

**PLAYWRITING IN ARMENIAN DIASPORA: MELANCHOLIA AND
SURVIVAL**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
OF
İSTANBUL ŞEHİR UNIVERSITY**

BY

DUYGU DALYANOĞLU ALTINDİŞ


**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
IN
CULTURAL STUDIES**

SEPTEMBER 2016

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Cultural Studies.

Examining Committee Members:

Assist. Prof. Mehmet Fatih Uslu
(Thesis Advisor)



Prof. Tülin Sağlam



Assist. Prof. Fatih Altuğ



This is to confirm that this thesis complies with all the standards set by the Graduate School of Social Sciences of İstanbul Şehir University.

Date

09.09.2016


Seal and Signature



I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

First Name, Last Name: Duygu Dalyanođlu Altındıř

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Duygu Dalyanođlu Altındıř', written in a cursive style.

ABSTRACT

PLAYWRITING IN ARMENIAN DIASPORA: MELANCHOLIA AND SURVIVAL

Dalyanođlu Altindiş, Duygu

MA, Department of Cultural Studies

Thesis Advisor: Assist. Prof. Mehmet Fatih Uslu

September 2016, 89 pages

This thesis study concentrates on the theatrical activity of Armenian North American Diaspora in the 20th century. The Catastrophe Ottoman Armenians experienced in 1915 had severe conclusions for the whole Armenian nation, Ottoman Empire and every individual who experienced it. Reflection of this unforgettable event in the field of theatre was the loss of a theatrical tradition, which was developing in terms of playwriting, acting and directing. However, the survivors of the Catastrophe carried the theatrical tradition to their new countries with themselves and managed to continue theatrical activity. Throughout the study in order to understand how Armenian identity developed through plays and how they contributed in the formation of Armenian North American Diasporic identity, play texts written between 1939 and 2008 and nine plays from six playwrights are analyzed and discussed. The theatre of the Armenian North American Diaspora possessed a split character between the past and the present experiences in terms of Armenian identity. The thesis study also deals with the limits of the representation of the experience of the Genocide and the post-Genocide identity formation for the Armenians with a focus on the Armenian North American Diaspora.

Keywords: Armenian literature, Armenian theatre, Diaspora

ÖZ

ERMENİ DİASPORASINDA OYUN YAZARLIĞI: MELANKOLİ VE HAYATTA KALMA

Dalyanoğlu Altındış, Duygu

MA, Kültürel Çalışmalar Bölümü

Tez Danışmanı: Yad. Doç. Dr. Mehmet Fatih Uslu

Eylül, 2016, 89 sayfa

Bu tez çalışması 20. yüzyılda Kuzey Amerika Ermeni Diasporası'ndaki tiyatro faaliyetine odaklanmaktadır. Osmanlı Ermenilerinin 1915'te yaşadığı felaket Ermeni milleti, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve tüm vatandaşları için vahim sonuçlara neden olmuştur. Bu unutulmaz olayın tiyatro alanındaki karşılığı ise oyun yazımı, oyunculuk ve sahneleme alanında gelişmekte olan bir tiyatro geleneğinin yok oluşudur. Öte yandan bu felaketin ardından hayatta kalanlar göç ettikleri ülkelere bu tiyatro geleneğini de taşımışlar ve tiyatro yapmaya devam etmişlerdir. Bu çalışmada Ermeni kimliğinin tiyatro oyunlarda nasıl işlendiği ve oyun metinlerinin Kuzey Amerika Ermeni Diasporası'nda Ermeni kimliğin inşasına nasıl katkıda bulunduğu anlaşılmaya çalışılmaktadır. Bu amaçla 1939-2008 yılları arasında altı farklı oyun yazarının kaleme aldığı sekiz oyun metni incelenmektedir. Kuzey Amerika Ermeni Diaspora tiyatrosu Ermeni kimliğinin temsili açısından geçmiş ile şimdiki zaman arasında sıkışmış bir kimliğe sahiptir. Bu tez çalışmasında da oyun metinlerinde Soykırım deneyiminin temsili ve Soykırım sonrası Kuzey Amerika Diasporasında Ermeni kimliği inşasının yansıması incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ermeni edebiyatı, Ermeni tiyatrosu, Diaspora

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could not have been accomplished without the support of Istanbul Şehir University, Cultural Studies Department. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor Mehmet Fatih Uslu for his mentorship throughout my graduate study and during the process of writing this thesis. I also owe a debt of gratitude to him for encouraging me to learn Armenian at the beginning of this study. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Fatih Altuğ and Tülin Sağlam who admitted to take part in my thesis jury and supported me with their valuable comments, suggestions and critics.

I am also thankful to Harout Marashlian and Krikor Moskofian for their efforts and guidance in the Armenian language classes I took from them. I want to express my warm gratitude to Deanna Cachoian-Schanz who supported me with her comments and suggestions on the translations of the play texts from Armenian to English.

Heartfelt thanks to Jan Balakian, Lorne Shirinian, and Vahe Berberian who contributed to my project with their stories. Without their voices, this work would not have been possible. I would also like to express my gratitude to Vahe Berberian for sharing archival material and information with me.

I am wholeheartedly grateful to my friends Nihal Albayrak, Sema Merve İş and Şebnem Keniş who shared the pains of thesis writing with me. I also thank Emrah Altındiş who helped me for to access the journals published in United States.

I am sincerely grateful to my mother Ayten Duran, my sister Dilek Şenyürek, my brother-in-law Levent Şenyürek and my nephew İmre Şenyürek for their love, care, and support.

No word can suffice to acknowledge my husband Burak Altındiş' support in this thesis. My special thanks go to him for sharing the hard times of my graduate life and for offering unconditional support. His intellectual, political, and emotional engagement nurtured this project at every stage.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ABSTRACT | iii |
| ÖZ | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | v |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS | vi |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Historical Background of the Armenian Theatre | 2 |
| Armenian Theater in North America | 4 |
| Theoretical Approach..... | 6 |
| Methodology | 7 |
| CHAPTERS | |
| 1. WILLIAM SAROYAN AS A PLAYWRIGHT AND THE REALITY OF PEOPLE AND CITIES | 10 |
| 1.1. <i>My Heart's In the Highlands</i> (1939)..... | 12 |
| 1.2. <i>Armenians</i> (1971)..... | 18 |
| 1.3. <i>Bitlis</i> (1975)..... | 26 |
| 2. PLAYWRITING AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE CATASTROPHE . | 31 |
| 2.1. Play Texts and Narratives | 33 |
| 2.2. Patterns and Recurring Themes in the Play Texts | 36 |
| 2.2.1. Influence of Genocide Narratives / Memoirs..... | 36 |
| 2.2.2. Life in Diaspora | 42 |
| 3. VAHE BERBERIAN: THEATRE MAKING BETWEEN THE TWO DISAPORAS | 49 |
| 3.1. Life in Lebanon and <i>Vartakooyñ Pighu</i> | 50 |
| 3.2. Life in Diaspora and <i>Baron Garbis</i> | 59 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 67 |
| REFERENCES..... | 70 |
| APPENDICES | |
| A. Interview with Lorne Shirinian | 74 |
| B. Interview with Jan Balakian | 77 |
| C. Interview with Vahe Berberian | 79 |

INTRODUCTION

This thesis study concentrates on the role of theatre and especially playwriting in the formation of an Armenian identity in the Diaspora context. It was not a coincidence for me to decide to conduct a research on this subject matter in 2015. The 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide was in the agenda of Turkey, Armenia and other countries where Armenian Diasporas exist in 2015. Either people who deny and reject it or the people who want to commemorate and respect the victims were writing articles, making protests, producing movies, writing novels, publishing research articles. However, I realized that theater was not an artistic medium to discuss and make this issue visible in Turkey. The Armenians' contributions to the field of theatre were discussed with reference to their role in the establishment of the modern theatre in 19th century. How theater as an artistic medium developed in the recent history by Armenians was not widely discussed. The realization of this fact encouraged me to research on the contemporary Armenian theatre and its dynamics. Each Armenian Diaspora and modern Armenia has developed different cultural and political dynamics those influenced theatre field so I had to choose one particular context in order to reach certain conclusions for the contemporary Armenian theatre. This phenomenon explains my preference behind choice behind taking Armenian North American theatre activity as this thesis' subject matter.

I began this research in order to understand the role of theatre and playwriting in American Diaspora after 1915 and whether or not theatrical activity became a part of Armenian identity politics in North America. But after finishing the first level of my research and when the time to write the outcomes arrived, to begin writing the thesis became hard for me. So, I wanted to start from my own encounter with the plays. As a theatre practitioner and researcher whenever I meet with a new play I get excited, follow the lines with a curiosity and end up imagining how cues and actions will be performed in my mind. Whether I like or do not the play in the end does not matter, I always enjoy the first reading and imagining the text, which is a unique, one time only experience. However reading several plays concerned with the memory of the Catastrophe and how it experienced by Armenians became tough for me. I had read several plays with a motivation of understanding what words and dramatic actions

actually say about the Catastrophe. But what stroked me was how my first encounter with a theatre text changed dramatically. Me as a cold blooded, rational and analytic eye trying to find out the reality and/or level of representation embedded in text directly or symbolically hit the rock! The reason behind that feeling does not come from encountering what happened in 1915 through dramatic texts; but reading and imagining how the survivor, the witness or the remnant dealt with the Catastrophe after 1915. In the plays the main characters were the people who survived during 1915 and at the same time the people who were still trying to survive in different parts of North America after 1915. In other words, these texts were written not to deal with past but the present, being in America as an Armenian, as a remnant, as a child or grandchild of a remnant. None of the playwrights were experienced the Genocide but Diaspora became a context where this experience transmitted to them and shaped their imagination as playwrights. In order to understand how this collective memory affected the playwrights I had decided to create a text, which discovers not only the plays but also the conditions behind playwright's production process. The following chapters are about the representation of the experience of the Genocide and the post-Genocide identity formation for the Armenians with a focus on the Armenian North American Diaspora.

Historical Background of the Armenian Theatre

Modern theater in Ottoman Empire has introduced by the Ottoman Armenians in the 19th century and developed until the first half of the 20th century. Armenian Catholic Mkhitarist Brotherhood of San Lazzaro in Venice played a major role in the development of Armenian modern theater in 18th century. "Mkhitarist dramas were in-house productions mainly drawn from biblical and ecclesiastical themes and composed in classical Armenian, the tragedies also treat episodes of secular history" (Parlakian and Cowe, 2000: x) Not only historical and religious themes were dramatized by the members of the Armenian Catholic Mkhitarist Brotherhood of San Lazzaro but also original stories inspired by daily life of the Armenian people and other communities living in Ottoman Empire were also written and performed in the form of comedy which could be defined as "lively farces mostly written in the Armenian vernacular of Constantinople, involving characters drawn from motley Ottoman capital". (Parlakian and Cowe, 2000: xi) The theatrical presentations started in Venice by Mkhitarist students affected other schools in Constantinople. "Local

talents organized performances in the middle of the century, and the first Western Armenian professional theater was established in Constantinople in 1861". (Bardakjian, 1999: 104) In the early 1860s several historical plays, musical theaters, comedies and translations of European plays staged in Constantinople by the Armenian theater troupes. At end of 1860s Hagop Vartovyan's theater company Ottoman Theater is founded and his company had "10-year government license that allowed him a monopoly of sorts. Vartovyan staged an estimated 200 productions in Armenian and a similar number in Turkish." (Kouyoumdjian, 2015) Ottoman Theater's rich repertoire resulted as an enhancement of theater as a popular genre in Constantinople under Hagop Vartovyan's direction until the year of 1878. *Istibdat* (pressure) period started under the reign of 2. Abdulhamit, which resulted in a 30 years of political and cultural control in the all fields of intellectual and artistic production including theater. "The theater companies struggled with the financial problems and political pressures such as bans and censorship. On the other hand, many theater men and women stayed on stage despite their poor living conditions. Theater struggled to survive until the end of the century because of the efforts of a few people". (Güllü, 2016: 43) At the beginning of the 20th century not only Armenian community's theatrical activity was under hardship but also other communities' theater troupes were experiencing difficulties mentioned above. The 1908 revolution changed these conditions and beginning with the Second Constitutional Era, 2. Abdulhamit's pressure on intellectual and cultural activities were abolished, theater making became popularized and even became a tool for transmitting revolutionary ideas to the politicized masses. Bilge Seçkin who studied this period by focusing on how theater became a tool for transforming public sphere claims that "the promulgation of the constitution was followed by an explosion in theater activities; The old theater groups that continued their theater activities from the pre-constitutional period, such as the Ahmet Fehim Company and the Minakyan Company, were suffocated under the pressure of new amateur groups". (Seçkin, 2007: 11)

Starting from the Hamidian era to First World War, Armenian community of Ottoman Empire living in Constantinople and Anatolia experienced several massacres. The Armenian Genocide which took place in 1915 was the climax of violence Armenian people experienced since 1890s and resulted in not only

approximately death of one million people but also forced migration of the survivors from the Ottoman Empire to America, Europe, Caucasus and Middle East. The Catastrophe experienced in 1915 marked a new era for the survivors of the Armenian nation: “post-genocide Armenian Dispersion”. (Bardakjian, 1999: 230) Under this dispersion process Armenian people migrated and settled in new countries and carried their religious, political, educational and cultural institutions with themselves to their new countries and established new communities there.

The death, deportation and dispersion of Armenian people in living in Ottoman Empire also affected the Armenian theater tradition in Ottoman Empire. Playwrights, performers and directors either killed or migrated to different countries. Armenian theater makers who stayed in Constantinople and Anatolia were banned from making theater in their own language. Starting with the foundation of Turkish Republic in 1923 to 1946, staging plays in Armenian prohibited and Armenian theatrical activity which was a popular theater form that addressed masses until 1915 turned into a community theater from in the Turkey only after 1946. (Berberyan, 2007) However theatrical tradition developed by Armenians in 19th century evolved in several Diasporas where Armenians migrated. Within the scope of this thesis study I will try to portray the character of this transformation of Armenian theatrical tradition of in Diaspora context. As mentioned above, post-Genocide Armenian dispersion led Armenian people to emigrate different parts of the world but in order to deepen in a certain field and reach a detailed understanding about the features on the shift in theatrical activity I will limit my research in the Armenian North American Diaspora context.

Armenian Theater in North America

United States and Canada became the major centers in America in which Armenian people aimed to start a new life. Just after the Genocide, in different parts of North America several Armenian Diaspora communities are established. “After the massacres, the forced marches and refugee camps, and the confusion caused by World War I, America became a meeting-place for the reunion of many groups and families whose members had lost track of each other”. (Avakian, 1977: 46) Under these circumstances a survivor generation was born from the ruins and the traumas of the Genocide. “The literature reborn in diaspora was written by a group of authors

whose major preoccupations were longing for the homeland or their native provinces and memories inspired by the great tragedy”. (Hacikyan, 2000: 107) In other words, literature produced in any form had seen as a way of preserving the ties with the homeland and Armenian identity. Apart from professional authors, “ordinary people who were not necessarily artists by craft but who had the urge to use their modest ability to write, to describe what they had seen, to vent their feelings in versified form, to pen their memories for posterity or at least for their children to read”. (Peroomian, 2012: 49) These two tendencies resulted in a literature which is concentrated in memoirs, witnesses, testimony and real experiences. Literary works produced in the form of memoirs, novels, stories, poetry and theater plays concentrated on the depiction of the past with reference to the experience of the Genocide and present with reference to the experience of the Genocide. Armenian North American Diaspora literature after the Genocide developed between these two lines and determined by authors perception and account of these two phenomenon. The emerging literature possessed a split character between the past and the present experiences in terms of Armenian identity.

Drama as a genre also influenced by the literary trend I tried to portray above. Parlakian states that “formation of drama groups was highly important to early Armenian immigrants seeking to preserve their national identity, for it bound members together as an ethnic group” and gives an account of the several Armenian theater companies established in United States between 1920-1980 as follows: Knar, Hai Arvest Taderakhoump (The Armenian Art Theater), Theater Lovers Group, Sevan Theatrical Group, Diocesan Drama Group, Masis Theatrical Group, Mher Megerditchian Theatrical Group, Ardashad Theater Group, Armenian Students Association Theater Group. (Parlakian, 2004: 11-12) Members of those theater groups not only acted or directed plays but they wrote their own texts both in Armenian and in English. Playwrights of Armenian origin wrote plays on various subjects but when they aimed to write plays dealing with Armenian identity the themes were as follows: “joy of being with kith and kin in a free society in which Armenians can practice their faith and enjoy their ethnic customs, the turmoil and travail of transplantation from the Anatolian homeland to Diaspora; the feared dissolution of Armenian racial identity through assimilation; the loss of hegemony

over ancestral lands; and the chaos and agony associated with the Genocide of the Armenian nation.” (Parlakian, 2004: 1)

Theoretical Approach

As mentioned above the two main themes structure the theatrical activity of Armenian North American Diaspora: the traces of the Genocide and the experience of the Diaspora. In order to understand how these themes are developed through play texts and how they contributed in the formation of Armenian North American Diasporic identity, I will refer to three contemporary scholar’s approach on Armenian literature and/or theater studies. The three approaches those will be mentioned below have certain conflicting and intersecting aspects, which enabled me to develop a multi-dimensional interpretation and comprehension of the field.

Firstly, Marc Nichanian’s theory in which he discusses the limits of representation of the catastrophic event in literature will be referred throughout the thesis study when Armenian North American playwrights’ works are analyzed. Nichanian mentions “the need to distinguish between the ‘genocide’ as a historical event, one possible object of historical discourse, and the Catastrophe, which does not belong to history as historians conceive it”. (Nichanian, 2002: 248) While doing that he aims to define the beyond certain depictions of perceivable and representable outcomes. He claims that “the catastrophe is not an empirical event that we could observe or describe. It is, at the most a trace. It presupposes writing”. (Nichanian, 2002: 248) When he analyzes the 20th century Armenian authors’ literary responses to Catastrophe he concentrates not only on what and how they chose to write but also what they did not write or how they modified what they write. With reference to his approach I will try to develop an understanding of the play texts dealing with the representation of the Catastrophe and show the strategies that playwrights used when it is impossible to express the experience of the Genocide.

Sharing Nichanian’s perspective on the freeing the Catastrophe from a historical and factual perspective, Carol Martin defines a specific genre called “theater of the real” which will be my second reference point in my research. According to her theory, “theater of the real poses questions relevant to both theater makers and historians. What does it mean to be an instrument of memory and of history? In what ways is

performance embodied kinesthetic historiography, and what end does this serve? What is the relationship between individual stories and the grand narrative of history? Is using imagination an assault on historical accuracy?” (Martin, 2013: 10) Martin examines this concept through theater and performance practices in various contexts and how Jewish identity represents is one of these. One of the chapters of her book, by examining performances that use real experiences as primary documents to portray Jewish identity, she shows that “in the hands of the theater artists, the story of the Jewish people in relation to Bible and the Holocaust has, in the postwar period, been a remarkably durable one. Using an array of indexical dramatic and theatrical indications of the past, such as memory, testimony, re-creation, photographs and film, to signify reality and truth, similar narratives about Jewish people have been created”. (Martin, 2013: 118) With reference to Martin’s concept of theatre of the real I will try to evaluate Armenian North American playwrights’ depiction of reality of the Catastrophic past.

Lastly, while trying to perceive how Armenian North American drama evolved in terms of illustrating the life in Diaspora I will be introducing Lorne Shirinian’s theory on the character of the Diaspora Literature. Shirinian in his works examines different genres and claims that authors, because of living as a member of minority community in the context of Diaspora, are able to create a literature through symbols of Armenian identity and one can comprehend Armenian North American literature only by following the traces and influence of these symbols. (Shirinian, 2000; Shirinian, 2008) With reference to his ideas on this symbolic literature I will discuss certain shared aspects play texts have in common.

Methodology

This thesis covers theatre texts from almost a seventy-year period between 1939 and 2008 and nine play texts from six playwrights are analyzed and discussed with reference to the aspects mentioned so far. Discussing all written texts dealing with Armenian identity at this specific time period is not preferred for enabling close textual analysis of the chosen play texts. Playwrights, whose works are evaluated within this study, are selected according to different periods they wrote between 1939 and 2008; and different parts of North America where Armenian communities

are developed. I also pay attention to include representatives of different generations of Armenians who were born in North America.

In addition to textual analysis of the play texts, playwrights' writing process and their resources of creation and how they are received by the audience is also taken as a resource throughout the study. I either conducted interviews with the playwrights on how they reflected Armenian identity via their plays or referred to the studies or interviews already done with them on their creation processes. This approach could be received as a methodological challenge in terms of certain literary critics who may argue that literary text itself should be taken as the main and only source and voice of the author, apart from the text, should not be taken into account. However, due to the fact that my aim is to reach an understanding of how theatrical activity developed after the Catastrophe of 1915 among the Armenians in dispersion in North American Diaspora I find it crucial to research the motivations of theatre people to create new plays. Moreover, in order to discuss how Armenian identity shaped Diaspora literature, or vice versa, I need to understand how playwrights shaped their identity with reference the past experiences of being an Armenian.

In the first chapter of the thesis I concentrate on most known and productive Armenian North American writer William Saroyan's theatrical activity with reference to his three plays *My Heart's In the Highlands* (1939), *Armenians* (1971) and *Bitlis* (1975). I had chosen these three play texts among Saroyan's various dramatic texts because all three texts refer to his observations of Fresno Armenian community's relation of Diaspora and Homeland. How he portrayed his own community's experience of the Catastrophe and Diaspora is discussed throughout the chapter with reference to Nichanian's theory on the literature of Catastrophe and Shirinian's theory on Diaspora's symbolic literature.

The second chapter depicts different playwrights' works belonging to second or the third generations of survivors of the Catastrophe. Jan Balakian's *Home* (1990), Richard Kalinoski's *Beast on the Moon* (1995), Herand Markarian's *Mirrors* (1996), and Lorne Shirinian's *Exile in the Cradle* (2006) are discussed in terms of Carol Martin's concept of the theatre of the real. In this chapter I aim to concentrate on how the narratives of the Armenian past they listen and/or read as children or

grandchildren of the survivors shaped the strategies they used while building the dramatic actions of their plays. Similarities and differences exists among play texts are discussed with reference to how playwrights define their Armenian identity in the play texts and in the interviews taken into account.

