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Identity, Sense of Belonging and Sense of Place

Introduction

The concept of place has primarily geographic connotations, as people tend to associate place with a specific location on the surface of the Earth, detectable on a map. Nevertheless, when thinking of place there are also symbolical values associated with this concept, entrenched in one's memory, nostalgic recollections of past events or landmarks. These values and memories are reflected, through emotions and feelings about a place, and this creates the sense of place. The sense of place defines who we are and contributes to understanding our individualities. As we have different perceptions regarding our sense of place, we acknowledge the differences existent between humans. And just as our individuality changes throughout our lives, the way we perceive a place transforms in terms of intensity of feeling or in terms of assigned values and emotions.

Body

Being a Muslim student in a Western country, I often face various biased and stereotyped perceptions about Muslim people. Silently or not, Western population usually accuse Muslims of being extremist terrorist, mentally associating us with the 9/11 tragedy. These stereotypes are harmful for Muslim individuals. I personally felt very isolated when I first came to Perth, Australia to study. People were watching me suspiciously, were afraid to approach me or were even throwing slurs at me. Such incidents make me miss my home, taking me back to the pleasant memories that I associate with my place of birth - Malaysia, where people live in harmony.

While I understand that the extremist terrorist theory associated with the Muslims sprang from United States as a way for its people to protect their own sense of identity against what they consider a threat, I am aware than Muslims are good-hearted people. Not all terrorist are Muslims, and most Muslims are normal people, who have a peaceful lifestyle, guided by the pacifist teachings of Quran (Berglund 2010). Accusing an entire race or ethnicity of terrorism because of a dozen individuals who participated in 9/11 tragedy is ignorance, as Syed (2013) also observes.

Schofield and Szymanski (2011) state that the relationship between sense of place and belonging contains nationalist and anti-other ideologies. This theory explains the Americans' and the Westerners' attitude towards Muslims. By showing anti-other attitudes (expressed through racial or religious slurs, through stereotypes, discrimination or through avoidance of people who are different), they are manifesting their nationalist ideology, considering the others as not belonging to their place.

I felt as not belonging to Australia and for a while I could not adhere to a sense of place within Perth, as I was not in my comfort zone. My mind and my soul were permanently travelling back to Malaysia, where I felt good about who I am.

Geographically, Malaysia is situated at a considerable distance of Middle Eastern countries, being spatially far away from 9/11 events and the consequences associated with this terrorist attack. Each time I go to Malaysia I relieve the spiritual joy of the Muslim holidays, the fun of being with my childhood friends, of being loved and cared by my family, and I re-sense the authenticity of the Malaysian Muslim traditional dishes. In

Australia, the availability of halal food has become a political issue, or so I sense it. The halal food, produced from meat from supermarket is much more expensive than other meat processed dishes; in addition, halal food is unavailable in restaurants or in hospitals (Akbarzadeh and Saeed 2001).

These aspects indicate a cultural discrimination towards Muslim people who are in impossibility of consuming their traditional dishes because of the existent cultural restrictions against halal food. As such, this Western behavior contradicts the Islamist religion, according to which Muslims need to consume halal food, as it is recommended in the Muslim scriptures (Berglund 2010).

But I feel nothing of this exclusionist attitude when I get to Malaysia for celebrating Ramadhan or Hari Raya. Here I can have my favorite Muslim dish, the Nasi Lemak, which is a fusion authentic food, based on rice, coconut milk, anchovies, peanut, boiled egg and cucumber (Munan, 2008). Just like the Western Madeline story of Marcel Proust (1913) symbolizes a childhood memory of the French author and a sense of place for Combray, when I taste the authentic Nasi Lemak I feel like I am returning to my childhood and to the real values of being a Malaysian Muslim. I do consume Nasi Lemak elsewhere, in Perth also sometimes, as this is an international dish. However, the taste of my preferred home dish is only authentic when I am at home. Not only the ingredients used to prepare it are different, but also the connection with the place, with Kuala Lumpur, is unique.

In the same spirit, fasting during Ramadhan and celebrating Eid Bumarak in Perth is not the same as being home for these holidays. At home, all my

family, relatives and people with the same beliefs are together, sharing the same values while in Perth I do not feel this way.

