

“GOOD” AND “BAD” ARMENIANS: REPRESENTATION OF THE KARABAKH CONFLICT IN AZERBAIJANI LITERATURE

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“We, Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijanis, vallah, didn't have any differences” – these words by a character in H. Guliev's play *Besame Mucho or Karabakh Prisoners* in condensed form expresses many of the contradictions that accompany the Karabakh conflict and its perception in Azerbaijan. On the one hand, these words seem to establish a territorial community “we”, united by a common homeland – Karabakh. This unity is further emphasized by the denial of differences between two groups that comprise the community. And yet, the speaker at the same time establishes those very differences that he seems to deny by identifying the groups and giving them different names. Thus, in one sentence, both the unity and division of “Karabakh people” are declared. Even the exclamation “vallah”, a word with obvious Islamic connotations, is used to emphasize the intertwining of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Karabakh: it is pronounced not by an Azerbaijani and therefore Muslim character, but by an Armenian and therefore a Christian one. The speaker is Ashot, a native Karabakh Armenian and a fighter with the Armenian Karabakh militia forces; and he makes this contradictory statement in a half-destroyed Karabakh village during a short stand-down between the battles.

This play was first published in 1997, three years after the cease-fire agreement was signed between the sides. Yet, the end of the military actions did not mean the end of the conflict itself; both the basic contradiction – the territorial dispute – and the mutually irreconcilable positions of the sides remain unchanged even now, as I write this in late 2009. The Karabakh conflict, one of the earliest and most violent ethno-political conflicts to erupt amid the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union, has had an immense impact on the Karabakh region, the rest of Azerbaijan, Armenia and on the security situation in the wider Caucasus. The bitterest results of the conflict include thousands of fatalities and over a million refugees and displaced

persons on both sides. Yet this is not all; the conflict also brought many other less tangible yet profound changes at various levels, from everyday life to changes of thinking. The termination of everyday relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis is especially significant: after the respective minorities were expelled from their homelands, the contacts between ordinary Armenians and Azerbaijanis have been minimal. Now they are limited, apart from the official conflict resolution negotiations, to some NGO and scholarly meetings, and some communication between diaspora communities. Apart from the rare exception, these contacts take place on “neutral ground”, outside both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Thus, normal communication that involves diverse interactions in diverse settings has been terminated. In this situation, imagination has come to play an increasingly important role in the shaping of representations of each other; they are becoming progressively more mythologized and depersonalized. This is especially true for the younger generation in the two countries, who have had little or no personal experience of communicating with each other and often no personal memories. The representations of each other, of the past, the present and the future of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are to a large extent shaped by collective memory, transmitted both orally and through media.

In this respect, the role of literature in the reproduction and transmission of collective memory becomes especially relevant. On the one hand, literature, along with other forms of media, becomes an important source of representations of each other and of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. On the other hand, the literary representations themselves reflect and express those that already exist in the social imagination. Yet these literary images are not simply blueprints of social representations: literature provides space for contestation, creative transformation and (re-)construction of representations, both by writers and readers. Literature allows for re-personalization of representations and stereotypes, when remembered or imagined characteristics of people of the respective ethnic origin are attributed to the characters of stories or novels. Literary representations also make it possible to show interactions between and changes of the characters under various imagined circumstances. Literary representations are emotional and are constructed with the purpose of evoking an emotional response from the reader. Finally, literature has an important role in the imagination of a nation (Anderson, 1991). All of these make literary representations a valuable means for understanding the social process of identity and nation building.

The relations between literature and society are diverse and complex, and so are the scholarly approaches to studying them. Milner, for example, identifies at least eight analytical strategies of literary and, more broadly, cultural studies, ranging from hermeneutics to Marxian studies to post-modernism and politics of difference (Milner, 2005: 43). My own approach in this article is largely informed by structuralism and semiotics, with their emphasis on textual analysis and the study of the relationship of signification between literary representations and social facts.

This article is an attempt to explore such literary representations of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Azerbaijani literature. It is based on a study of Azerbaijani literature undertaken in 2005 in the framework of the individual research scholarship program of the Heinrich Boell Foundation. In particular, I am concerned with the literature written and published after the consummation of the conflict in 1989. The study included 20 works of Azerbaijani literature, 13 of which belong to the conflict period (post 1989), and seven to the pre-conflict period. The selection of the works of fiction is subjective: I scanned a rather large number of works and selected those that seemed most relevant. However, the selection is far from exhaustive. I do not intend to make sweeping generalizations, yet the analysis revealed some patterns that seem to be important for understanding the perception of the conflict in Azerbaijan.

For the purposes of this study, I define Azerbaijani literature based on the national origin of the author rather than the language in which it was written. This is because the phenomenon that I am interested in – representations of the conflict – belongs to the sphere of the social and political history more than to the sphere of language, and therefore the common socio-political experiences of the authors are more significant than the language in which they write. I assume therefore that the representations of the authors who identify themselves as Azerbaijanis, have been socialized in Azerbaijan and have lived through some of the processes that they describe are more relevant for the social imagination and collective memory. Thus, the study includes several works that were originally written in Russian. Despite formally belonging to Russian literature they in fact represent a certain section of Azerbaijani society that used to be rather influential in the Soviet and early post-Soviet period: the Russian-speaking Baku intelligentsia. It is also worth noting that literature is never neutral in terms of class and gender and I am well aware that the representations

presented here belong to a rather narrow milieu: educated, largely urban, and predominantly male. Thus, only one of the examined works, the short story *The Tree*, is written by a woman. Nevertheless, analysis of these differences is not part of the present study and it is to be dealt with in the future research.

Given the extraordinary role of the Karabakh conflict in shaping the present Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, my first point of focus will be on the literary representation of the conflict itself, of its origins, reasons and potential for resolution. Then I will look at the larger theme of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and the factors that facilitate or hinder interaction between the two groups. In this section of the article I will be concerned with the problem of drawing and maintaining the intergroup boundary, as a process that has key significance for identity-building and maintenance (Barth, 1969). Here I will compare the representation of this boundary in contemporary, post-1989 literature with the representations of boundary maintenance in the pre-conflict period.

