

Ideology of the Armenian Experience in William Saroyan's Novel *The Human Comedy*

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William Saroyan (1908-1981) is one of the most distinguished American writers of Armenian origin who lived through the Armenian Genocide, and is well known to both Armenian and non-Armenian readers. He has been considered one of the most prolific writers in the United States who has used his Armeniaism in his novels introducing the world the nation he belongs to and the way the Armenian people felt in exile. Saroyan's philosophy preaches to all Armenians in the Diaspora a message of tolerance that helps them understand who they are as Diasporans without letting go of their tragic Armenian past and Genocide. The work I have chosen by William Saroyan which reveals the Armenian experience is *The Human Comedy*. The linguistic theory I have applied to my analysis to reveal Saroyan's attitudes is Fairclough's (1995) theory of ideology.

Key words: Genocide, death, suffering, home, hope.

Introduction

In the underlying study, an attempt is made to reveal the Armenian experience expressed through the ideological aspect of *death* and *suffering*, as well as *home* and *hope* in William Saroyan's works through his characters in his novel *The Human Comedy*.

To study this, I will consider Fairclough's (1995) claim according to which specially chosen linguistic forms and specific contents are conditioned by a certain ideology. However, this ideology cannot be easily revealed without interpretation carried out on the basis of a thorough study of the linguostylistic features of the novel mentioned. Word combinations, syntagmas of certain choice and their arrangement, that are part of the whole linguistic system and characterized by a

typical ideological function, as well as the peculiar means of realization of the given function, are all studied in the utterances of different characters in different places throughout the aforementioned novel. Fairclough ensures that "... the forms and content of texts do bear the imprint of (are traces of) ideological processes and structures, it is not possible to "read off" ideologies from texts, [...] because meanings are produced through interpretations of texts, and texts are open to diverse interpretations which may differ in their ideological import" (Fairclough 1995:25).

William Saroyan and the Human Comedy

The Human Comedy was written in 1943. The date corresponds to the time after World War II. Reading the novel one can easily realize that Saroyan is not only dealing with America's situation of sadness and misery but is also linking it to the Armenian Genocide and its after-effects. The entire novel depicts the myths and symbols of Armenian-American Diaspora Literature enabling Saroyan to tell the Armenian story in America. The more one reads Saroyan's work, the more it becomes apparent that "one basic story is being told; that is, the Saroyan myth, which is the Armenian story in America" (Shirinian 1990:163).

Most of the characters in *The Human Comedy* are Armenians and their stories are the Armenian story in a land far away from home, in a place called Diaspora, which, in K. Kenny's words, comes into being due to the movement of the population from its original homeland (Kenny 2013) or a dispersion of an originally homogeneous entity (Thesaurus 2016).

Before one even begins reading the novel, it is evident that Saroyan is writing about the Armenian-American Diaspora because he dedicates the book to his mother, Takoohi Saroyan. He writes: "I have taken all this time to write a story especially for you ... Soon, I hope, someone wonderful will translate the story in Armenian ... In translation the story may read better than in English... one way or another, though, this story is for you. I hope you like it. I have written it as simple as possible, with that blending of the severe and the light- hearted which is especially yours, and our family's. The Story is not enough, I know ... it will surely seem enough to you, since your son wrote it and meant so well" (Saroyan 1942).

One can tell that this dedication does not only go to Saroyan's mother but is also a dedication to all the survivors of the Genocide. Saroyan admits, "The story is not enough," however, it is Saroyan's attempt to make sense of the family, death, home, and life in general by giving his readers hope and making it a key function throughout *The Human Comedy*. According to Dickran Kouymjian (2016:5) Saroyan pursued his inner quest in Armenians, treating a single facet of the Armenian predicament in each of his plays.

The Theme of Death in *the Human Comedy*

Considering the fact that Armenian history is stained with blood, and Saroyan is one of the first generation Armenians who lived in the Diaspora after the Armenian Genocide, he might have known and tasted death well enough and so, has used the theme of death in his novel. *The Human Comedy* tells the story of Homer, a young telegraph distributor in Ithaca and his life experiences with death at such an early age.

There are four tragic deaths throughout the novel along with Homer's nightmare related to death. There is another death, too, but it took place prior to the time Saroyan gives to this book. That was the death of Homer's father. There is little discussion of this death – comparing it to the other deaths – because the sort of deaths which Saroyan specifically focuses on are the unnatural ones, deaths caused by other men as in the case of the Armenian massacres during the first half of the twentieth century. One of these unnatural deaths is the death of Homer's brother. Homer says;

*"What about my brother? When **my father died** it was different... We were sad because **he was dead**. But we weren't mad. Now **I'm mad** and I haven't got anybody to be mad at. Who's the enemy? Do you know Mr. Spangler?" (p. 187)*

In the above quote the ideology of death and suffering are stressed in the words *died*, *dead* and *mad*. Homer's suffering becomes increasingly difficult for him to bear. The task of bringing the cold news of death into the warm homes of Ithaca

scandalizes him, radically changing his attitude towards his job as a messenger. He starts feeling *sick and terrified* before delivering messages and openly rebels against his fate saying: *I'll go back to the office... I'll quit. I don't want a job like this* (p. 132).

Keats' idea that "the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways" (Keats 1951:215) is a precise description of Homer's experience. He is being exposed to a variety of *pains and troubles*.

