

## SEEKING REFUGE IN THE PAST. BERET'S FAMILY CHEST IN O.E. RØLVAAG'S GIANTS IN THE EARTH

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**ABSTRACT.** *Seeking Refuge in the Past. Beret's Family Chest in O.E. Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth*<sup>2</sup>. This study explores the importance of homeland treasures for the immigrants longing to belong. Beret Holm, the female protagonist in *Giants in the Earth*, speaks for the difficulties faced by Norwegian settlers in the Dakota prairie during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both in what concerns the land they are about to conquer, but also in what concerns their sense of belonging, as well as the preservation of their identity in the American melting pot. The family chest she had brought from Norway, in which she kept all the treasures, all the memories from the homeland, would become her shelter during a locust plague that ravages the settlement. Torn by remorse for having left her country and parents, Beret seeks refuge from the wrath of God, hiding with her children in the very object that was so dear to her, her sole remembrance of an intangible past. The family chest that she sees as her coffin in a moment of despair would become the altar for the ritual of communion held by a Norwegian Lutheran priest, a ritual which would bring comfort to her troubled soul.

**Keywords:** *Norwegian-Americans, Ole Edvart Rølvaag, Giants in the Earth, Norwegian heritage, cultural identity, immigrant chest, immigrant belonging, homeland memories*

**REZUMAT.** *Căutând adăpost în trecut. Cufărul lui Beret din Uriși pe pământ de Ole Edvart Rølvaag.* Studiul de față analizează importanța lucrurilor de preț din țara natală pentru imigranții care tânjesc după apartenență. Beret Holm, protagonista romanului *Uriși pe pământ*, este exponenta dificultăților întâmpinate de pionierii norvegieni în preeria din Dakota în secolul al XIX-lea, atât în ceea ce privește pământul pe care sunt pe cale să-l cucerească, cât și în privința sentimentului lor de apartenență și păstrarea identității în creuzetul american de culturi. Cufărul familiei, pe care-l adusese din Norvegia și în care își păstra toate lucrurile de preț, toate amintirile din țara natală, va deveni adăpostul ei în timpul unei invazii a lăcustelor care face ravagii în așezământ. Chinuită de remușcări fiindcă și-a părăsit țara și părinții, Beret caută adăpost de mânia lui

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Dumnezeu și se ascunde împreună cu copiii tocmai în obiectul care-i era atât de drag, singura amintire a unui trecut intangibil. Cufărul familiei care aproape-i devine sicriu într-un moment de disperare va fi altarul în ritualul împărtășaniei ținut de un preot luteran norvegian, ritual care va aduce pacea sufletului ei tulburat.

***Cuvinte cheie:** norvegieni-americieni, Ole Edvart Rølvaag, Uriași pe pământ, moștenire norvegiană, identitate culturală, cufăr de imigrant, apartenența imigranților, amintiri din țara natală*

## **Introduction**

The immigrant chest that Beret Holm, the female protagonist in Ole Edvart Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, had had in her family for generations is the object that connects her the most to her roots, to her Norwegian heritage, acting both as a depository of her family and homeland values, and as a shield from the challenges of the pioneer life in the prairie. Its role in Beret's immigrant life is to provide her with an anchor in the past, in the familiar and safe environment she had left in the Old World. The chest is used throughout the novel, in certain key moments, when the heroine's restlessness and anxiety reaches paroxysmal heights, to sway the balance, to give her comfort and solace, to make her look forward by looking backwards.

### **Losing the Connection with the Homeland while Venturing into the Unknown**

One has to bear in mind the fact that the decision to emigrate to America taken by the pioneers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was far more consequential in terms of changes in the lives of the immigrants if we compare it to the decision of the migrants of our century. In most cases, the emigration implied a complete fracture with the homeland, besides the possibility of never reaching the shores of the New World because of the frequent sickness among the passengers who crossed the Atlantic Ocean, particularly in the first half of the 1800s. People faced the unknown with few chances of returning to the only world they had known, while the only means of maintaining the ties with the homeland were the things they had taken with them on the journey, the letters exchanged with their family and friends, and, in the case of the fortunate ones, the voyages back home.

