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A SEMIOTIC INVESTIGATION OF THE MEANINGS
ABDUCTED FROM THE CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS OF WAR:
STORYTELLING THROUGH DRAWINGS

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Abstract:

Drawing is a vital tool used in understanding people, especially children, with the use of visual media as a means of expressing their emotions, as well as the use of different forms of images that emerge on a drawing surface. Therefore, it is significant to understand that children can use different forms of drawing media to articulate their inner feelings as well as making their thoughts understandable to others. This study, based on the belief that the art works of child survivors furnish materials for analysis, focuses on meaning-making of the drawings of the child survivors of war through semiotics investigation, thereby exposing the stories of war through the lens of the child survivors. This made use an analytical research design to investigate the poster narratives drawn by the participants who were living in the two temporary shelters of Marawi last September 2020. The researcher had meaningful meaning-making of the drawings and the findings of the study include: conceptualization of the *masjid* (mosque) as a sanctuary during war; definition of religion as a wellspring of resiliency, demarking peace as the absence of war, and highlighting the role of *kambangsa* (clanship) amidst danger, and from all of these, a grand narrative of the child survivors of Marawi Siege was written. The meanings abducted from the drawings led to the narratives of the child-survivors- narratives that may have been left unspoken and unheard after all these years of trying to live a normal life as young, gentle and innocent children of the city. This supported the claims that children are thinkers with knowledge of their own sensations, thoughts, beliefs and other mental states. Finally, this study implied that drawings are rich sources for semiotic discourse despite the limitations at hand.

Keywords:

Semiotics, Grand Narrative, Drawings, War, Narratives, Themes, Child-Survivors

Introduction

Drawing is a dialectical platform that children may use through visual media, different forms of images, lines, colors and other elements in expressing their emotions. Therefore, it is significant to understand that children can use different forms of drawing media to articulate their inner feelings as well as making their thoughts understandable to others. Moreover, this study based on the belief that the art works of child survivors furnish materials for analysis, focuses on unveiling the meanings of symbols or objects and other elements in the visual narratives of the child survivors through semiotics. In the primitive times up to this day, art has been undeniably a strong medium for communication, such as the cave paintings discovered in Lascaux, France which have become the source of the experts in gathering and understanding the traces of one's roots. At present, art still plays the same role for people to communicate between one another. Elin (2012) adds that when people are unable to communicate verbally to others, then people turn to signs or symbols to express one's self. Thus symbols or signs can be abstract, realistic or semi abstract symbolic form or just body languages with symbols, sign, or sound.

The corpus for analysis in this study consisted of the drawings created by kids as a semiotic instrument to convey a specific message. Therefore, meaning-making was not examined in terms of how children generate knowledge from a developmental standpoint. Rather, a social semiotic approach was applied to the process of meaning-making as it related to the messages that children drew and wrote to express how they felt about the Marawi Siege. This study helped to make sense of the drawings by illuminating the messages the children were trying to get across about how the siege affected the community as a whole.

Literature Review

This part reviews literature and studies of other researchers and writers related to the present study. These are from local and foreign writers whose literature and studies reinforce the information of the current study. This includes a thorough discussion of the following key points: Children's Drawing and Its Theories and The Children of War.

Children's Drawing and its Theories

Drawings are defined by several authorities as instruments of representation and as a cultural resource to share meanings. Brooks (2009) defines the terms as a product of mental abilities of the artist. Poster narrative, similar with drawing, is a personal expression, but it can also be a way of communication. Children do not have enough ability to express themselves in abstract language, but they do have methods of symbolic communication, such as this tool. Children can communicate with familiar people through pictures; life skills development, etc. It is believed that children can communicate with people they trust, develop life skills and develop a sense of trust. Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) document that children's drawing has a

development process that accompanies the development of emotion, social psychology and perception. The children draw what they know in their own style. This means there is a process of functioning and interacting of perception, sensibility, emotion and motor skills.

