

“STONE DREAMS” - context and discussion themes.

For Melikian Center reading group, at <https://asu.zoom.us/j/98076549674> on Thursday, 24 September 2020, at 6 PM: offered by Keith Brown and Garine Palandjian.

“Stone Dreams” is a novella by Akram Aylisli, who at the time it was published was one of Azerbaijan’s most celebrated and honored writers. Today, he lives under de facto house arrest in Baku: one of several acts of retribution against Aylisli and his family, which is documented by the PEN organization at <https://pen.org/advocacy-case/akram-aylisli/>

Never published in Azeri, “Stone Dreams” incensed Azerbaijani nationalists for its main character’s explicit acknowledgement of, and attempts to counter, violence against Armenians. This aspect of the novel is distilled in the frequently-cited section title:

Dr. Abasaliyev claims that if a single candle were lit for every Armenian killed, the radiance from these candles would be brighter than the light of the moon (146)

Aylisli has stated he was driven to publish the novella by the Ramil Safarov case. In 2004, at a NATO partnership-building training in Budapest, Safarov killed an Armenian officer, Gurgen Margaryan, in his sleep. In 2012, after serving part of his prison sentence in Hungary, Safarov was extradited to Azerbaijan, where he received a hero’s welcome and a presidential pardon.

Aylisli felt this did not represent his Azerbaijan, and published “Stone Dreams” as a form of protest. Azeri reactions were furious, and documented in this RFE/RL article, which includes video of book-burning... <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijani-writer-books-burned-akram-aylisli/24898784.html>

Conversely, Aylisli found himself celebrated in Armenia. That was not his intent. In an interview with RFE/RL in 2013, he said

“This novel is a kind of message to Armenians living in Karabakh; in other words, to the Armenian citizens of Azerbaijan.... The message is this: Don't think that we've forgotten all the bad things we've done to you. We accept that. You have also done bad things to us. It's the job of Armenian writers to write about those bad things, about the Khojaly massacre.”

<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-stone-dreams-akram-aylisli/24890815.html>

One thread of the book is the protagonist, in a coma in hospital, recalling his childhood in the village of Aylis. The Armenian name for the village is Agulis - today it is called Ashaghi Aylis, Azerbaijan (Aşağı Əylis in Azeri). It is in the Nakhchivian Autonomous Republic, separated from the rest of Azerbaijan, and close to the Turkish and Iranian borders.

In our discussion, we will consider themes including: artistic freedom and dissidence; authoritarianism and the opportunism that enables it; and the power of literature to mix realism and imagination to convey complicated, entangled, and traumatic histories.

Two further quotes that caught our attention when thinking about these themes:

89 That thing you’ve got in your pocket, it’s not a Communist Party membership card, it’s a pistol. You frighten people with your pistol – you control them with fear so you yourselves can live without fear.

140 I’ve always thought it necessary to periodically spoil one’s relationship with authority in order to preserve the feeling of freedom in oneself. In that regard, I’m prepared to consider him [the “First Person”] as my godfather.