This rupture caused by the distancing from the familiar surroundings which offer stability, but also from the loved ones, brings about the awareness of a certain lack, a certain loss, and our need for anchoring, for filling the void left by this lack, leads to questions of identity and belonging (Muresan: 353). The historian Oscar Handlin has drawn the attention upon the effects of

immigration on people's lives, who found themselves cut off from their homelands, oftentimes in hostile environments, obliged to start things over, and discover new meanings to their lives:

Emigration took these people out of traditional, accustomed environments and replanted them in strange ground, among strangers, where strange manners prevailed. The customary modes of behaviour were no longer adequate, for the problems of life were new and different. With old ties snapped, men faced the enormous compulsion of working out new relationships, new meanings to their lives, often under harsh and hostile circumstances. (Handlin: 5)

Despite the great expectations and the enthusiasm the immigrants might have had, most of them went through difficult times, and experienced a shock as they tried to adjust to a new world, and perceived all the differences, starting with the language, with the geography, the people and the new customs they met. Hence, "strangers, the immigrants could not locate themselves; they had lost the polestar that gave them their bearings. They would not regain an awareness of direction until they could visualize themselves in their new context" (Handlin: 85).

Once the immigrants became aware of their situation, once they realised they were in-between continents, countries, identities, they found themselves caught between the desire to preserve their identity, their home culture, and the need to fit in the new one, to find a place to belong to. They eventually realise they no longer belong to their homeland, nor entirely to their new land, that they have become strangers to the family and friends left home, but that they are also strangers to those they had come to (Rølvaag 1971: 126). This acknowledgement creates tension and anxiety, but it also leads to a better understanding of their need for cohesion within their communities.

### ***Giants in the Earth and the Story of an Unsettled Soul***

The questions of identity and belonging, but also the need to preserve the cultural heritage of the homeland on the path to Americanization as they emerge from immigrant experiences are the focus of *Giants in the Earth*, written by Ole Edvart Rølvaag. The author experienced emigration himself, as he left Northern Norway in 1896, as a twenty-year old fisherman. Twenty years later, after having worked on different farms in South Dakota, having graduated from Augustana Academy in Canton, South Dakota, and earned a bachelor's degree from St. Olaf College, in Northfield, Minnesota, he became professor at the same college, while in 1912 he published his first book, *Amerika-breve fra P.A. Smevik til hans far og bror i Norge* (translated as *The Third Life of Per Smevik*, 1971). Despite his dim beginnings, despite the difficulties he, like many other immigrants, had to go through on his way to adapting to a new culture, he found in America a suitable

environment to fulfil his dream of learning and becoming a writer. More than that, he fully dedicated himself to the Norwegian-American community, describing in his narratives the journey of the Norwegian settlers in America, and their struggle to Americanize without losing their Norwegian identity.

*Giants in the Earth* was published in 1928 as a translation of two books first written in Norwegian and published in Norway in 1923 and 1924. O. E. Rølvaag translated it together with Lincoln Colcord as the first novel of a trilogy that continues with *Peder Victorious* (1928) and *Their Father's God* (1931). The core tension in *Giants in the Earth* lies in the contrast between the two main characters, Per Hansa and his wife Beret, between Per's prideful optimism in the vast landscape and Beret's profound loss of space, unmasking the tensions in the Norwegian-American community (Schultz: 91). Per Hansa used to be a fisherman in Norway, like Rølvaag, and convinced Beret to elope with him, to move to America and become farmers. His enthusiasm and determination seem to be almost surreal, and help him conquer the ruthless prairie despite little knowledge about the hardships they were to face, while Beret is frightened by the immensity of the prairie, and her mental condition degrades as she immerses in loneliness, and emptiness. Yet, Rølvaag chose to highlight the perils of emigration, to speak of the angst that immigrants dealt with, and, as Simonson concluded, "Beret is the one in whom Rølvaag portrays the psychological anguish accompanying the immigrant experience. She is the one who suffers from being uprooted and alone in a new land. She is the one who knows the true cost of immigration" (Simonson 1987: VII).

