

Diasporic Elements in William Kent Krueger's *This Tender Land*

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Abstract

This article discusses the use of diasporic elements in William Kent Krueger's *This Tender Land*. This research will interrogate the concept of the diaspora at length, thereby addressing the concept well in detail through the plot and circumstances of the novel. *This Tender Land* is set during the Great Depression, showcasing the economic crisis and the struggles of each character in the novel through direct or indirect means, constantly rotating in the ouroboros-like loop of cause and effect. This article presents the idea of diaspora through the textual perspectives as presented by the author in his novel, which depicts the essential qualities of diaspora and its effects.

Keywords: Diaspora, Existentialism, Transcendentalism, Identity Crisis, Self-Realization, Transnationalism.

Introduction

This article discusses the use of diasporic elements in William Kent Krueger's *This Tender Land*. This research will interrogate the concept of the diaspora at length, thereby addressing the concept well in detail through the plot and circumstances of the novel. *This Tender Land* is set during the Great Depression, showcasing the economic crisis and the struggles of each character in the novel through direct or indirect means, constantly rotating in the ouroboros-like loop of cause and effect. This article presents the idea of diaspora through the textual perspectives as presented by the author in his novel, which depicts the essential qualities of diaspora and its effects.

Approaching Diaspora

The word 'diaspora' is derived from the ancient Greek word *diasperin*, which is an amalgamation of two words: *dia*, which means across, and *speirein*, which means scatter. A literal translation of 'diaspora' is therefore 'scattered across', which in context refers to a cultural or ethnic group that has been displaced from their traditional land. It was originally used to describe the Jews' displacement from Israel, but has since come to refer to

any historic displacement of ethnic or religious groups. Thomas Faist explains, “Diaspora, in particular, has become an all-purpose word. It may therefore be more meaningful to look at its uses. As the uses of these terms often overlap and are sometimes even interchangeable, no clear separation is to be expected.”¹ Faist, through his understanding and analysis of various theorists like Michel Bruneau, establishes a relationship of mutual synonymy between the terms ‘transnationalism’ and ‘diaspora’. Bruneau established differences among various factions of diaspora referring variously to entrepreneurship, politics, religion, and ethnicity. His approach steps beyond the notions of community by embedding his inquiry focused on the categorical spaces. This is accompanied by a juxtaposition of transnationalism and territory movements.

Bruneau himself provides further clarity on the concept of diaspora and its importance. Discussing the role of community in diaspora, Bruneau says, “A community diaspora first comes into being and then lives owing to whatsoever in a given place forges a bond between those who want to group and maintain.”² According to Bruneau, diaspora is best approached by first studying the host country where the community currently exists; then the country or territory of origin in which their cultural memories are located. According to Bruneau, “A diaspora tends to be an autonomous social formation that the host and the origin of the societies thanks to its numerous cultural, political, religious, professional associations.”³

Diaspora is not a planned event. In most cases, a large part of the population is forced to leave their original territory due to war, famine, natural disaster, or another event that renders their land uninhabitable. In some cases, they are forced out by invaders. Bruneau observes that,

The choice of countries and cities of destination is carried out following the structure of migratory chains which, beyond the oceans, link migrants with those already installed in the host countries, the latter thought of as conveyors towards the host society and the labor market, and guardians of the ethnic or national culture.⁴

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¹ Thomas Faist and Rainer Bauböck, *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories, and Methods* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 14.

² Faist and Bauböck, *Diaspora and Transnationalism*, p. 35.

³ Faist and Bauböck, *Diaspora and Transnationalism*, p. 37

⁴ Faist and Bauböck, *Diaspora and Transnationalism*, p. 36

Following forced migration, the idea of the homeland changes in the mind of the community, often becoming a painful topic. Despite this emotion, however, it remains of great cultural importance, influencing the structure and organisation of the community long after it has been fled. This occurs alongside feelings of alienation toward the host country, especially among younger generations who may have little to no memory of their original home. As such, the idea of the 'motherland' is highly personal among diaspora communities, with individuals often grappling with the concept as they become adults.