In a parallel study, Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) contemplate that children's drawings have attracted widespread attention from teachers and educators. The facial expressions illustrated by the children are inherent in their nature. Children's drawings are unique and can provide accurate information about young artists, accordingly, analyzing children's drawings is an attempt to explore their views on world issues. The study of children's drawings can be traced back to the 19th century. There are three main types of research on the emotional expression of children's drawings. First of all, painting is analyzed as a form of expression of personality traits, which is mainly explained by Freud in the psychoanalytic theory and its derived theoretical framework. Second, it is mainly confirmed in the works of Koppitz (1968) as cited by Farokhi and Hashemi (2011), where he tries to develop and scientifically prove the classification of "emotional indicators" in children's drawings. Lastly, this type is related to the ways in which normal children depict personally important or emotionally significant topics, rather than with personality assessment or clinical diagnosis. Children's drawings are analyzed to explore their view of major problems in the world today and in the future.

Finally, in studying children's drawing, the organization and order of characters are very significant. According to Edwards (2016), there is an affective connotation of the location of the characters in a drawing. As a provided example, in a drawing, when parents are put together, this stresses the parental block, or separated by a child, who can be the same drawer. Whether this separation does not show devaluation, it may mean that the child between the parents is in a privileged position, may need protection, or may even express reliance to the parents. In a family, the normal order of hierarchy is father first, then mother and child (from oldest to young). However, it is a common order, especially for children, to paint mothers first and then fathers. This feature may also suggest the extra dependence that mostly kids commonly have to their mothers.

The Children of War

Children's struggle memoirs are gaining recognition in literary publishing, according to Berents and Prellis (2020). Using narratives of kids' conflicts, combined with memoirs, enables kids to triumph over distance and abstraction. Testimonies provide a counter-narrative to dominant characterizations of kids in war as passive victims. Even as violence and conflict crush their lives, children's war memoirs show them finding ways to navigate, resist, and survive. As a matter of fact, in an article *Through The Eyes of A Child: Refugee Children Speak About Violence: A Report on Participatory Assessments Carried out with Refugee and Returnee Children in Southern Africa 2005– 2007* published by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) (2009), it was perceived that war impacts kids in several ways similarly that it impacts adults. There are, nonetheless, particular consequences on kids. It is mentioned in this article that firstly, children's right of entry to the care, empathy, and interest of adults who love them is regularly constrained or non-existent. In instances of war, the dispossession of a mother and father, the separation from parents, the mother and father's intense preoccupation with defensive and finding subsistence for the family, and the emotional unavailability of depressed or distracted parents cause tremendous and common disruption of

their attachments. As Barbara (2006) adds that in a few cases, children can be in alternative or transient care with a person who has restricted connections or familiarity with them (remote household or neighbors, an orphanage). Children who have lost their safety during war are often referred to as "unaccompanied children."

At times, the outcomes of battle on children appear overwhelming and insurmountable, however there may be hope. It is important that people around them understand that those kids are frequently notably resilient and own an extraordinary preference to live to tell the tale and thrive. To do so, they do want the proper environment, in addition to protection, care, and support. When they do enjoy such situations they remarkably, if now no longer miraculously, thrive, recover, and conquer the difficult, part of their lives. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2009) points out that this is an important factor and it must shape the premise for educators and others who work with war-affected children within the field, or within the nations and groups to which refugee children immigrate and resettle. It is suggested that everyone should be looking for means to construct on their very own resilience, strengths, and capabilities. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2009) adds that educational programs and associated programs must try to present younger human beings the sources and possibilities to rebuild their very own lives and create the protecting surroundings with a purpose to permit them to do so.

Thus, Berents and Preli (2020) emphasize the importance of stories narrated by children of war to help concerned sectors better understand children's experiences. With their high-quality form, they could be used to mobilize action, support, and funding so that kids' future is kept in mind while addressing their conflicting struggles. In addition to educating readers about complexities of conflict and violence, they show how resilient and determined children living in war zones are.

Research Instruments & Methods

The focus of this study was to the child survivors of Marawi Siege aged ten to twelve years old in the aforementioned two temporary shelters. This made use of an analytical research design to investigate the poster narratives drawn by the participants who were living in the two temporary shelters of Marawi last September 2020. This study utilized poster narratives as the main instrument and got 30% sampling of the population of each mentioned transitory shelter. The drawings were analyzed to deduce the meanings in order to relate these with that of the participants' expressions of terror and survival during the siege. The researcher met the participants in the transitory shelters and instructed them to draw their memories of what transpired during the Marawi Siege.