Built antagonistically, Per and Beret have very different views about their life in the prairie: Per rejoices in the boundlessness of the prairie, exploiting all challenges as opportunities, working hard to build themselves a place they could call home, but Beret sinks into disappointment, feeling lost in the vast prairie, and feels that only her faith, and the traditions inherited from the homeland could bring her comfort. It becomes apparent that they are polar opposites, as they have contrasting reactions to the prairie, to pioneering and immigration; above all, "they also embody the clash between the traditions of the old world and the freedom of the new, the clash between the temporal and the eternal in their past, their present, and their future" (Paulson: 201). Hence, the contrast and tension between the two major characters embodies the contrast and tension between the New World (Per Hansa) and the Old World (Beret). April Schultz brings forth the questions arising from this conflict: "How is this tension to be resolved? Do we toss away our culture and blindly follow the new? Or do we hang onto those values that give meaning and richness to our lives while also contributing to our new culture? Do we have a choice if one extreme leads to madness and the other to death?" (Schultz: 94). It seems that neither of the two ways is without perils. However, the end of the novel reveals that Per Hansa's role has ended once the Norwegian settlement in South Dakota is well established, as he gives his last breath when facing the prairie blizzard,

while Beret slowly finds her place in the settlement, continuing her fight for the preservation of the religious and moral values of the Old World.

As the story of the settlers unfolds itself, so does the longing Beret feels. Growing more and more restless as Per becomes more and more immersed in the building of their new life in the Dakota prairie, Beret has the impression that her world is shattering: "But it had been as if a resistless flood had torn them loose from their foundations and was carrying them helplessly along on its current – flinging them here and there, hurling them madly onward, with no known destination ahead. Farther and farther onward ... always west. ..." (Rølvaag 1929: 40). Per Hansa is the one who lives fearless and masculine (Simonson 1987: 6), embracing with almost frantic courage the challenges of the frontier, whereas his wife has the impression that their wandering will never stop, that "she had lived many lives already, in each one of which she had done nothing but wander and wander, always straying farther way from the home that was dear to her (Rølvaag 1929: 40)". The thought the prairie is making her husband and the other settlers forget about their homeland, about rules and even God, is almost unbearable for Beret. The striking contrast between her and Per is evident:

"... Beret represents the antithesis of the American frontier. Whereas her husband lives and dies facing westward, she looks eastward to Norway, to her family and cultural origins and an inherited Christian orthodoxy. On the frontier devoid of governing landmarks, she at once appears totally unsuited, physically and psychically fragile, fearful. [...] When people forsake the past, scoffing at the lessons history teaches, Beret is afraid. The frontier is no place for such a person (Simonson 1987: 6)."

Rølvaag was interested, as Laura Patton Samal observed, in highlighting the price paid by the immigrants in pursuit of their dreams. When analysing Beret's attitude towards the transformation undergone by the settlers during their pioneer experience, one cannot help noticing her deep spiritual and existential disorientation, while "Beret's sense of dislocation is not simply the result of weakness but of a deep awareness of the spiritual value of these alternative methods of orientation that provide a connection to the past and to God" (Patton Samal: 110-111). She perceives the rupture from the beliefs and traditions of the past at the highest level, and feeling that her family is enclosed in a sort of magic ring that cuts them off from God, unconsciously isolates herself and her house by covering the windows or hiding in the family chest (Patton Samal: 111).

### **Treasure and Refuge**

Upon their departure for the New World, emigrants were accompanied by their large wooden chests, which contained all the goods they could take with them: clothes, bedding and blankets, tools, household goods, seeds, books,

documents, family pictures and jewellery, the family Bible, as well as some food supplies for the journey. The chest represented more than a piece of luggage or furniture, it was an essential element in the immigrant experience, an almost impersonated partner on the voyage, especially if we consider the lone travellers. Personalized for each owner, many times with the birth or wedding date carved onto it, the chest or trunk was meant to be passed from generation to generation, and its importance was further emphasized by the flower ornamentation elements painted through the use of rosemaling, an art that has its roots in the villages from the Norwegian valleys.

But they continued to be useful and worth keeping for practical reasons, too. The pioneers had a difficult start in the prairie, beginning with the strenuous journey from the Atlantic shores towards west, and throughout the immensity of the prairie as they were searching for a suitable piece of land they would settle on, and build a home they would call their own. The immigrant chests were used for storage all along their journey, and, once the pioneers decided to settle, the chests were the first pieces of furniture in their newly built sod houses, since they were used both for storing the few memories from the homeland, but also items of clothing, and some of the food. In addition, the chests were used as benches, due to their size and sturdiness, but also because the pioneers had very few pieces of furniture until they would build them if we consider the limited space on the wagon. They became, hence, central pieces in the life of an American immigrant, serving both practical and psychological purposes.

