



5. A traumatic coming of age in exile: Evolving identities in Shahan Shahnour's *Retreat Without Song*

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Abstract The present essay deals with the representations of exile in Shahan Shahnour's novel *Retreat Without Song* (Chahnour, 1929). Exile is represented through a translingual literary identity, but also through an unsettling version of a bildungsroman which fails to provide a final stage of fulfilment, harping on trauma and exile as inhibitors of seamless integration and self-development.

Keywords genocide | bildungsroman | exile | Lubin | Shahnour

THE WRITER'S BACKGROUND

Shahan Shahnour,¹ whose real name was Shahnour Keresdedjian, was born in 1903 in Istanbul and grew up in the Ottoman Empire in a multilingual environment (Beledian, 2001). He experienced exile when he left Istanbul at the age of 19 to avoid a very bleak future for Ottoman minorities following the end of the Greek-Turkish war. His narrative techniques as well as his pen names – cleverly composed of elements suggesting ambivalence, fluidity and multiple identities – reflect his mastery of multiple languages and his oscillation between cultures and identities. Shahan Shahnour was a translingual writer, “writing in more than one language” (Kellman, 2000), more precisely, “ambilingual” (Kellman, 2000) as he would alternate between two languages – Western Armenian and French – around which he carefully crafted his literary identities. He adopted two different pen names, one for his writings in Armenian, which bears a close resemblance to his Armenian

1 French transliteration, Chahan Chahnour.

birth name and another one for his works published in French, Armen Lubin, which was both a nod to his Armenian origins (Armen – Armenia) and a reference to Arsène Lupin, the famous fictional master of disguise and thief created by French novelist Maurice Leblanc. The shift from one language to another is not only accompanied by the adoption of a different pen name, but also by a shift in themes and literary forms: Shahnour's/Lubin's Armenian language work is exclusively prose, whereas his French work is almost always poetic. Even though exile is seeping through his entire creative work, the Armenian language corpus refers specifically to the Armenian condition of exile as loss of homeland; whereas the French language corpus evokes temporariness and duality, but also deals with sickness and hospital confinement as another form of social exile and marginality.

According to Pierre Brunel (1983), Shahnour, unlike Arsène Lupin, never intended to deceive the public by crafting multiple identities; instead, his pen name would mirror his frustration provoked by exile and the in-between as loss of identity, as well as by the problematic aspects of identity in the post-imperial era, during which political dissidents and minorities would become stateless or shift from one nationality to another. His internal conflict concerning his identity would be worsened by his ever-changing documents and by his statelessness. Shahnour, who had left the Ottoman Empire with a Nansen passport as an "Armenian refugee" would ultimately be labelled an "ex-Armenian" in his official documents (Shahnour, 1958). Stripped of his very own ethnic belonging, he was consequently both symbolically but also literally distanced from his ancestral roots, which would further aggravate his trauma and bitterness.

His split identity echoed his exilic condition, namely the decentralization of the exiled subject. Alexis Nouss (2015) defines the relationship of the exiled individuals to space as being "bipolarized", oscillating between their place of origin and the following stages of their itinerary, "supporting a dynamic of multi-belonging" (p. 29). The exiled individuals are constantly dissatisfied and incomplete by what they leave behind and what they find later on in their lives. The status of exile necessarily implies a transformation of the exiled individuals, who can no longer fully identify with the place they leave behind nor with the places where they settle thereafter: "[Exiled individuals] do not cross borders, they are 'border beings that have no border'" (Nouss, 2015, p. 11).

1915: A MAJOR TURNING POINT IN DIASPORA HISTORY AND LITERATURE

The historical context that shaped the Armenian diaspora literature, as well as the conflicts within the Armenian literary circles that are mentioned in *Retreat Without Song*, have to be evoked for a better understanding of the novel's content and its underlying ideological positions. The Armenian Genocide is, undoubtedly, an event that has shaped every aspect of the social and political life of Ottoman Armenians from 1915 to the present day. The surviving Armenians were given Nansen passports that allowed them to migrate primarily to Europe, the Middle East, the US and to a lesser extent to Latin America, but always without the possibility of ever returning: the note *sans retour possible* was stamped on their passports. Most survivors were very young children, mostly orphans and women of rural background (Kevorkian, 2006; Tachjian, 2009) who would rarely have received secondary and higher education in their country of origin.

