

YOU HAVE A VOICE HERE: IMPLEMENTING ARMENIAN FEMINIST  
LITERATURE WITHIN FEMINIST DISCOURSE

By

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“Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals, the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.”

- Gloria Anzaldúa

## ABSTRACT

### YOU HAVE A VOICE HERE: IMPLEMENTING ARMENIAN FEMINIST LITERATURE WITHIN FEMINIST DISCOURSE

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This project melds personal narrative with literary criticism, as it excavates the literature of Armenian writer and political activist Zabel Yessayan, particularly with her novel *My Soul in Exile* and memoir *The Gardens of Silihdar*. I argue that the voice of Zabel Yessayan should be included in the feminist women of color discourse within institutions in the United States. I develop this argument by bringing in the works of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and showing parallels in themes and lenses such as excavating traumatic histories, the importance of personal identity, and using writing as a form of resistance. Zabel Yessayan's texts and *This Bridge* both comprise stories conveying the theme of residing in the "in-between," and topics concerning womanhood, culture, identity, alienation and isolation. Weaving in my own narrative alongside historical and textual analysis, I bring the Armenian woman's voice into feminist discourse.

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## A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The published writings of Zabel Yessayan that I am incorporating within this project are not her original texts; they are translated from Armenian into English. While they have been interpreted carefully, it is important to note that there are still matters that can be lost in translation. An issue that can stem from this additional layer of representation that when engaging in close textual analysis, I am analyzing not only the author's rhetorical choices but also the textual choices of the translators. Zabel Yessayan lived most of her life in Constantinople; some names, places and cultural norms within her writings are hard for me to understand. The reliance on translated literature can lead to gaps within my research by not being able to be as thorough in my analysis and not having access to all of Yessayan's literature. I read these books in translated form because even if I found Yessayan's texts in Armenian, which has been difficult to do, I no longer am able to read in Armenian fluently.

## IN REGARD TO AUDIENCE

There are three intended groups of readers for this project. First, I want my work to gravitate toward those who don't know about Armenian history and Armenian feminist literature. Second, my project is for scholars and students of feminist studies who have yet to grapple with Armenian feminism. Lastly, the third intended audience is the Armenian woman. I encourage her to speak up within other cultures and settings, to go outside of the Armenian bubble and incorporate the Armenian woman's voice within literature, art, and history. I encourage us all to move forward in coalition, using writing as a form of resistance.



## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Letter from the Author

I am an Armenian American woman who has been residing in the in-between for some time now. The in-between is a constant discontented state of who I am and where I belong. Growing up I was constantly disenchanted by my Armenian identity; although I am mindful that my childhood and personal experiences played a big role in that feeling, I still had this longing to be stripped away from my “Armenianness.” At the age of sixteen I changed my name to a generic American name to peel myself further away from my Armenian identity. In all honesty I wasn’t even sure why I felt this way, I just knew that I didn’t feel Armenian enough in Armenian spaces and didn’t feel American enough in American spaces. No matter how hard I tried, I was a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.

In my early twenties I started attending Humboldt State University. I had the privilege of learning about numerous women writers of color, taught to me by fierce, educated and motivating women. It was in this space where I began to feel at home. I began to read the words of women who have written about their culture and the dual reality of home life and American life. I felt I could relate to these women but still felt left out of the conversation. Where was the Armenian women’s voice? Initially I experienced a sense of embarrassment, that I did not feel proud of who I am and where I am from. I was disappointed that I allowed the experiences of my upbringing and the bad

aspects of my culture to push me away from my cultural identity. Instead of plucking away the bad and shining a light on the good, I shut myself off from my own culture. Despite all these negative aspects and experiences within my culture, I made a goal for myself to not focus on the bad any longer. In order to embrace my identity, I turned to the voices of women of color authors who did not shut their eyes to the challenges within their cultures, even as they claim their cultures with pride. Initially, I had to claim that I have the right to be just as Armenian and just as American as anyone else, even those who have never felt disheartened by their identity. I accepted that I have the right to be proud of who I am, even though it has been a difficult journey.

In order to move forward with my ideas I had to figure out a way to include the Armenian woman's voice within feminist discourse. The inspiration that sparked within me stemmed from reading the works of women of color authors who wrote about feminism, identity and culture. Their stories, theories and lenses compelled me to join the conversation as an Armenian American woman and writer. The root that started my vision was Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. This anthology brought forth models of excavating traumatic histories, the importance of personal identity, and the coalition of women of color writers using writing as a form of resistance. I use this project to include my voice as an Armenian American woman writer by taking the theories and lenses from *This Bridge* and using them to analyze and incorporate the written work of Armenian author Zabel Yessayan (1878-1943).

This project highlights Zabel Yessayan, a woman whose name I came across thanks to the Armenian International Women’s Association. AIWA is a nonprofit organization founded in 1991 in Boston, Massachusetts, by Eva Medzorian, Barbara Merguerian and Olga Proudian. Although these three women had diverse backgrounds and skills, they organized an Armenian association administered by women that centered on the needs of women. AIWA is “the only international organization dedicated to the advancement of Armenian women regardless of their political, religious or educational affiliation” (aiwainternational.org). Today, the nonprofit has members from all over the world and is not associated with any prescribed political or religious views. Their mission statement is, “to promote and enrich the social, economic and personal advancement of Armenian women worldwide through educational and other community activities that unite Armenian women, promote gender equity, and emphasize our Armenian cultural heritage” (aiwainternational.org). AIWA’s mission statement really resonated with me because I felt included. My “Americanness” wouldn’t get in the way, nor would my non-traditional appearance of tattoos on my arms and a nose piercing. Their mission includes all Armenian women, and that is incredible.

One of the initiatives AIWA organized was the “Zabel Yessayan Project” in which they claimed, “Zabel Yessayan was one of the leading voices of her time, an advocate for social justice and women’s rights in Ottoman Armenian society.” This project began after members of AIWA watched a documentary titled, *Finding Zabel Yessayan*. They decided to translate some of Yessayan’s writings into English so they can be accessible to a wider audience because they felt that Yessayan is an important part of

Armenian literature and history. I have much appreciation for these women, especially since I would not be able to read Yessayan's works or even knew who Yessayan was if they hadn't taken on this project. Since the age of sixteen I have forgotten how to fluently read and write in Armenian, which I do believe played a role in my confusion with identity. I am grateful to have had access to these translated texts, thanks to AIWA.

Yessayan was not an Armenian American like me, but she lived most of her life in Constantinople (during a very difficult time which I further elaborate on later). Her dual identity was an Armenian living in the Ottoman Empire, while my dual identity is an Armenian living in America. I was able to build a connection with her in having to deal with dual identities, being raised within our own culture while living outside of our homeland, and not understanding the cultural norms and rules we were born into. For my research I analyze the scholarship about Yessayan's significance as an Armenian woman within Ottoman Armenian society as well as two of her texts, *The Gardens of Silihdar* and *My Soul in Exile and Other Writings*. While conducting research on Yessayan I found that her writings echoed the theories and lenses of excavating traumatic histories, the importance of personal identity, and using writing as a form of resistance similar to the women in *This Bridge Called My Back*. In fact, the coalition of women of color formed within the pages of *This Bridge* was the main incentive to include the Armenian woman's voice in feminist literature. *This Bridge* builds a coalition of women writers of color and gives them a space to share their narratives all while respecting their

differences; in these ways, this collection invited me to bring in the Armenian woman writer's voice.<sup>1</sup>

Yessayan helped form the backbone of Armenian feminist discourse during an extremely troublesome time in Armenian history. Most of her written work is inaccessible to a wide audience because it is unpublished, out of print or has not yet been translated,<sup>2</sup> which led to limited sources within my research. None of this was surprising because it reinforced the lack of attention to Armenian feminism and its history within institutions, at least through the resources I am able to attain as a student attending university in the United States. Regardless of the limited sources, this project helped me shed perspective on my Armenian roots the best way I know how, through literature. *This Bridge* unlocked literary discourses for me to answer my own questions about cultural identity and feminism. I felt compelled to join the coalition of feminists of color and write my own narrative within this project while contextualizing the works of Zabel Yessayan, a woman who I find to be a pivotal aspect of Armenian feminist literature.

This project excavates the literature of author, educator and social activist Zabel Yessayan, particularly with her novel *My Soul in Exile* and memoir *The Gardens of Silihdar*. By combining Yessayan's topics of womanhood, culture, identity, alienation

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002, women's studies scholar AnaLouise Keating co-edited *This Bridge We Call Home* with Gloria Anzaldúa. She states, "*Bridge* represented an urgent call for new kinds of feminist communities and practices, a call that simultaneously invited women of color to develop a transformative, coalitional consciousness leading to new alliances and challenged 'white' middle-class feminists to recognize and rectify their racism" (6). See Anzaldúa and Keating.

<sup>2</sup> Even the translated material can result in limited sources because they have only recently been translated. *The Gardens of Silihdar* and *My Soul in Exile*, the two translated books I use within this project, were published in 2014. Young scholars like me are just getting their hands on this material.

and isolation with the lenses conveyed within Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, I argue that the works by these women of color feminists deliver significant models, lenses and theoretical groundwork for situating Armenian feminist literature within American institutions.