Karabakh conflict: Whose fault is it?

I will base my analysis of literary representations of the conflict on three works of fiction: the short story *The Life of a Human* by Samit Aliev (2003), the play *Besame mucho or Karabakh prisoners* by Hasan Guliev, first published in a journal in 1997 and later re-published as a short story in 2007, and the short story *The Tree* by Gunel Anargizi (2004). But before turning to the analysis it may be useful to briefly recount the major turning points of the conflict – this may ease understanding of the plot lines and interpretations.¹

The Karabakh conflict officially began on February 20, 1988, when the Regional Council of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) voted to request the transfer of the region from Azerbaijan to Armenia. This triggered an escalation of violence both in Karabakh and in other parts of Armenia and Azerbaijan. That same month, in February 1988 violence leading to human losses broke out first in Askeran (Karabakh), and then, on a larger scale, in Sumgait, near Baku. Mass demonstrations were taking place in Baku, Yerevan and the capital of Karabakh, Stepanakert (Azerbaijani: Xankandi). A state of emergency

¹ For a detailed account of Karabakh conflict see, for example, De Waal T., *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through War and Peace*. New York University Press, 2003.

was declared in Azerbaijan, including Karabakh, and Armenia. Yet this could not stop the mass protests and deportations. Meanwhile, the Supreme Soviets of the Azerbaijan and Armenian SSRs engaged in a war of legislation, with each of them voting for Karabakh to be part of Armenia and of Azerbaijan, respectively. In late 1988 the Azerbaijani minority was expelled from Armenia. In January 1990 pogroms against Armenians took place in Baku, after which Soviet troops entered the city, killing civilian protesters. The fighting in Karabakh had turned into an outright war by early 1991. In 1992, after the collapse of the USSR, it turned into a war between two independent states. Between 1992 and May 1994, when cease-fire agreement was signed in Bishkek, Azerbaijan had lost, in addition to Karabakh, six other regions around it. The cease fire has brought termination of military actions, yet no peace agreement has been reached yet.

The Life of a Human depicts the conflict at its peak, in 1992-1993, the period of heavy violence in and around Karabakh. The story presents three interconnected narratives. Two of them are classical novellas, in both of which the Karabakh conflict is a key event that radically transforms the lives of the characters; and the third is the narrator's own account of the conflict in which he offers a historical and political interpretation of the events. The first of the novellas begins in Aghdam, a town that is traditionally considered part of greater Karabakh, although administratively it was not part of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast during the Soviet period. Like other towns in and around Karabakh, Aghdam too had a mixed Azerbaijani and Armenian population. This is where the characters, two childhood friends, an Armenian (Valery) and an Azerbaijani (Allahyar), grow up together, on the same street. Aliev's description of life before the conflict is rather nostalgic (p. 7):

Once upon a time, maybe in another life, or in another dimension, when this land blossomed and the eyes ached from the view of gardens and vineyards stretching to the horizon, and the snowy mountain caps nodded to every visitor, invited or not, and the river murmured “be my guest” and the smell of kebab tickled the nose, the two boys, Allahyar and Valery, lived on that land, on the same street. One block down from the taxi stop by the bus station – here is Allahyar's house, with a metal sheet roof, and a fancy water pipe, looking just like a pomegranate tip. A little down the street, 40 meters down, is Valery's house: a porch, curtains on the windows, and again, flowers on the windowsills...

The boys not only grow up near one another, but they are also similar to each other, both in appearance and character (p. 8):

Both were dark, big-boned, with swift eyes and heads; and as they grew up no one on their street could match them in drinking tutovka.² They looked similar in some way – maybe the tan, or air, or something else – you know what may strike a mind after tutovka...

This peaceful life is disrupted by the Karabakh conflict. It first begins with small fights among local youth but with time becomes more serious and involves weapons and militias. The arms come from “no longer Soviet but not yet Russian” army troops deployed in the region. As the unrest intensifies, Valery’s family decides to leave their hometown. The last meeting of the two friends is sad, as they do not expect to see each other again. Valery, by way of farewell, says something that Allahyar will remember for a long time: “[They] played ‘fool’ with us... And gave ‘preference’ to the Baltics. But ‘preference’ is an intellectual game... here we have to either work with our hands or run” (p. 16). The placement of responsibility in this comment is very telling: there is a clear division between “us” and “them”, “them” who are responsible and “us”, whether it means the two friends, or Armenians and Azerbaijanis, or both, who are the sufferers. But who is “them”? “Them”, as the next sentence juxtaposing the local situation with the one in the Baltic suggests, is the central government which manipulated the peripheries. This, as we shall see further on, is the central issue of the story to which we will come back more than once.

Allahyar and Valery next meet a year later, in early summer 1993, when both are lieutenant colonels in the opposing armies. They first make contact by radio, and agree to meet in a “neutral zone”, meaning 2 kilometers away from each other’s positions. Both come to the meeting unarmed, but with vodka, which, after initial verbal testing of each other, they drink together. “Like in the old times”, Allahyar says. “It will never be like the old times”, Valery replies. They exchange questions about each other’s families, and prospects for the future. Valery offers to smuggle Allahyar to Russia or Poland, “if you decide to come with me”. Allahyar refuses and makes counter-proposal which is also refused. They agree on “trying to survive. Both of us” (pp. 24-25).

² Mulberry vodka, a famous local drink in Karabakh.

But this does not happen. Aghdam is surrendered to the Armenian forces on July 23, 1993. The narrator emphasizes that it was surrendered rather than captured, thus implying betrayal in the Azerbaijani military command. Two months after the surrender, on September 23, Allahyar, who was known for his moral integrity and rejection of compromises, dies in a mine explosion. The next day after his friend's death Valery comes to the Azerbaijani post, unarmed, and asks for a permission to visit Allahyar's grave. Despite initial doubts he is granted this permission, and walks over to the Azerbaijani side to spend an hour at the grave of his friend. When he leaves, he is ready to surrender to the Azerbaijani army, but Azerbaijani soldiers let him go, following not the formal rules, but the code of male honor: “You are a man and we are men” (p. 28).

