

fiasco in the currents: A Self Study of Personal Traumas Through a Fictional Narrative

by

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Abstract

From oral history to self-study, from sexual assault to personal traumas. This capstone project includes two main sections: An investigation of personal traumas through a fictional story that has no direct connection to the researcher and an academic exploration of sexual assault. While adopting self-study as the research methodology in this capstone project, I try to explore the depths of my traumatic experiences coming from the 2020 Artsakh War in Armenia by writing a fictional narrative and analyzing it through the lenses of a traumatic event unfamiliar to me – sexual assault. In addition to this, I have also researched the nature of sexual assault, its victims, and their reactions to this specific traumatic event. Overall, this capstone project tries to understand how therapeutic writing a fictional narrative piece can be for the researcher and the researched, where they both become one person within the methodology of self-study.

Keywords: Self-Study, Sexual Assault, Personal Trauma, Fictional Narrative, Women

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I grabbed a glass of water, put it by the Pawns standing next to each other, sat on the chair behind the King, and very carefully brought the Queen to the center of her little white square. Struggling to move through the squares, the Queen was supposed to wait for a while. Pawns. A Pawn must have been moved first to make room for the Queen. King's pawn was pushed forward by two squares, opening a diagonal space for the Queen. After a couple of moves by the opponent and me, the Queens were out facing each other, threatening – threatening what? Isn't chess just a game? Chess is a game, and just like every other game, there are rules. But those rules channeled an inner anger in me – anger coming from a place of hatred, guilt, pain, sorrow. On the board of that little battle, there was no room for the Queen to move because if she did, it would be an open check from the opponent's Queen. The question that I asked myself was if I was being a little bit dramatic in my evaluations. The Queen still had other strong pieces that could have easily been developed early in the game, but I refused to do so. What was it that I was trying to prove? As much as I wanted to snap out of the game sooner rather than later, it was impossible. I was showing symptoms of a hurt child, once frowning, once breathing heavily, once panting, once resting my fingers on the Queen. And then, understanding that it was impossible to do what I was thinking, I buried my hands under the roots of the battle deep inside the chessboard. Elisabeth Hanscombe says, "There are many traumatised people who do not know it. Their trauma lies dormant, hidden and unable to be processed. It comes out in other ways, in so-called symptoms..." (2008, p. 118). But how do I navigate through this anger and pain? How do I let go of the Queen and push a Pawn instead? How do I conceal my symptoms so that it does not scare the opponent off or insult them? How do I live when the real battle is not on the

chessboard but inside the head that produces endless conversations about the past between me and me – two entities nothing like each other, completely separate in their nature? But now, when a choice must be made because the time is ticking next to the board –stuck to my eardrum, I start to cry. That didn't make me angry. On the contrary, it made me more desperate to know why, after four years of the death of someone that I knew from a very young age but had never been close friends with, shook me to my core, leaving me stranded in confusion, pain, and fear. Why is the trauma of what seems like coming from a distant past still haunting me and bringing me down every day through the consequences of that very trauma that produced another trauma on top of another trauma on top of another trauma ...? Elizabeth Hanscombe asks, "Is it more evidence of the way in which trauma can be repeated when left unacknowledged and untreated, when it is buried and kept secret?" (2008, p. 119) And the answer to this is as simple as the move that I was about to make with my Queen on the chessboard. No trauma left untreated will go away on its own without causing other symptoms to arise over time. And what seems to be the only solution to healing this trauma is to come to terms with your situation and feel the feelings you're designed to feel. To acknowledge that means to understand the trauma itself and its roots. Self-healing is not easy, and maybe that becomes clearer once we are open enough to understand that "...there is a timeless quality to trauma and our understanding of it is sociohistorical" (Hanscombe, 2008, p. 119). Understanding that every experience of any traumatic event is unique is the first step in self-healing. Self-study within this sphere is helpful in understanding what needs to be done to understand and treat the symptoms.

This capstone project is a self-reflection on past traumas through the study of an utterly unrelatable traumatic event in a fictional setting. The process of this project includes analysis and synthesis of trauma literature and self-study through creative writing. It is a reflection on mostly

everything that I have learned post-2020 Artsakh War about grieving, accepting it, and trying to recover from it all. This capstone project is not only a reflection and self-study but also a learning process – learning the most valuable thing that I could not understand back in 2020. For me, it has been learning to let go of what hurts me the most. I refuse to be the slave of my trauma.

