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Zabel Yesayan, woman and witness, or the truth of the mask

Marc Nichanian

Abstract

The essay deals with Zabel Yesayan's supposed feminism, both in her literary production and her political activity. It shows that any attempt at a discourse of reconciliation on the basis of women's solidarity became impossible after 1909. This explains the tone of her 1911 testimony on the events in Adana and the powerful appeal to her Turkish compatriots for a future citizenship. Here Yesayan spoke as a witness, not as a woman any more. The fact that after 1911 Yesayan slowly opened for herself a new field of "feminine" writing should be interpreted along that line, as an unexpected consequence of her turnabout.

Keywords: *feminism, reconciliation, testimony, feminine writing, citizenship, Armenian feminist writers, Zabel Yesayan*

Literary Gender

Zabel Yesayan (or Essayan)[1] (1879-1942) is the most renowned and talented female Armenian writer of the twentieth century and probably one of the most important Armenian novelists. She has been the only woman who, from a very early age, had the courage and determination to decide that she would become a writer and devote all of her energy to the pursuit of that goal. This is what she recounts with some anger and nostalgia in her autobiographical work *Silihdari parteznêrı* [The Gardens of Silihdar].[2] Before delving further in the characterization of

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1 I adopted the spelling "Yesayan" throughout this essay, in order to conform to the Armenian pronunciation. But she herself wrote her name "Essayan."

2 For the transliteration of Armenian *titles*, I am following the conventions of the American Library of Congress, while using diacritical marks when appropriate (ş=sh, ç=ch, ğ=gh). *The Gardens of Silihdar*

Zabel Yesayan as a woman and writer, this is the place to say a few words about the conditions in which Western-Armenian literature developed at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The following factors need to be taken into consideration.

A pernickety censorship was exercised on everything published until 1908, especially against any mention of a "national" Armenian culture in the provinces. Between 1896 and 1908, in the years when Yesayan came of age as a novelist, all important intellectuals of the former generation, labeled the generation of Realists, lived as exiles under extreme conditions of poverty and abandonment, in Egypt, England, or France. One of them, Yervant Odian, a popular novelist and satirist, produced a bitter-sweet account of these years in his book *Tasnyerku tari Bolsen durs* [Twelve Years out of Constantinople]. In the generation immediately preceding Zabel Yesayan's, the only option to make a living as a writer was to work as a journalist for one of the numerous newspapers with sometimes ephemeral life spans. This explains the quasi-absence of any novelistic production in Western-Armenian until 1908. In the newspapers, short stories could be published at best, and sometimes serialized translations of European novels, but never a single original work of literature belonging to the genre of the novel. Zabel Yesayan was an exception.

A number of these writers belonging to the former generation—Yervant Odian, Arpiar Arpiarian, Suren Bartevian, and even the poet Vahan Tekeyan—were either affiliated with or intellectually close to the Henchak Party, a revolutionary party that had been targeted by the authorities in İstanbul early in the 1890s. It was of course possible to be a woman and a writer among the Armenians in İstanbul in these difficult years, but a female writer had better satisfy a number of conditions, such as being married and conforming to prevalent stereotypes about feminine writing: choice of acceptable subjects, mild romanticism, writing poetry rather than prose, and not antagonizing male prejudices. These were all stereotypes that Srpuhi Dussap had tried to confront with some success before Yesayan, but only for a very short time at the beginning of the 1880s, twenty years before Yesayan appeared in the public eye. In this respect, one of the most interesting features of Zabel Yesayan's literature is that she struggled with her own female identity as much as

has recently been published in Turkish, unfortunately from a scandalously bad and partial English translation, rather than from the Armenian original. See Zabel Yesayan, *Silahtarın Bahçeleri*, trans. Jülide Değirmenciler (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları, 2006). The English-language version is *The Gardens of Silihdar & Other Writings*, ed. Ara Baliozian, trans. Ara Baliozian (New York: Ashod Press, 1982). For a beautiful French translation, see: *Les Jardins de Silihdar*, trans. Pierre Ter Sarkissian (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).

with popular representations of such an identity.[3] Several times in her life and under very diverse circumstances, Yesayan played with the conventions of gender. I will describe in detail three instances of such a play, each one with a different background and output.

In 1903, when she already was a regular contributor of mildly feminist articles to the journal *Tsağik*, published in İstanbul, Yesayan wrote for that same journal a novella without her signature, thus leaving her readers uncertain as to the identity and consequently the gender of the author.[4] Male or female? Later on, an article by one of her admirers explained that she had done so only as an experiment, in order to have the opportunity of observing and recording the readers' reactions.[5] Between 1913 and 1914, Yesayan wrote at least one theater play which should have been performed in Adana and Mersin, but could not take place in the former city because of one more intervention of "censorship." She signed the play with a male pseudonym, *Shaban*.[6]

In 1915, Yesayan was the only woman on the black list prepared for the 24 April round-up. She managed to escape, hid in different places, and finally fled to Bulgaria, leaving behind her mother and one of her children. Almost immediately upon her arrival in Sofia, she began publishing the account of her last months in İstanbul, of her hiding and her escape, in the daily journal *Hayastan*. But her writing was not exactly what we would call a testimony—that is, a first-person account of a personal experience. Indeed, her fictionalized account was presented in the form of a narrative recounted by a male protagonist and, of course, signed with a male pseudonym, *Viken*. The real story of her last months in İstanbul, albeit recounted in a purely realistic way, became entirely fictional only because of her change of gender identity.[7] Incidentally, I

3 For a first important account of Zabel Yesayan's feminism, I refer the reader to Victoria Rowe's *A History of Armenian Women's Writing: 1880-1922* (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003).

4 The novel is *Vêpı* [The Novel], which did not appear in book form before 1914. Of course, the main protagonist (who comes to İstanbul in order to launch his first novel) was male. I will explain below that Yesayan took up the same topic once again in 1917, this time with a woman as main character. *Vêpı* was the second novel published by Yesayan. The first one, *Spasman srahin mêj* [In the Waiting Room] appeared in 1903 in the same journal, *Tsağik*. The setting of the first novel was Paris. The second one tells the story of a young novelist returning from Paris to İstanbul, with the dream of making an impact on the Armenian community with his work, and experiencing complete indifference from all sides. Obviously, through this novel Yesayan gave way to—and tried to conjure up—her own apprehension as a writer and her ambivalence toward her community.

