

THE IRISH DIASPORA IN CANADA: BRIAN MOORE'S *THE LUCK OF GINGER COFFEY*

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ABSTRACT

In this work, I analyze the theoretical boundaries between the concepts of immigration and diaspora as represented in Brian Moore's novel *The luck of Ginger Coffey*. This novel raises the possibility of discussing different concepts of diaspora and immigration, as well as various aspects, like the perception of the experience, the fluidity of terms regarding mobility, the criteria that define diaspora and immigration, the concepts of home and homeliness, and assimilation.

KEYWORDS

Brian Moore, other, immigration, diaspora, Irish-Canadian literature

The luck of Ginger Coffey is a narrative about the immigration of an Irish family to Montreal, Canada, ten years after the end of the Second World War. Ginger Coffey, the main character, wants to improve his economic condition in the New World. He is certain that Canada is the place where he will find success. Like him, hundreds of foreigners entered North America after the war, most of them heading to the United States. Considering the Coffeys' immigration from Ireland to Canada historically, Brian Moore's novel can be considered as an account of the Irish diaspora. In this article, I discuss how the limits between the definitions of diaspora and immigration are blurred, and the way some processes of both movements overlap, in order to approach the Coffeys' experience as an instance of the Irish diaspora.

Many authors discuss concepts of diaspora; they sometimes establish criteria trying to somehow delimit the field. However, it is very hard to find a consensus among them, or clear distinctions between these concepts. The term diaspora derives from the Greek *diasperien*: *dia* – meaning across, through, throughout – and *sperien* – meaning dissemination of seeds or

sperm.¹ The concept is closely related to the dispersion of the Jews from Palestine, and this fact justifies why some authors have difficulty in dissociating diaspora from the Jewish experience. Chaliand and Rageau, in *The penguin atlas of the diasporas*, claim that this term is problematic to designate other peoples' condition. They do not consider, for example, the descendants of the British in the colonies as resulting from a diasporic displacement.² In the Introduction, Chaliand and Rageau justify the label diaspora saying they "have not sought to make a sharp distinction between 'authentic' diasporas and those whose status may be disputed".³ This classification seems quite arbitrary, since calling the Jewish diaspora authentic gives the idea that other groups' experiences are imperfect copies of an original, unattainable and fixed paradigm. By doing so, all non-Jewish diasporas might be viewed as homogeneous.

Other views of diaspora acknowledge the Jewish experience, but they also give room to other types of diasporic experiences. Although Alan Anderson recovers the etymological root of the term and connects it with the scattering of the Jews, he states that recently it "has come to refer to the dispersion of any ethnic collectivity, not just Jews".⁴ In his words, this is "a more extended, encompassing view of diasporas".⁵ Discussing the fluidity of the terms related to mobility, such as exile, nomadism and diaspora, John D. Peters considers the Jewish case paradigmatic. He works, however, with a more extended idea of diaspora, acknowledging other experiences.⁶ James Clifford also thinks it is difficult to define "a traveling term"⁷ and argues that the view of the Jewish diaspora as a model can exclude the diasporic experiences of other groups, which are as valid as the dispersion of the Jews. Therefore, his point of view runs counter to that presented by Chaliand and Rageau, who claim that this term is problematic to designate the condition of other ethnic groups.⁸ In my opinion, the Jewish historical background, in which the term diaspora has come into use,

¹ BRAZIEL; MANNUR. *Theorizing diaspora: a reader*; PETERS. Exile, nomadism, and diaspora; VERTOTEC. Diaspora.

² CHALIAND; RAGEAU. *The penguin atlas of the diasporas*, p. xiii.

³ CHALIAND; RAGEAU. *The penguin atlas of the diasporas*, p. xix.

⁴ ANDERSON. Diaspora and exile: a Canadian and comparative perspective.

⁵ ANDERSON. Diaspora and exile: a Canadian and comparative perspective, p. 5

⁶ PETERS. Exile, nomadism, and diaspora, p. 20.

