

The Mothers' Tales

by

Chouher Maria Doughramajian

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Abstract

What started as an analytical thesis paper soon turned into a personal creative project. This capstone encompasses three oral history interviews with three women and an informal group discussion between the researcher, videographer and two of the interviewees, around a food table that followed the very first interview. I created three artist books, each one is dedicated to my narrators, Silva, Ayda and Rita. These books are meant to visualize the lives and memories of these women. The aforementioned artifacts would serve as a visual and creative component that would exemplify their memories and craftwork. I explored my interviewees' backgrounds as they narrated their memories of childhood, growing up in Aleppo, Syria, witnessing war and the trauma that followed. The interviewees rendered their memories of their journey to Armenia, how they individually led their families into a new country and conveyed both emotional and financial support by their valuable labor, which is present in their handmade craft, from food to embroidery and tailored textiles.

Introduction

This project is focused on researching the lives of three artisan women through memory work and oral history interviews. It aims to learn about their journey as individuals, women and mothers. Born and raised in Aleppo, Syria, these three women were not intact from hardships, trauma and the gender roles that their societies imposed on them. However, all three were successful in breaking away by indulging in a challenging journey to a new land, that was long known as the homeland. From disappointments to new experiences, these three women single handedly led their families and utilized their crafts as a method of empowerment.

More than eight years have passed since the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011. What started as a revolution, soon transmuted into a catastrophic war which ended the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrians. The Syrian civil war has resulted in a massive forced displacement of its citizens. In April 2017, there were 5 million Syrian Refugees, most of them residing in nearby countries, such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon (Robila, 2018). The biggest refugee crisis of the 21st century did not bypass Armenia since more than 18,000 Syrian citizens found refuge in Armenia. The influx started in 2012 and continued in smaller numbers (Davtyan, 2017).

It is important to note that I, as the researcher, am also a Syrian refugee who first fled to Beirut and eventually settled in Armenia in June, 2014. Since 2012, several studies have been conducted by different organizations, governmental institutions, and individuals to assess the obstacles that hinder the financial integration of the Syrian refugees in Armenia. However, almost all these surveys examined the status of the Syrian refugees from an economic perspective. I realized the significant gap that existed in the programs that were funded by such organizations, which is the lack of a humanitarian approach, especially in the existing literature, that can be exemplified by oral history and memory work. The voices of Syrian Armenian women have been silenced for too long, thus, this creative work serves as a medium to voice their life narratives, experience and most importantly, memories.

Literature Review

While exploring the lives of these women, it is important to further understand the concept of “transversal politics” which was developed by Cynthia Cockburn in her chapter “Women Living and Re-living Conflict: Exploring a Methodology for Spanning Time and

Place.” In this chapter, Cockburn expands this concept to incorporate her research subjects who were women that were “alike in taking the risk of defying the territorialism and hatred being engendered by their respective nationalist ideologues, and the pursuit of armed violence by many, notably men, in their communities” (Cockburn, 2016, page 269-270). This concept is significant to my research and creative work, as all three women were in a process of negotiation of the complex identities that they were developing throughout their journeys.

When studying refugees and their social integration, two important notions must be considered, one being nationhood and the second, citizenship. In their scholarly article in the *Journal of Refugee Studies* of the University of Oxford, Dr. Strang & Ager (2010) argue that the prevalence of these concepts within a society determines their conventional understanding of the process of integration. This actively shapes both the cultural and social space, which are accessible for refugees and their honest perception of the concept of belonging. They also examine the idea of integration as a “two-way” process instead of the conventional mono-sided process (Ager & Strang, 2010). Nationhood and belonging play an influential role in the lives of the Syrians in Armenia, as the majority of them consider Armenia as the homeland of their ancestors, which is once again, one of the many factors that influenced the refugees in their settlement decision. As Cubitt states in his book, *Imagining Nations*: “The concept of the nation is central to modern understandings both of political community and personal identity” (Cubitt, 1998). Despite the cultural barrier, the relationship between nationalism and ethnicity remains complex, which is closely studied in Calhoun’s scholarly article. At one point, Calhoun summarizes and describes the relationship between nationalism and ethnicity as “Both being part of a modern set of categorical identities invoked by elites and other participants in political and social struggles” (Calhoun, 1993, page 211).

