

## Quiet Voices, Faded Photographs: Remembering the Armenian Genocide in Varujan Vosganian's 'The Book of Whispers'

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on concepts such as post-genocide literature, postmemory (Marianne Hirsch), and resonance (Aleida Assmann), this paper discusses a third-generation narrative of the Armenian genocide, namely Varujan Vosganian's novel *The Book of Whispers*, originally published in Romania in 2009. The first section of the paper examines whether the concepts of post-genocide literature and diasporic literature (Peeromian) can be applied to authors of Armenian origins writing inside the literary traditions of East-Central European national cultures. The second section analyses the literary techniques of inter-generational memory transmission in Vosganian's novel. Particular attention is paid to the way in which family and documentary photos are employed in the novel, and three functions of photographs are discussed in relation with autobiographical memory, historical representation, and literary aesthetics. The third part of the paper uses Assmann's concept of resonance to investigate how the Armenian genocide narratives are linked with other traumatic events such as the Holocaust, the mass deportations in the Soviet Gulag, or the political repression in Romanian totalitarianism, thus reshaping the European memory of violence.

### INTRODUCTION

One hundred years after its unfolding on the territory of the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian genocide still is a sensitive geopolitical matter and a complicated social and cultural issue, due to Turkey's refusal to confront the events of 1915-1916. The Turkish government pursued a series of actions during the First World War aimed at the Armenian minority, which included mass arrests of the Armenian elites in Constantinople, the attack, pillage, and devastation of villages, followed by the deportation of the civil population through forced marches and transit camps, leading, according to official estimates, to the death of one and a half million of approximately two

million Armenians residing in the Empire.<sup>1</sup> Although not all scholars agree on the use of the term ‘genocide’ for the 1915 events, most of them do, invoking Raphael Lemkin, who first paralleled the mass crimes against the Armenians to the Nazi genocide against the Jews.<sup>2</sup> Following Lemkin, Adam Muller remarks that, besides the ‘physical’ and the ‘biological’ dimensions (deportations, executions, etc.), there is also a cultural component of the genocide, involving the ‘destruction of Armenian churches, artworks, artists, intellectuals and so on’<sup>3</sup>. All of these extreme measures heavily impacted the Armenians’ individual and collective identities, leading to the formation of diasporas on various continents and affecting families for several generations.

Like the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide is ‘an impact event’ (Anne Fuchs), namely a historical event, which ‘produce[s] a collective trauma that intercepts the access to conventional social resources of perception, interpretation and communication’.<sup>4</sup> The traumatic interruption affects the representation of the event, its integration in the identity narrative of the group and its future remembrance. Unlike the memory of Holocaust, which relies on a global network of remembrance (Aleida Assmann),<sup>5</sup> the memory of the Armenian genocide is more fluid and transmitted in a mainly communal, ethnic and familial environment. It is unusual that an event which took place more than a hundred years ago continues to be passed on orally, as part of the ‘communicative memory’ (Jan Assmann),<sup>6</sup> in the Armenian diasporas scattered all over the globe. Following the period of silence induced by the traumatic event to the first generation survivors, these family narratives came out into the public sphere in the 1980s and 1990s, when the second generation published their parents’, often posthumous, memoirs.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there are frequent cases when the members of the third generation became carriers of their grandparents’ life stories. This is how the Italian Antonia Arslan and the Romanian Varujan Vosganian first

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed chronology and statistics of the Armenian genocide can be consulted on the webpage of The Armenian Genocide Museum Institute, part of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia <http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/chronology.php>.

<sup>2</sup> A critical discussion on the reverberations of the Armenian Genocide in different Jewish environments prior and after the Holocaust can be found in Auran, Yair, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide*, transl. by Maggie Bar-Tura, 4th edition (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Adam Muller, ‘Genocide and the Arts: Creativity, Morality and the Representation of Traumatic Experience’, in *Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians: One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation*, ed. by Joceline Chabot, Richard Godin, Stefanie Kappler and Sylvia Kasparian (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 16-35 (p. 22).

<sup>4</sup> Anne Fuchs, *After the Dresden Bombing*, quoted in Aleida Assmann, ‘Impact and Resonance: Towards a Theory of Emotions in Cultural Memory’, in *The Formative Past and the Formation of the Future: Collective Remembering and Identity Formation*, ed. by Terje Stordalen and Saphinaz Amal Naguib (Oslo: Novus Press, 2015), pp. 41-70 (p. 53).

<sup>5</sup> Aleida, Assmann, ‘The Holocaust – a Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community’, in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, ed. by Aleida Assmann, Sebastian Conrad (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 97-118.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, transl. by John Czaplicka, *New German Critique*, no. 65 (Spring-Summer 1995), pp. 125-133 (pp. 126-127).

<sup>7</sup> See Sona Haroutyunian, ‘Narrating the Armenian Genocide: An Italian Perspective’, *Lingue e letteratura d’Oriente e d’Occidente*, no. 5 (2016), pp. 125-138.

heard accounts of the genocide as children and later explored them in semi-fictional works such as Arslan’s *Skyllark Farm* [La masseria delle allodole] (2004) and Vosganian’s *The Book of Whispers* [Cartea șoaptelor] (2009).