Two months later the whole of Aghdam District is taken by Armenian forces; and after a few more months the cease fire agreement is signed. After the cease fire Valery returns to “the land that is occupied, yet his own” and settles in a small village outside of old Aghdam, which is now in ruins. This village is near the place where his friend Allahyar is buried, and Valery takes care of his grave. Rumor has it that it is always adorned with fresh flowers.

The other novella unfolds in another small town, this time in Armenia – in Razdan. This is the story of Anush, a middle aged widow struggling to sustain herself and her only son on a librarian's salary. She gets both herself and her son in trouble with one of the local “notables”, Vartan, a rich and influential man, and a member of the Party of National Self-Determination. Vartan gives a speech during a meeting of the housing committee where he calls on residents to resist and sacrifice of everything that is dear to them on the altar of the nation. “Everything” includes even the lives of their children. And Anush makes a mistake asking Vartan where exactly this altar of the nation was, in Razdan or in Marseilles, where his own son was studying. Vartan is enraged, and as he is a vindictive man, Anush is afraid that he will take revenge on her young son who will reach military draft age in a few months. Through the help of his vast connections Vartan is able to arrange for Anush's son to be sent to the war. To prevent this Anush asks her cousin who lives in Istanbul to help her find the money to pay to the draft officials. The cousin's husband finds money through a friend in Kars, an owner of small hotel who agrees to lend the money in return for Anush's service as a manager in his hotel. Thus Anush is able to send her son away to relatives in Russia, to the utter displeasure of Vartan. Several days

later she herself leaves for her new job in Kars, where she eventually marries the hotel owner.

In the second novella the author brings the issue of responsibility for the conflict closer to the ground and shows the role of local elites – of Vartan – in the actual practice of conflict. Vartan's involvement can be felt at two levels: at the ideological level he uses nationalist propaganda to encourage people to actively participate and contribute to the conflict; but at the same time Vartan is powerful enough to influence decision-making on who can be sent to the front line, and thus on who is to live and die. It is not by accident that Vartan is shown as corrupt, both morally and financially. Similar corruption among the elites takes place on the Azerbaijani side – remember the surrender of Aghdam and the strange death of Allahyar. Thus the policy-making of central government and the participation of the corrupt local elites combine in the escalation and development of the conflict.

The complementary themes of policies that are formed far from the Caucasus and of local elites that implement them on the ground are further developed in the third narrative, the narrator's own account of the conflict. The following two passages offer a good illustration of seemingly alternative, but in reality complementary forces that shaped the conflict:

It all started with ordinary fights [... ..] Here and there, sly little people with leather briefcases, whispered God knows what, stirred people up... In the evenings they gathered young people for lectures on some intelligent subject, on traditions and history. But that history was just deceitfully one-sided, in the spirit of "and in our neighborhood, along with such industrious ploughmen-builders-draftsmen-darlings of the Creator, barbarian neighbors settled" (p.12).

It all started not with fighting or some old ugly men, but with newspaper articles in Baku Workers or Yerevan Party Members [newspapers]. A thread tied to soft paws with spewing saliva, but not with sparkling wit of puppets, spread far away – far to the top, from the sunny south to the overcast north. To the Kremlin – Moscow, or to the White House in Washington, until it is needed... Even a cat would understand that if stupid people start screaming about heartfelt and sincere things, somewhere nearby there is always a prompter's box, where someone very, very clever is sitting. For the sake of fairness it should be noted

that the box may be located at a considerable distance from the scene, but what really is “far away” in our times – when people can move about, information can be transmitted and punishment meted out so quickly?... (p. 13).

So the conflict is initiated from outside, by policy-makers and intellectuals, and then the local elites implement those policies on the ground. This brings us back to the division between “us” and “them” from the first novella. It is now clear who is included in “them” and who bears primary responsibility for the conflict and its consequences. But what about “us”? First of all, who exactly are “us”? The answer to this question can be found in the author’s own introduction to the story (p. 3):

A human life is like a sheep’s hide, all in whorls and curls... the more interesting a time is for the historian, the more profitable it is for a politician or a speculator, the curlier it is for a simple person not spoiled by boutiques, fed at receptions, drunk on Veuve Clicquot or sucked off by Cindy Crawford. Life curls up, even if one does not want it to... Sometimes, you start howling like a dog at the moon. And so we live quietly, we love, laugh and cry... our brothers are called to the army... they are later dismissed without receiving severance... we are guinea pigs for this or that experience, forcibly driven to get vaccinated or to elections, organized in good conscience, with promises and carnival farce.

Thus, “us” is a non-ethnic category and includes, put simply, “ordinary” people. From the introductory passage cited above it may seem that “us” are in general victims. But the story itself disproves this. The three “ordinary” protagonists of the story can hardly be considered powerless victims. Both Valery and Allahyar are quite active participants of the conflict, with a considerable degree of power and control which allows them even to somewhat bend the rules and norms when needed. Anush, who formally fits the definition of a victim much better – she is poor, her job is unimportant, she is a widow, and she is a woman – also actively employs her agency in resolving her problem and succeeds in saving her son. But besides these three, there are also local youth who go to fight each other “with buckled belts wrapped around their fists”:

...They knocked out each other’s teeth with screams and curses, gouged each other’s eyes, carved crosses in their neighbors’ backs, hanged prisoners,

destroyed temples, burned villages, had fun... in short, they entertained themselves and the devil as best they could (p. 5).

It is these people who actually waged the conflict, and as such they can hardly be said to be wholly devoid of responsibility. Yet two questions remain here: first is the extent to which these fighters can be identified with the ordinary people, and the second is the extent of their responsibility. Although these fighters definitely are not part of the elite, the author does not directly identify them with the “ordinary people”. Ordinary people, in the story, appear to be first, rational agents, and second, honest and hard-working people. The fighters, rather, are the mob who is manipulated by the elites and therefore shares the responsibility with them.

