

The Paradigm of the Karabakh War: The Reflection of the "Woman-Witness" on Collective Trauma

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Abstract

This article examines the literary representation of war-related collective trauma through the figure of the woman-witness, focusing on Gunel Movlud's novel *The Camp*. Situated within the broader context of literary responses to the Karabakh conflict, the study shifts attention from military events and geopolitical interpretations to individual testimony, traumatic memory, displacement, and the everyday experience of civilians. Drawing primarily on Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's theory of testimony and Frank Ankersmit's reflections on historical experience and representation, the article employs a qualitative textual and interpretive approach to explore how female witnessing transforms private recollection into a narrative form of collective remembrance. The analysis considers the ways in which subjective testimony, emotional detail, fragmented recollection, and seemingly marginal experiences contribute to the literary reconstruction of traumatic events. It argues that the woman-witness functions not merely as an observer but as an active mediator between personal suffering, suppressed memory, and broader social consciousness. Through this narrative perspective, historical experience is presented not as a fixed sequence of past events but as a living and continuously reinterpreted reality. The study concludes that woman-centred testimonial narratives can deepen the ethical and humanitarian understanding of war by foregrounding civilian experience, vulnerability, memory, and the long-term psychological consequences of conflict. This approach contributes to trauma studies, memory studies, comparative literature, and scholarship on literary representations of war.

Keywords: Karabakh conflict; collective trauma; woman-witness; testimony; traumatic memory; Gunel Movlud; *The Camp*; war literature; memory studies; comparative literature

Introduction

In the prism of Azerbaijani-Armenian socio-political relations, the Karabakh War is viewed as an epochal tragedy, the representation of which has found corresponding reflection in the literature of both countries. In connection with the above, the figure of the woman-witness draws attention in the literary discourse of Azerbaijani and Armenian female authors, where focus is shifted away from the theater of war itself, military actions, and their underlying political causes, and toward the witnessing of female characters and their traumatic memories, which address collective traumatic memory. Clearly, the narratives of female characters as eyewitnesses to traumatic events are saturated with subjectivism, yet this too possesses a certain charm; for the reader, it is not the epochal events

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conveyed in academic literary-artistic language that become closer and more convincing, but rather the testimonies delivered by the woman-witness, filled with deep lyricism, sensitivity, seemingly insignificant details, and marginal facts.

Since the final decade of the last century, the study of testimony as one of the major discursive models has entered intensive scientific circulation. In the theoretical arguments of the present paper, we primarily rely on the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, in which the witness of testimony is presented as a crucial figure in the representation of transpired traumatic events, capable of reincarnating and delivering to society events that are sometimes forgotten or repressed from traumatic memory. Furthermore, in validating theoretical perspectives, we turn to Frank Ankersmit's work *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, which shares Felman and Laub's conceptual view and presents the witness as an important figure for the representation and reactivation of memories repressed from societal consciousness. According to Ankersmit, in the case of a subjective attitude toward history, we "experience" the past not as a combination of frozen/petrified events, but as living, authentic occurrences that undoubtedly expand our humanitarian knowledge [Ankersmit, 2003:160]. It is precisely through the lens of the aforementioned theoretical views that we analyze the novel *The Camp* by Azerbaijani author Gunel Movlud, the plot of which is based on the witness's testimony as a narrative representation of war trauma and collective memory.

Results and discussion

First and foremost, we note that in contemporary Azerbaijani prose, the Karabakh conflict is presented not as a concluded historical episode, but as a dynamic process that influences the characters' consciousness, memory, and collective identity; for this very reason, the angle and perspective of narration within it acquire special significance. Authors frequently resort to a subjective and fragmented narrative style, through which the complexity and contradictory nature of the traumatic experience are clearly outlined. This approach aligns with the general character of Caucasian ethno-political conflicts, where historical processes are often determined not only by geopolitical factors but also by discourses of identity, memory, and power [Cornell, 2000:45–46]. Consequently, the theme of Karabakh in Azerbaijani prose acquires not only a historical but also a cultural-narrative function, which defines the very principles of text construction.

