

LITERATURE AS A PLATFORM FOR  
DIALOGUE IN THE NAGORNO-  
KARABAKH CONFLICT

by

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## **Abstract**

Throughout centuries it has been said that truth is one of the first casualties of war. Propaganda, hate speech and dehumanization are tools, by which the legitimization of conflict is promoted throughout historical books where the vestiges of truth are hard to discover. Taking into account the human stories that literature portrays and the human side of the conflict, this capstone aims to show how literature plays a significant role in opening a space for intellectual dialogue to take place between intellectuals from both sides of the conflict. Therefore, by drawing comparisons among the existing literary writings of the two sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, this work aims to show how literature has served as a platform for prominent writers to present the conflict from a new perspective, apart the state interests, and break the taboos and the fears of speaking up about peace in a strictly intolerant environment.

## Introduction

Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime.

Ernest Hemingway<sup>1</sup>

One of the common formulas used in the field of peace-building<sup>2</sup> for the transformation of conflicts without violence consists of three inevitable components: empathy, non-violence and creativity. Literature not only fits this formula of conflict transformation but it opens up a vast space for the writers where they can voice approaches to conflict with empathy in a creative manner. Starting from the early 2000s a number of writers from Armenia and Azerbaijan have brought the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into the world of literature, which as a platform allowed a dialogue to take place about the need and the possibility of peaceful coexistence. While the attempts of these writers have the power to counter hate speech and propagandistic discourses, regrettably, they did not gain enough attention from the public.

Nevertheless, the efforts of these writers are not in vain but in need of further elaboration and responses from both sides to make a lasting dialogue, which can aim at spreading peace talks among a wider audience.

Thus, as an exploration of above-mentioned literature and as a contribution to its growth, consisting of two parts this capstone first will analyze the existing works in the literature about Armenian-Azerbaijani relations written after the war in the 1990s, mainly concentrating and drawing comparisons between Armenian writer Levon Javakhyan's *Qirva*

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<sup>1</sup> (1946) *Treasury for the Free World*

<sup>2</sup> (1996) In his book *Peace by Peaceful* means Johan Galtung, known as the founder of the discipline of peace studies describes peace-building as a method through which the conflicting sides are able to “overcome the contradiction at the root of the conflict formation” (p. 103).

(2008) and Azerbaijani writer Akram Aylizli's *Stone Dreams* (2012). The second part of the capstone is a short story of a soldier's memoir, which will serve as an attempt to add another message to the literary dialogue of conflict transformation in the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Being a first-hand memoir of a former Armenian soldier, who in the 1990s during the Nagorno-Karabakh war killed his childhood friend, the short story suggests that despite the results of the war on individual level it causes trauma, brings out the negative in people and harms their lives forever. Notwithstanding the decades-long hatred among the public, the work proposes that nations are not enemies and that there can be friendship among people whose judgements are not derived of nationalistic moods.

Altogether, the following is a call for dialogue and for ending the bloody conflict. It is an attempt to remind both Armenians and Azerbaijanis that before the war broke out they used to be friends. While reconciliation may sound unimaginable after decades of separation, throughout peace processes and dialogue engaging the grassroots in the conversation can slowly lead the nations into preparedness for peaceful relations. Thus, literature providing vast opportunities of discourse invites people concerned to make their step and this capstone is an attempt of increasing awareness and calling the caring ones for to make their step.

## **Literature Review**

Besides being a tool of self-expression and artistic talents, literature provides a platform for writers to tackle social issues and challenge the firm convictions of the general public regarding the contradicting reality in which they live. While discussing New Historicism, Ann Dobie states “literary texts are social documents and, as such, they both reflect and affect the world that produces them” (2011, p. 181). Hence, one cannot review literature as an isolated piece of art but as a part of a bigger conversation to which the literary text brings its contributions adding a new value into the existing dialogs. One cannot view history without the consideration of literature, which brings human voices to the strictly written lines of history. In this context, this literature review will concentrate on the depiction of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in literature produced on both sides of the conflict and how its differing essence adds to the propagated ideas of history.

Literature is never merely a source of entertainment, but it is a source of contradictions, constant questions and challenges. As Dobie states, “literature has a role to play in the reformation of the society” (2011, p. 182). With its role of bringing change in society, literature opens new windows for discussions of the past, which depicted in history seems fixed and unchanging. Dobie also mentions that New Historicism came to prove that the literary texts have the power to change what had long been considered to be true as it allows space for expression even to those whose voices had been silenced in the past in the writing of history. By the exclusion of the unpopular voices, history became a one-sided reality, and it is with the help of literary texts that history allows non-mainstream ideas to come into the surface. In other words, New Historicism views literature as a discourse of history, which by its influence on culture and its reflections of the environment in which it is created contributes to the process making the history.

Correspondingly, the poststructuralist theory suggests that it is within the scope of power that texts are produced. (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005). As the theory suggests, people tend to believe only to the discourses or to those texts that correspond to the dictations of the powerful, which are provided by those people who hold powers within the circle of intellectuals or the political authorities of the given period. As the authors of *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* state in the book, Michel Foucault being one of the post structuralist thinkers, believed that history could never be objectively precise as science is and that there is no truth in discourse but a “struggle for power” (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005, p. 180). In this context, it becomes apparent how in a given framework history lacks inclusion of opposition and contradictions, which is through the help of poststructuralist reading that can come to the surface.

The novels written about human relations from the two sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, add to the omissions of history. As Mikail Mamedov writes discussing literature about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, “Literary works are often more important than academic books because they reach a broader audience” (2015, p. 55). Literature, more widespread than academic books, captures the attention of not only professionals and it is also the representation of cultural values. Speaking of Akram Aylisli’s book, *Stone Dreams* Ulvi Ismayil speaks of writers in any society as people holding strong influence to change the perspective of thinking in society. The author states that even though in his society Aylisli was criticized as a traitor and liar for the work he produced, he confirmed each word of his work and he “invited historians to prove otherwise with legitimate sources” (2014, p. 68). Ulvi views Aylisli’s challenge to the Azerbaijani society as an act of heroism as it is a phenomenon not only in the Azerbaijani literary life but it is an essential contribution to the social and political life as well. Thus, Ulvi argues that Aylisli’s novel stopped being merely

a piece of literature, but it turned into a significant addition to history, which with its power to challenge the thinking of society was equally strong to challenge a debate with the historians of the day.

