

Re-readings of the epic *Sasna Tsrer* (*Daredevils of Sassoun*) in contemporary Armenian prose: from epic to novel

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Abstract

One of the traits of contemporary Armenian prose is interest in myths and the epic. Armenian mythology and the epic poem *Daredevils of Sassoun* are present in fiction by contemporary authors. However they prefer contradictory characters to positive ones. Why do authors refer to the Armenian national epic? Why do they prefer negative characters? Can the epic become a novel? These difficult questions require analysis of a specific literary and social-political situation. While reflection on epic and myths is conditioned by the influence of the literature of “magic realism”, and manifested in the form of a narrative and methods of literary representation, on the other hand, harsh, unstable times compel writers to consider national roots established by century old traditions. Though partial reference to the epic is possible, a complete novel based on it is not.

Keywords: *Armenian epic, contemporary Armenian prose, Daredevils of Sassoun, Levon Khech'oyan, The Book of Mher's Door*

1. The prose of independent Armenia

By “contemporary Armenian prose”, or “post-independence prose” we mean the novels and short stories written and published after the collapse of the Soviet Union in independent Armenia. Of course, not all the texts dating from this 25-year period, may possess the artistic and aesthetic features typical of this new phase in the development of Armenian literature, however the study of central, famous literary works does justify reference to a new literary period.

About 200 novels were published in this period, definitely a large number for Armenian Literature. They are very difficult to classify on thematic or genre lines. But we can point out a number of structural and typical contextual features of post-independence novels:

1. In most of the novels, the plot is not stable. In this case, instead of the plot, we can see the representation of different memories, dreams, long monologues, sometimes endless dialogues of characters.

2. From the linguistic point of view, we notice the search for a new language to represent a new reality. Along with literary language, there are examples of colloquial non-literary usage.

3. Writers try to understand a new and still unexplained reality. They refer to old and new philosophies and knowledge. The desire to perceive reality by means of philosophy is expressed in novel-parables or novel-allegories, on occasion manifested in satirical novels. Authors present seemingly absurd reality sarcastically (Hambardzumyan 2012, 161-178).

4. With a return to independence after so many centuries, Armenians faced many new challenges. To understand the problems of this new statehood, novelists looked for parallels in similar periods of Armenian history. As a result, during this period, many historical or pseudo-historical novels were written. Of course, many examples of the historical novel genre are also to be found in classical Armenian literature (Raffi, *Davit' Bek*, 1882; *Samvel*, 1886; Murats'an, *Gevorg Marzpetuni*, 1896; Step'an Zoryan, *Pap T'agavor* [King Pap], 1944; Georg Marzpetuni, *Hayots' Berdy* [Armenian Fortress]), 1959; *Varazdat*, 1967 etc.). The tradition of the Armenian novel began with a historical novel: *Verk' Hayastani* (Wounds of Armenia), 1848, by Khach'atur Abovyan. However, the historical novels of the independence period are very different from classical Armenian novels:¹

Գաղափարական առումով նոր պատմավեպիկ բնորոշ է հրաժարումը պատմության հերոսականության ըմբռնումից, ապամիֆականացումը (պետք չէ շփոթել միֆի կիրառության հետ), որն առավել բնորոշ է Զեյթունցյանի ու Նեչոյանի երկերին: Ժամանակակից պատմավեպում պատմական օրինաչափությունը, պատճառի ու հետևանքի կապը վախճարիվում է պատահականությամբ, ֆակտագրապաշտությամբ, միատիկայով: (Qalant'aryan 2008, 235)

In terms of ideology, characteristics of the new historical novel are rejection of the heroic conception of history, demythologization (not to be confused with applying myth), which is most typical for Zeyt'unats'yan's and Khech'oyan's historical novels (King Arshak and Eunuch Drastamat, The stolen snow). In the contemporary novel, historical regularity and causation are replaced, by coincidence, fate and mysticism.

5. The novels are often linked to ancient Armenian myths and heroic poetry, as well as well-known examples from the rest of Europe (See Bek'mezyan 2007).

