

# Rhetorical Resilience and Righteous Discontent in Eurasia: Female Students Leading the Way

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**Sona Gevorgyan** is an Armenian senior student at the Department of English and Communications at AUA. She was born in Kuwait and moved to Armenia in 2014. Sona is an aspiring writer and journalist who founded AUA's student magazine *The Highlander* to create a platform for student expression. Sona's passion for activism began when she was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome at the age of 15. Since then, she has become an advocate for raising awareness about the condition and fighting for women's health rights in Armenia. Sona plans to pursue a master's degree in Creative Writing in the United States.

**Nairy Bzdigian** is a Lebanese Armenian who moved from the small town of Anjar in Lebanon to the Armenian capital Yerevan in 2021 to study English and Communications at AUA. She works as a tutor at the Writing Center and is a reporter for the student magazine *The Highlander*. Born in an Armenian town in a Middle Eastern country, Nairy had the opportunity to grow up with and participate in traditions of different cultures. During her studies at AUA, she has been exploring the connections between Lebanese and Armenian liminality rituals to identify similarities between the way gender discrimination and violence against women are enshrined within the respective wedding traditions.

**Lilit Khachatryan** is a local Armenian who graduated from AUA with a bachelor's degree in English and Communications. When growing up, she developed an interest in Soviet Armenian cinema and was specifically curious about how women are portrayed in these films. In her capstone project at AUA, she honed in on the expectations of women's behavior in romantic relationships. To challenge the tradition and the resulting common perception, Lilit composed, directed, and produced a short feminist film in which she defamiliarized a famous Armenian movie from the 1970s by retelling the story from a woman's perspective.

Elitza, Sona, Nairy, and Lilit have worked together in the frame of several courses at the department of English and Communications, at the Writing Center, and within the TEDxAUA student club in the last four years. Elitza is the TEDxAUA club advisor and was the capstone mentor for Lilit and Sona.

**Abstract:** In this article, the authors employ rhetorical autoethnography as a critical method both in and outside the classroom to analyze personal lived experiences of female oppression in Armenia as they embed these local stories within a larger sociocultural framework. In this conversational piece, Armenian female students share their academic projects based on personal experiences and discuss them through the theoretical lens of rhetorical resilience and righteous discontent, bringing the private to the public, the personal to the political. The authors demonstrate that despite the local patriarchal culture with its institutionalized structures of male dominance, women in academia can work together successfully to build coalitions for feminist resistance to systems of oppression.

**Keywords:** rhetorical autoethnography, marriage, family roles, feminist resilience, health care, women's rights

On a sweltering July day in 2022, we had found refuge in the air-conditioned living room of Sona's home in Yerevan. The Armenian apricot season was underway, and the table, elegantly dressed in red cloth with small, embroidered crosses, featured a fruit bowl as its centerpiece. The crystal vessel was overflowing with apricots, peaches, pomegranates, and last-year apples.

We were getting together to talk about our feminist academic work. Four of us, women at different stages of our personal lives and professional development, felt connected because of the work we were doing at the American University of Armenia (AUA) and in the community. Lilit, a recent AUA graduate, had produced a feminist film that revisited ideas from Soviet Armenian cinema. Nairy, a Lebanese Armenian junior, had composed one of her final course projects on how traditional marriage practices in Armenia and Lebanon infringe on women's rights and dignity. Sona, a Kuwait-born Armenian senior student, had developed and delivered a TED talk on women's health and reproductive rights in Armenia. I, a professor at the English and Communications program, have been doing research on the rhetorical practices relative to gender roles of Armenian rural women who are left behind by their husbands for seasonal labor migration.

Lilit, Nairy, Sona, and I felt connected over the work we have done together and the experiences we have shared. In the last years, we read, discussed, and wrote about feminism in the world and in Armenia in classes and outside them. We bonded during Covid-19 isolation using online platforms. We cried together at memorial ceremonies during and after the 2020 Artsakh War—a military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the beautiful mountainous region of Nagorno Karabakh. The war came upon us unexpectedly to steal thousands of young lives, our friends and students among the victims. We survived Covid. We survived war. These experiences made us stronger but also closer and even more connected through our common interest in issues related to women, despite our differences in age, origin, and professional development. We felt we were part of a community where everyone had the right and space to voice their own opinion. We felt empowered together. We read more, we discussed more, we did more for women's rights in the unique context of Armenia and its history.

