Speak, Silence! The Whispered History of a Dislocated People

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Abstract: *Varujan Vosganian draws the attention of the Romanian public and literary critics alike to the tragic history of the Armenians by publishing, in 2009, the novel entitled, not coincidentally,* Cartea şoaptelor *(*The Book of Whispers*), which brings to light the silences that have burdened this people over time. I analyze here the two levels on which the metaphor of silence works in* The Book of Whispers*. Starting from the representations of silence and its semantics acquired in literature, the paper studies first the memorial level. This level can be glimpsed in the inevitable collision between the personal memory of the storyteller sealed by the whispers of the Armenian elders of his childhood and the collective one of his predecessors. The second level approached is the historical one because, depending on the context, it outlines destinies subjected to different forms of silence. The organization of the novel's argumentation on these two levels reveals the key elements that contribute to silence: the photograph, an omnipresent document in the constitution of the narrative, which is closely related to death, for the first level analyzed, and the liminal, for the second. These two elements generate a "postmemory" discourse meant, through the exorcising writing of* The Book of Whispers*, to end the silence shrouding those "unlived lives" that exist only in photographs and stories of the elderly, and to follow their echo imprinted on the scene of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history.*

Keywords: *silence, history, memory,* The Book of Whispers, *liminal*

1. Preliminaries

The rich literary creation of the twentieth century did nothing but disprove Theodor W. Adorno's problematic contention regarding the writing of works that draw on contemporary catastrophes. Tragic historical events have led to the emergence of themes such as memory and history, still found in contemporary literature. The prose text written by Varujan Vosganian is to be regarded as one such case.

By publishing in 2009 *The Book of Whispers*, dedicated to the "new" dead (Vosganian 2009: 12), to victims of a history that is considered the "central" character of the novel (Vosganian 2009: 7), Vosganian brings to attention the destiny of the Armenians over the last two centuries, which the book epigraph encapsulates: "Noi nu ne deosebim prin ceea ce suntem, ci prin morţii pe care fiecare îi plânge" (Vosganian 2012: 5), "We differ from one another not by what we are but by the dead we each mourn" (Vosganian 2017: 2).

Referring to the seriousness and extent of genocides, the narrator insists that the deaths of Armenians are less often reported than those of Jews during the Holocaust. The starting point of this paper is the silence that envelops the recent history of Armenians, which *The Book of Whispers* addresses. Both the identification of the aspects related to a silenced history, as well as observing the

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openness towards new approaches that the novel permits, have determined me to propose as object of this study the forms of silence found in *The Book of Whispers*, linked to the historical context of the twentieth century. Assuming the narrator role, Varujan Vosganian uses the writing of the book as an exorcising means to bring out the whispers of his nation subjected to silence under various circumstances.

1.1. Silence - literary and anthropological reception

In their analysis of the representations of silence and its semantics in fiction, literary critics lay emphasis on how silence becomes a constituent part of the texts in the form of blank pages, specific punctuation and words belonging to related semantic fields. Sorina Popescu, for instance, has unraveled the significance of human silence in different historical situations or circumstances as depicted in Virginia Woolf's novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. She has also approached *The Trial*, *1984* and *Robinson Crusoe* through the prism of silence. Particularly suggestive and illustrative for human silence is David Le Breton's book *Du silence*. According to the French anthropologist, silence is a non-verbal, polysemous form of discourse (Le Breton 80), which he discusses in the six chapters of his book in relation to conversation, politics, psychoanalysis, its manifestations, religion and death. In the context of this research I will refer in particular to the political implications of silence, which is imposed by the Ottoman political regime, but also to its connection with death because, as David Le Breton (24) notes, there is a close complicity between silence and death.

Due to the socio-political context of the Balkans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, silence is a ubiquitous theme in the literature belonging to this area. The prose of Ismail Kadare, Mircea Cărtărescu, Ivo Andrić, Meša Selimović or Danilo Kiš can be given as an example in this regard.

1.2. The novel of "**postmemory**"

Literary works from or about the above-mentioned period may belong with postcolonial or "postmemory" writings. The notion, theorized by Marianne Hirsch, refers to the perception of the sufferings of the previous generation by the young one. Not taking part directly in the historical circumstances illustrated in their works, the authors of the "postmemory" novels represent the "after" generation or the "postgeneration" that takes it as their duty and right to transpose in writing the painful past of the ancestors, inherited from their stories and family photographs (Hirsch 5).