The literary accounts of a collective trauma bring up several difficulties, among which are: representing trauma by linguistic means, speaking for the victim, constructing a coherent narrative of history, and adjusting the aesthetic parameters to an ethical commitment<sup>8</sup>. For the ‘secondary witnesses’ of trauma events (Geoffrey Hartman),<sup>9</sup> such as the members of the second and third generation, family narratives of the genocide are also influenced by historical and media representations, and, in the case of fiction writers, by the literary traditions and cultural patterns. Since these family narratives often occur inside diasporic communities, they inevitably intersect with local culture and thus participate in the negotiation of regional and national memory. As a result, the literary works produced by third generation authors of Armenian origins can be seen as complex sites where traumatic familial memory on the 1915 events meets the local memory practices and symbols. My hypothesis in this article is that contemporary works on the Armenian 1915 tragedy written in the diaspora should be assessed not only thematically, with an emphasis on the genocide as a literary topic, but also as part of the various literary systems and cultural traditions in which they are produced.

Drawing on concepts such as post-genocide literature, affiliative memory (Marianne Hirsch), and resonance (Aleida Assmann), my paper deals with the literary representation of the 1915 events, by focusing on a third generation literary narrative, namely *The Book of Whispers*, published in 2009 by Varujan Vosganian, a Romanian writer of Armenian origins. Vosganian’s book narrates the history of his family under Turkish rule at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its emigration to Romania, and its troubled fate in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under the totalitarian regime in this country. Shortly after its publication, the book gained international recognition, due to translations in sixteen languages, European, but also Armenian, Hebrew and Persian. Yale University Press has also scheduled an American edition at the beginning of 2018. Vosganian’s novel is already part of the genocide’s cultural memory: in a commemorative worldwide event in 2015, fragments of *The Book of Whispers*, translated in twenty seven languages,

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<sup>8</sup> The ethical dimension strongly influences the deployment of literary techniques in postmodern memory narratives, engaging a ‘critically reflexive perspective on the functioning of memory’ in fictional texts. See Birgit Neumann, ‘What Makes Literature Valuable: Fictions of Meta-Memory and the Ethics of Remembering’, in *Ethics in Culture: The Dissemination of Values through Literature and Other Media*, ed. by Astrid Erll, Herbert Gräbes, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 131-152 (p. 138).

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, ‘A Note on the Testimony Event’, in *The Power of Witnessing: Reflections, Reverberations and Traces of the Holocaust*, ed. by Nancy R. Goodman and Marilyn B. Meyers (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 81-86 (p. 81).

including Turkish and Arabic, were simultaneously presented in public readings.<sup>10</sup> In 2016, Vosgian won the Angelus Central European Literature Award, granted each year to one of the most prominent East European Writers. The author was also proposed for the Nobel Prize in Literature by the Writers Union in Armenia, thus including him in a global Armenian culture. In this respect, Vosgian’s work acquires a triple identity: it belongs simultaneously to Romanian literature, the Armenian diasporic literature, and to East-Central European literatures, in a wider sense.

### **IS THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA LITERATURE A POST-GENOCIDE LITERATURE?**

Alongside other forms of representation, the literary echoes of the Armenian tragedy from 1915-1916 are an important part of the event’s memory. In her study ‘New Directions in Literary Responses to the Armenian Genocide’ (2003), Rubina Peeromian suggests that the Armenian literary production after 1915, especially when published in the diaspora, can be seen as post-genocide literature. The author’s analysis heavily relies on Armenian-American material, but Peeromian extends her argument to worldwide Armenian literature. In her view, there are three reasons to see Armenian literature as a post-genocide literature: (1) the great significance of the ‘Catastrophe’ as a literary theme or hidden motif; (2) the expectations from both literary critics and the public regarding the ‘novel of novels – one that encompasses the Genocide in its entirety’; and (3) the need of both writers and common people to come to terms with the traumatic collective experiences of the past by means of literature, in order to gain worldwide attention and recognition.<sup>11</sup> In my view, both the concept of ‘Armenian diasporic literature’ and ‘post-genocide literature’, which Peeromian employs in her analysis, are in some degree questionable and need further investigation. Notwithstanding the nation-coagulating value of historical trauma and its importance for contemporary Armenian authors, there are numerous other forms of collective self-representation in current Armenian literature that need to be taken into account. Also, the existence of a variety of Armenian diasporas, each with its sometimes multi-secular history, calls into question the unity of a single diasporic literature.

It is true that, within diasporas, the memory of genocide is more present, since many of these communities resulted either from the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896 or from the 1915-

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<sup>10</sup> See <<http://www.worldwide-reading.com/archiv-en/21-april-2015-worldwide-reading-commemorating-the-centenary-of-the-armenian-genocide/lesetexte>> [accessed 18 April 2017].

<sup>11</sup> Rubina Peeromian, ‘New Directions in Literary Responses to the Armenian Genocide’, in *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, ed. by Richard G. Hovanesian (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), pp. 157-180 (pp. 157-158).

