



## The Sense of Belonging and Unhomeliness in When Mountains Weep: Coming of Age in Kurdistan



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### Abstract

The Sense of Belonging (SB) is a highlighted concept that has been a subject matter of various social disciplines such as education, geography, psychology, religion, and sociology. It is defined as people's experience of being involved in a system or environment so that they feel as an integral part of that system or the environment. It can be said that it is a primordial archetypical desire for human beings to develop and maintain a positive, durable, and remarkable interpersonal relationship with other human beings. Furthermore, it is claimed that the decrease or increase of this sense is correlated with Freud's concept of Heimlich or unheimlich, which is translated into English as uncanny, the term, which inspired Homi Bhabha to coin his renowned concept of unhomely. Considering the theories and explanations of Baumeister, Goodenow, and Alfred Adler on the concept of "Sense of Belonging" and regarding Homi Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness, this article portrays the protagonist Hamko's lack of Sense of Belonging stemmed from his "unhomely" situation due to his having been stateless.

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### 1. Introduction

Most of the studies on the concept of *Sense of Belonging* have been carried out on some certain groups of students and adolescents, who come from different ethnic and social classes from the mainstream. These studies designate the concept of *Sense of Belonging* under several various but identical phrases. For instance, Murray defines it as "the need for affection between people" (1938), Rogers regards it as "the need for positive regard from others" (1959), Baumeister & Leary, and Maslow put it as "belongingness" (1995, 1968), Ryan & Deci designate it as "the need for relatedness" (2000). Naturally, in line with the above designations, one can see slight

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differences when it comes to the definitions. For example, Ryan and Deci defines their concept “the need for relatedness” as one's striving to relate to and care for others, and having the feeling that the others care and are related to one's self (2000: 243). For Goodenow “sense of belonging” is the feeling of personally being accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the social environment’ (1993: 80). Baumeister & Leary suggest, “Much of what human beings do is done in the service of belongingness” (1995). They also claim that individuals have an intrinsic drive to build and preserve “at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (1995: 490). Alfred Adler regards the need of belongingness as a subject seeking a sense of superiority to counter a personal sense of inferiority (2007). In his, motivational hierarchy pyramid consisted of five segments, Maslow places “love/belonging” in the middle of the segments.

From these entire exceptions, one can conclude that “Sense of Belonging” (SB) has a great importance in individuals’ life. Moreover, it is possible to say that the more a person has this sense the more s/he will have a physical and mental health. In addition, this health will bring happiness and productivity from which the entire society will benefit. The SB occurs if a person has the sense of identity if s/he feels insecure and if there is a social connectedness in the territory s/he lives. As defined in Merriam Webster, Identity is the set of qualities and beliefs that make one person or group different from others.

When a person experiences or feels insecure, s/he instinctively exerts all his/her effort for survival and searches to attach himself/herself to a group or to an entity that will protect him/her from the danger. Baumeister exemplifies this situation by highlighting a child’s instinctive inclination to the parent due to the inability to survive and secure his/her needs (499, 1995). Otherwise, he claims, the subject feels helplessness and powerlessness, and such a situation, namely; the feeling of being helpless and powerless leads some negative psychological behaviors a few of which can be considered as fury, fear, and melancholy etc. (499, 1995).

## 2. Research Methods

I made an extensive research on the concept of “sense of belonging” through reading the theories and explanations of the prominent scholars, researchers, and psychiatrists who have laid down the theoretical bases. I also studied intensely on Freud’s concept Heimlich or unheimlich, and Homi Bhabha’s term “unhomeliness”. Considering the theories and explanations of on the concept of “Sense of Belonging” and regarding Homi Bhabha’s concept of unhomeliness, I tried to portray the protagonist Hamko’s lack of Sense of Belonging stemmed from his “unhomely” situation.

## 3. Results and Analysis

It is likely to suppose that, every novel is somewhat the biography of its author since it depicts the author’s fictionalized experiences, thoughts, and perception. *When Mountains Weep* is such a novel, which, through the protagonist Hamko’s way of life, portrays its author’s sense of not being at home in his own home. *When Mountains Weep* is a bildungsroman written by Gharbi Mustafa, an academic from University of Duhok, located in Iraqi Kurdistan Region. It depicts the maturation of a Kurdish boy growing up in 1990’s Iraq when Saddam Hussein, notorious for his severe human rights violation, was in reign. Narrated in the first person, the novel is told by the protagonist through his flashbacks. It is likely to claim that the author wrote the book based on a true story. In other words, it is a story about the aftermath of Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf War. After the war between Iran and Iraq, the Baath regime in Iraq ruled by Saddam Hussein put a genocide into action against the Kurds living in the north of Iraq. According to Human Rights Watch report in 1993 on Anfal\* in Iraq, it is claimed that the Baath Regime using conventional and chemical weapons killed around 100,000 Kurds.