Homogeneity prevails in Armenia; as a result, multiculturalism isn't a relevant notion in Armenia's mono-cultural society. Although the majority of Syrian refugees are ethnically Western Armenians, who are descendants of the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire, however language plays a great obstacle in the cultural integration of the Syrian Armenians. Since Syrian Armenians, have learnt and practiced the western Armenian dialect, which is preeminent in the diaspora. Throughout the last seven years, Syrian refugees were left on their own, to adapt to learning Eastern Armenian, which is the official spoken dialect of the republic of Armenia. In his book, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory*, Parekh approaches cultural diversity as a value and he writes about the dangers of avoiding diversity. He argues, "Multiculturalism is about the proper terms of a relationship between different cultural communities. The norms cannot be derived from one culture alone but through an open and equal dialogue between them" (Parekh, 2000, page 13).

When evaluating how successful the integration of the Syrian refugees has been, social alienation and discrimination are two concepts that must be dealt with, since both have hurdled the integration of repatriates and refugees alike. Repatriation often refers to "restore or return to the country of origin, allegiance, or citizenship" (Merriam-Webster, 2019). One of the notable repatriation waves, that Armenia has witnessed is called *nerkaght*, the first wave started in the 1940s, to boost the Armenian population. Although it's contextually different from the Syrian refugee plight, however parallels can be drawn from the experience of the immigrants of *nerkaght*. From negative reception to inscrutable social rules, Lehmann explores the repatriation wave of the 1960s in Soviet Armenia in her scholarly article, A Different Kind of Brothers: Exclusion and Partial Integration After Repatriation to a Soviet "Homeland." The stories presented in the collected archives provide an insight into the development of national identity,

its relationship with the Soviet reality and what it meant to be alienated and ultimately excluded from the Armenian society (Lehmann, 2012).

Another article that deals with discriminatory actions is *Analyzing Strategic Responses to Discriminatory Acts: A Co-Cultural Communicative Investigation* by Dr. Camara and Orbe, which was published in the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*.

Throughout this article, the authors survey the multiple ways in which individuals respond to acts of discrimination based on race, sex, age, etc. However, the objective is to identify the co-cultural communication guidelines and practices that are utilized as a response to discrimination and to observe whether these strategies differ depending on the membership of a specific co-cultural group (Camara & Orbe, 2010). This is one of the focal points of my capstone, in regards to analyzing the communication between two communities which are co-ethnically related, yet alienated from each other to a certain degree.

This phenomenon draws me to further study the implications of the theory of integrative communication, which was stated and explored by Young Yun Kim (2005) in her scholarly article about intercultural communication. She defines it by saying that. The integrative communication theory rests on the human instinct to struggle for equilibrium when met with adversarial environmental conditions as experienced in a new culture. This experience is a universal concept of the basic human tendencies that accompany the struggle on each individual when they are faced with a new and challenging environment (Kim, 2005, page 561).

Co-cultural discriminatory acts become reproduced in everyday life, that often leads to social alienation and consequently culminates into assimilation. Shushan Ghahriyan conducted twenty-four in-depth interviews for her article about Syrian Armenian refugees, that was published in *Migration and its Impact on Armenia: A field practice journal* published by the

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in the University of Vienna. Ghahriyan explores the idea of powerlessness that the majority of her Syrian Armenian interviewees identify with. She argues that, “powerlessness is a consequence of insufficient interaction with locals and a lack of self-identification with Armenian society” (Ghahriyan, 2017). She observes that the lack of communication causes further social isolation, which means the absence of a social network which is essential in the Armenian social setting. She concludes by asserting that the Syrian community in Armenia, especially the youth, is approaching the final stage of alienation, which is social pessimism.

