

Under Children's Eyes: Armenia in Nina Gabrielian's Work

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Abstract

Nina Gabrielian is a Russian writer of Armenian origin who lives and works in Moscow. She has published collections of poems, stories and critical essays. She is also a fine painter and from the early 2000s she has taken part in several exhibitions collective and personal as well. The imaginative world of her paintings is permeated by the memory of Armenia. In her stories and poems there is particular attention to colour and shape. The lyrical hero is constantly recovering the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide, which can take the deceptively innocent appearance of a children's game. In this paper I will investigate the way Gabrielian depicts childhood and memory in her literary work.

Key words: *Nina Gabrielian, Armenian Genocide, memory, childhood in literature.*

Introduction

Nina Gabrielian was born in Moscow in 1953 into a family of Armenian origins. She graduated at the Maurice Thorez State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages. As she herself sums up her own artistic career, she proceeded from poetry to translations, to prose-writing and finally to painting (Gabrielian 2013).

She began her artistic career in the second half of the 1970s writing poetry. In this period she met the Russian poet Evgenii Mikhailovich Vinokurov (1925-1993), who appreciated her poems and published them in the journal "Noviy Mir", in which he directed the section devoted to poetry. He also wrote the preface to Nina Gabrielian's first collection of poems *Trostikovaia dudka* (*The*

Reedpipe, Yerevan 1987). She published two more collections of poems *Zerno granata* (*Pomegranate Seed*, Moscow 1992) and *Poiushchee derevo* (*The Singing Tree*, Moscow 2010).

Nina Gabrielian also worked as a translator of classical and contemporary poetry, starting with Francophone African poets, as her language of specialization was French. She then began to attend the seminars of Mikhail Abramovich Kurgantsev (1931-1989) on oriental poetry. She followed his suggestion that she should translate from Armenian poetry using interlinear translation, as she did not speak Armenian fluently. She then met Levon Mkrtchian, who at the time was the Dean of the Russian Philology Faculty of Yerevan University. Nina Gabrielian considers him her “Godfather as far as translations from Armenian poetry are concerned” (Gabrielian 2013). She translated both classical and contemporary Armenian poets: Vahan Terian (1885-1920), Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937), Hovhannes Shiraz (1915-1984), Vahagn Davtyan (1922-1996) and Arshaluis Margarian (1924-1987). She was a personal friend of some of these authors.

At the beginning of the 1990s she became the chief editor of the feminist journal “Preobrazhenie” (Transfiguration) and contributed to the journal with several articles devoted to women writers and issues connected with gender studies. In the same period she began to publish stories and short novels which she later collected in her book *Khoziain travy* (*The Master of the Grass*, 2001). Her poems and prose writings have been translated into English, French, Swedish, Italian and Arabic.

The latest stage of Nina Gabrielian’s artistic career is painting. Since the mid-1970s she befriended the painter Boris Otarov (1916-1991), who advised him to start painting because there was “plenty of colour” in her poems (Gabrielian 2013). In spite of this, she hesitated to follow his advice, because she did not think she had enough talent. However, after Otarov’s death, he started to appear in her dreams and stare at her with an angry look (Gabrielian 2013). She interpreted this as the reproach of her friend for not having followed his

advice. So she decided to start painting and soon began taking part in collective exhibitions, making a name for herself both in Russia and abroad.

Painting can be considered the culmination of Nina Gabrielian's career and also the synthesis of her artistic conception of the world. The critic Yuriy Denisov (2014) has written that "her verses are like paintings, vivid oil paintings made of words [...] which recall to mind the still-lives of Martiros Saryan (1880-1972)." In her verses we can see a wealth of vivid colours and juicy sounds that show traces of traditional Armenian visual art.

The Armenian Theme in Nina Gabrielian's Work

The Armenian theme permeates all of Nina Gabrielian's creative work: her poetry, her prose and her paintings. In the poetic cycle *Vozvrashchenie (The Return)*, she felt the "potent spirit of the Genus" (Gabrielian 2010:85), a powerful genetic bond with the country of her ancestors. So she began to study Armenian culture, literature and history and embodied this feeling in her literary and pictorial works.