Beret's family chest is a central piece of their existence in the vast Dakota prairie. Built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it had carried their precious homeland items that she and Per had travelled the New World with, among which the family Bible is the most valuable. It becomes essential as Beret becomes more and more troubled by the prospects of a life full of dangers in the wilderness, as she deepens into sadness. Schultz argues that Beret's distress arises out of her longing for the Old World, and her strong disapproval of forgetting the old ways. Her family chest is the "symbol of that longing for the security of her old community" (Schultz: 105). Furthermore, "the seventeenth-century chest embodies the deep roots of her family in Norway. She is the one among the settlers who most consciously holds onto the past and reacts more strongly to any changes in the native culture of the settlers." (Schultz: 105).

The family chest appears throughout the novel in several key episodes which shed light on Beret's powerful connection to the homeland, on her belief that roots must not be forgotten, that the settlers' life in the prairie estranges them from their cultural heritage, and above all, from God.

Their first Christmas in the settlement is near, but Beret, pregnant, grows more and more anxious, and despair grips her as she fuels her anxiety over their life in the New World. Convinced that she would soon die, she looks

for a coffin where she could be buried in, and realizes the family chest would be the most appropriate:

If he could only spare her the big chest! ... Beret fell to looking at it, and grew easier in her mind. ... That chest had belonged to her great-grandfather, but it must have been in the family long before his day; on it she could make out only the words "*Anno 16—*" ... the rest was completely worn away. Along the edges and running twice around the middle were heavy iron bands. ... Beret would go about looking at the chest – would lift the lid and gaze down inside. ... Plenty of room in there, if they would only put something under her head and back! She felt as if she could sleep safely in that bed. (Rølvaag 1929: 230)

The immigrant chest acts here as an enclosure, along with the other two enclosures suggested by the text, namely the prairie, and the sod house (Paulson: 202). It symbolizes a barricade that separates the couple, "Beret's ultimate enclosure, a box within a box, that signifies both the stifling restrictions of her allegiance to the Old World and refuge from a place she cannot acknowledge as home. She is, quite literally, placeless." (Quantic: 255). Per Hansa feels no restraints, sees no enclosures, as he rejoices in the boundlessness of the prairie, thinking of the countless opportunities their life in the New World would bring. April Schultz underlies the contrast between Beret and Per Hansa, since "in Beret's reactions to her husband and in her own peculiar behaviour – covering the windows at night to ward off evil, packing and unpacking her father's chest and finally crawling inside it to die" (Schultz: 95), as her inward nature and the strong ties with the homeland is antithetical to Per's choice to look to the future.

As the birth of her child is approaching, Beret becomes convinced that the delivery would bring her death, that she would be punished for her sins, and urges Per Hansa to bury her in the family chest once she's gone:

To-night I am leaving you... Yes, I must leave you. ... I know this is the end! The Lord has found me out because of my sins. ... [...] "But promise me one thing: put me away in the big chest! ... I have emptied it and made it ready... Promise to lay me away in the big chest, Per Hansa! ... And you must be sure to dig the grave deep! ... You haven't heard how terribly the wolves howl at night! ... Promise to take plenty of time and dig deep down – do you hear!" (Rølvaag 1929: 235)

This episode had been preceded by an encounter with a family of Norwegians that had arrived in Spring Creek, with the woman tied to the cart. Their youngest son had died several days before as they were making their way through the ruthless prairie. The child had become sick and, after his death, his parents had nothing to bury him in other than his clothes. The woman, named

Kari, was, naturally, extremely affected by her loss, and could think of nothing else but that they had to go back after him and bury him properly. Her husband, Jakob, was forced to tie her to the cart lest she should run back for the boy. The chest of this immigrant family is a symbol for suffering, for crucifixion:

The sight that met his eyes sent chills running down his spine. Inside sat a woman on a pile of clothes, with her back against a large immigrant chest; around her wrists and leading to the handles of the chest a strong rope was tied; her face was drawn and unnatural. Per Hansa trembled so violently that he had to catch hold of the wagon box, but inwardly was swearing a steady stream. To him it looked as if the woman was crucified. (Rølvaag 1929: 316-317)

Eventually, Per Hansa leaves together with Hans Olsa to find the grave of the boy and bring him to be buried as all Christians should be, but they return defeated by the vastness of the wilderness after they do not succeed in finding the grave. Beret is the one to be most of all impressed by their story. Her sadness and depression deepen as she becomes more and more convinced that the place they had come to is full of wretchedness and evil. She even covers the windows in an attempt to keep the evil away from their home.