Drawing on Marianne Hirsch, Dana Bădulescu has interpreted *The Book of Whispers* as a novel of "postmemory." In her 2016 essay "Varujan Vosganian's Novel of Postmemory," Bădulescu distinguishes between memory and postmemory, and moreover argues that individual memory depends on collective memory.

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Emphasizing its memorial and historical character, Iulian Boldea has identified multiple dimensions of Vosganian's book: "memory book, historical novel, frame story (*Rahmenerzählung*), family novel, chronicle novel" (Boldea 76). *The Book of Whispers* is constructed by recourse to "description [and] observation of human types […] sliding from one distinct chronological moment to another" (Boldea 77). Highlighting its features of fantasy and Romanian science fiction prose, Lidija Čolević includes this novel in Balkan magical realism, besides works belonging to Ștefan Agopian, another Armenian writer (Čolevic 46).

1.3. The book of whispers, a metaphor for silence?

Drawing on both critical interpretation of the representation and symbolism of silence in fiction, on the one hand, and the reception of Varujan Vosganian's work in conjunction with the theme of memory, on the other, this paper aims to interpret *The Book of Whispers* through the metaphor of silence. I will study this novel on two levels, memorial and historical. My two-pronged approach can outline the mechanism of silence relevant to the novel, which has been under-examined in the literature. The correlation of the two levels proposed here can reveal the key elements that contribute to the realization of silence, as well as suggesting the aims of a novel of "postmemory." In what follows I analyze the types of silence recurrent in *The Book of Whispers*, to be found on the two levels mentioned. The memorial level highlights the collision between the individual narrator's memory, marked by the stories of the Armenian elders, and the collective one of their ancestors. The historical level contributes to the identification of the various forms of silence that Armenians have experienced over time. My analysis will suggest to what extent the metaphor of silence contributes to the coagulation of the narrative. In this sense, photography and the liminal are the eloquent aspects of this people's silencing, as they reveal the insertion in the novel of a postmemory discourse that exorcises the silences of the twentieth century. The first part of the analytical approach is focused on the two levels, memorial and historical, and will be discussed through the metaphor of silence towards the end of the paper. My analysis of *The Book of Whispers* identifies various types of silence in the novel. It brings together the particularities of photographs inserted and described in Vosganian's narrative and the liminal, a politically imposed characteristic of Armenian people, both closely related to postmemory writing.

2. A silent transmission of memory

Besides the history of the twentieth century, Vosganian considers that time, death or memory (Vosganian 2009: 7) deserve the greatest attention. The study of the first, memorial level will show the relevance of memory for and its preservation and transmission modalities with respect to the interpretation of silence. Commenting on Maurice Halbwachs' *The Collective Memory*, Paul Ricœur notes that we need others in order to remember (Ricœur 120). As Duncan Bell also points

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out, the conceptions that certain groups of people have about their common past and themselves can be found in the collective memory (Bell 2). Consequently, the narrator's individual memory in *The Book of Whispers* comes into contact with the collective memory of the Armenians due to his childhood spent together with the family elders, witnesses of the historical events:

> Mai toți oamenii din mijlocul cărora mi-am petrecut copilăria erau bătrâni. "Ce caută copilul ăsta printre noi?", întreba, râzând, Arșag, clopotarul. "Lasă-l, spunea bunicul Garabet. Nu e un copil obișnuit. E un copil bătrân de zile." […] "Tu ești bătrân din cauza zilelor noastre. Ce n-am trăit noi și ai noștri ți se adaugă ție." (Vosganian 2012: 80-81)
> (Most of the men around whom I spent my childhood were old. "What is that child doing here among us?" Arshag the ringer would ask with a laugh. "Leave him be," Grandfather Garabet would say. "He's no ordinary child. He's a child old in years." […] "The years we haven't lived are heaped onto yours. Whole haystacks of years...") (Vosganian 2017: 56)

As Marianne Hirsch notes, the storyteller of *The Book of Whispers*, is a member of postgeneration because most of his childhood memories do not belong to him, but to his predecessors (Hirsch 4). As Vosganian inherits these traumatic experiences from stories told in whispers about the "unlived" destinies of so many relatives, the world view belongs to the narrator as a child.

