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LIFE ON THE SKY ROAD: READING ZAVEN BIBERYAN  
ON THE HORIZON OF THE CATASTROPHE

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**Life on the Sky Road:  
Reading Zaven Biberyan on the Horizon of the Catastrophe  
Gökyüzü Yolu'nda Hayat:  
Felaket Ufkunda Bir Zaven Biberyan Okuması**

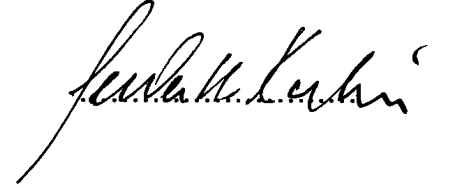
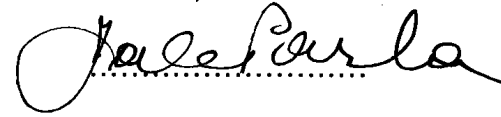
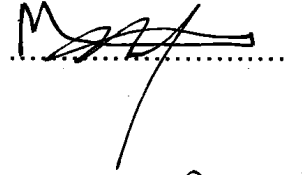
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Life on the Sky Road: Reading Zaven Biberyan on the Horizon of the Catastrophe**

This study aims at lending an ear to the call of Zaven Biberyan, a remarkable novelist belonging to the Istanbul branch of Post-1915 Western Armenian Literature, which echoes in the depths of a habitus encircled by denial. Biberyan, whose career began with the political articles he wrote for the Armenian newspapers and developed a distinctive voice in the Armenian press in the course of time, was late to view the literature, with which he had been on intimate terms since his childhood, as a power providing the possibility to move from ethics to politics. For detecting the reasons and consequences of this delay, it is essential to analyze the conditions under which he produced. I firmly believe that his representation of the trauma surrounding the Armenian community life and the way this trauma reverberates on his life will transform into a discourse on true collectivity.

The thesis is composed of three chapters. In the first chapter, which presents an extensive biography of Zaven Biberyan, the unpublished memoir of the writer takes center stage. To make explicit the gravity of the Catastrophe imposed upon social life, the ethical concerns of Zaven Biberyan will be traced through the help of his articles. Second chapter focuses on the analysis of Biberyan's literary works. The evaluation of the themes that Biberyan uses in his novels and stories to reflect on the experience of living as a part of denial will provide the basis for the reading on the horizon of the Catastrophe during the last chapter.

The last chapter, through reading the biography and works of Zaven Biberyan, reveals the way he experiences the impossibility to represent the Catastrophe in his life and literary quest. It argues that the rage and frustration of Zaven Biberyan, who challenged the denial with his uncompromising political stance but was engulfed in the silence he struggled to shatter, cannot be segregated from the search of reconciliation.

## ÖZET

### **Gökyüzü Yolu'nda Hayat: Felaket Ufkunda Bir Zaven Biberyan Okuması**

Bu tez, 1915 sonrası Batı Ermeni Edebiyatı'nın İstanbul kolunun en dikkat çekici romancılarından Zaven Biberyan'ın inkârla kuşatılmış bir habitusun derinlerinde yankılanan çağrısına kulak verme amacı taşıyor. Kariyerine Ermenice gazetelerde yazdığı politik yazılarla başlayan, zaman içerisinde Ermeni basının en sivri seslerinden biri haline gelen Biberyan, çocukluğundan itibaren haşır neşir olduğu edebiyatı etikten politığe açılan bir kapı olarak görmekte gecikmişti. Bu nedenle onun hangi şartlarda ürettiğine bakmak, aynı zamanda bu gecikmenin nedenlerini ve sonuçlarını tespit etmek açısından büyük önem taşıyor. Ermeni toplumsal yaşamını çepeçevre saran travmayı temsilinin ve bunun kendi hayatına yansıma biçiminin Felaket ufkunda okunduğu takdirde kolektif varoluşa dair bir söyleme dönüştüğüne inanıyorum.

Çalışma, üç bölümden oluşuyor. Zaven Biberyan'ın kapsamlı bir biyografisinin sunulacağı birinci bölümde, yazarın henüz yayımlanmamış hatıratı merkezi bir yer tutuyor. Felaket'in toplumsal yaşam üzerine çöken ağırlığını belirgin bir biçimde ortaya koymak için gazete yazılarından da yararlanarak Biberyan'ın etik kaygılarının izini sürülüyor. İkinci bölüm ise yazarın eserlerinin analizine odaklanıyor. Biberyan'ın inkârın bir parçası olarak yaşama deneyimini hikâyelerinde ve romanlarında yansıtırken kullandığı temaların tespiti son bölümde Felaket ufkunda yapılacak okumanın zeminini hazırlayacak.

Çalışmanın son bölümü yazarın hayatını ve eserlerini bir arada okuyarak Felaket'in temsilinin imkânsızlığını yazarın kendi hayatında ve edebiyatında nasıl deneyimlediğini ortaya koyuyor. Asla ödün vermediği politik duruşuyla inkâra meydan okuyan, ancak ısrarla delmeye çalıştığı sessizliğin içine itilen Biberyan'ın öfkesinin ve hayal kırıklıklarının uzlaşma arayışından ayrı okunulamayacağını savunuyor.

*In memory of my beloved dad*  
*Avedis Gebenlioğlu (Istanbul, 1954-2005) ...*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2012, I was an undergraduate student at Istanbul Bilgi University in the department of Comparative Literature. To be truthful, at that period, I did not think of pursuing a master's degree let alone working on an Armenian writer. When I turn back and examine the journey that transformed me, the need to thank those, who changed the plans I had for myself for good, dawns on me. First and foremost, I would like to thank Kaan Atalay, whose lectures were always providing food for thought, as he sparked the fire calling me to produce. That was from him that I came to learn not only the power of contemplation but also the necessity to epitomize the thought in act and embrace the liberation of the political in line with the ethical activity when confronting all kinds of domination including the one that the individual wields on himself/herself. One day, after leaving his lecture, with his voice ringing in my mind, I made my way to Aras Publishing. This course of events constitute the first phase of the road which led me to Zaven Biberyan.

I completed my primary, secondary and high school education in the Armenian schools of Istanbul. During those years, actively engaged with Armenian texts, I was able to speak and read in Armenian very fluently. However, through time, the familiarity I had with my mother tongue wore out due to the English-oriented program of my department. The summer that I spent in Aras Publishing helped me to regain my focus on Armenian texts and meet new writers. One of the most striking names in this direction was Zaven Biberyan. In the first place, I read *Yalnızlar* [The Lonely], which was the translation –undertaken by the writer himself– of his first novel *Lıgırdadı* [Slut].

At this point, I would like to turn back to another encounter that became the cornerstone of this journey: my admission the Cultural Studies Program in Istanbul Bilgi University. During the course of the program, I was able to widen my horizon thanks to the insightful approach of our professors. Especially, the lecture on “Melancholy and Modernity”, delivered by Ferda Keskin, provided me with the much needed theoretical baggage to draw upon in my thesis. The radical perspective of Marc Nichanian and his approach to the Catastrophe, with which I become familiar within the scope of this lecture, helped me read the signs that address the origin of that inexplicable force. Throughout this study, I will be relying on the theoretical background outlined by him.

This journey, rendered possible by Aras Publishing, also provided me with the opportunity to meet my thesis supervisor Mehmet Fatih Uslu. Reading Zaven Biberyan from Armenian

was a priority for me, and in this direction, it was a unique chance to work with Mr. Uslu, the Turkish translator of Zabel Yesayan. Last semester, upon his invitation, I followed his course on the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Armenian Literature in Istanbul Sehir University. This introductory course allowed me to contemplate on the ways, in Benjaminian terms, “to brush history against the grain.” With reference to this perspective, I started to examine the correlation between catastrophe and literature. This productive interaction opened up new channels and possibilities to approach Biberyan’s life and works. On the other hand, to compensate for the lacuna regarding the last fifteen years of Biberyan, the need to investigate alternative sources was evident. On that note, I would like to express my gratitude to Mrs. Tilda Mangasar, the daughter of Zaven Biberyan. The biographic details she kindly provided about her father helped me put the study on the right track. Likewise, when it came to find the Armenian periodicals which feature Biberyan’s articles, I was granted access to the library of Surp Pirgic Armenian Hospital. It was thanks to Mrs. Azat Kurtlukaya, the library custodian, that I was able to find my way in the archives.

Last but not least, without the unconditional support of my mother and sister, I would have never completed this study. Their unwavering belief in my capabilities helped me get over the moments of despair and provided the much needed motivation all along the way.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Özet.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter I: A Life Dedicated to Struggle.....</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1. “Either a Great Man or a Tramp”.....	14
1.2. “I Have Always Lived in Between Two Catastrophes Waiting for the Next to Come”.....	21
1.3. The “Knight” of Armenian Press.....	26
<b>Chapter II: A Realist Perspective: Zaven Biberyan and His Literary Output.....</b>	<b>39</b>
2.1. <i>Slut</i> .....	41
2.2. <i>The Sea</i> .....	48
2.3. <i>Penniless Lovers</i> .....	51
2.4. <i>The Sunset of Ants</i> .....	56
<b>Chapter III: The Age of Latency: Biberyan on the Horizon of the Catastrophe.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>94</b>



## INTRODUCTION

The intense first encounter I had with Zaven Biberyan, through *Yalnızlar* [The Lonely], still preserves its freshness in my mind. Later, I came to learn that this was the translation – undertaken by the writer himself– of his first novel *Lıgırdadı* [Slut]. He was strolling through the heart and soul of the 1950's Istanbul. Although I wanted to run away, to free myself as soon as stepping in the dreary world his characters inhabited, a force<sup>1</sup> prevented me from doing so. All the holes that allowed light to get in were rigidly occluded and I was unable to find a way out. After reading his novels one by one, from the Armenian originals, and learning the details on his arduous life, his persistent struggle set me back on my heels. A portrait of a man dedicated to his cause started to become apparent. Throughout his life, which elapsed in search of a scheme to assess the magnitude of devastation, he was trying to resettle the accounts. Only after reading Marc Nichanian and studying his eye-opening perspective on the Catastrophe, I started to decompose his intention. As outrageous as he was, Biberyan was not calling for a payback in terms of spilling blood. This was a call to bear witness, to put it more clearly, to bear witness to the trauma of the Armenian community, and most importantly, he embodied this trauma with his flesh and bones.

My initial aim when I decided to take on this research, was to analyze the case of Biberyan through the perspective laid bare by Marc Nichanian; however, as the process unfolded, I had the opportunity to study Biberyan's life in great detail and the necessity to approach his stormy life through a multi-faceted structure was clarified for me. Without identifying the social dynamics, against which Biberyan established his persona, a reading on the horizon of the Catastrophe would remain incomplete. To analyze the source of his powerful narrative and collect all the possible flashes or signs, an additional perspective illuminating the social conditions of his day was essential. Thanks to an unexpected encounter, during my tenure in Aras Publishing as an editor, I had the chance to work on the Turkish translation of Talin Suciyan's book, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*. This rare source on the Armenian community life during the Republican period not only illuminated me about the Armenian periodicals of that period but also provided the basis to assess the struggle Zaven Biberyan demonstrated throughout his life. In the book, with reference to the notion of *habitus* used by Pierre Bourdieu, Suciyan rethinks about the experiences the Armenians have been through in Turkey. Placing the denial into the center, Suciyan sets forth her theory of denialist habitus.

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<sup>1</sup> The nature of this force, related to the traumatic experience, will become clear in the third chapter.

Before initiating the discussion on Zaven Biberyan, I would like to introduce the perspectives –that of the Catastrophe and denialist habitus– that I intend to use in this study.

The literature, produced by Zaven Biberyan, cannot be dissociated from the traumatic experience of the Armenian community whose existence is based on the very act of *survival*, and surely, survival comes with its repercussions. Before anatomizing the Catastrophe, I would like to stroll through this intermediary zone, that is, of trauma. The contribution brought by trauma studies will modulate the switch to the Catastrophe. Yet what do they have in common? As I tried to implicate, this is related to the survival, in other words, to the impossibility to bear witness (we had better keep this in mind because it will come up again during the discussion on the Catastrophe).

History was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist.<sup>2</sup>

This argument on the Holocaust can be read within a similar context to that of the dehumanizing experience of the Armenians in 1915. The subject of a catastrophic experience is not aware of the disruption within the self at that exact moment. Therefore it is safe to say that trauma is revealed only through time, in other words, when the event seemingly comes to an end. In this sense, the effort to witness or that subtle claim of re-humanization must be approached with caution due to the inaccessible zone that exists between the catastrophic moment and the manifestation of the trauma. Most importantly, this gap “carries the force of the event.”<sup>3</sup> Although the victim leaves the site of the trauma “apparently unharmed”<sup>4</sup> and walks off as if nothing happened, the traumatic event –denied by the reason/not being able to historicized– the turns back to possess its subject. Freud calls this lacuna, “during which the effects of the experience are not apparent”, *latency*. An analysis conducted around this term, rendered possible by trauma, will pull the discussion toward the gravitational field of the Catastrophe. To put it in a nutshell, once the will to exterminate (or the life threatening experience) fails to fulfill its objective, the subject remains alone with an experience with which he/she does not know. “[T]he ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself”<sup>5</sup> resides at the center of the traumatic experience and the irreconcilability between

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<sup>2</sup> Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press), p.66.

<sup>3</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 7

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

knowing and not knowing inherent to the trauma –and related to latency– lays the foundation of *the event without a witness*, that is, the Catastrophe.

Before providing an insight on the emergence of this perspective, I would like to remind that Biberyan's his family was not subjected to deportation; however, in the aftermath of the event, he grew up in an environment structured by the survivors who did not know how to explain the experience in its totality as the name of the event was lacking. After the atrocities displayed by the Nazis against the Jews in the Second World War, a new name to historicize the event emerged: Genocide. In a short span of time, this term –establishing the factuality– started to countervail the mass murders of 1915. Along the course of this thesis study, rather than dealing with the genocide, I will follow the perspective offered by Hagop Oshagan and embraced by Marc Nichanian. That is to say, the literary discussion on Zaven Biberyan will function on the dynamics of the Catastrophe (Arm. Աղէտ/Aghed). To introduce this perspective, at first, I would like to explain the origin of the word *aghed*.

Through the explorations Nichanian –who claims that he is “the heir, successor and interpreter of Hagop Oshagan”<sup>6</sup>– has made within the scope of Armenian literature, the genealogy of the word can be traced. Although the terminology of Catastrophe, as a proper noun, is established by Hagop Oshagan, this usage was rendered possible after a significant process:

In 1911, Zabel Yesayan [...] was using the word *aghed*, not with majuscule, to describe the events in 1909 and their consequences. At that time, *aghed* was not a proper noun yet. Oshagan, to address the events of 1915-1916, was using such expressions as “our catastrophe, deportation [Arm. տարագրութիւն/darakroutyoun].”<sup>7</sup>

Until the emergence of the word *genocide* [Arm. *tseghasbanoutioun*], in an effort to name the ferocious hatred and extermination policy of the Nazis against the Jews, the Armenians were struggling to define their experience. Although there had been many expressions that refer to the event such as *axor* [exile] or *yeghern* [pogrom], which are still in use, *genocide* pulled ahead of those.<sup>8</sup> However, for Marc Nichanian, identical to the difference between the *Holocaust* and *Shoah*, a fundamental controversy exists between *Genocide* and *Catastrophe*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Marc Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, translated by Ayşegül Sönmezay (İstanbul: İletişim, 2011), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on how the term Genocide was coined and embraced by the Armenians all over the world to reinstate justice see Michel Marian, *Ermeni Soykırımı: Siyasette Adalet, Tarihte Ahlak Yer Açmak* (İstanbul: Aras, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> To provide an insight, I would like to quote from Giorgio Agamben: “The unfortunate term “holocaust” (usually with capital ‘H’) arises from this unconscious demand to justify the death that is *sine causa* – to give

At the heart of this dissimilarity, one will encounter the incompatibility of fact (that strives fixity) and event (which is of catastrophic nature). That is to say, the Catastrophe stands against the historicism “that is denialist in regards to its nature.”<sup>10</sup> It is not easy to get freed from the traps set up by denialism, which devours any ethical inquiry, as the experience of Zaven Biberyan will indicate. During his relentless fight against denialism, on the terms determined by historiography, Biberyan neglected listening to his own trauma and actively searched for the ways to improve the living conditions of the Armenians in Turkey; however, without envisaging a sincere confrontation with the self, neither self-fulfillment nor collective existence on a solid basis can take place. To do so, one should embrace the risk of putting psychic integrity in jeopardy. At this point, when listening comes into question, the connection between catastrophe and trauma becomes much more apparent. This coexistence demands walking around the margins of experience and language. Throughout the course of this study, I will be embarking on such a journey to trace back the ethical concerns of Zaven Biberyan, and accordingly, analyze the artistic channels through which he sought to create political possibilities. We have not talked about the future yet, have we? We surely will; however, as I tried to implicate above, this initiative to decompose the experience can only benefit from a focus on the trauma studies and psychoanalysis. After all, trauma comprises of “responses to both human and natural catastrophes.”<sup>11</sup> These responses guide the individual to restore the world according to the traumatic experience, in other words, the loss to which that individual lacks access.

Here we are, again, at the intersection of trauma and catastrophe, to find what makes this experience *Aghed* (the Catastrophe). The formulation of Shoshana Felman, adopted by Marc Nichanian, directs us to the center of this crisis. The Catastrophe means being “excluded from humanity forever and irremediably”<sup>12</sup> as it corresponds to an *event without a witness*. When the destruction of 1915 is in question, it is safe to say that there are innumerable testimonies to demonstrate the event in its totality and get over the trauma. Although abundant in quantity, from the perspective of this impossibility to reflect on the true nature of the event, they can only duplicate and indicate that impossibility. Where to find the “true” witnesses of the Catastrophe? “[T]he complete witnesses are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They

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meaning back to what seemed incomprehensible.” Giorgio Agamben, “The Witness,” in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 16. To support this argument, Nichanian points to the duel between Achilles and Hector.

Contemplating on the language that Trojans use, he analyzes the “symmetrical” narrative; the story that depicts the end of Trojans at the hand of the Greek are survived by the Greek in Greek language. Nichanian traces the origin of denialism with reference to this structure.

<sup>11</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction”, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p. 32.

are those who ‘touched bottom’.”<sup>13</sup> For the survivor, there is no possibility to bear witness as he/she has survived the complete consequences of the fatal will. Correspondingly, the same crisis is ingrained at the origin of trauma. The truth is not open to access due to survival. Therefore testimonies cannot be regarded as ultimate documents evidencing the irrefutability of the fact. Rather, from a different viewpoint, “testimony as monument belong to the witness according to the sign.”<sup>14</sup> Although Zaven Biberyan’s novels are not testimonies or do not directly approach the Catastrophe, they cannot be separated from the sphere of catastrophe. To initiate a dialogue between the dead and the living, Biberyan constantly sparks an interaction with the Catastrophe. In other words, through his literary dispositions, Biberyan tries to make the dead within the living speak. The space of this dialogue is the memory. The processes he performs on the memory –the way catastrophes shape the past and impacts future– shed light on the collective trauma of the Armenian community. As a matter of fact, Biberyan, who translated his own novel to Turkish from Armenian and published it during his lifetime, calls both parties of the trauma –Turks and Armenians– to confront with the wound. This trauma is a shared one, not only does it belong to the exposed but also to the one that inflicts the wound. In this direction, when I look at his life and listen to his voice, this invaluable effort of Zaven Biberyan provides a much needed ray of hope.

This literary perspective, based on the dialogue between the dead and the living, shifts the focus on mourning. To establish “a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary”<sup>15</sup>, with reference to Zaven Biberyan, I would be triggering the interaction between loss and its remains. This will be an intricate two-stage process; on the one hand, allowing me to analyze the dialogue that Biberyan initiates with the dead, and on the other, generating a possibility for me to initiate a similar process on Zaven Biberyan in the light of today. In this regard, the recollection of a series of catastrophes holds a crucial corner among the literary concerns of Zaven Biberyan. The very own life of him is marked by catastrophic experiences – Nafia (labor camps), the Wealth Tax, imprisonment, exile– to the extent that it is fair to say that he lived in a period of catastrophes succeeding the Catastrophe. As he had his share from the trauma of the Armenian community, he had the means to penetrate into the experience of the Other. Yet what can be done when the Catastrophe

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<sup>13</sup> Agamben, “The Witness,” in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Marc Nichanian, “From Document to Monument,” in *The Historiographic Perversion*, translated by Gil Anidjar (Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: Mourning Remains,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (University of California Press, 2003), p. 2.

[*Aghed*] itself makes mourning impossible? The remarks of Nichanian, regarding the pogroms of 1895 and 1909, sheds light on this crisis:

[T]he Armenians were barred from mourning. Mass murder did more than kill. already, very clearly, well before genocidal violence swept over the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, mass murder imposed on the collective psyche of the victims a generalized interdiction of mourning.<sup>16</sup>

Here, one can identify the premise of the will to exterminate, to erase without leaving anything behind. This will, impossible to bear witness and testify, overcomes reason: “Everywhere, it seems, mourning is sufficient to make sense; faced with the Catastrophe, on the contrary, *a sense is necessary so that mourning can occur*.”<sup>17</sup> In line with the idea of martyrdom presented by Zabel Esayan in *Averagnerou Mech* [Among the Ruins] or Hagop Oshagan’s persistence –which ended up in frustration– to represent the deportation to the latter in the last volume of *Mnatsortatz* [The Remnants], Zaven Biberyan, in his entire corpus, dedicates his literature to the representation of the denialist habitus he grew up in, which presents us with the opportunity to read him on the horizon of the Catastrophe. Only through this context, the feature encapsulating his novels, that is to say, that crushing rage of him can manifest itself. This *energeia* of his novels distinguishes Biberyan from other contemporary Armenian writers. Not even the tiniest bit of nostalgia or naivety sneaks into his works. A voice molded from fury but why? It appears to me that this rage reveals the desperate encounter with the limit, that is, the limit on mourning. This response, in dealing with the Catastrophe, discloses the interdiction of mourning, and accordingly, provides the necessary insight to assess the habitus pervading his novels. Despite how hard he tries to find a reconciliation platform, the past (searching for its proper place in history) comes to haunt him. There is no escape from the unburied dead. His struggle against the denial demonstrates the gravity of the situation. However, as it is seen from his literary stance, Biberyan does not place a premium on meagre mourning prospects. He is well aware of the conditions of the Armenians in Turkey and thanks to his keen eye on the society, had the means to reflect on the distortion of the language, the delay inherent to the trauma, the alienation resulting from the denial to approach the Other and the violence ready to erupt at any given time. Within this context, tracing the social construction of the denialist policy, against which Zaven Biberyan established his persona, will surely contribute to a more extensive study.

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<sup>16</sup> Marc Nichanian, “Zabel Esayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout,” in *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1: The National Revolution (Taderon Press, 2002), p. 189.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 199.

The policy of systematic intimidation toward the Armenians practiced by the Ottoman Empire came to a disastrous “end” in 1915. This extermination project left an ineffaceable mark on the collective psyche. Out of the total devastation a new organism called diaspora emerged. The Armenians, dispersed around the four corners of the world, were faced with new challenges after the ultimate test with death. The survivors now had to accommodate themselves to a life with which they were not familiar at all. Although the event, with all its complications, remained fresh in the memories of survivors, their safety was ensured by the hosting countries. However, for the Armenians remaining in Turkey, the situation was rather different. The newly proclaimed republic did not address the underlying problems inherited from the Ottoman Empire, instead, chose to paper over the cracks. The end of the armistice period, in other words, the victory of Kemalist troops in Istanbul, caused young Armenians to immigrate to European countries, especially France. The fate of the remnants, who were stuck within the borders of the country, in the eyes of whom they were the enemy from within, was in jeopardy.

Zaven Biberyan was born in 1921, in the midst of all the obscurity regarding the outcome of the Armenian community. His personal and intellectual development resumed alongside the growing pains of the newly formed Turkish Republic. Therefore examining the habitus of Turkey and reading her official and social tendencies on the light of the Armenian Question appears to me as an essential step on the way to depict a full-fledged portrait of Zaven Biberyan. Like other Armenians in Turkey, he was encompassed within the denial which was the building stone of the social habitus. Therefore before initiating a discussion on the characteristics of habitus, I would like to provide an insight on the nature of the aforementioned denial, which will make its presence felt throughout this study.

In her book, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, Talin Suciyan offers a perspective to analyze the conditions of the Armenians living in Turkey: Post-genocidal denialist habitus. In line with the theory of habitus, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, Suciyan decomposes the social practices that has worked against the minorities, especially the Armenians. Along the way, she comes to discover the official and social synchronization of the dispositions. At the heart of this habitus, the encounter with denial is inevitable, and when the fate of Nor Or generation –of which Zaven Biberyan was a member– is taken into consideration, a closer look at denial reveals the historical sustainability:

The group around *Nor Or* [newspaper], the first generation of post-genocide Armenian intellectuals, was dispersed around the world by the end of the 1940s as a result of state persecution. Thus, the Armenian community remaining in Turkey after 1915 lost its intellectuals once again within 35 years. In the post-genocidal period

the state was still persecuting and imprisoning Armenian intellectuals, thereby attesting to the line of continuity between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey in terms of state policies of severing relations between Armenian intellectuals and their community.<sup>18</sup>

The initiative of these intellectual to break through the denial, which aspires to draw everything into its abyss, was cut short by the authorities. In the first chapter of this study, this struggle will be analyzed broadly and Zaven Biberyan's contributions to this political cause will be discussed. Yet the question remains: What was being denied? And in relation to that, where did this denial originate from? To understand the dynamics of the denial, this position presents a good starting point.

The irrevocable calamity in 1915 changed the course of the individualization and sociation for the Armenians. Thus, that experience of catastrophic nature left its imprints on the victim and succeeding generations. The stories of deportation, mass killings and atrocity made their way into the collective memory. On this basis, one can examine the nature of denial and claim that it means turning a deaf ear to the existence and voice of the trampled. Although it is a valid perspective up until a point, this stance would prove to be insufficient when met with the infinitude of the Catastrophe. The denial cannot be squeezed into the moment of the catastrophic event – although it originates from there. It is safe to say that it exceeds the event and makes its presence known in the social relations. When a shared experience is at stake and its actuality is ignored by one of the addressees, denial pulls both parties toward its gravitational field and leads to the development of a habitus in which might makes right. “Thus, there has been no way to exist without being a part of denial.”<sup>19</sup> In this direction, the first two decades of the Republican period mark the “institutionalization of denial.”<sup>20</sup> This includes denying the sources of the Armenians, in line with the demands of the official history, although an active Armenian press and intellectual production were still maintaining their presence. All in all, denial was providing the structural ground of the habitus of Turkey, and as I mentioned, the Armenians were expected to give their consent participate within this social frame. To clarify this arguments, I will analyze the mood of the period in the light of the articles by Zaven Biberyan. His response to denial, which is apt to take the form of intimidation through some implementations such as Citizen Speak Turkish, labor battalions of Nafia or the Wealth Tax, constitutes a crucial part in the first chapter that aims at detecting the course of events through

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<sup>18</sup> Talin Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey: Post-Genocide Society, Politics and History* (I. B. Tauris: 2017), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p.21

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 3.



which he established his persona. How can we formulate the formation process of this habitus which revolves around denial?

The habitus allows for a wider and deeper understanding of practices that have become regularities: by structuring the regular and the ordinary, habitus *structures the structure*. [...] Thus, practices and thoughts create a world of regularities, which is itself ultimately a structured world, the outcome of a certain sociation.<sup>21</sup>

To support this argument with the experience of the Armenians in Turkey, in her book, Suciyan attaches importance to oral history accounts. This effort, in its nature, does not aim at analyzing the collective psyche, instead, tries to gather the stories related to the calamities of 1915 and the life in habitus. Through such an effort –and surely thanks to her personal history– she gains the necessary insight on “knowledge based in experience and transmitted from one generation to the next.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, she tries to decompose the sociation process developed without knowingly. The events that are not acceptable in normal conditions are told over and over again; the true nature of the inexplicable event change inevitably and remembering amounts to forgetting. In respect to this, the affinities between the two perspectives, which will be used in this study, comes to light. At this point, once again we encounter the death of the witness. Every attempt to explain the experience and present a complete narrative comes to naught, in other words, the swallowing impact of the denialist habitus, eliminating any political possibilities, reinforces the interdiction of mourning. In its essence, habitus compromises of dispositions whose formation can reveal itself with a closer examination to the history. Thus, we are faced with a controversy between individual and society.

