

**Հայ աղջիկ: Navigating the transitional phase from a teenager to a young adult as a
woman in Armenia**

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Abstract

Հայ աղջիկ/ Hay aghchik [Armenian girl] aims to shed light on gender issues in Armenia and how they shape women in a pivotal stage of their lives. As the conducted research puts a global as well as local frame around the understanding of gender and gender norms, the script tells a story of an individual. While the theoretical part focuses on the reasons why gender issues exist in our society, the screenplay shows someone trying to navigate life through them and, sometimes, in spite of them. As academic works of philosophers and writers explain how these issues affect people, the script walks the reader through a real and raw experience of someone who is constantly affected by them.

Հայ աղջիկ/ Hay aghchik [Armenian girl] is built on a number of true stories that, although put on paper by one woman, encapsulate the circumstances of many.

Introduction

Gender inequality remains one of the biggest issues Armenian society faces today. Whether the population realizes that or not is the other side of the issue. Some attribute the lack of equality and equity between the sexes to the traditionalist mindset of our society. However, let us not forget, that we are the descendants of a Republic that was one of the first to give women the right to vote and be elected in the Parliament. We are the descendants of a Republic that was first to appoint a woman as an Ambassador in a foreign country (Aslanyan, 2010). We are the descendants of Shahamir Shahamiryan, 18th century writer and philosopher, who wrote, “Each human individual, whether Armenian or of another ethnicity, whether male or female, born in Armenia or moved to Armenia from other countries, will live in equality and will be free in all their occupations” (as cited in Aslanyan, 2010, p. 31). Yet, here we are, in the 21st century, putting women in boxes, limiting their choices, pressuring them to be “perfect” while giving them a million definitions of the word, putting chains on their dreams and aspirations.

Sandra Harding says that “knowledge is always socially situated” (2004, p. 7). Here, she refers to the knowledge the oppressed group has regarding its own situation and the differences found with the situation of the dominant group. Moreover, as Harding explains, it is the dominant group that decides the knowledge the oppressed group will receive and, thus, use to form an understanding of its circumstances. As a result, women, being the oppressed group, are not only told what to do they are also told how to perceive their own circumstances (Harding, 2004). Additionally, once women are controlled this way from a young age, this becomes their only reality, which is much more difficult and intimidating to break out of.

What this research paper and, most importantly, the accompanying script aim to achieve is raising awareness about the pressing gender issues in the country as well as normalizing conversations revolving around the topic. Using research and art as a means to

encourage women to take control of their narratives and disregard the false knowledge they are being fed about their own lives and experiences, is what I have tried to achieve as the writer of this project.

Literature review

Life has different stages and people have no choice but to adapt to each one. The path of adaptation is rocky, full of trials and tribulations, caused both by internal and external factors. Being a young woman myself, who is still swimming through these confusing waters, I speak from experience when I say that the transitional phase from a teenager to a young adult in Armenia is not as black and white as one would imagine. The reason why the script for a feature film I have written has turned into a passion project is simple: I want to show young women that they are not alone. Not in their confusion, not in their self-deprecation, not in their urge to break free from the cage created by gender stereotypes. They are not alone because we are all in this together.

The number of studies done within the framework of gender and gender relations in Armenia are extremely limited, mainly because the word “gender” itself causes a commotion. Additionally, when sexism and feminism are brought up in everyday conversations, the former is glossed over, while the latter is frowned upon. This is one of the reasons research in this area is extremely important, as it is set to educate people on important matters that shape a society. As Hasmik Gevorgyan (2010) puts it “Gender relations play an important role in the regulatory system of the social, political and economic aspects of a society” (p. 50). Therefore, neglecting these concepts and not doing enough research is not only harmful but also merely unexpectable. Although it is too soon to speak about the movie that I hope will be made based on the script Հայ աղջիկ/ Hay aghchik [Armenian girl], I do hope that when the film sees light of day in the future it will serve as a tool to raise awareness on vital issues that have continually affected many people and have, at the same time, been purposefully swept

under the rug. Before exploring gender norms and roles on a local level, it is important to gain a broader understanding of the issue by defining gender as well as looking at the global picture.