5 See, *Tsağik*, September 1904.

6 To the best of my knowledge, Zabel Yesayan's plays have never been published. She mentions her activity as a playwright in a letter to her sister. See Zabel Yesayan, *Namakner* [Correspondence], ed. Arpik Avetisyan (Yerevan: University Press, 1977), 117.

7 The journal *Hayastan* was a bi-weekly publication first released between March and September of 1915. The last issue of this first series (or at least the last issue available) is dated 26 September. The

should also add that the story (which was serialized) remained unfinished because the journal stopped publication when Bulgaria decided to align with Germany and entered World War I in October of 1915.

Of course, Yesayan had to use a pseudonym, hide her identity and somewhat transform the circumstances of her escape in order to protect her mother and her son who had remained behind. In fact, they did leave İstanbul later, and Zabel was reunited with her son Hrant in Bulgaria, from where she had to flee once more when Bulgaria entered the war. She left for the Caucasus, where she spent the years between 1916 and 1918. Hrant was also with her during her long journey back from Baku to Europe, from February to October 1918. Much later, in the 1960s, he wrote an emotional account of that journey.[8] Here, a few lines of Yesayan's survival narrative (published in the 2 September 1915 issue of *Hayastan*) illustrate the tone that the writer adopts and the decisive consequences of the small identity transformation she introduces:

> When I came back home, my wife's concerns and her nervous anxiety changed my mood. I tried to calm her down but bad news had come from all sides and many had paid us a visit because they were preoccupied with my fate, which had made her still more anxious. My little child was playing in the garden. His clear voice and his joyful shouts were heart-rending. I looked around me already like a stranger to this place, my library, manuscripts, pictures... Suddenly I felt a terrible bitterness. What a fate, I thought. How many times all this has to be destroyed... We are the eternal bastards of this country. after so many escapes, so many insane migrations, why do we persist in returning to this accursed soil, where the most sacred labor makes us all the more suspect [...] For how many times now... And we thought that with the installation of the constitutional regime we had reached a haven of peace [...] Murderers, forgers, the most hardened criminals are not reduced to this destitute state probably in any other country. While I knew that we were innocent, at the same time I foresaw the insulting behavior to which we were going to be subjected. Sometimes I thought that I should go away from home and be arrested in the street, so that my wife and my child do not see the insult that was going to target me [...]

journal resumed publication in 1919. The signature "Viken" appears for the first time on 15 August, with an article on Krikor Zohrab (who had been killed in July on the road between Urfa and Diyarbakır, where he was supposed to be judged by a military tribunal). Here are the first lines of the article: "In this horrifying martyrdom of the Armenian nation, which with its dreadful dimensions and its indescribable episodes surpassed all terrifying events of the recent or distant past, the first victims have been the intellectuals. And the terrible news of one of their most powerful representatives', Zohrab's, death is one of the first to reach us." Yesayan's survival narrative itself begins in the issue of 26 August and extends through nine consecutive issues of the journal, of which only eight are available (issue 54 was missing in the collections that were used as the basis for a republication of the series in Antelias, Lebanon, 2005, under the direction of Jirair Tanielian). Many contributors to *Hayastan* signed with a pseudonym. The list of names corresponding to these pseudonyms can be found on a hand-written note kept with the main collection of *Hayastan* in the library of Haygazian University, Beirut. The author of this list is Garo Kevorkian, the editor of *Amenun Tarets'uyts'ı* [Almanach for All], which was published in Beirut between 1954 and 1968. The main collection of *Hayastan* belonged to Garo Kevorkian himself, who had also contributed to the journal in 1915. In the very last issue available, Yesayan recounts how she had conceived of the plan to hide in a hospital for a while, "as though I was really ill," which under the given circumstances, she says, was not difficult to pretend.

8 Hrant Yesayan, "Zapel, Mayrs..." [Zabel, My Mother...] *Sovetakan Grakanut'iun*, March 1978.

In 1920, Yesayan traveled to İstanbul and Cilicia, where an Armenian administration had been set up under French control and where communities of survivors tried to begin a new life. She had been called to take care of the orphans. Once again, this proved to be a short-term commitment. After 1921, she lived in Paris for a number of years. Before the war, when she had still lived in İstanbul, or between Paris and the Ottoman capital, she had been close to the Dashnak milieu. After the war, she became fiercely opposed to the politics and the policy of her former friends, to the point of becoming the most distinguished spokesperson of the Soviet regime in the fledgling Armenian community in France (obviously with the benediction of the Soviet embassy), by serving as the editor and publisher of pro-Soviet Armenian journals in Paris.[9] In 1926, she traveled to the Soviet Union and visited Armenia under Soviet rule (it was the first time she set foot in the country). Upon her return to Paris she published an account of her journey in the form of a book, *Promet'eos Azatagrvats* [Prometheus Unchained], which is nothing but propaganda in favor of the Soviet regime. In 1933, she emigrated to Armenia for good. She participated in the first conference of the Union of Writers in Moscow in 1934 and began a new literary activity in her new country. She was well-known among the party elite; she seemed to be happy with her choice and believed in what she was doing, as she also accepted the tenets of socialist realism without discussion. This led her to cultivate the type of literature that was expected from those who wanted to be obedient to the regime or simply survive. In her case, it was

9 In my monograph on Zabel Yesayan *The National Revolution*, vol. 1, Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century [London: Gomidas Institute, 2002]., I tried to follow the steps and to understand the reasons of her political and personal transformation, of which the central moment seems to be her friendship with the Eastern-Armenian poet Hovhannes Toumanian and the Western-Armenian fedaï Antranig in 1916-17 in Tblissi, where she was also politically active on the side of the relief organizations and the Council of Western Armenians.

not only a question of survival: she believed that this was the right thing to do. She wanted to be useful and participate in the socialist reconstruction of the country. Here is what Yesayan in 1935 wrote to Hagop Oshagan who at that time had just begun a new life in Jerusalem after eight years spent at the Melkonian institution in Cyprus:

> I have been here for two years and I am incredibly happy and relieved. I can say that there has never been in my life a period where I could have said that I was living according to my wishes and my feelings as much as since I came and settled down here. My daughter is with me and she works at the Public Library, in charge of the foreign section. My son arrived last year and he also works as an industrial chemist. We are all happy with our lives and jobs, and we look to the future with faith and enthusiasm. Don't imagine that I am writing these lines for the sake of propaganda. I believe that we have been friends for a long time and that we are mature enough in order not to behave lightly with such serious matters. The fact is that I acquired a magnificent knowledge and I would betray my friendly feelings if I did not communicate this knowledge to old and dear friends, only out of fear that they could misunderstand me... Especially for us writers, artists and intellectuals, the Soviet reality is a paradise on earth, without any exaggeration. We are spoiled people. Our material and other problems are taken care of by the government... I contributed my part to the Conference of Writers in Moscow, which was an international event. You should have seen how great writers coming from big countries (with whom I could speak French) strove to attract our attention, to please us. When has it happened that an Armenian writer could feel behind him the support of 170 million people? The whole issue is that we should be able to elevate ourselves to that great and broad reality in which we live and create, not simply as Armenians, but by embracing that enormous reality. In connection with the Conference we visited workers' housing estates, where they listened to us and applauded by the thousands. At one of these meetings, I spoke in Armenian. Our director translated sentence after sentence. The translator was interrupted with cheering and applause. Can you explain that? The victorious proletariat of Moscow and Zabel Yesayan. These are moments that leave profound traces in us. These extraordinary moments, when an emotion going far beyond the human limits, an emotion that I often felt in this reality and in which not only my individual and professional but also my national feelings found such a complete satisfaction, I consider them the summits of my life. It's false and slanderous to say that we are limited in our movements. Nowhere ever did I feel so free, so unlimited, so bold. I remember with disgust my life abroad, where I felt constantly limited by all sorts of material difficulties...[10]

This is an extraordinary letter by any standard. Three years later, Zabel Yesayan was imprisoned and never returned to her "free" and "unlimited" life.

The first piece she published in Armenia was an autobiographical account of her childhood and adolescence in İstanbul. This is the book I mentioned in the beginning, *The Gardens of Silihdar*. It must not be assumed that she was original, controversial, or adversarial in her enterprise. Actually, here already, or again, she was following the directives of the Union of Writers. In the same period, many well-known writers from Moscow to Yerevan wrote down their childhood memories, only because they were commissioned to do so, the order or the permission having come directly from Moscow. The miracle is that this commissioned work is one of the most beautiful, most poetic texts ever written in the Western-Armenian language, describing the immediate environment where Zabel had grown up, Üsküdar; the beauty of the landscape around the Bosphorus; her unending love for her father; and the life of an Armenian family in İstanbul in the last decades of the nineteenth century. But miracles happen only once in literature when one conforms to party directives. After this beautiful memoir, she wrote one of her worst novels, entirely in the style of socialist realism, called *Krake Şapikı* [The Burning Shirt], published in Yerevan in 1934, in which she used the very same childhood memories to describe the life of a poor Armenian family. She had taken up the task of broadcasting the heroism of the proletariat. Others who were doing the same in these fateful years at least understood that they were betraying themselves as writers, but felt compelled to comply with what was expected from them. (Totovents is the best example in this category of writers who were torn between faithfulness to themselves and faithfulness to a regime in which they did not believe, stuck between truth and falsehood.)[11] Zabel Yesayan was arrested in 1938 in spite of all her good intentions to serve the regime. She disappeared in 1942. Her last letters to her children were sent from the prison of Baku. However, between 1935 and 1938 she found the

10 Yesayan, *Correspondence*, 305-09. The same letter was republished a few years ago in a more correct version by Vartan Matiossian. See "Zapel Yesayani nor namakanii me hamar" [For a new publication of Zabel Yesayan's correpondence] *Horizon*, Literary Supplement, October 2004, 1-4.

11 See my monograph on Vahan Totovents (1889-1938) in *Writers of Disaster*, vol. I.

time to complete one more novel, her last one: Called *P'arpa Khaç'ik*, her most ambitious enterprise is a voluminous work in which she once again describes her own life and attends to the necessity of praising the struggles of a proletarian family. In this novel, she used the same setting as in *The Gardens of Silihdar*, the same characters, and the same family in which her male character is growing up. Here again Zabel Yesayan appears in the disguise of a male character, which returns us to her ambiguous use of her literary gender.[12]

It is surely obvious that the question of Zabel Yesayan's literary gender is entangled with many different topics: the role of women in Armenian bourgeois society; the necessity of preserving the truth of the facts through an absolute fiction, coupled with the pragmatic necessity of hiding one's identity as a fugitive; the experience of annihilation; and the will to deliver a socialist epic. This profound ambiguity surrounding literary gender deserves in-depth study. Zabel Yesayan's work has never been subject to real academic study. Today Zabel Yesayan is almost entirely unknown in Armenia. No edition of her complete works exists, and the works written and/or published in Armenia in the last years of her literary activity need to be re-edited in their entirety.

I want to conclude the first part of this essay by citing the (partial) English translation of the first letter Zabel Yesayan wrote to her sister Keğuhi after escaping from Turkey in August of 1915:

> Dear Keğuhi,
> Yesterday I sent a card to Dikran [Zabel's husband] to tell him that I finally succeeded in escaping. In İstanbul the situation of Armenians has become truly unbearable. Every day 30 to 40 people of all sorts are arrested and after two days in jail they are deported to unknown places.

12 *P'arpa Khaç'ik* was published posthumously in 1966 in Yerevan, on the basis of Yesayan's manuscripts, by Sevak Arzoumanian, who also authored a monograph on the writer. The problem with this study is that the truth could not be said in Armenia of 1966. In the edited novel—which recounts the story of an Armenian family, moving from İstanbul to Paris, and then to Yerevan—the unbroken description of events abruptly stops in 1914 and resumes in 1918, as though nothing at all had happened between these two dates. Zabel Yesayan was not Hagop Oshagan, and it is highly implausible that her silence on these fateful years could be the consequence of an ill-fated will to measure up with the Catastrophe and a difficulty to cope with it. The most probable is that here we have one more example of how censorship intervenes. As if the Hamidian censorship of the years 1896-1908, the Young-Turk policy of total extermination, and the Kemalist silencing of the past was not enough, Armenians also had the dubious pleasure of yet another censorship, this time by the Soviet regime. I have never myself worked on the manuscripts, but I know with certainty that unpublished parts of the manuscript of *P'arpa Khaç'ik* are somewhere in Yerevan, awaiting study. This sole example shows that there is still an enormous amount of work to be done against the general policy of "silencing the past," which is no less active on the part of the victims and survivors than on the part of the perpetrators and their worthy heirs. Or is it only a question of courage and perseverance?