[H]abitus is a mediating notion that helps us revoke the common-sense duality between the individual and the social by capturing “the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality,” that is, the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, to feel and to act in determinate ways. [...] Habitus supplies at once a principle of sociation and individuation: sociation because our categories of judgment and action, coming from society, are shared by all those who were subjected to similar conditions and conditionings [...], individuation because each person, by having a unique trajectory and location in the world, internalizes a matchless combination of schemata. Because it is both structured (by past social milieus) and structuring (of present representations and actions), habitus operates as the “unchosen principle of all choices” guiding actions that assume the systematic character of strategies even as they are not the result of strategic intention and are objectively “orchestrated without being the product of the organizing activity of a conductor.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Habitus,” in *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*, ed. Jens Beckert and Milan Zafirovski (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 315-319.

I tend to read this description of habitus together with the decision-making process problematized by Jacques Derrida. As for Derrida, “every true decision has to face, at one moment, the strictly undecidable.”<sup>24</sup> The undecidable is the specter of history. Only through challenging the undisclosed determinants that renders possible every decision one can liberate the reason. When this perspective is assessed in line with the habitus, which is based on denial in this case, the possibility of deconstruction emerges. After all, the continuum of habitus hinges on the consent of its agents or participants. It is important to note that this habitus produces and encourages inequality. If we take the position of the Armenians into consideration within this denialist habitus, it will appear that “the descendants of victims continue to be victimized through that denial.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, habitus solidifies the superiority of the victor and unjust treatment to the victim. The intellectual purpose of Zaven Biberyan, when read within this context, was to reveal the deficiencies of such a habitus and save the decision mechanism –as described by Derrida– from its shackles. “Hence, the more ordinary people become part of such a crime by profiting from it, the easier it is to reproduce denial.”<sup>26</sup> This directs us to 1915 and the consequent attempts to historicize the event. Again, through the theory of Derrida and duplication of denial, the determinant characteristic of trauma in political realm comes to surface. Thanks to the channel paved by the theory of habitus, which decomposes the social context, the Catastrophe once again heaves into sight (Did it ever disappear?) The young Armenian intellectual of the early Republican period, who had their political agendas, was not happy with the reproduction of denial. At the end of the Second World War, they knew that they were presented with an opportunity to challenge this habitus as the values and traditions of old had collapsed. In this regard, the activism of Nor Or Generation (*Nor Orian Serount*) – of which Zaven Biberyan was a member– was an attempt to problematize this habitus and showing that a form of existence outside of the yoke of denial was possible.

As I tried to indicate above, habitus brings forth a discussion on the society and the individual. It can be inferred from this quote of Wacquant that “that individual is both structured by the habitus and has agency in it.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, habitus functions as a confidential network –in construction all the time– connecting each person to one another. Zaven Biberyan was contemplating on the contradictory interaction between the individual and the society he/she lived in. Throughout his life, he searched for the ways to distance himself from the

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<sup>24</sup> Idelber Avelar, “Mourning, Labor, and Violence in Jacques Derrida,” in *The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics and Politics* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 20.

limitations brought by the society. This concern showed itself in the domain of literature. Accordingly, the *energeia* of his novels comes from his mastership to depict the zones of incompatibility. For him, the individual, the constituent factor of sociation, needed to stand firm against the demands of the society and hold his own. Therefore, in his literary quest, this tense and compelling relationship became a key element as he would describe it as “the greatest disaster of mankind.”<sup>28</sup> It is important to mention that this tension enables him to discuss the effects of the social habitus, additionally, in line with his own ethical process, that is, listening his own traumas, he was able to make use of personal experiences (most characteristically the unstoppable rage) which take up a significant place in his narratives.

To present Zaven Biberyan with all of his qualities and initiate a discussion on the political significations of his struggle, I will be drawing upon his unpublished memoir. All the biographical information in the study takes its source from this recently revealed document. It is important to note that this is the first effort to realize a far-reaching study on Zaven Biberyan. Hence, the lack of sources may leave the reader stunned.<sup>29</sup> The same lacuna can be noticed when Biberyan’s life comes to question. To clarify his life in full detail and fill the void left originating from the memoir, which covers the first twenty-five years of his life, I had an interview with the daughter of Zaven Biberyan. Thanks to this productive meeting, I came to learn the details on the later course of his life. This chapter will also include his articles for the Armenian newspapers such as *Nor Lour* [New News], *Nor Or* [New Day] and *Aisor* [Today]. As it is understood, first chapter will focus on the life of Biberyan and call the reader to witness Biberyan’s quest for reconciliation. Marc Nichanian claims that Biberyan is “a man of his time”.<sup>30</sup> I argue that despite how hard he tries to become “a man of his time” Biberyan encounters with an unsurmountable barrier which fills him with rage. This is the specter of the dead, not letting Biberyan to move away and holding him back in each step of the way. Therefore, I believe that it is necessary to analyze social conditions of the day together with the

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<sup>28</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>29</sup> There are two separate master’s thesis on Zaven Biberyan in Turkish according to the Council of Higher education. Murat Yusuf Önen, in his dissertation (“Türkçe Yazan Türk ve Ermeni Yazarlarda Türk ve Ermeni İmajı [Zaven Biberyan, Krikor Ceyhan, Agop Arslanyan, Mıgırdıç Margosyan, Markar Esayan]”) searches for the representation of Turk in the novels of Armenian writers, touches upon Zaven Biberyan. On the other hand, Yıldız Deveci from Ankara University directly focuses on Biberyan’s novel *Yalnızlar* (“Zaven Biberyan’ın ‘Yalnızlar’ Adlı Romanıyla Barbara Frischmuth’un ‘Pembe ve Avrupalılar’ Adlı Romanında Türk İmgesi”). Again, this research is concerned with the image of Turk and is based on a comparison between two novels. In the Armenian milieu, as the reader will see in the following pages, the production of Zaven Biberyan is quite little. Apart from the literary critics of Marc Nichanian and Haroutioun Kurkdjian, whom describe Biberyan as one of the greatest Armenian novelists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the lack of interest is bizarre. Therefore, this research is an pioneering step to make correlations between Biberyan’s life and works.

<sup>30</sup> Marc Nichanian, afterword to *Mrchewnerou Verchalouyse* (Istanbul: Aras, 2007), p. 564.

personal experiences of Zaven Biberyan. In the second chapter, I will be reading his works (all three novels and his stories) closely, from the realist perspective he has always been associated with. Through the background made available within the first two chapters we can develop the insight to approach Biberyan on the horizon of the Catastrophe.

This study aims at lending an ear to the call made by Zaven Biberyan. His initiative was unanswered during his lifetime which brought him frustration and mental collapse toward the end of his life. Does this suggest a defeat against the habitus of denial? This is the question that evolves into an ethical concern for me. There are powerful signs to extract from his struggle. Ignoring these signs and refusing to remember is a choice that will abandon Zaven Biberyan to the claws of denial. Another choice, the politically correct but mentally compelling, is bearing witness to him through all the trials and tribulations. I dare to take the second and listen to his odyssey which is yet to be completed. He still has so many things to say; reading him on the horizon of the Catastrophe opens up a possibility to take out those words. Therefore, in the last chapter, I will be discussing the constituent elements within the call. Surely, he was aware of the unspoken abyss existing between the agents of social habitus. This devastating force, initiated by the Catastrophe and concealed through the denialist habitus, is to be decomposed through the channels made available by these two perspectives. As an assisting perspective, the discussion on trauma will reveal the impact of Biberyan's personal catastrophic to the literature he has produced and investigate the political possibilities that our traumas nurture.

## CHAPTER I

### A LIFE DEDICATED TO STRUGGLE

Today when Zaven Biberyan's name is mentioned, some signs will probably start to appear on the mind of an average reader – especially if one is familiar with Armenian literature. At first glance, we can surely mention his disposition to examine the behavioral traits of the society and keen eye for the individual's struggle in the collective domain. He was depicting the world of people living on the shadow of the Catastrophe and waiting for devastation at any given time. This fearless man, who lived his life to the fullest and dedicated himself to his *cause*, was ironically announcing the impossibility to leave the gloomy world he created and closing all the exit gates. Indeed, all of his novels were taking their energies from this irreconcilableness. And now, thirty-five years after his death, I am embarking on this journey, which has transformed me as well, in order to find out the origin of this darkness, bitterness and desolation.

The road map I am about to draw in the first chapter will offer a basis for reading this tension which will be discussed elaborately in the second and third chapters. Initially, I will take a look at Zaven Biberyan's life and the social conditions of his day. We will be keeping Biberyan's claim in our minds all along the way: "I don't think there can be found a freer Armenian in this country than me."<sup>31</sup> We will examine the mindset behind this statement step by step. His comparison, between him and other Armenians, presents the two crucial realities in his life: pressure and struggle. So, he was taking a shot at the Armenians and the Turks. On the one hand, he was protesting against the silence of the Armenians in Turkey. He thought they lacked the courage to stand against injustice and refrained from defending their rights. On the other hand, the opposite corner was sealing the freedom zones and applied all kinds of oppressive measures.

The unpublished memoir of Zaven Biberyan, which covers the first twenty five years of his life (1921-1946), will be the main pillar of this chapter. As there is very limited information on his life, most of the details will be from this memoir. That is why I will not cite each and every reference in the footnotes. So, if an information on Biberyan's life is without reference, the readers can deduce that it is from the memoir. Nevertheless, I do not want to rely on the memoir too much and harm the diversity of the sources used in this study. To sustain the balance and compose a multilayered biography, I will also refer to the memoirs of Biberyan's contemporaries as well as his articles in the Armenian press. These will constitute a portrait of

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<sup>31</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

Zaven Biberyan with his ideals. To analyze his struggle, I will touch upon the political atmosphere and anti-Armenian campaigns of the day. This discussion will direct us to the denialist habitus<sup>32</sup> against which Biberyan established his persona. He was not alone in his demand of equal citizenship and justice. The newly emerging Armenian intellectuals gathered around *Nor Or* newspaper after the end of WWII and although Biberyan was in charge of another newspaper at that time, he never hid his sympathy for those socialist opinion makers. After mentioning the different and compelling phases of his life journey –imprisonment, exile, return, political venture, business enterprise, financial bottleneck– a heart-breaking question will greet us at the end of the chapter: Why was he forgotten by the Armenian community and literary sphere? The reproachful statement of Zareh Vorpouni, the remarkable writer of the Paris school, will demonstrate the crisis of Western Armenian literature. Up to day, we do not have the comprehensive biography of Biberyan. As things stand, this chapter aims at a task that has never been undertaken before.

### **1.1. “EITHER A GREAT MAN OR A TRAMP”**

Until recently, we have had very limited information on Zaven Biberyan’s life. However, a change of fortunes made a very reliable and valuable source available for us. His daughter handed some pieces of paper to the editors of Aras Publishing a few years ago. I was working at Aras back then and upon seeing the large pile of papers which were reflecting the uncovered paths of Biberyan’s life, I was very surprised. One of the most skilled writers of the Republican period whose mastery on Armenian language was recognized by even the fiercest critics had written his memoir in French! I will further discuss this subject on the last pages of the first chapter. This memoir was depicting the first twenty five years of Biberyan’s life. From some of his remarks, we can understand that he began writing when he was forty. Although being written over a long time span, it did not lack the consistency. So, this unpublished manuscript will take an important place in this chapter. Nevertheless, before entering the domain of his biography, I would like to name Zaven Biberyan’s literary works.

Zaven Biberyan is a published writer of three novels and a story book. This production may seem limited or weak; however, as it is mentioned in his unpublished memoir, he wrote many novels before failing to keep the possession of them. All of his Armenian books was published

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<sup>32</sup> This term of Bourdieu borrowed by Talin Biberyan in her book *The Armenians in Modern Turkey* will be particularly discussed in the following pages of this chapter.

during his lifetime but he did not see them reprinted. His first novel was *Lgrdadze* [Slut]. Published by Doğu Printing House in 1959, this book was translated to Turkish by the writer himself in 1966 with the name of *Yalnızlar* [The Lonely]. Öncü Basımevi took on the publication task. According to Biberyan, Turkish translation of the book was publicly acclaimed. Öncü Basımevi's book can still be found on online second-hand bookstores. Also, there is Aras Publishing's reviewed version of *Yalnızlar* which was published in 2000. It is still on the shelves of bookstores. All of Biberyan's books have been published by Aras, the contemporary successor of the long-standing Armenian publishing tradition in Turkey. Biberyan's memoir will probably be published by the end of 2019. Biberyan's other books in chronological order: *Dzove* [The Sea - stories] (1961 - Getronagan Alumni Association), *Angoudie Siraharner* [Penniless Lovers - novel] (1962 - TO Printing House) and *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse* [The Sunset of Ants - 1984]. The cover pictures of the Armenian first editions of *Slut* and *Penniless Lovers* present sketches from the writer himself. The Turkish translation of the latter, *Meteliksiz Âşıklar*, appeared for the first time in 2017 – just like the Armenian reprint of the same book and *The Sea*. *The Sunset of Ants* was serialized in the long-established Armenian paper *Jamanag* [Time] in 1970 and published into a book just before the writer's death in 1984. *The Sunset of Ants* will cover a crucial role and be discussed in the remaining chapters. Turkish translation of the original novel appeared as *Babam Aşkale'ye Gitmedi* [My Father Did Not Go to Ashkale] in 1998 (Aras Publishing). Although I have read those books from the original Armenian scripts, I will cite them with their English titles throughout the paper to make the reader's work easier.

Zaven Biberyan was born in Istanbul, Cengelkoy in 1921. One of the early turning points in his life was his family's relocation to Kadikoy. The neighborhood would mark its stamp on his life and for the most part of his life, except from his "voluntary exile" in Beirut, he would live there. Just like Zabel Esayan's devotion to Uskudar, he would be occupied with the depiction of Kadikoy, Moda, Fenerbahce in the background of his novels. Spontaneously, Kadikoy would initiate his first contact with one of the most extensive problems of the Armenian community which was trying to heal the wounds inherited from 1915. During the first decades of the Republican period, handling of *kaghtagans* was the main priority. He would reflect on this experience in his memoir with these sentences:

Nail Bey Street [where our family lived] was on the periphery of poor Çarıkçı District. Today this district does not exist but during those times, it was home to the immigrants from Anatolia, the remnants from the great Armenian exile, the ones washed up onto the shore in İstanbul after World War I. The children of these resentful families were of course hating the middle-class Istanbulers, those well-dressed, plumpy little monkeys,

that is to say me. They were forming gangs, sweeping through the district with wooden swords in their hands. My mother had banned me from speaking with those bad boys but I used to envy their lives and games. Nevertheless, as envious as I was, I was too young to resist my mother's orders, let alone having the courage to pollute my clean clothes. Gangs were particularly hating me. They were seeing me with my tidy outlook, loftily walking while holding my mother's hand and they recognized me. I used to admire them and aspire to earn their friendship. I did not understand why they were hating me.<sup>33</sup>

I would like to discuss *kaghtagans* briefly because the remaining Armenian population in Turkey was trying to tackle this problem with the vigorous efforts of the institutions and aid committees. This struggle will also demonstrate the structural vulnerability of the society. The direct translation of *kaghtagan* would be “immigrant” in Turkish. Some of the Armenians who were removed from their homes in the provinces during the exile returned back after surviving the death march. However, the ethnic pressure made their lives harder and caused them to migrate to Istanbul. The memoirs of Armenian orphans offer us important clues about the instability throughout the Armistice period. Karnig Panian was three and a half years old, when he was deported from Sivas with his family in 1915. In his memoir bearing the title *Goodbye Antoura*, Panian tells us about the days he spent in Antoura Orphanage. This orphanage established by Djemal Pasha was in Lebanon. After his defeat in World War I, the Ottoman Empire retreats from Lebanon and the Americans start to handle the management of the orphanage hosting hundreds of orphans like Panian. With the management's decision to move the orphans to Antep a tragic chapter begins. This repatriation will not prove to be long-lasting: During the turmoil in the city between Turks and Armenians, the orphanage gets attacked and one of the children dies with a bullet smashing through the window.<sup>34</sup> Turkish victory in the War of Independence and the withdrawal of the French troops from Antep, the orphans, whose fate is in jeopardy, return back to Lebanon. Although the abovementioned problems had to be solved urgently, the complicated situation in the Armistice period continued to occupy the agenda after 1923. The first twenty years of the Republican period saw the endless articles and news about the orphans and *kaghtagans* through the Armenian press of Istanbul.

The community's will to overcome these problems through organized efforts in spite of limited financial resources during the Armistice period, took its toll with the declaration of the new republic. As of 31st August 1923, 6.385 *kaghtagans* were living in thirteen *kaghtagaians* (immigrant house) all over Istanbul and the number of *kaghtagans* reached 7.036 in 1924; when the calendar marked 1939 there were two orphanages in Istanbul hosting five hundred

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<sup>33</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>34</sup> Karnig Panyan, *Elveda Antura*, translated by Maral Fuchs (Istanbul: Aras, 2018), p. 370.



*kaghtagans* and two hundred orphans.<sup>35</sup> This information makes clear that the maintenance of the orphans and the needs of *kaghtagans* could not be handled in short term. Also, as the surge from Anatolia to Istanbul continued due to the compelling conditions in the provinces, the process dragged on and on. Armenian newspapers, which only existed in Istanbul, made serious efforts to inform the public about what was going on. However, literature was still preserving its silence.

Zaven Biberyan's family also *got their share* from those catastrophes experienced by the Armenian people.<sup>36</sup> The family tree that Biberyan draws up in the first pages of his autobiography provides important information on the disastrous fate of the successive generations. His great maternal uncle, a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, was murdered by the Armenian revolutionaries during the bloody days of 1893; of his two half siblings, one was killed during the Great War while serving for the Ottoman army and the other passed away at the Armistice period due to the tuberculosis he caught on the poverty-stricken days of the WWI. This sinister turn of events would also hit Biberyan's father Levon-Ghevond. Although the Biberyans were not directly subjected to *aksor* (Arm. exile) in 1915, Levon-Ghevond was conscripted to the army after having been arrested unexpectedly in 1914.<sup>37</sup> This was a complete devastation for the family. His wife and daughter had to lead their life in very miserable conditions – Zaven was not born then. They were still residing in Cengelkoy and they managed to survive thanks to their benign landlord who rejected taking money from them until Levon-Ghevond's return. His tenure in the labor battalions of the army during WWI did not last long. After the initiative of his family and payment of *bedel*, he was exempted from the military service. However, returning to Istanbul was out of the question for the Armenians at that time and he had to live in Konya for four years. By working as a translator at the German headquarters –he was working with German companies in Istanbul before the war– he managed to ensure his safety. German protection for the exiled is an oft-encountered topic in Armenian testimonies. To give an example, a similar experience happened to Yervant Odyan, the most renowned Armenian writer of his time and the nephew of Krikor Odyan (co-writer of the 1876 Constitution alongside Mithat Pasha). In his testimony *Accursed Years*, Odyan realistically narrates his odyssey from 1915 to 1918. At one point, when all hopes of him to remain alive

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<sup>35</sup> Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> I chose to italicize this expression because Biberyan uses it in *Penniless Lovers*. In the second chapter, I will discuss this further.

<sup>37</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir

nears to an end, a German military officer hires him as an interpreter and saves his life.<sup>38</sup> To some extent, being under the German command provided protection for several Armenians during those unstable period. The end of the war signaled the return for Levon-Ghevond and he came back to Istanbul in 1918.<sup>39</sup>

After the Biberyans' settlement in Kadıkoy, the youngest member of the family, Zaven, starts to attend Dibar Grtaran (Model School), one of the most important institutions of the period. The students of this school in Bahariye, where a six-year education is given, were the sons of wealthy or well-off people. The founder, Madam Sultanyan, was the only person who can make Zaven afraid. Just as Zaven Biberyan, Vartan Ihmalyan, another member of Nor Or Generation, attended this school. Biberyan was an infovore because he had literacy before starting school while Vartan Ihmalyan was impressing Madam Sultanyan with his Armenian compositions. These two, although studying in different periods, were mischievous kids. On the one hand, Madam Sultanyan was very fond of them since she viewed them as smart lads. However, they stirred the pot during lectures. Later, in their respective memoirs, both Vartan Ihmalyan and Zaven Biberyan would shed light on a surprising coincidence. Without knowing each other's experience, they cite Madam Sultanyan's bold claim made to their mothers: "Your son will either be a great man or a tramp."<sup>40</sup> The lives of both would be filled with bitterness. Ihmalyan eventually came into conclusion that continuing his cause in Turkey would mean fighting in vain and he left his country for good; and a three and a half years long "voluntary exile" fell to Biberyan's lot. Against all the pressure, these two members of the first Armenian intellectual group in the post-Republican period dedicated their lives to their causes. Even though this struggle sometimes isolated them, they never ceased to look for the ways to improve social conditions. In the tragic case of Biberyan, he was neither appreciated enough in his lifetime nor received the respect he deserved.

After completing his early education in Dibar Grtaran, he registered to the Saint Joseph College of the French. This was a brand new experience for him. He started studying with Turkish students under the same roof but the way school operated and priests behaved arose to some question marks on his mind. The fuse of his future fight for equality was lighted here:

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<sup>38</sup> Yervant Odian, *Accursed Years*, translated by Ara Stepan Melkonian (London: Gomidas Institute, 2009), p. 189

<sup>39</sup> This unending line of catastrophes which make their presence known to all the members of family trees holds a huge place in *The Sunset of Ants*. The characters of this novel, which embraces a twenty-year period beginning with WWI and ending at the second half of 1950's, will be discussed in the second chapter.

<sup>40</sup> Vartan Ihmalyan, *Bir Yaşam Öyküsü* (Istanbul: Cem, 2012), s. 30.

Here everything was different from my dear school Dibar Grtaran. Over there, I used to think that I was on the center of the world and felt home. [...] I was not the son of a little bourgeois family who was more or less equal with everybody anymore; I was a gâvur kid who had to continue his education among the kids of bigwig Turkish or Greek families and Turkish deputies without drawing too much attention.<sup>41</sup>

In his childhood, Biberyan acquired a higher level of awareness than his peers thanks to the books he read. The movies, which would later become a never-ending passion for him, and in his own words “especially patriotic and revolutionary films” whipped him up in his quest for the procurement of injustice. The priests were making the matter worse. Their disposition to maintain the hierarchical structure among the students rather than eliminating ethnic concerns in school was fanning the flames for Biberyan. The complaint from one of the priests about Biberyan’s attitude sums up the situation: “But Madam, just think, he supposes that he can do what the Turkish students do.” These early experiences would make him an atheist. Yet, after learning French in college, he continued his literary journey with that language. Years later, in his letter to Hrant Paluyan, he would claim: “My culture is French.”<sup>42</sup> The influence of French writers, especially Lamartine, shaped the course of his early literary adventure. Again, we can infer from his letter to Paluyan that until his twenties he had written a couple of French novels.

The great shock he experienced in Saint Joseph was his second encounter with injustice after his days with *kaghtagans* in Kadikoy. In this period, his political views and artistic stance gradually started to take shape. His memoir clearly sheds light on Biberyan’s struggle to find a method of resistance against all kinds of pressure. We see that in one way or another he had managed to react; such as his intentional disruption of the religion lesson given by the priests in Saint Joseph. However, he could not stand the distorted running of the school and to make matters worse his family’s financial crisis caused him to drop out from school.

His drop out of school meant a new journey for him. He began working with the thought that financial independence would bring freedom to live his life during his adolescence. This venture lasted for approximately six months. Initially, he started working with one of his father’s friends. This was followed by another short-term stint but he found out that the drive to dominate and exploit did exist in business life as well, in fact much more brutally. After his disappointing business career, he took up studying from where he left and registered at Commercial Sciences Academy (Ticari İlimler Akademisi). It had been two years since he dropped out of college. The ethnic discrimination and injustice in the College did not exist

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<sup>41</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>42</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani,” [Letter to Hrant Paluyan] in *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyze* (Istanbul: Aras, 2007), p. 550.

there. He was viewed as a top student and one of his lecturers were the famous figure of Mehmet Ali Aybar who would later get nominated for the parliament in the same party with Biberyan. He had read relentlessly in that two-year span and thanks to his perseverance he overtook his classmates in every department. However, injustice found its way to reach Biberyan once again. After some time, he was alienated to his surroundings. A demonstration which took place during the tense days of pre-World War period changed his political perspective.

It was the day Great Hatay Demonstration was organized. The delegates of universities made speeches and tried to convince us to attend the demonstration. That was a patriotic duty. Patriotism was sacred at that time and neglecting it was the biggest dishonor. [...] I went there alone, to be right, with a friend whom I did not like at all. I walked hastily from Beyazit University to Taksim Square; on the road, I encountered with two barricades formed by the police singing out patriotic marches and crying out slogans. When we reached Tunel Square in Beyoglu, the mounted police attacked us with their swords. As I was trying to escape, I slipped on the tram way and got stuck between two horses racing towards me. I was almost crushed under their angry horseshoes. Eventually, I left there with my muddy overcoat. Nevertheless, I continued my way up until the Taksim Square. At the end of the demonstration, when I was on my way home, I started to feel disappointed and regret coming. The crowd started to disband but some nondescript flock joined them; they were attacking the shops of the Christians. A patriotic demonstration against the enemy was once again getting corrupt by the rage targeting the citizens. Suddenly, I felt a weird desolation in the middle of the crowd. Like I was a stranger. And that feeling of stupidity and being deceived. In any case, the youth fighting with the armed forces for the honor and interests of the country, that perfect, exciting, romantic epic was gone. Heroes of the day were having fun by bullying the mild and coward Christian artisans who had nothing to do with Hatay.<sup>43</sup>

Being the scapegoat was not a thing he could bear and for the first time, he –as an equal citizen of Turkey– was witnessing the ethnic hatred inflamed by an issue regarding foreign policy. In the latter stages of his life, he would experience the same discrimination with different manifestations but would not silently walk away like he did in Hatay demonstration. He was to lead the Armenian press at the end of WWII against the attacks of Turkish press when repatriation call to Soviet Armenia made by the USSR and the land request of the Armenian organizations in the USA would drop like a bombshell. Leading opinion makers of the Turkish press, who were guided by the policy and interests of the state, would increase the pressure on the Armenians of Turkey by perpetually demanding a firm statement from them indicating their loyalty to the Turkish state. Biberyan –and *Nor Or* Generation– was to confront these provocative articles. The cause of this generation was to end the incontestable superiority based on ethnic origin. However, in spite of his sympathetic approach to *Nor Or* columnists, he always maintained his own line. In that time span, he answered the provocative articles of the Turkish press from both *Nor Or* [New Day] and *Nor Lour* [New News]. He wanted to raise his voice

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<sup>43</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

against the unjust practices which dated back to the times of the Ottoman Empire. He dealt with this continuity in two different phases: A political struggle to break and a literary quest to manifest. A similar experiment would later be conducted by Hrant Dink in the second half of the 90's. He was to establish *Agos*, the first bilingual newspaper (Armenian and Turkish) of the Republican period. Facing hardships and censorships like his precursor Biberyan, he would talk about “a pigeon-like unease of spirit”.<sup>44</sup> As of now, I would like to trace the roots of this unease in the life of Zaven Biberyan. His time was an era of catastrophes succeeding the Catastrophe and as far as I am concerned, they were inseparably interwoven.