The four of us had built a relationship over the years that offered a safe space to share stories and learn from each other's experiences while also drawing connections to the scholarship. In our classes, we often combined autoethnography—analyzing our own personal narratives in relation to larger cultural phenomena<sup>1</sup>—with discussions of theory to effectively link the personal experience of students to a wider cultural experience and more abstract ideas. As a teacher, I always found this approach to work well—once students were allowed to share their own stories of oppression, it was easier for them to understand ideas that often remained abstract when presented in foreign social contexts. Lunceford also reminds us that people are unlikely to care about theory without emotional investment in the text, and autoethnography can bridge caring about a person to caring about an issue that is part of their lived experience.<sup>2</sup> As an instructor and moderator of conversations in the classroom, I thus follow the lead of Sara Ahmed who encourages us to start “close to home” in order “to open ourselves out.”<sup>3</sup> I try to create an environment which allows for a safe exchange of local experiences of struggle and resistance that we can then add to the chain of global histories of activism and thought. The conversation that follows, part of my autoethnographic approach to teaching, has the same goal—to add student narratives to the canvas of global feminist resistance and inscribe them into a wider activist movement toward resilience.

Feminist activists in and outside the classroom, my students and I actively practice what social scientists call ethnomethodology—the study of real-life activity, including the study of discourse—to find connections to bigger cultural phenomena. Using a cognitive-process model in combination with a constructivist approach<sup>4</sup> our conversations in the classroom intend to explore real-life situations and challenge, rather than perpetuate, the cultural norms that produce oppression. Deborah Brandt dubs an ethnomethodological approach to composition as sociocognitive, a much-needed empirical method that allows us to understand reading, writing, and (I would add) dialogue as aspects of the social structure of literacy while she views literacy as a cultural activity<sup>5</sup>. A hermeneutically trained scholar of composition, Brandt sees writing as interaction between context and cognition, society and the individual<sup>6</sup>.

Feminist social science scholars have used ethnomethodology to see how women “do class,”<sup>7</sup> or to explore the social organization of race<sup>8</sup>. Black feminists<sup>9</sup> have used autoethnography as a method of resistance to challenge the American mainstream historical narrative. Furthermore, teachers<sup>10</sup> have seen autoethnography's pedagogical possibilities as a critical method

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1 See Ellis and Bochner; more recently Poulos.

2 Lunceford 8-9.

3 Ahmed 58.

4 For cultural and textual criticism approach to composition see Cooper and Holzman, or refer to Berlin's and Bizzell's scholarship.

5 See Brandt 317.

6 See also Flower and Hayes.

7 See Scharff

8 See Whitehead

9 See Griffin, Rodriguez

10 See *Queer Communication Pedagogy*, eds. Atay and Pensoneau-Conway

in the classroom allowing to explore race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, religion, ability, class in order to “trouble boundaries,”<sup>11</sup> to challenge the borders of identity,<sup>12</sup> and to give voice to oppressive silences<sup>13</sup>. Using autoethnography in the classroom and beyond helps evoke reciprocal relationship with audiences, inviting participation and a sense of responsibility<sup>14</sup>. Finally, autoethnography can be rhetorical when it draws on experiences that are relative to a rhetorical transaction with the purpose of engaging the audience and seeking response and participation.<sup>15</sup>

In this conversational piece, we employ rhetorical autoethnography as a critical method to embed personal lived experiences of female oppression within a larger sociocultural framework, thus connecting the local to the global, the personal to the political, and the private to the public. We believe that the shared stories will emotionally appeal to the audience in ways to make them partial to an argument relative to feminist resistance. We hope that our conversation will evoke engagement in two rhetorical transactions: one starting “close at home” and working “to open ourselves out” and the other (intended for those coming from other sociocultural contexts) offering a glimpse into a local manifestation of a global feminist project—coalition-building for feminist resistance to systems of oppression.

On that hot July day, Lilit, Nairy, Sona, and I got together again to talk about some new ideas and see how they related to our current work. Sona’s mother had just served lemonade. I took a sip of the refreshing drink:

**Elitza:** We proved we are resilient by making it to Sona’s lovely apartment without fainting with the heat. Our resilience was certainly fueled by a determination to fulfill our feminist mission.

**Sona:** It is interesting you think of it this way. Your comment takes us straight back to our last discussion about feminist resilience.

