



## SAROYAN'S "THE BLACK TARTARS": FRAME NARRATIVE, NATIONALISM AND ETHNIC CLEANSING

MAURICIO D. AGUILERA LINDE 

*Universidad de Granada*

aguilera@ugr.es

*ABSTRACT.* This article offers an examination of William Saroyan's stance on nationalism through the analysis of "The Black Tartars" (1936), a story built on the technique of embedding which shows, through the layering of stories, two distinct models: one based upon primordialist notions of race; the other resting on the principle of ethnolinguistic homogeneity and resulting in the birth of the modern nation-state. By examining the dialogicity implicit in the frame narrative, I propose to examine Karachi's tale as an example of "parodic skaz" which stands at odd with the author's ideology and operates as a concave mirror reflection of the tragic fate hovering over stateless minorities.

*Keywords:* William Saroyan, nationalism, frame narrative, parodic skaz, ethnic cleansing, American short fiction.

---

## “THE BLACK TARTARS” DE SAROYAN: RELATO-MARCO, NACIONALISMO Y LIMPIEZA ÉTNICA

*RESUMEN.* Este artículo propone examinar la posición de William Saroyan sobre el nacionalismo a través del análisis detallado de “The Black Tartars” (1936), un cuento construido sobre el principio de la narración enmarcada que muestra, mediante la inclusión de un relato dentro de la narración principal, dos modelos de nación diferentes: uno tradicional, basado en nociones primordialistas de raza; el otro, anclado en el principio de homogeneidad etnolingüística que desembocará en el nacimiento del estado-nación en la era moderna. Mediante el estudio del carácter dialógico propio del relato-marco, propongo una lectura del cuento de Karachi como un ejemplo de “skaz” paródico, en clara disonancia con la ideología del autor, que funciona como un espejo cóncavo que refleja el destino trágico que se cierne sobre las minorías sin estado propio.

*Palabras clave:* William Saroyan, nacionalismo, relato-marco, skaz paródico, limpieza étnica, ficción breve estadounidense.

*Received 18 December 2022*

*Revised version accepted 7 November 2023*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1935, at the outset of a promising literary career, 27 year-old William Saroyan undertook a long journey to the Old World with an idea of visiting, for the first time, Armenia, at the time under the yoke of the Soviet oppression. From Lvov in Poland (present-day Lviv in Ukraine) he continued on a train from Kyiv to Kharkov until he eventually arrived in Moscow sometime in mid June. Finding accommodation at the Bucharest Hotel and under the nagging surveillance of an Intourist guide,<sup>1</sup> he faced one of the most prolific moments of his writing activity, producing a story a day throughout the travel period (Saroyan 1972b: 129-131). Except for “Moscow in Tears”, a story that got lost because he handed it to the hotel manager in the belief that he would mail it for him, Saroyan wrote a batch of eleven pieces from May to August 1935 which were to be included in the final section of his second volume, *Inbale and Exhale* (1936), and which depicted a bleak image of the Communist bloc under the Stalinist terror. In the subsequent British e-dition by Faber & Faber, some of the original stories were inevitably dropped, for the book exceeded the average length for commercial purposes. Yet, to Saroyan’s pleasant surprise, one particular story was kept. In a letter dated 16 April 1936, Saroyan expressed his utmost gratitude to the director of the publishing house, T. S. Eliot: “I am glad you enjoyed the one about the Black Tartars; I enjoyed writing it, and I still enjoy reading it” (*The William Saroyan Papers*, n.p.).

---

<sup>1</sup> The name given to the official Soviet Union tourist agency with headquarters in Moscow and founded on 12 April 1929. The Bucharest Hotel is now the Baltschug Kempinski Hotel.

In the following pages I intend to analyze "The Black Tartars" in relation to nationalism and the consolidation of the nation-states after the carve-up of the European (Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman) empires in the newly redrawn map of Europe after the 1918 Versailles Conference. Rather than re-inscribing what Bhabha calls "the horizontal, homogeneous, empty time of the nation's narration", Saroyan's story can be seen as "a disjunctive narrative" (1994: 231-232), for it brings to the fore "a zone of occult instability" (Fanon 1963: 227), which visualizes "the violence involved in establishing the nation's writ" (1994: 229-230) and unseals, albeit temporarily, the silence of the stateless (wandering) minorities. In order to accomplish my goal, I will first clarify Saroyan's position in relation to nationalism, a debatable topic used by interested groups in directions that have proven to be politically antagonistic. Secondly, since the story addresses the fate of a particular ethnic group in a very precise spatio-temporal context – Baku, Azerbaijan, 1930s – I will first provide a brief glimpse of the historical backdrop against which it must be read. To complicate things further, "The Black Tartars" uses a frame narrative structure with a principal or diegetic narrative and an embedded or metadiegetic narrative which is of paramount importance for the comprehension of its conflicting ideological overtones. Finally, my contention is that the analysis of the oral speech that informs the nested narrative – the story of how Mago decided to kidnap and kill his bride – shows that it is as an instance of a character-bound skaz, a second voice whose message creates a dialogical tension with the framing story, revealing much more than what it overtly aims to do. The nexus that links both narratives is related to what Achille Mbembe, in tune with Foucault's concept of biopower, defines as necropolitics, "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (2003: 11), an idea the genesis of which is to be found in the need to divide humans into species and the consolidation of racism.

