

William Saroyan. Ethnic and Family Identities in Universal Settings

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Abstract As a particular cultural production, migration literature, increasingly heralded as a new world literature, internationalised literature or world fiction – is a form of transnational writing, concerned mostly with cosmopolitan issues. The universalism of migration literature, however, is based on national or ethnic tradition. Moreover, it is manifested through original life experiences and attitudes that are typical of ethnic expressions of identities. The significant point that this paper emphasises is the fact that William Saroyan is an author who represents a dynamic Armenian-American cultural blend, moving both universal and ethnic literary expressions to new heights. His works demonstrate clearly both his universality and his adherence to national heritage – his ethnic and family identities are employed in his distinct western settings and tones.

Keywords Migration literature. Cosmopolitan dimension. William Saroyan. Armenian-American cultural blend. Ethnic identity. Family identity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Saroyan’s Family Identity. – 3 Saroyan’s Ethnic Identity. – 4 Conclusion.



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Although I write in English, and despite the fact that I'm from America, I consider myself an Armenian writer. The words I use are in English, the surroundings I write about are American, but the soul, which makes me write, is Armenian. This means I am an Armenian writer and deeply love the honor of being a part of the family of Armenian writers.

(William Saroyan 1976)

1 Introduction

As a particular cultural production, migration literature, increasingly heralded as a new world literature, internationalised literature or world fiction - is "a new genre of transnational writing, typically global in scope" (Young 2012, 215), and is concerned mostly with cosmopolitan issues. As a form of transnational literature placed outside the context of national literary tradition, migration literature, however, adheres to literary forms, genres and expressions that are not typical of traditional cosmopolitan writing. M.R. Thomsen (2008, 76)¹ makes a persuasive argument that the inclusion of migration literature into world literature is legitimated by the way it renegotiates or reevaluates the cosmopolitan dimension. In other words, the universalism of this type of literature is not devoid of national or ethnic tradition, moreover, it is manifested through original life experiences and attitudes that are typical of ethnic expressions of identities. Thus, in migration literature "we find elaborate descriptions - explicit and implicit - of matters and perspectives about and related to identity in all" (Tötösy de Zepetnek 2010, 2).

William Saroyan is an author who, representing a dynamic Armenian-American cultural blend, moved both universal and ethnic expressions to new heights. His writings are projections of his own self - on the one hand all his works reflect his small town Western heritage which is American, on the other hand all his writings are influenced by his Armenian essence/being which is inherent, by no means imposed on him from outside.² His works demonstrate clearly

¹ This is how Thomsen describes a migrant writer: "In a globalizing world, migrant writers are particularly interesting as emblems of the cosmopolitanism lived out by an increasing number of people, no matter whether their own bodies move, or their interaction with the world has changed due to shifts in their own society and the media they use" (2008, 62).

² In the same way Saroyan loved both being an American and an Armenian - he loved America but he never forgot Armenia. Being the most known Armenian literary figure, he made the world recognise and understand Armenian history and culture, traditions, values, expectations from the future. As he had willed, after death half of his cremated remains were enshrined in the Pantheon of the Greats in Yerevan, Armenia (he want-

both his universality and his adherence to national heritage – in addition to his distinct Western settings and tones (because he is the writer of his time and his place), he employs broadly his ethnic and family identities. It is these two identities that created the American writer Saroyan within universal frames. Before discussing Saroyan's ethnic and family identities I will present his fictional description of his own universality (Saroyan 1993, 89):

I am out here in the far West, in San Francisco, in a small room on Carl Street, writing a letter to common people, telling them in simple language things they already know. If I have any desire at all, it is to show the brotherhood of man. This is a big statement and it sounds a little precious. [...] I do not believe in races. I do not believe in governments. I see life as one life at one time, so many millions simultaneously, all over the earth. Babies who have not yet been taught to speak any language are the only race of the earth, the race of man: all the rest is pretense, what we call civilization, hatred, fear, desire for strength. But a baby is a baby. And the way they cry, there you have the brotherhood of man, babies crying. [...] All the eternal things, in our words. If I want to do anything, I want to speak a more universal language. The heart of man, the unwritten part of man, that which is eternal and common to all races.

Interestingly enough, Saroyan's final major works were a series of autobiographical reminiscences and memoirs published from 1952 until his death.³ In them, he attached more and more importance to his roots, national background and identity, and wrote one work after another about the past he remembered so well.