**Elitza:** Yes, you are right. We defined feminist resilience as a product of conscious and persistent feminist resistance, and we looked at its dimensions: physical, material, and even bodily,<sup>16</sup> as well as linguistic<sup>17</sup>, but also emotional<sup>18</sup>. We often can be resilient in one of these ways but then fail in the others. In all of your feminist projects you have shown how Armenian women can be resilient in material, linguistic, and emotional ways.

**Sona:** Feminist scholars use the term resilience in a sense to describe communities taking action together toward addressing social injustice, inequality and oppression. With our work here

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11 Johnson 84

12 See Alexander

13 See Glenn.

14 Holman-Jones et al.

15 Lunceford 17.

16 See Fleitz or/and Shellenberger.

17 See Glenn.

18 See Ahmed and Canter.

in Armenia, we try to achieve all of the above. As we work with language, our resilience practices are within the scope of rhetorical strategies because we are trying to paint a picture about the ways women are oppressed and experience social injustice in the context of our culture.

**Elitza:** As feminists, we have to be rhetorically resilient. As we were reading the book by Flynn and her collaborators, we decided to think of rhetorical resilience as a practice that is communal, relational, and social. How do you think your work and experience fits within our working definition of feminist rhetorical resilience?

**Lilit:** I believe our projects resonate within our definition of feminist rhetorical resilience. Feminist scholars refer to the Greek term *mêtis*, which they define as a force that combines creativity, opportunism, and even deceit to create situations that allow for seizing chances and utilizing potential.<sup>19</sup>

**Sona:** That's right, Lilit. My personal story illustrates well the idea behind *mêtis*. A couple of years ago, I was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal disorder that affects women's reproductive health. At the time, research on this condition was relatively new in the medical world, so, naturally I went to different doctors to understand more about the effects this condition had on my health. PCOS is caused by an imbalance of hormones, and women struggle with infertility. In Armenia, women's reproductive capacity has become the main marker of the Armenian nation's survival and the primary measure of authenticity and traditionalism in maintaining national identity<sup>20</sup>. This is why infertility is seen as a huge struggle for a couple to have. In some families, if the couple struggles with infertility, women are blamed for it. After my diagnosis, what really caught me by surprise was the advice from my female doctor. She advised me to hide this condition from my future husband. As a woman, she was only looking out for me. When I asked why, I was told, "After learning about your condition, your partner will not want to marry you." This followed countless stories I heard of married women secretly taking hormonal pills to conceive, or young women getting divorced, or breaking off their engagements because their partner and their families found out about their infertility struggles.

**Nairy:** Actually, last year, I had to visit a gynecologist because of my irregular menstrual cycle, and the very first thing she asked me was if I was married. I believe this was a "safer" way for her to inquire if I was sexually active or not. Advice like that by your doctor, Sona, can be quite devastating, especially since you heard it from a professional, who is supposed to look at your case on a medical level and not on a cultural one. Hearing such advice from friends and family members is also very unpleasant—they are supposed to accept you no matter what. How were you able to stay resistant and strong after being urged to not disclose your condition to others?

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<sup>19</sup> See Flynn et al.

<sup>20</sup> Beukian.

**Sona:** It was very difficult, Nairy. I was stuck with the uncertainty of not knowing what this condition appearing in my life meant for my future. Feminist scholars define that resilience recognizes the need for flexibility and adaptation in situations characterized by change and uncertainty (Youssef and Luthans). For me and my circumstances, it wasn't just about dealing with the condition but facing the stigma around it, which is why I decided to talk about it in public. In Armenia, traditional perspectives hold a strong influence over Western notions of modernity and feminism. It is a society deeply rooted in patriarchal values. Women are regarded as mothers, caretakers, and protectors of their home<sup>21</sup>. Their roles in our society continue to be confined to their reproductive function. I decided to share my experiences with a wider audience. On April 30, 2022, I gave a TEDx talk about my condition and its effect on my life and tied it to being resilient when faced with uncertainty.

**Nairy:** Telling our stories of vulnerability to anyone is challenging, let alone talking about them in a public setting. This is especially true in our culture where we are forced to stay silent about issues related to women's health. Was there anyone who encouraged you to tell your story? Anyone you looked up to?