As Thomas de Waal, who is an experienced writer on the Caucasus, while writing about Aylisli's *Stone Dreams* he says "good writing should be iconoclastic" (2015, p.41) in a way that it has to challenge and doubt the dogmatic nationalistic ideas. De Waal states, that in doing so, although, Aylisli was threatened and highly criticized for going against the "generally accepted dogmas" in the Azerbaijani society bringing contradictions to the stories told in history books, at the same time Aylisli challenged taboos and created a platform for intellectual dialogue to take place. His work contributes to the discussions of the Nagorno-Karabakh providing fresh perspective and conversations among the thinkers of both of the sides of the conflict.

Emil Sanamyan argues that despite the hateful reactions of the Azerbaijani side, where most of the people not having read the novel criticized Aylisli, in Armenia people, even those who were unaware of the depth of the work spoke of Aylisli under a positive light. Sanamyan states that with his work Aylisli gave hope to the Armenian people for a possible long-lasting peace with Azerbaijan. Sanamyan divides the reactions from the Armenian side in two directions: propagandistic and genuinely sympathetic (2015, p. 61). In the propagandistic grouping of Emil Sanamyan, disregarding the content of the literary work the reactions toward the novel in Azerbaijan were used by the Armenian side to blame the officials of Azerbaijan for promoting hatred, intolerance. On the other hand, the Armenian commentaries belonging to the genuinely sympathetic group did not use this case as a source



to play a blame game, but as a platform to elevate the “other side” and to show that by his nature Aylisli shows how there also exists a human side in Azerbaijan.

In a more historical-based analysis of *Stone Dreams* Mikhail Mamedov states that “the novel was bound to attract international and domestic attention” (2015, p. 45) with its frustration and also Aylisli’s credibility both as People’s Writer and as an eyewitness of the brutalities that he depicted in his work. For the protest against Aylisli among the majority of the Azerbaijani population, Mamedov mentions three sensitive topics: religion, the tradition of circumcision and one-sided blame toward the Azerbaijani side. Overall, it becomes clear that Aylisli was blamed not only for the lack of criticism against the “other side” but because he touched a very sensitive taboo topic, which would hardly be welcomed in a society where only 47 percent of the population thinks they are free to speak openly of their beliefs (2015, p. 47).

Mamedov in his work also refers to the conversation of the conflict in other literary works as well. Another work that Mamedov mentions in his article that is of high importance for this thesis is Seymur Baycan’s *Gugark*, which consists of four different themes, one of which is a love story between the Azerbaijani protagonist (Seymur) and a young Armenian woman Anoush. Although this book is not highly regarded for its value, as it synthesizes four different stories, it is hard to follow and its intended meaning is not clear, as Mamedov says “Baycan’s work is one of the most important anti-war novels to emerge among the literature about the Karabakh conflict” (2015, p. 52). Another important literary work for the conversation about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that Mamedov discusses is Levon Javakhyan’s *Kirve*, which is again very cautious compared to Aylisli’s *Stone Dreams*. Although as Javakhyan noted himself his book is very humble, and no Armenian writer is as

courageous as Aylisli was, his book was another page in anti-war literature that speaks of “decency, loyalty to old friendships, and the traditions of brotherhood, which prevail over the interethnic divisions and hatred that have captured the younger generation” (Mamedov, 2015, p. 54).

Shura Burtin’s interview with Akram Aylisli titled “*The pen or the axe, or why should being the nation’s conscience make you an enemy of the people?*” in the *Caucasus Survey* (Burtin, 2014), is a great addition to the conversations and analysis about *Stone Dreams*. The interview reveals questions that many people tried to answer in their articles, such as what the motivations of the writer were for creating such a cultural value and how he feels about walking in the streets of Azerbaijan. Aylisli reveals that his work is an uproar for peace and that as an inhabitant of the world, he feels an obligation to give back to it. Aylisli states, “For me, it is a matter of life and death. If I die without seeing these two nations together—I do not want this death” (2015, p. 72). Burtin’s interview shows that Aylisli’s aspirations are rooted in humanitarian ideas and silences the doubts that Aylisli wrote the novel to receive a Nobel Peace Prize or because he was not a pure Azerbaijani. Burtin’s interview also reveals the depth of Aylisli’s background, his political views, and credibility for writing such a piece, which is a significant addition for the analysis of the work and its position in replenishing the omissions of history.

Nevertheless, the Armenian-Azerbaijani case proving the power of literary figures and the influence of literature is not the only example of such literary contributions in the conversation about the conflict in the region. Similarly, in Turkey writers like Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak dared to speak of conflict and the power of their voices was undeniable. As British novelist Geraldine Bedell states in her review, “Elif Shafak, was accused by the

Turkish government of 'insulting Turkishness' and could have been the first writer to be jailed in Turkey for fictitious words spoken by an invented person.” (Bedell, 2007). This statement reveals the weight that those ‘fictitious words’ carry to the degree that the writer can be brought to the court for she has ‘insulted Turkishness’ with her attempt to voice taboo topics. Very similar is the case of Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Peace Prize winner, who had to flee out of his country as he “recalled his country's mass killing of Armenians” (Freely, 2005).

Similarly, the power of the writer’s voice is also reflected in Vicken Cheterian’s *Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict* where the author mentions the perception of the Azerbaijani political powers of Akram Aylisli’s book as a threat to the reading of the Azerbaijani history, as it challenges the elite’s propagandistic ideas. Cheterian states that the authorities of Azerbaijan have proposed their model of history and “any foreigner who contradicts such a stance is stigmatized as an Armenian agent, and any Azerbaijani offering a different reading of history, even as fiction, can be threatened” (2018, p. 899). Cheterian’s observation shows that the views of Azerbaijanis toward Armenians suggest that Armenians are in search of occupying Turkish lands and Aylisli’s novel telling a different story is diminishing the stance of the state.

