

By Batil Vartanian



Analysis of Zabel Yesayan's "In the Ruins"

About the Author Zabel Yesayan

- She was born and raised in Constantinople, Turkey.
- She was a writer, activist, and a feminist.
- At the age of 17 she began her literary career and pursued her studies in literature at Sorbonne University in Paris.
- She married the painter Dickran Yesayan and bore him 2 children.; Hrant and Sophie
- She managed to hide underground and escape the Armenian genocide in 1915.
- In 1933 she immigrated to Armenia
- In 1938 she was arrested and imprisoned by Stalin's forces and died in exile around 1943.

About the book

- In 1909 Yesayan was appointed to a delegation sent to the Ottoman city of Adana to provide aid to orphans and assess conditions in the aftermath of the bloody massacres of Armenians by the Turks.
- “In the Ruins” is the first Armenian book that dealt with the 1909 massacres in which it gives a detailed account of the victims’ painful stories narrated by Yesayan.

Research Questions

- The purpose of this study is to comprehend “In the Ruins” at a more profound level. Three elements will be analyzed -- genre, trauma, and theme, therefore my research questions are the following :
 - 1) Since many critics argue about the genre of Yesayan’s work, which genre fits the most for “In the Ruins”?
 - 2) Since Yesayan constantly repeats the term “silence” in her book; what is the role of the theme Silence?
 - 3) How did the psychological trauma effect Yesayan during the aftermath of the catastrophe?

Genre

- According to **Perroomian**, the outpouring of feeling, the psychoanalytic approach to characters, emotions, and behavior, the rich metaphor, imagery, and hyperbolic expressions, all come into play to elevate the work to the level of artistic creation, closest to a genre of **non-fiction essay**.
- **Oshagan** characterizes Yesayan's great work "In the Ruins" by placing it under a very particular title "**the chronicle**". He suggests that new categories must be invented when writing enters into the poorly explored regions of interdiction of mourning and the catastrophe.
- **Nichanian** believes that her book confronts the interdiction of mourning only in the form of direct **testimony** and a challenge of witnessing. **Nichanian** says, she transcribes and thus she witnesses, she keeps the trace of their narratives. He believes that **testimony** can be transformed into a work of mourning. That is the lesson of the entire book.

Psychoanalytic and trauma theory

- **Defenses**

- 1) **selective perception:** hearing and seeing things only what we think we can handle.

Example: Yesayan saw and heard things that she could not handle. She accepted this dangerous task in order to spread the world about the agony of the Armenian for herself and for her nation.

- 2) **Avoidance:** staying away from people or situations that are liable to make us anxious by stirring up some unconscious.

Example: "I was physically and mentally oppressed and closed my eyes in an attempt to escape the abiding nightmare." - Yesayan

Trauma and Testimony

- By extension the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself.
- The listener, however, is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out his function of a witness to the trauma witness. The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself.

Theme: Silence

- “No answer. No answer. The **silence** was as heavy as lead” (Yesayan, p. 63).
- “They were often **silent**, and often remained **mute** when we asked them questions” (Yesayan, p. 26).
- “Why did those saints, in whose power they had always believed, remain stonily indifferent to their suffering? what curse, what punishment had they been marked out for? In retribution for what long trains of sins had god remained **mute** and blind, as if He were altogether absent from that sanctuary” (Yesayan, p.18)?

Conclusion

- Zabel Yesayan spent a year and a half writing her book “In the Ruins” and soon became one of the greatest pieces of work of Western Armenian Literature.
- This book was written in order to bear witness, of course, but above all – and in a very personal manner – in order for the author to liberate herself from the terror, from the submersion, from the too- great identification with the stricken (Nichanian. p, 190).