## **1.2. “I HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN BETWEEN TWO CATASTROPHES WAITING FOR THE NEXT TO COME”**

The increasing tension in Europe up until 1939 was the precursor of a new war. This period, in which the basic strategy of the Party-State was remaining non-belligerent,<sup>45</sup> marked the annexation of Hatay. The policies of such fascist regimes as Italy and Germany would be adopted by Turkey, the Turkish-German Treaty of Friendship in 1941 would demonstrate the intimacy of the relations. Under these circumstances, military service brought about serious concerns for the non-Muslims. With the Incident of Twenty Classes many Christians in Turkey was drafted to the army, for some this was their second or third stint. Zaven Biberyan, who would be drafted before this tragic practice, was aware of the dangers awaiting him. He tried to escape Bulgaria at the age of nineteen. In his memoir, when he talks about the possibility of being a soldier for the Turkish army, he gives away his mood: “I would do everything not to wear the uniform of those whom I have to hate.”<sup>46</sup> After his unsuccessful first attempt because of a problem in his passport and returning back to Istanbul, he had to overcome a series of bureaucratic obstacles. As German aggression reached its peak and Bulgaria was in a vulnerable position, his journey to Plovdiv became very nerve-wracking. However, this tension would disappear into the blue when he started talking the Bulgarian passengers in his compartment:

For the first time in my life, being an Armenian gave me an advantage and favored me instead of causing trouble. I think all the Armenians in Turkey, living in a hostile terrorizing, uncertain environment, were longing for warmth, relaxation, freedom, emancipation from the pressures and threats of all kinds. How could an Armenian,

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<sup>44</sup> For the full English version of Hrant Dink's article see <http://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/14061/agos-archive-a-pigeon-like-unease-of-my-spirit> (accessed 29 April 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Baskın Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşı'ndan Bugüne Olgular Belgeler ve Yorumlar*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: İletişim, 2013), p. 394.

<sup>46</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

accustomed to see darkened faces, frowned eyebrows and animosity when he mentions his name, not get shocked upon such an unexpected sympathy, shown just because he was Armenian?<sup>47</sup>

*Relaxation* rather than being pinched in a clamp. In contrast to Turkey, his days in Bulgaria were “without politics, care, grudge, tediousness, the thought of tomorrow, anxiety.” Not just the people, his first impression of Plovdiv was very positive: “A peaceful, lukewarm, taxi-less city.” However, this sense of safety and euphoria did not last long. This time it was the Armenians who caused discomfort for him. After the exile in 1915, many Armenians had fled to Bulgaria and even this small city was home to a considerable Armenian population and revolutionaries. He tried to establish contact with them but the situation was more complicated than what he had imagined. At one point, he met a former Tashnak revolutionary which turned out to be a disappointing encounter. They did not share the same ambitions. The works or memoirs he read during his stay in Bulgaria confused his mind as well. His sympathy towards Tashnaks received a serious blow. Things went from bad to worse when the Armenians of Plovdiv turned their back on him because of a love affair. He was on the verge of an existential crisis with his individual happiness and ideals in jeopardy. That was when his yearning started to become much more apparent and he sank into nostalgia. These lines in his memoir reflect the deduction Biberyan made from this experience: “Probably, the reason I have not settled somewhere else even today is my commitment to the land I was born in. Maybe at the cost of my own life!”<sup>48</sup> After staying in Bulgaria for some months, he could not get the necessary documents to make his stay permanent. So, military service became inevitable. During his three and a half years of military service, he would experience the devastation in his very existence and main cause of this would be the intervention policy of the state.

Zaven Biberyan was conscripted to the army in 1941 and given into the service of Nafia. His forty-two months long odyssey started at Borchka. Then Trabzon, Gumushane, Akhisar, Adana, Iskenderun... Each stop with new uncertainties, struggles and deprivation. “These concentration camps that the world ignores, but which in the background, have little difference with those of the Nazis”<sup>49</sup> were centers of forced labor and survival depended on different and imaginative strategies. These rankless recruits were subjected to discrimination every single day and had to work tirelessly. “We were starving to be treated like a human being, like a friend, like a citizen.”<sup>50</sup> The intimidation was not limited to the higher ranked officials but also Kurdish

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<sup>47</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

soldiers were trying to harass the Armenians and create brawls. This catastrophic experience left its mark on Zaven Biberyan. One of the most striking statements of him on Nafia years can be found in his letter to Paluyan: “I pity those three and a half years. The best three and a half years of my adolescence was wasted on wild mountains and jungles.”<sup>51</sup> Just then, Biberyan’s peer and one of the committed members of Turkish Communist Party, Vartan Ihmalyan started his military service in July 1941 as a Twenty Class Soldier. That was his second time in the army. He had been discharged in March, returned back in the hope of continuing his education in Robert College but for months after his initial service he was on his way to Denizli. He remembers those days:

Twenty classes all in one breath, my Turkish friends were very upset about such a draft of us, minorities. They were saying: “This is not a good sign, there are rumors, people are saying they are taking you in order to kill, be careful, if they call you some place, never go alone, go with groups.” As if the choice of not going alone was left on our hands...<sup>52</sup>

The soldiers of The Twenty Classes included many Armenian intellectuals such as Ara Kocunyan (the editor of daily *Jamanag*), Yervant Gobelyan (writer and editor) and Haygazun Kalustyan (poet). During his stay in Akhisar, where he was a nurse as a part of the *Erkan*<sup>53</sup> group, Zaven Biberyan was in the same squadron with Dario Moreno as well. Back then he was not the Dario Moreno we know now. As a Smyrnian Jew, he was there to serve his military service as a part of the Twenty Classes. However, Biberyan was in Istanbul when the Twenty Classes practice took the Armenians by surprise. He was not in Akhisar yet – that would be his second to last stop. While he was laboring in the construction of a dining hall in Gumushane – around the Black Sea region– he fell seriously ill and got the permit to return home temporarily. These statements in his memoir starkly shows the collective memory of the Armenians in Istanbul:

Exactly on this day of May 10, 1941, a surprise drama was played in Istanbul: twenty classes of non-Muslim reservists were literally rounded up. They were taken from their homes, torn out of their beds, stopped in the street, at work, even in churches (weddings or funerals), and cemeteries. They were directly thrust into camps. The unsubmissive were threatened. There was a commotion of deportation among the non-Turkish population of the city. The women, tears in their eyes, anguish in their faces, were preparing the items of their father, husband, brother and son. Hosiery, woolen underwear, sweaters, medicines, and medicines were hastily obtained. They were going, God knows where, towards an unknown fate because it was not a regular recruitment.

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<sup>51</sup> Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani”, in *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 550.

<sup>52</sup> Ihmalyan, *Bir Yaşam Öyküsü*, p. 72.

<sup>53</sup> “The squad of bureaucratic aristocracy” for Biberyan. To be a part of these high ranking officials and to dine or sleep with them one had to pay the required money. The main prerequisite was that. Biberyan managed to become a nurse and a part of the Erkan thanks to the bribe he paid to some intermediate. See. Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

It was not proclaimed or decided by special law passed in the Assembly, as set out by the Constitution. And it only concerned non-Turks. It was weird, abnormal and scary. We were expecting anything to happen, we can predict everything. The memories of 1915 were waking up. People were thinking that the ones who had left would not come back. Farewells everywhere. The women, the old men, and the little ones watched them with tears in their eyes, with the tacit conviction that they went to the slaughterhouse, as in 1915.<sup>54</sup>

These type of expressions are abundant in the testimonies which are related to the pre-1915 period. The images from 1894-1896 massacres come back to haunt the “hard-bitten” (Tur. *görmüş geçirmiş*). The specter of mass killings revolve around the minds of the elderly. Although it had been twenty five years since the Catastrophe, the sequence had just begun. The signals coming from the depth of collective memory in such moments of insecurity and danger were taking up a huge space in the literary works of Zaven Biberyan.

The three and a half years in the military were really compelling for Biberyan. His memoir shows us that he has faced death and taken to the hospital many times because of severe exhaustion and physical collapse. Hard labor and malnutrition made these hospital brakes very important for all the soldiers including Biberyan. In the case of a Twenty Class, if one fakes an illness and plays his role convincingly, that will bring a nice meal in the hospital in relatively comfortable conditions. Biberyan tells us about one of his friends who tries to get into the hospital with the hope of being warranted a permission, even a certificate of disability; however, nobody in the hospital manages to diagnose the illness and the soldier stays in the hospital under the control of the doctor. We can read this hospital image parallel to the experience of the Armenian orphans. These orphans were scattered all along the Middle East after 1915. Antranig Dzarugian (Sivas, Gurun 1913-Paris, 1989), one of the most well-known writers of Western Armenian literature, narrates his orphanage days in his memoir *Mangoutioun Chunetsogh Martig* in Beirut. Hospital is adored as a lifesaver by the orphans including Dzarugian: “The hospital was heaven in the Earth for us. When one entered there, he would have a single dream: never going outside. And after going out, the same dream: returning back there.”<sup>55</sup> The reservists were living under very harsh conditions and as Biberyan mentions, they were sleeping in the tents over the grass. So, hospital meant a credible bed and substantial nutrition. By the

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<sup>54</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>55</sup> Antranig Dzarugian, *Çocukluğu Olmayan Adamlar*, translated by Klemans Zakaryan Çelik (Istanbul: Aras, 2016), p. 77.



way, cleanliness was a serious issue during the military service as louses were everywhere in the barracks or dormitories.<sup>56</sup>

But every cloud has a silver lining. Or should we call it an ominous inspiration? The physical and psychological devastation of this three and a half year span did not leave him in peace for a long time and thirty years later, he transformed this two-way experience –not only of the departed but also of the remnant– into a work of art. As a future journalist, novelist and politician, he always set his eyes firmly on the reality. During his military service, he saw several towns and had the time to analyze Anatolia’s sociocultural structure. The fellow Laz and Kurdish soldiers he met in Borchka, Gumushane or Akhisar confessed their identities as Islamized Armenians. This was the first clue for him about this type of an Armenian existence in Anatolia. Twenty years after the Catastrophe he was discovering such a shocking reality and this reality found its way into his novels.<sup>57</sup> In his memoir, he stresses the poverty in Anatolia and identifies himself with them. The main reason behind this identification is the disengagement from his urban identity: “Only now I can fully understand what happened to all those Anatolian people who have been treated like hicks throughout their lives, wretched, ridiculed, threatened, frustrated because of deprivation.”<sup>58</sup> Last but not least, Zaven Biberyan made a strong effort to improve his Armenian during the military service because at that time, he was writing poems and novels in French under the influence of French culture and writers. From his letter to Paluyan, we learn that he looked for each and every Armenian word in the dictionary and checked their spelling one by one.<sup>59</sup>

The Armenians in Turkey did not have wait long for a new catastrophe to arrive. This time the government’s target was to break the commercial power of Armenian merchants with the Wealth Tax. It was implemented during Biberyan’s military service and became one of the biggest tragedies of the Republican period. According to this law, which aimed at creating a Muslim bourgeoisie and tariffed the non-Muslims and apostates much harsher than the Muslim citizens, the minorities not being able to pay the total sum were sent to the labor camps in Askale.<sup>60</sup> Some sold all their belongings and paid these arbitrarily decided taxes at the expense

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<sup>56</sup> This issue of cleanliness would later be discussed in *The Sunset of Ants*. After the completion of his service, upon returning home, Baret directly visits a bathhouse, in a way tries to regain his urban life habits and standards. However, he fails to readapt his formal life and gradually distances himself from his family. The destruction of this bond and afterwards alienation are what Biberyan tries to express. The result is again a devastation for all, nobody can escape the deterioration from within.

<sup>57</sup> All three of his novels include sharp observations about village life and peasants. I will analyze his perception and the way he conveys it through his works in the second chapter.

<sup>58</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>59</sup> Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani” *Mrchewnerou Verchalouyze*, p. 550.

<sup>60</sup> Rifat N. Bali, “20 Sınıf İhtiyat Olayı”, *Cumhuriyet Dergi*, no. 717, 19 December 1999.

of giving up their prestigious position in the social hierarchy for good.<sup>61</sup> This latest blow of the state once again showed that the minorities were hostages rather than being the free citizens of Turkish state. And Biberyan was ready to wage his war against the reactionary forces who produced and maintained this anti-Armenian habitus.

### 1.3. THE “KNIGHT” OF ARMENIAN PRESS

The initial contact of Zaven Biberyan with the Armenian press was during his short stay in Istanbul before going to Akhisar to serve in the army. With the help of a friend he started sending articles to *Marmara* and used the pseudonym D. Mardirosyan for a while. However, the real leap came thanks to his fellow Twenty Class, Ara Kocunyan, who was the editor of daily *Jamanag*. His serial called “Krisdoneoutian Vaghdjane” [The Death of Christianity] received wide attention and harsh critics because of his radical discourse in 1945. 1945-1946 was the period Biberyan became one of the Armenian opinion leaders and devoted himself to his cause. The reason why I chose this title is Biberyan’s disposition to view himself as a “knight” in his memoir. A Lamartineian romanticism can be noticed in such an expression.

I am well aware that I have not brought up a literary discussion yet. This confession of Biberyan will make my point much more clear: “I noticed quite late that it was not possible for me to produce in the intense periods of life. I can only produce in temporary, short serene moments.”<sup>62</sup> These serene moments were very few throughout his life. All of his published novels were written after his return from Beirut, beginning with 1950s. His first story “Yerek Unger Eink” [We Were Three Friends] appeared in *Jamanag* in 1945. Nevertheless, World War II had come to an end with a ton of uncertainties. On the verge of a new world politics, the Armenian press would witness the birth of young intellectuals who were ready to countervail the accusations and provocations of the Turkish press. The news of such a movement, alongside the great purge of the Leftist intellectuals –among whom there were a lot of people he was going to collaborate with– came to Biberyan’s ears during the last days of his military service in Akhisar: “A comrade [...] whispered in my ear that there was already, in Istanbul, a circle of Armenian patriots who were trying to create an animation, a revival of the national feeling, by progressive publications. I had no idea. But it made my blood boil and I was dying to find myself among them.”<sup>63</sup> He was itching to do his bit for the sake of the common cause and the

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<sup>61</sup> *The Sunset of Ants* revolves around a similar story. I will open this discussion in the second chapter.

<sup>62</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*

contribution he made to this struggle, those intense days kept Zaven Biberyan away from literature.

The Yalta Conference, which took place during the short intimacy period between the USA and the USSR after World War II was an initiative to reestablish the system. Thereby, the subsequent San Francisco Conference –the base of the United Nations– was very important for the Turkish state. This conference was watched by the Turkish press very closely. While the world politics was heading towards a quiet phase, the Soviets started to follow an aggressive agenda against Turkey who had signed the Treaty of Friendship with the Nazi Germany before the war. The following repatriation call of the Soviets and the land request of the Armenian National Council of America, again supported by the Soviets, triggered the reaction of Turkish press. The council sent a note to the conference: “What would be more natural for Armenians outside that budding new land to want to return to their homeland and join hands with their brethren? The time has come that the Armenia which is under Turkish rule be joined to the existing free and independent Armenia within the bounds of Soviet Union.”<sup>64</sup> Zaven Biberyan became the editor of bi-weekly *Nor Lour* [New News] which had thirty years of a history. During this three-month long stint, he grew into one of the strongest columnists of the Armenian press.

His production was not limited to the articles published in *Nor Lour*. He made concessions from his individualist approach and rather than going after his cause alone, joined the forces with the *Nor Or* group. *Nor Or* newspaper, first weekly then became daily, was established in 1945 and hosted the first post-1915 Armenian intellectual generation. This union of public figures would be called Nor Or Generation (*Nor Orian Serount*). Founded by Avedis Aliksanyan, A. Savars and S. K. (Sarkis Kecyan) Zanku, most members of this group were active in the political sphere as communists and socialists. There were members of the Turkish Communist Party such as Vartan Ihmalyan (engineer) and Jak Ihmalyan (painter) supporting the newspaper with their articles, poems or pictures. “Weekly newspaper focusing on literature, art and social life” was the slogan of *Nor Or* and Zaven Biberyan contributed to the first issue with his article “Khosk yev Bernard Shaw” (Word and Bernard Shaw). The manifesto signed by the editorial staff was suggesting the need to build the social dynamics on a new basis after the war and promised to keep up the fight:

When World War I ended, the ones who stayed connected to the pre-war thinking spiritually and mentally lost their paths in the face of new events and were stupefied.

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<sup>64</sup> Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 143.

We can probably say the same, even more, for this post-war period. Today, the world mostly seem restless and fiery. When the communities enter such a transitional period, just like we are experiencing now, it always goes like that. In this transitional period, societies review all their values which belong to the past and are obliged to lay the foundation of present and future on totally different and new terms.<sup>65</sup>

These intellectuals were addressing the policy makers to “review all [the] values which belong to the past.” As the Armenian question was a hot topic in the agenda, this presented a dilemma for them. On the one hand, they had to maintain the energy to counter the accusing articles –the general tendency was to blame the Armenians as the “fifth column”– of the Turkish opinion makers. This was used as the mainstay to aggravate the hatred and exacerbate the living conditions of the Armenians in Turkey. On the other hand, this might have been a crucial point in history where a struggle arising from the Armenian question may transform into a broader insurrection thanks to these progressivist figures. For the first time after 1915, the Armenian intellectuals were turning their attention away from the internal matters and wholly participating in a nationwide political struggle. The focal point of their combat was the undemocratic political climate which produced injustice and favored a group at the expense of a powerless other.

Well, what were the components and characteristics of this denialist habitus of Turkey? Firstly, the systematic program of obscurity. The fate of the Armenians remained uncertain after the proclamation of the Republic as the Armenian community was still bearing the traces of 1915. As mentioned at the start of the chapter, there was the issue of *kaghatağans* (immigrants). These people, living in the remote parts of the Asia Minor before making their way to Istanbul, were the direct victims of this anti-Armenian habitus. They could not grant the permission to have their schools under any circumstance and had to attend public school.<sup>66</sup> The executive organs of the Armenian community were robbed of their power and ability to resolve the problems. This denialist habitus that disseminated insecurity had three different phases:

[Firstly] any historical approach toward Armenians in Turkey or elsewhere was considered a threat to the perpetuation of the entire denialist construct. Secondly, the isolation of the Armenians remaining in Turkey from other diasporas was intrinsic to this habitus, as was the expectation that the Armenians remaining in Turkey express themselves in line with the Turkish official position. [...] Third, Soviet

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<sup>65</sup> *Nor Or*, no. 1, 21 July 1945.

<sup>66</sup> There are many examples in this direction. Hayk Acikgoz, the veteran member of the Communist Party, was born in Samsun in 1918. Before coming to Istanbul, he received his education in a public school. For detailed information see. Hayk Açıkgöz, *Bir Ermeni Komünistin Anıları* (Istanbul: Belge, 2004). One of the most renowned Armenian writers of the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Migirdic Margosyan shared a similar fate. He was born in Diyarbakir in 1933. Before leaving for Istanbul to attend an Armenian school, he received his education in Suleyman Nazif Elementary School and Ziya Gokalp Junior High School. Only after his stint in Bezciyan and Getronagan that he was able to learn Armenian and write in that language. See. Mıgırdiç Margosyan, *Tespîh Taneleri* (Istanbul: Aras, 2006).

Armenia's immigration call, conjoined with the territorial claims, revived the fifth column accusation against Armenians.<sup>67</sup>

Thereby, newly formed Republic –some of its parliament members were formerly linked with the Committee of Union Progress– declared a silent official consensus. Mainstream papers such as *Tasvir*, *Sabah*, *Son Posta* or *Akşam*, whose editors were close to the administrative circles, was giving a wide publicity to the demands of the diaspora organizations or the Soviets and inculcating the Armenians of Istanbul by not differentiating them from the multipartite diaspora. However, contrary to these newspapers Armenian periodicals had a very limited reader base. This generation of Armenian intellectuals were retaliating from their own columns without abstaining from speaking out loud and were sometimes writing their articles in Turkish to let themselves be heard. At such a time, when criticism against the government practices was thought as a threat and might cause the closure of a newspaper,<sup>68</sup> Aram Pehlivanian (A. Saydan of the Communist Party) and Zaven Biberyan were shouldering the load together and fearlessly attacking the anti-Armenian dispositions of Turkish press.

1945 also marked the year during which Turkey was at the threshold of a deep structural change in the form of a forced democracy. As the Soviet aggression forced Turkey to the wall, the USA emerged as the ultimate ally and was perceived as an “impeccable savior”.<sup>69</sup> The kick start of the liberalization campaign stretched into the politics. This brought along the transition to a multi-party system. Biberyan was hopeful and waiting for a change of fortunes for the Armenians in Turkey:

The spring of 1945 is a memorable date. Germany collapsed, a nightmare that had lasted five and a half years was ending – for both the world and the Armenian community. Heads were recovering, new hopes were reborn. It was truly a spring full of promise, an irresistible revival around the world. Coming out of concentration camps, forced labor and the Wealth Tax, the Armenian community was as vibrant with vitality as it had been for twenty years.<sup>70</sup>

He was impatiently waiting for this period of vital importance and joined Esat Adil Mustecaplioglu's Socialist Party after the initiative of Avedis Aliksanyan. This meant another channel to pursue his cause. Until then, he had been operating through his own means and

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<sup>67</sup> Talin Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 126.

<sup>68</sup> The surveillance of Turkish authorities was very far-reaching. The tendencies of the Armenian newspapers and editors were being reported on a regular basis. *Nor Or*'s reputation as an outright newspaper brought it under the scrutiny. Biberyan and Pehlivanian's articles were especially translated as both writers were well-known leftists. For more information on the extent of the surveillance see Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 132-136.

<sup>69</sup> Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası*, p. 493.

<sup>70</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

within a confined community. Surprisingly for Biberyan, the people with whom he would pursue a common goal was Turkish:

For the first time, in this milieu of “communists”, I discovered the equality, the fraternity, the frankness between Armenians and Turks. But it was so new and incredible, for me, that I remained skeptical and even felt some discomfort. [...] The memory of all that I had endured was too much alive. I did not suffer to forget everything, to renounce revenge, to treat peace. I had to fight again. To fight especially against the Turkish power. And I did not imagine a fight in which I would have Turks as allies.<sup>71</sup>

He never thought that this struggle could be given with Turkish because the main aim was to eliminate the superiority of an ethnic group, in this case of the Turks. The characteristics of Turkey’s habitus surely had something to do with the long-established non-Muslim disposition. Not only were the inheritance of the collective memory, but also his own experiences had led him to this conclusion. He was strictly protesting against the usual inclination to attack the Armenians in Turkey when a problem with the diaspora emerged, just as it did in the San Francisco Conference. During his three-month stint in *Nor Lur* as editor in-chief the sales rate of the newspaper hit record high. He was publishing the paper almost on his own; so as to make the best of this opportunity and let himself be heard, he started to sign his articles with different pen names as well. He used the pseudonyms Ani Azad (Free) –which was a women name and probably a reference to the ancient city of Ani– and Nemesis. After his takeover, this newspaper, normally selling 200-300 copies, were selling four thousand copies. The turning point was 5 January 1946; that issue included his famous article “Al Ge Pawhe” (this article will be discussed in the next page). This was a historic day for the paper because the issue was sold out and hit the black market for fifty times of its original price.<sup>72</sup> In his memoir, Biberyan recalls that day as if it was the first victory of his fierce campaign: “The shudder that swept through all layers of the population was no longer that of anguish or anger, but of selfless enthusiasm.” However, the leap toward democracy left the leftist elements out. A gradually intensifying period of McCarthyism stormed through the politics.<sup>73</sup> During the days of the raid on *Tan* press and the hard anti-communist campaigns *Nor Lour* would receive a threat letter because of the outrageous articles of Biberyan.<sup>74</sup> The most striking of these articles was abovementioned “Al Ge Pawhe” [Enough is Enough] which was published the day the Democrat Party announced its establishment.<sup>75</sup> It would leave its mark on history as one of the

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası*, p. 492.

<sup>74</sup> Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 134.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 138.

unforgettable cries arising from Armenian press. In his article, covering the three quarters of the paper, Biberyan was discussing the pressure applied on the Armenians during the first two decades of the Republican period. He was aware of the reason why the Armenians sudden rose to prominence: “The issue of *nerkaght* (return home) provided some journalists with the opportunity to harshly criticize the Armenians once again.”<sup>76</sup> Without holding anything in him, he was enlisting the provocative columnists of the Turkish press such as Murat Sertoglu, Peyami Safa and Asım Us. This was a call for the Turkish newspapers to stop the anti-Armenian campaign:

Enough is enough gentlemen! Enough is enough! The name of the Armenians is not a toy for your mouths. It cannot be, it should not be. The Armenian people have pride as well. It is wrong to ignore this truth.<sup>77</sup>

Also, Biberyan was claiming that the Armenian press did their best to establish a strong bond with the Turkish press and from then on it was their turn to show sincerity: “What did they receive in return for this service and duty? Only humiliation and doubt from their Turkish colleagues.”<sup>78</sup> He was also signing his articles by the names of Nemesis and Ani Azad. He now had a media outlet to transmit his ideas the public and was using it to the fullest.<sup>79</sup> After this bold article, he did not back down and continued to hit back. His target was *Tasvir* which was giving place to the historical distortions. Biberyan was furious:

If it is necessary to open the old accounts, we can do it as well. If it necessary to count each and every dead bodies of the past, we can count them as well; because like all off the nations in the world, even more than them, we have our dead bodies to count. And probably we have even more words for *Tasvir* and its supporters who are responsible for the millions of dead bodies lying around us.<sup>80</sup>

This transformation of the newspaper was made public in the next issue. In a segment with the title of “Mer Untertsoghneroun” [To Our Readers], the new period in *Nor Lour* was announced: “The editorial staff of *Nor Lour* has decided to turn the newspaper into an oasis in this desert of Armenian journalism.”<sup>81</sup> The newspaper started to follow a more political track and frequently gave place to the news from the Soviet Armenia. Biberyan was more willing to

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<sup>76</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Al Ge Pawhe”, *Nor Lour*, no. 95, 5 January 1946.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>80</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Verchin Aztararutioun Krkrichneroun” [Last Warning for the Provocateurs], *Nor Lour*, no. 98, 15 January 1946.

<sup>81</sup> *Nor Lour*, no. 99, 19 January 1946.

declare his opinions directly about the issue of *nerkaght*. He was viewing this as “a last opportunity” which may open the “salvation door in front of the Armenians.”<sup>82</sup>

At this period, he had a beef with *Marmara*’s editor in-chief Suren Samliyan who had also worked in *Cumhuriyet* for some time and had connections with the bureaucrats in Ankara. Samliyan was attacking both *Nor Lour* and *Nor Or*. On the other hand, Biberyan was not having it. He responded as strong as he could with two separate articles. The first one, a long article with the title “Paroiagan Tas Me” [An Ethical Lesson] probably did not satisfy Biberyan and he added a note at the end of another article. He had the intention to destroy Samliyan: “We leave the lost S. Samliyan to his inevitable death. Curse his black memory!”<sup>83</sup> Samliyan claimed that Biberyan was too feverish and reckless. He thought Biberyan’s attitude might have serious repercussions for the community. However, the serious blow came from the state and the target was the leftist intellectuals. During the great detention wave in 1946, most members of Nor Or Generation –Aram Pehlivanian, Avedis Aliksanyan, Zaven Biberyan, Jak and Vartan Ihmalyan– were arrested. Biberyan’s detention was not related to his political activities. Surely his socialist views had played its part; however the main reason was his answer to the aforementioned threat latter in *Nor Lour*. He was inviting the aggressors to the editorial office. For this reason he was imprisoned for six months. He spent his first month in the building of National Security Service which was in Sanasaryan Inn, Kadikoy. Later, he was relocated to the military prison in Harbiye. His detention caused an uproar in the diaspora: “Armenians in Europe and America continued to stone Turkey. Turkey imprisoned an Armenian writer who had called for justice, equality and the right to live. All the Armenian press in the diaspora spoke only about that. I later saw newspapers where it was said: ‘Zaven Biberyan was arrested and sent to an unknown direction.’”<sup>84</sup>

During his days in Harbiye, he spent his time with people who shared his world view and philosophy. Ironically, only here had he the chance to talk to them without the fear of being watched:<sup>85</sup>

I noticed with astonishment that the prison was the only place in Turkey, where there was absolute freedom and breaking the famous articles 141-142 of the Penal Code were

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<sup>82</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Badmagan Nshmarner” [Fragments of History], *Nor Lour*, no. 100, 22 January 1946.

<sup>83</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Hayots Badmutioun yev Doktor Safet Engin” [Armenian History and Doctor Safet Engin], *Nor Lour*, no. 103, 2 February 1946.

<sup>84</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>85</sup> This surveillance issue would later find its way in his novel *Penniless Lovers*. In this novel, the lovers, wishing to remain alone and away from people’s eyes, are surrounded by *röntgencis* – these people are ready to give the lovers away. I will discuss this theme further in the second chapter.



out of the question. Those who had made the mistake of breaking it “outside”, there enjoyed the freedom they coveted.<sup>86</sup>

He was later released thanks to the press repentance law. Upon his release, with the invite of Avedis Aliksanyan, he started to work at *Nor Or*.<sup>87</sup> However, the paper –as a twist of fate the Communist Party as well– was shut down in December 1946 with the decision of martial law.