There is one more interesting aspect of the conflict that is represented in this short story: its transnationality. We already mentioned the orchestration of the conflict from Moscow and Washington, but there is more. Thus, Vartan is the head of a local branch of the Party of National Self-Determination who “had connections from Los Angeles to Yerevan”. This transnational network is behind Vartan’s power in his home town. But the ordinary people, the “us”, also employ transnational social capital. Thus, Anush solves her problem through a transnational family network: her cousin in Istanbul provides money, and her son is sent to relatives in Russia. Allahyar and Valery, in their last meeting at the neutral zone both indicate their ability to smuggle each other into Russia. Thus, the Karabakh conflict even at the level of personal relations and involvement is seen not just as a problem of a certain locality but as embedded in global processes.

So overall, in *The Life of a Human* the Karabakh conflict is presented not as a spontaneous outbreak of violence based on irrational impulses but rather as a deliberately constructed conflict. The responsibility for its initial development is placed on neither the Armenian nor Azerbaijani side, but on the policy-makers outside of the region and on local elites; the latter are often seen as corrupt. The elites manipulate the mob, with whose hands the actual atrocities are committed. Yet the consequences of the conflict, the sufferings of military service, forced migrations, human losses are born by ordinary people, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

In *Besame mucho or Karabakh prisoners*, the events also take place in Karabakh, in a small village near the frontline. Serj and his wife Galia have recently

moved here from Baku, because their son Armen is doing his military service in Karabakh. Serj is a medical doctor, and here in Karabakh this is a much needed profession at the time of military actions. Serj and Galia temporarily live in the house of Galia’s relative Ashot, a local Karabakh Armenian. They are waiting to exchange their son, Armen, who has been taken prisoner by the Azerbaijani side. Serj is an old-time Baku resident, proud of Baku’s internationalist past, and is very critical of Armenian nationalist discourse. He hates war, does not like Karabakh, and misses his home and his life in Baku. For him, all those who shoot are “bastards”. Galia, on the other hand, is a more sincere nationalist. She often recites quotes about Armenia’s great past and the oppression of Armenians in Karabakh, and “blames everything on the Azerbaijani side”. Serj thinks that she acquired her nationalist sentiments from her father, who was a member of *Krunk*³ in Soviet times and paid regular membership fees. Galia is the one who wanted them to come to Karabakh in the first place. Galia’s relative Ashot, in whose house they live, is a good man. Not only does he offer his home to them, but he also brings them Azer, a wounded Azerbaijani prisoner for potential exchange for their son. Ashot seems to be confused about the conflict: on the one hand, he does not see Azerbaijanis as his enemies, recalls his many Azerbaijani friends and seems to believe that Karabakh is in fact part of Azerbaijan.

Not so Khachik, head of local Armenian militia and by inference also the top local authority at the time of war. Khachik is a diaspora Armenian from Beirut who had repatriated to Armenia a few years earlier. He is a proud member of the All Armenian Movement, and unlike Ashot he hates Azerbaijanis and has no doubts that Karabakh is Armenian land: “Armenia is where Armenians are”. His vision for the future is the cleansing of Karabakh of all Azerbaijanis, whom he calls Turks. He is generally a morally corrupt man: while speaking of Great Armenia and the war he is involved in trade of positions, equipment and ammunitions with the Azerbaijani military management; he tries to seduce Galia; he makes several attempts to kill Azer, the wounded prisoner; and eventually he kills Serj.

Serj, in the midst of an Azerbaijani offensive, makes the difficult decision to stay and surrender. At this time, he recognizes Khachik, whom he had met

³ An Armenian political organization pursuing the goal of independence of Karabakh. Officially it was founded in February 1988.

many years ago during a trip to lake Sevan. There, Khachik was working as a waiter and earning his long-distance university degree in Moscow by entertaining his professors in his restaurant. For Khachik, with his present military and political career, this is compromising information, and so he shoots Serj and kills him. When Azer, on his wounded leg, approaches Serj to see if he can still be helped, Galia enters the room, and assumes that Azer killed her husband. She picks up the gun and kills him.

So who is responsible for the conflict in this play? Different characters have rather different perspectives here. Galia “blames everything on the Azerbaijani side”; Khachik uses war for personal career and enrichment. But Galia’s position appears unsustainable and based on false Armenian propaganda rather than on serious analysis of the conflict. In the final scene, the killing of Azer, her view is shown as both false and leading to tragic results. The two “local” Armenians, Armenians from Azerbaijan, one from Baku (Serj) and another from Karabakh (Ashot), seem to have the most complex views. Ashot in many ways resembles Valery from *The Life of a Human*, although he is a much more comic character. Thus, he is local, he has many Azerbaijani friends and he cannot see Azerbaijanis as his enemies:

And do you know how many Azerbaijani friends I have here, as well as there? If I want, they will take me through the block posts directly to Baku, they will get anything for me... and they will safely deliver me back. And you say: enemies, enemies...

Yet, unlike Valery, he does not come up with a clear opinion of the origins of the conflict. He seems to be rather confused about this, but Moscow and Yerevan are both present in his thinking about the conflict. For example, he suggests, half-jokingly, that the war was started by Raisa Maksimovna (Gorbacheva, the wife of the then-Soviet leader); on the other hand he also mentions the role of Armenians from Armenia in the conflict:

“Ara, they...”, he points somewhere to the side, “...where the hell did they come from?! Now they even feel bad in Yerevan, it’s bad... Bread...”, he picks up a nub, “...this is how much they give us every day... And why they don’t let us near them? They say to us, go and fight with Azerbaijan. With whom, ara? With myself? We are in Azerbaijan, after all, not in the US!”

At the same time he does not blame Azerbaijani side for the conflict at all. When Galia reminds him of the oppression of Armenians by Azerbaijanis in Karabakh, he cannot remember any and just tells a story about a local police officer Mamikonian (an Armenian) who used to take money from his father.

Finally, Serj too attributes responsibility to the central government. He says to his wife: “This is the essence of the conflict: us for us. There is no ‘us’ and ‘them’ here. Everyone is us... Didn’t those stupid idiots, up there at the top, didn’t they understand this?!” Unlike his wife, he does not blame the Azerbaijani side for the conflict. He even checks with Azer whether he had been involved in killing Armenians in Baku pogroms. But in fact Azer had been helping Armenian refugees from Baku during the pogroms which were organized, according to Azer, by Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia. Thus, we are faced with a rather paradoxical situation, when even the pogroms of Armenians in Baku are seen as originating in Armenia, not in Azerbaijan.

