

# Literary Constellations. The Case of Armenian Authors Writing in Russian Today\*

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Since 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union raised problems once hidden behind the veil of national unity. This is particularly true not only from a geopolitical point of view<sup>1</sup>, but also from the standpoint of literary, cultural and linguistic identity. Indeed, during the Soviet times, literature produced in Russian language was regarded as the product of a pan-Soviet identity. To recall the words Maksim Gor'kij (1953: 324) pronounced in 1934, "I think it is necessary to point out that Soviet literature is not only Russian language literature, it is a pan-Soviet literature"<sup>2</sup>. Soviet literature was a fundamentally supranational artistic phenomenon, which supposedly expressed the vision of people united under the same flag. Nowadays, with the abandonment of a politically imbued art imposed by the State, the paradigm has radically shifted. Yet, although the Soviet Union's flag does not exist anymore, a considerable number of non-ethnic Russian writers still choose Russian to compose their narratives. Such choice, determined by a multitude of factors<sup>3</sup>, has a significant impact on the definition of the post-Soviet Russian literary canon.

In this respect, the Armenian case seems to be particularly interesting, given the fragmented nature of the nation and its literature<sup>4</sup>. The presence of a large, "internal"<sup>5</sup> Armenian diaspora living in the Russian soil has given Russian literature a copious amount of writers throughout history. Notably, after the fall of

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\* Note on transliteration. Russian has been transliterated according to the scientific system; so have been the names and surnames of Armenian writers living in Russia. Names and surnames of Armenian scholars are reported as they appear in their works.

<sup>1</sup> On Caucasus-related issues, cf. Coppieters 1996, Baev 1997.

<sup>2</sup> "[...] ja sčitaju neobchodimym ukazat', što sovetskaja literatura ne javljaetsja tol'ko literaturoj russkogo jazyka, èto – vsesojuznaja literatura". If not otherwise stated, all translations from Russian and Italian are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Place of author's birth and a wider literary market are among the most prominent ones.

<sup>4</sup> According to Anahit Avetisyan and Mkrtich Matevosyan (2015), "the boundaries of the phenomenon called 'Armenian literature' are indefinable". On this point, cf. also Bardakjian 2000, Hacikyan *et al.* 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Ishkanian (2008: 136) makes a distinction between "internal" (Eastern) and "external" (Western) diaspora. "The first", writes Ishkanian, "is called 'internal' because, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it consisted of the Armenian communities

the Soviet Union, migratory fluxes<sup>6</sup> enlarged the pre-existing diaspora, creating a “hybrid” one (Spivak 2005: 828). In this hybrid context, literature produced by second, third or “n<sup>th</sup>” generation of Armenians born in Russia (or Soviet Union) cohabits with that written by Armenians born and raised in (Soviet) Armenia, who emigrated at some point in their lives. Inevitably, those artists, whose umbilical cord is still closely connected to the homeland<sup>7</sup>, inject their cultural patrimony in the circulatory system of Russian literature. As a result, this type of literature can be regarded as a product of both Russia and Armenia. Pertinently, Anahit Avetisyan and Mkrtych Matevosyan (2015: online) maintain that “many Armenian writers – or writers of Armenian origin – present their work as just as much a product of their adoptive culture as of their Armenian roots”. In keeping with Hall (1990: 226), comparison with other cultural models unavoidably shapes one’s identity, which is characterized by “unstable points of identification or suture”. It is a game of loss and gain. Indeed, according to Eric J. Leed (1991: 177), “[t]he transformations of social being [...] suggest that there is no self without an other; and that, at bottom, identity is done with mirrors. With a change, a twist, a distortion of those reflections, an identity is transformed”. As a matter of fact, the encounter between the Armenian and the Russian cultural heritage changes both their identities.

In light of these assumptions, embracing Caffee’s definition of ‘Russophobia’<sup>8</sup>, this research concentrates on the development of contemporary Russian literature during the last couple of decades. Special attention is devoted to the contribution writers of Armenian origin are giving to the on-going formation of the post-Soviet literary canon in Russia. This line of critical inquiry encourages a serious reflection on the role of the ‘*rossijane*’, and Armenians in particular, in the construction of contemporary Russian literature, an issue hitherto neglected both in Russian and Armenian studies.

