is not new. Within this paradigm the term *translation* does not apply to texts, but to human beings, to their migration and mobility.

The model of Armenian communities is emblematic and is a case in point. There are both old communities as well as new ones because of recent migration flows, especially after the fall of the USSR.² Usually in the Armenian diaspora one can see efforts to find a balance between integration in the new country and maintenance of their identity from the old homeland. However there had been some historical periods and some circumstances when assimilation was considered the ideal path for immigrants to follow. This is also the case of the Italian-Armenian authors Vittoria Aganoor and Antonia Arslan considered in this paper.

2 Part I. Vittoria Aganoor

The migration routes of the Aganoor family began in early 17th century and extended from Persia to India, to France and finally to Italy.

In 1604, Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I (the Great) deported hundreds of thousands of Armenians from the Armenian old mercantile wealthy town of Julfa, located in the Safavid-Ottoman boarder, and resettled them in mainland, in the Iranian capital Isfahan. Vittoria Aganoor's ancestors were among them. Here is how Vittoria

¹ Among many others consider Aalberse, Muysken 2013; Brinton, Kagan, Bauckus 2008; Appel, Muysken 2005; Milroy, Muysken 1995.

² Among multiple sources on Armenian Diaspora for a first approach see Hovannisian 1997; Myers, Hovannisian 1999; Libaridian 1999; Jendian 2008.

describes her family in a letter addressed to the Mekhitarist³ monk Father Ghazikian:

And now the information, the little information that I have of the Aganoors. Under their genealogical tree, that we have, is written: "The genealogy of the Aganoor family that was transplanted by Shah Abbas the Great to Armenia from the province of Persia Nachijevan and made them live in the beautiful and magnificent New Julfa". (Haroutyunian 2013b, 352⁴)

The shah gave the Armenians an exclusive suburb in his capital, which the Armenians called New Julfa in honor of their old town, already razed to ground. Also, Abbas I granted them administrative and religious autonomy, as he was aware of their high reputation as valorous merchants with an extensive trade network. One of the reformist measures of the shah was promoting Iranian silk in the international trade, and the Armenians had solid experience in trading silk in European markets even before their deportation.⁵ In fact, very soon New Julfa became "one of the most important mercantile centers in Eurasia" and its Armenian merchants "experienced unparalleled economic prosperity as purveyors of Iranian silk" (Aslanian 2011, 2).

Aganoor's family remained in New Julfa until 1770. This is why sometimes it has been said by mistake that the Aganoors are of Persian origin. They further moved to India with other conationals. And here is another error of some publications that speak about Indian origin of the poetess. Father Ghazikian blamed a bit Vittoria herself for this piece of disinformation. During her public presentations, she often used to speak about her Oriental origin, assuming that everybody knows that she was Armenian. However, as father Ghazikian observes "Not only Armenians live in the Orient region!" (Aganoor [1905] 1932, 44; Haroutyunian 2013b, 353).

Vittoria Aganoor's father Edward was born in Madras, and was one of the three sons of Abraham Aganoor, who, according to Fathers Alishan and Issaverdents, was of conspicuous and noble race (Aganoor [1905] 1932, IX).

Abraham's wife Maria Teresa was the great grandchild of the prince Moorat Aghamalian, further honoured by the shah with the

³ The Mekhitarist Congregation has had its home in the Venetian lagoon on the beautiful island of San Lazzaro for over three centuries. The island of San Lazzaro, or 'of the Armenians', as it is called, is known as a Cultural Centre and the 'Armenian Academy of Sciences' the official title given to it by Napoleon (cf. Peratoner 2007, 113-201).

⁴ All the English translations of Aganoor's letters are done by this Author, unless otherwise mentioned.

⁵ For New Julfa commercial network consider Aslanian 2011; McCabe 1999.

title of *melik'*, and was the daughter of Samuel Moorat, the benefactor of the Armenian college in Paris.⁶ They had a residence in *Rajapata*, village of kings, near Madras.

In 1835, on the suggestion of the Armenian monks of the Mekhitarist Congregation of the Venetian San Lazzaro island, the Aganoor family emigrated from Madras first to France and then to Italy. At that time Vittoria's father Edward was twelve. In 1847, he married Giuseppina Paccini, an aristocratic woman from Milan. They gave birth to five daughters: Angelica, Maria, Elena, Virginia and Vittoria.

