Unearthing narratives: Exploring women's experiences and reflections on the Armenian genocide through memoirs of two women survivors

by

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Abstract

This capstone attempts to unearth women's experiences of the Armenian genocide by delving into two memoirs authored by women survivors, Payladzou Captanian and Serpouhi Tavoukdjian. It seeks to illustrate how women contextualized their and their community's experiences, focusing on dehumanization, personal resistance, sexual violence, as well as life after enduring mass violence. It also considers the discursive space, the construction of the self, and the choice of narration within the memoirs. Moreover, this work seeks to illustrate how writing served as a tool for representation and constituted an act of resistance.

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Throughout my capstone journey, many have asked me why I got engaged in this research and why it is important to me. In the beginning, I failed to give a comprehensive answer, not because I didn't have one, but because back then, in my head, the answer presented itself through memories of personal experiences rather than words that I could articulate.

In recent years, the escalation of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has revived the notion of reinforcing traditional gender roles, promoting an ideal for women that glorifies fragility and obedience, invoking history to claim that Armenian women have historically conformed to this standard.

Who reads women's narratives? Who decides their value and importance?

The voices of the past are always in the present, but these voices are selected. The positivist empiricist standards of academia historically empowered by male authority have overlooked women's experiences, leaving them in the margins. Appropriated narratives on women are used to reproduce a profoundly patriarchal society that undermines women's experiences. This project is my attempt to untangle women's stories from patriarchal narratives.

Reflecting on my school years, I realize that women's narratives were absent from the academic programs, with a few exceptions. Later, I realized that there is a lack of these narratives, not because they do not exist but because women's stories and experiences are not given the same importance. They are appropriated, mystified, overly criticized, and often misinterpreted.

Despite the abundance of women survivors, women's experiences and reflections have been absent from the conventional narratives of the genocide. Throughout my capstone, I discovered that many women have recounted their experiences and shared their reflections on the atrocities that forever changed their lives. Being a descendant of Armenian genocide survivors, I am in a never-ending search. I am in a continuous struggle to uncover painful family stories, of the details hidden from me as a child.

I have embarked on this research because I want to know and because I want others to know. Knowing is the first step to understanding, to empathy, to resistance, to transgression…

If they spoke, they wanted to be heard.

If they wrote, they wanted to be read.

The voices of the past are always in the present and I want women's voices to be with us as well.

Literature review

The objective of this section of the literature review is to discuss the gendered aspects of the Armenian genocide, focusing on the experiences of women and girls. The instrumentalization of sexual assault, particularly rape, the forceful assimilation of Armenian women into Muslim households, and the later efforts of reintegration are discussed with a focus on gendered aspects.

Historical background

The Armenian genocide of 1915-1917 was a seminal atrocity that almost entirely destroyed the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. Approximately 1.5 million

Armenians perished, while others were affected by non-lethal genocidal acts and were often forcefully assimilated into Muslim households. Although Armenians and other minorities supported the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), a political party also known as Young Turks, after coming to power, the reforms in the interests of minorities were substituted with pan-Turkism and pan-Turanism, ideologies which respectively emphasized the ethnic homogeneity within the Ottoman Empire and encouraged the unification of Turkic peoples from the Balkan Peninsula to Central Asia. The Armenian population of Asia Minor, which was aiming for autonomy, posed a challenge to this unification, which eventually led to the genocide of the Armenian people through an intentional plan executed through systematic and widespread genocidal acts (Derderian, 2005). The acts of violence targeting diverse members constituting the Armenian community were determined by the intersection of gender, age, economic and social background, political and religious activity—grouping individuals to determine different paths of destruction of the community.

Gendered implications of the pre-genocide stage

Acts of violence targeting women were central features of the marginalization of the Armenian community even before the genocide of 1915 began. Sexual intimidation was omnipresent, creating a sense of alarm and terror while at the same time dehumanizing Armenians as a group. Bjørnlund discusses the earlier massacres of Armenians in the 1890s and 1909, wondering if this was the beginning of dehumanizing Armenians as a group allied with the depiction of Armenians as “disloyal” and “greedy” (2009, p. 22) by politicians and the state media even before the First World War. While he recognizes that the death marches had the leading role in dehumanizing Armenian victims, he emphasizes that the earlier massacres became the substratum of the genocide. Parallelly, for Armenians, sexual intimidation evoked

memories of earlier massacres, for example, in Adana (1909), after the CUP came to power (Derderian, 2005).

Living side by side with the victim group gave the perpetrators insider knowledge of their societal and familial structures. Aleksanyan argues that “traditional family structures and gender roles” determined the “gendered path of destruction” (2023, p.11). She also explains that Armenian women were vulnerable before the genocide because, in the Ottoman Empire, Muslim men could marry non-Muslim women, which made Armenian women targets of kidnapping and rape. The marginalization of the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire was gender-specific and included “sexual insults, intimidation, and violence” (Derderian, 2005, p. 3). The pre-genocide stage leading to the Armenian genocide of 1915 illustrates how gendered instruments of intimidation and violence were wielded to systematically marginalize and dehumanize Armenians as a group.

Gendered aspects of the Armenian genocide

The Armenian genocide was a gendercide, which can be defined as “gender-selective mass killing” (Bjørnlund, 2009, p. 17). Ekmekçioğlu explains, “The Ottoman Turkish state's campaign to get rid of its Armenian population involved a variety of strategies, all sex-selective and age-sensitive” (2013, p. 525). As with many other genocides, it started with the destruction of the male population of military age. Armenian men who were conscripted into the Ottoman military were disarmed and killed or worked to death (Aleksanyan, 2023; Bjørnlund, 2009; Derderian, 2005). The extermination of men of military age was concurrent with the arrests, deportation, torture, and massacres of the Armenian elite, including politicians, religious leaders, and other groups who were mostly comprised of men. It is important to mention that their wives

were specifically targeted for physical and sexual abuse. Women whose relatives were suspected of resistance or were politically active were treated harshly, as physical abuse and rape of female relatives also had the objective of intimidation and emasculation to suppress attempts of resistance (Derderian, 2005). Consequently, the Armenian population endured both physical and psychological emasculation, reducing the prospects for collective resistance.

After the removal of men from Armenian communities, the next stage of the Armenian genocide was deportations comprised of death marches. The Ministry of Interior's Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants was supposedly organizing the *relocation* out of military necessity, however, "the general purpose of the deportations was to kill all or most of the deportees by outright massacre, individual acts of violence, attrition, starvation, dehydration, or disease before they reached the alleged relocation areas in the desert" (Bjørnlund, 2009, p. 19). Deportees, who were mostly women, children, and elderly, were often given hours of notice regarding *relocation*. In many cases, women were unaware that men were killed once they were removed from their communities. They were also told that their families would be reunited after the *relocation* to Syrian deserts. Derderian explains that this strategy at least initially successfully prevented women's organized resistance and "assumption of familial leadership" (2005, p. 6). During the initial stages of the deportation, those who resisted or had previously been politically active were massacred. Men and boys who managed to escape the initial stage of destruction were targeted during death marches and immediately massacred. Men had to bribe the guards or disguise themselves as women not to be killed immediately (Bjørnlund, 2009).

The death marches in deserted areas, which would often last for months, created conditions calculated to lead to the destruction of the deportees. The caravans of deportees had to walk kilometers in inhumane conditions and pass through "circuitous country roads, and rugged

mountain passes crowded with the rotting, worm-infested corpses of those left behind from previous caravans" without food and water (Aleksanyan, 2023, p. 23). The routes of death marches bypassed larger populated villages to limit access to food and water. The deportees were also not allowed to drink from streams (Aleksanyan, 2023). Bjørnlund (2009) discusses an eyewitness testimony who explained that caravans often marched in the same areas, in circles, to exhaust Armenians and kill anyone who was left behind.

Sexual violence directed towards female deportees escalated during the death marches, as women found themselves exhausted and without any means of protection, becoming targets of "gender-specific abuse" (Bjørnlund, 2009, p. 25). Derderian explains, "Rape, kidnapping, sex slavery, and forced conversion to Islam furthered the genocidal program, in which women and girls represented a productive and reproductive force targeted for forced labor and biological assimilation" (2005, p. 3). Bjørnlund (2009) tries to understand the reasons behind not massacring the remaining Armenian population. He brings the accounts of missionaries who asked this question to gendarmes, which were organized groups responsible for the *relocation* of the Armenian population. They explained that Armenians should be miserable and that killing them immediately would burden them with a large amount of corpses. This answer illustrates the dehumanization of Armenians as a group in the eyes of the perpetrators and is a "combination of rationalities" (Bjørnlund, 2009, p. 21). Bjørnlund also discusses the accounts of Khanum Palootzian, a deportee from Erzerum, who stated that gendarmes were ordered "not to kill women with sword or bullet, only in another way" (2009, p. 21). While massacres of women and children were still common, deportees were also killed through the conditions gendarmes created, such as starvation, ongoing abuse, and exhaustion. The author calls this fate "worse than

dying" because the humiliation, abuse, and suffering were not ended immediately for these victims (Bjørnlund, 2009, p. 25).