The last and third chapter of my research is devoted on the experience of a contemporary playwright, director and actor: Vahe Berberian. While in the first and the second chapters an understanding on the practice of the playwrights of Armenian origin who produced play texts in English will be developed, this chapter will concentrate on Berberian's production in Armenian. With reference to his two plays *Vartakooyn Pighu* (Pink Elephant) (1985) and *Baron Garbis* (Mister Garbis) (2008) and the social and historical conditions behind his journey from his homeland Lebanon to his hostland United States and his artistic career between the two Diasporas will be portrayed. The detailed biographical interview I conducted with him, in which we discussed his life story together with his literary and theater career will be the main source of this chapter.

CHAPTER 1
WILLIAM SAROYAN AS A PLAYWRIGHT AND THE REALITY OF
PEOPLE AND CITIES

William Saroyan was born in Fresno, California in 1908 as the son of an Armenian family who just immigrated to America. Although he traveled worldwide he lived most of his life in California. But he always described his identity by mentioning that he was American and Armenian, not by giving priority for any of these two identities. In an interview when Garig Basmadjian asked him about this “duality” he ironically said that it was a laughable word which was very famous among the intellectuals of New York and stated that he was simply product of two things: “The inherited and the environmental” (Basmadjian, 1987: 137) In fact, Saroyan had chance to visit his family’s hometown Bitlis when he was 56 years old. But being an Armenian, being a “Bitlistsis” was something he experienced through his family, language and the Armenian community he lived together in Fresno. When he became a famous writer in 1930s, his production was meaning for the whole North American society including the Armenian community living in North America. Saroyan became a productive writer and wrote numerous stories, novels, autobiographies and plays. Within the context of my research I will concentrate on his writing related to theater and especially the plays dealing with the experience of the Armenian identity, Catastrophe and Diaspora. But the play texts he wrote during his career deserved to be analyzed as the main subject of wider study in its own right. When we take his unpublished plays into account William Saroyan wrote 50 theater plays, nearly half of them are prepared for the stage and the radio and meet the audience in United States of America.

While reading William Saroyan plays I was able to realize the continuous relationship between the past, present and future within the plays. I believe this feature could be better analyzed with the concept of melancholia, which Eng and Kazanjian used as a tool in order to understand the “catastrophic loss”. Eng and Kazanjian, with reference to Freud, see melancholia “not simply a ‘grasping’ and

‘holding’ on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains” and they argue that “this engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future.” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 4) It can be argued that their thesis on seeing melancholia and mourning as a possibility of creating a cultural, political and/or dynamic space for what remains from the loss may help us to understand the role playwriting for William Saroyan as an Armenian American author. I think that he saw theater and stage as a cultural and political space where mourning through melancholia becomes possible. The nature of theatrical activity, as a shared experience between the performer and the audience, creates a possibility of a collective mourning. When the history of Armenian American theater is examined one can see the conditions for this possibility to become real. Nishan Parlakian, in his introduction of *Contemporary Armenian American Drama*, concentrates on political, educational, entertainment and social aspects of Armenian ethnic drama and how it empowered the Armenian community living in Diaspora in those aspects. He analyzes the theatrical activity of Armenian community living in America with a reference to Maxine Sellers’ *Ethnic Theater in The United States* and argues that “very appropriate for Armenians purged from Turkey is the observation that immigrants could even ‘express the grief they felt at leaving friends and family behind, perhaps forever, and facing the frustrations and disappointments of American life’ ”. (Parlakian, 2004: 14-15)

William Saroyan play texts make collective mourning through melancholia possible with their ability to represent the experience of the Diaspora not the Catastrophe itself. Lorne Shirinian in his *Armenian-North American Literature: A Critical Introduction: Genocide, Diaspora and Symbols* argues that “the Armenian genocide has rewritten the discourse of the Armenian nation, and forced the Diaspora of the previous generations from the Armenian homeland; at the same time, it is also a witness to the difficulties of living in Diaspora situation always compromised by the amenities of life in North America.” (Shirinian, 1990: 58) With a reference to Benjamin he claims that much of Armenian literature throughout the ages is a response and witness to barbarity of the Armenian genocide. Throughout his study Shirinian indicates that this responsive way of writing produces a symbolic literature. According to his approach “the literature a Diaspora community produces is one type

of discourse which uses such symbols; therefore, a study of this literature could show the way symbols, discourse, and literature come together to present a particular vision of a community and their group identity”. (Shirinian, 1990: 59) However Marc Nichanian defines the Catastrophe as a “situation in which language is no longer capable of symbolizing violence or of working for the identification of the subject; either the power of symbolization and identification has disappeared, or we have to do with a form of violence that is henceforth beyond all possible integration and symbolization” (Nichanian, 2014: 137-138). While Shirinian mentions a literature, which creates its existence only through the symbols; Nichanian strongly emphasizes “the loss of all possible symbolization when faced with catastrophic event”. (Nichanian, 2014: 138) How Nichanian and Shirinian differ from each other on their approach to the literature produced after 1915 provided a relevant background for this thesis. I agree with both of the authors because I observed that Saroyan used certain symbols to represent the catastrophic event but the moments he was able to get close the experience of the catastrophic event was not the scenes, narratives or the actions about what happened in 1915 but the occasions in which the continuous relationship between the past, present and future is established through being an Armenian in Diaspora. I would also like to mention that it was possible to observe that the dramatic structures of the play texts were formed through the dramatic actions took place in Diaspora while experience of the Catastrophe were transferred outside of the dramatic structure itself. For the rest of the chapter, in order to clarify my argument, I would like to offer a close textual interpretation of William Saroyan’s *My Heart’s In the Highlands*, *Armenians* and *Bitlis*.

1.1. *My Heart’s In the Highlands* (1939)

When William Saroyan wrote his first play *My Heart’s In the Highlands* he was in the fifth year of his career as a professional writer. The play was staged by the Group Theater in New York and had the Drama Critics Award for the best play. The one act play was about an Armenian-American family’s encounter with an old Scottish actor and musician Jasper Mac Gregor. He escapes from the Old People’s Home and coincidentally comes to Ben Alexander’s house who is a failed poet living with his son Johnny and his mother. Saroyan wrote the play text with reference to one of his early short story called “A Man with the Heart is in the Highlands”. While he developed his story as a play text he made two radical changes. Firstly, while the story is

focused just on the specific moment in which focuses on the encounter between the man and the family, the play is about the two encounters those take place in four months in which Jasper Mac Gregor dies and the family leaves their houses because of the financial problems in the end. Secondly, in the play version, Saroyan wrote the story of an Armenian family and by showing three generations' (child, father and grandmother) relation with the Armenian language, homeland and America. However in the story neither the ethnic background of the family nor the grandmother character is mentioned.

On the foreword of the *My Heart's In the Highlands* Saroyan writes about why he decided to write a play text and mentions his opinions about the role of the American theater by stating that current American dramatic art is alienated from the American life itself: "To say there is no American theater at all is false, and to some degree silly. To say there is not yet an American theater equal to the dramatic materials provided by the American environment and people, however, is very true, and to a small degree profound. (...) American life is still a total stranger to American dramatic art." (Saroyan, 1940: 17) Saroyan's emphasis for the need of a realistic theater approach, which must have close ties with the daily life of the ordinary people and must find the artistic ways to interpret this life, is one of the key features in order to understand his position as a playwright. As it will be shown in the following pages Saroyan had written his plays with reference to his own experiences and by interpreting what he observed or listened. Saroyan was neither the first nor the last playwright to do this, but I argue that he was very successful at observing the human attitudes, writing very strong dialogues and in the end being able to produce plays which can be labeled comic, ironic, melancholic, desperate and hopeful at the same time. While writing his preface for his first play he rejects the common idea that the daily reality is simple and on the contrary he claims that as a playwright he finds it more meaningful. "A great but simple and more or less dimensionless reality is constant, of course, where there are people and cities, villages, and dwellings. The greater reality, the truer, deeper and more pertinent reality of a people and place, however, can be established--by isolation, emphasis, and magnification--only by men of good will, good vision, and great humanity." (Saroyan, 1940: 18)

My Heart's In the Highlands takes place in Fresno, Saroyan's own town in 1914. Play starts with 9 years old Johnny's boredom and his father Ben's attempt to create his new poem. Throughout the play we learn details about what kind of poet he is by witnessing his anger, family's financial problems and letters coming from magazines stating that his poems are rejected. This character resembles Saroyan's own father Armenak Saroyan he mentioned in his memoirs as a "failed poet and Presbyterian preacher whom had to abandon his scholarly interests and in order to support his family took a job in vineyards". (Hamalian, 1987: 37) In the beginning of the play Jonny's mood changes when he hears the beautiful sound of a bugle and sees the man playing it in front of his door. When he finished the song called "My Heart is in the Highlands", Johnny asks him to play another song, but the old man rejects:

MAC GREGOR: Young man, could you get a glass of water for an old man whose heart is not here, but in the highlands?

JOHNNY: What highlands?

MAC GREGOR: The Scotch highlands. Could you?

JOHNNY: What's your heart doing in the Scotch Highlands?

MAC GREGOR: My heart's grieving here. Could you get me a glass of cool water?

JOHNNY: Where is your mother?

MAC GREGOR: (*inventing for the boy*) My mother's in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but her heart isn't.

JOHNNY: Where is her heart?

MAC GREGOR: (*loud*) In the Scotch Highlands. (*soft*) I am very thirsty young man.

JOHNNY: How come the members of your family are always leaving their hearts in the highlands?

MAC GREGOR: (*in the Shakespearean manner*) That's the way we are. Here today gone tomorrow. (Saroyan, 1940: 24)

Jasper Mac Gregor's entrance to the scene becomes the key element to start the dramatic action of the play. His instrument's voice, though it appears as if from nowhere, and blows his melody of freedom through streets and into the house. The song he plays is written by famous Scottish poet Robert Burns, who became a symbol for the thousands of Scottish and Irish people those had to immigrate America because of famine and poverty in the 18th century. This melody is something that makes him feel like he is at home –or the nearest feeling like being home. Later in the play when a man comes from Old People's Home to take him back we understand that he is a runaway. So, this melody represents freedom in both ways. Through the dialogue between the man and the kid, which I cited some part of it above, Mac Gregor's longing for his hometown simply and directly expressed. As

he escaped from the Old People's Home he is in need of water and food, though he is able to access them on the Old People's Home. He is not very healthy but keeps wandering in the streets by playing his instrument. He stays with the family, living in a kind of pastoral simplicity, until after seventeen days an officer comes to take him back to the Home. But 3 months later he comes to Johnny's house again. After playing the same beautiful melody he explains that the reason behind his second escape is the fact that the people in the Old People's Home forbid him to play his bugle by claiming that it will do harm for his health. Which is true. At the end, when officers come to take him back for the second time, they find his dead body. In his last days, rational or not, as a man from the Scotch Highlands what he wants is feeling freedom and playing the music that reminds him his homeland. His wish became true with the help of Johnny's family and their neighbors. Johnny's family invites him in, although they lack money and food, neighbors bring him gifts of food and honor him. At that point the question we must ask is that why Saroyan wrote a play text based on whole Armenian Town's cooperation and support a man like Mac Gregor? The answer to that question could be found in Saroyan's own words about the character of the place he grew up: "now it may be impossible to notice that the people who live in Armenian Town were all the members of other small nations. (...) I liked all of these people because they were quite simply part of mystery of my neighborhood, because I saw them daily quite a few years, and because they had a quality about them that both amazed and amused me." (Saroyan, 1978: 83) In his memoir called *Chance Meetings* he wrote that Fresno was not only an Armenian Town but also full of immigrants coming from various parts of the world. By stating that he worked as a newsboy in his childhood and knocked every door in the town, he was grown up in the multiplicity and abundance of ethnicities. One possible interpretation of these sentences could be done within an understanding of the common experiences and shared feelings these people might have in the context of Diaspora. In other words, the reason behind Saroyan's attempt to write *My Heart's In the Highlands* has something related to this phenomenon. In order to develop this argument I would like to concentrate on the scene we witness the character of the Armenian family in the absence of Mac Gregor between his first and second escape. The scene starts with Johnny's grandmother's, who enters the stage for the first time in the play, approach to Johnny who suffers boredom again:

JOHNNY'S GRANDMOTHER: *(in Armenian, which is the only language she speaks, with the exception of Turkish, Kurdish and a little Arabic, which nobody around seems to know)* How are you, my heart?

JOHNNY: *(who understands Armenian, but hardly ever speaks it; in English.)* Fine.

JOHNNY'S GRANDMOTHER: How is your Papa?

JOHNNY: I don't know. *(calling loudly to his father)*

(...)

JOHNNY'S FATHER: Did you call?

JOHNNY: Yeah. How are you?

JOHNNY'S FATHER: Fine, Johnny. How are you?

JOHNNY: Fine, Pa.

JOHNNY'S FATHER: Is that all you wake me up for?

JOHNNY: *(to his grandmother)* He's fine. *(louder to his father)* The old lady wanted to know.

JOHNNY'S FATHER: *(in Armenian, to the old lady)* Good night ma. *(to Johnny, in English)* What do you mean old? She's not so old.

JOHNNY: I don't mean old. You know what I mean.

(...)

JOHNNY'S GRANDMOTHER: *(to both of them, to herself, and to the world)* Where's that man?

JOHNNY'S FATHER: *(deep in the news)* Hmmm?

JOHNNY: Who?

JOHNNY'S GRANDMOTHER: You know the old man who blew the horn. *(She pantomimes the blowing of a horn)*

JOHNNY: Oh. Mr. Mac Gregor? They took him back to the Old People's Home

JOHNNY'S FATHER: *(reading the paper)* Austria. Germany. France. England. Russia. Zeppelins. Submarines. Tanks. Machine guns. Bombs. *(Shaking his head)* They've gone crazy again.

JOHNNY'S GRANDMOTHER: *(to Johnny reproachfully)* Why don't you speak Armenian, boy?

JOHNNY: I can't talk Armenian.

JOHNNY'S FATHER: *(to Johnny)* What's the matter?

JOHNNY: She wants to know about Mr. Mac Gregor

JOHNNY'S GRANDMOTHER: *(to Johnny's father)* Where is he?

JOHNNY'S FATHER: *(In Armenian)* He's back in the Old People's Home

JOHNNY'S GRANDMOTHER: *(Shaking his head)* Ahkh, ahkh the poor old prisoner. (Saroyan, 1940: 39-40-41)

This is the moment when the reader understands that the family who hosted Mac Gregor has an Armenian origin. The dialogue between the old lady speaking Armenian, but expressed in English by Saroyan, and his grandchild speaking English gives emphasis to the role of language in the context of Diaspora. The reader realizes the Armenian background with reference to the voluntarily spoken language by grandmother or the rejected language by the grandchild. Neither the grandmother nor the grandchild is criticized by Saroyan, on the contrary he just tried to express the distance they have because of the language issue. The ability to speak Armenian is one of the common symbols, which one can often encounter within the literature of Armenian Diaspora. According to Shirinian within the context of Diaspora literature

use of language many do not know or have forgotten and/or objects from the past results in showing the tight relation between the past and the present. “In the Diaspora, each present moment is claimed to a certain extent by the past; the past is contained and preserved in the present with a result that it could not be cut off from the past without becoming in some measure intelligible”. (Shirinian, 1990: 42) The problems of communication between the grandmother and Johnny are represented as an experience of the present, which has close relations of the past, which resulted in the family’s migration to the Diaspora.

Father Ben, who’s able to speak both languages as the second generation, becomes the one who establishes the link between the two. It could be noted that this is the only moment Ben takes such a role leaving his grief for his dead wife and his poems aside. This scene could be considered neither inside nor outside the main dramatic action of the play, which is related to the Mac Gregor’s existence in the town. As it can be understood about the dialogues I mentioned above, the scene seems to be about what happens to family on the absence of Mac Gregor and how they feel about him but at the same time it is about Diaspora experience of the Armenians who begin to lose language as an instrument that connects them to each other. However, Saroyan is not very skeptical on this issue, existence of a figure like Mac Gregor makes family change and bring them hope in the middle of all bad conditions. Like grandmother who is willing to communicate with her grandchild through Mac Gregor, Ben for the first time in the play makes a real conversation with his son and talks about the homeland, longing and death.

JOHNNY: I sure get lonesome for him sometimes. Don’t you Pa?

JOHNNY’S FATHER: To tell you the truth, Johnny, I do.

JOHNNY: I’m always remembering him, especially the music. And the way he drinks water.

JOHNNY’S FATHER: He’s a great man.

JOHNNY: Is his heart really in the highlands like he said, Pa?

JOHNNY’S FATHER: Not exactly.

JOHNNY: Is he really five thousand miles away from home again some day?

JOHNNY’S FATHER: He’s an old man, Johnny. He will.

JOHNNY: You mean he’ll take a train and a boat and get back where the highlands are?

JOHNNY’S FATHER: Not that, Johnny. It’s a little different from that. He’ll die.

JOHNNY: Is that the only way a man gets home.

JOHNNY’S FATHER: That’s the only way. (Saroyan, 1940: 41)

This dialogue could be interpreted as an indication of the common experience William Saroyan observed and shared with the immigrants living in Fresno throughout his life. Ben Alexander talks for himself as an Armenian, Mac Gregor as a Scottish and writer William Saroyan as an Armenian who never been in his family's hometown in Bitlis but just heard of it...

1.2. *Armenians* (1971)

In the last decade of his life, Saroyan wrote three different play texts concentrated on Armenian identity and one of these was *Armenians*, which was written upon Primate of the Armenian Diocese of North America's request. He asked Saroyan "for an original play on the Armenians that could be produced in the diocesan cathedral in New York City". (Saroyan, 1986: 8) Ed Setrakian directed the play and it was performed ten times at Haig Kavookjian Armenian Arts Center, in 1974. (Parlakian, 2004: 50) The play takes place in Fresno, California in the spring of 1921 and it is about life of the Armenians living in Fresno. *Armenians* is published in two acts and the main theme of the play can be summarized as a discussion about the independency of Armenia and what American Armenians can do to support and help Armenia. 1921 was a year in which First Republic of Armenia had been in a continuous conflict with Soviet Russia and the Red Army. Dickran Kouymjian in his foreword of *Armenians*, states that the play text was written in a consistency with the historical events of the year of 1921 due to the fact that in early April, 1921, the Bolsheviks entered the capital and by July the revolt was crushed throughout the country and the Russians took the chair of government. (Saroyan, 1986: 12) As I mentioned above, Saroyan wrote the play text in 1971 and in relation to that what I wanted discuss is why he chose to write "an original play on the Armenians" which eventuates fifty years ago from his time of writing? Did he really want to discuss the failure of the independent Armenia and show that Armenians living in America could do nothing to save them? One explanation could be centered on the fact that Saroyan aimed to do emphasize this. But another possible interpretation could be done by claiming that he created a play centered in the discussion of Armenia because he wanted show Armenians living in Fresno (or elsewhere in US) create their existence and Armenian identity through Armenia. If one chooses to follow this second approach Saroyan's ability to show that characters actually discussing "themselves" rather than anything related to Armenia should be analyzed.

During the first act of the play we encounter three characters talking and discussing at Red Brick Church in Fresno: Father Kasparian as the priest of Red Brick Armenian Apostolic Church, Reverend Muggerditch Knadjian as the minister of Armenian First Presbyterian Church and Reverend Papazian as the minister of Pilgrim Armenian Congregational Church. By showing the representatives of the three Armenian churches sitting around the same table and discussing Saroyan has much to tell to his audience. One of the most important institutions Armenian immigrants carried with themselves to America were the churches. Berge Bulbulian who made studies on the Armenians living in Fresno claims that “unlike the other organizations have been established and disappeared, the churches remain strong and continue to be the sole center of ethnic involvement for many Armenian-Americans” (Bulbulian, 2001: 86) Moreover the communal life of Armenians in the United States “came to be organized around the churches. Immigrants would congregate initially in rented meeting halls or church buildings and the houses of worship doubled as locales of social gatherings and became the hub of a burgeoning collective existence. Where there was a church, there was also politics.” (Bakalian, 1994: 89) So by setting the church as the place of the dramatic action, choosing the leaders of the churches in the Fresno as his dramatic characters and making them speak about the future of the Armenians in the America in a hopeless and sarcastic way Saroyan shows the experience of being Armenian in the American Diaspora.

At the beginning of the act all of the characters tell each other how they learned Russian invaders entry to the Armenia and begin to talk on politics. But all of them seem to be hopeless about the future of Armenia. Then Kasparian mentions that what they are able to do is helping their people right there in America. After that moment the three clergymen begin to discuss about their own position in Diaspora and how to “lead” their people. Kasparian from Armenian Apostolic Church refuses to learn English and gives his sermons in Armenian and he is anxious about boys and girls growing up unable to read and write Armenian:

KASPARIAN: We must work on the parents. If they do not teach their children to be Armenian, we can do nothing to improve the situation.

KNADJIAN: My wife is an Englishwoman, and so my children are only half-Armenian. I must confess I have not been able to make them love Armenia

PAPAZIAN: And that is precisely how it is with me, too.

KASPARIAN: Well, forget your own children, then, but do not forget the children of Armenia, itself. (Saroyan, 1986: 54)

The moment I mentioned above could be interpreted as an illustration of how Armenian identity in America is defined through Armenia. Learning or teaching Armenian is not discussed through cultural, social or political conditions of Armenian community in America but rather their relation to Armenia (whether or not they love Armenia). Shirinian explains this phenomenon by stating that after 1915, “an Armenian Diaspora discourse has been created which contains and express the concepts of being absent from yet being linked to other Armenian communities around the world and the homeland.” (Shirinian, 2000: 41) Armenia, which is miles away from America, becomes a symbol of Armenian identity. Meanwhile, Saroyan uses this symbol in his play but at the same time he continuously deconstructs it:

KASPARIAN: (...) if we do not do useful things whenever it is possible or necessary to do them, we shall soon be totally departed from the human scene, and forgotten, or remembered only for having disappeared. (...).

KNADJIAN: I believe I understand what you are saying. Please tell me what you would like to expect from both of us, or each of us, one at a time. What can I do for Armenia? We are nine thousand miles away from Armenia, and the Russians are there, what can I do at the First Armenian Presbyterian Church of Fresno?

KASPARIAN: Yes, you have every right to ask me, to ask yourself, to ask him that question. You can do precisely what you are obliged to do in the conduct of your duties, but you can add to all of that the powerful belief that Armenia, although occupied by the Russians, is Armenian, not Russian, and that the Armenian people will become more and more Armenian with time passing and more experience and wisdom of the world coming to them, and that furthermore Armenians in dispersion all over the world, but especially here in California, in Fresno, will continue to be Armenians, they will not become so foolishly American that being also Armenian will even be an embarrassment to them, and something to forget as quickly as possible, by marrying foreigners and bringing up children who neither know nor care that they are Armenians .