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations are by the author.

6. There are many references to the folk epic poem *Daredevils of Sassoun*, which has great ideological significance and importance for the Armenian people. This article will make constant reference to these novels.

Of course, literary references to old myths and the folk epic are not new. They had also been present in the Soviet period since the 1960s. This is especially the case in the novels of leading writers like Khach'ik Dashtents', Zorayr Khalap'yan, Hrant Mat'yevosyan, Aghasi Ayyvazyan etc. However, in the period of independence, re-readings of the epic had other goals and manifestations.

A large number of quotations from and references to Armenian mythology and the epic *Daredevils of Sassoun* are especially to be found in Levon Khech'oyan's first collection of short stories *Khunki tsarrer* (1991; Incense Trees) and his three novels *Arshak Ark'a*, *Drastamat Ner'ini* (1995; King Arshak and Eunuch Drastamat), *Sev girq, tsanr bzez* (1999; Black Book, Heavy Bug), and *Mheri dran girqy* (2014; The Book of Mher's Door), as well as Armen Martirosyan's novel entitled *Maze kamurj* (1986, 2002, 2003; Hair Bridge), Gurgen Khanjyan's two novels *Nstir A gnats'ky* (2002; Get on Train A), *Histerianer* (2004; Hysterias) and Hovik Vardumyan's novel *P'oqr Mheri veradardzy* (2014; Poqr Mher's Return).

In most of these short stories and novels the epic narrative and underlying motives of ancient myths come in the form of indirect links. Only in Levon Khech'oyan's *The Book of Mher's Door*, is there an exhaustive presentation of *Daredevils of Sassoun* as the eternal narrative, with parallels to modern reality. Moreover, the epic is represented not only following the main plot line but also in its oral and literary versions and epic studies.

Why do the authors refer to the national epic? What interests 20th-21st century writers in the medieval epic? What is the relevance of folk epic today?

2. *The epic Daredevils of Sassoun (David of Sassoun)*

The heroic poem *Daredevils of Sassoun* is the Armenian national epic, which has ancient mythological roots, but was given its final form between the 8th and 12th centuries. The earliest written reports of the epic were made by Portuguese travellers in the 16th century. The basic text was recorded in the village of Arnist, near the city of Mush in 1873 by Garegin Srvandztyants' a bishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Srvandztyants' 1874). The second variant was found in 1886 in Ejmiatsin and recorded by the famous armenologist Manuk Abeghyan (1889). Later, up to the end of 1970s many other variants were recorded too, mostly in Eastern Armenia (Republic of Armenia).

160 versions of the epic written down in more than 100 years are mainly in three dialects: Mush, Van and Sasun. Most of the versions of the epic were written down in Western Armenia (now in Turkey). The epic, from when it was first recorded, has undergone a long period of writing, perception and study, a difficult and complex one, the result being narration in many dialects.

Most of the versions were published in Yerevan in five volumes (1936, 1944, 1951, 1977, 1979, 1999). The edition bears the title *Sasna Tsrer* (*Daredevils of Sassoun*). In 1939, when the Soviet Union celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the epic, the official text was published.

This text is based on 65 versions and was compiled by M. Abeghyan, G. Abov and A. Ghanalanyan. The editor is H. Orbeli. This edition is entitled *David of Sassoun*, not *Daredevils of Sassoun*, because it was the source text for the translation into Russian and other languages, one of the reasons being that the word *Tsrer* is difficult to translate. *Tsrer* has many meanings in different contexts. *Tsur* in Armenian can mean “foolhardy”, “daredevil”, “crazy”, “madman”, “brave”, “naive”, “crooked” etc.

It should be noted, that contemporary authors dealing with the epic, with the exception of Levon Khech'oyan, know it from this text, that does not fully reflect all its features. It was created in Soviet times under certain ideological constraints. There are, however, some authors who were aware of literary versions of the epic.