Although the literature written about Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which depicts human stories lacks large audiences and is little in number, it still provides profound grounds for history to be reconstructed and viewed from a new perspective. The intellectual discussions around the works that Akram Aylisli, Seymur Baycan, Ali Akbar and Levon Javakhyan produced are powerful anti-war weapons, and as Aylisli states, ‘an uproar for peace,’ which need to be further studied and elaborated to have a weightier contribution on the process of peace-building and challenging taboos in the two societies.

## Research Question

The main aim of the capstone is to show the role and perspectives of literature in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Though highly criticized, the fiction written about the human side of the war started intellectual conversations between the two sides of the conflict. Thus, at the center of this capstone is the following question:

- What is the role of literature in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

The secondary question that the work seeks to answer is,

- Why should the literary works written in the scope of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remain at the center of peacebuilding processes?

The above-mentioned questions have been addressed by close analysis of four main works written in the scope of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by prominent writers from Armenia and Azerbaijan, Levon Javakhyan, Akram Aylisli, Ali Akbar and Seymur Baycan with strong emphasis on Levon Javakhyan's *Qirva* (2008) and Akram Aylisli's *Stone Dreams* (2012). Having in mind the importance of fiction in this regard and lack of such works from the Armenian side, an attempt to the contribution of literary dialogue has also been implemented by writing a soldier's memoir *After His Death* in the form of a short story.

Overall, the research and the creation of the work has been based on the theory of New Historicism, which aims to interpret and understand history within the framework of literature and also interpret literature within its association to the historical context of the day.

## Critical Introduction to the Project

### *Part I: Analysis of After His Death*

Fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures.<sup>3</sup>

- Jessamyn West

Throughout my research in this field, I noticed how there are more works inspired by the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict written on the Azerbaijani side than there are on the Armenian side. In his interview with a well-known journalist in Armenia Tatul Hakobyan, the author of *Qirva* Levon Javakhyan said, “Akram Aylisli’s work is an ocean, while mine was only a drop of water” (Javakhyan, 2019). Taking into account the lack of responses from the Armenian side in this regard, as a peace-builder, I decided to have my contribution and add another drop to this ample ocean, not leaving Javakhyan alone. Though the process has been challenging, especially having in mind the lack of political will for peacebuilding, the possibility of another war breakout and the criticism among the public for such a story, I did not stand back from the convictions I follow. As challenging as the process was, the weight of the responsibility for contributing to the literary platform dialogue for peace was much heavier than the weight of fear. Thus I continued writing.

In this story, the center of the plot is the human being who on the background of the war gets lost. Titled *After His Death*, the creative component of this capstone is a fiction written in the form of a memoir, which reflects the memories of an Armenian soldier who

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<sup>3</sup> 1957, To See the Dream

participated in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in the early 1990s. The memoir is a recollection of various memories that the narrator Ruben is trying to put on the paper, but due to the troubled state of mind, he is unable to create a logically interconnected train of thought with a smooth flow for the reader. Quite the reverse, in the form of flashbacks his memories go back and forth, causing distractions and confusions for the reader. These limitations in concentration on one topic at a time reflect his psychological condition more tangibly. With the reflection of his memories troubled by the cruelties of the war, by the quick decision to kill his childhood Azerbaijani friend and the psychological disturbances, the protagonist shows how even decades after the war he cannot free himself from the traumatic burden the war put on his shoulders.

After considering various genres and plots, I ended up writing this story, primarily because it covers many layers of the war. It provides the opportunity to show emotions and create an atmosphere where the reader feels as if he/she is engaged in a dialogue with the writer. The memoir is woven not only around the inter-state conflict but more importantly around personal hurdles that keep repeating in everyday life of the narrator who by voluntarily joining the army does not feel as if he is a good fit there but at the same time is unable to escape.

The story does not mention names and nationalities in the beginning for humanizing the other side. In other words, if the Armenian reader picks up the book and starts reading, he/she will not know until the second half of the story that the childhood friend whom Ruben killed was an Azerbaijani. The choice of eliminating the name from the beginning has been an intentional one to make the reader empathetic toward the Azerbaijani protagonist, by not knowing his nationality at first. The reason behind this choice, first of all, is that there is a

widespread dehumanization against the other side among the population so that killing the “enemy” is considered as a heroic act. The second reason is that after being separated by neighboring Azerbaijan for three decades, it is not easy nowadays to think of a brotherly neighbor from their community to live by the side of the Armenians. Hence, by doing so, I tried at first to show the closeness and the pain of Ruben toward his nameless friend and only then challenge the reader by providing details on his identity and national belonging. This choice of showing the reader that friendship between an Armenian and Azerbaijani is possible was born after reading various stories of the older generation both in Armenia and Azerbaijan, who at the time of the Soviet Union used to befriend Azerbaijanis/Armenians same way as they would do with the representatives of any other nation. Thus, if it is difficult for people to remember those days long gone, with this story, I am aiming at challenging them to remember what the events looked like before war took over.

The story refers to various aspects of war that shape the thinking of the people such as dehumanization, heroism, feeling glorious during the time of war and the feeling of obligation toward the motherland. Playing on the emotions of the people is easy, especially during wartime and the propaganda of war implemented under the umbrella of heroism does mobilize people against the enemy. On the other hand, with constant attempts of dehumanizing the other side, it is easier to make the soldiers kill. Therefore, by linking those aspects together, one can see how different tools are applied during wartime to make people less prone toward standing up against violence and how justified it becomes to be a bystander for the sake of the glory of one’s nation.

Hence, the work aims at reminding Armenians that we also killed during the war, and both of the sides have their hands imbrued in blood. Through the accentuated empathy and

love from Ruben's side toward his Azerbaijani friend Javid, this story also aims to show that people are not born as enemies but instead transformed through various of means of propaganda for state interests. This story, being a human-centered work, is trying to depict the traumatic consequences of war, which lead to devastation in the lives of those who either directly or indirectly become part of its mission of hatred and animosity. While during the war, one of the states wins, having seen blood, many cases of death, losses of friends, and so on, the humans behind the victory carry with them the destructive results of war throughout their lives.