The setting of the novel is northern Iraq, namely Iraqi Kurdistan. Where a “No-Fly Zone” was established by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France north of the 36th parallel and was enforced by American, British, and French aircraft after the Anfal Campaigns. Any of Saddam’s aircraft, including helicopters that attempted to fly in the restricted area was to be shot down. (Kelly, 2008:46)

Throughout the book, Hamko, the protagonist, is torn between his dreams and ethnic discrimination imposed by the Iraqi government. Unlike most people in the world, he is born in a land on which a people consisted of 40-

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\* The Anfal (meaning the “the Spoils” in Arabic) was an eight-stage military campaign that resulted in the deliberate murder of at least 50,000 and possibly 100,000 Kurds. During the Anfal, Iraqi forces used chemical weapons on numerous occasions against the Kurds. The Anfal lasted from late February to early September 1988. The victims, including women, children and the elderly, were selected because they were Kurds who remained on their traditional lands in zones outside of areas controlled by Baghdad. Following its investigations in 1992-1993, Human Rights Watch categorized the Anfal as a genocide against part of the Iraqi Kurdish population in the north. (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/06/22/q-anfal-trial>)

45 million have been living without a proper state since the ancient times. Kelly in his book titled *Ghosts of Halabja* suggests, "From, before the time of Xenophon (427–355 b.c.), this land was in the possession of the Kurds, who consider themselves indigenous to the region" (2008: p.11). He also underlines that "Kurds are an Aryan people and an ethnic group distinct from the Turks, Persians, and Arabs, although the majority of Kurds share the Islamic faith of those populations" (2008: p.11). Although the land (known as Karda by Ancient Sumerians, and Kardu by Babylonians) on which the Kurds have been living stretches across southeast of Turkey, northwest of Iran, northern Iraq, and northeast Syria—an area of around 75 000 square miles—(Kelly, 2008), and although they consist of 40-45 million sharing the same language, customs, and traditions, the Kurds could have never established a proper state. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the land on which Kurds inhabit were divided into four parts each of which is now controlled and ruled by four neighboring states (Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran). In the text of the 1954 Convention held by UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), Article 1 defines a stateless person as "someone who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law" (article 1 of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons). Statelessness is not a concept used only for migrants, it also denotes a person or a people who have never been abroad, having inhabited as the first residents of a certain geography governed by different cultures.

Among many causes of statelessness, discrimination based on ethnicity excludes large groups and even indigenous people of a land. Moreover, ethnicity, gender, race, and religion are the major reasons for discrimination. The underlying reasons for discriminating indigenous people of a land are mostly economic and political. Yet, Gharbi Mustafa, rather than setting the discrimination on an economic or political basis, he depicts the feelings and longings of a whole people via his protagonist's lack of 'sense of belonging', which most likely might have been triggered from their "unhomely" conditions resulted from their statelessness. What is striking about being stateless is that a community has nowhere to escape while being bombed as it is illustrated in *When Mountains Weep*. In an article published in *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Paul Weis describes statelessness as follows: "The stateless person has been called flotsam, a *res nullius*<sup>†</sup>, and has been compared to a vessel on the open sea, not sailing under any flag" (p1074: 1962). That is a stateless person is not under the protection of a state and vulnerable to any discriminative action.

In the light of all above explanations, this article aims to shed light on the life of little Hamko who lacks all the essential preconditions to form a sense of belonging; and who instinctively is in the search of some means that can help him feel that he belongs or is a part of a territory, a state, a culture or a group. For him, the only means is to take and complete his education 'even if it is in the language of his enemies.

In the very beginning of the book, it is emphasized that maltreatment, slavery and being despised in childhood in one's own land is among the worst experiences one may face in life. Such kind of experiences are the hints of a stolen childhood. Due to having been grown up without fulfilling the need to belong, even during one's happiest moment, the stolen childhood will come to mind and interrupt one's happiness. The cruelty faced in childhood, which is even unbearable in maturity, will most probably haunt in any moment of life. Hamko, long afterward the challenges he faced, remembers the old days while he is spectating the landscape and portrays the old days using a poetic language:

What to remember!  
 The first stick, striking down on my shaking hand  
 From a teacher unable to make me understand.  
 The first ugly truth: I was born a slave in my own land  
 The first tears, for a football I saw in my cousin's hand  
 The first shock, visiting the cemetery,  
 The first puzzle, losing my identity,  
 The first crime, living in poverty. (Mustafa 6).