Silence and whispering talk within the small circle of friends is the result of the political context of the time, of the installation of communism and of the betrayal rampant among the Armenian community, as among all others. Deportations and imprisonment silenced individuals belonging to various social groups. The narrator recalls: "În copilărie, am trăit într-o lume a şoaptelor. Ele se rosteau cu băgare de seamă. Abia mai târziu am aflat că şoapta mai are şi alte înţelesuri, cum ar fi tandreţea sau rugăciunea" (Vosganian 2012: 29), "In childhood, I lived in a world of whispers. Those whispers expressed wariness. It was not until later that I found that a whisper could also have other meanings, such as affection or prayerfulness" (Vosganian 2017: 19).

2.1. The apricot tree and coffee – symbols of the present's safety

Despite the political circumstances, whispers have found a safe way to circulate. The space beneath the apricot tree in the courtyard of the family house in Focşani offered the needed protection to Armenian elders. Given the role of this fruit, the narrator distinguishes between apricot and pomegranate. The former is considered a symbol of unity and security, while pomegranate represents the disunion and uprooting that marked the days of the Armenian genocide: "Caisa e fructul celor ce stau laolaltă. Rodia în schimb, este fructul singurătăţii şi al exodului" (Vosganian 2012: 256), "The apricot tree is the fruit of those who stay together. But the

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pomegranate is the fruit of solitude and exodus" (Vosganian 2017: 180). The apricot tree witnessed the whispered history of the "new dead," but also the complex ritual of serving coffee, a practice brought by narrator's grandparents from their native Anatolia (Vosganian 2012: 15). Among the smells that have persisted since his childhood, depicted in this novel, the narrator describes that of coffee, reviewing the entire process of its preparation – grinding, boiling, types of cups used and serving habits. Coffee consumption means retreat, but also a reconciliation with the hostile history of the last century: "Era clipa când, în ciuda pribegiilor, a amintirilor însângerate şi a timpului care trece, lumea părea neschimbată şi tihnită, iar sufletele împăcate" (Vosganian 2012: 17), "This was the moment when, despite exile and wandering, despite memories of bloodshed, despite the passage of time, the world seemed unchanged and tranquil and their souls were at peace" (Vosganian 2017: 11).

2.2. Photography, a voice of the past, a premonition of death

In addition to the whispered stories of the elderly in the shade of the apricot tree and to the scent of coffee, the photographs also outline the postmemory discourse. Passionate about them, grandfather Garabet transmits to his nephew the pleasure of discovering the faces erased by the passing of time. Vosganian's narration is often based on the contemplation of a photograph revealing the character's history. The sepia image is frequently a starting point in presenting an individual destiny, at the microcosmic level, which is a proper reason for invoking the collective memory to which the Armenian community adheres, at the macrocosmic level. The photograph thus elicits the intersection between the narrator's individual memory and the Armenians' collective memory. The readers are led from the description of the physical features of the characters, revealing the particularities of the epoch when the pictures were taken, to the great historical disasters of the twentieth century. Through these images, the spatiotemporal limits are transgressed and the narration plunges from Focşani to the most distant places in the world: the deserts of Mesopotamia, Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor, Bucharest, Constanţa, Buenos Aires, and Berlin.

Silence imprinted on the pictures provided is indicative of the events illustrated in *The Book of Whispers*. Armenians have developed a whole culture of photography, and Vosganian's family album available online (Vosganian, *Cartea şoaptelor*. *Album*) can be seen as a guarantee of the persistence in time of those who lived once. The Armenians' desire to immortalize various moments is interpreted by the narrator as their need for survival, as they have the premonition of what was going to happen:

> Armenii, în acei ani, ţineau morţiş să se fotografieze. Era felul lor de a rămâne împreună, căci, scurtă vreme după aceea, familiile s-au împuţinat şi s-au risipit […] Chipurile le-au rămas întipărite pe cartoanele sepia,

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> decolorate pe margini. Vrând să amintească cu tot dinadinsul că au existat vreodată. Presimţind ce avea să li se întâmple. (Vosganian 2012: 47)
> (In those days the Armenians were dead set on having their photographs taken. It was their way of remaining together because shortly thereafter the families dwindled and were scattered […] Their faces thus remain imprinted on the sepia cardboard with the fading edges. Wishing at all costs to remind you that they once existed.) (Vosganian 2017: 32)