⁷ CLIFFORD. *Routes*, p. 244.

⁸ CHALIAND; RAGEAU. *The penguin atlas of the diasporas*, p. xiii.

should be acknowledged, but it cannot prevent a broader understanding of the current collective dispersion as diasporas.

Some scholars present a few criteria upon which their definition of diaspora is based. Chaliand and Rageau believe that an experience of dislocation has to meet four criteria to be considered a diaspora: to be a “collective forced dispersion” bearing a political cause; to involve a collective memory; the minority group feels responsible for the transmission of the group’s heritage; and finally, only time can qualify a specific type of mobility as a diaspora.⁹

When analyzing these criteria, which only the Jewish experience seems to incorporate, Chaliand and Rageau question other eleven experiences recorded historically. As an example, they interrogate the Irish diaspora: is it really a diasporic experience or are these random cases of migration? The problem of such categorization is that it is very difficult to reach Chaliand and Rageau’s ideal model of diaspora, the Jewish dispersal. Their suggestion of calling other groups semi-diasporas indicates a depreciation of the experience of other ethnic groups, as if the non-Jewish experiences were not equally legitimate.

John D. Peters offers some other criteria, approximating some features of diaspora to the idea of exile. He states that “diaspora can be elective or imposed”, and it involves a sense of collectivity and a network among people with the same origin.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he recognizes that “nothing is more dispersed in intellectual life today than the concept of diaspora”.¹¹ Peters alludes constantly to the Jewish experience, but he acknowledges the influences of different groups’ experiences, and accepts a more extended definition of diaspora. His concept is not beyond criticism, though. He states that diaspora suggests “displacement from a center”.¹² By doing so, he qualifies the notion of a center as a state of “staying put”, a definite place. If what he calls center is related to the idea of home, the place of origin may seem more relevant and it does not allow the diasporic subject to build a new idea of home elsewhere. Although Peters presents a broader concept of diaspora than Chaliand and Rageau, his idea of a center is questionable.

In Brian Moore’s novel, the center is unstable. The Coffeys sail to Montreal in 1955, and the center is dislocated from Ireland to the New World, where they establish a new reference for their lives. After the Second World War, there was a large movement from

⁹ CHALIAND; RAGEAU. *The penguin atlas of the diasporas*, p. xiv-xvii.

¹⁰ PETERS. *Exile, nomadism, and diaspora*, p. 20.

¹¹ PETERS. *Exile, nomadism, and diaspora*, p. 18.

¹² PETERS. *Exile, nomadism, and diaspora*, p. 20.

Europe towards the Americas, and many Irish families left their country in search of new opportunities, performing a diasporic movement. Enda Delaney argues that “mass migration was a phenomenon which affected most European states in the postwar period either as sending or receiving societies”.¹³ The Irish experience, composed of millions of cases of emigration, in my opinion, constitutes a diaspora. The dislocation to Canada performed by Ginger Coffey and his family is, therefore, inscribed in the history of the Irish diaspora. The Coffeys move away from Ireland, transposing their Irish experiences to the realm of memories, and as they have new experiences in Canada, they reconfigure their values in the new land. In the end of the narrative, they decide to make Montreal their new home.

Home in a diasporic space is a concept discussed by Avtar Brah and Bronwen Walter. Brah starts her approach to the idea of home from the dictionary’s definition of diaspora, as “dispersion from”, or as “a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs”.¹⁴ In the conceptualization of the term she acknowledges the existence of a center, but she wonders whether the twentieth-century diasporas carry the same connotation. She argues that the arrival in a new place and the process of settling down are as important to diasporic peoples as the circumstances of leaving.¹⁵ Because one’s “home” may change, the term gains some fluidity.

Bronwen Walter considers diaspora as a “third space”,¹⁶ in which there is a combination and negotiation of the places of origin, of travel and of settlement. From this point of view, the idea of home has to be reconfigured and enlarged, encompassing at least two places: the place of origin and that of settlement.