What happened to *Nor Or* and the members of Nor Or Generation? Avedis Aliksanyan (1910-1984) established *Aisor* after *Nor Or* got shut down; however his departure to Marseille meant the end of the paper in 1949.<sup>88</sup> He lost his life in France. By the 1950s, Nor Or Generation was scattered around the different countries of Europe and the Middle East. Only one of them returned: Zaven Biberyan. I will discuss this below. Although still believing in and following their cause, one by one they decided to resume their struggles for equality and justice from another centers. After staying in prison for three years, Aram Pehlivanian left Turkey because of his looming and obligatory military service. He settled in Syria and then moved to Eastern Germany, Leipzig in 1958. He resumed his revolutionary activities and became the politburo member for the Communist Party. He passed away in 1979.<sup>89</sup> Vartan of Ihmalyan brothers moved to Paris in 1948 and Jak, after his six months of imprisonment, decided to settle in Beirut. Vartan Ihmalyan lived in many different countries as part of his duty in the Communist Party and died in Moscow in 1961.<sup>90</sup> In Beirut, Jak Ihmalyan shared the same house with Hayk Acikgoz and Zaven Biberyan for a short period of time. Hayk Acikgoz briefly talks about those days in his memoir.<sup>91</sup>

Zaven Biberyan’s unpublished memoir covers the first twenty five years of his life, to be specific until 1946. Hence, I will analyze the remaining part of his life in the light of the basic information we have and the signs we receive from his works. With *Nor Or* being shut down, the only channel through which Biberyan expressed his opinions was blocked. However, the establishment of weekly *Aisor* in 1947, from the ashes of *Nor Or*, provided a relief for the opposing Armenian intellectuals. The publisher was Avedis Aliksanyan, Biberyan’s comrade from the Socialist Party. This short-lived experience was the last initiative of Nor Or Generation. They temporarily found a new home to express their ideas. Zaven Biberyan was

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Toros Toranyan, “S. K. Zanku”, in *Zarmanali Ashkharkh*, ed. S. K. Zanku (Istanbul: Aras, 2003), p. 204.

<sup>89</sup> For detailed biography see <https://www.arasyayincilik.com/tr/yazarlar/aram-pehlivanian/10> (accessed 3 March 2019).

<sup>90</sup> For his life story see Vartan Ihmalyan, *Bir Yaşam Öyküsü* (Istanbul: Cem, 2012).

<sup>91</sup> See Hayk Açıkgoz, *Anadolulu Bir Ermeni Komünistin Anıları*, p. 290 and p. 310-311.

writing on various topics including world politics, domestic matters, art, literature and the problems of the Armenian community.

His articles in *Aisor* are very guiding so as to demonstrate his mindset after the detention in 1946. Although having been watched by the police on a constant basis since his *Nor Or* days, Biberyan did not back down from his progressivism. In the article “Inchu Chadjir” [Why It Does Not Proliferate?] he was making a personal statement and a strong criticism: “When a writer cannot complete his intellectual revolution, he stagnates, and when he stagnates, that suggests retreat and decay. The diagnosis of Istanbul Armenian intellect and literature is as obvious as this.”<sup>92</sup> The danger was there as it had always been. To avoid from this fate, an intellectual had to do nothing but to remove all the obstacles in front of self-fulfillment. The idea of self-fulfillment was hand in hand with a society free from its chains. Therefore, he had two targets in his mind: capitalism and tyranny. “Ankorduzutiun: Baduhas Arouwesdagan” [Unemployment: Artificial Evil] was a salvo against the capitalist owners. He was trying to raise the awareness among workers, demanding humanly working hours and conditions to “live as the human dignity requires.”<sup>93</sup> His articles in 1947, mostly on political matters, were instilling encouragement. “Khaghtanagen Yergou Kayl Herou”<sup>94</sup> [Two Steps Away From Victory] was depicting the struggle of Missak Manouchian, noted Armenian revolutionary of WWII who fought against the Nazis with his group known as the 23’s.<sup>95</sup> In the last article of the year he was looking back at 1947. He did not see any promising development but giving up was not an option even though he could predict the outcome: “What will the new year bring us? Nothing. Only ardent hope.”<sup>96</sup> Indeed, it would get worse. In 1948, the paper was shut down after Aliksanyan’s departure and the pressure over Zaven Biberyan increased more than ever. He could not find a job. Without hesitation he took up women’s underwear and sold them on the far end of Mahmutpasa Slope. His close friend Ara Kocunyan, the editor of *Jamanag*, claims that Biberyan did this “under the bewildered eyes of the empty-headed and the admiring look of the press.”<sup>97</sup>

In 1949, he decided to leave the country because of the unbearable conditions and went to Beirut. He continued journalism in Beirut, worked in Armenian papers *Zartonk* [Awakening]

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<sup>92</sup> *Aisor*, “Inchu Chadjir,” no. 6, 23 August 1947.

<sup>93</sup> *Aisor*, “Ankordzutyun: Baduhas Arouwesdagan,” no. 14, 18 October 1947.

<sup>94</sup> *Aisor*, “Khaghtanagen Yergou Kayl Herou,” 2 August 1947.

<sup>95</sup> For detailed information on Manouchian’s life, see *Bir Özgürlük Tutsağı*, Meline Manouchian (Istanbul: Aras, 2000).

<sup>96</sup> *Aisor*, “Inch Ge Pere,” no. 24, 27 December 2018.

<sup>97</sup> *Jamanag*, 5 October 1984.

and *Ararat* as an editor. The memoir of Hayk Acikgoz shows us that without having any knowledge about construction, he worked alongside an Armenian engineer as a foreman.<sup>98</sup> His life in Beirut was not what he had in mind when he came. At the same time, we can feel his dislike for the diaspora intellectuals. In his letter to Paluyan, we can see his harsh criticism and disgust:

I tasted this famous diaspora and eventually that nauseated me out. At last, I came to the conclusion that diaspora, which always hates İstanbul natives, had abused another İstanbul native. In the winter of 1953, I returned to my homeland [...] without pain and without regret. No, I did not like the national cross stealers or the national thieves or the national villains or the national slaves. Chauvinism was against my character and the education I had received.<sup>99</sup>

This statement clearly accuses those intellectuals with phoniness. For Biberyan, these pseudo-intellectuals were behaving as if they were the protectors of the Armenian identity and exploiting the nation's cause to satisfy their personal interests. And despite the existence of a strong Armenian population, he saw himself as an outsider in Beirut. Biberyan, just like the other Armenian intellectuals in Turkey, was isolated from the diaspora. In the first place, that was the reason for their ignorance about the Armenian communities around the world. During the Republican period many Armenian books and newspapers from diaspora were banned from entering to Turkey. Also, the state was pressuring the press in order them to stop giving news about the Armenians in the diaspora.<sup>100</sup> Biberyan knew how to continue his life under tough conditions but the struggle was lacking in Beirut. The independent struggle on his own terms. A struggle in these conditions would be negating his own self. The only real fight he was to have would be on his hometown, the center of denial. So, the return became inevitable. His words describing the detentions in 1946 may as well be adapted to this context: "For me, heroism does not consist in being stupidly shut up and spent years languishing in secret, withdrawn from circulation, on the margins of active life, practically liquidated."<sup>101</sup>

As I mentioned before, upon his return Biberyan started to direct his attention to literature. However, until the end of his life, he just wrote three novels. *Slut* was picturing the early 1950s, *Penniless Lovers* early 1960s and *The Sunset of Ants* covering the period between mid-1940s to mid-1950s. In a way, Biberyan was ready to reflect on the psychological condition of the Armenians in Turkey. He was more into the devastating practices of the state and their consequences. He revealed the origin and formation of the dispositions of Armenian community

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<sup>98</sup> Açıkgöz, *Anadolulu Bir Ermeni Komünistin Anıları*, p. 310.

<sup>99</sup> Biberyan, "Namag Hrant Paluyani," in *Mrchewnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 551-552.

<sup>100</sup> For detailed information see Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 127-132.

<sup>101</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

and large community together. He was tracing these dispositions such as uneasiness or domination. His descriptions on the contradiction between the splendor of the past and the devastation of today were one of a kind.

After his return to Turkey he worked at the Ottoman Bank for a while. Following the days of 27 May 1960 coup d'état, he was a publicist in daily *Marmara* newspaper. *Nor Tar* [New Century], the journal of politics and literature he started to publish in 1964, was shut down due to financial difficulties. At the end of the 1960s he took part in the proofreading council of Meydan Larousse Encyclopedia. "Up until now (1962) I have had plenty of occupations, even I do not know the exact number. All of this occupations have provided many things to me, except wealth." he would say later.<sup>102</sup>

He was nominated as an Istanbul deputy parliamentary candidate in the 1965 general elections by Workers' Party of Turkey but did not get elected. In the 1968 local elections, he was elected as the deputy chairman of the Istanbul Municipal Assembly. As one of the opinion leaders of the Armenian community, Zaven Biberyan wanted to be visible in the public sphere in order to make his struggle known to a wider audience. He stood by the decision he made after the detentions of 1946:

It was no longer the Armenian community that would be the subject of my articles, but larger problems. [...] My first article in *Nor Or* [after his release] and the ones following up did not dissociate the problem of minorities from those of the whole country. I already thought myself entitled to speak of the economic and social policy of governments.<sup>103</sup>

He wanted to be a part of the decisions concerning the society and was demanding "the right to speak". He considered himself competent in political matters. However, frustration take hold of him in the last ten years of his life. Although I will be analyzing the meaning of this withdrawal from the political and literary sphere in the third chapter, the biographical information I have received from his daughter will be crucial here. As I have said before, the sources on Zaven Biberyan are very rare, and for that reason, this interview with Mrs. Tilda Mangasar (and the memoir of Rober Haddeciyan –veteran of the Armenian press– which will intercede in the last chapter) filled the void for me.

The last period of Zaven Biberyan's life was marked by health issues. For him, frustration and breakdown came hand in hand. During those hard times, he lost his love for the literature. His focus shifted to painting and the paper and pen was replaced with brush and canvas. He

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<sup>102</sup> Biberyan, "Namag Hrant Paluyani," in *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 552.

<sup>103</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

used to sit in the balcony of his home in Moda and draw imaginary scenes painting his thoughts out.<sup>104</sup> Although he was producing as much as he could, his skills were in decline due to atherosclerosis. Not only had this trouble in the vessels heading to the brain but also the removal of his duodenum –he had to be careful with his diet– affected him badly.<sup>105</sup> When I talked with his daughter she told me that the atherosclerosis was related to the lifelong distress. This tension would surely explode at one point as the financial troubles of the family was another concern: “My father was a man of letters, never a man of affairs.”<sup>106</sup> As I tried to point out, Biberyan took up several businesses without much success. This frustration surely had a share in the solitude he endured during the last twenty years of his life: “Everybody moved away from him, he did not have any close friends.”<sup>107</sup>

Biberyan, after the birth of his daughter in 1961, gradually withdrew from the zones of controversy. He was not as sharp-tongued as before. At that point, he had to grapple with the tribulations of the past. To protect his daughter from harm, he developed a protective attitude toward her: “It was hard to live with Biberyan.”<sup>108</sup> Tragically, this gifted man, in the last one and a half year period, had some kind of amnesia and impairment in his language (would mix French, Armenian and Turkish while speaking).<sup>109</sup>

The life that was devoted to politics and literature ended in October 4, 1984. Biberyan suffered from ulcer disease and died after a long period of distress, and was buried in the intellectuals section of Sisli Armenian cemetery.<sup>110</sup>

Over the course of time, especially in the Armenian diaspora –where he was once well-regarded– the name of Zaven Biberyan was forgotten. In his article honoring the memory of late Zaven Biberyan, Rupen Masoyan –one of his contemporaries and the owner of Tepy Louys [Toward Light] printing house– was asking a question with all his sincerity: “Why did not we know the worth of a respectable and progressive writer like Zaven Biberyan?”<sup>111</sup> The conditions of his time also played a major role in this. We have very few sources on the Armenian community of Istanbul in the Republican period. There are Armenian newspapers, but we can safely say that there is not much research on this subject. Most of our knowledge on Biberyan comes from the memoirs of such writers as Rupen Masoyan, Ara Kocunyan, S. K. (Sarkis

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<sup>104</sup> Tilda Mangasar, interview, 18 March 2019, Istanbul.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> For the brief biography of Zaven Biberyan see <https://www.arasyayincilik.com/tr/yazarlar/zaven-biberyan/83> (accessed 2 March 2019).

<sup>111</sup> Rupen Masoyan, *Yev Aysbes Abretsank* (Istanbul: Aras, 1998), p. 80.

Kecyan) Zanku. He had gained the friendship of the leading publishers and intellectuals of his time, and had been involved for long years in the editorial board of many Armenian newspaper. He was not a person who can refrain himself and stand silent against injustice, so that was why he lost most of his jobs and remained in the midst of unexpected troubles. Because of his courageous and assertive temperament, he became the subject of serious polemics and was marginalized by the introversive, silenced, uneasy Armenian community. But most importantly, as a writer who had never strayed from Armenian in his novels and short stories despite his almost native French, he chose French when he was to relive his memories and to rewrite (reinvent) his journey from the past to the present. We can draw a parallel between this preference and his statement in the letter to Paluyan: “Sincerely, today I regret having written in Armenian, if I knew in my twenties what it was to be an Armenian writer, I would never have abandoned French.”<sup>112</sup> If he felt the need to explain himself knowing that one day he would be read, then not being understood by the public surely had its share in this urge.

The last fifty years of Western Armenian literature has been tragic because of its downhill course. We should take this factor into consideration when we talk about the neglecting of literature. The lacuna was not unique to Biberyan. His works, translated into Turkish today, attract a certain amount of attention; however, it is impossible to say the same for Armenian originals. We are faced with a language that loses its feature of being a literary language. S. K Zanku’s statements about the indifference to the Armenian literature produced in France should be giving us a general idea:

I remember clearly that on the 40th anniversary of the Armenian Writers Association, Zareh Vorpouni was making his anger known on the stage of “Musée Guimet” because his newly published novel, *Sovorakan Or Me* (1973) sold 5 or 6 copies at most on all around France.<sup>113</sup>

We can see that Zareh Vorpouni, one of the most important writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Armenian literature according to the critics and a strong figure in Marc Nichanian’s Catastrophe literature, was not understood by the readers and his literature did not trigger much reaction except a certain milieu. For this reason, I read all the primary sources from Armenian originals. Harkening the words of Zanku, through an extensive reading of Biberyan’s life and works, I wish to examine the channels that he signals and make them visible today. As this requires a much wider perspective, I want to move on to the next chapter.

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<sup>112</sup> Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani,” in *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 553.

<sup>113</sup> S. K. Zanku, “Houshi Or” [Memory Day], in *Zarmanali Ashkharh*, p. 67.

## CHAPTER II

### A REALIST PERSPECTIVE:

#### ZAVEN BIBERYAN AND HIS LITERARY OUTPUT

The never-ending tension between the society and individual holds a special place in the history of art. This much-discussed conflict presents a question for the ages: Does the individual establishes the society or is it the society which constitutes the individual? As one of the most intriguing topics in literature, this question has puzzled the men of letters right from the start. Through the course of time, each literary school brought its own contribution and perspective to the table. The realists, by turning their attention to the society, tried to determine the individual's place in it and reveal the source of the deep-rooted dispositions and motivations. From Balzac to Stendhal or Dostoyevsky, the social criticism of the realist school has always been based on observation.

The influence of realism started to be felt in Armenian literature after the undisputed reign of French romanticism. This first experiment, performed by writers such as Krikor Zohrab, Dikran Gamsaragan or Yervant Sirmakeshanliyan, was a little hodgepodge of styles which was neither realist nor romantic with its true definition. Yet, the catastrophe in 1915 would change the course of Armenian literature. The response to the experience received different forms. There was the urge to collect the testimonies of the survivors at first which took an uncontrollable extent and tend to become a roadblock in front of literature. Then, *odarutioun* (alienage) came into play. This rootlessness due to the ultimate loss of the fatherland and the ensuing encounter with the “other” created an urgent crisis which needed to be addressed. Thereby, the literature produced in the diaspora found its constituent element. On the other hand, after the murder of the intellectuals and the escape of the survivors to the different parts of Europe, the literature of the Armenians in Turkey received a serious blow. Their consequent isolation from the fellow Armenians of the diaspora –through the intentional policy of the newly-formed Turkish Republic– created a peculiar situation. Unlike their relatives who were free to express their thoughts, they were confined within the denialist habitus of Turkey which demanded their silence in any case. Nevertheless, constant interventions and practices of the state did not leave the Armenians in peace.

Zaven Biberyan, a first-hand witness of this challenging period, was familiar with the question presented at the beginning of the chapter and established his life philosophy in reaction to this tension well before the start of his literary career:

I have two “I’s in me: individualist and non-individualist. This basic disagreement arises from the contrast that puts the individual against the society and the society against the individual. In social life, there is no such thing today. Yet for the individual, there is no such thing as tomorrow. The future of the society is established by the present sacrifices of the individual, whereas the present time of the individual –the only truth, the only absolute time so to speak– depends on the denial of every idea of tomorrow.

And, of course, society means human. If the requirements of the society prevent the individual from living his/her life; then what is the meaning of society’s long-term well-being, which steals from the present moments –the only real wealth– of the human?

But on the other hand, if society and the individual are identical, how can one get rid of all this in the society that imposes new captivities, new unhappiness, new misery in every step of the individual?

What to do then?

This contrast, especially nowadays, constitutes the great disaster of man.<sup>114</sup>

To address this existential stalemate and escape from his own disaster, he vowed to live his life to the fullest and simultaneously developed a keen eye for the society. As a publicist in the Armenian newspapers, he was quite aware of the problems of the community. Throughout the years, he had heated arguments with some members of the Armenian press who were, in his eyes, incapable of representing the community. Not only was he aware of the concerns and motivations of the Armenians but also his experiences enabled him to penetrate into the mind and life of the Turk. In his first novel, he roamed in the world of both. His second and third novels would shift their focus to depict the multilayered decay of the Armenian community, although the salvation of the whole society was at stake. According to Biberyan, the nature and origin of this decay had to be traced. His long-standing political struggle can surely be viewed in line with this desire. He took hold of every opportunity to widen and sharpen his analytical perspective. A fiery communist, Biberyan became the flag-bearer of liberal and progressive ideas. This formula provided the basis of his social criticism. In all of his novels, he set his eyes firmly on the middle-class bourgeois. He was acquainted with these people as his family provided the primary example for him. However, characters from different classes and marginalized layers of the society found their way into his novels. To photograph the life of Armenians in this period of catastrophes succeeding the Catastrophe, he included as many parts as possible into the equation.

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<sup>114</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.



This chapter will focus on the literary output of Zaven Biberyan and analyze his works in chronological order. Before reading his novels along with his biography and discuss them on the horizon of the Catastrophe in the last chapter, a look from the realist perspective will hopefully demonstrate the thematic concerns of Zaven Biberyan. Starting with his first novel, *Slut*, I will introduce the main characters and surrounding atmosphere of his works. The gloomy and suffocating world presented in *Lıgırdadzı* will be replaced with the hope-inspiring stories of *The Sea*. This compilation of stories holds a unique place among the entire corpus of Biberyan. Unlike the unnerving tone in his novels, these stories depict a world where the brotherhood of men is a possibility. From there, the turn will come to *Penniless Lovers* in which the influence of *The Sea* is perceptible, especially at the very end of the novel. The dead-end of the lovers suddenly opens up thanks to the unexpected –love!– and the tension between the individual and the society comes to an end. After an eight-year break, he produced his magnum opus. *The Sunset of Ants*, serialized in *Jamanag* in 1970, was published when its author was in his deathbed. The double odyssey of Baret –one forced, the other voluntary– will recall the fragments from Biberyan’s life. Although this novel is not a direct testimony –as it is a work of fiction– it does not fail to represent the social conditions the Armenians were living in.

## 2.1. *SLUT*

Published by Doğu Printing House in 1959, *Slut* is the first literary work of Zaven Biberyan. It also marks the writer’s first attempt for making a name for himself in the Turkish literary sphere. The Turkish translation of the novel came out with the name of *Yalnızlar* [The Lonely] in 1966 through the efforts of two separate publishers, Öncü Press and Payel Press. Actually, the initial plan of Biberyan was to write the original work in Turkish.<sup>115</sup> However, somehow it was cancelled and the writer undertook the translation himself seven years after the Armenian publication.

This novel, unlike Biberyan’s other novels, aims at discussing the Armenian perception on the minds of the Turks. While a similar effort is also present in *Penniless Lovers*, the most obvious and direct text is surely this one. Rather than providing some hints –as he does in *Penniless Lovers*– the writer constitutes an all-pervading tension which eventually ends in violence for both parties. Each contact with the “stranger” brings a feeling of insecurity. Biberyan’s novel includes a series of characters from different backgrounds and he invites us

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<sup>115</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani,” in *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 352.

to walk around their minds. Taking place in Caddebostan and covering a two-day span during the summer, *Slut* narrates the fate of the individuals in the light of changing social conditions.

As of 1950's, Turkey was on the verge of a transition into a new system. This system, named as "Pax Americana", kick started with the Truman Doctrine and was solidified with NATO; the economic pillar was initiated with the Marshall Aid.<sup>116</sup> Western European countries took hold of the opportunity and began to rise from the post-war devastation. Socioeconomic standards were changing as well. In the meantime, after his three and a half year absence, Zaven Biberyan returned to Turkey in 1953. Upon his return, he turned his attention to literature as he was striving to record the change in societal norms. *Slut* was his first work of art in these terms. This novel is exceptional and requires special attention due to its focus on a female character – a rarity in Biberyan's works. Fatma, adopted by a newly emerged bourgeoisie family from a distant town in her early age, becomes the maid of the family and to differentiate herself from the past she starts to use the name Gülgün. She envies the fine-bodied, good-looking women in the magazines, she desires to be just like them but the ineffaceable traces of her past and her status in the public eye make this impossible despite all her beauty. Biberyan constitutes the body as an indicator: "The only thing that still reminded him [Ali] of Gülgün of old, was the lower part of her body. Her feet."<sup>117</sup> The butcher of the neighborhood, Ali is a countryman who is in love with Gülgün/Fatma. As an immigrant, he is stuck between the country life and city life. Gülgün/Fatma becomes the embodiment of this dilemma for him: "But it does not finish with the feet. A little above, till her face, till her short hair, she was an urban girl."<sup>118</sup> Both characters, a shopkeeper and a maid, are disqualified from becoming a real dweller of the city. However, they are not meant for each other as well. Gülgün/Fatma has always been in some kind of love with the child of the family Erol. Although Erol has that sexual desire for Gülgün/Fatma, he is "aware of his status"<sup>119</sup> and insults her at every opportunity.

The Armenian family of the novel consists of Krikor, Yeranig and Pupul. These people rarely leave their home and lead a secluded life. This family reminds us of the Tarhanyan family in *The Sunset of Ants* about which I will talk a little bit later. This similarity arises from the

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<sup>116</sup> Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası*, p. 486.

<sup>117</sup> Zaven Biberyan, *Lgrdadze* (Istanbul: Doğu, 1959), p. 6.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> I preferred to stress this expression as the mother of the Armenian family Yeranig uses it. To show her anger towards Pupul because of her long and sincere conversation with the plumber who is there to fix the tap, Yeranig accuses her of "not being aware of her status". See. Biberyan, *Lgrdadze*, p. 42. From Biberyan's perspective, this was one of the key reasons for alienation and the distance between people. In other words, prejudices and labels originating from the obsession of status quo was an obstacle in front of people to healthily communicate with each other.

defected relationship. Their house is the space of conflict and disconnection. Yeranig's son, Krikor is a micro-sample for the insecurity of the Armenian community. Although he is a rich man, Krikor avoids from any eye-catching action. Throughout the novel, this feeling of insecurity pervades all parts of his life. His encounter with Ali on the street presents one of the most memorable scenes in the novel:

“Good evening.”

“Good evening.”

They took two steps in opposite directions. Ali stopped, turned his head.

“*Müsü* [Mister].”

Krikor had a shiver. He had a feeling that Ali would seek a fight or rob him or hit his head with a stick. Involuntarily, he looked around in fear. At that time, there was no one near and they were in equal distance to two street lamps, and in half dark.<sup>120</sup>

Why is he afraid within the borders of a country whose citizens are equal on every term? This fear undoubtedly has a historical background and has something to do with class differences. As an immigrant from economically underdeveloped Anatolia, he hates (*adeloutioun*) this city-dwellers. Biberyan uses the word *adeloutioun* very frequently to describe the tension between the money-owners and the substratum. All of the relationships in the novel, in one way or another, are tainted with *adeloutioun*. Although this hate does not produce violence in this scene –the blood will be spilled at the end– the mindset of Ali becomes clear after his remarks to one of his countryman:

“*Gâvur oğlu gâvur* [Son of an infidel].” A few steps away, he hissed out loudly:

“These were a dozen and a dime during the war, in Yozgat. Who would spit on *mewsew*'s [mister] face back then? They were all under my feet.”

He sighed.

“Now, for the sake of business, we call them *mewsew* [mister]. We respectfully salute them. Money, money is all theirs.”<sup>121</sup>

Ali refers to the labor battalions consisting of the Armenian soldiers during the WWI. Biberyan was the victim of a similar implementation. As his fellow-Armenians, he was a rankless recruit and people who normally should have received the orders were in command of those Nafia soldiers. His experiences provided him with the insight for making comparisons between these two disasters. In Ali's case, the civilization is a roadblock and an anomaly, whereas war is the evidence of the inferiority of the infidels. As Ali's countryman asks that why

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<sup>120</sup> Biberyan, *Lgrdadze*, p. 78.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid*, p. 79.

the government lets them flourish, Ali answers: “There is a time for everything. The government knows better than us.”<sup>122</sup>

Krikor, who is forty-eight years old but still unable to sustain himself, lives alongside his mother and aunt. No matter how hard his mother tries, he persistently denies all the possible matches. From Yeranig’s remarks, we are inclined to think that this is more about his selective nature. However, Krikor’s inner monologues guides us to the conclusion that everything is about the idea of family. Family as a monetary and therefore hypocrite establishment. This idea originates from the structure of his own family. Let us take his sister’s marriage into consideration. Krikor’s sister Hilda is married to a *charshele* (tradesman) which is equal to *serseri* (tramp) in Yeranig’s eyes.<sup>123</sup> While his husband prefers playing cards and watching football games, Hilda belongs to a different world. This irreconcilableness also exists in Krikor’s own home. Yeranig is not very content with his life, as he wishes Krikor to be more aggressive in monetary matters. In a way, she puts pressure on him to make more money. This perspective of marriage which Biberyan constitutes, deters Krikor from such an initiative. He sticks with his “comfort” zone. Krikor’s insecurities does not stop there. To protect himself from the unwanted effects of outside world, he wears sweaters on summer’s day: “He went out to the garden from the kitchen door. And suddenly felt that he wore a shirt.”<sup>124</sup> His defense mechanism never ceases to work and to ensure his safety, he tries detach himself from the outer world as far as possible. However, Biberyan shows that such thing is possible to a certain extent. Throughout the novel, there are two occasions in which the external finds a way to crawl in. First, as mentioned above, it is Krikor’s encounter with Ali. This unexpected contact makes Krikor feel uneasy. The other example is a striking conversation between Krikor and his brother-in-law Garo triggered by the discussion about giving money to the Turkish foundation volunteers:

“We will disturb you for a minute. We are entrusted with the sacred duty of helping the unfortunate, poor constituents of the Turkish youth who represent the radiant future of the holy fatherland. Appealing to the sense of duty and patriotism of our citizens for the helpless youth and provide them with education and health...”

Nobody understood anything from the speech.

Garo, in Armenian, told him:

“Ignore it, send them away.”

Krikor’s face got red. He would reprimand Garo and tell him “Do not speak Armenian!” but he did not dare to do it. He stood up hastily, went toward the door so that Garo would not speak Armenian.

[...] The girl asked:

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<sup>122</sup> *ibid*, p. 79.

<sup>123</sup> In the Armenian text Biberyan uses these two Turkish expressions.

<sup>124</sup> Biberyan, *Lgrdadze*, p. 77.

