

Nexus of Migration in Children's Literature: Displacement, Memory and Grief in Kirsty Murray's *Bridie's Fire*

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Abstract

Kirsty Murray is an Australian writer who writes for children with a special focus on history. She says that by intertwining history with fiction she was able to connect voices and stories that connect people across time. Bridie's fire is a historical novel based on the fact that over 4000 girls were shipped out to Australia between 1848 and 1850 as a part of an orphan scheme, most of the girls were victims of the Irish famine. This novel probes into the predicament of these new migrant children who were transported to Australia and how migration affected their lives. This paper discusses the problem of child migration and its nuances. Children's literature which is shifting to new paradigms in the 21st century is becoming more and more inclusive and representative. Orphan characters are not a new aspect of children's literature, writers often make the central character an orphan in order to give a certain degree of independence in action. But when it comes to migration, and here Murray is juxtaposing fact with fiction, the child displaced to a new country is more affected by loss of filial security and warmth. This paper discusses different aspects of child migration and how it is represented by a contemporary writer like Murray. This book is more like a 'site of memory' for descendants of these children and all other children who migrated to Australia during colonial times. The paper probes into the problem around the representation of migration, especially the migration of children to Australia during the 1840s. It looks into different aspects of displacement and how children clutch into memories that they carried off to a new country. The paper will connect displacement, memory and

grief as motifs in children's literature and how contemporary writers acknowledge history using these motifs.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Child Immigrants, Potato Famine, Grief of Migration, Displacement, Memory.

Introduction

History is generally understood, not as objective truth but from a historian's perspective. Therefore, there could be scope for revision in different nuances of political or cultural aspects narrated by historians. A historical novelist challenges mainstream history by either changing the perspective through alternative history or rendering the past from marginal positions. Consequently, sub-genres like time slips, historiographic metafiction, conspiracy fiction, and alternative histories sprouted in literature. Contemporary Australian children's historical novel is thus re-visioning its mainstream history in two ways: Firstly, making indigenous literature inclusive and diverse. Secondly, by foregrounding the subsumed history. Contemporary Australian children's writer, Kirsty Murray, writes for children with a particular focus on history. Her series *Children of the Wind* portrays child migration to Australia during the 1840s and moves up to contemporary times, where these immigrants' descendants are settled. Murray's *Children of the Wind* is an Irish-Australian saga covering 150 years of Australian history as the quartet begins from the early 1840s and moves up to present times. As readers' intended age falls approximately between 10 to 14, this historical quartet can be categorized as historical novels for young adults (Beyer 2014:174).

Bridie's Fire is the first among the quartets and depicts Bridie, an Irish Orphan, transported to Australia as part of the Grey Orphan Scheme, supported by the government. This migration from Ireland was of 'morally pure' girls from Ireland's workhouses. The scheme ended around 1850 because

Australian society became discontented with the 'type' of girls being sent out and prejudice against Catholics also demanded a stop to the flow of migrants. The novel projects the predicament of these children in the new land and what they endured. Their displacement and consequent dissonance are compromised with memory and grief. Grief and memory act as resistance against misery and segregation. Children make their grief and memory a medium to enliven the childhood memories of their homeland. The author carefully constructs an entwined thread of displacement, memory, and grief in the historical reality of prejudice against Irish Catholic immigrants. The paper analyses the theme and motif of displacement by looking at Bridie's character and the consequent grief that Bridie undergoes. The paper further analyses how the author employs motifs like displacement, Home, memory and grief as substantiating elements to the theme of migration.

Displacement

Displacement is the relocation process where various factors place the subject into an entirely different space or place. In this sense, all migration is displacement, but not all displacement is migration. In Murray's series, there is displacement and migration, and for the children, both are equally painful. Displacement plays a major role in Bridie's life, who is the protagonist in the novel. This transports her into different spaces like the workhouse, domestic space, theatre, and goldfield make Bridie's sense of belonging vary in degrees. She feels at home only with the theatre group, and it is at that moment, that she accepts Australia as her home. Art appeals to everyone universally, and art has no boundaries or nationality, so Bridie finally accepts Australia as her home which is evident when she finally says she would rather be under this sky, with Tom (Murray:250). Her belongingness

is also evident when she says, “we’re making something special in this place that’s new and fine and worth fighting for” (Murray:249). Tom’s presence replaces Brando’s (Bridie’s brother) void and makes her feel at home under the strange sky in a strange land.

