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L'identité du lieu et la recherche du foyer dans *Between Two Worlds* de Zainab Salbi

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Introduction

Our sense of belonging can be manipulated and controlled by our emotions. Love, fear, or even repugnance can either create a link between us and the place we inhabit, or break it. Our emotional attachment to, or detachment from, places is similar to our relationship to people. Whatever the factors that can destroy our attachment to people, some can also reduce our attachment to a specific place. Several studies have been conducted on place and its relationship with one's self and identity.

Low and Altman (1992) have dealt with place attachment as an interdisciplinary concept and highlighted its aspects within different fields like: anthropology, psychology, sociology, and architecture. Similarly, Gaston Bachelard (1994) has focused on the intimacy that people create with their surrounding environment, with greater focus on the emotional bond of people with house, rooms, cellars, and so forth. Likewise, Bladow and Ladino (2018) offered the term “affect” to express the concept of attachment from an anthropocentric perspective and in relation to the contemporary environmental problems. Indeed, countless scholars, such as Bachelard, agree on the existence of a certain emotional relationship with one's environment, regardless of how different they referred to it. Whether it is *attachment*, *affect*, or *intimacy*, this special emotional bond displays significant impacts on one's identity.

The present paper, on the other hand, emphasizes the humans' tendency for a constant quest for a safe haven (when the need calls for it) and thus the inevitable multiplicity of homes. Additionally, the concept of *place identity* is discussed in dialogue with the humans' need for multiple homes throughout their lives. Accordingly, this paper challenges the ecocritical scholars who claim that home is a static phenomenon, and that “it implies the long term imbrication of humans in

a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work.” (Gerrard, 2004)

Zainab Salbi’s journey between Iraq and the United States is a temporal – rather than a spatial – one in which the author takes the train of memories back and forth. By and large, we create memories in each place we inhabit that eventually become a part of our personality and identity. As long as we can travel between the past and the present through memories, we can easily recreate places and the emotions they evoke.

1. Poetics of the Homeland

The house which Gaston Bachelard considers as one’s “corner of the world” and his/ her very “first universe” (Bachelard, 1994), plays a significant role in Zainab Salbi’s life as we can see through her memoir. She commences her book entitled *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny, Growing up in the Shadow of Saddam*, with the description of her grandmother’s old house in Karbala, where her mother spent her childhood, and where she – herself – as a child loved to be. The house the importance of which is apparent in the first chapter is also where Zainab was. Providing the reader with details of her location, she mentions in the prologue section: “I STAND ON THE balcony of the old house with the courtyard on the Tigris where my mother spent her childhood.” Moreover, the effects of the author’s location on her emotions is extremely apparent due to her psychological attachment to her homeland, her (geographical) detachment from the homeland and family at an early age, in addition to her life in exile.

Rewriting home from memory while in exile is undeniably a confirmation of her emotional and mental connectedness to her native soil. Throughout the book, several signs of Zainab’s attachment to her homeland can be noticed. As a matter of fact, the author poeticizes this homeland in her descriptions of streets, houses, and even passersby. For instance, she describes Karbala as “an adventure into an exotic past,” where:

The streets were narrow, some disappearing into walkways lined with small shops selling prayer beads and sizzling kababs and pickles and window after window of gleaming gold jewelry (...) The whole city seemed to glow golden from the surrounding sand, the gold jewelry in the shop windows, and the sun glinting off the gold-leafed domes of the two mosques that dominated the city. (Salbi and Becklund, 2005)

Time and place are both interrelated and essential in the process of linking the character’s environment with her psyche. In this sense, the idea of *chronotopes* shows how Salbi presents her own emotions and state of mind through the over-

lapping usage of time and place within her narrative. A chronotope is a phenomenon that Coanus and Lefort describe as: “present carries within itself the past of other places and other experiences.” (Peraldo, 2016) Accordingly, it is crucial to shed light on Salbi’s present in America which was loaded with her memories of the past, her childhood and adolescence, of her hometown, and her family that dismantled and was never reunited again after she migrated to the United States.