In the aforementioned context, a special place is occupied by Gunel Movlud's autobiographical novel *The Camp* (*Düşərgəh*), which presents the Karabakh conflict from the perspective of a witness's testimony, the experience of displacement, and the memory of lost space. Gunel Movlud is the pseudonym of Gunel Imanova. She was born in 1981 in Azerbaijan, in the village of Mehdili of the Jabrayil district. Her childhood is directly linked to the tragic events of the First Karabakh War (she was only 11 years old at the time). In 1993, as a result of the escalation of military actions, Movlud's family, along with other residents of the village, had to leave their native land; they found themselves in an internally displaced persons camp in the Sabirabad region. Later, the writer reflected the experience endured in the refugee camp in her autobiographical novel; she notes herself that working on the book proved to be difficult from a psychological standpoint, as comprehending those childhood memories in adulthood turned out to be heavier than experiencing them directly during childhood [Movlud, 2020:2].

Gunel Movlud's novel represents an important literary representation of the displacement experience, where displacement is understood not only as a social condition but as a profound psychological and ethical crisis [Caruth, 1995: 4–5]. Direct descriptions of war are not found in the text; the author focuses on the daily reality that people face in the refugee camp. The author describes her own five-year life in the so-called "tent city". The text depicts the fate of people torn away from their land, home, and ordinary life, the hierarchy formed under harsh social conditions, relationships generated in an extreme environment, and processes of moral degradation. In the novel, the camp is presented not only as a physical space but as a social environment where everyday life dictates human behavior and relationships, while the narrative representation of the conflict is formed precisely on the basis of

this experience. Moreover, the camp, as the primary space of the text, functions as a special narrative unit where time and space are merged, and the characters' experience acquires meaning precisely within this unified context [Bakhtin, 1975: 84].

The author describes the severe conditions of the camp: tents pitched close to each other ("the distance between the tents was only two meters"), lines at the water taps, the impossibility of maintaining basic hygiene rules, open sewage channels whose unbearable odor saturated the surrounding space. Such a life, naturally, is degrading to the dignity of the displaced persons [Movlud, 2024: 9–11]. The daily life of the camp is oppressive: "Our tent stood at the far end of the camp. To reach our tent, you had to cross the entire camp" [Movlud, 2024: 17]. This phrase illustrates an organization of space where every movement is connected to the entire social environment of the camp. In such conditions, personal space almost vanishes, and a person's daily life turns into an open environment, constantly visible to others, in which people observe and evaluate each other's lives.

In the narrative representation of the Karabakh conflict, the tent in the refugee camp emerges as the space where the consequences of war manifest directly in daily life: "We all fled separately — father and sisters to one side, mother and brothers to another side, and I, completely alone, because when the Armenian forces entered, we were all in different places. We met each other only in the camp. There, the whole family lived in a single, 6-square-meter tent" [Movlud, 2013: 1–2]. The mentioned detail not only demonstrates the scarcity of space but also narratively reflects the limitation of human existence and forced collective living, which emerges as a direct experience of the trauma caused by the conflict.

The description of the tent's interior space and household items narratively intensifies the daily reality even further. The text notes: "A well, at the bottom of which slightly salty water accumulated, served the function of a refrigerator". This detail demonstrates how the elementary conditions of daily life change and how they are subjected to the necessity of survival. The placement of food, water, and clothing within a single space emphasizes the circumstance that the tent turns into a multifunctional, yet extremely limited environment for human existence. Such mundane details, as signs carrying memory, emerge as one of the forms of representing collective experience [Halbwachs, 1992: 53].

In Movlud's novel, the camp is a place where time seems to be stopped, the future is uncertain, and the past constantly returns in the form of memory. People live in a mode of constant waiting — between the hope of return and the perception of an undesirable reality. Tents, huts built of reeds and mud, confrontations over drinking water, a single toilet for dozens of people, constant heat, cold, dust, and confinement create an environment where personal space practically does not exist. That is why the camp can be perceived as a kind of cage in which people are forced to adapt to this confinement and lack of rights.

When describing the camp space, the author pays special attention to the childhood experience, which becomes one of the major narrative foundations of the trauma. The author asks the question: "What could a twelve-year-old child see and experience?" [Movlud, 2024:3]. This rhetorical question determines the direction of the narrative and presents the historical catastrophe through the eyes of a child. In the framework of Gérard Genette's theory of focalization, this narrative structure can be interpreted as internal focalization, where the narration passes through the prism of the character's subjective perception and reality is formed precisely within the boundaries of their experience [Genette, 1980: 189]. It is through this perspective that the text acquires exceptional sincerity and emotional intensity, as the tragic reality is conveyed not through political or historical evaluations, but through concrete details of daily experience.