## 2. NATIONALISM AND SAROYAN

On 29 May 1982, during the burial of the writer's ashes held at Komitas Pantheon, the resting place for the country's heroes, Saroyan was hailed by Karen Demirchyan, secretary of the Communist party, along with a group of high-ranking officials, as a fervent defender of the Soviet rule in Armenian. Almost three decades later, in 2008, in the very heart of Yerevan a monument to Saroyan was erected as part of the celebration of the centennial jubilee of his birth. The bronze, consumptive-looking statue, created by Armenian-French artist David Yerevantsi, was one of the initiatives to pay tribute to the presence of the Armenian diaspora in the making of the nation. Long gone were the days when Stalin's overpowering statue, one of the largest of the dictator in the world, was taken down from its plinth. Now the national memory of the motherland was to be found in the image of artists and intellectuals. Saroyan emerged as one of the indisputable symbols of the New Armenia, the resilient, battered nation that was able to stand up, despite the tragic events of history as long as two Armenians happened to get together.

“The Armenian and the Armenian”, the celebrated story which closes *Inbale and Exbale*, has been frequently quoted (and misquoted) so as to nourish the idea of a phoenix-like country perpetually being resurrected from its own ashes. Marc A. Mamigonian (2017) has shown that the passage used and abused as the motto of the nation’s indestructibility in myriad posters, badges, sweaters and whatnots (“Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia”) was never written by the author. “The famous version does not merely sanitize the original passage for family ears [...]: it substantially rewrites Saroyan to include new phrases [New Armenia] and concepts. And now the pseudo-Saroyan version has effectively displaced the genuine article” (Mamigonian 2017: n.p.).

In point of fact, Saroyan’s ideas on the question of the national identity are, however, far more complex and baffling than what their political commentators and political activists have attempted to make them sound. Victor A. Shnirelman argues that the hegemonic Armenian nationalistic myth, essentially “anti-Turkic”, rests on three principles: (1) The belief in their civilising mission to promote the legacy of Greece and Rome; (2) their self-identification as an isolated shrine of Christianity in the East; and (3) the resigned acceptance that they are destined to be the eternal, defenceless “victims of barbarians” (2001: 22). However, despite being elected as one of the bearers of the national cultural memory, Saroyan seems, to all intents and purposes, inclined to knock down nationalistic aspirations at their base. Whereas nationalism seems to be centered upon the maxim that “communities of ethnic descent, language, culture and religion and so on should find expression in territorial states” (Hobsbawm 1996: 1066), Saroyan’s main preoccupation is to debunk the myth of what Anthony D. Smith (1986: 21-22) calls “the ethnîe”, “a myth-symbol complex” i.e. the fantasies, symbols and myths that allow a community to congeal in a unified identity based upon three tenets: “territory, language, [and] common descent” (Kohn 1944: 6). Not in vain, the haunting question that echoes in Saroyan’s Armenian plays: “What is it that makes us Armenians?” (“Haratch” 1986: 129) finds no satisfactory answer by attending to these classic criteria. The racial criterion fails to define Armenians: the Kurds “look precisely like members of my own family” [and e]verybody seems pretty much the same as everybody else” (“Bitlis” 1986: 108-109), observes the writer during his visit to his ancestral city. If Armenia is a crossroads of races and tribes with the result that all people are a mixed breed, race and genetic descent, the sacred categories that a nation must ally with (Balibar; qtd. in McClintock 1993: 4) lose any ontological value. Not surprisingly, Saroyan chooses what James Clifford calls a “Pauline universalist humanism”<sup>2</sup> solution (1997: 269), i.e. we all belong to the human race, one of the most heavily repeated formulas in Saroyan’s writings. This allows the author to abrogate any attempt to reinforce autochthonous nationalism or nativism. The self is where everything happens or begins, and the self is “essentially universal” inasmuch as it shakes off any classification for it is “anti-limitation of any order” and therefore repudiates nationality (“Haratch” 1986: 162). At any rate, belonging to a particular race is “a

---

<sup>2</sup> St. Paul advocated the idea that all [wo]men were one in the spiritual body of Christ.

decision open to all people", a question of choice ("Haratch" 1986: 153). "An Armenian is a Turk who says I'm an Armenian", concludes one of the habitués of Haratch ("Haratch" 1986: 153). By embracing this antinomy, Saroyan manages to conclude that identities are by definition disaggregated, i.e. divested of any national, religious or genealogical affiliation. For a writer who knew the dire consequences of the Wilsonian system which imposed, through the League of Nations, a new map of the European continent neatly "divided into coherent territorial states inhabited by ethnically and linguistically homogeneous population" (Hobsbawm 1990: 133), insisting on the dangers of nationalism was a non-negotiable belief. "There are no nations. There are no leagues. There can be no organization of mortality into the body which happens by itself at birth, by the grace of God" (Saroyan 1983: 223).