“How much worth of a voucher do you want sir?”  
 “I don’t know. How much?”  
 “For five, for ten.”  
 [...] “A five.”  
 Garo looked at Krikor lengthily:  
 “Why did you pay man? These are purse-snatchers. Fake foundations. [...] These people were used to visit us, I got rid of them. They do not go to the Turks, they come only to us. The Turks do not pay a red cent to these beggars!”  
 Krikor shook his head with a disgruntled expression:  
 “The Turks do not pay. If we do not, they will put us on blacklist.”  
 “Who will put you on blacklist, man?”  
 Yeranik intervened:  
 “So what? For five liras! If you do not pay, they will call say “The infidels do not pay.” No need for that.”<sup>125</sup>

The response to the social reality embedded in history –the ethnic discrimination of early Republican period– differs here. Yeranik and Krikor, who represent the middle-class bourgeoisie, approach the issue with caution. However, Garo, characterized as a shrewd jeweler in Grand Bazaar which makes him a *serseri* in Krikor and Yeranik’s eyes, makes no concessions. This conversation hints at another cause for concern. If we look closely at Krikor’s reaction to Garo when he speaks Armenian, this will lead us to a quite striking background. Speaking their mother tongues brought about a common hesitation for the Armenians of the time (and in a sense it still exists today, as the elderly are inclined to speak Turkish in public space). The social pressure which was the result of “Citizen Speak Turkish” campaign, starting in 1928, left its imprints on the language. Although the Armenians managed to preserve their language as they were speaking it at home or at the church, the bitter fate of Judeo-Spanish is familiar to us today.<sup>126</sup> With the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the period of multi-party democracy in Turkey “Citizen Speak Turkish!” campaign fall off the agenda and it was not mentioned until the coup d’état in May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1960. However, the anti-minority habitus in Turkey had already made a significant progress. The haunting shadow of constant devastations, keepsakes of old, are present in every corner of *Slut*. The most recent source of insecurity for this family is the implementation of the Wealth Tax. Biberyan, as the record-keeper of social memory, delves into the tunnels of the past, bluntly demonstrates the black marks of the history and brings into question how the Armenians interpret those. In this respect, the row between Yeranik and Krikor is eye-catching. While those two have a quarrel, Yeranik

<sup>125</sup> Biberyan, *Lgrdadze*, p. 158-159.

<sup>126</sup> Turkish Jews, smothered because of the constant and fierce storm of criticism, swore an oath, signed a commitment to speak Turkish in the synagogues to dissipate this tense air and relieve the public. Turkish with a heavy Judeo-Spanish dialect became the mockery of popular humor magazines of the period. Turkish Jews started to take lessons from young university students to be able to speak Turkish fluently and without accent. See Rifat N. Bali, [http://www.rifatbali.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/turkce\\_konusma\\_birgun.pdf](http://www.rifatbali.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/turkce_konusma_birgun.pdf) (accessed 6 April 2019).

intentionally opens up the pages of the past to hurt Krikor: “Damn you! Was not I the one who paid your shop’s Varlık? If it was not me, you would have kicked the bucket in Askale!”<sup>127</sup> Introversion, which means ignoring the external, now comes to demolish the internal, the family. All the rage accumulates but as it cannot be discharged and the only option is to hold it in, this potential explosion crawls in the family and eventually destroys the bond between the household. This is one of the characteristic features of Biberyan’s novels – we see a similar narrative concerning the family in *Penniless Lovers* and *The Sunset of Ants*.

While the Armenian side in the novel is distinguished by an inertia, the same cannot be said about the Turks. Towards the end of the novel, in two separate occasions, the tension explodes and blood spills. First incident is related to the Armenians which gives important clues about how they are perceived. After encountering with their friend Aret in the street, Erol and his group, who hate him because of his popularity within the neighborhood, make fun of him being an Armenian. However, just when he thinks about the possible answer of Aret, he realizes that the superiority belongs to him and assumes the power:

He doubted that he would reciprocate by making fun of the Turks. But no, he could not do it; there was the law, he would be imprisoned for a year for the offense of insulting Turkishness. No, that bastard would not dare.<sup>128</sup>

With this confidence boost, they beat Aret to death as the anger of being outclassed by an Armenian in terms of popularity seduces them. However, throughout the novel, Biberyan constantly sends signals about the Armenian image on the Turks’ mind. The tendency to caricaturize the Armenians comes into prominence: “There was nothing in that man’s [Aret] face to cause traditional cynic laugh. It was not possible to draw an Armenian caricature with him. His name may as well be Hamparsum, Karabet or Agop.”<sup>129</sup> These type of expressions are abundant in the text which suggest that the idea of treachery are solidified with the stereotypes. During a meeting in Erol’s father house, the guests starts to talk about a radio show in which there is an Armenian character. There we hear such accusations as: “Infidels after all. They laugh in our face,”<sup>130</sup> or “Do they think faking will earn them anything?”<sup>131</sup> or “They rob the country.”<sup>132</sup> These should recall the discussion of habitus in the first chapter and Biberyan’s answer in his article “Al Ge Pawhe” [Enough is Enough] to all types of accusation and

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<sup>127</sup> Biberyan, *Lgrdadze*, p. 28.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid*, p. 177.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*, p. 21-22.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid*.

prejudices. Although these people were living with the Armenians in the neighborhood side by side, they were not viewing them as equal citizens of the country.

The second moment of discharge –of this all-pervading tension– is the homicide of Fatma/Gülgün in the hands of Ali. The villa, where Fatma/Gülgün lives, becomes the scene of crime at the end of the novel. This marginalized characters are immigrants from Anatolia as they try to keep up with the life in big city. They live with a constant whistle in their mind, which is the call of the past. On the other hand, they have a strong desire to gain prestige and be treated like an urbanite. Being torn between who they are and who they want to be. This incompatibility is one of the most obvious causes of the tension and eventual discharge (by the way of violence). To evade the burden of unwanted past, a new “appearance” is essential. Only through appearance, which can easily deceive the people, the complete transition seems impossible. While Fatma/Gülgün envies the Western models in the magazines, compares herself to them and imitates them, Ali’s struggle with urban life is much more chaotic. His attitude toward the object of desire:

Gülgün’s shoulders, Gülgün’s chest, Gülgün’s hips. His eyes did not see anything else. That hoochie was totally different this year. She wasn’t the girl last year anymore. He desired and hated her at the same time. Yeah, she was totally different now. She was like Mübeccel Hanım, like the other broads. His feelings as well were different this year. He would have this feeling when he peeked at the broads there. A lust mixed with kin. A desire to both possess and destroy. A severe desire. To bite, eat her fresh meat, to crumble the underwear that the laundry women told so much about, to tear up Gülgün’s body in pieces.<sup>133</sup>

While fictionalizing this narrative and constituting the characters, Biberyan was surely making use of his own experiences. As mentioned in the first chapter, during his days in Nafia, Biberyan had the chance to observe the behavioral traits of the Anatolian people and develop a perspective on them. The most striking thing for him was the poverty of the region. His living was so disastrous that he gradually started to identify himself with the natives of Anatolia. During one of his short visits to Istanbul, as he had a permission because of malaria, the emotions he felt after getting into the domain of the city resembles the irresistible urge boiling within Ali:

The first thing I saw the moment I stepped ashore was an illuminated car. There was a woman sitting comfortably. She had her fur, jewels. This lady had her hair and make-up done. [...] This image shook me oddly. I felt a terrible rage, surprise, and even a scary grudge. [...] Indeed, I wanted to destroy that fancy woman sitting in her car.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

Personal observations and impressions hold a crucial place in Biberyan's literature. His keen eye for the society, as he viewed the matters from a materialist perspective, enabled him to decompose an experience to its parts. For him, all elements of the bourgeoisie got their share from the degeneracy, may it be the Turk or the Armenian. However, the two elements on which this uncontrollable rage manifested itself was money and woman. The scene where Ali kills Fatma/Gülgün supports this idea. When Fatma/Gülgün invites Ali to the villa of her foster-family, Ali is struck with a temporary paralysis as he is *inside*. Fatma/Gülgün makes him feel like at home, she offers him a drink and imagining him as Erol she lays down in his arms. The ultimate desire is fulfilled for Ali –although temporary– but he abstains from making a move for the fear of ruining everything. Then suddenly the perfect image ruptures for Fatma/Gülgün and she abruptly speaks: "You smell meat!"<sup>135</sup> This triggers the inferiority complex of Ali especially coming from "an inferior in the eyes of the society." He runs amuck and tears her to the ribbons crying: "Damn your Erol! Damn your house! Damn your furniture! Damn..."<sup>136</sup> The collapse brings devastation for all.

This narrative shows that Biberyan was eager to expand the boundaries of the Armenian community and depict a more general picture including the Turks. *Slut* was his only novel translated to Turkish during his lifetime. His target was the whole society. However, in his second and third novels this theme would be treated much more subtly. While *The Sunset of Ants* would be about the life of the Armenians during the first twenty years of the Republican period, *Penniless Lovers* would catch the attention with its symbolic expressions and political aspect. Nevertheless, to keep the chronological order intact, now I would like to analyze the only storybook of Zaven Biberyan which differs from his novels in terms of its multipartite characters and topics.

## 2.2. THE SEA

This book of Zaven Biberyan consists of twelve stories which take place in different countries and portrait people from different backgrounds. Published initially in 1961 by Getrgonagan Alumni Association, *The Sea* is the collection of the best stories of Zaven Biberyan. During the publication process of the book, the publisher and the writer cooperated. For that reason, it is safe to say that these stories were picked by Biberyan himself – a painting

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<sup>135</sup> Biberyan, *Lıgırdadzi*, p. 150.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid*, p. 151.



of him was on the original cover of the book as well. However, I will take the latest edition of Aras Publishing (2017) into consideration and make the quotations and citations from it.

The afterword of the book is written by Haroutioun Kourkdjian who is a contemporary prominent Armenian literary critic. His perspective provides the guidance to categorize Biberyan's stories. He identifies those under four main titles: a) the depiction of very modest, poor layers of the society; b) daily emotions, depressions; c) tendencies, tragic collisions; d) freshness and dream.<sup>137</sup> To stress the characteristic of short story writer Biberyan and demonstrate the main differentiation points with his novelist identity, I would like to analyze four short stories which correspond with the four main categories.

Zaven Biberyan had a keen eye for the marginalized elements of the society. While his novels –except *Penniless Lovers*– seal off all the holes for the daylight to infiltrate, his stories follow a different path. A sense of brotherhood is always possible in these stories. In this regard, the second story in the book, “Burunsuz Kadriyen” [Nose-less Kadriye], is instructive. There Zaven Biberyan narrates a sequence from Kadriye's life who is an old prostitute hanging around the city. Due to her look, the people stay away from her. The story takes place during a ship ride. Biberyan uses this place as a parade of characters. To stress the possibility of solidarity, Biberyan initially exemplifies the opposite. Kadriye seats next to an Armenian family and they do not hesitate revealing their disgust. This middle-class family is intimidated by the existence of Kadriye. The mother of the family warns his son-in-law and this reaction implicates the perception of the uncanny (*tekinsiz*) among the Armenians: “For God's sake, before any trouble arises, let's get out of here.”<sup>138</sup> The uncanny is identified with trouble. As they had enough trouble, the Armenians has made habit out of staying away from any notion of danger. Here, Biberyan subtly criticizes this disposition which eliminates any possibility of brotherhood. However, there exists an understanding between the vulnerable. A fisherman, selling his fish at the ship, sees that Kadriye is hungry and offers her food. The story reaches a bittersweet ending. Indeed, this is the identification mark of Biberyan's stories, he tends to leave this impression. Kadriye continues his way alone as the fisherman who has offered him food rejects joining her that night.

One of the most striking stories of Biberyan in his book is “Anonk Vor Veratartsan” [Those Who Returned]. In his memoir, Biberyan declares that with this story he has narrated the life of

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<sup>137</sup> Haroutioun Kourkdjian, afterword to *Dzovi* (İstanbul: Aras, 2017), p. 190.

<sup>138</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Burunsuz Kadriyen,” in *Dzovi*, p. 30.

his Nafia friends. This claim is worthy of consideration and a comparison with *The Sunset of Ants* is needed. As I will discuss more elaborately in the following pages, *The Sunset of Ants* tells the aftermath of Nafia days. Baret, the main character, upon his return tries to find his footing in a world to which he is alienated. However, throughout the novel he does not offer a glimpse into those days – although we sense that he had memories worth remembering. This story fills what Biberyan leaves out in his novel: An inside look. When the narration of this experience in the story is compared to the mood of the novel, it seems as if these two works belong to different writers. In other words, the bittersweet tone of this story would have never found its way into the novel because the novel depicts a vicious cycle and the reader fails to find a glimmer of hope. Then where does this great difference originate from? *The Sunset of Ants* was written in 1970. So, Biberyan had the chance to saturate his experience and unify it with the psychology of the remnants. In this story which belongs to 1956, Biberyan tells the mood in a dorm after a piece of good news. One of the soldiers, Adrushan, receives a permission to visit his home in Istanbul. After this pleasing news, his friends, rather than envying him, show their happiness and start to write letters for their loved ones in the hope of sending those through Adrushan. Each one offers money to Adrushan for his ride back home. This solidarity –the feeling of being surrounded by friends who had their share from the disaster– is what makes Nafia life tolerable. However, the bitter part has yet to come. At the end of the story, the whole dorm learns that the permission is cancelled and they are being imported to Akhisar. The scene where a drunken fellow-soldier reproachfully speaks to Adrushan summarizes the atmosphere of the dorm: “Why are you going to Istanbul now? You made us remember. We had forgotten Istanbul. Enjoy the journey but come on brother! You will leave us here and go away.”<sup>139</sup> However, the only heart-wrenching stories in this book are not under the roof of Nafia.

Biberyan is willing to take his readers to places where they may abstain from stepping into. One of his stories presents the life in prison. The book’s name comes from the tragic story “Dzovi” [The Sea]. It is constructed as a dialogue between Kapitan –a wise man– and Boshnak – a prisoner waiting for the death verdict. Boshnak is a common guy who enjoys Kapitan’s friendship and seems as if he is the apprentice of this wise man. A significant part of the story includes Kapitan’s statements about the nature of the sea while he claims that Boshnak will never understand. This dialogue, which reminds of the philosophical texts of the Ancient Greek, ends tragically as Kapitan learns from another prisoner that the verdict has been given. Kapitan

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<sup>139</sup> Biberyan, “Anonk Vor Veratartsan,” in *Dzovi*, p. 133.

bursts into tears and the reality penetrates into the soul of him, taking the place of the dream, namely the sea.

The last story I would like to mention is “Aniskhanagan Che Yegher” [It Turns Out He Was Not a Maverick]. This story brings Zaven Biberyan’s joyful days in Bulgaria to mind. From his memoir, we can infer that the Bulgarians left a good impression on him. From that time on, he always had sympathy for these Slavic people. The love affair between Petko and Marinka maintains the freshness of youth. In this story, Biberyan writes about the prejudices as well. Georgi, the father of Marinka, believes that Petko is a maverick and may hurt Marinka. To understand what is going on, he raids Petko’s home with a rifle in his hand. However, after talking to Petko’s relatives, he is convinced that Petko’s sincerity. He drinks at their home and has a fun night. This course of the story which is highly vivacious surely contravenes his novels. Biberyan was keen on using his impressions and it seems as if the tension in his literature is unique for Turkey. This argument originates from the energy spreading from this story taking place in Bulgaria. The suffocating atmosphere of his novels is replaced with an uplifting love affair. Hence, we can safely assume that these stories were the products of a special period in his literary career. The next novel of him, would revolve around pretty different themes and issues.

### **2.3. PENNILESS LOVERS**

Published in 1962, this novel of Zaven Biberyan narrates the stormy relationship of two lovers –Sur and Norma– and through which it penetrates into the psychology of an Armenian family in Istanbul during 1950’s. Just like his other novels, the social reality makes its present felt in the background; that is to say, Biberyan discusses being an Armenian in Turkey or the Pogrom of 6-7 September. In the midst of all these, Sur, a self-ordained teenager, has a problematic relationship with his family which reminds of the tension between Yeranik and Krikor in *Slut*. His two little siblings are almost as insubordinate as him. However, this time, the narrative presents a much healthier romance unlike the one in *Slut*. These lovers yearn for making love in a secluded place and they wander around different parts of the city to accomplish their objective. The parents of Sur do not approve of their son’s love affair with Norma because she is a working girl (*kordzavor akhchig*) and to crown it all, older than Sur. This dispute lights the fuse between Sur and his parents.

To start with the thematic analysis of the novel, I would like to stress the outstanding theme of peepers (*rontgenci*). As the lovers stride through the hills and valleys, they are constantly

watched by these people. Not only do they come after the lovers but also try to punish them physically.

Him on the front, Norma at his back, they started to advance carefully. Sur felt that Norma's fingers suddenly strained in his hand.

"The guy stands there," said Norma.

Almost at the same time, he saw guy with the blue shirt too who was standing under a tree indifferently. He looked at them.

"For all I care," said Sur.

It felt like a stone slipped under Norma's feet and rolled over the stones of the adjoining valley. It felt like a dry branch was broken due to the weight of a crow.

Indeed, a branch was broken but the sound of the branch was succeeded by a dry sound. Then another sound, more muffled, on the soil. Norma could not stand:

"I guess they are throwing stones," she said.

"For all we care."

A stone as big as a nut crushed the soil five meters away from them and rolled along the slope until a bush. Another stone, much smaller, broke into pieces after hitting the stones of the valley.

"They are throwing them to us Sur," warned Norma.<sup>140</sup>

This incident takes place during the lovers trip to Buyukada (Biberyan was in love with Buyukada and used it as a setting in his novels except *Shut*). After surviving this great danger without harm, the lovers continue their way. According to Marc Nichanian, the depiction of peepers is related to the psychosis experienced by the Armenian community and Biberyan made psychosis (downfall) the object and subject of *Penniless Lovers*. He claims this because he sees this feeling of being in the limelight without an inner life and privacy as an expression of psychosis.<sup>141</sup> While this perspective is plausible to a great extent, I would like to discuss the issue of peeping with an additional term. Throughout the novel, Sur encounters with a lot of traps (*dzughag*). This is how he names them. The peepers are a part of this web of traps as well: "They set up a trap" (*Dzughag larer en*).<sup>142</sup> It is the whole city that becomes a trap and much as he tries to escape from those, he falls into them. In this regard, his adventure in the Grand Bazaar is a good example. After running out of money, he asks for the help of his mother Meline. Nevertheless, she rejects lending money to Sur as she does not approve the love affair between him and Norma. This attitude irritates Sur, he loses his temper, decides to steal his father's coat and sell it. However, the things do not go to plan. He finds himself among the cunning artisans of the Grand Bazaar. The first shop offers him a quite good amount of money but in hope of finding a better deal, he rejects it after a long negotiation. From then on, the artisan web of the Grand Bazaar starts to proceed. He visits shop after shop but fails to find a

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<sup>140</sup> Zaven Biberyan, *Angoudi Siraharner*, p. 54-55.

<sup>141</sup> Marc Nichanian, foreword to *Meteliksiz Âşıklar*, p. 19.

<sup>142</sup> Biberyan, *Angoudi Siraharner*, p. 56

better offer and when he gets to the first shop, they do not come up with the same offer. Sur is disappointed:

He had a heavy pressure on his chest. He thought that hundreds of eyes were watching him from the shops in the two sides, laughing upon him. He vowed for thousand times not to set his foot in the Grand Bazaar once again, until the elderly dies and the young man forgets him, even if they may tell their children how they entrapped (*dzughag tskadz*) an idiot, they will not recognize that idiot when they encounter him.<sup>143</sup>

Being singled out and exposed. These traps were there to expose his incapacity, immorality, indiscipline. Then where do the rest of the traps lay? Or do they end here? No, I would like to bring up another trap which makes Sur's blood boil even more.

The scene in which Sur tries to get on the ship from Karakoy to reach the Asian side is quite striking. To get through the crowd, Sur jumps over the safety rails and boards the ship. However, an officer notices this act and calls him. Sur answers the call back, jumps back from the safety rails and gets back to the pier. From then on, a strange conversation begins between Sur and the supervisor. When Sur asks the supervisor that whether his act ruined the discipline, he answers: "In my opinion yes. I view that as an ugly act. Does the act you committed seem nice?"<sup>144</sup> This suggests that appearance is the only reality that exists. The Westernization and transition process is nothing more than a mere representation. The supervisor asks Sur that whether he listens the advices of the Society of Manners which proves that the punishment is based on interpretation rather than a law. Through the course of the conversation, Biberyan demonstrates the paradox between the ideal and the representation. On the other hand, this incident –which may as well be called a trap– brings forward an interesting topic. For the first time in this novel, we perceive an implication related to the ethnic origin: "That is all from us. If you are that much of a patriot, you can cut those who cut the seats? He stressed the "patriot" word distinctly."<sup>145</sup> To me, this scene constitutes the climax of the novel as the whole world turns against Sur and he hits the rock bottom. At that point, Sur starts to imagine a whole new kind of political existence –without a state or a barrier between people– which in a way comes

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<sup>143</sup> *ibid*, p. 42-43.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid*, p. 158.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid*, p. 160.

true at the end.<sup>146</sup> Hence, Biberyan, starting from the exact opposite, creates the roof of this novel to reflect the utopia of the brotherhood.<sup>147</sup>

Lastly, the novel brings psychological state of this Armenian family into discussion. Kevork, the father of Sur, is an immigrant. After coming from Anatolia in his young age, through time, he manages to establish a good life for himself and his family. Once again, the conflict between the province and the city is brought up by Biberyan. Although Kevork gains prestige and status as a *taghagan* (trustee), when he remembers his early days in Istanbul and life in the countryside, an unsteady psychology catches the eye: “His confidence was booming beside a countryman, he was feeling secure. He was becoming a countryman beside an Istanbulite. However, the countrymen were viewing him as an Istanbulite.”<sup>148</sup> Only after earning money that his confidence almost recovers. From then on, he starts to get involved in the community matters. However, this urbanized man, respected by the people in need of help, fails to establish his authority at home as he looks to dominate his family – which reminds of the patriarchal family tradition of the rural life. So, there are two Kevorks whose duplicity comes to light at home: *Taghagan* (and urbanized) Kevork and father (and provincial) Kevork. Especially Sur, the eldest child of him, hates (*adeloutioun*) his father because of his deceitful character. Again, this discussion can be conducted around the theme of appearance. The saying goes: “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” This is one of the most distinctive messages of Zaven Biberyan. There is no such thing as principle in the fight for status, the right thing to do is to stand with the powerful and predict the direction of the wind:

Kevork was not that much interested in Zareh being a bishop or not. The important thing was to support a side and gain importance thanks to that side. No matter which side is that! They should see you in action. That is enough.<sup>149</sup>

The narrator switches from character to character to manifest the inner motives. Throughout the novel, Sur declares that he is ashamed of having such a father. Kevork is a coward in his eyes. At the end of the abovementioned scene, where the supervisor fines Sur for jumping over the fence, a police escorts Sur until his father’s shop. There Kevork pays the fine and complains about the behavior of his son to the police, begs pardon. Just then we seem to hear the voice of Biberyan ringing in Sur: “The elderly used to bow to everything. He was not old. He fought.

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<sup>146</sup> I will discuss the ending of the novel in the last chapter. This novel holds a special place among the other works of Biberyan because it is the only which promises a bright tomorrow. Sur, eventually, loosens after his long strain (*brgoum*). Biberyan’s use of “loosening/relaxation” and “strain/tense” will spearhead the discussion on the last chapter.

<sup>147</sup> Nichanian, foreword to *Meteliksiz Âşıklar*, p. 16.

<sup>148</sup> Biberyan, *Angoudi Siraharner*, p. 92.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid*, p. 126.

He wanted to do smash the face of the person who looked askance at him.”<sup>150</sup> This reminds of Zaven Biberyan fighting from his columns in *Nor Lour* and *Nor Or*. Although being surrounded by traps and hostility, he did not shy away from raging his war for the sake of future democracy, justice and equality. On the light of this information, we can safely say that this novel had a politic background. The idea of “bowing” was unacceptable for Biberyan, just like sticking with the victim psychology. One of the most important scenes in this direction is the conversation about the 6-7 September Pogroms. Just when the communication channels close between Sur and Kevork, the latter brings up a topic which should kick start a conversation:

Community, church were not sparking their interest. Bu this time there was a thing to gain the sympathy of those bastards: Being in the situation of an infidel (*gavour*) victim in Turkey. This was effecting everyone, either the young or the elderly, either the old or the new.<sup>151</sup>

This is presented as a shared experience that contains the power to unify different generations. Kevork, a fierce supporter of Democratic Party and a big fan of Adnan Menderes, *had his share* from the disastrous implementations just like his predecessors. Giving into such a pace of life seems as if it is the pre-condition of being an Armenian: “They [The children] didn’t see the old times. A new thing happened so that they can have their share.”<sup>152</sup> For the Armenian community of Turkey, devastation is an unchanging component of life. In the novel, it is through Meline’s reflection on the past that the reader gets to know the hardships family survived. She remembers the infancy of Sur; when he was a newborn, Kevork was a Twenty Class Soldier working under the Department of Public Works. Then another blow upon the return: The Wealth Tax: Fortunately, he manages to stay safe and be exempted from the Wealth Tax because he did not have the shop at that time. Just then, Kevork turns the crisis into an opportunity. With the tradesmen out of the market, being in Istanbul changes his life and he starts to make money. After a series of thoughts, Meline reaches into a conclusion: “The tear of one is another’s joy.”<sup>153</sup> However, a last calamity awaits for the non-Muslim citizens of Turkey.<sup>154</sup> During the Pogrom of 6-7 September 1955, his shop is plundered. In regard to this long line of catastrophes befallen the community, he expects a sympathy from Sur; instead, he

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<sup>150</sup> *ibid*, p. 165.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*, p. 121.

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*, p. 122.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid*, p. 113. A similar enrichment story exists in *The Sunset of Ants*. In a way, the background of Kevork provides the skeleton for the Suren of *The Sunset of Ants*. Also, the depiction of these opportunist capitalists resembles each other.

<sup>154</sup> The last chapter of *The Sunset of Ants* sheds light on a looming evil. This is the course of events surrounding the Cyprus Question. The individuals –especially Arus– are aware of the disaster ahead and pleads Baret to save the last crumbles of her wealth. This aspect of the novel will be discussed under the sub-title of “*The Sunset of Ants*”.

receives a shocking answer: “They did it well. I would have demolished it completely.”<sup>155</sup> This provokes Kevork and a real argument breaks out between those two. The perspective of Sur is a radical one – also an act of treason according to Kevork. This may be a sentence popped out from Sur’s mouth in a moment of anger. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it implies something which will drag the course of Zaven Biberyan’s literature toward *The Sunset of Ants*. According to him, this embraced identity of victim had to be confronted. His progressive mentality rejected the notion of living in the past and waiting for another catastrophe to arrive. Only through confrontation –calling the past to present– a frank bond with the self was possible; and in this direction, Zaven Biberyan undertook a great assignment: Writing the history of the early Republican period from the eyes of an Armenian.

#### **2.4. THE SUNSET OF ANTS**

Biberyan was saving his best for the last. The masterpiece of him, also one of the most significant novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Armenian literature, *The Sunset of Ants* [Arm. *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*] was published serially by *Jamanag* newspaper over the course of 294 days in 1970. Only fourteen years later, after the death of its author the novel was published into a book and earned the Eliz Kavukcuyan Award –the most prestigious award of the Western Armenian Literature– in 1985. Another fourteen years later, in 1998, the book was translated into Turkish by Aras Publishing. However, the Turkish translation failed to include the full text until the last publication of the novel this year. I will touch upon this adventure, which can be considered as a sign related to the Catastrophe, in the last chapter. Now, I would like to analyze this novel and demonstrate its thematic structure.