Homer's first encounter with the effects of war is revealed in Chapter Five when he takes a telegram to a poor Mexican woman, Rosa Sandoval, informing her of the death of her son. Mrs. Sandoval doesn't believe the news and offers Homer candy in a desperate hope that there has been some mistake: *You would not bring me a bad telegram... You are a good boy - like my little Juanito when he was a little boy... You are my boy too*. Homer feels the woman's pain deeply and undergoes his first *sickness*, a sickness which recurs repeatedly as the novel progresses:

*He didn't know why, because he only felt wounded by the whole thing, but for some reason he was **sickened** through all his blood and thought he would need to vomit. He didn't dislike the woman or anybody else... he felt neither love nor hate but something very close to **disgust**, but at the same time he felt great compassion, not for this poor woman, but for all things and the ridiculous way of their enduring and dying. We saw her back in time, a beautiful young woman.... Now look at her, he said to himself. He was on the bicycle suddenly, riding swiftly down the dark street, **tears** coming out of his eyes and his mouth whispering young and crazy curses. When he got back to the telegraph office the **tears** had stopped, but everything else had started and he knew there would be no stopping them.* (pp. 27-28)

Thus, the ideology of death and suffering is stressed in the beginning till the middle of the novel. The words that stress this ideology are; *death, terrified, pain, trouble, bad telegram, sickness, disgust, and tears*.

The Ideology of Optimism in *The Human Comedy*

Since “ideologies partly control what people do and say” (Van Dijk 2016:21) Saroyan’s ideology changes gradually from pessimistic to an optimistic one. After the images of war and suffering, Saroyan introduces the image of home. As the chapter continues, Ulysses sees an old Negro hobo singing *My Old Kentucky Home* on the passing freight train and waves to him. The hobo waves back, and the child is ecstatically happy that he has received a response.

*This Man, black and different from all the others, waved back to Ulysses, shouting: “Going **home**, boy – going back to where I belong!”... Then Ulysses looked around. There it was, all around him, funny and lonely, the world of his life. (p. 12)*

By making this character of a black man who is *different*, Saroyan identifies him with Armenians who were also considered different. Another image of home comes two pages later when Homer passes the town sign which reads:

*ITHACA, CALIFORNIA
EAST, WEST – HOME IS BEST
WELCOME STRANGER*

This sign refers to the idea of *home displacement* – the Diaspora – because it welcomes the stranger as a Diaspora does. However, with the notion of east and west, it does not matter where one is in the world as long as he is with people he loves.

Revealing the image of home Saroyan enhances the idea of hope which is obvious in Spangler’s (the telegraph office manager) claim when he says,

*I’m not going to try and comfort you. But try to remember that a **good man can never die**. The person of a man may go, but the best part of him stays. (p. 187)*

Again, Saroyan is speaking to the Armenians. The Turks may have killed out good people physically, but they still live on through their loved ones. It is important to note here that in the first edition of *The Human Comedy*, the title of this chapter was *Love is Immortal, Hate Dies Every Minute* and it clearly explains the idea of hope through love which, according to Saroyan, is immortal.

Thus, the ideology of home and hope is underscored in the second part of the novel. It is expressed through the words *home, hope, good man, never die, love, and immortal*. It can be interpreted that the Armenians who were massacred will never be forgotten because love is immortal. The author lays emphasis on the idea of hope through love which the Armenian people desperately need.

Conclusion

Thus, considering the ideologies that reside in the text of Saroyan's novel, whether that of death and suffering in the first half of the novel or that of home and hope in the second half, they reveal the fact that Saroyan used literature as a means of an autobiographical quest. Moreover, through the use of positive words such as *love, life, home, good, and immortal* in the second part of his novel, Saroyan not only reveals the Armenian story in America but also tries to give Armenian people hope of a better future.

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SOURCE OF DATA

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Հայի կենսափորձի գաղափարը Վիլյամ Սարոյանի «Մարդկային կատակերգություն» վեպում

Վիլյամ Սարոյանը (1908-1981) մեկն է հայկական ծագումով ամերիկյան այն գրողներից, որոնք իրենց ստեղծագործություններում անդրադարձել են Հայոց ցեղասպանությանը, և մեծ ճանաչում ունեն ինչպես հայ, այնպես էլ օտար ընթերցողների շրջանում: Սարոյանի հայկականությունը դրսևորվում է նրա վեպերում, որոնցով հեղինակը աշխարհին է ներկայացնում հային և նրա անցած տառապազին ճանապարհը: Սարոյանի փիլիսոփայության հիմնաքարը սփյուռքահայությանն ուղղված հանդուրժողականության կոչն է, որը ոչ միայն օգնում է նրանց հասկանալ, թե ովքեր են իրենք, այլև թույլ է տալիս չճանաչող հայի ողբերգական անցյալն ու ցեղասպանությունը: Սարոյանական այս մոտեցումը դիտարկվում է հեղինակի «Մարդկային կատակերգություն» վեպում: Լեզվական նյութի վերլուծությունը հիմնված է Ն. Ֆերրըլաուի տեսական դրույթների վրա:

Идея армянского жизненного опыта в романе Уильяма Сарояна “Человеческая комедия”

Уильям Сароян (1908-1981) – один из самых известных американских писателей армянского происхождения, который хорошо известен в кругах армянских и зарубежных читателей, в частности своими произведениями о Геноциде армян. *Армянство* Сарояна отражается в его романах об армянах и их трагической судьбе. Краеугольный камень философии Сарояна – это его призыв к толерантности, адресованный диаспоре, которая не только помогает им понять, кто они, но и дает возможность не забывать свое трагическое прошлое в годы Геноцида. В данной статье рассматривается этот подход автора в романе “*Человеческая комедия*”. При анализе лингвистического материала мы опираемся на теоретические положения Н. Феерклау.