Migration is the phenomenon of moving from one place to another. It includes moving from rural to urban spaces and vice-versa. Many push and pull factors have acted as a catalyst for migration throughout the history of humankind. Push and pull factors are intricate components as the migrants impact both their homeland and the host country. They become emigrants in their homeland and immigrants in the host land. In Bridie O'Connor's case, the push factor was the famine, and the pull factor was the economic stability provided by the host country. Irish potato famine wreaked havoc in Ireland from 1845 to 1849, spreading blight, killing the population, and making the citizens refugees. Many fled to America, Canada, and Australia during the hard times. The famine further increased the rivalry between England and Ireland and boosted Irish nationalism and republicanism in Ireland. In the context of famine, Bridie becomes an emigrant. She knew England's role in worsening hunger. Seamus one night talks with his friend Mick that "good butter and oats and the best Ireland has to offer is loaded onto boats bound for England" (Murray:11). Bridie and Brandon also see ships loaded with grains ready to leave for England, "grains were loaded on board ships bound for England. Everywhere she looked there were soldiers standing guard over the food supplies" (Murray:46). Bridie always wanted to settle in Ireland, in her silver and golden house as fantasized, whereas Brandon, her younger brother, cherishes going to America like their Uncle Liam. In the beginning, moving out of the country is considered an omen; it is evident when their mother sings the song of a beautiful girl's beloved gone to America and was never heard from again

(Murray: 6). The warmth of home and the feeling of familial bonding is soon shattered with the arrival of hunger. Chapter 4 begins with the desolate Ballyickeen, barren land where all the glory is gone. Bridie's father had been drowned in the sea and was washed ashore. There was nothing to pull the family back in Dunquin. Almost everyone was dead; the entire land smelled of death, misery, and hunger. So, Bridie leaves their home for Dingle where, unfortunately, she loses both, her mother and little brother Paddy on the way. Bridie and Brandon somehow end up in a workhouse in Tralee. From the workhouse, Bridie is taken to Australia as a part of the Earl Grey Orphan Scheme, where the girls are taken as domestic maids or labourers.

She is continuously displaced from her home to the workhouse to domestic Skivvy to the goldfield to the theatre group; a series of displacements within a short span of time. With each displacement, she confronts different kinds of segregation and bigotries. Far from home in Dingle, her displacement and resultant unfamiliarity do not involve landscape or fauna. However, when she migrated to Australia, even the smell felt unfamiliar to her. She says, "The new world was full of strange new smells" (Murray:110). Bridie O' Connor, who wanted to be in Ireland, sets out to the new land. She always despised the idea of migration, and this scorn is apparent when Brandon persuades her to board a ship bound to America; she says, "Those ships, you know what they call them? They call them coffin ships" (Murray:46). It is at this moment for the first time, Bridie sees the pain of leaving her homeland. Further along the quay, she saw people wailing and crying from ships with grieving relatives left behind. Bridie saw a lady crying on her knees, "it was as if death was all around them, crying out for children who were sailing to America, knowing that would be the last she'd see of them" (Murray:46). Such was the grief in bidding farewell to the homeland.

Home

Bridie's concept of home was always where her family was, she didn't feel like leaving her house when she set out to Dingle because her family was with her. Her concept of home was where she was with her brother Brandon, and their togetherness was her home because when she describes her fancy home, which is half "silver and gold" she makes it very plain that "And you and me, we'll live there together forever"(Murray: 7). Until she parts with Brandon, she never spoke about missing home or does not grieve the lost home. Before leaving for Australia, Bridie sneaks into the boys' section of the warehouse to bid farewell to her brother. Bridie somehow consoles Brandon, and she says, "I'll get to the New World and then I'll send for you" and promises that they can build their home in Australia (Murray: 72). With immense pain, Brandon wonders at what Bridie says because she was the one who always stood against migrating to America. But now she had no choice as she is forced by workhouse authority to be a part of assisted migration.

The author vividly portrays the voyage of orphan girls to Australia and their pain in departure. Unlike the ship Brandon and Bridie saw last time, there was nobody to wail for them as most of them were orphans. The emigrants had left a tie in the homeland in the form of relatives but Bridie had none, except her brother. Some girls wept as Ireland disappeared from view, but most of them were numb because the thought of home gave them a cramp in their stomach, the pain of death, hunger, and misery. The author describes their departure:

Hundreds of girls milled about on the wharves, all in almost identical clothes. Further along the docks, some women were keening for their departing families. There was no one to keen Bridie O' Connor leaving Ireland, no one to call her name and bind her heart to the old world,

nor was there for any of the other orphan girls (Murray 2003:74).