2 Saroyan's Family Identity

William Saroyan (1908-81) was born in Fresno, California in the family of Armenian immigrant Armenak (a Presbyterian minister and poet) from Bitlis. His father died shortly after William turned three, and Saroyan and his siblings were sent to an orphanage. Although the family reunited in five years (when the mother found a job and was able to move to the Fresno section called 'Armenian Town'), the breakup of his family affected Saroyan deeply. Still deeper was the effect of his father's death. In an essay about tragedy, memory and art combining together to bring meaning to life, Saroyan (2013, 7) writes:

ed his heart in the Armenian Highlands), while the other half remained in Fresno, California in the Ararat Armenian Cemetery.

3 Ten books of stories and three volumes of plays were published during the period.

In the past were some of the best things I had, several of them gone: my father, for instance, who had died before I was three. My first memory, the one that went back to a time when I was not yet two, was of my father getting up onto a wagon, sitting beside my mother, and making a sound that told the horse to go. My two sisters and my brother and I sat in the back of the wagon as it moved slowly down a dusty road between vineyards on a hot afternoon in the summertime. I remembered sensing sorrow and feeling with – with mine, my people – a father, a mother, two sisters, a brother, our horse, our wagon, our pots and pans and books. The rest is lost in the sleep that soon carried me away. The next thing I knew my father was gone, which I didn't understand. I was fascinated by having memory, and troubled by the sorrow of it. I refused to accept the theory that things end, including people, including my father. I refused to believe that my father was dead.

The fact that his very first memory of childhood (when he was two or three) concerned his father and the sorrow upon his death, and the fact that he remembered so vividly the above incident after so many years, come to prove that his father had played an important role in shaping both his personality and his family identity. Moreover, it was after his mother Takoohi showed him some of his father's writings that he, a fifteen-year-old youth, decided to become a writer. It is obvious that the early death of the father became an essential and significant part in Saroyan's makeup, a theme the writer liked to return to (directly or indirectly) in many of his writings (Haslam 1993). J.H. Tashjian (1984) points out that the father's death and the urge to find the father who had left him grew into a veritable passion in his manhood and coloured his thoughts and his career.⁴ D. Kouymjian (1986) notes that more than anything else, Saroyan wanted to see Bitlis because it was the birthplace of his father, and the longing to see and to find the father's and his fatherland was inseparable from a lifelong search for his father.

Until 1964 Saroyan had not been to Bitlis but he had heard about it repeatedly from his mother, uncles, grandmother. In 1935 he visited Soviet Armenia knowing it was not exactly his father's birthplace, but he thought it was enough for him to reach the general vicinity of his father's hometown then. And finally, after the long-dreamt trip to Bitlis in 1964, he confessed it was very difficult for him to write about what there was in his heart, and eventually, in 1969 he wrote

⁴ James Harutune Tashjian, the chief editor of Armenian weekly *Hairenik* and *The Armenian Review*, was Saroyan's friend and associate. *My Name is Saroyan. A Collection by William Saroyan* (1984) edited by Tashjian, is a posthumous comprehensive selection of Saroyan's literary works. It includes ninety-seven short stories, four plays and five poems reflecting Saroyan's Armenian heritage.

the exciting story “Armenak of Bitlis” in which he narrated the visit to his father’s grave, and in 1975 he created the play *Bitlis* in which he described his 1964 visit to Western Armenia and particularly to Bitlis. During this trip

once in the city, he said he needed no guide because he knew it all by heart from the many times the city was described in his childhood. He shouted: *Bitlis, Bitlis, Bitlis*. As they walked to the district of Tsapergor, he rejoiced in saying, *I know all of this. I know the old trees. I am a Bitlists! My father walked on these roads. He met the mayor; he smoked a cigarette made from Bitlis tobacco.* (cited in Kouymijian 1986, 27; italics added)

Saroyan’s mother Takoohi also played an important role in shaping his family identity. It is by no chance that *The Human Comedy* (1943)⁵ was devoted to her. The family identity instilled in the boy by her, became a paramount force in his life. The pages of his stories are filled with characters, dialogues and themes that reflect the mother’s cultural values, mores, and the history of her and her husband’s families. In 1974 he wrote in his journal:

And what was the essential of the years in Fresno: they were the years of Armenia, pure and simple: and I mean that they were the years of the Saroyan tribe of the people of the highland city of Bitlis near Lake Van and Mount Ararat, who wrenched themselves loose from their roots going back centuries and traveled by mule and horse and ship and train to California, and down to Fresno. They were most of all the years of self - of this particular member of the Saroyan tribe, this last born of Armenak and Takoohi. (cited in Kouymijian 1986, 8)