Dehumanization through sexual violence

Gendered sexual violence served as a tool for both dehumanizing the victim group and entertaining the perpetrators, contributing to the broader objective of extermination and assimilation. Bjørnlund discusses whether the violence signified that Armenians as a group were already dehumanized in the eyes of the perpetrators of gendered sexual crimes. He outlines the role of rape for the perpetrators, distinguishing "… sadism; gratification by total domination; symbolic purification (the exorcizing of 'evil' through rituals of degradation); 'mutual demonstrations of masculinity' in the cases of gang rape and humiliation, intimidation, and dehumanization of the immediate victim, the victim's male relatives, and of the Armenians as a group…" (Bjørnlund, 2009, p. 29). His discussion of sexual violence reveals that the climate of systematic violence against Armenians could have created an environment where rape was used to not only degrade the victim group but also to entertain the perpetrators.

Several researchers have attempted to explain how sexual violence pertains to the objective of the extermination of the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire. Bjørnlund quotes Seifert to explain that "'rape is not an aggressive manifestation of sexuality, but rather sexual manifestation of aggression' and when occurring in a systematic, organized fashion during genocidal campaigns, rape becomes an integrated part of the arsenal of destruction" (2009, p. 31). Similarly, Derderian (2005) writes that rape should be viewed more than a means of gratification but as an exercise of power over the victim group. Rape illustrates the relationship of subordination through the violation of personal integrity, which dehumanizes both

the victim and the group. Very often, women were raped publicly in front of their family, relatives, and other members of the group. In a community with conservative traditions, this added an additional level of stigma for the victims, intimidating other members of the groups in addition to the dehumanization. The abuse that was initiated and tolerated by the perpetrators also had the objective of weakening the remaining community members to prepare them for assimilation (Derderian, 2005).

Forced assimilation of Armenian women

The patriarchal perception of gender and ethnicity becomes fundamental for understanding the assimilation of Armenian women and children into Muslim households. Men were considered to be the "bearers of ethnicity," while women were "susceptible to assimilation" (Derderian, 2005, p. 4). While the Ottoman central government was initially against intermarriage, regional differences in the implementation of this order allowed for the kidnapping of women and girls for marriage.

Contemporary observers view the assimilation of women and girls as a part of the intentional genocidal policy to disintegrate the Armenian community. Women could convert to Islam by marrying Muslim men and escaping deportation. The traditional perception of the bearers of ethnicity is demonstrated in the refusal to accept men's conversion to Islam. In addition, it can be observed in the refusal of women's conversion, who had male children, even if the babies were still unable to walk. The attachment of Armenian women to Muslim men signified the change in Armenian women's ethnicity, resulting in the forced assimilation of Armenian women and girls into Muslim households (Derderian, 2005). Children in these forced intermarriages were considered to be Turkish. Female deportees were also assimilated as

workers and concubines, as “the assimilation of female deportees into Ottoman households coincided with the Genocide’s goals by furthering the assimilation of survivors and thus eradicating the Armenian community” (Derderian, 2005, p. 10). By including Armenian women in their households, men received an economic gain, such as saving the dowry, which they had to pay if they chose to marry a Muslim girl, and gaining rights to the women’s children and family property. Gendarmes often sold Armenian women, and Muslim men would buy them as servants, sex slaves, nannies, maids, farmhands, and forced prostitutes (Derderian, 2005). The experiences of Armenian women during deportations, as well as their subsequent exploitation, reveal the brutal consequences of patriarchal power dynamics within the context of genocide.

Tattooing in the context of the Armenian genocide

Tattoos, which were markings given to some of the Armenian women as a part of their integration into non-Armenian communities, became the everlasting markers of their experiences of the genocide. Attarian (2016) brings to attention the Armenian word for faith, *jagadakir*, which can be translated as “the writing on the forehead” (2016, p. 257). She writes, “Their fate had branded them for life, with that lone word of ‘jagadakir’ encapsulating the actual territorialization and appropriation of their bodies in equal measure” (Attarian, 2016, p. 257). Semerdjian (2023) pays special attention to the skin, which creates contact between the person and the world. For her, the skin, in this case, tattooed skin, allows others to pass judgment on a person, as it evokes conflicting emotions.

Glum (2021) views tattooing in the context of the assimilation of Armenian women into Islamic communities, emphasizing that tattoos forever changed women’s relation to the Armenian community and Armenianness. Glum discusses the common practice of tattooing

among the Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab Islamic communities of rural areas, explaining that in these communities, the face, especially the chin, forehead and cheeks, upper body, and hands, were common places for tattoos. The available photographs indicate that these placements can also be observed in the case of assimilated Armenian women.

Tattoos indicated women's marital status, religion, and ethnicity. Glum writes that in Islamic communities, very often, tattoos communicated sexual connotations, such as puberty and marriage. She discusses eyewitness Tagouhi Antonian's observations, which indicate that by tattooing their faces with green ink, Bedouins protected Armenians from becoming a part of a Turkish pasha's harem. Glum explains that while this was a precaution, Armenian women later had to marry one of the Bedouins (2021).

Tattoos ascribed Armenian women a new cultural identity with a religious subcontext. Glum (2021) uses Smeaton's study to explain that in Islamic communities, tattoos had religious connotations and were believed to have healing and protective powers. These markings were a "physical manifestation" of a non-Armenian culture; therefore, they marked Armenian women's belonging and assimilation into it (Glum, 2021, p. 28). While tattoos were not meant to indicate a person's ethnic belonging, many Armenian women thought that the tattoos turned them into an *Arab* (Glum, 2021). Glum discusses the testimonies of two survivors, who both were tattooed to have a visual indicator of their belonging to their new ethnicity. In addition to the common restrictions on speaking Armenian or exercising their Armenian culture and heritage, tattoos changed the appearance of Armenian women, assimilating them into different cultures through visual means.

The act of tattooing is a complex aspect of the Armenian genocide. It left a lasting impact on the lives and bodies of women whose skin was etched with markings, not only symbolizing the trauma they endured but also contributing to the stigma surrounding them, serving as tangible reminders of their experiences. Tattoos were culturally specific visual markers communicating specific messages; however, people without specific knowledge of their significance would not be able to interpret their intended meanings. Therefore, the perception of tattoos depended on the identity of the person attempting to decode them, which led to different interpretations and judgments regarding tattooed Armenian women.

The reintegration efforts and challenges survivors faced

Vorpahavak, which was "the gathering of orphans," had the objective "to find, liberate, and reintegrate children and women sequestered in Muslim households" (Ekmekçioğlu, 2013, p. 534). In Sinai, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, the *Vorpahavak* started in late 1917 after the arrival of British and French forces, while in Istanbul, it began after the Mudros Armistice, which indicated the de jure occupation of Istanbul. The reintegration process was boosted after the signing of the Sèvres Treaty and later the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. During the rescue efforts, some women refused to return to their native communities. Ekmekçioğlu (2013) explains that some women assimilated into their new communities and were afraid of the stigmatization they would face after their return, while others finally had loving families after the horrors of genocide and were reluctant to submit to an uncertain future, leaving their lives behind. The Armenian Patriarchate and the Ottoman government had similar views on the reintegration of people below the age of twenty. The Ottoman policies annulled their conversions to Islam without considering their personal inclinations. However, for people above the age of twenty, the Ottoman government encouraged assimilated Armenians to choose what was best for them. This

was done in an effort to avoid the constitutional conflict of marriage and religion, which had to be resolved in court. Even in the case of married women under twenty, their annulled conversion to Islam during the time of marriage with a Muslim man had to be resolved in court. The Patriarchate decided that all Armenians "irrespective of their age, choice, marital status, or self-identification" (Ekmekçioğlu, 2013, p. 538) had to be reclaimed, while those who chose to escape had to be imprisoned. Ekmekçioğlu notes that not everyone participating in *Vorpahavak* agreed with this stance. Her discussion illustrates that the rescue process faced gendered challenges because, for assimilated women, both marriage and divorce had religious implications tied to Islamic communities, which were not thoroughly addressed during the process of the *Vorpahavak* (Ekmekçioğlu, 2013).