If those responsible are the authorities and Armenians from Armenia, then who are the victims? Azerbaijanis, of course, are seen as victims, as is exemplified by the figure of Azer, a man who was wounded in war which he did not want and then was killed for a murder that he did not commit. But Armenians from Azerbaijan are also seen as victims, and especially Armenians from Baku. Ashot, although he is forced to fight in war “with himself” and to accommodate refugees, is at least in his own home. But Serj and Galia have lost everything: their home, their son; Serj loses his life and Galia loses a husband.

The short story *The Tree* in a way develops this theme, shifting focus from Karabakh to Baku of 1990. This is a love story of an Azerbaijani boy and an Armenian girl. The young people are neighbors; they live in the same courtyard, where the Tree, the witness and the narrator of the story, stands. The identities of the characters, including their names, are never named directly: throughout the text they are dubbed “she” and “he”.

The place and the time of the events are also revealed indirectly, through other evidence. Thus, the families of the couple have not been on friendly terms since the “terrible massacre” of the 1918, when “her” grandmother seduced “his” grandfather, who eventually left his family, went broke, and ended his days in jail (p. 28). The year 1918 here indicates that the “terrible massacre” is the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Baku, recently recognized in Azerbaijan as geno-

cide of Azerbaijani people.⁴ The Tree also says that “her” great-grandfather slaughtered “his” ancestors, which suggests that “she” is Armenian and “he” is Azerbaijani. That old love affair was the talk of the town 72 years ago – which implies that the present is 1990, the peak year of inter-ethnic strife in the current conflict in Baku. Thus, the present, including both the love affair and the conflict are seen as repetition of history:

Hiding, I pretended to be asleep and watched from the side what was happening, I was aware that before me an ever familiar story was evolving. Realizing its end was at hand, I tried to scream. But can trees scream? I was silent. History repeated itself. In a moment she will say that his family will never allow them to marry, because she is of a different nationality. He will try to resist. She will cover his mouth with her hand. Then she will whisper that they should run away. He will say it is impossible, he can't abandon his parents. She will reiterate that his parents would rather die than agree to his marriage with the girl whose great-grandfather killed his ancestors in 18, and whose grandmother was blamed for the tragedy of the whole family. He will say nothing. She will sigh. The same thing has happened again. Repeated exactly in the same way... (p. 29)

And indeed, “his” father tries to convince “him” to break up with “her”, and the arguments he uses refer both to the family history and the current ethnic strife:

If she were from another family, if this happened a few years before! But now, when everything has turned upside down and he has to defend the honor of his motherland, which has been insulted by her tribesmen?! (p. 30)

He does not try to refute the validity of these arguments:

...He had nothing to protest. He loved his father, his mother, his motherland, and was willing to give his life for them. But he also knew that he could not live even a day without her...

This means a deadlock, which neither the young man nor his father is able to resolve. The resolution, a very tragic one, comes by itself, on “a dark Janu-

⁴ For a detailed account of the massacres of 1918, see Altstadt, 1992.

ary day” – thus pointing to the pogroms in Baku in January 1990. “his” family hides “her” and her grandmother in their house as an angry mob breaks into the courtyard. Although no physical harm is done to them, the grandmother does not survive the shock and dies. After this horrible night the girl runs out of the house into the courtyard, and, shaken with grief and anger cries, out to her beloved: “Because of you my grandmother died. You stole our land and killed my people. I hate you (your people) for that. And I hate you...” (p. 31). When “he” tries to hold her and calm her down she breaks out of his arms, and, having tripped over an empty bucket, falls down and breaks her head open. Unable to survive this the next day “he” hangs himself on the tree.

Who is responsible for this tragedy? The young man’s father seems to be attributing responsibility on the Armenian side: “...honor of his motherland insulted by her tribesmen” (p. 30). She on the other hand gives a radically different assessment: “You stole our land and killed my people”. But for *The Tree* both of these are not so much active interpretations of the conflict but rather lines of a historical drama that is being repeated: the strife, the charms of an Armenian girl, the young man’s obsession with her – all of these appear completely independent from the will of the characters. The outcome of the drama is also predestined, and therefore their actions are not able to change anything.

The three representations discussed here vary slightly in their interpretation of the causes of the conflict. In the first case the causes are largely structural, and include policies of the central government in combination with the actions of local elites. Interestingly, the responsibility for the conflict here is ethnically neutral. In *Besame Mucho* part of the responsibility is also placed on the central government; but also largely on Armenians from Armenia and diaspora as opposed to local Armenians from Azerbaijan. In *The Tree* the conflict is seen as a blind impersonal force, a repetition of history independent of the will of individual actors, and this in fact lifts responsibility from the people. But the three cases also share a lot in common: all three describe interpersonal relations across a group boundary in a situation of violent conflict. In all three the people attempt to preserve these relations despite the conflict but in all cases they fail, and the relationships end tragically, with death. This – the problem of interaction across the intergroup boundary – will be the focus of the following section of this article.

The intergroup boundary: “Good” and “bad” Armenians

The boundary between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in literature is always drawn quite clearly. There are, as I will show in this section, some cases where engagement and interaction across the boundary becomes intense and even intimate. Yet the boundary itself, the basic difference between Armenians and Azerbaijanis is always there, it is essential and non-negotiable. I do not recall a single literary case where the Armenian identity of a character was kept unknown or where it was completely irrelevant to the story – and therefore to the representation of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Usually, Armenian identity is revealed directly – by naming a person as Armenian, for instance, as in the story *The Life of a Human* or by using specific Armenian names and surnames.

This last method is used by Afanasiy Mamedov in his novel *Back to Khazr*. One of the characters of the novel is Maia Babajanian, a neighbor and childhood friend of Afik, the novel’s protagonist. Maia, as well as other neighborhood girls Jamilia and Zulya, are part of the same “neighborhood company”. Interestingly, the last names of Zulya and Jamilia are never revealed throughout the novel, and it seems that the whole purpose of giving Maia’s last name was to underline her Armenian identity.