Hence, Vittoria Aganoor's father was an Armenian immigrant and her mother was an Italian. Because Vittoria grew up in an epoch when assimilation was considered the best choice for immigrants towards integration, she did not learn Armenian, as attested in her letter to father Ghazikian:

You are asking me when you will be able to write me in Armenian and I fear it will never happen. I am so lazy for language study. Besides, Armenian scares me absolutely. With a teacher near maybe I would begin, but alone it is so difficult and I have little time. (Haroutyunian 2013b, 360)

She apparently expresses her regret for not having learned the language of her nation:

How sorry I, too, am for not knowing Armenian! Pray, do not say it, for I would cry at the thought of how little it would have cost my dear papa to teach it to me as a child! (359)

Vittoria blames her father for her lack of knowledge of Armenian. However, this was a meditated choice of Edward Aganoor. None of his five daughters knew Armenian. For education, they all were entrusted to their mother, to the Italian noble-donna Giuseppina Paccini. For the girls' literary education, she invited poets, literary cri-

6 In the first half of the 19th century, the Armenian Mekhitarist Congregation underwent considerable expansion of its educational activities with the foundation of numerous schools and colleges in the Crimea, Venice, Padua and various centres in Asia Minor and the Caucasus. In accordance with the conditions of the wills of two Armenian benefactors (who were Vittoria Aganoor's ancestors), Samuel Moorat College was founded in Padua (Prato della Valle), moving in 1846 to Paris, and the Raphael College was set up in Venice, originally located in Ca' Pesaro and moving in 1850 to Ca' Zenobio ai Carmini. Samuel Moorat, the benefactor of the Samuel Moorat College of Padua, and Edward Raphael Gharamiantz, the benefactor of Raphael College of Venice, were the father and grandfather of Edward Aganoor's mother. For more details consider Peratoner 2007, 141-3; "Murat-Raphayelian varzharanneru barerarnern ew irents ktaknere" 1936, and especially the chapter II "Samuel Muratean: azgayin mec barerar" (Samuel Muratean: Great Benefactor of the Nation), 175-86.

tiques and translators, such as Andrea Maffei – translator of Milton, Schiller, Shakespeare, Goethe, Heine –, as well as Giacomo Zanella and Enrico Nencioni. With these notorious personages, the Aganoors approached to the Ancient Greek and Latin authors, and to the Classics of the modern world, as attested in the following letter of Giacomo Zanella addressed to Andrea Maffei on December 20 1871:

We do some reading: the Purgatory of Dante and some modern poetry in between. In these days we have read Pia of Sestini and Alina of Lenartowicz, a Polish poet, translated into excellent verses by Ettore Marcucci. The tears of young girls often accompany my reading. They are so intelligent and so genial. They also compose something with great taste and style. Elena and Vittoria take drawing classes from Caratti, our talented painter. O my excellent, incomparable friend! I have no words to thank you for the acquaintance of this golden family that I owe to you. (Rusi 1990, 85-6)

In her late forties, when Vittoria Aganoor was already a consolidated Italian poetess, with the esteem of such illustrious personages as Benedetto Croce and Giosuè Carducci, her perception of her national identity changed.⁷ This corresponds to the period between 1903 and 1909, when she found out that the Mekhitarist monk Father Arsen Ghazikian – translator of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Horace, Dante, Tasso, Metastasio, Leopardi, Manzoni, Milton, etc. – was translating her poetry into Armenian.⁸

Vittoria begins an intense correspondence with him. Very often these letters have a familiar style and Aganoor repeatedly advises this great monk to take care of his health.

For Heaven's sake, take care of your health and do not abuse the vigor of your body and spirit [...] Thanks for always sending me your works, but I will never stop recommending a bit of abstinence

⁷ For issues inherent to translation and identity, consider Cronin 2006.

