

ANALYZING THE BEAST by Shushan Avagyan  
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In my analysis of Kalinoski's *Beast on the Moon*, I will reflect upon the treatment of key recurring themes such as the internalization of catastrophe, the inability or unwillingness to grasp the reality of events, and the acting out of the origins of trauma inflicted upon the human psyche. Furthermore, I will draw parallels between the act of Genocide and domestic violence, -- the first being harnessed by bureaucratic indifference and hard-line fundamentalist ideology, the other driven by unresolved trauma. The horrors told by the survivors, such as those depicted in *Beast on the Moon*, rise in a cacophony of bloody memories of rape, lynching, murders by firearm and swords, and most gruesome of all -- decapitation and crucifixion.

The play is set in Milwaukee, in 1921, in the home of Aram Tomasian, a twenty-one year old portrait photographer. Aram has survived the Genocide and escaped to America carrying his only possession -- his father's coat. The coat is associated with Aram's survival, his father, the old country, and a photograph of his family that was sewn into the lining. During the act of Genocide, Aram was hidden in a hole in their house and left for dead under his father's coat while the

gendarmes were hanging the heads of his family on the clothesline next to his mother's wash. Aram's existence is driven by the anticipation of resurrecting his perished family and saving them from oblivion.

Unable to verbalize his own grief, Aram impulsively acts out the beheading of his family through the photograph, which like a guillotine hangs on the easel in his living room. Concealed from the killers' eyes, peeping from his hideout at the gruesome act of beheading, Aram's haunting voyeuristic desire recurs in a repetitive pattern: his only pleasures in real life are perceived through his camera. Removed from reality, incapable of dialoging with his own disturbed psyche, Aram finds solace in hiding behind his professional camera and vigilantly waiting to record other people's lives.

Act I opens with Aram's meeting with Seta, a fourteen-year-old girl from one of the many orphanages set up in Istanbul after the Genocide. He has chosen Seta as his bride from thirty-seven photographs, sent to him from the Istanbul Mission. Ironically, the picture-bride, that Aram thinks he has picked, is dead -- Seta is her replacement:

"I'm sorry, that is a picture of a dead girl -- she's dead -- she died nine months ago of disease, but they must have used her picture. They put my name on the back, I think."

Aram is upset and confused, because he has done everything in his power to organize his life according to a plan, but from the very start he is faced with unanticipated circumstances. Quickly

recovering  
from an initial dismay, Aram resolves that he can forget the  
picture  
of the dead girl by taking a new photograph of Seta: "Our life  
should  
be recorded." Aram is replacing a traumatic memory [dead girl],  
with  
a falsely constructed happiness [Seta]. Here Kalinoski bares the  
device of historiography through Aram, who insists on taking  
Seta's  
photograph without the doll and with a strained fake  
smile. In this act Aram is doing two things: erasing Seta's  
Armenian  
subjectivity and appropriating a new American identity, and  
replacing  
Seta's girlhood with womanhood.

"Americans . . . they smile. Smile now -- a little, and  
hold. [. . .] Ah! You've ruined it. I must get a new plate.  
Seta,  
smile. No grim looking Armenian girls."

But Seta protests, it doesn't "feel natural" to her; she isn't  
registering self-identification within the imaginary order. In  
the  
Lacanian schema, Kaja Silverman explains the "imaginary" to  
designate  
that order of the subject's experience, which is dominated by  
identification and duality. And since Aram thinks that pictures  
shouldn't be natural, but posed, Seta must let go of her natural  
ways  
through self-alienation. In this new record, Seta's identity is  
being  
further reconstructed as she is forced to abandon her doll, the  
only  
memory of her dead mother. The doll is also associated with  
girlhood  
and a source of psychological strength that Seta identifies  
with.  
Only by means of this fabulous construct does Seta retain her  
own

self-recognition. By forcing her to fake a smile and by taking away the doll, Aram is stripping Seta of her own subjectivity and fabricating her as something that she is not. Seta's resistance to such history-making is rather strong, but ineffective; after all she really has no choice but to play along. The sources of Seta's powerlessness in this situation are obvious: she is an orphan, she is in a foreign country and in a house where nothing belongs to her. Furthermore, metaphorically speaking, Seta belongs to Aram in the sense that he has purchased her from the Istanbul mission and she feels indebted to him.