### 3. THE TATARS:<sup>3</sup> ETHNIC CLEANSING AND THE SOVIET UNION

"The Black Tartars" opens with a pithy demographic understatement that baffles the reader: "In 1926 there were only twelve Black Tartars in Russia, and now in 1935 there are only ten because of the deep love of Mago the soldier for Komi the daughter of Moyskan" (1972: 397). The embedded story that draws the reader's attention is set in Baku, Azerbaijan in 1926, and is told by Karachi, Mago's younger brother, on the train from Kyiv to Kharkov to a narratee made of a mixed audience of travel companions: Karachi's Ukrainian wife, a Jewish girl who lives in Tbilisi and who acts as the mediator for she translates the storyteller's words to the Armenian-American traveler, undoubtedly Saroyan's *alter ego*.

Tatars, the largest population in Azerbaijan, were decimated during the first decades of the twentieth century due to a number of historical factors:

(a) The Armeno-Tatar Massacres of 1905-1907, aroused by the ancestral hatred that divided the two ethnic groups, unleashing a series of clashes throughout the country that got even worse due to the non-intervention policy of the Russian authorities. Both minorities suffered important losses. On March 31 1918, two years before the short-lived independence of Azerbaijan and its final annexation as a Soviet satellite state, a large number of Tatars were killed in Baku.

---

<sup>3</sup> The spelling chosen in the short story's title is the one derived from the Medieval Latin "Tartarus" and adopted by most European languages. It comes from the Greek "Τάρταρος", the region of the Underworld where the wicked will be punished. The word "Tatar" is the variant used to refer to the Turkic people living within the Russian empire and originally coming from the vicinity of the river Kerulen in the territory of present-day Mongolia. I will basically employ the second variant and limit the use of "tartar" to refer to the Saroyan story. Chinese started to refer to these hostile neighbours as Ta-ta, i.e. "dirty", "barbarians". Black, white and Kai, among others, were appellations given to different tribes. In 1923 Russian scientists started to call the Tatars Turkic and the Anatolian Turks (Mirfatyh Zakiev 2002: n.p.). According to Edith Ybert, the Azerbaijan community was often labeled as "Caucasian Muslim [or] Transcaucasian Turk" and "defined by the Russian as Tatar" (2013: 2).

(b) The discriminatory policies waged by the Russian Empire against the Tatar population, mobilizing an estimated total of 100,000 Azerbaijanis and 40,000-50,000 Crimean Tatars to serve in the Russian army during the Great War (Iskhakov 2017: 4). This prompted a large number of Tatars to migrate to the Ottoman empire.

(c) The distrust or fear of disloyalty from Tatars, caused by the belief that they were naturally closer to the Turkish enemy, and might therefore promote Pan-Turkism, given their common religious and linguistic background. Philipp Ther observes that as early as 1907 Russian officers' textbooks "warned readers that Jews, Poles, and Muslims were disloyal and untrustworthy" (2014: 32). Traditionally Tatars were also viewed as bandits and robbers, savages on horseback that plundered and pillaged whatever village they found on their way.<sup>4</sup>

Terry Martin (1998) brings back to mind Fitzroy Maclean's eyewitness report of how "depressing-looking Turko-Tatar peasants" were carried, as early as February 1937, from Baku to Lankaran on trucks escorted by Russian soldiers with fixed bayonets. The goal was to relocate these people to Central Asia to work in the fields, the first of a long list of "precaution" measures that would characterize the Soviet Union policy. In 1944 the Crimean Tatars<sup>5</sup> would face an identical lot. Martin goes on to explain how this process of forcible relocation of segments of population was fueled by a major nationalist project consisting in making the national borders coincide with ethnic borders: "Popular opinion adopted an exclusive attitude toward national territories, insisting on the majority's right to dominate their own (nash) national region. This led to an intolerance toward national outsiders, who were frequently told to return to "their" (svoi) national territory" (1998: 826).

From 1935 to 1938, Poles, Germans, Finns, Jewish, Estonians, Iranians, Kurds, Tatars and a long list of minorities were periodically subjected to pogroms, ethnic-cleansing transfers and terror campaigns. Philip Ther (2014) cogently argues that the break-up of the great Empires unleashed the creation of a number of nation-states inspired by the belief that a policy oriented to achieving population homogeneity was the natural basis for peace and prosperity, and that minorities inevitably created conflict and instability, for their self-determination would eventually breed "discontent, disorder and rebellion" (Lansing 1921: 87). The solution was to be sought in the creation of political measures aiming to facilitate stateless minorities and diaspora groups to move to their kin states in what Rogers Brubaker calls the "post-imperial migration" (qtd. in Ther 2014: 34).