The roadmap of this capstone project is supposed to take the reader on the journey of deep excavation of PTSD, which necessitated doing self-study and research creation, where the latter is composed in the form of a novel. The themes explored in the novel include sexual assault, harassment, and trauma. Through the research creation piece, I try to analyze my personal traumas and get a deeper understanding of their root causes through the investigation of the fictional narrative. This capstone project also analyses the nature of sexual assault, its relation to women mostly, and the societal reactions that are formed because of this traumatic event.

Exchange of Queens – I resigned.

Key Terms and Definitions

PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)

"response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with the numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimulants recalling the event" (Ballinger, 1998, p. 100).

Sexual assault

“illegal sexual contact that usually involves force upon a person without consent or is inflicted upon a person who is incapable of giving consent (as because of age or physical or mental incapacity) or who places the assailant (such as a doctor) in a position of trust or authority” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.)

Sexual harassment

“uninvited and unwelcome verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature especially by a person in authority toward a subordinate (such as an employee or student)” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.)

Literature Review

I have divided the literature review into two parts. The first part discusses the concept of trauma through the process of creating art and the contribution this has to self-study. The second part deals with understanding and analyzing literature about the connection between sexual assault and PTSD, sexual assault survivors’ reactions to these events, and how they deal with their situations.

Understanding Trauma: Defining the Invisible Pain

According to Leys, “... the current surge in trauma studies is distinctively shaped by politics, culture, and history in and of the present...” (As cited in Douglas et al., 2008, p. 1) Being part of this history requires the study of trauma through the history itself for us to be able to make sense of it. Understanding personal traumas, our reactions to them, and how we plan to

deal with them is itself a self-study. Understanding what trauma is and defining this is the first step. Different definitions of traumatic events have been given for a very long time. Some of them lack the ability to include the sensitivity of the concept in their definitions. Judith Herman brings the example of the definition given by the American Psychiatric Association in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, where a traumatic event was defined as "...outside the range of usual human experience." (1992, Chapter 2 para. 2). Even though this definition was given around the time Herman wrote her text, it is still wrong, since "Rape, battery, and other forms of sexual and domestic violence are so common a part of women's lives that they can hardly be described as outside the range of ordinary experience" (1992, Chapter 2 para. 2). Instead of this, she gives her definition of what a traumatic event is: "Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (Hermen, 1992, Chapter 2 para. 3). This way the inclusivity of each experience is ensured.

Creating Trauma in Fiction: The Demand and the Remedial Effect of Writing Trauma Fiction

"The Greek root of trauma is 'wound', and the experience of trauma is an over-whelming and self-shattering event that is frequently theorised as unspeakable, resistant to representation" (Douglas et al., 2008, p. 1). As much as it is described as something *unspeakable*, over the years, trauma-related writings have found their way very comfortably into literature. According to Miller and Tougaw, "[I]n a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed

emotion” (As cited in Douglas et al., 2008, p.2). Elisabeth Hanscombe argues that the perception we have about trauma –how we see, experience, and understand it– has social and historical aspects to it, and regardless of when it happens, the nature of the trauma stays the same (2008, p. 119). Not even considering this statement true will allow me to argue that the rising numbers of trauma literature highlight our awareness of the trauma concept. The high number of representations of trauma has also caused concerns among critics. More specifically, they have become “...concerned about the uses and abuses of empathic engagement with life story” (Douglas et al., 2008, p.2).

As the findings leave us confused about the intentions of people who write trauma literature, the remedial effect of writing it has been demonstrated to be true. According to Read and Wyndham, it is important to understand that the preservation of places where people encountered traumatic events is essential for the remembrance of it, as it can contribute to generational trauma healing processes (as cited in Douglas et al., 2008, p. 5). Following this, we can argue that writing, as one form of tangible preservation of those memories, can have an equal remedial effect. The amount of written trauma literature that has been at the center of the attention of many critics indicates that writing about traumatic events can somehow become a coping mechanism or part of a bigger healing process. According to Pennebaker, writing about past traumatic events can be a therapeutic process since “...people who had suppressed a traumatic memory might learn to move beyond the experience once they expressed their emotions about it” (as cited in Harvard Health Publishing, 2011, para. 7).