Sometimes the Armenian identity is revealed indirectly, through geographical and historical context, like “Her” identity in Anargizi’s story *The Tree*. It must be noted that this clear and unequivocal drawing of intergroup boundary is consistent throughout XX century literature. Thus, for example, in short story *Story about Music* by S. Rahman there is a character named Akop; in the next paragraph after introducing him the author directly identifies Akop’s nationality: “the Armenian master” (p. 172). In the famous play *In 1905* by Dj. Djabbarli, the nationality of the characters is given in the very beginning, in the list of characters (p. 144).

Yet, the intergroup boundary by itself does not imply that communication is not possible or that interaction between Armenians and Azerbaijanis does not happen, and in fact such communication and interaction can be quite intense and intimate. What makes this possible? What makes the boundary a penetrable symbolic entity rather than physically restrictive protective wall?

One of the factors that ease communication across the interethnic boundary is co-residence, experience of living side by side with Azerbaijanis. Valery from *The life of a Human*, Serj and Ashot from *Besame Mucho*, Maia Babajanian from *Back to Khazr* – all these are examples of such (previously) positive experience of co-residence. All these characters are locals, they are natives of their respective homelands, they have diverse and intense relations with their Azerbaijani friends and neighbors. I have already described the friendship of Valery and Allahyar in some detail above; others too have Azerbaijani friends.

Thus, Serj’s best friend in Baku was an Azerbaijani, Mehman. They had a long history together, with Serj even thinking about marrying Mehman’s sister at some point back in their youth; they have traveled together, have shared romantic memories, particularly from the trip to Armenia from where Serj had remembered Khachik. Ashot says that he had more Azerbaijani friends than Armenian. Maia Babajanian is Afik’s close friend, they grew up together. She is an integral part of her “courtyard” company, with Afik and Zulya. They help each other out, Maia’s sells Afik’s books when he needs money, and Maia and Zulya are even romantically involved.

Such “our” Armenians, particularly those from Karabakh, often speak Azerbaijani: Valery spoke Azerbaijani with Allahyar and Ashot has no difficulties communicating in this language. They also identify themselves with Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis in addition to their Armenian identity; in some cases it may be difficult to make a choice. Thus, for example, Ashot does identify with Armenia and Armenians: “I can’t understand why, in the beginning of the conflict **we** gave diamonds not to Azerbaijan’s leadership, but to Raisa Maksimovna. Karabakh would have been **ours** long ago...” But at the same time he also identifies with Azerbaijan: “...they say: go fight with Azerbaijan. Ara, with whom? With **ourselves**?” [emphasis added – L. S.]. Serj decides to stay and surrender to the Azerbaijani military. Maia Babajanian unequivocally identifies with her hometown: when her friend Afik asks her to be more careful in town because “you know what they do to Armenians now”, she replies: “This is my city! Whom should I be afraid of here?” (p. 97).

Another interesting characteristic of such “good” Armenians is their attitudes towards other Armenians. While they identify with Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis they also dissociate themselves from other “Armenian” Armenians. For example, Maia, in the continuation of the same conversation, when Afik suggests that she “go ask her own people”, replies angrily: “my own people? They are

mine no more than yours – we are no-one for them, we are Turkified” (p. 97). Interestingly, Afik, Maia’s close friend, nevertheless draws and points out the boundary between himself and her, and Maia is offended by this. It is as if he does not accept her identification with him but at the same time she claims that she is not accepted by other Armenians.

A special case of intense interaction across the intergroup boundary is love affairs, like the one described in *The Tree*. This is a recurring theme in Azerbaijani literature, dating back to the epic *Asli and Kerem*, and also regularly reappearing in XX century literature, such as the novel *Bahadur and Sona* by Nariman Narimanov, *Mahmud and Mariam* by Elchin, and a number of secondary plotlines in other works, such as *The Resettlement*. In all cases, such love affairs are doomed to fail. At least one of the participants, and often both of them, die. Thus, in *The Tree* both die. In *Bahadur and Sona*, Bahadur commits suicide after Sona’s parents refuse his marriage proposal while Sona goes mad and spends the rest of her life in a mental institution. In *Mahmud and Mariam* both are killed by Mariam’s father. The love affairs in literature thus appear to perform an important role of structuring interaction across the intergroup boundary: while even the most intense interaction is always possible, the inevitable failure of love affairs indicates the importance and the strength of the boundary which remains insurmountable despite the interaction.

Thus, the experience of living in Azerbaijan, cooperation and friendship with Azerbaijanis, and identification with Azerbaijan, Karabakh, or Baku, and with their Azerbaijani friends all ease the communication across the boundary. All these factors indicate rather high perceived assimilation of Azerbaijani Armenians. But even with such assimilated Armenians, the boundary persists and is never completely removed. It remains in place despite the interaction, and during the actual conflict it becomes impenetrable even for the “good” Armenians who identify with Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis. The cooperation, the friendship, the harmony belong to the past. At present no matter how strong the friendship may be, any interaction is doomed to end tragically. Sometimes the Azerbaijani counterpart dies as a result of such interaction – such as Allahyar in *The Life of a Human*. But usually it is either the Armenian counterpart or both who die or are killed: the couple from *The Tree* dies, “She” from an accident caused by her own hate and “He” commits a suicide; Serj is killed by a foreign Armenian for whom Serj’s refusal to identify with Armenia is a threat, and Azerbaijani prisoner Azer is killed by Serj’s wife; Maia is killed by an angry Azerbaijani mob in

Baku who does not care about her identification with the city and her dislike of Armenian Armenians.

However, not all Armenians of Azerbaijan are seen as assimilated. There is also an important issue of choice that is made by individual Armenians; and while some choose to identify with Azerbaijan, others make a choice of identifying with Armenia. Thus, while Serj decides to surrender to Azerbaijani army – although he never gets a chance to carry this decision through – his wife Galia, also an Armenian from Baku, makes a very different choice and identifies with Armenians and never Azerbaijanis. Another example is presented in *The Tree* where She, despite her feelings of love for Him, finally makes a choice to identify with Armenians and shouts to her beloved in the end: “You stole our land and killed my people. I hate you (your people) for that. And I hate you” (p. 31).