Family identity and tradition, support of his extended family and Armenian community along with universalities referring to people of all ethnic types emerge in his book *My Name is Aram* (1940). The colourful characters are immigrants of Fresno and San Joaquin Valley, people from his boyhood days. All the fourteen stories in the book seem to be projections of the writer himself although they are not self-centred. Armenian cultural and family values served as a source of literary inspiration for the book, and central to it is the Armenian diaspora, separation from birthplace and home. The narrative style can be characterised as a memory of the good old days, which is to some extent beautified, but not exaggerated. The main character - the Ar-

⁵ The book was made into an MGM movie which won him an Academy Award for Best Writing Original Screen Story.

menian American boy Aram Garoghlanian (Aram was the name of a real life uncle and Garoghlanian was his mother's maiden name) is the author's alter ego. Aram spends most of his time among his numerous family members, and it is about them that he tells his stories. With kind humour and light irony he speaks about the head of the family - his patriarch grandfather (playing this role with a certain artificial grace), whom everybody respects, and sometimes pretends to respect, and about uncles and cousins who display various, typically Armenian characteristics. One uncle is famous for using with authority only the same couple of sentences in all different situations. The other is described as pragmatic and nothing else, the third one is a tender and soft-hearted unpractical dreamer, a poet at heart who wants to turn a piece of desert into a pomegranate garden and let all the tiny desert creatures live there.

Despite the difficulties of life, Saroyan always expressed the unconquerable spirit of those immigrants who built America, and saw a ray of hope and optimism for his Armenian family and compatriots. It was these people that formed and developed Saroyan's family and ethnic identities. Family identity inevitably shaped his personal and ethnic identities. Ethnic identity (as a form of group identity), in its turn, had an immense impact on his personal identity.

As a boy, Saroyan often had to deal with prejudicial attitudes because of his ethnicity, but in family life and his Armenian community, in contrast, he enjoyed living in a warm and thoughtful environment, and prided much on his family and ethnic heritage. He reflected in numerous variations the above-mentioned convergence of pride and prejudice, as well as significant family and ethnic values in his writing.

3 Saroyan's Ethnic Identity

At large, William Saroyan's family identity juxtaposed his ethnic identity. J.H. Tashjian (1984) made a very important point about Saroyan's ethnic identity when he declares that William Saroyan may seem enigmatic only to those who cannot understand how important his Armenian heritage was to him. Of course, in his works he reflected his vision of life in the United States, but that vision was pervaded with perspectives he had on America as an immigrant of Armenian ancestry, i.e. his ethnic identity spread throughout all parts of his American life and writing.⁶

⁶ After the publication of *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories* (1934) - a fresh and highly individualistic collection that marked the author as spontaneous and spirited writer, as an innovative artist indifferent to established literary

Issues of ethnic identity have been touched upon in all of Saroyan's works, but the three plays written during the last ten years of his life and published after his death in the book *An Armenian Trilogy* (1986) speak volumes about his Armenian origin/heritage and express a special concern about ethnic identity. The book composed of three plays ("Armenians", "Bitlis" and "Haratch") depict groups of Armenians talking about being Armenian, and the necessity to preserve Armenian identity and culture. Seemingly only about Armenians, the book, however, speaks for all races and peoples and the importance of preservation of all cultures, languages, identities. The characters are both typically Armenian, and at the same time universal. Through involving Armenians with different viewpoints - Armenians with extremist views, Armenians who want to forget their past and move on, Armenians who are just indifferent to everything -, Saroyan - eternally preoccupied with identity - is making an attempt to investigate his own self. Despite the differences, all the characters give the best idea of what kind of people Armenians are and what it means to represent Armenian heritage in the twentieth century. Chronologically, in *Armenians* (written in 1971) the characters in 1921 Fresno discuss the Armenian Genocide, in *Bitlis* (written in 1975) they investigate (together with the author) the author's 1964 visit to the Bitlis family home, in *Haratch* (written in 1979) the character's discourse about future goes on in Paris offices of an Armenian newspaper in 1979.