From these poetic sentences, (which bluntly lay down the protagonist's detachments from the school, from the land he was born, from his childhood, from his ancestry, and from his identity) one can clearly perceive that the boy has lost the bounds and bases, which are necessary for a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging is not an intrinsic primordial asset that a newborn infant acquires. Individuals, day by day, create and consolidate their

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<sup>†</sup> **res nullius**: A thing belonging to no one whether because never appropriated (as a wild animal) or because abandoned by its owner but acquirable by appropriation. ("Res Nullius." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 9 Aug. 2016.)

sense of belonging by reciprocal attachments to the entities they encounter (be it a person, a school, the language, the government, the culture, the history, etc.). Hamko first loses his enthusiasm to his teacher, a figure that is considered to have an important role in the maturation of a child. A school is a place where a child first recognizes that s/he has some common characteristics with the others, among which 'speaking the same language' can be considered the most important one. At the first day of the school, he recognizes that he is an alien because he cannot understand the language being spoken at the school. All the objects, be it abstract or concrete, are uttered by different words and sounds that he has never heard. What is tragic for him is that he does not have the opportunity to learn in his language; he has to learn in his oppressors' language. It is likely to claim that it is the first time that he might have thought something is going wrong. He is being deracinated from his mother tongue through which he has perceived the entire outer world. It means that he has to leave all his affiliations behind in order to go to school and acquire the necessary qualification for his will. Thus, he loses his happiness and excitement, in other words, he loses his fundamental motivation about attending school on the first day. Baumeister & Leary, in this regard, suggest nine criteria that must be satisfied to conclude that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. The fourth one reads, "Failure to satisfy a fundamental motivation should produce ill effects that go beyond temporary affective distress" (498). He realizes that nobody speaks the way he does. He asks himself; "*Why do we speak differently in our home, and what was the strange language I am hearing away from home?*" (Mustafa 9).

Language is one of the three main agencies, which are considered important in the process of colonization, subjugation, and assimilation. The others are said to be religion and education. It has been proved that if individuals or people are exposed to these three tools, they will eventually lose their national or ethnic identities. In this regard, Pavlenko et al. underline the role of language as: "In some settings, languages function as markers of national or ethnic identities, in others as a form of symbolic capital or as a means of social control" (2004). While little Hamko is exposed to a foreign language he feels oppressed by the language used as a means of social control and being disappointed by his first school experiment, he decides not to go again; and shares his idea with his grandpa, who is an old Peshmerga. His grandpa replies; "After all these years, I've realized that a gun may protect you from your enemies and put a few coins in your pocket, but I've also learned that carrying a gun is not the way to a better life. So, little Hamko, go to school tomorrow and learn how to read and write, even if it's in the language of your enemies" (Mustafa 11).

It soon comes out that the curriculum at schools is designed as a tool to expand the discrimination and erase the national identities of the subjugated people. The textbooks are filled with discriminating mottos like "Long live the president" and "Long live the Arab nation". The students are forced to draw pictures of soldiers and tanks that lead to dissolution in a society. Unfortunately, the school teaches to a seven years old student to be a party to a war instead of doing its main duty. Obviously, the education is not on behalf of academic achievement. It is said in this context: "Extensive research on schooling, performance, and achievement has shown that negative cultural stereotypes about racial and ethnic minorities can exert debilitating effects on minority youths' academic achievement" (Bobo and Fox, 2003). Hamko's resistance to his teacher who wants him to draw the picture of Iraqi army attacking the Kurdish outlaws shows that children grow mature than their age in wartime. Hamko, obviously not alienated to his people, replies defiantly to his insistent teacher: "I will not draw what you ask, Teacher, because those men are Peshmergas<sup>‡</sup> and not outlaws" (Mustafa 11). Unaware of the seriousness of the words he told, Hamko will not be punished for his words as a child, however; when he is at the age of high school, he will be called up to military service to fight against Peshmergas and have nothing to do except obeying the commands as he is grown enough to see the reality.