The Disposition of Trivializing Experiences: Understanding the Value of the Self and Self-Study in Trauma Studies

Avi Rose, in her work “Going Deep: Intersecting the Self as Researcher and Researched,” states that “I remained, for a time, mired in the belief that I should avoid anything to do with personally inclusive research. After all, I had been taught over and over that the self had no place in research, or in professional writing of any sort” (Rose, 2001). In the beginning, while researching this project, I had no direct individual or self-serving purpose since it had never even crossed my mind that self-study could be a legitimate research method. Besides that, doing self-study would mean talking about the most prevalent topics in my life – the 2020 Artsakh war and its consequences. This was an obstacle on its own since the trivialization of our experiences is so great that we don’t understand the value it possesses on an individual level. Elisabeth Hanscombe explains, “If I try now to attach the label of trauma to my own experience as a witness to such abuse I am stopped in my tracks, as if the label is too grand, too dramatic [. . .] How can I now compare my sister’s suffering and the suffering of countless others in war, in genocide, in family violence?” (as cited in Douglas et al., 2008, p.6). It is for the very purpose of quitting the act of trivializing our experiences that we should embark on the journey of self-study, where we are able to navigate through and analyze each one of our traumas individually and personally while valuing ourselves and self-study as a research method in trauma studies.

Unfolding the Gamut of Sexual Assault

Sexual violence has always been a prevalent issue in the world, and it has different forms. According to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, sexual assault can include one being touched without consent, one being pushed into performing various sexual activities with no

consent given by the victim(s) or an attempt of rape, which is the act of penetration by the perpetrator (n.d.). The Rape Abuse and Incest National Network also specifies that all of those acts can be considered acts of sexual assault; but, not all sorts of sexual assault cases should fit into the categories mentioned above (n.d.). In an article written by Antonia Abbey, Renee BeShears, A. Monique Clinton-Sherrod, and Pam McAuslan, the authors discuss the case of one being sexually assaulted through different verbal means (2004). This specific study by Abbey et al., concentrates on sexual assault cases where women were coerced to get into different acts of sexual performances through different uses of verbal strategies (2004). When I was doing my research in the field of legal terms for different forms of sexual assault, I did not come across cases of verbal coercion to be included as part of the definition. But, Abbey et al. discuss this case and argue that it is crucial for verbal coercion to be included in the definitions of different sexual assault cases (2004). It is important to understand what sexual assault means both legally and physically (both for the victims and the perpetrators). It is also essential for me to mention that sexual assault cannot be considered only the things mentioned above. Of course, there are other forms of sexual assault that people have experienced around the world and keep doing so even nowadays.

Understanding the Difference Between Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Understanding the difference between sexual assault and sexual harassment is crucial in this research. They can be used interchangeably in a lot of cases, but they have two different meanings. According to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, even though both of them can include the same forms of abuses that is already mentioned above, sexual harassment is a much broader term in this context (n.d.). Sexual harassment, as a legal concept, can include "...many types of unwelcome verbal and physical sexual attention" (n.d.). On the other hand,

sexual assault is usually considered to be "... sexual contact or behavior, often physical, that occurs without the consent of the victim" (n.d.).

The Politics of Reporting Sexual Assault Cases

Research claims that there are not a lot of people who report cases of sexual assault. (Johnson, 2017, p. 37). In a relatively new study conducted by Holly Johnson, it is believed that "Sexual assault is one of the most under-reported crimes, and, despite efforts to reform laws and legal procedures and improve the response of police, women's willingness to report has not increased and nor have these crimes declined" (Johnson, 2017, p. 37). The same source states that women are usually reluctant to report their cases of sexual assault because they might be judged or blamed for what happened, and their perpetrators might threaten them and persecute them with the intention of hurting them once again, or there is a possibility that the police will not be able to rectify the situation for them (2017, p. 37). This part of the research argues that one of the main reasons women do not report cases of sexual assault is very much connected to being afraid of how others (in this case, mostly police officers) will react to their statements. It is the fear that they might not be taken seriously or they will not be able to receive the help that they need in these situations. Of course, this fear that women who have been sexually assaulted experience has very deep-rooted reasons. Holly Johnson states that during reports of different sexual assault cases, police officers "...operate within a pervasive "culture of skepticism" towards sexual assault complainants..." (Johnson, 2017, p. 38). The same source also reports that this attitude of women who do not wish to report cases of sexual assault to the police is proven to be based on severe emotional grounds (2017, p. 40). According to Holly Johnson, "... many sexual assault complainants experience hostile and aggressive treatment by criminal defense counsel as well as police" (2017, p. 40-41). It is also mentioned that the police usually

base their judgments and investigation processes on various standards and conventional ideas, and they also impair “...complainant credibility through the use of myths and stereotypes about rape...” (Johnson, 2017, p. 40-41).