The famous literary versions of the epic were created with various principles and purposes. The most famous and popular one is Hovhannes T'umanyan's *Sasunts'i Davit'* (1903; David of Sassoun). It is the rhymed version of the third cycle of the epic and was written for children. Nairi Zaryan's *Sasunts'i Davit'* (1966; David of Sassoun) prose version, which was similar to T'umanyan's poem, was translated into Russian, English and Dutch. Two other versions – Avetik' Isahakyan's *Sasma Mher* (1938; Mher of Sassoun) and Yeghishe Ch'arents's *Sasunts'i Davit'* (1933; David of Sassoun) – have a social-political stance.

All versions of the epic have from 1 to 4 generations of heroes. The four generations are closely interconnected, each of the branches representing a certain period in the mythical, heroic history of the house of Sassoun. The first branch recounts the birth of the twins Sanasar and Baghdasar. They could not live with their father, because they were not his natural offspring, or because he was planning to sacrifice them to his idols. They escape to Armenia, slaying dragons, building the fortress of Sassoun, and restoring Armenia to prosperity. The brothers return to Baghdad to rescue their mother. Sanasar marries and has children.

The hero of the second branch is Mets Mher (Great Mher) son of Sanasar. Sassoun prospered under Mher's reign. Mets Mher is the epitome of the noble, wise, fair and self-sacrificing father-king. Mher had two sons: Davit' the former born from his wife Armaghan, and Msra Melik', the latter from Ismil Khat'un the widow of Sassoun's enemy.

After Mher, Sassoun had to pay tribute to Msyr. But Davit' defeated the king of Msra Melik' and all other enemies. Sassoun became independent. He then married Khandut' and had a son, P'oqr Mher.

In the fourth branch, the main hero P'oqr Mher diverges from his forebears. The differences are observable since the moment of his birth. In some versions, he was born with clenched fists. P'oqr Mher's character consists of diverse, and in

some respects, contradictory traits. Mher was stronger than Davit', but he could not find his place in the world. Mher used to quarrel with all his relatives and fellow countrymen. Finally, the Earth could no longer stand the severity of the hero and he was enclosed in Agravak'ar (Ravens Rock). The people believe that he did not die but lives in a cave, and will return when justice triumphs in the world.

Sasna Tsrreer is an oral creation, which has followed a long path of development. The epic's evolution concerns all levels: structural, semantic, the heroic system, style, etc. Structural formation and the development of the epic proceeded through the following phases: ancient, classic and epic.

The preliminary syncretic legends, created on the basis of a work of folklore, retain the mythological elements which are still visible, only now in an epic historical form. These evolutions are particularly to be observed in the case of epic heroes, who have developed from mythological gods to epic heroes.

They have undergone a long development from archetype-myth to epic, historical, and literary hero. Thus the development of these heroes can be identified with different mythological, religious, and historical personages. From an ideological point of view, the *Tsurr* (Daredevil) heroes of the Armenian epic embody the power of the essence of Armenia: dreams of the nation about independence and freedom.

3. *The world of the epic in the contemporary Armenian novel*

A long historical development and transformations, mythical roots, a heroic and patriotic nature, controversial characters and the great significance it has for the Armenian people: these features of the Armenian epic are of interest to contemporary novelists. The epic motives and attributes give the novels ideological depth, the plot becomes multilevel and the characters acquire new symbolic meanings. Writers were especially interested in P'oqr Mher. In some cases they emphasize Mher's alienation, the fact that he does not find his place in modern times, sometimes the expectation of a better future, associated with the conclusion of the epic poem, as in the novels by L. Khech'oyan and H. Vardumyan. The novelists believe that the epic summarizes timeless wisdom and the national ideology. They try to find answers to the many social and political issues connected with present reality or try to reinvent the important occasions of Armenian history.

For example, A. Martirosyan's novel *Hair Bridge* tells the story of the rise and fall of the medieval capital of Armenia, Ani. The author, in order to restore the atmosphere of medieval town life, uses many characteristic motives of medieval Armenian literature and the epic *Daredevils of Sassoun*.