What is Gender?

In her book “Undoing Gender” (2004), Judith Butler an American philosopher and author, calls gender a performance. She states:

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical.

On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.

Moreover, one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. (p. 1)

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this quote alone. Firstly, gender and demonstrations of femininity and masculinity are acts that people put on for themselves and others. Secondly, the roots of the said performance run so deep that people often perform without being aware that they are putting on an act. Another conclusion is that people are as free within the performance as they are limited. What this means is that people are free to perform within the frame of the expectations society has from their gender, but they are restricted from exiting that frame and performing outside of it. Lastly, Butler (2004) states that everyone is performing and no one is alone in their subconscious need to put on an act that “suits” their gender best.

As it becomes apparent from Butler’s explanation of gender roles, norms and expectations are pushed on people on a global level and the issues that arise with the performance of gender are relevant worldwide.

Gender Relations in Armenia

According to the report prepared by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) titled “Men and Gender Equality in Armenia” (2016), 86.8% of survey participants believe that gender equality in Armenia has come far enough. Moreover, 89.9% of women who answered that question deemed it accurate. At the same time, 69.7% of participants agreed with the statement that women are too emotional to be political leaders and 55.4% of participants agreed that a man is allowed to hit a woman if she has cheated on him. These are a few, yet extremely vivid and telling examples of not only gender inequality thriving in the country but also people being deluded in their attitude towards it. As a result, although a large portion of the survey participants believes that gender equality has come far enough, the answers they have given to other questions prove the opposite to be true.

As bell hooks (1984) puts it “To be in the margin, is to be a part of the whole but outside of the main body” (p. 156). However, being aware of the fact that one is indeed in a margin is a very important element in the mechanism of changemaking. Unfortunately, as the UNPF survey shows, many Armenian women are unaware that they are often left in the margins. Almost 90% of women thinking gender equality has developed enough, as in, there is no more space for it to move forward, is disheartening. This goes on to show that oppressed groups are often oblivious to the oppression because of the society they live in. As Sandra Harding notes “Women, like members of other oppressed groups, had long been the object of the inquiries of their actual or would-be rulers” (2004, p. 4). In other words, many women simply do not know any better and their circumstances do not allow them to get the education that will lead them to knowing better.

Moreover, as the UNPF report states, 83.3% of men believe that gender equality has come far enough (2016). It is important to point out this statistic because men are clearly the ones who have the upper hand in our society. Just like hooks (1984) said “Often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate” (p. 154).

Since men are the ones who dominate, leaving them out of the conversation is not only illogical but also potentially dangerous. Quite frankly, it is not surprising that such a big number of men think that gender equality has reached an acceptable level, because the oppressor usually does not want to lose the established power dynamic with the oppressed, which is what true equality would ensure. Regardless, as mentioned before, including men in the discussions about issues revolving around gender equality is vital, because this is not possible to reach an acceptable result without “addressing the dominator”.

Gender and Identity

A large portion of how people identify in a society comes from gender expression. Expectations are laid on both sexes to act “according to their gender” and shape their lives around the gender they were assigned to at birth. When it comes to women, the expectations usually revolve around softness and femininity (Gevorgyan, 2010). According to the research done by Hasmik Gevorgyan and her team in 2010, modesty is considered a very important quality in women, with 24% importance ranking. In the meantime, it is a quality ranking only at 1% importance in men (2010). These statistics do not strike me as surprising, since I was born a female in this country. Moreover, they also explain why my brother and I were raised differently: my parents were trying to raise me with modesty in mind.

In her article for EVN Report, Gayane Ghazaryan (2019) touches upon gender stereotyping and gender roles presented in books used at public schools. She states that women are portrayed as housewives or teachers, while men are represented as engineers and doctors. Moreover, as she states, women are portrayed as passive and dependent on someone else, usually a man (Ghazaryan, 2019). These are vivid examples of gender norms being taught, pushed on rather, at a young, impressionable age. This leads to generations of women growing up with the notion that they are weak, that their career choices are extremely narrow and that they have to depend on a man when they are older. Breaking this cycle seems

impossible when the roots are so deep, which is why addressing these roots should be a priority.