The Physical Aspect of Sexual Assault: Stereotypes, Resistance, and Aftermath

To understand the nature of sexual assault entirely, it is also important to understand the physical effects that come with it. By stating physical, I refer to the whereabouts and the situation in which these cases of sexual assault occurred. “To better develop measures to prevent sexual assault, we need to explore the circumstances in which sexual assaults occur, which women are vulnerable in which settings, and identify as well as quantify the most important contributory factors” (Larsen et al., 2014 p. 578). It is also important to understand the resistance that women show or do not because “...the degree of resistance is an important factor for the way the victim and others perceive the sexual assault” (Larsen et al., 2014, p. 580). In a study titled “Sexual assault: a descriptive study of 2500 female victims over a 10-year period,” the researchers conducted a comprehensive case study research among 2541 women on how those acts of sexual violence occurred. To understand the nature of the sexual assault, the authors talk about whether there was any resistance shown by the women who participated in the research process. About half of the participants did not act against the sexual assault either physically or verbally (Larsen et al., 2014, p. 580).

The statistics also show that most of the women who resisted verbally during the assault sustained physical injuries afterward (Larsen et al., 2014, p. 581). It was also reported that in a lot of cases, women who do not resist or fight back against the perpetrator of the sexual assault might do it based on different stereotypes and social norms, and “If we want to change the general attitudes towards sexual assault, this information should not only target young people of

both genders, who we know are at risk but also the police, healthcare professionals and the general public” (Larsen et al., 2014, p. 582).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Sexual Assault

When we talk about sexual assault, it is important to also talk about the trauma that comes with it, both after physical and verbal sexual assault. Pamela Ballinger, in her article titled “The Culture of Survivors: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Memory,” discusses the concept of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and applies her theories to those who have been sexually assaulted (1998). She states that PTSD “is commonly defined as a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with the numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimulants recalling the event” (Ballinger, 1998, p. 100). We should talk about this when we discuss sexual assault because the risk of the number of people who can have PTSD is much greater than compared to any other traumatic events such as accidents, natural disasters, etc. (R. Dworkin et al., 2023, p. 497).

Traumatic events, such as sexual assault, can impair one’s memory. Victims of sexual assault, and not only, can experience this in order to protect themselves from their own experiences. Sometimes, it is also connected with the pain that they have endured. And by saying pain here, I refer to both physical and emotional pain. In her article, Pamela Ballinger talks about the “repressed memory” concept, which is “... an unconscious psychic defense mechanism shielding victims from knowledge of traumatic events” (Ballinger, 1998, p. 102). We already established that the nature of sexual assault most of the time is not reported because of how women might be perceived. In constant mental resistance, it is also highly possible for one to

experience such traumatic events and even lock those memories away to protect themselves from the harm imposed on them. On this very point, Sharon Marcus, in one of her seminal works about the culture of rape and the term sexual assault, states that "... rape can only be feared or legally repaired, not fought" (Marcus, 1992, p. 387). This takes us back to the point where we have already stated that the culture of sexual assault is feared and suppressed by the environment and the legal system, and it cannot be resisted in this sense. It is destined to happen because of how victims of sexual assault are portrayed in reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, sexual assault can be conducted by a perpetrator in different forms. It can be through penetration, coercive sexual performances of different kinds, unwanted touching, and it can also be verbal. Sexual assault is still a phenomenon that happens nowadays. And within this scope, a lot of victims are scared of reporting their cases of sexual assault to legal bodies. The reasons behind this can vary. The research conducted suggests that police usually approach the issue with skepticism. Also, it has been reported that most of the time, victims do not get the results they wish to see, and are usually mistreated by those legal bodies for what has happened to them. The research suggests that those who have been sexually assaulted are more likely to experience PTSD than victims of any other events. The research also states that the human brain is capable of locking some of the memories that victims have been through in reality in order to protect them from the pain. It is important to find a safe space for victims to talk about their sexual assault cases because the research also suggests that understanding the circumstances of sexual assault can help prevent those cases in the future or reduce the number of cases overall.

Mindful of these findings, it is important to understand how discussions about such traumatic events can create a safe space of self-healing for those who have experienced sexual

assault and even other traumatic events. This leads to the research questions that I try to answer in this capstone project.

Research Questions

In this capstone project, I went from denying self-study to accepting it as being the right choice of research methodology. Understanding this and its functionality will ensure that I continue studying myself even after this project. As I am doing now, in the future too, I will be answering the following questions: How ethical and convenient is it to do self-study and create a safe space for a self-healing process by studying an unrelatable trauma? How much of past traumas can be analyzed through the study of an unrelatable trauma? How does writing a novel contribute to this analysis of self-study? The main question that follows these is what the outcome of this project was and if there were personal advantages or disadvantages following the process of writing the novel.