The researcher used the following instruments to be able to answer the research questions posed: 1) Drawings as the main instrument in this research were collected as outputs of the respondents. These drawings served as the corpus of the study in order to deduce meanings present in the drawings and to better understand respondents' expression of terror and survival during the siege; 2) Interview Schedule was also administered to the respondents in order to validate or support the abducted meanings of the poster narratives with the actual explanations of the respondents on their drawings of the Marawi Siege; 3) Counselling also served as an intervention to ensure that the respondents' well-being is given due significance. This was

administered through an activity where respondents were able to freely say what they felt and thought about the activity.

The researcher conducted the gathering of data needed for this study at the two temporary shelters of Marawi, namely: Boganga and Rorogagus Phase 1 and 2. During the data gathering procedure, the researcher adhered to several procedures such as: entry protocol, drawing process, drawing collection, counseling to the respondents and interview. Of similar importance, this study was conducted with careful adherence to ethical considerations on the following: 1) Voluntary Participation where respondents were informed to freely join or not during the whole process of the conduct of the study, at any point in time should they feel uncomfortable with any of the data gathering procedures. Furthermore, it was also explained to the respondents, along with their parents or guardians and the shelter head, the purpose of the study and how the gathered data are treated; 2) Informed Consent through a letter of consent was given to the parents of the respondents even before they were sent to the meeting area; 3) Confidentiality of the identity of the respondents was also highly regarded.

Results and Discussion

Analyzing works of art permits for the critical examination and improvement of those topics that go beyond historic eras. These analyses permit people to apprehend that sure subjects are not absolutely difficult to understand and may be as applicable nowadays as they had been hundred years ago. In this study, the researcher is able to abduct several meanings in general from the drawings of the children-participants, these meanings are: Masjid as an Image of Survival, Religion as a Wellspring of Resiliency, Peace is the Absence of War, *Kambangsa* Amidst Danger, and to capture all of these, the Children's Narrative of the Marawi Siege.

Masjid as an Image of Asylum

Following several of the narrations of the participants, particularly those of participants 1, 2 and 4 (see appendices), it is inferred that the *masjid* is conceptualized by the participants not just as an image representation of a religion, but, in this paper, much more of an image of asylum. It is mentioned in the previous interviews by the participants that they have found sanctuary in the different *masjids* during the Marawi Siege.

Although not majority of the poster narratives include *masjid* as an apparent visual image, it is considered significant by the researcher due to the actual narrations of the participants. As a matter of fact, it is mentioned several times in the narrations that most of them go to the *masjid* and even stay there for days seeking asylum. In general, a *masjids* or mosques serve as the center of community empowerment since the time of the Prophet. Though the mosque can play a wide range of roles and have an infinite scope, in its development and through the changing times, the mosque has become increasingly minimalist and restricted to worship only. However, the manner the participants fashion the image of a *masjid* in their narrations capture the researcher most significantly as it turns the meaning of a *masjid* into an image of asylum, thus survival.

It is already universally accepted that a *masjid* is a representation of Islam as a place of worship for its believers. However, in the poster narratives, the participants are able to conceptualize the image of a *masjid* as a sanctuary during war which is a product of their social and cultural

interactions with the object during the siege. Based on the narrations, families and individuals, Muslims and Non-Muslims alike find asylum in the masjid while believing they would not be harmed when inside the *masjids*. The moves of the social actors in the poster narratives to run in the *masjids* is a sign which is a socially motivated carrier of the meaning of the masjid as an image of asylum. This is primarily inferred because based on the narrations, the social actors, who may or may not be Muslims, do not find any other way out, except to either leaving the city or hiding in the *masjids*.

In the recent study of Abdussalam (2024), it was revealed in the visual images in the drawings that the masjids are dominant image found in the drawings. In this study, there are some drawings which only include an image of a masjid before and after the siege. This inclusion of the place of worship of the Muslims is reflective of the mental knowledge of the participants of the setting of the siege, in a place with dominant structures of masjids being primarily an Islamic City. Moreover, in the framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), it sees the form of expression of an idea or emotion as a differentiating factor in understanding the message, as this framework believes that verbal or visual expression makes a difference. This framework primarily defines Visual Image, as a language, as nebulous and is culturally and socially defined. It further discusses that Images speak through signs. A sign is what constitutes the basis of what is formerly known as Social Semiotics. In their book *Reading Images*, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) draw examples from many domains, such as text books, websites, advertisements, magazine articles and so on to express their meaning making in their social practices. Here, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discuss forms (signifier) such as vector, modality, gaze, composition, perspective, line and color, as well as the way in which these forms are used to realize meanings (signified) in the making of signs.