**Sona:** Yes, of course. Growing up, I always associated resilience with my grandmother. She suffered from a spine injury, and she could barely walk. Despite that, no matter how difficult it was for her, she would get out of bed and help the family when she felt she was needed the most every single day. Feminist rhetorical resilience is seen as communal, relational, and social. It is often perceived as a psychological trait, not a rhetorical action<sup>22</sup>. But it is not simply about individual strength. In my case, it wasn't just my grandmother's strength that motivated me to tell my story, but the stories of so many young women who are ashamed of talking about their PCOS struggles. Popular understanding of resilience envisions heroic individuals performing acts of resilience. But I think it is not like that. Acts of resilience are more communal and relational. Also, it was emotionally very challenging for me to show this part of my life to the public. I didn't know what the response would be. I didn't know if it was the right move.

**Elitza:** Not only that it is the right move, but it is a recommended move for all women who find themselves in precarious situations. This is how we develop rhetorical agency—though rhetorical engagement—and with that, you perform resilience. As Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady explain, resilience as a form of rhetorical agency “begins from a place of struggle and desire.”<sup>23</sup> You wanted to have your story heard and made it available to the community. I remember how difficult it was for you to open up about something so personal when even your family was not ready to hear you speak about your infertility issues in public.

**Sona:** Yes, it was difficult. A couple of days before the TEDx talk, I was telling my mother

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21 See Beukian.

22 Flynn et al.

23 Flynn et al. 7.

about my speech. She was worried about my reputation as a woman in Armenian society.

**Lilit:** How did you deal with your mother's concern about your reputation? Armenians live in tight-knit communities. It is very difficult for parents to see their daughter's reputation compromised. This precludes her chances of getting married and threatens the future of the family line.

**Sona:** You are right. It was not surprising that my mother agreed with the doctors because she was worried about my marriage prospects. She didn't understand why it was so important for me to talk about it in public. I knew where her concern was coming from, but I also understood that if I didn't speak about it, it was highly unlikely that anyone was going to do so because of the stigma around the topic. Feminist scholars think of resilience as seizing an opportunity even in the most oppressive situations. They see resilience in the form of a small step toward chance, acting in the face of impossibility, and finding strength in vulnerability<sup>24</sup>.

**Elitza:** Your story is a great example of what female rhetors call *righteous discontent*. Shirley Wilson Logan borrows the term from historian Higginbotham—who developed it in her study of Black Baptist women movement at the turn of the 19th c.—and appropriates it to address contemporary women's issues. Logan applies the notion to rhetorical situations in which women speak about social injustices with a moral authority, strongly believing that they are correcting these injustices<sup>25</sup>. She thinks that the rhetorical situation of women today and in the 19th c. are not that different, and therefore they use similar rhetorical strategies<sup>26</sup>. Logan recognizes three manifestations of *righteous discontent*: 1. Telling the stories of people, 2. Invoking the past, and 3. Establishing a common identification. Sona, you have managed to tell your story, invoke your past experience and, with that, the experiences of many other women. I'm curious now about the reaction of the community after your talk. Did any women identify with your story?

**Sona:** After the TEDx talk was published online, many women in their twenties reached out to me. They warmly embraced me and thanked me for speaking about my condition so openly. "Not many women speak about this," I was often told. Some shared that they were on different hormonal pills, while others, like me, were told by their doctors, "When you get married, your condition will disappear." This was an indirect way of the doctors saying that your hormonal imbalance will fix itself if you are sexually active. The women I spoke to were frustrated and found it absurd that they had to wait until marriage to take care of their health. "What if I don't want to get married?" one asked. I empathize with all of them because the stigma and shame around the condition forced them to hide that part of their lives. We have had conversations about different treatments and how we can help one another. I believe we established a form of *identification* in the same sense as Burke sees identification endemic to rhetoric. These women and I have estab-

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24 Ibid.

25 Logan 35.

26 Ibid.

lished common ground and a shared understanding of what needs to be done. As I explain in my talk, resilience is bolstered by the identification with others, especially when we speak about what we, as women, struggle with the most.

Resilience shapes the relationships among ourselves and others, speakers and audiences too. Before getting on stage to deliver my talk, the TEDx event organizer approached me and said, “If you get emotional on stage, pause for a moment, if you need to, and take it all in. Remember that the audience will appreciate your vulnerability.” I always get goosebumps when I think of the moment I had to follow her instructions and pause because all my emotions were welling up inside me. And then I heard the applause—the understanding and appreciation of the audience. That’s when I truly realized that the audience and I had established common ground. My fright disappeared. Instead, resilience became the stepping stone in my relationship with the listeners.