Upon *escaping* Iraq, Zainab acquires an ambivalent attitude towards her homeland. As she describes Baghdad and recalls her childhood memories there throughout the first chapter, she confesses the fact that she “assumed back then that Iraq would always be [her] home.” (Salbi and Becklund, 2005) Despite what seems like the author disowned her country of origin due to geographical displacement, her emotional attachment to Iraq is visible through devoting a significantly great portion of her memoir to deal with Iraq from geographical, social, and political stances.

2. Between Place and Identity

Dreese (2002) claims that postcolonial literature is a form of cultural rendering via the means of language (writing). As a matter of fact, due to colonization, a tremendous portion of (if not all) of the colonized nations’ “cultural consciousness” is lost, and the only possible way it can be retrieved is through “creatively reconstruct[ing] life anew” via memories and nostalgia. (Dreese, 2002) Because the political decolonization cannot repair the people’s cultural identities and their sense of communal belonging, other methods had to be devised to serve in restoring what has been cruelly destroyed. Writing for this purpose is more likely to “connect the people to their land, history, and cultural identity.” (Dreese, 2002) Through this last statement, he emphasizes the connection between people and the land to which they belong, in addition to the importance of this relationship in the postcolonial narrative.

Place – where we are located or to where we long to return – has a decisive impact on our self-identification. As human beings, we are constantly in a relationship with our environment, whether it was a place that we love to be, or somewhere that we are eager to forsake for another dreamland. Dreese mentions that “in order to know who you are you must first know where you are.” (Dreese, 2002) This statement suggests how important our sense of belonging or unbelonging is to our self-identification. In other words, our emotions toward a certain place can determine our identity. Concordantly, Ryan Hediger claims that “what we are and what we can do results to a significant degree from the environment in which we live.” (Bladow and Ladino, 2018)

Pointing out the significance of the interrelatedness between the individual's identity and his/her environment leads us to examine the concept of "place identity". The latter was introduced in the field of environmental psychology by Harold Proshansky to show the link between the individual's environment and the development of his/her identity. Through this concept he specifies that the individual's identity depends on its development on the physical environment, and that his/her identity can incur radical changes due to displacement. (Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira, 2012) However, before dealing with "place identity" and its formation and development, it is necessary to foreground the individual's sense of attachment to his/her place. This attachment is that emotional bond that connects the individual to his/her environment, and which can be referred to as *topophilia*.

Generally speaking, the person's mental state and mood change according to the surrounding environment. We tend to behave toward places like we behave toward other people, and similarly, the effects that a place would leave on us are reminiscent of those inflicted by other people. The person's attachment to a certain place depends on its impact on his/her self. Therefore, the bond that is formed with place can either be of attachment and love (*topophilia*), or that of hate or dread which can be described as *topophobia*. The main concern of this article, however, is the attachment with one's homeland and its impact on the individual's identity despite rupture and detachment.

Place, as we shall see, and its influences on the individual are among the major preoccupations of postcolonial literature of the diaspora. The latter usually tackles themes of home and homelessness, nostalgia, and different identity issues. In this regard, the expatriate author is an individual who is physically detached from the homeland and displaced into a different environment. Eventually, he/she lives between two independent worlds, and tries to balance between the two emotionally and mentally. Nevertheless, having a strong unbreakable bond with the homeland, for instance, does not necessitate feelings of repulsion towards the host land, in which case both places can be treated as one's own home and contribute together to the making of one's identity.