> Not only do we never receive direct news from them, but the news that we receive indirectly are very bad. My own predicament has become increasingly difficult. Of course when I was talking of being ill, you understood that I was in fear of being arrested. It would be too long to say something now about the fears and the terrors we went through. My poor mother was mourning me for three months. I was living underground and from time to time I came back home secretly. God only knows what I suffered. In the end, thanks to a miracle of boldness, cunning, and composure, I was able to escape. You can imagine how happy I was when I could pass the border. But how much happier I would have been if my little boy [her son Hrant was five years old at that time] and my mother had been with me. I did not want to link their fate to mine, because very simply until the border the probability was high that I would be arrested, and in that case they would have suffered the same fate as I. In the end I was able to arrange everything, financially and all, so that they can travel immediately. I even hope that they will be here tomorrow morning. If there is any impediment, they will be only a few days late. Sure, I am confident, but nevertheless my heart is trembling. My mother and Hrant need first to be here so that I can feel entirely relieved. I will write to you immediately. You cannot imagine what states of mind I went through. For ten days now I have not been able to eat or sleep. I was going from one house to the other, constantly hiding, it was too much. I will retell you the whole thing one day when we meet. I want to say only this, that Sophie's [her daughter who lived in Paris with her father and her aunts] picture, the one that you sent me recently saved me at a very critical moment. When they asked me why I wanted to leave, I answered that I was going to Philippé [Plovdiv] to pick up my daughter and come back.[13] They answered that I had to confirm having a daughter. How could I do that without giving away my identity? And suddenly I had an inspiration. That picture was in my bag. I took it out and showed it to the officer. He looked at the picture, he looked at me and it seems that he saw some resemblance. And that was it. Finally I had to walk on thorns [this is an Armenian expression suggesting the difficulty of a situation] in order to escape from that accursed country. What an emotion it was when I saw the Bulgarians for the first time... [14]

13 Hrant Yesayan's account (in *Zabel, My Mother*) is somewhat different. He says that after hiding for two months in a hospital, Zabel Yesayan lived in the city in the disguise of a Turkish woman, then a European; finally she decided to flee to Bulgaria with the identity papers of a Greek woman who was supposedly commissioned to go there and prepare the wedding clothes of a relative of hers.

14 Yesayan, *Correspondence*, 118-19. This is the place to mention that Zabel Yesayan's correspondence

Solidarity and peace through education

The second part of this essay is inspired by the work of Melissa Bilal, well-known for the book she published in collaboration with Lerna Ekmekçioğlu on the Armenian female writers of Constantinople.[15] In a recent article first published in German,[16] she quotes Zabel Yesayan's words written in 1912:

> If two enemy peoples only knew that in the days of disaster they looked alike, they shared the same spirit, they cried the same way, they groaned, they begged, they cursed with the same stresses and syllables... Maybe then the impossible harmony and fraternity could become a possibility under the dominance of misery.

These lines are very characteristic of the author's convictions. They were written during the Balkan war. They belong to a piece called *Bavakan e* [It's Enough], which had remained entirely unnoticed and unaccounted for before Melissa Bilal unearthed it a few years ago and wrote a study on Yesayan's opinions about fraternity and reconciliation, taking that piece of writing as a "manifesto for her pacifist thinking." *Pavakan e* was first published in 1922 in *Arek*, a monthly literary journal released in Vienna under the auspices and with the money of the newly established Soviet regime in Armenia. It was republished in 1925 as an addition to the second edition of a collection of novellas, *Yerb aylevs çen sirer, K'oghı, Vêpı* [When They Don't Love Anymore, The Veil, The Novel].[17] Melissa Bilal mentions that Yesayan had been inspired by Marya Chéliga's *Alliance Universelle des Femmes pour la Paix par l'Education* (Women's

needs a complete revision and republication. The volume published in Armenia contains many guesses, obvious mistakes, uninformed footnotes, let alone the fact that it does not give the original of all the letters that Yesayan wrote in French (especially to her daughter Sophie). For obvious reasons, the volume contains only a handful of letters from the last period of Yesayan's life after 1933. A few years ago, Levon Ketcheyan completed a PhD dissertation in Paris, in which the central piece was a study (and French translation) of Yesayan's letters. A new edition of the correspondence should be prepared on the basis of the work already accomplished by him and others.

15 Lerna Ekmekçioğlu and Melissa Bilal, eds., *Bir Adalet Feryadı. Osmanlı'dan Türkiye'ye Beş Ermeni Feminist Yazar 1862-1933* (İstanbul: Aras,2006). The book treats the following writers: Elbis Gesaratsyan (1830-1911), Sirpuhi Düsap (1841-1901), Zabel Asadur (1873-1904), Zabel Yesayan (1878-1942), and Hayganush Mark (1885-1966).

16 The original version is forthcoming in Sima Aprahamian and Victoria Rowe, eds., *Ottoman Women's Movement(s) and Print Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press).

17 The three novellas were first published together in a single book in 1914 (İstanbul, Hayg Goshgarian Publisher). In the only book-long study ever published in Armenia about the author, *Zapel Yesayan, Keank'ı yev gortsı* [Zabel Essayan, Her Life and Her Work] (Yerevan: Academy of Sciences, 1965), Sevak Arzumanyan makes a mistake when he writes that *Bavakan* e was published in the 1914 volume (170).

Universal Alliance for Peace through Education) and that, as a member of that alliance, she wanted to start a peace organization for Ottoman women from different religious and national backgrounds. This proved impossible under the given circumstances; the atmosphere of fraternity did not last very long after 1908.

Marya Chéliga (or Szeliga) was a Polish writer and activist who lived in Paris and whom Zabel and her husband, Dikran Yesayan, had befriended. She was the editor of *Revue féministe* (1895-1897), a journal initiated by Clotilde Dissard, and the author of the first edition of *Les Femmes et les féministes* (Women and Feminists, 1900). She was also a founding member of the *Ligue des Femmes pour le Désarmement International* (Women's League for International Disarmament) and later the president of the *Alliance Universelle* mentioned above.[18] Zabel Yesayan mentions her name in a letter to her husband, written in 1908 (the exact date is not specified). Along with Hasan Fehmi's wife, Yesayan had begun the preliminary work for the creation of a *Ligue de Solidarité des dames ottomanes* (Ottoman Women's League for Solidarity), the immediate purpose of which was to bring together women of all origins in the Ottoman Empire: "Our only goal will be to stir up solidarity between the different components of this country. Women play an important role in that regard thanks to their influence on their entourage and their son's education."[19] The Armenian word for "solidarity" here is *hameraşkhut'iun*, which also means "agreement," "fraternity," or (for lack of a better word) "reconciliation." In the same letter, Yesayan asked her husband to pay a visit to Marya Chéliga and to request a copy of the by-laws of the *Alliance*.[20] The seemingly harmless sentence that I just quoted on the