The first volume of this novel was published in 1986 in the Soviet period and the other two volumes in the period of independence. The change of times and society have left their mark on the novel. In particular, the second volume begins with attempts to revive the ruined Ani, which symbolizes Queen Katramide. Katramide (also spelled Katranide, 990-1020) is the historic Queen of Bagratid

Armenia (884-1045). She was the wife of King Gagik I Bagrtuni. She continued and completed the construction of the Cathedral of Ani.

In the novel, 150 years after her death, she comes back to life and returns to the city. People greet her as a long-awaited Virgin Mary or a saint who has come to save them. The motive of the second coming of a Queen, who symbolizes the city's former glory, and the motive of burial in the ground, is reminiscent of the epic hero P'oqr Mher. This hero is trapped in a cave, and dead and alive at the same time. Armenians connect their better life with Mher's return. Queen Katramide reminds people of good times in Ani and they rise up against Seljuk-Turkish despotism. This function also has a few other heroes, Sanasar, Jurj etc. In their deeds and descriptions, they are identical to Sassoun epic heroes (Martirosyan 2002).

The theme of the people's revolt, the struggle against injustice, is also present in Hovik Vardumyan's novel *P'oqr Mher's Return* (2014). The novel's plot is based on the story of the life of a man, who returned from the Kharabagh war and feels lost in a new reality: unemployment, corruption, poor living conditions of forgotten heroes of war. The author emphasizes the motive of the second coming of a saviour, which will be marked with the revival of the country and the survival of the nation (Vardumyan 2014).

In another novel by Gurgen Khanjyan, *Get on Train A* (2002), the author ridicules epic heroes and especially the motive of return of P'oqr Mher. So, the novel's hero sits for a day in a train to go to the beach but does not reach his destination. The train, which symbolizes the independent country, goes on in indefinite directions. Insecure present and uncertain future create a situation, when heroes do not believe in anything:

Հետո եկավ ֆաջի որդին, որ հորից
ու պապերից պակասը չէր ու ինքն էլ
հաստատ ինչ որ մեկին նույնիսկ մի
ֆանիսին երկու կես կաներ, բայց արի ու
տես, որ նրա ոտները խրվում էին հողի
մեջ, գետինը զզվել՝ չէր պահում նրան,
որովհետև նա հակված էր աշխարհի
արդարն ու անարդարը դատելու,
խորհրդածելու, և, ի վերջո, եկավ այն
հաստատուն կարծիքին, որ աշխարհն
այս սխալ է շինված. այսպես մտածեց,
բուրբ խփեց լճափի ժայռին, կնոջ
ծնատեղի պես մի նեղ քայտեց, մտով
էնտեղ, հայտարարելով, որ ինքը դորձյալ
աշխարհի դուրս կգա, երբ աշխարհը
վախվի, լավը դառնա, ապա մի ֆանի
ագրարային պայմաններ էլ դրեց ու պինդ
փակվեց: (Khanjyan 2002, 166)

Then came the son of the brave hero,
who did not concede of his father and
grandfathers, and he definitely can
break into two halves of someone or a
few man, but it turns out that his feet
stuck into the soil, the ground is tired
of him, did not keep him because he
tended to judge the just and the unjust
of the world, to think, eventually came
to the firm belief, that this world is built
wrong: so he thought, his sword struck
to the lake's rock, opened a crack, like a
woman's reproductive organ, he entered
there. Also announced that he will come
out into the world again, when the world
will change, will become better, then laid
several agrarian conditions, and tightly
closed in a cave.

But the most extensive and systematic references to the Armenian epic can be found in Levon Khech'oyan's prose. Four novels and numerous short stories by the author, directly or indirectly mentioned the epic motives and characters, especially P'ogr Mher. So, in his autobiographical novel *Incense Trees*, published in 1991, the author narrates a semi-mythical history of his family. Here, as in the first part of the epic *Daredevils of Sassoun*, the dynasty is founded by one woman, grandmother Shushan. There are other epic motives too. In this novel, though we do not find P'ogr Mher, the traces of Mher's plot can be seen in doomed and tragic heroes.