Stalin defined a nation as "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of

---

<sup>4</sup> August von Haxthausen (1854), the indefatigable traveler and folk-song collector, provides us with an image of Tatars in which features of both the Noble Savage and the Ignoble Savage merge together. Tatars "despise a man who cannot ride a horse" (443) and speak a lingo that is closer to "the language of poetry" (348); but as soon as one encounters Tatars robberies begin so that one cannot "venture far from Tiflis without being armed to the teeth" (106).

<sup>5</sup> The 1944 ethnic cleansing of Crimean Tatars who were relocated along the Volga River, one of Stalin's infamous measures, left the Crimea entirely Russian.

culture" (1976: 13). Drawing on Verena Stoke, Yuval-Davis (1993) has noted the three axes upon which the nation-state was built: the idea of a single territory (*Staat*), a single language and religion (*Kultur*), and a single race or ethnicity (*Volk*). If these criteria did not naturally coalesce, it became imperative to deploy other measures ranging from assimilation to deportation and cleansing. With the proliferation of nation-states like jigsaw puzzle pieces on the new international map, ethnic groups that did not fit into the national fabric became the target of exclusion: Armenians (1915); Jews (who were deported to the autonomous oblast in Siberia); gypsies, Assyrians, and Ukrainians whose rising nationalism was seen by Stalin as a major threat against the stronghold of the USSR, for they allegedly conspired with the Nazis<sup>6</sup> (Martin 1998: 842). Ther (2014: 231) concludes that 2.8 million people were forced to leave their homeland in the first period of ethnic cleansing (between 1912 and 1920), a figure that rose to more than 12 million people in the second phase (1938-1944), if we add together the 6.4 million of mass deportations in Europe (during the German invasion) and the 6 million in the Soviet Union, thus justifying Mark Mazower's image of Europe as "the dark continent" (1998).

#### 4. THE FRAME NARRATIVE

"The Black Tartars" is an example of a frame tale, i.e., one in which it is possible to find a principal narrative or story at the first degree (R1 or embedding story)<sup>7</sup> and a second narrative or story at the second degree (R2 or embedded story). Originating in the East with the proliferation of accounts of *One Thousand and One Nights*, frame stories have a long history of critical analysis. Gérard Genette draws the line between the level of diegesis (first-degree, framing story) and metadiegesis (the second-degree, framed story). The multiplicity of viewpoints implicit in the existence of at least two narrators (and several narratees) gives the frame structure a dialogic nature which calls for a comparative analysis. As has been amply shown, the doubling of the stories leads to what Linda Dittmar (1983: 192) terms "an investigatory frame" that seeks to explain the relation implicit in the syntagmatic contiguity of the two stories. By finding a second narrative unexpectedly framed by the first, the reader attempts to solve what Roland Barthes refers to as the enigma marked "by the layering of stories, by the system of frames" (qtd. in Nelles 1997: 140). This shift of narrators and narrative levels prompts the reader to activate a hermeneutic code which becomes in Barthes' view the *sine qua non* of all embedding. As William Nelles observes, the enigma may be

---

<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, Putin's mystifying rhetoric in his 2022 campaign to invade Ukraine harps on the Stalinist idea that the Ukrainian government is a natural ally of the Nazi ideology, and that to "denazify" Ukraine must be the Russian State's priority.

<sup>7</sup> Mieke Bal refers to the main narrative containing other narratives as R1; the nested narratives will be called R2, R3, etc. (1984: 61-62). Although there is a theoretical difference between embedding and framing, the first being a story within a story that has a consequence for the course and events of the embedding narrative (as in the case of Scheherazade); and the second a story that does not affect the unfolding of the main story, I will overlook this distinction in the following pages and use both terms indistinctly.

“either resolved or disclosed within the text, or it may instead be left open or even gradually complicated” (140).

Nelles also provides a detailed summary of the different classifications that have attempted to account for the relation between the first-degree narration and the second-degree narration. The interplay of both thematic and structural elements underlying the doubling of stories can be interpreted as self-reflexive (the second-degree story repeats, amplifies, or explains what has already been presented in the principal narrative), or as a departure which invites to discontinuity or interruption of what was anticipated in the embedding frame. In this regard, Genette (1980: 232-233) distinguishes between an explanatory function (whatever is told in the embedded story has a causal relation to the embedding story, being an example of an explanatory analepsis, i.e. the answer to “the question of the type ‘What events have led to the present situation?’”); a thematic function (the relation between diegesis and metadiegesis is grounded in an axis of similarity/dissimilarity (analogy or contrast) of the theme; and, finally, a non-explicit relationship which may result in distraction and/or obstruction, the classic example being the endless stories told by Scheherezade to the Sultan to avoid her beheading. John Barth’s system (1981) of the dramaturgical, thematic and gratuitous relationships moves in the same direction as Genette’s classification. Not very different conclusions are reached by David Ulrich (1986) who speaks of a didactic and/or ironic relation depending on whether the reader adopts or rejects the corollaries implicit in the framed story; and Gilberto Triviños, whose binary model (1980) includes a non-disjunctive embedded narrative which confirms or illustrates the viewpoint shown at the diegetic level; and a disjunctive one, which negates, critiques, or is critiqued by, the embedding narrative. Whatever is told in “the [outer] narrative is narratively affirmed or negated in the internally duplicated narratives” (qtd. in Nelles 1997: 149).