After a few days of leaving Ireland, girls open their boxes and belongings handed over by the matron as a part of propriety. Girls took out their things for airing, and they lovingly fondled things they took with them. Margaret, an orphan, sat holding her mother's locket with tears she said, "Ah, but it's a harsh thing to be sent away from your own loved country and all your own folk"(Murray 2003:85). Soon all the girls joined her wailing, each wringing her hand. Bridie was numb; when she opened her box there were so many things inside but "she felt no connection to any of them" (ibid). She wonders at her numbness, for her things inside the box felt, "crisp and unfamiliar. There was nothing of her family, no memento from her own home, not one thing that made her soul yearn for her old life. Perhaps if they would let her keep her wooden spoon, or if she'd thought to cut a lock of Brandon's hair, then the box would stir some feeling" (ibid). Often, the concrete things or sites evoke memory and are indispensable for sustaining the memory. Bridie had no such objects to carry with her and the only thing she carried was her brother's memory. For Bridie, as discussed earlier, the concept of home and her brother Brandon are mutually inclusive, and it is this intersection where she finds her real belongingness. Throughout her journey, she tries to fill Brandon's void by filling it with Caitlin, then Gilbert, and then Tom. Her first attempt to recreate her home in Australia begins with her intimate relationship with Caitlin. Caitlin promised that they together would have a home where they can invite Brandon, but Caitlin left when her indenture got ready. When Caitlin left, Bridie felt loneliest. Caitlin's promise helped her look forward, and the thought made her happy that one day she will have a home of her own together with Caitlin and Brandon, a small home of their own in Australia. She wished to recreate a miniature Ireland in

Australia as her need to clutch to the memories was indispensable to sustain an imaginary tie with her homeland.

There was a tendency to eulogize Australia as the home for those who were ready to work hard. Unlike America or Canada, Australia was portrayed as the most exotic and challenging land. Settlers saw the bushy landscape as alien, and their despair upon settlement is evident in the works like *The Conquering Bush* when the author says, "The bush is sad, heavy, despairing.....terrible for a year" (Dyson 1998:46). This exoticization was the general tendency during the 19th century. There was the genre of emigration literature written to persuade and motivate people to migrate to Australia, for instance, *The Gilpins and Their Fortunes* (1864), written by William Kingston, falls under this category (Nimon 2005). In *Bridie's Fire*, the author vividly depicts such popular tendencies during those times that reinforced the History of retold's historicity. Caitlin, a friend of Bridie, had positive hope of migrating to Australia, and it is evident when she says, "When we get to the colony, I tell you, girl, things will be good for us" (Murray 2003:77).

Memory and Grief

Memory and grief are treated as collocation, and it is the grief that stimulates memory in Bridie. Through grief, she connects herself to her homeland, so grief becomes a motif that supports the central theme- migration. Grief might be an essential facet of most displacement, especially in children who are more vulnerable to unfamiliar environments. C M Parkes (1965) states that grief is completed in four stages: numbness, yearning, searching, disorganization and despair, and reorganization (Parkes1965). It is difficult to move on to the last stage as it involves accepting what is lost. Numbness is when the subject feels that loss is not real and struggles to accept reality. Yearning is the phase in which we try to identify

the loss in other things. We replace the loss with something else, just like compensation. Despair is what follows, and we may feel like things will never improve. Parkes notes that if we do not progress through this phase, we may be consumed by anger and depression, and our lives will remain negative. Lista Williams in "Before the Five Stages were the FOUR Stages of Grief" states, Reorganization and recovery is the phase in which grief subsides to the hidden part of our brain. Grief will not go away, but its impact would be negligible compared to other stages (Williams 28 August 2013). Bridie's grieving can be analysed by these four stages of grieving as stated by C M Parkes in the process of grieving. The first stage of numbness hits her when she sails to a new land with other orphan girls on the ship. After a few days of leaving Ireland, girls open their boxes and belongings handed over by the matron as a part of propriety. Girls took out their things for airing, and they lovingly fondled things they took with them. Margaret, an orphan, sat holding her mother's locket with tears and she felt the despair of being forced away from her own country. But Bridie was numb and she couldn't cry. Yearning for her homeland approximates her yearning for her younger brother Brandon. She becomes close with Gilbert to fill the void left by Brandon. Her grief is tackled with strong identification of loss. When Gilbert leaves her, she feels broken and thus enters the despair stage where she realises that things would never be the same. Her attachment or effort to make an emotional attachment to Gilbert is a way of recreating Brandon, whom she missed. Moreover, finally, the recovery happens when she ends up in the theatre group, where art fills the void of loss.

Conclusion

Murray's work thus maps the migration of children to Australia and the consequent grief they endure. The literature on migration in Australia is a site of memory for immigrants and

their descendants. For displaced child migrants, grief was a way of retaining their memory of their homeland. When they mourn over what they lost, they are continuously in touch with their homeland's memories. Thus grief and memory are the medium through which they try to establish a link with their native place. Murray in *Children of the Wind* attempts to form a confluence of displacement, memory, and grief. The displacement of Irish children and the memory they carried to new shores are represented in the novel. Thus the novel itself becomes a 'site of memory' for Irish descendants in Australia. The history of their displacement and the memory that they carried, resonates throughout the novel. As the intended audience is children, it helps young readers to acknowledge their past. In the case of Irish-Australians, this acknowledgement from the younger generation is crucial because the Irish were depicted as 'the wild colonial boy' in people's collective minds. In addition, Murray critically analyses the various ways in which the migrants handle the crisis of displacement from their homeland through memory and grief.

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