⁸ There used to be a widely shared opinion – one that perhaps persists, almost like a stereotype passed on without any proof – that Ghazikian paid more attention to the quantity than to the quality of his translations. It is true that over a period of thirty years, from 1899 to 1927, he published thirty volumes of translated poetry, in all 7,000 pages chosen from the greatest geniuses of world literature. They include Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Horace, Dante, Tasso, Milton, Foscolo, Leopardi, Manzoni and a few women writers, like Vittoria Aganoor and Ada Negri. This comes to a total of about fifty volumes. Nevertheless, the style of Ghazikian's translations is almost always distinguished by its carefulness, faithfulness, harmony, literary value, lexicon, and above all, by the extraordinary intuition that went into the choice of the texts. He had excellent literary taste and considerable linguistic prowess. With his translations into Armenian of poems by the greatest authors of the world, Father Arsen Ghazikian was the initiator and artificer of direct communication between Armenian thought and the creative talent of the world's literary geniuses.

in your study and at work; otherwise your health will be damaged and everything will be lost. God gives us power and wellness; we have to preserve and care greedily for these gifts of the Lord, otherwise we will become sinners. [...] Thank you for two copies of the beautiful review. How quickly you translate! You translated *Pasqua armena* immediately, and *Adolescentula* as well, as soon as you read it. How do you manage? (Haroutyunian 2013b, 356)

Dear Father Arsen, you are really prodigious. How can you translate with such a lightning speed? I believe that no one else can be compared with you. Good for you! Don't abuse your enviable cerebral activity. The work [translation] that you are doing is colossal and very useful but don't do it in a hurry and think of your health. (2013b, 357)

In her poetry Vittoria doesn't refer to Armenian themes, except in one poem called *Pasqua Armena* (Armenian Easter). However, in this correspondence we note a powerful recall to her Armenian roots. She often uses terms never used before, like "my conationals, my Armenian brothers", saying even that "the Armenians are a nation of high intelligence and from which there comes the light of civilization and art" (355). And she finishes telling that "Armenia is sacred" (355).

Thus, from her earliest years, Vittoria benefited from an excellent education. Belonging to the cream of Italian society, she married a well-known Italian politician, Guido Pompilij (cf. Chierico 2010; Calzoni 2010). During her short life (55 years), Vittoria was already famous both in cultural and in mundane circles. After her death, on May 9th 1910, her fame grew further not only for the poetic value of her works but also for the immediate suicide of her husband, provoking dramatic interest in the press. Before committing suicide, Guido Pompilij wrote the following letter to Vittoria's sister:

May 7th, 1910

My dear Angelica,

When the day before yesterday I told you that I couldn't live without Vittoria, you didn't seem to take me seriously, even though you should already have to know my thoughts. My calmness arose from my firm decision not to let go of her for the rest of eternity; and she feels similarly towards myself, as she assured me spontaneously many times, as we loved each other with a deep, immense love of soul. According to our common wish, I must be buried in the same tomb as Vittoria; we stayed united for a short while when alive and we shall be together forever in death. (Arslan, Zambon 1988, 8)

Vittoria Aganoor has received a great deal of critical attention as an Italian poet. However, little overtone has been made toward her Armenian identity. The purpose of this author is to cast more light on her Armenian identity and then to prepare her epistolary correspondence with Father Arsen Ghazikian for publication.

3 Part II. Antonia Arslan

The migration roots of the Italian-Armenian bestseller author Antonia Arslan (Arslan 2004) extend from the Armenian town of Kharbert in Anatolia to Italy, first to Venice and then to Padua. She is the third generation of the famous otorhinolaryngologist Yerwant Arslanian, an emigrant of pre-genocide period, whose family was further truncated almost entirely during the 1915 Armenian Genocide.⁹

Here is Antonia's testimony about her grandfather move from Anatolia:

His mother, Iskuhi, the little princess, died at nineteen giving birth to him. My great-grandfather then remarried an "evil stepmother", who bore him many other children; my grandfather Yerwant couldn't stand her, and so, at the age of thirteen, he requested and was granted permission to leave the little city and go to Venice, to study at Moorat-Raphael, the boarding school for Armenian children. (Arslan 2006, 17)

Yerwant finished the Armenian college of Venice, founded decades before thanks to the generosity of the Aganoor family. He further graduated brilliantly from the University of Medicine in Padua. After years of training in the hospitals of Paris he returned to Italy and became one of the pioneers in the struggle of affirming the otorhinolaryngology as an autonomous discipline. He taught at the university and led the newly-established otorhinolaryngology unit at the hospital of Padua (Arslan 1948; Rubaltelli 1949). Yerwant, like Vittoria Aganoor's father Edward, married an Italian aristocratic woman, Antonietta, from the family of the Counts of Besi.¹⁰ From this union two sons were born: Khayel, Antonia Arslan's father, and Yetward.