## 1. *Towards a Transcultural Approach*

In recent years, a gradual increase in the researches on literature written in Russian language by non-ethnic Russians after Communism marked a turn-

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outside Soviet Armenia but within the same overall state (i.e. the USSR)”. “External” diaspora includes those communities in the Middle East, Europe and the Americas.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eganjan, Šachnazarjan 2005. In particular see table 2.1, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> It should be remembered that a growing number of Armenian emigrants choose to embrace their adoptive culture to the detriment of their origins. Galkina (2006: 191) has recently commented on this trend in Moscow: “[t]heir identity is changing, step-by-step, from purely an Armenian one, to a mixed (mosaic) ethnic and territorial identity; they are beginning to feel like Muscovites”. All this considered, it is not surprising to read that “Armenia-diaspora relations have historically been problematic, and the post-Soviet period is no exception”, as Razmik Panossian (2003: 140) claims.

<sup>8</sup> This concept and its implications are addressed in the next paragraph.

ing point in the field of post-Soviet studies<sup>9</sup>. In particular, the recourse to critical tools pertaining to Postcolonial studies paved the way for a new scholarly trend. From a purely methodological point of view, it is possible to question the applicability of these categories to the post-Soviet context<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, as Ewa Thompson (2008: 412) maintains, there are difficulties in “accommodating Russian colonialism within the postcolonial certitudes”. In a similar vein, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2005: 828) too recognizes significant differences between Russia’s case and the conceptual rubric of the thalassocratic colonial discourse<sup>11</sup>.

Instead, it would be more reasonable to use Madina Tlostanova’s notion of ‘transculturation’<sup>12</sup> (*transkul’turacija*) to identify a new form of cultural convergence. Tlostanova (2004: 28) holds that “[t]ransculturation is based on dynamic diversity [...]. Transculturation, as a new episteme, is based on cultural polylogue, in which, however, full synthesis, confluence, and full cultural translation must not take place. There, where cultures meet, they interact, but they do not merge, preserving their right to ‘opacity’”<sup>13</sup>. The introduction of a new term is justified by the fact, as Tlostanova also elucidates in a more recent article (Tlostanova 2012)<sup>14</sup>, that the post-Soviet context requires different and plural categories that overcome the “fraught relationship” between postcolonial and postcommunist (*Ibid.*: 130). Thus, Tlostanova (*Ibid.*: 132) suggests to

shift the emphasis from universalist applications of ready-made discourses and travelling theories, always based on the western cognitive principle of studying the other as an object from some disembodied position which in fact only hides its

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<sup>9</sup> For further reference, see Waldstein, Turoma 2013; Pucherová, Gafrik 2015; Puleri 2016; Smola, Uffelmann 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Due to length limitations it is impossible to discuss in detail the debate surrounding the applicability of postcolonial categories to the post-Soviet context. For a more complete overview on this point, cf. Etkind 2001, Moore 2001, Possamai, Albertazzi 2002, Albertazzi *et al.* 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Of the same opinion are all the participants (Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram, Vitaly Chernetsky) in the forum *Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space*, hosted by “Publications of the Modern Language Association of America” (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. with the definition of ‘transculturation’ given by Fernando Ortiz, the Cuban anthropologist who coined the term in 1947: “the word *transculturation* [...] expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation” (Ortiz 1995: 102-103) Emphasis in the original.

<sup>13</sup> “[t]ranskul’turacija osnovyvaetsja na dinamičeskom mnogoobrazii [...]. Transkul’turacija, kak novaja epistema, osnovyvaetsja na kul’turnom poliloge, v kotorom, odnako, ne dolžno proisходит’ polnogo sinteza, slijanija, polnogo kul’turnogo perevoda, gde kul’tury vstrečajutsja, vzaimodejstvujut, no ne slivajutsja, sochranjaja svoje pravo na ‘neprozračnost’”.

<sup>14</sup> On this point, see also Tlostanova 2011.

own contextuality, to pluriversal and pluritopic intersubjectification, paying attention to various local histories marked by colonial and imperial differences (or their combination) within modernity/coloniality.

Contrarily to what happened with the Anglophone world, in the post-Soviet space the shared experience of a communist political regime produced diverse cultural responses, depending on the geographic area or ethnicity involved. In the Armenian case, as Nancy Condee claims commenting Ajvazovskij's paintings, Russian contiguity "produce[d] not cultural homology but rather, at times, its opposite: a libidinal engagement, under certain conditions, with the great overseas empire" (2005: 831). To account for such "libidinal engagement", the concept of 'transculturation' proves to be particularly useful insofar as it entails the existence of a hybrid<sup>15</sup>, in-between culture. Arguably, in this suspended zone, no culture prevails. To put it in Fernando Ortiz's words, "the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them" (Ortiz 1995: 103).