One of the courageous moves in the story is doubting the nobility of heroism in the context of war. Indeed, there is no attempt of diminishing the bravery and devotion of the soldiers toward the protection of their motherland, but at the same time, there is a call of evaluating the destructions of human lives as a result of war they do not declare. This work is rather a protest against the use of the names of dead young soldiers for generating propaganda through calls for patriotism and pride among the population with an artificial glorification of dead young soldiers. It is a call to moralize conflicts through peaceful means and respect the lives of those soldiers who became a tool under the orders of the big men and who standing at the canyon of death have no control over their lives. It is for this very reason that I cited Ernest Hemingway at the beginning of this work who said, "Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime" (Hemingway, 1946). War never shows the kind spirit of human beings, and war never brings conflicts to an end. On the contrary, war injects further hatred and feeling of vengeance in the losing side, who later try to win it over by any possible measure. Thus, it is through a civilized process of negotiations and non-violent approach that the sides of the conflict can reach legitimate results, which will not be gained over the lives of innocent people who become casualties of propaganda



and dehumanization, but through compromises and mutual understanding that will lead the nations toward peaceful unity.

## *Part 2: Analysis of existing works in this field*

The first literary works in the scope of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were published ten years after the war in the 1990s. The ordinary people struggling and being affected by the war are at the center of those works. The stories have one common characteristic that becomes apparent at the end of each story, which is the despair in the continuation of friendly relations with people from the other side. Even if the main protagonists of the works are in good relationships throughout the work, at the end the pressure by the societies unwilling for reconciliation and the existence of the ongoing war with closed borders destroy their dreams of having future with each other. In Aylisli's case, the main protagonist dies at the hospital, in case of Javakhyan, the Azerbaijani citizen leaves Armenia with no possible return ahead, Baycan's couple divorces and Akbar's couple commits suicide.

Levon Javakhyan's story *Qirva* (2008) is about an Armenian man Ashot and his Azerbaijani qirva<sup>4</sup> Hasan who were separated as a result of the ethnic clashes between the two nations. Hasan who had bought a cow from Ashot paying only one part of the overall sum during his displacements from Armenia to Azerbaijan, Hasan finds a man whom he passes the remaining amount of money to be sent to Ashot. Hasan's action is a message about the existence of loyalty and friendship between the two nations. Hasan was being displaced, and he could simply leave Armenia without caring about the remaining sum of the debt, which as a displaced person he needed much more than Ashot did in his own house, but with this action from the other side, Javakhyan is trying to humanize Azerbaijanis, which is rarely seen in public discourses. Two decades after the war, with this work Javakhyan is trying to bring the humanity out of the two sides of the conflict, which as Mamedov says, "prevail

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<sup>4</sup> Means friend or acquaintance. Qirva is also a way of addressing a Turkish or Kurd person

over the interethnic divisions and hatred that have captured the younger generation” (2011, p. 54). In this context, Javakhyan is a singular writer in Armenia, as he has strictly spoken about the possible friendship and brotherhood of two people whose countries are in a war. Though the work does not praise Armenians, at the same time it does not make a bad image of the Armenian people, opposed to the work of Akram Aylisli, whose ideas portrayed in his *Stone Dreams* have been widely misunderstood as pro-Armenian and resulted in him being stripped off of his title as the People’s Writer.

Though in his work Aylisli is also trying to voice humanity through the personality of his main protagonist and bring the good side of Azerbaijanis into the discourse, at the same time he repeatedly refers to the brutalities of his nation throughout the conflict, while he presents the Armenian side as a victim whose violence is not discussed at all. The story is woven around the main protagonist Saday Sadyghly, who after being beaten up by Yeraz people<sup>5</sup> end up in a hospital. Memories about Sadyghly and his convictions told by his friend Nuvarish Karabaghly portray his criticism of the brutalities against the Armenian people in Azerbaijan and the pain he feels for his nation. Being the most discussed character of the book, Sadyghly after the pogroms of Baku his whole life dreams of being converted to Christianity in Echmiadzin and pray for remission of sins that his people have committed by doing evil to the Armenian people.

Perhaps this dream of Saday Sadyghly is the most controversial topic of the book, which created an uncompromising wave against Aylisli in Azerbaijan to the extent that as Mamedov writes, Hafiz Hacıyev “pledged that his party would pay \$13,000 to anyone

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<sup>5</sup> Azerbaijani sub-group of people having left to Azerbaijan from Yerevan. The word is consisting of two parts: *Yer*, which stems out from *Yerevan* and *Az* from *Azerbaijan*.

cutting off Aylisli's ear" (2011, p. 47). This topic is disturbing not only because Aylisli finds his people sinful for acting cruelly toward Armenians, but also because of the sensitivity of religion. Though Aylisli does question various other taboo topics such as the morality of circumcision, these other topics have not been as profoundly discussed as the topic of brutality used against Armenians, while Armenians were depicted as a peaceful nation with no traces of certain brutalities. Interestingly, Aylisli does not only show the negative side of the Azerbaijanis but also creates Azerbaijani characters who are kind-hearted. These characters at the same time are not seen by the Azerbaijani people as ones portraying the excellent nature of Azerbaijan, as all of them condemn the violence and brutality caused to Armenians. Despite the criticism of the political leaders of Azerbaijan, the public burnings of his book by his people, during an interview with Shura Burtin Aylisli said, "I am absolutely certain that I only lifted my nation up, that keeps me going" (2014, p. 73). At the same time, Aylisli said how he is waiting for a response from an Armenian, who will contribute to the discussion revealing the wrongdoings during the conflict from the Armenian side.