Motherhood as identity

Ghazaryan (2019) also notes how women are portrayed as mothers in many illustrations in public school books. This point is also made by Sevan Beukian in her article (2018), where she states that Armenian femininity directly revolves around motherhood, to the point where the two concepts become synonymous. On a societal level, being a mother, taking care of the household and raising children is what being a woman is all about. As Beukian puts it, this perception is also popular among women themselves. In other words, this has been the norm for so long that many women do not dare break away from their traditional role as mothers and accept it, oftentimes without realizing that they can explore other choices.

Research questions

Gender roles in the Armenian society and how they affect women and their perception of themselves are examined in the scope of this research. What expectations are laid on women? How do those expectations shape women, in the transitional phase from teenager to adult in particular?

Methodology

The Screenplay

I have always had a hard time fitting into the idea of an “Armenian woman”, which as discussed above is usually associated with modesty and motherhood. The older I get the less I fit in because I believe that as long as I identify as a female and as long as my roots are Armenian, I am an Armenian woman. The rest – the way I speak, the way I dress, the way I express myself and envision my future, are my choices to make and have nothing to do with my heritage.

The idea of the screenplay came to me more than a year ago, when I realized that I am not facing this struggle alone. Since then, I have had numerous conversations with fellow women who have expressed the same inability to be the “perfect Armenian woman” and fulfill the expectations laid on them. These exchanges, that would start as an outburst of protest against society and end with the realization that change is as necessary as oxygen, made me realize that turning my frustration into art is the best solution. This way, I would not only get to have a creative outlet but also would give a voice to so many women, including myself.

As I began to write the script, I started to incorporate stories from my own life, as well as bits and pieces of conversations I have had with my female friends. Certain phrases, especially the ones uttered by the characters who are supposed to represent the toxicity of the society we live in, have been, at one point or the other, directed at me. Many of those characters are based on real people that I have had encounters with or am related to. This is the reason why those characters do not have neither names nor faces. I wanted to give the reader the freedom to attach an identity to these people based on their own experiences. This way, I believe I have made my work even more universally understandable and relatable. Think of it as a game of “Mad Libs”, where the main story is being told as you complete it using your imagination and circumstances.

I knew I wanted to make the story as impactful as possible, which is why I chose to incorporate the element of breaking the fourth wall in the screenplay and have the main character address the audience directly. This decision will be discussed in more detail below.

The Main Character

Navigating through a new phase in life is difficult and confusing, especially when entering adulthood, especially in an Armenian household, where you are already expected to have children of your own as you are still being babied by your mother. People constantly

whisper their definition of “perfect” into your ear to the point where your self-esteem drops to the floor as you realize that you do not fit into those definitions. This is why the reader sees Lara, the main character, in the beginning of the story – lost, unable to love and accept herself.

As it was mentioned above, the story is autobiographical and the journey of the main character is heavily based on mine. The state the reader finds Lara in in the beginning of the story represents a version of me that I have already outgrown. During the past year, I have worked hard to put that self-distractive behavior and mentality behind me, and evolve into a more confident and self-loving person, which is a path Lara walks as well.

The story behind the main character’s name is quite interesting. My parents were thinking of calling me “Larisa”, after my paternal grandmother, when I was born. That name, which is quite popular in Russia, is shortened to “Lara” in every day speech, which is the reason why my father decided against it, since he did not want his mother’s name to be butchered. Since I did not want to use my own name in this story, due to the fact that for the most part I do not identify with the main character anymore, I decided to give her the name I almost got at birth.

The Fourth Wall

The element of breaking the fourth wall is inspired by the comedy series “Fleabag” on BBC. I watched it around the time I started having thoughts about turning mine and other women’s stories into a screenplay.

