

Belonging- romulus, my father essay



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A person's identity is often reflected and shaped through one's own personal understanding of where they belong in a society. A sense of belonging is driven by both the external and internal factors that exist around them.

Raimond Gaita's biographical memoir *Romulus, My Father* and Margaret Atwood's poem "Further Arrivals" clearly demonstrate similar concepts of how a person's sense of belonging may differ. Both texts construct related understanding of the harsh experience of migration to Australia, the struggle to find their own identity and pursuit to find their home, wherever that may be.

Belonging to the people around us as well as our surroundings remains closely connected to one's identity and sense of purpose and inevitably belonging remains an instinctive human need in all of us. Sense of belonging can be defined as the experience of both personal involvement and integration within an environment. In the chronologically constructed memoir *Romulus, My Father*, the characters individual pursuit to find their home is explored by Gaita. Throughout the novel, Gaita is constantly referring to his home at Frogmore, where he spent most of his childhood.

However, for his father, Romulus, the tough Australian environment and way of life was a place where he could not comfortably adapt, " He longed for the generous and soft European foliage ... seemed symbols of deprivation and barrenness. " For Romulus, the only place he believed to be his home was in " Markovac, a village in Yugoslavia. " Nonetheless, he is obligated by his own good will to fulfil his life in Australia for the wellbeing of his family. Gaita uses symbolism to represent his connection to what he perceives as his home.

The motorbike reflects the patriarchal relationship as well as the love and trust he shared with his father, and their surrounding environment. The motorbike gives Gaita and his father the freedom they enjoyed earlier in their life, before they were engulfed in family heartache. A person's individual hesitance to connect to a place is also poetically conveyed through Margaret Atwood's "Further Arrivals". This poem seeks to convey the similar theme of the pursuit to find their place of belonging.

Atwood clearly identifies the character's uncomfortable state of mind when she personifies her brain, "my brain gropes nervous," and gives the reader a visual image of the character's brain being forced to do something against her will. The emphasis is set on the feeling of the character being uncomfortable. This evidentially illustrates the character's feeling of being on edge and discontent with her environmental surroundings as well as other people.

In turn, a person must feel valued or important within their environment, and further, a person must have the desire and ability to develop a sense of belonging to his or her surroundings. Belonging and not belonging can be seen as basic human needs and important attainments in the process and struggle towards finding self-actualisation and self-identity. Atwood accommodates to this definition and expresses the sense of the character not belonging through the use of a truncated sentence, "I refuse to look in a mirror. The negative tone epitomises the character's lack of readiness to accept the new environment and the perception of the new her, an altered individual. Literally, meaning that she does not want to see herself in a place that she doesn't belong, and is in the state of mind that she is an outsider,

still struggling to find her true identity, and find herself. In contrast to this, Gaita gives us an intimate insight into the emotions and feelings of the different characters in his life through his sensitive observation and the use of emotive language. This assists the readers understanding of the strength of their emotions.

The character of Hora, who is regarded to be “ a man with sufficient courage to die rather than betray his principles,” commits to his true identity and stays loyal to his beliefs and in turn finds that although the society around him is changing, he as an individual remains the same throughout the novel, although he is faced with difficult challenges. For example, when he is looking after Romulus’ poultry farm and discovers that the hens are sick, he “ cannot bear to kill them individually” and the sight of the hens moving under the earth “ sickened him”.

The emotive language Gaita uses in this scene to describe Hora’s emotions demonstrates his unchanging compassionate nature and love of all things. Therefore, the hunger to belong is not merely a desire to be attached to something; it is rather the hunger to discover who you are, find your self-identity and remain true to yourself. For some people, immigration can allow them to develop a sense of place, and belonging to a place. However, for others, it can result in isolation, insecurity and in some cases, suicide.

Whether or not a person connects to their new surroundings, also depends on the conditions of where they came from. It is through the combination of visual imagery and the constant use of negative connotations that Atwood presents the place in which the character has immigrated from; “ we left

behind one by one the cities rotting with cholera”. Atwood clearly illustrates that the place in which this immigrant in particular has come from, is a disease-stricken country. The repetition of “ one by one” emphasizes the separation of the characters acquaintances.

This shows that they had to face the harsh immigration process alone, and with little to no support, possibly being the reason as to why she is afraid to open up to her new environment and surroundings, “ I have not come out yet. ” The character is portrayed, through the monosyllables as scared and fearful to literally speak her normal, everyday vocabulary. Similarly, the immigration process for Gaita’s mother, Christina, was also one which she experienced alone. Although she had her son, husband and friends that she had made on her journey to Australia, she had left behind her home, her sister, her friends, and her childhood.

Gaita accentuates his understanding of his mother’s hardship, “ a troubled city girl from Central Europe, she could not settle in a dilapidated farmhouse in a landscape that highlighted her isolation. ” Through his contrasting view of the two landscapes, Gaita convicts the reader to empathise with Christina. The extent of her loneliness is further revealed in the novel when she is diagnosed with a mental illness, attempts to commit suicide, has affairs with several men, “ she was a woman who liked men”. The lead to her having two other babies, and finally succeeds in committing suicide.

Through Gaita’s contrast it is also revealed however, that if Christine had not moved to Australia, her life may have taken a different course. Regardless, her own personal condition may still have prevented her from achieving a

true sense of belonging. A true sense of belonging remains elusive for some, whilst others seem to naturally or readily find connections with their environment or others. All the characters in the above mentioned literature exhibit some or all points of the spectrum of belonging at one point or another of their lives.

Whether it is belonging, resembled through the relationship of Raimond Gaita and his home in Frogmore, in his biographical memoir, *Romulus, My Father*, or not belonging constructed in Margaret Atwood's poetry "Further Arrivals", where the character refuses to connect with both the people and environment around her. Regardless of their experiences, belonging to the people around us as well as our surroundings remains closely connected to one's identity and sense of purpose and belonging remains an instinctive human need in all of us.