Ekmekçioğlu situates reintegration in a larger political and social context while illustrating its gendered aspects. The process of reintegration was affected by the efforts of "National Revival/Rebirth," which had the objective "to raise the Armenian population, Armenian landholdings, and Armenian life generally, back to, or beyond, the pre-war levels" (Ekmekçioğlu, 2013, p. 544). The Wilsonian concept of "self-determination," which implied that "the nationality of a region was to devolve to that community that made up the majority of the population" (Ekmekçioğlu, 2013, p. 543), created an opportunity to advocate for the expansion of lands of the Republic of Armenia in Transcaucasia established in May 1918. This would start the unification of Eastern and Western parts of Armenia, establishing the long-awaited Greater or Unified Armenia. However, after the Armenian genocide and the First World War, Armenians lacked the population for this. In order to have statistical proof of the necessary demographic profile, in their efforts of nation-building, "National Revival/Rebirth" focused on women, banning abortions, publishing new methods of child-raising to avoid early deaths, and

encouraging marriage. Armenian authorities also “changed the criteria for inclusion in the national collectivity” (Ekmekçioğlu, 2013, p. 544) in order to include children, including unborn ones, with Muslim fathers into Armenian communities as Armenians. The paternity rules were changed without any opposition. However, the author emphasizes that abortion was also banned for women who did not want to bear children forced on them through rape (Ekmekçioğlu, 2013). Ekmekçioğlu’s thorough analysis provides the foundation for understanding important state policies in their historical contexts. Her writing reveals the gendered aspects of the policies and the expectations put on women during the reintegration efforts.

Feminist epistemologies

This section of the literature review discusses the theoretical underpinnings guiding this capstone. This research is rooted in feminist epistemologies, which have revealed serious issues in the traditional realm of knowledge production. In turn, decolonizing methodologies stemming from standpoint theory empower anti-oppressive research practices, instrumentalizing research as a form of resistance.

Standpoint theory has transformed the research paradigms by questioning the epistemological foundations based on which knowledge is produced. It uncovers the relationship between the researcher's identity, knowledge production, and society and argues that knowledge produced by dominant groups through the traditional understanding of epistemology undermines minority groups and results in the production of knowledge that leaves out and marginalizes non-dominant groups (Code, 1991). Knowledge is neither impartial nor objective but “a construct that bears the marks of its constructors” (Code, 1991, p. 55). Code emphasizes the role of “masculine authority,” which has founded the production of knowledge through oppressive

research methods (1991, p. 55). She explains, “Knowledge produced in seemingly objective ways carries an authority that mirrors, reinforces, and probably also derives from masculine authority” (Code, 1991, p. 25). Standpoint theory illustrates the gaps in research practices and knowledge production, inviting us to question the notion of objectivity and reflect on our own standpoints. Research in social sciences is the representation of people and their experiences. This means that it should be “critical and self-reflective,” setting the standard for all sciences (Code, 1991, p. 41). Standpoint theory questions who produces knowledge and whom the produced knowledge serves, arguing that our ways of knowing are politically and socially situated.

Understanding the way power is used and distributed in research practices is fundamental for the discussion on standpoint theory. Haraway (2004) emphasizes the ontology of power in knowledge production, recognizing that research is a powerful tool that can be used both for further oppression and marginalization, as well as liberation. For her, shifting the paradigm can transfer the source of oppression to a source of “knowledge and political liberation” (Haraway, 2004, p. 10). Ultimately, the “prisonhouses” of knowledge production, which contribute to the said oppression and marginalization, can become “toolboxes” offering new perspectives, new understanding, and ultimately a “better life” (Harding, 2004 p. 6).

Oppressive research practices often carried out with a colonial mindset have had devastating effects on indigenous communities. Smith (2012) explains that Western research practices view indigenous people as objects of research, undermining their role in the process of knowledge production. Anti-oppressive research recognizes that knowledge does not exist in a vacuum and rather emerges from the interactions of individuals shaped by their identities (Potts & Brown, 2015). The ani-oppressive, decolonial approach seeks to amplify the voices of those

historically excluded due to oppressive research methodologies. It acknowledges marginalized communities without objectifying them, honoring their experiences, and granting them agency to narrate their own stories authentically. Smith's (2012) *Indigenous Research Agenda* aims for liberation through a combination of political, social, and academic processes based on recovery and self-realization. For her, research should be done by indigenous people through a shared authority, and it should be without the pressure to conform to Western standards of knowledge production as well as the pressure of the superior language, which is English, and its academic discourse (Smith, 2012). Challenging the oppressive patterns ingrained in knowledge production maps the road to liberation, making research a form of resistance for marginalized communities.

The epistemological considerations discussed in this section are crucial for research engaged with genocide studies. Very often, genocides are studied to fit into a Western paradigm of genocide and its legal definition. While the focus on the legal aspect is fundamental in addressing the denialism of the Armenian genocide, its study should not be limited to it. To grasp the full concept of genocide, we must also examine aspects overlooked by legal definitions, which were nonetheless vital in the planning and execution of the atrocities. This can help understand the concept of genocide, which can ultimately help in its prevention.

On another note, the common focus on the lethal acts during the Armenian genocide restricts our understanding of it, overshadowing non-lethal methods used, particularly targeting Armenian women. Even the conventional grand narrative tends to focus on deaths, more particularly on the number of deaths overshadowing other experiences. This often leads to the marginalization of Armenian women's experiences of the genocide, who were primarily targeted through non-lethal means. There is a lack of representation of women's experiences and perspectives on the genocide despite the abundance of women survivors.

The focus on the victims who became survivors also presents the opportunity to study personal stories and narratives of the genocide. While it is impossible to create a narrative that includes all experiences, it is crucial to remember that the bird's eye view, while useful, provides broad perspectives that lack depth. Personal subjective narratives offer introspective perspectives that are detailed, personal, and human.

Research questions

The overarching objective of this capstone is to facilitate knowledge of the nuanced understanding of Armenian women's interpretations and reflections on their experiences of the genocide. How did women reflect on, interpret, and position their and their community's experience of the genocide in the given socio-cultural environment? How did writing memoirs become a space of meaning-making and narrative creation for the survivors of traumatic events? By looking at women's standpoint, this research aims to unearth women's narratives, making them more tangible, in turn, humanizing victims of the atrocity.

Methodology

I selected two survivor memoirs, Payladzou Captanian's *Tsavak* (1922) and Serpouhi Tavoukdjian's *Exiled: Story of an Armenian girl* (1933) for a close critical study of the experiences of two Armenian women from different backgrounds. From the earlier stages of my research, I identified memoir studies and discourse analysis as the main methodological tools of my capstone. Memoir studies and narrative research gave me the opportunity to study subjective, personal narratives, representing detailed, unique experiences, while discourse analysis and the voice-centered relational approach instrumentalized the observation of common themes and the discursive space within the memoirs.

Narrative research

*"... sequential temporal orderings of human experience into narrative are not just characteristics of humans, but **make** us human" (Squire, 2008, p. 44).*

Narrative research is a widely used method instrumentalizing qualitative research. While in popular culture, narrative is a "representational sequence" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 3) based on similar biographical or social patterns, in social research, it refers to the diversity within a field of study. Narrative research is primarily concerned with "layers of meaning" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 3), which can also be contradictory. It places special attention on not only the structure of narratives but also on who produces them, how they are perceived in society, and how they get "silenced, contested or accepted" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 2).

Narrative research came to rise through two academic movements that challenged the empiricist positivist approach to research. Person-centered case studies of life histories accelerated with the post-war humanist approaches in sociology and psychology (Squire et al., 2008). In turn, French poststructuralism and the postmodern movement advanced deconstructionism in the field of humanities. Both humanist and poststructuralist traditions of narrative research view narratives in the context of resistance to power structures. The fluidity of the narratives, their conscious and unconscious meanings, and power relations in the context of which narratives exist, started becoming the primary concerns in social research (Squire et al., 2008). Narrative research displayed that "multiple, disunified subjectivities were involved in the production and understanding of narratives…" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 3), which emphasized the need to revisit meta-narratives.

A narrative is a person's "external expression" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 5) of their experiences and interpretations of events. Narrative research is concerned with the ways in which people construct their stories and place those stories in a wider cultural context (Abrams, 2016). Narrative analysis focuses on the interpretation of the world through personal stories. It seeks to uncover how experiences and lives are storied, which emphasizes that the telling of the story is equally important to its content (Abrams, 2016). Gready (2008) observes that experiences and identities change over time but are affected by narrative episodes. This emphasizes the need to give voice to individuals from various backgrounds and allow them to interpret and represent their own experiences instead of permitting others to write their histories. When a person tells their story in an oral or written form, the public and the private intersect, as stories start existing simultaneously in both locations. The telling becomes a process that intertwines with other narrations, interpretations, and receptions over time. Besides the opportunity to discuss personal experiences, the narration becomes a means for controlling representation (Gready, 2008).