Methodology

Initially, I had chosen oral history as the larger methodological framework for this project. I had planned to conduct two interviews, with women of different ages and backgrounds talking about their experiences with sexual assault. For ethical purposes, pseudonyms would have been used instead of real names to protect their identities and security. After obtaining information about their specific sexual assault cases, the interviews were going to be transcribed so it could be easier to work with the material and incorporate it later in the research-creation piece. But, considering different factors and ethical considerations regarding the researcher's and the participants' mental health, I abandoned the idea of doing oral history. Instead, I chose to work

on this project through self-study. At first, when I learnt about self-study, I kept telling myself that I would never use it for this capstone project, because it was not a legitimate research methodology. But it turned out that this capstone project was all about self-study from the very beginning without me even realizing it.. I chose this method because even though I was doing my research on a topic that, at first sight, seemed to have nothing to do with me, I realized that in fact much of the work I engaged in was all about me alongside the perception I had of myself and my traumas. For this reason, research creation, more specifically writing creative fiction, became the greatest part of my self-study, allowing me to connect with myself and have a tête-à-tête with the fears of what seems like I always had.

Research Design

Constant Denial of Self-Study: Self-Study as the Final Research Method

Never having heard of self-study as a legitimate research method, I have always been skeptical of it since the day I learned about it. I went as far as reassuring everyone interested in this capstone that even though oral history is not working as the research method for this project, I will never do self-study. *I will never do self-study* turned into *how glad I am that I chose self-study*. At some point during this project, I realized that even without my knowledge, I have always put myself in the center of my own work, and have always brought myself right under the spotlight of this project. That itself is a huge self-study process. In her book chapter, “The Sand Diaries: Visions, Vulnerability and Self-Study,” Anastasia Kamanos Gamelin writes, “... self-study defies traditional explanations of methodology. Indeed, it is a process that must be experienced... Understanding self-study involves 'becoming' your work” (2005, p. 184).

It took so long to stop denying the fact that I was doing self-study, even from the very beginning, right when I started working on the novel in my third year of undergraduate studies. I was trying to make sense of everything that happened and was about to happen then. Self-study provides opportunities for one to go beyond the traditional methods and study reality solely from one's own perspective, both as the researcher and the researched. This methodology works both with the past and the present. Its process requires constant engagement of memories and endless inner conversations for the purpose of making sense of what seems to have no purpose.

Kamanos-Gamelin states, "It [self-study] requires acute consciousness of process, a heightened awareness and an ability to live at the intersection of past, present and purpose" (2005, p. 184).

Once comfortable with the idea of self-study as the final research method for this capstone project and having to deal with no more denialistic ideas, I started writing, taking notes, and journaling. Then, once the troubling thoughts were on the paper, I would go back to them from time to time and try to study them through what I wrote in the research-creation piece. After all, "...self-study as methodology is concerned with personal change" (Kamanos-Gamelin, 2005, p. 185). This research methodology concentrates on the discovery of yourself, as it goes beyond the discovery of what is obvious. It requires a deep connection with yourself and even higher consciousness to be able to engage with yourself on a subconscious level. "Self-study research is an approach to understand one's own practice and one's self-concept..." (Hauge, 2021, p. 2).

This research method was instrumental in understanding what has been bothering me for so long, which happened both through the research-creation piece and the analysis of the trauma literature. Before, in the process of creating, I used to write words next to each other first to please me and only then to make sense of them. Engaging in this process of self-study, it became clear that as these poetic words were thrown right next to each other, they came from a place of

self-observation in the novel. Before, I never viewed myself as the researched and looked for other sources to rely on through the process of creating. But then, I became the center of my thoughts when I worked on the research creation for this project. Even though seeing myself as the object of the research made it harder to write, it bypassed many obstacles and got back to the core purpose of self-study as a research method.

Creative Fiction

Who Am I in the Novel?

The central theme of the novel is about a young girl's experience with sexual assault and how she navigates through that traumatic event throughout her life. This theme is neither based on my life experiences nor on the fact that I have ever witnessed such a thing that would inspire me to think about writing a capstone, let alone a novel about it. This being said, there is a personal motive for writing a novel about a woman and her experiences. The drive for writing such a novel is connected with me and my struggles with the war that took place in Armenia in 2020. Being in a terrible condition myself during the war, I was struggling to understand how some people were able to stay sane and pretend (or not) that everything was as it should have been. I was struggling to understand the most basic human trait – response to trauma and ignorance as a coping mechanism. When I was fuming with anger, I could only see people around me laughing and enjoying their lives. When I lost a friend to the war, I could only see people saying, “I'm sorry,” and then moving on with their lives. This did cause a lot of distress. I found my way around unhealthy coping mechanisms a lot of the time, thinking those would help me understand others around me and their carefree nature in times of a nationwide crisis. Of course, it didn't

help as it only set back the progress that I could see in me from time to time. All of this happened two years after the war. There was only one question on my mind that was left unanswered until I decided to write it on paper and see if I could make something out of it. The central question in the novel is the following: How can one *commit* to self-discovery through various traumatic events and continue living content with the discoveries of the process? This is when the creative fiction piece for this capstone came to life. Writing, besides being a way of keeping myself sane in times of personal struggles, was also a way of discovering and seeing myself anew.

