ABUSING THE MEMORY OF ARSHALUYS (AURORA) MARDIGANIAN

Turgut Kerem TUNCEL

Analyst

Turgut Kerem TUNCEL

09.04.2015

ABUSING THE MEMORY OF ARSHALUYS (AURORA) MARDIGANIAN

On February 5, 2015 the Massis Weekly, the official publication of the Social Democratic Hunchakian Party of the Western Region of the United States of America, reported that a documentary about the movie *Auction of Souls* (1919) is under production. According to the Massis Weekly, *Auction of Souls* is the first Hollywood movie on the Armenian Genocide and it is based on the book *Ravished Armenia; the Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl, Who Survived the Great Massacres* published in 1918. Massis Weekly says the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute in Armenia has released the first official trailer of the documentary on February 5, 2015. The documentary is planned to be completed by the end of 2015. This report was circulated by various Armenian media organs.

The Massis Weeklys report is partially as follows[1]:

"Ravished Armenia; the Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl, Who Survived the Great Massacres is a book written in 1918 by Arshaluys (Aurora) Mardiganian about her experiences in the Armenian Genocide. A Hollywood film based on it was filmed in 1919 under the title Auction of Souls (which also became to be known as Ravished Armenia, based on the book it was adapted from).

The author Arshaluys (Aurora) Mardiganian was born in the city of Çemisgezek, near Harput (Kharpert), (present-day Turkish province of Elâzig), Ottoman Empire ☀□□□ was taken to the harem of a number of Turkish pashas, but had remained attached to her Christian Armenian faith despite being tortured repeatedly on the hands of her captors."

The Massis Weeklys report, however, is fallacious. Awkwardly, some other Armenian media organs replicated this fallacious report without subjecting it to the necessary journalistic investigation most probably for the absence of professionalism. Hypothetically,

besides amateurish journalism, the fact that the content of this report fits well to the dominant sentimental and intellectual climate of the centennial of the genocide also had an effect on the circulation of this report without investigation.

However, the subject of this report is not the extent to which Armenian media complies with the contemporary global journalistic standards. The purpose of this report is to contemplate on the socio-cultural and political climate that some of the Armenian organizations try to reinforce by taking advantage of the sentimental load of the centennial.

To begin, Massis Weeklys claim that *Ravished Armenia* was written by Arshaluys (Aurora) Mardiganian is not true. As anyone who reads the inner-cover, the acknowledgement and the preface of the book can see, the book was authored by H.L.Gates upon what Mardiganian told him.

1

Image not found or type unknown

Figure 1) The inner-cover of the *Ravished Armenia* (1918)

To be exact, in the inner-cover it writes that this book was INTERPRETED BY H. L. GATES. Merriam-Webster dictionary explains the meaning of interpretation as follows[2]:

- the act or result of explaining or interpreting something: the way something is explained or understood

- a particular way of performing something

- the act or the result of interpreting: explanation

- a particular adaptation or version of a work, method, or style

- a teaching technique that combines factual with stimulating explanatory information

Synonyms: clarification, construction, elucidation, exegesis, explication, exposition, illumination, illustration, explanation, road map

Medical Definition: the act or result of giving an explanation of something; especially: an explanation in understandable terms to a patient in psychotherapy of the deeper meaning according to psychological theory of the material related and the behavior exhibited by the patient during treatment.

Therefore, anyone can understand beyond question that *Ravished Armenia* was not written by Mardiganian. Moreover, H.L.Gates did not simply translate and transcribe the words that came out of the mouth of Mardiganian. He re-ordered, adopted, explained, clarified, in brief, re-constructed what Mardiganian told him. Therefore, *Ravished Armenia*

is the re-construction made by H.L.Gates out of what Mardiganian told him.

Nora Waln, the author of the preface of the book writes about 1.5 year before the publication of the book, Mardiganian did not know English, not even to be able to greet Waln in English. Confirming that, in the acknowledgement, H.L.Gates states for verification of these amazing things, which little Aurora told me that I might tell them, in our own language, to all the world ☀ These verify that Mardiganian told her story in Armenian and H.L.Gates interpreted it into English. We do not know how well H.L.Gates knew Armenian. Even if he had a good knowledge of the Armenian language, which is quite unlikely, it is probable that he might have got lost in transition while re-constructing Mardiganians story. If he knew none or little Armenian, then he interpreted Mardiganians story in an absolutely free style.