In another novel, *King Arshak and Eunuch Drastamat*, such heroes are King Arshak and partly Merouzhan Artsrouni (Khech'oyan 1995). In *Black Book, Heavy Bug* there is the hero Onan (Khech'oyan 1999). These novels mainly realize Mher's motive of weakening the soil, after which he was shut up in a cave.

4. *The new reality and old hero*

As we have seen these novels do not mention the heroes and creators in Armenian epic folklore, such as Sanassar, Mets Mher, or Davit', but rather contradictory characters like P'ogr Mher, who rebelled against his father, was defeated, but did not die, and for this reason, is sometimes perceived as a character, who have the mission of a saviour.

Why do they prefer P'ogr Mher to other heroes? These are difficult questions to answer, however, analysis of literary reality and social-political conditions enable us to find answers.

On the one hand, reflection on the epic and myths is conditioned by the influence of the literature of "magic realism", and is manifested in the form of a narrative and in methods of literary representation. On the other hand, harsh and unstable times compel writers to disclose truths and national roots purified by traditions and centuries. On the basis of generalities of the independence period, the contradictory heroes of eschatological myths return in novels. The well known Armenian writer and Head of the Armenian Writers Union in the 1990s Hrant Mat'evosyan, in wrote (in 1993):

Էսօր մեր իրականությունը Փոփր
Մեքի անիրական իրականությունն է:
Խուսափուկ, անորոշ թեմամի և իրական
պարտություն: Ո՞վ է կարողանալու
մարմնավորել էս բոլորը: Մեր մտքից,
մեր տեսադաշտից խուսափող թեմամուն,
մեր մտքի եզրերին երբեմն առնչվող, բայց
երբեք մեր մտքից կլանվող այս վիճակն ո՞վ
է մարմնավորելու:

Today our reality is the unreal reality of
P'ogr Mher. An elusive, vague enemy
and a real defeat! Who will be able to
embody it all? Who will embody the
enemy eluding from our mind, from our
sight? Who will represent this situation,
which sometimes contacts with the edges
of our mind, but never is perceived by
our mind?

Դավիթն է ընդգծվել, Դավիթն էր
անհրաժեշտ ազգային զարթոնքի մեր
իրականությանը. իրական Դավիթ, իրական
թեմանի, իրական հաղթանակ: Դրանով
գրականության բուն էությունից հեռացավ
հայ գեղարվեստ-փիլիսոփայական
միտքը, չնայած, ակնհայտորեն Միերի
վիճակն էր կրկնվում՝ և՛ առանձին,
նույնիսկ խոռոք, անհատականությունների,
և՛ կուսակցությունների ու ողջ հայ
իրականության նակատագրերում:
(Mat'evosyan 2005, 501)

David was the highlight; Davit' was
needed for our reality of national
revival: real Davit', the real enemy,
the real victory. On this account,
the Armenian artistic-philosophical
thinking was estranged from the
very essence of the literature, althou-
gh, obviously Mher's situation was
repeated in the fate of big figures, as
well as in the fate of parties and of
the whole Armenian reality.

Describing the reality of independence and defining who could be the hero of that time, H. Mat'evosyan, willingly or unwillingly is directing our authors, advising them to re-read the Armenian epic and to find the new reality there (the reality of an elusive, vague enemy) to understand the respective hero (P'oqr Mher), we are invited to find a deeper meaning of this portrayal – the key being artistic-philosophical thinking.

The tragic, controversial Mher fought with his father, was cursed and deprived of social status and was exiled from Sassoun. This lonely and condemned hero is reminiscent of a man who is looking for his mission and national identity in this big world in general, and in particular, we can see an Armenian, who is living in an independent country but is still unable to rid himself of the mentality characteristic of a totalitarian regime. If characters preceding Mher have an external, tangible enemy, then Mher's enemy is within the country or inside Mher himself. In order to understand the world, first, he should understand himself. Accordingly, he may become the hero of a new and great literature, and not the soldier that won the Karabakh war; not the writer, who became a member of Parliament, as Hrant Mat'evosyan and many others, and not the scientist who became president, as in the case of the first president of Armenia.