The other two main works in this field are depicting love stories with one main similarity that is hopelessness in continuation. Seymour Baycan's *Gugark* (2011) depicts a love story between the main Azerbaijani protagonist Seymour and an Armenian woman Anoush, whom he meets in Gugark<sup>6</sup> during a peace camp. The short love story that is not fully synthesized with the other stories of his novel portrays an imaginary union of young people whose love story fails to resist the separation by war. Though Seymour gave his word of love to Anoush, he refused to leave Azerbaijan for the sake of reunification with her. Thus,

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<sup>6</sup> A village in Armenia's Lori region, where Seymour Baycan's family came from as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict started

in a more symbolic manner, the short-lived love story carried the desperateness of the peaceful coexistence of the two people from the two sides of the conflict. While love shows the sincere desire of the end of the conflict, at the same time the dead-end of the relationship proves the unfeasibility of possible conflict resolution, although at the same time Seymour's intentions and sincerity are not seen broadly, the question is, whether his character is truly in love with Anoush. Thus, it is hard to say whether, in case of genuine love, his character would be willing to leave his motherland to continue his life with an Armenian woman. Though, in his work Seymour does mildly criticize Azerbaijanis for heavy drinking and other habits as such, he does not portray the brutality or violence of war as Aylisli does. Therefore, he did not receive as much of criticism for writing this story, as Aylisli did for his *Stone Dreams*.

Another important work represented through the help of a love story is Ali Akbar's *Artush and Zaur (2009)*, which is a love story between two male journalists Artush being an Armenian and Zaur being an Azerbaijani. The two men meet each other in Georgia during a conference, and after years of separation, they realize that the love for each other did not diminish despite years of not seeing each other. After the conference, the two men continue their communication and Artush, as a journalist, finally manages to travel to Azerbaijan to cover an international event. In Azerbaijan, as planned the two meet and when Artush's absence becomes apparent, the law enforcement authorities start searching for him. As Zaur and Artush hear the news, they commit suicide by jumping off the cliff.

Thus, on its turn, *Artush and Zaur* portrays the despair of unimaginable union of the two nations with desperate consequences represented in the form of a devastating end of human lives. Opposed to Baycan's questionable plot, whether an Azerbaijani would leave

his motherland to unite with his Armenian spouse, Ali Akbar shows how on a personal level both of the sides would be willing to sacrifice their lives for one another. His work uplifts the human being and shows how personal happiness is what matters at the end of the day, and how love is more eminent than hatred.

Hence, though there are not many works written about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the ones existing have started a dialogue on a literary platform that has engaged various intellectuals in a discussion. My *After His Death* (2019) is an amateur attempt to continue the conversation going and to make sure the Armenian side is not neglecting the importance of this dialogue, although with its critical reflections on heroism, glory of war and brotherhood between an Armenian and an Azerbaijani it is likely that the work will see massive condemnation by the more conservative readers, especially that after three years, the wounds of April War<sup>7</sup> remain open for the majority of the society who faced it with all its severity.

In this context, it is essential not to neglect the power of literature in providing a holistic picture of the conflict. Here, the theory of New Historicism plays a crucial role in showing how there is no “unity or homogeneity to history or culture, viewing both as harboring networks of contradictory, competing, and unreconciled forces and interests” (Habib, 2008, p. 762). The role of literature is inevitable in the discussions of forming what is known as history, which cannot stand out as a detached phenomenon. Literature is not only influenced by the events that surround the writers, but it also affects culture and history, making those more contradictory and objective than they can be only viewed in the context

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<sup>7</sup> April War was a four-day escalation of the “frozen” conflict in 2016, which left hundreds of casualties on both sides.

of the interests of a given state. According to the theory, it is not enough to analyze a text taking into consideration only the psychology of the writer, but also of the political, cultural and economic conditions that surround him/her at the time of writing the work. Thus, it is only through viewing literature as part of the creation of history that can make the latter complete and objective.

Viewing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict apart from the literary works analyzed in this paper makes it impossible to achieve history that will reflect the desires of a nation comprehensively. Literature serves as a platform for various groups to voice their views in the given circumstances, and the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will only be seen one-sidedly, if it is analyzed through the representation of the state-funded books, which deteriorate the historical facts in such a matter that proves only the interests of the given state. As Levon Javakhyan said during an interview with an Armenian journalist Tatul Hakobyan, “there are two Azerbaijan: one of Aylisli, and the other of Ramil Safarov<sup>8</sup>” (Javakhyan, 2019). Looking at the state stance of Armenian historiography, one can only see the Azerbaijan of Ramil Safarov. To see more of Azerbaijan, one should also critically analyze the ideas proposed in literature.

Similarly, once during an interview given to Joshua Kucera at Eurasianet, Akram Aylisli said that the central theme in his work *Stone Dreams* is the tragedy of a person “who can’t find a place for himself in a society that has turned political amorality into a national

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<sup>8</sup> Ramil Safarov is an Azerbaijani officer who in 2004 killed an Armenian Lieutenant Gurgen Margaryan co-participating in a NATO-based courses in Hungary. Safarov not only stabbed Lieutenant Margaryan, but also aimed at killing the second Armenian participant of the program. The second attempt of killing was averted by other participants of the conference. After being convicted to life sentence in Hungary in 2006 and extradited to Azerbaijan in 2012, Safarov was welcomed as a hero whom the president of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev pardoned.

idea, and who therefore stands alone against the times” (Aylisli, 2018). Aylisli’s call is not an end in itself. On the contrary, the work portrays the desire of others like Aylisli who would not risk their lives to speak about peace, a concept alien to the propagated majority at the time of war. In regards to New Historicism, taking into account the official stance of Azerbaijan and the ideas of the writers from both sides of the conflict, one can see how the history-making not only depends on the works of the historiographers that commonly look after the orders of the state, but it also highly depends on the ideas of the writers depicted in literature.



## **Conclusion**

As a call of looking at conflict through creativity with the proposed theory of Johan Galtung, this work brought together the literary works existing in the scope of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and viewed those in the context of New Historicism with the aim to broaden the perception of history. It has tried to prove the essential role of literature in the evaluation of history, and with the creative component contributed to the dialogue happening among writers from both of the sides of the conflict. The paper argued that as a tool of peacebuilding, literature should be at the center of peacebuilding processes allowing different opinions to merge and diversify history with contradictions. As a human-centered work, it has also served as a humanization tool toward the other side of the conflict and tried to counter the propaganda of hate speech. The main attempt of the work is to challenge the audience and to keep the literature growing for the sake of countering discourses full of hate speech, which has no anticipation of positive consequences.

## Appendices

### After His Death

...