Thus, the first play of the trilogy, *Armenians*, presents Saroyan's youth reminiscences about how certain issues referring to Armenians were perceived by the Fresno Armenian community. Saroyan's characters here are mainly Armenian priests who, in 1921 Fresno get involved in ethnic debates - they discuss Genocide, religion, the Bolshevik revolution in Armenia, preservation of the Armenian language and customs in America, discrimination and Americanisation of Armenians there. Saroyan did not suffer loss of ethnic identity himself because he thought he had not been threatened by it in his American life. In a 1976 radio interview, discussing the problem of loss of ethnic identity, he said:

The question comes up: didn't Fresno have a tremendous limit of spirit and mind, and certain kind of obvious and foolish and mistaken sense of superiority, based upon wealth and class and so on? Well, of course it did, but that is human, and that is everywhere.

norms - Saroyan was criticised for being a careless and undisciplined writer. Saroyan's response to this was laconic: "One cannot expect an Armenian to be an Englishman" (cited in Haslam 1993, 6). The answer makes it clear that the convergence of ethnicity and Western transnational environment demonstrated Saroyan as an original writer, a certain type of originality that is typical of only himself.

Well, weren't the Armenian people in Fresno belittled and considered inferior? Yes, they were, by some people, but not by everybody. Well, wasn't it actually universally established in the mind, if you could call it that, of the town and the region, that the Armenian was something else, as the saying is? Yes, that was true, too. Well, what effect did that have on me? Well, it had little effect. I think it had a good effect. It certainly made it necessary for me to acknowledge to myself first that I am who I am – an Armenian – and not somebody who does not wish to be an Armenian, but somebody who accepts that he is an Armenian in an atmosphere where the Armenian is disliked; at the very least, we can put it that way. And that I must make known to anybody who dislikes Armenians that I am one of them. I am an Armenian. (cited in Kouymjian 1986, 19-20)

It is important to note that the characters in *Armenians*, the Armenian community in Fresno of the 1920s, and Saroyan himself were hopeful that (1) it would be possible for them to return to their homeland soon, an attitude and perspective that changed later.

The second play of the trilogy, *Bitlis*, was Saroyan's personal identification, hence it was more personal than the other two plays of the trilogy. The writer considered that the city of Bitlis was not only the hometown of his parents and forefathers but also his – the place, the customs, the traditions and the special dialect of Bitlis were symbols of homeland to him. Saroyan himself was one of the characters in *Bitlis*. The other characters were friends accompanying him during his 1964 trip to Bitlis and other places of historic Armenia. In the city of his family and ancestors

an old man guided him to the vestige of a stone house he insisted belonged to Saroyan's own family. He was photographed before the ruined hearth. [...] Though Saroyan was born in Fresno, when with close friends he always said he was from Bitlis. That is, in the Armenian fashion, he proclaimed himself a *Bitlistsi*, using the suffix *-tsi/-etsi* which renders of form when added to a place name. The attachment was strong, a source of pride. The ancestral hometown of his parents and grandparents as far back as memory was his, too. [...] He hugged various villagers who came to meet him. It was the most wonderful day of his life, he said. They went to the fountain where he drank deeply. *It's good water. See this city, it's a great city.* (in Kouymjian 1986, 22, 27; italics added)⁷

⁷ After Bitlis he also visited Moush, Diyarbekir, Harpoot, Antakya, Adana, Izmir and other places on behalf of his many friends in Fresno who were originally from those places.

In 1975 (just after *Bitlis* was written), reflecting on his Armenian-American duality and Armenian identity, and answering the question if his Armenian background was the best element in his literary output, Saroyan said:

Yes, yes, in the sense of my being anything. That is: what usage do you make of your identity? What usage do you make of the accident of what you are? [...] We are a product of two things well-known and established by everybody. The inherited and the environmental. I am an American by environment. I am an Armenian, that's who I am. I was born an Armenian. But you put me in California, that's my home. So somebody told me What does California mean to you? I said, to be perfectly honest, it's my native land. I have a very deep attachment to it. Yes, as much as to **Hayastan**, as much as to Bitlis. In an allegorical rather than sentimental sense, Bitlis is supreme. But this is another dimension of experience. This is almost a dream. This is almost beyond anything that we need try to measure in terms of the reasonable, because, remember, Bitlis has become a kind of monument of our loss. And I have a feeling about regaining, which is almost psychopathic. I wrote a book called *Tracy's Tiger* in which the theme of regaining the lost is made, insane, obsessive. This son-of-a-bitch tries to bring back the past, and that is madness. But in regard to Bitlis I know it's beyond any further expectation. I was there ten years ago. I didn't want to leave. But it's not ours. It is ours but other people occupy it. I did long for the day when it would be ours and I'd go there. I would go there. Go there and live there. I would settle down there and die there, and put the bones with the other Saroyans that have died there for maybe who knows. Forever. Our bones are there. We are there, as far as memory of our old timers goes; **Saroyannere hos en, ouskitz ekan?** (Basmajian 1987, 137; emphasis in original)