The discussion of taboo topics adds a critical dimension to the text and clarifies that the representation of the conflict moves beyond traditional discourse into socio-cultural discourse. It is noteworthy that in one interview, when asked by a journalist why the text does not talk directly about Karabakh, the war, and life prior to the refugee camp, Movlud responds that the novel *The Camp* is a book about the camp — the space where people ended up because of the war. According to her, if there had been no war, this camp would not have existed either; she deliberately did not want to speak directly on the

topic of Karabakh in order to avoid manipulating the reader's emotions or having the text perceived in a propagandistic light [Movlud, 2024].

From a narratological point of view, the text is built on a form of autobiographical memory, where the past is not conveyed through a sequential chronological narrative; it unfolds into fragmented recollections, perceptions, and emotionally charged monologues. It is precisely such a structure that creates the form characteristic of a trauma narrative. According to Cathy Caruth, traumatic experience often remains in human consciousness as an unprocessed event that periodically returns in the form of fragmented and intense memories [Caruth, 1995: 4–12]. In Movlud's text as well, the past constantly breaks into the present, creating the perception that trauma is not a concluded event but an ongoing internal experience. The author herself notes that remembering these stories is like pulling a thorn out of a wound for her, which expresses the metaphorical and emotional accuracy of traumatic memory.

Memory and testimony function importantly in the text as mechanisms that carry and preserve trauma. The narrative is based on a childhood experience that retains its emotional intensity even after years. The author emphatically notes that war is not just military operations; it represents a tragically altered human destiny and consequences that reflect even more severely on human lives after the war ends. In the novel, the theater of war is deliberately shifted to the background; for the author, what is important is not military actions (war is not just military operations, death, and tanks), but what happens after the war: life in poverty, hunger, constant fear, and social vulnerability — meaning that for the writer, war is, first and foremost, a broken human destiny. It is this concept that determines the humanistic direction of the text: at the center of attention stands not the image of the enemy, but the victim of war — the human being, their pain, their humiliation, and their struggle/effort for survival.

In the novel, the camp environment is presented as a closed social space that is formed under extreme conditions and functions by its own rules. This space can be interpreted as a structurally organized narrative unit where the environment and human behavior are closely linked and function within a unified system. In this space, the collapse of both familial and societal relations is sharply delineated; social norms and values are significantly transformed; people who were previously distinguished by mutual solidarity and support act out of survival instinct in the reality of the camp, which ultimately leads to the violation of the moral order and the degradation of human relations.

As noted by the author, extreme poverty and hunger significantly altered human behavior, turning it into a struggle for daily existence: "I saw people from my village whom, it turns out, I did not really know... Before, I saw how noble they were, but in the conditions of the camp, they started stealing rice, stealing someone else's share of bread, confronting each other, etc. Hunger and poverty can bring a person to such a state that war, in comparison, is simply nothing" [Movlud, 2013:12]. This episode clearly demonstrates that the social crisis generated by war is not limited only to material loss; it also breaks human relations and exerts a heavy influence on human behavior and daily life.

Several important thematic lines emerge in the testimony of the twelve-year-old girl: a complex relationship with a strict and emotionally distant father, harsh rules of daily life, and social control. Although life in the native village was not distinguished by material wealth, for the character, it was associated with a sense of stability, safety, and the existence of one's own space. War and displacement entirely shatter this environment and transform the childhood experience into traumatic memory. Thus, in the novel, trauma is not only the result of war; it also manifests in familial and social relations. The figure of the strict father, violence against the child, the prohibition of reading books, and constant control demonstrate that for the author, trauma is linked not only to displacement but also to the patriarchal order. The episode where the father beats the girl for reading a book and considers the love of reading a useless activity clearly shows the environment in which the child is restricted, her striving for knowledge is suppressed, and obedience becomes the norm. As a result, the family space is also presented as a major source of traumatic experience [Alexander, 2004: 15–16].