Since frames are not ornaments that can be glossed over but rather essential parts of the hermeneutic act, to ignore them is paramount to misunderstanding the story’s gist. Derrida speaks of the parergon, i.e. that which is “beside, and above and beyond the ergon” (1979: 20), a peripheral, external element which cannot be dissociated from the core. The frame of the painting makes for an inevitable part of both the work and of the environment or milieu, blending the inside and the outside, and disappearing in both directions. In relation to the painting, the frame “disappears into the wall and then, by degrees, into the general context; in relation to the general context, it disappears into the work” (24). It “touches, plays with, brushes, rubs, or presses against the limit, and intervenes internally only insofar as the inside is missing” (21); in short, it becomes “a supplementary by-work” which completes a lacuna existent in the ergon. The framing narration solves the non-sequitur of the framed narrative, operating as an adjunct which in the Derridean sense threatens the semantic closure or completeness of the metadiegesis by adding a supplementary meaning which transforms its apparently disconnected message.

It is precisely the suspension of any attempt to keep the two narratives separate that makes “The Black Tartars” a story rife with unsolved tensions: the metadiegesis (core) requires the diegesis (frame) to complete its meaning but an unwanted



caesura interrupts, or precludes, the transition from one narrative level to the other. I will delve into the ideological implications which Karachi's second-degree story, one which concludes without a return to the frame, has for the characters' principal narration. Since there exists "a mutually enhancing and mutually compromising reciprocity between contained story and containing story" (Moger; qtd. in Nelles 1997: 138), the corollaries of Mago's crime story may operate as a metonym which anticipates the diegetic narrator and narratees' harrowing fate. Not in vain, the technique of embedding narratives is one that forces readers to read "more meticulously and self-consciously that we ordinarily do" (Moger 1985: 316).

##### 5. "THE BLACK TARTARS": FEMICIDE AND NATIONALISM

Karachi's framed story of the circumstances that led his elder brother to kill his beloved constitutes the kernel of Saroyan's story. But if frame stories are heteroglossic by definition, multivocality is complicated even further in this case. The narrator is Karachi but his words are interpreted by the Jewish girl who reports the speaker's Russian words into English to the Armenian-American writer.

Karachi belongs to one of the very few Tatar families left in Baku but he abandoned the country shortly after Azerbaijan's independent state was overthrown by the Soviet Union forces, dissolving the short-lived Musavat (Equality) government and converting the new-born Republic into a satellite country ruled by the Kavburo, the organization created by the Bolsheviks. He is now living somewhere in Ukraine and has taken a Ukrainian wife partly because he does not "care to marry a Black Tartar, and preserve the race and the culture of the race", and partly because "he would rather be a Russian" and lead a peaceful life than "live greatly and foolishly" (Saroyan 1972: 397). In the meantime Mago<sup>8</sup> has enrolled in the Soviet-Azerbaijan army with headquarters in Baku where he has fallen madly in love with another Tatar girl, Komi, the most beautiful girl in the world: "She was all beautiful things of the earth" (398); an indomitable creature whose heart was "a black deep sea" (398). Mago's stubborn determination, Karachi hastens to inform us, is to take Komi as his wife against all odds. In line with the courtship rites of Tatars, Mago must win her hand. First, he talks with her father, Moskyan, a farmer who spends his days drinking and beating his wife. Three of Komi's brothers have been killed "in small wars or in banditry" (397); one has been sent to Siberia "for no reason in the world" – though the reader may suspect that he might have been involved in a high treason offence –; and the fifth is a migrant worker in a tractor factory in Moscow. Komi's father gives his consent to the wedding but the girl remains uninterested and gives the passionate candidate the brushoff. Soon enough he steals a horse for her; and later on a cow, a dress, and a table. Komi remains, however, unmoved: she is still reluctant to give in

---

<sup>8</sup> Mago is probably a clipped version of Magomed, an alteration of Mohamed, the Prophet, "the grateful". Komi, another Turkic name, comes from Komila. Komil is an Arabic name meaning perfection. I am indebted to Uzbek poet Azam Obidov's generosity for clarifying the meaning of both names.

despite the young man's constant gifts. "I do not wish to love you" (398) is her laconic answer. Eventually Mago, tossing and turning in bed and growing desperate to see her plans thwarted, steals one of the automobiles from the People's Commissars, a crime that may cost him his life. Unable to drive, he ends up embedding the car against the door of the New Europe Hotel, surely the meeting point for locals and officials alike. Mago is immediately arrested and sent to the military jail, tried for robbery and rebellion against the government, and given a death sentence.