1916 persecutions and deportations. As a result, past traumas are thoroughly integrated in biographical, familial and community narratives, since they usually intersected the family history and shaped the self-perception of individuals. In the Armenian community in Fresno, California, for instance, even the members of the fourth generation of émigrés perceive the events of 1915 as part of their identity: had they not happened, they wouldn’t have been born in America, but in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Peeromian remarks, the memoirs and literature written by Armenian-Americans were influenced by new trends in the Armenian diaspora in the 1960s, such as the political engagement and the search for one’s roots.<sup>13</sup> However, these trends are not limited to the Armenian diaspora, but viewed in the context of the American politics of identity and the emergence of ethnic literatures. Indeed these two factors shaped the Armenian-American literature as an ethnic literature, but this process is part of a wider phenomenon, including Native-American, Latin-American, or Asian-American literary cultures.

Nevertheless, the situation of writers of Armenian origins in Romania and other East-Central European states is radically different. In this region, Armenian communities formed centuries ago, even though, in Romania at least, they gained an administrative legal status as a diaspora at the end of the First World War, under the pressure of refugee waves from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenian diaspora in Romania remained discreet in celebrating its cultural identity, especially after 1945, when a communist totalitarian regime led the country in the Soviet sphere of influence. On the one hand, the mandatory internationalist creed of the communists discouraged the affirmation of ethnic roots both in social life and in literature. On the other hand, the Armenians had to play down their identity when, soon after the end of World War Two, the USSR claimed that Armenians in Romania should be ‘repatriated’ to the Soviet Republic of Armenia and, effectively, deported. As a result, it would be a stretch to talk of an Armenian diasporic literature in Romania and other East-Central European states. There are, of course, numerous Romanian writers of Armenian origins, including the literary critic Garabet Ibrăileanu (1871-1936), memoirist Jeni Acterian (1916-1958), novelists Ștefan Agopian (b. 1947), Bedros Horasangian (b. 1947) and Varujan Vosganian (b. 1958). But they are integrated, sometimes prominently, in the national canon and participate in shaping its multicultural profile. Also, especially after 1989, they bring a particular perspective on a troubled

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<sup>12</sup> Natasha May Azarian, *The Seeds of Memory: Narrative Renditions of the Armenian Genocide Across Generations*, doctoral dissertation, 2007, p. 141 <<http://gradworks.umi.com/33/06/3306055.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> Peeromian, pp. 157-180 (p. 167).

<sup>14</sup> See the webpage of the Armenian Union of Romania <<http://www.uniunearmenilor.ro/>> [accessed 18 April 2017].

past through ‘micro-discourses of memory’<sup>15</sup>, contesting and enlarging the official history and the common memory narrative. This is why, for writers of Armenian origins from East-Central Europe, the discussion of their relationship with local cultural traditions might prove more helpful than their adherence to an Armenian literary diaspora practicing the ‘topical genre’ (Peeromian) of genocide literature.

The concept of post-genocide literature can also be put into question. Firstly, the prefix ‘post-’ is rather vague, since it doesn’t provide a temporal limit and it doesn’t account for the inherent changes in perspective or mode of representation taking place with each generation. For instance, the survivors ‘often refused to share the trauma with the second generation’<sup>16</sup> or, when writing about it, employed polarised or theological language<sup>17</sup>. By contrast, the third generation, to which Vosgianian belongs, recaptures the sensorial and corporal dimension of the traumatic experience, often overlooked by the survivors. Secondly, the role of the ethnic dimension of the post-genocide literature remains unclear. Are works by non-Armenian writers, such as Franz Werfel’s *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933), the first renowned fictional account of the 1915 events, part of the corpus of Armenian post-genocide literature? Or is there a competition open strictly to writers of Armenian origins, those who can rightfully claim a monopoly on their nation’s memory? Also, it is doubtful that there is an umbilical connection between the genocide of 1915 and the literary works written by authors of Armenian origins addressing it. The importance of family history and of the ‘duty of memory’, as Paul Ricoeur calls it<sup>18</sup>, is undeniable, but often the socio-political context, which prompts such a memory drive, may be equally significant.<sup>19</sup> Vosgianian published *The Book of Whispers* in 2009, 94 years after the genocide and 20 years after the fall of communism in Romania. His book is not only part of the diasporic Armenian post-genocide literature, but also of the ever-growing memory wave in post-Communist Romania and, more generally, East-Central Europe, and it should be assessed as such. In this respect, Vosgianian joins other writers originating from this region which explore the past in order to dig out extreme experiences that their very families went through, such as Eva

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<sup>15</sup> Irene Sywenky, ‘Memories of Displacement and Unhomely Spaces’, in *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Simona Mitroiu (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 25-44 (p. 26).

<sup>16</sup> Haroutyunian, pp. 125-138 (p. 126).