During her childhood, however, she had only a very vague idea of the historical and cultural meaning of Armenia. She first visited this country in "a conscious age" (Gabrielian 2013) at 17. Both in her poems and her prose she describes how a child gradually becomes aware of his/her national identity and starts asking questions and seeing himself/herself as "different" from other children. See for example, the poem *Detstvo (Childhood)* (Gabrielian 2010, 46) and also the story *Liloviy khalat (The Lilac Dressing-Gown)* (Gabrielian 1996. English translation 2004). In this story we can find the difficult relationship of children with the Armenian language, which for them has been completely replaced by Russian. The little girl learns a few Armenian words from an uncle and proudly repeats them with some Armenian neighbours, who take great offence because, as she discovers later, their meaning is not as endearing as she thinks. Her reaction is to decide that she does not want to learn this "treacherous" language:

Uncle Babken stayed for a week, during which time, to our mutual delight, I learned nearly fifty Armenian words. But after he left, I had no one to show them off to. But then something wonderful happened. An Armenian family from Tbilisi moved into a flat in our entrance: Aunt Rimma, Uncle Mentor, and two boys – Albert, the elder and Rudik, the younger. [...] I make straight for the dazzling procession and greet Aunt Rimma: “Albert is an eschchikurak”. The procession freezes. The first person to recover is Aunt Rimma who asks threateningly: “Wha-a-at?” [...] “I did not insult Albert” I say indignantly. “I was just speaking Armenian” [...] Mama intervenes and turns to me “Who taught you that?” “Uncle Babken”, I answer. “He was always saying: ‘You’re my little eshchikurak.’ That’s a little donkey,” I explain innocently to aunt Rimma. “It’s very handsome, and it has big eyes.” The incident blows over, but from then on I have a certain distrust of Armenian.

(Gabrielian 2004:123-125)

The tragedy of the Armenian Genocide is described from a child’s point of view in the story *Igra v pryatki (Hide and Seek)*. The action takes place on two temporal and spatial dimensions. An elderly survivor of the Genocide recalls his childhood experience in an estranged perspective as a game of hide-and-seek, continuously mixing his memories of the past and his present life of an eighty-two year old person approaching the end of his life.

He must have done something wrong, because the shouts did not die down. They turned into screams and

howls. He pressed closer to the rock. It was warm, but he was cold. The howling stopped. [...] Nearby, on the other side of the rock Turkish words “Where’s the boy?” a man’s voice asked, “Did you forget the boy, ishaki?” “He’s hiding in the house somewhere” [...] The steps receded. Eyes half-closed, he peeped out from behind the rock. Opening them wide he saw a knee. A pulled up dress and a pink knee, warm and pearly. Then the rest of them: Father, Mother, Grandma, and Uncle Gevork. They were lying on the ground, all five of them. The pale-blue grass around them was trampled and splashed with red beetles. A crimson stream trickled out of uncle’s mouth. More sounds. He hid behind the rock. The footsteps came closer and closer. “Where has he got to [...] why haven’t you found him? The orders were to finish off the lot of them!” [...] He shuddered soundlessly, his face pressed against the rock. [...] The voices came closer, closer, and closer still.

(Gabrielian 2004:204-105)

In the story *Dom v Metekhskom pereulke* (*The House in Metekhi Lane*) the house of the Armenian painter Robert Kondakhsazov (1937-2010) in Tbilisi “exists not only in the usual spatial dimension but it also lives its own secret and mysterious life” (Rovenskaia 2001). Nina Gabrielian’s visit to this house is also reflected in the poetic cycle *V gostyakh u khudozhnika* (*In the Studio of the Painter*). The visit to the artist’s studio also makes her become aware of the history of the Genocide of Armenians, whose memory was concealed for so many years. The house becomes a tangible metaphor of historical memory not only of single individuals but also of a whole nation. It is the memory of the Genocide of the Armenian people.