This project has distinct personal relevance to my own experience as an Armenian woman and writer. I have attended both private Armenian and public American schools within the United States and I have yet to study the works of Armenian feminist writers. My own experience exemplifies the absence of Armenian women's voices within these institutions. I read on the "Embassy of Armenia to the United States of America" website that, "speculation puts the number from anywhere between 500,000 to 2,000,000," referring to the Armenian population in the United States. I couldn't help but chuckle at the word "speculation," because due to the fact that the US census does not have Armenian on the list of ethnicities to choose from, most Armenians just mark off "white" or "other," making it difficult to know how many Armenians are living in the United States. My issue as an Armenian born in America is why should we feel compelled to just mark off "white"<sup>3</sup> when filling out important documents? Why not have a box that we can all agree to check-off? The Embassy also claimed, "the Armenian community in the United States today is second only to that of Russia in numbers, and likewise the size of the diaspora community in Los Angeles is second only to that of Moscow." So, why am I

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the legal constructions of Armenian racial identity, see Ghoogasian and Haney López.

not reading about Armenian authors within American schools? After asking myself that question and having the motivation and inspiration by reading *This Bridge Called My Back*, I wanted to contribute in answering my own question by taking action. I decided to use this project as my “in,” by using the technique of weaving my personal narrative as an Armenian woman alongside my textual analysis of Yessayan’s books and the works within *This Bridge*.

In Chapter 2’s Literature Review, I take an unconventional approach with how I insert myself into the critical conversation regarding Yessayan. Since I couldn’t find significant critical dialogue on Yessayan or Armenian feminist literature, I approach the literature review in two ways. First, I examine the historical and cultural settings of Armenians and why that is significant in order to contextualize Yessayan’s works. I discuss the Armenian Genocide, the denial of the Armenian Genocide and how that history plays a pivotal role in Armenian women’s identity and culture, even those of us living in diaspora. Second, I shift gears and discuss *This Bridge* and how it is the theoretical grounding for my project. By discussing the anthology, I argue that Yessayan’s writings, and Armenian women’s writings in general, should join the canon of women of color feminist writers because of their similarities in themes, lenses, and experiences. My personal narrative interlaced throughout the project is my way of inserting the Armenian woman’s voice within feminist discourse.

In Chapter 3, I build on the review of literature to delve into the works of Yessayan. By examining her two books *The Gardens of Silihdar* and *My Soul in Exile*, I display her importance as a writer historically and for the Armenian woman’s experience.

Yessayan wrote about themes concerning womanhood, culture, identity, alienation and isolation, which I also find within Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. By discussing the commonality within these texts regarding excavating traumatic histories, the importance of personal identity, and using writing as a form of resistance, I argue that Yessayan's voice should be implemented within feminist discourse while motivating Armenian women writers to read and join projects like *This Bridge* in coalition with women of color feminist writers.



## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Ordinarily, this would be the section where I insert myself into the critical conversation on Zabel Yessayan's academic and cultural contributions as a part of the feminist discourse canon; however, this literature review will not be a conventional analysis in which I review and analyze the critical work on Yessayan, because there aren't many critical discussions around Zabel Yessayan or even Armenian women writers in general. Nevertheless, I was able to find a few online articles and dissertations,<sup>4</sup> which was exciting because I am thrilled to add my project to the list of scholars who are discussing Yessayan. Though the critical sphere of Yessayan and Armenian feminist literature in general is quite bare, my project was made possible by the Armenian International Women's Association. AIWA put together the "Zabel Yessayan Project" in which they translated several of her books into English, making it feasible for me to read *The Gardens of Silihdar* and *My Soul in Exile*. This literature review will identify gaps and lay the groundwork for my analysis regarding the absence of the Armenian woman's voice within feminist discourse using Yessayan's translated works.

There are two parts to this literature review that then allow me to contextualize Zabel Yessayan in feminist literature. First, I will discuss the historical and cultural contexts of Armenian identity and why Yessayan's writings are a product of that context, making her a significant facet of the Armenian feminist conversation. Second, I will

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<sup>4</sup> See Djoulakian, Nichanian, Vartanian.

examine the text which was the root and inspiration to my project, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, which is the critical grounding that forms my argument that Yessayan belongs in the canon of women of color feminists. Women of color feminism was not necessarily the decoding mechanism for my work, but it unlocked something within me, an overwhelming amount of motivation to include the Armenian woman's voice within Armenian and American institutions of feminist discourse.

### Part One: Historical Grounding

“I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, literature is unread, music is unheard, and prayers are no more answered. Go ahead, destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them into the desert without bread or water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia.”

-William Saroyan

One of the most prominent moments in my writing career took place the week I turned twenty-six years old. I had the honor of meeting Chris Abani, a Nigerian-American writer who is known for his stunningly poetic writings and numerous awards for his writings about his Ibo and English roots. Before meeting Abani, I admired his writings about his ancestors and their sad history with slavery. I asked him what advice he can give me to start speaking up about the history of my people, the history that is being kept hidden due to politics and denial. The moment I told Abani I'm Armenian he smiled and said, “We carry the melancholy truth of our ancestors within us.” I felt so

many emotions rush within me. I, just like him, am a survivor. I am the great-grandchild of those who survived the Armenian Genocide. I am living proof of the good in humanity, and the proof of failure of those who wish to do harm to others. History cannot be silenced, and writing is my form of justice. My goal is to create a New Armenia not only every time two of us meet face to face, but also when we read each other's words, conduct research and keep implementing our people's history within classrooms outside of the Armenian private schooling community.

#### Genocide studies: the Armenian Genocide

The systematic annihilation of 1.5 million Armenians on April 24, 1915, is known as the Armenian Genocide. It was on that day when the Ottoman authorities began to round up, arrest, deport or kill Armenian intellectuals and community leaders who lived in Constantinople, current day Istanbul. This gruesome time in history then led to the deportation and death marches of the remaining Armenian women, children and the elderly. These death marches entailed starvation, dehydration, rape, and massacre. The Armenian Genocide was far more than a historical tragedy. It is a scar borne by all Armenians. Zabel Yessayan was one of the only women on the list of intellectuals to be arrested, but she successfully fled to hide in exile.

I was taught about the genocide at a very young age, initially from my parents and then as a young child in Armenian elementary school, a private Armenian school in Los Angeles, California. The essential information of the genocide was relayed to me, but I was never told many details. The Armenian Genocide wasn't something I could simply go talk to my grandmother about, and it didn't feel right talking to my parents either. I

felt that it would be too painful to ask anyone about it. It was in my mid-twenties that I finally knew the survival stories of my great-grandparents, but my stories are bare and lack detail.<sup>5</sup> I did discover that all four of my great grandparents were children who lived through the Armenian Genocide.

When I was young, I knew that there was a genocide against the Armenian people by the Ottoman Empire, modern-day Turkey. I also knew that Turkey denies any responsibility for their actions, claiming that what took place in 1915 was not a genocide but simply casualties due to war. The denial of genocide on the Armenian people by Turkey is still an issue today. As I grew older and started to interact with social media, I learned more about the history of my people. I saw images of the horrific events, read the newspaper articles printed in the *New York Times* and other European periodicals trying to inform the world of what was going on during WWI in the Ottoman Empire. These materials were taught as a child at home, a student in Armenian private school and especially in the American schooling system from middle school to high school. I remember one history book in my middle school calling it a “war between the Turks and Armenians.” I felt so angry when I read that. Even after I built up the confidence to raise my hand and tell my history teacher why that is incorrect, she told me to let it go and that it is not in the lesson plan. My great-grandparents, who were all survivors of a gruesome genocide at a very young age, were not in the lesson plan. It was truly maddening and

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<sup>5</sup> My grandparents were either deceased when I was born or passed away by the time, I was a teenager. I was able to gather facts on the survival stories of my great-grandparents from my mother and several other family members.

upsetting. It was when I attended Humboldt State University that the history of the Armenian Genocide was a topic within the classroom. I was even fortunate enough to take a class that is predominately dedicated to the Armenian Genocide. I never thought I would be so happy taking such a depressing class, but I finally felt included. My culture, my family, my people were actually included in the lesson plan. This is not only a melancholy pain that we Armenians carry from the pain of our ancestors, but it is also something that we are still struggling to gain justice and closure from. Turkey denying a genocide that they are accountable for will not change if lesson plans continue to ignore the truth. The problem of Turkey's denial is complex, and justice and closure for our wounds can't be fully addressed until that denial is acknowledged or at least talked about.

#### Genocide denial

In fall of 2005, a graduate student at the World Policy Institute, Belinda Cooper, and associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota, Taner Akçam, published an article in the *World Policy Journal* titled, "Turks, Armenians, and the 'G-Word.'" The article discusses Turkey's decades of silence on the topic of genocide and their blatant denial. Turkey claims that the events that transpired during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire between the years of 1915 and 1920 were simply mass killings of the Armenians due to the inevitable casualties of war and not because it was a genocide; however, many historians consider the events that occurred to be the first genocide of the twentieth century (81).

Pairing the terms "Armenian" and "genocide" has been controversial at times, even in the United States. It was in 2019, 104 years after the Armenian Genocide, that the

United States Senate<sup>6</sup> passed a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide despite the White House and its relationship with Turkey (Edmondson). Simply put, political ties to Turkey take precedence over holding them accountable for the systematic killings attempting to wipe out an entire nation.<sup>7</sup> Barack Obama used the terms “Armenian” and “genocide” together during his campaign for the Presidency, yet after Mr. Obama was elected as President, he never used those two words together again. Felicia Schwartz of the Wall Street Journal wrote:

Expectations had been high that Mr. Obama would use the term this year, the massacre's centennial. Pope Francis recently used the term, and Germany said this week it would call the killings genocide. But geopolitical concerns relating to the U.S. relationship with Turkey have gotten in the way of Mr. Obama's pledges as a presidential candidate to do so. (A.8)

This particular instance alone demonstrates the significant history and weight on the word “genocide.” Not only is it a topic being avoided in Turkey, but it is also being avoided in the United States for over 100 years. The term “genocide” was coined in 1944 by a Jewish man named Raphael Lemkin. Akçam wrote, “although the word itself did not exist in 1915, most qualified historians today agree that the events of 1915-20 constituted genocide” (84). Notice the word “most” in that sentence. Ironically, Lemkin coined the

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<sup>6</sup> See Menendez.