Dreese points out that among the main concerns of postcolonial literature is "to recover a sense of home, identity, community, and place in response to various forms of displacement caused by colonization, oppression, and environmental alienation." (Dreese, 2002) In this respect, this paper will tackle one of the most prominent contemporary postcolonial texts that exposes and contests the concept of identity in relation to place. *Between Two Worlds* demonstrates Zainab's pursuit of identity through a spiritual and a geographical journey. The latter

would affect our protagonist in several ways, yet it would lead her to grow and learn more about herself. This narrative offers a detailed account of its author's life both in her homeland and in the host country. Thus, it follows Zainab's story from childhood to adulthood and the journey that results in her identity formation and maturity.

Given the importance of place in postcolonial narratives, Zainab Salbi makes an indirect reference to the setting of her story right from the start. The title of the work *Between Two Worlds: Escape from tyranny, growing up in the shadow of Saddam Hussein* (2005) bears the initial reference to place and demonstrates that the story will occur in two different locations. This also suggests the protagonist's journey from home to exile and her inevitable detachment from her endeared homeland. Within the same title, Salbi describes her journey from home to exile as an "escape from tyranny". The latter pushes us to assume that her detachment from home is a bittersweet choice to get rid of a certain unbearable situation.

Salbi's relationship with each of the two worlds or places was, at a certain point in her life, determined by her own safety within the confines of the place where she is located. Wherever her fear ends, there is home, even if it is temporarily. When Zainab's life and freedom were threatened in her homeland, she escaped to another place seeking refuge and searching for safety. The feeling of safety that a person acquires within an unfamiliar environment enhances his/her sense of place and facilitates the formation of a bond with the new place. Moreover, despite the fact that Zainab escaped tyranny in Iraq, the bond with her homeland did not break. Her emotional attachment to Iraq was neither affected by exile, nor by the new bond which she created with the host country.

Zainab's memories in Iraq, both the happy and the sad ones, determined her relationship with the place she inhabited for nineteen years. Happy memories of herself and her mother driving along the streets of Baghdad, shopping or running errands together, show the stability that characterized Zainab's home back then, and thus, her life. Nonetheless, her memories of her mother trying to commit suicide, lying unconscious on her bedroom floor surrounded with pills of different colors, imply the restlessness and insecurity she had begun to experience in Iraq during the reign of Saddam Hussein (1979–2006).

Nonetheless, feelings of insecurity, restlessness, and instability return to haunt Zainab's life when she finds herself entrapped in another abusive relationship. Despite being forced to forsake her homeland due to political and patriarchal oppression, her new situation turned out to be even worse. As soon as she realized that the man she married was a brutal rapist, her newly acquired sense of safety

immediately dissipated and she started to feel estranged. The marital house she inhabited did not feel like a home, and thoughts of escape started to form in her mind anew.

Fear, insecurity and indecisiveness have the ability to generate nostalgia and homesickness. After her marriage failed, Zainab wanted to go back to her homeland, but she knew that there was no place for her if she went back. Her nostalgic feelings did not disappear, however, they were redirected. The home she was eager to find could be anywhere, and she had to search for it instead of going back to where she came from.

For Zainab Salbi, home was her safe house in Iraq among her family members, before the coming of Saddam Hussein into their lives and becoming a threat to their wellbeing. The search for home, therefore, begins with looking for safety, and this is what urged Zainab to leave her homeland in the first place. Generally speaking, people would choose to be in a state of constant movement until they find a welcoming environment that may simulate home or replace it. Accordingly, when Zainab's first attempt to find home through marriage failed, her instincts instigated her to keep searching.

Later on, Zainab Salbi juxtaposes the sense of belonging and the freedom of choice and identification. Upon establishing her life away from her ex-husband, Zainab comments: “[h]ere, at last, I had an opportunity to read whatever I chose and say whatever I wanted.” (Salbi and Becklund, 2005) In fact, what she lacked in her previous “unhomely” homes was the freedom to be herself. This freedom, however, is retrieved when she finally moved out of her oppressive marriage and left for Washington D.C to pursue both her university education and a professional career.