In ethnographic research, testimonials are known to be the most appropriate method to collect data. In a book titled *Fundamentalism: Ethnographies on minorities, discrimination and transnationalism* Dr. Mollica collects eight ethnographic contributions from the Caucasus. Two chapters stand out the most, one of them being *From Aleppo to Yerevan*, where Hakobyan explores the route from Aleppo to Yerevan and how it was the only escape for fleeing Syrian Armenian refugees. By doing so, he provides historical and testimonial context to the reality of the Syrian Armenians that are currently residing in Armenia (Hakobyan, 2016) Another chapter that focuses on ethno-cultural identity and the religious perspective of the Assyrian refugees is *Religious Aspects of Structuring the Ethno cultural Identity* by Ketevan Khutsishvili. She discusses how one group of Assyrians chose integration while struggled to resist the dominant culture and defied assimilation and how another group of the same community decided to abide by the norm and assimilate in the host Georgian community (Khutsishvili, 2016). The Hakobyan & Mollica book provides a unique and different contribution from the dominant academic rhetoric, with chapters that cut across established historical "academic" regions while intersecting anthropological and cultural areas (Mollica, 2016).

The concept of diaspora is a fundamental part of Armenian history, this notion becomes even more crucial for the Syrian Armenian refugees, since they are, as Lepejian explains, victim diasporas. In her senior project titled *Diaspora as Nation: Examining the Transnational Mobility of Syrian Armenians during Wartime* Lepejian states: “A victim diaspora is created by a dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations” (Lepejian, 2017). She examines how the third and fourth generation of Armenian genocide survivors, first founded an Armenian diaspora community in Syria, then re-established themselves as the Syrian Armenian community in Armenia. She conceptualizes her experience as an American-Armenian and discusses how, “The Armenian spaces in which many Syrian Armenians feel most at home are not those within Armenia – a foreign country. Their Armenian nation exists within the diaspora and its de-territorialized reconceptualization of national space” (Lepejian, 2017).

Refugee reception and integration can be explained by Berry's conceptual framework of immigrants' acculturation to the host society, and it includes four strategies: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration (Berry as cited in Robila, 2008). Utilizing this framework will establish grounds to assess the reality of the integration progress of the Syrian Armenians. Lastly, it is important to highlight the influence of the history on integration. In their unpublished master's thesis, Campos & Gifford (2016) analyze ethnic Armenian perspectives regarding the influx of Syrian refugees focusing in particular, on the Syrian-Armenians. Through their fieldwork, they found a constant cultural influence of the Soviet membership on the Armenian society. The paper suggests that “...recognizing the importance of history is vital for the development of sustainable resettlement environments, at least until repatriation or resettlement in third countries is an option for migrants” (Campos & Gifford, 2016). The resettlement of the Syrian refugees into the host Armenian community must be observed and

studied as to how the Armenian ethnicity of the Syrians is communicated and eventually affected trust and crippled their decision-making process.

Research Question

This capstone aims to explore the lives of three Syrian Armenian artisan women through an oral history approach. I try to answer on how crafts can serve as a tool of empowerment for displaced women from conflict areas. Throughout this research, their identities and the negotiation process that these three women are practicing will be explored as well. The project aims to answer the question of how memories of conflict have influenced three women, as mothers and refugees and whether it transcends onto their crafts.

Methodology

I have adopted a qualitative methodology in order to collect the required data through oral history interviews and to ultimately answer the proposed research question. The questionnaire is inspired by the Montreal Life Stories Project which was supported by the Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University as it is designed to explore the lives and memories of these women. My interview guideline was based on the model of CURA General Interview Guide, which was initially published in 2007. One of the most moving moments of the interviews were infused during the last two questions, which are stated as the following: “Where do you stand today as an immigrant, woman and a mother?” and “What are your aspirations, hopes, aims for the future?” The interview guideline is divided to different categories, despite the value of the overall categories, however the most notable sections were

Family Heritage, Marriage & Children, Syrian Civil War Moving to Armenia and most importantly, Memories, Empowerment & Looking Forward.

Ethical issues, informed consent and confidentiality are at the core of oral history practice. To ensure that the narrators are informed about the content and focus of the project and their individual rights, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form before the interview. The consent form enables the participants to explicitly dictate their privacy measures, offering them the choice to pause, discontinue or terminate their voluntary contribution at any given time.