*The Sunset of Ants* examines the consequence of the interventions which spoil the ordinary flow of life. While undertaking such a challenging task, Biberyan avoids the danger of canonizing or purifying the victim. That is why this novel shines in the dusty archive of the Armenian literature. Biberyan’s criticism includes all the decadent layers of the society. In other words, he targets not only the unfair practices of the state but also the reaction of the people. To make his case clear, he turns to the community he knows best and takes the Armenians of Istanbul as his starting point. Nevertheless, a distance has to be created, a motion from in to out which makes the devastation visible. Biberyan solves this problem with an odyssey and looks at the society –in this case the life of a traditional Armenian family– from the perspective of the

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<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*



main character Baret. As the novel unfolds, more and more he becomes a recording machine – he listens and sees but does not act– as he has been away from his home for the last three and a half years. After his deathlike days in Nafia, he is finally at home but it is obvious from the start that something in him has changed: “In this moment, when he was at that old house of his dreams, which he had been searching with excitement for years, there was neither joy nor happiness in his heart.”<sup>156</sup> He experiences a strange alienation, his city, his home and even his family seem hostile to him. To top it all, nobody asks him what he endured in his military service. After some time, he gets to understand that his family experienced a disaster as well. The devastation is mutual. Baret loses his youthful vigor in the labor camps of Nafia as his family loses all his wealth in the plunder of the Wealth Tax.

At this point, I would like to introduce the members of the Tarhanyan family. The scapegoat of the family is Baret’s father Diran as he is held accountable by his wife Arus for the misfortune of the family. Diran is the embodiment of the dilemma Zaven Biberyan talks about. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Zaven Biberyan views the discrepancy between the individual and the society as the greatest disaster of men. The origin of the feud in the family is Diran’s refusal to go to Ashkale. After being burdened with debt by the state, the family sells everything and Diran escapes the nightmare of Ashkale. For the fear of dying because of his heart problems, Diran does not make a sacrifice for his family’s well-being. This behavior is harshly criticized by Arus who used to lead a good life without financial problems. Her main supporter at home is his daughter Hilda. In this novel, through Hilda, Biberyan once again brings up the “worker girl” issue (*kordzavor aghchig*) up for discussion. Just like the Norma of *Angudi Siraharner*, Hilda starts to work due to the financial hardships. However, from the statements of her mother, who blames Diran for this miserable situation, we can sense that being a “worker girl” is an immoral thing: “We did not want to tell you but you would hear it eventually. Hilda is working.”<sup>157</sup> This is considered as a dishonor to the family’s name and should be kept secret. Biberyan, as a writer whose pseudonym was once a woman’s name, was problematizing this sexist look to labor.

Another crucial character in the book is Baret’s uncle Drtad. It is sometimes through his voice, we seem to hear Biberyan. He is a recluse. One of the most interesting facts about him is his escape from the labor battalions during the First World War. He *had his share* in the mobilization period. Drtad’s mansion in Buyukada becomes a bolt-hole for Baret. Their

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<sup>156</sup> Zaven Biberyan, *Mrchewannerou Verchalouyse*, p. 26.

<sup>157</sup> *ibid*, p. 56.

conversation sometimes reminds the abovementioned dialogue between Kapitan and Boshnak; in other words, an Ancient Greek philosophical text. During one of this conversations, Drtad reflects back on his stormy life:

When I returned after [Mustafa] Kemal... You know that stories. The insurance company. My position. Then being fired. A personnel like me! Why did I leave again? “Turkey belongs to Turks” they said. And they said to me that I was not a Turk. What I was doing here? You see!<sup>158</sup>

At the end of the day, Drtad settles in Buyukada away from all the fuss of the city life. However, this choice of him is found odd by Arus and he never makes contact with his brother throughout the novel. He is totally excluded from his acquaintances. The only member of the family that is close to him is Baret as Arus believes he is an idle man (*haybehasıl*). The life and mentality of Drtad shows some remarkable similarities with the life of Biberyan.<sup>159</sup> Just like Biberyan’s escape, we learn about his time in France; but there is no choice other than returning back to where it all started. All he can do is wait for death in total freedom, independent from the Armenian surrounding. The only occasion which brings Drtad together with his family is the funeral of his brother. In other words, the sole common ground is death and annihilation.

The antithesis of Drtad in the novel is Suren, the maternal uncle of Baret. He is the exact embodiment of the ant Drtad criticizes. Unlike Diran he is one of those opportunists that had the ability to turn the crisis to his advantage. After taking the materials of a friend who headed to Askale, he sells it and makes huge amount of money. There is a complete contrast between Drtad and Suren. While the former is doomed to a tragic death –with no one around him and his corpse being found days later– the latter rejuvenates each day. As the story unfolds, we learn about the old Suren. Arus, once disregarding him because of his inferior position, now sings him praises and advices Baret insistently to visit him. On the other hand, the inferiority complex of Suren manifests itself as he gets very critical of Diran after becoming a rich man. Despite all the contradictions between those Tarhanyan men and Suren, a strange common view exists between him and Drtad:

This is not your country boy. They say to you that “You are not a son of this country.” If it was your country, I would say enlighten, study, become a scholar, officer, professor. They do not let you become a garbage man. Garbage man! Without money you have nothing.

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<sup>158</sup> *ibid*, p. 67.

<sup>159</sup> One of the most remarkable expressions that Drtad uses is about the “intense” way of life. In the last chapter, I will examine the connotation lengthily, together with the own life of Zaven Biberyan. Drtad is the critical eye of the novel and the title of the novel, the idiom of “being an ant” comes from one of his statements.

Although we can see sense that the principles are totally different, essentially they point out to a similar idea. Being an Armenian bars them from becoming an equal citizen of the country. The basic thesis is identical. Why do they say that? The realism of Zaven Biberyan, his ability to pinpoint the linear representation intercedes here. The common experience that bound these people, the Armenian community in Turkey together is the shared devastation. In each step of the way, we are faced with a devastating experience. While some of them reestablish their life, the others fail to do so. This inheritance passed away from generation to generation is the constituent element of Armenianness. Baret loses his internal integrity after surviving the hardships of Nafia; his father Diran becomes impotent and loses his prestige because of the Wealth Tax; and uncle Drtad chooses a secluded life away from all the interventions as he has those bitter memories from the days of mobilization and labor battalions. These people live with death patrolling around them. They form their identities in reaction to those occasions independent of themselves. This is the exact tension that exists between the society and the individual. They have to battle through this irreconcilableness and try to fill an irreplaceable gap.

Baret is aware of the fact that something is wrong and tries to identify the problem, the reason of this alienation. He finds a job, works for some time but his father's death makes matters worse. During this time span, he spends most of his time with Chamur and Haybenden, his friends from Nafia. What makes this detail interesting is Baret's struggle to get rid of his superior status compared to them. A middle-class Armenian son of a nice family, Baret is highly regarded by those two. With a strange effort he drinks with them, hangs out at their tavern and intentionally tries to dispose of his life in the Sky Road. But why? This expression is unique to Biberyan<sup>160</sup> and is used by Lula, an ignorant Greek girl who commits suicide after being impregnated by Baret. Lula holds Baret in awe as she understands from the first moment that Baret is coming from a rich family. However, Baret is of different opinions: "The Sky Road does not take you to the sky. It goes down to Dolapdere, then Shittycreek [Bokludere], then Kasımpasa, then Halıcıoğlu, it gets lost in the mud of Golden Horn."<sup>161</sup> He identifies the catastrophe he has experienced with the appearance, which rules out the contradiction between inside and outside. His friends and Lula regard him highly as they are unaware from the look

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<sup>160</sup> The Sky Road (in Armenian *yerginki djampa*) is the infinite horizon from Kadıköy-Muhurdar where the Marmara Sea seems to open up to the sky. It is also a remark about Muhurdar being the district of the rich. See. Biberyan, *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 575.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid*, p. 367.

within inside. However, the Sky Road is an illusion as the only reality from within is devastation.

After his father's death, to distance himself from his surroundings, even from his beloved uncle, Baret heads into a voluntary exile which lasts for ten years. He settles in a town in the Southeast of Turkey. During those ten years, he cuts his contact with his family and only exchanges letters with his uncle. The second odyssey of Baret comes to an end after the letter of his mother.<sup>162</sup> Upon his return, Baret enters into the realm of catastrophe as another storm is around the corner. It is the Cyprus Question in the making. This dialogue between Hilda and Arus signals the restlessness of the latter:

“Dear mother, why are you getting it on your brain? Whatever happen will happen. What do you care about Cyprus so much? Are we Greek?”

Arus was shaking her head persistently.

“Eventually we will bear the consequences, the last things we have in our hands will diminish.

“What are you saying mother?”

“I know what I say. [...] They will suck us dry.”

“Mother, what do we have that they can take?”<sup>163</sup>

The operation technique of the social memory and connotations are made blatantly obvious. As Arus loses his sanity from day to day, the nightmares of the past captures her mind. This is a vicious cycle without any sight of life into which no daylight can penetrate. The deterioration spreads everywhere and at the end it reaches into the ultimate conclusion. Arus is paralyzed and she dies before long.

Zaven Biberyan denies a tiny bit of daylight to his readers as he strolls through a habitus woven by denial. Therefore, to track his literary dispositions, which differs from his persistent political struggle, the thematic choices of him should be meticulously analyzed. First and foremost, I would like to note that Biberyan should be distinguished from his peers in the diaspora because of the rage propelling his novels. His quest cannot be identified with the nostalgic narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenian novelists as well, among whom the names of Hamasdegh, Hagop Mntzuri or Migirdic Margosyan come to the forefront. These representatives of Armenian Provincial Literature were surely trying to deal with the loss; however, this excavation in the depths of memory was not offering a statement for the future.

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<sup>162</sup> What makes these odysseys interesting is that Biberyan never narrates these experiences. We are compelled to assess the damage and make calculations with reference to it. The catastrophe –that exact moment of catastrophe– is absent. He does not try to describe that in his masterpiece. I will try to make a meaning out of this silence and the inarticulateness of Baret within in the realm of catastrophe in the last chapter.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*, p. 499-500.

This was an effort to reconstruct the province through writing and when nostalgia comes into play, the truth fades from the scene in favor of idealization. In this direction, the Armenian novelists from the provinces, with their poetic narratives, became the bearers of the nostalgic perspective. With this rage of him, Biberyan could have chosen the nostalgia and directed his focus on the historical Armenian as the site of vengeance as his memoir shows that he had a nationalist disposition in very early age. Nevertheless, as we have seen up until now, his rage, for me, the side effect of denial, did not take such shape.<sup>164</sup> With reference to the thematic preferences in his novels, it is safe to say that Biberyan is concerned with the representation of the trauma experienced by each and every member of the community.<sup>165</sup> The trauma is triggered, and at the same time, concealed by the denialist habitus:

By catastrophic experiences and practices I am referring to having a family in which grandparents were killed or lost, various stories of kidnapping were normalized, relatives were known to be converted, and property and assets were lost through confiscation policies. In our families, the norm was to use different names in different places. [...] Our families had been coerced to work in certain professions or areas and not in others, by way of either de facto or de jure restrictions, or by virtue of living in exclusive districts or even buildings where other non-Muslims lived. Our families were used to refraining from speaking their mother tongue in certain places, having developed a set of strategies to hide their own existence – I use the word ‘existence,’ since [...] by utilizing all these strategies, one hides not only his or her identity, but also becomes invisible in society at large, and visible or in fact existent in its own community alone, both spaces having been defined by the denialist habitus. Thus, there has been no way to exist without being part of denial.<sup>166</sup>

Zaven Biberyan’s literary quest can be analyzed as an early take on this generational (transferred) form of existence. The catastrophic experiences he had been through shows that he was a victim not only of his own but that of the community. Disasters were gradually becoming the majority shareholders in the collective memory and forced component of sociation. Therefore, for abolishing the tendency to normalize this set of disastrous experiences, he inexorably demonstrated the fallacies, starting from the most vulnerable section, the bourgeoisie. When tomorrow was in jeopardy, it was ridiculous to pursue material gain. This was a search for an alternative form of collectivity in which the Armenians would reject playing the part of the victim. Rather than internalizing trauma and devastation, the wound should be cried and demonstrated. In other words, the denial should be confronted in social level as once denial takes center stage everything revolves around the abyss created by it and the true nature of the constituent event of collective identity (for both parties) delusively fades away.

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<sup>164</sup> Rage and denial will be an important focus in the last chapter.

<sup>165</sup> This traumatic experience will be discussed elaborately in the last chapter.

<sup>166</sup> Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, p. 21.

The political struggle that he displays against official denial, accordingly, redounds on his novels. His insistence on problematizing violence, the excavations in the collective catastrophic memory, the constant unease because of the risk of being viewed as an infidel, the ban on the Armenian language, introversion (decay in the family), the concerns brought by the city life, the embraced identity of victim... This mutual interaction between official practices and transferred social dispositions, which apparently hinder production, accumulates and transforms into a prolific rage. However, an *energeia* of this kind, cannot be constrained to the sphere of denial, this is rooted in the interdiction of mourning, in other words the Catastrophe.

As the course of this chapter suggests the time to pass on to the discussion of the Catastrophe has come. These two chapters, picturing Zaven Biberyan with his life and socialist-realist perspective, will provide the much needed guidance while we walk within the domain of the Catastrophe. As I have mentioned before, Biberyan was living in the age of catastrophes succeeding the Catastrophe. From now on, I will try to present a collection of the signals that I encounter in his works and life.

**CHAPTER III**  
**THE AGE OF LATENCY:**  
**BIBERYAN ON THE HORIZON OF THE CATASTROPHE**

*When I got home [after Nafia], I was baffled at where I was; I was not happy at all. It took me a while to regain my joy of life, to return to my true mood. But until the last day, a bitter taste remained in my palate that sometimes ruined the most beautiful moments.*

Zaven Biberyan (from his unpublished memoir)

In his unpublished memoir, Zaven Biberyan retrospectively examines the experiences he has been through until 1946. This period marks the most intense days of his life – *Nor Or* days, his activism in *Nor Lour*, political involvement and the subsequent imprisonment. As challenging as the course of events may be, he sharply mentions that he has no regrets for his own deeds and the struggle he has displayed throughout his life. His conscious is clear for his own account. Yet strikingly, the quotation above reveals a powerful personal statement. Although he is “baffled” at first –actually not from the beginning, which is surely related with the latency implicit in the trauma, as the estrangement manifests itself when he steps into his home– we can infer from his remark that, after some time, he manages to adapt himself to the flux of city life. This would provide a reliable departure point during the discussion on trauma I intend to initiate later on; however, what makes this statement special is something else. It is this “bitter taste” that in his tongue. Thus, we have the immediate question in hand: What is this bitter taste that got hold of him until his last breath? Only through reading Zaven Biberyan’s life and works together that a sound perspective can be developed.

To delve into the nature of this “bitter taste” I will try to form a multi-faceted structure beginning with the theoretical baggage provided by the psychoanalytic approach. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth conducts a guiding discussion on the nature of trauma – which would pave the way for the discussion of catastrophe in following pages. Her departure point is the example laid bare by Sigmund Freud:

Tancred [the hero of Tasso’s romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*] unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest in which strikes the Crusader’s army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams

from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.<sup>167</sup>

With reference to the experience of Tancred, Caruth draws attention to “the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*.”<sup>168</sup> This cry, as a sign which holds the power to split the present time, makes Tancred come face to face with his past in a sudden flash. The call of the victim, each and every time, reminds Tancred that he is the perpetrator. Whenever this scene is repeated, the victim and the perpetrator witness each other’s traumas. They confront with their own experiences. From here, a path leading to Zaven Biberyan’s literary activity opens up. Tancred, although without his will, is able to hear the voice of his deceased lover. On the other hand, returning to the case of Zaven Biberyan, as an Armenian living in Istanbul, he was clamped under the space of denial. He established his identity, both as a publicist and a novelist, under such circumstances. The very existence of the victim was under the dominion of denial and the ears were shut to the cry of the victim –the bitter taste in Biberyan’s palate in this case. However, he was determined to transmit this traumatic existence which possessed the victim. The question was how to utter this cry and let it be heard. In dealing with this task, he went through different phases to set his approach.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, before his political involvement in the Workers’ Party of Turkey or in the literary domain, Zaven Biberyan came to be known in the Armenian community as a publicist in first place. This initial identity of him was a political one (he used to write novels from a very early age but he does not consider them as serious pieces of work). After the completion of his disastrous days in the military as a private under the command of the Ministry of Public Works, his entrance into the Armenian press took place. Upon the shifting dynamics of international politics after the Second World War, which threw the Armenians in Turkey to the wolves, the much needed response to the insults of the Turkish press came from the Armenian editors. The selfless contribution Zaven Biberyan made for this cause cost him dear. This course of events, delayed any possibility of an ethical confrontation with the catastrophic experience he had been through, that is, political concerns interdicted the ethical inquiry:

In 1945, all I knew was that I became the invulnerable again as soon as I returned home. But this time there was something wrong, which was not like before the war.

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<sup>167</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24. vols (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), vol. 18, ch. 3.

<sup>168</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction: The Wound and the Voice,” in *Unclaimed Experience* (USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 2.



Everything seemed to me changed. Or rather everything had changed in me. The escape into nature and the reverie, which was so salutary to me at times of crisis, no longer told me anything. Poetry was over. Even the novel was over. I could not dream and vibrate. I felt desensitized. *I needed to fight, and that's just what interested me. My mind only worked in the direction of aggression and rebellion.*<sup>169</sup>

Zaven Biberyan declares the death of the poet and novelist in him. The Armenian literature is no stranger to an argument of this nature. In the aftermath of 1915, an anti-literary perspective, led by the noted Armenian playwright Levon Shant, deemed literature powerless and impious when the duty of it was to reflect the mass murder without leaving even the tiniest bit of reality out. The unpublished memoir of Zaven Biberyan clearly indicates his stance toward literature. We know that he is into literature from a very early age and wrote his first novel when he was eleven years old. The devastative experience created a gap, which caused him to move away from the literature. The failure to address (or translate) the very same experience would be the factor pulling him back to literature. However, at that moment of time, in 1945, recuperation of the self was out of question because in this game showing weakness was not allowed. All in all, during those days of combat, the trauma, yet to manifest itself, was in the *incubation period*.

What does incubation period mean? According to Freud, it is “the time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms.”<sup>170</sup> However, feeling the necessity of further interpretation, Freud offers a crucial term to elaborate the nature of this incubation period: *latency*.<sup>171</sup> With reference to this term, embedded in the catastrophic experience, I would like to change the course of the discussion. As this question, posed at the beginning of the paragraph, will provide a different perspective and lead the discussion to its junction point. The dynamics of literature begins to function:

[T]his inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. If repression, in trauma, is replaced by latency, this is significant in so far as its blankness –the space of unconsciousness– is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir. To stress the mindset of Zaven Biberyan, I preferred to italicize this sentence. Also, this notion of being “desensitized” will be discussed toward the end of the chapter through the experience of Baret.

<sup>170</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, translated by Katherine Jones (Great Britain: Hogarth Press, 1939), p. 109.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid*, p. 110

<sup>172</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995),

The catastrophic experience *lived through* by the subject turns into an inextricable crisis. Any possibility of representation emerges just when the clamp crushing down on the victim loosens, the suffocating captivity ends. However, what makes this representation possible, on the other hand, denies access to the truth, making it indemonstrable. The one who survives (testifying from the kingdom of the living) survives *bearing witness* to the catastrophic nature of the event (ignoring the kingdom of the dead). As Agamben puts it, “The ‘true’ witnesses [...] are those who ‘touched bottom’ [...], the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy-pseudo witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony.”<sup>173</sup> We are now face to face with an impossibility of accessing truth or representing the event within its integrity. This perspective paves the way for a transition and offers an alternative way of analyzing the testimonies which is based on reading them as monuments (the realm of literature) rather than documents (the realm of history).<sup>174</sup>

How should Zaven Biberyan be viewed? Was he a witness of the Catastrophe? Or was he concerned with the representation of the Catastrophe? As I tried to implicate above, he was born and raised in a denialist habitus unlike his peers in the diaspora. Aside from the intellectuals –Gosdan Zarian, Zabel Yesayan, Hagop Oshagan– active within the Armenian literary sphere before 1915, who now had to bring their contributions from different countries, a new generation of writers were emerging especially in France. These talented writers, among them Shahan Shahnour, Zareh Vorpuni, Nigoghos Sarafian (the students of Hagop Oshagan in Istanbul), migrated from Istanbul after the victory of Kemalist troops and formed a literary fraternity named *Menk* [We]. Their concerns differed from those of the surviving intellectuals. Zabel Yesayan immediately set work to gather the testimonies of the survivors to demonstrate the world what happened in the depths of the Little Asia.<sup>175</sup> The first attempt to address the heart of the Catastrophe came from Hagop Oshagan. His masterpiece, *Mnatsortatz* [The Remnants], projected as a three-volume monumental project (started in 1931) stopped after the publication of two volumes in 1934. Despite his determinacy, he stumbled at the representation

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<sup>173</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “The Witness,” in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 34.

<sup>174</sup> I borrow this formulation and terminology from Marc Nichanian. From here on, taking this argument as a departure point, I will try to intermesh the life of Zaven Biberyan with his works and build a bridge between his ethical and political struggle.

<sup>175</sup> Marc Nichanian draws attention to the struggle of Zabel Yesayan in addressing the Catastrophe. Despite her early experiences in Adana, site of the massacres in 1909 and her monumental work to mourn the dead, her response to the Catastrophe is confined within the effort to establish the truth. For Nichanian, this makes her “the secretary of truth.” For further information see Marc Nichanian, “Zabel Yesayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout,” in *Writers of Disaster: Armenian literature in the twentieth century*, vol. 1, *The National Revolution* (London: Taderon Press, 2002), p. 187-242.

of the Catastrophe.<sup>176</sup> I will further elaborate on the Catastrophe [Arm. *Aghed*] in the following pages, but here, it is important to note that the term is first used by Hagop Oshagan. Marc Nichanian, a leading Armenian literary critic, embracing and developing this terminology, has extended the use of it in the wake of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His researches, which excavate the hidden gems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Armenian literature, also sheds light on the literary activity of *Menk*. Nichanian lists the literary agenda of them as such:

Writing the encounter with the Other was the main initiative of the Parisian writers such as Sarafian, Shahnour or Vorpouni in the thirties. [...] The limit in the compulsion of writing the encounter with the Other is *estrangement*. [...] Parisian writer generations, especially in the twenties of the last century, disclosed themselves to the unfamiliarity of this “unfamiliar lands” and they were asking this question to themselves: How is it possible to be a writer after the Catastrophe?<sup>177</sup>

This statement once again shows that behind the act of writing, in one way or another, the specter of the Catastrophe was making its presence known. Yesayan from Soviet Armenia, Oshagan from Cairo, *Menk* from France. Separate forces, though not in collaboration, were able to initiate a creative process. On the other hand, the Armenians in Turkey were isolated from their compatriots in the diaspora. Indeed, the diaspora, demonized in the Turkish public sphere, was considered as a viper’s nest by the Turkish state. Except from the contacts he established with the press of the diaspora through his title as an editor and publicist, Zaven Biberyan hardly ever had a familiarity with the literature being produced there.

With regard to the background I have outlined so far, one can assume that Zaven Biberyan established his persona within the center of denial as a response to it. As evident as this perspective is, it would prove to be insufficient without an investigation on his identity as a writer of the Catastrophe. The Catastrophe was, and still is, a seal in the Armenian collective psyche. Biberyan’s peers in the diaspora, searching for ways to represent the traumatic experience of the encounter with the Other, was also haunted by the Catastrophe. Although Biberyan was not a direct witness of the Catastrophe, his creative process unfolded in such a habitus that he had to live “always between two catastrophes, waiting for the next to come.” That is to say, he had his share of traumatic experiences and did not mince his words when he had the opportunity to discuss the psychosis of Armenians living in Turkey. This passage from

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<sup>176</sup> The mysterious case of Hagop Oshagan, first and foremost a literary critic, is analyzed by Marc Nichanian. For him, the failure of Hagop Oshagan to depict the event without leaving anything out, in other words, his silence “on the threshold of the Catastrophe”, provides insight about the impossibility to represent the Catastrophe. For further information see Marc Nichanian, “From Document to Monument,” in *The Historiographic Perversion*, translated by Gil Anidjar (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 91-115.

<sup>177</sup> Marc Nichanian, “Ermeni Tehcirinin Edebiyata Yansıması,” in “*Tarihin Durduğu O An*,” ed. Pınar Uyan Semerci (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2016), p. 26-27.

*The Sunset of Ants* –I will touch upon the fate of the book shortly– presents one of the rare occasions that lead us to the horizon of the Catastrophe:

The word catastrophe awakened Baret. [...] Yesterday it was Varlık [the Wealth Tax], today it is Cyprus, tomorrow it will be something else. Yet a “catastrophe” of which “we will bear the brunt”. Something, certainly, “heavy with something else”. What disturbed him was this, he was getting tedious as he listened, this general psychosis was animating the memories of old which had been reduced to the ashes. All along those years, he had undoubtedly forgotten what being an Armenian meant. Now he was starting to remember, and as soon as weathering the initial concussion, was beginning to understand what it meant. Involuntarily, he was assuming his Armenian identity again. This was causing a new disturbance for him and he was not fond of this situation. He was noticing that “not being Armenian” was better. Yet not being an Armenian was impossible.<sup>178</sup>

Baret returns to his home, to the city of his childhood and adolescence after receiving Arus’ (his mother) letter. This marks the end of his approximately ten-year long second odyssey. During this time we know that he lived in the Southeastern part of Turkey away from all the fuss of city life. When the owner of the house, in which his mother and sister lives, asks about the Cyprus Question and how it was perceived there, Baret mentions: “No such thing as the Cyprus Question exists over there, madam.”<sup>179</sup> On the other hand, in Istanbul, the footsteps of 6-7 September Pogroms are so powerful that Arus cannot help but worry for the last crumbles of her wealth. The fear of plunder (Biberyan uses the Turkish word *yaghma*) drives her mad. Baret, witnessing these scenes upon his return, starts to think about Armenianness. This introversive activity explores the mark of the Catastrophe right in the heart of the collective psyche. Baret is a product of not only the Catastrophe but *catastrophes succeeding the Catastrophe*. As Karl Marx mentions: “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”<sup>180</sup> Here, the case of Baret hints at an inherited traumatic existence, solidified through one’s own experiences. Ultimately, two indispensable factors come into play: Acclimation and normalization. An insightful passage on this argument can be found in the “collective masochism” suddenly realized by Baret:

When nothing was not happening for a long time, everybody was getting uncomfortable. They found something abnormal in peace, may be they were having a nervous breakdown. They were searching for a dark cloud on the horizon, getting gradually impatient to see it hinder the sun.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Zaven Biberyan, *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse* (Istanbul: Aras, 2007), p. 502.

<sup>179</sup> *ibid*, p. 500

<sup>180</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 595. Can be accessed from: [http://pages.mtu.edu/~jdslack/readings/CSReadings/Marx\\_The\\_18th\\_Brumaire\\_of\\_Louis\\_Bonaparte.pdf](http://pages.mtu.edu/~jdslack/readings/CSReadings/Marx_The_18th_Brumaire_of_Louis_Bonaparte.pdf) (accession date: 29 March 2019).

<sup>181</sup> Biberyan, *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 505.

Here, the community critique of Zaven Biberyan reaches to its peak. I propose reading this quotation in line with the argument set forth by Kai Erikson. As a researcher studying the social consequences of catastrophic events in their own scene, he claims that “traumatized people often scan the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger.”<sup>182</sup> This formulation provides a guiding reference on the impact of the devastative experience. In Baret’s case, we see an ethical inquiry that evolves into a discourse on the collective psyche as the repression comes to an end. The city, associated with trauma, triggers an explosion inward. Although the “voluntary exile” in the Southeastern part of Turkey has helped Baret silence the Armenian in him and convinced him on the possibility of a different kind of existence, this sudden attack of thoughts bring a moment of illumination. He faces with his own trauma, and through his own, the trauma of the community manifests itself:

Now they will talk about Nafia for years. Just like the elderly talking about *seferberlik* [the Mobilization] till making one vomit. Something to talk was needed certainly, from generation to generation, like this. [...] “Let’s hoist a few, remember the old days.” Now, Nafia was being addressed as such. Like a novel, like a movie. Torture was becoming pleasure, contempt to courage, insult to cynicism...<sup>183</sup>

The whole structure of the novel is revealed at this point. Baret, the hero –rather an anti-hero– detects the source of disintegration in the heart of the individual and the community. Once the decay begins, they intoxicate one another. The worst thing is that they are not aware of the calamity of the event. Through the placement of the double odyssey –the first one was the return from Nafia at the beginning of the novel– Biberyan grants Baret a new vision. Although contaminated by the severe trauma, these eyes diagnose the vicious cycle. Without the will to translate this “bitter taste” (that I drew attention in the beginning of the chapter) and configure the all-pervading trauma into a possibility of political collectivity, the estrangement is inevitable. This is the departure point of Zaven Biberyan’s artistic perspective and *The Sunset of Ants* makes a strong statement in this direction.