One may ask about the choice of the novel's topic since it has nothing to do with my experiences, and there is no apparent connection between my story and the story of Ragna (the main character in the novel *fiasco in the currents*.) The answer to that is very much in the question itself. The choice has never really been about the topic, as long as I was able to see myself in the character, attach a couple of struggles to it, and see its breaking point. This doesn't seem fair either to the project or to the character. It doesn't do justice to the sensitive topic that I chose for this project, and it certainly is not just for those who have suffered from it. Those are things that I have contemplated a lot as both an author and a researcher. That was when I decided to look at the process of writing not only as a way of self-discovery but as a means to raise awareness about sexual assault, since I had friends and relatives telling me about their own sexual assault cases over and over again.

One may also be confused about why I chose a woman to be the main character in the novel. If I was trying to go through a self-discovery process to understand how much trauma is enough for one to snap out of their sane boundaries, I could have as well used a male character. I could have easily done this since research shows that men who have experienced sexual assault usually refuse to talk about it, hence helping it to become taboo. To be fair, I have a lot of

similarities with the main character. She was created based on my fears, thoughts, and manners. When I first started writing the novel, the only character that I could think of as a protagonist was Ragna, a woman with a disturbing past. I believe this is because when I first dared to show my weaknesses following the 2020 Artsakh war in front of other people (friends, family members, instructors...) I was told that I should “man up.” Alongside the encouragement of a lot of people who endlessly helped me as a man to overcome my fears and negative thoughts, I have learned a lot about myself as a male author. Overtime, it became difficult living in a reality where I was not allowed to show my weaknesses because of *my circumstances*. For this reason, it became a necessity to have a female character centralized in my novel not to set me back from showing the struggles that one experiences no matter their sex.

I am not the main character in the book. I portray myself through the struggles, the ups and downs, and the resolutions that come with the story. This is where I want the reader to see me first as a human being, then as an author, then as a man, and only after these, as a grieving young boy who wishes to discover himself hand in hand with the main character.

The Writing Process

fiasco in the currents has three parts and four sections. The first part includes the sections *yesterday* and *today*. The second and third parts separately include the sections *tomorrow* and *the now*. I started writing the novel at the end of 2022. At first, I finished the first part of the book, the “Yesterday” section from Part I, in just three months. The text, of course, had yet to be heavily edited. But, I didn’t get to that part right away because the night I finished the section, the document was entirely empty once I wanted to start the editing process. A whole section, the first draft, was totally gone in a couple of hours! As much as I tried to retrieve the file,

unfortunately, there was no way to do that. Discouraged by this, I decided not to continue. It was only three months after that, that I was able to rewrite the novel from the very beginning, making sure I made multiple copies of it in different folders. At first, this event seemed very discouraging, and I nearly gave up on the idea of the novel. But, when I was not writing the novel, I dedicated my time to the research, which enlightened me with better ideas as to how to create the character. After this, the second draft of the first part was written in almost half a year.

The writing process also included experimenting. Most of the time, I would write paragraphs, trying to experiment with the sense of reality in the novel. My aim was always to write this research-creation piece in a way that can be interpreted differently based on individual experiences. My aim was to include not only sexual assault survivors in the bigger picture of the novel but also people with different problems who can, through the metaphors presented in the novel, feel included. Most of the time, I write with a clear structure and try to be as straightforward with my statements as possible. But, for this project, the experiments included writing abstract chapters about the feelings of the protagonist, the events, and how she processes them. Since I have never done them before in different writing projects, I believe these self-study experiments blended very well with the overall plot.

Thematic Conceptualization and Plot Planning

The Nature of the Writing Style and The Source of Inspiration

As I was planning on finding methods through which I would be able to answer my questions in the novel, I came across *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanigahara (2015), who very delicately succeeded in describing a story of a sexual assault that happened to a man. Having read such a book for the first time, I was inspired by the eccentricity of her style and how

successfully she was able to convey the message of such a sensitive topic. Inspired by Yanigahara and wanting to write a novel that would use a continuous storytelling style, I wrote the first outline draft of the story. Thematically, the story is designed to tell the constant struggles of the protagonist throughout the four sections of the novel.

