

Armenian-American Women Inhabiting
Out Bodies: Engendered and Embodied
Ethnicity in Carol Edgarian's
Rise the Euphrates

Janice Okoomian*

We live in the age of what is called "multiculturalism" in the United States. To be white and ethnic, sometimes even to be a person of color, is fashionable. This is true not only in the culture at large, but also in the academic fields of American literary and cultural studies, where the intersection between race/ethnicity and the female body is a popular subject for research. Most scholars who write about this topic, however, have focussed on what it means to be a woman of color in the United States. It is only recently that research is beginning to pay attention to white women's bodies.

Armenian Americans are one of many white ethnic groups in the United States, but we are too small in number to command much public attention or political power; thus we are not a fashionable object of academic scrutiny. Nonetheless, I believe we can make an important contribution to feminist and American studies by looking at the power dynamics (both gendered and racial) that intersect in the Armenian-American female body.

*Janice Okoomian is a doctoral candidate in American Civilization at Brown University.

The subject of my paper is Carol Edgarian's recent novel, *Rise the Euphrates*, which I believe can tell us much about the current condition of Armenian-American women. Before I begin to talk about the novel, let me give a brief explanation of the ways that literature can help us understand culture. In an earlier era of literary studies, it was popular to think of literature as a reflection of, or a response to, reality. However, in keeping with literary and cultural theory of the past twenty years, I favor a more complex model, in which the text and the culture in which it is written are part of a larger system of knowledge called a "discourse." I am using a Michel Foucault's widely known definition of discourse here: a set of rules, conventions, and practices which both enable and set limits upon knowledge and which permeate a wide array of cultural institutions.¹ For instance, when we talk about the female body we might talk about such topics as the differences between femaleness and maleness, the relationship between the body and the mind, or the similarities and differences between the human body and machines. The conventions of the discourse guide us toward these topics and away from others. In other words, the discourse makes some things visible and others things invisible. The most basic premise underlying this interpretive strategy is that all forms of identity are culturally constructed, rather than innate, and that they are always being produced and reproduced by cultural institutions, art forms, relations of power, and language.

What does this mean for our reading of *Rise the Euphrates*? Because the novel is part of the United States discourse on the female body, our interpretation will consider not only how the female body is represented in the text, but also how the

¹This definition is only a partial one, but sufficient for the purposes of this paper. For a more complete definition of discourses and their properties, see Foucault's *The Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

text is actually producing or defining the category of the female body. We will pay especially close attention to those things which the text makes invisible.

The novel begins by narrating the genocide survival story of the protagonist's grandmother, who is called Casard. After witnessing the torture and execution of many members for their village at the hands of the Turkish soldiers, she and her mother are force-marched to the Euphrates River, where all the remaining villagers are expected to drown themselves. But Casard lets go of her mother's hand at the last moment; she survives the genocide, but from that time on cannot remember her true name. Taking this as a sign that she has betrayed her mother, Casard looks to her descendants to heal the past. Her daughter Araxie, poisoned by the legacy of guilt and death, tries to escape that legacy first by marrying an odor, George Loon, and later by having an affair. So it falls to Casard's granddaughter, Seta Loon, to recover Casard's true name. The novel explores how each of the three generations confronts the dilemmas of Armenian-American ethnicity and femininity: they must come to terms with the genocide, legitimate their voices, and learn how to be female in an American context. In each case the struggle enacts itself through things that happen on and to the bodies of these characters.

Because literature represents the world non-visually, we must rely upon language to understand how the bodies are gendered and racialized/ethnicized in *Rise the Euphrates*. Attention to language about the female body in this novel reveals an abundance of oral references—lips, mouths, eating, feeding, are all prominently figured. We also see descriptions of physical pain, focusing on bellies, veins, and, again, on mouths. These images have everything to do with

the problems of Armenian-American female identity.² Let us consider three sample passages from the novel in which lip or mouth imagery is employed. In these excerpts, the three central female characters are linked in a nexus of trauma, voice, and fashion.

In the first passage, Casard and Araxie are so closely identified with each other that they seem almost to be one individual:

And their breath. It smelled the same, a combination of lamb, pekoe tea, mint, and bananas. It mattered not the men they were with, or the children, or how high in the community they might scale. They had the same breath. As a young girl Araxie watched Casard apply her makeup and experienced the odd sensation of her mother's methods and intentions, and yes, the ghosts of the Euphrates, too, planting themselves like a pair of lips on Araxie's white bones. In such moments, it was possible for mother and daughter to find communion and ease, with themselves and each other. (55)

The use of breath as a figure in this passage is symptomatic of the novel's central if implicit assumption that the bond between mothers and daughters is innate. They have the same breath because of the genetic bond between them, and because they engage in similar physical behavior, namely, they eat the same foods. Their physical bond is a precondition for the metaphorical link between their voices; actions of the conscious mind, such as their arguments over the choices Araxie makes, may disrupt but cannot obliterate the physical bond. This scene also reveals why Araxie's life is so tormented. Casard applies makeup, and through this act

²Orality is perhaps the central problematic of Armenian-American femininity, as it is represented in the text.

inscribes the legacy of genocide upon her daughter.