<sup>17</sup> Peeromian, pp. 157-180 (p. 165).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, transl. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> In this respect, Vosgianian’s novel was read from various perspectives, including the post-colonial one, in Dana Bădulescu, ‘Varujan Vosgianian’s Novel of Postmemory’, *Word and Text. A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, 2:1 (June 2012), pp. 107 – 125. Bădulescu’s reading fails to account for the particular situation of the Armenian diaspora in Romania, which did not result from a colonization process, but was formed by small merchant communities ever since the Middle Ages.

Hoffman with *Lost in Translation* (originally published in 1989, in the USA), Norman Manea with *The Huligan’s Return* (2003) or Herta Müller and her *Hunger Angel* (2009)<sup>20</sup>.

## PHOTOGRAPHS, WHISPERS AND POSTMEMORY

Of the twelve chapters in *The Book of Whispers*, only the seventh and the eighth directly evoke, mixing historical information and fictional imagination, the events of 1915-1916. The novel starts as an autobiography, moves on to a family narrative, than to a story of the local community, before reaching the ‘impact event’ which until then was only referred to in allusions, bits of overheard family stories, curious gestures and rituals. The autobiography does not have the habitual individualist perspective of Western personal memoirs, as the narrator assumes a paradoxical stance by willingly erasing his own individuality and accepting the overwhelming authority of the past generations: ‘My parents are still alive. Therefore I’m not yet completely born’.<sup>21</sup> The author is a descendent of an Armenian family originating from the Ottoman Empire, and his grandparents survived prosecutions and deportations during the First World War. As a result, the narrator’s biography carries the weight of many other lives and experiences, which he deeply assimilated, without having actually lived through them. The American scholar of Romanian origins Marianne Hirsch explored the appropriation of the predecessors’ biographical memories by the descendants, and coined her influential concept of ‘postmemory’. In analysing the Holocaust literature written by members of the second generation, Hirsch notices that ‘descendants of survivors (of victims as well as perpetrators) of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation remembrance of the past that they need to call that connection memory’.<sup>22</sup> Postmemory is a form of transmitting traumatic memories within a family: it doesn’t rely on narratives of intergenerational continuity or on a mythology of the family, but occurs mainly as a result of continuity breaches, generated by collective historical trauma, by mass deportations, prosecutions or annihilation of whole ethnic groups.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The many-sided relation between ethnic identity, place of birth and political climate gains significant importance for minority, exiled or émigré writers originating from East-Central Europe, as shown by Doris Mironescu, ‘How Does Exile Make Space? Contemporary Romanian Émigré Literature and the Worldedness of Place: Herta Müller, Andrei Codrescu, Norman Manea’, in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, ed. by Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian (London: Bloomsbury, 2017 [forthcoming]).

<sup>21</sup> Varujan Vosganian, *Cartea șoaptelor* [The Book of Whispers] (Iași: Polirom, 2009), p.7. All excerpts are given in my translation.

<sup>22</sup> Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008), pp. 103-127 (p. 105).

<sup>23</sup> Hirsch, pp. 103-127 (pp. 110-111).

Although Hirsch’s concept is extremely useful in analysing the construction and transmission of posttraumatic memory, there are still some questions that may be raised in regard to its applicability. The first question regards postmemory’s capacity to operate within several generations. In other words, when does postmemory cease to be active in a family? Hirsch began her analysis on members of the second generation of Holocaust survivors, but earlier historical events, such as the Armenian genocide, require extending the concept to include members of the third generation. In a recent interview, the scholar herself included the fourth generation as part of this structure of memory transmission. But this extension of the concept has its risks. After the third generation, when contact with survivors and direct witnesses becomes impossible for biological reasons, it can be argued that postmemory is heavily influenced by the ‘figures of memory’ (Jan Assmann)<sup>24</sup> dominant in the host culture (for diasporic communities) or globally. As shown by Haroutyunian, the fourth generation of Armenian-Americans in Fresno, USA, perceive the 1915 genocide as a mythical event.<sup>25</sup> Also, Cecilie Felicia Stockholm Banke suggests that the paradigm of the Holocaust’s ‘global memory’ marked the aspirations of the Armenian diaspora for the crimes of 1915 to be acknowledged in the same way.<sup>26</sup> Yet another question concerns the role of political factors in the postmemorial work. Could, for instance, the recognition of the Armenian genocide by Turkey, ultimately lead to an ‘amnesty’, whereby the intergenerational impact of this foundational trauma would diminish? The analysis of postmemory and its literary representations must integrate all these factors, which decisively influence the formation and transmission of posttraumatic family narratives.

*The Book of Whispers* illustrates a typical postmemory situation: the narrator is the youngest member of a large Armenian family, who spends his childhood in his grandparents’ house in Focșani, a city in South-East Romania, listening, interpreting and filling in the blank spaces in the life stories of the old men surrounding him.<sup>27</sup> Grandpa Garabet and grandpa Setrak are both survivors of the 1915 events and, within the novel, they illustrate two opposite ways of dealing

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<sup>24</sup> Assmann, pp. 125-133 (p. 129).

<sup>25</sup> Azarian, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Cecilie Felicia Stockholm Banke, ‘Global Memory and Dialogic Forgetting: The Armenian Case’, in *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, ed. by Tea Sindbaek Andersen, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), pp. 21-36.