In this story, the usage of this element serves two purposes. Firstly, it helps the main character establish a relationship with the audience. I envision Lara’s character finding comfort in the fact of directly speaking to the audience and trusting them more than some people in her life. Meanwhile, this technique is also intended to make people who are going

through a similar experience feel like they are not alone and they have someone who completely understands and sympathizes with them. In a way, each individual reading the script gets to befriend Lara.

Secondly, I intend for this element to be the biggest eye-opener to people who do not identify with the main character and her struggles. As she addresses them directly and speaks about important issues, those who are nothing like her will have a better understanding of what millions of women, in the face of Lara, go through every day.

Artist statement

Just “be a lady” they said.

– Camille Rainville

The way society treats women and what it expects of them does not make sense to me, so I turned to science to help me understand where the root of many issues lies. As I did research revolving around gender, I realized that although there may be an explanation, there can never be a justification. Women are still expected to tick so many boxes: boxes, contents of which often contradict each other. We are told what to wear, how to walk, who to love and when to have kids, yet we cannot win even after doing as we are told. Through this work, I hope to raise awareness, open people’s eyes and, most importantly, represent women and their struggles.

The research paper leads the reader through the global as well as the local picture in regards to women, their rights and gender norms in general. Meanwhile, the script tells a story of an individual, whose story encapsulates the collective female experience and will seem all too familiar to many women and young girls, especially those who have grown up in an Armenian household.

I intend for the experience of reading the screenplay to vary for different people. People who will recognize themselves or their experience in the main character – I want them to feel seen, heard and represented. By the end, I want them to feel empowered and inspired to go through a transformation like the heroine does, and adopt the “if she can do it, so can I” mentality. People who will not identify with the main character – I want them to become aware of the toxicity patriarchal society exudes, about its effects and consequences.

I believe in using my voice and artistic vision for a good cause, which is the aim of this project. If it touches even one person, I will consider my mission accomplished.

Reflections on process

Working on this capstone was a challenge and there are three main reasons why.

First of all, it should go without saying that the past year was mentally challenging and exhausting. I often found myself lacking motivation to do any sort of work related to not just the capstone project but every other class that I took this semester. I would often run to my usual coping mechanisms, which would result in procrastination. I found myself choosing between my mental health and doing university work. I chose my mental health more often than not, because I do believe that it is important to take care of it as much as it is important to take care of your physical health.

Secondly, I had a hard time writing the research paper specifically, because for the longest time I saw it as separate from the creative aspect of my capstone. I had to realize that it is not only a big part of my capstone, it is also an important element that fuels the screenplay as well as helps answer many questions from a scientific point of view.

Lastly, during the past year I have grown and changed tremendously and I believe I have moved on from that version of myself, the version that inspired Lara’s character. I do take pride in that transformation, however, when it came to writing the actual story, I was forced to return into that state of mind and, needless to say, it was not a pleasant experience.

Writing scenes, where Lara is talking down to herself, doubting her talent, feeling insecure about her appearance and so on, required an immense amount of strength because I had to immerse myself into a past I never wish to go back to for any other purpose than making it a reference point that shows my growth.

Regardless of the hurdles and the bumps on the road, I am proud of the end result. In a way, working on the script and getting to express myself through Lara, all while telling her story, gave me a sense of relief. It is almost as though I got to voice my concerns and let out my own dissatisfaction in regards to many issues. Like I mentioned before, it was unpleasant to relive some situations, especially those involving Lara's father's character, however, as I try to find the positive side to this, I realize that writing certain lines, the way I wrote them, set me free.

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Creative Piece

Prologue

Here's to strong women. May we know them. May we be them. May we raise them.

– Michelle Obama

This script is a love letter: to the person I used to be and to the road I have walked the minute I chose to leave her behind.

With this work, I want to tell her that I forgive her: for not loving her reflection, for not knowing her true value, for letting society define her worth. She gave all the love, support and strength she had to those around her, but never to the woman that stared back at her in the mirror. She fought for the rights of others, but never fought against her inner demons. And I forgive her.

To those who will recognize themselves in Lara – I see you, I feel you and I am sorry. I believe the day will come and you too will feel liberated.

Enjoy the read.