Very often, narratives of traumatic experiences remain untold. They are seen as secrets that should be kept silent and not stories that should be told (Abrams, 2016). When these stories are told, often, they are different from culturally and socially accepted narratives. Survivors of collective and individual trauma often find it difficult to put their experiences into words because language and narrative devices provide limited space for them. Offering a physical and discursive space by allowing the person to narrate their own story becomes fundamental (Hyden, 2008). Societal structures and cultural conventions form personal stories, however stories simultaneously become a way to construct and express personal identity and agency, "… the storyteller does not tell the story, so much as she/he is told by it" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 3).

Memoir studies

"An autobiographical text is a record of what has been preserved, rescued from the sea of memory" (Chandler, 1990, p. 55).

This capstone places women's own interpretations and reflections at its core. Memoirs, which can be seen as self-authored narratives, offer a unique lens to explore personal, subjective experiences directly from women's perspectives:

> Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story and reflect and consider the meaning of the story. It is a peculiarly open form, inviting broken and incomplete images, half-collected fragments—all the mass (and mess) of detail. It offers to shape this confusion—and in shaping, of course it necessarily creates a work of art. (Hampl as cited in Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 16)

Engaging in autobiographical writing is engaging in a dialogue between memory and imagination. The word imagination has several meanings, one of which connotes falsification, still, imagining surpasses this reductive connotation. For Chandler (1990), imagining is an essential part of remembering. Interpretation itself is an "imaginative act" (p. 68) needed for meaning-making. Imagining involves remembering, organizing, conceptualizing, and making sense of visions, thoughts, and even words—imagination extends beyond simple intervention, "… if memory is rooting, imagination is branching" (Chandler, 1990, p. 69).

For the survivors of mass atrocities, remembering comes with dangers. Engaging in introspective reflections is often combined with the urge to escape the constraints of the past (Chandler, 1990). Remembering becomes a decision as the person may choose to resist the memories or "enter into them" (Chandler, 1990, p. 45) to relive them. In turn, remembering

becomes dangerous because the survivor can reopen their wounds. Chandler brings forward Rich's example, who writes that one can observe the wreck from a distance, viewing only the surface or immersing oneself in the water—in the past. The dive is dangerous, but the "private vision" (Chandler, 1990, p. 45) offers the deepest kind of memory, returning the person *there*. They become witnesses to their experience, "myths fall away and are replaced by words" (Chandler, 1990, p. 46), and for Rich, "The words are purposes. / The words are maps" (as cited in Chandler, 1990, p. 46).

Language inhibits new meaning and purpose depending on the experiences of the person and their objectives in life-writing. Wording the experiences gives hope to survivors. Many of them know that while language enables the cruelties they have experienced, it can also heal them (Chandler, 1990). Through writing, people want to "experience both a sense of reunion and a sense of release" and make sense of the memories that construct their selves (hooks, 1989, p. 158). Chandler (1990) notes that for survivors, words ascribe different and even new meanings. She quotes Murray who views writing as "a significant kind of thinking in which the symbols of language assume a purpose of their own and instruct the writer during the composing process" (as cited in Chandler, 1990, p. 64).

Discourse analysis

"All stories are imbued with the nature of the world in which they took place or in which they are told. Behind every individual story is a socio-economic and political landscape. While stories start with individuals and end with the landscape, analysis finishes up the landscape and reminds us of individual stories that exist, often against odds" (Bertaux as cited in Goodley et al., 2004, p. 152).

Discourse analysis becomes instrumental for understanding the construction of the self in a given society. Postmodernist philosophers have established that language is not a “neutral or transparent medium” (Code, 1991, p. 58). They have also argued that discourse is tied to the given socio-cultural and political domination that instrumentalizes regulations (Goodley et al., 2004). The relationship between discourse, power, and regulation has to be studied to uncover the role of discourses in fulfilling social needs, which, according to Foucault, will ultimately reveal the cultural, social, and political construction of “truths” in a given society (Goodley et al., 2004).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a critical approach to narrative analysis. It includes thematic analysis, which considers the content of the story, structural analysis, focusing on structural units and their roles in the narrative, and dialogic/performance analysis, which considers stories as interactions in a given context (Forchtner, 2021). Thematic analysis is often used to identify common themes in narratives as well as their role in sense-making and the construction of the narrative. CDA also instrumentalizes the analysis of knowledge and identity construction by contextualizing the content of the narratives in relation to power. Goodley et al. explain, “All human subjects are open to a gamut of discursive regimes that ‘allow’ them opportunities for making sense of themselves” (2004, p. 115). CDA offers a valuable perspective on discourse and power. Instead of viewing language as the reflection of reality, it considers the role of language in creating and sustaining it through power relations embedded in language, encrypted in it through power structures. Through analyzing the content and the context of narratives, CDA becomes a tool for understanding narratives and the role people, institutions, discourses, and their relation to power, play in it (Goodley et al., 2004).

Voice-centered relational approach

"So, narrative is not merely the content of the story, but the telling of it" (Abrams, 2016, p. 106).

The voice-centered relational approach is a qualitative method nested in feminist theories of knowledge production that focuses on the voices within the narratives. Goodley et al. (2004) explain that the method can be used to deconstruct and make sense of the narratives uncovered during the research. The voice-centered relational method is based on relational ontology, which claims that humans exist within interdependent social relations that help them contextualize themselves within their social and cultural backgrounds (Bright, 2016). Narrators may have multiple, even contradictory, ways of thinking and recounting their experiences, which illustrates that voice is multi-layered and complex. As Goodley et al. recount, "The focus on voice aims to transform the act of reading into an act of listening as the reader takes in different voices and follows them through the narrative" (2004, p. 118). How a person recounts their experiences becomes equally important to the content as it offers new insights into different perceptions of the narrator within the narrative.

To understand the multiple voices within the narrative, a guide is offered comprised of four readings with specific interests—each with a specific focus (Goodley et al., 2004). The first reading is "Reading for the plot and our response to the narrative" (Goodley et al., 2004, p. 117), which explores the overall story, its structure, the people present in it, and the context evident from the story. It also encourages the reader to be aware of their response to the story. The second is the "Reading for the voice of 'I'" (Goodley et al., 2004, p. 118) which scrutinizes the way personal pronouns shift when the person explores their experiences and discusses their own

observations. Brown and Gillian emphasize that we should understand “how she speaks of herself before we speak of her” (as cited in Goodley et al., 2004, p. 118). The analysis of the pronouns seeks to uncover the multi-layeredness of the voice of the narrator instead of separating and isolating them. The third, “Reading for relationships” (Goodley et al., 2004, p. 117), emphasizes the narrator’s interpersonal relationships with people and social networks. The author recounts the analysis of “connections, autonomy and dependence” within these relationships (Goodley et al., 2004, p. 118). The fourth reading focuses on “Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures” (Goodley et al., 2004, p. 117) and encourages considering the political, cultural, and structural background of the narrative.

These readings are nested in social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Voice relational ontology illustrates that knowledge is socially constructed because both researchers and participants are in specific social and cultural locations. Knowledge is a reflection of constructed realities that are complex and multi-layered (Bright, 2016). In turn, symbolic interactionism enriches this perspective by considering the ways in which humans engage in meaning-making. This theory explains that our actions towards different objects are based on the meaning they have for us, which is developed through our social interactions and is modified through an internal meaning-making process (Bright, 2016). This illustrates that human actions should be understood in the context of social interactions and individual analysis, which includes a person’s interaction with their personal self. The self, constructed through social interactions, becomes a central component of meaning-making and actions, which in turn influence the self itself. Voice relational analysis considers how a person views themselves and their action in a specific context by considering a person’s relationships with others and their own self. Thus, a

person's process of creating or modifying meanings, which can be detected in their voice changes, becomes more visible.

Narrative research, memoir studies, discourse analysis, and the voice-centered relational approach facilitated various aspects of this capstone. Their interconnectedness helped reveal common themes within personal narratives and provided insights into the discursive spaces in memoirs of survivors of mass violence, allowing for a deeper understanding of both individual and collective experiences within personal life histories.

Research findings and analysis

Summaries

Brief summaries of selected memoirs are provided to equip the reader with essential background.

Payladzou Captanian's *Tsavak* (1922) begins with Captanian, two months pregnant, entrusting her two children to a Greek family in Samsun before being deported with her husband. She is soon separated from him, and they never meet again. Placed in a caravan primarily with women, she describes their horrifying journey to Aleppo. In Aleppo, Captanian works as a maid in a Turkish household, where she is mistreated, starved, and exploited until she is dismissed due to her refusal to engage in heavy labor. After some difficulties, she locates her uncle and shortly after, gives birth to her son Hrair-Tsavak at his house. Captanian maintains multiple jobs, endures many hardships amid the constant threat of deportation, and eventually reunites with her two older sons.