<sup>7</sup> Armenians were not the only victims of genocide; the Greek and Assyrian people were also targeted by the Ottoman Empire. See Shirinian.

term genocide after he read about the Armenian massacres and made his life mission to ban the practice of ethnic or religious killings (*Watchers of the Sky*).<sup>8</sup>

Why is the Armenian Genocide not common knowledge? The simple answer is, not everyone wants to talk about it because chances are there will be consequences. The silence that has now lasted decades is not just about using the word “genocide,” it is about propaganda campaigns in Turkey that keep their population away from the truth, it is about limited access to historical material to avoid facing accountability for what occurred during the Ottoman Empire. An example of this propaganda on denial is within Turkish schools, which used to provide no information on Armenians. Then in 2002 the Ministry of Education required a curriculum that blatantly denied the genocide. When six hundred scholars condemned this as an act of discrimination and bigotry, the Education Board decided to publish the Turkish and Armenian versions and let the students decide. I’m not sure which phase of denial is more insulting, but their propaganda tactics are imbedded into their schooling institutions, and that is terrifying. It’s as if they would do anything to further insult the Armenian people and their ancestors, but not give them the closure by recognizing and taking accountability<sup>9</sup> for the atrocities that their nation committed during the Ottoman Empire (90). I can’t imagine telling my great grandparents that seeing their families being slaughtered in front of their faces and having

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<sup>8</sup> See Belzberg or Power

<sup>9</sup> There are laws in place that punish the crime of genocide. Visit [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf) for more information.

to forcefully flee from home is something that Turkish students today have a choice to “decide” whether or not that is factual.

Even giving Turkish students a choice between the Armenian genocide being an accurate part of history or not makes no sense, because any individual who contests the nation's denial of history faces consequences. A teacher who questioned history during a seminar was briefly jailed and suspended. Another case is when three Turkish universities had to postpone a conference organized to discuss Armenians in the Ottoman Empire because they were being called traitors to the nation of Turkey (86). Akçam himself faced consequences. Salpi Haroutinian Ghazarian, executive director of the *Armenian International Magazine (AIM)*, interviewed Akçam in her article “Breaking the Wall of Silence: A Turkish voice joins the call for Armenian Genocide recognition. A Dutch journalist documents the effort fueled by the scholarship of an Armenian historian.” Akçam moved to Germany to be able to conduct his research because he is one of the first Turkish historians to speak openly about the Armenian Genocide. He claimed, “the genocide of the Armenians was the peak of that cleansing” (4), and discussed how he dealt with bombardment of abuse by nationalistic newspapers and was utterly ignored by the academic sphere. He has been accused of being an Armenian agent, enemy of the Turks, a traitor, a German spy, and even a secret worker for the CIA. Akçam voiced, “I must confess that as a consequence of the heavy attacks from all sides, I got frightened and lost interest in working on this subject. I am an ordinary person with the ordinary challenges of making a living. I can't be on the lookout for attacks nor do I have the power to deal with them. So I'm constantly preoccupied with my moral



concerns, my obligations and my fears” (3). The lack of conversation on the Armenian genocide both inside and outside the academic realm is obvious. How is historical fact a subjective matter? One way would be intimidating people with laws, better known as Article 301 in Turkey. Article 301 states that a person can be punished by imprisonment for simply speaking negatively against the Turkish Nation. Article 301 in Turkey affects not only its citizens but also Turkey’s global relations, including their allies. Many Turkish journalists and writers have faced prosecution for stating their opinions on the Armenian Genocide and Turkey’s denial (185). This is a country that is altering history books and forbidding their people to speak the truth, and that is disturbing to say the least.

Trauma: historical denial and the psychological consequences

“With this type of socio-political circumstance and its effect on childhood, trauma continues and is passed on through generation after generation. It is hard for the generation following the one that actually experienced what happened to be able to finish the memory of it, or to have the ability to find words for it. So, it would be challenging for people to find the strength and a vocabulary to verbalize their feelings. This is partly because the experience, and therefore the feelings about it, does not belong to them; they have to imagine it.”

– Dr. Aida Alayarian

Dr. Aida Alayarian, a clinical psychologist, child psychotherapist and founder of the Clinical Director of the Refugee Therapy Center, published *Consequences of Denial: The Armenian Genocide* in 2018. Alayarian discusses the common pattern of historical trauma by reporting, “in relation to Armenians, children of survivors of genocide carry historical burdens of rejection, denigration, and persecution, which, if left unresolved, impede the ability to mourn their losses and, therefore, the ability to move on” (101).

Alayarian raises a concern I've been wanting to understand my entire life: how can we as Armenians even grasp the idea of moving on when our true history is not even acknowledged? The notion of feeling as if I reside in the in-between echoes throughout my readings; I don't feel at home even at home. I am denied closure while my ancestors are denied their truth, because of political ties between the United States and Turkey. The entire issue feels very painful, violating and adds insult to injury.

I claim that Dr. Alayarian's argument that trauma which passes through generation to generation, instigating feelings of rejection and persecution, can also seep into the oppression of Armenians by Armenians. Psychological and traumatic consequences can also come from within the Armenian culture. Lerna Ekmekçioğlu's powerful book titled, *Recovering Armenia: The Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey*, discusses the Armenian women's identity post-genocide. Ekmekçioğlu asks the question how it is possible for women to plea for gender equality after such a tragic reality that now calls for the perpetuating of Armenianness. Women had immense pressure to revive the nation of Armenia as educators of history, caretakers and mothers, all for the greater good in establishing Armenianness once again. Ekmekçioğlu writes, "...there was a similar 'baby boom' among post-genocide Armenians, natalist calls were common, and they predictably placed women at the heart of the discourse" (30). Even the Armenian feminist publication *Hay Gin* promoted this notion in order to revive Armenianness after the catastrophe. Imagine the oppressive biological and social pressure put on women, women who survived a Genocide (32). Ekmekçioğlu also mentions that women who did not want to take on this burden or those who did not want to have

children or chose to seek an abortion were seen as “egotistical and undutiful” (32). The pressure on women to revive Armenianness was beyond just the preservation of one’s identity.

After WWI, there were postwar peace conferences in Europe which Patriarch Zaven Der Yeghiayan<sup>10</sup> attended for the Armenian National Delegation. During Der Yeghiayan’s European tour, the commission charged with Armenia’s future borders announced that the more people Armenians can get together the more land they will obtain. Armenians were scattered all over the world due to the genocide but were advised to instantly return and populate Armenia (33). Population numbers being translated into territory after the killing and deportation of millions seems traumatic in itself. Adding to this chaotic reality, expecting women to reproduce and be dutiful was one option, the other way was to find the women and children kidnapped into Muslim houses and institutions during the war and bring them back into the Armenian community (33). The idea of gathering Armenian women and children was referred to as *vorpahavak*, a movement that aimed to place babies and children who were left orphans with new Armenian families and for women and girls to be married off to Armenian men and reproduce more babies (35). Instead of focusing the attention on women who saw their relatives die, who were kidnapped, raped and had to flee to survive and make sure they get the mental help they deserved, they were seen as baby machines where men could protect them by marrying them. An Armenian American newspaper called *Hairenik*

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<sup>10</sup> Zaven Der Yeghiayan was the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople from 1913-1922. He was deported to Mosul during the Armenian Genocide. For more information see Movesesian.

(Fatherland) published in Boston proclaimed, “An Armenian man should not reject a woman who has been abducted since she is an innocent victim who cannot be held morally reasonable for her condition” (36). This statement is unsettling by simultaneously appearing supportive of the survivors while re-victimizing them with a misogynistic undertone.

Oddly enough, many Armenian feminists at the time found the movement to be a good idea because they were able to see themselves as equals since they were choosing their Armenianness over womanhood. I argue that this false sense of equality to men is a byproduct of genocide, that these women perhaps agreed to this reality because they finally felt included. What else was left to do besides serve their nation? But Ekmekçioğlu mentions a really valid point by stating, “The mainstream press of the time, which was in general so attuned to the suffering of orphans and rescued women, did not mention survivors who were disenchanted by the promises of the National Revival” (41). How can we know what the majority of women thought and felt toward movements like *vorpahvak* if their opinions were not written down? I chose to do my research on Zabel Yessayan because she wrote stories after the Genocide which solidified my argument that she used writing as a form of resistance by writing her truth. Armenian feminist discourse should be implemented within Armenian and American institutions, and Zabel Yessayan’s writings should be considered as one of the many examples of the silenced woman’s voice.

Identity and the “in-between”

“I define the Armenian-American community as a social construct, a mental image to both insiders and outsiders. The community consists of social networks of families, friends, acquaintances, as well as institutions and organizations. It comprises formal and informal relations among people of Armenian descent sharing a collective consciousness and concern for people and things Armenian.”

-Amy Bakalian

Amy Bakalian, former chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at New York University and former President of the American Comparative Literature Association, wrote a book titled *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*. Bakalian’s book resonated with me and my own experience on the reality and problematic state of being an Armenian American. The book discusses Armenian immigrants and how they identify themselves by their “host” countries; common labels would be Iranian Armenian, Romanian Armenian, Soviet Armenian and so forth. My father’s parents were Greek Armenian, my mother’s mother was Lebanese Armenian, and her father was Polsahye, which translates to an Armenian who lived in Istanbul. Even though my grandparents were all born and raised in countries outside of Armenia, they were genetically, culturally and ethnically Armenian. All four of my grandparents returned to Armenia in time to raise their families in Armenia, a very common notion in Armenians whose parents survived the Armenian Genocide and had to live in diaspora to survive. Even though my grandparents were born and raised outside of Armenia, they culturally remained prominently Armenian, adapting to their “host” country’s norms, food, and traditions on a minimal to moderate level. The pride and honor of upholding cultural identity was prominent when my parents’ generation came to America to raise

their families. This is one of the main factors that caused the social distance between “us” and “them.” What I mean by this is, I was born and raised in America constantly being reminded that I need to remain Armenian. It was my duty to speak Armenian within our home, have Armenian friends at school, marry an Armenian one day and have Armenian children. On one hand I understand it to a certain degree, a nation of people who have been oppressed, pushed in and out of their homeland, killed and enslaved are taking precaution in making sure that their culture and heritage lives on. I can imagine it being frightening for my grandmother who had to uproot her entire family from Armenia to America because of the Soviet Union and needing to bond with anyone outside of her Armenian community, living in Hollywood not able to speak English. It makes sense to stay close within one’s own culture, but that concept doesn’t stay relevant when time goes by and generations are being born in America. Holding onto one’s “Armenianness” is not a one size fits all issue; people should have the right to embrace how much of their heritage and culture they want uphold.