In her bestseller *Skylark Farm*, Arslan talks about a contradiction in the behaviour of her grandfather (Arslan 2006, 112). At first, he did

⁹ For stages of genocide, consider, among others, Stanton 2009; Whitehorn 2010; Haroutyunian 2016, 14.

¹⁰ For further details on De Besi family cf. Spreti 1981; Aldrighetti, Zorzi, Mazzaroli, Quadrio 2001.

not want to deny his ancestry, giving his sons four Armenian names each: Yetward, Erwant, Armenak and Vardan; Khayel, Anton, Aram and Maryam. But later, when Yerwant's family was exterminated almost entirely by the Young Turks during the 1915 Armenian Genocide, he tried to erase their origin, even though they were far from the Ottoman Empire and there was no threat for them:

And in 1924, he will petition the Italian government to allow him to legally remove from his surname that embarrassing three-letter suffix, -ian, that exposes so plainly his Armenian origin. His new, truncated name could even be Turkish. (160)

Yerwant closed forever the argument of his ancient homeland with his sons, a choice made by the most of the Genocide survivors. Being overwhelmed by massive psychological blocks, they often refused to share the trauma with their children. This was also the case of Yerwant, who waited for a long time to speak about his profoundly painful experiences and memories. Being bearer of the traumatic event or of 'non-event', in order to share the trauma, he needed a time shift.¹¹ In fact, he was able to overcome the psychological blocks only after decades, in his late 70s, and only with the third generation, i.e. with his grandchild, Antonia, entrusting her with the task of retelling his trauma and memories:

for a country that no longer exists, for the columns of deportees, for a family dying beneath a poisonous sun, for the unmarked graves along the dusty roads and paths of Anatolia; and for everything that disappeared with them, everything alive and fragrant, exhausted and joyous, painful and consoling: the country's soul. (Arslan 2006, 40)

Antonia Arslan in her turn needed more than half a century to 'translate' the memory¹² into literature giving birth to her bestseller *La masseria delle allodole* in 2004.

Antonia Arslan received thoroughly Italian formal education and never learnt Armenian. Translation played an important role in her life. While Aganoor rediscovered her Armenian identity through being translated, on the contrary, Antonia rediscovered her identity through translating the poetry of Daniel Varujan, an Armenian po-

¹¹ According to Claude Janin (1996, 38-9) "The traumatic event is a 'non-event', something that does not occur. [That] first stage of the trauma [...] is its cold core of the non-assimilated trauma by oneself, which is not assimilated by the ego" (cit. in Hinshelwood et al. 2015, 117 fn. 19).

¹² For translation and memory, consider among others Brodzki 2007; Haroutyunian 2017.

et who was massacred during the Armenian Genocide. Here is Antonia's testimony:

Poetry functions in an immediate and unexpected way. I discovered Daniel Varujan, his strength and his grace, when reading some of his poems in Italian and the entire *The Song of Bread* in French, translated by Vahe Godel. So it was that I concentrated on the text of his last work, which completely fascinated me. I already had a lot of experience translating poetry – from French, English and German – but my work with Varujan was a great adventure, also because of my collaboration with two young and enthusiastic scholars, Chiara Haignush Megighian and Alfred Hemmat Siraky. The Italian edition of *The Song of Bread*¹³ became the seventh one, and it enjoyed much success within the Italian secondary schools. I further translated other pieces of Varujan's poetry; I published twenty of them in the volume *Seas of Wheat*¹⁴ and the others in magazines. I also want to remind us that he was a great poet, one of the major ones since the beginning of the 1900s, equal to no one, but less known because he wrote in a minority language. (Haroutynian 2013a, 314-15)

This translation turned to be a revolutionary act for Antonia in the rediscovery of her Armenian identity. By that time Antonia Arslan, professor of Italian literature at the University of Padua, had published on Italian popular fiction and Italian women writers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Translating Varujan's poetry became part of the process of discovery of her own Armenian identity. Then she went on to edit different works on the Armenian Genocide.¹⁵ Varujan brought her to the unknown path of her lost ancestry and the birth of her first novel, the bestseller *Skylark Farm*, in which the author mixes autobiography and biography, history and fiction, documentary and memory. Drawing on the history of her own ancestors, Antonia Arslan tells of the attempts of the members of an Armenian family caught up in the Armenian Genocide to escape to Italy and join a relative who had been living there for forty years. And this relative is the author's grandfather Yerwant. This book won many prestigious awards in Italy and worldwide. It has been translated into numerous languages and inspired the Taviani Brothers' 2007 film *The Lark Farm*.¹⁶