For the sake of our alliance and peaceful life

My greetings, me greetings to the brotherly nation of ours

- Yeghishe Charents, 1930

And now it is past. Some twenty years or so, which come in shape of memories. Seems that it was yesterday, and still it was yesterday that I last remembered those childhood days, spent in idleness and self-indulgence to achieve nothing more than the pleasure of joy. Those days now loom as incomparable to my present as my present will be to the future. If the past has not yet gobbled the path to the future. And that brotherly smiling face, that is no more, I can still sense by way of longing...

We have come a long way.

“Hold the lines!” trumpeted the colonel.

I wish that I had something special to retell. Something which would blow away your mind, something like in that old story of Hasidic Jews when one of them wished to be a fleeing king so he could at least have a shirt on so. But there is no wisdom in my stories. But all I have are ragged memories just like the ragged clothing that the lone stranger wore during the Sabbath gathering. I have no story but bits and pieces of sempiternal recollections.

It was November 1991; I was inducted to the army, by my free will. Did not know where I was going but to save the motherland, indeed. The road to the battlefield seemed to stretch with the wind sweeping the gravel transformed into mud. No matter how quickly our yellow PAZ-3201 drove toward the destination it felt as if we were whirling around the same bushes and the same sentiments of tranquility. The road to the battlefield was long. The road to the battlefield had only one end no matter from which side of the country you were coming from. It had one end result, which came to each of us in a different speed limit but in the same shape.

But now it is past. The battlefield lays quiet. Affluent after heavy rain. Maybe flowers are blooming there, under the oak tree where I lost my friend.

Once I remember, we were six or seven coming home after a gloomy day. With his mouth full of food, he turned to my mother and asked, “Tyots<sup>9</sup> Mariam, Ruben and I decided to be brothers. Our teacher laughed at us because we do not have the same blood. So we cannot be brothers?”

Mom, so beautifully swaying in her green autumn dress slowed down her steps. She kneeled and holding our hands together she said, “Jan, in brotherhood blood doesn’t matter. What matters is your trust in each other. You need to trust and protect each other, then you will be brothers.” Each of us received a kiss on our foreheads: “the stamp of brotherhood,” we said.

From that day on we were brothers. We were brothers related not by blood, because in brotherhood blood does not matter. The logic was simple: we were brothers. It just

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<sup>9</sup> From Russian тётя (aunt) commonly used in Post-Soviet Armenia as a way to address older women

happened so. Blood was a secondary issue unrelated to the naïve imagination of kids. What could blood possibly mean to us? What an abstract illusion: blood. How could a seven-years old child set his friendship standards based on the definition of blood? We thought brotherhood was enduring. But as you grow older you realize how nothing is enduring in this evanescent world. It is only by experience that you realize seven years olds are wiser. It is the grown who spoil them by experience. Blood... what an abstract illusion, before you sense its warmth upon your hands.

That night mom knitted us bracelets with the first letters of our names *RJ*. We would never take them off.

But now it is past. Nothing has changed after his death. Only that nothing remained the same.

Even today, some twenty years past with my eyes open I dream of my friend. I remember him lying under the oak tree. His blood covering the peaceful whiteness of winter snow. Drop after another, second by second it was getting condensed. I wish I could drag him away, but like a bastard I left his veins dry out, his body to drain. Who killed my brother? Was it the enemy? Was it me? Where should I search for the answer? Or, was it maybe the enemy inside me?

The enemy inside me? Yes! I killed my friend. I did let him bleed to death under the oak tree where now flowers are blooming. I led him to death.

...

Back to those days in the battlefield. I was more of a cook than a soldier. I was more of a parent than a soldier. I was more of a nurse than a soldier, an actor and a plumber owing to the fact that killing was never my thing. I was not born to be a soldier, but they made me one. When you are given that damn gun there is one thing you have to do. Army was an unparalleled world. In the army there were answers to never-asked questions. In the army you knew the way out, which was leading you inside, which was catching you in snare. Alas, now it is past. All of the masks are facing down. Those dead are rescued. Only the ones alive are dead.

There you see again the cigarette smoke simmering in the air. The guys are having a social gathering again.

“Where is that jerk?” I hear that inevitable question from The General’s mouth.

It was no surprise to me that the guys never fancied me, so once in a while being the jerk in the team didn’t bother me at all.

“He is probably reading his goddamn Rimbaud or what’s the name of the other guy?” someone would always mention.

“Baudelaire guys, Baudelaire,” I would say approaching them with the book in my hands. Reading a line a day was reliving. Apart, all was sickening in the army. You had to have a strategy to survive. For the guys it was the simmer of the smoke so beautifully immersed in the air. For me the lines carved in the moulded pages were the path to salvation. Even a line a day and a sentence a day opened a crack toward the outside world. The world

in which beauty existed. Beauty which was so alien to us. For the guys I was weird not because they did not like me but because the army sets its standards. Bypassing the standards is unacceptable. I could not survive not doing so.

There is no beauty.

...

Once after a successful battle we lay on the muddy ground counting the stars.

“If a star fell now, I would wish to take Anjela into my arms and fly her to see the universe,” Hososaid as he slid his hand all over the surface of the sky.

You had to let it loose once in a while or in the constant scenery of the graveyards would suffocate you. The sky was so close that night that with a little effort Hosos could draw a star and serve it to Anjela with his naked hands cracked from cold like the sun-filled desert surface.

“If a star fell now I would make a wish to wander in the streets of Yerevan idly,” we heard Tyom’s husky voice trembling with the unsettled wind. “I would buy my favorite shawarma from Moskovyan, one by one throw away the disgusting onions and finish it all with a bite.”

“You, dumb bastard, why would not you ask them to make it without onions?” The General asked with a colorful language typical to his manners.

“Could I?” Tyom asked surprised.

A laughter was about to break out, but we saw a star falling. One after another the guys fell asleep. I lay under the peaceful sky knowing the war was around the corner. The General was having trouble falling asleep. He would never put his AK-74 aside. Even in the depths of his sleep his fingertip was on the trigger. An attempt of an attack and The General's fingertips would curl around the trigger happily. That guy was a true general in the outfit of an ordinary soldier. He fancied no sleep. The terror of the attack was a sweet delight for him. Eternity was his terminus. No matter who fell in the field, the blood shed for the motherland was blessed. The dead sanctified those left alive. The ones alive were dead forever.