The main incentive has always been writing through the vision of someone who struggles and has to bear that mental and physical burden over and over again every day. For that very reason, the reader might find the storyline disturbing as the main character goes through a cruel and almost indescribably painful self-healing process. As an author, it is essential to reiterate that this writing style was the only way for me to put the desired outline in a long narrative style and tell the story respectfully. Any other style would not have allowed the story to have the space for it to breathe and produce the outcome that is the novel now.

List of Trigger Warnings

What is a Trigger Warning?

Trigger warnings are usually put at the beginning of a book as a statement to warn the reader of the upcoming topics and scenes in the book that can cause stress. This is usually included in a book so that the reader can choose if the content that they are about to engage with is suitable for them or not. *fiasco in the currents* also includes a long list of trigger warnings to mainly warn the reader about the upcoming graphic scenes in the novel that can be triggering and/or prepare them for the content that they wish to proceed reading.

fiasco in the currents and Its Trigger Warnings

Writing a novel about various cases of sexual assault that happens with the protagonist first as a child and then as an adult, which is also accompanied by other triggering elements, it was necessary to mention every possible trigger warning at the beginning of the book that could perhaps generate distress for the reader. Thus, the list of trigger warnings goes in alphabetical order as follows:

Abandonment, Ableism, Addiction, Alcoholism, Alcohol Consumption and Abuse, Bipolar Disorder, Blood, Bones, Child Sexual Abuse, Death of a Parent, Different Modes of Self-Harm, Domestic Physical Abuse, Drowning, Dubious Consent Scenarios, Hate Speech and Slurs, Graphic and Explicit Violence, Grief and Loss of a Loved One, Incest, Overdose, Paedophilia, PTSD (Flashbacks to Accident, Death, Domestic Abuse, Self-Harm, Sexual Violence,) Rape, Sexual Assault, Suicide and Attempted Suicide, Suicidal Ideation, Verbal Abuse

Choosing what to write as a trigger warning was also a big part of the novel. When I finished the “Yesterday” section and reread it in its entirety, there turned out to be more trigger warnings than I had anticipated. While choosing what to include in the list, I was very meticulous about every little detail that can cause stress to the reader and hence tried to be as scrupulous as possible.

Character Development Plan and the Interviews

Character development was the second-greatest aspect of the research creation piece that I feared. While the first-greatest fear was the novel itself, I was always skeptical if the character

development plan I had in mind was right and if it really was a good fit within the context of the entire plot. At first, the plan was to interview women who would tell me about their experiences as sexual assault survivors, and then I would transcribe the interviews. After this, I was planning on working on these transcriptions and seeing any matching patterns of the survivors, which includes the way they think, the way they talk about their events, any similarities in the aftermath, and how they view themselves as survivors. All of these were supposed to help me build the main character and then bring her to the end of the story with accuracy. But, I never got the chance to do these interviews, taking into account major ethical considerations. Instead, I chose to rely on documentaries and archived interviews with survivors and perpetrators to see if the protagonist was on the right path in terms of her character development. Once it was evident that I was slowly succeeding in the character development plan, I started heavily relying on the findings of the self-study process to complete the process. The character for most of the part was based on my experiences with my traumas. Eventually, this led to one of the main research questions in this capstone on how ethical and convenient it is to do self-study and create a space for a self-healing process through studying an unrelatable trauma.

In conclusion, the methodology chosen for this capstone project is self-study. This methodology is used throughout the creation and analysis of the research creation piece, which has come a long way in confusion and doubt. The self-study process included analyzing the drafts of the novel, the writing process itself, and the choices that I made while composing the entire text. Through this methodology, I tried to understand who I am in the novel.

Artist Statement

It was a Sunday when the war broke out. My mother was trying to reach out to my brother in the army. My father was sitting on the sofa in the corner of the living room, hunched over on his worries that he kept suppressing. The news was on the TV. My sister went to work despite it being an ordinary Sunday. She is a journalist... she had a job to do. It was a couple of hours of mayhem, and then everything went back to normal. My parents went to the supermarket to buy a couple of things for dinner and in the meantime I was alone. I don't really remember what I did back then, but I was sitting all alone in front of the TV, waiting to hear something about the war – about my brother.

I tell my friends that I can't live here anymore. Even now, when I'm writing about this, holding the tears back at such strength because I don't want them ever to be seen again by others. My throat is hurting through the many threats of bursting open from the accumulated pain inside. My hands are numb, shaky, and very cold.

Days went by, and the war never seemed to come to an end. And one night, in regular confusion and fear, I tried to find comfort in the Bible. I *was* a Christian man, and it didn't seem to help. It didn't seem to help when I had it under my pillow. It didn't bring me comfort. And it didn't bring me peace on the night when I got the worst call of my life.