One of the oldest family photographs, which depicts all its members gathered around the eldest, reveals their well-being or, it may be said, more favorable historical circumstances. Towards the novel's end, the same image is contemplated in a different manner. The focus is on imagining the disappearance of the characters who lost their lives during the last century's genocide. In addition to its spatial nature, the photograph acquires in this context also a temporal dimension meant to emphasize the absence, disappearance and silencing the victims:

> Dacă, printr-o nouă rânduială, chipurile de pe fotografii ar fi dispărut odată cu moartea celui fotografiat, pozele acelea ar fi părut, la un an-doi după ce fuseseră făcute, stranii, cu scaune goale, cu toiege drepte, dar nesprijinite de nimeni, cu copii suspendaţi în poala unor mame inexistente. (Vosganian 2012: 477)
> (If, by some magic, the faces in the photographs had vanished as each person died, then just a year of two after they were taken, those photographs would have shown a strange sight: empty chairs, walking sticks standing suspended without any support, children hovering in the laps of invisible mothers.) (Vosganian 2017: 332)

A similar family photograph is invoked in the moment of grandfather's death. Garabet stands still just as the old Armenians used to so that the "new dead" can sit around him. The silence read on grandfather's lips and his static actions in the novel's end predict the approach of death:

> Rămase aşa o vreme, cu unchiul Sahag şezând în faţa lui descumpănit şi aşteptând ca ceilalţi, morţii cei noi, să se aşeze de-a stânga şi de-a dreapta. Până când în curtea noastră se alcătui poza de grup […] În clipa aceea pregătirea pentru moarte a bunicului meu Garabet începu. (Vosganian, 2012: 477)
> (With the bewildered Uncle Sahag sitting in front of him, Grandfather waited for the others, the new dead, to take their seats to his right and left. In our yard, they gathered for the group portrait […]. In that instant the preparation for my grandfather Garabet's death began.) (Vosganian 2017: 332)

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Other pictures evoking death can be identified in *The Book of Whispers*. The presence of Aunt Maro's figure in the picture taken before the massacres assures her "entry into time"; the "departure from time" or her disappearance from the frame is marked by her suicide. Such a presentation of this female character attests that the photograph is the result of character's premonition of death, but also the guarantee of existence in time:

> În fotografie Maro zâmbeşte, cu palmele lipite de fustă […] Intrarea în timp. Urmează ieşirea. Maro, căutată de ieniceri, se aruncă de pe stânci, în apele tulburi şi înroşite ale Eufratului. (Vosganian, 2012: 49)
> (In the photograph Maro smiles, her palms pressed to her skirt […] The entry into time. Then the egress. Maro, pursued by Janissaries, casts herself off the rocks into the roiling, ruddy waters of the Euphrates.) (Vosganian 2017: 33)

In the novel, pictures have the function of predicting death. After establishing the guilty party for the crimes committed against the Armenians, Armen Garo distributes their pictures so that they can be identified and killed by the members of Nemesis. Also, the images taken by the foreign travelers show the emaciated bodies of the children who would die on the road to Deir-ez-Zor.

The power of details cannot be overlooked in the descriptions of the photographed object. The multitude of details given within these descriptions amplifies the effect of unreality. Often the richness of descriptions contributes to the fictionalization and silent transcription in writing of the sufferings endured along the seven circles related to the seven settlements through which convoys of deported Armenians have passed. The following fragment is relevant for the arguments brought in favor of considering photography a memory object whose purpose is, in this context, to testify and to break the silence about the genocide of the first half of the twentieth century:

> Fotografiile făcute de călătorii străini care au reuşit să se apropie de convoaie ori să-i fotografieze, în urmă, pe cei rămaşi neputincioşi la marginea drumului, aşteptându-şi moartea, ne înfăţişează, pe drumul spre Deir-ez-Zor, mai ales copii. Drumul spre al şaptelea cerc a fost un fel de cruciadă a copiiilor. […] Copiii din acele fotografii sunt scheletici, cu trunchiul împuţinat, cu burta suptă, cu oasele zvâcnind ca nişte arcuri de oţel peste scobitura pântecului, cu mâinile şi picioarele subţiate ca nişte crengi, cu capetele disproporţionat de mari, ca şi găvanele ochilor, în care bulbii ies din orbite sau se adâncesc în fundul capului. Copiii privesc fără nicio expresie pe chip alta decât rătăcirea minţii, privesc ca de pe un alt