<sup>27</sup> As the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs pointed out in his seminal work *The Collective Memory* (1950), within a family the grandparents ensure the child’s access to the distant past: through their stories, the child ‘has the opportunity to gain direct contact with a period that [he] would otherwise have known only from outside, through history books, paintings and literature’. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, transl. by Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 64. In the case of the Armenian genocide, which is rather scarcely portrayed in the media, the transmission of survivor narratives to the third generation is even more important, because it refers to something that, for a long time, could not be found in textbooks, nor in literature or the arts.



with trauma. The story of Setrak, who lost almost all his family during the Turkish raids, was told only once in his lifetime and since then is confined to silence. He is still traumatised by the guilt of having survived his older brother, and this psychological syndrome is extended by the author to the entire Armenian diaspora. For Vosgianian, the survivors of a decimated people can never put an end to the ‘work of mourning’, as Ricoeur calls it,<sup>28</sup> as long as the dead of each family will not be acknowledged as victims or heroes, and therefore integrated into a collective narrative, becoming part of the nation’s history.<sup>29</sup> It is thus vital that the perpetrators admit to the crimes they committed, in order to resume and complete the construction of the genocide’s memory and of the Armenians’ collective identity.

Grandpa Garabet, the main character of the novel, handles differently his relationship with the traumatic past. Charismatic, cultivated and somewhat eccentric, Garabet is the leader of the Armenian community in Focşani and a guardian of its memory. He is the keeper and, in some cases, the author of the numerous photographs described in the novel, the owner of a trove of Armenian culture and also of everybody else’s life stories. It is he who passes on his people’s traumatic memory to his nephew, who in his turn becomes the narrator of the *Book of Whispers*. The memory transfer from the first to the third generation completely skips the generation connecting these two. The image of the father is present only once in the novel, when grandpa Garabet speaks his last words to his attending son and nephew. It is an unintelligible message, made of disparate words in Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Russian, and Armenian, all the languages he has spoken as a child. His son, the narrator’s father, is unable to decipher the message; by failing to understand his father’s last words, which he cannot translate to his son, he is excluded from the mandate of passing on the family history. As for the nephew, the empathic connection between him and his grandfather helps him reconstruct the meaning of his message as the voice of Garabet’s long gone childhood. The old man who faced death as a child communicates with this other child, his nephew, through a connection which transcends the limitations of a linguistic code.

According to Hirsch, postmemory requires a receptive environment, given that its ‘connection to the past is not mediated [...] by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection and creation’.<sup>30</sup> Postmemory does not rely primarily on institutional structures such as schools, archives or museums, which, in exile or under a totalitarian regime, inevitably fail to acknowledge

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<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 71-72.

<sup>29</sup> See the *Preface* to Varujan Vosgianian, *Cartea șoaptelor. Album* [The Book of Whispers. Photo Album] (București, Ararat, 2009), pp 11-12.

<sup>30</sup> Hirsch, pp. 103-127 (p. 107).

the minority identity and memory. Instead, postmemory is mediated by family photographs, family narratives or body language, which recall by necessity fragmentary and disparate images from a silenced past. In Vosgianian’s novel, the distant past is mediated by personal objects kept in the family for generations (a carpet weaved by grandpa Garabet, books written in strange alphabets, a rudimentary handmade wooden horse), rituals (meals eaten at wakes and memorials, muttered deportation songs), and legends (the belief in the existence of a hidden Armenian arsenal of weapons in the forests around Focşani). All these signals from the past are present in the family’s everyday life in the form of whispers, murmurs and quiet gestures, and are instinctively assimilated by the narrator in his fable of identity. Since these are all bits and pieces of stories rather than full narratives, the child first collects them like beads on a string, than tries to make sense of their fragmented diversity:

My grandparents Garabet and Setrak were very good storytellers. But they themselves were absent from the stories they told. [...] Each one became a character in the other one’s story and you always had to switch from one story to another, to see what came next. This is why the story of the Armenians from my childhood is without end.<sup>31</sup>

There are two main literary techniques which mediate the process of intergenerational communication in Vosgianian’s novel: the ‘whisper’ metaphor and the narrative device of photography description. From the very first pages of the novel, an abundance of family photos are either briefly referred to, or meticulously described, without, however, being inserted as actual images in the text. They are real photographs, owned by the author, as shown by the existence of *The Book of Whispers. Photo Album*, to which I will return later. Vosgianian’s choice not to integrate the photos in a book that insistently evokes them is, in my opinion, significant. Compared to W.G. Sebald, whose novels features pictures accompanying the text as ‘a distinct semiotic layer, one that inflects and refracts the story’,<sup>32</sup> Vosgianian seems indifferent to the tension between these two very different regimes of representation. The Romanian author prizes the force of literature and language to represent trauma, absence or loss, over that of the image. It is probably a belief indebted to the idealist vision of literature, shared by writers in East-Central Europe who experienced communism, with its web of oppression, censorship, subversion, and dissidence. For such writers, fiction and textuality were inherently ethical and anti-ideological, so long as they shunned real-life reference and concentrated on textual aesthetics. The result was often the

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<sup>31</sup> Vosgianian, pp. 32-33.