Serpouhi Tavoukdjian's *Exiled: Story of an Armenian girl* (1933) begins with her father being drafted into the Ottoman army, shortly after which their remaining family is deported from

Ovajik (Ovacık). During their deportation, Tavoukdjian's sisters and cousin die from starvation and illness, and her brother is lost. As hunger becomes unbearable, she convinces her mother to sell her as a slave. Allel Moose, a Bedouin man, buys the young child, not to be a slave but his daughter. Before their journey to Abu Galgal, Tavoukdjian is abducted and physically abused by Turkish soldiers but manages to escape and return to her adoptive father. Upon reaching Abu Galgal, Allel Moose's wives mistreat her, but their relationship is soon mended. Given a new name, Helema, she agrees to be tattooed out of the fear of being abducted by Turkish soldiers again. After the death of her adoptive father, Tavoukdjian leaves and searches for her biological father, whom she finds in Ovajik (Ovacık). She begins working to support her father, but soon travels to the United States to study and become a nurse, where she also undergoes several surgeries to remove her tattoos.

Introduction

The memoirs selected for this capstone provide nuanced, personal narratives of atrocities, presenting the opportunity for in-depth research into women's life stories in the context of mass violence. These personal accounts belong to middle-class women of different ages, each offering detailed recounts of the challenges they and their communities endured. Tavoukdjian's memoir reflects her experiences as a child enduring the genocide and her life afterward. Captanian's memoir offers a more immediate account, focusing on her own and other women's experiences during the genocide and its aftermath. Both works share various interconnected recurring themes with similar discursive spaces. This research centers on five of the most common themes: the act of writing, dehumanization, death, resistance, and the construction of the self in the post-genocide era. Utilizing the voice-centered relational approach, this study attempts to reveal how the authors situate their community's, especially women's, and their own experiences in relation

to themselves and others, as reflected in the *personal and collective voices* explored further in the analysis. These insights seek to contribute to a better understanding of women's experiences and reflections on the genocide.

The act of writing

> *Ջանացի զանոնք պատկերացնել իսկական գոյներով, բայց անկարելին փորձեցի, որովհետեւ բարբարոսութեան, սոսկումի ու թշուառութեան այդ աստիճանը չէ կարելի նկարագրել: Տեսնելը միայն ճշգրիտ գաղափար մը պիտի տար, ծայրայեղօրէն սրտաճմլիկ ու սիրտ բզքտող այդ պատկերներուն վրայ [I have tried to describe them in their true colors, but I attempted the impossible because it is impossible to describe that scale of barbarity, fright, and misery. Only by witnessing them can one correctly envision these heart-breaking and heart-wrenching scenes] (Captanian, 1922, p. 9).*

Memoir writing is a response. It is a response to the abundance of questions others and the authors have for themselves. Writing provides the space to search, remember, express, question, celebrate, and mourn—a space for seemingly endless possibilities. Still, for survivors, this space is limited by the language that simultaneously enables the chance to express oneself. Captanian recounts her and other women’s experiences in detail, while Tavoukdjian primarily focuses on the overarching storyline of her experiences and her life as a survivor afterward. Despite different narrative styles, both authors offer insights into the difficulties of narrating trauma in writing while conceptualizing and situating their and their community’s experiences of genocide.

The telling itself is a challenge survivors face. Humans rely on a shared meaning established through language, but how can survivors communicate unconventional, unusual experiences foreign to others? Chandler explains, “Convention establishes the terms in which we can communicate but thereby also largely determines what experiences are communicable” (1990, p. 74). The discursive space is not neutral. It is large yet constrained by existing linguistic structures and societal norms, which dictate the experiences that may be communicated and those that must remain unspoken. Captanian (1922) addresses the lack of discursive space in the introduction of her memoir, explaining that it is impossible to fully describe and name what she endured and witnessed. By recounting and reflecting on their experiences, survivors challenge not only narratives but the language itself, thereby questioning the concept of normativity. The act of memoir writing is a revolt against conventions reflected in the restrictiveness of the discursive space language provides to survivors, especially women survivors who often experience humiliation and stigmatization, whose experience of violence is already silencing itself.

Narrating histories through nuanced personal experiences of violence, which are usually collectivized to create conventional narratives, is an act of resistance Captanian and Tavoukdjian demonstrate. Captanian (1922) recognized the importance of documenting early during the deportation. Despite her initial writings being thrown into the river, she recounted her experiences after the genocide. Her memoir tells the story of many women whose names and experiences she purposefully included. She acknowledges that every woman’s story is unique and that every survivor could publish volumes of work narrating their individual experiences. Tavoukdjian (1933) recognizes the importance of ensuring the visibility of the survivors, and both women explicitly state that they want their stories to be known. Survivors expose

themselves to re-traumatization to recount their experiences, but even when they access a vision they can describe and reflect on, forever attaching themselves to the experience in written form and publicizing it requires courage. Captanian's work includes several short poems recounting her experiences during the genocide. The poems introducing and concluding her memoir are written from the perspective of her children: one from Tsavak-Hrair's, whom Captanian was carrying during the deportation, and one from Aram's, one of her boys entrusted to a Greek family. The introductory poem represents some of the recurring themes present in the memoir:

> Ու միակ ես, նմոյշ մը լոկ բիւրերէն,
>
> Ողջ մընալով անցեր եմ սեւ սարերէն:
>
> Քանի՜ անգամ դեռ չը ծնած, այն իժեր,
>
> Ծեծեցին մեզ, որ մայրիկըս զիս վիժեր,
>
> Քանի՜ անգամ բիրտ դաշոյնին սուր հարուած
>
> Փորձեց մխուիլ, ծակել սրտիկս, ու սարսուած…
>
> [And only I, an example from thousands,
>
> Surviving, have passed through black mountains.
>
> How many times, those serpents, I yet unborn,
>
> Struck us, so that my mother would miscarry me.
>
> How many times, the brute dagger's sharp blows
>
> Tried to stab, pierce my heart, and I in tremble]. (Captanian, 1922, p. 12)

In these short poems, Captanian narrates her experiences from her sons' perspectives, which not only allows her to express her children's concerns but also to recount her own experiences while maintaining a degree of distance.

Narrating histories through personal experiences of violence, which are usually collectivized, exposes survivors not only to re-traumatization but also to questions that cannot be easily answered. These authors submerge themselves into unwanted memories and explore to word them, to name them, and their narratives become the foundation for understanding women's experiences during large-scale systematic violence.

Dehumanization

> *Սեպիլ՝ Հալէպի աղբանոցն էր, եւ այդ տեղը ընտրեր էր թուրք կառավարութիւնը իբրեւ կեդրոնավայր հեռուն քշուող հայերուն։ Չէ՞ որ ինք, այդ կառավարութիւնն ալ կ’աւլէր, կը մաքրէր հայերը աղբի նման [The Turkish government had selected Sibil,[1] Aleppo's landfill, as the center for exiled Armenians. Wasn't that government sweeping them, treating Armenians like garbage?] (Captanian, 1922, p. 206).*

The study of dehumanization has been inseparable from research on genocide and mass violence. Dehumanization is often identified as a critical stage in genocide due to its role in denying people's humanity, thereby facilitating mass violence. According to Haslam (2020), the literature from the past two decades suggests that dehumanization occurs throughout various stages of mass violence and should not be confined to metaphors involving animals, diseases, and other non-human entities. Dehumanization through verbal and physical means is present in both Captanian's and Tavoukdjian's works, illustrating the role of derogatory language, physical and mental torture, and neglect. Several scholars have illustrated the link between

[1] The Armenian transliteration from Arabic is *Sepil*, corresponding to the Arabic transliteration Sebil in English. However, Sibil is commonly used in genocide literature, although Sebil more closely reflects the original.

dehumanization and violent policies or practices, uncovering common features in systematic and widespread violence.

While several forms of dehumanization are present in both memoirs, discussions on derogatory language are limited in both works, with few exceptions that are accompanied by intense physical violence. The absence of derogatory language can be attributed to the stigma associated with it, but it may also be intentional, aiming to avoid giving such language more power. Tavoukdjian's detailed description of being tortured to death by her adoptive father's wives, who initially resent her, includes her being called a pig, "Every time they struck me, they cried, 'Die, you pig, die!' I can feel those sharp, cruel stones yet, as they hit me, and it makes me shudder" (1933, p. 59). In Islam, the pig is considered an unclean animal, making the term derogatory when directed at a person. Tavoukdjian also recalls Armenians being called "pigs" (p. 27) by gendarmes and villagers when the caravan passes them. As Bjørnlund (2009) observes, Armenians were already dehumanized as a group before physical violence escalated. They were othered through the use of derogatory language and frequent acts of aggression directed towards them. During the genocide, the created conditions also made them visually appear as non-humans. Tavoukdjian is stiff, starved, infected with lice, and quickly loses her vision and ability to walk. In the eyes of the women attempting to kill her, Tavoukdjian could have already been dehumanized, as they even planned to bury her alive. This relationship is eventually mended, especially when Tavoukdjian starts recovering and understanding the power relations in the house.