5. *Waiting for a saviour*

As we have seen, Mher is not only a symbol of condemnation but also of national revival. He is related to new and better changes, to the triumph of justice. As early as in the 19th century, the famous romantic novelist Raffi, in his novel *Kaytser* (Sparks) wrote about this perception of Mher.

Մի օր նա կխորտակե իր շղթաները
 և, իր ձիու վրա նստած, դուրս կալանա
 ֆարայրից, վրեժխնդիր կլինի իր
 քեհանդներին, և կմաքրե հայոց աշխարհը
 չարությունից [...] Մի օր նա դուրս
 կգա իր արգելանից և կրկին լույս ու
 արդարություն կսխառնե հայոց աշխարհում.
 (Raffi II 1904, 101)

One day, he will break his chains and will
 come out of the cave, riding his horse, take
 vengeance on his enemies and eradicate evil
 from the Armenian land [...] One day he
 will leave his cloister and will shed light and
 justice in the Armenian land again.

Որ աշխարհ ավերվի, մեկ էլ շինվի,
 Եբոր ցորեն էղավ ֆանց մատուր մի,
 Ու գարին էղավ ֆանց ընկուզ մի...
 (Sasunts'i Davit' 1939, 369)

When the wicked world is destroyed and rebuilt,
 When the wheat grows to the size of a rose-pod,
 When the barley grows to the size of a walnut.
 (Transl. by Shalian 1964, 370-371)

In contemporary novels, this reading of Mher's character is related to the moods of waiting for the Saviour and is accompanied by the desires of bringing Mher or similar characters, out of the cave in different ways. In this case, he becomes the long-awaited Messiah, a prophet, a righteous king, who should come out of the cave, or rise up from times of historical-mythical glory and lead the people. We can find these ideas in H. Vardumyan's and A. Martirosyan's novels and partly in L. Khech'oyan's novel *The Book of Mher's Door*. We can also find the parody of this idea in G. Khanjyan's novel *Get on Train A*.

However, apart from the above-mentioned, in my view, there is another reason for reflecting on Mher: P'oqr Mher is the only incomplete and unfinished character of our epic, thus giving a possibility for new readings. He can be modernized, but not the other heroes – Sanasar, Mets Mher or Davit', because they are part of the finished epic world and the sacred tradition.

But in this case, we have another problem: if it is possible to make separate citations from or references to the epic, then it is impossible to write a complete novel based on the epic.

6. *From epic to novel*

The Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin in his famous work *The Epic and the Novel*, wrote:

[...] предание отгораживает мир
 эпопеи от личного опыта, от
 всяких новых узнаваний, от всякой
 личной инициативы в его
 понимании и истолковании,
 от новых точек зрения и оценок.

[...] tradition isolates the world of the
 epic from personal experience, from
 any new insights, from any personal
 initiative in understanding and inter-
 preting, from new points of view and
 evaluations.

Эпический мир завершен сплошь и до конца не только как реальное событие отдаленного прошлого, но и в своем смысле и своей ценности: его нельзя ни изменить, ни переосмыслить, ни переоценить. Он готов, завершен и неизменен и как реальный факт, и как смысл, и как ценность. (Bachtin 1975, 460)

The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past, but also on its own terms and by its own standards; it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value. (Trans. by Emerson, Holquist 1981, 17)

Опыт, познание и практика (будущее) определяют роман. В эпоху эллинизма возникает контакт с героями троянского эпического цикла; эпос превращается в роман. (Ivi, 459)

The novel, by contrast, is determined by experience, knowledge and practice (the future). In the era of Hellenism a closer contact with the heroes of the Trojan epic cycle began to be felt; epic is already being transformed into novel. (Ivi, 15)

For this reason, it is possible to bring Mher to our times, but it is impossible to import modern ideas into the epic world, at best it can become a parody novel. We can come across these issues in the last novel by L. Khech'oyan.