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> tărâm […] În ochii lor e nimicul. Neantul, ferestruica întredeschisă spre celălalt tărâm. (Vosganian 2012: 339-340)
> (The photographs taken by the foreign travelers who managed to get near the convoys or who came across those left behind to await their death, helpless at the side of the road, show mainly children on the way to Deir-ez-Zor. […] The children in those photographs are skeletal, their torsos withered, their bellies hollowed, their bones jerking like steel springs above their concave abdomens, their arms and legs having tapered to the thickness of twigs, their heads disproportionately large, like the sockets of their eyes, in which the eyeballs bulge from their orbits or sink into the back of the skull. The children gaze without any expression on their faces other than vacancy; they gaze as if from another world. […] In their eyes there is nothing. Nothingness: a small, half-open window to the other world.) (Vosganian 2017: 238)

The insertion of four other photographs within the narrative, also found in the related photo album, generates, as Dana Bădulescu also notes, the birth of a legend. Two photographs portray Nicolae Iorga – alive, in Văleni, and murdered, in the Strejnicu forest. The last two ones depict General Dro, the hero and the hope for realization of Armenian national ideals. He is portrayed riding a horse in a forest and, later, taking part in unveiling General Antranik's statue in the court of the Armenian Cathedral in Bucharest. The legend about the general's weapons is generated by the mystery surrounding these images. At this point, a textual strategy can be identified: a legend is born through the narrator's silence about the story of Dro's weapons:

> Începutul poveştii este o fotografie. Sârşitul poveştii este scurta propoziţie pe care mi-a şoptit-o Sahag Şeitanian înainte de a muri, atât cât a socotit necesar să-mi spună din această poveste: "Armele generalului Dro sunt ascunse într-o pădure." (Vosganian 2012: 182)
> (The beginning of the story is a photograph. The end of the story is a short-sentence that Sahag Sheitanian whispered to me shortly before he died, as much of the story as he deemed necessary to tell me: "The arms of General Dro are hidden in a forest.") (Vosganian 2017: 129)

In Hirsch's view, the owner of a photo album has the opportunity to arrange its contents (Hirsch 233), this being a subjective option. In *The Book of Whispers*, the place of the album is taken by narrator's stamp album made with his grandfather's help. It represents the stamped history or the new family picture (Vosganian 2012: 53), the narrator being the one who organizes the images according to different criteria loaded with meaning (according to the degree of kinship, in the order of leaving, birth or of death): "Le ordonez cu migală. Mă

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gândesc să pun la început rudele mai apropiate. [...] O iau de la început" (Vosganian 2012: 50), "I arrange them in a meticulous order. I decide to put the closest blood relatives at the front. [...] I start over" (Vosganian 2017: 34). Given the historical context, the letters received contained stamps from all over the world, images that the narrator considers the only portrait of his family made after a century of exile:

> Singura fotografie completă a familiei se află în clasorul meu de timbre. O să vă miraţi, căci în locul unor chipuri armeneşti, cu sprâncene groase şi ochi neguroşi, veţi găsi acolo peruca pudrată a lui George Washington, coroana reginei Elisabeta sau cedrii Libanului. [...] Istoria cea nouă a familiei mele, rămasă după destrămarea convoaielor. Pornită din Adana, Van, Afion-Karahisar, Constantinopol. Trecută prin deşerturile Mesopotamiei. (Vosganian 2012: 49)
> (The only photograph of the whole family is in my stamp album. You will be amazed, but instead of Armenian faces, with thick eyebrows and swarthy eyes, you will find there the powdered wig of George Washington, the crown of Queen Elizabeth, and the cedars of Lebanon. [...] The new history of my family, all that remained of them after the convoys unraveled. Having set out from Adana, Van, Afion Karahisar, Constantinople. Having crossed the desserts of Mesopotamia.) (Vosganian 2017: 33-34)

Studying postmortem photographs, Gabriela Glăvan comments on the paradox of preserving a dead person's image as a living one: "e un refuz direct al morţii, dar şi o acceptare a inevitabilului său. Înviat în efigie, cel plecat dintre cei vii rămâne, într-un fel, în mijlocul lor" (Glăvan 224), "It is a straightforward refusal of death, but also an acceptance of its inevitability. Resurrected in the effigy, the dead one remains, in a way, among them" (my trans.). Studied in the context of Vosganian's work and having as their object the characters disappeared in the mid-twentieth century's events, the widely described photographs coagulate the narration and also express the inability to allow those victims to be lost in time. Even if the pictures mentioned in the novel are not always postmortem, their purpose is similar, namely, to offer protection from the silence of forgetting.