I was born in Hollywood in 1991 and by sixth grade my family couldn’t afford Armenian private schooling any longer, so I started to attend an American public school. This was after I had been uprooted and moved to Armenia for three years and returned to America. It was a dark time in my family’s life but in respect to my family members I want to spare the details. I was completely turned off by my Armenianness when I returned to America and entered the sixth grade. This was mainly because every time I felt Armenian, I had an Armenian tell me I am not one of them. Armenians don’t have a broken family; Armenians have dads and certainly do not have a gay brother. This is

when I started to reject my Armenianness. I connected with Bakalian's writings because she discussed the negative aspects of overly holding onto one's Armenianness. She examined how the ethnic and cultural structure maintained and curated by Armenian Americans, the obsessive need of togetherness, potentially invited things such as prejudice and discrimination towards neighboring communities within other cultures. It can even cause a social distance between subcommunities within the Armenian American population, which is what I experienced (221). Bakalaian states, "moreover, the Armenian-American community is not a monolithic structure; it is divided into subcommunities by country of origin, by generation, by political ideologies, by religious denominations, by socioeconomic status, by life-style and interest, and so on" (242). Although I find it important to feel connected to our roots and family history, expecting everyone to have an inevitable need to be a part of their heritage and not adapt to the culture in which they live amongst was one of the main reasons why I felt like I was stuck in the "in-between."

Being raised to be Armenian, speak Armenian, be friends with Armenians, and date only Armenians, all while living in America, was problematic. The majority of my experiences with Armenians in my high school openly accepted racism, sexism and homophobia, which is something I couldn't look past. It was heartbreaking for me. I felt as if no matter what I did, I simply was not good enough for either Armenians or Americans. I would feel left out of my Armenianness because I did not have conservative views, had many non-Armenian friends and dated non-Armenian men. Concurrently I felt left out of my "Americanness" because I wasn't considered to be white by white

friends. My grandparents and parents were refugees, my grandparents didn't speak English and my mother has an accent. I can't even count how many times I was confused to be from another culture because many people didn't even know what an Armenian was before the Kardashians. I was teased for the food I brought to lunch because this was a time before hummus, pita bread and dolma (grape leaves) were made popular by American grocery stores. I felt suffocated in the "in-between." I made friends with non-Armenians, to then being friends with only Armenians, to then filtering friends constantly because I didn't understand where to fit in. I didn't feel included and comfortable with my dual identity until I was 23, the age I moved away from Los Angeles and began school at Humboldt State University. It wasn't that all the answers were there for me, but I was relating to women and stories within books I was reading from various authors who were all from different cultures and timelines, writing about issues that I for once could relate to. As mentioned earlier, the backbone to my project and main inspiration for work came to me after I read Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

Now that I have discussed the historical and cultural contexts of Armenia and my own Armenian identity, I want to examine *This Bridge*. I chose to do this before delving into my analysis of Zabel Yessayan's writings because *This Bridge* parallels themes and lenses such as excavating traumatic histories, the importance of personal identity, and using writing as a form of resistance similar to Yessayan's texts. I will further discuss the theme of residing in the "in-between," and topics concerning womanhood, culture, identity, alienation and isolation.



## Part Two: Theoretical Grounding: Women of Color Feminism

Before contextualizing Yessayan's literature and bringing her into the canon of feminist discourse I need to discuss the theoretical grounding and foundation of my argument as to why Yessayan, along with the Armenian woman's voice, should be included within the women of color feminist canon. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* is the root and inspiration for my project. I argue that the works by these women of color feminists deliver significant models, lenses and theoretical groundwork for situating Armenian feminist literature within American institutions. The foundation includes the necessity of coalition of women of color writers who use writing as a form of resistance to amplify their voices within the feminist movement, the importance of interconnectedness, and themes concerning womanhood, culture, identity, alienation and isolation. I examine the importance of interconnectedness, mindful coalition by making connections through differences, and discuss how these authors excavate traumatic histories, the importance of personal identity, and use writing as a form of resistance. The theoretical grounding of women of color feminism and discussion of *The Bridge* will allow me to move forward and examine Zabel Yessayan's texts and how her work parallels the same concerns.

### *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*

“This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch. We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all our selves to bear down hard on that reality.”

- Cherríe Moraga, xli.

Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* features the works of a diverse group of feminists from many racial and ethnic identities who challenge white feminists who do not acknowledge women of non-white backgrounds. The collection of poetry, prose, essays and letters are the foundational texts in third-wave feminism<sup>11</sup> during the 1980s in America. The authors challenge white feminists who do not acknowledge and fully incorporate the voice of women of color within the Women's Movement. More importantly, these women writers of color comprised a collection of works in which they speak of their own experiences in their own words, regardless of white feminists. The book is not just directed at the white women but speaks to fellow women of color. Instead of asking white women to include their voice in a white-dominated women's movement, the authors are claiming a feminist politic on their own terms, which is beyond inspirational. The content within the pages are still so relevant to today. Though there aren't any texts from Armenian women writers in *This Bridge*, I argue that this anthology and projects similar are exactly the kind of spaces that Armenian women should be contributing their voices. In the 1981 introduction Moraga and Anzaldúa wrote:

We named the anthology "radical" for we were interested in the writings of women of color who want nothing short of a revolution in the hands of women—who agree that that is the goal, no matter how we might disagree about the getting

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<sup>11</sup> R. Claire Snyder of George Mason University states, "third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critiques within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition" (176). See Snyder for more information.

there or the possibility of seeing it in our own lifetimes. We use the term in its original form—stemming from the word “root”—for our feminist politic emerges from the roots of both our cultural oppression and heritage. (xliv)

When I read this passage, I instantaneously thought of Zabel Yessayan and how she wrote about cultural oppression and risked her life in doing so.<sup>12</sup> Concurrently, I felt welcomed in a space where I can express my experiences while reading writings of other women who have had similar and dissimilar experiences as mine. Even reading the stories that I couldn't relate to at all helped grow my consciousness as a woman. My struggle with the “in-between” and the questions I had concerning my “Armenianness” in American spaces, or my “Americanness” in Armenian spaces, didn't seem like a unique issue any longer. I was able to relate to women who had also asked themselves these types of questions. For instance, when Moraga expressed, “I had even ignored my own bloodline connection with Chicanas and other Latinas. Maybe it was too close to home” (xxxix), I felt a connection to her. Here she is talking about her struggles with her dual identity of being a lesbian and a Chicana and overcoming the notion of having to pick one of those identities instead of openly being both. What is beautiful about this anthology is while I read this I can admit that I am not lesbian, nor am I Chicana, but I can gather the similarities and the differences between my struggles within my own dual identity and living in the “in-between” and Moraga's experiences.

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<sup>12</sup> I discuss Zabel Yessayan's life and written work in Chapter 3

Cherríe Moraga's goal for this project was establishing a coalition of women of color, one that includes and celebrates all women. The quote I chose in the epigraph leading into this section is one of the main reasons I felt so compelled to join my Armenian voice, along with Yessayan's works, within a project like *This Bridge*. As for Gloria Anzaldúa, this coalition's movement was to break oppressive customs and taboos and encourage women to be optimistic. Anzaldúa wrote:

We each are our sisters' and brothers' keepers; no one is an island or has ever been. Every person, animal, plant, stone is interconnected in a life-and-death symbiosis. We are each responsible for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea. (xxvii)

My understanding of Anzaldúa's words are that we are all connected and bound by the same destiny, which is death. I'm not saying this to sound morbid, but in a way that shines a common responsibility on us humans; we are sisters and brothers, like Anzaldúa stated, we must help each other regardless of our cultural or religious (and other) differences. Reflecting back to Amy Bakalian, her discussion on "us" and "them" and the negative aspects of togetherness within a culture also connects to Anzaldúa's point. For example, to narrow the scope in order to make my argument clear, let's take the population of the United States into consideration. Let's narrow that population down to people of color, then narrow that down to those who identify as women within that population. If all women-identifying persons of color within the United States acknowledged each other's heritage, culture, traditions, etc., and the issues regarding women's equality and rights within their own reality and within American cultural norms

were all discussed openly, the conversation would shift from the “us” and “them” and become “similarities” and “differences” instead. In fact, I argue that this mutual acknowledgment would eliminate the potential invitation of prejudice and discrimination towards neighboring communities that Bakalian mentioned. The coalition of women of color writers who used writing as a form of resistance to fight for women’s rights and vocalize their stories is what *The Bridge* is for me, and that is why I was inclined to incorporate the Armenian women’s voice within that canon.