18 Information available on Marya Chéliga (1859-1927) is very scarce. *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms, Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (by Francisca de Haan, Krasimara Daskalova, Anna Loutfi [Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006]) contains a very brief notice about this important figure of French feminism at the turn of the century. For more information on *fin-de-siècle* French feminism and the *Revue féministe* directed by Clotilde Dissard, I refer the reader to Karen Offen's articles, for instance: "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-siècle France," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984). The histories of the French feminist movements (for instance, Jean Rabaut, *Histoire des féminismes français* [Paris: Stock, 1978]) mention only her articles: "Les hommes féministes," in the special issue of the *Revue Encyclopédique* devoted to the "evolution of feminism" (28 November 1896), or "Le mouvement féministe en France," in *Revue politique et parlementaire* (10 August 1897). Others mention her activity as a translator from Polish and a champion of Polish friends in the Parisian theater scene. Again others mention her plays: *L'Ornière* (published in 1896), *Les Déblayeurs* (published and staged in 1905).

19 *Yesayan, Correspondence*, 90.

20 A footnote of the *Correspondence* (325) also mentions that Marya Chéliga had written an article on Yesayan in a French journal, but no reference is given. The only reasonable assumption is that Zabel Yesayan (or her children) had kept the article or brought it with them when they emigrated to Armenia. This needs confirmation.

"influence" of women deserves our attention, precisely because it is related to the question of the political transformation of the country, from a system based on the principle of domination to a system based on the principle of citizenship.

Zabel Yesayan's efforts to establish solidarity between Ottoman women and, through their action, between the "different components of the country" could not come to fruition at that time. A few months later, the events in Adana shook the Armenians' faith in any solidarity or reconciliation or any "peace through education." In 1908, it was still the woman in Zabel Yesayan who wanted to speak on behalf of reconciliation. After Adana, it was no longer the woman but only *the witness* in her who could speak. Moreover, from now on the act of bearing witness would be conceived as an operator of citizenship. (Fact is that reconciliation was definitely not on the agenda of the day. No reconciliation was visible on the horizon, as there was nobody left with whom to reconcile.)

The principle of citizenship

This conception of testimony as an operator of citizenship needs some explanation. I will take advantage of what we already know about Zabel Yesayan's experience as a witness in Adana from July to September 1909 and from the book she wrote in 1911, *Averaknerun mej* [Among the Ruins].[21] I will first quote a passage from the preface to this work:

> My project was therefore to communicate to those who belong to our people, but also to our [Ottoman] compatriots, who have remained strangers to our reactions and our sufferings, the infinite plight I contemplated in its deepest darkness for a period of three months. If I have been able to depict what has become of a people driven mad by the terrors of blood and fire, a people who, given over to insane decisions, flees the ancestral land, if I have been able to express these nightmares that darken and make dismal even the sky of the fatherland to eyes blinded by tears, that render the climate inhospitable, and the earth dry and sterile like the breast of a mother deprived of milk for those emaciated and defenseless bodies... if I have been able equally to say with sincerity that these backs hunched over from the whip of persecution still have within them the force to will and to feel, that these souls are full of a sacred flame, I believe I will have rendered my service to the fatherland. Indeed no one will ever again dare to approach with contempt and hatred these humble people who, armed with an unshakable faith, despite the intolerable injustices, despite the gallows raised on still smoking ruins, will offer blindly, instinctively, their blood-stained and crumbling existences to all the currents of progress, in order to rise against the greatest danger threatening the fatherland, against the return of dictatorship, in whatever form and behind whatever mask it manifests itself in the future.

21 I refer the reader to the monograph on Zabel Yesayan in my book, *Writers of Disaster*, vol. I, for a general view on Yesayan's "turnabout" and her experience of the Catastrophe. On the principle of citizenship, see a detailed account in "Testimony and Mourning after Adana" (of which the complete version will be published in the proceedings of the conference *Adana 1909*) and in the first chapter ("Armenian Testimony in the 20th century") of the book in Turkish, which will bring together the text of the five lectures I gave in İstanbul in the spring of 2009 under the auspices of Sabancı University and Boğaziçi University, thanks to the invitation of Osman Kavala.

The "fatherland" of which Yesayan speaks is the Ottoman fatherland, and the compatriots are the Ottoman Turks. Consequently, it is almost a profession of faith that she writes here. She believes that her Turkish compatriots, when they will hear and grasp the suffering of the victims—and, through their suffering, their humanity—will feel themselves wounded in their own humanity. They will therefore understand that the victims died for them, in the struggle for defending the liberty of their "fatherland," which was also the fatherland of their compatriots.

They were sacrificed to the fatherland, she says. Let us be more explicit: They were sacrificed to the *new* fatherland, the one in which all will be equal, all will benefit from equal rights, all will be citizens, and not subjugating/subjugated people. This is said almost word for word: "In order to put off our grief which burnt us like fire, we clung to this idea: 'We too had our victims; this time our blood flowed for our Turkish compatriots. This will be the last time.'" Did Yesayan believe in what she was saying here? It is a frightening question, one that remains unresolved even today, a hundred years later. But she had to believe it. This idea of witnessing as a citizen permeates the entire preface. "The main feeling that drove me was that, as a free citizen, as an authentic daughter of my country, with the same rights and duties that everyone has, I can write these lines without reservations of any kind..." Is this an act of faith? Is it the acknowledgement of a fact? Is it a word of defiance, or a challenge addressed to the power of the Young Turks? *In any case, by her very act of writing, she became a citizen of her "own" country.* And yet she knew better than anyone that in 1911 equality and citizenship had not been achieved; they had to be won. This explains and justifies the function of testimony for Zabel Yesayan at that juncture.

Bearing witness has always had within itself this same ambiguity. It presupposes a certain freedom of speech, which means at least a po-

tential status of citizenship. But conversely it necessarily presents itself with the force of an operator: its function is to produce citizenship when and where citizenship is missing. This is why I consider testimony as an "operator of citizenship." It is not only a question of *her* becoming a citizen. Testimony is the anti-dictatorial act *par excellence*. What she saw and heard "was capable of shaking an entire state to its foundations..." By these words of course she meant the constitutional state, the (present or future) state in which the word "citizenship" would have a meaning. And this is why she finally spoke of a possible return to dictatorship. As she referred to the Hamidian dictatorship she went farther than that with her words: She warned against each and every dictatorship to come. And what is a dictatorial state? A state in which the status of citizenship still has to be conquered.