Talking about the "parents" of this new "offspring", however, the "double" nature of the Armenian diaspora in Russia should be once again considered. Indeed, whereas it is normal that writers belonging to the "historical" Armenian diaspora use Russian language, the same choice made by Armenian emigrants born or raised in Armenia demands a different approach. Pertinently, this second case can be discussed against the background of the notion of 'Russophonia', introduced by Naomi Beth Caffee in 2013. Caffee (2013: 20) uses the term 'Russophone' to "describe literature written in the Russian language, and 'Russophonia' to describe the totality of social, linguistic, and geo-political environments in which Russian-speaking authors write and live". Therefore, the concept of 'Russophonia' allows the inclusion of all the Russian-speaking writers who do not identify as Russian in the Russian literary canon at large. Moreover, it encourages the investigation of the ambivalent position these writers take in their relationship with Russia and their homeland. "Russophonia", continues Caffee, "is best defined as a linguistic field of discourse that is connected to, but not bound by, Russian political and economic power, and which is held together by a combination of social, cultural, political, economic, and spatial relationships" (*Ibid.*: 29-30). As a matter of fact, Caffee's dissertation provides remarkable insights into a topic that has not yet been adequately addressed.

## 2. *Writers of Armenian Origin and the Russian Canon*

Scholarship has started assessing the importance of the writers of Armenian origin in the construction of the new Russian literary canon only during the latest years. In fall 2016, two international conferences, respectively hosted by

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<sup>15</sup> On the concept of 'cultural hybridity' cf. also Burke 2009.

Moscow State University named after Lomonosov (Moscow, Russia, September 13-17) and Yerevan State University (Yerevan, Armenia, October 13-14), focussed on Armenian diaspora and Armenian-Russian relations. In spite of the relevance given to the theme, a small number of papers dealt with the problem of Armenian authors writing in Russian<sup>16</sup>. In short, the available evidence seems to suggest that so far the appraisal of the Armenian case has been scarcely attempted, and deserves a much more systematic approach<sup>17</sup>.

The strong presence of ethnically Armenian writers composing in Russian provides confirmatory proof of the significance of the ‘Russophone’ issue. For instance, the writer Ašot Aristakesovič Sagratjan (1936-2015) is considered the son of both Armenian and Russian culture. Mirzozjan (2015: 272) explains Sagratjan’s fate with these words: “[w]hen Ašot Sagratjan’s mother lost her breast milk, a Russian woman fed the baby with her milk in the Moscow maternity hospital Grauerman. Maybe this is why he became a living bridge between Armenian and Russian culture”<sup>18</sup>. This condition, however, often times has been problematic for the author. According to Sagratjan, “[I], a Russian-speaking poet, have suffered here [in Russia] because my surname and my name did not meet the standards of those who saw me as a national, and in Armenia I was called ‘šortvac’”<sup>19</sup> (Sagratjan 2007: online). Nonetheless, without such circumstances, his book *The Land of Our Hope* (*Zemlja nadeždy našej*, 2012) would have never seen the light. This work, written in Russian, includes stories, tales, novels, parables, reflections on the past and the fate of Armenia. For his contribution to Russian literature, Sagratjan was awarded the golden Puškin medal.

If Sagratjan was born in Moscow and then spent part of his life in Armenia, Narine Jur’evna Abgarjan (1971) was born in Berd (Soviet Armenia), and moved to Moscow only in 1993. Nowadays, despite her Armenian origin and upbringing, she is considered a Russian writer. She achieved notoriety with her autobiographical *povest’ Manjunja* (2010). Thanks to this book, she was awarded the Russian national literary prize ‘*Rukopis’ goda*’ (‘Manuscript of the year’) in the ‘language’ category. In 2011, she was also shortlisted for the ‘*Bol’saja kniga*’ (‘Big book’) award. Then, in 2013, she won the prize “BABY-NOS” (*Novaja russkaja slovesnost’*). Finally, in 2016, Abgarjan received one of the most important literary prizes in Russia, the ‘*Jasnaja Poljana*’ award, in the category ‘21<sup>st</sup> century’ (‘XXI vek’), for her book *Three Apples Fell from the Sky* (*S neba upali tri jabloka*, 2015). Even though Abgarjan’s novels deal with Armenia, the

<sup>16</sup> The proceedings of both conferences should appear in 2018.