In the chapter entitled “Becoming Zainab”, Salbi presented the newly-found home as an extremely effective element in her identity development and self growth, through acquiring the right to choose who she wants to be. Hence, she was going through the process of becoming herself, i.e. becoming Zainab. What is more important is that she was no longer “the pilot’s daughter”, as people in Iraq referred to her, or “Saddam’s friend” as her former husband called her and thought of her. That new home granted Zainab the freedom and the power to become herself.

Conclusion

In her memoir, Zainab Salbi highlights the relationship between the place and the self, foregrounding its importance in the process of growth. Her experiences in Iraq were as essential to her growth as were her experiences in the United

States. Moreover, her strive for empowerment was reinforced as her sense of place was successfully established. When Zainab demarcated her boundaries as an Iraqi woman in exile, her ethnic and gender identity created the starting point for her journey of self growth and identification. Thus, through her book, the woman claimed the home she lost decades ago, decolonized it, and in due course, made peace with it.

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Abstract

The notion of home is multilayered and complicated. Identifying oneself with a particular place and embracing it as a home is the creation of an emotional bond with it, a form of attachment that lasts as long as one feels safe in that place. Accordingly, multiple homes may also exist corresponding to one's attachment to certain places in particular. Finding one's home may sometimes become a process that results in one's self-discovery and growth along the way. In this article, Zainab Salbi's search for home(s) will be explored and analyzed throughout the different stages of her life. *Between Two Worlds* sketches the ambivalence that its author has undergone during her life in exile. Her identity formation, development and eventual maturity were determined by her continuous quest for home, and the woman she ultimately becomes is the result of her quest.

Keywords

Mornings in Jenin, cultural representation, language, untranslatability, adaptation, domestication.

مستخلص

يعد البيت مفهوما معقدا يمكن دراسته من عدة جوانب، حيث أن ارتباط هوية المرء بمكان معين واحتضانه كبيت هو إنشاء رابطة عاطفية معه، وهو أيضا شكل من أشكال الارتباط الذي يستمر مادام المرء يشعر بالأمان في ذلك المكان. وبالتالي هناك إمكانية تواجد عدة بيوت حسب الارتباط العاطفي للمرء بأماكن معينة على وجه الخصوص. في بعض الأحيان، قد يصبح عبء ثور الشخص على بيت بمثابة عملية يتولد عنها اكتشاف الذات والنمو خلال مختلف مراحلها. في هذا المقال، سيتم استكشاف وتحليل عملية بحث الكاتبة زينب سالي عن بيت (بيوت) خلال المراحل المختلفة من حياتها. يوضح "بين عالمين" التناقض الذي عاشته الكاتبة خلال تواجدها في المنفى. إن بحثها المتواصل عن البيت نتج عنه تشكل هويتها وتطورها ونضوجها النهائي، والمرأة التي أصبحت عليها الآن هي نتيجة سعيها.

الكلمات المفتاحية

هوية المكان، البحث عن البيت، الارتباط العاطفي، بين عالمين، زينب سالي

Résumé

La notion de "maison" est multicouche et compliquée. S'identifier à un endroit particulier et l'embrasser comme une maison est la création d'un lien émotionnel avec lui, une forme d'attachement qui dure aussi longtemps que l'on se sent en sécurité à cet endroit. En conséquence, il peut également exister plusieurs foyers correspondant à l'attachement à certains endroits en particulier. Trouver sa maison peut parfois devenir un processus qui se traduit par la découverte de « soi » et la croissance en cours de ce trajet. Dans cet article, la recherche de maison par Zainab Salbi sera explorée et analysée à travers les différentes étapes de sa vie. « Between Two Worlds » (Entre deux mondes) esquisse l'ambivalence qu'a subie son auteur au cours de sa vie en exil. Sa formation identitaire, son développement et sa maturité éventuelle ont été déterminés par sa quête continue de la maison ; et la femme qu'elle devient finalement est le résultat de sa quête.

Mots clés

Identité de lieu, La recherche de maison, L'attachement, Between Two Worlds, Zainab Salbi