PAPAZIAN: I can't understand your excitement. It makes you say things that I'm not sure make sense. (Saroyan, 1986: 59)

Through this debate Saroyan shows us even the clergymen are in confusion with their existence and Armenian identity in Diaspora. But Saroyan does not aim to show that whether Kasparian or Knadjian and Papazian are right and how to survive in US will be an ongoing debate within the dramatic action of the play. During this ongoing debate Almast, an old woman from Moush, comes twice into room to serve tea and cakes. On her second entry Papazian suddenly wants to know about her and asks

questions about her past. He learns that she is a lonely woman who had lost all her family in Moush:

ALMAST: They have all died. They were all killed.

PAPAZIAN: During these past few years? Who was it? Where did it happen?

ALMAST: Well, it was all of them. I am alone, except for the good Father, and the other people who come to the church.

PAPAZIAN: Being alone is sometimes a good thing, but it is also a very bad thing. I hope you have become at home within yourself, alone.

ALMAST: No, that has not happened. It is now six years since I lost them all, but I have not become at home within myself.

PAPAZIAN: You have God.

ALMAST: Yes, He is here in the church, always.

PAPAZIAN: And you have Jesus.

ALMAST: Well, I don't know about Jesus. I know we say we have Jesus, but I don't know. I know we have God, but I don't know Jesus, I really have no experience of Jesus.

PAPAZIAN: We are Christians, of course you have Jesus.

ALMAST: Yes, sir, if you say so.

PAPAZIAN: Our whole nation has Jesus.

ALMAST: Our nation is lost, and I lost all of my family in our loss of the nation. I do not blame Jesus, but I don't know if He has ever helped us.

PAPAZIAN: What you say is very strange for an Armenian. It was for Jesus that so many of us died.

ALMAST: But we did not, you and I, did we? Perhaps we don't care for Jesus very much.

PAPAZIAN: You are a very strange woman, I must say.

ALMAST: The good Father does not think so. We have talked about this many times, and he has never said that I am very strange. (Saroyan, 1986: 60-61)

What is the meaning of this dialogue? Does it have a place within the ongoing dramatic action, which is actually concentrated on the debate among the three clergymen about the life of Armenians in Diaspora? Why Papazian suddenly wants to learn about Almast's story? Does she tell her story? And what does her story tell us? When it is considered that *Armenians* take place in 1921, six years later than 1915, Almast's lost must have been something related with the Genocide. Saroyan, through this part, changes the direction of the ongoing dramatic action and aims to write the Catastrophe itself. But the traces of Almast's experience of the Catastrophe is told not through her past, with the number of her losses or the way she lost them but through her way of her feeling in present. In order to interpret Saroyan's approach of writing about the Catastrophe, it is beneficial to mention how Nichanian evaluates the attempts to write about Catastrophe in his evaluation of Gurgun Mahari's literature:

The Catastrophe can only be approached indirectly, while speaking of something else. It is neither an object nor an instance, nor a fact. It is not an object that a scientific discourse could account for by catching it in its nets. It is not an instance from which one could draw conclusions on the moral or legal levels. Finally, it is not a fact that historians could circumscribe. Consequently, it cannot be made the object of a (scientific, moral or historical) discourse of truth. Again, I only succeed to say here what it is not. Obviously, I cannot say what it is, since it is the Catastrophe that limit or provokes what I say. The Catastrophe is well and truly a “horizon” from which all discourse becomes possible or impossible. As soon as a discourse claims to appropriate it, as an object, instance, or fact, it shies away, disappears from the horizon. (Nichanian, 2002: 166)

In the dialogue quoted above Papazian insists on learning about her past and he asks so many questions about the facts: When? How? Where? In Nichanian terms he wants to understand Almast experience of the Catastrophe in terms of the facts and truth or in other words he attempts to turn Almast’s loss and grieve into an object, which is measurable by time, numbers and/or people. But Almast refuses to answer any of these questions and talks about her current feelings and how lonely she is. She keeps silent about the past and Saroyan makes her talk about her actual feelings, melancholia and shows that she does not believe in symbols like nation or Jesus anymore while Papazian insists on those symbols. The most striking moment in this dialogue is the way two remnants discuss their experience of Jesus. While Papazian emphasizes the nationhood Almast simply shows him that it is meaningless to talk about the nation (and a Jesus belonging to the whole nation) when they were the ones who stayed alive among the whole nation. Because when people died nation got lost... And she suddenly leaves. Three men continue to their conversation and the dramatic action, which was interrupted by Almast’s entry suddenly, continues. Shortly after, Kasparian leaves to give a last rite for a woman who is dying and others with a newcomer, Dr. Jivelekian, decide to go Armenian Patriotic Club across the street. Similar to the first act, Saroyan chooses a symbolic place, which has an important role in the social life of the Armenians of the American Diaspora: Surjaran (meaning coffeehouse in English). These places were owned by social or political organizations, seen as important social establishments and a part of community where men spent time with compatriots, drank Armenian coffee and played cards. (Bulbulian, 2001: 122)

In the second act, in which three men drink coffee and enjoy the game of cards, the dramatic action is built through how those middle class men’s game is persistently

interrupted by the ordinary people in the Armenian Patriotic Club. Man from Bitlis, Moush, Van, Harpoot, Erzeroum, Dikranagert join them to discuss about the future of Armenia. They discuss about whether or not they can help and send money to Armenia, what will happen to the people who are in jail etc. Similar to the first act, the political debate about Armenia turns into representation of how they survive in Diaspora. As I mentioned before during the ethnic debate various problems are posed, but few are settled. Dickran Kouymjian states that this was a characteristic feature of Saroyan style: “by formulating a question clearly the reader was compelled to understand its dimensions, after which he was nudged toward, if not its solution, at least its resolution. However, some problems persisted, often because the questions of Saroyan’s youth remained the same when he wrote the play text: unanswered and, until now, unanswerable.” (Saroyan, 1986: 14) In fact it is possible to say that when the play suddenly comes to a final the problems raised in the coffeehouse remain unsolved and the characters hardly reconcile with each other. Nishan Parlakian, who wrote a review on *Ararat* after play’s debut in New York claims that such an ending stems from “great frustration and sense of loss prevail among these patriots. All that can be left for them to do is to keep the spirit of Armenia alive. That is the hope that Saroyan offers Armenians in his bittersweet ending”. (Parlakian, 1975: 27)

While most of the characters participate in this ethnic debate on how Armenians will survive in Diaspora two of them, Van and Harpoot, acts in a different manner. During this ethnic/political debate, all of a sudden, they leave their passionate and straightforward tone and begin to express how they feel about being in Diaspora and just like Almast they are marginalized among others.

JIVELEKIAN: Well, we are all of us always disappointed when we go to a place about which we have heard many many beautiful stories. What did you expect?

VAN: I expected a much better life than this life.

JIVELEKIAN: Well, that may be a personal matter. Perhaps you must think about it a little longer. You look very well for a man of fifty or more. You wear good clothes. What is it that you don't like?

VAN: The water. It's not as good as the water of Van. The greens are not as green, either. Parsley, onions, bell peppers, cucumbers, they are all greener and better in Van

JIVELEKIAN: Those are serious failings, no doubt about it, but I find it hard to believe that you do not like the water of Fresno. It is the best water I have ever drunk.

VAN: You have never quenched your thirst on the water of Van?

JIVELEKIAN: Alas, no.

VAN: The water of Van is water. This is also water, but it is not the water of Van, it does not give life to the soul, it gives life only to the body. Armenians are people with

soul. And the soul must have air, light, and water.

JIVELEKIAN: It seems to me that we are forgetting to be grateful, which is a very foolish thing. Gentlemen, we are lucky, we are very lucky to be in Fresno, to have our families here, and it is wrong not to remember this. (Saroyan, 1986: 77-78)

How Saroyan wrote man from Van's longing of his homeland is similar to Almast's entry to the scene mentioned earlier. Van who persistently claim that although they are miles away from Armenia there are things they are capable of doing for their "brothers" and harshly criticize Dr. Jivelekian and others who are against him. But during this debate Van abruptly changes his attitude and begins to talk on his feelings about his hometown. I believe making character of Van express his longing through the water of Van and define it as "giving way to the soul" is very poetic way of writing which is about the world of feelings and melancholia embedded in experience the Catastrophe. Again, this experience is expressed through not with a reference to past but with an expression of current and actual feelings about Van. Lastly, I would like to mention Harpoot's participation to the ongoing debate at Armenian Patriotic Club.

HARPOOT: I am from Harpoot. There are more people from Harpoot in Fresno than from any other city in Armenia. I could not help noticing the commotion around this card table from far across this smoke-filled room, and of course many of the words that were spoke n here carried across the room, so that I know you have been talking about matters of great concern. Well, I stood there and watched and listened, and suddenly it seemed to me I had better come here and protest. Let us be practical, gentlemen. Let us be reasonable. Let us be men of the world. Do you think you can talk about Armenia and leave out Harpoot? It is impossible. But you have talked and you have talked but not once has anybody mentioned Harpoot. What are we, orphans or something?

MOUSH: What do you want, a medal?

HARPOOT: Never mind a sarcastic medal, all I want is a straight answer to a simple question. Is Harpoot a part of the sorrow of Armenia, or not?

BITLIS: Why should you ask that question? What is the real purpose in asking such a question? Why do you wish to ridicule us?

HARPOOT: Me? Ridicule? I'm scared to death, almost, to open my mouth, for fear one or another of you, from Van, Moush, or Bitlis, will tell me to go back to my stupid rug business. Well, it is true that I am in the rug business, and that many of the people of Harpoot are in the rug business, it is an honorable business, and there is great beauty and art in many of the rugs that are in my shop.

VAN: Ah, please, please, sir, whoever you are, hasn't the Armenian name suffered enough because of the rug sellers? Why did you even mention that you sell rugs? Can you expect us to be sympathetic with a man whose sole purpose in life is to make a big fat profit from some perfectly ignorant and unsuspecting American who wants to believe he has become successful and prosperous. I hate rug sellers. I have always hated them.

HARPOOT: There, you see, everybody hates me. What right have you got to hate me for trying to make a living and to live in a nice home and to send my children to

college? The rug merchant is a man of importance in all of the great cities of the world.

MOUSH: Perhaps he is, but it is not quite clear whether he belongs to the Armenian nation or to the Money nation. (Saroyan, 1986: 82)

As one will easily understand from the part I cited above, Harpoot's presence in the play text and his entry into the dramatic action, similar to Van, took place not through the growing discussion on the prospective destiny of Armenia but via his (and others') senses and feelings. I would like to argue that the scene above is the strangest and the most violent part of the play. Harpoot's demand for recognition is expressed through an outbreak of suspense and fear while others react him with hate and hostility. With reference to that part I would like to analyze how Harpoot expressed his claim for a place in the Armenian community in Fresno. The image of rug merchant is a stereotype that shows us how Armenians are perceived in American mainstream. Mostly, "the archetypical Armenian rug merchant is portrayed as a cunning trader, a wheeler-dealer, a person with haggling in his blood." (Bakalian, 1994: 19) Harpoot and others actually protest this prejudice and discriminative perception common among the Americans. But Harpoot remarks his protest with reference to Armenia and being a part of Armenian nation: *Is Harpoot a part of the sorrow of Armenia, or not?* His demand to be a part of the community life in Fresno is made like a collective demand, which is symbolized by his homeland Harpoot and he asked whether or not Harpoot would be a part of Armenian nation. Others reject this attempt immediately and turn his symbolic demand out: *Whether he belongs to the Armenian nation or to the Money nation...* This part is also an example of how Saroyan used the symbolization and deconstruction of symbols at the same time.

The parts about the characters of Almast, Van and Harpoot indicated in previous pages shows us that Saroyan chose to write the Catastrophe with reference to field of senses and feelings and by the interludes he created within the dramatic action which is actually concentrated on the political and ethnic debate about Armenia. Moreover, it can be argued that Saroyan showed the experience of the catastrophic event not in the ongoing daily political debate which is designed and written in a realistic way but by representing the remnants' involvement with Diaspora and by writing Almast's

loneliness, Van's longing and Harpoot's outbreak Saroyan spoke for the limits of melancholia they are in.

1.3. *Bitlis* (1975)

Bitlis is play text, which was created with reference to William Saroyan's first and last voyage to his family's hometown Bitlis in 1964. The 10 pages long, short play text, which is the most autobiographical play text he wrote, was never staged during Saroyan's lifetime. The play text was written in 1975 and this is the only time he reviewed the voyage, which is mentioned by him as a touching and important experience. As a man, who constantly wrote his memoirs, the people he met and the places he had been, he did not write anything detailed on his experience of Bitlis except this play text. Beside *Bitlis* it is possible to follow the course of his voyage with reference to his traveling companions' memoirs: Fikret Otyam's feuilleton published in *Cumhuriyet* newspaper under the name of "Saroyan Baba Ocağında" (Saroyan On his Fatherland) and Bedros Zobjian's book called *Tebi Bitlis William Saroyani Hed* (Towards Bitlis with William Saroyan). When these memoirs are studied it is possible to realize how his first encounter with Bitlis affected him. Saroyan in Bitlis was full of joy and sorrow. He was excited and happy for his encounter of the city, which he only knew it by listening from his family. But at the same time he was somehow shocked to individually witness the fact that Armenians did not exist in Bitlis anymore. In Zobjian's memoirs short while after his arrival, he wanders in the streets and express his feelings with these words: "I live the most important moment of my life. (...) They told me about those places and they are as beautiful as they had told me. (...) My father Armenak, my mother Takuhi, Lusi, Mihran, all my ancestors passed through these roads. My ancestors were buried here. That means a lot to me. Our roots are here. Not in America. That's why I always say I am Bitlistzi¹. (Zobjian, 2010: 180) Writing a play text on Bitlis came into his mind in the middle of this complex feelings. In Zobjian's memoirs Saroyan in Bitlis uses these words: "I always dreamed of writing a nice and great drama about Bitlis but because I was never able to see Bitlis I failed to do so. When I turn back I will write, definitely write, and it will be one of my marvelous writings". (Zobjian, 2010: 187) But although he makes immediate plans of writing, he waits 11 years to write his

¹ I translated the citations from Zobjian's memoirs from Armenian to English.

play. Dickran Kouymjian, in his foreword to Saroyan's *An Armenian Trilogy*, while trying to find the reasons of this silence, gives reference to one his letter which written by Saroyan to Zobjian just after the voyage: "It was a grand tour, one of the most important pieces of travel and exploration I have ever made, but very very difficult for me to write about...And so, I have no immediate plans to even try to write about it." (Saroyan, 1986: 24) These sentences show that his 11 years of silence stems from, to some extent, his search for a way of writing to reflect his unique experience of Bitlis. Interestingly, three years after writing *Bitlis*, in another letter to Zobjian, he again questions his disability to write on Bitlis. "Why did I not write about our great 1964 tour of Anatolia, of Armenia and our visits to all of our magnificent places? I wrote a kind of poem called Bitlis which I shall have published someday, but I believe I was unable to write a full book because I knew I would become angry about our story and there are already so many of us who have written out of such anger." (Saroyan, 1986: 26) Saroyan as a mature writer who was able to write the various sides of the Armenian identity with numerous Armenian characters in his plays, stories and novels so far; lacks to find the right style to his own encounter of the traces of Catastrophe and abstains from writing with a reflexive and bitter tone and he ends in silence. Saroyan's silence can be understood with reference to Nichanian's theory on the impossibility of representing the traces of Catastrophe in a reasonable, sensible and true way we he develops in his *Writers of Disaster* with reference to Zabel Yesayan, Gurgun Mahari and Hagop Oshagan's certain works and how they kept silence, denied and/or became frustrated.

Bitlis, although it is written in a play form, does not have a strong dramatic structure in which an Armenian's first encounter with his homeland is shown through the dramatic actions. Anyone who had read some of Saroyan's writing expects him to write this remarkable encounter in a rich dramatic form. But on the contrary Saroyan fails to do so. Instead he wrote a play text about three Armenians sitting on a restaurant in Bitlis and sharing their thoughts on their identity. This is a similar form that Saroyan used in *Armenians*, but as I mentioned above in *Armenians* characters' disputes, fights, feelings are imagined in detailed by Saroyan while *Bitlis* concentrates on the arguments of the characters on certain issues and emphasizes how Ara as an Istanbul Armenian and Bill as an American Armenian differ from each other.

The play begins with Ara, Bedros and Bill sitting on a Turkish restaurant in Bitlis. Ara and Bedros, who are Armenians living in Istanbul, accompany Bill for his first voyage to his fatherland Bitlis. Ara asks Bill how he feels about being at home. The conversation begins but short time after it is interrupted by restaurant owner's Akhmed's attempt of showing his hospitality. When he leaves the table to serve them tea:

BILL: Yes, and I must say that all of the young men seemed to be members of my own family, cousins, as I said to the Mayor, and to a few boys.

ARA: Well, the Kurd is like the Armenian, he is like us. Take a sip of this aromatic tea, stir in sugar, lots of sugar. It will refresh your soul. And of course although it is officially frowned upon to remark that you are a Kurd, almost everybody in Bitlis is a Kurd. There was not one Armenian in the crowd. I can spot one in flash. Not one, not one, and Bitlis, for centuries called Baghesh, was one of the main cities of Armenia.

BILL: It still is, as far as I am concerned. Yes, the tea is refreshing. My grandmother Lucintak Garaoghlanian made tea like this. In our house on San Benito Avenue in Fresno we drank tea all day in the winter.

ARA: And in the summer?

BILL: We ate watermelon. Well, at any rate, I did, for I do love and needs lots of water. Akhmed seems like a decent sort. Is he a Turk? Is he a mixture? He looks like one of us.

BEDROS: We all of us share the same earth and have for a long time, and so we are bound to look like one another, but Akhmed is a Turk.

BILL: Not a Kurd, he certainly doesn't look like the boys in the crowd that met us at the gate to the castle.

ARA: Akhmed is not a Kurd. He is a member of the minority in Bitlis, a Turk, but he is the owner of a restaurant, and that makes the difference. He serves food and drink to customers, and he wants customers, and so in a sense he is not really very much of anything, he belongs to the nationality of cooks and waiters. (Saroyan, 1986: 100-101)

Although the dialogue seems to focus on the ethnic background of Akhmed, it is actually about the irrelevance of ethnic differentiation between a Turk, Kurd and Armenian. Saroyan, with reference to the Armenians changing religion and/or Kurd's assimilation as Turks gives emphasis to a man like Akhmed could have possessed any of these identities or could have beyond all these. Ara's labeling him as a member of "nation of cooks ad waiters" is an ironic way of saying that which finishes the debate. Than they began to talk about the only Armenian man left in Bitlis and about his wish of going to Beirut in order to die in peace among Armenians:

BILL: Poor old guy, I thought he was really the nearest thing to a hero I have ever seen.

Will you get him to Beirut?

BEDROS: I shall write about him in *Marmara*, and perhaps some people will send in some money for a fund – yes, yes, I will see that he gets to where he can walk among Armenians. (...)

BILL: But the place is ours. Bitlis is ours. Bitlis is mine. I would come and leave here if it were a part of our country. And it will be. I am sure that some day it will again our true Bitlis.

ARA: Really? How can you feel that way? Sentiment? Wish?

BILL: Well, of course, look at the place. It needs the Armenians. It will once again be a beautiful and important town in the world. That's why I believe it's even now still ours. And will again truly be ours. It needs us. The others can stay go as they please. But Bitlis is ours.

ARA: Yes, Bitlis probably does need the Armenians, so does Moush, which we will see this afternoon, so does Van, which we have seen, and so does Dikranagert or Diyarbekir, and so does Kharpet sometimes called Harput and for the matter who is to save the Armenians are not needed also by Athens, Rome, Paris, London, New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Hollywood. Especially Hollywood? Yes this is mockery but there is a certain amount of truth to it, too. What I am saying is Bitlis needs Armenians but it will never see them back again.

BILL: I wouldn't be so sure of that. (Saroyan, 1986: 104-105)

This conversation determines the rest of the play text, which turns into a clash of two approaches represented by Ara and Bill. As one can understand from the part I cited above Bill as an Armenian comes from American Diaspora has strong emotional ties with Bitlis, while Ara tries to show him that those ties are imaginary. Ara's rational or hopeless attitude comes from the fact that he is a part of the Armenian community still living in the center of the Turkish Republic where he is constantly reminded that he is a minority in the society. Although we expect such a variance between the two men, what surprises the reader is the fact William Saroyan's self-criticism which he truly and simply wrote. By the character of Bill and how he is attacked by Ara the reader becomes aware of the alteration Saroyan experienced after visiting Bitlis and this alteration can be expressed with words by this way: Before visiting Bitlis he was longing somewhere far away but reachable but after his encounter with Bitlis he realized that his feelings were (and will) be about a place that does not exist anymore. That is way he wrote *Bitlis*, which is weak in terms of dramatic structure while robust in understanding playwright's personal history. So, it would not be wrong to argue that when reading the play text (or maybe also when staging) it is possible to realize William as the fifth character of the play who stands somewhere between Ara and Bill. Maybe last words belong to neither Ara nor Bill, but William Saroyan himself:

I am just as Armenian as you are, as both of you are and I am not sad about that, or about my country, or about Bitlis, or about the city of my ancestors, Kharpet, which we shall visit in matter of four or five hours, I am glad about it all. We do not need the childish support of a geographical country to enjoy being who we are. We are who we are in other ways and for better reasons than having our own government pushing us around -let other governments, the governments of other peoples, do that. And who really cares or needs to know why an Armenian happens to be sad going away from Bitlis or going to Bitlis, or going from one room to another in his own house far from Bitlis. An Armenian is sad because of far far better reasons than geography and arrival and departure of himself somewhere geographical, it is the arrival and departure of everything and everybody everywhere that he knows isn't going to improve anything that saddens him. Saddens me, at any rate, and makes me break into song, so sing with me about eating bread and drinking wine. That's all. (Saroyan, 1986: 112)

As mentioned throughout the chapter and discussed via the close textual interpretation of Saroyan's *My Heart's In the Highlands*, *Armenians* and *Bitlis*; Saroyan's plays which deal with the Armenian identity and the experience of the Catastrophe has a pattern that could be defined as follows: When aiming to depict the past experience he creates symbols that belong the present experiences of the survivors. In his plays the survivor generation never attempts to tell what happened in 1915 or how they experienced in Catastrophe in the past. Saroyan uses certain symbols to represent the catastrophic event not by narratives or the actions about what happened in 1915 but the occasions in which the continuous relationship between the past, present and future is established through being an Armenian in Diaspora. According to Saroyan's dramaturgy, the life of the survivor generation in Diaspora has promising and hopeful aspects while it also involves a melancholy and unrest, which could be observed in the play texts via the traces of the past on the characters. What happened in the past is not opened by clearly rather it is portrayed roughly but the past's and the Catastrophe's trace and how this trace effects the character's life in Diaspora is symbolized by Saroyan.