"General, do you see Orion?" I asked him drawing the constellation with my forefinger. "They say Orion is protecting the sky. I wonder, is there anyone protecting us?"

Unprotected we laid on the curse of the sky. What is protection for a soldier anyway? What a fool! The soldier is the protection with hell under his feet and death in his rear. We laid there with every nerve strained hoping the next grenade would put us to death. At the end, what's death to a soldier? Eternity it is. A noble death puts you to immortality. Then, why lose the chance?

"Throw the grenade!"

The General was still having trouble to sleep. There was a small village by the riverside. We walked down the hill to find a semi-underground house. The candlelight was visible from the window covered with plastic bags. The old man had noticed us from far away and thinking the enemy is at the door he held his rifle in his hands. We approached the window, spoke some words to him and only then he opened the door to us. Mr. Miqayel put

an excellent khndoghni<sup>10</sup> grape wine on the table. The old man apologized to provision us only with rough bread and some cheese, which had both of us watering at the mouth. While the old pal brought his rusty knife The General broke the bread into three equal parts and we sat by the table.

We furnished ourselves with wine mixed with water to last for the toasts accumulated in the form of bullets shot in the battlefield. With every sip of the wine The General's calf-like eyes were shining like lampshades in the dark. We drank for freedom, for the motherland. When the drinking advanced we drank for our companions forever gone and for those alive. We drank for the women, later for the enemy who kept us alert.

As the jar emptied, The General asked for pen and paper. No matter how hard The General had tried to disguise his emotions, with every word spelled on the paper a tear dropped from his eyes. He never told me to whom the letter was addressed. He whispered in the ear of the old man what to do and we left. On the way back we did not speak a word. But I discovered that there was someone at home waiting for The General as well. Maybe the person was still there, waiting. What is important, I discovered that The General was not a cold-blooded animal like those of us who are called men but are none by conscience. Although The General never spoke a word of his emotions.

We reached the guys long before the dawn. The sky was still peaceful. Neither The General nor I were able to sleep that night.

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<sup>10</sup> Type of grape traditionally grown in Artsakh



About the enemy I thought profoundly after the death of my friend. What's an enemy anyway? I find to my amazement how similar we are with the same features, with the same bones, flesh and blood. And with the same functions we have: born, live and die. You are born the same way and you die the same way. The difference then must be in the way they teach you to live. And when you refuse to live with the rules of the others you turn into enemies. There is nothing to men more unifying than the fear of losing the motherland. And the enemy knows the best how to unify a nation. And the enemy knows that there is no brotherhood without common blood.

Sometimes when I looked in the eyes of dying enemies I wondered what it would be like to put the guns aside and have a man to man conversation. I wondered what it would feel like to be a human to a human not an enemy to an enemy. But thoughts stayed thoughts. When you are an agent to someone else's orders, you are but a slave to your own imagination. But anyways, I could not talk to those dead bodies falling on the ground helplessly. At the end of the day, if I was one of those cursed to remain, all I could was praying for them to rest in peace.

They say war and peace are interconnected. They say peace is impossible without war. They say to know the price of peace one must undergo war. But I refuse to believe in this humbug. Peace never exists in war. There can never be peace after war. And peace is never reliant on war. I do not know a lone instance, when people having willingly imbrued their hands in the blood of others kept living peacefully. This is how the two coexist: you live in war and die in peace.

Perhaps my friend is in peace now, while I live twenty years or so punishing myself. Which I will do till the day my soul sets to rest. Death was a salvation for him. To die meant

to live and I saved him. The logic of war is simple you either die and transfer to a hero or live with the guilt of what your hands have done. And this reasoning is discerning for all and always. When you put the other to death you save him from torture. When you put the other to death you torture yourself for the rest of your life. It is sort of an altruism. So, I saved my friend.

It is not always that I remember my friend but mostly in the delight of solitude when I look out of the window and see the young children swinging happily on the spot where we used to meet. The swing was the meeting point in the mornings when we walked to school. We barely resisted the temptation of indulging in the depths of carelessness but we always knew that grandma kept an eye on the swing. So we had to go to school. Today the swing still stays in its place. The street is still desolate. There is a happy family living in the house where my friend spent his childhood days.

He had come to my life as a brother gifted by nature. We were connected by DNA though without kinship to bond us together. He reflected my own self as a mirror, a dear soul so sincerely encountered with mine. On the uncoiling drawer still sits the wooden Mustang that his grandfather had made for us. On the car there are now incurable memories gently clamped in the form of dust. When my friend left the country some thirty years ago we swore to meet again. He expanded the world to me. After he was gone the tiny world starting and ending within the borders of our neighborhood seemed expansive. And it could only shrink again with the meeting of the two dear souls parted their ways. But it was not by our will that we ran into each other again. It was the war that united us for a short while and separated forever.

“Hold the lines!” trumpeted the colonel.

...

We are standing still. All of us in the same posture.

“Dress right, DRESS!” like robots thoroughly planned we look to the right.

“Attention!” the colonel had something to say.

“Soon we will face the expected guests,” the colonel uttered the word in such austerity uniquely typical to his character. He cleared his throat and continued this time even more strictly, “I want you all to remain alert. No talking. No jokes. No cigarettes. Absolute alertness. Corporal Terterian, watch your left. Be in your positions! Now, dismiss!”

Now we were feeling more meaningful. Ready for action, all in their positions. Killing had become a part of our lives. It takes no time to integrate into the life of a soldier. The hardest is always the first shot. After killing once you can do two things either run away or kill again. It’s a loop which one is unable to depart. Those who escape turn into traitors to the nation. The ones remaining are labeled as heroes. The title of a hero rewarded posthumous is more righteous than the title of a traitor in a lifetime. The more you kill the more glorified your name becomes. The more you kill the more acclimated you become to the unending cycle.

Now you know why we had people like The General. In his remote village who could possibly know the name of Lernik Terteryan? It was the war that had glorified his name. For the first time he felt as part of a mission greater than his inane deeds. Now he was The General with certification hanging on their walls “To the most efficient soldier” for his ego was more essential than a life of another human. Terteryan was not the only one.