13 Varujan 1992.

14 Varujan 1995.

15 The edited volumes include among others: Arslan, Pisanello, Ohanian 2001; Dédeyan 2002; Dadrian 2003; Mutafian 2001.

16 Arslan's more recent publications include *Il libro di Mush* (2012), which is an account of the largest extant Armenian manuscript that was preserved in two halves by two separate women, each of whom took one half when escaping the city of Mush during the Armenian Genocide, *Il rumore delle perle di legno* (2015) and *Lettera a una ragazza in Turchia* (2016).

4 Concluding Remarks

The Italian-Armenian authors Vittoria Aganoor and Antonia Arslan belong to two different migration periods in the history of the Armenian diaspora, with a chronological gap of about a century. The reasons behind their ancestors' expatriation were different. However, the final destination of both Abraham Aganoor and Yerwant Arslanian was the same. They were both attracted by Italy, by Venice in particular, with its historically consolidated Armenian community since 12th century, with its Mekhitarist Congregation of Armenian monks at San Lazzaro island - beacon of cultural and spiritual awakening of the Armenian people.¹⁷

Hence, in 1835, the Aganoors emigrated from Madras to Europe as suggested by the Mekhitarist monks, to whom the benefactors of Vittoria Aganoor's family had already contributed from India. Among their most important contributions were the establishment of the colleges in Padua (1836) and Venice (1850), which later merged into a unique institution named Moorat-Raphael at Venetian palazzo Ca' Zenobio.

Interestingly, this same Moorat-Raphael college became the main reason of expatriation of Antonia Arslan's grandfather. He moved from his native town at the age of 13, immediately after his mother's death, to study at this boarding school. It was 1878, decades before the Armenian Genocide.

In the period of the Armenian Genocide, Yerwant Arslanian was residing in Padua with his Italian aristocratic wife and two sons, and was already a well-known physician. There was no threat for them for their Armenian origin. However, Yerwant's brother and nephews, who were in Anatolia, were exterminated almost entirely by the Turks in 1915. Hence, Yerwant made a choice characteristic to many Genocide survivors: protect his sons through complete closure towards the lost fatherland, towards the Armenian roots, to an extent to change the family name.

Edward Aganoor made the same choice with a difference, that his aim was not to protect his five daughters from a threat due to their Armenian origin. It was a historical period in which assimilation was considered the ideal strategy for immigrants to follow for a better integration.

Both Vittoria Aganoor and Antonia Arslan grew up as 'translated selves', completely immersed within the cream of Italian society.

¹⁷ Venice is proud to have the oldest Armenian House or *Casa armena* in Europe. Some sources indicate that building became a guesthouse for Armenians around May 25, 1235 on Calle delle Lanterne, later renamed Calle dei Armeni, near St. Mark's Square, the most populated area among Armenians in Venice. It is personally given to the Armenians by doge Sebastiano Ziani (1172-78). For further details on Venetian-Armenian community consider among many others Peratoner 2007, 107-12.

However, at a certain period of their lives, they rediscover their *alter ego*, their Armenian identity. In this life-changing experience, translation played an important role.

Vittoria began an intense correspondence with the Mekhitarist monk Ghazikian when she found out that he was translating her poetry. In these letters she expressed with terms never used before.

Coming to Antonia Arslan, translation played a triple role in her life. Firstly, she rediscovered her Armenian identity through translating Daniel Varujan's poetry. This act of translation contributed her to focus her literary activity on her Armenian heritage, reawakening her *alter ego*. She recalled her Armenian grandfather Yerwant, who shared with her his family trauma decades before. Then, after half a century, it was Antonia's turn to 'translate' these traumatic memories into literature, giving birth to her novel *La masseria delle allodole* (Arslan 2004). Finally, translation contributed to her fame, as her novel became a bestseller, with 36 editions in Italy alone, was translated into 18 different languages. Thanks to these translations Antonia Arslan's fame surpasses the borders of Italy, accessing a global readership.

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