

Eco-Kinship and the Bonds of Belonging: Nature, Identity, and Displacement in Kapka Kassabova's
To the Lake: A Journey of War and Peace

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ABSTRACT

The research paper explores the concept of nature and people's connection to their ancestral roots in the novel *To the Lake: A Journey of War and Peace*. Lake Ohrid, an ancient lake in North Macedonia, is portrayed as a witness to the struggles, wars, political and border disputes which people have endured throughout the centuries. The region has unique landscapes and serves as a tourist spot, yet the declining job opportunities results in migration. People with a deep-rooted sense of belonging linger in their homeland regardless of the economic hurdles. Trena is one such character, who has a sense of belonging and connection to her ancestral place. Trena refuses to move abroad even though she has the opportunity

of leading a better life and career. The identity of a person is expressed in terms of their relationship with the land, nationality, name, culture and behavioral traits. When a nation undergoes turmoil due to political or geographical transformation, not only does the nation undergo a change in identity but its people are also forced to adapt to a new identity, as explored through the lens of Mufasa Shain. Displacement and nostalgia are conveyed through the experience of Kapka Kassabova's family. Ivanka's family stands as an embodiment of family bonding and projects a possible way of overcoming economic hurdles together as a family. The paper also delves into the people's ecological connection to the land.

Keywords: Ohrid, Eco-Kinship, Identity, Displacement.

The Balkan state is renowned for its rich history, diverse culture, and picturesque landscapes. The ancient Lakes Prespa and Ohrid give Europe a unique identity; their appearance amidst the mountains gives the look of eyes fixed on an ancient face. Kapka Kassabova, a Bulgarian writer, writes bilingually in both her native Bulgarian and English. Kapka Kassabova travels around the Balkan nations and learns the lifestyle and history of the Balkan people by interacting with them. Her works seamlessly merge travel narratives with history, war, and memory, deeply exploring personal and collective identity. Her novels weave people's way of living, society, and their connection to the land.

In the novel *To the Lake: A Journey of War and peace*, Kapka Kassabova portrays the lake Ohrid as a witness to the societal and cultural changes of the lake region. Kapka Kassabova's journey to the Balkan region serves as a weapon to unveil her ancestral roots and the lake's history. Through her journey she identifies the lake region as a cosmopolitan society, shaped by the leadership of various rulers. The research paper brings out people's attachment to their ancestral land and how they use their talents and the available natural resources for economic stability. It also highlights the relationship between people and the land regardless of the hurdles, and the people's emotional bonding towards Lake Ohrid.

Ohrid, the lake, is in the north of Macedonia, surrounded by mountains, and has a rich eco-centric view. The region is surrounded by beautiful landscapes, cultural heritages, and people from different ethnicities and nations. The lake region is considered a cosmopolitan place, welcoming people from various nations. Lake Ohrid symbolizes vitality and prosperity. Ohrid has been ruled by different empires like the Ottoman Empire and the Byzantine Empire; this region is home to multiple religions, cultural practices, and languages. Orthodox Christianity was once the central religion of Ohrid, but Islam became more popular after the Ottomans' arrival. When the Ottomans captured the throne, they imposed taxes on Orthodox Christians, which led many to migrate in search of shelter. Those who were wealthy enough paid the taxes and remained Orthodox Christians.

Nature stands as a provider and healing agent. Lake Ohrid is disturbed and polluted by man-made calamities such as war. The lake took nearly seventy-five years to regain its purity. The Lake not only consoles people by providing water and calmness but also holds the memories of people who lived there for centuries. A superstitious belief is that the spirits of dead people gather in the lake no matter where they are buried. This belief strengthens people's belongingness to the region even though they have migrated and settled in foreign countries. Once a home remains, it is always a home, as this is nature. Nature stands as a provider as it gives its best. Nature can heal itself and symbolizes hope for a better future among those near the lake region. Nature is considered a healing therapy. Being a part of nature, the lake is a symbol of hope and recovery.

The narrator comes across many people and learns their history, while exploring Lake Ohrid. People linger in a particular land or ancestral place because of their emotional bonding and belonging. Some people have a deep-rooted sense of belonging to their own nation regardless of their struggle. Others migrate to lead a better future or to escape the struggle. The reason for migration varies according to the circumstances over a long period. Until the 20th century, migration was due to the two World Wars,

border disputes, and political and economic challenges. In the present era, people migrate due to lack of job opportunities. Even though the war has settled, the country's economy is still in crisis. Lake Ohrid attracts tourists with its beauty, and tourism remains a source of income for the nation.

The journalist Richard Mertens, in his article "In North Macedonia, an Ancient Lake Faces Modern Threats," talks about the declining job opportunities and rising tourism, "North Macedonia is one of the poorest countries in Europe, with high unemployment, low wages, and few resources. Tourism has been one of the few ways to boost the economy in recent years. Visitors come for Ohrid's beauty, but also because it's relatively affordable" (Mertens). Along with this information, the journalist adds there is a significant threat to the ecosystem due to pollution. The rise in tourism increases the demand for new buildings near the lake, but pollution from construction contaminates the water, leading to its degradation.

Nature not only serves as a source of beauty by providing a feast for the eyes but also nurtures and takes care of people who rely on it. People find solace in nature and consider it a living being. Eco-kinship works on the idea that human beings are connected to nature. This perspective is based on treating the earth and nature as relative to human beings, where people care for the environment as they would for their families. Lake Ohrid attracts people worldwide to the lake region, resulting in the country's economic stability. People firmly rooted in the land take on roles as mountain rangers, tour guides, and others who prefer to sell antique products and run cafes. Eco-tourism and nature-related activities align with the principles of eco-kinship.