Intrigued by the real reasons behind the young man's wild behavior, the judge, an old captain, finds out about his boundless love for Komi and his strong determination to marry her to "preserve the race and the culture of the race" (397). "There are not many Black Tartars in the world. I do not wish to see the tribe of the Black Tartars to end in the world" (401). What follows is an interesting dialogue between the judge and the defendant which reveals the captain's belief in the values that define a national identity: number of people in a territory, race and language – i.e. "the civic-territorial" trajectory and the "ethnic-genealogical" model of nation-formation, in Smith's words (1986). Mago affirms to be a black Tatar, yet his skin color is not black but white: "A month in the sun and I am as black as Komi herself. It is the shade of the stable hat has given me this sickly white color", he insists (401). When asked about his people's language, his answer is still more vague and imprecise, since what they speak is "mostly other languages", "Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish and *lately* Russian" (402, my italics). "We have many words" coming from these languages but the moment we speak them, they become "our own language" (402). Deprived of a territory after being disseminated in a diaspora, left with a patois that is the result of cross-cultural encounters with other nations, and, finally, not bearing any distinctive racial features, Mago's resistance to preserve his tribal identity is, in the captain's eyes, a pipe dream, a wild idea of a savage mind unenlightened by reason. Not surprisingly, one of the questions is whether or not black tatars have a word for sun. Mago's answer is a strong no.

At the trial, Komi, pretending to be simply the soldier's cousin and not his bride-to-be, persuades the Judge to release Mago from prison and to forgive his stupid crimes. The captain, mesmerised with the young girl's unworldly beauty, decides to comply with her plea, and Mago is shortly returned to the army. Days later, Komi can be seen in town spending time with the old man, laughing while being taken for a ride in the Cadillac. This triggers Mago's madness. In no time he decides to kidnap her and, after riding through the hills for a couple of days, realizing that he will be unable to persuade her to love him, he drowns her in a stream.

Karachi's tragic story poses some interesting questions in relation to nationalism. He insists that the American listener understand that Mago's femicide was not a crime but an act of love for one must love deeply to be able to kill someone like Komi (405). Anne McClintock (1993) brilliantly condenses the three tenets of nationalisms: All "are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous" inasmuch as they "represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence" (161). That nationalism is inseparable from gender – and racial – differences from its origin can be attested in the fact that women have invariably been converted into

the symbolic bearers of the nation. The word nation is etymologically related to the Latin word *natio*, to be born. As Elleke Boehmer (1982) points out, women are the biological reproducers of the national (and racial) family. However, their role has been limited to providing a metaphorical iconography to the national project, the agency being exclusively put in the hands of men who grow into the active, metonymic builders of the nation. Thus Komi embodies the metaphor of the tribe, the symbol of the ethnic heritage that must be preserved for she alone can guarantee the continuity of the race; and since the national space is feminized, she becomes the territory disputed by the legitimate aspirations of her racial conqueror – Mago – and the illegitimate advances of the colonial/imperialist (Soviet) power.

Domestic genealogy is in close connection with the nation as an ideological site. Not in vain, Boehmer (1982) contends, “nationalism operates as a masculine family drama” (128) or as “a domestic rescue drama” (Fanon 1965: 38): it is the mother who must be saved and liberated from the hands of the national male “other”, for the victory of the latter signals the extinction of the race. As a result, the female body must be doubly domesticated: first, it must remain untainted by the hands of the colonizer; second it must be forced to cooperate, though passively, in the national liberation movement by keeping the family united. Mago’s last-ditch decision to abduct and eventually put an end to the bride’s life is consistent with the demands of a primordial nationalism: if the woman is lost, the totem of racial identity crumbles. Drawing on Edward Said’s argument that the crisis of the familial institution (filiation) in Europe gradually gave way to the rise of cultural/professional values (affiliation), McClintock (1993: 64) complicates things further by suggesting that the vocabulary of filiation was immediately adopted by the nationalist and imperialist project. Not surprisingly, the language of incommensurate love, sacrifice and protection or the language of punishment and violence which permeate the in-and-outs of family life was naturally transferred to the realm of the nationalist movement. To put it more simply, the logic that justifies a crime of passion or an abnegated mother’s self-sacrifice for the well-being of her offspring is the same logic that nourishes all violent acts and sacrificial offerings on behalf of the nation. The natural /ethnic must remain closely tied up with the national idea. Without the first, the second naturally disintegrates. In tune with this rationale, Mago’s decision is not only inevitable but the result of his limitless love for Komi, for only a man’s deep love can explain the impulse “to end the life of such a one as Komi” (405).

At this precise point in the narrative Karachi’s faltering discourse, overwhelmed by emotion, is abruptly brought to a halt, forcing us to lose sight of the diegetic story for there is no return to the frame narrative. And, although we suspect that there must be a nexus between the frame and the framed, the final words that justify the murder Mago committed – his brother was a great man, one “who wanted to live greatly” (405) – leave us with the wrong impression that this is the final message we must embrace as readers. Yet Saroyan has followed the rules of a parodic skaz for the creation of Karachi’s speech. This Russian oral form of narrative well deserves a commentary on its own for the ideological overtones which its adoption for the telling of the embedded narrative may carry.