The double odyssey, a central theme in the novel, enables a comparison between Baret’s and Biberyan’s experiences. As I drew attention above, the first phase of Zaven Biberyan’s life was marked with the struggle against the anti-Armenian habitus. Upon his return from Beirut –he stayed there between 1949-1953– he published all three of his novels and his storybook. This volcanic literary output resembles the flood of thoughts Baret had to endure after his return. We have very limited information about Biberyan’s time in Beirut. However, the drive behind this

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<sup>182</sup> Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 184.

<sup>183</sup> Biberyan, *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 505.

half-voluntary exile allows an interpretation. His decision was linked with the social conditions of the day. With the tragic events of 1915 preserving their freshness in the collective memory, the Armenians in Turkey were expected to participate in the denialist habitus. A partnership between the victim and the perpetrator. Only through the declaration of this consent that a “peaceful” existence was granted to the Armenians. (Zaven Biberyan’s article “Al Ge Pawhe” [Enough is Enough], mentioned in the first chapter, can surely be regarded as an answer –as well as a disclosure– to the joint pressure of the state and the press, discussed extensively in the first chapter). This agency, with a bold inference an unconscious collaboration, deserves an analysis. Both exiles, of Biberyan and Baret, are guiding references on this discussion. The factor that makes Baret leave everything behind is his unsuccessful attempt at adaptation to the necessities of the city life. The result is absolute estrangement; as something in him is broken, his eyes see nothing but devastation everywhere, especially within the family. Not only the one who leaves but also the remnant gets his share from the catastrophes. These people, each and every one, are possessed by the memories of the glorious and joyful past. For Baret, this “swamp” is not the same city of his childhood anymore while Arus is haunted by her yearning for the old prosperous days. Here, an inherent process of the trauma gets apparent as “our memory repeats to us what we have not yet come to terms with, what still haunts us.”<sup>184</sup> All in all, Tarhanyan family, a micro-scaled representation of the Armenian community, functions as the center of the psychosis.<sup>185</sup> Although Baret tries hard to fulfill his role in the city life –he finds a job, does the groceries for home, dates a girl– the catastrophic end comes with the end of his father. The diary of Diran, the scapegoat of the family because of not going to the labor camps in Ashkale, reveals the sacrifices he made to keep the family intact. The moment of illumination for Baret proves to be the climax of the psychosis as the lost contact with the external reality is re-established at the expense of inner integrity. When it comes to Zaven Biberyan, this background can offer a perspective to read his experience.

Why did he “choose” to leave Turkey and settle in Beirut? To start with, almost all of the members of his generation (the intellectuals gathered around *Nor Or*) had to flee from Turkey and resume their political activities from overseas. It would not be extreme to claim that this intellectual drought and the disappointment of his comrades affected Biberyan. However, this interpretation would prove to be inadequate when his individualistic approach is taken into

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<sup>184</sup> Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community”, p. 184.

<sup>185</sup> In his article on *Penniless Lovers*, Marc Nicheanian suggests this approach. He claims that the psychosis is the subject and the object of the aforementioned novel. This approach corresponds with the context I intend to analyze *The Sunset of Ants*.

consideration. For him, as long as there was a cause, there was hope and the will to carry on. His early experiences show that he had the power to maintain his political struggle on his own.<sup>186</sup> After his release from jail toward the end of 1946, he became an editor for *Nor Or*. When the paper was shut down, a new experience began from the pages of *Aisor* [Today]. Nevertheless, this short-lived experiment came to an end with the departure of Avedis Aliksanyan, the owner of the paper. Hereupon, Zaven Biberyan not only lost the channels to express his ideas but also fall into a financial bottleneck. This time the habitus was aiming at total destruction and sweep the remnant opponent intellectuals of the Armenian community. The police, through constant surveillance, did not let Zaven Biberyan work within the scope of any institution and upon an invitation from Beirut he decided to leave Turkey.<sup>187</sup> This provides the chronological order of the events from 1946 to 1949; however, to translate the “bitter taste” springing from the life Zaven Biberyan and search for the representation of it in his novel, the domain of the factual should be cast aside for now.

At the beginning of this chapter, with reference to his memoir, I made clear that Zaven Biberyan did not regret any of his decisions or actions. However, in his autobiographical letter to Hrant Paluyan, he expresses the biggest regret of his life:

Yet I sincerely confess that I regret my decision to start with Armenian. If I knew what being an Armenian writer meant when I was twenty years old, I would never abandon French thinking that “now that I am Armenian, I should write in Armenian.”<sup>188</sup>

He had the skillset to write in French because he lacked the sufficient grammatical or vocabulary knowledge of Armenian back then. However, the internal crisis, which he suffered for the rest of his life and tried to deal with all along, pushed him to constitute his artistic works in Armenian. Another aspect of this inexpressible gap was his effort to address it through different means. He was a publicist at first, then came to be known with his novels and stories and he always had the desire to appeal to the eye, constitute a visual representation throughout

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<sup>186</sup> This argument comes from Zaven Biberyan’s statements in his memoir. From his remarks, we can infer that he started revolutionary activities when he was almost seventeen years old. This single-handedly executed combat consisted of preparing and distributing a manifesto, writing a slogan on the walls of the Armenian church in Kadikoy. He would say: “What caused me to make this decision was the transformation of the Armenians into hopeless and stingy ruins as a result of constant humiliation.”

<sup>187</sup> Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani” [Letter to Hrant Paluyan], in *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 551. As the memoir of Zaven Biberyan covers his life until 1946, to collect information regarding his second tenure in Istanbul, I turned to secondary sources. A crucial source of this kind is Zaven Biberyan’s letter to Hrant Paluyan, the editor of Armenian newspaper *Zvartnots*. This short autobiographic account is very valuable. Still not as detailed as his memoir, Zaven Biberyan offers some insightful statements on his life which will be analyzed shortly.

<sup>188</sup> Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani,” in *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 553.

his quest to delve into the nature of the crisis.<sup>189</sup> Publishing his works in Turkish was another priority for him. Yet there was no escape from writing in Armenian. “The novelist, in person, chooses to translate the psychosis to *its own language*.”<sup>190</sup> The novels of Zaven Biberyan – especially novels because his stories constitute a contrast with them– cannot be read separate from the psychosis. This psychosis stems from the collective inability to bear witness each other’s lives and share the traumas as “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another.”<sup>191</sup>

From different accounts –of journalists, editors, publishers, intellectuals or even his daughter– we can confirm that Zaven Biberyan was not a very communicable person. “It was not easy to live with Zaven Biberyan,” her daughter told me when we met.<sup>192</sup> Especially in the last phase of his life, he was secluded from the outer world and dealt with the effects of his disease. This isolation, both as a person and as a novelist, was related with the regret he expressed. His novels were focusing on what he knew best, that is, the Armenian community he grew up in. To scrutinize the long-established dispositions of the society with his revolutionary perspective, he put away the publicist identity of him, at the service of factual truth, and presented his ideas with an aesthetic form. Here, to be more precise, I would like to quote from a statement of Rene Maublanc. When he is asked for whom he writes, Maublanc answers:

Unquestionably, [...] I write almost exclusively for a bourgeois public. Firstly, because I am obliged to” –here Maublanc is alluding to his professional duties as a grammar-school teacher– “secondly, because I have bourgeois origins and a bourgeois education and come from a bourgeois milieu, and so am naturally inclined to address myself to the class to which I belong, which I know and understand best. This does not mean, however, that I write in order to please or support it. I am convinced that, on the one hand, the proletarian revolution is necessary and desirable and, on the other, that it will be the more rapid, easy, successful, and the less bloody, the weaker the opposition of the bourgeoisie...”<sup>193</sup>

Although not as radical as Rene Maublanc, the literature produced by Biberyan is aware of the social realities and has its unique way to demonstrate them. In this regard, it can safely be claimed that each and every one of Biberyan’s novels reflect the stance of their writer. Yet most importantly, this politicization does not produce a didactic literature. Just like his ability to find the balance between the society and the individual, Biberyan, in his novels, does not let political

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<sup>189</sup> I would open up about this statement in the latter part of the chapter.

<sup>190</sup> Marc Nichanian, foreword to *Meteliksiz Âşıklar*, p. 17.

<sup>191</sup> Caruth, “Introduction: The Wound and the Voice,” p. 8.

<sup>192</sup> Tilda Mangasar, interview, 18 March 2019, Istanbul.

<sup>193</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Author as a Producer,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms and Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 236-237.



concerns overshadow the artistic aspect – except the utopic ending of *Penniless Lovers* which I will discuss broadly later.

The ethically neglected, politically dominated phase for Zaven Biberyan ended after his settlement in Beirut. We know that he worked in various jobs over there and did not find the atmosphere that was promised to him. However, it appears to me that the most crucial aspect of his years in Beirut is his attitude toward the intellectuals in diaspora. He did not share the same aspirations and ideas with them, in other words, his progressivism was creating a deep chasm with the intellectuals there, just like the discrepancy between his outspokenness and the silence of the Armenians in Turkey. One of the best descriptions regarding the nature of his progressivism belongs to S. K (Sarkis Kecyan) Zanku:

In general, he would thrust his sharp scalpel into the conventional, common wounds that endanger the existence or threaten the healthy functioning of our social structure; and, without causing further bleedings around, he would stick his pen right into the middle of the wound just like a master surgeon's scalp, and drag out the insidiously concealed pus, showing his readers the truth as it is.<sup>194</sup>

Zanku knew Zaven Biberyan closely as they worked together in both *Nor Or* and *Aisor*. From the pages of their papers, with a political demand, they rejected being treated as the inferior citizens of Turkey. Their aim was to contribute to the democratic process and remove any interference and barrier in front of free thinking. However, the most important of threats was the one within: The disposition to sanctify. For him, this enclosure allowed opportunists, who were ready to exploit the trauma for their own sake, to have a say in the matters regarding the Armenian community. With that aspect, it is important to examine the experience of Zaven Biberyan in Beirut. This encounter with the diaspora did not correspond to the political atmosphere he endured in Turkey. Given that the debate on the status of Istanbul, whether it is a diaspora or not, the case of Biberyan may provide the basis for a comparison. Anahide Ter-Minassian, a noted Armenian historian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, names the genocide of 1915 “constituent event” (événement matrice); as it is the founding element of “a memory of catastrophe”, and for some, marks the beginning of “Great Diaspora”.<sup>195</sup> The collective memory of Armenians in Istanbul was possessed by the devastation of 1915, just like the community in Beirut. Yet still, these were not identical experiences as they were reconstructed under diametrical political conditions. It was the denialist habitus that differentiated the Armenians of Turkey from their compatriots in the diaspora. The inflicted wound was breathing beside the

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<sup>194</sup> Introduction to *Babam Aşkale'ye Gitmedi* (İstanbul: Aras, 2009) p. 8.

<sup>195</sup> Stéphane Dufoix, *Diasporalar*, translated by Işık Ergüden (İstanbul: Hrant Dink Foundation, 2011) p. 56.

perpetrator. On the other hand, the absence of the interlocutor was compensated with the disposition to sanctify in diaspora. Zaven Biberyan, who always maintained his distance with the attempts of glorification, did not shy away from depicting the flaws of the Armenians. By this way, the perspective provided by S. K. Zanku brings forth a literary discussion. Depending upon the notion of shared trauma developed in this chapter, we can say that Biberyan's novels, which tend to "demonstrate", are open to psychoanalytic reading. Therefore, I would like to shift the direction of this discussion and read Zaven Biberyan through a perspective enabled by Freud's comparison between mourning and melancholy:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning [...]. The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.<sup>196</sup>

To initiate a suggestive discussion on mourning and melancholia, an excursion to the depths of trauma will certainly help. The recurrence of the trauma indicates an unreconciled experience which strives to find his place in the history. The traumatized "holds on to that moment, preventing it from slipping back into its chronological place in the past, and relives it over and over again."<sup>197</sup> Actually the event is over but it comes back to possess the present. This deterioration taking place in time initiates a strange dialogue. The subject of the catastrophic experience hears the word of the dead with his one ear, and the other is reserved for the sound of the living. By this way, the means to form a continuous dialogue between the loss and its remains emerges. However, there exists an abyss which is the result of being "apparently unharmed"<sup>198</sup> at the exact moment of the cut. The delayed epiphany of the trauma puts the reliability of the victim at risk. Central to the very immediacy of the experience is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory."<sup>199</sup> This factor, inherent to the experience, makes the event impossible to comprehend in full measure.

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<sup>196</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24. vols (London: Hogarth, 1914-16), vol. 14, p. 243-244.

<sup>197</sup> Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," p. 185.

<sup>198</sup> This description is used by Sigmund Freud to stress the indifference of the event which would later turn out to be traumatic. He cites the experience of a man who survives at a train crash "unharmed". However, after some time, the emergence of trauma suggests that the he has survived the moment of danger only "apparently unharmed". Through this example, he demonstrates the notion of latency and analyzes it in detail.

<sup>199</sup> Caruth, "Introduction: Trauma and Experience," p. 7.

The terminology used by Walter Benjamin –with reference to the long-standing tradition of melancholy– opens a door to reestablish the damaged dialogue between the land of the dead and the living. We owe this perspective –which will lead us to the heart of the catastrophe– to his approach to melancholy as a decisive historical materialist. For him, this interaction creates “a moment of production.”<sup>200</sup> The nature of this dialogue provides an insight to the way loss is reconstructed. Each and every encounter with the loss suggests a fracture in present time; however, the present surely plays a part in the interpretation of the past. He analyzes this process that has the potential to create vis-à-vis with *acedia* which “desires to “grasp” and to “hold” on to the fleeting images of the past.”<sup>201</sup> Benjamin, a fierce critic of historicism that glorifies *acedia*, rejects granting the past immunity. If we turn back to the Catastrophe, one cannot turn a blind eye to the clamor to name the event and put it to rest with the method historicism offers. Historicism (and the historian) seeks for fixity while the historical materialism –with its power of *poiesis*– initiates a dynamic process where at the end the reparation of lost integrity or reconciliation with the self arises as a possibility.

The traces of such an investigation can be found between the lines of Zaven Biberyan’s works. It is safe to say that all three of his novels subtly discuss the way memory functions. His characters are haunted by the past. Meline and Kevork of *Penniless Lovers* are, in a way, the precursors of *The Sunset of Ants*. Throughout their marriage, they struggle to find their footing against the external interventions. Traumatic experiences become the constituent element of their memories. Although at the end they achieve a respectable position in the society, they are consumed from inside. The decay of the family is a strong topic in this novel as Zaven Biberyan tends to translate the psychosis using this theme. However, for me, the most striking remarks of him on the memory and recollection are located in *Slut*. I would like to quote this long passage:

“You might have forgotten our home in Konya, the shop of our father in the bazaar but I did not. Do not you remember?”

Yeranig, blushed, looked down, remained silent in order not to provoke her sister and to make her cut short.

[...] “You say so aunt but in Konia, everyone had harkened the words of my grandfather. Former landlords and huge lands...”

“Boy, do not pay heed to words of your mother. She loves to fabricate. Where did the huge lands come from? Bare steppe. You can spend a month there and not encounter a bird. Mountainous terrain. Plant a wood and say that it is yours. Until someone comes and takes that from you. What were you eating? What were you putting on? We did not have toilet in our homes. There was a pit at the corner of the

<sup>200</sup> David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: Mourning Remains,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (USA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>201</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

garden. You cannot light a candle, it dies because it is cold, it rains, it snows, it is dark. You are deep into the mud till your knees. Do not you remember? You were a bit stupid even back then. You made me come with you because of your fear. We used to walk with our feet in the water, mud. We used to bend, it would splash to our clothes, we would run back to the room and get into the bed. It used to stink. Would not it? We did not feel that as it was so cold. ‘Oh! Our country...’ Which country? When you ask someone he says our village, our yard, our cows, our donkeys... Not one of them would say our poverty, our pain... We reached a state of comfort when we came to Istanbul, we saw a proper style of life. No, Yeranig, I know my caliber. Why would I be ashamed? Why would I deny that at home we did not have toilet? We used to go to the bath in every few months. You may say that we used to have a bath every night back home. No, we used to stay dirty for months. Do not you remember that our father smelled grease?”<sup>202</sup>

In their attempts to reconstruct the past, the two sisters display quite different attitudes. Here, we see that Pupul identifies that lost world with abjection, and in the meantime, rejects any attempt at fabrication. Although these remarks include true confessions, from her acts, it can be inferred that she is not at peace with those days. She refuses to call the family’s cat Bijou and insists on using the name Tekir to honor the memory of her cat in Konia. She has not been able to put the past behind her completely. The space of recollection is the city and the way it is realized suggests that this abjection emerges from the enforcing demands of urbanization. Her narrative, quoted above, is loaded with sickening odors, hideous images and unpleasant sounds. This is what Yeranig turns her back. Unlike the stance of Pupul, she believes that this can only bring humiliation and disengages from the miserable past as “in the triumphant phase of mourning work, denial takes the form of a loud, arrogant, festive rhetoric that attempts to exorcise the unsettling power of a ghost that remains lingering around.”<sup>203</sup> This strategy she develops –as a defense mechanism to maintain her dignity in the eyes of her neighbors– is the result of her desire to fulfill the necessary conditions of urban life. To keep up with the bourgeois ways, in a sense, Yeranig robs the past from its traumatic connotations and abstains from confronting: As Winfried Menninghaus puts it: “Everything seems at risk in the experience of disgust. It is a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation.”<sup>204</sup> The content of the loss is determined through the dictation of what remains. This extended subjectivity, from the perspective rendered possible by mourning and

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<sup>202</sup> Zaven Biberyan, *Lgrdadze* (İstanbul: Doğu, 1959), p. 48-50.

<sup>203</sup> Idelber Avelar, “Mourning, Labor, and Violence in Jacques Derrida,” in *The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics and Politics* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 85.

<sup>204</sup> Winfried Menninghaus, “Introduction: Between Vomiting and Laughing. Baselines of a Philosophy of Disgust,” in *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, translated by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (USA: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 1.

melancholy, demonstrates the “signifier’s flimsiness.”<sup>205</sup> With reference to the catastrophic experience of the Armenians, I would like to remind the words of Derrida: “In fact all heirs, by definition, are in mourning. [...] Inheritance and mourning represent both a ‘having it out with the past’ and a necessary condition for all future action.”<sup>206</sup> In the case of the two sisters, especially for Yeranig, the distortion of memory becomes the precondition of survival within the city. As a result, any possibility to initiate an unmediated memory work disappears and when memory is configured to serve an instrument to an end, estrangement steps in. First, among the family members and then within the community. The tense relationship between Krikor and his mother Yeranig takes root from such a background. Money (this may as well be read as urbanization), which is the primary concern, intoxicates not only the interaction between the living but also the dialogue with the dead (through the manner of recollection) as it inflicts a blow to the memory.

Here, I would like to change the course of the discussion on melancholy for a moment, and in relation to that, focus on the abovementioned assault on memory. Zaven Biberyan, unlike his subtlety in dealing with the forms of recollection, brings up a bold question on the origin of violence. All of his novels include violence in motion or violence as a potential. Estrangement, materialized as a consequence of repression (latency), finds its expression through this notion. We can infer from his memoir that Biberyan suffered from sudden bursts of rage throughout his life. The impossibility to stand silent against injustice –which he showed in his daring articles for the Armenian newspapers– was surely a crucial factor in this. This theme of violence was a part of the ethical inquiry he started. The newspaper and his identity as a journalist was presenting him with a chance to channel his fury. However, back then, he was fighting against violence (the oppressive measures taken by the state or interventions) without decomposing the nature of it. To detect the origin of violence haunting his self, he took shelter in literature. This ethical inquiry evolved into a political one and came to investigate the force that undermines collectivity. In his memoir, Biberyan reflects on his tendency to flame up:

I could even kill myself to take revenge on those who objected my wishes or those who tried to impose their will on me. I was responding with violence to every word. I think my mother and father, acting too authoritarian unjustly, nurtured this rebellious disposition and anger. Since my childhood, when I get angry for something, I see red. Again, they say, once, I was trying to catch my sister in

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<sup>205</sup> In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva draws attention to the “signifier’s flimsiness”. This is linked with the extent of subjectivity. Melancholy, with its power to create multiple connotations, has the potential to demonstrate the how the loss is interpreted.

<sup>206</sup> Avelar, “Mourning, Labor, and Violence in Jacques Derrida,” p. 87.

Yeldegirmeni, she escaped to the terrace and locked the door from the outside. That is when I broke the glass with a punch without even blinking an eye.<sup>207</sup>

The traces of this rage can be found in Ali or Erol of *Slut*, Sur of *Penniless Lovers* and Baret of *The Sunset of Ants*. To avoid from any misunderstanding, I would like to mention that my principal aim, in noting these, is not draw attention to the analogies existing between Biberyan's life and works. What makes this effort worth examining is the course this ethical investigation takes. I will try to proceed step by step so as to follow the thematic evolution of violence in Biberyan's novels. We can safely say that, starting with his first novel, *Lıgırdadı*, Zaven Biberyan is interested in discussing the emergence of violence. In his first literary attempt to tackle the issue, he draws an invisible wall that separates the Turkish side and Armenian side. Although these people live side by side in the same neighborhood, they are unaware of each other's life from within. However, this separation enables the writer to deal with the image of Turk. He walks within the minds of the Turks and tries to explore the Armenian image produced by the gaze of the Other. Thus the novel itself materializes the impact of the underlying tension between the two. There are certain anecdotes that hints at the potential of the society to turn against the Armenians such as the encounter of Ali and Krikor (discussed in the second chapter) and Erol's assault on Aret. This novel of Biberyan puts a certain emphasis on the interaction between the Armenians and the Turks. For Biberyan, this is a deceptive dialogue which represses the marks of the history. Without confronting the force that interdicts the possibility of true collectivity, the vicious cycle of injustice and violence can only repeat itself. At the end of the novel, to make his argument clear, Biberyan lets an explosion of violence to pervade the neighborhood. Ali kills Gülgün and Erol beats Aret to death. A violence originating from the descendants of the perpetrator on one side and an insecurity (an inertia as well) originating from the descendants of the victim on the other.

How can we decompose this rage? Before searching for the evolution of the rage springing from Biberyan's novels, through a thematic inquiry on violence, an effort to trace back its origins is essential. One may view this rage as a direct response to the denialist habitus due to Biberyan's lifelong struggle against the official and social mechanism working to the detriment of the Armenians. A flounder against the tacit agreement between the constituent agents of the aforementioned habitus. Although this argument is valid to some extent, the devastating force created by this rage in his novels can only be revealed through an alternative perspective, through the impossibility to mourn. During his early tenure in the Armenian press of Istanbul,

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<sup>207</sup> Zaven Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

Zaven Biberyan was a fierce publicist and his political activism was concerned with reconciliation. As outrageous as he was, the desire to contribute to a true collectivity based on the principle of equality stood above all. This reconciliation project of him was far from reaching into its full potential as literature was a distant possibility back then. To deflate the political tension, the editors of Armenian newspapers were searching for the right course of action and the general tendency was to sing praises for the goodwill of the government. Unlike his peers, Biberyan was in the limelight because of his furious attitude and his outspokenness while indicating the political realities. In every step of the way, he had to deal with the specter of the past. Here, I would like to point out Marc Nichanian's predisposition towards viewing Biberyan as "a man of his time".<sup>208</sup> For me, in the case of Biberyan, we are up against an intellectual torn between the desire to mesh into the present and the obligation to live under the shadow of the past. For me, the very impossibility to become "a man of his time" fires this striking rage of him which provides us with the opportunity to translate that "bitter taste" in his palate until the last moment. The political conflict, which bore the power of history, was constantly preventing him from focusing on living his life after his own heart. Hence, this stress comes to the fore and dictates his novels. It is safe to say that all the main characters of his literary works experience a similar impossibility, by this way, this rage makes the production possible. However, even though art comes into play, Biberyan cannot overcome this rage as it is reproduced and remolded again and again as I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs. Well then, how should we read his dead end? For me, this is related with the interdiction of mourning. Apart from the experiment with memory, which I mentioned above, Biberyan's novels appear to be lacking in terms of the capacity to mourn, and strikingly, this rage glows at every obstacle, at every barrier denying access to the kingdom of death. A meaning has to be created to deal with the utterly inconceivable loss. At this point, the feature that differentiates Zaven Biberyan from his compatriots starts to take shape, in other words, his intolerance toward ideals of any nature becomes more of an issue. Family, church, community, fatherland... He takes everything away one by one and brings down all kind of shelters –supposed to be protecting one from harm– in ruins. All in all, this rage of him (a reflection of the impossibility to represent the Catastrophe) is a medium to convey that bitter taste and a call to bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness.

Yet as if he is not pleased with his effort to deal with violence, Zaven Biberyan, in a bizarre fashion, in contradistinction to *Slut*, changes the course of the discussion in *Penniless Lovers*

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<sup>208</sup> Marc Nichanian, afterword to *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse* (Istanbul: Aras, 2007), p. 564.

and *The Sunset of Ants*. This time violence is not in motion, it hangs in the air as a possibility. With its utopic ending, *Penniless Lovers* marks a distinctive deviation on the account of Biberyan. The eruption of violence is replaced with the increase in tension. The energy, accumulated from the very beginning of the novel, does not explode, instead, deflates and brings reconciliation. A diametrical experiment. Now, I would like to draw attention to the words of Sur after an unwelcome incident:

His name was not Kevork. He used to fight. He would like to break the nose of anyone who looked him askance. He now wanted to knock the daylights out of that officer, because he was in the wrong, and himself powerless. Then he wanted to become friends, frankly, without holding a grudge.<sup>209</sup>

After “jumping” over the barriers at the dock, Sur is caught by the police. They fine him. Sur thinks that the fine is unjust and loses his cool. Just like the characteristic feature of Zaven Biberyan, Sur cannot tolerate any authoritarian action. The answer of him against any attempt of domination (a form of violence) is rebellion. Here, we find ourselves in the midst of a discussion about revolutionary violence. In a way, Zaven Biberyan advocates the words of Sorel: “A distinction should be drawn between the *force* that aims at authority, endeavoring to bring about an automatic obedience, and the *violence* that would smash that authority.”<sup>210</sup> With reference to this incident, we can say that the only real path, for Biberyan, which opens up to brotherhood is rendered possible by the evacuation of hatred.<sup>211</sup> At the end of the novel, the cosmos around Sur finds the perfect harmony as the song of fraternity echoes all over. This dream-like sequence takes place when the guy who pursues Sur and his girlfriend apologizes to them: “I made a huge mistake. I am humiliated. I behaved shamefully.”<sup>212</sup> Then we are at the threshold of reconciliation, are not we? Not even close.

The novel marches forward with the growing pains of Sur. As the novel unfolds, we see that the relationship with his parents gradually breaches beyond repair. This thematic structure, the decay of the family, exists in almost all of the novels of Zaven Biberyan. This is his method to demonstrate the discrepancy between appearance and reality. On the other hand, with doing this, he insistently draws attention to the irreconcilability of two generations. Kevork, as a man

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<sup>209</sup>Zaven Biberyan, *Angoudi Siraharner* (Istanbul: Aras, 2017), p. 165.

<sup>210</sup> Georges Sorel, “The Political General Strike,” in *Reflections on Violence*, translated by T. E. Hulme and J. Roth (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 175.

<sup>211</sup> Through a comparative reading of Sorel and Walter Benjamin, Agamben reaches into conclusion that revolutionary justice is not about the violence as a means to an end. For Benjamin, revolutionary violence exists for itself and it does not serve to the production of law. Agamben, with reference to the perspective of Benjamin, talks about the “sacred violence” performed by the primitive people as a mimetic activity to represent the initial chaos. For further information see Agamben, “On the Limits of Violence,” *Diacritics*, vol. 39, no. 4, CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN THOUGHT (2) (Winter 2009), p. 103-111.