Women of color feminism: interconnectedness

Christa Jean Dower of Texas Woman’s University wrote a chapter titled, “Beyond Opposition: Reconceptualizing Social Movement Through the Spiritual and Imaginative Rhetorics of *This Bridge Called My Back* and *This Bridge We Call Home*” in the book titled *Rhetorical Agendas: Political, Ethical, Spiritual* by Patricia Bizzell. Dower’s discussion on basing alliances in interconnectedness solidified my views on the need for coalition within the women of color movement. Dower claims, “women-of-color feminism teaches us that to join in solidarity, then, we must first educate ourselves about each other’s stories and not rely on the 'other' to teach us about their cultures” (337). I agree with Dower entirely, which is why I think it is important for Armenian women to insert themselves within these discourses. If our literature is not read outside of the Armenian audience how will our stories be known and how will our prejudices dismantle? By joining the bridge, we are opening the possibilities of not only no longer feeling alone in our struggles as women within our secluded culture, but perhaps finding solutions to our questions by example of others. Downer suggests four central

conventions in building coalitions towards social change. First, while our identities and labels are important, they can also inhibit social change; second, coalition will be better off if it is built around commonalities and interconnectedness; third, in order to change the world one must be willing to make the change within themselves; fourth, spiritual and imaginative approaches can create long-term social change (336). I'm fond of the list that Downer discusses as it is not restricted; her ideas on what *This Bridge* offers covers the big picture in what writing and literary activism could do. I can honor my heritage and be firm with my identity while accepting that I can create social change. If I don't prioritize just my issues within my own culture and find the interconnectedness within others while respecting our differences, we can make long-term changes.

Parallel to Dower, AnaLouise Keating<sup>13</sup> discusses how *This Bridge* was “instrumental in introducing intersectionality into mainstream feminist discourse” (30). In “Beyond Intersectionality: Theorizing Interconnectivity with/in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*,” Keating argues that intersectionality is just the tip of the iceberg for what *This Bridge* offers. Keating states that the anthology “offers complex relational perspectives on identity formation and alliance-making—perspectives that feminists and other social-justice scholars have not yet adequately acknowledged or explored” (30). Keating expresses how the text goes past intersectionality and leaps into interconnectedness, because intersectionality alone is not

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<sup>13</sup> AnaLouise Keating, co-editor of *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, alongside Gloria Anzaldúa in 2002. See Keating.

enough. I agree that intersectionality alone is not enough, because it can potentially circle back to the notion of “us” and “them.” Keating suggests the need to widen the scope and provide more tools. One of the lessons she discusses within the chapter is “making connections through differences” (38) which was a pivotal point in answering my own concerns on how to insert myself into a conversation while trying to find connection while also acknowledging differences.

Making connections through differences: mindful coalition

What is mindful coalition? It’s more of a reminder to myself rather than an argument. It is important to be mindful when entering feminist discourse built around coalition. For example, Keating discusses how she uses the term “commonalities” rather than “sameness” when referring to the connection among feminists. The term “commonalities” includes not only similarity but also differences (42). Keating claims:

The desire for connection and community motivates many mainstream feminists or others in some sort of majority position: In their efforts to forge solidarity with others who seem to share some important point of connection (like gender), they downplay, deny, ignore, or become oblivious to the differences that co-exist within these shared traits. (43)

Mindful coalition is to avoid the artificial solidarity. It is to understand that just because we identify as women of color, that does not mean all our struggles are the same. Uniting by solely basing the unity on gender denies differences which can push people further apart rather than bring them together in coalition (44). That would be the opposite of what texts like *This Bridge* offer women in the literary world. We can find commonalities

within our experiences of sexism, dual identities, residing in the “in-between,” alienation, discrimination, etc. but that should also be joined with recognizing the differences within our experiences as well. As Keating argues, making connections through differences can help us in, “moving beyond intersectionality, taking a few tentative steps into radical interconnectivity” (59). Arguments like this is what motivated me to research the feminist work within my culture, which is how I came across Zabel Yessayan.

Connecting with *This Bridge*

The title of the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* was inspired by “The Bridge Poem” by Kate Rushin, which is the prefatory poem in the collection. Rushin expresses her frustration on feeling as if her role is to be the bridge between groups who do not recognize each other’s perspective. The poem, which opens the anthology, was one of the reasons I chose this book to be the backbone to my project. I felt so connected to it. The lines that stood out to me the most within the poem were:

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister  
 My little sister to my brother to the white feminists  
 The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks  
 To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists, the  
 Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends’ parents...

Then

I’ve got to explain myself

To everybody (xxxiii)



Not knowing where my Armenianness begins and where my Americanness ends, all while tending to family members who fall on many different levels of that spectrum, coupled with friends who have no idea what that feeling is like, has been a disenchanting feeling for some time now. In the introduction of the anthology Cherríe Moraga argues how the pain of separation between women can be eradicated if the struggles of women from different cultures were treated as a way to unite them. This connects to my argument to include the Armenian women's voice within feminist discourse. Finding a connection within the differences that we women have within our own cultures can be uplifting and inspiring, especially since the Women's Movement was predominantly for the white woman. In the forward of the anthology, Toni Cade Bambara, African American writer and social activist, expresses the pain of separation between women and that the struggles of women from different cultures can be a way to unite them. Bambara suggests that *This Bridge* can make revolution irresistible by arguing, "we have got to know each other better and teach each other our ways, if we're to remove the scales and get the work done" (xxx). I agree with Bambara, especially since one of the main reasons why I decided to write my project was because of the admiration and inspiration I felt when reading the works of other women.

The first section, titled "Children Passing in the Streets: The Roots of Our Radicalism," encompasses stories from women of color who grew up in America. These stories express the issues revolving around the societal mistreatment towards those who are seen as different because they are "colored." The part that resonated with me within these stories is how they express the experience as young girls who were longing to pass

as “white” in order to fit in. They would mask their accents and adjust their mannerisms to be perceived as “white girls.” Nellie Wong expresses her longing to be white and the need to look and speak like American girls in her poem, “When I Was Growing Up” (5). Mary Hope Whitehead Lee’s poem “on not bein,” discusses her childhood and being half black and half white and her not fitting in with either group (7). I circled back to the time I changed my name to not be associated with my culture, the times I felt embarrassed my grandmother didn’t speak English or that my mother speaks with an accent. Flashbacks of feeling left out of my American and Armenian identities and wanting to look less “ethnic” or “exotic” all resurfaced while reading these poems. I never realized that these struggles were molded within my upbringing, preconceived prejudices of feeling like I don’t belong because I didn’t fit into the white American mold or wasn’t Armenian enough for the Armenian mold. In the introduction to this section I read, “on the one hand encouraged to leave, to climb up to white. And with the other hand, the reins were held tight on us, our parents understanding the danger that bordered our homes. We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root in our radicalism” (4). When I read this passage, I felt it in my core. I reflected back to when I was a child trying to be white and not feeling right about it, but also being tired of forcing myself to feel more Armenian. Trying to be Armenian but feeling as though it was never enough while trying to be white to feel included is the notion of the “in-between.”

In “Entering the lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” the second section in *This Bridge*, I read “daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers’ heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak

us from the knowledge of ourselves” (19). Here I was reminded of feelings of alienation from other women within my own culture, where traditional roles are still widely normalized, while simultaneously feeling alienated by my “Americanness” because my family had different cultural norms. For instance, I do not sit comfortably at the dinner table with my aunts, even sometimes my mother, because I have tattoos and piercings. I’m sure many Armenian women would find me to be damaged because I moved away from my family home in my twenties and am going to marry a non-Armenian man. On the other hand, I’ve experienced my white friends not understanding my anxieties toward getting a new tattoo, or dying my hair a vibrant color, or the guilt of leaving my family home. Theory in the flesh delivers the voices of women who are battling with which parts of their mothers can help them and which parts suppress their identities. I take this dynamic as the roles women are born into within their cultures, not specifically by just their mothers, but the role all women have played within their culture. It was difficult to find my true identity while playing the tug of war between which parts of my culture’s womanhood were mine and which parts were not, whilst attempting to figure out who I actually am. Theory in the flesh insists that telling our stories in our own words is theory, and that it is absolutely important theory. Theory in the flesh is what encouraged me to braid my own story within my analysis because it is theory that derives from and is applicable to lived experience. Reading *This Bridge* helped me truly see that the issues I have grappled with exist within other women as well. Just because I haven’t had the courage of discussing these matters with women within my own culture doesn’t mean it does not exist. I am confident that I am not the only woman who has faced these struggles

within my culture, and I hope that texts like *This Bridge* will inspire Armenian women to be more vocal about their stories within and outside of the Armenian community.

These thoughts also sparked within me while reading Mitsuye Yamada's "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism," an essay within section 3 of *This Bridge* titled, "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You: Racism in the Women's Movement." Yamada's essay is about the cliché behaviors expected of Asian American women and how even their political actions are not regarded by other women simply because they do not expect that sort of behavior from them. The essay expresses how many Third World and Asian women have found the Women's Movement to be predominately middle-class white women and that makes it challenging to have representation within that movement. Yamada argues that third and fourth generation American women should not have to put off third world feminist issues because their race still has not received equal status with the feminist movement. The author claims:

Asian Pacific American women will not speak out to say what we have on our minds until we feel secure within ourselves that this is our home too; and until our white sisters indicate by their actions that they want to join us in our struggle because it is theirs also. This means a commitment to a truly communal education where we learn from each other because we want to learn from each other, the kind of commitment we do not seem to have at the present time. I am still hopeful that the women of color in our country will be the link to Third World women throughout the world, and that we can help each other broaden our vision. (72)

Yamada describes the reality that I have been hoping for myself and my Armenian sisters. I find Yamada's solution to be inspiring and eye opening. One way for Armenian Americans to feel that America is their home too, is to insert their voice within institutions, such as education, publishing and social movements. Another is to be dedicated to not only educating other cultures about ours but learning about other cultures as well. It is important to become a part of the feminist discourses outside our own cultural bubble, not just because of the similarities we may share with women outside our culture, but because it is another way of breaking down the oppressive barriers we have carried on our shoulders for generations.