CHAPTER 2

PLAYWRITING AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE CATASTROPHE

William Saroyan's advent as a playwright at the end of 1930s resulted in the development of a literal and cultural area in which Armenian American playwrights began to produce plays for the stage varying for Broadway stage to off-Broadway, for community theaters to school theaters, for local amateur theater groups to regional theaters. The rise and development of this activity in different parts of North America is studied by scholars with reference to theater groups established and their aims to produce play texts in English and to some extent in Armenian. Among the various subjects play texts involved with, the life of the Armenian Diaspora community in North America and the how the traces of the Armenian Catastrophe of 1915 experienced by the Diaspora community is a recurring and prominent subject. While reading various play texts dealing with different aspects of the Genocide the basic question on my mind was whether or not it is possible to represent the Catastrophic event on stage. This question triggered others and I wanted to understand what sources they used to represent a historical event on the stage, for an audience and/or what kind of an aesthetic and genre these plays fall into. For my willingness to find responses to these questions and understand the dynamics of the plays taking the Armenian Catastrophe as subject matter, I believe that it is beneficial to identify this phenomenon with reference to the term "theater of the real", which as a phrase identifies a wide range of theater practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical. Carol Martin in her study called *Theater of The Real*, while trying to define the genre, gives emphasis to its relation with history and memory. "Regardless of style, theater of the real does not necessarily document the real with complete histographic accuracy. Creators of performance reinterpret history and represent it according to their fascination, proclivities, imagination, and individual convictions about whether or not a definitive truth can be known, all the while using the archive as source material." (Martin, 2013: 12) One of the chapters in Carol Martin's book examines certain play texts by focusing on Jewish identity, Holocaust and Israel-Palestine conflict and tries to

understand the genre in terms of narrative, representation and testimony. She examines five different works in terms of text and performance and she indicates “the similarities and differences in the representational strategies of Jewishness over a 33-year period in relation to the Holocaust”. (Martin, 2013: 93) With reference to Martin’s discussion on these performances it is important to emphasize that the primary dynamic behind the emergence of the genre is the ongoing conflict between the history and the memory. In other words, trying to create a different account of the Jewish identity and the Holocaust via theater and performance, artists concentrated on alternative narratives than of the fixed and constant narrative of the history. (By alternative narratives I mean using memory, testimony, re-creation, photographs and film as theatrical indications of the past.) According to Martin “history and memory are the building blocks of this theater, even as history can systematically repress memory by asserting an authoritative account that consumes the oral culture of the individuals and the collective memory of groups of people”. (Martin, 2013: 93) At that point, I would like to discuss the concept of “collective memory” which I think crucial in terms of being the source material for the theater in Armenian-American Diaspora. Hrag Varjabedian in his article called “Historicization of the Armenian Catastrophe: From the Concrete to the Mythical”, examines the artistic works of Armenian-Americans in literature, cinema and visual arts, demonstrates how the rupture of Armenian Catastrophe is portrayed. While doing that he tries to understand to what extent does the collective memory of the artists shaped their artistic work. Similar to Martin, he defines collective memory with a comparative approach to the concept of historical memory. Developing his theoretical background with reference to Maurice Halbwachs’ theory on the collective memory he claims that:

Collective memory exists and is propagated within a distinct social group, delimited in the space and time, within which individuals can remember and articulate their own personal memories. As for historical memory, it is formed when memory is detached from its social setting and is embedded within the structure of historical records and details. In this context, the past is remembered through autobiography and memories of individual constituents of a social group where lived experiences and collective memory ‘interpenetrate’ one another. (Varjabedian, 2007: 144)

I think in order to develop an understanding of the theater of the real in Armenian–American Diaspora context, we should be able to understand what kind of collective

memory of the Diaspora playwrights constitute as children and grandchildren of survivors of the Genocide. In order realize that for the rest of the chapter I will try to examine the work of Jan Balakian, Lorne Shirinian and Herand Markarian with regard this aspect. Within the context of my research I would also like to include Richard Kalinoski who does not have an Armenian background but chose to write play texts concerning the Armenian Catastrophe with reference to the collective memory of the Armenians living in North America. Jan Balakian's *Home* (1990), Richard Kalinoski's *Beast on the Moon* (1995), Herand Markarian's *Mirrors* (1996), and Lorne Shirinian's *Exile in the Cradle* (2006) and will be discussed in terms of the borders collective memory as a playwriting strategy created.

2.1. Play Texts and Narratives

Richard Kalinoski placed the *Beast on the Moon*'s story in Milwaukee, Wisconsin between 1921 and 1933. Aram Tomassian is a twenty-three years old young man, who is only member of the family survived; he escaped to United States, where he started working as a photographer. His family photo and his father's old coat were the only items he brought with him from homeland. He removed all the faces of his dead relatives from family portrait, and replaced them with his own and his wife Seta's head. Seta is fifteen years old "picture bride" just came from Istanbul to United States to marry with Aram. By marriage he wants to have a new family which will be replaced with his lost one. Aram was willing to complete their blessing task with his wife, which is add a new face to family portrait of a newborn to continue his father's bloodline. However Seta was not able to give a birth due to her poor dietary, back her time in orphanage. On this conditions Vincent invades, an Italian homeless boy who is under Seta's protection. Vincent's presence changes Seta and Aram's relationship dramatically while three orphans fight with their wounded existence.

Jan Balakian's *Home* is a short play built on the story a brother and sister of Armenian background who discovers their family history due to the fact that their grandmother is having a breakdown because she imagines the Genocide is happening again. Play begins with twenty-one-year-old Sopia's return to home after graduating from university with a degree in literature. Family members fail to participate her graduation ceremony because of her grandmother's sudden disruption. When the ceremony is over, she finds only her twenty-five-year-old brother Krikor at home and

learns that other members are still at the hospital. Two siblings spent a couple of days together at home, trying to know each other better and Krikor, who had just quitted his job in Wall Street to write poems, makes Sophia to discover the story of the grandmother via his poems and the photos he discovered. By looking at the photos they try to imagine their grandmother's experience of the Genocide and how he survived in New Jersey. One day they decide to visit the laundry store where their grandmother worked when she first immigrated to New Jersey but they find out that the store plowed down, a new store is built and it is hired by Mc Donald's. Their disappointment results in their decision to travel to Armenia for discovering their grandmother's homeland.

Lorne Shirinian's two-act play *Exile in the Cradle* takes place eighty-six year time period between 1915 and 2001 in Istanbul, Ayas and Toronto:

Shirinian's play begins with a nameless woman in the crowd announces that the Genocide began on April 24, 1915 when the Ottoman Empire began arresting approximately 2,000 Armenian artists, community leaders, and intelligentsia, forcing them into trains, and deporting them. Popular anti-Turkish government poet Pierre Srabian and Hagop Keosserian, both Armenians, are forced onto a train while being watched by Turkish guards, and are being deported to a destination that has not been revealed to them. Pierre is twenty-five, cynical, and pessimistic; he despises the Turks and clearly sees the devastation that is about to occur. Hagop, a fifty-three-year-old food purveyor, is a leader in his community, a wealthy man with important government connections - until the genocide begins. During the journey to Ayas, Hagop is optimistic because he believes that the deportation is temporary so he willingly boards the train, not realizing that he has no choice; he believes that he will be fine because of his great wealth and government friends; he fails to realize that his influential Turkish friends no longer care or are willing to help him. (Sterling, 2008)

Pierre who is aware of the situation, manages to escape from the train and in the next scene we encounter with ninety-five years old Pierre who cannot escape from the train in his nightmares and traces of massacres follow him in his dreams. In this part we learn that Pierre survived from the Genocide, migrated to Canada, made a career as a poet, and had a family there. Ten years later, in 1995, Pierre dies and in his funeral his daughter Armig leaves his husband Yervant while his two granddaughters conflict with each other. We see a cultural split within an Armenian family. "Armig's daughter Liz is devoted to Armenian history and wishes to remember the Armenian Genocide while her sister Helen wishes to ignore the Genocide and pretend that it never happened. Liz believes that the people need to

listen to the accounts told by Armenian victims, yet Helen is tired of the stories of the past and refuses to listen”. (Sterling, 2008) The final scene takes place on Christmas day where all members of the family come to visit Armig when she is just about the finish her poetry book, continuing her father tradition of writing poetry about the Armenian Genocide. “Armig knows and respects the past but refuses to pass it on unquestioned to her granddaughter Yerchanig as her older daughter Liz may wish to. At the end, motivated by her need to pass on their family national story, she recounts the Genocide narrative as a quasi-tale or fable, which, of course, the baby cannot understand. She, thus, refuses to impose it on her granddaughter”. (Shirinian, 2008: 73)

Lastly, Herand Markarian’s *Mirrors* is play that focuses on the trauma as result of the Genocide. Play begins an old woman’s -Teny- emergency transfer to a psychiatric hospital. Dr. Brown and Nurse Mrs. Davis try to communicate with Teny who never talks and seems to have a lost memory While Dr. Brown, who is an orphan with a non-existent past and currently in the search of his ties with his family and ancestors, tries to help her. Meanwhile the audience via Teny’s dreams and nightmares witness her past. Young Teny is a curios teenage girl who likes to go to meadow to pick tarragons. On her visit to meadow he meets Garo, a *fedayee*, they talk friendly and spend time together. Garo warns her about enemies. Their conversation suddenly ends with gendarmes’ arrival and Garo’s escape. Teny’s mother by stating that she is not a child anymore warns her that she should not go far away alone and should not chat with foreigners. But Teny who fell in love with Garo goes to meadow again to meet him on the day of village deportation in 1915 and encounters with the gendarmes who will in the end rape her. Then she loses her father, mother and brother on the way to Der Zor. By observing that she is talking in her sleep Dr. Brown understands that she had an experience that triggered her to live her denied past and tries to find a remedy for her. He finds a letter among her items; he goes to Armenian Church and learns that letter comes from Teny’s brother Armenag whom Teny believed to be dead. By using an illegal drug he helps her to encounter her biggest horror, the Gendarme. With the help of the drug Teny kills the imaginary gendarme with a non-existent knife and with every stab she believes that she takes the revenge for the murder of her family. The next morning Teny wakes up relieved and by helping her to deal with her past Dr. Brown feels better on his personal

journey in which he has a long way to go on his search for his own past.

2.2. Patterns and Recurring Themes in the Play Texts

2.2.1. Influence of Genocide Narratives / Memoirs

Different authors living in the different parts of North America wrote the four plays summarized above in terms of the plot. Similarities they share stem not only from playwrights' preference to choose Genocide and survival as their main subject but also the strategies they used while building the dramatic action in the play. When plays are analyzed one can easily realize that dramatic action is build and developed around the story of the survivor. Aram and Seta in *Beast on the Moon*, Teny in *Mirrors*, Grandmother in *Home* and Pierre in *Exile in the Cradle* are the characters who survived during 1915. Plays mostly concentrated of the remnant's life in Diaspora and how the traces of unforgettable past shaped his or her life. It is possible to observe that narratives on the experience of Catastrophe, which means being able to survive and witnessing the violence for those characters, are embedded in dramatic action of all play texts mentioned above. The function of these survival stories varies in each play text. For instance, *Beast on the Moon* and *Mirrors* based on survivors' silence and denial of their experience of the Catastrophe and as a consequence how characters experienced it narrated later in the play. *Exile in the Cradle*, on the other hand, begins directly with this experience because it focuses on how the Genocide affected a family's life by focusing on four generations. But although plays' models differ from each other, representation of remnant's experience of the Genocide have commonalities in the play texts. In order to discuss this further I would like to quote some crucial moments of characters' narratives on Genocide:

ARAM: He made a place for me to hide—they put a hole in the floor, and I was to hide under my father's old coat. They told me to go there if anything happened and they stacked old blankets on top. In the night I heard the guns of the Turks. I slid underneath. There were shouts and shots and screaming—they poked at the pile of the blankets. The Turks were clumsy or lazy or drunk. They didn't find me. I lay for a long time, shivering...under my father's coat. When I came out, I was all wet, with urine, and sweat...there was blood...on the floor and the walls...on the ceilings, in the air. Oh, I ran into the backyard...outside...anywhere I thought, and then I saw...My mother had a line outside, for her wash, the Turks they had hung...they had hung...the heads of my family on the clothes...the clothesline. The heads of my family, in my backyard, next to my mother's wash. (Kalinowski, 1995)

OLD TENY: (*Points offstage, terrified*) Over there... they're waiting... Look out! Look out! They are approaching... *Yegan Yegan!* Get down, get down... O.K. I'll put

the mud on my face... Hold on to my hand. Don't let go... (*Shouts*) No... No... (*starts crying*) (Markarian, 2004: 247)

OLD PIERRE: Oh, moon, what I have seen. When they pushed us off the train at Ayash, I took off and ran and ran. I surprised them and disappeared quickly into the dark. But I was captured soon after. (*Five seconds.*) Salim Bey must be dead. That is a small comfort I was put in the lines of our deported forced to the east and became a son to some, a brother to others, a husband to yet others. (*He sees in his memory.*) On the sandy slope where the exiled lie strewn like stones thrown carelessly by god's hand, Mrs. Manuelian and her daughter Arsho are quiet, having been terrorized into sleep. (*Points.*) Off to the left of the long column, the soldiers sit around a glowing fire and bite off great mouthfuls of grilled, spiced lamb skewered on sticks as they laugh and tell stories of the women in the brothels near their barracks and plot the morning's assault on the few remaining men they are certain have hidden gold coins inside their bodies. There's the big blustering one who grabs a large, hot chunk of meat and tears deep into it then twists his foul, greasy hand around one of the ends of his long, thick, dirty moustache. I know that he lusts after the young women, fatigued and helpless by weeks of walking barefoot on the high stony mountain trails and along the blazing expanse of sand and rock. In his mind, he picks out one lying there beside her mother. He observes the fine line of her thighs and breasts. Brothers, he says, there is cause for many dreams this night. They laugh. Some sharpen their bayonets; others snicker. What pickings, he thinks. God is great. (Shirinian, 2008: 43)

Aram managed to survive by his father's attempt to hide him and Teny escaped from gendarmes because her injured mother cut her hair, put mud on her face so that she looked like an ugly boy. Pierre also risked his life and took off from the train; if he could not escape his life would have ended in Ayash like many others. All these characters' life hung by a thread, all these narratives were written to demonstrate that their survival was by chance. It was quite possible that an exact opposite situation could have occurred. Moreover, lines mentioned above represent characters not only as survivors but also as witnesses. It is possible to figure out that narratives are written also to indicate what these survivors witnessed. I think authors by writing Aram's testimony of his entire family's assassination, Teny's loss of her mother, Pierre's experience of watching other people's death, rape and torture on his march to Der Zor wished to concentrate on the relationship between the survival and testimony. All these texts represent survival as an achievement and a consequence of courage and strength that characters had but at the same time show that the sharp, serious and hard things they had witnessed and experienced made them vulnerable in many ways. In other words, concept of survival in these plays' context represented as a paradoxical phenomenon. When I realized this shared attitude among authors on representing main characters both as survivor and witness I would like to figure out under which circumstances playwrights created these play texts. Soon after I realized

that all of them wrote the play texts with a reference to a relative's or an acquaintance's experience of the Catastrophe. So they were more than an outsider who narrate and dramatize a story and convert it to a theater text. As children or grandchildren of the survivors they were somehow a part of witnessing process and the experience of Genocide became an important part of their life in Diaspora.

Azarian in her study titled *The Seeds of Memory: Narrative Renditions of the Armenian Genocide Across Generations* tries to discover how the narrative of the Armenian Genocide is told, retold, and interpreted transgenerationally in Armenian Diaspora by focusing on the community in Fresno. With reference to the interviews she had conducted with children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of Genocide survivors she focused on the Genocide narrative people told while growing up. Although the narratives of the Armenian genocide is lived multifaceted ways within the different generations, there is one phenomenon common all across the generations which is about the fact that narratives transmitted by survivors has a strong effect in the formation of the collective memory. Azarian, according her research, defines narration of the Genocide as endless:

“It was a story that was enduring, something that was always ‘there’ either by ‘feeling the sadness’ of the survivors or through visual reminders such as tattoos which were imposed on the faces of two of the grandmothers of the ten interviewed. While several expressed the idea that the stories were told and retold either after church on Sundays when the ‘old-timers’ would get together, or anytime an international injustice occurred (...) Furthermore, there was not an exact time, place, or occasion when the stories were recounted.” (Azarian, 2007: 102)

Azarian's findings show us that narration of the Genocide was embedded in the formation of the Armenian identity of the generations born and raised in North American Diaspora. When I evaluate her study within the context of my main focus in this chapter –whether or not it is possible to talk about the influence of a collective memory for the Armenian American theater works- I can argue that playwright's position as children and grandchildren of survivors resulted in their preference to make the collective memory on Genocide as their main source of playwriting activity. The fact that authors took their family narratives as starting point is one of the primary dynamic for the this genre theater of the real within the context of Armenian American theater.

Herand Markarian and Lorne Shirinian as the children of the survivors were among the first generation of the Diaspora. Herand Markarian told how he wrote *Mirrors* with these words:

Mirrors was written for my daughter (...) She had suggested that I base the play on the experience of her grandmother whose stories of the Armenian Genocide she had heard as a child. I took her advice and expanded it to include the agony of my late father, my wife's father, and all those whom I had known in my childhood and whose manifold stories still haunt my conscience” (Markarian, 2004: 238).

Lorne Shirinian, who wrote a play text concentrating on the story of the four generations of an Armenian family living in Canada in a period of 86 years, in the interview we conducted, defined his position as inheritor of the narratives. (See Appendix A)

My parents and maternal uncle were survivors of the Armenian Genocide-the only survivors of their families. My father was from Geyve and my mother from Peri, a village near Kharpert [Harput] They were put in various orphanages around Istanbul such as Changelkeuy [Cengelkoy] and Erenkeuy [Erenkoy] then were moved to the Near East Relief orphanage in Corfu. Even as young children they lived through many diasporas. My father was brought to an orphanage near Toronto in 1924, the Georgetown Boys' Farm Home; my mother was brought to be with her brother who had arrived in 1923 in 1927. I was born in 1945 and grew up in the small Armenian community of Toronto and became the inheritor of the stories and remembrances. Many of these became the background of my stories, poems and plays.

It is interesting that Azarian and Shirinian share a similar perspective when determining the status of the first generation. According to Azarian “this is a generation who as the children of traumatized parents were in many respects not only psychologically affected but also the enablers of testimony.” (Azarian, 2007: 90) The existence of their generation as listeners made survivors' position of witnessing possible. As told and retold several times, children of survivors participated to the experience of the Genocide as co-witnesses. Within that context the Teny and Pierre's vivacious representation and well-built characterization, the fact that they have been living both in past and the present stems from Markarian's and Shirinian's position in their relation to their parents. They were able to interpret both their parents' and themselves' position as witnesses and were able to develop it in the play texts. Even the motifs they used to express the fact that character has been living a life, which divided into two between the past and the present, were the same. Both

playwrights preferred to use the encounter of the young and old age of the same character on the stage. In addition to that, their inclusion of the process of testimony in terms of parent-child relationship and witnessing traumatizing aspects of survival may have resulted in their depiction of Teny and Pierre as individuals who are dealing with trauma and its mental and physical symptoms. While Pierre barely sleeps because of her dreams and nightmares and in need of stronger pills to stop his pain, Teny is portrayed as experiencing a psychological breakdown and she ends in hospital.

Jan Balakian, who wrote the story of two siblings (Sophie and Krikor) with reference to their grandmother's illness in *Home* influenced by his brother Peter Balakian's writing about the Genocide. She stated me how she decided to write to play text with these words: (See Appendix B)

In a fictional way, I would be Sophia and my brother, Peter, would be Krikor. The Grandmother is based on my maternal grandmother, Nafina, who watched her family murdered and then walked the desert with her two remaining daughters, and eventually came to New Jersey. That story is explained in [Peter Balakian's] *Black Dog of Fate* beautifully. I was interested in the stark contrast between our comfortable life in suburban New Jersey and the horror of the Genocide. Being thoroughly American and yet there was this Armenian culture that we experienced through the food, church, relatives, but the Genocide was unspoken, which is why Peter went on the quest to understand it. My grandmother's Claim -in my play, which I got from his poem, which then appeared in his memoir- listed everything that was lost. Its discovery was the climax of my play.

Richard Kalinoski, as a playwright without an Armenian background, mentioned that he decided to create *Beast on the Moon* based on personal experience of the Armenian Americans around him: "I began thinking about the play's possibility in about 1992 -it was influenced (not inspired) by my sometime familiarity with the personal experiences of my former wife's grandparents- both survivors of the massacres/forced marches under cover of World War 1." (Sonmez, 2015). Moreover, Kalinoski before writing his play text, interviewed would-be scholars, Armenian-Americans and Armenians in Rochester, New York and Wisconsin. He became intrigued with their accounts of Armenian men attempting to identify eligible brides from a pool of surviving young Armenian women who resided in Istanbul circa 1915. (Hicks, 2005) He also discovered important written accounts and memoirs like Franz Werfel's *Forty Days of the Musa Dagh*, Michael Arlen's autobiography

Passage to Ararat, former U.S. ambassador to Turkey Hans Morgenthau's dispatches and poet Peter Balakian's *The Black Dog of Fate*.