“Memory work” is a very specific branch of qualitative inquiry. According to Cockburn, Frigga Haug, the Marxist feminist author of *Das Argument*, was perhaps one of the very first who introduced memory work as an approach of qualitative research. Just like Cockburn and Haug, I adopted this approach as a method to “disrupt the academic canon, rejecting the ‘scientific’ mode in social research that divorced theory from everyday lived experience and setting store by women’s own account.” (Cockburn, 2016, page 271). However, it is important to be aware of the selectiveness and partiality of memory, as this distinctive approach makes a collective sense of personal stories about the past as an asset and knowledge which is ultimately viable in the present. As I was choosing my narrators, I knew I had to deal with them carefully. Having an oral history interview isn’t as simple as sitting around a table of food, I knew I had to be open minded and ready for whatever these brave women were going to bring to the table.

The Mothers’ Tales

My interest in these particular women was associated with their common background, as all three of them were born and raised in Aleppo, Syria. It is also important to highlight that all

of the narrators, identified themselves, first and foremost as mothers. The concept of motherhood was immensely present in their lives, which further explains their prioritization and personal identification with it. The tales which were narrated by these mothers were those of trauma, sacrifice and most importantly, love. Love stood out as the overwhelming concept that was incorporated within their memories, passionate labor and their crafts.

As a young researcher, I wanted to visualize the tales of these mothers, different mediums rushed into my mind, except one, an artist book. By the support of my supervisor, Dr. Hourig Attarian, and my partner in crime, Houry Pilibbosian, I came to realize that an artist book is a beautiful medium, where I can properly present these women's' stories.

Silva Kaplanian's tale

A poem, written on a textile hanging from a plastic/wooden ribbon roll, retrieved from Silva's crafts store. In her interview, Silva narrates the difficulties she faced while opening her textile store in Armenia. She specifies one specific encounter with a customer, who wanted to get only half a meter of a cotton thread, which was a request Silva has never heard of throughout her life as a craftswoman, back in Aleppo. Silva's artist book and the "Poetry Thread" are inspired by her narration of the cotton thread, and the culture shock she faced, as well as her love and narration of her deceased husband. The idea of creating poetry thread was also infused after finding Yuko Kimura's artist book collection, more specifically, the Indigo Spool Book (Kimura, 2012).

Silva's tale revolves around her motherhood, as she talks about her achievements, Silva continuously speaks of her children and then, her business back in Aleppo, which was named "Afkār" that translates to ideas from Arabic. Yet despite Silva's courageous stories, one of the

most interesting aspects of her tale is Silva's language. She began her interview by strictly talking in Eastern Armenian, a language that she learnt after coming to Armenia in 2012. Eastern Armenian is not native to Silva, yet she insisted to use it throughout the first 20 minutes of her interview. However, she abruptly shifted to Western Armenian, her mother tongue once she started to talk about Aleppo. She was persistent to use collective pronouns such as, "our, we and ours" whenever she started to talk about her life in Aleppo.

Silva's eyes lit up whenever she talked about her shop "Afkar" that she established back in Aleppo. She fought for her career and travelled across the globe all the way to China to ensure that her business takes off according to her plans. Despite reestablishing her shop in Yerevan, Silva still reflects on her grand times back in Aleppo. She talks about the progress of her business as if one would talk about nurturing a living being. Silva's tale is about survival and endurance, it's a tale of a mother who overcame trauma and reestablished herself in a country that she long avoided as she lost her husband on this very land. Silva is a living inspiration for her children, as she was the one who reinstated her children's hopes and aspirations to their long known homeland, Armenia. I was particularly interested in Silva's affection and appreciation of her business, Afkar, which resulted in the poetry thread, which is titled "Revolting Afkar."

After a while I learned the subtle difference

Between despising a crime scene and loving a homeland

And I learned that my homeland is not necessarily a Home

And I was forced to re-examine the universe

After a while I lost you

And I began to question the whole instinct and concept of Motherland

I was thrust back onto some bleak, jutting ledge
I was formless, in a world before kinship or tenderness

After a while I learned the subtle difference
Between grieving your losses and nurturing your blessings
And I Learned that I have to plow my own garden
And nourish my Afkar