Brah answers the question: “Where is home?” by saying that it is both “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” and “the lived experience of a locality”.¹⁷ In the diasporic experience, it is possible to live both concepts of home. One is linked to the past, to the place now enveloped by the mythical vests of timelessness, where memories maintain an idea of a nation/city/neighborhood alive. It involves a recreation of lived experiences, because now the subject is distant from what he/she recognizes as home, a private space. The other

¹³ DELANEY. Placing post-war Irish migration to Britain in a comparative European perspective, 1945-1981, p. 331.

¹⁴ BRAH. *Cartographies of diaspora*, p. 181.

¹⁵ BRAH. *Cartographies of diaspora*, p. 182.

¹⁶ WALTER. *Outsiders inside*, p. 8.

¹⁷ BRAH. *Cartographies of diaspora*, p. 192.

concept of home is linked to the present diasporic space, thus combining both the view of home as origin and the experiences lived in the host country, city or neighborhood.

In *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, there are different feelings in relation to the concept of home. Ginger's homesickness in relation to Ireland and its way of life is expressed in the beginning of the narrative: "It made him homesick to think of those pubs, so he must not think."¹⁸ This feeling, however, is not pessimistic in relation to his future. He misses his country of origin and is nostalgic, but he tries to focus on the present. He never regrets his departure and learns through his daughter that his wife does not want to go back either. He pushes away the idea of Ireland to the realm of the imagination, as Brah suggests: a place of desires once knew. He rejects, however, the idea of going back, and tries hard to get a job and to make sure he can settle in the new land. Canada represents a chance to succeed and, moreover, to create a new concept of home, far from the pressures of his wife's relatives. Although Ginger has some bad experiences in Montreal, he never considers the possibility of returning to his ancestors' land.

Veronica, Ginger's wife, states in the end of the narrative: "home is here, we're far better off here",¹⁹ thus showing her certainty about the decision to make Canada her new home. Whereas she seems a little unsure of staying in the beginning, in the end she proves her will to stay. She imposes a condition, however. Veronica wants to keep her job as a saleslady. In the new land she is introduced to a new reality. In Ireland she was a traditional mother and a wife, and she never argued about her wishes; in Montreal she has a job and can explore other possibilities in her life. She has money, she can make her own decisions; moreover, she is desired by another man. The construction of her new self is intimately related to the idea of a new home in America. The new space represents the possibility of negotiation and the idea of home is reconfigured and resignified.

Diaspora does not retain the idea of a feasible return to a homeland as a *sine qua non*. As an alternative, the return may belong to the imaginary realm of homeland, maintained by a latent desire. As Peters argues, "some communities in diaspora may agitate for return, but the normative force that return is desirable or even possible is not a necessary part of diaspora today".²⁰ The decision not to return does not make a group less diasporic. If their members assimilate the local culture and retain the idea of a homeland on the level of the imaginary, it

¹⁸ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 10.

¹⁹ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 242.

²⁰ PETERS. *Exile, nomadism, and diaspora*, p. 20.

does not disqualify them as a diasporic group. James Clifford, however, disagrees. He claims that diasporic peoples do not assimilate, whereas immigrants may do so.²¹ Are the Coffeys a less diasporic group because they long to stay in a foreign land? Absolutely not. They sort out their problems in the new land, willing to settle permanently, and they carry in their imagination the feelings, remembrances, and experiences lived in Mother Eire, which is a part of them. The desire to drink a pint in an Irish pub combines with the urgent need to build real possibilities to stay. Their behaviour resembles Wsevolod Isajiw's concept of interculturalization, which "refers to internalizing some or all patterns of behaviour typical of a group or society".²² The term "some" should be emphasized because it acknowledges the elements retained by the ethnic group. Diasporic peoples may assimilate the local culture; yet they maintain the belief of belonging also to another culture.