The round up and killing of the majority of Ottoman-Armenian intellectuals by the Young Turks (Kevorkian, 2006) had a devastating effect on Ottoman Armenian culture. After 1915, very few well-educated individuals and members of the former Ottoman Armenian "elites" had survived. The dismantlement of the former literary "classical" schools of Istanbul came as a result of the untimely deaths of most of the Ottoman Armenian writers and teachers. "Intellectual anaemia" within Ottoman Armenian circles was the direct consequence of the massacres (Beledian, 2001, p. 43). The Armenian elite living in Europe at that time was mostly made up of political *émigrés* from Russia who had received a European education and even though they also had lost their homeland and suffered oppression, their political exile couldn't be compared to the genocidal violence experienced by Ottoman Armenians (Kunth, 2007).

Life outside the country of origin and the migrant stateless status of survivors were also very challenging situations. In France, Ottoman Armenians found a means of survival in very precarious and menial jobs in factories until the early 1930s (Kunth, 2007). By the end of the 1920s most of them were still extremely poor, sometimes uneducated or having limited access to secondary and higher education in the host country, and few of them managed to escape this precarious life by enrolling in university courses as free auditors (Beledian, 2001).

A few years after the mass arrival of Ottoman Armenians in France, very few exclusive Armenian schools had been established; the majority of the exiled Armenian children would attend either Wednesday or Sunday school instead (Mouradian & Kunth, 2010). As a consequence, the transmission of oral, dialectal language would often prevail. Some attempts to produce literature during that period

reflect the impossibility of this orphan generation to convey feelings and memories of exile and displacement into some form of literary expression. Life in exile and death had marked the psyche and the culture, whereas the mother tongue (Western Armenian spoken by the exiled Ottoman Armenians) was by then a language without territory. As the short-lived First Republic of Armenia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1920, greater conflicts arose concerning the different stances of the Armenian diaspora on the question of whether Soviet Armenia is a legitimate state representative of its people and the diaspora or whether Armenians should advocate for the resurgence of Historical Armenia as was the position promoted by the political party Dashnaktsoutioun (Kunth, 2007).

THE NOVEL IN CONTEXT: THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA LITERARY CIRCLES IN THE 1920s

Growing concerns about the future of the Armenian language and of Armenian literature in diaspora circles following the Sovietization of Armenia led to fiery debates. A survey on the future and direction of Armenian literature was published in the first issue of the literary magazine *Zvartnots* in 1929. Writers with different political and artistic allegiances and visions were invited to argue in favour of a national, international or a universal direction of the Armenian literature (Beledian, 2001). Writers who were influenced by Modernism and Futurism, such as Kostan Zarian and Nicolas Sarafian, would adopt a rather moderate position defending the Armenian national tradition, its past and its present while opening up to the Western society and thought (Beledian, 2001). Such writers would argue that contrary to their predecessors who were influenced remotely and indirectly by European thought through translations that managed to find their way into the Ottoman Empire, Armenian writers, who were facing the plight of violent and permanent loss of homeland after the genocide, could also reap the benefits of life in the heart of Europe and of the direct influence of French and European Modernism in general, in order to breathe new life into Armenian literature. In that sense, exile could be a blessing and not only curse. The absence of territory and institutions as well as the progressive reconstruction of diaspora communal structures allowed space and time for profound recontextualization and questioning of values, for unapologetic forms of self-expression that stemmed either from the despair and disorientation of some of the survivors or from their realization that the almost complete destruction of their past had given them the freedom to trace new paths and free themselves of norms. Innovation was not, however, an easy task: forms of resistance and fear would always occur. *Retreat Without Song* depicts

the different tendencies inside a traumatized community in a very precise and vivid manner. The ambivalence of the characters simultaneously seeking and fearing change; being categorically attached to their Armenianness while also critical of traditional values is a prominent trait of life in exile.

Zarian's and Sarafian's standpoint echoed the collective ambivalence between the lost homeland and the new country but also between the maintenance of traditional values and the urgency of the present. As most of the representatives of the Ottoman Armenian old world had perished in 1915, the Ottoman Armenian diaspora in France had to reconstruct and recover through a working class immigrant orphan generation that was self-taught. Writers such as Sarafian and Zarian, who had partially embraced Modernism and Futurism and had experienced the deep questioning of values in the aftermath of World War I while bearing witness to industrialization, would argue that if literature were to be created after 1915, it would no longer be an exclusive affair of the bourgeoisie or of scholars. Shahnour's Armenian characters, both self-taught writers or artists and factory workers at the same time, echo the growing participation of the working class in literature, both as writers and as readers.