<sup>32</sup> Adrian Daub, ‘Sphinxes without Secrets. W.G. Sebald’s Album and Aesthetics of Photographic Exchange’, in *On Writing with Photography*, ed. by Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 254-296 (p. 267).

undervaluation of the text’s capacities to interact with other forms of representation, for instance iconic, and the distrust (which Vosgianian overcomes in this book) of non-fictional literature.

Three functions of photographs can be identified in *The Book of Whispers*, novel and album. Firstly, as family relics, they shape the autobiographical memory of the narrator. Secondly, the family photos are also a medium for historical representation, since their subjects are not just relatives, but also victims of historical collective traumas. Thirdly, the absence of photographs in the novel accommodates Vosgianian’s particular aesthetics, which relies on figures of elusiveness and allusion.

The relationship between *The Book of Whispers* and the *Album*<sup>33</sup> of the same name is twofold. On the one hand, the photo album functions as an extension of the novel, since the latter’s narrative structure dictates the structure of the album. The photographs do not observe a chronological order, like classic family photo albums, but appear in the order in which they are referred to in the novel and are accompanied by short quotations, instead of indications of subject, time, and place of the each photograph. On the other hand, the album can be considered independently, and interpreted as a ‘dynastic’ family album, or a family pantheon, in which the narrator gains his place.

The photographs referred to in the first three chapters of the novel, prior to the narrator’s biological birth, make up a family narration which introduces one by one the head of the family, grandpa Garabet, the great-grandfathers and the great-uncles of the child narrator. The quotations accompanying the photos are often at odds with the quiet, classic portrait of long-gone relatives. From a wedding photo one finds that the bride, the narrator’s great-aunt, is a survivor of the 1915 massacres, long after reunited with her brother in Romania and then immigrated to Argentina. For another wedded couple, the quotation explains that the groom, uncle Vagharşag Hovnanian, came to Romania as a refugee after 1915, and was deported to Siberia after World War Two. In the second part of the album, documentary photographs appear which further unsettle the already eerie family atmosphere in the first part. Among these photos, taken during the 1915-1916 events, there is one of a pyramid of skulls and bones in a common grave watched over by a group of men dressed in ethnic garb. Such images do not naturally occur in a family album, since their subjects are anonymous and impersonal. History invades personal memory in these pictures, but at the same time the anonymous photos are personalized and appropriated through the insertion into the family album. They cease to be mere terrifying

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<sup>33</sup> The photo album is also available online at <<http://carteasoaptelor.ro/carteasoaptelor-album/>> [accessed on 18 April 2017]

images, and become images of human subjects; in the logic of the photo album, the horrifying faces and the mutilated bodies may belong to anyone of the family members that disappeared during the massacres and deportations. If the camera-eye inspires a ‘cold gaze’, as Aleida Assmann remarks on the photos taken by Nazi soldiers to their victims,<sup>34</sup> the family album favours a ‘warm’, inclusive gaze, that extends beyond family relation.

In the novel *The Book of Whispers*, the photographs, though absent, support a rhetoric of authenticity. The characters’ portraits document their actual existence in real life, since the primary function of photography is to ‘authenticate’ reality, as Roland Barthes noted.<sup>35</sup> Vosgianian aims to create an *effet du réel*, but also an *effect of familiarity*. By describing in the novel photographs of members of his own family, the author stimulates his readers to perform an affective identification with the characters, and also to project their own biographical representations into the text. The ‘*familial* structures of mediation’, Hirsch states, facilitate what she calls ‘affiliative memory’<sup>36</sup>, namely the process through which the reader ‘affiliates’ herself/ himself to the other’s life experience. The photographs in Vosgianian mediate not only between the life experiences of the family members from different generations, connecting the narrator and his ancestors, but they also connect the narrator and the reader.

There is a connection between the photographs absent from the novel and the quiet words, the ‘whispers’ in the book title. They both suggest fragmentation, partiality and dispersion: the scattered photographs of living and dead, of family members and anonymous bodies fail to compose a coherent family narration, but only allow glimpses into a troubled familial past. In the same way, the whispers are semi-intelligible, interrupted sentences that communicate meaning through suggestion rather than outspoken discourse. The whispers in Vosgianian are not intimate, gentle, and caring, but fearful and exhausted, like the voices of the famished deportees in the Syrian Desert in 1915. As a metaphor, the quiet voice evokes the situation of danger and terror experienced by the victim, but also connotes the difficulty of speaking in the aftermath of trauma. The family environment, however, may encourage confession, especially when several members of the family share a common traumatic past, as it happens in Vosgianian’s novel. The low tone of voice should also be associated with clandestine speaking, with the mandatory muted voice of

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<sup>34</sup> Aleida Assmann, ‘Looking Away in Nazi Germany’, in *Empathy and its Limits*, ed. by Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 128-148 (p. 135). Assmann draws on Ernst Jünger’s photography metaphor, from his essay ‘On Pain’.