The first time I read *This Bridge*, the most impressionable piece was Gloria Anzaldúa's "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3<sup>rd</sup> World Women Writers," which is in section five of the anthology titled, "Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Women Writer." Anzaldúa encourages women of color to put their experiences into writing, because writing can help share truth, give others a grip on that truth while helping the writer make sense of the truth on her own terms. Anzaldúa emphasizes, "write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on the paper" (170). Anzaldúa words give me such vigor. I owe my gumption to taking on this project, putting aside my fears and writing my vulnerabilities, silencing my discontented state of the "in-between" and doing something about it, to women like Anzaldúa. I am also very thankful to have come across and read the works of Zabel Yessayan, a woman within my

people's history who wrote her truth despite her turbulent life. Yessayan's writing also gives me vigor and helps me claim my voice. Anzaldúa certainly did not have access to Yessayan's work, but I want to place them in conversation. I believe it is important to include women like Yessayan within the women of color feminist discourse and encourage further contributions of Armenian women writers within the canon.

## CHAPTER 3 ZABEL YESSAYAN

I don't remember much of my childhood. I'm not sure if that's because life is so entirely different now or if it's some kind of subconscious and unintentional defense mechanism. I remember snippets of memories, or how situations made me feel rather than living through them. One of the things I do remember is that I was raised to believe that women did not have the same rights as men. Now this isn't to say that every Armenian girl has been raised this way, this is my narrative and my understanding of my culture through my own lens and experiences. But this was reality. My mother was to be a housewife and raise her children and refrain from demanding a better life, the one I know she always deserved. I haven't seen my father since I was eleven and he passed away (maybe) five years ago? To sum it up without diving too far into the details, he wasn't a good father or husband. I was raised to think that male alcoholism is normalized, and a man has the right to abuse his wife if she doesn't play the role she has to. This may seem too serious of a chapter introduction, or maybe too blunt, but this was reality, my theory in the flesh. Life has been different for a while now, and I think back to that reality and am grateful with how life turned out after all the chaos. I'm writing all this because that's one aspect in my life that has not changed since I was a little girl, I write. My father was a writer, an actor too. He was known, a respected man within the community, which made our reality even crazier. But he wrote, just like I am right now. I used to hate that we shared similarities but now I feel empowered to write, like I am re-claiming it as my

thing, not his. Writing is my weapon to shake off the fear, the trauma and the resentment. I still write today for the little girl then.

### Zabel Yessayan: Biography and Significance

I stopped feeling so alone in my “Armenianness” when I read Zabel Yessayan’s texts. At first, it seemed like an outdated choice, to select the texts of a woman who wrote over a hundred years ago as my main argument to include the Armenian women’s voice in women of color feminist discourse, but that’s what makes her so significant. She wrote about topics that I as a child in the 1990s didn’t think were possible for Armenian women to write. Better yet, she wrote about topics that are *still* not likely to be discussed among many Armenian women today. As Gloria Anzaldúa described in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3<sup>rd</sup> World Women Writers,” Yessayan is the Armenian woman’s “truthsayer.”

Zabel Hovanesian was born on February 5, 1878, in the district of Silihdar, Constantinople (current day Istanbul). She graduated from the Holy Cross Armenian school in Scutari and was one of the first Armenian-Ottoman women to study abroad when she went to Paris at the age of seventeen to study literature at Sorbonne University. She met an Armenian painter named Dikran Yessayan with whom she had two children, Sophie and Hrant. When Yessayan returned to Constantinople in 1902 she didn’t want to partake in the typical career choice for women during those times, if they even pursued professions at all. Typically, women in literary studies became educators, but instead she focused on publishing essays on French literature, edited literary journals and wrote essays and novels. In 1909 she went to the Ottoman city of Adana to help Armenian



orphans after the gruesome massacres committed by the Turkish people<sup>14</sup> and published *In the Ruins: The 1909 Massacres of Armenians in Adana*, sharing the stories of the survivors.

On April 24, 1915, Zabel Yessayan was the only woman who was “black-listed” by the Ottoman Empire to be arrested. As mentioned earlier, this is when the Ottomans arrested Armenian intellectuals before killing them and sending the remaining Armenian population to death marches in the desert. Yessayan managed to escape her arrest and fled to Bulgaria then Baku, where she found temporary refuge while using a false identity. During this time, she met with Armenian Genocide survivors and published their stories in the 1919 Paris Peace delegation. She returned to Armenia in 1933, a time in which Armenia was under Soviet Union rule. Yessayan taught literature at the Yerevan State University, but she didn’t sit idly by while Armenian people were under yet another empire’s ruling. Yessayan was vocal and continued to use writing as a way to spread truth about the oppressed state of Armenian citizens. In 1937, Yessayan and many other Armenian intellectuals were arrested during Stalin’s purge,<sup>15</sup> where Communist government officials arrested, killed or exiled people into enslavement. Yessayan was imprisoned, tortured, sent to ten years of slave labor in Siberia and had to live in exile for the remainder of her life. Zabel Yessayan died “under unknown circumstances” around 1943 in Siberia<sup>16</sup> (Yessayan, vii-viii). It is very painful to learn about a woman this

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<sup>14</sup> This event is known as the 1909 massacres of Adana in which 30,000 Armenians were killed.

<sup>15</sup> See Shishmanyán and eclipse.

<sup>16</sup> My grandfather Sarkis was sent to Siberia for a few years around the 1950s and was released after Stalin died. He was arrested and sent to exile for slave labor, also known as the Gulag. For more information see <http://gulaghistory.org/nps/onlineexhibit/stalin/work.php>

strong, bold and miraculous and not even have her death officially documented. I first read about her in my late twenties and was shocked by her undeniable gumption and firm refusal in accepting victimhood. Yessayan's life is something all young girls should know, Armenian and non-Armenian. She is a great example of a woman who used writing as a form of resistance and justice.

#### Zartouk movement: women writers in Constantinople

In the years from 1880 to 1915, there was a philosophical and cultural movement in Constantinople within the Armenian culture referred to as Zartouk. Zartouk, which means "awakening," was a movement that enabled Armenian women writers to develop a presence within the public realm all while establishing their discourse of women's rights in the Armenian socio-political context. Victoria Rowe, a lecturer at the Faculty of Policy Studies at Chuo University in Tokyo, published an article titled, "Armenian Writers and Women's-Rights Discourse in Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Constantinople," which examines four women writers who contributed to the Zartouk movement by evaluating the cultural institutions that helped their involvement in the public sphere within Constantinople. The four women Rowe examines represent three generations of women writers who are the earliest examples of women's rights writers in Armenian culture. These women were Sruphi Dussap (1841-1901), Sibyl (1863-1934), Marie Beylerian (1880-1915) and last but certainly not least, Zabel Yessayan (1878-1942). They inserted their voice within cultural institutions including the salon, the periodical press, schools, and the philanthropic organization. Rowe reported that these cultural institutions helped Armenian women join the dialogue of women's rights and by doing so they "expanded

these cultural institutions to include women's concerns through calls for recognition of women's abilities, demands for female education, support of women's employment and affirmation of women's right to speak publicly on matters concerning the Armenian millet in the Ottoman Empire" (65). I think it is important to note that Dussap, Sibyl, Beylerian and Yessayan are not only significant to Armenian history because they are the earliest examples of women's rights writers, but they were able to succeed in being feminist writers within Constantinople as Armenian women. As I mentioned earlier in the literature review, the history of the Armenian people within the Ottoman Empire was far from welcoming. These women were not writing feminists works solely about their concerns as women within their own culture but from within the dominant culture as well. I reflect back to Mitsuye Yamada's piece, "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism," and can see parallels within struggles even though their stories are hundreds of years apart and about entirely different cultures and circumstances.

Though Dussap, Sibyl, Beylerian and Yessayan are an important facet to Armenian history, their names were not taught to me within the home, nor in my Armenian private school in Los Angeles, nor as a student in Armenia between the years of 1999 and 2003, and when I was a student in the public American schooling system from middle school all the way to my MA degree. Their history, names and writings should be implemented within schools and the women of color feminist discourse. I am thrilled to see texts like Yessayan's being translated and have hope that more of the works by these incredible women become translated and get into the hands of young scholars. These women should join the list alongside other women feminist writers and

activists who have risked their safety and lives to write to future generations. By conjoining fiction and non-fiction with activism, these women played a role in women's humanitarian organizations, teaching, editing women's journals, and writing about women for multiple types of Armenian publications. Rowe claims that they "attempted to negotiate their demands within their linguistic, ethnic and religious communities in order to create more freedom for women, while being subjected to systematic oppression because they were members of a vulnerable ethnic and religious group" (61). She also recommends historians (or truly any reader) to consider all the issues regarding Armenian women's rights during a time of "patriarchy, modernization, nationalism and state-sponsored violence" (65). Rowe's article discusses the treatment of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire and how it led women to join the Zartouk movement. These women used writing as a form of resistance and gave not only the voiceless woman a voice during a time where women were silenced, but Armenians as a whole. All four women are pivotal within Armenian literature and its history, and they all deserve the research and attention equally; however, my project is dedicated to Zabel Yessayan.

### Reflection

Yessayan's family name is Hovanessian, which was my last name before I changed it at the age of sixteen. While I am unsure whether we are related or not, the connection of our family names resonated with me.<sup>17</sup> When I came across AIWA (Armenian International Women's Association) and familiarized myself with their "Zabel

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<sup>17</sup> In all honesty I changed my last name because I wanted nothing to do with my father's identity, but the slight chance that Zabel and I share any kind of family line, or even just the same family name, was an inspiring motive to re-claim the name I was given for sixteen years.