Later in this act, Aram pursues his strategic "taming" of his girl-bride, as he presents Seta her first marital gift -- a custom-made hand-held mirror. At the back of the mirror, Aram has inscribed "For my wife" in English, a foreign and illegible language for Seta. Aram orders Seta to look at herself, while he places himself next to her and begins reading from the Bible: "Women shall adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety. I suffer a woman not to teach, nor usurp authority over the man." By looking at herself in the mirror, Seta is required to see in her image a woman entering a new symbolic order, i.e., as Aram's new wife. In *The Subject of Semiotics*, Kaja Silverman explains:

"Not only is the subject split off or partitioned from its own drives, but it is subordinated to a symbolic order which will

henceforth entirely determine its identity and desires. It will from this point forward participate in the discourse of the Other, and regard itself from the space of the Other."

In order to re-program her, Aram is committed to "a lot of training," as he tells her to "hold the mirror out and look into it. I'll read from the Proverbs." Here Aram is manipulating both the imaginary and symbolic registers at the same time, creating a binary opposition between Self and Other through both imagery and language. Seta's reaction to these manipulative games is to resist the new subjectivity, as she looks and sees "just a girl" in the mirror, a living-dead girl, just like Aram -- a living-dead boy.

From Seta's fragmented story it is evident that before the Genocide she lived in the city and was raised in a much more liberal setting than Aram. To Aram's surprise and outrage, his new wife used to read the Bible to her father; in his family, it was the man who read. What is even more abominable to Aram is the fact that Seta's mother had been an educated woman, a teacher, who used to sing: "When she sang, the whole house shook and the neighbors came out into their yards." To which Aram replies: "When my mother married my father she was not allowed to speak for a year. One whole year." At the turn of the century, Armenian wedding customs varied considerably from region to region, and were more rigidly observed in rural areas than in the cities. As Susie Hoogasian Villa recounts women's experiences in

her  
chapter on marriage and childbirth in Armenian Village Life  
Before  
1914:

"From her wedding day, the lower half of her face was  
constantly  
veiled in most villages, for at least a year. [. . .] She  
was  
not permitted to speak to anyone except the children, and  
even  
that was possible only when she was alone with them."

This Armenian custom, known as moonch, which literally means  
"mute," is reminiscent of purdah that was practiced by Muslim  
Indian  
women. Both customs are characterized with extreme forms of sex  
role  
differentiation and provide a separation within the symbolic  
codes.

Reduced to the status of a child, or a lesser human being, the  
woman  
in moonch was barred from access to other women and the rest of  
society. Bereft of any rights, she was not allowed to partake in  
any  
of the family affairs or decision-making. Once the wife in  
moonch had  
successfully completed her initiation, she became a full member  
of the  
extended family, enjoying its rights and privileges. Aram's  
reference  
to his mother's moonch is strategic in his attempt to silence  
Seta and install reverence toward himself as the patriarch of  
the  
house. Initiated by the photograph session, the gift of the  
mirror and  
readings from the Bible, Aram is systematizing his oppression  
and  
reconstruction of Seta's identity.

Later in Act I, in response to Aram's decision to perform "the

business of a man and a woman," Seta giggles like a child and persistently continues clutching her doll. At first seeming to be a game, the act suddenly paralyzes her with the realization that she is threatened by Aram the same way she was threatened by a Turkish militiaman. When Aram uses force to grab Seta from underneath the table, her temporary refuge from a stranger claiming to be her husband, Seta shrieks: "I saw a Turk. Oh no, I saw a Turk." Sexual intercourse for Seta is equivalent to crime, as she recounts her older sister's rape by a Turkish gendarme during the purges. Seta was spared because her sister sacrificed herself "in my place, she did it for me [. . .] but I saw him, I saw just then, oh I saw him on your face, in your eyes I saw him." Aram's tyranny invokes the memories of rape and genocide in Seta as she is re-traumatized and re-experiences an atrocious act from her past.