The sense of belonging and connection to the land has made some people stay in Macedonia. One such woman is Trena, a social entrepreneur with strong roots in her homeland. Despite opportunities to move abroad and build a career, she never considers leaving the homeland, as the following lines describe, "Through she'd had opportunities for an academic career abroad, she had returned to the Lake. No matter how hard it was to make a living here" (Kassabova 48). Trena remains a homebound individual who values

her connection to the land, prioritizing nationality over money and comfort. Trena is named after her grandmother. Trena's grandmother is the first female owner of a taverna, a restaurant where locals and tourists visit. Their ancestral roots, love for the land, and convincing environment make them stay regardless of their economic struggles.

Identity is one of the most fundamental aspects of human life, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and how they are recognized by others. For the people who have witnessed war, historical and political changes, the identity is not fixed but evolves with the changing scenarios. A nation undergoes change due to war, political upheaval, or independence movements. Not only does the nation undergo change, but the identity of the people also changes along with the geographical borders. These transformations have profound effects on the people who live through them. Such changes force individuals to adapt to their lives in significant ways. They must update official documents like passports and redefine their national identity to align with their country's new designation. This process paved the way for an identity crisis as people struggled to reconcile their personal and ancestral ties with the shifting political landscape.

In her journey, the narrator, Kapka Kassabova, meets a Muslim man named Mustafa Shain. He serves as a tour guide; his duty is to take visitors to the Christian heritage sites. The person describes how his family changed their identity when the Serbians and Bulgarians captured Macedonia. The whole family would change their name concerning the entities to avoid further suffering. Mustafa Shain states the following lines:

During the first Serbian annexation of Macedonia (sarcastically called here 'Serbia: 1', as in a football match), his family changed their name to Shainich, to pacify the Serbs. Then, during the second Bulgarian annexation of Macedonia in the 1940s (Bulgaria: 2), they became Shainov, to

pacify the Bulgarians. In the space of forty years, Ohrid was claimed and annexed by Serbia and Bulgaria twice each: that's four changes of hands since its liberation from the Ottomans (60).

Throughout history, nations have undergone renaming, redrawing of borders, and shifts in supremacy. As a result, individuals often find themselves unable to use the same national identity as their ancestors. Wars, disputes, and political realignments erase or alter historical affiliations, forcing people to redefine their sense of belonging. Despite these changes, the memory of one's homeland persists, creating a deep and sometimes painful connection to a past that no longer exists in its original form.

The land annexation dispute between the Balkan states causes much pain to the Macedonians. The Macedonian people suffer during the war. The Balkans and Greeks rip off their happiness with war. The war brings the people to distress. Many lose their families and migrate to other places for peace and livelihood. Kapka Kassabova's family has faced displacement for a few generations. The research paper "Migration and Identity Crisis: A Holistic Perspective of Migrants" states that "Most of the migrants move due to push factors. These push factors are socioeconomic status, better education, health facilities, specialization of occupations and living standard" (Rafiq et al. 2045).

Kapka Kassabova's family history exemplifies the struggle of displacement from their ancestral roots and land. This displacement causes them nostalgia, longing, and unfulfilled feelings of belonging to the ancestral landscape. Her grandparents, who used to live in Ohrid are forced to move to Sofia due to the war. Even though they have settled nearby, their heart still lingers around Macedonia. Throughout history, the nation's identity has kept changing. Her maternal grandmother refers to their homeland as the Balkans, a region encompassing modern-day Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.

Over generations, Kassabova's family experiences displacement multiple times. Her mother identifies as Bulgarian. The border change shifts, and the identity paves way to displacement. Kassabova's

parents later migrate to New Zealand, and Kassabova settles in Scotland. Each generation carries a different national identity, shaped by migration and geopolitical changes, but their ancestral roots remain a point of nostalgia. The narrator describes that even after settling in a country where everything is in place, she is nostalgic about her ancestral roots and the eccentric view that her ancestors once cherished. She states, “Each time I went abroad, I’d start dreaming of the lake. Like it was calling me. It’s in my blood. If I had a thousand lives, I’d still choose the lake” (Kassabova 49). Landscapes and waterbodies might appear neutral without meaning or significance but hold emotions and memories. The emotional connection with the place is aroused when a displaced person revisits the place to find the ancestral roots. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan terms such type of emotional attachment to a place as topophilia. Tuan explains, “topophilia is the affective bond between people and place or setting” (4).

The narrator discusses the importance of family bonding through the lens of Ivanka, a distant relative of Kapka Kassabova. Ivanka’s family stands as an embodiment of unity. Ivanka’s father has allowed his daughters to receive training as mountain rangers. For years, men have undergone training as mountain rangers, and it becomes a new experience when Ivanka and her sister join the training. No one expects women to take up the field. No wonder these women take the training they need to survive, depending on nature and tourism. The girls never fail to prove their ability; Ivanka says, “They hadn’t expected women, so we had to do the same press-ups as the men. But we did it. Dad always believed in us” (Kassabova 78). Emotional support is necessary for every individual to achieve their dreams; Ivanka’s father has provided everything for his daughters. Staying united as a family is the key to success, as the line states, “If you were to succeed at anything here, you did it as a family” (Kassabova 78). The necessity of education and women’s empowerment is valued in Ivanka’s family.

The research paper highlights how Lake Ohrid serves as a witness to the political turmoil, cultural transformations, and struggles, yet stands as a symbol of hope and recovery. People have a deep

connection towards the land, not physically but emotionally, making it a part of the family. The ancestral root remains a blissful or painful memory for the people who have been exiled, and others still linger in the place with a strong sense of belonging regardless of the economic hurdles. Identity is also expressed in region, name, and ancestral root. While the past has shaped the present, people's deep connection with their homeland continues to influence their lives and choices, making Lake Ohrid a historical and emotional landmark.

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