Powerful Silences: Becoming a Survivor Through the Construction of Story

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Résumé

La narration par des rescapés d'événements dramatiques porte sur plusieurs niveaux, tant pour le narrateur que pour l'auditeur. En divulguant ce qui a été dissimulé, les témoignages du drame vécu remettent en question les points de vue dominants sur le sens et la signification à la fois historique et contemporaine de ces événements. La construction de ces récits et leur narration peut également offrir un moyen de contrer les impacts psychologiques dévastateurs du traumatisme. Cet essai explore un tel récit à propos du génocide turc des Arméniens en 1915, tel que me l'a raconté ma grand-mère, Elmas Tutuian. Remarquablement conforme au fil des années, la narration de Tutuian omet autant qu'elle raconte. En examinant cette narration tant d'un point de vue psychologique que textuel, je suggère qu'en choisissant de taire certains aspects de son expérience, Tutuian se présente comme une survivante plutôt que comme une victime. En acceptant de partager son récit avec moi, elle a également forgé mon sens de résistance à l'oppression. L'article fait référence à des travaux analysant les témoignages de survivants du traumatisme d'un point de vue littéraire, psychologique, sociologique, théologique et historique.

Abstract

Survivors' accounts of traumatic events function on many levels for both the teller and the hearer. By giving voice to what has been silenced, testimonies to the lived experience of trauma challenge dominant perspectives on the meaning and significance of both historical and contemporary events. The construction of these stories and their telling may also provide a means of countering the devastating psychological effects of the trauma. This paper will explore one story about the Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915 as told to me by my grandmother, Elmas Tutuian. Remarkably consistent over the years of its telling, Tutuian's story omits as much as it tells. Examining this narrative from both a psychological and a textual perspective, I suggest that by choosing to be silent about parts of her experience, Tutuian constructed herself as a survivor rather than a victim. In choosing to tell her narrative to me, she also shaped my sense of resistance to oppression. The article references works analyzing survivors' accounts of trauma from a literary, psychological, sociological, theological, and historical perspective

Introduction

My grandmother, Elmas Tutuian, was a victim and a survivor of the 1915-1923 Turkish genocide of Armenians. I have lived with her story of the genocide for more than fifty years. She first told it to me when I was about fourteen years old. When I first heard it, I tried as hard as I could to suppress her tale of fear and victimization–Armenians being closed out of their houses, my grandfather conscripted into the army and never heard from again, my uncle taken away from my grandmother, the hunger of my mother and the rest of the extended family, and finally their salvation through emigration to the United States. Twenty years after she first told it to me, I needed to hear her story again and I then heard it not as a tale of victimization, but of survival. Four decades later, my grandmother's story is still part of my psyche, and I now see it as a narrative/performance through which she constructed herself as a survivor, healing herself through it from the trauma of genocide. Elmas Tutuian's story did not change. It was remarkable, in fact, for the consistency of the telling. What had changed was what I brought to the narrative as I changed over the years I heard it. This paper will analyze that story from a psychological and textual perspective, addressing as well the interaction between the teller and the hearer.

Holocaust and genocide narratives along with other traumatic histories such as the attempted annihilation of Indigenous peoples and the almost three hundred years of slavery in the U.S., have provided crucial testimonies for both historians and members of the groups whose ancestors experienced the events. They provide information that may have been suppressed by dominant histories, and insight into how the events impacted people's lives, how they coped, how they resisted, and how they survived. Along with bearing witness to the events and to their tellers' survival, these narratives also function to make meaning of the events. Bringing literary theory to his reading of holocaust narratives, James Young (1988) argues that literary and historical analyses are interdependent. We learn something about the history of the holocaust by reading the narratives, but we must also be attentive to the representation of that history by the narrator; the way the narrator has made meaning of his or her experience through the construction of the narrative. The writing itself imposes coherence on what may have been experienced as unassimilatible. Young states:

> *The eyewitness scribe . . . has aspired both to represent the sense of discontinuity and disorientation in catastrophic events and to preserve his personal link to the events – all in a medium that necessarily "orients" the reader, creates continuity in events . . . (1988: 16)*

Read as constructions of meanings of the events for the narrator, narratives function to shape the post holocaust lives of both the narrator and the post holocaust world. The stories become part of the survival–in literal defiance of "the final solution." When the

history is suppressed, telling the story may even be a reason to continue to live.