Retreat Without Song features primal versions of most of the themes that Shahnour would thoroughly explore during his literary career, such as despair, exile, trauma, transience, self and alterity. It was one of the first novels published in France by an Armenian writer, providing us with an overview of the post-1915 Armenian community a few years after it was founded. Even though the book received harsh critique upon publication for its nihilist and raw content, it is now praised for being very candid and very representative of the conflicts that animated the literary circles of the Armenian community of its time. Written within a year between 1927 and 1928, and as political turmoil in the aftermath of the Sovietization of Armenia was still very intense, *The Retreat without Song* echoed the standpoint of the writer. This would be further clarified two years later when Shahnour co-founded a literary magazine catering to the Armenian diaspora, *Menk* 'We', which he also briefly co-edited until it was dissolved one year after its creation.

The magazine's manifesto made an appeal for solidarity among Armenians in the diaspora, which could be made possible through the use of literature as the new transnational tool of communication. The manifesto stressed the fact that traditional national literature had died in 1915 and that the "New Literature" promoted by the magazine should convey the transnational experience and allow each and every one of the contributors to thrive and find their own personal way to contribute to the rebirth of Armenian culture (*Menk*, 1931). Nicolas Sarafian, co-editor of *Menk*, wrote about the magazine's decentred orientation: "We have to create a

spiritual homeland and think like an Armenian in all of those countries that are both our plight and our greatest chance” (Beledian, 2001, p. 117). The idea of thinking “like” an Armenian stresses out the process of differentiation and hybridity that had already started to occur as the writers could see themselves evolving and changing through time and through contact with the Other, gradually appropriating their values.

AESTHETICS OF EXILE: LANGUAGE AND HYBRID IDENTITY

Shahnour’s poignant depiction of the Parisian society of the 1920s reveals a multi-layered narrative of exiles of all sorts: orphans, foreigners, victims of violence and members of the underworld. The Armenians represent only a small piece of fabric on the patchwork of Parisian life discussed in the book, made up of different stories of exiles, marginal people and misfits. The interaction of experiences and memories is crucial for the story. Bedros, the Armenian photographer whose name also changes throughout the novel – sometimes called by his Armenian name “Bedros”, sometimes by the French equivalent “Pierre” and sometimes just with the national epithet “The Armenian” – brings his painful baggage of memories from the Armenian genocide to Paris, where he meets other people traumatized by war and violence. These include his coworker in the photographic studio, Constant, who is a World War I veteran and an amputee, and his love interest, Madame Jeanne – or Nnette as Pierre calls her affectionately – a war orphan considered a “fallen woman” by society’s standards. She is a single mother and a producer of pornographic material, and, as it is revealed halfway through the story, a former prostitute and nude model during World War I.

The questions of migration and exile are addressed in Shahan Shahnour’s very first work by means of the presentation of a variation of exiles, a deep feeling of ambivalence, contrasts, conflicts and a continuous sense of movement that pertains both to the movement of people and to movement through time, languages, and cultures that shapes the characters’ transnational experience. An excerpt at the beginning of the book is very characteristic of the sense of movement, boundary crossing and differences that the immigrants experience in Paris. By the time the Armenian immigrant arrives in the city, he never stops moving from one place to another, from one language to another, from community spaces to means of transport and to work, using three different languages. The featuring of Parisian metro stations as spaces of transience where one passes from but that one cannot inhabit, *non-lieux* ‘non-places’ according to Marc Augé (Augé, 1992), further

accentuates the frantic sense of movement, temporariness and exile. The “non-places”, according to Augé, are opposed to *lieux anthropologiques* ‘anthropological places’ (Augé, 1992) like the community restaurants featured in the following excerpt, where the characters are able to socialize with their compatriots outside of the homeland:

When he got out of the **Gare de Lyon**,² the storm had already started; later on, running out of patience, he started to run to avoid getting soaked. This is how it goes, every émigré, as soon as he sets his foot in Paris does nothing but run, run. First towards the centre of Paris, **Saint Michel**, then towards the Armenian Church; “In **Châtelet** you do ‘**change**’ if you don’t know how to do ‘**change**’ you walk to ‘**Châtelet**’”. At Ani restaurant “Auntie, a slice of bologna! There are no more giant beans *plaki*, I’ve already told you!” Admiring legs, admiring the postal service, admiring the police officers. “Hey Bedros, don’t you recognize me? We are countrymen.” Yes, they came from the same neighbourhood but the other one was selling vegetables on the streets. “When you enter the **metro station**, don’t ask for a third-class ticket and don’t say the name of the place where you are going.” **Identity Card**. “Heyyy, they have no shame here, they kiss in public and even on the mouth.” **Open the gate, please** “Don’t worry Bedros, the **foreman** is a very nice guy, tomorrow just bring a box of *Turkish delight* and I’ll do the rest.”

Factory

Factory

Factory

Syphilitics, madmen, kings, puppets, ventriloquists,

What can you matter to Paris the whore,

Your souls or your bodies, your poisons or your rags?

She’ll shake you off, you pox-rotten snarlers!³

My violin fixed on the wall feeeeeel and brooooooke... **Just a platform on the back and its over!** Half past seven, the siren, hey! Bedros, **pint, canteen**. He won’t make it – **Score: Blue, that’s fine!** Where art thou, Mother! Where art thou, Mother! Where art thou Mother! [...] “He passed out, Bedros, Bedros,

2 The words in bold are in French in the text, the main text is in Armenian, the words marked in italics are in Turkish and the underlined excerpts are Armenian folk songs.

3 I used the following translation for the excerpt of Arthur Rimbaud’s poem: Rimbaud, A. (1997): *Collected Poems*, translated by Oliver Bernard, London: Penguin Classics.

everything is fine, what I would say to those who threw into factories those boys that *were raised like princes*.” (Chahnour, 2009, p. 19)⁴

The repetition of the word “factory” reflects the despair, monotony and alienation of manual work, and is followed by a poem by Arthur Rimbaud *L’orgie parisienne ou Paris se repeuple* ‘The Parisian orgy or Paris is repeopled’ (Rimbaud, 1895) about the history of Paris as a city in revolt, but also as the ultimate destination of exiled and marginal people. The protagonist is feeling alienated through repetitive manual work and loses himself in the vortex of hedonistic pleasures of the big city. The song about the mother is the Armenian religious hymn *Ուր էս Մայրն իմ* ‘Where are you my Mother’, sung only once a year, during the Great Vigil on the night between Holy Thursday and Holy Friday. It describes the moment Jesus Christ calls his mother while on the Cross and is meant to transmit the deep feelings of the protagonist’s longing for the motherland and for his own mother’s comforting and safe embrace:

Where are you my most delicate and sweet mother?

Your motherly love I seek fervently.
My eyes are full of bitter tears

I have no one to wipe them away.
I asked for water, but drunk vinegar

Given to me by the wicked. (Bayrakdarian, 2016)

As the future of literature was a subject of debate throughout the twenties and thirties, so too was the use of the Armenian language in literature at the time when Shahnour was writing his first novel. Some writers of the diaspora were adamant concerning the exclusive use of the Armenian language whereas others would emphasize the primacy of Armenian subjects and the need to advocate for Armenian matters in the language of the host country (Beledian, 2001). Shahnour’s work is very important as it focuses on the unavoidable process of evolving and puts into serious question the possibility of writing exclusively in Armenian in an environment where Armenian is a minority language; but also because his work provides us with a powerful insight of both sides of the linguistic debate. The text is teeming with references to the use of language and it is one of the first examples of literary

4 All excerpts, unless stated otherwise, were translated into English by me.

code switching in Armenian diaspora literature. Even when the narration doesn't shift from one language to another, the characters constantly practice different languages (Turkish, English, French, Armenian) or debate on the use of language. "The function of multilingual literature is not primarily a pragmatic one, but an aesthetic and an ethical one. Its aim is more symbolic than realistic: it symbolizes the variety, the contact and the crossing of cultures and languages" (Knauth, 2009, p. 42).