After the talk was published by TEDx, the response completely transformed my life—I realized how many women like me empathized with me and felt empowered as a result of my public speech. Feminist resilience is transformative — it changes the way a life is lived. It can be creative and can come through a suitable rhetorical resource in the form of music, film, family narratives, performance and more. The stories women tell should also address wider audiences, not one’s immediate community. That’s how as feminists, we can develop a bigger rhetorical agency.

**Elitza:** Telling our stories to transnational audiences is crucial. In her famous book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, Cynthia Enloe makes an important statement about international politics in relation to women’s issues across the globe: analyzing international politics must include the visibility of women and, even more importantly, their analytical visibility. That means that women affect politics even when they are not actively involved, but it mostly means that we should be aware of the ways in which governments depend on the control of women as symbols, consumers, workers, voters, etc. Enloe asserts that power is gendered and, therefore, women’s stories matter to the crafting of politics across national borders. I remember that a couple of years ago when I met Nairy, she was telling me about women in her Armenian village in Lebanon and how their stories of oppression were similar to those of women in Armenia.

**Nairy:** Yes, it has been only recently that I realized how the cultural rites in my village of Anjar in Lebanon were similar to those in Armenia in the way they institutionalize female oppression. When I was a child, I was introduced to the Armenian tradition of *Hinoum*. The ritual takes place one night before the wedding as a major celebration and involves all guests. Central to the celebration is a tray containing henna, decorations, alcohol, and a red apple. Every *unmarried* woman is expected to take a bite from the apple. The red apple is a symbol of the bride’s virginity. By taking a bite of it, every girl is marked as a virgin, and later their pinky fingernails are also painted red to announce their purity as virgins to the community and maybe thus attract fellow suitors. As a child, it was all fun and games until I realized how the ritual was actually indoctrinating women



into patriarchal society as it was teaching us children about its ideals—in this case, celebrating girls' virginity as a critical part of the wedding ritual. And we were expected to accept it simply as a tradition in our culture. And we did accept it because we were children and not aware of its deeper meaning. And when I started asking my female friends about it, no one knew why they took a bite from a red apple. Some of my girlfriends were told that by participating in the apple-biting game they were receiving a blessing to get married. The response by itself reflects the patriarchal expectation of young women to be wed as unquestionable.

**Elitza:** It is so interesting how cultures are political even in their rituals, and how girls are taught to behave within the norms of the traditional society from early childhood. From a rhetorical perspective, it is brilliant—the whole community teaches their female children how to be good daughters and good wives by having them participate in a ritual symbolic of ideal womanhood. I wonder what happens when women resist the traditional norms and engage in premarital sexual intercourse. What do their families do?

**Sona:** The act of premarital sexual intercourse is seen as a violation of societal norms, religious beliefs, and traditional family values in Armenia. It leads to disapproval, conflict, and strained relationships within the family which may involve verbal abuse, isolation, or even physical abuse. In such cases, many Armenian women resort to surgical operations to reconstruct their hymen and safe face. This way they can go back to meeting the traditional requirements for the ideal woman and partake in community life with restored dignity.

I remember that in my Gender and Social Change class we read a report on the first sexual intercourse of women and men in Armenia. The 2015-2016 United Nations Health Survey Report shows that Armenian women, if asked whether they had a sexual relationship before marriage, 99.3 % out of 1,830 surveyed women answered negatively. On the other hand, only 46.9 % out of 1,190 surveyed unmarried men claimed that they have never had an intercourse with a woman. It is significant that only 0.7 % of the interviewed women felt comfortable to admit that they have had sex before marriage. While the report does not analyze this data, I think the numbers suggest something about the bias of the female respondents to the question since a positive answer may harm their reputation in the community.

**Nairy:** This data illustrates well the point we are trying to make, Sona. Women in Armenia don't have the right to their own bodies. They seem to be fully aware of it. They know they cannot share in public anything that is not in line with the tradition's rules. And traditions relative to virginity are not only endemic to Armenia. They are present in some other cultures as well. While reading about virginity rites, I came across an article by ethnographer Iklim Goksel on squatter settlements on the outskirts of the Turkish capital Ankara. In these poor neighborhoods, women undergo a procedure to reconstruct their hymen to "be a virgin again" in order to be able to get

married.<sup>27</sup> These women are mostly illiterate—they cannot read or write. They must take different strategies in order to go on with their day-to-day activities which require reading and writing. I found it interesting that in order to get married, they need their index finger dyed black to be able to sign their marriage certificates with it.