In the novel *The Book of Mher's Door*, through contemporary and epic parallel narratives, the author tries to answer simultaneously a few questions: Who is Mher? What is Agravakar? Why and how did it influence the Armenian national path and identity?

These questions get numerous and various responses and eventually remain unanswered.

The novel's hero, a man, living in the 21st century, tries to explore the national epic. He lectures at university because he cannot write a novel, about the epic *Daredevils of Sassoun*.

Դասախոսություններով հանդես գալու մյուս պատճառներից մեկն էլ ազգային վեպի հիմքի վրա գեղարվեստական գիրք գրել չկարողանալս էր, սեփական շնորհիս նկատմամբ հուսահատությունը և բանի գնացող, սցիլալ-կենցաղային հոգսերի սաստկանալը, որն այլ հնարավորություն չէր թողել, բուն այդ եղանակով սպրելու միջոց գտնելը. (Khech'oyan 2014, 12)

One other reason for lectures, is the inability to write a novel based on the national epic, the despair with own grace. And social concerns, which more and more increased, left no other possibility than finding a way to live that way.

The hero is trying to prove that the epic is not a fairy tale, but “the sacred book of a constitution, belief, which gave our fathers-ancestors” (“Խաչր նախնիներից մեզ հասած սահմանադրության, հավատամքի սրբագան գիրք”, ivi, 10). It should be read and reveal the hidden messages and find the way to correct the situation in a new social-political reality.

The epic heroes are depicted in new situations. The political, economic and social conditions of Sassoun are portrayed in new, unusual details, which are not relevant for the medieval epic world. The motive of Mher's cave closure and condemnation, the author tries to explain with common human, psychological features and with a specific historical and social situation. The hero who lives in the 21st century, consciously or subconsciously, relives the epic hero's suffering and dreams and feels his presence and guidance. In modern Armenian reality, the hero repeats Mher's behaviour. Mher and the novel's character are reversed:

Մերի, բենգինի մի շուղ հայտնվել էի Ագռավախարի դիմաց: Գիտեի՝ միայն նրա հետ հանդիպելով, միայն այդպես էր հնարավոր ազատագրվել տարիներ շարունակ կյուծող ու մաշող ստրկությունից. երկուսիցս մեկը՝ կամ ինքը, կամ ես պիտի կործանվեինք: Եթե չցանկանար երևալ, որոշել էի կռվել. հրդեհ էի գցելու Ագռավախարի ներսը, հրկիզելու էի նրան, ինչ գնով էլ լիներ դուրս էի հանելու, որևէ հնարով հանդիպելու էի: (Ivi, 372)

Naked, with a bottle of gasoline, I appeared in front of Agravakar. I knew that I should only meet him, it was only possible deliverance from many years of backbreaking and exhausting slavery. One of the two: either he or I must perish. If he does not appear, I decided to fight. I set a fire inside the Agravakar, I set fire to him, whatever it might cost, I get him out, I must meet with him in some way.

The tense political situation of Sassoun is parallel to a similar political reality in Armenia. In both cases the requirements are social and political, in both cases the government responds that this is what there is and there is no choice. And this uncertain situation makes people desperate. The immortal Mher's myth inspires young people and they rebel. The Sassoun government, in order to suppress the rebels, spread the rumours that Mher is dead. That is, they want to deprive people of their last hope for a better future:

Նրանք ժողովրդին վերջնականապես հուսահատեցնելու համար ոչ միայն Մերի անմահության գաղափարն էին ժխտում՝ հորինված, Ոստանակապանի գերության ստորագուցիչ պատմությունը տարածելով իշխանի կողմից երեկեր որսալու ցանցով բռնվելու և ֆարհանֆերում բանելու մասին, այլ և վարձու բանասացների քատերախաղի միջոցով էլ մեկ ուրիշ, այլ սոսկալի պատմություն էլ էին ներկայացնում: Մերին սպանած և մահվան դատապարտված հինգ գյուղերի հինգ գյուղացիներին դատավարությունն էին խաղում: (Ivi, 24)

They, for final disillusion the people, not only denied the idea of Mher's immortality, telling the story of Mher's humiliating captivity in Vostanakapan, had spread the legend, that the prince is caught the Mher by animals net, and employed him in quarries. Also, through the folk narrator's play they represented another terrific story. They present the play of the trial of the five villagers from the five villages, who killed Mher.