When I am in Malaysia, I feel confident in who I am and I feel free. Free to eat halal everywhere and to express my Muslim values. I see other women self-confident about wearing the veil in public. In Australia, sometimes people look at them with pity, and I often hear that the veil is the symbol of Muslim women being oppressed by their men (Aly and Walker 2007).

However, this is a stereotyped perception, as Muslim women from Malaysia, and Muslim women from many other places wear the veil and the hijab because they want to. Moreover, in the Western countries, where Muslim women are not obliged to wear the Islamist veil and hijab but on the contrary, discouraged, they still wear them. This is their statement of respecting and trusting the Islam values. Although wearing the veil results in Islamophobic behavior upon Muslim women, aggressed and treated as terrorist or isolated and excluded from social circles, we stand for what we believe in.

As I am entrenched in my Muslim traditions, I practice the prayer and other symbolical and religious practices that connect me to my sense of belonging to the Islamic faith and to my home-place. When I see the Muslim symbols on the streets of Perth my memory takes me back home. My memory takes me back to the place where I was born and although I am now in a foreign place, I want to maintain and preserve my Muslim culture because it is the expression of my identity. For my colleagues and people around me in Australia, the Islamist-entrenched practices have negative connotations, as they have a negative perception about my culture. By expressing my faith in

Muslim religion, the Western people are stereotyping me. For defending myself against these prejudices that position me as the representative of a terrorist country or as a submissive woman just because I practice prayer or eat halal food and express my Islam opinions, I could just stop doing these things. In fact, it is a common practice for Muslim women to renounce their faith and their Muslim values out of fear for being assaulted, arrested by police or because their relatives pressure them to do so, for avoiding the racial consequences (Open Society Initiative 2013).

Nevertheless, renouncing what I believe in would lead to losing my sense of identity. Losing my sense of identity would mean losing my sense of belonging and implicitly my sense of place. My Muslim practices make me who I am and I stand out for my Muslim values and faith despite the associated oppression, exclusion and other such consequences.

The sense of place I first sensed in Australia was that the Australian society, as most Western societies, is reluctant to Muslims. Australians are discouraging the Muslim practices by excluding or aggressing the Muslims, which indicate segregation practices (Berglund 2010). These practices are meant to daunt Muslims from expressing who they are, encouraging them to integrate in Australian society by wearing Western clothes, renouncing the Muslim faith and consuming Australian food (Thomas 2004). This would mean developing a forced sense of place.

In these modern times, the globalization and the local politics are encouraging global values in the detriment of the local ones, threatening the preservation of the sense of place (Inglis n. d.). By preserving my values that connect me to my family and to my community I maintain my sense of

belonging and sense of place, which define who I am.

I am aware of the fact that mass media contributes significantly to shaping people's perceptions and to inserting negative stereotyped perceptions in Western societies about Muslims (The Guardian, November 14, 2005).

However, despite this, I have managed to overpass my fears associated with lack of self-confidence for being away from home, in a country that daunts Muslim culture and discourages the consumption of halal food. I managed to keep a good progress of my studies and to make some good friends, without having to give up my sense of belonging, my sense of place and my identity.

These aspects have contributed to defining sense of place for Perth, developing a sense of belonging with my Australian friends, although I remain loyal to my Muslim Malaysian identity. As Schofield and Szymanski (2011) indicate, the sense of place is guided by the sense of belonging. The fact that I managed to make friends in Australia helped me to overpass my fear of being unaccepted because of my religion and influenced me to develop a sense of belonging to Perth. Inglis (n. d.) questions whether in the current world marked by global mobility, people redevelop personal and social identities. I answer yes.

Conclusion

I am aware of the fact that I have changed my own perceptions about Australia and about living in this country as a Muslim woman. I am no longer afraid to be myself because I am accepted as I am. This discovery helped me to develop a sense of place for Perth, while still preserving my sense of place associated with Malaysia. Nevertheless, the taste of my favorite dish (nasi

lemak) always takes me back home and is nowhere better than it is at home. The authenticity of halal food and my Muslim culture connects me to Malaysia, giving me a sense of place, a sense of belonging and an identity.

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