Balakian's and Kalinoski's writing based on the experience of the second generation. Balakian as a granddaughter of survivor and Kalinoski as a non-Armenian differed from Markarian and Shirinian who are raised in houses in which Genocide narratives was a part of daily life due to their parents' situation. Azarian trying to offer a comparison between the generations in her study claims that while children of the survivors try to distance themselves in their narration from the experience of the Genocide because of the emotional heaviness, the second generation depict the narratives with pertinent themes and images that reoccur within the narrative renditions. Peter Balakian's *The Black Dog of Fate*, which influenced both authors in our case, has this sentence on the cover: "An American son discovers his Armenian past." (Balakian, 2009) But actually in *The Black Dog of Fate* Balakian's grandmother's story is told and her experiences of the Genocide is depicted. In this sense collective memory is filled with the remnants' past. "So this generation did not consist overwhelmingly of narratives of vicarious experience, where the lines of authorship are unequivocally blurred." (Azarian, 2007: 124). As Azarian suggests the second generations born in America were eager to narrate the experience of the Genocide as they were a part of it, witnessing it and as a consequence it is possible to name their positions as "imaginary witnesses". In Balakian's and Kalinoski's works we encounter with this fact by the motifs of the absence of survivors and/or limited focus on the experience of what happened in 1915. Unlike Shirinian's and Markarian's play texts, in *Home* we do not encounter with the survivor on the stage directly, the Grandmother is never present on the stage. But still she is the main person starting the dramatic conflict in the play. Jan Balakian chose to discuss the experience of the Genocide by how the grandchildren perceive it. Their position as imaginary witnesses can be discussed via Sophie and Krikor's dialogue in the fifth scene. When Krikor reads his poem about her grandmother's march in the desert Sophia criticizes him:

Sophia: How can you do that? It's like you were there, Krik, crossing that desert with granny and Aunt Lucine?

Krikor: A poet's always there in his imagination.

Sofia: I don't want to imagine any part of it.

Krikor: When I think about what happened I get so angry I have to run to the typewriter.

Sofia: Writing helps you deal with?

Krikor: The words have to come out. My anger explodes into words. (Balakian, 1993: 28)

Kalinoski, who wrote a play text with reference to his former wife's experience as a grandchild and the memoirs/biographies of Ottoman Armenians, written by their American-born grandchildren, based the story of the survivors not concentrating on their experience of the Genocide but their experience of the Diaspora. Aram and Seta share the same house for twelve years without being able to understand their inner melancholy. Aram never tells his wife his past and how he became an orphan because he believes that his remedy is in the future. That is why he cut off heads in his family picture and his own head occupied the hole made from the cut-out head of this father. He believes that his duty will be accomplished when other holes are occupied by his wife Seta and the children she will give him. He assumes that by starting a new family he will be able to overcome the loss of his family. Kalinoski by concentrating on this fact never uses any characters or scenes those remind past or techniques like flashback but prefers to focus on the present. Interestingly, in both play texts playwrights chose to fill the absence of the survivor or the experience of the past by using symbols like photographs. Aram's only heritage was the photo he found in his father's coat and Sophia and Krikor discover their grandmother's story via her photos.

Sophia: (*Sophia again looks carefully at the photographs.*) Hey Krik look at those old fashioned coats and old steel iron. Everything is so yellow and cracked in the picture like it is all from another world. (*She pauses.*) And will you look at granny leaning on that roll of paper for wrapping the coats? Krikor, will you look at her face? *Krikor goes over to the photo and looks at it closely.* I had never seen such sad eyes. (Balakian, 1993: 26)

2.2.2. Life in Diaspora

In the previous section influence of the past and how the collective memory of the Catastrophe took part in the play texts were discussed. As mentioned before four play texts analyzed in this chapter is not only about what happened to Armenian people in the 1915 in Anatolia but also about the possibility of survival in Diaspora. Moreover I would like to argue that the play texts are about the conflict between what people had experienced in 1915 in Anatolia and what they are experiencing in

Wisconsin, in New Jersey or in Toronto. In other words, these texts were written not only to deal with past but also the present, daily life. In that aspect what Armenian people experiencing in Diaspora had been an important theme in the plays.

The economic strains and the strategies to overcome this economic pressure is one of the conflicts Armenian characters of Diaspora face in the plays. When the financial conditions of the people who had immigrated to America after the Genocide considered it would be optimistic to argue that they had a comfortable life. The survivors of Genocide who succeeded to travel to North America and start a new life encounter with problem of earning a living. Newcomers either worked longer hours for little pay in the employment of others or established themselves as independent small businesspeople. "The family-owned and staffed, small but expanding business was a typical choice. Some business went under. Others remained solvent but stayed small. However, many Armenians started small and made it big." (Philips, 1989: 109) Philips by indicating the career cycles of two businessmen in Boston discusses the drive and ambition of the early Armenian immigrants on accumulating wealth and moving according to the mainstream capitalistic ideals of the North American society. Play texts develop this subject in two different directions.

Firstly, in Jan Balakian's *Home* when two siblings explore their Grandmother's past they find a photo of her, but this is more than an ordinary photo, it depicts the mood of a woman who had to leave her homeland and start a new life in Diaspora.

Sophia: Hey Krik, who is that woman standing with all those coats in that old, faded picture next to the fridge? (*She gets on a stool to look at it closely.*) Above the coats there is a sign that says, "Haig's Cleaning and Drying, Dry Fancy Cleaning" and then the rest is faded except for "Our Specialty 418 Totowa Avenue, Paterson."

Krikor: That's granny. We found it in her drawer when we were packing her up for hospital.

Sophia: Granny worked in a dry cleaning store?

Krikor: Yeah. She and grandpa owned it in the twenties in Paterson. That's how they got their start in Jersey.

Sophia: No one ever told me we began in dry cleaning.

Krikor: I thought you knew.

Sophia: How could I if no one ever mentioned it?

Krikor: Well, granny wasn't crazy about the whole thing. I mean, her family was prosperous in Armenia and then they had to come here and start from nothing. (Balakian, 1993: 25-26)

Aram of *Beast on the Moon* when he manages to escape to United States by inheriting his father's occupation as a photographer starts his own business and in years he expands it. In the second act, one afternoon he unexpectedly comes to the house to give Seta the good news:

Aram: *(Cheerfully)* Seta, listen to me now—sit down and listen. *(She sits and looks for a sign of Vincent and adopts a little smile.)* Good. I...me..I...have a contract. A contract. It's in Racine. And it's with the Jerome Increase Case Company.

Seta: Jerome Increase—

Aram: J.I. Case. The tractor company. Very big. Enormous. Thousands work there. They want me to take their Christmas pictures for the workers and even for the foremen. And if they like the pictures, if they like them, then I will take...guess. Guess. *(He struts a bit.)*

Seta: Guess?

Aram: Yes, guess.

Seta: The wives?

Aram: The wives? Oh, funny. You say the wives. Not the wives. What a guess! *(Laughing)* No, not the wives, Seta. The Executives. Me, taking pictures of executives. Me, this Christmas. 1933. Me! And so I wanted to come home and give you this gift—a gift to celebrate. A gift of celebration. *(He hands her the wrapped package quickly.)*

Seta: *(Surprised)* Oh. Oh. Just like that, you buy me a gift. Thank you, Aram. And you just walked in there and they said you could have the contract? Just all of a sudden?

Aram: I planned it. Vartan Gulbenkian—he took me in his lucky new Buick—we went right in and sat in a great office, huge—with sofas and fancy lamps—then they called me in and I laid them out—my pictures—and they looked down, over their noses and stared at them.

Seta: Aram, I want—

Aram: Okay, yes. First there were two vice-presidents. Mr. This and Mr. That and then Mr. Big Somebody and Mr. Bigger Somebody Else. You should have seen it! Four of them, Seta. Four. They stood there and laughed in their beautiful blue suits and made loud American jokes while they smoked. And they smiled like happy dogs, and then they shook hands and said 'fine' and 'swell' and my work was rare and clear. They said I had talent. Me. Talent. Americans. My pictures. My contract. You should have seen.

Seta: I am proud.

Aram: Yes.

Seta: Very proud.

Aram: The photographer for the Jerome Increase Case Company. My father, you know, was only the village photographer. This is not some small moment. (Kalinowski, 1995: 48-49)

The two plays seem to present the theme of how economic life went in Diaspora by using the same writing technique. Balakian and Kalinoski represent starting a business as having a respectful status in the new country where Armenians are behaved as foreigners. The old photo Sophia found was kept as proud memory of the moment how family started to the business. The inviting and self-confident mottos written in front of the dry cleaning shop contradicts with Grandmother's sorrowful

and unhappy look. We understand this by Sophia's reaction to the photo: "I had never seen such sad eyes". When she learns from his brother that all the relatives of her grandmother was killed and coming to United States was her only chance to survive Sophia puzzles: "She watches her family get murdered and then comes to New Jersey to dry clean people's cloths. Life is so unfair." (Balakian, 1993: 26)

In the part I cited above, Aram, by having chance to develop relations to an American truck company feels excited, happy and proud. This is the second time we see serious and quiet Aram in the play so cheerful. What make him excited is not only the fact that he will earn more money but also the fact that his work is appreciated by the Americans. Seta, however, fails to share his enthusiasm. This contrast produces the same effect as the grandmother's look in the photo. During the scene Seta rather than Aram's success in his photo business is interested in Vincent, a 12 years old Italian orphan. She gives him food and clean clothes and takes care of him. Although reader may think, with reference to her infertility, that she performs all these actions in a motherly attitude, but Seta gets close with Vincent just because of her own experience as an orphan. Similar to Aram whose melancholia and grief is embedded in his obsessive wish to establish a big family, Seta wishes to help Vincent who is an orphan, a foreigner and an immigrant just like her. This is Seta's way to deal with her own melancholia and to survive in Diaspora. Unlike Aram who keeps silent about the past and present but attached to the future by expanding his business and family, Seta wishes to speak and share her melancholy with Vincent. It would not be a coincidence that two women represented the same way towards business and regulation of economic activity in the plays. Seta's and Grandmother's indifference against entrepreneurship and silent resistance against adopting the life in United States like nothing catastrophic happened in their past is an important manifestation of how reactions of survivors in Diaspora differentiate in terms of gender.

It is possible to describe main features of Disapora as "history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for the eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and collective identity importantly defined by this relationship". (Clifford, 1997: 247) In that context the definition of the identity of the people who are living in certain Diaspora is always split between the Diaspora and the homeland. With reference to this fact another theme that we encounter in the play texts is the fractured identities a Diaspora culture creates.

Diasporic peoples often feel like they never truly belong, or feel marginalized, even in a multicultural society such as United States or Canada. In addition to that, Armenian Americans tend to lose certain aspects of their diasporic heritage in order to attempt assimilation in the new hostland. Therefore, they feel mutually marginalized in both the homeland and the Diaspora. In the Armenian case, their histories in North America go back over one hundred years. As such, many present-day Armenian Americans report decreased feelings of connections with the homeland and a relaxed importance toward maintaining ties with identity, although this is far from a homogenous feeling (Balakian, 1993: 7). Given the fragmented view that Armenians hold towards themselves, it seems that discontinuity and self-invention are the cornerstones of the play texts discussed in this chapter. Mostly, representation of the younger generation in the plays seems to have links with that fragmented understanding of the Diaspora identity. *Home* and *Exile in the Cradle* can be given as examples of play texts in which the second generation born in Diaspora is portrayed as in search of an identity or in identity crisis. Both playwrights use the same method while searching the appropriate way of showing the fractured identity Diaspora's younger generations. Facing the thread of losing a certain family member who belongs to the former generation makes the identity crisis to emerge in the plays. For instance, in the third scene of *Exile in the Cradle* we encounter Helen and Liz, grandchildren of Pierre and daughters of Armig, in their father's funeral. After his death the two women find enter into discussion about how and according to which values Armenians of Diaspora should live. While Helen rejects her Armenian background, which she identified it with the burden of the past, Liz on the contrary believes that the past still matters for her own generation.

Helen: I'm tired of being caught between these worlds. I'm sick of dealing with it. The Armenian past is like thick gauze. It blinds me to what's real. I won't let it hold me back.

Liz: What do you mean? You don't look hard done by.

Helen: How would you know? Have you ever asked me what I think about anything? Sometimes you act as if you're my mother.

Liz: That's not fair, and you know it. I'm just trying to help Mom. We need to make things easy for her after all she went through with Dad.

Helen: You always indulged Dad, let him go on about Armenian history and culture. I mean what kind of world was he living in?

Liz: Why can't you accept that this was important to him?

Helen: I didn't want any part of it then, and I don't now. It's tough enough being a Canadian trying to make it. I'm an artist, Liz. This is what's important to me. Being Armenian in some remote way has no significance for me. I want to be free of it.

Liz: Why do you always bring things back to you? You're so damn self centered. This is our father lying here. Can't you stop even for one afternoon?

Helen: Our father, who art no more. Hollow be thy name.

Liz (outraged): How could you say that? He only wanted what was best for you. So what if he went on about the Genocide. What do you expect? His parents were orphaned at the age of five. Can you imagine what they saw, what they lived through? You don't think this affected Dad?

Helen: That whole generation isn't quite normal, Liz.

Liz: You just don't want to understand, do you? Their exile was a constant adaptation. You and I were born here. We can't possibly know what it's like.

Helen: Yes, but Dad was born here, too.

Liz: He was comfortable here, but he wasn't always at home.

Helen: No wonder, going on as he did.

Liz: He did it to fight the denial.

Helen: Armenians and Turks. I don't give a damn about them. They're never going to be free of each other. You know, when we were younger and he talked about it, telling us the stories that his parents told him, and listening to Mom's Dad, I felt as if I were in one of the deportation columns, that my life was meaningless. I hated that feeling. I hate the Turks for what they did to us then, and I hate them now for what they're still doing to us. But I can't let this be part of my life. I'm not going to be another victim three generations later. I can't live with this hate, these images.

Liz: And we can't live with the denial. We can't let them get away with what they did. All those lives mean something. We have to give them a voice. That's what Dad taught us. (Shirinian, 2008: 51-52)

Similar to Liz and Helen's conflict Sophia and Krikor after their grandmother's breakdown step by step discover her past. Sophia who stayed indifferent to her family's history for years seems to have difficulty to face this knowledge and discovery. Her reactions are far more different than Liz or Helen who were raised in an environment where consciousness of Armenian identity was immense. Sophia throughout the play experiences the phases of discovery, denial, grief and acceptance of Genocide in a very short period of time while Armenians in Diaspora pass over these stages in years or -maybe- in a lifetime. That explains why she fails to build the connections with her family's past and feel lost in her search to find answers.

Sophia: (*Picks up a handful of sand*) I feel like one of these grains. If I disappeared it wouldn't even matter. (*Lets sand pour through her hand.*)

Krikor: If every grain of sand felt that way, where'd the beaches be?

Sophia: We're all just grains of sand, Krik. It doesn't much matter what we do with our lives.

Krikor: How can you say that?

Sophia: Cause at any moment someone can murder you and your family or take away your home or smash up your life, and you're standing there like Job screaming to the sky.

Krikor: If everyone...

Sophia: But no one answers, Krikor, the Armenians are the Job. They're Lear on the heath. They're waiting for someone to come and sweep up the mess, restore their lives, their families, their homes. But no one has come. Whoever's up there (*Points to*

the sky.) has been on one hell of a long siesta.

Krikor: You're wrong Sophia, because we made it here.

Sophia: And I don't even have to deal with what granny did, and I'm still lost.
(Balakian, 1993: 27-28)

Armenian American theater as specific field of a genre that can be called as “theater of the real” with reference to its strong and direct relation to the collective memory of the residents of Diaspora. As can be seen, the fragmented sense of identity that often arises from living under the diasporic condition plays a central role in the theater of Armenian American authors. “Through their writings, which deal with confused self-identification, assimilation, alienation, and retained and forgotten cultural memories, the authors attempt to tackle the issues of identity they have inherited as people born into diasporic cultures.” (Taub, 2007: 50) But the playwrights have been born in North America and have additionally inherited a North American identity too. It is this dual identity as both Armenian and North American, which ironically works to both help and hinder the playwrights and their respective cultures in the ongoing search for identity while living in Diaspora. For the next chapter the concept of dual identity will be expanded and discussed with reference to late immigration wave from Lebanon to United States, how Armenian identity formed within different practices of Diaspora and how it is shaped the theatrical activity.

CHAPTER 3
VAHE BERBERIAN: THEATRE MAKING BETWEEN THE TWO
DISAPORAS

Having reviewing playwrights like William Saroyan, Herand Markarian, Lorne Shirinian and Jan Balakian in the previous two chapters I tried to develop an understanding on the practice of the playwrights of Armenian origin who produced play texts in English mostly. It would not be wrong to say that most of the Armenian playwrights in the North American Diaspora who were not mentioned within this study also write in English. Although analyzing the reasons behind this fact and reaching conclusions about it is not within the scope my research, it should be considered as a phenomenon having multiple dynamics behind it. According to my observations in the field I can argue that the level of fluency in Armenian, the limited opportunities in the theater “market” to stage a play not in English but in another language, the motivation to reach wider audiences can be reasons behind this situation.

Similarly Nishan Parlakian while analyzing Armenian-North American community’s theatrical activity claims that producing and writing play texts in Armenian become possible when theater makers are supported and promoted by certain religious, cultural and educational organizations. According to his account when performers or theater companies seek the ways of making a career in the fields like off-Broadway or Broadway the language of theater making turns out to be in English. For instance Parlakian by illustrating Herand Markarian’s shift in his theater career discusses this fact. He tells the story of *Mirros* which is discussed in the previous chapter with these words: “After writing a number significant play texts in Armenian, Markarian wrote *Mirrors* in English for his daughter to stage as her Barnard Collage graduation project. Upon being enlarged later, it had significant run off-Broadway. By this time there was no question that the theatrical torch was passed on from Armenian to English”. (Parlakian, 2004: 12) Parlakian’s documentation explains the shift from Armenian to English to a certain extent however there may also exist other dynamics

determining this fact which is waiting the interest of scholars of Diaspora, Armenian Studies and Theater.

On the other hand, there still exist playwrights of Armenian origin living in North America who continue to write in Armenian. One of them is Vahe Berberian: a well-known artist whose reputation went behind the limits of United States and reached to the other diasporas and Armenia. As far as I can observe from Istanbul via Armenian friends and colleagues, most of the Armenians know and appreciate his works even if they had never watched him alive. His theater plays and one man shows written and performed in Armenian are available via his website, Youtube channel and other social media platforms and that, to some extent, explains his worldwide fame among Armenian communities. According to the Aram Kouyoumdjian's article titled "From Constantinople to LA: Three Centuries of Western Armenian Theater" Vahe Berberian should be considered as the most productive playwright in Los Angeles: "In the current century, a single individual, Vahe Berberian, has perhaps created more original works in Western Armenian – a pair of full-length plays, along with monologues, sketch comedy, and an improv show – than any other L.A.-based theater organization". (Kouyoumdjian, 2015) As a person working in the field of literature, theater and art Vahe Berberian is one of the important figures of contemporary Armenian theater and for this chapter his career in theater will be analyzed with reference to his two plays *Vartakooyn Pighu* (Pink Elephant) (1985) and *Baron Garbis* (Mister Garbis) (2008) and the social and historical conditions behind his journey from his homeland Lebanon to his hostland United States. The detailed biographical interview I conducted with him, in which we discussed his life story together with his literary and theater career will be the main source of this chapter. (See Appendix C)

3.1. Life in Lebanon and *Vartakooyn Pighu*

Vahe Berberian was born in 1955, in Bourj Hammoud which is the biggest Armenian town in Beirut, Lebanon. Bourj Hammoud was founded by the survivors of the Genocide who were able to reach Lebanon, a region under the French rule at the time, and stayed there. The town became "a safe heaven in which innumerable survivors found refuge". (Voss, 2007: 283) Like most of the people who managed to stay alive during the Genocide and settled either to Syria or Lebanon, Vahe Berberian's father was also a survivor of the Genocide. His father, who was one year

old at the time of the Genocide, and grandmother lived in Syria first than migrated to Beirut in early 1950s. His childhood and adolescence in Bourj Hammoud and his parents' home is described by him as a place where people from the field of theater, literature and the arts often interacted and communicated:

My father was very very involved in arts. He ran a dance ensemble, he never danced, I never saw my father dance a single step in my entire life. He was also in charge of the community library. You can imagine I grew up with these books because he was madly in love with books. Both him and my mother were readers. My mom was a very talented painter. She never persuaded but when I was growing up she was like my inspiration. So when I was growing up all sorts of intellectuals, writers, painters were in and out of our house and it was like an old style salon type of environment. It has influences on me.

Such an environment had significant effects on him to develop an artistic and intellectual presence at a very young age. But Vahe Berberian was more than a privileged young person who had born into an intellectual family. The Armenian community he was born into was also a rich and ever developing in terms of culture and arts. Armenian community's access to Lebanon citizenship during 1920s under French Mandate and beginning of its political integration to the country with new oligarchic system that emerged with the post Mandate period beginning in 1946 prepared the ground for community to develop in many ways. As a result of the liberation Lebanon emerged "as a culturally liberal model of modernity in the Arab world; its economic prosperity laissez-faire economic policy and remarkable freedom of expression were at the origin of the emergence of Beirut as the 'Mecca' of the publishing industry in the entire Middle East and as a rare haven for a comparatively free media and literary life." (Migliorino, 2008: 122-123) Due to Lebanon's unique political system and relative autonomy, the pressure to assimilate was not great. (Alajaji, 2015: 7.) Armenians who had developed institutions like schools, libraries, publishing houses and theaters in Ottoman Empire, by protecting their language and tradition in new lands, tried to reconstruct all these foundations in the Diasporas after the Genocide and Lebanon became one of the leading countries among them. For the status of the theater it can be argued that 1940s became a turning point. During 1960s it was possible to talk about an "emerging Lebanese Arab theatrical movement: media and intellectuals become acquainted with the until then neglected Armenian Lebanese theater, and Armenian professionals started teaching at the newly established Académie d'Art Dramatique or other, university based drama schools".

(Migliorino, 2008: 125) Within that social and cultural context Vahe Berberian met with theater at school and started theater when he was 16 by spending time in theaters, rehearsing, acting and putting on plays. His account of the theatrical context of 1970s was coherent with the process mentioned above:

In most of the Middle Eastern countries the theater was introduced through Armenians. When Armenians came to Beirut for example they started the theater. Until the beginning of the Civil War in Beirut it was fascinating. We were experimenting; there were some incredible plays, everything was just fantastic. The war cut that completely.