Memories weigh heavily on the old house in Metekhi Lane. In 1915 the artist's grandfather Arshak Arutinovich Kondakhsazov, a merchant of the second guild, sheltered a group of refugees from Western Armenia who had managed to escape the carnage. There were about thirty of them, weak with hunger and almost crazy from the sight of the savage massacre their friends and families had suffered. For years, this memory filled the grandfather's house, exploding decades later on the granddaughter's canvas as monstrous red, full of pain.

(Gabrielian 2004:196)

Nina recalls her childhood memories when, in the early 1960s, people of the Armenian diaspora started coming back to the Soviet Union and impressed her with their lovely elegant foreign clothes. She completely ignores the tragedy that hides behind their smart exotic appearance:

They were the first foreigners I ever saw, and yet somehow these foreigners were also Armenians [...] At the time I didn't know that besides their lovely clothes, their elegant baubles and their foreign names [...] these elegant men and women brought with them their tragic destinies. How could I, a child, have known that these ladies and gentlemen were in fact refugees and children of refugees. [...] I knew nothing of the tragedy, which befell my people in 1915, when the government of the Young Turks [...] developed and implemented its policy of systematic genocide of the Armenian population. [...] I did not understand any of this then. The book about the genocide of the Armenians had not yet been compiled, and even if it had been, I doubt my parents would have considered it

suitable reading for a primary school pupil. In my little seven-year-old head, only one thing was clear: that the name Robert was directly linked to the word “wonder”.

(Gabrielian 2004:189-190)

In the mid-1990s Nina Gabrielian started to paint at a professional level. Art and literary critics agree that there is an organic and evident link between her literary production and her work as a painter (Golovina 2010). Many of the themes and images that are central in her poetry and prose “migrated” (Onanian 2014) into her paintings and drawings. Among these themes and images are the house, the garden, objects of everyday use, landscapes and faces of elderly Armenian women and men. Many paintings can be described as self-portraits. However, the paintings *Avtoportret* (Self-Portrait), *Bol'shaya Ma* (The Great Mother) (2005) and also *Zhenshchiny moego roda* (The Women of my Family) (2004) and others all share an abstract nature, they are a kind of “spiritual gesture expressed through the image of a concrete person” (Golovina 2014). In *The Women of my Family* we can see three women wrapped in black mourning robes. It can be considered a collective portrait of the Armenian people and of its sorrowful memory of the Genocide. In its essential traits and colours this painting recalls a child’s memory of the elderly women seen in the home village during one of the poet’s early visits to Armenia, a long time before she acquired consciousness of the meaning of this image.

The theme of the mournful women can also be found in a poem of the cycle *The Singing Tree*:

*[...] Да, я хотела уйти,
Но женщины из моего рода –
Недолюбленные, недоласканные,
Недоцелованные женщины –
Подняли плач и вой.*

*Yes, I wanted to leave
But the women of my family,
Who did not manage to be loved
and caressed,
These women who did not*

*Они вопили, стонали, дергали
меня за рукав...*

И разве могла я уйти,

Если женщины из моего рода,

Все женщины из моего рода,

Изголодавшиеся женщины

Хотели твоей любви?!

(Gabrielian 2010, pp. 105-106)

manage to be kissed,

Started to cry and howl.

They howled and sobbed, they

pulled my sleeves

How could I leave,

If the women of my family,

All the women of my family,

These famished women

Wanted your love?

[Translation – G. I.]

Even the portraits of specific people, as for instance *Pamiyti ottsa* (*In Memory of my Father*) and *Pamiyti Borisa Otarova* (*In Memory of Boris Otarov*) retain the abstract character typical of icons. They are “negatives of the interior world” (Golovina 2010). They are represented as very near close-ups of the human face with “vivid strokes of the brush from which emanates an elemental energy” (Denisov 2014). It can be said that they have a certain grotesque character, as for instance in *Liki-Gor* (*The Visage of the Mountains*). However, there are no satirical or mocking traits in this type of grotesque, which is rather “tragic and compassionate”, similar to “ancient tragic masks” (Denisov 2014). This tragic element is well expressed in the poetic cycle *Vozvrashchenie* (*The Return*).