One century has passed since these events. And what a century! The principle of citizenship was not on the record for a long time to come; instead, a scheme of systematic extermination was carried out four years later. The program of extermination was implemented to the end, without hesitation and without delay. The survivors have been living a haunted existence for so many decades. We cannot say that the principle of citizenship imposed itself on this soil, which saw so many deaths, so much suffering. It needs to be conquered, and it will be an uphill battle. The truth is that the dictatorial state whose return was feared by Yesayan in 1911 never ceased to return. Did the dead die for nothing then? Had Zabel Yesayan written for nothing? Or should we think that she was only slightly mistaken? She was off merely by one century. She was also mistaken about the number of deaths that was necessary in order for the act of bearing witness to begin its anti-dictatorial work, after long decades of silence. Should we not believe, then, that what a century ago seemed to be a pure delusion is going to make sense today? Are we not allowed to dream of a world in which this book named *Among the Ruins* will shatter consciences, will turn them upside down, will finally convince our compatriots of the humanity of the victim and oblige them to stand up against "dictatorship," to see in the Cilician dead the first victims of that unending struggle of citizenship against tyranny? We can only hope that this book will soon be translated into Turkish. Maybe then Zabel Yesayan will really have helped "our country," this country. I do not know if the living will benefit from it. But the dead at least will be saved.

I insist on the remarkable fact that she addressed her testimony to her Turkish compatriots. Her intention was to make them understand and admit that "we" are human, too—that "we" have died for them. And I insist on the same unavoidable question: Was it a terrible illusion? The

answer is: Yes and no. Yes, if one looks at what happened four years later. No, if we read her words with today's eyes, as though she had written them *for today*, and not for her compatriots of hundred years ago. In other words, she was writing in order to be read one century later. Her Armenian readers have not done anything but keep her text alive and transmit it to the next generation, so that one day it may reappear in the hands of our "compatriots." Yes, testimony is an operator, its destination being *the production of citizenship*, but before it could be read and understood in this way, the total sacrifice of an ethnic group was necessary—and hundred years of waiting.

In the years between 1916 and 1918, having taken refuge in the Caucasus, Zabel Yesayan deployed a relentless activity for the sake of "testimony," working as the "secretary of witnesses." She wrote down, transcribed, and reworked the narratives of survivors. She published Hayg Toroyan's long testimony in February 1917 in the journal *Gorts*, as well as the memoirs of Mourad, a fedaï from Sivas. She worked in collaboration with Henry Barby, the French journalist, who published in 1917 the first important book related to the genocidal events, *Au Pays de l'épouvante* [In the Country of Horror]. Later, again in collaboration with Barby, she translated into French the testimonies gathered by Karen Mikaelyan, which had been published in *Gorts* as well. Traces of this activity are spread all over her correspondence of those fateful years.

For instance, in June 1916, she wrote to the editor of *Gorts* about Karen Mikaelyan who had collected Armenian children's testimonies, which would eventually be published in the journal under the title "Dismembered Armenia":

> The work that he has done is extremely interesting and touching. He read a few pages of it to me, which are all of great value. This is what we need and I am convinced that what he has accomplished and my own works are infinitely more important [...] than the uncertain and expensive results of all the commissions... In this way *Gorts* will become the only source of authentic information on the terrible story that is ours.

In November 1916, she wrote to Arshag Tchobanian:

> I also wanted to ask you if you think it is useful that I send you *The Memoirs of Mourad* in Paris and some impressions on the Armenians of Mesopotamia, which I assembled with the help of an eyewitness's recollections. The work on Mourad is going to appear soon and I will

send the printed version. The other work is not finished yet, and if you think it's necessary I will do everything so that you receive all of the interesting pages.

In the postscript of the same letter, she added, "My nerves are so jumpy that, if I do not appeal to all the forces of my will, I will go mad. I work ceaselessly in order not to have the time to think." A year later, in December 1917, she wrote to Tchobanian again:

> I am busy classifying all the documents that we have obtained on the subject of the recent persecutions in Turkish Armenia. It is a work that is unbearable in itself, which is why all my nervous system is entirely upside down. But I will carry it out to the end, no matter the price. After classifying I intend to prepare a general study, which will probably appear in the monthly *Gorts*, if I remain alive. I would be happy to bring my part to *Veratsnund* and I will send you something to publish with the next mail. If I remained silent for so long, don't think that it was out of indifference or because I didn't care. Take into account that I am working ten to twelve hours a day reading and classifying all sorts of horrifying stories about massacres, rapes. Besides I am busy working with Henry Barby at least two hours every day. My spare time is to be counted in minutes, not hours, because we are in such a predicament that I have to finish this work whatever its costs. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? All sorts of dangers are threatening these precious papers...[22]

Four novellas: A woman in the first person

For our current purposes, the most impressive letter is the one that she wrote in September 1917 to Karen Mikaelyan:

> 1. I'd want to know, Mr Mikaelyan, why you did not go on with the publication of your "Dismembered Armenia"? What do you intend to do with that work, which I believe is invaluable not only today but forever, as one of the most moving works about our present miserable life? As I told you at that time, you have carried on this difficult work with art and taste, and it is a pity that the whole thing has not been published for so long. Maybe you intend to publish it as a book? I beseech you to keep me aware of your plans.

22 Yesayan, *Correspondence*, 146. *Veratsnund* was a bi-weekly journal which had begun to be published in Paris and of which Tchobanian was one of the editors.

> 2. These days I have been busy among other things with translations that I do for Henry Barby, who is the correspondent of Parisian newspapers in Russia. You know that he has already released a book about Armenians with great success. Today I translated for him "Nakhshun" from your *Dismembered Armenia*. This piece aroused his fervent interest and Mr Barby himself recognized that this was one of the most moving pieces we have translated so far. [...]
> What are you working on lately? Have you started work on something new? I myself am overwhelmed with different projects. As soon as I have some time left for myself, I will begin a novel on Armenian life in İstanbul, entitled *Hogis ak'sorvats* (My Exiled Soul...) I am full with the novel's subject and as soon as I am alone—which rarely happens—I will withdraw in that corner of my soul that seems to be my novel's world and where there is neither massacres, nor refugees, Bolsheviks, or anything else, but only sun, rose nurseries, and the eternal songs of love, beauty and grace. If only I could bring to the fore that hidden world, I would be happy, very happy.[23]

