



Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Aghtamar Island
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Van,_Turkey

Gurgen Mahari's controversial novel, *Burning Orchards*, is set in the Ottoman city of Van, Eastern Anatolia, during the period leading up to the Armenian rebellion of 1915 and relates the epic story of the events which culminated in the catastrophe of the following years, wonderfully told by one of the great writers emerging from Soviet Armenia. (<http://www.blackapollopress.com/mahari.htm>)

Context from the Introduction (pgs. 9-10): Mahari was born in Van in 1903 and survived a mass exodus from the city during the Armenian Genocide before ending up in an orphanage in Etchmiadzin (near Yerevan, Armenia). He went on to become a writer and political figure and was arrested in 1936 and exiled to Siberia. His book *Burning Orchards* (published in Yerevan in 1966) offers various accounts of the personal and political events leading up to siege of Van from the perspective of Van's citizens. Mahari saw the text as striving to achieve realism through the inclusion of what many regarded as negative portrayals of Armenians and positive portrayals of Turks. Mahari was also concerned with the safety and future of the indigenous Armenian peasantry which he believed educated leaders were not thinking about in the course of resistance. Initially, copies of the book were burned in Yerevan and Mahari was publicly and widely criticized, leading him to attempt to make revisions. He died "a somewhat broken man" (10) in 1969 in his wife's home country of Lithuania. The original text was published in Eastern Armenian but with Turkish, Persian, and Van dialect words.

Quote from the Interlude: "But I am also accountable to all those future generations. You can sin against the past and the present, but if you are deaf to the future, or hearing it pretend you do not, you deprive yourself of the right to speak." (pg. 340)

Themes: multiple perspectives on revolution and war (Vanetsis' perspectives, revolutionaries perspectives); Armenian survival; being "in" history vs. being "out of" history; the constitution of a city (people and/vs buildings); folklore and fairy tales; paradox

Questions:

1. What are the various meanings of "burning orchards"?
2. What motivates Ohannes to act as he does throughout the novel? Does Ohannes change?
3. What purpose do the following serve: descriptions of nature, dreams, food and drink, pits, and songs?
4. What is the difference between Van and Stamboul, between Van and Yerevan / Tiflis / Russia?
5. What is the place of women and children in the novel, in the revolution?
6. How do Vanetsis characterize the three Armenian revolutionary parties (Dashnaks, Ramgavars, and Hunchaks)?
7. What is your impression of the Interlude? Why does it appear where it does? (pgs. 339-340)
8. How do you understand Mahari's use of humor?
9. What is your impression of the Epilogue? (pgs. 517-520)