Holocaust narratives are part of the record of a genocide that has long been recognized by the world community, even by the German government. For genocides that do not have this acceptance, narratives are particularly crucial documents. The Armenian genocide is still contested. Despite thousands of oral histories by survivors, other eyewitness testimonies, and scholarly work attesting that the genocide was, indeed, perpetrated, the Turkish government continues to deny it. The United States, dependent on its bases in Turkey, also refuses year after year, to designate April 24 as a day of commemoration of the genocide. And it was only within the last few years that *The Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* stopped using the modifier "alleged" when referring to the Armenian genocide. In this context my grandmother's telling of the story is one of the thousands of testimonies – eyewitness affirmations that genocide was perpetrated on the Armenian minority in Turkey.

My grandmother did not talk about her experiences in the genocide frequently, but when she did the narrative always had the same form. It began with a description of her idyllic life with my grandfather, Arakel, their three children, and their comfortable circumstances. Her marriage was arranged, and although she had not wanted to marry Arakel because he was twenty-eight and she was only seventeen, she grew to love him. He was, she told me, very intelligent and took very good care of her and their children. The idyll ended when Arakel was conscripted into the Turkish army, and she never heard from him again. Sometime after Arakel left, she and the other Armenians in the city came home from church on Easter to find that the government had sealed their houses and ordered them to the town square. When they had gathered they were told they would soon be exiled and until that time only one room of their houses would be opened for their use. Among the last of the Armenians left in the city, Elmas and her children along with seven other relatives, were sent to a village in the interior of the country where they were fed and housed. After a short time, Turkish gendarmes came to take her son Ashot away to a place where they were taking the boys, she said, to make them into Turks. Leaving her two other children in the care of her relatives, Elmas went to get her son back. She managed to find him and enlisted the help of the police commissioner in the town where they had lived. He had been her husband Arakel's friend and was reputed to have an Armenian grandmother. The police commissioner arranged to get Ashot back, and her other children and relatives out of exile. In a few years she was able to contact a nephew in Iran, who sent money for their passage to the United States where they began a new life.

Survivor narratives are interpreted in a variety of ways from many disciplines, interdisciplines, and theoretical perspectives. The most obvious interpretation of this narrative is one that follows the pattern of a wonderful life before the genocide, disrupted

by calamity, and resolved by emigration from the site of the trauma. While the story does idealize life before the genocide and ends with emigration to the United States, analyzing the story from the perspective of a narrative reveals a structure that positions the climax as resisting the Turks and getting her son back from the concentration camp where they had taken him. The narrative can then be read as Elmas' resistance to the Turks, and using the narrative device of dialogue and rich detail, continues the resistance to the denial of the genocide.

At the age of 92, sixty-four years after the events took place, and with a failing short-term memory, she told me what happened when the gendarmes came for Ashot.

> He said, "I am taking this boy."
> "Where are you going to take him?"
> "They are collecting the boys."
> I said, "This boy's father is a soldier, you are not taking this boy. He is my boy. I won't give him to you. He is mine. He is mine."
> He said, "He is not yours."
> I said, "He is mine. He is mine and I won't give him to you. Understand this. He is mine."
> And we were screaming in Turkish.
> "I won't give him, this boy is mine", I said, and "his father is a soldier", I said. "Soldier, do you understand?"
> "I am going to take him."
> "You can't", I said. "I won't give him", I screamed. "I won't give him. You can't", I said., "Who are you to take this boy?"
> He screamed at me.
> "I won't give him. Do you understand?"
> Then he said, "You are doing too much."
> I said, "You are doing too much. Do you understand? You cannot take this boy. No, I said. He is mine. I won't give him to you. Understand this, I said, if there is a God in heaven this boy will not stay with you. . . . Day and night", I said, "I will pray that the English come" – already when you say English the Turk trembles – "and take your child from your wife's hands and you will know what I am feeling. Do you understand? Night and day I will pray if there is a God, he will come and do that. If there is no God, do what you want. But I will not give my son, understand that. . . . Take me with him."

This dialogue continues until the gendarmes tell her that they will come for all of them the next day. Still arguing with them, she relented, but when they were gone the men from the village who had been watching the interaction began to laugh. When she asked why they

were laughing, they told her that the gendarmes had no intention of coming back for the family who would be staying in the village. Ashot would never be coming back. She ended this section with her final words to them:

> I said, "Is that how it is? You wait and see."

The bulk of the rest of the narrative is about how she got to Dadai, where the gendarmes had told her they were taking her son, how she found out where he was being held, how she walked for three days to get back to Kastemonu where she would appeal for help to the police commissioner there who had been a friend of Arakel's. This part of the narrative is interspersed with dialogue but is mostly told in highly descriptive detail. The account of coming to the police commissioner's house again uses dialogue.