Brooks (2009) adds drawing will frequently incorporate and portray the essence of a concept or idea. When those mind or ideas exist outside of the child, the child can then come up with the concept with regard to different ideas. Drawing, while used as a medium of exchange, can shape a dynamic feature that permits an elaboration of a preliminary concept and the definition of a concept. Moreover, the Maryland State Department of Education (2013) stated in the book *Creative Connections: Young Children and the Art* that when children participate in the artistic process, children learn to observe, organize and explain their experiences; they can make decisions, take actions and control the impact of these actions; they can create forms and meanings that did not exist before. This is a product of the artistic experience that recognizes the active role of children in learning. This experience provides them with many opportunities to construct and process the meaning conveyed through language and other means of expression. In addition, children's solitary exploration on open source materials and the stimulation process of participating in creating their own artistic expressions can be a meaningful experience for children.

Religion as a Wellspring of Resiliency

It is made perceptible by the participants in their poster narratives that religion, Islam in particular as the religion of the Meranaws, plays a substantial part in the survival of the child-victims and their families. This is depicted in several posters such as Drawings No. 1, 2, 3 and

4. In these particular posters, the participants put on view the images of social actors praying, some are accompanied with texts as discussed previously.

Meranaws, the inhabitants of Marawi, composed the majority number of the victims of the siege. Islam being the religion follows vastly in the city immensely teaches its believers of *sabr*, which means the ability to remain steadfast and patient while in any situations. In fact, this teaching is one of the two parts of faith of Islam. This teaching of *sabr*, as part of the religion, hugely partakes in sculpting the resiliency of the Meranaws particularly during adversity, that in this case was the Marawi Siege. It is also seen vital to note that most of these scenarios exhibiting the religious acts of praying by the social actors are placed usually at the center of the visual space, as if giving emphasis to its importance.

Moreover, as communicated in the poster narratives, there are scenarios exhibiting *tawakkul* (*putting complete trust to Allah*) by the social actors. This is another part of the religion that teaches its believers of complete reliance to God. For instance, Poster Narrative 2 shows a mother praying while the bombing of the city and the fire shot between the militants and military, this poster is accompanied by a text saying “Allah please save our city”. One more poster conveys a picture of a crying woman lifting her hands above, as if imitating the act of making *dua* (prayer) by the Muslims, the woman here also is wearing a Muslim clothing which could speak of her identity. In another narration, the respondent narrates that while they are leaving the city, her sister is playing a Qur’an recitation. These scenarios showcase the vantage point of resiliency as a result of the teachings of the religion. Hence, it is further deduced from the findings of this study that the participants conceptualize and illustrate the meaning of religion in their poster narratives not merely as a teaching but as a wellspring of resiliency which takes a significant role in their acceptance of the repercussions of the siege.

Kress and Leeuwen (1996) state that the approach of visual grammar starts from the social aspect. Its structure is not a simple reproduction of the structure of reality, but instead, producing a reality picture bonds to the interests of the social community that produces an image, circulate, and read it, so it becomes ideological. Meaning expressed by printmakers, photographers, designers, painters and sculptors in first and foremost are the social meanings. In addition, Leone (2020) argues that religion as a semiotic resource must not merely be focused on studying how language generates religious patterns of codification and meaningfulness, but also, conversely, how religious ideologies can influence the conception of meaning in even more mysterious ways. He adds that a semiotic analysis of religion must capture both the general dynamics of human reasoning and reflect the specificities of these dynamic processes, starting from abstract alternative ways of seeing the world.

As they point out, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) demonstrate that the visual structure of center plays an increasingly significant role in Asian visual semiotics as compared to Western visual semiotics, which can be explained in terms of cultural and social values. According to them, this tendency may be attributed to Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchy, harmony, and continuity, which makes centering a fundamental organizational principle within one's culture of visual semiotic. This idea is found in parallel with this study as it is mentioned previously that the participants seem to highlight the role of religion in staying resilient during the

adversity by their choice of framing the images of praying, along with texts at the center of the visual space.

Peace is the Absence of War

The meaning of peace as perceived by the participants is also demonstrated in the poster narratives. This conceptualization of peace by the participants are particularly evident in Poster Narratives 5 and 6. In the mentioned drawings, the participants make a comparison of their lives before and after the siege.