Clearly, Aram's behavior in Freudian terms could be described as the repetition compulsion, where "a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an inlaid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken." In Act II, with Seta's help Aram articulates his compulsion to repeat through symbolic beheading:

"I sat alone and looked at the picture coming alive in the chemicals and I took a knife and cut out the heads of my father, Toros, my mother, Vartuhy, my little sister, Karin, and my brother Dickran . . . I cut out the heads of my family. I thought I

could

replace them. I really thought that's the way it would be. I thought . . . a wife . . . children . . . then I would forget. Completely. But I never forget. I never do."

Aram is finally faced with what Freud would call his restitutive tendency, a function working by various means to re-establish the situation which had existed prior to the trauma; it exploits repetitive phenomena in the interests of the ego. Furthermore, by acting out his unconscious wishes and fantasies, Aram relives them in the present with a sensation of immediacy, which is heightened by his refusal to recognize the source and its repetitive character.

Aram fails to realize that this impulsive acting out is at the expense of another human being and is absolutely destructive. His desire to father a family and resurrect his lost family has consumed him so much that he is completely in denial of Seta's body refusing to conceive. In his delusional state, Aram hears Seta, but is deaf to understanding her reality:

"He [doctor] said girls who starve sometimes . . . can't. [. . .]  
Mr. Tomasian, when I was nine, I starved. I starved. [. . .]  
And  
you bought a carriage -- was this to be my surprise? Or was it  
your surprise . . . Mr. Tomasian, a carriage does not make a baby."

After his systematic forced attempts to realize his dream, Aram simply cannot come to terms with the thought that his desire alone is



not

enough to fill the empty holes of his family photograph.

Flagrantly

blaming Seta for his failed mission to continue the Tomasian family

tree, he deploys psychological aggression against her. Using the Bible

as an instrument of power and authority, Aram attacks her:

"Proverbs: Chapter 25 Verse 24. "It is better to dwell in a corner

than in a roomy house with a quarrelsome woman'"and "Genesis!

Chapter 25 Verse 21. "Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren.'"

Raised in a traditional patriarchal society, Aram fails to acknowledge

that Seta's traumatic experience was as painful and inhuman as his

own. In her essay "Not Outside the Range," Laura Brown explains that

trauma is usually identified as something abnormal experienced by

white, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual men. Brown critiques

the definition of human and how our images of trauma can be narrow and

constructed within the experiences and realities of dominant groups.

Aram, as the patriarch, refuses to see Seta's experience as legitimate

as his own, since he fails to see her as an equal human being. And so,

Aram's treatment of Seta as a lesser human being is analogous to the

Turkish leaders' reasoning behind their politics of violence against

the Armenian infidels. Once the Armenian subjects, living under the

Ottoman rule since its creation, were ostracized as gavurs, or

contemptuous beings, it was legitimately permissible to treat them inhumanly. According to British ethnographer William Ramsay, the Christian subjects of Ottoman Turkey were regarded as

"dogs and pigs . . . to be spat upon, if their shadow darkened a Turk, to be outraged, to be the mats on which he wiped the mud from his feet. Conceive the inevitable result of centuries of slavery, of subjugation to insult and scorn, centuries in which nothing that belonged to the Armenian, neither his property, his house, his life, his person, nor his family, was sacred or safe from violence -- capricious, unprovoked violence -- to resist which by violence meant death."

While Aram is dogmatically obsessed with his barren solution to the healing process, Seta, burdened by Aram's despotism, is resisting her subjugation and at the same time trying to salvage whatever is left from her past life. She is fighting for her own dignity and also for the cultural heritage which her parents left her before they perished. In response to Aram's denigrating comments from the Bible, Seta cleverly counterattacks:

"Mr. Tomasian, you know Proverbs. 'When one finds a worthy wife, her value is far beyond pearls.' Chapter 31. And . . . 'She opens her mouth in wisdom, and on her tongue is kindly counsel.'"

Seta is concerned with healing together with Aram; she is smart enough to realize that only together, and only on equal terms can they overcome the gory baggage of memory. As a child, in her father's house, Seta had been taught values based on human equality and even now, as an orphan, in a foreign country, Seta refuses to abandon her own familial values. As much as she has adopted Aram's new world, Seta is the vigilant keeper of their Armenian identity, which she is keen on preserving no matter what. And in her memory, the identity of the Armenian woman is not the silenced bride in moonch, but the image of a strong-minded vociferous woman, who would rather be crucified as an infidel, than forsake her convictions.