> It was early Friday morning. He had just come downstairs to wash up. It is in front of my eyes now. He said, "Please come in", in Turkish. The rest of the family was upstairs. I closed the police commissioner's door and opened my face.
> "Oh my, Elmas, where did you come from? What has happened?"
> I said, "They took my Ashot."
> People upstairs noticed that there were two people talking. His wife looked down from upstairs. "Oh my, Madam Elmas", she said. "Come upstairs."
> I cried, "They took my Ashot." I am crying.
> The police commissioner came and said, "Don't cry. I'll see what's what."
> I said, "If I don't cry, tell me what it is I have to do to save him. I have to save him."

Tutuian's extensive use of dialogue and the rich detail is a narrative technique that puts the hearer at the scene. Given that this genocide has been, and continues to this day to be denied by both the Turkish government and the United States, her use of this particular way to tell her story is very effective. The gendarmes have voices. The police commissioner has a house with an upstairs and a family who know Tutuian, even call her Madam Elmas. She goes to see him *early* on a *Friday* morning. He is engaged in his morning ablutions. She created a narrative we can believe because the characters in it are real people going about their lives, in their houses, talking to each other and to the narrator with a veracity that counters denial.

I also read this narrative as one that transforms my grandmother from a victim into a survivor. Building on feminist theory about trauma and work on genocide and holocaust narratives, Flora A. Keshgegian (2000) argues that merely remembering suffering and trauma does not transform it. What is needed to go beyond victimization is for the victim to identify instances of resistance and agency. "Remembering resistance enables resilience, the ability of human being to go on living" (2000: 122). Elmas Tutuian's story

is about resistance, and she was transformed even as she told it. When I asked my grandmother to tell me her story for the second time, she was ninety two years old, suffering from short term memory loss, and seemed uncharacteristically introverted. I asked my Aunt Arsenig, Elmas' oldest daughter, to join us to help me with the interview. Elmas' facility in English diminished as she got older, but we spoke in English for most of the interview since my facility in Armenian, my first language, was by then almost nonexistent. In the first part of the discussion, she was passive, allowing Arsenig to respond to my questions about their lives before the genocide only adding a word or two now and then. I thought I had waited too long to hear this story again, that my grandmother would not be able to tell it. When my aunt began to talk about the first stages of the exile in Kastemonu, however, Elmas seemed to come alive. She sat up and said, "Ashot's story. Ashot's story." Arsenig told her not to skip, and continued to tell me about how their house had been sealed. Elmas became passive again, only occasionally adding brief comments or clarifications. When the story got to the point where they were in exile, she sat up, and took control, saying "Let me say it in Armenian." She told the rest of the story with great emotion and drama, just as I had remembered it twenty years earlier–in Armenian–and miraculously I understood everything she said.

Her story brought her alive in that moment, but I would argue that her construction of this particular narrative of saving her son had healed her trauma many years earlier. Analyzing the use of stories from a therapeutic perspective, psychologists White and Epston (1990), like James Young (1988), posit that stories give coherence to lives. The structuring of stories, even oral histories, requires selection and rejection. Using Foucault's concept of a dominant narrative, they argue that psychological problems occur when there is a discrepancy between lived experience and the dominant narrative. Encouraging alternative stories with patients, they argue, would "enable them to perform new meanings, bringing with them desired possibilities–new meanings that persons will experience as more helpful, satisfying and open ended" (White and Epston, 1990: 15) In addition to the construction of the narratives, the very telling of the stories is part of the creation of new meaning for the teller. Quoting the work of anthropologist Bruner, they argue that the telling of life stories is performance.

> *It is in the performance of an expression that we re-experience it, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture. The performance does not release a pre-existing meaning that lies dormant in the text . . . Rather the performance itself is constitutive. (1990: 12)*

It is through these stories and these performances, White and Epston maintain, that people "re-authorize" their lives (1990: 13).[1]

[1] Arthur W. Frank also addresses the central significance in restorying for people who develop chronic illnesses in The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics (1995).

Elmas Tutuian re-authored herself through her story of saving her son and surviving the genocide. As an Armenian woman in a patriarchal culture, she was not raised to take care of herself outside of the domestic sphere even in ordinary circumstances. Even within the home, male dominance prevailed, as Armenian culture was both patrilineal and partilocal. In Elmas' generation, village women lost the right to speak in public upon marriage, regaining it only on the occasion of the birth of a son. Moving to husbands' families, young brides were subservient to everyone.[2] While Elmas did not discuss her upbringing as a girl, upon questioning she did say she had very little education. She was, however, literate, and worked in a rug factory before she married. Yet, her story is one of standing up to Turkish men, those who literally had the power of life and death over her and her family.