With the said comparison, the participants are able to illustrate their definition of peace. As seen from the poster narratives, their perception of peace is centered to the idea of a beautiful urban area, silent life, undestroyed houses and other buildings and a complete family. The participants make use of a juxtapose presentation of pre and post war, and from this the researcher draws the meaning of peace by the participants. Critically, peace is viewed by the participants as the absence of war where there are no destroyed houses, bombings, military, militants, migration, or any ruins. These children describe peace as the absence of war and conflict, the life before the battle between two forces, the absence of death and destruction. All the children draw inactive figures of houses, cars, and trees and they describe peace as their lives in the past, and with these come the implications that these children first understand the concept of war before they conceive peace in their innocent minds.

In a much related study of Farokhi, M. and Hashemi, M. (2011) entitled *The Analysis of Children's Drawings: Social, Emotional, Physical and Psychological Aspects* which significantly shows that drawing is in the same field of expressions as speech. It is revealed in this study that through drawings, children express their happiness, dreams, pain, etc. Not only an understanding of their relationship with the world and other things, but the children's artwork represents their individual vision. Moreover, with regard to the study *Children Express: War and Peace Themes in the Drawings of Iraqi Refugee Children in Jordan* by Jabbar and Betawi (2018), it is revealed that even if the drawings of younger children are not detailed and only show some figures, children under the age of 4 can understand the concept of war. Many of the children who participate in the study do not directly experience the deaths of relatives and friends, but are still able to describe the war and its consequences in detail in their paintings. The children of Iraqi refugees share something with their peers upon resettling, they give the peace new meaning and become peacemakers in Piaget's accommodation phase.

Clearly, human beings have adopted positive characteristics as symbols of peace. In the course of history, peace has been considered essential to human survival, as well as to the development of nations (Baltork, Mansoori, and Azad, 2015; Bar-Tal, 2002). Peace may be defined as the absence of war or violence among relevant parties in a harmonious relationship based on mutual benefit (Johnson and Johnson, 2006). Two features of definitions of peace appear to be significant in the literature when analyzing the definitions of peace in the literature. There are two main characteristics of peace: the first is social dimension, and the second is that peace is accepted equally in all cultures (Fogarty, 1992 in Asal, 2013). By definition, peace is conceived in two dimensions as positive peace and negative peace. The concept of positive peace refers to the resolution of disagreements without violence, as well as the inclusion of social justice. In terms of negative peace, it is associated with the absence of war, the absence of war activities,

or a decrease in conflict. It can be argued that negative peace refers to the absence of violence, whereas positive peace refers to the absence of structural violence, which is often the result of social injustice (Galtung, 1969 and Sagkal et al., 2012).

In societies, according to Erkman (2012), peace is not only a cultural element, but also a value, so it is crucial that people practice and internalize peace. A democratic society can develop a peace culture by these people. He adds, peace culture can be defined as a mosaic of different personalities, attitudes, values, and beliefs, with the intention of balancing the needs of freedom, social proximity, and dependence of people. Finally, he argues that peace consists of harmony between individuals, handling differences, and sharing resources in justice.

***Kambangsa* Amidst Danger**

It is made evident on poster narratives the depth of *kambangsa* among the Meranaws, most particularly in times of crisis in the case of this study. Despite the most brutal experience that every constituent has to go through when the war began, Meranaw people show the importance of *kambangsa* (kinship or clanship) towards their fellow Meranaws.

Kambangsa (kinship or clanship), in this study, is viewed on a different perspective. Although, this attitude is commonly associated with kinship or clanship among the Meranaws, it may also speak of the frame of mind of the Meranaws on “One Bangsa, One Meranaw”, which widens the scope of the idea of *kambangsa* to be not finite to close kins and clans alone but to the entire community of Meranaws in general. Aside from this viewpoint is showcased in the verbal narrations, this is most especially exhibited in the poster narratives as well, as such, when a woman offers a ride to a woman which she describes as “*duwanyan ka Meranaw*” (I pity her because she is a Meranaw) to flee with them out of the war zone. Similarly, as can be recalled, in one narration, the respondent mentions that her mother assures her that they will be safe because the militants are described by the mother to be Meranaws. Here, the poster narratives serve as a resource of representation which display a culturally induced meanings. These scenarios would not have happened should the Meranaws do not have this perspective of *kambangsa* (kinship or clanship).