Therefore, photographs become, as Marianne Hirsch remarks, instruments of the process of transmitting the past (Hirsch 61), documents preserving the Armenians' history, speaking and "supplementing the account of historians and the words of witnesses" (Hirsch 61). In his preface to *The Book of Whispers* photo album, Vosganian distinguishes between two types of predecessors: the old dead and the new ones. The first category includes the heroes or saints of Armenians whose presence in the hanging portraits does not disturb the characters who are proud of their fate. However, the images of the "new" dead cannot be accepted because they are still a part of the people's lives, which, unfortunately, no one

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assumes (Vosganian 2009: 12). This is why *The Book of Whispers* is not a history book. It is just a book about states of consciousness (Vosganian 2012: 290). The narrator's mission is to write a book about his Armenians and against their forgetting. Following the preparatory discussions with his grandfather, the narrator diligently fulfills his task, using photographs as metaphors for silence interruption.

Summing up the destinies of so many members of the narrator's family, the stamp album reflects the sad reality understood by twentieth-century Armenians: the chance to die in the same land where they had been born was almost nonexistent. If for them the apricot tree in the courtyard meant peace and security, the pomegranate symbolized the exodus and loneliness accompanying the deportees and providing them with food for three hundred and sixty-five days of the year (Vosganian 2012: 257). For David Le Breton, exile is another means of invalidating the word: "L'exil est un autre moyen d'invalider la parole en la réduisant au silence à cause de son éloignement" (Le Breton 93). Leaving their homelands, Armenians lose their self, family and homeland. *The Book of Whispers* is therefore a novel in which the past and the memory of the lost ones are recovered and conserved where the narrator illustrates the fears and hopes of Armenian Diaspora.

3. A whispered history: the liminal

As Dana Bădulescu notes, the history of the Armenians is whispered, while the voice of power is constantly heard (Bădulescu 2016). The factor that favors the emergence of this type of silence is the historical and political context of the time through which Armenians joined the Diaspora. Therefore, the following analysis will focus on the second level, the historical one. The intention is to demonstrate its relevance in outlining the metaphor of silence and its constituent element – liminality. I will consider historical periods and events that determined marginalization to become a dominant feature of the silent history of the Armenians. Liminality is associated by Dana Bădulescu with postcolonial texts, the characters of *The Book of Whispers* being in a continuous "transit."

Armenian whispers are amplified with the account of historical events usually simultaneously, on several narrative plans, starting from the individual memory of certain characters. The narrative process that transcends both spatiality (through the diversity of locations in which the action takes place) and temporality (depicting events that happened in four distinct moments) is that of simultaneity:

> Faptul că suntem simultan în patru timpuri diferite, ascultând trâmbiţele Trabizondei, tobele crainicilor care anunţau, douăzeci de ani mai târziu, adunarea populaţiei armene în zorii zilei, în faţa caselor, cu boccelele pregătite de drum, apoi discursurile congreselor Daşnac ale anilor '20, ce proclamau necesitatea plăţii unei datorii de sânge şi faptul că toate acestea

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> au în fundal şoaptele copilăriei mele, nu trebuie să ne mire. (Vosganian, 2012: 228-229)
> (The fact that we are simultaneously in four different times – listening to the trumpets of Trebizond, the drums of the heralds that announced the order for the Armenian population to assemble at dawn twenty years later, with bundles for the journey, and the speeches at the Dashnak congress of the 1920s, which declared the need to exact a toll of blood – and the fact that all these have as their backdrop the whispers of my childhood should not surprise us.) (Vosganian 2017: 161)