I could not help but notice the analogy between the Turkish case and the tradition in our culture of painting the pinky finger's nail red during the wedding ritual. The colored mark becomes a symbol of women as illiterate in the first case and women as virgins in the latter. In both cases, it is about marking women or, rather, labeling them, or even branding them, like animals. Their bodily rights have been violated but—because the mark is already a symbol—they have been also labeled as incapable of communicating on their own using oral and written language. Empathizing with these women for the violations of their human rights, Goksel sees in their actions a different type of literacy. For example, she describes the process of searching for a place and physician to do a hymen reconstruction as a form of resilience as well as a form of literacy. However, like Western anthropologist Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater who was doubtful of Goksel's argument, I also disagree that this can be considered a form of literacy. I'd rather refrain from referencing such practices as a literacy event. I see the actions of these women more as a survival strategy to which they resort in order to continue living respected in the community.

**Elitza:** But isn't that a form of literacy as well—learning how to read the culture so they can survive in it? Goksel lists all kinds of vernacular literacies related to everyday life activities –from going shopping, to organizing gatherings at their houses to gossiping. Women in such poor neighborhoods engage in all of them and, in this sense, are literate in these activities. In the case of hymen reconstructions, women need to find ways to seek a physician who can perform the surgery outside of their community for obvious reasons. With that, they need to invent strategies, discover how to engage in the given tasks, develop relationships, etc.

**Nairy:** I fully understand Goksel's point when she references Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. She suggests that Western scholars, even those who study cultures, are tempted to essentialize and look at other cultures with a Western lens. Goksel accuses Chiseri-Strater of reinforcing an Orientalist paradigm on her ethnographic study, which Goksel explains was contextualized within a specific part of Turkish culture. However, I believe that Chiseri-Strater did not have these intentions because this is about violation of women's rights to their own bodies, no matter where they live, in the East or West. And traditions of virginity should not violate women's rights either.

**Elitza:** Can the practices of hymen reconstruction among these Turkish women be considered an act of resistance to the norms that violate women's rights? When they repeatedly resist the patriarchal rules, don't they, in a sense, show resilience to the violation of their human right to

make a choice regarding their own body?

**Nairy:** I think that their arduous endeavor can definitely be considered an expression of resilience. Flynn and her cowriters assert that “resilience suggests attention to choices made in the face of difficult and even impossible challenges.”<sup>28</sup> These Turkish women choose to get hymen reconstruction in order to be considered pure again as virgins and they meet the demands of a patriarchal society.

**Sona:** What about the case of Lebanon? Have you noticed any form of feminist resilience there?

**Nairy:** Actually, during my recent visit I was lucky enough to be invited to a wedding and took it as a chance to observe and think about the ceremony. During the ritual of *Hinoum*, the guests were offered an apple on a tray. I was shocked to see that everyone, regardless of their gender or marital status, took a bite from the apple! I do not know if it was because they were not aware of the hidden meaning of the tradition and did not see that the apple serves as a symbol of female subordination and oppression. They did not seem to understand that participation in the ritual indoctrinates one into patriarchal norms. I did not take part in *Hinoum* and thought of my resistance as a success story, a step toward resilience against traditions that perpetuate female oppression.

**Sona:** I do believe that resisting participation in such ceremonies could be a way toward gradual dismantling of these traditions either consciously or subconsciously. We have a similar tradition in Armenia. It is really concerning because women here, too, are deprived of the right to make choices regarding their own bodies. They need to follow specific social norms and traditions in order to maintain their reputation in society. When I first heard about the Red Apple, I was horrified. Nairy, can you tell us more about the Armenian version of this tradition?

**Nairy:** In Armenia, people practice the Red Apple tradition as a rite of passage for women who are getting married. When I first walked into your apartment, Sona, I noticed the fruit bowl on the table, specifically the red apples. Before doing my project on marriage traditions in Armenia and Lebanon, the red apple was just a piece of fruit for me. Now it has changed its meaning.