The figure of the father presented in the novel — that of a morally degraded, diminished person — emphasizes the crisis of the institution of the family and the collapse of social order. As for the mother

— a weak, vulnerable, and oppressed individual — the strict and humiliating attitude toward her by her husband, just like toward other neighboring women by theirs, is accepted as a regular norm. The image of the strict grandmother presented in the text is also noteworthy, whose authority extends even over men; the latter indicates that the traditional gender structure is partially broken. The grandmother's figure contrasts sharply with the conformist model of other women; she is presented as a strong, independent woman, confident in her position, who did not take into account the opinions of others (including men) and did not perceive herself as a subordinate subject [Movlud, 2020: 14].

The writer describes the grandmother's image with exceptional emotional intensity as an exemplary figure for her. In the novel, the grandmother is presented as a woman who does not accept the existing social reality and strives for a higher social status and a better life. Her physical appearance and manners differ from the behavior of other women: "She always walked upright, and her body was as neat as a waist-fitted glass. She dressed beautifully and delicately... The grandmother's 'outbursts' astonished the village community" [Movlud, 2020: 28]. In the village society, the grandmother's independence and pride were a subject of constant gossip, yet it was precisely these qualities that created her strong and autonomous image. The grandmother's figure in the text is formed as an alternative gender model — an example that a woman can exist not as a subordinate, submissive being, but as a purposeful subject possessing her own will. From a narratological point of view, the grandmother's image is presented as a figure that opposes the patriarchal order and performs an important function in the value structure of the text.

The camp space in the text appears as a place of social and moral decay where violence acquires a systemic character. Cases of both physical and sexual violence are described, including against women and children, which further intensifies the tragic tonality of the narrative. The author does not shy away from covering taboo topics and emphasizes that such behaviors are not merely the result of individual immorality; they are caused by extreme poverty, hunger, and social chaos that keep people on the edge.

The through-line quote of Movlud's text — *War is immorality!* — demonstrates how the narrative representation of the Karabakh conflict is formed not in a broad historical scope, but at the level of concrete human experience. One of the most shocking episodes from the recollections of the adolescent girl conveyed in the novel relates to the fact when her brother witnessed a scene of violence by people living in the camp against a young refugee boy like themselves. Violence is presented in the text as an established rule of daily life, conditioned by environmental circumstances.

People living in the camp are forced to adapt to such a life, because their main task is physical survival. In this situation, violence manifests with particular severity toward vulnerable people. The text describes a case where the victim of violence is a woman whose speech is limited and, consequently, who cannot defend herself or ask for help. Her physical and social vulnerability is exploited in the existing situation, as a result of which she becomes an object of violence. In this way, the camp turns into a closed space where social relations are regulated by harsh rules and human dignity is frequently violated.

The cases mentioned above clearly show that in the reality of the camp, violence is not limited to the aggression of isolated individuals; it bears a broad and repetitive character and is based on the abuse of power. In such an environment, those who are deprived of the opportunity to defend themselves and lack support find themselves in a particularly severe situation. Thus, the text presents vulnerability as one of the heavy manifestations of camp life, where a person's physical or communicative limitation becomes an additional basis for violence. This further intensifies the tragic character of the narration and shows that violence here is not accidental, but an phenomenon conditioned and established by environmental conditions [Movlud, 2024: 2–3].

Such scenes demonstrate not only the physical hardship of the refugees but also the moral degradation of some of them, which no existence of an extreme social crisis can justify. The author deliberately touches upon themes that are taboo in conservative Azerbaijani society: domestic violence, gender inequality, social shame, and collective silence. Such themes give the text a critical social dimension

and present those aspects of traumatic experience that frequently remain unnoticed in official narratives [Caruth, 1996: 4–12].

Importantly, the author's text focuses not on the war, but on the moral and social trauma of post-war life. The work can be viewed as a protest against a patriarchal society where the role of the woman is significantly diminished, despite the fact that in reality, it is precisely women who bear the primary burden of survival. Movlud notes: "During war, the man turns into a hero, a cult of the man is created, and the role of the woman, especially in a patriarchal society, drops to zero. She simply has no place in the entire cult of male heroism" [Movlud, 2024:2]. This opinion clarifies that the author views the experience of war not only through the lens of military conflict but also within the scope of social inequality and gender power. Thus, trauma manifests in the text as a multi-layered experience that influences not only the perception of displacement and loss but also the social condition and self-perception of the woman.