<sup>17</sup> This would also help Armenian Studies overcome some of its major shortcomings, i.e. its puristic approach and a fundamental lack of structure, as also Kotchikian (2006: 304) laments.

<sup>18</sup> “kogda u materi Ašota Sagratjana propalo grudnoe moloko, mladenca v moskovskom roddome Grauermana kormila svojim molokom russkaja ženščina. Možet, potomu i stal on živym mostom meždu kul’turami Armenii i Rossii”.

<sup>19</sup> “[ja], russkojazyčnyj poët, stradal zdes’ [v Rossii], potomu čto familija i imja moi ne sootvetstvovali standartam tech, kto videl vo mne nacmena, a v Armenii menja nazывali ‘šortvac’”.

issues she explores are also a concern for today's Russia. For example, in her last novel *Three Apples Fell from the Sky* the depiction of a town called Maran is used to foreground problems regarding both Armenia and Russia. As Abgarjan tells Gelija Pevzner (2016: online) in a recent interview,

[...] I somehow tried to bring my own, national [concerns]. But Maran is not only an Armenian village, it is the same as a Russian village, which today is close to extinction. Sometimes there live only five elderly people, who cannot even be helped by anyone. This terribly worries me. My heart bleeds when I go somewhere in the province and see what is going on<sup>20</sup>.

Through the foregrounding of common themes and worries, Abgarjan builds a transcultural dialogue where the peculiarities of her Armenian background interact with the Russian reality. The same mechanism can be found in Karine Arutjunova's short stories. Yet, her case proves to be even more complex. Born in Kiev (1963), Arutjunova is of Jewish-Armenian origin. After moving to Isreal (1994), she now lives between Tel-Aviv and Kiev. In the story *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* (*Kniga o vkusnoj i zdorovoj pišče*, in: *Sčastlivye ljudi*, 2015), Arutjunova elects as the subject of her narration the eponymous book, which was extremely popular throughout the Soviet Union. The story opens with these lines:

[w]hen the Cosmos' depth and emptiness reveals itself to me in its dreadful silence, I immerse myself into what for centuries has been saving and warming people on rainy days – “The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food”. Who has not leafed through this masterpiece at least once, feasting their eyes upon the unruly bacchanalia of flavours and smells, appearing through austere type and luxuriously coloured illustrations inserted in it? In depth and richness they compete with the best examples of the Flemish school<sup>21</sup> (Arutjunova 2015: online).

<sup>20</sup> “[...] ja kak-to pytalas' privnesti svoe, nacional'noe. No Maran – èto ne tol'ko armjanskaja derevnja, èto ta že russkaja derevnja, kotoraja segodnja nachoditsja na grani isčeznovenija – tam inogda vsego pjat' starikov, kotorym daže pomoč' nekomu. Èto menja očen' volnuet i bespokoit. Kogda kuda-nibud' v provinciju poeđeš', u menja serdce krov'ju oblivaetsja, kogda vidiš', čto tam tvoritsja”. In the same interview Abgarjan reveals that several stories of her next collection are set in Moscow: “[...] this is a big step forward to me, because it is very difficult for me to write about a big city. No matter how long I have been living in Moscow, to me a big city is a kind of exotica, which I still cannot penetrate”. (“[...] èto dlja menja bol'šoj šag vpered, potomu čto mne očen' složno pisat' o bol'šom gorode. Skol'ko by ja ni žila v Moskve, dlja menja bol'šoj gorod – èto nekaja èkzotika, kotoruju ja do sich por ne mogu dlja sebja otkryt'”, Pevzner 2016).

<sup>21</sup> “[k]ogda glubina i pustota Kosmosa otkryvaetsja mne v pugajuščem svoem bezmolvii, ja pogružajus' v to, čto vekami spasalo i sogrevalo v nenastnye dni, – v ‘Knigu o vkusnoj i zdorovoj pišče’. Kto ne listal ètot šedevr odnaždy, upivajas' raznuzdannoj vakchanaliej vkusov i zapachov, prostupajuščich skvoz' strogij šrift i rosškošnye cvetnye vkladyši-illjustracii, po glubine i nasyščennosti soperničajuščie s lučšimi obrazcami flamskoj školy [...]”.