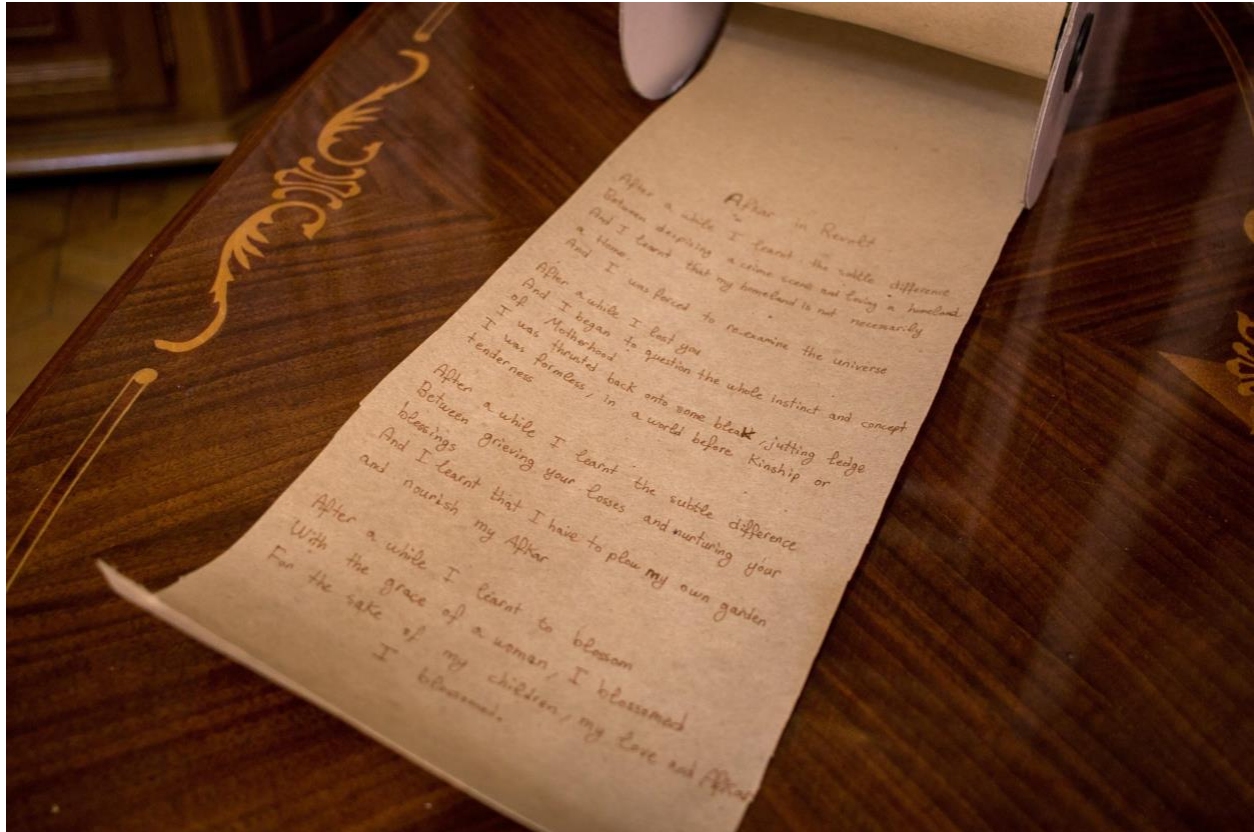
After a while I learned to blossom.
With the grace of a woman, I blossomed
For the sake of my children, my love and Afkar
I blossomed



During Silva's Interview, March 5, 2019



After Silva's Interview, the Lentil Kufte Table, March 5, 2019



Silva's Artist Book, Poetry Thread

Ayda Santourian's tale

Ayda continuously talked about her relationship with her maternal grandmother, who first taught and later became her inspiration to enter the world of embroidery. The black accordion map, is also related to the black leather which Ayda uses in her latest Marash designs. The map entails Ayda's intergenerational history from Marash to Aleppo and finally, Yerevan.

Throughout the road-map journey, six checkpoints are highlighted along the way, which according to Ayda, can be marked down as the cornerstones of her life. Inspiration from Arzu Mistry & Todd Elkin's Accordion book, which was initially formulated for as a part of their project, titled: "Unfolding Practice: Reflections on Learning and Teaching" (Mistry & Elkin, 2015).