Casard tries repeatedly, through arguments as well as through ritualistic acts such as the lipstick scene we just looked at, to make Araxie obey her. Araxie doesn't obey her mother, but is deeply affected and develops an identity crisis. In the second excerpt, Seta as narrator tells us that Araxie's

troubled soul only heightened her outward beauty: her black swath of hair, her deep pooled eyes, the lethargic ease with which Momma made even the smallest gesture seem infinite. Countless mornings I stood beside her to watch the wand of her lipstick slowly, painfully describing the O of her mouth. (4)

As we now see Araxie applying makeup herself, it is clear that each time she traces the outline of her mouth with the lipstick, she is freshly defined as Casard's daughter and as the one whose inheritance is a past full of death and torture.

A third scene completes what I call the lipstick trilogy in the novel. In this one, it is Seta's turn to apply lipstick to her mouth, sitting alone at her mother's vanity:

I unrolled a lipstick and applied it; in recent years, Momma had begun to favor pink shades of lipstick, with names like Cordelia and Gypsy Rose. I glanced into the mirror. This is what she sees. This. (272)

Again we see the mother-daughter bond (wearing Araxie's lipstick, Seta is able to see her mother in the mirror); Araxie's recent taste for pink lipstick suggests she is trying to look younger, perhaps to return to a time in her life before the conflict with her mother overwhelmed her. The romantic, slightly risqué names of the lipstick colors (Cordelia, Gypsy Rose) suggest that Araxie is trying on different ways of being feminine and sexual. Significantly, it is immediately after putting on the lipstick that Seta discovers evidence of her

mother's affair. The impact of the genocide persists, we are thus to understand, into the second and third generations. Because the characters are so closely identified with one another, it seems not at all strange that the genocide affects them all. By the end of the novel, Seta heals the wounds of the past through discovering her grandmother's true name, making peace with her own mother, and getting pregnant, thus ensuring the survival of the family into the next generation.

In part, the progression of lipstick through the generations follows the assimilation formula of most white ethnic American literature: the first generation, the immigrants, cannot fully adapt to the new world ways and desire at all costs to transmit the culture of their country of origin to their offspring; the second generation, caught between old world ways and new world ones, rejects the former; it is the already assimilated third generation that goes back and reclaims the ethnic identity. William Boelhower, a prominent scholar of ethnic literature, argues that immigrant novels look nostalgically at a golden past in the mother country, bemoaning the loss of authenticity in the present.³ Here Edgarian departs from the formula followed by most white ethnic literature, as she must in order to account for the hellishness of the Armenian past that precipitated Armenian immigration to the United States. Edgarian rightly shows that the impact of the genocide upon our lives makes assimilation difficult for Armenians, but assimilation is clearly an imperative imposed by American culture on its white immigrants.

In the novel, I believe assimilation tension underlies the lipstick scenes, as well as the numerous references to other modes of orality—people eating food, sucking lemons, kissing,

³William Boelhower, "Ethnic Trilogies," in Werner Sollers, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1986). Sollers and others in the Ethnic literary school make similar arguments.

playing the duduk. What should we make of the orality of Armenian-American culture as depicted in the text? The novel seems to lend itself to Freudian interpretation, which would go something like this: cut off in the most horrific imaginable ways from the nurturing of our mothers, Armenians never progressed beyond the oral stage of infant sexuality. The novel's main project would then be to move Seta beyond that oral stage and into adult (phallic, heterosexual) sexuality. And in fact this is exactly what happens in Part II of the novel, which is called, appropriately, "Kiss Me," and is devoted to Seta's adolescence.

But there are two problems with using Freudian theory to interpret the novel. In the first place, there's a Eurocentrism to the Freudian perspective. Like members of other colonized groups, Armenians are infantilized and assumed to be somehow less developed than supposedly more advanced Westerners. We are lulled into forgetting that most Western cultures are the colonizers, rather than the colonized, and they have the luxury not to have to contend with massive psychological wounds such as those inflicted on the Armenians by their colonizers.