A couple of months before that, we were together talking about his aspirations in life. He had many of them. He possessed a virgin conscience that always spread onto others. He was gone! It just breaks my heart that a man of his demeanor did not get the chance to experience life as it is. And then I believe I kept blaming myself for it when there was no apparent reason for that. I kept on living with survivor's guilt when I was not even aware of it until someone pinpointed that, and it came like a slap on the cheek so soft that had never seen real hardships in

life like the ones on the frontline. It hit me in both eyes, leaving me with an unprecedented enlightenment of past sufferings that came from a place unknown to me. And then realizing this about myself was a whole new pain that I was not familiar with. I caught myself being unfair to me and my body – trying to destroy it, thinking it would help with the pain. It, of course, did not, and all I was left with was another set of pain and suffering. And just as I imagined myself from a different perspective, I started writing about it. I put my soul into a fictional someone else and made it suffer, so all the anger could come out of me. I literally put my brain in the character's head with all of its perceptions of past traumas to torture it for living despite so many of us dying.

Later, my brother was told this news. They were best friends. I was blamed once again, but this time by someone else for not telling the sorrowful message. I was accused by strangers of grieving. I was blamed for being a man and crying, mourning, laughing, dancing, sitting, and staring into the abyss in times of intense pain that kept taking over me in the most ruthless ways. This was when I started working on *fiasco in the currents*.

The novel consists of three parts. The first part, "Yesterday," talks of all the past aches that I presented the character with. The second section, "Today," is about the change I want to see and what I think will happen if I go after it. The third part, "Tomorrow," is where I slowly come to terms with everything that happened. This is where I try to make sense of a concept so unfamiliar to me – *feelings*. The last part, "The Now," is the last current – the concluding act of the fiasco in the last current.

I have a purpose in life: to make this world a better place. I want to see a world better in its morals. I want to live in a world where aspirations are not killed, suffocated in their literal meaning, but supported, lifted up so high in the sky where no hands could touch them. I want to

live in a world where I am not blamed for feeling and where I am free to stand apart from my fears. *fiasco in the currents* is not a book about pain. It's a resolution that I came to here – in this cruel world, and despite pressing my teeth harder on my tongue, I could not lie about it. This is the purpose of this work – the central statement I am focusing on.

Reflections on Process

Everything about this capstone felt very strange and weird from the first day. I started writing the novel first, and even though I was writing for myself, I knew that it would eventually be part of the capstone. Every time I finished a chapter and shared it with friends for feedback, it felt even weirder. Every time, it felt like a piece of myself was being exposed again and again. In this vulnerable state, everything seemed very strange to the point that several times, I even thought of changing the topic of the capstone and doing something totally different. Now, reflecting back on this experience, it feels even stranger that the capstone is complete, and I am actually sharing it with strangers. I am sharing what I have been thinking was weird.

As strange as it felt, I always thought once I did the oral history interviews with the sexual assault survivors who agreed to be part of this project, it would be different because then I would have had something to back up the choice of this capstone topic with. But, I never went down that path, considering first my and then the participants' mental health. It would not have been fair if I did the interviews only for me to put my internal confusion at ease and torture my interviewees with my unpreparedness. Taking into account this ethical consideration, I only incorporated archived interviews with sexual assault survivors and perpetrators to help me develop the characters in the novel rightfully. My decision not to do the interviews may seem

selfish as well, but it was absolutely the right choice. If I did the interviews, there would be neither the novel, nor me.

There was a time when I completely forgot the intentions that I had with this project. At some point, throughout the creation of the novel I started writing, only to hurt and punish myself for sharing too much in this capstone. There were times when I would write chapters to only hurt the character as much as possible and make the novel even more dramatic. I was lost in my confusion and anger that I was mentally not strong enough to do the interviews and do everything as planned. But once I was content with what I had on my table, those chapters were re-edited and rewritten in a manner that, I believe, supports the statement that I am trying to make with *fiasco in the currents*.

Reflecting back on the process, I think I could have just approached this project with a much more carefree nature. But this capstone has never been just a project that I wanted to be over with as soon as possible. I think I have a lot to say about life and how I see it through its beauty and ugliness, black and white, good and bad. Now that it is clear that I said everything I wanted to say with this project, my mind is more at ease that this will eventually reach its right audience. And initially, having been scared of the criticism that I may receive because of this novel, I now understand that my intentions with it have always been pure. Of course, there may be errors that need to be fixed, but that's for later. For now, reflecting back on the process, I am sure that I have done everything with as much care and consideration as possible, and I am not turning my back on the project that I poured my soul into.

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Research Creation Piece

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