Ayda describes herself as a community leader, then as a mother and a lifelong learner and teacher. Her journey started back in their backyard in Aleppo, as she was learning embroidery from her grandmother, Arika, who comes from Marash. She constantly talks about embroidery as an art and most importantly, as a priceless legacy. She also talks about the difficult journey to set up her business, especially when it comes to fixing price tags on her grandmother's legacy. Her ambition is to involve youth with the art of embroidery, as she perceives it as a powerful tool to preserve her family's history.

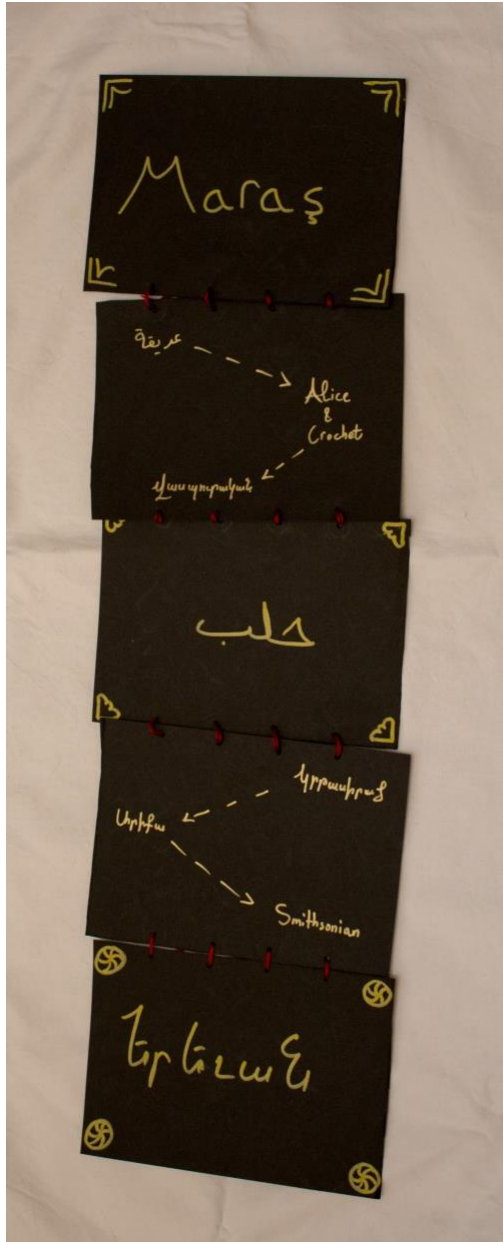
Ayda also reflects back to her career as a teacher, as she tracks it down to her days as a leader in the Vasburagan scouts' legion, which was founded by the Marash cultural society, where Ayda's roots go back to. She also reflects on her time in Grtasiradz's kindergarten, an Armenian private school in Aleppo, where she first kicked off her teaching career. She continuously speaks of the influence of her career on her motherhood, and how one of her daughters, Shogher, turned out to be a teacher of Qanun.

Ayda is inarguably a pioneer in her community, as she was one of the very first women who set up their own business, despite the societal constraints and negative notions. Her business wasn't only concerned with the local level, as she took her legacy on a global platform as she was selected as one of the very few craftswomen who represented Armenian and more specifically, Western Armenian crafts and heritage during the Smithsonian folk life festival in Washington D.C. back in 2018. Ayda isn't willing to compromise whenever it comes to her business and family members, she often mentions how she is willing to do anything for the wellbeing of her daughters, which is yet again one of the reasons that she doesn't aspire to expand her current business. She regards her embroidery crafts as precious gifts that should be handmade by her, which is why she refused many offers that encouraged her to commercialize

and mass produce them. Ayda's current goals revolve around seeing her children succeed, as she believes that she already reached her goals, and she's currently impatient to witness her children's achievements.