**Elitza:** What does the red apple mean to Armenians?

**Nairy:** The Red Apple tradition is an Armenian tradition that celebrates a bride’s virginity by a basket of red apples. Armenia society, who is quite religious, has strict rules on virginity and pre-marital sex like the Christian doctrine stipulates. In the Bible, the original sin of Adam and Eve is represented through an apple—with one bite of the apple they lose their innocence, that is sexual

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28 Flynn et al. 1.

innocence. The Armenian Apostolic Church has strict rules on sex before marriage, where they view virginity as a form of purity. In short, being good Christians, Armenians preserve the Biblical symbols in their traditions as they practice them today. On the wedding night, or sometimes on the second night, the newlyweds are expected to have a sexual intercourse for the first time. The following day, the mother-in-law inspects the sheets of the bed where the bride and the groom spent the night. The anticipated scenario is for her to witness blood stains on the white sheet signifying that the hymen of the bride was broken, hence she had been a virgin. The groom's family then sends a celebratory basket of red apples to the parents of the bride to congratulate them on having a pure daughter. If the blood stains are not witnessed, the marriage could end without even properly starting, and the bride's family is shamed. There are cases in which the marriage lasts only for a day because the bedsheets did not feature blood in the morning<sup>29</sup>. When I learned about this, I was so shocked until I saw the similarities between the Armenian red apple tradition and that in my town in Lebanon.

**Elitza:** Your findings prove that women face similar issues across national borders, and to be resilient, they need to be creative in their rhetorical strategies. As Logan reminds us, the rhetorical situations of women are similar regardless of time and geographic differences. The contexts may differ significantly, and within that, the choices we make to develop an argument against patriarchal structures differ too, but the strategies remain the same. This reminds me again of Cynthia Enloe's book on women's importance in politics across borders. Her conclusion carries an important message: The personal is political. And vice versa, the political is personal. Enloe recommends that we pay attention to the fact that, in a globalized world, personal relationships have been politicized. Allegedly private personal relationships have been "infused with power that is unequal and backed up by public authority."<sup>30</sup> In Armenia, women's personal relationships with men have been governed by patriarchal norms but also by state politics, which has, in turn, been influenced both by the Soviets and by the West in recent years. When I was working with Lilit on her capstone project, she thought a lot about these influences. Lilit, can you tell us more about your film *Section of Fairy Tales* as you discuss why you chose to focus on the relationship between men and women in Armenia?

**Lilit:** I've always thought that films have a lot to say about a country's traditions and mindset in general. Movies can tell us about the relationship between men and women in a certain culture. Over the centuries, the role of women in respect to men in Armenia has changed dramatically, but in the last century, Soviet culture influenced it the most. During Soviet times, women were encouraged to partake in paid labor and participate in public life, but at the same time, the Soviets also promoted the image of women as mothers and household carers.<sup>31</sup> In the post-Soviet period since 1989, women were pushed back into their traditional roles. They were expected to be good

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29 See Poghosyan.

30 Enloe 348.

31 Eichler.

wives, homemakers, and mothers—not only in the family but on the national level, too.<sup>32</sup> In her article “Motherhood as Armenianness”—you already referenced it earlier, Sona—political scientist Sevan Beukian observes that women were perceived within an ethno-nationalist discourse as “biological (re)producers of the nation as mothers.”<sup>33</sup> I was really interested in exploring how during the Soviet period in Armenia, traditional patriarchal and Soviet “modern” female ideals were enmeshed to govern women’s behavior in public.

**Nairy:** I am always intrigued by films and specifically their language with regard to ideology. I believe that cinema is a very powerful medium that reinforces ideas for the better or, sometimes, for the worse. Actually, growing up in Lebanon, I didn’t learn much about Soviet Armenia even though I attended an Armenian school. I wonder how women were portrayed in Soviet films. Did their presence and presentation reflect the reality?

**Lilit:** Soviet Armenian cinema offers an array of memorable female characters. However, there are very few films that revolve around female protagonists. Women are often portrayed as secondary characters that complement male protagonists in their role as a mother, daughter, or love interest. For example, one of the most popular roles of the famous Armenian actress Verjaluys Mirijanyan is when she plays the wife and mother in *Bride from the West* (*Harsnacun Hyusisic* 1975) by Nerses Hovannisyan. The husband in the film feels proud every time Arusyak, his wife, manages to accomplish her household duties. Moreover, in the late Soviet period (1970-1990), women in Soviet-Armenian films were desexualized as a result of the Communist government’s normative ideology with respect to private life in combination with prohibitionist social-sexual mores prevalent in Soviet Armenian society during that time.<sup>34</sup> Scholars like Azatyan and Kaganovsky have pointed to the detrimental nature of desexualized portrayal of women to cinematic love stories. I myself was intrigued by these realizations: women were playing secondary roles in films, and they never actively engaged in a love narrative in Soviet Armenian cinema. And in those few cases that included an intimate loving relationship between male and female protagonists, oftentimes female characters were portrayed in an extremely innocent and pure manner.