Dehumanization through physical violence is omnipresent throughout both memoirs. At the beginning of the deportation, both Captanian (1922) and Tavoukdjian (1933) describe being herded into confined spaces such as trains and carriages. Tavoukdjian observes, "They were very

particular that we have no comfort” (1933, p. 26). After a short period, they are divided into caravans composed of deportees from various locations, which is where the *collective voice* of *we* representing the caravan is introduced in both works, beginning to substitute its attribution to the families of the authors. The process is accompanied by searches and robberies that become progressively violent and ritualized. Women are eventually left with nothing but their own, sometimes bare bodies. The only women who manage to hide a limited amount of money, which was essential for survival, are those who swallow coins to conceal them within their bodies:

> Կլլողները իրենց ստամոքսին մէջ ծանրութիւն մը կ’զգային, երբեմն ալ սաստիկ խիթեր կ’ունենային. ութ օրէն կամ տասնըհինգ օրէն կը մարսէին զանոնք, ու մաքրելով վերստին կը կլլէին: Որո՞ւ միտք կուգար թէ օր մը հայ կնոջ ստամոքսը, պիտի ծառայէր քսակի տեղ, բարբարոսներու երկրին մեջ անօթի չմեռնելու համար: Ողջ մնալու պայքարն էր ասիկա: [Those who swallowed the coins would feel the weight in their stomachs and sometimes experience extreme pain. In 8 to 15 days, they would digest the coins and, after cleaning them, swallow them again. Who would have thought that one day, the stomach of the Armenian woman would serve as a coin pouch to avoid dying of hunger in the country of barbarians? This was the struggle for survival]. (Captanian, 1922, p. 132)

In the complete loss of privacy, the inner organs, still protected by flesh, became the only private entities for women. Captanian compares the stomach to a pouch for coins, shifting to the collective voice of *Armenian women*. This practice illustrates women’s resistance and wit in unbearable conditions. Captanian herself resorted to this practice, as money was essential for survival, and hiding it was impossible even inside hair:

> Ամէն օր խուզարկութիւն կար, եւ ասիկա ժանտարմաները կ’ընէին քանի մը քիւրտերու հետ ընկերակցաբար: Մէկիկ մէկիկ կը հանուեցնէին մեզ. ամենափոքր ընդդիմութիւն մը կը փոխարինուէր հրացանի կոթին սաստիկ հարուածով: Մեր գլխուն մազերն իսկ կը քակէին ու նայէին թէ արդեօք դրամ պահա՞ծ էինք մէջը: Ոմանց բերանը անգամ բանալ տուին և նայեցան թէ մի զուցէ լեզուին տակ ոսկի մը կամ մատանի մը պահած ըլլայ: [We were searched every day, and the gendarmes would do it in cooperation with a few Kurds. They would strip each one of us naked. Even minor disobedience was met with the hit of a gun’s butt. They carefully searched for money in our hair, and they even had some open their mouths to see if anyone had hidden something made of gold or perhaps a gold ring under their tongue]. (Captanian, 1922, p. 131)

The frequent violent searches served to intensify fear and demonstrate that the caravan’s fate depended entirely on the mercy of gendarmes. These searches emphasized the relationship of subordination between the victims and perpetrators, dehumanizing the victims not only in the eyes of those endorsing the violence but also in the perception of the victims of themselves.

To narrate their experiences of the genocide, survivors must expose themselves to re-traumatization. For them, words fail to capture profound meanings foreign to those who have not experienced similar hardships. In addition to enduring physical and mental torture, the victims were subjected to extreme hunger and thirst. Tavoukdjian (1933) begs her mother to sell her because hunger becomes unbearable. Captanian struggles to describe the intensity of thirst, a basic human urge, because the extreme scale of her experience is foreign to those who have never been purposefully starved or deprived of water. She suggests asking the “exiled Armenian woman” (Captanian, 1922, p. 134) what thirst is, as they are the ones who experienced it:

> Ծարա՜ւը ա՜խ, չի բացատրուիր. շրթունքդ լեզուդ ու կոկորդդ կը չորնան, շնչառութիւնդ կը կարճնայ, սիրտդ կը նուաղի, կ’զգաս թէ պիտի մեռնիս: Լեզուդ կը պտտցնես, բերնիդ ներքին պատերուն զարնելով որ գէթ կաթիլ մը լորձունքով թրջես զայն, բայց ա՛յդ աղբիւրն ալ ցամաքած է: [The thirst—it is impossible to explain. Your lips, tongue, and throat get dry, your breathing gets heavy, your heart sinks, and you feel like you will die right there. You roll your tongue, hitting the inner walls of your mouth to wet it with a drop of saliva, but that spring is dry as well]. (Captanian, 1922, pp. 134-135)

Wording these experiences becomes challenging, exposing authors to re-traumatization, as they must relive these traumatic experiences to be able to provide descriptions for readers. The author constructs a vision for the reader. The reader joins the effort, and they co-construct a unique vision that differs based on the identity and experiences of the reader.

From a voice relational perspective, Captanian’s (1922) choice of wording of “exiled Armenian woman” (p. 134) represents the *collective voice* of Armenian women who lived through the atrocities, illustrating the shared nature of this experience for women survivors. This *collective voice* illustrates the magnitude of their suffering and fosters a sense of solidarity through a shared painful memory.

Recounting experiences of violence is the most challenging for Captanian. She often purposefully distances herself while discussing it and writes as if she is observing the caravan she was placed in from a distance, revealing that she was one of the women exposed to physical violence, sexual assault, and intimidation only after she finishes describing them. In some cases, this is done implicitly by shifting between the prominent *collective voices—the women, they,* to *we, us*—a shift in the pronouns and the naming of the group. By mentally creating a distance, she

is able to narrate some of her difficult memories. This practice also collectivizes the experiences of many women placed in the same caravan with Captanian, but her attention to detail clarifies that even in the same caravan, women's experiences differed. While recounting difficult memories, Captanian also reflects on the writing process, shifting to her *personal voice* as a writer, as she is struggling with the limited discursive space, "Գրիչս կը կենայ հոս, որովհետեւ բառ չգտնէր այդ ծայրայեղ արհաւիրքներուն չափը ու տեսակը որակելու համար: Բազմապատկեցէք խոշոր թիւերով, սրտակեղէք տեսարանները, արիւնը, սարսափը արցունքն ու հառաչը, զորս ցարդ պատմեցի, դուք կ'ունենաք ճիշտ պատկերը այդ երկու ամսուան Հայ տառապանքին" [My pen stops here because it cannot find words to describe the kind and the degree of these atrocities. Multiply with big numbers the heart-wrenching scenes, the blood, the horror, the tears, and the sighs I have written about, and you will have the full picture of the sufferings Armenians endured during those two months] (Captanian, 1922, p. 130). Captanian (1922) exposes herself to re-traumatization, explicitly stating that she becomes emotional while writing because she is reliving the horrors she will never be able to forget. Once again, she attempts to construct a vision for the reader despite the limited discursive space she has.

Sexual intimidation, assault, rape, kidnapping, and forced marriage further targeted women. Both Captanian (1922) and Tavoukdjian (1933) recount the shame and fear experienced by the victims and witnesses who knew they would likely face similar violence in the future. The body, reduced to a mere mechanism of suffering, paradoxically became the only remaining means of survival. Navigating this contradiction in the functions of the body is a prominent struggle faced by women, especially as they were surrounded by rotting bodies serving as a reminder of their own potential fate:

> Sometimes they would be released and come back creeping back through the gray dawn, pitiful shamed wrecks of innocent girlhood, only to have the experience repeated again next night. Sometimes we never saw them again. As terrified screams of these helpless victims filled our ears, our blood ran cold, and we prayed that God would protect our virtue and save us from their fate. (Tavoukdjian, 1933, p. 29)

The memoirs illustrate that systematic dehumanization worked hand in hand with the objectification of women's bodies, stripping them of their autonomy and seeking to reduce them to mere objects of violence and control.

The omnipresent threat of sexual violence, accompanied by other forms of physical violence, forced starvation, and verbal assaults, created an environment of constant terror and helplessness. This dual process of dehumanization and objectification not only inflicted immediate physical and psychological suffering but also aimed to destroy the community's sense of self through the demonstration of control and power.