Yessayan Project” I was thrilled and sad at the same time. I felt thrilled because I finally found texts that I could relate to but felt sad because it took me so long to come across them. AIWA claimed that, “Zabel Yessayan was one of the leading voices of her time, an advocate for social justice and women’s rights in Ottoman Armenian society,” but I argue Yessayan is still a leading voice for Armenian women today. I wouldn’t have the courage to do this project if it wasn’t for Yessayan. Rowe reassured my opinion by stating, “Zabel Yessayan’s lasting legacy to Armenian literature was her creation of strong female characters who develop a sense of self, despite social conditions that hinder personal development. Yessayan’s characters exist and struggle against the backdrop of Armenian history whether it is pre-1915 Constantinople, the lonely world of exile, or the struggle for survival in post-1915 Caucasus” (52-53). I believe Yessayan’s work is timeless and still helps Armenian women like me, born and raised predominantly in America trying to find a balance within the “in-between” of a dual identity.

“More thorns than laurels”: *The Gardens of Silihdar* (1935)

“This rich and diverse body of literature is relevant not only to present-day Armenians, but also to all those interested in multifaceted issues regarding ethnic identity, social justice, cultural values, and the evolving roles of women in society.”

-Treasury of Armenian Women’s Literature

*The Gardens of Silihdar* is Yessayan’s literary memoir where she presents a detailed picture of her childhood as an Armenian living in Constantinople. The book title is named after the neighborhood in Scutari where she grew up. Yessayan was the oldest of three daughters, with a brother who passed at an early age. Their household consisted

of their immediate and extended family, which was common for Constantinople at the time. Yessayan transcribed her personal narratives along with the socio-political situations of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire. *The Gardens of Silihdar* upholds themes concerning womanhood, culture, identity, alienation and isolation

As I was reading her memoir, I found Yessayan's relationship with her father significant; not only was it an unorthodox one, but it also interlaced with issues concerning gender inequality. It was unorthodox because Yessayan's father, Mgrdich, was very progressive, composed and compassionate. He taught her to read by the age of four and frequently discussed issues revolving around human rights and women's emancipation. Yessayan described her father as a heroic figure and that she dreamt of being like him someday as she wrote, "oh, if I had only been a boy...I would have fought for justice and would gladly have died for it" (58). Yessayan longing to be a boy in order to achieve justice displays the inequality of men and women within society. She may not have been a boy who was allowed to physically fight for justice, but her written work and activism are what caused her to be blacklisted by the Ottoman Empire, and what eventually led her to be a victim of Stalin's purge. Yessayan's writings are how she fought for justice and she did die for it.

Further examples of gender inequality surface throughout the memoir. Yessayan explains her frustration towards her friends who felt that her unique bond with her father would create no obstacles for her in wanting to be an activist, feminist and writer. Her response to them was, "my father's open-mindedness was not enough to prevent me from confronting all the obstacles that the backward Armenian bourgeoisie so oppressively

imposed on all of us. Life showed me that this fight would be constant and unrelenting” (135). Sure, she and her father did have a strong relationship but that doesn’t diminish the reality of her living in a suppressed and sexist society. We see an example of that reality in the chapter titled, “Had I Only Been a Boy,” where the author writes about her memories at the age of nine and her constant battle with her health in dealing with anemia and an array of illnesses. She described how she liked to hang out with the boys in her neighborhood and found the girls to be “tricky, crafty and vain” (53). Running around with the boys helped her for the exercise started to improve her health and her muscles eventually felt stronger. Yessayan claimed, “my mother used to cry out in despair, and I would listen to how my behavior was not a good sign for my future” (53), because she wasn’t behaving the way a girl should. The expectation to be a delicate and graceful little girl overshadowed her achievement in finding ways to improve her health. It didn’t matter that young Yessayan didn’t relate to the girls her age or didn’t mind getting her clothes dirty and hanging out with the boys, there were a set of expectations on how a girl should behave.

Yessayan’s stories of girlhood reminded me of my own childhood and of *This Bridge’s Theory in the Flesh*. Which parts of our mothers do we claim, and which parts do we admit are holding us back from our true selves? Grappling with *Theory in the Flesh* brings out the embedded guilt within me from a young age. The feeling of guilt that surfaced when I went against the grain, when I behaved differently than what was expected of me. These issues contributed to the “in-between.” I was in an Armenian household being raised in America. There are preconceived expectations from Armenian

and American societal “norms” that are assigned to gender roles and it was puzzling trying to understand where I fit in. Perhaps Yessayan felt the discontented state of the “in-between” as well; the acceptance and understanding of her father versus the need to explain herself to her friends or be more “ladylike” around certain family members.

I believe Yessayan’s life had several layers of residing in the “in-between.” On one hand, Yessayan longed to be a boy in order to fight for justice and didn’t seem to like the gender roles assigned to girls. On the other hand, she didn’t comprehend the other issues within her community. For instance, Yessayan was living in a society that had Muslim, Christian and Jewish people living amongst each other in a distressed coexistence; her memoir exposes the troublesome ethnic, racial and religious conflicts. Yessayan’s stories of her family reveal a strong sense of identity and pride within their culture, which is a dynamic that can potentially produce othering against other groups. For instance, her grandmother, whom she called Doudou, despised her favorite son (Khatchig’s) wife, because she was Greek and was unable to produce children (60-61). Even though they lived amongst other cultures, there was a strong bond within Armenianness, which is still very similar within the Armenian culture today. This norm is the same concept I discussed earlier with the “us” and “them” dilemma, especially since Yessayan mentions alienation, where Armenians were looked down upon as second-class citizens. The negative reaction toward going outside their own culture to marry can be a byproduct of alienation, leading to patterns of discrimination towards other people. Young Yessayan describes her complete and utter discomfort the first time her grandmother judged her for feeling empathy for a Jewish tinsmith who had been knocked



down and harassed by boys who were playing on the street. “[W]hy are you so upset? He is a Jew...a Jew,” her grandmother said to her (37). Yessayan, being only a young child, knew that this was not the right and humane way to think, and even asked her father at the age of ten on how one can think Jewish people, or even Turkish people, can be bad. Her father’s response was, “my darling, there is no such thing as a bad group of people. There are good people and there are bad people...it’s the same for the Turks” (37). Here we see another example of her and her father’s relationship. I admire the bond she had with her father, and his outlook on life even during a significantly scary time for Armenians, especially in Constantinople. Young Yessayan’s discontented state towards racism, even though she lived in a society that was racist against her own race, is what makes Yessayan so inspirational. As I discussed in the literature review, this is a time when Armenians were alienated from society, looked down upon as less than second-class citizens by Turks. These were the times leading up to the Adana massacres and later followed by the Armenian Genocide.

Alongside a turbulent reality between cultures and religions in Constantinople, an example that intertwines both sexist and racist issues in one is when Yessayan reflects on a story of her then fourteen-year-old Doudou. This was during the time in Constantinople where Christian Armenian women would dress like Turkish women to fit in and avoid confrontation from authorities, known as the janissaries. The janissaries were the elite military unit of the sultan’s army during the Ottoman empire. On the way back from church with her relatives the janissaries ripped off her headscarf because there were green flowers on it: “the color green was sacred in Islam, and infidels did not have the right to

wear it” (10). Her face being exposed meant that her reputation was damaged, and her life was in danger because it was common for girls to get kidnapped from their homes. The solution here was to marry her off and save their home from “looming disgrace.” Nothing was mentioned of her trauma from the attack; the only issues revolved around how she would find a husband because, “[w]ho would marry her now that the so-called pagans had seen her face?” (10). Doudou’s parents had to hire a matchmaker bringing Yessayan’s grandfather Hagop into the picture to marry and save her honor. It was strange reading these stories because I have experienced so many similar memories even though I was born 113 years later. Blatant sexism and heavy judgement on reputation is still apparent within the Armenian culture. Heavy judgment can also come from the amount of interaction one has outside of the Armenian culture (like marrying a non-Armenian for example). During my childhood I wouldn’t think that writing honest stories like Yessayan’s and having people read them was even an option. I was constantly reminded of my role as a woman and what that meant-- to be quiet, humble, and eventually to be married to a strong Armenian man and have his children to affirm my honor. This predetermined life is why Yessayan is such an inspiration, the fact that she used writing as a form of resistance against the expected roles for women, and how her relationship with her father molded that behavior. Yessayan did what Anzaldúa encouraged women to do which was to put that “shit on the paper.”

The memoir ends with the story of Yessayan and her friend, Arshagouhi, meeting Sruphi Dussap, one of the four women Victoria Rowe highlighted in her article which I mentioned earlier in the literature review. Their interaction was by far the most

significant moment for me within the book, because Madame Dussap was a fellow Armenian feminist writer whom Yessayan admired. When Yessayan was a young child in school she was labeled as disobedient because she did not tolerate the inequalities within the classroom and her teacher's old-fashioned approaches. Yessayan formed a group with her friends, young women writers, in high school and Madame Dussap was their most important teacher. Similar to Dussap, Yessayan wrote about matters revolving around gender inequality and the scarcity of education for women. She then proceeded to move to Paris and study literature and philosophy, a very uncommon reality for women during those times. But her travels to Europe for further education was not an easy decision. Yessayan writes:

Hearing that I hoped to become a writer, Madame Dussap tried to warn me. She said that, for women, the world of literature was full of many more thorns than laurels. She told me that in our day and age, a woman who wanted to carve out a place for herself in society was still not tolerated. To overcome all of these obstacles, I needed to exceed mediocrity. In her words, a male writer was free to be mediocre; a female writer was not. (136)

Regardless of Madame Dussap's advice, Yessayan and her friend acknowledged their mentor's words of caution and turned it into a test instead. Yessayan and her friend Arshagouhi decided to go to Europe and continue their education, believing that that will help them in surpassing mediocrity. Although Yessayan and her friend made it to Europe, Yessayan and Arshagouhi were not necessarily on the same page. When Yessayan was in Paris her friend was in London and had visited her. The author explains her friend's visit

by expressing, “she was disturbed by the free life that I led as a student and by the socialist issues that interested me. Even in Europe, she was concerned about the malicious gossip that would circulate about us in the suburbs of Constantinople once we returned” (137). Yessayan was not concerned by other’s opinions, it didn’t matter what inequalities she faced in grade school or within her family and friends; it didn’t matter that her mentor gave her cautionary advice, Yessayan was focused on her writing.