<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida. Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> Hirsch, pp. 103-127 (p. 115). Hirsch differentiates between two different forms of postmemory: the ‘familial memory’, which is limited to the family circle, and the ‘affiliative memory’, which goes beyond it. By employing in their fictional works what Hirsch calls ‘the idiom of the family’, second and third generation writers encourage such processes of ‘affiliation’ to the memory of the other.

individuals in a brutal dictatorship. The plot in *The Book of Whispers* is placed in a period of repression of pluralism and suppression of memories that do not align with the official version of history. After the initial traumatic violence of 1915-1916, during the communist regime the Armenians in Romania meet with another form of repression, which implies blocking memory (Aleida Assmann),<sup>37</sup> denying traumatic experience, and forbidding public commemoration. The story of a national disaster can only be told whispering and can only be transmitted to the descendants, in the disguise of a family story.

Vosganian’s novel also illustrates an ‘ideology of the family’,<sup>38</sup> as memory is transmitted on a masculine line, from grandfather to nephew, and women are totally excluded from this filiation. The family’s traditional hierarchy reflects the hierarchic structure of East-Central European Armenian communities during the second half of the last century. A completely different image of the family and of memorial intergenerational transmission can be found in *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), a novel by Turkish-American writer Elif Shafak. The two families in her novel, one Armenian-American and one Turkish from Istanbul, are both made almost exclusively of women. There is a subtle gendered ideology which influences the processes of memorial transmission in both novels. Vosganian’s narrator identifies with male heroes of Armenian history (imprisoned intellectuals, generals, heads of church, courageous men avenging historical crimes) and with their mission to keep the memory of trauma alive. On the other hand, Shafak describes attempts by women from Armenian and Turkish families to cope with past personal and historical trauma and surpass political injustice through empathy and compassion.

#### **REVERBERATIONS: ECHOES OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE ACROSS TIME AND SPACE**

In order to tell the story of his ancestors and gain the empathy of his readers, Vosganian faces a double difficulty. First, there is the problem of appropriating distant memories belonging to other individuals – his grandparents, who as children witnessed the horrors of 1915 – without transforming them into an ideology of ethnic sufferance, or into a narrative of self-victimisation. As I have shown in the previous section, the author overcomes this difficulty by employing particular literary techniques, such as the recourse to familial figures of representation, descriptions of photographs, and the metaphor of whispers. A second difficulty deals with the question of representing, for an originally Romanian readership, an impact event which is part of

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<sup>37</sup> Assmann, pp. 128-148 (p. 136).

<sup>38</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), p. 8.

another people’s history and which took place a century ago in a distant place, whose political and ethnical configuration has changed radically. In the Romanian cultural imaginary, the memory of political conflicts with the Ottoman Empire since the Middle Ages and until 1877, when Romania gained its independence, is still alive, leaving little room for empathy with another victim of the Ottoman Turks. Furthermore, because of the four decades of communist dictatorship experienced by Romanians between 1947-1989, which left numerous victims, some of them still anonymous two decades after the fall of the regime, the horrors from the nation’s recent past surpass in importance the tragic narration of another group. This is why Vosgianian needs to establish a connection not only with the memory of his own ethnic group, but also with the cultural tradition and historic pantheon of the Romanian readership.

In her recent study ‘Impact and Resonance – Towards a Theory of Emotions in Cultural Memory’, Aleida Assmann states that ‘resonance refers to a fusion in the process of remembering between a new stimulus and an earlier one that has been deeply incorporated’.<sup>39</sup> For Assmann, resonance manifests itself at the level of cultural memory and relies on the processes that Bolter and Grusin describe as ‘remediation’, by which an ‘impact event’ comes to be interpreted through existing cultural patterns from a group’s collective imaginary. However, we may extend the meaning of ‘resonance’ to individual memory, by comparing it to what psychologists call associative memory. As an attribute of individual memory, associativity involves, among others, the capacity to link personal memories with inherited or culturally acquired ones, as well as the sudden recall of repressed or ‘forgotten’ memories, in response to an apparently indifferent stimulus. In Vosgianian’s novel, resonance functions as a narrative technique used to combine the narrator’s autobiographical recollections with distant traumatic collective memories, which are thus brought into the present:

We are now in 1965, in Focșani, a small town in Southern Moldavia, with thirty-nine thousands inhabitants, with a textile and food industry [...]. We are, simultaneously, in 1895, in Trabzon, a city white with the salty sea winds, where the trumpets call, like at the fall of the walls of Jericho, announcing the massacres against Armenians. [...] We are, at the same time, in 1915, in the village Ghiushana at the foot of the mountains, devastated, reeking of death and burned wood like everywhere in Eastern Anatolia, on the sand

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<sup>39</sup> Assmann, ‘Impact and Resonance’, pp. 41-69 (p. 46).

routes of the desert, toward Deir-ez-Zor. And we are also in 1920, when Armen Garo [...] organises, with Shahan Natali, the first avenging mission of history.<sup>40</sup>