Another significant episode that reveals the symbolic use of the immigrant chest in *Giants in the Earth* is related to the occurrence of a plague of locusts, which the Norwegian settlers compare to the Egyptian plague described in the Bible. As the settlers prepare to harvest their crops, hordes of locusts begin to devastate the land. Miraculously, Per Hansa's crops are saved, since he had been the first to seed the fields, and managed to gather the crops, but all the others' crops are destroyed by the insects. Beret perceives the locusts so threatening that she is convinced the plague is a punishment for their sins, for their poor faith, and for having severed the ties with their Lutheran heritage. She seeks refuge in the family chest, where she is desperate to hide with the children to avoid being engulfed by the evil which surrounded them. Per finds Beret hidden in the chest, and "the scene closes with one of the mystical personifications of the prairie which Rølvaag drops into the narrative to underscore both Beret's sense of demonic power and the futility of human endeavour in the great wilderness." (Weber: 187) Hence, "Beret, who, locking her past inside a trunk, stood a stranger in the American wilderness, a place of crisis where light and dark held tryst and where the terror beyond the promontory filled the earth and sky." (Simonson 1983).

There is, however, hope of redemption, as a Norwegian Lutheran minister arrives in the settlement, and decides to hold the ritual of communion in Per and Beret's sod house. On the planned Sunday, the service is held, and the big chest Beret had inherited from her family serves as altar, connecting her link to the Old World with their home in the prairie (Quantic: 255). The service has a strong impact on all the settlers, making them think about the hardships of



pioneer life, but also giving them a sense of community as they all sing the hymns. "During the service the minister, though conscious only of his own inadequacy, speaks to the people with great power; when he places his hand on Beret, she feels released from all sin, all burden instantly lifting from her soul." (Weber: 187). Beret is uplifted, her dark thoughts begin to fade, as she realizes she had been absent from her home and children for a long time, eager to rediscover the joys of motherhood. As Ronald Weber observed, "with the healing of her spirit comes a new stability and an eagerness for life" (Weber: 187).

Beret's return to mental and spiritual health comes after she feels both divine and human love around her (Paulson; 207). The communion ritual performed by the Lutheran minister brings her divine grace, while she finally understands Per's unconditional love for her. The healing of her spirit is achieved through the use of the family chest, "which she had envisioned as her coffin now becomes the altar for the sacred ritual of communion and a symbol emphasizing both the structure and the theme of death and rebirth" (Paulson: 207). Furthermore, the chest becomes an instrument of redemption for the entire community of Norwegian settlers, as "the use of the chest as the foundation of the church symbolizes that the immigrants, though afflicted with homesickness and fear, have at last found their homeland in the prairie" (Jin: 85). Once the church is established in the settlement, Beret becomes convinced there is though a possibility to found a civilization in the vast and wild prairie. Ha Jin concludes that "this classic scene in American literature illustrates the appropriate use of the past in establishing the immigrants' present existential order" (Jin: 85).

### Conclusions

The story of immigration would not be complete without the inner struggles generated by the difficulties of adjustment to a new culture. Crises of identity are inevitable, and Rølvaag perceived the dangers of uprootedness, that is why he illustrated in *Giants in the Earth* both the immigrant that feels empowered by the possibilities offered by new shores (Per Hansa), and the one that feels shattered by the loss of the Old World values and way of life (Beret). Upon their very arrival in the settlement, Per Hansa begins the process of implacement, by settling on the unmarked land, whereas his wife "attends to her steamer trunk, her link with the familiar places in Norway that she abandoned when she acquiesced to her husband's determination to emigrate. It is the one possession that remains with her for the rest of her life on their Dakota farm" (Quantic: 247).

The family chest accompanies the couple on their immigrant journey, at sea, but its role becomes more relevant in the vast Dakota prairie, as it provides refuge for the troubled soul of Beret, who cannot seem to find peace knowing they had deserted their parents and homeland in search of a life devoid of

tradition and religion. She feels the stark contrast between the security of the past and the vulnerability of the present (Simonson 1983), and the chest she had inherited from her father acts as the missing link between her sordid life in the wilderness, which she refuses to call home, and her Norwegian cultural and spiritual heritage. Harald Simonson praises Rølvaag's achievement, as the author's "greatest theme is not doom but a heart made strong by nurturing connection with voices of the past that join the present in essential continuity. One will search American literature in vain for a portrait more sustained and textured in this theme than Rølvaag's Beret" (Simonson 1987: 8).

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