Earlier, I articulated my troublesome childhood and relationship with my father. I definitely cannot relate to Yessayan and her relationship with her father. As I read her stories, I tried to find the differences more than the parallels between us, because it allowed me to break the mold of the impression I had about my culture. Certainly, my childhood molded the opinions I had about my heritage, but Yessayan broke that mold for me. Sure, the sexism, racism and homophobia are apparent within my culture, but it isn’t what defines it. Yessayan guided me into honing the positive aspects of my people and motivated me to fix those issues rather than be turned-off by my culture entirely. The fact that I am reading books from a hundred years ago written by a woman who risked her life to write about justice which led to her death all while she had an amazing relationship with her dad is still shocking for me to comprehend.

“The eternal song of love, beauty, and grace”: *My Soul in Exile* (1922)

“Inside me is the effervescence of a wonderful expectation:  
I feel that my soul is in exile and eagerly awaiting its  
emancipation. What and who will loosen its chains? At  
every moment, one can feel hope or despair.”  
-Zabel Yessayan

Zabel Yessayan wrote *My Soul in Exile* after the Armenian Genocide. The novel takes place after the Adana massacres of 1909 and before World War I. The short novel is written in first person where the protagonist, an Armenian painter named Emma, returns home after being a traveling artist to the Ottoman capital. Emma's return home is confronted with a troublesome reality where she is faced with feelings of alienation and isolation. *My Soul in Exile* portrays the dilemmas of the Armenian artists living in diaspora within the Ottoman empire during a very dangerous time.

Armenian novelist, poet and literary critic Krikor Beledian described Yessayan's work as a psychological novel where the protagonist expresses her feelings with the "exploration of a subjective vision of things and a pronounced taste for synesthesia (sounds, scents, colors)" (46). I found Yessayan's use of synesthesia to be an interesting choice of style for writing such a heavy topic, but her writing is lyrical, revolving around sounds, smells, and light, which adds beauty to the chaos. Yessayan may have deployed such imagery intentionally, since her protagonist is a painter, and I suppose we are reading the experiences through her interpretation as an artist. Another reason can be that since Emma herself is trying to grapple with the harsh reality she lives in, the lyrical writing and focus on imagery is her psychological process. Within the novel we read numerous imageries based around the sky, what color the sky is or if it is light or dark outside. We also read the scents that surround Emma, the scents of the city, or perfume scents from other characters, mainly women. Within Krikor Beledian's critique of the novel, he shared a portion of a letter Yessayan wrote two years after the 1915 genocide:

I am full of my novel's subject, and whenever I am alone—which rarely happens—I isolate myself in that corner of my soul which shelters my novel's universe: in that refuge there is neither massacre, nor deportations, nor Bolsheviks, nor anything else, but only sunshine, roses, and the eternal song of love, beauty, and grace. If I could manage to give expression, even if only partially, to that secret world, I would be satisfied, very satisfied. (44)

This excerpt captures Yessayan's revolutionary and brilliant mind. Instead of feeling defeated after escaping a horrific and violent reality in Constantinople and fleeing into exile in fear of being killed, she uses writing as a form to fight back and articulate an alternative reality, even if only through imagery. *My Soul in Exile* encompasses the experiences of Emma and her relationships within her community, conveying social injustices toward the Armenian people who have been forced into physical and social exiles. The lyrical writing and strong use of imagery is echoed from Yessayan's inner refuge, where there are no killings or fear of staying alive. I find it beautiful that she wrote a novel that simultaneously reveals the true state of Armenians post the Armenian Genocide but also uses beautiful imagery and scents to allow the reader to see her manifestation of her "secret world." I argue that *My Soul in Exile* was Yessayan's rehabilitation and form of healing in coping with her reality of surviving a genocide and living in exile.

The novel begins when protagonist Emma returns home to Constantinople following a successful time abroad as an artist. Emma confronts her feelings of alienation and isolation instantaneously. She describes that it is spring and expresses how the

bloomed flowers and smells provoked a “sad homesickness” (4) within her. Emma then follows by saying, “my native land’s luminous sun has yet to rise in my work, but I feel certain that the mist will be dispelled in the future works and that my day will dawn” (5). Possibly this is Yessayan speaking to us through Emma. Emma asking herself, “I feel that my soul is in exile and eagerly awaiting its emancipation. What and who will loosen its chains?” (8) is perhaps Yessayan herself pleading to her readers for comfort or solutions. I argue that Yessayan uses her fictional character Emma to ask her unanswered questions because I do think *My Soul in Exile* was Yessayan’s form of coping with reality and possibly because writing her thoughts and fears through a fictional character can be less dangerous and less vulnerable. It takes us readers ten pages before we find out the narrator Emma’s name through dialogue. I deem that Yessayan chose to introduce Emma’s name after ten pages of expressing alienation and isolation from one’s home to readers because it was Yessayan herself expressing her thoughts through Emma.

Emma has several conversations and friendships throughout the novel with women, but I found Mrs. Danielian to be the most significant one. Mrs. Danielian is introduced as a poet and the most influential woman in Constantinople at the time. Emma has a conversation with Mrs. Danielian in which Danielian expresses that she hopes they become good friends because there are few people within Constantinople who can understand one another. She says, "it's as if we were exiles in a remote foreign country. We're exiles in the land of our birth because we're deprived of the kind of environment that our people's collective existence would create around us. Only fragile, loose threads bind us to our native land...but we artists, at least, can become comrades in exile" (17). I

argue that passages like this that build the need of Yessayan's writings to be incorporated within the pages of projects like *This Bridge Called My Back*. Finding solidarity in pain, existing in the in-between spaces of gender and race discrimination, alienation and exile, war and recovery, etc. Here I am reminded of Gloria Anzaldúa's words and that, "we each are our sisters' and brothers' keepers." Mrs. Danielian's words are very connected to the concept of using art as a form of resistance and standing by one another during times of oppression; however, Emma's reaction to Mrs. Danielian's statement captures the other side of oppression: denial. Emma has an inner dialogue, like a mental battle in which she first admits that she has not allowed herself to feel sadness yet, which she later follows by saying "and I, who would have considered myself so different from her---in temperament, character, tastes---suddenly felt not just similar to her, but the same, as if we were two soul sisters; companions in exile" (18). I think Emma's inner dialogue and struggle to comprehend reality is significant because she seems to be in denial about the reality in which Armenians were living in, yet she then quickly sees the reality how they are companions living in exile. Emma seems to be residing in her own version of the in-between. Eventually, Emma copes with reality and her bond with fellow women artists allows her to absorb creative and political energy. Although Emma is feeling alienated and exiled within her own country, the relationship she builds with the women in her life stabilizes her. I think these connections gave her a purpose, for through these connections they are surviving and seeking justice against the oppressive Ottoman Empire. The bond the women artists form within the pages of *My Soul in Exile*, a bond that helps them cope and express their reality of alienation and isolation, truly echoes back to *This Bridge*.



Emma's conversation with Mrs. Danielian and the connections women artists made within the short novel reminds me of *This Bridge* because, to become "comrades in exile" and connect through their art to break down oppressed barriers is remarkable and similar to why *This Bridge* was created. I was reminded of Cherríe Moraga's poem within the anthology, "The Welder," where Moraga writes about her longing to join things while making sure she leaves them whole. Her wish is not to be an alchemist but to be a welder, someone who connects two different things while honoring their difference. Her symbolism here is to encourage women to not be afraid of the struggles they are faced with but to take the power into their own hands (219-220). I believe Yessayan did just that, expressing her voice through protagonist Emma.

## CONCLUSION

Although Zabel Yessayan wrote her memoir and novel many years before *This Bridge Called My Back* was created, she fought back against the injustices and suppression of her people by writing and being a “truthsayer.” In a different place, time and reality, Yessayan did take the power into her own hands, ink to paper, and wrote the experience of Armenian women during a time before and after the Armenian Genocide, which we can still read today. Having the context of Zabel Yessayan’s upbringing and life when reading *The Gardens of Silihdar*, and knowing she wrote her novel *My Soul in Exile* after escaping and surviving the Armenian Genocide, helped validate my argument that she used writing as a form of resistance as she navigated her existence in the “in-between.”

I too am an Armenian American woman and feminist writer who has learned how to cope with residing in the “in-between,” guided by not only Zabel Yessayan, but also Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the feminists of color they gathered in the coalition of their anthology. These models helped me implement the Armenian woman’s voice within women of color feminist discourse. These models also helped me reclaim my “Armenianness” and my “Americanness,” with all the contradictions that that dual identity entails. These feminist writers, many decades apart, did not shut their eyes to the challenges within their cultures, even as they claimed their cultures with pride.

Yessayan wrote about themes concerning womanhood, culture, contradiction, identity, alienation and isolation, which we also find within *This Bridge Called My Back*.

All of these texts work to excavate traumatic histories and use writing as a form of resistance. As we read in Yessayan's memoir, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, young Zabel dreamt of being a boy who would be allowed to fight for justice. But I believe Yessayan achieved a very impactful reputation within Armenian history, one that cost her life. Yessayan's writing was her justice and activism, and it is still living and breathing over a hundred years later. I argue that Zabel Yessayan's voice should be implemented within the women of color feminist discourse while motivating further research on Armenian women writers throughout history. I encourage Armenian women writers to read and join projects like *This Bridge* in coalition with women of color feminist writers as "comrades" in seeking justice and as the "truthsayers" for our narratives.

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