By dismissing the chronological order of facts and events typical for the historical novel, Vosgianian opts for an affective order, which allows for such figures of simultaneity to appear throughout the novel. This way disparate life stories, scattered through time and space, are connected in a web of violence, repression, and remembrance: ‘we are simultaneously in four different time frames’ and all of them ‘are accompanied by the whispers of my childhood’, states the narrator.<sup>41</sup> The ‘impact event’ of 1915 echoes with previous aggressions on the Armenians, such as the Hamidian massacres of 1895, but also with other events in other nations’ and groups’ histories. The emphatic use of the personal pronoun ‘we’ is also significant. While it reinforces the realist convention of placing the reader, alongside the narrator, inside the fictional world, in this particular case the ‘we’ also invites another kind of solidarity between the Armenian tragedy narrated and the presumably foreign readers to which Vosgianian addresses himself.

There are several places in the novel where such distinct chronologies of suffering connect events concerning the Armenian nation or diaspora with dramatic moments in Romanian history. In the photo album, which accompanies the Romanian edition of *The Book of Whispers*, one of the most striking images is the close-up of a man who was shot in the head at close range. It is the Romanian scientist and politician Nicolae Iorga, who was executed in 1940 by members of the Iron Guard secret police, a far-right movement which was governing the country at the time. The resonance of this image is twofold. First, the photograph encourages a connection between Iorga’s violent liquidation and the arrest and execution of the Armenian intellectual elites in Constantinople, in 1915, since Iorga was seen as an intellectual giant at the time, making his assassination a crime against Romanian culture. Secondly, this symbolic connection transforms into a personal, affective one. The man who took Iorga’s last picture is, in the novel, an Armenian photographer, who explicitly links this famous atrocity in Romania to the memory of his own father’s death in the genocide.

The phenomenon of resonance, in my view, implies not just connecting two traumatic experiences separated in space and time, but also *the re-location of trauma* and its *translation in another code*. The collective crimes done for the consolidation of the Turkish national state in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century echo with the collective crimes done in Eastern Europe by the

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<sup>40</sup> Vosgianian, p. 244.

<sup>41</sup> Vosgianian, p. 245.

emergent totalitarian states before, during and after the Second World War. In Vosgianian’s novel, the massacres of the Armenian minority in the Ottoman Empire are paralleled to the crimes of the political police during the 1940-50s in Romania. At the same time, numerous Armenians who had survived the genocide and had come to Romania were deported by the Soviets to Siberian work camps. Several cases are mentioned in Vosgianian’s book, which link the 1915 deportations to the horrors of the Gulag, where numerous other nationalities from the Soviet Union suffered. Another episode in the novel narrates one of the bloodiest peasant uprisings in Romania, in 1957, when the villagers near Focșani protested against the forced collectivization of their lands by the communist authorities. Years after the uprisings, as the dead are commemorated secretly in grandpa Garabet’s house, the child narrator eats their Orthodox funeral cake and the Armenian family decides to integrate these victims in their mourning rituals. In this way, the child becomes the receiver of a memory which belongs not only to his family’s past experiences in Anatolia, but to his own present life in Romania.

However, Vosgianian only refers to various experiences assimilated by the memory of Armenians in Romania, failing to integrate actual situations of memorial resonance, when groups from other times and places associate their own hardships to distant traumatic experiences of another group. There are many cases where the Armenian genocide was relocated and culturally appropriated by other ethnic groups in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The most important instance when the Armenian tragedy confronted its political and symbolic resonance was prior to and during the Holocaust, when Franz Werfel’s monumental novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933) became a rallying call for the Jewish people in Warsaw and other places where the Hitlerite threat was felt. As Yair Auron states, in the Warsaw ghetto the book, which was translated into Hebrew immediately after its publication, passed from hand to hand and elicited vivid debates on active versus passive resistance from those who were dramatically confronted with this option.<sup>42</sup> An even more intriguing echo of the genocide is its unexpected resurfacing in contemporary Turkey. Recent novels and short prose written by Kurdish authors insistently evoke the events of 1915, thus drawing attention to a history of abuse on minority populations by the Turkish state, and possibly to bring to the fore the predicament of contemporary Kurds<sup>43</sup>. In this way, traumatic memory travels from one place to another, changing its cultural codes,

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<sup>42</sup> Yair, Auron, ‘*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh: Its Impact on Jewish Youth in Palestine and Europe*’, in *Remembrance and Denial. The Case of the Armenian Genocide* ed. by Richard G. Hovannisian, (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999), 147-164 (pp. 156-160).

<sup>43</sup> Adnan, Çelik and Ergin Öpengin, ‘The Armenian Genocide in the Kurdish Novel: Restructuring Identity through Collective Memory’ *European Journal of Turkish Studies [Online]* (2016), <<http://ejts.revues.org/5291>> [accessed 18 April 2017]



addressing new recipients and, in the process, enhancing its impact. But the Kurdish novelists also have to integrate in these narratives of genocide the fact that their forefathers also took active part in the atrocities. Even if it hasn’t reached the worldwide recognition of the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide still participates in the negotiation of ethnic and regional memory and is implicated in today’s politics of memory.

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