The peripeteia in Act II is key to the politics of memory and Seta's metaphoric emergence from moonch. Upset by Aram's self-internalized tyranny and silencing of her own traumatic experience, Seta becomes belligerent. For the first time, she refuses to go to bed with him by threatening him with the iron that he purchased for her as a gift -- a classic reenactment of what Audre Lorde would call "using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house." Then Aram finds her in the middle of the night, pounding nails into the hands and legs of her doll, kneeling in front of a lit candle. Seta has taken down the photograph off the easel and crucified her own doll on it. Unlike Aram's compulsive repetitive and delusional processes governed by the unconscious, Seta in this demonstrative act is deliberately mimicking and confronting Aram.

Aram's first reaction to this is, of course, that he is witnessing some sort of witchery or hysteria, which is a disgrace to him. Aram quickly resorts to pathologizing and marginalizing her as the hysterical Other. His inability to cope with the situation is, "naturally," Seta's fault. Similarly, Sultan Abdul Hamid blamed the Armenian reformers for revolting against the Empire's centuries of oppression and as punishment thought it logical to "give them a box on the ear, which will make them smart and relinquish their revolutionary ideas."

To Aram's berating accusations, Seta replies:

"It is a disgrace like your portrait is a disgrace. A grown man who cuts the heads off his murdered family. And here sits the murdered family, here sits the dead family, holes for heads, sitting, staring with no eyes, day after day after day after day. [. . .] Now after these years you have never told me what happened to you -- you brought me here -- you put this (indicating portrait) in front of me and said fill it up, nothing else."

In her next line Seta confronts Aram for treating her inhumanly and attempting to erase her experience by replacing it with his own burdensome trauma:

"Did you listen? Did you hear me? Did you hear that the person who is a wife is a person? I do not just do -- make cakes! Sell cakes! Cook! Wash! Iron! Sew! Count money! Shop! Make your bed

. . . and make your bed warm. I weep. I feel. [. . .] Your  
grief  
is so great you make me carry it."

Because of his insensitivity and dogmatic religiosity, Aram is completely oblivious to his own oppression and his mimicry of the Turkish perpetrator against Seta. Aram's denial to accept his destructive actions and construction of a delusive repetitive memory are analogous to the politics of the Turkish conduct in creating false allegations against the Armenians and then denying the violations committed during the Genocide.

Where language gives way to silence, as the human mind gives way to madness, the symbolic order becomes inadequate to express reality. Because Aram is in denial, he is constructing a partial memory and closing the doors for negotiation with Seta's memory. He has locked himself in a cellar of grievance throughout the years, perpetuating both his and Seta's psychological wounds. Juxtaposed to him is the spirit of Seta, the resilient life-loving girl, who, because of her gender and social status, is positioned at the margins of the patriarchal order. Her struggle for self-preservation has helped her develop a pluralistic stance, where she can negotiate with the various realities and is better adapted for survival and psychological regeneration. It is due to these qualities that in the end Seta shows Aram how the origins and meanings of a traumatic experience can be recognized and worked through various contexts.

The complex relationship between Seta and Aram constructed by Kalinoski in this domestic setting is an allegorical reenactment of the internal affairs between the Turkish and Armenian people. For centuries initiated into moonch, Armenian subjects were silenced and oppressed through various strategic schemes. Like a metaphoric Seta, they were treated inhumanly, their schools were closed, they were imposed with heavy taxation, and legally barred from ownership. This systematic subjugation culminated in the Genocide, which attempted, but failed, to annihilate the Armenian spirit.

And today, by neglecting the Armenian experience and constructing a partial historiography, the Turkish politics of retaining memory becomes skewed and delusional. It perpetuates victimization and obstructs the process of rehabilitation and recovery from the traumatic baggage that haunts generations of the Genocide victims. In Deborah Lipstadt's words, denial of genocide is the "final stage of genocide," because it "strives to reshape history in order to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators."The trauma experienced by the Armenian people, like an unhealed wound in our brains, persists from generation to generation without closure or psychological recuperation. Through his play, Richard Kalinoski helps reconstruct a history absent from the Turkish memory and complete the partial historiography of the Armenian Genocide.

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