Considering that the Massis Weekly and other press organs which circulate its report are unable to even notice these basic things, which are far easier to notice than studying rocket science, it might be over-optimistic to expect from those media outlets to be thoughtful of the possibility that even if this book was authored by Mardiganian without any interference and interpretation, it is still very unlikely that it reflected the events that it told precisely. In the foreword of the book, it is written that this book tells the story of three years that Mardiganian lived through[3]. One does not need to be a psychologist to be able to predict that a young lady who witnessed terrible things for three years would suffer heavily from post-stress disorder. In fact, in the preface of the book Waln writes that during the interviews sometimes there had to be intervals of rest of several days, because her suffering had so unnerved her[4]. She adds they persuaded her to go to a camp off the coast of Connecticut for three weeks[5] revealing how seriously Mardiganian was traumatized. As such, it can be asked how accurate the story told by Mardiganian could have been. This does not to mean Mardiganian falsified her story. Rather, this means that Mardiganian or anyone else who was so heavily traumatized could simply not precisely recall and narrate the events (s)he witnessed. Hinting this point which could be grasped through theoretical knowledge and reasoning, in the preface Waln writes[6]:

> "Miss Mardiganian's names, dates and places, *do not correspond exactly* with similar references to these places made by Ambassador Morgenthau, Lord Bryce and others, but we must take into consideration that *she is only a girl of seventeen*, that *she has lived through one of the most tragic periods of history* in that section of the world which has suffered most from the war, that *she is not a historian*, that her interpreter in giving this story to the American public has *not attempted to write a history*. He has simply aimed to *give her message to the American people that they may understand something of the situation in the Near East* during the past years, and help to *establish there for the future, a sane and stable government*" (emphasis added).

This passage does not only display Mardiganians story was not precise. It displays many more things. On many websites, including Armenian ones and Wikipedia, as to Mardiganians journey to the USA it is said that through the mediation of General Andranik Ozanian and orders of the Russian military leadership in the Caucasus, [she] was sent to the United States for recovery and to bear witness to the sufferings of the Armenians in

the Ottoman Empire[7]. The claim that Mardiganian was sent to the USA by the orders of the Russian military leadership begs the explaination as to why the Russian military leadership would do that. At the same time, several details point out the very high probability that Mardiganian was aided by someone for her journey to the USA[8]. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that she was 'sent' to the USA by someone through some organization, no matter if this was General Andranik Ozanian or not, although in the preface Waln writes [Mardiganian] begged us to help her to help her people. My father said America was the friend of the oppressed. General Andranik sent me here because he trusted you to help me, she pleaded[9]. In the acknowledgement, on the other hand, H.L.Gates tells that Dr. F.W. Mac-Callum was the one who made Mardiganians journey to the USA possible.[10] Even then, the claim that General Andranik sent her to the USA, verifies the effects of the trauma that Mardiganian suffered. An alternative view would be Walns fabrication of words that do not belong to Mardiganian.

Waln in the preface writes:[11]

> "Aurora Mardiganian has come to America to tell the story of her suffering peoples and to do her part *in making it possible for her country to be rebuilt*. She is only a little girl, but in giving her story to the American people through the daily newspapers, in this book, and the motion picture which is being prepared for that purpose by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, she is, I feel, playing one of the greatest parts in helping to reestablish again "peace on earth, good will to men" in ancient Bible Lands, the home in her generation of her people" (emphasis added).

This passage hints that Mardiganian was brought to the USA not by General Andranik but by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief that sought to inform the American public about the events in Eastern Anatolia. The two quotes above show that what lies behind this enterprise is something more than humanitarian concerns; although not disqualifying the humanitarian concerns, there were also political concerns. In a nutshell, the Armenophile lobby in the USA, the backbone of which was formed by the Protestant missionary organization some of which had a fanatical antipathy against Muslims and the political circles, in their effort to convince the American public opinion for an US mandate in Eastern Anatolia, launched a propaganda campaign in the USA to this end by circulating the heart-breaking stories of the sufferings of the Christian Armenians in the ancient Bible Lands[12] at the hands of the Mohammedans.