In "Diaspora and Homeland: Political Goals of Israeli Narratives" Sahar Burla explains, "The elite of the homeland when turning to Diaspora, will attempt to employ successful imagination agents for its purposes, to turn it into active Diaspora, in the same manner, it turns inwards to its citizens."⁵ Burla also emphasises the political influence of diaspora.

Diasporic Elements

In applying the concept of diaspora to literature, one must consider which aspects are most significant to discussion. Elements such as identity and legacy help in forming many postcolonial approaches to the topic. These elements place diaspora as not a subject area, but a theoretical concept that can assist in analysis while at the same time demanding its own analysis.

Identity awareness refers to the idea of being aware of one new identity concerning the particular place or host society where the individual resides for a particular movement making his move to be able to understand his situations properly thereby making him or her able to start a new life afresh and understanding it properly and with proper care towards the situation as it is rightly defined making it more adaptable and more understanding to accept. Diaspora in itself is a vast ocean to understand and elaborate on the situations that are occurring both fictionally and factually. An Individual who has lost his nativity with a particular place always tries to look for it in the new place.

This leads him or her to other important elements of diaspora, that is the quest for identity or the identity crisis. Quest for a particular identity has always been a part of postmodern and post-war novels as it makes us understand the concept of how one identity is important for one. As a

⁵ Sahar Burla, *Diaspora and Homeland: Political Goals of Israeli Narratives* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015), pp. 602-603.

researcher through the concepts given by Bruneau, one understands that identity is constantly passed down from generation to generation in the form of a practicing culture or a tradition, making one understand and feel the sense of belongingness which, when snatched away, leaves a psychological blank in the mind, making an individual unable to understand the meaning of his or her existence in the world.

This blank leads one to feel alienated in a new space unable to fathom the new people around him and constantly feeling threatened. As their traditional heritage has been snatched from them they feel the idea of not being connected to the place where they belong. This absence of connection towards the new land is called rootlessness, and generally brings with it a chaotic mindset for an individual making it so that the person decides to start afresh studying and understanding himself and his connection which leads to the Quest for Identity; a process where he or she sheds their old self with old memories and gain a new self.

This process of realizing who he or she is led to self-realization where one becomes sound enough to accept his or her flaws through a shift from material to spiritual way. This transfer from a sense of materialism towards a sense of spiritualism is known as transcendentalism, where the individual lets go of the ego, and realizes that whatever s/he believes till now about himself is not true and what he realizes himself to be is the only universal truth around him leading to the realization of one's true self. This makes him or her invulnerable to subjugation by the society and world thereby establishing the networked spaces.

Networked spaces refer to the spaces that have been interconnected with one another to establish communication between the host and the origin society while making sure that all the ethnic groups are safe concerning every idea of the society while making sure that they have fulfilled every part of their role in the society and have established themselves properly and perfectly. This makes the individual aware of all the situations that are happening in the origin society so that s/he makes a decision either to migrate back or remain in the host society. Many times, due to shifts in places, this tie breaks leading to the individual becoming rootless.

Rootlessness describes the idea of deviation from one's tradition and culture thereby making them lose their identity. It could be any tradition that kept one individual connected with his motherland or any culture. During the early nineteenth and late twentieth century at the time of colonization, as a researcher, one sees a major emergence of rootlessness, especially in a

country like Africa. In America too there is a group of tribals commonly called in modern times Native Americans or First Nations, but more commonly known as the Indigenous people or American Indians, who since the colonialist period have lived alongside contemporary settler Americans.

Jonathan Grossman refers to Floyd Anthias defining the idea of diaspora as the “scattering of seeds,”⁶ where seeds are symbolic to the people who are scattered from their roots and longing to return to their origin despite the circumstances as it holds the idea of safety and security for them. Grossman’s definition of the diaspora in essence discusses the idea of rootlessness making one understand its effect upon the individuals during migrations which soon turned out to be a psychologically painful process that leads to an idea of separation and confusion.