War is a fight against death. In the battlefield all you care about is staying alive. To stay alive, you need to kill the ones who might kill you instead. But honestly, to tell you the truth, war is nothing more than a phase of terror behind the covers of heroism. No justification of killing is sacred when war is a curse to the trigger pullers. It brings out the worst amongst us. What else is war if not destruction of the creations of nature by the hands of men, by the commands of the devil. Heroes killing heroes. Heroes – what an abstract illusion when upon their return those soldiers have no past at their backs. What is the past to a soldier when with every bullet he dies inside?

Past is nothing more than a ghost haunting the soldiers in their present.

On those cold winter days, we would make fire and sit around it idly like in the childhood when carelessness was our only occupation. Very often the guys would tell us jokes to relieve the strains in our muscles. But after hours of a long gunfire we would sit in complete silence with the crackling sound of the fire in remembrance of those fine guys we lost in the field.

That night was one of remembrance. That night I felt The General's clumsy hand resting on my shoulder.

“Don't lose your cool, Ruben!” he said in a demanding tone with an underlying sympathy.

I could not look at his face but I could imagine how all of its features had been emphasized with the pride of how I had turned into a villain. The devil had taken over my wretched soul earlier that day. I had fought like a true warrior. I pulled the trigger with no pity still using my ammunition when all corpses had for long been lying on the ground. The

desire of the crime had ripened intractably with the slain of so many my eyes regretfully had to see. The cruelty I lived through had turned me into an animal with lost rationality,

“What am I?” I uttered these words aloud in a snap wishing I could suffocate it in the flames of the fire.

“You are a hero, idiot” the newcomer shouted with a thrill. The killings were yet satisfying his young soul. He was part of something glorious.

No other person in the field could understand what I was going through but The General. A man so deeply having experienced the sentiments of losers like me. Sentiments are nothing but a destruction in a wartime.

“Take this,” The General handed me a half empty bottle. “Drink till the end,” he added as my arm unwittingly reached the bottle.

In a couple of hours, I woke up from the pain of persistent shame. The alcohol was gone but the vestiges of torture were gnawing my nerves. The guys were still sleeping after a well-deserved victory.

I could not sleep.

I am looking at The General sleeping his face in complete harmony. Yes, we are nothing but slaves to our own judgements. I still believe in the good of all people. What I do not believe is the classic sense of heroism. Heroes fighting on both sides. Heroes killing heroes. Then why those heroes do not provision each other? Where are those heroes in the time of peace? I am not a hero, although I died during the war. But those committing suicide

are not heroes, you need to be killed by the bullet of the enemy. It was not the enemy. I killed myself.

...

Breathless. My friend was lying on the ground, breathless, with the flask of water still in his hand. Throughout the years, I tried and failed over and over again to erase the memories of him. To forget that my friend existed. To forget that among them all I killed my friend. When that damn bullet escaped the barrel, I still had a chance to save him. The bullet traveled toward him so narrowly. It could not escape. It hit him on the birthmark on his neck. He fell instantly, with the flask of water still in his hand. His wrist already bruised from the worn our bracelet so tightly tied to his pulse. His pupils dilated. An instant turned into eternity, which until this moment subverts my soul neglected for over twenty years or so.

That AK-74 had never felt so heavy on my shoulder before. My arms refused to move. When I saw Javid's still striking posture I instantaneously recognized him. I missed him. I could not possibly look at his strangely green birthmark and not recall those memories when we put our lunch coins in a jar to remove it. How naïve we were to neglect its beauty. It was green like a wild jungle, where you feel lost in the beginning then your soul diverges in its trails. Now I come to understand. It was not him but the society that did not like it. Green was not socially accepted for a birthmark. He was already cursed on the day of his birthday.

Javid did not like it.

As a child I fictionalized our meeting quite frequently. I had thought when friends meet after years of separation they embrace each other. I had decided to do so too. But when

I saw Javid through that front sight the soil trembled under my feet. I froze. Javid was drinking water. They say water has vital importance for the life of a person. But he was destined to die. So I pulled the trigger.

What else could I do? If it was not me, someone else would kill Javid. Think about it, how could I let them kill my friend? And so I committed suicide. When the bullet sank in his neck he fell. Blood, red as mine, covered the snow. Guilt over purity. We were brothers sharing no common blood. His was red as mine. I died killing him. Today, I know Javid would thank me if we had met. Javid is now in Heaven. I am on the way. We will meet again in the Heaven where our souls will transcend. We will meet in Heaven when my dead body perishes again.

I know Javid would thank me if we had met.

...

Now, after twenty years or so, I look outside of the window; no one cares how the rain pours down. The school building stands still in the riot of the winds. No one is in a hurry. The streets are taking us nowhere. I stand by the window. Even the rain does not bother to knock on my door. If it did we would have become good friends. Two souls - soon to evaporate from the surface of the earth. Two souls – deprived of human characters. Like that rain I am wretched till my death.

I wish the rain had knocked on my door. We would make great friends.

Yet, now it is past. Day by day my memories fade away in my mind. I open a new bottle of wine getting old on the top shelf. This one I had decided never to open. I had decided

to quit. But I am not that strong. I pour the glass. I need this wine to suffocate the memories. Alcohol is an immense terrain, which can put up the suffers. So, my friend, I must drink.

“This is to the powerful motherland of ours!” I quaff the glass in one gulp.

You can hear the glug of wine touching the glass from the other side of the building. I can’t wait. The glass is full again.

“This is to all the heroes fallen in the field!” I say the toast standing. This one I drink sip by sip paying tribute to each of those men.

“This is to friendship!” I drink the rest straight from the bottle.

The wind penetrating into the room through the cracks of the windows is not strong enough to cool down my burning body. My primitive soul can no longer bear the pain. I open the windows. I lay down. I drink for Javid. He was a good guy. Javid will forgive me.

The storm stops. I am in bed. The room is turning upside down. The birds are singing on the only tree standing in the neighborhood. The birds are singing, “Come my nightingale.”

*I drink this toast to Javid!*



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