But, the expansion of the epic plot and author developments inevitably import new, modern ideas, which are not peculiar to the Middle Ages. The ideological integrity of the epic world is violated. To save the situation, L. Khech'oyan creates the character of an epic researcher. He simultaneously presents epic scientific theories and writes a novel about Mher. The character confesses to the inability to finish the novel, however, his lectures are successful, because it is possible to analyse the epic scientifically, but impossible to turn it into a novel.

7. Old treasures and new leader

In contrast to previous references to Mher's character, the author brings to the foreground Agrravak'ar – the place, where Mher was shut up. He doesn't try to bring Mher out of the cave, but he himself goes to the cave, in order to get acquainted with spiritual treasures and national wisdom stored there together with Mher. Eventually, he comes to the conclusion that Mher should stay in the cave so as to preserve the Armenian gene till the arrival of better times.

Ագրավակ'արը ոչ գնդան, ոչ էլ ֆարե
 դամբարան կոչելն է հիւս, ինչպէս
 ազգագրագետներից ու բանասերներից ոմոնք
 են անում: Կարծում են՝ բնության արգանդի
 է նման՝ նյութական անգոյություն ծնող:
 Կարելի է ժողովրդի ողնաւար, գլխուսում,
 հոգևոր բանականություն էլ անվանել կամ
 էլ հավերժական արժեքների, նպատակների
 և երգանքների խորհրդաբանություն, որտեղ
 ազգը միլիոնավոր տարիների ընթացքում մեղվի
 նման աշխատելով, հոգևոր հարստություն էր
 կուտակել: (Ivi, 95-96)

It is not right to call Agrravak'ar a
 dungeon or a stone mausoleum, as
 some ethnographers and philologists
 do. I think it is like the womb of
 nature, which gives birth to materi-
 al non-existence. It may also be
 called the vertebra, chromosome or
 spiritual rationality of a nation or the
 symbolism of eternal values, goals
 and dreams, in which the nation has
 accumulated spiritual wealth working
 like a bee during millions of years.

Accordingly, in a sense, Khech'oyan's novel marks a new ideological twist. The writer does not link the salvation of the nation to Mher's exit any more, but emphasizes the importance of the cultural and spiritual heritage of our country stored at Agrravak'ar for the next generations till the arrival of better times. May this be viewed as a writer's and nation's expression of disappointment from different kinds of leaders, kings and heroes? We can think of it.

In 2002, L. Khech'oyan wrote, “Throughout my conscious life, I have been waiting for the hero with a red mark on his forehead, who would bring a nationwide project” (“Ամբողջ իմ գիտակցական կյանքի ընթացքում սպասել եմ կարմրածուխի նշանը ֆակտաիկ կանչվածին, որ համազգային ծրագիր կբերեր” (2002, 116-117). In fact, the writer is unable to fulfill this idea in the novel, perhaps, now times have changed.

In my opinion, it is the expression of a defeat of an intellectual, the final rejection of activity, of any activity in general, in favour of awaiting better times.

Conclusions

Khech'oyan's novel, and also the other references to Armenian epic and myths, show that the contemporary Armenian novel, in general the public consciousness, constantly reproduces old ideas, historical and mythical characters. This is an attempt to interpret the present and in some way be ready for the challenges of the future. It seems that the present is not so interesting for the contemporary novelist, or they cannot understand and submit it.

Of course, the present is directly or indirectly in the novels, but is presented through the past. Perhaps there is a need to finally overcome the past heroic myth and bring new ideas and concepts. It seems that the new generation of novelists is on this road.

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