In the novel, the issue of assimilation can be viewed in the role played by Ginger's wife, Veronica, and how Ginger apprehends the new situation. The Coffey's immigration from Ireland to Canada in the fifties is experienced differently by both husband and wife. Ginger is a gambler, who has bet "all on one horse, a horse colored Canada, which now by hook and crook would carry him to fame and fortune".²³ He is incurably optimistic, someone who would always look "for the good in the bad".²⁴ His moving to Canada means a chance, first of all, to leave Ireland. He wants to be his own boss and sees an opportunity when his father dies and leaves him some money. He dreams of adventures and chooses the New World for a fresh start. The moving however did not mean only a change of landscape. It produced a dislocation in terms of the roles each member of the family performed in the country of origin as well as an adjustment to the new social environment of the fifties. Ginger Coffey is the head of the family, and his duty is to support them: "he supposed [his aim in life] was to be his own master, to provide for Vera and Paulie (...) to make something of himself."²⁵ He is aware he is the breadwinner of the house.

When Veronica arrives in Canada, she continues to play the role of a dutiful mother and wife, taking care of her teenage daughter and looking after her husband. There are many passages showing her in the kitchen and in the bedroom. She is subordinated to her husband not only financially, but also sexually when she, obedient, makes use of a contraceptive,

²¹ CLIFFORD. *Routes*, p. 250.

²² ISAJIW. *Understanding diversity: ethnicity and race in the Canadian context*, p. 170.

²³ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 11.

²⁴ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 241.

²⁵ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 21.

against her will. Her life in Canada is an extension of what she had lived in Ireland. Veronica's decision to get a job appears in a moment of crisis when she finds out that Ginger has been lying to her, as he has spent the money for the return ticket, and also that a friend of the family has shown some interest in her. Her action can be seen as a departure from her previous life. Besides getting a job, she decides to move out, because she does not want to live with Ginger anymore, indicating that she may have a hidden agenda involving Grosvenor, the family's friend. Detached from the duties she inherited from Ireland, she seeks a new role in Canada; however, her husband is not prepared for that. Ginger moved to Canada with great expectations, but realizing his wife's assimilation occurring so fast was not one of them. He resents her and reacts negatively. His reaction is also a result of an inherited Irish national guideline in the constitution of the society's basic unit, the family. According to Bronwen Walter, the "1937 Constitution defined women's roles even more restrictively by placing the family at the heart of the national project".²⁶ Because Veronica deviates from this role, it is understandable that Ginger has some difficulties in accepting her new demands. Veronica's behavior reflects the struggle for an individual space in a new cultural context.

However, assimilation, as I said before, does not mean the apprehension of all aspects of the new society, and Veronica demonstrates it. After getting a job, she changes her looks by having her hair cut and choosing a different clothing style. She looks like a modern Canadian. The new look reflects the reassurance of a different woman. She transforms herself into someone Ginger can barely recognize: "She was Vera and yet she was not."²⁷ Veronica leaves Ginger but, to his surprise, she does not move into Grosvenor's apartment, choosing to live in a tiny room, "smaller than the cell [Ginger] had briefly occupied at the Y.M.C.A."²⁸ The situation demonstrates that Veronica was not ready to take the consequences of the Canadian modernity she claims for herself. She gets a job in order to ensure her financial independence, but she is prepared to get a divorce only by maintaining another official marriage into perspective, an expectation that Grosvenor is not ready to fulfill. She presents bursts of independence while demonstrating conservative attitudes and actions, reflecting Irish standards of the female role. This behavior is stressed in the end of the narrative, when Veronica goes back to her family, even though she imposes the condition of keeping her job. As suggested by Isajiw, the character internalizes some new patterns of behavior while

²⁶ WALTER. *Outsiders inside*, p. 17.

²⁷ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 143.

²⁸ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 182.

retaining others, typical of her original ethnic group. Thus, as a diasporic group, the Coffeys assimilate the new culture, preserving in their attitudes traces of the Irish culture. Therefore, in my point of view, to draw a line between diasporic peoples and immigrants, considering aspects as the concepts of home and of assimilation, reveals an open area in the discussion of diasporas.