Saroyan's visit to Bitlis was his search for his roots and heritage, it was the proof of his family and ethnic identities, it was the place he would rather claim belonged to him, but actually it did not. In the play he expressed this claim through a character:

I choose to love Bitlis and to believe that it is ours. Of course I choose. I have no choice but to choose. But since I do choose, that is it, is it not, that is the truth of it, I love Bitlis, I believe it is ours, it is mine. (Saroyan 1986, 107)

Interestingly enough, it was in *Bitlis* that Saroyan (2) proved the impossibility of return to homeland half a century after the Genocide. The return that had been real in the *Armenians*, had turned into a dream.

The third play of the trilogy, *Haratch*, was written four years after *Bitlis* and, as mentioned before, two years before Saroyan's death. The play seemed to be the last survey of his ethnic identity. Although the 1915 Genocide had been discussed in the previous two plays, it was only in *Haratch* that Saroyan (3) stated Genocide as a fact, spoke directly and openly about it and about adjustment to living far from homeland. It was here that the first and second generation Armenian professor, poet, journalist, writer, clergyman characters openly declared, "How have we had our revenge for the two million Armenians killed by the Turks?" (Saroyan 1986, 142); "We refuse to forget the crime of genocide inflicted upon us by Turkey" (Saroyan 1986, 159).

In *Haratch* Saroyan's Armenian theme becomes more serious. *Haratch*⁸ means 'forward' - forward to create and discuss new ideas about Armenian identity and the future of Armenians in the global world. The Armenian characters, and Saroyan himself as a character, presented a variety of questions and debates attempting to seek answers and solutions. All the dialogues and conversations are about being Armenian: about the Diaspora and Soviet Armenians, about European and American Armenians, about how Armenians have flourished in Soviet Armenia and all over the world, about our greatest tragedy - the Genocide and about some other things referring to the Armenians and the world at large. As always, Saroyan's ethnicity and identity are expressed within universal frames.

In a world of questions, paradoxes, and complexity, where one argument sounds as reasonable as another, Saroyan insists that each person's destiny is determined by his or her own decisions, [...] as human beings we share the totality of all experience. (Kouymjian 1986, 37)

As always, Saroyan insists that Armenians will resurrect anywhere in the world if only they choose to be Armenian, get together with other Armenians to enjoy ethnic commonness, to show that behind unique peculiarities and characteristic traits of any nation resides the universal humanity.

Who shall remember us if we don't? Who shall remember the Armenians if they don't remember themselves? (Saroyan 1986, 179)

⁸ *Haratch* is an Armenian daily in Paris. The office of the newspaper was and is a gathering place for intellectual Armenians. For years, living close by, Saroyan used to visit his compatriots there.

4 Conclusion

Migration literature enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being presented as transnational writing based on universal values; second, by going beyond this and being presented in the light of a particular ethno-cultural tradition, expressing the unique mindset and the worldview, the original language and style of the author belonging to a particular ethnic group. William Saroyan is one such author known for his free style, for usage of his own life experiences referring to his Armenian family and ethnic identities in an American setting, and also famous for his presentation of the uniquely personal visions of humanity as universal in his literary works.

The loss of the father, the relations with the extended family and Armenian community, the Armenian Genocide and the effects of the loss of fatherland have always been of great importance to him, both as a writer and as a person. Representing a significant and dynamic Armenian-American cultural blend, Saroyan extrapolated the mentioned themes within the borders of transnational literature. Artful employment of his ethnic and family identities in distinctly Western settings made William Saroyan one of the most outstanding representatives of migration literature.

Following Saroyan's death, a memorial service was held in Paris during which His Holiness Vazken I, the Catholicos of all Armenians, eulogised the author, calling him "the prodigy of the nation, the vehicle through which three millennia of Armenian experience was perhaps most perfectly expressed". We must also agree that the Catholicos was quite observant in his conclusion when he said that "William Saroyan's writing, his humanism, speaks not just about or to Armenians but to all people" (cited in Haslam 1993, 10).

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