Through her narrative she also re-authored herself as an oppressed Armenian. She presents herself throughout the story as someone who defies submission, did what needed to be done, and did so without fear. Both her resistance to the Turks, and her performance of this narrative lifted her out of victimization. She became a survivor–a person with agency. While she is helped by strangers on her journeys to Dadai and Kastemonu, and she acknowledges that without the help of the police commissioner she would not have gotten Ashot back or the other people out of exile, she reiterates throughout that she is responsible for her son and that she and he both have rights. To the gendarmes she says, "He is my son. You cannot take him. He is mine." And even to the police commissioner she repeatedly says, "*I* have to save Ashot. *I* have to save him."

At the end of the interview she offered the story of what happened to her on her first visit to Turkey after the genocide. Again using dialogue she recounted how Turkish officials tried to detain her by accusing her of forging her exit documents. Summoned to a government office, she was asked what she wanted when she arrived, and replied:
"I don't want anything. You said you wanted to see me, and so I came so you could see me." And the place was full of people.

> "I came so you could see me."
> He asked, "Who signed this paper?"
> I said, "I did."
> He said, "No you didn't."
> I said, "Give me the pen." I took the pen and signed my name. "That is my signature." He saw that it was the same. I opened my mouth in the government office and said, "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? Shame on you doing these kinds of things. No one can sign my name. Look at me and look at my hair. Such a woman does not do such things. Shame on you. Only I can make my signature. Aren't you ashamed?" In

[2] Susie Hoogasian Villa and Mary Kilbourne Matossian's book Armenian Village Life Before 1914 (1982) provides a wealth of information on pre-genocide village life including a chapter on "Married Life and Childbirth."

the government office. Everyone was sitting there. No one made a sound.

Commenting on her courage, she said,

"I am never afraid. When I have something to say, I say it. The man came and took me to my relative's house." "Oh", he said, "You are like an *aslan*." A lion woman. After that they gave me permission to leave.

Elmas Tutuian re-storied herself as someone who could not be told what to do, could not be dominated, and was not afraid of behaving in a manner that could have resulted in her imprisonment, even her death.

When I became a feminist I delighted in this story, but when I first heard it, I wished she had not told it to me. I was a young teenager and I wanted more than anything to be an American. In 1953 it was not interesting to be ethnic even in a Middle Eastern neighborhood in New York City. I was desperate to do whatever I could to reshape my family, to have them speak English, eat Wonder Bread, go to the movies, but my family did not change their old world ways. I did not want to hear what my grandmother told me, and when she sat back at the end of her tale and said "*Yavroos*,[3] now I want you to tell the world", but I had no intention of telling anyone. I had heard this story merely as one of Armenians as a despised minority, and tried to do what I could to forget it, and in some ways that was easy. Like many other families of survivors no one else in either my immediate or extended family talked about the genocide, and no one in the larger culture seemed to know about it. Most people I knew had not heard of Armenians and even I did not know where Armenia was. My parents, all of our relatives, and everyone we knew was from either Persia (Iran) or Turkey. The concept of diaspora would not be part of the discourse for many decades, and since Armenia was a Soviet Socialist Republic, it not a homeland my parents wanted to claim in the years of virulent anti-communism.

But as hard as I tried, Elmas' story would not go away. It lay in my psyche, waiting it seemed until I was ready to look at it again. That time came in the 1970's when I was deeply involved in the women's movement. Repulsed by theories of women as total victims, I suddenly realized that even in her extreme circumstances, my grandmother did not allow herself to be victimized and that she may have been my first model of a strong woman. I learned then, too, about the utter complexity of women's lives since it was also my grandmother who taught me bitter lessons about male preference, especially after my younger brother was born. When I heard her story again, I heard not only what had been done to her but how she resisted, survived, saved her family, and defied the Turks.

That reading stayed with me for another twenty years. I learned more about the Armenian

[3] Amermenan term of endearment.

genocide, other genocides and their psychological aftermaths, undertook research on Armenian American women, lectured and ran groups in the Armenian American community, and wrote my memoir, *Lion Woman's Legacy* (1992), with my grandmother's story as one its major themes. I also became a member of an Armenian feminist support group which I attended regularly for almost a decade. All of the members were descendants of survivors and victims, and regardless of the chosen topic for the day we talked about the effect of the genocide on our lives every time we met, immersing ourselves in the emotional work of healing the intergenerational trauma of genocide. My grandmother's story, her decision to choose her first granddaughter as the recipient of her narrative, and my hearing it was a backdrop to many of these discussions.