The poetic language goes on telling about the childhood memories. The author portrays "the first ugly truth as being born a slave in one's own land" (Mustafa, 6). That means you are born to a miserable future with full of ambiguity. The UNHCR report reveals the situation as "Stateless children are born into a world in which they will face a lifetime of discrimination; their status profoundly affects their ability to learn and grow and to fulfil their ambitions and dreams for the future" (UNHCR, 2015). The need to belong to the ancestral lands where one is born is vital since s/he naturally internalizes it as his/her home. In his text titled *Unhomely Lives: The Literature of Recognition*, Homi Bhabha, citing Frantz Fanon, underlines that it is important for the subordinates to assert their indigenous cultural traditions and recover their repressed histories (1994: 9). It is natural that in the case of suppression and subjugation, one eventually will experience the feeling of alienation and s/he will most

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<sup>‡</sup> Peshmerga: The literal meaning of the term is—'one who confronts death' They form the military forces of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. [...] The peshmerga forces are responsible to defend the land, institutions and people of the Kurdistan region. (Seddon, David. (2004) *A Political and Economic Dictionary of the Middle East*, Europa Publication, London.

probably lose the sense of belonging and homeliness. Having been inspired by Freud's term *unheimlich* which has been translated into English as *uncanny*, Bhabha coined the term *unhomely* denoting "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations." For Bhabha, as he explains, "the term "home" does not signify a physical object; or *unhomely* doesn't mean being without a physical home or shelter. For him, as Elisenda Masgrau Peya indicates, *unhomeliness* is a question of being forced to renegotiate one's place in the world (2004: 60). For Bhabha, she claims, "*unhomeliness* is most readily identified in the experience of migrants and postcolonial people, for whom geographic or cultural dislocation are defining traits either because they have been uprooted from former places of identification or because a familiar place has undergone radical change as a result of its colonial past or present" (2004: 60). This is a psychological condition of feeling unsafe in a familiar place, unfamiliar within the familiar as Freud puts it; or *unhomely* situation within one's own home as Bhabha explains. Freud explains this feeling as: "The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *Heimlich*, meaning "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (1919: 2). Hamko's uttering "the first ugly truth as being born a slave in one's own land"(Mustafa, 6) is an obvious mark that he feels *unhomely* at his ancestral home; in other words, this is his second and the most vital moment that he feels the need to belong, or the need to feel safe and in peace at his home.

Reading the novel, one can easily infer that the protagonist is in a desperate search of a means to attach himself in order to not to lose his sense of belonging. Upon losing his belonging sense for the school, for his language, for his land, which can be considered as his home, he desperately feels that he needs a tie to attach himself to. When he becomes a university student, for the first time, he falls in love. This is the first time he feels like an individual in a conservative country where he is oppressed in all aspects. However, Hamko's dream does not last long as chemical and conventional weapons attacked his people. Thus, Hamko once again could not fulfill his need to belong.

As it has been mentioned previously that every novel carries some hints from its author, one can infer that the protagonist Hamko is a fictionalized character who represent his creator. Gharbi Mustafa, through this novel, tells us about his life. He fictionalizes the lives of a people who live in their homes without feeling safe; a people desperately searching for a bond to the land where they have been living from the ancient times, a bond to their language, a bond to their culture. Through Hamko's experiences, one witness that Hamko's people are forced to leave all their filial, geographical, cultural and historical bonds. The writer illustrates that even the seasons make Hamko and his people to feel the sense of homelessness or *uncanniness*. When Hamko runs away from the attack and heading for Turkey border, he realizes that a new spring is coming soon, seeing the blossoms on the trees. Spring is used as a key symbol because what it evokes for the Kurdish is different from what it evokes to other societies. Hamko states: "In my country, spring brings us hope, the beauty of the land – and tragedy. People feel uncomfortable because it's the time of the year when trouble begins" (Mustafa 92). While the coming of spring is celebrated and welcomed by the Kurdish, on the other hand, it is a foreshadowing of an upcoming bloody assault. The author portrays Spring as a time when both happiness and pain is experienced at the same time. Spring is a time for the Kurdish when suddenly a huge explosion can shatter the restful atmosphere. This excerpt implies that Hamko and his people are on the verge of the fulfillment of the need to belong or being deprived of the sense of belonging. The fulfillment of this need, as Maslow suggests, is likely to lead them to have positive emotions such as happiness, self-esteem, feeling safe and individual productivity. But, on the other side, being deprived of this sense and feeling insecure at their own home will most probably lead them to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, lack of social contribution, depression, high level of stress, suicides, drug abuse, criminal tendency, etc. (Maslow, 1968).

