

Shirvanzade's Selected Works By Eddie Arnavoudian

Armenian News Network / Groong

December 7, 2004

By Eddie Arnavoudian

Armenian novelist Shirvanzade (1858-1935) has perhaps been treated with undeserved disdain, by myself among others! This at least is suggested by a reading of three works published in this collection, a novel 'Namus', a play 'In the Name of Honour' and a long short story, 'The Artist'.

I.

'Namus' (1884) was Shirvanzade's first novel. Its treatment of some of the consequences of the primitive cult of honour that was the cause of so many domestic tragedies in late 19th century Armenian communities is impressive. Shamakh, a town neighbouring Baku, once a provincial capital but now in decline, is the site for a drama that engulfs two families, their children and many others. Shirvanzade, a skilled narrator with a deft touch for dramatic dialogue, depicts well the horrific results of backward social prejudice. And with a sharp observing eye he captures something essential about the relations and things he describes.

Sussan's and Seyran's respective parents arrange their marriage to each other when they are still children. But Sussan, in accord with social tradition, on reaching marriageable age, is locked away in the home, forbidden to see any man, even her future husband with whom she

had played freely as a young child. Defiance of this tradition promises to bring the deepest dishonour on both families. It is a tradition that Sussan and Seyran challenge. But they are discovered and tragedy follows. Sussan's father Parkhoutar, feeling deeply dishonoured and humiliated, beats her savagely, cancels her engagement and ends decades of friendship with Seyran's father Hayrabad. Hayrabad turns on his son while the bond between the children's mothers is also

broken. The cult stands overwhelming as an untouchable, unquestionable omnipotence. Its destructive scope is measured in a monologue by Sussan that questions divine wisdom for permitting moral codes that cause so much pain. Yet, she too feels, and is powerless before it having no other option than to bend to her father's will and then hope for death as release.

There is a weakness here however. Shirvanzade fails to offer any description of relations or contexts that would indicate the cause, origins or social purpose behind this poisoned prejudice. He captures appearances well but goes little further. We feel deeply the humiliation, the hatred and the violence that the cult of honour causes, but we perceive no reason. The issue of 'honour' seems to have no social logic, appearing as something external to social relations, purely arbitrary, or subjective - a problem of irrational prejudice with no apparent social purpose. Yet a purpose it did have - that of morally legitimising and reinforcing the oppression of women. It acted as a moral chain that bound women as chattels to man.

If the first part of 'Namus' tells of grief caused by the cult of honour, the second deals with the hypocrisy, cruelty and barbarism of arranged marriages. The tradition of arranged marriages was not in the first instance a shackle either for Sussan or Seyran. They were lucky. They loved each other. But later on even they cannot escape its brutal clutches. Parkhoutar, hoping to restore his name, tries to marry his daughter off a second time. With her reputation 'soiled' he has to put money into the equation and employs Shebbanik, a grasping, greedy, drinking, shifty trickster who practices as a matchmaker. After a great deal of deception she succeeds in fixing a marriage with the Rustam, a well-heeled son of a local widow.

Shebbanik turns out to be the only person to profit from the arrangement as all others involved are trapped in a web of humiliation, hatred and self-hatred. Sussan wastes away in a marriage that she hates. Seyran's own heartache is compounded by the humiliation of being powerless to stop his beloved being married off

to Rustam. Vengeful, Seyran deceives Rustam into believing that his newly-wed wife has been unfaithful. Rustam turns murderous. The novel closes with Sussan's, Seyran's and Rustam's families in mourning. A primitive cult of honour and a system of arranged marriages has devastated and wasted precious human life.

For all its faults, including a rather forgettable ending - scenes of blood and gore as Seyran commits suicide and Rustam kills Sussana - 'Namus' remains eminently readable. Its powerful treatment of arranged marriages and irrational cults of honour is set within a passionate indictment of the generalised brutalisation of women's lives. Vivid descriptions of individual emotion, psychology and perception gives the protagonists their deeply human quality and thus also their durability. Affording a great deal of stimulation, the future of this novel would be better secured if the substantial portions of its now incomprehensible Shamakh Armenian vernacular dialogue were rendered into modern Armenian.

II.

'In the Name of Honour', a four-act tragedy written by Shirvanzade in 1905, moves the scene of action from provincial Shamakh to the new oil capital Baku. Here Shirvanzade depicts with effect the sordid world of parvenu wealth, that accumulated through fraud and deception and is then defended with no regard for honour or decency. A complex yet perfectly credible plot revolves around efforts by self-made businessman Andreas Elizabarian to fend off a challenge to half his wealth from Artashes Otarian, the son of the business partner he had so ruthlessly swindled. The endeavour is complicated. Andreas' daughter Margaret is in love with Artashes. Unable to accept Artashes' charge that her father could be dishonest Margaret demands proof. This Artashes promptly furnishes in the form of documents that he leaves with her but with a firm promise to return them intact. Discovering the documents, her father destroys them and so driven by greed sacrifices his daughter's profound sense of principle and honour. Some sharp dialogue, written with an eye for revealing detail,

provides a compact reconstruction of social and domestic relations of the time - the late 19th early 20th Caucasus that are in transition to capitalism. The Elizabethan family's life reveals the tensions and contradictions of a world in which 'conscience, despite its virtue, is increasingly being enslaved to money'. Western fashions and tastes have begun penetrating family and public life causing havoc to its traditional values. But even as economic and social life is attuned to the latest technological and industrial advances, in the private domain Andreas remains a feudal tyrant treating his wife and daughter little better than domestic serfs.