Vosganian's novel covers the period before his childhood, also marked by whispered words: "Ea a început cu mult înainte de vremea copilăriei mele, pe când se vorbea în şoaptă" (Vosganian, 2012: 206), "It began long before my childhood, in the days when they spoke in a whisper" (Vosganian 2017: 146), in the Anatolian vilayets where his elders were born. More precisely, *The Book of Whispers* starts in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the pogrom of the Armenians in the Ottoman territory begun. The first step in silencing the Armenian population was the earlier occupation of their land by the Turks. Because the tax and the "devshirme" system (Payaslian 114) were applied in the same way in Armenia as throughout the empire, the nineteenth century brought the Armenians' national ideals, as well as the desire for improvement of the quality of life. Sultan Abdul Mejid responded to the pressures exerted by the foreign powers by ushering in the Tanzimat period, which consisted in implementing several reforms aimed at improving the situation initially created and ensuring people's equality. Their suspension during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 by Sultan Abdul Hamid created tension within the Armenian community, and any opposition was punished. The hope for improving the situation of the Armenian people increased with the fall of Abdul Hamid, when Young Turks came to power in 1909. Despite this, their ideals proved to be against the Armenians. Considered a threat to Turkey, the Armenians had to be exterminated, it was decided in February 1915. Therefore, the silence imposed at that time was caused by the historical context, generating the phenomenon of exile and, at the same time, the marginalization of the Armenians, who had no available options.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator draws attention on the Armenians' situation within Diaspora, recording a phenomenon specific to the communist period: "Şi, totuşi, vremurile erau tulburi. Uneori, bunicul Garabet şi vecinul nostru de curte, Sahag Şeitanian, vorbeau în şoaptă" (Vosganian, 2012: 26), "But nonetheless the times were troubled. Sometimes Grandfather Garabet and Sahag Sheitanian, the neighbor with whom we shared our yard, used to speak in a whisper" (Vosganian 2017: 17).

Also, whispered words marked the meetings of the Armenian community inside Seferian's vault in Focşani, a secret place which did not shelter anyone's

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bones, but served to convey meaningful information in troubled times. Thus are found out and are transmitted details about Kennedy's death or repatriation in Soviet Armenia: "Lucrurile despre care nu se putea vorbi decât în cavou erau lucruri rele" (Vosganian, 2012: 91), "The things they could talk about only in the vault were bad things" (Vosganian 2017: 63).

Another type of silence identified in the section regarding the repatriation of Armenians is political censorship. Their letters did not reach the recipients, but were published in newspapers. In order to communicate to Romanians the new situation, Armenians even invented a representative character, Mr. Staipelochian. Also, the photographs sent home communicated messages codified by the body's position in the image.

The insertion of testimonies of those present at the Vadu Roşca uprising in the novel is another sign that Vosganian's text conveys the desire to reveal concealed facts. Firstly, the subjects did not talk about the events because of the political context, and secondly, time had to pass until one could ask and speak about what had really happened under the communist oppression. It was not meant to happen until 2005.

The fact that the history of the twentieth century forced the Armenians to silence is also evidenced through the murmur or mourning that characterized the cry of deportees arrived in the last "death" circle of Deir-ez-Zor, as well as that of the survivors of convoys. Grandparents Setrak's and Garabet's mourning replaced crying:

> Plânsul era un fel de geamăt neîntrerupt, cu voce joasă, care, repetat de mii de piepturi, se auzea ca un ison. Plânsul nu era o dâră pe obraz, ci un sunet [...] Plânsul acesta uscat ţinea loc şi de rugăciune, şi de blestem, şi de tăcere, şi de mărturisire, iar unora le ţinea loc şi de somn [...] Am auzit plânsul acesta când bunicul Setrak se legăna în şezlongul din grădină şi murmura sau când bunicul Garabet se încuia în camera lui şi se oprea din cântatul la vioară. (Vosganian, 2012: 343)
> (But the weeping was a kind of uninterrupted groan, in a low voice, which, repeated by thousands of chests, made a droning sound. The weeping was not the streak of tears running down the cheeks but a sound [...] That dry weeping took the place of prayers, and of curses, and of silence, and of confession, and for some it even took the place of sleep [...] I heard that weeping when Grandfather Setrak used to rock back and forth on the chaise longue in the garden or when Grandfather Garabet used to lock himself up in his room and his violin fell silent.) (Vosganian 2017: 240-241)

Grandfather's Garabet model of suffering was Komitas the monk, a historical figure (Walker 209). The pain encountered on the convoy road by Komitas was so prominent that every word was superfluous: "Şedea aşa nemişcat şi mormăia

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pentru sine" (Vosganian 2012: 306), "He would often sit motionless, mourning to himself" (Vosganian 2017: 215).