With the emergence of colonial dominance, many colonizers started to view the tribal culture as a culture of savages, and therefore they wished to wean the native children from the idea of savagery which they brought out using the systematic process by firstly framing the particular culture as blasphemous and by slowly brainwashing the regular public regarding the ill-effects of the culture. Many of the most elite minds used this process for their benefit thereby making it so that the ones who follow the culture are persecuted and their tradition is established under the radar of negativity.

This makes people believe only the negatives of that particular tradition of culture, this creates a sense of Identity crisis as the individual is unable to leave behind his old identity and accept the new identity of the colonizer. This alienated the individual making him unable to understand his or her situation properly which may make it difficult for them to move forward and face a strange sense of psychological pressure leading to trauma and anguish. Still today in war-prone countries it is a common belief that a major exodus of people happens due to threats to life and property. Such an event is a realistic and more current example to study and understand the emergence of a diaspora and the idea of rootlessness.

As Yeats rightly states in his poem *The Second Coming*, “Turning and Turning in the widening gyre the falcon cannot hear the falconer, things fall apart, the center cannot hold.”⁷ This statement not only helps to understand the true functioning of de-centralization but also the major example of rootlessness which is one of the major elements of diaspora and makes us

⁶ Jonathan Grossman, *Towards A Definition of Diaspora* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2018), p. 2.

⁷ William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming* (New York: The Dial, 1920).

more precise with its existence one sees the tradition as the center of human identity and its fall causing the idea of chaos is the form of rootlessness and leads to alienation. It is a common belief that Yeats has also pointed out the displacement of an individual through the simple yet deep lines of his poem.

Examples of Diasporic Elements in the Novel *This Tender Land*

The entire novel in itself seems to be a trove of examples related to an existential crisis concerning diasporic trends and understandings, making it a novel open to a postmodern approach, concerning diaspora as a conceptual understanding. Krueger's choice of background concerning the plot helps us to realize and psycho-visually understand the concept presents itself through the characters which have been presented and situations that have been discussed making it one of the most crucial novels in American Literature which becomes a set frame to understand diaspora as a literary concept.

One sees major example of this in the novel is the journey of Odysseus 'Odie' O'Bannion, a child of some thirteen to fourteen years of age, who narrates his journey and his pain to the audience. Odie yearns constantly to go back home, though in a corner of his mind he knows he has forgotten what kind of a place home is, until his brother Albert produces the letter sent to Thelma by their aunt with a meagre amount of money to take care of the children. After escaping from their clutches, the brothers, with young Emmaline and mute Moses, go on a journey to fulfill their dreams.

As Sister Eve explains during the proceeding course of the novel; every character in this novel is on a journey with Odie, most particularly on the journey towards a place he calls home and Moses is on the journey to know himself and gain an identity.⁸ Both Moses and Odie want to reach back to their idea of a homeland, though they have very different meanings of the same. For Odie, his idea of a homeland is a place of safety, care, and love while for Moses it is his tradition, identity, and the idea of self-acceptance as an Indian. Krueger through his writing discusses the harsh journey every individual had to take during the time of the Great Depression when the country was going through a major economic meltdown.

In the narrative of the novel, as a researcher one also comes across the family who take care of Odie after he leaves his brother and friends fearing for their protection.⁹ One also gets to know through the arc that they are the victims of the economic crisis in the country and are travelling to find a place

⁸ William Kent Krueger, *This Tender Land* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019).

⁹ Krueger, *This Tender Land*, pp. 218-219.

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to settle and look for work. Throughout the novel, they are seen occasionally on the move and living in a caravan. Odie understands as he meets with various people how humans tend to behave differently. Through Odie, Krueger trying to show us the real scenario of the world.

According to his perspective throughout the novel, a man who has been displaced not only from a particular area but also from his home yearns to find a place with love and care to form his haven from the world around him. Using Odie and his struggles, Krueger shows the plight of the common person in society and how diaspora comes into play. Though someone is displaced from a particular place s/he tends to bring back memories they require to understand their identity, and sometimes take a journey home, making tough choices and facing struggles, yet finally reaching their goal.