To the best of my knowledge, Karen Mikaelyan's *Dismembered Armenia* was never published in book form. Zabel Yesayan's *My Exiled Soul* appeared first in the journal *Arek*, and then as a book (Vienna, 1922) with a slightly different title in Armenian (*Hogis ak'soreal*). Although Yesayan calls it a novel in this letter, it is a short piece of about 40 pages, written as the first-person monologue of a female protagonist who is a painter: Back in İstanbul for an exhibition of her works (we obviously are in the pre-1915 period), she reflects on herself and her art through a limited number of encounters and conversations with visitors. This is not the place to further analyze the particular exile (from herself, from her childhood, from the "fatherland" of her soul) to which the title gives expression. It suffices to say that this work has always been considered by its Armenian readers as the *epitome* of feminine writing, along with *Verjin Bazhakı* [The Last Cup], which was written in 1916, also in the Caucasus and under the same conditions of extreme exhaustion, insecurity, incessant travel, and fear, and with the same constant background of death and desolation. Or is it the *epitome* of a literary genre, the one of poetic narrative, which Zabel Yesayan imported into Armenian letters and beautifully implemented, with short notations, fugitive impressions, allusive references to the past, barely sketched characters, a first-person account, and an accentuation of feelings and sensations?[24]

23 Ibid., 143-44.

24 In his beautiful essay on Yesayan's *The Exiled Soul*, Krikor Beledian shows that the genre of the novella is what the French call *récit poétique* (*Mart* [Antelias: Armenian Catholicossate, 1997], 194-230). The

If 1917 was the year of her most intense activity as the "secretary of witnesses," it was also the year when she experienced a kind of a literary and personal revelation in her novelistic production, precisely the one whose task was to expose the "exile of the soul." Yesayan was perfectly conscious of what happened with her. She opened (or rediscovered) a novelistic vein that in her eyes allowed her to lay bare the very essence of art. I will not be able to explain this last point at length in the present context. I will only say it through a condensed formula: the essence of art echoes the structure of womanly desire. She was conscious of the revolution and the revelation that happened in her writing so much so that, as soon as her existence in Paris became sufficiently stabilized, she published the four short novellas that belong to this thread, one after the other. The four titles that emerged from the artistic revelation that she experienced in the years of 1916 and 1917 are: *Andzkut'ean zhamer* [Hours of Anguish], written in 1911 and published in the form of a booklet in 1924, in Thessaloniki, as the first volume of a collection initiated by the journal *Alik*; *Verjin Bazhakı* [The Last Cup], written in 1916, and also published as a booklet in 1924 in İstanbul; *Hogis Ak'soreal* [My Exile Soul], written at an indeterminate date between 1917 and 1919 and published as a booklet in Vienna in 1922; and finally *Meliha Nuri Hanım*, written in 1925 and published in 1928 in Paris, as the sixth volume of a collection named *Lusak'agh*. These four novellas form a tight group, even though they were published in quite diverse places, as though she wanted to lead her future readers astray. Indeed, they have many things in common. All four are written in the first person and have a woman as their main protagonist. The fact that a novella written in 1911 has to be included within this series only indicates that a certain time span was necessary for Yesayan in order to fully realize and develop the literary potential of the womanly first person and its connection with the power of art. That is not to say that first-person narrative was unknown to her before 1914, only that it was used merely as a literary device. With these four novellas, however, the first person became the expression of a feminine voice; through it, Yesayan began to thematize the intimate connection between art and womanly desire.

All these novellas contain a story of passionate love, experienced to the point of death and madness. In *The Last Cup*, an ill-married woman is torn between her passion and her obligations toward her children. In *Hours of Anguish*, another woman, finding herself in the same predicament but this time displaying no consideration for her obligations, literally executes her husband with her words and the expression of her hatred. A third one, a painter whom readers and critics have often considered a novelistic personification of the author, returns from Paris to İstanbul for an exhibit and frees her imprisoned soul through her passion; yet, this has no influence on her practice as an artist. The first two stories are situated in İstanbul, but without visible time frame; we know through a very brief and allusive mention that the present time of the third narrative is situated in 1909, just after the Cilician massacres. In each of these stories, the woman is Armenian, except for the fourth novel, *Meliha Nuri Hanım*, in which the woman speaking in the first person is Turkish. Incidentally she even expresses anti-Armenian feelings, revealing the uncontrolled and absurd effect of a nationalist rhetoric. The action takes place during the battle of Çanakkale at the hospital of Gelibolu, where Meliha Nuri is a benevolent nurse. She has just learned that her husband, a man of power and a military commander who repudiated her years ago, will pay a visit to the hospital. She passionately waits for his arrival, while a childhood friend of hers, a doctor at the same hospital, hopes to declare his love to her if only she was able to see him and notice his presence by her side. Commenting on this womanly passion which desires tyranny and reflecting on its relationship with the genre of the novel, Yesayan produced the following quite explicit theory:

> In every woman there is this feverish and anxious expectation of a greater force, of a strength impregnated with a somber mystery, this crazy, unconscious, instinctive tension, toward the unknown power, toward the superiority that subjugates, even in a tyrannical way... From the palaces to the humblest cottages, under all the roofs where a womanly heart is beating and where a feminine imagination flies away beyond the borders of reality, where the mysticism of the unknown, the impossible, the unattainable, agitates the souls that are thirsty for strong emotions, the story is the same, nothing can replace it.

These lines are from an essay that Yesayan wrote in 1911 on Shirvanzadé, an Eastern-Armenian novelist and playwright, and his short story "Miss Liza."[25]

same idea is succinctly exposed in the preface that Beledian wrote for a recently published collection of Yesayan's first short stories and essays of poetic prose, *Skiutari verjaluysner yev ayl gruti'unner (1895-1908)* [Twilights of Üsküdar and other writings (1895-1908)] (İstanbul: Union of Teachers, 2009).