Apart from the abundance of French words and phrases interspersed throughout the Armenian text, the use of English words is also recurrent, suggesting the cosmopolitan way of life in the diaspora but also fostering a situation of "conflictive multilingualism" (Knauth, 2009, p. 55), revealing the confrontation between the minority language and the dominant ones. The Armenians are not only transformed by French culture, but they are also under the influence of the western way of life and the ever-growing influence of Anglo-Saxon culture. When Bedros's friends meet at Hratch's apartment and discuss the inevitable assimilation of their orphan generation in foreign countries, Souren, one of the most outspoken and nihilist characters of the book, foresees the bleak future of a deterritorialized, victimized minority that is forced to accept its cultural demise with stoicism. The repetition of the very ironic phrase "Boy, cocktail!" in English reveals the tension between cultures and languages. Souren reluctantly admits that the language, the habits and the culture of the Armenian people will be crushed under dominant cultures. After launching into a long diatribe against the weaknesses of the Armenian nation, Souren's phrases conclude with the apostrophe "Boy! Cocktail!" in English, reflecting the sarcasm and nihilism of his statements while inviting his friends to drink to their collective destruction:

The Armenians are sterile, without descendants, without seed. The Armenians are empty, futile, vain, and frivolous.

"They don't have the right to live, because they weren't born. Pffff! One day, they might be reborn, with a different colour than the one we hope for: red, yellow, or even black. But we, our branch of Armenians, we are condemned to disappear! – We were never born – *Boy! Cocktail!*"

[...] Assimilate! Assimilate! Assimilate! *Boy, cocktail!*

(Chahnour, 2009, pp. 106–108)

Code switching does not only concern the use of two or more languages (such as French, Armenian, English and Turkish). There are also many instances where Shahnour uses typical French syntax in Armenian or translates French expressions into Armenian, a shift from one language register to another which is not justified by the context. In other instances he switches from vernacular Western Armenian to Classical Armenian, which is a religious and liturgical language and hasn't been used in literature since the 18th century.

It is interesting to observe that the text is not only written by someone who is in-between languages and cultures, in the process of creating a new identity or claiming a “hybrid/third space identity” (Sebba, 2012), but it also targets a public with similar experiences. In fact, a bilingual or trilingual message can only be grasped fully by a receptor who bears similar characteristics to that of the transmitter of the message, thus making a simultaneous claim to more than one social identity (Angermeyer, 2005). It appeals to those who bear a similar cultural and linguistic combination and who understand the situation of the Ottoman Armenians outside of their homeland at that time. As such, it is a landmark and a historical testimony of the exiled writer's experimentations with decentred narratives, an obvious literary product of immigration.

Intertextual references such as quotes and pastiches play a very important role in the sense of movement inside the text, as the writer strategically and symbolically quotes or imitates classical Armenian and French writers in order to suggest the protagonist's sharing between two cultures but also to create confusion. Apart from the citation of Arthur Rimbaud's *The Parisian Orgy* mentioned above, Jules Supervielle's poem *Grands yeux dans ce visage*, alluding to Nenetette's seductive eyes, is recited in French by an emotionally and morally devastated Bedros:

*Grands yeux dans ce visage,
Qui vous a placés là?
De quel vaisseau sans mâts
Êtes-vous l'équipage?
Depuis quel abordage
Attendez-vous ainsi
Ouverts toute la nuit?*

(Chahnour, 2009, p. 132)

It is obvious that Shahnour's choice of writers is not accidental. Rimbaud notoriously lived a very marginal and extraordinary life and was a very famous wanderer,

and Jules Supervielle was a transnational poet and also a wanderer who spent most of his life between Uruguay and France.

Chahnour's Armenian literature quotes pastiche classics of the 19th century, such as the literary giants Siamanto and Daniel Varoujan, with the intention of showing the effects of life abroad and of the exile on Armenian culture. The two Armenian writers pastiched by Shahnour were both advocates of nationalist ideas that they conveyed through the themes of their poetry: heroic sacrifice and death for Siamanto, and patriotic paganism for Varoujan. As they both perished during the genocide, they became national literary symbols and martyrs, and their work is considered sacrosanct. For that reason, Shahnour's tampering with their work conveys a nihilist viewpoint, symbolizing the corrosion by the Other of the very core of the Armenian soul that both these writers symbolize. On one occasion where Shahnour describes Bedros's and Nenette's reactions after lovemaking, Bedros is depicted as ecstatic and triumphant, contemplating the sun. Inspired by Varoujan's famous pagan poem *Vahagn* where the poet extols the god of sun and fire, offering him a bull from the valleys of Tauron as sacrifice, Bedros recites an altered version of the poem, where all references to the sacrificial bull have been replaced by references to Nenette. Shahnour mocks the defeat of the traditional values and the perpetuity of the nation conveyed in patriotic literature as he stages the character's unconditional rendering to the sensual power of the Other, represented by Nenette, an enticing mythical Siren of destruction.