During Ayda's Interview, March 6, 2019



Ayda's Artist Book, A Road-map of Memories

Rita Akkelian

The jar of recipes was initially inspired by Terry White's pickled books artwork (White, 1992) and developed by Rita Akkelian. The jar of recipes has a background superstitious story concerning the curse of the pickles, as told by Rita during the informal conversation around the Lentil Kufte table, which took place after Silva's interview at Rita's house. Motherhood and

cooking play a significant role in Rita's identity, as she continuously portrays throughout her narration. However, the pickles curse connects these two notions, as Rita was told to believe that pickling food carries a bad omen and that she lost her first son due to the curse. As a result, Rita wrote down her favorite recipes, which were developed and slightly tweaked by her, and agreed to rest them in a jar. To break the cycle of shame and criticism which were associated with the implicated sterilization by her community in her early years of marriage.

Rita's tale revolves around her childhood in Aleppo, how she grew up in a household which was headed by her mother, Leoni Dimijian, as she worked as a secretary at one of the public offices of the British mandates. Despite the feminist figures in her life, Rita's education has been ultimately neglected, as she was the only one from her siblings who decided to stay by her mother and eventually become her caretaker. She dropped out of the American College at the age of seventeen and took upon the caretaker role. Moving on, Rita talks about her travels and how her identity was initially shaped by them, while accompanying her father on his business trips, mainly to England. Whenever asked about her adulthood, Rita immediately refers to her marriage, and how it was perceived as an act of disobedience by her own father. Losing her mother at the age of 25, Rita often felt lonely and misunderstood by her father, who was still grieving her wife's death.

Rita met Aram Doghramajian during a family gathering organized through the Urfa cultural society, she explicitly stated how their story isn't a romantic one, however she also refrained from calling it an arranged marriage. After all, she was called a "խաբիտ" which translates as a runaway bride, as her father disapproved of her marriage and demanded that she should break her engagement with Aram. However, that's where Rita's troubling journey took off, as after her marriage, her mother and sisters in law concurrently reminded her of the

importance of her pregnancy and rushed her into having children. Rita's health didn't allow her to have children, she went through several miscarriages and abortions, and often said that it was the most difficult time of her life. She was looked upon as an incomplete woman, an inferior human being. However, after six years, Rita was granted with the "so called gift of motherhood," as she plainly states during her oral history interview.

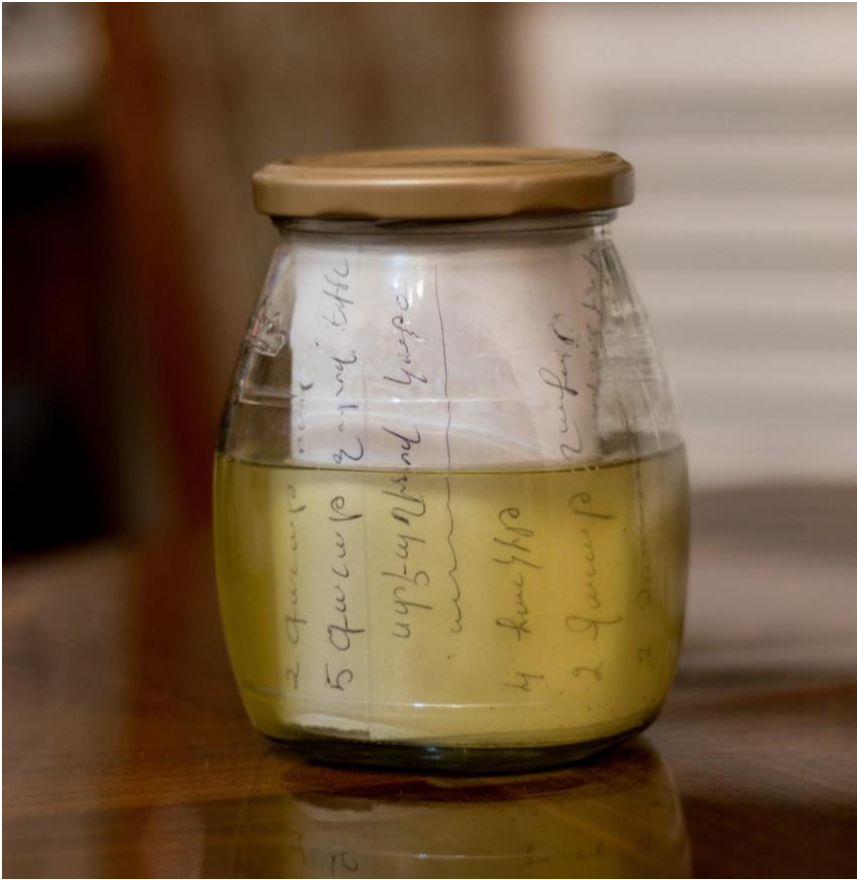
Motherhood and the journey to get there is the inspiration behind the Jar of Recipes, it's a superstitious story of how Rita's mother in law believed that Rita would lose a close person whenever she attempted to pickle cucumbers. By pickling her own tweaked recipes, the ones that she calls "the dearest ones" Rita broke the stigma and curse that was imposed on her. Another important notion about the pickle juice which was used in the artist book is that it was prepared by my dear friend's grandmother, Mariette, who's a craftswoman and an entrepreneur in Kuwait, who traces her matrilineal roots back to Marash, just as Rita. Rita's tale is one of bravery, leadership and motherhood. She's a pioneer, a woman who by the end of this project got her very first job, in a restaurant called "Մայրիկ" which translates as mother from Armenian. Rita is an exemplary woman, who reaffirms how women, especially those who come from conflicted families and countries can integrate with their crafts and ultimately empower others through them. Rita's perseverance is inspirational to say the least, the journey of crafting her artist book was an emotional one, full of memories and aspirations for the better future, first for herself and for her daughters.