Towards the end of the novel, upon being assaulted by chemical gases, Hamko's people run to the border of Turkey leaving all their assets back. However, reaching the border does not mean that they are in safety. They are trapped in the border. While the Iraqi military forces bomb the crowd to banish them, Turkey side beats the crowd back. This scene is likely to be considered that being without a proper state is the main reason for Hamko and his people's *uncanny* situation. They are not accepted in the lands they have been living for thousands of years. Their only hope is that the Turkish side will let them cross the border. Meanwhile, an angry man who can't bear the sufferings anymore invokes the God and shouts; "God, why don't you stop this rain? Can't you see we are dying down here? Or, like Bush, have you made a pact with Saddam and will get a share of his oil for letting him massacre us"? (Mustafa, 102). However, the problem is that a stateless community is a stateless community, which means that they have nowhere to escape even during a bombardment. In the climax of the assault, having the unbearable sense of *uncanniness*, and losing their hopes to one of the last two bonds that they have reserved

for the worst times, namely losing their hopes in god, now they have only the mountains to rely on and feel secure.

It comes out that in spite of all the hindrances and difficulties that Hamko experiences in the process of searching for some means that will lead him to feel a sense of belonging and live in a peaceful homely land; one can infer that he has a profound bound to the mountains scattered all along his homeland. In case of he could not find any shelters, the mountains are his faithful, loyal home where he can fulfill his need to belong. The mountains are depicted as strong structures, which shake but never fall. Gharbi Mustafa depicts the mountains as follows: “The mountains have always been there to share our good times and our tragedies. They have been our only true friends. When we are in agony, they hear our screams echo through their valleys, blending with the cries of the eagles. Then the mountains weep their white tears into streams that flow down their sides” (Mustafa 94).

Boon Lim, in an article written on belongingness, draws a matrix table consisted of four segments.

	Voluntary	Non-Voluntary
Social Inclusion	Social Inclusion Voluntary	Social Inclusion non-Voluntary
Social Exclusion	Social Exclusion Voluntary	Social Exclusion non-Voluntary

SocialInclusion/Exclusion-vs.-Volition(Takenfrom [http://myweb.fsu.edu/bhl08/others/C\\_Belongingness.pdf](http://myweb.fsu.edu/bhl08/others/C_Belongingness.pdf))

As Lim claims, social inclusion and social exclusion are the most commonly discussed topics regarding the sense of belonging. Here, he evaluates both interactions via different level of volition. The above table tells us the combination of social settings. The first combination, namely social inclusion-voluntary, is considered as the most desirable situation since people who voluntarily accept to be a part of a social circumstance, or who are voluntarily accepted to a social circumstance will most likely feel happy, secure and confident with a sense of satisfaction. The second quadrant (social inclusion, non-voluntary) depicts a people or a person who forcefully (due to some certain reasons) participates in a relationship or organization that he has not any affiliations. In case of the third quadrant (social exclusion-voluntary), the subject is enthusiastic to depart himself from the group or organization. Explaining the matrix table, Lim claims that the last quadrant is the most scrutinized one since people in this state have to face and challenge extreme cognitive, emotional and motivational obstacles for their well-being and survival (Lim, 12).

Studying on the concept of belonging, one can easily recognize that most of the studies are focused on the sense and feeling of the subjects who non-voluntarily are forced to leave their habitats. Additionally, all these studies conclude that be it a people or an individual, “those who are involuntarily socially excluded by the dominant and oppressive cultures display increased violent behavior, poorer intellectual performance, a loss of pro-social behavior, and a susceptibility to self-defeating behavior patterns” (Lim, 13). In line with the explanation above, John Horgan, a psychologist from Pennsylvania State University has found that people who are more open to terrorist recruitment and radicalization tend to:

- Feel angry, alienated or disenfranchised.
- Believe that their current political involvement does not give them the power to effect real change....
- Believe that joining a movement offers social and psychological rewards such as adventure, camaraderie and a heightened sense of identity. (2008, 16)

Asking the question that why all those foreign fighters join to ISIS, Horgan says, “As far as foreign fighters are concerned, they are driven to join ISIS by the need to “belong to something special. They want to find something meaningful for their life,” he said. (2008, 17).

#### 4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, one can infer that subjects, be it an individual or a people, who are rejected and forced to live at their homes without a sense of homeliness or canniness, are more susceptible to an individual or societal chaos and complications. Because, as Lim also puts it “social rejection causes people to be less willing to improve themselves from their shortcomings. Understanding the cause-effect for social interactions vs. individual volition will help solve many societal problems through promotions of socially inclusive activities, ideology, and acceptance.”

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