O God of the fathers
 There I approach your altar,
 And taken from the shop⁵ I bring you a female
 From the realms of passion.
 See, plump is my victim;
 Inside her milk coloured flesh,
 Lives all the life of the race.

(Chahnour, 2009, p. 47)

5 A humorous and slightly ironic alteration of the original text by Bedros/Pierre: Nenette owned a photographic studio and was therefore taken "from [her] shop" and brought before Vahagn.

SEX, GENDER AND HYBRID IDENTITIES

A very important part of the book also alludes to the distinction between bilingual/multilingual and monolingual characters, as well as to the materiality of writing and the materiality of multilingual practices. For example, through the reading of notebooks, notes and scraps of paper featured in the novel, and insisting on the distinction between the languages used in writing. The multilingual practice also reveals the character's investigation of identity and its hybridity (Kellman, 2000) as he explores different aspects of the self. Bedros uses different languages to analyse his experiences, with the second newly acquired language used to describe novelty and unknown paths in his life, because this particular language is deemed more suitable and sometimes more culturally acceptable for the description of such events. Such an instance occurs in the novel in the form of a diary that Bedros keeps both in French and in Armenian. Readers experience a *mise en abyme*, as Nenette skims through the entries of Bedros's diary, written both in Armenian and in French and discovers fragments of thoughts written in French scattered inside the Armenian text that she doesn't understand. The only parts of the diary that are accessible to the reader are those written in French, as we experience Nenette's viewpoint, a monolingual reader of the diary. The parts written in French and understood by Nenette concern Bedros's discoveries as a young man living in Paris, his newly discovered freedom, his acquaintance with the different morals of French women and Bedros's transformation through sexual awakening and liberation. Nenette discovers Bedros's remarks about his sexual adventure with a woman he met on the metro. Readers are led to believe that Bedros wrote this specific diary entry in French on purpose, as if to address something extraordinary or something that he couldn't possibly confide in Armenian:

We were squeezed to the point of pressing one another; I removed my gloves, she moved her box. I proposed we take a taxi and she accepted. I switched off the light in the back of the taxi and pulled the shade. She had an accent from Marseilles and darns in the knees; all of a sudden she made me stop moving and said: "Please be careful not to break my box with your feet". She didn't arrange for a second meeting, she was engaged and I didn't insist either, she seemed way too serious a girl. (Chahnour, 2009, p. 32)

Bedros's adventures with older married women are also described in French in the diary, as they could be considered a taboo activity for Armenians at that time: "Miss Lambert is different; no other woman has given me as much pleasure as she has; is it because she already has a grown up son and she calls me 'her son'?"

(Chahnour, 2009, p. 32). The question of sexuality is a major element of the development of personality, indicating the transition of the characters from a traditional society to a more liberated one and from childhood to adulthood. By experimenting with multiple partners and accumulating sexual experience, Bedros becomes more alienated and distracted from his search for eternal love. His descriptions of his sexual encounters become more and more dry and repetitive. When Bedros and Nenette, his love interest, finally form a couple, they grow apart quickly because Bedros cannot accept an open relationship.