The writer notes that under the conditions of war, societal attitudes toward women and men are different. The text sharply criticizes the patriarchal society where a cult of male heroism is formed during war, while the labor and pain of the woman disappear. According to her observation, men more frequently deserve sympathy, because the violation of their dignity acquires a special societal significance, whereas the pain of women often remains unnoticed; "No one wanted to see the woman's pain. They even had to hide their own clothes, because it was considered a shame" [Movlud, 2024:2–3].

It is noteworthy that the author is frequently criticized for a lack of sympathy toward men, yet she emphasizes that her goal is the direct and undisguised delivery of reality. However, we note here that Movlud does not completely demonize men; as a rare exception, the work also presents men who work in the cotton fields, help their wives, and maintain a human face under harsh conditions. The author herself notes that her goal was not to express a hostile attitude toward Azerbaijani men; she wished to present reality as it was. The author implies that the patriarchal structure exerts pressure not only on women but also imposes a heavy responsibility on men themselves and worsens their condition [Movlud, 2024: 12–13].

When asked whether these events are characteristic only of Azerbaijani or Muslim society, the writer notes that this is a broader, regional, Caucasian problem. According to her, she did not wish to generalize any religious or national trait; she describes only what she saw and experienced herself. This position removes the text from ethnic and religious stereotypes and places it within a broader context of social criticism [Movlud, 2024:1–2].

In the novel, special significance is attached to the theme of the lost home; the home here is not just a physical space; it emerges as a symbol of belonging, stability, and identity. The author describes with heartache people who spent their whole lives building their home and lost everything in a single day. Such an experience implies not only the loss of housing but also the collapse of the world that was based on familial and social order. The intensity of traumatic memory is particularly outlined in the phrase where the author says: "On that day, looking back at my rootless past, ready to be burned with a single matchstick, I could not hold back — I sat down and sobbed bitterly" [Movlud, 2024:17].

From this perspective, the text goes beyond the borders of personal recollections and is formed as an artistic document of collective trauma. According to critic Sevil Guseinova's evaluation, the camp in Movlud's text is presented as a space where the new "home" becomes a narrow canvas tent and each person's life is visible and understandable to others. Over time, this temporary shelter transforms into a new dwelling: families are created, children are born, and cemeteries appear as well. This circumstance indicates that displacement is no longer just a temporary state; it is formed as a long-term social reality [Guseinova, 2024:5].

In the narrative comprehension of the Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijani prose, special significance is acquired by the biographical experience of the authors, which directly determines the thematic and content direction of the text. In this respect, Gunel Movlud's work is closely linked to the experience

of displacement and political persecution, which conditions the formation of trauma, identity, and social criticism in her narrative. As we noted above, Gunel Movlud's life path is directly linked to forced displacement and existence under conditions of societal opposition. The author notes that she encountered serious opposition in her own country, which was conditioned by her critical attitude toward societal rules and established views. According to her, she had problems not only with the state authorities but also with religious circles, due to which she found herself under broad societal pressure: "I clashed with the hatred of my country" [Movlud, 2024:1].

Conclusion.

It is noteworthy that the novel *The Camp* provoked a mixed reaction in Azerbaijani society. One part of society met the text positively, because the severity of refugees' lives was realistically presented in it; for the conservative part of society, however, the novel became an object of criticism. Mainly, the author was criticized because the novel did not focus on the political aspects of the conflict and, for the most part, the author presented themes that were considered taboo in traditional society. Nevertheless, the author emphatically notes that her goal was to present the real conditions of refugees' lives and to show how such an environment affects people's lives and social relations.

Based on the above discussion and the analysis of the novel, it is possible to arrive at the following conclusions:

- Gunel Movlud's narrative goes beyond the description of one concrete conflict and acquires a broader significance; the testimony of a little girl as a witness can be viewed as a universal narrative about displacement — about people who lost their homes and try to maintain dignity and hope for a better future under harsh conditions;
- *The Camp* creates a complex narrative space in which displacement is presented not only as a challenge of material hardship but as a social, moral, and psychological crisis that manifests in human relations, violence, and gender inequality; in the work, the space of the camp appears as a social microcosm where traditional norms are broken and the influence of the survival instinct is sharply outlined;
- The text clarifies that the experience of war in literature is transformed into a form of memory that not only represents trauma but also forms the narrative structures for its comprehension and delivery; *The Camp* appears as a narrative in which the individual experience of the witness is transformed into an important form of collective memory and shapes the historical consciousness of the post-war society.

Declarations

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