In 1975 there began a major civil war in Lebanon and lasted until 1990. Despite the fact that Lebanese civil war is often depicted as religious conflict among the Muslims and Christians, its underlying causes were political more than just being religious. The political crisis was started from the presence a Palestinian resistance movement in Lebanon that resulted in Israel's confrontation and attacks. Muslim and Christian communities polarized against the presence of Palestinian resistance movement. Break out of the civil war "resulted in the rapid collapse of the Lebanese political and social system. The country's territory was broken up into a number of areas controlled by military forces on the ground. The constitutional system was defacto paralyzed: no parliamentary elections were held until 1992." (Migliorino, 2008: 152) Armenian community in Lebanon attempted to carry out a policy of militant neutrality, and involved fighting only when it was necessary to defend the Armenian areas. However, "during the early phases of the war the Armenians of Bourj Hammoud found themselves dangerously close to Palestinian controlled area of Karantina, on one side, and Naba'a on the other; furious battles took place with Christians forces and the Palestinians." (Migliorino, 2008: 153)

Vahe Berberian was in the Beirut in the first two years of the civil war that I tried to explain briefly above. A few years later he wrote *Vartakooyin Pighu* based on his experiences and observations of the war in 1985, he also directed it and the play premiered in Los Angeles same year. Later it had also produced in London, Edinburgh, Sacramento and Los Angeles in English and in Athens in Greek. The two-act play is about a theater company's final rehearsals to stage a play in the middle of the Lebanese civil war. The play, which is supported by an Armenian organization, is scheduled for a premiere for the following night and it is almost sold-

out. While rehearsals are often interrupted by occasional outside explosions and news came from outside, some members of the company and especially director Apo insist on rehearsing until midnight.

APO Simon, you are an artist, and you must practice your art. Everyone has a different talent. Your talent is on the stage, and if you believe in what you're doing, then you can bring about change.

SIMON Art doesn't change a thing. Basically you have to live your life as art.

APO You find theater to be absurd in the midst of this war. But in reality, it is the WAR itself that is absurd, Simon. It's the WAR that is absurd.

VATCHE *(Coming in)* Apo, the streets are pretty much deserted. I think there is a power failure in the neighborhood.
(Powerful explosion)

ROUPEN That one was too close.

TZOLAG Where did you put the Cognac?

VATCHE Here. *(Takes the bottle and hands it to Tzolag)* Hold on a second. There will be another one. *(Explosion)* What did I tell you? They usually come in pairs. (25)

(...)

(Explosion)

ROUPEN If it continues like this, we'll be trapped in here again tonight. Apo, let's just call it a night, so everyone can go home safely, all right?

APO Come on, we're almost done.

ROUPEN We've still got the whole second act. It's dangerous out there, man. Let's just go home.

APO If you go, there's no way we'll be ready to perform this play tomorrow night.

SIMON So what?! Fuck it! Is the play more important than our lives? *(Loud explosion)* I'm going. You do whatever you like.

APO Simon, are you willing to sacrifice our friendship right now?

SIMON I'd rather sacrifice my friendship, than my friends. *(Explosion. Simon leaves for the auditorium door.)*

ROUPEN Simon!

ANI Hang on a second, Simon, let's all decide what we're going to do.

SIMON There's nothing to decide.

NINA Who's going to take me home?

SIMON I'll take you if you come right now.

VATCHE *(Rushes in breathless)* Apo, I think we're stuck here for the night. They are targeting this area. The guards outside said we shouldn't try to leave.

SIMON Nina, are you coming?

VATCHE I'm telling you the truth, they won't let you go. *(Simon ignores the warning and heads out)*

APO *(Angry)* Simon!

NINA Simon, what about the play?

SIMON Fuck the play.

NINA And the audience?

SIMON Send them home². (Berberian, 28)

² *Vartakooyin Pighu* was published only in Armenian. Its English translation was done for play's London, Edinburgh, Sacramento and Los Angeles production and but it was never published. Vahe

I cited these two different parts in order to give an example of play text's ongoing pattern in which every scene they rehearsed is interrupted either by a sound of an explosion and clash or the news from the ongoing conflict outside. Although some of the company members desire the rehearsal to end and wish to turn back home safely at the beginning of the play violent situation outside the theater building discourages the rest while director Apo and a few others insist on creation process to continue. This is the one of the main dramatic conflicts within the play text in which whether or not it is possible to continue to make theater when there is an ongoing war is discussed. In the beginning of the play Berberian informed the reader that the play takes place in a theater house in Beirut in 1980s and a theater company is rehearsing a play, while the war continues to ravage the country. So it can be argued that the theater company has been experiencing the conditions of war at least more than five years. But throughout the play Berberian portrays different reactions of the artists to the ongoing war and aims audience to think what theater maker's responsibility should be in such condition: To give up, to shut theater down and to hide or to continue, to insist making theater? It is obvious that director Apo's tendency is towards the second, he believes that theater should be done during wartime and the plays should depict the harshness and violence of the war. His approach creates a second layer of dramatic conflict within the play text, which also determines *Vartakooy'n Pighu's* style. The scenes rehearsed by the performers also take part in the play text and because of that it is possible to argue that *Vartakooy'n Pighu* is a play within the play. Throughout the scenes it is understood that they rehearse an absurdist play that concentrates on the growing tyranny in an unnamed country by focusing on the relationship between revolutionary Simon, his girlfriend Lily and her uncle Alfonse. Lily and Alfonse try to persuade Simon to leave the country, but soon after when Alfonse receive news from his ex-wife years later he decides to leave the country and go to her who lives in Albania. Simon and Lily join him but they encounter problems at the border of the country as refugees. Somehow they manage to enter the country but as days go by Simon begins to miss his old life and turns back to struggle in his homeland. At the end of the play Simon is executed because of defamation of the state, of subversive activities against the state, of inciting antisocial behavior and espousing immoral ideology. The play ends with

Berberian shared the English version with me. The citations from unpublished English version were done with the permission of Vahe Berberian.

executioner's monologue to the audience in which he claims that lawful killing is ethical. It is interesting that Berberian makes the theater company to stage an absurdist play that is loosely connected in terms of dramatic structure. As it is well known the theater of absurd emerged as a theater movement in the post-World War 2 period as a reaction due to as lack of belief and faith in the any kind of possibility in resolution that will make world a better place. If absurdist playwrights "could believe in clearly defined motivations, acceptable solutions, settlements of conflict in tidily tied up endings, these dramatists would certainly not eschew them. But, quite obviously, they have no faith in the existence of so rational and well ordered a universe." (Esslin, 1965: 3) Why then Apo as the most passionate artist in the theater company who advocates that they should continue to perform in any condition wishes to stage such a play? During rehearsals there occurs discussions among company members on "what to stage in times of war" and some seems to be dissatisfied with the play they are about to stage:

APO Don't do that! It's not funny. You've messed up the whole play. We haven't seen it once from beginning to end.

ROUPEN The play itself is a mess. What are we doing, dragging people to the theater in the middle of this bombing and then hitting them with this heavy distressing piece? We should do a comedy, to cheer them up and send them home happy.

TZOLAG I think we've chewed up each other quite enough on that subject. Let's not open old wounds.

ANI What did you want? Yet another insipid farce?

TZOLAG Hey, every time we've done a play like that, we've packed this theater with people, and they have gone away happy. People like slapstick. They come here for entertainment. You do a worthy play you play to empty chairs.

ANI Better to play to empty chairs than to empty heads.

APO If you present high quality work, the audience will appreciate it. But if you underestimate it's taste, they'll come to expect little from you.

SIMON I agree with you to some extent, but I am convinced that it's wrong to rack people's heads with messages. (*Explosion*) The important thing is to hold their attention and entertain them.

TZOLAG You work all day, you've got a thousand things to worry about, so you go to the theater to forget about them, and have a laugh.

ROUPEN Come on guys, Forget it. Let's just finish this rehearsal and if we're lucky we might even get home in one piece. (*Explosion*)

APO Nobody goes home until we've had a complete run through tonight. We either do it properly, or the curtain doesn't go up tomorrow.
(Berberian, 22)

This part seems to be an indication of the second dramatic conflict mentioned above. What kind of theater should be produced in such a violent era? Berberian in this

discussion justifies none of the approaches on the contrary by contradicting ideas there emerges an alternative paradigm. Apo and Ani are in favor of political theater and believe that it should have a “message” but ironically the play they are rehearsing is very abstract, heavy and nihilist. Tzloag and Simon on the other hand claim that in such times people are need of entertainment and relief so they should stage a comedy. So, Berberian raises up a question about the role of the theater in times of war: Is it really possible to stage place that would depict the reality of the violence of the outside world but at the same time take people attention by using the power of humor and irony? Is it possible to interpret the contemporary crisis of the Lebanese society for the stage? When I asked him about to what extent his play portrays of the situation of Lebanese theater during civil war his response was as follows:

We lived that war and in the beginning when the war started we all thought that it is going to end any time. Nobody, not one single person believed that it is going to go for 17 years. We were all trying to continue our lives as they were. We were still going to the theater, trying to rehearse or put on plays etc. Eventually we realized that there are a lot of destruction and death involved and this is not a joke. We cannot continue life as normal. *Vartakooyñ Pighu* is the realization of that. When it comes to reality and art, reality is far more powerful than everything else created. Reality dictates, art only follows. So, yes it is very autobiographical and also ironically when the war continued it became a norm. People went back to doing what they were doing because they realized just because it is the war we cannot stop living. But the realization of “there is no end to this so we need to adjust this situation” also took a few years.

Within that context *Vartakooyñ Pighu* is not just a play text that depicts the civil war in Lebanon. Related to Vahe Berberian’s personal experience it should be considered as reflection of a crisis situation in which artists search for the necessary tools to express the harshness of the reality. Berberian’s emphasis on the fact that war’s reality is far more overwhelming than any effort that could be made to express this reality on stage could be regarded within the context of Nichanian’s theory on the representation of the Catastrophe which is mentioned in the previous chapters. Nichanian, when trying to evaluate Zabel Yesayan’s *Among the Ruins*, asks these questions: “What is the force of writing when faced with the Catastrophe? If the imagination has a limit, does the written word have one as well? Is the same limit? Do we have something other than images for saying the unimaginable?” (Nichanian, 2002: 205) Berberian’s play text is centered on the similar questions but this time he

tries to understand the limits of theater in representing a situation of Catastrophe which is experienced both by the members of the theater company and the audience who are expected to see their play. It is striking that while Nichanian builds his theory on Catastrophe's being beyond the representable and all possible narrations with respect to Armenians' experience of the Catastrophe in 1909 and 1915; Berberian did the same but this time we are talking about Armenian's experience of an another Catastrophic event. *Vartakooyn Pighu* is the ongoing struggle of this search for representation of the catastrophic experience of the civil war. Play ends with a bizarre final which like a symbolization of the defeat in this struggle: The following day theater company meets with its audience, play starts and continues, but in the middle an explosion is heard and the curtain at the back of the stage falls. The actors on the stage are confused. Khoren runs to confer with Tzolag who is seated in the audience. Roupen, with his back to the audience, speaks to someone backstage. Apo comes onto the stage, as do Tzolag and Khoren. They speak in whispers as Simon tries to continue his performance. Finally Tzolag addresses the audience and announces that they had to postpone the performance because of the news that cease-fire is lifted and a hospital is bombed. This final moment could also be considered as a symbolization of the Lebanese theater's serious decline due to the conditions of the civil war mentioned above. The civil war was inflicted a blow on the production and diffusion of the Armenian theater in Lebanon.

The war severely damaged Armenian theater too a number of the best authors and interpreters decided to leave the country and to look for the opportunities in other Armenian diasporas. (...) Approximately fifteen Armenian groups present in the scene at the beginning of the 1970s interrupted their activity. The migration of the best professionals associated with that of the Armenian population in general, predicated a rapid decline of Armenian theater in Lebanon. The movement did not disappear all together but become more amateur and provincial. Paradoxically, the few groups that remained often managed to set out their shows in the two theaters of Bourj Hammoud staging comedies that represented the life of the community in those difficult times. (Migliorino, 2008: 167)

Like many artists mentioned above Vahe Berberian, at the age of 21, left the country and immigrated to United States to study like many Armenians did as war continued and based there until today. His experience of leaving homeland is also expressed in *Vartakooyn Pighu* and it can be referred as the third dramatic conflict that is developed in the play text. Can theater people survive and create in the conditions of war or should they leave the country to be able to survive and create? Will escape be

a remedy for artists? What does other Armenian Diasporas or Armenia offer them? Staying or escaping is represented in the play as a dilemma and members of the theater company are displayed in between the devil and deep blue sea. Berberian, who wrote the play text after his nine years immigrant life in Los Angeles, by not depicting life in United States and Armenia as a relief and solution to the problems of Lebanese Armenian evolves a multidimensional attitude towards immigration. United States promises unsecure economic and social conditions or assimilation while Soviet Armenia offers artists oppression and limitation.

NINA Vatche, what happened to your plan to go to America?
VATCHE My parents got their visas, we're waiting for mine.
ROUPEN There won't be anyone left if it goes on like this. Everyone's thinking about getting out.
NINA I'm thinking of going to Los Angeles this summer.
APO Go. Why don't you all go. Everyone's obsessed about going to America. Like they're going to heaven.
NINA Well at least it's safer.
ROUPEN Nonsense. It's the same everywhere. There's no bombing in America, but robbery and murder are rampant. Huh, my sister in law had gone shopping last week; two guys attacked her in broad daylight, hit her on the head, snatched her purse and ran off.
NINA There is a difference between shelling and mugging, Roupén. A war zone is more dangerous; that's logical. Isn't it?
VATCHE At least you're more free in America. Here people talk about whatever you do. They'll fucking beat you up if they don't like your hair cut.
TZOLAG To tell you the truth, last year we decided to go. But they were offering peanuts for my business. Even if I sold absolutely everything here, I wouldn't have been able to do much over there. Aida and the children still want to go, but it's difficult for us. Aida's brother went four years ago, and he's got everything sorted out now. He's got a house and a car and his own jewelry business. He's living the good life.
APO It's easy to buy a house or a car in America. You put a "down payment" of a few thousand dollars, and you buy the house, but then you waste the rest of your life paying the mortgage. I was there two years ago, and saw everything. My sister's been there for six years and the children don't speak a word of Armenian. But she's happy: "They didn't know a word of English when we came, and now they speak it like natives".
TZOLAG That's up to the parents. We have relatives there too, but the children speak perfect Armenian, whenever they talk to us on the phone. They go to Armenian school and their mother is very strict about that.
ANI They go to Armenian school, but speak English outside the classrooms. "Are you Armenian? Yes, I am Armenian." That's the extent of it.
TZOLAG Assimilation happens everywhere. Why do you assume that we'll remain Armenian here? Sooner or later we'll be assimilated here too. As far as I am concerned, America is our only chance.

APO Bull shit. Our only hope is Armenia.
ROUPEN Is that why they are falling over themselves trying to get out?
APO We've had communities all over the world for decades, and everyone of them has disappeared. Only Armenia has survived for three thousand years.
TZOLAG Why don't you go then? Go to Armenia! You can't even get along with our Organizing Committee... You think you'll be able to get along with the Soviets? Try to live there for a while, then we'll talk.
APO I will. If I ever leave Lebanon, I'll go to Armenia and nowhere else. Otherwise I'll stay here.
NINA What will you do here? There is a limit to everything. Even a stone will eventually crack in this hell. The only trick is not to take things seriously. You have to live life like it were a play.
TZOLAG "All the world's a stage" - said the man.
APO If the world's a stage, and all men players, then where is the author? I'd like a few words with him. (Berberian, 34-35)

3.2. Life in Diaspora and *Baron Garbis*

Leaving Beirut at the age of 21 Vahe Berberian lived 3 months in Cyprus, then Canada for a year in and ended up in Los Angeles. After having a degree in journalism in Los Angeles he had continued his theater career and founded the Armenian Experimental Theater Company with the artists who also had to escape from Beirut like him. *Vartakooyn Pighu*, discussed above, was company's first production, which followed other plays called *Avazakhrum* (Quicksand) and *200*. The company was producing plays in Armenian and meeting the audience in the different parts of the United States where Armenian communities exist. The company's rise was interrupted by Vahe Berberian's illness, which prevented him to run the company as before. During this period he started writing his first monologue and performed it. Because of the fact that it is well received by the audience he concentrated on his one-man shows for a while. In 2008 by realizing that he was becoming self-observed by the one-man shows, which were all dependent on him, and he decided to return back to theater. (Asbarez, 2007) This was the time when Armenian Experimental Theater Company members gathered again. Play's cast and crew was including the company members who had been active in *Vartakooyn Pighu*, *Avazakhrum* and *200*. In 2008 Vahe Berberian wrote and directed *Baron Garbis* which is a play which is concentrated on the life of a contemporary Armenian family immigrated from Bourj Hammoud to Los Angeles by depicting the relationship between the three generations: grandfather, father and son. A turbulent Baron Garbis is "set in his ways, knows right from wrong, finds himself being right quite often, and the rest of his acquaintances are either gays, prostitutes, weak, soft in the head,

misguided, ill-informed or just unworthy. Baron Garbis knows all. He is however getting old and he is courting memory loss, a fog in his head and a permanent state of garboil and medical problems men in their 80's often face". (Afeyan, 2008) The whole play is set in the living room of an Armenian family in which 50 years old Jirayr and his son Khajag deals with his 82 years old Baron Garbis' up and downs.

After its premiere in 2008 the play broke the records for the Diaspora theater for a play that is performed in Armenian. It had 48 performances and 38 were sold out. (Haroutyunyan, 2008) Moreover when I watched it via Vahe Berberian's Youtube channel I realized it had been watched 20921 times since its release in 2014. Audience reactions in the videos was like a proof of what Chris Bedian's, who plays the grandson Khajag, words about the play: "What has made the biggest impression on me is hearing the audience on stage, almost participating. The play is so powerful and accessible that I believe it blurs the lines of reality not only for me as an actor, but also for the audience." (Asbarez, 2008) However unlike *Vartakooy'n Pighu*, *Baron Garbis* could be assessed as less complex in terms of dramatic conflict, simple in terms of plot and more dialogue based play, then what was the reason behind its huge success? At first sight the plot was not different compared to most of the plays produced in Armenian-North American Diaspora. As discussed in the second chapter, the family stories that concentrate on the conflict among the family members and/or the emergence of an identity crisis due to mental illnesses of the elder generations are the commonly used motifs by the playwrights. But what made Berberian's play prominent was his approach and style. This time same story was being told by with a more powerful and transformative tool: Satire. The satirical approach Berberian used in *Baron Garbis* could be compared with famous 19th century Armenian satirist and playwright Hagop Baronian. Baronian in his dramatic and literary works like *Medzabadiv Muratzganner* (Honorable Beggars) and *Baghdasar Aghpar* (Uncle Balthazar) chose certain archetypes as his main characters and the humor and the irony emerges by these archetypes' encounter into certain conflicts with other dramatic personae. Baronian develops this model due to his clear observations of the society and the crisis Armenian community in his time which he transferred these ongoing conflicts into his satirical works. "The Armenian community, Baronian held rather pessimistically, was in moral deterioration owing to the decline of the institutions of marriage, education and religion under the impact

of the degrading power of money and self-interest”. (Bardakjian, 1978: 305) In order to criticize it he uses strict and well-shaped characters like Balthazar and Apisoghom who fit into certain archetypes that one can observe in the society as the core of his satire.

Similar to Baronian, Berberian develops *Baron Garbis* centered in the archetype of “Baron Garbis of Bourj Hammood” who is a conservative man loyal to his values performs “being tough and aggressive” as defense mechanism to the emotional and psychological difficulties that being transferred to one Diaspora (Lebanon) to other (United States). It could be argued that Baron Garbis archetype is the Berberian’s analysis of the generation who grew up in a “country of orphanages” and then “rediasporized” after the civil war. (Alajaji, 2015) Due to the change of restrictive United States Immigration Act of 1914 a new wave of Armenian immigration started to United States starting from 1965. Thus “Los Angeles has attracted both native-born Armenians from Fresno and from the Eastern states, as well as recent immigrants from a few Middle Eastern countries and the Soviet Union. Los Angeles is now one of the most ethnically diverse Armenian centers in the world.” (Sabagh, Bozorgmehr and Der-Martirosian, 1990: 3) “By 1991, the population of Armenians in Los Angeles had swelled to over a hundred thousand, and the city could lay claim to having the largest number of Armenians outside of Armenia.” (Alajaji, 2015: 154) For the Armenians who came from Lebanon with this second wave of immigration the relationship they had established with their homeland and/or Diaspora. As discussed in the first and the second chapters of the study for the generations who came to United States after the Genocide or born in Diaspora as children and grandchildren of the survivors the relation with “Home” could be assessed as symbolic and as a rather imagined place. But for the Armenian people who experienced establishment of an independent Armenian community in Beirut the situation is much more complex. Sylvia Angelique Alajaji, who studied the Armenian communities’ relation with music in Diaspora in her book titled *Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile*, claims that “the notion of past home was complicated further. And to add an extra layer of complexity, while the notion of Home for many diasporic communities is taken to be imagined or purely symbolic orientation, in this case Home is real, physical place”. (Alajaji, 2015: 9) Accepting the fact that being far away from a home that is physically there, which is still accessible may have created a deeper emotional burden to the elder generations

who had to emigrate to from Lebanon to United States. Berberian's hero Baron Garbis is the representation of this complex experience in which children born right after the Genocide observed the effort to establish a new community in Beirut, which is ruined up a few decades later. Rejecting this "failure" the generation of Baron Garbis became much more conservative and engaged to the traditions. However, the following generations are different. Baron Garbis' son Jirayr, who is a college professor, and his grandson, who speaks a hybrid language, which is a combination of Armenian and English, represents contrasting attitudes to him. Berberian's satire relies on the diversity among generations that creates a conflict, which is mostly centered in the Baron Garbis character.

According to the most of the reviews written for the play it seems that the audience interest mentioned in the former pages stems from Berberian's successful adaptation of this conflict to the stage by using humor and irony as his main tool. For instance Shahe Boyadjian said, "Every home has a Baron Garbis, or a Digin Garbis. It's incredible how people have recognized and identified with them." (Asbarez, 2008) Another review also states that "Baron Garbis, was the epitome of the typical Lebanese-Armenian from Bourj Hammoud and his manner of speech and disposition on life were a dead on representation of the demographic he symbolized. The humor was very ethnocentric to the Lebanese-Armenian community I found myself laughing almost constantly". (Lori, 2008) So, rather than play's success depends on a complicated and well-built dramatic structure, its achievement is related with its ability to project the experience of Armenians of Bourj Hammoud living in Los Angeles in a realistic and humorous way.