An independent woman such as Nenette intimidates Bedros; he is unable to detach himself completely from traditional Armenian values and remains haunted by the archetypal female figure of virginity of the Virgin Mary. His views echo the conflict between the traditional role of Armenian women appreciated primarily because of their purity and the European emancipated women that Armenian men admire or are attracted to, but that they cannot consider trustworthy or suitable for marriage. Bedros has conflicting thoughts about Nenette. He had initially placed her on a pedestal, incarnating perfection and purity, but as he realizes that Nenette is not ready to settle with him and is not interested in marriage like Armenian girls were at that time, he starts to dehumanize and diminish her, revealing a more traditional and conservative side. The ambivalence that prevails in the novel also permeates Bedros's feelings about Nenette. Throughout the novel Nenette's image oscillates between the reincarnation of idealized love and absolute purity and her depiction as an immoral and sinful soul: "Ah, come closer, take a look in the mirror, you should feel disgusted with yourself, filthy Nenette... And I... Who could have second thoughts about you and your admirable beauty...? And I...this repulsive thing..." (Chahnour, 2009, p. 85). When he realizes that Nenette left him because she was unable to commit to an exclusive relationship, he expresses his depreciation of her and resorts to spiteful generalizations: "You wouldn't be French if you weren't a prostitute" (Chahnour, 2009, p. 66). Bedros's oscillations and conflicting viewpoints about Nenette, as a representation of French women, and Armenian women in general, who are described as family-oriented and trustworthy but too unattractive or "sacred" to be sexually objectified, also reflect his ambivalence concerning his image of his own people and of the Other, a relation of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. The blurring of the boundaries between the Self and the Other also suggests ambivalence, as Bedros and his compatriots would partake in activities they considered immoral and thus associated to the immorality of the Other, leading to self-repudiation. The way gender roles are perceived and represented also shift under the influence of French culture.

Following Nenette's and Bedros's breakup and the subsequent discovery of Nenette's pornographic activities, Bedros dreamt that he was a church boy swinging a thurible in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary, while a yellow fly was sitting on the statue's nose. This comparison, heavy with metaphors, illustrates Bedros's confusion about womanhood, symbolized by the object of his desire, Nenette. The dream illustrates his opinion of Nenette, incarnating both the purity and the virginity of Mary, but also sinfulness. Nenette's representation still bears the remnants of the polarized representation of women either as chaste and pure or as promiscuous and seductive, but is nonetheless more moderate and humane, beyond stereotypes, as Nenette in his dream is capable of being both an object of love but also of desire:

The Virgin Mary? Apart from Nenette, what other woman could she represent? But of course, it was Nenette! And this fly, this yellow fly, like the colour of her hair, was Nenette's soul. This perfidious, filthy, appalling soul, in front of which he was swinging in vain his thurible of love, burning away his tenderness and his desire. (Chahnour, 2009, p. 58)

A NIHILIST BILDUNGSROMAN

Through the story evolving around Bedros's discoveries, sexual awakening and efforts to build his personality and identity while in exile recovering from violence and suffering trauma, we are allowed to think that the novel adopts some of the characteristics of the bildungsroman: "a novel about a young person facing the challenges of growing up" (Graham, 2019, p. i). The traditional conventions of such a genre – "originally concerned with young, white, privileged, heterosexual men" (Graham, 2019, p. i), and closely preoccupied with questions of identity, belonging, the assimilation and education of individuals with regards to the society of their time, as well as being rooted in specific cultural and historical contexts – need to be reconsidered in the light of modernist, postcolonial, feminist and post-traumatic settings that have altered our perception of such core notions of the genre as well as the content of the education received by the protagonist or and the values attached to the formation of their personality.

In *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle (2006) argues that the "failure" of the *Bildungsheld* (the protagonist of the bildungsroman) by "canonical" bildungsroman standards should be examined through the lens of modernity. Namely, as a formative and transformative process and as a critique of society's power structures. Stella Bolaki (2011) analyses the construction of "hybrid spaces and borderland subjectivities" (p. 15) in female ethnic narratives that unsettle the

traditional bildungsroman through the voicing of non-traditional *Bildungsheld* experiences such as gendered violence, genocide, trauma, systemic oppression and marginality that leave permanent scars and cannot guarantee a “happy ending” or closure. Whereas Geta LeSeur (1995) introduces the subgenre of *black bildungsroman* as a distinct literary product of the specific socio-historical context and experience of slavery and colonization of the West Indies. Special attention should also be given to such coming-of-age stories with regards to identity formation and social and self-acceptance when hybrid identities are at play. Defined by Bhabha (1994), the notion of hybridity is not characterized by duality but by newness: “a third space” that also results in unhomeliness, and which also questions the basis upon which the traditional bildungsnarratives are built.