When a researcher discusses diaspora concerning culture, he or she turns to the character of Moses. Moses was a young boy who witnessed his mother die and had his tongue severed, rendering him mute. He is unable to express his pain and torment to the world. Though being one of the indigenous populations one sees that Moses is displaced from his sense of homeland. When he narrates his story to Odie and Albert through sign language one can see the sense of pain and anguish in his eyes. In his sorrow at the death of his people, Moses signs his hatred of Whites, who stole his land and executed his people.

The Lincoln Indian Training School plays the role of the oppressor in the entire novel along with its rules and people like Thelma Brickman and Vincent DeMarco who are hell-bent upon erasing the culture from the minds of children displacing them from their heritage through harsh methods like solitary confinements and strapping with a leather belt.¹⁰ A major example is given by Odie, when he narrates how a young boy who just arrived at the school was forced to give up his culture by having his doll snatched away. When Odie tries to stand up for the boy, he is punished by whipping.

Though it is ironic to see this as the name of the school tells us that this school is to make the students adapt to the American Indian culture, but one sees them being harshly oppressed and punished for doing the same. This idea of irony helps one to define how the diaspora is going to emerge within this novel which makes it more understandable for the reader and researcher who tend to analyze this part in detail thereby able to make out the reason for the transcendental journey towards the goal which makes it all the more

¹⁰ Krueger, *This Tender Land*, p. 392.

important for one to stay connected with the characters in the novel.

Krueger not only touches upon relationships and the societal thought process but somewhere he points out the plight of the Indigenous people in a wide diasporic aspect thereby making us understand their pain and their suffering to the reader asking them to understand how life of a Native is in his own country. As a researcher one sees many examples of such situations in the current scenario, for example, the present-day wars also lead to an equal threat towards life and property making people displaced from a particular place which they call their home.

Throughout the novel, as a researcher one sees many characters presenting an idea of diaspora whether they are displaced in search of a job, forced to leave their roots, or have lost their parents. Each person goes through a similar aspect of sufferance and struggles to gain a new identity thereby understanding his or her problem or accepting his or her fate. Odie as protagonist questions his decision of leaving the school as somewhere in his mind he has started getting used to the idea of hopelessness. When Ms Cora Frost offers to adopt all three of them for a brief moment Odie feels a ray of hope but after her death, his sense of displacement turns into rage, and he believes that his life will never be the same.

He slowly sinks into despair and doubts his very existence calling himself a jinx for anyone who comes across him including those he loves. Through this aspect, the researcher comes to take Odie's situation as circumstantial evidence of how diaspora works and its effects and side effects which make us understand the situation with great difficulty. The novel's background itself is a great manifestation of diaspora as during the Great Depression many people decided to walk out and seek new jobs elsewhere thereby leaving their homeland to look elsewhere and settle in that place and find new jobs or resort to street vendors which is common and relatable these days as well.

Thelma's character was also deeply influenced by the elements of diaspora which made her cold-hearted towards the children and made her torment them. She mentions to Odie that when she got to know his aunt was the brothel owner, she decided to have her revenge through him to ease her heart and discuss her pain, which makes it more than just an instrument for revenge but a medium to let of the rage and anguish at her abandonment and shunning which made her behave and believe what she wanted was revenge from the world for keeping her subjugated and tormented.

Thelma sought her identity through the corporeal aspects of her

revenge against Odie and Albert's aunt, which made it equally difficult for them to understand their situation as to when and why these situations occur.¹¹ Odie says at the end of the novel after the revelation that for the first time in his life he felt pity for Thelma. Her character was also displaced from her home at a young age when she was sold to a brothel. Throughout the novel, there is a clash between innocence in the form of Emmy, Odie, and Moses and experience (with a hint of cruelty) in Thelma Brickman, who is hell-bent on taking revenge on her preceptor Odie's aunt through the children, and wants to keep them under her thumb, making them unable to seek their freedom.¹²

Though she could be capable of forgiveness, her heart due to the shunning of society has become as hard as a rock, making her unable to sense pity and feel motherly affection. As a researcher one finds that Thelma's character as showcasing the elements of diaspora but in a negative sense. Diaspora does not only account for displacement from the society or a country but also from the community. Thelma as a character was shunned from society for being a prostitute, something she was not responsible for, directly or indirectly. She was just sold for money, yet she was the one to be blamed for being a prostitute which made society shun her. To let out her anger and pain, she instead of leading a life seeking revenge which made the world see her as a villainess in the novel.