The silence found in *The Book of Whispers* can be associated with illness or death. In the case of disease, it turns into mourning, demonstrating the inability to articulate the words. It occurred after the events that involved both Armenians and Jews. The maximum manifestation point of this condition through which the individuals are reduced to silence is the proximity of death. Garabet's doctor stated about it: "E o boală nouă, spuse, am întâlnit-o şi la bătrânii noştri evrei, reîntorşi din lagăre, cărţile nu o numesc şi nu-i găsesc leacul" (Vosganian 2012: 479), "'It's a new illness,' he said, 'I've encountered in our old Jewish folk who came back from camps. There's no name for it in the medical textbooks, and no cure has been found'" (Vosganian 2017: 333-334).

Commenting on the meanings of silence in its relation with death, David Le Breton associates it with the shout:

> La douleur brise la voix et la rend méconnaissable, elle suscite le cri, la plainte, le gémissement, les pleurs ou le silence, autant de défaillances de la parole et de la pensée […] Le cri n'est jamais loin du silence. (Le Breton 237)

In the context of Vosganian's novel, the silence takes the form of the cry that marks the death of Yusuf's foreign identity, a character converted to Islam, and, at the same time, the rebirth of Sahag's previous personality:

> Şi, cum simţea nevoia să iasă din trupul lui, să se smulgă, începu să strige. [...] Atunci când strigătul se stinse, lăsând în loc geamătul de la Deir-ez-Zor, plânsul uscat, Yusuf murise. Fusese o fiinţă nefericită, străină, tăcută, rătăcind în locuri pe care nu le cunoştea şi printre Dumnezei în care nu credea. Născut din sângerare şi ucis din strigăt. (Vosganian, 2012: 351)
> (And feeling the need to be released from his body, he began to scream. [...] By the time the scream faded, giving way to the Deir-ez-Zor moan, to dry tears, Yusuf had died. He had ben an unhappy, alien, silent creature wandering in places unknown to him and among gods in which he did not believe. Yusuf had been born from blood and was slain by a scream.) (Vosganian 2017: 246-247)

4. Speak, silence! Conclusions

Starting from the premise that literature has inherited from the twentieth century a rich source of thematic inspiration due to the complexity of the related sociopolitical phenomena, the present paper has interpreted *The Book od Whispers* by Varujan Vosganian through the metaphor of silence. In order to achieve this objective, I have reviewed the reception of silence in both literary theory and

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anthropology. Drawing on the arguments of David Le Breton in his study *Du silence*, I have emphasized the connection of this theme with the historical and political context. Studying the realization of silence at both the textual level and that of human communication, I have shown that Vosganian's text can be regarded as a postmemory novel.

The analysis of various types of silence found in *The Book of Whispers* brings to light the Armenians' history in the last two centuries. The elements that contribute to the construction of the metaphor of silence, the photograph and the liminal, are characteristic of the two levels studied, the memorial and the historical one. The study of the first level reveals the importance of memory, the ways of its preserving and transmitting. Considering the photograph a document of memory, Vosganian builds the whole history of his family in correlation with the great historical events that marked the Armenians' destiny and gave birth to the opinion that liminality is a defining feature of this people. However, the Armenians of the narrator's childhood found their peace in the scent of coffee under the protective shade of the apricot tree, both symbols of safety despite previous sufferings. The historical level studied highlights the permanent struggle for survival depicted by the author who transposes in his book his people's major historical events.

Presenting both the history of his family and that of the Armenians, Varujan Vosganian demonstrates that literature, through its metaphors, is, as Dorian Branea also points out, a "domain of freedom, the place where the human being, endangered by history, regains its memory and its abducted values" (Branea 14). *The Book of Whispers* is anchored in history, thereby preserving, on a personal level, "the hidden memory of lost worlds" and, generally, "an entire memory of historical traumas" (Branea 14). The record of the past is not always faithful, because, according to Paul Ricœur, this "is not a given, but a wish. Like all wishes, it can be disappointed, even betrayed," and the desire is "a claim," "the aporia that is constituted by the present representation of an absent thing marked with the seal of anteriority, of temporal distance" (Ricœur 494). Evidence of it are the photographs, metaphors that transcend both spatiality and temporality, the narrator-character being the one empowered to interpret Armenians' destinies through the sepia filter. Vosganian's aim is to highlight the Armenians' liminality over the centuries and, above all, the desire to allow their silences and whispering to start to speak, an objective achieved by writing *The Book of Whispers*.

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