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), in reading images, they view image as a resource for representation, and therefore displays culturally induced regularities. It is widely accepted that the meanings communicated by individuals are the primary social meanings. It is their belief that images and other visual modes can represent objects and their relationships in a world outside the representational system, therefore, for visual sign-making in visual communication, there are a large number of different ideational options available. Kress and Ivan Leeuwen (1996) add that imagery and other visual modes, accompanied with texts and narrations, can also be used to create complexes of signs that are internally cohesive and externally cohesive to the contexts in which they are created. Consequently, there are a large number of different intellectual options available for visual sign-making in visual communication as a result of the belief that images and other visual modes can represent objects and their relationships outside the representational system.

Conclusion

The drawings reveal meanings that are abducted with the use of the visual images, themes and children's experiences. These meanings are considered profound as the researcher does not expect that children are capable of creating such. This implies that children have a world of their own where they are also capable of associating new meanings to images and figures that have long been existent in this world. This further proves how children can be considered as thinkers with knowledge of their own sensations, thoughts, beliefs, and other mental states. This suggests that children are not just mere children, innocent and young, but also thinkers of knowledge and are great narrators of experiences. As war is highlighted as the most prevalent theme, along with glimpse of chances in the narratives of the children, the findings imply that there may be hope in spite of the overwhelming and insurmountable consequences of battle for children. In addition to being remarkably resilient, those kids often have a remarkable preference to live to tell the tale and thrive, and it is important that people around them understand that. A proper environment, along with protection, care, and support, is important for them in doing so. They flourish, recover, and defeat the difficult aspects of their lives when they do enjoy such circumstances.

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Appendices (Drawings Exhibit)

Drawing No. 1



Drawing No. 2



Drawing No. 3



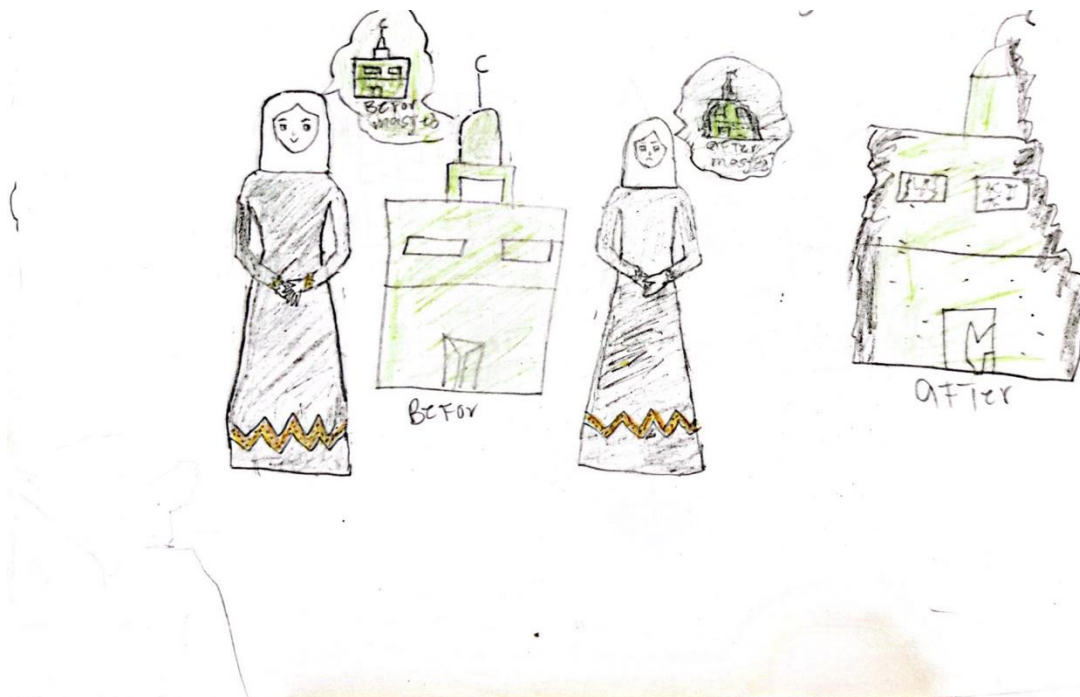
Drawing No. 4



Drawing No. 5



Drawing No. 6



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