As people can observe in daily life, Baron Garbis, who experiences physical and mental illnesses such as problems with his leg or memory loss, portrayed not as incapable and weak but as an independent and outgoing man throughout the play text. He fails to remember certain things but he makes up lies that he later believes; he can always find something or somebody to criticize, he hates being controlled by his son, he dislikes being treated by doctors whom he distrust and he believes that one should be his own doctor. As being alienated in the family and his new hostland he turns out to be a storyteller in which every story he tells centers around him and his truths. But he does not tell stories from past that he remembers with sorrow and

longing rather his stories and memories are full of violent and rigid elements which are full of swear and curse. That is Baron Garbis' way of longing and this feature makes the character far from being a stereotype Armenian elder generation representation who is mostly portrayed as unhappy and excluded in the Diasporan context. On the contrary Berberian's Baron Garbis is a live and humorous character that one can observe in daily life. He is critical of the new generation about the way speak Armenian, their life style and attitudes. The following passage could be assessed as an example of his approach:

GARBIS: Don't talk about the kid like that! He's my dear one. Every day he comes and sits [and] drinks a coffee with me. What a boy! He's a thousand times better than the rest. Weeks go by and Shant's boys don't even set a foot here. The little one doesn't even speak a word of Armenian. Ya... they've spoiled him, spoiled him... now they can't even deal with him. They don't say "Kızını dövmeven dizini döver"³ for nothing. One time I pulled his ear, and they all went crazy on me. Just when I go to open my mouth, "This is America," they said. And so what, you discipline your kid just because you're in America? Avo, Mari's boy... When we first came to America, one day a mother came here crying and said, "Baron Garbis, I can only confide in you... What do I do with this boy? I have no idea... Every time I yell at him, he tells me that now he's gonna call the police. He was 16/17 years old then, that little brat." I went to their house and there was he was, with his feet up on the table, watching television with a beer bottle in hand. He didn't budge an inch. I sat at the dining table and drank a coffee, smoked a cigarette, and then I said, "Avo, my boy, can you bring me the telephone from over there?" He looked at me dumb-struck, got up and got the phone, and put it in my hand. It was one of those big, white telephones with gold engraving around the handset. He was about to let go of it and walk away, and I said "wait a minute", and then all at once, "wack!" I wacked the phone over his head, and his head cracked open, and there was blood all over the table. And I said, "are you going to call the police on your mother? Now take this phone and call for me!"

JYAYR: I don't believe it.

GARBIS: Believe it or not. She didn't know where he came from. And then Mari started in on her last cry: "Aman, Baron Garbis, poor thing..." and I said [to her], "don't meddle". Then I said to Avo "if you make your mother suffer again I'm going to stick this telephone up your ass".

JYAYR: And...?

GARBIS: And what? I took her to the hospital, they gave her eight stitches and sent her home.

³ A Turkish phrase which means "spare the rod and spoil the child".

JYAYR: Good job. Bravo. You should have been a [primary] schoolteacher. (Berberian, 2008)⁴

As one can find the hints by his reactions in this passage, the son Jirayr, on the contrary to Baron Garbis, is portrayed in the play as a serious and decent man. He took the responsibility of taking care of his father who always criticizes him. Grandson Khajag finds the balance between the two men who had to live together and have a fluctuant relationship going on. The three men's roles developed in the play text could be analyzed in terms of Berberian's approach on the relationship among different generations. The youngest Khajag who had born in United States and never been in Beirut has formed a symbolic identity and defines this identity via his grandfather's existence in the house. We can say that his stories enable him to realize his symbolic identity. However son Jirayr's situation is far more complicated. Spent first half of his life in Beirut, the second in Los Angeles he had a divided identity in which he attaches strongly to the symbols that shaped his Armenian identity. He feels himself responsible to both his father and his son. It would not be wrong to argue that Berberian portrayed him –to some extent- as a “control freak” throughout the play text. He struggles to change things that he is not capable of. He wants his son to live a proper life, to speak Armenian language properly, to have a proper education while he wishes to prevent his father's losing connection with his past. That is why whenever Baron Garbis misremembers something due to his memory loss he makes great effort to correct it. For instance in the second act of the play when he turns back from the house he realized that there is something mysterious going on between his son and father. Soon after he finds out that Baron Garbis insisted that they should find the buried gold in the garden according to his mother's advice and Khajag helped him to please him, to help him to have an occupation. Jirayr gets angry, begins to yell his father and son and tries to persuade his father that there exists any gold in their garden. Baron Garbis gets mad too and insist on his efforts to find the gold as told by his mother. Although there is no direct reference Baron Garbis, whose mother probably is a survivor of the Genocide like most of the people settled in Lebanon in the beginning of the 20th century, must have been remembering his mother's stories that she told them. While Jirayr makes great

⁴ *Baron Garbis* is not published, the text is shared with me by Vahe Berberian. I am making citations from the text with his permission. The play is written in Armenian and for the cited parts I made the translation from Armenian to English.

effort to correct these “foggy and false” memories, for the first and only time in the play his son Khajag warns him to stop and leave Baron Garbis own his own.

GARBIS: Why do you think I started to dig so gung-ho? She was your mother. For months she was after me until she went digging. Don't look at me like that! You don't remember Krikor! How do you think from one day to the next she got rich? After he died the wife would come and give away all his secrets. “What lottery numbers you played! Now it's time to buy gold. Buy as much as you can, or convert as much money as you want into dollars just like in the past”. All of a sudden he got rich. So, you're gonna/going to believe him and not your mother? In any case, a lot was disappeared and little remained. If we just dug around for one or two more days everything would come out.

JIRAYR: Well, there aren't one or two more days to go digging. It ends here. We spent so much money to plant those roses... Tomorrow they'll all die. Do you have a screw loose? Just take a look at yourself! Even I can tell you why your back pain's gotten worse.

KHAJAG: Dad, a man has a dream, and he tries... What's wrong with that? You're like a fucking Nazi. Everything's so black-and-white for you. There's no gray! There's no mystery. Everything has to be logical. Let everyone do what they want.

JIRAYR: Everybody already does what they want [to do] without me.

KHAJAG: Do what you want [to do], too!

JIRAYR: So I'll leave you be and let's see what happens. You're a 20-year-old boy. Can't picture it? In North Hollywood, what fool can hide his gold? Can you tell me?

KHAJAG: Why would I be *that* stupid to believe that there's gold hidden in the garden? But if I didn't help him he would have gone digging himself. He's convinced that there's gold. I don't care about the fucking gold, I just wanted to help him out. For me this is a way to spend some time together, to get to know him better. (Berberian, 2008)

When I listened Vahe Berberian about the motivations behind his decision to write *Baron Garbis*, his answer was remarkable. I thought that the hints of his way of doing theater were hidden in it. He never directly projects the real experiences as discussed in the previous chapter with reference the genre of “theater of the real” but in a different way he is able to create imaginary conditions that enables him to tell the crisis that real and traumatic experiences reproduced in the Armenian community. Similar to *Vartakuyun Pighu*, Berberian in *Baron Garbis* focuses on the result of a crisis of Catastrophic experience –the Genocide and the civil war- and tells the story of not an individual men but a society of Baron Garbises. I would like to finalize this chapter with his and Baron Garbis' words which make himself better understood than any effort that can be made to analyze his work:

Baron Garbis character is very close to heart because I grow up with this type of people, I think you will understand this, imagine this: It is right after the Genocide. People are been displaced all over and in Beirut they have created ghettos specially Bourj Hammoud that area where this people got there and they were mostly kids, they are young and they had no education, none what so ever. Their lives was cut off, they had no role models because elders were gone, we are talking about thousands of thousands orphans so they created this though street wise characters in order to go on, to survive, to compensate for whatever there fathers grandfathers were not able to do. Because in the end when we were kids for every single one of us the first question you asked was “How come 20 *jandarmas* let 1000 people? Couldn’t you done something, couldn’t you have fought back?” This was appalling for us. So these people growing up there at the time were compensating for that though exterior. “Yeah they didn’t do, but we are here. We are going to do something and we can do something.” And of course it was too late. The tough guy attitude translated into the way they treated their wives, their kids. They were rough, and you always thought that in the end there was some tenderness hidden in there. And we looked for that tenderness. In that tenderness in Baron Garbis it comes all the way in the end. When he cries for the first time. And he realizes “Why? Why did I do this?”

GARBIS: Ya... on Sunday mornings your mother would put on her white and red flowery Barbie dress and pin up her hair on two sides, and would take me to church. You don’t remember her Barbie dress, but it was very in style in those days. All the kids were wearing one... The edges were elastic, real puffy. Neyse⁵, another day she left her kid at home and left, and I fell back asleep and the next thing I know I opened my eyes and the whole mattress drenched in coffee. The kid knows that when I drink coffee I wake up, and so she went and brought me coffee and then spilled it, she spilt it all over from head to toe, and she was sitting there crying. I got up and slapped her one on his hand I was so angry...

(Pause)

My heart became heavy. I couldn’t forget about it for days. Ya, what [the hell] are you saying...You know how much freedom I gave that kid?

(Pause)

Now, after all these years, how am I supposed to look into this girl’s eyes? What should I say to her, call you tell me? We did whatever we knew how to. Whoever criticized us we gave them hell. It’s what our time’s called for.

(Pause)

Huh... and you’ll see, do you think you can deal with your parents?

(Knock on the door) (Berberian, 2008)

⁵ A Turkish word which means “anyway”.

CONCLUSION

The Catastrophe Ottoman Armenians experienced in 1915 had severe conclusions for the whole Armenian nation, Ottoman Empire and every individual who experienced it. Reflection of this unforgettable event in the field of theatre was the loss of a theatrical tradition, which was developing in terms of playwriting, acting and directing. However, the survivors of the Catastrophe carried the theatrical tradition to their new countries with themselves and managed to continue theatrical activity.

By focusing on North America and partially Lebanon case the theatrical character of Armenian Diaspora had a major shift in terms of language and playwriting activity is discussed in the thesis. All six playwright's productions interpreted throughout the thesis study shows us that two major themes dominates the field of new writing in the 20th century: The theatre of the Armenian North American Diaspora possessed a split character between the past and the present experiences in terms of Armenian identity.

As for the past experience it is possible to determine two tendencies. Firstly, in Saroyan's and Berberian's case traces of the Catastrophe of 1915 in Ottoman Empire and Civil War of Lebanon it can be argued that the two authors never aim to tell directly what was experienced on the contrary found their on voices in which they never directly show what had happened actually but imply it. By creating characters who deal with the traces of the past with different manners and attitudes, they were successful at challenging the assumption on experience of a catastrophic event could be measurable and understandable. Each character's reaction that we encounter when the play texts are discussed shows that catastrophic event has no limits. When the plays analyzed in the previous chapters are considered it may cause to the feeling of loneliness, it may cause mental trauma, it may make people more conservative or more patriotic, and it may cause disbelief in religion. The variety of these outcomes could be interpreted as a dramaturgy, which relies on the uniqueness of this difficult experience for each individual.

The second tendency, which is discussed in the second chapter, is the aim to depict a different reality than history and it is collective memory of the Catastrophe which is transferred two the second and the third generations of Armenian Diaspora in North America. The similarities authors adopted in the playwriting strategies are important due to the fact that this collective memory has been influential in playwright's imagination and creative skills which is considered as a product of individual memory. Of course it is not possible to define a certain type of playwriting strategy based on the collective memory of the Armenian past. However it is possible to argue that its common for the second and the third generation Armenian North American playwrights to specific playwriting strategy, which is centered via the characters, commemorate and/or remember the past.

For the present experiences those were reflected in Armenian North American playwriting traditions it is possible to conclude that the experience of the Diaspora is depicted through and identity crisis that characters face in different settings and situations. Play texts discussed in this study portrays the problems Armenian North American people encounter with their daily life and how they manage to solve them by welcoming the hybrid identity that Diaspora offers to them. The ability to speak Armenian, split identities between Armenian and American, communication problems among generations, how to preserve religious identity are the leading motives that we encounter in the plays.

There exists exceptions to the tendencies mentioned above which needs further research with a comparative analysis with the Armenian Diasporas in other parts of the world and other ethnic communities' theatre tradition developed in North America. This thesis in this context should be assessed as an attempt to understand major tendencies, which are observable during a major shift of Ottoman Armenians theatrical tradition in 20th century.

This study dealt with how these plays received by theatre makers and audience in a very limited way. If we see theatre and stage as a cultural and political space and the nature of theatrical activity, as a shared experience between the performer and the audience how these plays are received by performers, directors and audience of

Armenian and non-Armenian origin is an important subject matter that needs to be investigated in order to reach a full comprehension of the character of theatrical activity in Armenian North American Diaspora. How the texts were staged, how characters were interpreted by actors and actresses and how audience reacted to performances should be evaluated in order to reach further outcomes. In order to do that live performances and/or video recordings of the performances could be watched, more critics and reviews should be analyzed and interviews with the members of the creative team should be conducted. For my further studies I would also like to focus on these aspects in order to deepen in the field.



REFERENCES

- Afeyan, Bedros: "Baron Garbis is Alive and Well in BH" *Groong Armenian News Network*, June 2008 <http://www.groong.org/tcc/tcc-20080608.html>
- Alajaji, Sylvia Angelique: *Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015)
- Avakian, Arra: *The Armenians in America* (Minnesota: Lerner Publications Company, 1977)
- Azarian, Natasha: *The seeds of memory: Narrative renditions of the Armenian genocide across generations*, Ph.D. Thesis (University of California, Berkeley, 2007)
- Bakalian, Anny: *Armenian Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994)
- Balakian, Jan: "Home", *Ararat 34 A Quarterly, Special Issue: Drama*, (No: 136, Autumn 1993)
- Balakian, Peter: *Black Dog of Fate* (New York: Basic Books, 2009)
- Bardakjian, B. Kevork: *Hagop Baronian's Political and Social Satire*; Ph.D Thesis (Oxford University, London, 1978)
- Bardakjian, B. Kevork: *A Reference Guide Modern Armenian Literature 1500-1920* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2000)
- Berberian, Vahe: *Baron Garbis* (Vahe Berberian's personal archive.)
- Berberian, Vahe: *Pink Elephant* (Vahe Berberian's personal archive.)
- Berberian, Vahe: *Vartakuyun Pighu* (Los Angeles: Friendship Arts, 1987)
- Berberyan, Bercuhi: "Panel: Cemaat Tiyatroları ve Modern Tiyatronun İnşasına Katkıları", *Boğaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu Kültürel Çoğulculuk Dosyası*, May, 2007 <http://eski.bgst.org/tb/egitim.asp?id=11&bn=16>
- Bulbulian, Berge: *The Fresno Armenians: History of a Diaspora Community* (Sanger: Quill Driver Books, 2001)
- Clifford, James: *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997)
- Eng, David (Ed.), Kazanjian, David (Ed.): *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (California: University of California Press, 2003)

- Esslin, Martin: "Introduction", *Absurd Drama* (UK: Penguin Books, 1965)
- Gökdemir, Aziz (Ed.): "Saroyan Baba Ocağında", "Bitlis Yolunda", *Amerika'dan Bitlis'e William Saroyan* (Istanbul: Aras Publishing House, 2008.)
- Güllü, Firat, *System crisis and theater in the Ottoman Empire: representation of the late Ottoman system crisis in theatrical plays*, M.A Thesis (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 2016)
- Hacikyan, Agop J. (Ed.): *The Heritage of Armenian Literature, Vol. 3: From The Eighteenth Century To Modern Times* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2005)
- Hamalian, Leo (Ed.): "Beginings", "Candid Conversation", *William Saroyan: The Man and the Writer Remembered* (London and Ontario: Associated University Press, 1987)
- Haroutyunyan, Gayanne: *Yerevan Magazine*, "Journey is the Destination: Interview with Vahe Berberian", Fall, 2008 <http://www.madisongalleries.com/yerevan-magazine-vahe-berberian-fall-2008/>
- Hicks, Robert: "Shooting at the Moon – an interview with playwright Richard Kalinoski about 'Beast of the Moon' ", *New York Theater Wire*, 2005 <http://www.nytheater-wire.com/rh05051t.htm>
- Kalinoski, Richard: *Beast on the Moon* (Smith & Kraus, 1995)
- Kouyoumdjian, Aram: "From Constantinople to LA: Three Centuries of Western Armenian Theater", *Asbarez*, January, 2015 <http://asbarez.com/130385/from-constantinople-to-la-three-centuries-of-western-armenian-theater/>
- Lori: *Cilicia.com*, "Baron Berberian Strikes Again with Another Winner!", March 2008, http://www.cilicia.com/2008_03_01_armo_spiurk-backlog.html
- Markarian, Herand: "Mirrors", *Contemporary Armenian American Drama: An Anthology of Ancestral Voices* (Edited by Nishan Parlakian) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)
- Martin, Carol: *Theater of the Real*, (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013)
- Migliorino, Nicola: *(Re) Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008)
- Nichanian, Marc: *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire* (Translated by G. M. Goshgarian, and Jeff Fort) (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014)
- Nichanian, Marc: *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century* (UK: Taderon Press, 2002)

Parlakian, Nishan (Ed.): "Introduction", "Mirrors", *Contemporary Armenian American Drama: An Anthology of Ancestral Voices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)

Parlakian Nishan: "Introduction", *Modern Armenian Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)

Parlakian, Nishan: "Saroyan's Armenians", *Ararat*, Volume 26, Summer, 1975 (New York: Armenian General Benevolent Union of America Publications)

Peroomian, Rubina: *The Armenian Genocide in Literature Perceptions of Those who Lived through The Years of Calamity* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Intitute, 2012)

Phillips, Jenny: *Symbol, myth, and rhetoric: the politics of culture in an Armenian American population* (New York: AMS Press, 1989)

Sabagh, Georges, Bozorgmehr, Mehdi and Der-Martirosian, Claudia: "Subethnicity:

Saroyan, William: "Introduction", "Armenians", "Bitlis", *An Armenian Trilogy* (Edited by Dickran Kouymjian) (California: California State University Press, 1986)

Saroyan, William: *Chance Meetings* (New York: Northon, 1978)

Saroyan, William: "My Heart's in Highlands", *Three Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940)

Seçkin, Bilge: *Staging the revolution: the theatre of the revolution in the Ottoman Empire 1908-1909*, M.A Thesis (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 2007)

Shirinian, Lorne: *Armenian North American Literature, A Critical Introduction: Genocide, Diaspora, and Symbols* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990)

Shirinian, Lorne: "Exile in the Cradle", *The Theater of Genocide: Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia and Armenia* (edited by Robert Skoort) (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008)

Shirinian, Lorne: *Writing Memory: The Search for Home in Armenian Diaspora Literature as Cultural Practice* (Ontario: Blue Heron Press, 2000)

Sonmez, Aysan "Richard Kalinoski ile Söyleşi", *Mimesis Sahne Sanatları Portalı*, June, 2015 <http://mimesis-dergi.org/2015/06/richard-kalinoskinin-aydaki-canavari-turkcede/>

Sterling, Eric: "Sterling on Skoort, 'The Theatre of Genocide: Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia' ", *H-Genocide*, October, 2008 <https://networks.h-net.org/node/3180/reviews/6320/sterling-skoort-theatre-genocide-four-plays-about-mass-murder-rwanda>

Taub, Ryan: *Diasporic Identity in Armenian American and Jewish American Literatures* (M.A. Thesis, University of Florida, Florida, 2007)

Varjabedian, Hrag: "Historicization of the Armenian Catastrophe: From the Concrete to the Mythical" *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies* (Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian) (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007)

Voss, Huberta v.: *Portraits of Hope: Armenians in the Contemporary World* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2005)

Zobyan, Bedros: *Tebi Bitlis William Saryani Hed* (Istanbul: Aras Publishing House, 2010)

"Armenians in Los Angeles", *California Immigrants in World Perspective: The Conference Papers, April* (UCLA Institute for Social Science Research, Volume V. 1989-90)

"Vahe Berberian Turns to the Stage with Baron Garbis", *Asbarez*, November, 2007
<http://asbarez.com/56202/vahe-berberian-returns-to-stage-with-baron-garbis-to-premier-in-january-08/>

"Baron Garbis' to Play Extended Run in Pasadena", *Asbarez*, March, 2008
<http://asbarez.com/56882/baron-garbis-to-play-extended-run-in-pasadena/>

APPENDIX A

Interview with Lorne Shirinian

(2 April 2016)

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Mr. Shirinian, for my MA thesis I chose to work on theater of North American Diaspora, especially after 1915. I research on Armenian-American playwrights and how they wrote their plays and how these plays are received by the audience. I specially concentrate on how Armenian-American playwrights represent being an Armenian-American through their plays. One of the plays I am studying is your *Exile in Cradle*. I would like to discuss the conditions you created the play. I know that the play is staged in Toronto in 2006. What were the audience reactions to the play?

Lorne Shirinian: The play was well advertised and raised a lot of interest. There were 1200 people in attendance for the performance and was greatly appreciated. There was a second performance several months later at a different theater with about 400 people in the audience. Again, there was a very good response. Keep in mind that this was community theater. The Armenian community in Toronto was waiting for a play that represented their lived history and present needs and frustrations. The play had a third run at Berkley University in San Francisco put on by the student theater group. I was not in attendance but was told by the producer that there was a good audience who reacted well to the play. The group raised over \$400 to help victims in Darfur.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: How did you decide to write *Exile in Cradle*?

Lorne Shirinian: I am a writer and professor emeritus of English and Comparative Literature. I have been writing poetry, fiction, drama and academic literature for many years and have published over 20 books. (You may see my websites: blueheronpress.com and lorneshirinian.com) My parents and maternal uncle were survivors of the Armenian Genocide-the only survivors of their families. They were put in various orphanages around Istanbul such as Changelkeuy and Erenkeuy then moved to the Near East Relief orphanage in Corfu. My father was brought to an

orphanage near Toronto in 1924, the Georgetown Boys' Farm Home; my mother was brought to be with her brother who had arrived in 1923. I was born in 1945 and grew up in the small Armenian community of Toronto and became the inheritor of the stories and remembrances. Many of these became the background of my stories, poems and plays. I like exploring subjects through different genres. I like the immediacy of drama and wrote 4 plays based on the genocide theme. Robert Skloot anthologized *Exile in Cradle* several years ago. The Armenian Genocide has been the focus of much of my creative and academic activity for close to 50 years.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Does it have any relation with your personal experience as an Armenian-American individual?

Lorne Shirinian: The answer above explains this. Furthermore, I was an activist in having the genocide recognized by various governments in Canada.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Did you build the characters from different generations with reference to your personal experience and/or experiences of the Armenian community in Canada? If yes can you tell this via characters?

