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Throughout the world, language and religion are typically considered markers of ethnic and national identity, and Armenians are no exception. Religion and language became national identity markers for Armenians in the fourth and fifth century, respectively. In discussions of Armenian nationalism and national identity, two significant historical moments have been influential, the first of which occurred in the early 4th century when king Dertad III declared Christianity the official religion of his kingdom; and the second in the early 5th century with the foundation of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrob Mashdots.¹

For the Armenian diaspora, the clergy have been positioned as the guardians of classical Armenian. However, most Iranian Armenians did not master classical Armenian due to an emphasis on fluency within the host nation, which encouraged a form of Armenian vernacular. The process of standardizing the vernacular languages happened in the 18th and 19th centuries. While the language of the Church and the clergy was not completely abandoned, the vernacular began to be used. The first Armenian periodical to use an amalgam of classical and vernacular Indo-Armenian dialect, and which was printed in the Armenian alphabet, was published in India.² Hence, the idea that nationalism is a strictly secular ideology does not apply to Armenians for whom religion plays an important role; many Armenian ethno-symbols are religious in nature.³ With modernity and secularization, ethno-identities have incorporated socioeconomic and political-territorial contexts into their conceptualization of identity. For ethno-national communities outside the homeland, however, a common language and/or religion are the major markers of collective identity, as in the case of diasporic Armenians, Chinese, Greeks, Indians, Jews, Sikhs, and Tibetans.⁴

In terms of the use of a unified vernacular Armenian language, Armenian intellectuals of the early 18th century had become keenly aware of a need for a common Armenian language capable of uniting a widespread diaspora. By the second half of nineteenth century, “the vernacular was victorious as the hegemonic language,” in political scientist Eliz Sanasarian’s words, due to the widespread and fragmented nature of diaspora, which ultimately resulted in two vernaculars: Western Armenian with a Constantinople dialect, and the Eastern Armenian with an Araratian Plain, Yerevan dialect. Classical Armenian – used only by intellectuals – was not suitable for the unification project. It was perceived as inadequate for contemporary communication.⁵ Since they believed language is a tool for demarcating an ethnic group from other groups, a unified language could facilitate in-group communication. It was also meant to remove foreign, mostly Turkish, influences. In turn, the relationship between ethnicity and language would also influence national and diasporic identity.

This non-homogeneity of Armenian language and the ways diasporic Iranian Armenians negotiate shared language arise in several diasporic literary works. On his way to the US, Vartan Gregorian chronicles in

1 He is also known as Trdat or in the Hellenized form, Tiridates.

2 Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 133.

3 William Safran, “Language, Ethnicity and Religion: A Complex and Persistent Linkage,” *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 1 (2008): 181.

4 Safran, “Language, Ethnicity and Religion: A Complex and Persistent Linkage,” 184.

5 Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 133 - 134.



his *The Road to Home* that he lives in Lebanon for a short time. He highlights how Armenians in Beirut spoke the Western Armenian dialect, yet being from Iran, he spoke the Eastern dialect. Nonetheless, this did not cause miscommunication. Right after discussing language, he emphasizes his loneliness in Beirut: “My first night in Beirut was depressing. All of a sudden, I felt alone in the world. I was in a faraway place, in a strange city and strange hotel and bed, uprooted and transplanted to follow the unknown. I had neither friends nor acquaintances.”⁶ Without the shared language identification, Gregorian experienced a sense of non-belonging even while he was among other Armenians, emphasizing the importance of language to collective identity, even at the level of dialect.

Language as the cornerstone of Armenian identity appears in Iranian Armenian poet, Soukias Hacob Koorkchian’s (Varand) poems. Varand captures the significance of Armenian language to Armenian identity in the following poem titled, “Hayeren” (Armenian Language):

All over the world
Monasteries
Chapel-tabernacles,
If need be
(in front of the Christ,
Or the Virgin)
I’ll say in your language
The words of my prayer.
All over the world
Rich in languages
Covered in a book’s
page
If need be
I’ll only write
Letters in your language.
All over the world
In missiles
If one missile
Flies toward the sun,
And if it happens for me

⁶ Vartan Gregorian, *The Road to Home: My Life and Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 66.

*In that sharp moment
To release a new wing
My song of faith
My breath and existence
It'll be in your language
Infinite-eternal
Whispering "barev" (hello)
My luminous Armenian.⁷*

It is interesting to see that Varand links the Armenian language to the practice of Christianity, Christ, and the Virgin Mary, which alludes to Armenian nationalization of Christianity in the third century and the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrob Mashtos immediately after. He refers to the chaos surrounding Armenians, which can metaphorically be a reference to the historical position of Armenia as the crossroad for many wars and conflicts. Notwithstanding all this chaos, the Armenian language will acquire a "new wing" and will survive. This is indicative of the precarious existence of a diasporic subject whose language is on the verge of disappearance and who strives to maintain their heritage and roots – in the face of much war, Armenian language will remain alive.

The significance of the Armenian language and praise of it also appears in Almin's poem, "Hrashalik Hayox Lezoo" (the Marvelous Armenian Language):

*Whoever says that
There are seven wonders in the world
And I say
An Armenian teacher and poet
That of the eight wonders of the world
You are one of them, our Armenian language
Our and the world's love for the Armenian language,
You are beautiful, gentle and rich,
And a miracle,
The one who speaks you becomes beautiful,
Nobler and ... more magnificent ...
My friend, my good one,*

⁷ Varand, "Hayeren," (Armenian), *An-veradarz* (Irreversible) (Tehran: Alik Publishers, 1999), 79 - 80. Author's translation of the poem from Armenian into English.