As such, rather than informing the American public about the events in Eastern Anatolia through the lenses of a young girl, the aim of the book and the movie is to impose a certain view onto the American society. Accordingly, it is highly probable that Mardiganians story had been dramatized and aestheticized while it was under the re-construction of H.L. Gates in accordance with the socio-cultural codes of the then USA and the political purposes of Armenophile circles in the USA to make the story of Mardiganian book more impressive and compelling for the American public. The emphasis on Christianity as a binder between Americans and Armenians, which was a common strategy of the Armenophile circles in the USA those days, can be understood as an aspect of the propaganda that the sponsors of the book and the movie were performing.

As to utilization of and heavy emphasis on Christianity, which is based on the alleged antagonism between Christianity and Islam, for better or worse nearly 70 years after the screening of the movie Mardiganian stated that the scenes showing the crucified girls was not genuine; rather than crucifixion impalement was the case.

2

Image not found or type unknown

Figure 2) A scene from the movie *Auction of Souls* (1919) based on *Ravished Armenia* (1918).

Certainly, this does not lessen the horror that Mardiganian went through; it reveals how these horrors were re-arranged and aestheticized for propaganda purposes. In this process, many of the real dimensions of the tragedy were probably brushed under the carpet and many of them were exaggerated or manufactured according to the political needs of the day.

In fact, the name of the book (☀□□□□□ Mardiganian, the Christian Girl ☀□ and the advertisements of the movie *Auction of Souls* reveal those propagandist purposes. One of the advertisements of the movie shows an ugly, dark-skin, ape-like Turkish man holding a bloody sword in one hand and a young, beautiful, pale-skin girl in a white satin light dress [13].

3

Image not found or type unknown

Figure 3) Advertisement of the movie based on *Ravished Armenia* ***[14]***.

Another advertisement of the same film shows a man with a fez and a whip. An almost naked, young, beautiful, pale-skin girl lies at the feet of the man. She is killed or wounded by that man. The man stares at a second girl who is also almost naked, young, beautiful, pale-skin. Her hands are tied at the back. She waits for the next move of the man in a destitute, innocent and absolutely defenseless manner. The girl lying on the floor tells the viewer what awaits this girl.

4

Image not found or type unknown

Figure 4) Another advertisement of the movie based on *Ravished Armenia*.

Significantly, pale vs. dark skin, beautiful vs. ugly, violent vs. innocent, female vs. man all symbolizes supposed categorical difference and antagonism between the West and the East and the derivatives of this duality such as Christianity vs. Islam. Within that symbolic universe, canonized Armenian and demonized Turk are the figures that represent broader dualities and the related prejudices.

As such, these advertisements are examples of the Armenophilic and the Turcophobic socio-cultural atmosphere that the pro-Armenian circles in the USA intensified successfully and the sponsors of the book and the movie utilized. The lengthy quotation from one of the articles of Henry Morgenthau published in the New York *Evening Sun* in the preface demonstrates that orientalist and racist socio-cultural atmosphere[15]:

> "What is definitely known about the Armenians, however, is that for ages they have constituted the most civilized and most industrious race in the Eastern section of the Ottoman Empire ☀ They are so superior to the Turks intellectually and morally that much of the business and industry has passed into their hands.
>
> ☀ In face of persecutions which have had no parallel elsewhere, these people have clung to their early Christian faith with the utmost tenacity. For 1,500 years they have lived there in Armenia, a little island of Christians, surrounded by backward peoples of hostile religion and hostile race. Their long existence has been one unending martyrdom. The territory which they inhabit forms the connecting link between Europe and Asia, and all the Asiatic invasions □□□□□□□□□□ Tartars, Mongols, Kurds and Turks —have passed over their peaceful country."

Notably, demonization of the Turk and canonization of the Armenian was such an urgent political was such an urgent political imperative for the Armenophiles in the then USA that even Morgenthau, a Jew by birth, did not hesitate to use Christianity-related images and rhetoric like Christian martyrdom.

Apart from these, maybe the most striking expression of the irony, which many would call absurdity, was on the advertisement of the movie (see, figure 3 above). On that advertisement it was written that the frank story of Aurora Mardiganian who survived while *four millions perished* in RAVISHED ARMENIA" (emphasis added). Today, even the Armenian propaganda speaks about 1.5 million victims, which is a groundless exaggeration; scholarly research shows in 1910s the number of the Armenian population was around 1.5 million. Many of the 1.5 million Armenians fled to the Caucasus by the withdrawing Russian army, a considerable number of the male population died in the Russian ranks during the fighting, there had been survivors of the war. Accordingly, research shows that the number of the causalities during the war at most 600.000-700.000. This demonstrates that yesterday for the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief and today for the Massis Weekly, Armenian Genocide Museum--Institute and other Armenian organizations in diaspora and Armenia if demonization of the Turk is at stake, numbers are just details.