25 *Şirvanzatê yev ir gortsı. Grakan koç'unk' hobelearin ir t'rk'ahay yeghbayrakits'nerên [Shirvanzadé and his work. Literary homage by his Turkish-Armenian pen-brothers, for his jubileum], (İstanbul: 1911)* (volume conceived and edited by Dikran Gamsaragan, an important representative of the realist generation of Armenian writers in İstanbul, and obviously an admirer of Shirvanzadé), 245-246. This passage had

Two themes are mixed together here: the desired tyranny, and the mysticism of the unknown. Are they the same? Should they be distinguished? In any case, the entire responsibility for these assertions on the structure of feminine desire is Yesayan's. The Armenian word for "tyranny" is *br'natirut'iun*. At the end of the article, Yesayan also says that men should not allow women to unmask them. Once unmasked, there is no superiority, no strength, no power left. These reflections accompany the commentary on Shirvanzadé's story, in which Liza kills her own desire as a consequence of her insistence on knowing the whole truth about her lover. "What does woman want?" Freud would have asked. Does she want to be subdued, does she *believe* in the figure that her desire needs for staying alive? Or does she want the truth? But which truth? The truth about her lover behind his manly mask, or the truth about her own desire? Zabel Yesayan's extraordinary answer is: Woman wants the truth of the mask. These considerations would have proven futile if Yesayan had not brought them forth later in her artful novellas, of which at least one also contains a reflection on art, on woman as an artist. I would need more space to perform the last step of this reasoning and explain how, for Yesayan, *art is the truth of the mask*. Suffice it here to ask whether this complex operation (which involves her own desire as an artist) makes Yesayan a feminist or an anti-feminist writer. After all, the reader would say, what is the truth of a mask? Is a mask not conceived for hiding the truth, for removing it from our sight? Yesayan had not read Freud, I am quite sure. But she had read Nietzsche. Let us suppose that she knew about Nietzsche's philosophical "feminism" woven into the "overwhelming corpus of [his] venomous anti-feminism,"[26] and let us read Derrida's commentary on Nietzsche's "woman" and the belief of dogmatic (feminist) philosophers about her:

> The credulous and dogmatic philosopher who believes in the truth that is woman, who believes in truth just as he believes in woman, this philosopher has understood nothing. He has understood nothing of truth, nor anything of woman. Because, indeed, if woman is truth, she at least knows that there is no truth, that truth has no place here and that no one has a place for truth. And she is woman precisely because she herself does not believe in truth itself, because she does not believe in what she is, in what she is believed to be...[27]

been previously quoted by Sevak Arzumanyan in his book on Yesayan, 197-198.

26 I am quoting from the English translation (by Barbara Harlow) of Jacques Derrida, *Eperons/Spurs* (Venice: Corbo e Fiore Editori, 1976), 47.

27 Ibid., 43-44.

This convergence between Yesayan and Nietzsche (as read by Derrida) certainly deserves a longer development, which I will offer elsewhere. Meanwhile it is interesting to observe that in exactly the same days when Yesayan wrote her "feminist" articles in the journal *Tsağik*, the chief-editor Mikael Shamdanjian who was one of the rare Western-Armenian intellectuals who had studied in Germany, published a long essay on Nietzsche, which to my knowledge is the first ever published in İstanbul.[28]

Finally, one must add to this short demonstration of the novelistic nature of these four stories that each took up a theme that Yesayan had broached before with quite different means. Of course, this reworking thoroughly modifies the theme that she embraces. The first two stories cited here bring to the fore the hatred felt by a married woman toward her husband. This theme found its preliminary expression in a story called *Molorumı* [Going Astray], written and published in 1907,[29] which describes a marriage conceived for ill reasons. *Hours of Anxiety* (directly) and *The Last Cup* (indirectly) push the situation to its extreme consequences; the first documents the husband's destruction, the second the woman's tragic resignation. *My Exiled Soul*, meanwhile, takes on the question of art: its place and its function in a social context, and its possible or impossible reception in a community that has closed itself, as was the case of the Armenian community of İstanbul. These very same problems had been discussed along similar lines in *The Novel*, the second novel written by Yesayan (*Tsağik*, 1904, republished in the volume of 1914). Finally, *Meliha Nuri Hanım* stages a Turkish woman, a device Yesayan had already employed in *K'oghı* [The Veil], a short novel she published in the volume of 1914.

The differences between these last two stories lay bare the profound change that slowly but strikingly began to take place in Yesayan's writing after 1911. Beside contrasts in style—*The Veil* was written as a realist novel looking, among other things, to denounce the social condition of women—the difference resides in the very substance of the story told. In 1914, the young Turkish woman was kept in a stranglehold between two obstinate wills: her husband's—after bringing a concubine into his bed, he does not want to repudiate his wife and later asks in vain for forgiveness from her father—and her father's—personally and deadly wounded by the offense to his daughter, he does not want to hear of any pardon and consequently asks her to respect his refusal *beyond his*

28 Mikael Shamdanjian, "Nietçei masin," *Tsağik* 194-5(1903).

29 See Zabel Yesayan, "Molorumı," *Masis*, İstanbul, no. 28-29, 31, 34-35 (1907). As far as I know, this novella was never integrated in a volume before its recent publication in *Skiutari verjaluysner*, 196-224.

own death. Of course, this story has nothing to do with the situation of Meliha Nuri. In the notes jotted down by Meliha Nuri, there is no stranglehold, almost no action, no father, and certainly no fidelity to the deadly obstinacy of a man. There is only one fidelity left: the one that a woman owes to herself.

This is precisely what characterizes the four novellas I have linked together. These novellas contain no social critique, no denunciation of tyrannical male powers—whether a father's or a husband's—between which a woman can be fatally torn. Rather, the woman who speaks in the first person owes nothing to anyone but to herself and to the tyranny—or is it the truth?—of her own desire. This new faithfulness can have terrible consequences for the woman (in *The Last Cup*, she renounces her love forever), or for the man attached to her (*Hours of Anxiety* ends with the suicide of the husband). And yet, everything remains unchanged for Yesayan's women, suspended between the desired tyranny and the mysticism of the unknown. In her two most beautiful first-person narratives, the one of the exiled soul and the one of Meliha Nuri, nothing happens, nothing changes—no narrative knot, no theatrical turnabout, no tragic end—because the Armenian artist and the passionate Turkish woman are suspended in the truth of their own desire. They are finally reconciled with themselves in an unchanging world.

Let us now summarize what I have tried to show in this essay. Yesayan's attempts to develop a feminist activity *stricto sensu* in İstanbul, which was also an attempt to link the writer's feminist persuasions to a political agenda, came to an abrupt end with 1909's pogroms in Cilicia. Reconciliation, delayed until an unforeseeable future, could be carried out only in the form of citizenship, and it was in the name of such a principle of citizenship that Zabel Yesayan expressed herself as a witness. In 1911, after writing *Among the Ruins* and a series of bitter articles on the orphans in Adana and elsewhere, Yesayan set out to explore a new continent with a series of novellas. In these, she put aside her active feminism and her denunciation of phallocentrism or social conservatism, in order to practice a "feminine" writing which cannot be accounted for with the help of essentializing categories: "There is no truth of *the* woman."[30]

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30 Derrida, *Eperons/Spurs*, 95.