

Reflective Portfolio: Navigating Between Cultures — My Journey from Iran to Belgium

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Introduction

My journey from Iran to Brussels has been a profound voyage of self-discovery, cultural negotiation, and personal growth. Moving from a relatively homogeneous society to one of the most internationally diverse cities in Europe has opened my eyes to both the richness and complexity of intercultural experiences. This portfolio reflects on my international experience, emphasizing the interplay between my Iranian identity and the multicultural, multilingual environment of Brussels and Belgium at large.

This reflection aims to demonstrate my personal development through the challenges and opportunities presented by living in a culturally diverse context. It also explores the intercultural awareness I have cultivated by engaging with different languages, customs, and worldviews. By analyzing my experiences, I hope to provide insight into the dynamic and sometimes overwhelming nature of cross-cultural living.

My Background: Life in Iran — A Homogeneous Yet Warm Society

Growing up in Iran, I lived in a society characterized by a relatively homogeneous culture and language. This was not, in any way, a negative aspect but rather a defining element of my early life. Iran is a country where the majority of people speak Persian (Farsi) and share a rich cultural heritage steeped in hospitality, warmth, and deep interpersonal connections. Despite economic and geopolitical challenges, the sense of community and the feeling of belonging were pervasive and reassuring.

In Iran, it was rare to encounter foreigners, and the cultural fabric was closely knit. People greet each other warmly, and a tradition of hospitality permeates daily life. These features created a comfortable, secure environment where everyone seemed connected through language, customs, and shared experiences.

This closeness, however, came with a degree of isolation. My worldview was limited to what I could experience within this cultural bubble and the narratives presented in local and international media. Interactions with people from different cultures or countries were scarce, and my knowledge about the broader world was incomplete, often shaped by external representations rather than direct experience.

Arrival in Brussels: Entering a World of Diversity and Complexity

Brussels, the capital of Belgium, is often described as an international city, a melting pot of cultures and languages. Unlike Iran's relatively uniform cultural landscape, Brussels presents a vibrant mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and traditions. The city is situated at the crossroads of the country's two main regions: Flanders and Wallonia, each with its own language (Dutch and French, respectively), laws, and cultural nuances. Brussels

itself is officially bilingual and home to many immigrants, diplomats, and international institutions, further amplifying its diversity.

Living in Brussels means engaging with a variety of cultures daily; Arabs, Turks, Africans, Europeans from different nations, and many others contribute to the city's rich social tapestry. This multicultural environment offers unparalleled opportunities for learning and intercultural dialogue but also presents unique challenges.

For example, unlike other international cities such as New York, where multiculturalism can sometimes feel dispersed, Brussels has a more compact yet layered structure of cultural communities, intertwined with political and linguistic complexities. The coexistence of multiple languages and legal systems in one city added a new dimension to my experience that I had never encountered before.

The Duality of My Experience: Enrichment and Overwhelm

This shift from a relatively homogeneous society to a multicultural environment has been, metaphorically speaking, like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, I am deeply grateful for the exposure to diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives. I have met people from countries I had barely heard of before and I have learned about their histories, languages, and ways of life. This interaction has expanded my worldview, enriched my understanding of humanity, and challenged many preconceived notions.

On the other hand, this overwhelming diversity often makes me feel disoriented and isolated. Constantly encountering new cultural norms, languages, and ways of thinking can be exhausting. Sometimes I wonder if I am suited for this environment or if I would have been happier staying in the familiar and stable cultural context of Iran.

This sense of ambivalence is not uncommon among immigrants and international students. It represents the tension between the comfort of belonging and the challenge of adapting to the unfamiliar. I often find myself grappling with feelings of alienation despite being surrounded by people. This emotional complexity is one of the most profound aspects of my international experience.

Facing Cultural Misunderstandings and Stereotypes

One of the persistent challenges I have faced relates to being Iranian in a context where the media often portrays my country through a limited or negative lens. People frequently ask me questions based on stereotypes or misinformation, such as whether it snows in Iran or about the country's laws. These questions usually stem from genuine curiosity, but their repetition sometimes feels tiresome and alienating.

I also notice that if I belonged to another nationality, I might not be asked such questions so often. Explaining my language and culture repeatedly can feel like a burden. This necessity to explain myself has heightened my awareness of being perceived as "other" and increased feelings of loneliness.

Participating in international programs like EUTOPIA and attending seminars or hackathons has provided me with a safer and more understanding environment to discuss these issues. These platforms allow me to connect with others who share similar intercultural experiences, reducing my sense of isolation.

Learning and Personal Growth: Expanding Worldviews

Through my international experience, I have realized how limited my knowledge of the world was before moving abroad. I had never heard of many countries or understood their cultural and social contexts. Meeting people from diverse backgrounds prompted me to educate myself about their countries, their geography, population, culture, and challenges.

This process of learning has fundamentally reshaped my understanding of humanity. I now appreciate that good and bad traits exist in every culture and nationality; it is inappropriate to generalize based on ethnicity or nationality. This insight has deepened my empathy and open-mindedness.

At the same time, I have gained a renewed appreciation for my own culture. Iran's relative isolation has preserved a rich history and culture that I am proud to belong to, not in a nationalistic or exclusionary sense, but as a core part of my identity.

Despite this growth, I continue to grapple with feelings of dual or multiple identities. I constantly compare my home culture with my new environment, and this ongoing reflection sometimes feels overwhelming. Yet, it motivates me to find meaningful ways to engage with diverse cultures while maintaining my own roots.