As this brief excerpt shows, Arutjunova's story overcomes the national boundaries of the post-Soviet states. This result is achieved both through the use of a culture-specific object and a shared language. However, the linguistic preference allows the author to reach a wider Russian-speaking public, also involving the Russian diaspora in the world. Indeed, according to Viktor Leonidovič Toporov (2012: online),

[a]t a first glance Arutjunova's stories, which geographically and metaphysically repeat the contour of her wanderings, may seem psychological studies. In part – in the Israeli part –, they may also seem linguistic studies. Here, with the tools of Russian language, [she] skilfully recreates Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladin<sup>22</sup>.

Arutjunova's Russian-language works earned her a nomination in the shortlist for the 'Andrej Belyj' award in the 'prose' category (2010, with her short stories collection *Angel Hofmann and Others – Angel Gofman i drugie*), and in the shortlist for the 'Rukopis' goda' award (2011, with the manuscript *Floating on the waves – Plyvuščie po volnam*). She was also long-listed for the 'Bol'saja kniga' award (2011, with the novel *Ashes of the Red Cow – Pepel krasnoj korovy*).

### 3. Conclusions

Although length limitations do not permit an extensive engagement of this topic, the discussion allows the development of some conclusions. Nowadays, a considerable number of authors of Armenian origin writing in Russian occupy a prominent position in the Russian literary canon. Prestigious Russian literary awards have honoured many of these outstanding voices in literature across diverse genres. Notably, the use of Russian language by ethnically Armenian authors living in Russia functions as an in-between space where identities are plural, both Armenian and Russian. This is particularly true for those born in Armenia and then joined the diaspora in Russia later in their lives, as in Narine Abgarjan's case.

Furthermore, the choice to use the "language of the other"<sup>23</sup> had and still has a strong impact on Russian society. To some extent, their success testifies a change in the attitude of Russians towards Caucasian peoples<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, in a 2003 survey conducted by Ljudmila Alekseeva, Russians indicated them as the

<sup>22</sup> "[r]asskazy Arutjunovoj – geografičeski i metafizičeski povtorjajuščie kontur ee skitanij – mogut na pervyj vzgljad pokazat'sja psihologičeskimi etjudami (otčasti – v izrail'skoj časti – i lingvističeskimi etjudami: zdes' sredstvami russkogo jazyka masterski vossozdaetsja ivrit, idiš i ladino)".

<sup>23</sup> Yet, the reverse side of the coin should be mentioned. According to Mark Malkasian (1996: 111), the Russian linguistic ingerence, which intensified during the Soviet period, produced a sense of cultural inferiority in Armenians.

<sup>24</sup> As Thompson (2008: 412) asserts, "racism has intensified in the post-communist period".

first source of xenophobic anxiety. After almost fifteen years, the popularity of the writers of Armenian origin seems to have contributed to a re-evaluation of their civilization. Most certainly, it has marked the return of the “Caucasus theme” in Russian literature<sup>25</sup>. This phenomenon, however, has not yet been sufficiently dealt with and deserves further investigation.

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<sup>25</sup> The “Caucasus theme” was extremely popular in Nineteenth century Russian literature. Cf. Ferrari 2005.

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## Abstracts

Irina Marchesini

*Costellazioni letterarie. Il caso degli scrittori armeni che oggi scelgono il russo come lingua compositiva*

Sulla scorta dei concetti di 'transculturazione' e 'russofonia', rispettivamente proposti da M. Tlostanova (2004) e N.M. Caffee (2013), la presente ricerca si concentra sul contributo degli scrittori di origine armena nello sviluppo del nuovo canone letterario russo post-sovietico durante gli ultimi due decenni. Questa linea di ricerca incoraggia una seria riflessione sul ruolo dei 'rossijane', e degli armeni in particolare, nella costruzione della letteratura russa contemporanea, un problema sinora poco studiato sia dalla slavistica, sia dall'armenistica.

Ирина Маркезини

*Литературные созвездия. О современных писателях-армянах, пишущих на русском языке*

В ракурсе концепций 'транскультурации' М.В. Тлостановой (2004) и 'руссофонии' Н.Б. Каффи (2013) данное исследование сосредоточено на рассмотрении вклада писателей армянского происхождения в развитие нового постсоветского русского литературного канона за последние два десятилетия. Подобное направление исследований служит стимулом для более глубокого размышления о роли россиян и в особенности армян, в формировании современной русской литературы, что до сего времени малоизучено как славяноведением, так и арменоведением.

## Keywords

Russian Literature; Post-Soviet Literature; Russophobia; Armenian Diaspora.