The second problem with the Freudian reading of *Rise the Euphrates* is that it makes certain troubling assumptions about femininity and sexuality. I said at the beginning of this paper that novels, as elements of a discourse, make some things visible and other things invisible. I am critical of Edgarian's reliance upon genetic and mystical ties to explain what Casard, Araxie, and Seta all have in common, because I believe in doing so obscures the cultural, social, and historical forces that shape these characters. So let us now uncover what the novel makes invisible about Armenian-American women's femininity and sexuality.

In order to negotiate this central problem of how to integrate Armenian and American cultures, Edgarian's female characters must undergo an acrobatic set of bodily

contortions. I have used the lipstick scenes here because I think that the beautification process transacted through the lipstick rituals is not at all value neutral. How is it, for instance, that Casard, who resists intermarriage, processed foods, and drip-dry fabrics because they are too American, uses lipstick, which is certainly not an Armenian fashion? And what does it mean that it seems so normal for her to do so, that we can read about it without, so to speak, batting an eyelash? Resistant as she is to some elements of American culture, I argue that she has readily embraced American notions of femininity, and that the novel's attempt to portray her as unassimilated masks the ways in which she does conform.

Araxie's struggle to negotiate Armenian traditions and American culture has even more dire consequences for her body. The varicose veins she inherits from her mother, for example, gesture to the Euphrates swollen with genocide victims. And in Seta's narration about watching her mother apply lipstick, Araxie appears to suffer physically through conforming to the disciplines of Western fashion. But the exoticization of her beauty in that passage shows that she has already been positioned according to American ideals of feminine beauty, in which what makes her beautiful is her difference from European norms and the suggestion of suffering that marks her as a descendent of a tragically doomed, eastern culture. The term "Orientalism," coined by Edward Said, can help us evaluate Araxie's status vis-a-vis American culture. Said tells us that Orientalism is a Foucaultian discourse, "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient,"⁴ and he points out that Orientalism "view[s] itself and its subject matter

⁴Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 3.

with sexist blinders . . . women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing."⁵ All American readers, whether we be female or male, descended from Eastern or Western cultures, are accustomed to orientalizing the bodies of Eastern women. Edgarian plays to this bias by stressing Araxie's exotic beauty and promiscuity.

The text's project to incorporate Armenian women into American norms of femininity and sexuality culminates in Seta's attitudes and behavior. Seta is repulsed when she glimpses Casard's legs: "blue like a river, purple as a bruise, veins crisscrossed her white, white skin, soft as a baby's."⁶ I have already suggested that the veins signify the Euphrates, and indeed part of Seta's revulsion is horror at viewing a sign of the tortures inflicted by the Turks on the Armenians, but we must not forget that this scene of revulsion is enacted over the female body. It was, after all, women who were driven to the Euphrates, it is women who get varicose veins in childbirth; the rivers of fluid within their bodies threaten to rise (as the book's title tells us). In short, the Armenian woman's body represents femininity gone amok, and it must be contained by the disciplines of Western fashion. Only then can it be safely displayed and exoticized.

Araxie understands that the game of Westernizing the Armenian woman's body has high stakes. In one last lipstick

⁵Ibid., p. 207.

⁶P. 143. This passage invites a closer scrutiny of the way racial categories are being produced through the Armenian-American women's bodies, and indeed that is an important element of my reading of the novel. We need to address not only the fact that the Armenians are white in the United States, but that their mode of whiteness differs from what we usually think of as white. Sadly the limitations of scope prevent me from addressing this question more fully here.

scene, she seeks out an orphan girl, perhaps a stand-in for her orphaned mother, and searching her purse for a gift, pulls out keys, lipstick, a comb, and a roll of candy. All of these are offered, and the child, wishing "to make the correct choice," picks the lipstick. For Seta, this knowledge comes more dramatically when her friend, Theresa Vartyan, is abducted by a milkman, who rapes her, beats her, and then leaves her for dead. Armenian orality, we are to infer, makes us vulnerable. Theresa expresses her Armenian difference through promiscuity and flamboyant clothing, and although the novel sympathizes with her freedom of spirit, her story is a cautionary tale from which Seta must learn.

To conclude, let me suggest that what Seta has at stake, we all have at stake. I believe that *Rise the Euphrates* accepts the terms offered by American culture to Armenian-American women. The novel conveys the message that, although we might have some difficulty inhabiting our bodies in the way American culture wants us to, it is a good goal to strive for. Thus, the novel implies that we accept conventional femininity (heterosexuality, makeup rituals, and so forth) as normative. But to do so we must repress, erase, or at the very least tame those aspects of our femaleness which mark us as different.