## 6. SKAZ

Skaz (a word derived from the Russian *skazat*, to tell) is the term that Russians gave to any form of (pseudo)oral narration “dissociated from the author” (Schmid 2014: 787), one stylistically defined by the theatricalized use of vernacular features, a peculiar use of lexis and a capricious, seemingly-improvised syntax in a discourse that is rendered in a living-speech style that is far from the professional literary standard. This oral narration, cultivated in Russian since 1830, is always addressed to an interlocutor – imagined or not – from whom the narrator expects some kind of sympathetic understanding. In a nutshell, *skaz* can be defined as an oral monologue of the narrative type modeled “as if it were directly spoken” by a (wo)man of “the common people” “with a set of viewpoints and evaluations” of the world (Bakhtin 1978: 183), a second voice socially different from that of the author, a fundamental fact which implies the use of dialogicity. Whereas Boris M. Ėjxembaum’s central focus in his seminal study of the genre (1918) was an analysis of the aural features that created this illusion of orality, Mikhail Bakhtin paid attention to the “double-voicedness” that transversed the discursive structure of the *skaz*: the crux was now to be found in the relationship between the character’s message and the author’s ideological stance, thus ruling out any attempt to build up a monologic context. Bakhtin also drew a line between a stylistic or ornamental *skaz*, characterized by the non-committal attitude of the author who listens without interruption to the character’s speech; and a parodic *skaz*, which introduces an intention – though refracted –, a viewpoint which is radically opposed to the one provided by the *skaz*-teller. The parodic *skaz* thus becomes the battlefield of opposed meanings and values by putting together two voices and two ideologies. In short, the *skaz* can be single-directed (ornamental) or double-directed (parodic). It is the latter that catches Bakhtin’s attention for it condenses the clash between the author’s point of view and that of a second voice.

Karachi’s monologue is complicated by the fact that it is mediated through the Jewish girl’s translation. Occasionally the interpreter feels at a loss with some expressions she is unable to render in English (“the landscape of life changes. I do not know how to translate his words”, complains the girl, 399). This often results in the interruption of the narrative flow for the simple man doubts that his story can be translated by the girl in a way that the American traveler can understand what his brother did and why he did it. Can an American citizen grasp Mago’s decision? His speech is constantly dotted with moans, silences, whispers, sighs and sullen gestures. He gets up from the train seat and shakes his head every single time he remembers what his brother, a foolish hero, did: stealing the official car from the Russian government and killing Komi so that she could not be loved by any other man. Karachi’s communicative goal relies on the power of his words to persuade the audience that Mago’s actions can be forgiven as long as one believes in the nobility of his brother’s soul, and understands the intricate cultural codes of Black Tatars.

Bakhtin underscores the fact that the parodic *skaz* may push the author’s intentions to the margins lessening his/her dominant position over the second voice, the outcome being “perturbed, internally indecisive, and ambiguous”, “not only

double-voiced, but also double-accented" (Bakhtin 1978: 191). In the case of "The Black Tartars" this is made further evident by the lack of a terminal frame so that the reader may lose sight not only of who is telling the story and to whom the story is told, but also of the cruel fate that hovers over the stateless minorities that share the journey on the same train. The false impression which the reader gains is that the crime of passion is – or needs to be – justified on behalf of a noble cause: the preservation of the race, for this is the conclusion that Karachi dishes out bringing the story to a close. Whereas Karachi has decided to take a Ukrainian girl as a wife because he does not care about the ethnic survival and he is happy "to be a Russian, anyway" (397), Mago's resistance to assimilation against the external forces that threaten to wipe out the authenticity of the tribe's lifestyle is presented as the heroic deed of a man who simply wanted to live greatly. But to focus on the skaz-teller's words alone entails not only blurring the framing narrative against which his tale is constantly silhouetted but also missing the author's opposite ideological stand in relation to any form of nationalism.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The overriding conclusion of "The Black Tartars" is then not Karachi's overemotional tale but its embedding into a particular historical moment harrowed by the ethnic policies conducted by the Stalinist regime. The frame narrative chosen by Saroyan allows the coalescence of two clearly distinct narrative centers that can be interpreted as metonymic of two national models: the nativist or ethnic trajectory epitomised by Mago's story; and the growth of the nation-states based upon the confluence of *Volk*, *Kultur* and *Staat*, working together to generate a new map of nations ordered by the principle of ethnocultural and linguistic homogeneity. Although both models are historically different – one is infused by the belief in the continuity of the race and family-and-clan traditions; the other, anchored in what Pierre Clastres (1994) calls "ethnocidal violence", is intent on assimilating differences and/or imposing segregation or relocation on minorities – they partake, however, of the same reverse/perverse logic. Thus, the embedded tale, the grotesque skaz, functions as a concave mirror reflecting the opening diegetic narration. Mago's femicide is motivated by the need to preserve the tribe. When Komi insistently rejects the young man's marriage proposal because she feels acculturated ("I do not know what I am [...] Maybe I am not a Black Tatar", 404), she is acknowledging not only that she does not care about the kith and kin, the basis of a primordial, blood-tie attachment, but also that she is a step closer to russification. Her refusal to live with Mago in the same house signals, long before her death, the extinction of the tribe. Thus, her murder operates as a proleptic motif of the policies that will be conducted on behalf of the construction of the nation-state against those who cannot, or refuse to, integrate, racially or culturally, into it. To paraphrase Kenneth R. Minogue's well-known metaphor of nationalism, Komi is the Sleeping Beauty who will never awake after being kissed. What lies ahead instead is the long shadow of Frankenstein's monster writing one of the darkest chapters of contemporary history.

## REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M. 1978. "Discourse Typology in Prose". *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. Eds. L. Matejka and K. Pomorska. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press. 176-196.
- Bal, M. 1984. *Narratologie: Essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes*. Utrecht: HES.
- Barth, J. 1981. "Tales Within Tales". *Antaeus* 43: 45-63.
- Bhabha, H. K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Boehmer, E. 1982. *Stories of Women. Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Clastres, P. 1994 (1980). *Archeology of Violence*. Trans. J. Herman. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Clifford, J. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge; MA: Harvard University Press.
- Derrida, J. and C. Owens. 1979. "The Parergon". *October* 9: 3-41.
- Dittmar, L. 1983. "Fashioning and Re-Fashioning: Framing Narratives in the Novel and Film". *Mosaic* 16: 189-203.
- Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. C. Farrington. New York: Grove.
- Genette, G. 1980. *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. J. E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. 1990. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. 1996. "Language, Culture, and National Identity". *Social Research* 63 (4): 1065-1080.
- Iskhakov, S. 2007. "The Impact of the First World War on Bashkirs and Tatar Muslims (1914-1918)". *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 41: 103-121.
- Kohn, H. 1944. *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lansing, R. 1921. *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative*. London: Constable.
- Mamigonian, M. A. 2017. "The Misquotation of William Saroyan". *Creative Armenian* (13 June). <https://www.creativearmenia.org/the-misquotation-of-william-saroyan>
- Martin, T. 1998. "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing". *The Journal of Modern History* 70: 813-861.
- Mazower, M. 1998. *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. London: The Penguin Books.
- Mbembe, A. 1993. "Necropolitics". Trans. Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15: 11-40.
- McClintock, A. 1993. "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family". *Feminist Review* 44: 61-80.

- Minogue, K. R. 1967. *Nationalism*. London: B.T. Batsford.
- Moger, A. S. 1985. "Narrative Structure in Maupassant: Frames of Desire. *PMLA* 100 (3): 315-327.
- Nelles, W. 1997. *Frameworks: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Saroyan, W. 1972a (1936) "The Black Tartars" *Inbale and Exbale*. New York: Books for Libraries. 347-405.
- Saroyan W. 1936-1937. "T.S. Eliot 1936-1937". *The William Saroyan Papers 1926-1981*. Box 27, Folder 6. Department of Special Collections. Stanford University. Ts. n.p.
- Saroyan W. 1972b. *Places Where I've Done Time*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Saroyan, W. 1983. *My Name is Saroyan. A Collection*. Ed. J. H. Tashjian. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Saroyan, W. 1986. "Bitlis. A Play in One Act". *An Armenian Trilogy*. Ed. D. Kouymjian. Fresno, CA: The Press at California State University. 89-112.
- Saroyan, W. 1986. "Haratch. A Play in Three Acts". *An Armenian Trilogy*. Ed. D. Kouymjian. Fresno, CA: The Press at California State University. 113-179.
- Schmid, W. 2014. "Skaz". *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Eds. P. Hähn et al. Berlin: De Gruyter. 787-795.
- Smith A. D. 1986. *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*. London: Blackwell.
- Shnirelman, V. A. 2001. *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.
- Stalin, J. 1976. *The National Question and Leninism*. Calcutta: Mass Publications.
- Ther, P. 2014 (2011). *The Dark Side of Nation-States. Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*. Trans. C. Kreutzmüller. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Triviños, G. 1980. "Los relatos de los relatos". *Estudios Filológicos* 15: 145-178.
- Ulrich, D. W. 1986. "Organic Harps Diversely Fram'd": *A Theory of the Frame and the Frame Narrative Including a Taxonomy and its Application to Nineteenth-Century British Literature*. PhD diss., University of Wisconsin.
- von Haxthausen, A. 1854. *Transcaucasia. Sketches of the Nations and Races between the Black Sea and the Caspian*. Trans. John Edward Taylor. London: Chapman and Hall.
- Ybert, E. 2013. "Islam, Nationalism and Socialism in the Parties and Political Organisation of Azerbaijani Muslims in the Early Twentieth Century". *Caucasus Survey* 1 (1): 43-58.
- Yuval-Davis, N. 1993. "Nationalism and Racism". *Cahiers de Recherche Sociologique* 20: 183-202.
- Zakiev, M. 2002. "Origin of Tatars". *Podgorski Family Archives*. <https://www.podgorski.com/main/tatar-origins.html>