В желтой глине лежат мои предки,

Горбоносые, низкорослые.

Бабки, деды, прабабки и прадеды

С жаркой кровью, густою и

темною.

(Gabrielian 2010, p. 83)

My ancestors lie in the yellow clay,

They are hook-nosed, short.

Grandmas, grandfathers,

greatgrandmas and greatgrandfathers

Their blood is hot, thick and dark.

[Translation – G. I.]

In the poetic cycle *Iskusstvo (Art)* the mournful portrait of the Armenian father, who embodies the whole of the Armenian people, mingles with the motifs of the garden and of the promise of the Motherland:

<i>А в саду у отца</i>	<i>And in Father's garden</i>
<i>Шуршит шелковица.</i>	<i>Rustle the mulberries.</i>
<i>У отца – глаза в пол-лица</i>	<i>My Father's eyes take half of his face</i>
<i>И солнечные ресницы.</i>	<i>And his eyelashes are sunny.</i>
<i>Желтые груши</i>	<i>Yellow pears</i>
<i>На ветках висят.</i>	<i>Hang on the branches.</i>
<i>Прадедов души</i>	<i>The souls of the great-grandfathers</i>
<i>Стерегут наш сад.</i>	<i>Guard our garden.</i>

(Gabrielian 2010, p. 27)

[Translation – G. I.]

Nina Gabrielian's paintings have a certain naïve character resembling children's work with bright colour and no perspective. Some of them seem to derive from fond childhood memories, as for instance *Maro gotovit asapzhandal (Maro prepares Ajapsandali)*, *Pekut lavash (Baking Pita Bread)*, *Na kukhne (In the Kitchen)*, *Letniy dvorik (Summer Courtyard)*, *Trapeza (Repast)*. In other works themes deriving from the Gospels are treated in a naïve, childish way, as for instance in *Pokidayushchie svoy dom (Leaving their Home)*, which is based on the episode from the Gospel when Joseph and Mary, soon after Jesus's birth, flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13–23) in order to avoid King Herod's murderous intentions. The connection of this painting with the theme of the Armenian Diaspora after the Genocide is self-evident.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can quote Nina Gabrielian's own words about her concept of art:

*My artistic method does not consist in dissecting
and separating but rather in contemplating and feeling.*

I try to catch and engrave the thrill of life itself, the vibration that derives from a mysterious source, which is situated beyond the boundaries of the visible world but which manifests itself in the colours and the shapes of Being [...] My painting is not conceptual. I do not seek to design some ready-made meanings which can be transmitted with the help of the word. On the contrary, with the help of colours, forms and rhythm I try to get closer to those energy flows which I can feel pulsating in the depths of the garden.

(Gabrielian 2012)

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Մանկան աչքերով. Հայաստանը Նինա Գաբրիելյանի աշխատանքներում

Նինա Գաբրիելյանը հայկական ծագմամբ ռուս գրող է, որն ապրում և ստեղծագործում է Մոսկվայում: Նա բանաստեղծությունների, պատմվածքների ու քննադատական էսսեների հեղինակ է: Բացի այդ՝ հրաշալի նկարիչ և 2000-ականների սկզբից մասնակցել է բազմաթիվ համատեղ և անհատական ցուցահանդեսների: Նրա նկարներում պատ-

կերված երևակայական աշխարհը ողողված է Հայաստանի մասին հիշողություններով: Իր պատվածքներում և բանաստեղծություններում հեղինակը հատուկ ուշադրություն է դարձնում գույներին և ձևին: Լիրիկական հերոսը մշտապես կրում է Հայոց ցեղասպանության հավաքական հիշողությունը, ինչը կարող է ստանալ անմեղ մանկան խաղի տեսք: Սույն աշխատանքում փորձ է արվում ուսումնասիրել մանկության և հիշողության պատկերման գաբրիելյանական եղանակները:

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