*Keep this miracle pure,
Keep it pure,
Get rid of foreign words
And the unfamiliar ones.
Why distort,
Why distort?
This miracle
God-given.
Our mother tongue and the jewel,
Magnificent and wonderful,
The most Armenian...
So come on
And become beautiful,
And gentle,
And rich
by the Armenian language's
great miracle...⁸*

In praising the Armenian language, Almin emphasizes lingual purity impermeable to the host nation's language and culture. This theme of preserving the Armenian language becomes a significant motif in many diasporic Iranian Armenian authors' works, indicating a preoccupation with resisting assimilation and the cultural motivations of maintaining ancestral heritage. However, it is not just preserving the Armenian language but preserving the pure form of it. Gender plays a significant role in the way that Armenians talk about language. The fact that the language is female (mayreni lezu/mother tongue) and the land is a male (hayrenik/fatherland) is a deliberate contrast. The language is the mother, nurturing and emerging through home life whereas the land is masculine, in need of strong men to defend it and be willing to die for it. This is while the Armenian language is otherwise less gendered than other languages that their neighboring communities or countries speak, such as Kurdish, Arabic, Russian, Georgian, etc. Turkish and Persian of course like Armenian are not heavily gendered in either nouns, pronouns or verbs. Almin's poem also reminds the reader of the well-known Armenian poet, Silva Kaputikian's "khosk im vortun" (A Word to My Child) where Kaputikian also includes an illusion to migration and Armenian mobility, and the importance of maintaining language.⁹

⁸ Almin (Albert Minasian), "Hrashalik Hayox Lezoo," (The Marvelous Armenian Language), *Shkegh Banasdeghsootyun* (Rich Poetry) (Tehran: Alik Publishers, 2018), 28. Author's translation of the poem from Armenian into English.

⁹ Thanks to James Barry for pointing this out to me.

From a very young age, Iranian Armenian children learn about these tools from a progression of socializing, namely family, schools, and church, and later are reinforced from adolescent and adult social interactions. It is important to note that Iranian Armenian children become fluent in their ancestral language while simultaneously learning the host country's language via mass media. This naturally impacts the language skills of Iranian Armenian authors, the majority of whom produce works in their first language, Armenian. In the diaspora however, manifestations of Armenianness vis-à-vis lingual fluency exist alongside the popular narratives of the host nation. According to James Barry, "Armenians are to some degree able to feel part of the Iranian nation not so much because they share Iranian ethnicity, but because both the Armenian and Iranian 'nations' shared a long history of close cultural and political interaction."¹⁰

Language influences identity in two ways: as a behavioral attribute and by establishing the context and lexicon through which identities are expressed.¹¹ From a social constructionist standpoint "identity is not one thing for any individual [...] Rather, it may be a place from which an individual can express multiple and often contradictory aspects of [themselves]."¹² As linguist Andrée Tabouret-Keller indicates, identity is both an objective social construct and a personal subjective construct established by individual mental processes and choices. Language, which connects both of these identity categories, is a powerful symbol representing all sorts of affiliations.¹³ Individuals access a range of self-identificatory measures in constructing their ethnic identity, and bilingual individuals, in particular, possess a rich linguistic and cultural repertoires to draw upon.¹⁴ Language is also an agent of hegemony through which cultural beliefs and values are adopted.¹⁵ According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."¹⁶ Thus, language is a highly significant identity marker capable of maintaining group boundaries and maintaining a group's sense of its unique ethnic identity. Ethnic groups vary in the degree of importance they place on language as an identity marker, with some groups being more language-centered than others.¹⁷

Using spoken and visual languages to maintain Armenian cultural heritage situates the consciousness of the subject in the past (via remembrance of images and cultural materials) while their own performance of remembrance and cultural maintenance is situated in the present.

10 James Barry, *Armenian Christians in Iran: Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 64.

11 Andrée Tabouret-Keller, "Language and Identity," in *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*, ed. Florian Coulmas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 324. See also Asif Agha, *Language and Social Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

12 Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Ann Phoenix, "Shifting Identities Shifting Racisms: An Introduction," *Feminism & Psychology* 4, n.1 (1994): 9.

13 Tabouret-Keller, "Language and Identity," 319 - 324.

14 Anne Woollett, Harriette Marshall, Paula Nicholson, and Neelam Dosanjh, "Asian Women's Ethnic Identity: The Impact of Gender and Context in Accounts of Women Bringing Up Children in East London," *Feminism & Psychology* 4, no. 1 (1994): 120.

15 Jean Mills, "Connecting Communities: Identity, Language and Diaspora," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 8, no. 4 (2005): 260.

16 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Wheatsheaf, 1993), 392 - 403.

17 See Susan Gal and Judith T. Irvine, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).



Iranian Armenian diasporic communities define themselves with a historical antecedent linked to important cultural markers, and shared history, geography, and memories. They harness the sense of belonging established by these shared elements of diasporic heritage, hinging on a nostalgic sense of belonging.

In contrast, the newer generations of diasporic Iranian Armenians – the more transnational ones – do not base their sense of belonging on a relationship with the nation-state, the homeland. In a move that counterbalances the impact of language, religion, geography, memory, and history, transnational diasporic Iranian Armenians look forward to their own “feeling” of Armenianness. To this end, the homeland of Armenia as a nation embodying a large diaspora community is a dynamic one with a diasporic identity that is in constant flux, subject to redefinition and reinterpretation.