Establishing a sharp difference between diaspora and immigration is a difficult task, mainly because dislocation occurs within both movements and there are characteristics present in both processes, such as the conceptualization of home and the practice of assimilation. As for the concept of immigration, it also involves a double relationship with the country of origin and the host country. Immigrant communities in the United States are considered by James Clifford as “temporary, a site where the canonical three generations struggled through a hard transition to ethnic American status”.²⁹ His concept of immigration implies a deep involvement in the host country by the immigrant, who is absorbed by the mainstream culture. However, this assimilation may also occur in diasporic communities. Alan Anderson, on the other hand, considers immigrants “by far the most prevalent (...) type of diaspora minority”.³⁰ Immigrants can recognize both the country of origin and that of arrival as their own: the former as the “original historical country of emigration” and the latter as the “mother-country.” In his opinion, they may want to return to their country of origin or not.³¹ Many conditions occurring in immigration may contain elements that also characterize diasporas. In my understanding, there are overlapping areas and the borders between one field and another cannot be sharply defined. Thus, the terms immigration and diaspora are interconnected in the same field, and they are not mutually exclusive.

Besides discussing the limits between the concepts, it is important to notice the characterization of both movements, as they appear in the novel. As I said before, there was a growing movement of European mass emigration after 1945, a phenomenon that is discussed in the narrative. According to Graham Davis, since the end of the Napoleonic wars, Irish migration indicated a movement away from religion, politics, and family.³² Some passages in Moore’s narrative reflect Davis’ affirmation, such as the admonitions of Father Cogley, who

²⁹ CLIFFORD. *Routes*, p. 255.

³⁰ ANDERSON. *Diaspora and exile: a Canadian and comparative perspective*, p. 12.

³¹ ANDERSON. *Diaspora and exile: a Canadian and comparative perspective*, p. 17.

³² DAVIS. *The Irish in Britain, 1815-1939*, p. 33.

condemns the schoolboys' dreams of emigration.³³ The reader can also perceive a feeling of relief in the protagonist when Ginger realizes he is distant from the bosses appointed by his wife's relatives.³⁴ Furthermore, "with the post-war economic boom, Canada aligned its immigration policies to economic needs and admitted large numbers of immigrants of the greatest ethnic diversity ever".³⁵ The financial constraint appointed by Isajiw's studies can be found in the needs of Ginger Coffey, who wants to succeed in Canada. His profile can be located historically, as Irish migration in the fifties was characterized by "less educated and less skilled" migrants.³⁶ Despite his lack of an educational degree, Ginger gets two jobs, thus indicating his capability for self-adjustment. All these conditions promote in the main character a positive feeling of a fresh start.

Avtar Brah states that "diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'".³⁷ The Coffeys' immigration to Montreal makes it necessary for them to conceive a new concept of home to help them cope with their new reality. If their journey is considered immigration or a diasporic movement is a matter of perspective, hardly defensible.

RESUMO

Neste trabalho, analiso as fronteiras teóricas entre os conceitos de imigração e diáspora, levando em consideração o romance de Brian Moore, *The luck of Ginger Coffey*. Esse romance possibilita a discussão dos diferentes conceitos de diáspora e imigração, bem como de vários aspectos, como a percepção da experiência, a fluidez de termos relativos à mobilidade, os critérios que definem os termos diáspora e imigração, os conceitos de casa e da condição de se sentir em casa (*homeliness*), e assimilação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Brian Moore, outro, imigração, diáspora, irlandês-canadense literatura

³³ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 17.

³⁴ MOORE. *The luck of Ginger Coffey*, p. 13.

³⁵ ISAJIW. *Understanding diversity: ethnicity and race in the Canadian context*, p. 83.

³⁶ HALPIN. *Who are the Irish in Britain: evidence from large-scale surveys*, p. 106.

³⁷ BRAH. *Cartographies of diaspora*, p. 182.

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