**Sona:** I’ve noticed this too, Lilit. While I grew up in Kuwait, my parents, who lived in Armenia during the Soviet era, often watched such films where women characters were always secondary to men. I know about them too—*A Piece of Sky* (1960), *The Tango of Our Childhood* (1984), *Khatabala* (1971), *Bride from the West* (1975), *The Men* (1972), to list a few. Even today, the films are often broadcast on Armenian TV channels, and people continue to watch them. I remember when we talked about Judith Butler and her theory of performativity, we discussed the power of repetition and citationality to our social identities. We talked about how if we make meaning within repetition, then agency comes with the possibility for variations. Lilit, I have seen your film and

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32 Beukian.

33 Ibid 252.

34 Dmytryk, Azatyan.

know that you wanted to develop rhetorical agency for the female protagonist as you challenge the portrayal of women in Soviet Armenian cinema. How did you develop the idea?

**Lilit:** Just like with your TEDx talk, I decided to practice what we discussed as righteous discontent. With my project, I wanted to retell a story that portrayed Armenian women from a well-known film produced during the Soviet years, which you just mentioned, *The Men (Tghamardik 1973)*. The plot of the original film revolves around the main character Aram who tries to win over his love interest with the help of his close friends. I wanted to make my female viewers think about it from a different angle as they identified with the main character, a modern woman. A sexually appealing female protagonist, she acts upon her feelings and is not afraid to be the first one to approach the opposite sex to initiate a love relationship.

**Nairy:** From a rhetorical point of view, this sounds very interesting. Rhetorical resistance in the language of cinema—is this what you did?

**Lilit:** Yes, in my film, the main character—a young girl—tries out all the possible scenarios in her head and never gets the courage to speak directly to the boy she loves. Although the girl acts only in her imagination, it is already a huge step toward feminist resilience. In her book *Traces of a Stream*, Jacqueline Jones Royster describes the phenomenon best. She dubs *critical imagination* the commitment to making connections and seeing possibilities where there are none. It is a tool to see and rethink what is not there and speculate about what could be there. Royster encourages us “to look at what we know and reconstruct with critical imagination the worlds that might have been.”<sup>35</sup> I end my short film with a call-to-action encouraging those who identified themselves with the main character to act, not wait and observe patiently. I invite all Armenian women to “say something.” I tell them simply, “You can’t just live in your head forever.”

**Sona:** That’s a great message, Lilit. I wish they showed your film on Armenian TV channels instead of repeatedly broadcasting Soviet Armenian movies, which many people, like my parents, have watched so many times that they know the script by heart. I wonder what would happen if they showed Lilit’s film. What would our society’s response be? What do you think, Nairy?

**Nairy:** That would be great. The film invites people to rethink their traditional views on gender roles. I believe that initially there would be some criticism, as expected of anything that challenges the norm. Change doesn’t happen overnight, but we should not be afraid of taking the first step. Sitting right here, right now, and talking about these issues together is already a step toward change. Maybe we were scared to voice new ideas a few years ago, but now we have developed more confidence and I believe we can become change-makers. I hope that Lilit’s film will be aired on TV alongside the old Soviet films soon.

**Elitza:** Lilit's suggestion for change in the relationship between men and women in Armenia is certainly a step toward rhetorical resilience. It is more. It helps build rhetorical agency here and now. Your projects and ideas, Sona and Nairy, too are contributing to the common effort. Like you in your inquiries, we need to follow Enloe's example and worry about the personal first, knowing that it relates to the political. The moment we learn how to better investigate our own personal position to gendered power, how to develop stronger arguments and how to act upon them, we will be able to change the political locally, regionally, and even globally. The personal is political, and we are together working on improving the rights of women in Armenia, and by proxy, across the globe. Building coalitions of solidarity here and now can positively affect the life of women elsewhere. This is what we all are here for.

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Sona's mother called from the other room, asking if we wanted more lemonade. We did not. "Shnorhakalutyun!" we thanked her. She came into the room and looked at us, puzzled. Her expression revealed that we must have appeared thoughtful or somewhat detached from the reality of her living room. She tried to bring us back:

"Would you like some fruit?"

Her slender figure gracefully glided across the room. Her hand reached toward the fruit bowl.

"Let me treat you to the best fruit before you leave."

She picked a fruit from the bowl and lifted it in offering toward us.

It was a shiny red apple.

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