<sup>212</sup> Biberyan, *Angoudi Siraharner*, p. 211.



who survived great tragedies, consistently blames his children for degeneration: “These got degenerated here. Turkified. Frenchified. Ruined.”<sup>213</sup> Why does he talk like that? This is surely related with the catastrophic memory. The only shared experience for Kevork’s generation is devastation as they are living at the age of catastrophe succeeding the Catastrophe. However, Sur and his siblings are not a part of this all-pervading set of experiences. They are outside the sphere of the trauma. Throughout the novel, in a way, to allude to it, Sur seeks for a confirmation of his maturity. He gets angry when Norma tells him that he is a boy. These scenes are abundant in the novel. Another crucial incident that offends him is the way he treated in the Grand Bazaar. As if he is a boy, the artisans play him a trick and take the coat he intended to sell for almost nothing. Despite all the misfortunes, he never gives up on his claim and tries to behave like an adult. This immaturity, for me, is a sign that has to be taken into consideration. Although he grants pardon to all the enmity he endures in public life, to witness the event with all the consequences and assess the impact of the trauma, we should wait for the experience of Baret. From this perspective, *The Sunset of Ants* can be regarded as the medium of the bitter taste that did not give Zaven Biberyan piece.

We have come to understand the ethical process lying underneath the theme of violence which is related to the traumatic experience I have tried to depict. Through the opportunity presented by literature, this quest evolves into a political discourse. Now, as we are more familiar with his concerns, it is time to sustain the project Zaven Biberyan started and shake off the dust that covers the dead, in other words, demand the presence of the past in the light of today. “There is no art without mourning,”<sup>214</sup> as Marc Nichanian declares. Yet what can be done when the mourning is interdicted? Reading the experience of Baret and the fate of *The Sunset of Ants* simultaneously will guide this impossible journey on the horizon of the Catastrophe.

What makes this task, the representation of the Catastrophe impossible? First of all, as I discussed in the beginning of this chapter, this impossibility is related to the death of the witness. Marc Nichanian, aware of the contributions made by Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman and Giorgio Agamben, declares his argument: “What the witness has to bear witness is *his death as a witness*.”<sup>215</sup> Yet most importantly, at the heart of this formulation lies the “will to exterminate”. This inconceivable force turns into a catastrophe for the victim as the integrity of

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<sup>213</sup> *ibid*, p. 91.

<sup>214</sup> Marc Nichanian, “Catastrophic Mourning,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (University of California Press, 2003), p. 99.

<sup>215</sup> Marc Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, translated by Ayşegül Sönmezay (İstanbul: İletişim, 2011), p. 37.

the language falls into jeopardy because each uttered word commits a treason against the nature of the experience which aims at destroying the subject. Therefore, the survivor finds himself in the midst of “a symbolic paralysis”.<sup>216</sup> To get to the bottom of this petrification, I would like start with the regression of the language made apparent by Agamben:

The Greeks’ association of politics with language —and their understanding of language as essentially nonviolent— was so pervasive that anything outside the polis, including encounters with slaves or barbarians, was defined *aneu logou*: a phrase that did not refer to actual physical deprivation of the word, but exclusion from the only way of life in which language alone had meaning.<sup>217</sup>

We can define *aneu logou* as “not to be present in the political sphere, not to judge, not to have your opinions considered when judgment on the basis of communal validity occurs.”<sup>218</sup> This lack of speech is surely related with political (non)participation. During the Republican period, as limited as it may seem, we know that the Armenians continued to create and produce. The Armenian newspapers in Istanbul were still functioning. However, when the existence and the experience of those who testify are denied, those sources starts to constitute a paradox. They exist but reverberate in emptiness, suffocate within the whirlwind of denial. As for Zaven Biberyan, he was struggling to pierce through this barrier. One of the boldest initiatives of him was the Turkish translation of *Slut* which was originally planned to be published in Turkish.<sup>219</sup> Why did the things not go to the plan? Although Zaven Biberyan does not directly answer that question, a keen reader will be aware of the fact that he had to cope with censorship, which indicates the tendency to rule him out of the political sphere, all along his literary career. His second book, *Penniless Lovers*, was published in 1962 and the initial plan was to translate this novel into a scenario; however, this attempt of him was proved to be in vain as the problem of censorship emerged.<sup>220</sup> Another work of him challenged by the denialist habitus was the abovementioned *Slut*. Through the biographic letter, written in 1962, we know that there was a project to adapt that novel into a movie, and in this direction, he produced a Turkish script. Yet again, “the illustrious censorship” got in the way.

Before elaborating on the fate of *The Sunset of Ants*, to reflect upon the castration on speech, I would like to focus on the fate of *Slut*. Turkish translation of the novel, performed by the writer himself, was published in 1966, seven years after the initial publication of the

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<sup>216</sup> Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (Duke University Press, 1999), p. 210.

<sup>217</sup> Agamben, “On the Limits of Violence,” p. 104.

<sup>218</sup> William Paul Simmons, *Human Rights Law and the Marginalized Other* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 36.

<sup>219</sup> Biberyan, “Namag Hrant Paluyani,” in *Mrchewnnrou Verchalouyse*, p. 552.

<sup>220</sup> *ibid*, p. 553.

original Armenian. Although the Armenians were barred from participating any decision-making process (as their very existence was denied), he was determined to translate the cry released through the wound which concerned both parties of the trauma. *Slut* was his only novel translated from Armenian to Turkish –the title was *Yalnızlar* [The Lonely]– during his lifetime. He was writing for the realization of the possibilities that future hold and he was not blotting out the past, instead, relied on the interaction between the past and the present, on the terms of the present. And now, we are living in the future time that Zaven Biberyan wrote and thought about. To do our share (to bear witness to the experience of Biberyan), we have to relieve his era through the active dialogue that melancholy presents. A reading on the horizon of the Catastrophe and a moment of production can be realized only this way: by sacrificing the integrity of the soul to set out on a journey to the land of the dead.

As the discussion is on the deprivation of speech, the fate of *Karincaların Günbatımı* –the Turkish translation of *Mrchewnerou Verchalouyse*– will provide insight about the extent of the Catastrophe.<sup>221</sup> Unlike the journey *Slut* had been through, the Turkish translation of *The Sunset of Ants* was “completed” in a totally different manner. To illuminate the reader on this issue, first off, I would like to give some information about this painful process. It is only now that we have the complete Turkish translation of *The Sunset of Ants* in hand, twenty-one years after the initial translation. However, the publication of the original version of the novel is taken captive by protraction as well. *The Sunset of Ants* was serialized in *Jamanag* newspaper in 1970. It published into a book in 1984 –a fourteen-year delay due to the uncertainties of the political atmosphere in Turkey (latency again!)– when the writer was on his deathbed. The publication process was handled by a group of women and after the completion, Zaven Biberyan had the chance to touch his book. Strikingly, it came out that some passages in the book was left out. The group, one of its member was Zaven Biberyan’s wife Seta Biberyan, had decided to shear the parts that may be viewed as politically bold (passages that refers to the Catastrophe) because of the potential to get harassed by the state.<sup>222</sup> Surprisingly, we owe the complete publication of the Armenian original to the efforts of Zaven Biberyan. The Armenian reissue of the novel, in 2007, by Aras Publishing, was realized thanks to the model-books that Zaven Biberyan bestowed to his inner circle. From the very first serialization to the complete publication, a

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<sup>221</sup> In his article, “Biberyan’a Bir Yer Lütfen!”, Rober Koptaş discusses the publication process of this novel and initiates a discussion to its connotations in regard to the Catastrophe. For detailed information see Rober Koptaş, “Biberyan’a Bir Yer Lütfen!” [A Place to Biberyan, Please!], 21 February 2019. Available at <https://www.t24.com.tr/k24/yazi/karincalarin-gunbatimi,2170> (accessed 1 May 2019).

<sup>222</sup> Tilda Mangasar, interview, 18 March 2019, Istanbul.

thirty-seven year delay in total. Welcome to the age of latency! However, this bitter sequence (which calls us to bear witness to the bitter taste in Zaven Biberyan's palate) did not end there.

The Turkish translation of the book was as well marked with lapses.<sup>223</sup> The Armenian community, when faced with the duty to walk through the possibilities demonstrated by Zaven Biberyan, failed again. The first publication of the Turkish translation, with the title *Babam Aşkale'ye Gitmedi* [My Father Did Not Go to Ashkale] in 1998, was from the censored version. Although the book was reissued many times, the missing passages which present Biberyan's take on the Catastrophe continued to reverberate in emptiness. This year the original title was restored and a complete translation appeared under the title of *Karıncaların Günbatımı*. This suggest that the denialist habitus, as always in motion, was sneaking into the heart and soul of its participants, shaping their responses and intuitions. Moreover, this would prove that he was right to be disappointed and distance himself from the Armenian literature; he would decide not to write in Armenian until his death.<sup>224</sup> Rober Haddecian, the owner of the long-established Armenian newspaper *Marmara* and a close friend of Zaven Biberyan, reflects upon his mood toward the end of his life: "Biberyan suffered physically as well. Yet this physical pains were not related to his withdrawal from our literature. He was, indeed, raged against the Armenian readers."<sup>225</sup> I heard identical sentences from Biberyan's daughter in our interview. She claimed that her father was mentally sound and had the power to produce despite the health problems he had.<sup>226</sup>

So far, I have tried to depict how Zaven Biberyan experienced the impossibility to address the Catastrophe on his very self. This breakdown toward the end of his life, just like Hagop Oshagan's failure to conclude his great project, indicates the limit while confronting the Catastrophe. However, without listening what Baret intends to tell, this effort would come short. As we move to the heart of the Catastrophe, the signs that reflect the impact and extent of the devastation starts appearing much more clearly. For the Armenians, the Catastrophe and the denialist habitus, hand in hand, was barring the language from retaining its integrity. However, now that we have the full text of *The Sunset of Ants* in hand, both in Armenian and in Turkish, there emerges the opportunity to compare Baret's story with Biberyan's tragic life, in other words, to establish a dialogue that reveals the experience of *aneu logou*. Through the

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<sup>223</sup> This expression, more of a confession, comes from Rober Koptaş, the editor-in-chief of Aras Publishing. Rober Koptaş, "Biberyan'a Bir Yer Lütfen!," 21 February 2019.

<sup>224</sup> Rober Haddecian, *Kragan Hawakouit Souadiet Mer Bardezın Mech* [Literary Meetings at Our Garden in Suadiye] (Istanbul: Murad Ofset, 1999), p. 140.

<sup>225</sup> *ibid*, p. 145.

<sup>226</sup> Tilda Mangasar, interview, 18 March 2019, Istanbul.

psychological collapse of Baret, Biberyan problematizes the disruption of the speech, which enables narration, and therefore interdicts mourning.

Baret was getting angry again. At any moment, he was waiting for her mother to say, "At least you did not have these troubles or thoughts, at least I was at ease in that direction." This time he was going to explode. After a three and a half year long break, he was ashamed of standing silent but could not find a thing to say. He could not find a thing to say to his mother. He could have told many things, he could have talked heart to heart. However, it felt like someone was holding him, squeezing his throat. Everything he could have said was drowning in his soul. He was standing silent, hopeless, and unable to open his mouth. It seemed impossible for him to speak of the things that caused a terrible havoc in his head. Even if he wanted to, he probably would not be able to do that. Everything was so complicated. Even himself was not able to come through it.<sup>227</sup>

Baret is aware of the impossibility to narrate the traumatic experience he had been through. Relatedly, from the moment he steps into his home, he perceives in him "not only a *changed sense of self* and a *changed way of relating to others* but a changed worldview."<sup>228</sup> In this regard, the trauma becomes the differentiation point, that is to say, it separates boyhood from adulthood. This untimely metamorphosis on the basis of the unnamable gap—in reference to latency inherent to the trauma—puts a firm stamp on the body and mind of Baret. The result is a symbolic paralysis or a lethargic existence. Although the transition to adulthood is marked with the traumatic event, as I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, this crisis reveals itself as soon as a change in space occurs: "He realized that a destruction was taking place. The destruction was in his soul. He did not see what was changing in him during the three and a half years."<sup>229</sup> This traumatic neurosis, which leads to a total disintegration, gradually takes hold of him. We rarely hear the voice of Baret at home. The astounding power of the novel comes from this estrangement—even hostility—among the household. Strikingly, through Baret's encounters and conversations with fellow Nafia friends, it becomes possible to know him more closely and witness the identity crisis of him: Where does he belong? To the Sky Road (a symbol for bourgeoisie) or to the ginmills of Tarlabasi. Although he is regarded as "too noble" by his friends, Baret does his best to accommodate himself to a worn-out life and "develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie."<sup>230</sup> This indicates the tendency to seek for interaction with people who share the same traumatic experience.

Zaven Biberyan combines the sensations from his own experience with that of Baret to introduce the distortion that the Catastrophe causes on the language. This "symbolic paralysis"

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<sup>227</sup> Biberyan, *Mrchewnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 33-34.

<sup>228</sup> Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," p. 194.

<sup>229</sup> Biberyan, *Mrchewnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 30.

<sup>230</sup> Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," p. 187.

I tried to draw attention above results from the inability to deal with the “bitter taste”. Thus Baret, as if a bellows, strains (*brgoum*) and loosens (*tulnal*):

He started to become loose (*tulnal*). Insects were strolling around in his legs. A numbness was spreading over his brain. His eyelashes were growing heavy. His stomach was full. Instantly, three days of (even three and a half years of) fatigue, sleeplessness, exhaustion was manifesting itself. The liberty to cross his legs was succeeding the everlasting tension (*brgoum*).<sup>231</sup>

This tension is surely related with the defense mechanism which Baret develops during his tough tenure in Nafia. A similar constraint on the mind is implemented by Zaven Biberyan on the eve of his departure for the forced military service: “I wanted to forget my mother, to forget everything, to break with everyone and with the past.”<sup>232</sup> This repression to prevent the well-being from any harm proves to be in vain, both for Baret and for Biberyan. Once the integrity of the self (or of the language) takes place the devastation spreads everywhere. The event, with its unnamable force, disrupts the perpetual effort to stay on guard, in other words, “something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense.”<sup>233</sup> Baret is pursued by the specter of the past with which he could not come to terms and “becomes a symptom of the history that he cannot entirely possess.”<sup>234</sup> Once again an ethical inquiry—a trace that can be detected in very own experiences of Zaven Biberyan—comes to suggest a political discussion. What is this history that haunts Baret? I would like to quote the abovementioned words of Avelar again: “Inheritance and mourning represent both a ‘having it out with the past’ and a necessary condition for all future action.”<sup>235</sup> Baret is a product of the Catastrophe and he is the very subject of his own experiences, that is to say, he is haunted by an interwoven history. This is what preserves the event in its literality as the recurring traumatic image/voice is “the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits.”<sup>236</sup>

One of the most interesting scenes in this direction features the sudden explosion of Baret. With the assistance of his uncle, Baret manages to find a job in a noteworthy insurance company. He tries to turn the tide and adjust himself to the necessities of urban life. After working his tail off, he outshines the personnel in his department and gets promoted. However, insecurities gradually get hold of him, affecting the relationship he has with his colleagues. This atmosphere of office demonstrates Baret’s intolerance for domination. It is not so hard to guess

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<sup>231</sup> Biberyan, *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 34.

<sup>232</sup> Biberyan, unpublished memoir.

<sup>233</sup> Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” p. 183.

<sup>234</sup> Caruth, “Introduction: Trauma and Experience,” p. 5.

<sup>235</sup> Avelar, “Mourning, Labor, and Violence in Jacques Derrida,” p. 87.

<sup>236</sup> Caruth, “Introduction: Trauma and Experience,” p. 5.

that this repulsion takes its roots from his days in the military as a soldier without a rank. These soldiers, due to their low status as non-Christian citizens, were receiving orders from unqualified people to whom they were supposed to be superior. As a result, they were subjected to unjust treatment. The incident at the office causes this traumatic experience to come into surface. The row with Monsieur Kazal, an officer behaving as if he is the chief of service, presents the only occasion throughout the novel that Baret is relieved from his numbness (apart from his inner response upon the mentioning of the word “catastrophe”). What prompts him to action is an excessive sensitivity to meritocracy. Monsieur Kazal’s words trigger a brutal burst: “You are new here. Harken the words of the old stagers. I tell you this in a friendly way.”<sup>237</sup> This statement takes him back to the days of the past and he starts to shiver in an uncontrollable way. In front of the bewildered eyes of Monsieur Kazal, Baret starts to fire questions at him: “Is here a place for military Monsieur Kazal?” and “Is here a barracks Monsieur Kazal?” The space of trauma, soaring beyond the event, takes the present moment and habitus captive. Thus the gravity of the disruption prevents the historical placement of the experience. When faced with the impossibility to detect the origin of the trauma, Zaven Biberyan appeals to literature.

Through an extensive reading of Zaven Biberyan –which I have tried to generate so far– the origin of the interaction between literature and trauma (that results from the catastrophic experience) can be traced:

[L]iterature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet.<sup>238</sup>

To crystallize this quote, one should be aware of the fact that trauma comprises of “responses to both human and natural catastrophes.”<sup>239</sup> Without venturing into the inaccessible component of the experience, the effort to gain an insight about “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” will be of no avail as this interaction is at the heart of the impossibility to represent the Catastrophe. Zaven Biberyan was haunted by this impossibility –of representing or mourning– from the very beginning:

If it comes to open the old accounts, we can do that as well. If we need to count all dead bodies of the past, we count our own dead; because like all the nations in the world, we have the dead of our own to count, and actually that is more than theirs.

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<sup>237</sup> Biberyan, *Mrchewnnnerou Verchalouyse*, p. 174.

<sup>238</sup> Cathy Caruth, “The Wound and the Voice,” p. 5.

<sup>239</sup> Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” p. 3

We have a lot to say about *Tasvir* and the people who back *Tasvir*. They and others like them are responsible for the millions of dead who are lying around us.<sup>240</sup>

This perspective is in no way comparable to Zaven Biberyan struggles to achieve through literature. His fight against the anti-Armenian tendencies of the Turkish press –especially of *Tasvir*– was pulling him into the trap of historicism and delusion. If the article is analyzed closely, it will appear that the dead are regarded as a fixity; whereas they should have been granted the status of witness. Back then, Biberyan was not concerned with their status as the true bearers of the will to exterminate, in other words, history was still thinking in behalf of him. A perspective of this nature, sustained on the hegemony of history, brings about a distortion “even the dead will not be safe.”<sup>241</sup> They will continue to exist just as numbers which total the degree of suffering and devastation. Yet how come Zaven Biberyan managed to break loose from this mangling struggle and interiorize the inaccessible force that divides the dead and the living? As I drew attention above when discussing the odyssey of Zaven Biberyan and Baret, it was only after departure (taking a leave out of the habitus) that the trauma manifested itself. In Beirut, Zaven Biberyan, surrounded with people shaped by the Catastrophe, realized the defects of the Armenian community. Rather than taking shelter behind the idealism, which for him marks the intellectual life in the diaspora, he desperately searched for ways to represent the lives under the shadow of the Catastrophe. As a man who vowed to reproduce life, multi-dimensional creation became a principle for him. Especially toward the end of his life, after distancing himself from the Armenian literature, he concentrated on his paintings. He would sit in the balcony of his home in Moda and paint the landscape that he adored until the last day.<sup>242</sup> Moreover, his memoir shows that he used to carve figurines from soap which were appreciated by his friends. For some time, to improve his family’s financial situation, he produced wooden toys with his wife. However, the most powerful means for him to address the disruption of self was literature. The trauma of his own was presenting him with a chance –concurrently a curse– to develop an insight about the Catastrophe. Guided by his ethical concerns, through tracing the origin of behavioral patterns on social memory, he reached out to the realm of the dead in an attempt to lay bare the genealogy of collective psyche. At the end of the journey, in which he strolled through the present –the space of remains or an accumulation of responses to loss– he came up against estrangement and otherness as an unsurmountable reality.

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<sup>240</sup> Zaven Biberyan, “Verçin Aztarutyun Krkriçnerun,” *Nor Lur*, no. 98, 15 January 1946.

<sup>241</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings, 4:1938-1940*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 391.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Tilda Mangasar, Istanbul.



*Indeed, how does one bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness? Therefore only a linguistic act beyond witnessing can bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness. This needs to be a linguistic act which resides on the periphery of the language; when faced with the Catastrophe, it needs to experience this limit in itself. This linguistic act beyond witnessing, this act which takes the language to its limits is literature.*<sup>243</sup>

The entire corpus of works of Zaven Biberyan, *The Sunset of Ants* as the climax, reflect the estrangement to the utmost. In such an unreliable habitus, even the strongest bond, that of the family, decays. There is no escape without decomposing the habitus that conceals it. Through this specific focus on estrangement, Zaven Biberyan emphasizes the inaccessibility of the Other. In this context, *The Sunset of Ants*, by sealing all the gaps that allow light to infiltrate, destroys the strong statement of brotherhood in *Penniless Lovers*. The “bitter taste” in Biberyan’s palate finds its ultimate translation. However, as I tried to implicate throughout this chapter, reading the literary output of Zaven Biberyan detached from his life would be missing the potential of reconciliation they possess. Only through a comprehensive analysis, in other words, bonding the ethical concerns with his artistic dispositions, a portrait of Zaven Biberyan as a writer of disaster will start to appear. Without mourning the dead or dealing with the interdiction on mourning, this vicious cycle, the wait for a new catastrophe to arrive can only last longer. In this direction, I would like to turn to Idelber Avelar who quotes the words of American legal philosopher Drucilla Cornell:

[W]e do not directly know the death of the Other. We only know the Other’s absence. The Other’s death, in other words, is only there for us as *her* absence. This is why Derrida says that death does not *literally* exist, *for us*, only mourning exists.<sup>244</sup>

The cry from Zaven Biberyan rises from and reverberates across the site of the trauma. To meet the gravity of the event, he includes all the factors inherent to the Catastrophe leading to disintegration. When the thematic evolution of his books is analyzed in accordance with the chronological order, his artistic quest to interpret life under the sphere of collective trauma appears to the eye. An insightful example in this direction is his approach to violence, developed bit by bit, as a potential ready to explode. The way he reflects upon the disruption of speech likewise draws attention. Through his publicist and novelist identity, unlike the uncommunicative Baret of *The Sunset of Ants*, Biberyan challenges the habitus that demands his silence. Therefore, this voice “released through the wound” is the product of a lifelong ordeal and summons the sides of the trauma to confront with their historical responsibilities as

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<sup>243</sup> Nichanian, *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, p. 34.

<sup>244</sup> Avelar, “Mourning, Labor, and Violence in Jacques Derrida,” p. 89

“history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas.”<sup>245</sup> It is now our turn to harken to the experience of Zaven Biberyan and to collect the signs he sends through his works and life in order to initiate an ethical investigation which paves the way for a productive collectivity.

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<sup>245</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History (Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*),” in *Unclaimed Experience* (USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 24.

## Conclusion

This dissertation aimed at lending an ear to the call made by Zaven Biberyan. As an intellectual born and raised within the sphere of the Catastrophe, Biberyan displayed a relentless struggle to decompose the denial, which consolidated the interdiction of mourning, into its parts. The research that I carried out constitutes one of the first attempts to analyze the life and works of Biberyan from this perspective. Without the memoir of Zaven Biberyan, this study would probably come short of reaching its objective, as only through gaining insight on the ethical processes of him that I was able to discover the path leading to literary production. However, Biberyan was late to turn his attention to literature, because for him, the urgency to confront the political realities of Turkey took precedence over anything and everything.

After the proclamation of the Republic, the Armenians in Turkey found their fate in jeopardy as the community was trying to heal the massive devastation. Without a proper administrative mechanism, the problems, the most urgent one being the condition of the *kaghtagans* and orphans, turned into a crisis. Most importantly, Armenian community was robbed of their intellectuals –in the Eliticide of April 1915– who may have led the campaign to set the things right. They had to wait for the first post-1915 intellectual generation to speak on behalf of them. After the detention and massacre of the Armenian intellectuals in 1915, the community found new faces under whose guidance the cultural life blossomed once again. These intellectuals, who were fierce communists, had their political agendas and fought against the denialist habitus that demanded the silent approval of the Armenians. Zaven Biberyan was one of the leading members of this political activists who were gathered around the daily newspaper *Nor Or*. They had enough of playing the part of the victim as the pressure imposed on the Armenians by the state grew heavily during the first two decades of the Republican period. Biberyan and his comrades had their share of the catastrophes experienced by the Armenian community. The constant intimidation because of their involvement in the communist milieu, the forced military service in labor camps and the financial devastation as a result of the Wealth Tax, even the ban on the language with the “Citizen Speak Turkish” campaign. To top it all, Turkish press was intensifying the situation with their contributions to the anti-Armenian habitus. Most of the members of *Nor Or* Generation were forced to leave the country by the beginning of 1950s and did not return. Except one: Zaven Biberyan.

Biberyan’s quest is a unique one. Therefore, not only his return to Turkey from Beirut, where he lived for almost four years as a “half-voluntary exile”, but also the course of his literary

career deserves closer analysis. In this study, I tried to illuminate his return to the center of denial, in other words, to the space of trauma. To find the right context to read his turbulent experience, I appealed to the theoretical perspective offered by Talin Suciyan. In the light of denial encompassing the social life, Zaven Biberyan's political struggle clicked into its place. His war declaration against the habitus –of which the Armenians were a part– that constantly reproduced the victimization of the victim made him a controversial figure as he was problematizing the consent of its participants. This determination had repercussions. Not only was he under constant inspection of the state but also the Armenians, accustomed to preserve their silence, were intimidated by the outspokenness of Biberyan. As an outrageous columnist, he was demanding to be treated like an equal citizen. His voice was filled with the rage of those three and a half years, spent in the labor camps of Nafia. The confrontation of his trauma and literary production become possible only upon his return from Beirut in 1953. In other words, literature presented him with the opportunity to translate his ethical process into a political possibility. However, he needed to detect the factor which was hindering him and filling him with rage at every encounter. To trace the origin of this stunning rage and read Biberyan's literary tendencies, I tried to move in line with the Catastrophe. Denial is related to the facts, on the other hand, the Catastrophe offers a perspective to bear witness to the impossibility of explaining the event, in other words, the frustration of Zaven Biberyan at the end of his life. In this case, denial, together with the interdiction of mourning imposed by the will to exterminate, was barring the Armenians from successfully historicizing the traumatic experience.

It is safe to say that Biberyan's life consists of two phases. He was the fierce columnist that cut everybody down to size with his articles in the politically dominated period which lasted until 1949. The disappointing years in Beirut made him keep aloof from the intellectuals of the diaspora and swept away the idealist Armenian in him. The ethical investigation left its mark on the second phase of his life. To represent the trauma, of which he was the victim and the witness, he turned to literature. Although his political struggle, away from the field of literature, continued in the ranks of Turkish Workers' Party until the last years of his life, literature stole the spotlight. His meager literary production started in 1959 with his first published novel *Lıgırdadzi*. Starting from his first novel, I tried to detect the prominent themes in his novels and stories. This proved to me that he was able to combine his own catastrophe with that of the Armenians. In this direction, his perspective on the collective memory is crucial. As the agents of this denialist habitus, Armenians played their part. The transmission of memory from one generation to the next constructs the habitus. For the

Armenians, the memory, full with the connotations of devastation, can act on the basis of security. This silence produces the ultimate alienation on the novels of Zaven Biberyan. Family, the most intimate organism for its members, produces violence, rage and irreconcilableness. The shadow of the Catastrophe darkens the horizon of the Armenians and without the will to truly confront with the event the vicious cycle cannot be broken. By the way, Biberyan speaks for both parties of the trauma as he sets his eye on the deformed collectivity. He is interested in the representation of the Turk and when he looks toward the opposite shore, he notices the same unaddressed trauma. Biberyan decomposes this vicious cycle and problematizes it with the help of literature. This is the same denial he fought against throughout his life. Indeed, his quest to gain visibility in the public sphere is a bold attempt for that period. However, at the end of his life he experienced the ultimate frustration and drifted away from Armenian literature. Therefore, his ethical point of origin evolves into a political discourse when the aforementioned rage and frustration is taken into account. A rage forceful enough to capture his entire corpus. This rage, taking the form of violence, strolls through the space of the Catastrophe. Whenever he faces with a limit, especially if we consider his intolerance to idealization, he produces with that piercing rage and each time we misread or ignore those signs, it once again tells us that we have failed to find a way out of this habitus. For me, these crucial signs link Zaven Biberyan to the school of the writers of the Catastrophe. Only through joining his pursuit of reconciliation and reading his lifelong struggle alongside his literary career that we can bear witness to his experience and make an appeal for his guidance toward our journey to the heart of the Catastrophe.

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