The Concept of “Third Culture Kid/Adult” and Its Impact on My Identity

During my participation in the EUCI seminar, I was introduced to the psychological concept of the “Third Culture Kid” (TCK) and its less commonly discussed counterpart, the “Third Culture Adult.” These terms describe individuals who spend a significant part of their developmental years or, in the case of adults, formative experiences in cultures different from their parents' or place of origin. Over time, such individuals often develop a unique cultural identity that blends elements of their home culture with those of their host country, forming what is often referred to as a “third culture.”

This concept struck a powerful chord with me. I realized that I had been thinking about this phenomenon long before I even knew it had a name. I've often contemplated what it would mean for a child especially my own potential future children to grow up in a culture that is not entirely their own. Would they feel torn between identities? Would they ever feel truly at home anywhere? Would they speak the language of their ancestors, and if not, would that create a barrier between generations? These questions have quietly occupied space in my mind for years.

Before encountering this terminology, I always assumed that such a hybrid identity would inevitably result in confusion or a fragmented sense of self. But learning more about the TCK concept allowed me to shift my perspective. Perhaps hybridity isn't a disadvantage, it might actually be a source of strength. The capacity to hold multiple cultural frames in one's identity, to navigate between worlds, and to communicate across cultural boundaries is a skill that the globalized world increasingly values.

I began to reflect more deeply: maybe these children, with their so-called "patchwork" identities, could end up more emotionally resilient and adaptable than those who grow up entirely immersed in a single culture. Maybe having to constantly switch codes—linguistically, socially, and emotionally, builds muscles that many of us, who were raised monolingual and monocultural, don't even realize we're missing until we step outside our bubble.

Interestingly, this realization also made me re-examine my own identity as someone who, for most of her life, lived within a single cultural framework. My roots are firmly Iranian, and for years, I considered that cultural identity to be a stable and singular foundation. But now, living abroad and navigating an entirely different cultural landscape on a daily basis, I find that my own sense of self is evolving too. I may not be a traditional Third Culture Kid, but as I move between languages, values, customs, and social expectations, I am slowly becoming something in-between, a hybrid in my own right.

This transformation is not without its discomforts. There are moments when I feel culturally dislocated when I'm not "enough" of either culture to feel fully at home. I sometimes feel like an outsider in my host country, where I constantly navigate unfamiliar norms, and yet I also notice how distant I've become from aspects of my home culture that once felt natural. It's an odd sense of floating of always belonging "partially" but never completely. And yet, there's something liberating in that too. There's room to grow, to question, to redefine.

In many ways, my growing understanding of TCKs has given me language for feelings I hadn't previously been able to name. It's helped me think about identity not as a fixed point, but as a process an evolving, ongoing negotiation shaped by place, people, memory, and language. It's also made me more open to the idea that my identity is allowed to shift. That embracing change doesn't mean abandoning my roots it might mean honoring them more deeply by choosing consciously what to carry forward.

Moreover, this realization extends beyond just myself. I now look at others my peers, my future children, the people I meet from around the world and realize that identity is increasingly a fluid, layered experience for many of us. Perhaps, rather than trying to anchor ourselves in one clear label or culture, we should begin to see ourselves as bridges people who can span the space between, rather than being limited by it.

Understanding the Third Culture experience didn't just give me insight into others it gave me a tool for understanding myself, especially in moments when I feel like I'm "in between." It's a reminder that in a globalized, mobile world, cultural fluidity is no longer an exception it's becoming the norm. And with that comes both challenge and opportunity. It's a double-edged sword, yes, it can feel disorienting or overwhelming at times, but it also offers a richness of perspective that is rare and valuable.

This part of the seminar helped me move from a sense of anxiety about hybrid identities to a more grounded appreciation for them. It has made me less afraid of cultural complexity, both in myself and in others, and more curious about the diverse ways people construct belonging in today's interconnected world.

Language and Communication: Navigating a Multilingual Environment

Language has been both a tool and a challenge throughout my experience. Brussels is officially bilingual, with French and Dutch as the primary languages, and English widely used as a lingua franca. While many French speakers have varying degrees of comfort with English, I have mostly been able to communicate effectively in English.

I realize that learning at least one of the official languages is essential for deeper integration and daily life, and I am actively working towards that goal.

Interestingly, I have also learned the power of nonverbal communication. Often, gestures, facial expressions, and tone can bridge language gaps, allowing meaningful interaction even when verbal language fails. This realization has broadened my appreciation for the diverse ways humans connect beyond words.

Impact on Future Life and Goals

This intercultural journey has shaped not only my present experience but also my future aspirations. I now understand the value of cultural sensitivity and flexibility in an increasingly globalized world. I aspire to integrate this intercultural competence into my personal and professional life.

Whether through further international collaborations, intercultural projects, or educational endeavors, I intend to continue expanding my horizons. I also hope to create spaces where people from diverse backgrounds can feel welcome and understood, much like the supportive environments I have sought out.

Moreover, I am committed to honoring my own cultural heritage while embracing the plurality of identities that modern life offers. This balance will be fundamental in how I approach relationships, work, and community engagement in the future.

Conclusion: Embracing the Double-Edged Sword of Intercultural Experience

In conclusion, my experience transitioning from Iran to Brussels embodies the double-edged nature of intercultural living. While the exposure to diverse cultures and

perspectives is deeply enriching and educational, it can also be overwhelming and emotionally taxing.

Despite these challenges, I consciously choose to engage with this complex reality. I seek out opportunities such as EUCI seminars, international programs, and social events that provide supportive spaces for dialogue and growth.

This reflective journey has increased my self-awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and resilience. It has taught me that while cultural diversity can feel like a sword that cuts both ways, it is also a powerful force for personal transformation and connection.