Epilogue

Writing this commentary was challenging. It was so not because it was challenging to unearth what laid behind the book *Ravished Armenia*, the movie *Auction of Souls* and the aims of the Massis Weekly, Armenian Genocide Museum--Institute and others. What made this commentary challenging was an ethical concern. After all, beyond the question of the accuracy of her story, Mardiganian was a young girl who had to leave her home. This alone itself was a pain big enough imposed on Mardiganian by the particular wartime circumstances during the World War I. For this reason, writing a diagnostic commentary that may amount to interrogating the honesty of Mardiganian is besetting, although that is not the purpose of this paper. On the other hand, someone had to do what I have done. Someone had to do that to save the memory of Mardiganian, the young girl who had witnessed enough cruelties in her life, from the ones who abused and abuse her pain yesterday and today. By this way, the reliability of Mardiganian can be given back to her that was stolen by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, the Massis Weekly, Armenian Genocide Museum--Institute and others.

We all need to emancipate ourselves from the ghosts of the past that hunt us today. To do that, first we need to be true first to ourselves and then to the world. Otherwise, people would see us when they look at the ugly, dark-skin, ape-like man holding a bloody sword in one hand and a young, beautiful, pale-skin girl in white satin light dress in the other…and that would be not because of visual impairment.

[1] http://massispost.com/2015/02/ravished-armenia-the-story-of-aurora-mardiganian-new-movie-trailer-introduced/ (latest access 03.03.2015)

[2] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interpretation (latest access 03.03.2015).

[3] H.L. Gates, *Ravished Armenia; the Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl, Who Survived the Great Massacres*. New York. Kingfiled Press. 1918. p. 12.

[4] Ibid p. 12.

[5] Ibid p. 12.

[6] Ibid p. 14-15.

[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ravished_Armenia (latest access 03.03.2015). General Andranik Ozanian (1865-1927) is one of the commanders of the Armenian troops during and after the World War I that fought an unsuccessful war of liberation against the Ottoman Empire. Today, Andranik is one of the most renowned Armenian national heroes.

[8] From the preface of the book, it can be understood that Mardiganian arrived to the USA latest in the spring of 1917. Therefore, she was 16-17 years-old when she travelled to this country. This young-lady was heavily traumatized. She did not know foreign languages. Most probably she did not have legal papers needed for her journey. War and the accompanying chaos were still the bitter realities in Eastern Anatolia, Caucasus and Europe.

[9] H.L. Gates, *Ravished Armenia*. p. 12.

[10] Dr. F.W. Mac-Callum was a Canadian missionary who had worked with the Armenians since 1887 and supervised refugees and orphanages in Cilicia and a fund of $65,000 for this cause (see, Aram Adjemian, *Canadas Moral Mandate for Armenia: Sparking Humanitarian and Political Interest, 1880-1923*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Concordia University. 2007. p. 17).

[11] H.L. Gates, *Ravished Armenia*. p. 16.

[12] H.L. Gates, *Ravished Armenia*. p. 16.

[13] Initially, the name of the movie was planned to be the same with the name of the book. Then, this name was decided.

[14] See, footnote 13 for the change of the name of the movie.

[15] H.L. Gates, Ravished Armenia. p. 15.

About the Author :

Dr. Turgut Kerem Tuncel is a senior analyst at Ankara-based think-tank Center for Eurasian Studies. His research focuses on Eurasian geopolitics, Wider Black Sea Region, South Caucasus, Karabakh conflict, and Turkey-Armenia relations.

To cite this article: TUNCEL, Turgut Kerem. 2026. "ABUSING THE MEMORY OF ARSHALUYS (AURORA) MARDIGANIAN." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Commentary No.2015 / 42. April 09. Accessed October 31, 2026. https://www.avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/ABUSING-THE-MEMORY-OF-ARSHALUYS-AURORA-MARDIGANIAN

Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

© 2009-2025 Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) All Rights Reserved