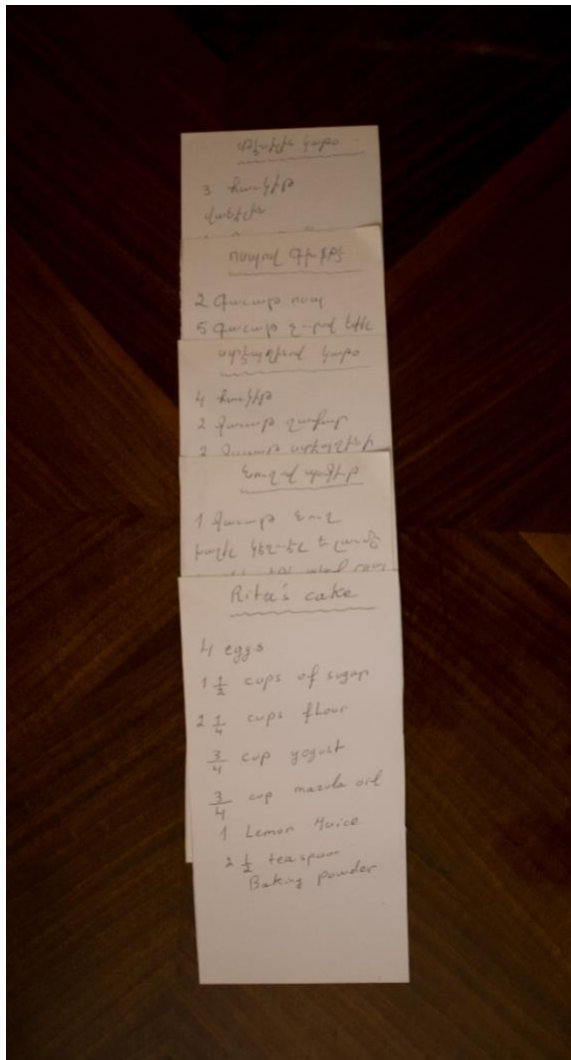
During Rita's Interview, March 27, 2019



Rita's narration of the curse of the pickles around the Lentil Kufte table, March 5, 2019



Rita's Artist book, The Jar of Recipes



Rita's recipes

Avenues for future research

I am planning to revisit these women and to prepare a questionnaire that would report on my findings, just as Cockburn did in her chapter "Women Living and Re-living Armed Conflict: Exploring a Methodology for Spanning Time and Place." I also plan to expand my testimonials and include different Syrian Armenian women, from different backgrounds and later on plan a thematic exhibition. Another medium to publicly present these testimonials and artist books can be a blog or a website, with an archival oral history collection of Syrian Armenian testimonials,

this thought was inspired by the Zoryan Institute's private collection of their most recent oral history project on Syrian Armenian refugees.

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