Lorne Shirinian: I have done so much reading on Armenian and Ottoman history that the characters and types were clear to me. I had watched many documentary films and films such as Elia Kazan's *America America* that reinforced the characters and situations. The survivor in Act II is based upon many survivors I had met growing up. At his advanced age as he approaches the end of his life, many things and events become distorted and become almost poetic as he relives the tragedy. The characters in the final acts are contemporary. I know their desires and daily conflicts very well. The heroine is a poet. She has children who don't always share her worldview as they want to be free of psychic trauma of the genocide. It was important to me to make the play multigenerational. We know that the trauma of genocide does not end when the conflict does. It burns its way through generations. I take up this theme in my last play, *Monumental*.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Do you have any other issue to emphasize about the play?

Lorne Shirinian: Not at this time. I'll be happy to continue this conversation with you if you have other question



APPENDIX B

Interview with Jan Balakian

(20 March 2016)

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Mrs. Balakian, for my MA thesis I chose to work on theater of North American Diaspora, especially after 1915. I research on Armenian-American playwrights and how they wrote their plays and how these plays are received by the audience. I specially concentrate on how Armenian-American playwrights represent being an Armenian-American through their plays. One of the plays I am studying is your *Home*. I would like to discuss the conditions you created the play. I would like to begin by asking you when did you write *Home*?

Jan Balakian: Around 1990. It was the sequel to my prize-winning student play about a brother and sister discovering the Armenian Genocide, called *The Ceiling Will Open*, which was given a staged reading at Cornell University.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Did *Home* staged by any amateur or professional theater company? If yes when and where? What were the audience reactions to the play?

Jan Balakian: It won second prize at Cornell, so no staged reading.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: How did you decide to write this play?

Jan Balakian: It was the sequel to my first play about a brother and sister discovering the Genocide.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Does it have any relation with your personal experience as an Armenian-American individual?

Jan Balakian: Yes, of course. Both *The Ceiling Will Open* and *Home* were influenced by my brother's writing about the Armenian Genocide -first as a poet. Later, he wrote the acclaimed memoir, *Black Dog of Fate*, about my family's

experience as survivors of the genocide.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Did you build the characters (Sophia, Krikor and Grandmother) with reference to your personal experience and/or experiences of the Armenian community of New Jersey? If yes can you tell this via characters?

Jan Balakian: Definitely. In a fictional way, I would be Sophia and my brother, Peter, would be Krikor. The Grandmother is based on my maternal grandmother, Nafina, who watched her family murdered and then walked the desert with her two remaining daughters, and eventually came to New Jersey! That story is explained in *Black Dog* beautifully.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Do you have any other issue to emphasize about the play?

Jan Balakian: You know, the play is hazy in my memory, so I would have to dig it out. I was interested in the stark contrast between our comfortable life in suburban New Jersey and the horror of the Genocide. Being thoroughly American and yet there was this Armenian culture that we experienced through the food, church, relatives, but the genocide was unspoken, which is why Peter went on the quest to understand it. My grandmother's Claim -in my play, which I got from his poem, which then appeared in his memoir- listed everything that was lost. Its discovery was the climax of my play. I became discouraged when they tried to take *The Ceiling Will Open* Off-Broadway. Producers, director all had their own ideas, and it fell apart. Ever since, I've been intimidated about writing for the theater, but I have a new play that I want to try to write that does not deal with Armenian things. Maybe the family will be Armenian-American. I'm not sure. I also wrote a screenplay that was produced, called *Everyone's Depressed*. It's a romantic comedy that deals with students discovering literature and the way it helps them overcome their psychological struggles. The protagonist is Sophia Hagopian, who goes by Sophia Jackson. It's just a small detail.

APPENDIX C

Interview with Vahe Berberian

(17 June 2016)

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Can you tell me about your life story?

Vahe Berberian: As you know I was born in Beirut. My father was a survivor of the Genocide. He lost his entire family. The only person alive was his mother and my father was one year old at the time. I grew up with her and it was so fresh to her. I was born in 1955. So considering that the Genocide was in 1915, it was 40 years ago and the trauma was very alive to her. When she put me into sleep, every night she talked about her two daughters, how they were snatched away. Until the day she died she knew that they must have been alive. Because she was saying “no human being could have killed them because they were so beautiful.” One was 9 years old and other was 12. She told me that three times she went to the river to throw my dad because he was 1 year old but she thought that she could not see him suffer so she could not do it. In the end she was saved by this Turkish family and I found this truth very later. My father wrote his biography and I was about to edit it and there I learned what had happened. During the deportation, in the caravan, some *jandarma* came and said “Küçük Ağa wants you to stay at the end of the line. My grandmother took her mother, the two daughters and my father who was new born at the time. They stayed until the end of the caravan and then this Küçük Ağa came he put a huge handkerchief on the floor and said “whatever you have as far as golden, jewelry, put it here”. They did and he took the whole bunch and ordered one of the *zaptiyes* to take them to the home of this Turkish family. My grandmother did not recognize this family however she thought that they were somehow related to either her husband or her father. You can imagine at the time it was a major offense to hide an Armenian family and this people hide them and treated them incredibly well. They lived there for a few months. One day my grandmother’s mother hears that in Malatya, where they were from, the family had come back or something. So she takes her two granddaughters and goes to their village, which is maybe an hour or two away from where they were hiding. And she never comes back, never. So my grandmother stays with that family for another few months and then she decides to go back to her

village, which was Tzak near Egin. They go back and it's a ghost town, there is no one. There is one Armenian family which was very rich and apparently they bribed their way to stay you know. They stayed with them for a while but not with *them*. I mean you know they sort of took care of them because there were relatives or something. About six years... This is like a weird period of time where they were completely in limbo, they did not know what to do, there's no one around; they are scared shitless taking a chance to leave. But at the same time they are starving to the point they were trying to find grains in bull's shit to eat something. Finally they make it to Aleppo, Syria with a caravan. In Aleppo my father is put in an orphanage. He grows up in Aleppo and in early 1950s he moves to Beirut. He takes his mother with him and that's where he meets my mum. My mum was, I think, 17 at the time and my dad used to teach and help her with her classes and staff. Because he was 18 years older than my mum. So and they fall in love. I am not sure about this falling in love thing. My mum loved him very very dearly and she had respect for him. Up until the day he died she called him Baron Raffi which was very odd for us you know. That's where I was born in 1955. And so I lived in Beirut until I was 17. I was a rebel, during the counter culture I had long hair, (showing) beard sprouted from here to here. Of course both my parents were not happy with me. I left for Europe, I lived in communes. But at the same time I started theater at a very very young age because I loved painting, I loved writing, I loved music. I was madly in love with music; I used to play guitar, sing and stuff. When I discovered the theater I fell in love with the theater because I thought "ah here is something that has everything that I love." And then during this time I was doing so well in the theater I had an offer from Berliner Ensemble, which was at the time led by Berthold Brecht's wife, to go to East Berlin to study theater. But I did not go because for me Berlin was an alien space especially I didn't speak German and I thought "why would they invite me, I don't speak the language what I am going to do?" Anyway I lived in different communes in Europe, visited different theater workshops. When I went back to Beirut the war started. I witnessed two years of war and in late 1976 I left again. This time I lived 3 months in Cyprus, then Canada for a year in and ended up here. I have been here ever since. Here I studied journalism and for a while I worked for newspaper writing movie and theater reviews and staff. And started my theater company with some of my friends who escaped the war and they were in LA and with my wife Betty, also she loved the theater. We did some amazing work during

the 1980s. This was the time when I wrote *Pink Elephant* and it was a huge success. *Pink Elephant* played in London, in Edinburgh and so on. It got fantastic reviews from the Scottish press, from the English press. We did two other plays. In the 1990s when we were doing so well and as far as the company goes I had cancer. I almost died, it was pretty bad. I spent almost five years writing mostly because I was in and out of hospital, surgeries etc, not doing well physically at all. This was the time when I wrote and finished my novel called *Namagner Zaartaren*. During this time also I started writing my first monologue, the monologue's success I think was a fluke. Because I was sick I could not reorganize the theater company, I decided to do this one man show. I did not know what I was doing, I was so inexperienced, the field was so new to me. So when I started it was not the stand-up show, (*laughing*) actually I was sitting down the entire time. One of the reasons was I was so scared of not knowing what I was doing I unconsciously I was hiding behind this desk. And I had my notes in front of me. Secure within this environment I was afraid of standing up. It had such a fantastic response and I started getting invitations. Eventually getting involved in this, what I am doing right now.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: As I read your parents were also related to art, how did it influence you?

Vahe Berberian: My father was very very involved in arts. He ran a dance ensemble, he never danced, I never saw my father dance a single step in my entire life. He was also in charge of the community library. You can imagine I grew up with these books because he was madly in love with books. Both him and my mother were readers. My mom was a very talented painter. She never persuaded but when I was growing up she was like my inspiration. So when I was growing up all sorts of intellectuals, writers, painters were in and out of our house and it was like an old style salon type of environment. It has influences on me.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: You said that you began in theater at a very young age. How did you started?

Vahe Berberian: My first trace in theater started at school. Then I started working with a theater company when was 16. We were theater rats. We just spent every

night behind the curtains watching other theater companies perform. Two friends in the company were older. One of them had just returned from Belgium and studied theater. The other one had just returned from Los Angeles where he had studied theater and he was under the spell of Grotowski. He was like in love with Grotowski. We spent I think more than a year doing all these exercises, improvisations, breathing, this and that you know. We put on experimental plays. By the time I was 17 I left the country.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: I wonder about relation to art as an artist. You are an interdisciplinary artist who paint, draw, write and perform. You also portray artists in *Gyank* and *Vartakuyn Pighu*, and your main concern could be summarized as “whether or not artists are able to create in any condition”. Am I right? Why did you choose to create plays based on characters who are related to art?

Vahe Berberian: One of the things I am fascinated with is the creative process. First of all anything that one creation's big chunk of it is autobiographical. Even if I write anything about a spaceship captain I know that there will be something autobiographical in it because I believe that an artist creates to exercise his demons. Here is what it is, I have always said it Duygu: Life is like a cocktail party where you are drinking and every drink that you drink, every sip that you take is something that happens to you. For example the death of my father is like a huge glass of vodka, falling love is like a big cocktail drink. You drink until you cannot anymore, you become sick. The process of putting your finger in your throat and throwing out is the art. Because of this whatever you spill out is that every think you consumed; you love life, your political affiliations, the books that you have read, inspirations come from music and everything. I believe the criterion of art is honesty. Because when you throwing out there is nothing you can hide anymore, it comes all the way from your gust. When you are really sick you it has to come out. If whatever I am writing or whatever I am creating does not give me the chance to relieve myself completely, to empty myself completely then I will not be satisfied. This is why I try to whatever I do as personal as possible. Because I have a lot of issues when it comes to creativity. The whole idea of being an artist is that it has a lot of vanity involved if you think about it. I paint, paint and paint. I can say that I paint for myself but that is

bullshit. In the end why would I send invitations to people and say “come and see what I have done.” There is a vanity there, you think that you created something that will enrich the lives of the people around you. There is a lack of humility there. But at the same time as far as an artist said “the only thing that a writer writes for himself is a shopping list.” It is so true because you do it to show something. I try to personalize it.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: I have read your blog articles. One was called “Forging a new Identity”. You were comparing current Armenian Diaspora communities to “security guards in museums, trying to protect our cultural heritage, which, like anything that’s displayed in museums, smells of decay and putrefaction”. And you were claiming that “for many, many, many years, being an Armenian has been associated with everything that’s tragic, sad, passé or unhip. But as artists, I think we should concentrate on creating art that’s relevant to our times, art that is first and foremost entertaining.” These words are important for me because when I read your three plays, *Gyank*, *Baron Garbis* and *Vartakuyun Pighu*, I had realized that you are using the power of humor and irony. Can you explain where these three plays stand in this context?

Vahe Berberian: This is a very important subject for me. Believe it or not, within the Armenian community right now this is a major issue we have because whatever is out there is either too heavy, too ancient and it does not really speak to the younger generation or so trivial, so like as you say *maskara*, it is embarrassing. To create something that is entertaining is vital because I believe no matter how important your subject is if you are putting someone to sleep you lost them. This is a problem within the Armenian community. I meet artists and they always complain like “ah they do not appreciate” and I say “if I am falling into sleep of course I am not going to appreciate.” I don’t care how important your subject is, I don’t care how profound what your saying is. In the end if I am not captured by it, if I am not entertained by it you have lost me. It’s very simple. Humor for me the fiber of our intake. Without that fiber we are constipated. You need that lightness, that ruffage in your diet in order to stay healthy. A lot of what we have now is either constipation or diarrhea. The other is, no matter what do you have to have a story. This is vital, essential to anything that you do. You create a piece of art, picture, even poetry... I cannot read a

poetry that does not say anything. If it sounds good, you should be impressed by it but in the end you say “what was that?” For everything you write you should be able to narrate. And also something else, you should be able to realize that trends changing, people are suffering from severe Attention Deficit Disorder. We are bombarded by images, everything blurbs, short, short, short... No matter how much you hate this in the end you cannot fight it. You cannot because you will lose your audience. So for me everything you do in the end should be entertaining to capture the audience.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: In an interview you had said “I have realized that certain memories come only in their own language. There are certain things I remember only in Armenian. It just doesn’t sound right if I write them in English”. That is why you choose always write plays in Armenian?

Vahe Berberian: This is a very important subject for me because I came to this realization when I was working on my second novel. When I was working on it at the same time one of my friends, who was a German novelist, Patrick Roth was working in his own novel. We were both working in LA. He was writing in German and I was writing in Armenian. We were talking and we both came to this conclusion that there are certain things that you remember that when you recreating it almost feels like treason to change the language. Because it has originally happened in a certain language and when you change it the feeling, the authenticity is gone. This is not the same thing as translation. Because translation is something specific you have the specific words to translate. This is recreating, so there is a lot of creativity in the situation, which makes it even more fundamental the need to stay as true environment, because you create that environment. For example when I am writing right now when the characters are Armenian and the situation is conversing Armenian in a certain topic I will write in Armenian. However when the characters are speaking in English I have hard time to write in Armenian. This is a dilemma. How do you recreate certain situations and stay true to the authenticity of the situation? It is a tough one. Sometimes if I can’t I stop. You realize that you are bastradizing the situation. It does not work.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: You are right. I cannot imagine creation of the character of Baron Garbis in English. Because the way he speaks Armenian is his character, and writing and acting him is a creation.

Vahe Berberian: Duygu, I can see *Baron Garbis* in Turkish, but not in English. It is very interesting. For years I realized that our culture is so similar. Even when we talk is so similar. Western Armenian is so much influenced the Turkish intonations and staff. It's unbelievable. We can say the same sentence exactly the same way in two different languages.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: I also would like to discuss these three plays with you in details. Let's begin with *Vartakuyun Pighu*. The play takes place in a theater house in Beirut in mid-1980's. How did you decide to create this play? Does it have a relation to your personal experience of the civil war in Beirut?

Vahe Berberian: Yes definitely. We lived that war and in the beginning when the war started, we all thought that it is going to end any time. Nobody, not one single person believed that it is going to go for 17 years. We were trying to continue our lives as they were. We were still going to the theater, trying to rehearse or put on plays etc. Eventually we realized that there are a lot of destruction and death involved and this is not a joke. We cannot continue life as normal. *Vartakuyun Pighu* is the realization of that. When and it comes to reality and art, reality is far more powerful than everything else created. Reality dictates, art only follows. So, yes it is very autobiographical and also ironically when the war continued it became a norm. People went back to doing what they were doing because they realized just because it is the war we cannot stop living. But the realization of "there is no end to this so we need to adjust this situation" also took a few years. I was not there then. *Vartakuyun Pighu's* story is the first realization that life is far more powerful than any creation.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: How do you think the civil war affected the cultural and theatrical life of the Armenian community of Lebanon? Different types of artists in the play represent the artist's different responses of civil war. As I understand characters discuss the two options -trying to survive and create in

the conditions of war or leave the country to be able to survive and create-. Was this the experience of the theater people living in Beirut?

Vahe Berberian: *Vartakuyun Pighu* is very very real. I tried to simulate the reality as much as I could. War is horrible existence. One of the reasons why I have not been able to go back to write about the war in Lebanon is because I do not want to recreate and relive it. I have so many stories experienced and heard that if I have written down I could do something interesting with all that but at the same time I do not want to go there. Believe or not the novel I am writing is such escape from it. I think the more I am getting old the more I escape from the reality. Look at what is happening in Syria now. It is the same but much worse now because the weapons are far more advanced and it is a bigger country but it is the same story.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: **When I read it I also thought that it is relevant for today in Turkey too. Because war and violence are everywhere nowadays. I think that's one of the reasons of play's success in other parts of the world. How did it staged and received?**

Vahe Berberian: When it was filmed and shown at the festivals it had an incredible response in the Ireland. At the time Irish people felt that connection so much with the play and there I realized something interesting for me. When I was 19 as a young boy whatever I was writing at the time in my mind I want to make in order make it universal I would give my characters universal names like Alex, George, names that could fit anywhere in the world, in the name of the city's. The environment would be something generic which does not matter, I would stay away from specifics in order to make it universal and then the older I got especially after *Vartakuyun Pighu* I realized was the more specifics you go into the more universal it became, this was a lesson I learned.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: **Secondly I would like to ask questions about *Baron Garbis*? I have read that "True to character, Baron Garbis almost forced you to write this play". Can you open this a little bit? How did you decide to create this play?**

Vahe Berberian: The character really is based on the father of friend of me, he is an actor and I was fascinated by this character because every time he told a story I was not sure if he was a *şarlatan* or he was telling the truth. And then while writing Baron Garbis I came to the realization that there is a point in our lives where every lie that we say can become truth in our minds. Sometimes that line between truth and lies are so thin that our ability to convince ourselves is so amazing that is such a blur. The topic fascinates me and I think my next monolog is going to be all about lies. Because it is possible to create false memories. It is possible, it is very possible. But Baron Garbis character is very close to heart because I grow up with this type of people, I think you will understand this, imagine this: It is right after the Genocide. People are been displaced all over and in Beirut they have created ghettos specially Bourj Hammoud that area where this people got there and they were mostly kids, they are young and they had no education, none what so ever. Their lives was cut off, they had no role models because elders were gone, we are talking about thousands of thousands orphans so they created this tough street wise characters in order to go on, to survive, to compensate for whatever there fathers grandfathers were not able to do. Because in the end when we were kids for every single one of us the first question you asked was “How come 20 jandarmas let 1000 people? Couldn’t you done something, couldn’t you have fought back?” This was appalling for us. So these people growing up there at the time were compensating for that tough exterior. “Yeah they didn’t do, but we are here. We are going to do something and we can do something.” And of course it was too late. The tough guy attitude translated into the way they treated their wives, their kids. They were rough, and you always thought that in the end there was some tenderness hidden in there. And we looked for that tenderness. In that tenderness in Baron Garbis it comes all the way in the end. When he cries for the first time. And he realizes “Why? Why did I do this?”

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: We see the three generations of an Armenian family throughout the play, how did you shape these three character types?

Vahe Berberian: Having the 3 generations was very important for me because the second generation is the one that is the most clear headed for now and it is very important for the younger generation, for the grandson to take the grandfather’s character with a grain of salt, to not recreate that character with in themselves.

Because it is so easy idolize this people. And I have a problem with idolizing in general. If you read my novel, in it the whole thing is you became major only when you came to the fact that your father is not this idol that you created in your mind, that he is a normal human being. And that is very very important.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: While reading the play, I had also realized that there are many common words and sentences we also use in Turkish like *parayı veren düdüğü çalar, serseri, canım* etc. It is important to stage and to some extent document this richness of shared language. What do you think of that? And what are the responses of the audience's reactions to these?

Vahe Berberian: I try to be as true as possible. As I said the culture of us is so intertwined that is amazing, everything from food this, that. What bothers me is there has always been this understanding of Diaspora that because of what was happened we should cut our ties with our culture because it is so much Turkish or it reminds us of Anatolia. For example when we got to America in 70s Indies were listening to a lot of music that was very Allaturca like Turkish music and people were upset. “How can you listen to this?” Or the songs that our grandfather sang in Turkish and there was like “Oh no you can’t do that!” Why? Why can’t we do? This was our culture we co-existed with these people all these years and we have 600 years of history together. You cannot detach, you cannot throw that away. I mean talk about theater, talk about music. I have book here that says there are 320 *aşıks*. Armenian *aşıks* sang in Turkish, wrote in Turkish, these were before Udi Hrant times. How can you erase the memory of this people? Just because it is Turkish, just because it sang in Turkish. For me that has always been a problem. In case of *Baron Garbis* I would had use a lot more Turkish terminology but the problem was that within Armenian community in Los Angeles you have such a huge Armenian population from Armenia who do not speak or understand Turkish and a huge population there has been born and raised in America do not speak Turkish. If the character spoke completely like authentically half of it would go over their heads. So there was a compromise.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: What about your latest play *Gyank*? What was your motivation behind writing this play?

Vahe Berberian: One of the main reasons for feeling comfortable to write *Gyank* was the fact that one of my very close friends had a bicycle accident and he ended up in a coma for seven months. In for seven months every one of us go visit, talk to him and this and that and just when we thought that was it we should pull the plug he came back to life. I took lots of notes at the time and I still have whole a bunch of notes that I have not used and one day I will use again for a story with coma. Because I still did not emptied my experiences completely. So that experience, spending all that time in hospital, inspired me. Another thing was the relation between husband and wife. Our relation between Betty and I has never been a normal relationship. Every time I look at the relationships of my friends around me I have thought “would I been happier with this normal relationship” and the answer was “no”. I would prefer an exciting, volatile relationship rather than normal one. The woman’s strength to insist her husband that “you are writer you should write” is a very powerful thing. In *Gyank* the woman’s character is the most powerful character. What she talk about to her children, her stand in life... Because of that a lot of people tell me that they had a problem with the woman because she was not realistic: “What kind of woman would expect her husband to write when they two children, started a life, running a restaurant etc.” That is not the thing it is exactly the opposite.

Duygu Dalyanoğlu: Lastly, how would you describe the role of the theater for Armenian-North American Diaspora?

Vahe Berberian: In most of the Middle Eastern countries the theater was introduced through Armenians. When Armenians came to Beirut for example they started the theater. Until the beginning of the Civil War in Beirut it was fascinating. We were experimenting; there were some incredible plays, everything was just fantastic. The war cut that completely. After coming here the theater unfortunately has not derived at all. We have very very few playwrights. I think because of the loss of the language we are in the very tough place. I am not very optimistic about what is happening with the theater. I honestly do not know.