The representation of “good” assimilated Armenians is rather consistent throughout XX century literature. A vivid example can be found in the play *In 1905* by Dj. Djabbarli, written in 1930s and dedicated to the history of Armenian-Azerbaijani strife in 1905. Two families, an Armenian headed by Allahverdi and an Azerbaijani (called in the play “Turk”), headed by Imamverdi, live close to each other in Karabakh. They are connected by a multitude of personal and business ties, they help each other, Imamverdi and Allahverdi are good friends, and their children are friends too. Moreover, Imamverdi’s son Bahshi and Allahverdi’s daughter Sona are in love with each other. When Sona’s brother Eyvaz goes to Baku to work at the oil refinery he asks his close friend Bahshi to look after his sister (p. 152). Here, like in the literature of the conflict period, we can see the motive of peaceful and harmonious co-residence and friendship. Eyvaz, in particular, underlines the irrelevance of inter-ethnic boundary: “A book which is the truth for me does not contain such words as ‘Armenian’ and ‘Turk’” (p. 180). Another example is Akop-usta, maker of musical instruments, from *Story about Music*. Akop loses his daughter in the turbulent years of 1918-1920. She is a beautiful woman, and after the death of her husband a local Azerbaijani *bek* (they live in Karabakh) kidnaps her and forces into concubinage. Eventually the *bek* leaves her and she dies of tuberculosis. This Azerbaijani *bek* also tries to kidnap Leyla, an Azerbaijani girl from the same area, but she manages to escape. Years later Akop-usta and Leyla meet and recognize each other. Akop is particularly happy to meet Leyla who is like a daughter to him. A similar representation can also be found in the novel *The*

Day of Execution by V. Samedoglu. There, an Azerbaijani writer who is about to be arrested – the events take place in 1930s – gives the manuscript of his controversial novel to his neighbor Akop for safekeeping. Akop possesses all the characteristics of the “good” Armenian: he is from Karabakh, he speaks Azerbaijani, he likes Azerbaijanis and is a trustworthy person.

In all of these works the “good” Armenians, like Allahverdi, Eyvaz, or the two Akops, have experience of living in Azerbaijan, first in Karabakh and later in Baku, and they have Azerbaijani friends. However, there is one important difference – in Soviet literature there is no dissociation between local Armenians residing in Azerbaijan and the Armenians who originate from territory of Armenia or present-day Turkey. Such foreign Armenians are simply not present in Soviet literature. Instead, division and unification in Soviet-era literature are based on class lines, with peasants and workers pitted against *beks* and oil barons. Thus, the families of Allahverdi and Imamverdi are both peasants, their son Eyvaz is a worker and their common enemy is oil baron Agamyani; Akop-usta is a maker of instruments, and Leyla is a daughter of peasants; their common enemy is the Azerbaijani *bek* who kidnapped Siranush and attempted to kidnap Leyla. A similar motive is reproduced in *The Life of a Human*, with ordinary people pitted against corrupt elites. But in the literature of the conflict period the common class enemy is often replaced by Armenians from outside of Azerbaijan.

If “good” Armenians are the ones who live in Azerbaijan and love it and their Azerbaijani friends, then logically the “bad” Armenians would be the opposite. And indeed, foreign Armenians, Armenians who come to Azerbaijan and the Caucasus from somewhere else are often represented as “bad”. One example of such an Armenian would be Khachik: an immigrant from Beirut, he transposes his hatred of all Turks in general onto Azerbaijanis, with whom he had very limited experience and whom he does not know. Another vivid example is Ovanes Agaronyan from G. Guseynov’s historical novel *Fire of the Sun* (2003). This novel has a complex structure that interconnects the present, the history of deportation of the author’s family, with the fictitious historical novellas describing the role of Armenians in the region. Ovanes Agaronyan is the central character in two of these novellas – *Trickery and Love* (pp. 69-82) and *The Sun of the Dead* (pp. 132-152).

He is an orphan who had grown up in the house of his uncle in (Tiflis) Tbilisi in the 19th century; there he had acquired ideas about building a Greater Armenia which he goes to implement in Yerevan. In Yerevan he also has a lover,

a daughter of a rich merchant, Melik-Samvelyan who had come there from Maraga in Persia. Melik-Samvelyan does not like Yerevan and wants to go back to Persia; but this runs against the radicals' plans of creating Greater Armenia and to stop him they burn his house. Both Melik-Samvelyan and his children die there. Ovanes, however, overcomes his pain for his lost lover and goes to Moscow to become a diplomat. One of his defining features is his hatred for Muslims and Azerbaijanis which he does not hide even on his translation missions. His son Avetis later becomes one of the leaders of Dashnaksutyun, a radical nationalist party that was engaged in the inter-communal strife between Azerbaijanis and Armenians at the beginning of the 20th century.

Another example is from the novel *The Key to Your House* by R. Huseynov (2008). This novel covers the period from the early 20th century to 1930s. Sadiyar Agha, an Azerbaijani landlord, loses his family in an Armenian raid on his summer camp. The raiders shoot Sadiyar Agha's 9-year-old son and his pregnant wife dies from shock. Sadiyar Agha swears to take revenge and kill all perpetrators of this terrible crime. Over the next several years he finds and kills them one by one; but the last one, the organizer Levon Sarkisian, he does not kill yielding to his wife's plea not to kill a father in front of his children. But Levon does not feel any gratitude: on the contrary, he follows Sadiyar Agha and kills him from behind. After that he turns into a fugitive and lives the rest of his life in hiding. Levon is not a local; he is an immigrant from Ottoman Turkey and he brings with him hatred towards all Turks. So are his assistants in the tragic raid.

This pattern of hate and crime continues in the next generation, with Levon's son Gurgen. After the flight of his father, Gurgen gets involved with a group of criminals and once he even brings them to his house where he witnesses them raping his own mother. Yet he does not do anything to stop them. Moreover, he continues his relationship with one of those criminals, “Uncle Karen”, for the rest of his life: two decades later they both work for the NKVD (Soviet Secret Police) of Azerbaijan. While in service, Gurgen commits another horrible crime. He tells Ida, who is betrothed to his colleague Farhad, that he possesses information about Farhad who is fighting in the Spanish Civil War. This is a lie aimed at forcing Ida to have sex with him. After several months of this forced relationship, the severely depressed Ida dies in a car accident.