Death

Because the love of life is a fire which burns bright in every human heart. We sometimes think we wish to die, but when actually face to face with the specter, death, we shudder and turn away (Tavoukdjian, 1933, p. 45).

In times of mass violence, death is everywhere; it leaks into the soil and water, it breaths into the air, it bleeds into life. This constant presence of death further dehumanizes the victims in the eyes of the perpetrators and the victims themselves. Death's presence is contrasted with the need to live and survive, which both authors recognize as fundamentally human and natural.

Dismembered rotting bodies melting under the sun made death tangible, giving it a physical form. Captanian (1922) and Tavoukdjian (1933) compare their death march to an unending walk in the graveyard with dismembered, unburied, rotting corpses. Those who managed to survive often appeared as mere skeletons due to starvation. Both authors recall that burying was strictly prohibited, which was humiliating and dehumanizing for the caravan, restraining any attempt to gain some closure for the loss of a loved one or acquaintance.

Having their lives interrupted by genocide makes both Captanian and Tavoukdjian reflect on their lives while preparing to meet their own death. Over time, death becomes an integral part of their daily existence. Both authors have moments of contemplating the end of their lives. Captanian writes, "Քանի՛ հանգչեցայ, աւելի շատցան ցաւերս. քնանալու սաստիկ հակամիտութիւն մը կար մէջս. այդպէ՞ս կ'սկսէր մեռնիլը արդեօք: Մարմինս կը տենչա՛ր հանգիստին, հողին վրայ ըլլար այն թէ հողին տակը" [As I rested, the pain intensified. There was an intense resistance against sleep in me. Is that how dying begins? My body longed for rest, be it on the ground or under it] (Captanian, 1922, p. 171). Navigating death while pregnant was especially challenging for Captanian because she was pregnant during the deportation. She recognizes that there is a young life growing in her and finds a source of strength in that, even though being pregnant undoubtedly made her experience more challenging.

Both authors address the issue of suicide in their works. Tavoukdjian (1933) views it as a way to end the suffering of mothers and their young children, discussing it very briefly. Captanian (1922) elaborates on it, viewing it as a sign of courage. She views suicides in the context of forced marriages as a response to the humiliating prospect of marrying the murderer of one's family. In this context, she sees suicide not only as an escape but also as an act of reclaiming ownership over one's body, avoiding not only public shame and humiliation but also

the coercion of marrying a murderer. This discussion is not extended in the memoirs, but both authors show deep understanding and empathy for victims who chose suicide, without over-romanticizing it.

Despite the pervasive presence of death and the difficulties the authors face, they recognize that people have an innate desire to survive, attributing this to *human nature*, which becomes a *collective voice* in both memoirs. Captanian (1922) writes, “Ապրելու տենչը, ա՜հ, ինչո՞ւ այսչափ զօրաւոր է մարդուն մեջ. ինչո՞ւ չուզեր մեռնիլ, նոյն իսկ եթէ դժոխքը զտնուի” [Why is the will to live so powerful in humans? Why don’t they want to die even when they are living through hell?] (p. 135-136). She also discusses how supernatural forces are discovered in humans when they must survive, attributing that strength not to the body but to the mind.

Navigating death and the desire to survive while witnessing death’s physical manifestations and feeling its threat is a prominent theme in both memoirs. The authors illustrate that the functions and capabilities of the body change in the face of mass violence, as the authors find themselves in a new world, one they never thought they would enter.

Resistance

Մեր ապրելու իրաւունքը կապտեր էին մեր ձեռքէն ու տակաւին կը յամառէինք ու կը մաքառէինք մահուն դէմ, զիջանելով տանջուիլ անօթի ու ծարաւ, բայց միայն ապրի՜լ… [Our right to life was taken away from us, yet we continued to resist and struggle against death, willing to suffer through hunger and thirst but live…] (Captanian, 1922, p. 136).

Survival in the face of violence is resistance, though we seldom recognize it as such. Resistance is usually seen as a form of armed and organized process, yet individual resistance, especially that demonstrated by women, is often excluded from this category. Captanian's and Tavoukdjian's narratives of survival include stories of resistance by women of different ages, economic and social backgrounds, and concerns who refuse to be passive victims of genocide. Resistance during mass violence is more than a natural response to violence—it is a powerful manifestation of hope.

Women's resistance is demonstrated in their attempt at survival. The caravan Captanian was placed in eventually became a community of women from different social and economic backgrounds attempting to survive the deportation. Captanian (1922) recognizes that surviving became a form of resistance for the women surrounding her. She acknowledges that women from more economically stable backgrounds had more chances of survival, addressing a critical intersectional issue and recognizing a privilege she also had. Later in the journey, only those who managed to hide their money were more likely to survive. Despite these differences, the women in her caravan supported one another, building a community rooted in empathy, solidarity, and hope for survival. Seeming easy targets was not desired to avoid being targeted by gendarmes, and women recognized this. They were not passive during the searches and forced abductions as they actively protested, shaming perpetrators and physically resisting violence. In her work, Captanian (1922) wonders why society is divided during peace and cannot be as supportive as the women surrounding her were during their death march. The unity women from different backgrounds demonstrate in times of crisis makes her question societal norms and economic barriers that prevent it in more stable times.

One of the most memorable stories of resistance in Captanian's memoir is Hasmik Khereian's, who was a young girl forced to marry a man who threatened to slaughter the entire caravan if she refused. This illusion of choice placed the responsibility on a young girl. She resists till the end, disrespecting her future husband and promising Captanian to retaliate, "Մի կարծէք թէ ես այդ Քիւրտին կին պիտի դառնամ. արիւնը պիտի խմեմ այդ գազանին. յետոյ պիտի իմանաք…" [Don't think that I will become that Kurd's wife. I will drink the blood of that beast. You will learn about it later…] (Captanian, 1922, p. 122). Only at the chapter's end does the reader learn that Captanian was her teacher. Captanian devotes the end of the chapter to Hasmik Khereian, purposefully including her words, because she recognizes the importance of giving her voice one last time and hearing her *personal I* instead of Captanian retelling it. This illustrates that for Captanian, giving Hasmik Khereian's story space is more important than including her own interpretation of it.

Captanian has a unique attitude towards death from the beginning of the memoir. For her, dying should never be in vain; it should be in struggle, it should be in rebellion. She writes, "Կը տենչայի իյնա՛լ հողին վրայ, գէթ մէկ վայրկեան հանգչի՛լ…: Բայց ո՛չ, պետք էր քալե՛լ ու քալե՛լ, մինչեւ վերջին շունչը քալել. մեռնի՛լ և ապա իյնալ, եւ ո՛չ թէ իյնալ եւ ապա մեռնիլ" [I yearned to fall on the ground and rest for a minute… But no, I had to walk and walk, walk until the last breath. To die and then fall, not fall down and then die…] (Captanian, 1922, p. 171). Surviving and giving birth to her child becomes a form of resistance for Captanian. She gives birth in Aleppo at her uncle's house and names her son Tsavak-Hrair. Hrair was the name of her third child, who had passed away a few months before the deportation. Reflecting on Hrair's death, Captanian (1922) wonders if it was a sign warning her about future misfortunes. Naming her child Hrair can also be seen as a sign of rebirth, while Tsavak, which is also the name of the

memoir, means “little pain” (Ekmekçioğlu, 2016, p. 174). Surviving and giving birth to her child in times of genocide, when the destruction of the victim group is systematically executed, is an act of resistance that requires not only endurance but also wit.

Women’s individual and collective resistance during mass violence takes various forms. By asserting control over their bodies and fate, women refused to be passive victims and strived to survive in an environment calculated to dehumanize and destroy them.

The construction of the self in the post-genocide era

Բայց ***յո՛յսն*** *ալ հայուն անբաժան ընկերն է… [But* ***hope*** *is also an inseparable companion for the Armenian…] (Captanian, 1922, p. 284).*

Women’s struggles continued after enduring mass violence. In a society etched with division, fear, and discrimination, women still struggled for survival and a livable life. They were often stigmatized, exploited, harassed, and deprived of the opportunity to heal in peace. Healing became a lifelong journey, often interrupted by new struggles.