Retreat Without Song offers a nihilist, dystopic version of a bildungsroman as it depicts Bedros's early adulthood⁶ and his love story with a much older and traumatized woman. In a way that is more traditional to the genre, the plot unreels after a tragic milestone, the traumatic event of the Armenian genocide. However, the characters are permanently marked by the tragedy that pushed them to exile and traumatized them for life, disrupting their personality and psychological development. From both a moral and a sociopolitical viewpoint, the workspaces into which Bedros is initiated are completely alien for predominantly rural Ottoman Armenians raised as subjects of the Sultan inside close-knit, traditional ethno-religious communities (Anderson, 1986); first as a photographer of nude models and then in a huge automobile factory as a manual worker, facing promiscuity as well as individuality and urban alienation. The dialectic relationship between the self and the society, a very important didactic element of a bildungsroman, is also problematic in the novel, as Ottoman Armenians traditionally valued community and collective goals more than individual ones. The concept of the individual in secular western societies and most particularly in France was, in fact, foreign to the Ottoman Armenian immigrants at that time (Minassian, 2015). For that reason, the feelings of “loss” and of the “wilderness” experienced by the characters are both deeply felt in the novel and seriously affect the telling but also the ending of the story, namely the inability of the characters to integrate into a society with such different norms and standards, but especially due to it having little regard for community identities.

6 Bedros is 24–25 years old when the novel begins. Shahnour specifies that Bedros had been raised as an only child by overprotective parents and was sexually inexperienced when he left Bolis (Istanbul). Our analysis focuses on milestones of a bildungsnarrative such as losing one's innocence, “leaving the nest”, facing alienation in a foreign land and sexual awakening, rather than on the actual coming-of-age.

Bedros's initiation into a new and harsh environment provokes his fascination for the Other, but also spite and contempt, as Paris is often depicted paradoxically both as a charming setting as well as a city of the vicious. This harsh description corresponds to the double exile of the protagonist: as an exile from his homeland, and as an exile from innocence. The former describes the displacement of the protagonist from his comfort zone into a new environment full of challenges, however it also underlines the way he experiences adulthood outside of homeland after the genocide. The latter type of exile relates to his transformation from an innocent young boy to a refugee hardened by life and by his experiences as he tries to navigate through the challenges and the alienation of the big city. The big city is thus described as a place of fascination, but also one where innocence disappears as every person, not only the immigrant, is transformed by entering adult working life, by new experiences such as sex and love as well as the disenchantment and disappointment of far from perfect love stories, and the alienation of urban life. Thus, the optimistic resolutions of the traditional bildungsroman are faced with the harsh realities of the exiles who are deprived of a home and faced with alienation and disappointment. The characters experience *unhomeliness* (Bhabha, 1994) within themselves, as they feel detached both from their ethnic identity which they are gradually distanced from as a result of exile and loss, and the foreign French culture which they find both attractive and repulsive. Their stateless status officialises this feeling of unhomeliness that severely impairs their ability to settle or follow a specific path to integration. Shahnour stages suicidal, depressed and alienated characters that fight for approval, sense and plenitude, but more often than not fail in the process, as trauma hinders development and integration.

The novel resumes with the couple's reunion and their search of "home": Bedros hopes to create a family far away from the alienation of Paris with Nenette who represents the influential woman of bildungsnarratives, but who is nonetheless also scarred by trauma. Nenette's inability to escape her past and her eventual death from suicide ends Bedros's dream and his hope of fulfilment. Shahnour deprives his protagonist from catharsis as Bedros ultimately loses his love interest and his *raison d'être*, that is, his search of home through love in an unhomey world. In the end he is seen as an outcast in the little village where he had moved with Nenette. Shahnour stages a final proof of alienation of the protagonist struggling to remember the Lord's Prayer in Armenian in his desperate attempt to save Nenette from death.

This alternative ending of a bildungsroman is negative but not devoid of didactic messages. The demise of Nenette cannot be dissociated from the pressure she experienced as a single mother and emancipated woman who survived childhood

trauma. Meanwhile Bedros is expected to conform to the standards of a French society where he is not always welcome, all the while he is officially deprived of identity as a stateless person and shattered by the experience of genocide. With a nihilist novel written so soon after the Armenian Catastrophe, Shahnour questions the all too simplistic concept of unidimensional national and linguistic identities as opposed to the multiplicity of experiences and identities brought together by intensified movements of populations at the turn of the 20th century. Through translingual and transcultural characters, he challenges idealized, unified perceptions of the self. The novel raises concern over the difficulty to conform and flourish according to society's standards in extreme situations, furthermore it criticizes social norms that push people with a feeling of exclusion further into marginality.

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