As a researcher one understands through the concepts of Bruneau and Faist that diaspora is highly different from transnationalism, and is more connected to one's identity which makes it highly important and its impact equally devastating for an individual both physically and mentally as it tends to impact one will. This makes one understand its highly negative effects on an individual which is highly stressful. Diaspora is highly complex, which makes it worth studying and helps one to easily perform a theoretical dissection to understand the elements of rootlessness, a quest for identity, existentialism, alienation, and identity crisis which are its key aspects.

Throughout the novels of the twentieth century, as a researcher, one sees community diaspora in the making which is still in development as a more concurrent stage making it open to interpretation. Even today many authors and writers are contributing to the field of diaspora-making it easily interpretable for an individual. Every aspect of the diaspora in a way narrates

¹¹ Krueger, *This Tender Land*, pp. 375-377.

a clearer and vivid image of its reality making the diasporic literature a reflection of the society and its impact which makes it easier to be dealt with by linking the text with its surroundings and understanding its functioning through the detailed study of the text.

Krueger showcases the aspects of rootlessness and quest for identity along with a brief existential nature through his or her characters. Each character showcases a penchant for understanding his or her situation and making it so that he or she easily withstands the emerging stress. Every individual within the novel goes through an important journey and finally in the due course of the novel reaches a haven which in their thought and understanding is their homeland and provides safety for them bringing their struggles to an end and thereby constructing a perfect diasporic background for all the characters.

Conclusion

This research has shown that *This Tender Land* displays elements of diaspora and portrays them evidently through its lines hence it should also be called a diasporic novel. The text through its lines shows an elaborate racial treatment of how the Native Americans were displaced by the arrival of migrants which led to their constant persecution erasing them and making them fear for their life. Such persecution of Native and Indigenous people was seen in both the historical contexts of Australia and Canada where each one of them was systematically wiped out in the context of settlement for the migrants.

This made the Indigenous people fear for their life and migrate to new countries which were strange to them. This made the native population of that particular area to be dispersed across a larger region and brought forth a clash of cultural ideologies and traditional beings making many adapt to new cultures thereby losing their heritage completely and forever which was a part of their old identity. Due to this the individual became a new person with a different mindset and would not be counted back among his or her people which lead to a decrease in the Indigenous population and the loss of history.

One such disappearance is the First Nations of Native America. As shown through the character of Moses; many people forget their Indigenous name thereby losing their identity which is one of the most intrinsic aspects of them. Many displaced Native Americans do not know their origins and the true meaning of their identity, and may dismiss it as nothing but a sheer waste of time. This led to the extinction of some Indigenous traditions and cultures and also languages, for example, there are many languages currently

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in the world which have been termed endangered languages.

Most importantly languages like Mayan and Creole do not have any traces anywhere in the world except for books and excerpts for studying ancient dead languages and traditions of the Indigenous population. To maintain the diaspora, it is necessary to keep the traditions and culture alive thereby transmitting their ideas and their understanding to generations to come and maintaining their roots which makes it important for them to be more comfortable wherever they are without feeling a sense of alienation that they feel always making their existence easier.

Krueger's novel aids the reader to know in detail how during the Great Depression many people lost their birthplace in search of jobs or goals. Due to the advent of the American Dream, massive migration led to the Great Depression affecting the economy of the society thereby impacting the displacement of the Indigenous population which brought forth a major diaspora. Hence one concludes that there is a major impact of the diaspora in the novel where one sees individual characters facing the psychological pressures of displacement, and yet are unable to understand their feelings. As a researcher of diaspora, one sees a varying degree of struggle and a yearning to reach home in the characters, who try to find common ground for them to achieve their goals by meeting various people, understanding them, and making a psychological connection with them. Each character has a different mindset when it comes to struggling against their problems, yet all they want is to have a home away from the ruthless world around them.