In both Tavoukdjian’s (1933) and Captanian’s (1922) writings, the experiences of women with tattooed skin who had returned to their communities are different from other women’s. Tavoukdjian herself had markings on her face and began to view them negatively only when she returned to predominantly Christian groups. She realizes that the markings on her skin allow others to make judgments about her experiences during the genocide, which becomes unsettling to her. While living in the Bedouin household, the construction of her new ethnicity is realized primarily through visual means. Besides new clothing, her skin is scrubbed, and her hair is shaved not only to get rid of her peeling skin and lice but to reveal her “Arab skin” and “Arab hair” (Tavoukdjian, 1933, p. 64). Tavoukdjian agrees to get her face tattooed to ensure she is

never mistaken for an Armenian again, attempting to protect herself from the possibility of being abducted by Turkish soldiers. Although the tattooing process is excruciating, she does not express dissatisfaction with the markings on her face until she leaves the Bedouin household. While traveling to cities with Armenian and Greek populations, and later traveling to the United States, she feels ashamed of her tattoos, "… I felt much ashamed of these tattoo marks, for everyone who saw me knew that I had been sold to the Arabs" (Tavoukdjian, 1933, p. 119). Eventually, she undergoes several surgeries to remove the "disfigurements" (p. 119). The markings that once ensured her safety and survival became a source of shame in another culture, and Tavoukdjian underwent surgeries to protect herself from it. Captanian (1922) meets survivors with tattooed skin and believes these tattoos should be removed surgically because they belong to a foreign culture. Still, she acknowledges that removing the marks will not erase the experiences women had to endure. In both memoirs, the visual markings serve as reminders of women's experiences, allowing others to pass judgment on them, thereby increasing their vulnerability and complicating their effort to re-integrate and re-construct their sense of self in Christian groups. Both memoirs illustrate that the experiences of women with tattooed skin differ depending on individual circumstances and thus should be studied individually through personal narratives.

Captanian's writing reveals survivor's guilt common in those who endured mass violence. While recounting her experiences, she remembers people left behind, feeling guilty for being unable to help many in need. She is haunted by these images. Mourning becomes an important part of healing, but she also experiences guilt for focusing on her individual losses, "Այս գոյժը շատ արցունք խլեց աչքերէս: Բայց անձնասէրի մը խղճի խայթ կ'զգամ, երբ իմ անձնական կորուստներս լամ: Այնչափ մեծ է ընդհանուր կորուստը և ընդհանուր վիշտը որ

անձնականը շատ կը պզտիկնայ անոր քով” [This sorrowful news brought tears to my eyes. But I feel guilty for being self-centered and crying for my losses. The common loss is so enormous that personal ones seem tiny compared to it] (Captanian, 1922, p. 259). Survivors relive their experiences of mass violence throughout their lives, with grief becoming inseparable from their daily existence. Healing becomes a deeply personal journey, often without a clear destination.

After returning to the Armenian community, Tavoukdjian (1933) maintains a strong personal voice in her memoir and remains persistent. She does not hesitate to leave her hostess's house when she discovers that one of the men intending to help her find her father plans to propose to her. She leaves at night and finds the nearest orphanage to reside in. After finding her father, she works to support their family, but when the opportunity to study overseas presents itself, she chooses to leave to become a nurse. Tavoukdjian (1933) recognizes that her experiences of the genocide equipped her with unique skills, and she freely expresses this standpoint, "Now I write and speak both Armenian and Turkish, and I speak Arabian [*sic*]. Also I feel that my experiences have brought me more in general than the actual credits I have received in school before I came in training" (p. 114). Her voice in the memoir corresponds to her character until the end, as she remains attentive, outspoken, and resilient.

During mass violence, the impact of patriarchy on women becomes even more evident. Throughout her journey, Captanian (1922) works as a servant, teacher, milkseller, caregiver, taking on different jobs. She observes other Armenian women working in similar positions discussing the starvation and mistreatment they had to endure, implicitly mentioning widespread sexual harassment and rape by stating that women had *declined morally* (p. 281). This statement

is followed by a powerful critique of the patriarchy itself, exposing how these conditions are not the fault of women, but the outcome of a system that targets and exploits them:

> Եւ ասոր պատասխանատուն միայն աղէտները չէ. բուն պատճառը պէտք է փնտռել մեր աւանդական բարքերուն մեջ. հայ կինը միշտ դատապարտուած էր չորս պատին մէջ մնալ լռիկ աշխատիլ իր տնական գործերով. ան չէր ունեցած ազատութիւնը մտնելու ընկերութեան մէջ ու բարեկամանալու այրերու եւ կիներու հետ անխտիր: Հայ կինը բարի էր, պարկեշտ էր, իր ամուսնոյն, կեսրայրին կամ կեսրոջ ազդեցութեան տակ. մենք չէինք վարժեցուցած անոր բարի ու պարկեշտ ըլլալ ազատութեան մէջ, որովհետեւ չէինք տուած իրեն այդ ազատութիւնը. չէինք տուած անոր առողջ դաստիարակութիւն: [The atrocities were not the sole reason behind this. The underlying problem lies in the traditional customs/mindset. Armenian women were always confined to the domestic sphere, restricted to quiet domestic labor within the four walls of their homes. They lacked the freedom to form friendships and build connections with both men and women indiscriminately. The Armenian woman was kind and well-mannered under the influence of her husband, father-in-law, or mother-in-law. We failed to educate her to be kind and well-mannered in freedom, because we did not give her that freedom. We did not provide her with a healthy education]. (Captanian, 1922, p. 281-282)

Captanian provides an intricate gendered social analysis through her unique perspective. Her experiences in Armenian society before, during, and after the genocide allow her to navigate the effects of confining women to the domestic sphere as she observes women being exploited in new roles. Before mass violence, the patriarchal social structure robbed women of freedom, but during and after such violence, it also deprived them of the opportunity to live livable lives.

After enduring mass violence, women survivors, in particular, continue to struggle, dealing with stigmatization and exploitation in an eradicated society that still conforms to patriarchal standards. Navigating pain, loss, trauma, survival, and hope becomes yet another challenge. The experiences survivors endured forever become a part of their lives but should not define them entirely. In Captanian's and Tavoukdjian's memoirs, hope shines through as another testament to their resilience.

Limitations and avenues for future research

This capstone is, first of all, limited by the selection of only two memoirs for study. While focusing on these two works allowed for a more in-depth analysis, this research would benefit from expanding the number of discussed works while still engaging in personal, subjective narratives. Expanding the sources will allow for a broader perspective from women coming from different standpoints. This will also allow to reveal how economic, social, and political backgrounds affected women's experiences of the genocide.

Further study would benefit from identifying the specific caravans where Captanian and Tavoukdjian were placed, situating them within the context of other historical sources and materials. By examining the names of cities and villages mentioned in their memoirs, researchers could map their deportation routes, which will allow a more expanded study of the memoirs and also facilitate a further study of the experiences of these caravans.

Examining additional sources authored by Captanian and Tavoukdjian or studying related documents could provide further essential insights. For instance, archival research into their letters or other documents where their names are mentioned may expand this research and offer

detailed accounts of their lives and reflections on the writing process or their experiences after having the memoirs published.

This capstone does not address the concept of ethnicity and its connection to religion, even though both of them are crucial for research engaged with genocide studies. Both memoirs provide an excellent opportunity to study how religion and ethnicity intersect and merge. Both memoirs can also be further explored to understand the role religion plays during mass violence, both for victims and perpetrators.

This research does not engage in multimodal discourse analysis even though both memoirs include visual materials. Studying them would further deepen the analysis on the act of memoir writing as the authors selected and included the materials themselves.

The two selected works also offer the opportunity to examine women's experiences within foreign households. Further study can uncover the power dynamics in these households and women navigating their roles within them. This is particularly interesting in the case of Captanian, who worked as a maid for a Turkish family in Aleppo, where the husband was involved in issuing deportation orders for Armenians. Exploring different dynamics reflected in both works and women's analysis of them would enrich our understanding of their experiences.

In the future, a comparative study of women's experiences and reflections in self-authored works and the narratives of women's experiences presented in museums, different forms of media, textbooks, and other public sources could be conducted to study collectivized and often appropriated narratives. This research could further explore how narratives of women's experiences contribute to shaping Armenian society, particularly gender roles within it. A study incorporating in-depth interviews, such as oral history interviews focusing on how perceptions of

women’s experiences of the genocide evolved over a person's lifetime, could lead to more grounded research into the representation of women’s experiences.

Conclusion

Subjective, self-authored narratives present the opportunity to explore women’s experiences and reflections on the genocide. These deeply personal accounts allowed the survivors to be vulnerable while engaging in reflection and meaning-making. Captanian’s and Tavoukdjian’s memoirs engage in common themes while simultaneously providing nuanced experiences. Narrating trauma allows for personal reflections, revealing introspective analysis of not only the authors’ experiences of the genocide, but also on the process of transformation from a victim to a survivor. The act of writing is an essential part of this transformation. Captanian’s and Tavoukdjian’s voices situate themselves and other women in historical context by narrating histories through personal experiences. Even after decades, their reflective voices guide the reader, illustrating the importance of subjective sources when exploring the past. The past that is never concluded—the past that rightfully inhibits the present.

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