But it would be years again before I realized that despite knowing all that I did about the genocide, I had accepted my grandmother's story on face value. That realization came to me suddenly during a conversation with Shake Topalian, a friend and colleague who is also the daughter of victims and survivors of the genocide. It was not an unusual conversation between us–genocide talk–but this time we were discussing not our family stories or lack of them and their effects on us, but about the genocide more generally. As we talked about the various methods employed by the Turkish government to kill hundreds of thousands of people and attempts to destroy a culture, I suddenly became aware that my grandmother's story was a very limited version of what she must have experienced. She did not tell me much at all about the genocide, about what she must have seen or heard about what happened to other people. Elmas Tutuian told the story of a woman saving her son and the rest of her family. Now it was time, I thought, to look at the silences. What was it that she did not tell, and what purpose did her choices serve?

Literary scholar Tina Campt's analysis of oral histories, what she calls memory narratives, posits that they constitute subjectivity through the "continual process of attributing meaning to events of the past in the present." Studying Black Germans', Campt (2004) argues that what is not said is as important as what is said. "Certain silences in the in the narratives of Afro-Germans can . . . be read paradoxically as 'loud' articulations and forms of indirect speech that reveal important levels of submerged meanings." (2004: 17). Silences then, "speak." (2004: 18) Rather than pathologizing these silences, Campt argues that these elisions were one way Afro-Germans negotiated the contradictions of being Germans by birth, but aliens by race–the "other within."

Elmas' story is also full of silences, and once noticed they become very loud indeed. Mass killing during genocides are often public events serving to terrorize and intimidate the targeted populations, and the Turkish genocide of Armenians also deployed this method. There is nothing in Elmas' story of the Turkish practice of shooting the young to middle-

aged men in town squares or just outside towns, leaving only old men, women, and children to be sent into the desert to die of exposure, starvation, thirst, or to be murdered and raped. She and her family were the last to leave Kastemonu, a city in a province with the smallest Armenia population of all the provinces in Turkey, but containing more than 13,000 Armenians, with 17 churches and 18 Armenian schools. What did she hear about the fate of her neighbors? Arsenig told the story of my grandmother hiding an Armenian man in her house, and when it became too dangerous, dressing him as a woman and sending the young Arsenig to accompany him to his family's house across town. What did Elmas know of the fate of other Armenian young men? The first time she told me her story I remember her saying that they were lucky since the gendarme that took them to the interior was a kind man. What was the standard by which she judged his behavior? What did she know of about the fate of other Armenians on what have been characterized as death marches? There are accounts of young girls whose bodies were doused with gasoline and then lit, forced to dance, as they burned to death. Did Elmas hear about this practice?[4]

Nothing in her story focuses on these horrors. The narrative she constructs is of a woman who confronts her oppressors, manages to outwit them, and saves her family. Through this story of survival, she faces down victimization. Were she to put this achievement into the context of the true horror of the genocide she was in the midst of, her strategy of re-authoring herself may not have been as successful. She constructed strong walls around pain of the horror she experienced by focusing on her courage and triumph. The story Elmas Tutuian constructed, I would argue, helped her to be more than a genocide survivor. She was a charismatic woman who was able to enjoy life and engage with others. Up until her late 80's she spent a month of the summer in an Armenian hotel in the Catskill mountains in New York State, and many people one quarter her age would make sure to plan their vacations only when Mrs. Tutuian was at Shady Hill. Her silence about the vicious and inhumane treatment perpetrated on Armenians during the genocide contributed to her ability to not only survive, but to triumph.

She made meaning of her experience through her particular version of the genocide, and as James Young (1988) argues all stories are not only valid, but by making their particular sense of the world they change the post-genocide world. My grandmother first told me her story after ritualistically preparing me to hear it. She charged me with telling the world about a genocide that was and continues to be denied. As much as I ran from it, tried to deny it, repress it, her story changed me. Her choice to tell me about her refusal to accept Turks' authority over her impacted my own sense of agency, as a woman and as an ethnic minority. In a variety of ways, since my second hearing of Elmas' story, I have been "telling the world" about the Armenian genocide. And the more I become my own agent and a resister of oppression, the more her story grows and lives in me.

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[4] For a detailed account of the Armenian genocide, see Dadrian (1995), Hovannisian (1987), Suny (1993) or The Zoryan Institute (1997).

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