Thus, the “bad” Armenians, unlike “good” ones, are often immigrants or come from immigrant families. Coming from outside the region they are not personally

involved with the local Azerbaijanis and bring with them perceptions that originate elsewhere. They are full of hate, and often this hate is generalized and directed towards all Turks/Muslims. Finally, such Armenians are generally bad, morally corrupt people, murderers, traitors, rapists. In many cases Armenians also work in law enforcement agencies: Gurgen and his patron Karen Baghdasaryan are one example. In *Fire of the Sun*, in the novella about the author's family's deportation to Kazakhstan, there are several Armenian officers organizing the deportation. The same motive appears in the autobiographical novel *The Resettlement* by M. Oruj and the short story *The Black Train* by N. Rahimov.

Unlike the representation of the "good" Armenian, which is a stable and consistent image throughout all of XX century literature, the "bad" Armenian is rather new. Because of the Soviet ideological pressure of "friendship of the peoples" representations of "bad" Armenians were a sort of taboo in Soviet Azerbaijani literature. Yet there is one exception that can be found in the novel *Mahmud and Mariam*, based on the epic *Asli and Kerem*. This novel was published in 1987, and written a few years before; thus, it appeared immediately before the conflict began. In the novel, Mahmud, son of the *khan* of Ganja, falls in love with Mariam, daughter of a local priest, a "Dark Priest", as he is called. There are of course numerous obstacles in front of Mahmud's love, such as the resistance of his own family, differences in class and so on. However the most important obstacle turns out to be the resistance of Mariam's father, the Dark Priest. Eventually, unable to prevent the wedding, the Dark Priest gives his daughter a magic dress as a wedding gift; this dress, when unbuttoned, bursts into flames, killing both Mahmud and Mariam. The Dark Priest in this novel resembles very much the other "bad" Armenians found in the literature of the next two decades. Like Khachik, Ovannes, or Levon, the Dark Prince feels the same strong hatred towards all Muslims. Like them, he is also a stranger to the Caucasus – he comes here from Erzurum (in eastern Turkey). The consistency of this representation with the conflict period image of foreign Armenians as enemies suggests that the idea of Armenians as outsiders, as a potential foreign threat is not new at all but in fact lay dormant during the Soviet period.

The literature of the conflict period supports the notion of the importance of group boundary maintenance for the ethnic processes put forward by Frederik Barth (Barth, *Introduction*). The boundary in literature is maintained regardless of the characteristics of individual Armenian characters and of the quality of interaction across it.

Conclusion

“It will never be like the old times” – these words of Valery, a Karabakh Armenian from *The Life of a Human*, summarize the Azerbaijani literary representation of the Karabakh conflict very well. The “old times” are the times of harmony and peace, when Armenian-Azerbaijani relations were based on cooperation and mutual support. This “golden age” is destroyed by the Karabakh conflict, which radically transforms this relationship into hostility, suspicion and war. In literature, as well as in real life, this transformation is often represented as tragic, as leading to and bringing death to the participants. Despite some variation in the interpretation of the causes of the conflict, in all works of fiction analyzed here the Karabakh conflict is seen as a major blow that radically transforms the relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Meanwhile, the causes of this conflict and this radical transformation are represented as external: either the policy-makers in Moscow, or provocation from Armenia, or an impersonal historical force that plays with the actors.

Yet, despite this representation of the conflict as a radical transformation of the relations between two groups, the comparison of conflict period literature with that of the Soviet period shows that there exist significant continuities between the two. Thus, in both periods there exists a representation of “good” Armenian. Such good Armenians are always local, hardworking and well integrated into Azerbaijan, including integration into cross-ethnic social networks, knowledge of Azerbaijani culture and language. However, and this is another carryover from the Soviet period, regardless of the level of integration of even the most friendly Armenians, the inter-group boundary between the two groups is always drawn very clearly. There may be the most intensive interaction going on across it – such as friendship, mutual support, and even love affairs, but in all cases the boundary is maintained.

On the other hand, there are important differences in the pre-conflict and conflict period literatures. The most striking of them is the emergence of the image of “bad” Armenians. Such “bad” Armenians are often outsiders; they are newcomers to Azerbaijan, and often to the Caucasus, from the territories of the former Ottoman Empire. They bring with them hatred towards all “Turks”, which for them includes Azerbaijanis, and all Muslims. They are always hostile, and

interaction with them leads to death. Interestingly, the “good” Armenians often also suffer from this interaction, they fall victim to the hatred that their “bad” co-ethnics feel and exercise towards Azerbaijanis. This negative representation of Armenians emerges first, at least in the literature that I have read, immediately before the conflict, in 1987. But after the escalation of the conflict this image rapidly proliferates, and in many cases can be found in historical fiction that describes Soviet and pre-Soviet history. As the “good” Armenians in the conflict period literature always die, it is possible to suggest that the representations of “good” Armenians are being gradually replaced by representations of “bad” ones.

One important issue that I did not address in this article but which deserves a special attention is the problem of the relationship between the literary representations and the empirical reality. In other words, to what extent the representations of the conflict and interaction correspond with actual relations in “real life”. This is a particularly interesting question with regard to the image of past relations as a “golden age” and the image of “bad” Armenians as outsiders. Is that really true? The sternness of the Karabakh Armenian position in the ongoing conflict resolution negotiations suggests that the representation of Karabakh Armenians as well integrated into Azerbaijan is somewhat exaggerated; or perhaps literature has generalized individual, special cases. However, to answer this question in more detail, further research would be needed.

Finally, if “the old times” are over, what then is the future of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations? Is there any basis for building new relations after the old ones have been destroyed by the Karabakh conflict? Recent literature dealing with the Karabakh conflict does not offer an answer to this question. This lack of vision for the future is perhaps based in the current uncertainty surrounding the conflict, in the lack of any resolution and settlement. Thus, both the literary representations and the conflict situation await a resolution. Judging from the literature, the resolution is likely to come from outside, from the same external forces that initiated the conflict.

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