Andreas is a typical representative of an early stage of industrial development climbing the ladder of prosperity with no concern for legality or loyalty. His son Bagrat however takes his wealth for granted and dismisses objections to its illicit origin by claiming that 'all that was a long time ago.' A driven man determined to become 'a mighty financier, one of those giants who control the greatest force of our day - capital' Bagrat has no moral qualms. 'After all, whose father is it that did not swindle this or that person in this or that way?' There is only one difference he argues: 'the old generation swindled in their own old way, the new generation swindles in its own new way.'

This is the setting for the clash between moneyed greed and moral principle that unfolds in relations between father and daughter. It is to Shirvanzade's credit that the latter's virtue is shown to be a function not of her gender but of an insistence on the need for decent relations between people. Margaret's defiance of the father is additionally forceful in its affirmation of how despite patriarchal tyranny the spirit of independence endures in oppressed womanhood. Besides father and daughter, a host of other characters enter the stage to underline the central social contradiction and tension of this drama.

Andreas's scheming business lieutenant is a master of hypocrisy lining his own pockets whilst strutting about as if in selfless and dedicated service to his master. With a trite comment that 'our money being

tainted, it is no sin to waste it' Andreas's younger son Souren offers a novel and radical justification for the dissolute expenditure by the elite's offspring. Rosalia, the spendthrift daughter, ostentatious in consumption and in cheap aping of Parisian fashions, like many of her contemporaries also has a haughty contempt for the common Armenian man

and woman referring to Armenian servants as 'bears' and demanding that

'we employ foreigners' instead.

Shirvanzade's moral vision, knitted into a dramatic plot with finely drawn characters brings to life the corrosive consequences of the overwhelming of human relations by monetary considerations. For all its flaws, easily ironed out by any competent director, 'In the Name of Honour' remains fresh in its preoccupations.

III.

Shirvanzade's 'The Artist' charms the reader with its gentle depiction of teenage Levon, passionate about the opera, theatre and music. Possessed of a tender sensibility and creativity he is however trapped into circumstances inimical to his ambitions. In Levon's mother, a rather weak, perhaps broken woman, Shirvanzade encapsulates

well some of the plebeian hostility to the artistic character often seen as good for nothings incapable of putting bread on the table. In her case this attitude is reinforced by personal experience. It was her husband's love for theatre that led to an infatuation with an actress out of his class that then drove him to drinking and ruin. Like many mothers, she would prefer Levon to follow a steady trade rather than take the risky road of art. So she places before him whatever obstacles she can.

Whilst depicting well Levon's artistic temperament this is not a novel about the artistic personality. It is rather the story of talent and youth falling victim to the vagaries, the unpredictability and the accidents of life. To escape his mother's stifling grip and to travel to Italy where his beloved Luisa has returned, Levon puts aside his

preoccupation for all things theatrical and turns to earning some fast money singing to sailors in seedy seaside taverns of Russian Odessa where the story is set. Shirvanzade reveals an ability to conjure the material reality of life in the 'lower depths'. One can almost feel and smell the dirt and the fumes of smoke and alcohol drifting through bars packed with drunken and rowdy sailors.

Levon's enormous sacrifice and dedication come to nothing. On the brink of being corrupted by alcohol, he does finally save enough money to leave for Italy. He is elated believing his ambition and love are about to be attained. But one evening he is mugged and robbed of everything, including his shoes in the right foot of which he had his 150 roubles concealed. Compelling descriptions follow of Levon's despair as he engages in a futile search to recover a pair of worn shoes that become the embodiment of all his hopes and ambitions. Shirvanzade is masterly in evoking the concentrated emotion and pain of personal tragedy. To add to misery Levon finds out that Louisa was never actually in love with and has married someone else in Italy. Shirvanzade's prose flows smoothly and slowly, unruffled by flights of poetic flourish or by incisive authorial observation and comment. It nevertheless prompts emotional and intellectual reaction. This simple, straightforward, matter of fact narrative, almost monotone style has something compelling about it, evoking effectively the world that Shirvanzade describes. It is a naturalism that, even though it sacrifices the analytical vision of critical realism, is compensated for by a sensitive, sympathetic and generous depiction of real, memorable characters. Shirvanzade's accurate descriptions of living human beings in social relations and circumstances that are familiar to us all allow us to engage in their dramas as they strive or stumble driven by everyday hopes and ambitions.